

N. Thompson Powers Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 5/26/1982
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Biographical Note

N. Thompson Powers (1930-2007) worked for the United States Labor Department as deputy solicitor and special assistant to Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz from 1961 to 1965 and was Acting Executive Director of the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1965. This interview focuses on the internal operations of the Labor Department and Powers' time on the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee and the Labor Management Committee, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

Of

N. Thompson Powers

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Oral History Interview

with

N. Thompson Powers

May 26, 1982
Washington, DC

By Sheldon M. Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don't I first ask you about the background of your appointment as Assistant to Undersecretary Wirtz [Willard Wirtz]. I was wondering, first, for example, if you had had any role in the 1960 campaign, which was often a....

POWERS: Yeah, yes I had. I worked in President Kennedy's benefit, first in, well in Maryland [INTERRUPTION]... and then, after the Convention, I worked, had a partial leave of absence from the firm to work at State Headquarters in Maryland. I ran the Speakers' Bureau for the State and ran a pilot registration project for the National Committee, for Frank Thompson [Frank Thompson, Jr.], and was involved from August until the election, and wanted very much to come in the Administration and.... I had not known Willard Wirtz before. I had met him once when we were both at the National Committee on speakers' matters. He was concerned about Governor, he was handling Governor Stevenson's [Adlai ^{E.} Stevenson] schedule in the '60 campaign, and I was over trying to coordinate things for the Maryland Committee. But, Archie Cox [Archibald Cox], who had been my labor law professor at Harvard, and who knew Bill Wirtz well, and with whom I talked about my interest in getting into the government, recommended me to Wirtz

and that's how I was hired.

STERN: Uh-huh.

POWERS: By Wirtz .

STERN: I see. So, that was the first time you ever met him?

POWERS: Really, yes, other than this one encounter at the National Committee during the campaign.

STERN: Okay, now, could you describe exactly what you were hired to do for Wirtz ~~and~~ and how you got into both the Labor Management Advisory Policy Committee and then the Equal Employment Opportunity, the thing on the other side?

POWERS: Sure, Well, an assistant does whatever the his principal needs to ^{have} ~~be~~ done, and at that point, we had I came to work the sixth of March, I think ^{it} ~~it~~ was, about six weeks after the administration began. At ^{abt} that point, there were the Secretary, the Undersecretary, ^{Reynolds} ~~Reynolds~~ [James J. Reynolds], Holloman [J. Herbert Holloman] from Texas, were Assistant Secretaries; Donahue [Charles Donahue] was the Solicitor, Esther Peterson ~~4~~ _____ ~~4~~ was at that point, I think, head of Women's Bureau, and not an Assistant Secretary. Weaver [George L-P Weaver] was to become an Assistant Secretary but because of the ILO, George Lodge was held over , so Weaver was functioning in a somewhat different capacity. There was in addition Steve ^{Shulman} ~~Shuman~~ [Stephan. N. Shulman] who was Goldberg's [Arthur J. Goldberg] assistant, and that was all the political appointees. I was, I think, the next one of the.... but anyway, there were just a handful of people. It was loose and friendly and wonderful. There was just so many things to do. You'd be pulled from one thing to another. The first thing I had to do was to try to get the mail handled so that it wasn't such a burden on the Sec-

retary, well, first the Undersecretary and then the Secretary. You see, Goldberg generated tremendous amounts of mail. All of that stuff would be farmed out to the various Bureaus to answer. Their responses would come funneling in and the first central point was the Undersecretary's Office. You'd have literally two feet of mail a day to review, and a lot of it was just routine stuff. ^g someone wanted to know the unemployment rate in Scranton, and you'd send them the report or something like that. But, by the time I got there, Goldberg and Goldwater [Barry Goldwater] had had a debate and we were answering those things for the longest time. The ^{bureaucracy} beaurocracy had gotten used to answering certain things in a certain way. We wanted to put a little different twist on things, so we had to get those all, all of those things done. But, so that was sort of the routine job. And then meeting people, talking to them on behalf of the Secretary and then helping to, helping the Secretary or the Undersecretary, deal with the things that Goldberg was assigning him to do. Goldberg, talk about someone w hitting the ground running, I think Goldberg had gone up to New York and settled the strike before the Administration was even in office, and he was just constantly generating new things to do, so that it was just whatever you were asked to do. That's what I started out doing. And, in that job, the one spec, well, I picked up two specific responsibilities ^m and the year that I was Wirtz' assistant. One was to be the Labor Department representative on a series of White House regional conferences that were held. We, as I recall, we went to the eight or ten cities and we had three or four programs. One, was essentially employment program, one was a housing and urban development program, there was another one ^{that} the I think had to do with health and welfare issues,

