

INTERVIEWING GEORGIA'S GOVERNORS

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A 1985 survey, in which fifty Georgia historians participated, identified Ellis Arnall, Carl Sanders, and George Busbee as Georgia's most effective postwar governors.¹ It was my good fortune to interview those three governors for the Georgia Government Documentation Project. The project represents a systematic and largely unique effort to collect the oral reminiscences and public papers of the state's political leaders.

The initial contact for the interviews I conducted was made by Dr. Thomas B. Brewer, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Georgia State University, who explained the purpose of the project and secured the governor's consent to participate. I, then, set up appointments and interviewed the governors in their offices.² The interviews, structured to last for four hours, were conducted in two two-hour settings. The first hour was devoted to the pre-gubernatorial years. The second and third hours focused on the gubernatorial years. The last hour concentrated on the post-gubernatorial years.

Two audiotape records were used and the interviews were transcribed, audited, and edited on a word processor. Having a back-up recording was a godsend since portions of the primary recordings were unintelligible. Extensive editorial changes were required to convert the spoken word into acceptable prose. In a few instances, it was necessary for the governors to clarify points they had made either because the meanings of statements were unclear or because the recordings were faulty. After the initial editorial revisions were made, the governors proofread the interviews and made additional revisions. Before the interviews took place, the governors were assured they would have this prerogative, and their input proved helpful in many ways. After the final editorial revisions are completed and biographical introductions written, the interviews will be bound separately and made available to scholars. Later, some of the interviews, or excerpts from the interviews, may be published in book form. At this point in the project, the Arnall and Sanders interviews are finished, and the Busbee interview is in the final stages of editorial revision.

In a sense, these interviews of governors provide a view from the top, revealing the ideas, concerns, and goals of Georgia's political elite. They have little to say directly about the poor, the disadvantaged, and what Franklin Roosevelt called the "forgotten Americans." Instead, their emphasis is on the "movers and shakers,"

the people and policies of state, national, and international importance. The interviews include much information about the governors' families and early years which has not been widely publicized, and their conversations are filled with anecdotes and obscure details on both trivial and significant subjects. Thus, Busbee relates how he first met Charles Kirbo and Jimmy Carter, why he picked Beverly Ponder to head the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and why Speaker George L. Smith decided to back Governor Carter's reorganization plan. He explains that when Georgia's public schools were on the verge of being closed by the Vandiver administration to avoid integration, it was Governor Vandiver's chief of staff, Griffin Bell, who came up with a solution. He proposed creating a study commission which would hold hearings all over the state, study the issue for months, and make recommendations to the legislature. Bell's idea was implemented and the study commission, headed by Judge John A. Sibley of Atlanta, accomplished its objectives. It enabled Vandiver to keep the public schools open and circumvent his campaign promise that "no not one would enter." Governor Sanders describes his relationship with Hosea Williams, Julian Bond, and Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. He had great admiration for both men, and explains why he campaigned vigorously for Johnson in 1964, even though it cost him political support to do so. Arnall, a gifted raconteur, discusses his relationship with Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan. Furthermore, he gives a fascinating account of how he met his present wife and the way he got into the insurance business.

All three governors were surprisingly frank and straightforward in their comments. They welcomed the opportunity to set the record straight and correct misunderstandings and distortions concerning their administrations. They also realized that future historians who write about them could be influenced by these interviews. Consequently, they were cooperative and very interested in the finished product.

On many issues they expressed themselves quite forcefully. Busbee, for example, was deeply disturbed over the controversy concerning the resignation of Jesse Bowles from the Supreme Court and the appointment of Hardy Gregory to replace him. He points out that Bowles, who had personal problems, wanted to resign much earlier. In fact, he remained on the bench only because Busbee insisted that he do so. Had Bowles's resignation been accepted when first offered, Busbee is convinced there would have been no controversy, no lawsuit, and no special election.³ Similarly, Arnall is certain he would have been reelected governor in 1966 except for the

