

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

Interview

with

Robert E. McNair

Interviewer:

Cole Blease Graham

Date:

May 16, 1983

CBG: This is Tape 22, Side 1, 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 May 16, 1983. Governor, could you generally describe the circumstances, the feelings, and the attitudes, of the major participants in the Charleston hospital situation?

REM: Well, I think we started off by saying we had an attitudinal problem there. I don't think the working relationships were as good as they should be. What we discovered later was there was perhaps an overstaffing of the hospital. The work rules were not good. So we had a generally bad situation there. Nothing took place to improve it along the way. It sort of hit us, as most things did, rather cold, actually, with the firing of a number of employees. That precipitated the real uprising down there; I suppose you'd call it. It'd been obviously festering for a good while. With the firing then came the walk off the job. From there it just became sort of a national issue, really, with the effort to organize the workers rather than to solve the working problems that we had down there.

CBG: Was the firing unique because of the people who were fired, or was it the event itself, the number that was fired?

REM: You know, really when you look back at it, I don't think there was over six or eight people . . .

CBG: Six is what I remember.

REM: . . . I think it was six people that were terminated, and if you'd looked at that just by and of itself, [there's] no way that could have precipitated what happened down there. Obviously, there'd been some unrest going on for sometime, and, if anything, some bad relationships existed. Obviously there'd been an effort to organize the work force down there. With that there was a strong feeling that the five had been fired as a retaliation against the efforts on the part of some to organize the work force. I think that's the way it sort of got blown up and from there on into where it got the national attention and all.

CBG: Was the walk-off a spontaneous occurrence, or do you think that was organized?

REM: Well, it's hard to say. It can be spontaneous in a situation like that. I have a feeling that just like a lot of the civil rights problems we had were spontaneous--some of them were well planned, of course, and orchestrated, but many of them were spontaneous, one little thing and then it blows out of proportion, and everybody sort of either walks out or everybody starts demonstrating. There I think it was a combination.

As we look back on it, as we find out more about it, we discover that there was more of an organized effort down there to get some things done and to improve some work rules, to get better pay and all of those things, blacks in better jobs, and it all was festering. I suppose it was partially spontaneous, really.

CBG: Do you have any idea or theory about how it is that in a state agency such a thing as this could happen?

REM: Well, you know, I suppose you look back and the fact is that it just had gone on and operated like that for so long. Nobody paid a whole lot of attention to those kinds of complaints that were coming. We almost had the same thing here at the Mental Health Commission. It had been sort of festering along. Work rules, positions, promotions, pay, all of that was in there. You have to recall back at that time we really had no personnel system, no classification system, and we were just beginning to develop one. In fact, we had just gotten into it at that time. Everybody had their own, and everybody operated on their own, and we in Columbia didn't know much about what was going on until something happened.

CBG: And that was really a tradition, too, that the state government stayed out of state agencies.

REM: We tried to. I think that part of the philosophy in this state of having boards and commissions set policy and be responsible for policy decisions. In some places it all either came out of the governor's office or out of some centralized state headquarters. With us we let the boards and commissions really run the agencies and departments through the people that they hired.

CBG: Would you say, at about this time, that state government, in the case of South Carolina, was still, as some observers would describe it, the sleeping giant, that is, that the state government really hadn't awakened to its responsibilities and resources?

REM: Oh, yes, I think so. Really we were just beginning to find it. We were getting into planning. We were really determining that state government had to get more involved, that it really had to begin to coordinate activities at the state level. Not only did we recognize that there was authority and power at the state level, but it had to be exercised, and people had to begin to operate as a state government and not as a bunch of autonomous agencies going their separate ways, not communicating, not cooperating, not coordinating their efforts.

CBG: Did you find then that it was difficult to establish an initiative over the situation in Charleston? Were state officials looked on as, let's say, as intruders by locals?

