Mel Steely: 00:00:44 I'm Mel Steely from the history department at West Georgia College. Today we're interviewing Judge Griffin Bell for the Georgia Political Heritage Project for the archives at West Georgia. Today is September 24, 1997. We're interviewing Judge Bell at his office in Atlanta.

Judge, I assume it’s normal for me to call you judge instead of general? I assume you prefer...

Griffin Bell: 00:01:13 I don't care about either one.

Mel Steely: 00:01:15 Okay. Well, I'll just call you judge then.

Griffin Bell: 00:01:17 That's Southern custom. Call anyone judge, he would be any kind of a judge. Even justice of the peace or recorders court judge, you seem to be called “judge” the rest of your life.

Mel Steely: 00:01:29 Yes, sir. A good friend, Judge Bob Tyson-

Griffin Bell: 00:01:31 Nobody really... the average person doesn't know that you call the Attorney General, “General.” That's only because of Brown Wiseman that everybody knows that, but you get outside of the Beltway, not many people know that.

Mel Steely: 00:01:46 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 00:01:46 So, “Judge” has stuck. But I was a judge for fourteen and a half years.

Mel Steely: 00:01:52 The people that know you from the Washington, do they still call you “General?”

Griffin Bell: 00:01:57 Yeah. It's hard to get anybody to call me by my first name for some reason.

Mel Steely: 00:02:04 You've outlived all of those people, I'm afraid. You were born in Americus, Georgia, on October 31, 1918. Would you begin by telling us a little bit about your family, and about what it was like growing up in South Georgia?
Griffin Bell: 00:02:19 Yeah. Well, my family was a family of farmers, on both sides. Some of them... some of the Bells had to do with the law, because my grandfather was a justice of the peace, and some of his relatives were justices of peace scattered around that same part of Georgia. One of them, who's my father's cousin, later was justice of Georgia Supreme Court. He started out as a solicitor general, then a superior court judge, that was Judge Reason Chestnut Bell, R. C. Bell. Probably I got the idea of being a lawyer, and my father got the idea, because of him. They were farmers, and most of them were driven off the farm during the boll weevil crisis. You couldn't grow cotton and we had a cotton economy. And they moved in around different towns around Americus: Preston, Richland, Lumpkin, places like that. I found out... I traced back to find all the farmland, all the places they went, and know where they all came from when they moved to... the Bells came from Edgefield district, South Carolina, when they got the last part of the Creek Indian lands.

Mel Steely: 00:03:51 Mmm hmm.

Griffin Bell: 00:03:51 That was down there in southwest Georgia, 1827. And my mother's family all came from the Savannah River, but on the Georgia side. Washington, Wilkes, Lincoln, Warren Counties. I'm descended from pioneer stock, but mainly farmers.

Mel Steely: 00:04:14 Mmm hmm. What was your mother's maiden name?

Griffin Bell: 00:04:18 Pilcher.

Mel Steely: 00:04:18 Pilcher.

Griffin Bell: 00:04:20 P-I-L-C-H-E-R.

Mel Steely: 00:04:23 Excuse me, I've got a little touch of bronchitis here. Did you graduate from Americus High School?

Griffin Bell: 00:04:29 Americus High. Very good high school, and thought of, in that part of Georgia, almost like a prep school. People would come in there from small towns, live with relatives so they can go to Americus High School.

Mel Steely: 00:04:48 Excuse me.

Griffin Bell: 00:04:49 City school system.

Mel Steely: 00:04:50 That was when they had eleven years?
Griffin Bell: 00:04:55 Eleven years.

Mel Steely: 00:04:55 Were you a pretty good student?

Griffin Bell: 00:05:00 I guess. I skipped a grade. Which is, I guess...

Mel Steely: 00:05:04 Did pretty well.

Griffin Bell: 00:05:05 Yeah. I got out of high school when I was fifteen.

Mel Steely: 00:05:08 Good gracious.

Griffin Bell: 00:05:10 Which was not an advantage, it was a disadvantage. I was just a child almost.

Mel Steely: 00:05:18 After you got out of high school, did you go right on in to Georgia Southwestern?

Griffin Bell: 00:05:24 Yeah, I went straight in there, stayed there two years, and then I got a... I didn't have any money, so I got a job. And then you could go to law school if you'd been to college two years. I was planning on going to law school, but it took me several years to ever get there because the war intervened. I went in the military.

Mel Steely: 00:05:45 What kind of job did you get before you went into the military?

Griffin Bell: 00:05:48 I went through a training program that Firestone Tire Rubber Company had. Came here to Atlanta and lived at the YMCA. Took this training course, and they sent me to run one of these tire stores they had. The first one I went to was in Bristol, Virginia. Then I left there and I went to Augusta, finally ended up... Now, my father had a Firestone dealership in Americus. I went back down there to work for him till I went in the Army. I had a low draft number and I figured I was-

Mel Steely: 00:05:48 You were going to go.

Griffin Bell: 00:06:23 I was going to get to... know you could go for one year and get out?

Mel Steely: 00:06:29 Mmm hmm.

Griffin Bell: 00:06:31 So I was waiting to get drafted for the one year, and then I was going to go to law school. Well, shortly after I got drafted, the war broke out. It was almost five years later before I ever got out of the military.
Mel Steely: 00:06:47 Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Griffin Bell: 00:06:51 Yeah, I was in Americus. I had been out at Fort McPherson and I had a weekend pass, and I was riding back from Americus with two girls from Americus who worked in Atlanta, and I caught a ride with them. We had the radio on and they announced it. Of course, I was anxious to get back into Fort Mac, but I knew they’d be mobilizing everybody, moving you around. So I got back that same day into Fort Mac.

Mel Steely: 00:07:25 You didn't stay home very long, did you?

Griffin Bell: 00:07:26 No, I spent the night.

Mel Steely: 00:07:31 Tell us about your military service. You were in just about the whole, well you were in for the whole war?

Griffin Bell: 00:07:35 Whole war.

Mel Steely: 00:07:37 From the beginning to the end of it, because you didn't get out of it until '46.

Griffin Bell: 00:07:38 Right.

Mel Steely: 00:07:39 What did you do?

Griffin Bell: 00:07:39 Always... you were not the master of your own destiny in the military, they just sent you wherever they wanted to send you, so most everybody that was in my group that was drafted was sent to Camp Croft, South Carolina, to the infantry, and my uniform... they hadn’t completely given me my uniform, so they put me in the next group, and that group went to the quartermaster in Fort Lee, Virginia, then called Camp Lee. I stayed around there about six months, and then I had to go to Fort Boyd and went to officer candidate school. I went to that, officer candidate school, and got out... There they formed truck regiments, they were forming some to send to different parts of the world.

I was a Second Lieutenant, and in about two months I got promoted to a First Lieutenant. They put me in one of these truck regiments and made me a Company Commander. By that time I was about 23 years old, and I was a Company Commander. Then, I stayed with this truck regiment for the rest of the war, in different ways. And finally, they sent us to California, wanted us to go to this CBI, and instead of that, they
took the company, the regiment, and broke it up into companies and battalions and sent some of us to different ports to work. And then by that time, transportation corps had started, and that became a big thing. So I worked around there, ports in San Francisco and Seattle, and ran these convoys up and down the East Coast, radar trucks and those sorts of things. They would tune them up and ship them out to the West Coast, and then we'd take them to the ports, up and down the West Coast.

And I became very alarmed that I wasn't overseas. My [inaudible 00:09:54] name was Steve Pace, from Americus. I was writing to him, trying to get him to send me overseas. I felt embarrassed still being in the United States. Never had any success. He finally told me if I didn't quiet down they'd probably send me to Alaska, which was the last place anybody wanted to go, you know. Time went by and I finally ended up... the war ended in Europe, and they started deploying people to the Pacific. I was moved to... From Fort Lawton, which is in Seattle, down to Fort Lewis, which is a huge base. We stayed, all the troops were there, and I was in Georgia with about five hundred men, and maybe that many vehicles. People would get them off the train, take them to the camp, take them back to the train, unload ships as they were coming...

When the war ended in Japan, then we started bringing everybody back in, and I had a big job, but it was... It didn't suit me well because I never had gotten overseas. I ended up the war sort of like an executive, I guess. Running a big truck operation. Rail operation.

Mel Steely: 00:11:13 I bet it certainly gave you a feel for business, then, didn't it?

Griffin Bell: 00:11:15 Oh, it did, yeah. But I still wanted to go to law school, so when I finally got out of the army, I went to law school.

Mel Steely: 00:11:22 And you went down to Mercer?

Griffin Bell: 00:11:22 Right. I went to Mercer. I was going to Georgia and I stopped at Mercer on the way, because I'd planned to go Mercer before the war, and had been admitted at one time, actually. I was going over to the University of Georgia, and I was married, and I told my wife, "I believe I'll stop at Mercer and talk to the dean. They might get me a job with a law firm." So I did, and the dean said, "If you make good grades for three months, one quarter, I'll guarantee you a job in a law firm." Well, I knew I couldn't get a job in Athens like that, so I went to Mercer, and never have regretted it. He did get me a job in a law firm.
Mel Steely: 00:12:02 Who was the dean, do you remember?

Griffin Bell: 00:12:03 Mead Field. I started working in this law firm. You could take the bar examination any time you wanted to, so after four quarters I took the bar examination and passed it. I was a lawyer and going to law school at the same time.

Mel Steely: 00:12:18 Huh.

Griffin Bell: 00:12:21 Worked out pretty well.

Mel Steely: 00:12:22 So you didn't-

Griffin Bell: 00:12:23 You know, people that have been in the military four or five years were in a hurry to get on with your life. I then started looking for a job. I looked and talked to people in Albany and Americus and Savannah, and they firm I was working with in Macon offered me... made me an offer. I finally took the job in Savannah, that's how I got to Savannah.

Mel Steely: 00:12:50 You stayed there about a year and a half.

Griffin Bell: 00:12:51 No, I stayed there four years.

Mel Steely: 00:12:53 Four years. And then went to Rome for a year?

Griffin Bell: 00:12:55 Went to Rome a year and a half. I was recruited out of there by this law firm. So I've been here... I've been in this law firm three times.

Mel Steely: 00:13:05 Yeah, I've seen you... '53 you started out, and like a ping pong ball, coming back and forth.

Griffin Bell: 00:13:11 Yeah. I'm the only main who's ever been in the law firm three times. The law firm is a hundred and twelve years old.

Mel Steely: 00:13:16 That was a pretty venerable firm by the time you came here.

Griffin Bell: 00:13:24 I was still small, but it had big practice. Law business was quite different then from what it is now, you didn't need as many lawyers.

Mel Steely: 00:13:31 What was it like being a lawyer, young veteran, getting your feet on the ground in Savannah and Rome? What did you do to that made people at King and Spalding notice you, in other words?
Griffin Bell: 00:13:46 Well I was a young trial lawyer, I got started out down in Savannah, and life was very simple then. They had one superior court judge in Savannah, Judge David Atkinson. His only son was killed in the Philippines in World War II, and he took a... He just liked young veterans. So he'd help us all get appointed to cases, and several of us had benefited from his help. He told me one day, this is the most prophetic thing I can remember almost in my life... I'd won some case. He called me in his chambers, and he said, "If you keep going the way you're going, you're going to end up in the Coca-Cola firm in Atlanta." And I didn't even know what the Coca-Cola firm was. In those days, people didn't move to Atlanta. The law firms paid the least amount of money in Atlanta of the places you could go to practice law. Now it's the most, but that's how it's changed. And I didn't pay any attention to that, you know, but in probably three or four years after he told me that, I was in the Coca-Cola firm.

But anyway, what happened was they didn't have many lawyers then. There was a big shortage of lawyers, didn't produce any lawyers during World War II. You could get a job just about anywhere. The firm I was in in Savannah represented the Central Georgia Railroad. That was our largest client, but they represented a lot of other people, too. It was the oldest firm in Georgia then, called Lawton and Cunningham. Older than King and Spalding. The chairman of the board of the railroad, I fell in with him, did a lot of work for him, he lived in Rome. And his lawyer in Rome killed himself in the middle of a trial. He called me and wanted me to come up to Rome and move up there and be his lawyer. That was a big change, I'd never even been to Rome in my life. I'm from South Georgia and in those days you're either South Georgia or North Georgia.

I finally went up to Rome on account of him. He put me in a law firm that the previous lawyer was a partner, they changed the name of the firm to Matthew, Maddox, and Bell. It was Matthew, Owen, and Maddox. And Owen was the man that killed himself. So when I got to Rome, I was already in a partnership with people I didn't know. But it turned out well.

Mel Steely: 00:16:45 Did you have to negotiate that?

Griffin Bell: 00:16:47 No, he negotiated it.

Mel Steely: 00:16:48 He took care of all of that to get you to come?

Griffin Bell: 00:16:48 Took care of the whole thing, yeah. His name was Al Ledbetter, he was a big citizen up in Rome, had a lot of interests. Yeah, he worked the whole thing out. It turned out to be that these are
nice people and my wife enjoyed Rome, she cried when we moved to Atlanta, she didn't want to leave there. But there was a lawyer in this firm by the name of George Branch, who was the same age as I was. He died with a heart attack when he was 34 years old. In those days, a law firm would just go get somebody to fill a slot if they had a vacancy like that. Incidentally, his son, George Branch, is a partner in this firm right now. They recruited me because he died, I came down here and just took his place. That's a long story around the firm here, everybody knows it, but I turned him down the first time they approached me, because I didn't really know anything about Atlanta. I was doing well, there was no point in moving.

They sent a committee back to see me again and wanted me to come down here and meet with Mr. Spalding, who was the head of the law firm, so I came back down here and met with him. This was important, sort of a legend around the firm. They... Spalding said, "What would it take to get you to come down here and join up with us?" He offered me a partnership, second level from the top. I was 34 years old, it was a big thing. I said, "Well, I'd like to see the books." He said, "See the books?" And I said, "Yeah, I just like to have some assurance that the firm's done well over the years."

Mel Steely: 00:18:44 Oh my goodness.

Griffin Bell: 00:18:44 He said, "I never heard of..." It just really startled him. He said, "How many years you want to see?" I said, "I'd like to start in 1929, when the Depression broke out, and come through those years right on up to now." And they let me see the books, and once I saw the books I realized that this was an unusual firm, they had substantial clients, it was well managed, and it gave me a feeling of security. Our rent in Rome, we had five lawyers with $150 a month. The rent down here was like $2,500 a month. It was a shock to me how you could make enough money practicing law to pay the rent.

Mel Steely: 00:19:29 Mmm hmm.

Griffin Bell: 00:19:32 That's how inexperienced I was. But, anyway, I decided to join up with them, and I came here on September 1, 1953. I started in with King and Spalding as a partner. They had a great trial lawyer, Robert Troutman. He told me that I was never going to be a well-known, good lawyer unless I got with somebody who would give me backup. He said, "We'll just give you a backup. We'll give you helpers and make you into a great lawyer." I sort of believed that, and when I got down here I found out I was his
assistant. It took me a while to get to be his number one man, but I learned a lot from him.

Mel Steely: **00:20:22** Now is this the same Bobby Troutman that was the brother-in-law to Ernest Vandiver?

Griffin Bell: **00:20:26** No, that was Bobby Russell.

Mel Steely: **00:20:27** Russell, okay.

Griffin Bell: **00:20:28** This was Troutman. He was the brother of Troutman Sanders.

Mel Steely: **00:20:33** Okay.

Griffin Bell: **00:20:34** Governor Sanders's partner. Two brothers.

Mel Steely: **00:20:35** Well, now, is it through Troutman that you got involved in politics?

Griffin Bell: **00:20:41** That was his son. Mr. Troutman's son who was my age, he was also in the law firm.

Mel Steely: **00:20:47** Oh.

Griffin Bell: **00:20:50** He had been to... Young Troutman, that's a different story, he had been to Harvard Law School and roomed with Joe Kennedy. Joe Kennedy was later killed in the war, but that's how he knew the Kennedy family. He was here in the firm, but he didn't care for practicing law and he left and went into business. But when I came here, they had three sons, one of them was smaller than Junior, Rupert Todd, still living. James M. Sibley, who was Mr. John Sibley's son. Mr. John Sibley was in Cambridge, Florida, but he had left to run a trust company by that time. These men, they had not many men in the firm, but they-

Mel Steely: **00:21:34** They were substantial.

Griffin Bell: **00:21:36** Oh yeah. Well, the first... I think two of them were chairman of the Board of Regents. Mr. Spalding was the first chairman of the Board of Regents. They represented... they always kept up with politics. Mr. Spalding was Gene Talmadge's chief of staff, which was a free lawyer, you know, in those days. They were big friends with Senator Russell. When Russell was governor, they reorganized their university system and made the Board of Regents. Spalding was the first chairman, and he was appointed by Senator... Governor Russell. So, the politics of the firm goes back a long ways.
Mel Steely: 00:22:13 Was there a stated policy at the time, you come in, you're an new attorney at the time here in Atlanta. Did you get assigned a political side to be on? Nothing like that?

Griffin Bell: 00:22:13 No.

Mel Steely: 00:22:26 I know some firms nowadays have Republicans and Democrats-

Griffin Bell: 00:22:28 Yeah, we didn’t, and sometimes we would lose. For example, when Marvin Griffin was elected governor, Charlie Gowen was running, he later joined our firm. He's now a retired partner, still living. We supported Fred Hand, and the reason we supported Fred Hand is, his brother-in-law was with the Callaway brothers in LaGrange, Fred, he was from Callaway. We represented him. We were their lawyers and through them we knew Fred Hand, so we, the firm supported Fred Hand and we lost. We don't always... King and Spalding's not always won, but we always seem to get back in. Because we have resources, we have people that can help on things. So, Marvin Griffin got elected governor, and Charlie Gowen was an outstanding candidate, we probably had selected him, he might have won.

