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

University of Arkansas
1 East Center
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Nate Coulter

Interviewed by Betsey Wright

March 29, 2012

Little Rock, Arkansas

Copyright 2012 Board of Trustees of the University of Arkansas. All rights reserved.

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 in the Pryor Center archives. The transcripts, audio and video files, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips 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. We attempt to transcribe verbatim all words that are spoken, including false starts and repetitions.

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 18th 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.
- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
  - and standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

See the Citation Guide at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/about.php.

Betsey Wright interviewed Nate Coulter on March 29, 2012, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Bruce Perry: Working.

Kris Katrosh: This interview is being conducted by the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History in partnership with the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies. The interviewee is Nate Coulter, and the interviewer is Betsey Wright. The interview will be transcribed and returned to the interviewee and interviewer for their review before being published. The interview, transcripts, and related materials will be deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and at the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies in Little Rock. Mr. Coulter, if you agree with this statement, please give us your verbal consent now.

Nate Coulter: I consent.

KK: Okay, great. Could you? [*Unclear words*] No, he knows how to do it.

NC: Looks like Quasimodo.

KK: And if you would, leave the paper down there until you really

need it. Good.

BP: All righty.

NC: How's that, Bruce?

BP: Okay. [*Unclear words*]

Betsey Wright: Such a handsome guy.

BP: All righty. Anytime you want, Betsey. We're rolling.

[00:01:01] BW: Nate, [*sirens in background*] I wanna start with your beginnings and wish you would talk about where you were born and who your family was and your early childhood days.

NC: I was born in 1959 in Nashville, Arkansas, the county seat of Howard County. My father's family had been there five generations, maybe. I'm a sixth-generation Arkansan, or my children are. But any event, since the 1840s in Sevier County. Howard County was formed out of Sevier County after the Civil War. My dad was a Main Street merchant. My mother was a school teacher. I went to public schools in Nashville, went to college on the East Coast, came back to Little Rock to practice law, and at some point not too far into my practice, I got a call from you at the Wright firm. I had actually met you at Wright, Lindsey & Jennings in the summer of 1981, I think it was. I was a glorified flunky, a runner they called it, or a courier I think's the Wright firm term for that. And you were working there with

the governor, Bill Clinton, who'd been on a forced sabbatical in the [19]80 election, I guess, and I remember you had a little alcove set up near the end of the hall where his office was, and you were working on a database. That wasn't what we called it then, but you were typing in addresses and names and the like for the governor's contacts. [00:02:22] And I had always had a yen for Bill Clinton, and I knew he was working there. And I asked you if I could make some trip with him. He was making political trips after hours when he wasn't at the firm. And you said, "Sure, I'll call you when there's an opportunity to do that." So, I don't know, two or three weeks later you called me one Wednesday afternoon. Rang to my desk where the courier station was and said, "Bill's going down to Redfield tonight to a Pentecostal rally." Pentecostal—it wouldn't be a rally but—Pentecostal revival. "Do you wanna go?" "Sure." So I remember going. There was a minister from a North Little Rock church who I think picked him up. Bill and Hillary were living up on Midland, and Chelsea was an infant 'cause I remember when I drove up and parked my car, he was out there on the front porch swing rocking Chelsea, swinging Chelsea. This minister picked us up. [*Laughs*] We went to Pine Bluff, and what I always remember about that trip—it was my first real, close

contact with any length of time with Bill Clinton. [00:03:23] And we get to this Redfield assem—Pentecostal revival. And I had never been to a Pentecostal service. Didn't appreciate that the lengths of the sermons was a great deal longer than the Methodist's twelve- or fifteen-minute efforts. And there was not just one preacher, there were several. But in between the sermons, we were sitting up on the platform, and these were just kind of primitive buildings but a big stage. They passed the collection plate. And I knew, as a Methodist, what that was about. And I didn't know at the time that the governor never traveled with cash. I later learned that when I was working for him. He leaned over to me and said, "You got any money?" And I had a ten-dollar bill or a twenty-dollar bill or something like that, and I discreetly handed it to him, and he dropped it in the collection plate. And I was naïve enough at age twenty-one or whatever it was to—twenty-two—to think, "Well, he'll give that back to me the next day at the office." But he didn't, and I didn't care. But that was my first encounter, I think, with you and my first real proximity to him. I guess I went on to law school after that, came back to Little Rock, and then you called me to come out and work a stint for the governor in the run up to the . . .

BW: Well, there . . .

NC: . . . legislative session.

[00:04:41] BW: All right. You glossed very quickly over your education. Where did you go to college?

NC: I went to Harvard College and Harvard Law School, so it was two Harvard degrees for a boy from Nashville, which was probably too much of a good thing. But it was also geographical affirmative action. They didn't have a lot of guys from Nashville, Arkansas, in the classes at Harvard.

BW: And then . . .

NC: That was also probably a Bill Clinton creation because Bill Clinton had gone to Georgetown, Yale, and Oxford, and lots of young people in Arkansas were probably, as I was, impressed with that and thought that's a good path to educate yourself, find out what the world's like outside of Arkansas. He was from Hope. I was from Nashville twenty-eight miles away. So there was some—I'm sure some subconscious or conscious implant from that.

[00:05:39] BW: When did you first become aware of Bill Clinton?

NC: Probably when he was running for congress. I was pretty attentive to politics as a child or as a teenager. Clearly by the time I had gotten to be in high school, I went to Boys State. He

was there as attorney general and was elected governor the year I was going off to college. And that election, I guess, really was in the spring because the Republican party at the time was nominal in the South or at least in Arkansas, and once he'd won the primary in May of [19]78 the—he was the de facto governor. And I was graduating from high school that year. So it would have been sometime in between [19]74 and [19]76 that I had first started paying attention to him.

[00:06:27] BW: So between your introduction with Bill Clinton and the Pentecostal camp meeting, I think it was, what other interactions did you have with Bill Clinton?

NC: Oh, probably very few, or few that I can remember of any direct nature. You know, just observing him, reading about him in the *Arkansas Gazette*, watching him on the local television affiliates. I knew Joan, I think, knew Joan Roberts a little bit. I'm trying to remember if there were any other contacts. He may have come to Nashville for the Poultry Festival or some other event, and I would've been there, probably, with other throngs of admirers. But that was about it up until that point. I had, in the summer of 1980, worked as an intern in David Pryor's office in Washington. One of the things I do remember then was—this was before Bill Clinton had been defeated in the fall of that year

by Frank White. There was some not very subtle concern among staffers for David Pryor that Bill Clinton was going to run against Pryor in the 1984 Democratic primary when Pryor was up for reelection. So I remember that kind of talk among staff people in Washington about Bill Clinton. And I guess that's not unusual for s politician's staff to be suspicious of or looking out for their boss's potential rivals or opponents.

[00:08:04] BW: And then when you joined the firm as an attorney of Wright, Lindsey & Jennings, what interactions did you have with Clinton and the staff?

NC: Well my first job was with—I always like to tell people that I'm bipartisan. My first job was given to me by a Republican, Tom Eisele. I clerked for the federal judge for two years, then I went to the Wright firm in 1987. And by that time, obviously, Bill Clinton was back in the governor's office, and I would have had some—he had higher visibility, and I had—I was back in Little Rock and had more opportunity to keep up and pay attention. There was, I guess I do remember, in [19]86 there was some talk that he was going to run for the senate that year, and he had an assemblage of folks down at the Mansion, I guess, when he announced that he was gonna run for reelection and not against Dale Bumpers, I guess, for the senate. I think that was

the . . .

BW: That's right.

NC: . . . year Bumpers was up. And that may have been the summer of [19]85, even. It would have been before the spring of [19]86 'cause I think I was here studying for the bar exam when that took place. [00:09:11] But I didn't really have a lot of contact. I couldn't have any sort of political involvement of any visible nature when I was working for the federal judge. But I do remember your calling sometime in the spring of [19]88 and asking if I would be interested in—I came out and talked to you about whether I'd be interested in working on the legislative package and assisting Sam Bratton, who was the general counsel or the governor's counsel, I guess, head legal counsel at the time. And I said, "Sure, if the law firm will let me do that, I'd love to do that."

BW: And?

