

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

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**Blue to Red Oral History Project**

Mike Huckabee  
Interviewed by John C. Davis  
July 1, 2021  
Little Rock, Arkansas

## Objective

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

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

## Transcript Methodology

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

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

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

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

### **Citation Information**

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**John C. Davis interviewed Mike Huckabee on July 1, 2021, in Little Rock, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me today is Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas, former lieutenant governor of Arkansas prior to that. Governor Huckabee's been active in Arkansas and national politics for decades. He is very active in national media as well and has a family that's very politically active as well and continues to be in the state of Arkansas. And on behalf of the Pryor Center, I would like to thank you for sitting down with me today and talking about a period in our state's history and our state's political history that you actually have a very heavy role in. So thank you so much today.

[00:00:41] Mike Huckabee: Well, thank you. I did a lot of swimming in the water for the past thirty years, and it's been a fascinating journey and—just delighted to get to chat with you about it.

[00:00:52] JD: It's something that we'll certainly enjoy. And what I want to do, too, is—when we first talked, the Pryor Center and I were discussing how we wanted to go about this project. Of course, we're really more narrowly focused on that time period in the first decade of the twenty-first century to about 2015,

when we see a ten-year period of—more or less one party still controlled democratic politics, with yourself and others being certainly the sort of the alternative, if you will, to what we've seen in the state's history. And then to today where we see one-party domination in almost all the same respects.

MH: Yeah.

JD: There's some places where Democrats are doing okay in the state of Arkansas, but statewide races and constitutional state races, as well as the state House and the state Senate, are heavily Republicans. So we effectively go from one-party rule for over a century . . .

MH: Yeah.

JD: . . . to one-party rule again. We have switched the parties, which has significant effects on the state. [00:02:02] And so I wanted to go a little further back, though, and break down what I saw as the modern party, which is, I think, up for debate, when we look at the first generation and think of Winthrop Rockefeller. He, of course, runs in [19]64 and loses, is successful in [19]66 and [19]68. John Paul Hammerschmidt as well, during that era, becomes—what would then be a very long career in Congress—to the early 1990s. Which is about the time that you step onto the scene in a big way in the state political arena. And then we

go from the early [19]90s to about 2010, where we have people such as yourself and others in the Republican Party making gains. We're not seeing those gains quite all the way down ticket. By then we have—we're showing an obvious favoritism as Arkansas voters to Republican presidential candidates . . .

MH: Yeah.

JD: . . . and had been for some time. We're seeing that, at times, Republicans can win in the Governor's Mansion as well, but we did not yet see the General Assembly flip in quite the same way, obviously, that we have today. And we look at those constitutional races, and it was still pretty much dominated by Democratic politics. And then the third generation, which is roughly 2011 to today. We sit here today with a full slate of Republicans in all four House seats of the US Congress, both of our senators, all state constitutional offices, and the General Assembly has supermajorities in both chambers claimed by Republicans. So a very different environment from that which you found yourself in when you became governor. We'll get to that here in just a little while. [00:03:44] But going back a little further, what is your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

[00:03:50] MH: When I was a kid, I was very interested in politics and government, growing up in Hope, Arkansas. There were no

Republicans there to speak of. I think the old thought was there were about seven Republicans in all of Hempstead County, and all of them had moved in from somewhere. None of them were native to Hempstead County. But as a kid I remember campaigning for Winthrop Rockefeller and Fotsie Britt. You know, I'd have been ten years old, eleven years old during that period of time. And I'm not even sure, at age ten, why I put balloons on my bicycle and would ride around the neighborhood. [00:04:25] But by the time I was fourteen, I started work at the local radio station for a gentleman named Haskell Jones. He was the manager there, gave me a job to work at the radio station at fourteen. I did sports, was a disc jockey, read news, all this stuff. The amazing thing was that he trusted me to have that kind of job at fourteen. But he was one of those seven Republicans, and he was a staunch Republican in a town where there weren't any. And it was not a pleasant thing to be a Republican in Hempstead County, Arkansas, back then. But you know, he was not a negative person about it. He was an incredibly patriotic individual, loved America, loved the country, loved the community. Was one of the most generous, giving people I'd ever seen in my life. And he rubbed off on me in a lot of ways. Not just politically, but he rubbed off on me in the

sense that he gave me that sense that if you're part of a community, you owe something back. Everybody's gotta contribute. You can't just live somewhere and be a receiver. You gotta be a giver. It was a shaping force in my life.

[00:05:38] So as I became a teenager, I became more involved in Republican politics. I was the Richard Nixon youth coordinator for South Arkansas in the 1972 reelection campaign. I'd campaigned for Nixon in [19]68, but I was thirteen, couldn't vote. So you know, I had some involvement in that respect, and you know, I've never really looked back. I was conservative, and it was not that I had a—you know, some strong ideological bent, but I was very patriotic, I believed in personal responsibility. And the older I've gotten, I've realized that if there is a fundamental difference between the core of the two parties—especially now more so than it was then. Democrats or Republicans ideologically weren't that different then. Had more to do with the offices they held than the ideology. [00:06:33] But as I look at it today, there's a real distinct difference. And it's whether or not you're a collectivist, or an individualist. If you are an individualist, you believe that liberty is the gift to the individual, not to the group. So I am who I am not because I'm white, or if I were Black, or if I were male or female, or a union

member, or a particular occupation, I'm an individual. That my rights, written into the constitution of the Bill of Rights, are given to me as an individual. And so therefore I'm not limited by the fact that I grew up poor. No family influence at all. No one in my family was ever, you know, asked, "Could we put a yard sign out in your yard?" 'cause nobody cared whether my family was for someone. So growing up in that environment, but believing that I could be anything I wanted to be. I didn't have to stay where I started. And that was a lot of the influence of Haskell Jones, and the Republican Party, and this idea that I lived in the greatest country on earth, and that I was not bound by whatever my family had done or failed to do or by anything around me. It was up to me. And that was a powerful part of my growing up and my ideology that exists to this day.

[00:08:00] JD: Explain the political landscape in Arkansas at that time. Growing up in Hempstead County—you've touched a little bit on that, but just bigger—as you, perhaps, as you got a little older, a little more politically aware in the state political arena, what was it like being a Republican and knowing you were a Republican during that time?

[00:08:17] MH: It was like being an oddity. What's wrong with him? My own parents, I think, questioned what had gotten into me.

There was an old saying down there that everybody in Hempstead County was a Democrat except the ones who had moved in or been messed with. So I guess I'd been one of those messed with. *[JD laughs]* And the other thought was that, you know, there were three great heroes growing up in the South when I came along: Jesus, Elvis, and FDR, not necessarily in that order. That was the mindset, and there was always this sense of, you know, be careful of them Republicans, now, 'cause they're all for the big guys and the rich people. And you know, I look at it now, it's comical. Because you see the really big donors in America, the billionaire donors, whether it's Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates or Warren bu—they're all Democrats. You know, they're all Democrats. The billionaire elitist class are not Republicans. And it's switched pretty dramatically. But the core of the Republican party is really still that idea of individualism. Our rights are individual, but our responsibilities are also individual. So as much as I can say that it is up to me to determine my future, it's also incumbent upon me to be responsible for me and my family and my property. And I can't say, "Well, I'm waiting on the government to see what they're going to do to bail me out." I, you know, I didn't grow up with that mindset.

[00:09:48] JD: So moving ahead, in 1992 you run for US Senate.

Tell me about that. What inspired you to run? And then maybe some highlights about the race.

