INTERVIEWEE: JOHN BAKER

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

November 13, 1968

M: Just as a general way of description now, you started with the Agriculture Department in the 1930's, and except for the period 1951 to 1961, you've been connected with it pretty continuously ever since. Is that correct?

B: That is correct.

M: And you were appointed Assistant Secretary of Agriculture by President Kennedy in 1962.

B: Right. Having been previously appointed director of Agricultural Credit on Inauguration day.

M: Right, and that was at the beginning of the Kennedy Administration.

B: Right.

M: Do you recall the first time that you ever came into contact with Mr. Johnson?

B: Not with any great concrete specifics. He was a member of the House, and I worked with various committees and had visits with him as early as the 1930's.

M: That's when he first went to the House of Representatives?

B: We had at that time a completely informal organization that, if I recall correctly, used to meet on Thursday evenings at Old Hall's Restaurant in the Southwest, called the Southern Policy Committee.

M: This was congressmen and people in the offices?

B: People in the Executive Branch and a few others. Every once in awhile Congressman Johnson would come to those meetings.

M: What was the purpose of this organization?

B: Mainly these were discussions of such things as NYA, in which Lyndon Johnson was interested; WPA; Farm Security Administration; other public policies of particular interest to orderly economic development of [the] South.

M: Just general problems that might apply to rural areas?

B: Right. Well, yes, and to the distinctly southern kind of problems although they used to laugh--we had someone there from the far North. We said he was a member of the Southern Policy Committee because he was from South Dakota instead of North Dakota.

M: I see. Do you remember whether Mr. Johnson, when he did attend those sessions, took any particular positions of leadership, or was he interested in any particular type of topics of problems?

B: No, I don't recall that.

M: This was in the thirties, then; when he moved on to the Senate, did you ever have any contact with him in those years, in the late forties and early fifties?

B: Well, most particularly beginning in 1951 when I became Director of Legislative Services for National Farmers Union.

M: This is when you were out of government service?

B: That is correct. And in the course of that work, I checked with him or members of his staff rather frequently.

M: Was this because he was Majority Leader or because of a committee assignment that he had at that time?

B: Mainly it was because he was Minority Leader and later Majority Leader.

M: Right. This was in connection with various items of interest to the National Farmers Union, I assume.

B: That is correct.

M: Was he pretty generally a supporter of the National Farmers Union position?

B: Well, not specifically the National Farmers Union but shared the general point of view or position that we ought to do something to make life better for people who lived in rural areas, including farmers. And he always supported the efforts to have better farm programs. Rural electrification--he was an early advocate and always a strong supporter of rural electrification, rural telephone program; the various credit programs of the Farmers Home Administration.

M: So you were just involved in anything that touched the business of the National Farmers Union that might apply to some legislative problems.

B: That is correct.

M: What about his career as Vice President? Did he continue to take an active interest in agricultural problems during that three-year period, two-plus-year period?

B: Yes, but there was a less direct involvement, as I remember, then. Back in the Senate days, the incident that is etched on my memory more than any other was, I believe, after the 1958 election, in the early part of 1959. We were still operating under very poor legislation and what was then called Ezra Benson's "Sliding Scale" farm program. And in Farmers Union, other farm organizations, and various members of Congress, we were trying to develop some new legislation that we might put through after the election of '58 that would improve the situation for producers of various farm commodities. And Mr. James G. Patton, president of National Farmers Union, and I called on the Majority Leader early in '59 to discuss this with him. And he was very sympathetic to the idea, said that it was not his practice or policy to introduce bills himself as Majority Leader, but if we could work out legislation that Senator Humphrey and Senator Talmadge could introduce that he would help us get it through. He put it this way, in

his characteristic way, he said, "If Baker can breed Humphrey on Talmadge, Patton can name the offspring."

M: Right. Was this subsequently done, then, this legislation that you wanted?

B: We then spent months working on legislation between the staffs of those two Senators and others; and if I recall correctly, a bill was passed which President Eisenhower vetoed and later a watered down version was passed which the President signed.

M: So the Majority Leader's role was carried out even though the law didn't go into actual operation?

B: That is correct.

M: Did Senator Johnson play any direct role in shaping that legislation, or did he take an interest in the provisions of it, or did he just simply sponsor it once it was completed?

B: He took a certain amount of interest in the provisions, but he had, in effect, said that if we could get these various groups together that were interested in the different commodities and the different regions of the country, that then he would support it. And that was mainly what he did. I'm sure that at times I would have no way of knowing about what he discussed with those two Senators and various others in terms of his own point of view.

