

An Oral History

with

Owen Cooper

(Excerpt)

Hales: You said you were nominated [for president of the Southern Baptist Convention] twice before, to what do you attribute the actual election on the third nomination to as opposed to the first two?

Cooper: Well, increased exposure. Then periodically the convention decides they want a layman. A third factor is that there were events in both of the other cases where the convention was wrestling over some theological questions and they felt like probably a person trained in theology might give a little bit better leadership. They were probably right about it.

Hales: That's questionable in light of what took place. One of the things in—you know rumors and stories are told—one of the things that I heard, at a Southern Baptist Convention I attended at which you were nominated, was that your views on race and race relations, your activities in civil rights, were quite controversial, [and for] that reason many people voted against you. You have been quite active in civil rights and I'd like, if we could, to move to that area and talk about the important incidences, particularly as related to this state, as you see it, persons that you think of, actually what part you played and how you see your role.

Cooper: Well, I was a latecomer in this. I grew up with all the traditional thinking of the typical hillbilly, and I'm a hillbilly, in Mississippi. My wife and I often think about how we could have grown up not even conscious of the existence of some of the problems that are matters of conscience to us now. I probably came at the human rights stage rather than the civil rights stage, because in the early days of a great deal of the real activity I was not involved. I'm not sure that that would be my approach had my conscience been alerted at that time. I think our children probably had more to do with our thinking than anybody else. It shook us up a little bit when one of our daughters said that she wasn't going to join a Baptist church in Mississippi when she moved back here from Washington. We said, "Why?" She said, "They won't take black people in." [She] said, "You find me one that will [and] I'll probably consider joining it, but we're not going to join the church that will not let black people in." Well, that kind of shakes you up just a little bit. Now I've always been interested in helping people, but it's been more or less of a reaching down and helping a person in distress. It [is] only when consciousness [is] developed to the point that the real help comes when you reach out and treat a person and try to help him as a peer, as an equal—equal at least in the sight of God, maybe not an economic equal, maybe not an educational equal, but an equal in the sight of God—that you really begin to get yourself involved. I'm not so sure, on some of these earlier things, that I wasn't doing things because I was just suppose to do them. I'm not sure just what my motivation was.

My real thrust came when it was decided in Washington, several years back, that the whole child development in Mississippi—child development organization, I forget the exact name of it—it was to be disbanded and set up something instead. I was asked, along with three other whites and three other blacks, to meet in Greenville to discuss my role, whether we'd take some leadership in it. I'd be less than candid if I didn't say that I had often aspired to be governor

in Mississippi. I thought this thing pretty well through because I felt like if I did this, my aspirations for governor would go out the window. I had about decided maybe they'd go out the window anyway because I wouldn't want to undertake it until I had retired. You see, as a cooperative I don't own this [and] they paid me a good salary. But I just couldn't see walking off and leaving a good job with lots of opportunities to serve; prospects of a very adequate retirement; several years after retirement, if my health permitted, travel and involvement in anything I wanted to do, for maybe an unlucky, unsuccessful race for governor of Mississippi. I decided before I went to this meeting in Greenville that I was making a pretty far-reaching choice.

Hales: This was your first integrated committee to serve on?

Cooper: The first one of any consequence, because I knew I would be exposed, which is perfectly all right. So we got involved and we organized what we call MAP, Mississippi Action for Progress, and it was then that we really began to get involved in some of the problems of the community. I want to say that, in my experience, though there have been several different things involved, that my receipt of hate mail has been minimal. My telephone calls—we never even thought about an unlisted number—now it fooled me. I don't think we had over ten telephone calls and at least half of those were people who would just call you up and breathe in the phone and would not say anything. [And] four or five [or] half a dozen letters. I often wondered why and I just concluded that most of the people thought that maybe Owen Cooper didn't know any better anyway, so they let it go at that. But I had some friends that received a tremendous amount of hate mail and obscene calls and things like that.

Hales: Well, has this racial issue been pretty big in the Mississippi Baptist Convention as a divisive issue?

Cooper: No, it hasn't been big. The Mississippi Baptist Convention has never recognized the existence of the issue. I believe that's a fairly safe statement to make. That may be a little bit too harsh, but they have never faced the issue, in any particular aspect of it.

Hales: Now when we say this and look at the Mississippi Baptist Convention when a lot of the civil rights marches and things started, this was the time that Doctor Quarles was executive secretary, I believe, and Dr. Hudgins was pastor of First Baptist Church. What can you remember about these two men and their orientation toward the problem? And the governor at that particular time—

Cooper: Well, I think at that time, along with them and everybody else, I was bewildered. I won't give you their reaction, I'll give you mine. I was mad. I was bewildered. I do not feel that force is a way to get the job done, and although, [much] of this was done in the name of non-violence, many of these activities—the fact [remains] that they resulted in violence. Even though at times the violence may have resulted entirely from innocent—the victim may have been entirely innocent, yet, in my interpretation, then he was inviting it, he was exposing himself to it.

I think we were all bewildered. I know through the Convention and through the Mississippi Economic Council and so forth, we wrestled with the growing consciousness on the part that something should be done in this field, but [also] how to do it. I do not feel that until the extreme militants—Now I'm not saying without that militance, I don't know about the other fellow, but without that militance—I might not have been shocked into consciousness of it. Another thing that shouldn't have been done, not saying it didn't use [to] serve a useful purpose, but I am saying it from my own viewpoint. Initially I had an adverse reaction to it. It probably

began to prick my conscience to the fact, and I'm sure, I served on the Resolution Committee at the state convention at MEC and others where we were trying to say—well, what could you say—well, we'd usually couch it in "law and order" and I do believe in law and order. I believe in equal justice though. I believe in equal treatment under the law and I'm not sure we've arrived at that point yet. But we're making progress; I know in my own life it took at least a decade to make a transition with the opportunity and exposure and the background I had. I'm sure it would take a score of years in some peoples' lives. We can't expect a miracle, but we can hope for one and work toward it.

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