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

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Blue to Red Oral History Project

John Brummett

Interviewed by John C. Davis

April 7, 2021

Little Rock, Arkansas

Objective

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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 John Brummett on April 7, 2021, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me today is John Brummett, columnist for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, long-term—longtime political observer for all things Arkansas politics. He's speaking with us on this project with the Pryor Center that is looking at the Republican takeover of the state, if you will. Dramatic historical gains made by the GOP in Arkansas over the last ten, fifteen years or so. Your experience in reporting, in writing, and observing Arkansas politics is invaluable to this endeavor. And on behalf of the Pryor Center, I really appreciate you sitting down with us today.

John Brummett: Well, thanks. I'm just honored to be included. It's great.

[00:00:39] JD: This project's looking at mainly the last fifteen or so years, as we discussed just briefly a moment ago. One thing I've tried to do is break down the history of what I'm kind of considering the modern GOP over three generations starting in [19]66. And this just helps me kinda come up with a frame of reference and . . .

JB: Sure.

JD: . . . organizational framework. And so loosely, the first generation would begin in [19]66 with Win Rock's win. Of course, he had run in [19]64, loses, wins in [19]66—all the way up to [19]92, where you see a series of Republican gains in fits and starts. But by almost all measures, no real long-term, sustained, managed growth or momentum outside of John Paul Hammerschmidt in some pockets in north and Northwest Arkansas. [00:01:31] And then between [19]93 and 2010, you see GOP up-and-comers such as Mike Huckabee be in office for a considerable amount of time, ten years, through sort of nontraditional means. And still though, a party that is very much in the minority. It's gaining in presidential votes, right. It had been for some time at that point, but it wasn't trickling all the way down, certainly not to the county level, and not really even being reflected in the General Assembly yet. [00:02:01] And then to today, right. We look at 2011 to where we are today, looking again as a state that is dominated by one party. The difference is it's the other party. It's the Republican Party today that's arguably more organized than the Democrats perhaps ever were when they had over a century of political dominance. [00:02:21] So with that, John, what is your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

[00:02:26] JB: [*Laughs*] My earliest political memory. You're not going to believe this, but I would've only been four years old, maybe three and barely four. And we lived in downtown Little Rock in an apartment house, and my mother walked from the apartment on the east side of Little Rock about where Interstate 30 would soon come to a 7UP bottling company many blocks toward and through downtown. And my mother was a meek, little country woman from down in Howard County on a tenant farm, and she was scared of the city anyway. But I remember, believe me or don't, I remember my mother saying to my dad, "We've got to get away from all that mess out there." Now at the time, I didn't know what the mess was, but when I put myself in that place, and I double-checked with her where she was working, and then I later asked her what she meant, she meant the trouble at Central High School. And so I had some—and then we moved out in the country to this rural part of the county where we grew u—where I grew up. So I had a moment there where I knew something was wrong in Little Rock. And I knew it had to do with politics. And I think I—and then in time, pretty soon, I understood more about it, but that's my first. [00:03:37] And then I remember my folks liking Faubus and Eisenhower, which I remember asking my mother. How can—

one's a Democrat and one's a Republican, which made me a quintessential, unpredictable Arkansas person, or my family that way. And she explained the difference. I'm not sure what it was, but she gave me some explanation. [00:03:58] So you know, I had a political interest. And then as a young teenager reading anything that came into this house where there weren't a lot of books—my dad was a Teamster for the Nabisco cookie company. And he loaded trucks and unloaded trucks at their plant down on the east side of Little Rock. And he would get the labor bulletin. And I'm a twelve-, thirteen-year-old kid [*laughs*] getting down on the middle of the floor with this black print, smudgy, labor bulletin, reading all the labor view of everything. So those were formative experiences that made me as weird as I am in terms of my politics in regards to the place that I'm from. [00:04:41] I remember the [19]60 debates. I would've been seven. I remember Nixon and—well, that wasn't Arkansas politics. But by the time—I'm rambling too much, but by the time I got to high school, I understood well that Faubus had been bad—my view—Rockefeller good, Bumpers better. That was the progression that I have. In fact, as a sixteen-, seventeen-year-old high school kid, I stopped a guy in my neighborhood in Southwest Little Rock who had a bunch of

Bumpers signs in his truck and was putting them up. And I said, "Can I help you? I'm big for Bumpers." And I helped him put up some. We went around and put some signs. So that's sort of my . . .

[00:05:25] JD: Those are formative years and tumultuous years . . .

JB: Right.

JD: . . . in Arkansas's political history. And you refer to—you know, we look at this Little Rock Central High crisis as something that happens in [19]57. What a lot of people forget is it extended. I mean, it really . . .

JB: Well, yeah.

JD: . . . for quite a considerable amount of time, especially if you were a kid. I mean, that was a long part of an academic career there that was impacted.

[00:05:48] JB: I believe we were some of the original white flighters. And I don't think it—and I may be kidding myself, but I think it was less about race in my family than just fear. Fear of the trouble going on. So if we get out there on Arch Street Pike, six miles out of the city, that's another school district, and so we won't be so—it'll be different. I think—and that's—I grew up, therefore, going to schools in Southwest Little Rock in what was called the Pulaski County Special School District, which was sort

of a segregated district surrounding the city district, which became a source of decades of litigation. And had a—and it was a white-flight, middle-class, working-class, educational experience and a good one. Whatever I learned, I started learning there. But yeah, completely influenced in where I lived and where I went to school by Central High in [19]57 and the ramifications of [19]57.

[00:06:57] JD: So moving ahead just a few years, when was your first—when did you first start following Arkansas politics as part of your job?

