INTERVIEW XXXII

DATE: July 12, 1988

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH A. CALIFANO, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: --that series of visits [you made] to university campuses in 1966. This was really a departure from the more formal task force approach. Where did the idea for this initiative originate?

C: You know, I can't remember. I'd like to say I think it originated with me, and I think it did. I think the idea of expanding it to cover the whole country, some of that came from the President, because he was constantly saying, "You go see people at Harvard and you go see people at Berkeley, but you don't see anybody in between. In the middle of the country there are a lot of bright people." Or he'd say, "And you have to learn about the problems there," and I did learn. I mean, water is something I never understood, I don't think, until I went to both the University of Texas and New Orleans. I went somewhere in New Orleans, I think--but I think it was just the sense that we had [that] the early Great Society task forces had really kind of put together everything that was left over from the New Deal. We had exhausted what we had in the government, and we really needed new ideas.

G: How did you decide who would go with you?

C: Well, I basically took people that I thought would be involved in the program or, I mean, I guess it was a combination of two things. It was both people that, like [Harry] McPherson, I'm sure I took on the trips, [Douglass] Cater, Jim Gaither. Maybe, I don't know, [Lawrence] Levinson, I can't remember. I took people that were interested in the substantive programs, and all kind of people that I also thought would make a good impression on the university audience in terms of LBJ. Cater had written a book on the fourth branch of government about the press in Washington, and Harry was obviously a very bright and personable guy. For some of them I think I did, I mean I may not have listed them in this memo, but I think I probably took Cater, I mean Gaither, or Levinson or [Fred] Bohen to any one of these, but, again, they also would have made good impressions in the academic community.

G: Was there a problem getting away from the White House for this?

C: Well, he gave us the airplane. He always wanted me back the same night so I don't think--I doubt if we ever stayed overnight. I mean even going to California, we went, I remember going to California and we went to Los Angeles. I don't know which year we did that or what trip that was in.

G: I think it was 1966.

C: Well, these were the people, these were just the universities from which people came. Yes, the University of California. We went to Los Angeles--this is digression from this but--and we were at Chasen's [restaurant in Beverly Hills] where we met and Warren Christopher sort of put the group together, and Christopher was under consideration to be the deputy attorney general, and while I was at Chasen's having dinner with these guys--I

flew out and I was to fly back immediately that night. It was, incidentally, not the only time the President sent me to California to have dinner with somebody and turn right around.

G: Is that right? There were . . . ?

C: To see, I don't know, [Lew] Wasserman or [Arthur] Krim or. . . . I remember going out there a couple of times, literally having dinner and just coming right back to the airport, lying down on that Jetstar and coming back to the White House, taking a shower and going to work. But he [Johnson] called me at Chasen's and he said that he wanted me to bring Christopher back, that he was going to announce him as deputy attorney general the next day. And so I came out of the dinner and I said to Christopher, I wanted him to come back to the White House for [with?] me. He obviously knew Ramsey [Clark] was considering him and Ramsey talked to him. I said the President wanted to talk to him. So I continued at the dinner while Christopher went and got, you know, a shirt and a suit and what have you. And we left there and got on the plane and went back, and got back to Washington. I don't know where he shaved or dressed, probably in the White House, but [I] brought him in to the President and within a half an hour the President had the press in and announced him as the deputy attorney general.

Well, that's a digression from this stuff. In any case, picking the universities were, with some exceptions--I left the selection of the people we would see up to the people who would run the dinner. For example, we had Mac [McGeorge] Bundy do one in New York City. I'd have him, but tell him I wanted a broad base [of] people: people on cities, foreign affairs, what have you. And the same thing in Chicago. Same thing in Boston.

G: Was there any formal process then of note-taking?

C: Yes. I took some notes. Somebody took notes at these meetings. That's one of the reasons why I brought Gaither or Levinson or Bohen to all of them, but I also followed-up with a letter to everybody right after the meeting and asked them to send in ideas, and they did, and we did get ideas, I mean I was . . .

G: Was New York the first one, do you recall?

C: I don't recall the order; I'd have to go back and look at my own notes and my datebook.

G: What do you remember about the New York dinner?

