

INTERVIEW III

DATE: April 21, 1981
INTERVIEWEE: JOHN A. BAKER
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: Mr. Baker's home, Arlington, Virginia

Tape 1 of 2

G: Let's continue today talking about your work with the [War on Poverty] task force. I want to ask you if you recall where the task force met. Is it correct that it had to move around from one building to another?

B: Yes, but that's not the most important of my memories. We were on the fourth floor, I think we were one of the top floors, of a building next to the old Court of Claims Building that has since I think been torn down and they've got an Office of Management and Budget, a beautiful building, now. But it was on that part of 17th Street that runs up from Pennsylvania to Connecticut, before it jogs over to the east and continues as 17th Street. It's that part of 17th Street that runs into Connecticut, almost across the street from the White House. It would be west of Hay Adams [Hotel]. It was across the street, literally I guess, from the old State-War and Navy Building, but one set of buildings removed up 17th Street. I'm sure there was an elevator, but I don't remember the elevator. But it was a large-sized room, and there was plenty of room for a great big horseshoe for the participants to sit around the table.

Baker -- III -- 2

- G: Would the representatives vary, or was it generally the same people every day?
- B: Both, and by that I mean the people would be absent and sometimes there would be somebody taking their place temporarily, or Sarge would bring in new ones. We're talking now about the LBJ task force?
- G: Right.
- B: Sarge would bring in new ones. I don't remember of any of them who kind of started with it that disappeared in the process. [Adam] Yarmolinsky was in and out, I guess because he had other duties. [Paul] Ylvisaker was in and out, because he was I guess looking after whatever it was for the Ford Foundation. The young man whose name I can't remember who worked for Governor [Terry] Sanford of North Carolina, in the North Carolina project, was in and out, but more in than out. I can't remember his name.
- G: I'll look that up.
- B: But the agency representatives, mostly assistant secretaries, like Lisle Carter and me, we [attended] faithfully all day and all night, one day after another. It just seemed like something to do. Most of us had been doing it with the Kennedy preliminary thing and we just stayed with it.
- G: Did you have a shortage of operating funds as a task force?
- B: We didn't have any operating funds for the task force that I knew of.
- G: How did you exist without any operating funds? I mean, where did you get the money for stationery and how did you get furniture and file cabinets?

Baker -- III -- 3

B: Everybody supplied their own.

G: Really?

B: I don't know, maybe Sarge was dipping into the White House emergency fund, I don't know that. But there wasn't any need for funds; everybody was on a payroll somewhere. Supplies, Sarge provided them out of the Peace Corps, I don't know.

G: Phone bills, for example, and things like that.

B: I don't know. I haven't got the faintest idea.

G: Okay. Was there a general feeling among the task force members that the existing cabinet departments were not really focusing on the poor?

B: I think that all of them thought that they were, but that it was like outdoor recreation, and water resources, and water resources research, and later beautification. It needed a White House focus if you were going to get it up above the threshold of national conscience. They all thought they were doing an awful lot. That's human. They all were in their own ways, coming out of the New Deal, but it lacked a central focus. Then there were others who were not representing departments, like Ylvisaker and Yarmolinsky and some of those young Yale lawyers that Sarge brought in, that felt like nothing that had ever been done was any good. Nobody ever really found out what they thought needed to be done except rehabilitate criminal offenders. They each one had different kinds of things. We never did know for sure what they were focusing on. I think maybe that was just us deep-in-the-mud bureaucrats and

Baker -- III -- 4

country boys, and we didn't understand the greater things that [Kingman] Brewster had taught his young lawyers at Yale. I was thinking this morning, I never did catch on to what Ylvisaker and Adam Yarmolinsky were--do you know Yarmolinsky was the only guy that I ever knew in my life whose mother and father both were Who's Who in America?

G: No. Well, did the Department of Agriculture, was your main interest developing local leadership for rural programs? How did you view the focus of the task force?

B: To use the words I've been using a long, long, long time, my purpose and the purpose of the department--to the sense that you can say that anything as big and complex as the department has got a purpose--was to eliminate the complex, interrelated causes of rural poverty. There was still an awful lot of rural poverty. As I told you earlier, we had made an awful run at it with the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security. Since about 1937 I guess it was, when Roosevelt put the Resettlement Administration into the Department of Agriculture, the elimination of the causes of rural poverty and amelioration of its symptoms had been one of the major things the Department of Agriculture was supposed to be in business for, primarily through what was then called the Farm Security Administration.

G: What was the White House input or involvement in the task force?

B: Sarge, who was assigned to it by the President, Yarmolinsky, and I don't really know.

G: Was there anyone on the White House staff like [Myer] Feldman or [Ted] Sorensen?

Baker -- III -- 5

B: Sorensen I felt like had more, but he was never there. But you kind of felt like Feldman was kind of telling his boys what to say when they came, without knowing for sure, you know. But the big thing is, we knew LBJ wanted to do it and was going to do it one way or another. There must have been some Bureau of the Budget people there, but I don't know who they were. I don't remember them at all now. You got any indication that Sam was there? Sam Hughes.

G: Sam Hughes? I don't recall his name, but there were people detailed from BOB I guess: Ann Oppenheimer, and I guess Chris Weeks had worked with you.

B: I don't remember the face to go with either one of those names.

G: In reading the newspaper accounts of the task force operations, you get the feeling that there was an enormous amount of pressure from the White House to hurry up with its recommendations, with its legislative package and the President's message to Congress. Did you feel like the White House was hurrying you to get this thing out?

B: If you're using the word "you" in the singular addressed to me, the answer was no, because I thought they were going too slow. But I'm sure that the President and a number of his people and a lot of the people who wanted him to be elected felt like we just had to have it before entering the campaign. There were some of us that were--in fact, I was even a little irritated with Sarge putting up with Yarmolinsky and Ylvisaker and all them putting in strange protein, slowing down stuff. I was ready to go fast. So I wouldn't have felt pressured the way like maybe some of the others did that maybe

Baker -- III -- 6

LBJ was trying to bum's-rush them. See, I had already been trying to do it since January of 1961, and it all seemed awful slow and way behind to me.

G: Do you think that the poverty program was planned with the idea that Shriver would be the director of it, that he would head it afterward?

B: I presume some of the people that think about things like that, they might have been concerned about it if they thought about it. I didn't even think about it. Maybe I just assumed he would be, I don't know. I don't remember thinking about it at all.

G: How did you yourself perceive the Community Action Program in these discussions?

B: (Laughter) You could have talked all day and not asked that. I think that there's a word that people like me don't use very often, but I think maybe my attitude was bifurcated. I was kind of of two minds. The dirt level, pragmatic country politician told me that if you let people like Yarmolinsky and Ylvisaker run them, you might just as well kiss the rural areas good-bye for LBJ because they'd turn everything up on its edge and even LBJ's magic couldn't put it back together.

On the other hand, in my own work in the department I had already organized what we call Rural Areas Development Committees. The need for a focus at the community level, county level and the state level, and mine had created a lot of controversy. Not all controversy is bad, but people started visualizing power redistributions. While mine had a mild advocacy slant, these things that these wild boys

Baker -- III -- 7

were talking about--there was somebody from the prisons over in the Justice Department--

G: [Ronald] Goldfarb?

B: No, that's not the right name. Somebody else. They were just wild. They were going to revolutionize America through these community action agencies and substitute community action agencies for city and county government and so forth. That part I just knew wouldn't work. Of course, it ran into real problems with Congressman [Carl] Perkins later, just as I knew it would. But I shared their idea that it needed something. There had to be something there. Prior years, the question came up, where should what used to be called the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation be located. [Secretary Orville] Freeman and I held out for the White House. We lost that fight, and they put it in Interior. The Council on Water Resources, we held out for it to be in the White House. Instead of that, Kennedy put it in the Interior Department. There were various of these things that had been given to a single line department to run that was of government-wide concern, and we knew what the weaknesses of putting it into a single department were, with other cabinet officers having to take orders from a colleague. So we didn't want the poverty given to any one line department for that reason.

We also knew that you couldn't just give it as a line function to a line department and tell them to do all of it. That would probably be even more difficult to try to do than if you had the

Baker -- III -- 8

Lee Graham approach of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. I think most of us thought it would be a mistake to set up an independent agency. Well, in the final windup it was kind of half and half; it was an independent agency in the White House, almost you know. And the departments very rapidly over the years have developed a new word called devolvement, and they started taking stuff away from the office.