M: Right. A question that's very important but that calls for a judgment answer, a subjective thing, but you are in a very good position to be able to make a comment on it--can the man who happens to be President at any time directly influence the general operation of a department, like the Department of Agriculture?

B: Yes, indeed.

M: How does he go about doing this?

B: Well, he uses his own personal contacts and communications with the

Secretary of Agriculture--probably the single most important one. Then he utilizes his White House staff for review and supervision, ironing out of difficulties, resolving issues and questions and problems. They in turn, and the President also, exercise considerable influence on a department like this or any other department through his director of the Bureau of the Budget and the other people in the Bureau of the Budget working for the director who pass not only on the budget numbers, the dollar numbers in the budget, but also pass on--that's the channel through which proposed new legislation comes up.

M: How are communications actually carried on? Does the President, for example, communicate with people at the assistant secretary level directly?

B: Not as a general rule but occasionally. Usually, and it has been true I think throughout this entire eight years; it was President Kennedy's practice and President Johnson's practice to insist on his cabinet members being able to speak on anything, have a complete knowledge of all of the subject matter under his jurisdiction.

M; The stories of the various frequent phone calls then to people in the departments are not, so far as you know at least, true, as far as Mr. Johnson's general operating procedure is concerned. He doesn't pick up the phone and call you or somebody else at your level or somebody who works for you?

B: Only in the cases where I am acting secretary or something of that kind.

M: He does use the chain of command pretty much as it is set up?

B: Yes.

M: What about things that direct your particular areas directly? Do you communicate with his staff at the White House, with his various aides who are interested in particular--?

B: Yes, there is considerable of that. But again the main line of communication is through the Secretary of Agriculture to the President, to the Director of the Bureau of the Budget, and to the White House staff.

M: The Bureau of the Budget has really increased its role in the Kennedy-Johnson years, if not before. Do you find that, generally speaking, they are adequately familiar with the problems faced by the Agriculture Department when they make their considerations of budget priorities?

B: Usually yes, sometimes no.

M: The Agriculture Department--how do you work with them? Do you send people to the Budget Bureau to work with them on agricultural programs?

B: Well, in more recent years, with the development of planning, programming, and budgeting; in this department the Secretary established six task forces, two of which I am chairman, one on Resources and Action, and one on Communities of Tomorrow which coincided more or less with output categories, with programatic categories in the planning, programming and budgeting system. This was superimposed and combined with the pre-existing budget development process and the legislation development process. And the typical development would be the initiative of agencies, initiative maybe by the White House, initiative by the secretarial level in the department for new ideas or for guidelines for developing new ideas. Then this would come up for rather strenuous attention and discussion in the task forces, sometimes with considerable work.

M: This is before the Budget people got involved in it to any great extent?

B: Well, I tried to keep them involved, but not as a part of the formal budget process-by inviting the appropriate BOB staff person to be an ex-officio member. Following thorough Task Force discussion the agencies would make their proposals, both for new legislation and for budget numbers. This would go to a central staff we have here called Program Evaluation and Planning, PEP staff, for the

preparation of program memoranda, special studies, issue papers, and these kinds of things, each one of which then would be subject to review, sometimes three or four times, by one of these task forces.

Another channel for developing ideas for the President to send to the Hill, in addition to the former budget and legislative proposal process or the new combined one with BBBS, has been President Johnson's, more than any President I know of, use of special top-secret task forces.

M: Are these things like the National Commission on Food and Fiber?

B: No, that's something different. These were ad hoc, sometimes in-house, sometimes in-house plus some people from the outside, and given a specific job to develop a new program like the new communities program that has now been enacted in the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 of which Assistant Secretary Haar of HUD was chairman. There have been a number of these, all of which are in a pretty highly classified category.

M: These are White House initiatives, then, the same way that your departmental task force might come up with an initiative from the department, and Mr. Johnson's administration has been notable, you think, for a greater number of these type White House initiatives?

B: Yes, I think so.

M: Generally speaking, do the White House staff people who work on that type of program cooperate what you consider well with the department?

B: Yes.

M: Do you have any difficulty working with the staff over there?

B: No, not at all.

M: I think Mr. Johnson has probably formalized the use of that White House staff more perhaps than his predecessors have. Can you make a comparison

as to the Kennedy and Johnson operation on the Department of Agriculture? Is there a change, or was there a change when Mr. Johnson became President?

B: I don't believe so. This may well be a case of the change being so gradual that someone that was participating in it from day to day didn't notice it; but the feeling that a lot of us got was that the procedures and the handling of these things at the level that you asked about in the Johnson years were a fruition, a logical development, from the nature of such things in the Kennedy months.

