

INTERVIEWEE: BETTY FURNESS

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. MC COMB

December 10, 1968

M: First of all, to identify the interview, this is an interview with Miss Betty Furness, who is the special assistant to the President for consumer affairs. The date is December 10; it is 2:10 in the afternoon. We are in her office in the Executive Office Building, Room 100. My name is David McComb.

To start off with your background, according to my information you were born in New York City in 1916 and educated in New York City and New York area. Is that right?

F: Correct.

M: You then had a career in the 1930's and afterwards as a movie actress, on stage and radio and also in television. You are famous, of course, for commercials for Westinghouse. You have had your own shows, Penthouse Party, Success Story, Meet Betty Furness, Ask Betty Furness. And then all of a sudden, to the surprise of the entire nation apparently, you were appointed as special assistant to the President for consumer affairs. So my first question is, why and how were you selected? Why did you come up?

F: Well, I think we have to attack this from a couple of angles. First, let's say, why did the White House offer me the job? It was the White House; it obviously was not the President who made the telephone call to me. I received a call on the fifteenth of February, 1967, at six o'clock at night; the operator said, "The White House is calling," and I almost dropped

the phone right there, because I had never had a call from the White House. It was John Macy, and John Macy outlined this job. I picked up a pencil because I realized I should be making notes because I would want to refresh my memory later because I was just so shaken that I knew I would forget things. I found that when I hung up after ten or fifteen minutes of conversation I had written "consumer interests" three times on one piece of paper; that's all the notes I had made. I was more rattled than even I knew. But Mr. Macy explained what this job was. I did know Esther Peterson who held the job at that time. I had interviewed her on a couple of radio and television shows. And so I knew what the job was and I knew what it was that she was doing. Frankly, I didn't understand quite what Mr. Macy wanted me to do. I don't believe he came right out and said, "We want you to replace Esther Peterson," because I think I probably would have died of sheer shock. But I talked it over with my then fiance, now husband, and we both decided that I had better find out a little more about this job.

It just happened that I was flying through Washington three days later, so I called Mr. Macy's office and asked if I could come in and hear more about it. That was a Friday, and then he outlined the job in much more detail, and in point of fact the President had given his consumer message of '67 the day before. So I had the consumer message to read and I had the idea of what it was he had in mind for the year. Well, I then went back home again and talked this over with a couple of friends, my fiance, and I talked to my good friend Walter Cronkite about it because I rely on his judgment quite a bit, and I remember well he said, "You're not thinking of not taking it, are you?" So Monday morning I called Mr. Macy and said I was taking the job. I didn't think I was qualified

for the job. But I have long had the theory that if somebody else thinks I can do something I had better have a pretty good go at it. And if the President of the United States, or if someone close to him, thought that I could do this job, it seemed like certainly a worthwhile challenge.

Now, why they asked me to do it I'll be quite honest with you I don't know to this day. The nearest thing that I can figure is that the President wanted to give this job quite a bit of light. He wanted it to be conspicuous. Therefore, he went to somebody who was indeed conspicuous; because qualified I wasn't, conspicuous I was. I think that what they hoped was that the image from television would carry over. In fact, Mr. Macy said something to that effect; I'm not just inventing this. But the suburban housewife was used to the image of me standing beside a well-stocked refrigerator, and I think they thought that at least the image would be that I was involved with consuming, if not consumer problems, that people associated me in a kitchen in a home. I think I have a certain amount of believability. They didn't say that, but I say that; I think that's my boast of probably why the commercials worked well for all those years, because when I started doing commercials I wasn't a sales person, you know. I learned that job out in front of God and everybody just as I did this one. But I think perhaps they sensed a believability within me and they figured that I could go out and sell this program, sell this idea, sell Congress on getting behind the President's legislative program. Beyond that I don't know of the reasons they might have picked me.

M: Did you have any prior background in political work?

F: Now I would like to go into that because in a sense I wasn't quite as ill prepared as the press felt that I was, for this reason: Westinghouse took

me to the political conventions in 1952. I did the commercials right in Convention Hall at both conventions. This was the first time the conventions had been nationally televised, and certainly the first time I had been even in the neighborhood of one, let alone in the same hall. Since I worked at those conventions and again in '56 and '60, right in the convention halls each time, I began to get a feel of, well, politics obviously is what they were dealing with there. When I wasn't doing commercials, if I had just done one or if an important speaker was coming up, I ran out into the house with a couple of cameras and would take pictures of the politicians. I became really very interested. My studio was adjacent to the news studio, CBS news area, and I used to run in and ask Walter Cronkite, which is where I met him, you know, what did that mean and what is this significance, and somebody would always answer me. So I began to be interested in the political world. When I had been with Westinghouse for eleven and a half years, I was tired of that job, and I quit them on election night in 1960, and I determined at that time that I was going to take a whole new tack in my career. I knew if I did one more commercial that I would be forever damned as being "the lady who does commercials," and then I would get no other job doing anything, that that would be my total association. I had it enough anyway, and may I tell you, still have. People don't make White House jokes with me, they make Westinghouse jokes with me. Even today I can't seem to live that down.

So I determined that I would do no commercials. I had lost all interest in acting. And it left me with really the real world to deal with, which is what I wanted to do. I became, I'm sure, through being at the conventions, very interested, not in the political world necessarily, but the whole world around me. Well, I had to eat, I couldn't just, you

know, read newspapers and say Isn't the world exciting? So I figured I would try to communicate what was going on in the world through the media that I was used to and knew how to work in, through radio and television. The industry did not clamor for my services, but I did get a very good television show on a local channel in New York. Through a fluke it was put on as a daytime program, and it was a question and answer show with four experts each day, and it was put on as a daytime show. I was the moderator. The questions were phoned in by the television audience, and it was I who determined which questions would be asked and I asked them.

M: This was the "Ask Betty Furness?"

F: No, it wasn't. This was called "At Your Beck and Call." Now, through the fluke that I mentioned, this show was put on in the daytime, and it ended up as an evening show; the channel was put up for sale, and a few weeks later when their evening programming ran out, they put this show down in the evening simply to plug a hole, and it gave me exposure, ninety minutes a night, five nights a week. So I had some tremendous exposure just in the New York area, and I became fascinated with the guests on the program, with all that they knew about all kinds of subjects. So my head was getting a little fuller than it had ever been. When that channel was subsequently sold and we went off the air, I started a radio program for CBS; it started out as a three times a day, five minute show called "Dimensions of a Woman's World"; now obviously I picked all the subject matter for these three shows a day, fifteen different subjects a week. Obviously I was getting involved to some degree in consumer interests, as I was in other interests of women. But I was getting fairly liberal education about many things. But that show was later cut down to once a

a day. Then they took that off and kept me at CBS, changed the format, and called that program "Ask Betty Furness." That was a less satisfactory program, where people wrote in questions, anything that was on their minds, and we selected them and they were researched, and I read the answers. It was not a very interesting show, and I gave it a minimum amount of time. I had been trying very hard to get into the news area. I wanted to be a reporter in television. And I did not make it. They wouldn't have me. They kept saying it was because of the association with Westinghouse and commercial people weren't welcome in the news department. Then they also said I had no background in journalism which was very true. They failed to point out to me that I was woman, which I already knew, but I think this was part of the reason they didn't want me--they say they want women, but they don't really.

M: It's a male domain.

