

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

# Interview

*with*

Robert E. McNair

***Interviewer:***

Cole Blease Graham

***Date:***

July 20, 1983

**CBG:** This is Tape 26, 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 July 20, 1983. Governor, in going along with the discussion of politics during your term we come, I guess, to an inevitability and that is the winding down of the term from a political perspective. What is the role of the governor or what role can a governor in South Carolina play in helping to pick a successor, at least at that point when there was only one term to the governorship?

**REM:** Well, I think historically very little. People are rather independent in that respect, and I don't think they ever liked the idea that somebody was sort of anointing or selecting his successor. So politically it was a very delicate thing to try to help some body, really, without making it appear that you were in reality trying to impose on them your own personal choice. However, the way we had run in the state, with the lieutenant governor playing the role he had played and by tradition running for governor and in most instances being the front-running candidate, made it a little different than it would be normally. But even then, I don't think the public looked with favor on a governor in effect saying, "This is my choice, and this is the person I want to see as the next governor." You had to be very careful and very cautious and handle it very delicately.

**CBG:** How do the candidates start to form? Does the lieutenant governor have the inside track, so to speak?

**REM:** Well, he has the inside track, he is the lieutenant governor, and in the minds of the public he plays that role. I don't think the public ever really looked on a lieutenant governor and accepted him, as some people in government do, as nothing but the presiding officer of the Senate. They saw very little of him that way. I don't think they were consciously aware that that's what he did. They looked on him as being the next in line. They looked on him as being someone who filled in for the governor, who worked with the governor. They saw him out making speeches, traveling around, talking about what was going on in South Carolina. That's more the image I think the general public had, and because of that, if the lieutenant governor handled himself well, avoided very critical political problems, he normally was the front-runner. At least if he wasn't, it was his fault rather than anything else, rather than the fault of the office.

**CBG:** That raises a question that maybe we've overlooked a little bit and that is your relationship with Lieutenant Governor John West.

**REM:** I have said to people that, having been there for a good while and having served in the legislature with several governors and several lieutenant governors, I think John West and I enjoyed the best working relationship that I ever was exposed to, and it was by effort not only by chance. John and I had been

classmates in law school along with [Ernest] Fritz Hollings, so we'd all sort of come along together. We had known each other. We liked each other. We had been a part of a little group in law school that studied together some. We vacationed together. We'd get a house, a little group, and go to Edisto or places like that. So we knew each other, and we liked each other. We had our political differences as we came along, and I think I've mentioned that before. John veered off in my lieutenant governor's campaign and supported my opposition and was the leader in that.

So we had our parting of the ways politically, and then with him coming back and running for lieutenant governor, we put it back together because of the personal friendship and the fact that we were all among a group of friends. I give John West credit for committing himself and dedicating himself to playing that role. We had some differences on programs and issues, but he subordinated all of his feelings to mine and played the role. It's the first and only time that I can remember when the lieutenant governor sat in on discussions of programs and strategy sessions on legislation and really played a role as almost the legislative leader for the governor, the legislative coordinator. He played that role in the Senate and helped generally as we formulated major plans and major programs. John was always involved and I used him more. We brought him in and used him in the industrial development program. I found that that was a high priority with me, and I devoted a lot of time, but because of the circumstances that developed during that period, I couldn't get away as often as I would like, and he could. He would go to Europe. He would travel. He would work with the Development Board.

We wanted to get a housing program started. We made him chairman of that to try to help develop a housing program that later emerged under his administration. So we had daily communications and developed an extremely close working relationship. I have said to people since then that John West contributed an awful lot to my administration.

**CBG:** Did his involvement as a political coordinator for you expose him to political risk, do you think, in the Senate, or were you all able to manage that?