[00:10:00] MH: There weren't a whole lot of highlights. I got drummed pretty good. But honestly, you know, I did okay for that race because nobody thought I had a chance. Looking back, maybe I should have figured that out. Turned out that [19]92 was a terrible year to run as a Republican in Arkansas with Bill Clinton leading the national ticket to become president. So everybody in Arkansas was gonna go vote. Never had Arkansas had a president, so there were a lot of people that went and voted for Bill Clinton for him to be president because they thought that it would be good for the state. And so there was a record turnout of people. If it had been a normal year, I'd have been very competitive in the number of people who voted for me. But in a record turnout, that overage was way focused on getting Bill Clinton elected, so I understand. [00:10:52] I'd been president of the Arkansas Baptist Convention for two years, and it was at a time when there had been a lot of contentious things happening in the Baptist life. I was seen, in many ways, as somebody who tried to heal that fracture, and I think, maybe not personally, but we saw it really brought to a calm and to a

kind of a new beginning and a rebirth of the convention getting back to what its purpose was. In the context of that, I had people who came to me and said, "You know, you ought to think about running for office." What they didn't know was that was always what I had wanted to do since I was a little kid. And many people say, "You were a pastor that became a political person." I was not a person who went into the pastorate intentionally. That was not—I was in advertising and radio and television. And that was my career path, running an ad agency, working in radio, and doing some television work. And I found myself in the pastorate. That led to being convention president. The Baptist, Southern Baptist—largest denomination of the state. [00:12:08] So in the course of that, I ended up knowing people all over the state. And then when that encouragement came, it was a little weird because no one knew that these were thoughts that I had harbored since, you know, my teen years. And so in the course of that long process of praying and talking to people that I trusted and whose advice I valued, I thought, "You know, I don't like what I see in the political realm." And a lot of it was that I felt that the time that I spent in the church pastorate, I saw life at a level no one else sees it. And people who thought, "What do pastors know?" I'll tell you what they know. They

have an understanding of every social pathology that exists in our culture today. Because the pastor is the one who sees poverty by going into the kitchen and the living room of an elderly couple that doesn't have food in the cupboard, and he takes them a box of food. Or a young family, same thing. He's the one who's holding the hand of an elderly person at two a.m. in ICU as they pass into eternity and comforts the family. Or maybe stands there with a young couple whose child is just been in a terrible accident, and they're having to decide whether to donate his or her organs at a time when they're just overcome with grief and trauma. Pastor is the guy that probably is going to hear from a teenage girl that she's pregnant before she ever goes home and tells her parents. So I'm just saying that you can't name a social pathology that we live in today that a pastor couldn't put a name and a face to. [00:13:50] And I felt like, as I observed the policies that were happening in government, not Democrat or Republican so much, just generally, that it was as if the people who were coming up with these ideas didn't understand the root causes of what we were faced with. And that was sort of the push point for me to get into politics, to say, "I think we need people who are making decisions about the policies that affect people who know who these people are,

who've lived with them, walked with them from their best moments of life, the birth of a baby, to the worst moments of a life, the death of a baby. And everything in between."

[00:14:28] JD: Some powerful calling, if you will, into politics in the 1992 race. And you had touched on this earlier, but you know, if you—I've looked at the turnout results, and just your raw vote count numbers, especially historically for a Republican, were impressive. I believe Asa Hutchinson did quite well too in that race. 'Course, you both were unsuccessful in your general election bids, but the turnout was, as you said, probably part of the factor that played a role there. But you had a little momentum after that election. And so tell me, what comes next shortly thereafter?

[00:15:00] MH: Asa Hutchinson, who was party chairman at the time, came to me and said, "You know, there's gonna be a special election for lieutenant governor. Clinton's becoming president, Jim Guy Tucker will move from lieutenant governor to governor, there'll be a special election in [19]93, off year. Would you run? You have a statewide organization, you've just completed a statewide race, you have the, you know, the contacts and the structure." And honestly, I'd never thought about it. Never crossed my mind. And my first reaction was,

"No, I don't want to do that." And I'm exhausted. I mean, I've just spent the last year and a half of my life leaving it all on the field, and I need to recover financially, physically, and every other way. But he was very persuasive, and you know, I felt like I almost owed it to the party, the people who had been so helpful, who had been out there pounding yard signs in on a hot July day, that, you know, they—we needed the candidate.

[00:15:58] So I think the original thought was nobody thought I could win, but I'll take one for the team. So out there I went, and to the shock of everybody, I won. And it was a summer election in July 1993. The money was unbelievably stacked against me. It was, like, probably fifty to one. But what I did have was an incredible volunteer army of people that, from around the state, wanted to see me win, wanted to see the Republican Party have a shot. [00:16:31] And I'll never forget the night of the victory. We were at the old Camelot Hotel, which is now the Doubletree. And that night—Dick Morris was my pollster and political consultant. And polls hadn't been closed thirty minutes. And he said to me—he was doing a bunch of little figuring on his notepad. This is before iPads and laptops so much, and he was figuring. And he looked up at me, and he said, "Well, you're going to win." And he told me exactly what

the vote count was going to be. And I said, "Dick, there's not 6 percent of the vote in. How do you know that?" He said, "Just trust me. It'll happen." Susan and Asa Hutchinson were also in the room, and I'll never forget. Somebody came running in and said, "You just won St. Francis County." Now that's Forrest City. If there was a Democrat stronghold where Republicans dared not go, it was St. Francis County. And when they came in and announced that, Susan looked up—and I'll never forget this, the expression on her face—she says, "You just won this election." [Laughter] Because in—you know, in—I think in all of our minds, that was a seminal event to carry counties like St. Francis. And it turned out I did. [00:17:41] The moment that, to this day, is still emotional for me is when I went out to make the victory speech, and it was, you know, raucous, and people were just beside themselves. We were actually winning. There was an elderly man, and as I went into the room, he came up to me, grabbed me by both shoulders. Tears were streaming down his eyes. And I thought, maybe he's at the wrong party. I don't know. And he looked at me, and he said, "I've been coming to Republican functions for years. This is the first time I've ever been to a victory party." And I realized that's who our party was built on. Not me. These guys that went out there year after

year, took it in the teeth, got their britches whipped, but they got back up, and they kept going, and they kept going. That is really where the party had its strength. So you know, I feel like there are a lot of things maybe that I helped do and set the stage for. We can talk about those. But deep down it's those folks who never gave up without whom I would not have had that night. And you know, I can think of names. Ada Mills, dear lady from Clarksville, Arkansas. She was eighty years old. And on the week before the election, somebody called me and said, "I just—driving by Walmart in Clarksville, and Ada Mills is out there with a straw sun hat with a big mallet pounding in your yard signs across the road from Walmart." And you know, I'll never forget that those are the people on whose shoulders I was carried to victory. Not just then, but every time.

[00:19:30] JD: A powerful story. And then you serve as lieutenant governor, as one may have expected, for some time, and then—pretty major event in not only your professional life and political life but the state's political history. So what—if you would, go—take us back to that moment?

[00:19:48] MH: Well, I became lieutenant governor in [19]93, reelected in [19]94. It was not exactly that I was met with open arms, and people said, "Oh, this is wonderful." Actually, I was

an outlier. I mean, only the fourth Republican to be elected statewide since Reconstruction, and the first in twenty-five years. And so there was like a shock wave that went—and especially because it was the first year of Bill Clinton's presidency. So everyone thought that if there ever was a time when the Democrats would own this state, it would be with a sitting president. So my election in the summer of [19]93 was a shock to the system. [00:20:29] And before I get to that moment of becoming governor, I just have to tell you that—because it's something that to a lot of people couldn't have happened, but it did. On the day that I was sworn in, we went down for the swearing in. I came back to what was supposed to be the office of the lieutenant governor, and the door wouldn't open. Couldn't figure it out. And one of the employees from the secretary of state's office kind of sheepishly said, "Yeah, we were ordered to nail it shut, and we nailed it from the inside." And they literally had nailed the door shut. And one of the people who were with me had left her purse. They had to go around and get it open long enough to get her purse out of there. Had been nailed inside that office. So my first welcome to the capitol was having the office door nailed shut. It remained nailed for fifty-nine days. So I didn't have an office. I made a makeshift

