The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History

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Blue to Red Oral History PRoject

Mike Beebe

Interviewed by John C. Davis

August 5, 2021

Little Rock, Arkansas

Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio and video files, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at http://pryorcenter.uark.edu. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio and video recordings in addition to the transcripts to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/ redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.
- Brackets enclose
    - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing; and
    - annotations for clarification and identification.

- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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John C. Davis interviewed Mike Beebe on August 5, 2021, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me is former state senator, attorney general, and most recently the state's forty-fifth governor, Mike Beebe, who served from 2007 to 2015. And on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, I want to thank you for sitting down with us for this project.

Mike Beebe: You bet. It's my pleasure. The Pryor Center endeavor is a gem and a jewel for our state, and everybody associated with it should be congratulated because it's gonna provide an actual visual history of so many important parts of what Arkansas is and has been. And future generations will be able to enjoy it forever and ever and ever.

[00:00:43] JD: We're here today, primarily, to focus on the historic partisan shift in the state of Arkansas that we've seen before our eyes in the last decade or so. And in particular the Pryor Center project is looking at the shift from blue to red in the Natural State. It is focused on the years between 2005 and 2015 . . .

MB: Sure.

JD: . . . which fall right in there in your era as governor . . .

MB: Sure.

JD: . . . of the state of Arkansas as the last Democrat to date that has won statewide election. And so you'll offer a unique perspective and viewpoint on what it is to be in the General Assembly, to serve in a constitutional office, to be the governor of a state when you're the clear majority party. But you'll also have unique insights with us that—in regard to your second term where the majority began to dwindle to the point where the Democrats were in the minority in the General Assembly . . .

MB: Sure.

JD: . . . and you had to build bridges to do some significant legislative work in those last few sessions. So again, we're thrilled that you're sitting down with us. [00:01:51] What is your earliest political memory in Arkansas, [*MB laughs*] if you go back?

[00:01:55] MB: Wow. I think my earliest political memory was—about Arkansas was when I was in high school, and somebody, some weird candidate that I remember that had a car that apparently had the frame bent because it looked like the car was going sideways down the road, was running for governor. And I can't, to this day, remember what that person's name was. Obviously, they didn't score well. [*JD laughs*] But my first

political memory was some local person or a person from that area around Newport was running for governor and didn't have much of a chance. I think that was my first actual memory of anything political. My first political, I guess, engagement was remembering the 1960 Democratic Convention when Kennedy beat Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination, 1960.

[00:03:03] JD: Moving forward a little bit there, do you recollect—and Arkansans have a unique history where the Democratic Party dominated for so long that . . .

[00:03:13] MB: Yeah, I've got a theory about all that. I don't know how accurate it is. But if you recall, the South, from Reconstruction forever, was heavily Democratic, the entire South, Arkansas, of course, included. And that changed in 1964, started to change in [19]64, when Dixiecrats broke off from the Democratic Party. It was a reaction, if you will, to civil rights. There was an anti-civil rights sentiment in most Southern states, particularly Southern states that had a significant Black population. And we saw the Carolinas and the Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana transition as a reaction to Democratic federal civil rights legislation. [00:04:12] Arkansas never succumbed to that at the time. My theory is that instead of having a 30, a 35, or 40 percent Black population, Arkansas

had a 14, 15, 16 percent Black population. And so the fear, the negative reaction to civil rights for African Americans didn't manifest itself in Arkansas like it did in those other states. So they quickly, throughout the late [19]60s and then to this day, gravitated to the Republican Party as a negative reaction to Democratic civil rights legislation and activity. Arkansas didn't do that for the reasons that I think I stated. We had a smaller Black population, and the white population didn't have that visceral reaction that the other Southern states did. [00:05:07] I think the second component was we had an extraordinary run of pretty progressive, educated, Democratic talent, particularly at the top of the ticket, with Bumpers and then Pryor and Clinton and so on down the line. So I think for those reasons, Arkansas resisted going the way the rest of the South did. And if you'll recall, all through that time period Arkansas remained a heavily Democratic state. Five out of our six congressional seats were consistently held, with an anomaly or two here like a Jay Dickey, but for the most part, consistently held by Democrats. Only Northwest Arkansas consistently elected a Republican, and that was John Paul Hammerschmidt forever and ever. So that combination of not overreacting by our predominantly white population to the civil rights legislation coupled with

extraordinary Democratic talent, I think, kept Arkansas in the Democratic fold against that tide throughout the South.

JD: And as you said, it was really decades.

MB: Yeah.

JD: I mean, Arkansas, you know—and if you're measuring when the state turned Republican, it lagged thirty years in some cases.

MB: Precisely.

JD: You know, twenty years in a few states, but certainly our neighbors had turned more gradually perhaps, but much earlier on.

MB: Yes.

[00:06:44] JD: And so you touched on the idea of—Diane Blair and others call them the Big Three with Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton. And Governor, I would think you would fit in there [*MB laughs*] as somebody who continued that baton, carried it forward for several more years and still enjoyed success even when your party was losing in the ballot box in those last few elections. But before that, you served in the General Assembly as a senator for twenty years.

MB: Twenty years.

JD: Close to it.

MB: Twenty years.

JD: And you also overlapped in service with Mike Huckabee when he assumed office of governor, but before that, lieutenant governor.

MB: Right.

JD: And the 1990s, you know, we look at that. We see that from really, as you mentioned, [19]64, [19]66, [19]68, Republicans in Winthrop Rockefeller, most notably, sees a little success, becomes a governor, first time a Republican's been elected governor in Arkansas since Reconstruction. You see John Paul Hammerschmidt the same year have success in [19]66 and go on to have a very long career. But as you said, he's sort of isolated in that Republican pocket in Northwest Arkansas.

