

INTERVIEW I

DATE: October 26, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN McCULLY

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. McCully's residence, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's start with your joining the committee staff. I believe you indicated that you joined it in April of 1961.

M: Yes.

G: Do you remember the circumstances of going to work with the committee?

M: Well, I was working for the Texas AFL-CIO as the information director. Jerry Holleman, the president of the Texas AFL-CIO, went to Washington as assistant secretary of labor, and among his assignments was to be executive vice chairman of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. In staffing that committee, he offered me the job of information director for the committee. I mean, when he left, we had an understanding that if something turned up that might interest me, that I'd like to go to Washington with him. So he called and told me about the job and asked me if I wanted it and I said yes.

He told me later that he and Lyndon were on a plane to Louisville or Nashville or someplace and that the Vice President told him he had somebody he wanted to be information director of the committee, and Jerry told him, "Well, I've already got an information director who's on his way now," and that it was John McCully. The Vice President said, well, he wasn't sure McCully was a Johnson man. That's when

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Jerry told him when labor was for Johnson, he [McCully] was for Johnson, which I say was not exactly true, because I was for Johnson at times when labor wasn't for him, such as in the 1948 campaign when the state federation endorsed Coke [Stevenson], at which time, of course, I did not work for labor, I was a newspaperman.

There were times in Democratic Party politics when labor and Johnson were not in agreement on state convention and national convention issues. It actually was in reference to that that Holleman made that statement, because labor did support Johnson in his re-election races during the time I was connected with them in 1954 and 1960 as vice president and as senator. In my heart I had always been a Johnson man as far as Texas politics went. My friends were Johnson people, like Stuart Long, my partner. At that time, people I had known in the University [of Texas] such as John Connally and Jake Pickle were Johnson people. My friends were Johnson people. I considered myself a Johnson man, except in some intra-party disputes when the liberals and Johnson were tied up.

Anyway, I arrived in Washington in April and my family came along a little while later. I worked with the committee [until] I don't remember just exactly when in 1963. Jerry Holleman had left, but even before Holleman left, I had started trying to get into U.S. Information Agency. Jerry was helping me. He talked to George Weaver, for example, the assistant secretary of labor, black, who wrote me a letter of recommendation to USIA, and he himself did what he could to try to get me on the rolls there. I took the examination to be appointed and was

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approved. Then Holleman left and through George Reedy I solicited the help of the Vice President in getting over to USIA. He was not averse to my leaving and actually was very instrumental in my finally getting an appointment. As Walter Jenkins told me later, the Vice President ran into Edward R. Murrow, who was head of USIA, at a cocktail party and asked him why he couldn't even get one man appointed to a job in USIA, a man who had already passed their tests and was on their rolls for appointment. In a few days, over the weekend, George Reedy called me and said, "How would you like to go to Bolivia?" They had advised the Vice President that I was being offered the job before they even advised me. So that was, I'm not sure, sometime in the summer of 1963 that I left. So in all I was with the committee a couple of years.

G: How typical was your hiring by the committee a coming out of the labor movement rather than Johnson staff?

M: No, it wasn't. Well, actually the committee staff, you couldn't say they came from Johnson staff or from Johnson people particularly. By and large they were Democrats interested in this field. I mean, they came from all over the country, not just from Texas. I guess Jerry and I were the only two staff people from Texas connected with the committee. The others came from all over.*

G: The vice chairman was Arthur Goldberg, secretary of labor.

M: Yes, Jerry was executive vice chairman. Hobart [Taylor, Jr.] was vice chairman.

G: And [Holleman was] also in the Labor Department. How active was the Labor Department in this committee?

* Others from Texas AFL-CIO mentioned later.

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M: They did all of our printing and that sort of thing, administrative work; a lot of it was handled through the administrative offices of the Department of Labor. We were a part of the Department of Labor.

G: Oh, you were?

M: In a sense. They had the operating mechanisms of printing and such functions, press releases. I released press releases through the Department of Labor, not direct.

G: How about office space?

