

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

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Blue to Red Oral History Project

Rex Nelson
Interviewed by John C. Davis
October 8, 2020
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 Rex Nelson on October 8, 2020, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: With me today is Rex Nelson, a long-time columnist, political observer, politico, long-time writer and thinker on all things Arkansas, historian, very well-regarded Arkansan who has seen firsthand, and in many cases in various roles, the dynamics of politics in Arkansas stretching back decades at this point. And he's seen it from the vantage point of Arkansas, but also our nation's capital and back. And so we're very grateful. On behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you for sitting down with us today.

Rex Nelson: Thank you for having me. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

[00:00:42] JD: And so in this study, the Pryor Center is primarily focused on the historic shift in partisanship that we see in Arkansas, particularly beginning around 2010. But we like the time frame period of 2005 to 2015 because it allows us the opportunity to see what it was sort of pre-2010, 2011, where we see solid Democratic majorities in both the State House and State Senate that had been that way since Reconstruction. We see occasional Republican governors that have been elected: Rockefeller in the [19]60s, Frank White early [19]80s, and then

of course Governor Huckabee in the 1990s into the early 2000s. With exception of those gentlemen, we had seen steady gubernatorial success going the way of Democrats. We had seen—of our four House of Representatives, on occasions we would see one or two Republicans in those positions, but they never really would be able to claim to have considerable momentum in those with exception of one district where we see Representative Hammerschmidt hold the position for decades, and then that mantle passed on to other Republicans. But with exception to his position, we see congressionally, looking at Washington, DC, and also legislatively, looking at Little Rock, continued long-term Democratic dominance in this state.

[00:02:07] And so we wanna go back a little further before 2005 to sort of set the stage. I am reminded of—V.O. Key, when he writes about Southern politics in 1949, he, to paraphrase, says that Arkansas politics may be one-party dominance in its most undefiled form. Among a region where one party dominated all aspects of political life, Arkansas stood out as even one that was, even maybe more so, seeing Democratic dominance with exception of a few key pockets in the Ozarks and other areas of the state. So one way we might break this up is into three generations. So we could look at

1960, perhaps 1964, but certainly 1966, where we see our first Republican elected governor since Reconstruction in Winthrop Rockefeller. And Governor Rockefeller holds two terms of office, which at the time were two years apiece. And prior to that time and also during his time as governor, we really see a rebranding and resurgence of Republican Party organization largely funded by his own wealth and his own ability to bring and bridge gaps and bring people together politically. We then see a period where, with his leaving political office and eventual passing shortly thereafter, sadly—with exception of Congressman Hammerschmidt, who coincidentally is elected the same turn of events in 1966, we see sort of a waning again of prominence in the state among Republicans. [00:03:46] We then see, in 1980, Frank White beat a very young Bill Clinton who's seeking his second term. Arkansans sort of wanted to punish Governor Clinton and send him a message, and they certainly did. Frank White had switched parties essentially as—to run, in part, to run against Governor Clinton, is successful in the polls, serves one term in office, but yet we don't see a l—a great deal of momentum for Republicans. And by this time, we do see Republicans being favored in presidential races. We can go back as far as the 1960s to see a breakdown of Democratic

dominance in the presidential elections for Arkansans. And we see a growing presence of favoring a Republican at the top of the ticket, but still having those long-term attachments to the Democratic Party down ticket that extends through the 1980s. [00:04:38] So even with the prominence and popularity of a governor—former governor, President Reagan, of a President George H.W. Bush, we see that down ticket not a whole lot of movement occurs for Republicans. We do see some successes, but it's sort of fits and starts. And that closes out that era in 1992. Course, 1992, we have a governor then who had been in office some time after losing to Frank White in 1980, who ascends to the White House, is elected in 1992, and defeats incumbent President George H. W. Bush. And in 1993 we see really a mass exodus perhaps of some Democratic—we might say bench or talent that was sort of intended to carry the mantle probably another generation, but for the most part goes to DC to work with Governor Clinton, President-elect Clinton. And that perhaps opens up a vacuum of political opportunity, which I know you'll have a lot to talk about. And then beginning in 1993 to roughly 2010, we see a period of party renewal and organization and rejuvenation with the Republicans. We see some of that down-ticket weakness that they had experienced

waning a bit where Republicans at the top of the ticket are still enjoying considerable success in Arkansas where, with exception of a Southern—either a favorite son in Bill Clinton or a Southerner in Jimmy Carter in [19]76, we're not seeing Democratic success at all for presidential candidates in Arkansas. And we're seeing that trickle down. We see Governor Huckabee, who ascends to office under unusual circumstances, but then holds his own and becomes a very popular governor and is reelected in his own right. [00:06:32] By 2010 we see the Tea Party movement. We see President Obama. We see a sort of nationalization, perhaps, of politics that finally penetrates those walls in Arkansas. We by now are decades into most Southern states being majority Republican in their state legislatures, or at least becoming stronger Republican states, where the Natural State is this notable laggard in that process. And we look to 2011 to today, where we see considerable dramatic shifts in partisan control. And so I know you'll have a lot to talk about and a lot to help us unfold and unpackage all that's been going on. [00:07:18] Rex, you've—you're—it's well-documented your love for Arkansas, Arkansas history, and politics. What would you say would be your first political memory?

