Dale Goter: Hello, I'm Dale Goter, retired Kansas journalist, assisting with the Kansas Oral History Project. Today is October 23, 2026, and I'm joined by Ed Flentje, a man of many hats, who's helped shape the political and journalistic environment in Kansas for several decades.

First, a little background on this series. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation whose purpose is collecting the oral histories of various individuals who helped shape public policy in Kansas over the last several decades. It has a library of over 200 interviews collected over the past ten years. Our videographer today is former State Legislator, Dave Heinemann, and Susie Murphy is the project coordinator.

I first met Dr. H. Edward Flentje in the early nineties when he was serving as secretary of administration for Governor Mike Hayden, and I was a Topeka Statehouse reporter for Harris News Service. Since then, our paths have crossed several times and leads us to today's interview. One of Dr. Flentje's most recent contributions is his latest book called "Reform and Reaction: The Arc of Kansas Politics", published in 2024. I'm sure he's got a sequel coming, but we'll have him talk about that.

Ed, it's a privilege and a pleasure to have you give your story and to have this opportunity to hear it. It would take me forever to tell your background, so I'm going to make you do that job. You played a prominent role in state government, local government, higher education, politics, and more recently, as a newspaper columnist. I want you to tell me how it all got started from the very beginning, your entry into the world and what shaped your initial years.

Ed Flentje: Well, I think I'd have to say that my undergraduate degree and experience at Emporia State University, that experience got me involved in student politics, and I got interested in politics. An interesting anecdote, I finished my degree the summer of '64, and I was walking past the president's office, no air-conditioning. He had the windows wide open. This is Dr. John E. King who later became a very critical part of my life.

Anyway, he sees me and he says, "Ed, come here." I joined him in his office. He had just received a letter from Senator James B. Pearson who said, "I have a patronage job in Washington, and somebody who could go to law school or a graduate degree would be a perfect fit." Two weeks later, I was in Washington in a Senate Capitol cop uniform with a six-shooter on my hip.

DG: That's hard to visualize, Ed.

EF: The Capitol cops were split into two groups: young folks like me seeing law degrees or graduate degrees or old-time politicos who were there for the duration. So, that's how I first became acquainted with Jim Pearson. That's kind of a start on my political involvement.

DG: In that era, a lot was going on. What particularly shaped your view of the world at that time that was going to direct you on the path you were going? It was lively times, back in the Vietnam era, obviously. What did you see there?

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EF: Well, one of my first exposures was quite unique. Senator Pearson had been asked by Minority Leader Hugh Scott to represent the Republican Senate at a Republican gathering in Pennsylvania. I drove the senator up to that gathering. Senator Scott was not a [Senator Barry] Goldwater fan. This is Goldwater time. I took this exposure to Pennsylvania Republican politics, and it was held at Gettysburg. Guess who came over for the gathering? President [Dwight] Eisenhower.

I had that experience early on. That one-year experience as a Capitol cop led me to have a relationship with Pearson. I then joined him as a legislative assistant after finishing my doctoral degree.

DG: Is that when you came in contact with Dave Seaton, the legendary past publisher of the *Winfield* [*Daily*] *Courier*? I know he also served with Pearson, did he not?

EF: He did. Dave, if he were alive, would say I recruited him there, but I just happened to be on the staff, and we had a drink together as he was interviewing for the job. I came a little bit before Dave in that experience, but that led to a lifelong friendship with Dave Seaton.

DG: A great man. What brought you back then to this part of the world?

EF: I had a diversion in my preferences. I had thought maybe I wanted to be a college president. An acquaintance that I'd developed during my graduate school at KU [University of Kansas] asked me to come to Illinois. That led me to serve the Illinois Board of Higher Education in the Southern Illinois University Board in staff capacity. I concluded from that experience that I probably didn't want to be a college president.

Then I got a contact from Herman Lujan who said, "A new agency division of state planning and research would have a vacancy as director," and he encouraged me to apply. I did apply, and my connection was Pat Storey, then Ranson who recruited me to that position. Dave Seaton and Bob Woody were both instrumental in supporting my application. Governor [Robert] Bennett gave me a huge opportunity in state government, and I turned the division into a policy research and analysis and recommendation area and first became acquainted with state government. That's certainly an important experience in my time.

