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BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

**The Honorable Thomas W. Blackwell, IV (D)**

190<sup>th</sup> District

Philadelphia County

2005-2008

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**Jesse Teitelbaum (JT):** Good afternoon.

**The Honorable Thomas Blackwell (TB):** Good afternoon.

**JT:** I am here with Thomas Blackwell, the Fourth, who represented the 190<sup>th</sup> District in the city of Philadelphia from 2005 to 2008. Thank you for being here with me today.

**TB:** Thanks for having me.

**JT:** What I would like to do is start out by asking you about your background. Tell me about your family life and your education.

**TB:** Well, believe it or not, I went to the public schools of Philadelphia up until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Then, I went to a boarding school in Lexington, Mississippi. It was a religious school affiliated with the Church of God and Christ, even though I'm Baptist but, that's where I went to high school down there. Shortly after graduating, I came home and I went to work on the Philadelphia waterfront, where my father was a business agent at the time, one of the locals of the International Longshoremen's Association. So, I got involved with the Union politics. Now, I've always been involved in politics. Actually, my father was a former House Member back from the [19]70s. He left here and went to the Philadelphia City Council, served there for 18 years, then he went to Congress<sup>1</sup>. So, my step-mother<sup>2</sup> now has his seat in the Philadelphia City Council. So, I come from a political background, but I actually got the political bug in 1968 when Hubert Humphrey<sup>3</sup> was running for president. Actually, I thought it would be an opportunity for me to skip school in the afternoon because my father was a committeeman, long before he became a

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<sup>1</sup> Lucien Edward Blackwell (1931-2003), State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1973-1976; United States Congressman, 1991-1994

<sup>2</sup> Jannie L. Blackwell, Philadelphia City Councilwoman, 1991-present.

<sup>3</sup> Hubert H. Humphrey, United States Senator, 1949-1964, 1971-1978; Vice-President of the United States, 1965-1969.

publically elected official. And, for whatever reason, I grasped the philosophy of Hubert Humphrey because my father made me research him rather than tell me about him, because I wanted to know why he was supporting Hubert Humphrey against Richard Nixon. So, that was in 1968. I was 10 years old. And from that point on – here I am. But, my personal background, I'm a former labor leader; I rose from a laborer all the way up to the office of president. I held every office there with the exception of financial secretary. I never wanted to hold a money position in the organization. Even though I filled in at times, but I never wanted that position – a lot of paperwork. But, I rose through the ranks to become President of ILA - International Longshoremen's Association - Local 1332, on the Philadelphia Waterfront, and I've travelled quite extensively around this country and some parts of the world negotiating contracts that affected the lives of many, many people. Ultimately, I was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, for a few more days anyway. So, I was smitten with the life of a politician from a young age. You know, I enjoy it, I love what I do. It's not a job to me. I think when you get the opportunity to do something that you like it's never a job to you. So, I enjoyed being here. But, that's basically where I come from.

**JT:** You mentioned Hubert Humphrey. Would you say that that was an influence with regards to becoming a Democrat then?

**TB:** I don't know if that was an influence on me becoming a Democrat, because my immediate family, from my father – believe it or not, my grandfather was a Republican and that was during the Roosevelt years, and I'm talking about Franklin Roosevelt, not Theodore<sup>4</sup>. That's when most black people – African Americans – became Democrats, after the Great Depression. But, I'm sure that Hubert Humphrey's philosophy did influence me somewhat, but I think my father is the one that had the predominant influence over me – watching him grow and watching him work. When he was President of

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, President of the United States, 1933-1945; Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United State, 1901-1909.

my Union, I was Vice President. I worked with him for about 16 years, every day. So, I think he had the greater influence on me, but nationally, I think Hubert Humphrey – actually, I call him one of my heroes, because I think Hubert Humphrey was the type of person who cared about people. I followed his career ever since my father made me research him. I even remember when he got cancer and got the opportunity – this is after he was Vice President and he's back in the Senate – he got the opportunity to speak in the well of the Congress and he had the Congressional people and the Senators there and, you know, it was like when the President gives the State of the Union address, and Hubert Humphrey was there and he had lost a lot of weight because of his cancer, and he mentioned the fact, you know, how he'd always wanted to make a speech in the well of Congress, like the President does, and he got that opportunity, and I thought that was great because I thought he was a great guy.

**JT:** When you decided to finally run for political office, why did you choose the House?

**TB:** Well actually, believe it or not, the opportunity presented itself some years ago. As I grew, I always wanted to run for public office, but the opportunity never presented itself. Actually, before I did run for this office, I was given the opportunity to run for public office, but I was President of my Union at the time and I thought it would've been too much on my plate, and then because of what I was into, I couldn't do it at that time. The timing just wasn't right. But, a year after my father passed, the opportunity presented itself again and I thought that I would take the opportunity then, because people that I respected politically came to me and asked me to run in terms of keeping my father's legacy going. It was something I've always wanted to do, so I decided to jump on the opportunity.