REM: Well, it was difficult, and the problem was that when you get something that had been festering. It erupted, and that's when we got it. That's what happened in this situation. So there we were confronted with a situation that had already erupted. Positions had hardened, attitudes were worst than they were before, and, you know, you had to deal with it in that atmosphere. It was awfully hard to get any of the real root causes. What caused this? How did this thing really happen, and how did it get so out of control and out of hand? We knew there had been efforts down there, apparently, to organize and, as I say, we wondered why H99B chose Charleston and chose the Medical University rather than one of the private hospitals, other than it was ripe for it. You know, conditions were such that apparently it was ready for something like this, and they didn't anticipate the ultimate. They were just looking at the immediate situation and personnel problems and all that existed there, to find a real good spot to move in very quickly.

CBG: When you moved on the situation in Charleston then from the state level, what did you find? Were there union organizers on the scene?

REM: Yes, they were there, and they were signing up and had people pretty well signed up, particularly among the nonprofessionals. I mean, that's naturally where they were working, in the nonprofessionals, and found strong support among the black workers naturally. They had them pretty well signed, organized, and ready to stay out on strike until they got issues resolved. Of course, there were two sets of issues down there. One was with jobs and better work relationships, and the other was recognition and bargaining. We were caught in the middle of trying to improve the work relationships and improve the working conditions and get that in better shape without getting ourselves in trouble over on the legal side where it came to negotiating or recognition and bargaining. So we tried quickly to define the areas and make it clear by an enunciation of a state policy that the state was neither going to recognize a union nor engage in collective bargaining. Now we didn't say and didn't intend to say that people couldn't join if they wanted to and belong if they wanted to, but that in the public sector we weren't going to recognize a union, and we weren't going to engage in collective bargaining. So from those two points, you were out there, and there wasn't anything we could do about it. That caused the prolonged effort. I think that's where H99B almost felt that they had to succeed in that or lose something nationally, and our attitude was that there just wasn't anything that was negotiable.

CBG: There's no movement or sympathy in the legislature to change the state's position on it?

REM: There was absolutely none. There was, if anything, unanimity on the part of the General Assembly. After I had issued that policy decision and enunciated a policy, the legislature by resolution ratified it. It didn't pass into law, but it, by enunciation of the governor and by resolution affirming the policy, became an official state policy.

CBG: Was there any fear of perhaps a move in the United States courts to question the state's policy? There's really no legal basis for it.

REM: Well, there's no legal basis for it really. There was no effort to really get into that. It was mostly pressure, and a test of will power, I think, is what it got down to, and, of course, Charleston, being the kind of city it was, was a great concern to us because we had people from everywhere coming in, getting into it, participating in it. Walter Reuther coming down and leading marching demonstrations, just about everybody you could think of that was a national labor leader. We had some of the Catholic nuns and one or two of the bishops get involved on the side of the workers and, of course, on the side of the union.

That caused it to be a long, prolonged, strike. Had it not been for that, the thing could have been ended much earlier. The end result was about what it could have been within a matter of weeks. Let the people go back to work. Commit that we're going to work toward improving work relations and work rules, and develop a better classification/compensation system down there, and streamline employment. I think we recognized that that was a part of it. Nobody was going to be fired because of their activities, but at the same time we were going to work toward streamlining the operations down there and get rid of the overpopulation of people.

CBG: Did you assign state level personnel to help work out this plan?

REM: Well just about everybody was involved in it. We were directly in communications with Dr. [William] McCord, who was head of the hospital, Dr. Coburn, who was then his number-two guy, was very instrumental in helping resolve it. He was a rather strong administrator. We sent Earl Ellis, who had come into South Carolina to head up the personnel system, down there to take a look at it. He gave us the report that things had not been good, were not good, and had to be improved. So we recognized we had problems and we had some justification of the part of the workers. At the same time that wasn't the way to solve it.

CBG: You mentioned a moment ago concern among the people of Charleston. What was the concern about the possibility for violence?

REM: That was a very, very strong concern.

CBG: It's not a good city to start a riot in. [chuckles]

REM: Charleston is a wooden city. It was a place you couldn't afford to have one, and thus we had to take precautions to keep people out of those areas. We really pretty much sealed off the old city by using the national guard and all and prevented any of the demonstrations from taking place down in there and tried to keep them out in the areas where they could march and could congregate without the risk of either violence or a fire. Both of them were of equal concern to us because one fire in the wrong place and you'd have a terrible time there. Fortunately we were able to avoid it. I think one thing that most of the national leaders who came in shared with us is they didn't want violence, they didn't want to get caught up in violence, and we didn't either.