DG: Did that serve to kind of solidify policy making or to give it a greater intellectual description in state government, to organize it in some fashion?

EF: Yes, I defined the agency. We had about seventeen staff members, if you can believe it. Bennett wanted a counterbalance to Jim Bibb, the director of the budget. Bennett had some skepticism about how—

DG: He had a lot of power.

EF: Yes, about how [Governor Robert] Docking had turned over the running of state government to Jim Bibb. He wanted staff capability to counterbalance that relationship. So, we developed a policy orientation to do that.

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DG: Then Bennett gave way to [Governor] John Carlin. You were there watching that at that point. You're not part of the Carlin administration, I don't think.

EF: I offered my services for the transition, and they said, "Show up and leave at noon on Inauguration Day."

DG: Welcome to the world of patronage and politics. But John Carlin serves two terms and enters [Governor] Mike Hayden. I don't know if you knew him before, or you just fit into that—what brought you into your role as his secretary of administration?

EF: Mike and I had become acquainted during the Bennett administration. Mike was kind of an up-and-coming guy, and we hit it off. We're both country kids and had some of the same orientation, and we had Mike and Patti and their girls in our home occasionally. I had kept contact with Mike over that period. Of course, he was being considered for the governorship, and I tried to help him in that regard and became involved in the campaign to some extent.

DG: Those were really I guess—we see them as maybe more competent people than we've seen in the aftermath. People like Bennett, Carlin, Hayden were really students of government, really understood politics. It was divisive then but nothing like now. Do you see that, that there was an era of, I don't know, greater public service insight by the folks than you see now.

EF: Yes, there was civility.

DG: That's a good way to put it.

EF: I mean, we were competitors and opposed on some issues, but we were always civil. Mike said, "We can disagree without being disagreeable." He followed that path, I think, during his governorship. It had an influence on me certainly.

DG: You watched his demise. He was a victim of the property tax revolt of that era.

EF: Well, some could say I advised Bennett and Hayden, and both of them lost. That may be—

DG: I didn't see that on your resume, Ed.

EF: That probably shows the quality of my advice.

DG: Well, I'm going to take you back to that era with Hayden. I'm a reporter at the Statehouse, and my current wife, Lori Linenberger, was in the UPI Bureau. There was a testiness between the media and the administration, notably yourself. It was, as you said, a competitiveness but still some degree of civility.

EF: The statehouse press fell in love with John Carlin. Mike Hayden didn't fit the same mold. I think that might explain part of it. But I would challenge anybody who said we were nasty towards the press.

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DG: Again, those were interesting moments.

EF: I recall giving the press access and information.

DG: And Governor Hayden certainly was open. It was interesting to watch his evolution to a more sophisticated person—now lately, of course, we've seen—this is 2026, and the election on the table. Our senator, Roger Marshall, being at risk of losing and seeing two former governors, Hayden and Graves, speak out against a fellow Republican. What does that say about what's happened?

EF: I was really proud of Mike for speaking out. The video endorsement he gave was powerful.

DG: It was, yes.

EF: Really powerful. Obviously, things have changed. It changed with [Governor Sam] Brownback, and it really changed with Trump.

DG: Let me take a moment to reflect on your book which is about that era. You lead up to the Brownback era and beyond the correction. What compelled you to think—that kind of description hadn't been written before. Was that in your mind an important part of history that had to be chronicled?

EF: I was co-author on a book on Kansas politics that was published in 2010. We completely missed the Brownback era, and I write in the book about 'red state governance', which was Brownback's call to fame. I write about three things he tried to do, first was eliminate the income tax. Secondly, elect or change the selection of judges from the merit system. Third was to deny, block federal funds. He failed in eliminating the income tax eventually. He got it done, but then he was overridden on it. He made some headway on the Court of Appeals with the appointment process. He was quite successful in blocking federal funds, food stamps and income assistance.

It was a different policy arena. The civility of politics had gone by the wayside.

DG: Would you agree that the Summer of Mercy, '93, I believe it was, the abortion issue suddenly leaps into the fray at a level it hadn't been before. What was your counsel to people like Hayden, at that time, how to navigate that?