M: Would you say that the chief agricultural legislation in the period of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations has been the Agricultural Act of 1965? Was that the major legislation of the period?

B: In terms of the overall Department of Agriculture concerns, yes; but fully as important in a broad national sense have been, under Johnson particularly, an increasing emphasis on rural America as a whole. Four out of five people who live in rural America are not farmers; and President Johnson's leadership and Secretary Freeman's leadership have moved into consideration of rural-urban balance of non-farmers in rural areas--in other words, Main Street and residents who made their living doing something other than farming.

M: Now, does that date from the '65 Act, or is that other legislation?

B: No, that really dated from the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962 where we made the first firm--well, we made a beginning on this in the Housing Act of 1961 where we expanded the farm housing program to a rural housing program. But there was not much emphasis on this until President Johnson pushed it very strongly.

M: So these programs do date from Kennedy's time.

B: Some. The Farm Housing Program, for example, was expanded to a Rural Housing Program in the '61 Act. This has been amended and expanded six or eight times under President Johnson's leadership. A big major move by the President in this connection was in the issuance of Executive Order 11307.

M: This is President Johnson?

B: Yes. Assigning to the Department of Agriculture the responsibility for coordinating all the programs of the executive branch in their operation to solve the problems of rural areas.

M: Regardless of what agency did the administering?

B: That is correct. This brought about the beginning of what we call the Outreach Program in which the President told the Secretary of Agriculture that he should use his personnel and his offices to see to it that all the programs of the executive branch reached rural America, the people in the rural areas, conveniently, fully, and effectively.

M: And this was done without legislation?

B: This was done without legislation.

M: Who all does this involve you with importantly--the Office of Economic Opportunity, for example?

B: Yes.

M: What other agencies have programs that are important in this area?

B: EDA, Economic Development Administration; Health, Education and Welfare; Housing and Urban Development; OEO; Department of Labor.

M: How are these programs coordinated? One of the big problems that seems to come up frequently is how various agencies work with each other. Has that proved to be successful in this area?

B: Well, one thing that this executive order did for us was to give the effect of the President's directive to a system of ad hoc organization structures we had set up called Technical Action Panels. These had been set up as a way of bringing together the top official in the state, top officials in the county, of Department of Agriculture agencies to which meetings and to which work we invited the participation of representatives

in that same geographic area of other federal and state and local agencies. These were called Technical Action Panels, and the first three letters spell TAP. This is for two reasons: one is that these federal employees are to be on tap to help the local people solve their problems rather than be on top in the decision-making process; and secondly a television reporter in Kentucky--we didn't think of this, but it's a good figure of speech--these we thought of as kind of the taproot like a taproot to a tree. This gave them a way to tap into all of the new programs as well as the old programs that were embodied in what I still like to call the Great Society.

M: Your cooperation with other government agencies in the field at least has been on this level, the tap level?

B: That is right. Now, in Washington, we reorganized the pre-existing small staff agency into a new agency called Rural Community Development Service.

M: That's one of the agencies under your direct supervision?

B: That is correct. And assign to that agency the job of Washington level Outreach. They have a series of specialists, one that knows about housing programs, one who knows about Labor Department employment programs, and one who knows about the Health programs--

M: Regardless of what agency they may originate in.

B: Right. And it's the function of these specialists in the Rural Community Development Service, in cooperation and support of the Bureau of the Budget and the PEP staff in the Department, to work with the representatives of the agencies outside the Department of Agriculture to determine first what programs do they have that would be useful to rural people. Then secondly determining which of these programs are already reaching into rural America effectively, conveniently, and fully, or to what extent--

evaluation, in other words. Some, we've found, reach there quite well. Others, we've found, were just barely scratching the surface. Rural people were, for some reason or other, not participating. We then sat down with the agency outside the Department of Agriculture that had a program that we thought would be useful in rural areas but were not reaching there effectively to figure out ways and means by which it might be extended into rural areas better. In some cases we found that this could be done by simple changes in their budget practices or their organization structure or procedural materials. In other cases we went back to Executive Order 11307 and utilized the personnel of the Department of Agriculture to help that other agency get its program to operating in a rural area.

M: You mean particularly in the realm of just letting people in the local area know what was available to them?

B: Sometimes it was that simple. In other cases we have very formal agreements of understanding with another department when one of our agencies actually administers at the local level in a rural area the program of that other agency.

M: Has the cooperation between all these agencies been satisfactory by and large?

B: It has been quite good, yes.

M: No bureaucratic in-fighting as to trying to garner control of this or that from one another?

B: No, there has been a minimum of that.

M: That's a good comment on the efficiency of the people running it which I suppose is your direct agency.

