

**“Sunday Morning With”**  
**Sid Salter Interview**  
Ronnie Musgrove  
December 9, 2003

**(1) What excites you most about Mississippi?**

Every time I visit a classroom in our public school and see the faces of the children light up, I realize again that there is no reason to believe we cannot continue to set unprecedented goals and reach for unparalleled progress for all of our people. Our people are without exception our most valuable resource. Traveling across this great state, I am constantly reminded of our people’s achievements and potential.

**(2) What confounds you most about Mississippi?**

There remain lingering perceptions of Mississippi around the region and across the country that we are somehow stuck in a time warp, adhering to the social structures predating and leading up to the 1960s. Over the past four years we have worked very hard to dispel these notions both at home and beyond Mississippi’s borders. We are one state, and we share a common future. The challenges we face, we must face together. And, we must continue to present this new face, this genuinely inclusive face, of Mississippi to the rest of the nation.

**(3) What are your memories of the early years of your political career?**

When I first ran for the state senate, I decided to start my campaign where I had spent many hours as a child—on the front porch of the local store in Tocowa. Like most country stores, this front porch served as a gathering place for the older gentlemen of the community who would commiserate and solve most of the world’s problems on a daily basis. As I got out of my car and started down the line shaking hands and talking with these folks, the older man on the other end who was nearly blind by then called out to me to come down there. “Ronnie,” he said. “Is that you?” When I replied it was, he told me he had a piece of advice for me if I was serious about running for the state senate. You can imagine that I welcomed any and all advice at that point. Mr. Aaron looked up at me as best he could and said, “Ronnie, I want you to remember something. It doesn’t matter how rich you become or how famous you are, the number of people at your funeral will still depend a whole hell of a lot on the weather.” (His words, not mine.) This story serves as a reminder that the most important thing about my job is not me, but the people that I’m privileged to serve.

**(4) Money? What does it mean to you?**

Growing up in a household with limited resources, I came to appreciate the value of a dollar and the ability to take care of your family. My mother taught us early to be good stewards, to think before we spent and to always be mindful of the needs of others around us who were worse off than we were.

**(5) Your most vivid memories of childhood? Lessons from your parents and grandparents?**

It seems like we got a lot more snow in North Mississippi when I was a child than we do now. I remember the snows. I guess you would think my first thoughts would be about our poor living conditions, but truthfully we didn't know we were poor. We had such a great time growing up.

And, I remember having a tremendous amount of respect for my father. I remember that my father liked politics. Even though he wasn't what you would call educated in politics, he wanted to be aware and knowledgeable of what was going on. He always voted, and I remember talking about politics around the table. That's what we would do because we didn't have a television.

You know my father never had a television, not one. We didn't have one in our house until some time after he died in January of 1964. There had been a really big snow before just before he died. I was seven at the time, and the snow was fun. But I came to realize that working outside on the roads in the snow is really what killed my father.

I think that's one reason my father, before he died, and my mother both encouraged us to study hard, work hard and get better jobs than they had.

**(6) You grew up in a rural home of modest means, yet you came to occupy the Governor's Mansion. What was the roadmap to that growth and success in your life?**

I have not always been the governor. In fact, I have not always been an elected official. There was even a time when I wasn't a lawyer. Looking back down the road, I can still see the halls of Mississippi's public schools. I can hear the encouraging words of teachers, neighbors and friends along the way who never gave up and who pushed me to go for the American Dream. As I told several reporters on Election night this year, I am living the American Dream right here in Mississippi. And I will never quit believing that every child in Mississippi deserves the best public education and deserves to have the choice to succeed by what ever terms they choose to define that.

**(7) You have two wonderful children. What does your relationship with your children mean to you?**

There are no words that adequately describe what my children mean to me. They are both in high school now, young adults really. Our days together are occasionally challenging as in any home but priceless. Maybe I treasure them more because I lost my father so early, I don't know.