CBG: It would have hurt their case, too.

REM: It would have hurt their case, and none of them wanted to get in the middle of it. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, you know, took it on as a major project with Dr. [Ralph] Abernathy. That's when Andy Young was emerging, and that's where we really discovered him because he was a very bright, articulate young leader who tried to keep himself elevated above the levels that had normally been. I think none of us were surprised to see him emerge in a leadership role later on. Abernathy at that time was losing, you know, losing his strength, losing his power, and tried to use this as a place to get back again. He'd gotten in bad health. In fact, he spent some time under a doctor's care down there.

CBG: What was going on in your office during this time? I mean, did you involve yourself in this around the clock?

REM: Pretty much. This was the big issue of the time. We had direct communications with everybody down there. We were getting direct reports from [J. Preston] Pete Strom on the one hand. We were getting direct reports from the attorney general, and we were getting direct reports from people out of our office who were there coordinating. We were also having communications with Dr. McCord and his people. So it was one of those things where, yes, you were in communications all the time with them. It sort of preoccupied your time during that period.

CBG: What is the protocol during a time like this? How do you establish jurisdiction? Who's in charge?

REM: Well, you know, that's the thing we usually sort of established early because I can recall in the first few instances or trouble spots that we had problems of who's in charge. So we established pretty early that when it got beyond local control and we were called in, we were in charge.

CBG: That was the definition, if you were called in.

REM: Once we got involved, then we were in charge, and we had to be in charge. Under the plan we had, Pete Strom really became the guy in charge of all the security, including the National Guard. Everybody sort of worked under his supervision. They had their own internal team set up where they were constantly meeting and always together and always in touch so that nobody went off on their own, nobody got out of hand or precipitated a problem. We worked closely with the local enforcement people. Sometimes we would take them out of it because they were so close to it, and we knew they had to stay back and live and work together afterwards. So occasionally we'd take them out of it totally and just let them go on with their normal day-to-day activities in Charleston. They had Chief Conroy, who was one of the outstanding police chiefs in the country, and he worked very closely with Pete Strom and the National Guard as far as security and maintaining protection for the areas in Charleston and the people down there. Also, one of the big things we always had in matters of this kind was protecting the demonstrators or the strikers. We felt that was a thing we had to be very careful about. The last thing we wanted is somebody to do something from the outside to trigger a problem. So it was a matter of protecting them and avoiding any problems happening that would precipitate an explosion or something of that kind.

CBG: Did you or Chief Strom have a series or something like a tiering effect?

REM: Well, that depended on the circumstances really. The highway patrol, depending on the circumstances, was utilized when we thought there was a need and a place for them. They had been put through the FBI-sponsored riot control training programs and operated in squads which had trained together and continued that training under supervision. So they were awfully good when you needed an emergency force in a hurry to assemble them and get them in. The National Guard was extremely good when you had to have security for a large area, and we would use them and ended up using them in Charleston because we sort of sealed off the old city to keep things from happening in that area. So it depended on what the problem was as to whom we would utilize. The SLED [State Law Enforcement Division] agents, of course, were your real plain clothes investigators who were always finding out what's happening and where things are about to happen or who's coming in and all of that. They worked very closely with everybody. They mostly

worked around the hospital because there you didn't want the highway patrol in uniform or the National Guard, but the SLED agents, being plainclothes people, could work better in and around the hospital than could some of the others.

CBG: Were you able to establish communications with the strike leaders?

