

Interview number A-0086 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

Jackson: . . . and that sort of thing. I'm not going to . . . I don't get excited about busing.

J.B.: What do you think will be the long range political effect of school desegregation? By that, I mean what will be the effect of younger voters coming into the political process who have been in more integrated schools?

Jackson: They ought to be much more liberal and they are going to be willing to form alliances and, therefore, a man that is responsive and responsible and intelligent and diligent will be able to put together coalitions that will enable black folk to get elected to statewide offices and high positions.

J.B.: Among black politicians, and by that I mean elected representatives, what is the general perception of an organization such as P.A.R.?

Jackson: Well, we don't think that P.A.R. understands nor attempts to understand the hopes and aspirations of black people in depth. We think that they make peripheral attempts to understand based on the interest of the business community. We also think that their research is shoddy and unscholarly because it's biased and skewed to accomplish a purpose that's most times selfish and in the interest of the people they represent.

J.B.: Now, you happen, of course, to agree with their single member district plan, but why do you think

Jackson: Well, I don't, you know . . . not entirely, you know. We should have had more I agree that single member districts are important, but I don't think . . . I don't agree with the plan submitted

by P.A.R. as a special master. We . . . the lines could have been differently where we could have had more blacks in the house and at least some senatorial districts where blacks could have won.

J.B.: Have black candidates in Louisiana been able to attract white votes as yet?

Jackson: I think it's . . . you're talking about on a statewide basis?

J.B.: No, I mean on a local basis.

Jackson: Well, I think to some extent, yes, but I think it's kind of early to tell. I would want to see somebody run statewide and put together the kind of sophisticated campaign that would be designed to effectuate the kind of coalitions that I was talking about before I would emphatically say that a black can or cannot attract white votes.

J.B.: Are you talking about statewide for governor or statewide for some other office?

Jackson: Some other office.

J.B.: Anything specific?

Jackson: No, just any other offices except governor.

J.B.: Would you be interested in doing this yourself ?

Jackson: Well, I don't know. I'm kind of evaluating my own long range plans at the moment to see what I really want to do.

J.B.: Do you want to remain active in political life?

Jackson: Well, that's part of the evaluation. I'm not sure. I think I am able to make a contribution but I don't really . . . haven't really decided that I want to remain in politics.

J.B.: Do most of the congressional delega- . . . members of the congressional delegation have blacks on their staff?

Jackson: I'm not sure. I know Bennett Johnston has a black on his staff

I think Russell Long, Gillis I would hazard a guess, I wouldn't want you to hold me to it because when you say people on their staff I guess you include . . . you're talking about people at the upper echelons or are you including secretaries and all that?

J.B.: Well, I'd say somebody above the secretaries.

Jackson: I don't know. I know the people that we supported recently, we insisted upon that and I can talk knowledgeably about John Brough and Bennett Johnston and Gillis Long. I know they have blacks on their staff. I think that Joe Wagoner might have a secretary or something but I doubt that he has anybody else. I don't know. I doubt if the rest of them Linda Boggs might have somebody on hers. She just got up there. I don't think it's no big deal. I don't think it would hurt them politically.

J.B.: Other than the bill of rights in this constitution, what do you think are the major, most important things insofar as the black community is concerned?

Jackson: Well, I think the education article is very important.

J.B.: Do mean keeping a separate board

Jackson: Well, not necessarily. I just think the whole We have a commitment in the education article to equal education, equal educational opportunities for people. We set forth a whole new rationale in the opening statement for education. We make commitments in terms of a humane teaching and learning environment that we never made before. I think that that is very, very important. The fact that we have reorganized the executive branch or provided for the reorganization of the executive branch is going to make for efficiency and make for sensitivity and allow creative leadership to really exercise the kind

of judgment that it would not be able to make . . . exercise if we did not have it. The fact that we have a very flexible legislative branch under the new proposed document that will allow us to really address ourselves to some of the crucial problems that confront this state. I think the whole document is important.

J.B.: How do you accept the . . .

Jackson: The fact that we have changed the civil service. We increased the board from five to seven and placed black institutions on the nominating panel will insure that we will have more black representation on the civil service board and we will have more jobs. I think we have made some real important . . .

J.B.: There seems to be a lot of predictions that the public is not going to accept the document.

Jackson: I don't agree. I would suggest that maybe if people voted today, they probably would turn it down, but I think once we get the final document out and those of us who plan to work for it get out and explain it to the people and show them their advantage . . . show them the advantages of the document, that they're going to vote for it.

J.B.: The black vote could very well be decisive on this.

Jackson: Very well. Black vote, women and young people.