**JT:** Good. Did you enjoy campaigning?

**TB:** Loved it.

**JT:** Did you?

**TB:** Loved it. I love campaigning. Campaigning gives you an opportunity to meet people. I love people, I love talking with people, and it gives you an opportunity to interact and actually see what you don't know, because I don't think anyone comes into office knowing everything about their districts but the more you make yourself accessible to your constituents, the more you learn. But, campaigning is a learning process in itself, in terms of interacting with people. So, I loved to campaign and I love the people that I've met who are now going to be life-long friends. When we decide to do what we are going to do in a couple of years, those same people who were with me then, have said that they want to continue to be with me and whatever decisions I make in the future. And I'm sure that there will be a place in whatever I do, for them, because our public life is not over; we do have plans for the future.

**JT:** Good. Describe for me the 190<sup>th</sup> District with regards to both geography and constituents.

**TB:** It's a very vast constituency, a very vast district. We have very poor people, we have working class people, and we do have a smidgen of upper-middle class people. Actually, two divisions which is in the East Falls in Philadelphia; actually a section of the city where the Governor lives, and the United States Senator Arlen Specter live in that area, in East Falls. I have two divisions there. But, for the most part, it's a working class neighborhood. The main part of my district is in West Philadelphia. I do have a small part of North Philadelphia. It can be challenging at times because of the way the district is broken up. You're careful not to lean toward one area of the district too much because that in itself becomes political. But, you know, I wasn't responsible for the district being drawn up that way, but I think for the most part, we were successful in serving our constituents. I promised, when I ran my platform, of opening an office on both sides of the district, because I didn't think it was fair to ask people who live in North Philadelphia to come to West Philadelphia, or vice versa. And so, we were successful and the leadership worked very well with us and were very good to us, in terms of giving us what we needed. Of

course, we always want more staff because there are some things that you work on that you need people, you need resources. I was fortunate enough to have people who would volunteer for me that knew political game and that helps tremendously. But, I guess my labor background, when people do things for me, I want to pay them. I have the philosophy; if you work for me for free, you'll double that work effort if I'm paying you. I think people should be paid for what they do, but some people just love the fact they're in the game; they're part of something that's good. So, they volunteer, but the fact that you're in two different parts of the city can be rough, because people are watching you to see what you do for the other part of the city, the other part of the district that you're not doing for their part of the district. So, that's challenging at times, but that's what's so much fun about it; because you never know what you're going to come up against. Its constant change, they are constant challenges and if you love this business – you cannot have a thin skin and be in this business, I will tell you that – but, it's very rewarding, very beneficial because it's gratifying to know that you can help people in a lot ways that you didn't think you could before you got here. So, I enjoy it and, like I said, my district is very vast. No one person can do it by themselves. We did a lot of networking, even with other elected officials who were very helpful. As I said, the leadership team that I came up under, and I'll throw out some names – Dwight Evans [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1981-present], Bill DeWeese [H. William; State Representative, Fayette, Greene and Washington Counties, 1979-present; Speaker, 1993-1994], Mike Veon [State Representative, Beaver County, 1985-2008]– they helped me tremendously in getting me started here. But, I had an advantage. I had been knowing Majority Leader DeWeese, I guess since the mid-[19]80s, when I was President of my Union. He appointed me to the Philadelphia Region Port Authority, never knowing that one day I'd be here serving with him. It pays to not allow a relationship to go bad. Keep in touch. So, it made my job easier when I got here, because I used to have business here. So, it made my job easier, because if you're not careful, this place can be very intimidating for a freshman coming in. Then I had relationships with other politicians, or other elected officials, so many people – and State Senators here. So, I had a tremendous advantage when I was first elected. While I respected the House, I wasn't in awe of it.

**JT:** Right.

**TB:** So, It wasn't as intimidating to me. I've seen new people come in and I could just look at them, and see the way they're even looking at that room, going to the General Assembly Floor – it's awesome. I tell you, I think it's a beautiful room. The architecture in there is unbelievable, second to none. I've been in quite a lot of government buildings, but I think we have the best, in terms of architecture. So, I would watch certain people when they come in and I see how they react and I say, "Oh boy. They don't know what they got into." But, you're in a fishbowl. Your life becomes public, which I think is in order, because if you're doing the people's work then you should not mind your life being public. You know, but that's what we choose to do, so, yeah, we work for the public; it's not the other way around. So, I had a lot of advantages, but I love this place. The more I'm here, the more I love it. Like I said, you never know what you're going to come up with. The people that you meet here are long, life-lasting friends forever on both sides of the aisle. Because, like I said, I love people. I could care less whether you're Democrat or Republican, because everyone has a purpose for being here and I found a long time ago that I don't have all the answers, so you have to listen to other people's opinions and we're all supposedly leaders and there's always room to listen to other opinions. Your way may be better than mine. That's what compromising is all about.