office out of what had been a vault. All the furniture had been taken away, the budget had been zeroed out, there was no equipment, no printers, no computers, nothing. So an office supply place over in North Little Rock donated some furniture. There was an old, wrecked Ford car that had been assigned to the lieutenant governor's office. We found a way to trade that in and get computer equipment so we could function. I tried to get letterhead printed, and the people who ran that part of the state basically never could find the order. Never did. And so we had that printed privately. I mean, it was just that kind of thing. Because it was almost as if to say, "We can't keep you from being here, but we'll make you wish you weren't." So it was a rough time. But you know, my attitude was the meaner they are, the nicer I'll be. The more difficult they are, the more cooperative I'll become. And over time it was amazing how, you know, some of the people that I think thought, "Boy, we'll make his life miserable and make him want to get out"—they ended up being okay. It was very interesting to see that happen over a period of time. [00:22:36] Fast forward to 1996. A special independent counsel was set up at the federal level to investigate President Clinton and his involvement in Whitewater and all sorts of things. And the net result, the fast version of the

story, they ended up getting Jim Guy Tucker for loan issues that involved his private business dealings, and also Jim and Susan McDougal. Susan, by the way, was a classmate of mine at Ouachita, so that was kind of an irony. I knew her from my student days. But I never thought for a minute that any jury in Arkansas, which would be made up almost for sure 90 to 95 percent of Democrats, would ever convict a sitting Democrat governor when the backup quarterback is a Republican. So I was in the midst of running for the US Senate for the seat that David Pryor had announced that he was going to retire from. I would never have run against David Pryor. I might have been stupid enough to run against Dale Bumpers, but never [laughter] would I run against David Pryor. Because I loved David Pryor, still do. And I think, you know, he's just a wonderful public servant. And I—Mark and I are good friends, and he was AG when I was governor, and you know, we've maintained a good friendship. But when he retired, you know, here I was at this point, lieutenant governor, in a position that might have a shot. [00:24:04] And there was such a shock from, I think, even the fact that Tucker had been indicted that the atmosphere was already changing. It was no longer that the Democrat Party had a pristine image and a clear sailing. And Clinton had left. You

know, he was no longer here. Had a lot of his people here loyal to him, but you know, he wasn't here. So it was a different kind of environment. And in the polls, I was leading. Leading heavily going into it. Won the primary handily and was leading what would've been a race with Winston Bryant, who at that time was attorney general. And then the absolutely, I guess, almost unthinkable happened. Jim Guy Tucker got convicted. And I remember I was on I-30. I was headed to do an event for the Senate campaign in Texarkana. And we were on our way down there in a van, and at the Friendship exit, I get a call. And it was one of the people from the campaign headquarters. They said, "Turn around and come back. They just convicted Jim Guy Tucker." My world changed in an instant. And I still remember exactly where I was when I heard the news. So turned around, headed back to Little Rock, on the phone the whole way trying to figure out what in the heck just happened. Tucker at that point had not yet made his announcement that he was going to step aside. But I think everybody understood that, just based on the constitution of Arkansas, that he could not continue to serve.

[00:25:43] So suddenly my life took a completely different turn. The first decision I had to make was whether to stay in the Senate race or focus solely on being governor. If I had

abandoned the governor's office by virtue of saying, "I'm gonna stay in the Senate race," it would've meant that Arkansas could have had four different people in the governor's office in the space of four years, three and a half years. And I felt it was not good and not helpful, that we needed continuity and we needed, particularly at that moment, stability, leadership. [00:26:24]

And this is something that I don't know if I've ever even discussed this before, but I was getting calls every few hours from Bob Dole and from Al D'Amato, and all the Senate leaders on the Republican side. "You got to stay in this Senate race. You need to stay in this Senate race. We need you in the Senate." And for me, it was a very simple thing. I said, "Gentlemen, I appreciate it. Thank you. But you know, I feel like that I owe it to my state. I'm lieutenant governor. The one thing the lieutenant governor's supposed to be is the guy stepping into the governor's office if called upon, and I've been called upon." So I made an announcement that I would be dropping out of the Senate race and devoting my time fully and completely to being governor. And it was the best decision I ever made. I would've hated being a Senator, to be honest with you. Looking back, I realize that I don't have a legislative mindset, I have more of an executive branch mindset. It's very

different. I understand it way better now and truly appreciate the significant difference and the personality that one needs to be effective as a legislator or as an executive, and clearly I would've been miserable in the legislative branch. [00:27:42]

So there was a seven-week period from the time that Jim Guy Tucker announced that he would step down, and he said it would be on or before July the fifteenth. Again, I'm trying to give you the short versions of some of this. But everything was set for July 15. It was a long, extended interim. And frankly, it was too long. I know there needed to be some transition time. But what most people didn't understand was by making it into July, it would be a new fiscal year. He would have control of the fiscal budget that would end June the thirtieth and the one that would begin July the first. He would have all of the appointments that would go through the fiscal year ending in June, and all the ones that would be available to a point in July. And you know, I'm not going to ascribe ill motive, but I'm just saying here's what happened. He spent every last dime the state had in that last fiscal year, and in the first two weeks of the new fiscal year, spent pretty much everything for that year. He appointed almost a thousand people to positions in that seven-week period of time. So he was packing the agencies and the boards and the

commissions, and looking back, I could see exactly what was happening. It was sort of the last dig at power that the Democrats were gonna have. But it also, I think, had a very negative effect on people's attitudes toward the Democrat Party in Arkansas. And everything that was done, probably, that was not really good for me turned out to be great for me because people were thinking, "That's just not right." And you know, I have no illusion that people were excited that I was going to become governor 'cause they didn't know me that well. I mean, lieutenant governor doesn't put you in a position to make major decisions and affect policy. So there was anxiety. What's this guy going to be like? You know, what is he going to do? Is he gonna set up—take the dome of the capitol down and put up a steeple? I mean, that was kind of the rub on me, that I was, you know, this wild-eyed, crazy preacher, and Lord knows, I'll turn the whole thing into a church and require the legislature to meet on Wednesday night for prayer meeting or something. Obviously that was never going to happen, but that's kind of the anxiety that existed. [00:30:14] On the day of the fifteenth where we were supposed to have the transition, two o'clock was the magic hour where I was supposed to go and be sworn in. And he would be leaving that day. Five minutes until two, I'm

down in the lieutenant governor's office, I've had a transition team, we've had people getting ready to take over the state agencies, and to move into offices, and all of this stuff. People have left their jobs, sold their homes, moved from all over the state to come be part of the staff or the leadership of agencies. I mean, you know, the die is cast. Five minutes before two, I'm in the lieutenant governor's office, and my assistant says, "Governor Tucker is on the phone." Hmm. Okay. I figured he was just going to say, "Look, it's been a tough transition, it's not the way I hoped it would transition, but I wish you well. You know, I left a note for you in the desk and good luck. Godspeed." Instead, he said, "I've decided that I'm not going to step down." Now the legislators who are supposed to escort me to the house chamber for the swearing in are standing outside my door at this very moment, waiting to take me down there for this. [00:31:25] And I mean, the interesting thing—every bit of this is on videotape because we had hired Skip Thomas, local videographer and video guy, just to kinda record it for posterity sake, and we didn't think it would be of great value other than maybe some cool things that my kids could one day look and say, "This is the day, you know, you became governor." So the cameras were rolling. And even when I took the call, somebody

was going to say, "Stop the camera," and I think it was my chief of staff Brenda Turner said, "No, keep it rolling, keep it rolling." So everything that I was saying is all on video. Every bit of it. It's absolutely—I've gone back and watched that day's video, all of Channel 7's and all of that Skip shot, and I'm sitting there spellbound because at the time, you don't have time to process what's happening. But he basically said, "I'm not going to resign. I think I can win on appeal, and I will take a temporary leave of absence, and you can serve, but I will not resign and step down." And you know, my reaction was, "Governor Tucker, with all due respect, you have already promised not me, but the people of Arkansas that you were resigning. And your people have all found other jobs, my people have left their jobs to come, and that's not an acceptable option at this point. This is too late for that decision to be made." And I said, "You know, I think we just need to go on with what you committed to and what we're planning today." And he said, "Well, I'm not gonna do that, and I'm not gonna step down." And I said, "I think it's a huge mistake. You got to do what you got to do. I've got to do what I've got to do." And you know, the next few hours were bedlam. Utter chaos in the capitol. And I remember state police people come and say, "Who do I answer to? Who's my boss,

you or Tucker?" The adjutant general of the National Guard.

