INTERVIEW XVII

DATE: January 5, 1988

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH A. CALIFANO, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Califano's office, Washington, D.C.

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G: We might begin our discussion of the Selective Service situation by asking you of your involvement with the Selective Service System while you were at the Pentagon. Did you have any experience with it then?

C: We had--and I just don't know whether this started when I was at the Pentagon or later. We wanted--when did we start the STEP [Service Test and Evaluation Program] Program? Was that--or try to start it, before Congress turned us off. Let me just--

G: It was during the fall of--

C: We were on it before. (Long pause) Before I went to the White House, sometime in 1964 I think, we began to think about the army as a possible means of what--I think we called it in the Pentagon Project 100,000--as a possible means of taking draftees or enlistees that weren't well, didn't meet our minimum standards but could be brought up to our minimum standards, bringing them into the army, and giving them some training in English or math, whatever they needed to bring them up to our minimum standards. We thought this would both satisfy our need for men, which was increasing because of the Vietnam War, and at the same provide opportunity for people that otherwise wouldn't

have a chance. And that if they stayed, terrific; if they didn't, at least they'd go back into society much better than they came into the army. Much better equipped to work and at that point, Congress came along at some point when I think we announced this program or we told them about it. We put it in Bob McNamara's posture statement, and objected strenuously, sort of lowering the quality of the army, all that stuff. They also thought that it was an attempt to make the army a part of the Great Society and this stuff ought to be done by the Job Corps or OEO, or somewhere else.

And our problem was complicated, and I wish you--maybe I mentioned this before: [Adam] Yarmolinsky? You should get--Yarmolinsky was supposed to go over and had gone over to work with [Sargent] Shriver in the Office of Economic Opportunity. When we were passing the OEO legislation, I was still in the Pentagon, actually I had succeeded Yarmolinsky. He became a major issue because his father and/or mother were Communists, or had been Communists or, I can't remember. You ought to get the vote on the OEO Act and the debate on the floor in Yarmolinsky and see if there's anything in the files in the White House and we ought to talk about it in another session.

G: Were you involved in that?

C: Yes.

G: Were you?

C: Yes. And it was really rough politics. The North Carolina delegation, [Lawrence?] O'Brien, the President. In any case, because Yarmolinsky had been sitting where I was sitting and because they thought he might have been part of this Project 100,000, it further made it more difficult for us to get it because he was then with the Office of Economic Opportunity.

G: He was ultimately barred from having a role in the poverty program.

C: That was part of the price of passing the legislation which is why I think we ought to get it. Then also look and see if there aren't memos from [Secretary of Defense Robert] McNamara to the President suggesting that we make him [Yarmolinsky] general counsel of the Defense Department or something.

In any case, we ultimately started Project 100,000. Because we had a terrific kick in the need for draftees, tripling I think from a hundred to three hundred thousand. The navy had to start drafting; the marines had to start drafting. It was something I don't think they had done since the Korean War. So we began this program. By the time we began it, I was over in the White House. The first dealings with the President on the draft were that I remember in connection with whether to eliminate the deferment for married men. Let me just take one look at one thing here and see if--

(Interruption)

C: At some point in connection with the need for more men, the terrific problems about fairness and unfairness of the Selective Service System, issues relating to whether we were keeping rich men's children out of the draft by giving them college deferments. Among the things McNamara recommended was that we end the deferment for married men. There was a sense that kids were getting married just to avoid the draft; they'd go to college and then get married right away. And the President assigned Harry McPherson one side of the issue, and he assigned me another side of the issue. Sitting here I can't remember which side either of us had. Although I think I ended up briefing the press on the issue, and therefore backing off from that I believe my side of the issue was that we should continue the deferment for married men. We had a little debate in the Oval Office

and the President sat there behind his desk and Harry and I stood up like high school debaters and argued both sides. Ended the debate and he said, "I'm going to end the deferment for married men and, you"--to me--"Joe, you brief the press on it." And I was kind of surprised. He said, "You've made all the arguments for keeping it so you'll know all the arguments and you'll be the best able to answer those arguments if the press gets into them." And we announced that that was his decision at some point.

