

TRANSCRIPT: LEWIS R. DONELSON III

Interviewee: Lewis R. Donelson III
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
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Transcriptionist's Note: When the time is noted in brackets it indicates an inaudible passage. Otherwise, the passage is noted as inaudible in brackets with a question mark. If the spelling is unclear, [sp?] is used.

START OF FILE ONE

Elizabeth Gritter: This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Lewis Donelson III in Memphis, Tennessee, on June 25, 2004.

Oh, good, and I'm just going to be--good--checking every once in a while to make sure it's recording.

Lewis Donelson: You probably ought to move it up because I talk low.

EG: Okay.

LD: At least my voice, as my wife [says], fades.

EG: Okay, sure.

LD: I've only been married fifty-nine and a half years, so. [Laughter]

EG: Oh, wow. So, yeah, I'm doing this master's thesis and looking at Memphis city politics in the late '50s and early '60s, particularly looking at the 1959 city election, and so I had just, you know--.

LD: Who was elected then?

EG: Well that was when Henry Loeb was elected mayor--

LD: Uh huh.

EG: --and I'm particularly looking at the campaign of [Russell] Sugarmon and the Volunteer Ticket then.

LD: Yeah.

EG: And so what I'm thinking is that I'll probably end up doing a dissertation on Memphis, so I'm asking broader questions than just focusing on that as well, just on the Civil Rights Movement here and so forth. But I was wondering--I saw that you were one of the few Republicans here in the '50s and '40s.

LD: There was a very small group of us and most of them are gone, yeah. Judge Wellford, who has just retired from the federal bench, was with us at that time. He's younger than I but he was very active in it, in the '50s particularly. They're not many of us left. But that's--yeah, that's right.

EG: What was the Republican Party like then?

LD: Well, the Republican Party had been a, what I would call--. It had blacks, the heritage from the Civil War, and then it had post office Republicans, and that's people who when the Republicans controlled the White House they had jobs at the post office. [Laughter] So that was what it was. And it was right funny, of course I'm sort of like Andrew Jackson's great, great grandson, and I, you know, but a group of us decided to

become Republicans and start[ed] to build the party in 1952, in early 1952. We went down to the Republican convention, which was held in one of the courtrooms downtown, and Lt. Lee, who was the leader of the black Republicans, locked us out, and that got us all infuriated and stirred up and so on. And we began then to try to build the party. The first primary we had, Mr. Crump wouldn't let us have it in the regular polling places so we had it in backyards and garages and various other places, a few churches, and we polled seven hundred and fifty votes.

EG: How many?

LD: Seven hundred and fifty.

EG: Ah.

LD: A huge amount of work for basically nothing. But two years later in '56 we polled about ten thousand votes in the primary and elected some of our, we called them New Guard Republicans, to the executive committee. And that was going to be my lovely story, it's kind of a freakish story. The way the ballot was set up, that Lt. Lee was here, and under him was Harry Wellford, and then over on the other side opposite him were my wife and Helen Allen--no, further down under him. So many of the blacks, I think, thought that the people underneath Lt. Lee's name were people on his ticket. So we sort of got elected--they got elected, the three of them--more or less by [a] fluke.

[Laughter]

But anyway there was a long, ongoing battle in the '50s for the control of the local party. The state party had been playing footsy with the blacks down here for years and years and years and they liked it the way it was. They really didn't--. They were so ingrained in being a minority party that they really didn't have any ambitions or wishes

or even visions that you could be a statewide party. So they opposed us becoming active in the party and so on and so forth. That went on all during the '50s. I think in '56 we ran our first Republican for office down here, and he was defeated, and then in '58 we ran our first slate of candidates for the state legislature, and then again in '60 and in '62 we did, and I guess in '64. By that time we also had somebody running for the Congressional seat. I think we ran somebody in '58 and '60. Maybe it was--yeah, '58, '60, and '62. In '62 we almost elected a Congressman. I think Bob James lost by about, less than a thousand votes anyway.

So one of the more interesting developments that was occurring during the '50s and the early '60s was the rise of the Republican Party. Because Mr. Crump died in '54, I believe, and I remember I was in my office at that time over in the [00:06:53 Commerce Time?] Building. There was a lawyer over there, the big Crump henchman, named Abe [00:06:58], and Abe used to tease me because we were constantly in the papers, the *Press-Scimitar* particularly, [was] very interested in our getting a second party going and that sort of thing. The fights that we were having with Lt. Lee and the state party and all that sort of stuff, lots of press about it. He was always teasing me about it. He was teasing me about something he'd seen in the paper not long after Mr. Crump died and I said, "Well, Abe," I said, "Y'all are going to have a hard time now. What in the world are you going to do? You're going to have to think for yourselves." [Laughter] Well he never teased me anymore. Everybody in the elevator just died laughing. [Laughter]

EG: [Laughter]

LD: But they--. And of course Henry Loeb was the first non-Crump person to be elected locally in many, many a year. So that was the first sign of a break over, that the

party, you might say organization, was breaking up and not as effective as it was or had been. Then of course in '62 when Bob James almost won, I think they suddenly realized that you couldn't win anymore just by being a Democrat. And we had a precinct organization, which in Mr. Crump's time the precinct organization was the light, gas, and water division, and they had somebody down there, nearly every precinct had some employee who was the precinct captain for that precinct and it was his job to get the vote out and see that everybody voted. But after he died that kind of fell apart and he--. So they suddenly were in a situation, and really it's almost true today, except in the black community where you've got the Fords who know how to operate, there's no precinct organization among Democrats even now, whereas we've got, not as good as it once was, but we have a pretty stable county-wide precinct organization, not much in the black precincts but pretty good in all the other precincts. Part of that was when we started we had to--. The businessmen were all afraid to admit they were Republicans. Some of them would give us a little money but they never wanted it to be known what they'd given, and so on and so forth. So we tried to get people organized and what we did, we ended up going around to neighborhoods and getting people that were interested in politics and so on and so forth. We got a lot of small businessmen, we got a lot of housewives, which were more plentiful then than now, and we had something called the Republican Workshop, and we'd go into a precinct and get somebody to host a meeting and invite all their friends to come, and then we would talk to them about the two-party system and how the whole political system worked and so on and so forth, and then talk about the importance of having two parties.

EG: This was in the '50s?

LD: In the '50s.

EG: Okay, yeah.

LD: And from that we built up a--. My wife was one of the principal ones. It was mostly done by women, most of whom were not working, of course, then. And that's where we built the precinct organization. A lot of those people, some of those people, are still active Republicans today that we signed up in those days. So that was an interesting time of growth. I think they were totally stunned in '62 when Bob James almost won. Then we did not win in '64, didn't do really as well. Bob James ran again, lost [00:10:45], possibly because they were better prepared and realized it was a real contest, but also because at that time Goldwater was an ultra-conservative and he brought out a lot of black opposition that had been sort of muted before that.

EG: Oh, uh huh.

LD: The sort of party lines began in the '64 election and they continued to be drawn, you know--. [Telephone rings] My secretary's not here. Excuse me. Hello? Well either they hung up, or they heard my voice, or they got disconnected or something.

EG: So it was in 1964 that the Republican Party really--?

LD: Well in '66 we had a big breakthrough.

EG: Oh, with the breakthrough with--.

LD: We had gone from '52 to '66 without electing anyone.

EG: Yeah.

LD: We'd come close twice, once we'd run [inaudible] back in '56, and then again with Bob James in '62. And we'd come--. We polled a very respectable vote in '64 but it wasn't enough. We actually did carry the county for Goldwater. We had it

carried for Eisenhower, both in '56 and in '60--I mean both in '52 and '56--and we carried it for Nixon in '60. But that was the extent, but locally we had not elected anybody. In '66 something had happened. *Baker v. Carr* had been decided and someone came to me and said, "You ought to go to the court and represent the Republican Party in the reapportionment." So I went and sort of, I guess being sort of unfamiliar with political politicians, I had prepared--and man, in those days there was a lot of--I had prepared two reapportionment plans that complied with *Baker v. Carr*. I arrived in the courtroom, a three-judge court. There must have been thirty lawyers in there but I'm the only one with a plan. [Laughter] To make a long story short, the court adopted one of my two plans and we shortly thereafter captured the legislature for the first time in many years. But in '66 under the new reapportionment plan we elected six Republicans to the legislature for the first time, and we elected Dan Kuykendall to Congress. That was in '66. At that point we also elected, statewide, we elected Howard Baker to the Senate. And in '70 of course we elected Winfield Dunn as governor.

EG: The court you went to for the reapportionment, was that the--?

LD: It was a three-judge district court, which is for constitutional issues and that sort of thing. They have three-judge district courts, and they sat in Nashville.

EG: Okay, sure.

LD: Now Baker was a Memphian out of Shelby County and basically the plaintiff in *Baker v. Carr*. The case came up from Tennessee.

EG: What attracted you to the Republican Party in those days?