MB: Sure.

JD: And after that, it's fits and starts, where maybe a Frank White wins in 1980 and then loses again in [19]82. Or you would see a few congressional seats for a couple of terms perhaps be Republican and return back to Democratic hands. So you know, it was a story of fits and starts. The 1990s, were that era where a lot of political scientists and historians said, "Well, any time now. Any time, Arkansas is going to go red."

MB: Yeah.

JD: And we don't really see it until really Mike Huckabee in the [19]90s. But again, there's sort of a pin put in that success that

the party has until the 2010s, right? So we have this period there where we have a Mike Huckabee as Republican governor who's working with overwhelmingly Democratic General Assembly and is very much alone if you were to look at prominent Republicans in the state, with exception of maybe Tim Hutchinson and, as you said, Jay Dickey and a few others who gained some traction. [00:08:53] What was it like being in the General Assembly as a Democrat working with one of the few, at that point, Republicans who not only had been elected, but really had assumed the position in very unusual circumstances.

[00:09:07] MB: Yeah. Well, you talk about assuming the position in unusual circumstances. If you recall, Clinton was elected president, and a lot of Arkansans traveled the country. And certainly a lot of Arkansans were deeply involved, even if they didn't travel the country, in a native son running for and ultimately being elected president. And so my theory is they got all worn out with politics. I mean, they had lived and breathed this presidential election, and they were worn out. Jim Guy Tucker had been the lieutenant governor. All of a sudden, he's elevated to governor because there's a vacancy since Clinton's going to the White House. So that leaves the lieutenant governor's office open, and under the constitution, that's the one

other office that you have to have a special election for. A governor can't appoint like you can auditor or something like that. And so there's a special election that nobody voted in. If you'll go back and look at the numbers, there's a special election for lieutenant governor that was very poorly attended by our voters because they were worn out. And Huckabee wins it. The first since Frank White to win that statewide office, though in Frank White's case, it was governor. But so Huckabee is, as you say, alone in as lieutenant governor. Now historically the lieutenant governor belongs to the Senate because he's the ceremonial presiding officer. So there's an affinity between that office and senators. And so we had that with Huckabee. We had good relationships. He was ours. He was our constitutional officer. So then when Tucker resigns with the indictment or with the conviction, then Huckabee assumes the governor's role, and we had that history of working together and liking him. And he had a great sense of humor, always has had a great sense of humor. So it was a fairly easy transition to work with Mike Huckabee. [00:11:25] And he didn't know much. You know, as lieutenant governor, he didn't have much responsibility. It's all pretty ceremonial. And so he relied more on the Senate because of his relationships with the Senate, and then certainly the

House. And he had an administration in the bureaucracy, if you will, particularly DF&A and other major agencies that had been there a long time and worked under Democrats. And so he was, to some degree, dependent on some of those forces to help him get up to speed, to get educated. Now he's a smart guy, so he could learn quickly, but there's no substitute for that experience. [00:12:13] So what was it like for me, personally, to work? It was easy. He listened. We had our differences. There were a couple instances where he did stuff that I thought was pretty stupid. But for the most part, the relationship was good, the working relationship was good, and it was a relatively easy transition for all the reasons that I just stated. And I think he felt a camaraderie with us just like we did with him because of that. Now there were some issues, particularly some social issues where there was a whole lot of posturing, but we overlooked a lot of that. You know, you overlook it and you go on and work together for the benefit of the state. And he did the same thing.

[00:12:59] JD: And in that same election cycle that you started on there with [19]92, the state voters not only send their—the boy from Hope to DC, but they also begin the implementation process of term limits.

MB: Right.

JD: And what effect do you think term limits had on the rise of the Republican Party eventually . . .

MB: Well . . .

JD: . . . in the state? Do you think it mattered?

MB: Yeah.

JD: Do you think . . .

[00:13:22] MB: I think term limits had a major effect. First of all, anecdotally, if you talk to people—"Well, I didn't want to get rid of you. I was trying to get rid of those folks from Washington when I voted for term limits." I mean, I heard that ad nauseam. I said, "Well, you didn't get rid of the folks in Washington. You got rid of me." And you know, I had the best of both worlds. Politics—I was as high as you could go and be part-time. I still had a real job with real income. I had my own law firm. Yet I was deeply engaged in Arkansas politics and public service to the point that I had the best of all. Might have stayed there forever. And the way the redistricting fell in the constitutional thing, I ultimately ended up with ten more years in the Senate after term limits hit. But without term limits, I'm not sure I would have ever left the Senate. It was—I very much enjoyed it, and I very much enjoyed having my own income. Ginger liked my

own income better. [*Laughter*] [00:14:26] But then I had a choice to make, you know, when it was over, when term limits actually affected me, which was the last—I was in the last group to be affected by the original term limits. The House had already turned over because they had a six-year limitation, and most senators only got eight years or half of them because of the way the redistricting worked. But I ended up with ten after that. But I was the last out the door, one of the last out the door. [00:14:53] During that time, you saw incumbents who would most likely win leave office and leave that thing open. And so you had a more competitive open-seat situation in a lot of these districts, House districts and Senate districts. And that began a little bit of a rise of the number of Republicans. I think when I left, we had ten. I think we had three when I went into the Senate. So I mean, you just incrementally, you saw that. But it's still heavily Democratic, and it remained that way until 2010.