C: Oh, you know, I have no real recollections of any of these. I mean, I do remember at the University of Chicago, if I can find them, an economist from Northwest[ern University], Robert Eisner, laying into us on the war, but in terms of--you know, I would go around the table. . . . Ah, here's New York.

G: You were saying you'd go around the table?

C: Well, Vietnam came up. Since these were academics, it would come up at every meeting, in greater or lesser degree. They were not happy with it. We were now drafting a lot of people and they were feeling it on the campus.

G: Were these discussions designed to include foreign as well as domestic policy or were they . . . ?

C: They were designed to include anything, any new ideas across the board. Most of the ideas came in the area of domestic policy, and what they really provided--I mean there were two things that came out of this. One, we'd get, we'd pick up in several places something, like children and problems with children, and we created a task force on children. I think we had a Doctor Walsh [?] chair at some point down the road, so they'd provide that kind of thing for us but, sometimes we'd pick up some sort of scientific

breakthroughs where we're on that verge or very edge or near something or what have you and we also pick up other things. I mean, I remember it enhanced, I said water, but it really enhanced my awareness of air and water pollution and I think it's fair to say that these meetings contributed to our attempts in 1967 and 1968 to really strengthen air quality standards, water quality standards and all that stuff, something I wasn't as conscious of. It also produced, you know, a lot of the chronic dreams of the Democratic liberals, national health insurance and those kinds of things that. . . . And it did, there was no question but that at every meeting somebody would talk about Vietnam. I see . . .

G: Bill Leuchtenburg.

C: Bill Leuchtenburg's tough note about the President, but even in that context, and I would note that he starts his letter, "That was an excellent meeting in New York and I enjoyed meeting you and seeing Doug Cater again. I thought you ran the meeting well, in a pleasant, quiet, but effective, manner, pulling together material for memorandum for you." Of course, he says, "I'm not going to draft any memoranda because of the war," and because his despair, which I would, you know, sure we got that, but I mean we kept going with the Great Society.

You know, we also get a letter like the one I notice I've got here from Chuck Daly, in which he says--

(Interruption)

You know, Daly says, "(Inaudible) rather limited discussion clears the ground," but then he says, "If the discussion does get on to Vietnam [War], don't (inaudible) display pain or amusement at the strength of feeling, and don't, not even to economists, dismiss the war by saying we can afford it and domestic programs too." He says, "Change the draft

policy." But at the end of his letter, "He's on a lofty level. . . . Don't despair. You're doing all right and a few (inaudible) administrations with this spirit will bring spring to much of the wasteland." I mean, you know. By and large those meetings were very valuable.

G: I noticed several specific suggestions in Daly's letter. One, to fire Sylvester.

C: Yes, Arthur Sylvester.

G: Which speaks to the credibility gap, I guess.

C: Well, I mean, Sylvester was hanging out there. You have to understand, Sylvester started with credibility in the Cuban Missile Crisis when the press made a big issue over [John] Kennedy's saying he had a cold and what have you. And Sylvester said that the government had the right to lie, and all hell broke loose. I mean, all hell broke loose. He then was a spokesman again and again on Vietnam, and he found it very painful. I don't blame Sylvester. He was very much the point man in a game in which [Robert] McNamara was holding everything very close to his chest as was the President. So Arthur would hang out there with just what he needed to know. He ultimately did go.

G: Daly's letter also suggests an emphasis on water pollution, air pollution.

C: That wasn't the only one. You see, one of the things that would come out of these meetings was the same point would come up in two or three places and we'd get a sense that maybe this is really--you know presumably whatever these guys were, they weren't going to stand for their politics, but they were thinking out there on the cutting edge, which would give us some sense of where public policy should be headed.

G: Who organized the meeting in Boston, or Cambridge?

C: Let me just look here and I'll. . . . Here it is; here's Los Angeles. I did bring Gaither and others to these meetings. North Carolina. God, we went to quite a few, didn't we.

G: Now some of those were in 1967.

C: Here's Cambridge. We only got half the list from Harvard. Mac Bundy organized the one in New York. We've only got part of the Harvard list; it begins with [Richard] Neustadt.

G: Let's see. I don't.

C: Let me just see if there is an earlier list I sent him of who was there from various universities. I might be able to tell you. Dick Neustadt.