**JT:** Yes. Thank you. You served on a number of committees. Did you have a favorite one?

**TB:** Believe it or not - my background is labor and I served on Labor Committee, but my favorite committee, believe it or not, was State Government. I think because you have more issues that came before that committee that actually have a direct impact on more people. Labor has a direct impact on people, in terms of their workplace and their families, because, you cannot separate the two. I did that as a labor leader. Not only was I responsible for the men that actually elected me, but I was responsible for

their families, where I take that same philosophy here; we're responsible for families. But, the State Government Committee has so many things that come before that committee. Actually, I was told when I first got on it, "Man, you don't want to be on this, it's a boring committee." I never found that to be true. I love that committee and I think we had some good Chairmen there – Republican and Democrat. I'm always happy to see the Democrats as Majority Chair. I think that Babette Josephs [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1985-present] did a tremendous job as Chairlady of that committee. Actually, I served as Vice-Chair. I'll tell you, if the opportunity presents itself for me to be back here, that'll probably be one of the first committees that I want to be on because it's so many things about voting that come before that committee and the right to vote. We had a bill recently about when we could start the Primary, and now we see through this Presidential Election how early voting is very significant, because it gives people opportunity on their time to vote where we're not locked into one certain day or certain amount of hours in one day. I think early voting is good and I think it's going to be in the state of Pennsylvania very shortly, because I intend to work on that happening, even while I'm out of office because I think it's significant and it opens the opportunity for more people to get involved in the process and I think while they're involved in the process, they learn more about the process and they become more trusting of the process, because they realize they do have a stake in it. So, the State Government committee was very good for me. I also served on the Urban Affairs committee, of which my district is the inner-city, and that was important to me because there's a lot of development in my district now. I played a significant part in helping that happened because we have more affordable housing now where we had the long housing projects. Now, in most parts of my district, we have new development where people have their actual private homes and it just makes for a better community. It looks better, because I think the long, tall, housing projects was nothing but warehousing people. So, we got away from that. And it gives people the mindset of actually having a stake in the neighborhood because they have their privacy, it's clean, it looks like a suburban community within the urban community. Through the Philadelphia Housing Authority and Carl Greene, the executive director, and the city elected officials, of which my stepmother just happens to be the Vice Chairman of the Philadelphia Housing Authority – no,



I'm sorry, she sits on the board of the Philadelphia Housing Authority – and I think that they have done a tremendous job, but in conjunction with the state government and the city government working together, I think we have given a lot of people a better quality of life. And that's what I think we should be all about.

**JT:** You were also involved with the Pennsylvania Black Caucus.

**TB:** Yes.

**JT:** Was that extremely influential in your House career?

**TB:** Well, I think every aspect of my career in the House there's been some influence from each committee that I sat on. The Black Caucus is near and dear to me. My first term, I served as the Secretary of the Black Caucus. Now, I happen to be the Chaplin of the Black Caucus. I think we deal with issues that are not only important to African-Americans, but to working and poor people in general. Everyone has to have their niche, and we come from a perspective of one culture where another Representative maybe comes from another culture, and we can talk about our issues and enlighten people where we come from, what our needs are, as opposed to what their needs are and, hopefully, we find some middle ground that we can agree on. One issue that's very important to the Black Caucus was the issue of gun control. In the inner-city, there's a lot of gun crime committed for whatever reason. Guns are very easy to get, be it legal or illegal. My personal position is that I'm for gun control. But I understand people who come from a different part of the state who grew up with guns, who for whatever reason, they hunt, things like that. I'm not an advocate of taking that away from them. I don't want people to be able to have hand guns. I don't see what you hunt with an AK-47. Not on the streets of Philadelphia. We don't have deer; we don't have rabbits and things in the streets of Philadelphia. So, you know, I don't understand the reasoning for not having gun control in the city of Philadelphia. Especially in the days of economic times, when people – listen, we're going to have bad people no matter

what. You have to acknowledge that, and I do. But, when people are desperate for jobs and the economy is bad and they can't get a job, let's say they are convicted felons, well they've served their time and they get released; well, the same processes as you go through in going in these prisons, you actually go through a process of being monitored; they check you out thoroughly, and that's good because they want to know where to place you at when you're inside. Well, being in prison is supposed to be about rehabilitation. We have found, in our experience, because we visit prisons – mainly in Dallas, State Prison; Graterford State Prison, and not too long ago I was in Dauphin County Prison here, right near here – we find that, basically, what they're doing is warehousing people. They're not giving them opportunities to actually better themselves and then when they're released, well, they're released with no skills, no education, no monitoring – what do they expect these people to do? So, while I understand people who hunt, I understand the position of NRA – I don't agree with it – I understand it to a point, but no one has convinced me yet why you need an AK-47 on the streets of Pennsylvania. I will never understand that. It is not enough, in my opinion, to say, "No" in terms of gun control, without having an alternative. Just recently, because of the economic times this country is facing, the city of Philadelphia's Mayor<sup>5</sup> announced a couple of weeks ago that we're going to have a budget shortfall and he's going to close pools and things that kids or teenagers have to get rid of all their stress, all their energy. While these pools, and even libraries, are going to be closed and things of that nature – things that are positive – what do you expect these kids to do? They can't get a job, now they have nowhere to release that energy. So, what it means is there's going to be some negative things happening. Right now, anybody that is looking for a job in selling drugs, they can get it. But anyone who is looking for a job to be positive, they can't get it. Now, if you're a convicted felon, you're in trouble because no one wants to hire you. Now, there's no doubt in my mind that there is a process of 'you have to be trustworthy.' I encourage people who come from prisons who were incarcerated, volunteer in your community. Earn your respect. Earn your trustworthiness from other folks. No one owes you a thing. When I visited a prison in Dallas or Graterford my first year elected, there was an inmate – I'll never forget this – who stood up and, of