[00:07:27] RN: My first political memories are of Winthrop

Rockefeller. And I was young. I was born in 1959, so when Rockefeller took office—or was elected in [19]66 and then took office in January of [19]67, I was a young child. I was a weird child, though. I mean, from—when I wo—learned to read, the first thing I would do is run out on the driveway of my parents' home in Arkadelphia and get the *Arkansas Gazette*. And loved it all. Not just the sports section, which I did read cover to cover, but also the political stories and so forth. [00:08:04] I can remember my Cub Scout pack going to a Proclamation Session at the State Capitol and meeting Governor Rockefeller. I can remember going downtown—you know, things are a little vague when you're young. I think it was probably the [19]68 reelection campaign. But Rockefeller was campaigning in a helicopter. And you know, a small town boy from South Arkansas—that was a big deal. So I can remember my mother taking me to the Piggly Wiggly parking lot downtown to watch Winthrop Rockefeller land. So I was fascinated by this rich New Yorker who had come here, and that's probably the period when I got interested in politics. I started collecting bumper stickers and signs. I r—do remember in [19]68 not only Rockefeller, not only Marion Crank, his opponent that year, but even other candidates. George Wallace is a third-party candidate who

carried Arkansas, and because he carried Arkansas, then you had American Independent Party candidates actually on state tickets in 1970. [00:09:23] And I remember I had a Walter Carruth sign, actually, and bumper sticker just 'cause that was unusual—who was the American Independent Party candidate. So that was the period as a kid when I really started paying a lot of attention to politics. By the time I was in college, late [19]70s, early [19]80s, I was really into it and actually worked full-time in my first political campaign in 1984.

JD: So growing up were—was your household Republican?

[00:09:55] RN: You know, my household was pretty apolitical. I think it probably skipped a generation. My grandfather on my mother's side had held practically every elective office in Prairie County. He lived in Des Arc. He loved politics. I think it probably, again, skipped a generation. My father was a former coach who sold sporting goods, so everything in my family was sports. I mean, my dad sold sporting goods gear all over the state with basketballs and footballs in the trunk, and sports was big. But I also loved politics, so I would actually make him take me to the Clark County Courthouse on election nights to watch the returns be read. That was like a sports event. That was exciting to me, and I can remember making him do this. But it's

not something we discussed around the dinner table. Certainly at my grandparents we would. He was an old hardcore Southern Democrat. But not my parents. We were pretty apolitical. So I was the one in the family probably with a political interest. Not something I ever discussed with my parents.

[00:11:03] JD: If you could think back—and you mentioned your first political job was in [19]84, in that election cycle. Take us back to that period. And if you can answer, maybe, the question in two parts—sort of as your perception of the Republican Party in Arkansas at that time, and then maybe what you thought the perception among Arkansans would've been in the, say, the late [19]70s into the early 1980s.

[00:11:27] RN: Yeah. Well, I was—I had decided I was a Republican by then. I had a Reagan bumper sticker on my car in 1980. In college I had a Reagan bumper sticker in our dorm room there at Ouachita. In 1978 I remember I didn't live in the Second District, but I remember how incredibly exciting it was to me that Ed Bethune would be elected to the Second Congressional District in 1978. So in 1984 when Bethune decided to take on David Pryor for that US Senate seat—and of course, Pryor ended up winning—but that opened up the Second Congressional District seat. And I got a call from Judy Petty who was the

Republican in the district—asked me to come to work for her as her communications director in the campaign. She lost to Tommy Robinson, who had served two terms and become kinda this statewide folk hero as Pulaski County Sheriff, and Robinson won in a relatively close race. But Republicans lost that seat. But that was my first time to work full-time in a political campaign. [00:12:46] Ironically, my next time to work full-time in a political campaign would be for the guy who beat us, Tommy Robinson, when he ran for governor in 1990. But as I would always remind him—he would say, "Well, we beat y'all back in [19]84," and I'd say, "Yeah, but I've worked for Republicans both times, so I'm the consistent one here." [Laughs] Because of course Robinson had switched to the Republican Party by the time of that gubernatorial primary in 1990. So those were the first two campaigns that I worked full-time in.

[00:13:21] JD: You had mentioned that the Rockefeller era in the late 1960s as a child really s—peaked your interest in politics. And looking back we know that Governor Rockefeller gets elected in part because of what we might call, especially in that time period, sort of modern or moderate progressive Republicans, moderate, maybe progressive Democrats, and

particularly African American voters moved over for him if only momentarily in 1966 and [196]8, in part because of Rockefeller's opponent, Johnson, in [19]66. Do you think the momentum that may have been expected or anticipated by some Republicans with having, you know, for the first time in almost 100 years, a Republican in the Governor's Mansion—is there a reason that you can come up with as to why that momentum waned after Governor Rockefeller's departure?