candidacy of Jimmy Carter and the Republican votes for Maddox. Arnall, who is loquacious by nature and has an exceptional memory for details, discussed many facets of his administration that have remained cloudy over the years. For example, he explains why he picked Jimmy Carmichael to be his successor in 1946 and why he discouraged a constitution change that would have permitted him to run for a second term as governor. On these and many other issues, Arnall expresses his opinions emphatically. Sanders, by contrast, speaks more softly but also has strong convictions about many subjects. One in particular is the 1970 campaign for governor. Although the 1962 campaign against Marvin Griffin was a hard fought contest, Sanders considers the 1970 campaign a much nastier race. The Carter campaign, he asserts, was evasive and full of "sly innuendoes" and "deceit." As evidence, he cites a number of dirty tricks. As part-owner of the Atlanta Hawks, Sanders joined the team, which was mostly black, in the dressing room to celebrate its winning the wester division. Someone took a picture of Sanders with the team, sent it to ministers all over south Georgia and to militants who believed strongly in segregation, and implied that Sanders had crossed the line and was advocating integration. Moreover, Jimmy Carter campaigned as a George Wallace supporter, which was contrary to his real political beliefs. Finally, late in the campaign, the Carter people insinuated that Sanders had made a lot of money fraudulently while he was governor. With no proof to back up such allegations, Sanders considered them malicious and unethical. Despite the passage of nearly two decades, his interview still reflects bitterness over the 1970 campaign. Sanders wanted the campaign to focus on a discussion of relevant political issues, and, needless to say, he did not enjoy Carter's tactics or the outcome of the election.

Not only do the governors express strong opinions on many subjects, they also demonstrate pride in the accomplishments of their administrations. It is not in the nature of politicians to hide their lights under a basket, and these governors do not. Witness Ellis Arnall, who remarks: "If you go over to the State Capitol today everything over there is what I put there;" or Carl Sanders's assertion that his administration modernized Georgia's government; or George Busbee's claim that his administration built the infrastructure that made possible later economic growth.

The interviews also reveal many similarities in the lives and careers of governors Arnall, Sanders, and Busbee. All three were born in Georgia, reared with strong family ties, attended the Baptist Church, and have been lifetime Democrats. All three were ambitious, hardworking, and energetic. After graduating from college, all of

them earned law degrees at the University of Georgia. their political careers began with election to the Georgia House of Representatives, and they rose quickly to positions of leadership in the General Assembly. Such background similarities are typical of modern Georgia governors, a remarkably homogeneous group. Indeed, of the 10 who have served since world War II, 10 were WASPs, 10 were Democrats, 10 were born in Georgia, 8 were Baptists, 8 were reared in rural or small town settings, 9 were college graduates, 7 attended the University of Georgia, and 9 had either legislative or executive political experience prior to serving as governor.⁴ Thus the backgrounds of Arnall, Sanders, and Busbee follow the standard pattern for modern Georgia chief executives.

The similarities between Arnall, Sanders, and Busbee continued during their gubernatorial years. All three were moderates on race and their administrations brought improvements in race relations. In becoming governor, each one defeated a former governor who was noted as a staunch opponent of civil rights. Arnall upset Eugene Talmadge in 1942, Sanders crushed Marvin Griffin in 1962, and Busbee defeated Lester Maddox in a runoff in 1974. Each governor made education a high priority in his administration. Arnall had to restore accreditation after Governor Talmadge's political interference had left the University System in shambles. He removed the governor from the Board of Regents and quickly regained accredited status. Sanders poured money into the University System in an unprecedented manner and the state's college flourished. Busbee concentrated on improving elementary education, establishing kindergartens, and strengthening vocational schools. Their moderate views on race and their emphasis on education undoubtedly contributed to their high rankings by contemporary Georgia historians.

Another similarity during their terms was the emphasis on constitutional revision. Arnall succeeded in writing a new constitution and getting it ratified by the voters. In less than twenty years, however, his constitution had been amended over 300 times and as a result had become confusing and unwieldy. Sanders, convinced that a new constitution was needed, managed to get General Assembly approval of a new one in a special session in the summer of 1964. But to his dismay, the federal courts refused to allow the people to vote on it since the legislature that approved it was malapportioned. The decision later was reversed, but by then the momentum was lost and Sanders's efforts had come to naught.⁵ For Sanders, the failure to adopt the new constitution was the biggest--and one of the few--disappointments in his administration. By Busbee's term about 500

additional amendments had been added to the Constitution of 1945. Through skillful maneuvering and a lot of hard work, he managed to incorporate the amendments into the Constitution of 1983.

