

Methodist University Community Oral History Project
Methodist University
Fayetteville, NC

Ean C. Gitchell

Interview Conducted by
Carl Dyke
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Descriptive Table of Contents:

- 0:21 -Gitchell feels like he's part of a movement; people are frustrated, looking for "non-conventional political social solutions"
- Donald Trump fills a need at a time of political dysfunction
- 0:46 -people have trepidation about jobs, dwindling manufacturing base, trade
- immigration: America previously had "responsible immigration," respecting "civility and the law;" has gotten away from that because of dysfunctional bureaucracy
- 1:40 -in a polarized political context, Trump supporters want solutions ("in appropriate fashion through the political system")
- people want leadership, which Trump embodies
- 2:56 -the political process will test Trump to see if he can put America back on its course of fifty years ago
- leadership can inspire Americans to "see that city on a hill"
- 4:03 -reflections on America thirty, forty, fifty years ago
- this part of America—the South? North Carolina?—had textile and other manufacturing, a middle class; by contrast, today even college-educated workers lack skills for today's economy
- 4:40 -with hard work, people could "work their way into the middle class"
- the political system's restraints on business, other factors, have caused those jobs to disappear
- 5:26 -economic fears have turned political discourse "downright hostile at times"
- "in America, what makes this country great is the individual;" the individual losing a stake in things to oligarchs and monarchs will cause us to lose hope
- 6:21 -reflections on Gitchell's own political journey
- started out conservative; describes self as "a Constitutional conservative, a libertarian-minded person"
- 6:55 -agrees with Senator Bernie Sanders on some things, but not enough
- Gitchell has "moved on from the conservative camp" to thinking America needs "more government intervention"
- 7:29 -struggled economically after September 11, 2001, leading to his doubting the system
- but has confidence in the individual's ability still to "do okay" in America today
- 8:02 -has evolved to want government to do less, people to do more, communities to do more
- hopes that Trump will challenge states and local leaders, individuals to do more
- 8:53 -what does he hope Trump will say? Hopes to hear about belief that America can be great again
- there's not "a solution in Raleigh or Washington, D.C.," but people can be inspired "to do what is morally right, what is prudent" economically

10:09 -in Trump's business experience, he showed ethics; Gitchell wants Trump to challenge business leaders to have ethics again

-sees flaws in Trump's political "messaging"

10:41 -disappointment in the tone of the current campaign (in general terms, seemingly, not specific to Trump)

-Gitchell worked in education, wants individuals to be inspired

11:40 -looking for economic solutions; perhaps they will come from Methodist University, via GoFundMe capital investment?

-people want hope that government will do what's right and enable people to pursue opportunity

12:42 -Trump's hopeful, ambitious rhetoric is what appeals to people across party lines

-Gitchell doesn't like Trump's personal attacks on opponents, is wary of Trump's rambling rhetorical style; Trump is "creating a whole new, different art of speechwriting"

14:33 -might prefer if Trump were more concise and more rhetorically effective

-Trump's rhetorical style might stem from his being a political amateur

15:10 -placing Trump's campaign in historical context: comparisons between Trump and Theodore Roosevelt

-but "TR was a statesman, and we've yet to see statesmanship from Mr. Trump"

15:40 -hoping that Trump, like Roosevelt, can get things done

-compares Trump to Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in using inspiring words

16:20 -Trump has defied explanation, expectations; Gitchell finds this intriguing. "Intrigue is why I'm here"

-notes a "P.T. Barnum element" to what's happening, finds it unpredictable

16:57 -compares Trump's situation now to Reagan's in 1976 and 1980 in their need to campaign in North Carolina during the primaries

-in those campaigns, Reagan made the case for a "return to Jeffersonian principles and federalist policies"

17:57 doesn't know if Trump today will be part of that same process; it's hard to tell from Trump's inconsistent language

-evidence of America's decline: the weak dollar, unemployment that's worse than the statistics say, manufacturing in decline, declining innovation

20:30 -people feel they can't control outcomes, feel that the game is rigged

-what unites Americans is the ability to "turn the corner"

21:00 -what turned the corner in the Gilded Age was policies that "leveled it to a degree" (leveled the playing field? Leveled economic inequality?)