My son, Jordan, is 18 now, and he decided this summer that he wanted to work on my campaign staff. I told him he would have to interview with the campaign manager just

like everybody else. He did, and she hired him. A few days later, I let her know that I appreciated her giving Jordan a chance. She quickly told me that he was doing a great job. And more importantly, she told me that they were treating him, well, as well as everyone else. That might be a little cleaner than how she said it, actually.

I still find that it's the simple things I enjoy most with my children, like studying with Carmen Rae for her driver's license exam. Carmen has always been a good student and continues to make exceptionally good grades. But I wish you could have seen her face when the examiner started checking questions wrong on her driving test! He checked the first, the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth questions, and I thought Carmen Rae was just going to explode. There was surely no way she could pass the test at that point. Of course, he was just running on with her and got her good. She had actually made a perfect score.

Sure, these are small memories, but it seems to me they all add up to who our children become. I see Jordan and Carmen Rae growing into the kind of adults that we as parents can be proud of and that we as Mississippians want to see make Mississippi their home, too. I'm very proud of my children.

**(8) What is the greatest problem confronting Mississippi today?**

We are still overcoming the lack of investment in education from the 1950s and 1960s. Over the past 8 years or so, Mississippi has taken a very different approach. We've fought for improvements to our schools at every turn, and we're winning that fight. The challenge to keep up with expanding knowledge and remain competitive in a borderless economy has to be met with persistent effort and unwavering commitment to our public schools.

**(9) The shining moment of your career in politics has been what? The worst mistake of your career has been what? Hardest lesson learned?**

You may remember that I decided to run for Lieutenant Governor because I believed the leadership at that time had let us down and had failed to take public education seriously. Sure, we had passed a framework for adequately and fairly funding Mississippi's public schools, but the leadership was not committed to funding it. What good did that do? While I was Lieutenant Governor, we passed the funding portion of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program. Since that time, we have made dramatic improvements to Mississippi's public schools. That would have to be a watershed moment by any account.

My worst mistake? That's easy. As a freshman senator, I was foolish enough to accept an appointment to a three-person sub-committee to study deer hunting with dogs.

There are lots of hard lessons learned in politics as in any part of life. Learning that those of us in public office don't always agree on how to balance politics and policy in the best interest of the people was tough, is tough and always will be tough. I just think that if we

can hold the politics to about 15% and keep the policy at about 85%, then even if we disagree, we can work through an issue to a solution that serves our people well. Unfortunately, there are lots of folks who would rather play politics instead of focusing on what matters. When that's the case, you can't get much done.

**(10) Why do you think your re-election bid was unsuccessful? In hindsight, would you have campaigned differently?**

That's simple. Haley Barbour won.

At the end of the day, I'm very pleased with the over 409,000 votes I received. If I had that many in 1999, we would have called it a landslide victory!

**(11) How do you rate your term as governor? Highs, lows, successes, failures?**

Rating this administration will be for others to do. It's hard for me to narrow the list of memorable achievements for our people. We tackled tough issues and we worked across geographical, racial and party lines for results. Think for a minute about our public schools: the MS Adequate Education Act to build the infrastructure, a historic teacher pay package to finally reward our teachers as professionals, putting technology at the fingertips of children in every classroom across the state.

And, then I think about the things that almost go without notice but mean so much for the quality of life in our state like expanding civil defense systems to cover almost every county in the state and increasing the number of Army National Guardsmen to protect our nation and respond to crises in our communities.

And, how can I not mention the economic growth and expansion of opportunities for all Mississippians with the advent of Advantage Mississippi, our state's first comprehensive economic development plan in over a decade. We looked at systemic changes in how we grow our communities as well as our businesses, and it's paying off for all of us.