and I can't recall the fourth one. But, there was a book and I had it somewhere that had it all laid out the ten cities that we went to. We organized the, organized the meetings and then organized the programs. I had responsibility in the department for the coordination. That began, I guess that ran from, we started planning that probably by May of '61. The last one was held late '61. Then I also became the department's representative in first drafting and then the initial legislative handling of the Trade Expansion Act of '62. The Department of Labor was quite interested in that, because of the Adjustment Assistance provisions. We in the Labor Department had responsibility for drafting the adjustment assistance provisions for workers, which were, I think it's fair to say, the more significant ones. Commerce was never quite able to put together a politically saleable program for adjustment assistance to firms, but our provisions were quite important, I think, first in getting, insuring Labor support, and then in getting support on the Hill. That was really, that was a fascinating process. We had, for a time what was known as the oldest established floating drafting session in Washington, which was presided over by Sheas[] from State, but we had Nick Katzenbach [Nicholas de B. Katzenbach] from, who was then legal council, Office of Legal Council at Justice, and Dave Manning [] who went on to be Dean of Stanford was Consultant to Commerce. And then, just the sessions on the Hill with Wilbur Mills [Wilbur D. Mills] and an Executive Session with Ways and Means that was just a great opportunity. Then I left Wirtz to become Deputy Solicitor in about March of '62, although I kept, I for a time stayed active on the, probably for about another six months on the Trade bill, and then we got a lawyer to specialize on the bill over on the Senate side, he took over. Then,

Wirtz became Secretary in September, I think, of '62*. He needed, well, Pat Moynihan [Daniel Patrick Moynihan] had been an assistant to Goldberg, but Pat took a leave to go back to assist ~~was it~~ Morganthau [Henry Morganthau, Jr.] that ran for Governor in New York ^{2/1/62} whoever it was, Pat took leave. Wirtz needed some additional help to, with Pat gone. John Donovan [John C. Donovan] was, had taken my place as Wirtz' assistant when he was Undersecretary. John was the Executive Assistant, I guess Pat ^{for a time} carried the ¹ title Executive Assistant....^e

STERN: Yes, he did. That's right.

POWERS: Although John really functioned, Pat was always the special ¹ kind of distinguished Special Assistants from Executive Assistants. An Executive Assistant did whatever needed to be done. The Special Assistant was more a project person.

STERN: Right.

POWERS: John was the Executive Assistant, in fact, and I came down to just help out ² on various things. One of the things that became clear was that Wirtz would be the Vice-Chairman of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], well, Lyndon Johnson had been Chairman as Vice-President....

STERN: Right.

POWERS: It wasn't clear how that was going to be handled from then until ^e until the election in '64*. There was a rather complex relationship between the Vice-President and the Secretary of Labor and the funding of the President's Committee. Without getting into all of that, the Committee needed help from the Labor Department and the Labor Department provided that. It was important that the Secretary have some people close to the running of that Committee that could keep him informed. It was

obviously important that the Vice-President or now the President have his people in key positions, too. Initially, Jerry Holloman, the Assistant Secretary had been, I guess, the Executive Vice-Chairman of the President's Committee ~~it was~~. The Vice-President was the Chairman, Goldberg was the Vice-Chairman, There was Holloman, the Assistant Secretary who was the Executive Vice-Chairman. There was a Civil Rights person with considerable Civil Rights experience named John Field [], Michigan Democratic Party who was Executive Director. Then, Hobart Taylor [], also from Detroit, was the Special Council. Taylor was Johnson's man, Holloman was Goldberg's man, Field was brought in because of his experience. Field eventually left, Holliman resigned, Goldberg put ~~Shulman~~ ^{Shulman} in as Executive Vice-Chairman, Taylor stayed as Special Council. When ~~Shulman~~ ^{Shulman} went to Defense, which was happening right ~~around~~ ^{about} the time that Goldberg was elevated to the Court and Wirtz became Secretary, it was decided that, Well, I'm a year ahead of the assassination, but in any event, it was decided that Taylor would become Executive Vice-Chairman, which opened up the Special Council's position. I recommended to the Secretary that he consider having me or someone else in the Solicitor's Office become Special Council and that we would provide the legal services for the President's Committee and it would give him a, it would keep him informed of what was going on on the Committee. I gather he talked to Hobart Taylor and they agreed that that's the way that that would be done. So, Moynihan came back, I went back up in the Solicitor's Office, but it was late Novemeber of '62* that I became Special Council for the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. That was to be sort of a part time job that turned out that

from then, certainly by the Spring of '63, that was my dominant responsibility. Even when I was Executive Assistant to the Secretary I think I probably spent as much time on the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity as anything else I did.

STERN: You stayed on that until 1965?

POWERS: Until 1965, until May when I went over to be Executive Director of the E.E.O.C.

STERN: Right. I wonder if you could say a little bit more, I know about one thing you mentioned briefly. I know that the Committee had problems with funding because of obvious Congressional opposition to the whole concept and that ^{essentially} departmental contributions were the key. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about the critical role of the Labor Department in that.

POWERS: Well, the Committee was housed in the Labor Department.

STERN: Right.

POWERS: Labor was, since we were there, I think there was a tendency for the Committee when it needed help on short time basis to talk to those of us that were working with them and see if we could help them out. It was my understanding, you probably heard this before, that there was an understanding between the Vice-President and Senator Russell [Richard B. Russell] that if the Committee did not utilize more funds than had the predecessor committees under President Eisenhower that there would be no question raised about it. Since there were, I think there had been a, it was my understanding that there was a general practice of putting a rider on appropriations bills. I think it may have been called the Russell Rider and may have started in '46 and led to the abolishment of the F.E.P. That no agency could continue to exist for more than one year, that did not have its own line item.