"Who's commander in chief? You know, what do we do?"

[00:33:36] And I first said, "Okay, I need to go down and explain to the legislature what's going on. They need to know." The capitol is filled with people who had come to witness the swearing in. More my supporters probably than his, so you can imagine the reaction when word started getting out in the capitol. I thought they were going to take the place apart stone by stone. I mean, it was a very electric atmosphere, to put it mildly. And there were people saying, "No, you don't need to go down there. You shouldn't talk." I said, "No, I need to go. They need to see and hear from me." [00:34:11] So I went to the House. The House and Senate were all convened thinking it was a swearing in. And you know, I kind of disarmed the situation with some humor because I knew that everybody was so tense. You could have hit a spark and blown the place up. It was just so very tense. And you know, I made the comment—something like, "Well, I guess this is going to be a day we'll never forget." And I explained what I'd been told. And I said I'd like to have a meeting with the leadership of the House and Senate, and of course, that means Democrat leadership. We came back to my office, we sat down, and I said, "Gentlemen, look. I'm not really

interested in destroying your party or you. But if you don't stand with me right now, it will destroy your party. Because I think the people of Arkansas will not take a liking to of the idea that a man made a promise that he would step aside and then doesn't at the last minute. Not about me. People don't have to like me, but they won't like the way this is going down." They agreed. And I said, "So you know, I'm gonna ask you to stand with me. I will let Governor Tucker know that we expect him to give an unconditional resignation. And if not, we'll begin impeachment proceedings in the morning." And I mean, that's a pretty bold deal to throw down there, but Bobby Hogue, speaker of the house—Stanley Russ was the president pro temps of the Senate. And you know, to—I guess somewhat to my surprise, they said, "We'll stand with you." Jack Holt, who was the recently retired chief justice of the supreme court—I'd asked Jack to come in. Now Jack's a Democrat, but he's a great guy, and he's an honorable man, and he, more than anything, is a legal scholar. Leon Holmes, who later became a federal judge—I had known Leon from working on the right-to-life effort with him. But you know, he's a constitutional expert, but country lawyer down at Redfield and smartest guy I knew on constitutional law. He was there. And so you know, I said to

them, "All right, let's look at all of our options, let's understand what the situation is." I was very fortunate to be surrounded by people who, on that day, rose above whatever personal affiliations they had or even personal feelings, I guess, and they stood up and did what was right for the state. So we issued that to Tucker. He continued to say that he would not step down. And there were a lot of people close to him, his friends, saying to him, "You've got to. You have to do it." And finally, by about six thirty that evening, Sharon Priest came running up the steps of the capital. She was the secretary of state. She had been down to the Democrat Party headquarters. She had a letter in her hand that he had just given her. Larry Audas was the chief anchor for KTHV Channel 11, the CBS affiliate. He was standing doing a live telecast on the steps of the capital. [00:37:32] And as Sharon came by, he just stopped her, and he said, "Madam Secretary, do you have any news?" And she says, "I have the letter of resignation in my hand." He literally takes it out of her hand, holds her there [*JD laughs*], he reads it on the air. That's how I found out that it had happened. We were in my office watching TV, watching this, and we look at each other and said, "I'll be doggone." I found out watching Larry Audas take the letter from Sharon Priest. I mean, it's like—you can't make this

stuff up. It'd be heck of a novel if you just wrote it as fiction. So I went down, and somebody said, "Well, we've got to get the chief justice who"—Brad Jessen from Fort Smith was chief justice of the supreme court who would've normally done the swearing in. And somebody said, "I think he's already driven back to Fort Smith. Should we wait on him?" And I says, "Heck no. I don't want Tucker [*laughs*] to change his mind again." I said, "Anybody in a black robe who's a judge can do the swearing in. [*JD laughs*] You get somebody down to the House chamber. We'll meet there in fifteen minutes, and we'll get this done, or you know, we could be going through this again." So everything was happening very fast. Ended up going to the House chamber, was sworn in, and spent almost eleven years in that office. Reelected twice. It's a long answer to a question, right?

[00:38:52] JD: No, that—so you come into the office under unusual circumstances. You're elected and reelected in your own right. As you said, you serve over a decade. You're the—as you mentioned, you've got Rockefeller, you've got White.

MH: Yeah.

[00:39:08] JD: Right. And I guess what I'm really curious about, too, is what was it like to govern a state that is in a lot of ways more moderate to conservative . . .

MH: Yeah.

JD: . . . but has stridently, historically speaking anyway, been a Democratic stronghold state? And you're working with a legislature who might not know you that well and who is overwhelmingly Democratic. And you've had, what, six months once you were in office to your first general session. So what's that like?

[00:39:43] MH: I had a good relationship with senators because as lieutenant governor, I'd been the presiding officer of the Senate. And I knew some House members, but I had not worked closely with them. And keep in mind, 90 percent, not just of the legislature—which it was 90 percent Democrat—90 percent of all elected officials in the state, in the entire state, were Democrats. County judges, sheriffs, county clerks, all of them. So you know, there was certainly a lot of anxiety, some open hostility, but there were a lot of people whose attitude was, "You know what? You are the governor, and we're going to work with you."  
[00:40:23] And there's some notable people who stepped up and were statesmen that I will never forget. Lloyd George is a guy that—you know, he was probably the expert on the budget, as Democrat as Democrat could be. But I'll never forget somebody was trying to play some games with the budget and

really mess me around, and Lloyd George stood in the middle, and he said, "Folks, let me make it real clear." Now Lloyd was highly respected. He was, you know, the guy—like a bear. He stood up and talked, and people listened. And Lloyd just stood in the whole thing and said, "This is my governor. He is my governor, and he's governing all of us, and I'm gonna stick with him, and we're going to help him get this budget." I mean, I—it was—I'll never forget that. And there were a lot of people like that who were, as I say, statesman. And as my time went on, I mean, there were more of them who really realized that I wasn't trying to just build a Republican state. I wanted to solve problems. [00:41:21] But it took time to win trust. In the early days, I think there was some things that I did that probably caught people off guard that they weren't expecting. In the summer of [19]96 when I became governor, the people who were leading the effort to bring the one-eighth-cent sales tax amendment to the constitution for conservation—they assumed I'd be against it. And I never forget we had a meeting. Richard Davies who was parks and tourism director, Steve Wilson from game and fish, Witt Stevens Jr. was like the chairman of the committee, and there were a couple of other people, game and fish commissioners. And they asked for a

meeting, we sat down, and they later have told me that their whole purpose was just to beg me, "Please, be neutral. Please don't come out and oppose this because we really need to get it done." And so we sat down, and I said, "Well, before we get started, can I just find out what can I do to help get this passed? Because I really think this would be great for the state." And they looked at each other. I could see on their faces just the shock. And they looked back at me and said, "What did you say?" I said, "What can I do to help?" And so I campaigned for the amendment in my bass boat from Fort Smith to the Mississippi River, 308 miles on the Arkansas River. My wife did it on a Jet Ski. We, I mean, threw everything we had into the passage of that, because I really believed in it. [00:42:53] Before the session began, I was convinced that the uninsured children of the state were a huge issue. And Ray Hanley, who was the Medicaid director for the state and—my goodness, how can I forget? Oh. It'll come to me. But she was head of the advocates—Arkansas Advocates for Children. And we were in a meeting, and people were talking about, you know, what we needed to do, and she finally just said, "What we need to do is to do something for these kids." And I listened to her, and I realized she's 100 percent right. The kids who had Medicaid,