F: It sure is. So for all these reasons, you see, I had been building up, I had been trying very hard to find something that I could grab hold of, be interested in, and I had resisted, as I say, some more lucrative kinds of things because they just bored me, and I could manage to get by on what I was doing. So obviously I was extremely open-minded when this offer came, and you can see that it was a very easy one for me to accept.

M: Did you do some work with Head Start, too, in that period?

F: That was my only other contact with the White House. Because I was reporting on CBS, I was invited down here the day that Mr. Johnson announced project Head Start. I had never been to the White House, and I was terribly excited to be here. And I thought, what could I do to, in effect, thank them for inviting me down. I could talk about Head Start on radio, but I didn't think that was quite enough. So it occurred to me that we might use my talents as a saleslady to try to recruit volunteers to work

in Head Start for the summer, and I thought, who is available in summer! College girls, that's who's available in the summer. And they like to think of themselves as junior homemakers, they would enjoy working with young children. So I introduced myself to Sargent Shriver and asked if he would like me to go to colleges and recruit for Head Start and he said, "That sounds like a good idea," and why didn't I talk to that man over there! So I went to that man over there who was their public relations man, and someone overhearing me said, "If you do that, would you mind talking about VISTA while you are recruiting." So I said, "Well, that's not half as good, that's twice as good, because this means I'm offering two programs to interested young people and if they don't want the one, they may be interested in the other."

So I went to eight or nine colleges in Boston and Pittsburgh that spring. I don't think it was terribly successful, because the only people I was talking to were people who were predisposed to do that kind of thing or they didn't come hear me. The audiences were small. I don't know if I really got any actual recruits or not. But the following fall the VISTA office called and said they would like me to go around ahead of recruiting teams to various cities, a couple of days ahead of the team, and be on every radio and television show in town just saying the recruiters are coming and explaining what VISTA is. Now, this is obviously a much better idea because there are many more people who are eligible for VISTA than those who were in college, you know, older people, men, women, children, all ranges, all economic backgrounds, all educations and social backgrounds. So I did that. I ended up going to about thirty-five towns; the one where I was busiest, I remember well--I went to St. Louis, and I did thirteen radio and television shows in one day and got

the seven o'clock plane out of town. It was a busy day.

M: Were you effective with this?

F: Well, they told me in that particular--you know, I never knew, because I was a couple of days ahead of the recruiting team, so I never talked to anybody. All I did was leave these words flying out in the air behind me, and I had no idea how effective it was. But they did say that in St. Louis, the day after I did that big job, that the recruiters could not go out for lunch the day that they opened up the office there, and they credited me with having at least brought the people in to talk over the situation.

Back to plug up all the answers as to my political background. Oh, I was asked to a woman doers lunch, I believe it was Mrs. Johnson's second woman doers lunch. But I think that was because perhaps of the Head Start and VISTA thing. And six years ago in '62 I used the format of that television show, the phone-in television show, to help Abe Ribicoff in his campaign for the Senate. We did a telethon at the beginning and at the end of his campaign, and everyone in his office thought it was tremendously effective and might have been really quite influential in his winning the election. So in '64 I contacted the Democratic National Committee and said, "I've got this trick I know how to do, which is to run a telethon, and would anybody like it?" And they explained to me that they weren't set up that way, but if they could find somebody in trouble they would let them know and they could then contact me. As a result of that, I did a telethon for Senator Frank Moss in Utah. I did not know him prior to that, but I checked on him, found he was a good man, and told them out there how to set it up and I produced and ran and emceed the telethon. That same year they were looking, in '64, for a citizens committee for Johnson-Humphrey.



Oh, I forgot one other minor contact I had with the political world. In '64, I had to figure out a way to get back to the political convention because I had never missed any, and CBS radio sent me and let me report on my radio show, and I had literally met Mrs. Johnson there--"How do you do, Mrs. Johnson." You know, that's all.

Then when they were looking for a citizens' group for Johnson-Humphrey, they apparently wanted a nonpartisan, bipartisan type of group, and they called me and asked if I would appear, if I would join this group, and I said, sure I would. And we had one meeting in Washington at Kay Halle's home; it was an all women's group, thirty-five women; some had come from very distant points in the country. We had a meeting, we talked about what we could do in our own areas and regions to try to get out the vote and urge people to vote Democratic. And then we came over to the Cabinet room to be greeted by the President, and it was quite a moment because I thought, gee, we'll be lucky if he comes in at all, because I've always figured that the President was a busy man. Before I knew him and since. And we waited some ten or fifteen minutes and he did come in and having kind of a show business clock in my head, I thought, well, how long will he spend with us! I figured three minutes is good, five minutes would be marvelous. And there was a clock right in my line of vision and I watched, and the President talked to us for fifty-five minutes. It was one of the most exciting experiences I have ever had because it was my first exposure to him, and I think exposure is the right word because he comes on so strong and with such power that it is really a great experience to listen to him, and he told us how it was to be President. I wondered at that time, "Who needed it?" when he was through, but it was a very moving experience.

M: Did he just generally talk about the job?

F: Talked about his job. This was not long after the Bay of Tonkin incident, and he told us how he was concerned about the boys and how when his phone rang in the middle of the night, you know, he would pick it up and say, "Did the boys get back?", and his really deep concern for the boys who were involved in the war-type activity that was surrounding that particular incident. I met him, of course, that day; he shook hands with everyone. But that was literally my only contact with him prior to my being offered the job.

M: But up to your appointment, then, you did have a good background in consumer affairs?

F: I had more of a background than the average housewife. Don't forget I had the full background of the average housewife, in spite of the fact that I said that my maid did the grocery shopping. You know, I was a pretty grown-up lady and I had run a couple of households during my lifetime. But then I had more information than I was given credit for, I think.

M: Was it true that you asked your housekeeper the price of eggs?

F: No. The day that the appointment was announced I said I didn't know the price of eggs, and I didn't. I did not buy my groceries at that time. I never would if there was any way I could avoid it, any way I can get somebody else to do it I will never buy them. I do buy them now, but I didn't think that was quite the sin that the press made it out to be. Little did I know-- one thing I did not know, I didn't know the price of eggs, but I also didn't know that I could have said any amount of money that came into my head and it would have been right some place in the country for some kind of eggs. That much I have learned since then.

M: Well, you did have a political connection, although perhaps not entirely--

F: I had served that one day. That was the entire functioning of that committee, that one day's meeting; we never met again.

M: You did have this background, so you didn't come in exactly unprepared.

F: No, I didn't come in exactly unprepared. I did not come in, however, as some people--as an old friend of the Johnson family or as a political payoff because there was nothing to pay me for.

M: Then when you accepted this position did you have any conferences with the President as to what you were supposed to do?

F: Instantly. I called John Macy, I think it was a Monday, and said I would accept the job. He called back and asked me if I would come down the following Monday to talk to the President, and I said I couldn't, that I was going to be recruiting for VISTA in Boston and that the President would have to wait. I think Mr. Macy was some shook up, but they had made all the appointments for me to be on radio and television, and I couldn't tell them why I wasn't coming if I didn't. So I figured it would wait a day, which it did. And I came down Tuesday of the next week. I had met Joe Califano on my second visit here, and he had talked to me more about the job. So Joe and John Macy took me to meet the President. The President briefed me on why he thought the job was necessary, what he wanted done for the consumer. He had given his consumer message just two weeks before, so that he still had it in his memory and played back some of the things that he had asked for, said that he wanted attention paid to these things. The one specific thing that he charged me with that I remember very well was, he said, "I want you to go out and tell the consumer that his government cares about him, and I want you to come back and tell me what is on his mind." And that was really all the directive I had on how to run the office.

