

This is an interview with James Sasser, Chairman, Tennessee Democratic Party, Nashville, Tennessee. The interview was held on August 20, 1974. It was conducted by Jack Bass and was transcribed by Susan Hathaway.

JACK BASS: I wanted to ask you how significant do you consider the Supreme Court races this year in terms of the Democratic party?

JAMES SASSER: Well, you know, I think that is really yet to be determined, but I think the Supreme Court races were of quite a bit of significance because the Democratic party came up with a strong ticket of Supreme Court nominees. They were popularly received by the Bar and by the people, and they were eminently well qualified, we thought, now I think that is the public conception of them. This Supreme Court group, I think, was sort of a restoration of credibility of the Democratic party, I think to some degree. Or if it was not a restoration of credibility it enhanced the credibility of the Democratic party. Of course they won overwhelmingly but even more significant Republicans didn't make a serious effort against them. It was sort of like the old days when the Republicans would run a token candidates for Governor. They were running a token ticket of three people.

J.B.: Do you know why they did that?

J.S.: Well, I think primarily because we simply stole the march on them. We had moved out early and got good public

relations on this concept of a selection commission which would base their selections on competence and not particularly political muscle, and then we came up with a good group of nominees, two of whom are sort of (inaudible) political, that I think the Republicans really wanted to put on their ticket. But both these fellows told me that they were Democrat, and they wanted the Democratic nomination, and we gave it to them.

J.B.: In the event that Blanton wins this fall, would you consider that Supreme Court . . . the whole operation of the Supreme Court, the selection process and the election itself a turning point?

J.S.: I don't . . .

J.B.: From the stand point of unifying the party, giving it credibility, removing the loser image.

J.S.: Yeah, I think you could say that that was a turning point, or a beginning point, or if it was not the single beginning point, that in combination with other things was the beginning point of the turning around of the Democratic party's political fortune in this state. I think . . . yeah, I think you could say it is a beginning point, from the point of view of the electorate, yes.

J.B.: What sort of budget does the Democratic party operate with in Tennessee?

J.S.: Very, very limited. We operate, I guess our state headquarters expense is less . . . total expense is less than the Republicans spend on postage per month. Probably the average headquarters expense each month of \$1,200.

J.B.: Does that include salaries?

J.S.: Yeah.

J.B.: So your total operation is under \$20,000.

J.S.: Yeah. I'm the State Chairman and you know, I don't even get my expenses paid. It costs me about \$3,000 out of pocket . . . out of my own pocket to be Chairman, not including the lost time from my law practice.

J.B.: In terms then of service to candidates and so forth you provide very little.

J.S.: That's true, that's true.

J.B.: How about research staff?

J.S.: No research staff.

J.B.: Is that . . . do you see that as a continuation of that, or will that change?

J.S.: No, I think . . . you see when I was elected chairman, about a year and a half ago there was nothing. We didn't even have a headquarters.

J.B.: You had a debt didn't you.

J.S.: We had a debt of . . . counting old bills which were overdue and they were threatening to sue us on, we had a debt of probably about \$65,000. We've reduced it now to about \$30,000, cut it in half. We've opened up a modest state headquarters, we have a two or three person staff, we've begun publishing a periodical called Tennessee Democrat that goes out about once ever six weeks, done the preliminary moves to try to compile mailing lists.

J.B.: To whom does it go out?

J.S.: Oh, I'd say about 20,000 Democrats across the state, put together from various mailing lists.

J.B. Is there any sort of dues mechanism?

J.S.: No dues mechanism. Well we do get some input from people who won't be sustaining members, who'll send us \$65 a year, but that doesn't amount to much. What I really want to do is to get an on-going direct mail operation moving, and I think we can do that. Then I would like to do some computeration of lists and get one or two professional full time staff people. All these things I think we are on the verge of doing now.

J.B.: How is voter registration handled in Tennessee, its not on a single state wide basis is it?

J.S.: Each county controls the voter registration and keeps the records and holds the elections and has the registered voters list.

