

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

# Interview

*with*

Robert E. McNair

***Interviewer:***

Cole Blease Graham

***Date:***

September 1, 1982

**CBG:** This is Tape 10, 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 September 1, 1982. Governor, how did you go about communicating the many changes and new ideas that you had about state government to the public? Did you consider the speech as the major vehicle, or were there other approaches or a combination of approaches that you employed.

**REM:** I suppose there was a combination. One of the first things that we recognized was the need to be able to communicate, to disseminate information so that the public would know both why things were happening as well as what was happening, and we tried to formulate some plans for that. That was the reason I went out looking for what I thought was a good news secretary. I wanted a top-flight person who could himself communicate, who had a recognition factor. We wanted someone who could help with that and who had an ability to formulate a way of doing it. We used speeches, news conferences, news releases, and other people. We used various groups and associations within the state as a medium. For instance, on mental retardation, we had an association in the state of lay people who had been laboring with this problem for a long time. They became a vehicle to get the message out and to get the program out to the public.

**CBG:** In putting together these various devices, did you take the lead in identifying topics and sketch out major ideas and then let speech writers or news release writers fill in the details, or did it work in the other direction with you as the editor?

**REM:** It worked both ways. Generally I had an idea of what I wanted to do and of the areas that I wanted to get involved in. When we wanted to talk about something, I would spend time outlining broadly what I wanted to accomplish and what I wanted to say, and the speech writers, who were rather limited in number but good in quality, would pull in people from outside who were knowledgeable and expert in that field and put together all of the information. Most of the time it was done without an awful lot of reviews and redoing. We didn't have time for that, and the people were pretty much in tune with my feelings, my thinking, and my way of doing things. Thus we were able to do it without a whole lot of time and a lot of redoing.

**CBG:** As you made speeches in general, did you stick to a prepared text, or did you begin to develop the knack of speaking off the cuff, I guess you might say?

**REM:** Well, I had come along speaking off the cuff, not having the benefit of a speechwriter nor having time myself to sit down and reduce to writing what I wanted to say. I spoke mostly from notes. When I had a specific subject that I particularly wanted to talk about and had chosen a forum, I would use the prepared

text. Quite often, even then, I would use the prepared text as background material and read it and get familiar with it and then mainly use it as an outline. I was always more comfortable just speaking without having to read something. I always felt I could communicate better if I wasn't concentrating on reading it and more on eyeballing people and getting the message across to them.

**CBG:** Would you read something more important like, say, a state of the state address, a major speech like that, or would you ad lib with that, too?

**REM:** Generally I stayed close to the text on a major one.

**CBG:** Yes.

**REM:** Seldom would I ad lib. If you did on something like a state of the state, you would normally write it in so that it would be there not necessarily in full text but in substance.

**CBG:** Who were some of your major speech writers?

**REM:** Well, Dr. [James A.] Jim Morris over at the university [of South Carolina], head of the School of Business Administration, was a participant in a large number of them because he had such an understanding of the economic conditions in the state and had been sort of a close ally and adviser. That gave him an insight into me and my thinking. So he was normally involved in putting things together. [Patrick C.] Pat Smith, who was state auditor and Budget and Control Board director, as I've said before, was a surprising person in that he was extremely broad in his knowledge and more intellectual than most people thought. He had significant input into a lot of the speeches involving state government and particularly finance, but also in structure of state government because he was a student of that. If it was going to be on education, we would pull in Cyril Busbee and some of his people. Jesse Coles, who was then a deputy, and others would have input. [J. Robert] Bob Hickman, of course, was the person in charge, and Bob had an ability, as a TV news director, to write it in a more concise, clear manner than others. So he had the responsibility of putting it in final form. A lot of them he did himself just with us in consultation.

Staff people had a lot of input because they themselves had the areas of responsibility and gained a certain knowledge in those areas and could contribute significantly to it. We would pull people in from wherever. If it was one on agriculture, we'd pull in people like Dr. Wayne O'Dell from Clemson, whom I had great respect for. If it was dealing with farm problems and things of that nature, there were folks like

some of the major farmers in the state who I relied on, from Allendale and elsewhere, who were very progressive and sort of ahead of us in our own program in what was going on.

**CBG:** Let's take an example, say, the first state of the state address. Could you give us a little sketch as to how this was put together?