LD: Well, of course the attraction was in '52. I can tell you that story. It's kind of an interesting story. I was at a cocktail party, and I don't drink so I was cold sober, but

we got to talking politics and I got to talking about the Democrat Party and going off on that because they had abolished the two-thirds rule. The South had no more real veto power over anything that happened in the Democratic party, and unless something really changed the South would never be able to elect a President because that vote was just conceded and nobody could do anything, and [I] ranted and raved perhaps a little more than that about how bad it was to have a single-party system, because when you have a single-party system everything is decided on the basis of personality and not issues. So a couple days later this guy called me up. I didn't even know him. He was at the cocktail party. I'm sure I'd met him. But he said, "Lew," he said, "I heard you talking there at the cocktail party the other night. Did you mean all that stuff?" I said, "Yeah, I sure did." He said, "Well how about coming and having lunch with me," so I had lunch with him. He said, "You ought to become a Republican," and he made the pitch.

But the main pitch that we used in those days was [the] two-party system. The real attraction was--there were two things: the Democrat Party was very much union-dominated, at that time particularly, much more so than it is [today], and unions were a much bigger factor in those days in politics; and the fact that most of the people they elected were well to the left of many Tennesseans, shall we say, including myself. It was a big decision for me because as I say, my great grandfather was named Andrew Jackson Donelson. He was actually [00:16:25] nephew, but he was raised by them and they referred to him as their foster son. So I had that strong you might say Democrat heritage back there. Of course Nicholson was a Democrat as well, and so I had that. But that's what attracted me to it in the first place is the two-party system, and that's what we really

sold it [as] mostly about in the county, the two-party system, giving people a choice, letting the issues be laid out, and that sort of thing.

EG: Sure. And you had been involved in 1948 with the Kefauver campaign, or--?

LD: No, I had not.

EG: Oh, you weren't, okay.

LD: No I had never been involved in a campaign until 1952 when I was involved in the Eisenhower campaign.

EG: Oh, okay, okay.

LD: I was--.

EG: Did you have any involvement with the--? Because I did see your name in one place mentioned with how in '48 the first real move against Crump [occurred].

LD: No, I wasn't involved in that at all.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: Nor was I involved in the ultimate defeat of Crump and Crump candidates, except to the extent that I was involved in working for Eisenhower in '52, but that's really the size of it. No, I had not been--. I had been--. You know, Mr. Crump had one of his men call me up and ask me if I'd like to go to the legislature, and I had said I didn't want to do that, mostly because I didn't want to interfere with my law practice at that time. I was trying to get my law practice started, and so it wasn't--. I don't even know what year that was. It was just a perfunctory call, you might say. I'm sure he had a list and he was calling the best people. But I had not otherwise been involved at all.

EG: Why didn't Lt.--? You mentioned right away that George W. Lee had shut you out. Why was that?

LD: Well he was really sort of a [00:19:40]. He certainly wasn't an evil man. He was a pretty able person. He was one of the less-than-five [black] lieutenants in the US Army in World War I. So that's why he always called himself Lt. Lee. But he'd always been--. He controlled the party down here and it had certain prerogatives that he liked and that sort of thing, so he didn't want anybody interfering. As a matter of fact Harry Wellford and I went to see him I guess in 1960. We had defeated him in several primaries and so on, and our message was basically: we want you to stay in the party, and we need your votes, and we'd like to build a Republican base, and so on and so forth, and we don't mind you having some positions of leadership but we--you're not going to run it. And basically he said, "If I can't run it I don't want to be involved." I said, "Well, move over because we're going to run you out," [Laughter] which we did. [Laughter] That was probably a mistake, but it wasn't a mistake in one sense because to do what we wanted to do we had to get control of the party, because you had a situation where one of the problems is getting people to vote for blacks, and that was a problem. But that was the story. He had the support of Guy Smith, who was a long-time state chairman of the party, and so that's sort of the background of that.

EG: So there wasn't so much collaboration between the white and the black Republicans in the '50s?

LD: No.

EG: Huh.

LD: Now in '56 I was state chairman of the Eisenhower campaign in Tennessee and I got Lee to support me. We got a good turnout from them and carried the county, and that was a big--. I'm not sure we came close to carrying--. We may have--. I

believe we carried the county but not the city, but anyway we did extremely well, and part of it was--. And in that race in Shelby County, Eisenhower got close to forty percent of the black vote, which probably is still a watermark. Howard may have exceeded it a couple times, Howard Baker.

EG: Pardon?

LD: Howard Baker may have exceeded it a couple of times.

EG: Okay.

LD: He was always strong with blacks. Howard is the Baker of Baker, Donelson.

[Laughter]

EG: Oh, okay. [Laughter] Sure.

LD: But we haven't been together as lawyers except about ten years, but I was involved with him in all his political campaigns and all, close friendship over the years.

But it's interesting what happened. When Mr. Crump died you had the situation where we were used to having people who just held the office as mayor and as county commissioners and all, and Mr. Crump made all the decisions and they just raised their hands when he punched them, and that was the end of that. So you had a bunch of people who were so-called political leaders who had very little leadership ability, shall we say. So the city kind of drifted, and it wasn't that we had evil people, they just weren't too--. Mr. Crump, now you say a lot of bad things about him but he got a lot of things done because he didn't have to worry about any opposition or anything like that. He did what he wanted to and he wasn't worried about the political risk, so he could do some things that might be politically risky because he was immune to those problems, and in the process we got a lot of industry in Memphis, a whole lot industry, a huge influx, and we

had a bunch of awards of being the cleanest city and the quietest city and all that sort of thing. It made Memphis a pretty nice place to--.

EG: To live, yeah.

LD: To live, if you weren't concerned about politics. There was some hangover from that, but it's amazing how quickly it degenerated. I mean there was no one designated to take over so there was infighting and jealousy between various ones in the Democrat leadership.

EG: After Crump's death.

LD: After Crump's death, yeah. See he had planned on his son, Johnny, taking over, but in '37 Johnny was killed in a plane crash. As a matter of fact people say--and I didn't know a whole lot about Mr. Crump before '37. I was in Austria at that time--I mean I was in college at that time--but he--. They say he changed tremendously after Johnny was killed. We do know that one thing happened. All the gambling places and all the prostitution houses were shut down. [Laughter]

EG: Huh. [Laughter] Just in reaction.

LD: Completely different. I don't know what to attribute that to or anything else, but that did happen. That would have been in about 1939 or '40. Here's the difference: I remember when I was in college every hotel had its own gambling room. You could go down there and shoot craps or play roulette. Some of them had poker tables, not all of them. But all the hotels had gambling rooms. There were a couple of places, the [inaudible] and a couple of others, that had gambling rooms down in the basement, dancing and drinks up above. So that was all wide open, and of course you could go

down on [inaudible] Street and down there in that direction and the houses of prostitution were running wide open.

But that began to change things. Loeb didn't start out being an anti-Crump person, but he was not the choice of the machine, what was left of the machine, and to that extent he was viewed as an independent. He was a tremendous campaigner, very attractive, charming guy who loved people, and that sort of thing has to be genuine, it really does. Winfield Dunn had it in spades. Ronald Reagan had it, just loved people. So that's the kind of thing that--. Henry, of course I had a lot of dealings with him when he was mayor the second time. He wasn't an evil man. He wasn't racist, really, but he was awfully--. Once he made up his mind he was awfully immovable, he just--.

EG: Awfully what?

LD: Immovable. He couldn't be changed. And the fact that the circum--. If he didn't understand the circumstances to begin with, or the circumstances had changed, it didn't make any difference; he didn't change. Unfortunately that led to Dr. King's death. We should have settled that strike but we didn't.

EG: What do you see as the reasons for the rise of the Republican Party in '66?

LD: Well, the first real reason for the rise--we'd been rising all along--was the reapportionment, which, see the rural districts had incredibly more representation than the urban districts. See we hadn't reapportioned since 1910.

EG: Ah. Wow.

LD: Even though the constitution says it's got--. The Tennessee constitution says it's got to be done every ten years--never been done; so all that made a huge change in that base. But statewide it was because, see there was always the incipient possibility of

a Republican state because you had those two districts that were overwhelmingly Republican, the first and second districts. The second district of Tennessee had never voted for anybody except a Republican Congressman since the Civil War.

EG: Where were these districts?

LD: Knoxville.

EG: Okay.

LD: The first district is up above Knoxville. Chattanooga was mixed. So you had those three districts where you had base. What changed the whole history of politics was when we began to carry the county in Shelby County, a huge county, why we could change things, and it made the party so--made things so much more evenly divided. See when Winfield Dunn ran, I've forgotten but I'm sure that his majority in Shelby County must have been fifty thousand, which is a huge majority, because the county wasn't quite as big as it is now. So that changed--. When people began to realize that a Republican could win, you got better candidates.

EG: Okay.

LD: See when we went to young Howard, who was--his father was a Congressman--.

EG: Howard Baker?

LD: Yeah, and from the Second District and so on and so forth, and we persuaded him to run. He lost the first time, but by a fairly narrow margin, and then he ran again two years later and won. He ran in '64 and was defeated, and then--. But we ran two Senators in '64--we ran Howard for the Senate in '64--and we began to pick up strength in our districts. Then in '66, see we elected--. We already had a Congressman in the

Third District, Bill Brock. We elected him again and we picked up a Congressman in the Ninth District, so at that point we had four. In '66 we had four Congressmen.

