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Interview with George Dunne

Date: 16 December 2003

Location: unidentified

Present: George Dunne, Dr. Robert V. Remini, and Dr. Fred W. Beuttler

(The interview has already begun)

George Dunne: He was a wonderful man, and so was his wife. And his kids, I think, are following pretty much in his footsteps. I enjoyed all of the days that I had with him. He was a very humorous man.

Dr. Robert V. Remini: Was he?

GD: Yes (laughs). And I'll never forget one night when we were in Springfield. We were down there for a dinner. And the dinner concluded somewhere around oh, nine o'clock, I guess it was. We got in his car and we were on our way back. And he became quite talkative. And on the way back, he remarked how much he hated sauerkraut (laughs). We were all quite surprised. He said that he bought the cabbage, I guess it was. Then he chopped that up. He went on for quite a while, explaining this material in his food. His mother was kidding him. He said that he wasn't kidding. He was serious. He was a good cook (RVR laughs). That was a very humorous evening that we had with him on the way back.

He was pretty much responsible for much of what I did in my life. I was a member of the state legislature. He called me over to his office. At that time, I worked for the county. I was just across the hall. He asked me to come over and I came over. He said "Listen, I want you to take a position on the county board." I said, "Mr. Mayor, I don't want to go on the county board. I'm perfectly happy where I'm at. I'm grateful to you for your support." He said, "You don't want it? Do you know how many people in Cook County would like to be the chairman of the Finance Committee (laughs)?" I said, "Mr. Mayor, under those circumstances, you'll have no trouble finding somebody (RVR laughs)." He said, "No. Never mind that, you're the man for the job. I want you to take

it." I said "Well, to start out with, I'm five thousand dollars short, if I take it." He said, "Well, I'll get you the five thousand." I said, "Oh no. Just get somebody else, Mr. Mayor." He said, "I want you to take it." I said, "Okay. I'll take it."

RVR: When was that? Do you remember the date?

GD: I came on the Cook Country Board in 1963.

RVR: Okay.

GD: But as I said, I recollect the occasions that I had with him. I took the position. And one day he called me again, as quite frequently was his policy. He said, "Come over." I came over and he handed me five thousand dollars. And he said, "Here's that five thousand dollars, George." I said, "No Mr. mayor, I don't want it." He said, "Just take it. I don't want you to be short church or family. You take it." I said "No, Mr. Mayor, we won't do that at all." He said, "I wish you would." I said, "No. I can't do it." And I never took the five thousand dollars. And later on, I don't recall who the officer was. He had left the county. But at any rate, the central committee, of which I was a member, had a meeting. And I selected Seymour Simon to be the president of the county board and me to be the chairman of the finance committee. We functioned for one term. Then, Seymour Simon didn't go for re-election. They put me on as president. Of course, the mayor and I were friends. Quite frequently, he would give me a ride to a place where we were both invited to attend and so forth. It was a very fine reception. He wanted me to take his place. He called me over and he said, "Well George, I think that you ought to sit right in this desk." I'm not very well." But I knew that he didn't mean it. So I said to him, "Mr. Mayor, why don't you set aside some of the things I can do for you, right here?" He said "Well, my wife and the doctor want me to quit." I knew that he didn't want me or anybody else to succeed him. So I told him no, that he should stay. So, for a period of time, he would meet me. He'd say, "Come on, you take this job." I said, "You stay right here." Then of course, he passed away. He died. I'll tell you about the occasion. It was on

St. Patrick's Day. There was a luncheon down at the hotel on Michigan Avenue. What's the name of that big hotel?

RVR: Was it Hilton?

GD: It wasn't that hotel. It was the Congress Hotel. That's where they had this function with the head of St. Patrick's Day. He called me over and said "George, let's ride over together." I said, "Mr. Mayor, I've got four guys waiting for me. I appreciate the thought." He went his way and I went my way. And when we got to the hotel, he came over to me and said, "I want to talk." I said, "Fine." Of course, I had told the fellows of his pretensions of becoming retired and naming me as the mayor. When we got to the hotel, he called me over and he said, "I'm going to stay." I said "Oh, that's great, Mr. Mayor. I kind of felt that you would." I went back and I told the fellows, "You're with me. He's going to stay. He changed his mind." Those were two very memorable events that we had shared with one another. We went to the ballgame a couple of times out at Sox Park. He was a Sox fan, as you can understand. We enjoyed each other's company.

RVR: Did you ever go to his house?

