

## 2001 GEORGIA HUMANITIES LECTURE

### **Reflections on a Public Life**

By Joe Frank Harris, Governor of Georgia 1983-1991

Georgia Humanities Council, Atlanta

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### **Introduction**

What a wonderful honor to be the recipient of your invitation to provide the Annual Humanities Lecture for the Sixteenth Governor's Awards in the Humanities. I have a lot of pride knowing these important awards were initiated while I was Governor. Not only have you continued this program. . . you have improved it each year. This is a special privilege for me to be here on the year your theme is *Celebrating 250 Years of Representative Government in Georgia*. This is a very appropriate theme, and in looking back. . . there is indisputable proof that our system does work. . . PEOPLE CAN GOVERN THEMSELVES!

It is also appropriate that the Humanities Council is involved in planning the events to commemorate this historic anniversary during this year (2001). Recently, during the first week (January 8, 2001) of the General Assembly, I had the privilege of joining Governor Roy Barnes, Former Governors George Busbee, and Lester Maddox in a special ceremony in the House Chamber to acknowledge this "seed" of Representative Government that was planted in Savannah on January 15th, 1751. It is amazing to observe how this seed has grown over the years and how the leadership of this state has continued to provide nourishment for it in a responsible way. The Georgia Humanities Council has become the home of the *Georgia Center for Character Education*. It is through this important program and your many other projects that you continue to build community, character, and citizenship around the state. I am grateful for your leadership in this area.

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### **Reflections on a Public Life**

This truly is an honor for me to share my *Persona/ Reflections on a Public Life* and to discuss my thoughts about the values necessary for an informed and engaged citizenry. It was through this invitation that I had the opportunity to get to know your President, Dr. Jamil Zainaldin. I am impressed with his vision and the leadership he is providing the Georgia Humanities Council. I have fond memories of my working relationship with Dr. Ron Benson while I was Governor, and the special time to work with Dot McClure, who was Chair during the time of the first Governor's Awards in 1986. I am happy to see that she is still providing leadership as a member of the Board.

Things are not what they used to be. We all have favorite people that we like to quote when their wisdom fits the occasion. Will Rogers is one of those people I have quoted many times over the years. It is reported that he once said, "Things aren't what they used to be. . . and never were." Think about it! He was correct. Things really are NOT what they used to be. It is also reported that Will Rogers was famous for saying, "All I know is what I read in the papers." Many times we are limited because that IS all we know. The rest of the story is not usually told. Only the facts that win fit into a "pre-assigned" limited space newspaper column or the few seconds of a sound bite for the evening news. . . is all we know!

For a few minutes today, I would like to share with you my thoughts during some of the important events of my public life, possibly something you haven't. . . read in the papers. My remarks win

probably be different from the usual lecture for this event, because I will be talking from my own personal experiences and my HEART!

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#### **Why did I do it?**

Why did I do it? Why did I run? Was there a defining moment? When did I know I should be a candidate for public office? Anyone spending twenty-six years in an elective office would have to have a purpose, incentive or reason. I was privileged to serve for eighteen years in the House of Representatives and eight years as Governor. This required me to have my name on the ballot twenty-three times. Five of those ballots were statewide during my two terms as Governor. Amazingly, I never lost an election!

There never was a burning obsession in my heart to one day be the Governor of Georgia. I didn't prepare or plan my life to even be a public servant. My entry into public life was a "Spiritual Commitment". How did this happen? On June 25th of this year, it will be forty years ago that Elizabeth Carlock and I were married. She was my pastor's daughter! We are Methodist, and as you know, the Methodist Church moves its pastors from time to time. I had an ideal situation. . . . because soon after Elizabeth and I married, my in-laws were moved out of town. Marrying into a preacher's family—or a "P.K." (preacher's kid)—brings on a lot of kidding.

I will always remember an introduction once by a friend of mine who had married the daughter of a physician. He said, "You know, I married the daughter of a doctor. . . .and I can be *sick for nothing*. Joe Frank married the daughter of a preacher. . . .He can be *good for nothing*." Elizabeth and I came from religious families and grew up in the church. After we were married, we felt that our home and family should be built on a spiritual basis. To do this, we committed to pray together each day and to establish a "family altar" in our home. This family altar was not something we had to build but a "time" to pray together at any place that might be convenient each day.

During this prayer time together, we committed our home, our family, our business and our future to the Lord! We prayed for opportunities to be used. . . .for places for us to serve. Our prayer was. . . ."show us ways that we could make a difference". This is a HUGE request! This is a BIG request! I'll have to admit I was fearful to make this kind of request and to commit to go wherever the Lord wanted me to serve. Looking back. . . . never in our wildest imagination could we have dreamed of the opportunities the Lord provided! Never could we have dreamed. . . .of the miracles we would witness.

