

This is an interview with T. Harry Williams, conducted on January 10, 1974, by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries. Transcribed by Jean Pruner.

Jack Bass: Can we start by asking you some of the questions that were generally asked . . .

Williams: Yes, sure.

JB: Looking back over that period to 1948, what major political changes have you seen in this state, or in the South.

Williams: You mean since '48?

JB: Yeah.

Williams: Well, I'd have to talk almost entirely about Louisiana, then. I don't have any pretension of expertness on it. In the 1940's up until the 1950's, in this state people, you know, when they talked about their political affiliations, they said, "I'm a Long," or "I'm an anti-Long."

But, really, it was a political nomenclature and if you were a Long you meant you were for social services, high income and corporation taxation, what might be generally called the liberal side. And if you were an anti-Long, you meant you were what would generally be called the conservative side. And, as I see it, that division survived until the late 1950's or around 1960. Beginning in the late 1950's, when the integration issue began, as the slavery issue did a century or more before, to absorb all other issues. And since 1960, as I see it, there is no clearcut division within the Democratic party in this state. Of course, there are, you know, conservative Democrats and liberal Democrats, using the terms very generally. But I don't think they are as clearly defined or differentiated as they were before. Of course, since about

19 . . . well, the middle of the 1960's, you have this almost miraculous turnaround I described in this article, you know. Legal segregation was finally destroyed and, since that time, is a very, very minor issue in politics or even in political thinking. I mean nobody is going around anymore on that attitude of saving the whites from the niggers. That's just impossible. Nobody would even think of it. Since the ending of legal segregation, thank God, it's much more possible now for white Southerners certainly to think of normal, what I'd call normal political issues. Economic issues. Instead of yelling about niggers all the time. God, that's all they used to talk about, you know. It was the one issue and beginning in the '50's and the early '60's, it absorbed all other issues. And the guy who screamed loudest was elected. Everybody was for segregation but the guy who yelled loudest was likely to make it. Now, not always. Well, did make a mistake. He screamed louder than anybody else but he didn't make it. But in other states the loudest screamer did. Everybody was for it, but the guy who was most extreme in his rhetoric was the guy who would win the election. When Bill Leonard got beat in Mississippi, he was for segregation but he didn't emphasize it. His opponent did.

JB: But before that issue absorbed all others, was it essentially . . . you say it was Long, anti-Long, was it a kind of populist, anti-populist? Or didn't it break down that way? Did it break down to economic terms?

Williams: Well, yeah, it was I think an economic division. You said you were for . . . you were a Long, you wanted to see the program of social welfare kept and extended. You favored a lot of the tax burden falling on the corporations instead of the little guy. Well, I don't think of other issues now, but, as I see it, it was largely an economic differentiation.

Yeah. I mean, you know, if you were a Long, you believed the people should rule and all that kind of jazz that Huey and Earl had talked, but . . .

JB: Where is it now? Are we going back to that sort of division?

Williams: Well, no, that's the sort of think that puzzles me. I'm not sure that we've gone back to it where it is as sharply defined as it was before. Now, I wouldn't know how to classify Edwin Edwards ideologically. Or John McKeithan. John McKeithan considers himself a walnut, an heir of Earl Long and Huey Long. But I don't know that McKeithan had a definite political philosophy or ideology or even something less than that. I rather doubt that he did. If he did he never expressed it. And I'm . . . I'd say can't classify Edwin Edwards. I guess you'd say he is a contemporary Southern liberal. I don't know. I don't know how much Edwin Edwards wants to change society.

JB: Insofar as race taking over, the integration issue, during the late 'fifties, did it really predominate in Louisiana beyond that one governor's race? The Jimmie Davis term?

Williams: Yeah, well, you see it starts in the late 1950's, really. And when Earl Long was in his last term and the legislature was beginning to consider measures to prevent it, and at the time the Civil Liberties Union circulated a petition which simply told the legislature not to close the public schools. And it was a petition a segregationist could well have signed if he didn't want to abolish the public schools. Over about 56 or so professors among others who signed it, and all the reaction in the legislature was rabid. General Eisenhower was then President and the deans had to go down and appear before the States Right Segregation Committee, whatever it was called, to deny that these professors were Communists or Communist-inspired or were nigger-lovers. Actually, some of us thought at that time the legislature might abolish the University.

I think now, you know, it was very farfetched. We feared. And then you get, when Jimmie Davis was elected governor, you get the school integration in New Orleans and he makes no attempt to restrain the legislature, which I think Earl or somebody like him might have done. And it really comes to this very ugly height during the Jimmie Davis administration. And I think he is very much to be criticized there, for not trying to hold that in line better than he did. I mean a governor could, a Southern governor could have, excuse me, a great deal of influence on what a legislature did. And Jimmie Davis just let them have their heads.

JB: How do you assess McKeithan's role in that?

