INTERVIEW II

DATE: May 18, 1989

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN SCHNITTKER

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Schnittker's office in Washington, D.C.

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G: [I'd like to] begin with a discussion of the existing programs in the Agriculture Department for food programs.

S: Domestic food programs.

G: Domestic food programs. Particularly the Commodity Distribution Program, the purpose of it and how well you feel that it worked in the mid-1960s.

S: [The] Commodity Distribution Program was the only domestic food distribution program for the general public when the Kennedy-Johnson period began. There was also the school lunch program, but that was another classification. One of the earliest presidential or secretarial orders reestablished the Food Stamp Program on the basis of residual authority in the Commodity Credit Corporation Charter Act. This sort of reinvented a program which had been invented in the Department of Agriculture largely by an economist named Fred Waugh, W-A-U-G-H, in the late 1930s, and was then interrupted by the war when you no longer either had the food or as many unemployed people to whom to distribute food.

So [Orville] Freeman and/or [Robert] Kennedy, urged on by economic adviser Willard Cochrane, said we will start a pilot food stamp program in a few counties to supplement the Commodity Distribution Program. This resulted from a professional judgment by economists and others advising Freeman, and I think an instinctive judgment by Freeman, that the Commodity Distribution Program was not a good program. While it got food out to people, it was dependent upon the existence of surpluses owned by USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] as a function of price support programs, so you gave the people what you had, prunes or flour or corn meal or lard; whatever there was, they got. It was cumbersome because the people weren't always where the food was. And it was also degrading because you didn't go to the supermarket; you went to the courthouse where you were handed these poor commodities. That problem arose also with food stamps as well and with free lunches, but was overcome as nearly as possible by using the market to some extent. So with food stamps, people could go to the supermarket, and the kids could go right through the lunch line, and paid with a coupon called a food stamp, or the cashier checked the kids off of a list if they were eligible for free or reduced price lunches. So the onus wasn't quite as heavy on them as it had been before when they were visibly charity cases.

I don't remember the details at all because I was at a staff level in the 1961-1964 period working almost entirely on commodity programs. But I recall that each year Freeman, with some support from the Congress, expanded the Pilot Food Stamp Program and--till it got into quite a number of counties. I believe it went national, at least theoretically, about 1965 or 1966, although it still had to inch its way from state to state

and county to county. Southern states and members of Congress principally resisted it, because commodity distribution was an element of patronage, which seemed to be more important in Alabama or Mississippi than it might have been in some northern or western states. Local control of commodities also permitted county officials to discriminate on the basis of race.

In any case, there was considerable resistance to the expansion of the Food Stamp Program, but it went relentlessly on. Orville Freeman felt by 1965 or 1966 or 1967 as secretary that he had gone a long ways. The school lunch was also expanded and improved. Cash was acquired through the appropriations process to go out and buy some of the food that you didn't have in surplus so that you could have a more balanced school lunch, and the long-standing Section 32 funds were used for some meats and vegetables. We inched our way toward improvement and expansion of each of these food programs, and toward the decline of the Commodity Distribution Program.

Then came the famous film, *Hunger in America*, and Robert Kennedy and Jacob Javits and others going to Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, wherever they went, and, as Freeman saw it, acting as if nothing had ever been done by USDA. Suddenly the department--and by then I was under secretary, which is now the position deputy secretary,--found itself on the defensive in the domestic food battle. We were still expanding, but only inch by inch, and Kennedy and Javits and others wanted to move faster. There was also a civil rights component to this effort. They wanted someone, the Congress, the secretary, to expand in the Delta, whether the politicians there wanted to permit it or not. I'm sure that Congressman Jamie Whitten, then Chairman of the

Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee [D-Mississippi], was an important figure in this somewhere along the line, in making sure that the Food Stamp Program didn't expand too rapidly in places he represented. Bob Poage [D-Texas] was also wary of the Food Stamp Program.

But I want to deal more with the global picture because I was never deeply involved in the food programs, except in his absence, as Freeman's deputy. The reason for this was that there is a memo of record with Charlie Murphy, my predecessor as under secretary, and with me, perhaps in June of 1965--in my case--from Orville Freeman either to all department heads and assistant secretaries or to me and then distributed to everybody. [It] said, in effect, "The Secretary and the Under Secretary are one. Whatever you tell him you should expect me to know and vice versa." Then he divided up the department. He said that "I'm going to take day-to-day leadership on issues including domestic food programs, Food for Peace and other foreign food programs, the Forest Service, and soil conservation, and Schnittker gets milk marketing orders, grain price supports, acreage control programs and all that." Much of that was in my bailiwick anyway, as president of the Commodity Credit Corporation, which financed all those operations. But Freeman took on day-to-day responsibility for working with administrators of those programs. Whenever any assistant secretary, chief economist, or administrator of the marketing service wanted to talk about food programs he went to Orville Freeman directly and to me only if Freeman was out of town. So my role was always a peripheral one in this.

