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Interview with Wyche Fowler: Saturday, November 2, 1991, Dining Room at Wyndham Hotel

The first thing that Wyche did was to give an interview to a young man from Davidson College, who was writing a term paper. I sat there while Wyche talked to him about the state of the two-party system in Georgia. He was writing a term paper for Tom Kazee, and he had remembered me from my talk at Davidson and we exchanged greetings, and so forth. But I sat quietly while Wyche gave the interview to this young man.

One of the interesting things he said during that interview was his idea that the Republican party had never tried to establish "a farm team," but that the people who ran in the Republican party had always wanted to start at the top in politics and hadn't worked their way up through the system. He said that Mattingly was the first Republican to have been elected state-wide to a state-wide office in Georgia. He especially noted that the Republicans never fielded a slate of candidates for the constitutional offices, or at least rarely did so. He said, "when I ran for the Senate and I noted that the Republicans had not put up any candidates for the other state-wide offices, I took that as a sign that it would be much easier for me than otherwise. I think that if they had fielded a whole slate of Republican candidates, they could have run a much better campaign with more enthusiasm and attracted a broader base for the Republican Senate candidate than they did."

He did say to the student, in response to some question about racial politics, "when you water the seeds of racism, you will get a nut like David Duke."

In answer to another question he said to the student, "I do almost all my speaking to high school and college groups. I don't speak to very many rotary clubs or social clubs." He said this in answer to a question about whether young people were more likely to be Republicans or Democrats. In answer to that question, he noted that young people don't vote much one way or the other and that he didn't think it made much difference what you did, it was difficult to attract young people to vote. But he noted that he kept trying in his own way, and that's when he mentioned that he spent so much of his time talking to young people.

Before this young man had come down into the dining room, Wyche and I had started to talk. I had told him that I had a conversation yesterday with Ed Sims. He immediately said, "he doesn't know much. He's a hustler who told Zell Miller that he would like to get into politics and he helped Miller raise a lot of money. So Miller made him chairman of the party. It doesn't really mean much and it's not much of a job. Everything he knows about politics he has learned from Bill Johnstone. He comes up about every three weeks or so and talks to Johnstone for several hours and then he goes back and talks as if he knows about politics."

He started to tell me a story before the young man came in and then he finished the story after the young man had left. The story involves a man by the name of Perdue, a wheeler-dealer type politician who cut a deal, says Fowler, in 1986, a deal which proved that the Democratic

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establishment, as Fowler put it, "did not support me in 1986." It seems that Perdue was the executive secretary to the Democratic governor Joe ^{Frank} Bill Harris. In 1986, Perdue went to Mattingly and said that if you don't run ~~any~~ serious Republican against the governor, then the governor will ensure that you, Mattingly, have no opposition during the election. Harris then sat on all the Democrats who might want to run against Mattingly. Fowler thinks that this kept a number of Democrats out of the race. "I was stirring around and I knew that the war chest Mattingly had would scare an awful lot of Democrats out of the race. He had a war chest of \$4 million dollars one year out." The idea was that he didn't realize exactly why these people were being scared out, but he now thinks a deal engineered by Perdue had a lot to do with it.

"My decision to run was not based on Mattingly's \$4 million dollar war chest. My decision was do I want to give up 10 years of service in the Congress, which has given me a minor position in the leadership and membership on the Ways and Means Committee. Do I want to give up my seniority to take this real chance? I jumped into the race around the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner, or shortly before the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner. At that dinner, there were about 1,500 people there, but Harris and Perdue wouldn't even introduce me. I was a ^{six} six-term congressman in the middle of my own district, and still they wouldn't introduce me. Everywhere I went during the campaign when the governor of the state spoke, I'd be in the audience and he wouldn't introduce me. I understand maybe they say they couldn't call me a candidate since it was before the primary, but they could at least have introduced me as a five-term congressman. The Democratic establishment kept that deal with Mattingly and the Republicans to the best of their ability."

