INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 25, 1968

INTERVIEWEE: ESTHER PETERSON

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mrs. Peterson's office in the Labor Department Building, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: Your first contact with the then-Senator Johnson would be while you were legislative representative for the AFL-CIO in the decade of the 1950s.

P: I started off as representative for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

M: Do you remember Johnson from that far back?

P: He was in the House then. Let's see, when did he go into the Senate?

M: In 1948.

P: In 1948 you see, and I began working for the Amalgamated in late 1944, so I knew him in the House at that period--but not well. Then in 1948 we went abroad and were gone and came back in 1957.

M: With your Swedish horse out here in your office.

P: Then when I came back in 1957 I began as legislative representative for the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO. Then, of course, I began working--

M: Mr. Johnson was majority leader at that time?

P: He was majority leader at that time, that is correct. My particular area of responsibility was--well at that time I was working pretty

much on the minimum wage legislation. I was also working on the forerunner of the Medicare, and I was working on unemployment insurance a good deal. Those were three major areas, and I do remember some of the very general kinds of things that we worked on. But I didn't work with him as specifically as I did with others, like Senator Thomas of Utah.

M: He wasn't directly working on the pieces of legislation that you were?

P: I didn't have day-to-day [contact]. I knew him and I knew of him. I suppose I became acquainted with him most when I worked in the political campaign of 1958.

M: The Kennedy campaign?

P: No, before that. 1958, I think, when Senator Moss was elected. I guess that was 1958, wasn't it, when Moss was elected? Then 1960 was the Kennedy campaign. We all did a good deal of political work, all of us who were working in the trade union movement. I come from Utah. That is my home state where I have connections, so I was assigned to work there, and I did a good deal, I would say I took a major responsibility in the Moss campaign out there.

M: How did Mr. Johnson get involved in that?

P: By my trying like mad to get him out there.

M: Did he go?

P: Yes, he did. I worked at that time with Bobby Baker, who came into Utah, and I worked with Earle Clements. I had been out at the campaign [headquarters] and was very much upset about the way things

were going and came back and talked with Earle about it. He thought Johnson could make a big difference in Utah. Then Earle put me in touch with Bob Hinkley, and we began to get little pieces together of areas where we felt very definitely that Senator Johnson at that time could be very very helpful.

M: He was an effective campaigner in a state like Utah?

P: He came in. Well, we were having a very hard time to really make headlines and to get the kind of publicity that we needed. I shall never forget how grateful I was when he did come in about two days before the election. He flew in and really helped us with it, and Earle and Bob Hinkley and some of them were helping us at that period to get him in. I must say that it was my friendship with Earle and with Bob that helped to put these pieces together. At that time also I shan't forget some extremely good speeches, very liberal speeches, that Clements showed me Johnson had made which were, with his background of not being a radical like I was supposed to be, you know, very human. I shan't forget his basic 1958 speech. In fact I saved it, because I quoted and quoted and quoted from this, that this was in the tradition of the Democratic Party, and it helped a lot. I felt that this did help a great deal in the campaign, and I remember a few also rather ticklish questions when Bobby Baker was in and we needed money and Baker felt that we were lost. I remember having to just fight with Bobby Baker heavily that we weren't lost, that we could make this. I remember at that time some of the deals that were not made, and we won anyway.

M: Without the help that he thought you needed?

P: We won anyway, but it was awfully close. But we had a three-way race at that time, and therefore it was because it was a three-way race that I thought we could win, because we had Bracken Lee in the picture.

I remember then especially liking my relationship with Earle Clements and with Bob Hinkley, who I felt had a stronger influence with Johnson and I felt that they were the ones that really got through to him. I'm sure that Bobby Baker and Senator Smathers came in. But I do remember the really constructive work being what came from Earle Clements and from Bob Hinkley, for my book, and for the political mentality of Utah. Then I remember their helping us very distinctly to get Johnson to come in. My work with the labor people I was doing with one hand, and with the other hand I was trying to get this other sort of citizen group going a little bit more, and I could feel we organized, as far as the labor group goes, I think one of the very best campaigns on the telephone. That was one of the first telephone banks. That is where we first got women started in doing this, and it paid off. But along with getting the people registered and to the polls, we had to get this climate of acceptance for the would-be senator, and that's where Johnson was extremely helpful in an area like Utah.

He flew in, by the way, and made a speech that we were able to get broadcast, and it meant that we had banner headlines the day before election. I've always said that that trip put us over.

M: What was the general reputation that Mr. Johnson, as a senator, had with labor?

P: Well, it certainly was not a hundred per cent. He was generally regarded as an oil and natural gas partisan, and also I remember some of the difficulties we had with him on Rule 22 on filibusters, not all of labor was in back of that. So it depends on which wing and which group of labor that you are talking about.

M: I'm thinking particularly in terms of the 1960 election. You mentioned yourself laughingly as a radical. A lot of the liberal community did not want to go along with Mr. Johnson as Kennedy's vice presidential nominee. Did you get involved in any of the campaign that year?

P: At that period in 1960, yes, I did. I must say that I was one that did not support Johnson at that time. I supported Kennedy completely, and I just felt that Johnson was really not with us on many of the liberal kinds of things. I shan't forget Helen Gahagan Douglas calling me and telling me that I was wrong, that once he got out of a broader base than Texas he would be more liberal. She was right. I must say that I think history will show that he did just that on the domestic program. I feel very strongly about his success in that field.

M: You were already advising Kennedy then on consumer affairs, I think, were you not?

