INTERVIEWEE: John Hannah

INTERVIEWER: Paige Mulhollan

M: Let's begin, sir, by identifying you. You are John A. Hannah, and you are currently Administrator of the Agency for International Development.

H: That's correct.

M: Your career has been spent largely as president of Michigan State University from 1941 until 1969, and your official positions during the Johnson Administration were as chairman of the Civil Rights Commission and as chairman of the President's Council on Equal Opportunity. Is that correct?

H: That's essentially correct, yes. Mr. Johnson really inherited me in the civil rights role. I was appointed by Mr. Eisenhower when the Civil Rights Commission came into being back in 1957. Senator Lyndon Johnson was a key figure in developing this legislation.

M: You were a member from its very beginning and on through.

H: That's right. In the beginning President Eisenhower talked to me about the possibility of my membership on the Civil Rights Commission. In the early days of the Eisenhower Administration, I had served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, and before I finished

that assignment President Eisenhower appointed me as the United States Chairman of the Permanent Joint Board for Defense, which was charged with the defense of the U.S. and Canada.

M: With Canada.

H: That's right. It was involved with the building of DEW and mid-Canada early warning systems and I carried on in that role for ten years.

M: That came to an end about 1963 before Mr. Johnson was President, as I recall.

H: That's right. I came to the Civil Rights Commission without any long established connection with civil rights. The President had made up his mind to staff the Commission with three of the members from the Old South and to be people with the typical Southern attitude of that day. He appointed Governor (John S.) Battle, former Governor of Virginia, Governor (Doyle E.) Carlton, former Governor of Florida, and (Robert) Bob Storey, who was then Dean of Southern Methodist Law School and immediate past president of the American Bar Association. The grandfathers of all three of them had been officers in the Confederate Army, and they had a --

M: That's a good, safe Southern background.

H: Typical Southern attitude. When President Eisenhower indicated that he would like me to accept membership, I told him I really didn't know much about civil rights. He said that was the reason he wanted me to take the job, and I hesitatingly agreed. Then a few weeks later he informed me that Justice Reed, whom originally he had tagged to be the chairman, thought it would be inappropriate for him to serve since he might conceivably be called under some emergency situation to act in a judicial capacity again, and so the President asked me to be the chairman.

So I was chairman through the Eisenhower Administration. When President Kennedy came to the Presidency in the normal routine we all resigned. President Kennedy urged the Commission members to continue. After the Kennedy assassination we went through the same routine again. While I had some contacts with Senator Johnson in the days when I was in the Defense Department, and had met him socially a few times, we were not close personal friends. I raised the question with him after we offered our resignations and there had been no action for some time, suggesting that with all the contentions about Civil Rights in Congress and elsewhere and, since some of us wanted to get off the Commission, maybe it would be a good thing if he would accept our resignations and name some new members to the Commission.

But he promptly invited the Commission to meet with him and indicated that it was his wish that the Commission stay on as was. There had been some earlier changes. Governor Battle and Bob Storey had retired, and someone else had replaced them -- we don't need to recite all the personnel changes. President Johnson was a very busy man but on several occasions during his Presidency we did meet together to discuss civil rights problems. In general, however, he allocated the responsibility of dealing with civil rights to some of his White House staff.

M: Who particularly, any special one?

H: There were different people at different times. McPherson was one.

M: Harry McPherson I knew did it at the end.

H: At the end, but earlier than that, immediately preceding McPherson was the young fellow that went to the Federal Communications Commission. (Lee White)

M: I was thinking of Nick Johnson, but he wasn't at the White House.

H: No, no. Very bright young fellow. So much water has passed under the bridges that it is difficult to recall. (later it was Lee White)

M: Did Mr. Johnson feel differently, or use that Commission differently than his predecessors? You saw it under three presidencies. Was it pretty much the same all the time?

H: No, it was quite different. In the beginning, President Eisenhower met with the chairman about once a month and we were in touch with Sherman Adams or other members of the staff more frequently than that. We were in the process of just getting off the ground, and the legislation was rather ambivalent in its language. We were completely independent. We were required to make an annual report to the President and to the Congress reporting what we found the facts to be and with recommendations to hopefully correct abuses or alleviate them.

M: That leaves you with about as much leeway as you can possibly get.

H: Our three Southern members were not inclined to take advantage of it, and so it took a lot of doing to finally move up the situation. We were charged to see whether or not it was true that people were being denied the right to vote or have their votes counted because of race, religion, color or national origin. It was contentious back in 1958 as to what was the truth.