Williams: Well, McKeithan was elected over Chep Morrison. Of course, Chep was a segregationist, too, as he said openly when Chep said, "We got to use the rule of reason," whatever that meant. I think Chep was a very weak man. I don't have much admiration for Chep. But McKeithan just murdered him in the campaign and McKeithan accused him of, you know, snuggling up to the people in Washington and then McKeithan got in. He followed, excuse me, a very restrained course on the racial issue. And probably could do it more safely than Morrison could have. Because he was known as a segregationist, you see, a north Louisiana segregationist. And yet, actually, once he got in power, he does not inflame the racial issue. In fact, he plays it down. And he could get away with it, as I say, more easily, I think, than Chep Morrison could have. But, Lord, he just murdered Chep in the campaign, you know, and got Chep on the defensive. Chep made the mistake of answering every charge McKeithan leveled at him, including the one that he had a toupee, you know. I mean, you know, you don't answer all these attacks. You go to the attack yourself. Chep got up on television and pulled his hair in locks. He said, "See my hair is

real. You can come up and pull it if you want to." Ridiculous, you know. I, you know, I don't think that . . . I think McKeithen just thought that way to get elected and acted as he thought he had to when he was governor.

JB: When the term "reform candidate" is used in Louisiana, what does that mean?

Williams: Well, it used to mean somebody who wanted good government, which often meant government by the elite, I think. I mean that was the way it was during the Long period as I remember it. I'm very suspicious of the real reform instincts of the anti-Longs, at least during Huey's period. Earl's period, too. Well, some of them were. Some of them were sincere and earned the title but I think a lot of them when they talked they just wanted to get the Longs out and . . . but that's what they meant, you know. Economical government, good government, gentlemen in power, end of the Long kind of graft, and maybe a more polite kind of graft.

JB: Has there been any element of a genuine reform movement in Louisiana for the Long economic tradition but with honesty in government?

Williams: You mean with a liberal economic orientation and then for honest government, huh?

JB: Right .

Williams: Well, you see, one problem there, you can't have what they mean by honest economical government if you're going to have economic reform. Economic reforms cost money. You can't have a low budget with a liberal populist coalition. You may have a no corruption in government or little corruption in government but with any kind of a liberal coalition group, it would necessarily, as I see it, involve a big state budget, big state expenditures in order to satisfy their constituents. But, well, Huey got that honest government within his framework. So did Earl, but people in

Louisiana don't take this too seriously. People in Louisiana, you know, I wasn't born here but I . . . they have the same psychology, they have an ambivalent attitude toward corruption. On the one hand we deplore it. On the other hand we brag about it.

JB: Well, I think . . .

Williams: Thank God, we've got the best. We've got the best.

JB: A quote from you, I think, Louisiana admits corruption and takes pride in it.

Williams: Yeah, yeah.

JB: Do you think . . .

Williams: I might say, people start bragging about their corruption, I say, "Listen, you ain't got nothing compared to what we got down in Louisiana." I mean, you know. Ours is always funnier, too.

JB: But has that attitude changed at all?

Williams: Well, I don't know whether it has or not. I doubt it. Now, some people, of course, want it to change. I mean, you know, particularly . . . well, I've heard Dean Ross over in Business Administration say, you know, it hurts the state in getting business. That there's this image of the state. And I don't know that it's changed. You know, curiously, I've got a speech I give on Huey Long called "Huey Long and the Problem of Our Time," and I've given it on a lot of campuses. And a part of it, partly for information and partly for interest, I describe the corruption down here. And in Louisiana you get loud appreciative laughter. And this is pretty much true, too, of other Southern campuses where I have been. But, God, in the North they are grim as hell about this. They are shocked when I describe these episodes, you know, that I think are . . . funny among other things. But Louisiana likes it and practically all of the Southern campuses

I've talked to have also, you know, laughed knowingly. But not in the North.

JB: Why is that?

Williams: I don't know. They . . . no, I'll tell you what it is. It's in part what I say in here, the a problem of our time is can you accomplish important change within the democratic framework. And Huey Long said you couldn't. So he kept the forms of democracy but subverted it. In other words he thought you couldn't bring change within the system so, but instead of destroying the system, he kept it and manipulated it. But that's what I mean by the problem of our time. It is a very important question really, you see, can you bring important change within the democratic framework.

JB: Could you also say in here that Lyndon Johnson thought you could?

Williams: He thought you could, yeah. Yeah.

JB: I've been told that Hale Boggs, was the leader of the corporate reform movement in Louisiana back from the time that he was in law school, and he and a group in the late thirties . . .

Williams: Well, now by reform do you mean an honest, efficient government? Is that what you mean?

JB: Non-corrupt government, I suppose.

Williams: I don't know. I've never heard him characterized that way, but it could be. I don't think so.

JB: Is it still realistic to characterize people as Long and anti-Long and use that as a way to explain what happens in elections?

Williams: No, I don't think so.

JB: When did that change?

Williams: Well, about 1960. I, you know, people say is there a Long machine anymore, in Louisiana, and I don't think there is. I think it was a personal

creation of Huey Long and Earl Long and dependent largely on them.

JB: Well, McKeithan picked up some remnants of it, didn't he?

Williams: Yeah.

JB: And that was sort of the end of it?

Williams: Well, he . . . when he ran, he went around the state and talked to a lot of the old Long leaders before Gillis got to them. And got them on his side, and so when Gillis started, therefore, went into a particular town, Gillis would often have to pick up a younger man, because McKeithan had gotten to the original old Long leader first and got him committed. But I don't know whether you'd want to call that a machine, but I don't think McKeithan recreated the old Long machine.