[00:07:09] JB: I started out as—I'll tell you more than you want to know, but I'll go quickly. I started out the day after my sixteenth birthday as a part-time sports writer for the then afternoon, dying *Arkansas Democrat*. I was an editor. The only thing I was really good at in school—I was okay in everything except science. But writing—give me an essay test, I set the pace. Just when I wrote things, they were better than anybody else in the classroom. It's just the way it always was. That's my deal. And I loved sports. I'd get the paper and read the sports pages. And I heard that the *Democrat* was in such dire straits, as a dying, afternoon newspaper, they used kids from local high schools as part-time employees to cover games. And I called,

and they said, "Yes, you come tomorrow morning and help, before school, and work from six to eight to help put out the paper." That's not an answer to your question. That's just my background. [*JD laughs*] So that's how I started. [00:08:07] Then in college, switching from UALR to UCA, then SC, no, UCA, I went to work for the *Log Cabin Democrat*, which was a very good, at the time, small-town, daily newspaper, highly regarded, as their sports editor, covering the Hendrix Warriors and the Bears and a very active sports scene there. And about two years into the sports coverage, the editor, managing editor, who was John Ward, who had been press secretary to Winthrop Rockefeller, called me over, and he said, "You need to write politics. I think you'd be good at it." He says, "It's a lot like writing sports. It's just not as important." [*Laughter*] And I said, "Okay." He said, "Well, all right, tonight you start with the city council, and you get to quorum court next week. And then there's this vote fraud in Conway County with Marlin Hawkins, and that's in our readership, and that's your story." [00:09:01] And so that's when I started, mid-[19]70s for the *Log Cabin Democrat* in an uncommonly fortunate experience for me. And I got noticed by the *Gazette* for the coverage largely of the voter fraud thing. So that's how it happened. Then I joined the

Gazette in 1977 on the state desk, which was general news but some politics. And then in 1980 there was an opening at the state capitol, and that was a plum assignment, and I got it. And who's governor in 1980, about to get beat? Who'd I get assigned to cover? Bill Clinton. And then the rest is the rest. And then in 1986 during the newspaper war, the *Gazette* decided it needed a columnist on politics. And as somebody said at the time, my news articles read like columns anyway, so I was it. That's how it happened. So I've been—for the *Log Cabin Democrat*, I covered a Second District race in which Jim Guy Tucker won the seat in a big race after Wilber Mills retired. So I—right in there is when it started, and I've been doing it ever since.

[00:10:05] JD: Put me in that place and think back to the partisan politics of the day, which is kind of tricky, right, because it was so dominated by one party. What was your perception of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party at that time?

[00:10:24] JB: My perception is and remains, but I perceived it pretty early, there's no meaning to being a Democrat. It's just it's the thing that you call yourself to win. And these people, these local legislators, the others, they're Republicans or Democrats or conservatives. It's—it makes no difference in

Arkansas. If you are a viable community leader seeking the legislature anywhere in Arkansas except maybe the tip, Northwest corner, you're a Democrat. It's a default position. It's not a party. It wasn't a one-party state. It was a no-party state, and D was the default. And the Republicans were only these true believing, old-style Republicans, who—much—they weren't Republicans like now. They weren't arch conservative. They just were, you know, just—they liked the Republican Party for their heritage. And I thought they're just pitiful, bless their hearts. [00:11:22] Sort of the way I feel now, that they're aliens in their own land. And they had good humor about it around Conway and in that area. It's like, you know, "All we want's a post office every once in a while or something. That's just it. That's what it is to us." And everything was Democratic. But I knew that this is not Democrat, even then I knew this is not Democrat, Republican the way it is other places. Massachusetts is Democrat for a different reason than Arkansas's Democrat. So I observed that the game is the D. The other is not important. That's the way it was then and remained for a good while.

[00:12:03] JD: I think back to—in the late [19]40s, V. O. Key is a political scientist, writes about Southern politics. And he says,

"With Arkansas, you might have a single party in its most undefiled form." And what he's really talking about, I think, is what you're referring to.

JB: No party.

JD: You can't really have a one-party system that is dominated that way without sort of not having a party system.

JB: Right.

[00:12:24] JD: You mentioned Sheriff Hawkins, who was one of sort of these many fiefdoms around personal loyalty, not so much about policy or partisanship by nature. And you were in the middle of this really historic time.

JB: Right.

JD: That sort of old guard grew up in those young, progressive times.

[00:12:46] JB: It was a perverse view. Accurate for Arkansas. But I remember when the *Gazette*, and I was a columnist by then, got bought by the Gannett Company, a national newspaper chain. And they sent an editor here who'd been around the country, a well-known editor. And he took me to lunch, and he said, "Hey, man. You're good. I like your columns. The one thing I don't get is why are you so just offhandedly dismissive of Republicans?" I said, "Because I grew up in Arkansas. I mean,

they just don't matter." And even as late as the [19]90s they didn't much matter. I mean, Ed Bethune would beat Doug Brandon for congress in the Second District and serve a couple terms. But then when he went for the Senate, David Pryor would beat him, and the Democrats would take it back. You've seen those spasms that we've had over the years, these brief interludes. But the Republicans just weren't serious. The repub—demo—governor's races were, the phrase was, tantamount to election. You know that. Democrats, Democratic primaries tantamount to election. And in the fall, the Republican will get 33 percent, 34 percent, 36 percent. About what Democrats are getting now. So that wa—so I had—my whole grooming, my whole background or foundation in covering politics was from a perverse system that a national editor said, "What about Republicans?" And I'm thinking, "You need to understand where you are. You know, we don't take them seriously here. Never have."

[00:14:14] JD: And that's the context I think that we miss in what we're seeing today is that we went from a—call it a party system, call it a nonparty system with Democrats for well over a century. A brief, brief moment in time that we probably didn't recognize until now, where you might have had two viable

parties by definition.

JB: Accidentally overlap for a short period of time.

JD: Right, right. And then immediately . . .

JB: Boom.

JD: . . . almost as quickly as we see that, we're back to something akin to what we've seen before, but flipped. [00:14:45] And so you mentioned the [19]90s and how the, you know, the ailing of the GOP continued, especially in Arkansas, longer than a lot of its Southern and even Midwestern neighbors when we look at surrounding states. You've written extensively on the Clintons for years. You've covered those early days in the White House. You've written a book on that. There's a thought by some that when Clinton wins in [19]92, he goes to DC in [19]93, that he takes a lot of talent out of the state, sort of that next generation behind what we typically would consider the Big Three of Pryor, Bumpers, and Clinton. That next group goes with him. That leaves this vacuum for Republicans, that Jim Guy Tucker for a myriad of reasons is not able to really capture the Democratic momentum, and Republicans are able to make headway there, due in large part to Clinton's ascendance onto the national scene. Is there anything to that?