Pretty early, after many months of argument among ourselves and prolonged sessions of continuous discussion in which we would begin to get some sort of agreement (it was a part-time Commission), the Commission would disperse and get together again two or three weeks later. We would then find some of the members right back

where they were when we started, and we would have to go through this whole routine again. But Governors Battle and Carlton and Bob Storey were gentlemen. We developed respect for all members of the Commission. When they did make some sort of a concession or a commitment they held to it. Rather early we decided that we had to be concerned with much more than voting but also all of the kinds of infringements and inhibitions - housing, education, use of public facilities, employment and so on.

One of the interesting things about that Civil Rights Commission was that it lived to see translated into legislation almost all its recommendations that called for legislation. Of course you can't change the attitudes of people overnight but in the brief period of twelve years great progress was made. The Civil Rights Commission really served as a conscience for the American people. The Commission made a record of the facts as they determined them to be and let the chips fall where the facts dictated.

M: Did you claim important parts in that legislation.

H: Practically all the civil rights legislation during this whole period had its initiation in recommendations that came through the Commission. Now they didn't always come promptly. The recommendations to the President that he ought to implement the law

by instructing the Executive branches of government to comply with the law, which was clearly the law - the law as interpreted by the Supreme Court - and that it was totally inappropriate for the federal government to continue to subsidize violation of the law, was politically unpopular in some parts of the country, and President Kennedy indicated that he didn't want this kind of authority. If he had it he didn't plan to use it. The New York Times wrote a very critical editorial, surprised that six intelligent men would make this unwise suggestion, etc. But this became Title VI of the law of 1964, and it was most effective in enforcing compliance!

You asked the question about the attitude of the Presidents. In the early days President Eisenhower didn't have a great interest in civil rights. He thought something ought to be done about it, but he was inclined to encourage the staff to do research and this sort of thing, and we were not pushed by the General. But his instincts were right and when action was indicated he backed the Commission fully. President Kennedy had a great interest and thought we ought to move on with vigor. In the beginning of his administration the relationships with the Commission were close. He was interested and we saw him frequently. Later when he assigned this responsibility to his brother, the Attorney General,

the Attorney General took a little different attitude. He was not disinterested in the early stages, but he was very chary of anything that might affect the political fortunes of the Kennedy family adversely. So there was a running feud with the Commission for a fairly prolonged period. The Commission had held its first public hearing in Montgomery, Alabama back in 1958 and early in the Kennedy administration the Commission decided it should have another comprehensive hearing in the Old South.

M: November, 1963.

H: The Commission had decided to go back into Alabama for the hearing and the Attorney General thought this would have an adverse political effect. He first tried to prohibit it, and he couldn't do that. Finally we agreed that we would postpone it and we did, from time to time. Eventually we went on with the hearings in the South.

When President Kennedy was assassinated and Mr. Johnson had all of this new burden thrust upon him which he hadn't anticipated, he was not confused, he was never confused, but he was overwhelmed for awhile until he got it sorted out as to how he wanted to handle it. As I've already indicated the direct contacts between the President and the Chairman of the Commission were not frequent. There was never any question about his desire to advance the cause

of civil rights for all, the elimination of segregation, and all of the inhibitions based on race, color, religion, etc.

M: He had had some civil rights functions as vice president. Was one of them as liaison with your Commission?

H: That's right, he had pushed the Equal Employment Opportunity Program. This is my personal view, and I'm not sure it is valid, but I always had the feeling that Mrs. Johnson was the real push in this one. I think that she had the real interest in civil rights. This view is based on my conversations with Mrs. Johnson and with the President. I think she really kept the President more interested than he might otherwise have been.

M: That's interesting. I've heard that before, and it's an interesting insight, someone who has had a chance to really see and view that.

H: This is my own conclusion. When Father Hesburgh and I agreed to stay on the Commission, we were the only ones of the original Commissioners left and the President kept saying, "You stay on for another six months or a year, and then I will accept your resignation." When the time came he wouldn't accept it. We went through this routine several times during the rest of his administration, offering our resignations, seeing him, talking to him, and he was never ready to accept them, and so as he left office we were still there.