JB: But now are there still people identified as being part of the Long tradition or machine or fraternity, whatever you want to call it, today if you

Williams: Oh, yeah. You could pick Ernest Clements over at Auburn, who is on the public service commission. You identify him. And Ernest is, oh, if you ever heard him speak, he is almost like Earl Long speaking, only his voice is better. But saying, "Hello , you know. And Ernest considers himself an enemy of the corporation and a friend of the people except that he don't like Negroes. I mean if you get him on some of these new contemporary issues. And, you know, this is a surprising thing to me. Actually, I suspect that at Huey's time and for a while in Earl's time, a lot of these old Long people are actually more tolerant or humane on the racial issue than they were later, or than their sons were. Their sons. A curious thing, on the racial issue, in an older time, of course, when the pressure was less intense, people could take a more enlightened or humane attitude than people could later. Somebody did an article on an old populist sheriff

in Texas in the 'nineties who had, well, he had a big support of Negro voters, and he supported the right of Negroes to vote, limited rights for them, but still something at that time. And, eventually, as I remember got shot up about it, in the fight between the Negroes and the whites. And the person who did this article interviewed his . . . the daughter or his granddaughter. Now this gal wasn't nearly as liberal on the racial issue as this old boy had been back in the 1890's.

JB: So the basic political change then occurs toward the end of the 'fifties and the beginning of the 'sixties.

Williams: I think so, yeah.

JB: That's really the breakdown of this whole Long and anti-Long . . .

Williams: Yeah. Well, now, it could appear again. I don't know.

JB: Appear?

Williams: But nobody is going to, you know, propose the ending of these reforms, economic changes that the Longs . . . well, nobody is going to abolish those. What would the division be all about, you see.

JB: Well, the legacy, has the Long legacy in Louisiana been that in contemporary Louisiana politics, so far as statewide races, basically liberal candidates are going to win? By Southern tradition?

Williams: Well, the Longs, Huey Long, Earl Long, I mean, just cut the racial issue off. It wasn't even a part of it, you see. And if he did anything for the Negroes, it had to be done on the quiet, you know, on the side, which Earl Long I think when Earl Long was governor, about . . . Negroes comprised about 15% of the total vote in this state. And this is before the federal pressure. And this was largely because of Earl Long's efforts, that a lot of them got on the ballot in certain parishes. But, I mean, this was something you didn't talk about. In campaigns you talked about these other issues: public works, welfare, and all this kind of thing, increased pensions,

maybe, whatever the case might be. But, as I see it, in the 'forties and 'fifties, this was the way the factions divided. The race issue, you didn't discuss it publicly. Now both Huey and Long, both Huey and Earl realized that, you know, you couldn't help just some poor people, and no, you had to cut the Negroes in on it. But this was something you didn't go out and advertise, if you could help it.

JB: Well, my point is that the last governor's race, the three high candidates were all basically, by contemporary Southern standards would be considered liberal Democrats. Moderate, progressive . . .

Williams: Do you mean Gillis and Bennett Johnston and Edwards?

JB: Yeah.

Williams: Well, now, how would you classify Bennett Johnston as a liberal? Well? I don't think I would. I mean, but again, I say I don't know whether Edwin Edwards has a clearcut set of political beliefs and I'm not sure Bennett Johnston does, either. He couldn't be too liberal to and get elected.

JB: But he projected himself as basically a moderate, progressive type candidate, didn't he?

Williams: Yeah. Well, of course, I've got kind of a prejudice against Bennett Johnston. I think he's a non-hero. And a product of the television age, low-key, quiet, cultured. He's a nice guy. I don't think . . . I think he's a weak man. I don't see him as a strong man and I wouldn't have thought of him as a liberal. Incidentally, you will have to pursue this to get verification for it, but I know it's true. You know who Father A. K. McKnight is?

JB: No.

Williams: In Lafayette, he's a Black and he's a leader of the Southern

black cooperative movement. And, I say, I wouldn't want you to quote me on this, because I don't know whether he would want it quoted without his verification of it. But he called one of my students who did a paper on it, but they deliberately divided their vote and gave some of it to Edwards and some of it to Johnston. Well, I don't know whether they divided it between Gillis and Edwards. Anyway, they gave some of the vote to Johnston, so if he got in the second primary, he couldn't yell "block vote." But I, no, I wouldn't think of Bennett Johnston as a howling liberal exactly.

(Interruption in tape.)

JB: There might be another co. . . they might coalesce again around another Long-type person in the future. You say you don't write that off as a possibility?

Williams: No, no. But, not unless, I mean, Huey Long comes at a particular time when for decades government has done practically nothing for the masses of the people. And Huey Long says government should, and government does. And he establishes that tradition. Government . . . one of the purposes for which government exists is to perform social services. And Earl Long enlarges that, you see. But how do you enlarge it any farther without making some great, drastic change in the system? How do you go beyond that, you see. Under the Long-type leader, what would he propose? Higher welfare, higher pensions?

JB: Probably get into health delivery.

Williams: What?

JB: Health delivery.

Williams: Maybe. But Huey Long capitalized on widespread discontent and did something about it and Earl Long filled it in. But I wouldn't see an Earl Long-type leader coming along to arouse the masses unless there was

some widespread economic dislocation, unless there were a lot of people discontented, who would then turn to a leader who promised to help them.

JB: But you don't see that on the horizon?

Williams: No, I don't. In fact, if in the South or in the nation, in the nation, if there had been during the 'sixties, if there had been a mass leader who would have risen, who would have been from the Right.

Somebody like George Wallace, who has said, "I will save you from disorder."

I think if the disorders of the 'sixties had continued there would have been a

JB: There wasn't any

Williams: a leader from the Right who would have appeared, because, if you know, the only choice people have is between order and something else, they'll take order, if that's the only choice. Every . . . most people would take order.