[00:15:46] JB: There may be a little, but I don't think it's the main

thing. There was some talent left in Arkansas on the Democratic basis as—at a statewide basis, as Mike Beebe would demonstrate in a very few years. In fact, first I ever saw of Mike Beebe, I'm talking to some legislator at the top of the second-floor stairs in the state capitol. And here comes Clinton, who was always out in the hall working people, and here came Beebe. And somebody said, "You see that guy with Clinton? That's Mike Beebe. He's the next Clinton." It was already, "This is the next guy." And so if that's so, then the succession was—occurred. Took a little longer, and we had a ten-year interlude with Mike Huckabee. But even before then, there had been occasions when Republicans could win. Jay Dickey and Ed Bethune in Congress, and Huckabee was of that order. And Huckabee got there by virtue of a lieutenant governor's special election occurring because Tucker became governor because Clinton became president. And Huckabee ran against my good friend and librarian—I call him head librarian—Nate Coulter. And I'm up in Washington working on a book, but I'm thinking, "Nate will win that. The D will win it." But he didn't. So the state was willing to occasionally veer. What happened is Huckabee turned out to be such a talent—and Tucker had his difficulties—that Huckabee ascended to the governorship and then was able to

hold it for a long time. [00:17:26] But that didn't mean that the Clinton-to-Beebe succession didn't exist. It just meant something has happened in between because Arkansas is always a little curious in its politics. I don't think because all these smart people like Rodney Slater and whoever went to DC with Clinton caused it, caused anything to happen. I think it was entirely other factors.

[00:17:47] JD: Well, and I've also—and I've heard—I've had the good fortune to interview a few other folks that brought out this point that by Clinton going to DC, he was able to counteract some of that narrative that the National Democratic Party politics didn't resonate with Arkansans. You can look to your former governor . . .

JB: Exactly.

JD: . . . and say, "Well, that's still my party. If I've been one of these longtime Democrats, it might not be ideologically pure, but I'm used to voting for these, and I'll just keep doing that for a while."

[00:18:14] JB: Help me on this. I think in presidential races the Republicans have won—have carried Arkansas every time except for Southern nominees.

JD: Right.

JB: Carter, and then Clinton, the home favorite son. Twice. So yeah, Clinton was able to give it that continued sort of vague patina of acceptability. It wasn't yet freaky, out-of-touch liberalism. It wasn't yet, "Democrats are all San Francisco and New York, and they don't understand us." Because if anybody understood Arkansas, it was Bill Clinton, and he's now the president. So yeah, if that hadn't happened, could Beebe have won as a Democrat? I don't know. Against Asa Hutchinson? It's all interesting to say, and we'll never know, but yeah, I think that's probably true. [00:19:05] I do know that in my lifetime, Republicans have carried Arkansas. JFK carried Arkansas, LBJ carried Arkansas, George Wallace then carried Arkansas. And ever since McGovern it's only been—in [19]72—it's only been Carter, a fellow Southerner, and the two Clinton terms. Otherwise, the Republicans win every time. And all of this is happening, and I'm looking at it, but it doesn't register with me like, "This affects state politics." Well, okay. Yeah, I see. We're going Republican in the presidential races, but the D is still the default for everything in the legislature and every state constitutional office, which was the dynamic, which was the thing that got changed in Arkansas by events that we're probably going to get around to discussing. But that's—I mean,

it was just this dichotomy. The people out there are showing you every four years they prefer Republicans on national policy, okay, unless they've got a Southerner to vote for. But in the meantime, it's ninety-five Ds in the state house of representatives and five Rs. That's—or almost that much. And I thought nothing of it. That's just the curiosity of Arkansas at the time.

[00:20:21] JD: You touched on Huckabee and the way he gets into to the office of governor. It's nontraditional, not really anticipated. He, if I recall correctly, wins special election lieutenant governor and after a failed attempt to win the US Senate, uses that—some of that momentum, some of that fundraising, some of that campaigning effort to continue to get into the lieutenant governor's seat, as you've touched on, becomes governor when Jim Guy Tucker resigns amid scandal. Huckabee, as we know—governors in Arkansas enjoy, for one thing, considerable appointment power.

JB: Yes.

JD: We're looking at—you see a governor like Huckabee, who is still the longest serving Republican governor in the state's history. Rockefeller serves two terms, which is almost traditional back in the day that they're two terms.

JB: They're four years. Yeah.

JD: And then we have Frank White for two years, Huckabee . . .

JB: An aberration.

JD: . . . for a decade . . .

JB: Right.

JD: . . . for quite a long time. So you're looking at hundreds of political appointments. You're looking at maybe the first time where the GOP in Arkansas is able to match some of the success they did see over time, really beginning in the [19]80s, maybe into the [19]70s on the presidential ticket, to see an executive at the state level also enjoy reelection success. And maybe for the first time, we see a Republican candidate and Republican office holder in the state be able to build a base and sort of a political foundation. [00:21:49] Could you just talk about what it was like to cover Huckabee in sort of that political context?

[00:21:55] JB: Well, I can do that, but first you—your observation is correct, but I was real slow coming to it as it was happening. I didn't think quite in those terms. Just sort of asleep at that switch. But I remember when Huckabee's second bid for the presidency—you know, first one he won Iowa, and he's serious, then he goes again, and he runs into the Trump-Cruz thing, and there's no path for him. But he's—and he's moved to Florida in

the interim, and he's not doing very well, and he's staggering around. And he comes to Arkansas to—across the street to the hotel and has a fundraiser. And I go down just to stake it out, just to see who's coming in. And I saw all these people that were on state boards and commissions coming through. And I said to Alice Stewart, who's now a pretty well known, national, political observer, who was working for—she's sitting by me saying, "Why are you just taking names? That's not nice." And I said, "That's just what I do." But I said, "These people. I mean, there's So-and-so, there's So-and-so." Said, "John, he appointed them all. He appointed them all." [00:23:06] So that was really my coming late to the party you just described as having taken place earlier, that he's building a political base. He raised a ton of money there for—he'd gotten money from a whole lot of people to sustain himself artificially for a few more weeks in a race in which he had no chance because of that appointment power and the obligations that are owed. So I can speak less to his development of that political base as it was happening than I can to the way it was revealed to me there. It's a powerful thing. And in ten years you can overtake the membership of some commissions. The highway commission is what, five members . . .