REM: We were able in just about every serious incident we had to have communications. We always had people close to the scene or people who could communicate with them. We had in Charleston Herbert Fielding and some others in the black community who were working closely with us to try to keep the thing under control and keep it from getting out of hand and at the same time working feverishly to try to develop some communications and bring the thing to an end. At the same time, I normally had communications, developed through Hugh Lane, who was then chairman of the C&S Bank, with Bill Saunders. Bill is now a very prominent black leader in Charleston. At that time, he was on the island. He had Stokely Carmichael visit him, so people looked on Bill as being a militant. He had confidence in Hugh Lane, so Mr. Lane could communicate with him. He was really the key down there because Mary Moultrie, who was the leader of the hospital workers and who led the strike and led the demonstrations was close to Bill Saunders. With that communications we were able to develop a direct relationship with them.

I can recall my first sit-down conference with Bill Saunders. That was arranged through Hugh Lane and Chief Strom, and I flew into Charleston and met him in the conference room at Hawthorne Aviation. We met there to get away from the city. Bill was there, dressed in his white pants with his rope belt and all, and we had a rather tense first meeting, but chatted a little bit. It normally was my pattern, before I got into discussions to try to determine if I could develop a relationship with them and maybe ease the tension. And I can recall when I met him, it was, "What in the so-and-so are you doing creating all of those problems for me down here when I'm just across the river over in Hell Hole Swamp, one of your lowcountry fellows." We really started talking, and he turned around to Pete Strom and those and said, "He ain't a mean old bear, after all," as he had been describing me. We had a very good, very productive meeting in which we were able to talk, and I was able to explain to him the position we were in and the predicament we were in as far as union recognition was concerned, while on the other hand we were concerned about the workers. We wanted to try to resolve the thing, we recognized there were problems, and we recognized that something had to be done about it, but we couldn't do it in an atmosphere of confrontation where we were caught up like we were. From that we had other communications--and occasionally he would want to come to Columbia and SLED would bring him to Columbia--and he and I would have a direct conversation. I give him an awful lot of credit for being perhaps the key figure in ultimately defusing the situation and getting it in a posture where we could resolve it.

Bill had been a leader. All these national figures had come in. They had sort of taken over, and they'd shoved people like him and some of the others aside almost and made this a national thing, but I'm not sure they really intended or wanted it, and later discovered they didn't want it. I also had a meeting in the office with Mary Moultrie and her committee, at my suggestion that I'd be happy to sit down with her. There was a lot of concern then, legally, about direct meetings being considered recognition and all of that. The labor lawyers were involved, and we finally told them to get the labor lawyers out of there, that the governor had enunciated a policy and I had made it very clear, and with that I didn't think communications was going to create any legal problem for us. So Mary Moultrie and her committee came up, had a conference with me in the governor's office. I thought it went well. We had a very pleasant meeting. We had a very frank discussion. And later, we discovered that it was one of those almost staged conferences because right toward the end as I thought we were communicating well, Mary Moultrie got up and said, "Governor, I bid you a fair adieu. We didn't expect to get anything when we came, and we got nothing. Good-bye, sir." And she walked out of the office.

Pete Strom was an unusual fellow. He developed that close tie through Hugh Lane with Bill Saunders and with others and soon we were able to get the local people and get Mary Moultrie through Bill Saunders and others to defuse the thing and get them back to work. A lot of people have taken credit for it. I read Harry Dent's book where he settled the hospital strike in Charleston. My only comment has been I wish he'd told us that he was settling it and was doing it. President [Richard] Nixon did express concern, did want to send the federal mediators down and all of that. We didn't think we needed that. We said we'd take all the help we can get, but didn't want to make this thing any bigger than it is. By then we were getting close, and I think the bottom line was, as you usually get in things like this, when you're dealing with people like we were dealing with them, agreeing to let everybody go back to work, agreeing to improve the work conditions, developing a good salary schedule and giving people an opportunity to improve if they could. That was basically what it was. We ended up doing what we probably were in the process of doing in the beginning because we were then, you know, getting into our compensation/classification system statewide. I think we probably would have gotten around to all of this, saved a lot of time, a lot of money, and a lot of effort.