[00:15:32] JD: Going back a little bit to governor Huckabee's time, you know, as a former governor yourself, I'm curious to know your opinion on this. The governor of Arkansas enjoys significant appointment power to commissions and dozens, a few hundred, if I remember offhand . . .

MB: More than that. Yeah.

JD: . . . 300-something at any one time. And Governor Huckabee of course comes in, I'm sure, with commissions that have terms that far extend beyond, you know, the initial—his predecessor's term. And so he's not necessarily working with his appointments. But over ten years of service, because of the circumstances in which he comes into office being elected in his own right and then reelected, that has to have, I would think, a real impact on the growth of the Republican Party in ways that we might overlook sometimes in building a bench and cultivating some talent and also just party loyalty. And I was wondering if you could speak on that a little bit.

[00:16:30] MB: Yeah. I don't remember the number, but with three or four hundred different annual appointments to different boards and commissions, you know, it's pretty staggering how quickly you can begin to change the composition of those boards and commissions. I mean, everything from something everybody wants to something nobody's ever heard of except in their—the Abstractors Board versus the Highway Commission, if you want to go from one end of the spectrum to the other. And you do appoint, not only people that you think are competent to do it, but also people that share your vision, your philosophy,

and your political ambitions. So it's naive to think that you don't appoint people that are members of your party or that share your values. And over the course of ten years, he was able to be very influential in putting people in the boards and commission spots that reflected not just his vision but also the loyalty to the Republican Party. And you saw that a lot. Now having said that, a lot of them were apolitical. A lot of the best ones are apolitical, many of whom I retained. But to his credit, he also retained some that had previously been there, particularly in some areas where it's a professional or vocational area of jurisdiction, the Soybean Board. I mean, you're gonna select the farmers that are involved in that industry and that know that industry regardless of their political affiliation. And a lot of times, those people transcend administrations and transcend political party changes. And that was true with Huckabee as well as with me.

[00:18:36] JD: Can you—and we've been kind of touching on this. But before we move on, though, can you speak to the impact, you think, of having a Republican governor in Arkansas in the [19]90s into the 2000s for ten years? Just the overall impact that may have had for the Republican Party. Because the interesting thing is, and we'll get to it in a minute, you're elected

in the election in [20]06. Democrats have arguably some of the best success they've had electorally from that period to just prior to 2010.

MB: Yeah. I . . .

JD: And then we see this wave. So did Huckabee, you think, play a major role in that, and it just sort of set dormant for a while? Do you think a lot of his success was then sort of brunted by just Democrats doing well? Or what do you think about that?

[00:19:21] MB: Yeah, I, you know—while he was governor, there was a bit of an anomaly. You had him and Win Paul as the two Republican constitutional officers. And then you had one congressional seat that was Republican. Everything else remained, even while he was governor, Democratic, including significant majorities in both houses of legislature. Most counties were dominated by Democrats. I think his tenure for ten years aided me to a large extent because it activated people in the [20]06 election that had been out, at least in so far as appointments and things like that. So they got real energized. I mean, we had people that were working hard that had been kind of laying around after they worked so hard for Clinton for president. [00:20:22] Now you got to remember, it's still primarily a Democratic state so I had that advantage over Asa to

begin with because while there had been, as you pointed out, stops and starts and fits of Republican success, it was still primarily an overwhelmingly Democratic state in virtually every election, the exception being in presidential elections. Arkansas Democrats distinguished themselves from National Democrats and Arkansas Independents distinguished the Democratic Party from the National Democrats. And so all that inured to the benefit of Democratic candidates on the state level. State and local level for that matter. So Huckabee had some success and put some people in some places, did create some bench and created some hope for people that wanted to run as Republicans. But it was still an uphill battle for them, even as he left office.

[00:21:27] JD: I think it touches on your tenure as governor, the success of your administration, but also just the politics of getting elected and reelected. And you just touched on it now about how Arkansans have sort of an independent streak where we can go back to the 1960s where, if it wasn't Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton, Democrats in Arkansas, seemingly Democrats, were voting for Republican presidential candidates.

[00:21:56] MB: Well, yeah. And the most talked-about example of the Arkansas Independent voters is the 1968 election where you elected a Republican governor in Rockefeller, a Democratic

senator in Fulbright, and a Dixiecrat for president in George Wallace. Arkansas voters, all [*JD laughs*]—I mean, in that one election, they voted for—those three different types of people carried Arkansas, a Republican, a Democrat, and a Dixiecrat, all in the same election. So yeah, Arkansans have traditionally been pretty doggone independent. And as a result of that, I think the personality of the person really trumps a lot of—you know, I think I had a 71 percent approval rating among Republicans when I left office. So I mean, Arkansas voters are able to distinguish between the party label, particularly on the state level, or at least they used to. But as you point out, we had traditionally been voting for Republican presidential candidates from the early [19]60s on.

[00:23:16] JD: So kind of keeping in that theme and moving into your administration as governor, the state, as you said—Democrats have been really successful in Arkansas in separating from the national brand, the brand that, as you had said, certainly during the civil rights era onward had become, at least in brand, more liberal, right . . .

MB: Yeah.

JD: . . . more socially liberal.

MB: Right.

JD: And arguably, there's some evidence to suggest that they were a step out of where Arkansas voters were . . .

MB: Yeah.

JD: . . . predominantly. But yourself and others were able to continue that connection with Democrats in the state, even if they were voting for Republicans nationally, or even if they didn't identify as National Democrats. And so we have, you know, Bumpers and Pryor and Clinton of course who seemed successful in doing that.

MB: Tucker did it, Jim Guy.