**(12) As the outgoing governor, what's the most pressing problem facing state government and the new administration? What does the Legislature need to do to help solve the problems? What's your sense of Barbour and his ability to lead?**

In a speech I gave a long time ago, I talked about the need for determination, diligence and discipline. These three things must be present for our state to continue its improvements in all areas. These three things must first be applied to our commitment to public education. We must be determined to continue investing in the education of our people. We must be diligent in finding ways to promote excellence in our public schools, and we must be disciplined enough to keep education at the forefront of all that we do.

Listening to the last two parts of your question, Sid, let me simply say that we need to give the new administration time to get organized and to present a plan of action for our state.

**(13) Talk about poverty in Mississippi and the role of public education at all levels in addressing that malady? How have you made that problem better as governor?**

Let me answer that in the context of my own life. Sid, there was one event that truly shaped the course of my life in ways that I could not possibly have comprehended at the time. That one event was learning to read, something that would not have happened without the commitment of teachers in Mississippi public schools. Learning to read gave me choices and opened doors that would have been closed because of poverty otherwise. Once we learn to read we are given the ability to choose a path that will lead to success by whatever terms we define that. Without solid public education, we cannot possibly move toward the eradication of poverty.

For the four years I've occupied the governor's office, I've stuck to the same simple philosophy I had as lieutenant governor or as a state senator: Education must come first. And, we've successfully put education at the top of the list of priorities by getting serious about funding public school infrastructure, professional salaries for educators, technology and all the tools necessary to give our children the knowledge and skills they need to choose a path of success for themselves.

**(14) Who are your heroes? Whom do you seek to emulate?**

Waverly Wray is not exactly a household name but he came from the same community I did. Unfortunately he died about 12 years before I was born, so I never knew him. But I knew about him. As a young man, Waverly Wray served in the U.S. Army, and during World War II was stationed overseas. Very quietly and without seeking any sort of recognition, Waverly would send half of his paycheck home to his sister to put in the church building fund.

That church was built in great part because of his selfless contributions, and it was that very church I attended as a child. Because my mother couldn't drive, Waverly Wray's sister carried me to church every Sunday where I would see week after week the corner stone of the church inscribed with his name...a World War II hero I never knew...a Mississippian whose heroic actions were chronicled in Stephen Ambrose's book, The Victors.

We fail to realize sometimes the amount of influence that we have on people around us who we know and even more importantly the influence that we can have on those we don't know simply by what we do. I've tried never to forget.

Even though I was only seven years old when he died, I have tried to emulate my father who was a hardworking straightforward man and had a positive approach to life. I can remember sitting around the table hearing him say he wanted a lawyer in the family.

**(15)Do you have regrets from your term as governor, personal or professional?**

You know, Sid, I'm not sure that 'regrets' would be the right word. When we look back at a particular job or a time in our lives, I think we all have disappointments, something that we didn't get to do or finish or something that just didn't go our way. But those are temporary disappointments. Our challenge is to look forward to each day and remember that every day is a great day. There's always work to be done, and we're here to get it done.

**(16)What's next for you? Do you plan to return to Batesville and practice law, or do you have other plans?**

We'll see. I feel good about the offers that have been extended to me. I'll weigh each of them carefully, and I'm excited about the future. Whatever I do, it will allow me to continue to spend quality time with Jordan and Carmen Rae.

**(17)What part does faith play in your life?**

We could talk about this for quite a while, Sid. How could a poor boy from Tocowa lead the state of Mississippi without faith and without benefiting from God's grace? With faith the size of a mustard seed, we can do so much. Time and time again, the naysayers stood in the way of taking Mississippi to the next level. Time and again, they said we couldn't do anything about public education in this state, that we couldn't possibly attract a major automobile manufacturer. But, we have to remember that through faith, all things are possible: faith in God first and a little faith in ourselves, too. I believe that we are under the constant care of our heavenly Father who recognizes our abilities and our inabilities and who grants us the strength, the patience and the comfort we need to continue working daily in His service by working to lift all of our people. That's something I have held onto ever since I found salvation at the age of 13, the most important day of my life.