Now he gets to the punch line about Perdue. It turns out that in the governor's race (I believe) the opponent of the governor was a man named Barbour. Perdue accused Barbour of taking a bribe. Barbour sued Perdue and won a libel suit against him. The suit was settled for a \$400,000 judgment. The way the judgment was framed, Perdue was to pay \$200,000 of it, and the other \$200,000 of it, somehow or other, would be picked up by the taxpayers. Now when a judgment is handed down, Perdue has to agree to it, and so in a sense he confessed to the situation. Now it turns out that Fowler's prospective opponent in the 1992 election, Coverdell, has hired Perdue to help him. As Fowler puts it, "Coverdell has hired a confessed libeler." Fowler does not intend to say anything about this at this point, but he clearly will "hold it in reserve," he says. We can expect it to come out "somehow or other" if the campaign gets nasty.

"Their campaign strategy will be desperately negative--attack, attack, attack. Perdue is a hatchet man who will try to bring me down as much as is possible negatively, and then hope for a big Bush win. They can't beat me with either half standing alone. They will have to have both halves--bring me down a few points negatively and gain six points or so with George Bush."

I ought to note here that ^{WF} near the end of the interview, and I will pick it up when I get to it, ^{Bush} Bush noted that what really worries him and what he needs to figure out some way of handling, is the anti-incumbent feeling

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around the country.

I asked him to talk about the Thomas vote and he gave me a long explanation. I asked him to tell me about his "activity" from before the Anita Hill story and during and after. I noted that he had been in the newspapers all along at various stages.

He began with Sam Nunn and his declaration. "Very early on, maybe two or three days after Thomas was nominated by Bush, Sam Nunn issued a classic Nunn statement, 'I intend to vote for Judge Thomas unless some major disqualification should occur somewhere down the line.' The press carried this announcement as 'Nunn supports Thomas.' If they mentioned the qualifier it was way down at the bottom of the page, if at all."

"Very early in my Senate term, I thought it through at some length and made up my mind that I would not decide any Supreme Court nomination until the end of the confirmation process. I remembered the Haynsworth and the Carswell cases and believed that I ought not to speak out prematurely in such matters. I felt that the nominee has a right to make a case and that the only way the public will find out about the nominee is through the confirmation process. I think it is the most important vote a senator makes is the vote for a Supreme Court Justice. In that case, I am voting for seven million Georgians. They have absolutely no recourse if I am wrong, except in the rarest of case of impeachment. If you don't like Wyche Fowler, you can vote him out; if you don't like your member of Congress, you can vote him or her out; if you don't like the President, you can vote him out. You can get at everyone else except a Supreme Court Justice. So when I am casting my one vote, I am casting it in my representative capacity for the entire seven million Georgians. I feel that so strongly that I owe it to myself and to others to go all the way through the confirmation process. I did that with Bork, Kennedy, Souter-- and I thought with Thomas."

"Between the time Sam Nunn made his statement and my own announcement in favor of Thomas, I was pilloried by the press. They said he's dragging his feet, he can't even support a Georgian, so caught up is he in the Kennedy, Metzenbaum liberal democratic crowd, he can't even support a Georgian. They said he's trying to hide his vote and so forth."

"I had said from the beginning that I wouldn't vote for him because he was a Georgian or because he was black. I quoted Dr. King that you should judge a man by the character of his heart. I stuck to my guns or at least I thought I would."

"I announced my support for Thomas on Thursday. I didn't want to be the last one. I remember Charles Weltner called me before I made my decision, 'Oh no, don't do it till you have to do it. Something may happen. You never know in cases like this. You just can't tell.'"

"I came at it differently. One thing I want to get out of the way at the beginning. The fact that Thomas was a Georgian did matter. The fact that he had had certain life experiences and people were proud that a poor man from Georgia had been nominated was, to quote Dylan Thomas, 'a worm beneath

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the nail.' It couldn't be discarded if the ultimate decision was close on the merits."

"There are two things. Nobody knows how he will vote when he gets on the court. We project but we do not know. There have been surprises throughout our history--and besides, he is a Georgian. That is the way I thought about it."

