

GRIFFIN BELL: A CONVERSATION  
CAPTIONING SCRIPT

**Hoffman:** His experience in the legal profession spans nearly six decades. As an attorney, a judge, and the nation's seventy-second attorney general, he helped to chart desegregation, affirmative action, and environmental protection. Griffin Boyette Bell was born in rural Sumter County in 1918. His family was driven off their farm by the cotton boll weevil and settled in Americus, where his father opened a tire store. After military service in World War II, Bell entered Mercer University's Law School and in 1947 passed the Georgia Bar, while still a student. Within a few years, his sharp legal mind was enlisted by political leaders. As Chief of Staff to Governor Ernest Vandiver, Bell was a moderating influence during the turbulence of school desegregation. In 1961, President Kennedy appointed Bell to the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and in 1976, President Jimmy Carter nominated him to be Attorney General of the United States, a position he held for two and-a-half years. Since returning to Georgia in 1979, Bell has served on innumerable committees and boards. He also led the investigation of the Exxon Valdez oil spill and served as counsel to President Bush during the Iran-Contra investigation. At a time when most people would rest on their laurels, Griffin Bell is still active in law and policy, and he still retains an office at the venerable Atlanta law firm of King and Spalding, that he joined way back in 1953.

**Hoffman:** Judge Bell thank you so much for this conversation, it's a pleasure to have you here today.

Bell: Thank you. Thank you for asking me.

**Hoffman:** You know, there's a lot of people that say you could rest on your laurels after your very long, distinguished career and yet you don't. You're at the law office frequently, usually once a week, maybe once every couple of weeks. What is it about the law that still intrigues you?

Bell: Well, you're resolving disputes. And we couldn't have the kind of society we have, a democratic society, if we didn't have some sort of dispute settling mechanism and that's what the lawyers are, that's what the courts are. I've always thought- that's my philosophy about the law.

**Hoffman:** So you still like solving problems after all these years?

Bell: Yea. I like it. A lot of people may want to work out crossword puzzles.

**Hoffman:** (Laughter) You'd rather go to the law office.

Bell: Yeah. I'd rather work out a human conflict problem.

**Hoffman: You were born and raised in rural Georgia, Sumter County, outside Americus, in 1918. Your dad was a cotton farmer. Do you remember much at all about those early years?**

Bell: I remember the farming but I didn't—I was a small boy when we moved into Americus, I think I was eight years old. My grandfather had sold his farm to and moved into Americus, so my grandfather and grandmother were there.

**Hoffman: So, your father followed and he opened a tire store there.**

Bell: Yea

**Hoffman: And do you remember running in and out to the tire store? Did you help at all when you were a young man?**

Bell: I always had to work, doing something.

**Hoffman: You were also a good student. Was it something that came easily to you; you didn't have to work at or did you work really hard at being a good student?**

Bell: I didn't work hard enough. I really never worked hard in scholastics until I got to law school. It was too easy.

**Hoffman: Did you, at an early age, know that were going to go into law? Could you feel it inside?**

Bell: Well, I always wanted to be a lawyer because I think my father put it in my head. And it seemed to me to be a fine way to live. It was challenging and all the things you'd want to do in a career seemed to be there. Yeah that was, I was always drawn to being a lawyer in a way.

**Hoffman: Something else we need to point out is in rural Georgia, back in that time, in the twenties and thirties, people would go to the courthouse for entertainment. So you grew up watching trials.**

Bell: Right. Yeah. People would—even farmers would come into town, a lot of them would be on the jury. They'd just spend the whole week there.

**Hoffman: (Laughter) Take a day off or take a week off.**

Bell: And court was different then. You didn't have court constantly, you had terms of court. So you might have jury trials two or three weeks and then it'd be three months and you'd have some more, and it was a different way of practicing law than what we have today. Now the courts in the cities - and some of this started with air conditioning--

example, when I was a young lawyer, there was never any court in August. We all took vacations in August.

**Hoffman: It was too hot. I also know that your father used to take you around to campaign rallies so, he was politically active and kind of turned you on to politics at a young age as well. Do you recall some of those early campaigns?**

Bell: I do. I recall going to a rally for Senator George. He was running for the Senate. I also have a vivid recollection of going to a Gene Talmadge rally and I'll never forget it because I saw people putting money in his pocket.

**Hoffman: (laughter) Just flat out cash donations.**

Bell: Well, this was in the middle of the depression. I couldn't believe people were putting money in his pocket. He had an overcoat on.

