

INTERVIEW XLVII

DATE: June 13, 1989

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH A. CALIFANO, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

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C: At some point I recommended and put in a presidential statement, either a signing statement or speech, that we were expanding the number of counties or areas in which the food stamp program would operate, which we did with a little flourish. It turned out to be an expensive proposition, maybe a hundred million dollars or something. I can't remember the exact amount. When the bill came due for that, either by Charlie Schultze saying, "This is what it's going to cost and you have to stick it in the budget," or [Orville] Freeman saying, "This has got to go in this year's budget," the President was distressed, shall we say, and said, "I didn't realize it would cost this much," or, "I didn't realize it would be this expensive." And then he put a rule in that any time I stuck anything in a message or speech, or anybody did, we had to put a price tag on it so that he'd know how much this stuff was costing him. I thought of that. We ought to run down that food stamp expansion.

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He was very disturbed in an ostentatious way. And I never knew whether he was really disturbed or whether he wanted Schultze or Freeman or whoever was also present at that meeting to make sure to have a sense of how frugal he was.

(Interruption)

G: I have a sense that this whole initiative to redirect the feeding programs to the poor children rather than schoolchildren in general grew out of LBJ's Cotulla [Texas] experience. Did you have a sense of that? Did he talk about it in connection with it?

C: I have sense that it was really--one, yes, the idea of a child nutrition program to provide food for all poor kids at no cost, not even a nominal cost, came from him. The concept of cutting it back to limit it just to poor kids and not middle-class kids came from our desire to find the funds to do that, and also a feeling that we ought to focus our resources on the needy; there was so much need out there. The idea of reducing, or eliminating, in effect, impacted aid to schools where there were heavy federal installations. It was really because we thought that was a preposterous program. The military installation, if you will, or the government installation which these communities were fighting for because they provided so many jobs, so much good stuff in the economy--the idea of impacted aid was, "Well, they were immune from taxes and they used the local school systems." But we thought that it was a wash, and that ran into an absolute buzzsaw too as I recall.

What we ran in to--within the administration we got some resistance on this theory that even to this day continues, which is [that] if you make a program just for poor people you cut the political base of the program, and [that] the most successful programs are like Social Security and Medicare--well, Medicare wasn't in place then--but Social Security, that applied to everybody and everybody's behind and everybody supports it.

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There was such enormous need to provide food for poor kids and such evidence that providing food for poor kids would have a tremendous impact: better attendance, better attention, better marks, less truancy, fewer dropouts, all of that, less crime. And that's what led us in to that: the idea of summer feeding programs for kids, feeding programs wherever there were community centers in poor districts. I don't have current recollections of Johnson proposing that but it was in line with the kind of stuff that he did propose. We did have some evidence that food programs for poor children had an impact above and beyond what the President felt from his own experience as a school teacher which were evidenced from poverty programs that were being run in Denver.

G: In Denver, you say?

C: Yes. We also had within the administration a hell of a fight over who should run the programs. [The Department of] Agriculture wanted to run them all. And HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] wanted to run them all since they were school programs. Well, we created a Child Nutrition Act and put under one act our lunch programs, our breakfast programs, our summer feeding programs, and that strengthened Agriculture's argument. Our concern and the President's concern was to put the program in a place where it would get passed year after year. John Gardner and the people that wanted it in HEW said that the HEW committees--I don't know what they were called then.

G: Education and Labor in the House.

