

INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 8, 1989

INTERVIEWEE: OWEN DONLEY

INTERVIEWER: Michael Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Donley's home, Alexandria, Virginia

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G: Well, let's begin, Mr. Donley, with a brief sketch of your background and an explanation of how you became involved with Senator [George] McGovern's initiative on food and hunger.

D: Well, I was born and raised in a small town in South Dakota, and practiced law for a number of years in South Dakota. I was active in McGovern-type politics, worked on several of his campaigns prior to his being elected to the United States Senate.

Senator McGovern was elected to the United States Senate in 1962, took office in early January of 1963. I became his administrative assistant in 1963 and moved here from South Dakota with him in 1963. I was his administrative assistant from 1963 until 1970. Then I left the Senate staff and became involved in some of Senator McGovern's political activities. Then I returned to the Senate staff in 1975 as director of legislation and held that position until Senator McGovern left the Senate in 1980.

I don't know if you're interested in what I've done since then or not, probably not.

G: No, I think . . .

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D: Oh, all right. I then went down to the general counsel's office at the Department of Agriculture and was the attorney to the general counsel's office at the Department of Agriculture until my recent retirement in May of 1989.

G: Senator McGovern had served on Agriculture Committee for--

D: Well, Senator McGovern was served on the Agriculture Committee all the years that he was in the United States Senate.

G: Did he have a long term interest in food and hunger before this, let's say before [inaudible]?

D: Yes. In 1960, Senator McGovern ran for the United States Senate against an incumbent senator by the name of Karl E. Mundt. He lost that election; it was a close election. He lost by about fifteen thousand votes. The incoming president, Kennedy made--he was a congressman at that time and was defeated for the Senate.

President Kennedy made him the director of the Food for Peace program in the early years in the Kennedy Administration. He came back and ran for the Senate in 1962 and was elected, and so he thereupon or prior to campaigning for the U.S. Senate in 1962 resigned his office at the White House as director of the Food for Peace program and that was really the start, I think, of his long-term interest in undernourished, hungry people although [it] was more on a global basis than it was on a national basis.

G: His interest was on a global basis?

D: As director of the Food for Peace program--that's commonly known as PL 480 and that [was] generally involved donations to what we would now call Third World countries but

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we called them underdeveloped countries at that time. And so we either gave food to those countries or else sold it to them for local currency, but that was not a direct--his position at that time was not directed toward any national effort in hunger in America.

G: Any insights on what directed his interest to the United State's problems?

D: Well, I think that it basically stemmed from a mid-1960 visit that then-Senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania and Robert Kennedy--trips that they made to Mississippi.

G: In April 1967?

D: I think it would be about that, yes. Those two senators were members of the Senate Labor and Welfare Committee and were not members of the Senate Agriculture Committee, but I would say that Senator McGovern's national interest was sparked by talking with those two senators and then moving on from there.

G: Any insights on the discussions that they had?

D: Well, Senator McGovern was close to both of them. Probably closer to Senator [Robert] Kennedy than to Senator Clark. I know that Senator Kennedy had been in our office and talked to Senator McGovern about that although I don't think I sat in on those conversations.

G: Was it seen as a regional problem, as largely a southern, rural [problem]?

D: I think it was perceived that way, yes.

G: Let me ask you to just analyze the feeding programs that existed at the time and how well they worked both in terms of the concept and the delivery services.

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D: Well, the largest feeding program was a surplus commodity program and that was operated by the Department of Agriculture under Secretary Orville Freeman. That dealt mainly in things that had come into the inventory of the Commodity Credit Corporation and were in surplus and were taken around on a makeshift delivery system to the poor areas of the country.

I'm not sure if we had a food stamp program at that time or not, but if it was, it was very ineffectual and there were no free food stamps; they cost money and my recollection is that it was a very ineffective, very unfunded program, and I think that was largely because the magnitude of hunger in America just wasn't perceived by the Congress or by the administration in the very vastness in which it eventually turned out to be.

G: Were these programs largely designed to deal with surpluses in agriculture rather than nutritional needs?

D: Oh, yes. An analysis of nutrition didn't really come around until, in my judgment, until the mid-1970s with the publication of a document prepared by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs called "Dietary Goals for the USA."

No, it was just peanut butter and lard and corn meal, edible dried beans, stuff like that.

G: You mentioned the conversation with Senators Kennedy and Clark after their visit. What were some of the other incidents or events that sparked Senator McGovern's interest in this as a problem?