JD: [*Unclear words*]

JB: . . . in pers—totally in charge of highway jobs. And the term comes up every two years. So . . .

JD: I wanna say two. Every two, yes.

[00:24:02] JB: Well, in ten years, you've pretty much done the whole thing. Everybody deciding where highways go, they're your people. So yeah, that's—it's absolutely true. But I applaud you for knowing it was happening. And I fought myself for only being aware of it sort of after the fact. Like that's why everybody is givin' this ridiculous money to this futile campaign for president. Because there's that obligation. And it reminded me they're still on these commissions, some of them, helping make regulations and policies for state government. So yeah, that's exactly how that is.

JD: A lot of these things are clear in hindsight. Right. That's sort of a fact—you didn't see it.

JB: Well, I guess. I'm not beating myself up too much. I'm just telling you that's how it was revealed to me, that's how it happened.

[Recording stopped]

[00:24:52] JD: So we know that the Republican takeover of the state's politics happened rather quickly. And when it did, it was

dramatic, right. It was—we're talking a couple of election cycles and the long-hailed tradition of Democrats dominating particularly state and local politics is gone. And we might have a brief period of time where we have two competitive, viable parties, but just as quickly we go into a Republican dominated state of state politics. Looking back now, was there a time early on, maybe prior to that era, where you saw this coming? Where if you could think back in time, you said, "You know, at that point there were things, there were machinations in place that made sense to what we saw really starting in 2010, 2012, [20]14 to today?"

[00:25:47] JB: Maybe not exactly that, but I had moments where I would think, "You know, something's happened to Arkansas politics which is different from what I've experienced, and I'm behind the curve, and I need to get with it." 1996, I guess it was, Tim—a US Senate vacancy. Tim Hutchinson, running against Winston Bryant. Tim Hutchinson, a Republican state legislator from Northwest Arkansas. Winston Bryant had been around Democratic politics forever in Arkansas, was a labor guide, been attorney general, been lieutenant governor, been secretary of state, had the name that we always joked was Magic Bryant, because we had a longtime Secretary of State

Bryant. And we figured he was winning things by default by the name Bryant. And so he's the Democratic candidate for the US Senate. I walked into the newsroom of the *Democrat-Gazette*, and late political editor Bill Simmons, said, "Hey, Brummett, we've got some numbers in Bryant/Hutchinson." He meant they'd done a poll, Mason-Dixon or one of those things newspapers do, run cheap, quickie polls for newspapers. And I said—I remember saying, "How much is Bryant ahead?" He said, "He's not." And I said, "What? You're telling—this is—Winston Bryant with a D is behind now?" At that point, I could see it happening if there was rhetoric suitable in the campaign that would begin to damage him, but I thought just this early. [00:27:16] And Hutchinson was ahead by—outside the margin for error. And I thought two things. "This is different." And, "I didn't know about this." I just didn't. [00:27:28] And then this was not so much greatly early, but I remember in 2008 when Obama—was it [20]08—2008, Obama was elected the first time, the day after the election or two days after, I'm on a panel at the Governor's Mansion at the Little Rock Political Animals Club. And I'm seated by a woman who is a—young woman who worked for the Republican Party. And I don't remember the other two panelists. But we got into this issue of whether race

was a factor, and I said, "Well"—and the Republican woman is saying, "No, it's just a coincidence. It's not a factor at all. It's just Arkansas people reflecting their conservatism." And I said, "I saw a map just today in the New York Times." And I believe it's a famous map. And it shows the areas of the country, the only areas of the country, where John Kerry, who lost the presidency as a Democrat, and Obama won it. But there is an area of the country where Obama did worse than Kerry. Even though Obama was plainly a much more successful, national candidate, here's this curious streak where they—where, though it's a low percentage, Kerry out-polled Obama from [20]04 to [20]08. It was Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, West Virginia. And I said, "I believe you can make a case that this is a racist strip. You can make a case that race is the factor here." That aside, then I thought, "Well, we're now going in a—even more—we're going more in a direction of conservatism or Republicanism than I realized because of that." I mean, we're unique in the country or rare in the country where this dynamic is at play. So those two things sort of made me think this is more than what I knew, and it's something I need to begin to understand. And then, of course, in 2010, the cliff is there, and there we go, begin to go.

[00:29:45] JD: So in 2010, as you mentioned, we see the dam break . . .

JB: Yeah.

JD: . . . where with exception of Governor Beebe, who's reelected by winning all seventy-five counties, which was astounding, almost every other Democrat either lost outright or lost more of the vote share than we would've anticipated a year or two before that. What was it like covering that election cycle? That was the beginning of the end if you were a Democrat in this state that had just sort of grown up assuming that, as you pointed out earlier, that the elections were typically settled in May or June or even later historically in the primaries. November was a foregone conclusion. So what was it like covering 2010?

[00:30:34] JB: It was different because—and you've alluded to this, the dam breaking. We had all these episodes where the Republicans would make gains but the Democrats would block it. The Democrats would come back in the next cycle, and it would be stopped, whether it's the Republican seat from the Second District, or whether it's Jay Dickey in South Arkansas with Mike Ross. I mean, the Democrats would find a way to stop it. After Huckabee, Beebe. And I thought, "This one—this isn't an isolated case where maybe the Democrats can stop it. This"—I

believe that's the same election. All these things are running together on me. Help me with my facts. But Mark Darr elected lieutenant governor . . .

JD: Over Shane Broadway.

JB: . . . by a scant, few votes.

JD: Very close.

[00:31:27] JB: So I mean, we haven't gone over the cliff, we're just teetering on the cliff. And just kinda—the Democrats are hanging to the cliff, and that race was so close that it wasn't sure for a day or two exactly how it was going to be, but it was very close. So it wasn't the avalanche that was coming, it was the harbinger of the avalanche. But even so, a majority of Republicans winning state constitutional offices, making gains in the legislature—well, these guys are about to take over. This is different from the spasms of inroads that the Democrats have been able to stop. I wasn't sure it was permanent or strong. And I think it became more permanent and stronger with the Affordable Care Act and with the actual Obama presidency. And the largely irrational revulsion in Arkansas among conservatives to gun fears and those sorts of things. But yeah, I knew it was a new day. I didn't know how stark, how dramatic, how overwhelming it would prove to be in a decade.