STERN: Right.

POWERS: Except, and there was some language, except that inter-agency Committees ~~we~~ that were, I guess, supposed to be sort of ad-hoc things that were set up for a couple of months or, I don't know how long. But, things ~~that~~ that would be set up where you'd get every agency to chip in, and that's the basis on which the President's Committee was funded. I don't, I never knew how the allocations were set, whether they were in terms of number of employees or I guess it would be more, well, it could, number of employees or number of contractors or whatever. Defense obviously had a bigger share of the money that they would contribute ~~to~~ to the President's Committee.

STERN: Of course, there was a natural problem in that Johnson as Vice-President didn't really have staff, not in the ^{sense} ~~way~~ that the Labor Department had staff.... [Inaudible]

~~STERN: [Inaudible]~~

POWERS: That's exactly right.

STERN: Right. So, and given Goldberg's obvious interest in the ~~in the~~ in the whole problem and Wertz after....

POWERS: Yeah.

STERN: So, it was natural that it would sort of fall to the Labor Department.

POWERS: Well, I think so. And I think on the whole it worked pretty well, because it's a tough situation you had, the Vice President's Office and his people and then there was the Labor Department interests. It developed that ~~the~~ the Justice Department under Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] became very interested and concerned and critical about the way things were being handled, particularly from, I would say, well, from the time, all during the time that I was there. Certainly through the spring and the summer of '63. And then Lee Wright []

was the Civil Rights contact in the White House and Lee had concerns of his own. There were just a lot of people looking and watching this particular pot boiling....

STERN: Right.

POWERS: And....

STERN: I heard an account of at least one meeting in which Robert Kennedy came and essentially....

POWERS: Picture right up here on the wall is, let me show you. I'll bring it over. This was during a meeting of the President's Committee. Wertz, the Vice-President, Hobart Taylor and ^{George Reedy.} ~~George Reed.~~ That's the way we always sat, and I think it was right at that time that Bob Kennedy was asking a question ~~and~~ ^{that} was very critical of the way the staff had been functioning on some compliance matter. He would come and ask a couple of very difficult questions and then leave. Wait to hear an initial response and then, and then be gone. I think it created a lot of concern. It was a time when I think people viewed Lyndon Johnson as nowhere near as aggressive and ^effective on Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity matters as he turned out to be.

STERN: Apparently, at least some of the eventual and substantial hostility between RFK and LBJ, ^e Certainly, I think it was generated by some of those incidents. I know I remember reading one account in which Johnson felt really quite humiliated by the way Kennedy came in and essentially accused him of incompetence and then left.

POWERS: I think we may be talking about the same meeting. It wasn't directed to Johnson personally, but it was, as the picture shows, the target was more Hobart Taylor and his administration. But, it was, Hobart was understood to be Johnson's man....

STERN: Right, which he was....

POWERS: Everyone had a sense, rightly or wrongly, that there was a, there were differences between the ~~Presi,~~ the Vice-President and the Senator, so you ~~it~~ it just added something to any disagreement that they had.

STERN: Yeah. What about the whole Troutman ^[Robert B. Troutman] business? Of the ~~plans~~ plans for ~~Progress?~~ Progress?

POWERS: That really was before, the Troutman part of it was before my time. th The person that you ought to talk to about that would be Steve ~~Show-~~ ^{Shulman} ~~men.~~ Shulman was the Executive Vice-Chairman during the initial recruitment of the ~~plans~~ plans for ~~Progress~~ Progress Companies. From the time I was involved, Hobart Taylor was the Executive Vice-Chairman. I think it's fair to say it was Hobart's view that, well I think Troutman made a significant contribution in enlisting companies.

STERN: Right.

POWERS: The question, that was what made me say they, maybe the mission of late '61* and early '62* or maybe most of '62*. But, by '63* it was clear that the question was going to be "What are these ~~plans~~ plans for ~~Progress~~ Progress companies to do?" or "What is the Government going to do with ~~plans~~ plans for ~~Progress?~~ Progress?" There was criticism that it was a, oh, it was just a cloak that companies were wrapping around themselves and they ~~issue~~ ~~plans~~ ^{plans} for progress and then they wouldn't do anything. Did this mean they were going to get favored treatment and were they going to be subjected to less review than others, and so forth. I don't think, I suppose that ~~if~~ Bob Troutman had been asked to come up, to design the next stage, maybe he could have done it. I didn't work with him ~~enough~~ enough to know whether he could or not, but, in any event, he wasn't asked to do that, or he didn't do it. Hobart, I thought came up with a very effective program for that time, for getting companies set

up this advisory council. He got Bill Miller []
of Textron to be the first Chairman, He got five companies to loan
an executive for a year. He started trying to hold meetings and coord-
^{no}~~inate~~ things. Now, by the standards of the last ten years, it may
look kind of tame, but back at that point, it was, companies were do-
ing more and I think one thing it really did was it built a climate
of opinion that I think contributed a lot to business not being more
resistant to the Equal Employment Opportunity, to Title 7, than they
would have been otherwise. I'd add that I think those of us involved
had no idea that Title 7 would be interpreted as it has been. But, in
any event, that's , I really can't tell you much about Troutman.