G: Was it a question of fairness, his motivation?

C: Yes, I don't think he had any--it was very much fairness. We had chronic problems with the Selective Service System over all the years and actually I think what you ought to have is somebody go down and get the papers on the Selective Service Advisory Committee [National Advisory Commission on Selective Service] when we get to that and their report on the problems. I mean I know we got a letter from a bunch of university presidents complaining about--I think [Director of the Selective Services System General Lewis] Hershey started moving protesters up to number-one draftees at some point down the road. Issues about . . .

G: Was there any consideration that these deferments were sort of a safety valve to limit opposition to the war?

C: I don't remember any overt discussion of that with the President. I know that I eventually concluded, and wrote indeed after I left the White House, that when you look back on that period it wasn't until we started drafting the middle class that we started to get opposition to the war. Now that Johnson was very conscious of because I can remember him saying many times, "Wait until we start drafting. When we start drafting large number of boys then you'll see difficulty."

G: And at this point draftees were not sent to Vietnam, is that right, in the late summer of 1965, or were they?

C: No. You're right. I forgot about that. For some period of time, and I don't remember how long it was, the only people that went to Vietnam were people who volunteered to join the army or the navy or the air force. But in a sense, even that, while it had an element of fairness about it, a lot of people joined the navy because they didn't want to be drafted into the army. A lot of young college graduates became first lieutenants in the army because they didn't want to be drafted as privates. So eventually that, plus the need for men in Vietnam, unwound that policy. I can't remember when.

G: Were the reserves also a haven for youth that did not want to go to Vietnam, do you think?

C: I think they were. But we needed the reserve and the guard, which we tried to merge when I was in the Pentagon, because they were a great source of officer material coming out of college.

G: But that's only if the units were activated, is that right?

C: No, what I'm talking about was the ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] program where you went to college, the military would pay your tuition, then you'd go into the military. You're talking about the program where you went in the reserves for six months--

G: Right.

C: Sure. I'm sure it was. I mean, I'm sure there was a lot of avoidance of the draft by individuals and General Hershey was very difficult to deal with.

G: Describe that; elaborate on that.

C: Well, most of that comes later. I'll talk about it now but I think you've got to get the papers. We're talking about--well, I won't get into it. You'll find later--maybe 1968, I don't remember when--a letter sign by a group of college presidents, mostly the Ivy League colleges complaining about Hershey's policy of drafting protesters. Let me stay off of that for now.

G: Okay.

C: But let me just say, even in 1965 Hershey was difficult to deal with because he thought he was the law unto himself. And if I remember I think there were times when we even thought about folding the Selective Service into the Pentagon. We couldn't do that. I mean the country wouldn't stand for a system to bring people into the military really run by the military.

G: Rather than a system of civilian draft boards.

C: Yes, as distinguished from a system of civilian draft boards. Hershey I'm sure encouraged the passage of the legislation to make it a crime to burn your draft card. That incidentally turned out to be--again go to 1968 but even early in 1965, people would hold up a draft card and burn it but it wasn't a draft card. It would be a Xerox copy of a draft card because they didn't want to get in trouble. But Hershey was--he was somebody you couldn't talk to. He was terribly out of touch. He'd become not quite J. Edgar Hoover, not even close to J. Edgar Hoover but he had become a presence in his own right and a symbol. He'd been in the job too long, and one had a real sense of--all dealings with him were at arms-length. There was no way to have, if you will, a candid discussion with him. He had absolutely ironclad views: if they protest, draft them. [It's a] crime if they demonstrate before a draft board.

G: Did the President consider replacing him?

