

Milton P. Semer Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 09/10/1968
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Biographical Note

Milton P. Semer (born 1919), an American lawyer, served as General Counsel for the Housing and Home Finance Agency (1961-1966). This interview focuses on Semer's responsibilities as General Counsel of the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA), President John F. Kennedy's active efforts to create affordable housing through legislation, and the role of the HHFA, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Milton P. Semer

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Milton P. Semer—JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

MILTON P. SEMER

September 10, 1968
Washington, D.C.

By William McHugh

For the John F. Kennedy Library

McHUGH: Mr. Semer, could you tell us how you first came to have contact with Senator Kennedy or with his staff?

SEMER: I first met Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] in 1950 when he came to work for a subcommittee on railroad retirement of the Senate Committee on Labor and Welfare, the subcommittee then being chaired by Senator Paul Douglas who hired Ted Sorensen as one of his staffers. I was then a senior staff member at the Brookings

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Institution and kept in touch with that subcommittee because of mutual intellectual interests. I know that when the Democrats lost control of the Congress and that subcommittee was no longer chaired by Senator Douglas, Ted Sorensen was recommended by Senator Douglas through Robert Wallace, now an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, then staff director for that subcommittee. Ted Sorensen was recommended to the new Senator Kennedy as a staff man. And, of course, Senator Kennedy hired him even though he was outside of Massachusetts. Senator Douglas, at the time, recommended that he have the best possible man on legislation even if he had to go outside of his state.

McHUGH: How did it happen that you got to know Kennedy's staff? That was because your office...

SEMER: I got to know Kennedy's staff because of Wallace's close association with him -- Wallace and I married sisters -- and because my own

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office -- later on I was chief counsel of the housing subcommittee -- was located right across the hall from one of the Kennedy staff offices in the basement of the Old Senate Office Building. I also got to know Ted Sorensen socially, through Bob Wallace during those early years. I got to know Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.], who was his Administrative Assistant, and I knew some of the other people in Massachusetts Politics.

McHUGH: Who for instance?

SEMER: I've known John Barriere, who now works for the Speaker, from Worcester, Massachusetts, who was with the House Banking and Currency Committee and my opposite number...

McHUGH: He also worked on the task force report on housing and urban renewal?

SEMER: That's right.

McHUGH: Are there any others that you can think of from Massachusetts that you knew?

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SEMER: Not at the moment, but I'll fill that in if I think of them, when I go over the transcript.

McHUGH: Could you say something about the relationship between Senator Douglas and Senator Kennedy?

SEMER: I think it was a teacher-pupil relationship at the start and for some time.

McHUGH: Can you elaborate on that at all?

SEMER: I think it was because, of course, Paul Douglas had been an economist of some renown for some time and I think that Senator Kennedy had a bent in that direction. Senator Douglas was a man, who was willing to theorize, as well as play the practical economical game. I think that Senator Kennedy right from the start, had that theoretical bent.

McHUGH: I think also Ted Sorensen was working on the economic problems of New England.

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SEMER: Yes. They had quite an exercise in connection with the New England Council.

McHUGH: Do you have anything to say about the 1956 Convention?

SEMER: Not particularly. At about that time, Ted Sorensen was groomed as, you know, the number one man, notwithstanding the fact that the Senate tradition is that the administrative assistant is number one, the legislative assistant is number two. Notwithstanding the fact that Ted Reardon really handled Massachusetts politics for the Senator, Ted Sorensen began to emerge as the number one political aide on the national scene for Senator Kennedy.

McHUGH: Do you know why he supplanted Reardon or appeared to supplant Reardon?

SEMER: Brain power and the ability to communicate with Senator Kennedy on what -- for the lack of a better phrase -- I'd say the theoretical

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and the conceptual, which is not Ted Reardon's strength.

McHUGH: What would you say Ted Reardon's strength was?

SEMER: A good workman on a day to day basis, to clear your desk.

McHUGH: Did you have any contact with Senator Kennedy on any legislation he was interested in?

SEMER: No.

McHUGH: You didn't have any contact.

SEMER: No. Senator Kennedy was one of the liberal bloc, whose vote was more or less predictable, except that every once in a while, he would have some questions, particularly as it might relate to the farm program. He began to see the urban interest as beginning to clash with the rural interest, when farm bills came up.

McHUGH: At the time he decided that he might possibly seek the

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presidency, there were some people who had doubt of his liberalism. Do you know what Senator Douglas felt about Kennedy?

SEMER: I think Senator Douglas was that kind of practical politician, who felt that that kind of criticism was just part of the game.

McHUGH: He didn't particularly partake of Mrs. Roosevelt's [Eleanor Roosevelt] doubts about his convictions?

SEMER: I don't think so.

McHUGH: Well, from the time prior to when he ran for the presidency, do you have any other remembrances of him or of his staff?

SEMER: The only remembrances I have is that, in the period from '55 through '61, whenever I was working the floor and we'd always have some legislation coming out of Banking and Currency Committee, he was interested, but

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had a relatively short attention span, so far as staff was concerned, because staff was always especially informed and erudite on the thing it brings to the floor. Senator Kennedy was not one of the activists in helping us on that type of legislation, although he always voted with us.

McHUGH: I don't think you mentioned Mike Feldman, how he came into Senator Kennedy's orbit.

SEMER: Mike Feldman was an SEC [Securities and Exchange Commission] attorney who was detailed to the Banking and Currency Committee in 1955 when the Democrats took that Committee over under the chairmanship of Senator Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] and launched an investigation of the stock market. Two people were taken on to augment the regular staff, one of whom was Mike Feldman, from the SEC to handle

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legal work, the other one being Dr. Asher Achenstein, who was borrowed from the legislative reference service, of the Library of Congress. The two of them worked in the basement of the Old Senate Office Building, right over a room divider from where I worked, so I got to know them pretty well. When that study was over in about two years, Mike Feldman went back to the SEC.

McHUGH: And what was your estimate of him at that time? Do you remember? You felt he was an idea man or what?

SEMER: Mike Feldman has always been a very aggressive bureaucrat, and he's hit the big time. At the time, however, he was a career bureaucrat in the SEC who wanted out. He did finally get out and I think with great success.

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McHUGH: So you had known quite a few of the people around Senator Kennedy then.

SEMER: I knew Lee White very well, at the time.

McHUGH: Oh, did you.

SEMER: I can't think of his name at the moment, but he's now at the Chancellor of Higher Education in the state of New Jersey.

McHUGH: Dungan [Ralph Dungan]?

SEMER: Yes. Ralph Dungan who was put on the Senate Labor and Welfare Committee as part of Senator Kennedy's patronage.

McHUGH: Oh, is that so. What was your estimate of Ralph Dungan?

SEMER: I thought Ralph Dungan was very able. But my favorite Kennedy staff member always was and is Lee White.

McHUGH: Oh, is that so. Why was that true?

SEMER: Because Lee White, I think, is a man of consummate judgment. I had occasion to work with him

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on many occasions and he was my favorite Kennedy Staff Member.

McHUGH: What sort of things did you work with him on?

SEMER: Whatever was of interest to Senator Kennedy at the time. Of course, later on he went with Senator Cooper [John S. Cooper] for a while, toward the end of the fifties. Then when Senator Kennedy won the election, Lee White came over from Senator Cooper's staff and worked in the Kennedy office and just stayed with him. And then when Lee White became Special Counsel to the President after Ted Sorensen had

left, and after him Mike Feldman had left, I became Lee White's successor at the White House in 1966.

