INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 10, 1989

INTERVIEWEE: JOE ROBERTSON

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Robertson's residence, Bethesda, Maryland

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R: And [U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Orville] Freeman was interested in expanding the food programs as much as he could. See, I tend to be conservative. I think there is a tendency to expand the programs once you get it started. Somebody [would] say you turn on all the spigots. He came up with the concept of "nutrition age" that we were going to have and the food service program. These were aids who were going to advise people about what they were instituted about that time. But the march was about food, I guess, social programs generally. I don't think Freeman ever talked to any of those folks because it scared the hell out of people in those days. If you can remember the sit-in in the Secretary's office and I guess you very well might have, it's possible, I learned something about negotiation with those folks. I learned to listen very carefully.

I had an experience with Jesse [Jackson]. Jesse showed up there one day leading the multitude. He said, "Well, we're here to eat in your cafeteria." We had a cafeteria there in the Department of Agriculture. I said, "Why absolutely. You'll have to pay for it of course." And Jesse just pitched a real hissy. He upbraided me seriously. "Now if your white cotton-planting friends were to come here and want to eat in your cafeteria

you wouldn't feel it incumbent on you to tell them that they had to pay would you?" I guess I wouldn't. I didn't tell Jesse that because they just assumed this and I learned that I didn't make statements like that with Jesse.

Jesse said, "Don't worry about it. I'll see that the bill is taken care of." "Fine. Go eat." Three hundred dollars worth of food consumed or something like that. The cafeteria belonged to the employees. Three long adding machine tapes. Jesse held this up for the television cameras and said, "Mr. Robertson was concerned about getting his money. The cafeteria manager probably wouldn't have fed them if I hadn't had this great multitude showed up, a couple hundred people. Mr. Robertson is concerned about getting his money and we told him that we'd take care of the bill, and we would. We're going to take care of this bill when this department that has just taken advantage of black people since its creation pay them what they're entitled to. Then we'll just net this out of that, we'll take care of the bill that way."

Well, I learned there, Mike, that when you say you'll take care of it, it's another question. Louie Bramwell [?] said, "[Inaudible] the ability to ask the last question." Take care of it, that means you're going to pay when served. Isn't that what that means? (Laughter) Well, I got some letters--I didn't keep them--and some phone calls about how stupid I was and how I shouldn't be taken in by this shyster this way and the employees out this money. Two or three days later the multitudes showed up again. We were scared to death--I say scared to death. We weren't scared to death because we had police around there all the time.

[Ralph] Abernathy was leading the multitude that day. He smiled and said, "Well, we're here to eat in your cafeteria again." I said in effect, "The hell you say. You won't eat in our cafeteria until you pay for what you've already eaten." (Laughter) And he said, "Can we talk about it?" We go in there and talk about it, and Abernathy said to me, "Would it be all right if my driver came with me?" I said, "Sure," because his driver was King's old driver who had been King's bodyguard and was standing there and the driver was in there with us and two or three other people maybe. Abernathy made a statement that I shall remember forever. He said, "Certainly we're going to pay for the food we ate the other day. We always intended for us to." He pulled out a roll of bills and paid for the food. He said, "Now, Mr. Robertson, you have a job to do. I have a job to do. I love this country very much. Don't make my job any more difficult for me than you absolutely have to." I thought that was a beautiful statement; he saw a very great deal.

Then it dragged on and on. The Poor People's bid did--I was terribly impressed with Jesse because Jesse was a young man. I talked to my wife about Jesse. I saw Jesse once one time when the mob was nearly out of hand across, right in front of the Department of Agriculture in the administration building, and they were harassing the police in front of the building. Jesse stepped out there and he said, "Now look here, if any of you want to get arrested, I'll tell you exactly how you can do it. Just walk right across this street here and punch one of these policemen and that'll do it. I want to tell you the difference between a movement and a mob. A mob has got it right here in the

hand. A movement has got it right here in the heart. We're a movement not a mob, and they went back to Resurrection City, no problems."

I must correct an earlier statement. Freeman did meet with this group a couple of times, not in his office, but this little place down on the first floor. He came down for a meeting and Andy Young was there and a negotiating team on their side. I remember Andy Young asking one time--telling him that things looked different from where he was and where this welfare mother was, down in Mississippi or Alabama and asking him to go with him down there to see some of these welfare mothers and see what the situation was. He probably made a mistake. He probably made a political mistake there because he would have been safe in doing it with Andy Young and he would have seen something first hand that he wouldn't have known otherwise. But it was going against the whole tradition I guess.

