

INTERVIEWEE: LESTER MADDOX

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

May 13, 1969

B: This is the interview with Governor Lester Maddox of Georgia. Sir, do you recall if you had any acquaintance or knowledge of Mr. Johnson, say, before the 1960's, when he was a senator?

M: Yes, sir, I did, because of his position in the Senate--prominent position.

B: Had you met him personally, sir?

M: No, sir, I did not meet him until after I was elected Governor of Georgia.

B: During those days, sir, when he was in the Senate, had you formed an opinion about his political philosophy?

M: Yes, sir, because he was a very strong opponent to all of the civil rights legislation, dealing with fair employment practices and our schools and the private free enterprise system. He constantly attacked the efforts of those who proposed legislation that would strike down--

B: What about his part in the 1957 Civil Rights Act?

M: He fought, as you may recall, a number of proposals at that time for the civil rights program. I don't have it before me at this time, but he stated on a number of occasions that these proposals of the Fair Employment Practices Commission, the federal takeover of our school systems, that this would make a police state out of this country, and that it was a farce and a sham that in the guise of liberty would ruin the United States.

B: What was your reaction then, sir, when he was designated as the vice presidential candidate in 1960?

M: We still felt, because he campaigned as a conservative even in his last Senate race, that he was still a conservative and that he would stand by these principles that he had practiced and expoused (sic) for so many years.

B: Did you participate in the 1960 presidential campaign, sir?

M: Yes, sir, I did.

B: Did you campaign for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket?

M: No, sir, I did not. I did not campaign for any candidate. I did voice my feelings. And in that particular race, I supported the Republican candidate when I voted. I did not do any campaigning, but I did vote for candidate Nixon at that time.

B: Then, sir, during the years of the Kennedy presidency, in the early '60's when you were having your difficulties here in Atlanta with the Pickwick Restaurant, did you have any direct or indirect contact with Mr. Johnson?

M: Other than sending to him wires and letters and communications, no contact. I could not get any response from his office.

B: What sort of wires and letters did you send to him, sir?

M: I advised him on several occasions that if he signed the Civil Rights Act into law, the '64, or that if it passed and it should be signed into law, that we would see more violence in this country than we had ever imagined, that our cities would be burned and our policemen would be shot down, that there would be problems at our schools, insurmountable problems. On a number of occasions I advised President Johnson of this. Also, I did have one-way correspondence with President Kennedy about this particular type legislation that was designed for special groups instead of for the whole country.

B: These wires and letters to Mr. Johnson--you sent them after the assassination of President Kennedy while Mr. Johnson was President?

- M: Yes, sir, but I sent some to President Kennedy before that time. And then I sent a number to President Johnson after the assassination of President Kennedy. And of course my public record, public notice for a number of years, stated too that this type legislation would lead this country to violence and the wrecking of our cities that we have witnessed.
- B: When President Kennedy was assassinated and Mr. Johnson became President, did it by any chance occur to you that perhaps Mr. Johnson would have views different from President Kennedy on civil rights?
- M: No, sir, because acting as Vice President and following along with the Kennedy Administration, I had anticipated that probably his policies would be similar to Kennedy's.
- B: You believe then that somewhere in there Mr. Johnson changed his mind, or his attitude, from what he had evidenced during his years as a senator?
- M: Yes, sir. I do not believe that he has changed his innate beliefs. He knows, as he did for all these years, that these things would create a serious problem in this country. He changed for the political expediency.
- B: I believe I have seen in the public prints that some time in '64 you picketed the White House in connection with the Pickrick Restaurant affair. Is that correct, sir?
- M: Yes, sir, either '64 or '65. I think it was '64.
- B: Did you receive any indication of interest from Mr. Johnson at that occasion?
- M: None whatsoever. In fact, I picketed only after I could not get any response from a series of wires to the President asking for an audience with him. He had been giving audiences to Martin Luther King and other groups, other individuals, and I had wanted to talk with him personally and had sent him many wires. But I could not even get any response from either the President or

any of his staff. And only after total refusal or recognition did I picket the White House.

B: No response whatsoever of any kind, even phone calls or informal--

M: Nothing whatsoever, no, sir. I did talk to Marvin Watson before I started picketing in Washington, D.C. I finally got through to him. I was in Washington at the time. He stated that they could not find any of the letters or communications, and this is why they had not set up an appointment. Then I tried again to get an appointment and could not.

