

## INTERVIEW LV

DATE: September 13, 1989

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH A. CALIFANO, JR., with comments by Marcel Bryar

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

### Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

C: We had some concern about financing, because we were worried about getting the financing of the highway safety program hooked up with the financing we'd just been able to sweep through on the highway beautification program the year before. And we ended up proposing not to disturb the highway safety program and, in effect, to use the same 1 per cent twice, with highway safety and for auto safety. As it turned out, there was never any trouble getting money for auto safety. It turned out to be such a popular program that nobody complained about it.

G: When you say the same 1 per cent you mean to simply take it out of what was--?

C: We ended up in our own heads saying, "All right, we'll take the 1 per cent. We've already got it set aside for beauty. We'll say we'll use it both for beauty and safety." Okay? As it turned out, we didn't have to worry about that. We were worried about it before the bill went up. Once the bill got up there, and over the years as history has demonstrated, there's been such enthusiasm for auto safety that there's never been any problem getting money.

Califano -- LV -- 2

G: Did any of these related factors cause you to be more cautious than you might have otherwise [been]? Either a fear that it might impact on the funding for other programs, or on the creation of the Department of Transportation, or anything else, that led to a more cautious posture in taking on the auto industry?

C: I don't think those did. I think the bill we sent up was somewhat more cautious than what Congress passed because it gained so much steam when it went up there, one. And, two, the General Motors following of [Ralph] Nader added a piece of momentum that made the auto industry just without credibility. But I don't think it was anything the auto industry did or said to us that in any way inhibited what we did.

Johnson wanted congressional contacts again and again and again. On most bills we would just run the subcommittee or the committee, and we ended up with this--because the Transportation Department we knew was going to be controversial as hell as to what went into it--we ended up, as you can see from these papers, making a monumental number of contacts on these bills across the board. We were going to people like Wilbur Mills who really had no jurisdiction.

Then we did our congressional briefing on--God, what a life we led--on the first of March. And it's interesting, we had a--I guess it's worth spending just a minute. This was the best way to unfold a new program. It's not related just to highway safety, but the whole transportation program. The night before the message goes up, bringing down to the White House Mess the congressmen--here I report that we had thirty-five senators and congressmen--giving them a briefing on what the program was all about and what was going up the next day. Doing it sort of late-ish, six o'clock or something, giving them a couple of drinks and having some hors d'oeuvres, briefing them--in and out in an hour.

Califano -- LV -- 3

Hopefully, late enough so that there wouldn't be tremendous leakage of the message that was coming the next day, just enough to tease the public and get them interested, and giving them a chance of feeling they were on the inside. It was done in the evening so they could have an opportunity to call their press friends if they wanted to or call the interest groups they'd want to and get credit for giving them a little advance on what was happening, but also so that it would be difficult for newspapers to redo their stories or what have you for the day. They already had their story budgets laid out.

We were, in those days, very unconscious about morning television. It wasn't what it is today and what you rush to get on the morning shows. Probably compared to today's standards [we were] very unsophisticated about using it.

G: Was it a question of picking the ranking members of important committees or--?

C: Normally we took the whole committee. We would invite the whole committee and I think we invited both Democrats and Republicans. I just can't remember whether we limited it to Democrats or not. In this case, the following morning--the message technically went up at twelve noon. That was the time it was delivered to the Speaker [of the House] for inclusion in the *Congressional Record* and the President of the Senate. Here on the highway safety and transportation stuff when we were touching so many government departments and we expected so much bureaucratic resistance, we had a special briefing in the Indian Treaty Room in the EOB [Executive Office Building]--a very nice room--for a hundred or so government people who were going to be affected by the reorganization, at nine in the morning.

We then briefed the press at ten. Included in that briefing [were] people like [William F.] Bozo McKee and [John W.] Bush, who was chairman of the ICC [Interstate

Califano -- LV -- 4

Commerce Commission] and commandant of the coast guard, because they were being moved around, and we wanted to force them to go publicly on the record with their support at that briefing so they wouldn't cut us up. Or if they did cut us up, behind their back we could jump them in the press, say, "Look, here's what they said on the record," and what have you. And we did the press briefing for the White House press corps. Then we talked to some transportation experts. In today's world they'd all be at the same briefing. They'd just add to the White House press corps [and to] the experts in the area. The press wasn't as sophisticated then as it is today. And we relied on our White House correspondents to cover all these subjects in the first instance.

