INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 17, 1978

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN J. CORSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

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

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's start with your association with the NYA. How did you get into the organization?

C: I got into the NYA, to the best of my knowledge, through a recommendation of Frank Bane, B-A-N-E. He had been commissioner of public welfare in Virginia. I had never known him well, but I had known him, and he had known of me because I was writing for the afternoon newspaper, the Richmond News Leader. To the best of my knowledge, he brought my name to the attention of Aubrey Williams.

(Interruption)

G: --through Aubrey Williams, you were saying.

C: Frank Bane, then--in 1935--was the executive director of the American Public Welfare Association, but was on loan to Harry Hopkins and Williams. He was a personal friend of both men and he was assisting them in organizing the WPA. When the NYA came along, although no one ever told me this, I think he brought my name to their attention. To me, in Richmond, Virginia, the invitation to join the NYA came as a complete surprise. I had no idea what it was all about. I received a call from Aubrey Williams, of whom I had never heard. He invited me to visit him in Washington.

You must recognize that I was twenty-nine years of age. I have often thought, that as today in a federal agency it is essential to have a woman executive and a black executive, so in the National Youth Administration, it was essential to have a young executive. I was a symbol of youth. I had had little previous administrative experience. I had been director of the NRA in Virginia briefly. But I was predominantly a newspaper writer in those days, an assistant to the distinguished editor of Richmond's afternoon newspaper, Douglas Southall Freeman.

My experience as deputy administrator of NYA was brief but thrilling and enriching for a young man. I stayed only from May until October of 1935.

G: How did Lyndon Johnson get the appointment as director of the Texas NYA?

C: My recollection is that Aubrey Williams, a social worker by trade, who loved political manipulation, often went to the horse races and elsewhere with members of Congress. In the course of one of those episodes he was talked into appointing a fellow in Texas, a clerk on one of the railroads, as state director of NYA. I don't recall his name; I have a visual recollection of him but nothing more. I remember especially that he proved to be a substantial disappointment and we had complaints from a number of Texas college and university presidents that they had difficulty in doing business with him.

We were under pressure that summer by college and university presidents, not only in Texas, to get the program under way before students came back in the fall. NYA had been created in May and we had to define each of NYA's programs, and establish the procedures for these programs by the time students came back in the fall. And these college and university presidents, fairly enough, wanted to know what the procedures would be well before September 1.

There was considerable complaint. Cloyd Heck Marvin, the president of George Washington University, served as spokesman for the colleges and universities in Washington. I remember well his indignant protests that the procedures had not been promulgated. In his eyes we were ineffective bureaucrats, because we hadn't completed all this establishment work within the first sixty days of NYA's existence. We were doing our best, but we had not gotten it done.

The college and university presidents complained of this fellow who was the first state youth director in Texas. They complained to the point that, in my recollection, Aubrey Williams called me on a Friday and said, "I think I'm going to fire that fellow down in Texas." My reply was to this effect, "I think you're right, Mr. Williams. I think that's what we ought to do." He added, "I tell you what I want you to do. I'm going out of town. I'll be out for a few days." That meant that whoever the political sponsors were in Texas, they'd get on my back rather than Aubrey's, when they learned of the dismissal. "I want you to go up," he said, "to see Sam Rayburn on Monday morning. Ask him what we ought to do in Texas." I said, "Yes, sir."

Monday morning, hat in hand, I made an appointment to see Mr. Rayburn. Mr. Rayburn may have been a very convivial fellow to his contemporaries in the late afternoon over a bourbon in the back room, but for me he was a very austere, dour gentleman. There was no particular conviviality. He was all business. I told him, "Mr. Williams asked me to tell you about the problem we have with the state youth administration in Texas. We need a state youth director." He listened patiently and then said, "There's a young man over in [Richard] Kleberg's office named Johnson. You go see him."

As I recall, I went--still in the Old House Office Building--to Kleberg's office. Lyndon was his administrative assistant at that time. I told LBJ about our problem and that Mr. Rayburn had suggested that I come see him. I voiced the hope that he might be interested in becoming NYA state director. If he was interested I would make an appointment for him to see Aubrey Williams when Aubrey returned to the city. My recollection is that he was obviously interested. I subsequently saw to it that Aubrey saw him shortly after Aubrey returned to the city.

G: What did Lyndon Johnson say to you? Do you recall anything?

C: I don't have any clear recollection. My best guess, as I think of it, is that he said something to the effect that, "Yes, I've known of your program. It interests me. You know, I used to be a schoolteacher," something like that. He was obviously interested, but it was a very brief conversation. The real discussion was not with me but with Aubrey Williams at a subsequent meeting.

G: Did he indicate any dissatisfaction with his current position?

C: No. I do not recall any dissatisfaction with his assignment in the Kleberg office. I wondered why Rayburn thought that he was ready to move, but I never had any knowledge of that.

During the next two or three months, I had occasion to talk with him on the telephone once or twice; I would have said not many more times.

I remember particularly one contact when, within a very short time after he became the state youth director, all state youth directors were brought in to Washington for an orientation meeting. Aubrey Williams addressed them, and in the course of that address said, "Now, I have worked out with John Corson a budget for each state director's office. I want each of you to make an appointment to talk with John and he will give you a copy of the budget we've planned for your office." Lyndon Johnson came in to see me.