[00:24:04] JD: But you, yourself, were able to. Tucker, Governor Tucker was able to do it. I just wonder if you can speak on that. How were you and others before you able to thread that needle?

[00:24:16] MB: Well, back to the point of the independence of the Arkansas voters and the importance to Arkansans of the person and the personality and being empathetic with and associating with and touching and feeling like you're one of the populace, the electorate, those voters. And when they feel that connection—you know, I always said, if they know you or think they know you well enough and like that, that that will transcend the R or the D, that it'll overcome the party loyalty. And I think you had that. I think you had person after person at the top of

the ticket that you mentioned, the Bumpers and the Pryor and the Clinton and so on and so on, that exhibited that ability to be able to connect with the Arkansas voters in a way that caused them to feel comfortable with them, not withstanding whether it was an R or a D. Arkansas is big enough that you had to be able to project on TV, and you had to be able to do that media, but small enough that it wasn't just dependent on that kind of electioneering. We didn't have TV markets that dominated three, four million dollar—people each like a Texas or a Florida. And so Arkansans not only wanted—were affected some extent by the media, but they wanted to see you. They wanted to touch you. Arkansas was still small enough that they expected their candidates to be able to relate one on one or one on fifty or one on two hundred in a forum or in a speech. So you needed some communication skills. You needed some degree of eloquence or some degree of connectivity in order to win because Arkansans demanded that. [00:26:26] If you look back, you see that Bumpers and Pryor and Clinton and Tucker and Huckabee—Arkansans wanted their governors, particularly, but also to some extent other elected officials, to be able to communicate with them. And that required communication skills that weren't dependent just on a script on television like some

politicians in other states were able to get by with because they could sit in front of a camera, they get to cut and paste and cover up their mistakes and their inability to communicate with relying purely on media. And that made Arkansas a little unique in that regard. And that's why you continued to see pretty glib politicians elected to governor and to other offices, because Arkansans wanted you to be able to do that. They wanted to touch you. They wanted to communicate with you and for you to communicate with them.

[00:27:24] JD: So you—seems like one thing that sets Arkansas apart was maybe we held some of those traditions longer than some others, some states. Maybe it's demographics, or population allowed it. But I'm thinking of the Watermelon Festivals . . .

MB: Yeah.

JD: . . . and the Pink Tomato Festivals and all these things.

MB: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

JD: Armadillo Days [*MB laughs*] and all that good stuff, where you have, and still to this day, you have elected officials going and seeing people. [00:27:48] What do you think the effect that broadcast media and certainly social media and things have had on that element of Arkansas history? Because it seems like it

may have less of effect today, and I wonder sort of what's causing that and if you have any thoughts on that.

[00:28:04] MB: Well, I think we've gotten so polarized for lots of reasons. We've gotten so polarized that people attend events and watch the media or subscribe to social channels, if you will, social media channels, that they're comfortable with and that say things they want to hear and that think like they think, so that you're not getting a cross section of the other side. And I think that's further polarized our people. And I think some people just watch Fox News or Newsmax and other people just watch MSNBC or CNN without taking time to listen to the other side or to look at other viewpoints. And I think that's further polarized. Then you get on Facebook, and you see people that think like you do and you want to stay friends with them. And then you get people that say things you don't like, and so you unfriend them or you get away from them, and so you further isolate yourself. And it's a phenomenon that we see occurring, I think, across the country.

[00:29:20] JD: And maybe it started earlier, but we know that, you know, as you've touched on this with party affiliation, you know, a large portion of Arkansans have preferred, even when the Democratic Party was the clear dominant force in the state's

politics, to be identified as Independents. And over time, polling would show that they sort of went from Independent voters to Independent voters who were still voting for Democrats to Independent voters who began to vote for Republicans. And now of course, more and more Independent, but a plurality and even perhaps a majority now are identifying as Republicans. [00:29:57] When did you first see that? I mean, it's one thing to see it on poll sheet and see those results. But when did you feel like the partisan winds were changing in Arkansas?

[00:30:07] MB: Well, I think where it really manifested itself to the point that it was pretty dominant and pretty prevalent as an ongoing force was the 2010 election. If you recall, when I was elected in twenty—in 2006, the Democrats swept everything. We—the Democrats had increased majorities in the House and Senate, five out of six congressional seats. All seven constitutional officers were Democrats in [20]06. That continued in [20]08. And if you recall, the margins even increased in the General Assembly. Now the constitutional officers weren't up in [20]08, but you had a Senate race where Mark Pryor didn't even get a Republican opponent. You got a Green Party opponent. The Republicans couldn't even field a candidate in 2008 for a US Senate seat. What happened between [20]08 and [20]10?

[00:31:13] What happened? I'm telling you objectively what I think without regard to how I truly feel about all this, but objectively, I think what happened was Obama and Obamacare. And the Republicans and the conservative Arkansas voters reacted negatively, particularly to Obamacare. The rise of the Tea Party, the anti-government, anti-socialized-medicine, if you will, rhetoric that accompanied all that was the factor that separated [20]08 from [20]10. [00:32:01] So what happened in [20]10? In [20]10, you saw a United States, Democratic United States Senator get beat. You saw every constitutional officer that had a Republican opponent except me get beat. I mean, somebody as good as Shane Broadway running for lieutenant governor, and he only lost by 12,000 votes in the whole state, but he lost. Dustin McDaniel stayed as attorney general because he didn't have a Republican opponent. So I was the only Democrat of the statewide races that won in 2010. And not only did I win, I carried every county, which never happens. It just never happened. Carried all seventy-five counties in the midst of a repu—why? How does that happen? Back to what I said, if the people know you or think they know you well enough to decide they either like you or they don't like you, that that will trump the R or the D. It will—the personality of the individual

