

**Ross R. Barnett, Oral History Interview – 5/6/1969**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Ross R. Barnett  
**Interviewer:** Dennis O'Brien  
**Date of Interview:** May 6, 1969  
**Place of Interview:** Jackson, Mississippi  
**Length:** 24 pages

**Biographical Note**

Barnett, governor of Mississippi from 1960 to 1964 known for his opposition to civil rights and integration, discusses his conflicts with the federal government over civil rights, his opposition to integrating Mississippi schools and universities, and Mississippi's economics during his governorship, among other issues.

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**Suggested Citation**

Ross R. Barnett, recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 6, 1969, (page number),  
John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Ross R. Barnett

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Oral History Interview

with

Ross R. Barnett

May 6, 1969  
Jackson, Mississippi

By Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BARNETT: As Governor of the State of Mississippi, I issued a proclamation in September of 1962 which states the salient legal point. The pertinent point at issue in September of 1962 was C-O-N-T-R-O-L. Who should exercise legal control over the activities of the University of Mississippi – the State of Mississippi, or the federal government? My position was that all legal control was vested in the State of Mississippi, and in no way did the United States Constitution give control to the federal government. The historical facts are that education has

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always been left to the states, or the individuals, to control. While the issue of control was paramount legally, it was really given added urgency by the issue of racial integration in the Southern states. Integration by force has led inevitably to black power and the anarchy that is displayed at the nation's leading universities. As to the issue of control, Senator James O. Eastland in a speech opposing the nomination of James Allen [James E. Allen] as Assistant Secretary of HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare] which was made recently referred to guidelines. It is reasonable to assume that I would not have been believed if I had predicted in 1962 what was going to happen in 1969 insofar as the extent or degree of federal control was concerned.

I testified before the United States Senate Commerce Committee on July 10, 1963, and I told the members of the Committee that in my humble opinion if they passed those civil rights proposals into law that were then pending in the Congress of the United States that it would bring about more turmoil and strife and bloodshed than they have ever heard of before. George Wallace [George C. Wallace], Governor of Alabama, testified to the same thing the next day, but they

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paid no attention to our warnings. They went right ahead and passed those civil rights laws. I remember distinctly that one of the Senators of Michigan asked me: "You said something a while ago about Communism being mixed up with all these sit-ins, marches and break-ins." I replied, "Yes sir, I said it a while ago, Senator, and I meant every word that I said." Then I added, "I believe it." The Senator then asked if I had any proof. He stated, "You're making a mighty serious charge here." I then answered, "Certainly, it's a serious charge, but I think it is just as true as two and two are four." He mentioned that he would like for me to offer some kind of proof. I said, "All right, Senator. Here is a picture that I am taking out of my briefcase of Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] sitting beside three or four known Communists while listening to a Communist lecture at Monteagle, Tennessee." When I handed him the picture he did not say a word.

Then I believe it was Senator Hart [Philip A. Hart] of Michigan who questioned me. "Isn't the fact that Mississippi has always maintained segregation one reason you are not getting any big industry in Mississippi today?" I said,

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"Senator, we have gotten two times as much industry in the last three years during my administration as ever before in the history of the State of Mississippi. By the way, Senator Hart, only a few weeks ago we were successful in securing the Oliver Company from Battle Creek, Michigan, with 400 male employees to locate at Vicksburg, Mississippi, and several others from Michigan in the last three years. We actually secured 427 new and expanded industries in three and one-half years." I noticed in the press about two months later in September of 1963 that Congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr. of Michigan made a statement and quoted me as having said that Mississippi had secured 427 new and expanded industries in three and one-half years and that he was going to investigate to find out what was happening to the communities to cause these industries to leave. I wired Congressman Diggs that the papers had quoted me correctly and that I had stated 427. However, my telegram to Congressman Diggs read: "Now, as of today, two months later, 492 new and expanded industries have located in Mississippi in three and one-half years." I have not heard from Mr. Diggs since.