**(18)Talk about the Nissan project. What is your vision of this enterprise in 20 years?**

When I look down the road twenty years, I see a Mississippi that is on solid economic footing and that has attracted a number of high-profile industries across the state while growing healthy entrepreneurial ventures at home. At that point in time, I hope we're looking back to the Nissan plant and all its related businesses as the tipping point that set us on the right track to reach a new level of competition and to bring new levels of prosperity to our people.

We will look back and realize just how many barriers fell for Mississippi on the day we announced Nissan's selection. We'll realize what a tremendous partnership was born all because our workforce was ready. Our people had the knowledge and the skills. We'll

recognize the importance of our public schools in Nissan's decision, and we'll be able to point to others who came and others who stayed for that very same reason.

**(19) Is it possible for a governor to lead the Legislature, or does the governor necessarily occupy an adversarial role?**

We have to remember that we're talking about two very different branches of government, the legislative and the executive, and by law, they have two different purposes. In fact, if you stop to think about it, they represent the people in very different ways: the executive looking out for the interests of the state as a whole and the legislative looking out for particular slices of the state. I don't think that either branch necessarily leads the other, nor do I think that they are required to always be adversaries. They work together, even when they disagree, to serve the best interests of our people by balancing each other when the system is working like it should.

**(20) Did the Democratic Party help you to the extent necessary for you to win re-election? Can a Democratic gubernatorial candidate be successful without increased party help?**

Sid, you're asking me to be a Monday morning quarterback. I wasn't re-elected because Haley Barbour got more votes than I did.

**(21) Are you a Democrat in your heart, or are you as you suggested in your campaign, more "conservative and independent?"**

I am a Democrat. The Democratic Party has long stood for hard-working men and women, has supported investment in public education, and has allowed for independent thinking and a diversity of opinions. There is room within the Democratic Party to discuss difficult issues and to disagree. We don't have to walk lockstep with the party leaders in Washington. We don't have to walk lockstep with each other.

I have the freedom as a Democrat to be an independent thinker, to say what I believe to be the truth, and to do what I believe is fair and in the best interest of all our people. That allows me to be more conservative on certain issues, issues where I believe I am in step with the people I serve. I value independent thinking and the ability to discuss important issues, issues that affect us all every day, from different perspectives. My father, I think, would be disappointed if I didn't.

At the end of the day, isn't that what our form of government is all about anyway?

**(22) On the tenth anniversary of gaming in Mississippi, what has been the impact? Good? Bad?**

As you well know, I didn't support the legislation allowing gaming in our state. However, with close controls and good management, we have been able to maximize the benefits and minimize the detriments to our state.

**(23)How does Mississippi go about improving the quality of jobs for our citizens?  
As the garment factories of the 1962s give way to Nissan and Howard Industries,  
how do we best provide opportunities for blue-collar Mississippians to better  
themselves?**

For years I have said that the bottom line of economic development is about improving the quality of life for all Mississippians. That begins and ends with our commitment to education. We are clearly in an era of life-long learning that starts very young and perhaps never ends. We must never waiver in our commitment to providing high-quality public education so that our people have the knowledge and the skills they need to be world-class employees and entrepreneurs.

**(24)Did the media treat you fairly during your term in office?**

Yes, especially Marshall Ramsey with his accurate drawing of my nose.

**(25)Marriage and family have been casualties in many gubernatorial  
administrations in the last three decades in Mississippi. What advice do you  
offer Mr. Barbour regarding life in the fishbowl of the Mansion?**

Well, Sid, you have to remember that Mr. Barbour comes to the fishbowl of the mansion from the fishbowl inside the Beltway. Do you really think he needs advice from me on that point?

**(26)Best part about being governor? Worst part about being governor?**

Marshall Ramsey cartoons. Marshall Ramsey cartoons.

**(27)Any future political plans?**

Now, Sid, do you really expect me to answer that?