So the balance was beginning to shift to a much more Republican state. Probably the rise of Republicanism in Shelby County had more to do with the watershed change in state politics than anything that's happened in my lifetime. It made the state a two-party system, and it made it so that you could run a--. What it did was it increased the quality of the candidates. You couldn't run--. Now Bray Benton won, but except for that--after Watergate--you can't run a dud, which is really what he was, just way over his head. We had some Senators and some governors around here, Democrats, who couldn't have been elected in a contested election where you really had a good candidate on the other side running against them, and over the issues. So that changed everything.

EG: Some people I've talked to have said that also when Democrats started supporting civil rights measures, like Kennedy in the '60s, a lot of people turned Republican because of that.

LD: Well, that was first felt in '64, the Goldwater campaign. That was an election in which the Democrats were very strong on civil rights at a time when civil rights were still a hot issue and so on, so that began. The truth of it is the Republicans we got in the beginning were probably taking the lead on civil rights. The Democrats were following Mr. Crump's lead, voting for--. He voted for Strom Thurmond, you know, and supported him publicly, so it wasn't a big Democrat policy to be for civil rights. Of course Howard made a crucial civil rights vote in his first term in the Senate, so it was a--. It was not--. The Democrats were--. I mean the Democrats were not the party, in Tennessee at least, until after '64 where they really supported civil rights, and whether it is true that since

then--. But we haven't many what I would call anti-civil rights Republicans in Tennessee. We haven't--. Brock would be--and he wasn't anti-civil rights--but he would probably be as close to it as anybody.

EG: Who is that?

LD: Bill Brock.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: Who was elected to the Senate in '70 and elected to Congress in '62 in Chattanooga. But Winfield Dunn was not against it at all and Howard was not.

EG: What was the last name?

LD: Howard Baker was not.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: And then Lamar Alexander was not, so we haven't had a lot of what I'd call segregationist-type Republican statewide candidates. As a matter of fact we had a couple that would be classified as that who got beat. [Laughter]

EG: As what?

LD: We had a couple that might be classified as segregationist who got beat.

EG: Oh, uh huh.

LD: Robin Beard was one of them. But anyway that's--.

EG: One of the things that interests me too is the rise of black electoral power, and it seems to really be starting with the 1959 campaign of Sugarmon and other candidates for public office then, and I was wondering what you remembered about his campaign?

LD: Well, I don't exactly mean to tell you whether I voted for Sugarmon or whether I voted for Loeb, but I probably voted for Loeb. I didn't know Russell at the time at all. I got to know Russell really on the charter commission for the city, the new city charter. But I knew A.W. Willis, we got going at the same time, and I was involved with him in the charter commission and all that sort of thing, and then of course A.W. and Russell were elected to the legislature, I believe in '68--or was it '70? I'm not sure which one. But they were elected to the legislature. It may have been before that. I'm not sure when they were elected the first time. But anyway, I really--my involvement with that race would be peripheral. I was very much involved in the '68 race, of course, when I was running myself, and in the '67 race when Loeb was running again and Willis ran against him. I did not support Loeb in that race. I was not supporting Willis either, although I voted for him, because I was running myself and I didn't feel like I ought to be picking and choosing between the two. But that's--.

EG: That's when you ran for city council?

LD: Yeah, that was it. I got about thirty-eight percent of the black vote.

EG: How influential was the black vote at that time?

LD: It was pretty substantial. They didn't turn out as well as they do now, and the percentage turnout was lower, but it was a fairly influential vote. It certainly had a big impact in Howard's races in '66 and '72, because he got a substantial part of the black vote and that made him almost impregnable as a Republican.

EG: Oh, uh huh, sure.

LD: Of course he had done some things, a very courageous vote for the civil rights--one of the few Senators from the South who voted for the Civil Rights Bill. He

had been involved in appointing Ben Hooks to the Federal Communications Commission. So he had a lot of, you might say, support there. Of course I'd been very much involved in civil rights myself. That's part of why I got that vote when I ran. See I served on the, I'll just call it the Community Relations Committee. [The official name was the Memphis Committee on Community Relations.]

EG: Yeah, that's one of the things I wanted to ask you about.

LD: That was a wonderful committee and a major achievement, which a lot of people have forgotten about. It's been lost because of the King assassination that we really were the only city in the South to desegregate without violence. All that was lost in the King mess, but that's--. The Community Relations Committee was chaired by Dr. Hollis Price and Dr. Paul Tudor Jones, who was my own minister and a fairly close personal friend. [I was] probably his closest friend in Memphis. We had the committee and the idea was very skillfully conceived because we had both [white newspaper] editors--not some designee, but both editors served on the committee--and the managers of all three of the TV stations served on the committee. The agreement was that we wouldn't announce anything we were going to do until after it was done, and the press observed that. And we just--. I wasn't involved, I was the chairman--. Vasco Smith and I co-chaired the committee to integrate the restaurants, and we did it all and then the next morning, "Yesterday the restaurants were integrated." So you didn't have a lot of troublemakers standing around doing things and so on. We did that same thing with the buses and the libraries, the water fountains, restrooms, and with the movie theaters, and then the hotels, and finally with the schools. It was an amazing achievement, and

probably part of the reason we didn't deal with the sanitation strike as well as we should have.

EG: What were your strategies for persuading people to desegregate? How did you go about that work?

LD: Well, we went about that work by contacting the various leaders in each area. We talked to the people. At that time the most visible restaurants were the ones at Goldsmith's, and at Lowenstein's, and at Gerber's, and then in the Peabody, and in the Gilson [sp?], and in the Farrington [sp?] and in the Chiska [sp?], and so we contacted them and said, "Look, it's time we integrate," and most of them said yes. We had important people calling them and they would listen to you.

EG: Were these important people on your committee?

LD: On the committee, yeah, on the committee. It was a good-- See, names were never published. I mean they were not hidden but the names were never published. The press never published the names, and it was evenly divided between blacks and whites. So I called up all the restaurants and told them, "Look, the time has come to integrate and this is the day we're going to do it. Will you accept the people when they come?" I said, "There will be two couples, one black and one white, and they'll ask to be seated together, and there'll be a plainclothesman there who will keep the peace if there's any problem. And then there'll be some members of our committee who'll be there." That's what we did on that one. The library was a little bit simpler because you just had one place [Laughter] so to speak. But the movie theaters we did the same way, and even there it was a little bit different because you go in and you sit down and you're anonymous when you sit down. Restaurants were a really touchy one because you were

very visible and people had a lot of--. When I was elected to city council one councilman said--. We had a party for all the council and called and said, "I'm sorry we can't--. My wife will not eat with blacks." That was in '67. Those things were touchy things, but that's the way it was done. Then of course we made an elaborate plan with the schools.

EG: Yeah, I heard a little bit about that, how you didn't publicize it until afterwards, like you did with your other things.

LD: Yeah. Well what it avoids is, of course, drawing a crowd and troublemakers that cause trouble. There's always some nut cases out there, and Memphis has plenty of them. [Laughter]

EG: [Laughter] What was the relationship like between white and black members on the Committee of Community Relations?

LD: Oh, it was good.

EG: Yeah?

LD: It was good. We had--I'll just be blunt about it. We didn't have any segregationists on our committee. The white members were all people who were known to be supportive of what we were trying to accomplish so the relations on the committee were excellent. Vasco and I, I'd never met him before I served with him on the committee, but his wife was Maxine Smith. Jesse Turner [Sr.] was on the committee and a good many black ministers. Dr. [Hollis] Price, of course, was a minister himself but he was president of LeMoyne [College]. On the committee they had Rabbi [James] Wax of the Jewish temple and they had the dean at St. Mary's Cathedral, and they had a Methodist minister. I don't think we had any Baptist participants. We probably had several black Baptist ministers but no white Baptist ministers on the committee. But, as I

say, Judge Wellford was on the committee with me. I think maybe there were two or three other Republicans on the committee. It was a committee that some of our Democrat politicians, you might say, ducked, didn't want to serve on it. I was not involved in recruiting the committee or anything like that, and I know I got on the committee because of Paul Tudor. [Laughter] Harry did too. We were both in his church.

EG: Harry?

LD: Harry Wellford.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: But of course my involvement with civil rights is real funny. My views were known. There was a guy on the *Press-Scimitar* who had gone to Southwestern with me and he'd heard me talking about integration and all that kind of thing. He invited me down to speak to his church which was a--. Oh, it's awful to be old. Anyway, it's a church down on the river.

EG: Okay.

LD: Anyway, so I went down there and he asked me to talk about segregation. Well I did, and I guess I was pretty naïve then. I hadn't been very involved in politics. This must have been probably in '54 or five. [Break]

In the beginning it really worked awfully well. The busing changed a lot of that. But we found from better experiences that when a school like Central High School for example, where many of the leaders of the community had gone, got to be over fifty percent black everything's going to change. That's when white flight really began to take over.

EG: Was when the school busing?