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D: Well, there were a number of Indian tribes in South Dakota where--and he was very familiar with those because he'd campaigned on Indian reservations. He grew up with knowledge of the needs of the American Indian people and so he had that plus just a genuine humanitarian interest in seeing people fed. But I would say that the Indians in South Dakota for which he had very personal knowledge was one of the huge sparks that excited his interest.

G: In May of 1968 the CBS documentary "Hunger in America" was aired. What sort of impact did this have?

D: That was a big one. I remember that program; I remember that program very well. And I can say for sure that I witnessed his reaction to that program and he became very, very steamed up on the whole idea of what to do about this problem. I think he probably perceived the magnitude of hunger in America perhaps more than other members of the Congress.

G: In terms of the Senate Agricultural Committee, how would you appraise their interest in it?

D: Probably very minimal. The chairman of the committee was Senator [Allan] Ellender; Senator McGovern on that committee was still considered a junior member. Senator Ellender ran the program with a pretty tight fist and the committee was farmer oriented rather than people oriented or hungry people oriented. In other words, the business of the committee was considered to be farm programs, not feeding programs.

G: Were there any other advocates on the committee?

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D: I think that Senator [Walter] Mondale was on the committee by that time and he was one. I mean it's been so long ago I just don't really remember the makeup of the committee, but it was a southern-dominated committee.

Senator Ellender [of] Louisiana, was the chairman; the ranking member was Senator [James] Eastland of Mississippi; Senator [Herman] Talmadge was on the majority side. And on the minority side was Senator [George] Aiken of Vermont and Senator Milton Young in North Dakota were the two Republicans with the greatest seniority. And I don't recall any burning interest that they had in this issue.

G: Was there an element of civil rights controversy in this issue?

D: Not that I'm aware of, no. I don't think so.

G: Marian Wright Edelman testified and I guess met with the senators when they came down.

D: Sure.

G: Did she have any association with Senator [George?] McGovern?

D: She was a close friend. Pete Edelman was an aide to Senator Kennedy and Marion Wright was a native Mississippian and she was a good friend of Senator McGovern, I think, as the years went on. But I'm not aware of any interplay or conferences with Marion Wright and Senator McGovern at least in 1966-67 or 1968.

G: Did the CBS documentary result in a lot of mail on the subject?

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D: Yes. The office was flooded. Our office was flooded with mail because for one reason or another Senator McGovern was already publicly perceived as associated with this issue. Why, I'm not quite sure, but our office was flooded with mail.

G: How about the poor people's march?

D: Well, the poor people's march was--can you refresh my memory. What year was the [poor people's march]?

G: 1968.

D: 1968. And that was Resurrection City and all that business. That had a great impact. That had a great impact. Ralph Abernathy had seen Senator McGovern a number of times during that period and he had been down to Resurrection City. I know that. So I would consider that as having quite an impact on him.

G: In April 1968 Senator McGovern and thirty-eight other senators called for the creation of this Select Senate Committee on [Nutrition and Human Needs] . . . Any insights on the background?

D: Sure, sure. I can address that. A man by the name of Bob Choate came to our office a number of times advocating the creation, I think originally, of a joint committee. And [he] met not particularly with me because I was the administrative assistant rather than in the legislative area of the office, but he did meet all the time with Ben [Benton] J. Stong, who was a legislative aide to Senator McGovern at the time--and Bill [William C.] Smith.

(Interruption)

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D: Bob Choate [?] was coming up to our office a lot and he talked to Ben Stong and Bill Smith. Now Choate was trying to advocate--he was a wealthy man with a great social conscience and he was advocating a joint committee which would mean House and Senate members. We felt that we'd do more with a select committee just on the Senate side; the Senate at that time being considered slightly more liberal than the House.

Well now, Stong was a wily old legislative veteran. He was a great friend of mine and he died in 1979, 1978 maybe. But the business of drafting the resolution creating the select committee was left up to Stong. Stong had been around the U.S. Senate for so long that he knew virtually every senator and called them by their first names and all this business. And I knew him very well because I worked with him every day, and he was crafty and wily and all that sort of thing.

See, by all rights such a resolution would be referred to the Agriculture Committee. Well, that was a dead end because of Senator Ellender's opposition. Stong ended up drawing that resolution in such a manner that the first time the word "agriculture" appeared was way down buried in the resolution and Stong's object was to get that resolution referred to the Labor and Welfare Committee where it was perceived as having a better chance of being reported. Stong was not above making a deal with a parliamentarian. I'm not sure whether he did it or whether he didn't, but in any event the resolution was drawn and the resolution was referred to the Labor and Welfare Committee. And Bill Smith was incidentally an employee of the Labor and Welfare Committee, and it had fairly smooth sailing over there.