LBJ--although LBJ was a great convert in the civil rights area, this was fairly early on in his presidency. Well, it wasn't really--he was caught up in the Vietnam War, and money running out his ears there and there was the whole southern delegation in Congress that you had to deal with, that you went to see for money. It was a difficult thing. I guess a person could have gone out as a great hero and said, "This is it." But you know George Schultz didn't believe, as secretary of state, the last man that I know of that left with a high principle resignation was Cyrus Vance, Harold Ickes. (Laughter) It doesn't happen often.

G: Do you recall the particular points of discussion in that meeting with Reverend Abernathy with you that day?

R: Oh, he just wanted to eat in the cafeteria.

G: That's all? No larger--?

R: No, no larger issue at that time. He just wanted to eat in the cafeteria. We were the--the Department of Agriculture was the focal point for a whole thrust of the Resurrection City fight because all of the food situation, the agricultural situation in the South and people were upset with the extension service. You had 4-H Clubs; white 4-H clubs, black 4-H clubs. I remember even in the Nixon Administration Marian Edelman--have you talked to Marian?

G: She's on my list. I haven't talked to her yet.

R: Have you met her?

G: No, I don't believe so.

R: She's an amazing lady. She's an amazing lady. Freeman said to me one time--Marion is a Yale Law School graduate. She lived--she was the *au pair* so to speak at William Sloane Coffin's home when she went to law school at Yale. Freeman said to me, "Did you see that sharp attorney with the poor people who picked me up on some point of law?" I forget what it was and it was Marian Edelman. I saw Marian Edelman come see Cliff Harden--Harden was secretary of agriculture--about the extension service. Harden was a nice, genteel college chancellor who was explaining to her all the problems. I remember--this was so dramatic--she stood up and slapped her hands together. I remember I was impressed by the length and the artisticness of her fingers as she clapped her hands together and said, "Mr. Secretary, you need help. We're going to help you. We're going to sue you."

(Laughter)

But the whole thrust [was] they wanted more justice out of the system, food, services through the extension service.

G: Was the problem with the extension service, as they saw it, that the service was not dealing with poor people, that they were directing more of their efforts at the middle class?

R: The middle class and the big farmers. This can be documented I'm sure in your research. Put one of your graduate students digging on it. Gladys Baker knew a great deal about it. Gladys is dead or is so far over the hill with Alzheimer's now she couldn't tell you anything.

Are you familiar with ASCS?

G: ASCS?

R: Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service. The farmer committees system--came out of the triple A. I'll tell you another person I'd put on that list--the history of the whole thing with a lot of papers--was Wayne Rasmusen. Now have you met that man?

G: Yes. We have an interview with him.

R: You've interviewed him.

G: Yes.

[Interruption]

G: You were saying when Henry Wallace and New Deal agriculture people started the committee--

R: The committee system. There was as I understand it--and I think you can find this documented in some of Gladys' stuff or Wayne Rasmusen's stuff--they had a network out here in rural America already. It was the extension service, county agents in every county. But they thought they were too conservative. They built a countervailing network here, the farmer elected committee system, ASCS. That whole network and the extension service--you can find a lot of literature that will indicate to you--and I think [John] Schnittker would tell you this if you ask Schnittker.

I remember our talk with Schnittker--I was a free wheeling spirit around the department. I never intended to be there because I had worked for Freeman in Minnesota. I would just as soon have been somewhere else because I didn't want to be known just as Freeman's boy. I remember talking to Schnittker once upon a time when he was in the staff economists group, asking Schnittker how he would like to be director of the federal extension service. Not that I could do anything about it, but I could certainly have access to Freeman and I knew he thought highly of John and to get some different blood in there.

I don't know the details of any message or any legislation that was prepared, but there were all sorts of thrusts and the Department of Agriculture tried to alleviate some of the hardship in the rural area. John Baker was very much interested in this family farmer and the difficulty with the family farmer. The family farmer tends to get awful damn big sometimes, you know, and at the same time you're pushing the cause of the family farmer, there are very few people that I saw who were willing to say, "Well, we sure as

hell are going to take it away from Jamie Whitten's delta cotton planters." It's difficult having it both ways.

G: Let me ask you to describe the pressures that these agriculture-related committees on the Hill placed on the department? As Whitten and [Bob] Pogue [Poage?] and I guess--?