LD: Yeah. And that was--. Of course that had another tremendously evil influence in my opinion. It greatly decreased parental support for the schools. Because when you lived down on Vance Avenue and your child is going to a school out in Raleigh, say, you can't get out there. You have little interest in the school. The whole thing so much accelerated the lack of interest of the parents in the school, and their building one-on-one relationships with the teacher, and follow up what the student was doing and all. It really had a very pernicious effect. It shows--I learned this in my time on the city council--you really have to think through an issue sometimes because you almost--. The law of unintended results is very strong. The Supreme Court never thought that this was going to destroy the neighborhood school, but it did in the South. That was a huge setback. The sad thing about it is--and I was talking to somebody about this just the other day--the truth of it was before integration you had better black teachers by far than you have today. Part of that was, of course, the blacks felt that this was something that was very important to them. People of real quality--of real ability, I should say--would give their lives to teaching. Today it's oh, well, you know I've read all these articles, but it's almost got to the point of: if you can't do anything else, be a teacher. [Laughter]

EG: Yeah, right. [Laughter]

LD: Now that's maligning a lot of wonderful teachers, but it is that kind of situation, and that's disturbing. Then of course as the city expanded why you had a lot of the wealthier people who were more concerned about their children and able to do something about it and all, and they moved out to the county or they sent their children to private schools. Because I was a product of a private school, but that was before all this

ever came up. I don't think they had a black at Choate when I was there. I don't know if they had a policy against but they didn't have a black, or I don't think they did. I can't remember. But of course that was in '32 that I went up there.

EG: Why did you think that there was here the fact that they allowed black voting, where you saw in Mississippi and the Deep South there were all these measures against black voting, but here black voting was allowed, and yet also that--? But yet why was that allowed but there was so much opposition to busing and to school--?

LD: Well, [Laughter] there's a cynical explanation. I'll give you that one first.

EG: Okay. [Laughter]

LD: Mr. Crump voted them.

EG: Yeah.

LD: If Mr. Crump said that's what we're going to do, why everybody said, "Yes sir, Mr. Crump." [Laughter] That's the cynical explanation. He did vote them, and it was really sort of a disturbing situation, because the picture that you'd see--and the papers would run it every time we had an election--they had these trucks, open-bed trucks. The driver would sit there and he had two fistfuls of poll-tax receipts and the back of the truck would be loaded up with black people. He'd ride from precinct to precinct and hand them out a poll-tax receipt and they'd vote. So that was--. But fortunately when all that began to change voting was never an issue because they'd always voted, so it never came up. That was just something that people did. But the other side of that is the truth in Memphis, particularly in the '50s, is the city was rapidly changing. Memphis was a very plantation-oriented town. I make the distinction between the plantation attitude and what I call the redneck attitude. The leadership of Memphis

was very plantation and so there was never any big, you might say drive to create hate against the blacks or anything like that. It was more an attitude that they were inferior but they were our responsibility. They were our-- The plantation attitude said, "They're our responsibility. We've got to look out for them. We've got to see they're taken care of and all."

So I think that more describes the situation, and I think it describes the fact that we were able to accomplish all the legal desegregation without any difficulties, even though there was a lot of opposition to busing, because busing brought an instinctive reaction. I had a good friend from Clarksdale, Mississippi, one of the ringleaders in trying to get schools desegregated in Mississippi, very much involved in desegregating Ole Miss, and so on and so on. He called me after desegregation was at the [00:47:45]. I don't know when it was. A good friend, his family were clients of mine, I know his father, wonderful people, and they did marvelous service to the community. "Lew," he said, "My daughter is in the fifth grade and she is the only white person in her class. And my wife is saying to me, 'I admire your stance, but are you being fair to your daughter?'" He said, "I've been praying over this. I've agonized. I don't know what to do, because if I take her out, because of my vocal leadership position, it's going to be a big deal. Everybody in town's going to talk about it: 'I told you so; it won't work;' all these other things." Of course I gave him a horrible answer. [Laughter] I said, "Send her up to Memphis and let her go to Lausanne." [Laughter]

EG: Go where?

LD: Lausanne, which was an elementary boarding school in those days.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: The only one in town, private school. He didn't do that the first year but the second year he did do it. I think when she was in the sixth grade she came up here. But those are hard problems, and you see that, and you think about the fact that--. [Telephone rings] Hello? [Break] I think it's switching over to my secretary and she's not there, so they're getting the answering machine and that's what they deserve anyway. [Laughter]

EG: [Laughter]

LD: Anyway, that's--. Busing--. While desegregation was accepted pretty well busing was very different, because--. Of course what you ended up doing is your child could go to a school that was at that point frequently sixty percent black. Of course you've got to remember at that time too there was a great deal of opposition among the civil rights people and so on and so forth against what they called "track systems," so that your child would go and you knew that that child was going to have to be subjected to a teacher who was trying to teach to everybody. So she had to teach at least to some extent to that lowest person in the class. Just like Susie said to my friend, she said, "How is she going to get into a good college?" We had a whole lot of very difficult problems. And we had some academies created in Memphis and some are still in existence. They were mostly from the Baptists. There was a pre-existing school which had Presbyterian connections. There was MUS [Memphis University School], which my father went [to] in the 1890s, been in existence forever. And Hutchinson's which was started about 1915 or something like that. So those schools had a long tradition. They weren't created in any racist atmosphere. St. Mary's is an even longer tradition, going way back. So we had some longstanding--. But of course the ones that grew the fastest--and many of those Baptist things have disappeared. But the Evangelical Christian School is still operating

and that kind of problem is still going strong. But busing was just a hard problem and had--. Those who opposed it, they opposed it probably more out of racism than anything else, but there was some logic to their concerns. Just like the sanitation strike, you know. It brought out the latent racism in a lot of people because they had some logic: it was a labor dispute. It wasn't a racial issue, it was a labor dispute. [Laughter] And boy, all the black haters came out of the woodwork, you know.

EG: What?

LD: The black haters came out of the woodwork immediately. I'll tell you one more story. I was walking out of a cocktail party in the mid-'50s and Harry Wellford was with me, and I said, "Harry, I'm so tired of nigger jokes I can't stand it." He said, "So am I." I said, "Let's try something. Next time someone starts to tell it let's just say, 'I don't want to hear it.'" And you know we stopped them in our crowd. Oh, it took half a dozen times of saying I don't want--but the first thing you know, other people were saying, "I don't want to hear it either." Of course, as I said, Memphis is a plantation town, but there wasn't a lot among my crowd. None of us were rich but we were all upper middle class, and some of us I guess were rich, but not many. But there wasn't any racism among us, and you put a stop to a lot of it. So it's interesting what can be done.

But the problem of the schools is a very difficult one and we haven't solved it yet. Because I'm just reading--. I got a new report on the Community Institute for Early Childhood, and Barbara Holden [sp?], who's a friend of mine, is its executive director and all. I'm strongly convinced that we can't change our problems in Memphis in the education area without early childhood education, because teachers tell me, and Jane Caldwell [sp?], who's the commissioner of education and long-time principal out at

Craigmont [sp?], she says, “When they come to school,”--because kindergarten is compulsory--“When they come to kindergarten there’s a percentage of them that have never seen a book. No one’s ever read to them. You hand them a book they don’t know how to--. Only the pictures tell them which way is up.” She said, “The truth of it is that those children will never catch up.” Because the teacher’s got so much obligation to the rest of the class that they’re never going to be able to go back, because those people need to be segregated and treated in a different manner from those, and of course nobody would stand that and that sounds awfully horrible, but it just--. They--. So what I’ve concluded, and Mayor Wharton is very interested in this, is that the only way we’re going to deal with this problem is to deal with it, you know--.

EG: In early childhood.

LD: Yeah, and I mean very early childhood. They have tests now that actually show that talking to your child in the womb has an impact on brain development.

EG: Wow.

LD: They’ve measured all that stuff now. It’s not speculation. They’re measuring the brain activity. They can show that a child who can’t possibly understand a word you’re saying, a babe in arms, you read to them and it stimulates their brain activity just listening to what you say. Of course, as she says, the fastest growth of the brain is from birth until they’re three years old. It grows faster at that time than anything. Just like they tell you right now, you can teach a three-year-old a foreign language much easier than you can teach the brightest adult that you know. But anyway [00:56:49].

[Laughter]

EG: [Laughter]

LD: But it's Memphis's major problem. Go on back to get the history a little bit. See what happened in Memphis was, particular with the coming of the cotton picker and the eight-row and twelve-row planters and so on, and with chemicals to fertilize with, to kill the weeds and all, the need for field labor went way down. Then in the late '30s [blacks] began to move to Memphis because there were less jobs. After World War II it just accelerated. What happened was that the most able of those who came here in the late '40s and early '50s went on to Detroit and Chicago and Cleveland, Indianapolis, and what was left were their dregs. So we've got this, you might say, adverse selection that went against us and it made our racial problem here so much more difficult than it otherwise would have been.

EG: Dealing with the uneducated and so on.

LD: Because they--. And of course you--. I was on something called "Free the Children" and a social worker reported to us, she said, "We have families in this neighborhood,"--and we took a small neighborhood, about twenty blocks--"where no one in four generations has ever worked." So that's the population out there that's just so intractable. It's extremely hard to deal with. When you've got a parent who dropped out in the tenth grade, or even some of them in the eighth grade, they're not going to think it's important for their children to go to school. It's really a sad thing.

On the '59 election I wasn't much help to you. [Laughter]

EG: Oh, that's all right. A lot of people don't remember it.

LD: But I would say that far more important than the '59 election was what was happening as that was going on, silently growing, where the Republican Party would change the whole dynamics of politics in Shelby County.