C: Education and Labor, and Labor and Human Resources, or something [Labor and Public Welfare] in the Senate, were liberal and would be much more inclined [to] provide this. The Agriculture [Department] people argued that the Agriculture committees would

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provide it because it was food, and farmers produced the food. Johnson picked Agriculture because he knew their economic interests--the same theory that was behind the food stamp program. It would give the economic interests of the rural areas, the farming areas in this country, something that would support these programs and it would tie them to the urban areas where in terms of dollars most of the money that was spent would be going. I notice here a memo before we sent the bill up in late February of 1966, February 28, which I sent a draft of the Child Nutrition Bill to Lew [Lewis] Deschler, who is the parliamentarian for the House, to see to what committees he would refer the bill and whether there'd be a joint referral. And I don't remember but I think it was referred only to Agriculture. I think we didn't want a joint referral because we just didn't want to waste a lot of time. Implicit in sending it to Agriculture was the fearful fight we were headed for over our ability to cut out the school lunch program for middle-class kids that didn't need it, and [it was] a fight we ultimately lost. But over the long haul making sure we had plenty of dough, and that the program would stay funded, I think the President's judgment on Agriculture was right. That's relevant and it will come up in other bills. We often fashioned bills in a way to--that was one of Johnson's great techniques--in a way to put them within the jurisdiction of committees that we thought would pass them and get them out, rather than fashion them in whatever might be the most logical way.

G: How did it first come to your attention that the current school feeding programs were not reaching the truly needy on a large-scale basis?

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C: I just can't remember. I guess I think--I know the President talked about this in the context of his experience as a teacher. I think the task force report of the 1965 Task Force--

G: Rural Poverty?

C: On Rural Poverty. Well, we eventually had a rural poverty report, while I think here, which came out later. We had a Commission on Rural Poverty. The Commission on Rural Poverty--I don't know what year that was. In any case, the Commission on Rural Poverty issued a report, or gave us a report. I sent the report in to the President. It called for tremendous expenditures of money to eliminate rural poverty. This had to be in the 1967, 1968 area--and much more than he was recommending. The President was furious about the report and he wanted the report killed. The report had already been sent to the libraries. Do you know this story?

G: No.

C: I forgot all about it. The report had already gone out to the depository libraries. I don't know. A hundred of them or--

G: Government depository libraries?

C: A hundred or two hundred or whatever, all over the country. The question became whether I should recall the report, or what to do about it. And he wanted me to get every goddamn copy of the report back and lock them up in the White House and what have you. Finally, I concluded that if I recall them I'd create more attention than was necessary and just let them sit there, and nobody ever read them. I don't know whether he ever found about it or not; I can't remember. But I do remember we just sort of never had a

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leak. Eventually it became known, but way down the road. I sat there for a couple of weeks really--

G: Sweating it out.

C: Well, sweating because I didn't want to--I can't even remember whether I told him that they were already out in the libraries or not. That'll show up. We ought to find that if there were some exchanges on that.

(Long pause) I notice here there were still attempts on the Hill for Adam Clayton Powell and others to try and get control over the school lunch programs. But I believe they were all done--that the Child Nutrition Act went through the Agriculture committees. I don't remember anything about the Tower thing [?].

(Interruption)

I have to go back. This is a memo from me to the President on March 22, 1966, about Father [C.B. "Woody"] Woodrich, a parish priest in Annunciation Parish in Denver, Colorado. Sometime--it should hopefully be on my calendar--sometime in 1965 when we were looking at these programs, Father Woodrich having really beaten--unable to get to anybody in Agriculture, unable to get anyone at HEW--somehow made his way through to Larry Levinson and then through Levinson to me. He really made two points to us, one of which is reflected in this memo and one [of] which he made at the time. The one reflected in the memo is that by reducing the cost of a school lunch to ten cents--it had been thirty-five cents--at four schools and then have four neighboring schools stay with what then was the usual price, thirty-five cents, there was a dramatic change in all kinds of things with respect to these poor kids. As I note here in the memo, that the absentee was 3.6 per cent in his schools where he was running this pilot program; it was

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10 per cent where it wasn't being run. Only fifteen students from the pilot program schools were booked on juvenile crimes; four hundred students from the non-pilot schools were. Marks were higher; attention, interest and learning went up beyond measurement.