G: Should OEO have been a coordinating agency as well as an operating agency?

B: At the time, in a sense, I have not particularly worried about that. It might have been better if they had been a much stronger coordinating agency, if there is such a way to strengthen such an animal, and not have been an operating agency at all. But of course all of us were aware of the administrative mess in HEW, which hadn't been cleared up yet, I guess. But that would have been the logical place for some of the major operating functions. Of course, that's where they did finally send Community Action.

G: What did the phrase "maximum feasible participation" mean to you?

B: It meant that starting with the most downtrodden, it meant that women ought to have an equal say-so with men. It meant that poor black folks ought to have equal say-so with upwardly mobile, upper middle class like Lisle Carter, that Lisle Carter ought to have an equal voice to John Baker. At the community level, everybody that had kind of perceived themselves to have a unique concern or contribution should be geared into the mechanism, the decision-making mechanism.

Baker -- III -- 9

My pattern on that came from an early experience when I first became assistant secretary. The watersheds project program of the Soil Conservation Service was in awful hot water with the Game and Wildlife and Fisheries people in the states. Whereas the watershed projects had a very elaborate planning process, there was nowhere in that planning process that a state fish and wildlife guy, or anybody even representing the hunters and fishermen had a legal, formal responsibility and opportunity to participate from ground level in the planning of proposed projects. As soon as I finally got the plan processed for watershed projects changed to start them out at the ground level, the controversy stopped, because they got their two bits worth in in the beginning and influenced the thing. But in any event, they got it off their chests before it became a capital crime.

G: Sure. Did you see a pretty set formula of certain percentage of neighborhood residents or poor people, or a certain percentage of people from agencies and city governments and that sort of thing? Did you see it as a [quota system]?

B: No. I was kind of on the other side on that, recognizing the importance of having some rules of thumb, but every community is different. Pick a percentage, and it's wrong the next place you stop. The other is, if you seem to be trying to force everybody into a quota system, so many of this kind and so many of that kind and so many of that kind, you overcome or set aside the benefits you get from maximum feasible participation. But over at Agriculture

Baker -- III -- 10

in the three years we had had a lot of preliminary experience in these local planning bodies, and it made a lot of our mistakes in the other context. If you don't get somebody in, he don't like what you decide to do. Same way in water resources. They'd been planning water resource projects--it's what I was teasing [Lawson] Knott about a while ago--since the late years of World War II. They had been planning them with everybody, trying to get everybody that was involved in on the planning process, so it didn't seem quite as strange an animal to us as it did, for example, to the boys in the Labor Department who didn't know about things like that.

Maximum feasible participation in a typical pre-bellum, meaning World War II, southern county, is really an upheaval at just the thought, when you let black sharecroppers come in and have a say and take it seriously, give them a vote. But even in the Appalachians, where it's all white and all English, it's still a revolution to talk about it sometimes.

G: Did you anticipate conflict?

B: If they went to the full extent of Ylvisaker and Yarmolinsky and them, that prison guy from Justice--

G: Was it Dick Boone?

B: Dick Boone, yes. That's who I'm talking about. If it went as far as them, there would have been all hell to pay. Whereas. . . .

G: Well, there was all hell to pay anyway, wasn't there? I mean, there was. The Community Action Program did stir up a lot of conflict, didn't it?

Baker -- III -- 11

- B: Yes, but it wasn't anything like if it had been if those wild boys were there.
- G: Really? Was the conflict useful, do you think?
- B: Oh, yes. Sure, it was. That's why I brought my Extension director with me to all the meetings. I thought the stretching was doing him a lot of good.
- G: Really?
- B: Sure.
- G: Can you elaborate on that?
- B: Well, Cornell just doesn't train their Ph.D's like they train their lawyers at Yale, for one thing. It did him good. Wasn't it Kipling that said, "He knows not England who only England knows." The fact is, that Extension director that I'm talking about, when it was his turn to not be Extension director anymore, instead of going back to Extension he became a building contractor out here in Fairfax County. They stretched him so that the blinders were too close to his eyeballs, so he just gave it up. He learned a lot. The Extension Service, states more than the national, really felt that if you wanted to have a community action program, just turn it over to them and they'd do it. They needed to be disabused of that.
- G: Really? They wouldn't run it effectively, or they wouldn't include the poor or what would be the [problem]?
- B: They would run it effectively without the poor. They would do it for the poor and to the poor, but not with the poor.

Baker -- III -- 12

G: And I gather part of the purpose was to organize the poor.

B: Well, in 1940, Farm Security Administration, Rural Rehabilitation Division, after six years of experience of trying to do something about rural poverty, we felt the need for something like this, and organized every place where we could get the knot-headed regional directors to do it, to set up neighborhood discussion groups of four or five or six or seven families meeting together once a week to discuss their problems with each other and what to do about it. A guy by the name of Harry Culbreth helped organize that. He had worked for Murray Lincoln, out in Ohio, who was a kind of sociology-inclined county agent who became president of the Ohio Farm Bureau. Dr. Will [?] brought Harry in, and with Carl Gibbon and Jim Maddox, an administrator, supporting him, we got those neighborhood discussion groups set up nearly everywhere, and they lost out of course when the war came along. A lot of things were messed up when the war came along.

It was the same general idea that these people have got perceptions if not scientific knowledge about what their condition is and what the world is doing to them. I used to always draw the distinction between that being a democratic approach as distinct from scientific socialism. Humanitarian scientific socialism or humanist scientific socialism figures out what's the right thing the people need and does it to them. Whereas democracy, you ought to really let the folks kind of figure out what they want even if they're wrong part of the time. And they will be. And [it's] more

Baker -- III -- 13

commensurate with our form of government, Constitution, Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence and so forth.

G: [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan argued that there was not sufficient emphasis on jobs and manpower training.

B: I shared that with him. There wasn't enough on infrastructure building either. By that I don't mean just institution infrastructure, I mean actual dams and courthouses and such things.

G: Didn't the Appalachian Regional Commission address itself to a lot of that?

B: Well, you get two stories. I thought so. You know Phil Hammer, Hammer Associates here in town? Phil was my successor as program analyst for Farm Security when I went to Little Rock and had been an urban planning guy most of his life. Phil felt like there was a lot of overemphasis on highways in the Appalachian program and underemphasis on human things.

G: Like hospitals or--?

B: Well, I think he felt like maybe even hospitals were overdoing a little bit. He had me over there as a consultant one day. I was taking up for the Appalachian program and he had a grant to say what was wrong with it. So I wasn't a very good consultant for him that day I'm afraid. You know, when you're in on getting something started and you don't even know whether you're going to get it off the launching board or not and you're in on it like I was on Appalachia, I guess there's a lot of shortcomings that you don't see, because you fought so damn hard to get what you did get.

Baker -- III -- 14

G: On the War on Poverty legislation, to what extent was the consideration of whether or not a particular measure or program would be legislated by Congress weighed in this whole thing?

B: It was constantly in the background. But I think we felt, and maybe Sarge even told us, that LBJ under the circumstances could get anything through, and not to be worried about it, the same announcement that LBJ made to the Budget Bureau: don't pay any attention to assistant secretaries about political feasibility, or that Reagan made to his whole outfit when they came in. He said, "Don't worry about politics, I'll tend to that."

G: One proposal was for a cigarette tax. Do you remember that, to finance a jobs provision?

B: I don't recall that.

G: That was evidently scotched.

Let me ask about the Job Corps and especially about the compromise that was reached with the conservation forces who were lobbying the Hill to have a certain percentage of Job Corps projects devoted to conservation. Do you know how this agreement was arrived at or any of the background of this? I understand that Congressman [John P.] Saylor was active in representing the conservation interests on that.

B: He would be, yes. He was a very strong conservationist Republican, an atypical Republican of his time. He was not a [James G.] Watts-type Republican on conservation issues and was very supportive of forests and soil conservation and those things.

Baker -- III -- 15

Frankly, I don't think I know the real answer to your question. If I ever knew, I've forgotten the ins and outs of it, maybe because I was trying to get as many Job Corps centers as I could for the Forest Service and was kind of blind-sided to anybody else deserving any. I think we had kind of a mystical, religious attitude about this, too, that if you are going to take kids out of the slums and try to give them a new slant on life, that there was something to be out there with God's trees and fresh air and everything that was over and above what you taught them in those wonderful math and reading books. And the discipline that was inherent in not cutting each other's head off with a knife.

