

Governor McNair Oral History Project
South Carolina Department of Archives and History

Interview

with

Robert E. McNair

Interviewer:

Cole Blease Graham

Date:

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CBG: This is Tape 18, Side 1, an interview with Governor Robert E. McNair for the McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Today's date is February 28, 1983. Governor, we were talking about various problems of coordination and development in higher education. What did you devise or think about in an approach to a higher education commission as the potential coordinating body?

REM: Well, we've talked around that question before, but from looking around the country at what had developed and what was developing and what seemed to be working best and then focusing in on South Carolina and looking at our organizational structure and at the politics of the situation, we determined that the best course was to take the old defunct coordinating commission for higher education, strengthen it's authority, and reactivate it with very strong members, and thus utilize it to coordinate our efforts as we moved toward what we liked to think about at that time was sort of a three-level, tri-level system, the vocational-technical or the two-year programs, then that middle level of the four-year liberal arts colleges which Winthrop, State, and The Citadel had to fit into, and then the two universities.

I think we've said earlier, too, we felt fortunate that we only had two universities in South Carolina and didn't have a proliferation of them like North Carolina did and some of the others. We felt comfortable not only knowing the political realities, but we felt comfortable in letting them have their own separate boards and sort of functioning as institutions under the umbrella, but still as they had in the past. We saw no deep concern or no deep problems over duplications and all because, if you only have two, duplications really help more than they hurt, I felt. We could support two engineering schools. We could support two graduate programs in education even. It wasn't a real serious problem, and we controlled the professional schools. We had only one law school; we had only one school of forestry, one school of architecture. We felt we were very fortunate in that we didn't have a real problem of proliferation. It was mainly a problem of strengthening the two institutions and making them fit in and develop more on the graduate level and become real universities.

It was my concern that they had operated more as higher level colleges than as universities in the past. Graduate programs were woefully weak and nonexistent in a lot of essential areas. The professional schools were weak really and not recognized to any great extent, even in the region. It was my concern that we as a state couldn't continue to grow and to take the place we wanted to take without really strengthening the university level, and I suppose, as has been said recently, we put a priority on higher education and a particular priority at the university level and the graduate level.

CBG: How did you view the configuration of this strengthened commission?

REM: Well, what we really wanted were--we felt and I still feel that when you get into a problem like education, with the complexities of it, and trying to deal with regionalism in the state and deal with the internal politics in higher education, you have to have people on that commission who had name recognition themselves, that is, prominent, well-known, successful, respected business people who had credibility out there, the kinds of people that when they came through with a decision would bring political and public support to it. I felt like we didn't need--no reflection on them, but we didn't need public school teachers and principals on the Higher Education Commission or political people to any great extent. We needed what people recognized as outstanding business folks, people who everybody would have enough confidence in them to know that they had both the educational and business background to make the kinds of decisions that could be supported and should be supported. So we sort of picked those kinds of people and picked them also with an idea of their having influence in certain areas like the private schools, which had a great concern over their future, both from our beefing up the state system and the competition that would come from that and at the same time our doing things that would strengthen them, like turning out people from our professional schools who could go back in and teach and help them develop their programs. So naturally we looked for somebody to serve on that board who the presidents of Furman, Presbyterian, and Wofford would recognize as a friend of theirs and somebody that wasn't totally committed to public higher education but yet a person that was going to put first things first.

Then we had problems in the Charleston area with The Citadel and the College of Charleston. What do you do with The Citadel as a part of this system? How do you bring the College of Charleston in? Do you bring it in as a Ivy League university, you know, which was how some of them looked on it, as what it was fifty years ago, or do you bring it in and convert it from an elite school for the very, very upper class to a real part of the liberal arts education and open it up to people in that region? We looked up someone from that area that the community would respect and that had a broad perspective and yet had credibility with the community.

The same thing here with Clemson and [the University of South] Carolina. We had to be conscious of everything we'd ever done. You know, does this help Clemson and hurt Carolina or vice versa? So we really looked for people who had less affiliation with them than we did for those who had affiliation with them. We looked for folks who had not had a real affiliation with either one of them, but yet were people that were looked on as being solid people, solid supporters of higher education, who recognized what we needed to do. So that was sort of the way we approached the thing, was to get away from the competition between the two majors and assurances from everybody else that this was really going to be a commission that was going to look at South Carolina first and sort of fit the institutions into a system and into programs that we thought were going to really be best and most beneficial to the state.