But, no, we don't do that. And we don't tell anybody how to... When I was representing the Kennedy campaign, for example, we had a bunch of young lawyers, all who were helping Nixon, and people asked me if that embarrassed me, I said, "No. They're citizens. They can vote for anybody they want to." And we still do that. Like, I'm supporting Marvin Arrington right now. Well, there's people in the firm, I'm sure, I don't know who they are, but they're supporting the present mayor, Campbell. I usually don't have anything to do with city politics, I stick to the state and federal level. And Mr. Spalding always did that, although Mr. Spalding was an outstanding citizen and leader, and he was, for example, during the Great Depression, he was the county attorney of Fulton County. But he was also the chairman of the board of Rich's, and on the Coca-Cola board, things like that. He was also chairman of the Grady Hospital, that's why they have the huge Spalding Pavilion down at Grady Hospital, it's named for him. That wasn't because he was just an outstanding citizen, he was chairman of the Fulton County Hospital Authority that built Grady. He ran Grady. We represented all the black colleges, for example, and didn't charge a fee for it. I remember one time we were going to charge some college a fee, and Mr. Spalding said, "You know, we don't charge colleges fees." That was just part of the culture of the firm. Now you wouldn't find any lawyer anywhere that wasn't charging fees.
Mel Steely: 00:25:00 Yeah, they fuss about any kind of pro bono work nowadays.

Griffin Bell: 00:25:03 Oh yeah. I bet you every college in Atlanta's got a different lawyer from us. Far as I know, we don't represent any colleges. We do some work for Emory, and we represent Mercer, we do most of Mercer's work, but everybody's got different law firms, and they all get paid now.

Mel Steely: 00:25:25 You're-

Griffin Bell: 00:25:25 Mr. Spalding was a great citizen, he was high in the Catholic Church. He was the only person I ever met who gave a double tithe to the church. You know, it was hard to get anybody to give one tithe-

Mel Steely: 00:25:37 Yes.

Griffin Bell: 00:25:38 He gave a double.

Mel Steely: 00:25:39 My goodness, I've never heard of that. I don't believe I've ever met anyone that did that.

Griffin Bell: 00:25:42 I didn't. I'm a Baptist, so he was always... I was the first Baptist ever admitted to his law firm. He was always asking me how the Baptists always raised so much money. We would have a lot of discussions about that.

Mel Steely: 00:25:56 Yeah, tithing is one of the ways. How did you get involved in politics? You became very close to Governor Vandiver in a brief period of time. How did that come about?

Griffin Bell: 00:26:09 I like politics. Always enjoyed politics, my father was a city councilman in Americus, and he was chairman of the Democratic Party at one time. In the country, everybody's in politics. You know, in town, in a big city, very few people are. But if you grew up in a small town, you had something to do with politics. It goes in your blood, it's generations of people participating in politics. One of the great things going wrong in the country now is not enough people keep up with politics. It's not like it used to be. Most people in the city don't really care about politics.

So, I was interested in politics, and I had a friend named Bob Jordan, who I went to Georgia Southwestern with, who was Vandiver's best friend. He was put on the highway board and he got to be chief justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia. From Tarbutton, he's dead now, but... Bob and I were friends from
when I was fifteen years old, I was out there at Georgia Southwestern College. In those days, the depression was on, people were poor, and you might go to school a year and drop out for two years and work, and then go back to school for a year. Bob had worked somewhere for a while, and he was about seventeen when I was fifteen. Anyway, we got to be friends, and we stayed friends. After the war, he and I made contact again. He had fallen in with Vandiver, and he got me in with Vandiver. Vandiver was... he told me Vandiver was going to run for lieutenant governor and asked me if I'd like to help in it. So I told him I believed I would, and that's how I got started out with him. And then we, we had a...

There's an article in the Journal of Southern Legal History, maybe it was the first or second edition, where I tell about this. We had ten people that started helping Vandiver, we'd meet every month or two. He got elected lieutenant governor, and we just kept meeting till he got to be governor.

Mel Steely: 00:28:19 Kind of a brain trust group.

Griffin Bell: 00:28:23 Something that you wouldn't think about now, but each one of us had a different background. He had all the leading politicians of the state helping him, like Mr. Gillis and people like that. But we were all his friends, and we were all the same age. That's how I became chief of staff, a free lawyer, and went through all the segregation crisis with him and all those sorts of things. He picked me out to be the... probably because I was a partner in King and Spalding and living here in Atlanta. He picked me out to be chief of staff, which meant his lawyer. Those days we didn't... the attorney general's office was very small, and Gene Cook was the attorney general. The governor had one of the assistant attorney generals working in the governor's office. It was Henry Neal, who later became lawyer of the secretary of the Board of Regents. But, anyway, through Bob Jordan that I got started with Vandiver.

Mel Steely: 00:29:23 Okay, you obviously enjoyed it and thought a lot of Vandiver or you wouldn't have continued working with him?

Griffin Bell: 00:29:27 Oh, I thought a lot of him, and still do. I think he's never gotten the honor he's entitled to. He was a brave man. It takes a very big man to go back on your word, when you say you wouldn't let one black into any school in Georgia.

Mel Steely: 00:29:45 Well that leads me-
Griffin Bell: 00:29:45 You have to go back and just say, "You know, I've changed my mind. I'm not going to close the University of Georgia." I was in the room when he had twenty-three state leaders assembled at the old governor's mansion and it was the day before Hamilton Holmes and it was a woman's name, a woman student. What was her name? They have two students.

Mel Steely: 00:30:19 Yes.

Griffin Bell: 00:30:20 Black students.

Mel Steely: 00:30:21 Yeah she's [crosstalk 00:30:22].

Griffin Bell: 00:30:21 They got in the next day. But Vandiver had these people out there to tell him he was going to let them in and not close the university. And the way he handled it, he told them all goodbye. He said, "I called you out here to tell each one of you goodbye and thank you for the help you've given me over the years. Tell you I think a lot of all of you and I know I'm bringing great embarrassment on you by giving up. But I can't bring myself to close the University of Georgia."

So he started out with Mr. Gillis and Roy Harris, and to keep it on down the line. Finally you got to Frank Twitty, who was a floor leader in the House, down in Camilla, Georgia. And he told him goodbye and Twitty said, "Don't tell me goodbye, I'm not going anywhere. I'm sticking with you." And then they hit Carl Sanders and he said the same thing and before the evening, before the afternoon was over, this was late in the afternoon, the whole crowd decided they was staying. I've never seen anything like that. Nobody has probably in modern history has ever seen such a change brought about by one man. And he did it in a negative way by telling them goodbye. But he stood up. I mean, they had to admire him that he was getting ready to do what he said he wouldn't do.

Mel Steely: 00:31:42 This is his immediate advisers, that he had to-

Griffin Bell: 00:31:45 Oh, yeah. All of them. The biggest politicians in Georgia. And it was a great thing to see it.

Mel Steely: 00:31:52 Was Peter Zack in the room?

Griffin Bell: 00:31:53 Oh yeah.

Mel Steely: 00:31:54 And Peter Zack decided to stay with him?
Griffin Bell: 00:31:56 Yes, sir.

Mel Steely: 00:31:58 That's remarkable.

Griffin Bell: 00:31:59 Yeah, but he didn't have... Where would he go?

Mel Steely: 00:32:01 Well, that's true.

Griffin Bell: 00:32:03 Where would he go? He was working for Vandiver. He wouldn't even have a job.

Mel Steely: 00:32:06 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 00:32:09 He wasn't like the rest of them. The rest of them were all independent. So I wouldn't expect his staff to leave. Mr. Gillis, Jim Gillis, for example. And Roy Harris, he was just a lawyer from Augusta at the time. He'd been speaker of the House at one time, but it was a remarkable thing and Vandiver... I figured, we have three governors that ought to be honored above all others.

After World War II, Talmadge was brave enough to put in a sales tax dedicated only to education. You can't believe what poor education system we had in Georgia for blacks or whites, at that time, county systems were very poor. And that started the modern education, the sales tax. Now today you couldn't find a politician that would come out in favor of a tax. It'd have been hard to do and if it did it'd be a little thing. That was a 3% sales tax. The next one was Vandiver who saved the school system, the Sibley Commission and all those sorts of things. And all that has been written up, but I'm the one that thought of the Sibley Commission and all that and gave the people the chance to speak. Did they want to save the schools or close the public schools?

Mel Steely: 00:33:32 Now, did you think of this after that meeting at the old governor's mansion? Once he made a decision, or had you and he already talked about that ahead of time?

Griffin Bell: 00:33:41 No. We talked about that ahead of time and we were in the process of finding out how to save the whole education system, but we hadn't gotten there yet.

Mel Steely: 00:33:49 And so you didn't want to explain it all to these men?

Griffin Bell: 00:33:52 No. And what happened, the University of Georgia case came up suddenly. Judge Bootle headed down to Macon and he just
ordered these students, two students admitted and that was just total out of the blue, so we had to back then.

Mel Steely: 00:34:06 Charlayne Hunter Gault.

Griffin Bell: 00:34:07 Yeah, that's right. Charlayne Hunter. She was Charlayne Hunter then.

Mel Steely: 00:34:10 Right.

Griffin Bell: 00:34:11 And Hamilton Holmes.

Mel Steely: 00:34:12 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Griffin Bell: 00:34:13 I saw that Hamilton died not long ago.

Mel Steely: 00:34:15 He did. He'd become a doctor over at Emory, I believe. Very famous for it.

Griffin Bell: 00:34:19 He did a lot of work done at a Grady Hospital. I believe his father might've been a doctor. But at any rate, this all fit together. This was just a part of it, the university thing. We had the Sibley Commission go around all over the state and have ten hearings on the question, shall we close the public schools or not? If they're not going to be closed, they have to be integrated.

Mel Steely: 00:34:45 And you thought up that idea?

Griffin Bell: 00:34:47 Oh, yeah. Not only that, I wrote it up one Sunday night in longhand in my den on Habersham Road. Took it to the governor the next day and he said, "Well, this might have some merit." And then we got three or four other lawyers to look at it. And he discussed it with a small group. Then he said to me, "This won't work unless we get a strong chairman." And I said, "Well, who do you want to get?" He said, "Get John Sibley." So I went to see Mr. Sibley, who was right in the same, next door to our office down there where the trust company is now. He was very hesitant to do it. He thought it was some kind of political scheme. He didn't want to be used.

So he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll get the governor to talk with me, I want to get certain representation from the governor, I might do it." And so he had found him and talked to him about him. Vandiver told him it was on the up and up. Said, "We've got to help Georgia," so we've got to face this issue. But he said, "We can't handle it unless we have some sort of a
polling system where people can let off steam." The whole idea was to have these hearings and let people come and complain and have their say.

And it was a closely divided public opinion. But the public, we thought the majority wanted to keep the schools open. And it would have been chaos otherwise. It would have been a setback like the Civil War. As I remember it, the University of Georgia thing happened shortly thereafter and we then decided we'd repeal every segregation law on the books. Called a special session of the legislature. Vandiver did that and then spoke to them at night. They got it on television, and I was working with the editors of both papers to tell them what we were doing, to keep them advised of the plan we’re on. They were 100% supportive. We got every law on the books for Georgia that had required segregation repealed. That’s how modern Georgia started. And we got so far ahead of the rest of the South that it was just remarkable. And that wasn't the plan at all, to get ahead of everybody, but we did get ahead of everybody.

Mel Steely: 00:37:15 Yeah, you were just taking it a step at a time to begin with there, weren't you?

Griffin Bell: 00:37:18 Yeah. Yeah, the University of Georgia thing just sort of intruded on the plan we were working on.

Mel Steely: 00:37:25 Well now who was it that decided to give it to George Busbee to introduce?

Griffin Bell: 00:37:29 Me.

Mel Steely: 00:37:29 You did?

Griffin Bell: 00:37:30 I went to see George Busbee-

Mel Steely: 00:37:31 Okay.

Griffin Bell: 00:37:32 -at the Henry Grady Hotel on a Sunday night. And Vandiver had gotten Jim Gray to ask him. And he wanted to read it. So I went to... And I let him read the thing and he said, and this is sort of a joke now, he said, "This may ruin me." I said, "Well, it might make you." He was twenty-nine years old. And I said, "You may want to run for high office someday." Blacks will be voters and the whites of Georgia, they'd be grateful for saving the school system. It was a win-win thing. And he was grumbling about it and he finally said, "All right. I'll introduce it." It was a resolution. And he introduced it. And then when he ran for
governor, I said "Governor, do you think you're still ruined?" He wasn't governor then. But he stated bragging about being the author of the Sibley Commission Resolution.

Mel Steely: 00:38:34 But he owned up to it when we interviewed him [crosstalk 00:38:36] and told us that you had been the one that got it started.

Griffin Bell: 00:38:41 Nobody knows how all those things are going to come out. You just have to use your best judgment. This was a crisis.

Mel Steely: 00:38:51 Were you very involved in the '58 gubernatorial campaign? Did you do much in that campaign itself?

Griffin Bell: 00:38:57 No. [crosstalk 00:39:01]. But the politicians took over in the running. Like Mr. Gillis was the chairman of the campaign, and somebody like me wasn't thought to know enough about politics to do anything like that. The County Unit System was still in. All you had to do was know how these votes were, and two or three people in each county was all you had to have on your side, in a lot of the counties. And these people who had been in politics for years, they were skilled in that sort of thing. Knew who ran it. It was later when the County Unit System was knocked out that we had what I guess you'd call modern politics in Georgia.

Mel Steely: 00:39:43 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 00:39:43 Before that it was like a machine. There never would have been two parties under that system.

Mel Steely: 00:39:51 So you weren't involved at all in Vandiver making the speech-

Griffin Bell: 00:39:57 Oh no.

Mel Steely: 00:39:57 -about one or anything of that sort?

Griffin Bell: 00:39:58 Oh no. Not at all. I was as surprised as everybody else. In fact, I do remember saying something to Bob Jordan that this was going to be a tough thing to uphold that, something like that. An then after he made that speech, the Supreme Court handed down, before he took office, before he was inaugurated, the Supreme Court handed down a second Little Rock case. And in the second Little Rock case, they said that the fact that you're going to have riots and that sort of thing was not an excuse for not integrating schools. And they didn't make any bones about it. And I remember going to see Governor Vandiver, or Ernie
Vandiver then, he was the Lieutenant Governor, and taking him [inaudible 00:40:48] opinion and talking with him about it. I said "Governor, this is going to be hard to live with the promise you made and I don't know where all this is going to end up." He then said, not that minute but sometime in the next few days, he said, "I'm going to appoint you chairman of the Lawyers Committee and I want you to go around all the south and talk to these other governors and state attorney generals and find out what their plans are." And Hawken Perry, who's still living in Albany, Georgia was one of the lawyers on the commission and [inaudible 00:41:21] was on there. Charlie Block from Macon and somebody else, I've forgotten who.

Anyway, I went to all these places and usually Hawken Perry or one of them would go with me. Some of them. And I remember going to Virginia and talking to Albertis Harrison, the attorney general who later became the governor. Went to Alabama to talk to John Patterson, who was attorney general who later became governor. I talked with somebody from Mississippi, I've forgotten who it was. But I came back to report it to the governor that none of them had a plan that would work. That there was no plan. I said, "Nobody has figured out what to do about this. In Virginia, they're going to close the schools. And I don't think you want to close the schools."

That was called, I think, an imposition, or something like that up in Virginia. Massive, massive something. Anyway... Oh, and the governor of Virginia, I talked with him. Lindsay something was his name. But anyway, they didn't know anything any more than... I said, "Nobody knows the answer to this." And that's the way it was. Then that led me to writing the Sibley Commission. I finally concluded, and I remember being called over to the state highway department by Mr. Gillis and Dixon Oxford. Dixon's still living. He's in a wheelchair. I saw him not long ago.

They told me I was ruining the government. They said, "You're too liberal." They said, "You're just a... " You know, that's the only time anybody ever called me a liberal, I guess, in my life. They said, "You're about to ruin the governor." And I said, "I think I'm saving him. My intention is to save him." And it turned out that's the way it was. Until that day when Vandiver had them all in the mansion to tell them goodbye, that's the first time we got everybody in agreement.

Mel Steely: 00:43:25 Now, how would you have described yourself at that time within the framework of Georgia politics? A racist, segregationist, moderate, liberal, conservative? What would you... Vandiver says he was a segregationist.
Yeah, but I don't think I ever was. I was a... I don't know. I don't know that I was certain what I was. I remember in Savannah, Talmadge tried to put... Governor Talmadge tried to put the County Unit System in the state constitution and I was in a small group of lawyers that fought that, which meant I was fighting the Talmadge machine. But that was just on one issue.

I remember one day when I was in law school, I had a job checking titles for a law firm in Macon. That's when I first started law school and I had to go from Macon to Thomaston to the courthouse. And I passed a black school down there somewhere around Roberta in that area of Georgia which is poor enough now. It was then too. And they had the worst building. And I had a lawyer with me, a student. I remember who it was, but anyway, I said to him, "This was a disgrace the way we're treating these black students. Putting them in a building like that when the whites have a brick buildings and all this sort of thing."

That's the first time it ever dawned on me how unfair this system was because I had grown up in Americus and in Americus the black high school and the junior high and all was a good building. It was a more enlightened place despite what people may think of Americus now. But we had something that at least looked like separate but equal. And some of those students that came out of the black school in Americus had done exceedingly well. There's Dr. Anderson that was down there in Albany that led the movement for the blacks down in Albany when the Dr. King was down there, he was a... Graduated from that school and plenty of other people did.

But in the rural areas, it was terrible what they were doing. I remember I had some remarks about that and probably said something about it. But I don't know what I was, to tell you the truth. I was just the product of a system and I had an evolving philosophy, I guess. And I more was interested in saving things than I was on being the leader of the philosophy. Philosophic group.

You never thought of yourself philosophically as anything one way or the other, have you?

I remember something Talmadge told me when I was nominated for a judgeship, that a man in Americus objected to me, and he told me his name. I won't give you the name, but at any rate, he's dead, long gone. But he told me that this man told him that I was very liberal and dangerous. And he said, "How'd that happen? What did he mean? Why would he say that?"
said, "I can tell you exactly what he said." I said, I was in a conversation one night with a group of people in Americus and they said that they Ku Klux Klan had been to somebody's house and got the man out of the house and beat him or something. And I said... And this is what I said, I said, "It's a good thing he never came to my house."