**REM:** Well, the first I did was when I was sworn in, you know, rather suddenly when Mr. [Donald] Russell went to the Senate. I felt it was important for me to sort of set the tone in that one, not spell out or enunciate any program, but to set the tone and sort of let people know what I was going to be like and how I was going to try to operate. That's where Jim Morris, since I didn't have a staff, was so helpful. Jim really was the producer of that very short document that told them what I wanted to do. We were going to be a "we" administration and work together, and we had a lot to get done. We were going to get on with it, along the various lines, in broad, general terms, sort of philosophically what my approach was going to be, being governor and trying to function working with them.

The first state of the state, of course, was a recognition that I was in a caretaker position. I didn't want to come on strong as being someone who was marching in and taking over and going to cure all the ills of the state in one fell swoop. I didn't feel that, in the first place, I should do that because I was filling an unexpired term. Secondly, I felt that I needed a little time to really get into it and get ready to come with a strong program. There was a lot that I felt needed to be looked at and I never was one to come unprepared with the recommendation, like I never did want to try a case that I wasn't prepared to try. So my feeling was that I had to be ready first and prepared to defend whatever I came forward with. So it was along that line Bob Hickman and I worked on it at length with sort of those things that we felt were essential to get us started more than anything else.

**CBG:** Before you delivered a speech like that, did you practice it at all?

**REM:** Rarely. [chuckles]

**CBG:** There wasn't time, really, was there?

**REM:** Really, because most of the time I got the final draft as I was walking out the front door to go up to the hall of the House to deliver it. Occasionally I would get it in advance, and I normally liked to get things at least long enough ahead to read through it once in final form so that I could underscore and make a few notations on it for emphasis and otherwise. That was a rare thing, though.

**CBG:** It was a luxury, I suppose.

**REM:** It was really, but I had the opportunity of reading a draft or a couple of drafts so, by the time you got to the final version, you were very familiar with what was in it.

**CBG:** Did you sit down afterwards with a group of people and evaluate the impact of the speech?

**REM:** We would do that, and you got evaluated instantly by the press and the legislature and everybody else. We'd sit and talk about it, and we always had some legislative input, too. I was not normally one who liked to drop things on people. If we had something important, we would have already discussed it with the leadership, either in general form or quite often in specific detail and have them familiar with it and hopefully on board in support when we'd go to the General Assembly with the plan or with a recommendation. So, yes, we'd sit around afterwards and talk about it. You got your critical review, you know, usually immediately and shortly thereafter.

**CBG:** Did you use this kind of information to suggest to staff people things to do differently next time out, or did you pretty much see, let's say, each major speech as self-contained?

**REM:** I think each one was, and we concerned ourselves more with substance on the major speeches than we did with maybe the appearance and how things were done and all of that. There was a lot less input into how it was set up and how it was presented and all of that stuff than there is today. Television, live television, was just coming into being. I can recall that we were televised with the camera up in the gallery. You know, when you are making a state of the state, you are speaking to those legislators sitting down in front of you. When you looked at it that evening, you wondered how the public thought when you never ever looked at them as if you were ignoring them altogether.

**CBG:** Yes.

**REM:** I did comment on that. That was an awkward situation because you really were talking to the public, too, but you had to talk to your board of directors out there in front of you and keep their attention. They were very conscious, if you started looking at the camera and talking to the public, about your ignoring them.

**CBG:** They'd have you labeled as a showboat.

**REM:** Well, that plus the fact that you were trying to bring public pressure onto them. Sometimes you were, but it wasn't good politics do it that way. Generally we didn't have too much of that problem back then because rarely were you covered live. Normally it was a little spot and it was an interview before or after rather than live coverage of it.

**CBG:** Thinking about substance, what about some of the contents of major speeches? We've talked about the "we" tone of the inaugural speech. There's the voting rights speech, the collective bargaining, and the brown bagging speeches, I guess . . .