GD: No. I think that I was in his house once. I went in the basement. There wasn't anything that attracted our attention. We just wound up there for a few minutes and that was it.

RVR: Do you remember anything about the University of Illinois at Chicago, how he brought the campus here?

GD: Well, I'll tell you, I was a member of the legislature at that time. I think you'll have to check the records on that. But he was working with somebody. I can recall as I sit here, not too much. But I can recall that the Republicans didn't want it at the same place. I'd be out of the chamber. Somebody would come running up to me saying "George, you'd better get back in there." I can't think of the Republican. He was the leader. He was on the

floor, trying to stop it from going on the west side of Chicago. So I'd get on the floor and stop it. He encouraged me to do everything that I could to assist the university coming in.

RVR: Do you remember what you did?

GD: Well, I got up on the floor and made a speech (laughs).

RVR: Okay (laughs).

GD: But everybody knew who I was speaking for. You know, there wasn't any question in anybody's mind about that.

RVR: He talked to you about it, then?

GD: Oh, he came down there. He came down to Springfield. He spoke to the entire house. There wasn't any question about that.

RVR: He was the mayor, then?

GD: Yes.

RVR: I see. And you were his floor manager?

GD: Right.

RVR: Why did he want the University of Illinois to set up a campus here?

GD: Well, he felt that it would enable people to more conveniently get that higher education and that they wouldn't have to travel. And I'm sure that was one of the principle motivators.

RVR: Was he ever disappointed in what they set up?

GD: I don't recall that. Whatever it was that you're referring to, there wasn't any major acknowledgement as far as I can recall.

RVR: Well, the faculty and the students would boo him, you know, when he came on campus (laughs).

GD: Well, of course. The motivating factors don't necessarily always relate to true facts.

RVR: Right. That's very true. Could you tell us something about his character? What kind of a man was he?

GD: Well, I think that he was a fine man. That's the proper description. As I said in my opening remarks, he was a fine man. And his family is following in his tradition.

RVR: Right. How did he operate? Did he use jobs to get people to do what he wanted them to do?

GD: Well, he used jobs to assist people. I wouldn't say that he did it to get people to do what he wanted them to do. I don't know that that would be the proper total analysis of his motivations. He helped a lot of people in a lot of ways. I can recall the time that I didn't want to become a member of the county board. I was on the central committee. They had a meeting and I went over to attend the meeting. He said, "No, no. Don't come to the meeting." I said, "Why not?" He said, "I want you to present yourself." I said, "I've been a member. They know me (GD and RVR laugh). I didn't think, you know, that my being present or absent would have any bearing on it. I don't want the job. And I'll just explain that." He said, "No, no. You go." So I went in before the committee and I told them precisely that. Then I left and I went back to work at the park district. I was in the office at the park district and the phone rang. It was my custom that I'd pick up the phone and I'd say, "It's George Dunne." And a voice said "George, this is Dick." I said, "Who?"

And he never referred to himself by that. He was always Mayor Daley. He said, "I'll tell you what we did." I said "Well, is it necessary, Mr. Mayor, for you to call me and tell me? It's perfect. It's fine with me. No one wants it." He said, "I'll tell you what to do. Jump in the cab." We were meeting then in the Sherman Hotel. Do you know where the Sherman is? So I went up there along with Joe Gill and Tom Donovan. We're standing out there and I said, "Listen you. I don't want that job. He said "Here, take these papers and sign them." I said, "No. I can't do that." So, the mayor came out of the room and he said, "Why don't you accept it, George? It's a very important, responsible position. And you'll make good money there. It won't be hard." So I said, "Okay! I'll sign it! Okay!" So I signed it. And I became a member of the county board.

RVR: Did you always call him Mr. Mayor?

GD: Oh yes.

RVR: You never called him Dick?

GD: Oh no.

RVR: In all of the years that you knew him?

GD: Right.

RVR: He was the chairman of the Democratic Party.

GD: Yes.

RVR: He once said that he was going to resign when he became mayor, but he didn't. Do you know why?

GD: Well, I guess he liked the job (GD and RVR laugh). That's about the best way I can put it!

RVR: It was a good job. I thought he felt that the best way to control the city was to be both mayor and chairman of the party.

FWB: When did you first meet the mayor? Do you remember that time?