STERN: Right. The, the record certainly seems to show that some of the
companies did, to use your words, sort of cloak themselves in it,
and claim, for example, a 100% increase in black employment which
meant going from one to two...~~e~~

POWERS: Oh, sure.

STERN: ^{or} Going from five to ten. Whatever, but there were other examples that
were quite impressive, and on the whole, Kennedy himself, the President
himself, ^{had done} thought Troutman did a good job. That it had been a substan-
tial ~~step~~ forward.

POWERS: I think it was a very good step at that time. It was a way to bring
these companies into association with the President and the Vice-Pres-
ident and the idea of equal employment opportunity. ^{To} get the chief
executive officers of these companies committed, that race discrimina-
tion was not ^{to} be the policy of that company. We didn't really know what
affirmative action was, and we're still trying to figure that out. ^{But} At
least these companies were committing themselves that they would take,

they'd go beyond simply not discriminating in some ways to try to promote opportunities for blacks.

STERN: Right. And, there were, as I say, some very substantial successes.

What about the whole issue of employment within the government itself?
Were you involved in that at all?

POWERS: Not very much. I guess as one of things that President Kennedy did in his Executive Order was combine the, the Eisenhower Committees on Government Contract and Federal Employment into a single committee. We did have, it got us a fair amount of attention, well, as the lawyer for the President's Committee, I don't recall spending much time at all on that. The big issues that we addressed were plans for progress and what was going to be required of companies to comply with, the initial order was 10925. Construction was a major, major concern. Building trades, because we had no, the Executive Order never was interpreted, ^{as applying} directly to Unions, even though you can make the argument that certainly a building trade union is an agent of the contractor, and you could develop the theory, but we never did that.

STERN: And they turned out to be one of the most resistant, the construction union.

POWERS: Well, they, yeah, I think we spent a lot of time in '63, beginning when ^{Stoakley} Stoakley Carmichael [] was leading the picketing of the addition being put on the Howard University gym. It was essentially all white mechanical trades, and Carmichael and other young students said, you know, "not here, not at Howard, not in Washington, not on a federal project". We got some cooperation from the building trades but federal office building projects remained a lightning rod for Civil Rights issues, at least as long as I was in the government, and I suspect it was a few more years ^{there} after while the Philadelphia

plan was....

STERN: Right. How about black employment in terms of, particularly the higher GS ranks? JFK had asked for a report early in the administration and the results were shocking. I even have some examples here. There were only five blacks in GS 18 rank in the entire government. 48 out of 13, 600 in the FBI, 15 out of more than 3700 in the Foreign Service. [Inaudible]

POWERS: I know. I remember, I used to have a good friend who was working for Bob Kennedy in the Justice Department. He would call me occasionally to ask why we weren't [Inaudible]... and I'd say, "Well, we're working on it, just as you are ^{on} and the FBI". That would... the government was then and, I suppose, is now and probably ever will be to some extent ^a ~~the~~ series of organizations within organizations. Depending on the personal force and competence and traditions, some of these bureaus change very slowly. Some of them probably should change ~~very~~ slowly. The Bureau of Labor Statistics considered itself sort of an island of purity and, in a sea of politics. BLS has, I think, always been somewhat resistant to the desires of the political appointees to get information that they can use, that hasn't been run through that five year process that BLS wants to do. I remember one time Wirtz was going to Geneva for a textile negotiation and we were just trying to get him some data that he could use. I kept calling and saying "Look, we've got to have more information, better information", and [?] Clague who was the Commissioner finally came up and said "Mr. Secretary, we can't, we can't provide you with anything else. There's nothing else we're willing to stand behind". The Secretary said, "So, I'm going to go with nothing. I ^{don't} won't have anything." He said, "I'm sorry". You know,

they just felt so strongly that they didn't want to be ever in a position of giving data that hadn't been fully checked out that they just didn't provide anything.

STERN: Yeah. I think you're right, particularly about specific bureaus. Although a lot will depend on the kind of leadership generated from the White House.

POWERS: Oh, sure.

STERN: No doubt about that.

POWERS: Well, and that certainly isn't meant as ^{an} ~~as~~ excuse for the, for the very low representation of blacks in the government. It was just a period when before the government had really faced up to that problem.

STERN: Few people, until recently, are beginning to see, just as sort of a side note, that President Carter made, I think, extraordinary advances in this area.

POWERS: Oh, I think that's so.

STERN: In some ways perhaps more than any other President. And may in the long run be one of the things he will get most credit for.

POWERS: Of course, it was, in a sense, he had the benefit of fifteen years of preparation. So, you really can't turn those things on overnight, I don't think, but that doesn't mean a lot more couldn't have been done, certainly if you go out and look as I think we did when we sent out the EOC.