M: He didn't criticize your predecessor?

F: I don't believe he mentioned her. I don't recall, but I don't think so.

M: You know there is that story that the President and Mrs. Peterson had some difficulties over her outlook on consumer affairs and her support of the housewives' strike and a few other items.

M: I think, as near as I can glue it together from this distance, I think that there was probably some misunderstanding about her seeming backing of the boycott which she really didn't do. I think the real problem that Esther Peterson had was that she was first in the job, and that business was so horrified at the thought that anybody would be put in the job that she caught a lot of early flack that anybody would have caught. In fact, she might have caught less because she has a great deal of charm and it is possible that it would have been worse for someone else. I know I would have caught it if I had been on the job first.

M: Also at this point I might ask you, the President has made it a point to stress the hiring of women in government positions.

F: I reported on that on my radio show long before I had any thought of getting a job from him.

M: Was this policy really true? I mean, does he do this?

F: Well, he certainly did in my case. I haven't thought through how many there are. I don't think there are very many, but of course there is a real problem there, you know, to get women who are free to come to Washington, who have, let's say, any background at all. Even though I will concede that I have no background in consumer protection, I will tell you that I did have a background in talking. And if he wanted someone to talk, I think he got the right lady, because I did have experience in that, and that has been a very important part of this job, to get out and talk

to the public, talk to business, and I do know how to do that. And also, you see, I was available. Now, it is very hard to find women who have enough experience. For a woman to be desirable in some of these jobs she should be, let's say, thirty years old. You know, less than that may not be enough living or studying or whatever; by the time she is thirty years old, she is married and she has some small children. What's she going to do? Bring her husband to Washington, bring her children to Washington? That isn't the way our society is made up; that's not the fabric of how we work. Women and children move with husbands, husbands and children don't move with women. So that makes it difficult--to get women who are at all qualified and who have the availability and flexibility to move around. Now, he was lucky, in asking me, that I had no family ties at the moment. So I could move down here the next week and never give it another thought.

M: How did you go about finding out what the consumer was thinking? This is one of his charges.

F: Right. The first thing I did was to settle down into this office and learn what it was about. I was very lucky in that the man who was my legislative director, Leslie Dix, had been here for a year and a half or so with Mrs. Peterson. And he was very well informed on the whole activities of the office. And he is a very nice man. He is a very gentle man. And he really took me by the hand through the first few months and explained everything to me. He asked me if I would like to address the CUNI, the Credit Union National International is really what it stands for, and I had to ask him what a credit union was. I mean, I was that ignorant. He told me, and I addressed them. It was like going to school, having him explain everything to me. So for the first few months I did just that, and I read

14

the mail, and of course I read everything that was published about consumer problems. I knew some myself. Eric Sevareid did an editorial shortly after I got the job, he did an editorial on CBS news in which he indicated that if I could just get repairs done I would be doing very well. Well, that joke was made a couple of times. Somebody else said that if I just got the stuff repaired that I had sold originally, I would justify my entire job. Eventually it became a task force study under the President to try to figure out what to do about the repair business. I thought it was a joke at first, but it turned out to be so real that we had to apply ourselves to it. So I learned a good deal from the mail as to what was bothering consumers. Then after a few months here, I started to move out and talk to consumer groups, after about four months.

M: These would be groups such as--?

F: Well, they were consumer organizations around the country, but I talked to other kinds of groups. I had been conned into doing an appeal for the United Fund in Akron which is something that doesn't fit into this job. Liz Carpenter asked me, and I didn't dare say no. So I did that. But I always turned those meetings inside out. When I was through talking, I would say, "Now, tell me what is on your mind. What is bugging you?" And the ladies told me, and very soon I was able to see the general trends. After a few meetings it was hard to surprise me as to what bothered them.

M: You could almost predict what they would say.

F: Yes. Some of the things they talked about there was nothing I could do, some I didn't think there was any point in trying to do anything about, I didn't agree with them as to the necessity, and others I did. But then there was at least one large area where I never heard from the public at all as far as complaints are concerned, and that's the area of credit.

15

People don't write to the government to say that they are in money trouble. In the first place, a lot of people who are in money trouble don't know this office exists; you know, the poorer the people, the worse trouble they are in and the worse credit jams they've gotten themselves in. If they know that I'm here and the government cares, they haven't got the stationery or the know-how to write the letter. And more important than all that, they don't want to admit that they are in trouble. It is my personal belief that when people are in financial trouble they feel very guilty about it, and they feel that they have made some terrible mistake. I have learned since I have been here that it is seldom their mistake. Somebody has handed them a contract that they couldn't read, terms they couldn't understand, and they've made deals that they couldn't possibly see through.

M: When did you discover that this is a great area that people do not talk about?

F: Well, it sort of came upon me, because Mr. Dix had been talking about credit areas a lot, he is well informed on it; and of course we were working on the Truth in Lending bill which pertains to this area, and he would tell me how terrible the problems were. I suddenly looked up one day and said, "But nobody's writing about it." And then I put the answer together myself. So I have not reacted just to the mail or to what I have been told, because I realize that I am not told everything. But you don't have to rely on the mail; the mail will tell you how irritated people are. And then also I found out I could affect the mail. I let a blast loose one day at the unsolicited credit cards, and I had never had any complaints, or a minimal few complaints, about unsolicited credit cards. But once it was in the paper that I said I was opposed to them, then everybody wrote me and said that they were, too. So I could cause mail that way.

M: I see. Well, then, you got into your new job, and Mr. Dix was here to help you. What was your first problem? Did you have to go down to the Hill?

F: The very first thing I testified on was the amendment to the Flammable Fabrics Act when I had been here three days.

M: Do you know anything about flammable fabrics?

F: I did by then. You see, the appointment was announced on March 4, and I didn't come down here until the first of May. Now, really every week of that time I was down here one day a week working with Mr. Dix, getting briefed, and they got together excellent books for me, briefing materials. And wherever I went--I was doing my radio show daily and running around lecturing because I had some contracts--I took these books with me on planes and back and forth and read all I could so that I was pretty well briefed about the flammable fabrics situation. And then maybe two days before the hearing, I went over to the Commerce Department and the then, I believe, assistant secretary--his name was Holloman, marvelous man, he isn't there any longer--ran me through a session of how it would be. And I have to admit that it reminded me of working the Goodson and Todman shows. You know, if you did "What's My Line?" or "To Tell the Truth," they would always have you come in and play the game with the people in the office, and that's what I did. I sat down and played the game with the people in the office. Holloman and his assistants and associates fired nasty questions at me to see what I knew. And then when I was through they criticized me just like a performance. I had tried too hard, and I had told them more than they had asked for, and Holloman led me down one terrible path to where he knew there was no end and he wanted to see how far I would go. So I got very good experience just from that literal



rehearsal; you know, I was wondering if I had ever left show business because it was like a rehearsal. Then I had the assistance of a young man who has been a long-time friend of mine, young Peter Benchley, who writes for the President. Peter wrote my testimony. I find that the Legal Office tends to write in legalese, and reading legalese is not my longest suit. I thought perhaps I would be more effective if I could talk more the way I talk. So we took a chance and asked Peter Benchley to take the rather stiff formal testimony and turn it into something a little lighter.

M: Did you concede in your mind an image of what you were to be? Were you to be the champion of the consumer or what? What did you think about yourself?