B: Did Mr. Watson or anyone else try to discourage you from picketing?

M: Yes, sir. Not Mr. Watson, but some of the security personnel at the White House came out onto the sidewalk on Pennsylvania Avenue and said that this was prohibited and that it was illegal. I reminded him that I had watched just in the past few days several hundred demonstrators walking and protesting on the same sidewalk. He responded and said he would go into the White House and determine whether I should be able to continue to exercise this protest. I told him when he left to not go to the security captain, but to go to the President and advise him that I was on the sidewalk, and I had planned to stay there until I was so tired and hot that I could walk no longer. We returned then about fifteen minutes later and told me to go ahead as long as I wanted to there at the White House.

B: Even after that, you still had no response from the President or the White House staff?

M: No, sir. [I] never received any response whatsoever. It was somewhat disturbing, knowing that every time you looked at the television and you read news reports about what was going on at the White House, that you would see some of the civil rights advocates and others who were welcomed and greeted at anytime,

seemingly, that they wanted to get into the White House. Yet after all my pleading I was not even given any recognition whatsoever.

B: Later in '64 you also did a similar action at the Democratic convention, didn't you?

M: I believe it was at the Democratic convention first.

B: Yes, it probably would have been.

M: And then the White House.

B: With similar results at the Democratic convention, or did you get any more recognition there?

M: No more there. I had asked the governor of Georgia, I had asked the state Democratic chairman of Georgia, I had asked the two U.S. senators from Georgia, I had asked the President of the United States, and I had asked the national Democratic chairman to permit me an opportunity to voice my position before the convention because they had permitted a large number of others who were private individual citizens to appear before the convention. Then I did receive communications from these people--of course from the senators--stating that they had no authority, which they did not in this matter, and from the governor who pushed it off on someone else, and from the state Democratic party chairman, who used some other excuse. But I never did get inside the convention hall.

B: Sir, in that year, did you ever think about formally and officially becoming a Republican?

M: No, sir.

B: You did support Mr. Goldwater in '64, I believe, though.

M: Yes, sir. I did that because I could see that the policies of the Johnson Administration and the Kennedy Administration, too, and their platforms, in my opinion would lead this country to the civil and criminal disobedience that

we have been witnessing. I stated that this would happen, that we would see our flags spit upon and that our cities would be burned. And feeling that the programs and the philosophies of these candidates and these Presidents were such as to create these conditions--in other words, shooting for a Great Society--those programs and those policies could not lead us to anything except a society of turmoil and disturbance.

B: And you believe that Mr. Johnson's motives in here are at least partly political expediency?

M: Almost totally, yes, sir.

B: Sir, during '65 and '66, did you continue to try to correspond with the White House, or had you just given up by then?

M: I don't think, after I lost my business finally in February '65, that I had any further correspondence or sent any additional wires to the President.

B: For the benefit of the transcript, the "lost your business" is a reference to the sale of the Pickwick Restaurant?

M: Yes, sir. I lost my business. It wasn't just the sale. I lost my business. The best estimate I can say is that it cost us about \$600,000, because of that loss.

B: During your campaign for the governorship in 1966, was there any involvement of the White House or the national Democratic party in that campaign?

M: Not that I could detect.

B: Was there any suspicion in your mind that they were trying to prevent your becoming governor?

M: Well, definitely so, yes, sir. Because I later told the President, in meeting with him, that had we nominated one of his friends in Georgia, that we would have lost another state house like we had already lost some nine, I believe, governors' offices between '64 and '66.

B: You mean if a pro-Johnson Democrat had won, the Republican candidate--

M: Would have been elected governor of Georgia. Yes, sir.

B: Then, sir, after you became Governor you then got to meet with Mr. Johnson?

M: Yes, sir.

B: On what kind of occasions, sir?

M: On several occasions I met with the President. I met him at various governors' meetings. I met him on a particular occasion where he granted me an audience personally, and then with the Georgia delegation relating to releasing of the Federal Aid Highway funds that had been temporarily withheld because of the inflationary problems the country was encountering at that time. I met with him about specific projects here in Georgia.

B: When you met with him privately, sir, did you ask him why he had not replied to your earlier letters and overtures?