McHUGH: Could you say anything about the role of the particular people in Illinois in the 1960 campaign? Were you involved there at all?

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Mayor Daley [Richard J. Daley], for instance.

SEMER: I didn't know Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] or Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] very well until they came into the Administration, as White House staff people. My involvement in campaigning was in the National Committee in '56 where Senator Sparkman [John Sparkman] and Congressman Ed Edmondson were co-chairmen of the speaker's bureau. Being Sparkman's Chief Counsel, I spent four miserable months down there doing his chores. One thing worth nothing is that the Kennedy operation in '56 was an independent operation.

McHUGH: Now, you say it was independent.

SEMER: He scheduled separately. He went off on his own.

McHUGH: Did that provoke any particular reaction?

SEMER: Yes. It did. It was resented by many. As far as I was concerned in the speaker's

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bureau, it was just that much less of a burden on me, that somebody was willing to take that initiative and that a man who was probably second or third most in demand, from around the country, you know, by political organizations, that they had their own operation. Then such coordination that was needed; that wasn't too hard. They were easy to work with.

McHUGH: So you didn't have any direct role in the 1960 campaign?

SEMER: Well, in 1960 being in the Senate Banking and Currency Committee, in the spring of the year, or maybe it was late winter, Ted Sorensen called me, at home, and asked if I would do some thinking about a swing that he wanted Senator Kennedy to make to speak to municipal organizations, like state leagues of mayors, which would wind up at

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a national mayor's meeting. As I recall it might have been Denver. I just can't remember exactly. So I put some notes together. Through most of the fifties for party platform purposes, I put in a few paragraphs here and there for platform and provided grist for candidates.

McHUGH: Who were you working with on that?

SEMER: Well, by 1960 it was Mike Feldman, Ted Sorensen, Archie Cox [Archibald Cox], Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton], I guess, was on the scene. It was mostly on the intellectual side, at the time, because by 1960, I had close to six years of experience with the field and the urban problem was beginning to emerge as something identifiable. That was being handled by the Banking and Currency Committee. Then about midway in 1960 -- midway of the campaign -- I made a swing with

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my own Senator, Senator Muskie [Edmund S. Muskie], who is now the vice presidential candidate, of course, because I'm from Maine and I had campaigned with him whenever he was up. But this never clashed with national elections because Maine used to vote in September. So I used to double in brass. I'd go up and campaign in my state, in September, and then go on the national circuit for November.

McHUGH: Before 1960, apparently you didn't see Senator Kennedy as presidential timber. When did you first think he might be?

SEMER: Well, about the same time as everybody else did, when he made that very dramatic run on the vice presidency in '56. Then being relatively close to the urban problem, I don't think I was the first to see him. But on the other hand, I was not the last to see

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that he was a candidate who would appeal through TV to the urban mass.

McHUGH: Did I understand you correctly to say that you contributed some ideas to the platform in the 1960 Convention? I presume you were at the Convention.

SEMER: Well, I suppose the only thing I can say is that I will share some modest amount of credit with everybody else that takes such credit for the '56, '60, '64 and '68 Democratic party platform language on housing and urban matters.

McHUGH: And even as far back as 1956 you worked on the program to some extent?

SEMER: That's right.

McHUGH: I see. That's interesting.

SEMER: Then the other thing, in 1960, right after the election, Senator Kennedy -- because

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West Virginia was so important -- set up a whole series of task forces and the one that he was put out front, which was in the public domain, on purpose, was what started out as the so-called West Virginia task force, but then blossomed into a national task force on depressed areas. That started out in Charleston, West Virginia on December 9, with Senator Douglas as the chairman and I staffed that for him. We delivered that task force report to Palm Beach, on New Year's Day, in a press conference on the patio, on New Year's Day, when we delivered that report to the President-elect.

McHUGH: Who else... Well, the names, I'm sure, are available of the people who participated.

SEMER: That was pretty much a Paul Douglas operation.

McHUGH: Is that so? I see. What kind of a

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reception did the report get?

SEMER: Actually the report was more propagandistic in its thrust than substantive, because the depressed areas bill, so-called, was vetoed twice by Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. It was a big issue in the '60 campaign. It was pretty obvious that it was going to be reintroduced by President Kennedy. As a matter of fact, the only thing that was in doubt, as to whether it would be introduced before he took office, so it could become S-1, which it did become, or whether it would be introduced after he took office, so that it would be a Kennedy presentation. We had quite a discussion about that, after we rehearsed the press conference, went through the findings and the recommendations. I was very strongly of the view that it should be S-1, that he

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ought to put it in front. I can't recall at the moment... I think it was Mike Feldman, who felt everything ought to be stockpiled for introduction after he took office. But my own familiarity with the vagaries of the Senate were such that I knew that you couldn't preempt numbers like S-1, S-2, S-3. I checked with the leadership and was in effect told "if you want

S-1, you better get there right at the start. We won't hold it for you until January 21." Pierre Salinger sided with me. When the first day of Congress came, we just went ahead and put it in.

McHUGH: Of the recommendations that you made in that report, were any of them particularly controversial or...

SEMER: Well, what we recommended is that the vetoed bill be passed. That's in effect what happened.

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McHUGH: I guess President Kennedy wasn't prepared to disagree with that.

SEMER: No. The diagnosis and prognosis were entirely on a political basis, because that thing had been worked over for years and the feeling was that let's just go ahead and deliver on it.

McHUGH: Do you remember in the 1960 platform statement on housing whether there was any conflict over just what ought not to be included?

SEMER: Not particularly. Not particularly.

McHUGH: Was there an indication that open occupancy might be a problem or anything of that sort?

SEMER: Well, open occupancy has always been a problem. I don't think there was anything unique to the Kennedy thing. I'd always felt that very neat turn of phrase "Stroke of a pen," which I guess was the Pittsburgh

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speech was a little bit of an albatross, because it forced them to do something, too early.

McHUGH: Well, we'll get into that a little further on. Well, I guess it's fairly transparent, perhaps it isn't. I was going to ask you how you were invited to fill the position that you took?

SEMER: Well, that came up during a little session following that patio press conference that we had.

McHUGH: You mean that that was discussed at Palm Beach?

SEMER: Well, at Palm Beach, we had a press conference which was relatively short,

because the press corps was in great pain, having partied all night. This was New Year's Day. So we got rid of it fairly fast, and then we went off to one of the little rooms off the patio

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The President-elect and Senator Douglas and Pierre Salinger and I had a session for about an hour. The things that came up were, "What can I do for you, Paul?" Paul Douglas had only one definite, concrete recommendation. He wanted Frank McCulloch, his administrative assistant, to be chairman of the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] and that's what happened. Senator Kennedy also went through some names, without referring to a list -- just from memory -- names that were being recommended to him for the Council of Economic Advisors. Some of the names came up in connection with that. We discussed the appointment of Robert Weaver as the Negro head for the Housing and Home Finance Agency.

McHUGH: Do you know who had recommended that he be announced?

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SEMER: He had just been announced the day before.

McHUGH: Oh, he had been announced the day before.