STERN: Yeah.

POWERS: We had three ? teams, and two of them were filled initially with blacks. Blacks were two of the first five Commissioners. But, there also, we had a couple of years and it was somewhat easier then. It's a combination of availability and looking and knowing people. Someone in the Kennedy administration once to me, "We appoint the best people we know, but the best people we know are people we know".

STERN: (Laughs) That's a great line. I wonder if ^{you} we just, before we move on to the Labor Management thing, you mentioned affirmative action a couple of minutes ago. *Harris Walker* told me that in many ways, affirmative action really had its origins here. He mentioned, for example, that the Committee acted on about six hundred complaints in less ^{than} that, in about its first nine or ten months. In what amounted to affirmative action, although obviously the definition of the term was to come later. There's some dispute as to who coined the term - whether it was Johnson or John Donovan thinks he did, by the way, but that's another issue.

POWERS: I think you'll find that the term was written into the Executive Order 10925, which was issued in March of 1961. I think that Hobart was my source of most of this information, but I think Shulman and Goldberg were also, and Hobart's dead now. (Inaudible) But, one of the things that they wanted to do, and Hobart was a great one for finding a felicitous or less controversial term, was get away from FEP, because Equal Employment Opportunity had a better ring to it. Opportunity was a big word at that time. Equal, of course, ^{is hard to oppose, although you'd think} think fair wouldn't be objectionable either, but, in any event, the other term, affirmative action, I think was my sense of it, and I don't know who coined it, but it was, I guess, part of that Kennedy administration view ^{"we ought to} where you get something more. "That people shouldn't just be passive, they shouldn't just stop. Wirtz used to talk about ^{it} in terms of you're not just putting up stop signs, you're trying to put up green lights, you're trying to encourage people to take action and promote things. The issue really came to the fore, not I think in handling complaints, but when we, the time I remember was when ^{were} we dealing with the building trades and spent a long time in '63 trying to develop standards for determining

contractor compliance. I can remember that almost as if it was yesterday, because we ^{id} talked to the contractors and the contractors ^{would} said, "Look, we just take the workers from the building trades". We'd say, "You've got a responsibility, it's your job", and they'd say, "Well, you've got to work with the building trades". And the building trades would say, "What do you want us to do? What do you want us to do? We're hiring on the basis of merit". So, we tried to say, "Well, this is what we want you to do". It came out sort of as an option. "We want you either to hire on the basis of fair standards that are unobjectionable, which would mean that you wouldn't just ^{simply} hire sons or nephews. Or, we want you to demonstrate by the selections you make that you're providing equal opportunity". They'd say "What do you mean by that? Is that a quota?" We'd "Oh, no, it's not a quota, it's not a quota". "Well, what is, when is it enough". "Well, it's a significant number". "Well, what's a significant number?" and all of that. We were trying to skirt around saying you've got to have x out of y, but suggest that to some extent the measures should be, you know, it was sort of a results orientation. But this was back in '63, before there was a Title 7. A time when any kind of statistical task would have just been anathema. I wrote an article in '64 that was in Modern Contemporary Problems and I said something really very bland about what affirmative action was. It certainly ^{we} hadn't given it, and would have rejected the notion that it should have the kind of ^{percentage} ~~percentage~~ task that was ultimately contained in the Philadelphia Plan, although we groping towards something like that in these standards that we never were able to get formally approved by the President's Committee. We had it up for one meeting, but the AFL-CIO had some concerns about it. I think Lyndon Johnson was still Vice-President then. He decided to hold it over for another

meeting. He just never, you know, it never got ? and acted on.

STERN: Okay, unless you have anything to add on that, I'd like to move over to the Labor Management Committee.

POWERS: Sure.

STERN: It's clear from the material that we have at the Library that the idea for the Labor Management Committee basically originated in the Labor Department. It seems that it was Goldberg's idea and almost from the start you could see that there were a number of people, such as Walter Heller [] and ~~Ann~~ Douglas Dillon [] who didn't like the idea for obvious reasons and objected to the scope, the intended scope, of the whole committee. Eventually, of course you know, that it had seven labor, seven management and five public members. The first meeting in March, at the White House, with JFK. When did you get involved exactly, that was hard for me to find. I'm looking through the material. Although, eventually, I discovered that you had a title Executive Secretary in October of '63.

POWERS: Yeah. I think that's probably when I became directly involved. The pattern was that it moved back and forth between Commerce and Labor. The Chairmanship rotated. It's a Committee that I had been interested in because I had been a labor lawyer before, and the idea was attractive. Goldberg had talked about it a lot, and Wirtz was personally identified with it, and it was his background, arbitration....

STERN: Was it ?