"The second thing is that I had made up mind after Souter that George Bush was not going to nominate anybody or any time to the court who had a distinctive, distinguished background in constitutional law, jurisprudence, judicial experience. In fact all of us Democrats in the Senate were convinced that a litmus test on choice would be applied to nominees, that abortion was the paramount issue for nominees to the Supreme Court by both Ronald Reagan and George Bush. The only way, therefore, to change the court is to change the president. We in the Senate could shut-down the Senate and could reject nominee after nominee and never get a nominee according to standards of impartiality or jurisprudence. If that happened, the process would tear the electorate apart as we fought over a succession of nominees without any chance of winning. George Bush had the upper hand in this respect because he could always present another nominee to us when we rejected the first one."

He then went into his reasoning about the final decision. He emphasized "he does have the capability--unlike Kennedy and Souter--the capacity to surprise us on judicial and constitutional issues. His view on judicial matters is evolving. He is an intelligent man. He is not totally predictable as a knee jerk, right wing ideolog voter would be. That's a cause for hope. So part of it is borne of my view that he has the capability of being an independent jurist. Those are the hallmarks of his life, that he has gone against the grain, that he has been a person of independent thought and action, and has spent his life overcoming road blocks."

"I have not made this notion public but I will say this to you. I became worried that if Thomas were defeated, we in the Senate would have created another martyr a la Ollie North and, to some extent, Bork, who would be thrown out on the lecture circuit, financed by the right wing, and used as a martyr to racism. The word would be that we would have rejected Thomas because he was black, and the country would be further shattered."

That was the thinking before the Anita Hill thing broke, and, of course, Fowler did endorse Thomas.

"Along came Hill. There was no doubt that this was a very serious charge and that we had to reopen hearings. The committee was being called insensitive. I joined the others in calling for hearings on the case. That position was made easier because at the same time I was urging the majority leader to do it, Thomas called publicly for a hearing. I give Thomas a lot of credit for that. I was a member of the delay-proceedings group. I was Mitchell's person in the meeting which lasted for a good two-and-a-half hours on that Tuesday, the day we were supposed to vote. There were Biden and me for the Democrats and there was Hatch, Thurmond and

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Danforth for the Republicans. The Republicans wanted a no-delay and then they finally agreed to a delay, but the argument was over how much of a delay. I just sat there through most of it and Biden did the talking. Biden told the Republicans that we would be the laughing stock if we did not give it a reasonable amount of time and we finally agreed to start the hearings on Friday. My only contribution was to change the day of the vote from Wednesday which Biden has proposed, back to Tuesday. And we agreed to hold the final vote on Tuesday."

At the time of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, the Atlanta Braves were playing the Pittsburgh Pirates in the National League Championship Series. The games in Atlanta were scheduled for Saturday at 3:00 p.m. and then for Sunday evening and then for Monday at 3:00 p.m. Fowler went to all of those baseball games and listened to the hearings in between and had his staff tape for him the hearings that he missed.

"I watched all the hearings on Friday and on Saturday, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., when I went to the ball game. Now everyone who goes to the games or knows baseball knows that I do the play-by-play during certain parts of the ball game and they know where I sit at the ball park. Jay Rockefeller came in with me--and you can ask him about this if you wish. I came down from the back, down the long aisle to the front and I have barely gotten to my seat and the Star Spangled Banner had barely ended when people came at me as if I was a rock star. At least two hundred people starting jumping into the aisle and lining up to tell me to vote, by damn, for Clarence Thomas. The first woman nearly knocked over Jay Rockefeller who is about 6'6" tall. She poked her finger in my chest and said, "You'd better vote for Thomas, or don't you ever come back here." The first 19 women demanded that I vote for Thomas before the first woman came to ask me to vote against Thomas. At every half-inning, they lined up to come down and to give me their opinion. Finally, we needed to double the security at the box where I was sitting. Finally, I decided to get up and go to the bathroom every half-inning so that people could give me their opinion--which they did. In the sixth inning, a plane came over-head trailing a sign which said, "Send Thomas to the showers and not to the bench!" Well that activated the crowd and three hundred of them left their seats in response to the banner. Eighty to 90% of them were for Clarence Thomas. The same thing happened on Sunday and the same thing happened again on Monday--in the same proportions. Not more than one in eight or nine would say, "vote against Thomas."