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I believe that, in the retrospect, it seems reasonable to assume that if the federal government had cooperated with the leadership of Mississippi, as we requested, that the

federal government let the people of Mississippi solve its own internal affairs, the conditions in Mississippi and other states would be much better. If the federal government had permitted Mississippi to control its own schools and its own internal affairs, and if the federal government kept out of trying to operate the public schools, we would have all done better. I think the conditions at Columbia, Harvard, Cornell, Wisconsin, San Francisco State University and UCLA and other institutions would be better and that the conditions which confront them today would not be present if they had listened to the people of Mississippi and the leadership of Mississippi and other Southern states during my term as Governor of this great and sovereign state. If they had taken our advice and left off all those civil rights bills and let us operate our own schools and let Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, and all other Southern states operate their schools as they saw fit, they would not have all the trouble that they are having today. I do not understand why the leadership

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in the colleges and universities where the students go on strike and take over certain parts of the buildings and demand that the rules be changed, why is it that the presidents and administrators of those institutions do not lay down a rule to the effect that if you do not like the rules we promulgate you may get your hat and books and get out of here and stay out. That is what they should do. If they had any good common sense and backbone and a little courage, this is exactly what they would do. They would tell those unruly students to get out if they did not like their rules.

O'BRIEN: Back in 1960 when you first became Governor, did you sense that things were going to go the direction that they did between Mississippi and the federal government?

BARNETT: No, I did not think so. I did not think the federal government would try to control the affairs of Mississippi as they have. I believe in the tenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States; and I thought that the leadership in Washington would have a little respect for the tenth amendment, which clearly and unmistakably provides that the powers not delegated by the Constitution to the federal government and when not prohibited by the Constitution to the states belong to

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states or the people thereof.

O'BRIEN: Well, what happened to the Democratic Party in 1960 that they in Congress and the executive go the other direction from this and seek out stronger federal controls and federal activities in the states – states such as Mississippi?

BARNETT: The selfish and greedy liberal politicians tried to please the minority groups. They tried to sell our heritage and our traditions for what I would call a “mess of minority bloc votes,” and it kicked back in their faces

O'BRIEN: Did you try to tell the Democratic National Convention this?

BARNETT: I did in 1960. I was given five or six minutes on national television to oppose the platform on integration in the school and other obnoxious matters in the platform, including give-away programs. You know, I believe that people should be required to work for a living; I believe in sweat and toil and not giving away bread and circuses just to please minority groups. I believe in helping people who are down and out and who need help, but I do not believe in so many of the give-away programs that are being carried on now and heretofore.

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There was a colored boy in Leake County, my home county, who was approached by a cotton farmer. The farmer said, "Young man, I want to hire you to chop cotton." The colored boy asked him, "What will you pay me?" "Five dollars a day," the farmer replied. The boy answered, "I can make more than that going to school – the Great Society school." "Well," the farmer continued, "what are you studying in the Great Society school?" "Right now we're studying equations," the boy said. "What do you mean by equations?" The boy answered, "By equations we're taught that I equals you."

O'BRIEN: Before the election in 1960 all these people such as Senator Stuart Symington [William Stuart Symington], Senator Lyndon B. Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], Senator John F. Kennedy, and Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], were seeking the nomination for President; and you were here as Governor. Did either they or did anyone in their behalf ever come to Mississippi to get your support?

BARNETT: Oh, yes.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember what you told these various candidates?

BARNETT: All right, in 1960 at the Convention in Los Angeles, California, Senator James O. Eastland, Senator John Stennis [John C. Stennis], Walter Hester and I were together in Senator Lyndon

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Johnson's hotel room. Senator Eastland and Senator Stennis asked me to go with them to his room, and I said to them, "That is one man I cannot support." When they asked why, I replied, "Because he is a liberal." They said, "He's just like you are. He is not a liberal." So I went with them to his room, where he was eating a bowl of soup, tomatoes and okra. I told Mr. Johnson that Mississippians would not support him simply because he was a liberal. I told him, "I wish we could support you because you are from a nearby state, but if you are a liberal we are just not going to back you." He said, "I'm not a liberal." In a "Reader's Digest" I showed him an article which had been written by Lyndon Johnson and said to him,



“Here is an article by you in the “Reader’s Digest” which states that you’re a Senator, a Texan, a rancher, and a liberal.” Mr. Johnson said, “Do you know what I meant by the word liberal? I meant that I would be liberal in granting jury trials.” (He knew I tried many jury cases you know.)

O’BRIEN: What did you say to him then? Did you still tell him that you could not support him?

BARNETT: I told him that I could not support him. Then in 1960 Mississippi and Alabama voted for Senator Harry Byrd [Harry F. Byrd]

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of Virginia, and I think he got one or two votes maybe from other states – one, I believe, from Oklahoma.

O’BRIEN: One from South Carolina, too.

BARNETT: That is right. I think if the votes in Illinois had been counted correctly in 1960, we would have needed only four more votes to have thrown the election into the House of Representatives, and I believe that we could have gotten them probably from Arkansas. I think Harry Byrd would have been President if the election had been thrown into the House of Representatives.

