INTERVIEW II

DATE: May 9, 1986

INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT G. LEWIS

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Lewis' residence, Washington, D.C.

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G: Let me ask you to begin by tracing what you know about the origin of the Task Force [on Agriculture and Rural Life].

L: We used to meet with the Secretary of Agriculture with a group of the top people in the department every morning at eight o'clock, which is an hour before the official start of business. The Secretary told us that the President wanted a task force, or wanted recommendations on how to cure rural poverty, poverty in rural America, within ten years. And that came just about the time of the riots in Watts in Los Angeles. That weekend I sat down and did a lot of talking back and forth with my wife who was interested also in the same subject of the nature of the problem. And the idea that I had in my mind [was] that if we could somehow use the resources that are wasted in welfare and crime correction, crime prevention, and the costs of crime, and the burden on society caused by poverty and its byproducts, if we could somehow capitalize that and use it in a positive way to help the poor people, the country would come out money ahead.

LBJ used to describe this too, I think perhaps later, "let's make taxpayers out of these people instead of tax eaters." And that was an idea that I had in my own mind, feeling, for example, that some of the

agricultural programs, the Farmers Home Administration, rural credit programs for small farmers, for example, actually did represent a good economic investment for the country to make, because it would develop the human resource and make it more productive and in Johnson's own words "make taxpayers out of those people instead of either tax eaters or a burden on society."

G: Was it unusual for this proposal to originate in the White House, though, rather than in one of the departments?

L: I think that it was not unusual.

(Interruption)

--in our form of government, or our form of politics, I should say, and introduced into the government the idea that presidents are the spark plugs for the whole government. In the Kennedy Administration a lot of decisions made in the departments that were of a positive political nature would be systematically sent up to the White House so that the President could make the announcements, get the publicity. And Johnson accentuated that tendency.

This particular thing, I am pretty sure, originated with Johnson. He had inherited the poverty program, of course, and I think he had a particular interest in the rural side of it, because that was the part that he had known personally. Anyway, I always felt that it was a very personalized thing with Johnson, the rural poverty problem and the rural aspect of poverty. So I don't think it was unusual. And the direction to [Orville] Freeman to do something about rural poverty

certainly did come from the White House. I think Freeman was reporting on a cabinet meeting that he had just gotten back from the day before.

Well, on that weekend I sat down and typed out a fairly long proposal and I called it Opportunity Homesteads. [I proposed] that if we would, in effect, use some of the public resources that otherwise were going to be welfare costs and crime costs and so forth as capital and let these people develop themselves and then earn the right to keep the capital and not have to pay it back, that would be a way that we could help poor rural people particularly to improve themselves and become productive citizens, at the same time improving the quality of their family life and the quality of the children that they were rearing by improving the quality of the homes in which the children would be nourished and so forth.

I brought that to the Secretary, I think I got it retyped and turned over to him about Monday or Tuesday. He read it overnight and he immediately became enchanted with it. And so he took that proposal to the White House, or at least made that the centerpiece of the task force which the President had asked him to set up and he made me the staff director.

G: It was after you did the Opportunity Homestead feature that you were named the director.

L: Yes.

G: I see.

L: That's right. I wrote the Opportunity Homesteads proposal, the original proposal, on the inspiration of the information that there

was going to be an effort to curb rural poverty and it hadn't yet been put together and I wanted it to take that direction. That's the direction I thought it should go. So I presented that to Freeman as a memorandum. I was then the administrator of the Rural Community Development Service, so it was certainly in my field of responsibility. (Interruption)

I was responsible in the Department of Agriculture for extending the War on Poverty into rural areas. That was my primary function in my service. And I don't remember for sure whether the idea for a task force had been broached by the Secretary or what, but what I do remember is that I felt that the Opportunity Homesteads approach would be a way that we could cope with rural poverty in a way that would actually represent a good, sound economic investment as well as humanitarian and social investment for the country.

G: Just to put on the record the flow of paperwork, your original memorandum that you discussed which you've just shown me a copy of is dated August 25, 1965, and Joe Califano's memo to Orville Freeman establishing the task force is August 30. Apparently, he met with Freeman the day after your report to discuss that task force.

Well, you've described this proposal of Opportunity Homesteads as the centerpiece of the task force proposals, and let me ask you to go into detail on all of the elements that this would include.

L: Well, the Opportunity Homesteads approach became one part, I think you could call it the centerpiece of the rural poverty approach. But the task force report and direction to the task force was to broaden the

coverage quite a bit beyond people for whom it would be applicable to settle in rural communities and to provide housing as an integral part, housing and a home life, and possibly home food production and preservation and these other Opportunity Homestead features. The Forest Service, for example, was called on to look into the possibilities of providing additional employment. That also was a part of the Opportunity Homesteads thing--that these people would receive vocational training instead of merely developing a piece of land, as my parents did in Montana at the time I was born, proved up their homesteads by making specified improvements in their land and then getting title to it. The primary improvement that these people were to be required to make would be to improve their own productivity as well as their home life.

G: But did the idea come from the earlier provision? Where did you get the essential idea?

