

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

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Blue to Red Oral History Project

Doyle Webb
Interviewed by John C. Davis
August 5, 2021
Little Rock, Arkansas

Objective

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

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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.

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John C. Davis interviewed Doyle Webb on August 5, 2021, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me today is Mr. Doyle Webb. Doyle Webb is the outgoing party chairman of the Republican Party of Arkansas. He is a former elected official at the county and state level. He is also very involved, and has been for decades, in Republican Party politics at the national level as well as the state and local levels. On behalf of the Pryor Center at the University of Arkansas and myself, thank you so much for sitting down with us and spending time to share your perspectives on this unique opportunity to discuss political history in Arkansas.

Doyle Webb: I'm glad to be here, John. Thank you.

[00:00:38] JD: What is your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

DW: My earliest political memory is going and campaigning with my mother. Many times—the Webbs and my maternal family, the Cornetts—the Cornetts go back in Saline County back into the 1840s. And the Cornetts were well thought of. The Webbs were well thought of. My Grandfather Webb had a grocery store in south Benton. But going—when the Democrats would be having a primary for sheriff or county judge, they would call on my mom. She worked in the county judge's office for a period of

time. And I remember going with her in the African American community of Benton and campaigning with her. I was probably four or five. Matter of fact, it may be one of my earliest memories of doing that because you have a youngster out in an atmosphere that they're not used to. And my mom was the campaigner. She enjoyed campaigning. My dad worked at Alcoa and did for twenty-five to thirty years, but my mom was the one that loved politics.

[00:02:00] JD: Do you recall the perception of the Democratic Party and Republican Party politics at that time?

DW: Absolutely, because I remember the election eves down at the courthouse where we would listen to the results coming in from the Democratic Party primary. I remember us, once again, the family, driving around in Benton and my mother saying, "You know, the Downings, they live over there. They're Republican." Because our family was not Republican. Okay, we—our—matter of fact—once again, obviously the Downings were Republican, but most families in Saline County, being the strongest union county in the state, were Democrats. And so I grew up not being aware of a real difference between the Democrat Party and maybe not even an awareness of the Republican Party until—I was probably eleven or twelve at that time, and that became

apparent to me.

[00:03:09] JD: When did you begin to follow politics in Arkansas?

DW: You know, my—I had a—my ma—mother's sister, Sarah Cornett, was Governor Rockefeller's campaign manager in Saline County and very involved with Governor Rockefeller in [19]66, [19]68 and—operating a campaign headquarters and putting up signs. I remember going with her to load sticks, campaign sticks, in the back of the car, going and putting up signs in [19]66, in [19]68. My maternal grandparents were still Democrats. My aunt was a Republican, and she worked for the City of Benton in the light and water office, is what they called it. And I remember in [19]66, she got a new Galaxy Ford 500, baby blue, four-door, beautiful car. And she came out one day, and battery acid had been poured all over it because she was campaigning for a Republican. And that made you stop and think, "What was all of that?" But I loved campaigning with my mother. I loved campaigning with my aunt, who, once again, was a very detailed person and very respected in Saline County.

[00:04:42] JD: Tell me about your first political job in Arkansas for pay or maybe as a volunteer.

DW: I believe it was either in the eighth or ninth grade in junior high when the Vietnam War was going on, and we ha—I had civics.

And civics was a good teacher of what was Democrat and what was Republican. And of course, when we think back to the late [19]60s and we think of national politics, we had Southern Democrats who were conservative, and the Republicans were essentially the Northern office holders. But I think I became acutely aware during that time in the Vietnam War. [00:05:33] My mother, backing up just a little bit, loved Goldwater. And as a kid I remember us going to the state fair and drinking some gold water. They had it flowing where you could drink a little bit of gold water. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to drink gold water or not because the family had always been Democrat. But as you get educated and you become interested in politics—I ran for office in junior high, and so I became interested in campaigning and loving people. But I think it was in that time frame when I was in the eighth or ninth grade. So that's the late [19]60s.

[00:06:14] JD: Explain the political landscape in Arkansas at that time.

