INTERVIEW IV

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN A. BAKER

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Baker's residence, Arlington, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1

B: My first personal involvement in foreign migratory farm worker activity in the United States--which might be thought of currently as the forerunner of the deal that President Reagan is trying to make with the President of Mexico--was one Thursday or Friday afternoon [when] our phone in the regional office rang. It was our Washington office in the Farm Security Administration saying that they had just been ordered by the President of the United States to establish a program to accept West Indies workers from the British West Indies when they had been shipped to the Gulf Coast, and to process them and place them for year-round farm workers or for seasonal farm workers in the United States in western and northern states. But they came in down on the Gulf Coast, so Region Six got the job of taking them in and getting them out.

It was a little difficult. These blacks with a British background didn't understand the way they were supposed to walk and not walk on sidewalks in Gulfport, Mississippi in 1942. We actually put them in special trains, sealed--nobody get on, nobody get off--and [would] take them places like Michigan for the cherries, or

Oregon for the fruit, or north central states for just regular farm work and things.

So I've been off and on then ever since, I guess because of that general background and maybe a nosy interest in it, involved one way or another in migratory farm worker and the general migratory worker program.

G: Did you learn anything from that first experience that applied to the problem later on?

B: Facetiously, I didn't learn it, but my Ph.D. friend John McNeely, who's now full professor emeritus at Texas A & M and was working for me at that time, did learn. And that is that sometimes staid old husbands who get out of town on a migratory farm worker trip to Oregon are liable to come home and spend the first three days with a girl friend instead of with their wife who doesn't know he's back in town yet. I never will forget how shocked old John was.

What did we learn in that year? One thing that I learned, that on the things that are completely new that an organization or a society is trying to do for the first time, people with just good common sense and a lot of energy are sometimes better than people with a lot of training. You train them on the job or you train with them on the job.

The other thing I learned was the truth of that old business about necessity being the mother of invention. The Washington office didn't have time and did not prepare any procedures in policy or

manual for either the year-round program or the seasonal program. One Sunday morning John McNeely and I just went down to the office and wrote one, so that our people that were working for us at least would know what we wanted them to do. And the Washington office accepted that and put it into effect in the other regions. We didn't know a thing in the world about it. All we did is just apply our general background and logic to the problem. You've got a boatload of people landing at Gulfport. How do you get them on working picking cherries in Michigan? Fortunately I had had a military background and [knew] the business of feeding them and keeping them from getting sick and all everything else.

One thing we found was that the farmers that got them were desperate. Otherwise their cherries were going to lay on the ground and rot. And they really treated them great, which was a little bit of a surprise. I didn't know they'd do that. Just as they treated the German POWs that came over here real good, just almost took men as permanent hired hands or as members of the family or something.

G: During the Johnson presidency the bracero problem was, I guess, a political as well as an economic problem. I wonder how Johnson himself responded to this.

B: I don't know whether he responded at all or not. Willard Wirtz would know better than I would. Prior to the Johnson Administration--in fact, we had set up our cadre but we hadn't actually taken over yet in the Kennedy Administration--I explained to Secretary [Orville]

Freeman, who had had no experience in that kind of thing, why, as secretary of agriculture, he'd be better off if he transferred the function on day one to the secretary of labor, which we did. Our only involvement in that labor thing after that first week was to support Willard Wirtz for whatever he said the policies were, and help him run the interference with the so-called labor users.

Then we had the statuatory requirement of establishing minimum wages for sugar beet and sugar cane production and harvesting labor. Although that wasn't in my job description, that wound up my job every year four times a year for eight years, to do that. We really raised the minimum wages during that eight-year period. Now, of course, the entire law of which that was a part has expired, was not renewed. Bill Fulbright got that.

G: Was there opposition from state governments to the minimum wage provision?

B: In the Sugar Act?

G: Yes.

B: No. The Sugar Act resulted from a senator from Colorado by the name of [Edward P.] Costigin. Colorado raised sugar beets. Sugar was as controversial and as combustible in the early thirties as dairy milk was. Senator Costigin had had three young sprouts help him in his campaign get elected the first time: John L. Lewis' sister, who was head of District Fifty, a fellow by the name of Oscar Chapman, and a fellow by the name of James Patton. The four of them, just as soon as they realized how hot this sugar thing was,

sat down and worked out in consultation with the fifty foreign countries and a hundred and fifty different interest groups in the United States, something to make everybody sit still and not fire fifty caliber at each other. It was one of those consensus things where enough sharp people had figured out who's got how much power, and they gave each one of them his share and kept peace for a long, long, long time, including consumers, and including [labor]. They kept labor quiet with the minimum wage provision. I always thought that'd have been a hell of a good thing to have had in all the other farm legislation. But actually the food stamp plan turned out to be better later, for the same purposes.

