

INTERVIEW II

DATE: May 3, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: MORRIS ABRAM

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Abram's office, New York City

Tape 1 of 2

A: I don't know the year, but it was probably around 1963-64. Arthur Krim called me and asked whether or not I would be willing to be the president of the Motion Picture Association. I believe the retiring president was Eric Johnson. I was practicing law here in this firm and quite happy in New York, but as Arthur portrayed the job it had a lot of interesting aspects to it. Some of them I didn't like, such as being away from home a great deal. I had young children. The salary--this is funny to think of it now--I think, was something like a hundred thousand dollars a year.

(Interruption)

So a hundred thousand dollars a year, plus expenses, plus meeting figures all over the world in the entertainment [field]; well, I liked the idea, at least I wanted to pursue it. And before I was able to say yes or no, I got a call either from Bob Benjamin or Krim, I forget which--I think it was Krim--saying that no, the matter was no longer alive because the President of the United States had decided that [Jack] Valenti would have the job. Now, Valenti at that time had been serving in the White House, had married Johnson's secretary, I believe.

G: Former secretary.

A: Former secretary. I did not know why Johnson wished to impose him upon the Motion Picture Association, particularly if he was, as he was, a loyal and valued employee of the White House. I don't think Johnson had any personal opposition to me that I know of. Maybe I'm wrong about that, but I don't think so. But Arthur made it very plain that it was not possible for the Motion Picture Association, which had so many issues at the executive branch to be decided by the President, to oppose the President on something that he strongly wished, and he strongly, strongly wished Valenti to occupy that seat, so Valenti was appointed.

G: What were some of the issues that he was interested in?

A: I would think the issues involved foreign distribution of films, films imported into the United States, exported abroad, negotiations with foreign persons to let in American films.

Abram -- Interview II -- 2

In those days dollars were in short supply, and it wasn't always easy for European markets or other markets to pay in American dollars. I don't know. As portrayed to me--I didn't go into the details--there were an extraordinary number of issues on which it was important to have the support of the president of the United States, and that's what happened. That's how I was not offered the presidency of the Motion Picture Association.

G: Amazing.

We talked a great deal about the Civil Rights Conference last time, and there are just a couple of other questions I want to ask about that before we move on to some other topics. One is the appointment of Berl Bernhard. I want to ask if you had a role in that, if it was partially your decision, or who decided on Bernhard?

A: It certainly was agreeable to me. It may have been suggested by Harry McPherson. It may have been suggested by Harold Fleming. I did not know him very well. I had met him in Atlanta, I believe, when he was on the staff of the Civil Rights Commission holding hearings in the Eisenhower Administration. I believe he was there setting up hearings in Atlanta. I had a high opinion of him then, I have a high opinion of him now, and I have an even higher opinion of Harry McPherson.

G: Did Bernhard do a good job administratively on the conference?

A: I would have to say that none of us did a good job in terms of anticipating what was really going on in the undercurrents of the black community. Now, it just happens that I debated today--

(Interruption)

Back to the Social Action Commission of the Union of American People of Congregations [?]. I debated him as a former president--I am--of the American Jewish Committee, before the annual meeting of the American Jewish Committee on what happened to the civil rights movement. Crucial to that is the question you're asking me: What happened at the Civil Rights Conference of 1965? If you want me to, I'll tell you what I think happened, because it relates to why Bernhard did not do a perfect job, I did not do a perfect job, nobody did a perfect job. Harry McPherson didn't do a perfect job. I don't think anybody knew what was really going on at the time.

By 1965, the statutory agenda of the civil rights movement was in place, and I think Johnson wanted a triumphal celebration. He was entitled to it. He'd enacted the legislation and the courts were acting. The blacks had the vote now, or would soon get it, which was both the sword and the shield, the sword to get the things that the citizens needed and wanted, and the shield to protect them against racism and bigotry in politics. Bear in mind that the full executive committee were all integrationists, and this becomes important. You know who they were, Roy Wilkins, Dorothy Height--well, the whole list

Abram -- Interview II -- 3

of them, there wasn't a person amongst them who wasn't an integrationist, and all of them were loyal in the main to the Johnson Administration. It didn't happen that he picked people who were loyal. All the leaders in the movement were loyal except Martin [Luther King], who was off on a tangent about the Vietnam War, but he was able to be lassoed in because of his respect for Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young and the others. But out in the wings, unnoted by us, this Black Power movement was beginning, and the Black Power movement is a separationist movement.

Now let's be clear about the difference between two schools of thought in this country on civil rights. One is integrationist, which I think is a movement that has to prevail, and the other is a separationist movement. The Black Power movement was not the first. The Garvey movement was a tremendous separationist movement, the Marcus Garvey movement. But these young kids now were assailing the old titans of the movement who had created the revolution, and you know who they were: Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown, and even the SNCC people were getting a little nervous. So John Jewer in the city council in Atlanta, a nice fellow, ran a voter education project; he was moderate. But the separationists were beginning. Now separationists even began to reject Bob Moses as white legendary leader of the young white kids in Mississippi, in the summer of 1964. Blacks wanted to reject whites; they were angry; they wanted to do things for themselves.