DW: Oh, clearly, it was Democrat. There were a—the few Republicans. Certainly Governor Rockefeller coming on the scene in 1966. I really did not meet him until probably after [19]68, maybe closer to [19]70, just because I was younger

than a lot of the teenagers that could drive. But it was exceptional if you were a Republican. There were very few individuals. A lot of times in my county, a Republican was someone from somewhere else. They had moved to Arkansas. Surely, we wouldn't have a Republican in Arkansas that grew up in Arkansas. They had to be from somewhere else. And I remember that. So they were a little different. Republicans were a little different than old Joe that we knew, or Guy Grant, who was sheriff, or Buddy Parker, who was county judge.

[00:07:23] JD: Can you tell me about your experience as an office seeker?

DW: Well, it's, you know, the f—I ran for JP in 1986, where—there were no elected Republicans in Saline County at that time. There had been a few nominal JPs back under the old system when a JP really was just a rubber stamp. But I remember ca—my wife and I got married that year and came back from our honeymoon and started going door to door. Some of the experiences were great. People were very encouraging. Some were not very encouraging. Matter of fact, I heard some words I'd never heard before when I was [*laughs*] asking someone for their vote and them finding out I was a Republican. But [19]86 was an interesting year in that I remember campaigning, and

Dale bu—there would be signs in the yard for Dale Bumpers or—
for US Senate. Tommy Robinson for Congress. And they would
let me put a sign in their yard, Doyle Webb. So obviously,
Arkansans knew about ticket splitting. And here was a
Republican that was—that we knew, that went to elementary
school here, that went—was—went to high school here, and his
mom and dad have deep roots in Saline County, fifth generation.
So that was very positive. Very encouraging people that I
respected would be supportive.

[00:09:04] JD: You served in county and state government. What
was it like to serve as a Republican in a state so overwhelmingly,
at the state and local level at least, Democratic at that time?

DW: Correct. Correct. You know, I—when I was elected JP in
[19]86—and I've had to go back and look at this, and I—we
probably need to be sure and verify it. When I was elected, I
believe I was the only elected county-level-or-above Republican
in the Second Congressional District, not only the first
Republican elected in Saline County. And I remember—I'm
gonna go forward here a little bit—goin' to my first quorum court
meeting, and the Democratic JP said, "Doyle, we will never vote
for anything that you propose. You're a Republican." And so my
first ordinance at our organizational meeting was that every

meeting would begin with a prayer, and it would be followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. And we got a little argument over both. I remember one *[laughs]* longtime blue dog Democrat who said, "You know, we're not school kids. We don't have to say the Pledge at every meeting." And but we passed. And so the issue was broken. I was able to become influential in the quorum court because of hard work. And that was the change. But that was the attitude, okay, that was the—even though I had—even though I was a practicing attorney in Benton, had been chairman of the Republican Party, had been on the election commission, they just were not gonna support something that a Republican could do.

[00:10:47] JD: What does a state party organization do?

DW: Clearly, the first responsibility of the state party is to establish the brand of the party. What do I mean by that? What does it mean to be a Republican in Arkansas? What do we stand for? What can you, the voter, identify with? So I think our first responsibility is establishing that brand. [00:11:23] The second esta—purpose, I think, for a state party, particularly in Arkansas, was to establish affiliate organizations in every county. We call 'em county committees, kay. So that you have an outlet, if you will, an organization in those counties. The Democrats had the

courthouses. They—from my perspective, they didn't have to organize at the local level because the organization was the courthouse, okay, and the elected officials at the courthouse. We had none of that. So establishing those county committees, finding individuals that identified with the brand and that were supportive of the brand, and then helping to target, recruit, and support candidates at every level, although the county committees would be responsible at that county level. But fledgling county committees can't always do what needs to be done, so the state party needs to be a model for that, or the state party needs to give some criteria to how to do as I'm saying. Yu—ch—target, recruit, and fund, or provide volunteers for campaigns. But I think the brand is the key. And sometimes the brand is defined by the gubernatorial candidate or the top of the ticket. And but you have to continue to talk about the brand and not confuse the brand, okay.

[00:13:12] JD: Can you explain what a county party organization does?