L: I made it up, out of my own experience. I was a child of parents who were homesteading in Montana, and I knew a good deal, of course, about the homestead tradition, and I felt that the prophetic vision of the Homestead Act in 1862 could be applied to the more complex problem of rural people in 1962, or 1965, a hundred years later. So I viewed the rural poverty situation as something we could attack using the basic philosophy of the 1862 Homestead Act, readapting it to the modern problem. And that was the pitch that I made in the memorandum that I submitted to Secretary Freeman.

G: You mentioned the vocational training as one element that would be part of this Opportunity Homestead.

L: Yes, I recognized that there was not an opportunity for full employment in farming for all of the people then on our farms, and that particularly the rural poor, for the most part, probably would have to get most of their income from off-farm work. But I also felt that it is very important to provide housing for them, and a good home environment could also produce a garden and perhaps a small subsistence farming kind of unit. That is, actually, a majority of our present-day farmers are now earning most of their money off the farm, but they have the benefits of rearing their children on a farm, giving their children experience with growing things and taking care of animals and poultry, and living in a rural environment and so forth. That's the vision that I had for the rural poor, for many of them at least. I didn't feel that the best thing to do was to just shove them into the cities, which is where they'd been going willy nilly. People in the South used to give black people one-way bus tickets to New York and Baltimore and St. Louis and Memphis and Chicago, just to get them out of the state. And that is not a way that develops a human resource very well.

G: Were you aiming at one group of rural poor in particular, such as the southern blacks?

L: No, not at all. I certainly felt that the southern blacks would be a big factor in it because that's where a lot of the poverty was concentrated. But a majority of the rural poor were white. And there are

also Indians, American Indians, and Spanish-speaking people. No, I felt from the beginning that it should not be a means-tested nor a race-tested program, but it ought to be offered, just like the Homestead Act was, to everyone and anyone, including a millionaire; if he wanted to subscribe to it, theoretically he'd be eligible. I felt that that would be a good way to avoid any stigma that might come from a welfare program. And I felt that self-selection would be perfectly appropriate and adequate in the public interest, because no one who didn't really need the program and wouldn't benefit from it would be likely to select themselves to apply for it, and that anyone who did select themselves or choose to apply probably could benefit from it, and the benefits would be not only to the applicant, but to society also. Therefore there was no compelling need at all; as a matter of fact, it would be a detriment to start trying to split hairs finely about who should be eligible.

G: I wonder about individuals, rural poor, who were perhaps in such desperate straits or culturally backward conditions that they wouldn't even be able to meet your standards or even be aware of the program.

L: Well, a part of the Rural Community Development Service function was to reach out to those people and help them to benefit from the government programs that had been created for their benefit. That was a very serious problem, that rural people particularly and rural municipalities often were nominally eligible for federal programs, but because they didn't have the know-how to get through the red tape, they weren't applying and weren't receiving their fair share. And

my agency was created to overcome that problem. I worked with the Housing and Urban Development Administration, the Labor Department and all through the government to find ways whereby their programs could be stretched out to reach the rural areas and the rural people who had not previously had full benefits of them, even though by law they would be entitled to them.

G: With this Opportunity Homesteads, you were actually combining a home finance or home finance and refinance program with an educational, employment, cultural advancement program. Would that be fair to say?

L; Yes, that was an extension of and elaboration on the Farm Security Administration programs of the 1930s. That was a program generically called supervised farm credit. The idea was that you can't just dish out some money to a lot of people who have other disadvantages than lack of money. They need technical help, they need standards, for example, on how to construct a house and set up a sanitation standard and home management and they need counseling and guidance. And they also need financial guidance on how to pay their bills and how to set up a budget for the resources they had. So it was an extension of and elaboration on the supervised farm credit program of the thirties which persists today in the Farmers Home Administration programs and which was very much a feature of the land reform ideas that General [Douglas] MacArthur imposed on Japan when he was acting god of that country after World War II and [which] our people persuaded the people of Taiwan to adopt, both of which had great benefits in the development of those countries.

G: Did you feel like the existing provisions under the law required that there be such a prospect of repayment that the needy didn't really qualify for the kind of loans you had in mind?

L: Well, a lot of these people could not have qualified for loans, conventional credit, even the Farmers Home Administration credit, because in the first place there was needed, I thought, a positive effort to help these people acquire other skills, so they could do things other than farm work for their livelihood. There were not enough jobs in agriculture to employ all of the rural poor. And a lot of the rural poor didn't have other skills that would qualify them for employment. So I got very good warm support from the Department of Labor, for example, on the idea of integrating its vocational training programs, Manpower Development and Training Act programs, into our operation.

G: Was there a performance standard as part of this?