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Another thing, the resolution didn't ask for any subpoena power or it didn't ask for any money, and so it therefore bypassed the Senate Rules Committee; the Senate Rules Committee being considered to be a pretty conservative place also. So in any event this resolution creating the select committee did not have any great legislative pitfalls and it was reported out of the Labor [and] Welfare Committee and passed the Senate in fairly good order.

G: Did Agriculture oppose it? Did Ellender oppose it?

D: He didn't oppose it on the floor, no. I mean, I just don't think anybody had any idea of what the implications were. It was just considered to be a do-good thing and let it sail, and nobody asked for any money.

The Senate Rules Committee has to fund all committees so it was referred to the Senate Rules Committee for funding. This would be in the fall, I think, of 1967. I sometimes get my years mixed up but I think I'm correct. And so we had to fund the committee from the fall until the following February because the Rules Committee usually funded all the committees in February of each year, and I think we asked for \$150,000 or something and the Senate Rules committee gave us \$25,000, if my recollection is correct; it wasn't very much. All that did was just kind of put Bill Smith as the staff director of the committee and then when it came around the following year, which I think would be 1968 for funding, they asked, the committee asked--incidentally, the Senator McGovern was elected the chairman of the committee and Senator [Jacob]

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Javits of New York, I think, was the ranking Republican member. I know that Senator Mondale was on the committee.

So we came around and asked for \$250,000 and I think the Rules Committee slashed it by at least \$100,000. That's normally the end of the road. Whatever the Rules Committee says is about all you're going to get, but McGovern took this to the floor of the Senate and made a big issue of it and in almost unprecedented form the Senate restored the \$100,000. So the committee was then operating in 1968 with a total budget, I believe, of \$250,000, and that really was the first time the select committee was in business.

Now you understand that a select committee can't report legislation. It's just investigative and makes recommendations to appropriate committees for legislation to be reported. So it turned out that it was conceived this way, that it was more of an investigative-type of committee and it then went into operation and started making these trips that are very well known or became very well known. Am I going ahead of--?

G: No that's fine.

D: My recollection of the first trip that the committee made into impoverished areas was in Beaufort County, South Carolina, although it may have been Collier County, Florida, but it was either South Carolina or Florida. And there was quite extensive news coverage that went along with the television crews and this type of thing. They went into--well, we'll take Collier County, Florida--migrant worker's camps and things like that and discovered just appalling conditions as far as children, rickets, nothing in the refrigerator,

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people eating peas and beans and water, and that was about their diet. Obviously the local people in those states were up in arms, and I recall the governor of Florida apparently didn't know the committee was coming down there and felt that that reflected badly on his state.

I know that Senator [Ernest] Hollings went with McGovern, Javits and company to South Carolina, and Senator Hollings went with them as a skeptical member of the party and didn't really believe that such conditions prevailed in South Carolina. After he saw them, he became a fairly enthusiastic supporter of the work of the committee.

G: Did you yourself have any involvement with this?

D: I did not go on any of the trips, no. No, I mentioned to you before that on the Florida trip they met a man by the name of Gerald Cassidy who eventually became a staff member of the committee. No, I did not go on any of the trips.

G: Did your work in Washington involve this select committee to any extent?

D: Well, only in terms of my being the administrative assistant of the office, and I was doing things that largely administrative assistants do rather than legislative assistants. We had a fairly small staff though and it was a closer-knit staff, so I knew what was going on and I was a very close friend of Ben Stong's. I knew what was going on all the time although I wouldn't consider myself an active player in the game, but one who was looking on from the sidelines and cheering.

G: Was there any counterpart in the House?

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D: Gosh. Fred Richmond, a congressman from Brooklyn, ended up as a counterpart. I don't recall him as a counterpart at the time, and I don't think he was.

G: What did the committee accomplish?

D: Well, the committee focused nationally. Its principal thing was focusing national attention. Incidentally, the committee then did go to some of the areas in New York City and Harlem and other places, so this was not an exclusive southern-oriented thing.