**Hoffman: You have said that your military experience in World War II, managing all those soldiers, really prepared you for law. Why is that?**

Bell: It prepared me for business too. It's a basic management course. If you are managing in the army you know how to manage anything.

**Hoffman: Did you ever worry, when you served in World War II, if you would make it back?**

Bell: Oh, yea. I never got in combat. It worried me that I couldn't get in combat. I thought my reputation was going to be ruined forever.

**Hoffman: Now, why did you want to be in combat?**

Bell: Because I thought you had to go overseas and be in combat if you were doing your share.

**Hoffman: Well, when you were in officer training school you met your wife to be, Mary, Mary Powell. You were married for 60 years and you had one son, Griffin Jr. Tell me about Mary. What was she like?**

Bell: She was a—had some relatives in Plains, Georgia

**Hoffman: That's right. Was it love at first sight?**

Bell: Well, not really. We just had some dates first. And I really was attracted to her, I think, not so much by her looks but the fact that she had these relatives in South Georgia.

**Hoffman: (Laughter) You felt like you could relate to her in some way.**

Bell: I was in Richmond, Virginia.

**Hoffman: That's right.**

Bell: That sort of opened the door anyway. That's the way we got started.

**Hoffman: You were discharged in 1946, at the age of 27, and you went to Mercer Law School, down in Macon on the G.I. Bill. So, now your opportunity to fulfill your father's lifelong dream of becoming a lawyer becomes a reality. You're working, while you're a student, at a law firm in Macon. You passed the bar, while still a student.**

Bell: Right.

**Hoffman: You were bright. You were on the move.**

Bell: Law schools; very few of them operated during World War II. That was a four-year hiatus. And most everybody was trying to find a young lawyer.

**Hoffman: But you were young, you were aggressive, you were energetic.**

Bell: Yeah I was. I was ambitious.

**Hoffman: You graduated and you practiced law in Savannah, and then Rome. And then in 1953 you joined King and Spalding, it wasn't called that at the time but ultimately, King and Spalding.**

Bell: Right

**Hoffman: And within a short period of time, you were made Chief of Staff for Governor Ernest Vandiver, who had campaigned on the pledge of "No, not one!" meaning no African American students will be allowed in a white school. And you came in and were a huge influence in his administration, in guiding this state in the way it handled desegregation. And I want to read you a quick quote if I can, "He was a great American, and a great Southerner. He was a very courageous governor and one of the best governors we ever had. I think he never really got the credit that he deserved for desegregation. He bore the brunt of a lot of criticism for what he did and he did it with grace." It was a very difficult time.**

Bell: It was. It was.

**Hoffman: You served on the Sibley Commission as well, which essentially was a Blue Ribbon Panel.—**

Bell: No, I am the originator of the Sibley Commission. I wrote it.

**Hoffman: But you were—**

Bell: It was my idea.

**Hoffman: Tell me about it. Explain the Sibley Commission and its impact on desegregation in Georgia.**

Bell: Well we were having a great travail almost over deciding what to do. We either had to close the—cut off state funding of schools, which meant they would be closed essentially, or we had to follow the court orders and integrate the schools. And there was a great division among the public about what to do. I think a majority of people, whites at least, would have voted to close the schools. So I came up with the idea of having these public hearings, one in each congressional district, at that time we had ten congressional districts, and I got up the—I wrote this resolution to be passed by the General Assembly. I wrote it in long hand at the house, on Sunday night, and I took it over to see the governor the next day and let him read it. And he said, “Well, this might work if you get the right person as chairman.” So he designated me then to find a chairman.

**Hoffman: But, it was really your job, I mean within this commission, you all went around the state and you pretty much told white segregationists, “Desegregation is coming. Prepare.”**

Bell: Yeah. Yea. That’s the law. I think--Hardly anybody has an appreciation of a provision in the constitution that requires every public official to follow the law, to follow the constitution.

**Hoffman: It wasn’t an option. Not a choice.**

Bell: They had no choice. If the Supreme Court makes a ruling. that’s the end.