During this, you recall, Dr. Abernathy did go to jail. The only close problem that we had was when he took a bunch of young kids and started down one of the residential street areas and got down in there, and they started throwing bricks and rocks. When they asked them to turn around and not go any further, they had a little rock throwing incident. So with little recourse they had to arrest him; and that's where we discovered he had bad health and all. I was determined that nothing was going to happen to him in South Carolina. So we sent the state plane over to Atlanta and flew his doctor over to examine him and take care of

him in the jail and then got him out of there as quickly as we could. We let him get on out and never prosecuted. We just let that be a way of ending that.

CBG: Would you say, in sum, then, that this was a situation, that despite tense moments, generally you felt that you had some control or at least could manage?

REM: We felt that this was one where we maintained some control over it all the way through and never let it get out of control. I think a lot of it came from experience in other situations and that we were really trying to simply control it, not do anything other than control it where they could have freedom to march, to demonstrate, to say whatever they wanted, and to get it out of their system. At the same time, we were caught where we couldn't yield on the big issue, a matter of principle, and once we got that resolved, then I think we could. Dr. McCord was caught, and I don't think he ever really got over the hospital strike because he got caught in his faculty with one group that just absolutely wanted you to fire everybody and be hard-nosed and another group which recognized things had to be more flexible.

END OF SIDE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO

CBG: This is Tape 22, 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 May 16, 1983. Governor, we were talking about Dr. McCord and how he had gotten caught between, let's say, a very conservative faculty group and a more tolerant faculty group that thought they could be a part of the solution. Do you think that hampered the development of the medical school, or was the end result of the strike settlement a positive one in which everybody gained a little bit?

REM: Well, I think it was a little bit of both. He was caught up there with a very conservative faculty and a very determined head nurse who wasn't going to yield at all and who felt that any effort to do anything that in any way reflected on her was personal in nature. She was unyielding almost. The very idea that we might consider letting these people go back to work was to her a total capitulation, a surrender. Bill McCord was caught with all of that. It got to the point where he couldn't get faculty support to do much in the way of anything positive to bring the thing to a conclusion. He called up one time, and Dr. Coburn, who really was the in-house worker and the fellow who was trying to pull the faculty together and was making some real progress, got the idea that an appearance by me would be the thing that could perhaps bring the faculty into line. Naturally I was willing to undertake most anything, so they got it all set up. I flew down to Charleston and made my persuasive argument to the boos of some and the cheers of others (chuckles) and really got

taken on pretty good. That, I think, turned out to be a good thing because I got taken on strong and hard by many of the faculty who were so resistant to doing anything about this, you know, surrender and all of this sort of stuff, and it gave me an opportunity to respond both in a very positive, pleasant sort of way and also to respond in a way that I thought we needed to respond, that, after all, we had to exercise some authority. We were the ones who had to resolve this thing, and we were going to resolve it, and not everybody was going to like it, and there was no way we could do it where everybody was going to be happy. So it turned out to be a positive confrontation. I didn't go to have one, but I went knowing there might be one, so we had what I thought was a positive confrontation because their hard questions and sort of belligerent attitude put us in a position to say to them and to deal with them in a way that we probably wouldn't have done had it been otherwise. So I think from there and from Bill McCord's willingness to sort of take the bull by the horn and recognize we had to get the thing resolved, we were able to do it. We had a lot of support in Charleston.

The mayor at that time was Palmer Gaillard. Palmer stayed firm, stayed out of it, but stayed supportive. We were saying that we didn't want them to get in and lose their credibility and bloody themselves up so they weren't of any use to the community thereafter. So we tried to keep people like that from having to take too much of the responsibility for it.

CBG: Do you think your give-and-take with the faculty was a unique kind of thing that really couldn't have happened with, let's say, a less educated group or a less professional group?

REM: I don't know. I thought that, but when I got in the middle of it [chuckles], I was beginning to wonder.

CBG: What happened to all that education? [chuckles]

REM: What happened to all that intellectual brain power that was down there because [chuckles] they were almost as militant as some of the other groups I'd run into with a lot less education. [chuckles]

CBG: This may be a vague question, but perhaps worthy of speculation. Would you see the faculty perspective on this as being a political argument? After all, we'd had the [Barry] Goldwater campaign and the acceptance, let's say, of a more conservative Republicanism, or would it be a social class argument with physicians and administrators, generally the better-to-do against the less well-to-do, or was it a medical argument, that we have to have competent people to avoid liability and make sure that we're giving adequate care in a research hospital?