R: I wasn't--I can't remember any instances. These people--Jamie Whitten's a very sophisticated man. He was chairman of the full Appropriations Committee; he survived that system. Jamie Whitten is not going to come out and say, "Well, now you do this and your testicles will come off." People were aware that he was a very powerful man. People were aware of that. Who was it, was it Nick Kotz who did that book--Charles Peters' magazine--*Washington Monthly*, "the Permanent Secretary of Agriculture." Have you read that?

G: No.

R: You ought to see that.

G: What is the title again?

R: "The Permanent Secretary of Agriculture."

G: *Washington Monthly* did you say?

R: I think it's in *The Washington Monthly*. ["Jamie Whitten: The Permanent Secretary of Agriculture," *The Washington Monthly*, October 1969] You'll run into the name of Kotz.

G: Yes.

R: You know Nick?

G: Yes.

R: Have you talked to Nick about this?

G: Yes, I have. I've read his book on this issue as well.

R: And Pogue I knew--I didn't know Pogue because I never got involved over here. I knew Whitten and testified before Whitten from time to time in connection with the budget and I know Whitten now. I think I could call up and talk to Buddy Bishop and Whitten and so on and if I needed to talk to Jamie--talk to Jamie. But there is a story--a lot of this is just--this is a story I've heard by word of mouth. Some guy back before the Kennedy/Johnson Administration had gone up on the Hill to see Whitten because somebody in the Department of Agriculture--maybe it was the triple A administrator--to reorganize the thing. And this Mississippi constituent was rather excited about this. He said to Whitten, "You don't seem to be very concerned about this, Mr. Chairman. Did you understand what I said?" He said, "Yes." He said, "Why aren't you concerned about it?" He said, "Well, it's a very simple reason. He comes up here to see me every year to get money and he's not about to do anything as drastic as you suggest without talking to me before he does it." Is that bad? I guess that still happens. Jim Baker clears things in the foreign policy area on the Hill before he--it's congressional relations.

Jamie had a brother-in-law who worked in the department. (Laughter) I'm seventy-three, I can be courageous if I ever--Jamie's brother-in-law is dead now, John Smallwood. Married Jamie's sister. They'd been in this household. Freeman thought that maybe if you build up something outside the existing bureaucracy you might get faster movement. You might get a fresh start. And the Rural Areas Development Service was set up. Have you met that man?

G: [Yes.]

R: Rural Areas Development Service. RADS. It was sort of like the--and Bob Lewis or maybe the first person in the Rural Areas Development Service--there were two or three administrators there. Billy Matthews [Donald Ray "Billy" Matthews], the old Florida congressman, headed the thing up once upon a time, the thought being if Congress took advantage of the executive branch the executive branch would take advantage of Congress. [President George H. W.] Bush is doing that. Jack Kemp is now secretary of Housing and Urban Development. And Billy Matthews--I think Billy may have been defeated in Florida--a fairly liberal Florida congressman headed up the thing for a period of time. Then Bob Lewis was there for a period of time. Bob was the lobbyist for one of the farm organizations, not the farm bureau, but one of the others. And I think the Rural Areas Development Service may have been abolished; maybe they didn't get money. I don't know. It went out of existence fairly early. But John Smallwood, Jamie's brother-in-law, worked over there for a period of time, but that wasn't efficacious either.

G: W hy not?

R: Why not?

G: Yes.

R: Because I guess Jamie thought it might have been a half-baked idea. It takes a lot of effort to bring something like that to fruition. When you bring in a new organizational entity and you've got entities already in existence that is a threat to or a potential threat to, they're going to do everything they can to see that it gets strangled in the process.

I remember Freeman went out to the country from time to time on tours. I suggested it to him once and I suggested the same thing to Harden, and I think it's a fine

thing even now. I think there are a lot of things, Mike Gillette, that formal information systems don't tell you. You are an historian, read military history, read John Keegan, and you'll find terms like the "fog of the battle" or the "feel of the battle." You know how it goes. You won't get that just in the transcript that is going to come out here.

I thought it would be a fine idea if he got dressed up about like I am and took an aide with him about once every three months and fly up to Austin or Dallas. Get out of the plane in Dallas and hire a car, not a government car; let nobody know that he was coming and just drive the little roads and stop in places like Bay City and spend the night, and eat at Dairy Queen in Bay City, you know maybe, and listen to the people there and see what they're talking about, ask questions from time to time. Just get the feel, but that never happened.