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<sup>5</sup> Mayor Michael Nutter, 2008-2012.

course, he'd berated the politicians and I sat there and I just listened because I understood his anger, even though it was misguided. And I told him, I said, "You know, when I invite people to my house, I don't mistreat them, I don't disrespect them. You invited me here; I didn't have to come here. Nobody here can vote for me. Because I'm the only one here that can vote for me. So, it tells you that I'm here for a reason." I said, "I'm here because I want you to know that you're not forgotten." My father used to say there are no throw away people. "Some of you are going to come home." I said, "Now, when you come home, I want you to be a better person than you were before you got here." So, he asked me to introduce a bill that would raise the salaries of the inmates in prison and a few other things he wanted me to do, and he said, "Man, they treat us like slaves in here." So, I let him finish and I, quite frankly, I answered him, I said, "Well, that's what you are here." I said, "But let me say this to you: you made the decision to come here. I didn't make that decision for you. You decided you wanted to do something that you weren't supposed to do; well now you're here." I said, "What you do if you're going to come home, you make the best of what you have in here. Try to become a better citizen, learn as much as you can here with the limited resources that are here that are supposed to help you." I said, "But don't you dare, don't you dare blame me for you being here, because I'm not the reason you're here." I said, "Now, in terms of introducing a bill to raise your salary here – you must be crazy." This is what I told him. "I'm not going to do that; they'll laugh me off the Floor." I said, "One thing, the times that we're in, some people probably look at me and say, 'Why are you there?'" I said, "Because, you know, I'm coming here and I have people in my district saying, why am I wasting my time coming here with you?" I said, "Now, I come here for a reason. If you have the opportunity to come out, I want you to be a better person. For those of you that are never going to come home, then you have an obligation to tell those people, younger people in your family that are following you, this is where you don't want to be." I said, "That's why I come here. So, you can tell your folks the reason why you're here; be honest about it, this is not a good place, but you made the decision to come here." I said, "So, you have to live with that decision and sometimes we make decisions when we're young that we pay for all our life; be that right or wrong, the fact is, that's the way it is." I said, "You make the best of what you can, what you have here." I said, "Be

a good person. When you invite a guest into your home, don't treat them like you're treating me, because," then I said, what I call, I went to the street on him, I said, "I'm nothing but a longshoreman. I can care less about what you feel about me, but don't let this suit fool you, because I can get just like you are." I said, "So, I'm a real person, but I come here because I love you; because I want you to know that there is a better way, if not for you, someone in your family. Don't let them make the mistake that you made, don't let them commit whatever wrong you did. Tell them about this; tell them about your experience, because you don't want them to follow you in here. Because I've met fathers, I've met sons, and I've met grandfathers in prison. You want to stop that cycle." I said, "So, that's why I come here, not because I have to. As I said, nobody here can vote for me. I enjoy it."

**JT:** Good. What were some of the legislation that you were involved with, whether you were the prime sponsor or even indirectly involved with, that was important to you?

**TB:** Well, we have a situation in West Philadelphia – we had – where a lot of businesses went under because of the transit reconstruction project, almost three quarters of a billion dollars. A major corridor in West Philadelphia was devastated because of the economic impact of this project, so a lot of businesses went under. We were successful in getting 30 million dollars in the capital budget a couple of years ago, last year actually, to help new business coming in. You know, one thing I've also learned in my experience, you can't undo what was done, so you try to improve on it. Now, we were also successful in helping some of those businesses that were able to survive to get funds to help them a little bit, and some of them it didn't help them stay in business, but at least it helped them financially with their families, because these people are mothers and fathers and they have families they have to take care of and they depend on these businesses making money to raise their children. Well, it didn't happen in most cases, but we were instrumental in helping to get the state to include funds for those businesses along with the city and with the Federal Government, to help them sort-of meet their day-to-day obligations. We weren't as successful as we wanted to be but we did try. The 30 million dollars that we did get, we were

successful in getting in the capital budget, that's new money for people who want to do new things in that part of the district. We ran on the platform that we would help and we were successful in doing that. We also introduced a bill that would do away with human experimentation. Back in the [19]70s my father introduced a bill to outlaw human experimentation in prisons. So, Governor Shapp was the Governor and he signed a bill outlawing that. What had we found, what's happening now is, some of those people who were experimented with when they were in prison, well now they're back in society and they're having problems as a result of those experimentations. Also, we have a problem – and most people ride public transportations, you'll see public billboards where the medical community is sometimes offering moneys if you would submit yourself to testing and some of these facilities, some of these schools do it, and we're against that unless you're held liable if something devastating or negative happens down the road. So, we introduced that bill. That bill has actually – we ran out of time for it to come to the Floor for a full vote, but it was before the Health and Human Services Committee and we did report it out; it just didn't have enough time to get it to the Floor. We also introduced a bill that would help people who live in public housing, if they should come forth if they witness a drug crime or drugs being sold in their communities, and if they would come forward and testify against it, we introduced a bill that would allow the people to be relocated without penalty. We set up a 500,000 dollar fund that would pay for the remainder of the leases they were on so they could be relocated. That was a very good bill, but unfortunately, again, because of time – and that's one of those things that could be improved; how these bills get brought to the floor. But, for the most part we were involved in a lot of the reform agendas, such as Open Records, things like that; we were involved in that process. We cosponsored a lot of reform bills, but we learned that in this business, like anything else, it takes time. The government can be slow, and I'm the kind of person, I cut right to the chase; I don't see the need for a lot of holding back. I think once you have an idea, you go through a process; you have the hearings on it, but speed the process up. Because, I find that the one thing that can be very frustrating is the speed in which a lot of these bills do come to the Floor and they're voted on, then they go to the Senate and the Governor, if they're successful. The slow process, I

think, can be sped up if we make it a priority. I think that's where sometimes we have people that are not interested or they distrust government because of the slow process.