J.B.: To what extent . . . what is the extent of the political role of black ministers in Louisiana? It seems to vary from state to state.

Jackson: I think that they play a very important role in this state because they are respected. They have a captive audience and people, black people historically believed that the minister is the man that's free to get involved and then to advise them and help make the hard decisions and so North Louisiana they play a very important

role, and I speak of north Louisiana because I know that part of the state a little better than, say, New Orleans. I know the state fairly well. And I think they, you know, a man like Reverend A.L. Davis that was here today, he plays a very important part in the politics of New Orleans.

J.B.: What would be the most single~~ant~~. . significant single black organization in the state?

Jackson: I don't think there is any.

J.B.: Is N.A.A.C.P. strong in Louisiana?

Jackson: It's not as strong as it was ten years ago.

J.B.: Do you national politics?

Jackson: I would think so. I would think so, depending on the candidate.

J.B.: What kind of a candidate do you think it would take?

Jackson: Well, somebody out of the mold like Scoop Jackson, like that. Think it would move back.

J.B.: How about Kennedy?

Jackson: It would be difficult.

J.B.:

the next presidential election

Jackson: I don't know. It's changing, changing, changing.

J.B.: What's the biggest problem you run into?

Jackson: In terms of what?

J.B.: In terms of political problems, in terms of getting things done.

Jackson: Inadequate staff, time.

J.B.: Is this state doing anything to deal with the housing problem?

Jackson: Not enough. But we are doing something. In the first session of the legislature, we created a housing authority that's about to get

It's going to make a real difference, I think. Because we were really moving when Nixon put the freeze on federal loans. But in Shreveport where we've been able to get a lot of federal projects going, it's really improved housing. New Orleans

J.B.: Does any single pieces of legislation . . .

(Interruption on tape.)

What was your response to the moves several months ago by George Wallace both in crowning the black homecoming/^{queen} and making a speech at the black mayors conference?

Jackson: Well, I think it's what I've said all along. I think that the power of black voters is manifesting itself all over this Southland.

George Wallace is a practical politician. Politics is the art of the possible. He wants to let elected for something. He knows that he can't holler, "Nigger, nigger, nigger," any more and get white votes, to say nothing about black votes. So he's going to have to do some changing. I think it's that simple.

J.B.: Have you found that white politicians that do change from a segregationist stance to a position where they recognize they need black votes and begin to seek them, do they change as individuals or is it merely a crass political movement? Do they later change in their attitudes?

Jackson: I don't know because I don't care, if that's an answer. And, you know, I will expand on that. I don't really care how they feel in their hearts because, you know, on a personal . . . in personal relationships I can select my own friends. I can be selective. All I'm concerned about is them doing what is in the interest of the people. So I don't really know. As an educator and as an observer of the political scenes,

I would think that it's impossible for people to behave in a certain way for a period of time, to be exposed across a period of time to new and humane experiences without having these experiences and behavior affecting them somewhat. I have a theory that ^{if} they take all of the public accommodation laws off of the books that this hotel wouldn't resegregate, because I think the people have grown accustomed to having black people in here now. When they were forced to behave in an acceptable and civilized fashion because of the law, but because they behaved in that fashion across a period of time, they have internalized sufficiently from that . . . from the many experiences to now know that it's in the interest of their business to have all people come in here so, consequently, their attitudes have changed. They are practical attitudes but nevertheless they would not resegregate this hotel. Now I could be wrong.

(End of tape.)

This is a continuation of the Alphonse Jackson interview on Tape 39.

JACK BASS: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Alphonse Jackson: One brother and one sister. They all went to college. My brother is a druggist in New York. He owns and operates two drug stores. My sister works at the University campus here in administration. She is assistant to the Vice-President in charge of academic affairs.

J.B.: How did you get involved in politics?

Jackson: It started out of a real deep interest and recognition that if I was going to get anything done in education in terms of making meaningful changes for children, that I had to learn how to understand and believe and manipulate the political decisions. I got started in that manner. First, by involving myself in the voter registration campaigns and local politics. This was in the early sixties, starting in the early sixties.

J.B.: What was the impact of the Voting Rights Act?

Jackson: Tremendous impact in my town. We started

off with about 4,000 blacks registered in this town and at the height of our effort, in one week we registered 7,000 black people.

J.B.: Was this after the Voting Rights Act?

Jackson: Yes. We had federal examiners come in. We increased the voter registration in my home town from less than 4,000 to 35,000.

J.B.: This was in Shreveport?

Jackson: Yes. In ~~_____~~, which is a little larger than Shreveport.

J.B.: Your legislative race in 1972, was that your first elective race?