NC: They did. Through somebody else—I'm sure yours or the governor's aid enabled that to happen. I don't remember who helped bless that at the Wright firm, but they were happy to do it once somebody from the governor's office called and asked if they would allow me to leave. I took a leave of absence, went on the payroll for the state, and I am sure that I was there by

June of [19]88. And I can mark it, again, from certain political things, one of which was at the point of the July 4 sort of traditional politicking in northeast Arkansas at Piggott and Pocahontas, Corning, I guess, all the Fourth of July activities that go on up there. [00:10:30] I was on staff then because I flew that day with the governor up to make the rounds, and I distinctly remember that when we got to central—or maybe when I got down to the Mansion to ride out with the governor's security detail to Central Flying, he was excited and talking about—Dukakis had called him the night before and had asked him would he give a speech at the convention in Atlanta in August, I guess, of [19]88. And the way I remember his explaining what they had told him was that Ann Richards was gonna give the keynote address. Jesse Jackson, who I guess had been a rival of Dukakis, the last standing alternative or other candidate, would get a night to—with a high-profile speaking opportunity, and you, Governor Clinton, would get a third night as the nominator for Michael Dukakis, and then Dukakis would give his acceptance speech on the fourth night. So we talked a lot about that on the—he talked about it, and I listened on the flight up to Walnut Ridge or wherever we landed that day. So I know I was working for the governor in the

summer of [19]88 and started in that fall working on the outlines for what kinds of legislative programs he wanted to present in the general assembly. I guess it was the 77th General Assembly starting in January.

[00:11:52] BW: Well, before we get into a discussion of the preparation for that session, following that conversation with Dukakis, we of course saw this unbelievable nominating speech. And what was your reaction to what happened then?

NC: Well, I was watching it. I was not in Atlanta. I was watching it, and at the time, you know, it seemed like it was not his best work. I understood later, and it was evident if you knew Bill Clinton, that he was working from a text that wasn't, probably, his that had been reworked too many times. But I didn't think it was as disastrous as it seemed maybe in the spin that was put on it the next forty-eight hours as I was watching it. It was obvious that people in the convention hall were more enthusiastic about getting on with the nominating process and not interested in listening. I do remember though that the next morning—I think you came back that night, and there was a meeting convened in the governor's conference room on the morning after that speech of all the staff. And I guess that would've been a group of maybe forty people at the time, all the

department heads and the people who were liaisons on staff to those agencies. And people talked about it and tried to process it and were philosophical about it. I member Lee Colwell talking and maybe others. And it seemed, at that point, maybe it was gonna be a bigger deal than it ultimately turned out to be. I guess going on Johnny Carson and dealing with it probably, as the recent PBS documentary about the Clinton years illustrates, I guess, put that to rest. And maybe if you weren't on Bill Clinton's staff or you weren't a politico or a news junkie you wouldn't—nobody would have any recollection of it eight years later, six, eight years later.

[00:13:48] BW: Well, and then four years later he was elected president . . .

NC: Right.

BW: . . . of the United States. And it was another one of his near death experiences. [*NC laughs*] Well . . .

NC: Yeah, I've told people for lots—on lots of occasions, both as a employee and admirer, supporter, however many times Bill Clinton's been on the ballot would be how many times I've voted for him, I guess, going back to seve—I couldn't vote in the congressional race 'cause I lived in Howard County, I guess. Maybe I didn't turn eighteen until after that. But in any event,

the one thing that you would want your children or people who you care about to adopt from Bill Clinton is the trait of persistence. And I think it's an underrated quality in life, but it really—he's a—the best example I know of how sort of a dogged determination and a willingness to keep going when you've been waylaid and had a bad day or a bad month is an amazing human power. He's been redeemed a lot of times by his tenacity and persistence. And you would hope your kids would pick up some of that and say, "Yeah, you gotta keep going even when it's discouraging." 'Cause most people would've quit. I think most human beings would've quit New Hampshire after the first blow and certainly after the second blow with the issue of the draft. But he didn't.

[00:15:10] BW: No, and those of us who knew him knew that it was gonna take more than that to knock him out of something. Well, in preparation for the legislative session, most of us remember it as the session when we were the best prepared the longest ahead of the convening of the general assembly, and it was due to your coming and pulling stuff together. So I wish you would talk about what—who you worked with and what you did to prepare for that session and how a theme developed for it.

NC: Well, what I remember, I guess, to set the tone that is—that

when you had talked to me about it, I guess there was this sort of notion among some of his legislative supporters that—I guess this would've been the second session of a four-year term starting in January of [19]87. And there was some, oh, fatigue notion that maybe Bill Clinton was not as attentive to the details of governing as he once was. Or that perhaps he had sort of lost his zeal for the policy wonk things about the government that he was known for. There's every indication in what he did to support this comprehensive proposal and the things we did to get it ready that that was not true. But I think part of it was to respond to that sort of complaint. And what we did was, as I recall it, we met chronically late hours at the Mansion and in the governor's office with various groups of agency leaders, people on the boards of particular agencies, and the governor's liaison to those agencies. [00:17:07] Carol Rasco, for example, for human services issues. Or people—Ruth Steele, I guess, was at the time the director of General Education. And we would talk about things that were important to the governor. He would be at—he would participate in some of the meetings, not necessarily all of them. And then we would sort of flesh out what it was that he wanted to have as his initiative on that particular area. [00:17:35] And it was comprehensive. It dealt

with a number of issues. And at some level it was fairly detailed about specific bills that he wanted to try to enact. There were things that were responsive to public topics. There was a—at the time, I guess, there were a lot of mergers and acquisitions and what were called hostile takeovers of corporations by acquiring corporations, and we had a little bill to talk about restricting that from happening and a lot of little things that were responsive to concerns in the business community. But the general theme was that we needed to invest in human capital in the ways that maybe hadn't been done sufficiently in Arkansas and to try to combine the—I think a lot of it was combining things that we'd done in K-12 that Clinton—I say we. The governor had done, the governor and Hillary and the legislature, with going beyond that to things that were a little bit secondary or tertiary. Things like literacy core, HIPPY programs, preschool things, things that were not as high profile but, in some ways, had lots of empirical data to support that they had a big impact. [00:18:50] You know, if there were themes beyond that, you'll have to help me and prompt me what those were. But I think that was the general notion that we were going to amplify on things and successes that had been achieved. And there were going to be some things that were more esoteric to some extent,

like the corporate takeover bill and other things that seemed to be riling people up. [00:19:13] One of—a couple of things that I do remember that he was sort of ahead of his time—he was interested in school choice, public school choice, at the time. This was probably in the era where there were no charter schools. Public school choice was a novelty that I think he had known about from his leadership in the National Governors Association. Some states were doing it. We had a particularly unique challenge to try to do it here in light of the history of segregation. And I remember Hillary putting me in touch with somebody she'd gone to law school with or worked with in DC who was an expert on crafting choice laws that were sensitive to desegregation orders and the like. I think that gentleman's now on DC's court—circuit court of appeals, maybe. But we ha—we were making that kind of comprehensive effort at that level of detail to address things that were important to the governor and that we thought the legislature would appreciate if there was that kind of effort made. [00:20:13] There were other kinds of specific items that were on his agenda dealing with welfare reform. He was constantly, I think, involved in efforts nationally. At the time he was working with the George W. Bush administration—George du—Herbert Walker Bush—first Bush

president about the issue. And later, I guess, made a benchmark of his own administration when the Bush administration had not been able to get it done. But there were all manner of things that not—that had to do not just with the higher-profile education issues. We tackled things in higher education. There were issues about vocational education that were important to him. And in every instance we would meet with a particular group of staff, agency heads, people who were knowledgeable about the issue. We would go back and forth as Bill Clinton always did, and we would think maybe we had consensus then we—he would say, "Well, let's do this." We'd tweak this or tweak that. So that process was elaborate and time consuming. And then once we got to something in October, I think it was, that was distributable or publishable, we put together this brochure or pamphlet or notebook, whatever you want to call it. [00:21:30] And I remember the intense sessions of working over the weekend before we distributed that with Caroline Whitson, who was a supporter of the governor's, was a faculty member, English faculty member, at the College of the Ozarks, University of the Ozarks, I guess, in Clarksville. And she came down, and you put Caroline and me in the governor's office. He was out of town or speaking somewhere on the road.