**REM:** Yes.

**CBG:** . . . are three fairly major ones during this time.

**REM:** Voting rights was one that we had to work on, you know, very carefully. That was when the voting rights bill was passed, and we had begun and were trying to establish a new image for South Carolina, one of compliance not defiance. At the same time, we realized that, if we were going to do this, we had to maintain the confidence of the public, that unless we maintained that confidence, we couldn't accomplish anything. So we were trying to figure that delicate way of maintaining their confidence and at the same time putting South Carolina's posture as being one that was going to comply rather than defy the law. So we set out to talk about our displeasure with that law, singling us out and putting us in the group of states when, in fact, we had not had any violations. There hadn't been a single violation presented at any of the Congressional hearings as far as South Carolina was concerned. It was one of resentment at being included among those in that group when there was no reason for it. At the same time, it was the law, and we were going to comply with it, but we thought it was unconstitutional to single out one section of the country and impose on it certain particular voting rights requirements that didn't apply to the nation as a whole. So we would join in testing the constitutionality of the law, and we felt that by doing this we could demonstrate to the public that we weren't retreating and rolling over and playing dead. We were going to legally exercise all recourse and remedy available to us, but we were going to comply with the law whatever that might be. So we worked long and hard on that.

John Cauthen, the late John Cauthen, who had been a forerunner and a leader in human relations councils to keep the peace and to help with the peaceful integration in Columbia and elsewhere, was a very close friend and adviser. John had real input into the drafting of that. In fact, it was his product, and I recall that his first draft was, in fact, so strong that my reaction was, "Well, John, if I do this, I can't comply." So we had to tone down the conditioning process, and we had to redo that one several times to get into more of a

moderate but firm tone that I felt comfortable with. That was one of these difficult ones because it was politically explosive at that time.

**CBG:** What was the audience for the voting rights speech?

**REM:** Well, the voting rights was more of a statement.

**CBG:** Statement.

**REM:** You know, than it was a speech, but it was a statement. My recollection is it was then delivered at a press conference, but it had to be drafted properly so that it could be printed in its full text and people could not pick at it or tear it apart. It was a clear enunciation of a policy.

**CBG:** Were you called on to repeat that statement before various groups?

**REM:** Yes, but I really was pleasantly surprised at the reception and the reaction to it. I think it helped set a tone. I think it sort of told people that we were going to exercise our legal remedies in instances like that, but we weren't going to defy the law. Therefore, when it came later to moving into integration in the schools, the same thing applied. We were going to comply, not defy, and that sort of became the byword of the time, compliance, not defiance, leading up to the time when the final, total integration had to take place, where I could then say, "We've run out of courts. We've out of time, and we've got to get on with it." I think had I not built to that, it would have been even more difficult to take that position and have people believe you.

**CBG:** Was this a transition, say, for a person like Mr. Cauthen, who had served on the governor's staff in the old days, I guess you might say?

**REM:** It was, and he was a tremendous fellow who had an ability; [he'd] been a newspaper man himself. He'd been a press secretary for Ransom Williams.

**CBG:** He worked for Governor [J. E.] Harley, too, didn't he?

**REM:** Governor Harley, that's right. He then became a close adviser and confidant of Senator [Edgar] Brown, Speaker [Sol] Blatt, and the leadership in the legislature as well as in the Governor's Office. He had

been head of the Textile Manufacturers' Association, which was a very important group in this state at that time. We needed that business support to make those kind of decisions.

**CBG:** Was he speaking from his own heart, I guess you might say, or do you think he was speaking for textile interests in being able to make this statement?

**REM:** I think John Cauthen had gotten himself in the position that he was a leader . . .

**CBG:** Could create an opinion.

**REM:** . . . rather than the other. I think he created opinions and helped lead the industry rather than follow. I think John was one who they respected so much until they would sit down with him, and he would talk about how he thought they ought to move and the positions they ought to take. Because of that and because of the respect and confidence business had in him, he brought something to the table with you. John Floyd, who was then head of the state Chamber of Commerce, was another very strong individual who had wide recognition and respect in the state. So when you brought those fellows in with you, you felt comfortable that you had almost total support from the business community. That was important during that period, really, to have their support because it helped the public make up their minds that maybe this is good for South Carolina.

**CBG:** And it's surprising that their opinions were not the reactionary, conservative opinions that often times are attributed to businessmen.

**REM:** It was. You know, you had people like Fred Dent and Bubba McKissick and Mr. Walter Montgomery. You would say you would expect that from some of the older ones, but they were real outstanding. Charlie Daniel, you know, really was very progressive. He recognized the need for this transition in South Carolina. He was one of those who felt like you had to educate and put to work this vast segment of the population that had been a drain all these years. His was that it's good business as well as good politics to do this, and people respected him.

