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Carl Sanders and Albert Maysles: Georgia Politics Meets  
Direct Cinema, 1969–70

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# CARL SANDERS AND ALBERT MAYSLES

C R A I G   B R E A D E N

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I thought, just like many people think, that the people of the state or the people of the country have a memory of the things that you did when you were in public life and the accomplishments that you were able to achieve for their benefit, and that I had such a good administration—no scandals, a lot of progress, a lot of opportunity for people that they never had before—that to run in 1970, that would give me a good edge to be reelected. Jimmy Carter, much to my chagrin, took the position that he was going to play the racial card.

—CARL SANDERS, *A CONVERSATION WITH*  
*CARL SANDERS*, DVD 2005

In 2004 the political papers of former Georgia governor Carl Sanders came to the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies at the University of Georgia. Among the collection were hundreds of reels of film, mostly dating to the early sixties. However, scattered here and there were others dating 1969 and 1970. To the surprise of the archivists working with the papers and films, it soon became apparent that this later set of reels, some composite pieces but mostly elements, had been sent to an Atlanta advertising firm by documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles. No paper trail could be found at the time, and this mystery's unraveling was delayed several years by personnel changes, funding issues, and shifting priorities. However, by early 2008, with a little detective work and the help of the Orphan Film Symposium, the impact of these few reels on Georgia politics could be fairly estimated.

Like many tales of Southern politics, the story of how Albert Maysles came south to make campaign ads for the 1970 Georgia gubernatorial race is partly one of race and segregation.

**In the summer of 1969, the Burton Campbell Ad agency in Atlanta hired Maysles to film former Georgia governor Carl Sanders as he traveled the state in preparation for the next year's gubernatorial campaign.**

Sanders, to quote the ad campaign, was “running again,” and his opponent was state senator Jimmy Carter. Earlier in the decade, Sanders had upset staunch segregationist

Marvin Griffin to become one of the South's youngest and most progressive governors, and through most of the 1970 race, he was considered the shoe-in to win against Carter in what was becoming known, in reference to Carter's peanut interests, as the "Goober-natorial Classic."<sup>1</sup>

But by 1970, Sanders' Georgia had changed—the federal civil rights acts created under Lyndon Johnson were deeply resented by a significant proportion of white, middle-, and lower-income Georgia voters. They were looking for leaders who, if not explicitly reactionary, identified with their anxieties. Where Carter, an equally progressive candidate when it came to race, was willing to imply he had these voters' best interests in mind where Sanders did not, Sanders steadfastly refused to suggest, even as election rhetoric, that he would subvert federal law or personal principle.

Sanders' attorney, Norman Underwood, put it this way in a 2008 oral history of state politics.

It's important in understanding that election to understand the atmosphere we had in 1970. In the 60s we had a lot of progressive—at the federal level—social legislation. We had the Voting Rights Act and the Public Accommodations Law, and in the history of the country in the twentieth century it's pretty clear that the 60s was a time of great movement forward. What is clear now that was less clear then is that underneath all this progress there was something of a backlash. There usually is. But just below the surface of the Georgia electorate there was a kind of churning resentment against the progress that had been made and Carl Sanders, because of the image he had, and because of his friendship with Lyndon Johnson, who had been the president who brought about most of that legislation, had a vulnerability being associated with that progress. And Jimmy Carter, State Senator Jimmy Carter, understood that very well and played to it and exploited it. . . .<sup>2</sup>

By March 1968 Carter also began to construct a strategy that would paint Sanders not only as an anti-George Wallace integrationist,<sup>3</sup> but also as a nouveau riche urban liberal, and a man who had clearly profited from his tenure as governor. Carter had learned well from Lester Maddox, an Atlanta entrepreneur and vocal segregationist who won the governor's office in 1966 by employing proven populist strategies—hammering at progressive social politics and financial corruption in government. Jimmy Carter had been Maddox's main opposition for the Democratic nomination that year. By 1970 a successful, politically liberal agribusinessman whose net worth outmatched Sanders, Carter was nevertheless artfully portraying himself as a hardscrabble Georgia peanut farmer, while

dogging Sanders with the nickname “Cufflinks Carl.” Although the name was given to Sanders not by Carter but by Jimmy Bentley, one of the Republican candidates, the Carter campaign leveraged it for all it was worth.