G: And Chicago?

C: I don't know. I looked through that list; I can't remember. Let me just look in the back. It could have been. I only have a partial list of Chicago; it begins with the "L"s.

G: Really. Well here, here's--

C: It's out of order. No, they're just the university people. I was trying to get everybody that was at the dinner. I was about to say Ben Heineman. It could easily have been Ben Heineman.

G: Was there a balance between academicians and business people?

C: No. It was focused on academicians, but in the areas where we really had somebody bright or something, like I think I had the Bishop of New Orleans there, who is supposed to be a very bright, progressive guy, that had lived with a lot [of] desegregation problems and I had people like that. Or Ben Heineman, but it was focused on academics.

G: Did you note some significant regional differences in your trips from one section of the country to . . .

C: Yes. It was a much greater interest in natural resources. You get into an urban area, you notice in Daly's letter he said, "I wish Lady Bird would get more involved in urban beautification." You know, the east was more urban, Chicago. South was still more concerned about racial issues. Water, natural resources. But in issues like the economy and the war and the need to help poor people, that was universal.

G: The first trip I guess was in May 1966 and you made another round in 1967. Was there a significant change in their views of the administration in that interim?

C: Greater disenchantment with the war. The war became a bigger issue, but otherwise no.

G: Did you report informally on these sessions to the President?

C: Yes, I would talk to him about them. He really, he was interested mostly in making sure I had a broad spectrum of places to go to, and he really--to be honest with you, I don't think he cared much what was said. He was interested in the ideas and where we go next and that kind of stuff. You were asking whether I told him about the war. I'm sure I did, but I'm sure I didn't stress it. I mean, he knew. We knew the academic community and the university community was opposed to the war.

G: Would he have seen Leuchtenburg's letter to you, for example?

C: Not unless I sent it to him.

G: Well, I guess, would you have sent it to him?

C: Probably not. Too nasty. Why give him that grief.

G: Resources, water pollution, any other specific ideas that came out of these meetings that . . . ?

C: I'm sure. I'd really have to go look at the books, but no--absolutely. I'd say a significant proportion of our legislative programs came out of these meetings.

G: You've mentioned one fellow--I think it was Julian Levy--that you were impressed with and suggested as a possible candidate for appointment. Were there any other people that stood out in these meetings that you subsequently brought into the administration?

C: I have to just go through the list. Whether we brought them into the administration or not, there were several of them, like [?] Dunlop, Jim Wilson, [?] Samuelson, [?] Solo, that we used. We'd call or talk to Jerre Williams at Texas on one or another things.

G: Anything else on these meetings that you feel is significant?

C: No. I think it's significant that the President was willing to have us go in a systematic way to the brightest people in the country and try to get ideas from them as to what he should be worried about where programs should be going. I'd contrast a lot of other administrations.

G: Was there any comparable initiative in targeting other sectors of the population besides academics?

C: I don't think so. In terms of a broad net, when we get close to an idea, like the Department of Transportation, we would talk to everybody in the industry, as we played it out and put it together specifically. But when we started going with our Department of Commerce and Labor, we talked to business leaders and labor leaders.

G: You also mentioned in the memo that you were talking with a lot of the cabinet officers and people in the agencies and getting their ideas for new programs as well.

C: I'd go out with a memo to the agencies and--in the spring or whenever--and ask them for ideas. Sometimes we'd get a few good ideas back. God help the typist on this tape. [Califano sneezing and blowing his nose.]

G: She'll appreciate your concern at least.

C: There were some specific ones I'd call like a John Gardner and basically through Gaither and [Matthew] Nimetz and Levinson and Bohen. We'd go out to that level of assistant secretaries and people that they thought were bright that had ideas and pick up whatever they had. And we got some good ideas, but I found that in relatively short order we got, that people in the government were much less imaginative. I don't think they were inherently less imaginative; I think they'd be so much more aware and unfortunately beaten down by what they'd think would be the insuperable obstacles. You could go to a bunch of these guys as I always used to do and say, "Forget about the politics. Forget about whether we can do it or not. Forget about all that stuff. If you could wave a wand and change the world, tell me what you'd do. What would you change? What would you have?" And you'd get a lot of that from them. Go out to the government and tell them the same thing and they became incapable of doing that.