SEMER: Just been announced the day before. He was in the patio on December 31. We were in the patio January 1. He had been announced the 31st of December, but just exactly a week before, there had been a leak to the New York Times, that Bob Weaver was going to be the Housing head.

McHUGH: Do you know how that occurred?

SEMER: Well, as I understand it and he's never denied it, Harris Wofford told the President-elect, that he had picked his cabinet and he didn't have a prominent Negro. So they asked what was left over, and there was Housing and they put that position and Bob Weaver together. Bob Weaver had been a leader in Housing in New York state. Then the question came up about what kind of contribution I was going to make to the executive branch

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and Paul Douglas said, "He's staying with us on the Hill because I think we may have some troubles on the depressed areas bill." So it was left there and I wasn't challenged. Then when Bob Weaver came up to the Senate for confirmation, he got into big trouble. The former Senator Blakley from Texas started out on a kind of a witch hunt interrogation of Bob Weaver, who had taken some foundation sponsored trip to Russia.

McHUGH: How long ago had he taken that trip?

SEMER: Oh, years before. So I had my work cut out for me and we finally got his nomination put through some late Friday afternoon before Lincoln's Birthday recess. Then I got a call from the White House in effect saying, "Get on down there. He'll need your help."

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McHUGH: Oh, really? Can you say generally what some of the things that you had to do were, in order to help secure his nomination?

SEMER: I had to form a kind of a staff coalition with a man named Jim Palmer [James E. Palmer, Jr.] who was sort of a staff member for the Southern wing and persuade him that it was not only in the interest of the party, but it was in the interest of the South to get this over with and not to dig in, on this particular guy. The Southerners still voted against him, but they didn't filibuster it, and they let it go through.

McHUGH: Do you have any opinion as to why they did decide not to filibuster it? Was there any particular argument that they...

SEMER: He wasn't that vulnerable. Basically, he had two facets. One is, he was a professional

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economist, and the other was he had been chairman of the Board of NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], a rather mild mannered, uninvolved type of Negro leader.

McHUGH: Their opinion was that he was rather left wing though, I presume.

SEMER: Oh, sure. Sure. He was left wing and they quoted from his writings. But he was not what is today called a militant. As a matter of fact, today he would be called and "Uncle Tom" because he cooperated with the white power structure. He was Harriman's [Averell Harriman] man up in New York and Bob Wagner's [Robert F. Wagner] -- Mayor Wagner's and Governor Harriman's. He was part of that political entourage.

McHUGH: Was there much opposition to his appointment other than from the South, do you recall?

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SEMER: Not particularly. Not particularly. I think it's because of the identification of Negro with housing.

McHUGH: Well, one would imagine that might cause all the opposition in the world, considering. Of course, one can look back in hindsight and say that. Is that what you meant that in the public mind he was thought to be a logical person for the position?

SEMER: I think in the public mind, he was a Negro appointment. He won his spurs as a housing man later.

McHUGH: So you mentioned that you were asked.... Who contacted you at the White House to ask you if you....

SEMER: I'd have to look at my notes. It was not the President himself. It was one of the staff people. I had so much, oh, practically day to day contact with them, I just don't recall, at the moment, who said ti

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But it became known on the Banking and Currency Committee that I was on my way.

McHUGH: Did they set a deadline for you to go over there, particularly?

SEMER: It was during the confirmation hearings. Once we'd broken the back of the opposition, I went on down to talk to Bob Weaver and just to get acquainted. As a matter of fact, I've always been a lawyer. I've been nothing else, other than a lawyer, so that was the logical place.

McHUGH: So that was the only position you considered actually, General Counsel of HHFA?

SEMER: That's right. Later on when Jack Conway who was Reuther's [Walter Reuther] man came in as number two man.... When he left, I was offered that job as Deputy Administrator, now the Under Secretary. I turned it down, because I wanted to remain as a lawyer and that

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position stayed vacant. Then when the big pay raises came in '64, I was asked to fill that slot till after the election, because it had become quite a prize. It was a slot that increased practically overnight from \$20,000 to \$28,500. So I took that and stayed in my office as

General Counsel, and had both positions, although for payroll purposes I was Deputy Administrator.

McHUGH: Why did Jack Conway leave?

SEMER: I think he decided to leave the night of the '62 elections when he felt that... We had our work cut out for us for '64 and he'd go back to the Industrial Union department of the AFL-CIO and start building a base for the '64 election. I'm going to have to take this call.

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McHUGH: Could you tell me how Administrator Weaver set up his staff, how the different jobs were defined and the top positions?

SEMER: Weaver took life as he found it. He didn't reorganize the staff. There were some members, that were given to him, such as Sidney Woolner from Michigan, who was given the job as Commissioner of Community Facilities, I think even before Weaver came on the scene.

McHUGH: You mean the President had made these decisions?

SEMER: The President's people.

McHUGH: The President's people made these decisions, yes.

SEMER: Sidney Woolner was sort of the chief liaison with Williams [G. Mennen Williams] from Michigan. Oh, I think, although we observed the appropriate pageantry, I was a White House

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appointment, even though, technically speaking, I was not a presidential appointee. But I was handled and announced, as if, I was a presidential appointee. Actually, I was a salaried employee of Weaver's, in other words, a civil servant. Bill Slayton [William L. Slayton], who came in as Urban Renewal Commissioner, that was a Weaver appointment. Marie McGuire who came in as Public Housing Commissioner, that was very much a Weaver appointment. He sought her out.

McHUGH: Lyndon Johnson didn't have anything to do with his selection, did he? Do you know? I think she had been in San Antonio.

SEMER: Yes. She was in San Antonio, but Weaver had known her for years. I don't think the Lyndon Johnson involvement had much to do with it. I think the

Neal Hardy

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appointment, as FHA [Federal Housing Administration] Commissioner, was a result of a consensus among the private sector people. And that's about it.

McHUGH: And who would the private sector people have been making their preferences known to, the President's people again?

SEMER: Oh, they had a people picker operation involving.... Let's see, there was Adam Yarmolinsky and Ralph Dungan, Ted Sorensen, Larry O'Brien and Kenny O'Donnell. There was quite a...

McHUGH: They were in touch with these people, that is the...

SEMER: I would say that Bill Slayton and Marie McGuire were relatively nonpolitical, because of their professional expertise. Neal Hardy was a private sector recommendation

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who had pretty good credentials. He had been in the Truman [Harry S. Truman] Administration. Woolner was a political appointment. Jack Conway had worked on the floor of the Convention with the Reuther forces. He was sort of the floor manager for the Reuther forces at the 1960 Convention in Los Angeles.

McHUGH: There was some delay over filling the position that William Slayton ultimately got and there was some feeling that the President wanted to make the former Mayor of Baltimore, the Urban Renewal Commissioner.

SEMER: Weaver vetoed that.

McHUGH: Weaver vetoed that. Do you know why?

SEMER: Well, he felt that Tommy D'Alesandro [Thomas D'Alesandro] was an old fashioned city machine man. Weaver felt that the urban renewal slot should have a professional expert. Bill Slayton had been with the Zeckendorf operation

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and I forget where he was at the time that he came over to HHFA. But I remember that very well. There was quite a lot of pressure by the White House people, on Weaver, to take Tommy D'Alesandro.

McHUGH: He just decided that it would be a matter of what? He felt that D'Alesandro was not qualified for this job and yet the President had a strong -- presumably the President or the President's people...