**Hoffman: Describe the meeting that took place at Governor Vandiver’s mansion, at the time in Ansley Park, an afternoon meeting that he called. He called you, he called Carl Sanders, he called all of his supporters, all high-ranking officials to the Governor’s mansion for a meeting, to discuss what he was about to do. You were there. You said it was one of the most historic events you had ever witnessed. Tell me what happened.**

Bell: It was. It was—it had to do with integrating the University of Georgia. And a great hue and cry to close the university. So he called all of his supporters, main supporters, Jim Gillis, Roy Harris, and the whole retinue. I didn’t know what he was going to do. I was just—he invited me to be there. I had no idea that what he was getting ready to do—so what he said was, that he’d called a meeting to bid everyone goodbye. That he was going to make a decision that would not be pleasing to probably anyone in the room he said. “So I’m going to have to do it though because I can’t bring myself to close the University of Georgia. We’re going to have to follow the law.” And so he

thanked Mr. Gillis, who was a senior, for what he had done for him and he kept going down the line. When he got to Frank Twitty, who was a floor lead in the house, from deep south Georgia, Mitchell County, Frank said, "Don't tell me goodbye. I'm not going nowhere. I'm sticking with you." And Carl Sanders was next; he said the same thing. They turned it, people started changing and finally nobody would leave.

**Hoffman: But that meeting, that single meeting, that single meeting.—**

Bell: That one meeting changed the course of history in Georgia. And after that shortly, within two weeks time we had a special session of the legislature to repeal all the laws that they'd passed in 1956, to close the schools, and various other things that were drastic steps to avoid integration. We repealed all those laws. We had a night session of the legislature for the opening and Governor Vandiver addressed them and told them the time had come we had to repeal the laws; it all went easy.

**Hoffman: You not only made history in Georgia, you made history in the south. I mean you guided Georgia and Atlanta in a very different way, very different from surrounding states. I mean you really put Georgia out in front of desegregation.**

Bell: I think—that's the way it ended. At the time, we weren't thinking about that, we were really thinking about following the law. That was my line, I couldn't— What happened between the time Vandiver got elected and the time he took office, which is like two months, the Supreme Court handed down what is known as the "Second Little Rock Case." in which they said violence is no excuse. You can't use violence to prevent desegregation. Well, that was the end of the road at that point. So you couldn't say we were worried about safety, those sorts of things.

**Hoffman: There were no excuses.**

Bell: No excuses.

**Hoffman: It wasn't a choice.**

Bell: No excuses left. And a lot of Governor Vandiver's supporters—older generation didn't think too well of this, what we were doing.

**Hoffman: You had said, he bore the brunt of an awful lot of criticism when he was simply doing what he was mandated by the Constitution to do.**

Bell: I had two of the top people call me--to come to the office at the state highway department and tell me I was running the governor. I was too liberal. I said, "That's the first time anybody ever called me a liberal."

**Hoffman: You were chair of John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign and you agreed to do that long before it was ever known that a Catholic and a liberal,**

**regarding civil rights, could really take Georgia. What made you step up to the plate on Kennedy's behalf?**

Bell: Senator Russell and Senator Talmadge and Governor Vandiver decided for the first time they would run the campaign for a Democrat. Before that they wouldn't take part in a presidential race. So they had designated me to go to Washington to meet with Senator Kennedy to get an agreement as to who was going to speak on his behalf in Georgia. And I did that. Then that's when the question came up, he asked me - he had just gotten under heavy attack by some Baptists, in Texas, Houston as recall, and he asked me what my religion was. I said, "I'm a Baptist." He said, "Does it embarrass you to be associated with somebody like me that's a member of the Catholic Church?" I said, "No, it embarrasses me for you to ask the question."

**Hoffman: To even have to ask.**

Bell: Yeah, because our country is better than that and that will all right itself before it's over with.

**Hoffman: Kennedy ended up taken Georgia in that election, by a larger margin than any other state. Were you surprised?**

Bell: Right...We had it organized well.

**Hoffman: (Laughter) Alright and then Robert, obviously John F. Kennedy made Robert Kennedy his attorney general, and Robert called you and said, "Is there anything that you're interested in?" And you said, "Yes, I'm very interested in the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals."**

Bell: No. At first, I told him there was nothing I was interested in. And it was about three months later, that I read in the paper, that they were going to add two judges on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeal. And then I became interested.

**Hoffman: So, did you call him back quickly and say, "I've changed my mind I want the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.?"**

Bell: Well, I saw him somewhere I think, as I recall. And--

**Hoffman: Now at the time, that was the largest appellate court in the country and it covered obviously the Deep South, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi—**

Bell: --Texas

**Hoffman: Texas, Florida. And they were really knee deep in a boatload of cases regarding desegregation.**

Bell: Then, we had a big argument over which state would get the judges, which states.