[00:32:38] JD: So in [20]12 and [20]14 we see gains made in 2010 not only sustained by Republicans but expanded upon greatly. After [20]14, moving forward, you have supermajorities in both chambers of the General Assembly. You've got a full slate of constitutional offices. You've got both of our senators being Republican at that point, that fall in [20]14. And then you have all four of our US House of Representatives. We are a fully Republican state with exception of a few pockets in Central Arkansas by the mid 2010s, Central Arkansas, Northwest Arkansas, and a few along maybe the eastern part of the state in the Delta.

JB: Delta with African American vote. Yeah.

[00:33:21] JD: You have a few of those places. And then you had a few of those more kind of, I would say traditionally, moderate, conservative Democrats still in south Arkansas as well. [Twenty] twelve and [20]14 will probably go down as being those election cycles where, as you said, that those gains were—for the first time ever for Republicans held. What they gained in 2010, they didn't slip away.

JB: They consolidated. What happened in 2010 that was a harbinger and made me think was quickly consolidated in the next two cycles.

JD: Were you surprised at how swift that occurred?

[00:33:57] JB: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that—bear in mind, I've talked to you about my whole training, my foundation in Arkansas politics. It's in a default D state. It's where Republicans are just innocent little jokes that you pat on the head. Sorry y'all can't do anything. And then you'd have occasional Republican victories, and you'd think, "Well, this is interesting, but it's an aberration." Frank White two years and out, Bethune four years and out in Congress. Dickey for a while and—popular but out when you get the—and I still thought—this is where—another thing I was late to. I still thought there was currency in Arkansas for the Mike Ross, Beebe kind of Democrat, which is a kind of Democrat that is [*laughs*] not much Democrat on a national scale, but connected to Arkansas and able to finesse this, "I'm a good, old, Arkansas, South Arkansas boy. And I'm with you on the guns. And I'm with you on the cultural issues. Now don't pay too close attention 'cause I'm going to go up there and vote for some several things that Ms. Pelosi would like me to vote for." But that—I thought that could still work. I thought that later than I should have thought it. And I didn't understand the change in the culture in that our politics was no longer state based, but fully nationalized because of the internet

and because of Fox News, and everything is about national issues. So I was still thinking as late as [20]12, maybe [20]14—well, you know, maybe the demo—if—maybe—I s—when did Ross run against Asa Hutchinson?

JD: In [20]14.

[00:35:42] JB: Yeah, and I'm thin—and Pryor against Tom Cotton. And I'm thinking, "It ain't done yet. These are the two kinds of Democrats who can still win." They have a personal connection. They can have an Arkansas cultural connection, and they can finesse the liberal politics and appear more moderate. No, sir. What I was hit over the head with is people ain't buying that anymore. Don't finesse me that you're one thing in Arkansas and another thing in Washington. It's all national politics. It's all guns, it's all abortion, it's all taxes, it's all health care, it's all Obama. And you're either with him and them, or you're not. And I did not fully see that coming. I thought it could still, as late as [20]14, I thought it could still be negotiated. Couldn't be. Couldn't be.

[00:36:36] JD: You're touching on this unique trait that Arkansas politics had for much longer than its neighbors in the South, which was we had sort of this historical preference for more parochial, personalized politics, retail politics, going to the

Watermelon Festival, the Pink Tomato Festival, this sort of thing, Star Days, going to the campaigns, rallies that were really not that different from what you would've expected in maybe the [19]40s, 1950s, as recent as a few years ago. And then nationalized politics, right, certainly permeates that and even bursts it to where we are today. What's the effect? I mean, you've touched on this, but what's the policy effect? What's the political effect? I think someone could have naively thought, maybe even in [20]14, well, Republicans are going to govern similarly to the way Democrats had, because Democrats had never been accused in Arkansas of being particularly liberal or particularly left leaning on a lot of issues. [00:37:40] Why didn't we see that? What changed that brought the politics we see today, which I think are distinctly different from what we saw ten, twenty years ago? I mean, take away the partisanship . . .

JB: Oh, good. I see what—yeah.

JD: Just the actual—in policy.

[00:37:52] JB: I know what you're saying. In the beginning of [20]10, more in [20]12, more in [20]14, what's happening is clear. The Republicans are taking over. But as late as [20]14, as late as Asa Hutchinson's first term and into part of his second term, Hutchinson and Republicans like Davy Carter, who was

Speaker of the House, sort of a practical, moderate fellow, they're—I remember Davy Carter visiting with me and saying, "We've got to show we can govern. We've got to govern." And I think there was that practical consideration of conservative but not extreme, ideological Republicans who were in positions—Hutchinson as governor. Carter for a while as speaker when Beebe was governor, who said, "Let's—hey guys, we gotta show the people we can govern." And for a while Asa, as governor, could see some of these culturally conservative bills percolating. Why, Representative So-and-so is getting ready to put in a transgender bathroom bill or something like that. And he could lean on that person. I saw this happen. He could lean on that person. "Don't do it. Let us—we got to show we can govern. If we invite national boycotts or national protest, that's the worst thing we'll do. That's not the time for this. Let's—we got to tend to the sort of Walmart conservatism, you know, with some moderation and some modern—we got to continue this moderation and modernization theme that began in [19]66." And he could stop it. [00:39:28] So that happened for a while, and I was able to cover this legislature and think, "This isn't terribly different from what I've long covered." In the end, a pragmatic governor, Democratic governor, Beebe, works with

some pragmatic Republicans, who are less conservative than some of the old nominal Ds of the old days but more competent, people like Carter, and Burris, John Burris, and David Sanders, and people like that, and Dismang. And they fashioned this kind of Medicaid expansion, which—by which Arkansas is the first Southern state to adopt a form of Obamacare. Even as we're railing against it, that sort of dichotomy and practicality is holding. What has happened now—if you're bringing us up to date? Is that what you're trying to do, to what's going on in the current session?