SEMER: His presidential staff.

McHUGH: Were backing him and...

SEMER: Well, they were looking for a place for a very loyal worker in the vineyards, during the '60 campaign.

McHUGH: I presume that traditionally, the President allows the administrator to make the selection of the urban renewal chief. Would that be...

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SEMER: Well, the urban renewal chief was then an administrative appointment. I mean it was not a presidential appointment. That begs the question. If the President wanted Tommy D'Alesandro in there, I'm sure he could have gotten him in. But Weaver sensed the situation, in which they were trying to find a place for Tommy D'Alesandro, and he had some questions which he checked with some of us around. And I remember advising him, I said, "Look, if you don't want Tommy D'Alesandro just tell him you don't want him. You have to live with the guy."

McHUGH: Were you advising on any other appointments?

SEMER: Well, I was advising on all of them.

McHUGH: Which ones in particular do you remember?

SEMER: Well, by the time I got in, the Woelner appointment had been made. The Marie

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McGuire had been made or had been agreed to. The Hardy appointment had been agreed to.

McHUGH: Some of the appointments were fairly late. For instance, Hugh Miels didn't come in...

SEMER: Well, Hugh Miels, the congressional liaison guy.... The Administration recommended he fellow who is now.... I don't know whether he's still in the Veterans Administration or not. But he had come from Capitol Hill and I can't think of his name. [Interruption]

McHUGH: We were discussing the appointment of Hugh Miels, I believe.

SEMER: Cy Brickfield [Cyril F. Brickfield] was recommended by the White House for that job. Hugh Miels had been very helpful to Weaver, in connection with mayors and the Mayors Leagues. Hugh Miels worked for one of them. Hugh Miels

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also was sponsored by Bill Slayton and that appointment was made and it turned out very poorly.

McHUGH: Really? What do you mean?

SEMER: Bob Weaver is kind of a loner, can't work with more than one or two people at a time, developed a format, where he confided in Jack Conway and myself. Just by one of those accidents of housing people, Hugh Miels was on the same floor that Weaver was, and felt he wasn't cut in on all the high policy making conferences and so on. He left, I think, about a year or so later, somewhat disgruntled. I'm sure they've made up since, buta the time it seemed to be like a big crisis.

McHUGH: He was chosen over...

SEMER: Cy Brickfield.

McHUGH: Oh, Cy Brickfield...

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SEMER: Who was given a job in the Veterans Administration.

McHUGH: Another position that came in later was Fred Forbes. He was also...

SEMER: Yes. Fred Forbes was always sort of a nursemaid to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. in West Virginia. He was an appointment by the Kennedy staff -- the political side of the Kennedy staff.

McHUGH: Well, were there any other people whose appointments you advised on that

you can think of?

SEMER: My attitude about appointments was that it was up to Bob Weaver. As far as I was concerned, I had grown up with all sorts of different people in government and am probably too indifferent.

McHUGH: Were any Eisenhower people kept in key

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positions?

SEMER: There was one who was head of International Housing. He seemed to go on and on. But it was a relatively inactive field.

McHUGH: Was there any disagreement whether certain Eisenhower people ought to be kept on.

SEMER: Not particularly. No.

McHUGH: Well, the bureaucracy usually tries to absorb the new administration. Was that...

SEMER: They did. It didn't take them long.

McHUGH: What was the first evidence, can you recall?

SEMER: The first evidence to me was a rather sharp, but not unfriendly exchange I had with Bob Weaver with regard to his congressional relations. Again, because of historical evolution of housing legislation, an awful lot of it was so-called back door financing, or contract authority so that once the

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authorizing committee gave you the enactment, that's all you needed. You didn't need the Appropriations Committee. This was true of both public housing and urban renewal, who were two huge bread and butter programs for the cities. Having come from Capitol Hill, I was somewhat more impressed with the importance of appropriations committees. Even though they weren't of great importance to the Housing Agency, except for salaries and expenses, I felt that the Agency ought to take the Appropriations Committee work out of the hands of the bureaucracy, because it had become pretty much the private domain of the Budget Officer and the administrative people. Bob Weaver felt that he was too busy that year -- this was in '61 -- to take that on. I remember telling him, if you didn't take it on early and get control of it, you

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never would. But again, the accidents of the evolution of historical happenings.... That was the year, in which the largest single domestic bill, that went through was the Housing Act of '61. We were so preoccupied with that and, of course, the Appropriations Committee process was parallel to that -- the usual submissions to the House Appropriations Committee and, I forget March, April, somewhere in the spring. We were spending an awful lot of time in the Banking and Currency Committee, to get the Housing bill through, which finally got signed on June 30. By that time, the Appropriations Committee process was well underway. The bureaucracy was in charge. It's such a detailed, esoteric piece of business, to prepare presentations for the Appropriations Committee that Bob Weaver never got control of it and never has since.

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McHUGH: Well, that was, we'll say an important too, he might have had to control the bureaucracy.

SEMER: Well, the other thing about it and I think it's worth bringing in: his relations with President Kennedy. Literally, for all the time that Bob Weaver was President Kennedy's housing man, he was never in the Oval Room except once, and that was almost by accident -- in connection with the mass transit provision of the '61 Act. A little bit of a fuss was raised about a labor amendment and a meeting was scheduled in Ted Sorensen's office to try to resolve things with Andy Biemiller and Secretary Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz]. Andy Biemiller of the AFL-CIO and Secretary Wirtz. Larry O'Brien came in. Then we had a few other people. I don't know. You can get this from the White House minutes more accurately, but

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as I recall, there was a meeting scheduled and it was running a little late. Before we knew it we were in the Oval Room, with the President running the meeting, instead of just having it in Ted Sorensen's office. Other than that, I don't think there was any professional intercourse, between the President and his chief housing man, except indirectly through Ted Sorensen and Lee White who became the housing man in the White House. As a matter of fact, Bob Weaver's reputation grew, in the White House, because of that -- because he was not bothered and he got his work done, stayed out of trouble. There was no scandal. He got his legislation through. Since one of the concerns on the Hill was, could a Negro get housing legislation enacted, the way it worked out, he got the biggest piece of

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domestic legislation of anybody, the Housing Act of '61. The other facet of that is that, as I said, Weaver's reputation grew. The only time that there was an intimate, or close relationship between them, was when we made a run on the departmental building in '62. Then later that year...

McHUGH: I'm not sure I understand what you are referring to.

SEMER: What I mean by a run on the departmental bill.... The Kennedy Administration submitted to the Congress a proposal to establish a Department of Housing and Urban Affairs.

McHUGH: Oh, yes. I'm sorry. I didn't catch it right off.

SEMER: And there was a telephone exchange between the President and the Housing Administrator in connection with that. Then later on that

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year, when the President signed the executive order on Equal Opportunity in Housing, they had the telephone exchange. But that ended up in Attorney General Kennedy's [Robert F. Kennedy] hands.

McHUGH: Let's go back to the organization of the HHFA for a minute.

SEMER: I probably ought to say, as a general proposition, that there was not that kind of interest, evidenced by the White House about housing, that would give it top rank. First of all, I think because the President's orientation was toward urban America, and I think that his notion was, that to organize the executive branch of the government to do the job, you'd probably have to get a Department of Urban Affairs. I think that one of the arguments that had to be used, when he submitted to the Congress the

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proposal to set up a Department of Urban Affairs was that the instrument that he had was ineffective.