and that connection with the Arkansas voter, the independent streak in the Arkansas voter, as you point out, will trump the R or the D. If they don't know you or don't feel comfortable—as comfortable knowing you as they should or as you'd want them to, then they'll gravitate to the R or the D as the case may be, as their leanings might be. [00:33:39] So the big difference was 2010, and then it grew more in [20]12 and grew more in [20]14. It wasn't any different for me working with Republicans in the General Assembly as governor versus Democrats. There were jerks on the Democrat side and jerks on the Republican side. There were allies on the Democratic side and allies on the Republican side. There were reasonable people on both sides. And the crazies [*laughs*] existed, if you will, on both sides. And I think Asa Hutchinson would tell you this to this day, sometimes he has more trouble working with his own party than he does with the opposite party. [00:34:28] I never will forget Huckabee put out a statement about what he called Shiite Republicans. [*Laughs*] I mean, this is a Republican governor blasting extreme right-wing Republicans. Randy Minton, I never will forget, was one of them from down in Cabot that got so—was so enamored with the idea that he was being called a Shiite Republican he had badges made up and proudly wore them

[*JD laughs*] as a Shiite Republican. So, I mean, it's not uncommon for a governor to have as much trouble in his own party as it is with the other party. We saw that with Huckabee. We saw it with—I've experienced it, and I think Asa has experienced it. So there are a lot of times that the party line gets you down the road, but where you got a dominant party, it's less likely. When there were 75 percent Democrats, the divisions were rural/urban. They were liberal/conservative. They were not just based upon parties. So you had to fight intraparty fights that the governor had to manage and had to try to navigate and vice versa. So that now when you got a 75 percent Republican legislature, you got the same dynamic going on that you had when the Democrats were there. [00:35:56] It's a—people often give too much credence to the R and the D, and it's because of Congress. That's the biggest mess we got. Gerrymandering has created too many safe blue districts and safe red districts in Congress so that you're not afraid of your November election. You're not afraid of the other party. You're afraid of your own primary. So Republicans run farther to the right, Democrats run farther to the left so that when they're elected—they do that to get through their primary. They're not worried about November. And so when they're elected, they've

staked out positions that don't lend themselves to being able to come together, to come to the middle, to compromise, to try to see the other side, and you've got this huge polarization. And it's our own fault. It's the legislature's fault across the country that redistricts congre—House seats, United States House seats. And it's created this huge division. [00:36:57] I think I read somewhere where something like 56 out of 435 House seats were truly purple, were truly—could go either Democrat or Republican. The rest were safe one way or the other. And it's a sad commentary because I think if you leave the people alone and give them choices and take the R and the D out of it to some extent, they'll elect people that will want to sit down and manage problems and listen to the other side and try to create something that's not sides, that's not the other side. It's a little naive sometimes and pie in the sky to think that way, but gosh, some of us need to be thinking more that way.

[00:37:38] JD: You might be—I mean, we'll know, you know, I guess, in history. We can't tell the future, but we can look back. And we know that your timing as governor, specifically your second term, you might be—you certainly are currently, but for maybe a long, long time, you could be the only governor that has tight minority-majority distance, right. In other words,

you've got a thinner margin of majority status with your party for a time after 2010, then you have a thinner status Republican majority for the first time since Reconstruction. And that's a unique Arkansas trait, historically. Frank White was overwhelmed by Democrats. Rockefeller, overwhelmed by Democrats. Huckabee, overwhelmed by Democrats. So there's a pattern here that you break with your success in 2010, but also your party struggles in 2010 below you on the ticket. [00:38:40] Beginning in that time period, we also have this private option. And as you stated, one of the reasons you think why the blue wall, if you will, broke for Arkansas in part was President Obama and the unpopularity of some of his policies. Just briefly, if you can, tell me how that worked [*MB laughs*], how, you know, in a polarized sort of nationalist, partisan politics we have where, you know, even the Big Three wouldn't be able to beat back, maybe, a lot of the challenges the state was facing at that time and continues to. How do you work with the first Republican Speaker in well over a century and get that done?

[00:39:24] MB: Well, there's a number of factors. One of the curious things is they did a poll, a national poll, at that time where they asked people if they supported Obamacare, and then they asked people if they supported the Affordable Care Act. And

overwhelmingly, people opposed Obamacare, but they were supportive of the Affordable Care Act. Well, they were same thing. They were the same thing. It depended—if you labeled it and put Obama's name on it, they hated it. If you called it the Affordable Care Act—now, it wasn't overwhelming, but a majority of the people supported the Affordable Care Act. So that's the first thing. You got to get away from Washington and Obama and talking about Obama. That's the first clue. [00:40:15] Secondly, you got to engage reasonable Republicans. I mean, they're controlling the legislature in what's best for our people and what's best for our state. And then you got to use facts. And then you don't lie to people, but you accentuate different facts for different constituencies. For example, the hospital constituency would've been killed without the Medicaid expansion, without the private option. Why? Well, factually, the way the feds did Obamacare/Affordable Care Act was they said, "Look, we're going to offer Medicaid expansion, so more people are going to have coverage, so your hospitals aren't gonna have as much uncompensated care. They're not gonna be stuck with 20 or 30 percent of folks coming to the hospital without paying anything. So since we're gonna have this huge new amount of folks that can pay through Medicaid, we're going