If you know anything about this conference, you know that A. Philip Randolph proposed a freedom budget of a hundred billion dollars. That was bigger than Johnson's total budget; he went through the roof. But bear this in mind: A. Philip Randolph was a great man. He didn't ask for a hundred billion dollars for blacks or any part of it for blacks. He asked for a hundred billion dollars for the needy. He, too, was an integrationist. Now any black leader today who asked for a hundred billion dollars would ask for it for blacks or a conglomerate of minorities. But not Randolph, not in those days.

Now you see the strains of separation beginning. Then the only thing that I think I detected, and I think the only thing that Bernhard detected, was the fact there was enormous resistance, even in the executive committee itself, to the idea that the black condition was the result of factors other than discrimination. And how do I know that? Because we all knew that [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan was an anathema [?] and he was saying, "Now wait a minute. There is racism, but there are other things, too." There's more than one thing about that. As a matter of fact, just today in the paper I saw where my friend Dr. Kenneth Clark says that Moynihan was right then, he's right now, and since Pat was called a racist, he says, "If Pat is a racist"--he said this at the time--"so am I."

But you see, that was the first evidence I had. Maybe Berl had more prescience than I did. But I did know this: that the separationists, who are now going to become the persons who are for preferential treatment and quotas, they attacked Randolph. They viciously attacked the freedom budget. They called it an integrationist operation or ploy, and Bayard Rustin attacked them. So I think that conference got split because right at

Abram -- Interview II -- 4

that moment in history the integrationists were over here, and the separationists were coming in, and the integrationists were afraid the separationists would take over, and they made certain accommodations, but not too many. You may ask me why did it happen. I would say it was predictable if you'd read history, but neither Berl, nor I, nor Harry knew enough history, I think, at that time to know that when things are moving forward, that's not the time the oppressed people are quiet. The French Revolution and the Russian Revolution occurred at a period when there was hope in those respective countries, and the released anger in the educated classes which could now go into operation in the desegregated society, began to be heard.

You asked me a question--I've rambled--"Did Berl do a good job?" Berl did not anticipate these things, and I don't know what good it would have done if Berl had anticipated. I don't know whether anyone could have prevented it. I would say that we were all babes in the woods. And I think Johnson was a babe in the woods for letting Pat Moynihan have him call that conference, because he thought he was going to celebrate himself. Do you not think that's true?

G: I definitely think that is what he expected. One of the memoranda that outlined some of the purposes of the conference states that one of the purposes was to make some of the existing programs and legislation more effective and to discuss ways in which--

A: To enforce the Voting Rights Act, for example.

G: Yes.

A: Of course, the blacks were raising hell about enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. Having the act on the books, they thought it could be enforced all across the country immediately. Anybody who knows anything about American life knows that it takes time to use the processes of America. The point is that the processes, unless you destroy them, are in place and eventually they will prevail if you don't kick them down or assault them. I don't know what your documentation shows, but I know that I was very pissed off at Johnson because I thought Bill Coleman and I and Berl Bernhard had learned a lot, and we had taken a lot of bricks and arrows. But he decided that he would not let us be the chairmen of the new conference. It made Bill madder than hell, and LBJ brought in Ben Heineman, who was a businessman, to run it. I think Ben Heineman is an extremely competent fellow, but I don't think he knew any of the bits and players about it. Maybe it was a better thing. I had a feeling all the time that Harry was very, very embarrassed when he would talk to me about this. I don't know what was going on. Do any of the documents that you have show?

G: McPherson discusses this in his memoir, *A Political Education*.

A: Yes, I didn't read it.

Abram -- Interview II -- 5

G: He doesn't say in so many words exactly why. I think the President felt that it needed a little bit different slant; he wanted to get business more involved.

A: Oh, that isn't what he wanted. He wanted more control, *I* think. I think he wanted somebody who was not known [to be] too friendly, had ties in with the civil rights movement but who was acceptable because of his decency and character, which Ben Heineman was.

G: You mentioned making the Voting Rights Act more effective. What else in terms of just nuts and bolts did the conference hope to do in terms of making existing programs and legislation more effective?

A: Well, you had the desegregation of schools question, you had those questions, which--after all, this was ten years, eleven years, after *Brown [v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas]*; there was a lot of feeling that *Brown* had not been carried out, and it hadn't been. But I must say--I don't know what I said at the time--but if I look back on it, I would say that *Brown* was extended too far by the courts, I don't know whether too far by then or not, but I'm opposed to *Charlotte v. Mecklenburg*. I think it was a mistake. Again, I think it's a case in which the courts act as sort of engineers of society. It always angered me that black children would be moved past a school they otherwise would go to because they were blacks. There were plenty of seats and every reason why, or if there weren't any seats, other seats should be built in a white school for them to go to. But I never thought that it was a good idea to try to produce a salt-and-pepper arrangement as if that's the end-all and be-all of education. But I know some blacks felt differently about it; they thought there was a lot of foot-dragging on that.