[00:14:23] RN: The momentum waned because his victories in [19]66 and [19]68 forced the Democratic Party to change. Win Rockefeller is by far my favorite Arkansas figure of the twentieth century, and that's a whole 'nother interview for another day why. But briefly, I mean, you've got this guy from what, at the time, was America's richest family. I mean, nobody in poor Arkansas could've dreamed that eventually America's richest family, the Waltons, would be from Arkansas. That would—not something we could've even dreamed of. So a Rockefeller moves here in 1953 to live among us. And Rockefeller's my favorite character because simultaneously, if I can spit it out, he saved us as a state while we saved him as an individual. And by that I mean he forced a new progressive era in Arkansas politics, and we saved him because we really gave him purpose in life,

which he was struggling when he moved here. That's why he got away from the Manhattan social scene and moved to Arkansas. But Rockefeller, of course, had gotten elected by getting large majorities of the African American vote in Arkansas, by bringing in moderates who were just ready for an end to the segregation hysteria of Democratic politics. The Democrats, of course, do nominate a segregationist in Jim Johnson in [19]66. They come back in [19]68 with Marion Crank, who is also a member of the so-called Old Guard of the Arkansas Democratic Party. And by [19]70 I think Democratic primary voters had said, "Look, we've gotta make a change." [00:16:04] Faubus, of course had come back after four years out of office, decided to run in [19]70, thought he would waltz back into office. But voters had changed by then, and Dale Bumpers was something fresh, he was something different. But I firmly believe without a Winthrop Rockefeller for four of—those four years, a Dale Bumpers never would've been possible, thus a David Pryor never would've been possible, thus a David—Bill Clinton never would've been possible. So because of Winthrop Rockefeller defeating the Democratic nominee in [19]66 and [19]68, it forced the majority party to change, and when the majority party changed—the Republican Party had been a party

of change. They were kind of left without a place to go for a long time, John.

[00:16:55] JD: I think that's incr—very well put. And I also think of the Republican Party during that era as almost what we would perceive to be a third party today in that, as you mentioned, they pushed the majority party into a sp—a political space that it had not been in. But it also kind of took away their own opportunity to try to get into the door that way as well. And we know that institutionally, at that time, Republicans were significantly disadvantaged. In particular, I think of even the court cases recently as the early 1990s where Republicans were having to—both parties, but it was disadvantaging Republicans, were having to fund their own primaries, pay the, maybe, the county clerks in return for conducting primaries. And really up until the 1990s, we see these systemic, rules-oriented approaches that we wouldn't expect a major party in the United States to really have to deal with. Maybe a third party, maybe an Independent candidacy. But I think you speak to so much there when you're explaining that process.

[00:17:59] RN: Yeah. I'm glad, and this is not a partisan comment at all, this is a comment of somebody who loves Arkansas politics and Arkansas history. I'm glad I've lived long enough to

watch a 180 because it's been fascinating. I mean, when Rockefeller stepped off the stage, then the Republicans are scrambling so that basically they're just throwing cannon fodder out there, their party chairman, to run for governor just to have somebody on the ballot. You know, we look at a Len Blaylock that runs or a Ken Coon, both of whom were/are friends of mine, who were just out there so they would have somebody.

[00:18:41] Now, ironically, we see the Democratic Party of Arkansas in that same position. I mean, as we tape this, they weren't even able to field a candidate against US Senator Tom Cotton. Their gubernatorial candidate was totally cannon fodder the last time around. Two years from now, I kind of expect the same thing. We may see something different, but I think it'll be a cannon-fodder candidate. So that, from a historical standpoint, that's really fascinating. Because once Rockefeller and his millions of dollars that he was putting in left the stage, the party was really back to, all of a sudden, kind of where it had been in the decades leading up to the Rockefeller revolution.

[00:19:24] JD: So if you could, explain what your role was in, say, the early 1980s, early 1990s as someone who was working more in different forms of media at that time, and sort of how you observed that era. Because that's the point where we start to

see a Arkansas governor running for president of the United States, positioning himself really as early as 1988. There's talk of even Dale Bumpers perhaps running in the late [19]80s. So you're seeing that from a different perspective. And then if you would, take us to 1992 and sort of how that was for someone who is covering Arkansas politics, who's been involved in Arkansas politics at that time. What was going on?