I remember when LBJ came in to see me; we sat across the desk from one another. I had a budget worked out for each NYA state office; they were not large budgets; we were providing for a staff of not more than five, six people. The budget indicated a number of employees, the prospective salaries, travel allowance, et cetera. I handed LBJ a copy of his budget even as I had handed each of the other state directors theirs. He took a look at it, and promptly made clear without saying a word that this wasn't suitable to him. He was thinking in bigger figures than this sheet suggested.

G: What did he say? Do you remember?

C: It was more in his manner than in what he said. He said, "Well, this is a disappointment," or something to that effect. It was a rather mild statement, but I got the distinct impression that he wasn't going to waste time with me. He was going to talk Aubrey Williams into a substantially increased budget.

G: He did get a larger budget, didn't he?

C: I think he did. I've forgotten what the amounts were, but my recollection is that he did.

G: Let me ask you some more about this appointment. Anything that you've heard, any indication that you might have gotten on the following people's involvement: Maury Maverick. Do you recall if Maury Maverick talked to Aubrey Williams about that or at all played a role?

C: I have no recollection of that. I knew Maury Maverick slightly in those days, but I have no recollection of Maury's involvement.

G: He has been credited as being the one that talked to Aubrey Williams about it by a number of people. Two people who worked on the Hill supposedly informed LBJ of it, Bob Jackson and Arthur Perry, I think. Did you ever talk to them about it?

C: No.

G: How about Dr. Bob Montgomery, Robert Montgomery, an economics professor at the University of Texas.

C: I know who you mean, but I have no recollection of his involvement.

G: Well, you've mentioned Sam Rayburn, of course, and your role there. How about Tom Connally? Was he involved at all?

C: I have no recollection of his involvement.

G: Or Eleanor Roosevelt?

C: No. Do you really have any evidence that Lyndon Johnson had any contacts with Eleanor Roosevelt at that early time?

G: Well, people's memories are often confused, but some have recalled that. They may have been thinking of a different time period. But you'd be surprised how many different versions there are of this particular [incident].

So he began work in late July, 1935. I understand that he worked for a time in Washington in the Washington office.

C: But not a very long time. I'm sure he did work in Washington for a time, but we had to have people in Texas to get both the educational support and the work programs started. I would have thought he was in Texas certainly by early August.

G: He stayed I guess four or five days.

C: Ten days maybe.

G: Did you have any contact with him then or do you recall what he was doing in Washington these days?

C: No, I do not. I had some contact with him, I don't doubt. Bear in mind much of what we were doing at that particular time was the recruitment of personnel. A substantial portion of my time was taken up with seeing people who wanted jobs, as state youth directors or on the

staff in Washington. But Aubrey Williams was responsible for all appointments.

When I came to the NYA we had space in the basement of what was known as the old Municipal Auditorium at about 18th and E Streets. Our offices were literally being built around us while we sat at our desks. It was a sort of a helter-skelter existence. There were only two other people on the staff, Elizabeth Scully, the daughter of the then Mayor of Pittsburgh, an administrative assistant, and Jeanette Heine, H-E-I-N-E, a secretary. We built from there.

I was trying to build the organization. Aubrey kept a very close hand on who was going to be appointed; I was interviewing a lot of people, making suggestions to him. The staff was pretty much my job. Aubrey was in another building; he had an office next to Hopkins in what was known as the Walker-Johnson Building on New York Avenue. It was a block and a half away. As a consequence he didn't have much contact with the staff during the time I was there. That was mostly my job.

NYA had an advisory council of five people, as I recall: Arthur Altmeyer, Josephine Roche, John Studebaker, Frank Persons, and a fellow named Chester McFall, an assistant secretary of commerce. McFall was the least concerned with NYA and I remember him least. That committee met weekly or biweekly. My time was somewhat taken up with preparing material describing our plans that we would present to that council.

The state directors weren't around the headquarters office much. Some came through Washington and they would stay a few days, but our purpose was to get them back to the states. Then we brought them in for a meeting when we had our plans sufficiently developed so that we could have a three-day session--as I recall, in the Department of Labor building--to go over all our plans. Then I saw the whole group and met each of them individually. Each came to talk with me about not only the budget but all the administrative plans [which] were my problem: how they made appointments, what their budget was going to be, what their staff salaries were to be, et cetera. This was my problem in those days.

G: Did Lyndon Johnson or anyone else dicker over his salary with you and get an increase there?

C: His salary was fixed with Aubrey, and what it was I don't recall. I suppose thirty-six hundred dollars.

G: Was anyone else interviewed for that Texas job?

C: To the best of my knowledge, no. My recollection is it happened quite promptly, you see. Aubrey fired the state director on a Friday. Monday I went to see Mr. Rayburn and Mr. Rayburn sent me to see Johnson. LBJ saw Aubrey later that week and accepted the appointment. I don't think others were considered.

G: Well, this other fellow could not have been in the job very long.

C: Oh, no. He wasn't in the job more than sixty days if he was there that long. As it turned out we really had made a mistake.