But you must bear in mind that Randolph, as the most respected leader of the black community at the time--he was more universally respected than Martin. People would fuss at Martin; they didn't fuss at Mr. Randolph. He was focusing on this freedom budget. He wanted more money for economic programs, and in a certain sense he had strayed from civil rights, and this was another thing that happened at that conference. Civil rights in U.S. society means to me equal opportunity, equal protection of the law, nondiscrimination in voting, and the due process of law. It does not mean a certain level of food stamps. It may in a socialist society, but not in this society. I am for a level of food stamps, but I don't call it civil rights and I don't salute it like I do the flag or civil rights. Mr. Randolph, however--and I don't know exactly how this came about except that you have got to bear in mind that Bayard Rustin comes out of a socialist tradition. Now, you understand me, he is a democratic socialist; he is a fierce anticommunist. He is fiercely anticommunist. Bayard Rustin supported the Vietnam War (I think), but economically he came out of a socialist model, and he sees human rights as also embracing economic and social rights. In that civil rights conference, Randolph makes the pitch for more economic and social opportunities, not segregated, but one would not ordinarily think of that as a civil right. It had nothing to do with the police dogs. It had nothing to do with keeping people away from the voting booths. It had nothing to do with keeping

Abram -- Interview II -- 6

people out of hamburger joints. So that was another. . . .

G: Well, let's talk about some other aspects of your association with LBJ and his presidency. The files indicate that you were helpful in the 1964 elections. Let me ask you about your role there.

A: Bill Moyers called me. I was in New York, and he said, "Look, it looks like we may lose Georgia, and I'd like for you to go down there and see what can be done to save Georgia." Now, it was strange to me, it didn't occur to me that the Democratic Party would lose Georgia. Hell, they had never lost Georgia since Reconstruction, not even to Eisenhower. So I went down, and I canvassed a number of people in the state, and I concluded that probably we were going to lose Georgia. There wasn't much support for Lyndon Johnson in Georgia. Now, I don't know why. He carried other southern states, didn't he?

G: Well, he carried some.

A: Well, he sure didn't carry Georgia, and there wasn't much that could be done about it. It is a disappointment to me that he wasn't able to do better in Georgia, but in 1964 Georgia was really quite mad at Lyndon Johnson.

G: The files indicate that you worked on a get-out-the-vote sort of campaign.

A: Right. I dealt with a lot of legislators. John Greer, I remember he was a very powerful legislator in the state. I met with Democratic officials and tried to get the vote out. But you know in those days the black vote wasn't all that significant, and that was the only vote that you could get out and be sure it would go right. Plus some votes in Atlanta.

G: Another time you went to Georgia concerned a subcommittee in the UN.

A: Oh, yes. This was when Kennedy was in office. I was serving in the Subcommittee for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities of the United Nations, and I was hearing so much static about what a terrible country we had and how dreadfully blacks were treated, and Atlanta was sort of a model. It hadn't been desegregated, but it was a model in terms of black voting, decent courts, fine universities, beautiful homes, and black prosperity. So I conceived the idea that I would take all of the members of the subcommittee down to Atlanta. The mayor of Atlanta was Ivan Allen, Jr., who was thoroughly supportive of the idea. Adlai Stevenson was at the United Nations and was the head of the Field Foundation, of which I was a member. Adlai got scared as hell. Adlai was easily scared. It didn't take much to scare Adlai, and he had an almost conniption fit, I think, because the Field Foundation was going to put up the money for the trip, which was perfectly proper, to educate foreigners about the United States and what we regarded as a model city. He got so upset that Ruth Field agreed to put up the money herself because we cancelled the grant, or didn't make the grant, from the foundation.

Abram -- Interview II -- 7

We went down and we were warmly greeted by the Mayor of Atlanta, by all the power structure there. We stayed at a fine hotel, the Riviera, and we went all through the city. It just happened the Ku Klux Klan decided they would hold demonstrations at the very time we were there. So they held their demonstrations, and we drove the multicolored, multiracial, multinational subcommission by to see the Ku Klux Klan And of course we even heard from this black comedian-- what's his name?--who is so bitter.

G: Dick Gregory?

A: Dick Gregory. We went down to the Butler Street YMCA one Sunday, and the blacks in Atlanta were very moderate and praiseful of Atlanta. He sat back in the back of the room, slouching and making caustic remarks about Atlanta and about the state of blacks.

I remember going through the section of the city that had these wonderful black homes, acres and acres and acres, some with tennis courts and swimming pools, and Mr. Boris Ivanov, the Russian, comes up to me, and he says--we were at the home of a black woman who was entertaining us for coffee--"Are all these homes we've been seeing black?" I said, "Every one of them, and I want to tell you something, Mr. Ivanov. This will sort of break up your rather unified image of what capitalism is and what socialism is. These are all black capitalists. The Mayor is a capitalist, and all of these people who have been so good to you and who are interested in improving race relations are capitalists, and they are for equal rights. This afternoon we're going to see the Ku Klux Klan demonstrating downtown, and I want you to know that under every one of those sheets beats a proletarian heart." He turned and walked away.

(Laughter)

But anyway it came off very well. But Johnson was vice president; he was not president, I don't think, at that time.

G: I think this was the--

A: I'm trying to find out when it was.

G: I believe it was early 1964.

A: You may be right.

G: I think the idea was conceived during the Kennedy Administration, but I thought you were in it, too.

A: Let me see if I can find it in this book.

(Interruption)

Abram -- Interview II -- 8

G: You were appointed U.S. representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights in March of 1965. Do you recall that assignment?