POWERS: Well, I stopped being Deputy Solicitor in the fall of '63 and became back down to work as an Assistant in Wirtz' office as a Special Assistant. One of my specific functions was to be Executive Secretary of the President's Advisory Committee because it was then coming back to Labor

and one of the great things that I got out of it, I remember I think Dave Burke [] told me, when I was talking to about it him, because Dave had been connected while I was over at Commerce, and I said, "Well, tell me about the job", and he said, "Well, one of the things that will happen to you is you'll get the best secretary in government". And, I did. A woman named Cora Holland [] who had been secretary over there and she moved with the Committee. ~~She~~ She then moved with me to be Executive ^{Assistant} Secretary to Wirtz and she was later George Shultz' personal secretary when he was first Secretary of Labor and then , but in any event. I got involved about October ~~of~~. One of the things that we begin planning very early was a series of meetings to, you know, I have a feeling that somehow I had some role on behalf of Wirtz with the Committee earlier. ^{when} But, it was at Commerce....

BEGIN TAPE I SIDE II

STERN: Well, that's earlier. That's right, that was earlier.

POWERS: I had a role in that. Maybe it was only that Wirtz had a responsibility and he asked me for a recommendation. Well, in any event, I volunteered to him that Derek Bok , who had been a classmate of mine at law school, was out at Los Angeles. I think this would have been fall of '62, was out at Los Angeles at UCLA on a sabbatical. I thought Derek would be a good one to get to do a study. Wirtz knew Bok and thought very highly of him. So, we or he, someone talked to Derek and Derek said he'd write the paper. The paper was produced, there was sort of two papers, one of them was strictly Derek's work and ^{I think} the other there was a lot of BLS participation. Those papers were completed and

then we were going to use those papers as the basis for a series of meetings, three meetings that we were gonna have. We ultimately had those meetings in the spring, I guess the spring of '64. We had one at Los Angeles, one at Chicago, and one, ~~that~~ ^{at Wharton} one, Pennsylvania. We, I guess the first one was to be Chicago, and never forget it, we were to meet to discuss that on Friday afternoon that the President was in Dallas. George Schultz had come into town to meet with Jim Reynolds and Dave Burke and me. We got, we didn't have lunch together, we all came back to the Department for this two o'clock meeting and that was the first that any of us heard about the assassination, about the shooting. We assembled in Reynold's office. We knew the President was very badly hurt and we were just waiting for more word and I remember Jim saying "Maybe it would make it easier if we try to talk about what we came here to talk about." He turned to George Schultz and said, "George, what are your thoughts?" I've never seen a man try harder to think in response to a question. He thought a minute and said, "I just really can't focus", or something like that, "on the subject at this time." A minute later the word came through that the President was dead and we all just split. We did hold the meeting out in Chicago and as I say one George Taylor sponsored session at ^{Wharton} Werton and then there was a third....

STERN: He was on the committee....

POWERS: He was on the committee.

STERN: Right.

POWERS: And the third [?] who was a close friend of Bill Wirtz and active in this field, he organized the meeting for us at UCLA. So, that was one of the principle functions that we had in that year.

STERN: I see. So, then you, during the earlier period the, you didn't have any particular role in any of the subcommittees of the...;

POWERS: Well, I think I do know that I had that role in getting the ^{Doc} report commissioned. I recall going to a meeting of the President's Committee when President Kennedy was the President and Dave and I sat at the, well I guess October, it could have been October '63. We also did a report, or at least completed a report on pension.

STERN: Oh, yeah, that was one of the big issues, ^g the funding of pensions.

POWERS: Yeah.

STERN: Right.

POWERS: I ~~remember~~, I think that must have been at the time when I was functioning more as an Executive Assistant or Special Assistant. It was just something that others were working on and I was ~~just~~ just trying to keep the paper moving and following up on things but not involved with the details. I certainly don't have any strong sense of what the issues were.

STERN: What about the personalities. Do you recall, for example, conflicts between ^{Meany and Reuther} on the committee or ^{Meany} and Henry Ford?

POWERS: No, I didn't see that. In my year, the year I was Executive Secretary, I don't know how many meetings were held and I think a lot of it from the time ^{that} Johnson became President, these things, I think, maybe it was just that by that time people had sort of gotten to know each other, the positions were defined. I don't recall the President's Committee being the same kind of, well, the same kind of controversy on it that I had seen on the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities. The Advisory Committee may have been going through that same process back in early '63 but I just ~~wasn't~~ wasn't conscious. I wouldn't be at all

surprised if John Donovan may have been following that for the Secretary....

STERN: Yes, he did.

POWERS: In '62, '63.

STERN: Right.

POWERS: That would, because I don't, I just don't recall having been involved in that. The President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities was the thing I was closer with at that time.

STERN: The Labor Management Advisory Committee issued a number of very significant reports. One of the biggest was on the issue of technological unemployment, which I think it would be fair to say now was an exaggerated issue, *possibly in* the early '60's for a number of reasons. Some of those did carry over into the Johnson period, some of the, the pension funding issue, for example, did carry over.

POWERS: Well, I recall that having been an issue. I recall someone having noted, I forget who it was, that it was one of those interesting issues where the splits were not labor-management, but were, you get Taylor and was Dobinski [*David Dobinsky*] on the Committee?

STERN: Yes, he was.

POWERS: Taking one position on funding, and MacDonald and Block and some of the other big industry people taking another position and it was sort of a have-have not kind of split. So, the split was by industry rather than by interest.