On the other hand, NYA had some impressive people. Somebody should write a history of the state directors. The Ohio state director, who was in his twenties then, has been for a good many years the foremost trial lawyer in Cleveland. The Georgia state director was subsequently president of the University of Georgia, the University of Alabama, and a member of the board of TVA. The Michigan state director, Bill Haber, is a distinguished economist at the University of Michigan. Tom Dodd in Connecticut and Anderson in New Mexico became U.S. senators. A later director in New Mexico, Tom Popejoy, subsequently was president of the University of New Mexico. The Virginia director, Walter Newman, was subsequently president of Virginia Polytechnic Institute. It was an impressive group of people. And the fact that Aubrey Williams recruited them in a truly slapdash fashion made it all the more amazing.

G: Anything else about that state directors' conference in Washington in August, 1935?

C: I don't recall anything else about it. Aubrey Williams was a quite impassioned speaker. He got up and rang the bells as to what a great mission we had. Mrs. Roosevelt, I believe, came and spoke briefly. We were taken to the White House. The President talked to us briefly from behind his desk. Then we traipsed around the desk and as we went by he shook hands with each of us. That's about my recollection of the meeting.

G: I gather that the NYA was really more of a crusade than a program, wasn't it?

C: Well, I'm a bad one to ask that question. It was my job to put some order into it, to establish procedures, and to set up an organization. When a guy like Cloyd Heck Marvin, to whom I've referred, asked, "Well, what are we to do about this program? What does the university do when the people come back? How do we obtain the money that will enable them to stay in school?" it was up to me to provide answers. I had to design forms, to work out payment processes, and create accounting systems. It wasn't a crusade for me. Mine was the job of making it run; it wasn't the kind of job Aubrey was good at or liked to work at.

G: I wonder why the state office in Texas was in Austin rather than, say, in San Antonio where the WPA office was?

C: I'll be damned if I know.

G: You don't recall the decision?

C: I have no recollection of that. Maybe Aubrey had a premonition of [James P.] Buchanan's death.

G: Well, I was going to ask you about NYA's relationship with Congressman Buchanan. Do you have any insight on that?

C: No. I never had any contact with him in the brief time I was there.

Buchanan was quite anxious to get federal offices for Austin, that I know. I subsequently learned that when in Social Security, we were locating our regional office. We got into a mess with Buchanan because he wanted the office in Austin and John Winant, who was chairman of the Social Security Board, made a commitment to a fellow he wanted appointed to be regional director. He promised the appointee

that the office would be in San Antonio where this fellow and his elderly mother lived. To pacify Buchanan, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, we had to promise that the Social Security office in Austin would have as many employees as there were in the San Antonio office! We had a difficult time doing that but we did until his death.

G: There was an NYA advisory board in Texas, a group of business-labor representatives.

C: As this describes?

G: Right, exactly. Initially Alvin Wirtz, who was subsequently one of Johnson's great mentors, was not among those listed as board members selected by Johnson. According to Alfred Steinberg, the national office or the Roosevelt Administration, one of the two, insisted that Wirtz be put on the board. Do you have any recollection of that?

C: I have no recollection of it, but I would put one additional element into the picture. My recollection is that around the WPA a person who was consulted about Texas problems would have certainly been Joel Westbrook. Well, I say Joel Westbrook, but I mean his father Lawrence Westbrook. Lawrence Westbrook was an assistant administrator of WPA, and he, Hopkins and Williams were all rather close. They used to play poker at the Kennedy-Warren apartment house where Westbrook had an apartment. Johnson speaks of Westbrook in this letter and speaks of having consulted Westbrook on the formation of that state advisory board.*

* See attached correspondence

G: I was going to ask if you have any insight on the contact of some of these other people with Lyndon Johnson: Sam Gilstrap?

C: No.

G: Juanita Sadler?

C: No.

G: A Mrs. Val Keating?

C: No.

G: Richard Brown?

C: Richard Brown succeeded me as deputy administrator of NYA. He came in as I left, and I knew Dick Brown very well. I do not know how close he was to Lyndon Johnson during subsequent months. He was there much longer than I was. Very likely Brown came to know him better than I ever knew him. I haven't come across Dick Brown for a long time. Have you found him?

G: No. What was he like?

C: Dick Brown, as I recall, had been a disc jockey on a radio station in Colorado. He had been active in politics and was affiliated with the Josephine Roche-Senator [Edward] Costigan faction in Colorado. He came to NYA under Josephine Roche's sponsorship, and was, I think, the NYA state director in Colorado for a brief time before he came to Washington. But he was a Josephine Roche man and I don't mean that in any venal sense. She was a great person. But she was the one who brought him to the attention of Aubrey.

G: But did you ever get any insight on his dealings with LBJ? Did the President ever talk to you about that?

C: No.

G: Or Aubrey?

C: No. My contacts with NYA after I left Washington were quite limited. I left in October, went back to Richmond. In March I came back to Washington as assistant executive director of the Social Security Board. This same fellow, Frank Bane, who had proposed my coming to the NYA, was the executive director of Social Security. However, I believe that appointment to Social Security was more attributable to Arthur Altmeyer, whom I'd come to know in NRA. Altmeyer, likely, also, had something to do with my appointment in NYA. I made a favorable impression on him in NRA. He and I were close associates for the next, oh, goodness, thirty years. I suspect that he had a part in my coming into NYA and I should have mentioned that earlier.

G: What about the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and Aubrey Williams?