**Hoffman: And you were confirmed.**

Bell: Yea.

**Hoffman: And you became the stable, moderate, go to guy, for desegregation cases. You were the one that in the end handled those very contentious cases.**

Bell: Well, I had a knack for getting people together

**Hoffman: How'd you do that?**

Bell: Well, I'd work with the lawyers. I'd get the lawyers from each side to meet, they'd come to my chambers, and we'd talk about the problem and I'd tell them to figure out some way to follow the law. They had to comply with the law. And most of the time they'd work out the plan themselves but it was like getting people to talk. A lot of time these disputes that we read about are really not disputes at all, it's two sides off by themselves.

**Hoffman: Well, then there was a big case, one of the larger cases that you handled, which was the United States v. Hine County, Hines County—**

Bell: --Hines County right--

**Hoffman: --and you had thirty three school systems in Mississippi that were—**

Bell: --Well I was put on that case by special appointment.

**Hoffman: Those cases—at that point, once that case was completed, it really had an impact because you really threw down the gauntlet, the result of that case was, “You know what? No more dragging you feet. Get it done.”**

Bell: That's true. Well, that's what the Supreme Court said. They said they had to desegregate the schools immediately, they used the word immediately. So I called a meeting of all the 32, 33 school districts in New Orleans in a courtroom and had the school superintendents and the lawyers, and told them that we were going to desegregate on the 4<sup>th</sup> or the 5<sup>th</sup>. I had the other two judges on the panel with me, and I told them we had to carry out the Supreme Court order and they said to desegregate immediately and I said, “We're going to treat immediately as January 2<sup>nd</sup>.”

**Hoffman: Which is like a month.**

Bell: A month. We're going to give you a month because it's going to be Christmas vacation in there and it had to be done. And I said, “I'll be glad to work with the lawyers on a plan, anybody that has trouble agreeing on a plan,” and I had the lawyer for the NAACP Inc Fund, a young lawyer, who I believe made head of the Civil Rights Division

at the Justice Department. He was so good at conciliation and the lawyers from the local district, we got everything done, it all happened.

**Hoffman Did you realize just how much you were influencing dynamic change in the south?**

Bell: Oh, I knew in advance. I made a chart. I prepared a chart of the school districts by population, race population, and you could see which ones would turn all-black and it turned out exactly the way I had it on the chart. We knew that in advance, but that was beside the point. All those things had been argued out in the Supreme Court so we had to follow the law. Even though it might have been a disaster, you had to follow the law. It was a disaster for some of those small places. And there was a tipping point. Thirty percent was the tipping point. If you didn't get more than thirty percent black in a white school it would survive. There were some of those counties, a lot to them in southwest Georgia, that were ninety percent black. Those schools were just gone. And it hasn't helped the blacks, because they bore the brunt of the thing. And it made their schools really third rate. It's a bad situation, and it still is.

**Hoffman: You believe that busing led to the decline of education?**

Bell: No, no question about that. That's one of the most foolish things ever started in this country.

**Hoffman: Why?**

Bell: Because, it put the burden on the people, the children being bused. My theory was that the children being bused ought to have a guardian ad litem appointed for them so they'd have a lawyer to defend them because somebody higher up, to settle out a case, to carry a court order had sacrificed them. And they get up at 5 o'clock in the morning, to ride a bus two hours each way. How can you get educated like that? And in almost every case it was a black being bused. It was outrageous. When all you had to do was make the neighborhood schools better. You had to integrate the faculty and all those things, there was nothing wrong with getting all that done, but moving the children around by buses was like treating them as inanimate objects.

**Hoffman: After handling all those desegregation cases and some of it started to pass, you actually kind of got bored on the appellate court. Why did you leave the appellate court?**

Bell: Well, the court asked me to go see Chief Justice Burger to tell him I was leaving. I said, "We're overloaded with criminal cases, lawyers appointed to represent drug dealers under the 4<sup>th</sup> Amendment to make the same argument over and over, and habeas corpus by everyone in prison, who wants to get out." I said, "If I was in prison I'd want to get out." I'm not holding that against them but I'm just tired of handling cases like that.

**Hoffman: But you also knew at the time that if you gave up that position you probably would never make it to the U.S. Supreme Court.**

Bell: Right, I gave up.