G: Did you have any insight as to why Yarmolinsky was excluded from the program? He was sort of being groomed as deputy director. You know, there was a deal with--

B: There were a lot of reasons, including I suppose the perception of many people same as I outlined that I had that he was kind of wild. But if I recall, one of the key things was that [Senator John] Stennis--I think it was Stennis--objected to him because his mother and father were communists or some such thing as that. At least there was a stink went around. He was abrasive as hell, as you maybe know. He turned a lot of people the wrong way. I don't know who decided not to--maybe Sarge just figured he had enough trouble trying to get the package through without carrying Adam on his shoulders. I don't know.

G: Did the task force have an anti-rural bias, do you think?

Baker -- III -- 16

B: Yes. But I would. But really, I think not the consensus, but kind of the majority drift of the task force was focusing on low income, black, inner city, and a little bit resented it having anybody else be poor, too, or being admitted that they were poor. There was lip service given to the fact that there are a whole lot more poor white people than there were poor black people in the United States. But when they started talking plans and policies, their stereotype that they were trying to get operating programs to operate on was the inner city, black poor. This, of course, heightened after Watts and Detroit and 14th Street.

G: Now, in the 1964 legislation you had the addition of indemnity payments to dairy farmers. Do you recall how that provision was added?

B: Not blow by blow, but I know where it came from.

G: Where did it [come from]?

B: I don't think it was an actual trade for any votes, I think it was a convenient piece of legislation on which to hang something that the dairy farmers needed to protect the public and to protect other dairy farmers' herds. The only solution to that disease is to kill the critter and burn it, and not just those that show the symptoms of the disease, but every cow and bull in the herd. When a federal inspector descends on farmer X and says "Tomorrow we come out and kill and burn your entire dairy herd," that's kind of like Mount Helena erupting in your backyard. Indemnities had been given over the history, and I don't remember now whether it was running out or whether there was some question about it or what it was. This

Baker -- III -- 17

was just a convenient [device], you know, like sometimes they hang things like that even on an appropriation bill, even though they're subject to a point of order. As far as I'm aware, I can't think of any votes we got by having it in the bill, or anybody that would have traded on it.

G: Now, here's a list of the members of the committee that considered the legislation in the House. The chairman was Adam Clayton Powell. You had Carl Perkins, Phil Landrum. Do you recall the role of any of these committee members in either modifying the legislation or pushing it through as it was or opposing it?

B: My gosh, that was a fine line-up of Democrats, wasn't it?

G: Yes.

B: Some of them didn't turn out so good in later years. [Congressman Albert] Quie was very supportive, Minnesota Republican. Bob Taft [Jr.] was broad-minded about it; in other words, he wasn't just against it, because McKinley wasn't. The one that sticks out in my mind in the Republican side is Al Quie and he was very, very supportive. Do you know Al?

G: No.

B: He's very much your build, very much attractive, all-American type like you, and he's just got a heart to go with it, really. He's one of those guys you kind of feel bad about being a Republican. He's governor now, of course.

I don't remember any of these guys. There must have been some of them. [Congressman] Paul Findley was obstructionist, but I don't

Baker -- III -- 18

remember what on. But I don't remember even Findley or any of them except Queie asking me any questions on the witness stand.

G: How did Powell regard the legislation?

B: He was for it, but he was more of a hindrance than he was a help because he had been such a demagogue that he didn't have a very good reputation with the other members, not the other members of the committee, but the other members of the House. Like Lee Metcalf, who--he and God hung the moon, you know, in my mind, he and Hubert Humphrey. But they knew what Powell was beneath the facade. My memory is that he was lazy and didn't pay a hell of a lot of attention to it. Perkins is the guy that carried the load, is my memory. You know, you remember what you saw and heard, you don't see and hear near all of it in some of these conflicts.

G: Edith Green. What was her role in the legislation?

B: Generally supportive.

G: She could be prickly I understand.

B: Yes, I started to say, on certain things she was a little abrasive. Prickly maybe is a better word. But I was trying to remember, the reason I hadn't said that yet. I can't remember why she was. You know, the Job Corps did some really marvelous innovative things on textbooks and teaching methods, right out in the Job Corps centers, textbooks and the ways they went about teaching. I can't remember now whether she was for that as an ex-teacher or opposed to it as a bureaucrat ex-teacher. She did raise an awful lot of questions of [Otis] Singletary and those people.

Baker -- III -- 19

- G: Well, they left out women's job corps for one thing and she very much wanted that included and succeeded.
- B: She was a great one. She was chairman of our Forest Service Appropriations Subcommittee in the House so I knew her better.
- G: So you had to deal with her on a regular basis, I guess.
- B: Yes, four times a year in fact and all the times in between. She never was that prickly, as you call it, with Chief [Edward P.] Cliff and me. We always kind of treated her as a nice old grandma and she appreciated it I guess, I don't know. But boy, we sure did fetch and carry. Any time she wanted any information she had it yesterday. But she never did give us a bad time. She was always supportive in the formal questions and everything.
- G: It seems that after the legislation was enacted, the urban areas had an advantage over the rural areas in that many of them already had grant proposals worked up. They had been working with Ford Foundation and other urban programs and they were first in line because they had an experience factor here. One of the memos seems to indicate that you started a push to get the rural communities in motion on this so that they could be up near the front of the line on community action grants. Do you recall this through your RAD areas?
- B: Yes. Not just in the case of this anti-poverty program but in the case of all of them. There were two or three disadvantaging factors or biasing factors. One, I'll give you an example of Eufala, Oklahoma. I was down there inspecting Green Thumb here about three or four years

Baker -- III -- 20

ago, and the person I met in the town hall of Eufala was the acting mayor and she was a Green Thumb worker, working twenty hours a week and getting the minimum wage as a Green Thumb employee. And her boss, the mayor, ran a barber shop down the street or a leather shop or something, and he dropped in the day I was watching her work. He dropped in a total of fifteen minutes that day. She was settling traffic tickets and everything else. Well, she and that mayor go back a few years; from 1975 to 1965 she and that mayor or their predecessors, even if they had been in contact with Ford Foundation, unless they had a Ford grant they wouldn't have had anybody to write an application for them. That was one of the big tough ones.

Another was: many of the procedures were written by city boys, which is the reason there's a food shortage in Soviet Russia now. Marx was a city boy. There was a New York Times Sunday Magazine article on that subject is how come me to say it that way. Procedures written to fit a mayor of New York City hardly fit Eufala, Oklahoma. I mean, you just can't do it the same way. I'll give you an example: at one time when I was vice president of Green Thumb, we got a considerable increase. I was going about the business of why it started and so on. Then the Labor Department puts out a press release. The next morning the first caller was Bella Abzug and she wanted the entire amount for her district. The last call before I finally came home that night was from San Diego, California. The cities in America went through the time zones

Baker -- III -- 21

calling me on the phone that day, and every one of them wanted and could have used all of it, you know, and not a dollar for rural.

So there's that. Not only the lack of personnel, minds and bodies to write up grant proposals, just the sheer business of not being sensitive, alert to it.

G: Was it a fact that the people who were really the most desperately in need of this sort of thing were the least likely to know of its existence and how to take advantage of it?

B: But that would have been true both in a big city and in a rural area. But it was certainly true in a rural area, sure, sure. One of the big things that we put on in the Department of Agriculture is when they got Medicare--I think it was Medicare--passed, wasn't it, or something. No, it was later than that. Maybe it was SSI, I don't know. In any event, I got Freeman to let me just put every employee of the Department of Agriculture out in the sticks on the road, in their cars and pickups, to go tell everybody "Here's a new program and just from looking around at your barn you may be eligible. Why don't you look into it?" We got for the first time a fairly even sign-up with the urban areas by doing that, by special effort. We called that Outreach.

G: It seems to me that one of the philosophies within OEO was to move the poor people from the rural areas into the cities where they could have programs there, rather than keeping them on the farms and providing services and opportunities where they are. I know you advocated the latter position, and I gather there was gradually a

Baker -- III -- 22

shift. But can you recount, say, the struggle between [Robert A.] Levine on the one hand and Carter and others on the other hand?