This image of Sanders, like Carter’s peanut farmer persona, had some truth to it. The forty-four-year-old Sanders was a Georgia success story—he had risen from economic hardship to become a state senator at twenty-nine and governor at thirty-seven—and he relished his image as one of the New South’s most socially progressive, business-oriented leaders. Yet on leaving office in 1967 (Georgia governors were then limited to one term), he stayed in the capital city and built his law practice there rather than in his hometown of Augusta, making inevitable amongst Georgia’s rural populists the criticism that he was a “slick Atlanta lawyer.” He flew his own plane, wore well-tailored suits, and cultivated the distant, cool demeanor of the experienced leader. Aides would say that even in the height of a Georgia summer, they never saw him sweat, and there are few in Georgia politics who would suggest this is something the electorate admires.<sup>4</sup> Despite polls favoring Sanders early on, many of his advisors recognized that he could have a serious image problem against a viable outsider candidate like Carter.

Nonetheless, Carl Sanders hired the Burton Campbell agency to present him in a fifteen-minute spot as he perceived himself, that hardworking Georgia boy who had come from modest circumstances, had made good, and, quoting the campaign, “ought to be governor again.” Burton Campbell turned to the lead writer of its creative department, Hugh Wilson. Enamored with the recently released *Salesman* (1969), Albert and David Maysles’ direct cinema landmark, Wilson turned to the Maysles brothers, believing the no-script, real-life approach would favor a solid citizen like Sanders. Not only did the Maysles gladly accept ad work, but Albert had shot politics before, as a cameraman on Robert Drew’s *Primary*, which documented the 1960 Wisconsin primary race between John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey. Albert Maysles and his team, minus David who stayed in New York, followed Carl Sanders for four days, shooting five hours of film with little or no direction from Sanders. According to several aides, Sanders believed that portraying himself as anything other than the authentic Carl Sanders was absolutely unnecessary.<sup>5</sup>

On the face of it, Sanders and Maysles made a good match for Wilson’s no-frills concept. Maysles had left Drew and Associates several years earlier to pursue his own take on direct cinema: “I had much greater interest in filming ordinary people in ordinary situations that had their own drama but weren’t of a life-and-death, necessarily, or political nature; and Bob was obsessed with situations, life-and-death and political situations.”<sup>6</sup>

**Just as Sanders was determined to take the high road, presenting himself as a man who plainly should be governor again based purely on his record and character, Maysles was explicitly departing from filming “political situations” that, while strong on drama, may have lacked the nuance of personal experience.**

In *Salesman* he had trained his camera on Paul Brennan and three of Brennan’s colleagues, investing a documentary about a down-on-his-luck Bible salesman with a depth of spirit that elevated the ordinary. Hugh Wilson was banking on Maysles to recapture the image Sanders had in 1962, and to soften his reputation as an Atlanta lawyer.

In execution, this proved a difficult task. To quote Remer Tyson and Robert Coram, writers in the Sanders campaign who published an article on the race shortly after it concluded,

One problem in trying to “humanize” Sanders was his reaction to the camera. Sanders could sense the presence of a camera the way a bird dog senses a covey of quail. Even before the film started rolling, Sanders stiffened into another personality. He posed, sometimes 24 hours a day. The ad agency found that out when it hired a photographic team to follow the candidate four consecutive days to film him in unguarded moments, times when he was genuinely himself, times when the voters looking at TV would believe he was human, not a ruthless robot. Approximately five hours of film were shot on those four days. When edited, five minutes of pure, unguarded, “humanized” Carl Edward Sanders were available for a TV spot.<sup>7</sup>

Tyson’s and Coram’s description, while insightful and echoed by Hugh Wilson, should be leavened by the consideration that the amount of film shot versus the amount of film used would not have been unusual for a direct cinema filmmaker like Maysles (and, in fact, two 5-minute spots resulted, not one, with additional short commercials created from remaining footage).<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the resulting ads were, and are, elegant examples of what campaign ads could aspire to. They are unique in the Richard B. Russell Library’s collection of campaign advertising—without the careful orchestration that typically accompanies the production of campaign spots, they look like no other political commercials we have.



Figure 1. Frame from *Running Again* (1969). Carl Sanders jogs in Atlanta's Piedmont Park. His legal partner and friend, Norman Underwood, has noted that this image was politically risky at a time when jogging for fitness was uncommon. Courtesy of Carl E. Sanders Papers, 1962–76, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia Library, Athens.