He did take tours out, inspection tours, field tours to see how this project was going. And he was asking [inaudible]. I like this guy. He said, "Goddamn it, Joe. I put out these directives and I get out here and I get way out here at the branch heads and people don't seem to know a damn thing about it. Why is that?" I said, "Darned if I know, Mr. Secretary. Why don't you take some of these agency heads with you when you go out there? Why don't you take Lloyd Davis, who is the administrator of the extension service? Take Cy Smith, the administrator of the food and agricultural programs with you. When you find they don't know anything about it out there, why don't you turn to them right on the spot and say, 'What the hell goes on here? Why doesn't this man, Mike Gillette of yours, an employee of ours under your supervision is

out here and he's never heard of this? Why is this?'" I'll be damned, but he started doing that.

G: Did he really?

R: He started doing that. The first one developed into a terrible fiasco because there was a poor dead man who was in the department at that time, Ken Birkhead. Have you ever met that man?

G: I know of him, yes.

R: Ken's a wonderful fellow. Ken's father was a minister who was a consultant to Sinclair Lewis on what ministers were like when Sinclair Lewis did *Elmer Gantry*. I saw Ken when Freeman took Lloyd Davis and Cy Smith with him late in the afternoon and Ken was very nervous; he's a chain smoker. Ken was just--said, "Have you heard what happened?" I said, "No. What's that?" And Ken said, "Well, Cy Smith got drunk and they were inspecting a housing project."

(Laughter)

You haven't heard this one?

G: No.

R: --"inspecting a housing project." He was late for the bus that morning when they were going out. They go in and he's there and he's hugging this man's wife and Freeman said to somebody, "Goddamn it, get him out of here and get him on the airplane. Get him the hell away." That was over the weekend. I came in on Monday morning--I normally got there at six-thirty, seven o'clock, something like that, early in the morning--Jesus, I hadn't been there very long until the phone lit up and it was Freeman. "Come around here." So

I went around to his office and he explains to me his version of what's happened. He said, "Is this guy an alcoholic?" Cy was man enough he came in over the weekend and left his resignation on the secretary's desk. He said, "Is he an alcoholic?" I said, "Hell, I don't know. It's seven o'clock in the morning, Mr. Secretary. I don't see a lot of drunks wandering around the street at seven o'clock." But he did do that; he got out there on those tours.

I'm just anecdoting.

G: That's fine. That's good. The CBS documentary, *Hunger in America*, that was critical of the feeding programs.

(Interruption)

Any insight on the Agriculture Department's reaction to that program?

R: I just recall--I seem to recall its not being favorable, like the same thing, a bit, about the surgeon general's report on smoking.

G: Did the film cause the department to do anything with regard to its own studies of the hunger situation?

R: I really don't know. Now, Freeman did do something. I really think that they pulled together in the Department of Agriculture and Willard Cochrane was largely responsible for it because Willard was bright, able and wasn't a sycophant in any way. [They] pulled together to provide Freeman some filtering and some staff work in the economic area, the staff economist group. You've heard of the staff economist group.

G: Do you want to tell me what it is.

R: I don't know that it's still there. You've heard of it?

G: I have heard of it, but why don't you describe it.

R: Well, my concept of it was that it was a group of very bright, young economists--young, able. Schnittker was there as a member of the staff economist group. Howard York was a member of the staff economist group. Martin Abel was a member of the staff economist group. Who else, I don't know. And these guys were going to staff out agency proposals. The Department of Agriculture was described as a holding company, not a department but a holding company, of all these empires. It was like Canada. It was a confederation. It had all these provinces--Ontario and Quebec and so on and so on. You had the agriculture marketing service. This was oriented toward commercial agriculture the feeling was. So it was going to be changed and it was changed. The name was changed to food and nutrition service.

There was a great thrust to change the department just from agriculture to a consumers department. We got out a little publication once, "Food is a bargain", about what a good buy the Americans got in their food. But the purpose of the staff economist group was to be sure that these big balls that got lofted up from the individual agencies had a hard eyeballing by somebody with some real professional competence.

G: Any insights on Secretary Freeman's change of his own attitude on the issue of hunger as a problem in this country?

R: He was very much interested in the international area. He did various things. A heavy emphasis [was] placed on the family farm. I'm sure he was more aware and more sensitive to some of the problems involved as a result of the poor people's campaign and

as a result he pushed for--I don't think they had--requiring new legislation for food stamp legislation. Was that something that had been on the books for some time?

G: The food stamp legislation was on the books. It was just a question, I think, of liberalizing the program.

