

SPECIAL INTERVIEW

DATE: June 12, 1973
INTERVIEWEE: HARRY C. McPHERSON
INTERVIEWER: ROBERT HAWKINSON
PLACE: Mr. McPherson's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

H: I think what I'd like to do first if we could is just get the sequence of your positions in the White House. I understand you came as a special assistant in counsel in 1965. You came over from the State Department.

M: Right. I came on loan from the State Department for about six months. I was still being paid by the State Department for the first half year, and then I became special assistant in counsel. When Lee White went on to the [Federal] Power Commission I became special counsel.

H: Your title changed I noticed in 1966.

M: Yes.

H: That's after the first six months. I guess the broad kinds of questions I'm interested in revolve around the way in which the policy development pro-process changed over the years that you were there.

M: Right.

H: I know you were very active in the drafting stage of messages. I know you were also active in some of the road trips which you

McPherson -- 2

described in the spring. I think those [are the] two areas that we'd be most interested in.

You went on campus visits, you mentioned in your book [A Political Education], in 1967. Did you go on any of them in 1966, do you remember, the first year you were there?

M: I think so. I missed a couple because I had some deadlines for speeches or other business, and [Joseph] Califano and [Douglass] Cater went instead. All in all, I recall going to Harvard and Yale, did not go to Columbia or Princeton, went to [the University of] Texas.

H: This is the first year?

M: I can't recall, to tell you the truth, which one it was.

H: Right. Was there any way in which they decided who would go where? Did Califano just tend to pick out somebody to go along with him?

M: More or less, yes. We talked them over and I think it's probably true that if one had wanted to go to all of them one could have gone. But it was kind of ad hoc; there was no set system to it.

H: How about selecting the places? How did they go about that?

M: I never knew. I think essentially it had to do with whom Califano knew. We talked about where we should go. I went to Chicago as well. As an example--I guess it serves as well as any--we knew Ed Levi at the University of Chicago.

H: Who was the contact there?

M: I can't recall. I guess Ed Levi had been on various task forces--

McPherson -- 3

H: Already.

M: --and had been in to see Califano. So we asked him, as we would ask a professor or college president in each locale, to draw together a group of people. Our intent was to get, quote, "the brightest people they could find," and it didn't matter whether they were social scientists or physical scientists. As a matter of fact, we were hoping to get both. We thought we might just get the very best people in the area. Sometimes our schedule, because it fell in the summer, would be bad for that purpose.

H: Just at the end of the school year, really, beginning of the summer.

M: Yes. But Levi got together, as I recall, people from Champaigne [University of Illinois], from Northwestern, the University of Chicago, and maybe one or two other schools. They were about thirty guys I guess around the table.

H: Could you maybe just tell me about one of these sessions? What it was like? Maybe the Chicago one. Incidentally, I'm from Chicago. That's where I'm doing my dissertation.

M: They varied a lot. I think the best of all in terms of consistent quality of responses was Harvard.

H: Yes. You made a point of that in your book.

M: Yes. I thought the reason was that people at Harvard were more likely to have been on the Washington axis than anyone else. They had more understanding of what the government was doing at the time than other academics. Many of them had been in government either

[recently or later: Pat Moynihan, Tom Schelling, Seymour Martin Lipset, Tom Pettigrew, Bob Coles.

H: It really is a unique kind of relationship the people in various fields there have had, I think.

M: That's right. Therefore you didn't talk about a lot of things that had no special relevance to what the government was doing at the time. We asked them essentially for advice on programs that we were not undertaking that we ought to be undertaking, and for judgments on those that we were. How well were they performing? I think it was at Harvard that we first began to get some sense of what later became the Harvard-MIT syndrome, that an awful lot of the remedial programs were not likely to work very well, that they were casually constructed and maybe barking up the wrong tree.

H: In a general way, are you thinking of remedial education of a more general nature, remedial programs?

M: Yes. I should say that that remark probably has more meaning for community action programs and for the OEO programs generally than for education. At Yale Kingman Brewster got together the group. We met at Mory's. The usual drill was to have a drink and a good dinner and then to start talking about eight o'clock and run until eleven-thirty or twelve.

H: Covering a range of topics?