And she and I essentially holed up with a computer in the governor's office on the corner there and went line-by-line through this set of proposals that talked about legislation in somewhat specific terms. And she improved the product literarily or as a communication piece. And then we had, I guess, the task of trying to go out and promote it. There was a big event, as I recall, at the, then, I guess, the Excelsior on a Sunday afternoon where Clinton had a big throng of his supporters and legislators, and he announced it. And he went through it with some detail talking about the things that were part of the initiative and part of his im—and his leadership. And then what I remember distinctly were these meetings that he set up around the state where he would go and meet with small groups of legislators in Forrest City or in McGehee or Dumas or El Dorado or southwest Arkansas, Hope, Hot Springs. And we went to scores of those kinds of sessions and found some skepticism or some criticism from legislators about certain parts of it. [00:23:02] Hillary also did some of those sessions, I think. I remember traveling with her. And [*laughs*] I remember—traveling with Bill Clinton, as everybody who's ever worked for him or been around him knows, is always an entertaining experience. At the time the state of Arkansas didn't

have an aircraft, I think. The Highway Department has one now that serves as the transportation for the governor. We had to patch together aircraft from supporters or constituents who had aircraft. Woody Futrell in Nashville, that I remember. Ives Trucking in Stuttgart. I member a particular day when we were going to Fayetteville for one of these meetings to talk about this program that was set up on campus, and we were delayed a little bit by just the dint of Clinton's schedule, as usual. And we were delayed somewhat more maybe by a low ceiling at the airport in Little Rock. We finally take off, and he thinks we're late, and for the governor to think we're late, we must have really been late. And we get about halfway up there, and the pilot, the hired pilot from Ives Trucking, turned around, took his headphones off, and said, "Governor, they're telling me at Drake Field that we can't land. The ceiling's too low." And the governor was just furious. He said, "Oh, I've gotta land! People are—there're several hundred people there. We're already forty-five minutes late. We've got to land. We've got to land." [00:24:23] And I think—I can't remember—I know Gauldin was on the trip, but I think Walt Patterson was on that flight. And I'm looking around thinking this is not a good dynamic. You got this poor pilot hired by the owner of the plane and the governor,

who's—believes he's bulletproof and invincible, can't—there's no thing, no aviation disasters can befall him. He's trying to plead with the pilot to put us down at the airport in Fayetteville, which is, under good weather, a little bit of a scary experience if you come down at the foot of that hill. And the guy gets back on the headset, and I can hear he's talking. And he finally turns around after we had—he'd been sort of—he says, "Well, I think we can get down now." And I'm thinking, "'I think we can get down' doesn't sound like what I'd wanna hear." And I'm just imagine—we go down—it was a rocky ride down, and you come out of the clouds and right there [*claps*] you're on the runway. You're thinking all the way down—and Walt's over there grabbin' the seat. Gauldin, I think, was playing cards with the governor. He was used to it. But I was thinking, you know, "There's gonna be a horrific crash. There's gonna be a huge headline, and I'm gonna be a little note. 'Als—two staff members were also killed in the crash.'" But we made it down. [00:25:34] That wasn't the only airplane incident. We were going to Hope one morning for one of these promotional deals. I remember—they've got a huge, old strip down at Hope which was used in World War II. I think they developed to—they had an ordnance ground, proving grounds, out there, and they flew military craft in there, so I

think it was a ten thou—I—at one time I knew the distance of all these runways. I think that was a 10,000-foot runway. Had a little plane. It's no problem. But we get down there, and there are no instruments, there's no person out there at the airport. And the pilot turns and says, "Well, it's foggy and there are no—no way to, you know, know where the runway is, so I'm gonna go down. We're gonna buzz the airfield a couple of times and see if I can figure out where the strip is, and then we'll come back and make an approach and land." And that was a big deal to me too, but Bill Clinton wasn't bothered at all. And we did that. We went down, and you couldn't see the runway till we got down right across it and were horizontal or were perpendicular to it, and the pilot goes down a couple of times before he figures out in his mind where it is. We circle back around and land. So that was a common thing. [00:26:27] We were out there sellin' the program, and Bill Clinton was not at all bothered by the fact that sometimes it was hard to get there. And he was oftentimes late, and people were tolerant because when he got there he delivered something that they were impressed by and motivated by. [00:26:43] I remember also—I think you had—at some point, Diane Blair's son, Bill Kincaid, was on the staff. And Bill was instrumental in helping with drafting the legislation, as was

Sam Bratton. And we would go through drafts. The legislative bureau, I guess, for the general assembly would help if we would tell them what we wanted, sometimes. Maybe they were more supportive of some things, as I recall, than others, but they were generally a good resource. But we had to craft these bills. And I think also we presented, on the eve of the convening of the session, a notebook with a bill for every one of the items that we had discussed in October that we were gonna promote. And then that was all the easy part. I guess the hard part was getting it through committee, various things through committee, and getting it to work. I know I had never done the—a legislative session, but I knew from Bobby Roberts and Bill Clark and other friends that it was a pretty intense process. [00:27:44] I think when I first started working, as I'm recalling, I was working down on the opposite end of the capitol in a sort of a large room that had partitions. And I member Carol Willis was next to me, and that was an education 'cause Carol was always calling people saying, "I need a favor from you. I need you to help the governor. We're coming to such-and-such, and we need this." And I was constantly entertained by Willis with efforts that he was engaged in. [00:28:13] And there was a woman there who worked across the aisle from me who was

visually impaired. What was her name?

BW: Barbara Duncan.

NC: Barbara, yes. And she had a little cubicle there. But by the time the session started, I think we'd moved to a sort of war room that was over in the other end of the capitol in—on 250, which I guess was the north end. And Kincaid was in there. And that was gee—that was Bob Nash's office, typically, I think. We set up a big space over there. And then they had the seven thirty meetings where they—seven or seven thirty every morning to talk about every bill that was in the hopper—somebody who had an assignment to keep tabs. [00:28:52] And the staff, the governor's staff, would go around the circle and describe the bill that anybody who was in that room had been detailed to through committee or through the topic area to keep up with. And the governor would indicate—I think we put a letter grade on those as to whether or not the administration was going to support them. A bills, I guess, were the ones that were in his package, things that we were promoting. There were B bills that he was for, and he wanted to spend capital on, or help get passed, and there may have been C bills that were sort of neutral we didn't really need to take a position on. And then there were Ds and Fs, and Fs were those bills that we had to do something, the

staff had to do something, and the legislative lobbyists had to do something to try to stop 'cause they were anathema to the governor's agenda, bad for, in our eyes, bad for the people of Arkansas. And there were a lot of those, and that was an education for me. [00:29:45] And I member Bill Clinton and Sam Bratton laughin' about, you know, sometimes you conclude that you do more good up here as governor and legal counsel to the governor by stopping bad bills, vetoing bad bills, than you ever do on the other end. I think that wasn't true of Bill Clinton, by the way. I think he was underselling his own achievements, obviously. But there is a lot of bad stuff that somebody has to be keeping up with and trying to stop it. And you obviously wanna stop it before it gets to the governor's desk. I remember lots of conversations where the governor would say, you know, "I need somebody"—talking to legislators—"I need you to not let that come here. I don't wanna have to deal with that, but if I have to, I'm not gonna sign it. But it's better if it doesn't get out of committee or we can convince people that it shouldn't be passed."

[00:30:33] BW: As I recall, this was the first session after we had taken ethics legislation to the people.

NC: Yeah, I'm glad you reminded me. That was a part of the

summer of [19]88, too. I think the spring of [19]88 there'd been a special session on ethics and the infamous committee meeting where—that I still recall the newspaper and the coverage—where—maybe it was the late Bud Canada was on that committee, and there was a motion to—maybe it was a—he may have made the motion. I don't remember who the sponsor and the friends of that were initially were on the committee. But it was clear, I think, by all accounts that Senator Wilson, Nick Wilson, had been opposing that, and it got bottled up and didn't get out of committee and didn't, therefore, get adopted. So I guess after that was when the petition drive started. And that was part of the things that we were doing in the summer. We would go to Piggott or Corning for the Fourth of July. We had petitions, and local people who were a part of the organization, the governor's local, county leaders, would support those petitions and get those out. And I guess the deadline of the constitution would've been summer for presenting those and then campaigning in the fall to get 'em adopted. And I remember lot of time . . .

BW: Yeah.

NC: . . . and a lot of . . .

[00:31:51] BW: It was the ethics, and then we had a constitutional

amendment effort that failed to equalize the way taxes got voted on . . .

NC: Oh, that's right, that was . . .

BW: . . . in the legislature.