M: We were in the General Accounting Office Building. Hobart officed in the Labor Department, as did Jerry, of course. I would imagine that was probably part of Labor Department. Labor Department handled such things as the rental or the allocation of the space. Physically we were separate in that we were in a different building.

G: Was funding a problem for you? You didn't have a congressional appropriation.

M: That's a field completely out of my range. I had no idea. I would imagine the funding was through the Department of Labor, would be my guess.

G: There's an indication that a lot of the government agencies were asked to contribute some resources to this committee, the departments and agencies.

M: That's undoubtedly true, yes.

G: There's also an indication that some members of Congress, like Richard Russell, objected to this type of operation that they didn't fund, that

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they didn't control, that could live off the land of other government agencies. Was this a problem for you?

M: It's quite possible or even probable, but beyond my ken.

G: I wanted to ask you to talk in some detail about Johnson and the committee and his involvement with it and what you think his interest in the committee was.

G: Johnson was very active in the committee's work. I think he was very interested in the committee, very involved in it, and very desirous of achieving goals of equal employment opportunity in both the private field and in government. I really believed that he was sincerely devoted to the principles of the committee. As a matter of fact, after Kennedy was assassinated, at which time I was working with the USIA getting ready to go to South America, USIA asked me to do a story on Johnson and civil rights, which I did and which I wish I had a copy of, in which I reported my honest opinion that Johnson was very devoted to civil rights for all people and that he had been active in the committee and that he had passed, while majority leader, a civil rights bill. He always seemed [interested]. My contact was largely with Holleman and John Feild, not with the Vice President. But I know that he was in constant touch with Holleman about this, that, and the other of the committee and its work. I believed he was sincerely interested in it and hopeful for it.

G: He was chairman of it so he was a visible head of it, and yet since it was part of the executive, I'm sure that the White House wanted it to reflect some of its own input and prestige.

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M: Things frequently had to be cleared with the White House.

G: Was there a problem with publicity in terms of to whom would the publicity accrue, to Lyndon Johnson or to the Kennedy White House?

M: Not insofar as I knew. No, the publicity that I personally handled, the press releases and that sort of thing, there never was any question. I would quote the Vice President, who was chairman of the committee and the one making the announcements. There may have been some conflict. I know that the Vice President and Bobby Kennedy never got along apparently. At one point--this was towards the end of my stay with the committee--the Vice President had Reedy invite me to what he was having, a regular staff meeting once a week with staff people. I went to one meeting and didn't have anything to contribute to the meeting as far as I could see and I didn't go to any following meetings and so far as I know was never missed.

But I can remember one instance so well at that one meeting I did attend. The Vice President was chewing these people out to a fare-you-well because he wasn't getting publicity like the Kennedys were getting. "Every week they're on the cover of this magazine or that magazine. I can't even get an item in 'Periscope.'" (Laughter)

G: This was his Senate staff, is that right?

M: No, his vice presidential staff. Reedy, Liz Carpenter, those kinds of people.

G: From your perspective on the committee, was he excessively interested in publicity?

M: Well, I don't think any politician can be accused of being excessively interested in publicity because that's the lifeblood of a politician. Lyndon was certainly interested in having the accomplishments of the committee, such as they were, seen in what he considered a proper light. That was part of his work.

On the other hand, one time when we were due to get what we considered a good splurge of publicity on the release of an annual report on the activities and successes of the committee, increased percentage of employment of minorities in government, et cetera, the New York Times, Peter Braestrup, I think it was, who I saw on television just the other night, had a big story the day before this was scheduled for release, giving some pretty accurate figures on what was going to be announced. Johnson was furious with Braestrup's story being released before he could make the announcement. And there was a big investigation and civil service investigators came around and took affidavits from everybody whether or not they had leaked this information to Braestrup. Nothing ever came of it because they never found out who had done it. I don't know where he got his information but he had some pretty accurate information.

G: Was his concern about leaks fairly common in this committee work?

M: That's the only time in this committee that such a thing occurred.

G: I notice in the minutes of one of these meetings he refers to it and seems to indicate that President Kennedy was also upset by it.