And this fellow said... He was a court reporter for the court system. He said, "What would you have done?" I said, "I'd have just shot him right off the porch. He'd never come back." Anybody else who walks up would have gotten shot." And he considered me to be a liberal for saying that. I thought I was a patriot.

So, Talmadge said, "I don't see anything wrong with that." That's what he was talking about, though. That fellow may have been in the Ku Klux Klan for all I know. I never knew anybody that was in the Ku Klux Klan, but he could have been.

Mel Steely: 00:47:29 Well if he was a member, you were dangerous to him then.
Griffin Bell: 00:47:31 Yeah. Yeah. I was. Yeah.
Mel Steely: 00:47:34 Garland Byrd-
Griffin Bell: 00:47:34 But I was a young veteran. Outspoken.
Mel Steely: 00:47:38 A lot of you guys were veterans then. Vandiver was, Byrd was.
Griffin Bell: 00:47:41 Oh yeah-
Mel Steely: 00:47:41 Jordan was. Did it mean something to be a veteran in those days?
Griffin Bell: 00:47:45 Yeah. Yeah, I think you had more of an interest in your country and a public interest. I mean if you're in the military you're in the public interest. And we felt like we ought to make things better. That's what we were told, that people all over the world were trying to make the world safe for democracy. And a lot of veterans didn't figure they had much democracy in this country when they got home.

I'll tell you a story. This is one of the Charles Kirbo stories. I'm sorry he's dead. You could've gotten a lot of stories out of him, but he was a lawyer in Bainbridge, Georgia. This is right after the war and he was in the airborne and D-Day and all that, Kirbo was. But he was a lawyer before the war and afterwards, and a
group of veterans from Seminole County, Georgia, Dawsonville, came over there to see him in Bainbridge and wanted to get an injunction against a particular person that lived in Dawsonville against him having anything to do with the elections, that he always steals the election.

And I know the man's name and I asked Talmadge to tell me, this was later on about him, and it was true that he was a great manipulator of the elections. And Mr. Kirbo and Custer advised them that they couldn't get an injunction against anybody. They hadn't done anything. You can't just enjoin somebody from not having anything to do with election. So this group of veterans said, "Well, let us borrow your conference room. We want to have a meeting." And they met and they came out and were getting ready to leave and Mr. Custer said to them, "What did you all decide?" And the spokesman said, "We decided to kill him." He said, "Kill him?" They said, "Yeah." Said, "We've been fighting all over the world for democracy" and said, "We don't have democracy in Seminole County." So he said, "Well, hold on here a minute." Now what they finally agreed on, they'd kidnap him. And they kidnapped him and held him three days in a cabin in the woods while the election took place.

I said to Kirbo, "Don't you think it was pretty bad to tell somebody they could kidnap somebody like that?" He said, "We didn't think so. We thought we saved a man's life."

Mel Steely: 00:50:14 And they may have.

Griffin Bell: 00:50:16 That's a true story. Another thing it that happened then, the GI Bill came into effect and it made this country over. So suddenly, we were able to educate a whole generation with college education. And there's never been anything like a shot in the arm for a country like that. The GI Bill. And all these same people, all veterans, had a public interest, a better mind and all got educated.

Mel Steely: 00:50:47 But if you go back starting with Herman Talmadge, every governor was a veteran up to Maddox.

Griffin Bell: 00:50:57 Yeah. But it looks like we won't have a veteran as president anymore.

Mel Steely: 00:51:00 That's right.

Griffin Bell: 00:51:00 We don't have one now.
Mel Steely: 00:51:06 Nope.

Griffin Bell: 00:51:06 And if George W. Bush, the governor of Texas gets in, he would get to be president. He's not a veteran of a war but he served two years in the Air National Guard and was a jet pilot. So he's pretty close to being one. But see, we haven't been in a war since Vietnam.

Mel Steely: 00:51:27 That's right.

Griffin Bell: 00:51:28 Except these [inaudible 00:51:29] things and Panama and the Middle East.

Mel Steely: 00:51:33 It's been twenty something years.

Griffin Bell: 00:51:34 Things have changed. We got used to all that. Look at Truman. Truman was a captain in the artillery in France.

Mel Steely: 00:51:40 That's right.

Griffin Bell: 00:51:41 World War I. A lot of his frankness and toughness came from that. So military's not all bad. It's good right now if we had a reason to help people in the military, we'd soon cure most of the problems we have in the society. I remember in World War II, we'd take people out of the reform schools. You know, when we got [inaudible 00:52:10]. At one point in World War II, we had drafted fourteen million people and there weren't any more men to draft. By the time of the Battle of the Bulge, we started taking in 4F's. You could be 4F's if you were illiterate. And I saw people train to read and write in six weeks. Six weeks. But the first thing the Army did was put them in a uniform, clean them up, send them to the dentist, send them to the doctor, and give them [inaudible 00:52:40]. Get them disciplined. Get them under control and then they could start teaching them.

In my own company, I had some soldiers that had been in the reform school and I used to joke about their parents ought to pay the government money for straightening them out.

Mel Steely: 00:52:59 Well, judges frequently would give people choices of jail or the military.

Griffin Bell: 00:53:04 Yeah. Now the military won't take people like that.

Mel Steely: 00:53:06 No.
Griffin Bell: 00:53:07 When I was the chairman of the crime commission here in Atlanta, I recommended and was able to get the legislature to pass a first offender law. And the main reason for that is if you had a felony on your record, you couldn't get in the military. But if you had a first offender and you didn't get in any more trouble for a year or two, whatever the judge said, that whole thing was wiped out and then you could get into the military.

Mel Steely: 00:53:33 But some of them went on and did very well.

Griffin Bell: 00:53:36 Oh sure. Well, I mean, you had people get-

Mel Steely: 00:53:38 One of my students went on, became an officer [crosstalk 00:53:42] and won the Distinguished Service Cross and Silver Star and the whole series of medals.

Griffin Bell: 00:53:47 Well, you get a second chance in our country. I think part of our culture is to give people a second chance.

Mel Steely: 00:53:54 One of the outstanding veterans was Garland Byrd who was Vandiver's lieutenant governor.

Griffin Bell: 00:54:00 Right.

Mel Steely: 00:54:01 What do you remember about Lieutenant Governor Byrd?

Griffin Bell: 00:54:05 Well, I liked him. He was a good, honest man, I always thought. He got the Silver Star in World War II. May have gotten it twice. I know he got it once. He was a very good man. I liked him, he would have been a good governor. And he was a good citizen all his life. Lived down there in Reynolds. Practiced law.

Mel Steely: 00:54:31 Did Vandiver and Byrd work closely together?

Griffin Bell: 00:54:35 Not particularly. They got along well. But I don't remember them being too close because Garland, everybody knew he was running for governor.

Mel Steely: 00:54:51 Right.

Griffin Bell: 00:54:52 And I don't know why they weren't closer than they was, but I didn't think they were too close. They were friendly. People were more civil then than they are now.

Mel Steely: 00:55:01 Yeah.
Griffin Bell: 00:55:02 Much more so. You didn't carry on a vendetta against somebody. You were very civilized in the way you approached each other. I would say that's the way they were.

Mel Steely: 00:55:13 I remember Marvin Griffin too-

Griffin Bell: 00:55:14 But there was a tension sort of between the lieutenant governor, who is running the Senate and he feels independent, and the governor who is trying to get programs through the House into the Senate. Each one of them has their own...

Mel Steely: 00:55:27 A three-way tension because you have to throw the speaker in there too.

Griffin Bell: 00:55:29 Yeah. Right. Speaker, too and each one of them has their own prerogatives and turf. So they don't get all that friendly. If you had a machine, it would. I suspect when Talmadge was governor, they probably had more of a machine than later.

Mel Steely: 00:55:51 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 00:55:52 By the time Vandiver got in there and had a lot of these reforms, a lot of people in the House and the Senate weeren't in favor of these... First reform was honesty in government. House Bill number one during the Vandiver administration stopped all this skullduggery that had been going on in the purchasing department and that sort of thing. And I remember a lot of people in the legislature saying something to me about that, said, "You all are getting too honest." That's how I approach the thing.

Mel Steely: 00:56:23 This is coming after the Marvin Griffin administration.

Griffin Bell: 00:56:25 Right.

Mel Steely: 00:56:27 Well, during that period when Vandiver was Lieutenant Governor, there was a clear difference between he and Governor...

Griffin Bell: 00:56:33 Oh, on the rural roads authority.

Mel Steely: 00:56:38 Yes.

Griffin Bell: 00:56:39 For example. That's when Marvin... George Bagby's brother worked for the state patrol and Bagby was in the House and he voted for Vandiver, he voted against Marvin. And he made a speech on the floor of the House and said that he was fighting
Governor Griffin on this bill and said to him, "I'm sure you're going to fire my brother." He worked for the radio operator for the state patrol, but he said, "I want to say to my brother we got flour in the bin and meat in the smokehouse and if he gets fired to come on home."

And Marvin Griffin called him on the telephone from the governor's office up on the floor of the House and he said to him, "You better tell your brother to get ready because he's coming home."

Mel Steely: 00:57:36 And he swears he didn't even know anything about his brother until he heard him say it, but he said, but he just couldn't pass it up. It's too good a shot to take. But there was a clear difference, I think, in the public's mind between Marvin Griffin and Ernie Vandiver.

Griffin Bell: 00:57:36 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 00:57:50 And Vandiver came out and looking much better as an honest man who was going to clean up government. And I would guess that's the main reason he won the election in '58, wouldn't you think?

Griffin Bell: 00:58:02 Well, there wasn't anybody running against him by that time.

Mel Steely: 00:58:02 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 00:58:03 Yeah. He was so far ahead. And the only person who ran against him was Reverend [inaudible 00:58:07].

Mel Steely: 00:58:07 Right. And that wasn't much of a...

Griffin Bell: 00:58:10 No, he carried his own county, I think, that was it.

Mel Steely: 00:58:13 Well now, you worked well with Vandiver, but right after he got elected that would've been in what? '59?

Griffin Bell: 00:58:25 No, he took office in '59.

Mel Steely: 00:58:27 He was sworn in '59.

Griffin Bell: 00:58:28 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 00:58:29 That's about the same time that the Kennedy brothers decided to go for the presidency.
Griffin Bell: 00:58:34  Right.

Mel Steely: 00:58:35  And you were close at that point to one of their contacts in Georgia.

Griffin Bell: 00:58:43  Troutman.

Mel Steely: 00:58:44  Troutman.

Griffin Bell: 00:58:45  Yeah.

Mel Steely: 00:58:45  Who had been the roommate to-

Griffin Bell: 00:58:47  Joe Kennedy.

Mel Steely: 00:58:47  The dead Kennedy brother.

Griffin Bell: 00:58:48  Yeah.

Mel Steely: 00:58:49  The one that died during the-

Griffin Bell: 00:58:49  Joe, yeah.

Mel Steely: 00:58:51  Joe Kennedy. Tell us how it came about that you got involved in the Kennedy race in 1960.

Griffin Bell: 00:58:56  Well, the same person, Troutman, had been promoting the Kennedys ever since Jack tried to get the nomination, four years before, you remember, somebody put him up.

Mel Steely: 00:59:14  Tried to be vice president.

Griffin Bell: 00:59:17  Vice president. I've forgotten who got it. Kefauver, somebody like that.

Mel Steely: 00:59:22  Kefauver, that's right.

Griffin Bell: 00:59:22  Yeah. And that Kennedy out as a candidate. So Troutman started, right then, he started working with a lot of Kennedy people up in Massachusetts and elsewhere getting him ready for the nomination. Well, in Georgia, Senator Russell was for Lyndon Johnson. And then there were some people, like me, that really started out being for Adlai Stevenson. And Ben Troutman got to working on me about Kennedy and he had Bobby Kennedy down here to visit and I got to know Bobby Kennedy. Troutman also got Vandiver into that.
I think Bobby Kennedy spent the night in the mansion, maybe, when he had him down here. And we all got to know the Kennedys like that.

At the convention, I was a delegate to the convention in Los Angeles. And Kennedy, as you know, he got the nomination on the first ballot. Well, we voted on the first ballot for Lyndon Johnson because Dick Russell asked Vandiver to get us to do that. Then on the next ballot, we were probably going to be split about fifty-fifty, and I was in the Kennedy camp, some other people here in Georgia were strong for Adlai Stevenson, but that never came to fruition. And then they had the question of getting the vice president, and somebody came up with the idea of getting Lyndon Johnson on the ticket as vice president. This set the liberals wild. Soapy Williams from Michigan, people like that, they just couldn't stand the thought of Johnson being on the ticket as vice president. Well, Kennedy just wanted to win, and they figured they'd get Texas, if they had him, and some other, maybe some Southern states.

So I remember John Connally came to see me and he was over there running the Texas delegation. He came to see me over in Georgia delegation. He said he thought, he heard we were having a revolt. People didn't want Lyndon Johnson. I said, well that's just a few people. And I said, we heard you're having one in the Texas delegation. And he said, well, we got that under control. I said, well, we got Georgia under control, you don't need to worry about us.

Anyway, Johnson got on there and then out to help the Kennedy's, no question about that. But it also helped in Georgia because by that time Vandiver and Talmadge and Russell, two senators, had decided that they were going for the first time manage a national campaign for a Democrat. It was the South before that wouldn't participate, they'd leave the country or do something. So they sent, Vandiver recommended George L. Smith, the Speaker of the House and me to be the co-chair of the campaign. Vandiver sent me to Washington to meet with John Kennedy, Senator Kennedy. I met with him in the Senate Sergeant-at-Arms's office. And I'll never forget that meeting because they were really working on him about his religion.

And he asked me what my religion was and I said, Southern Baptist. He said, aren't you embarrassed as a Roman Catholic? I said, no, I'm not embarrassed at all, but I'm embarrassed as an American citizen that's issue. It ought not to be an issue. Religion ought not to be an issue. And I think the next week or
two weeks after that, they went out to Houston and met with the Baptist preachers out there in some way.

But I got an autograph...

I would representing the two senators and the governor and we was going to manage this campaign. And I said, the governor gave me one condition he wants you to agree to. And that is that only the two senators and the governor and George L. Smith and me can speak for the campaign in Georgia. We want to keep it under control, and so as that’s the way it went. And we carried Georgia by the largest majority in the entire nation. And it was organized just like we organized a congressional race. We got every Congress helped, we got all our people, some of Russell’s people, Talmadge’s people, and just had it totally organized. The only blip we ever had was when Vandiver helped get Martin Luther King out of Reidsville. That got to be a sort of a crisis.

Mel Steely: 01:04:20 Were you involved in that phone call?

Griffin Bell: 01:04:21 Not at all. I didn't know anything about it at all. And the press asked me about it. I was in Rome, Georgia at some rally up there. And they asked me about, and I said, I don't know a thing in the world about it, but it was Vandiver and his brother-in-law, Bobby Russell. They handle all that. Of course, I find out about it later. That actually had a great deal to do with the campaign, but it worried George L. Smith so much, that he left Atlanta and went back to Swainsboro, because he was afraid he'd lose his seat in the legislature.

Mel Steely: 01:04:54 Oh goodness.

Griffin Bell: 01:04:55 It was a startling thing to everybody.

Mel Steely: 01:04:57 Well, there was some opposition on that. My grandfather was a Southern Baptist preacher and I remember he was strong for Nixon because he was just convinced the Pope was going to have some kind of tunnel under the ocean and going to come up and get there in the White House.

Griffin Bell: 01:04:57 I know it.

Mel Steely: 01:05:11 And trying to tell him how to run things. He was scared of those Catholics. In those days there was something to that. But you did manage to pull it out and to have a very strong election for Kennedy.
Griffin Bell: 01:05:24  Yeah, we had a great victory.

Mel Steely: 01:05:26  Yeah. The public wasn't as concerned as some of the preachers were.

Griffin Bell: 01:05:29  No, we had Kennedy to come to Warm Springs, and we had a writer, a speech writer over, worked for the governor named Ed Lynn Bridges, whose father was a county school superintendent out of Americus when I was growing up. He'd been with the Associated Press or somebody for a long time. He was a great speech writer and he wrote a speech for Vandiver to give in introducing Kennedy down there at Warm Springs, and it sounded like Roosevelt speaking.

It was so much like, his phrase-ology and all. That it was just put the whole aroma of Roosevelt's time, the New Deal and all that right around Kennedy. And then we had it organized. We had school children out, and everybody was out of school, wherever the motorcade went the children were on the side of the road. It was an exciting, big thing. That's the way, we got started in Georgia and then we had it totally organized. If you could organize a governor's race like that now, you'd win every time.

Mel Steely: 01:06:29  Oh yeah. Be almost impossible nowadays. George Busbee was a delegate as I remember at that same convention. His impression of Bobby Kennedy was very negative. Was that your personal impression?

Griffin Bell: 01:06:41  No, no. I'd gotten Kennedy and I... it wasn't at all. I went to see Kennedy about something over at a different hotel and I've forgotten what it was. It had something to do with Civil Rights. I can't remember what it was, but I never, no, I always got along with him fine. I think a lot of people didn't like him.

Mel Steely: 01:07:02  That's true.

Griffin Bell: 01:07:05  I didn't know about George, but I-

Mel Steely: 01:07:07  He didn't like him at all.

Griffin Bell: 01:07:08  Yeah, I didn't have, I got along with him fine. And then after Kennedy won, I dealt with him almost every week, sometime two or three times a week, about patronage. Who got what jobs and all that.
Mel Steely: 01:07:22 Well now, there was serious talk at the time about the governor Vandiver being appointed Secretary of the Army. Were you involved?

Griffin Bell: 01:07:30 I was not involved in that. Didn't know anything about it until I read it in the newspaper. And I don't know how it came started. Vandiver would have to tell you that.

Mel Steely: 01:07:41 He says he doesn't know how it got started. He said it was not, they didn't start it with him.

Griffin Bell: 01:07:46 Well-

Mel Steely: 01:07:46 It started somewhere else, he thinks.