**REM:** I think we were able to manage that. I think, again, we were all conscious of that, and as we went along there was a pretty good feeling that John West was developing to where we all felt definitely that he ought to be the next governor. Thus we would help him avoid the real political things, and my attitude was almost, "John, pick what you want to get involved with, and on these other things let me take the gaff on that." I could take it, and he contributed a lot. He worked with the black leaders, and I think that's where he developed a relationship. He was able to work with them in a positive way and avoid the hard decisions and not get blamed for the hard decisions, quite often by working with them and trying to work behind the scenes

to help us resolve a lot of the problems and mediate them. John felt very strongly in that respect, so he made a good one to work on that.

**CBG:** Was he able to announce first as a candidate?

**REM:** Well, everybody pretty well knows the lieutenant governor is going to run but he has the same problem, unfortunately and surprisingly, that everybody else has, and this is running too fast and peaking too quickly. That's always a strategy problem, to avoid officially announcing and becoming an official candidate as long as you can. It was always to the lieutenant governor's advantage to hold off as long as you could and let everybody else sort of get out there and scramble for their own recognition because once he became a candidate, you sort of had an official campaign going, and thus everybody else got a little more press attention and thus more name recognition than they would otherwise. Although people know you're going to run, you really work very hard not to become a candidate because you don't need to become one, you don't want to become one, and you're getting all the press coverage and the free television and everything else that you want. Once you become a candidate, then you can't get the benefits of all of that like you did before. Then everything you say and do is done in a campaign atmosphere. So it's a very difficult tightrope to walk.

**CBG:** Did you or any of your staff get called on to help in planning this campaign?

**REM:** Our feeling always was that--and John had run before as lieutenant governor--everybody had his own organization. I reckon that was part of the spinover from the old one-party system that we've talked about before, where it was factionalism and not partyism that prevailed. John had his own people who had worked before and that group continued to grow and to build as he came on in. So he had his own organization, which was different--a lot of the same people outside--but different at the top level from those who had been directly associated with me.

**CBG:** Did you personally or did you have a sense that people could anticipate the Watson candidacy, or was that a surprise?

**REM:** That wasn't a surprise. We had anticipated Albert Watson running for governor from the time he went to the Congress. You know, he had played around with it all that time, and it was pretty open, pretty public knowledge. He had worked for Lester Bates, studied under Lester Bates, had been Lester's speech teacher, and everything else. Albert had ambitions to run for governor and was waiting for the opportunity to run and never could run as long as Mr. Bates himself was a potential. So I don't think Albert was a surprise

at all. We had anticipated him, and we had recognized him as being a very strong contender. We've said before that was the last of the campaigns where the civil rights issue was a dominant influence, and Albert was going to take advantage of it to the fullest.

**CBG:** Did that effort start to build after Mr. West was nominated, or did they start . . .

**REM:** Well, as far as I can remember, Albert Watson started running for governor well ahead, campaigning and all and speaking all over the state and singing at revival and evangelist meetings and all, which he had always done all over. It was also no surprise that John West was nominated. You know, there wasn't anybody coming on the scene. Nobody was out working; nobody was out traveling around indicating that he was going to challenge John for the nomination. I think everybody felt politically that John West would be the nominee of the party, and everybody thought Albert Watson would be the nominee of the Republican Party. At that point they didn't have open nominations. They just got together. I don't think they even had a convention to nominate. They just decided in a closed room somewhere . . .

**CBG:** More like a caucus.

**REM:** . . . that this is going to be our nominee and we are going to finance it. So Albert was no surprise, and he didn't have to campaign for it. Normally that would be a minus. We always felt the Republicans lost a lot by not having a campaign for the nomination because it didn't give them the name recognition; it didn't give them the exposure that we got running in the Democratic primary.

**CBG:** The thing I was thinking about is that, coming off the [Barry] Goldwater victory in 1964 in South Carolina and the [Richard] Nixon victory in 1968, the Republicans with a good head start could throw the Democrats into disarray and in-fighting and on that basis stand . . .

**REM:** They had a lot going for them . . .

**CBG:** Yes.

**REM:** . . . at that time because that was probably the peak of the civil rights problems, and that was the school integration, you know, 1969 and 1970.