P: A little later than that. I had worked with Kennedy, you see, pretty closely for a long time. I had worked with him when he was in the House, and I had been assigned to do the lobbying work with

him by the clothing workers, so I got acquainted with him at that time. Then when I came back from Europe, where I had been abroad with my husband, and I began working he was of course on the Senate Labor Committee. So I had an opportunity to work with him when I didn't have much opportunity or reason to work with Johnson. Had I gotten acquainted with Johnson personally at that time, it might have been a different thing, but he was not one that I had occasion to talk with, because my areas of responsibility did not touch his very much. So in all honesty I have to say that I didn't have the close working relationship with him that I did have with Kennedy, you see.

M: Kennedy talked a lot about consumer affairs but then didn't appoint a special assistant.

P: No. I was appointed by Kennedy--and first director of the Women's Bureau and then later assistant secretary of labor. I can remember very definitely when Ralph Dungan called me, and that was in October I should think, and asked me if I would come over to the White House and be a special assistant.

M: This was in 1964?

P: This was the year before Kennedy was killed.

M: Oh, before he was killed, in 1963?

P: This was in 1963.

M: They had already decided to bring in a special assistant on consumer affairs?

P: You see, Kennedy had campaigned on consumer issues. He had said that he would appoint a consumer council if he were elected, and the consumers kept pressing him, "When are you really going to set up a consumer council?" They did set up the consumer advisory council to the Council of Economic Advisers. I know the consumer groups felt that this was not a complete carrying out of what Kennedy had [promised]. I know some of the consumer people came to me and said, "Won't you take over the consumer job?" I had just organized, for President Kennedy, the President's Commission on the Status of Women to set up and to work out some of the women's questions that we had not been able to solve through the bureaucratic structure, so you try another way. I remember these groups saying, "Oh, Esther, we want to propose you for the consumer job." I remember not taking to it kindly at all because I was up to my neck in my own work here at the Labor Department. But then Ralph Dungan did call me, and if I recall it was in October of 1963. When was I appointed by Johnson?

M: You were appointed special assistant in January of 1964.

P: January 3, 1964 is correct. So this was in October. I remember Ralph calling me about this and saying that they wanted me to come over, that President Kennedy was interested in my coming over full time on the staff as consumer adviser, and it was to fulfill his campaign promise. I remember saying, "Look here, Ralph, I've got a full-time job in Labor, as well as the Status of Women Commission. And he said, "Esther, assistant secretaries are a dime a dozen.

Special assistants to the President aren't." But I was really uncertain about it because it was not my field. It was just a matter of here is another area to learn about. I wasn't a consumer expert then and I'm not an economist, and my background was in labor pretty much. Ralph kept pressing me about doing it, and I was talking then to the Secretary [Wirtz] about it, should I or shouldn't I--you know. It was kind of off and on a good deal. But no final decision had been made, and I kind of dropped it. There was some talk about doing both or setting it up here in the Labor Department, and I would have to look up old records and memoranda. I'm sure there are loads of them.

M: The important thing here is that definitely Kennedy had intended to go ahead with this appointment.

P: The offer that came to me was from Kennedy.

M: So what Mr. Johnson did was pick up a Kennedy program here.

P: Right. I felt that maybe some of my problems with Johnson were that I was a Kennedy appointee.

M: Yes. Well, that has happened in other areas.

P: That has happened in other areas, although I must say that he has done a tremendous job in picking up Kennedy's unfinished business.

M: Let's get into that a little. When did he appoint you, what kind of charge did he give?

P: When Ralph called me on December 9, because that was my birthday and I remember that, the Status of Women report had been completed and given to the President but there was still an action program to

be carried out as spelled out in this report. He asked about coming over once again, just following through the commitment from Kennedy. He said Johnson was willing to go through with this. Then there were a lot of complications about it, because there was some feeling here, I think, on the part of the Secretary whether this was a good thing to do and would this ever really amount to anything? Was it a gesture or not a gesture? The best advice seemed to be that if I did do it, that I should do it in addition to the work that I already had, for a number of reasons. I do remember definitely the Secretary pointing out the problem of my sitting and being chairman of a President's committee and presiding over people who outranked me, cabinet people, and he said that this would create problems. There were a lot of kind of fuzzy sort of things.

M: Did Mr. Johnson ever talk to you and give you an idea of what he wanted you to do as special assistant?

P: Not really.

M: You didn't have a very definite charge?

P: Not really, no. I worked with Walter Heller a good deal in setting up the executive order, and there had been already a good number of plans. There were problems in the relationship of the Kennedy consumer council to the Council of Economic Advisers, and the consumer council felt that they were not sufficiently independent, which they were not. I think that's a matter of record, a lot of the problems that they had at that time. I remember my discussions with the Kennedy White House about setting up a consumer program

along the lines of things that I felt would have to be done if I were able to really do anything. And then I do remember definitely Ralph calling me again in late December and then finally saying, well, maybe I would accept the job. Then I remember getting a call from Walter Jenkins asking me if I would get on the plane and go down to the Ranch the next morning.

M: That was when you were appointed?

P: That was the day, but I had had no conversation before that except with Walter Heller when we had worked over the program structure a little bit. Then we had to work out what statement we would issue. I always felt, and I'm speaking very frankly, a little disappointed, I suppose, about that trip to Texas--there were a lot of other things, too. Here was my Secretary, who outranks me, who was there on a manpower question, and I did not feel free to therefore monopolize the time and say, "Look, Mr. President, I also need to have--." These human situations that develop around situations like that make it [difficult]. I think it's only right that I deferred to the Secretary. I had some other questions in relation to my program that he was to take up with the President; I was right there, but he had to take them up. So again, he is my Secretary. These are the problems that were just a normal thing--but difficult.

But I do recall at that time that the President was extremely nice, "Esther, you are going to do this now. You're my gal and just get in there and do it." About all it was was a nice luncheon with him. We were discussing manpower things, and I'm sure he had read

the release on my appointment to the White House which said that he wanted a good strong voice. I shall never forget the words. He said, "Now, Esther, I said that it was going to be clear, uncompromising, and effective," or something like that, "and I expect you to be this." I took him literally, and I remember when he took me out he said, "Look, this is my girl now. You people in the news be kind to her." He was very friendly and very fine.