"If I look at the situation in my representational capacity, the overwhelming support among my constituents was for Thomas. The rap against me is that I vote against my constituents--on contra aid, on the Bl, on the MX missile, on weapon systems. I'm used to being against the crowd. If I wanted to look at it just as a representational matter, it wasn't just me going through the process, it was 15 million Georgians going through the same thing. And they had voted 60-70% in favor of Thomas."

"I had a meeting on Sunday evening with a group of my black supporters, people who had worked in my campaign. They were mostly women. I didn't know very many of them first-hand. They said that they thought there had been a relationship between Thomas and Hill and that they had had a falling

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out. The important ingredient of that line of thinking was that both people were telling the truth from their perspective. Thomas didn't see things that he had done as being important; and she was inflating the impact on her at the time. These women were unanimously upset by the fact that she had brought it up 10 years later. And as part of the last point, they brought up the fact that unfortunately Hill could not have been stunned by the language of Thomas or by the rough talk. Any school girl from the eighth grade on--on the block, in the school or on the street corner had heard this kind of talk all the time. Anita had heard that kind of talk since she was 12 or 14 y/o every day of her life over and over and over. Black females had had lots of experience with that. And the women I talked to felt strongly about that."

"What had happened was not to my mind sexual harrassment. He did not touch her or threaten her or do any of the sorts of things that would cause a lot of females to want to cut his balls off."

"At the same time I was fielding calls from 10-15 women--white women--some of my most ardent supporters who called to tell me they found it incomprehensible that I would support Thomas because he was not qualified and because of the sexual harrassment."

"I had two meetings with Clarence Thomas. The first meeting was a courtesy call in which he ducked all of my questions. I asked him whether he thought a white man could represent a black district, and he said he didn't want to get into questions of that sort. I told him I just wanted his opinion, and he backed and filled and said nothing. In our second meeting, he talked a lot. He was intelligent and he showed a sense of humor. He knew that I had represented a 70% black district, and he said to me, 'Surely, you are going to support me based on your experience in your district.' That set me off. Well, I don't know whether he actually said that to me, but he clearly implied that by everything he said. I said to him, 'Judge, let me tell you. If I vote for you, it is because you know in your heart of hearts that the only reason you have been nominated is because you are black.' I could see his teeth clench and his eyes opened wide. 'You've been nominated for the most cynical of reasons. In nominating you, George Bush is fulfilling in his mind a black quota seat on the Supreme Court. He's using a quota, but the only operative word in his mind is "black." I know you know that; and when I vote for you to put on that robe, it is because you don't owe this president anything. You can call 'em the way you see 'em. You wouldn't have come up like a bleep on the screen of possible nominations if you weren't black. You have never tried a case, you have never sent a man to prison. You are going to have a chance to grow into the job. You are going to have the greatest chance for your race and for your country. Remember when you fulfill your promise that people in the shadow of life look to you for impartiality.' I reminded him again that he didn't owe the president one single thing. It would have been nice if he had said that he understood what I was saying; but he said nothing and turned and walked out."

I had asked him the question of who he had talked to after the vote and I wanted to see what kind of explanation had gone on afterwards.