-reflections on American exceptionalism, wanting to teach that "in a way that is respectful toward . . . all groups of people;" America's greatness gives freedom to all groups of people

22:10 -believes divine providence will steer leaders

-Gitchell is "ambivalent" about the campaign, but excited by the groups of people feeling hope

23:37 -seeing this involvement (as well as involvement in favor of Sanders) is "good for the republic"

-compares Sanders to Eugene V. Debs, and perhaps William Jennings Bryan, although the Progressives may have "overreached"

24:27 -we're still evaluating Trump; Gitchell is probably 75-70% behind Trump, acknowledges some question marks about him

-thinks Trump can be "a greater candidate than what he is being"

25:10 -hopes Trump's rise will reverse America's decline

-but that improvement may come from the people challenging candidates to be better candidates

26:02 -perhaps there's too much disconnect between leaders and the people

-perhaps a Sanders rally with a more social-media savvy audience might do a better job challenging candidates

26:55 -hopes for the return of the industrial base in North Carolina; maybe Trump can reverse a declining economy and infrastructure

Interview of

EAN C. GITCHELL

Interviewed by

CARL DYKE

0:01

DYKE: There we go. Okay, so this is Carl Dyke. I'm here with Ean Gitchell. We are at the Fayetteville Coliseum for the [Donald] Trump rally on March 9th, 2016.

0:13

GITCHELL: Yes.

0:14

DYKE: Yup. And we're just collecting history here. So Ean, why are you here?

0:22

GITCHELL: Well I feel part of a movement. I think people are frustrated, they're looking for a non-conventional political, social solutions, if you will. And Trump fills a need at a time when you have dysfunction in our political system. And I think that's why you have all these people coming out. People have trepidation about their daily lives as to whether jobs that have traditionally been here are gonna be here generations from now. Our manufacturing base in this country is dwindling. Mr. Trump obviously speaks to some concerns about trade and the United States as a producing, as a maker-country. And that's what I feel a lot of his rise is. Obviously the immigration issue, in terms of—we have traditionally been a country that had responsible immigration. We want immigrants, but we want to do

it in a way that respects civility and the law. And we've really gotten away from that, I think, with bureaucracy and, again, our political system at the federal, state, and local level—it's not working for immigration. So again, Mr. Trump speaks to some of those concerns. So I think as much as there's the polarization and the animus tenor of the discourse politically, I think that people here want solutions. And they don't want it in the manner of—they want it in democratic and appropriate fashion through the political system, not through—. And that's why they're here. They're here, I think, it's looking for, can someone step to the plate? I always take it back to the great Michael J. Fox line in the movie *The American President*, that line when he's like, "People want leadership so bad," he tells—Michael Douglass is playing the president—he tells him, "they want leadership so bad that they'll run through the sand for a mirage and drink the sand," because that, for them, is leadership. And I think Trump embodies that right now, just to the fact that he is the man for the times. Whether or not, going forward, he ever becomes president, the point is that he stepped up—he's willing to step up, I think, and many Americans, as you can see here today, admire him for that. And, you know, they're gonna see if he can be—the process will test him to see whether or not he can be someone who can make history, you know, put America back on a course that it was fifty years ago or forty years ago, thirty-some-odd years ago. So I think that's why the outpouring of support. You know, some of it's unfortunate, but it—again, the hope that it can get better. I really feel hopeful today. I look around today, and it's a beautiful day. I feel hopeful that—. I think people here are about solu—they want solutions, they're willing to work for solutions. They're willing, as Americans, to pull up their pants, you know, not just go out and vote, but I think they're willing to, you know, do what it takes. If they have that leadership again that will inspire them to do it, I think we can see that City on the Hill that, you know, a lot of us—can Trump bring us back to that, you know, that Morning in America, City on the Hill belief of thirty-some-odd years ago. So, you know, we'll see whether it's wishful thinking or whether it's going to be a

reality. So I think that's where we're at now. That's why we're here. There's a curiosity, that's why we're here.

4:01

DYKE: Yeah. Fantastic. Okay. So you mentioned that sort of, thirty, forty, fifty years ago, that's sort of the model that's the target. So when you think of America at that time, what do you think about?