G: It was not unique to the anti-poverty task force, nor to OEO. I just looked up two or three days ago just to refresh my memory. The word "civilization" comes from the Greek word meaning city. Ever since several centuries before Christ, progress and civilization and the better things and the right-thinking people and the artists are the cities, and the bigger the cities the better. This was the derived wisdom. People knew that that was true. They didn't even have to prove it, because it was just true. The attitude was very strong in the Department of Agriculture, which had never really thought much about rural people as a whole, but just about farmers. In the Department of Agriculture, for years and years and years, the right-thinking people knew that the Catholics were wrong in trying to keep them in place, and that the best thing to do was to run them off to the cities where they could get higher paying jobs and where people would treat them right, like they did the blacks that went to New York City from Georgia and so forth, where there was greater opportunity and where civilization was instead of out in the red-neck backwoods.

Starting in the government in 1937 I was on the rehabilitation-in-place side, partly I suppose [because of] agrarian mysticism and partly because I was a country boy and partly because it seemed to me like the country is a better place to live than the city was. The administration that preceeded the Kennedy-Johnson Administrations,

Baker -- III -- 23

Ezra Taft Benson was secretary and he was very solidly sold on the idea that you should not tell these people that, for political reasons, but that the real economic solution was to get them off of the farm and off to the city somewhere where they could get a job building automobiles and so forth. So it was not unique to the OEO thing. In OEO, people in the task force and in the administration, I did not feel it was a matter so much of what you might call urban fundamentalism and religious attitude as it was just fighting for budget. They wanted a lion's share, they knew how much they needed and whatever what they had to let the rural areas have was a deduction.

G: You made the case that 47 per cent of the poor were in rural areas, but they only got 27 per cent of the OEO Title II money.

B: Right. Title II was not as bad as a program HEW called Captioned Films for the Deaf. The ratio of deaf people in rural areas to undeaf people is about the same as the ratio of the two in urban areas. Yet the Captioned Films for the Deaf money was distributed 97 1/2 per cent to urban areas and 2 1/2 per cent to rural areas. I used to have a great big chart on the wall of my office that started with Captioned Films for the Deaf at the top and showed the percentage of the money that went to rural areas. About once a week I'd have an assistant secretary from another department over to the executive dining room to feed him and then take him up to my office and go rub his nose in that chart.

G: Let me ask you to recount your experience with SWAFCA [Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association]?

Baker -- III -- 24

B: Well, let's see, where is a good place to start? As some of this material that's in one of those sacks will indicate, I had set up way back in 1961 a rural areas development advisory committee. It was not a typical Department of Agriculture kind of advisory committee. I didn't know about the term then but we had a maximum participation principle. I had Fay Bennett [?], for example. An awful lot of eyebrows including up in the security office thought I was crazy putting her on the advisory committee. In fact, I had put the thumbs down on a security office report to get Fay on. She was the executive director of the sharecropper's league in the United States or whatever the name of it [is], this thing that former-Senator Graham of North Carolina was president of so long.

G: Frank Graham, I guess.

B: Yes. Others, Elizabeth Herring--do you remember the name Elizabeth Herring? She was executive director of something called NCALL, that's National Council of Agricultural Life and Labor--but who I had worked with when I was lobbyist for Farmer's Union, a very fine lady, out of the YWCA hierarchy--which was for migratory farm workers and low income farmers, families. You know, not the most effective group in the world, it's not like the real wielders of the Farm Bureau or American Legion, but Elizabeth was trying. I had her on the committee, people like that.

We were just absolutely in a system because we were convinced that in really tough social structure intertwined with economic structure, that the only solution for poor folk was to get co-ops

Baker -- III -- 25

with competent management to be on their side. Partly we've been strengthened in that with the experience of the rural electric cooperatives. Part of the strength of the rural electric cooperatives were not the actual members of the cooperatives as such, but the fact that they had to have a lawyer and they had to have an accountant and they had to have this and that. And you started to get some upper middle class people who were being paid to represent these folks, in the case of Rural Electric, [who] didn't have any electric lights or washing machines.

We felt that we needed to do that with marketing and purchasing. We had had good experience in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi in purchasing and marketing cooperative associations in the old Farm Security days in the late thirties and early forties, as long as we kept it on purchasing and marketing. And there were a lot of very successful farmer cooperatives around all over the country, in addition to rural electric cooperatives. That's why we wanted the poverty program to have that component in it. When you start with people, none of whom are functionally literate and not many of whom can even read or write at all, they're going to make a lot of mistakes starting the big sophisticated vegetable marketing business or something like that. And I guess we had been raised up in Resettlement and Farm Security that what you do is don't make bad loans. You make good loans and then fill in the part that you need to with a grant, instead of making bad loans and then having delinquencies and foreclosure, you know. I still don't follow even

Baker -- III -- 26

Bob Poage as to what's wrong with a grant. Ain't a darn bit different between a grant and a loan with a subsidized low interest rate that I can see, mystically or religiously or morally or any other way. But in any event, we had seen in the Philippines, for example, where they had tried to set up cooperatives strictly with loans, and they made bad loans that couldn't be repaid. Well, all this did was to sicken the recipients and all their neighbors and everybody that had heard about it both in the credibility of the central government and the credibility of the program itself.

That was the background. And I really think Fay Bennett rather than one of my people stirred up the business of them organizing the co-op down there right in the middle of the black belt. I think it was Fay Bennett and her crowd that did it. I don't know whether I would have done it if I had thought of it or not. But Fay is not short on guts; she's sometimes short on wisdom once in a while, but she wasn't short on guts.

Anyway, they organized and applied for a grant and a loan. In the process of organizing them the organizers kind of had to promise them the moon I guess to get them to engage in any kind of disciplined organization. And what they had heard over the radio and whatnot about the War on Poverty and all, they thought--in any event, I guess it first came to my attention in a purely routine way: Would I be willing to approve a loan if they gave a grant for this thing? So I guess I got Howard Bertsch to send some of his boys down there to look into it, and Howard and I decided we'd do

Baker -- III -- 27

it. Then about that time all hell broke loose on the Hill. Both senators and all members of the House from Alabama had old Sarge by the ear, anytime the phone wasn't busy, or whoever was Sarge's replacement with them, and they were giving whoever it was that was in charge of those grants--

G: Is it Ted Berry?

B: Ted Berry. They were giving Ted Berry fits. Alabama hadn't decided that black folks were as good as white folks yet like they have since. They were still supported by their governor, their then-governor, who has changed his mind some since, too. And it was a black versus white, white versus black, Democrat versus communist. Oh, it was bloody. I couldn't see anything wrong with it. My experience had been with some ski jump loans in Illinois and Pennsylvania that if you had guts enough to go on and do it, pretty soon the congressional delegation would be prouder than hell and they'd start claiming [it]. At any event, I kept urging them and goosing them to go on with it. About then, when it got so hot, I decided I had better keep Freeman informed. He said, "Well, have at it!" but he said, "Don't quote me." Finally Sarge got Freeman on the phone. Freeman backed me. Finally I guess Freeman and I between us just gave Sarge and whoever it was, Ted [Berry], enough guts to go on and do it.

Then the next thing that--I'm sure there were a lot of things in between Howard Bertsch and his people are dealing with and so on, and that Ted and his people are dealing with that I wasn't aware of

Baker -- III -- 28

or don't remember. The next thing I knew, the entire board and their lawyer, who was alleged to be a French woman lawyer, communist, was there, plus two of her assistants, both of whom were alleged to be communists, and some hangers-on, appeared in my outer office and said they weren't going to accept the loan with the terms and requirements of the Farmers Home. Have you ever seen a loan docket?

G: No.

B: It's this deep, all in them legal documents, in seriatim, all the Latin root words and everything. By that time I guess they were partly interested in giving us trouble as well as letting the other side give us trouble. They weren't going to accept the loan unless we met their terms, instead of them meeting our terms. I told them that all the members of the board and all of their employees of the board, representatives of the board, should come in. We'd close the door and we wouldn't open the door until we came to an agreement, even if it was nothing more than to agree to disagree. My main lawyer was out of town, darn him, but I got the number-two lawyer. He sat there with me.

G: Who was that, your number-two lawyer?

B: Oh, my goodness. [Howard] Campbell was my main lawyer for Farmers Home. It wasn't [Elmer] Mostow. Mostow was Joe Robertson's lawyer.

In any event, he was kind of a timid little guy in a way, but he also had a lot of basic moral courage. I sensed at the beginning almost that if we'd take the in seriatim words out and everything-- you know how lawyers do, every time there's a new court case you

Baker -- III -- 29

add another word on that horse means equine and equine is something else and they've got a list--[and] just use one word instead of twenty in each of those cases of loan docket, and that all Latin root words would be put in in Anglo-Saxon instead of Latin, one-syllable words instead of four-syllable words, then let's see what the loan docket looked like.