NC: . . . Brownie's tax fairness proposal to lower the threshold for adopting taxes other than the in—other than the sales tax, which had a simple majority requirement. And I guess under the constitution, any other tax that wasn't around in, what, 1933, has to be adopted by a supermajority, 67 percent. Or 75 percent.

BW: Seventy-five percent. Which you could hardly get 75 percent on a apple-pie bill, so.

NC: Yeah, and I don't remember particularly—my fifty-two-year-old memory's not any good, but I—there was some issue where we got the seventy-five votes on it, and I don't know if that was the funding part of the desegregation settlement. [00:32:45] I remember David Matthews being instrumental in the house in getting those votes. And I remember being very favorably impressed with David. He was not only a Democrat from a more and more Republican sector of the state, but he was also a good Baptist. And that seemed—in the post-Jimmy Carter era, that seemed to be a declining group of folks who were Democrats

and strong Baptists like David was. But he—and I guess the governor was too but that—he was—I remember his being in the office with the governor talking about trying to vote—get the votes. Counting heads. And I don't remember whether that was a part of the desegregation settlement that had to be adopted by a supermajority or whether it was some other funding component. [00:33:33] I do remember the governor lobbying particular legislators and one in particular [*laughs*] that was part of my education was the legislator, I think was, called up to 250 and asked if he could vote for this tax—it may have been a sales tax component. And he said, "I will if you call So-and-so in my district and he says it's okay for me to vote for it." And the governor dutifully called this big supporter of the particular legislator, and couldn't persuade him, so the legislator didn't vote for it. And I thought that was interesting, revealing, that he essentially outsourced his judgment and his decision making to a particularly important constituent. And so the governor didn't have to deal with that legislator, he had to deal with that constituent. And in that instance, unsuccessfully. [00:34:22] But I do think we got the supermajority for the vote that we were talking about. I do think David Matthews had been a big, big part of that.

[00:34:29] BW: Well, there was a lingering anger in the legislature and among the lobbyists . . .

NC: About the ethics reform . . .

BW: . . . from our having gotten the ethics legislation on the ballot and passed, and that created an additional environment for this package that you put together for the governor. So when we talk about working the legislature and some of those pieces, I want you to keep—ya—don't forget that that was part of the environment of what succeeded and what failed. [00:35:08] What memories do you have of battles, both good and failed, succeeded and failed, from the package that we put together?

NC: Well, you know, part of the difficulty in answering that is, I think, the human capacity to sort of forget and repress the things that were unpleasant or unsuccessful—and maybe ego drives some of this. You remember the good things that you achieved, and you don't dwell on the bad things. You know, I think it was a mixed outcome, maybe in part because of what you described as the lingering resentment about the governor's support of the ethics reforms. And some of the things, as is always the case with Bill Clinton tackling the hard issues, they're controversial. And there's pushback, and people don't gravitate to it the first time. It takes several times to do it. [00:36:07] And I do recall some

of these that we were not successful with in January of [19]89. There was more success in a legislative session or two after, some of those things that he picked back up and promoted. I guess he had one more legislative session before he went to the White House. Is that right?

BW: Two.

NC: [Nineteen] ninety-one?

BW: 'Cause in early [19]92, he had special sessions.

NC: Oh, that's right.

BW: Two.

NC: Okay. But I would have to—I'd have to study the book and go through and see which things that I could recall success on. You might be able to prompt me and help me. My memory was that—sort of the general gloss on it was that, you know, there were some gratifying success but some—but a lot of frustrations that we were not as successful as I would have liked.

[00:37:00] BW: My recollection of that session—and it's wonderful that you remember successes better than the bad stuff 'cause I'm the opposite. [*NC laughs*] My recollection is that we were the best prepared that we had ever been because of what you and Bill Kincaid pulled together from all over the country. I mean, you have understated the kind of research and

preparation you did. And yet we did accomplish a lot, but on the proportion of what we proposed, less than we had ever had before. And I attribute it to the lingering anger from the ethics initiative, which we took to the people after the legislature failed to adopt it. I wanna take a break now.

[Tape stopped]

[00:37:53] NC: Betsey's prompted me here by giving me a [*papers shuffle*] document that we put out after the session, and it's providing the specifics of what I had a sort of general notion that we'd done a lot of good things, although we were frustrated at some turns. And it's also prompting me to see that some of these things remind me of some of the jousting that went on. One of the things that I remember, partly because I was a jock sniffer and interested in sports, was the requirement that all the state schools would have to report on athletic spending and the notion that there ought to be some sort of limit on how much you could spend of your general revenue money or from your appropriation—your appropriative money on athletics, and I think that was an impulse the governor had that was before his time, and I guess that's one of the things where I definitely remember there was some pushback, particularly from legislators. [00:38:53] One of the other kind of broad reaches

that was a hallmark of the entire Clinton gubernatorial was trying to raise teacher salaries. And maybe because my mother was a teacher, and my grandmother was a teacher, and I always attributed most of the positive impulses in my life to being either from teachers or progressive Methodist ministers, I was always very, very sympathetic to the notion of that we oughta pay people to deal with these things. When I subsequently had children—I guess my first child was born the year I left the governor's staff, and I would drop off Caroline or Nathan at the time in the kindergarten space at Pulaski Heights Elementary school, and I would go in that room, and thanks to the Clinton years, the numbers of students was fewer than it was when I was a child. And thanks to Dale Bumpers, they had public kindergarten now. We didn't have that when I was a child. [00:39:44] But I would close that door, and there'd be twenty kids in there, five year olds, and I'd walk out of there and say, "I don't know what they're paying Jimmie Lou Neal, who was the kindergarten teacher for both of my kids, but it's not enough. I couldn't do that." And I always had a sympathy for that impulse, but I know that there were a lot of people who didn't because I remember countless legislators telling Bill Clinton, "Well, it's a part-time job. You know, they only work nine

months a year. Why"—and it's—there was some gender sexism, I guess. "It's women, you know. They're gonna have a husband who's got a real job." And that was a startling thing to me. I think that was a part of one of the forces that the governor had to constantly resist. At the time as I'm recalling, we were at the bottom, near the bottom, in teacher pay, and there was an effort over time that was subsequently advanced by ensuing governors, subsequent governors, that were not down there, but that was something that Bill Clinton tackled, and there were a lot of resisters to that. [00:40:46] I'm proud now, looking back through this list to see these things that I had forgotten. In the area of higher education there was an initiative to try to find a certain core set of classes that the board of higher education would approve and that all campuses would offer. And students who transferred from campus to campus would be able to transport those classes and those credits. It's a problem we still haven't succeeded in dealing with. Arkansas's 46th or [4]7th, maybe 49th, in numbers of people over the age of twenty-five with a college degree. But Bill Clinton was fighting that then. [00:41:29] And one of the problems in that area, as I recall, was just the sort of decentralization of higher education spending in the state and the resistance to some notion that,

you know, we needed to consolidate the way we provided degrees and we needed to consolidate the resources. And I think that's just a function of having a state that's spread out. From where we put the land-grant institution to the Delta was a hard pass, hard way to get there sixty-five, eighty-five years ago. But there was resistance to doing some things that were perceived by some campuses to be favoritism to other campuses. And so he r—he fought that to try to get us to be smarter about how we spent our money and try to spend more of it on educating our children and children's children. [00:42:22] I'm proud of the lawyer who's in the courthouse often to see—and I'd forgotten that this was a legacy of Bill Clinton—the Domestic Abuse Act, which was an outgrowth of a commission studying domestic violence, as I'm recalling, and that's a very substantial accomplishment and has a day-to-day effect on people's lives. It essentially removed the requirement that there had to be an officer witness the abuse. You can essentially go in and get an ex—what lawyers call an ex parte order if you swear out an affidavit that you've been violently treated by a spouse or a partner or a lover—and the law was not as friendly to that kind of grievance before this act was adopted. There's a subsequent requirement that you get a hearing, but