A: Yes, I got appointed. That was strange. I knew I was to be appointed; I was on the subcommission. I knew I was to be appointed to the commission. Bill Moyers, I knew, was pushing it, and the commission was to meet in March or April, and even as the weeks were eaten up, I was waiting to go, to be appointed, and no appointments came through. I think I was appointed only two or three days before I was to go to Geneva. Why he took so long to appoint me, I don't know, but obviously he was thinking about something. What he was playing around with, I don't know. I think Johnson always thought that I was close to the Kennedys, which I have been, and he suspected me of having Kennedy fealty, and I suppose he probably thought that Moyers was straying off the beaten path, and Moyers and I were Kennedy people. I don't know, but I know it was very hard, it seemed to me, for LBJ to sign off on that appointment. Are there papers that reflect that or not?

G: No, I haven't seen anything to that effect in so many words. It's a possibility.

A: Moyers would know.

G: Yes. That's the sort of thing that would be reflected--

A: It must take days for Moyers to talk to you. Have you started with him yet?

G: Not yet. Let me ask you to describe your work on the UN commission.

A: I had a great time. I'm not sure that I would do it again. I had the view that American foreign policy grounded on the traditions and best instincts of the Republic was apt to be a sound policy and in the national interest. I felt that was something--that is, American human rights and civil rights in this country--that no matter how lax we were in enforcing them, we were without fault compared to the rest of the world. You may say we had many faults, and indeed I would always, in the UN commission, point out the faults, but if you want to criticize us, you had to say, "Compared to what?" So I felt that the moral authority would have a lot to do with the adherence of countries to our interests and to a clustering of them around us in terms of security and trade. I must say as I look back upon it that I don't think that has much to do with real politics. That isn't to say that a country shouldn't hold the banner of human rights aloft, but it cannot be the determiner of foreign policy. It cannot be, because the first duty of the state is to protect itself, and I do not believe that any state is always perfectly lawful. It is not in the nature of sovereignty to be lawful. They are two inconsistent positions. It is beyond the law. So whereas I entered the job with great hopes and expectations, I came out of the job feeling that it wasn't always best for the United States to do what I would have had them do. I'm going to tell you of a time when I think Johnson got madder than hell. I was in the commission

Abram -- Interview II -- 9

at the time there was a lot of trouble in Haiti and a lot of trouble in Greece. There were juntas in both countries and we were supporting them. I thought I had enough leeway--[Arthur] Goldberg was the ambassador--in the position papers that I had--I was then a representative of the United States--to table a resolution that we look into the gross and persistent violations of human rights, and I mentioned Haiti and Greece. God, all hell broke out! And it broke out because, hell, Greece is a part of NATO and it's the southern hinge of our defense. Haiti is a terrible state, as you well know.

G: Excuse me. You voted to table--?

A: No, I put on the table some kind of resolution--you have to look at the documentation--in which Haiti and Greece were mentioned, and all hell broke loose and the State Department had a fit, and I suppose Johnson had a fit if he knew about it. I guess he did. But I thought I was well within my instructions, and I believe I was, and I certainly was well within the tradition of the United States to uphold human rights, and I had been preaching that we do it against friend and foe. If you're not evenhanded it has no meaning, and certainly Greece and Haiti were persistent and gross violators of human rights. There was no question of that. But again, compared to the Soviet Union, neither of these countries was a threat to us and, compared to the Soviet Union, I don't think either of these countries are quite as evil. I think you could have more free speech in Greece at the time of the junta than you possibly could have in the Soviet Union.

G: How was Johnson's anger relayed to you?

A: Only through the State Department.

G: What did they say?

A: They wanted me to withdraw it, and I wish I had the papers, but I did make some fuzzy compromise and the thing was wiped out in a way that was satisfactory. It didn't break up NATO. I can assure you that was not possible, but you would have thought that we had committed some grievous crime.

I'll tell you who would remember all of this: David Squire [?] in Weston, Massachusetts. He was my assistant, and he kept careful records and will remember the whole damn thing. He would love to talk to you about it, David F. Squire.

G: It was about this time that you also began thinking of ways to end the Vietnam War?

A: Oh, yes. But that was--no, it was not about that time.

G: The first proposal that I see, I think, was in the summer of 1966.

A: It got to be an embarrassment in the UN, but I can't tell you that I was opposed to the

Abram -- Interview II -- 10

Vietnam War. At least if I were opposed, my speeches in the UN were very defensive. I am sure that a collection of speeches at the UN that I made at the time would have defended the U.S. policies in Vietnam as required by the conditions of war that then existed, though undeclared.

G: In at least one memorandum written in 1966 you seemed to redefine the objectives in such a way as to facilitate a disengagement.

A: Oh, yes. I really think this is closer to 1967, because then I was thinking of running for the Senate and if you remember, by 1967 the thing had gotten very hot and in New York there was a great peace movement. I was being encouraged, quite frankly, by Bobby Kennedy to run against Jacob Javits. Now, why? As you look back on it, Bobby Kennedy quite obviously was wanting to get control of the New York Democratic Party and a Senate seat. He had one seat. He certainly didn't love Johnson. He figured that I would be a very good candidate to run against Javits, and he urged me to run. Steve Smith urged me to run, and I said I would test the waters. But I always made it clear I would not run unless I had the support both of Johnson and Kennedy, because Kennedy might have had the political effect in New York, but Johnson had the money. He controlled Ed Weisl and the fund-raising operation here. Anyway, I was going to have enough trouble; I didn't want to run against Johnson or against Kennedy as well as against Javits, and I never thought I could beat Javits. The point was that I could set myself up so that the next time I tried, or Javits retired or some other seat became available, I would have run such a good race that I could win.