JB: Well, was the Edwards' tax package, the recent one, taking the sales tax off food and drug and putting more on oil, wasn't that in the Long tradition?

Williams: Yes, it was. Yep, yep. Now, it's also because the Governor would like to get money, of course, and he has seized on this energy crisis. I think, very effectively, and said, "Look here. This is going to help the state and the energy crisis." And ordinarily, he would have had a hell of a time getting those bills through. It's damned hard to raise taxes in this state where it's two-thirds rural. He would have had a hell of a time.

(Interruption in tape.)

It's a shackling thing. It's terrible. It's a

JB: You didn't mention that

Williams: No, that was put in by the anti-Longs.

JB: Right, I'm familiar with it.

Williams: That was put in to prevent Earl from raising taxes.

JB: Can you think of any other major political changes in the last twenty-five years?

Williams: Well, you mean in Louisiana. No, no, I don't, unless you can suggest something to me. What I have told you is, as I see it, the important thing. Of course, you know, it's the end of an era, too, you see, with 1960 the death of Earl Long. You're never going to have people like that again. I don't think you can with television.

JB: So television is a major change, as you see it.

Williams: Yeah, yeah. Television is m . . .

JB: In terms of campaign style?

Williams: Yeah, yeah. I mean, you can't get up and yell and holler like Earl Long did and, because you have to get on television. You can do it on the stump, but No, maybe we invented the age of the non-hero. You know, you've . . . like J. Bennett Johnston. He may be the perfect epitome of it. You know, do you see what I've . . .

JB: Yeah.

Williams: . . . what I mean by the non-hero?

JB: The point I was making before, though, is that the Long tradition resulted in Louisiana in whites, basically poor whites, voting for economic liberals and electing them.

Williams: Yep.

JB: And now blacks, most of whom are poor, are voting, and therefore are naturally going to be voting for economic liberals.

Williams: Yeah.

JB: And so is the permanent legacy of the Longs that Louisianans then retain a basically economically liberal form of government? . . .

Williams: Yeah.

JB: . . . and for the foreseeable future?

Williams: But now, you know, it doesn't work as neatly as all that.

Now, in '64, Gillis carried, what, two of the Negro wards in New Orleans and then he lost others. He didn't carry . . . he didn't get the Negro vote in New Orleans he thought he was going to get, and came out of there with a very narrow lead. And then in other parts of the state, this Negro candidate, Bell, was it? In some of the littler, smaller towns, out-pollled Gillis. And, but I don't know why, at least one ward heavily-populated by blacks didn't go for Gillis *Long* Were they bought up or were they intrigued by something else? I do n't know.

JB: Who did they go for?

Williams: I don't remember now, but I know that Gillis got part of the black vote but not what he expected he was going to get. But I don't know who got the other part. I don't remember now.

JB: Does that suggest that maybe down the road there might be a coalition of blacks and, say, poor whites? Or is the race issue still that hot?

Williams: Well, some commentator said that, in effect, that was the kind of coalition that elected Edwards.

JB: My question was is that the kind of coalition that now dominates in this state?

Williams: What?

JB: Is that the coalition that now dominates in the Democratic party in this state?

Williams: Well, that was a coalition of Negroes and whites that elected

Edwards. I don't know how you would break up the white vote economically or socially, what classes you appeal to. You know? I mean, could you demonstrate where Edwards got his biggest blocks of white votes? I don't know. But one of the purposes of the Negro vote was that it enabled him to counteract this normally big white vote against the liberal candidate, or moderate candidate, in north Louisiana. Because so many of the blacks up there voted for him. And, now, I remember in 1960, when Jimmie Davis ran against Morrison in the second primary, and just for fun, I checked some of the votes in the northern and southern parishes. And the southern parish that Morrison would carry it was maybe, oh, five to three. And then you would go into the north and the population was scantier, practically all white voters there. It was scantier but where in the second primary you would really get a block vote, talk about block votes. And I think it was Union Parish and maybe Lincoln Parish, maybe both. Morrison lost them five to one to Davis. And you would get a, say, a population . . . a parish with a relatively small population like Union. Nevertheless, by delivering a five to one vote for Jimmie Davis, it would wipe out Chep's majority in a more populous southern parish. But Edwards was able to counteract that to some degree. I mean, partially because of the Negro vote.

JB: The Has there in fact been a change in . . . from domination by north Louisiana to domination in south Louisiana in state politics?

Williams: Well, that was . . . this was certainly the case in the last election, yeah. Because south Louisiana . . . well, now

I don't know, I haven't examined the vote breakdown enough to see, but I don't know where the south Louisiana parishes, I know some of them did, went very solidly for the south Louisiana candidate, which they didn't used to do. He might carry them, but not by a big enough majority to counteract

the north. But I think . . . I think Edwards did carry them, didn't he?
Most of the southern part . . .

JB: Yeah, Edwards made a direct open appeal . . .

Williams: Yeah.

JB: . . . in other words, that Cajuns should support Cajuns.

Williams: Yep. Um-hum.

JB: And he made a very direct, apparently the most direct ethnic appeal made in a long time.

Williams: Yeah, yeah. Well, I mean, this was a real turnaround in the last election. South Louisiana, Catholic. Jesus. Supported by blacks.