G: Was there an attempt to generalize this minimum wage, to have it apply to more industries?

B: I'm not knowledgeable on that point anytime prior to 1961. There was considerable discussion starting in the Freeman entourage around Christmas of 1960. Willard and I talked about it a whole lot. I guess the cotton, tobacco, peanut and rice people just really never did get into a presidential message. I think, though, we sent it to the White House a couple of times.

G: Why did you urge Secretary Freeman to turn over this responsibility to Secretary Wirtz?

B: Administratively and militarily, it is very, very difficult to serve two masters, to have two immediate superior officers. The Secretary of Agriculture more then than now was thought of as being the representative in the cabinet of the farmers. Well, some of the

farmers were big employers of hired labor. Whereas in the Depression years and World War II years, where Department of Agriculture people really had the only know-how there was with respect to farm labor, what little there was, as a result of coming out of World War II. With this foreign importation, Mexico and the British West Indies, there'd been huge camps established for migratory [labor], with buildings and barracks and mess halls and all kinds of things to manage. As the pressures of the war got over and the war emergency powers started running out and so forth, in the late forties it became an increasingly uncongenial job for the Secretary of Agriculture to try to encourage farmers to produce better oranges, and at the same time beat them over the head because they weren't feeding and housing the people that harvested the oranges in any decent way.

In the late forties, and on through the fifties--and we were obviously going to inherit it in the sixties--the preeminent job of the secretary of agriculture was going to be the so-called farm programs or the commodity price support and income programs. My experience of ten years as a lobbyist for a farm organization just convinced me that a secretary of agriculture just could not comfortably wear both coats and that it would be the migratory farm workers that would suffer from it. Because he obviously had to look after his first clientele first. Also, all the rule book boys, personnel, bookkeeping, finance, space, all of those people had been growing up in a department that for a hundred years was Agriculture, not Labor.

The unions--although there were not any farm worker unions to amount to anything at that time--the big unions were taking kind of a peripheral interest and raising Cain all the time. They were, of course, institutionally opposed to all importation of foreign farm workers, except that Roosevelt just made them take it so they could eat during World War II. And there were inevitable scandals in these big labor camps in California and alleged scandals--a lot more alleged scandals than there were actual scandals--and truck-loads of people getting killed on the highway and all that. It just seemed to me like the secretary of agriculture would be better off if he could get the cabinet officer that's responsible for labor to take it just like the secretary of commerce ought not to be in charge of the steel workers union.

G: Did some of the growers or large farmers try to get you to become involved on their side?

B: Oh, yes. They wanted us to keep it, because they knew they could come nearer getting their way. [More] political pressures they could put on us than they could on the secretary of labor.

G: Let's talk about the Mississippi food situation.

B: Okay.

G: You had some material on that.

B: You don't want to start with Sarge [Shriver] getting so mad that Saturday afternoon, do you?

G: Sure.

B: Did you read that?

G: Yes.

B: I still don't--

G: Do you recall that meeting?

B: It wasn't a meeting. It was all on television.

G: Oh, that's right.

B: Well, it's another example of Sarge being one of the world's best promoters and one of the world's poorest administrators. Apparently there must have also been a slip-up on the Department of Agriculture duty officer being where he could answer the durn telephone or something, I don't know what it was.

G: On Saturday or something. Evidently no one was--

B: Well, we had a duty officer every [weekend]. The Clark subcommittee, Senator [Joseph] Clark of Pennsylvania, and--your memorandum refreshed my memory--some real star-studded members of that subcommittee, [Gaylord] Nelson of Wisconsin and numbers of others, had just finished a bunch of hearings on whether the food program that had been initiated at their pushing really was being conducted. They had had a lot of witnesses and written a fairly critical report. I would assume without knowing that staff members of these senators were beating on Sarge all day long, because he says in that hide-lashing he gave me over the telephone that he'd been working eight hours on our business. But those staff members must have been calling him off and on all day long. One of his problems was, every time I tried to call him that day, his switchboard said they couldn't find him.