REM: The unfortunate thing was all of that was mixed up in it. It really was. They felt very strongly, and it was hard to argue with them, particularly with the professional nurse staff. It was hard to argue that they had to have competent people and that they did not have them, that a lot of the people there obviously had just been hired to fill slots and to comply with the quotas that were being imposed and things like that and that they just couldn't practice in that kind of atmosphere and they weren't going to do it frankly. So that was there. I think that was part of a crutch though . . .

CBG: Really.

REM: . . . although they did have some justification. On the other hand, we were also caught up in the same old social problem that we'd been dealing with. You have to recognize that this group were very, very conservative in their views and had not yet yielded and were yielding very, very slowly to the change that was taking place.

CBG: Do you look back on it and consider yourself fortunate, let's say, to have arrived at a livable solution?

REM: I think so. It had to come. We'd reached a point where I think everybody had just about worn out, physically and mentally and politically and every other way, and it had to come. I have to give the AFL-CIO an awful lot of credit in this because the AFL-CIO refused to get involved. Sinway Young, who was the head of the AFL-CIO here in this state, had several meetings. He took the position that this was not something that they ought to be involved with. It should not be a labor dispute because we'd pretty well made it clear that we weren't going to recognize, and he didn't want to get in that position. Sinway's bottom line was that it would hurt him and hurt the image of his union to get involved in that, so they stayed out of it. They got criticized severely from Mr. [George] Meaney on down, but their attitude was that they were not going to get involved. My recollection is I may have talked to Lane Kirkland, but I'm not real sure about that. Their staying out helped us tremendously because if there was anybody that could have really made this a tougher issue than it was, it would have been them. Walter Reuther coming in and things like that was just pure social issues, you know, part of the same old segregation/integration battle we'd been confronted with.

CBG: Did you talk with any of the principal actors in years after this?

REM: Oh, yes, yes. We have continued a fairly friendly relationship. I've seen Mary Moultrie on rare occasions very pleasantly and I see Bill Saunders quite often. In fact, I went in and made a couple of speeches for Bill Saunders when he was running for the Senate. We're good friends, and we have a lot of

respect for one another, and I have given Bill--you know, I don't want to give him undue credit and cause him harm, but I've given him an awful lot of credit for helping us resolve the hospital strike.

CBG: By that, I understand you mean acting as a responsible citizen and . . .

REM: Yes.

CBG: . . . and being able to have his position and maintain credibility.

REM: By moving in and working to regain control locally of the problems is how we were able to resolve it. He was one of the ones who, with our help and support, was able to regain the role of leader and spokesman. Working with him and the other leaders down there, we were able to resolve the thing in a way so they got the credit for resolving it and for doing it in a way that everybody came out of there saving face.

CBG: Did the strike problem follow you out of the state on occasion?

REM: Well, that became a national . . .

CBG: It got a lot of play.

REM: . . . issue with an awful lot of play because 1199B was moving into hospitals at that time and into the public sector. They had organized a hospital somewhere--I don't recall whether it was in New York or in the Midwest--and then opted for this one. So it was prominent. It was on the national news, and it was all over everywhere. Yes, I went to New York on one of my industry hunting trips during it and went up and spoke at a luncheon one day as--it was a funny incident. I spoke at a luncheon in New York and then had a cocktail party and dinner that night for a group of industrialists. I had let the two staff people with me have some free time because I was tired. I'd been up most of the night for weeks, and I was going to stretch out and get a little nap. They wanted to go and buy some shoes right up the street from the St. Regis Hotel. Well, I stretched out in my underpants and undershirt, and about that time I heard a knock on the door, just as I was getting relaxed good, and I assumed it was one of them. So I went to the door and half opened it and there were five people standing out there, including--my recollection is--two blacks and two who looked like Puerto Ricans, and not in too friendly a mood, it didn't appear at first. They wanted to know if this was Governor McNair's suite, and I said, "Well, he's not here." They wanted to see him. We talked on for a little while, and there was a black lady in the group, and I noticed her accent. I finally wanted to know where

she was from and she was from North Carolina. I said, "Well, my family all are from North Carolina." So, through the door, we got to the point in a few minutes--it seemed like an hour--where I said, "Aw, heck, I'm the governor. Let me slip on my pants. Come on in, and we'll talk."