The first of the longer ads, entitled *Running Again*, is a statement by Sanders of his faith in himself and Georgia. It begins with Sanders in sweats, jogging through Atlanta's Piedmont Park (Figure 1) as camera angles change almost to match the rhythm of Sanders' feet as he runs. An abrupt transition follows, to Sanders office, where he is talking on the phone and editing a speech on political divisiveness, which he appears to be delivering in the next sequence: "The people of this state, of this region today, are far too intelligent, too well-educated, certainly politically aware, for their grandfathers' party allegiance to have the compelling relevance it once had in the South." While this may be a reference to segregation politics of the southern Democratic Party, personified by then-governor Lester Maddox, the message is only suggested, as if the filmmaker and politician are leaving some interpretation to the viewer. This approach continues in the next sequence, where Sanders is on what is clearly the campaign trail, eating barbeque at a political rally. "We've come a long way in Georgia in the last several years in changing that philosophy, a long way." To what philosophy is he referring? What may have been clear at the time is difficult now to know, but the message is similar to the first: Georgia must move ahead. The next minute is given over to personal reflection, with scenes of Sanders boating with his son and sitting on a swing on the boat dock with his daughter as he talks about his aspirations in a voice-over. This continues in the next sequence as



Figure 2. Frame from *Running Again*. Carl Sanders, behind the wheel, discusses the tension between rural and urban Georgia. (Diana Little at Cineric observed that this shot is reminiscent of shots in *Salesman*, released that same year.) Courtesy of the Russell Library, University of Georgia.

Sanders is driving (Figure 2): “There are many people in, I would say, in the South who have just as great a disdain for someone who might be making his living by the sweat of his brow on a farm as they do for someone who is cooped up in an apartment in a ghetto—and if we can break through these barriers and overcome some of these limitations that we’ve placed on some of the people who live in our state and country we are going to see some progress that none of us ever dreamed was possible.” The ad ends with bluegrass music being played as Sanders claps along, then cuts to a montage of Sanders flying his plane, playing handball, back to the boat dock, and finally to running again in the park.

From the standpoint of traditional political campaigning, the spot makes little if any sense as a platform statement or an attack ad. It avoids political rhetoric and favors personal perspective, a theme that continues in the other longer ad, entitled *Agriculture*. In contrast to *Running Again*, *Agriculture* is a simple exchange between Sanders and a dairy farmer, Sam, whose soft cadences repeat and confirm Sanders observations. The camera dwells on the face of the farmer and the silhouette of Sanders (Figure 3) as the two discuss the increasing difficulty of running a farm that raises tobacco, peanuts, and cotton as well as dairy cattle. Ambient sound and other voices enter, and figures cross in a blur between the camera and its subjects. Sam’s hands fill the frame as he ties into a knot a strip of tobacco (Figure 4), and the camera raises back to Sam’s face.





Figure 3. Frame from *Agriculture* (1969). Carl Sanders briefly emerges from a shot in which he is otherwise silhouetted. He and a farmer identified only as Sam (left) talk about the modern Georgia farm of 1969. Courtesy of the Russell Library, University of Georgia.

SANDERS: You dairy farmers have really had a rough row to hoe these last years . . .

SAM: Yeah, and it's getting rougher.

SANDERS: Now you having to compete with out-of-state milk being brought in . . .

SAM: Out-of-state . . .

SANDERS: Artificial milk . . .

SAM: And all those things . . .

SANDERS: How in the world does a man like you stay in the farming business?

SAM: Well I've heard it all my life that farming folk are the only ones who can go broke every year and stay in business. I don't know how you do it. I found out one thing: if you try to figure out these things too far ahead you get in trouble.

The beauty of the camera work, the sound, and the editing of this opening sequence delivers the story with tremendous impact, and with its cohesive message (farming is in trouble), the spot is far more effective and immediate than the more open-ended, even vague, *Running Again*. With the camera following, Sanders and Sam walk over to a cornfield, and on the way Sanders stops a worker driving a tractor (Figure 5). A long exchange, at times barely audible over the tractor engine, follows, as the camera zooms on Sanders' face, retreats back to the figure of Sam, waiting patiently, and then to the worker, hunched forward in his seat as he explains where he's from and who he's worked for and how he and Sanders know some people in common. Now standing next to the



Figure 4. While the candidate and Sam discuss the challenges of farming, Albert Maysles tilts his camera down to reveal their hands tying tobacco leaf into knots. Courtesy of the Russell Library, University of Georgia.

Figure 5. Sanders visits with a worker on Sam's farm, discussing the health of the crop. Frame from *Agriculture*. Courtesy of the Russell Library, University of Georgia.



field of corn, Sam and Sanders have a substantial discussion about the future of farming in Georgia, as the camera turns 360 degrees to show the surrounding buildings, farmyard, and even a group of men in ties (no doubt Sanders' aides). The camera returns to the two men, as Sam observes that a line of credit is getting harder to obtain for younger people who want to have their own farms.