**CBG:** The turning point.

**REM:** That is when it all took place, and all of that was there, and John West had to know that there was no way he could get away from some of the blame for total integration in the public schools and some of the other things that had taken place, no way he could get away, on the other side, from some of the unhappiness with some of the blacks because we didn't do enough and there wasn't enough there. It put him where he was getting the backlash from both sides, and, as I say, I think he did a good job of avoiding some of the more crucial problems that we got into.

**CBG:** Did that bounce back on you at all of maybe reversing the roles a little bit at this point, of you having to maybe intercede?

**REM:** Well, there probably was a little more involvement from us in that campaign than we've had in the past. Other than the time when Mr. [James] Byrnes interceded on behalf of George Bell Timmerman against Lester Bates, I doubt that there was as much involvement from the Governor's Office and the governor's people as there was in this campaign. We felt very strongly that we had South Carolina moving forward and that Albert Watson would not just stop it but turn the clock back.

**CBG:** Yes. How did the gubernatorial campaign develop? Was it a heated campaign? Just how did things transpire in that election?

**REM:** Really I would say it was a heated campaign. It began to warm up and began to really tighten up. We felt that John West was comfortably ahead, and I think we were assuming an awful lot that people in the state were responsible, that they really felt South Carolina was dealing with the problem, that we were coping, we were moving, and, as I said, they did not want to stop. They didn't want to turn the clock back, and I think we were underestimating a little bit the depth of the feeling about integration. The thing arose in Greenville where we had all the backlash from trying to integrate that county up there and some busing and all with Carroll Campbell emerging as a leader and the leader of the demonstration to Columbia. So all of that got to be a problem, and John West was getting the spinoff.

We had Lamar, which was a plus and a minus. Lamar sort of counterbalanced the problems in Orangeburg and all with the whites turning over school buses. We had to make some very positive reaction to that, a very strong reaction of getting that under control and dealing with those people just like we did with the folks on the other side. So that was all there. We had the football stadium meetings with Senator [J. Strom] Thurmond and Albert Watson about "No, not never. Defy the court." They felt really I had yielded

too quickly and that I wasn't resistant enough and I wouldn't stand firm. They would invite me, I think, to the football stadium to talk about freedom of choice and all of this sort of stuff and I wouldn't go.

We had the Darlington spinoff with all of that and Gerald Best, who emerged like Albert Watson as a great hero, you know, in the minds of a lot of people. They had arrested him and were going to try him for inciting a riot, and we had that problem. They scheduled a huge rally in Darlington at the football stadium. This is the one time that--you know, you never know when you're going to reach somebody--but the one time that, in talking with Gerald Best, impressing on him that that thing could really blow up, and getting Senator Thurmond and Congressman Watson over there, we could incite those people a little more and excite them more than they were. No way I could participate, and no way John West could participate. Even if John wanted to go, I would have to resist his going and urge him not to go and participate in that kind of thing. Gerald Best called me back, and I will never forget the call. We really had our differences, and he said, "Governor, if you feel so strongly, would you like to have this meeting called off in Lamar?" And I said, "I sure would." And he said, "Well, I'm the one person can call it off." And I said, "I know you can." And he said, "Well, let me just say this to you. It's off." And he literally pulled the plug from the meeting and it never took place. As I say, I've always remembered that because that defused it. We were afraid that thing was going to get totally out of hand, and we didn't know what would happen because those people felt very strongly.

I recall shortly after Lamar I was scheduled to speak at Coker College, and we had all kinds of threats about my coming over there, what was going to happen, what was going to happen to me, and everything else. We had a little session discussing it and determined like we had in other places that if you yield to those kinds of threats, you've lost, you've lost really. My feeling always was that I'm not going to get--like trying Cleveland Sellers in Orangeburg -- that we'd have problems and we couldn't control it. I said, "If we can't hold court, we might as well quit." You know, the system is gone. If the governor can't go speak at Coker College and people feel comfortable, you know we've lost.