F: I don't think I had a personal image. My goal in the first few months was to try to let the country know that this office existed, just that it existed, never mind what it did, but that it existed--just what the President said, the government cares about the consumer. I figured after that, I was quite concerned that I have one crusade of my own so that when I left here I could say and they could say, "She's the one who 'blank.'" Now, I never did fill in the blank. Enough things happened, just came my way, so that I didn't have to develop something of my own. As Esther Peterson's crusade became the truth in packaging, I wanted one that was mine. And I was concerned that I might be here a year or two and not have anything to be proud of or to my credit. I obviously had no way of guessing that a lot of things would just fall into place while I was here and that I might get either due credit or undue credit for some of them.

M: The mere appointment of you and your name gave a great deal of publicity to the office.

F: Yes, that's right. But not total. You still had to get around to people who didn't read the papers for those couple of days, who didn't necessarily

know about it. But the only thing I kept thinking was there is so much I don't have to bring to this office, so much background in all of this area, what do I have to bring to it? And about the best thing that I thought I had to bring was my delivery, my literal delivery. That's why I have always been careful when people wrote my testimony or my speeches to try to make them sound like somebody was sitting there talking, because that's how you get attention. You can say something marvelous and bore people right into the ground if you are using the wrong language. So I tried very hard to make it more talking words, because it's people I'm dealing with, I'm not dealing with lawyers or educators; I'm dealing with people. So I tried to come off like a person.

M: Well, you apparently survived the flammable fabrics area.

F: I did. The amendment was passed, I survived the hearing, I was able to answer the questions, the members of the committee asked me a few questions just, I think, to find out if I could speak at all. They knew I could read, but could I speak? The questions weren't very probing, and I was able to answer them.

M: Are there any of the laws that were passed during this time in particular that you are especially proud of?

F: Well, I think that we did bring something special to the meat inspection law. That was a pretty good moment; of course, that was one of the President's bills that he had asked for. I was not asked to testify on that in the hearings on the House side. And just to put all of this into perspective, the House had a pretty poor bill by the time they had hammered it out, it was really very weak, it was more a bill in name only; it wouldn't have done much about inspecting meat. But just before that bill was voted upon, two congressmen, Smith and [Thomas S.] Foley [D, Wash.] came along with an

amendment that was much, much stronger than the bill and would have changed it and would in fact have made it a very good bill. At that same time, Ralph Nader had been talking about meat inspection. Nick Kotz had been writing about the problems in the meat plants. The public was beginning to catch on to this very unattractive messy situation, but the House didn't know that. And when they voted down this Smith-Foley amendment, they didn't realize that the public was looking. In fact, if you check the record on that, you'll find that the vote was very small and very few people were there, a lot didn't vote at all, and they underestimated the public interest in this particular bill.

A couple of days later, a little while after the House bill passed, I had declared that I was in favor of strong meat inspection, and Senator [Walter F.] Mondale [D-Minn.] phoned me and he said, "Look, I know that you are for a strong meat bill." He said, "I'm going to introduce a bill that calls for mandatory federal inspection now." That was much farther than the Smith-Foley amendment. He said, "Will you back my bill?" I said, "You bet I will." Now, at this time I realized what I had said, that I would go for a very strong bill, and I cleared this with the White House; I called Larry Levinson, who is my immediate contact over there, and I said, "Larry, I have told Mondale that I am going to back the mandatory federal inspection now meat bill. Now, that is my position, my personal position and the position of this office. But I think I should notify you that I am going to do that, because what is the White House position?" And Larry Levinson called back and said, "Your position is our position. You can do that with the blessing of the White House." This is the only instance where I cleared anything that I said or did with the White House.

M: On these other bills, then, you would just take your own position?

F: Well, what you do is, you see, the technicality on this is we pick our position here. Les Dix and I worked it out. We clear with the Bureau of the Budget. This always happens. You have to clear your testimony with the Bureau of the Budget. The Bureau of the Budget is informed as to what the White House position is. Now, there have been cases where I have, if you will, led the White House, where the consultations between the BOB and the White House have been for a middle of the road kind of thing, or not terribly strong, and we have gone out ahead of that. Nobody has ever told me not to. And I think we have led the White House a couple of times. This is the notable one.

Now, what happened was, after I got permission to do this, I went over to the hearings, and the only people there were the chairman and Senators Mondale and [Joseph M.] Montoya [D-New Mexico], who had a good bill but not as good as I felt that Mondale's was. And I read my testimony, and poor Senator Montoya almost had a heart attack because he had thought I was going to be for his bill. He had no idea I was coming out for the Mondale bill; and he said to me after I was through, "Miss Furness, I am confused here because the Secretary of Agriculture was over here two days ago and he backed my bill and now you are backing Senator Mondale's bill." And I said, "That's right." And he said, "How does that happen? I don't understand. Who speaks for the Administration?" And I was able to say I did, because I did. I had cleared it. And I think in that instance we--you know, it was pretty dramatic and I did establish that the White House was for something even stronger than the Department of Agriculture had been for. And the bill, the Mondale bill, was not the one that was passed. It was a compromise between that and

the Montoya bill, but we got a very good bill, and far, far out ahead of what the House had been fooling with.

M: Is that the one that is in the picture up there?

F: Yes, it must be.

M: With the President and Yuki, and people are standing around laughing.

F: Well, that's because the dog leaped up on the desk as the President was about to sign the bill.

M: This was the meat inspection?

F: Yes.

M: Well, that was passed in, what--1967?

F: Yes.

M: Then there are some other bills that came up which apparently bear your mark. How about the Truth in Lending bill?

F: Yes, I did a lot of work on that. I didn't testify--did I testify on Truth in Lending, I don't believe I did--but I worked on it an awful lot. I gave it a lot of publicity around the country. That's one I took out to the public. You see, we have a real problem about legislation. The public doesn't know what it is all about. You know, they say, "Why don't we hear from the public?" Well, the public doesn't know what bills are up, they don't know what "truth in lending" means. We talk about a radiation bill, they don't know what you are talking about. So in many of these bills I talked them up around the country, especially on television. I tried whenever I could to use television, because you just get to so many more people.

M: Is this a part of your job, to publicize these bills?

F: Sure. It is a part of my job to get the bills passed.

M: You do this--

F: By creating public interest in them and telling people to notify their congressman that they want the bills passed.

M: Well, now, your position is what--one of publicity agent?

F: No, that's not fair. That's really not fair. It was said that what this job was was public relations and there is public relations in any job that deals with the public. But I have done far more than public relations in this job. I mean, the President signed twenty consumer protection bills himself. Now, those didn't just happen. Don't misunderstand me, I don't want to take credit beyond what I really was able to do to help, but we did work hard here. I testified, I don't know how many bills I testified on, six, eight, ten bills, something like that, and the legislative office writes letters for my signature in very legalese fashion to the men on the Hill, to the Congress, telling them what we think; and if they are about to do something we don't like, we tell them. I've taken some of these things right to the public. In point of fact, when the meat inspection went into conference between the strong Senate version and the weak House version and it looked like the House might prevail there for a minute, I went right to the public, I yelled help! I said, "Get in touch." I sent out a press release, but I yelled help to the housewives. I said, "You tell your congressman you're not fooling about this." And one senator told me that he came back from his state, it was Senator [Norris] Cotton [R-New Hampshire], said that he came back to vote on the meat inspection bill because he was afraid to face the women in his state if he didn't. Because I got them so riled up.

M: So this appeal to the housewives or to the public in general is effective.

F: Yes. It is, if you can get them on a bill that has sex appeal.

M: What do you mean by that?