4:15

GITCHELL: Well, I think in this part of the country, as you know, you had textile mills. You had a manufacturing base. Which, for a lot of people, that's the ticket to the middle class. You know, I mean, it's great for everyone—I went to college and stuff, but I find that even in a society where people are highly educated, they often don't have—the skills aren't there. The economy will change, and certain skills aren't needed. There used to be a backbone in terms of manufacturing, and regardless of what variance you'd have on the local economy, people were able to fall back on a textile mill or a printing plant or a tire plant, and they could, through hard work and dedication, work their way into the middle class. And that's not here. And that's not there anymore. Trade deals are not working. With the political system that puts such restraints on business, there's a variety of factors—the greed factor, too—that it's just cheaper to do business outside the United States right now. And that, again, the jobs are not here. You don't have people having a ticket to the middle class, people are having a harder time getting ahead, and there's fear with that. And it's, you know, it's made the discourse this year become pretty downright hostile at times. But it's where we're—. So again, we're here, again, we're drinking the sand for leadership. We want to hear solutions. We want to hear, is there hope for this? Can this get better? And, you know, like I say, he stepped up to the plate right now at a time that others could've. I do think in America, what makes this country great is the individual. And that's why it's

worth fighting for being a free country. Because if we lose where the individual can have a stake in things, and we just concede it to someone else, you know, oligarchs and monarchs, I think we lose what hope that God has for mankind, I really believe that.

6:22

DYKE: So I think you've already said a whole bunch of things about this next question, but—

6:27

GITCHELL: Go ahead, go ahead.

6:27

DYKE: —just to sort of fill in. So when you think about your political journey, from your first awareness about politics, and obviously you're a well-informed guy, I mean, who knows, I mean—. Were you always well-informed, and, like—

6:42

GITCHELL: [Laughs.] I try to be!

6:42

DYKE: —and then, how did you used to think, and, you know, have you evolved over time?

6:48

GITCHELL: You know, I will say, I started off pretty conservative. I became a little more like—like, Bernie S—we talk about Bernie Sanders, I'm from Vermont—there's things I agree with Bernie on. But there's

not enough things that Bernie is—. You know, I'm a constitutional conservative, I'm a libertarian-minded person. And a lot of stuff, he just doesn't, he doesn't—on economic and social issues and economic policy, with the exception of trade and more institutional economic policy—I differ on him. He just doesn't—. But I've moved on from the conservative camp to being a more, where we needed—we need more government intervention. There's times in my life where I had real doubts, you know, after 9/11 I had some, you know, economic struggle. I had doubts in the system. But there again it's back to the individual. This country's still—you want to go out, you want to struggle, you want to take some lumps and get back up. The truth is, you can still survive out there, you can do—not that you're always gonna get rich, but you can do okay. And that's still somewhat around America. I mean, I've worked at it and I do okay. So I've evolved in that into believing that government can do less, people need to do more, communities need to do more. And we're looking for someone that can inspire us. [John] Kasich in the last debate I thought was great about challenging communities. Because municipalities, local government, civic leaders, we can do more and less from the federal level. I hope to hear more of that from Trump today. I think he's—that there's gonna be some big ideas in terms of challenging states and local leaders to do more, for the individuals to do more. We can do so much if we get involved and we [are willing] to work together, be creative, I think there's enormous—. So we have to rediscover what made this country great. Haven't seen a lot of that yet on the campaign [trail]. I'm looking for some of that today. May or may not get it. I hope he—.

8:53

DYKE: So let's say that, I mean, you know, as you said, there's no perfect candidate—.

8:59

GITCHELL: No perfect candidate. [We always] struggle with that, yeah.

9:01

DYKE: Yeah, but let's say that Mr. Trump says everything you hope he says. What would it be?

9:07

GITCHELL: Oh, it would be, you know, that's—. When he said Saturday—I watched him speak Saturday at the University [of] Central Florida—when he talked about that he hoped that this would be one of the great days in the changing of hope in our lives, political hope in our lives, a belief in America, that there's a turning, that now we're gonna be back in the conviction that America can be great again. That we're gonna start rising again. I think he's gonna stay on those lines. I would advise him to stay on those lines, challenge greatness, and you just lead. I think that's what we're looking for. We don't believe there's a solution in Raleigh or Washington, D.C., but I believe if you can inspire people of any generation that they will rise to do what is morally right, what is prudent, in terms of what economically I think is prudent, in terms of—. I think we do have the chance to change something of our—I think Mr. Trump with some of his business endeavors has shown ethics. We're at a time as you know that ethics is indeed taught in business college curriculums out there now, and I think that he can really—. That's gonna be in the area, too, to challenge business leaders to have ethics again, and to lead the business sector the right way. He's got to get better at messaging. I think messaging's an issue I'm looking for. But, you know, [we said,] when you look at what's available on the field right now, there's not a lot out there, and that's why I'm here today.