JB: Do you see any political realignment in this state? What kind of future do the Republicans have? And, to add to that question, do you accept . . . agree with the position expressed by some that Republicans' problem is that they are really still the old-time Republicans or another view, that the basic problem has just been a lack of effective leadership?

Williams: Well, there are a lot of reasons. And, of course, something influences voters, at least of an older generation. Just habit, you know. You're in the habit of voting one way. But I don't see any prospect of a Republican upswing unless, oh, when some campaigner, very attractive Republican candidate for Governor, particularly if the Democratic candidate was not attractive, or had been smeared or something. It might then. In fact, some people, and I half swallowed it, thought that Treen, you know, might win. That all the other disgruntled Democrats would gang up behind him. But even if he got elected, so what? What could he do, you know. Only a very few members of the legislature. Actually, the Republican party. What's it going to be? In . . . as compared to the conservative Democrats, it's no different.

God, when Charlton Lyons ran against Joe Wagner for Congressman from the northeast district, the only question was which one was the more conservative. It wasn't conservative or liberal, which one of these two candidates was the more conservative. They . . . I don't think they marked themselves out a distinct position in politics, you know. What do they stand for after all? What are they going to do if they win? What's their philosophy of government and economics? They don't come over, I think.

JB: How do you assess the administration since 1948 in this state? Obviously, McKeithen had two of them, but if you look at all of them, which ones have made the most changes or the most progress, however you want to measure it, most significant for the state?

Williams: Well, I would . . . I think I would have to say Earl Long. Of course, I was a Long in politics. But I admired Earl. I thought Earl was all right, a good man. Have you ever met Bob Kinnon, by the way?

JB: No. He's on the list.

Williams: Well, he'd be excellent . . .

JB: McKeithen

Williams: Yeah, yeah. Bob would tell you. He's a reform candidate and Bob, I think, as far as I know, is an honest man. Honest conservative. He'll tell you he's a Jeffersonian. I think he probably means it. Not in the pure Jeffersonian sense of the eighteenth century, but Bob is a Jeffersonian. But, why, I don't think Bob as governor did any great harm to this state and I don't know that he did any great good, either. But I would say since the war Earl Long probably has been the most forward-looking administration, according to my prejudiced viewpoints. I would say Jimmie Davis has been the worst.

JB: Was there anything notable in his administration other than his role in the race issue?

Williams: You mean Jimmie Davis? I don't think. I think you would find

it hard to classify Jimmie Davis. Long, anti-Long, liberal conservative?

What is he? You know, he's not that firm.

JB: Well, what did Earl Long do that stands out in your mind?

Williams: Well, without going into detail Of course, Earl always was for higher taxes and higher expenditures. Roads, welfare, education. And when he was governor, somebody said Earl Long probably had never read Machiavelli, but he instinctively practiced it. And Earl immediately got a big tax bill through, right away. And this aroused cries of anguish. A lot of people opposed it. But he had the money. And then for three years he spread out the expenditure of it. And Machiavelli said, "Do all your evil at once, and then spin the good out. People will then forget the evil you did." Or the bad, and they will remember . . . all they will remember will be these goods taken over a period of years. But, I mean, this was expenditures for education, roads, welfare, etc. I think it moved the state along and was good.

JB: How about McKeithan?

Williams: When are you going to see McKeithan, by the way?

JB: Saturday.

Williams: Where?

JB: At his house.

Williams: In Columbia? Yeah. He's a fascinating guy. He's a great storyteller. In fact, if you don't watch him, he'll get you sidetracked, telling you stories that you'll roar at. And talk! He's very conceited. And I used to talk to John and he would tell me about the battle of Chancellorsville. He said, of course, he said I know you know all about this, but let me tell you my idea. He told me one wonderful story about Earl Long saying he didn't have to talk to colored audiences. And then was when McKeithan was public commissioner, service commissioner. And Earl was

telling some of the people in the mansion he didn't have to talk to colored audiences. Says, " I got me the best nigger speaker in the state, John McKeithen." But, I like McKeithen very much personally. And McKeithen Am I taking up your time without giving you anything . . .

JB: No, no.

Williams: . . .very valuable? McKeithen would, he would get a sudden liking for somebody and his associates could never figure out why, you see. Usually they couldn't figure out why, but if he likes you that was it. And, I don't know, for some reason he got a liking for me. Generally came to visit my class, for example. And was very, very nice to me in various ways when I was briefly on the Bicentennial Commission, on which he appointed me Chairman without telling me he was going to do it. And I got off of it eventually but he was very helpful to me there. And a man, you see, who likes to read history, most of it was about the Civil War that he read and on the Confederate side, but he does like history. But, I would say that John McKeithen, I would say it's true of Edwin Edwards, I think they're both aware, you know, that Louisiana and the South is living in the twentieth century in the modern world. And I'm not sure Jimmie Davis was aware of this. You know, it's a new day after all. And there are certain things politicians now have to do and I think John knew that and I'm very sure Edwards knows this. You know, you just don't go around saying and doing the old things you used to do. And I think you see it in the last race in Jimmie Davis' race, I was talking to Ed Stagg after the election. You know Ed Stagg? He's *head of the* Council for a Better Louisiana. You might talk to him. He's a very interesting guy and . . . Ed Stagg. And I said I was surprised at the low vote Jimmie Davis got. In fact, I was afraid he would get in the second primary. And Ed said he wasn't surprised because he said

he had taken the tabulation of the vote Jimmie Davis got in 1960 and he said he figured it would be no more than that and maybe less, because it was an older vote. And a lot of these people had died who voted for Jimmie in 1960. And, of course, he was absolutely right. I would suspect that Jimmie Davis got practically no votes from young voters. But Jimmie Davis never emerged into the twentieth century, I don't think.