C: No, not to my knowledge. And indeed the President didn't even want to talk to him. I think the only time the President really talked to him was when I--and I do have pictures of that in here, the President and myself and Hershey in my office. This is in 1968, trying to get Hershey to stop drafting kids who protested. But there was no way to talk to Hershey about the difficulties, for example, of trying to conduct a Vietnam War in a slowly escalating scale, with measured force, in a democratic society in which you were drafting kids from the middle class, and how all of this had to be very carefully orchestrated. There was none of that. His view was--and God knows, he may have been correct--his view was very simple, very patriotic, very World War II, very World War I.

G: Mobilization.

C: Mobilization, you go, and very simple, straightforward, apple pie kind of patriotism. And he had a lot of allies on the Hill.

G: Any additional thoughts on the President's views on student deferments or married deferments other than what you said before?

C: No. Actually. Put that on hold for just a second.

(Interruption)

C: The problem is where he's got--I know we were physically in that office. Maybe my memory--God knows, your memory can play terrible tricks on you. There are lots of calls with McPherson and me but I don't--

G: Maybe I can find the briefing.

C: Go ahead.

G: Anything else on LBJ's personal attitudes regarding student deferment or married deferment?

C: No, just that he really knew what an incredible hornet's nest it was. He knew the Selective Service System was unfair and we kept trying to deal with it and ultimately ending up with that commission. And he knew there was trouble every inch of the way. It was just one no-win decision after another no-win decision. If he didn't defer them, if he did defer them, every time you moved you make people mad as hell, and how do you make the system fair. And I think he was sensitive to all that stuff.

G: There were discussions regarding a national lottery. [William] Gorham in the Defense Department had done an analysis.

C: We looked at that. My recollection is that Hershey was not for it. I can't remember. I do remember thinking that the Selective Service really didn't want it because they didn't want to lose all those jobs on those Selective Service boards and all of that stuff. I think there were points at which we thought--at least I thought--a national lottery might make some sense. I just can't pull out of my memory why we didn't go forward with it, why we didn't do anything about it. We may just not have wanted to tinker so enormously with the draft and re-open--anything significant that we did I think required legislation. And I do remember a great reluctance to dump that issue into the Congress as the war got hotter and hotter and more and more controversial and not knowing what we'd end up with up there.

G: A lot of these issues revolved around public opinion, public support of the war and you had this strategy versus the one of mobilization, rallying the country behind the war effort, involving the country on a larger scale through a lottery.

C: You have to remember something: the President's head was always concerned about the right. It wasn't just the [Barry] Goldwater election; it was a tremendous movement in this country. I mean the speed with which Mendel Rivers changed the Selective Service law and the overwhelming votes to the fact that even the student loan program to this day, certainly while I was secretary of HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], has a provision about people protesting. He was worried about the right getting the upper hand, and he didn't want the right to get the upper hand. While he kept looking over his right shoulder, the left came up on him and came up on him hard. We were trying to wave the flag without getting the whole country aroused. We were genuinely and he was genuinely worried about a massive right-wing, bomb-them-into-the-stone-age reaction in the United States that would force him to do more than should be done there.

G: Was there also a fear that this sort of massive mobilization would encourage the enemy to do likewise? Was this on his mind at all?

C: Yes, I'm sure it was. To bring the Chinese into the Vietnam War, will they come into the Vietnam War, that was constantly a concern to the President.

But just go back and think; Kennedy is assassinated. There's such strong right-wing feeling in the country that there's a sense that Dallas was a city of great hatred and what have you. The fact that [Lee Harvey] Oswald was, if anything, a left-wing ideologue or a Cuban agent, whatever, was really sort of lost. So you have people spitting on Adlai Stevenson for being too left-wing, great resentment among the white population about the blacks and that being considered a left-wing thing. And in that, Goldwater being the nominee of the Republican Party and running on a [platform of], "We're not strong enough on defense; we're not tough enough on the Communists."