10:40

DYKE: Well, you've said a couple times, I think, that you've been a bit disappointed in some of the tone of the campaign.

10:44

GITCHELL: Yeah. The tone, I definitely have, yeah. Because I think we need people that lead. And leading is, again—it's not always an elaborate public-policy speech. Because, you know, I like policy speeches, but I think that, again, it's you the people, we the people, what we can do. What we have the power to do. And that still exists in America. I've worked in education, I tried to—you know, I guess that's what got me into education—because I just believe so much that the individual has a stake, that the individual can do it. I'd like to see more him talk more in that manner. I don't know.

11:28

DYKE: So you really—you would like inspirational leadership.

11:33

GITCHELL: I want inspirational leadership. I want policy specifics and detailed policy. But again, I don't think solutions are gonna happen in Washington or Raleigh. I think that solutions at this point are gonna happen from—. I mean, there's great ideas on your campus that need a GoFund [referring to the crowd-sourced fundraising mechanism, GoFundMe] or something, and bang! Those are startup capital ventures, and we get the next [Inotech] company or Facebook or whatever it is that's gonna change the economic—. Your economics department has really hammered on stuff like that—that's gonna change the stakes for a lot of people in Cumberland County. That's what we need. So it's that [unintelligible] with policy. The policy's gonna be there, but we want to have hope again, real, legitimate hope that government's gonna do their part, do what's right, and the opportunity's gonna be there and we want to pursue it. We gotta do our part, but I think that it's a tough time and we have a broken system. But, you know, he's got to keep, I think, reiterating that tomorrow's gonna be better. If you had, like, a room

of anybody of any political persuasion, got them in a room and said, “take points of his speeches and say what probably is—how did this make you feel in terms of one through ten?” When he talks more the hopeful stuff—we can do it, America’s gonna be great, or we can accomplish these things—that’s what separates him, I think. And that’s probably, you know, why I’m here, because that’s what—

13:13

DYKE: Yeah, see, you should be doing the interview, because that was something I was gonna ask.

13:20

GITCHELL: Well, you know, it’s been an interesting—you know, this has been already an interesting political season. I don’t know where it’s gonna—who knows where it’s gonna lead?

13:30

DYKE: So I get the feeling that there are specific things that Trump has said that you don’t agree with. And that’s not really your concern.

13:38

GITCHELL: Yeah, well, my thing is that I don’t think the personal attacks—I think he’s great if he just stays on point and doesn’t get into the personal attacks that, you know, other—. To me, I listen to, I’ve watched probably a couple speeches in its entirety, because you don’t get a chance from the sound bites stuff now. To me, as someone who’s worked, volunteer on campaigns and stuff, I find it uncanny when you start a speech and ramble on a few other—you sort of ramble and get lost, and then you come back, and you conclude [unintelligible]. To me, that’s a weird, that’s weird political speech. I’ve never—I just, to me, that doesn’t—I don’t know, he’s creating a whole new different art of

speechwriting, I would say. I guess I'm of the—if he was more [unintelligible], in the sense where he was, like, concise, hundred words, and they were the really effective words? I think he would still be where he is—you know, a little better in the polls, and still be getting ten thousand or whatever, today. You know, I don't know. I mean, it's weird when you have to watch candidates evolve that haven't been in the political game, I guess. I guess that's how I look at it. I mean, you're watching someone who's an amateur just get better at it. That's weird in American politics. We haven't seen a lot of that historically.

15:08

DYKE: Yeah, that's true. Okay, so you're a student of history.

15:11

GITCHELL: Yes.

15:12

DYKE: So how do you see this campaign in sort of a broader historical [optic]?