B: You might be interested--I know you can't show this on your tape, but--

M: Is that the list of the various agencies that get involved?

B: That's a list of half of those. The other side of the chart shows the other half. We picked out the ninety--eighty-seven or so--programs of other agencies that we thought would be most useful if they were operating fully in rural areas. And we have kept a running account by fiscal years here of what kind of progress we were making toward the President's Outreach aim and goal.

M: Are most of them on an upward trend?

B: Most all of them are on an upward trend.

M: That was the job that you have resigned--

B: I'll give you some examples. When President Johnson brought about enactment of Medicare after some twenty-five years, this being something that a lot of people thought that the country ought to do, we were quite anxious that the people who were eligible for Medicare in rural areas, who were the hardest ones to reach by mass media or any other way, knew that they were eligible. So we used the Technical Action Panels in this Outreach agreement with the Social Security Administration and HEW; we mobilized what amounted to a volunteer army across the rural areas of the country, and tried to make certain that every person in rural America who was eligible for Medicare knew what he was eligible for and understood what the benefits were from Medicare and then had an opportunity, a convenient opportunity, to sign up if he decided that that was what he wanted to do.

M: Agricultural people did this, not HEW or Social Security?

B: Well, a lot of other people were working on it, too, but in rural areas we just simply asked our personnel to make it their job to see to it that this got done.

M: The coverage, I seem to recall, was virtually complete on Medicare.

B: That is correct. Now, clear over at the other extreme, and to indicate

that the principles in Executive Order 11307 were not being adopted by Congress as parts of new pieces of legislation, in the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968, there were many new housing programs which particularly I want to bring our attention to--the new guaranteed loan programs in which the federal government pays part of the interest if the family's income is too small to meet the full principal and interest, taxes and insurance payment each month. Legislation provided that this would be a HUD program but that that part of it that operates in rural areas would be administered by the Department of Agriculture.

M: I should know this; I don't, though. When you say "legislation provided something for rural areas," is there a specific definition of rural in that sense?

B: There are many specific definitions in that sense. We use the word rather vaguely because there are so many different definitions. In terms of the housing programs and water and sewer loan programs, the statutory dividing line is set at cities of 5500 and smaller and the open country as being rural areas.

M: Anything smaller than 5500 then would be eligible for rural programs?

B: In the new multi-county, multi-jurisdictional comprehensive planning legislation which was also involved in this year's Housing and Urban Development Act, the dividing line, and also the dividing line between the Executive Order 11307, which is our "convenor" order, it is sometimes called, and 11306, which is Secretary Weaver of HUD's "convenor" order, the dividing line is kind of placed between metropolitan and non-metropolitan. It's a great big page-length definition really, but what it amounts to is built-up areas of 50,000 and more are metropolitan areas. A built-up area of 50,000 or smaller is non-metropolitan. President Johnson, almost once

a year, [in his] rural American messages--farm and rural affairs messages, different titles, different years--has recommended, and the Congress recently adopted as part of the Housing and Urban Development Act of '68, this new program of grants and technical assistance for comprehensive planning by multi-jurisdictional non-metropolitan districts.

M: Are the local level county officials cooperating in this pretty well?

B: The program has just now been enacted, and all of their national associations and counties, the League of Cities, and other of their representative associations and organizations worked with the President all the way in getting this legislation enacted, and they have participated in drafting the directives and guidelines for the program.

M: So there's no reason to believe that they won't cooperate?

B: We've been very careful; this is the kind of thing that the President would be the kind of person that would want us to do--not leave the impression that we were trying to abolish counties, you know, but rather setting up a new program whereby counties could cooperate; and the history of legislation, going clear back to the Blue Room in the White House right on through to final enactment--a large proportion, probably about two-thirds, of the members of such a planning body would be composed of democratically-elected county and municipal officials; so that this would be built into the process, and the boundaries' composition, jurisdictional composition of these districts would be determined in the first instance by the counties that wanted to get together and the approval either by the governor or the state legislature; and then it comes up for cooperation between Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Agriculture.

M: When a law like that, or any law that has agricultural provisions in it, is moving through Congress, what role does the White House play under

Johnson? Does he take an active role in sponsoring such legislation, dealing with the objections of various congressmen and so on? Or is that left to the department?

B: The answer is yes.

M: The answer is yes, meaning both?

B: Meaning both--that the President, when it looked like one--his first formal participation, his first public formal participation was when he sent a message to Congress recommending a new program. And then he expected the rest of us to move it as far along the way as we could and then when we ran into trouble, Baker and Freeman and Larry O'Brien and their staff people couldn't get it done--when we ran into a knot or a hard place, they always called on the President.