C: To the best of my knowledge they were good friends. That relationship developed, however, after I had left NYA. Aubrey enjoyed developing political relationships. I'm sure that after Johnson came to Washington as a member of Congress that Aubrey would have cultivated Johnson and Johnson would likely have cultivated Aubrey, because Aubrey was still, up through 1939, in charge of the NYA and it was a large and politically useful institution. I feel sure Johnson

would have taken advantage of his relationship with Williams, and that Williams would have taken advantage of his relationship with Johnson during that time. It was a close enough personal relationship so that over the years Aubrey would come to see Johnson when he came to Washington. And as I previously indicated, Johnson visited him when he was ill and dying in his last year here in Washington.

G: I want you to go into that story in some detail, but I wanted to ask you another thing or two about Aubrey Williams first. Did he ever talk about Lyndon Johnson as NYA director or characterize his work in that regard?

C: Not in conversations that I had with him. I have the impression that he and Lyndon were friends and they saw each other from time to time. LBJ had made a very good impression on Aubrey, but it wasn't very long, remember--summer of 1935 to 1937--until Johnson dropped out of NYA to run for Congress in 1937.

G: Yes. Did you ever hear that Aubrey Williams didn't want him to run for Congress because he didn't want to lose him as state director?

C: That wouldn't surprise me, but I never heard it.

G: I gather there was also some sort of coordinating committee, WPA coordinating committee, in Washington that had the power to approve or disapprove NYA projects.

C: That was later. That was, I would say, much later. I would say it was a year or so after the founding of NYA.

G: What was the procedure when you were there?

C: Well, you see, our effort in the early days was to tell the colleges and universities, and the state school systems as well, because the program extended to high school students, that money would be available under specified circumstances. And these circumstances included definition of the kind of work that individuals could be assigned to, the hours that they could work, and the rate of pay. The procedures included, in addition, the manner in which they would submit their statements as to how many had worked how many hours and at what rates, and how they would be reimbursed, or how there would be an advance made to the institutions against which they would subsequently report. We were helped a good deal in all of this by the WPA offices. They handled a lot of the administrative routine for us of receiving the forms and making the payments.

G: Was there a problem with, let's say, a program or a site or something in Texas that Lyndon Johnson was interested in establishing and the Washington office was balking on it?

C: Not in my day. Dick Brown would be the guy to ask, I would suspect.

G: Was there a policy on blacks then? You had some southern NYAs of course.

C: Well, there was a decided interest in creating opportunities for blacks. Aubrey came from Alabama but he was an honest-to-God liberal. His heart was always in the right place; he was always for the underdog; that was the nature of the man. One of our advisers in the NYA and quite a person--influential with Eleanor Roosevelt and influential with Aubrey Williams--was Mary McLeod Bethune. She was

very much interested in seeing to it that the blacks had a full share of opportunity, not only in the South but elsewhere.

You ask, "Was there a policy?" You must recall that 1935 was before the time when national policies prohibiting discrimination had been promulgated. Fairness and equal treatment for blacks depended on the good will of people that were trying to do something that wasn't quite the accepted thing, and that was to include the blacks in. That surely was the intent of the people who headed up the NYA. I'm talking about Aubrey Williams and about the members of the NYA advisory council. It was certainly my personal view, and it was a view I had held in Richmond, Virginia, before I came to NYA. If you had asked any of us we would have surely answered, "We must make sure that the blacks get fair treatment in the South."

The exchange of letters that you have shown me between Lyndon Johnson and myself evidenced the prevailing point of view.* I was suggesting that one or more Negroes serve on the NYA advisory council in Texas, and LBJ was responding that such an appointment was not possible, that "they would run me out of the state if I appointed a Negro to the Texas Advisory Council."

My letters to LBJ on this issue were typical of the attitudes that prevailed. But if you say, was there a policy in any formal sense in 1935, no. To the best of my recollection there was not. Franklin Roosevelt issued his first fair employment practice order later; in 1941, I believe. In the intervening years, 1935-40, it

was just the instincts of people who felt that [blacks should be treated fairly].

Another person who was brought in as an adviser to the NYA--and who participated in several meetings in the early days when we were really thinking out the program--was Walter White, then the executive secretary of the NAACP. He was the whitest black man you ever saw. I have a vivid recollection of meeting him at the old Municipal Auditorium, when he came to one of those meetings. I knew he was to be there as one of our guests and I was looking out for him. In came this blond, rather curly-haired, blue-eyed man. I had no idea that I was greeting Walter White. It was quite a surprise. But he was a bright, keen-minded fellow.

G: Was there much friction between the NYA and the WPA?

C: Yes, in my day there was some friction. I suspect there was a good deal more later on. We were small and young in the early days and WPA was to provide an administrative infrastructure for the NYA operations. And we thought that they sometimes confused "help" with "review" and "control."

For example, on one occasion I developed an order to be sent to all state youth directors. I was anxious to get it out promptly and I had prepared it carefully. After several days I found it still in a review office of WPA headed by Don Stone, who was at that time in charge of WPA's policy and procedures review office. Subsequently he was in the Bureau of the Budget, and more recently served as head of the School of Public Administration at the University of Pittsburgh.