Griffin Bell: 01:07:49 Well, it could have started in Washington. Could have-

Mel Steely: 01:07:52 He traced it back as best he could to Carl, what's his name, the congressman.

Griffin Bell: 01:08:01 Vinson.

Mel Steely: 01:08:01 Vinson, and he thinks that's where it got started.

Griffin Bell: 01:08:04 Well, do you ever give any thought to if you've got a Machiavellian bent of mind, maybe Garland Wade's people started.

Mel Steely: 01:08:13 That could be.

Griffin Bell: 01:08:14 That have made him governor. And so it could have come out of Washington in that way.

Mel Steely: 01:08:21 Or some of Byrd's folks.

Griffin Bell: 01:08:22 Yeah, but Garland said he didn't have anything to do with it.

Mel Steely: 01:08:25 That's right, he told me that. I interviewed him two weeks before he died and he said he didn't have anything-

Griffin Bell: 01:08:29 He didn't know.

Mel Steely: 01:08:31 ... to do with it either. At any rate, he did not become Secretary of the Army.

Griffin Bell: 01:08:36 A lot of times, politicians in Washington, then and now, will float somebody's name just as a good political thing. They'll
float the name and then not appoint them, because if somebody else objects, and then they'll get to somebody else in there. I mean, a lot of that stuff. It's like leaking. There's never been a leak that wasn't for a purpose.

Mel Steely: 01:08:58 President Clinton is doing that right now.

Griffin Bell: 01:08:59 Yeah. Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:09:02 Quite a bit of it, as a matter of fact. What did you think of Vandiver as a governor? How would you assess him?

Griffin Bell: 01:09:09 I thought he was excellent. I thought he was an excellent governor.

Mel Steely: 01:09:13 You listed him as the second of three best. Who was the third governor-

Griffin Bell: 01:09:17 Sanders. I didn't get around to saying, third one that helped-

Mel Steely: 01:09:20 You helped Talmadge, Vandiver...

Griffin Bell: 01:09:20 And Sanders.

Mel Steely: 01:09:20 And Sanders, okay.

Griffin Bell: 01:09:23 Yeah, Sanders succeeded Vandiver. Sanders set out to build up the university system. And did a great job on that.

Mel Steely: 01:09:31 He sure did at our school, West Georgia.

Griffin Bell: 01:09:34 Well he did it all over the state, University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, everybody benefited from Sanders.

Mel Steely: 01:09:39 I teach a course.

Griffin Bell: 01:09:40 You see those three people in a row, you think about the impact they've had on Georgia education.

Mel Steely: 01:09:45 It was something. I teach a course on Georgia's governors since World War II. It's a graduate course and my students in this last session, when I taught it, picked Vandiver as their top governor.

Griffin Bell: 01:09:59 They did.

Mel Steely: 01:09:59 For the crisis. And what they were challenged with was, look at the times the man faced.
Griffin Bell: 01:10:05 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:10:06 And how did he deal with it? And based on that, who would you pick as the top governor, who dealt the best with what he had to deal with, and they picked Vandiver.

Griffin Bell: 01:10:15 Yeah, well that's good. I think I would pick him, myself, of course what he, not only that, but he brought a new moral tone to politics. We had never had anything like “truth and honesty in government,” that sort of thing. Law is still on the books. That got a lot of people upset with him, but he did... he just was a good governor.

He never got really the credit he should've gotten for, he never lived down the speech of “No, Not One.”

Mel Steely: 01:10:46 Well one-

Griffin Bell: 01:10:47 That marked him as a segregationist. There's a lot of segregationists, but most of them were changed and they got credit for changing, and he never got into credit much for changing.

Mel Steely: 01:10:58 One of my students was a black student, said that she understood why he had done what he did and everything, but frankly, she could not vote for him as the top one because of that speech. She said, I can't get past that speech.

Griffin Bell: 01:11:12 Yeah. I can understand that.

Mel Steely: 01:11:14 She was very honest about it and she went for Sanders. A number of them, incidentally, would have gone with Zell Miller, if he'd been a choice. They liked Zell, a lot.

Griffin Bell: 01:11:24 Well, Zell, I wasn't excluding Zell.

Mel Steely: 01:11:26 I understand.

Griffin Bell: 01:11:27 Yeah. I was talking about in that era.

Mel Steely: 01:11:30 Right.

Griffin Bell: 01:11:30 Those three were... That was a formative time in Georgia, modern Georgia and those three all made a mark. Now you understand, Sanders was in the Vandiver administration so it was like carrying on the same.
Vandiver built on Talmadge, and then Sanders was a little different from either one of them, but he was built on, had the same supporters almost.

Mel Steely: 01:11:58 Right.

Griffin Bell: 01:11:59 As Vandiver did.

Mel Steely: 01:12:01 And he inherited many of Byrd’s supporters when Byrd had his heart attack, at the beginning of the campaign. You helped President Kennedy or Bobby Kennedy really make appointments in the Southeast.

Griffin Bell: 01:12:15 Right.

Mel Steely: 01:12:16 And one of those appointments you were working on for judgeships or whatever, got you in close enough that he’d considered you for a judgeship yourself and appointed you to the Fifth Circuit. Could you tell us about that?

Griffin Bell: 01:12:30 Yeah. When he first asked me if I wanted to, what I wanted. I said, I really don’t want anything. I’m practicing law and I’m not prepared to go into the government. I was trying to help everybody else.

Mel Steely: 01:12:45 You were the managing partner at that time.

Griffin Bell: 01:12:47 Yeah, right. Let’s see how that came up. I think I read it in the newspaper. They had a bill pending in the Congress to add two judgeships to the Fifth Circuit. In the back of my mind, I’d always wanted to be on the Supreme Court of Georgia. My thinking then, from rural Georgia, that was a big thing. I never thought about being a federal judge. There was so few of them it was impossible to think about being a federal judge.

So I read that in the newspaper, and next time I saw Bobby Kennedy I asked him about it. And he said, yeah, we’re going to add two judges to the Fifth Circuit. And I said, I may be interested in one of those, and let me get back to you on that. So I did and told him I was interested in it. Well, Johnson had a candidate from Texas named Connally, Ben Connally. He was insisting on him. And then Carl Vinson showed up with a candidate, a lawyer named Hall from Macon, who was one of his supporters down there in that district.

And so President Kennedy used to be on the Vinson’s committee in the House, Naval Affairs, and he’d got in touch
with Senator Kennedy about Hall, so there was then a lot of backing and filling going on. But finally they, Bobby Kennedy told me they decided to give it to Georgia. One of the places to Georgia and one they were going to give Alabama. So then that got down between Hall and me. And for some reason, Carl Vinson just made his mind up, that I wasn't going to get it. And so Bobby Kennedy called me one day and said, the president has got a letter from Dick Russell and Talmadge and they approved both of you.

So Talmadge told me, he told them that they ought to consider the rank by alphabetical order. That would put me ahead. Well, they didn't want to get into that, they were worried about Vinson. So they then did something, now I'd never heard of before or since, they decided they'd poll the Georgia members of the House to see which one they wanted of Hall and me. And I got nine votes and he got one. That really threw Congressman Vinson off, got him upset. And he never would change.

Mr. John Sibley was from Milledgeville and they grew up together. And Mr. Sibley told me one day, he said, I'm going to get on the train and go to Washington and see Carl Vinson. I'm going to get this straightened out. So he went up there to see him, and Vinson wrote the president a note and got in touch with him in some way and withdrew his objection. And I got it then.

Mel Steely: 01:15:56 So he didn't endorse you, but he did not object to you either.
Griffin Bell: 01:15:59 Right.
Mel Steely: 01:16:00 So that way he will still stay loyal to his own man.
Griffin Bell: 01:16:03 Right.
Mel Steely: 01:16:03 Okay. And so then it worked out fine for you.
Griffin Bell: 01:16:06 Yeah. But I don't think anybody ever had to go through getting the vote of the House members.
Mel Steely: 01:16:12 No. I've never heard of that.
Griffin Bell: 01:16:14 No. I hadn't either, before or since. I had a lot to do with appointments under President Carter, I never heard anything like it.

That showed the power Congressman Vinson had, though.
Mel Steely: 01:16:27  Yes, it does.

Griffin Bell: 01:16:29  In those days, committee chairman were powerful people.

Mel Steely: 01:16:33  Could lock up a bill real quick.

Griffin Bell: 01:16:35  Oh yeah. You had to deal with them.

Mel Steely: 01:16:37  Well, they still have a little bit of power today, it's just they have them-

Griffin Bell: 01:16:39  Sort of just happens now.

Mel Steely: 01:16:42  Yeah, you can ask William Weld whether or not there's any power left in the chairmanship.

Griffin Bell: 01:16:46  Well in House, in the Senate Judiciary Committee in the year before the presidential election, they don't kill forty or fifty judge ships. Then the last year of the Bush administration, we had two judges nominated from Georgia and neither one of them got it. Never got a hearing even, Biden wouldn't give any of them a hearing.

   Well it's not unusual for the chairman, not to call any - arrange for a hearing.

Mel Steely: 01:17:11  But he was the first one to protest about how unjust it was [crosstalk 01:17:15].

Griffin Bell: 01:17:11  Well, to take-

Mel Steely: 01:17:18  He did have the decency to look embarrassed, when Senator Helms mentioned that to him on TV.

Griffin Bell: 01:17:23  You had to take all that with a grain of salt. Television is changing politics. If you never had a camera... I'm on a study commission in Washington, on separating the powers, and one of the people on the commission is Sandy Vanocur and he is an expert on how television has changed politics. And if we didn't have any cameras ever in the Congress, things would get back like they used to be. People would-

Mel Steely: 01:17:54  Could well be. If you didn't have any cameras-

Griffin Bell: 01:17:55  I've been there, many times I've been to the Congress, someone's there as attorney general to some committee hearing. If the television cameras didn't show up, they'll call off
Mel Steely: 01:18:19 Was being a member of the Fifth Circuit, U.S. Court of Appeals what you thought it was going to be?

Griffin Bell: 01:18:28 And more, yeah and more. I never realized how much I'd be in the Civil Rights Revolution.

Mel Steely: 01:18:35 You were right in the middle of it, though.

Griffin Bell: 01:18:36 Yeah, every day.

Mel Steely: 01:18:38 Because you went in from '61 to '76?

Griffin Bell: 01:18:41 Right, and it was just getting started good when I got there. I spent ten years in the Civil Rights Revolution and once it sort of ended, it wasn't much fun being on the bench. The excitement and the challenge of all that was so great that just handling prisoner appeals and that sort of thing got to be very, very slow. In the last three or four years that I was on the court, I really wasn't too happy. But I finally brought myself to resign. It took me a long time to decide to do that because I felt like I was a disgracing the judiciary, that if you're ever appointed to the judiciary, you ought to stay there. And I finally brought myself around to it.

I've had a really exciting career since then. Most likely I'd never even been attorney general. President Carter asked me if I wanted to be appointed to the Senate when he appointed David Gambrell. Governor Carter, he was then. And I told him I'd been in all these school desegregation cases and that sort of thing and I didn't think I could ever get reelected. Being appointed would be an honor, but I felt like he wanted to get somebody who would run for reelection. He said, I do. He said, if I were to appoint you, you'd have to run for reelection, on that condition, and I said I couldn't do it. I just, all I'd do is borrow a lot of money and lose the race, because the feelings were mighty high then about school cases.

I'd had a lot of school cases. Made a lot of unusual rulings.

Mel Steely: 01:20:18 Doesn't sit [crosstalk 00:20:18].

Griffin Bell: 01:20:19 Talbot County School Board and receivership, and all sort of things like that. But at any rate, that was a period of my life
about ten years, really longer than that, it started with the Sibley Commission.

Mel Steely: 01:20:32 That's true.

Griffin Bell: 01:20:32 I mean, I was just in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement.

Mel Steely: 01:20:32 Go back to '59.

Griffin Bell: 01:20:36 If his biography is written they'll get into all that.

Mel Steely: 01:20:42 What was your best memory of your years on the bench?

Griffin Bell: 01:20:47 The school cases and...

Mel Steely: 01:20:50 Any particular one in?

Griffin Bell: 01:20:51 No, not that... Probably a little group. The thirty-two cases I had in Mississippi. I had better thirty-two school districts in one case, that three judge court, three judges on court of appeals always operate together. And Judge Brown was the chief judge, and they made a ruling, he and two other judges that was reversed by the Supreme Court. I've forgotten what the reversal was about, but it involved thirty-two school districts in Mississippi. The Supreme Court, in a totally unprecedented action before or since, ordered that the Court of Appeals administered those cases on reversal and it not be sent back to the district judges. So Judge Brown called me and said that he was too busy being chief judge that I'd have to take his place. And I said, well, I've got them, I've got ninety school cases in Georgia and I've got them scattered everywhere and I don't really don't want to do it. And he said, well, you got to do it. He said, I can't be chief judge and run these school districts.

I took his place and I sat in with a Judge Doll from Florida and Judge Ainsworth from Louisiana on the panel with me. I was the presiding judge. So I called a meeting of all the lawyers and all the schools superintendents in those thirty-two cases. The Supreme Court ordered that those districts would be desegregated and used the word immediately. I called them all to New Orleans to the main courtroom down there and well, the other judges with me, but it was my idea and I told them that they had to integrate the school immediately. I said, we don't have any choice. This is what the Supreme Court of the United States had ordered. And this was like on December the 6 or 7, and I said, what we have construed immediately to mean is January 1. So you've got three weeks to get ready.
But you’ve got to present a plan. We’ve got to approve the plan. And most of them were simple. It would be two school buildings in one county, one of them be black, one be white. They all had to do to go to one or the other. Half the grades in one, half in the other. Some of them were much more complicated and I’ve dealt with those cases for several months and got everything done we were supposed to do. One of them was Senator Stennis’s district. He filed the papers themselves. Senator Stennis, a United States Senator, drew the papers. And he got a stay from Judge Coleman, who wasn’t sitting on the panel of the order, and the FBI called me and said, that our order had been stayed. It was supposed to start on a certain day. And I said, that’s impossible. I called the clerk’s office, and Judge Coleman had entered the stay.

So I called Judge Coleman. He said, well Judge Stennis, that’s what they called Senator Stennis, came over here on Sunday afternoon to see me. They lived about ten miles apart and said they weren’t quite ready over there in Kemper County, to integrate the schools. And he got me to give him a stay.

And I said, well it's only for seven days. He said, that's right. That’s all I’ve agreed to do. And I said, well suppose you don’t give any more. These are my cases. And so they didn’t give any more and that’s the way that one ended.

Mel Steely: 01:24:26 But he got to keep his seven days.

Griffin Bell: 01:24:28 Seven days, yeah. And it worked out all right, Senator Stennis cooperated and we got all these districts. I remember one time a school board lawyer came to see me, came over to Atlanta and said he was going to kill another lawyer, had a pistol with him. And I said, why? He said I was supporting the blacks and said he was ruining my reputation and I’m trying to do my duty, to get the school integrated. He said, I just wanted to come over to you and tell you I’m thinking about killing him. And I said, well that's ridiculous. I talked him out of it. And I said, you just go on and do your duty and let it go at that, don't get yourself in trouble.

But the emotions were high, you know. But to get that done, if I never had a feeling like that until I got to be attorney general. Attorney general, you can come to work in the morning with an idea that you thought about during the night and you’d get fifteen, twenty, a hundred people working on it before lunchtime to get something done. A judge can’t get anything done. But when you’re assigned something like thirty-two
school districts to get them desegregated, to get it in three weeks time, that is a big project.

Mel Steely: 01:25:48 But they do have to obey you.

Griffin Bell: 01:25:50 Yeah. We got all that done and I've... My best decision in school cases that I ever wrote would have changed the course of history. It involved Orlando, Florida, called the Orange County School District Case. And I went back and got the Brown papers in Brown v. Board of Education, and to see what the prayer was of the plaintiffs, what they wanted. This was all they wanted, they wanted to go to school nearest their home. The blacks were being forced to walk by white school to get to a black school. And they wanted to go to school nearest their home.

So we put out an opinion in Orange County that you had to go to school nearest your home. And it was a school district larger in territory than the state of Rhode Island: Orange County, Florida around Orlando. And it got every school integrated except one, and that was a grammar school. Just by going to the school nearest your house.

So I wrote an opinion saying that was the way we ought to do in the future. Just carry out the prayer of the Brown decision. And we'd end all this turmoil, busing and the whole thing. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund had a national meeting. All the lawyers called them together. Drew Days, who later worked for me at the Justice Department, head of the Civil Rights Division, told me this story he was one of them, ink fund lawyers. And they decided that they had to either appeal Orange County or appeal the Charlotte case, which was a busing case. It had been reversed by the Fourth Circuit Judge, Judge Mike Millen. He had ordered a balance, race balance on busing. The Fourth Circuit set that aside.

So they decided that they couldn't win Orange County. It was too logical, too simple. And they took this busing case and the Supreme Court reversed the Fourth Circuit, and that's how we end up with all this busing all over the place. That's just a footnote in history, but that's just how simple that was. If we had started out just saying you had to go to school nearest your home, we wouldn't had all this turmoil because you can anywhere you want to. Particularly now with housing laws and all the things we have. We might've done better with the school...

Mel Steely: 01:28:24 Did you know-
Griffin Bell: 01:28:25 ... public schools. Huh?

Mel Steely: 01:28:26 Did you know Thurgood Marshall?

Griffin Bell: 01:28:28 Yeah, I knew him, yeah. I didn't know him well, but he used to come to our judge meetings in the Fifth Circuit. We'd have a judicial conference every year, and invite Supreme Court justices.

Hugo Black was our Supreme Court representative. Justice Black, but-

Mel Steely: 01:28:49 From Alabama.

Griffin Bell: 01:28:50 ... but sometimes Thurgood Marshall, Judge Marshall would come.

Mel Steely: 01:28:57 What's your worst memory of the years on the bench? Boredom?