M: Yes. After which we would go back out and pile onto the airplane and fly back to Washington at two o'clock in the morning. I thought it was ridiculous and we ought to spend the night, but Califano is

McPherson -- 5

possessed of a kind of Italian-Catholic work ethic that is really awful.

H: Like a lot of Protestants.

M: Yes. We'd come back from all over the country at ungodly hours. Chicago was I think the one place at least where I went where the war played a particularly vivid role in the conversation. Two or three people in the Chicago meeting in effect said, "None of this will work, none of this will do, because of the war. You can't finance it and it's ruining the country. It's immoral, and it's debilitating the drive of social scientists. Therefore they won't participate."

H: Probably 1967, this would be.

M: Maybe. Yes, it could have been either 1966 or 1967, but probably 1967. At Texas I was astounded by the responses of several of the professors. Some were quite good and right on the money, the equal of people elsewhere. Others were quite concerned with intra-university problems or university-government problems, the problems with fellowships and things--

H: The government as a funder for them.

M: Yes.

H: You mentioned that, yes. Which is not what you were looking for.

M: I'm really not sure how I would rate the take from all of these sessions.

McPherson -- 6

- H: Was there some advantage in regional diversity and hitting, say, places in the Rockies or the Northwest or South where you got different perspectives?
- M: Our idea was that we would get different perspectives, that there was such a heavy Harvard-MIT relationship to government that we ought to get out and talk to guys on the West Coast. I can't recall if there were two meetings in California, one in Los Angeles and one in San Francisco, or just one in San Francisco.
- H: I know there was a meeting in L.A. one of the years, now I can't recall offhand, but I've seen some of the letters.
- M: Frank Murphy I think put together that one.
- H: Right. You mentioned one thing that I really hadn't thought of in connection with these interviews, but I think you really touched on something that I'm quite interested in. You talked about the Harvard-MIT syndrome or what's become the Harvard-MIT syndrome. I take it you're talking about some of the critique that's developed, especially strongly in the last few years, what some people call this neo-conservative critique of a lot of the Great Society programs. I'm very interested in that, but I hadn't thought I could pursue it in connection with my dissertation project. But I'm very interested to hear what you have to say about the origins of that, because you may have seen that in a form very early on before it started getting into even the academic. . . .
- M: Well, I attribute at least a lot of the energy behind it to Pat Moynihan, who was a commanding figure in the Harvard-MIT-Washington

McPherson -- 7

axis. I remember that Pat began to tell me in I guess it was 1966, maybe early 1967, that the Community Action Program would destroy Johnson. This was perhaps typical Irish hyperbole, but he was very concerned that it would undercut any support for sustained public programs. He was dismayed that we had given up on the family assistance plan, on that idea as a product of the civil rights conference of 1966, and very impatient with--

H: Dismayed at the attack on himself I suppose in the wake of that, because of course it did get such a vitriolic blast.

M: I'm sure that was a very large part of his whole feeling about service programs generally, which were being demanded by the same black leaders who were attacking him for his anti-black views, as they were being perceived. But I think it began with that, with the community action programs, and then began to extend to other programs.

It would be useful maybe at this point to back up to the civil rights conference of 1966, because in preparation for that conference in 1965, when Johnson announced at Howard University that there would be such a conference, we began a series of meetings with educational leaders and civil rights leaders in the White House. They would come in once or twice a week in groups that Moynihan and several others had put together. To jump ahead for a moment, that conference did not come off when we thought it would. It was to come off in the fall of 1965.

H: The Howard speech was at commencement in 1965.

McPherson -- 8

M: In June of 1965, and the conference was supposed to be in November. So great was the disparity of views and so strong were the feelings about how that conference ought to be run, and so considerable were the dangers that we felt in it--that is, that it would be too radical and would demand too much performance out of a government that was already giving about as much as it could, that we made the November conference a, quote, "planning conference," for the full conference, then brought in Ben Heineman to be the chairman of a more centrist board of directors. [We] brought in my present law partner Berl Bernhard to be the executive director of the conference, and began to plan for something much broader in scope. By that I mean something that included moderates as well as the cutting edge people. But during those sessions in the second floor conference room in 1965, we had [Martin] Bronfenbrenner in and we had Coles and we had Erik Erikson and a number of thinkers in the field of education, particularly.