STERN: Yeah. The other big part of that, as I recall, was the ^aportability issue.

POWERS: Yeah, the funding.

STERN: The issue of taking it with you from one place to another and not losing it.

POWERS: Funding was the issue where the, I gather that the, the marginal industries just really didn't feel that they could fund....

STERN: Did you have any connection at all with a committee's efforts to recommend changes in the emergency provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act?

Do you recall that at all?

POWERS: I don't....

STERN: You don't.

POWERS:think I did.

STERN: Do you feel generally that such committees work, large committees of that kind, particularly when you have these ^{very} prominent public personalities. Do they really do the work, do they have staffs that do the work for them. How effective do you feel these things are?

POWERS: Are you talking about the Advisory....

STERN: In this case, the Advisory Committee, yeah.

POWERS: Well, I guess one of the interesting things that they did was, I believe it was their policy that only the principle, only the person appointed could come, that you couldn't send a deputy.

STERN: That's right.

POWERS: I think that, a lot depends on who you get and what kind of, how much, how active a part they take in a, I had the impression that most of the people, certainly in the beginning, took their responsibilities seriously, and that that contributed to it. They knew that only the heavy-weights would be there and there wouldn't be some third Vice-President or ^{an} Assistant that was gonna represent some of the other people. I had the sense that that particular committee served an important function, not only in Labor-Management Matters but probably in terms of President Kennedy's relationship with economic power in this country. I think Goldberg, I guess one of the things that caused Hiller [

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]some concern about it was that it was gonna be used to express labor-management positions on macroeconomic issues.

STERN: Exactly.

POWERS: And that it was a way of trying to involve the President in policy statements that the Council might feel should, if at all, better come from them. The problem is always if you establish it for certain specific projects and after you dealt with them what do you do with the committee? The *care and feeding* of committees is a continuing problem and I think that government has generally not done a good job. The great tendency is you bring them down and lecture to them and don't, they're Advisory Committee but they're being advised more than advising.

STERN: Yeah.

POWERS: And I think that was true to some extent with the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities, too. We had some people, Dean Sayer [*Ruthen*], Walter Ruthen [*Ruthen*], there were a couple of others that really, I think, wanted the Committee to move out a lot faster than it did, and were very critical of what they regarded as an action.

STERN: Donovan, for example, told me a story about one particular meeting where there was so much tension that Goldberg broke the meeting up by inviting everybody to take a trip on the President's yacht with the President....

POWERS: Yeah.

STERN: And he said that that did wonders, (Laughs) The whole ambiance of the thing. Burke was particularly pointed *out* that he thought Kennedy's role was very, very important, *coming* occasionally to the meetings, having

them to the fish room....

POWERS: Yeah.

STERN: ^{at the} ~~at the~~ White House. And, giving them some real leeway, that he expected them to really do a job.

POWERS: I think he really took an interest in that committee. Of course, the Vice-President wasn't involved and I think just contrasting the two, there was much more Presidential involvement in the work of the committee, on the Advisory Committee than there was on the EEO committee. President Kennedy was very good about attending meetings of these Plans for Progress companies that had been brought together, and he would address them. He ^{certainly} ~~certainly~~ was interested in the work of the committee but the committee's meetings were generally held monthly or every other month. The Vice-President would chair the meetings and I'm not sure there was even anyone from the White House who came to most of them. You know, there'd be all the secretaries and Cabinet Secretaries, the Attorney General would come. They'd, in contrast, I think both Goldberg and Wirtz and probably Secretary Hodges [

] felt it was quite important... I think the meetings were held in the Fish Room at the White House for the Advisory Committee. That was considered, I guess, one of the benefits of being part of that group.

STERN: There's also a story about the boss of IBM being offered a ride on Air Force I at one point, at the end of a meeting, Kennedy was going someplace and was going the same place. The President said "Why don't you come along?" I think it was Donovan who said he was just like a kid, he was so thrilled.

POWERS: Yeah. I'm sure.

STERN: Kennedy used that kind of thing so effectively. Okay, I just have a few

more questions in general about the Labor Department. I wonder if you might just talk briefly about the, your sense of the differences in the way the department operated under Goldberg and Wirtz.

POWERS: Well, I'm not sure if, that these differences are all ones that reflect the personalities as much as the difference in time. I do have a recollection that under Goldberg things were more spontaneous. I think Goldberg was more of an activist and felt, and less of an organization man, or administrator. Charlie Donahue, the Solicitor told the story of one Saturday that he said he was in the office, the Solicitor's office was on the fourth floor and the Secretary's on the third floor, and he came down on the third floor and the Secretary was running around in shirtsleeves and Charlie said "Arthur, you look busy, is there anything I can help you with?" and Goldberg said "No, no, I'm just drafting an Executive Order." And here's his chief legal officer, who's not involved in that at all. Of course, it was wonderful for the people that were close and I think he had sort of a small law firm approach to things that anybody could do anything. You often just grabbed the person nearest at hand. That was Shulman often or the Undersecretary or someone else and he didn't see now "where should this function?" First of all, should we do it? Second, if we're gonna do it, how should we do it in the Department. I think there were a lot of feelings that were bruised although I would think on the whole people look back on that time as a very exciting time, where a lot was accomplished and certainly it was good to be trying some of those things. It was, that was one of the things that the Kennedy Administration was supposed to do was try to get things moving again. Try to find solutions and so forth and I think in many ways Goldberg was an ideal person to fill it, although I don't think he could have carried on much longer without some, some real concerns about, ^{how} things should be