M: No, sir, but I did talk to him along the lines of, "Mr. President," I said to him, "I would like to work with you. I would like to work with the national party. But back in my administration, and in the Georgia Democratic party, we have appointed consensus party delegates and a consensus administration. And this has not been true in the national party nor in your administration. If you could adjust your thinking and your policies to where you could include not just the far left and the liberals but to include all of the people, then Georgia can go along. But we cannot unless you are willing to do this." And I advised him of this personally.

B: What was his reply to that, sir?

M: He stated that he recognized we had problems and various different parts of the country had different problems to cope with, and that he would hope that we could work out our differences and that we could work together.

B: Did he attempt to explain his reasoning behind the acts of his administration?

M: No, sir, he did not.

B: When you were discussing with him such things as your highway program and other relations between the federal government and the states beyond just civil rights, did you find him knowledgeable and interested in that kind of thing?

M: I found him to be very able and very knowledgeable of any subject matter that was discussed--in our meeting discussing inflation, discussing the highway program, and discussing other areas of government, without any prompting from any staff members. He could cite the figures, the percentages, the causes and the reasons in his opinion for various things--if it were dealing with the Southeast Asian conflict, or domestic problems, or whatever it would be.

B: Did he ever discuss with you in private, that is beyond general meetings with all the governors, the Vietnamese war?

M: No, sir, not personally. We've discussed that, of course, with various cabinet officers, cabinet members, and in the presence of the President and the Vice President.

B: Did you find these briefings full and adequate?

M: There would be no way for me to determine as to whether they would be full and adequate or not. Only the person that had total information would be able to determine as to whether it would have been adequate and full.

B: Sir, in dealing with the Johnson Administration generally--not just Mr. Johnson himself, but cabinet officials and all the other government officials--did you find any difference between the Kennedy Administration and the Johnson Administration?

M: I had no involvement with the staff of the Kennedy Administration. I could not get in the White House or get any correspondence responded to, or acknowledged



rather, from either administration until I was elected governor. Then of course I could get in the White House, and I was received cordially and very warmly.

B: I meant, for example, the difference between, say, Attorney Generals Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Katzenbach and Mr. Clark?

M: I had no personal contact with any of those.

B: How about at levels like the cabinet officials? Did you find them easy to get along with and understanding of Georgia's problems?

M: I found them to be very cordial and friendly and very receptive to listening. I was pleased with the response to my request to meet with these gentlemen--various cabinet officers. I believed then, as I believe now, that they act in whatever they think would be acceptable and pleasing to the President.

I did meet with Secretary Gardner, and it was my opinion that he was dedicated to the cause of the federal government totally directing school operations in this country. And, although he's a very personable and friendly and able person, I felt like that I had no influence whatsoever on any decision that he might make.

B: Did you ever discuss with Mr. Johnson the coming presidential election of 1968?

M: We discussed it of course not individually, but in groups with governors. I discussed it with him to this extent, that I would like to support him--this was personal--provided that the administration could move in the direction of being all inclusive and include common-sense conservatives as well as the far-left liberals that he seemed to surround himself with. He was well aware that I would not support him unless there was a way made possible for us to do it. In fact, I discussed this with Vice President Humphrey. And when I asked him would he expect me to support him and the President--this was prior to the President removing himself as a candidate. I asked the question: "Don't

you think it would take a miracle for me to support you and the President in the upcoming election?"

He said, "Yes, I do, Governor."

I said: "Well answer this. Wouldn't you also agree that even if I kept my mouth shut along about election time, that you could consider this a victory?"

And he said, "Yes."

B: This was on the occasion of Mr. Humphrey's visit to you in the summer of '67?

M: Yes, sir.

B: Did you find Mr. Humphrey any easier to talk to than Mr. Johnson?

M: I think they're both easy to talk to. I don't think there's a more personable, friendly, probably a sincerer person in the United States in public office than Hubert Humphrey.

B: Sir, who do you suppose is the major influence on Mr. Johnson among the liberals he has surrounded himself with, as you said? Can you single out any particular individuals as being of major influence?

M: I believe that they all are--all the extreme liberals and the far left. He seemed determined to please them--and the bums and the beatniks and the parasites and the Socialists--and to totally ignore the achievers and the conservatives in this country. He, having formerly been a conservative himself, he deserted his friends of old and the conservatives. I think he finally totally moved into the far left himself because, as every man would, he was anxious to have friends and to have support. And after having deserted his old friends, he had nothing to turn to but the liberals. And he may have finally actually changed from a conservative to a liberal in his quest for friends, or some recognition, or someone that would hold his hand because he had thrown out his old friends and supporters who had made it possible for him to move into the White House as Vice President originally.