McHUGH: Well, this relates to the disorganization in HHFA that was usually regarded as pretty disorganized and some of the agencies very independent. Was that something you found true, initially?

SEMER: I think that was true in Eisenhower Administration, but I think that with the help of Kenny O'Donnell and Lee White, and because of the personal

relationships that were set up among the top people, I don't think that they were set up among the top people, I don't think that they were ever as good before that or since.

McHUGH: Really? That's very interesting. What happened particularly with Lee White and Kenny O'Donnell to get in on that? How did they go about strengthening the

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control?

SEMER: I think there were two things, at least. One was that Lee White especially, as the President's agent in the housing field, was a very sophisticated operator, and would never undercut Weaver. And secondly, since that first year, was a year of a large legislative effort, which we won, Larry O'Brien let me call the shots on the congressional relations, so far as the content and the strategy was concerned. Since I had been doing that for six years, on the Senate side, and since the people in the Senate were people I had worked with, or actually had worked for me, what I did was to set up a network involving Lee White, on the substantive side and, of course, Ted Sorensen – although Ted wasn't that much interested in it – Larry O'Brien's

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people. Larry found the field rather novel. So the White House and my office. . . . I operated almost as if I was still Sparkman's Chief Counsel which I'd been just a few months before. Most of the substantive ingredients of the bill were things left over from the Eisenhower Administration, which we hadn't been able to put through. And the House Banking and Currency Committee, and Congressman Albert Rains, and his staff director, John Barriere. So that was the circuit. We all cooperated.

McHUGH: Did you ever have any differences with O'Brien on what. . .

SEMER: None. Never had any differences with O'Brien, and had only two differences with the Administration, but that was with the Budget Bureau, and those were very easily resolved. The only big difference within

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the Administration which was resolved by Ted Sorensen – and I don't have any personal knowledge, as to whether the President was involved. I rather imagine he was, but I don't have any personal information, as to what the occasion was – and that was on the question, as to whether mass transit would go into the Department of Commerce, or into the HHFA. It

was a White House decision that it would go into the HHFA. And that was fought out in Ted Sorensen's office.

McHUGH: I see. Was that a particularly hard fight, do you know?

SEMER: Yes. Sort of a hard fight. But not unfriendly.

McHUGH: What were the compelling reasons, why it was decided to give it to HHFA?

SEMER: Well, it still plagues the Administration. It's a question, as to whether the mass transit program is best viewed as an

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overall transportation question, or whether it's so indigenous to the city problem, that it ought to be with the people that are working on city problems. As a matter of fact, just last year by reorganization.... Well, I guess, this year. yes. Sure. This year, the operating part of that program has gone over to the Department of Transportation, and the planning aspects stay with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

McHUGH: What about FHA? That had traditionally had a reputation as being very independent. How did you find them to deal with?

SEMER: I found them very cooperative. The key there was that Neal Hardy, he was FHA Commissioner, was really part of the family or team – whatever cliché you want to use – and he worked very closely with Bob Weaver.

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McHUGH: What led him to leave?

SEMER: I think probably Neal Hardy left, because of a very unhappy domestic situation that he had. He had a divorce. You know that half world, or unknown world, where a person has domestic problems which you don't poke into. Because when he left, he went to New York.

McHUGH: I sort of wondered whether he had any resistance. I know a lot...

SEMER: Neal Hardy did not leave, because he wasn't doing the job.

McHUGH: No. I thought it might have been, that some of the people that he was representing were resisting the President's order on open occupancy.

SEMER: None, none whatsoever. Not at all. Neal Hardy's standing was always very

high with the private sector people, who sponsored it right up to the end and still is.

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Everybody, you know, was very sympathetic to this rather unhappy domestic crisis that he had to go through.

McHUGH: Now, you mentioned at the beginning your role was defined.... Well, you were going to be taking care of congressional relations. That was your primary work was it?

SEMER: My primary job was General Counsel. The congressional relations were handled three different ways over the years. During the Truman Administration, a fellow named B.T. Fitzpatrick was Deputy Administrator and General Counsel, he more or less handled the congressional relations. When the Eisenhower people came in, they tried it two different ways. One was to make it separate and the other is to make it part of public relations. When the Kennedy

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Administration came in, it became part of the General Counsel's office as a matter of fact. Then when we organized the HHFA, I recommended that it be split off, because we had a big bill going through. I saw the departmental bill, the urban affairs thing, as being a big congressional effort. I also felt that by having a separate congressional relations office, I could induce Weaver to get more interested in the importance of appropriations Committees, and didn't want it to be just an adjunct of the General Counsel's office. Also I'm kind of a purist in the law and I wanted to build up the General Counsel's office and build some legal strength for the agency.

McHUGH: You had mentioned that Larry O'Brien had more or less given you a carte blanche...

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SEMER: Yes. He did.

McHUGH: But you were no longer in congressional relations as of the time that the department bill was going in. Is that right?

SEMER: Well, as a practical matter, even though we had a congressional relations office this, I think, is what we got Hugh Miels, as a matter of fact, quite irritable about the whole thing – Weaver still looked to me for his counsel on congressional relations and couldn't care less how it was organized. I tried many times to

bring in these other people, until I got the insight that Bob Weaver was basically a loner. He worked with very, very few people. As a matter of fact, when Jack Conway left, it was practically just Bob Weaver and myself.

McHUGH: What was his relationship to Jack Conway?

SEMER: It was very good. Jack Conway is

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an extraordinarily good administrator and he came over and became sort of the Mr. Inside, handling the administrative chores and shaking up the bureaucracy. Jack just about mastered the job when he left, the great tragedy to Weaver I think, because Jack Conway is an activist. He mastered it and got it in good shape and then he left.

McHUGH: Can you say, in general, how he was able to master this or to get control?

SEMER: No. Jack Conway is quite an egghead, quite apart from the fact that he is one of Reuther's musclemen. He really mastered the field. I say that in the best sense of the term. He studied it. He learned its background, had a very good perception of how capital formation was important to financing housing and urban development

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and so on. Yes. He's one of my very favorite administrators. Of course, later on he turned up at OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] and that was sort of unhappy – you know as Sargent Shriver's [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] deputy.

McHUGH: Oh, is that so. I wasn't aware of that. How long was he there?

SEMER: Oh, a year or two.

McHUGH: Did he or Weaver meet fairly regularly with the heads of the constituent agencies of HHFA?

SEMER: Oh yes. We had weekly staff meetings.

McHUGH: Oh, did you?

SEMER: Yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, I suppose I say this with a certain amount of bias. Although I had a lot to do with the formulation of the Department and getting it through, but I don't think they have ever had the

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esprit and the Kennedy style of administration at the time, had a lot to do with it. I don't think you ever had the esprit within an agency as they had in that team that Weaver had. That's because Kenny O'Donnell, Lee White, Ted Sorensen would back us to the hilt – and Larry O'Brien. As a matter of fact, the one crisis that came up on personnel, which was moving Sid Woolner out.... Weaver and Conway and I went over and sat in the Cabinet Room with Kenny O'Donnell. Weaver explained what our problem was and Kenny O'Donnell just approved it in about ten seconds. In other words, they back us up.