**CBG:** What about some of the other speeches that we've talked about, say the Baptist Convention speech?

**REM:** [chuckles] Well, that was when we had the liquor question here with the Supreme Court decision confirming that we could not have liquor by the drink in South Carolina. I felt I had no choice but to say we

were going to enforce the law, like I had on everything else, and we then were enforcing it. We recognized that we had to then come forward with a realistic, practical liquor law, and that was what was dubbed brown bagging, for lack of a better phrase. I think people had brown bagged so long in this state that it was just an easy thing for them to do. That again was a difficult one because we'd tried constitutional referendums, and all of them had failed. So you were confronted with trying to accomplish something on which you had constitutional limitations. The public had historically refused to change the constitution and, therefore, you were very, very limited in what you could do statutorily.

So my position was that I had to satisfy the public first, that we were going to enforce the law whatever it was, and if they became comfortable with that, we were then going to try to change the law to a moderate position on liquor and alcohol, such as allowing private clubs to have lockers and to serve it, to have grade A restaurants and hotels and motels with so many seats to be able to have somebody come in and check it and be served at the table rather than sit the bottle on the table like they had done before. So we took the same approach we did on the voting rights, the same thing we did on everything else. First, we gained their confidence that we really meant business on enforcing the law. We strongly felt this was a good way to go and the best way to go because it was an enforceable program. We felt then that, with the Baptists and my being a Baptist and as large as they were in the state, that Baptists had to understand that. You know, they had historically just said no to anything but now had to recognize that it was here and that we had to have a law that was enforceable and one that the public felt wasn't just putting a bar on every street corner, but at the same time was allowing the Myrtle Beaches and the Charlestons and other places where tourism was so important and where conferences and conventions were so important to have it under lawful control.

I chose the state Baptist convention, where I'd been invited to speak as a Baptist, to enunciate and spell out my position in a very blunt, plain, straightforward way on this and to say to them in the beginning that I knew how Baptists felt, being one, but that they had to recognize that I was not only governor of the Baptists, but I was governor of all the people of South Carolina and I had to function that way and do what I thought was best for South Carolina and move in that direction. So we worked long and hard on that. Dr. Archie Ellis, who was then minister of the First Baptist Church and really the leader of the progressive Baptists in the state, had a lot of input into it. As I said, he was leery of it and cautioned me, but stood very firm in his support and introduced me to the convention. Purposely, he made an introduction that was pretty hard for anybody there not to sit and listen and pay attention to.

**CBG:** Did your political advisers think this speech unwise?

**REM:** No, I think generally they felt it was something I ought to do. Again, I believe John Cauthen may have had some input into that, Jim Morris, Bob Hickman, who wrote it, did a strong job on it and some of the

other leaders, Wright Spears. I had strong support from and had real strong, open, public support from the bishop of the Episcopal diocese and worked diligently at getting those people in. In fact, I had them in the meetings and conferences where we talked about the problem and how we wanted to deal with it. My recollection is that I had some strong public support from a lot of them.

**CBG:** Were business interests in favor?

**REM:** Yes, the business community was very strong in its support, the Chamber of Commerce and groups like that.

**CBG:** What about the public employee collective bargaining speech?

**REM:** Well, that was another one that, you know, was new ground for us in South Carolina. We had limited union activity even in the private sector, and a very small percentage of the work force was organized. We had had strikes but not of any major significance. So a public employee move was something that I don't think we'd ever thought about in this state or even dreamed we would have. We were sort of, I suspect, caught off guard by the strike in Charleston. The Medical University was sort of an entity unto itself, a domain that none of us invaded very much. Being in Charleston, we didn't hear that much and didn't know that much about what was going on inside. We knew they had problems. I would get some things from people about conditions down there, but we were caught short, totally unprepared for a strike at the Medical University hospital. With that, we felt that we had to very quickly enunciate the policy of the state. That had to come quickly and firmly, so that again came from meetings with legislative leaders, government leaders, and others in the state, no question about it having strong support from the business community because we were a right-to-work state anyway.

**CBG:** Yes.

**REM:** We worked long and hard on that, and fortunately I had an invitation to speak to the State Bar Association at Myrtle Beach, and I thought that was an excellent forum really, speaking to the bar, to talk about something that was legal in nature. We chose to draft and really work hard at preparing that speech for delivery down there, which did in fact enunciate the state's position. Then I prepared something for the legislature also.

***END OF TAPE***