Griffin Bell: 01:29:01 Habeas Corpus. Yeah. Prisoners trying to get out of jail. And some of those are worthwhile, because sometimes it's occasionally somebody in jail that ought to not to be there. But the... What finally got me was the drug cases. With a court appointed lawyers raising Fourth Amendment questions about searches and seizures and some kind of technical thing to protect them. I mean, here's a government furnishing lawyers for drug runners, and they're all raising the same kinds of points. I wake up in the night thinking about all these Fourth Amendment cases. The court, when I told the judges in a secret session that I was going to resign, they all got very upset about it and wanted me to go to see Chief Justice Burger and tell him I was going to resign. They thought he'd talk me out of it. So I went up to Washington to tell him, and he said, "Well, I'm sorry you don't make enough money." I said, "They ain't got a thing to do with it. That's not why I'm resigning. I knew what the pay was and I took it and I had a little bit of money saved up. I've been doing fine." But he said, "Why are you resigning?" And I said, "I don't want to hear any more Fourth Amendment questions in drug cases with court appointed lawyers. I've had enough of that. I've got a higher calling in life than that." And he said, "For goodness sakes, don't tell any other judges, they'll all leave." But that was my worst memories.

Mel Steely: 01:30:39 Well, now you came back to King and Spalding. No problem coming back in of course, but you were here-
Griffin Bell: 01:30:49 I got all my opinions written on the court and was able to get out of that about six weeks after I told him I was wanting to leave. And I didn't leave a-

Mel Steely: 01:31:00 Cleaned your desk out.

Griffin Bell: 01:31:01 Cleaned it all. Didn't leave an opinion unwritten.

Mel Steely: 01:31:05 When did you first meet Jimmy Carter?

Griffin Bell: 01:31:08 Well I don't know, because I grew up in Americus and he grew up in Plains.

Mel Steely: 01:31:14 You knew each other as children?

Griffin Bell: 01:31:16 Yeah, but he's six years younger than I am.

Mel Steely: 01:31:18 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 01:31:19 I was in the same grade in school with his first cousin Dawn Carter, who is a journalist, now lives out at Sea Island. And I just thought the Bells and the Carters had always been friends. You know in a rural setting like that, everybody knows everybody. I remember Jimmy and Fred Carter when he was a little boy. As the years went by, we stayed sort of in touch with each other. You know, he has a very inquisitive mind and he used to come over to the federal courthouse. My office was over here on the side street and he was in the State Senate. He'd come over and visit and want to get some law review articles, something I'd written to read. And he'd just absorbed knowledge. And that's how our modern relationship, I guess you'd call it, started. He assigned me to find an attorney general. After it became apparent that he was going to get the nomination. He started trying to plan his government. I was here in the law firm.

Mel Steely: 01:32:28 Before that though, back in '71 when he became governor, he called you while you were a sitting judge to see if you wanted to become a Senator.

Griffin Bell: 01:32:40 Oh, well that was later on when Dick Russell dies.

Mel Steely: 01:32:40 Well that was '71.

Griffin Bell: 01:32:44 Okay. Well, I'd been on the bench since '61.

Mel Steely: 01:32:48 So you'd done your time on the bench.
Griffin Bell: 01:32:49 Yeah, and before that he was in the State Senate and that's when he used to come over and visit me at the courthouse.

Mel Steely: 01:32:57 And he also, if I remember correctly, I read somewhere that he talked to Charlie Kirbo about becoming a Senator and he didn't want to do it.

Griffin Bell: 01:33:05 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:33:09 Senator-

Griffin Bell: 01:33:10 I think he offered it to Kirbo before he offered it to anybody. Kirbo probably suggested me to him.


Griffin Bell: 01:33:21 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:33:22 Both thought they were going to get it. Vandiver says, and has witnesses that it was promised to him.

Griffin Bell: 01:33:29 That's right. It was promised through Bob Jordan. There's no question about that. But President Carter didn't make the promise himself, Kirbo made it. And Kirbo talked with him. They wanted to get Vandiver to endorse him in the Governor's race, is the way I remember it.

Mel Steely: 01:33:51 They had a fellow by the name of Andrew Hill.

Griffin Bell: 01:33:56 Yeah. He lived up in Lavonia.

Mel Steely: 01:33:56 In Lavonia.

Griffin Bell: 01:33:58 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:33:59 Who met with us when we interviewed Governor Vandiver and says that he flew in with Carter. Carter told him and another fellow on the airplane, they were definitely going to appoint Vandiver. They met at Vandiver's home, where he repeated it to the three of them.

Griffin Bell: 01:34:14 Yeah, I didn't know about that.

Mel Steely: 01:34:14 Says that was it.

Griffin Bell: 01:34:14 All I knew was-
Mel Steely: 01:34:21 Lamar Plunkett thought he had first shot at it when I talked to him. I asked him why he thought that Gambrell got it. And Gambrell, when we interviewed him, said he had no idea why he got it. He did not think it was because he was chairman of the party and he didn’t think it was because he had worked with Carter very early on in that little contest back there when Kirbo and the others were helping him.

Griffin Bell: 01:34:51 Yeah. The Senate race.

Mel Steely: 01:34:52 But Lamar Plunkett says he thinks it’s because that Smyth Gambrell bought it for him. That he had a call to come to see the governor right after the election, and Russell had just died. And supposedly it was, I think $600,000 was still owed on the campaign and he was serving as treasurer or something at the time. And he arrived at the governor’s office and was told to wait a few minutes. He was busy. Then Gambrell came out, Smyth Gambrell. Lamar Plunkett went in, said they talked about the problem with raising the money. And said at that point, Governor Carter, brand new governor, said, “Don't worry about it, it's taken care of. We don't have that problem.” He said, “Well last night we had a problem.” He said, “We don't have a problem today.” And shortly after that he announced David Gambrell as Senator.

Griffin Bell: 01:35:45 Yeah. Well, I don't know a thing about any of that. I know Lamar-

Mel Steely: 01:35:48 I didn't know whether you'd been involved.

Griffin Bell: 01:35:49 Oh no.

Mel Steely: 01:35:50 I know as a judge, you couldn't get too involved in it.

Griffin Bell: 01:35:52 No. I wouldn't have been in that. The only thing I knew is Kirbo called me up and asked me if I wanted to be appointed to the Senate and we talked about it and I told him same thing I just told you, couldn't get reelected. When President Carter announced, this ought to be in the record somewhere, when he announced David was going to be appointed, he read off the list of folks he considered. He read off my name and I've forgotten who else was on the list. And he might not have read of Lamar. In fact, I never knew Lamar was a candidate until you telling me right now. Lamar was a friend of mine because we are both big supporters of Mercer. He went to school there as well as I did, and I knew him well and thought highly of him and I don't have any recollection that Carter read his name off.
Mel Steely: 01:36:50 That may have been the problem right there.

Griffin Bell: 01:36:52 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:36:52 Lamar didn't ask him until after a decision had been made before it was announced.

Griffin Bell: 01:36:58 Yeah. I talked with Eugene Patterson who was added to the Constitution about a month later after David had gotten it, and he said, "You made the biggest mistake of your life. You should have taken it." And I said, "I couldn't have been reelected". He said, "You'd be amazed at what you could have done if you have just gone on and taken it." I said, "Well, I guess I'm not a gambler. I wasn't willing to take the chance." But I didn't know all these details. I didn't know Hill had anything to do with any of that. All I know is that, Governor Carter was trying to get support of Vandiver when he was running, and Kirbo and Bob Jordan had a meeting. Bob being Vandiver's best friend, and I had always understood from both of them that Kirbo told me this and so did Bob Jordan. He said, "If it's a vacancy in the Senate, I'll appoint Lenny." But he might've said, "I'd be inclined to appoint Lenny." That's what I would have said. I would never make a straight out promise like that.

Mel Steely: 01:38:09 I think it had to be something like that because when we interviewed President Carter, I asked him and he said, "No, if I'd made that promise I would have kept that promise."

Griffin Bell: 01:38:17 Right. Yeah. And I think he must not have. When you are passing something like that through other people, the words can get changed.

Mel Steely: 01:38:27 The only problem I have with any of it and I can't get it confirmed because everybody has a different memory, is if there was indeed a meeting in Ernie's house-

Griffin Bell: 01:38:36 Yeah, that's different.

Mel Steely: 01:38:36 Ernie Vandiver's home with witnesses. Now they say it was.

Griffin Bell: 01:38:39 Yeah. That's quite a different thing.

Mel Steely: 01:38:41 Yeah. It is. And I don't know the answer because people just say different things.

Griffin Bell: 01:38:45 I never felt bad toward President Carter about it. Of course based on my limited knowledge of what I just gave you.
Mel Steely: 01:38:52 Right.

Griffin Bell: 01:38:53 And having life experience, I know how words can get changed and a lot of times you hear what you want to hear. There's an old saying that, something with the father of a thought. When you hear something and you hear it differently from what the man who said it meant. The wish. That's it. The wish is the father of the thought.

Mel Steely: 01:39:29 Oh yeah.

Griffin Bell: 01:39:30 And that'll get you in a lot of trouble. You have to be very careful what people say to you. I always figured something like that happened.

Mel Steely: 01:39:40 And it may be.

Griffin Bell: 01:39:41 Yeah, well, I just don't know all of the things you know.

Mel Steely: 01:39:45 What role did you play in President Carter's presidential race in '76?

Griffin Bell: 01:39:50 I helped write the speech he delivered to the American Bar Association. I've had to testify to all this in the Senate at least ten times. They were trying to make me out to be a henchman of some kind. And I gave him $1,000 and I helped him raise money when he was going broke in the Pennsylvania primary. They needed some money and I got money from some businessmen here in Atlanta and I think maybe a hundred to $200,000 or something like that. People normally were Republicans and viewed the idea that he was from Georgia and he was running a good race and it didn't make any difference what party you were in. You ought to help him. And that was to happen in about a week's time. I went to some breakfast over in, I think, in the Commerce Club, it was in existence then, somewhere like that and helped get that money. That's all I did.

Mel Steely: 01:40:53 You've got those people who feel you were a strong Carter supporter, and then there are those who feel that you didn't really care for President Carter, but he was from Georgia and you decided it was an obligation and it had to be done. Maybe that's where that second opinion comes from.

Griffin Bell: 01:41:08 Yeah, it might. Anyway, we got money for him and that got him through Pennsylvania. The second was Scoop Jackson from Washington and he got that and that put him over the top and he never won another primary after that. That's why the
election, when you look back on it, the election was as close as
he went on out West he wasn't winning primaries. I liked
President Carter, I had a great respect for him and tried to make
the point in my book that he's one of the few presidents ever to
let the Justice Department be independent. He wanted it to be
independent.

Mel Steely: 01:41:46 He did fiddle with it though according to your book.
Griffin Bell: 01:41:49 Yeah, but not much. He tried.
Mel Steely: 01:41:51 You were able to block it most of the time.
Griffin Bell: 01:41:54 Most of the time. And most of that was coming from his staff,
Mondale and the staff. And they would sometimes get him into
it.

Mel Steely: 01:42:04 Why do you think he defeated President Ford, who was a fairly
popular sitting president?
Griffin Bell: 01:42:11 Watergate and the pardon of Nixon.
Mel Steely: 01:42:15 That was it.
Griffin Bell: 01:42:16 Yeah.
Mel Steely: 01:42:17 That's what Ford thinks it was.
Griffin Bell: 01:42:19 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:42:21 Now your original role in the Carter transition was to-
Griffin Bell: 01:42:25 Only one thing, to find an attorney general.
Mel Steely: 01:42:27 Okay.
Griffin Bell: 01:42:28 That's all he ever asked me to do.

Mel Steely: 01:42:38 In your book, you say that you were working and you found him
one that he wanted out in Texas. Tell us about that if you
would.
Griffin Bell: 01:42:38 Well, that was an accident. I recommended a number of people
to him and one of them was a Judge in Pittsburgh on the federal
court of appeals named Rogero Alderset, very well-known
judge, an Italian. But that didn't suit him. And then I
recommended Senator Heflin, and Kirbo interviewed Senator
Heflin, and they didn’t want him. And then I recommended John Hill who was the Attorney General of Texas. Still living, a very popular man. Later became chief justice of Texas. And President Carter knew him and he said he didn’t want to appoint him because he said he might leave the Attorney General’s office and run for office and that wouldn’t be good for the Justice Department. “I don’t want to get anybody that’s going to run for office.” So while I was checking up on John Hill, President Carter was in Plains and I was in Americus spending the weekend, and that’s where he vetoed John. He didn’t veto him, he just said for whatever reason he didn’t want him.

So he said, "Who have you checked with?" And I said, "I checked with Judge Reynaldo Garza in Brownsville, Texas.” He's a Mexican-American federal judge, and I knew him well and he thinks very well of John Hill and had known him for years and so forth. President Carter said, "Well, who did you say you checked with?" I said, "Reynaldo Garza." He said, "He's Hispanic?" I said, "He's a Mexican American, lives in Brownsville.” He said, "Why don't we make him attorney general?" This is the truth. I said, "He doesn't want to be attorney general. He wouldn't leave Brownsville for anything. He's the only federal judge in Brownsville and it's like being having a barony. There's no way he'd leave there". He said, "Well, why don't we ask him?" He said, "If he's got that good a reputation and all, maybe he'd be a good attorney general.” I said, "Well, why don't you ask him? You can ask him. I'll give you the phone number.” So on a Saturday morning he called Judge Garza and Judge Garza hung the phone up on him. Said somebody was playing a joke on him.

President Carter was so informal, he said, "Judge, this is Jimmy Carter speaking." He said, "Tell me another joke," and hung up. So President Carter then called me back and said, "He won't talk to me. He won't believe that I'm really Jimmy Carter." I said, "I can get him on the telephone, I'll see about this." So I called him and I said, "That was really President-elect Carter on the telephone.” He said, "I can't believe that." I said, "And he wants you to be the attorney general". He said, "I wouldn't take that job for anything." So I said, "Well, you talk to him, he wants to talk with you.” And he said, "Yeah, I'll talk with him.” I said, "He'll call you back in fifteen minutes, and this time you talk with him.” So the President called to talk with them about doing it.

Finally he told President Carter he’d think about it. Then President Carter had Kirbo start calling people around Texas about him, without my knowledge. And Garza called me Monday, and told me to tell President Carter not to have
anybody else checking up on him, that he did not want that job and said, "Stop people from making phone calls about me." And then I set in to try to convince him. And he had a son who's a lawyer and another one's a CPA. They all live in Brownsville. I said, "When you're finished being attorney general, you can go back to Brownsville and be retired." He said, "Yeah, but I don't want to leave Brownsville. I am not going to Washington, so just leave me alone. And so I had to stop it then. And he probably would have been a very good attorney general.

Mel Steely: 01:46:52  At that point, President-elect Carter turns to you.

Griffin Bell: 01:46:56  Well, not immediately, but he told me he wanted to meet with Senator Eastland and he was, by that time, staying over with Busbee at the governor's mansion. And he wanted to talk to Senator Eastland about setting up these judicial selection commissions. And so he asked me if I could get Senator Eastland to come meet with him, and I called Senator Eastland, and he agreed to come to Atlanta. I met Senator Eastland at the airport and took him out there to the governor's mansion. At that time I lived about two blocks from the governor's mansion, and Senator Eastland told him he'd agree to commissioners for all the court of appeals judges, but he would not agree for commissions on district judges, because the Senator thought that was their patronage, and said it would take quite a persuasion to convince them. So I got a lot of them to agree later to that.

But President Carter said to him, "Who should I make attorney general?" Eastland said, "Griffin Bell, the man that brought me out here would make a wonderful attorney general, been a federal judge and all these things."  And President Carter then, I think the next night, by ten o'clock called me to come over to the Governor's mansion and I told him it was too late and I said, "I'll meet you over there tomorrow" But I just got in, I'm ready to go to bed, maybe I was in bed, I've forgotten. But anyway, he said, "Be over here in the morning at seven o'clock." So I went over there to the mansion and he had and Busbee were up drinking coffee, and Busbee left immediately, just the two of us. And he said, "Everybody, I've asked about being attorney general," he said "Every time you recommend somebody I ask people, who do you think would make a good attorney general?" He said, "They all recommend you."

And I said, "Yeah, but the trouble is I don't want to be attorney general. I just got off the bench. I just started practicing law again. I can't just walk out of the law firm." And he said, "Well, they've got plenty of lawyers down there. They've got seventy-
five, eighty lawyers, they wouldn't miss you.” And finally I said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you don't object, I'll take it up with the partners in the law firm. If they will release me, I'll do it for two years." And so that's what I did. And then he promptly forgot about the two years, and he kept making these statements about everybody in his Cabinet was serving four years and I'd remind him that I was serving two and then he'd just totally ignore it. Finally I wrote him a letter at the end of two years and resigned. But it was seven months later that I finally got out of there. At the time he said, "I think you're going to hurt my campaign for reelection if you leave.”

So he let me resign the day he fired all those Cabinet members, and he got thousands of letters protesting the fact that he fired me. But he didn't really fire me, but he did replace me the same day. He fired Califano and he put in Civiletti, which was a stratagem. And then he called me on the phone three or four days later and said, "I want you to resign again and send me another letter over here resigning and I want to answer it and get this talk stopped." So he wrote me a nice long hand letter, it's in my desk in there right now, thanking me for my service and that sort of thing.

Mel Steely: 01:50:36 You've got one of them framed up there on the-

Griffin Bell: 01:50:37 That may be it.

Mel Steely: 01:50:40 That may be. I think that's the one he wrote you. Two page?

Griffin Bell: 01:50:43 Yeah, that's probably it.

Mel Steely: 01:50:44 I think that's it. That's the one-

Griffin Bell: 01:50:46 Somebody else did that was, I didn't know what was up there. I just read and I keep looking. We got a-

Mel Steely: 01:50:51 They framed that letter from the president.

Griffin Bell: 01:50:52 Yeah, well that was it and that was written after all this furor, at any rate, that's how I got to be the attorney general. And I had the hardest time getting confirmed of anybody. Some of the people thought I was too conservative, the Republicans thought I was too liberal and I had written a letter for Judge Carswell recommending him for the Supreme Court. He was in my class in law school. And after about a week of answering all that question, I told Senator Bayh, this was in the record, "If you think I'm going to recant from writing that letter, you'll be
absolutely mistaken and I wouldn't do that even if I don't get to be attorney general.” And nobody ever asked me another question after that. Judge Boodle said that was the finest statement he ever heard anybody make. He told me that about a month ago, said you got out of all that debate about that, but at any rate, that's how I got in.