But in any event, I figured I had enough in the bank with Sarge that I was going to go on and do it anyway. I found out [Joseph] Califano was on duty and [James C.] Gaither was on duty at the White House, so--in fact, I never did leave this house. I got Rod down there, Rod Leonard, who was by then administrator of Agriculture Marketing Service I guess--he's in one of those pictures you've got--and had been Freeman's press man or whatever you [call it], spokesman. I got old Rod to prepare a reply and I kept trying to get hold of Sarge. The switchboard said they couldn't find him, and they said there wasn't anybody designated to speak for him. So then I guess I read Rod's statement to Gaither and Gaither took it in and showed it to Califano and Califano wanted to add one sentence to the end. He approved releasing it. About that time Sarge called me. (Laughter) He hadn't had any input at all. I guess Gaither told Califano "they claim they can't find him," so they just cut him out of it. It was his money, of course. I thought about that even before I got your memorandum, when I read Califano's comments about Carter. Joe's a little abrupt. I guess that's one thing though that made him useful to LBJ, he didn't take a lot of palaver.

Actually a lot of the criticisms were based on unfounded half-truths, snips and snatches of testimony and stuff. It wasn't as bad as the report said it was, but trying to operate a food program for people that are too poor even to get on welfare in Mississippi at that time wasn't the easiest damn thing in the world to do either.

It was far from perfect. I threw the whole RAD [Rural Areas Development] apparatus into it, to try and find the people. They were scared to even come in and qualify for the food. It was a major, believe you me, political and diplomatic operation just to keep the officeholders in Mississippi to sit still while we did something like this, at that time. Virginia was even further back on letting people have food than Mississippi. The Lower Mississippi is bad enough. And you never knew when this might lead to a lynching bee, you know.

G: How did the RAD people work to find those who qualified and make food available?

B: Got in their cars or on horseback and went up and down the country roads.

G: Did they do a fairly good job?

B: Yes, sir. Didn't get them all on the rolls, didn't talk them all into even coming in and trying to get on the rolls. But it reassured a lot of timid people, and it found a lot of people that never would have heard of it otherwise. We did the same thing on Medicare when it came along.

G: I noticed that in one of the memos, insurance and that sort of thing.

B: It can be done. You've just got to have somebody with the guts to motivate it and try and hope you don't stub your toe.

G: The Mississippi program I gather was multi-faceted in that it was aimed at not merely food, but providing employment and housing and. . . .

B: Well, it's according to what you mean by the Mississippi program. Operation Help was the food program. There were a lot of other things stemming from the luncheon that Bobby Kennedy and Sarge Shriver had, as a result I'm sure of one of the civil rights workers, or maybe a group of them, alerting them to a bad situation.

G: Marian Wright I guess was the one that was. . . .

B: Might have been. Marian Wright Edelman it is now.

G: Well, these were primarily displaced farm workers that you were meeting with, weren't they?

B: No. No. Not in Operation Help. That's why I'm making a distinction here. These were just anybody that didn't have enough to eat, didn't have enough income to buy enough to eat or didn't have a piece of land to grow something to eat on, or didn't know how. That was not under my immediate administrative direction, except I always wound up with it, just like eight year. . . .

Other aspects were handled in different ways from the food thing. See, the Department of Agriculture had been in the food distribution [business], and to a limited extent the food stamp plan business, activity, since the early thirties. The old surplus commodity distribution program operated through really county welfare.

They had warehouses out at the edge of town, and we'd send them surplus peaches or surplus peanut butter or whatever we had, and they gave them to the people that were on welfare.

This predates LBJ's presidency, but he was part of the general era. We had four or five log houses where our house was. My mother was always a great hand to, as she put it, be good to those people. There was an old Negro woman living in one of the log cabins out back of our house and it was the presidential election of 1936, I guess it was. Our dining room had a big bay window, if you know what a bay window is, sticks out beyond the edge of the house, and we had a radio sitting on that bay window, and she had all of her renters and some of the other people in our dining room sitting around listening to election returns on that radio. I'll never forget that old black lady, she was as big as that door and had a great big skirt and apron on. It wasn't very late, because Roosevelt started taking that election off fast. She disappeared. We all kind of looked around and didn't think anything about it, thought maybe she was. . . . And then she came in the back door. She had this apron and skirt pulled up like this, like you've seen country women for years making a basket out of their skirt. She walked over to that bay window and let down the front of it, and four dozen oranges at least rolled right out in that bay window. She said, "Help yourselves, folks. There's more where these came from. Aunt Rosey is in again." (Laughter) That's the background.