McHUGH: What was the problem with Weaver's appointment?

SEMER: Well, the crisis was that Woolner was having difficulty administrating. Probably one of the most difficult programs that ever hit

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an agency was the accelerated public works program of '62. It was in '63 and he just had lost control of that constituency, and Weaver felt that Woolner was not doing the job and wanted him out. It was as simple as that.

McHUGH: Was his replacement effective?

SEMER: Well, his replacement got sick, awfully early.

McHUGH: That Community Facilities Administration...

SEMER: Actually, Conway and I were running that program and we didn't have any trouble. We got along with Woolner, but Weaver just decided that he felt that the thing would work better without a head, than it would with Woolner there.

McHUGH: What do you think his difficulty was, in your opinion.

SEMER: I don't think I'll ever know. Well, actually, I think Woolner would probably

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be the best guide on this. That particular program was one – I think in the entire Kennedy Administration, and as a matter of fact the whole Kennedy-Johnson era, probably more money was put out in a shorter period of time, with fewer people and no scandal of any comparable program. Something like a billion dollars was put out in public works projects, which was pregnant with possibilities of scandals and never a scandal.

McHUGH: If we could backtrack for a minute: did you work at all on the President's message on housing? Were you involved in that?

SEMER: Oh, yes. I used to work on all of those things. But those are the usual bureaucratic mosaics. We did an awful lot of work for the White House in connection with those field trips, the White House conferences,

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in the fall of '61.

McHUGH: White House conference. Now, there was a move for a conference on urban problems?

SEMER: Well, that thing never came about. The White House was too sophisticated to go for that. But what they did in the fall of '61, was they sent out road teams to have meetings in the field, to talk about urban problems, to tell the story to the country about what the Kennedy Administration was doing.

McHUGH: Well, was this an alternative to having them congregate in Washington where the...

SEMER: In part. In part. You see, President Kennedy had a kind of no nonsense approach to administration, and he felt that a lot of White House conference, would be a waste of time. He also felt that he wanted to hold down the number of committees,

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commissions, interdepartmental things and so on. I think he probably would have come around to permitting more of that, as he approached the '64 election, because these have some propaganda value. And if all the mayors of the country are screaming for a White House conference, and you've got a year for your reelection, then you'll go ahead and do it. Sure. But in '61 and '62, he wanted to get a relatively lean operation.

McHUGH: Were any of the proposals that were made in the housing message.... Well, did any of them prove particularly controversial?

SEMER: Well, I think the one that was quite controversial, and now is more or less, taken as old hat, which was put through by the '61 bill, was supermarket interest lending, for middle income housing. That was quite a

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rough fight on the.... That was the one thing that was controversial, and we got it through.

McHUGH: Was that when you would have forty year low interest loans and no down payment?

SEMER: Well, there were two issues. One was the one for single family housing, where you'd have forty years and no down payment. That was compromised. I forget what the term was, and at what percent down. But that was really a lightning rod. Nobody takes that too seriously in the housing field, where you have no down, and ask 1 percent on it. The really controversial one was the middle income housing program, where you had submarket interest rates, with the Federal National Mortgage Association being a direct lender.

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McHUGH: That was not 221-D3 Housing, was it?

SEMER: Sure. It's in effect what is now 221-D3. Sure.

McHUGH: What they called moderate income housing.

SEMER: A low market interest rate and a submarket type of financing. You see, the precedent for that was college housing, which had a submarket rate, housing for the elderly, which had a submarket rate and community facilities, which had a submarket rate. Those three programs, were put through by the Democratic congressman, over the screaming opposition of the Eisenhower Administration. In '61 what had been suitable for colleges, college dorms, the elderly and community facilities, was now made available for residential construction. That was the big leap and that was the antecedent for what is now rent supplements and all these other

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subsidy programs. In many ways that fight in '61 was the big breakthrough for middle income housing. It led the way for, what is now subsidy programs, other than public housing for the poor people.

McHUGH: Were the opposition based on the fact that they saw this as the foot in the door, so to speak?

SEMER: Oh, sure. Well, a combination of just historically and ideologically opposed forces, against any government involvement in housing.

McHUGH: You had a lot of opposition, I believe, from both the National Association of

Real Estate Boards on that?

SEMER: Oh, yes. They always opposed us. But that was routine. I never paid much attention to it. The key was that we had the support of the home builders. Whenever you can

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split off the home builders from the realtors and the mortgage lenders, you have a pretty good chance of building a base in the Congress.

McHUGH: How did you slit them off? How was that done?

SEMER: Well, you just sit down with them and show them, that there's money in it for them. Here's a chance to increase housing production and when you increase housing production, they make money. They're always interested in additional federal programs, whenever there's a recession, which there was one in '60-'61.

McHUGH: And so by splitting them off, you were able to get it passed. I see. That's very interesting. At the time the President gave his message, did the proposal for

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Cabinet Status for the Department of Urban Affairs present.... At that time did anyone.... It was not controversial I presume when he gave the message. It later developed when...

SEMER: No. As a matter of fact, the notion of having a department of the urban interests and so on, came from the time of the Eisenhower Administration. Nelson Rockefeller at one time was for that, when he was in the Eisenhower Administration. What made that impossible, was the fact we had a Negro. The vote on that was just like a vote on open occupancy.

McHUGH: If Weaver had not been indicated to be the head of the proposed department, do you think the bill would have had a good chance of passing them?

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SEMER: I wouldn't say a good chance, but it would have been in the ball park. I think that probably the way we would have played it, is to revise the Nelson Rockefeller image, and try to build some kind of bipartisan base, and get some Republican support. I think we probably could have put it through. But again, we lost by such a large margin, it's awfully hard to say.

McHUGH: There was some opinion that the handling of that had been bungled. Did you feel that that was so?

SEMER: Well, there's an old adage in this town, "When you win them, you're a hero and when you lose them you're a bum." And when you win them your strategy and tactics were brilliant, and when you lose them, "My God, you made more mistakes and you were just a ham handed, inept amateur." Actually, what

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happened was -- and this is where the President had to make a tough decision -- we first submitted it as a proposal, which would go through the regular procedure on the Hill, and it was knocked out by the Rules Committee. At that point, you could either forget it, or you could accept the challenge. So he accepted the challenge, by sending up a sudden death reorganization bill.

McHUGH: When you say sudden death, what do you mean?

SEMER: Well, what that means is you send up a reorganization bill and the clock begins to run. And it either becomes a law, or somebody offers a resolution of disapproval when you vote on it.

McHUGH: I think Senator Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall] said, at the time, that Kennedy was violating the traditions of the Senate when that, I think, when Mansfield sought to have that discharged from McClellan's Committee.

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SEMER: I think that's correct. That's correct and irrelevant, because he knew he had a vote coming up in the House, in which we were going to get licked, so the question was could we get any kind of a vote in the Senate? And this was '62. There was an election coming up, although I don't think that was the dominant influence. But you try to salvage as much as possible. One of the things you do, when you get licked is try to put your opposition on the record, make them stand up and be counted.

McHUGH: Some people said that the Republicans hoped to dull some of the edge or the glamor of the Kennedy Administration. Do you think there was anything to that?

