Legislative Research On the Road: The Problems of Access

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(written on evening of October 21, 1980 in
Holiday Inn, Montgomery, Alabama)

My problems in getting here, and knowing how to get here and trying to
figure out where "here" ought to be have been enormous. Earlier this month,
I talked with (Rochester colleague) Harold Stanley. He offered to call a
lawyer friend of his in Alabama, Mike Waters. Mike once played football with
Jim's brother Jack and once played in a rock band with Jim. Harold calls
Mike. Mike calls Jack and tells him about me. Mike calls Harold and says
Jack Folsom is working in his brother's campaign and suggest I call. I call Jack
Folsom, and he says "You want to spend some time with the candidate, don't
you?" I say yes; and we make a tentative date for October 20. I tell Harold
"It was too easy." (I have come to travel with former Alabama Governor Jim Folsom
now running for U.S. Senate.)

A week later, I called to check on our arrangements and I get Rachel,
the scheduler. She turns out to be Jim's sister, though I didn't know it
at the time. She says to me "The 20th is not a good time." When I mention
the possibility of riding in the car, with the candidate, she says "The answer
to that is uh uh. He's tired and he needs to rest when he's in the car." She
suggests I go to Huntsville on the 22nd, and "get a car and follow him." She
tells me that he'll be back in Birmingham that night. She tells me to call her
when I get to Huntsville and she'll tell me what his schedule is there so,
presumably, I can watch him. I ask her if she can give me a "maybe" that I
could get to talk to Jim if I come down to Alabama. She says "I can't promise
you anything. I can give you a maybe maybe." With that, I tell her I'll come
down and that I'll call her from Huntsville.

At that point I'm pretty well stymied. I decide that it makes no sense
at all to go to Huntsville. I would be wandering around by myself, possibly
without any contact person, not knowing where to stay, then driving back to
Birmingham for the night activity, possibly never even getting to say hello
to the candidate. I'd be altogether on my own, without any moorings or sign
posts, so I decide my best course is to go straight to Montgomery on the 21st,
take a taxi to headquarters, arrive with my bags and put the ball in their
court, hoping to create a personal contact of some sort. I figure that I'll
play it by ear once they see me, and I see them. My plan is to throw myself
on their mercy.

I did just that today. I arrived at the Montgomery headquarters this
afternoon suitcase in hand, and asked for Rachel. And the first thing I learn
is that Rachel has no mercy! She does not know the meaning of the word. She
is the coldest hearted person in Alabama. I walk in to her office and say,

"Hi, I'm the guy who called you from New York last week, the guy Mike
Waters called you about."

"Oh, yes."

"I just thought I'd stop in and say hello and check on the schedule."

"I thought you were going to Huntsville."

"Well, I just wanted to drop by before I did anything and let you know
what I'm doing. My bags are out there by the door. I just got in."

"I'm very sorry but there just isn't any way you are going to be able
to ride with Jim."

"What does the schedule look like?"

She gets it out, goes through it, and comments at each point how busy
it is, e.g., "There's no possibility tonight. He gets in too late."

"It turns out he flies to Huntsville tomorrow with his wife, tours NASA,"
holds a press conference, goes to a "private" luncheon and then flies back to Birmingham. We talk a little about distances for me if I drive, how I would catch up with him, who I might contact there (she doesn't know); and it soon becomes clear that for me to drive 4 hours to Huntsville would be a great waste of time. So, mentally, I cross that off.

Later in our conversation I say "I'd drive the 4 hours to Huntsville if you could find me 20 minutes to talk with Jim." She says, "I don't see how I can do that. I'm sorry. Your best bet is to go to Birmingham and you can catch him at the blue grass and hot dogs dinner tonight and talk to him then." (They expect 500 people.) I say "That will probably be a mad house." She agrees and says, again, "I'm sorry I can't help you."

I then move to discuss Thursday and the possibility of renting a car and following him around in Birmingham that morning and to some outlying areas the next day. "You could go to Sears Roebuck tomorrow. He'll be there in the morning. But then the University tour would be a problem. And then there's a private lunch." She proceeds to go through the rest of the day, Montevallo, Chilton County and Cullman County indicating that he'll be flying part of that time.