I called Don and asked, "What's become of the order I sent up there? I am in a hurry to get it out." He replied, "Well, we haven't gotten to it yet." I was irked and I told him so. I remember Don Stone replying to me--I had known him well--"Look, you've got an important office, you have a big title, but I have the mimeograph machine and I decide what's going to be run on that mimeograph machine. So this will get out when I get ready." (Laughter)

G: I gather that LBJ also had problems with WPA.

C: I would expect he would.

G: Perhaps some of it was a philosophical difference, the WPA feeling that it was more important to get adults working first than younger people.

C: Well, that was the whole bent of WPA. They had no particular concern with the younger people. It was up to the NYA to sponsor that cause, and that was what we endeavored to do. That was, I'm sure, a cause of friction, but remember that my stay there was limited in time. NYA was enjoying a relative honeymoon during my term there. The more trying problems come later.

G: Anything about the program in Texas, in particular?

C: The program in Texas had hardly shaped up before I left. It was just developing.

G: Well, shall we shift to the next contact that you had with him? I think that was after [he was elected to Congress].

C: I guess the next incident that I had was when, as I recall, he and Mrs. Johnson, very shortly after he was elected to Congress, within

sixty days I believe after he came to Washington--I say "came" to Washington, but I should say returned to Washington--came to my home for dinner one evening. I then lived in Arlington County. My recollection is that there were just the four of us at dinner, he and Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Corson and I. It was a very pleasant social evening, just a sort of a congratulatory note on his having been elected to Congress and coming back to Washington.

The one bit of conversation that sticks in my mind is his description of the financing of his campaign. He explained that he had announced for Congress a day or two after Congressman Buchanan died. He at that point had a Ford car that was owned by either he or his assistant NYA director. He told how they traveled throughout the district around Austin, going to every crossroads, meeting everybody they could, and tacking up posters, "Johnson for Congress," on every telephone pole. When they ran out of money for gasoline, posters and food, they borrowed money. The thrust of the story was that by the end of the campaign, when he was elected by a very close vote, he had borrowed the equivalent of one year's congressional salary, which at that time was ten thousand dollars. This to him was a cataclysmic debt, as he described it. He was not then the man of wealth he was pictured to be later. In fact, I had the impression in those days he and Mrs. Johnson had nothing more than his salary to live on. But this was the nature of the story he told and of the pleasant evening that we spent together. I didn't see him after that for quite a while.

G: Did he talk about the issues in that campaign?

C: No. He was talking about political maneuvering, how important it was to get around to those county seats and shake hands with people and get to know all of those people. There was a certain amount of emphasis, as I recall, on the fact that he hadn't been back in Texas very long. NYA had brought him back to the state and he'd only been there a year and a half.

G: You mentioned something earlier about moving his residence from one area to another.

C: My recollection was that he was a resident of another congressional district and that within the Texas state law you could announce and run for office in another district. That you can check on to be sure. But it was my recollection that his legal residence in Texas was in another congressional district than that represented by Congressman Buchanan.

G: Well, let's see. I don't want to miss anything. Did you have any contact with him during the interim years before you were appointed chairman of the Task Force on Income Maintenance?

C: Practically none. My recollection is that I ran across him at, oh, a cocktail party or a meeting occasionally. We might speak to each other across a room or shake hands but that would be about all.

During the years from 1936 to 1945 when I was in the government, I was a career man in the government. I had little, and no self-initiated, contact with members of Congress. If I were advising a young man growing up in the government today, I would advise him that

that was a bad approach. But that was the philosophy of the group that I grew up with: a career man didn't seek political favors or political associations. I had some contacts because I used to present the budget for the Social Security Board and then when I was director of what's now Social Security, I presented the budget before congressional committees. I got to know members of the Appropriations Committees. But that was about all the contact I had.

G: Do you want to trace back your appointment as chairman of the task force?

C: Well, that was I think in 1964. I had retired and I was teaching at Princeton University. I received a call one day from Charlie Schultze, then an assistant director of the budget, asking me if I would serve as chairman of this Task Force on Income Maintenance. Somewhere along the line at that point I talked to Wilbur Cohen about it, who had been a close personal friend for thirty years. I have the decided impression he may have told me that he had suggested I serve as chairman. He may have called me before Schultze called me and told me that he had suggested it and that he hoped I'd accept.

In any event, I accepted Schultze's invitation. It was arranged that I would come to Washington, and he and I would talk about who would be the other members of the task force, how we would put together a balanced group. When I visited him in Washington and we were talking about who would be the members of the task force he interjected, "You know, I had quite a surprise the other day." I

responded, "What was that?" Charlie Schultze was not, at that time, a fellow that I had known well. This was the beginning of my acquaintanceship with him. I said, "What was that?" He said, "Well, I had to prepare letters for the President to sign to each of you fellows who are going to be chairmen, and I took them over for him to sign and he was going through the pile. There were thirteen of them. He got down to the letter to you, and he looked up and he said to me, 'You know, I used to work for that guy.'" I was amused during my subsequent weeks as I noticed the extent to which my status was leightened among Bureau of the Budget staff members!