R: He was very much interested in that. I think he grew in this area a bit, but I think he felt great political and budgetary constraints. The political constraints came in a way from the Hill. It would be much simpler now with all these black folk voting--(Laughter)--in the South. It would be much simpler now. And it came from OMB [Office of Management and Budget], the Bureau of the Budget at that time, and the White House as a result of limited dollars, dollars going into the Defense Department. I remember a budget session and the undersecretary's office wanted some more time, and this, I suspect, had to do with the food program. But I cannot be sure, because, hell, this has been twenty-five years ago and I didn't know there was going to be a bright, young Texan here talking about it twenty-five years later. I didn't keep a journal about it.

I remember Kermit Gordon giving the secretary our budget mark and Freeman said, "Well, that's one we'll have to talk to the President about. The President will have to make that decision." I remember Kermit very forcefully slapping the table with his hand and said, "Orville, that is the President's decision." He didn't have just *carte blanche* to go any way he wanted to. Hell, if somebody offers you a cabinet appointment in this Texas administration or in another administration, as a Texas history major--what was the Webb who was a historian?

G: Walter Prescott Webb?

R: Walter Prescott Webb's old department, and Frank Dobie and that crowd--it might be a different Texan who would offer you an appointment. But I'd think very seriously about taking it because I don't have a very inflated opinion about what cabinet officers can do.

G: Is the point that they really didn't have a lot of autonomy, that they had pretty much to toe the line that the--?

R: I don't think they did then and I don't think they have now. I used to joke with Tully Kosack, and you might want to talk to Tully some time--Nathaniel Kosack, a lawyer downtown, who was the second--he was the inspector general in the Harding Administration. He's in the criminal division in the Justice Department.

G: You were saying you were talking to him about this.

R: The secretary has a limousine and flags and the buglers when he shows up at the airport. He comes back. He clears his legislation with OMB. He clears it with the White House staff. Soapy [G. Mennen] Williams became assistant secretary of the State Department. What a demeaning thing to do. I'm off the subject but I see Jack Kemp differently now. He's got a cesspool over in HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. And I think he's got a lot of guts. I think he could quit. I think Jack Kemp could walk away from it. He's played ball with these black fellows. He knows what they can do. He knows what the black linebacker can do for you and so on. And I think he's a pretty honest sort of fellow. He doesn't have to be secretary of HUD.

G: At one point in this food and hunger controversy, Secretary [of the Treasury Henry] Fowler testified on the Hill that he was in favor of the Sullivan Amendment which would

lift the ceiling on food stamp authorizations. Apparently this triggered a very heated reaction from LBJ. Do you recall that?

R: What I recall about LBJ is a potential heated reaction from LBJ, (laughter) he would look forward too with that great deal of enthusiasm.

Charlie Murphy was undersecretary of agriculture, one of the greatest men I ever knew. Charlie Murphy was [Secretary of Defense Clark] Clifford's deputy. Clifford was everything for Harry Truman and then Charlie Murphy was everything for Harry Truman after Clifford retired. I remember when we got the message that Kennedy had been killed, and I was in Charlie Murphy's office. Charlie Murphy was a very sentimental man and Jim Sundquist--you might talk to Jim; Jim knows something about this. And Jim said, "Well, Charlie, you know Lyndon." Murphy's response was, "Hell, Jim, I don't know that anybody knows Lyndon." (Laughter) But I shouldn't be at all surprised. Hell, cabinet officers--I gathered that members of Congress, you know, I see on the radio talk shows or the TV talk shows talking about how everybody likes George Bush. I like George Bush, nice fellow. Nobody's afraid of him. I suspect it was just the flip side of that with LBJ. Nobody really liked him, but many people were afraid of him. But I say that--and this is going to be typed up by somebody down in Austin. I want this to show--I think he was a tragic figure. It was a lot easier for John Kennedy to be for civil rights than it was for LBJ. I think he was a true believer there, I don't think there is any question about it. I was in two or three meetings. He realized that black people had a tough time and he wanted to do anything he could to improve the situation.

So I can forgive him the fear that people had of him. I read this great story--I've forgotten where I read it. My wife read it; she may identify it.--about integrating the faculty club at the University of Texas. Have you read that story? Some professor wanted to take some friends--maybe it was in connection with the LBJ Library--to some to-do they were having. He called up to ask if it were integrated and [they] said no. They go over, LBJ shows up after a while with a very attractive black woman. Nobody said you couldn't bring her in. He called up the next day and said, "I thought you told me it wasn't integrated." And they said, "Well, it is." "How long has it been integrated?" "Well, the President of the United States integrated it last night." He just finessed the big quagmire some way. Thurgood Marshall was gone--

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R: And we had a new assistant secretary for international programs in the Department of Agriculture. Schnittker came to me in the men's room and we were standing side by side in the men's room and said to me, "What would you think about Dorothy Jacobson," as assistant secretary. I said, "My God, I think it would be a catastrophe." Bright woman, Phi Beta Kappa from University of Minnesota, staid person, was in the room in Philadelphia when Hubert Humphrey made his big civil rights speech. But thirty minutes later I'm back in my office and here comes a press release through for me to take a peek at announcing her appointment. I thought, "What the hell is happening here?"