In Mississippi they had kind of unwritten qualification requirements, in addition to--they didn't go out and hound people to participate. But they did prefer surplus commodity distribution to food stamps. I'll tell you why about that in a minute. In Mississippi you also had to kind of be a good nigger and you had to vote right in the primary. Let's put it another way, if you voted wrong too much or talked wrong too much or acted wrong too much, you couldn't get on, no matter how poor or destitute you were. The reason they preferred commodity distribution--and Sue went through this fight in Virginia, like I say, as late as 1969 and 1970--a food stamp, you go and get that from an agent of the federal government. It says that "I, John, am qualified for this." I don't have to go hang my head and go in the back door and get four oranges. I can go to any damn store in town and I've got money like anybody else. It's kind of funny money, but it's money. The cultural climate--I would imagine still to some extent--you just didn't want those kind of people to think they were as good as anybody. They had to admit that they were lower class to participate. If you gave them a food stamp, that makes them just as good as anybody with a damn dollar bill.

We ran into the same thing on the Brannan Plan in Agriculture where you were going to qualify each producer for a payment from the federal government, instead of just raising the total market price under price support loans. The same culture opposed [Secretary of Agriculture Charles F.] Brannan's production payments. This qualified

an individual black sharecropper to get a check from the federal government, see, instead of going through the regular furnished merchant system.

All of this background of all of the different things you've run into in OEO of upsetting an entire caste and class system that had been established over a period of what, a hundred, darn near two hundred years. LBJ and Lady Bird [were] right out of this background, same as I was. It's unbelievable that a Lyndon Johnson would have the guts to even take it on. You know, a Rex Tugwell, that's something else, than Lyndon Johnson, even discounting his closeness with FDR and his employment in NYA. The fact as a grown man, if you want to put it that way, he had guts enough to say it's all right for John Baker and Sarge Shriver to try to feed the poor people in Mississippi, whether the rich people in Mississippi wanted them fed or not. That's an act of political courage.

G: Did the Mississippi politicians go to him and try to get him to curb it?

B: I don't know. Like you say, that was not under my immediate direction. It's only when they needed help or got into trouble that they called on me to throw my troops in.

G: There was a lot of pressure from the White House to cut back on the budget deficits here. I know that Orville Freeman tried to get LBJ to endorse a much larger food program than he was willing to accept. Do you know anything about the details of that?

B: Not the specific details with respect to food, except that--and it's not a specific detail, it's a general [observation]. The thing you have described is. . . . Beginning really in the summer of 1965, as either this Millet [?] or some other historian I was reading last week put it, LBJ tried to have the Great Society and Vietnam at the same time.

G: Guns and butter, as they [say].

B: The ones of us, including him, that were old enough to remember it and participate in it, remember that FDR quit being Mr. New Deal and became Dr. Win the War. LBJ didn't do that. In their different ways with respect to each of a thousand different programs, the same combination of charades and actions took place, whether it was food or whether it was watershed projects or whether it was. . . . People working with me worked up something called Opportunity Homesteads. This would have taken quite a few millions. I can't remember now whether Califano was already on the job or not, I guess he was. They just wouldn't touch it because of the money. It was supposed to be a companion piece with the food program, to give them an opportunity to homestead ten acres or whatever it was, to have a place to live and a place to grow a garden. But even in ten-acre tracts, a million of them runs up, and there were upwards of a million at one time or another of displaced farm workers.

G: Would this program have been run in the Department of Agriculture?

B: Operation Homesteads?

G: Yes.

B: Yes. By Farmers Home. I guess that's one of the reasons I didn't get to be under secretary, and John Schnittker got it. He and Califano were fighting inflation, and all I was doing was coming up with things to do to do good for people that cost Califano a lot of money. He talked to the Boss. Freeman recommended me and the Boss took John Schnittker for under secretary when Charlie Murphy went over to the aviation outfit [CAB]. Because they got to be such close buddies in this anti-inflation committee that LBJ set up. All I was ever doing was giving Califano trouble wanting more money for this and more money for that, or setting up a commission that would recommend two billion dollars worth of programs, and they couldn't keep down the Vietnam inflation and also. . . .

G: Anything else on the political aspects of this Mississippi food problem?