SANDERS: Farming used to be the business that anybody could do, but now . . .

SAM: If you couldn't do anything else you could farm.

SANDERS: Now it's almost . . .

SAM: Now if you can farm you can do anything.

A voice-over concludes the ad, "When Carl Sanders was governor he listened to people, knew their problems, and got something done. And that's why this political ad is paid for by Georgians who think he ought to be governor again." As with *Running Again*, there is no platform here, just an acknowledgment of an issue and a statement of Sanders' experience. Sanders' humanity, which Hugh Wilson knew he had to capture, is successfully drawn by Maysles' camera, and emerges out of his discussion with Sam. As with *Running Again*, *Agriculture's* style is so nontraditional as a political ad that its elegance can appear stilted. And, ultimately, this was the problem with the Maysles ads in Georgia in 1970.

Norman Underwood, who was Sanders' campaign attorney and ran for governor himself several years later, remembered the ads vividly, and believed they were impressive but not persuasive, and far too esoteric for campaign spots—Sanders jogging in Atlanta's Piedmont Park, flying planes, and having a game of handball, were hardly activities the common Georgia voter in 1970 could identify with, and talking with a farmer in a cornfield appeared forced to audiences who saw Sanders as a big city lawyer. The overall campaign, moreover, had taken the tone of the Maysles' direct cinema-style ads: it was ambiguous in message.

In contrast, Carter's campaign employed clear statement, and used it in the attack: being governor had made Carl Sanders too rich and too "city" to care about most of Georgia. The Carter campaign also employed ambiguity in the form of strong suggestion, much like modern push polling. Carter's ads suggested that Sanders was courting the black vote. In addition, fact sheets were distributed showing a photograph of Sanders among the Atlanta Hawks, the basketball team in which he held ownership, with one of its black players pouring champagne over Sanders' head after a winning season. *Atlanta Constitution* columnist Bill Shipp at the time observed that using such an image to indict Sanders, an image involving not only race but alcoholic celebration, was political dirty pool. While those close to him denied that Carter was playing the race card, he

clearly impressed many observers otherwise, and Shipp noted that “race was the silent issue,” as Carter remade himself in the image of the working class white Georgian. “The grim-faced factory workers who brushed past Carter in the grey dawns of Spring 1970 found that by the following September Carter stood for everything they did, hated everything they did, lived and looked like they did. At least that’s the way he seemed on television. And they elected him governor.”<sup>9</sup>

Sanders insisted on keeping the campaign positive even as Carter’s became more aggressive. However, in a concession to more traditional campaigning, several shorter ads were created by Burton Campbell without the help of Maysles to clarify the Sanders message. They include animations, jingles, and text-with-voice-over spots detailing Sanders’ accomplishments as governor. These proved to be too little too late, as Jimmy Carter’s strategy worked. He beat Sanders in a primary runoff and was elected, virtually without opposition, in the general election. In his inaugural address, Carter voiced a position he had not articulated during his campaign:

I thank you all for making it possible for me to be here on what is certainly the greatest day of my life. But now the election is over, and I realize that the test of a man is not how well he campaigned, but how effectively he meets the challenges and responsibilities of the office . . .

At the end of a long campaign, I believe I know our people as well as anyone. Based on this knowledge of Georgians North and South, Rural and Urban, liberal and conservative, I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over. Our people have already made this major and difficult decision, but we cannot underestimate the challenge of hundreds of minor decisions yet to be made. Our inherent human charity and our religious beliefs will be taxed to the limit. No poor, rural, weak, or black person should ever have to bear the additional burden of being deprived of the opportunity of an education, a job or simple justice.<sup>10</sup>

Jimmy Carter was a natural campaigner, ambitious and realistic, and had used a strategy necessary for political success at a specific time in the American South. Sanders recovered from his shock and returned to a phenomenally successful law practice, Hugh Wilson headed for Hollywood, and Albert and David Maysles released *Gimme Shelter*, the Rolling Stones concert film they were editing at the same time they were putting together the Sanders ads.

Reflecting on the difficult match of the filmmaker and the politician, Hugh Wilson noted that, “The problem with the Cufflinks Carl criticism is that that’s who Sanders was.” Wilson, who would go on to have great success with his creation *WKRP in Cincinnati*,

admitted the commercials failed because they did exactly what they had set out to do: show Carl Sanders truthfully. And in politics, as Hugh Wilson learned from Hamilton Jordan, Bert Lance, Jody Powell, and Gerald Rafshoon, the same staff who would take Carter to the White House six years later, this can be a liability. In Wilson's words, "I'm the guy who got Carter elected governor of Georgia."