M: And did he generally respond?

B: Generally.

M: And is his influence generally pretty successful on the Hill? Does he still have the gift that he seemed to have as Majority Leader of convincing wavering votes, for example?

B: In our field, yes. I don't believe that either the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 or the Food and Agriculture Act of 1965 would have been enacted if it had not been for his personal participation.

M: It was that important to have the White House pushing it?

B: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

M: That's a direct way in which the President affects, of course, the operation of his various departments about getting their legislation through.

B: Right.

M: You have under your jurisdiction a number of different agencies in the department here. Has President Johnson displayed any particular interest

in any of these? The one that comes to mind is REA, which was one of his first loves. Has he, since he has been President, displayed any particular or uncommon interest in that particular operation?

B: Well, I wouldn't say uncommon interest, but he has watched it very, very carefully, and he has been very, very helpful in the efforts to smooth the way. We weren't successful; I think the President himself may even have initiated the idea of a rural electric bank to obtain supplemental financing for rural electric cooperatives that could afford to pay a higher rate of interest than the 2 percent in the direct loan legislation. He encouraged this along both with Congress and with private groups as well as here within the Administration. We never were quite able to get the legislation where it was satisfactory so it never did move, but he made it a point to stay constantly informed on the progress of this legislation and the problems we were running into.

M: Why had there been an objection to that? Wouldn't that ease budgetary impact of the REA program?

B: Yes, the big problem was that the investor-owned utilities took the occasion of new legislation with respect to this to try to eliminate what they, and I think incorrectly, feared the generation and transmission facilities for rural electrification administration and were able in the House Agriculture Committee to get enough restrictions and requirements on it that the new legislation, as amended, would not have been useful in carrying out the purpose for which it was intended. So it didn't go far.

M: What about the application of these REA systems, REA loans in the United States to foreign countries, particularly underdeveloped countries? Has there been an extension of the idea of REA to these underdeveloped areas?

B: Yes, indeed, even in Viet Nam.

M: Is this one of President Johnson's projects, or has the initiative for this come from somewhere else?

B: Well, I don't know where to say the initiative came from. Mr. Clyde Ellis, former general manager of the NRECA, you might be interested, is a former Arkansas Congressman--

M: That's right. In fact, he was from the northwest district.

B: That's right. And a fellow member of the House with now President Johnson. I would not be surprised, although I don't know this for certain, that if this might not have started as a conversation between President, maybe then Vice President Johnson and Clyde Ellis.

M: Is Clyde Ellis still living?

B: Yes.

M: Is he still in that position?

B: No. He's now a special assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture. Don't hold me to the exact number, but I think the National Rural Electric Cooperatives Association and a contract with A.I.D. has moved into some fourteen other countries helping them to set up rural electric cooperatives and the cooperative approach to electrification. In addition, we in REA have arranged training schools for engineers and lawyers and accountants and other people from other countries who wanted to learn more about how to operate a rural electric cooperative in their country. And we usually have had about one of these a year.

M: You mentioned the opposition of the investor-owned power companies. What about the farm organizations? Are the farm organizations generally effective supporters of USDA's projects? You were for quite awhile in the National Farmers Union. For example, are they effective advocates of the programs that the department initiates?

B: Yes, within their limitations. One of the big problems is, of course, now with respect to farm legislation per se, that the farm population is such a small percentage of the total population, but there is still a great deal of good will. But this is why I said I don't believe there would have been an Agricultural Act of 1965 if it hadn't been for President Johnson working very diligently in educating and explaining the need of this kind of legislation to a large number of suburban and city congressman, particularly Democrats.

M: What about the American Farm Bureau Federation? It's often pictured on the other side from the Department of Agriculture. Is it a handicap or a roadblock in getting these new programs under way?

B: They have in cases been able to exercise a veto.

M: They're that strong?

B: They have very seldom been able to enact anything of their own. They weren't that strong.

M: A negative force rather than a positive force.

B: That's correct.

M: Why is that? Because of the constituency they represent?

B: No, I think not. They have built alliances with, and their formal policy-making machinery in that organization comes up with--for instance, they opposed Medicare. Well, there were a lot of other people that opposed Medicare. When a farm bill comes along, they talk to the other people who opposed Medicare along with them and got most of them to help them oppose something that the Farm Bureau didn't like in the farm program. And they are bound to have had a lot of influence on minor things, you know, the amendments of the various legislation. But actually the President and the whole team that went forward with these commodity-type programs, which is

what we are talking about right now with very small margins a lot of times in the final roll call vote, a rather crucial roll call vote, usually, and right on up through now, passed legislation quite similar to that proposed by the President.