There was food stamp legislation at that time but the food stamps all cost money and the people we were talking about were people with incomes of anywhere from thirty to eighty dollars a month and they couldn't buy food stamps. So one of the things that the committee accomplished was advancing legislation to the Agriculture Committee that eventually expanded the food stamp program to the point where there were free food stamps and for the purchase of food stamps there were bought at a substantially lower rate than was currently enforced. It recommended and established a school breakfast program and a free milk program, and I'm not sure but I think the WIC program--Women, Infants, and Children--came from recommendations and findings established by this select committee.

G: What was the White House or the administration's attitude toward this initiative?

D: The people at the White House who were involved in this situation were Daniel Patrick Moynihan and then-Secretary [of HEW] [Robert] Finch and Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin. I think that the White House wanted to appear as though it were in support of all this business and wanted to be perceived as being supportive but didn't

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want to spend any money. General White House involvement, as I recall it, was, number one, "Let's get this off the first page;" number two, "Let us indicate that we're supportive of this whole thing but don't spend any money."

Now somewhere along in this way was a White House conference on hunger which was generally under the operation and supervision of [inaudible] who was immensely supportive of what the committee was doing but of course he was not a White House operative and then he became the director of the Nutrition Institute at Tufts and by this time the Agriculture Committee was rewarding him by furnishing most of the money for that venture.

G: Was the Nixon Administration more receptive to expanding these programs than the Johnson Administration?

D: I wouldn't say so; I would say that they were less. I don't know exactly during the Johnson Administration what the people were doing at the Department of Agriculture, but I do know that Secretary Freeman and some of his staff people had taken trips of their own especially into the Appalachian section of West Virginia to assess and look at these conditions.

And I would perceive them anyway as being supportive but not--this whole thing got to be a point of proportion. I remember at one time the Nixon administration wanted to commit three hundred billion dollars to the food stamp program and McGovern's attitude was that that would only scratch the surface. Though it sounded like a lot of money, it just wasn't any money at all. And then we came to a point in the mid-seventies

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when virtually somewhere between 65 and 70 per cent of the whole budget of the Department of Agriculture was food stamps and feeding programs.

G: Was there an issue within Congress regarding how the feeding programs would be distributed, whether they would be to all regardless of need or whether they would be to the neediest or the poorest of the poor, just in terms of who would be targeted for these programs?

D: Well, a great deal of controversy developed over whether you could have food stamps and commodity distributions in the same counties. Everything was done on a county basis and as a general rule, except on Indian reservations, if you had food stamps you couldn't have commodities. That really doesn't answer your question but the perception in the Congress was that this was a program for starving people and that's where the target should be.

But I go back to this business--the really kind of inside story on this whole business was the actual creation of the committee, how you can use Congress, how you can use the committees in Congress if you have enough savvy and have been around long enough and know how to operate that you can do something one way that you could not do at all another way.

G: Did Stong have the support of the leadership on that? The majority leader?

D: Oh, yes. That's possibly partly because the leader at that time was Senator [Mike] Mansfield and Stong was a Montanan and a close associate of Senator Mansfield as well as Senator [Lee] Metcalf of Montana. I can't really give enough credit to Stong on this

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whole thing because he was just a wily old staff member who senators respected. If any senator had any question on any problem regarding agriculture, Ben Stong was the first one they'd call.

G: Did Senator Clark have a role in [inaudible]?

D: I don't think so at all, no. I think Senator Clark was a member of the select committee. But I don't recall him going on any of the trips although he might have gone on that Florida or South Carolina trip.

But see, Senator Clark had a tough campaign to run in 1968 in Pennsylvania, and then everybody went off and started running for president too. Senator [Robert] Kennedy got in it and then after Senator Kennedy's death, McGovern himself got in it; so there were all these competing things for people's time.

And then the committee, the select committee in its later years got all involved in this nutrition issue, which is a completely different issue. They also got involved in the housing issue and things like that. I mean, the number of public housing units that were created and periphery things to what they originally started out for, and it had a real broad mandate, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs.

G: You mentioned the study, the direct dietary--

D: Oh, yes. "Dietary Goals for the USA." I'm not so sure that still isn't the--at one time it had the record for sales and distribution of anything ever printed by the government printing office, and I'm not sure that that record isn't still intact.

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And that opened another big can of worms because of all the food interests in the country because the dietary goals started in with this business of eating more chicken and fish and less meat and so then all the ranchers are raising cane; oh, my God, it was a real mess. And the egg people and the milk people and this, that and the other thing, and cholesterol became a big issue at that time.

In other words, long before we're talking about what we're talking about here in 1989--this goes back into the--I would say that the "Dietary Goals for the USA" was published about 1975, 1976, but right in that area, and so it's sort of come around full swing. What the McGovern committee was advocating in the mid-seventies has now become almost an accepted national health program today.