M: Well, it's possible, but if so, I don't know. It was also rather amusing I thought that--I don't remember whether this was the same

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time or same report or some other report. I believe it was this one. We were charged to get the press out to attend a press conference on it. TV cameras were there. And Johnson got to the door and looked in and saw those TV cameras, and he turned on George Reedy and literally gave him hell, "You know I don't want any live TV coverage! Get those cameras out of here now!" So we had to hold everything up while George got the TV cameras out of the room. I never could understand that. Here he was, he could have gotten good publicity on a definite accomplishment, and didn't want that live TV. Of course, in not so long he was going to be getting live TV coverage all the time as president.

G: One story that Peter Braestrup wrote dealt with the conflict within the committee over voluntarism versus mandatory compliance. Let me ask you to talk about this.

M: I don't remember the story.

G: Well, the issue then.

M: Well, I think it was a constant issue. There were those on the committee staff I know who felt that the committee should be harsher, particularly in the private sector, "Cancel the contract!" As far as I know, at least until I left, they had never cancelled a contract. "Let's cancel a contract and show them we can do it." This was never done. Plans for Progress, the voluntary approach, became the big thing with the committee there. It was a good publicity gimmick but wasn't going to get the job done.

G: Really?

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M: Definitely.

G: Did Plans for Progress prevent you from taking sterner action, relying on this voluntarism?

M: I think it did.

G: Do you?

M: Yes. I think so. At least it was a very big factor, that the committee was going to accomplish its goal by voluntarism through Plans for Progress.

G: Under Plans for Progress, could a corporation, let's say, that had a government contract get by with less than was required under the law or the executive order?

M: Well, this is getting into a technical field that I really am no judge in. The thing is that a plan for progress was voluntary and it wasn't necessarily going to be kept, [that] was the feeling on the part of a lot of people. So Coca-Cola makes a big announcement about being an equal opportunity employer and what they're going to do, but there was no strong follow-up to force them to do what [they said]. It was a voluntary program.

Of course, unions were as bad as management in this field in a lot of cases. In many cases, it was union as much as management that kept the blacks off the employment rolls and down in the bottom of the job market. I think the committee lacked a hell of a lot of ever being the force in the field that it could have been under the executive order, but I think it did do some good and had some good results, particularly within government.

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G: What was Johnson's own view on the question of voluntarism versus compulsory compliance?

M: I really couldn't say, but I would assume that he leaned toward the voluntarism, at least in the private sector, because he was so high on the Plans for Progress approach. If he favored a stronger approach, the cancellation of contract approach, why didn't we cancel some contracts?

G: Well, I was going to ask, did any corporations actually reach a point where you could justifiably cancel a contract?

M: In the opinion of staff, yes.

G: They did fail to comply with the terms of the--?

M: Yes. But we also realized that it would quite likely result in going to court in the long run and a long drawn-out perhaps and unsuccessful fight. Quien sabe? But I'd say staff members generally on the contract side of the picture favored at least a show of force in some instances.

G: Any particular case that you recall?

M: No. Not really. [Ward] McCreedy probably would.

G: Okay. The staff would appeal this to Arthur Goldberg or Lyndon Johnson or whom? Who made the final decision not to cancel a contract?

M: I don't know where it lay. In my opinion I would think Feild probably would have favored a strong action to see if we could get some results. I think Holleman would have. After Holleman left, I question whether Hobart would have, which I guess gets up to the Vice

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President, and apparently he didn't, because nothing happened. If he had wanted something strong done, well, then it would have been done.

G: Bobby Troutman is associated with the Plans for Progress. Can you recall his role in working with the committee?

M: All I remember is he was very active, constantly in and out and contacting--I think he contacted companies and helped work out a program with staff help. It was generally considered sort of his program.

G: Do you recall how his relationship with the committee was severed?

M: No, I don't. It may have happened after I left. I'm not sure. Do you know when it was severed?

M: No, I think it was before you left.

B: I have a dim recollection, but I don't remember any detail.

G: Did Johnson lose interest in the committee after a while?

M: Not so long as I was there and insofar as I could tell.

G: One of the criticisms that was published was that he controlled the agenda and that he wouldn't let the committee take up some topics that had interest to it. Is this a fact?