GD: Well, I was active in the Forty-second ward Democratic organization for a long, long time. So at some point in time, during that tenure, I got to know him. And Senator Connors, who was the committeeman for the Forty-second ward was a great booster of mine. I started in politics just as a kid, really as a kid. Senator Connors asked me to become a precinct captain. I said "Sure, I'll be a precinct captain." Then I got acquainted with the mayor. Let's see. We had Mayor Kelly prior to Mayor Daley. There was another gentleman.

RVR and FWB: Kennelly?

GD: I think that was probably it. And during their time in office, I got acquainted with them. Mayor Daley became, Clerk of the Cook County Board. There was no question about it. I got acquainted with him in that regard. He took a shine to me, as they say. We got acquainted very well. I think his whole ingenuity and contribution to the city, the county at that time, was very good. He just loved it and worked right with it.

RVR: What do you think his best contribution to the city was?

GD: Well, it's pretty hard to say. There were so many. His natural way of life, you might say, was a contribution of importance to the city.

RVR: Why was he such a good mayor, in your mind? Why?

GD: Well, as I say, he was a good mayor because that's all he knew, and that's all he wanted. And he continued to serve.

RVR: How was he with finance, the budget?

GD: Well, I don't know in what sense you mean it. There were several ways, I suppose. I never found him to be short of cash or long on cash. I think the best way that I might be able to describe it is that he was not moderate. Let me say that he was a conservative person and in his own personal life. And he exercised that same spirit in the office of mayor.

RVR: What do you think was his greatest talent?

GD: Well, I would say that his greatest talent was the fact that he respected everybody. That was a talent. It was an exceptional one for a man in his position.

RVR: Did you ever see him lose his temper?

GD: Oh, I don't know that I can recall him losing his temper. I know that there were times of disappointment. But it didn't affect his way of life, you might say.

RVR: And how he handled people?

GD: Well, he handled people pretty well.

RVR: He did?

GD: It's been the conclusion of my appraisal.

RVR: And he pretty much made your life what was, I mean, directed it.

GD: Yes.

RVR: And it's always been with the party.

GD: That's right.

RVR: And it's been in an elected office.

GD: That's correct.

RVR: That's a great legacy that you have, too.

GD: He made most of it.

RVR: He did.

GD: Right.

RVR: What do you think you ever did that was the best thing you ever did?

GD: In what regard?

RVR: I mean politically, as an officer of the city.

GD: Well, that's pretty difficult to separate things. You know, the way I started out, I'll tell you this. I don't care whether you record it or not. But one day I was in the house. There were eight kids in the family. I was in about the middle of the group. I don't remember my age at that time. But I would say it was somewhere around eight years of age. My mother was standing and talking to a man by the name of Mr. Barrett. He said to her, I'd like to have one your boys come over to the polling place and pass out these cards tomorrow. And I'll give him fifty cents (laughs)." In those days, fifty cents was a good

amount of money. So she turned to me and said "George, you meet Mr. Barrett tomorrow at the other grocery store."

So the next day I went over there. And I never saw the grocery store look like it did (RVR laughs)! It had all of these big booths and everything. It was a polling place. I didn't know what it was. But at any rate, I passed out the cards and everything. And every election, from then on, Mr. Barrett would call me. And I would go over and do whatever he wanted me to. As time went on, there were some changes made in the organization. The committeeman died. Senator Connors had ultimately become the committeeman.

He called me over one day, or he talked to Mr. Barrett first. Mr. Barrett came to see me. I was working at school for the florist, on State Street across from the Cathedral. I was over in the church decorating for Holy Day, planting plants and things around. And he said to me "George, Mr. Connors would like you to take a job as precinct captain. Burns is running against him in this particular precinct that had been Burns's. They want you to go in there. We're not kidding ourselves. We expect our precinct. We go our way, but we have to cover it." So I said, "Sure. I'll take it."

So, from that point on, I was a precinct captain. And ultimately, Senator Connors sent me to Springfield. And I can remember very distinctly telling him, "You don't have to give this to me. There's a lot of people to give this to." He said, "Never mind. You take it. And I'll take care of the rest." So the next day, I went in to see him. I hadn't told anybody. And he said to me, "What do you think of Eddie Ghana? He came in to see me yesterday. He wanted a job. I told him, 'No. You don't even live in the district, Eddie (RVR laughs).'" He said, "You can forget it." He got up and he ran out of the office (RVR laughs). He said, "Do you know what? He came back in here this morning. You were a good man (GD and RVR laugh), a good selection." Poor Eddie, later on in life, he was a wonderful captain. He committed suicide.

RVR: When you were precinct captain, what did you do?

GD: You run the precinct.