B: Were you surprised when he withdrew himself from the renomination campaign?

M: No, sir.

B: Oh? You had anticipated that something like that might happen?

M: We had thought that possibly that this would be the best. It was my opinion, and I had stated it publicly, there was no chance for us to retain the White House. It was a definite loss. I think this is the only course that the President could take without suffering a major defeat.

B: You feel he definitely would have been defeated had he run again?

M: Yes, sir.

B: Sir, then did you attempt, after Mr. Johnson's withdrawal, to have any influence on who would be the nominee of the Democratic party?

M: Not except to this extent, sir. I publicly over and over stated that our one hope of gaining the White House would be that we have a conservative candidate, either in the top slot or the number two slot as Vice President, and that if we did not, then I felt sure that we would lose the White House. So, with this thinking, I even thought maybe that George Wallace might even be considered. I recognize this was certainly a long ways from any recent Democratic national persuasions, but I even feel today that had George Wallace been the vice presidential candidate, that the Democrats would have swept the election.

B: Did you ever discuss that with Governor Wallace?

M: I suggested it, but he felt, as I did, that chances were nil.

B: You said several times there early in '68 that you did not want to support a third party.

M: That's right, sir.

B: Presumably a reference to Governor Wallace's movement.

M: Yes, sir.

B: What was your motive then, sir, in announcing yourself as a candidate?

M: Hoping that we would get some of the far left feelings diluted within the national Democratic party, possibly in our platform--or our nominees, either for one position or the other, would be something different from the far left, and that this would get us a victory and we would maintain the White House.

You know, we've gone from thirty-three Democratic governors down to twenty. We've lost some state houses. We've lost a lot of city halls and courthouses. This has been handwriting on the wall. As I told the President, when talking with him, I said: "You know what happened to the state houses. You know what has happened in--lost forty-seven congressmen. Had the Democrats in Georgia nominated one of your friends, we would have lost five or six more congressmen in Georgia." And I stated to him at that time, I said: "I don't have to tell you what's going on over in Alabama. You know." And he acknowledged that he did know at the time what was taking place, so far as the Wallace movement was concerned. And I said: "You know, Florida has a Republican governor. Arkansas has a Republican governor. And Georgia is somewhat of an island. We can be the difference between a successful election in 1968 on (sic) our party, and possibly the failure of our party to get elected." This is generally what I had tried to project. This was a feeling that some degree of conservatism within the platform and within the nominees to Chicago convention would assure us of a victory for the Democratic Party. This is why I sought the nomination.

B: Did he ask you specifically what you had in mind, sir, in the way of platform planks or anything?

M: No, sir. We did have a regional meeting here--

[interruption]

B: You were talking about the regional meeting, sir.

M: And this was a matter of national position, at the regional meeting that involved about six or eight states here in the Southeast for the national Democratic party, I stated then what we would prefer in the platform, what had to be in the platform--some of what had to be in the platform--that if we were continued to be ignored, that we would not go along. But if some of these conditions could be met, then the Democratic party could be assured of the support of Georgia, and I thought could be assured of winning the White House.

B: Sir, did you feel that you were badly treated at the convention in the matter of your own candidacy and the seating of the Georgia delegation?

M: Yes, sir. We had the most consensus delegation that Georgia has ever had, and I believe the most consensus that this Southeastern region has ever had. And I believe the most consensus in the United States. We had far rights and far lefts and moderates and blacks and whites and young and old and poor and rich. I think we possibly had the most consensus delegation in the whole fifty states there at Chicago. And so I was hurt.

Of course, the party suffered more than Lester Maddox, not the state party, but the national party. I believe that when Mr. Daley, if he was involved, and Mr. Hughes and Hubert Humphrey, when this group decided that they would throw out the Maddox delegation in order to let the whole country see that they were totally disassociated from Lester Maddox, that this assured the defeat of Hubert Humphrey for the presidency of the United States. I think had this incident of throwing out the Georgia delegation not happened, that Hubert Humphrey would be President today.

B: Did you feel, sir, that Mr. Johnson was deeply involved in the handling of the convention himself?

M: No, sir, I never did feel that way.