whose parents were really poor, they had no worries about healthcare for their kids. They had a platinum-level plan because it covered everything a hundred percent. No deductible, no copay, nothing. It was 100 percent Medicaid, great plan. And if you were really poor, you could have that. If you were really rich, your parents could afford health insurance or paying personally. But if you were in the middle, if you were working class, \$1 above the Medicaid threshold but nowhere near enough to be able to go out in the marketplace, your kids couldn't get medicine, they couldn't have surgery. That was the target. [00:44:10] So I sat down with Ray Hanley, and we started creating what would become ARKids First. It was a shocker because no one had thought that a Republican governor would be the one who would push that, lead it, stand up in the legislature and say, "We ought to do this." And not to be unfair to previous governors, but Bill Clinton had been pushed to do this. He didn't. Jim Guy Tucker had been pushed to do it. He didn't. It was almost like Nixon goes to China. A Republican pulling this off probably is what made it work. 'Cause everybody expects, you know, maybe a Democrat to get into something like that. Don't know that they expected me to. But I looked at it as a true conservative policy. You're conserving the people of your

state, and especially the ones who, through no fault of their own, don't have insurance for their kids. So why is that ideological? It never was for me. It was a matter of these are the people that need the help. So why wouldn't we do this? And if it means that a kid can get eyeglasses and see the board, he learns. If he doesn't see the board, he doesn't learn. He falls behind in school. And then what happens? We have to remediate the kid. It costs a lot more money to reeducate him, than it ever would to have educated him in the first place if we take care of his stomachache, his toothache, or his inability to see, or his inability to hear. It just makes perfect sense to me that that's what we need to be doing is plugging that hole. So it was a turning point, I think, in people's attitudes toward the way I would govern. And I would like to think that, you know, in the entire ten and a half, almost eleven years, that's how I looked at the job.

[00:45:57] JD: Well, you never shied away from—controversial might be a strong word, but you took positions that were not, as you say, sort of stereotypical, you know, Republican positions, and you would also take on an issue that Democrats would have a hard time wrestling with such as school consolidation and other issues like that in the state.

MH: I still have the scars for that one. [*Laughter*]

[00:46:20] JD: So I mean, in that tenure. And so do you think—and you kind of touched on this, do you think in some ways it was advantageous to be sort of a historical anomaly in many ways back at that point, working with that Democratic legislature? Was it easier for them to work with someone who was of the other party for some of these third-rail issues, if will?

[00:46:40] MH: Well, I think for some of them, they didn't care that I was a Republican. They wanted the problem solved, and they were willing to work with me in spite of my being Republican, not because. There were some people who were belligerent and just as obtuse as they could be, and sometimes obstructionist to the core. And it was frustrating because they couldn't give me a reason that they were opposing a bill. [00:47:05] For example, one of the things that I did in my very first session was we resolved this horrible problem in Arkansas of getting your car tags, which used to require a trip to about seven different offices and I don't know how many pieces of paper to get something from the assessment office and the insurance, and you had to physically go and get the paper. And I always said, if anybody could ever figure out how to make this simple—be elected governor for life. We laughed about it, but we figured out how

to do it. And so we got rid of the car inspection, which was a joke. We got it where we could do it online. You could do it in less than four minutes on a computer and do the whole thing online and make it a dollar cheaper than it had ever been. So why would anybody oppose that? Believe it or not, they did. And I mean, for the most ridiculous reasons. So there was that kind of stuff I always had to deal with. Just, again, what I'd call the pure nonsense. And there were people in the legislature—I called 'em—and some of them were Republicans, to be fair. I called them towel poppers. I said these are the guys that'll never start in a game, they'll never come off the field with grass or mud on their suits and jerseys because they never played a single moment of play. They sit on the bench, they wisecrack, they're on the team, but they don't contribute anything. And but they're the ones in the locker room who are popping towels and, you know, horsing around 'cause they have nothing invested in the game. They're not even there to play it. They're just there to dress out and be in the locker room. And I said, "You know, that's the problem we got. We got towel poppers. These people are just, you know, going in there and trying to gum up the works and let everybody see what a big shot they are."

[00:48:48] Fortunately, you know, that wasn't the prevailing

view, and we got a lot of things done. Because if it was education, it was guys like Robert White, an African American Democrat from Pine Bluff, and Jim Argue. Now by anybody's definition, Jim was a liberal, but a great guy and genuine, you know, authentic to the core. He was who he was, and he wasn't pretentious about it. But when it came to education, that's where his heart was. So if I said, "Jim, I need help on this"—Jim put his shoulder to the wheel on the highway program. We redid the highways. Needed to be done, it was tough, it was heavy lifting to get it done. Tom Courtway, Conway—again, Democrat. But he knew that infrastructure was critical. He chaired that thing. [00:49:37] What I think—the greatest contribution I made to the transition toward a Republican Party was being there long enough to appoint every single person to every board, agency, and commission. You have to serve just over ten years to do that, because the longest boards are the University of Arkansas Board, the highway commission. Those are both ten year. Game and fish and high—game and fish and police, state police, are seven years, and then most of them are anywhere from four to six. But unless you can stay in office—and most governors will only be there eight years, so they'll never have the entire highway commission, the entire UA board, all of it. By

being able to stay long enough, I think, number one, there were people who—some of whom weren't rabid Republicans, but they at least were willing to be seen with one. But being a part of a Republican administration over an extended period of time gave people this comfort that Republicans aren't crazy. The university didn't fall apart. In fact, we did some pretty amazing things at UAMS. And you know, you look at the things that happened during that period. Same thing with the highway commission. We rebuilt the entire interstate system in the state. Game and fish, my gosh, we got the one-eighth passed and were able to do amazing things to make accessibility for poor kids to go hunting and fishing in this state that didn't have it. In my mind, there's nothing that singularly made more difference in the long-term effect of the party than having Republicans that really, quite frankly—the board's agencies and commissions is where the power is. And the governor's ultimate power is in his power to appoint and his power to delegate the power of his office through all—which at that time were 353 boards, agencies, and commissions. And when you, over a period of time, have every one of your people in those positions, now people want to be a Republican 'cause if they ever wanted to be on the commission, whatever it is, they realize being a Republican ain't so bad.

'Cause that's who's been on that board for ten years. And if I want any shot at it, I might want to keep my options open.

[00:52:04] And that, I'm convinced, was a part of it. And people saw that a Republican governor did things that made a difference. Whether it's ARKids, the highway bill, the school efforts to really hold accountability and raise standards, all of that was very, very important in sort of saying, "Whew. Being a Republican is not that scary."

[00:52:32] JD: Very good. Well, you touched on the boards and commissions. And you know, it's one thing that your Republican predecessors struggled with, because they just weren't there long enough.

MH: Yeah.

JD: They had the two year terms, they—you know, Governor White serves one term, Rockefeller, of course, in two, but it's just four years. And so I think that's a great point that you had the staying power, right, to do that. [00:52:55] And so do you think—is there an added benefit to what you're talking about? Did those individuals, you think, become more politically engaged as a result as well? Sort of do you think that allowed the Republican Party to build a farm team, if you will, a bench?