B: There was a very fine congressman from Mississippi by the name of Frank Smith, who later--after he failed for re-election one time --went to the TVA board, chairman I think. Frank Smith supported OEO in the Mississippi Delta, believe it or not. He was the congressman from the Delta, and Frank supported it all the way and got re-elected once after doing so. But then they redistricted and got him. Throughout all of this, [Congressman] Jamie Whitten, [Congressman] Tom Abernethy--I don't remember the others specifically --Jamie before the Appropriations subcommittee would make a little speech, and he made it I guess sixteen times in my eight years, about all these things that I was for and he didn't believe in, and

how smart I was and what good friends we were. He and Tom never. . . . And at Agriculture hearings Tom would come down from the rostrum and just sit down with me in the audience and we'd sit there and whisper while other people were testifying, a real [contradiction], one of those peculiar things that happens. So they never did fall out with me. They'd ribald the hell out of me and rawhide me, "You're just a damned do-gooder" and even "nigger lover" sometimes, all this kind of stuff. They thought it was all right that I was doing it, but if it was Rex Tuggle or Willard Cochrane, they thought they were about four degrees lower than an s.o.b. I never did quite understand what went on in their head. But Jamie made that speech every time. He started making it when I was testifying for Farmers Union back in the fifties, and he made it every time I appeared before a subcommittee.

So that was why [Orville] Freeman and [Joe] Robertson, who was his administrative assistant secretary, oftentimes would call on me to run interference or try to get somebody to settle down, when it really wasn't any of my damn business, like on this food program in Mississippi.

G: You mentioned I think in your first interview that the CBS program on the hunger in America, particularly in I guess Mississippi, was not a fair or accurate program. Can you recall the details of that? How you feel that it was distorted?

B: Mainly that it wasn't balanced in the sense that they gave the bad examples, just like on the migratory documentary. They gave the

bad examples and didn't balance them with the good examples. For instance, the guy who was seen marching with Marian Edelman would go in the next day to get his commodities, the counter would close between the front door and before he would get to the counter. They'd reproduce that on television. They didn't show the other two hundred that marched in and got their oranges and Irish potatoes and carried them home with them. In other words, it was a polemic rather than a true documentary of the kind you're writing.

G: Anything else on the Mississippi situation?

B: Well, one of our problems, Mike, and I'm sure you have run into this on a lot of aspects of things. People in Alabama and Minnesota and the Indians in Montana, and people in other states and their congressmen and senators, if you were going to spend a hundred million dollars, [said], "Why spend all of it in Mississippi? We've got poor people, too. We're Americans." That was a constant problem for all of those OEO programs, every one of them I know about except the entitlement ones like Head Start and the ones where everybody was eligible.

G: Is there a natural tendency for federal programs to spread themselves too thinly? Is that in essence the [problem]?

B: It's more complicated than the projects approach versus the entitlement approach. It's a form of the project approach that gets you into trouble. Like you say, the whole idea of having a big push in Mississippi of course was--was it [Ross] Barnett locking the schoolroom door and people were killing people. There were U.S.

marshalls attending class. There was all kinds of trouble in Mississippi. There was the Freedom Riders down there. This came to an important cabinet member's attention, meaning Bobby Kennedy, who Lyndon didn't know quite what to do about. All of the attention and all of the money and everything got focused on Mississippi. Right across the river were Louisiana and Arkansas [which] had exactly the same conditions, and east of there Alabama and Georgia had exactly the same conditions. But nobody talked about making that extra special effort in those other states, primarily because the demonstrators were in Mississippi. This causes a lot of just ordinary political envy and jealousy and controversy, plus all of that stirred up by the emotions involved.

Now you can do a project approach that everybody understands and never becomes subject to this kind of thing. I'll give you an example of that, two examples. [One] was our watershed program. We just started with four. One of them was in my home county. Now we've got one nearly everywhere in the United States. But everybody knew you may not be the first, but this program still needed to be going on. Your watershed is going to be taken account of, too. RC & D, which was Resource Conservation and Development projects, I started that as an amendment to Title III of the old Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, that trip I told you about making to Eleanor [West Virginia ?]. We had twelve counties the first year. I noticed that Congress the other day passed a law making everybody in the United States eligible for it now. But the entire geographic

area of the country is now almost covered by RC & D projects. Everybody kept still that was supporting and [thought] "we'll get ours when our time comes."