you could now essentially get on your own affidavit if you're a woman who's the victim of abuse, an order that protects you that the officer would have to honor until there's a hearing or some further judicial act. That wasn't the case before this happened. [00:43:27] We did things, I guess, with—was it ADAP or the office of drug abuse prevention. One of the constant themes in Bill Clinton's presentations around the state was that there aren't enough state beds for inpatient treatment and rehab for people who are drug abuse victims or have—need drug rehab. And we tried to address that. There were efforts, I guess, to [*papers shuffling*]—on the law enforcement side there were efforts to deal with that problem, but there was a—the rehabilitation notion and the idea that people don't wanna be alcohol or drug abuse victims oftentimes, but they're dealt that hand, and they make their lives and the people around them's lives worse. And there was an effort to deal with that increase in the resources for substance abuse rehabilitation. I see here on your list that Act 734 provided some additional good time for prisoners who had successfully gone through a substance-abuse treatment program or had gotten a GED or had done something to increase the probability that they would not be recidivist or that they would be—it reduced the probability they'd be

recidivist. It increased their capacity to be successful citizens or contributing citizens when they got out. [00:44:58] But there was the balancing act. We had to enhance the penalties for drug sales at schools. I guess we also passed an act that prohibited minors from carrying handguns on areas in and around schools. One of the things that I think was a novelty item at the time that I think is still very successful and other states followed it was the boot camp idea. You would take first-time offenders, often juveniles or young adults, and put them in a boot camp setting where they would be forced to do things in the community. You see people in Little Rock now, I think, who are from the facility that's over by the health department doing these kinds of things, picking up trash and the like. And that was an act from that [19]89 session that essentially would put people who were in the boot camp in paramilitary exercises and sort of work them in a way that you hoped would deter them from wanting to be back in a penitentiary. [00:46:07] My recollection was that there was very little money spent by the state government after we paid for the public school-funding formula and we paid the department of co—and we funded the Department of Correction and higher ed. That was about 75, 85 percent of the state fisc—general revenues. And so we were trying to find ways to reduce

the part that was going to the Department of Correction by keeping people out or getting them out sooner. There were also things in the area of technology. I know John Ahlen's been here and probably amplified that throughout his long tenure and successful tenure. There were areas of technology and trying to create grant programs and incentives for technological development. A lot of these things were hyperdetailed efforts to [*paper shuffling*] create incentives and maybe liberate the process so that universities around the state could get into the business of creating ideas, getting patents, and things that would enable the university to essentially create innovation and make money from it, oftentimes maybe with the private sector. [00:47:24] One of the things that any Arkansan in the ensuing twenty-three or –four years who cares about the culture of the state has to appreciate was the Delta Cultural Center, which was a product of that session. And that again, I think, illustrated the breadth of Bill Clinton's interest and his affection for Arkansas. He was a great student of the culture in Arkansas and did things to support that with his political and financial contributions. [*Laughs*] I think one of the things that we got into—one of the battles I remember in that session was an issue about the federal constitution's restriction on interstate commerce. It had

to do with solid waste. There were some high-profile cases of where people were shipping their waste into other states, and legislators were quick to want to support the bill to prevent legislate—prevent people from shipping trash into Arkansas. There was a problem, though, with the constitution. You couldn't put a ban on interstate—you couldn't say "We'll take trash from Arkansas, but we don't want people shipping things along the East Coast and through the Gulf and up the Mississippi from New Jersey and putting it in a landfill here." That would violate interstate commerce. So we had to find ways to try to make those things unattractive in Arkansas. You had to assess penalties on everybody. It couldn't just be out-of-state trash. [00:49:06] And there were things that were done in recycling, which was way ahead of its time, I think, for a Southern state to—you know, maybe California, Massachusetts were doing recycling things at the time, but we were working on the solid waste management, recycling, I guess, in concert with things that the federal EPA was doing. Regional solid waste planning districts were created as a result of some enabling legislation authorizing those. And I know from my southwest Arkansas ties that they essentially quit having a junkyard, as we called it as a kid, out east of Nashville, and they had a solid waste landfill site

up north of Howard County. I guess it's probably in Pike County or maybe in Montgomery County even, but it's an area-wide, five or six counties—and I think most parts of the state now have solid waste landfills that are lined and appropriate by EPA standards, and that was a product of something that—that was fueled or furthered by something that was created in this session. [00:50:08] So there were lots of great things and it—as is often the case, I guess, the details that are not as memorable but—at the time but—not as exciting sometimes but they have a lot of impact. The things that were higher profile had to do with public school choice that I mentioned earlier and the school report cards. That was an idea that was subsequently adopted by lots of folks and elaborated on now. There are constant publications in both the newspapers, and people can go online, I guess, and get access to what their—not only their school district but the particular school, elementary school or middle school, their child attends test scores are. I'm not a fan of the testing craze that we were treated to after the Bush years, but there is a sense that people oughta be able to find out this information about what the scores are in particular schools, I guess, that I can value. And we established in [19]89 the office of accountability within the state department of education where

people would—schools would turn in their information, and patrons of schools and parents of children could go get that information and find out what kind of school, what kind of performance—the notion I think Bill Clinton believed in was that every public school needed to be top flight. But if there were differences and variances, it shouldn't be the punishment of a child whose parents happen to live in a poor district or at a school that had an underperforming tradition—that child should somehow be able to get to a better public school if the parents wanted to take the initiative to look for it, and there oughta be ways to find out where that school was. And I think the lawyer who helped us with the legislation in trying to be sensitive to the desegregation implications—we crafted something that's—that was a little bit complicated because of those traditions or those histories and that concern. [00:52:10] But you could transfer to a school district if the school district (a) opted to participate as a school that would allow students to come from another school district, and (b) if you were not altering the racial population in a way—if you were a white student, and you wanted to transfer to a neighboring district, you couldn't do it, as I recall in the legislation, if that district had a higher white population than the district you were leaving, so there was some

sensitivity to that that was a product of trying to make the fine balances that you have to make in these quarters with the history we have. There were other things done, I guess, to try to discourage dropouts. One of the things that, now, as a parent of drivers—we established revocation of a driver's license for kids who dropped out of school. There were penalties established for parents who wouldn't attend parent conferencing. Every teacher I know says that the most important thing he or she would like is parent to be involved or engaged in their children's education. And it seemed to me, even in 1989 before I was a parent, that the harder and harder task for schoolteachers is that there aren't nearly as many parents who are actively involved in their kid's education as there were fifty years ago, forty years ago, when I was a child perhaps. [00:53:39] One of the big things that the governor started tackling, and I think every governor since has dealt with in varying degrees, was the notion of did we have too many school districts because a lot of our school districts were relatively small, and some large number of those districts were ultimately underfunded. We wrestled, I think, extensively with, as you've alluded, with going around the country and trying to find out if there was a way to deal with that problem that wasn't just a

line-drawing exercise, or you say, "Well, you've got to have in your K-12 *x* number of students or more, otherwise you're gonna be consolidated." That subsequently happened, I think, in the Huckabee administration after a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth. But we were looking for a way because the information we got back said that there can be inefficiencies of districts that are too large and inefficiencies of districts that are too small. And we were looking, as I'm recalling, with Ruth Steel and others for some sort of model that said, "All right, there might be an optimal size school district in terms of efficiency large enough to be able to ensure that your children would have access to physics, trigonometry, all kinds of advanced languages and classes, but not so large that you've got an excessive amount of administrative expense, or you've got too many administrators, and you don't know, maybe, what's going on at all the innumerable outposts in that district in middle schools and elementary schools." [00:55:15] And we tried to find some number that we thought, "All right, this is what ought to be an optimum number," and then you would suggest for the funding for—that you would fund at that level. And if your district was inefficient because it was either too big or too small, there might be consequences to that. I don't think that caught on because it

may have been more complicated than just drawing a white—a bright line that says, "If your school district's too small, you don't get funds." But there were an awful lot of small districts, and the general assembly was represented by people who knew those districts and had employees and constituents in those districts. And one of the controversies I remember—Bynum Gibson was a big supporter of the governor's and a progressive legislator from Dermott. And in his district was the Arkansas City school, I think, at the time. It may be consolidated now, I don't know. But Arkansas City school is at the end of a road that abuts the Mississippi River, and there were things that legislators like Bynum wanted to put in the funding formula that would give you subsidies if your district was an isolated district. This happened in Madison County, for example, where there might be a school district that had a small number of students because of topographical or geographical problems that made it difficult to get the school busses very far to pick up students, so their district would be constrained. [*Truck passes*] [00:56:42] And they wanted incentives or in—or supplements or add-ons in the funding formula, and those were the sources of controversy that a governor who's looking after the whole of the state and making sure that all of our public schools achieve some level or try to