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#### **Are you ready to travel?**

My personal fear that my place of service might be in the "pulpit" as a preacher or as a missionary in some "foreign mission field", on the other side of the world, never materialized. *I did /earn that if you are not ready to travel . . . . you better not ask for the ride!* Our "mission field" was not on the other side of the world. . . .it was at the State Capitol, only 42 miles from our home in Cartersville. Sometimes we fail to look down our own street or in our own neighborhoods for places to "make a difference" in someone's life, because we are looking too far beyond.

It is interesting to realize now that my big fear of a foreign mission field was the territory that brought tremendous success for our efforts to create "jobs for Georgians" while I was Governor.

Elizabeth and I traveled overseas many times "chasing leads" and "taking orders" for new jobs. We visited in over thirty-four different countries and were in several of these countries multiple times. In fact, we have been to Japan eleven times. Our efforts brought almost one thousand new foreign companies for a total of almost fifteen hundred while I was Governor. Including the jobs that came with this foreign investment, we were blessed with over 850,000 new jobs during our eight years.

## 5 Vision and Values

We are experiencing a "crisis of confidence" right now across our nation, because we had a President that I think had a *vision* but allowed his *values* to become a question. President Clinton could have had a wonderful legacy but instead left a lot of disappointment. A "VISION" is scriptural! Proverbs 29: 18, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." I tried to capsule my vision as Governor in my inaugural speeches. I will always remember including in my first inaugural address. . . I will be striving to instill one principle in every aspect of state government and that ingredient is. . . *EXCELLENCE*. . . Excellence in education. . . Excellence in our economy. . . Excellence in our human services delivery system. . . Excellence in transportation. . . and Excellence in our criminal justice system."

It is interesting to note that many of these same priorities were included in most of the inaugural speeches of the former Governors that I reviewed prior to taking my oath of office in 1983. There were many common threads woven in almost all of them. VALUES! Where did your values come from? Mine came from my home. . . from my Mother and Dad. They always impressed on me to. . . DO WHAT IS RIGHT . . . BE HONEST. . . BE FAIR. . . KEEP YOUR WORD! Most people want to do what is right. Most people still have a conscience. Most people still embrace ethical behavior and morality. We are all governed by some value system. I will always remember a letter that I received about tax time during my first year as Governor. The letter stated, "Dear Governor: Several years ago, I didn't pay all of the tax that was due. I can't sleep. My conscience is bothering me. Enclosed, please find a twenty-dollar bill" . At the bottom of the letter a P. S. was included, "If after sending this money to you. I still can't sleep. . . I will send you the rest".

## 6 Looking bad with pride

When I reflect on the accomplishments of the Harris administration, I feel a lot of pride in what we were able to accomplish in education, which was my TOP priority. We, as a state, have experienced a reform effort almost every ten years since the early sixties. The first came during the Sanders Administration. It was called the Minimum Foundation Program for Education (MFPE). During the Carter years, we had the Adequate Plan for Education in Georgia (APEG). Because of a campaign statement in which I stated that. . . we needed a *Quality Basic Education* for every child in Georgia. . . QBE was coined. Now fifteen years later, Governor Barnes is being successful with further improvements with his (A+ Education Reform Act of 2000).

QBE provided a tremendous momentum when it was signed into law. There were new accountabilities, a fair distribution of funds and an increase of 690/0 in teacher salaries. Along with QBE came the program for funding 142 new libraries in communities all across Georgia. The new libraries received very little attention and the public really did not understand, in my opinion, the magnitude of this program and the citizens that are still being served. I remain very proud of this accomplishment.

A few of our other important accomplishments were the 850,000 new jobs, building the Dome Stadium, bringing the Democratic Convention to Georgia, receiving the bid for the Olympics and the first effort to effectively protect the environment with our *Growth Strategies Commission* and the legislation which was implemented.

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### **Biggest disappointment**

The huge amount of money that had to be spent because of our "jail overcrowding" will always be a disappointment for me. When I was elected Governor, we had a total of 13,700 prison spaces in our state system including about 5,800 correction employees. When I completed my second term, we left a total of 37,334 spaces and over 12,231 employees. The budget for our prisons had tripled and over a half-billion dollars had been spent for new construction. I have always been disappointed that any of these new dollars could not be used for improvements in education.

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### **Our future**

We are truly blessed in Georgia with all of our valuable resources. . . .our wonderful location (in the South)....and our abundance of natural resources. In my opinion, our most valuable resource will always be our people. I feel we have a state that is made up of people that do embrace a "VISION" for our future. My concern and prayers are that our leaders will always remember the scripture that I referred to earlier from Proverbs. . . ."Where there is no vision the people perish".

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### **Thank you for making this day necessary**

In his recent address to Congress, President George W. Bush quoted the great sage, Yogi Berra. . . . "When you come to the fork in the road. . . . TAKE IT". I would also like to remind you of another of Yogi Berra's humorous contradictions. After receiving an honorary degree from Montclair State University, he said, "Thank you for making this day necessary."

Thank you for making this day "necessary" for me! May God bless you!