**JT:** Right.

**TB:** That's something that, you know, unfortunately because of the numbers of elected officials sometimes I think, because of the numbers and the process of having to hold hearings on these various bills, I think that contributes to the slow process, but I think there are ways we can look at to speed the process up.

**JT:** Good. In 2007 you introduced House Bill 729 which was also known as The Republic of Sudan Divestment Act. What inspired you to try to take action against the situation in Darfur?

**TB:** Well, I look at what was happening over there and I look at people of color, who are basically poor people, who are being killed and women are being raped, and I think this government – not just in Pennsylvania, but our government, because we are a world leader – I think we live in the greatest country in the world, bar none. Doesn't mean we're perfect, but I think we're the greatest country and I love this country. I've been out of this country and I couldn't wait to get back, because I think we have such advantages over here. But, I think because of our commitment to this being a more kinder and gentler Earth, I think it's incumbent upon us as elected officials and leaders to do things, to not only make a better quality of life for people here, but a better quality of life for people across these seas and wherever we see negative things happening, I think we're obligated to try to help it out. Some people say that's policing the world, well guess what? We are the greatest and strongest country in the world; we're supposed to do that. I happen to be saved; I'm a deacon in my church. Sometimes you hear the phrase 'separation of church and state.' Well, frankly, I don't see how I can separate myself from my belief. Do I try to make people or influence people to believe what I believe? Of course not; you believe what you

want to believe. But, I think there's good in everybody; there's good in every religion. Take all that good out of every religion, every philosophy, every ideology, take it and put it together; we'll have a better world. You know, like I said, I tend to see the glass as half-full, not half-empty, so it's not that much that I have to do. So, if everybody does their part, it'll be a perfect world.

**JT:** That's right. Are there some pieces of legislation that you would've liked to have seen, but just ran out of time, or are there some issues that are important to you that you would still like to see get passed?

**TB:** Of course. I think the gun control issue is going to be ongoing. During the time when we had a Special Session dealing with gun control, I introduced a bill that would have this date – I forget the figure, but I think it was something like 500,000 dollars for those who wanted to go to school and those who wanted to go to college – that that fund would pay for that. In turn, those people who got those funds, graduated from college, had a commitment to work within the government or the cities, in schools and things like that, law enforcement; it would be an investment. You know, we invest in infrastructure in our communities, but we don't invest in people. If I was here I would reintroduce that, because I think people have to see that you are interested in people's ability to have a better quality of life. I think you'd become a better person when you feel like you're involved in something, you have ownership of your community; you become a better citizen. So, I would push that. You know, there are a lot of issues involved here, you know, sometimes people will say you can't combine a social issue with an educational issue. Well, it's all the same to me. If I'm a kid and I'm going to school hungry, my mind is not going to be on learning; my mind is going to be on getting something to eat. So, we have to look at, unfortunately, the social parts of this problem. We as a society, we tend to deal with the effects of problems and not the cause of problems, in my opinion. Like I said, there are a lot of good minds here, but I think sometimes we want to get our own idea out there so bad, you know, ours is the only good idea. That's nonsense. Politics is about the art of compromising and there's always room for compromise that is good. There's nothing wrong with compromising. Some people say it's just deal making. Well, call it what you want.

The fact of the matter is that everyone's opinion should be respected. Out of your opinion, if I hear something that works for me, then I should have the good sense to accept that and incorporate that in my idea or vice versa, because that makes us all better people. I say a lot of times; we don't have a race war, we have a class war. When people start to understand that, more especially working people and poor people, when they start to understand that it is not race, that it's class, I we'll understand that you can have all the money in the world, but if you have all the money in the world and you don't have the votes to go along with it to get something done, what does it mean? Where, you know, poor, working people, they may not have a lot of money, but they have numbers. One thing a politician can do better than anybody, in my opinion, is count, because they want to be re-elected time and time again and they want to stay here. I for one believe that people run for office because they care about people. We may have different ways of doing things, but I don't that believe there's one bad soul that sits in this government. I really don't. Some people look at me and say, "Man, you're crazy," but I really believe that. What makes the Democrats the Party of 'I know what's best' and you just disregard the Republicans. No, no, no, there are good people in both parties. We just happen to have a different way of trying to get to the same point. Now, the fun part is trying to convince the other side. If we're all right in terms of our hearts – if our hearts are clean and we really care about people, then we're going to see the good of what you're saying. If you say something that doesn't fit me, I'll leave it there. But, if you say something that will help me get my agenda pushed through, I should have the good sense to take what you say, and guess what? Let it be your idea. It doesn't matter who gets the credit as long as you're doing the right thing. People don't – my father once told me you can't fool people; people know who's working on their behalf. So, you do the right thing, no matter what happens, it's going to happen regardless of whether you're here or not. I'm not going to be here next term. This government is going to go on. Nobody is going to lose any sleep over me, but meanwhile, I think I did make some imprint here. I don't say this arrogantly, but there are 203 of us in the House. I don't know everybody there, but everybody knows me. That's a good thing. I don't say that arrogantly; I say that because I just don't know everybody. But, I don't get up on every issue and make a speech; I get up on an issue that is close to me that actually has something to do