Since there were no major scandals during the administrations of these governors and the state made substantial progress under their leadership, all three governors were popular with the people of Georgia. Busbee was reelected to a second term by an overwhelming majority, and it seems apparent that if the constitution had then allowed governors to succeed themselves both Arnall and Sanders would have been reelected.⁶ In view of their popularity and age when they left office (Arnall was 39 and Sanders was 41), they seemed destined for higher political office. but aside from Arnall's brief stint with the Office of Price Administration in the Truman administration, neither would hold public office again. Arnall recalled that Truman wanted him to become Attorney General, and he was ready to accept the position until Mrs. Arnall emphatically informed him she was not going to Washington, D.C.. Family considerations also affected Sanders's political career. He seriously considered running against Richard Russell for a seat in the United States Senate in 1966. It was widely believed that he decided against the race when polls revealed that he could not win. Sanders admits he faced an uphill battle against a popular and respected senator, but he adds that an important consideration in his decision--perhaps the decisive factor--was the reluctance of Mrs. Sanders to live in Washington.

Rather than pursue politics, these three former governors have concentrated on their legal careers and business interests since leaving office. To put it mildly, they have done well! Both Arnall and Sanders have built prestigious law firms, each with over 100 attorneys. In addition, both have prospered in other endeavors: Sanders in banking and real estate and Arnall in insurance. Upon leaving office in 1983, Busbee joined the firm of King and Spalding, one of Georgia's most distinguished legal firms. All three of these law firms, located around Park Place in downtown Atlanta, lie within a radius of 200 yards. The three former governors remain active professionally and they have developed a fondness for world travel. Busbee spends much time in the Orient, seeking trade and business for Georgia firms. Sanders toured the Soviet Union, and Arnall, who refuses to slow down at age eighty, recently visited Australia and China.

Many of these similarities are well known to students of Georgia politics. But the interviews reveal other similarities that are less well known--athletics, for example. Sanders was an outstanding

athlete who went to the University of Georgia on a football scholarship and has remained a health enthusiast ever since. For many years he has maintained that there is a strong correlation between physical activity and mental well being, and he has also asserted that football was a positive influence on his development and maturity.⁷ Since Busbee is tall and looks athletic, it is not surprising that he played basketball and tennis. But it is surprising that the five-foot six-inch Arnall also was a skilled athlete. In high school, Arnall quarterbacked his football team and deliberately remained in high school an extra year so that he could play football one more season.

All three governors also emphasize the strong positive influence their families had on their development, especially the moral influence of their mothers. Although Busbee's mother died when he was fifteen, he remembers her vividly as the "anchor of the First Baptist Church," as a "single member welfare agency," and in general as "a great influence on all of us." Sanders recalls the exceptionally high moral standards of his mother and describes her as "one of the most wonderful saintly people that I have ever known." Arnall greatly admired his grandfather, Henry Clay Arnall, the patriarch of the family who "ruled with an iron hand." It seems apparent that strong moral and ethical values instilled in the governors by their families influenced their thinking, molded their character, and deepened their concern for others--qualities that later would be manifested in their careers in public service. In Sanders's case, such values were reinforced by the Young Men's Christian Association (Y. M. C. A.), an organization he has continued to be affiliated with up to the present.

All three governors benefited from fortuitous circumstances, or what Machiavelli called "fortune" and others have called "luck." Although Arnall seems to believe that he was predestined from early youth to be governor, he nevertheless admits that he ran for a seat in the General Assembly in 1932 largely because of the Depression. The absence of law clients in Newnan during those troubled years made legislative service an exciting diversion. Ten years later he ran for governor because Governor Eugene Talmadge, by interfering with the schools, trust an issue upon Arnall, then Attorney General, which he could not avoid and which he could use to his political advantage. Without the education issue, Arnall admits that he would not have triumphed over Talmadge and would not even have considered a race against the powerful incumbent.