**Hoffman: Do you regret that?**

Bell: No, I don't. I gave up. Well, I had to – just by accident I became the attorney general, which was a really exciting job.

**Hoffman: But you had a rather contentious confirmation hearing. It wasn't easy. Tell me about it. Describe what happened.**

Bell: A group of Republicans decided they'd block one of President Carter's nominees and they picked me out because they thought I had a record with all these cases I had written. And then I had the fifteen Democrats who thought I was too conservative. So there I was--

**Hoffman: Your own party tried to derail you.**

Bell: Oh yea. There I was. I had two sides fighting. Well, I had some friends that stood up for me. One of them was Senator Hollings, of course my own senators, but Senator Hollings of South Carolina did the floor fighting for me. Did the debate on my behalf. And then Senator Beyh, started out against me and then he switched sides, came over and supported me. And I finally got—I had twenty-one votes against me and before I left Washington, twenty of the twenty-one said they had made a mistake; made speeches about it on the Senate floor and that sort of thing. So, that made me feel some better.

**Hoffman: You were Attorney General for two and a half years, why did you resign? Because, Carter stayed in office until 81'.**

Bell: Well, he didn't want me to resign.

**Hoffman: Why?**

Bell: Well, when I took the job, I took it with some reluctance because I had just gotten back into law practice so I told him I'd take it for two years. Then, at the end of two years I resigned. I sent him a letter. And he said he wouldn't accept it.

**Hoffman: (Laughter) How do you resign without going to see him? I'm surprised. You sent him a letter.**

Bell: Well, I told him I was going to send him a letter.

**Hoffman: Okay.**

Bell: And I asked him if he wouldn't be embarrassed if he saw in the newspaper that the Attorney General went into bankruptcy. He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Well, I'm spending so much money, I'm going to run out of savings."

**Hoffman: "Going broke as your Attorney General."**

Bell: Going broke. So, he just said, "That's no excuse," said "You should have bought a house up here, you wouldn't be keeping up a house in Atlanta." So, time went by and then he had this day of blood-letting when he got rid of several cabinet officers and he asked me if I'd mind going ahead, and said "You already resigned. Why don't you let me accept your resignation now."

**Hoffman: But as Attorney General, you know the Justice Department had taken some hits because of Watergate, and so you really had to pull that department back together.**

Bell: I did, yeah.

**Hoffman: How did you do that?**

Bell: Just by leadership. Making the people feel proud about working at the Justice Department, saying what a great department it was, how important it was to our country. My background was such, you know having been a federal judge that I had good deal of credibility that just an ordinary lawyer would not have had. So that helped a lot. It was a great experience.

**Hoffman: But you went back to King & Spalding with senior positions yet you couldn't seem to stay out of Washington. You continued to receive all kinds of just high profile positions, you led investigations into some of the high profile corporate crimes, E.F. Hutton's check kiting scheme, the Exxon-Valdez Oil Spill, the Dow Corning breast implants. Did you enjoy some of those?**

Bell: Yeah. Those were great challenges. Those were disasters actually, particularly the Exxon-Valdez.

**Hoffman: Yeah.**

Bell: Somebody had to get in there and find the facts and make sense of it. Speaking of challenge, that was a real challenge.

**Hoffman: Something else very interesting about your career, you were a private attorney, a personal counsel to President Bush after the Iran-Contra affair.**

Bell: Right

**Hoffman: What can you share about some of those behind the scenes conversations you had with the president at that time?**

Bell: I came to know him as a fine man. He was the ultimate in honesty and he had not done a single thing wrong. He just got caught up in—Politics has turned into a vicious undertaking.

**Hoffman: Disappointing to you?**

Bell: It is. It is. I think—I get so upset with these two parties fighting each other. We made end up with some independent party, who and they would not run candidates but they'd vote people out of office.

**Hoffman: You still are extremely active. You've also published a book. You published it in 1982, Taking Care of the Law. You still write a lot, you still speak a lot and you have no signs of slowing down.**

Bell: Well, you ought to use your abilities when you can. Oh, I'd be wasteful. I was told as a child, not to waste anything. "Make yourself useful," my father used to say.

**Hoffman: How would you like to be remembered?**

Bell: My ambition when I was young was not only to be a lawyer but to also run for some public service, and I've done that.

**Hoffman: I think history will judge you kindly. And with that I need to say thank you Judge Bell. I appreciate your time and I appreciate the opportunity to have this conversation.**

Bell: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

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