Then I shan't forget he told me to go over and have a press conference, which just terrified me. I thought, "What in the world am I going to say?" Frankly it was at that press conference that I began to get the ideas of what kind of program I was going to evolve, because they did say, "What do you intend to do?" And I said, "I first have got to find out what is on the people's minds." And, "How are you going to do this?" "I expect to hear from them." "Well, how will you do it?" I remember then saying, "I imagine that I will have a lot of regional conferences, and we'll bring in all the groups." "Will you have business participation?" "Sure, I'll have business participation." It was an extremely interesting experience.

It isn't as simple as that, because I think, "How do you create an issue?" I've had enough experience doing this, so all you do is think, "Look, we did it this way. This is the way we do it." You set up a body of competent people, and you do have an ear tuned to the public. I shan't forget when they said, "Do you expect to hear from the people? Do you expect letters? Would you welcome letters?"

I said, "Yes." Where should they write? Well, I didn't even have an office yet, but I said "the White House." And that's when the avalanche started. That was the best thing I ever did. It was tremendous, and it was the best spontaneous idea I ever had, because I did hear, by the thousands. Then I saw that what we call the professional consumers were off on the wrong [track], that the way to get an issue out of this was to pick what was really on people's minds and not these high economic issues of the complexities of the marketplace and the use of our productive power and the kinds of things that had kept the consumer philosophy so far removed from day to day concerns of the average family--car repairs, package sizes, credit costs, et cetera.

Of course, I've always worked for my living. I grew up on a farm. I've had a very practical background. I know what goes into things. I know what a job it has been doing the marketing for my own family on a limited salary. I also have had the experience of living abroad under different systems where I could see the different marketing systems. I suddenly decided I did know more about it than I had thought I knew, and I was glad because it did give me a certain degree of confidence that I hadn't had before. I had worked, also, as a legislative representative on the bill that Humphrey was mixed up in so much--what was it called?

M: Humphrey has been mixed up in so many of them.

P: It was one where we were on opposite sides of the fence. The fair trade act, and whether or not manufacturers could require mandatory

minimum prices on brand name products. And I had testified on the truth in lending bill also. I had worked with Senator Douglas on this. So I was not unaware of some of the important and basic consumer items. I had also been aware of the way some of the federal regulatory standards were set, which always bothered me, because I had felt when I would read these things that came across my desk that I could not see a consumer voice in the setting of many of the standards, such as jam and jelly and catsup and olives. I could see that these regulations were based on industry demands and certainly not on consumer voices. So I thought, "Well goodness, maybe the thing for me to do is to really see if we can create a consumer awareness. How does one create a national consumer awareness? Because until you create a national issue, you will never get these things passed and you will never get anywhere." Then I was told afterwards, "Esther, you did make consumers aware, but the President didn't expect you to be a zealot." I became very controversial. Businessmen complained loudly to the White House, and don't forget that was an election year for LBJ.

M: You became very quickly identified with dissident housewives, and you started a boycott in Denver and elsewhere.

P: I know I became identified but I didn't start the supermarket boycotts. I wish I had been that clever. I didn't. I can't take the credit for it.

M: But you did lend help to them.

P: Yes, I identified myself with them and their complaints about supermarket games, gimmicks, and trading stamps. There again I acted on my own. I think the problem that I had was that I was so alone in the administration. This is what bothered me. I used to send in reports about the day-to-day problems of the consumer in the marketplace, and I would never get a feedback, you see. If I did anything, it was on my own. I was so fed up I said, "To hell with it, I'm not going to go on being bruised and neglect my own job at the Labor Department." I think when finally I forced the issue with the White House--were they behind me or not?--they got fed up with me. I was rocking the boat. So I said I should quit the job. They finally realized that this was a hot political issue after my intended resignation leaked out and as soon as it became a political issue then brother--I wish I had had one-tenth of the support when I was on the job that Betty Furness has had ever since.

M: That's largely where it came from, I expect. What was President Johnson's personal reaction to your identification with these things?

P: Bless him, I'm sure he was bothered, because I know that a lot of the so-called big shots got to him, but he never, never personally confronted me with the problems. I think that my best relations with the White House was when Jenkins was there. I must say this was splendid, because he gave me answers, and when I was having my problems he always returned my calls. He always gave me advice, and I was just terribly, terribly disappointed when he left, because I felt that he had the President's ear. I felt that he

really reflected far more than others in the White House staff what the President was thinking. For example, an advertising publication, Printers Ink, printed a nasty editorial attacking me personally, not on issues but personally. "Is she ignorant? Does the President know what she is doing?" I sent it over to Jenkins, and I said, "Am I? Does he?" And on the first one he answered, "Definitely not." I still have it because I'm going to frame it some day, I love it so. "Am I ignorant?" "Definitely not," and "Does he know what I am doing?" He said, "To a degree, but keep it up."

M: Is that when the advertisers were calling you a pernicious threat to the American economy?

P: That was when they said I was going to ruin the free enterprise system and the whole world was going to come tumbling down. But I thought, "Bless you, Walter Jenkins." I have always interpreted his note to mean that the President did not object to what I was doing. But I do think that a lot of interests got to people around the President, and I never did get the full support I needed. I think that one of the biggest problems that I had, if I can say, was Jack Valenti.

M: Blocking you out, you mean?