F: Well, a bill that--"dirty meat" any woman is able to understand. She is buying meat, it already costs too much, you know, she doesn't want to give her family bad meat. That's sex appeal. You start talking about truth in lending--truth in lending has a nice sound about it, but nobody knew what the bill meant. And the declaration of interest rates on an annual basis, you begin to lose people very quickly. You know, "What did she say?" And many of the bills have not had what we call sex appeal, and it has been harder to get the public to pitch in and say that they want them.

M: Well, now, do you help write the legislation?

F: No, never.

M: But your task comes then in testifying on the Hill supposedly from the point of view from the consumer?

F: Right.

M: As well as the point of view of the White House.

F: Right.

M: And you've got to have the support there?

F: Right.

M: Contacting consumer groups on a particular bill.

F: Right.

M: Generating public support.

F: Right.

M: Anything else, now? I'm trying to get some conception of the scope of your job.

F: Well, that's legislation. That's not everything. Now, that's--

M: I mean in regard to a bill.

F: Right. And urging the Congress to act on these bills.

M: You mean, contacting the congressmen?

F: Absolutely. On a couple of bills, I was even phoning them about their individual vote on the bill, if their vote was shaky.

M: Now, obviously, when you can get thousands of housewives to write to their congressmen, this is effective.

F: Yes.

M: All right, say you are working on some bill like gas pipelines, and you have a hard time generating public support.

F: I never did generate any public support.

M: What did you do then?

F: The best you can. If the public doesn't catch on, if you instinctively know they are not going to catch on because it's something that doesn't affect them immediately or personally, you've just got to do it on the merits of the bill. Then you are going to do your job on the Hill.

M: So you would call up a congressman and you would see them at a party or you would perhaps go to see them?

F: Right.

M: And try to persuade them about the merits of the bill?

F: That's right. And in some cases we would go over and talk to the man who had to schedule the hearings on the bills. You may have the best bill in the world but if the hearings on it aren't scheduled, it isn't going to get passed. So a couple of times Mr. Dix and I went over and talked to Chairman [Harley D.] Staggers, his committee handled many of the consumer bills, and tried to shake some of them loose.

M: It would seem to me that you would be in a weakened position if you could not draw public support. Is that correct?

F: Yes, that's true, but believe me when you say "natural gas pipeline safety," you've got the classic example of one that the public doesn't really



get hold of unless there has been an explosion in their neighborhood.

M: So what do you do then? Do you just say, "This is a good bill; you ought to work on it."

F: Well, the consumer groups are aware of these bills. They understand that they don't have to have a lot of pizzazz in order to be worthwhile, and they'll let their membership know and they will be behind them. But we have contacted consumer groups on occasion and said, "Now, this one is coming up right now. Get your people behind it and tell them to write such and such a committee, you know, and tell them that they are really for this and want a strong bill."

M: How effective are people like Ralph Nader who work sort of on their own trying to stir up interest?

F: I think he has been effective, extremely effective, especially--of course, he was notably effective in the automobile safety area before I came down here, you know all that. But I think then there was a period there where everyone was after him and saying, you know, what axe is he is grinding, what does he really want? And then when they couldn't find anything and found that he is pure, that he wants just what he says he wants--I think that he has personal clout.

M: Yes. Well, now, you are doing in a sense much of the same sort of thing except you are on the inside.

F: Yes, I have to be more careful than Ralph Nader does. You see, Ralph Nader can name names, he can talk dirty, he can be mean, he can say anything he likes. I might be tempted to do that, but I have to remember that I am representing the White House. I don't want to cause the President trouble, I don't want to be rude on behalf of the White House; I think you simply have to be more circumspect if you are representing the White House.

You see, anytime I open my mouth, people don't know who is talking. They don't know if it's I who is speaking or if it is the President. So I have to be very careful.

M: Does the fact that you are a woman and a woman of some glamor help you in this? Can you judge this?

F: It's hard for me to judge. It's a situation I have long been aware of--the liability of being a woman, not the advantage, because men really don't want to deal with women in the business world. They just are uncomfortable; they'd rather deal with other men. I have not really felt that it was either an advantage or a disadvantage. I think perhaps the one time I have been aware of it was when I testified, and I could sense the committee's feeling me out, trying to see if I really knew anything, asking questions that they knew the answer to, only to find out if I knew the answer, testing me, in effect. Well, I don't know that that's because I'm a woman or just because I was a novelty.

M: Has this sort of probing disappeared in your testimony in, say, the last year?

F: I think it has diminished to some degree, but then, of course, you also find that when you are testifying that a lot of the questions are not to get your opinions but to get their own on the record. So I am never sure why they are asking some of the questions, because they don't seem to be really getting anywhere with it. But by and large they have been very gracious to me, perhaps more gracious than they might have been to a man.

M: Are there any other bills that are outstanding in your mind that you have dealt with? You've mentioned meat inspection and flammable fabrics.

F: Gee, there are a lot. The National Commission on Product Safety I think is a reasonably important, really very important bill; that was to establish

a commission to look into products to see to what degree they are unsafe, and then they will make their own recommendations. But that was certainly a consumer bill because that's household products they are talking about. I think the automobile insurance study was very important. We will be hearing a great deal more about that. Then one other thing that wasn't legislation but the President, as I mentioned earlier about the repair problem, it became so enormous that we had to recommend that something be done about it. And the President set up a task force consisting of the Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of Labor, Chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, and this office.

M: Then did the pressure here come from the public on this?

F: Yes. That's what I get the most complaints about all the time, repairs, and I finally had to bend to that. That's a case where I had to give in to what I was hearing from the public because it is just so overwhelming that you have to react.

M: So in this case the public is leading.

F: Yes. The President ordered that study in his last consumer message of last February, and that study will be handed to the White House this week; that's a pretty good one.

M: Are the current hearings on automobile repairs a spinoff of this?

F: No, it's a separate thing, because these things are popping out all over. We list our repair complaints in three categories: appliances, television sets, and automobiles; and any one of those is larger than any other area of complaint that we get in the mail. When you put the three of them together, it is just staggering.

M: So you know you have a monumental problem.

F: That's right. And in our looking into repairs we had to start some place;

you couldn't start automobile repairs and home appliances at the same time. So we picked home appliances because they--you know, I don't know, we picked it. And now other people are beginning to zero in on the auto repairs, which I think may be worse than home appliances.

M: And the scope of this problem is what? I mean, it includes not only warranty, but guarantees--

F: It is a thorough study of warranties and guarantees which the Federal Trade Commission did with recommendations as to how they might be bettered. Then it gets into the complicated marketing system that we have today where, you know, years ago manufacturers had franchise deals and you went to your G.E. dealer or whatever the dealer was, and you were in effect dealing with the manufacturer right there. Now you go into a store and have your choice of twelve brands in the same store, and you try to get the fool thing repaired and nobody quite understands who is responsible; who is, is it the dealer you bought it from, is it the repair man who comes to your house, or is it the manufacturer? And when does one leave off and the other begin? Let's say, for instance, that someone argues that it's the dealer because the manufacturer gives the dealer an allowance to cover repairs. All right, a fifth of this country moves every year, so you move all your appliances away from the dealer where you bought them; now who's responsible? Some dealer who never saw you before? So there are great complications as to who is responsible, and that's long before we get down to getting the fool thing fixed. Just getting it repaired is another problem. Why are repairs done poorly? Why are they inadequate? Why are there not more good people in the repair business? So this has been a massive study. Commerce (dept. of) studied it from the viewpoint of industry and Labor, from the viewpoint of labor, etc. We hope we may have some recommendations for industry; that might start to ease all of this, but it is a very interrelated problem among many groups.