RVR: How did you do that?

GD: Well, the first thing you've got to do is to get acquainted with all of the people in the precinct. Then, what you try to do is influence them to accept your recommendations concerning various candidates. You worked on election day itself. And you hired a few people to help you and you counted the returns.

RVR: Were you good at convincing people to vote for your candidates?

GD: Well, I tried to be good. And I would say that I was effective.

RVR: You were?

GD: Yes.

RVR: That's why he wanted you to go on the board.

GD: His motivation was that he knew he could count on me. He was a good man.

FWB: Why didn't you want to be chairman of the Cook County Board? You'd said that you were reluctant to be chairman of the Cook County Board. You didn't want the job. Why not?

GD: Initially. Well, I don't think that I was particularly hungry for the position, like some people. Whatever their motive was, I can't relate. But there were people who wanted to be that. The mayor said, "Do you know how many people would want to be this?" I said to him, "You'll have no trouble finding somebody (RVR laughs)."

FWB: But he trusted you in that position.

GD: Oh yes. I don't think that he ever had a quarrel or a disagreement in so far as the position.

FWB: When he passed away, you were in line for his successor, right? And you became the head of the Democratic Party for a while.

GD: Right.

FWB: What was your relation with Mayor Bilandic and then Mayor Byrne while you were on the Cook County Board? That's part of the scope of our project, too.

GD: Well, I had no problems with Mayor Bilandic because of the fact that, as I said, I didn't want the job. And not wanting the job, I wouldn't have a quarrel with somebody who did.

FWB: Did Bilandic want that job?

GD: Yes. I think he did. I don't recall the dates. He had the meeting. He was elected and he was selling members of the committee. I had been away in the service. He was kind of kidding me. He said, "How many of you people realize that George is a colonel (laughs)?" We all had a good laugh. But I had no problems with Bilandic or anybody else. I just wasn't, shall I say, too anxious, too ambitious, too hungry, or whatever you want to call it for any of the jobs.

FWB: What about with Mayor Byrne?

GD: Well, I got along with Jane Byrne all right. Although I was reading in the paper someplace that she disposed of me. But I can't recall her ever disposing of me (RVR laughs).

FWB: You were one of the most influential people who backed Mayor Harold Washington when he ran. That was one of the major accomplishments in that transition between Byrne and Washington.

GD: Well, I had no problems with Mayor Washington. He was a forthright fellow. And he let you know how he felt about anything. What happened there was that he won the primary and I was the chairman of the party. And I felt that as the chairman of the party, my responsibility was to accept the judgement of the voters of that party. And when they elected him to be the mayor, I met with him and I told him. He said "Well, that's fine. That's great. I'm glad to have your support."

FWB: When did you decide and why did you decide to leave the chairmanship of the Cook County Board?

GD: Well, I left the county board when I left the presidency of the county. I felt that I was getting old and there ought to be a young person. The young people should be encouraged to participate in politics for the good of the party and for the good of the individual. And those are the motivating factors.

FWB: I have a couple of questions on the functioning of Cook County Hospital, because that's under the authority of the board. Right (GD nods)? Did you know Karl Meyer?

GD: Yes.

FWB: Did you know him quite well? What was he like as a man?

GD: Well, he operated on me (laughs)!

FWB: Oh he did (FWB and RVR laugh)?

GD: (laughs) What happened was this. My doctor was Karl Meyer's partner, Dr. Capos. And I had appendicitis or gall bladder, one or the other. Of course, I had both of them at different times (RVR laughs). At any rate, Dr. Adalist, who was the county doctor that handled my case, told me what the analysis was. He said, "I think you ought to be

operated on, George. Who would you like to have operate?" I said "Well, I'd like to have Karl Meyer (laughs)." He said "Well, you picked the best." So Karl Meyer operated on me, he and his partner. They operated on me three times. But he was a fine man.

FWB: When he decided to retire, how did you choose his successor?

GD: Well, of course, they were kind of like in line, you might say. You're dealing now with professional people who have a mind and a desire of their own. And I went along with that.

FWB: What about the more reformer, Quentin Young? Do you remember Dr. Quentin Young? Do you remember dealing with him? He had a few harsh words about how the county hospital was being run in the seventies. I was just wondering, if there was any significant criticism, on how Cook County Hospital was being run, from within the professional staff.