The following day, the day after we sent the message up--I'm sorry, the same day we sent the message up--we briefed the industry: airlines, truckers, shippers, safety people. But most of the focus of these briefings was on the Transportation Department; that was where the controversy was. That was where we really expected trouble, and as you can see from this memo, the night before we worked out the jurisdictional issues about how to split this up.

We would prepare a brief TV clip so the President could read a brief statement--two minutes--what today we'd call a sound bite basically, that we would send out all over the country to media markets and TV stations. We didn't have technological facilities you have today. If it had been today, it would have been instantly satellited to every TV station in the country. But that gave us a little something that could be used on the news.

G: How did you send it out?

Califano -- LV -- 5

C: I can't remember, but I remember we did it. Maybe we had the networks send it out, gave it [to] them and they did it.

We had our people lined up to introduce the legislation, and we had statements of support, which we wrote for congressmen to give in support of the legislation, as you see here, seven in the Senate and seven in the House. And we gave Johnson a breakdown of what we saw the vote count was. As it obviously indicates, there's going to be more problems with . . . I don't know why Macdonald. Macdonald, was he a union member? This note of the President's, I just don't . . . I don't know who Macdonald was.

G: Torbert Macdonald, Massachusetts.

C: Maybe it was. Was he one of the subcommittee chairmen?

G: Yes.

C: Yes, then that would be the speaker. Sure. That's what it was. (Long pause) God, it was a great message.

Then Johnson's message went up on March 2 and it was four days later that the Nader story broke. By the time his message went up, incidentally, it was quite clear to us that the traffic safety bill was going to sail through. And . . .

G: Did you have any advance indication of the Nader [story]?

C: Not that I recollect.

G: Any recollections on LBJ's reaction to it?

C: No, I don't have any recollections of his [reaction]. Then [John] Connor testified, and, by the way, [when] he testified before [Abraham] Ribicoff he started to put us in a defensive position because Ribicoff was pressing for standards later. I do have a recollection, rightly or wrongly--it's very dim though--that Connor's testimony put us in such a

Califano -- LV -- 6

defensive spot in March that when GSA [General Services Administration] went up the next day to testify about the federal courts basically, we had GSA testify that they had no objection to immediate standards so that we were not in a defensive position on federal courts and what have you. Senator [Secretary?] Connor did not like, and I don't think he ever knew, we encouraged GSA to do that. Then General Motors hired [Theodore] Sorensen to sit next to [GM chairman James] Roche to try and cool down the Democrats.

And eventually the President--I can't remember how or when--he really got revved up about traffic safety, because I remember this letter going to all the governors. And we started to get into this language like, "Last year this carnage claimed almost fifty thousand lives. That's more than the total population of Redwood City," he writes to Pat [Edmund G.] Brown. He wanted to really drive it home.

And tire safety sailed through the Senate. That was really basically. . . . Then Bobby [Kennedy?] came in, I see, to join with the call for more . . .

G: Did this irritate the President?

C: I don't have any recollection of that. I think he just didn't want to be--I'm trying to think; when is my meeting with--was it April 4 that they came to see me?

G: Yes.

C: Was it April 4 that [John] Bugas came to see me?

G: That's what I have. Bugas and . . . well, Mark[ley]--

B: Bugas and [Rodney] Markley.

C: Okay. That was the meeting at which they came to see me as a courtesy to give me a copy of the testimony that Bugas was going to give for the auto industry which essentially was going to ask that they be given more time to put together a voluntary program. And I

Califano -- LV -- 7

told Bugas he would be crucified before the committee, that they were so far beyond where we were and the committee was so much ahead of us in terms of standards, penalties, timing, and Bugas was asking for less than we had proposed, that he'd be killed up there. That's when I told Johnson that evening, I said, "If I were they, I'd revise their testimony." And that's when the President said to me, "What the hell are you doing that for? Let them go up there. It will just build up more steam for the legislation; we'll get it out." By this time Johnson wanted a really whopping bill.