Any way you look at them, the ads had political influence, and are of significant interest because of where they fall in the Maysles' ascendance as filmmakers. That the films were buried in boxes for thirty-five years before coming to the Russell Library as part of Carl Sanders' collection says something about the fate of campaign media post-election; it is advertising for a product that either sold or didn't, and in either case, its primary purpose is finished. It also speaks to the difficulty of accessing film in a paper-dominated archive such as my own. These orphaned films, forgotten by Albert Maysles and only vaguely remembered by his subject, who remains a highly respected and admired Georgian, help document one of the great cautionary tales of Georgia politics.<sup>11</sup>

It was clear when the ads were found that the story of their making needed to be recorded, given the respective reputations of the politician and filmmaker. Once this process began in earnest, reclaiming their history took the better part of a year. In the 67 linear feet of the Sanders paper collection, Albert Maysles' involvement in the 1970 campaign is mentioned only once and only by his last name, in a memo from the Burton Campbell agency to the Sanders campaign. Because neither Sanders nor Maysles clearly remembered the ads, and written histories of the campaign were based on the Sanders collection at UGA and a handful of newspaper articles from the time, seeking further confirmation that Maysles actually made the films required more direct communication with other principal actors, many of whom are still alive. Georgia's political circles are tightly knit, and a lot of memories of that particular campaign emerged. However, it soon became clear that while Carl Sanders' attorney and colleague Norman Underwood had the most vivid recollection of the race, and even remembered the ads (if not their creator), it would be up to Hugh Wilson, if his memory served, to really provide substantive information. After a lengthy search Hugh turned up in Virginia, and the most complete story emerged, including the detail that when he visited the Maysles in New York during the editing process, they told him that the release of *Gimme Shelter* was being delayed because of the trial involving the murder they caught on film at the concert. Hugh Wilson confirmed for us that indeed Albert Maysles had shot the film.

The film in the Sanders collection is still being fully assessed, although we believe most of the Maysles reels have been identified. Along with the finished commercials and dozens of pieces of elements, we have identified fourteen picture reels, about

5,500 feet in total, with what we believe are matching magnetic soundtracks. Limited playback resources and competing institutional priorities make discovery of these a slow process, while there is no preservation budget for film. Thankfully, the film community has taken note. Because of the efforts of Dan Streible and Cineric (particularly Diana Little), the finished spots were preserved. It is our hope to do the same with the remaining reels over the coming years as funding permits, so that we may create an accessible resource that speaks to turning points in filmmaking, advertising, and Georgia politics.

## NOTES

1. Remer Tyson and Robert Coram, "The Loser Who Won," *Atlanta Magazine* (Nov. 1970): 41.
2. *Reflections on Georgia Politics: Norman Underwood*, DVD (2008), Reflections on Georgia Politics Oral History Series, Bob Short Audiovisual Materials Collection, Russell Library. See also *A Conversation with Carl Sanders*, DVD (2005), Oral History Documentary Collection, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.
3. Bill Shipp, "Carter Turned Right to Triumph," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 8–9, 1970. The issue with George Wallace rested on an incident that occurred while Sanders was governor. Wallace was booked to speak at Jekyll Island but the permit was refused by local officials to avoid conflict or violence, when it developed that both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Ku Klux Klan were going to be there to protest against and support Wallace, respectively. The venue was changed to a National Guard Armory, but permission was again denied at the federal level. So while Sanders could not be characterized as pro-Wallace, neither did he as governor of Georgia prevent Wallace from speaking.
4. Tyson and Coram, "The Loser Who Won," 41.
5. Norman Underwood, telephone conversation with the author, Mar. 2007.
6. *Albert Maysles: Filmmaker*, directed by Jules Engel, streaming video and transcript, posted to PeoplesArchive.com, May 12, 2004.
7. Tyson and Coram, "The Loser Who Won," 68.
8. Hugh Wilson, telephone conversation with the author, Apr. 2007; Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 5.
9. Shipp, "Carter Turned Right"; *American Experience: Jimmy Carter*, transcript, 2002, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carter/filmmore/pt.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carter/filmmore/pt.html).
10. "Governor Jimmy Carter's Inaugural Address—January 12, 1971," Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, Atlanta, [www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents).
11. Albert Maysles generously took the stage to say a few words following the screening of the ads at Orphans 6, pronouncing with great humor, "I don't remember these at all!" However, Maysles' further comments on his philosophy regarding commercials illustrated why the Sanders ads are unique.