So I got them in my room, which was a little nervy in a way (laughter) particularly not knowing, and we had a very pleasant conversation. She and I did particularly, in which again, sort of like my first session with Bill Saunders, we went through it. We talked and we talked very plainly, very frankly, very nicely, and came to find out they were having a demonstration in front of the hotel marching with placards and all, demonstrating against me and the hotel because I was there. About that time the telephone rang, and it was Wayne Corley and Jim Konduros saying, "Governor, guess what's outside of the hotel?" I said, "Outside of the hotel! Guess what's sitting here in my room?"

CBG: [chuckles]

REM: And they said, "What?" And I said, "A committee from 1199B." I knew they didn't have time to get the elevator because they were in my room before I could hang up the phone, totally out of breath, [chuckles] scared to death because they were. I visited for about an hour with those people and had a good long discussion with them, and my parting thing to her was, "I have to leave the hotel shortly. How about don't embarrass me as I go out." We had a very, very good ending to that.

We had people in New York that I talked with. One was Bill Vanden Heuvel, who was a very close friend of the Kennedy family. Bill was very active in New York, and I sat down with him and explained this thing in great detail, and Bill was, I think, instrumental in letting the top leadership of the labor movement know what kind of a situation we were in and sort of helped defuse it some, too. He was very cooperative and very helpful, and I was able to make people like that aware of the fact that the policy was going to be the policy and that we weren't going to retreat from that, period.

CBG: Did it surprise you at all, in this issue area and maybe others as well at the national network that exists in America, I mean, how something like a personnel problem in Charleston could really . . .

REM: Oh, yes.

CBG: . . . get to the attention, let's say, of the Kennedys or . . .

REM: It really did.

CBG: . . . leaders in California?

REM: It really did, and, you know, it would get there in a way that everybody would get excited about it and get interested in it and before you knew it, you were almost caught up in a volcano with all of it coming down on you. So this was why I was anxious to talk to people like this that had their ties in those kinds of groups, that I could make understand our situation. By then, too, we had been through the political process, and I'd been active at the national level and had spoken out about South Carolina being a part of the national party. So I felt like I had gained some credibility among those groups and was able to, because of that, keep them from condemning and criticizing and coming down on us and adding to our problems.

CBG: Do you think a lot of governors get themselves in this network, or do most governors get buried by day-to-day problems and kind of hole up in their state houses and not venture out in that fashion.

REM: I don't know. Then, when you did, you were in real trouble. You almost had to, and it was matter of how you were perceived, as much as anything else. I think my perception then was I had developed a reputation that--I really didn't set out to one, and it was out of character--of being firm and stern, and people knew once we got to a certain point, and we said it, we meant it. I sort of in that period of time felt that you didn't say anything you didn't have to say. You didn't make statements that would inflame, but when you reached a certain point, if you said something, you had to mean it. You said what you meant and you meant what you said. Otherwise you really couldn't deal with those kinds of problems.

CBG: Or you'd be bargained down to a nub.

REM: That's right.

CBG: Yes.

REM: So our one issue was recognition and collective bargaining. We just weren't going to do that. Now within that, we'll work with the problem.

CBG: Let's reflect for a second about labor unions in South Carolina. It's important, don't you think, to distinguish between public sector labor unions and the business world of labor unions. The student of government needs to remember that public sector labor unions have an entirely different tradition.

REM: Yes.

CBG: It's much shorter, so this attempt in Charleston was really on the forefront.