G: Did they complain to the President about your--?

C: Well, Henry Ford had--they were not happy with our bill but by this time--and also that testimony by Bugas also toyed with the administration. It was dumb, and any lingering concern that LBJ might have had for his friend Henry Ford or anything like that, went out the window with that, because--at that point that was it. They had decided to walk away from us; we were going to go with the toughest bill we could get. Then we decided to have the National Defense Transportation Day, which I guess was the day which he made that blood statement.

G: This is April 22.

C: I guess eventually. This is the tape where he said, "There's blood on your hands," or something.

G: "Quench your thirst for a little blood." That was not in the original text of the speech, is that right?

C: Yes.

G: Were you there when he said it?

Califano -- LV -- 8

C: On April 15 I had a visit from Sidney Weinberg. Weinberg was I guess an investment banker, wasn't he?

G: Yes.

C: I forget what house he was with. He was a friend of Johnson's and a friend of Henry Ford's. He came to say that he was concerned about the impact of the tax on the auto industry, on selling cars, and on confidence in American cars. I talked to [Robert] McNamara. McNamara thought that was all bullshit. But I reported to the President anyway that he wanted Johnson to call the presidents of the four auto companies and to listen to them present their side of the traffic safety issue. I thought that made no sense and neither did McNamara. But since the auto industry was getting the shit kicked out it every day of the week, day after day, we thought we might try and move more aggressively on the traffic safety bill.

Then Ford blasted Congress and Nader in what was a very ill-advised statement here on August 16. All he did was create more problems for the auto industry. We sent out our telegram for the great National Transportation Week and National Defense Transportation Day. The auto industry got terribly concerned about--Rod Markley started sending me stuff about [how] we might slow down the sale of cars and that would hurt the economy.

The auto industry came in force to the big ceremony. We then, again in trying to get ahead of this problem on the Hill and become more aggressive, we had Lawson Knott, the General Services Administration, set up their Transportation and Auto Safety Advisory Council to advise them on the safety of the cars that the government was buying, what the government should have in them.



Califano -- LV -- 9

Where is the President's--what page is the--here it is. Yes. Do we have the text I sent him so I can see the difference between. . . . It would be attached to my April 21, 1966, memo to the President. This is my memo. Can we get the original maybe, at the [LBJ] Library? April 21, 1966, 8:30 p.m., Thursday. It's from me and Jack Valenti and it attaches the reading version of his statement. Because I don't think this was in it.

B: The *New York Times* says he ad-libbed that part.

C: Yes, he did. Well, in any case, to really appreciate it--he was getting so revved up. He said, "Fifty thousand people are dying now. There are fourteen hundred have died in Vietnam. We lost fifty thousand, fifty times that people, right here under your nose as you're talking about dying out there. And I'm going to try and," do something about keeping the deaths to a minimum out there and something about keeping them to a minimum here. "Help from every person in this room, and you may have to back up a little bit. You may have to moderate your views. You may have to quench your thirst for a little blood a little bit and not run over the President or the Congress with your pressure." And to really appreciate this, he was looking right at Ford and Lynn Townsend when he said that. Then right after that, Rod Markley called me--have you got the phone thing for that? Let me see for the twenty-second here. Yes, see Rod Markley calls me. Lloyd Cutler called me at 4:40. Rod Markley calls me at six-fifteen, just bananas about this statement.

G: What did he say?

C: Oh, he just said that it was awful what the President had done. I don't know whether I said I didn't hear it, or I didn't know, or what have you. I went back to Marvin Watson; I went back to get the tape because it wasn't in the prepared text, and Watson, at the

Califano -- LV -- 10

President's direction, had confiscated the tape. I'm sure it's in the Library; I assume it's in the Library. But the tape was not going to be available to anybody. They didn't give out anything except the prepared text. The President protested that he never said anything like that.

(Laughter)

Have you got the clippings here? I don't have them.

G: Yes. There's one here, in the *New York Times*.

C: (Long pause) Here's the occasion. He really got revved up to make a spirited speech. Do they have the "quench the thirst for blood" here?

G: I thought they did.