So pretty soon, as I contemplated and talked to these West Side liberals and radicals, I saw that the Vietnam War was the end-all, be-all, and there was Paul O'Dwyer in the wings. He wanted to run, and Ramsey [Clark] hadn't appeared on the scene, but his later thinking was percolating. I called Bobby and I said, "Bobby, look, I don't think I can support the President on the Vietnam War, not fully. I've got a different position than he, and I would like to lay it out." He said, "Morris, I am telling you, you are going to be running on a ticket headed by Lyndon Johnson. You cannot oppose the war." And that was 1967. "It can't be done." Now, of course, when did the [Eugene] McCarthy thing--?

G: 1968.

A: Yes. All right. By 1968, or late December [1967], I saw that I had to find a position that was consistent with my own views, and also with the views of the majority of the leaders of the party in the liberal community of New York in which I lived. So I wrote this, "How to Protect the National Interests, Honor Our Commitments, and Disengage in Vietnam." It speaks for itself; I won't try to read it into [the interview], but I was perfectly prepared to campaign on this document.

G: But this is one that was apparently proposed in 1966; this is the same formula, though, that you pushed in 1967 and 1968 also.

Abram -- Interview II -- 11

A: I did not realize that I had formulated it that early.

G: The newspaper articles indicate that Burke Marshall helped you.

A: Oh, now, let me tell you about that. I found it very difficult to talk to Bobby Kennedy, *very* difficult, [yet] here were two people that agreed about a lot of things. When he became attorney general, I was in his office the first day he was attorney general. I think he wanted to see me; I think his idea was to appoint me to be the assistant attorney general for civil rights. I sat in his office and talked to him about my fourteen-year struggle against the county-unit system, and he just grunted and groaned. He was nice enough; he knew that I had had a role in the election of his brother and getting Martin King out of jail. He knew all of that, but I just couldn't talk to the man. He expected you to carry all the conversation. So when I got into this--

Tape 2 of 2

So when I began to seriously contemplate running and also began to formulate a position about Vietnam, which was *the* crucial issue by that time, it seemed that Johnson was going to support a man named Resnick--what's his name?--Joe Resnick, a congressman who was going to run on a straight Johnson, win-the-war ticket. I went down to the UN Plaza where Bobby had a home and talked to him about this proposal. Bobby by this time no longer said to me, "Now, look, you've got to support the President's position." But he had a great deal of difficulty talking to me about it, and he finally said to me, "Morris, you and I have difficulty talking. That's true. Burke Marshall is a great friend of yours and, of course, mine. You work out your position, and whatever Burke approves, I'll approve." So I worked this out with Burke, and it was satisfactory with Burke, and then I sent it over to Ed Weisl. I had then the problem of getting the President to agree, and Ed hit the roof. He said, "That's impossible. I've talked to Cy Vance"--who was his law partner--"and he says it's no good." So I had Cy Vance and Ed Weisl against me.

G: How about Arthur Krim? Did you talk to him?

A: I did not talk to Arthur. I should have. I did talk to Hubert.

G: You got Humphrey's approval, didn't you?

A: I got Humphrey's approval.

G: Tell me about that.

A: I was out at the home of Max Kampelman, I believe, and Hubert was there. I went over it with Hubert, and Hubert said, "Look, Morris"--I saw Hubert in his office, too, the Vice

Abram -- Interview II -- 12

President--"you're never going to get the approval of the President. But don't [let it] make any difference. Run. Say what you want to. Run. I tell you, then he's not going to be able to do anything about it and you'll win." Best advice I ever had, but I'm afraid that I had set up conditions that were absolutely impossible. That is, Johnson and Kennedy both agreeing, and the Vietnam War being the fulcrum of their difference and the one thing that I needed them to agree on.

Then came Brandeis, the offer to go to the university, and that was a marvelous way to achieve a life ambition, that is to be an academic president of a great and distinguished university, and also to get out of this damned bind between Johnson and Kennedy.

G: Did Johnson himself ever focus on your proposal?

A: I do not know. All I can say is that Eddie Weisl rejected it vociferously and said that Vance agreed with him. Now, where was Vance at that time?

G: He and [Averell] Harriman headed up the delegation in Paris, but that was [later].

A: Well, I don't know. Weisl may have not been telling me the truth. It may have been Weisl's view.

G: In any event, Johnson never talked to you about the proposal himself?

A: No, I never talked to him about it. Is there any record on how he judged this?

G: No.

A: Who is this [inaudible]?

G: Let's see. [looking at document]

A: Where did it go? Moyers?

G: I guess it could be Moyers. It looks like he saw it. This is an indication. Well, I don't know. I'll find out.

A: Is that his signature? Is that Johnson's check mark?