Well, that pleased them mightily when they started seeing the result of it. But that wasn't all they wanted. They had a real prickly in their craws over our state director of Farmers Home Administration in Alabama, Red Bamber [?], who was a buddy of the governor and a buddy of the delegation, a big politician in his own right. But the most recent thing he'd done wrong--and I just barely kept Freeman from firing him over that--Red Bamber had gone up to Father [Theodore] Hesburgh's, one of his hearings when Father Hesburgh was chairman, in Memphis. Old Red gave him the straight stuff as a plantation operator, pre-bellum, about the way you got to treat them damn niggers. They said they wouldn't accept the loan if he administered it. I said, "Well, you don't expect me to administer it from this corner office, do you?" They said, "We want somebody that's sympathetic. We don't want somebody like Red Bamber." I said, "Well, would you let Bertsch do it?" They said, "No, we don't want Bertsch. He's the one that's been keeping Bamber on the payroll." I finally talked Herman Hankins into loaning me the county supervisor from Arkansas, and I talked Howard Bertsch into putting him on the payroll in Alabama, somebody whose background they

Baker -- III -- 30

knew in Arkansas as not being a pre-bellum plantation-minded kind of guy. They went home and had to think about that for a while, and I had to do some LBJ-type persuading to get somebody over there that they would take. I was absolutely insistent that it not be a fake or a namby-pamby, because with that much money involved and me for hundreds of years in solid for making safe loans and grants instead of bad loans, I couldn't put up with somebody that was either incompetent or in a sense dishonest.

Then the next thing I'm aware of, we finally got the darn thing going. The next thing my memory recalls to me is anywhere from eight-thirty at night until five o'clock the next morning, or anytime in between, not counting hours and half hours, that phone was liable to ring. "What do I do now?" I said, "Who are you?" "I'm a truckdriver for SWAFCA and I'm on back roads and mountains of North Carolina. They told me not to go the main highways because somebody would turn my truck over. And now I'm broke down and I can't find any garage that will repair my truck." It was one thing after another like that for a while.

G: Was this after the loan was approved?

B: Yes. Oh, we were operating by then.

G: Really. So what would you tell him to do?

B: Oh, we did whatever [we could]. You know, each one of them was an emergency. [We'd] get a local county supervisor to go help him or whatever it was. When you've got--see, I had eighty-five thousand troops in my command over there.

Baker -- III -- 31

G: That's a lot.

B: Somebody's truck broke down anywhere in the United States I could damn near get it fixed for him. But sometimes it went through channels and sometimes I followed that principle, I told them, "I'll tell you what to do and then you inform all the people in between."

G: You said in one of these meetings that you had finally gotten Osborne [?] out of the way at noon and things went better after he left?

B: Yes.

G: Who was Osborne?

B: He was one of their needlers.

G: Oh, I see.

B: Advisors in court. What I did, I wouldn't even let them go to the bathroom. I kept them in there twenty-six hours, and he had to go to the bathroom. I wouldn't let him back in. See, I didn't want a bunch of smart alecks sitting out there in my outer office or out in the hall double-timing me. We were just going to sit by God there until we came to an agreement. Thank God I lasted.

G: Did you have any problem at your end getting the USDA or FHA to approve it?

B: No.

G: You just had a blank check?

B: Yes. See, Freeman was the only one I would have had to worry about. Bertsch knew I was prepared to sign the damn loan docket myself, but he didn't raise any objection. He was for it.

Baker -- III -- 32

- G: Did you ever go down there and look over the SWAFCA area?
- B: I always wanted to and never did get the chance.
- G: What kind of a program was it? Do you think it was worthwhile?
- B: Yes. In that part of the South as distinct from mine and your part of the South, part of the deeply-believed folklore and beliefs was that "colored people", they called them when they were polite, could grow crops like cotton and corn, but they couldn't handle livestock. Vegetable growing was too complicated for them, but they had to stick to things like cotton and corn, rice. And in the black belt there was a problem of soil erosion and one-crop agriculture, partly because of that. Fay and Dr. Graham [?] and whoever else was in on the initial of this thought the way to open up the society and also give them additional sources of income was vegetable growing, which they could sell in the northern cities who were in favor of black people and so forth. Back at that time the cities claimed they were pro-black.
- G: Did the White House put any pressure on you at all?
- B: I don't recall the White House being in on this at all. It may be they knew what old John was doing and figured that they'd let poor old John break his plow, or plow the row.
- G: How about pressure from the Alabama delegation? Was all this directed at OEO?
- B: Yes.
- G: Or did you catch some heat on that, too?

Baker -- III -- 33

B: I didn't catch [any]. These guys all knew me, had been knowing me since 1951. They knew that I wasn't a nigger-lover. They knew I was just for folks.

G: Well, but you were still funding this program?

B: Politicians are human beings. They didn't want to hit that bus though. They figured they could kick these city kids around, see. They knew that I had more answers than they had questions. There wasn't one of them bothered me. But they knew that I knew Farmers Home loaning business and farming from the time I was two days old. What they were against was the grant part. I mean, this is what they said. No, they didn't want to tangle with me on that. Now incidentally, I should say there was one exception in the House delegation. [Congressman] Bob Jones was always for it. I knew Bob would be; I never talked to him, but I knew he would be.

G: What happened to SWAFCA? Do you recall?

B: Still going last I heard. I asked somebody about two months ago.

G: Was the ideological aspect of it a problem, the fact that there were--

B: No, there never did anybody face the--you mean the co-op technique?

G: Yes.

B: No, because some of the largest businesses in Alabama and Georgia are farmers co-ops.

G: But this seemed to have more of a leftist [orientation].

B: The ideology was the alleged communist affiliation, not the co-op mechanism. The fact is, I think maybe that year the national

Baker -- III -- 34

president of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association was from Alabama. A lot of the TVA stuff was co-ops. So the co-op thing was not an issue as a mechanism for organizing economic activity. The opposition said that was just a facade for Ted Berry to become a commissar.

G: How radical were these SWAFCA leaders?

B: I never did have that woman lawyer investigated, so I don't know the answer to that. She played it straight that twenty-six hours in my room. I never thought Fay Bennett was wild or crazy or communist-inclined or anything. There were a lot of people that did over in the Department of Agriculture and worried about folks like that.

The members of the board were leadership types right off of the sharecroppers and they were just as solid an American as I am or anybody else. They didn't have any foreign ideologies or anything else except to get in a little better shape in life. I've forgotten his name, the proposed manager had played fairly close to some of the more humanitarian-minded archbishops of the Catholic church down in Louisiana. I think I'm remembering correctly. There was some thought that this was somehow tied into the Vatican. McKnight, was that his name?

G: It could be. I have Harrison.

B: Harrison. Harrison was the manager. McKnight was an advisor. There was some question about McKnight's, you know, people trying to raise innuendos. But when you sit with people twenty-six hours in a row

Baker -- III -- 35

you find out pretty darn soon whether they're communist or dope addicts or drunks. They were coming from somewhere else than where I came from; they were from Alabama and I was from Arkansas. But it was kind of agrarian fundamentalism and a lot of deep ignorance about business. You've got to have sophisticated management and you've got to keep a set of books and you can't let people steal your money and those kinds of things.

But that's no different than when Farmers Union set up cotton gins all over the South and co-op stores all over the South in 1902. They weren't sophisticated enough then, but while a lot of managers absconded and a lot of other people were just incompetent, and they went bankrupt, well, I couldn't see that that SWAFCA board and the proposed management was any bigger risk than those Farmers Union things were back in 1902, 1908. No more risk they'll overthrow the government. I did not sense any French communist conspiracy.

G: Did you aid them at all in insuring that they had efficient management or handling of the finances.

B: Yes, sir.

G: How did you do that?

B: [It's an] absolute requirement going back to 1935 when the people in old Farm Security wrote the first procedure manuals on co-op loans, out of the Farmers Union experience and the experiences in the Grange and others. There's nothing [surer] to blacken this kind of effort and kill it for generations than to have a whole bunch of proposed, initiated co-ops go broke, particularly if there

Baker -- III -- 36

are any scoundrels that steal money and stuff. You might as well just blank that territory out for two or three generations.

G: Was this insured through a monitoring system?