There was a major hearing in 1961 in which the [Senate] Armed Services Committee--it lasted eight months. [It] began with [an] investigation of McNamara and really Kennedy for censoring military speeches to make sure they complied with the State Department policy. Against all of that and coming out of the [Joseph] McCarthy era, which the President was very conscious of, and [Richard] Nixon who was still playing very much on the right, he was very worried that if he waved the flag too much, we would have the whole country in a fury and he would be forced to do things he didn't want to do. Coupled with that, you had this incredible--in retrospect it may be incredible but--this view that there was a way to sort of turn the screw a half a turn when you wanted to and send a message to Hanoi. You've got to remember this is an era in which we had [measures of] weapons captured, weapons lost, body counts. How do you measure a guerilla war, and all of these whiz kids--of which I was one--[were] trying to figure out how do we measure a guerrilla war, and this and that, and believing that we could measure that stuff, believing that you could turn the screw a half a turn and Ho Chi Minh would understand and what have you. So you had these two things going at the same time. And the Democrats--Kennedy had just blown the Bay of Pigs. It was a disaster. And Cuba had gone communist, if you will. So against all of this, the concern was constant, if anything in hindsight, [it was] focused too much on the right and not enough on the left.

G: You had a shortage of doctors as well and a draft of doctors. Was this a controversial area for you?

C: We tried all kinds of things with the doctors. We drafted them. The President had the AMA [American Medical Association] in to get them to start a program to send doctors

over to Vietnam for six months. Actually we drafted the doctors we needed in the military, but we also had the problem of the Vietnamese forces and the Vietnamese civilians and the President tried to get a program. I remember well the AMA came in. The AMA was coming in to talk about Medicare. We'd passed Medicare. The regulations were going out. There was concern about whether or not the doctors would work in the Medicare program, and they were coming in to bitch about Medicare. It was all a done deal; we had passed regulations on it and were about to go out. They arrived and the President started, just immediately started the meeting by saying he wanted them to put a program together. Doctors would go to Vietnam for six months and help the Vietnamese and what have you. And the doctors agreed to that. They had the press in, and the press asked whether or not--the press was all interested in Medicare. The President announced this Vietnam thing and the first question of the press was, "Are the doctors going to go in the Medicare program?" And the President said, "Well, that's the law of the land. Of course they will, won't they?" He turned to this guy, and what could the head of the AMA say but that they would. We had periodical complaints but I don't think--the doctors didn't present any serious political problem to us because in the reality your talking about a very small number of people, and you're talking about a situation in which being an M.D. is a license to live pretty well in this country. Therefore, they could complain, but the average American thought it was pretty good, and for them to just have to spend a couple of years over there, it wasn't so bad.

G: There was also an effort on the part of the administration to use civilians in positions that had been formerly held by military in order to free up more military for combat-related

jobs. Any reflections on that? This had been something that LBJ had stressed when he was in the Senate.

C: We tried to do that when I was in the Pentagon and continued when I was in the White House. And McNamara was very much for that. The military resisted that mightily on the ground that everybody in the army ought to be able to shoot a rifle and go into combat and that's the only way you could run an army. By and large we thought that was bullshit. I think we even had numerical goals for X thousand number of jobs which could be filled by civilians or by women or what have you. It seems really arcane against the world we live in today in which we've got women at West Point and the academies and what have you. But we tried to do everything in every way we could to reduce the number of people we had to draft. That was really the object. We were incredibly sensitive about the resistance to the draft and what that meant in terms of the reaction of the people in terms of supporting the war. And one of the techniques was to get quote "fighting men" unquote out of as many desk jobs as possible, just get them out so we'd need to draft fewer people.

G: One of the earliest draft-related protests was at the University of Michigan with student interference with the draft procedures there in December 1965. Do you recall that and White House reaction to it?

C: The students at the University of Michigan, it was the first brush with Hershey which we really didn't do much about. Hershey proceeded to immediately reclassify the students that demonstrated or sat in at the draft board. And we got complaints. I notice here a complaint from Don Edwards, but we got other complaints from liberals about that. At that point in time at least the President had no stomach for--the President's gut was with

Hershey. I mean he was angry; he was pissed off. So that while I was concerned, Lee White was concerned, Larry Levinson was concerned about how these students were treated, there really wasn't much we could do about it. It wasn't until Hershey really became very blatant and the resistance became very strong, that's when--if you get those papers in 1968, or whenever, of the university presidents complaining about draft protesters being moved to the front of the line--*that* we were able to do a little bit with Hershey.