EF: I think we write in the book that the abortion issue arose in the [Senator] Bob Dole/[Representative] Bill Roy [election]. But it kind of then disappeared from politics. It went underground, and there was a lot of groundwork being done by evangelicals that finally brought it back to the surface in the '92 and '94 elections. You had a serious break between the party and moderates like [Governor] Bill Graves and the attorney general.

DG: David Miller was his foil, in the governor's race —

EF: Yes.

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DG: Attorney General Stephan, or are you talking after that?

EF: No, the lady.

DG: Carla Stovall.

EF: Carla Stovall.

DG: You had the seat watching this thing play out for these decades. We're at a point now where it's hard not to be pessimistic about what direction things have gone: the divisiveness. the animosity. You looked at this spectrum from back when you started to now. How would you characterize what that has turned into?

EF: Well, Trump in my view has introduced a coarseness in politics.

DG: That's putting it mildly.

EF: That just wasn't there. You had opposition, and you had disagreements, but you didn't call people names and use coarse language in your politics. That seems to have changed completely. Once one side starts doing it, the other side kind of thinks you've got to do it to keep up.

DG: I recall Brownback coming in. It seemed like a change. I remember him speaking to the Republican caucus in the early years and he said he wanted that bill passed, and he wanted no Democratic votes. He wanted them totally closed out of the conversation. That's different than the way Bennett, Hayden, Carlin would have operated.

EF: Well, we write in the book that the major accomplishments were done in a bipartisan manner. John Carlin couldn't get his stuff done without Republican support. And Mike Hayden couldn't get his stuff done without Democrats. I think that has gone by the wayside. It is a more partisan-oriented politics.

DG: I don't want to wear that out. Also in that period of time as you look back, you left your imprint on various policy things. What areas of state government do you think required the most of your attention and were perhaps you had the most impact?

EF: Well, in the Bennett years, I think the work of the water task force chaired by Shelby Smith, lieutenant governor, set the stage for the creation of the Water Office and ultimately a water plan and ultimately financing for a water plan.

DG: Now you said Bennett. You mean Hayden. Did the water thing start with Bennett?

EF: Bennett. One thing that Bennett did, he liked interim studies. As president of the Senate, he was a fan of having designated study groups. I write in the book that when he became governor, he became a fan of task forces of various kinds to develop issues and look at alternatives. One of

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the most significant of that group was a water task force chaired by Shelby Smith. I think Joe Harkins would agree with me, that set the stage for Joe's appointment.

DG: The director of the Water Office.

EF: The creation of the Water Office and director of it and the development of a water plan. And ultimately John Carlin joined Mike Hayden to lobby for the funding of a water plan. Carolyn McGinn is now—I don't know if she's acting or—

DG: Former Senator Carolyn McGinn from Sedgwick now serving in the [Governor Laura] Kelly administration.

EF: The water, it's gone from nothing over that period to a heavily staffed agency doing really good work.

DG: I covered that extensively for Harris [News] and traveled around the state for those hearings with Joe Harkins, and the saying then was that water would become the new oil. I don't know if that's really happened. Oil is still pretty dominant. Do you think the end result of that is that we have much more competent management over our most vital resource, water? Did that come out of that?

EF: Yes. I think it did. Water is one thing I'd point to that we did some staffing for that task force. I think the other thing during the Hayden era, we produced for Mike the Kansas policy choices, which had an emphasis on infrastructure, and I think that shaped some of Mike's thinking about issues to push. Obviously, he pushed highways, but also corrections. I think one thing that has not been appreciated was that the highway plan adopted during Hayden has really set the stage for a number of steps along that same path, and it's a different concept of how you pay for highways. The state for the most part operated on a pay as you go. In other words, the money coming in would be spent on highways this year, and the use of debt financing has greatly improved the ability of the state to address its highway needs, pay as you use, and not much talk about that, but I think the work we did on Kansas policy choices set the stage for having really some of the best highways in the state —

DG: Really, back in '89, when I moved to Wichita and had to travel to southeast Kansas recruiting journalists, those little two-lane roads with no edge to them, and now that's all changed. That was a dramatic change as a result of that highway plan.

EF: Mike made highways a part of his campaign in '86. Of course, that led to Tax Hike Mike and getting advised from his staff.

DG: I think in a recent conversation with him, he kind of mentioned that '92 was the great tax reform bill and lots of things on the table and wanting a change in property tax at that point was something that Carlin had pushed through. Mike said the problem was I had to administer it. So he had to pay the price.