B: Yes, sir. We called it supervision. It's tutoring. It's different than the typical banker-borrower relationship. It's application of all of the scientific, agricultural and home management and business management principles by a full-time person. Farm Security and Farmers Home always provided that for individual borrowers as well as for institutional borrowers. That's part of why the grant didn't have to be any bigger than it was, because you had a full-time guy there saying, "Look, if you put the hay out there it will all rot," or "if you don't give them this kind of pill, the mules will all get worms and they can't pull a plow."

Interestingly enough, remember when Truman started the Greek and Turkey program--

G: Yes, the Truman Doctrine, yes.

B: Yes. There was a great big hassle here in town whether the agricultural end of the Truman Doctrine was going to be [on the] Farm Security pattern or the Extension Service pattern. The Extension Service pattern works through determined leaders. You teach them the best way to grow watermelons and then they teach their neighbors. You send them bulletins and print articles in the paper.

The Farm Security method was ruled out in Greece and Turkey because it cost too much in terms of personnel, and they went the Extension route. Between the United States government and the

Baker -- III -- 37

Ford Foundation they went about halfway in between in Iran. If they would have gone the full Farm Security route in Iran, when the Shah gave away all of his land, I'm convinced that the Shah would still be over there and he wouldn't be a bad ruler. He tried to do by force and violence what you can do by knowledge and sweet persuasion. That's what you call supervision. That was one of the key things in the old Farm Security.

Owing to budget cuts over the years, there's not near as much emphasis on it now as there used to be, but still a lot. Bertsch used the word tutored, it's the first time I had ever heard it applied. But it's actually teaching a guy. You not only make him loans to buy his feed and seed and fertilizer, but you teach him how to grow crops and how to raise livestock and make a success of it in the process of while you're doing it. That was part of what the neighborhood discussion groups I mentioned earlier were for, let them talk to each other with a supervisor, you know, it's time to cut hay yet or not.

We had that same controversy many years later in South Korea in the land reform program. Clyde Mitchell and I were both refugees from Farmers Home. Wilhelm Anderson had three Ph.D.s and a doctor of divinity and was a brilliant man, but he was kind of Prussian idea. His idea was that he was going to rationalize all this stuff before you turned the land over to them. We fought each other for years for the mind of the military governor. Finally Clyde and I won and we got it done our way. And it worked. If you had done

Baker -- III -- 38

it Wilhelm's way it never would have gotten done. If you do it the communist way, either you have to control it with violence or it won't work at all.

G: Anything else on SWAFCA? The group did have whites in it as well, I understand.

B: Yes, but not very many, and the reason is not because they excluded them, but because in that part of the country there aren't very many whites out on the land. That's part of why they call it the black belt; it's not just the color of the soil.

G: Were they suspicious of you at all, was SWAFCA initially suspicious?

B: No. Partly I guess because of my Farmers Union beginnings and partly by the grapevine, and maybe partly because of what they had heard me say or heard somebody say I'd said, just expressing a conviction on something or other.

G: Which was what, do you recall?

B: I don't know. I mean, I'm just trying to figure. You know, the grapevine of these guys is just like the grapevine among slaves. They got word quicker and more accurately about who's sleeping with who than the white folks structure. Something lead them to believe that they could trust me, even though I'm mean as hell. (Laughter) They knew that I wanted them to succeed, I think. I expect Fay Bennett had a lot to do with it, because I had been working with Fay since way back in 1951 lobbying. And possibly Elizabeth Herring, I don't know, she'd say something. And they had heard about discussions in the Rural Area Redevelopment Board where I

Baker -- III -- 39

was taking up for the poor folks. They trusted Jack [Kennedy]. They knew that I was Jack's appointee. They trusted Lyndon.

Lord knows Lyndon sure went to bat for them, more than any president in history. Not just SWAFCA but the whole business. Jim Patman said this morning, "You know, if it hadn't been for this damn quagmire in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson would go down as the greatest president in the history of America and the greatest national leader in the history of the world." A great, great thing he did, just unbelievable all the things he did. I pled with him many a time when he'd get mad and call me over the phone about something else, I'd pick on him about Vietnam. I'd say, "Listen, Lyndon, win the goddamned thing or get out." He was scared to try to win it and because Democrats had been "soft on communism," closed quote, he was scared to get out. Last time I ever talked to him over the telephone we were still fussing about that.

G: What did he say?

B: Well, the last time was some days or weeks after--it was bound to have been weeks after the speech--

G: March 31, [1968].

B: Yes. I listened to that on the floor of Earl Hogan's [?] living room in Indiana.

Tape 2 of 2

B: The phone call I'm thinking about is the day or two after both Bobby [Kennedy] and Hubert [Humphrey] had announced. Freeman had

Baker -- III -- 40

called a press conference and announced for Hubert. John Schnittker, the under secretary, called a press conference and announced for Bobby. I just called the press room and told them to pass the word that Baker was still supporting Humphrey, as they knew I had been since 19--when. These three tickers came in about thirty minutes apart over at the White House. He [the President] was irritated by the fact that Califano's wife had already announced for Hubert, about the same time I did.

Mrs. Harmonson came in from my outer office just as white as a sheet, said, "It's the White House." It was about six-fifteen. [Some of the staff had] already gone to a retirement party for a guy in the Forest Service, [and I had] stayed late working. I said, "I guess you better put him on." It was LBJ. He said, "What in the hell is going on over there? Where's Freeman? I've been trying to get him for half an hour," something like that. I said, "He's on the way to Minnesota to make a speech." He said, "Where's that goddamn Schnitt-i-ker [Schnittker]?"--he always used an extra syllable. I said, "He's on the way to Kansas to make a speech tonight." He said, "Well, goddamn you, you get word to him to not put a damn word in either one of those speeches about who they support for my successor." And they were both on airplanes. He said, "And while I've got you, I don't want you popping off anymore either." I said, "Why?" He told me, "I'm dedicated to peace, and if all my appointees start taking sides politically, people in America will think that we're more interested in politics

Baker -- III -- 41

than we are winning peace." I don't know whether he was sincere or not. But I understood what he was telling me. I was about two hours late to that retirement party that night. I finally caught Schnittker on the ground changing planes at Indianapolis, on the way to Kansas, got the word to him. And I got Freeman as he came off the airplane in Twin Cities.

G: What did the President say about Vietnam though, in addition to the business of peace?

B: He knew that I was military but also kind of simple-minded, and the impression that he [gave me]--I don't remember any exact words. The reason he couldn't do it the way we were taught to win a war is because it would bring in the Chinese and the Russians. The reason he couldn't get out was the same thing we had all put up with during McCarthy times. The average Democrat until after Nixon went to China, the average Democrat [inaudible]--

G: Okay, we're on again.

B: There are no historians in the family, and they already know that their daddy was a failure in life, so they don't have to worry about that. (Laughter)

I'll get you something else, too. Well, have you ever heard of Billy Sol Estes?

G: Yes.

B: I've got a folder that thick on him. See, I was about eight inches from where it was all going on, but I wasn't personally involved. But I wanted to be goddamn sure I wasn't, so I think between Wilma [?]

Baker -- III -- 42

and some of my other people, they packratted everything they could get and I've just got it all put together in a folder.

G: Great, we'd love to have it. You bet.

Let's talk about the Job Corps. Some of your correspondence elaborates on the relationship between the Job Corps and USDA. One of the points that you made was that there was a manpower shortage in Agriculture already and that placing the added administrative training, teaching requirements on you all just exacerbated it. Can you elaborate on that?

B: Two things: when we went in in 1961, along with Joe Robertson I took the point of view that you could increase program without increasing personnel, up to the point where they had a full load. The preceding administration had reduced and abolished programs but had not reduced personnel. My friends in particularly Farmers Home Administration told me that they had more numbers than they needed. So at all the Budget Committee meetings and all my recommendations on budgets, which everybody from Elmer Staats to the President was glad to receive, I was tough as hell on increasing personnel.

Then all these new things started coming along and I was caught with my pants down. I had to have bodies. Plus the fact that in a specific case, Job Corps was going to be administered by the Forest Service, and the Forest Service, like the air force and the cavalry, travels well and eats well. By that I mean they saw to it that each of their line officers at all levels were adequately

Baker -- III -- 43

staffed. For instance, they didn't just take you on a tour but two highly qualified people had made a dry run of that same tour twice before you got there. And they had enough personnel to do that. Farmers Home never did. I wouldn't let them have them. But Forest Service already had them.