(Interruption)

G: How would you regard the proposal in retrospect? Is it workable?

A: Let's see. No. It may have been a peace with honor, but it would have been a peace in

Abram -- Interview II -- 13

which the North Vietnamese would have swallowed the South Vietnamese, held no elections. As far as UN tribunals to which people could petition for protection, they would be wiped out by the Vietnamese government. I do not think that there's a possibility that the North Vietnamese would have agreed to any such impingement on their sovereignty, even to get a peace for the moment, and if they had agreed, they would have violated it. I say the USSR, in its own interest, should have welcomed a neutralization of an area which they cannot dominate but which China might. It saves face for the USSR by moving the United States Armed Forces.

Here's the crux of it. "The North Vietnamese should, and perhaps silently will, welcome a guarantee of independence from Communist China." As it happens they would, because they were Soviet agents. You see, in those days we thought they were possibly Chinese agents.

They will no doubt officially denounce the machinery to protect against reprisal and discrimination as an invasion of sovereignty, but on reflection, what are the North Vietnamese options? Conquest. Is it better to agree to these restrictions, which would merely implement the Geneva Accords to which they are so wedded, or face another decade of war and ruin?

I don't know if they would have agreed, and if they had agreed, they would have violated it, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't a good platform to run on.

G: The portion about resisting Communist China was certainly valid.

A: Yes, I don't want to scotch it entirely. As a campaign document it's perfectly [inaudible], as good as anybody else's.

G: Did you plan to run in August, 1966?

A: Was that 1966?

G: Yes.

A: That's August, 1966? (I believe it was 1967.)

G: Yes.

A: I think I was planning, obviously, to run if I could get the proper setup.

G: Let's talk about another aspect of Vietnam, and that was an indication in some of the memoranda that support for Israel was tied to Jewish support on Vietnam.

A: Yes, Johnson makes some crude points about that, as crude as hell. He began to make

Abram -- Interview II -- 14

speeches or noises or complaints to Jewish leaders that "How in the hell could Jews not support him in Vietnam and expect him to support Israel?" Is that what you're saying?

G: Yes.

A: In the first place, the two things should never have been joined, because he was trying to blackmail people politically to support him in one area, when presumably he ought to have been supporting or not supporting Israel in the nation's interests, so he was not politically pure.

G: Did this ever get back to you in a direct form? For example, did Weisl ever say to you that LBJ made support of Israel conditional on--?

A: No.

G: Who did he say it to, I wonder?

A: He said it to a group of Jewish leaders.

G: Did he?

A: Yes. It certainly got in the press. It certainly was spoken of in the Jewish community, but let me say another thing. As I look back on it, though, it was not something--he didn't put it right, but it is true that the ultimate support of Israel is dependent, not upon a trading of favors for votes in the United States from the American president, but I believe the support of Israel is tied into American willingness to defend freedom's interests around the world, and if you're not prepared--I don't think our interests were that deep in Vietnam. But if we're not prepared to put those missiles in Western Europe and keep them there, you can forget the defense of freedom on that frontier, and the defense of freedom on that frontier is tied in to the defense of freedom on an even more extended frontier, and that is the frontier of Israel. Do you understand what I'm saying?

G: Yes. The question in my mind though, really, is how did Johnson himself perceive support of Israel. Did he see it in terms of Jewish votes?

A: Oh, I don't--

G: And fund raising?

A: I don't think there is any question he did to some extent, and that's what he is saying when he made those objectionable remarks. But I would hope, and give him credit for having also a knowledge, and it is knowledge, that the defense of Israel is tied in with the defense of the free world, the whole arc there against the constant threat of communism. I would hope that he had that strategic purpose in mind.

Abram -- Interview II -- 15

G: Johnson had a tremendous amount of financial support from the Jewish community.

A: Oh, yes, he did. Arthur Krim was the kingpin of that.

G: Do you think that Johnson's Middle Eastern policy was too pro-Israeli? Should it have been more balanced?

A: Now, let's see. Johnson was president during the 1967 war. There was a war in which I think Johnson, if anything, was not as pro-Israel as he should have been. We had an obligation as a nation to--just forget Israel, forget votes--to defend those maritime waters. Time after time, on instrument after instrument, Israel had been guaranteed free access through that damned canal, and Johnson kept making noises about the principle of protecting the right of international waters, but Israel's ships had not been able to go through that canal. Then he [Nasser] closed the Gulf of Aqaba and that really imperiled Israel's shipping.

Johnson spent a lot of time trying to organize the world to react, but he was not successful, and I don't know how hard he tried. I don't know how many locks he put on people. But in any event, when the UN troops were moved from their positions of guarding the gates to Israel and the Sinai, there was nothing Israel could do. I think Johnson during his administration did furnish a reasonably adequate supply of arms to Israel, but I don't think Johnson went out of his way to force the Arabs to do what they should have done and which would have prevented the war, and that is keep those shipping lanes open, which was his international obligation as president to do. No, I don't think he was nearly as committed to the defense of Israel as this man is, Reagan, personally. I'm not saying about the State Department, but I think Reagan is personally committed because he sees the thing in an ideological framework in which Israel is part of the defense against the Soviet Union.

G: Interesting point.

Let's shift to domestic policy and the War on Poverty.