(Interruption)

G: Now the effort to merge the reserves into the National Guard. Describe, if you will, this mischief?

C: In April of 1964 or early 1964 at some point, I was working for McNamara and he called me into the office. He and I and [Cyrus] Vance were the only people there. It was over lunch. And he said, "Goldwater is going to run against Johnson. President Johnson is going to win by an enormous landslide and we're going to have an opportunity to really do a lot of things, sort of a second push, that we never had the chance to do. We're going to be ready to do them the day after the election." And that's started something I called the hundred initiatives. We had a whole host of things, like we wanted to get the congressional members out of the reserve units and the guard, making it illegal for a member of Congress--

G: Why did you want to do that?

C: Because we thought that that helped create, you know, strength for the military services and Congress. We also thought it was inappropriate under the separation of powers.

G: It was an informal lobbying mechanism, is that--?

C: Well, it was both an informal lobbying mechanism and it was a--if you had Barry Goldwater flying around in air force airplanes and Jack Marsh [who] is now the secretary of the army as we sit here today was a member of the Army National Guard, was in Congress then. In any case, there are a lot of things, base closures. There was the billion-dollar base closure program we presented to the President. I mean there are a host of things we were doing. And one of the things was merging the reserve and the National Guard. There was no logical, rational reason to have both. And we were going to put them all in the National Guard, have an air international guard and an army national guard. And also by and large there was a great sense that the reserves, as much as we tried to make them ready, they weren't ready. They really weren't trained. It was a big boondoggle for many, many people. Maybe if we had them all in one, we could find a way to train them more efficiently. We proposed it. We needed legislation to get it and all hell broke loose on the Hill and we were just unable to get that legislation. I have no sense of the President getting deeply involved in that fight. I mean that's one he left for McNamara to fight. I'm sure we let the White House know it was coming, and I think we unfolded it probably in the [Defense] Secretary's posture statement. As time went on, it was clear we were unable to do it.

G: Where was the opposition?

C: The reserve units, the National Guard units who went to their members of Congress. They were afraid they'd lose their status, they'd lose their jobs, they'd lose their two weeks away from the wife, whatever. And we lost resoundingly. And when we did lose, finally I notice at the end--and I remember--McNamara then did as much as he could disbanding

reserve units as unnecessary and what have you. It was a very bitter fight with Congress, with the members of the Armed Services Committee in Congress.

G: This was [Congressman F. Edward] Hébert and Mendel Rivers, people like--

C: Hébert, Mendel Rivers. But [John] Stennis was very much opposed to it, [and] [Strom] Thurmond. It was hard to find people that were for it. And the military services weren't really for it and they didn't support us.

G: Was most of the opposition in the South?

C: No, I don't think so. I think it was probably strongest there, but only because there were more reserve units and more military bases. I mean [Richard] Russell and Mendel Rivers and the whole seniority system had, for a quarter of a century, plus the climate, made the South a place where you're going to have far more military installations than in the North, and many more months to train people outside, all that kind of stuff.

Was it a fight worth fighting? Sure, I suppose in the wake of that kind of a landslide you wanted to do as much as you could to make the Pentagon, make our military more efficient, less expensive, any dollar you save. In terms of the politics, as I said my recollection is this is when we get out of the Pentagon, the President stayed out of it.

G: How was McNamara regarded on the Hill during this period? He seems to have been very willing to take up controversial issues.