Well, they were going to do the Job Corps. The Forest Service was absolutely insistent that they have enough numbers of thoroughly competent staff to do the job right. And they had already had experience for X years in the thirties running CCC.

G: Was there distrust of the Agriculture personnel in Job Corps? Did OEO have a distrust for them?

B: I think to the contrary. My impression was to the contrary. I don't know whether you have had the privilege of much association and acquaintance with Forest officers of the Forest Service. They are really very high-type individuals. You don't even get into the Forest Service as a beginner unless you're in the upper--if it was an arts and science college you'd have to be in Phi Beta Kappa. By the nature of the kind of things they have to administer, they have to have their own moral standards. I used to say they were kept upright by conflicting pressures from all directions. They've apparently got a very successful promotion system and have had for seventy years, because just the finest type of person comes up through the ranks of the Forest Service.

This Jack Deinema, I hope you can find him and talk to him, was the Forest Service man for Job Corps. I'm still mad at the Nixon

Baker -- III -- 44

Administration for not making Jack Deinema chief of the Forest Service when Ed Cliff resigned. Jack was young. He finally went to Colorado State [University] on the faculty and I heard he'd retired from that now. But Jack was a future admiral type of guy, a young one that you bring up out of the ranks like Roosevelt and Marshall did Eisenhower, like Califano did Chief Haig. (Laughter) Jack was really tops. But all those other guys were tops over there. Some of them, of course, were set in their ways, which were ways of ten years ago or twenty years ago. But Jack wasn't, he was young enough to be right up with Singletary [?].

G: Some of the memos in these files point to a confusion within OEO on directives and policies and a lack of coordination within the poverty agency itself. Was this a problem with respect to the Job Corps?

B: More of an irritant than a problem. An irritant in two ways: one because the other people that were administering non-Forest Service Job Corps centers were not doing as good a job as we were and we were kind of taking some of the heat out there locally because of what somebody else was doing wrong. The other was, and I realized at the time but I didn't let it bother me very much, you had a completely new outfit of people that hadn't worked together six months, much less seventy years, up against one of the most highly efficiently organized and operated outfits in the world, the Forest Service. So that it don't matter what OEO did, it looked clumsy compared to what Forest Service could have done if it was doing it itself. I'm talking

about housekeeping as well as everything else. And that was an irritant.

But it never was a great problem. The Forest Service never did recognize problems whether it be viv-a-vis--they figured it was their own fault if they didn't have good working relationships with people. Ever since old Teddy Roosevelt first set it up with Gifford Pinchot of Pennsylvania, they just figured that--they don't ever articulate it this way, although strangely you'd be surprised how many of them go to the church after they retire--they were doing God's work and God was kind of guiding them, and truth and justice will always win. That didn't matter whether you were talking to GAO or Budget Bureau or a member of Congress. And they were nice about it; they had learned how to be diplomatic, so that they figured if you can't get in the front door, you go in the back door.

Bertsch was the hot-fighter, on the other hand, in Farmers Home. He'd lose his temper. Freeman would lose his temper. But I never ever saw a Forest Service man lose his temper in an OEO meeting or anywhere else.

G: What in your impression was the best Job Corps center or camp? Was there one in particular that you would single out and why was it so successful?

B: No. I could tell you the one near Hot Springs, Arkansas was the best, and the reason why is because it was in Arkansas and most of the kids were Arkansas people, but that wouldn't be the truth. Gosh, the one at Poplar Bluffs, Missouri was good, and two or three

Baker -- III -- 46

of those in New Mexico. I don't remember ever really having any trouble with any of them except in Montana once or twice. Some of those Montana people, they thought Indians were bad enough, and when they brought in those black Indians from New York City and told them they were going to have to let them date their girls that caused a little trouble. Lansey [?]-Lord, I never thought to ask Jack or anybody since which one was the best. We thought nearly all of them were pretty good.

G: You did feel that the rural camps were better than the urban?

B: Well, I didn't know too much about the others. I just learned what I read in the paper about it about the dope dens, they were hanging the manager in effigy, a lot of things like that.

G: Another thing that was pointed out in the memos was that there were imbalances in racial groups that were contrary to the firm commitments that had been given locally. That when a camp was being set up the local officials would be assured that it wouldn't be 60 per cent black apparently or something, then suddenly when the kids arrived that's exactly what it was.

B: Anytime that happened it caused at least temporary trouble and maybe some simmering trouble. Well, it wasn't anything that ever really rose above the national threshold of consciousness.

G: Do you recall the camp in Yorktown, Virginia? Early on it was cancelled because of local opposition.

B: That name doesn't ring a bell.

Baker -- III -- 47

Oh, incidentally, I don't guess I sent them to you. Somebody wrote a failure feature story on Job Corps, I think in Washington. Did I send them to you?

G: I don't know whether I got them or not, but it came out when I was in town last.

B: Well, in any event, it was about two-thirds misinformed or just plain outright wrong, a lot of the stuff that was in those stories.

G: Were your relations with [Otis] Singletary good?

B: Yes. Wasn't he the guy that was the former president of Ohio University, as distinct from Ohio State University?

G: Well now, let's see. I think Vernon Alden had been with Ohio.

B: Yes, yes.

G: Singletary, wasn't he from North Carolina?

B: I don't know. Maybe he was.

G: One of the schools there [North Carolina].

B: It's awful hard with guys like Chief Cliff and [Arthur] Greeley and Jack Deinema to really have downright trouble with anybody. Chief Cliff, when he retired, became a Morman missionary in South America and he's down there today. Art Greeley started over as a beginner and is now a bishop in the Methodist Church, some kind of traveling bishop, I read the other day. Jack Deinema is of the same stripe of guy, except he's younger than those people. The Forest Service approach always was that "we're not having trouble with these guys, they just haven't quite understood it all yet." When they carried me along, they'd gotten just about as far as

Baker -- III -- 48

they could go by their approach with the army engineers. We made a helicopter trip around Pennsylvania one time with the army engineers over a dam and a recreation area. I really learned a lot from those guys how to get things done, as Hubert Humphrey used to say, "how to disagree without being disagreeable." But I was always the one. They never did quite have the knack.

I'll give you an example. I don't know whether I ever treated Singletary this way or not, but one time we and the Bureau of Land Management looked like we had an insoluble problem. So I got the assistant secretary from Interior [Harry R. Anderson] and his lieutenants over there, and I had the Forest Service guys sitting there. Before they got there I typed a rough draft letter from me to Stewart Udall, on my own typewriter. It obviously hadn't been done by anybody else except a fellow with low mechanical aptitude. I talked about such things--we didn't mind them giving away their sugar to special people, but we didn't want them giving our sugar away at the same time, kind of a mock-serious, but you couldn't tell for sure whether it was serious or not. There were some horrible examples in it and stuff. And when Anderson brought his crew in I just passed out xerox copies of this and said, "Our meeting here is to determine whether I send this when the meeting is over or whether I tear it up." When the meeting was over we decided we didn't have to send it. But every once in a while the Forest Service had to fall back on me for things like that. I

Baker -- III -- 49

don't remember whether I ever had to rough Singletary up or not. I don't recall it.

The meetings with Ted [Berry] were more apt to be--I had a hell of a time talking Ted into being rural.

G: Is that right?

B: Oh, yes.

G: Well, you indicated that one of the big obstacles there was [Robert] Levine, who was with--

B: Levine, I don't think Levine has changed his mind yet. Did I tell you about going to the American Agriculture Economic Association Meeting? He was going to give a paper and I was going to give a paper, and this was two or three years after we're both out of office. I didn't know he was on the same airplane, but he was down at the foot of the ramp snarling. "What in the hell are they inviting you out here for? All you can think about is agrarian fundamentalism." Still snarling. He was supposed to have been an honest analyst, but he was sure anti-rural.

G: I notice that in the 1967 legislation Congress stipulated that it was to be a policy to keep people on the farms and to provide the services and training and opportunities where the people were.

B: Yes, sir.

G: Did you have any input in [that legislation]?

B: That originated in my typewriter and went in the Secretary's recommendation to LBJ, for the State of the Union Message or whatever it was. That's one of the things that Revere [?] let get through his

Baker -- III -- 50

typewriter, and it didn't cost anything. So Califano approved it.

And it got in.

G: But was this a way of lobbying around OEO?