CBG: Were you able to find such people?

REM: We really were. We were able to pull people in that had never served before on boards and commissions. I think I've alluded to Alester Furman from Greenville, Bob Vance from Clinton, Craig Wall, Sr., from down in Conway, John Lumpkin, Sr., from here in Columbia, just to name a few, that kind of person who really brought a lot of instant credibility and instant recognition that this was going to be a real commission this time and that we were really going to accomplish things.

CBG: How did all this change or proposed change go over with the legislature?

REM: It went over extremely well. They were just as concerned. I had been in there, so I had suffered from the lack of something like this in having to sit, really, as a member of the board of trustees of all the institutions and having to make judgment decisions that we really didn't have a good basis for making. So they welcomed it and were very supportive, very supportive of changing a word here and a word there in the act that was already there that really strengthened it, gave it approval power over new programs, gave it review power over budgets, and really got it into, from the beginning, being what we wanted it to be, a real strong coordinating commission. So we had strong support. We had some apprehension on the part of the university level people because, you know, this was an infringement on what had been their autonomous, independent terrain before. They had always sort of enjoyed coming to Columbia without anybody looking over their shoulder and using their own influence to get what they wanted, not all bad, but at the same time without anybody trying to help coordinate the activities and determine how best to approach the overall picture.

CBG: Were staff available?

REM: That, of course, was one of the problems. They staffed up with perhaps some good people, fairly competent, technical people--no reflection on the individual--but, for instance, they started out with Frank Kinard, whose father had been president of Newberry College. Frank was down at the Savannah River Plant, totally unknown in the educational community and certainly never recognized at the higher level, at the university level. He was the first director, and he used sort of a technician-type approach, and that is what we didn't want to do. My feeling was that I had gone out and searched for these very prominent businessmen, people who had not served before and didn't want to be a part of something that was just going to be another commission.

So shortly, we recognized that if the commission was going to function, the top staff person had to be somebody on the same level of the university presidents. He had to be a peer of theirs, somebody they recognized, somebody they respected, and thus I personally went to the commission with the problem. I said we had to have a staff to do this job, and I recommended that [James] Jim Morris be brought in from the university to really be the commissioner. Jim brought an awful lot to it, and I really give him more credit than anybody else in making the commission what it was. It became controversial certainly, but it began to function. If the university wanted to start up a new program, it had to run the course, and it had to pass through a peer-level examination. If it was a new course in engineering, Jim would assemble a committee of distinguished engineers from other institutions to review it. If it hadn't been properly thought out, hadn't been properly planned, if it was not something that was going to meet a need, they looked hard at it and sent it back or declined to approve it. That caused problems. That had never happened before. That kind of thing began to create problems, but I think so long as I was there, the commission enjoyed strong support and had good solid support from the legislature.

My recollection is that about everything they did moved us along in trying to coordinate the whole program and to get the various levels of education doing what they were supposed to be doing. That is, we assured technical education and they assured us that its primary responsibility was manpower training and development in a broad spectrum, not a college parallel. Two-year programs were really for college parallel, not to get into the TEC system. We tried to coordinate them, and I think the commission was able to do it to some extent along at that time.

CBG: Was something like the debate over the engineering course the typical controversy?

REM: Well, you know, I'll have to say back then the typical controversy was Carolina and Clemson. Really, it wasn't whether it was a good engineering program or whether it wasn't. It was who was doing it and whether one was treading on the other's territory and things of that nature. That's what I felt we had to get away from if we were ever going to really accomplish things. We had to get out of just, you know, you vote for Carolina, or you vote for Clemson, or you support Carolina, or you support Clemson, to you support a program that ought to be at Clemson or a program that ought to be at the university or you beef up a program because it ought to be beefed up, you know, not because one was for it or against it. That was awfully difficult and still is.

CBG: Yes. Maybe it's a little too much of a political science argument, but at least one of the old criticisms is that in the legislature there are alumni clubs. There's a Clemson club and a Carolina club and a Citadel club, but in the absence of women and blacks, there's nobody to be an advocate for Winthrop or State

College or other institutions. The point of my question is, do you think the Commission on Higher Education was able to advocate a broader availability, a broader distribution of resources?