I remember very well the feeling that we had been ambushed by Javits and Kennedy, because in the effort, and the obvious need to make a giant move forward in food distribution and in reaching poor people who weren't being reached, there seemed to be little credit for the progress that Freeman himself felt personally responsible for; only a demand to go faster, faster, faster. I was not present at a couple of confrontations between Freeman and Javits in his office because of this division of authority. But Rod Leonard, then food program administrator, might very well have been present at some such meetings. And I recall--it seems to me the department prepared a blistering critique of *Hunger in America*, which became public and I think was somewhat embarrassing even though it might have been factually correct in a number of respects.

G: Do you think, as you look back, that the documentary overstated the problem or did it simply understate what the department had done?

S: I didn't have a television. I didn't see the documentary until years later. But it was not so much the documentary; that was only a symptom. I think it was Javits and Kennedy that really got under Freeman's skin because they had legislative power and they were agitating publicly, saying, "You're going too slow. You're not reaching the people." Freeman was saying, "Look at all we've done," which was an odd position for Freeman. If he had just joined them, things would have moved a lot faster. It would have been much better for him from the public relations and the political standpoint. And he himself as a person--his instincts were the same as Kennedy's and Javits's, but he got put on the defensive. And the President was also unwilling to spend more on food, or to do anything for Robert Kennedy.

This issue coincided with the Martin Luther King assassination, the Poor People's March, and the civil rights acceleration of 1967 and 1968. Much of the Poor People's March, a very large part of its agenda, was "more food for more people." They camped in the parking lot north of the administration building during the day. There were always hundreds if not thousands of people on the north side of the administration building right below Freeman's window and mine. I don't quite remember why, whether it was because of Freeman's absence or that he just wanted to stay a little distant, but I was delegated to meet, mostly, with the Poor People's March folks, to negotiate, both some fundamental things, like, "Would we go to the President with a proposal to sharply expand the food programs in March, April, May of 1968?" There are a series of papers, probably April, May, June of 1968, within the department and back and forth to the White House and OMB [Office of Management and Budget] on this question. We did finally discuss with the White House, Joe Califano and Bill Moyers, some expansion in the Food Stamp Program. I negotiated some of the elements of this with Ralph Abernathy at the other end of my table, Marian Wright sitting next to him, Jesse Jackson in the back row--not a familiar place for him recently, but it was then. I don't believe Jackson ever said a word in my office, in those days, because he wasn't delegated to say a word.

And of course there was the question of surplus food for the people who were camping. On occasion they created a little crisis in the department by just walking into the cafeteria line in the basement of the north building, filling their trays and not paying.

G: What did you do in these instances?

S: Well, I instructed cafeteria people to feed them, and then Marian Wright and I found some way to pay. I think she collected the money from movement people, and I accepted it and transferred it to the department on an informal basis. I don't think there's any record of that, but this was one of the little informal crises that we had to negotiate from day to day. I do believe that my decision to let the Poor People's March folk use the cafeteria seemed as much of an affront to Freeman as the Kennedy-Javits business. I don't think I've ever talked to Freeman about it, but I know he disapproved of the Poor People's March making food a big issue in their campaign. And that was related to the film. I think their initiative was supported by the film, or was maybe suggested by the film. But it just seemed like we were under siege both physically and intellectually on the domestic food issue.

G: During the Poor People's March was there coordination with the White House and the Justice Department regarding how to deal with the protesters?

S: Yes, there was, and with security people. I recall that Mr. Joe Robertson--you should see Joe Robertson about this. He was the assistant secretary for administration, a Freeman confidant from the governorship days, and he lives out in Bethesda. Joseph M. Robertson. He would have a very good memory of this. He was in charge of security and physical arrangements, which doors should be locked, who should be let in, and I expect any liaison with other departments was conducted largely by Joe.

G: Did Freeman have a problem on the other side in terms of dealing with the congressmen on the Hill, like Bob Poage and Jamie Whitten, who controlled to a certain extent the debate on the budget?