EG: Yeah, absolutely.

LD: And that was very much growing in 1959 and in '60.

EG: It's interesting--.

LD: See we ran Winfield Dunn for the state senate I think twice, maybe in '60 and '64, anyway, but the world changed so much by 1970 he could be elected governor, but he got defeated for state senate.

EG: Yeah. It's interesting to hear your perspective on the Memphis Committee of Community Relations, because I also talked to Vasco Smith about it and he didn't seem to think too highly of the committee.

LD: Is that right?

EG: Yeah, he said that blacks on the committee met separately from whites.

LD: That's not true. That's a damn lie!

EG: [Laughter] Okay.

LD: I can't believe--. But Vasco will lie.

EG: Huh.

LD: I shouldn't say that about him. I consider him a good friend. We were co-chairman of the committee that integrated the restaurants.

EG: Yeah.

LD: I don't whether he told you that or not.

EG: Huh.

LD: But we never had a separate committee.

EG: Never separate meetings?

LD: Not that I know of. Now they may have had some separate meetings--black meetings--that I wasn't aware of, where they were trying to outline what their position was going to be. But Dr. Price and Dr. Jones presided at the meetings. Every meeting was--. Ah! Jesse Turner attended the meetings with me. Vasco attended the meetings with me. That's how I got to know him.

EG: Yeah, yeah. Huh.

LD: I called Vasco once, and I'll never forget this. I said, "I have a friend who's thinking about running for the school board. Do you know of anybody in the black community who's thinking about running?" He said, "We haven't even given it any consideration." He told me, "We're not considering it." My man announced and he announced the next day.

EG: Huh.

LD: Whether I triggered his interest or whether I didn't I don't know, but anyway--. Vasco and Maxine [Smith] have sort of a mindset that anything they can do to make whites uncomfortable is justified. I went to see Maxine. I had a proposal from the county mayors--Germantown, Bartlett, Collierville, Millington, so on and so forth--to provide single-source funding for the schools and establish a plan which would involve the termination of busing. I got Richard Fields, the lawyer for the thing and all, to agree to it and we talked to some other politicians. But Richard said, "You've got to go see Maxine. She's the plaintiff." I went to see her, and she's--we've been friends. I mean she liked me always and we've done things together and so on, and she says, "No, I can't do that." I said, "Maxine, you know it's hurting black people just as much if not more than it is whites." She said, "Yeah, but it's hurting whites and that's good enough for

me.” So my experiences with--. On the other hand A.W. Willis, Russell Sugarmon, who maybe I knew better than any of them, and I’ve had some other black friends, wonderful people, not that attitude at all. I don’t know what the situ--why--. But Maxine was out there on the cutting edge. She ran into all the white opposition, she ran into all the rednecks, all the ugly talk and that sort of thing, and I’m sure that had a major impact on her, and probably had a major impact on him as well.

EG: Hmm. So that was an exaggeration.

LD: Go ask Russell. I’m sure that he would say--. I’m pretty sure Russell was on the committee.

EG: Yeah. I’ll have to ask him about that too. Yeah. Hmm. Interesting with the oral histories what you hear--

LD: That’s right, mm hmm, it really is.

EG: --[01:03:37] between when people--.

LD: I’m amazed at that.

EG: Huh.

LD: Because I would think that Vasco would be proud of the fact that he was instrumental in integrating the restaurants.

EG: Well he said that the pressure came from the boycotts or the NAACP protests of the Freedom Movement, and then the Committee on Community Relations’ role was negotiation and that there wasn’t this--. The pressure came from the NAACP, but then the Community Relations was doing the--.

LD: I was on the committee and I never felt any pressure from the NAACP, and I don’t recall any boycott. Now the boycott went on during the sanitation strike.

EG: Well, like the Freedom Movement downtown where they had the eighteen-month protest of Main Street.

LD: That was in '67, '68.

EG: That was in '60 and '61, where they had the sit-ins and then they had sit-ins all over Memphis and then they had--.

LD: I'd sort of forgotten that. I guess so.

EG: And then they had, yeah, with the pickets all over Main Street and then the desegregation of the restaurants in like '63 and '64--

LD: Yeah.

EG: --'65. So, I mean, the story I got from him was that there was all this pressure as a result of the boycotts, and then the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, they didn't out of their own will go and desegregate things. It came about because of pressure. What do you think of that assessment or view?

LD: Well, I don't know what to think of that assessment. My view would be that we felt pressure because we thought it was wrong. The Supreme Court had spoken. We needed to get ourselves--. We thought segregation was wrong, and so on and so forth. We were of course aware of the Freedom Riders down in Mississippi and all and conscious of that, but I am--. I'd forgotten about all that. Maybe I've got a selective memory. But as I know we took each one of them up. We talked about them and decided. I think the first one we did was the buses, of course.

EG: So you thought it was wrong and then you did go out to the buses, or to the restaurants and so forth and talk to the owners?

LD: Yeah, well when we decided to do the buses we talked to the bus company and got them to agree, and then we went on and did it. Of course I'm sure they were feeling the pressure.

EG: Because [Vasco] did talk too about how they rode the buses and had teams and did the direct action and then, yeah.

LD: But we--. I don't recall any of that getting to where it was violent.

EG: Right, right.

LD: I may be wrong. I don't recall any of that.

EG: Because the purposes were, I mean the committee was formed to prevent violence and to help with the desegregation?

LD: That's right. The committee was formed to accomplish legal desegregation without violence. It was formed for that purpose. Of course the truth was you didn't have to put any pressure on the committee because every one of us was committed to doing it.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

LD: No white person was on the committee that wasn't in favor of doing that.

EG: Uh huh, yeah. So that's where it seems like I'm getting a jaded view.

LD: I guess that's his view: the white people don't do anything unless you make them do it.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

LD: Could well be. I can tell you one thing. My minister took the lead in advocating better relations and so on and so forth. He came with the church in '54 or five and--.

EG: What minister was this?

LD: Paul Tudor Jones.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: Yeah. I bet he--. He had a lot of members leave.

EG: Huh. But that too, I saw that at one point he didn't allow black people to worship in his church?

LD: No.

EG: I read that somewhere. That's not true? Okay.

LD: No, as a matter of fact, when the first people came to our church they were seated and then we had a big meeting to decide what we were going to do, had all the officers of the church past and present, and my father--that man right there [points to a picture of him], when he was in college--got up and moved that we seat them like everybody else, and it passed overwhelmingly, not unanimously but overwhelmingly. Of course Idlewild [Presbyterian Church] took the lead in that and our church was involved from the Presbyterian point of view. The Second [Presbyterian] Church didn't want to do it. We had a big meeting with them and finally the Presbytery put a whole lot of pressure on them that they need to do it. Independent--a lot of people left Second at that time and went to what is now Independent Presbyterian, so it was conceived in sin. [Laughter] I think it is a very nice church now but it was conceived in sin.

EG: What was it called?

LD: Independent. It still is. It's out on Walnut Grove.

EG: Independent Presbyterian?

LD: Mm hmm.

EG: Okay. Huh.

LD: Which is a contradiction in terms, you know. You can't be a Presbyterian church if you're not a member of a Presbytery, [Laughter] but anyway.

EG: So the view I got from Vasco Smith, that was more--. The purpose, which seems to be kind of more in the middle, it was with negotiations and that it was used--.

LD: Well it was designed--and of course Paul Tudor and Jimmy Wax were the two leaders among ministers, and Hollis Price and Jesse Turner were probably the leaders of the blacks. Of course there was--. But basically we started with the premise that what we want to do is to do this now. How do we do it? So there wasn't a whole lot of need to bring any pressure on us. Now to some extent it may be--. And of course there was one restaurant that turned me down.

EG: Oh, really?

LD: But it may be that more pressure was brought on them--.

EG: Because of the protests.

LD: Yeah, by other things.

EG: What did you say to persuade restaurants, businesses, to desegregate?

LD: [Pause] Now who's to know what you said [Laughter] in 1960?

EG: Right.

LD: But basically our message was that the law now requires this. It's time we move into the modern era. Memphis can never progress if we're not going to deal with this situation and move on. Look at what other cities are doing and how they're getting it done, and we need to--.

EG: So it was people on the committee--.

LD: But our--. It was mainly, you know, justice and economics.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

LD: That was the main argument. Of course each time we did it we got good support from the papers, Memphis is doing this great step forward and so on, and so it gained momentum as it went along.

EG: Sure, sure. I was also wondering about the influence of the Shelby County Democratic Club with campaigns. Did you have, when you ran for city council, much dealings with the Shelby County Democratic Club?

LD: Well see, that election was nonpartisan.

EG: Okay.

LD: I did not run as a Republican. Otherwise, well, I was probably one of the best known, if not the best known, Republicans in Shelby County at that time. But it changed--. It was a major influence. It changed politics dramatically. Those white leftovers that had been running the party after Crump's death, the Shelby County Democrats, they demolished them, you might say. They no longer--. They quickly became non-factors as the Shelby County Democratic Club gained strength. They were the main--. So it had a major impact. Actually during the '60s, particularly during the late '60s and all during the '70s, the Republican Party and the Shelby County Democratic Club were the two main political forces in the county.

EG: Oh, really?

LD: Because there was nothing left of the white Democrats.