But these one-shot things like Mississippi, a lot of people don't understand why you're putting all of your marbles in Mississippi. Or there is the thing like SWAFCA. I never once got a criticism from anybody for putting that big a loan in Alabama, partly because Alabama people that counted didn't want it. Partly also they knew they could let them have a loan sometime. Maybe not exactly the same way, but they could get one.

Now as you know from the memorandums that you sent me a copy of, we never did get off the launching pad on housing for displaced farm workers in Mississippi. We never did get off the launching pad on vocational education or manpower training they called it for a while. Then the women made them change that name to something else. You can't call it manpower development anymore. Yet right across the river in Arkansas with a hillbilly segregationist by the name of [Orval] Faubus, operating through the Arkansas Farmers Union and a part of the University of Arkansas system, we had five hundred displaced farm workers living in dormitories at the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff they call it now, former predominently Negro college, and going to class and taking shop work. Faubus made the graduation speech, and every darn one of them in the room was black. Again, that's the Jamie Whitten-Abernethy syndrome. None of us are a thousand per cent consistent all the way across the board.

G: Did it ever get into the question of Martin Luther King's leadership in particularly that Greenville project?

B: Greenville project?

G: Well, I gather there was a movement to take over a deserted air base in Greenville, Mississippi and that King seemed to be active in this.

B: I wasn't involved in that.

G: I thought maybe there might have been something here involving the rivalry between Martin Luther King and LBJ.

B: Not that [I know of]. Fact is, I wasn't even aware of what you just said. I didn't realize there was any--it would be understandable if LBJ had some of the same internal thoughts about Martin Luther King that his mentor, FDR, had had about Huey Long. Might just take it over and replace him. I think LBJ's interest in the FBI reports on Martin Luther King's girlfriends was more recreation and entertainment than it was anything serious. But I don't know any of the details.

G: Another question, going back to OEO, you attended a lot of the meetings or at least a number of the meetings of the Economic Opportunity Council, the board, inter-agency departmental board that would meet occasionally.

B: I guess I attended every one of them if I was in town.

G: Did you? Can you tell me about the board and how it worked and whether or not it was effective?

B: Let me think about that a little bit. I am always inclined to answer a question "Was it effective?" by saying no. Because

compared to something [that] operated smoothly in a straight line you don't get that kind of results and you waste a lot more time. On the other hand, the widespread use by presidents and cabinet officers and me and my own administration activities, even military, navy and army, you find them useful. It's like this, it's a mirror, not a mirror, but a reflection--that's not even right--of the same general variety or breed of this problem with presidents and the cabinet. Every president you ever heard of right after elected is going to have cabinet government. It's like presidential commissions, outside commissions. Rarely do they amount to anything, but they always amount to something. I don't believe that all of those smart people going back to Charlemagne and the popes and emperors of Rome would have set up councils for this and that and everything if they hadn't been convinced, either from what they had heard of past ones or of what they perceived the current situation to be, that it would do more good than it did harm. The OEO council is not one of the ones that stand out in my memory as being either exceptionally effective or exceptionally a waste of time. I noticed in some of the materials that you have that there were times when actually we got something done that we wanted done as a result of being a member of the thing, and got a point over that the switchboard would have said, "Oh, we can't find him."

G: You seemed to use that council as a vehicle for funneling more attention to rural poverty problems.

B: I used everything available for that purpose.

G: Did Hubert Humphrey take an active interest in that council?

B: Yes.

G: I gather he was chairman.

B: Hubert Humphrey was never associated with anything that he didn't take an active interest in, period, end of paragraph.

G: Did this create any rivalry between Humphrey and Shriver?

B: Not that I was aware of, because I was a whole lot closer to Humphrey than I was Shriver. Anytime Shriver did something that was wrong we had Humphrey straighten it out for us. Or try to.

G: So you would use Humphrey to get to Shriver in other words, or use pressure on Shriver or something else.

B: Well, there was a good reason for that. One is Hubert and Orville grew up together politically in Minnesota. I'd been a very close associate or friend of Hubert since he ran for the Senate the first time. Fact is, I was thinking yesterday, I even ran into him in 1944 when I was in the navy. I was over at Princeton going to college for the navy and went over to look at some of the Democratic National Convention as covered by navy regulations. It happened to be the night Hubert made his walk-out speech and caused the Strom Thurmond candidacy. I had supported Hubert for president or vice president every four years since, until he gave up himself, like in West Virginia, running against Jack [Kennedy].