P: Right, and not letting me get to the President when some of the situations were rather tight, especially during my fight with the advertisers. For example, when they had asked me to speak--that is, the AFA, the American Federation of Advertising. Then they

proceeded after they had asked me to speak to send out this nasty editorial about me to all of their people. I thought, "Why the hell should I go speak to them if their mind is already made up? I'm asking for a dialogue, and if the dialogue is closed, I've got better uses for my time." So I just said to them, "If your mind is made up, why should I go?" And I didn't go. Then they went around my back to get the President to speak at their next meeting. When I got wind of that I got furious, because that was just really pulling out the rug from under me. That's the time I had the most trouble with Jack Valenti, but I know that he was with the advertisers and had been one of them. And that time I think, I'm speaking very frankly, was the roughest time. That's when I missed Walter Jenkins the most. Busby was good, but not as good. He didn't have the thing at heart as I felt that Jenkins had in really interpreting the political aspects, which were, of course, very important to LBJ. I like to think that Jenkins more fully interpreted the President's feeling on these things than the others.

M: He was certainly with him long enough.

P: He was with him long enough. He used to get my reports; then he would comment. Jack Valenti would just send it back and say "Fine" or no reactions, you know. I just decided I could have written a nursery story, and I felt like doing it in some of my reports, just to see what would happen.

So the hard thing that I had was to do what I thought the President wanted me to do. Oh, the President did say to me,

"Esther, I want every housewife in this country to know I'm on their side." And that's what I tried to do. I honestly tried to do that very thing, but I must say that I was fighting not only businessmen, but I was fighting some of the people around the White House, too, and they were harder to deal with.

M: What about the businessmen? Did you get no cooperation from them?

P: I got tremendous cooperation from a lot of them, bless their sweet hearts. For example, before I said to the AFA that I would not speak there, I had had an offer from the very prestigious AAAA to make my speech before them.

M: The AAAA?

P: That's the advertising agencies, the American Association of Advertising Agencies. That's the real power. They are the ones that have the accounts, and the AFA were just these little advertising clubs around the country which were on their last legs anyway. So as far as I was concerned, I did have tremendous support from the J. Walter Thompson people, Young and Rubicam, and some of the others. I mean, they are still my friends, and they tell me that I didn't hurt business one bit when I ran the White House office.

M: What about the individual firms? Were there leading large firms that were particularly outraged?

P: Oh yes, of course there were. It was largely on the packaging bill. Then it was the Chamber of Commerce and the NAM who felt that my having these regional consumer conferences and speaking as I did cast the finger of accusation at all business, when actually I

never did that. I think my speeches and everything that I said indicated that I was trying to make--well, let me put it into the President's words. It's all coming back to me, and I had forgotten all about it--that we would make the good practices of the marketplace the common practices; this was what we were trying to do. But then the thing that I found when I got into it was it wasn't just the little firms who were the offenders, it was the big ones, too. And if this was the case, I was willing to say so, you see.

M: But they are the ones who can talk back.

P: They are the ones that could go around--the spice companies, Procter and Gamble, General Foods, General Mills and the people who are the big shots, the power structure in the GMA, the Groceries Manufacturers Association, the corn products people, and so on. All you need to do is take the list of people who testified against the truth-in-lending bill and against the packaging bill, and those were the people who were opposed to what I was doing.

M: What about Congress? You advised, I think, housewives to write their congressmen. What did the congressmen think about that?

P: I think most of them liked it, because they said that it helped them. During the presidential campaign, not this year's but the time before, 1964, I just couldn't get to all the congressional districts that the congressmen asked me to come to. They said I had a following, and if I would just come in it would help them and LBJ. I did

go to Denver with [Roy] McVickers. This was where the boycotts have started. He lost. I don't know whether it hurt or helped, but these are the kinds of things you don't know what the factors were. I understand there were a lot of other factors, too, in that race. That was one of the most tense times, whether I should go there or not go there. I wanted to force the White House to make the decision whether I would or would not do it, and they gave me no guidance at all, so I went anyway. I felt I had to in order to keep my credibility. Those were very rough days.

M: What specific legislation passed while you were in that position?

P: In the consumer field, only the packaging bill. That's the only one. We did an awful lot of groundwork on meat inspection, and the truth in lending goes back long before. We worked very hard. I ran I don't know how many conferences on the truth in lending issue around the country to get the evidence and get the data on that one. These things take time. Even the meat inspection, I had gotten wind of a report on conditions in a lot of plants, especially in intra-state commerce, and I had talked to some of the inspectors. I had been talking about the shameful situation this was, but the Agriculture Department didn't want to press it. I was trying to get that on the legislative program for some time, even though it had been in the consumer messages. And the flammable fabrics bill, we worked on that one before, and the product safety. A lot of these had come as a result of the work of the Consumer Advisory Council. You see, all legislation has seed time, and it comes to its own. I think

it's just absolutely splendid what Betty has done to pull these things forward. I look at it now and I think it was absolutely right that I quit when I did because I think she came in with certain kinds of talents and skills which I didn't have. I think I performed a function to help create the issues, but I think I really accomplished about all I could in the job.

M: What about the truth-in-packaging bill that did pass while you were there? Did the White House play a role in it?

P: Yes, they did.

M: How?

P: Well, they played a very good role in getting the entire administration united on a position instead of going off on different tangents. There again I had problems, and I can't say that they were with the President as much as they were with some of the people around him. Maybe they did reflect [his view]; these are the things that are awfully hard to know. Of course the President was so completely absorbed in Vietnam and some of these other issues that in my own philosophy are really far greater, involving lives of people. You can't feel like, "Oh, look, this has got to have his personal--" I never did insist on personal confrontations.

M: Who was running the--?

P: It was Califano during that period.

M: They were in charge of the legislative activities?

P: That's correct, and I think they felt that I was a little too vigorous on my causes. I know Califano said that they didn't

need a zealot and I was too much of a zealot.

M: Zealots sometimes, as you say, create the issue.