B: Did you see anything of the violence in Chicago at the convention, sir?

M: Yes, sir. I witnessed it from the Statler-Hilton Hotel. I could not sleep in the evening. We had difficulty getting in and out of the hotel because of these demonstrators. We had to be under armed escort and had to go through lines of armed police officers to get in and out of the hotel. We had two fires in the Statler-Hilton on one occasion. And one morning, I would say from 1 o'clock until 5 in the morning, this group with their bull horns out front and the fire trucks out front, we listened and we watched. The major violence that occurred in Chicago was after we had left the city.

B: Were there any demonstrations aimed at you personally, sir?

M: Nothing other than some remarks from some of the demonstrators themselves.

B: Then, sir, you supported Governor Wallace during the campaign, I believe.

M: Yes, sir, I voted for him.

B: Did Mr. Humphrey or any representatives from him try to convince that you should stay with the Humphrey ticket?

M: No, sir.

B: You did not receive any sort of messages from him?

M: No, sir, none whatsoever from any Democrat.

B: That sounds a little strange, sir. Would you not normally expect to hear something or other from him?

M: After I had predicted that the Democrats would lose the White House unless the national leadership would be willing to be more consensus in its makeup, and after I had pleaded to get some of these changes made and failed and I announced that I would seek the nomination, I never heard anything else from any national Democrat.

B: Sir, in sum, could you evaluate Mr. Johnson's presidency, his strengths and weaknesses?

M: I think his greatest weakness was that he was not Lyndon Johnson; that he was whatever the establishment around him wanted him to be. And his decisions and actions were based upon what may please these people and may give him a favorable image in the news media, rather than based upon what he knew in his heart was right for this country and right for black and right for white, that the Great Society, as he envisioned it and he was almost successful with it, had it been fully implemented then I think we would have lost our right to private property, to private free enterprise system; we would lose our war against communism; we would lose our war against the crime and immorality that sweeps this country-- if we were successful in producing the Great Society as envisioned by Lyndon Johnson and those who directed him to move in that direction.

B: Do you believe he had any strengths as a man and as a President?

M: Had any what, sir?

B: Strengths. Was there anything in his administration you regard as real accomplishments?

M: Well, I think his concern with doing something for the needy, for our highway programs, for our major city problems, I think these were all possibly sincere efforts to try to improve the common lot of all of our people. And I felt that even though these were his convictions--and I admire any person for standing behind their beliefs--that these programs--part of the Great Society--were going against what is best for this country and what is a common sense course for this country. I believe we can continue to pour billions of dollars, say, for instance, into our ghettos, and we are going to have billion-dollar ghettos. At the national level and state level, had we gone back to our local governments, our cities and counties, and determined that they have adequate water and sewerage and streets and these things that are essential to a growing and prosperous

community, that we would have created stay-at-home opportunities for our people who in a transition from an agricultural economy to an agro-business economy found that they were left holding the bag, so to speak. We did not do the things that would have brought industry into many parts of this country, and thus we forced people through Mr. Johnson's proposals, and President Kennedy's too, into the major metropolitan areas where they were actually grasping for bare subsistence of food and clothing and housing. We have produced our own ghettos and slums by having not properly planned. So I respect his efforts in that field. But I think he was definitely on the wrong track, and America is suffering today because of it.

B: So far as one can tell, sir, do you feel that his response in Viet Nam has been adequate, strong enough?

M: Absolutely not, not so long as---. First, let me say, I think we are in Viet Nam because we first surrendered to communism and helped to bring it into power in Cuba. We compromised with it in Korea. We're feeding and clothing it, housing it and financing it in our own United States of America. And so when he stepped up from a few thousand to a half-million troops over there and still had no goal of victory, and we still made no effort internationally through our foreign aid or foreign trade--programs to give strength to our effort in Viet Nam. We caused our men to fight a war, and they still are, with one hand tied behind their backs. So I think his decision in Viet Nam was wrong and has proved to be a total failure.

B: Do you feel this, too, is the liberal influence on the President?

M: Possibly so, yes, sir.

B: I know you have another appointment here in a moment. Is there anything else you would like to add to this kind of record?



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Gift of Personal Statement

By Maddox, Lester

to the

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Signed

Lester Maddox

Date

June 7, 1972

Accepted

Harry Maddox, Jr.  
Archivist of the United States

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Dec. 11, 1972