Bronfenbrenner was telling us of the first experiments under Head Start. I remember a fascinating afternoon in which he described the process of a test in North Carolina. They had two control groups of children. One of them in which the mothers were brought in to the Head Start classroom and made a part of the whole learning process so that they might continue it at home after it was over, that [they] might get some sense of what the Head Start group was trying to do. And the other [group were brought in] without mothers, on the theory that mothers, particularly black mothers, were too

McPherson -- 9

repressive of the vital juices of their children, that they were too insistent on discipline and not encouraging enough of the creativity of children. I never knew how that came out.

H: Fascinating. He had it under way.

M: He had it under way at the time, working with the state of North Carolina. They had a number of Head Start programs going down there.

H: This was a different level of involvement than one I'm--I'm sure it's there in the Johnson Library civil rights records and the civil rights conference.

M: Yes, there's an awful lot of paper on it. I've got a lot of it at home, but I'm sure there's a lot in the Library.

H: This hasn't been something I've gotten into, but that's another avenue through which social scientists and experts became involved in education policy making.

M: Very much.

H: In conjunction with that--now, of course, I'm spending a good bit of time on the task force process itself, the task forces--I had the impression that while many of the task forces were quite important in terms of policy-generating suggestions, that the committees, formal advisory committees made up of professionals in the various areas, adjuncts to the Office of Education and HEW, were of less importance. At least when I talked to people who were in the BOB-White House circle, that is almost never mentioned. I'm going to start bringing it up to see if there is anything that clicks there. Now under Johnson a number of these committees were created--advisory councils

they were usually called. In fact in education there were over twenty of them. But I don't see much flowing in from them. Were you ever aware of anything? Or in fields that you were closer to, such as cities? I think there were some advisory councils, too.

M: There were. Well, you know, this is not an entirely precise description but it's a general description. Essentially the idea of the whole task force operation was that you would have an outside task force, one made up of experts and concerned bright people who might not be experts but at least could contribute to the resolution of some problem area. And [the idea was] that you would have an inside task force as well, and that the product of the outside task force would be turned over to the inside task force of bureaucrats, who would then try to form it into legislation. Model Cities is a classic case in which--well, I guess in which that didn't exactly happen. We kept the Model Cities task force product away from government to the maximum degree so that it wouldn't get shot down by HUD, and quoted it with about two days notice to Bob Weaver.

But in the education field I remember there was, for example, a higher education task force that was chaired by George Shultz, the present secretary of the treasury. At Yale in the seminar that King Brewster put together for Califano and me, an old professor of education, whose name I can't recall, he was from Kansas originally and was kind of a midwestern salt-of-the-earth type--

H: I've heard of him, too.

McPherson -- 11

M: --made a hell of a suggestion, I thought. He talked about the land grant college system which had developed most of the schools in the Midwest. He said he didn't understand why we didn't do the same kind of thing for urban colleges. You know, the land grant schools did not produce, by and large, great scholars. They produced tremendous numbers of competent people, people who otherwise would not have been exposed to much of the world. They gave them some humanistic training, but they gave them an awful lot of vocational or quasi-vocational training, things that would be useful to them as farmers and as entrepreneurs in rural America. He said he didn't see why we didn't start some urban land grant colleges which would produce a society of people who were simply competent. He talked about reading as a kind of paradigm of the educational process. He said it was quite obvious that even kids who were graduating from the twelfth grade in urban high schools had a ninth-grade or in some cases eighth-grade reading ability, and that the function of these urban land grant schools would be to bring them up by the time they were through with four years of college at least to a sophomore collegiate level of reading. [He said] that this would have tremendous impact on the quality of urban life.

H: That would have been like 1966 or 1967 that that suggestion would have come up in one of the meetings?

M: That's right. I recall going over to George Shultz' task force--in doing this under assignment from the President I told him about this urban schools idea, said that I thought it was the best one I

McPherson -- 12

had heard in several sessions in the colleges. He was quite interested in it. He said, "Go over and tell the Shultz group about it." So one afternoon I went over and made the pitch. Some of them listened with a good deal of interest. The academics there I think took it as a bad idea generally, because its goal was quite clearly not academic excellence and they were conditioned to that. Several of the non-academic members of the group thought it was a pretty good idea. Federal City College here in Washington is an example of the kind of school we were shooting for, or at least that that professor had described.