Subsequently the task force worked diligently for a period of three or four months. Then, when each of the thirteen task forces had completed their work and we were to submit our reports, it was arranged that the task force chairmen would dine with the President in the White House Mess. It was a notable evening, but not for the reporting of the task forces. Each of the thirteen members of the task force sat around the table. The President was quite late getting to the dinner; his place at the table was vacant for a while after we had had drinks and sat down. It was explained that he had an appointment upstairs in the White House and he'd be down as quickly as he could. And he did. When he came in I had the good fortune to be sitting right across the table from him at a U-shaped table. He was sitting at the head of the table and I was in the vortex of the U. When he came in he shook hands with each member of the group seated around the table. When he came to me he recognized

me despite the fact that we had not been together in ten years or more. "My," he said, "you've been around here a long time." I replied, "Yes, sir. I've been around here about as long as you have."

With that pleasantry the dinner went on. Each task force chairman made a report telling the President in a five-minute statement essentially what the task force had done and what recommendations would be presented. He listened politely but we certainly got the notion that he had other things on his mind. After all task force chairmen had been heard, he started talking about Vietnam. That was the most impressive thing of the evening. I would say that our conversation on Vietnam lasted an hour or two hours. The thrust of it all was that he was saying to us that, "I've tried this to get out of Vietnam; I've tried that; I've tried everything I can think of. What can I do next?"

He was not talking to a group that could advise him on Vietnam. We were not experts in that field by a hell of a long shot. I remember that one of the group, whose name will be left unmentioned, was saying, "Oh, Mr. President, you've done great. You've done great. All you've got to do is just keep at it." The speaker had no real expertise on the problem; he was unequipped to judge whether the President's course was "great" [anymore] than the rest of us. The task force chairmen were from other fields: Joe Fisher on natural resources, John Gardner on education, me on income maintenance. The individual who spoke up was no more an expert on foreign-military affairs than any of the rest of us, but, as I

suspect, many others do, when in the presence of a president, he agreed with alacrity.

As we were leaving I had a brief moment or two when I was standing with the President alone. I took the occasion to express my appreciation of the fact that he had visited Aubrey Williams, who was ill and dying of cancer. Aubrey was poor and he was living in a small, cheap apartment in the Bethesda area. The President had driven out to see him on two or three occasions. I felt this, with all the demands on his time, was a very generous, considerate act, and I said [so]. His reaction was, "Well, what would you expect me to do?" Not discourteously in any way, but still: "What would you expect me to do?"

Then we left. John Gardner and I walked from the White House up 17th Street. I was spending the night at the Metropolitan Club and John was staying at the Hay Adams House. I remember our both expressing very considerable--amazement?--not quite that, but we were greatly impressed with his obvious, deep concern about Vietnam and his seeming involvement in Vietnam to the exclusion of almost anything else.

My understanding was, when the task forces were set up, that this was an effort on President Johnson's part to take a look at current programs and to obtain suggestions for the framing of his own programs. He didn't want just to carry out John Kennedy's programs. This was a reason for creating these task forces. But by the time the task forces had gotten through, he hadn't lost track of them,

but he was so deeply involved in other things that much that the task forces did, to my way of thinking, never received much attention.

G: Let me ask you one more thing about this meeting. How did you know he had been out to visit Aubrey Williams twice? Had you heard it from Aubrey Williams?

C: I have a hard time answering that question. I'm sure I heard it from mutual friends of Aubrey and myself. Aubrey's widow is a friend of mine to this day. We saw her socially and we had a number of mutual friends. I'm sure I learned it from mutual friends, not from Lyndon Johnson.

G: I gather in his last years Aubrey Williams was very concerned about Vietnam, also.

C: Yes.

G: Very upset by it.

C: He would have been. I didn't see Aubrey the last year or so of his life. I was then in Princeton; he was in Bethesda. The only contact I had with Aubrey during the last years of his life was at breakfast in the Tudor Hotel in New York one morning. I was sitting in the dining room when Aubrey, staying at the same hotel, walked in and we had breakfast together. But I think this was even before he left Montgomery, Alabama, and that would have been before he came back here. He wasn't back in the Washington area long after he gave up the newspaper down in Montgomery, Alabama.

G: But you've never gotten any indication of his opposition to Vietnam?

C: No, I never had any discussion of that with him. But I would have bet that would have been his position.

G: Now let's go back to the task force. Did Charlie Schultze, when he told you about the task force, tell you that it was to be completely confidential?

C: I don't recall that he did.

G: I mean, they were, weren't they? You didn't talk about your meetings and they weren't publicized. Weren't they pretty much secret?

C: I don't believe so.

G: You don't have any [recollections]?

C: I don't have that recollection. I don't believe so. We met on a series of occasions in Washington. I didn't consider this task force such an important endeavor that we would announce it in the newspaper each time we met. We met and discussed quite informally but I don't recall it as a secret exercise.

John Gardner and I had a dinner party in New York for all the other chairmen. He and I had been closely enough associated that we were talking to each other about our respective activities. He and I concocted the idea that it would be a good thing if we got the other task force chairmen together for an evening and exchanged notes. John hosted the party at one of the hotels or at the Century Association in New York.

One or two fellows around the White House invited themselves. I say that with no complaint; it was logical they should. Walter Heller, for example, thought he'd like to sit in and he came, one or

two others. As I recall Charlie Schultze came. Then we just spent an evening together talking about what each of the task forces were doing and what common currents there might have been. I don't feel that we made any great contribution by the meeting, but it was useful.