M: I suppose it would go back to original quality control.

F: Well, that would be nice. That's one place to start. It also can go back to design. They are beginning to design some products in modules now, you know, so that you just take out a hunk and replace it yourself and eliminate the repair man which is highly desirable.

M: Right. Is there any other legislation?

F: I think those are the major ones. The Interstate Land Sales Full Disclosure Act, that got thrown into the housing bill this year. This means that they can't sell the desert and say that you can move in, you know, that it is all ready for a retirement home. Clinical Laboratories Improvement, Fire Research and Safety Act, and a couple more, but I think you have hit the highlights.

M: All right. Now, beyond the realm of legislation, what do you get into?

F: Another area is dealing directly with business, which is very important because the question comes up, "Do you have to legislate everything? Must government control everything?" I am of two minds about this. Instinctively I would like business to do its own policing and shaping up, if you will. They certainly would rather do it; business cringes at the thought of legislation, control by the government. So, fine, let them go ahead and clean up their own house, I cry, and I have made many recommendations to them as to how they might in one way or another. There is also a strong argument for saying that that is never going to work, that you can get some of the people to do it; but because you can't catch them all in one net, that even the best intentioned people can't go out and catch the unscrupulous fellow around the corner, that maybe he will have to have legislation. I suppose that that is probably true; I have not

so said in the office; I have said the opposite. Because I see no reason at this early stage of consumer protection to hit them with everything you have; and if they can indeed clean their own houses and see the light about helping the consumer, then why shouldn't they do it? I'm perfectly willing to do it their way until it proves that their way won't work.

M: Are businessmen generally upset with you and your office?

F: They are upset--

M: Are they nervous about this?

F: Yes, they are very upset with the concept of the office, and they don't know why we need this, and the free enterprise system is perfect, and the competition in the marketplace will take care of all the problems, which is the ostrich viewpoint of this year--you know, it gets ridiculous, and the more they shout that, the more harm they are going to do themselves. If they will just, even listen to themselves as consumers, listen to their wives, they will find out that you cannot deal in today's marketplace without some assistance. This wasn't true thirty, forty years ago. Life was simpler, the marketing system was simpler, there were salesmen in stores. You are too young to remember, there were salesmen in stores, you could ask a question of a salesman and not only that, he could answer it.

M: Right.

F: And today if he's there he's been there since Tuesday, he doesn't know anything about what he is talking about or he may, in a discount store or supermarket, be nonexistent. So the consumer needs a great deal more help and information and care than they are getting. But business does not want to see it this way. There are a few enlightened businessmen. Some I think are figuring, if rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it, and are even

trying to help, because they see that this is definitely a moving force now. But there are few enthusiasts.

M: Well, now, part of your job is to ease the mind of businessmen?

F: Well, not to ease their minds so much as to get their cooperation.

M: I see.

F: And try to work together. If they admit they have problems, of course it is easier to work with them. If they don't, then talk them over and say, "Look, I think you really do have a problem, and here is where you are not giving the consumer the break that you could without any detriment to business."

M: Can you give me an example of where you have done this?

F: Well, I can't give you any notable success stories, because all of this moves very slowly. But the one thing we have asked for perhaps more than any other from industry is more information, give the consumer more information about what you are selling them, give it to them in a form that they can understand. That's terribly important. They say, "But we have instruction manuals. Nobody reads them." I said, "Have you ever tried to read them? Go read your own manual and you'll know why nobody reads them. It's impossible to understand. And nobody wants to feel like a fool. So they try to read it and fail and that's that." The light is dawning on this; the Whirlpool Corporation came out with a marvelous warranty a few months ago, and they did it as an open letter to Betty Furness on a full page of the Times. And they said that I had had some criticism of warranties and they didn't think I was entirely wrong and that they had torn up their old warranty and were putting out one in the form of a letter, very simple and easy to read, short words, which they have done.

Now I don't take credit for that warranty. I do take credit with having made this office conspicuous enough so that they saw the wisdom of addressing it to me, and that's a case of industry beginning to move in the direction that we are talking about.

Now, the funniest one--last December, I made a speech in which I suggested that industry tell us how long their product would last, that they would tell us design life. Well, you would have thought that I had asked for--I don't know, their grandmother's inheritance or something. They were appalled, absolutely appalled; they said they don't know how long it will last, and they gave me a lot of very funny answers. I understand that there was not a big corporation in this country that didn't send for my speech the next day, and that's the last I ever heard from any of them, because they saw there was no threat of legislation in it, and they just backed off and shut up hoping I would go away. Well, there has been some funny dialogue about it since then. One appliance company came in here and said, "Now, Betty, we can't tell you how long that stuff lasts. We don't know. We can tell you how long the one lasted we made in 1950 because we know it gave up in 1962, you know, it was twelve years, but that isn't going to help you about today's appliance; we don't have any way of knowing how long it is going to last. Who is going to use it? Where is it going to be used? How is it going to be used? I mean, you take a washing machine and you put it down in a damp cellar and you run it four or five times a day with a big family, that's going to use it up pretty quick. How do we know if it's going to be there or will it be in some elderly couple's kitchen with a geranium on top of it where they are taking very good care of it and they only use it once a week. How can we tell you how long it's going to last? Now, we



can tell you how many washing cycles it will go through." I said, "What did you think I asked?" "Oh, oh, is that what you wanted?" But nobody has ever come in and said, "Okay, our washing machine will go through so many cycles," or "our refrigerator is designed to last fourteen years with reasonable care. The door will fall off after ten, and the egg container will break at the end of six months," nobody has given us that information; they just don't want to. And I know they either have the information or could get it.

M: Of course. This is a logical question.

F: I think it's pretty reasonable. You see this lovely cartoon over here in the middle of the wall? It's a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, and I have my back to him, and he is labeled "U.S. manufacturers." And he said, "Now, really, Miss Furness, if I were to tell you how many rabbits I had in my hat, we would both know."

M: Now, in the area of dealing with business, have you done anything else?

F: Well, I have met with them endlessly. I have sent for them; they have to come in, and they would come in on varying levels. They come in with real problems; they come in asking me to lobby for them; during all of the trials with the meat business, the meat packers were in here every twenty minutes.

M: What do you tell a meat packer?

F: Well, I listen to them. These are trade associations that come in basically. I listen to them, and if I am sure of my opinion, I tell them what it is. I said, "It has been very interesting listening to you, but--" or "It has been very interesting listening to you, and I will do whatever I can to help," or "I will have to think this one through a little farther," because you obviously have to have all information and not just

the blatantly and sincerely prejudiced information of a trade association. I have had them come in just to do a snow job on me, you know, just to tell me how glorious their whole industry is.