[00:20:09] RN: Well, you know, there were still—we were still in a state where, if you were a young person who really had an interest in politics, it was the thing to do to run as a Democrat. That was the way in. But what we had seen with Arkansas tending to go Republican in presidential races, with, you know, Hammerschmidt still in office, we had seen some young talent start to run as a Republican. And so there were some openings there that allowed the Republican Party to add what I call some foundation blocks to build what we have seen now. The first of those came thanks to the House banking scandal, and that's something I think a lot of people miss. But Arkansas had three of the top-ten check bouncers, for lack of a *[laughs]* better term, in the US House of Representatives. And one was Tommy Robinson who had already been beat in the Republican gubernatorial primary of 1990. So he was off the stage. But we

had Bill Alexander in the top ten, and we had Beryl Anthony in the top ten. It got both of them defeated. What happens is that Anthony loses to Blanche Lambert, now Blanche Lambert Linc—I mean, excuse me, Alexander loses to Blanche Lambert in the First Congressional District. And the Secretary of State, Bill McCuen, defeats Beryl Anthony in the Fourth Congressional District. Now McCuen is such a controversial figure. Of course, he ends up going to prison. But he's such a controversial figure. I think a lot of people come to the realization that he actually is corrupt. [00:22:08] So the Democrats, I think, nominate the only guy who probably could have lost that Fourth District [laughs] seat because they wanted to punish Beryl Anthony. So they nominate McCuen, so that allows Jay Dickey outta Pine Bluff to step in and win that Fourth Congressional seat and gives Republicans a toehold at that point down in South Arkansas. [00:22:34] In fact I was political editor of *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* at the time—and of course, an earthshaking night in Arkansas history with our governor being elected president. The only non-Clinton story we put on that front page that day was Jay Dickey winning down in the Fourth District because that was a very important story in Arkansas political history. [00:22:56] Now a former Baptist preacher named Mike Huckabee comes

along, and he loses to Dale Bumpers on that same night in 1992. However, what Mike Huckabee had done is he had gotten a lot of publicity, a lot of name ID, and had a seventy-five-county organization ready to go. And so Bill Clinton wins. Bill Clinton resigns from the governorship to become president.

Automatically Jim Guy Tucker, the Democrat in the lieutenant governor's office, steps up. And Huckabee basically never stops running. He announces immediately he will run as a Republican for lieutenant governor. Nate Coulter is the Democratic nominee in the summer of 1993. Not a lot of races going on in 1993 in an odd year. [00:23:58] So Haley Barbour from neighboring Mississippi is the chairman of the Republican National Committee. And so Barbour sees this as a chance to really embarrass Bill Clinton in his home state. So Barbour puts the entire resources of the RNC behind Mike Huckabee. And people forget how close that race was. Mike Huckabee comes in with only 51 percent of the vote and beats Nate Coulter and, of course, changes Arkansas history. So in that short period, you have Jay Dickey winning in November of [19]92 to give Republicans the seat in the Fourth District. And then you have Mike Huckabee elected lieutenant governor in the summer of [19]93. Nobody could've seen this coming, but of course,

putting him in position to move into the governor's office three years later on July 15 of 1996. So that's a critical period right there for Republicans to start those building blocks in late [19]92 and the summer of 1993.

[00:25:06] JD: Do you think—did Mike Huckabee foresee the opportunity—do you think there was in his political and campaign orbit in ni—the [19]92 Senate race, was there sort of this idea that, if Governor Clinton were to ascend to the White House—or was this something at the eleventh hour where—is this sort of a reaction and almost just sort of a happy coincidence that he had just run this statewide race and then was going to run another statewide race, or was that a plan?

[00:25:33] RN: No, I think he really—he was into national politics. I think he really wanted to go to the Senate at that point. And so lieutenant governor was kind of a happy coincidence, and that gave him, then, a base in Little Rock to start planning for his Senate race in 1996, then, as David Pryor steps off the stage. What—of course the Tucker conviction by a Whitewater-related jury in Little Rock on charges brought by Kenneth Starr, the special prosecutor—nobody could've seen that coming. And so Mike Huckabee is leading Winston Bryant pretty handily in the polls in that summer of [19]96. He's on his way to the US

Senate, and once he becomes governor, then he makes the decision. Arkansas really can't handle this upheaval of having three governors in such a very short period of time, so he drops out of the Senate race. Tim Hutchinson is elected to the Senate. Huckabee then, of course, goes on to serve ten and a half years as governor and becomes our third longest serving governor in Arkansas history behind only Orval Faubus and Bill Clinton.

[00:26:56] JD: And I think you touched on this idea that while the focus, especially right now, is on a few election cycles removed from, you know, say, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and so on, so much happens in the early to mid-1990s, and so much of it could not have been foreseen.

RN: Oh, not at all.

JD: And the Republican Party had to have, at that time, at least stronger apparatus organizationally than they had had maybe in a decade or two prior to be able to jump into this opportunity because we were no longer in a situation where if a individual is caught in an unexpected scandal of some sort or some sort of legal mishap—the assumption in the past may have been, well, we'll have a really heated Democratic primary that will settle this months before the general election. But you have an emergency or special election in [19]93, and you have a primed, well-known

by then candidate in Huckabee. And then you have, of course, a party apparatus. You touch on the RNC being more involved in the state. So many moving parts had to fall into place for the 1990s to end the way that they did, if we consider how they began . . .

RN: Exactly.

JD: . . . where—a night and day difference. Not terribly dissimilar from what we talk about between 2005 and 2015 in terms of a pretty bleak outlook in 1990 for a lot of Republicans perhaps. Certainly when we look at the state legislative politics and this sort of thing. And then to the late 1990s on in to the 2000s, where you've got a popular Republican governor and you've got some strides, at least, in more competitive contested races in the state legislature by then with Republicans competing against Democrats in all sorts of different state level district races. [00:28:52] What do y—if you could look back at the party organization beginning with maybe Huckabee's—the beginning of his tenure to when he's leaving office in [20]07, what are some of the changes that strike you?