**CBG:** Were these threats like death threats to you and to your family?

**REM:** Well, all kinds of threats to me and what would happen at the meeting and everything else. So we determined to go and Thad Saleeby, who was on the Highway Commission and was Senator Ed Saleeby's brother, represented Best and that group--of course, not their thinking--but he represented them legally and was a very respected person. So in going over there they set up pretty good security all the way and they knew which way we were going to be traveling and Thad got in the car as we came into Darlington County and rode with us, stayed with us, and stayed through the meeting. I said, "The safest place anybody in the world could be tonight is here at Coker College at this auditorium." The security was there. They'd

threatened to do all kinds of things, but there never was an incident. I think they had learned by that that we meant what we said, and that I meant I was coming to Coker and I was going to speak, and that nothing was going to happen.

**CBG:** Things did get a little bit out of hand, though, here in Columbia near the end of the campaign.

**REM:** They got out of hand, again, exploiting the school thing. It was going better than anybody expected it to, and I think they were very upset that there weren't a lot of incidents in the schools. There wasn't a lot of conflicts and fights and all like they had predicted. You know, we've always said that they manipulated an incident out at A.C. Flora [High School]. [Robert] Bob Liming, who was Albert Watson's press secretary, was really instrumental in precipitating a mini-riot out at A. C. Flora. He got a bunch of students excited and was out there in the middle of it himself with a camera taking pictures of it. We thought frankly it was staged. I don't want to be too harsh, but what that did, I think, was reacted and that may have been the single thing that turned that campaign back around again, the very idea that they would try to take advantage of something like that for political gain and risk injury to kids. I remember when I heard about it and got the whole story was one of the few times I injected myself fully into the campaign and really scolded Albert Watson. I think people saw the light at how far folks would go. [Note: McNair biographer Philip Grose and South Carolina Political Collections Director Herb Hartsook disagree with Gov. McNair's recollection. They find no evidence that Liming was involved in this incident in any way.]

**CBG:** When you made this injection, how did you do it. Did you make a formal speech?

**REM:** I had a press conference. I was speaking out at SLED [State Law Enforcement Division] at some meeting out there. I don't recall whether it was the . . .

**CBG:** It was really the groundbreaking for the Criminal Justice . . .

**REM:** Maybe it was the groundbreaking for the Criminal Justice Academy when I heard about it, and I immediately went to SLED headquarters and had a press conference because it upset me so much and spoke of it in a press conference because to me it was, as I said then, a rather detestable thing. I just couldn't imagine people exploiting something like that.

**CBG:** That's the kind of thing that could have set off a little bit of . . .

**REM:** Well, I think I would have almost been harsher on Watson and Liming, if I could have gotten a hold of them, than I was on Sellers and Best because in my judgment they occupied a higher level of intelligence and should have been more responsible . . .

**CBG:** Yes.

**REM:** . . . than those people were.

**CBG:** And given all the years of not having the kind of outbreak that this could have turned into . . .

**REM:** It could have turned into, you know, the beginnings of just a festering thing and could have led to eruptions all over the state. That's what bothered us. If something like that had disrupted the school, people are quick to do it someplace else and that's what we were trying to avoid.

**CBG:** Were you anxious as the vote approached?

**REM:** We got very anxious frankly. The polls that we were getting were always lagging two weeks behind, and I can recall calling the group together myself and saying, "When we look at this thing and we watch the trend that has developed over the last few weeks, if something doesn't happen, this election is going to be just a dead heat." The trend was there. I remember getting Governor West and those in and talking seriously about it and during the last few weeks of the campaign pulling in [James] Jim Waddell, Senator Waddell, who had managed campaigns for Hollings for governor and the Senate. He was very close to Hollings as a Citadel friend and all, and we felt the campaign was sort of falling apart.