I had one funny experience. The S&H trading stamp people asked if they could come in. They first asked me to go to their plant, their redemption centers, you know, a great big place where they have all this stuff. Well, I said I couldn't get there. So they came in here, and they came in at eleven one morning and as luck would have it, that particular day I got a letter in the mail at ten o'clock that morning that had been sent by the S&H Green Stamp Company to--it turned out a great number of people out in the Midwest. And it said, "Dear Mrs.---," I have the lady's name, "as you probably know, Betty Furness has been appointed special assistant to the President for consumer affairs. Now, Betty doesn't know much about trading stamps, and so we thought you would like to write and tell her how much you have enjoyed the benefits of trading stamps," etc., etc. Well, this lady had turned that letter over and on the back had written to me, "I don't like these people, I don't like trading stamps, I don't like how they do business, and I thought you might want to see this." So they came in and brought their consumer education expert and they told me all the marvelous work that they do on behalf of the consumer and how adorable they are generally. And when they were all through talking, I said, "Well, this has been most interesting (they had been there a good hour); thank you for all of this information." I said, "You know, when I came down here, there were people who said this was a public relations job, and it isn't, and if I thought it was I would not have taken it on that basis." "But," I said, "I do know a little something about public relations, and I am going to share my knowledge with you." And I picked up this

letter. I said, "Don't do this! This is bad public relations. How could you in your wildest imagination think that this letter would not end up on my desk? Don't pull any cheap tricks like that with me, because it will get you no place. And further, if you know me so little as to think you can get away with this and to think that you could write and tell somebody that I don't know anything about trading stamps, then you don't know me well enough to call me by my first name," which they had in the letter. So they were seen "sklunking" down the hall after that. That's really the only experience of that kind that I have had. They sent people to every single speech I have made since then, there has been somebody from the S&H Green Stamp Company in the audience waiting to see what I was going to say about trading stamps.

M: Do the businessmen send you presents?

F: No.

M: You know, it's common in the business world to send purchasing agents presents.

F: I'm not allowed to accept presents. They must know the rule here. I am not allowed to accept anything.

M: There is no attempt.

F: There has been no attempt whatsoever, not to entertain me. A few people wanted to take me out to dinner, but I think they thought that was something I would enjoy, and I resisted, because I didn't think it was something I would enjoy.

M: You've got to keep the businessmen, I would guess, at arm's length, really.

F: Right.

M: So you can listen to them, accept some of their ideas, and reject what you need to.

F: Right.

M: Which gives you flexibility you need.

F: Right.

M: To be the champion of the consumer. All right, now, beyond the realm of business, contacts with business, what do you do?

F: We have another area in this office of consumer education. This is one that I established, although Mrs. Peterson had started on it. I feel very strongly that a strong arm of this whole idea of consumer protection is involved in education, education within the school system and education to existing consumers. We believe here that the schools do a pretty fair job of turning out people ready to make a living, but they don't give them a clue as to what to do with the money after they have earned it. And certainly the world of spending money and of credit is more complicated all the time. It's not like when I was a girl, you saved up if you wanted to buy something and then you bought it, and the only two things in your whole life you ever bought, what we called "on time," were your house and your car. You didn't buy a refrigerator on time, nothing. You saved up and then you got it, went out and bought it. Well, obviously that has been reversed completely today. But nobody is telling young people how to handle credit, how much is enough, what to look for in a purchase, how to judge between one product and another. Mrs. Peterson had located a man named David Shoenfeld who had put on a good consumer education series of courses. It's not a course, it's consumer education ground into existing courses up at Lincoln High School in Yonkers, New York, and she had put him on here as a consultant. I brought him here as the full-time head of the consumer education office. He is not only the head of the office, he is the office, because we have very few people here. And he had done

extensive traveling, talking to schools, colleges, educators, about the concept of consumer education, and I pushed that as much as I know how. Because we are understaffed, we have not been able to really devise the kind of programs that I would like to devise on consumer information, which is getting information out to existing consumers, especially in the poverty area. There is so much they don't know about.

M: Well, don't you do some work, then, with, say, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare?

F: Not specifically. Actually, OEO has done more on this than anybody has. We just needed more people here. I'm sure we could have worked with HEW, but I don't even know--we haven't even had a chance to find out who over there would be interested in really moving on this. I've had a couple of high level conversations, but things have a way of falling between the chairs; unless there is somebody to keep after them, it doesn't all get done.

M: But you have worked with OEO?

F: I haven't worked with them. They have worked on their own. You see, you must understand, we have fifteen professionals in this office, and that's all.

M: That's the entire office.

F: That's the entire office. And we are supposed to be the liaison between all the government agencies and departments that pertain to consumer protection or consumer interest in any way and the public and the Hill and work on the legislation, and you don't get it all done, in all honesty.

M: Now, you've got consumer education and business and legislation. What else?

F: The public affairs office, which is the--they write the speeches, get out press releases, make my appointments with the press, television, radio,

all of that. Then we have two people, or one, depending on what week you are talking about, in the field office which contacts consumer groups and voluntary groups around the country who are interested in consumer affairs.

M: This is a part of your pipeline information?

F: That's right.

M: And you keep that open.

F: Right.

M: Is there any other general category of activity that you have been involved in that we haven't touched on?

F: No, that's it. We have a couple of people who answer mail here. Every letter gets an individual answer, and we send out no form letters. We send them to the agency that they pertain to if there is something asked that we don't know. We try to answer as many as we can, you know, give them the final answer. We did work out an arrangement between a couple of groups to send mail to them. Industry would like us to turn all our mail over to them. And we have refused on the basis that it is privileged mail, it does come to the White House; and if the people who were writing to us knew that we were turning it over to industry, they might not write to us, and it could cut off our avenue of communication. So what we have now done, because we have been, to put it mildly, urged by industry, is that we have set up with the home appliance manufacturers, the Automobile Dealers Association, and the Grocery Manufacturers of America an arrangement whereby when we write back to people, if their complaints pertain to any of these associations, we tell the people that the association is there and is eager to hear from them. So we put them indirectly in touch with them.

M: Do you have any conflict with, say, the Department of Commerce which is supposedly to aid business?

F: The only time you have conflict is when they say that they are serving the consumer and they believe it; they say in all good faith that they are protecting the consumer, and they aren't really. The same is true with Agriculture. It might be true with other departments if I had had any more deeper relationships with them. But Agriculture thinks they are protecting the consumer, and they really don't.

M: You have farm subsidies, on one hand, which would support high farm prices which raises the cost of food for the consumer.

F: That's right.

M: So there is a potential conflict between you and Agriculture.

F: That's right. There is always a conflict when an agency has a name on it, they are going to protect the people whose names are on the door; that's what they are there for. Now, they honestly think that at the same time they have the consumer interest at heart, but if there was a conflict between the farmer and the consumer, who do you think Agriculture is going to take care of? Who would you expect them to take care of?

M: Well, now, have you had any head-on collisions with Agriculture or Commerce or somebody like that?

F: No, not head-on collisions. We have had--well, for instance, on this study of repairs, we had to persuade Commerce a little about some things they should recommend to industry because we had a few more advanced thoughts than they did. It ended up that they didn't want us to put our recommendations on in addition to theirs, so we said, "Fine, if you don't want us to, then you just incorporate our recommendations." And they did.

M: So this was a problem resolved within your own conferences.

F: That's right.

M: Now, has the President, has Mr. Johnson simply turned you loose, sort of saying, "Let there be Betty Furness and her office," and let it go on from there or has he continually shown interest in what you are doing and aided you in this, or what is your relationship?