Jackson: Yes.

J.B.: Would you have run if they had not had single member districts?

Jackson: No, I wouldn't.

J.B.: What is the impact of single member legislative districts insofar as black politics is concerned?

Jackson: Well, I think it makes the politician much more sensitive to the problems of the people. He has to be ever mindful of black voters in his district because they can make a difference. It certainly makes them responsive to the people and places him close to the people. You can't *be* somebody else when you talk to him about problems in his district.

J.B.: The argument is made, if representative of land parish wide, then all of them would have to be responsive to black voters because all of the and some of the money is from virtually all white districts. How do you respond to that and what has been your experience?

Jackson: I don't agree with it. I've heard the arguments, too. I think it is fallacious because people always want scape goats. So what they simply say is, "Well, I'm for it, but the other members of the delegation are concerned about it, or they didn't vote for it." People just aren't that sophisticated to check the voting records of people in Baton Rouge. So they can always escape. The other thing is the effect of the black presence. White politicians behave differently because eight of us sit in the house of representatives because they know that we are going to report to the people on the behavior of the individuals. Especially the people who hail from our neck of the woods. So, they are very sensitive to our presence and consequently will not make many of the racist votes and speeches that they normally would make if we were not there.

J.B.: What percentage is black registration in your specific legislative district?

Jackson: About 87%.

J.B.: Are there any all white districts?

Jackson: No.

J.B.: During Louisiana politics, the day was even 15 years ago, we are going back 25 years ago.

Jackson: Louisiana is a vastly different place from what it was 15 years ago. It's going to be one of the vital states in what I call the new South. Things are happening in this state that would not happen in many of the other states. I point out the fact that the Governor of this state recently appointed a black woman as his press secretary, recently appointed a black woman judge in this state, the fact that he has been accessible to black people and black groups and black meetings. We find in the house of representatives a great acceptance on the part of our colleagues. We don't have any problems socially. Of course, people still have their own personal biases that will manifest themselves. I am not suggesting that we don't have problems because we do, but we have . . .

J.B.: Do you think the problems that you have differ at all in any way from problems of black legislators in other states like California or New York?

Jackson: I don't think they are the same problems.

J.B.: What does that mean to you in terms of change?

Jackson: Well, I think this state has really forged ahead. It has made, I think, greater strides toward freedom than places like New York or California. We are doing things

at the local level in terms of black representation that is not happening in some of the northern areas in terms of having blacks participate in local government. You will find blacks on school boards, on police juries, on town council.

J.B.: What does this mean in terms of government services that are responsible?

Jackson: Already I see a greater sensitivity on the part of local government to the needs of all of the people. Certainly it has not manifested itself to the extent that I'd like to see it, but there is no way that local government is going to be able to ignore the hopes and aspirations of black people. There is no way that they are going to be able to make arbitrary decisions that discriminate against large segments of the population simply because they happen to live in a different part of the town. I see local government very sensitive. We have, for example, in my home town, three blacks on the school board and we have four blacks on the police jury. Because of our political sophistication, we were able to write a plan to desegregate and unitize the school system there that mandated by the courts, 50% of all of the jobs for black professional educators. We have 50% of all of the central office positions including two assistant superintendents right on down the line. So, I just know that the school system in our town is not going to be the same.

J.B.: How do you assess Edwards as Governor and also in terms of relations with the blacks? Do you think that he is motivated by vote, . . .

Jackson: I think the man cares about this state. Because he cares, I think he is aware of the fact that you can't have for a large segment of the population of this state, ill housing, ill clothes, ill educated, and ill fed. So his decisions are based on the fact that he has got to bring everybody along if the state is going to grow. I think the man cares. I think he is sensitive to the problems. I am very proud of him as a Governor. I support his administration.

J.B.: Do you find any difference in attitudes of legislators that do come from all white districts?

Jackson: Well, that is a very rare animal in the house. Of course, the senate is a different place because there aren't any blacks there, but even with people we have a very low percentage of blacks in their districts. Politicians are always looking towards the future. The future in terms of what their alignments are going to be like in the future, or toward the future when I decide to run for something else, and so this temper is leaving the individuals who are not representing large black constituencies.

J.B.: How important do you think it is in regard to the question of whether or not the Voting Rights Act is

extended in 1975?

Jackson: I think it is very very important. I think that while we have made great strides, and because we have changed the way people behave by way of new laws, we certainly have changed in attitudes, I do believe that it is important as a vehicle and as a tool to enlarge the political ability of minorities.

J.B.: Do you see any ways in which the Republicans can attract the black voters in this state?

Jackson: No.