C: I think he was regarded as incredibly smart and not political and not understanding of the political problems of the people on the Hill. I do not think he was liked by, if you will, the establishment of the Armed Services Committees, the Mendel Rivers and Stennises and Russells and what have you. But anyone that tried to do what he tried to do wouldn't

be liked. You have to remember, he came in and just turned the Pentagon upside down. There was no Defense Supply Agency, no Defense Intelligence Agency, no Defense Communications Agency. Christ, the army didn't have any helicopters really. The army did not want an airborne--what we called the air infantry, something like that--in the army. Special forces, none of that existed. Done overnight. So all of that, that kind of churning. Even though groundwork had been laid for it and had been laid for it by Senator [Henry "Scoop"] Jackson, who did a series of hearings and reports on preparedness, and it had been set up by Tom Gates. And Jackson's hearings resulted in some changes in the National Security Act. Tom Gates, McNamara's predecessor, was moving very much in the direction that Bob ultimately moved. He just wasn't as strong or as tough or as fast. And I don't think anyone had ever quite seen a secretary of defense like that. So in that sense he just wasn't part of the old congressional military buddy system.

G: Was this an effort to support that STEP program?

C: No, this was more a reaction of McNamara to the refusal of the Congress to merge the National Guard.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 2

C: It was hell to--right after the Senate and House Armed Services conferees had barred the merger. And McNamara said that if he couldn't merge them and make them stronger and have a greater ready reserve, [have] more people who would really be ready if you called them up on twenty-four-hours' notice, then he had to get more people into the military. And therefore they were creating a problem in which he either had to get the reservists who went in for six months' training and then went out to stay in the military, or we'd end

up drafting more people. And it was his attempt to really take a shot at them and lay on the Congress the blame for having to do this, and ultimately, lay on Congress the blame for having to draft more people to meet the goal of an increase in strength of three hundred forty thousand. It was not part of the STEP program. I think the phrase "recruited from the streets" was the reporters' phrase; [it was] not so much meant to be recruited from the ghettos or urban streets or something as it seems to say.

G: Anything on Peace Corps and VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America] deferments?

C: No. There was a passing attempt to do that. We never supported it. The Peace Corps was still a very popular program. VISTA was a very controversial program because inevitably the VISTA volunteers became involved in local politics, and the organizations they built to help educate people or get them housing, what have you, inevitably got people engaged in realizing that if they wanted to get housing or the schools, they have to get control of the school boards or housing administration, that meant getting into government or politics. So there was no way Congress would ever have done anything about VISTA volunteers. The Peace Corps was still a popular program, popular in the sense it was popular on the Hill as well as in the country at large, but there was no way Congress would ever have approved Peace Corps service as a substitute for military service. When we get into later years there is also some point at which McNamara proposes a national service training program or something--a national service program--in a speech somewhere that the President reacted very negatively to. You ought to get that.

G: Really?

C: Yes.

G: Why did he react negatively to it?

C: See if you can get McNamara's speech. I think McNamara proposed it in Canada or something, I don't know. But, any case--

G: At this point in late 1965, early 1966, did you have any reaction from civil rights groups, civil rights leaders, with regard to the inequities in the Selective Service System, particularly regarding blacks?

C: No, not that I remember. The complaints about civil service, about Selective Service and our political attention was really focused on the middle class, the college issues, except insofar as we saw them. I mean we saw and were concerned about the element of unfairness--if you weren't going to college and I was then I that I got deferred. But I think by and large there weren't the number of blacks in the military then as there are today, and minorities. And two, it wasn't a bad job for them. I think that this was one avenue of upward mobility, if you will. So I had no sense of that at that point in time.

What we were beginning to see was the earliest phases of a bunch of college kids protesting before school boards, protesting before draft boards, and these kids were deferred. I mean, they had the best deal of all. I don't think there were many protesters among the high school graduates that got drafted and went right into the service. So I have at least--at least in my recollection is no civil rights [protests].

Thursday, August 26, look at that--"Press briefing draft four o'clock." That's the day I did that and maybe there's a transcript.

G: What's the date again?

C: Thursday, August 26, 4 p.m. I should have looked at that.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XVII

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Joseph A. Califano

Interviewed by: Paige Mulhollan, Joe B. Frantz and Michael L. Gillette

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Joseph A. Califano Jr. — Donor

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