J.B.: So if you want to get a registered voters list you'd have to go into what is it?

J.S.: 95 counties.

J.B.: And there is no filing fee to run for office, am I correct?

J.S.: Well, I think maybe \$25 maybe not even that.

J.B.: So no money comes into . . .

J.S.: No money comes into the party that way.

J.B.: I think in Georgia and Florida . . .

J.S.: Oh yeah, in Florida they have a budget down there probably about . . . John Morlan, the state chairman was telling me about it. They've got a budget for the party down there of an excess of \$100,000 a year and it all comes from filing fees.

J.B.: A fair amount of Georgia's comes from filing fees.

J.S.: But we've come so far. I don't think you realize how far down we were. Now in 1973, for example, in September of '73, we participated vigorously and aggressively in the first telethon, and on a per capita basis, just using volunteers, we didn't have a paid staff, on a per capita basis, Tennessee raised almost as much as any state in the union.

J.B.: You became the Chairman in . . .

J.S.: In March of '73.

J.B.: You had no headquarters, all you had was a debt.

J.S.: All we had is a debt. Well we had one old room up in the Hermitage Hotel, that we hold alot of back around in, that was it. In Fact somebody even came in and cleaned out our files before I came in. There really was nothing.

J.B.: What took so long for the Democratic party to begin to organize as a political party in Tennessee?

J.S.: It just never had a two party system. The Democratic party had been nothing more than a step child run out of the Governor's office. There had never been any need for a Democratic party. There were the ins and the outs of the Democratic party and the ins took care of everything.

J.B.: Well about 1970 you lost the Governorship and two Senate seats, and it was 1973 before anything got started.

J.S.: Well, that's true. I really don't have any explanation for that. I just don't have any explanation for it, other than just a pure lathergy from the defeats, and we went through then the trauma of the reforms and the defeat in '72 with McGovern sort of further paralyzed the party, and it just . . . I don't think anybody got around to realizing that

some of the old people had to go and that we needed to come up with a decent party structure . . .

J.B.: What has been the role of the Speaker and the Lieutenant Governor in the revitalization of the party?

J.S.: Well the role of the Speaker of the House has been quite prominent. Of course the Legislature and Legislators are much better political fund raising than people who don't hold offices. They had given us some financial support, certainly had given me some . . . great moral support, and both of them have been extremely cooperative, and I think that both of them are dedicated to the proposition that we've got to have a real party structure in the state.

J.B.: Does the party itself have a position on the run off vote?

J.S.:No.

J.B.: How about you, yourself?

J.S.: I have mixed emotions about it. I guess I am probably opposed to it. I think a run off law favors the candidate with the most money, and Democrats have a tendency to have multi candidate primaries, much more than the Republicans. If we have to go through two elections before we get to a general election, then we are going to not only be financially behind the eight ball but also just sort of psychologically and emotionally spent and not in much condition to meet the Republicans in November.

J.B.: But if you go into a run off law, do you think the election law might be moved up any closer to the (inaudible) year? Away from November?

J.S.: I just don't know. I would hope so but I don't know.

J.B.: If there'd been a run off this year, and the winner, whoever he was, say if Blanton had won in a run off, would he be a stronger candidate?

J.S.: If he had won in a run off? Probably . . . probably be a stronger candidate, yes. I don't think there is any doubt about that because he would have been forced in the run off to make their peace with the organizations of the other candidates and really take them in whole heartedly and weld them into their organization. Yeah, he would have been a stronger candidate, I think.

J.B.: Is there any single thing that unified that has any more force in unifying the Democratic party in Tennessee than Bill Brock?

J.S.: Well I think Bill Brock is sort of universally disliked by Democrats . . . the people who are real Democrats, sort of the (inaudible) test is whether or not you're a Democrat is whether or not you supported Bill Brock. You can be conservative even conservative, some of the conservative Democrats don't like Brock. So he is a unifying factor in the Democratic party, but the most unifying thing is simply having Bill out of office for four years, and having for the first time, the Democratic party has had to contend with the Republican party, and a Republican party that is better organized, better disciplined, better financed, and we just realized that there is a two party system in this state. I think people are realizing that. That is the biggest unifying factor.