G: Were the agricultural interests opposed to this program?

D: Oh, sure. Well, by and large unless you were raising beans or if you were raising eggs--if you were a chicken farmer or if you were an egg man or a beef man or a milk man--because all his business was talking about high concentrations of fat in our diet. And we had grown accustomed to eating thickly marbled steaks and the more thickly marbled the better the steak. And, yes, the rancher-feeder operation became very strong on that issue and it was a very strong and a very hot political issue in a state like South Dakota where that type of thing predominates.

G: How did Senator McGovern deal with that issue?

D: Well, he took it on. He just took it on and--I guess maybe we better put it another way. The ranchers, the beef producers and such, had never been political supporters of his

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anyway; the farmers had. He always did very well on the farm vote but never did very well in the rancher vote. But we did some toying around with the language on it, and I did that myself with the executive director of the American National Cattleman's Association who was at that time a man by the name of Bill McMillan, who was later the assistant secretary for marketing in the Department of Agriculture in the Reagan Administration. And we changed a few words around to make it more acceptable to them. In other words, I think we changed "avoid fat" to "eat leaner cuts of meat" which accomplishes the same thing but did it with a positive rather than a negative, and so that mollified that political opposition somewhat.

G: How about the egg lobby there?

D: I don't recall the egg lobby in any great form because I don't think that eggs were connected with cholesterol to any great extent at that time. I think that all developed later.

You see, you have to remember that in about 1980 the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs got folded into a subcommittee of the Committee on Agriculture. See, by 1980 the committee--it used to be the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry and then it became the Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, and Nutrition. And that's the way the committee is denominated today, but I think that was only since 1980.

G: This reduced the committee's effectiveness?

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D: Yes. In my judgment, yes. Although you know, Senator [Patrick] Leahy of Vermont became the first subcommittee chairman, and he's always had an active interest in this issue and overall I would say it diminished the effectiveness that the select committee had shown but still had a strong advocate in Senator Leahy.

G: It did give the committee the power to initiate legislation.

D: That's right. That's correct.

G: Was there any legislation that came as a result of this?

D: I don't think I'm a proper person to address myself to that in any specific thing because I was no longer in the Congress at that time. I was no longer an employee of the United States Senate at that time.

G: Anything on Lyndon Johnson's attitude toward these programs while he was president?

D: Well, I think that President Johnson's commitment to the War on Poverty was carried over and I think he had a substantial commitment to the work of this committee. It was probably foreshadowed and diminished somewhat by the divergent points of view that President Johnson and Senator McGovern had on the Vietnam War. So I think had that not been an issue that the commitment of the Johnson administration would have been greater. I am not so sure who was handling that sort of thing at the White House. Could you refresh my memory?

G: It was Charlie Murphy.

D: It was Charlie Murphy, yes. I guess that's right, Charlie Murphy was. And then Charlie Murphy was--let's see, Charlie Murphy was at the White House and he was also secretary

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of agriculture for a short time. Well, I can say without fear of contradiction that Senator McGovern's relations with both Orville Freeman and Charlie Murphy were very, very cordial, as they were with John Schnittker. I think we probably saw--

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G: --thought you saw Schnittker more than the secretary himself.

D: Yes. See, by that time John Schnittker was the under secretary of agriculture. He was an assistant secretary to start with, I think, and then became the under secretary which at that time was the number two man in the department, there being no deputy secretary of agriculture at that time. But Schnittker and McGovern got along very, very well because they were both scholarly types; they both came from academia and they had a good rapport. John Schnittker came, I think, from Kansas State University; Senator McGovern had been a professor of history in a small school in South Dakota.

G: Anything else on this issue that we have not covered?

D: Well, I think we've covered as much as I can intelligently address. I can tell you to emphasize that the unsung hero in this whole scenario, in the creation of this whole committee and behind it, was Ben J. Stong who really--. Bob Choate was a legislative neophyte and Bill Smith was a young man who was just making his mark in the Congress. But Stong had been in the Congress so very, very long and had so many associations and so many contacts and knew all the tricks, and from a staff point of view, I can't say enough about Mr. Stong's efforts in this whole thing.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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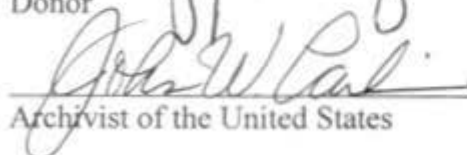
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