EG: Huh. That's really interesting.

LD: They were a small group, and it's amazing how the blacks continued to elect them, but gradually that changed. But it was a big influence, a big influence.

EG: Did you ever work together, on any bipartisan--?

LD: We did on the charter.

EG: Right, with the Program of Progress.

LD: Yeah, Program of Progress, right, to draw the charter. And actually there's another example of it. See what happened was when we had that town hall meeting the Republicans were organized.

EG: What town hall meeting?

LD: When they chose the POP committee.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: See that committee wasn't chosen by the powers that be. It was chosen out of a town hall meeting which the *Commercial Appeal* stirred up, and we met down at the auditorium and all. Everybody was invited and we voted it. What happened was that the Shelby County Democratic Club and the Republicans got virtually everybody on the committee. [Laughter]

EG: Huh. Wow.

LD: Because we were the only people organized. The Democrats were just living on the fact that they were Democrats. [Laughter] But, yeah, that was the time when we really worked together on that committee in drawing up the charter and all that sort of thing. Russell and A.W. were very major players in that drafting of the charter. So it was a--.

EG: Now you said the Republicans, you had--. Did you have precinct clubs, or you said you had an organization--?

LD: We had precinct captains.

EG: Precinct captains, yeah.

LD: Yeah, and sometimes we'd have other precinct officers and so on. We still do.

EG: Yeah, yeah. That was used for getting out the vote and informing about issues--

LD: Right.

EG: --and stuff like that. Then did you have meetings of these precinct captains?

LD: Well of the captains, frequently yes.

EG: Okay. Like how often?

LD: In an election year you might have three or four. In a non-election year you might only have one or two.

EG: Okay, yeah.

LD: Then of course we always had a convention every year.

EG: Of just Shelby County Republicans?

LD: Yeah, Shelby County Republicans.

EG: Okay, yeah.

LD: Of course you count on the precinct captains to turn them out for that.

EG: Yeah. How many people would you say were in the Republican Party in Memphis in the '50s?

LD: The black Republican Party?

EG: Both.

LD: Oh, well, what did I say? In '56 I think we turned out seventy-five hundred votes in the primary. Of those votes I'd say at least probably around sixty percent of them were black. Now by '60 that had changed and we were turning out twelve, fifteen thousand or maybe twenty, it went on up, and it would be about sixty percent white. After '64 the black just fell off to nothing.

EG: Yeah, yeah. Why do you think it was that the black--?

LD: Well the Goldwater campaign drew out every conservative Southern Democrat that didn't like the liberal Democrats and so a lot of them switched parties at that time, and that's when we really had a major addition to our strength, and of course that resulted in a defection of the blacks. We never had--. Probably the black strength never exceeded five thousand.

EG: Okay. What do you think the impact has been of the rise of the black power in terms of elections, and then the rise of black public officials? Do you think it's been positive toward contributing to improved race relations, or not had much of an impact?

LD: I think it's improved race relations a great deal. They're far from perfect still but they've been improved on a great deal. I think it's improved, you might say, race relations to an extent that it's pretty much now no one--really very few people, very few people--openly talk racist in the white community, and that's been a help. It has also drawn out more black people to be involved in the political process, which may be a mixed blessing but it should be good. On the other hand the disturbing [thing] has been that although we've elected two pretty good mayors some of our other black elected officials have been pretty bad, not only in the fact that they're probably far more racist

than they ought to be, but more importantly some of them are just not really able to make an intelligent decision on a complex issue. That's a racist statement--we got some whites like that too. The Republicans have elected some people--. Of course it's hard to get people to run. It's the sorriest job, a thankless job. Of course I was on the council during the sanitation strike and I can tell you it was really bad. But the quality of our white Republican officials has gone down. I always think about the fact that A.W. Willis, a bright man, able man, successful businessman--not much of a lawyer; he had never practiced law [01:19:36]--but he got defeated by a black that didn't know his way to the bathroom.

EG: In what?

LD: The legislature. After two terms he lost to a black that was just totally worthless. And that's--. I say that the problem with the community in Memphis right now is that the blacks are in the majority and they act like they're the minority, and the whites are in the minority and they act like they're in the majority. The truth of it is that we need to know as white people that we are in the minority and how to deal with that. But the blacks also need to know that now that they're the majority they have to be more responsible. When you're in the minority and you're getting whipped all the time it doesn't really matter what you do because you don't have any power. When you have power you've got responsibility. That's been disturbing to me. The quality of our elected officials, both black and white, anyone will tell you that the original Memphis city council was so superior to the one we have today and the ones we've had in recent years that there's no comparison between them, in the quality of the people, both black and white, and it's also true the quality of our legislators has gone down. Leonard

Dunavant [sp?], who's my close friend, one of the finest legislators I know, a Republican and all, he got defeated on the income tax issue.

EG: Who is this?

LD: Leonard Dunavant was his name. He was first elected in '66. He probably shouldn't have run; he was in poor health, but he did, and I probably was at least partly responsible for him running, one of my many mistakes. [Laughter] But I [01:21:43] with the income tax relief. I feel a little [01:21:47]. And I do [01:21:50] and they probably got beat in the Republican primary.

But I would say in sum total it's a good thing--not so much a good thing; it was an absolutely necessary thing. And really we have had some adverse results as well, and we have got to, you might say, grow up and get more mature about it all, and that's still to come. Part of the problem is of course that so many of the young people are so totally ill-informed, and it's very hard to--. Thomas Jefferson would be horrified at the people we let vote today. [Laughter]

EG: [Laughter] Uh huh.

LD: But I'll say it has to be for the best. It had to come. It had to be done, no matter how hard it was and no matter what the adverse affects were, it had to be done, so from that point of view--. And then the benefits that we--. Well the real benefits are we got a real black middle class in Memphis, a real middle class, lots of them. Unfortunately most of them are out in East Memphis or out in Germantown, the ones that have moved up the scale. But that's a major, major, major impact on the community and it's an important element in the community. If they would take a little more leadership--they've sort of, I would say, turned it over to the black politicians, and most of them don't mind

indulging in a little, you know, demagoguery. The same thing is true in the Republican Party. You can't get by with demagoguery as a white Democrat but you can get by with demagoguery as a white Republican, and you can sure get by with demagoguery as a black Democrat. Well that's my view, is what--. It's sad but necessary, and I hope we can move on. Wharton is a very able man and he got elected at a time when we still had a majority electorate that was white, a real interesting fact. It was interesting to me that I was very involved in Judge [Odell] Horton's campaign. I've forgotten when that was. He ran for attorney general. I was his campaign manager actually. He got roughly fifty percent of the white vote but he got slaughtered in the black community.

EG: When was this?

LD: I'm trying to think when it was. It had to be in the late '60s, maybe the early '70s, I'm not sure.

EG: Why was he slaughtered in the black community?

LD: Uncle Tom.

EG: Ah.

LD: It turned out that the white support that he had was highly visible, it was mostly businessmen and more prominent people in the community, you might say, and they tagged him as being a white candidate, you know. I don't know, he may not have had that knack that you need to have of relating to people out on the campaign trail, but anyway, he was running for attorney general. He had been a judge and he then became one again after that, went on the federal bench, and certainly one of the abler black leaders in this community, but--. And that's always disturbing. As I say Wharton and Herenton have been pretty good mayors. I think they're pretty able people. But as I

compare the present black delegation with the one we had at first, with Sugarmon and Willis in it, I'd say they were not as good, what we have today.

EG: Yeah. Why do you think there is this decline in the quality of--?

LD: Well I think it stems from a couple of things, but to my mind the first thing is it is not much fun to be a politician. The public abuses you and it's a thankless task. The second thing though is that we have gotten--. [Telephone rings] Hello? This is he. Just fine.

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EG: So you were saying that the decline was attributable to--.

LD: The second thing it's attributable to is that we have gotten democracy and freedom mixed up in this country. The truth of it is now that we have got this mindset that's out there that the people ought to decide everything. I'm just a huge you might say derogator of the poll.

EG: What the poll?

LD: A political poll.

EG: Oh.

LD: It's the curse of modern politics. What is a poll? A poll is the offhand opinion of somebody who didn't know a damn thing about the matter. That's really true.

EG: It is. [Laughter] It really is.

LD: It's the offhand--. Not that they're evil. It's the offhand opinion of somebody who doesn't--. We've got this set of politicians now that all they do is read polls.

EG: Yeah.

LD: Bill Clinton was a--. You know he had a focus group every morning so to speak, read the polls over and over and over again. I've found out that polls tell you a whole lot. I mean I've been involved in a whole lot of political campaigns, a whole lot of them. Polls tell you a lot, but you cannot allow polls to run what you're really thinking. Our system was designed to elect people that we had confidence in to go and do what was best.

EG: Yeah.