The other thing that Father Woodrich had was the breakfast program, which he ran in these schools and which had a tremendous impact on these kids. It was actually his visit--when I now go back, I wondered why this memo was so late. But I see in the memo I noted to the President that it was Woodrich that first brought the programs to my attention. It was his program in Denver that really turned me on to push for the Child Nutrition Act. So we had kind of the President's anecdotal sense of what he saw in Cotulla when he was teaching those kids, combined with this priest, a simple guy, running this program out of Denver, Colorado. As I noted in the memo, he thought Johnson was the greatest things that ever happened to the free world. And gave me a book. I don't know where that book is; it's probably in the Library.

G: I don't know.

C: It's a book of photographs. It's a crude book of photographs, an album, of just the kids.

G: Did you take Woodrich to meet the President at all?

C: No.

G: I notice the President did refer to him in his signing statement when he signed the Child Nutrition Act.

C: I don't know whether we did or not. I just don't know. But there's no question that that Woodrich thing had a tremendous impact on me and I'm sure on the President because,

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while there may not be memos reflecting it, I'm sure I talked to him, because I remember him being very moved in seeing these numbers.

God, these weekly reports; they're just incredible, aren't they? We really--

G: The legislative reports.

C: (Long pause) We had great resistance from the conservatives on the school breakfast program. I think it was more spending than anything else, or why should a school provide breakfast; and this reminded me.

When we got the bill out of the Agriculture Committee in the House, we got it with our school breakfast program in. It had all the school lunch program money. We didn't make a dent in that this time around. [Howard W.] Smith, Old Man Smith, the chairman of the House Rules Committee, wanted to knock out the breakfast program. So we ended up scurrying around to get enough votes to beat him in the House Rules Committee when the bill came through there for a rule.

G: How did you get the votes, do you recall?

C: Well, we just called guys. It was just one of those last-minute flurries where we thought we'd--I just remember the President saying, "That's why you have to watch everything." We had to be sure when this became a little flap.

G: I gather the dairy interests were opposing the reduction in the school milk program.

C: Were opposing? Oh, yes. That's what we ran into. We tried to get Dan Schorr to go out there and do a show with [Woodrich]. Dan Schorr came in to see me in 1966, of CBS, and said that he was going to be assigned to cover the Great Society programs--he was being brought back from Europe--and was interested in any kinds of stories we had. We

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tried to get him interested--I don't know if he ever went out to Denver--to go out there and do this.

Pictures filed on the shelf. I guess we brought Woodrich back.

G: Well, I think he testified, didn't he?

C: No, I know he testified, but I think we brought him back for the signing, too. We put Woodrich in the. . . . (Laughter) [Reading memo] Kintner: "It was written by the Department of Agriculture. It came to us through Calif"--this is attached to the statement to be issued after you sign the Child Nutrition Act--"It was written by the Department of Agriculture. It came to us through Califano's office and has been reviewed by Douglass Cater. A copy has gone to Bob Fleming." Larry [Levinson] did the final paragraph. Larry put in Father Woodrich. And [Allen] Ellender and [Harold] Cooley--

(Long pause) I'll tell you something that's very interesting. Scattered among these notes are something about the First National Bank of Fort Worth and Jim Wright.

G: Is that right?

C: This is 1965, I guess. Steno Pad #14. I just can't decipher this. [Reading notes] First National Bank of Fort Worth. Something about, " . . . call someone. . . . Do this as a patriotic duty using your name, saying you cut out losses. . . . Jim Wright . . . make us leave them there." And then back here--

Well, these notes on third of February just reflects his desire to do something about impacted school areas and that conversation with me. On the fifteenth it's clearly getting us to go after [W. R. "Bob"] Poage on our milk program.

(Interruption)

G: Redirected.

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C: I think the Child Nutrition Act--I may be wrong but I think--it was the first time that a president tried to take a program of general applicability and limit it to poor people. I'm sure part of why we did that was the pressure of the budget, the war. But part of why we did it was also that we wanted to make lunches essentially free for poor kids and also provide them with a breakfast program. What I don't have here and what I remember is just the President going around talking about Rockefeller's kids getting free lunches and school lunches and only paying thirty-five cents for them, that we ought to make that point and we ought to think of all the rich kids. The problem was that those rich kids weren't in public schools. But that didn't stop us. I do remember that, Johnson saying, "People ought to be disturbed, they ought to be angry, because Rockefeller's kids are getting lunch for twenty-five cents or thirty-five cents. All we want is for Rockefeller's kids to pay." That was the kind of tone we tried to put on it. I don't have the final version of the message. I don't know whether any of that came through or not.