SEMER: Well, I think what happened is when the President sent that up as a reorganization plan, the die was cast and it became a race

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issue, rather than a good government issue, because the vote in the Rules Committee was a race vote. People divided, as if it was a civil rights bill, so the President figured, "Okay, if it's a civil rights bill, we'll play it that way." In other words if you are going to lose, lose my way, not your way.

McHUGH: I'd like to ask you a few questions on the '61 housing bill if I may go back to that.

SEMER: Actually, my favorite bill in the Kennedy Administration was the accelerated public works bill.

McHUGH: Why was that?

SEMER: Well, because I think that, that was one of the best programs ever administered by the Kennedy Administration. A very interesting aspect of it is, that the Congress delegated it

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to the President, not to a department. It was run out of the White House. I had this on hearsay, from Larry O'Brien, that when the President had to send the civil rights bill up in '63, Larry O'Brien tells me that the President remarked to him, that the existence of the accelerated public works bill in its administrative problem -- and the way we administered it -- is the only way he had to keep the lines of communication open with the South because this was one of the Southerners' favorite bills. The way we administered that is we escalated all of the pressure on the Administration from the regional offices to the bureaucracy, into the White House, so that if a congressman wanted a project for his district, he had to call the White

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House. This, as a matter of fact, now that I think of it, is one of the reasons why Sid Woolner left, because he didn't want to play it that way. Because this, in effect, undercut his authority to run an independent operation. But as I used to tell Sid constantly, I said, "Look, we are White House operators. We are not presidential appointees. But that's a technical Civil Service matter. You came in through the political circuit. I came in through the political circuit. I came in through the congressional circuit. It is our responsibility to make the President look as good as possible." Now, you have very, very short rations of money. Oh, it eventually became about a billion dollars. The demand for that money was many times that. How do you ration money? You ration it politically, and as objectively

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as possible to stay out of trouble. So Jack Conway and I disciplined the whole bureaucracy, so that if there was going to be any political pressure, the political pressure could not succeed at the lower echelons. It could work only by calling the White House. So even though a politician helped that regional technician get his job, that regional technician couldn't deliver. So I remember getting these fellows together and saying "I'll make a deal with you. I will protect you, the technician in the bureaucracy, and will not ask you to do anything, other than your job. I don't want you to approve a project that's not approvable. In exchange for that, you stay out of politics. Don't you decide, on a political basis, that it should go into this district or that district."

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Larry O'Brien and Henry Wilson, Mike Manatos, Conway, myself and some of the people from Congress -- because there were more than one agency involved -- we would sit down, and we would allocate these funds, in consultation with congressmen, senators, and so on. I have laid down the challenge to the Budget Bureau, many times, at Brookings Institution meetings, and even when I was still in the bureaucracy, "You show me a program, whether you use PPBS [Program Planning and Budget System] or some computer, where the result was more rational and objective and impartial, than what the politicians did in deciding to allocate scarce resources, and still stay out of trouble politically. But the political plus, was not that we bought votes here or bought votes there, but President Kennedy's

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statement to Larry O'Brien, that this kept the lines of communication open to the South, when he had to start to move on that civil rights bill. That's why that was my favorite program.

McHUGH: Well, that's certainly a very interesting story.

SEMER: And that's the way I think administration ought to be conducted. But I'm in a very small minority, and practically a vanishing minority, on that.

McHUGH: Why did the proposal on urban open space appear in the President's message, but not in the original bill? Was there any reason for that?

SEMER: Let me see if I can recollect. It was in the President's message?

McHUGH: Yes. He did ask for a reservation. He wanted to reserve lands for use in the future, as parks and so forth. I think perhaps

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Senator Williams [Harrison Williams] was connected with it.

SEMER: If my memory is correct, it's because Senator Sparkman felt he'd father not handle it as an Administration proposal.

McHUGH: Oh, really?

SEMER: Yes. There was also another one, which is the land bank.

McHUGH: Well, I think that may be what it was , actually, the land bank.

SEMER: I think open space went up, but the land bank did not. And that was to Senator Sparkman's request to me, in my persuading the people at the White House, let's leave it out.

McHUGH: Why did Sparkman feel that was particularly....

SEMER: Because we'd made a run on that. Somebody had lobbied it into consideration, and we didn't even come close to having the votes

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on it. It just caused more grief and Sparkman got clobbered in '60, for promoting socialism and federalized land and all that sort of thing. And it still isn't, well, pieces of it are part of the law. But this is the notion, that you have a federal land bank. Now the open space thing which is part of the law now, I'd have to look at my notes, as to whether or not Senator Sparkman or Albert Rains or the two of them had asked us to hold it out and they'd arrange to get it in, because as it turned out there was a trade off in the Senate House conference, where the Senate had mass transit, the House had open space, and they took the two of them.

McHUGH: I see. Was there any feelings that that was something that perhaps ought to be handled by Interior rather than HHFA?

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SEMER: Oh yes. There was the usual hassling with Interior. Once it got into the law, it went on and on and on, probably still going on, as to how you cut up that jurisdictional pie, as between the Interior Department and the Housing department, and I frankly don't know how it's going now.

McHUGH: Do you know, at the time, why they decided to give it to HHFA? Do you have any recollection of that?

SEMER: Simply because we were ready to move on it, I think. Interior was an older

bureaucracy. As a matter of fact, HHFA during the Kennedy Administration, was acting like a young bureaucracy and not an old one. That's why I say with some, oh, I suppose some immodesty, that we were able to lick the Commerce Department on mass transit, and the Interior Department on open space without

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any trouble. Weaver ran a very personalized administration on legislation. He'd been badly burnt, on his confirmation. So far as the Banking and Currency Committee which authorized legislation it was very tightly controlled. But then as I said earlier, he just practically turned over the whole appropriations circuit -- or, just let the bureaucracy run the appropriations circuit -- which, at the time, wasn't as important, because so much of it was so-called back door financing. Now, practically all of it is Appropriations Committee.

McHUGH: Was there much trouble getting the four year authorization?

SEMER: No. Not at all.

McHUGH: One of the things, of course, as you mentioned....

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SEMER: Well, the reason that it wasn't hard to get is, because it isn't that important.

McHUGH: Well, it was important to the Mayors, I think.

SEMER: Well, but they sort of exaggerate.

McHUGH: I think some planners felt that it was difficult to plan in the future if you never know...

SEMER: Well, at the time certainly the planners felt.... But now they are so gutted with planning money, that they don't know what to do with it. It's not so much of an issue, now.

McHUGH: You mentioned that the stroke of the pen statement, became an albatross around Kennedy's neck, can you say, generally, who was bringing pressure to have him do something about that. Were you aware....

SEMER: The Negro leadership and the liberals generally.

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There was this National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing.

McHUGH: Can you name any names of people that were particularly vociferous?

SEMER: The National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing. Algernon Black and, of course, the Negro leaders.

McHUGH: Where did Weaver stand? You said that Waver was being a good administrator and not bothering the White House, but where did he stand on that?

SEMER: Oh, he was for it. He was for a much broader executive order, than the one that was signed. You see, the one that was signed applied o FHA and VA [Veterans Administration] there wasn't any question about being able to cover conventional...

McHUGH: You mean savings and loans?