15:16

GITCHELL: I mean, Theodore Roosevelt? When you think back to the rise of Theodore Roosevelt, I think there's a lot of comparisons. But this is what I come back to: [I've put] a lot of in-depth thought about this. T.R. was a statesman. And we've yet to see statesmanship from Mr. Trump. That's what I'm hoping for today, and probably—you know, who knows? Maybe it won't be—I don't know what to expect. But we're looking for a statesman. And I think that the statesmen, the leaders throughout the world, they move history, they move the ball, whether—you know what I'm saying? I mean, I didn't

agree with T.R. on everything, but T.R. was just highly effective as a president. He got things done. And I think that's what we're looking for. And that's where you're looking at him, and you know—. I think Theodore Roosevelt. But at the same time, I also think with both [Ronald] Reagan and F.D.R. [Franklin Delano Roosevelt], in a sense, when he talks about, "We can. We're gonna do it again. We're gonna get there." Even though he's not spelling out how it's gonna happen, the fact that he's using those words, those are powerful words. And I think that to me brings back to where he gets more into the line of presidential. I don't know where we're gonna—I mean, this is a weird—. For someone who tries to follow it, I can't think—no one can explain that. I mean, no one could have predicted when he announced in July that he would be where he is today.

16:32

DYKE: Is that something you kind of like about it?

16:35

GITCHELL: [Laughs.] Intrigued? I've sent some texts about, "intrigue" is why I'm here. Yes. Because, you know—you know, there's the P.T. Barnum element of it, you're like, it's a circus! What will happen? It's the unpredictable, I guess. I guess, yeah. I don't know. I mean, who knows, going forward, I mean—. If they have a political rally in Fayetteville this early in the political season, before a primary, I mean—. I don't know historically if there's ever been anything like that. What I would give you, is I would give you '76 with Reagan and I would give you '80 with Reagan, because he needed North Carolina. He was down prior to—. '76, really, it didn't look good in March in '76 and prior to—when the campaign went south, he started racking up delegates, went to a brokered convention, and was laying the groundwork. '80, you know, '80 basically South Carolina, the South turned it around for him again. So you've seen it when there has been—that time for conservatism—. To win, to make the statesman's case for a return

to Jeffersonian principles in federalist policies, you've seen that played out both those times. So I don't know whether today's gonna be part of the next—you know, when he had the Beatles' "Revolution" song, after he won New Hampshire—whether that's part of this? Long term? Because he doesn't stay on, you know, using the same political speech that resonates. I mean, you're not getting that with—I don't know.

18:20

DYKE: And yet, not resonating is resonating.

18:21

GITCHELL: Yeah, not r—yeah. It's an enigma as far as to understand, you know—I don't know. But I'm here out of hope, because I hope that tomorrow—we want to, when we get up, we want to believe tomorrow's gonna be better than what yesterday was. That's our American epic. I don't want to lose it. If we lose it, that's a scary proposition.

18:50

DYKE: So, as a sophisticated conversant, here, so I'm gonna ask a question that always sort of puzzles me. So the United States is sort of unprecedentedly wealthy and powerful—

19:05

GITCHELL: Yeah.

19:05

DYKE: —in world history, right?

19:06

GITCHELL: Yeah.

19:07

DYKE: And yet we feel like we're in decline.

19:11

GITCHELL: Yeah.

19:12

DYKE: How does that make sense?

19:18

GITCHELL: I think we feel it, we see it, where—I think the dollar is the number-one thing I come to, I guess in terms of trying to make logic of it, would be the dollar. Our dollar was so powerful at one time. So that's how we're feeling our decline. I think it's mood, where you have, you know, like, he's been right about this, about the unemployment numbers: what they say they are and what they really are two different things. So I think the fact that our manufacturing base is not here in this country, that is another thing we feel in decline, because we're used to making stuff. Innovation's a big thing. The ideas are not coming domestically. They're coming [from] elsewhere, now. There's very little innovation. Those are all things I would outline as to, to me, as to why even though maybe in reality we're a lot better off internationally to what we are, that's what I think: dollar is unpredictable, drifting weak; we're not producing; innovation—producing and innovation are both in decline. And the mood—people just

don't feel that they can control their outcomes anymore. I think that they feel that the game is rigged. Now, again, whether or not he's a guy that can change it, balance it again, I don't know. But again, we've had those times in American history where we've seemed to turn the corner, and I just tend to believe that, as Americans, what unites us is greater than whatever could divide us, that we're gonna turn that corner again. We did it when we felt the Gilded Age of 1901 with T.R., and again some policies that I think did level it to a degree, for better or—you know, was necessary to the times. [Unintelligible] time. We seem to have that stake. The recession of 1920, we turned the corner there. You know, Twentieth Century showed time and again that we were able to make that leap toward—. It's a unique study in history to see a country that can do that, because not a lot of countries can. I don't know. This time, I just feel that we, I don't know—. I think we can teach American exceptionalism, and do it in a way that is respectful toward a demographic covering all groups of people. Because this country is—the freedom that allows all groups of people, we do it better than anybody. I think that's the way, that we each have a stake in this. [In the background, a loud voice approaches selling cigarette lighters.] You know, it's a crossroads. I also believe—

22:12

DYKE: You good for a cigarette lighter?