M: So they didn't make too many significant changes in it?

B. Now, in the area of farm credit and conservation and less so with respect to rural electrification, the Farm Bureau has not taken a very big part in it one way or another. The other farm organizations -- the National Grange and the National Farmers Union and to a lesser extent the National Farmers Organization, a new one that sprang up in Benson's time out in the Corn Belt -- have usually supported the department as have a great many of the commodity producer associations like the Wheat Growers Association.

M: At a time when the number of farmers is decreasing and the political base for the agricultural programs is thereby perhaps also decreasing -- you mentioned the fact that the department still had a lot of good will, even though they had a small number -- what's the effect of the publicity that has come out in recent times about the very large payments that have been made to certain landowners? Does this kind of thing destroy the good will that the Agriculture Department probably has?

B: Well, it doesn't help it. And it resulted this year, for example, in the Democratic platform calling for a study of limitations on the size of payments. It led in the legislation just enacted extending the '65 act to considerable parliamentary efforts on the part of people who were trying to kill the program to put a $20,000 limitation on it. That was defeated, but the debate certainly highlighted the fact that this is something that someone needs to give attention to before very much longer.

M: Is there anything that the department can do to stop this without legislation?

B: No. The legislation's pretty directive, and what we could do would be to, as this study that the President has asked the department to make, come up with a proposal that will meet the social objectives or the political objectives that this body of thought has in mind without ruining the program. To put it another way, this is a case of where you need to work out a mechanism that will use a scalpel rather than a meat axe.

M: Something that would get through Congress, in short.

B: Yes. But not only that, but something which will not only get through Congress but be workable in terms of maintaining a meaningful farm program after it has been adopted.

M: Was it CBS that ran the special on the hunger thing--does this give the department public relations difficulties of any substantial measure?

B: It did for a time, but it was so inaccurate that in the long run it was discounted.

M: You were able to demonstrate the inaccuracies sufficiently to counteract its--?

B: That's right. It was more than just inaccuracies. It also related to what the administration was doing about food programs, and a very great expansion has taken place in food programs in the last eight years, and the proposals that were then pending before Congress that the President had recommended to expand. In some sense such things as the CBS broadcast actually helped bring about the enactment of better legislation than might have otherwise been enacted.

M: By focusing public attention on the problems?

B: Yes.

M: President Johnson has been a great user of these blue-ribbon commissions. I mentioned a while ago in another connection the National Commission on

Food and Fiber, and there was, I believe, a commission on rural poverty a year or so ago. Do commissions of this type accomplish short-run objectives of any consequence?

B: Yes, both short-run and long-run. I think they'll accomplish long-run objectives, too.

M: Their recommendations are, or have been, implemented in many cases?

B: I'm most familiar with the one on rural poverty because I was the administration's liaison with the Commission on Rural Poverty. A very great many of the recommendations of that commission were incorporated in the President's message on the farmer and rural America of February 27, 1968--those that he could move forward with immediately. In addition, we have had two formal inventories of the extent to which different agencies and departments of the government are implementing the recommendations of that commission.

M: So it didn't just make a report and it was filed away?

B: No, this has been a very active document.

M: And I believe they made a vast number of recommendations--one hundred fifty or so.

B: More than that, I believe. I think two hundred seventy-four.

M: Could all of those be implemented without legislation?

B: Some. And some of that has been done--a few of them that give us quite considerable problems, and some that we don't even agree with, but they are the exception. One of the major problems has been the funding situation. The fiscal situation being what it was you couldn't put some of the recommendations into full operation without additional money.

M: Ones that cost a great deal had to be budgeted for or left out. What about the civil rights problem as it has affected the Agriculture Department's operation?

B: What now?

M: The civil rights problem, generally. Are a large number of the rural poor Negro, country-wide?

B: No. I don't remember the exact figures, but something like 80 percent of the rural poor are white, but some of the poorest of the rural poor are Negro, and we have wrestled with this.

M: Of course, the Negro population is concentrated I expect in the rural South. Has it been possible to get Negro participation? You mentioned the local people who operated with agriculture. Is it possible to get Negro participation on--I can't name the name of it--your local boards, but I know you have local boards and local organizations that coordinate your programs.

B: The answer is yes, and in terms of the change from '62, for example, it's right remarkable because of the President constantly pushing it.

M: President Johnson?

B: Yes. --constantly pushing on this. But in terms of volume against some ideal that the Civil Rights Commission, for example, might have, we're a long ways from having reached what I'm sure was the President's goal in connection with it.