S: Yes. They metered out the money and the authority, not only for food programs, but for all other USDA programs. If Freeman were to have tried to move as fast as Kennedy-Javits wanted or to respond to all the demands of the Poor People's March in the food area, he would have been resisted by Whitten and Poage, perhaps Senator [Allen] Ellender and Senator [James O.] Eastland and maybe even by Senator Milton Young, the Republican on the Senate side. So Freeman was walking a narrow political line, which had allowed him in the early and mid-sixties to make the progress he claimed, but would never have allowed him in the mid- or the late sixties to make the leap that Javits and Kennedy wanted, and was made in the Nixon Administration when the Food Stamp Program became truly national with many billions of dollars, instead of one or two billion for the Food Stamp Program by 1968. So that was definitely a part of Freeman's behavior and he would argue a necessary part, I think, but it didn't help him much in the inciteful climate of 1967 and 1968.

G: Looking ahead, how was Nixon able to expand the program, dealing in part with the same members of Congress and senators?

S: More time had passed. But Poage and Whitten still remained, and I believe Ellender remained, but Daniel Patrick Moynihan was on the White House staff and he picked up the expansion line at the White House conference on food and hunger or something like food and nutrition. I believe that it was the broadening of the Kennedy-Javits line, and the nationalization of the point of view that was implicit in *Hunger in America*. It was finally accepted that the government shouldn't be distributing food, but should be using

money. A little bit later, perhaps 1972 or 1973, the Nixon Administration tried to go to cash on all kinds of welfare programs, but they never quite got it done.

I think that it was essentially the dam building up in the 1966-1967-1968-1969-1970 period, and the force of public opinion. The Special Committee on Hunger and Nutrition chaired by McGovern on the Senate Ag Committee helped. Maybe the political changes in the South contributed--the recognition by the Ellenders, Eastlands and Poage that things were changing. Senator [Bob] Dole joined Senator McGovern on food program expansion. Certainly the change in political personnel with Nixon Administration did not quite explain it.

I think there was a bit of an analogy there with, "Only Nixon could go to China." Only Nixon could take advantage of this imperative that had been apparent in the late sixties and do something dramatic, not so much in new programs, but in doubling and redoubling the appropriations for food stamps [and] school lunch. We also invented WIC, the Women, Infants and Children's food program, in about 1967 or 1968, but it was basically implemented in the late sixties and early seventies. Publicly, it was the "humanitarian Nixon" doing something on this front even while he was redoubling the bombing in Cambodia and conspiring to cover up the Watergate break-in or something like that.

G: What constraints did you have at the White House with your budget? This was the time when Vietnam was placing a lot of pressure on the budget. You had difficulties in expanding programs?

S: I'm quite sure that when we went over it for the 1967 budget, and even though I was chairman of the budget committee then, I do not remember it in detail. But I do recall that the Vietnam War by 1966 or 1967, particularly 1967, was a great restraint or constraint on what we could get for the social programs. Johnson's refusal to consider the tax increase--I was in on a cabinet meeting or two when Freeman was out of town in which Gardner Ackley and Treasury Secretary Joe Fowler really laid it on the line for a tax increase to pay for the war. But the President would not do that, and war spending sucked the money away from domestic programs. We made this little push in April, May, or June of 1968 for more money for Food Stamps in conjunction with the Poor People's March; as I recall we went to the White House for some major increase, like a doubling of food stamp money, or maybe it was a 50 per cent increase. We got next to nothing.

But you have to rely on the memoranda of that time, which I'm sure exist. We didn't do it all off the top of our heads. Rodney Leonard would have a better memory of that because he would have prepared the memoranda for that period.

G: Were there any memorable discussions between Freeman and the President that you recall, or recall hearing about, regarding expansion of these programs? At one point Freeman testified on the Sullivan Amendment to use Section--

S: [Section] 32.

G: Yes.

S: There was a fund there which had a lot of money in it--

G: That was an open authorization for food stamps?

S: Yes, a fund that developed from duties on food imports, and was used in the early development of the Food Stamp Program. I believe that Freeman met with Johnson in April, May, June of 1968 as the culmination of this effort to have a major expansion. I think the answer was almost entirely negative, but I don't remember in detail. I've never looked back on it. To me, the most dramatic events of that period, which turned the tide psychologically in favor of expansion of the food programs and against the Department of Agriculture as a worthy administrator of the food programs was the film, the Poor People's March, and the Kennedy-Javits intervention.