to cut your Medicare reimbursement." Now we're not cutting Medicare, and people that heard that, we had to make sure they understood Affordable Care Act didn't cut Medicare. It cut what hospitals receive per procedure from Medicare payments because the hospitals, theoretically, wouldn't have needed it. [00:41:32] Well, that was going to happen whether you accepted Medicaid expansion or not. So the hospitals are gonna get cut on Medicare, but they're going to have no Medicaid expansion if you don't accept this. Wow. So then you start doing numbers. Well, I think my recollection was, and this could be a little off, but something like $56 million a year hit just to UAMS. And you go to Searcy, it's $6 or $8 million a year hit to the Searcy hospital. And you interpolate that across the entire state to every hospital. Now all of a sudden, you got a core of folks that you can put real numbers with and say, "We need you to get off your butt and talk to your legislators." [00:42:12] Well, then you go to another group. "You're going to be able to have insurance." Now this is obviously a different constituency. "You're going to be able to have insurance, and so you need to get busy because now you can get healthcare coverage, and you can go get some preventive maintenance and some ongoing care that you never could before until it got so bad you showed up in

the emergency room." So you got that constituency. [00:42:39] Then, you got the pure-Arkansas-cussedness constituency that says, "We're paying for this whether we take it or not. You want our tax dollars to go to California to take care of their people and leave our people out? Do you want our tax dollars to be paying for healthcare for New York, and we don't get our share?" That's a different constituency. And that—all these arguments I'm giving you are true. They're factual, but you emphasize the different arguments to the different constituencies that would have the most effect. And in some cases, you make all of those arguments together. Then you say, "Well, wait a minute. We don't like socialized medicine. We don't like Medicaid. That's just socialized medicine. We need private insurance." Okay. The private option is using insurance companies to get Medicaid dollars to provide insurance for our people using the same standards and guidelines that the federal government required for Medicaid expansion if you'd've just called it pure Medicaid. Then, you got the political ramification of no Southern state was gonna adopt Obamacare, and the administration needed a win. They needed somebody besides New Jersey, New York, and California to opt for Medicaid expansion. So Kathleen Sebelius is secretary of health,

education, and welfare, administering the program and—whatever they call that now. I'm still using old terms, I think. But Kathleen Sebelius was the governor with me, and she was governor from Kansas. We had a good relationship. And so coupled with Obama and them needing a win in the South and the relationship that existed, we were able to get a waiver from the feds that said, "Okay, do it your way. You want to do it with"—then you had the unintended—it wasn't unintended for some of us because we knew it. But most people didn't understand the unintended consequence of doing it with the private insurance. First of all, we already had a healthcare premium tax on the books, been on the books for thirty, forty years. So without raising taxes, all of a sudden we've got a huge influx of revenue that we could put aside for when the state had to start sharing up to 10 percent of the burden of the Medicaid expansion. So all of a sudden, without raising taxes, we got a new revenue stream. [00:45:12] Then the other, for a lot of people, unintended consequence, we go from one or two competitors in hospitalization insurance and health insurance to four or five because these other companies say, "Well, let's go to Arkansas. We might be able to pick off and make some more money because now more people are gonna have health

insurance, and we can compete." Well, competition drives better service and better prices with the insurance companies. So I say all those things to say how we do it. [00:45:47] Then you have to add to that, that you—I think it was Reagan—I'll quote a Republican—who said, "It's surprising how much you can get done when you don't care who gets the credit." And leaders like Jonathan Dismang and David Sanders, to a lesser extent because he was so flighty, Burris, and Davy Carter, Republicans all, who got together and said, "We like privacy, the private sector. We'd rather do it with private insurance so we don't get stuck with this." It's the same program doing it with private insurance versus straight Medicaid. You gotta offer the same amount to the same people under the same qualifications with the same parameters, but you're calling it private, and you indeed are using private insurance companies to deliver the services rather than Department of Human Services directly. It's a win, win, win. And Dismang deserves tons of credit, and Sanders, tons of credit, and Burris and Davy Carter, tons and tons of credit. [00:47:05] Now you had some people that went sideways. Westerman, for example, our Congressman down—he was for it for a while, and then he was against it for a while, and then he was its biggest critic for a while. And I mean, it's—you

had all kinds of politics played in there. But all that, people do not realize, was overlaid by an antiquated constitutional requirement. Seventy-five percent requirement to appropriate the money for this to work. Seventy-five percent of each House. That means seventy-five out of a hundred House members had to vote for it. And twenty-seven out of thirty-five senators had to vote for it. You can't get 75 percent for motherhood and apple pie. How in the world are you going to get 75 percent for Obamacare? With a Republican legislature majority, how do you get 75 percent for Obamacare when you can't get 75 percent for Razorback football? I mean, how do you do that? Lots of people working all of the honest and true arguments that I just mentioned. Lot of grassroots stuff. The Hospital Association did yeoman's work. The Farm Bureau did—you actually empower various constituencies to go to work. You give them the facts. You tell them the truth, and you get them to go to work. [00:48:38] You know, somebody asked me, "How would you get the legislature to do X, Y, and Z when they really didn't want to, especially in a special session?" I said, "Well, I'll tell you how do it. You rely on lots of other people. If I've got congress—I mean, state representative X in so such and such county, and he's being absolutely an obstructionist, I got ten or twelve major

leaders in that city or in that county that are big supporters of mine. And I pick the phone up, and I say, 'Go get twenty each. Go get four hundred'"—four hundred phone calls or four hundred letters to a state legislator is like 10,000 because it probably reflects a lot more than just those sheer numbers. And it doesn't work on everybody. You know, you still get some people that say, "I don't care what that governor wants, or I don't care whether you support me in the next election or not back home, I'm not going to do that." But you'd be surprised how many will. How many will react because they're trying to do what their constituents are telling them to do. So you use every tool in the toolbox, and sometimes you invent new tools, and sometimes you invent new tool boxes, but you don't lie to them. You tell them the truth, and you don't care who all gets credit, and you bring those people in, and you put them inside the tent. [00:50:04] And I had great Republican help. Obviously, I had great Democratic help. But you had—I had—and I just mentioned the Dismangs and the Sanders and the Davy Carters of the world because they deserve mentioning. They provided extraordinary leadership.