Apparently Freeman had gone to LBJ with a suggestion that Bob Lewis back up in the rural areas be named to this post and LBJ said, "Orville, I want a woman in that job." Freeman waits for a couple of weeks--he's a bright fellow--and he says, "Mr.

President, I understand"--I didn't hear this but it goes something like this--"you want a woman for that job and I've thought about it but I still think on balance that Bob Lewis is the best person." LBJ supposedly said, "Orville, I told you that I want a woman in that job." Well, I think Dorothy Jacobson was selected that afternoon or very shortly thereafter. If LBJ was going to have a woman, Freeman was smart enough that he wanted it to be his woman, not necessarily LBJ's woman.

G: Would Freeman have done more do you think in terms of expanding these food programs if the White House had gone along?

R: My answer is yes. If you asked me to document that I cannot do that. Are there any memoranda on this?

G: Yes.

R: You've seen them?

G: Yes.

R: Do they indicate that a --? LBJ may have known more about this rat hole that he was just pouring billions and billions into that you get something else started here, but he wasn't particularly adverse to that. He thought if you started new programs that they'd generate their own energy.

G: Anything else on the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and Orville Freeman during this time? Did you sit in on any of the meetings at the White House?

R: Oh, I sat in on a couple of budget meetings, but none if you're talking about a half dozen people talking about food programs, I didn't. I don't know what size those meetings were. I sat in on a meeting at the Justice Department once when we were moving to

somewhere with Burke Marshall. But that was in the Kennedy Administration again. Schnittker must have sat in on some of those meetings.

G: All of this issue was being debated at the same time as the 1968 presidential election and by this time you had Humphrey running against Robert Kennedy.

R: That caused some little friction. (Laughter) Schnittker must have told you that.

G: Describe that for me if you will. Schnittker was supporting Kennedy.

R: I don't know of that. All I know is that Schnittker was supporting Kennedy. Schnittker was up front about it. I guess LBJ could have fired him. The handwriting was sort of on the wall by that time, it seemed to me. I was hopeful for Humphrey, but I thought the relationship--to answer your question as specifically as I can--I thought the relationship between Freeman and LBJ was very good. These people were somewhat of the same background. Freeman, I think, would be more naturally at home with somebody from LBJ's background than John Kennedy's background. The lace-curtain Irishman from Boston and so on in the East and he's a Middle Westerner.

I lost twenty dollars. I bet twenty dollars that Freeman would be Kennedy's vice presidential nominee because I thought he would bring just what he didn't have. He was an agricultural man from the Middle West and he had been elected the governor of Minnesota two or three times, something like that. He was a Lutheran. It never occurred to me that LBJ would be it. But my sense of the situation is that they were friendly. When Freeman went down to the Ranch, LBJ gave him a hat. I don't know if he ever took him horseback riding anymore than he did or not, but . . . I'll tell you one other

anecdote. This is an anecdote to Freeman's relationship with LBJ may be able to shed something on the subject, the White House Fellows program. You know about that.

G: Yes.

R: The first White House Fellow we had was Mike Walsh. Mike Walsh is now chief executive officer of the Northern Pacific Railroad. He's done very well. And Mike was a savvy fellow. I was sort of Mike's mentor around the department. He had an office across from mine. We had a vacant office there and he was there and I used to talk to Mike about various things. Mike called me and said he had some information for me. He was going around with a going around with a young woman by the name of Joan somebody. I said, "You and Joan are going to be married." He said, "How do you know?" I said, "Well, as smart as you are, if you had a chance to marry her I thought you would have done so." They were married.