Mel Steely: 01:52:01 The circuit court-

Griffin Bell: 01:52:03 And President Carter stuck with me even though it took me... Everybody else had been confirmed by the time he was inaugurated, and I was still in the Senate when he was inaugurated. That was sort of embarrassing to him, but he stuck with me right through it.

Mel Steely: 01:52:20 Your confirmation as a judge was much simpler, smoother.

Griffin Bell: 01:52:24 Oh. Yeah. No problem at all. But if you have a record written record and then you got to Republicans, one of these Republican fundraisers that I found out since was promoting this thing and I got fifteen votes against me from the Republicans. And all of them after that, every one of them at various times, got on the Senate floor and said they made an error, and Dole said it three or four times. I introduced Dole at the American College of Trial Lawyers three or four years ago. There was a thousand people there and he told them the same thing. Said I never cast but one vote I wished I could take back. That was against me. All that was just promoted. There was great strife in the country then.

Mel Steely: 01:53:11 And it was over the integration thing you think? Civil rights.

Griffin Bell: 01:53:13 Well, it got worse as time went on. I've never told anybody this I don't think in a book, but Senator Byrd from West Virginia called me to his office and told me he wanted me to agree to keep Director Kelly at the FBI if I was confirmed. And I said, "I can't agree with that, President Carter has already told me to replace him." He said, "Well then, I'm going to extend your hearing week.” He said, "Every riff raff in the nation will be here protesting you if you don't agree.” And I said, "Why don't you take that up with the president? I don't have that power to agree or disagree. I'm doing what the President told me to do.” He said, "No, I'm going to just take it up with you, I'm depending on you.” And he extended the hearing a week and I-

Mel Steely: 01:54:05 And everybody showed up.
Griffin Bell: 01:54:07 Everybody showed up. He was right about that, and it got so bad and I told Senator Eastland, it was embarrassing to me to be there to hear all this riff raff. And that I would be glad if he would excuse me from the hearings. So the last two days I didn't even go over there. I mean, I didn't care what they did by that time. And Senator Eastland did excuse me. I mean, they weren't going to call me anymore, they were just accommodating all these people. But that's Senator Byrd caused that.

Mel Steely: 01:54:36 Now Senator Kennedy and some of the other Washington liberals did indeed change their minds; some of the conservatives, like Dole, changed their mind about you.

Griffin Bell: 01:54:48 Well, Senator Kennedy supported me to begin with. He didn't vote against me.

Mel Steely: 01:54:52 Did you ever change your mind about those that opposed you?

Griffin Bell: 01:54:57 Oh yeah. Not-

Mel Steely: 01:54:59 Kennedy, for example.

Griffin Bell: 01:55:01 Oh Kennedy, he supported me, but people thought he was going to vote against me, but he never did. Bayh supported me in the end.

Mel Steely: 01:55:11 Was it mostly the Republicans that opposed you?

Griffin Bell: 01:55:12 Yeah, and with twenty-one votes, six Democrats, and one of them was McGovern, who later apologized to me, and I've forgotten who the other Democrats were, but I think there was twenty-one votes against me. But Kennedy voted for me. And Hollings was my biggest supporter. Senator Hollings, he handled the debate on the Senate floor. But Bayh, in the middle of the hearing, changed his mind and started supporting me.

Mel Steely: 01:55:44 Remarkable. This might be a good time to change tape real quick. We only got about six or eight more questions. If you...

It was true. And so he had her give me a call to find out and sure enough, I said, "Yeah, I called down there." She said, "Well, you've got them all stirred up." Said that whole group down there thinks the President's done called personally to wish him a happy birthday. I said, "Well, Lord, don't tell him any different, let him think." But people are willing to believe it. Okay, we're ready to go. Okay. We will pick it up on tape two of our interview with Judge Griffin Bell, September 24, 1997.
Judge, in your book, which is extremely frank book, *Taking Care of the Law*, you describe some of the problems you faced, as did President Carter, when dealing with the bureaucracy in your capacity as attorney general. Do you really think that the bureaucracy is more or less a permanent clash with their own agenda?

Griffin Bell: **01:57:18** I don't think there's any question about it. And bureaucracy has expanded even more in the last twenty years than it was then. And there's even one now in the Congress, the staff members in the Congress run things and they allow that and most of them have been there for years and years. They switched from one Congressman to another. When one leaves they just get a job with another one. So you've not only got a bureaucracy in the executive department, these agencies, but you've got it in the Congress as well now.

Mel Steely: **01:57:50** Is it party oriented? I ask that because I remember when Congressman Gingrich engineered more or less the Republican takeover in the '94 election, and almost immediately after the election, there came this *Time* magazine or *Newsweek* magazine about the Gingrich that stole Christmas. And when you ask him who did he steal it from? Well, he stole it from the professional staffers who were there for a lifetime and now all of a sudden now they weren't there. Is it party-oriented? I'm asking, is it Democrat or Republican?

Griffin Bell: **01:58:26** No. No. It's not party-oriented at all. We were talking about this Monday of widening of this separating the powers commission I'm on. And Senator Baker is the co-chairman. He and I are the chairs, and he's written a paper on the bureaucracy now in the Congress. But we were just thinking about how many people Clinton is appointing who were staff people in the Congress. The new head of the CIA has never done anything except be a staff person. Tenet is his name. But there's plenty of them. You make a career out of being a staff member in the Congress. And the next thing you know, you're in the executive department. And this may be good, may not be good and widening, they look on these people as good because they're experienced.

Mel Steely: **01:59:17** Yeah.

Griffin Bell: **01:59:18** But in a representative form of government like we have, I've got a considerable doubt about the bureaucracy of having all the power and overwhelming the people we send there. That's one problem. The second problem is the parties have inordinate influence on people we send there. The Democratic party, for example, is dominated by the Northeast and California. And
we'll send a Congressman up there and the first thing you know, they're voting with the people in Northeast, their interest, not our interest. Don Johnson was a good example of that.

Mel Steely: 01:59:59 Buddy Darden?

Griffin Bell: 02:00:00 Yeah. So it was more of the same, but bureaucracy is something else. I mean, that is where the power is now.

Mel Steely: 02:00:13 It has a tremendous impact.

Griffin Bell: 02:00:15 Oh, yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:00:17 I would commend anyone watching this tape later if they want to get a full picture of your time in Washington... I'm not going to try to go over all the same ground because you've covered it very well, but I would commend to them the reading of that book because it has case and verse, and you end the book with some assessments of your time there, what you think should be done.

Griffin Bell: 02:00:39 Attorney General William French Smith, who was for four years Reagan's attorney general, first four years of the Reagan administration, after having been there two or three years, read my book. And he called me on the telephone, and he said, "I wished I'd have read your book the first week I was here. I'd have been a lot better off." That was really one of the reasons I wrote that book, is to sort of help people that might later have the same job or might be in the government at all. [crosstalk 02:01:11] Those things about the bureaucracy and the chapter on leaking and those sorts of things, they affect everybody.

Mel Steely: 02:01:18 Well, the section on the press I think also...

Griffin Bell: 02:01:20 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:01:22 ... is very good. There were a whole group of people that went to Washington with President Carter, generally kind of loosely referred to in the press as the Georgia Mafia.

Griffin Bell: 02:01:36 Right.

Mel Steely: 02:01:38 Would you consider yourself part of that group, and would you describe that group for us?

Griffin Bell: 02:01:43 Well, I guess some people thought maybe I was in it, but I never thought I was in it. I thought of those people as being people
who had worked on the campaign and had supported President Carter for a long time, although I didn't mind having that said about me. You know, I was a friend of President Carter, a supporter, and doing the best I could to reflect good marks on the Carter administration.

Undoubtedly, we had too many people from Georgia, but if we hadn't had people from Georgia, then the Mondale group would have taken over the government totally. They had not won, but they brought into Washington an in-waiting government into the Carter administration. A lot of people who were appointed to high places President Carter didn't know. It came in through Mondale. So, I think that the Georgia group was a good counterbalance.

Mel Steely: 02:02:44 Do you see that same thing happening with President Clinton and Senator Gore or Vice President Gore?

Griffin Bell: 02:02:49 Oh, yeah. Particularly with Clinton, everybody from Arkansas seems to be working around them. Of course, they come and go. Most of them lose out. They must have decimated the Arkansas Bar when they... They all seem to be working in the White House, but most of them are gone now, particularly the Rose Law Firm.

Mel Steely: 02:03:09 Well, wouldn't you have to have been a member, a real honest, hardworking attorney that was a member of that firm?

Griffin Bell: 02:03:14 Yeah. I'm sure they had a lot of good lawyers in there.

Mel Steely: 02:03:17 Yeah. They opened a Washington office even briefly.

Griffin Bell: 02:03:20 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:03:21 Oh, my goodness. There were a series of investigations, during your tenure, of Carter appointees. Bert Lance, of course, who comes to mind immediately. Ham Jordan, some stuff with him, and if I'm not mistaken, either the...

Griffin Bell: 02:03:41 Tim somebody, first special prosecutor in the investigation of... Tim Kraft.

Mel Steely: 02:03:47 Right.

Griffin Bell: 02:03:48 Appointments secretary.

Mel Steely: 02:03:51 [crosstalk 02:03:51] and the president's...
Griffin Bell: 02:03:54 Doctor. The doctor.

Mel Steely: 02:03:55 Yeah. At was some point, he was involved. What do you remember about all of that? I know you remember a lot, but-

Griffin Bell: 02:04:05 Oh, yeah. Well.

Mel Steely: 02:04:07 How would you assess it all? I mean, I don't remember. Is it just a product of Watergate and everybody after everybody? Is this where it all began?

Griffin Bell: 02:04:14 Yeah, that's where all the strife and the incivility started. Hamilton Jordan's case was a fake from the word go. If I'd been the attorney general, I would've called those lawyers before a grand jury and probably done something with them. It was just a shakedown to protect from drug people running a nightclub in New York, and they never had any evidence that Hamilton was doing drugs or anything like that. I think that was the first abuse of the special prosecutor law. Civiletti and the people there by that time came to the view that they didn't have authority to put anybody before the grand jury. They couldn't investigate that much. Now, they've got more power under that same law because it's been amended as years have gone by.

I never favored that law, and President Carter promised that law to the American Bar Association. It was our law. It was something they got up, and it turned out to be a bad law, and it has been ever since. And we don't need that. The Justice Department can do investigations, and they did that Lance case, and I was disqualified in the case, and it was handled by other people. That's the way you're supposed to operate, like you do at court. I don't think we had any anymore. We didn't have that much scandal or that many investigations.

The only time President Carter ever got criticized was twice. One time was about the peanut warehouse. They claimed that money was being laundered from the Bank of Georgia through the peanut warehouse to help him in the campaign. I appointed a lawyer, a special counsel, myself to investigate that, Paul Kern. He finished in six months and never had a leak, never had a press conference until he finished. He said he had accounted for every nickel and every peanut, and there was nothing wrong. That's the way the system ought to work.

The other time that President Carter was criticized was a member of the press rolled in to the Justice Department to say
that President Carter and Vice President Mondale had taken a political contribution in the White House, the same law that's an issue now. I had somebody to check that up and find out they had not. The people that gave the money had actually been to the White House, but they didn't give any money. They gave the money to the Democratic National Committee.

So, I knew that, since this tip came from members of the press, that they'd start a big story about it. So, I filed a petition with the court asking to make my report public why I didn't appoint a special counsel, and they did make it public, and that ended the story there. Other than that, I don't think President Carter ever got under any other kind of investigation.

Mel Steely: 02:07:17 No. There was the-

Griffin Bell: 02:07:18 He had... Of course, Billy caused him problems.

Mel Steely: 02:07:20 Yes, he did.

Griffin Bell: 02:07:22 Yeah, but that was not him.

Mel Steely: 02:07:25 He did have one legal historical footnote in that he testified by video camera in the Culver Kidd-

Griffin Bell: 02:07:34 Right.

Mel Steely: 02:07:35 ... case. I believe he was the first President ever, sitting President, to do that.

Griffin Bell: 02:07:40 Yeah, we worked it out with the prosecutor so they could do it by video and a couple of Kidd's lawyer.

Mel Steely: 02:07:48 Denmark Groover, I believe.

Griffin Bell: 02:07:50 Yeah, to do it by video.

Mel Steely: 02:07:51 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 02:07:54 When the president goes out, I think I told the president, "I know I've said this a lot of times, everybody in this country has to give evidence." The Supreme Court decision and the Paula Jones case once again emphasize that we don't have royalty in this country. The president's no better than we are when it comes to giving evidence.
Mel Steely: 02:08:19 And to me, that case itself shows how we have changed. I know you noticed what a litigious group of people we are, but when I was growing up, had something of that sort happened where a fellow did that sort of thing, the girl probably would have slapped him and told him to pull his britches up and walked out and told somebody they better take better care of him. That would've been the end of it, but now everybody's wanting to sue everybody about everything.

Griffin Bell: 02:08:48 Yeah. Well, if that happened, it was a disgrace, but...

Mel Steely: 02:08:54 But is it something you sue over?

Griffin Bell: 02:08:56 Yeah, that's the question.

Mel Steely: 02:08:58 [crosstalk 02:08:58] I agree. It was a terrible, terrible thing.

Griffin Bell: 02:09:01 Oh, shoot, you just go to the newspaper and tell them about it so they'd write up...

Mel Steely: 02:09:06 Go tell his mama.

Griffin Bell: 02:09:07 [crosstalk 02:09:07] Yeah. Well, I would have... think it should have been made known to the newspapers and let them run it, and let the... Some things the public needs to judge, and if you can get it out as a fact before the public, they'll decide what to do about it. The court of the... The public is a great court of itself.

Mel Steely: 02:09:32 Yes, it is.

Griffin Bell: 02:09:33 They will decide what to do with people like that.

Mel Steely: 02:09:36 Although they seem to be changing a little bit now. The things they used to hold against you they don't seem to, much anymore.

Griffin Bell: 02:09:42 Well, that's because television has lowered the moral standards of the nation.

Mel Steely: 02:09:46 I think that's true.

Griffin Bell: 02:09:47 Yeah. We don't have the same level of moral expectations we once had. As a nation, we are sort of sinking down in that respect.

Mel Steely: 02:09:59 Do you think television is the main cause?
Griffin Bell: 02:10:00 And the movies and books. I just finished reading a Scott Turow book, and it's got the most foul language in it from the beginning to the end.

Mel Steely: 02:10:00 It does, doesn't it?

Griffin Bell: 02:10:10 Yeah. Like you deliberately put it in, and it must be... It's on the best seller list, so there must be an audience that appreciates that sort of language.

Mel Steely: 02:10:18 Well, he's a good writer. I enjoy reading his books, but-

Griffin Bell: 02:10:23 Yeah, [crosstalk 02:10:23]. His first book... I've forgotten the name of it... didn't have all that language in it, wasn't near that bad.

Mel Steely: 02:10:29 But you can write a good book without that. I'm reading Cold Mountain now.

Griffin Bell: 02:10:34 Yeah. I was told last night at dinner. My former law clerk, one of them told me about Cold Mountain.

Mel Steely: 02:10:34 You ought to read it.

Griffin Bell: 02:10:44 [crosstalk 02:10:44] He said he really enjoyed it.

Mel Steely: 02:10:44 You ought to read it. You don't have that kind of language, and yet you carry over a lot of the hostility and the feelings people had. It's there, but there's very little what I would call bad language or anything.

Griffin Bell: 02:10:44 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:10:54 You can carry on ideas and paint pictures without that. [crosstalk 02:10:59].

Griffin Bell: 02:10:58 Yeah. This Turow book, I forget the... The Laws of our Fathers. It's on the best seller list. It's got... There's hardly a paragraph that hasn't got foul language in it.

Mel Steely: 02:11:08 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 02:11:08 Everybody that talks uses bad language. I mean, I'm around people. I don't see all that going on.

Mel Steely: 02:11:20 I hear more of it now than I used to.
Griffin Bell: 02:11:20 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:11:22 I can still remember clearly the first time I heard a coed at school use a four-letter word. I was walking behind them down a hall. Must've been about 1970, and it shocked me at the time. I thought, "Girls don't talk like that." Well, of course they did, but they didn't do it out in public yet, and now people don't think anything at all of that sort of thing.

As you look back on your almost three years, two years and eight months, as attorney general, what is your greatest accomplishment?

Griffin Bell: 02:11:58 Restoring the morale at the Department of Justice.

Mel Steely: 02:12:01 From the Mitchell period? Or...

Griffin Bell: 02:12:02 Yeah, and the Watergate period.

Mel Steely: 02:12:03 And the Watergate period.

Griffin Bell: 02:12:05 And putting pride back in the people that work there. I think that was my greatest accomplishment, made it more professional, one reason being I was a professional myself and probably a good leader for the Department at that particular time because of my judicial service. Then, I got the FBI back in shape, too, brought in Judge Webster to be head of it. He had been a federal judge. In fact, the chief justice once told me I was taking up... recruiting all his best judges. I brought in Judge Wade McCree to be the solicitor general. He was a federal judge on the Sixth Circuit.

And just generally furnishing leadership. I went to court, two or three... twice in a district court. I went to court on a United Mine Workers strike, I think it was, some strike in the district court. The courtroom was packed with all the law clerks in the building, and they had never seen an attorney general in court before. Then, I went down there, and I went to court when they were arguing the Taiwan treaty being changed when we recognized the People's Republic of China. A group of senators led by Senator Goldwater followed suit to stop that abuse of executive power, and I argued snail darter case.