O’BRIEN: Did you have any contact with people in behalf of Adlai Stevenson, for example, in 1960? Did they come around?

BARNETT: I made one speech for Adlai Stevenson over radio in Jackson, state-wide hookup, and we carried the state for him in 1952.

O’BRIEN: Right. This was 1956. How about 1960, though, when he was sort of a dark horse.

BARNETT: In 1960 we voted for Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia.

O’BRIEN: Remember, he did not know whether he was a candidate or not?

BARNETT: Do you mean what did our delegates do?

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O’BRIEN: Did anyone come to you and try to get your support for Adlai Stevenson?

BARNETT: For Adlai Stevenson, I don’t recall whether they did or not.

O'BRIEN: How about Senator Symington?

BARNETT: I don't think anyone asked me to support him – possibly one man did.

O'BRIEN: How about Senator Kennedy? Did anyone come in his behalf to you and seek your support?

BARNETT: You mean in 1960? I think so.

O'BRIEN: You do not happen to remember who it was, do you?

BARNETT: No, I don't.

O'BRIEN: Theodore C. "Ted" Sorensen or any of those people around him?

BARNETT: I do not remember who it was. There were a few saying a good word for him.

O'BRIEN: Right. In putting that campaign together in 1960, of course, you ran with the independent elector system. Was there any real split in the Democratic Party here in the state?

BARNETT: Not much. We carried the state for Harry Byrd.

O'BRIEN: Right. Did you have any opposition?

BARNETT: Yes, we had a lot of opposition.

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O'BRIEN: Who were they?

BARNETT: Well, they were people who wanted Kennedy elected.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember who they were here in the state?

BARNETT: I would not be for sure.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember any of the other people around him?

BARNETT: I don't recall who backed him that year. I did not hear much talk about it.

O'BRIEN: Did you go to the Southern Governors Conference in 1960 in September?

BARNETT: That was in Hot Springs, wasn't it? Yes, I was there.

O'BRIEN: What happened there? Did you sign that letter of support?

BARNETT: To Kennedy?

O'BRIEN: Yeah.

BARNETT: No.

O'BRIEN: Did the other governors try to put a lot of pressure on you?

BARNETT: No.

O'BRIEN: Did you try to pressure them?

BARNETT: No, I didn't try to pressure them. That was my first year as Governor. I believe Luther Hodges [Luther H. Hodges] of North Carolina was Chairman of the Southern Governors Conference that year. I believe they nominated Orval E. Faubus, and Price Daniel [Marion Price Daniel] of Texas. I voted for Faubus, but Daniel was elected.

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O'BRIEN: Do you remember anything in particular about those meetings that you might want to put down for the future?

BARNETT: No. I tried to get some of the others to vote with me for Faubus for Chairman of the Southern Governors Conference, but they claimed he was too controversial.

O'BRIEN: How did you happen to get involved in the House Rules Committee fight that was going on in '61?

BARNETT: House Rules?

O'BRIEN: Do you remember when they were attempting to expand the committees in the House of Representatives and the House Rules Committee?

BARNETT: You mean in the legislature?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

BARNETT: Here in Mississippi?

O'BRIEN: No, in Washington. You wrote some letters, didn't you, urging....

BARNETT: I don't recall whether I wrote any letters or not. That has been a long time. I usually went along with Senator Eastland, whatever he wanted up there in Washington. I figured he knew the situation there better than we did.

O'BRIEN: Did you and Senator Eastland see eye to eye on things pretty well?

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BARNETT: Oh, yes, we surely did.

O'BRIEN: How about Senator Stennis?

BARNETT: Well, I think he went along about the same way most of the time.

O'BRIEN: During those years that you were Governor there was a good deal of activity with the Civil Rights Commission. Did you ever encounter any of the people on that Civil Rights Commission? What did you think of them?

BARNETT: You mean the Civil Rights Commission in Washington?

O'BRIEN: Right. The national one.

BARNETT: No, no. I never did go before that Commission. The only Commission that I testified before was the United States Senate Commerce Commission. I was hoping that we could prevent the passage of all those foolish civil rights bills. Now here is a proclamation. Do you want me to read it?

O'BRIEN: As long as you have it printed, we could take it and just enter it in the record that way.

BARNETT: Suppose I just read it?

O'BRIEN: Okay.

BARNETT: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution nor prohibited by it to the States are

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reserved to the States respectively or to the people." These are not my words. This is the tenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, my friends and fellow Mississippians: I speak to you as your Governor in a solemn hour in the history of our great state and in our nation's history. I speak to you now in the moment of our greatest crisis since the War Between the States.