A: I was on the Council of Economic Opportunity and helped in the conference in shaping the War on Poverty. I went down there several times. Shriver was getting a lot of people to rally around, [to] discuss the theses of Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America*, [or] whatever it was. I must say at that time I was very much of the opinion that the government could wipe out poverty, like it could wipe out venereal disease if it just had enough penicillin, and I must have been one of those who was loyal to the view of the Great Society and the Community Action Program with maximum feasible participation of the poor, which turned out to be a rip-off. The only thing it did was to teach a good many blacks to become more effective leaders, which is not a bad thing. But it was a rip-off, and it really, perhaps, furnished the patronage route out and up for a group for rather

Abram -- Interview II -- 16

talented, but not necessarily honorable, and somewhat venal, black leaders.

G: Tell me why it was a rip-off.

A: Because you got everybody and his brother in HARYOU-Act up here on the payroll. It's a notorious rip-off, the HARYOU-Act program. Are you familiar with it?

G: Yes.

A: I don't know what Adam Clayton Powell's role in it was, but it was a terrible mess, and I suspect it was that way all across the country, because the people who were employed to do community action had nothing whatsoever to qualify them to do community action, and they got salaries and they got secretaries and they did "community action," whatever that is. They organized poor people to try to improve the neighborhoods, or mainly to politick. And I'm not saying that in the long run it didn't have an effect, and this country is big enough to tolerate a certain license. But looking back on it, I'm not so sure that the methods that were being discussed and advocated for the elimination of poverty were enduring methods. I quite frankly tell you that except for those who cannot work and who are temporarily unemployed, I think that the best route out of poverty is to keep the gates of opportunity open, to have incentives for people to enter and to get into the productive work force, and to be educated to live in it and work in it and to have the terrible incentive of necessity to do it. There are lots of people who can't do it for a variety of reasons. They're crippled, they're lame, they're emotionally unstable, and there are [the] temporarily unemployed who have to be helped. But there's a lot to what Pat Moynihan says. Do you know how his thesis came about?

G: You mean the black family? Yes.

A: Moynihan says this. Do you know that Moynihan says this? You know that?

G: This is the black family and the--

A: Yes, but Pat, in the Johnson Administration, is looking back on the parallelism between being unemployed and Aid to Dependent Children.

G: This we went into in the first interview.

A: So I think there's a lot to that, and that's not going to be helped by prosperity. It isn't helped by prosperity. It's not going to be helped either by building more housing, because all you're going to do is to create more homes for people to go to and separate from their families and have children.

G: I guess the basis for the War on Poverty was that there was an interrelationship of the various ills that affected generations of impoverished in employment, health, housing,

Abram -- Interview II -- 17

education--

A: Yes.

G: --and unless you tackled all of these simultaneously you couldn't break that cycle.

A: I don't think anything helps break poverty like economic prosperity, and it has an effect of really breaking poverty and in a way that it does not diminish or create dependency in the individual.

G: Yes, of course, this was in a period of great economic prosperity.

A: I know it was. I know it was.

G: And yet you still had, what, two million--?

A: We had a great many impoverished people, there's no question, but to a large extent, these were, as you say, people who were uneducated and displaced by the technological revolution. I think training programs to reeducate them and retrain them certainly are admirable and necessary, perhaps, government expenditures. I had a great deal to do with the support of the Head Start programs, which I thought did more help for the mothers, to teach them how to be mothers, and to teach their children in a more secure and structured setting, than their children would be taught in their own homes. But I don't know. I don't know what historians have said about the War on Poverty. Have you found generally that it was thought to have been a successful thing?

G: Oh, I think there's a tremendous range of opinion, and I think a lot of it depends on the particular program you focus on. If you focus on the HARYOU-Act, you get one opinion. If you focus on another component or another local program, you get a different viewpoint.

A: You know something I never have understood: why in the world no president has ever revived the Civilian Conservation Corps, which I remember very well. Why not?

G: Who knows? But of course, they had some of the New Deal youth programs in mind when they created the Job Corps, and in fact some of the Job Corps programs were conservation.

But let me ask you about the advisory council. Was that an effective way to have policy input? What did the group do?

A: Talked. Jab, jab, jab. I don't think it was effective at all.

G: What was the purpose of it?

Abram -- Interview II -- 18

A: Oh, I guess it was to build political support for it, because it was going to require appropriations; and second, to give it a window-dressing of having been vetted by experts and sensitive people. But Shriver did it all himself with his staff.

G: But did the group have political significance to the War on Poverty?

A: Oh, yes. I think so.

G: How did it--?

A: I don't remember who they all were, but they were people who had sectional and sectarian interests in the political community. I couldn't tell you who they all were, but it did insulate them as much as you can from politics. I don't mean it was purely political, but it did give a veneer of blue-ribbon expertise; and second, it furnished a lobby for the bills as they were ready to go through; and third, Johnson could always say he had a bunch of experts, the leading people in the nation, who had drawn this thing up. Well, they hadn't drawn it up. Shriver and his staff of experts drew it up.

G: Did the group ever take issue with Shriver?

A: I don't recall it.