L: Oh, yes, there would be a performance standard. For example, one of the elements was a self-help house, home construction, or home improvement; people could homestead on their own little farm and get the capital and supervision and guidance and counseling benefits to go along with it to upgrade the quality of their home life and their family life and also their employment possibilities. Or they could acquire and start from scratch building an adequate home, and, of course, there would be standards for sanitation and construction and so forth. The basic idea was that after satisfactory performance of the various requirements that would be set up for enrollment in classes where they were needed, training courses, as well as home

construction, home food preparation and household management and things of that kind, that at the end of five years or whenever the proper period might be, if they had satisfactorily performed that then a certain percentage of the money advanced to them would be provided as a grant, it would be forgiven, just like the land after the homesteaders had proved up became theirs, they got title to the land. The idea was that when people graduated from the Opportunity Homesteads program, they would wind up with their home free and clear or maybe a small portion of it might still be carried as a debt to be repaid over a long period of time. But then, in addition to that, they'd have the benefits of vocational training and all the rest of it.

G: Did you have any estimates on what this program would cost?

L: Yes, [we] worked that out in quite precise detail, and the task force report did provide estimates of what the cost would be under various circumstances. And these costs, the Farmers Home Administration, Lee Fryer, who was an associate administrator, I believe was his title at the time, worked as a task force representative of that agency to help develop that cost information.

G: Did you feel that this was a way to keep the rural poor from migrating to the cities?

L: I felt that that should be one of the objectives because I felt Watts had demonstrated, the riot in Watts, that the cities were not coping with the problems of the rural people who had migrated there. I remember reading the newspaper accounts of the riots and their interviews with some of the people in the area. They were identified as

having come from Mississippi and Arkansas and East Texas and elsewhere in the South. And they had migrated maybe twenty years before or in the intervening period. There was a huge migration after the beginning of World War II which persisted then up into the sixties and still goes on. And the cities, it seemed to me Watts proved, were not coping with it, and I did not believe that the poverty programs were going to be adequate to cope with the problems of these people in the urban environment. A very substantial reason for that, in my mind, was that these people were torn up from whatever social and cultural resources they had to start with. They had to abandon all of that back in the rural areas from which they came. They hit the cities, they were unprepared to rear children, to find jobs, to find decent housing, to have a decent community life, to re-establish community institutions, and the whole institutional framework within which these people were cast in the urban environment was unsatisfactory.

Now, I was rearing children in the city of Washington, having grown up on a farm which was located on the remote suburbs of Pigeon Falls, a little village of about a hundred and twenty-seven people. And I had my own problems of how to raise a boy in the city. I didn't know a thing about it because I hadn't grown up in the city. I was certainly a lot better off than some of my contemporaries who had come from similar rural areas but without a college education and without the other advantages that I had, so I could project that it must be impossible for those parents to hit town, destitute and without skills and try to rear their children without their community churches which

were a big part of every rural community and the other rural institutions which I felt had great value, even though it wasn't much appreciated by many of the economists at that time.

G: Which institutions are these?

L: All of the things I have mentioned: the community life, the knowledge of who your neighbors are, and generations deep of relationships, family to family and within families in the rural areas, the religious institutions, the churches, the schools, and just basically being a part of a community and knowing the community.

G: Did you hope to reverse the out-migration from the rural areas and have people who were living in urban settings migrate back to the rural communities?

L: I felt that that might be a possibility for some people and certainly that people who wanted to do that should be eligible to do so. My purpose wasn't migration or anti-migration, my purpose was what is the best way for this human resource to develop itself for its own and the community's benefit. And I felt that people should be given as much freedom to make their choices as it was feasible to do, and that the choices people made were probably a better guide to the workability of a program than some bureaucratic determination by application of this kind of means test or eligibility standards or whatever. And since I felt that any family that would choose to volunteer for a program like this would probably benefit from it and would probably benefit the community by going through it, that there would be no point whatsoever

in making it hard to get in. It ought to be open-ended, as open-ended as possible.

G: Were there any within the task force or within the administration as a whole that disagreed with this principle?

L: Well, yes. I don't know that they so much disagreed, but felt that, I think, it smacked a little of rural fundamentalism, agrarian fundamentalism. I know a lot of the people in the Office of Economic Opportunity positively felt that the rural areas were no damn good, and people said this explicitly in meetings where I went as the representative of the Department of Agriculture in interagency meetings with people in the Office of Economic Opportunity and others who were against putting resources into the rural areas. Their view was, we know how to handle poor people in the cities, and "we've got good programs in the cities, good facilities, good schools," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, "there is where those people should go and get treatment, get them out of those backward rural slums." There were people who had that view.

G: The report did seem to contain the message throughout that there was an inequality of facilities between the rural and urban, in terms of health, education, cultural features, that the rural communities had much less to offer.

L: They did, that was demonstrable by objective standards, and we made a great deal of that. Our argument was we've got to get the resources back to those communities. The counterargument was, take the people out of those backward areas and put them in the cities where the

resources are better. Well, actually, the cities couldn't handle the populations they had, in my view, and I think events have proved that true.

G: One criticism of the Opportunity Homestead provision was that it would make that population less mobile, because they would be tied to a new loan that they would have to repay, that they wouldn't have the mobility to select the best circumstance for them economically.