JD: Well, just in the last couple of years, but this session's appropriate as well, sure.

[00:40:19] JB: Well, yeah, and I—the cultural conservatives, the movement conservatives, have said, "The hell with it. We've waited long enough. We've shown we can govern. Now let's do what we want." And it's just this pent-up frustration. "I need to get down there, and we got to just say, 'We're not going to have any abortion.' We got to say, 'We're going to have stand your ground.' We got to say, 'We're going to teach creation in the school,' whatever we want. It's our time because we have played—Asa, we've played your game, and David Carter, we've played that game. Sure we can govern. We can pass

appropriation bills. We can keep this thing afloat, but it's time to do what we believe in." But what—so it's—partly, it's time, but what happened in between that gave them fuel? A president who was—a president of the United States from Manhattan, who was of them. He was totally about the kinds of things that Arkansas rural conservatism is drawn from in our state's heritage. Resentment, bitterness, some element of bigotry, bullying. Resentment of power, be it business or politics. We've fashioned a weak government in our state constitution, a weak governor, for sure. And all of a sudden finally, now, for sure, these folks are saying, "We got the numbers. We're winning all the elections. The president is of our party, and we're going to listen to him instead of Asa telling us to be nice. We're tired of being nice. We're going to be what we really are." [00:41:54] And it's a merger of Trumpism and the natural, rural, conservative instinct based on some of the resentment of the state's heritage, so resentment of government, resentment of power. People say, "Why can't Walmart have and Waltons have more influence on this legislature not to pass some of the bills that they're passing?" Well, it's because these folks resent Waltons and Walmart as much as they do government because it's power. They have consolidated power, and they're elite.

And they're worried about appealing on the national level to their business interest. "This is our state, by God, and we're gonna d—it's time to do what we thought, what we think we ought to, and Trump is with us." And that's precisely, in my view, what has happened. And it's what's going to lead us, I guess, to being a Trump outpost after 2022, when his press secretary becomes our governor. So that will be another—that's how the whole thing has coalesced. It's a perfect storm that has led us to where we are I think.

[00:43:05] JD: So in 2016 we see then candidate Donald Trump do well in this state, to say the least. We see him in [20]20 do even better. And he does better in, as you know, a lot of these rural parts of the state. Even in the Delta, he does fairly well. He does really well in timberlands. He actually outperforms his [20]16 numbers in a few of the South Arkansas counties. In his wake, we see Republicans make some pickups, which at this point's pretty hard to come by in the General Assembly because they've got so many seats as it is. They do take over a few more seats in both the state Senate and state house, mainly in those southern parts and eastern parts.

JB: Southern parts from incumbent, conservative Democrats trying to finesse that they're different from the national party.

JD: Certainly.

JB: Nobody's buying it anymore.

[00:43:58] JD: He loses in [20]20, as we know, nationally. But as you're alluding to, his reach, his shadow seems to still be very much in Arkansas. I guess my question is even though he lost in [20]20, do you see this being a long-term effect? Do you see the Trump presidency, which is going to be—at least right now it's appearing, a four-year, one-term presidency. Perhaps he'll run again, perhaps he'll win before, you know, too long after this interview. [*JB laughs*] Is that going to be something that continues to be a legacy in Arkansas? And if so, how interesting is that, that a guy who probably had never been to Arkansas prior to maybe flying in once or twice in his campaign in [20]15 to [20]16, have such an impact on a state like ours?

[00:44:54] JB: Donald Trump was perfect for Arkansas. Do you remember a guy in Arkansas politics named Tommy Robinson?

JD: I do.

JB: Just a big talking, tear everything up, everybody's ridiculous, tell the absolute truth, as he claimed it was. And people love his big talk and his toughness. And he gives it to everybody, and he's his own man. Tommy Robinson was a poor man's Donald Trump. It was just the same thing. And he was a powerful force

in Arkansas politics and kind of on his way to governor until other factors beset him. He was the great risk to—great threat to Clinton, which is a whole different thing.

[00:45:37] JD: Tell me about the 1990 GOP primary.

JB: Well, we'll get to that. [*JD laughs*] The 1990 GOP primary. You want me to talk about that?

JD: Yeah, I do. Absolutely.

JB: Well, I shouldn't have brought up Tommy Robinson. You talked to Skip Rutherford about this?

JD: I did, yes.

[00:45:51] JB: Yeah. It's one of his favorite topics. And he and I are in sort of a permanent dispute about who's most responsible for what happened. But Clinton is just trying to maintain his famously desired political viability so he can make a move in national politics, perhaps in [19]92, but he's got to do something. Does he just sit out, or does he run for Senate, or what does he do in [19]90? Or does he go for yet another term as governor? And he decides to run for governor, and he gets up, and he says he decided to run for governor because there's a dark cloud over the state. He actually said this. And the dark cloud is this Tommy Robinsonism, this guy. He's gonna break everything. He's gonna tear everything down. And he's

dangerous for the state, that kind of demagoguery, and he's going to run. So it was assumed—the race is Tommy, who'd gone to Congress and then been—made a party switch from Democrats to Republicans in the White House with George H. W. Bush's sanction, manipulated by the late Lee Atwater. So it's going to be Tommy/Clinton. It's going to be one for the ages. And Tommy has a rival in the Republican Party, Sheffield Nelson. They're both—the two best friends of Dallas Cowboy owner Jerry Jones with ties to each other in business and personal. And they have one of the most bitter, horrible, nasty primaries you've ever seen, Sheffield and Tommy. They're—things are coming out on each other that I'd never seen come out in politics about what you're—a pint-of-bourbon-a-day habit or things like that. And Tommy's money at the house bank where he was supposedly kiting checks. All that's coming out. [00:47:51] And I and Skip Rutherford started advancing this notion: If Tommy Robinson is the number-one threat, why don't Democrats go vote in the Republican primary? It's an open primary. Go vote for Sheffield and take Tommy Robinson out. Take him out. And I wrote columns saying, "If you're a good Democrat, your man Clinton is going to beat Tom McCreary. Don't worry about that." Now Clinton started worrying about it