[00:50:21] JD: And after your two terms, of course, the individual you beat in the general election in [20]06, Asa Hutchinson, is

elected . . .

MB: Yeah.

JD: . . . in 2014, begins—serves as governor in [20]15. He's reelected to a second term. And he's with clear Republican majorities, supermajorities, at this point.

MB: And having trouble with them.

JD: And so there are some . . .

MB: Back to my point about sometimes you have more trouble with your own party than you do with the other party.

[00:50:47] JD: Right. At the state level, if you could look at it today, what do you think—I mean, we've talked a lot about Rs and Ds and numbers and some policies, some significant policy in your tenure. One thing we haven't talked about yet is just the effect overall of policy, not just one or two major pieces of legislation. What's the effect? What do you think the effect has been in the state of Arkansas with, for the first time in an era where anyone can recall, I mean, we're talking Reconstruction era, as far back as we can go, where we could see Republican majorities and a Republican governor. We're clearly there now. What do you see as the policy impact, just overall, the policy impact for Arkansans for this historic shift?

[00:51:36] MB: Well, to some extent, the more things change, the

more they stay the same. Most Arkansans aren't paying attention. Most Arkansans lives aren't significantly affected. You know, when I got rid of the grocery tax, it probably affected more Arkansans directly, or at least they felt it more directly and talked about it more than the reduction in the income tax, particularly at the higher levels that we're seeing now, because it affects fewer people. So John Q. Arkansan is going on about his business. He's trying to raise his family. He's trying to make a living. He's trying to enjoy hunting or fishing or ball games. And life goes on regardless of whether it's a big, heavy Democratic presence or a big, heavy Republican presence. So I think we overplay to some extent the effect of one party versus the other on the everyday Arkansan's quality of life. [00:52:44] Now to a certain extent, there are things that obviously change and affect people a certain way. But what you're seeing now is what you saw with a lot of Democrats. You're seeing a huge split in the Republican Party. You're seeing Republicans—I just saw on TV yesterday, a Republican state legislator testifying to do away with the opposition to local ability to have a mask mandate in schools, and another Republican on that they interviewed later saying, "No, we're not going to do away with the prohibition on mandates." That's not different than what we

saw with Democrats. It's still an urban versus rural. It's a educated versus less educated. It's a liberal versus—well, it's a moderate versus conservative. You know, the whole pendulum has shifted a little, but you still have the internal divisions within the majority party that you had when the other party was in the majority. And for the most part, life goes on either way. And my neighbor's gonna get up, and he's gonna go to work. And this weekend, he's gonna take his family out to eat, and he's probably going to get some tickets to a concert or a ball game, presumably, when they let you go, and his life is going to relatively be the same with or without a Republican or a Democrat being in power. [00:54:24] And so while us political sorts, and certainly the Pryor Center is one, concentrate a lot—and it's good to know, and it's educational, and it's historic, the average citizen is going to go on about their business much the same either way.

[00:54:49] JD: So Governor, you're the last, to date, the last Democrat to win statewide office in Arkansas. How long do you think it's going to be?

[00:54:59] MB: Well, I think you make a good point. All this stuff is cyclical. Life's cyclical. [*Laughs*] Certainly politics are cyclical. I mean, you see the pendulum swing this way. You see it

swings back. It will swing. I don't know that it'll ever swing to the point where it's heavily Democratic. It'll probably swing to the point where it's more in the middle, where it's more fifty-fifty sort of thing. When will that be? I don't know. To a large extent, it'll be dependent on personalities. I mean, Trump is an example of that, of personalities. I mean, there are people that, like he said, "I could shoot somebody on Fifth Avenue, and my people would still be with him." You saw that, January 6th. I mean, so it—the cult of personality plays a major role in the rise or fall of political prominence and to some extent political parties. [00:56:02] Well, you're seeing a backlash even in the Republican Party. So you got a division in the Republican Party, but it's not a strong enough division yet for the Republicans to abandon Trump. So what's going on? Well, you're seeing a closer divis—a closer contraction of people coming more toward the middle. They don't like AOC and Elizabeth Warren and some of the more liberal policies, and they don't like the far right. And they're—a lot of them are fed up with Trump. Now a lot them aren't, but a lot of them are, so you see a compression of folks back toward the middle. That's the cyclical nature of politics, and that's the cyclical nature of what we can expect to see. When will it happen? I have no clue. It's not gonna be

tomorrow. It's not gonna be in the next year or two, but it's gradually going to occur. And you look at what other states have done. North Carolina has gone from deep, deep red to really, really purple. Texas came close to electing a Democratic Senator against an incumbent in the last election. Texas is moving more purple. So while we were late to the party to go Republican in Arkansas, we're going to be late to the party to go back purple.

[00:57:23] JD: And maybe for the same reasons you mentioned demographics earlier.

MB: Exactly.

JD: When I hear Texas in particular, I think of the changing demographics there. To scale, we may have a little bit of that, particularly in Northwest Arkansas, but not anywhere . . .