L: Well, I disagreed with that and I don't think that was a fair criticism. The proposal provided that people could, at will, sell their equity, if they had any, in their project to another homesteader or to somebody else and move on any time they wanted. And furthermore, mobility doesn't mean getting a one-way bus ticket from Mississippi to Chicago. That's not mobility. Mobility is more like my circumstances, having been reared on a farm, got a high school education, which came very hard because we had to pay our own transportation ten miles to and from high school every night and morning, and times were very hard. But I did get a high school education and then I got a college education, and so it wasn't hard for me to be mobile and get from the farm to an urban professional job, in the best sense of mobility. Now, that's what it takes to be mobile, and I felt that these people when they have skills, if they can get a better opportunity someplace else, that's the kind of mobility that I would favor, not the one-way bus ticket from Mississippi to Chicago.

G: There does seem to have been--the issue that we just discussed, the issue of urban versus rural. And I know that Gardner Ackley even felt

that it was right to encourage the young families that had potential to move out of the rural areas into the cities.

L: Well, I have no objection to that if they are ready. But I felt that a poor rural family would have a better chance to have a good family life, a good supportive family life, if they could get adequate employment, adequate housing, adequate health care, adequate community life, in the institutions with which they are familiar, where they came from. It's better to fertilize the plant where it sprouted and get it strong and pull out the weeds if necessary before you try to transplant it someplace, because transplanting is always a difficult thing. I think the same thing is true of people. They had many resources in those areas where they came from; there were many resources there which were not appreciated, but which were absent when they hit the slums in the cities. People knew what to do with growing boys out in the country. You could go fishing with them and go hunting with them, and you could do some farming activities that were meaningful. And they could raise some pigs or chickens or something to give them vocational experience as children, which you can't do in the city. And things like that, I think, have a great deal of value. I would rather move more adequate public education, more adequate health care and income back into the rural areas until those people choose themselves to move, rather than to give them a one-way bus ticket to Chicago. I think that's the real alternative: the one-way bus ticket to Chicago. And then when they get there to get into a big, bureaucratic, War On Poverty kind of program where people don't know how to

find their way around socially or geographically or vocationally or any other way.

G: Another element of this was the whole rural development aspect of this, the community development districts. Let me ask you to talk about this and elaborate on it.

L: Oh yes, the Opportunity Homesteads idea was not to be something all in isolation but as a part of a comprehensive rural development program. We developed and made--maybe you could say the second centerpiece of the task force report was the rural community development district idea.

G: Where did this proposal originate, do you know?

L: Well, we developed that in the Department of Agriculture.

G: In what division?

L: In my division. I guess I'm as close to the developer as you could get. Now, it was a take-off from the comprehensive urban planning idea. The first model, in my mind, was the--well, here in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia area, there is a metropolitan area planning activities. There is one for transportation, there is one for sewage control, things like that. So the metropolitan area planning grants provided by HUD were to be the source of support and then that idea was to be adapted to the multiplicity of small rural communities that persist over most of the rural area. And we developed the idea of planning for commuting areas, that is commuting communities. Now, back in 1920, somebody at the University of Wisconsin got up on a big, tall hill, I think it was Blue Mound--

this is on the record and I can find his name if I can search through my files enough--and he observed that the little villages seemed to be located about six miles apart. It came to him that three miles is about as far as you can go to town and back with a horse and wagon, and the commuting district, or community there, was something with about a three-mile radius and the towns therefore and the settlements, the stores, were about six miles apart.

Well, the age of the automobile had expanded the commuting community to a radius of around fifty miles. And we observed, looking at the maps, that the small villages were competing with each other to become the nucleus of the commuting community of about a fifty-mile radius. That's about as far as people will drive in the morning to work and back home again at night. So we devised the idea that the planning grants should be made available to planning districts, federal planning grants to planning districts that were based on commuting communities, recognizing the real facts of life out there as people were behaving, not simply the political and geographic boundaries. And that the planning district would be comprised of the elected representatives or of elected representatives from each of the municipalities within that community district, and they would form a planning commission and hire a planner and get federal grants to do their planning work, and plan for all kinds of public services for the serving of that district.

For example, I drew a map off a highway map of Wisconsin with Eau Claire, Wisconsin, as the center of a commuting district because I was

familiar with that location. I changed the names of the counties and of the city and I presented that to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, which approved the idea, reported it out, and our bill passed the Senate, but it got blocked in the House. And I remember Senator [George] Aiken--I had renamed those counties for various presidents, one was Eisenhower County, and Senator Aiken made a wry comment about how I was renaming the counties. I think he knew what the map showed, and he knew my personal interest in it and he kindly but humorously kidded me a little bit about renaming those counties for my home town.

Well, the idea was that if the people of that area needed certain kinds of medical facilities within a fairly quick distance, they would go to Eau Claire. But the big hospital in Eau Clare could serve smaller clinics in the smaller communities surrounding it. So that this would not necessarily mean that the functions of the smaller cities and villages surrounding the center would be put out of business, but the services that they had to offer would be appropriate to what they could do and would be integrated into an overall plan.