"It's too bad you can't follow him on one of his whistlestop tours, hand-shaking in the little towns and the court houses. That's when he's at his best. He doesn't like this other kind of campaigning. If you followed him on a whistlestop tour, you could follow him easily in your car. But that won't be till the 27th."

"I need only 15 minutes. Is there any leg of his travels that I could join him for on Thursday--for just 15 minutes?"

"I know you want to talk with him, but I can't promise you anything. If you rode with him to Chilton, you'd be left there without a car."
first time, she smiles. The thought of me stranded in the Alabama boondocks give her unconcealable pleasure!

"I'll worry about that when I have to. I've come a long way to talk with your brother."

"I'm sorry I can't promise you anything. I can't put you in the car with Jim."

There are long pauses during all this. She is eating her fried chicken lunch from a Colonel Sanders bucket. And when the pause gets excruciatingly long I say "I'm just trying to figure out what to do." She nods. In the early part of this I do tell her the other Senators I've travelled with, but she is totally unimpressed. "Good luck with your book," she says. She could care less about the rest of the world. I go through my spiel partly because I hope it will ring a bell and partly because I don't know what in hell to say to her.

I then take a different tack and ask her who I could contact to help me follow Jim around Birmingham on Thursday in my rented car. She mentions the name, Mark Lovelady. "I don't know whether Mark is in town or not. Maybe he's going to Huntsville. Maybe he's up there now, I'm not sure. But he'll be with Jim on Thursday."

"I then ask her if I can talk to campaign manager John Guthrie, who, it turns out, is Jim Folsom's father-in-law. She says "yes, that would be helpful," and says John Guthrie will come to the Headquarters "later." I ask if I can talk to the elder Mr. Folsom. She says "My father is in the hospital. He's not very well." So I get up saying, "OK I'll wait and talk to Mr. Guthrie when he gets back."

I get up to leave and she says something about "Jack." I say "Can I meet Jack." We walk out of her room and bump into Jack. I introduce myself.
"Hello Mr. Feeno. I'm glad to meet you. When did you get here?"

"About a half hour ago."

"Let me introduce you to Mark Lovelady." He had been standing right outside Rachel's door(!) "Mr. Feeno called me on the telephone. He's from New York. He's writing a book. You want some time with Jim, don't you."

"I sure would."

"Well, we'll do that. We sure will. You've come all the way from New York. We'll get you some time. It's too bad you didn't come in earlier. Jim just left(!) You could have gone with him today. Let me go talk to Rachel about this."

He talks to Rachel. While he talks to Rachel, Mark Lovelady asks if I've ever seen Southern politics. I say yes. Mark tells me I really would like to go politicking in rural areas where, among other things, "they pass the hat." I tell him I once passed the hat for a southern congressman. We strike up a conversation. Mark Lovelady turns out to have been Folsom's college roommate.

I go with Jack to his office, where Jack ruminates about what to do with me. The telephone rings. It's "Big Jim." It turns out he had been in the hospital but is home now! Jack indicates to me that he's going to put me on the phone. He talks to his dad and then says "There's a man here I want to have talk to you. His name is Richard Feeno. He's from Rochester, N.Y. He's writing a book about the Senate and he's down here to learn about Alabama politics."

"Hello, Mr. Folsom."

"Hello there. So you've come down here to learn about Alabama politics."

"Yes, and about your son."
"My son is going to be Senator. I'll tell you why. He isn't a lawyer."

"We've got too many of them already."

"The fellow he beat in the primary was a lawyer; but Jim isn't. The other fellow was a Senator, too. The lawyers take out of one pocket, and Senators take out of one pocket. Senators who are lawyers take out of two pockets. The other fellow lost; Jim is going to be a Senator."

"Good, that's what I came down here for."

"You want to learn about Alabama politics. I've lived here a long time and I never learned all there was to learn about Alabama politics."

"I don't believe that. I'll bet I could learn an awful lot from you. I guess I came here too late."

"Well, I wish you a lot of luck. It's been nice talking to you."

"It's been a privilege for me."

"Put John Guthrie on will you?"

He was calling to report to Jack and John something he had read in the paper. Jack arranges for me to ride up to Birmingham tomorrow with Mark Lovelady. We'll have to see what happens when I get there....