RN: Well, I'll go back and say again, talking about the [19]90s, the irony of the early [19]90s and mid-[19]90s is the fact that those doors all opened for the Republican Party due to things that

happened on the Democratic side of the spectrum. The House check kiting scandal. Let's start with that. Again, affecting all of the Democrats in the Arkansas House delegation. And then you have Bill Clinton's election as president. You have the Whitewater investigation. You have the Tucker indictments. You have the Tucker conviction. You have the Tucker resignation. All those things served to open doors for Republicans. By 1998 I'd joined Huckabee. I left my job as political editor of the *Arkansas Democratic Gazette* and joined Governor Huckabee as his policy and communications director on the day he took office, July 15, and then took a leave from state government to be his campaign manager in 1998. But I can tell you, even by that point in 1998, the Huckabee organization that—kinda his personal organization, his county chairman, chair people, was a stronger organization than the Arkansas Republican Party. [00:30:24] I remember as campaign manager, Richard Bearden was the executive director of the Republican Party of Arkansas at the time, and every Friday all the campaign managers for the statewide campaigns would get together, and they were really ripping at our coattails. I mean Fay Boozman who was running for the US Senate at that time, Betty Dickey who was running as a Republican for Attorney

General at that time—wanting us to help them. But I can tell you now [*laughs*] in retrospect, we really couldn't do that. We had to, as cam—Mike Huckabee's campaign manager, my only job was to look out for Mike Huckabee and get as much—I was shootin' for 60 percent. We just about got there—to give him political capital coming into the next legislative session. So I could not afford to be using our campaign—as much as we love Fay Boozman, as much as we love Betty Dickey, who would end up working in the governor's office, we could not use our campaign to help them because our polling at the time, John, showed there were a lot of Huckabee/Blanche Lambert Lincoln for Senate/Mark Pryor for Attorney General/voters that year, and I couldn't afford to alienate those voters. We still wanted 'em to support us. So all of that's a long way of—inside baseball of saying that the Huckabee—even by 1998, the Huckabee camp was a lot stronger than the true Republican Party of Arkansas at that point. Still.

[00:32:08] JD: And then Governor Huckabee goes on in [20]02 to be successfully reelected, a pretty close race because . . .

RN: A lot closer than [19]98. Yeah, the economy was bad, and then that affects governors. It affects all incumbents. So we went from about 60 percent against Bill Bristow of Jonesboro in 1998

to about 53 percent against Jimmie Lou Fisher in 2002, and yet still wins and still leaves office in early 2006 as a very, very popular governor of Arkansas.

[00:32:44] JD: And you touched earlier on your involvement with the legislative side, the legislative politics in Governor Huckabee's—the early years of his administration. If we look back, we see that in the twentieth century into the twenty-first, we only have three Republican governors, right? We have Rockefeller in [19]66, [19]68. Have Frank White going in [19]81. He's elected in [19]80, serves a single two-year term. And then Governor Huckabee who serves, as you said—wouldn't say unprecedented amount of time in office . . .

RN: Right.

JD: . . . but it, you know, certainly up there in the top three is—in terms of continuing . . .

RN: And as far as straight—because of course you had the White years breaking up Clinton. So as far as consecutive years, he ranked second actually only to Orval Faubus.

[00:33:32] JD: So in those years, if we look at Rockefeller, White, and then Huckabee, one thing that stands out I think to me is, of the three, Governor Huckabee enjoys arguably the most legislative success. Rockefeller, it's well documented, struggles

and really butts heads with the Democrats in the legislature. He doesn't really have any critical mass whatsoever of Republicans, and the Democrats are recalcitrant, are just simply going to wait him out in many ways. And sure enough, the governor who was elected in 1970 and [19]71 enjoys a lot of the fruits of Rockefeller's labor, and he has even given that much credit in his—in some previous recordings and writings. We see that Frank White struggles in sort of fits and starts with a single term. Explain your firsthand account of legislative politics with a popular governor who's Republican still going against majorities in the House and in the Senate and the General Assembly.