DW: A county committee is responsible for recruiting—targeting and recruiting and supporting local candidates. And when I say local, I'm talking about JPs or county clerks or assessor. Now they get excited, and a lot of people come into a county committee 'cause

they're excited about the presidential candidate or the United States Senate candidate. And certainly that's a role of theirs. And their role is to—the old role was certainly to have precinct committeemen that were responsible for a precinct and would turn out the vote for the Republican ticket in that precinct. I—that certainly has, I think, gone by the wayside in the era of modern media and—but once again, the county committee is the organizing tool to support—recruit and support candidates at the local level and then support up the ticket. I often say that the party is the county committees, and that the state organization, the state party, is subservient to the county organizations.

[00:14:29] JD: You've had an extraordinarily active political life in national and state Republican Party politics. Can you tell me about your observations over that time?

DW: You know, I—that's a good question because I've thought about that a lot. As I grew up in the party, and we're talking pre-1980, the party, the Republican Party was known—you know, we had Nixon, we had Ford, we had Watergate, we had those issues, mm-kay. So the party was really a national party and was probably viewed as a little more liberal, clearly, than the Democrat Party, but clearly, I think, outsiders. Outsiders of Arkansas. So the brand was strong defense, lower taxes,

smaller government. There were none of the social issues.

[00:15:40] And I think what occurred with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980—the—and his ability to articulate a new brand or a transition of the brand—was that we became more of a—we picked up more social issues. We are pro-life. We're pro—since that time, pro-traditional marriage. We are strongly for the Constitution, okay, Constitutional Party. Clearly, smaller government is better government. That carries over. I think that was—once again, we're talkin' about the modern Republican Party. But I think that the brand changed at that time. Now in Arkansas, clearly, a viable two-party system was important to Rockefeller. And that has always been the mantra. A two—a viable two-party system gives a check and balance to government. And that has always been part of our brand here.

[00:16:54] JD: Under your leadership, can you elaborate on what steps were taken to eventually see the Republican Party dominance we see today?

[00:17:02] DW: I believe that we became consistent in what we did. We would target—you're gonna hear me say that a lot—target a race, whether it be a JP race, or a state legislative race, or a lieutenant governor's race, a US Senate race, and recruit and fund and supply volunteers for that. In some cases, we had to

say, "That's not a priority. We can't win that race. If you wanna run in that race, that's your decision, but we only have a certain amount of assets that we can put in that race." So I think that is clearly a key. I think that we were able to get on a strong financial footing. When I became chairman, the party had some debt, not serious debt, but debt for the party. And we had had a series of one-term or half-term chairmen. And it's hard to cast a vision if you are moving—changing your leadership that much. So I think that I provided consistency with leadership. We're gonna have a state committee meeting at this time, this weekend, every year. We're gonna have a fundraiser on this Friday night, every year. We're going to use our filing fees to support candidates, not to pay the electric bill, which requires you then to raise money to pay the electric bill, okay, which requires a chairman to do more. [00:19:04] And as you may or not know, I ran in 2008 as a paid chairman. And I think that was a historic, great step for the party. Because I didn't feel like I could be chairman part time, that I needed to give it my all, and I think—thought the party should invest in that rather than sacrificial giving—at least help compensate. So I think consistency, I think—and once again, if you're targeting, you're looking at mishaps. You're looking at can you win that race?

You're looking at who else could be in that race as well? So it takes into factors all the things that you've mentioned.

[00:19:57] JD: Whether as volunteer, activist, or elected official, your political experience has placed you within portions of each of the three generations of the modern-day GOP in Arkansas. As you played a role and saw the successes of the party in the state, how did they—how did the political dynamics of the state change?

[00:20:17] DW: I think the—and beginning with Rockefeller. Let me go back. I—we should never discount the transformation that Rockefeller brought to Arkansas, kay. I think that clearly, we ha—we Republicans have opened the door to so many people that had been shut out of government. And I think we've opened the door to a competitive party system and competition in government. You know, I had the pleasure of meeting the first African American that Governor Rockefeller appointed to a state board or commission that had to be escorted into her meeting because the white members of that commission were not gonna accept her—was escorted in with the state police, kay. So I think—I'm proud of the fact that we have opened the door of state government to people that otherwise may not have been in the right family or the right economic group or the right

demographic. And I think that's been a consistency. Are there bumps along the way when you do that? Yes, but you are opening up government. And I think that when you open up government, it will move Arkansas forward to where you have a better quality of life for all Arkansans. We're in a very competitive world. Very competitive. And fortunately, Arkansas has been shielded through a lot of the negative, but the world of the internet has brought anything in the world to Arkansas, okay. And so we're—our people are no longer as sheltered, and I say that in a positive way, as at one time they might have been.