P: But there I felt that they listened pretty heavily to a lot of the special interests, and when they agreed to a lot of compromises with many of them it bothered me because I wanted a stronger bill.

M: Of course, they would say that those compromises were necessary to get any bill at all.

P: These are where you have differences of opinion as to where those compromises are to be made. I know the legislative process because I have lobbied a long time, and I know at every point where you have to throw something overboard. I like to leave a few things to throw overboard, not throw them all over beforehand.

M: Do you think the bill was weakened so badly that it failed its essential purpose?

P: It depends. I think it's still in the process of being implemented. We have jawboned the standardization thing. Whatever you need to get, the mechanism is in there to be used. It could be enforced very well. It just depends on how it is administered. I think some of the procedures in it are awfully difficult and subject to filibuster. I remember feeling a little tongue-in-cheek when I went out during the campaign and said, "Look what we have done." There isn't a time when I go shopping when women don't come to me and say, "Listen, when are we going to see a difference in these packages."

M: I get that at home, too.

P: This is the sort of thing where the real gutsy results are still in the offing--it's coming, and there again one has to be patient and know that this kind of reform takes a long time. We have to know that the only voice we had for us, really, was the government. We didn't have strong consumer voices. Although we kicked up a lot of storm, it was unorganized and didn't come in as a strong consumer voice. The audience was a business audience, mostly. But we had good administration presence, involving the Secretary of Commerce as a witness.

M: It is a pretty difficult and suggestive thing, but how would you estimate the general consumer performance of the Johnson Administration?

P: I think it is just splendid, absolutely splendid.

M: Despite a few setbacks?

P: I don't know how to put it. I don't want to sound bitter, because I'm not. I really think, as I look at it, that this is one of the areas that history will praise LBJ. It was during his administration that the great things were done. He brought the consumer voice and awareness to the highest levels of government. You see, Kennedy, in spite of having the idea and getting it started, never really [pressed it]. There was reluctance. He knew me, and I knew him, we were comfortable with each other. And sure, he would say, "Esther, do this." But I didn't feel the vigorous push that LBJ supplied. I think that Kennedy's consumer message to Congress in 1962 is the basic historic document as far as that goes, but Johnson's really pressing on these issues, carrying through Kennedy's

commitments and putting it on his legislative priorities [was crucial]. I think as soon as LBJ was aware that this was a good political issue there were no holds barred. He really put to it, and I think this will be one of the things that he will really go in history for. I think this has been the period of consumer awakening. LBJ kept score on every bill.

M: How did you, then, finally decide to come back over here full time?

P: I think records will show that they had decided that the consumer office should not be in the White House.

M: The job?

P: The job. They were going to abolish it. Apparently, I had really messed up pretty badly, I'm afraid. I don't know. But I had always wanted the job separated. I was finding it very difficult to do both jobs--White House and Labor--and I was getting pressure from the Secretary of Labor that we were not doing a lot of the things here that needed to be done in the industrial safety area and in a lot of the areas where I have responsibility. It was difficult for me. I'll be frank with you. They were both very absorbing jobs, and it was quite difficult for me to find the time both jobs required. Bill Wirtz once said that I spent two-thirds of my time at the White House and two-thirds at Labor, and he was right about that.

M: Your secretary told me how many hours you work now. I wonder what you did then?

P: We worked, I'll be very frank, very, very hard. And there were a number of plans for the consumer office. They wanted to move it

over to HEW, and were practically ready to do that. Somehow or other some press person got hold of that information and they asked me if it were true. It was accurate that that was going to be done, and that's when the whole thing kind of broke open. I did not want to go over to HEW with it. We had all kinds of plans, and some very splendid plans, because I felt that the program was important; I really believe in the program very strongly. I could see the difficulty of having it in the White House, because the shots do come to the President and I was very sensitive of that. I seldom used White House stationery, because I felt I wanted the blame to be one step away from the President. I wanted to protect the President. I felt I mustn't say, "I represent the President." Instead, "This is Esther speaking." I don't know how to say it exactly. I was aware of the political shots and political fall-out when you have such a strong program going, especially in getting it started. There was some talk about having the program here in the Labor Department, but I felt that it should not be identified definitely with an interest, a labor interest on this. I felt that it had to be broad consumer interest. A lot of my friends here in Labor objected to that because I could have bureaucratic and said, "Oh, yes, let's take it over here." Well, I didn't believe in that. That did cause some problems for me, too.

M: Then they left it as a White House job?

P: Then when the thing broke in the press I'm told by friends over at the White House that telegrams and letters kept coming in, and I

believe that it finally was realized that this was a political issue that was worth something. I was accused of starting that avalanche of letters, but I was not guilty.

M: At the White House they don't have to have a constituency in the department.

P: Yes. I recommended different kinds of things. For example, one I really had outlined--and I'm sure the White House memoranda will show a number of different plans that we proposed--was to put it in HUD with the Model Cities program, because it could start with a new agency with a whole consumer protection idea. Also, we had proposed some very strong assistance to an office that would not be as visible as mine but would have the power to intervene before the regulatory agencies. I felt immediately that what we needed were a whole battery of good, bright lawyers who could really present consumer briefs and enter before regular agencies, before Congress, assist the groups that were interested in it, to pull together the kinds of public interest voice that just had not been heard.

M: And being in a department would help that.

P: And being in a department would help that. So we proposed a number of alternatives when the decision was made to not have it a White House operation. Then the decision was made to ditch that and to set it up, as it was, in the White House, with Betty Furness in charge. I would go back to being full-time assistant secretary of labor, which was the job for which I was being paid and the job

for which--I got sort of annoyed at people thinking that I was collecting two salaries. Things like that. But those are just crazy things when people don't understand the workings of government. I worked two jobs for one salary, of course.