REM: I think it did, and I think it's made some significant contributions because it has discouraged Carolina and Clemson from getting into everything or encouraged them into getting out of some things. I recall with Winthrop and Clemson they were able to work out the agricultural home economics area and resolve that to some extent. Carolina and Winthrop were able to work on some business and masters programs and things of that nature. I think it defused to some extent the fight in the legislature, you know, the voting levels between the two universities, even. It helped to a great extent to defuse that though it will always exist.

The state college board never really became what I wanted it to be. Even with all of the four-year colleges except The Citadel, we didn't get what we were looking for. But I think you can see from the development of the College of Charleston and Francis Marion and Lander what might have been, had that board--and of course, we would have put all of the boards together to form a new one so none of them would have been left out--what might have been with them under it, and State and Winthrop as part of that four-year college program. I still think it would have been much better. I think we'd had a much better system and been able to work that out, but it did help.

It did focus attention on what Winthrop ought to be, and I think the commission supported the move to coeducational education up there so that it could become more a regional school than just a women's college. A lot of us had some concerns over that. There's always room for a women's college and always room for a Citadel and things of that nature, but we felt that there was more room for them as a part of an integrated system than there was with them going their separate ways and doing their own thing. Of course, with Winthrop, we needed to open it up. The first thing we did was open it up to non-boarding male students. It had been doing that, but that really opened it up initially, to let them become, as I say, that regional school.

CBG: Was there ever any advocacy or any thought about a complete centralization of higher education?

REM: Yes, there was a lot of discussion of that. For years we had debated it in the legislature and constantly had legislation proposed that would have created a so-called board of regents with full and complete control. That never really got anywhere because in those you really had the political problem that made it an impossibility and not realistic to accomplish. When you talked about one board and the elimination of local boards, you also had the political situation, not only in the legislature but in the politics

of the institutions. That's why we concluded that the best thing to do was to go with the coordinating commission. That, we felt, was something we could accomplish.

CBG: How did you coordinate the development of facilities with these developments and programs? In other words, was there a problem with the capital development of higher education?

REM: Well, there was; the same problem. There was a real problem. It had always been, you know, everybody coming for their own needs, and everybody coming with their own documentation and support. We'd gotten concerned about that particular problem and had what I think was the first outside group come in and do a space utilization study because we wanted to determine really what the problem was and where it was. That study was very revealing and interesting. Also, we had the problem that had developed over the years of funding, taking care of all of these various needs. That's where, with that space study and with looking at how you would finance this, the whole space problem was dealt with.

The Facilities Act came to authorize the colleges and universities to use their dormitory fees--that was your revenue support for dormitories--and then tuition to support facilities. But even with that, we felt like we needed to look and see, not just have an open-ended goal and build whatever they thought they needed, and that was the space utilization study. It was most revealing because it surprised us to determine that the university had the best space utilization of the institutions and that several of them had more space than they really needed if they'd properly utilize it. The problem was to find no real space utilization in-house activities. You had a facility that was built for something and was used three hours a day for that, that's all it was used for. There was no internal coordination of space or internal control of space. I think the study itself stimulated everybody to get more conscious of using their space better and sort of coordinating the use of space on campus. We discovered that kids would have, you know, in the same school or college, a class on one side of the campus at 8:00 and have one on the other side of the campus at 9:00. There really had been no effort to try to pull things together and to coordinate, and I hope we stimulated some internal look at that kind of thing and better internal utilization.

CBG: Did the same personnel manage the development of facilities as managed the development of programs? By that I mean, were there separate commissions with separate staffs?

REM: Well, the facilities was a separate program administered more by the Budget and Control Board. The Budget and Control Board staff looked more at that. As the commission came on, we began to coordinate more through the commission, but the Facilities Act was there and was sort of overviewed by the Budget and

Control Board staff. That's why we brought in and had that study. Really it was done under the auspices of the Budget and Control Board.

CBG: Would you characterize this facilities development as being a modernization of South Carolina that was different from what was going on in other states?

REM: Yes, I think we were one of the pioneers in that. I think we sort of started early with that approach to campus facilities.

CBG: Would you characterize it as a pay-as-you go plan?

REM: You had to make it pay, and we felt that that was a good way to do it. We'd reached a point where housing, you know, should have been more on a take-care-of-yourself basis, and when we did that, that put some control on itself. That helped put a lid on because without growth--you know, people couldn't just go and build new facilities if they didn't need them because they wouldn't have the support. There's no way the students living in a brand new dormitory could pay for it by and of themselves. The student rentals and student revenues from other facilities would help take care of that. State College for instance couldn't do that, couldn't support that. We still found in those days--and that was in the early stages--that the state had to just go ahead and appropriate and authorize facilities for them to sort of get them up, really, more than anything else, to a level with the other institutions.

