

Jack Bass: Key said that the Negro is the key to understanding southern politics. The change in the status of the Negro and the reaction to that change has been the focus on what has happened since then. In your view, what has been the effect in the South and in Louisiana in particular of the role of race in politics?

Edwin Edwards: I don't think there's any realization or fruition of great fears of outspoken segregationists in that you don't see mass intermarriage or "mongrelization" of the races that was feared. This movement was anticipated, that if you integrated schools, that black and white children would all go home together. We have still more or less an integrated vertical society, a society integrated vertically in the shops, in the schools, in working areas, shopping areas, but at the close of business, each goes his own way. The main difference being that sidewalks, shops, movie theaters, conveniences, accommodations that used to belong solely to the white man are now used on a mingled basis by black and white with greater utility and greater understanding by both. I think there's less resentment of blacks by the white and much less fear of whites by blacks. That's number one. Number two is that the Voting Rights Act of 1965, in my opinion, probably was the only effective civil rights legislation that has ever passed. I think the rest is so much garbage and rhetoric. The VRA passed in 1965 and it extended in 1970 to provide vehicle for registration for hundreds of thousands of blacks in the South and that provided the catalyst for something far more important, which is black power at the polls, not only in electing huge numbers of black legislators, local officials and even now some Congressmen, but more important in making white politicians sensitive to their needs and desires, and that of course, has served to elevate the status of the

black, not only to the quality of his schools, but to the quality of his roads, and sewer systems, his water systems and housing conditions in which he has been living.

J.B.: You said you really didn't think previous civil rights bills amounted to much, but how about public accommodations section and the employment section of the 1964 act?

Edwards: I don't think it had anything to do with the ultimate successes of blacks. I think it was the voting power that really made the difference.

J.B.: What do you think the future trends are insofar as race relations and political effects are concerned in the South?

Edwards: I think trends have been established and are going to continue. They will continue to enlarge themselves in areas where black populations begin to converge on white populations in numbers and in areas where blacks constitute a significant minority, but not a majority, but in areas where there are an insignificant number of blacks, I don't think you'll see much change.

J.B.: How about white reaction to the changes in the black situation?

Edwards: I think white reaction has been remarkably good. There are exceptions, of course, again I must go back . . . the Voting Rights Act which implemented the right to vote for blacks made it impossible for radical white politicians to use blacks as an issue anymore in areas where there is a heavy black population. Hence, instead of white politicians stirring up trouble, encouraging antagonism and continuing the fight, they have taken the lead in accommodating to these changes. It's a fact of life that when major public officials on these issues either remain silent or constitute sobering influences rather than become firebrands, no population, white or black, it doesn't make any difference, yellow, bron, or whatever, really gets stirred up. It's got to be somebody leading them out front or

making a certain issue popular or making it one that is brought out in front in the open.

J.B.: I understand you're one of the first governors from South Louisiana?

Edwards: I'm the first governor elected from the southern part of the state in 30 years, but actually, the one elected 30 years ago wasn't a southern governor in the sense I am, in that he was white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and conservative, and was from the western part of the state, had been reared in the central western part of the state and then moved back to the Lake Charles area. I'm the first Catholic in probably 75 years, first person of Cajun descent in probably 75 years, first member of Congress, first person never to have run a statewide race before. I was elected by a coalition of blacks, farmers, people from south Louisiana, of French Cajun descent.

J.B.: How did you put together a coalition of blacks and Cajuns?

Edwards: I didn't really put it together so much as it became in their interest as the campaign developed to support my cause because I best represented things they were concerned about. The Cajuns felt they had been left out of the political processes throughout the years because they had divided themselves and the Protestant northern part of the state had solidified themselves and relentlessly just taken over the statehouse by holding together. The blacks felt that the candidate willing to seek out their support, woo them, speak out for them, had for those same reasons been defeated and they had never gotten a bite of the apple, so to speak. And here came along someone of Cajun descent who rather than deny allegiance or association with Cajuns was ready to openly admit his heritage. I was making overtures and had a record as a city councilman,

state senator and member of Congress who showed a willingness to accomodate black needs, which in most instances were the same as the needs of the poor whites.