with the way my district is run. My issues that are important to me, I'll get up and say something about that. But then, sometimes, I found that I may have an issue, but if someone is speaking on that issue and saying the right things then, what do I need to get up for? They're saying what I'm going to say. Speed the process up; the more people that are speaking, the longer the process. If you want to get up and just be redundant and continue to say the same things they said, what's your point? You turn people off.

There's a legislator who I'm very, very fond of, I have a lot of respect for this person, but he used to get up on every issue. I told him one day, I said, "You and I probably agree on 95 percent of what you say, but every time you get up you turn people off because you're the one that's saying it," and he looked at me and said "What do you mean?" I said, "Man, you get up on every issue." I said, "The unfortunate part is I agree with everything you're saying. But because it's you, people are not hearing you; they tune you out." I said, "You will probably have a lot of your bills be successful if you have someone else introduce it." So, we laughed about it, but meanwhile I watched him and this term he didn't get up as much. You know, actually there's two of them; one on each side, but they speak good on good issues. Sometimes, I think they're a little longwinded. You know, when you've won, let it go. There were times when I've gotten up, for example the Chairman of the Labor Committee, he saw me speaking and he would come by, wave to me "Tommy, we got it. No problem." I don't have to be the king of every issue. I don't have to be the spokesperson of every issue. If you're going to be a leader, I think you should also know how to follow. Speed the process up. A lot of talking – and you remember now, we're constantly campaigning; there's cameras on the Floor, so people are actually talking to their constituents. Now, I don't have a problem with that, but say what you're going to say then sit down. Don't prolong it because what you're doing, you're actually letting your good – as the Bible says – you're letting your good be evil spoken of because people tune you out. Even though it may be a good thing, but because it's you prolonging, and you're telling us you don't want to put out the PSAs, but yet you're going to stand on the floor in front of the cameras and make your speeches, what's the difference? What's the difference? And I told this person that, but I watched him, and I didn't go around telling everybody, I just talked to him because I didn't want to embarrass him. I thought I was helping him and apparently I did something right because

he took my advice; he stopped jumping up on everything. So, it's a good thing; you make good friends here.

**JT:** I was just going to ask you, how was the camaraderie?

**TB:** Well, as I said, you know, you have to love people. I've gained some friends here that I probably would've never have met in my life, on both sides. Actually, there's a Republican friend of mine, Tom Quigley [State Representative, Montgomery County, 2005-present], who we found that we're both boxing fans; we talk about it all the time. We actually E-mail each other when a fight comes on, like, during the summer when some fights were on and we weren't here, so we actually E-mailed each other to talk about it. Like I said, I believe that there's good in everybody. I found that we are more alike than we are unlike, because we all have the same goal, which is to make things better for people. We have different ways of doing it, but we all have the same goal and I think if we're sincere about it, we'll be successful. Tom Quigley, I found out, is a genuine guy who really is here to help. Some people say, "Well, are you helping a Republican?" He's a good man; he's a good man, and he just happens to be a Republican. The class that I came in, which I think is the best class out of every one, the people – Jeffrey Pyle [State Representative, Armstrong and Indiana Counties, 2005-present], who I think is – now we disagree a lot – but he's a good man. Of course, I'm going to have friends on the Democratic side, especially – a lot of them from Philadelphia I knew before I got here – but, I made some friends here that I'm going to always cherish and remember. And who's to say, they might still be here when I come back.

**JT:** Was there a typical Session day or were they all different?

**TB:** Well, they are different in many ways. I'll say that because of the issues that may come up on that day. You know, a lot of times, even though you're sitting there debating bills and things like that, and resolutions and things like that, a lot of times other issues come up that happen to take priority over the

issues or agenda that you have for that day. That's proper, because that's what life is. But, I enjoy the debates. As a labor leader, I was taught to be aggressive but you have no one to pull back. You know, one thing that I do not like is a lot of these Resolutions for our fallen heroes, our soldiers, because it reminds me of how terrible things can be. Where I respect everyone's right to honor these people, I just don't think that's enough. I just don't think that's enough, because these people have given their lives for me to be free; for me to have a good quality of life. It's just terrible that they have to go through this process and I feel bad for their families. It's just the one thing that I don't like, because it brings it home. My brother, my father served – my brother went to Korea 30 years to the day that my father was there. I think about that a lot. Fortunately, I'm not a veteran; I've never been to the service, but I often wonder how things may have been had I served. Sometimes I wish I had served, but I missed the draft, that was done when I was old enough to go and I never volunteered because I had a family; I was working. But, there's no more respect you can give a person who actually dies for their country, and I see a lot of that and I wish it didn't have to be. But, unfortunately it is, so I respect those heroes of ours that have gone on and died for this country, but I hate that process. I don't like that.