G: Was there any sense that if you limited it only to poor children that there would be a stigma attached?

C: Well, that was the argument of the "liberals," in quotes. That was the argument that said you let every kid go get the same lunch and go down the same line and pay the same thirty-five cents so you don't separate the poor kids from the other kids. My recollection is we had all kinds of things. You could give the kid a card. There are lots of ways to take care of that, but, by and large, we just didn't agree with it. We weren't worried about the stigma. We were worried about getting some food in the stomach of these kids and it's amazing. I think that the lesson of the Child Nutrition Act is not really so much the task force. It's not really so much the fact that we failed to trim it back to poor people.

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It's really that this little priest in Denver drove that engine. He drove that engine. And it was a world in which--Johnson provided a world in which it was hard for him to get anywhere. Agriculture wouldn't talk to him. OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] wouldn't talk to him. HEW wouldn't talk to him. I don't know how he got eventually to Larry Levinson, but he finally got to him and Larry got him to me. And he had this tremendous conviction and commitment and everything else, and these numbers that showed that his program was working. That both drove the task force report, because he was there before the final task force report [and] it reinforced in a vivid contemporaneous way what Johnson was saying about the kids in Cotulla falling asleep, heads on their desks when he was trying to teach them. And we went with the program.

G: Was this the first step in really making good nutrition as part of the child development a national policy, really committing the government to--?

C: I don't think we did. It was just feeding hungry kids. I think we were--we obviously understood the long-range development impact, not as well as we do today, but remember these kids were probably getting hot dogs and full fat milk and all that stuff. So I don't think it was good nutrition as you use that term today. It was feeding hungry kids so they could pay attention and learn and do something. It was part of this tremendous thing driving him that if you educate kids--and how do you educate them? You've got to give them access to education, and then you've got to make sure they have enough fuel in their bodies so they can listen and learn, and if you just do that they'll get their piece of it.

G: One of the provisions that did pass was the provision to provide the kitchen equipment necessary to enable some of the poorer districts to even offer this kind of program. Do you recall that aspect of it?

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C: Only that it was--I remember that coming up in the task force report, I guess, and putting it in the message. Do I recall whether the President mentioned that to me or not? I don't know. He easily could have. There was no need to sell this program to LBJ. He was there with it all the way because he'd lived it.

G: I guess part of the problem was convincing states and school districts to actually take advantage of the programs that were being offered.

C: Well, part of the problem was that. School districts, if you took breakfast, one of the problems was they didn't want to open that early. We're talking about half an hour. The kids are around there anyway. We're talking about a little milk and a little cereal, not a hell of a lot. We had that kind of problem with school districts. And we did not have enough school districts taking advantage of it, but I can't remember why. I do remember also whenever he signed or wherever he signed it, in the East Room or--it was a very happy day for the President. He was very happy doing this.

I think that's it. I can't--

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XLVII

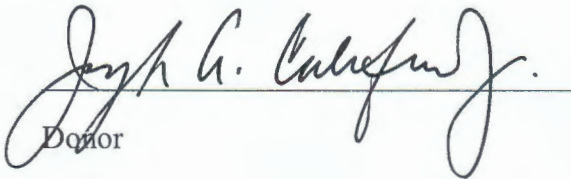
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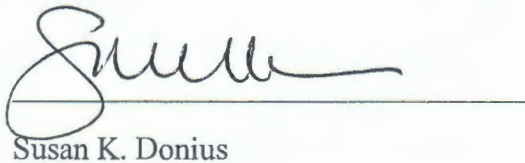
Joseph A. Califano

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

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