J.B.: Did you consider you campaign a basic Populist type of campaign?

Edwards: I didn't, but in retrospect, there's no question that it was. I wasn't making a conscious effort, but it just developed that way.

J.B.: Do you think this appeal is going to have wide ranging appeal throughout the South in the next decade?

Edwards: I think it's going to have wide ranging appeal thoroughout the country. I think there's a growing awareness on the part of the average citizen that big government, whether state or local or national isn't doing enough to spread wealth and make it possible for Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen to hold on to a big enough percentage of their earnings and result of their efforts.

J.B.: What has been the effect of reapportionment on the government of Louisiana?

Edwards: It's had basically, I think, some bad effects. A good example: Jefferson Parish, second only to Orleans, before had 10 representatives who could represent a parish-wide view. The parish now has been split up into anumber of single member districts and people are confused because they don't know which of those fellows represent their districts and there's little opportunity for them to correlate their efforts because each man now has to address himself solely to the problems of his district, and I think that while in many respects, there's some benefits that come from that, we've lost a lot because people have lost an allegiance to their elected representatives and senators, and senators and representatives have lost an ability to move areawide or regionwide on legislation.

J.B.: How do you evaluate the status of two-party politics in Louisiana at this time?

Edwards: Nonexistent at this time. There are four Republican legislators at this time. One Congressman. We were the last state in the Union in this century to have a Republican Congressman.

J.B.: What do you think has been the effect of Nixon's so called southern strategy? Basically, it's an appeal to a traditional role of race, or the basis of race in the South, to go easy and pull back on school desegregation and so forth?

Edwards: Well, I think that the effect has been to convert the South from an almost solid Democratic stronghold to an almost equally strong Republican stronghold, on a national basis. That has not been the effect of Nixon's strategy. I think Nixon's strategy evolved from that philosophical change in the South. A cart and horse deal. I believe there would have been that kind of voting bloc for Republicanism absent any kind of Nixon strategy.

J.B.: Why has there been no real development of a Republican party on the state and local level in Louisiana?

Edwards: Because the Louisiana Democratic party, as distinguished from the national Democratic party, has within its ranks all the people with anything to offer on the political scene. 98% of the registered voters in state are Democrats. Not enough to build up a nucleus of candidates for the Republicans on the local level.

J.B.: Louisiana seems to be an exception to the political role of organized labor in most southern states. We believe organized labor has not been very effective in most southern states, but my understanding is that this is not the case here. Am I correct on that and what is the role of organized labor?

Edwards: Organized labor is very effective in Louisiana. I don't know that on balance it is a plus. It's one of those things that used to be like the black vote. If you had the black vote you lost so many white votes and it was a minus. It's that way with organized labor. Let's say organized labor is effective for 50,000 votes. Once you become branded as the candidate of organized labor, you lose business communities, the country club set, the people who are anti-organized labor, the difference being that organized labor people will actively work for your campaign and will get behind you and support you. As you know, I had the support of organized labor, but I can't say that contributed to my success.

J.B.: Do they contribute financially?

Edwards: Not materially. You're talking about maybe \$5,000 in a governor's race. That's really nothing.

J.B.: Do they contribute effectively insofar as workers are concerned?

Edwards: Yes. Where I got the biggest help out of organized labor was in New Orleans and in Shreveport and Monroe. Very effective in Monroe because everyone else was already against me. I was looking for any kind of support. It was almost a desert area, and I could build the nucleus of a campaign around organized labor and could keep from getting washed out. I would say organized labor has tremendous effectiveness with the legislature.

J.B.: Why?