[00:34:33] RN: You know, one of the things I think surprised a lot of the so-called political class in Arkansas—and I'm talking everybody from political scientists to the media—I think they expected Huckabee to govern more as a hard-right governor. I can tell you if he had tried to do that, he would've had a lot of frustration in dealing with the Arkansas General Assembly. But the fact is, he fit right in that mold as a very pragmatic governor. I mean, he governed, frankly, quite a bit like Jim Guy Tucker and Bill Clinton had before him. Democrat Mike Beebe would end up governing a lot like Huckabee did. And then Republican Asa Hutchinson would govern a lot like Beebe did. I

mean, we've been fortunate because I think pragmatism and moderation is a good thing. And we've been fortunate in Arkansas to have over a fifty-year run now of pragmatic, moderate governors. So I think that's—that was the key to Huckabee's success in dealing with the legislature. [00:35:35] I can remember some things early on—I can remember a group coming to him pushing a one-eighth-cent sales tax to go in the Constitution and thinking, "All right, this guy is gonna be against any new tax as a Republican. We just have to ask him not to oppose us. That's the best we can hope for." And he says, "What do you mean, don't oppose you? I wanna lead the campaign." Because Huckabee was an outdoorsman. It was the conservation tax that would go to Parks and Tourism, go to the Game and Fish Commission. I happen to think it's one of the greatest investments we've ever made. We went from holding things up by duct tape to maybe the best state park system in America over the years now because of that amendment, Amendment 75. But there was one example. [00:36:23] Another example going into the session is Huckabee embraces this idea of the Our Kids First Program, insurance for children. And he and Democratic state Senator Mike Beebe actually go on the road together, a road show, to embrace this. So I think

Huckabee—there was already popularity there. And then the fact that he showed that he was going to govern as a moderate and a pragmatist in that very first session in 1997 set the stage, and I'm obviously biased since I spent about ten of the ten and a half years on his staff, but set the stage for what was a very successful governorship and a man who left office with very high approval ratings for somebody who's been in office for that long.

[00:37:17] JD: Certainly, certainly. So you've also had time serving in the Bush Administration as an appointee to the Delta Regional Authority, the first iteration. Certainly the first person in your position in the DRA. And we know that by ni—by the, certainly, by the 1990s, but without a doubt by George W. Bush's tenure, we see clearly that there is a decline in Arkansans identifying as Democrats, although they're not really identifying as Republicans. We see this widening gap of growing numbers of Independents in Arkansas that really we start to see in the late [19]90s, but certainly in the early 2000s. The state is very much in favor of Governor Bush's election in 2000, but really in 2004 without a doubt in the reelection bid. And by then, of course, he's not running against a Southerner with ties to Clinton with Al Gore in 2000. [00:38:17] We start to see a breaking down of this wall that had existed really all the way back to the

1960s, certainly in the 1970s, where Arkansans favored Republicans at the top of the ticket as long as they weren't Southerners who were Democrats, such as a Carter or a Clinton at one point. And then there's just basically more favoritism towards those Democratic norms, those Democratic candidates that they're used to. But by the 2000s, we start to see that breakdown. We start to see President Bush, and we start to see other Republicans. Now-governor Hutchinson, of course, runs in [20]06. We start to see really strong-caliber background Republicans in many of these races running high-profile races. [00:39:01] They don't necessarily become victorious in these races, but I wonder if you had some remarks about that—the 2000s, of course, with Governor Huckabee's success and popularity, but is there anything else going on in sort of the undercurrent outside of Huckabee where we start to see in the early 2000s some of those seeds being planted for really a post-2010 era?

[00:39:26] RN: Going back to Huckabee first, one thing that the governor's office does give you is an incredibly strong—use a baseball analogy, a training camp. There's a lot of patronage, and by patronage, I mean that in a good way. Boards and commissions appointments by the thousands because [*laughs*]

we have so many boards and commissions in Arkansas. Jobs in the administration—and I could go off and list you a whole lot of people that I worked with in the Huckabee administration that went on to be elected to the Arkansas legislature and other public offices. So then the Republicans had that base, and they had it for ten and a half years. So that really spurred, then, the growth of young people. I was talking earlier about how, if you were a young person interested in politics, you went into the Democratic Party because that was the way to be elected. Well that started to change in the Huckabee years because then you came in, you worked in the governor's office or you worked at DHS or you worked somewhere in state government, and you got a lot of experience, and you set that stage if you wanted to run for office, and then you ran as a Republican. [00:40:41] So through all of that, then you started to have growth in that party structure that I had mentioned was still weak in [19]98. As we get into the 2000s, that starts to strengthen considerably. And so we start to see the shift at that time, and I know I'm getting ahead of myself, but what I always say when people ask, "Well, it was—was it all because Barack Obama got elected?" I think it—that actually sped up by several years something that was going to happen by that point anyway in Arkansas. It just sped

it up.

[00:41:16] JD: I think we can certainly see that there are, as you said, you know, parts of an Obama administration being especially unpopular for whatever reason among Arkansans. But absolutely we see infrastructure and party organization on the Republican side enhancing. There's a study done that compares basically a party survey from 1999 to 2014, 2013, and we see significant changes in what we might consider professionalization of a party organization for the Republicans, where the Democrats are pretty much where they were in 1999.

RN: Yeah, yeah.

[00:41:52] JD: We see a significant ramp-up during that era that you're talking about. We also see s—of course, with Huckabee and others, with players in government from the party perspective. So really from all angles, right? You have a party that is primed for electoral success. And then as we get into—especially in 2010, we have a unique cycle in Arkansas. We have the Tea Party movement gaining some steam, inspiring some Republican candidates to run for office. We see s—many of them have historically significant successes. And then we also have a Republican candidate for governor who fails to win a single county in 2010. So we have this strange dichotomy in

that we have a popular Democratic governor in 2010 running for reelection in Mike Beebe. Wins handily. But most other races went for Republicans, or at least showed gains with Republicans. And so I wonder if you wanted to speak on that, on sort of what was going on at the state dynamics, but also maybe an increased nationalization of politics during that election cycle as well.