There's really three parts to this question you raised. One is employment by the Department of Agriculture as employees, Spanish Mexican-Americans or Negroes or Indians and these kind of people--we've made some rather remarkable gains, both at the relatively high GS grade level, as well as throughout the personnel. But again there are literally thousands of problems that you run into. These people have not had the kind of first-grade education that somebody else has had. If they went to a predominantly Negro educational institution or college, they didn't get the same quality

of education that you get at the University of Arkansas, for example. So we've had to do more than just depending on making it completely possible for them to put in an application to the Civil Service Commission.

M: It's too hard for them to be, in fact, equal with others applying for jobs?

B: That's right. So we've had special training courses. There's the same problem of in-service promotions. We've had special training courses to help overcome that. We're still far from obtaining what I would call President Johnson's ideal on this, but there have been mighty efforts and considerable problems.

M: There has been a continual effort to push forward--?

B: Right. Now the second one is the one that you mentioned specifically, on the advisory committees and boards and so on. There has been measurable and progressive movement in this direction, but again it's far from being satisfactory to I'm sure what President Johnson's long-time goal would be.

M: Was the problem here qualified applicants of the minority groups or acceptance from the majority groups or both?

B: Well, it's both. Many of our advisory committees are elected by their fellow farmers. And what we did there was to make the election process just as fair and open as possible so that it would not be weighted against the potential election. And in those farmer committees they've made some progress in electing Negro members of the elected farmer committees. The Secretary and the President have appointed Negroes as members of the state committees; these were appointed for that program. In the case of Farmers Home Administration advisory committees, we now have, I think, at least one Negro as a member of every county committee in a county that's predominantly Negro. Before President Johnson started really pushing on it, there were very few, if any; nearly all the state committees have one

or more Negroes. On the Rural Areas Development Advisory Committee to the Secretary of Agriculture and the Multiple Use Advisory Committee to the Secretary of Agriculture on national forests, and the Salt and Water Conservation Advisory Committee, all of which I am chairman, have taken very seriously the President's desire to have young people and have some women and have minority group representation; and all of these do have one or two or three or even more Negroes on the national advisory committees.

M: You mentioned in passing earlier that one of the times President Johnson had called you directly didn't have anything to do with agricultural business. What did it have to do with? Can you tell me?

B: This was during the week following Vice President Humphrey's announcement that he was going to run for the nomination.

M: This year?

B: Yes. And Secretary Freeman had announced that he was going to support the Vice President, and I announced that I was going to support the Vice President. The Under Secretary announced that he was supporting Senator Robert Kennedy. And that was the third announcement that came along. And the day that announcement came along, along about 6:25 or something, I was sitting here and the phone rang and a girl buzzed in and she said, "They say the President wants to talk to you." So I answered and they put the President on; and he made it clear that his reason for not running for reelection was to try to work out a peace in Viet Nam, and that he did not want his presidential appointees participating in the personalities in the election. I told him I read him loud and clear.

M: Didn't he ultimately send out a directive to that effect?

B: Yes.

M: This was before that?

B: This was before that.

M: He gave you to understand that he didn't--?

B: He sure did. I read him loud and clear.

M: Is he pretty effective when he--?

B: Yes, sir! Indeed he is.

M: He can let you know what his view is.

B: Yes, sir.

M: This is a little bit irrelevant to your current job, but it's part of your background that interested me, and partly because it's timely--I noticed that you were for a period of a year or more director of the land reform program for the U.S. military government in Korea after World War II.

B: Right.

M: Do you have any insights into the problems of land reform vis-a-vis Viet Nam, for example?

B: Well, I'll answer that question by a for instance, rather than going into the philosophy of it. In South Korea there were a group of grape producers near a little town called Pohang which was north of Pusan. These grapes were used for the production of a very high quality of brandy. These grape growers, and they were all tenants--Japan took over Korea, you remember, in 1907, and the oriental development company which was the economic aura of Japanese imperialism, took over much of the good agricultural land of South Korea by one hook or crook or another. And these grape-growing tenants throughout that whole period from 1907 to 1947, when I was over there, had a very well-known reputation for being trouble makers. They were the kind of people that would catch the strawboss out too far out from anybody else and they would beat him up; catch the rowboss down at the wrong end of the row and they would beat him with sticks and stones. Often

on Saturday nights they would throw rocks through the windows of the manager's home or his office. And they had a reputation all over Korea of being the most trouble makers there were. In the development of the program to sell the land to the occupiers in South Korea, there was considerable discussion, both in the South Korean government's side and in the American military government's side, of whether to let these troublesome grape growers have a chance to get the ownership of their land. They'd been just as troublesome after we came over there as they had been when the Japanese were there.