J.B.: The impression that we have gotten . . . that I have gotten is that the defeated candidates (inaudible) we sort of perceive a genuine willingness to go out and support and

work for Blanton if he does anything that almost allows him to do.

J.S.: I don't think there is any doubt about that. I think there is a real feeling among those candidates . . .

J.B.: It's not out of love for Blanton.

J.S.: As a matter of fact, that's true. I think there might have been others who can . . . in that group who were . . . some of the other candidates felt more personal affection towards than they do Ray Blanton. But they're willing to get out and do whatever they can to get him elected at this point. I think that's the way people who identify with the sort of rank and file working members of the Democratic party feel all across the state. They didn't feel that way in 1970 about John Hooker. I think the reason is they never suffered the defeats in wandering the wilderness as long as they have in the last four years.

J.B.: Won't Blanton have to do something to activate them still?

J.S.: Yes, I think he has to do something to sort of energize these forces who want to move in behind him. I don't know precisely what that needs to be. He has got to come up with some issue and some acceptance of all these people, and I think some token of gratefulness for their willingness to sort of move in behind him when no arrangements or no requests for anything on the front end of it. I think he's just got to do a bare minimum to get their support.

J.B.: Has he given any indication of what he is going to do to do that?

J.S.: Well, he has indicated to me that he intends to include everybody in his organizations. That on the county level he intends to have the committees who supported the other gubernatorial candidates come in with his committee and that they form a coalition with the county Democratic Executive Committees on the local level to handle his campaign. Of course that is much easier said than done, but he's indicated that. He has indicated that he wants to make his peace with all segments of the party even those which he would consider the most radical segments.

J.B.: Does that mean that he would go as far as giving a public endorsement to ~~Howard~~ ^{Harold} Ford in the Eighth District?

J.S.: Yes, I think he would do that. I am not so sure that Ford would reciprocate. It was interesting that Ford was the only congressional nominee who was invited that didn't show up for that dinner Saturday.

J.B.: The Turley Brothers were there, weren't they?

J.S.: I don't know, perhaps they were. I don't know.

J.B.: Shelby County could be the crucial, is it perceived as being the crucial factor in this Governors race because of that big majority Dunn got last time out of Shelby, which is not necessarily going Republican again because of different, you don't have the local anger.

J.S.: Well I think Shelby is always crucial in any political campaign in Tennessee because one out of every eight voters lives in Shelby County. So, you know, just by that heavy weight of population down there, of course it is crucial.

I think where Blanton was defeated so decisively in 1972 was failing to get the usual majority in middle Tennessee. In some of the black wards here in Nashville, where McGovern was coming out of North High School, for example, a large black precinct, was beating Nixon 1,000 to 2. Blanton was coming out of there splitting black vote 60 - 40 with Howard Baker. Even some of his rural west Tennessee counties where you'd expect to be some real strong, Baker was knocking his margin down there, in rural west Tennessee. I think that Blanton has got to get the traditional Democratic margin in middle Tennessee. I think the rural west Tennessee have got to come home, and I think that he has got to hold his own in Memphis to win this election. And to hold his own in Memphis, that means getting substantial support of the black wards.

J.B.: What is it that we haven't discussed that you think we need to know to understand Democratic politics in Tennessee?

J.S.: Well I think you sort of have to know history of the Democratic politics in this state, and know that there were two, or perhaps three Democratic parties . . . there was sort of a liberal Democratic party which was led by Estes Kefauver and Albert Gore, which was at odds with sort of the state party. I characterize this liberal party as sort of the Federal Democratic party which concentrated primarily on the senate seats, perhaps some of the congressional seats, active in Presidential elections and Presidential politics. Then the second party was sort of a state party, which concentrated on the state Governor office, more concerned with patronage, state contracts, essentially rather

conservative . . .