**JT:** How was your relationship with the media?

**TB:** I think I have a good relationship because, one, you see, I like to talk and I think I talk responsibly I think because I'm in this business I should be open to the media. Because, you know, when things are going good I want them to report it. I haven't had any negative experience with the media, but I think I have a good relationship with the media. As my father said, tell the truth and whatever happens, happens.

**JT:** What aspects of the job, as a legislator, do you like the most?

**TB:** Actually, I like the interaction among legislators. I love the hearings because it educates you on a lot of things that you don't know. Issues that come up that you were not even aware of, that you had no

idea of what other people – or people who have a difference of opinion than you do, you know, you hear them out and you digest it. You say, “Man, why didn’t I think of that,” sometimes. The only problem, or process, that I don’t like is the way sometimes bills are brought to the Floor. I think that there should be more openness in terms of how bills get to the floor. No one else’s bill should take a priority over my bill coming to the Floor. I think there’s something that could be done with that and I think that something should be done with that, because a lot of people can get very disappointed and not want to continue. You know, I’ve seen people get so frustrated and say, “I won’t come here anymore,” because they feel like their issues are not heard. Like I said, you can’t have a thin skin if you’re going to be in this business. I believe in seniority, but I don’t think seniority should take precedence over issues. I think everyone should have a chance. There was some idea floating about every Member having a certain number of bills per session being brought up to the Floor, which I don’t have a problem with that, but there are some instances where some issues will take more important precedence over others. I can respect that but there has to be a way that everyone is heard, where it doesn’t take a long time. I think that can happen, but I think sometimes you just have to have the will to do things. I think sometimes that’s where rank-and-file can help leadership. The one thing I’ve learned, you know, I was President of my Union which gave me a lot of influence; I had control over what was said on the floor and what was not in my Union. But I found out that most leaders – most good leaders – are able to listen to other opinions and not take it personally, even though they may be different from yours. I found that a leader that will hold a grudge, they will try to stymie someone’s growth. I found that, usually, leaders like that have an insecurity about them. We are 203 legislators in this General Assembly; everyone has a right to be here and our people sent us here to speak for them. So, if you try to stymie me – and I’m not saying this has happened – but, if you try to stymie me you’re stopping my constituents from being heard just because you have the ability to do it. That’s wrong, that’s wrong. Sometimes, we tend to see Republican and Democrat instead of people. That can be worked out if you have the respect of each other. One thing you have to do is respect them. You’re going to get respect from other people if you respect yourself and understand that you do not have all the answers. That’s why you have phones, your network. When

people come to my district office, I tell my staff this is why you have a phone. We may not have the answer right then, but we have to get the answer, people expect that of us. That's why we have a phone; call someone. Call a Congressman; call a Senator, because this is the way you network. And you'd be surprised what you might learn when you have relationships. That's what politics is all about.

**JT:** I like to ask the Members when I'm talking with them if they have a funny or a memorable story of something that happened, either during a session or something associated with the House during your time here. Do you have one?

**TB:** I'm sure there is but, you know, I'm blank right now. I'm sure there have been things that have happened. Sometimes, I can be a jokester and, as a matter of fact, I sit next to Jewel Williams [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 2001-present] and we joke all the time, because there may be a thing, like the way some people talk or the way they get up. The one thing that I do like to see and it's unfortunate, and maybe I shouldn't laugh about it but, I get a kick out of when some people – I was talking about two individuals, but I didn't mention a name and which I will not name now – but, they just nitpick. Sometimes, I watch them and I watch the Speaker. And they'll stand up there and they'll have their hand raised and he acts like he doesn't see them, but he sees them, and it's funny to me. And they're very angry, the Members will be very angry, but they know what they're doing, you know. So, I laugh at that. Sometimes, I have found myself not being able to stop laughing and I go over to the person and I'll say, "You know they're just messing with you, right?" So, it's, "I know they're messing with me. I'm going to get them; I'm going to get them." And they get really angry about it, but in a good nature. I've seen some things, like I said, I've seen legislators – I used to sit between two legislators who couldn't stand each other when I first came here. And this one would be in my ear whispering to me, "Don't say nothing to this one," you know. It took me back to Grade school, you know what I mean? I'd say, "What in the world did I come to here?" It was just funny to me. So, finally what I did – both of them did it at the same time – I'm sitting there trying to listen and both of them, and both of them are in my ear, so I