Now, I think one thing in my proposal that has been missing from many and that I consider very important is that the federal government has a very difficult time--so does the state government--knocking heads together on the local level, on these municipalities. So we don't want to get integration and coordination by knocking heads either; that never works. So what I devised was the idea that any time a federal grant for any purpose was to be made within one of these planning districts, once it had been established, that no grant

such as that could be made until the planning committee of that district had approved it. Now, that means it would have had to go through the process of being checked out with all of the municipalities involved and winning majority approval by people who are responsible politically to the people in the municipalities, the towns and villages and cities concerned.

G: They would be elected representatives on the--?

L: Well, they would represent elected governments. They would represent the governments by whatever means that they might be [chosen]; we didn't insist that they be elected. That's another part of my philosophy, personally, of administration. You don't nitpick about exactly how people do things, but look at what the principle is. And the principle is in my case, in this case, we want decisions to be made by the people that are responsible who are going to have to face the electorate in their respective communities and who are going to have to raise the taxes to pay for it and to pay off the loans and account for the services that are granted. So if the village board wants to designate its planning director to represent it, that's fine. But it's the village board that is responsible, rather than having some committee of volunteers. There are many kinds of planning districts or activities where the planners are civic leaders, the planning committee, and they really have neither authority nor responsibility, and I didn't feel that that was very satisfactory.

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L: Well, I felt if we could blanket the country with rural community planning districts, development districts, that we could bring some order out of the chaos that was beginning to prevail at that time in federal grants where you had the Farmers Home Administration and HUD both in the sewer and water business. You had people locating hospitals one place and something else that was closely related to that kind of facility someplace else. And you had small town competing with small town, and some small towns getting grants that exceeded their own requirements and somebody else nearby getting a federal grant that would create a competing and superfluous facility. And the result is relatively poor service and a lot of wasted motion. I thought this was a way that we could have a democratically controlled rationalization of economic development.

G: Was there a way to coordinate the federal programs with the state programs as well?

L: Oh, yes, that would have been a part of the picture. Many federal programs, of course, are integrated with state programs as it is. One of the virtues of the rural community development district idea was that you'd put in the hands of the local people who were going to live with it the opportunity and the means to screen the whole range of possibilities for development of their area. State programs as well as local activities, tax policies, zoning, and so forth that they might do locally under state authority in some cases, state government programs, joint federal-state programs as well as purely federal

programs. But I felt that the federal government had enough presence and enough muscle in the scope of the grants that were available from highways and housing and health and everything else, that the requirement that any federal grant, any federal project, federally financed project, would be subject to the approval of the applicable planning district before the federal government would turn loose the money, would be a good organizing device and that would make everything fall into place quite readily. And it didn't seem unreasonable; I don't think it would have been regarded as an imposition by the public in these communities.

G: Was there any assurance that the programs would benefit the needy instead of just perhaps the most powerful commercial farmers in a particular area?

L: Well, the RCDS, the Rural Community Development District idea, that was not strictly a poverty-oriented program at all. It was to develop the majority of the people in the communities. And they would be as subject to the Civil Rights Act and all the rest of it as any other federal program. It would be a way to make sense out of the multiplicity of federal programs that were falling all over each other in that era. And it was not strictly a poverty program, but certainly it would advance the poverty programs as well as other federal programs could be coordinated and made more effective.

G: How much new money did you envision in this single element of the task force?

L: The Rural Community Development Service--I don't remember just how much money we envisioned. I think that the legislation that was recommended by the Department of Agriculture and approved twice in the Senate may have specified a certain amount, but it would, in general, be the money that was under the authority of the comprehensive planning grants in HUD. And we would have, I suppose, started out relatively small and got the bugs out of the system just as was the general practice with government programs.

G: Would this be administered through the Rural Community Development Service?

L: Well, the Rural Community Development Service would have been the promoter. The districts, of course, wouldn't be administered by anybody but themselves. They'd be locally controlled and they would make their applications to HUD for their planning grants, and I don't remember whether USDA would have a role in deciding those, granting funds or not.

G: It seems like I read something that designated the size of the district as being the determining factor whether the grants came from HUD or from U.S. Department of Agriculture.

L: Yes, that does remind me. The distinction would be drawn at the metropolitan area, and places smaller than a comprehensive metropolitan district--what do they call them again? I can't remember but there is a term that applies to big cities like Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, Washington, Arlington, Silver Spring, and so forth. The big

metropolitan districts would be excluded. And this would be for the smaller places.

G: Anything else on that proposal?

L: Well, only that I was very heartened by the very, very strong support that I got from Senator Aiken who was the ranking Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, Senator George Aiken of Vermont, and Chairman Allen Ellender of Louisiana. Senator Ellender I had known for a long time in a professonal relationship as a journalist, then as a bureaucrat dealing with the Senate chairman, and also I had known him when I worked with Senator [William] Proxmire as his administrative assistant and he was a member of the Agriculture Committee. But Senator Ellender was a relatively conservative gentleman who was sincerely devoted to the interests of agriculture as he saw them. And I was very pleased that he took up this rather progressive idea and gave it very strong backing. We could never get by Jamie Whitten on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture because I think Mr. Whitten, who represented a district with a very large black population, could see a lot of trouble in his district if some of us Washington bureaucrats got down there stirring up the black folks, and he was against it.