handled institutionally. I think one of the things that Bill Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] sought to do was regularize that. I think he also had a very strong feeling that we were getting the government and the Secretary involved in more labor disputes than was a good thing. That there's first of all a question ^{about} whether any government agency ought to be involved in trying to settle some disputes and secondly to the extent that ^{should be undertaken by government whether it isn't something that} the Director of the Federal Mediation Service or the Assistant Secretary for Labor Relations should undertake rather than the Secretary. ^{director of}

STERN: Millard Cass [Millard Cass] for example mentions that ^{uh} that Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] held open houses for employees to meet the Secretary and Undersecretary etc... Did Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] continue that sort of thing?

POWERS: I think so. I certainly wouldn't think there was ^{uh} any ^{uh} difference in their-- certainly none that would be unfavorable to Wirtz [William W. Wirtz]-in, ^{uh} the openness and interest, ^{uh} in ^{uh} in being a ^{uh} a friendly employer or head of the Department. I think Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] ^{uh} one of his great strengths is ^{uh} he's just such a wonderful person to work for, ^{uh} very interested in the individuals that are around him and appreciative of what they do and concerned about their welfare. Now I think that's true of Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] too. Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] is just ^{uh} well I think ^{uh} he moves at a more measured pace ^{uh}.

STERN: Do you have any sense of what the problem was between Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] and John Henning [John F. Henning] when Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] became Secretary?

POWERS: I don't think there was a problem between Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] and John Henning [John F. Henning], when Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] became Secretary.

STERN: But he did leave, he apparently forced him out.

POWERS: Well, uh, I think that uh, I think they just, uh, ^{they're} there two different kinds of people. I guess I think that an Undersecretary ought to be uh someone that uh does what the uh Secretary feels needs to be done not necessarily agrees with him...

STERN: Uh-Huh, Sure.

POWERS: But ought to be able to assist the Secretary and uh in discharging the Secretary's functions, uh and I, I think it, um well I just I don't think that it was a, that it was a good working relationship and uh I think John Henning [John F. Henning] is a fine man, I just don't think uh under the best of circumstances he could have provided uh Bill Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] with the kind of uh assistance that Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] I think had a right to in that position.

STERN: Okay, just two more brief things. One uh did you have specifically yourself any contacts at all with the President and if so what were your just general impressions?

POWERS: Well they were just very fleeting, uh no. I would, I think, I just uh, I think the only time I probably looked him right in the eye and uh, and talked was when uh when Secretary Wirtz [William W. Wirtz] was sworn in.

STERN: Uh-Huh.

POWERS: But uh, I came into government uh really because I'd worked for him in the campaign and uh it was just a great experience.

STERN: Okay, and then the last point uh. Do you, some of the long perspective question.... As you look back now and two decades have passed, do you assess the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] years differently today than you did when you were living through them or right after them? uh Has your perspective on Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] and the Kennedy administration altered in any substantial way? I mean especially as you look at the years since.

POWERS: Well I, I'm not sure this is directly responsive but let me just say once what comes in my mind as I think about that. In terms of President Kennedy and what he was doing when he was killed I guess I still feel that trying to assess it is, is very difficult because it was incomplete. And, I don't think it's, it's sort of trying to judge uh the first, part of the first movement in a in a work of in a piece of music uh. Unless you could have seen the whole thing and.... I was going to go to work, I was gonna uh.... Larry O'Brien [Lawrence Francis O'Brien] had offered me a position as his assistant and I was to call him when they got back from Dallas and I was gonna go over to the White House and work with O'Brien [Lawrence Francis O'Brien]. We were going to uh work together on a couple of, uh, there were three or four key legislative congressional issues and then then we were gonna get about re-electing the President. And I think that, uh -- President Kennedy and those around him always saw this as a, an eight year administration. It was a period of confidence building and building of political support, and I and I so I, I really don't judge it in any ultimate sense because I think it just it was a

fragment. Uh, wonderful in some ways, very incomplete in others. I guess the thing that, when I think about the whole eight years and particularly the way the eight years ended uh -- I guess I and I wonder even more after the Carter [James Earl Carter] administration which I thought was so disappointing and this one that I think is uh even more disappointing in another direction how, just how do you find the right combination of compassion, and concern and activism -- uh without unleashing expectations that uh, that you can't satisfy and that you end and do you end up in some sense with the, the country exhausted, divided, and uh less able to cope than before. I don't think there is a general answer to that. I, I guess I feel that that's probably uh part of the continuing dilemma or challenge that anyone that tries to deal with public issues has to face.

STERN: Well, thank you very much unless there's something you want to add.

POWERS: No.