22:14

GITCHELL: [Laughs.] Cigarette lighter. But I believe in divine providence. And that's what gets me up in the morning, I believe in divine providence. I believe that if people have fallibility and fall short in themselves, under God it can happen. I just believe that, I believe that somehow if you're in line with God and you're doing what is right, that he'll steer the leaders. It will happen. I just believe it will

happen. But it is a time when it's unprecedented. We haven't—at least in my lifetime it hasn't been like this. I don't know. I don't know whether to come away from this and be, like, “yeah” —

22:57

DYKE: So you feel like this is possibly a turning point?

23:00

GITCHELL: Yeah, I—and whether today I'll come out of this and say, you know what, I'm more hopeful, less hopeful—because I'm sort of—I'm ambivalent as far as whether campaigns—. It's been a good campaign. What excites me is the groups, the types of people you see coming out for this. You're seeing people that, you know, probably, they've been hurting. And hope has them here. Hope has them getting out of bed today, has them here, has them saying, you know, I want to be a part of this. It's good for the Republic, too. I think it's—you know, it's good for the Republic to see this. You know, I mean, regardless of what the outcomes always will be, more people get involved—I think Bernie Sanders has been good for the Republic, too. I don't fault—I think he needed to run, to say, well—. Fight 'til the end, for him. If he, you know, he, you know, I think—. Sometimes it just has to happen. People have to see things in American life. Sanders is gonna go back to Eugene Debs in the early twentieth century, with Sanders, maybe William Jennings Bryant [sic] with the Progressive Era. Some things that were—you know, he overreached it, but I think that there's a calling to be Reagan in '64 with the speech endorsing Goldwater, and in '76 and '80. But I think people sometimes have to put themselves out there, you know? I mean, we're still evaluating Mr. Trump. We're evaluating him. I'm not in the camp that is probably 100 percent behind him, I'm probably seventy-five, seventy percent behind him. There's some question marks that I have. Again, 'til we—

24:45

DYKE: No, it keeps coming back to the energy and the inspiration, yeah.

24:47

GITCHELL: Right, 'til we see it—. He maybe just hasn't hit his peak. I don't think he's what he can be. I really believe he can be a greater candidate than what he's being. His background shows he can definitely hit it out of the park and do it. We'll see.

25:10

DYKE: Okay. So, if there's anything that you wanted to be in the historical record about this moment, about this event, about you, now—.

25:17

GITCHELL: Well, to be honest, I hope today—. I hope that this march for him, and, you know, this rise for him, that it's gonna change the American decline, that we're basically gonna be able to—. You know, whether it can be a turning point in terms of where the people will—. Maybe it takes we the people challenging the candidates to be better candidates—I mean, maybe we're not doing that enough. There's maybe, there's too much friction or disconnect between leaders and people. And the people have to do more to challenge. That's where maybe the change has to—that's where the impetus for—you know, maybe—. I don't know, I haven't been to a Sanders rally. Maybe his having a more younger, a more wild audience, if you will—we're more the silent body, as I think, [unintelligible] we're not as social-media savvy as maybe the—. You know, maybe they'll do a better job of, some of the grassroots do a better job challenging on stuff, where maybe that hasn't happened with Trump. I don't know, I mean, I like the whole, going forward it's gonna be the return of more of the industrial base here in

North Carolina, more opportunities, more greater wealth. You know, America can be in the global economy and still produce, have wealth, have the high living standard. Yeah, I don't think that—. But we're in decline, infrastructure and other ones, we're in decline on a lot of fronts. That's where maybe he's the one who can [unintelligible] economic, infrastructure decline, and we're not—our roads are not what they once were, rail could be so much better, I mean—. It's hope. And again, I come back, I'm here [because of] hope and I want to leave feeling hopeful.

27:45

DYKE: Yeah. No, that makes sense. It really does. Alright.