There's one more little element of this from my standpoint. I was not close to Robert Kennedy, but I knew him and I had been active in the John F. Kennedy campaign at a fairly low staff level. The night that LBJ withdrew from the 1968 race, I was at the governor's mansion in Kansas at some kind of a Democratic political event. I got a call from Ted Sorensen. He had just heard the President renounce another term, and he said, in effect, "Bobby's going, and are you with us?" I said, "Yes." Bobby Kennedy did announce two days later. Freeman was out of the country, and I attended the cabinet meeting the next day at which Johnson told us why he had withdrawn and I thought he told us that we as cabinet and sub-cabinet members should support whom we wanted to for president, but he clearly meant [Hubert] Humphrey. Well, I had already signed on with Kennedy. A few weeks later this became known in the White House.

First, Joe Califano tried to warn me and did warn me to be very careful in this, and suggested that I ought to cut loose from Kennedy. Then sometime probably in May of 1968, maybe a week before Kennedy was killed, Johnson called me himself and

pleaded with me and then directed me to get out of the Kennedy campaign or out of the government. I told him I would resign, but he resisted. Perhaps four hours before Johnson had called I had told the *Kansas City Star* reporter what I was doing. So the next day it began appearing in the *Kansas City Star* first, that here was a Johnson sub-cabinet officer working for Robert Kennedy. The next day in the *New York Times* there was a story which described how Johnson had directed all cabinet and sub-cabinet officers to withdraw from whatever they were doing in the Humphrey, Johnson, whatever other campaigns there were and everybody agreed to do this. That saved me from resigning, and of course everybody went underground and kept on doing what they were doing anyway.

G: What was Johnson's rationale?

S: He didn't want anybody helping Bobby Kennedy, and he didn't want me to resign, because Secretary Freeman would be out campaigning for Vice President Humphrey.

G: Is that right?

S: His rationale with me had another angle: the typical pleading Johnson that you must know quite a lot about. He told me how they considered me like a son, that they'd never had a son, he and Lady Bird. That was the only time I ever got "the treatment," and this call happened to come an hour before I was leaving for a Kennedy campaign meeting in Indiana. (Laughter) And so I was really torn apart, but he pleaded with me and said that they'd never had a son. They felt I was just like a son. And I had decided to go ahead with it, that I couldn't recall now--I let Joe Califano know and he, of course, let Johnson know that the cat was out of the bag, and that's when Johnson rhetorically pulled all

cabinet officers out of helping candidates. There's some little written record of that, I think in the *Kansas City Star* and the *New York Times*, but I never did save the clippings on it. I think it was mainly that he didn't want anybody involved with Kennedy. As far as I know, no other cabinet or sub-cabinet officer was with Kennedy, but I was working daily with Peter Edelman, Marian Wright, a woman over here named Mary Yates who was also in the campaign.

G: Was there a problem with your helping Kennedy in view of a conflict with Freeman [inaudible]?

S: There was a little problem, but Freeman and I talked about it. I had told Freeman at the very start and so we were out in the open. We talked very candidly all the time and so to the extent that could have become a major problem it would have had to come from the White House. Freeman and I had worked this out. He was working for Humphrey and I was working for Kennedy. I offered to resign and Freeman said, "Don't resign. Depending on who gets the nomination, one of us is going to be very active in this campaign. And you can resign if Kennedy gets the nomination, or I can resign and you run the department if Humphrey gets the nomination." Well, he didn't resign, but he got very active in the campaign. So we had that well worked out, and Freeman--I have a letter in my file somewhere from Humphrey, a very understanding letter, after the election of course, after he had lost. But we've gotten off food.

G: Was there a sense in the Agriculture Department that it would reduce motivation, self-reliance, if these food programs gave commodities to people, that it was better to reinforce some sort of self-reliance through an alternative mechanism?

S: I think there was that feeling and there was a symbolic gesture in the first Food Stamp Programs in that you had to pay something for your food stamps if you had any way to do it at all. You hadn't had to buy your commodities before; they were pure charity. I think the necessity for some payment came more from the committees of Congress, particularly the ag committees, than it did from people in the department, up to and including the secretary. It was an acknowledgment, I think, of the "go slow" principle, that we ought not go too fast; we ought not give these people too much. I don't think the workfare idea, that people ought to work for their sustenance, had gotten very important then yet. I've forgotten when the purchase requirement was taken away; perhaps it was in the early Nixon years when more money was appropriated and the purchase requirement was reduced or ended.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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