Edwards: Very simple. They work at it. They have a most effective president of the AFL-CIO, Victor Bussie. He is knowledgeable. He helps legislators with other problems they may have. He knows the first names of wives and members of the legislature, and whether they like to hunt or fish. He just spends time at this.

J.B.: Is the effectiveness primarily because of the personality of one man at the top?

Edwards: At this moment, yes. Very possibly it's the lack of leadership at the top in other states. Also the converse is true, the dearth of leadership in the Chamber of Commerce, the Manufacturers Association, the organizations you expect to yield some power and influence. They on the contrary, spend no time courting the legislature, finding out about them. Maybe they change their officers every year . . . just serve.

J.B.: Is there an effective labor newspaper in Louisiana?

Edwards: No. Numerically, they're not that strong. Probably more on a percentage basis than average southern states because we have no right to work laws.

J.B.: Where is the real political power in Louisiana, more or less in institutional terms? Is it banks, labor? Who are the dominating forces that are effective in political decision making?

Edwards: There are none except to some extent Victor Bussie representing organized labor, and black groups. Insofar as banks, manufacturers associations, farmers, the Long dynasty, the anti-Longs, its all vanished. There's nothing left, it's a very independent area. One succeeds or fails on his ability to convince the general public that what he proposes is in their interest.

J.B.: Where does political financing come from?

Edwards: The oil interest? Not to my knowledge. There are so many restrictions on corporations making contributions, prohibited by federal and state laws in Louisiana. The average citizen thinks of the oil companies giving hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign

contributions. It's been my experience that presidents or vice-presidents or general managers of companies out of their own pockets or free will collect four or five thousand dollars and give it to each of the top two or three candidates. That's the extent of their contributions. It's nothing like the average fellow thinks.

J.B.: What about the influence of the banks with the legislature?

Edwards: Very little.

J.B.: In Louisiana, there is a strong executive?

Edwards: My office is where the action is.

J.B.: Has reapportionment affected local government?

Edwards: Very little, except that single member districts have allowed blacks to get elected. On citywide, or parishwide bases, they wouldn't have been able to get elected. There are eight blacks in the legislature.

J.B.: Do you see Republicans gaining any strength?

Edwards: No, they have no source of potential candidates. A lack of leadership and what few people they have are the oddballs and very conservative people.

J.B.: Louisiana's voting behavior in national elections hasn't been much different from other southern states.

Edwards: It's been solely a resentment against encroaching federalism and the race question, but those two matters are now behind us, and now there isn't any more on balance to be gained from supporting Republican presidents than Democratic presidents on the race question.

J.B.: Do you view Louisiana at this time as basically a one-party state?

Edwards: Yes. Only people who vote Republican are those whose candidates lost in the Democratic primary and are disenfranchised Democratic nominees. I have proposed, in interest of helping those who are philosophically in the Republican party and don't want to lose the franchise. (describes proposed election procedure and an open primary which would eliminate general election. Two top candidates would have a runoff, even if in the same party.) I don't think that the Republican hierarchy really wants to open up the party. . . Long's influence is dead as a force and when someone says that the Longs are supporting John Brown and everybody should get with him, that doesn't cut a thousand votes. Russell Long remains significant, but not controlling at all.

J.B.: How did you run in northern Louisiana?

Edwards: I got about 40% of the vote, a combination of farmers, organized labor people, blacks and the few liberals . . . very few significant campaign issues existed between Johnson and me. The issue was corruption in government. It boiled down in the first primary to which of the nineteen candidates presented the best hope for a clean administration. Johnson and I emerged as the top two, and in the second primary, I won.

J.B.: Is the Democratic party in Louisiana factionalized? Are there two basic factions?

Edwards: There are really no factions. I believe there are as many factions as registered voters. It's very loose knit. People are registered as Democrats because that's the thing to do in Louisiana.