[00:53:14] MH: Without a doubt. And it meant that people started

running as Republicans in races around the state. That was the big thing. I mean, it's one thing to elect a governor, and yes, you leverage that power through the appointments. But ultimately, you need the sheriff, and you need the county judge, and you need the county clerk and the school board members, even though they don't run as partisans. Everybody knows they basically do. The court positions. All of those things. But until you make it where it's acceptable to run as a Republican, and that you're not considered like a weirdo, and that you're just begging for a beating, you know, even people that ideologically were very conservative, pro-life, again, by nature Republican would even say, "I'd like to run as a Republican, but man, I can't get elected." So it starts changing the mindset. [00:54:04]

And I'm convinced that what really started taking place was as people became more comfortable—I can't tell you how many hundreds of times somebody would come up to me at a political fundraiser when I was running for reelection and say, "I've never given to a Republican before." You know, it's like—"and I didn't get struck by lightning when I did it." [JD laughs] That—I mean, this was big thing for a lot of people in Arkansas whose daddies, granddaddies, and great granddaddies had never, ever voted for a Republican, and they were afraid, you know, their

family would come back from the grave and tear their nostrils out. "You just gave money to a Republican." That was the—to me, that was the thing that I would see, that comfort level of even just being seen in public with a Republican. It was okay. Wasn't that bad. And we really didn't have horns and a tail and a pitch fork, and it was—you know, they were all going to be okay. In fact, some of them realized, you know, we governed pretty darn well and got things done that needed to get done. [00:55:16] And I was very careful too. Let me be very clear. If I had a Jim Argue or a Robert White or one of the Democrats, a Tom Courtway, any of these guys that stuck their neck out for me, you know, I'd go to their Rotary club in their hometown, and I'd say, "Look, this guy right here, he's a Democrat. He did not vote for me. He sure as heck didn't give me any money, and he probably never will. And I bet he will never vote for me. But when I needed to get an education bill passed, you know what? He came through. He didn't do it for me. He did it for you. He did it because he cared about the kids in your town, and he was willing to put aside his political difference with me, because he cared more about you." I said, "Guys, I'm not going to probably vote for him because I don't live in his district, but if I did, I wouldn't probably vote for him 'cause, you know, he is who he

is, and I'm who I am, but I thank you for sending him." Now there were Republicans who got mad at me for doing stuff like that. But I said, "When you give me a Republican who helps me get this stuff elected, I'll go to his town and do the same darn thing." But here's what he did. It let people know that I wasn't gonna use them and then act like I never heard of them. That I would make it that it was okay—that what they did—they didn't abandon their party, and I didn't abandon mine, but we saw that we had a higher purpose. And I do think that that had a residual effect over time.

[00:56:47] JD: And I think this starts with your tenure in the Governor's Mansion. But what do you think—the Republican brand seemed to, in some ways, show promise in Arkansas as early as really the 1960s, 1970s . . .

MH: Yeah.

JD: . . . at least in presidential races, but really kinda gets stilted, right. It sort of gets stunted there at the very top of the ticket. Arkansas is not unique in that we were ticket splitting in that regard. But what was unique is over time we saw our Southern neighbors become more Republican. In Arkansas, with exception of, you know, yourself, Tim Hutchinson, who's elected first US Senator Republican since Reconstruction—there's some

momentum there, but it stops and starts, right, success and setback. [00:57:32] And what do you think happened with the Republican brand, I think during your time, that seemed to translate so well to Arkansans? I mean, you're touching on that now, I think, but . . .

[00:57:40] MH: Yeah, some of it was policy and the effect of that and how it affected people's lives who never really thought about Democrat or Republican. 'Cause I mean, a lot of people, they don't swim in demo—political water all that time.

JD: Right. Right.

MH: I mean, they're too busy worrying about are they going to pay their rent this month. And I think just giving them a reason to say, "Don't just go in there and vote everybody a Democrat 'cause your daddy did." You know, that was part of it.

[00:58:06] But the other was that as the national parties began to really separate ideologically—because there was a time you had staunch Democrats who were very conservative fiscally. John F. Kennedy would be a Republican today. He cut taxes, he was an anti-Communist, he was pro-life, staunchly pro-life. He would certainly not fit in today's Democratic party. He was pro-law enforcement, pro-military. I mean, this is a guy that would be so out of the water of today's Democrat Party. Even in

the [19]70s, you had Scoop Jackson who was a defense Hawk, you had so many Democrats. The Democrats probably were more pro-Israel for a long time than the Republicans were, and quite frankly, the Republicans for a long time were more the Northeast elites. You know, the Skull and Bones from Yale, and the Harvard legacy kids and all this stuff. But then things started changing. And as other Southern states began to embrace the Republican Party over the life issue, that was a big, big part of this, and the cultural issues. Increasingly, people who were conservative on cultural issues had nowhere else to go. 'Cause from the time—it really started in the late [19]70s and into the [19]80s. When the Democrat Party decided it was going to be pro-feminist, pro-abortion, it set itself in a different mode. And that just didn't work in Southern communities where people, no matter how heavy-duty Democrat they were, they didn't believe that it was okay to take the life of an unborn child just because it was an inconvenience to the biological mother. They just didn't. That's just something that was appalling to a lot of people. [01:00:07] So increasingly, and as Reagan began to become the soul of the Republican Party, you had Walter Mondale becoming the soul and ultim—and Michael Dukakis. I mean, true liberals. And I say that with respect because they

weren't crazy people. You know, they were thoughtful, they really believed what they stood for, and they were classic liberals. They still believed in free speech, they still believed in, you know, a budget that was meeting basic needs, but they were classic liberals when it came to a lot of the cultural issues. And that just was at odds with people in the South. I want to make very sure people understand, it was not race. That's the dumbest thing people ever say. It was never race. In fact, I will tell you that as a Republican, I had far more support from African Americans than any person from the Republicans had ever had. Forty-eight percent of my reelect in 2002—CNN did an exit poll, and that was shocking. People said, "How did you do that?" [01:01:14] But people like Bill Walker who was an African American, Democrat senator, took me around all over his community and campaigned with me. And that happened several times because when it got right down to it, for things like reapportionment, I knew that the African American community were getting screwed over bad. 'Cause all the—they would gerrymander the districts and make it so that a district that should have absolutely been represented by a Black Senator or a Black House member, they penciled that out where it wouldn't happen. And they knew I was standing with them for an

equitable assignment of the legislative seats. It was things like that. Anyway, all of that, I do believe, had an impact over time.

[01:02:04] But as the national issues began to crystallize more and more in the local areas, that's when you started having people at the local level, the sheriff, who just can't abide anti-law enforcement that he hears from the national party. You know, gun control, that was a big issue. Still is. Then you saw the demise of the Blue Dogs in the Democrat party from the South. You know, there used to be a very solid Blue Dog kind of caucus. People like Mike Ross, who was Fourth District Arkansas and others, they were pro-gun, they were pro-life, they were solid on issues like that as any Republican. So you know, they were still there, but as the national party put the squeeze on them, and the Pelosis of the world basically shut them out, and the Democrats nationally started sticking to people who believed in the second amendment and pro-life. Folks at the local level just finally decided, "Look, you may be a second amendment, pro-life guy, but your party is taking us the wrong direction."

[01:03:12] And that was the real turning point. Obama was probably the sort of the linchpin because with him it was the gloves off, it was all hands on deck. And by the way, the dumbest thing I hear people say is that because Obama was

Black that people were upset with him. Had nothing to do with that. Maybe with a handful of people, maybe. I never heard it. It was the policies, the fact that he embraced, openly and vividly, policies that were so out of touch with the values of Arkansas. And when he lit up the White House with rainbow colors after the Supreme Court decision in 2012—I mean, those were seminal moments where I think a lot of Arkansas people, lifetime Democrats, said, "You know what? That's it. We're done."

[01:04:05] JD: So and I think to that point, you know, if we look at other Southern states, we see that during the 1990s, early 2000s, you know, they're undergoing a slower transformation but earlier transformation, politically speaking, from Democratic to Republican. From Blue Dog Democrat to align with more conservative politics Republican. It's maybe not so much that the voters changed, right, but the parties, as you said, sort of changed around and became more nationalized. Those issues were more nationalized. You've—course, being in Little Rock, are able to show Arkansans that, as you said, there's no hoof and claws and [*laughter*] horns and everything with the Republican party. I wonder too, though, you know, is part of the challenge nationally speaking—if I'm an Arkansas voter, I might

like Mike Huckabee, but I look over, and I'm okay with my time in Arkansas when Bill Clinton was governor, now he's in the White House. And now Bill Clinton isn't in the White House, but George H—or George W. Bush is. There's not a real juxtaposition there until President Obama, right.