[00:43:01] RN: Yeah. I came to my realization actually on the morning after the 2010 election that Arkansas really had changed at that point. I knew the change was coming, but it really had changed. And I like to compare [19]98, where I was talking about, and 2010. This is gonna sound familiar 'cause I think it's the speech I gave at your Southeast Arkansas Political Animals Club [*JD laughs*] a few years ago. But in 1998 remember I said that we were careful because we knew there were a lot of Blanche Lambert Lincoln and Mark Pryor voters that were also voting for Huckabee. So in [19]98 at the top of the ticket, they had a governor they liked personally. You feel like you know your governor. You don't know your other constitutional officers as well, but you know your governor. So we had a lot of voters go in there, and they voted Huckabee at the top of the ticket, but then they went down the rest of the

ticket and went Democrat, Democrat, Democrat, Democrat, as they had always done. [00:43:59] All right, 2010, I'm doing commentary that night on the NPR affiliate, KUAR here in Little Rock, and we know that we're starting to see some interesting things happen. Every contested Senate race on that night, state Senate race, goes to the Republicans. So that is very interesting to me. We finally sign off our local coverage, and several of the state races are really close. I go home, I get a few hour's sleep. I get back up, get back on the computer, and lo and behold, my friend Shane Broadway, who had just—I had considered him a shoo-in as, again, most of the political insiders had, for lieutenant governor, had been defeated as a Republican, a guy named Mark Darr. Now a lot of people start calling me because Mark Darr's a Republican. I had worked for Republican candidates and office holders. Mark Darr's a Ouachita graduate. I had graduated much earlier, but from Ouachita, so they think I know him. I'd never met the guy, to be honest with you. I got to know him later, but I had never met the guy at the time. I had just assumed like everybody else. So I said, "Wait, there's something really happening here." [00:45:15] And then I start scrolling that computer, and I see, my gosh, we've elected a Republican as secretary of state, and we've elected a Republican

as land commissioner. Now those are offices that people really don't know the candidates. Let's be frank. So what that had shown me is that now we had had a lot of people vote for Mike Beebe because, again, a Democratic governor but we like him, like they'd done for Huckabee. And they had voted for Beebe for governor. Yeah, we like this guy. But then they had gone down that ticket and voted Republican, Republican, Republican, Republican. So in that sense, we had done a 180 as Arkansas voters from 1998 to 2010, and I knew the stage was set then for Republicans to gain full control of the state, which they went on to do in the 2012 and 2014 cycles.

[00:46:15] JD: So to that point if we look at 2012, 2014—we know it doesn't happen overnight. But that is when nationally we start to become recognized as this last state to go from a traditional, sort of Southern, conservative Democratic stronghold to a state that has joined its Southern neighbors, maybe albeit twenty years later than the rest of them, but we are now a solidly red state in really one election cycle, and particularly . . .

RN: Yeah, yeah.

JD: . . . by four years, by 2012 to 2014, four years removed from the 2010 elections where we start to see significant gains for Republicans, the party has completely dominated virtually all

facets of state and local government in many places in the state. And I wonder if you could point to a single race in 2012 or 2014 that really illustrates the point that I think you were already alluding to, which was this idea that voters' behaviors had shifted almost overnight. I mean, without—with exception of some pockets of the state, you're looking at one or two election cycles where generations of behavior just completely flips.

[00:47:31] RN: I'll point to a number of races. I won't do 'em by name, but I'll do 'em by category. And that was county races. Again, I'm the grandson of an old Democratic office holder who was a Prairie County judge back in the 1930s when every local official at the courthouse level in Arkansas, with maybe exception of like a Searcy County where you had some old ancestral Republicans dating back to the Civil War up there, but virtually every county official in the state was a Democrat. Two thousand twelve—after that big change in 2010 statewide, 2012 and a little more so in 2014, we start to see Republicans win county positions, courthouse positions. And I'm not talking just in Northwest Arkansas. I'm talking East Arkansas, the Delta. I'm talking the pine woods of South Arkansas. And that's when I knew, John, that the change was really, really here for, I think, a long period of time, and it really happened for good because

you're starting to see it at the county level. I mean, I grew up in Clark County in South Arkansas, one of the most Democratic counties in the state. Never thought I'd live, to be honest with you, to see Republican officials elected to county office. Now the courthouse is mostly Republican there. And we've seen that all over South Arkansas, all over large parts of East Arkansas, even, now. Those are the races if you would really look down at it, that you knew, boy, this thing's for real.

[00:49:11] JD: This is an unfair question. *[RN laughs]* If you could pinpoint one thing, knowing that there are a myriad of variables at play at any point in a political history of a state, particularly Arkansas, if you could point to one thing that you think led to such a dramatic shift over two or three election cycles, what do you think it was?