achieve some level of excellence—those were hard issues because his friends were looking out for their constituencies in places like Arkansas City, and the governor was trying to look out for the notion of providing education that enables kids to have access to all manner of programs that you might not get in a tiny school district. [00:57:21] So I remember that being a source of a lot of tension. Which the—a capstone, I guess, for that was at the end of the session—may have actually been a special session in the summer of [19]89. The state of Arkansas had tentatively agreed through the lawyers—I think Bill Allen was representing the state, maybe—in the desegregation case in Pulaski County to reach a settlement agreement that would require the state to make substantial annual funding outlays to the three districts in Little Rock or in Pulaski County, and that was extremely controversial outside of Little Rock. [00:57:58] And as was the case in a lot of issues at the time, there were not so—there were not a lot of Republicans in the general assembly. There were some, particularly from Fort Smith and Northwest Arkansas, but most of the issues were not partisan in the sense of Democrat/Republican or left/right. There were differences that had to do, in my view, of Little Rock or not Little Rock or Little Rock versus the rural parts, more rural parts, of the state,

or to some extent Little Rock versus Northwest Arkansas, and particularly maybe in higher education issues, struggles between the campuses of state schools like UALR and the flagship campus at Fayetteville. So those kinds of fault lines were there, and the fault line—the rural versus Little Rock or the not Little Rock crowd. And I could appreciate that 'cause I had grown up way outside of Little Rock and suspected everybody from Little Rock was a little bit full of themselves, probably, or thought they were better than people from Nashville. But it was a problem and a legislative hurdle to deal with. And I do remember that there was an awful lot of tension when the vote had to be made and the governor needed the votes from his friends to approve the settlement. And I don't remember if at the time it required a tax to be dedicated too, but I know it was a difficult vote, and I know people like Bynum who was a good legislative friend in those—I think he attended the seven thirty meetings 'cause he was generally in line with the administration's policies and programs—had a hard time voting for it, and it's understandable. But that was the kind of endemic problem that you had if you're looking after the whole and not a particular constituency or a particular county or a particular school district. [00:59:55] I think what we ended up settling on was trying to find some sort

of standard that wasn't number driven, either in the minimal size that later became law, and it wasn't driven—number driven in this formula that I'm talking about. Well, if we could find—is 1,800 or 2,000 students K-12 the optimal efficiency? There's certainly enough to have all kinds of classes, but not too big. We didn't—I think neither one of those became the standard, but we did try to create some type of forced merger if the school district didn't attain certain performance standards, and that seemed to be acceptable. Because there were a lot of small school districts that were—that patrons were taxing themselves at a high millage, and their students were performing, and their teachers were dedicated, and their administrators were good, and it made sense to a lot of legislators and to the administration to allow those districts to survive. But there was an effort to merge the districts where they were not performing and to force those mergers.

BP: We've got about three minutes left, so we need to probably change tapes about now.

BW: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[01:01:11] BW: I think I'm—I tr—I really appreciate your spending the time to go through the preparation for and some of the

substance of this session because within the environment, separate from the specific legislation and the pressures of the Little Rock and the Pulaski County desegregation settlement, it was an extraordinary session. And people usually only talk about Bill Clinton's history in the first ec—education's efforts. And to some degree, but not as much as it should be, to the economic development session in [19]85. And they don't—they aren't aware of the ensuing, continued improvement and expansion of those programs and efforts that went on that are ongoing in—benefits to the state of Arkansas now from his days. [01:02:09] If you have no other thoughts from that session, I wanna move to . . .

NC: All right.

BW: . . . another time. 'Cause at some point, you did leave the staff and went back into law practice. But we didn't really let you go in some ways. There emerged a need for us to do some election reform in Arkansas, and we established a commission and got you to come and chair it. So could you talk a bit about the issues around the election reform commission?

NC: Yeah, what I remember was that there was some type of legislation, and maybe it was in [19]91, that created the legisl—the electoral or the election reform commission. [*Vibration*] And

I think the party chairs from both parties were on it. I remember George Jernigan was on it, and Asa may have been on it, Asa Hutchinson. I don't have a distinctive recollection of Asa being on it. But somebody would have been on it. It was a bipartisan effort. And we met around the state to—I remember being in West Memphis in particular. But five or six places, and we were looking at things—the mechanics of voting. And in particular one of the issues that ended up becoming law was the question of what we called at the time, I think, no-excuse absentee voting. [01:03:44] The law at the time required that if you wanted to vote on any day other than the day of the election, you had to go to the courthouse and fill out a form swearing that you were gonna be unavoidably absent on the day of the election and therefore you needed an absentee ballot. And if you sign it—you would sign an affidavit, you would vote absentee. And I think the practice for a lot of people who didn't wanna wait in line was they'd go in and say they were gonna be away and get their absentee ballot and vote that way. There may have been some attention drawn to this issue because, as I'm recalling, in nursing homes and places where there were large groups of people, there were—either the institution or somebody for some candidate would go in and get a bunch of

absentee ballots and bring 'em back. And so the election law reform commission looked at those issues, tried to address things that you could do to make that streamlined and facilitate it but not lead to—not allow abuses. [01:04:46] But the most—I think the most lasting thing that we did was create what later be called early voting. And the legislature did adopt five or six pieces of legislation in the, I think, the [19]93 session. I remember going out to the State Agencies or whatever the committee was in the house and the companion committee in the senate and talking about five or six bills. And I think all those bills with maybe one exception passed. [01:05:11] But the most significant, lasting one was the bill that allowed clerks to create early voting periods and to have voting outside the courthouse for early voting. And over the subsequent years, a number of states, I guess virtually every state now, has some period of that. I went at the end of the election in 2008. I volunteered for the Democratic ticket and was sent, coincidentally, to North Carolina where my daughter had just enrolled in university there. And I remember going to Raleigh for several days and then Greenville, which is the location of East Carolina University and apparently a precinct or a particular county that the Obama campaign thought that it could do well.

And I was surprised to find out that you can register—at least you could then, I'm not sure what the state of the law is there after the Republican push to restrict voting, but you could register and vote on the same day in a period of maybe thirty days before the election. Three—two weeks. Maybe twenty-one days. [01:06:18] We didn't go that far here, but what we did was create the authority that the clerks could set up election sites remote from the courthouse and allow people to vote in the two-week period, as I'm recalling, before the election. And it turned out, I think, to be much more popular to many more people and to candidates, too, than George's and the other people of that commission's notion that it would be. It made the vote more accessible and made it in some ways less frenetic on election day for the clerks. [01:06:55] There was some problems logistically the clerks had, and we heard from a lot of 'em. You know, you've gotta take these—at the time the voter rolls were all manually kept, and they would have to take them out to a particular place or try to figure out how to make it work that you could check the rolls. Now it's easy 'cause you've got it all online, and you oughta be able to check electronically from remote sites to see if Nate Coulter's really registered when he goes to vote remote from the polling precinct where he lives.

But they had problems with that, and we tried to work through that. But that was one of, I think, the more gratifying things that came out of that was that it was a way to make it easier for people to vote.

[01:07:35] BW: Well, you move toward a computerization of all of the voting rolls that came out of that commission. It took a while to get it into place.

NC: Yeah, one of the problems that we tried to figure out is what keeps people from not cleaning up the voter reg rolls. Or people move. If you move from Lonoke County to Sebastian County, and then later you move to Benton County, and you registered everywhere. You were a good citizen. You registered everywhere you lived. At the time, as I'm recalling, there was no way for the county clerk in Sebastian County to notify the clerk in Lonoke County to take you off the rolls. And then if you move to Benton County, there's no way for the Sebastian County clerk to know you'd moved to Rogers. So we tried to implement something that would facilitate that, and the computers obviously helped that. [01:08:21] I think there were also questions about—is residence a state of mind. In other words, people would move—let's use my hypothetical again. You lived in Cabot, and you moved to Fort Smith, and then you moved to

Rogers. But you still said, "I'm from Cabot. That's where my family is, and I still vote absentee or somehow in Cabot. I'm still in Lonoke County." And I think we had—we persuaded the legislature that it's not just a state of mind. You don't live where you just declare you lived, you live where you work or where you have a residence, and we had some standard put into the statute that determines when you really could ought to be able to register—where you ought to be able to register.

[01:09:02] BW: Well, I believe you all also [*ringing*] pushed the state toward easier and more widespread ways to register to vote, which led to your being able register to vote in revenue offices and other places and not just at a given period of time and place.