M: Let's talk about your job over here in the Labor Department then. We've got you moved back over here. I suppose you started over here as the head of the Women's Bureau before you were assistant secretary.

P: That's right.

M: The obvious question is the Johnson record, if any, on women.

P: You see, I feel very pleased with the areas in this administration that I have had something to do with. I think they are things that LBJ is going to be known for. I say without hesitation that he has done more to promote the advancement of women than really any president at all, and I think he means business. I think part of it is because of Mrs. Johnson.

M: Her interest in women's problems?

P: As a person, you see, here is a woman with ability and with brains who has been a businesswoman of her own, and I think he is accustomed to recognizing that there are other skills that [women can have]. It certainly hasn't detracted from her as a person. I've always felt that part of his basic understanding of the problems of working women was because of her and the relationship that he has with her. I may be wrong, but this is my own feeling about it, although I've never discussed it with her. I shan't forget when

right after he was elected vice president and I had not supported him for the presidential nomination in 1960, I went up to see him and said, "Look, you're the vice president, and I'm with you and I will work with you a hundred per cent." Liz Carpenter, I remember, made the appointment, and I meant what I told him because I knew his ability. As we were walking out, I remember right by the elevator he said, "Now, Esther, what are we going to do for women? Let's get going on something." And we talked about it for a little while. Actually I credit him with the idea of setting up this commission which Kennedy bought.

M: The President's Advisory Commission on the Status of Women?

P: On the status of women, yes, where we got Mrs. Roosevelt to be the chairman. The Vice President then helped me a great deal in getting this started. So the point is that I couldn't say more strongly the support that he has given to women's issues and programs.

I remember also very well that he helped me on the equal pay bill, which was one of the first things that I really wanted to get done. People would say, "You will never get that through. It is impossible." He gave extremely good support to this in a personal way, in a personal effort, when we were getting it introduced and in some of the little difficult problems as we went along the way. So you see these were not publicity items, but these were areas where his genuine concern for women would show through.

M: This was while he was vice president.

P: This was while he was vice president. That was just very clear at that time.

When we had our first commission meeting, I shan't forget, he invited us all out to his home the first night. Before that, I remember the one thing he asked from me in setting up the commission was to make a place for one person he wanted appointed to the commission, and we did appoint her and she turned out to be, contrary to our fears, a very, very good person. She was sort of the voice of the ordinary uninvolved citizen, not a career woman type, but was articulate and served a very, very fine function on the commission. This was interesting, because I myself had to change my [mind] about her. I thought at first, "Oh, dear, here is one of those uninformed persons." But she was good and made a real contribution to the commission. She helped us keep our minds out of the clouds and our feet on the ground.

M: Can you name her?

P: Yes, it was Ellen Boddy of Texas, the wife of a rancher. She had helped in the 1960 campaign, and LBJ had recommended that she be appointed to the commission. I remember Mrs. Roosevelt asking me, "Where did you get her?" Because she and we talked a different language; she didn't know what we were talking about when we discussed items like the Fair Labor Standards Act. But bless her sweet heart, she sat down, she would read, and she asked questions and would always say, "Look, I don't know anything about this," but

she really would ask the questions which made us come back onto the real beam. I grew very fond of her.

M: You need someone like that.

P: You do, and it was a very good lesson to me, a very good lesson to me, because I recognize that on so many of these commissions we talk to ourselves. In this case she provided [a fresh perspective], and I thought this was wise on Johnson's part as well. I don't know whether that's what he had in mind, but anyway the result was positive and the result was good. That helped a good deal. That was strong.

I remember talking with him about the coverage of the Fair Labor Standards Act. We were concerned about the laundry workers, because they were largely women who had been left out, and he was helping us on that as well.

M: Now, he didn't succeed on that?

P: No, but he was helping us. We didn't succeed on the first round; we did in the second round after he became president. But the point is that as vice president he moved; he was consistent on that. We did lose on that at first. McNamara was putting up a real fight for it. I can't remember whether Johnson entered into anything openly, but I do remember the conversations with him about the work we were doing on the Hill, where Johnson was located as vice president. In fact, we used his outer office sometimes as our Hill base. Then I think he [helped] as president in his

appointment of women, too, when he announced that he would appoint fifty and we scoured around to get names.

M: How important is that in the overall picture of women's rights? Is that really important?

P: It is important because it is a symbol that you do mean business. So many politicians said, "Oh yes, we are for appointment of women." I think the thing that the women have felt and all of us have felt is that the important thing is to be sure that you have qualified women; otherwise you are just making a political gesture. On the other hand women have said, "Look, men can be political hacks, too, but if you have a woman in the job she has to be good." As Mrs. Roosevelt said, they've got to be better than a man because a woman is more visible and one must recognize that. But there again there were a lot of times when appointments were made, when we would send recommendations, but a man would get the job. Nevertheless, he has made some splendid appointments of women, and he did do a good deal to establish more opportunities and open doors for women in government positions.

The thing also that he did that was important was not just these visible things of the fifty women--and maybe there could have been a lot more of such appointments--there were some judgeships where we had felt that there were some competent women available, and there were some other places where they weren't appointed--but he took a strong interest in the role of women in the day-to-day operations. For example, the Civil Service Commission, where

he really instructed [John] Macy to see to it there would be equal opportunity for women. And it was signed in an executive order. Another example was his willingness finally after a lot of hard work to sign the executive order calling for "best efforts" to employ women for federal contracts. That took some courage, because there are enforcement powers there, and they are not clearly spelled out. It would have been simpler if we had been able at that time to ban sex discrimination entirely, but that had to come later. I have no doubt in my mind that he means sincerely all the things he worked for--it was not a gesture. I think that this has not been always easy because I think there are a few at the top echelons of government that feel as strongly about it as he does. In fact, a lot of them were opposed.