[00:49:35] RN: I'll point to two things. One, I'm gonna go back—and again, I'm a biased observer. But I'm gonna go back to Mike Huckabee taking the governor's office on July 15 of 1996 and his performance on that day, which was—we had a real constitutional crisis for a few hours in this state when Governor Tucker decided he was gonna renege on his earlier promise to leave office, and then eventually Huckabee is sworn in that night. But setting the stage for those ten and a half years,

again, of basically having thousands of appointments, hundreds of state government jobs that he could build the Republican party with, I think that was the first big event. And so that allowed the building to take place. [00:50:25] And then you do have the Obama election as president, and I think some of it is race, but I happen to think just saying, "Well, because a Black man was elected president, white voters in Arkansas revolted"—I think that's too simplistic. I tell you, Arkansas voters, as it turned out, tended to dislike Hillary Clinton more than they disliked Barack Obama. So I think it was this whole sense of the old line, "I didn't leave the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party has left me." I think that really sped up with the Obama election. So Mike Huckabee entering the governor's office and then, down the line, Barack Obama entering the White House—those two events I think were the two key events to get us to where we are now as a strongly Republican state in Arkansas.

[00:51:21] JD: If we consider the—this dramatic shift that we've been discussing, and we compare a twenty-year horizon looking back—and we could even say that if we looked at an electoral map today compared to that of twenty years ago, it would barely be recognizable if we look at county level, city, certainly state and state legislative races. If we could go forward ten, twenty

years, knowing that right now outside of Arkansas we see some Southern states that have been Republican dominated for, in some cases, a few decades at this point, and we see demographic change complicating matters, where we start to see the more competitive elections between the two parties, Republicans still having an overwhelming advantage in most of these cases. But there's sort of a growing organization again with the Democrats in these states. There's national money being dumped into some of these states supporting Democratic candidates, and at the time of this taping, the election cycle is not clear. But we're seeing early indications of at least races that are competitive that might make you scratch your head and say, that doesn't make a lot of sense. A lot of people would chalk that up to demographic change just over time. It's a slow, evolving process that we see in some states such as maybe Texas, Georgia, North Carolina, and a few other examples.

[00:52:51] Where are we in Arkansas in ten or twenty years politically?

[00:52:55] RN: Depends on what the Republican Party does. If the Republican Party makes a hard right turn, I think that opens the door for some Democratic comeback in Arkansas. I—as you note we have a growing Hispanic population in Arkansas. Those

people will—those kids now will be registered. They will vote eventually. The voting numbers among Hispanics will go up. We have a lot of new people moving to Arkansas, particularly Northwest Arkansas, with the growth of that economy and the fact it's become one of the most desirable places to live in America. A lot of those people come from urban Democratic areas and tend to be Democratic voters. So if the Republicans make this hard right turn, they go away from the pragmatism we've seen of a Asa Hutchinson and a Mike Huckabee, and they make a hard right turn, I think it does open the door for Democrats to make a comeback in the state. [00:54:00] If, however, we remain with the real pragmatic Winthrop Rockefeller/Mike Huckabee/Asa Hutchinson style of governing in Arkansas, I think it's very, very hard for the Democrats, even over a ten-to-twenty-year period. So that being said, I'm firmly convinced, 'cause it's just kinda where the state is now, that we're going to elect a Republican as governor of Arkansas in 2022, but what kind of Republican is it going to be? And in that sense, I think that Republican primary for governor of 2022 is one of the most important elections in my lifetime in Arkansas.

JD: Any final thoughts? Anything we missed here that we should discuss?

[00:54:52] RN: Well, I mean it's just been fascinating to watch, John. And again, this is not partisan. I don't care if you're Democrat, Republican, or Independent, but if you love Arkansas history like we do, if you love politics, to consider the fact that ten years ago from when we're taping this, right before the election of 2010, we had heavy Democratic majorities in both the State House and the State Senate. We had seven Democratic constitutional officers. We had five of the six in our Congressional delegation were Democrats. Here we sit a decade later with heavy Republican majorities, with seven Republican constitutional officers, with six Republican members of the Congressional delegation. The speed, once that took off, with which it happened, from a historic standpoint is just absolutely breathtaking.

JD: I would agree. In fact, we can look and see that all states have partisan changes over time, but the rapidity of Arkansas's and the strength behind it was such that it's—it really does stand out as one of the most dramatic shifts of any state's party politics in the US, in fact.

RN: Absolutely.

JD: And especially in the South.

[00:56:20] RN: But we're still a state with a bit of a progressive

streak, and so like I said, the Republicans started to grow because of things which happened on the Democratic side. Now, to go back to my earlier point, if the Democratic Party in Arkansas is to come back, it's gonna be because of things that happen on the Republican side opening that door and giving them the opportunity to do so.

JD: Well, Rex, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you very much . . .

RN: This was fun. Thank you.

JD: . . . for sharing your time and your perspective.

RN: Thank you.

[End of interview 00:57:05]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]