MH: Yeah.

[01:05:11] JD: And so to your point, I wonder if part of the delay for Arkansas going—you know, turning red or turning more Republican in part is that they didn't really have that box A, box B that you're talking about. That it was clearly distinguishable finally in 2008, 2009, and [20]10 with Barack Obama, and what they, you know, had previously been comfortable with in terms of maybe moderate-to-conservative Democrats and the occasional Republican. Because something happens there, right. The dam breaks . . .

MH: Absolutely.

JD: . . . in probably 2010, certainly by [20]12 and [20]14. You know, any thoughts on that?

[01:05:51] MH: Sure. Let's keep in mind, Obama was openly pro-abortion. He was the first president, Democrat or Republican, who was. Bill Clinton—you know, he would say safe,

legal and rare. Didn't mean it, but he would say that. I have a letter from Bill Clinton from 1986 when I was working on the statewide initiative to amend the constitution of Arkansas for life begins at conception and we protect human life, in which he explicitly states his pro-life position. But when he moved to the national stage within the Democrat party, you know, he didn't go full gun because that would really mess him up with more conservative Southern Democrats. But you know, he kind of took that middle road position. He also did Don't Ask, Don't Tell, so it was like, you know, "Look, we're not embracing same sex marriage, we're not ready to redefine what marriage means and ban the biblical view, but you know, we're just a little more open-minded about it." [01:06:55] Here's—you got to remember that from the time of Bill Clinton to Barack Obama—when Obama comes in, first thing he does is Obamacare. And part of Obamacare is providing funds for abortion. He changes the Mexico City policy about funds that are being used overseas. He openly declares war on the Second Amendment. He openly says things that scare the daylights out of Southern Christians when he says stuff like people need to quit clinging to their guns and religion. Well, what does that mean? Clinging to my gun? Nobody's clinging to it. It's just a matter of, you know,

constitutional right to protect myself and my family. You know, and I don't—live out in rural Arkansas. If somebody breaks into my house, I ain't got twenty minutes to call the sheriff and wait till he gets there. I better do something now, or I'm dead.

People understood that viscerally. They had that feeling. And he is talking about clinging to their religion, and they're thinking, "What do you mean clinging to it? I go to church. Is that a bad thing? Should I be ashamed of that?" I mean, it—I don't think it was intentional on his part, but I mean, he basically just went out there and threw the spear down at the ground and said, "Folks, it's a new day, and I'm not being subtle about it."

Clinton was subtle. Clinton was a master at being able to finesse the issues. Clinton supported the religious—the RFPA, you know, Religious Freedom Protection Act. He was the one that signed it. Most Democrats voted for it. I think it was like ninety-seven to nothing in the Senate in 1994. Obama comes along, trashes it. [01:08:37] I mean, so you have a fundamental difference here, and it's not small. I think people forget how big a deal it was when essentially Obamacare was gonna nationalize people's healthcare. And their doctor told them they hated it. People usually trust their doctor more so than they trust a politician. But you take all of these very critical

issues that are deep to the heart and soul of people, especially in the South, challenge them on their—what their church teaches about marriage, challenge them on what they believe about guns. And again, it's not so much about the guns as it is their freedom. It's like, you know, I'm not going on waving a gun at anybody, but don't tell me you're going to come make me tell you I have, you know, a rifle, and sign off on you knowing where I keep it. All of that was part of what just finally—and I think as I look at Arkansas, it was ripe for it, the stage had been set, we had shown we could govern, we had shown that we were trustworthy, and then at the national level, the Democrats lost their ever-loving minds, and they put people in. And there was no Mike Ross or Blanche Lincoln anymore to sorta hold the tide back and go out to the fish fry and slap people on the back and say, "You know, I'm still out there just like I was." Those people were gone. So what do they do? They embrace the Republican party. [01:10:14] And let me be fair. You know, we had good leadership. Doyle Webb as party chairman did a good job of recruiting candidates, helping raise money for them. People started seeing they could actually win local races as a Republican. Now they realize they can't win unless they are. So that means the full pendulum has swung, but it was moving ever

so clearly in that direction. But the nationalization of the Democrat party to the far left—and it's even been gone way beyond that now—was the gift to the Republican party of Arkansas.

[01:10:54] JD: If you had to point to one election that, you know, you say that's the one—you know, maybe it's in [20]12, maybe it's in [20]14, could be in [20]10, where you say that's the one that really illustrates sort of this transition that we saw. Because you know, I think one thing that, you know, we know, but I think history will need to recall eventually is that there was really no point where there were two competitive parties by definition in the state. It was like a light switch.

MH: Right.

[01:11:22] JD: I mean, it was truly a historical event in how quickly everything shifted. So you know, is there one, two races you can point to where you say, "Oh, that one illustrates sort of this point that you're making."

[01:11:33] MH: Two thousand twelve. And here's why I say that. In 2008, Barack Obama was at Saddleback Church with Rick Warren, and I remember very vividly he and McCain were doing this forum with him, and Obama was asked about marriage. His—almost verbatim is what he said, "I believe that marriage is

between a man and a woman. You know, it's a biblical thing." Comforting. Everybody said, "Whew, that's good to hear." Because he took a biblical position, a very traditional position that—a thousand year old view of marriage, and he crystallized it in his statement. After he got in office, you could tell that he was really moving from that. And in [20]12, Biden, in like March of that year, came out and explicitly just said, "I'm for same sex marriage," before Obama did. And it really—I mean, the word was it ticked Obama off because it was—I think Obama's expression was Joe got a little over his skis going out there that soon. But that year, which was a reelection year, you know, Obama came out full bore for same sex marriage. The Court then, in June of that year, made their Obergefell decision, and I think that was the seminal moment, the flash point. And I think it was not just in Arkansas, but a lot of places, but certainly in Arkansas. That's when people said, "You know what, they've been leaving me, but they have completely run off and left me." And if you . . .

JD: And it's ten years—what, ten years prior when the state constitutional amendment is supported—that, you know, to your point.

MH: Yeah.

JD: Not that long before.

[01:13:19] MH: That's right. And so they saw things happen so quickly, and their brand of Democrat just simply had disappeared. Maybe they had good old guys down in the local level, but the people on the local level weren't happy with this. You know, they were having to explain at their church, why are you supporting this stuff? "Well, I don't support that." "Well, your party does, and you're supporting your party. How are you doing that?" I mean, it was creating a lot of very awkward moments for a guy living in Monticello or wherever else who was the local sheriff, and his people would come up and ask him, "Do you support this?" And then ask him at church. And he'd say, "Well, no. I don't." "Well, your party does." I mean, that put people on the spot. So there's no doubt in my mind that [20]12 was—that was the gate.

[01:14:08] JD: Well, since then the Republican party of Arkansas really hasn't looked back.

MH: Yeah.

JD: And not only majorities in the House and the Senate, but you know, for parliamentary purposes, you know, supermajorities.

MH: Yeah.

JD: And with exception of a few pockets in Central Arkansas and

Northwest Arkansas, Republicans—most of the races are settled out in primaries, if we really think about it. I think it was [20]14 where we finally, for the first time, saw more Republican primary voters than Democratic primary voters, which I think was a pretty significant moment as well . . .

MH: Big.

JD: . . . electorally speaking.

MH: Yeah. And remember when that happened, right after 2012.

[01:14:46] JD: Right. Right. So looking at where Arkansas is—and you know about governing in a state that is—you know, sort of places you in the political minority in that sort of strange way where you're the chief executive of the state, and yet most other people are voting another way. We have a situation now where we see a governor of the same party, you know, governing a state that is overwhelmingly Republican as well, working with a legislature that's overwhelming Republican. And history would tell us that after a while, there's only so many people in the room to beat up that are not wearing your jersey, so you'll start fighting. And I just wonder—you've got a very unique perspective as a former governor. [01:15:33] How does—what are the challenges of having a supermajority of your party? Obviously, there's luxuries.