G: Did you also seek input from the legislative branch?

C: It's interesting. Not in a systematic way, in part because we were driving the train. They weren't. The legislative branch had [a] very small staff. We ought to indicate that somewhere; get something on that. I mean, their staffs were small. They had no capacity compared to ours, and what good ideas they had introduced--if we review the legislation that was introduced, yes, because we had to comment on it, so we knew. But some people were--Phil Hart really is the guy that turned me on to truth-in-packaging and somewhere in my papers there ought to be handwritten note from Hart thanking me for sticking that in the President's message. I mean, he came by to see me and talk to me. But it's interesting, this creature of the legislative branch. We did not systematically go after them.

G: This whole process does show a certain vitality in an administration that is looking at a certain . . .

C: Well, there was no--I mean, we never lost our belief that we could change the world, and we were constantly looking for new ideas, and, my God, I was working for a president that ate them like Chiclet[s], you know, like chocolate chip cookies. He just . . .

(Interruption)

G: Anything else on this sequence of events here, that we haven't discussed? No crises ever came up while you were out there, did they? Do you recall?

C: The only thing I recall, I know on one of my trips--I don't know, I think it was one of these trips--was when the President. . . . Maybe I've already written this. I know we were in a fight on the House over a piece of legislation--I can't remember what the piece of legislation was--and the President decided that he wanted words to. . . . And the fight was going on the day before I left, and at some point late that day after I left, the President decided that he wanted [Willard] Wirtz to write a letter to Carl Albert about the legislation, for Albert to use on the floor. And Larry Levinson calls Willard Wirtz to ask him to do the letter and said, "The President wants this," what have you. And Wirtz was insulted at not being called by the President or by me, but being called by Larry Levinson. So I came back the next morning and when I, I mean, you know, typically [I came in at] eight o'clock, [and the President asked] "Where's the letter?" I didn't even know what letter the President was talking about and I found out it was a letter and Larry said he had called Wirtz. I called Wirtz. Wirtz said to me [that] he didn't know if the President really wanted the letter; he hadn't sent it over. I said, "Jesus Christ, get it over there." And [the] President called me again. When he came over to his office about ten, I went down to his

office and told him that it was being done and the President blew up and hit that button, called Wirtz and said, "I don't care if the charwoman calls you from the White House. If I'm going to bed and I say to the charwoman, 'call Wirtz and tell him to write a letter to Carl Albert,' you write that goddamn letter right away." And, I do remember that. We ought to try and reconstruct that. But, I don't, my greatest, not a crises, but . . . and when you talk to Jack Connor you should . . .

The day I went to get--maybe I've told you this. I got the award for being one of the Ten Outstanding Young Men of 1966, and it was quite a crew of men, incidentally. It included Ralph Nader, and it included Morris Dees who became the fundraiser for [George] McGovern and several other guys. In any case, Johnson was very proud; I mean he was going around the White House saying, "No Kennedy aide ever got this. No other aide for any other president had somebody," you know. And I left to go to Sea Island on Friday, and I got there. It was a big deal, I mean, it's really, the Jaycees, you know, ten thousand strong, and they do a movie of your life and put it on a big screen as a kind of an introduction to you. That Saturday morning, Jack Connor goes by to see the President, and the President tells him how proud he is, you know, what a great a achievement this is. And then Connor said, "I'm going to resign. I'm leaving." And the President hits the hot button for my line. Of course, there is nobody there, and he puts the receiver down and he turns to Connor. He said, "That son of a bitch, he's never here anymore. It's all going to his head." In any case, he runs me down, okay? The President ran me down and devastated my day. I mean, the whole day was spent "who we gonna?" on who's going to replace Connor, talk to Jack, and what about this, and what about what have you, and I guess ultimately we came up with C. R. Smith, wasn't that it?

G: Sandy [Alexander] Trowbridge and then C. R.