Sanders and Busbee, though not inclined to put much stock in predestination or fate, also explain how circumstances affected their careers. In 1962, when Sanders let it be known that he was going to

run for lieutenant governor, his chief opponent convinced an unknown Atlanta lawyer named Carl F. Sanders to run for lieutenant governor in order to confuse the voters. Carl E. Sanders, realizing that the similarity of names militated against his chances for victory, thereupon decided to run for the office of governor instead. His candidacy received a major boost when the federal courts subsequently threw out the county unit system and ruled that the Democratic primary would be decided on the basis of popular votes.⁸ Busbee's political career began in an unusual fashion. He was quietly attempting to build a law practice in Albany when, in 1956, the popular local representative, Stewart Watson, decided not to seek reelection. His decision came shortly before the deadline for qualifying. A group of local leaders approached Busbee about running. Since he had no political experience and no political aspirations at the time, Busbee was dumbfounded by the offer. When the community leaders insisted he run and promised to finance his campaign, Busbee agreed. He explains that he hoped to serve one term in the House, gain name recognition which might attract a few more clients, and then retire from politics. Instead, he would up serving eighteen years in the House and eight years as governor before retiring.

Arnall, Sanders, and Busbee agree that it takes more than good organization and hard campaigning to win elections. Timing, they assert, is absolutely crucial. Thus, what appeals to the voters in one election will not necessarily appeal to them in the next. Arnall notes that his timing was right in 1942, but not in 1966. Sanders say essentially the same thing. He was the people's choice in 1962, but in 1970 his campaign fell flat. Both doubt that changes of style or tactics would have made any difference in their losing campaigns.

The political philosophies of the three governors were quite similar. They, basically, must be classed as moderates, perhaps a little left of center, in the context of Georgia politics. They never questioned the basic concepts of rule by law, limited government, protection of private property rights, and adherence to basic Judeo-Christian morality. None sought a wholesale transformation of the political, economic, or social order. All sought reforms within the system and indeed worked harmoniously with the conservative General Assembly. Even Arnall, who in many ways was Georgia's most liberal governor in the twentieth century and who calls himself a progressive or ultra-liberal Democrat, set forth goals for Georgia that did not differ appreciably from those of Sanders or Busbee, except they were set twenty years earlier.⁹ Though there were differences in their styles and rhetoric, in the final analysis all three

adopted a pragmatic approach and compromised when necessary to achieve what was attainable at the time. The constitutions they wrote are perhaps the best examples of their understanding of the necessity of compromise in the political process. concessions had to be made to various factions to secure legislative approval of the new documents. These governors were regarded as strong executives and all three received much favorable attention in the national media.¹⁰

While stressing the similarities of the three governors, let me add that they are not identical. They are three distinctive individuals. Of the three, Arnall is the more philosophical, the more widely-read, and the most imaginative. He likes to grapple with ideas, concepts, and the meanings of words. His undergraduate major at The University of the South (Sewanee) was Greek. Always a staunch believer in democracy, his administration extended the vote substantially by lowering the voting age to eighteen, repealing the poll tax, and other measures. Now he advocates registration and voting by mail as a means of increasing participation in elections.¹¹ Neither Sanders nor Busbee, on the other hand, is philosophically inclined. Rather, they are more like mechanics who concentrate on nuts and bolts issues and adjust them to make the machinery of government run more efficiently. Busbee, who played a major role in establishing legislative independence of the governor, is fundamentally satisfied with the structure of government and the present allocation of power. Sanders and Arnall, however, express concern over the growing power of the legislative branch. They believe that the people of Georgia are best served by a strong governor. The Georgia legislature, with 236 members, is one of the largest in the country. Many critics have suggested that it is too large and ought to be reduced in size. Sanders agrees with these evaluations and thinks that a smaller legislature would be more efficient, but Arnall and Busbee are content with the present size and see no need to change it.

In summary, oral history, by its nature, has certain limitations. In four hours of interviews, it is impossible to cover every aspect of a governor's life and career in depth. Inevitably some pertinent topics are skimmed over superficially and others are omitted altogether. Several of the topics discussed in these interviews warrant deeper probing that was not possible because of the time constraints. Secondly, oral history is one-sided. It provides only the speaker's viewpoint and does not include any opposing viewpoints or analysis of the speaker's comments. The only control comes from the interviewer's questions. These interviews, therefore, should be used with the same skepticism that is applied to journals or autobiographies. They are personal accounts, and personal accounts

are rarely noted for their objectivity. Thirdly, after the passage of time, memories fail, details are forgotten, and reality becomes blurred. That problem was minimized by these governors, however, for they displayed exceptional memories, and Arnall's mastery of detail was simply astounding. Finally, in using a comprehensive format for these interviews, there was some repetition and time spent on material that has been adequately covered elsewhere. The transcript revisions eliminated much of the repetition and made the interviews more readable and accurate, but at the cost of spontaneity.