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EF: And Mike said at the time, I think it's in the book, that if your taxes went down, you thought it was a great program. If they went up, they blamed you.

DG: You can't win that one. Again, if there's other major things—we had mentioned our paths crossed periodically. You may not remember this. In the nineties, there was an economic development conference in Wichita. There were legislators there, and they were talking about how incentive funds were being distributed, venture capital. I remember you walked in right behind me, and the legislators from Johnson County were there, and you were stunned that it was obvious that Sedgwick County was not at the table. That kind of evolved, the power of Johnson County over that era, and maybe the diminishment of the power of Sedgwick County. Does that make sense?

EF: I invited Mike to a gathering at the university at some time during that time period. I think it was while he was speaker. Somebody put this question to Mike and Mike said, "You don't send us your best people."

DG: I thought it was, "Wichita never sends their best and brightest," and that didn't come from Hayden.

EF: Something like that. Obviously, some Wichita legislators took offense at that comment.

DG: I want to move on, the many hats. Another time our paths crossed, you were called into service into local government. You started out, your first city manager gig stepping in at Emporia. Was that not true?

EF: For whom?

DG: Interim city manager. You filled that role in Emporia, and then later on, when Wichita went through a change, you again got called to the table and said, "Run the city of Wichita for a while."

EF: I did at first as city manager of Wichita, interim city manager.

DG: That was first.

EF: I had the chance to fire you.

DG: The biggest mistake you never made.

EF: But resisted. I don't know why.

DG: I recall your putting on the table or helping advance the idea that you might supplant the property tax with the sales tax. I remember you bringing it to the Council. It never went anywhere, but it was your moment to try to make a mark on local government.

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EF: I had a former student and budget analyst who developed some work on that. I didn't push it too much. The interim city manager job was the most consuming job I'd ever experienced. It really is a big assignment. So much, the scope of it, the depth of it. It affects citizens in every way.

DG: Do you think it's a similar observation in regarding what a city county commissioner has to deal with versus a legislator goes to Topeka and then just kind of drops out of sight. It seems like there's a disconnect when they get to Topeka. They don't really remember where they came from, but you can't do that at the local level. Isn't that true?

EF: Sure. I recommended some things that got me run over by a truck during that time. Somebody came up with a bright idea to take Bill Warren out of his mortgage at the—

DG: Bill Warren being the movie and theatre magnate in Wichita.

EF: A six-million-dollar mortgage. I did everything I could to stop that and got run over by a big truck eventually.

DG: Why is there such a disconnect? I've served as a lobbyist for the city of Wichita and watched local government and state government. You'd see people from the same party, but the perspective of the local City Council commissioner versus that of Topeka. It was so different. There was like an animosity that seemed to play out, and I don't know why.

EF: It's a different kind of politics. It's nonpartisan, supposedly. The state level is clearly partisan. It just doesn't encourage coalition building at the state and local. You've got to really work at it to get something done.

DG: What do you think of local government now, having seen this time period? Is it more competent, sophisticated, effective? Does it have the same challenges?

EF: It's a more difficult challenge in local government than when I was around. The politics are more divisive. Some of this partisanship at the state level has seeped into some jurisdictions. That's not fully the case across all communities, but if you are in a tight spot, the politics may do you in.

DG: It is a dangerous world. Let's touch on education. You had that role at KU and Wichita State. What do you see having—what's transpired in these last few decades, the role higher education plays in our society?

EF: Well, I've written a little bit about this. The change is again coming from the top. You have to say that Trump has been effective in demonizing higher education. He's targeted mainly elite private universities, but it's seeping into public universities as well. Then your legislators at the state level take what Trump says and try to apply it with even fiercer restraints. So, you get DEI kind of stuff that's been around.

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I think for the bulk of colleges and universities in Kansas, we're somewhat immune from this, but it's still out there and a threat if folks get out of line.

DG: Would you agree it's a bit of an anti-intellectual perspective, a resentment of intellectualism to some extent that those folks, that the ivory tower is seen as the ivory tower, and it doesn't really relate to their lives. There's been a disconnect there.

EF: That's some of it. I think Trump reads it very simply that colleges produce liberals, and he doesn't like that.