MH: Yeah.

JD: And you may have wanted those [*MH laughs*] on occasion, but it seems like there'd be some challenges, too, in governing within the party. So just what are some observations that you may have on that?

[01:15:51] MH: Well, I was present when Asa was inaugurated his first term, and I remember going up to him, and I said, "Asa, you experienced something that I never did when you walked into the House chamber and they gave you that standing ovation. Number one, they really meant it, and number two, there were people in that room that actually voted for you."

[*Laughter*] I said, "I never experienced that." You know, and I was very thrilled that he had kind of situation where, if he had something he wanted to get done, he'd get it done unless it was just so outlandish that even his own team didn't want it.

[01:16:33] But it does present some issues. It's not always as easy. My problem was I could veto a bill that required seventy-five vote votes to pass, and fifty-one votes would override the veto. Arkansas's got some weird stuff in the way it's structured, and it needs to be changed. That's one of the things that needs to be changed. It makes it challenging because sometimes in the majority, people want more than is

realistic, and they want to do things that may not be the highest priority, but it may be maybe the sexiest thing, if I can use that term, not literally in that sense, but by that—popular and sensational. But it may not be an ARKids First. You know what I'm saying? And I can only sort of point to the things that I'm most familiar with, but that was a program—I mean, I had to spend some political capital to push that. Same thing with the highway program or the education program. To get the schools where we're not having 1,200 districts. My gosh, how insane was that? With superintendents that oversaw 120 students and were paid \$160,000 to do that. I mean, who could think that was efficient use of tax money? So there's a challenge to get some things done because you need to do substantive things, things that really matter, rather than just stuff that will make a nice headline or give you a speaking point when you go to the Lincoln Day dinner and raise money for the party. But if I had to choose between the two, I'd love to have had a majority.

[*Laughter*] [01:18:27] 'Cause—but I will tell you this, and it's very true. And I've said this to people in many states. The best thing that did happen was by being in such a minority, especially when I first went in, I really did have to learn how to govern and do it artfully. I couldn't just go in and say, "Guys, here's what

we're going to do." And everybody, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, we're going to do it." It didn't work like that. I mean, I had to pick them off one at a time. I had to deal. I had to go to a Democrat legislator and say, "What do you want? I need your vote. What do you want out of me?" And it might be, "I got a buddy. I want him on the soybean board." "That's it? You've got it, Ace. Your pal is gonna be on the soybean board, but you're voting for the highway bill." That's how it works. But I had to, you know, finesse that day after day, but it made me a better governor because I was dealing not with people who were inclined to want to go my way. But I think it taught me a lot on working with people and—you know, despite what the press may have ever saw because they didn't see a whole lot that really happened, but behind the scenes. [01:19:39] One of my greatest thrills was a few years after I had left, out of the clear blue, I got a call from one of the Democrat state legislators. And he and three other Democrat legislators were having lunch. He still had my cell phone number from when I was in office and hadn't changed it. And he said, "I didn't know if I'd get you or not, but I just want to tell you, we were sitting here saying, 'You know, by golly, you may have been a Republican, but we had a good time working with you, and you'd listen to us and would

help us when we asked for it, and you actually listened when we needed something.'" And it was one of the most just, I guess, affirming kind of moments that I have ever had. It was really neat to hear that from these guys. And they weren't all that cooperative when I was there, but they recognized that I had reached out to them and listened when they needed it, and if they had a problem in their district, I did my best to help them. Not because they were helping me, but because if it was a need, their people were my people. They may not have been, but the people they represented, they mattered to me because I was their governor too. And that's something I always try to remember.

[01:21:01] JD: Looking ahead—we've looked in the mirror today, but looking ahead, what does the Republican Party of Arkansas need to do? What are the new challenges that it'll face either trying to continue to grow, if that's even possible, or just maintaining? Because that's historically been the challenge for the party is growth and then setback. I don't think we're there anymore.

MH: Yeah.

JD: But what do you think they need to do moving forward?

[01:21:26] MH: Remember that good policy is the best politics.

Don't focus on the politics, focus on good policy, good programs, good things that help people whether they're Republican or not. And if you do that, the politics takes care of itself. I mean, I truly believe that with all my heart. So many times people try to manipulate the political process and get elected, and then you have power. But if you don't use that power—I think there's nothing worse than to get elected, be given the political capital of power, and then sit on it because you don't want to do something unpopular. I believe you've got to be willing to do the things that are blatantly unpopular, but are necessary to move the state forward. And if you aren't willing to do that, you shouldn't run for office, especially governor. I mean, I believe this with all my heart. It's a job that you've got to do some things that'll make people mad. You just do. And you don't do it on purpose. You don't go out there and say, "I'm going to see how many people I can make mad today." Don't worry about that. You're going to do that anyhow. And I used to say I gotta make ten new friends every day 'cause I'm going to lose about seven. And that was true. You know, 'cause I didn't appoint this guy who really wanted the job, and this dude over here, he wanted a grant that he didn't get. And it's always disappointing people. You can't make everybody happy. But look at the big

picture and ask, what really needs to be done? [01:22:47] For example, right now you look at the Delta. It is an economic challenge. Northwest Arkansas doesn't need a darn thing. Just leave them alone. You know, the best thing you do for Northwest Arkansas with all the entrepreneurial activity and things going on, just leave them alone and don't get in their way. But in Southeast Arkansas and in East Arkansas, you've got communities that are miles from a good doctor, miles from a hospital, miles from somebody who can manage the hypertension and diabetes rates that exist among the African American community. It's epidemic. Well, if people are that sick, they're poor. And sick, poor, unemployable, what do you got? You've got to completely collapsed economy. And it won't get better until you start dealing with the stuff that's the underpinning of it all. So if the education system in those communities are subpar, and you know, you can't get doctors to go there, you can't get the best teachers to go there, you've got to figure out, "Okay, let's put more resources here." And not just throwing money at it. I think that's a big mistake, just saying, "Well, we'll put more money." It's about targeting the money so that it really does scratch where the itch is. That's what I feel like a person has to do, and it may not have one

political advantage at all. [01:24:10] 'Cause I mean, I could go—I never will forget the mayor of Helena was a great man, medical doctor for a long time. And he noticed that I was spending more time in Helena than in Hope. I was doing more stuff for Helena than I was for Hope, my hometown. I'd do stuff for Hope, but Helena had a bigger need. And so we focused attention in places like that. And I never—you know, it wasn't because, "Oh, they love me there, and they vote for me." No, they didn't vote for me. But that's where the need was. And over time, people do take notice that you didn't do it as a political payoff for their votes, you did it because you honestly said, "You guys don't have any clinics over here. You guys have the highest percentage of type two diabetes in the state, and most of you can't afford insulin." I mean, it just—it's a compounding thing. [01:25:08] So short answer to all that, take risk and never do things because they are politically advantageous. I think you get elected—and if you lose an election, but you spent your political capital on things that mattered and changed the landscape, then it was okay to get beat because you did something worthwhile. I think the worst thing is a person gets elected and their goal is to be popular. Their goal is good poll numbers. So they don't do anything to

offend anybody. They don't do anything significant, nothing big happens, but you know, they didn't make anybody really mad. They lived up to the expectations of not doing a whole lot. What a waste of the entrustment of the office when that happens.

[01:26:01] JD: Well, Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas and someone who had a very interesting run in [20]08 in presidential politics—sorry we didn't get to that today.

MH: Yeah.

JD: I would love to hear stories about that as well. Thank you so much for sitting down with us today. On behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you for your insights and your stories and your perspective on a very historic time in our state's political history.

MH: Well, I appreciate it. It's been a pleasure to visit with you.  
Thank you.

[End of interview 01:26:42]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]