G: What about the selection of other members of the task force? What sort of things did you look for in choosing the other members?

C: Well, in the income maintenance field we sought a balance between people whose primary concern was with the problems of the aged, people who were concerned with the problems of the unemployed, and people who were concerned about the problems of widows, orphans and dependent children. We sought people who were concerned with the insurance approach to these fields and the public assistance approach to these fields. One of the people that you probably are going to interview at some time or have, Wicky--

G: [Elizabeth Wickenden] Goldschmidt, yes.

C: We wanted Wicky on the task force because she represented the public assistance approach. In fact, she claimed she was the only one on the task force that knew anything about public assistance. Whenever we came to a problem in that area she rather assumed we should accept her judgments!

Wicky is an old, old friend. When I first came to the NYA in 1935, I shared an office with Wicky. She was an assistant to Aubrey Williams. She knew Lyndon over the years better than I did, because she married a guy from Texas, Tex Goldschmidt, who was working in the WPA when they met in the late 1930s. She knew Lyndon much better

than I did in those years. But in those early years--1935-40--I doubt that Wicky had much contact with LBJ.

There were no political pressures brought to bear on choosing task force members. It was wholly a question of who could we get that really knew the different areas we would study. One person included on the task force, a good capable guy, was a labor man, Stan Ruttenberg. Stan was needed because he represented the labor point of view and in unemployment insurance that was important. Another member, Bob Lampman from the University of Wisconsin, was an economist who was particularly interested in the problems of poverty. He was good. He was intelligent. I had never known him before, but Charlie Schultze had.

G: Was there any geographical balance at all?

C: No, no effort. My recollection is that there were nine members. Wilbur Cohen had a voice in how we'd put together the task force. Wilbur was then an assistant secretary in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

G: How about the insurance industry? Did they have representatives on there? Was it balanced in favor of, say, one group or another? Did you feel ultimately that the [task force was balanced]?

C: Yes, I thought it was a reasonably balanced group. There was no representative from the insurance industry, but my recollection is we had some contacts with the insurance industry.

When I'd been in Social Security I'd had very good relationships with the insurance industry and particularly with a fellow in the

Metropolitan Life, Reinhard A. Hohaus, H-O-H-A-U-S, who was the spokesman for the insurance industry on social security matters. He had been assigned by the Metropolitan to London for a period of years during the development of the British social insurances. He brought to this country an understanding of it that few people in the insurance industry had. Moreover, he had status in the insurance industry, he was respected by his peers in the industry, and he was respected by the people in Social Security. They knew him and they respected him. They didn't agree with him always but we recognized that he knew what social insurance was all about. We could have consulted with him if we felt the need but I don't recall that we did.

It's aside from the subject, but I had a telephone call from him when I was in Miami this past winter. A lady at the Brookings Institution who is writing a book about Social Security had called him to ask questions the answers to which he had decided I knew better than he did. How he'd tracked me down, I don't know. But he found me in Miami and we talked on the telephone for an hour. He must be well in his eighties now.

G: Is that right? Where does he live now?

C: Somewhere in Connecticut.

G: Did you choose the other members? Was it a group effort?

C: It was a group effort. Wilbur Cohen, Charlie Schultze and I.

G: Did you do it over the phone or did you get together in a meeting and do it?

C: I met with Charlie Schultze on one occasion. I can't recall quite how Wilbur Cohen's input was made, but he had an active part in it.

G: Wicky Goldschmidt sounds like someone that he would have selected because they're close.

C: Yes. But I knew Wicky equally well over the years. Of course, she was closer to Wilbur at that time, because Wilbur was active in the government and I was no longer associated with it. Wicky served as a lobbyist for the social service groups over a long period of time, and came to know a lot of people in Washington.

G: During that meeting that you had at the White House Mess, did Lyndon Johnson ask questions of you?

C: Yes, I would suspect--

(Interruption)

G: Did he ask questions of the chairmen during that meeting, when they made their presentations? You said his interest was obviously on Vietnam, but did [he question you]?

C: At that point in the meeting his interest, his mind, was obviously on something else. We didn't know at first on what; he revealed later what he was consumed with. He didn't ask many questions, nor did Hubert Humphrey or Bill Moyers, who also attended. There was a limited amount of questioning, not much. My recollection is Charlie Schultze was also there. Of course, they would wait for the President or the Vice President to raise a question, if they would but there was not much questioning. It was quite an informal

session. Each chairman made a brief statement and moved on to the next one.

G: You said that Charlie Schultze did most of the work on the commission, is that [correct]?

C: He did the staff work on setting up the task forces. He was the one that we dealt with on tactical problems from time to time. He sat in on some of our meetings, as did Otto Eckstein. Do you know that name? Otto Eckstein was then a member of the Council of Economic Advisers. He was a young Harvard professor who looked even younger than he was.

The kind of problem that we would ask Charlie's advice on would be relationships with the Treasury or other departments of the government. We had direct relationships with HEW, but as to relationships with Treasury, Labor or HUD, we sought Charlie's help as to who could provide the expertise we needed. We were especially concerned with our relationships with Treasury.

G: Sure.