Mel Steely: 02:13:42 [crosstalk 02:13:42]. I was just going to see if you'd get around to the snail darter.
Griffin Bell: 02:13:44 Yeah, but I think just furnishing leadership, and I created something called the Office for Improvements in the Administration of Justice, which Republicans promptly disbanded when they came in, and I recruited a law professor in West Virginia for two years and then one from Columbia for two years. We had a tremendous impact on the legal procedures, trying to bring efficiency into the federal system. That was a good thing. We also, that same group, wrote prosecutorial standards so that all the prosecutors everywhere would follow the same standards. We had never had anything like that in the government. We had a great deal of innovation.

Mel Steely: 02:14:37 You brought about some changes in the approach we take to national defense and prosecuting spies.

Griffin Bell: 02:14:46 Oh, yeah. [crosstalk 02:14:46]. They had stopped prosecuting spies because the CIA and the Defense Department objected always that they were going to lose their asset and that you couldn't let the public know who had done these things. So, they had just about stopped all spy trials. When I started, I told them our people, we were going to try them like trade secrets cases, and you could try a case to the jury without giving away all the trade secrets. The jury can see it, and that's it. We started. The man that ran all that has just retired. I just saw an article in the Washington Post about him, and he said I was his favorite attorney general, and that was because I got about... I let them start trying these cases again.

I had one case where I had to go to court myself and be a witness as to authorizing wiretaps. A document stolen at the State Department, handed it over to a courier, taken to Paris to be delivered to the North Vietnamese, represented by me by Warren Christopher, who was the deputy secretary of state at the time, it was going to cause people to be killed in other countries, and we caught those people.

I went to the federal court and testified as to the wiretaps, and the lawyer handling the case for the spies and defending them was Mike Tiger, who is defending a man out in Oklahoma now getting ready for trial, very good lawyer, used to be a Supreme Court law clerk. He wrote to the U.S. attorney in Washington and asked that I be investigated for high crimes and misdemeanors because I authorized wiretaps in foreign intelligence. Of course, nothing came of that, but I saw a copy of his letter.

[crosstalk 02:16:46]. Anyway, that was a big thing, and then I got the foreign intelligence surveillance court back, passed,
something thought of by Attorney General Levi. Up until that point, the attorney general authorized all of these operations, including wiretaps and foreign intelligence, and there was such a distrust of the system. Attorney General Levi, who was Ford's attorney general, had been president, as you know, of the University of Chicago. Before that dean of the law school. He conceived the idea of having a foreign intelligence surveillance court who'd pass on what the attorney general did, but he never could get it through the Congress. Well, I got it through it, passed, got it set up. It's still in use. You never see a story anymore about an abuse of the system.

Mel Steely: 02:17:35 Not in that.

Griffin Bell: 02:17:35 That ended it, so that was a big improvement. You have thirteen federal judges designated each year, in addition to their other duties, to serve on that court, one a month, and one's a chief judge, and they pass on these same things. When I was at... Six o'clock in the afternoon, my foreign intelligence people all came in with their papers. I'd go over all that stuff. Sometimes, it'd take until eight o'clock, but now those things, after the attorney general signs them, they go to this judge. He looks over the same paper, and it worked well.

Mel Steely: 02:18:17 If he doesn't agree, then what happens?

Griffin Bell: 02:18:18 Don't have the operation.

Mel Steely: 02:18:21 Stop it there.

Griffin Bell: 02:18:21 Stop it.

Mel Steely: 02:18:22 Okay, so you've got to have two signatures.

Griffin Bell: 02:18:23 Yeah, right, instead of one.

Mel Steely: 02:18:27 Well, I'm glad they've got something like that because we have caught some spies, although I will say that we seem to be stumbling over some of them.

Griffin Bell: 02:18:33 Well, we could-

Mel Steely: 02:18:34 ... at times.

Griffin Bell: 02:18:36 The number of spies in our country is enormous. I once figured that maybe there's as many as a thousand Soviet spies in this country in the form of students, most of them. They'll have a
A physicist fifty years old over here taking some kind of a course and that sort of thing, and the FBI keeps up with all... did. The Cold War is over, but when it was still going, the FBI kept up with all those people, and I told President Carter one time we could round up any number of spies if we needed them for trading purposes. Say they were holding some of our people in the Soviet Union, and we needed a trade. If we wanted five, or ten, or twenty, all we had to do was [crosstalk 02:19:18]. We'd pick him up, and catch them in the act passing documents, and all that sort of thing. We prosecuted a lot of those people after that, and we saved some lives in the Soviet Union, and we also used that method to get some people out, some of the dissidents. You know, we'd trade.

Mel Steely: 02:19:42 I know some people accused Stansfield Turner of being too open and costing lives with some of his revelations and all.

Griffin Bell: 02:19:42 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:19:53 Do you think that was the case? You knew him [crosstalk 02:19:53].

Griffin Bell: 02:19:53 No, not him, but there were some people that did tell secrets, but not him. It was turncoat types in Europe elsewhere. We'd give out names of agents, and some of them were harmed, yeah. I knew Turner. Turner probably deserved to be criticized to some extent for cutting down on the number of spies, people engaged in what we call human intelligence, and relying too much on SIGINT, signal intelligence. That sort of decimated the ranks and caused a lot of morale problems over at the CIA. I remember President Carter sent me over there one day to make a speech to them and try to... He went one day and spoke to the employees of the CIA to try to build the morale back up.

I remember telling them about Nathan Hale, first American spy we executed during the Revolution. There’s three statues of Nathan Hale. One’s out at the CIA. One’s in front of the Justice Department on the Constitutional Avenue side. One’s at Yale, and he was executed by the British. I alluded to his... in the speech I made, but they were having morale problems, probably still are.

Mel Steely: 02:21:19 I think they still are.

Griffin Bell: 02:21:20 Yeah.
Mel Steely: 02:21:22 Why did you decide... I know you told President Carter you were going to leave after two years, and it took you longer. Why didn't you just stay on with him?

Griffin Bell: 02:21:31 Well, by the time... I thought about staying, and he wanted me to stay, and of course, I had planned to leave, come back to practice law, but I could have worked around that. I finally concluded that it would not be good for me to be in the attorney general's office during campaign for reelection. They could raise the issue ofcronyism, that he had had me in the same county in South Georgia as a political henchman and that sort of thing. I told him that. I said, "It's going to be... We need to get someone on the outside of the attorney general and [inaudible 02:22:17] remove that as a possible criticism." He didn't agree with that, but it had a lot to do with my thinking.

Mel Steely: 02:22:28 What do you think his greatest achievement was as president?

Griffin Bell: 02:22:36 I think maybe the Camp David Accord was his greatest single achievement. I think another one the is rebuilding of the Defense Department. The rebuilding of the modern Defense Department began under President Carter, cruise missiles, things like that. All that started under him, stealth bomber, and he never got any credit for that. President Reagan got all the credit. It was as if we were just down and out when President Reagan came in. That was not true. President Carter had already started rebuilding it. So, that's something he never got any credit for, but I think he deserved credit.

Then, I think his moral standards were such that it helped the country. You know, people made fun of him about making all the people living together get married and things like that, but he was very good at that. If you worked over on his staff and he found out you were living with... two people were living together and not married, he'd called the person in and say, "Listen, if you're going to be up here, you need to get married." I think people would poke fun at him for doing things like that, but he had high moral standards, expected other people to live like that.

Mel Steely: 02:23:56 More so than what you see today.

Griffin Bell: 02:24:00 Yeah. Then, another thing I think that probably was good, he worked hard. I think people in the country ought to have an idea that the president works hard. He'd go to work at 5:30 in the morning. He worked too hard. Every paper of any importance in an executive department had to go over his desk.
He overestimated what he could do really, but he thought by hard work he could do anything.

Mel Steely: 02:24:31 He went too far one way, and his successor went too far the other way.

Griffin Bell: 02:24:35 Right. Exactly, but that was a good standard, a good example for the people. I'd say those were the main things.

Mel Steely: 02:24:48 Do you think of Jimmy Carter as basically a very decent man?

Griffin Bell: 02:24:52 Oh, yeah, no question, just very decent. I've often thought maybe he was cut out in life to be a missionary. He's too big a man just to be a plain missionary, but something, some kind of a mission.

Mel Steely: 02:25:10 He's doing pretty well with the Carter Center, don't you think?

Griffin Bell: 02:25:13 Yeah. He's been able to make his presidency into a mission, a continuing mission.

Mel Steely: 02:25:19 He's certainly been the greatest ex-president of this century.

Griffin Bell: 02:25:22 Yeah, I think-

Mel Steely: 02:25:23 Without any question.

Griffin Bell: 02:25:24 I think it's remarkable.

Mel Steely: 02:25:25 I've had some friends that said, "What a shame it was he had to be president. If he could have just gone from being governor to ex-president..."

Griffin Bell: 02:25:32 Right.

Mel Steely: 02:25:33 ... that it would have been a perfect life without any of that, all that problem in the middle.

Griffin Bell: 02:25:36 Yeah. I think, had he been reelected, he'd go down as being a great president. A lot of things that he wanted to do he put off. I can't remember what they were, but I remember two or three times, he said, "That'll be the second term we'll do that," whatever it was. Of course, he didn't get a second term, and then he got sort of shot down by the Iranian hostage situation.

Mel Steely: 02:26:04 You think that that was the main reason for his lack of a second term?
Griffin Bell: 02:26:07 I think that and inflation.

Mel Steely: 02:26:09 Inflation.

Griffin Bell: 02:26:10 Yeah. Those two things. The general people criticized him for saying the country was suffering from a deep malaise, and the people didn't like that, but that was true. It was an absolute fact, but people don't like to be told that in anything. You could be running a law firm. You say, "Well, we're in a deep malaise. Everything's in bad shape." You know what would happen? We'd get another leader.

Mel Steely: 02:26:44 Yeah.

Griffin Bell: 02:26:44 I think he was right about that, but it didn't go over well.

Mel Steely: 02:26:49 Well, he ended up being compared by some historians to Hoover in the sense that, with the economic crisis we had and people burning our flag and shooting our Marines and all, people looked on him much as they did President Hoover, a man who didn't offer them much, whereas Roosevelt and Reagan both came offering hope and opportunity.

Griffin Bell: 02:27:10 Yeah. Right. As soon as Reagan got there, he started talking about tomorrow, you know, what a great tomorrow we had. That's all-

Mel Steely: 02:27:18 People love that.

Griffin Bell: 02:27:18 Oh, they do.

Mel Steely: 02:27:19 They liked it when Roosevelt did it, and they liked it when Reagan did it...


Mel Steely: 02:27:22 ... and Carter was a victim in a sense. If there ever was a man a victim of his times, he and Hoover-

Griffin Bell: 02:27:28 Were. Both-

Mel Steely: 02:27:30 ... fit that particular-

Griffin Bell: 02:27:31 Both good people.

Mel Steely: 02:27:31 Both good people.
Griffin Bell: 02:27:32 Well, Reagan also had something else that Carter didn't have. He had just a few ideas, and he stuck with them. He had a deeply held philosophy, and President Carter was so intelligent, he'd change.

Mel Steely: 02:27:50 Right.

Griffin Bell: 02:27:50 He was thinking all the time, and he wanted to be convinced that what he was doing was not the thing to do. Reagan just stuck with the same things, and he brought the Soviet Union down just with that single-minded attitude. When he put Star Wars out, that brought them down. I know enough about that sort of business to know that that finished them off. They were already using a very high percentage of the gross national product for the military, much higher than anybody else in the world, and they didn't have the money to go into Star Wars. I used to be a director at Martin Marietta, and I'd go to Paris, and after Reagan started Star Wars, I was over there with the head of Martin Marietta and see all these modern weapons and so forth, and the German defense minister wanted to meet with us. He said, "How can we get into the Star Wars?" We went to England on the way back. The British defense department said the same thing. The German said, "You all got so far ahead of us with the moonshot, the Apollo program, that we have never caught up technologically," and said, "You all are so far ahead of the entire world with Star Wars that we'll never catch up. That's what brought Soviet Union down.

Mel Steely: 02:29:19 I agree. He pushed them to the wall financially.

Griffin Bell: 02:29:21 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:29:22 That and what was his four hundred ship navy?

Griffin Bell: 02:29:24 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:29:25 He hit him with... [crosstalk 02:29:26]. Financially...

Griffin Bell: 02:29:28 They couldn't handle it.

Mel Steely: 02:29:29 But having Gorbachev come in was a break.

Griffin Bell: 02:29:32 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:29:33 Had Brezhnev stayed there or someone else who was more aggressive-
Griffin Bell: 02:29:36 Probably started a war.

Mel Steely: 02:29:36 It could have started a war. It was a roll of the dice, but Reagan took the risk...

Griffin Bell: 02:29:41 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:29:42 ... and deserves the credit.

Griffin Bell: 02:29:43 President Bush, I ran into him one day out at the White House. I was there for some reason. He started talking about playing golf and spending his honeymoon at Sea Island, and I said, "I have a house down there." He said, "I tell you what I'll do. I'll stop there someday, and we'll have a golf game." He ended up coming down there for the weekend. We were getting ready to play golf. We was sitting in the dining room over there at the golf club and Gorbachev phoned him. It was a day after Bush had made some speech about eliminating some level of weapons. I've forgotten what it was, but we were sitting there having lunch and the somebody came out and one of the Secret Service said, you've got an important telephone call and it was Gorbachev telling him he agreed with his speech and was going to cooperate. That was a historic thing, right there. I'd forgotten all about that and I was down there at Sea Island not long ago and Jack Lumpkin, who was a great golf teacher, runs the Golf Digest school, asked me if he was having lunch with us. He was going to play golf with us. He said, "You remember that? He said, that's the most historic thing I've ever been around is that telephone call."

Mel Steely: 02:31:02 Golf's played a big role in your life all the way through, hadn't it?

Griffin Bell: 02:31:06 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:31:06 I mean, seriously.

Griffin Bell: 02:31:07 It really has.

Mel Steely: 02:31:07 For... I was talking to Bob Steed and some other people. I said, you know for a person that's in particularly in a managerial position at a law firm or in the government, golf is almost an essential thing just to get to know people and to know whether you can trust people.

Griffin Bell: 02:31:23 Oh yeah. I mean, [crosstalk 02:31:23] it had a big, a lot to do with my life. I've met more people playing golf, I guess, than any
other way. Well, I got to know President Bush very well like that.

Mel Steely: 02:31:36 Well-

Griffin Bell: 02:31:36 I went to, I was invited to Camp David with Arnold Palmer just for a golf weekend, but I've been to, of course, to Camp David with President Carter, but that was on serious business. This was just to go up there and play golf.

Mel Steely: 02:31:53 Well, now, Bush did more of that than Carter did. In fact, asking Talmadge about Carter, he said that he was never invited in four years to the White House for anything other than formal signings. And I said, well, surely, he'd have the Georgia people come over. He said, no, never.

Griffin Bell: 02:32:12 No, he didn't socialize.

Mel Steely: 02:32:12 He didn't do any of that. I thought what a shame, that must've been. But you served the Reagan administration on the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on South Africa.

Griffin Bell: 02:32:23 Right.

Mel Steely: 02:32:23 You were on Bush's administration as Vice Chairman of the Commission on Federal Ethics and Reform and numerous appointments. You've served both Democrats and Republicans. Do you think of yourself as a party person?

Griffin Bell: 02:32:36 No.

Mel Steely: 02:32:36 Are you a Democrat or Republican?

Griffin Bell: 02:32:38 Well, I started out in life of being what I call a Southern Democrat, which I had to explain what that means to me. To me it means a person is a fiscal conservative and conservative on most things. And the Republicans used to be like that. Now they got into the religious right business and they-

Mel Steely: 02:33:02 That's about to split them up.

Griffin Bell: 02:33:03 And split them up bad. And if I probably, if anything, I might've been something like a Rockefeller Republican, but I've never been a Republican. People ask me about that and I said, well I'm not a Democrat, because the Democratic Party left me. I just don't believe in everything that they promote and they're getting better. They're getting back toward the middle of the
road now. But I can say they left me, but I never went to the Republican Party. I'm more of an Independent.

I think my experience working in Washington had a lot to do with that. Everybody becomes a product of experience. And I didn't realize how liberal the Democratic Party was, particularly the Northeastern part of it, until I was up in Washington. But they bought on being socialist. I think Clinton has brought them back more to the middle of the road because he deals in [crosstalk 00:04:03].

Mel Steely: 02:34:03 Kicking and screaming.

Griffin Bell: 02:34:05 Yeah. But so we got... I may be a member of maybe forty percent of this nation who's out there in the middle of somewhere more an Independent. One of these days we're going to elect an Independent President, and we might as well elect an Independent governor of Georgia if somebody runs is an Independent.

Mel Steely: 02:34:29 Well, Isakson is talking about doing that.

Griffin Bell: 02:34:33 I think the party business is getting weak on both sides, at least in my view that's true. So I'm somewhere out there floating around in the middle and I take positions based on what a think of the candidate. If I think one candidate is better than another one, I don't have any hesitation of saying so. And that's why I came out for Bush instead of Clinton.

Mel Steely: 02:35:01 Now, you and Bush were fairly, I wouldn't say close personal friends, but certainly you were friends.

Griffin Bell: 02:35:07 We were friends, I met him when he was head of the CIA and I was attorney general and we picked the wrong person, Carter picked the wrong person to be head of the CIA. And we had to hold Bush over. All the other Republicans were gone. He would call me on the telephone and ask me when he could get relief. It was very embarrassing to be there with the Democrats. That's how I first met him.

But he was... If you've been around President Bush, he's just a sort of a man's man.

Mel Steely: 02:35:07 He is.

Griffin Bell: 02:35:38 And you know his Navy record and all, would indicate all that. Sportsman.
Mel Steely: 02:35:44 Well, the two of you just hit it off.

Griffin Bell: 02:35:45 We did hit it off.

Mel Steely: 02:35:46 Golf thing and personally you just clicked, didn't you?

Griffin Bell: 02:35:50 His interests were the same as mine, he hunts, he shoots birds, and everything. He's just like somebody who grew up in South Georgia.

Mel Steely: 02:35:57 Well you have served him in more than just a friend's capacity. I remember one particular case as a legal advisor.

Griffin Bell: 02:36:04 I was his lawyer in the Iran-Contra.