M: What about non-presidential pressures for women's rights? Does the old National Women's Party still play a positive role?

P: It does politically only because of Emma Guffy Miller. We've had a little battle between Emma and myself for a long time on this.

M: Is this the thing on the amendment to the Constitution?

P: This is on the amendment to the Constitution which they favor and we oppose. It's just a difference, you know; this is one reason that we had the commission, because every year we have been bombarded by these various groups that were pressing for an amendment to the Constitution. As you know, the labor groups were opposed to it and a lot of women's organizations were opposed to this amendment, and yet the Women's Party and some of the professional

groups were for it. So we felt that if we had a commission and really sat down to it and studied this thing we would have a basis for judgment. The commission later came out with the recommendation which said that we think that women are implicitly in the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, and now what we need are some Supreme Court cases to prove it. You would have to have that if you had an amendment anyway. The thing that always bothered [me]--I don't know if it bothered Johnson, but it certainly bothered Kennedy and myself--was that all these women who were working for the equal rights amendment would never help us on the equal pay bill and on the things that would really give substance to some of the women's right questions. I've always felt they were a bit superficial and unrealistic in their approach.

M: Is it a court initiative that has provided this ruling regarding the advertising--?

P: This is because under Title 7 of the Civil Rights Act, it is illegal to discriminate in employment. This was added really as a fluke--it was added by Howard Smith of Virginia who really wanted to kill the civil rights bill. At least I felt that.

M: That was an accident?

P: It was not intended as part of the civil rights bill, but it's there; it's the law of the land. I'm sure it was going to come in history, but we just jumped ahead a few years, a little early. I myself opposed that at the time--1964--because I was afraid it might endanger the civil rights bill. I just felt as an American woman

I didn't want to ride the coattails of an issue that I thought was more important at that time. As it happened it didn't, and I was wrong. It passed, and now I think it's there and it has meant that we have had to have an early confrontation with the very points that we were concerned with. I think very shortly we are going to have a Supreme Court decision that the special protective laws for women are invalid. It's coming that way.

M: Which will be a setback in the sense of privilege but not in the sense of equal rights?

P: I think if women want equality, they have got to take it as well as give it, and I think most women are feeling that way. The place where it is questionable is in relation to some of the women who are still in the unorganized, unprotected areas that are not covered by either the Fair Labor Standards Act or state laws or collective bargaining agreements. There an hours law, for example, is a real deterrent toward exploitation. We do know that the areas where they are not covered, where there aren't any state laws, there still continues to be a very high degree of exploitation of women. So the big thing, I feel, is getting them covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act and the regular standards that cover all workers.

M: That's part of your current job. Now, we've finally gotten down to what you do as assistant secretary of labor for labor standards.

P: That's correct.

M: Has Mr. Johnson dealt directly with you in this job?

P: I've dealt through, again, the White House offices. Now I've had a tremendous amount to do, because the big push for occupational health and safety is under the administration of my office. This bill was drafted here, and it has been part of my administration's responsibility. And the Secretary, of course, has worked on this very much. The big pieces we have worked on are the occupational safety and health bill, which was defeated, which we did not get through last year but which has been drafted with White House approval.

M: Getting White House approval--that's a good point. Where does the generation for this idea come from?

P: It came from here [Labor]. Then it goes over there [White House]. It's on our list of the kinds of things which the Secretary discusses with the President. We got the authority to go ahead. It becomes part of the legislative discussions with Califano and with Larry O'Brien, with the Bureau of the Budget, with Sam Hughes and all of them that are dealing with this agreed that we will move ahead. We had interagency meetings on it until we finally hammered out a bill that the administration could go with. You see, we did get it into LBJ's manpower message, and then he asked for a bill shortly after that. So we did get a bill drafted along the lines that he had outlined in his message.

M: Had the Labor Department been able to get fair hearing or equal hearing with the other departments in the Johnson Administration? I'm thinking back now to the comment you made regarding thinking

of you as a Kennedy person and of course thinking of the current Secretary as a Kennedy secretary.

P: On these issues I think we have, and I think we have had very good support on them.

M: Has there been a downgrading of the Labor Department?

P: I don't think so. Not in my area. Well, there is one area, yes, where I would say we've had some problems, and I will talk about that later. But on the occupational safety and health bill I think the big difficulties were with other bureaus, not with the White House. In fact, I think the White House would have taken an even stronger position on this than they agreed to.

M: When you say "other bureaus," you mean the Budget Bureau?

P: No. Budget on cost, not on principle but on cost. But HEW and Interior, Transportation, Defense, some of them were afraid that we would be moving into their territories in the safety area. You see, the only real safety standard area that we have in Labor is under the maritime program and under the Walsh-Healey Act, where we have the right to set safety standards for federal contracts. But it was on this basis, where we have had good experience and where we have enforced when we have been given the authority, that I think has given us the reputation around that we do enforce. A lot of people, I think, would rather have the enforcement powers elsewhere.

M: How do you reconcile these interagency incompatibilities like this?

P: We reconcile them usually over at the Bureau of the Budget, and then we work in your own personal relationship with individuals. But usually it is hammered out with the Bureau of the Budget around the table.

M: The White House doesn't intervene in these things?

P: Yes, Califano has been on a number of these things. If the President enters into it, of course, it adds great strength, and I think that is one reason we got as strong an occupational safety and health bill as we had, because of the President's interest. I think we had extremely good relationships with HEW in this, with Phil Lee, in developing the health aspects of the bill. You know, it depends on the kind of person. If people are issue-oriented rather than bureaucratically-oriented you really make hay, but if you get bureaucratically-oriented people you have just one hell of a time. I'm still comparatively new; I don't feel like I'm a real government person because I came in from the outside and I'd never had any government experience before.