So there was a good deal of interaction between various groups. You could pick up an idea in one place and try to get it into the process.

H: Well, I'm interested in the sort of linkage between the earlier go-rounds with the visits and then feeding that into later task forces or task forces that might be in process at the time you came back. Those visits were pretty much June and July affairs. After that you'd come back and I gather that's when these books were compiled, these idea books, the catalogs by subject or by policy area.

M: You'd have the outside task forces going in the late summer. Their work would be done in early fall and the inside task force would begin work about then. We would hope to have something into the BOB by November.

H: That's the scheduling that I have. Were you ever involved in task force selections in any of the areas?

McPherson -- 13

M: Oh, I would recommend names.

H: Now this would be a process where White House staff people, Bureau of the Budget people, CEA people, and relevant agency people would suggest names and they would be called down by White House staff. You'd be involved in that.

M: That's right.

H: And I gather from the accounts that the President always wanted to see the list and would sometimes make additions and rarely deletions.

M: That's right. Very rarely deletions.

H: Now the task forces get set up. I believe you were the liaison person with the [Robert] Wood task force, is that right?

M: I was.

H: Yes, that was the one you were most intimately involved in. That's the one in addition incidentally to the [John] Gardner task force, those two were sort of the ideal types. You call it atypical in your book, in that it was sort of the ideal type of a task force.

M: Yes, it was a superb group and they really worked hard.

H: It's also the one most studied, along with Gardner's.

M: Yes. In terms of the commitment of the people, the devotion of the people on the task force, I think those two and the council of the civil rights conference in 1966, which had a large education element in it--

H: I'd like to go back to that, because you've really opened a new area for me there, since I haven't looked at the civil rights papers. You say in preparation for that you brought in a number of these

McPherson -- 14

distinguished people like Coles and Erikson and so forth, and had seminars. Now you're talking about between the Howard address and the--

M: And say October --

H: November, which was the planning session.

M: Leading up to what we converted from a conference into a planning session. The planning session took place at the Washington Hilton. It produced a predictable amount of sulfurous language, a good deal of bickering back and forth. We played it down as much as possible, because we didn't want it to be seen as the conference itself. When it was over it became clear to Califano and me that we ought to then move on to something that would have a wider public acceptance than that particular group of in-fighters who were very much engaged in civil rights work.

H: You broadened it to get other types, other kinds of specialists, and generally give it a broader base, therefore a more moderate base politically.

M: Yes, right, a more acceptable one. We made Ben Heineman the chairman of it.

H: Heineman was really a workhouse for the administration, wasn't he?

M: He really was.

H: He's just coming and going. I wondered how he ever made Northwest Industries.

M: I'm not at all sure. Some of the problems of the Chicago Northwestern Railroad may have derived from about this period.

McPherson -- 15

- H: He made a great breakthrough some years ago when he got new cars for it, and I don't know, maybe they haven't done anything since.
- M: Well, we were [fortunate]. He's a tremendous guy. He had an acute sense of purpose. He really felt the cities were going to burst into flames and that the society was going to crack. He worked terribly hard. When it was over Johnson asked me and Califano to persuade him to become secretary of commerce. We took him to dinner one night and he just laughed at the idea, said he had no desire to be either the government's spokesman with industry or industry's spokesman with government. So we said, "All right, what about HEW?" He said, "No. It's too big. I'd have to work too hard, and I take a month every year, two weeks sailing and two weeks skiing, and I don't want to give it up." So we said, "Is there any job you would take? You could write your own ticket in the government. What would you like to have? What would you take?" He said, "The only job I would even remotely consider giving up my month vacation and the life that I like to lead for is director of the FBI." (Laughter)
- H: He's a lawyer, too, isn't he?
- M: Yes, he is. He became president of the Chicago Northwestern as the result of a reorganization proceeding. But we had guys like Courtlandt Gross of Lockheed and a number--Edgar Kaiser and others on that council. It always--as I wrote about this in the book--used to really get me that these guys would come barreling into Washington on their private jets and an hour later would be seated

McPherson -- 16

around tables in the Executive Office Building talking about children who ate paint off windowsills.

H: Social reform in America.

M: Exactly. I'm trying to think of the name of the guy who ran the education part of that conference. He's from Atlanta and his name is James--

H: I don't know, but you've tipped me off to that and I'll in the future really--

M: It's worth pursuing.