G: Some of the criticisms that have been made about that council are, one, that the President really didn't participate, didn't give it

the stature that it deserved to really oversee the War on Poverty by his own participation.

B: I don't recall him participating at all. But I'm sure that if whoever set it up had the idea that they were going to oversee the War on Poverty in the sense of directing the War on Poverty, none of the members had that perception of the function of the council. We considered it as kind of a substitute Senate of the United States, a place to settle squabbles, or get a point of view over to educate some knothead.

G: Was it effective in this purpose?

B: Oh, to some extent.

G: I noticed from those memos that things that seemed to have been discussed in the meetings were potential hot spots in the summer, areas where programs needed to be beefed up in order to avert riots and things like that.

B: Yes.

G: Was this a fairly typical area to address?

B: Well, it's according to how broad your definition of hot spots is. It wasn't just directed at potential Watts or Fourteenth Street things, but also just plain political disasters, economic failures, things like that. If there is time available for the main knockers, the decision-makers, to actually attend those kinds of things, I think they perform a useful function. Because the typical parametal [?] organization, you get your impulses from the people that are working for you. They don't tell you all they see, particularly if it's

critical to them. Each one of them is this history of the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps commandant, when he is still just a major and only had five hundred officers and men, when he was in the office of the secretary of the navy discussing something, spent more time trying to do something that would enhance the prestige and size of the Marine Corps than he did spending about the major strategy of preventing a war over Spain or winning the war with Spain. That's just plain human nature I guess. So that having a Willard Wirtz or a [Arthur] Goldberg or Bob McNamara sitting there that can bark at you from outside your realm of retaliation makes you think and take into account some things that you otherwise wouldn't.

G: Another criticism was that the cabinet officers themselves didn't attend enough, that it was relegated to lower-level people and therefore did not achieve the degree of inter-agency coordination of the War on Poverty that was desired.

B: I think that was true and there's of course good reason for that, and I have already mentioned it's just a matter of there's twenty-four hours in a cabinet officer's day, like there is everybody else's.

G: You did memo back to Freeman on these meetings. Did he seem interested in what was going on?

B: Oh, yes.

G: Really?

B: Well, Freeman had three stages in this. The first stage, I guess Jim Patton and I and others had really sold him that his job, number one priority for him, was to handle this foreign commodity price and

income program. When he wound up with me over there, the first stage he just kind of didn't even want to hear about it. It was something he didn't participate in hardly at all. Then the next stage [was] when he never knew from one day to the next whether LBJ was going to fire him or not, I mean in his own mind. I kept telling him, I said, "LBJ won't fire you." He maybe knew some things from Los Angeles I hadn't known about, I don't know.

G: Why did he think that, I wonder? Did he ever give any reason?

B: As a fellow Texan you'll understand what I'm talking about, if you took any of your education north of the Mason-Dixon line. I ran into it with a vengeance when I left the University of Arkansas and went to graduate work at the University of Wisconsin. Even rank and file rural mail carriers and labor people in Wisconsin look down their nose at people that come from south of the Mason-Dixon line as being an inferior kind of people in terms of intelligence, good will and all those kinds of things. I think Orville had a guilty conscience. I think he knew that LBJ ought to fire him. I don't mean that literally, but you know what point I'm making. That they really thought LBJ was a crude, ignorant, uneducated kind of a guy, you know how they are, an awful lot of this Eastern Establishment and yankees. I found it true in my life, just as true as it could be, what LBJ said a million times. In addition to race and sex and other forms of discrimination, regional discrimination, you can cut it with a knife. Back in the thirties and forties [it was] even worse than it is now. Even yet, I'm sure that Carter, both Tom

and the President of D.C. University [Teachers College?] wouldn't believe anything I said unless I prove it, just because of my accent. They felt that way about LBJ.

Well, when you feel that way about your boss, you feel insecure, wondering what the hell he's thinking about you. (Laughter) I kept telling Orville, I said, "Hell, LBJ is a damn rural populist, just like I am and like you ought to be, like you said you were when you were governor, and like you've been behaving yourself as secretary of agriculture. He ain't going to fire you." He was constantly on needles and pins.