GD: Well, I don't recall that there was ever any, what you would refer to, as a very serious objection. I can't operate on the basis that these are profession people. They're in a class by themselves. I went along with them. It seems to me in the back of my mind that there's somebody that was. I know this. There was this doctor. Oh, what hell was his name? Anyway, he was the head of the Medical Department. As you know, there are variations of medicines. There's a national organization. And he was the head of medicine, I think it was, at the county hospital. They came in and examined him. And they submitted a failure, that he wasn't up to it. I don't know how he got eliminated. But he was. He'd been very active in the formation of the unit of that kind of medicine and that he was supposed to be the top man at the county. And he's still running around. He keeps popping up. Do you know the man's name?

FWB: Yes. It's Quentin Young, I think. That's the guy. Yes. I was asking about him and your relations to him because he's been quite public over the last thirty years.

GD: Well, in the relationship that I had, and had he decided to stay, I wouldn't have taken any action against him. I think that it might have been people that held like positions that he had, but in a different administration of a particular type of medicine than they were in. I just think it's a shame that he did what he did.

FWB: What was your relationship with the alderman of that ward, Vito Marzullo? Do you remember Alderman Marzullo?

GD: Yes I do. Well, the Marzullo in the area, I believe, was for the county hospital. But I had no problem with him.

FWB: Okay. I was just wondering of your relationship with him and how that near west side functioned, because the county hospital was a very important position in there.

GD: I don't recall any problem.

FWB: Was there a lot of relationship in the county hospital with the University of Illinois Medical Center?

GD: Not that I recall.

FWB: A couple of times, there were a few attempts, when you wanted to renovate Cook County Hospital, there was some talk of when the new University of Illinois Hospital came in, in some ways sharing beds and facilities there.

GD: Well, I don't recall the conversations that were taking place, that they were creating a discord or something like that. In the main, I think that there was a lot of harmony. There may have been some discord, but not to the extent that it created an upheaval at the county hospital or the University of Illinois.

FWB: So you worked pretty well with the head of Rush, and the head of the U of I Medical Center?

GD: I don't recall any problems. Naturally, there were some occasions, I'm sure, where there may have been some disagreement, but not a problem that wasn't able to be resolved.

RVR: Do you have a position within the Democratic Organization today? Anything in the ward?

GD: Yes. I am the ward committeeman.

RVR: You still are a committeeman?

GD: Yes. I will hold that position until the termination of this office, my term, which will be in March.

RVR: Are you elected to that position?

GD: Yes.

RVR: That's by the voters?

GD: Right, by the Democratic voters. There's no salary connected with it.

RVR: No. You live on your retirement.

GD: That's right.

RVR: Yes. I did have one more question. Do you still have contact with the present mayor? Do you still see him?

GD: Right.

RVR: Does he ever ask you to do anything special?

GD: No.

RVR: Just deliver the votes.

GD: I've supported him every time he's ran for office.

RVR: Really?

GD: You know that he lost a couple of times?

RVR: Yes.

GD: Harold Washington beat him. Jane Byrne beat him. But I supported him every time. And I have no regrets for that.

RVR: Right. How does he compare with his father?

GD: Well, I think he's getting more and more like his father (laughs).

RVR: Well, that's not bad (laughs). I'm sure that he'd like to hear that.

GD: Yes.

RVR: He's a friend?

GD: Yes.

RVR: And so was the late mayor?

GD: Right.

RVR: It must have been a blow to you when Richard J. Daley died.

GD: Well, it was a blow. But I think that the good Lord kind of set me up for it. I realized that his days were numbered.

RVR: You did? Why? Did he act differently?

GD: Well you see, he told me that the doctors told him that he wasn't going to live too long. And his wife wanted him to live as long as he could, to take care of himself, and to not overwork. So naturally, when you get that kind of a reaction....

RVR: So you were prepared?

GD: Right.

RVR: Are you going to run again for this position?

GD: No. I'm through running (RVR laughs). After all, I'm ninety years old.

RVR: That's remarkable. You still have your hair (GD and RVR laugh).

GD: I know. It's getting white (GD and RVR laugh). Well, God has been good to me.

RVR: Is your wife alive?

GD: My first wife died. My second wife is still alive.

RVR: Good for you.

GD: We've been married for fifteen years. And now, I'm planning on leaving as I have for many years, at Christmas time, for Stowe Mountain, Vermont. And we take over a motel. There's thirty one of us (RVR laughs). We were there for a week.

RVR: That's great. Well, thank you very much.

GD: You're more than welcome.

RVR: Well, we're very grateful to you, Mr. Dunne.

*****END OF INTERVIEW*****