SEMER: If it was savings and loans, but the question

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came up with regard to loans made by commercial banks. In a conference with the late Bobby Kennedy when he was Attorney General, we were all over in his office. By that time, President Kennedy had just dumped the whole thing on Bobby's lap. The question came up, as to assuming that there is no legal problem in connection with savings and loan -- that was fairly clear as a matter of law -- if there was some legal doubt about the commercial banks, then it was a question of what the FDIC [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation] would do. At the time, it was felt that the Kennedy Administration, may not have the votes in the FDIC, and so it was decided, and as I remember Bobby saying, "This isn't a question for the lawyers, this is a question as to whether we've got the votes in the FDIC."

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So once it was decided that it was too hazardous, to risk submitting this to the FDIC, and be turned down, because there were holdovers in the FDIC, then it was decided that if you can't include the commercial banks, well don't include the savings and loan either, because it would be discriminatory against savings and loan, because they're conventional. I think that decision was bad and I told Bobby that.

McHUGH: How do you think it have been...

SEMER: I think the risk should have been taken and I think we should have covered them all, and just not forced the showdown with the FDIC. In other words, a

kind of a soft sell approach to the bureaucracy. But since the whole thing was pretty much a matter of presidential exhortation, initially, and without the prospect

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of any massive administrative, or investigatory or enforcement effort being launched, in the short term. I felt it should have been across the board. But that was basically, a matter of legal judgment. I felt that all the -- all conventional could be included, and I think it's been born out since although they've taken the legislative leads, of course, instead of the administration.

McHUGH: How did the White House staff stand on this? Were they for issuing you? For instance, Lee White, what was his position? Do you know?

SEMER: I don't recall. You'd have to ask Lee. I know I made a very strong argument in favor of covering it all, because I felt, granted it would be discriminatory against one conventional sector, as against another. It was discriminatory against the savings and loan, vis-a-vis the commercial banks. But the

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greatest discrimination of all, would be to cover just the A in FHA, because there's a certain breed of builders and mortgage lenders, that deal just with the FHA and VA, and that was a minority portion of the market.

McHUGH: How did Neal Hardy feel about this?

SEMER: He wanted to go across the board.

McHUGH: Oh, he did.

SEMER: Especially. Oh, sure, because his orientation was to the building industry, and he saw this discriminating against some and letting others just have a free ride.

McHUGH: Oh, yes. Charles Abrams, at that time, made a statement that the housing order would cover only 13 percent of housing. Was that...

SEMER: Yes. Let's see. VA and FHA together, it was about one out of six. That's close

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enough. That's close enough.

McHUGH: They said also, that you would be asked to use your good offices, to further

prevent discrimination...

SEMER: Well, we tried, and especially when Mayor Lawrence [David L. Lawrence] came in.

McHUGH: How did you try?

SEMER: Exhortation.

McHUGH: I see. Did you get anywhere?

SEMER: Oh, little bits and pieces. But the key to the whole housing field, at least in Weaver's mind, was increasing production, so that you had, much more choice, because to Weaver, and certainly to an awful lot of other people, housing discrimination is something quite difficult to plumb, because it's not like being able to use a john in a public building, which may or may not cost you a dime, but to enjoy a non-discriminatory housing

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opportunity, you have to be able to have enough money, to buy a house or to rent a house. So Weaver, as an economist, always felt the problem was, as much, if not more, economic than it was social.

McHUGH: Where did you try exhortation?

SEMER: The big builders and when Mayor Lawrence came in, we made a big drive in the Washington area principally with Bill Levitt. Bill Levitt had started Blair. His argument was, "Unless everybody does it, I'm not going to do it."

McHUGH: And he stuck with that position.

SEMER: That's right. That's right.

McHUGH: Could you tell me, generally, what your relations with other Departments were? The Department of Commerce for instance. You said you had...

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SEMER: Well, we had friendly, competitive relations because of the mass transit thing. Had very good relations with Interior because Udall [Stewart L. Udall] came from the Hill and I got very well acquainted with his people. As a matter of fact, I got well acquainted with all of them, because for the '62 election we set up a network of subCabinet people to work on the campaign, and I was the HHFA representative in that

group. They used to meet every Wednesday morning, and had scrambled eggs over at the National Committee.

McHUGH: What were your relations with HEW? They had a role, for instance, in I think nothing but public housing.

SEMER: No. The HEW role emerged much later. HEW and HHFA should have gotten together years ago. Except for a minor liaison they had in connection with college housing and

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construction, had no mix at all.

McHUGH: I thought that they, at that time, were going to try to provide some social services in public housing.

SEMER: That matter was fought in the Senate in the spring of '58 and the Democrats lost in trying to get some funding for social services.

McHUGH: How were your relations with Justice? You were dealing with them on the executive order.

SEMER: Well, I was dealing with Justice on the executive order, dealing with Justice because some of the old campaigners were there like the Attorney General himself and also dealing with Justice through the compliance network.

McHUGH: How much litigation was undertaken on that compliance?

SEMER: Well, Justice used to litigate for us.

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We used to have about eighteen hundred compliance cases a year that came up through the HHFA circuit of which about four hundred were....

McHUGH: Actionable.

SEMER: Actionable. So that was a regular liaison with the Justice Department.

McHUGH: How many of those four hundred cases were you able to handle successfully?

SEMER: Well, in a way they were all successfully resolved one way or another. My attitude always was, "Let's resolve it as administratively, if possible, and stay

out of court.” That’s the kind of lawyer I am. We took a few to court, but nothing came out of HHFA- in the WEaver years, that he was with Kennedy, that caused everybody any worry. We did our work. I don’t think anything was ever swept under the rug. We had no scandal.

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When I say cases four hundred out of eighteen hundred were important, we’d move in on them and handle them quite quickly, then usually by negotiating out a solution with some sponsor of a project. In most of those cases some underling would get a principal in trouble and there would be an investigation.

McHUGH: Were there much congressional involvement in any of these cases that were sent to the Justice Department?

SEMER: Not really. As a guy who came from the Congress, I was never intimidated by a congressional call.

McHUGH: Were there any particularly significant cases that you care to comment on?

SEMER: None at all. Nothing really major. They were sort of routine. You could have

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built them up, but we just called the sponsor, and settled it and get it out of the way because nobody was ever stealing anything from the government. People were just breaking rules. [Laughter]

McHUGH: Interesting distinction.

SEMER: Well, without costing the government any money. I think I ought to explain that, if this is going into eventually the public record. There would be a rule that in order to finance the equity on a project, a sponsor had to do it a certain way. But he wouldn’t do it a certain way, he’d do it some other way. The dollars and cents result would be exactly the same. So we’d call him in and say, “Do it the other way.” Chances are, the rule never should have been there in the first place.

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McHUGH: Well, do you have any concluding comments that you care to make particularly?

SEMER: No. Not particularly. I enjoyed those years not more than the so-called Johnson years, but whenever you’ve been in the wars you always remember

the good things and you forget the bad things. I don't think that Weaver has turned out to be a very good administrator, although I think I can imagine a lot of people who have been worse. The Kennedy notion of having a department.... It may be that he might have given it more urban emphasis, but it's hard to say. An awful lot of people that came into the Johnson Administration, tried to give it more urban emphasis as distinguished from housing. What they have finally come around to the conclusion that the greatest

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contribution they could make is to get some housing built, for the poor folks. So you're right back where you started from.

McHUGH: Well, thank you very much for your time, Mr. Semer.

SEMER: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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