The use of tuition to support the other facilities on the campus also was a very good thing, but at the same time, you know, the state had to pick up, was still picking up, the tab for it, but it did let the schools do some long-range planning which they'd not been able to do prior to that and let them use tuition and dormitory rentals to move forward with that. We had no higher education facilities act as such other than that. We had no capital improvements program in the state. If somebody came along with a need, it was dealt with on that basis. There was no coordination of that, and everybody was sort of going their way, and that's why again it was a part of that study and was a part of the Moody Report. We determined that we needed to coordinate all capital improvements and pull it all in and do it in an organized, orderly way and that we shouldn't have to pass a whole new separate bond issue act every time it came along. So we came up with the first capital improvements program. In the future, you just had to add the project to it. You didn't have to go back through the whole mechanics of it.

CBG: And the Budget and Control Board was the governing authority.

REM: The Budget and Control Board was the governing authority.

CBG: From the usual perspective . . .

REM: And we didn't do what they do now. We didn't just approve a whole bunch of projects and then let them sit for ten years. If it wasn't needed, we didn't approve it, and if it was needed, we approved it under the capital improvements program, and we let it move forward in an orderly way, and the control on it was the debt limit. We wouldn't let our debt limit exceed a certain amount. So we had controls that way, plus the fact that the Budget and Control Board really exercised its authority.

CBG: From the perspective of the governor as chief executive and with a university president as a prominent executive, what was your experience with the role of university presidents? Did that change with all of these administrative changes going on?

REM: Well, I think it changed, yes, I think it changed to a great extent. I really believe they had to begin to look more at South Carolina than they had before. The breadth of their vision before had been the bounds of their own campuses, and I think this caused them all to look out and understand more what everybody else was doing and what the state really needed and see that there was a developing program, some long-range planning going on, and to fit their own institution into that. Again, that was the reason that we put the chairman of the board of each state institution on that commission. We didn't want the president, and we said the chairman of the board or his designated board member. We didn't feel that we could have the president sitting around the table, but we wanted the board members sitting around the table as the Higher Education Commission functioned to give each institution some input. By having a board member, we recognized that we were getting a top person who could look beyond his own institution hopefully and look at the big picture.

CBG: Do you think a university president could be a political executive as well as an academic leader at the same time, or did you hope that the board member could serve by negotiating the political needs and the university president could be a leader at home without getting beat up in all these battles?

REM: We really hoped that's what would happen. I'm not sure it did because we have always had strong university presidents who were deeply involved. I don't suppose we ever thought you'd get away from them being both, you know, political and academic. They had to learn to deal. If they couldn't, as we know, they stayed in deep trouble and really didn't accomplish as much. [Robert C.] Bob Edwards was a good

illustration of a fellow who, you know, was strong on the political side and worked real hard at it and ran his institution administratively. [Thomas] Tom Jones was more of the intellectual who sort of let things run in a different sort of way on the campus but gained some respect because of his intellectual capacity and what he brought to the university. He still had serious problems. He just couldn't live in the political world, and when he did, he had his problems. He got beat up pretty bad on occasions.

END OF SIDE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO

CBG: This is Tape 18, Side 2, an interview with Governor Robert E. McNair as a part of the McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Today's date is February 28, 1983. Governor did you find in working with higher education that there was perhaps a tension between the development of South Carolina universities in a national sense as opposed to a state sense? In other words, was there a danger of just moving the fence one step out rather than opening?

REM: I think so. When you got out, by being involved nationally, you also got a different view of South Carolina, and you began to understand really how deep some of our problems were. Donald Russell was an education governor because he'd been president of the university, but I suppose next to him, I had an opportunity to look at the national scene and sort of look back at us as well as anybody by reason of being active in the Southern Regional Education Board and by being a part of putting together the Education Commission of the States, which looked at education across the whole. You know, SREB was higher education, and that's normally what you looked at, but with the Education Commission, you got involved with the whole spectrum of education from pre-school all the way through the graduate level, and it threw you in with people from the national level. You ran into folks that you gained a lot of respect for.