Mel Steely: 02:36:08 You want to tell us about that or...

Griffin Bell: 02:36:10 Well, he made a speech to the Buick Dealers of America and he had a question and answer and he asked them, some Buick dealer got up and said, "Mr. President, why would you of all the Republican lawyers in the United States, why would you pick a Democrat to represent you in the Iran-Contra?" The Buick dealer here in Atlanta told me this, [inaudible 02:36:35]. He said, "I was looking for the best lawyer I could find. It's not my fault, he happened to be a Democrat."

Mel Steely: 02:36:44 That's got to be pretty satisfying.

Griffin Bell: 02:36:46 It was, yeah, it was. I was playing golf at Sea Island, and a messenger came out on the course on a golf cart to tell me the White House was calling. Well, I learned when I was attorney general don't take any calls, just because the White House is calling. It could be a secretary, no telling who it is. If the president's calling that's quite a different thing. So they said the White House was calling. So, I was playing golf with these three men, and they said, you're not going in. I said, I'll return the call when we get through playing, no rush just because the White House is calling. Well, they couldn't believe that. Well, when I did get in, about thirty or forty minutes later I returned the call and it was Boyden Gray, President Bush, wasn't...

Mel Steely: 02:37:35 Special counsel.

Griffin Bell: 02:37:36 Yeah, he called me, and he said President Bush has decided he needed to get a lawyer in the Iran-Contra investigation, and had asked him to call me and see if I could represent him. I said, yeah, I can represent him and I need to check with my law firm
to be safe and not any objection to it. Under the special counsel law, if you're representing, you've got anybody in law firm, like Larry Thompson's in the HUD investigation, nobody else in the firm can represent anybody on the other side. In any, think of that. In any. If President-

Mel Steely: 02:38:11 That's crazy.

Griffin Bell: 02:38:12 ... Clinton called me right now to represent him, I couldn't represent him, because Larry is a prosecutor in the HUD. That's crazy to have to think like that. But anyway we didn't have any impediment. So I told him I'd do. They wanted me to then two or three calls back and forth and wanted me to come up there. I was up there in two or three days. It was like a Monday, that was a Saturday, I think.

I started representing him, got a bunch of young lawyers in Washington office helping me. And we did represent him.

Mel Steely: 02:38:12 Successfully.

Griffin Bell: 02:38:44 Successfully, right. Then I went up, when I found out that nothing was going to happen, then I went up to Kennebunkport, took one of my young lawyer with me, and we met with the president and whoever his press man was about what we were going to say when Walsh announced it wouldn't be anything done. And I told him, I don't think we'll say anything. They had a statement all written out and all. I said, less said about all this the better. People forgotten about it in a way. If you make a statement, Walsh will make one back, that sort of thing. That's sort of the way it ended.

But we did get to be friends. And I stay in touch with him. He calls me up every now and then. If I'm in Houston, I'll usually call him. We've got a Houston office now. I go out there every now and then. He's a nice man and I'll tell you what, he's got a super wife. Yeah. I mean she could have been elected president. If she'd have run instead of him, I think, she would have gotten elected. She's really a nice, nice, smart woman.

Mel Steely: 02:40:00 Why didn't you ever run for office, yourself?

Griffin Bell: 02:40:03 Well, I planned to run for office when I was young and I was going to run, my ambition was to run for the attorney general of Georgia. And all these other things happened, and I just never got around to it. I was telling my law clerks last night, I had a fantastic life and most of it by accident. I was attorney general
by accident of geography. If I hadn't been from Americus, and President Carter was in Plains nine miles apart, I'd never known him. That was just an accident. Most of everything I've ever gotten in life, I've got accidentally. And if I had a chance to run for office, I would have run. But we had a rule in the firm, you couldn't be in this firm after by the time I could afford to do anything I was here, and we had a rule you couldn't run for office. You had to leave the firm if you wanted to run for office.

That kept you from running for the legislature. Something like that, you'd that run for a higher office. I probably would've run, might have even gotten appointed attorney general when Cook died, but by that time I was on the bench. And if I'd have run for attorney general and gotten that, then I could've run for governor. Now I had a chance, I really had a great chance to be governor when I got back from being attorney general. Vandiver, Bob Jordan, just a lot of people wanted me to run on my name because I'd made a good name in Washington. I talked to my wife about it and finally decided too late in life, I needed to do something, I needed to get back and just be a lawyer for a while. You can't spend your whole life just jumping from one thing to another in a political world.

Mel Steely: 02:41:54 Is the main-

Griffin Bell: 02:41:54 I could have gotten that and I'll tell you why I think I could've gotten it. There was a lawyer named Bell out in DeKalb County, who at that same year paid $500 to qualify for the Supreme Court of Georgia. He never spent another penny and he'd tell me this, he's told me this several times, people thought that he was me and he got elected. He ran away with it just by himself, and paid $500 and never spent another penny.

Mel Steely: 02:41:54 And they elected him to it.

Griffin Bell: 02:42:25 No ad in the paper anything. But that's name recognition and television creates a lot of that, and I guess, but anyway.

Mel Steely: 02:42:36 You would have run then in the what, '82.

Griffin Bell: 02:42:39 '80.

Mel Steely: 02:42:40 '80.

Griffin Bell: 02:42:41 '80.

Mel Steely: 02:42:42 Okay. When Joe Frank.
Griffin Bell: 02:42:43 Right. That would've been the time. But I didn't and I never thought about it since then.

Mel Steely: 02:42:54 Is the main consideration there financial?

Griffin Bell: 02:43:00 Yeah in a way, not so much that. I never have been short of money. Since I was a young lawyer, I always saved my money and I never had a high standard of living. And when I went on the bench I had a good bit of money saved up, and I had a lot of stock in a bank and I'd sell stock whenever I needed to buy a car or something like that, I never suffered from lack of money, but I never had much money. And it maybe I was thinking about accumulating money for my old age or...

Mel Steely: 02:43:30 Well, I know that happens, Zell Miller, I was talking to him about why he didn't want to run for the Senate or something. And he said, I've done enough. He said, it's time to go make a little money. I hadn't got that many years left. I want to have something for my family, et cetera.

Griffin Bell: 02:43:42 That's pretty well put.

Mel Steely: 02:43:58 I will make the money, put it aside, then I can run.

Griffin Bell: 02:44:03 That's the other end of it.

Mel Steely: 02:44:03 I know Randy Evans, a good friend of mine that was Congressman Gingrich, or Speaker Gingrich's attorney in this ethics thing. He and I have been very close since he was a student of mine and I've been trying to get him to run for office and he said, not yet. He said, [crosstalk 02:43:59].

Griffin Bell: 02:44:03 I had a lot of friends in Washington, one of them was Senator Lloyd Bentsen from Texas, he and I used to hunt together. He told me an interesting story when Bert Lance was having all this trouble. He said, I was a young Congressman, from Texas, I didn't have any money, for all that, a lot of grapefruit land down in the border. Came there with two dollars. Grew up in the Midwest somewhere. And so he didn't... But Lloyd and his brother had this acreage of grapefruit trees and that's all they had. He said, I left the Congress and went back to Texas to make some money. He said, I knew I wanted to have a political life, but I also had come to the realization that you can't be in politics and be broke. He said, if I hadn't done that, and he said, I was in the process of making money and I passed up running for the Senate once, but he finally won, he beat President Bush, for the Senate later on.
He said, I’ve got plenty of money now. He started an insurance company and a bunch of things. He said, "If I hadn't had done that, I'd have ended up like Bert Lance." That's the very words that he said. He said, Bert came to Washington when he couldn't afford to come. I said, well, was he better off when he came than he was two or three months later because the bank started going backwards. They cut the dividend out all that. And he said, nobody ought to come to Washington, political career unless they got some money. He said, may not be rich, but you can't owe money and you've got to have some money saved up. And there's a lot of truth in that.

I tell our lawyers, if you want to be in public life, want to have a political office, practice law ten years, get a profession, so you'll have something always to go back to. And then you'd do whatever you want to do. I mean you're set for life if you practice law ten years and learn to be a good lawyer.

Mel Steely: 02:46:03 Well, there is an expectation that you have money. I know I have a close friend that was Newt's first campaign manager who is now the senior person staff person and probably the leading authority on Medicaid up there and Chip Kahn's his name, and he was telling me what a stress it is on him financially, and I said, well, how much are you making? And he said, a little over 140,000. He said, but I have to do moonlighting down at a Tulane and I get another 30,000 for that. He added up, he was making close to 200,000, was complaining about how bad it is.

Griffin Bell: 02:46:40 Oh my God, he should have been living great.

Mel Steely: 02:46:43 He asked me what I was doing and I said, well, I've been teaching thirty-something years and I'm making 42,000 and he said, my Lord, man, why do you do it? Why do you accept it? This is terrible. I said, well, this is average.

Griffin Bell: 02:46:57 That shows you the difference between inside the Beltway and out.

Mel Steely: 02:47:00 It really is, and he was sincere. He was sincerely upset that he didn't make more.

Griffin Bell: 02:47:01 Under my system, if I was president, he wouldn't have that second job. You'd have to work full-time for the government. That was one of the rules we put in the Bush Ethics Commission. Nobody could make more than fifteen percent of their income outside the government job. And you should have heard the judges screaming because they're teaching. But it's for the
work... If the government pays you, you ought to work full-time for the government. And if I was president I'd insist on that. But that's not the way it is.

Mel Steely: 02:47:38 No.

Griffin Bell: 02:47:41 But anyway, I probably, that's probably had something to do with the fact I never ran for office, but just being a success may mean too much to me in my life. I'd hate to run and lose. I'm very competitive I guess, and it'd be nice if you won but you might not win.

Mel Steely: 02:48:07 It's hard to imagine you being any more successful than you've been except possibly a Supreme Court appointment is the only thing that's left.

Griffin Bell: 02:48:18 Right. Right. And I wouldn't care about that. I mean, I'm too old for all that now, but at one time that would have been a nice thing to do. No, I've had a great career and appreciate everybody who's helped me along the way and I've had a lot of help.

Mel Steely: 02:48:33 Good timing.

Griffin Bell: 02:48:34 Good luck, timing.

Mel Steely: 02:48:35 Good luck.

Griffin Bell: 02:48:35 I've always had good luck. Luck has a lot to do with what you amount to in life. There's some people just born with bad luck. I feel sorry for people like that. I've always had more luck than I really deserved, I guess. I tell people in sometimes in speeches, that I was one of the few merit selections of judges. I was there before they even had commissions. They'll ask you how is that? And I said, well, I was the co-chairman of John Kennedy's campaign for president, we won. I was a friend of both Georgia's senators and I was chief of staff to the Georgia governor and they thought I had a lot of merit, and that's why they put me on the bench. That always gets a laugh.

Mel Steely: 02:49:24 Yeah, I guess it does. And I'm not so sure that that's a bad thing. It goes back to Sam Rayburn's comment to Lyndon Johnson, I mean to Kennedy, you know, I wish one of these guys that run for sheriff one time in there talking about the Kennedy people and there is something to that. Get the person a little experience and it does leaven you.
Griffin Bell: 02:49:45  No question about it.

Mel Steely: 02:49:47  Unquestionably your tenure on the court helped you tremendously as an attorney general.

Griffin Bell: 02:49:54  Oh there's no, I can't tell you how much it helped me. It really did. And being on the Court of Appeals like that, it's like going to law school for fifteen years. You're always dealing with a different kind of case. You're learning all, every time you hold court you learn something. All that just fit right in to being an attorney general. Nothing they could bring me that I didn't know something about it. Even foreign intelligence, I knew something about it from being on the court because every now and then we'd get a foreign intelligence case or something sort of. Nothing never came up that surprised me. I didn't have any, of course practice as a manager and I recommended Frank Johnson to President Carter to run the FBI and he said, he later got sick and couldn't take it, but President Carter said, what makes you think he can run the FBI? I said, he was a company commander in the infantry during World War II and that's good training. He said, well a company commander wouldn't have but a hundred people working for him, he said they got 50,000 over at the FBI. And I said, if you can manage a company in the military system, you can manage anything. And he said, something. And I said, that's why I'm a good manager. He said, who said you a good manager? Said, you think you are, but does anybody else think it? Kidded me a lot about things like that. And I said everything I know about management, I learned in the military. They got basic unit, start with a squad, go to platoon, go to a company, go to battalion, go to the regiment. If you learn that most basic things, and know how to deal with people, you can run anything. And that's another thing we missing about the military, I guess, people don't get a chance to manage anything.

Mel Steely: 02:51:45  No, they don't. And of course personality has a lot to do with it. You're an outgoing person that likes people.

Griffin Bell: 02:51:52  Right.

Mel Steely: 02:51:53  And you mentioned Senator Byrd, just the opposite. He has a good reputation because he's succeeded at various things, but he's a very sour man that people don't personally care for.

Griffin Bell: 02:52:05  Yeah. I like people. I've always just liked, I like people. I like to deal with people, and always been friendly. I think growing up in
small town helps you. My wife's from Richmond, Virginia and we went down to Americus and she said everybody down here speaks to you. You're driving down the street and people wave to you in the car and said, people in pickup trucks will wave. I said, well that's the way people are. They're friendly and even if they don't know you, they're friendly.

Mel Steely: 02:52:36 Absolutely.

Griffin Bell: 02:52:38 She thought that was strange, a strange habit.

Mel Steely: 02:52:42 And we've tried not to repeat things that you've covered in your book and stuff like that, but is there anything that we've left out that you think ought to be covered as part of the record?

Griffin Bell: 02:52:54 No, I don't think so. I asked these law clerks last night to be prepared to give oral interviews if somebody want to write a biography of me and they can all do it. One of them has got a wonderful story to tell, we'll let us be the end. Judge Tuttle used to give me all these hard assignments and Judge Alexander Lawrence was a federal judge, district judge in Savannah. And he had the Augusta, Georgia school case, and he ordered the schools integrated. People got mad and had a march and they hanged him in effigy. So he wouldn't sit on the case. He disqualified himself. Judge Tuttle turned the case over to me. And I said, well, I'm on the Court of Appeals, that's a district judge's job. He said, well you can handle it, you get it straightened out.

One of our law clerks was named David Hudson from Augusta. And he likes to tell the story. I told, sent word someway, I don’t know how I did it, but the school board had come to Atlanta and meet me in a courtroom. And they bring the lawyers from the NAACP and the school board lawyers with them. And when they got there, this was my law clerk tells it like this. I said, well, I'm glad to see all of you. Said, I called you over here to give you a lesson in civics. Of course that caught their ear, they didn't know what that meant. And I came down off the bench, took off my robe and sat down at the clerk's table. I said, all right, now we're going to get started. I told them about Brown versus Board of Education, about the Constitution, and how judges have to and the local government. Everybody has to obey the constitutional mandate, Supreme Court decisions made on it, and all that sort of thing.

I said, you all treated Judge Lawrence shamelessly over there in Augusta. I'm embarrassed for him and embarrassed for you that you did such a thing. And now we're going to get started over
and we've got one decision to make and that is, are you going to integrate the schools, come up with your own plan, or am I going to send a professor from Ohio down there to do it? And I said that's what we're going to decide today. I said I'm going to leave the room and I want to... Fifteen minutes and I want the school board and the school board lawyers to meet over in one side of the courtroom and decide what you want to do because I'm not going, we're going to get it resolved today. And they came back, I came back, and they asked a few questions and they finally agreed they'd do it, and they did, and that was the end of that problem. And David Hudson thinks that's one of the greatest things that ever seen a judge do was just-

Mel Steely: 02:52:54 Well it's different.
Griffin Bell: 02:55:54 Just talk to them. He said, I called it a civics lesson. I don't even remember it. I mean I remember having the meeting, that's all I remember about it.
Mel Steely: 02:56:00 Were you on the court that, you didn't handle Kentucky, did you?
Griffin Bell: 02:56:03 No.
Mel Steely: 02:56:04 I was just wondering.
Griffin Bell: 02:56:06 I had Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida and the [inaudible 02:56:10] zone, that was our territory.
Mel Steely: 02:56:12 I know they did the busing in Louisville, and they refused to raise money for it and the judge made them raise the money and he was just running that city. Just drove him crazy.
Griffin Bell: 02:56:22 Yeah. Levying taxes.
Mel Steely: 02:56:23 Yeah, he was. And they told me that the judge had gotten that right. I said federal judge got more rights and you can even imagine.
Griffin Bell: 02:56:28 Well, that's right. Because you got to write an equity to fashion a remedy.
Mel Steely: 02:56:32 That's right.
Griffin Bell: 02:56:33 And the Supreme Court upheld that in the-
Mel Steely: 02:56:36 They did.
Griffin Bell: 02:56:37 Charlotte-Mecklenburg county school case. Fashion remedies. I was an originator of putting the Taliaferro County School Board in receivership. What reason that happened was, we had this hearing going on over there in Augusta federal court and Roy Harris was the lawyer, Charlie Block, and I sensed in hearing that they had some of a plan that they were trying to prep us in some own way and they had a beautiful woman as superintendent of the school named Ms. Williams. Her brother-in-law was a judge, R. Good Williams, here on the Fulton Superior Court. They were going to make us put her in contempt and then put her in jail. That was what they were trapping us on. I thought I finally figured that out and I told Judge Morgan and Judge Cailet, that’s what they were doing.

And they said, well what can we do about it? And I said, well, why don’t we put the school board in receivership and name the state school superintendent as the superintendent as the receiver. And we did that. And that was pushing the edge of the envelope and that, I don’t think that decision has ever been followed, but it’s been threatened by judges to get something done.

Later on, Roy Harris told me... I was over there making a speech at the Augusta Bar Association and he said, who thought about putting this county school board in receivership? I said, I did. He said, well, I want to tell you, we had you trapped. You were going to have to put, Ms. Williams in jail. And we were going to bring the whole thing to a head all over Georgia.

Mel Steely: 02:58:17 But you got around them?

Griffin Bell: 02:58:19 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 02:58:19 Very good. All right. Thank you, Judge Bell. We appreciate the time.

PART 6 OF 6 ENDS [02:58:23]