NC: Yeah, I think there was later a federal initiative called motor voter that helped—amplified on some of the things that we'd done. But again, the state of Arkansas and Bill Clinton were a little bit ahead of some national trends in this area. And I think we were doing things before motor voter that eventually became a part of what the motor voter laws required, I guess, for states to continue to comply with federal funding for election operations. [01:09:53] What was—remind me, do you remember what the motor voter initiative came from? Was it—

what federal catalyst caused that? I don't remember.

BW: ACORN . . .

NC: Was it?

BW: . . . was the cata—was the push in Arkansas to get more access and easier access to registering to vote. And I don't know what the federal catalyst was but . . .

[01:10:17] NC: Well, one of the things—I think the tension in some ways had always been that I guess the bar had always flirted, in some jurisdictions, had flirted with the idea that they'd pick jurors from voter registration or from motor vehicle registration. And obviously some people because they have an allergy to serving on juries would just not register to vote. And I guess if you go to picking your juries from people who have automobiles, hardly anybody's gonna think that the risk of serving on a jury pool for six months and maybe getting called is worth not driving with a license. There are a lot of people who might see the value of their vote not being worthy of that, unfortunately, but hardly anybody, probably nobody, would say, "Well, I'm not gonna have a license because I might get called for jury duty." And I think some of the move in Arkansas and other states was to create voter—create jury venire panels from the motor-vehicle roster, and I think that was tied to—if you're gonna let people be

chosen from jury pool because they've got a car, you oughta also let 'em register to vote when you're there. And if you do it from the motor vehicle licensing anyway, then you eliminate some small deterrent to people who don't like serving on juries and keeping them from voting.

[01:11:40] BW: I think that you all also planted what became an expansion of the state election board and its powers because prior to that, the power election board was locally. And there were county party committees that were taking filing fees and never doing . . .

NC: That's right.

BW: . . . anything with them.

NC: And putting them in the bank. And they'd have two or three hundred thousand dollar CDs.

BW: And pay each other to attend meetings.

NC: Yeah, and there was a great, as I'm recalling now, there was a—some testimony at these hearings we had to significant discrepancies in the way elections were administered and run. Sheriffs and election officials had different precepts in different parts of the state. Maybe, perhaps in some counties they had different precepts and different operating principles from precinct to precinct. So we looked for ways to have some central source

of educating people about what the law is. I think there were things had—having to do with could you get assistance if you needed assistance to cast your ballot? If you asked that question in Fulton County and you asked it in Nevada County, you might get different answers. And so we were trying to create some organization or centralization of a uniform approach to what was deemed to be the law and maybe in some instances clarify the law. And then have that disseminated through training and seminars for people who were gonna run. And I think we pushed to have the state fund some of that so that you would encourage people to work as election officials who had the time, who had the incentive and had gotten some of the training and the education. [01:13:28] You know, you would like to think that voting is accessible everywhere and that the same standard applies. I remember going to my parents to vote in Nashville, Arkansas, probably in the [19]60s, early [19]70s. You would go in to vote in the county—or the—I guess it'd be in the city library. And they'd just have a bunch of banquet tables set up, and they'd give you your ballot, and you'd sit down there, and you'd vote across the table from somebody else. And maybe nobody thought anything about that, but there were some complaints in the election law reform meetings we had

that, you know, they didn't really feel like they had a secret ballot in some counties. And I've never really felt like I had a secret ballot 'cause I usually have a yard sign up, and everybody knows everybody I'm voting for, but it's an important thing in a small town, and people were expressing frustration that too often they didn't feel like they had any privacy when they voted. So I think we may have encouraged the state election—state board of elections to create mechanisms to make that available, to tell the local people that you need to provide some way for people to vote with a little more privacy than had maybe been the custom in lots of places.

[01:14:43] BW: Well, I wanna move from that as we're talking about elections to what you have done since you left the governor's office and what you're currently doing. And then you made a couple of political . . .

NC: It's been all downhill since.

BW: . . . races yourself.

NC: I guess I was—almost—probably at least half—a substantial part, let's say it that way, of my adult life or work life has been connected to Bill Clinton or forces that he's unleashed. I left in [19]89, went back to Wright, Lindsey & Jennings to practice law. I had always thought that I would be involved in public life or

have had a political yen and wanted to run for office. But I also thought that if you were too fastened to that, it was a recipe for frustration and sometimes worse. Maybe you got into a position where you didn't make conscientious choices, you made choices that were utilitarian, or you were vulnerable to doing things that maybe you didn't wanna do because you were obsessed with your political ambition. So I was always aware that I had a law degree and a law license and I needed to be able to practice law. And I had grown up like maybe a lot of southern people who feel some obligation to try to cure some of our history or the things that are the product of our history of slavery and Jim Crow. And I saw *To Kill a Mockingbird* here recently again and told the director at the Rep that Harper Lee and Atticus Finch had more to do with my being a lawyer probably than anything else 'cause I didn't have any lawyers in my family. Didn't really know any. But Bill Clinton had more to do with, probably, a lot of what happened after I got out of law school, at least for the period until I had been convinced that I wasn't gonna be a successful political candidate. [01:17:01] I went back to the law firm. I practiced there. I took another leave in [19]92 to run Dale Bumpers's reelection campaign. And one of the sort of personal ironies at that time is I was friends with Bruce Lindsey because

he was—I was in the law firm where Bruce's father was or Bruce's firm, I guess it could be called. And Bruce and I had—we were the only two people in the firm, probably, of seventy-five, eighty-five lawyers who obsessed with politics and everything Bill Clinton did. And so we would have a cheeseburger once a week at the Sports Page, which was a smoky, greasy cheeseburger place in the block with the—or in the bank building where the firm's offices were. And then Bruce started in the fall—I guess, in the summer, spring and summer of [19]91—and then the fall announcement that Clinton was running for president. Bruce was gone, essentially, all the time. So I didn't see Bruce. And Bruce later—I had one or two encounters with Bruce where he asked "Why aren't you gonna enlist in the presidential campaign?" And you know, I told Bruce recently that the issue was I was trying to save my marriage and stayed in Little Rock. And I said, "That ended up failing anyway. Maybe I should've gone to work with you," and Bruce had some observation, well, he went to work in Washington, and his marriage failed, too. So maybe all those things were independent of political and career forces. But I didn't do that. I stayed here. [01:18:34] And then as another impact from Bill Clinton—when he was elected president, then-lieutenant-

governor Jim Guy Tucker became the governor when Bill Clinton resigned December of [19]92 in the interregnum, I guess, between the election and his inauguration. And there began immediately talk about there would be a special election to fill the lieutenant governor's seat. That talk was fueled mostly by Republicans because they had a candidate in waiting, Mike Huckabee, who had just run against Bumpers in the campaign I had been involved in. And Hucakbee'd spent what, at the time, seemed like a lot of money for somebody to lose 65–35. He'd spent a couple of million dollars. Had a fairly high name ID. And the Republicans thought he was going to be able to win pretty easily for two reasons. One, he had the name recognition. He was a very effective campaigner, and he was just coming off that November race. They wanted an election. [01:19:36] The other reason was the constitutional oddity in our 1874, [18]78 constitution that says no member of the state government, either the legislature or anybody who's inside government, can resign from office and be appointed to or run for another state office. That effectively eliminated the 135 people in the general assembly who might want to be lieutenant governor in any odd year from being able to run in a special election. As I recall, Governor Tucker's impulse was he'd been

lieutenant governor. He had some sense that the office was maybe a constitutional oddity itself, and that there wasn't a lot to be done. By the time you had a special election, there wouldn't be a general assembly gru—assemblage. There would be no regular session before that because they were meeting at the time of the presidential inaugural. And he said, "We don't really need an election. We'll just leave it vacant." Republicans raised a storm about that. And it—their cause of insisting for an election was aided, as I recall, by the fact that the governor, Jim Guy Tucker, went to Washington for the inaugural, and while he was gone, the president pro tem of the senate, Jerry Jewell, either commuted or pardoned three sentences of inmates or prisoners, I guess, some said at the behest of Say McIntosh. [01:21:05] That was a politically volatile thing, I guess in part because the president pro tem of the senate was African American. And the request for these pardons or commutations came from a controversial African American. Once that happened, I think there wasn't much prospect for the governor to resist the urge to have to call a special election for lieutenant governor to create somebody who'd been elected statewide to fill in when the governor crossed the river. We had this other oddity in our constitution that if the governor's out of state, he