DG: Education is a dangerous thing.

EF: Yes, education is dangerous.

DG: That covers most of the waterfront. I don't want to leave anything out that you would consider notable to make at this point. A couple of things I would ask: going back on this long, storied career, what stands out as the most memorable moment that you witnessed in that period of time?

EF: Well, personally my experience with Mike Hayden and with Bennett were top peaks of my personal career. I had great appreciation for both those governors. But I've had a long career. My main career is as a professor and teaching research and service. That has served me well and been a great opportunity for me throughout my experience.

DG: I'm getting a little ahead of myself. I wanted you to particularly talk about the evolution of the political science professor in the editorial world. Back in the seventies, eighties, the editors the publishers dominated that. The model changed so much in print that suddenly the word, the advice, and the counsel of political science professors—you, I think of [Russell Arben] Fox, [Michael A.] Smith. There's a number of professors around the state who write columns regularly, weigh in, Bob Beatty in Topeka, and that's kind of a change. That was a big deal. What did you feel about taking on that new role?

EF: I had begun phased retirement at the university. Burdett and Beatty.

DG: Burdett Loomis at KU.

EF: We started doing this weekly column, not each of us doing a week, spreading it out over the number of weeks we had group. I did about ninety-two columns and actually put it into the form of a book with the help of Richard Crowson.

DG: The cartoonist for the *Wichita Eagle*, a genius of a man.

EF: Who courteously allowed me to use some of his terrific cartoons. That was my COVID project, actually putting that book together. It actually sold quite a few copies. I was amazed, mainly because folks wanted to get the cartoons.

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DG: It has been a notable contribution. I noticed, I might have mentioned to you there's a publication the state county appraisers put out. The State County Appraisers Association puts out a monthly, and I'm looking through that past archive, and there's a column by Dr. Ed Flentje about the horrific aspects of the Brownback tax plan. You had quite an audience back then. It was a notable contribution.

EF: Our vehicle for doing this is called *Inside Kansas* [*Politics*]. There were five of us who got that off the ground. The membership has changed over time. Most recently, I've done columns for *Kansas Reflector*, but I'm slowing down on writing.

DG: We all are slowing down. Would you acknowledge that you did fill a void at that point? The editorials were going away, and there wasn't anybody really stepping up to do that. You're timely.

EF: Newspapers were cutting staff. They used our material quite a bit. The *Wichita Eagle* almost regularly carried our columns for a number of years. I think we put the word out at a critical time when Brownback was at his height in cutting the income tax and taking on the judicial issue.

DG: Let's kind of wrap that up. What would you think at this point, all those dynamics in play, what shapes public policy now? It's not exclusively media. Maybe it's social media. I don't know. What do you think influences the way the country and the states are headed?

EF: Well, there are good public servants carrying out important jobs still. Their heads may be down a bit, but there are public servants at the state, local, and federal level who are working every day and doing good work. The leadership at the top is really what's the problem. I start that with Trump, but it's also the impact of money in politics. I started collecting the big postcards, colored postcards that came into our home from Americans for Prosperity for Ty Masterson. I think there were about a dozen. They all say the same thing. They demean the opposition obviously. It just is a lack of civility.

DG: Would you agree that perhaps another casualty from that era back when we were reporters and lots of stuff, accountability was a bigger deal? That was kind of our role as a journalist was to bring accountability, make people answer to what they've done. That seems like a lot happens now when nobody is called into accountability.

EF: Look at the Senate candidate Marshall. He's not opened himself up to a public forum in this entire thing.

DG: Nor has Ron Estes running for the House.

EF: You can say the same for the local Congressmen. That seems to be working for them. It obviously is working for them to some extent at least because they do it.

DG: Do you think it's going to be necessary to have a resurgence of emphasis on education to counter that lower strata of intellectual capacity?

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EF: I'm not sure that's the answer. I think you've got to have candidates that can persuade folks that this is not the best way.

DG: I don't know if we're getting there or not. I think that pretty much gets us to a nice recounting of a great life and a man, so many hats. Your closet's full of them. I don't know what the next hat will be. I'm sure there's one. I'll just close that and make reference to Dr. Flentjes's book, "Reform and Reaction", which is an insightful look at the history of our state. For the Kansas Oral History Project, I'm Dale Goter.

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