(Interruption)

This was an occasion on which I, as president of the Field Foundation, which was quite interested in the Child Development Group in Mississippi, took grave issue with Shriver and [Hyman] Bookbinder and, I guess, the Johnson Administration. CDGM, as I look back on it, was a much more innovative and, probably, radical group than whatever the other countervailing, establishment group was. But anyway--

G: Mississippians for Progress?

A: Mississippians for Progress was the watered-down version that would be more appealing to Senators [John] Stennis and [James] Eastland than the CDGM, which was not appealing to them at all, because apparently CDGM had gotten Fannie Lou Hamer and a lot of other Mississippians who were very much opposed to the old regime, as their godmothers and godfathers. Eastland was about to have a fit, and some of them were in his own Sunflower County, and he was going crazy. He was no doubt peppering Sargent Shriver and peppering Johnson with his complaints that these people were engaged in politics.

I suspect the CDGM was doing a much, much better job than the Mississippians for Progress group. First of all, they had more intellectual manpower. They had more

Abram -- Interview II -- 19

activism behind it. They had more confidence in their methods, and they had more community support. But on the other hand, they had the opposition of these senators, and Shriver was between a rock and a hard place. I saw Shriver a couple of times. I don't think there's very much that Shriver could do. The Field Foundation actually, as I recall, put up the money to keep these things going while they were unfunded, in the hope that eventually they were funded. I think eventually they were funded at a lower rate, but had it not been for the Field Foundation money, they would have gone out of business. I visited those projects.

G: Tell me about them.

A: They were rather remarkable. Black women, not very well educated, drive miles and miles with a little gasoline allowance to help educate their children and the neighbor's children in these centers, in Jackson and in Meridian and other counties in Mississippi, and up in Sunflower County. I even went to see Fannie Lou Hamer. I don't know exactly whether she was tied in with one of these. Well, I know she was tied in, but whether she operated one, I don't know if she did. But there's no question they were anti-Stennis; they were anti-Eastland. And you know, Johnson had things to do with Eastland. He had judges to get approved. He had all kind of problems with Eastland. I well understood Johnson's problem, but on the other hand, I do think the CDGM was a hell of a lot better than his own group.

G: When you say "his own group," did the White House have a role in creating the rival organization?

A: I don't know. I couldn't say that. I couldn't say that. The Mississippi senators may have had a role in it, because there were some prominent white people involved. Undoubtedly, measured by those times, I suppose Eastland and [inaudible] could say, "My God, to get white folks messing in this thing is a great thing, and what in the hell are these bastards raising hell about? They must be radicals. You can't get better white people than these people, and the fact that they are cooperating with black people, that ought to be perfectly satisfactory." I would think that is the way they would look at it, wouldn't you?

G: I'm not sure what Eastland's reaction to the other group was.

A: I don't know, but I would think that--

G: It included people like Hodding Carter, as I recall.

A: Did it include Hodding?

G: I think so.

A: Well, he might not have liked that either.

Abram -- Interview II -- 20

G: No.

A: No. If it included Pat Dornan [?], he wouldn't have liked it, but I bet Pat--Oh, Pat would have been with CDGM. His wife, I'm sure she would have.

G: I don't know.

(Interruption)

A: I left Georgia. I wanted to be a judge, and I would have given my eyeteeth to have been a judge. It was impossible. Herman Talmadge and I were partners in various business enterprises. We never agreed on anything, and I never voted for him in my life. He liked me, trusted me to be an honest man. It was just honest disagreement. But I knew goddamn well Herman was never going to let me be a judge. It would have been his political life to recommend me or to let me, by 1962, which was when I left. I've often wondered if I had stayed in Georgia, won the county-unit system [fight] and Johnson had come in, which I didn't anticipate--none of us did--and the great Civil Rights Acts had passed, whether Johnson would have made me a judge in 1967 or 1968. I've thought of that.

When I was up here in 1965 or 1966 when Bobby became senator, he offered me a federal judgeship, and I said, "Bob, I have no interest in it. What do I want, to be down there at Foley Square sentencing narcotic victims? No interest." And anyway I had a family to educate. He appointed Marvin Frankel to the seat. But if I'd been a federal judge in Atlanta, I would have loved it. I don't know whether Johnson would have done it because by that time, with the crumbling of segregation, it may well have been a good thing for Herman to let Johnson do it if Johnson had wanted to do it. And of course there was [Richard] Russell, and in some ways Russell was more--he was not more segregationist--by far, he was a much more gentle and wise and statesmanlike man, not smarter than Herman, not smarter. Herman is one of the smartest men I know. Brilliant. But Russell would have been more principled, and though he respected me, he would have recognized that I was an enemy of his principles, and Charlie Bloch would have done anything in his power to prevent Dick Russell from approving me. Those are just sidelines.

G: Amazing. Well, I certainly do thank you.

A: I've enjoyed talking.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews
of
Morris Abram

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, **Morris Abram**, of Green Farms, Connecticut, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted on March 20, 1984 in Austin, Texas, and May 3, 1984 in New York, New York, and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.

(4) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed by Morris B. Abram on April 6, 1993

Accepted by Trudy Huskamp Peterson, Acting Archivist of the United States, August 24, 1993

Original Deed of Gift on File at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2313 Red River, Austin, TX 78705

ACCESSION NUMBER 94-6