J.B.: Was that the court house party?

J.S.: That was sort of the court house party led by Frank Clement and ~~Beaufort~~ ^{Buford} Ellington. Clement had the ability and moved fairly well between both factions of the party. Ellington did not have the ability or savvy or the intelligence of Frank Clement and he was pretty well an old line conservative who felt no real allegiance to the Democratic party, and I think did more to destroy the party in this state than any other single individual.

J.B.: Is there a third faction?

J.S.: No, I guess there were probably two factions within a faction, there was a Clement - Faly faction and an Ellington faction. The Clement faction, I think most folks could live with on sort of the liberal side. It was exceedingly difficult to live with the Ellington faction, because they were very conservative and when they controlled the party machinery, they simply allowed it to wither and die.

J.B.: Is ~~McCorder~~ ^{McWhorter} perceived as a state wide contender in the future?

J.S.: There's some talk that Ned would be a state wide contender. He's talked this time about running for Governor, and then he has talked about running for the senate in '76.

J.B.: Your name has been mentioned as running for the senate in '76. Are you seriously thinking about it?

J.S.: Well, I'd be interested in it, but there is a lot of water to flow under the bridge between now and then, and it depends on whether or not we can elect a Democratic Governor,

who the Republican and Democratic nominees are for President in 1976, and there are a lot of intangibles. I think also we've got to sit down and try to decide who can best handle and beat William Brock in '76.

J.B.: Well the experience the Democrats had this year in the Supreme Court rulings, is there any chance of that leading to . . . in the future to more party participation in this election process?

J.S.: Do you mean in the selection or the election?

J.B.: In the selection process of candidates for state wide office.

J.S.: You talking about judicial candidates or . . .

J.B.: No, . . . in other races?

J.S.: Yes, I think so. There has been some fall out, a healthy fall out, I think from these . . . from this Supreme Court experience in that I think that people now know that they've got to toe the line. In other words, their a Republican, a Democrat or independent and there is not this easy fluidity back and forth between the two parties, that I think a lot of people thought existed in 1970. In the Supreme Court race, I think, and other judicial races have had something to do with enforcing or holding up the example of the enforcement of a little part discipline. Now to really answer your question as to whether or not the Supreme Court race will more clearly delineate the party differences . . .

J.B.: Is there any chance of say the party endorsing a candidate in the primary? Do you think there is any chance of this developing?

J.S.: You mean endorsing a Democratic candidate in the Democratic primary?

J.B.: Right, as sort of being . . .

J.S.: No. I don't see anything like that in the near future. There has been some talk of that, but I don't see that in the near future. Of course, that would be nothing new for us, heretofor the Chairman of the Democratic party and the state executive committee were all committed in the primary to one or the other of the gubernatorial candidates. In 1970 it was John Hooker, 1966 it was ~~Beaufort~~ ^{Boford} Ellington, prior to that it was whoever . . . Frank Clement.

J.B.: Was that being though the Executive Committee being picked by the candidate or the candidate being picked by the Executive Committee?

J.S.: Well the Executive Committee being controlled by whoever the incumbent Governor was . . . or the Chairman of the Executive Committee going over who he perceived to be the leader . . . the front runner . . . whoever way going to get the nomination.

J.B.: But you don't see anything similar to this election process in picking the judicial candidates being used as a pre-primary screen committee.

J.S.: I don't see that because, quite frankly I've thought about that, but the problem is that the party simply does not have the muscle to force that sort of decision. In other words this state all it takes is 25 names on a qualifying petition and you're off and running. If we selected somebody and endorsed him even by convention, which you know some states

do, like New York and others . . . Massachusetts, I think.

There's not the tradition of party loyalty and party discipline in this state to prevent anybody else from jumping in and wanting to run. They have the ability to issue and say look, I am not the baby of the political bosses, I'm my own man, etc, etc.

End of interview.