JB: What do you think . . . how do you account for the lapse of resistance to integration after it came?

Williams: Well, you know, I discuss it in here and without accounting for it, probably. How far did you get into the article? Did you get to where I quoted Leslie Dunbar? Who said, you know, the white Southerner made his fight and he lost it. So what? He adjusted to it, though. But it is an almost miraculous change.

JB: As an historian, did that surprise you?

Williams: Yeah, yeah. It pleased me. Well, no, yeah, I think it did surprise me, yeah. But once the fight was lost, that was it. I mean, God, you get George Wallace emerging today almost as a hero of the blacks. A great moderate on the racial issue now. Jesus.

JB: What's the future, say, for John Rarick?

Williams: None, I hope. John Rarick is, well, he's a doctrinaire, I think. I don't know how he gets elected in a district like this. Extreme reactionary. Truly, I think, a man who doesn't live in the twentieth century. Incidentally he's from Indiana, you know?

JB: Yeah, southern Indiana.

Williams: Huh?

JB: Southern Indiana.

Williams: Well, I don't know what part of Indiana but he's a resident of

Indiana, yeah. Came down to Feliciana Parish after the war, I guess. But why I wouldn't think he would go anywhere. In fact, you know, he'd be forcing it to hold onto his congressional seat. But he . . . I would say probably John Rarick gets elected, some people still do by appealing to the politics of frustration. You know, you hate Washington, those bastards up there, and here is the guy who gives them hell and so you elect somebody like John Rarick, and you're making a face at the national government.

JB: What's your explanation then of Russell Long's almost leadership role in opposing the Family Assistance Program which, to me at least, was the nearest thing to a national share-the-wealth concept there ever was?

Williams: Yeah, ye ah. Well, Russell is a different generation, a different mold than his father, from his father. Russell is conservative, except on certain areas that are partly a survival from his father, I think, you see, in small businessmen, or for the little businessman, the little guy. And I think Russell voted for the abolition of the poll tax, too. But Russell is just a conservative. And I'm sure he doesn't like some of the things I say about his father being a radical. But . . .

JB: So his role came as no surprise to you?

Williams: No, oh, no. No.

JB: And some argue that it's harder in this state than the other Southern states. I think, I know *this* Southern phenomena to people you make this talk.

Williams: They laugh. Yeah.

JB: They laugh.

Williams: Yeah.

JB: But is the laughter any greater in this state than in the other ones?

Williams: Yeah, oh, yeah.

JB: Why is that?

Williams: Well, you know, it's generally ascribed to the Latin tradition and combination of Latin temperament and a warm climate. I don't know. I'd suspect there is a good deal to that.

JB: But is there a sort of a threshold? In other words, just so much corruption you can tolerate and then the people won't tolerate it any more, or is that

Williams: Well, I don't think you can go out and brag about it. I mean I don't think you can slap people in the face with it. It has . . . it has to be done with a certain style.

JB: Does Edwards have that style? I mean, you know, just this week we read Edwards says, "Oh, that's sort of corrupt and it's just a coincidence," and . . .

Williams: Yeah.

WDV: What's one word for paying his rent at the Watergate apartment for his wife and then the family health thing, the computer services. Those also appeared this morning.

Williams: Yeah.

WDV: And as I read the Times-Picayune, it seemed to be back in Ann Arbor, if I picked up the Free Press and read that, hell, the state would just blow up. I mean, you know . . .

Williams: Yeah.

WDV: . . . the governor would never say things . . .

Williams: Yeah. So . . . I . . . yeah, you know, so what? They're paying his wife's rent, so what, you know. Well, that's pretty good people, they'd say, you know. They wouldn't be shocked by it. But, now you are asking is there a limit beyond which you could steal or . . .

JB: Well, I'm asking two things. Is that tolerance, has it remained consistent during the years or is it going down or up or . . .

Williams: I don't see any signs that it's lessening materially. It may be but I don't see any signs of it if it is.

JB: Even the media today have no impact on that, apparently.

Williams: I don't think.

JB: Well, we heard some suggestion that Lieutenant Governor, who has been described as the Gerald Ford of Louisiana, but is really a potential next governor simply because he is honest and everybody perceives him as being honest.

Williams: Well, I've heard a lot of people say that and I don't know whether he is or not. I don't think he was elected because he was honest. I don't know why he was elected. He, of course, he waged a very big campaign, spent a lot of money, was on television a lot. But I don't think he was elected because he was honest. You know, there is one theory that actually there is less corruption in Louisiana because it's open. And whereas . . .

~~JB:~~

~~Williams:~~ Well, okay, everybody knows about it.

JB: Everybody knows about it.

Williams: Whereas in Illinois or Michigan it may be hidden.

JB: What about in other Southern states?

Williams: I don't know. Now all I can say is this: in Reconstruction the two most corrupt state governments were Louisiana and South Carolina. There was practically no corruption in Mississippi during Reconstruction. But in Louisiana there was a great deal. And I always suspected the carpetbaggers were learners down here. They didn't bring it with them; they were taking lessons. Now I don't know about South Carolina, but there was a lot of corruption in South Carolina. But actually outside those two states you don't get an awful lot in Reconstruction. Those were the two.