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"For four months, we had been working on a New York fund-raiser. We had 50 co-sponsors lined up and the fund-raiser was to be hosted by Lulette Samuels. I didn't know her, but her husband apparently had been some kind of political figure in New York. The fund-raiser was scheduled for the Monday after the Tuesday on which we had voted for Thomas. All kinds of people began to call Bob Spector who had organized the meeting, cancelling their co-sponsorship and calling my vote disgraceful. They said they couldn't support anyone like that. Bob Spector, who is my national fund-raiser, found out that a couple of people who worked for Dinkins, liberal activists, had called all 50 co-sponsors of the event to decommission me. There had been articles in the New York Post about this Georgia liberal populist who had disgraced himself. Spector panicked. I got hold of Lulette and we talked for one-and-a-half hours. I told her why I had done this, I told her about my record in Congress as a sponsor of WIC, the ERA, my pro-choice position, my defeat of the Moral Majority in 1982 and 1984. I talked her into it. She said, 'it will be very unpleasant.' I told her, I'm used to it and she says, 'ok.' So I get there at about 6:00 p.m. I get off the elevator which opens directly into these kinds of apartments--as big as a hotel lobby and filled with original art. As soon as I stepped off the elevator, six people were waiting for me like the Spanish inquisition. They called me the most dastardly person, they were cursing and carrying on. I took them out onto a balcony, they were so agitated. There was a big crowd there, even though one-half of the sponsors had already jumped ship. When it came time for me to say something, everybody sat down. The ladies were dripping with their jewels and the young activists were sitting down front snarling. Lulette gets up and introduces me. She says, 'I had agreed to host this event thinking that here was a man of principle. I want to tell you (and here she pirouetted toward me) Senator your vote was bullshit.' She screamed it at me. 'Why we're here is beyond me.' Henry Rosenberg, who was one of my supporters, jumped up between us and said, 'Let the Senator speak for himself.' Lulette shouted, 'Don't you try to shut me up in my own home, you shit ass!' I'm standing there, looking as angelic as I can. She launches into a diatribe with me standing there, saying she wants all the people who voted for Thomas run out of office. Then she storms out of the room and I didn't see her again until the very end of the meeting. You could hear a pin drop. One-third of the people were embarrassed, one-third of them were stunned and one-third were shouting, 'right on, damn straight.' There was palpable tension in the air. I got up and told them about my record. I told them that if they wanted to change the court they had to change the country, that their argument was not with me, but it was with George Bush. I told them that if they wanted to do something right, they had to get Newt Gingrich, they had to get David Duke and others of that sort. I told them if they thought they could achieve their aims by defeating the senator from Georgia, then they deserved everything they got. I said 'you deserve what you get, you New Yorkers.' The first woman stood up and said, 'I came here and I was very upset; but I'm going to write a check for a \$1,000.' The next woman stood up and said she was going to write a check for a \$1,000 too. We collected checks for \$50,000."

"At the ball park during the World Series I had one or two people criticize my vote, but most of them came up to say thank you. I'll let the activists cool down and then I'll get them together. I will spend time with them,

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give them my reasons, talk it out, and tell them, 'I need your help, we're on the right side.' I will work to bring them back into the fold."

I asked him the "string of votes" question as to whether or not the Thomas vote on top of the war vote might cause him difficulty and I sketched out that idea a little bit.

"Anita Hill activated a few activists, but I think the general affect will dissipate pretty fast. I think that happened with my vote on the Gulf resolution, although the Republicans may want to bring it up. I have a good deal of confidence that back-to-back votes like this will not hurt me, not even two or three votes in a row. What I worry about is the anti-incumbency feeling. I will have to figure out how to handle that because I will be painted as corrupt and one of the long-term incumbents. That feeling is the problem for me, not my votes. People like me because they like my dimensions--not because of any vote. They may not like the way I vote all the time, but they trust my judgment, I think. I think that I have a bank of confidence that allows me to vote as I think best."

"A couple of weeks ago a few of us were sitting around in the Senate wondering what things would be like three weeks from that time. I said to them, what if Harris Wofford wins in Pennsylvania and David Duke wins in Louisiana. Then you will have Duke on television saying 'I'm a Republican, I'm a Republican, I'm a Republican. The White House will be in a panick.'" He seemed to take enormous delight in thinking about that scenario--and the likelihood, now, that it might occur.

He called Wofford "an addled professor." He told me that he would tell me a couple of stories about Wofford because he was a professor and I was a professor. Said that he got in a cab with Wofford one day, they were in a group somewhere, and that Wofford told the cab to stop and jumped out all of a sudden because he left his glasses at the hotel and Fowler says he got out of the cab and ran after him because his glasses were on top of head all the time. Then he told me they went to a restaurant and he, Fowler, hung his coat on a coat rack and when they got through eating, Wofford got up and started to put Fowler's coat on over Wofford's own coat. He laughed. And the thought that this addled professor might defeat Dick Thornburgh filled him with total delight.