G: Did he make this argument in opposing it?

L: No, he didn't make that argument. But that's just my surmise, but he scotched it, and he eventually scotched the agency and the whole approach to the Rural Community Development Service. He knocked our budget out. We requested a three million dollar budget, which of

course is not very big, in order to set up several state offices with a coordinator in each state who could represent the rural interests in developing the rural communities, and he reduced that. He defeated that request for an increase and took us back down to less than a million dollars, which pretty much put the kibosh on the program. And it was as the result of that that I eventually left the Department of Agriculture. I had no more future for that kind of development.

G: Let me ask you about some other facets of the task force proposal itself. There were some labor measures, labor provisions that were not in the initial [Joseph] Califano memo to Freeman, apparently some that emerged in the task force discussions, and these were pretty progressive items, in terms of expanding minimum wage coverage to some of these farm workers and collective bargaining and all sorts of things here. Do you recall the origin of these various labor provisions?

L: We had people designated from each of the departments to meet together and talk about what ought to be put into the response to Califano's memo. And each department came up with its own ideas of what would fit. So the initiative for those ideas came from the Department of Labor. Other initiatives may have come from other agencies. The Califano memo was interpreted not as a prescription of what to do, but kind of a hunting license to fulfill the general idea of how do we abolish poverty in ten years.

G: Did you feel that the administration would be receptive to these labor measures?

L: Well, I certainly felt that the administration would be receptive to our work, yes. I can't remember specifically what the labor measures were anymore in any detail. I don't remember that there was any substantial controversy about it. Willard Wirtz was the secretary of labor at that time, as I remember, and I felt that he had substantial political as well as intellectual credentials and that what his department representatives proposed probably reflected what that constitutency would go to bat for.

G: Okay, let me ask you about the food and nutrition elements of the task force report. Do you recall those?

L: Well, I don't recall precisely.

G: One of the major elements was an expansion and extension and consolidation of the school lunch program and also free milk and breakfast programs and upgrading the food stamp program.

L: Oh, I do remember that I had personally supported those ideas long before I was in the government, and it was a manner of enlarging all kinds of public services to satisfy the need or to contribute to the purpose of abolishing poverty. So long as there are people in an area that aren't getting enough to eat or school kids that aren't getting adequate nutrition, I felt that our mandate was how can we make the difference to get to the point where they are getting enough to eat. And it was a matter of using existing programs or introducing new ones that would achieve the object of ending poverty, of which, of course, a part is inadequate nutrition. So that was just a matter of

looking at the program and seeing how much farther does it have to go to get the job done.

G: Did you also see it as a way to expand the market for agricultural produce?

L: Well, it certainly would do that. That wasn't a primary objective, we didn't want anybody to eat more than they needed, or at least more than they wanted, but certainly when I was in the Farmers Union in the 1950s and even before that during the forties when I was working for the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative back in Wisconsin, I advocated measures of that kind on behalf of farmers as a way to expand consumption of food. And from the farmers' standpoint it is certainly in their interest. Anything that you do to feed hungry people you can use as a way to persuade the farmers that you are doing some good for them.

G: One of the big criticisms of the school lunch program at the time was that it was directed much more toward whites than minorities because so many of the predominately minority school districts were unable to afford their portion to qualify for the federal subsidy.

L: Yes, and they didn't have the facilities. They didn't have refrigeration and they didn't have stoves to cook with and they didn't have personnel to do the things. I haven't reviewed the task force report now for twenty-plus years, but I think you'll find, as I remember it, we proposed ways to overcome those problems, that is to provide the resources so that some of the poorest rural schools could upgrade their facilities to the point where they could use the federal

program. That also was consistent with looking at the programs that we had or should have and making them adequate to get the job done.

G: Another element of the task force report was improvements in fire prevention and this received a reasonably prominent play in the report.

L: I think the initiative for that came from the Forest Service.

G: Was the need such that there was a serious problem, do you think?

L: Well, I think there is a serious problem. Time after time even today you'll read about a fire in some rural home that burns out of control because there is no way to get any kind of fire truck on the site, not an adequate supply of water or anything else to put it out. The fire hazard is more serious in rural areas generally than in the cities and that was viewed as one of the disadvantages of rural life. As I remember that, the source of that idea was John Baker, who was the assistant secretary of agriculture, through whom I reported when I didn't report directly to Freeman, which I did basically most of the time. But John and I had worked together in the Farmers Union in the 1950s before I went to work for Proxmire, so we were close friends and collaborators. I think that that was one of his ideas that he contributed and we took it from there and his interest in it may have accounted for the relative prominence which it received. I certainly think it was a warranted inclusion.

G: Let me ask you about health provisions. There was another theme in this report that the rural poor did not have the quality of health care that the urban citizens had.

L: Yes, rural health care was another serious disadvantage that was quite evident. And that's one of the aspects of poverty that we felt had to be overcome. We had some precedent in the Farm Security Administration's programs in the thirties for providing health care as a component of supervised farm credit. And what we proposed was actually an extension of that idea and that approach.