Now why South Carolina, I don't know.

JB: But the . . . but corruption in Louisiana was prevalent before the Civil War also?

Williams: Yeah, yeah. Sure. I mean it didn't originate with Huey Long or anything like that.

JB: Well, somebody was telling us the other day that this was something that just occurred in the last thirty or forty years. That this sort of tradition or tolerance for corruption was, really came about in the last forty years.

Williams: Uh-oh. You had it in New Orleans before the Civil War. You had it in New Orleans after the Civil War.

JB: How about . . .

Williams: *New Orleans* ~~were~~ were a typical big-city machine. You have relatively little in state government because there just wasn't enough money to tempt people. I mean, God, before Huey the state governments had very low budgets. There wasn't too much to steal.

JB: Do you see a turning point in race relations? Some people have told us that it was McKeithan's speech during the Bogaloussa march and someone else told us it was McKeithan's speech that I'm not leaving the state and neither are the blacks. And we're going to have to get along.

Williams: Well, I would think those things are more symbols of a deep change than the causes of the change. I think this was just somebody recognizing, you know, the moment is here. I don't think that causes or expressions the turnaround. But those are reflections of a change rather than the causes of the change, as I see it.

JB: Would it be symbolic of a turning point?

Williams: Yeah. Oh, yeah, sure.

JB: From that statement. One other thing, we . . . the role of Victor Busey here is just something we haven't found to exist anywhere else. And we have even been told that he is probably the most single powerful figure in this state, including the governor.

Williams: That could well be. He is certainly very powerful. He has a great deal of power through the labor movement and, of course, he is very smooth, very able and adept. And he's a member of a lot of other organizations. For example, he's very big in mental health. I know a lot of people are big for mental health who ordinarily wouldn't like Victor Busey, but do because of the help he gives them in the mental health movement, you see, and all kinds of things like that. So he spreads out and, you know, he's just not any old caricature of the labor boss. Victor appears like a man of culture. I don't know whether he is but that's the way he appears. I know people who are in mental health who swear by Victor Busey, who ordinarily wouldn't swear by a labor leader.

JB: Is that, is that just a unique phenomenon?

Williams: You mean are there other labor leaders like that?

JB: No, I mean just the fact that here is an individual sort of behind the scenes who is in that much power, and particularly in a state where the governor has so much institutional power to begin with.

Williams: Yeah. What do you mean? Unique to . . . unique to what?

JB: Well, certainly unique to the South.

Williams: Yeah.

JB: If not to the rest of the country.

Williams: Yeah, yeah.

JB: And is his role unique to Louisiana? I mean, there is no tradition for this sort of thing.

Williams: Well, that's right.

JB: The explanation, then, has to be in the man. Would that be a fair . . .

Williams: Well, partly. Except I think the labor vote is pretty powerful. He can influence a lot of legislators. I've seen him operate in the legislature.

JB: Well, there are states where the labor vote is far, far more powerful.

Williams: Is that right?

JB: Well, not in the South, but out of the South.

Williams: Yeah.

JB: Than here and they don't have it

Williams: But I know when he speaks a lot of legislators will listen, though. Now I don't know whether he can swing a vote or what but it can.

(Interruption on tape.)

JB: What does the Bureau of Ethics do?

Williams: Well, it watches over things like conflicts of interest. . . . Somebody who is a legislator has an interest in a company, his office bids, or his company bids for a state job. This could be contrary, maybe, to the Code of Ethics. Government officials in the performance of their duties . . .

JB: Does it have enforcement power or just investigatory?

Williams: I . . . it can issue a decision but I don't know how binding I guess maybe the Attorney General's office would have to enforce it, but I am not sure about that. You might check on that if you are interested.

JB: Getting back to what you said before, some people think that perhaps there is less corruption in Louisiana because it's more open, I mean, what there is is open. What's your view on that?

Williams: Well, I suspect this could be true. Actually you know corruption, God, corruption has been throughout American history. And I suspect that in

some states they say they are sanctimonious about it and they say we don't have corruption, but there is corruption. Either they won't admit it or they hide it. But, why, I can think of corruption incidents in the past, I couldn't you know, in any other state I couldn't document it in the present, but it's got to be.

JB: Well, but the attitude of the leadership, though, is different, isn't it. I mean, you get a quote like the ones we've been looking at from Edwards, say about that rent being paid or about, in this case, the computer services company which is being run by kids that are twelve, thirteen and fifteen years old. I mean, you would have said well, you know, it's just kind of flippantly passed off. Another chief executive could not get away with that.

Williams: Right.

JB: He's seen as providing leadership in a sense and a moral sense.

Williams: Yeah, yeah.

JB: There is another side of this coin I wanted to ask you about also and that is, am I correct that there is a tradition of, some sort of tradition of sending people to jail in Louisiana. I mean, it's almost . . . it's I can't quite get a grip on it because on the one hand, there is sort of this widespread tolerance and you said almost pride, and yet there is this constant attempt to prosecute.

Williams: Well, are you thinking of the Long scandals of the 'thirties or . . . when they were prosecuted by the federal government?

JB: No, I'm thinking more recently.

Williams: Oh, what particularly.

JB: Well, Gremillion, Dodd.

Williams: It is the other side of the coin.

JB: And somebody else mentioned to us that even when they go for the jail sentence and emerge that even then it doesn't appear to be any real political

stigma attached to it.

Williams: Yeah.