John had the PR people running his campaign, and we felt he had to have some political people. So my recollection is we got Waddell in ourselves and persuaded him to take control of the campaign, and we got some people in like Reggie Wilson, who'd been mayor of Chester, and got him to take a furlough, just take his leave from state government and spend the last two weeks really trying to pull that thing back out again. Hopefully all of that contributed to it because it still was a very, very close election.

**CBG:** As you looked back on the election, on that particular election, did any particular voting group that you could discern make a difference, like did Mayor Wilson get municipal employees?

**REM:** Well, we got back to the municipal people who got active because they could see what would happen in their cities. I mean this A.C. Flora incident really gave rise to a flurry of activity, and people could see disruptions in the streets and in the schools, and they were the ones that were going to have to deal with it.

**CBG:** Teachers and school administrators.

**REM:** Teachers and school administrators, I think, really rallied to the cause. That was my recollection that school administrators contributed as much or more to that campaign, and the role we could play was to get to those people very quickly and say, "Look, this thing is really turning around, not just between the two men, but the state is going to suffer. We need you to get out there and be sure that people who would do what they've done at A.C. Flora are not sitting here in the Governor's Office."

**CBG:** Yes.

**REM:** There's always something, some little incident, not something big, that is crucial in a political campaign, the wrong statement or some little slip or, like Muskie, an emotional breakdown. We felt, it was always thought, that that was the incident that turned that campaign around.

**CBG:** Did you have any ideas as to whether Mr. Watson was directly involved?

**REM:** Well it turned around with law enforcement, too. It had its effect on law enforcement. I suspect that there were a lot of law enforcement people in this state who were probably supporting Albert Watson.

**CBG:** Well, his platform . . .

**REM:** His platform appealed to them and all, and a lot of church people were supporting Albert Watson, and I think that incident had its impact on a lot of the church leaders and on the law enforcement leaders, certainly on school people . . .

**CBG:** Do you think he knew about it?

**REM:** . . . and on municipal people.

**CBG:** Do you think he knew about it personally, or is this one of those things where a political stringer . . .

**REM:** I've--I've never . . .

**CBG:** No way to know.

**REM:** No way to know, and I've never, never said. I just--the fact that they tried to take advantage of it and exploit it upset me so much until I didn't--I don't think we got beyond condemning it and flat out saying that that wasn't going to be tolerated. You know, candidates could go to jail as well as demonstrators.

**CBG:** So that even if he didn't know and a youthful political organizer perhaps got out of hand momentarily, had he condemned that, he perhaps could have redeemed the situation.

**REM:** He probably could have if he had handled it better, but my recollection is he never did disassociate himself or back off from it at all.

**CBG:** Yes. Once the election was over, how did you devise the transition?

**REM:** Well, again, I have to say, having been through it and having watched it, we were determined that this was going to be a smooth one. In the past there was no communications really. We had no transition team. The incoming governor was never afforded even a secretary to help him in the interim, and we sat down and committed our staff to him and for the first time got some money appropriated through the Budget and Control Board so that he could have his secretary and begin to develop. We gave him offices and almost opened up the governor's office. There was a good relationship between the staff and him, too, so we had what we felt was an extremely smooth transition. I think it reached a point once or twice where I almost said, "Say, look, we can't have two governors at one time."

**CBG:** What were your feelings as you approached the inauguration of the new governor?

**REM:** I think after six years I probably looked forward to it more than anybody else. I really was ready. I have to acknowledge that I was mentally and physically exhausted. That had been a pretty demanding period. We had pretty much given it, you know, twenty-four hours some days, a total commitment physically, mentally, and otherwise, and I was looking forward to it. I think the good thing was that I never got the feeling of being a lame duck, and I never got a slow-down period. I was the last person who could get ready and get in line to go down the steps for the inaugural ceremonies. I almost went out of the front

door saying, "It's twelve o'clock. I've got to go," with people still wanting to talk and wanting to hang on. That changed very dramatically, I'll have to acknowledge that, by ten o'clock that night.

***END OF TAPE***