M: I don't know it for a fact, but I wouldn't be surprised. I know he controlled the agenda, yes. Whether he kept things off that others wanted on, I really don't know.

G: Let me ask you to describe the public information aspect of the committee, particularly getting the word out around the country. You've mentioned press releases. Let me ask you to go into some detail how you informed the country of the committee's work.

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M: Oh, brother! Press releases, booklets. I really can't remember much in detail about just what all was done. It seems to me we were always publishing some sort of booklet or putting out some sort of release, sending out speakers, which was not my job but was done, things like these workshops, which were described in this booklet.

G: This is "The American Dream of Equal Opportunity" pamphlet or booklet?

M: Yes. You have that, I presume.

G: I think we do. Were there also regional meetings held, and how did these work out?

M: Yes.

G: Did you ever go to any of these?

M: No, I didn't go personally. I don't remember how many were held. I know the one that I was personally involved in never came off. We had one scheduled in Houston and they couldn't find a hotel that would take blacks. Lyndon sent Ramsey Clark and me down to Houston to try to straighten out the situation and find a place, a hotel, to hold the conference. We spent a couple of days in Houston talking with hotel people, particularly Johnny Black [?] I think was his name, who owned one of the hotels and was a strong Johnson man. He said he'd desegregate--I can't remember what his name was--his hotel, he'd take them, if the Rice would, and the Rice wouldn't. It's amusing, this was just at the time--I think it was while we were down there--that the Dallas hotels announced that they were desegregating. So Ramsey and I went back to Washington and reported our failure to crack a hotel, and so

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Johnson said, "Okay, just cut it out. We won't have a meeting in Houston." So we didn't.

G: He didn't try to call the owners?

M: I don't know, he may have. He may have himself, but in the long run the answer was no.

G: Do you think Johnson was sensitive to--?

M: We suggested that we move it to Dallas. And of course, he hated Dallas; he wasn't even about to consider Dallas.

G: Really?

M: Yes.

G: What did he say, do you recall?

M: As I understand it, I didn't talk to him directly on it, he was just adamant that he wasn't going to hold it in Dallas.

G: Was Lyndon Johnson sensitive about Texas firms that discriminated in this way? Did he tend to look after his own home state industries?

M: I wasn't close enough to him personally to say yes or no to that. To the best of my knowledge I never saw any difference in the way Texas firms were treated and other firms in other parts of the country, but it could have been.

G: No exception was made because it was from his state that you're aware of?

M: Not so far as I know.

G: How about something that was not only from his state but something that he was closely allied with politically or financially?

M: If the problem ever arose, I don't know about it.

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G: Okay. Did the White House get involved with protecting contractees?

M: Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge. But could have been.

G: Any other insights on Lyndon Johnson and race that you gained from seeing him in this committee? Anything to bolster your belief that Johnson was seriously interested in civil rights and wanted to do something to help the situation?

M: Not really, not any individual single instances, just a general over-all feeling that he really worked at this committee and really wanted the committee to succeed. I can't remember any particular instances that would bolster that feeling.

G: You mentioned his conflict with Robert Kennedy. Can you recall any specific instances where he would hold a committee meeting and be attacked or critiqued by Kennedy? Does that ring a bell?

M: Not really. It could have been, but I--I was just wondering what in the hell I had here. Must have been in that folder or something.

G: There was one meeting in particular in which Kennedy homed in on deficiencies of the space program, NASA, in hiring blacks, seeing that blacks were hired on projects. Do you recall this?

M: I don't recall it, no. Of course, while I was in and out of committee meetings, I didn't always sit through them.

G: Okay. Let me ask you about the committee's efforts to eliminate discriminatory practices in labor unions.

M: I know there was a lot of talk and some activity in this regard. I'm very vague on details. I know that they made a big effort to integrate some of the District of Columbia unions, building trades. How

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successful they were, I don't know. I know there were activities aimed at this, but just what and how much they accomplished, I really wouldn't know.

G: The [Theodore] Kheel report led to a reorganization of the committee staff. Do you recall how that report was undertaken to begin with?

M: I just vaguely remember it. I vaguely remember it.