JB: That you can get right back into the political . . .

Williams: Yeah, this is true of some of the sheriffs, yeah. They put them in jail and I don't think Jack Gremillion will ever come back.

But Dodd wasn't. Bill Dodd wasn't imprisoned. Did you say Dodd?

JB: Um-hum.

Williams: He wasn't in prison.

JB: No, he wasn't in prison, but they went after him.

Williams: Yeah, yeah.

JB: Same with Garrison in a sense.

Williams: Yeah. But, you know, when Earl was, I don't know what campaign it was, supposedly Edmond Regey over at Crowley brought a big contribution for him from the theater people. And who wanted the state tax on theater tickets slightened or abolished, and Regey gave it to Earl and said, you know, why he was doing it was for the theater people and they, you know, hoped to get some relief. And I don't know what Earl said but anyway Regey took it as a promise and according to the story, after the election he asked Earl to sponsor a bill, you know, to change the theater tax and Earl said he wouldn't it. They needed the money. And Regey said but I told these people when I got this money that you were going to do something about the tax. What am I going to tell them, and Earl said, "Tell them I lied." Well, this wasn't in the papers but, you know, it was told all over the state and the people think this is great, because this was funny.

(Interruption on tape.)

. . . when Chep Morrison wanted to make gambling in New Orleans legal and, of course, draw state revenue, draw city revenue from it. But in order to

do it, he had to go to the legislature and get a change on the charter. Well, this was too much for the legislature, specifically north Louisiana, to legalize gambling. It might be illegal and go on and that was all right, but it couldn't be legal and go on and be regulated. And they wouldn't let him do it. So then, in order to be consistent, Chep had it declared outlawed in Orleans, so whereupon it moved over into Jefferson Parish and I forget what other parish. But, anyway, one of the New Orleans papers sent a reporter over to Jefferson to play the games, where it was also illegal, but open. And this guy came back and would write an expose every day, you know, the kind of thing that wins you a Pulitzer prize. And the response was the sheriff of St. Bernard called a press conference and complained about this publicity Jefferson was getting. And he said, "We've got as much ^{illegal} gambling in St. Bernard as they got in Jefferson but they won't expose us." Said, "I may have to take out advertisements in the New Orleans papers." And, God, here virtue, you know, Jesus. But nobody in south Louisiana was stopped by gambling. You couldn't abolish gambling.

JB: That's like drinking in Charleston.

Williams: Yeah.

WDV: You think then it's just a cultural matter and follows the tradition?

Williams: Yeah.

JB: How do you assess the role of Leander Perez?

Williams: Well, I, have you seen this new book by James Conway, The Life of Leander?

JB: I've seen a review of it.

Williams: Yeah, well, I wrote a review in the Washington Post. They never sent me a copy of the damned thing. Well, I said in this review essentially this: that I hoped the book wouldn't lead people to take Leander more seriously than he should be taken. That actually he was a creation of the

national media, with his extreme statements. And that he didn't have . . . he didn't actually have very much power in Louisiana. And people in Louisiana accepted him as a national phenomenon. He only had some power but he wasn't nearly as powerful as he painted himself to be and as the national media painted him to be. Leander is a fabulous character. Oh, God, just fabulous, incredible. Man of principle. Dangerous. Men of principle are dangerous because they won't compromise. And to make democratic politics work you have to have a lot of compromises, and Leander wouldn't compromise. He was not a typical politician and he didn't have to be down there. He was ex culpea . Truly a Latin American principality he ruled, you know, like a Latin American principality. And Leander didn't have to campaign particularly; he ruled. But he had a limited influence in government, in state government, but that's it. But Leander was never a twentieth century. Fabulous man, though, Jesus. I just met him once. I went down to interview him. He asked me to speak at a dedication of a statue of Beauregard in St. Bernard, he was giving to the parish, Beauregard's parish. A kind of affair. P. G. T. Beauregard, dates of his birth, death, and then in much bigger letters, "Donated by Leander H. Perez." And I just did it in order to interview him. He drove us down from New Orleans. But I interviewed him in the coffee shop of the Monteleone about the "round robin" and he said, you know, there were two round robins. And I said, "Yeah, Judge. I think maybe you and I are the only two people alive today who realize there were two round robins." And I said, "I've heard, you know, many versions of how it originated and I'd like to hear yours." And he got up. He said, "What do you mean, my version? I'm going to tell you exactly truth and if you don't choose to accept that, we can terminate the interview right now." Sometimes in all these interviews you may have

to humble yourself, you know, to get what you want. I said, "Judge, what I meant by your version, it was the only one. Please sit down." And I don't think he was ever going to leave but it was his little act. And so he drove us down to St. Bernard in his big limousine. It was weird. The minute we crossed the parish line motorcycle cops started coming out from behind trees and signs, formed a cloud, a screen around us. We drove down through St. Bernard in majesty. Great. People would come up and touch him reverently. Say, "Judge, are you all right? We need you." He was going to save them. He was going to save them from the outside world.

JB: Is there anything else about Louisiana politics you want to comment on?

Williams: No, I really had great hopes for Gillis. I thought Gillis would have been a good governor, a good leader. I was sorry he couldn't make it. I don't know what's wrong with Gillis that he doesn't come over but, do you know?

JB: Unh-uh.

Williams: I don't, either. For some reason or other he just doesn't, to use this horrible phrase, project. But he doesn't do it. Gillis is very able.