Clark Kerr from California came in and did some studies for us at the Southern Regional Education Board. Having the opportunity to sit on a couple of committees with him to me was a very broadening experience because he was one of the outstanding men in higher education during this whole period of time in our history. Dr. Friday from up at the University of North Carolina became a very close friend and almost an adviser. I would pick him and talk with him, and, you know, raise questions with him and get his insight and even on one occasion explored the possibility of bringing him to South Carolina, thinking of what somebody like him might have done for us if we could have brought him in and put him down over the whole thing here. He's really one of the outstanding men in higher education in this country. He had a lot to do with a lot of my approaches, like going to the coordinating commission rather than the board of regents. I don't want to tell stories on him, but I think he felt it functioned better. You know, some of the things that you wanted to do in some of the areas of greatest concern in higher education were coming from people like

that. The former president of the University of Tennessee, Andy Holt, again, one of those outstanding men, sat on several boards and commissions and was then chairman of the association that accredited colleges and universities. I got close to him and sat on a couple of committees with him.

I just use those as an illustration of what you got. So, yes, we began to look at South Carolina from other people's eyes as well as from what we thought we had to do, and we began to realize that we had to have institutions that could compete and were recognized regionally. So the approach was to try to help develop the two universities to the extent that they could compete regionally. Our business school was to me sort of an essential ingredient in South Carolina as we grew economically and we brought in new business and industry. We had to have a good, strong business school. It was good, but it was not recognized regionally and certainly not nationally. By some special emphasis on providing facilities and all of that and then, of course, their going out and bringing in the business community, they're now one of the top institutions, at least in the Southeast, and I think in some programs are recognized nationally.

The College of Engineering at Carolina and Clemson--at Clemson, textile engineering and some of the other areas had grown and developed and naturally had a national reputation, but it was admitted that, North Carolina State was a lot stronger in many of those areas than Clemson was. It bothered me that we had so many folks who felt like they had to go to NC State. We didn't have a forestry school. We felt like we had to have one because when you looked at South Carolina, there was so much involved in forest products. We had a College of Agriculture, but we didn't have a School of Forestry. So we moved into that, plus veterinary medicine and all of those things. We began to look at it as the fact that South Carolina couldn't just function as an island unto itself, and unless we had some programs or schools within the universities that were recognized as comparable to Chapel Hill and Charlottesville and Athens, we really were sort of treading water.

CBG: Did you feel like you were perhaps defending the runt of the litter among southern states? [laughter]

REM: You know, we'd begun to emerge. I have to say for a period there we used to say, "Thank the Lord for Mississippi," but everybody else said, "Thank the Lord for Mississippi and South Carolina." I really sort of shuddered when I heard that and felt that we'd begun to come, and I go back to Mr. [James] Byrnes, coming home and being governor. Here was a recognition nationally, and we needed that to build on economically. Regardless of the problems of integration, the sales tax gave us a recognition nationally for an educational revolution, and people began to look and see South Carolina as emerging, South Carolina's coming, and once we got over the politics of that period and became accepted as being a moderate, you know, sort of a leader and all, then I think we began to make even greater progress.

CBG: Did these regional associations result in any federal legislation? Did you come up with specific proposals?

REM: Well, we had input, and we tried to influence it. We would determine positions and then various ones would go to Washington and testify in the hearings. I recall then we were always concerned about these specific categorical grant-in-aid programs. They were designed because some congressman or some senator had a problem in his state, and he wanted to deal with it. Well, not all of us had the same problem. So we were constantly trying to get the Congress to broaden and not put us in a straitjacket. We were constantly going to talk about what really needed to be done in the areas where we needed federal support. So I suppose we did have influence in that we began to support federal funding, particularly in the higher education levels. We felt we needed it there. We felt that those institutions were serving more than just their own state borders and that people were moving around, so there was more of a justification for federal support at that level.

CBG: Across the board now, do you feel when you left office that you had basically gotten into place the mechanisms and the basic approaches that would develop South Carolina educationally from kindergarten through graduate education?

REM: Yes, I really did. I really do feel that we'd sort of done that because we'd looked at it broadly and tried to get things into place. We'd gone with a pretty big program with the taxes to support that program and felt that we'd gotten higher education, with the coordinating commission and all, in place. We didn't accomplish everything, but nobody ever does, but by and large I felt pretty comfortable about it. Like everybody, you know, you had some apprehension about what was going to happen down the road, but we felt that we had it in place.

END OF TAPE