Larry Sabato, a careful student of American governors, observes that the "good-time Charlies" who once dominated the governorships are gone, and in most states across the country "concerned, capable, accomplished persons have been elected in their stead."¹² The three Georgia governors interviewed for this presentation fit the mold Sabato describes, for Arnall, Sanders, and Busbee were certainly concerned, capable, and accomplished persons. As such, their reminiscences and observations are valuable resources that should be preserved. Having been through the political wars, they have keen insights into the nature of Georgia's political system. Oral interviews are a practical way of recording their views. Such evidence is not likely to be the last word on any subject, but it should contribute to a greater understanding of many topics and may stimulate research on others. The interviews are designed to be a convenient source providing comprehensive coverage of the life and careers of governors Arnall, Sanders, and Busbee. At present, reliable information relating to these topics is hard to find since few books and articles have appeared. Until the papers of the governors are published and full biographies are written, these interviews should be especially useful.

NOTES

¹*Georgia Association of Historians' Survey of Georgia Governors*, May 1985, compiled by Gary Fink. Arnall ranked first, Sanders second, and Busbee third.

²The Arnall interviews were conducted on March 25 and April 17, 1986; the Sanders interviews were conducted on August 5 and 12, 1986; and the Busbee interviews were conducted on March 24 and 31, 1987.

³When Bowles eventually resigned and Governor Busbee appointed Hardy Gregory to replace him, a controversy emerged. Claiming that the franchise rights of citizens were denied as a result of the Gregory appointment, a lawsuit was filed and the plaintiff emerged victorious. Thus, a special election had to be held to fill the judgeship. Busbee was eventually vindicated when his appointee, Hardy Gregory, won the special election.

⁴Lester Maddox is the exception to the rule, since he was reared in Atlanta, did not attend college, and lacked political experience. At age fifty-one, he was the oldest when he took office. Herman Talmadge had not held office prior to his election as governor, but he literally grew up in Georgia politics and directed his father's last two successful gubernatorial campaigns in 1940 and 1946. For short biographical sketches of the governors, see James F. Cook, *Governors of Georgia*. (Huntsville: Strode Publishers, 1979), 255-309.

⁵A copy of the proposed new constitution as passed by the General Assembly is in *Georgia Laws*, 1964, *Extra Session*, pp. 234-333. The decision vacating the District Court's order is *Fortson v. Toombs*, 379 U. S. 621 (1965).

⁶Two-thirds of the historians who responded to the Fink survey thought that Sanders and Arnall would have been elected had they been eligible to run at the end of their first term.

⁷Gov. Carl E. Sanders, "What Football Taught Me," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine* (Nov. 3, 1963), 18; Reg Murphy, "How Governor Sanders Keeps Fit," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine* (Sept. 15, 1963), 34.

⁸*Sanders v. Gray*, 203 F. Supp. 158 (1962).

⁹In the Fink survey, Arnall was the most liberal on social issues, but he ranked fourth as a racial liberal, behind Jimmy Carter, Busbee, and Sanders.

¹⁰John Chamberlain, "Arnall of Georgia," *Life*, Vol. 19 (Aug. 6, 1945), 68-76; Walter Davenport, "Unanimous Arnall," *Collier's* Vol. 112 (July 24, 1943), 16, 57; "Information Arnall," *Newsweek*, Vol. 29 (Feb. 10, 1947), 58; "People in the Limelight: Ellis Arnall," *New Republic*, Vol. 112 (Feb. 12, 1945), 214; *Numan v. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham, Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 148-49; *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 January 1970; Ben Hibbs, "progress Goes Marching Through Georgia," *Saturday Evening Post*, 16 February 1963, 69-73. Busbee was chosen by his fellow governors to head the Southern Growth Policies Board, a consortium of southern states aimed at enhancing the region's competitive edge in economic development, and in 1980-81 he was unanimously elected by his

fellow governors throughout the nation as chairman of the National Governors' Association.

¹¹*Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 24 January 1987.

¹²Larry Sabato, *Goodbye to Good-Time Charlie: The American Governorship Transformed*. 2nd ed. (Washington, D. C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1983), 201.