But Mike was talking to me. Freeman was going to a meeting in Rome, a meeting on food and agriculture, and Mike wanted to go. He had talked to Dorothy Jacobson about going and Dorothy had said no, it was a big delegation--couldn't do this, and Mike was talking to me, and I said, "Well, why don't you get your shots and things fixed up? I'll talk to the secretary about it," because it was a marvelous relationship I had with this man that I could do something that was absolutely none of my business. And I was doing some business with Freemen and I said, "Before I go, Mr. Secretary, I think you ought to take Mike Walsh with you to FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization]." He said, "Now, Joe, don't bring that up. I've got a big delegation and we're short of money. Suppose the President--the President wouldn't approve of anything like that." I said,

"Well, Mr. Secretary, if the President says a thing to you about taking Mike Walsh if you take him, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go over and talk to him. Send me over. I'll go over to see him and you know what I'll say to him. I'll say, 'Mr. President, whose program is this anyway? I thought this was your White House Fellows program and I was trying to give this young man an opportunity to develop to his full potential.' That's the reason I'd take him to Rome" and he took him to Rome.

G: He did take him?

R: He took him. And Mike made such an impression on Freeman that he became his traveling companion thereafter; he was his bagman. But that might shed some light. I suspect that it would have been better.

You're studying this man--I should have asked Emmette Redford. He knows a lot about this. Were there examples of people who were loyal to LBJ whose loyalty he didn't question, who would stand toe to toe with him and say, "You're making a goddamn fool out of yourself"? It's important that presidents have people who can do that. Maybe old people can do that. I've come to the conclusion that I would probably be a better staff person now than I ever was in my life. I suspect every public executive, maybe every executive, maybe The University of Texas chancellor or president who has a person around them who are mature enough that they aren't over the hill, they aren't suffering from Alzheimer's disease, the fires of ambition no longer burn in them, they're not hankering for the job. They can say, "That is the biggest damn fool idea I ever heard of in my opinion. If I were you I would take a good hard look at that before I did anything." Now Averill Harriman may have had the reputation of doing some of that, but I don't

think independent wealth alone will do it. Was there anybody? I'm interviewing you now.

(Interruption)

G: I wanted to ask you to describe your own dealings with the poor people during the Resurrection City. You talked about the discussions with Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy about eating in the cafeteria. Did you go out into this tent city and talk to the residents? How about when the group of them met with Freeman, any insights there?

R: That was my most exciting period--if not the most, one of the most exciting--and learning and inspirational experiences that I ever had. They came here, down in Resurrection City. It was rainy as hell. Because of my job it was agreed that I would be the flack catcher and we had some consultation, all of the assistant secretaries for administration, with the Justice Department on how you handle the issue and the police department, the D.C. Police Department. There was a chap by the name of Charlie Monroe who had the special operations division of the police department. And the building was secured; people just didn't wander in.

When the poor people came up to the department they came up *en masse* and they'd be stopped. I guess the first time they came up--I remember the first time. I was talking to Jesse and he said, "No, no, no, Joe. Let's move over here. The television cameras are over here." And I would meet them. We would talk. They'd want to eat. The Secretary came down. He may have met them more than once. Then they ate at that time. My relationship with them was--I felt very good. I got insulted with our preacher--never forgave that bastard because I did get on television a number of times. It

was a hot story. People would be there and they were marching around the building all the time. I came back from a meeting and I had this message my secretary gave me from the preacher that he hoped in future roles of this sort that I was cast in that I'd be in more keeping with my philosophy than indicated in this. (Laughter) I learned if I listened--if I had said to Jesse, "Now this means you're going to pay for the food you eat, eat it." I think he'd paid for it.

I remember going down one morning. We worked out an arrangement that I went down one morning and a fellow--it may be way back in the fog of memory, it may have been Charles Lewis, the Georgia congressman.

G: John Lewis.

R: John Lewis. I don't know whether he was here with me. Is John Lewis a minister? I don't know if he was here with them or not. But it was a chap by the name of Lewis and I thought a minister, he said to me, "Our people need to use the restroom." I said, "Well, the building security doesn't want that." He said, "Well, I'll tell you. If you will let us use the restroom, use the men's room and women's room downstairs here, I will assure you that there will be no lollygaging around inside the building. They'll go in and come out." "Deal." We go up there and I say to the guard, let these people in. He's the marshal. And some young man gets in an argument with a GSA guard up there. I remember this chap Lewis grabbing him by the shirt collar and saying, "If you want to piss, you get in there and piss and cut out this argument." (Laughter)

I trusted those people. I had an understanding with them. The time came when they wanted to be arrested. They wanted to terminate it. The police--I never had such a

feeling of power. The chief of police was around there. The special operations--they weren't going to pick up anybody unless I told them to pick up somebody, unless a fight occurred or violence. I remember all the doors got blocked one morning, and I was sitting in my office. I got a call from a lawyer over at the Pitts Motor Hotel, "So-and-So calling." He said, "I understand you're having some trouble over there this morning." I said, "Yes, we're having some trouble over here this morning. But it won't be long because the police are coming over here right now." This fellow said, "Well, you're not supposed to have any trouble this morning because it's not scheduled for today. We've got Jose Williams"--Jose used to be an employee of ours--"We've got Jose Williams *en route* over there to straighten it out right now." I said, "Well, fine. If Jose gets here before the police get here there'll be no trouble, but if the police get here first, they'll get picked up." Of course, Jose should have been here to see that it didn't happen if you don't want people arrested. But Jose got there, you know, and whistled a time or two and that ended it, and they began to trek around the building again. It was sort of fascinating to see.