I don't think it means any embracing of ideology, it means nothing at all to the average voter as far as any loyalty. He feels no compulsion at all to vote for the Democratic nominee. Blacks are the only significant solid Democratic vote. They will vote for the Democratic candidate over the Republican everytime in overwhelming numbers.

J.B.: Do they tend to be unified behind one candidate or another in the primary?

Edwards: They tend to be. This time in the first primary, they were pretty well fragmented. Gillis Long got the biggest percentage. A black candidate and I split for second. In the second primary, I got 65% and Johnston 35%. That was the most fragmented ever, but I think it was a deliberate ploy. The black leadership in the state thought both Johnston and I had a proper attitude toward black voters and that either of us if elected would give them a fair shake and hence they divided their allegiance, I think . . . divided on an area basis. In Johnston's area, he had it. In New Orleans, they split, and in my area, I had it all. I can't prove this, but I think they just got together in New Orleans and divided up the city and said, "Look you go with Johnston and we'll go with Edwards. If Edwards wins, we'll take care of you and vice versa." They just wanted to have some input into the governor's office regardless of who won. Now, if I had got into a runoff against Taddy Aycock, the lieutenant governor, or Jimmie Davis or some of the other fellows running, I'd have gotten all of the black vote. Or Johnston would have have, or Gillis Long, against one of those other fellows. When Johnston ran eleven months later in the Senate race, he got all of the black vote.

J.B.: What role does the Democratic party play in Louisiana ?

Edwards: None, except to take qualification papers, promulgate who is qualified for what offices and up to the last McGovern debacle, to have some influence as to who goes to the national conventions.

J.B.: Who are the key people in local politics?

Edwards: The sheriff in each instance is by far the most powerful parish official in the state. That's especially true in rural areas. Followed by the assessors. Mayors of towns have very little political influence. I would rather have the support of the sheriffs, but people have become so independent minded. Television has put the candidates in the livign room with such impact and such clarity that people pretty much make up their own mind. I had some areas where sheriffs were openly supporting me, because sheriffs all disliked Bennett Johnston because he had ruled against supplemental pay raises that they all supported, but sheriffs couldn't get people in their areas to support me because Johnston was more their type. There was a reluctance on the part of the average housewife and businessman in norhtern Louisiana to support me. About half of the white vote is Cahtolic. Blacks are about 20% of the vote, mostly Protestant. . . two other things, I would suggest you read the Lamar Society. I'll give you a synopsis. It relates to how the South after the Civil War went through nineteen years of Reconstruction, then exploited by norhtern financiers, then about the time World War I came, it was getting on its feet. By the time we got over that, the Depression came and by the time we got over that, World War II, then the agony and marches of the 50's and 60's and then the Vietnam war. Thr hurust of that being that now all of that is behind

us. We have no depressions, no civil wars, no Reconstruction, no existing war that we can say is impeding our progress. Now for the first time in 100 years, the South can shape its own destiny. We don't have to depend on national socialism to get us out of a depression, our young men are not off to a war, we don't have the marchers from the North, we've settled those problems, we have learned to live at peace with the black and now the South has for the first time no excuse to blame for failures and no reason not to succeed. It impressed me a great deal. It epitomizes what in my opinion is the history, the problems of the South that it has had to wrestle with and they are now behind us and we really have an opportunity to grasp. The second thing. The country found its independence in a crucible of real southern patriotism, in Virginia and the Carolinas and Georgia and people like that, people who were really leaders in the move against the King of England and in writing the Constitution and forming the government. Until the southerners began to lose their influence in Washington, the country was growing by leaps and bounds in its infancy, and suddenly something happened and we lost our national power and prestige and the Civil War came along. Then for decades thereafter, the South had no leadership on the national level and no input in national policies. Then the Democrats began to use the solid South to insure its elections and as a result, the Democratic party catered to the South and succeeded in national politics and the South had some input into national policies. Two things were happening. One, the Democratic party nationally was successful and two, I believe the nation was better off because I believe the country was better off because of the balance we provided.