REM: Right in the forefront. Why they chose us is something I don't know, and I'm sure they look back on it as being a mistake because I think they lost an awful lot of ground by opting for a no-win situation as far as they were concerned. They later moved from here, if I'm not mistaken, up to Durham, North Carolina, to a hospital up there. I think they were successful in that one. Had they gone to a Catholic hospital or to a private hospital, I'm not sure they could have or would have withstood the pressure because they didn't have the shield that we had to stand behind. There is a difference, a philosophical difference, between conventional union activity and business and management and the public employee sector. I remember when we were settling this and were looking ahead a little bit, there were some discussions about the fact that we ought to have some law on the book on strikes of public employees. My recommendation was--and I talked about it during the height of this--that we simply adopt the New York law. I would be very happy with the New York law. Everybody rose up in resistance because their problem was, "Well, you'll enforce it."

CBG: [chuckles] Yes.

REM: And we would have. New York has one of the strongest anti-strike laws for public employees in the country, so strong until labor opposed anything close to that down here. Since we couldn't get together, we just never did adopt one. We never did pass one.

CBG: Aside then from the considerations about the public sector labor union, what about unionism in general in South Carolina? Why are we often thought of as not being sympathetic to labor unions?

REM: I think it's basically the independence of the South Carolina person, the agricultural background, not inclined toward that kind of organization, taking away our individual rights to do what we want to do. It's just inherent in us, and you know what we see and what we knew about labor was what we saw on the television, coal miner strikes and those kinds of strikes, the turning over of automobiles, the destruction of property. That was just not our way of doing things. So we've never been really receptive. On the other hand, I think another reason is most of our industry was sort of family-owned, community-oriented, the mill village. Everybody was a part of one big family, and people just didn't like the idea of that kind of organization and confrontation. That's followed on. If you see the pattern, it's still there, even on into today, when I believe we probably have about the same percentage of our work force organized today as we had ten

years ago, if not less. It's a tradition of independence. It's like voting. When we talk about party registration, the South Carolinian just doesn't like that. He doesn't want to register as a Democrat or a Republican. He wants to preserve his independence of action. We're not strong organization people, not really. Farmers never organized here like they have in the Midwest or in other areas.

CBG: Do you think that makes us vulnerable as a political culture to, let's say, blind emotional adherence to a popular leader? The thesis I'm developing is that since farmers didn't organize, Ben Tillman was very popular.

REM: Yes.

CBG: Since people generally aren't organized into intermediate political groups most of the time, there is this vulnerability to a broad sweep of the popular leader.

REM: There probably is, but if we were strongly organized and dealt only with the leaders of those organizations, what would it be like? I like to think that we maybe have avoided a little bit of both of them. We've maintained more a personal relationship with our leaders, and, sure, we got caught up in a wave. We had the Ben Tillman wave, and I think the [Charles] Pug Ravenel situation was part of what you're talking about. Here's a fresh young face that comes on the scene with a Fifth Avenue media campaign that suited the time, and didn't have a background. So he took the position on every issue that the polls said take and swept through. Maybe we are susceptible to that, and if you look at most of the leaders, your labor leaders, black leaders, your other leaders really were skeptical, but the people were caught up in it.

CBG: At least vulnerability of a popular leader means also vulnerability to criticism and evaluation in a public spotlight.

REM: It does, and you can look at the organized states of the nation and see what's happened to them in instances, and I don't know that it's a whole lot different.

CBG: Is South Carolina unique among southern states in this regard?

REM: I have found Alabama is perhaps a little different, and I don't know enough about the politics of Mississippi. North Carolina is somewhat similar. I think the Carolinas and Virginia, when you trickle down from Virginia to North Carolina to South Carolina are similar in this pretty much. Georgia is different

because Georgia has Atlanta. Atlanta either dominates, or the rest of the state gangs up on Atlanta. None of us really have that one big metropolitan city that sort of dominates the politics of the state. As I went around in the governors' activities and conferences, you found many places that you seemed to get a feel for. I always felt Indiana was very much like South Carolina. I always felt I could go to Indiana and run for governor as well as I could run in South Carolina for some reason, and there were some of other parts of the country that were somewhat similar.

CBG: If you had run in Indiana, would you have had to run as a Republican, do you think?

REM: I don't think so. I think I could have made it as a Democrat there.

END OF TAPE