Somebody came to me early on before the Poor People's Campaign on Jose and said, "We've got an employee down at Albany, Georgia, who isn't doing a very good job and I think we're going to have to fire him from the Agriculture Department." I said, "Why tell me about it? Fire him." He said, "He's black." I said, "Well, I don't see that that should interfere with it. You just better be careful about what you do. Make sure you know what you're doing." Well, they didn't fire him. I called that personnel officer during the Poor People's Campaign and said, "Bill, I understand there's a delegation

coming up from Resurrection City to see us this afternoon and they're being led by your former employee Jose Williams. Do you want to go out there and talk to Jose and see if there is anything you can do about it?" (Laughter) It was sort of mean on my part, but you can check the record on this. Jose was given a leave of absence without pay for about a year to work on the voter registration drive in the South. We weren't completely racist because this counted a little bit towards Jose's retirement pay when he left and so on. But then the place did get blocked, the decision was made to--I guess it was sort of playing out and some people just got near all the doors, just stretched out in front of all the doors. The policemen took those and carted them away.

G: Was there a sense that the Justice Department was too lenient with regard to the way it handled the demonstrators?

R: A sense on whose part?

G: Just in the Department of Agriculture.

R: There sure as hell wasn't on my part. For my part I had a feeling that--I wonder what the country would have been like if Bobby had been president sometime. He knew what was going on. He was in touch with these people. He wasn't going to be pushed around. He wasn't big but he was hard to push. I didn't get the feeling that the Justice Department was doing--you need a character like Fannie Lou Hamer. Does that name ring a bell?

G: Yes.

R: I heard Fannie Lou talk to Tom Hughes, Freeman's executive assistant. We were in his office. And here is a woman who had been beaten, there was no question. Fannie Lou

had a hard time; she was a brave woman. From Jim Eastland's home county if I'm not mistaken.

G: What did she say to Hughes?

R: Well, she just pointed out that things were tough down there, real tough down there. Hard to communicate with the white power structure with bomb-throwings and so on going on.

G: What do you think in retrospect should have been done to remedy the situation?

R: Maybe we did as well as we could at the time. I suspect we should have started fifty years ago, a long time ago. It's surprising what that old ballad does. I'm a feminist. I talked to my neighbor up the street from Smith, by God, fight it out in the state legislatures. I'm going to go up and down the street here and talk to my neighbors and say, "Look here, we need money for campaign purposes to elect right-oriented people to the state legislatures on this abortion issue." I think I could do it pretty well, an old, gray-bearded man raising money for this purpose. I say don't get people with hairy legs and natural body odors; they're not going to have much success, I don't think, when they're going to have to appeal to mainstream America. I think we should have started much earlier with the extension service, with the education, that whole business of the black land-grant colleges. It's hard to get just a quick fix here. LBJ's right here in a way; you just give people here and give people there. I agree with Jesse: all we can guarantee you is an opportunity. We can't guarantee you success, but, hell, you started a huge food program and you probably still have it. You as an historian have read Harry Caudill's *When Night Comes to the Cumberlands* [*Night Comes to Cumberlands*] haven't you?

G: I'm familiar with it. I haven't read it.

R: A great guy. I met Harry Caudill one time. He would agree with LBJ you know. You've got bigger food programs now. People have to be educated, know something about work schedules. We had a youth employment program and the Department of Agriculture has a facility out at Bellsville and I thought it would be a fine idea if we could have some jobs out there for people working on those experimental plots and so on. I found that some of these black youths in D.C., this sort of ran counter to their culture, this is a plantation mentality. You have to show them that it's probably not that, that it's something else. A job is a job. I'm not going to second guess them; it was a time that was a very important time in the history of the country. I say the Poor People's Campaign was a success. I say it was a howling success because they raised the consciousness of the people about the food programs. Every secretary of agriculture--Orville Freeman, God bless him, was the first who got smacked in the head with it. But people have been having it ever since.

G: Good point.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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