“In the absence of constitutional authority and without legislative action, an ambitious federal government, employing naked and arbitrary power, has decided to deny us the right of self-determination in the conduct of the affairs of our sovereign state. Having long since failed in their efforts to conquer the indomitable spirit of the people of Mississippi and their unshakable will to preserve the sovereignty and majesty of our commonwealth, they now seek to break us physically with the power of force.

“Even now as I speak to you tonight, professional agitators and the unfriendly liberal press and other trouble makers are pouring across our borders intent upon instigating strife among our people. Paid propagandists are continually hammering away at us in the hope that they

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can succeed in bringing about a division among us. Every effort is being made to intimidate us into submission to the tyranny of judicial oppression. The Kennedy Administration is lending the power of the federal government to the ruthless demands of these agitators. Thus we see our own federal government teamed up with a motley array of un-American pressure groups against us. This is the crisis we face today.

“Principle is a little word. It is easy to speak and to spell and in print is easily overlooked, but it is a word that is tremendous in its import and meaning denoting respect and obedience to those fundamental and eternal truths that should be respected and form the way of life of all honest and right-thinking people. Expediency is for the hour; principles are for the ages. Principles are a passion for truth and right and justice, and as long as the rains descend and the winds blow, it is but folly to build upon the shifting sands of political expediency. It is better for one’s blood to be poisoned than for him to be poisoned in his principles. So deep and compelling were the convictions and principles of our forefathers that they risked even death to establish this now desecrated Constitution as the American way of life and handed it to

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us in trust as our sacred heritage and for our preservation.

“The day of expediency is past. We must either submit to the unlawful dictates of the federal government or stand up like men and tell them no. the day of reckoning has been delayed as long as possible. It is now upon us. This is the day, and this is the hour. Knowing you as I do, there is no doubt in my mind what the overwhelming majority of loyal Mississippians will do. They will never submit to the moral degradation, to the shame and the ruin which have faced all others who have lacked the courage to defend their beliefs.

“I have made my position in this matter crystal clear. I have said in every county in Mississippi that no school in our state will be integrated while I am your Governor. I shall do everything in my power to prevent integration in our schools. I assure you that the schools will not be closed if this can possibly be avoided, but they will not be integrated if I can prevent it. As your Governor and Chief Executive of the sovereign State of Mississippi, I now call on every public official and every private citizen of our great state to join me.”

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O'BRIEN: Did things like the Civil Rights Commission ever get in the way of being Governor?

BARNETT: The Civil Rights Commission?

O'BRIEN: Did it ever really interfere with you? How about the Justice Department when it came in on the voter registration?

BARNETT: They did not come in while I was Governor. They came in while Paul Johnson [Paul B. Johnson, Jr.] was Governor.

O'BRIEN: Right. Weren't they investigating some of the counties?

BARNETT: Oh, yes, they've been doing that for the last fifty years.

O'BRIEN: Did they ever come to you in any way?

BARNETT: Well, there were a lot of them that would come to me and ask questions, you know.

O'BRIEN: How about the freedom riders, when the so-called freedom riders came in?

BARNETT: Well, we didn't have much trouble with the freedom riders. When they didn't obey the officials here in the City of Jackson in Hinds County, we just simply put them in jail, and when the jails were all filled and the mayor's chicken coops down on the fairground were all filled, there were thirty-two of them left, and it was

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my happy privilege to send all of them to the State Penitentiary at Parchman and put them in maximum security cells. We put them in maximum security cells so they would be protected, you see. You haven't heard of any more freedom riders in Mississippi.

O'BRIEN: What did you tell the Justice Department about it? They took a particular interest in this, didn't they?

BARNETT: About freedom riders?

O'BRIEN: Right.

BARNETT: Well, I just told them they had to obey the laws in Mississippi if they came here, that we would obey the laws of other states when we went into other states. I believe in obeying the laws of any state when you go into it.

O'BRIEN: You went to Washington, was it 1962, with the poultry....

BARNETT: Yes. I went with a petition. First, I called a meeting of the governors or representatives of agriculture of the poultry-raising states. The main states seemed to be Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Maryland and Delaware and a few others. I called a meeting here in Jackson. I remember Governor Elbert N. Carvel from Delaware spent the night at the mansion. We had a nice

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meeting here and then I went to Washington with a petition before President Kennedy. I remember Governor J. Millard Tawes [John Millard Tawes] was there of Maryland, and Governor S. Ernest Vandiver [Samuel Ernest Vandiver, Jr.] was there from Georgia and some other governors and President Kennedy was very courteous to us. He gave us a hearing, and we got some results.