We had agreed that when President Johnson left office, that this was going to be the end of it. So Father Hesburgh and I both resigned as soon as Mr. Nixon was elected, to make sure there wouldn't be any question about this one. Well, the new President said that that wasn't fair to him and he'd have to have a little time and so we agreed a month or two wouldn't make any difference. Then I accepted my present role, as A.I.D. Administrator, and President Nixon accepted my resignation and then persuaded Father Hesburgh to become the chairman.

M: I was going to say, Father Hesburgh still is not off the hook! You at least got out of there. Well now, what is the relation of the Civil Rights Commission to the other civil rights group on which you served, the Council on Equal Opportunity?

H: Well, the Council on Equal Opportunity was a creation of the President which was concerned with doing everything that could be done to enforce equal opportunity, particularly in employment, on the part of the federal government.

M: I see, this was a specialized sort of thing.

H: That's right. And of course Mr. Johnson had headed this responsibility in the Kennedy Administration, and then it was headless for a period. When Mr. Humphrey became the Vice President, this became to a

degree Mr. Humphrey's responsibility. Again, I don't want this to sound critical, because I don't intend that it should be, but it lost much of its oomph -- maybe it would have anyway. Certainly this was not due to any lack of interest in civil rights by Vice President Humphrey. He was always a vigorous protagonist for civil rights programs.

M: About late fall of 1965, Mr. Johnson reorganized a lot of these civil rights functions under the Justice Department, kind of consolidated them, and some of them out of existence. Did he consult with you directly about that?

H: Yes, there were consultations, but this was a decision that he made and it was appropriate, because after all, as the President, he was concerned with making certain that the Executive Branch of the government did comply with the law and with his intentions. The Civil Rights Commission was a free-wheeling, independent agency in which the members held their membership at the pleasure of the President. They were appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate, but not for a fixed term, it was always at the pleasure of the President. And of course his pleasure, as I've already indicated, was not to make many changes.

M: You did encourage it? You don't think it lost its effectiveness by this consolidation and transfer?

H: I don't think so. Another technique was coming into being. The Civil Rights Commission was in the process of reviewing all of the executive branches of government. You'll find in the literature the re-examinations. The Defense Department was pretty lax, except in words. They talked very well. There was considerable difference in the different services. The Commission put much time and effort and energy into a comprehensive study of the Defense Department and made it publicly available, and it resulted in a good many changes and improvements. The Department of Agriculture dragged its feet. We held it up to public scrutiny. The Secretary pushed a bit and made some progress but it moved at a snail's pace. The Commission reviewed the principal officers and agencies of government one at a time. It was in the fortunate position of being able to call the attention of the President and the public to the deficiencies and failures in the Executive Branch.

M: You never had trouble getting heard in the Johnson Administration?

H: Oh no. Mr. Johnson never dodged responsibility on civil rights. Not only were his instincts right but he did the appropriate things, even when it was the unpopular thing to do.

M: And that was true before he was President, as well? You know a lot of people have said that he was inconsistent here; that he was a conservative on civil rights until he was President and then suddenly he became something different.

H: I don't know as I ever discussed civil rights with him until he became Vice President, and I didn't have that feeling about him.

M: You think he was more consistent than his critics would--?

H: Yes. Again, I wouldn't tend to say what his critics thought, because they thought a great many things that weren't true.

M: That's right. Going back a little ways, you mentioned that you had a little contact with Senator Johnson when you were in the Defense Department. Was that ever close?

H: No, Mr. C. E. Wilson, the Secretary of Defense, had a close personal relationship with Senator Johnson. And, if you recall, Senator Johnson had a heart attack and was unwell for a period. In those days there weren't a whole bevy of assistant secretaries in the Defense Department. I think there were four civilians under the Secretary, the Under Secretary and three assistant secretaries. As Assistant Secretary for Manpower there was a single waiting room that served Secretary Wilson and my office.

M: Now there are several pages in the directory of assistant secretaries.

H: There are many. And the Assistant Secretary for Manpower's waiting room and the Secretary's was the same one; that is, visitors went one way to the Secretary's office and through another door to mine. There was a back door between the Secretary's office and my office,

when he got perplexed or tired or irritated he'd come in through that back door. I'd known him for years in Michigan. That's how I happened to be in the Pentagon.

The political polarization then was not as intense as it has been sometimes since. Senator Johnson and C. E. Wilson were friends. Perhaps it is because maybe the Defense Department has always been more or less immune to political influences; there's been support or criticism about equally on both sides. I recall very early on one occasion when the Secretary had a dinner party on the yacht that used to be provided for the Secretary of Defense on the Potomac, and there was only a handful, including Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. It was the first time I had been close to them. There were very pleasant conversations, and this led to many more. These contacts were purely social. At that time I was much more impressed by senior senators than I have been since.