H: Yes.

M: I think I would go through the civil rights papers on the education side, because you'll find just about all the ideas that anybody could dream up as to remedial education.

H: Yes. Well, really, this is in addition to the whole task force operation, the preparation for that conference. Would you say that there is a [turning point]? Well, either in education policy or in administration policy more general, did that event in the summer of 1966 and really the whole year process leading up to it, was that any kind of a turning point? At that same time, of course, you had 1966 elections which really followed on that, the 1966 elections which really changed what the President worked with with Congress, and of course you had the growing constraints, I guess not manifested until fiscal 1967, of the war. I'm trying to get a sense of the environment in which education policy was made in those years and maybe this is something I really haven't looked at, that the changing sort of

McPherson -- 17

civil rights climate--of course, with the riots going on in those summers--does this represent a change?

M: Well, you start with a very fundamental proposition--and it's one that I'm sure you have begun your work with--the proposition that Lyndon Johnson and other liberals, social liberals, in the 1964 through 1968 period had one rock-bottom belief, and it was typical of the United States in all our history. It's a belief that you can find expressed I guess as well as anywhere else in Frederick Jackson → Turner, that education is the whole key to social peace and to a healthy society. Everybody--Phil Landrum of Georgia, who got the poverty program through, if you see him today, he would speak with exactly the same conviction that he spoke with back then, that for poor southern whites and poor southern blacks the only way out was through education. The only way the society could ever be made fair and tolerable to most of its members was through improving educational opportunities. That key phrase that appears in a thousand - Johnson speeches, about every man being able to become as much as is within him to become, is an educational doctrine.

H: Getting as much education as he can take.

M: Even when the cities were burning down and when the constituency for social change was being diminished, when labor unions and their members were becoming hostile to this tremendous concern for the rights of blacks, even then the talisman of the administration was education, more and more education. If only we can educate these young kids who are out looting the stores and mugging people on the streets, then

McPherson -- 18

they'll quit doing that, because they'll have an opportunity to live a better life. It was right at the heart of everything Johnson ever did. When he's called the Education President and when people write, it's all true. There was a faith that I suppose a number of scholars, particularly in the Harvard-MIT group, would call naive now.

H: Today. That wasn't the case a few years ago though.

M: But it was an absolutely profound conviction and it was something that Johnson used as a weapon in forging an alliance between the blacks and the labor unions. Because everybody believed it, and it was the one thing that everybody believed. If you could just give people education, then you'd. . . .

H: So it fit into the whole consensus coalition-building kind of politics perfectly, because it had such a broad base.

M: Absolutely. It not only fit into it, it was the cord that tied it all together.

H: This confirms, of course, everything that one reads, but it's good to hear it confirmed from someone who dealt with Johnson on a day-to-day basis that that came through.

Even with a great unpopularity that developed on the campuses among academics, it struck me as I've gone through the task force-- I've mainly been looking, of course, at the education material--but that even right up through the last year they were able to get very top-flight people from academic life involved in the task force process. In terms of Johnson's own views on academics and the scholars in various areas and so forth, was there any change?

McPherson -- 19

M: Well, you remember I wrote about the meeting that we once called together of the intellectuals in the White House.

H: That sort of flopped. You said [John] Roche expected a few. . . .

M: Yes. You know, I've wondered--I know that the polls were down and I know that there was tremendous hostility among a lot of academics, and there was lots of hostility from the Floyd McKissicks and other black leaders. But I've often thought that probably there was a lot more underlying support, which was there until almost the end or maybe till the end, than we suspected. We were so beseiged, and the war had turned so many things sour, the Congress had turned sour on the war, and Wilbur Mills was demanding as the price for increasing taxes to pay for the war a corresponding cutback in social programs and all of that. It was all the nightmare of 1967 and 1968.