F: I have been at all of these bill signings; I think I have ten or eleven pens here representing visits to the White House when the President signed the bills. I have been a guest at dinners at state functions a couple of times, and I have never seen the President but what he has always told me that he was proud of me. He has been very, very gracious. I have not had specific guidance from the White House. Well, really very little. It is my belief that the President has vast and enormous problems to consider. I know that he is interested in this program. I know that. I talked to him about it, and I know it. Now, there were three occasions within the last year when I wanted the President to appear somewhere, give a reception at the White House, to appear at a Consumer Federation meeting, and he did it. The day I set it and the hour I set it, he was there. You can only believe that he was therefore behind what we are doing, because he has many other vital matters on his mind. I may be flattering myself, but I think that he thinks I'm doing okay, and as long as I'm doing okay, he has not felt it necessary to chaperone me or urge me on or constrain me. He has in effect let me go, which is very flattering, just let me go my way on it. And I think perhaps in the early stages I might have liked a little more direction, a little more comforting. I got some from Joe Califano; I'm lucky in that--I think Joe Califano is brilliant, and I think Larry Levinson is brilliant, and Larry Levinson is the person assigned to me over there; if I have a problem I call him about



41

it. And if you can get them on the phone, they are very satisfactory to work with. But they too have other problems. And so I have been left to a degree on my own, and I have chosen not to feel sorry for myself about it, but look on the other side and feel it is flattering that they figure that I will do it right.

M: Well, have you ever had the feeling that your ideas were not getting through? Say you wanted an answer to something and you would talk to Larry Levinson?

F: Not really, no.

M: You can make yourself heard, then?

F: Yes.

M: And your ideas do flow through to where you think they should go?

F: I believe so. I am sure that Califano makes decisions on behalf of the President, but I have seen instances where Joe would not make a decision on behalf of the President. For instance, in the two years that I have-- (have I been here two years?)--no, only for one consumer message, but we pulled together the package for--I know why I thought it was two, it was the State of the Union and the consumer message, twice we took ideas over there and Joe or Larry would not come out for them if they didn't like them at all. But if they thought they were pretty good ideas and good possibilities, they then took them into the President and the President made the decision, and if the President says "No" then it's no. It's that simple. You do the best you can. And of course you can't win them all, no more than he can win them all, because he suggests things that don't get acted on too. But I think the important ideas get to the President.

M: Okay, now here you are in this office, you have been here for some time, you know something about it, where do you go from here? What does the

consumer need now in the way of a voice in government? Does it need a department of consumer affairs?

F: I am not persuaded that they need a department of consumer affairs. I would like to see this be a statutory office. You see, this can be abolished at the whim of any new President.

M: And it might be.

F: And very well might be. Actually, I don't think it will be, because I don't think Mr. Nixon is that foolish. I don't think he is that dumb. I think he may downgrade it; I think he may give them nothing to do, but leave it here and say that he left it here.

M: So you would like to see it statutory?

F: It should be made statutory, but I doubt that Mr. Nixon will make it a statutory office, but that's what it should be. It should be bigger. I'm sorry about some things that I have not accomplished. I haven't even used the best tool I have to its fullest extent, and that is that I haven't appeared on television as much as I should have. We never had time to even talk about what we would do on television if we did our own show, if we devised our own kind of programs, we never discussed it, there simply has not been time.

M: You mean a program like--

F: A consumer education kind of thing.

M: Say over educational television?

F: Might be, might be. But we never even talked about it, you know, I don't know if it would be over educational broadcasting or if we might have even tried to get it into a commercial network. We really didn't have time. So you need more people in this office; you need easily twice as many, three times as many as there are. I don't mean to be piggish about that,

but when you are talking about fifteen professionals, it's very few people. I could have used perhaps some more imaginative thinking; I think the one thing that I am most wistful about is that shortly after I got here the President called Joe Califano and he said, in my presence, "Now I want her to have the best possible staff that you can get. You look out, find them wherever they are, if you have to bring them in from the universities, do that; I want her to have the best possible staff so that the ideas that bubble up to her will be the best ideas, so with the ones that she is finally confronted with she will be able to choose between the very best thinking." I think back at that and I could cry. Nobody ever got me any staff at all whatsoever. I had no executive director, I pleaded with them to help me find one, I didn't know where to look, I didn't know how to interview the man when he walked in the office. I finally got an executive director, a nice young man who was over at the Department of Commerce, but I have never had the kind of thing that the President outlined. Ideas do not bubble up to me. We are lucky if we can scratch up an idea. You know, I find myself working on all levels in this office, so it has not been as totally brilliantly staffed as I could have hoped for. That's one reason, maybe, we haven't done more. I'm not embarrassed at what we haven't done, but I think we could have done more.

M: Would you want this office to become, say, more actively involved in directing perhaps consumer education courses, say, for low-income groups?

F: I think that could be very valuable.

M: Or would you prefer this to remain more on a staff level to encourage Health, Education and Welfare to do this? Which would you do?

F: Well, I don't know. I don't care who does it. Maybe it's OEO who ought to do it. Maybe it is Model Cities who ought to have a go at it. There

may be a variety of ways to do it, and part of the fun of today is that there are many ways to do the same thing. And I'm not sure which are the right ways. And now you have come on a perfect example of what I am talking about. Nobody has come in here to me and said, "Betty, here are six ways to do this, and here are the advantages and disadvantages of each one." And I am not knowledgeable enough to know this instinctively on my own as to which would be just the right way to do it. I know it is something that should be done.

Now as far as where the consumer protection should go, I think we have gotten most of the important legislation we needed at this time. We need wholesome fish because we have the others, you know, and there are a few things that are held over. I don't think there is a crying need for very specific legislation at this point. I think we've got to move down the road a little more. But we are still a very long way from having the buyer and the seller face each other on an equal basis across the table.

Now we are getting into something much deeper. It may be an ethical question. A couple of people have brought up the subject of white collar violence. There are deep problems of ethics involved. Some of it came out in the automobile investigation. The automobile people weren't trying to build a safe car; they say the consumer wouldn't buy one. But I didn't see them really confronting the consumer with that decision. Is there such a thing as planned obsolescence? I ducked that issue. I know that a handle will fall off a product a long time before the product is worn out, and I wish they would make the whole thing so that it would finish at one time, and then I wish they would tell me how long it would last. But are they deliberately building products so that they don't last so that they can sell you another one? I think the biggest realization

45

that I have come to since I have been here is the answer to the question, "Why is anyone in business?" The easy answer to why anyone is in business is to make money. That's not true. That's not the answer. They are in business to stay in business. And if you think of it in that term, of course they are not going to sell you an automobile that will last twelve years. They want you to buy one every two or three years. That makes them stay in business. So are they trying to design an automobile that will last for twelve years? Are they trying to design a washing machine or a coffee cup that will last twelve years? Or are they, in their anxiety to stay in business and make a good corporate profit, pawing off something on me in the name of modern technology that isn't so hot? That's what I have learned in the year and a half.

And I don't know where you go with it. You can't even say it aloud. I can't say it aloud. I can't say it aloud from where I am sitting now. These questions are too deep, and the business community would be so antagonistic to this kind of thinking that you could discuss nothing with them any longer. So you can't really confront them with the whole thing. You have to say, "How about telling me design life?" And maybe you can bug them long enough so that they will tell you design life, and then maybe you can make a decision a little better. We must at least have that. We must at least be able to make an intelligent decision in the marketplace, "Which is the best product for me?" I'm not going to buy a product because some advertiser tells me that I should or if some girl in white boots makes a car look sexy, I want to know what's good about it, what will it do and what will it not do. That's the least they can do.

M: Well, on that impassioned note, maybe I should call this interview to an end unless you have something else you care to add.

46

F: I think I have told you everything I know including a few things I didn't mean to.

M: I thank you for the interview.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Mrs. Leslie Midgley (Betty Furness)

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Betty Furness Midgley hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.
2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.
4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed

Mrs. Leslie Midgley  
Betty Furness

Date

5/19/71

Accepted

Henry X. Wadsworth for  
Archivist of the United States

Date

July 23, 1974