M: You mentioned one area that you didn't get very good cooperation in.

P: Before I talk about that, I recall the other one where we did get very good cooperation, but we still didn't get through what we wanted. It was on the uranium mine radiation standards. You see, we wanted to set workmen's compensation for the uranium miners who were dying of cancer as a result of the radiation from mining uranium purchased under federal contracts. Secretary Wirtz had been absolutely magnificent on this on setting a standard, really

going in to the danger. This is where bureaucratic authority has really stood in the way, and he was able and willing to cut through it. I was very proud to be a part of that and to have recommended this action, and I think Bill Wirtz as secretary supporting this exemplified a fine moment where the powers of responsible government can cut through if they want to, if they've got the guts to do it. Here again I think the President was splendid on this. It was not a problem.

We had a problem on the garnishment provisions of the truth-in-lending bill. We had very strongly recommended from our department that we limit garnishing and that we do add it as part of the lending legislation, as the Sullivan bill in the House proposed as part 6 truth in lending. We had a lot of problems with Justice on this, and some of the agencies, and I think because of that we did not get the administration help on this that we wanted. The Secretary was not able to testify on this as we had wanted to. I believe the White House refused to let him do so. It's very interesting to me. My reading of this was that garnishment was a good issue, and again I had felt this from going around the country. You can feel what we are ready for as a people. I could tell it. I made a couple of speeches on it, and I got many letters on this, and many requests to come and talk about it and to explain it and what we were doing on it. When you've been around in public life for a while you begin to get a sensitivity to the kinds of things that the country will support legislatively. I recommended very strongly to the Secretary--

I didn't have to recommend it because he believed it, too, and had wanted to go into this, but we did not get White House help. But part of it was, I think, bureaucratic problems, and I must say that when the garnishment law passed in spite of not being endorsed by the administration I almost felt like I could say, "Look, we were vindicated" in the position that we had taken, which we had recommended very strongly. That's the one specific area which I do remember of lack of expected support.

M: How far was the final provision from what you were recommending?

P: Oh, I think we had wanted a little different formula on it, but it is quite close to it. We would liked to have had the loss of one's job for garnishment completely outlawed. The law makes it that you can't lose your job on the basis of one garnishment, I think it is the way it was finally passed, if I recall correctly. And then the percentage that was worked out was not so bad. I think the main thing is that we were hoping there would be an outright banishment on all garnishment as the House bill originally provided. That was my position and the Secretary's, but we never did get to the point of really working out how far we would go because we were not able to go ahead on that point. We were out of the negotiations on this.

M: You've still got a list over there. What else has it got on it?

P: Isn't that pretty much what we did do? I think the other thing that we kept pressing and are pressing was the need for working in the workmen's compensation field, and I think partly from the stimulation that we have put forward there has been a task force

on that question with recommendations now that the administration move ahead in this area. Had the Democrats won this year, I think this would have been a big item on the agenda for next year, because this is one of the things that we are greatly concerned about and had worked on in our own department here. It would be one of the top items of recommendations that we would have. Whether the new administration accepts this or not I don't know, but we are going to be ready and push it in any event on the list of recommended legislation. It seems to me that it's a two-phased activity: one is to cut down the accidents, and then the second phase [is] to be sure that the people who suffer as a result of the accidents don't carry the burden unduly themselves, that this becomes part of society's responsibility. The best method for doing that is what is under discussion. Of course, there is the school of thought that it has to be left completely to the states, which is the traditional way of doing it. But then here you have a hodgepodge of fifty different systems with very inadequate benefits and great confusion, which does real harm to the workers injured on the job.

I think the hardest thing I do is sign these letters that say there is not a thing we can do for you. It just hurts every time I sign one of those letters. "Your case does not come under the jurisdiction of the federal government"--that phrase. I just keep toying with some way to say, "Look, honey, you happen to live in a state with an inadequate law---" I shan't forget when one of the uranium miners who I interviewed--and there is only one state where

death by cancer from radiation is compensable under the workmen's compensation laws, at least where they do pay, and that's Colorado--said, "Look, I've worked a little bit in every one of these states, Mrs. Peterson. Which state should I go to die in? Where would my family do best?"

M: That's the kind of thing that can drive you to--

P: You see, this is why you just can't drop these things, and frankly this is where my real love is, I think. I've long worked in these areas, and this is why I go back to what I said earlier about my consumer assignment. It was sort of an assignment to have helped get something started, which I think we all did, but the labor standards job has been much closer to my background.

M: One of the final subjects, I guess, then--the Labor Department in doing these things is one of the number of big bureaucracies around town. What happened to the reorganization efforts that were prominent in the news several months ago regarding it? Is it going to be accomplished?

P: I think the Secretary is still hoping it will be, but whether it will be or not I don't know. I'm sure you will be talking to some people about this who know more about it than I.

M: You don't know of Mr. Johnson's role in any of this?

P: Just vaguely, and I think that probably Mr. Ruttenburg and some of those who were close to it--

M: I think we've talked to Mr. Ruttenberg, although I wasn't the one who talked to him.

P: I do know that there was an LBJ role in it, yes, but to what extent and how this will really come out isn't my area of responsibility.

M: That was what they did to you on the Kennedy thing. I won't do that.

Are there any other things you would like to add? I don't want to cut you off.

P: No. The Kennedy Library interviewer did question me at length about things I really had no part in.

M: If there are things that we should talk about that we haven't talked about, by all means suggest them, and I'll be happy to pursue them.

P: I think we've covered most of the kinds of things that I was actively participating in in this administration.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of Esther Peterson

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Esther Peterson of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted on November 25, 1968 and October 29, 1974 at Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.

(4) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Esther Peterson
Donor

Jan 5, 1982
Date

Archivist of the United States

February 9, 1982
Date