And every once in a while, you know how LBJ was. He was impulsive sometimes, and he was also explosive on the telephone sometimes. But just one illustration. The job of--well, Ronald Renne who was assistant secretary for foreign affairs in the Department of Agriculture. He resigned to run for governor of Montana, and the job was vacant. Orville recommended Bob Lewis, who was the head of Rural Area Development Service, whatever the name of it was. The next thing Orville heard, they had appointed Orville's longtime Mother Blewer [?], Dorothy Jacobson, in that position, because she was a woman and LBJ was wanting to balance up his numbers a little. Freeman had a running fit, and Dorothy had been his hand-slave since before Orville even thought of running for governor of Minnesota. But he was so enflamed that LBJ would appoint Dorothy to an assistant secretary's job without even talking to him about it. From then on he just sneered at Dorothy at staff

meetings and stuff and never did really let her act as an assistant secretary. I don't know all of the other reasons why, but hell, she was his ghostwriter. She was his political mentor. She had a Ph.D. in political science from Macalester [College] or somewhere, one of the really high level outfits in Minnesota, and as fine a woman as ever lived.

Or, this case of me and Schnittker as under secretary. Freeman recommended me. Orville appointed John because that's who Califano wanted. Those things always nettled him a hell of a lot more than they nettled me.

G: Were there issues of substance as well as personnel?

B: Nothing except the thing that you called guns versus butter, and I called Great Society versus winning in Vietnam. No, Orville walked a straight and narrow. LBJ barked and Orville answered, because he was scared if he didn't there'd be a replacement.

So there wasn't ever any real difficulty. In fact, Orville ruined his reputation by taking orders from Califano, just absolutely killed himself. The farmers still hate Orville. I don't know whether you heard about the time he went out to the Shoreham Hotel and thought he was talking off the record. He told the reporters what LBJ and Califano really thought about the price-quote program. Bill [Blair] put it on the front page of the New York Times the next morning.

G: What was LBJ's reaction to that?

B: Some way or other Califano kept it away from him or kept him calmed down or something. That part didn't blow. It was from Orville out that it blew. He lost every friend he had on farm groups. He put it in Marine language, you know, thinking he was talking off the record, which always looks worse on the front page of the New York Times than if you'd talked like a Ph.D. economist like Willard Cochrane, who's bad enough sometimes. Marine language looks a lot worse when you're saying farmers aren't deserving what they say they want, you know, in four-letter words and stuff.

On strictly OEO the big problems were two, as I think back on it and as I participated in it. One was, there was not enough money for a war left over from Vietnam. I recall my first trip to Washington to take a job, February, 1937. I drove through. I was invited to have dinner at the home of a girl friend I had in Wisconsin whose father was the vice president of Heinz 57. The newspaper at their house that night at suppertime had a headline in big block letters, "FDR asks 4.8 billion for relief." This was of course 1937. That was just a part of FDR's anti-poverty [program]. 4.8 billion in 1965 or 1966 was a whole hell of a lot more than LBJ ever asked for for the War on Poverty. So there just wasn't enough money to do everything, which meant that things equally meritorious really, you just couldn't do them all.

The other was a very strong urban bias in the high-level personnel, both in and out of government, related to the OEO program, resulting from two things as I analyzed it. One, that it was just

there because they knew about cities instead of knowing about the country. In other words, they didn't grow up with it. The other was because that's where the demonstrations and the riots were taking place. It left the impression with an awful lot of relatively cynical, high-level bureaucrats, that the War on Poverty was just simply a pacification program to prevent city riots more than a sincere effort like the Resettlement and Farm Security had been. Therefore it was of course fair game to get as much money out of the bastards as you could get to help people you loved instead of the people they were trying to keep from burning down the city.

G: When the program was originally being planned, I think Michael Harrington raised the same point, that it just wasn't enough money to meet the problem effectively. It seems to me that one of the responses here was that there simply wasn't enough technology to spend more money at the time. Do you think that this is valid? Do you think that you could have spent--

B: No, that was an invalid rationalization.

G: Really? How would more money have been spent if it had been available?

B: Well, for one example, Opportunity Homesteads. Another example--incidentally, have you got a copy of the report of LBJ's Commission on Rural Poverty?

G: Yes.

B: I never will forget Califano snarling at me about how much that'd cost. Well, everything they recommended in there, that didn't get

done. Did you get a copy of my--I guess I must have given you my great big thick--Califano finally got tired of me fussing at him so he got LBJ and Orville to set up a government-wide thing, internal, to take every recommendation of that commission and staff it out. That was his way of getting me cut off.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV]

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Susan T. Baker for
John A. Baker (deceased 3/2/83

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