[00:22:12] JD: When you were elected chairman of the state party, the GOP in Arkansas had long struggled to capitalize on the electoral gains at the national level. So for instance we have President Reagan in 1980, we have Nixon in [19]72. We have a pattern of ticket splitting in Arkansas, the top of the ticket, that had certainly benefited Republicans in those offices. But it had not yet really trickled down to the lower ballot races. And so when you take over in this role, what was something that the parties and organization did that you think helped, in part, bring about the changes we began to see in the state's partisanship in 2010 to today?

[00:22:54] DW: Certainly, you cannot talk about this without mentioning Governor Huckabee and his long service as a governor. Which once again, his style and his communication ability helped to sell the ideals of the party and the brand. You know, I love everything that Governor Rockefeller did. The difficulty of that time was it was a top-down organization. He spent a lot of money to try and change Arkansas. And I dare think, "What if we had had a Republican legislature in the [19]60s when he was governor? Where would Arkansas be today?" You know, and there's always a debate whether he was a liberal or a conservative. And I believe that he was conservative to moderate. I think he was for a clean government, open government. He certainly changed Arkansas, and if you think that's liberal so—I can't argue with you, but FOI is not a liberal idea. It's a clean government idea. Checks and balances government. [00:24:10] But I wanna go back. And I think Frank White was only there a two-year term. You can't have much impact in two years. He was not the articulator that Governor Huckabee was. And I think Governor Huckabee, with the volunteer forces, with the social issues as well that inspire people and move people—the—never discount the pro-life movement and its impact on the Republican Party and how that

has moved so many people to save so many lives in Arkansas. But I think Governor Huckabee, his ten years, and the—and his programs—it was hard—he—certainly, he was a conservative, but sometimes you might classify some things he did as being a caring conservative, okay. And I think people saw his love of the state. You can't argue that he was anti-tax because he certainly helped us with the conservation and a eight-cent sales tax that's benefited our state parks and so forth. You can't argue with the better roads that we got. I've certainly benefited by six lanes to Saline County. [00:25:37] But I think that—and then we come along with Governor Hutchinson, and we see what he has been able to move the state, been very articulate in how he has led a overwhelmingly Republican legislature. And remember, once again, Governor Huckabee had that Democrat legislature. He accomplished all he did through a Democrat legislature. So I think that the expansion of the Republican Party into more grassroots has made a difference, created a groundswell. And the belief of conservatism has helped to permeate into state government. And it will continue to evolve, kay. We're not to the destination yet. We're on the road to the destination. That's right.

[00:26:36] JD: The 2012 and 2014 election cycles were incredible

historical feats for Republicans in Arkansas, going from the minority party, losing every county in a gubernatorial contest as recently as 2010, to winning majorities in both the state legislative chambers and a sweep of constitutional offices. Can you point to one or two or a few races during this time that you think set the tone for this dramatic shift? In other words, did it start in 2010? Did it carry over into 2012 and [20]14 and moving forward from there? What do you think happened here during this pivotal time?

[00:27:12] DW: Barack Obama was elected in 2008. And that—he was on a high. He was—there was a lot of excitement for him, even though he did not carry Arkansas. So and then in 2009, we have the passage of the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare. We have Blanche Lincoln, who cast what all believe was the sixtieth vote to get it out of the Senate. And we have Mike Ross, who may have had some support for it. I say that because there's been news articles—one way or another to help get it out of committee, okay. I don't want to—I don't know the fact there. So we have that occurring. We have the Obama administration certainly sending out smoke signals and actions of very liberal policies, kay. We have a Republican brand. But the Democrats had never revealed who they were, kay. I like to use