just sat back and I said, “Y’all talk to each other.” So, I thought that was funny. But, you know, the thing that impressed me most is the debate. One thing I will say, the last election we had for Speaker, when most people were caught by surprise in the process; I thought that it was a great maneuver. I thought it was a great maneuver, because when I was going up steps, I was getting on the elevator with Representative Preston [Joseph; State Representative, Allegheny County, 1983-present] and I said to him when we were going up, I said, “You know, I hope we have a plan B because I don’t think plan A is going to work.” So, he looked at me and said, “I agree with you.” So, we walked on the Floor and I’m talking to our deputy from the Philadelphia Delegation at the time, and I said, “What’s going to happen today?” So, he tells me some things, but I see he really doesn’t know. So, when Bill DeWeese nominated Denny O’Brien [Dennis; State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1977-1980, 1983-present; Speaker, 2007-2008] I said, “Oh my goodness!” We had seen reports that something was going on, but I thought that was good politics in terms of the gaming, because, look, that’s what it’s all about sometimes. But I thought it was important, but my disappointment – and I’ll have to be honest with you – while we did elect Denny – and I do like Denny O’Brien, I think he’s a good man – but, you know, I don’t think that would have happened on the other side; that they would have elected a Democrat and allow him to remain a Democrat. I think if we’re going to be Democrats we want a Democratic Speaker; that’s not being personal, that’s just the way of the game. To the victor go the spoils. I think that that in some ways may have hurt Denny, because now I know there’s going to be a Democratic Speaker this time and where does Denny go now? Because I’m sure there’s some negative fallout behind that process. But, I love to see the game being played. I love to see the outmaneuvering because, like I said, it teaches you something. I remember there was a State Senator who retired and he didn’t announce his retirement until the night the petitions were in, because his son was actually running and everybody thought this guy was running. So, there was a fellow who wanted to run against him, but he figured he couldn’t beat the father so he figured no point. So, when his son turned in the petitions, he was outmaneuvered. I thought, you know, gamesmanship. It shows experience and I like to see things like that because it teaches me. But, I just love the game of politics, because when I was 10 years old and I worked on my first campaign, when

I was allowed to put literature in doors and mailboxes on my block, and man, I've been doing it ever since. But, the guy who really, really inspired me was Hubert Humphrey. You know, I make speeches about him all the time. I don't know too much about his son, the one that became Attorney General; I don't know too much about him<sup>6</sup>. He should have become Governor, instead we got Ventura, the wrestler<sup>7</sup>, but Hubert Humphrey was a great man in my book; great guy.

**JT:** How would you like your tenure as a House Member to be remembered?

**TB:** Someone that was easy to get along with; someone who did show leadership; someone that always had an open ear for another opinion; someone who loves people; someone who had great respect for this House, great respect for the people that worked here. More especially, I think the staff that works in this building – second to none. I don't think they're paid enough, because they do a great job. I think they cover our backs a lot of times when no one else will; they work long hours, even though the rules have changed in terms of compensation, but you know, I see them still here late at night on their own time and I think they're dedicated people, they're willing to learn. I think they're the ones that actually make this place work. We come and go; these are career people who deserve a lot of credit for what that actually does get done here; it's good. Because, I won't give them the bad because a lot of times we're the reason that is bad, but there are very good people here. It's just a shame that they're not really paid what they're worth. Because without them we wouldn't make it.

**JT:** Finally, what advice would you give to someone who was interested in starting a life in politics?

**TB:** Get involved in your community first. Don't do it because you're looking to make money, because you won't. I took a pay cut to come here, because there are some things to me that should be important

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<sup>6</sup> Hubert H. Humphrey, III, Minnesota Attorney General, 1983-1999.

<sup>7</sup> Jesse Ventura, former professional wrestler and the Governor of Minnesota, 1999-2003.

than just money. We need money to live on, we should have a decent salary – which we do have a decent salary. But, if you want to get in the game of politics, understand what community is all about. Understand what people are all about. Never get – and, I'll say what my father told me – never get bigger than the people that you serve. The day that you think you're bigger than them, that's the day you're going to fall. But I found that if something should happen to you while you're in office, if you treat people on your way up the way you want to be treated – because if you ever fall, they're going to cushion your fall. So, understand the issues, but be a community person. Be a person that's not looking for credit, you know, just want to do the right thing. As long as you keep that, in my mind, your philosophy real simple, treat people the way you wanted to be treated, be interested in wanting to give people a better quality of life; that does not mean that you have to be in an elected office. Just in your community be a block captain, you just be a street sweeper. Whatever you decide to do, as Martin Luther King<sup>8</sup> said, be the best at whatever you do and people will recognize that. Remember, people are not born to be leaders; leadership is cultivated. You have to be taught how to be a leader. But if your heart is right, that's half the battle. You have to love your neighbors. Do everything you can that's good for your community and you'll be successful. A lot of times, being that way is more rewarding than being in elected office. Because, you know, there's a lot of sacrifice in being an elected official, because you spend a lot of time being away from home. That's something I experienced. I guess that's part of the reason why I didn't run the first time I had the opportunity to do so, because I had young kids at the time and sometimes you're resentful of the fact when your parents can't be there when you want them to be there, and we live a good life, so there are a lot of advantages to being an elected official, of being a member of the family in the elected office. There are also sometimes when you're in sports and you want your parents there but they can't be there because they're somewhere else but, you know, your older siblings have to take their place. There's a price to pay but it's very rewarding, very rewarding. So, anybody that is interested in politics, remember it's just a matter of being committed to your ideals and know what you represent.

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), Civil Rights Movement leader, activist, clergyman and Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1964.



**JT:** Representative Thomas Blackwell, I'd like to thank you very much for participating in our oral history program and sharing your stories with us today.

**TB:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**JT:** And good luck with everything in the future.

**TB:** Thank you.

**JT:** Thanks.