O'BRIEN: Was that the first time that you met him and seen him?

BARNETT: I believe it was the only time I went before him, yes.

O'BRIEN: Did you meet him in 1960 at the Convention?

BARNETT: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember anything about those meetings?

BARNETT: No. He was shaking hands around.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get involved in any patronage matters with Mississippi, the appointment of Mississippi to federal jobs, judgeships and things like this? Did you ever recommend anyone?

BARNETT: No. I did recommend Harold Cox [William Harold Cox] for United States District Judge while I was Governor, and he was appointed. I recommended him to Senator Jim Eastland, and I believe that Jim Eastland presented his name to the President.

O'BRIEN: Senator Eastland handled the patronage then, for the most part?

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BARNETT: That's right.

O'BRIEN: You did a lot to promote economic growth, bringing business into Mississippi,

and things like that.

BARNETT: That's right. You see that schedule behind you there? That shows that I made thirty-five trips throughout all areas of the nation. It shows the dates and the number of contacts and the number of miles we traveled during my four years. That means that we made thirty-five different trips, and we contacted six hundred and fifty-nine groups. And this state actually secured five hundred and fifty-five new and expanded industries during our four years as governor. I recommended a program that the legislators enacted into law that helped bring in many industries. The legislators are entitled to a lot of credit because they passed an economic development program known as the "Bill of Rights for Business and Industry," forty-one different laws, such as reducing the income tax from 6 percent to 3 percent, giving extra exemptions, giving industry the same ad valorem tax exemption that other states were giving – that helped get the big Standard Oil Refinery down in Pascagoula – and taking over the port at Gulfport and building a great banana terminal there helped a lot. I noticed in

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the press not long ago that Standard Fruit Company of New Orleans left there and went to Gulfport with a thousand employees.

Well, we put the right-to-work law in the state constitution, and we lent the full faith and credit of the State of Mississippi to the grain elevator proposal down at Pascagoula, and that's a huge concern now. We passed a lot of laws creating industrial parks and giving aid to communities, engineering aid, if the community wanted an industrial park whether it was five acres or one hundred and fifty or two hundred acres. The State helped them financially. We passed a program that was named the "Bill of Rights for Business and Industry." We amended the Constitution so that industrialists could purchase sixteenth section school lands. The officials of the Standard Oil Company said they could not locate here if the company could not buy sixteenth section school lands down in the Bayou Casotte area at Pascagoula. We gave everyone an extra one thousand dollars state income tax exemption. Do you know what has happened about reduction of the income tax from 6 to 3 percent? Some people said it would break the state. Instead of breaking the state, we began to collect six to seven million dollars

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more than we ever collected under the 6 percent basis simply because it helped bring in a lot of people. In July, 1960, you will find from the census report that our population started increasing. It increased rapidly for the next three or four years.

O'BRIEN: Did you have much help from the United States Commerce Department?

BARNETT: No, I did not ask for it. You have to do your own helping about getting industry here. You have to call them yourself. The Governor has to call them



and get appointments and go there and sell them a bill of goods. They will listen to a governor. I mean, maybe they will give him an appointment whereas they won't give someone else one. And you will see from that chart that some trips I would have as many as thirty-eight appointments. On one trip I had twenty-six appointments, and one trip I believe there were one hundred and twenty appointments.

O'BRIEN: I know you are very busy, but I came down with the intention of letting you tell your story about what it was like to be Governor. I don't know whether you want to continue this at another time or whether you would like to say more and think about it. Since I will be here for a few days, I could call you later.

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BARNETT: Well, I do not think of anything else. I told you my ideas about the Constitution of the United States and the tenth amendment and that we thought we had a right to control our own schools. And I still think the acts of the United States Supreme Court were ultra vires. I think the actions of the Supreme Court were beyond the scope of its authority if they would abide by the Constitution of the United States.

O'BRIEN: Do you think an interview like this is worthwhile?

BARNETT: Yes. Did you know that the United States Supreme Court held that a law which was passed by the legislature of New York state was unconstitutional? I believe it was passed during Thomas E. Dewey's administration or maybe after that. The legislature of New York state passed a law giving the trustees of schools the power and the authority to fire a school teacher if they found he was a Communist, and it gave the trustees authority to refuse to hire teachers if they thought they were Communists. The Supreme Court of the United States said the State of New York did not have any authority to pass a law like this. I think this is down-right ridiculous, not letting the states take care of their own problems.

O'BRIEN: You're very busy. Thank you, Governor Barnett.

BARNETT: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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