But in all of that there was still a tremendous underlying support for the kind of things Johnson was trying to do, and indeed, a lot of very personal support for him. In 1966 in that civil rights conference, right until the night the conference closed, we were scared to death that the SNCC people were going to tear it up and all of that. The response when Johnson walked on the floor of the conference, with three thousand people in the room out at the Sheraton Park, was absolutely convulsive. People were on their feet yelling, "LBJ! LBJ!" The response to him in the black community when he died, the feeling that people had that the best friend they ever had was gone, suggests to me that even in academia, even among lots of people who wanted social change, that while it was almost

McPherson -- 20

impossible to speak well of him in an atmosphere where the students were violently anti-war and therefore anti-Commander-in-Chief who was drafting them, through all the convulsions of Columbia and other schools, the trashing of the campuses, that there were still a lot of bright, academic minds who saw him as a man who was still trying to improve social conditions in America, and who wanted to help him do it.

H: What about his reaction though? What about his reaction to these things?

M: Well, I think it was, as I described in that meeting, one of real mystification, "My God, you guys have been asking for all of this forever. Now I've given it to you. What are you griping about?" I mean, not you. The people who were sitting around the table there were all employed by the federal government in high positions and all working hard for the Johnson program. But he was talking about the people that they had come from, the faculties that they knew and had served on. He was genuinely mystified.

H: Because he had been implementing the things that they wanted.

M: At the same time he knew that his style, his manner of operating, was offensive to them. I think that he understood deep within him that there was really nothing he could ever do that would attract them, that would be winsome to them, that he could pass all the legislation in the world, and he did. I suppose at one point toward the end of the administration, an enormous amount of the budget for the

McPherson -- 21

very kinds of research they were doing was funded by his programs. It really puzzled him.

H: But the levels of support are reflected in that, and when you were suggesting earlier about there being residuals for it.

Let me just ask you one or two more shorter questions. You were very involved in the drafting, of course, of the State of the Union messages, the various messages. Did you work on the education messages as well?

M: Yes. I should say not anywhere near as much as I did other messages, because we had someone in that field, Doug Cater, who was both extremely knowledgeable, more knowledgeable than anyone else, about the elements of the education program and could also write.

H: What about the President's involvement in first of all, the message-drafting process which took place after the checkout at the Ranch, the meetings with Califano and then by the head of the [Bureau of the] Budget, [Charles] Schultze or whoever it was, usually the CEA people there, and relevant cabinet heads would come down. Then the drafting started and the message schedule developed. Were there important decisions that were still made during that time, substantive decisions, or had things pretty much been laid out? Like, would you get real substantive changes when you were working on drafts?

M: Well, it depended. In areas in which I had a personal interest and had some substantive responsibility--urban affairs, crime, civil rights--I would get involved in the last couple of weeks of the whole task force legislation-developing part of it. I would meet

McPherson -- 22

in Califano's office with the cabinet secretaries and assistant secretaries, people from the Bureau and from CEA and elsewhere and we would change it. I was just one more staff man involved in that process, and at the end of the process, when we had a bill or we had the outline, the elements of the bill that we wanted, then I would set to work writing the message to Congress. Agriculture was another one where I had that kind of responsibility. In other areas like manpower training, where I didn't have a hell of a lot of either expertise, interest or responsibility, I would just take the product of Califano, Larry Levinson and others, sometimes in the form of a draft already done, and would rewrite it.

H: Cater might do similar things with education or [inaudible] along those same lines?

M: Yes, yes. And with education message business, I guess on reconsideration, I did damn little because I would be sent a copy of the message by the President and he would ask me what I thought about it. Generally it was extremely well done and well written and I thought he could go with it.

H: You would sometimes be involved in checking back with the President at that point. As the message finally reached its final stages there would be a kind of flowing back and passing around.

M: Some of them a great deal of that. The Model Cities thing went back and forth with him for two weeks.

H: Well, that covers most of the points that I was interested in. You

McPherson -- 23

put me on to a couple of things that I am going to look at in addition when I go down there again.

M: You'll see Cater, I'm sure.

H: Oh, yes. I'll be seeing Cater in the fall, not the summer. I'm going to be teaching this summer at the University of Alabama, summer school, and then I'm going out to start a job at the University of California, Santa Cruz, next fall.

M: Good.

H: So I'll be right in the area.

M: That's terrific.

H: Yes, I'm looking forward to it.

M: I'm sure he'll be tremendously helpful, because he's got lots of papers and probably as deep a knowledge of Johnson in education as anyone has. Wilbur Cohen and John Gardner are also people you'll want to see, and probably Frank Keppel and Harold Howe.

H: Right.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Special Interview]

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