In connection with the Wofford race, we talked about the importance of health care as an issue and I reminded him of the conversation we had had about the issue when I was in Georgia in August. He said that he had a plan that he wanted to present, but that he did not want to over-promise and he wanted to be very careful about it. He said, "I haven't decided whether to present this plan early in the campaign or whether to save it for later. I don't want to over-promise and to raise peoples' expectations about what can be done about health care."

After he had called Weltner and we were in his car on the way out to Weltner's house, we talked about the fund-raiser a little bit. He said that they had raised \$800,000 for the event this evening and that he had never raised more than \$100,000 at a crack. He said he thought this might be the most money ever raised in Georgia at one particular event. "I can

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hardly believe it. We have raised \$800,000 for this event. I have never raised more than \$100,000 at one time in my life. I think it's the most that has ever been raised at one crack in the state of Georgia. It means several things. It sends a message to the Republicans that we are ready for a campaign. It tells my supporters that we have momentum. For me it means that I am finally free to campaign the way I want to without holding my hand out for money every where I go. We will continue to raise money at fund-raisers for \$25 a person or \$50 a person, but the main event is over. I've looked at the accounts and many of the large amounts are made up of \$100 or \$200 from members of a group from all over the state. Every sizeable city in Georgia has contributed to this total. That widespread support must carry some message about my strength at this point."

When we were at Weltner's house, he talked about the money with him and he mentioned the Oglethorpe Company as one that had given him \$30,000, all of it in \$100 and \$200 checks from all around the state. He said to Weltner, "I've looked at the list and 80% of it is new money." Weltner said that, "his target was \$500,000, he predicted \$300,000 and he raised \$800,000." Weltner shook his head in near disbelief.

In the car I had asked Fowler whether or not he hadn't gone over \$2 million with the large amount of money coming in. He said that yes he might have, but that they wouldn't announce it as having gone over \$2 million because they wanted to save a little for the end of the year announcement or the first announcement next year, I can't recall, to give them some sense of momentum so they will use their press release this time to announce the \$800,000. Then they will use the next press release on money raising to indicate that they had gone over \$2 million. That will give them two press releases, the net of which will be to convey enormous momentum in the money raising business and, therefore, to impress both the Republicans and the Fowler supporters.

On the ride, I asked Wyche whether people who gave money first would get any different treatment than people who gave money later in the campaign. He laughed and said, "as Huey Long said, 'those that give first, get favors; those that give last get good government.' The only problem with this is that there are no favors to give when you're in a legislative body."

I asked him if he knew who gave early and who gave late and he said that yes he did and obviously the people who gave early were recognized as strong supporters and the fact that he knew that would indicate some recognition. Whether that recognition translate into anything by way of service or action I could not say.

I ought to note that during the World Series, Wyche went to Minnesota for both weekend games of the World Series. This probably clinches the fact that he is Atlanta's number one baseball fan, which is what they frequently call him in public conversation. But I wonder about the fact that he sits with Ted Turner in his box so often does not convey to some people the sense that he may have gone a little bit high hat or elite on them. Just a thought. What is interesting, of course, about the reaction at the ball park is that baseball remains primarily a blue collar sport and the people

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at the ball park who urged him to support Thomas would tend to be a pretty good middle class cross-section and would not be likely to contain many of the feminist activists that were so upset with his vote. So it would have something to do with Fowler's interpretation of the representativeness of the people coming up to him at the ball park. That he should pay attention, however, to those people at the ball park also says something about his responsiveness to a broad constituency. And I think his secret of success has something to do with the sheer breadth of the Georgia electorate to which he can fashion some kind of appeal. The most common thing I heard about Fowler as a description was, "people don't like the way he votes, but they like him and they respect his judgment" or, "people say he doesn't vote the way I want him to, but he's the best man for the job." I guess I need to ask him more about baseball, the ball park, and his attraction to the sport.