G: Another element proposed changing the name of the Department of Agriculture.

L: Yes, I don't take any particular credit or blame for that. Department of Agriculture is all right as far as I'm concerned because it is a lot shorter than the Department of Food and Agriculture or some of the states now--[in] my state of Wisconsin, I think it is the Department of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection.

G: I think this was Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs, perhaps. Did you see it or did Freeman see it as a way to expand the mission of the Department?

L: Yes, Freeman supported that idea, and he did feel very strongly that the mission had to be expanded beyond agriculture. I wasn't terribly sympathetic with that idea. I think agriculture is a very, very important thing and it's important to everybody. If it gets into rural development and rural affairs that aren't strictly farming, that didn't seem to me to be a very serious problem. So I just kind of went along with that good-naturedly. Since I was subordinate to all of the people that favored it, it wasn't hard to be good-natured about it.

G: There were proposals also for expanding international trade of agricultural goods--trading with communist bloc countries. I assume you're talking about exporting wheat and things of that nature.

L: In this task force report? Well, I'd forgotten about that. But I suppose that we had some feeling that the Kennedy Administration had sold some wheat to Russia in 1961 or 1962 or 1963. I was the bird dog of that program when I was in the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. I was once sent with my staff assistant, Clifford Pulvermacher, by the Secretary of Agriculture. I met him on some kind of a trip in Duluth, Minnesota, where we were going to farm speeches [inaudible] and he told me to get myself up to Ottawa where the Russians were dickering with the Canadians and to make connections with the American grain trade and not to let any of the press know that there were government people there and not, for goodness sakes, for any of us government people to be caught talking directly to the Russians, but to find out from the grain traders what the Russians were saying to the Canadians and the grain traders. I did that, and I supervised the negotiation with the grain traders and the Russians for the sale of wheat, which we finally consumated, to the Russians.

So there was a strong feeling in the administration that if we're going to handle the surplus problem and not have too much burden of paying the farmers not to produce it or giving it away, that we ought to develop markets with the Russians as a way to enhance agricultural prosperity. And I think if we put that in the task force report it

would be justified on the basis that it is a way to enhance farm income and prosperity in rural areas.

G: There was also a component of enterprise opportunity or entrepreneurial promoting enabling rural areas to develop the capital necessary to start the creation of jobs and generate more money in the rural economy.

L: The Department of Commerce had an economic development program where loans were made for that purpose and the idea there was to tap into that kind of a resource for the more rural communities or especially to put a special emphasis in rural communities or to ensure the effectiveness of the outreach of that kind of a program.

G: Did you feel that you could generate enough capital to create the jobs that were needed?

L: Well, we did not think necessarily that it was necessary to measure exactly how much job creation there would be, but my feeling was, and the philosophy of the report was, that chances are there would not be superfluous housing created in rural areas through this program, there would always be somebody who would want to live in those houses and on the plots that were developed. And that wherever the jobs were, people would be better able to move after they had gone through the program than they started out being. We felt sure that the economy would continue to grow and probably these rural areas would generate jobs that would increase employment if not provide fully enough for everybody that was trained, but that people would be free to seek

better opportunities and would be in a better position to get better opportunities elsewhere.

G: Under one of these provisions the government would buy properties that were not economically viable enabling the people to move to places that were. And one of the criticisms of that provision was that it would create a terrible administrative problem for the government to try to administer all of these small isolated properties.

L: I don't remember that there was a substantial proposal to acquire a lot of small isolated properties, but rather that we did provide that some large tracts might have to be bought and subdivided in order to provide adequate housing space for people who didn't have rural land. I think that was much the bigger end of it. And that did generate some criticism, because that evoked the idea of the old 1930s Farmers Settlement Administration a little bit.

G: Land reform.

L: Land reform was anathema in the United States, but the very people that got fired out of the job in the United States in the thirties wound up under that great conservative Douglas MacArthur reforming Japan, Japan's land, and imposing on Japan a redistributive taxing system. Well, taxing for redistribution of income, of course, is another no-no in some circles, but it is kind of curious that General MacArthur who was a great hero to the conservatives probably accomplished more drastic land reform and tax redistribution, by far, than Franklin Roosevelt did.

G: I think there is a notion that it is all right if the military does it.

Let me ask you to recount the opposition that you got on this land reform proposal.

L: I don't remember very definitely, but I do remember there was a little static raised on that question and I felt that any time I was confronted with it that I made an adequate argument against it, that yes, we might want to buy a big farm on the outskirts of some city and subdivide the land and, in effect, grant it and sell it back to private ownership, that this did not represent socializing the land at all. As far as I was concerned that was the answer and an adequate answer to the criticism. Just how much of that criticism was voiced, I don't know. I suppose that if we had gotten a program under way and got it into the political arena that that might have been a problem.

G: Are there any other elements of the task force report that we haven't talked about?

L: Not that I can remember, keeping in mind that I haven't read the task force report now for years. It was a very important part of my professional life and I put a lot of energy into it and I remember it quite vividly but not in great detail.

G: Looks like you were on a pretty rigid time schedule to get this task force report written and submitted.