M: The job you've got now would cure that, I'm sure, if nothing else will!

H: But I always liked the senator, he was a very decent person.

M: The best known -- I don't know if it's famous or infamous -- project with which your university was connected in the 50's was the Vietnam project that Michigan State University did. Did Mr. Johnson ever have any connection with that at all, as far as you know?

H: No.

M: Are there any parts of that that you think your story needs to be told on that hasn't appeared elsewhere? This is part of Mr. Johnson's times, even though it doesn't--

H: Well I don't know as I have anything to say. I never felt called upon to answer Ramparts Magazine or the other critics. If you are interested, and I haven't thought much about it lately, I can tell you how we happened to be in it.

When the United States government decided that we were going to participate in the Geneva Conference after the French had failed in Indochina, and that they were going to probably work out a partition of Vietnam into the north and the south, the Secretary of State called -- I was then president of Michigan State -- to see whether or not we would be willing to make Professor (Wesley) Fishel available to go to Geneva. I had only minimal curiosity. I indicated if he wanted to go, of course we certainly wouldn't object. It later developed that Ngo Dinh Diem, who was later the President of South Vietnam, was the leader that apparently the French, British and the United States had agreed that they were going to back to head up this new government. Diem had been in exile in this country for some time, he was a political scientist, and he had been a friend of Fishel's. Diem had

little confidence in the colonial power governments, not much more confidence in ours, and when it was proposed that he participate to some degree in the Geneva Conference he agreed to go if Fishel would go with him. So Fishel went.

And after the new government was set up, next was a call from the State Department that the new President of Vietnam had many problems, and he would appreciate it if Michigan State would send over some of its people and advise him as to how he should organize his public information department. He was concerned with the building of a civilian police force.

M: Michigan State's speciality.

H: That's right. He was concerned about the whole matter of tax collection, and so on. And he was particularly interested in the development of some sort of an institution to train public servants. As the French left there were very few people left that had had any role in government at all. So the response was, well, we'd send over a team and see what seemed to be appropriate, and we did. A team of distinguished members of the faculty went over and came back, and there was a question as to whether we should undertake this assignment.

M: Why was that?

H: Well, the public administration people were enthusiastic. There was no question about the propriety of our helping organize a school of public administration. There was enthusiasm on the part of the Department of Police Administration, which is now the School of Police Administration. They thought they could do this. They thought they could recruit people from the state police systems and from some of the large city police departments to augment their staff, etc.

When you got into the public information business, this is something else. Most universities have a department of public information. They have teaching departments in advertising, radio, television, journalism, and so on, but a professional PR kind of an operation was something else. And when you get into the tax collection business, our Economists and School of Business people didn't seem to have a lot of enthusiasm.

To make a long story very short, finally again at the urging of the State Department--

M: Was that out of Secretary Dulles himself?

H: No, this was -- when did Diem take over that government?

M: Late 1954 or 1955.

H: Well then it would be someone in his office - it might have been Herter.

M: It was high --

H: It was the Secretary of State's office. So, we undertook it and it became a pretty sizeable operation, and I think pretty good. The School of Public Administration is still there, still operating in Saigon. We suggested that the old University of Saigon, which was a French institution, should play a part in this total operation. There was great resentment on the part of the new Diem government toward the French and our people were inclined to side with them. Because of the French orientation of the University of Saigon, and because they had very little interest in helping to solve the problems of the government anyway - they exemplified the basic French elitist tradition. Relationships with the University of Saigon never eventuated.

We went along happily enough for a period of years. It was a sizeable program, we had a great many people involved in it, and I think it was a well managed operation. The problems didn't come as part of any CIA infiltration or anything of that sort, the basic problems were with President Diem.