toward the end like, "Wait a minute. What are y'all doing to me?" But go do your state a favor in a low turn—and at the time, Republican primaries had at the most, 40,000, 60,000 votes. Get oh—let's all go over there and vote for Sheffield Nelson. We're not for him, but he's the agent by which we take out the greater existential threat. And damned if a lot of people didn't do it. In my boxes in the liberal, Hillcrest section of Little Rock, there were more Republican primary votes than Democratic votes. Now, it wasn't the sole reason that Nelson won, but it was a big contributing factor to it. So that existential threat was removed. The race was not as epic, and Clinton handled Nelson with some difficulty, but not as much as I think he would've had with the entire Republican Bush White House support to Tommy Robinson. [00:49:25] So that was another case where the Republicans—that's supposed to be a big moment. Republicans have just—the talking-tall, folk hero of Arkansas politics, Tommy Robinson, has just switched to the Republicans, and they've done it in the White House. And the Republican president of the United States is there with him. And they're going to take out Bill Clinton, and this is the new Arkansas. And it didn't happen. See, until like 2010 and 2014, when I'm late to thinking that it may not really be fully

happening, it would always be sort of mitigated, headed off. And that was the wild story of 1990. I think Rutherford claims that's like the most seminal thing that happened in Arkansas politics. I don't know, but it sure was interesting, and it was fun to write those columns and to see [*laughs*] all those Republican votes in my liberal neighborhood. That was a weird thing.

[00:50:31] JD: Following that election, of course, we have for the first time in the GOP state party's history two chairmen to patch the party together, to try to capitalize on some pretty high numbers in the primary. We see Sheffield Nelson be a co-chair to the GOP Arkansas party organization, as it were, and Asa Hutchinson. Sheffield Nelson goes on shortly thereafter to be a national committee chairman or committeeman, if I remember correctly. And Chairman Hutchinson stays there for a time. And during that time, there's a court challenge to the way that the state had funded, or not funded, rather, primaries. That disadvantaged Republicans for that time. And so again, sort of like what we see in the years after Clinton, where a series of things occur, [19]90 seems to be one of those pivotal ones, right, and maybe not in the way that we would've thought. You know, not in the way that Republicans made political gains, but in the way that things happen after the fact.

[00:51:39] JB: Asa Hutchinson will tell you—I don't—that—I've had conversations with him when I talk about how all this happened and offer my theories. And he said, "Well, one thing you're not given sufficient credence to or significance to is that we got the primary law changed." For joint primaries. It's easy—it's now convenient. I mean, you could go vote, and if you want to be a Republican here, you'd be a Republican here, and vote in the Republican primary, as opposed to having the real election, which is Ds and an ancillary election, which is those Rs who don't matter. Suddenly they were joined. He thinks that was as important as anything in what happened as a result.

[00:52:22] JD: We've been talking a lot about the past in Arkansas politics. Some of it's been decades ago. Some of it's been as recent as maybe the last election cycle. What we saw in 2020 in Arkansas was, if anything, a further, more expanded-upon solidifying of GOP dominance in the state.

JB: Overpowering.

JD: Overpowering. What we saw in a few other Southern states I think would be the product of demographic shifts. And we see it somewhat in Texas emerging. We see it in Georgia in particular with a lot of the population gains being made in some of the metro areas in Atlanta being peopled by more progressive, more

racially diverse numbers of people. And so there's a lot of talk right now about politics in the South and whether it's changing or not. Where do you see Arkansas in ten or twenty years?

[00:53:31] JB: Behind the Southern curve. I just think that's where we're gonna be. That's where we were all those years when we were a nominal, default, D state, while the Republicans have taken over other Southern states. We simply remained this static, unique place. And partly, it was the cult of personality of really good Democratic politicians, meaning Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton, and Beebe. But partly, it was just that we go slow. We just don't move as quickly as other places. I mean, things happen here after they happen elsewhere, historically. They just do. And the other, I think, was demographic, as it's going to be demographic going forward. So now Arkansas is almost unique among the Southern states in the level of its Trumpian Republicanism because Trumpian Republicanism is a white, rural, culturally conservative thing, largely. And we have less African American population to vote D than Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. So our Republican percentages are—in this new—you just asked me about a lasting legacy of Trump. I think there is one, regardless of what happens to him nationally. It's gonna be stronger here. Our percentages of Republican

votes in this post-Trump or lingering-Trump culture are gonna be higher here. And then some of the Southern states are growing, and are more demographically diverse. We remain largely the same in terms of our demographics. But Georgia has a stronger African American population, but it has this incredible suburban, exurban metro growth in Atlanta, where professional people of moderate-to-progressive politics are coming. And so it's becoming more Democratic. Texas, not just Atlanta, but you got Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Austin. You got several of those. Combine—the similar dynamic of people from elsewhere moving in who are educated, moderate, progressive. Combine that with the Hispanic vote, which is strong, and growing, and typically blue. Texas is going toward the Ds. Georgia is still going toward the Ds. It hasn't gone, but it had an aberration, and a glorious one to me, but an aberration in this election, whereas Arkansas is gonna be going the other direction. We're gonna—we're just gonna s—because we—Little Rock is not Dallas. Little Rock is not hou—it's not even Nashville, Tennessee. Little Rock is just okay, and it's a blue place, but it's not growing. And you look at the suburbs of Little Rock. What are they? Benton, Bryant, Conway, which are overwhelmingly Republican and likely to remain so. And so we're gonna be

Trumpian and Republican long after, or some period after, Texas is a purple state. And Georgia may be a blue state. [00:56:53] We're going to be back here, different, the same way we were when they went Republican and we stayed nominally Democrat. It is just Arkansas's fate as long as we remain an economically second—an economic—not a strong, vibrant, growth economy. And where is the growth in Arkansas? Largely, it's up in the Bentonville, Fayetteville area. And you get a lot of—you get some Democrats around Benton County. You can't have a world class art museum without some Democrats comin' in, so that's happening. But that happens to be the most overwhelmingly, historically, the most overwhelming Republican area, and they get a long way to go to actually make a difference. So we just have this perfect storm by which Trump and the culture of the state merged. We've got this perfect storm of demographics, which are gonna keep us the way we are. Just as we were no-party Democratic for decades, I fear that we're going to be a Trumpian conservative state for, I don't want to say decades, but a while. And certainly longer than other places.