LD: We don't have a democracy in this country; we have a democratic republic. That's a representative form of government. What's happened is that the decline in quality has been you now elect people that play to what they know the public wants to hear, and being a statesman, or even being the slightest bit independent, can be death, as I said with Leonard Dunavant. He'd been elected for twenty-odd years and he comes out for the income tax; promptly defeated. David Cope, been there fifteen years or so; he's promptly defeated. You take other issues like that, and so your politicians, they're rabbit ears. They can hardly bear to take a stand that some poll has told them is unpopular. So they have relinquished their real goal, which is leadership. They're supposed to go find out what the issues are and then tell the people about them and lead them to see what the right is. They don't do that anymore. They just come back and cater to the public line. I mean they tell the public what they want to know. I know one time when I was on the city council we went down to Whitehaven to make a talk and we were talking about annexation. I sat down, and one of my fellow councilmen was with me, and I won't name him, but I was received with boos and hisses and [Laughter] he said, "I don't know how you can bear not to tell them what they want to hear."

But that's the story today, and so people of ability and knowledge and courage don't want to run. Why subject yourself to that where people don't want anybody who's going to go up there and study the issues, try to do what's right, think about the long term, think about other things, what's going to happen tomorrow, that sort of thing, and so you're just loaded down with that kind of elected people. It's true of Congress; it's true of the legislature. It's that kind of a situation. So that's why I think it's gone down, more than anything. I attribute a whole lot of that to the press who has given what I would call unthinking support to the idea that taking a poll on everything is a great thing because that's true democracy at work. Well nobody in his right mind would want to say we want our government run by a bunch of people who don't think about the issues, never give it any attention, don't know anything about it, yet they're going to punch a button and decide our issues. No one really would want that sort of thing, but that's what we've gotten to.

EG: Yeah.

LD: It also makes things so much more partisan. When I was commissioner of F & A [Finance & Administration]--.

EG: Much more what?

LD: Partisan.

EG: Yeah.

LD: Because many people, they call themselves Republicans and Democrats and that sort of classifies them. They don't have to think then. They don't have to take a stand on the issues. "I'm a Republican." "I'm a Democrat."

EG: Yeah, right, right.

LD: So that's enough of a [00:05:24] classification. So it's been a, to my mind, very, very pernicious trend, and as I say I know that Jefferson and Madison would be horrified, Madison particularly, at what--. Because Madison was educated in the Presbyterian tradition, is where you elect people to do those things and you have confidence in them.

EG: Well one of the things that I observed and what people--. I talked to Pete Sisson and he brought up too about how in the '50s and '60s with campaigning how that was so different.

LD: So different.

EG: It was a community affair.

LD: It was so much more one-on-one, so much more personal, and now it's all television and all that, and all some paid guy who tells you exactly what you're supposed to think.

EG: Yeah.

LD: I used to tell Lamar [Alexander] when he was running for President, I said, "Now, [00:06:22] those polls. You learn something from those polls. Now you can't learn something from a poll just by reading about it in a newspaper."

EG: Yeah.

LD: That doesn't tell you a bloody thing, because you've got to know the exact wording of that question. Well, Rose, I didn't know you were here! [Brief conversation with secretary from 00:06:36 to 00:07:06; not transcribed]

EG: What was women's involvement like in politics in the '50s?

LD: Well in the Republican Party they were very active. As a matter of fact the party was really built by Republican women.

EG: By the women?

LD: Yeah. My wife and fifteen other Republican women built that precinct organization just themselves, with personal visits and phone calls and meetings, that sort of thing. They'd call up and find somebody in the precinct and say, "How'd you like to have a Republican workshop?" They'd find somebody and they'd say, "Now you get as many of your friends as you can to come and we'll come and give you a lecture and all," and we'd sign up Republicans. They were very, very much involved, and we had--. Of course I say Gwen Awsumb was our first candidate who did real well, and she was ultimately elected to the city council many years later. A good many of our Republican office holders right now are women. So they've been very active, and they've been active in a, I guess you might say in a full-fledged way, because the type of women that we got, particularly at the beginning, were--. No man told them what to think. My wife and I get along beautifully and we agree on most things, but I sure don't tell her what to think.

EG: [Laughter]

LD: Those women that helped us build the party here, their husbands weren't telling them what to think. So they were very, very much involved.

EG: Did any take formal leadership roles, or was it more kind of organizing, grassroots?

LD: Well, yes, we've had two or three women be Shelby County chairman of the party in the county.

EG: This was in the '70s?

LD: No--well, it probably was, yeah, maybe the late '70s.

EG: Okay.

LD: The late '70s. My wife was on the state committee for ten years. Of course she took a--. She was elected to that and she took a leadership role there. As I say Gwen Awsumb was one of the leaders of the party from the beginning. She was very much involved. So we had a lot of women who were active and took leadership roles. I guess we've had--.

EG: You were on the first city council in which there were black members.

LD: Yeah.

EG: How did that work? Was there a good working relationship between the black and white members, or--?

LD: Really excellent.

EG: Excellent?

LD: Yeah, excellent, because we were forged together by fire. [Laughter]

EG: Oh, with the sanitation strike.

LD: Yeah, it was really--. I mean everybody was to some extent in the same boat, and we had--. But Fred Davis is still a close friend of mine. He came just last week and we went and did something we've done maybe fifty times, talk about the sanitation strike. We do a duet, you might say. [Laughter]

EG: A what?

LD: A duet. We talk about it. And Jim Netters, who was on that council, is still a very good friend of mine. I don't see him as often as I do Fred but he's still a very good

friend of mine. Now J.O. Patterson I never was close to. He was kind of a weird duck and he went on and became a minister and I haven't seen anything of him in the past fifteen years probably. But relationships were good, even among those who you might say would not agree to settle the strike. They didn't have any feelings--. The relationship with the black members was excellent.

EG: Huh. Yeah.

LD: And that one member whose wife, he ultimately became completely reconciled, you might say, to the situation, got along fine with the blacks, ran a number of times after that and was re-elected. So we did real well. Now when I had the--I say when my wife had the first party, it was one of the first I'd say mixed parties of that kind. We had them for dinner.

EG: When was this?

LD: That would have been in '67.

EG: Oh, okay, right.

LD: But about that same time, I'm not sure if it was before that or after that, we had a party for the opera singer, the black opera singer. She was in town singing with the symphony orchestra and so we had a party in our neighborhood and had blacks and whites and so on. It got a huge amount of I'd say not publicity, but attention. Then the leader of the black community, you might say, the richest man around was A. Maceo Walker who was president of the insurance company. He was a guest and he was very impressed by it, made a big thing of it, told everybody about how significant it all was. So, yes, but on that first council the relationships were excellent. I don't think the relationships are bad on the council today.

EG: Yeah, yeah, sure.

LD: I think that's a problem that has pretty much disappeared. I mean relationships among our legislators are good. They may disagree on issues but I don't think there's any black and white things at all. So that's one of the pluses, you might say, one of the real pluses, because truthfully that sets a tone for the community and it makes a situation where your white racists particularly are kind of muffled. They don't speak out very much. They know that's not the proper thing to say. They may be just as racist as ever. They may be more so. But--. [Laughter]

EG: Yeah. Well I mean I've heard that the sort of tone of civility was the reason that the White Citizens Council and Ku Klux Klan didn't develop in Memphis.

LD: That's right.

EG: Yeah.

LD: Of course the Ku Klux Klan--.

EG: And also I heard too that--.

LD: Nathan Bedford Forrest was one of the early leaders, but--and he was a Memphian--but that was way back in 1870. And the Klan here now--. Cliff Davis was a long-time Congressman and Crump man. They brought out on him that he had been a member of the Klan. He wasn't defeated until '62, I guess.

EG: Okay.

LD: No, he was defeated in '64. He lost in the primary in '64 so he survived the Crump machine a long time.

EG: Yeah, wow.

LD: And he denied all--no he didn't; he said it was just a youthful indiscretion. His great political claim to fame was he got shot when the Puerto Ricans [00:15:17]. That was his only accomplishment that I know of while he was in Congress. [Laughter]

EG: [Laughter] I know you were highly involved with the sanitation strike and that you were one of the people who wanted the strike to be settled and pushed for the strike to be settled. What do you think could have been done differently that would have made it so that things wouldn't get as out of control as they did?

LD: Well in retrospect I would think that those of us, Downing and Jerred and myself particularly--.

EG: Who was the first person you mentioned?

LD: Downing Pryor.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: And Jerred Blanchard.

EG: Okay.

LD: And myself. We needed to go out and talk to the business community and get them involved much sooner.

EG: The business community?

LD: Yeah. We didn't do that and, you know, I'd say that's the one thing we could have done. The problem was, that went on--and everywhere the mayor went he got a standing ovation. Of course he never went where there were any blacks, [Laughter] and that fed his obstinacy. Many white leaders were very anti-union and so they had a good place to hide. Of course they gradually began to realize it wasn't a union issue, that it had become a racial issue and it was very, very negative for Memphis, but it was too late

when they really got involved. The ministers got involved, some of them got involved, fairly early.

EG: The white ministers?

LD: Yeah.

EG: Okay. Why do you say that you would have, in retrospect, gone and talked to the business people?

LD: Well I think I could have--. Of course I think I'm extremely persuasive.

[Laughter]

EG: [Laughter]

LD: And I've convinced a hell of a lot of courts. [Laughter]

EG: Right. [Laughter]

LD: [Telephone rings once] Rose got it. [Laughter] But I think I could have convinced them. I think I could have convinced them, because I knew that many of them were not racists.

EG: Yeah.