G: How did the committee change when Hobart Taylor assumed the top position?

M: Well, I was there only a short time after Hobart became executive vice chairman. If there was any dramatic change in the composition of the staff, it came after I left. I don't recall any before. But I really was there only a month or two I think.

G: Do you think that Taylor did a good job administratively?

M: I always felt that Feild handled most of the administrative work actually. How much the executive vice chairman, either Holleman or Hobart, did in actual administrative work, that was detailed, that was generally I would say below the level of the executive vice chairman.

G: Of course Feild was gone, I guess. He left about this time.

M: Did he leave before I did? I don't remember.

G: Yes, he did.

M: He didn't get along with Hobart. That's right, he went to Potomac?

G: Potomac Institute, yes.

Do you feel that Taylor was not as aggressive as he should have been in pursuing compliance?

M: I'd hesitate to say that in view of my short time.

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G: Let me ask you if you recall any of the circumstances of Jerry Holleman's leaving and what effect this had on the committee.

M: Well, Jerry and I were very close friends so naturally it was a real blow to me personally. I think it undoubtedly had an effect on the committee staff as individuals, particularly those who were especially close to Holleman. I said Jerry and I were the only ones from Texas; that wasn't true. I'd forgotten. Mildred Hathcock, Azie Taylor Morton, and Ruth Graves all came up from the Texas AFL-CIO along with me. And of course we were all close personal friends of Holleman. So that was quite a blow. But as to the work of the committee, I don't know that it had any--it did have an effect certainly, because Hobart became executive vice chairman--

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G: Had Holleman spent a good deal of time with the committee?

M: I think he spent a fair amount of time, yes, on the committee work. He was assistant secretary of state [labor] for manpower, which [meant] other work took up a lot of his time, of course. But he devoted a fairly large amount of his time to the committee.

(Interruption)

G: How much of the committee's work was involved with upgrading the jobs that minorities held rather than just getting a larger percentage of minorities hired?

M: It was a very important part of the program, try to get job lines opened, which also involved many unions because the union contracts would keep the blacks down in the lower levels of employment and away

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from the upward lines of promotion. It was always an important part of the work of the committee in connection with both government and contract work.

G: Were any of the government agencies involved hard to deal with or reluctant to move forward in this program?

M: I really wouldn't know. I wasn't that closely involved in such things.

G: What about the employment service?

M: I couldn't say with certainty.

G: One of the questions raised in some of the committee meetings was whether or not the committee staff was large enough to do the work that it needed to do. Do you feel that the staff should have been larger?

M: Well, like most government bureaucracies, they can always use additional hands. I think the staff was too small to really do all the things that should have been done or could have been done. A staff member, an individual staff member, would have to spend weeks on one company or one company's problems. So the more staff members you had, the more places you could be operating. By and large I thought it had a competent staff.

G: Some of them were, I gather, holdovers from the committee that had been formed under Eisenhower.

M: Yes, I think that's right.

G: The [President's Committee on Government] Contracts.

M: Yes, but I don't know which ones.

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G: One of the criticisms of the committee was that it really used misleading statistics to show progress, that you could have a very small increase in the number of minorities and they would show it to the best advantage, whereas numerically it might not represent that big an increase. It might show it as a percentage, for example.

M: By and large I'd say that might well be true. It's only natural to try to paint your picture as brightly as you can. Percentages were used largely--I can remember in regard to government employment that it was always largely based on percentage increases and this and that grade level, et cetera. But I don't remember any specific charges of misuse of figures.

G: How could the committee have been more effective?

M: Well, I think they should have tested their contract cancellation power, which was the biggest weapon in their arsenal. Unless it was tried, you never knew whether it was going to work.

(Interruption)

The Afro-American, the Washington black newspaper, Chuck Stone for some reason took out after me, and after Jerry left he said, "Now it's time for McCully to go." He had written a column earlier about what happened to white liberals when they got to Washington, in which he listed my name along with such people as Stewart Udall and other people high in the administration who had never heard of me.

(Laughter)

G: Why did he want to get you out?

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M: I never knew what he had against me personally, but let me get his column.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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