L: Yes, we were on a forced draft to get something done. I think that the time constraint was the President's budget which had to be buttoned up in December. I can't remember just when we had our conference with Califano, but it was in the final stages of the budget

process, and the way the outcome was interpreted by me and I guess by other people, including Secretary Freeman, is that the spending for the war, the escalation of the Vietnam War which the President knew about, and some other people, but we didn't, crowded this out. I think I remember Freeman telling us that at a cabinet meeting President Johnson had said that his strategy was to get that war over quick and then by that time some of these programs that had been authorized and started on a token basis would be mature enough to put big resources into and turn the big federal effort into the War on Poverty, and this then might have been revived as a part of it.

G: But it never was.

L: But it never was. The war went on and got bigger instead of smaller.

G: Do you think it was then killed at BOB? Would that be the place where it did not advance?

L: Well, I don't think it was BOB, no. I'm sure BOB is part of the process, but we talked to Califano who talked to Johnson. Califano was helping the President make the President's choices along with the Bureau of the Budget.

G: The President did propose in January 1966 the Community Development District Act.

L: That wasn't going to cost anything. That's the difference.

G: Strictly a pilot type of project.

L: Yes, that didn't cost anything, or very much, except money that was already in the budget. We just put HUD, maybe [we] increased [it] a little bit. But the rest of it, including the Opportunity Homesteads--

for one thing, the Opportunity Homesteads idea would have been a lightning rod to attract attention at least and probably all kinds of opposition from people who were a priori opposed to the administration and its works and who would see in it things that they could target and perhaps misrepresent.

G: Do you think it was politically unsound?

L: Oh, I don't think it was politically unsound. It would have attracted a lot of political attention, which includes opposition as well as support.

G: Did you have any indication of whether you could legislate it or not, in terms of congressional support?

L: No, we didn't really feel out the legislative possibilities very much; we never got it to that point.

G: These were never floated with the agricultural committees?

L: No. No, there certainly wasn't time. You see, from the first of September until the middle of December, is September and October and November to put together--I think we had over one hundred people involved from various agencies in the process of developing these ideas, deciding what to propose and then getting the proposals worked out. It was a pretty short-order business.

G: Did Freeman try to persuade Johnson to free up the money to do this later on? Do you know?

L: Later on, I don't know. I think the high-watermark of President Johnson's domestic programs was that December. And I think it receded from then on as the war became more and more pressing.

G: Was there any issue or problem with the confidentiality of these reports? There were numbered copies, and evidently it did enjoy a very limited circulation.

L: I don't think there was any particular problem. It was just our practice to avoid disseminating internal working documents too widely, and certainly it was recognized that anything that was going to the White House, the president is entitled to see it, read it, think about it and maybe even decide about it before it is all over the newspapers. It was just a matter of standard behavior.

G: Were any of the ideas of the elements incorporated into subsequent programs?

L: I think the main thing was the Rural Community Development District legislation which we've talked of. That then became the key element in my Rural Community Development Service effort.

G: Anything else regarding the work of the task force that you haven't talked about?

L: No, I can't think of anything. I think I could add that I think some of the old bureaucrats in the Department of Agriculture--well, it's not fair to say old bureaucrats exclusively either, but some of my colleagues there did regard the Opportunity Homesteads idea as rather fanciful and a little bit off what they wanted to concentrate on in the department. They were primarily interested in commodity programs and the regulatory activities and so on, and this did not necessarily conflict with that, but I think they took a dim view, a little bit, of

the Secretary's enthusiasm for it and may have thought I had gotten him out a little bit into the wild blue yonder.

G: How much did you think you needed to have as an appropriation to make this program work?

L: I don't remember. I think what we thought was, if we could get the authorization and get enough money to give it a fair try that it would go on from there.

G: So you saw it as an incremental--?

L: Yes, that's generally the case with any new program. I think we may have made some estimates in the task force report on how much would be required in ten years to get the job done, I'm pretty sure we did. Because that was our mission: how much is it going to cost over ten years to cure rural poverty? But as far as the practical is concerned, you don't set up a ten-year schedule that is going to be hard and fast. You get enough to get up an adequate team of people to administer the program, plus enough money to make a fair show of the idea, a fair test, and then see how it goes along and next year, if it's working, you get more.

G: How would you contrast this task force in 1965 with the President's Commission on Rural Poverty that was formed in 1966?

L: This one was a part of the government. It was a part of the working government, representing the secretaries of the departments concerned, and it reported directly to the President and it went back and forth between people in their official capacity. The commission was an advisory committee which did not involve people in the performance of

their actual line duties, which we did. It made a report which, of course, was whatever it was, but it was not a working part of the government, it was an aside activity, primarily people not in the government.

G: Yes, it was an outside task force.

L: And certainly not in their specific official functions. What they knew about it was, there was a felt need for increased coordination in the government and various kinds of efforts were made to get programs that reflected integrated views of several departments. And this was a very good illustration of that. We had people from pretty much all over the government working together on this. Of course, I was staff director and put things together, but drafts were circulated to the various departments for comments and so on.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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