B: Partly, but not just OEO, whoever was supervising the Captioned Films for the Deaf, everybody else. And the economists in the Department of Agriculture, they knew and I knew it didn't have the force of law. But at least Congress had adopted it and the President signed it. And it made a difference, you know. Oh, from 1961-62--well, it was not until after Watts. One day the administrator of Economics Research Service was not at the early morning staff meeting, but the deputy was. Freeman had just told something that Baker and Sarge, or Baker and somebody, was going to do. This individual jumped up and said, "Well, that's just the opposite of what you ought to be doing. It's just as uneconomics as you can be." Freeman reared back and just took his skin off. First time that Freeman had ever--Freeman was always worried that maybe these economists were right and Baker was wrong, just dreaming a dream. But that day he took the boy's hide off. From then on economists in the Department of Agriculture kept their mouth about half-way shut about it.

See, they all believed that the way to increase farm income per capita was by reducing the denominator, not increasing the numerator. Nobody--it's almost as if they didn't care what happened to these people after they left, because--you know what happened, it just blew up the cities. That's what that headline said about

Baker -- III -- 51

one of my speeches. From then on it was coast after the cities started blowing up.

G: There was also a problem in OEO in coordinating with USDA and the land grant colleges in getting their programs to be mindful of what was already going on in the way of research and training and this sort of thing. You cited the University of Wisconsin's program as one that was not even being considered by OEO when they were launching their own program in this area. Do you remember that?

B: This was sort of the thing that I told you about earlier on--Jim Patton and President Rode [?] of the Wisconsin Farmer's Union talked the University of Wisconsin into setting up that poverty personnel training school.

The truth of the matter was, and still is, that I was playing with a hand tied behind me, trying to say that if they would trust the Extension Service--meaning the land grant colleges--that I would see to it that they changed. I never did sell that bill of goods. See, the Extension Service is not organized like the Forest Service and SCS and Farmers Home; it's not organized like an infantry division. The local county agents [are] paid half by the local people and half by the state and federal government. The secretary of agriculture's authority over state Extension Service, for example, is really effective only one day a year. That's the day where he decides to let them have the full year's appropriation. Once he signs that piece of paper, they can thumb his nose at him until next July 4. You know, real under--where

Baker -- III -- 52

the power lies situation. Land grant colleges, which is their umbrella organization, is even more so, although they're very fiercely jealous of it. There's not enough money to wad a baby's popgun, a federal appropriation to the land grant college as such. I always assumed it didn't mean a darn thing to them until I was later consultant to Bob Wood when he was president of University of Massachusetts. To my amazement, the University of Massachusetts, going back in history, got nine-tenths of the land grant college [appropriation], but MIT is the other one-tenth, and MIT is as jealous of saving that one-tenth of a little old appropriation-- like I say, MIT spends more on one project in a week than that appropriation is, just like tigers.

I went over to talk to some of their people, why wouldn't they just let the University of Massachusetts be the land grant college. I thought Bob Wood was going to have to put out a prairie fire just because I went over there. They're very fiercely jealous of this. It goes way back to Abraham Lincoln, you know. The Extension Service came along in World War I. Experiment stations came along somewhere in between. They're partly federally-financed and part state-financed. So that you can't really give an order and expect the Extension Service to carry it out unless they want to, you know, an assistant secretary or secretary. I carried them an awful long ways in eight years.

G: Was there much foot-dragging on War on Poverty in the Extension Service?

Baker -- III -- 53

B: Yes. A very large part of it in the southern states, which were very powerful in the Extension Service. It was racial.

G: In what areas? Would it be in community action or rural grants?

B: Keep going.

G: Everything?

B: No, not everything.

G: Head Start?

B: Lip service, they agreed on.

G: But which programs did they oppose the most that you worked with them on?

B: Community action.

G: VISTA?

B: Oh, yes. SWAFCA. They were farm managers, especially since the Alabama Extension Service testified that it wouldn't work, by letters, you know. They didn't really have much to say about the Job Corps one way or the other, because some of them had been successful graduates of CCCs. But they didn't really have to interface with Job Corps very much. They were torn between two things, particularly with me as assistant secretary. Whether to co-op it, or whether to fight it, and different ones different ways, and the same individual would have tendencies in both directions.

But the sheer business of being for the lower class was involved, you see, because their system was top down, aristocrats to the nobles to whatever the ranking order is. Here was Baker first, and then later Sarge and all these other guys to a whole lot

Baker -- III -- 54

more extent than I did, turning society upside down. It was really social class in the society-page sense that had a lot to do with it, believe it or not, even though a lot of these county agents and wives were from a very low order of society before they got a college degree. As an anthropologist advised the navy, one way to keep any lower class people from becoming commissioned officers in the navy is to require a college degree for a commission. That's the new upper class in America, from World War II on.

Then they wrestled with it mightily, ECOP--that's Extension Cooperative Organization and something--their own organizations wrestled with these things mightily and they came out with task force reports and all kind of stuff, much of which I think at one time or another got in my material that you've got.

Same way with Rural Areas Development. Partly in understanding Extension, you've got to remember that in 1932 "they" is all there was out there doing social action, and in terms of what they were originally set up for they made a tremendous success in terms of two blades of grass.

G: But did they focus on white primarily?

B: Oh, yes. Joe Robertson came tearing into my office one day--and this was rather far on, probably in Lyndon's time--and he had the Extension Service personnel directory, telephone directory, for the state of Mississippi. He had the white people listed alphabetically by their surname and the black people listed alphabetically by their given names. Oh, Joe was mad! He said, "I expect you

Baker -- III -- 55

to get that straightened out before the Civil Service Commission calls me." I said, "Hell, Joe, they don't even work for me." "But hell," I said, "Joe, that's an improvement. Back in my time down there they didn't even have the blacks in the directory." (Laughter)

So that was part of it. The word around Washington was that OEO was a front for a black organization. We had an awful time, and finally had to go to Congress to get OEO to set up an assistant director for rural affairs, that boy from eastern Kentucky and southern Ohio.

G: Was this something that USDA pushed rather than OEO? You pushed it directly legislatively?

B: Yes. And not formally.

G: Didn't they want all the lobbying to go through them?

B: Yes.

G: Say, their congressional liaison, Bill Phillips?

B: Yes. That was one thing I disagreed with them on. When I became assistant secretary, I told everybody that worked with me that they could call any congressman they wanted to about anything any hour of the day. I'd been a lobbyist for ten years, I figured I knew the congressmen and senators better than anybody in the Department of Agriculture did, so I wasn't "afraid." The second one was, everybody had a telephone on his desk and I couldn't be sitting on every desk for eighty-five thousand people scattered around the world. I said, "Just have at it, if you think you can whip me, go to it." I never had any trouble from all of my folks. But

Baker -- III -- 56

every once in a while a new legislative liaison guy would try to talk me into letting him be the only--they could talk only on things he approved of. I said, "You're just going the wrong way. The best thing to do is let them say whatever the hell they want to say and then you've got to have enough stuff to overcome it."

G: Was the assistant director for rural poverty effective in focusing more attention on the rural world?

B: The truthful answer is yes, but my contention has always been, and still is, that he didn't do enough. But he was playing an awful hard game over there with some pretty tough cookies. When we finally got [James] Sundquist convinced that Agriculture was right and the Yarmolinskys were wrong, Sundquist was very effective, more effective than the Assistant Director of OEO was in getting things down over at the Budget Bureau or OEO. But that was a nice guy.

When the 1968 election, and 1964 election both, starting in 1952 I guess, just as a matter of faith, I wound up as kind of the unofficial nexus of the Farmers for X-blank-Z or Rural Americans for X-blank-Z, of trying to keep everything coordinated. I don't know whether you've ever been in a presidential campaign or not, but there's more fighting among the people that are all for Johnson than there is between the people that are for Johnson and for somebody else. I just called up all these damn people, OEO and all of them, EDA and everybody else around that had a program out there in rural areas. I wanted them over there helping. Not a darn soul

Baker -- III -- 57

from OEO showed up except that rural assistant director's wife. But he was too scared to come. That was 1964 and 1968 both.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview III]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of John A. Baker

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, Mrs. John A. Baker of Arlington, Virginia 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 December 11, 1980, April 21, 1981 and June 12, 1981 in Arlington, Virginia and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

as edited

(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 the 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.

Susan T. Baker for
John A. Baker (deceased 3/2/82)

Donor

March
April 27, 1983

Date

Robert M. Korman

Archivist of the United States

April 11, 1983

Date