B: Yes. [Inaudible]

C: In the second [?]. "Some of you may have to quench your thirst for a little blood."

Looking at the industry leaders--yes, he said to one of the-- He looked right at them.

(Laughter) They went bananas. That really was. . . . Now here's my memo to the

President still a month later. "I told Bugas I did not remember that. I reminded Bugas that [inaudible] in the room, and he said he remembered that." Told him most

considerate. This is really incredible. My memory is good. "I expressed my concern that he would meet with serious opposition with a statement of that kind."

Then eventually, I guess about a month later I finally got my hands on the tape.

Then we took the position that the "quench your thirst for blood" remark was not directed at the people they were killing on the highways, but at their political pressure in Washington. Oh, here's a better copy of it. Yes. Okay.

G: Do you think that LBJ just slipped, that he didn't really intend to say that?

Califano -- LV -- 11

C: I think he just got revved up. He really just got revved up. He was all fired up, and he just let them have it.

G: When he later denied having said it, do you think he ever convinced himself that he didn't?

C: I don't think this is one where he really convinced himself, as he was capable of doing on other things. No, I don't think so.

Then this is a very interesting. The auto industry came up with an idea which I always attributed to [Lloyd] Cutler--I don't know whether it was his idea or not--that's something called the Vehicle Equipment Safety Commission, which they said was an organization of states, comprised of representatives of the state governments, basically be allowed to write the safety standards. And Connor sent me a memo in the end of April saying this was a proposal that he thought would solve the problems. When we started to look into that--and that memo to me is April 28--when we started to look into that, we discovered that that was totally controlled by the automobile manufacturers. It was, I think, funded by them and it would be a complete cop-out.

Then Cutler sends me their automobile industry proposals with respect to this. Then Markley comes by to tell me that auto sales are slipping. [Then George] Romney chimes in to say that the safety bill would hurt auto sales more. Our view incidentally on that, as I told Markley at the time, was you're making your own problem. Get the goddamn bill passed and let's move on to other things.

Then all the Business Council people say the slump in auto sales is due to the safety thing and Gardner Ackley answers them. It must be close to the point where we had that meeting in my office.

Califano -- LV -- 12

G: I think it's May 21. Let's see. Yes.

C: Okay. And with Connor at the helm in the Commerce Department, they basically were soft on auto safety.

G: Was the UAW [United Auto Workers] a factor at all in this legislation?

C: I don't remember them as being a factor.

G: This should be the end of it.

C: (Long pause) Yes, life was complicated by the fact that Connor was a former member of the General Motors Corporation Board of Directors. I had forgotten that. And that kept popping up in press stories and he also had very little credibility. And [Warren] Magnuson--this now brings back--Connor, either in a letter or in talking to Magnuson, said that we opposed immediate mandatory auto standards on, I see here, the nineteenth of March. Maggie--let me just see that. I don't know if it'll be there. No, I mean the nineteenth of May, the phonebook? Oh, I've got it right here.

I guess I talked to [Gerald] Grinstein. I talked to Pat McNamara--no, that was Bob McNamara. Well, at some point Magnuson or Grinstein or somebody talked to me and said, by and large--and so did the President--"The hell with Commerce, let's put this thing together." That prompted the--here it is. There must have been a ticker on Thursday the nineteenth that showed this, that we were fighting for a softer bill, because I have this memo to the President which says, "Magnuson was in a committee hearing but I passed the word to Grinstein about our position on mandatory traffic safety standards. I also talked with Connor. He will issue a clarifying statement today and put out the Commerce Department letter to Magnuson which is inaccurately reported by UPI [United Press International]. Finally Grinstein and [Michael] Pertschuk, Magnuson's two top men

Califano -- LV -- 13

on this bill, are having lunch with me on Saturday and we will go over the amendments, come to an agreement and so he will be ready for his meeting on Tuesday."

That was the last--and here's Connor's clarification. That was the end of Commerce in the bill, in having anything to do with the bill.

G: Did Connor go peacefully?

C: He was very unhappy. He was basically overruled. The President was angry about him. Connor, as you can see from the story in the *Times*, had to say that we strongly supported mandatory standards.

Then we had this, but didn't we have a work sheet that [Lawrence] Levinson had?