M: It didn't make any difference to them who the bosses were; they didn't like any of them.

B: The real question was whether to let the people who occupied the land be the potential purchaser, or whether we would go through some kind of selection process. I was one of those who held out for whoever was occupying the land and working it to have the first chance at buying it. Fortunately, General Dean, who was then military governor and later you remember was captured, agreed with this particular point of view and that was in the ordinance that was issued. Later, long after I had left, I read in the paper, and I've since checked up with some people that were there--remember the North Koreans came south and pushed the perimeter right down around Pusan--these grape-growing tenants at Pohang were just behind the American lines. The North Korean intelligence obviously wasn't as much up to date as they should have been. They made a landing around what was the American right flank on the east coast, obviously to link up with these former troublesome tenants down there as a way of throwing the Americans in the ocean. And right at that time there were not very many Americans on that front line, if you will recall. Instead of those tenants

welcoming the North Koreans and helping to throw the Americans in the ocean, they joined the Americans in helping throw the North Koreans back, because by that time they had a piece of paper on the wall of their mud hut saying, "This belongs to me," and they weren't just fixing to have a Communist come down there and take it away from them.

M: And it was the idea of actually selling it to them that was successful, as opposed to the Communists always saying they were going to give it to them.

B: Right.

M: This didn't make a difference to them?

B: No. As a matter of fact, I think that it provides a greater sense of stability.

M: If they are buying it, you mean?

B: Yes.

M: Why has this seemingly not been successful in Viet Nam? Not being involved in that, do you have any reason to know why that doesn't seem to have been successful there?

B: Well, it has been very largely [because], while the French were still there, the French and the Vietnamese who cooperated most closely with them were big land owners, and they just didn't really go for land reform in any sense. They wanted to continue the big landownerships if they could. More recently my understanding of the situation is that while the American presence has been pushing just as hard as it could on this, the strength of the South Vietnamese government was not such that they could go against the big landowners and make it stick; but, they've made considerable progress in such things as credit to the occupiers, cooperatives, better marketing, better seeds, all these parts of land reform.

M: Does USDA have people doing that, or is it A.I.D. people?

B: The Department of Agriculture has manned a very large share of the A.I.D. mission, you might call it, the agriculture part of the A.I.D. mission.

M: Would that be under Mrs. Jacobson's jurisdiction?

B: Yes.

M: We'll talk to her shortly, I think. I know you have other things to go to. This perhaps calls for a great deal of speculation, but I think it's an important insight which you probably have. How would you characterize the Agriculture Department's evolution from the time when you first came in the 1930's to today? Is it vastly different, and in what ways? You've had a chance to see it grow now for a generation.

B: Well, first, this is a very great institution, a unique institution, in the world, a very high quality of a spirit of public service, if you will pardon those terms, on the part of the rank and file employees in the department. In the last eight years the department has become a more unitary whole than it has ever been in my thirty-five years of watching it quite closely. Some of the major changes have been the very much expanded. increased priority for rural America as a whole as compared with just farmers, in the sense of water and sewer loan programs, rural housing, rural planning, rural electrification, programs of that kind. Recently [there has been] also a very great expansion in the food programs of the department. It's one of the world's great scientific institutions and continues to be so. It's one of the world's great conservation resource agencies; and the main changes in that area most recently have been increasing attention to natural beauty because of the First Lady's emphasis on this, and Mrs. Freeman's and Mrs. Baker's, as part of an overall greater emphasis on outdoor recreation, on both public land and privately owned rural land. I'll never forget one of the first meetings of the Rural Area

Development Committee, and I told the group that we were going to start emphasizing outdoor recreation on privately-owned land in rural America. One of the associate administrators, who has since retired, looked like somebody had hit him in the head with a pole axe. Then you could just see him start to think about this, sitting right there at the board table; and since that time, we have amounted a very large program of technical assistance and financial loans--a loan program for outdoor recreation facilities and operations on privately-owned rural lands.

M: This is part of the whole idea, I think President Johnson has said--let all Americans be able to live where they want to with the same opportunity and same amenities as any place else.

B: Right.

M: I guess this is as good a climax as any. You think this is a possible objective; you think we can really provide that kind of choice; that you can have the opportunities in a town of 3,000 that you can have in a larger town?

B: Yes, we think so. We think we've made enough progress on this to prove that it is possible.

M: You've been extremely cooperative. Would you like to add anything that I haven't mentioned? I'm perfectly willing to give you the floor here for anything you'd like to say.

B: No, I believe not.

M: Thank you very much, Mr. Baker.

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By John A. Baker

to the

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