C: We came up with Sandy Trowbridge and with respect to Trowbridge, Trowbridge had had a mild heart attack. This is all happening this weekend, and, I mean, I lost the whole day. I did not participate; I did not get off the phone until dinner that night and then I had to come back early Sunday. Trowbridge had [had] a mild heart attack and the President, as he reached the point of deciding he'd appoint Sandy Trowbridge to be the secretary of commerce, he also decided that he wanted a letter from his doctor saying that it was fine, [it] wouldn't endanger his heart in any way. And I called Trowbridge, and Trowbridge could understand that, and then the President kept calling me and he said, "Now, you know, you dictate that letter to his doctor." So I talked to Sandy and I said the kind of letter we needed. I mean, I just remember, I never, I never talked directly to Trowbridge's doctor, as I recall, although I think he thinks I did. I don't think I did and we got some kind of a letter somewhere. I don't know where it would be in those files but. . . . And he went with Trowbridge. Trowbridge to this day remembers that. I mean, he remembers I think, you know, because I just saw him on a plane the other day and he remembers either reading something to me or . . .

G: Well, it's a testimony, too, to your medical expertise that he's still around after. . . .

(Laughter)

C: Well, C. R. Smith came in one day and he said--who is the guy that was deputy secretary of commerce, Howard Samuels? C. R. Smith became secretary of commerce and he came by the office one day. He sticks his head in and he says, "I'm going to see the President." And he said, "I know he's going to call you when I see him, so I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell him." He said, "You know that Commerce Department

building. It's a great big building. It's a square block." I said, "Yes, C. R." He said, "Well, it isn't big enough for me and Samuels." And he said, "So I want you to start looking for another job [for Samuels]." And he went down to see the President and Christ, in ten minutes the President was on the hot line to me saying, "What are we going to do with Samuels?" And we actually got Samuels--we gave him a plan. We had one of our task forces develop the great plan for the Small Business Administration. We gave him the plan. We gave him the job and he fucked it up. But, in any case that's all off the . . .

G: Why did Trowbridge leave? Do you recall?

C: Didn't he get a good job offer?

G: I think so.

C: I don't think there was any. . . I mean, I think he was . . . thoroughly happy. You know what happens when you make somebody who is an undersecretary the secretary, if you're strong as we were, and you have a strong White House staff, we get even more control over the department. But Commerce was not a major player for us, because economic policy by that point was clearly, you know, it was [Gardner] Ackley and [Henry] Fowler and McNamara, and myself, [Charles] Schultze.

The first day Jim Gaither came to work for me was the night at which we settled, I think it was the steel strike. It may have been another strike. The President was going on television at nine o'clock. He decided to announce it right between the broadcasts, so all I lost was a minute, and we were in his office. It's after eight at night. Gaither is still waiting for me. Hasn't seen me all day, I've been so busy, and the President hits my hot button, forgetting I'm right there. [He was] actually calling one of my secretaries. We

can't find anybody that can type the teleprompter and he wants the statement on teleprompter, so he hits this button. Gaither is sitting there. There's nobody there. My secretaries weren't there at the time. So he [Gaither] picks up the line and he says, "Yes, sir, Jim Gaither." And this voice says, "Do you know how to type a teleprompter?" And Gaither says, "No, sir." He says, "Goddamn it," and slammed the receiver down. That was Gaither's introduction to Johnson. As a result of that, incidentally, we had to train I don't know how many secretaries in how to type on a teleprompter so there would always be somebody around to do it.

G: Did you find someone in that situation?

C: We did. I don't know whether we did . . . I guess we did that night. Yes. And he announced it, and we announced the settlement.

G: The hotline was different in the way it rang. Is that right?

C: The hotline never stopped ringing. You know that, don't you? You know how a phone rings on and off? The POTUS [President of the United States] line just rang.

G: Until you answered it.

C: It didn't ring on and off. It just rang and rang and rang. It didn't go ring--you know, if you dial something (Califano demonstrates how the phone rang using telephone), it stops and rings again. The POTUS line just rang. It also couldn't be set. When you couldn't--you didn't have the power on your phone where it was ringing as distinguished from the secretaries' phones out there. It rang loud.

G: Oh, lower the volume.

C: I mean, you couldn't turn it down. So you knew when he called. It was also, it had a red button on it. (Laughter)

G: That's great.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXXII

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**Addendum to the Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of**

Joseph A. Califano

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

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Joseph A. Califano Jr. — Donor

5-28-19 — Dated

Susan K. Donius

Director for Presidential Libraries

July 17, 2019 — Dated