doesn't have any power. [01:21:40] So there was special election that was called. And I remember deciding on or about the first of April of [19]93 that I would run, and there were five, I think, Democrats in that primary, the most prominent of whom was Tom McRae. And Tom was perceived to be the front runner and the likely nominee for the Democrats to then run against Huckabee because Tom had come out of the 1990 gubernatorial challenge to Governor Clinton with some following and some experience. As it turned out, it was clearly a big drag on Tom's candidacy that he had challenged Bill Clinton. And through no merit of my own, I inherited that. And I was able to tell people that I had worked for Bill Clinton, and the fact that I had worked for Bill Clinton and that I was running against someone who had challenged Bill Clinton inured to my benefit enormously. Again, through nothing that I had done to earn it, but just the fact of being in that situation. All I had done to earn it was answer your phone call and have somebody at the Wright firm let me go out there. [01:22:54] But it was palpable when you would go places, and there wasn't much attention to the race, but there would be people who would find out that I was running and that Tom McRae was running. And people who'd been supporters of the governor quickly began to help me. I was the Democratic

nominee. There was a runoff—five-person race. There was a runoff. I got in the runoff, led the ticket, was in the runoff with McRae and beat him decisively in the runoff. Not a lot of people voted as I recall. Hundred, 150 thousand people voted. One of the weird things was that typically, you know, runoffs have a big drop off. There were about as many people, maybe a few more, voted in that runoff as voted in the special primary, which indicated that it was just a low-profile thing. And then a month later there was the general election, general special election. Huckabee had been sitting back waiting. He had raised a bunch of money, had a bunch of name ID. [01:23:46] One of the ironies in light of all the subsequent history—Huckabee's media person was Dick Morris. Dick at the time was on the outs with Bill Clinton. They'd had an on-again, off-again relationship as has been widely chronicled elsewhere. But he was in his hostile to Bill Clinton mode, and he took up working for Republicans about that time, and as you know, in the [19]94 mid-year election, he ran or provided the media for a lot of Republicans who came into Washington and put Newt Gingrich in the speaker's chair in the House of Representatives. Running, in most of those campaigns, an anti-Bill Clinton message. And that's what he did here in [19]93. Huckabee had a very

effective commercial that talked about he was running against the machine, and machine candidates can be young people, and they can be people who never served in office, which is what I was, but they're still machine candidates. Unplug the machine. And I don't recall whether he used Bill Clinton's name, but it was clear from the visuals that he was talking about the Clinton machine. [01:24:52] [*Laughs*] The other irony of that in terms of media people was that my media was done by a guy from Austin named Mark McKinnon. Mark was a Democrat in Austin, and somebody had told me about him. He came up here. And he did a good job in the primary. I wasn't so convinced that we had a response to the unplug the machine that was effective—that media campaign. And I lost by four or five thousand votes to Huckabee. But Mark McKinnon went on to fame of national significance because he was at odds, for some reason, with Ann Richards in Texas and the Democratic structure there and fell in with George W. Bush in Austin and was aust—was Bush's [19]96 media person. Or [19]94 maybe. When was Bush first elected governor? He eventually went to Washington with Bush, and on the night of the election in 2000, it was painful to watch theirs. They were—the Gore people were in Nashville, and it was raining, and nobody knew what was happening in Florida. And

Mark MacKinnon was one of the spokespeople for the Bush campaign. And he start—he was eight years with Bush, and he's now running something called No Labels. He's described himself recently on an episode of Colbert I saw as a progressive Republican. But that's—the irony of that is that MacKinnon, who was working for me, is now a Republican. I don't know where Dick Morris is. But he had a subsequent involvement with the Clintons in the [19]96 presidential reelection until the day or so before the convention. [01:26:27] But anyway, Huckabee won the election, and it was a lot closer, maybe, than it otherwise would have been except for my associations and tenure with Bill Clinton. I ran again three, let's see, five years later in a Democratic primary for the senate, which was an ill-chosen move. There were effectively two incumbents running. I was never in the hunt. Shortly after that I ran into Richard Arnold, who was an Eighth Circuit judge, the late chief judge of the Eighth Circuit, and he said to me, "Nate, I ran twice for congress in south Arkansas. I lost to David Pryor. A few years later I ran again, and I lost to Ray Thornton. And you know what I told people after I lost the second time, Nate?" I said, "No, Judge Arnold, what did you tell 'em?" "I told them I had a mandate from the voters to practice law. I think you've got a mandate

from the voters to practice law." So I took that to be you get two strikes in politics, and I'm gonna practice law. So that's essentially what I've done since 1998 with my politics limited to supporting people I liked and giving money to lots of candidates.

[01:27:50] BW: Well, I want to close by asking you to tell us about your children.

NC: I have three children. And my oldest daughter, my oldest child, my only daughter, is a senior at University of North Carolina. My middle child is a sophomore at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville—my son, Nathan. And my youngest so—youngest child is another son, Tom, who's a ninth grader at Central High. [01:28:15] One of the other sort of more recent Bill Clinton stories that involves my family—I guess I need to ratchet back a little bit. Nineteen ninety in the election, the general election, there was a last-minute ad campaign by Sheffield Nelson where he excerpted some speech that the governor had made to the general assembly where the governor was explaining something about "We could come here, and we could raise taxes and spendin' and so on and so on." And they sliced it out and had a commercial put together that you recall where it suggested the governor's attitude about government was raise and spend, raise and spend. So all the Clinton staffers and people who were

supporters were summoned to headquarters on that Sunday morning before the election on Tuesday to disseminate reel-to-reel audio tapes to all these small-town radio stations. And I remember you or Judy Gaddy or whoever was making the assignments there, and I don't remember who it was, gave me five or six stations in southwest Arkansas. Murphreesboro, and Ashdown, De Queen, Nashville. And I had my—she would've been about fourteen, sixteen months old, I guess. No, no—I guess—actually this was—she'd been a year old. This was November 9. She was born November of [19]89. I had my daughter with me to make the ride, and I was gonna go by and see my dad and mother. And I look back and said, "I can't believe Hope let me take the one year old on this Bill Clinton run around in my Chevrolet Citation to all these radio stations." But she did, and when I was telling her that story one night in the fall of—or it was Thanksgiving of [20]07. Bill Clinton was back in Little Rock at Vince Insalaco's house for a fund raiser for Hillary's campaign, presidential campaign. And I went over there, and I took my daughter who was born in [19]89 and would have been eligible to vote in the 2008 election. She would have turned, I guess, eighteen in 2007. [01:30:16] And so I took her over there and said, "Oh, I want you to meet Bill Clinton. He's gonna

be here for the Hillary campaign." And we were fortunate. We got in the right room, and the president came in and spoke about what was going on in Iowa. And then he stepped down, and we were maybe the second or third person he bumped into. And I quickly relayed that Caroline had been on that [19]90 trip, and he started talking about that and was engaging, I thought, in his usual way. We got outside after the event was over, and I get in the car, and I tell my daughter, "Well, you like the president?" "Yeah, it was impressive," and so—"Are you gonna be for Hillary?" "Yeah. I like Bill Clinton. But I like Oprah, too." And it told me a lot about [*laughs*] what was gonna happen in 2008 with young people being influenced in the primaries. [01:31:01] But all—I'm grateful that I think all my children have adopted their parents' attitudes toward Bill Clinton and toward the Democratic Party, and maybe that's a function of habit. I think it's a function of their upbringing and their own independence and intelligence that they have come to appreciate the same sort of—have the same sort of sensibilities that their pre—that their parents do. I've always told people that when I ran for office—and I'm sure some of my dad's friends in the furniture association and elsewhere, chamber of commerce folks, were not happy, perhaps, at some positions that old Don

Coulter's son had taken. Some of his old navy veteran friends. And I said, "You know, that's a harder deal than if people come to me and say 'Why is your dad givin' money to Mike Huckabee?'" which I think he did once. When it's your parents, you say, "Well, I don't have responsibility for my parents. I can't help that." But when it's your children, if somebody comes up to you and says, "Your son's a screaming liberal Democrat. What's wrong?" you know, you gotta take some responsibility for how your kids vote and how they turn out. So I'm pleased, and I think my kids are well adjusted, first and foremost, but they also have insightful political sensibilities.

BW: As you always did. And thank you so much for doing this interview.

NC: I've enjoyed it.

[End of interview 01:32:32]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]