LD: I also knew that they were very anti-union, and I would have had to--. I think I could have explained to them that this has gone long past a union issue and it's become a racial issue that's just dividing the community something terribly. So that's where I feel--. I really was the only one on the council who knew and could talk to on a first-name basis almost every big business leader in town.

EG: Ah. And you think the business community would have--?

LD: Downing Pryor could do it a little bit less than I, but Jerred Blanchard was a-- . Well he was a newcomer to Memphis. He'd come here after law school and so on and

so forth and he, you know, he was a lawyer but he did have a practice that involved a whole lot of big business people and that sort of thing. So that put me in a unique position, and I really didn't use it. I thought, negatively--wrongly, I should say--that what I said publicly would provide that leadership because I--. After every meeting the press wanted me to comment. I often said to them, I said, "Why do y'all always seek me out?" One girl, who's since become a very close friend of ours--doesn't live here anymore--but she said, "Well Lew, you have a very rare talent." I said, "What's that?" She said, "You can say something in thirty seconds and that's all television wants."

[Laughter]

EG: [Laughter]

LD: But anyway, so I got a huge amount of publicity and I thought that I was getting my message out from that situation. But I also was trying not to get, you might say, too far over to the strikers' side because I felt like that I was in a position to be the bridge between them, and if I got too far over to one side then I would lose credibility and they would not really be listening to what I had said. So probably I would listen to all those comments I said--. My grandson has gotten out a lot of newspaper articles about what I said during that time because I'm thinking about writing my memoirs. But I expect that what I said was restrained because I wanted to be able to keep the confidence of the white leadership, you might say, because that was essential. I think that's it. It's a --. You know you do things in life, and my two big failures are that and [being] unable to convince Tennessee that they need to reform their taxes.

But in retrospect that's what I'd say. I didn't realize I needed to get out there and make the position much clearer because what we needed was people of influence calling

up some of those white council people to get them to--. See we had two council people-- maybe three, but we had two that I know of--that said, "We agree with you, but we don't think it's our business." They were right. [Laughter] See legally speaking--. And I'd drawn--not drawn the charter; I'd been on the committee. We never dreamed that the council would get themselves involved in a labor dispute. It wasn't our responsibility. Contracting power was clearly in the mayor. He did those things. So that was the big issue. I never could get them to agree because they said, "It's the mayor's responsibility; if the mayor tells us to vote for it we'll vote for it." I even came up with this clever idea, I said, "Suppose the mayor tells you you can vote for it but he has a right to denounce you for doing so?" [Laughter] They both agreed that was okay; but the mayor wouldn't agree. [Laughter] But in retrospect that was a big mistake. The other thing that was a problem--and I didn't work on this; I never had done this--but I always had great relationships with the press, with the reporters. I never played the game of going to see the editor and all that sort of stuff, you know. I've done that since for other politicians. But the *Commercial Appeal* was a huge negative factor toward settlement.

EG: A huge what?

LD: Negative factor.

EG: Oh, okay.

LD: They were very anti-union. Frank Ahlgren, of course, had to deal with the unions. He hated unions, and so that gave him a nice place to hide, you know. So he came out with a lot of negative--. We needed to go out and really sell our story to the newspaper. It would have changed the whole thing. And that in retrospect I'd say was a-

-. But the issues were really the same. We didn't sell our story to the public sufficiently. I thought I could sell it to the council. It had a good result though. [Laughter]

EG: A good what?

LD: After that, everything I said they did. [Laughter]

EG: Oh. [Laughter] So you think--?

LD: [00:23:55] was far less important than what I didn't do there.

EG: So going to the business leaders would have put pressure on Loeb?

LD: Yeah, that's right. And of course--.

EG: And on other city council members.

LD: And well of course the minute Dr. King was shot the business leaders all [00:24:11] called up the mayor and everybody else and it just changed overnight, bam.

EG: Yeah.

LD: Because everyone suddenly realized that they were in the papers around the country and Memphis had this image as being a backwater, redneck town, and our leadership didn't care for that too much.

EG: Yeah. Before the sanitation strike?

LD: During the strike and after the strike.

EG: During the strike, yeah.

LD: Yeah. And we had this--. I organized--well Ron Terry [sp?] helped me--but I organized what we called a breakfast group. We met I think every week for weeks and weeks trying to decide what Memphis was going to do to improve its image and get itself back on track.

EG: Yeah.

LD: Every one of them realized--. I realized then that if I had talked to them earlier they would have understood the issue so much better, because every one of them understood perfectly what had happened. Everyone understood perfectly what we needed to do and everyone understood perfectly what a huge setback it was for Memphis, a huge setback. So that was a big failure on my part. We developed a wonderful system after that. Gerald Moore [sp?] was the mayor's chief administrative officer. When there was a tough issue coming up he would call me and I'd come down and discuss it with the mayor. [Loeb] was really a very reasonable person, until he made up his mind [Laughter] so I avoided many, many an issue by going down there beforehand and talking about it. But even with him my credibility was much improved because I had been telling him what the issue was and he wouldn't listen.

EG: Well I see our time is running out and I still have to go over some proper words. Is there anything else that you wanted to add at all?

LD: Well I would like to add this. One of the things that we learned from the Crump death and all is what happens when you have that kind of a dictatorial leadership. You go through a period when the city drifts, the community drifts, because there's nobody there who steps forward and there's some jockeying for position and all that sort of thing. And in the '50s and '60s really describe that period. As I say, the Democratic Party went through a period when they didn't know who they were, they had [00:26:59] leadership, they were riding on the momentum of traditional Democrat votes, and so they provided very little leadership in the community. And we elected Bill Ingram as mayor; that was a farce. He was totally unqualified. He ran on--. What his campaign tactics was, he dismissed criminal charges against blacks. [Laughter]

EG: Oh, right, right.

LD: And he took the word of the black over the policeman. When the word got out that everybody was getting off. But he got a big black vote and he was a Democrat so he got a white vote too, and it was a disaster.

But that's the kind of period we went through. I do think that what we learned is the two-party system is better, and I think we also have learned that despite all of its warts and problems, why a desegregated community is by far the better. Those are all things that we learned. I hope that we will get back to a little more, you might say, spirit of bipartisanship after you're elected. As I say, when I was commissioner in '69 and--I mean '79--it was very, very--. I worked with the Democrats extremely well. Lamar worked with them extremely well. We didn't have--. We had issues. They had partisan issues, we would fight over them [00:28:46], difference of opinion, but there was no bitterness and there was no problem that you couldn't [get] anything done if you were a Republican or anything like that. Today it's just not that way anymore. I know Lamar and I would meet with the Democrat leadership every Wednesday morning for breakfast and we'd decide what we were going to do pretty well. Sometimes we'd disagree, and if we disagree we would take it to a vote and see what happens. Most of the time though we did agree and we got things done. In today's world it's very partisan. But even, see, today the only way [Phil] Bredesen got, say, workmen's comp reform was with Republican votes.

EG: Who is this?

LD: The governor.

EG: Oh, uh huh.

LD: His big issue this time was workmen's compensation reform. He got it with Republican votes. So in Tennessee you've almost got to put together a coalition to make things work because the legislature's fairly evenly divided and you've just got to do it that way. I think that produces better government. You get both views--. And we don't seem to--. We've sort of lost the understanding that the real, true meaning of a democratic government is compromise. All issues need to be viewed from both sides and frequently I'll find--I have found in my experience--that when I start with an issue that the opposition will improve what I've proposed, because they'll take it and look at it from a different point of view than I can and do look at it.

EG: Right, right.

LD: And you find--. That's one of the joys of the democratic form because you have so many different points of view and they really add light on the subject, and you get a better result. That's what we need to get back to. I don't know how we're going to do it. Of course the real curse of federal politics today is money is everything. The worst curse that I see on the horizon is these guys that are being elected because they've just got all the money in the world and they just elect themselves with their money, and I think that's a real bad thing. Another thing I think is a bad thing though is handed down from family--generation to generation.

EG: You mean cycle of poverty?

LD: Like Bush; like the Roosevelts; like the Kennedys.

EG: Oh, oh, okay, the politicians.

LD: The second and third generation, you know. I think that's a bad thing. It tends to create a political class, and that's not what our republic is about. It's not about a

political class. It's not about a ruling class. Because you're getting back almost to the situation that you had in Europe where, you know, even after World War II, nobody but the upper class ever participated in it. Some of them were labor and some of them were liberal, but they were not--. The ordinary people just weren't involved in being elected to parliament and things like that. I think that's a very, very bad trend. And I believe in democracy to that extent. I just don't believe that every issue, particularly complex ones, should be decided by poll, which is just not an intelligent way to decide an issue, in my view. Issues need to be debated; they need to be, you might say, put together; compromises need to be developed and so on; and I think--my experience is--that the results are better than one side just winning exactly what it wants. I'll say to you, you know, why did I become a Republican, that's why. I say today sometimes I wonder why I am one. [Laughter] I'm not a--. I'm a strong supporter of Bush, but there are some of the Republicans way over there on the right that I just find very hard to deal with them. They're hung up on issues that really are not issues of government.

All right. Well I said I'd be free until 4:00. I enjoyed it thoroughly, as you can tell.

EG: Oh, well, it's wonderful to--

LD: Very flattering, very flattering to--.

EG: --hear your perspect--.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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