a *Star Trek* analogy. I think at that time and with social media, the Democrats, the Southern Democrats, became uncloaked. Uncloaked. Klingons had a cloaking machine that you could not see 'em until they dropped the cloaking machine so they could fire their weapons, kay. Well, the cloaking machine was dropped, and we could see that our good Southern Democrats really weren't Southern Democrats. They were supporting very, very liberal policies that Arkansans were opposed to. [00:29:05] We saw the rise of the Tea Party, not a political party, but a faction. So at that point, I recall seven or—seven—roughly seven candidates wanting to run for the United States Senate. We have one federal official, John Boozman, in the Congress. And John Boozman decides he's gonna run for the United States Senate against Blanche Lincoln and wins. And wins, kay. And in that year, 2010, little did we know—matter of fact, I was still trying to recruit people in March as the filing period was coming to an end—we're gonna win. We're gonna win elections. Well, we got a lieutenant governor candidate filed who won. We got a secretary of state candidate filed who won. Of all things, we got a land commissioner candidate filed who won. So here we elect three statewide candidates and a United States Senator in 2010. And we go, as I recall, from twenty-eight in the house and eight

in the senate to fifteen in the senate, electing every Republican that was running, and going to I believe it was forty-three in the house. We predicted internally that if we could get to thirty-four in the house, that it would be a good year, kay. Internally. [00:30:43] What—success breeds success, okay. Because we had candidates who won statewide that had little or no name recognition, had little or no money to spend. And of course, John Boozman led the ticket and won that race. So those were the races and even those statewide races that we can point to. And if you'll recall—something I just want us to remember from historically. There was a lawsuit filed that year, and we filed a lawsuit against the improper use of cars by state officials, statewide officials. That they were using them personally and not reporting 'em as income. And we f—it was found that the land commissioner had a diesel truck that was actually at his farm that he was buying diesel fuel for. And other things. Where—here once again, we're talking about issues that are not in our control but just happen there. I think if we had had more people filed statewide that year, we would've elected more individuals statewide. So I think that if you look at those, that was clearly a turning point, that maybe better-known candidates, other than John Boozman, better-known statewide

candidates looked and said, "Oh, Arkansas has changed. Look at what's going on. Maybe we need to get involved." And I th— between [20]10 and [20]12 we had a change, and then going into [20]14, with the candidates who were wanting to file. They saw that, "Oh, I can get elected. I don't have to compromise my principles to run. I can be pro-life, and people know it, and I can be pro-Second Amendment, and so forth. And I can run my conviction. I can run as a Republican." So I think that—the hope that 2010 gave is important.

[00:33:01] JD: This is when we can pull out a crystal ball and have some fun. Where do you see the state of Arkansas state politics and Republican Party politics in Arkansas in the next ten or twenty years? Are we going to see demographic shifts such as what we're seeing recently in Georgia and perhaps in Texas in the near future occur in Arkansas? Or do we think that party gains by the Republicans will be maintained or even strengthened during the next decade, decade and a half or so?

[00:33:32] DW: You know, I think that that's the million-dollar question, of course. And I think that we look at other states, and we can see where some maybe some refinement could have been made. I think that we as a Republican Party—we're not stagnant. Our platform is not stagnant. I think that you will

continue to see it evolve some as maybe some of our urban areas become—more people moving in, okay. But I think that we'll be able to adapt to that. If you look to Northwest Arkansas, there has been a little bit of concern up there, and we had solid wins up in Benton County this time. We watch that closely. I know our committee up there is strong and is adaptive to that. We're not gonna sit on our laurels and let that happen. And I think Arkansas will move more slowly than other states.

[00:34:46] You know, I'll throw this into the mix just for historic purposes. I've always contended that Arkansas was more Midwestern than it is Southern. Certainly, we were part of the old Confederacy, but I think we were drug in to the Confederacy, m'kay. We're not the same state as Georgia, m'kay. We're not the same state even as Mississippi, even though it's just across the river. And I think that the leadership that we have had in the Republican Party has been able to—and I say that of our candidates—have been able to cross those boundaries to where people feel comfortable with the brand. The brand may evolve and may change slightly. It'll still be a core, small-government party, individual-rights party. But I think that we'll be strong in fifteen years. I think it'll be strong. As I tell people, the Democrats were in control for 140 years. Give us 140 years,

and let's see how Arkansas looks at the end of that 140 years,
m'kay.

[End of interview 00:36:20]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]