[00:57:35] MB: You're exactly right. Northwest Arkansas is a good example of changing demographic. Where it was once 100 percent Republican, they're electing Democratic state representatives from up there. Not just in Fayetteville anymore either, in other places in Northwest Arkansas. So changing demographics change it, a more diverse population, a more educated population. And an educated electorate often tends to be more Independent, to be able to say, "Well, I'm going to vote

for this Democrat, but I'm going to vote for this Republican." Ticket splitting, if you will. You see a lot of that. So to answer your question, I think it's cyclical. I don't know when it'll happen, but I think the pendulum will swing back to where there's less one-party dominance.

[00:58:25] JD: So if you were to caution the majority party in Arkansas—your time in office, I think of pragmatism. I think of Democrats separating themselves from some of the more liberal sort of branding and images and rhetoric and even policies of the national politics that we had at the time. Republicans, on the other hand, seem to be a little more unified in their brand. And so do you think pushing further to the right is the real risk that Republicans have, whereas I don't think Arkansas Democrats ever felt like they were going to go as far left as maybe a few in the party may have liked. It seems like the Republican Party division is more, as you said, sort of moderate conservatives to pretty, you know, we might even say sort of out there movements, and there's not maybe a unified organizational structure, but there's little fits and starts of those groups having some success out there. Is that the risk you think that Republicans run in shifting that pendulum?

[00:59:32] MB: You make a great point. If you gra—if you as a

party gravitate too much brandwise, as you point out, to one extreme or another, you run the risk of running some of your people off. Oh, you'll have a loyal brand, and you'll have a loyal core for that extreme brand whether it's right or left, but you'll turn off the folks in the middle. And so, as you pointed out earlier with polling, I think we ended up—the last poll I saw, which was a number of years ago, was if you didn't count the leans, it was a third, third, third. A third Democrat, a third Independent, and a third Republican. And that wasn't that many years ago. Now when you add the leans, you might favor Independents leaning Republican more than Independents leaning Democrat. But it's evidence of the fact that there's elections decided to a large extent by folks in the middle. And you pointed out earlier in this interview about the independent streak of Arkansas voters. I mean, that's inbred in us. It's in our water. We're gonna vote the way we want to vote and not be told. We're not in Chicago where we got a party machine that tells us who to go vote for. They don't hand out our ballots and say, "We want you to vote this ticket." They don't hand out anything or make it imperative that you just vote one way Republican or one way Democrat. Our independent streak is alive and well. And if you, as a party, try to interrupt that, if you

as a party try to get too far away from that independent streak, the voters will punish you. And yes, there's a danger in the Republican Party, if they get too far to the right, that they'll turn off that middle, and it will be harmful to them. Just the same would be true on the other side of the aisle.

[01:01:40] JD: Any closing thoughts? I mean, you've been in the center of this historic shift.

MB: I'm a . . .

JD: And I don't think we can overplay it. Not only is there a partisan shift, which happens all the time, right. A lot of states can point to this and say, "Every few years, we have this." What makes us so significant is it took so long. And when it happened, it happened so fast. And you were in the middle of all of that.

MB: Yeah.

JD: Do you have any other insights for us?

[01:02:03] MB: Well, I think I've at least given my opinion as to the whys that I believe caused the dynamics of what we've been talking about to occur. But I'm ever the optimist, and I believe that ultimately pragmatism, moderation, cooperation will ultimately win because I think that's where most Americans are. I think most Americans want their elected officials to go get problems solved. They want their lives to be a little better

realizing that, for the most part, they're going to go on with their life one way or the other. And it's the activists on issues or in business or somewhere that tend to focus more daily on what goes on by our elected officials. And the average American just—and the average Arkansan to some extent wants a good letting alone as—I forgot whether that was Bumpers or somebody said. [01:03:15] It—you were talkin' about—we were about these personalities. And I—you know, I may have told this to the Pryor Center, but it's appropriate to be told for the Pryor Center because of the Pryor name. But I like to tell a story, particularly where I had both of them in the audience at the same time and did this a lot when I was a governor because I had the podium. They had to sit there and listen. [*JD laughs*] And but they were best friends and totally opposite in their styles. Substantively, they weren't far apart, but stylistically, they were 180 opposite. And I'd tell the story, I'd say, now—I'd be behind the podium, and I'd look out in the audience, and I'd say, "Now there's David Pryor. If David were up here, his style would be that he'd shuffle his feet and hang his head and say how lucky he was to be here with all of you. And if Bumpers was up here, he'd look out at this audience, and he'd say, 'You people are lucky to be here with me.'" [*Laughter*] Both were

good styles. They worked for both of them. They were totally opposite. Bumpers got away with it with the combination of humor and arrogance. And Pryor got away with it with self-deprecating humor. It's an example of what I was talking about earlier. The personality of the elected official or the candidate for office has so much to do with their success or failure. And the quotient that never is understood by a lot of people that run for office is what I call the likability factor. The likability factor can overcome so many other shortcomings a candidate might have in their abilities. That doesn't mean likability will trump everything. If you can't talk, you can't talk. If you can't communicate, you can't communicate. But other things being of some degree of moderation, the trump card is the likability factor. Does the electorate like you? And if they like you, it overcomes a lot of other things.

[01:05:34s] JD: Governor, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much . . .

MB: Absolutely.

JD: . . . for sitting down with me and talking about this period in time and lending us your insights on a very important historic moment in the state's history.

MB: Absolutely. My pleasure.

[End of interview 01:06:07]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]