Do I have it here?

G: It's dated later, I think. 10/1968.

(Interruption)

Tape 1 of 1, Side 2

C: I think we went with mandatory standards. What I can't figure out is what we did on the criminal penalties.

G: That was voted out in committee.

C: Criminal penalties were--?

G: Yes.

C: What do you have? Or just from your recollection--?

G: It was the [Vance] Hartke Amendment that was defeated.

C: Who was "N"?

G: Nader.

B: That was the Hartke/Nader, Nader/Hartke--

Califano -- LV -- 14

C: Okay. But I mean it was voted--the bill that came out of committee had criminal penalties, you're saying.

G: No, I think it was an amendment by Hartke to make the penalties criminal, and that was defeated, in the Senate.

C: That was defeated, but there were civil penalties.

G: Right.

C: And there was also the authority to call back cars under our Senate bill. Okay. Alright.

Basically we put together a tough bill. We went with mandatory controls and we made it our bill. That bill is the bill that ultimately became the law; it's unbelievable. What we agreed to that day became the law of the land.

G: Well, these guys were the key congressional staff people, is that right?

C: Jerry Grinstein and Pertschuk were the congressional staff people. But it's something that would be impossible to do today.

Then Connor, you can see how burned he is when he says "in particular"--then I get a memo on the twenty-seventh. Commerce is commenting on the House safety bill and he says, "In particular Secretary Connor would appreciate your focusing this proposed letter in light of the discussion he recently had with the Senate Commerce Committee staff at which time you indicated an administration position on various points." We just had to take them out of play. And we blew the VESC [Vehicle Equipment Safety Commission] thing out of the water. That was really a sham.

(Laughter) What I'm laughing at, I remember when the Governors [Conference] Subcommittee on Traffic Safety came in and they were strong but they weren't as tough as we were. They were a little more sensitive to the automobile industry, and when

Califano -- LV -- 15

Johnson greets them he says, "Since the automobile was invented it has killed more than 1,500,000 Americans, three times as many as all our enemies have been able to kill in all our wars."

G: Strong medicine.

C: In any case, what he did basically was the governors came in sort of tilting a little bit toward the auto industry, but by making the meeting a public meeting, issuing a public statement, he put them in the position of having to support the mandatory standards as they left.

G: Just their being there made it seem like an endorsement?

C: But also he just made everything public. He made all his side of it public and they just could not withstand the press corps. (Long pause) Here's the thing.

G: Well, apparently the criminal penalties were included in the draft and then deleted from the committee bill.

C: Included in the draft that left us?

G: Yes.

C: (Long pause) Here's the issue paper. Okay. I've got to go. We haven't dealt with Drew Pearson . . .

G: No, or Nader.

C: Well, let's deal with Pearson. I can't do that now. I'm sorry. When do we next meet again?

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview LV

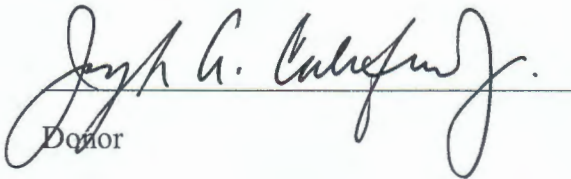
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
LYNDON B. JOHNSON PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY

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

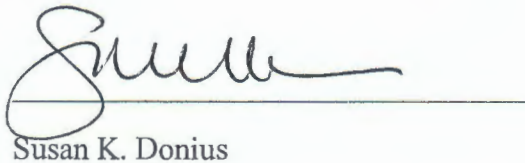
Joseph A. Califano

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

I, Joseph A. Califano, hereby remove the restrictions on the use of the transcripts and recordings that states, "During my lifetime I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the copyright in both the transcripts and tape recordings shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime researchers may publish 'fair use' quotations from the transcripts and tape recordings without my express consent in each case." of the sixty-three personal interviews conducted with me by Paige Mulhollan, Joe B. Frantz, and Michael L. Gillette, currently at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library. (see attachment for interview details)

  
Donor

5-28-19  
Dated

  
Susan K. Donius

July 17, 2019  
Dated

Director for Presidential Libraries