[00:58:05] JD: This summer in 2020 at the Republican National Convention, then GOP Chairman Doyle Webb for the state Republican Party made remarks, and he said that Arkansas was

the most Republican state in the country. And voting returns would indicate as much, and polling would indicate something very similar.

JB: We're up there.

JD: Maybe some rivals but we're certainly [*unclear words*].

[00:58:27] JB: We're certainly the most in the South, and that's the solid South. And we're different from the trends that are happening. I mean, you still got your Wyomings and mon—Wyomings and Idahos and the Dakotas where, you know, they may be up there with Arkansas, and Oklahoma. But a white, conservative—a ruggedly independent, white, conservative culture, which Arkansas still largely is and which those states I mentioned are, which are more Midwestern, that's Trumpian politics. That's the perfect climate for Trumpian politics. And I've heard—we mentioned Skip Rutherford. I've heard him say Arkansas politics is no longer Mississippi, no longer Louisiana, no longer Texas, no longer Tennessee. He makes us more similar to a block with Kansas, that we're sort of this Midwestern, farm, lightly populated, conservative, white, conservative, rural areas. I think that's true. And that's—Arkansas has long been less its own identity in some ways than a collection of its adjoining identities. The Delta is kind of like Mississippi. South Arkansas

is kind of like north Louisiana. Southwest Arkansas and west Arkansas are kinda like Oklahoma and Texas. Northwest Arkansas is like Oklahoma or Kansas or Missouri. Little Rock is Little Rock. But it's not a singular identity to the state, and it's always a battle. And the growth is all Northwest. And it's all—it makes us more—it draws us a little bit Midwest as opposed to Deep South. And that's very conservative, and that's a lower percentage for Democrats than states that can produce more African American voters than we can like Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina. So I'm, you know—I just think—I think things set in in Arkansas, and they stay, and I think that may be what's happening here.

[01:00:39] JD: What have we left out? What have we missed in this conversation on the causes and the dramatic effects of this historic shift?

[01:00:50] JB: Okay. I do have one thing I'd like to say in that regard. Just sort of a broader historical perspective. Bearing in mind for posterity that we're doing this during the Arkansas legislative session of 2021, which may hold some place in long history for the level of extreme conservatism, cultural conservatism that took hold. And we're dealing passage of—with creationist science bills and anti-transgender bills and all kinds of

things. First state in the nation to have—to do some of these culturally conservative things. [01:01:32] And I guess the perspective I want to give is this, and I've touched on it, but Arkansas was founded as a state—people fleeing too much commerce, too much government, too much going on over here in the Carolinas and in Tennessee. "We got to get out here to the frontier, and we got to build this state where we all get a good letting alone. And we have our—get us a piece of ground, and we'll build—we've construct with our constitution a weak governor." And we fashioned this fiction that you could build a wall around Arkansas, and we could be for—and we could live forever. And there's a strong frontier conservatism element of that that is based on resentment and bullying and bigotry and resentment of political—of public service. "Leave me alone. I don't need anything. Why should I be taxed to do things for other people?" That's sort of the heritage of the state. And it takes us through the Civil War. It takes us through Jim Crow. It takes us through this wildly populist, conservative populist governor, Jeff Davis. It takes us to [19]57 and Faubus and international disgrace. [01:02:48] And then in [19]66 something new starts. Winthrop Rockefeller defeats Orval Faubus. Well, he doesn't, no. He defeats Jim Johnson, but he

succeeds Orval Faubus. But I don't think that that was a conscious decision to be more progressive. It was we resent power, and the Democrats and Faubus, that machine politics, that had too much power. So we're going to throw out what's there. I think that was what's going on. And then four years later, Democrats defeat Rockefeller with Bumpers, who was very progressive. But I think the people were saying, "Hey, I don't wanna be governed by some guy from New York. This gives me a chance—you know, I got some resentment there. Let's go with Bumpers." The effect is we've elected another moderate to modernizing progressive. And that's—and in succession very talented Democratic politicians come along, Pryor, Clinton, Beebe. And we have an era from sixty—beginning in [19]66 that has a little up and down like spasms. We always have these spasms in Arkansas politics, but we have an era that I call modernization and moderation. Our emphasis is not resenting everybody. We'd like to be a little more of the country. We're modernizing our business around here. We want to be a little more moderate in our politics. We don't want you to see us as so nuts. [01:04:21] But there is this—but now I'm beginning to think that rather than a permanent change in the state, that was about a six decade interruption of the resentment-based politics.

Because what we—and to his credit—I'm something of a fan of Asa Hutchinson for some reason, but I just am. I think he has continued modernization and moderation or tried to the extent that he can, and how he's been overrun by it. And I just think that era's over. And it wasn't something that—I think we're back to saying, "We don't need anybody else but ourselves. We'll make our own laws, and the rest of the country can ridicule us if we want to. By God, this is Arkansas, and this is what I believe, according to what my preacher says. And this is what we're gonna do." I think we're seeing sort of an end of an era, a jolting end of an era. [01:05:21] And then you've asked me what's coming next. I see something like that now taking hold for a while. Makes me somewhat depressed, but that's just my problem, I guess. But really, I do think—I think—it was a history professor. You may know him. Ben Johnson in South Arkansas, who put on Twitter the other day to me—it was a message to me, but it was public, that my construction of this era of modernization and moderation, turns out—he—that he said, "I think that's just an interruption." We're now seeing us get back to, I guess, what you'd call our basic instincts. That's a perspective that I am not fully bought into, but I'm seeing it as something quite possible. I'm seeing validity to it. So.

[01:06:21] JD: Well, we certainly have the benefit of knowing that we are in and have witnessed a very, tremendously historic time in our state's politics. And I am very grateful for your time today and being able to help us unpack a lot of things that have happened and the significance of those events, which we really can fail to recognize if we don't have this sort of longer view on the events leading up to the last few election cycles. And so again, on behalf of Pryor Center, John Brummett, thank you so much.

JB: I'll do anything the Pryor Center ever wants, which is probably this and nothing else ever, but I'm happy to do it. Happy to do it. All right.

[End of interview 01:07:25]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]