C: I think it's fair to say that this group was one of the first that really seriously considered a negative income tax. On that proposal the Treasury had very decided views. Stan Surrey, then assistant secretary of the treasury for tax policy, had a fellow on his staff sit in on some of our meetings. It might have been a more difficult relationship but Stan Surrey was a really first-rate fellow, an intelligent, well-balanced, reasoning guy. He was not enthusiastic about the idea of the negative income tax, but still [he] was the

sort of fellow that would listen to your arguments and would reason it out with you.

G: Was the idea to try to get Treasury's support for these things?

C: Yes. It wouldn't have been much help to have recommended a proposal in which the Treasury would have been deeply involved, because the negative income tax, as was then considered would be administered by the Treasury in conjunction with the personal income tax. We talked with the Treasury representatives as to the feasibility of administering such a proposal.

G: But were your major recommendations considered favorably by the administration, by the departments?

C: Nothing much was ever done.

G: Really? As you look back in retrospect, what were the most significant things that the task force recommended?

C: I can't really tell you now.

G: Was it a question of not making a firm recommendation until you got, let's say, Treasury approval in the case of this negative income tax?

C: Don't let me overstress the Treasury relationship. They were involved in the negative income tax problem, but we were also making recommendations in fields unrelated to Treasury's primary concerns. In a sense, we were appraising proposals that Wilbur Cohen, as assistant secretary of HEW, had developed even before the Task Force came into being. And we were supporting recommendations in the public assistance field that had been proposed before. The

negative income tax and, as I recall, some recommendations on unemployment insurance,were the proposals that originated within the task force.

It seems to me a commission of this sort always does canvass all of the ideas that have been germinating and are being vigorously proposed. It accepts some and rejects others, and in the course of discussions the Commission adds some new initiatives. A commission's final recommendations aren't all conceived out of the brains of that one group at that one time.

G: I guess one of the things I'm wondering is, was there a reluctance on the part of the task force to come way out in front of the administration and advocate recommendations that you knew he would not accept?

C: No, there was not. It was a balanced enough group so that they weren't likely to agree on recommendations way out in front of the administration. Wilbur Cohen was, if anything, out in front of the group. One member of that group, John McConnell, then president of the University of New Hampshire, had long been a student of Social Security, but he was more conservative than the rest of the group. He was dragging his feet much of the time. Someone else on the group--who I do not recall--served as a counterfoil to Stan Ruttenberg, on proposals to liberalize unemployment insurance. All in all it was a balanced enough group so that to come out with substantial agreement it wasn't likely to be "way out in front." Our report

did support most of the proposals that represented the "next steps" at that time.

G: How often would you meet?

C: My recollection is we met in the old Executive Office Building, for a day, about every two weeks. Mike March, who had been loaned to us by the Bureau of the Budget, served as a staff man. A couple of people were loaned to us by the Social Security system--Ida Merriam who was director of research for the Social Security system for quite a period of time. My recollection is that we had to drag her along in a lot of the discussions. She was always finding reasons why we couldn't propose this or that.

G: Did it become for you almost a problem of lobbying to advance the predominant thinking on the task force. For example, on the negative income tax, how far did you get with Treasury in this case?

C: Well, we came out with a firm recommendation on the negative income tax and it was not one that the Treasury would have voted for. They were advisers. Our recommendation for a negative income tax would never have come from the Treasury. But our discussions with the Treasury representatives were quite useful. We framed a negative income tax that was feasible in the eyes of the Treasury. "If you're going to do the wrong thing, do it this way," was about their attitude.

G: Which was which way? What were they [advocating]?

C: I can't recall the details. It was a question of the amount of income that would entitle an individual to a negative income tax,

and the amount of the payment. Then much of the discussion had to do with who would make the payments, Treasury or Social Security? If it was to be the Treasury, the payments would be tied up with the personal income tax. The Task Force wanted these payments looked at more as a positive contribution to the income of the individual or the family.

G: Did you have much dealing with Schultze on this matter?

C: Schultze never took an active part in framing with policy proposals we would make. That came out of the Task Force. Schultze aided by finding a representative of the Treasury to talk with us about a proposal in the administration of which Treasury would be involved. It was more of that kind of a relationship.

G: Did you involve people on the Hill, also, say, staff?

C: My recollection is that no active members of Congress were brought in.

G: Were task force members ever called upon to go down to the Hill and lobby for recommendations that had been [made]?

C: No. The task force ceased to exist when we made our recommendations. It was up to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to press them.

G: Anything else on your task force experience that you feel is important?

C: No, I really don't feel that the task force--and I'm not sure whether the other task forces were more successful--made a great contribution.

But let me add that to my way of thinking, public administration is always, in considerable measure, a problem of advancing prevailing opinions, pushing the opinions of people within the governmental agencies, the opinions of the relevant interest groups and of the general public. This is an important task in a democracy. I think the task force contributed to that end.

The people who were concerned about the various aspects of Social Security were interested in what the task force was going to say. The labor groups, for example, wanted us to propose what they deemed important. Burt Seidman, a spokesman of the AF of L, appeared before the task force, if I recall correctly, and presented points of view. The representatives of numerous other interest groups were very anxious that we should come out on the right side, as they saw the right side.

We contributed to the advance of opinion in the field of income maintenance, but I don't think the task force had any cataclysmic effect. I think I served on other governmental commissions over the years that had greater influence.

G: Well, I certainly do appreciate your time.

C: I hope it's worthwhile.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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