J.B.: What would happen if someone with a moderate image were to run, say, against John Rarick in this district? A moderate Republican.

Jackson: He would probably get some black votes. The difficulty would be to try and fashion a type of campaign that would individualize the voting habits of the people. What I am talking about is splitting the ballot.

J.B.: That takes a high level of sophistication.

Jackson: That's right. I think that day is going to come.

J.B.: Let me ask you this. I was told, I believe it was by Judge Mauriel of New Orleans that there really is no state-wide black political organization in Louisiana.

Jackson: I agree with him.

J.B.: But he said that there is an informal network.

Jackson: That's right, he's right.

J.B.: My understanding is that the black delegates to this Constitutional Convention are pretty much united behind this Constitution.

Jackson: I don't want to speak for black delegates of the Constitutional Convention. I would think by+large that they are going to support the document.

J.B.: Will they campaign for it?

Jackson: I am going to.

J.B.: Would this be the sort of a situation in which an attempt would be made to unify black support around the state?

Jackson: Yes.

J.B.: Why? I understand that you were Chairman of the Bill of Rights Committee. Is that the primary reason why you think it is a good document?

Jackson: No, but I would say to you that is a big factor for me because the Rights Article is the strongest Bill of Rights in the nation. It is even stronger than the federal.

J.B.: I've looked it over, but what specifically do you think are the major points?

Jackson: Well, we have got a strong equal protection clause in there. We have a strong freedom from discrimination clause in there. We have, in the elections article, which is

different from the rights article, a strong section on the right to vote. We asked for strong strong protections for the rights of the accused. The whole criminal section is very strong in the rights article. It places, for the first time, strong emphasis on the rights of the individual over and against the rights of the state and the rights of the government. It has a strong provision against search and seizure, and the right to privacy.

J.B.: When you came to this convention, did you expect that you would be able to get through that strong an article?

Jackson: No, I did not.

J.B.: When you came to the legislature, did you expect to be accepted as well as you were?

Jackson: No, I did not.

J.B.: What does that mean to you? How do you interpret that?

Jackson: I think it means that the people in this state are far ahead of the decisions and ideologies of politicians.

J.B.: Well, I guess my question in a way is whether or not politicians are ahead of the people?

Jackson: No, I don't think so. I think that what it says that because of single member districts and the influence of black political power that people just aren't

going to elect any out and out racist in this state, and this is what I was talking about.

J.B.: How would you explain the

Jackson: Well, I think when you start talking about . . .

J.B.: Let me just add that

Jackson: Well, I think this bears out in my rationale that single member districts are in the interest of the people and all of the things that I have said about it, because these people are far removed. When you start talking about somebody running district-wide or state-wide, you are talking about a whole different thing. Of course, I don't think that a racist can ever get elected Governor of this state. I think that we have put that behind us in the last gubernatorial election.

J.B.: Will there be any attempts by the black electorate to communicate their feelings on issues such as the voting rights of the congressional delegation?

Jackson: Oh yes.

J.B.: Do you stand to get any commitments of support?

Jackson: Oh, we'll get people like Gillis Long, who will vote for it. We will get *him* to vote for it, I am sure on the house side. Bennett Johnston on the senate side will vote for it, I think. I think Russell Long will vote for it. Beyond that . . . I would not be surprised if Congressman Joe Wagoner would vote for it.

J.B.: You mean if the group is about to reverse?

Jackson: I think he is going to vote for it whether . . . we're going to talk to him, but even if we didn't talk to him I think he would vote for it.

J.B.: You mean just looking at the vote because of looking at the registration?

Jackson: I think he is a good politician and he serves his district very well. I don't think, we might have a majority of the congressional delegation voting. People in this state now aren't concerned about the voters' rights. I mean, they would be concerned about it, but nobody is going to exercise any sanctions against the white politicians because he votes for the voting rights acts. People now believe that black people ought to register.

J.B.: Do you see any organized effort state-wide to make another effort at increasing black voter registration? It has more or less leveled off, hasn't it?

Jackson: Yes, but . . .

J.B.: It is still somewhat less than the population?

Jackson: I think that while there might not be a state-wide effort, I think that locally, depending on the issues and depending on the goals for local organizations and local communities, there will always be voter registration

drives in the black communities of this state.

J.B.: This thing is unique in so many ways politically.

Jackson: It is very unique and very political.

J.B.:

Jackson: Yeah.

J.B.: Do you see this as supporting more or less natural populist alliance, more or less blue collar whites, and blacks from the .

Jackson: I think so. I think the day has gone in this state where people can holler "nigger, nigger, nigger," and get anything done or . . .

End interview with Alphonse Jackson.