Our professors would come back to the U.S.A. and make speeches which were critical and they would write articles that were critical of his government. This is typical of academics, you know. The Diem government was less than an ideal democracy. Finally, on an occasion when I was visiting the project in Saigon, President Diem proposed that he thought that it was not unreasonable for him to expect me to censor our professors when they returned. And I said, "Mr. President, that's impossible." He would always talk French when he was irritated or pretend not to understand English, but he understood every word of English and he could speak English well enough too. He insisted and to bring an end to an unpleasant conversation, I agreed we'd take a look at it. We decided that this was totally unacceptable. We couldn't censor professors when they returned. We couldn't tell them what they were to think or what they were to write or say. And so we suggested the termination of the MSU project. This was really the trigger. I think the AID predecessor -- it wasn't AID then, or their people in Saigon were unhappy because our mission chiefs, at one time Fishel, or Smuckler, or whoever else, were generally consulted by the President and his government more often than the USOM or the Embassy and this irritated the State Department representatives.

M: How did the State Department deal with the Michigan State group, through you or directly?

H: No, you see as it was set up then, as it is now, the Ambassador appropriately is responsible for everything that our government carries on in the country. The Mission Director, USOM, as it was called in those days, reported to the Ambassador and he also reported back here to whatever the agency's name was. Then, just as now, the Mission Director in Vietnam, or in Indonesia, of course reports to the Ambassador in the country but ties back here too. Since we're in the same building and the messages come to the same place, there is complete interchange. Communication is good and there's no problem.

M: So as President of Michigan State, you didn't get involved in the chain of command on a regular basis.

H: Not at all. We had a Campus office in East Lansing responsible for the Vietnam operation. It dealt directly with the appropriate Deans and Department chairmen. And there was a director of our operation in Saigon.

M: Did Mr. Johnson ever refer to or ask you about that later when he was President?

H: Never.

M: Even when the bad publicity came out?

H: No. Dave Bell was the AID Administrator at that time. Our relationships were always pleasant and appropriate. He was getting the Washington flak. He never told me what his responses were. I remember telling him that we were just going to tell the truth. We never had one bit of evidence that there was anyone working for us that had been a CIA plant as was alleged - and we don't until this day. The Ramparts Magazine made a great to-do about this and it helped sell their magazine for a few months.

The CIA has a place, and it had a place in Vietnam then and now. I think it is highly inappropriate if a university is used as a cover without its knowledge. We had no proof, and we never had any proof that we were being used although some of our people suspected that we had been used.

M: Apparently some of the people in the field thought that some of the MSU people were CIA.

H: Yes, and there well may have been, I suspect that it was true.

M: There wasn't ever an official request from Michigan for the CIA to terminate?

H: We were out. You see, when Ramparts got into this MSU had been out of Vietnam for a considerable period; we hadn't any mission over there at all.

M: It's not exactly industrious journalism four years after the fact. Did Mr. Johnson, as President, ever consult you, as a long-time successful university president, on the general problems of college disorders that occurred?

H: No, the campus disorders starting with Berkeley were a problem toward the end of President Johnson's Administration. While I saw Mr. Johnson on many occasions, it may well have been a topic of conversation but it was just a casual conversation.

M: Never seriously wanting advice or papers?

H: And of course I was fully occupied. I never ran any errands for him at all other than those of the Civil Rights Commission, which I was always pestering him to get off of.

M: How about AID? Did he consult you on AID at all? You had some background in that.

H: No. I had no role in AID except during President Truman's Administration -- when the Point Four first came into being -- he appointed me on the International Advisory Board. When I went to the Pentagon as Assistant Secretary of Defense, of course I resigned. I had no direct contact with AID or its predecessors except maybe I served on some advisory committees or something of that sort and Michigan State University was heavily involved overseas until I came down here in March, actually officially in April 1969.

M: That brings us pretty well to the end. What about your coming in here? Did the Johnson Administration conduct the transition period in such a way that a new administrator coming in could do so with a fair amount of ease? Or was there some tension?

H: No, there was no tension at all. Mr. (William S.) Gaud, my predecessor, had left on January twentieth. Rud (Rutherford M.) Poats, who was Gaud's deputy, is still mine. I feel that in AID's areas of interest and concern partisan politics should not be of major concern. I don't think that it is important, whether a man is a Republican or Democrat. Most of our people are careerists, as you know; most of them have foreign service status, or civil service status. I have the impression that the Johnson Administration -- of course President Johnson knew he wasn't going to be a candidate months before the election, and I gather that there was excellent provision for the transition from one President to another, particularly from one party to another.

M: Are there any areas where you had contact with the President that I haven't mentioned? I have no way of knowing.

H: No, I don't think so.

M: I certainly appreciate your time in the middle of a busy afternoon.

H: If this has been worth anything to you, you're welcome.

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By John A. Hannah

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