

Robert C. Goodwin Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 5/3/1967
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Goodwin, (1906 - 1999), Administrator, Bureau of Employment Security, Department of Labor, discusses the state of the Bureau of Employment and the Labor Department in the late 1950's, the decision to separate the Employment Service from the Unemployment Insurance Service, and the Civil Rights Act and Plans for Progress program, among other issues.

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Robert C. Goodwin – JFK #1

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First Oral History Interview

with

Robert Goodwin

May 3, 1967
Washington, D.C.

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Mr. Goodwin, did you know John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] at all before he became President?

GOODWIN: I did not know him personally. I appeared before committees of which he was a member when he was in the Congress, and I, of course, heard him publicly, but I did not have a personal acquaintanceship with him.

HACKMAN: Had you worked with any members of his staff on any particular projects that you can remember?

GOODWIN: They were in touch with us for information on some of the projects. I recall some of the task forces that he set up between the time of his election and the time he took office, for instance, were in touch with us, and we did a good deal of basic staff work for them.

HACKMAN: Would that have been the task force on depressed areas under Senator Douglas [Paul H. Douglas], for instance?

GOODWIN: That was one of them. This, I think, is the one in which the concept of the Area Redevelopment program came, and we did a good deal of work there. The Bureau of Employment Security, over the years, pioneered this area in terms of evaluation of the employment and the unemployment situation in areas. So we were able to furnish them a good deal of information from which they made the recommendations.

HACKMAN: Could you describe, in general, the state of the Bureau of Employment Security, let's say in the late fifties. What were the main problems you were facing at that time?

GOODWIN: Well, in the late fifties we had, among other things, the problem of farm labor, the bracero problem, importation of farm labor, and we had some problems of unemployment during that period. Our unemployment insurance program was facing some problems of increasing amounts of unemployment. These were the principal problems in the late fifties, I think. We were also getting the problem of industries going out of existence and having large numbers of displaced persons. This brought to the forefront the problems of older workers, people who completely lost out at the age of forty-five and above. It was extremely difficult to get them relocated again.

HACKMAN: Were you handicapped in this period by a lack of budget or by any other problems within the Labor Department or within the Administration that you looked forward to the new Administration with a hope that they would be alleviated?

GOODWIN: Yes, we did. One of these was the Employment Service. We'd not been able to get increases in our appropriations, even to take care of such things as the growth in population, so that the ability of the Employment Service to meet its day to day problems became less and less during that period.

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HACKMAN: Was that mainly due to congressional refusal of appropriations or problems within the Department or....

GOODWIN: No, I think it represented a fiscal policy, really, of the Administration at that time.

HACKMAN: How did the Bureau of Employment Security prepare for the new Administration? Was there anything particular...

GOODWIN: Well, yes. We knew, of course, of Mr. Kennedy's interest in our program, and, as I indicated earlier, we'd worked with some of these task forces that had been preparing recommendations for Mr.

Kennedy. So we analyzed our problem in the Employment Service, where we felt we had the biggest immediate need, and made a recommendation, had it ready, actually, when the new Administration came in, and made a recommendation for an increase in the Employment Service budget. We had recommended that the Employment Service budget be increased by about fifty million dollars. This finally came through after the Bureau of the Budget consideration and all, came down to a figure of twenty-nine million which we did get and which represented a tremendous help in improving the operation of the Employment Service.

HACKMAN: Did you go to Congress the first time with the final budget figure, or did you go to Congress and then go back again with the new estimation?

GOODWIN: Well, we went to them with what was approved by the Bureau of the Budget, which was the twenty-nine million dollars. My recollection is that we got virtually all of that from the Congress. At that time John Fogarty [John E. Fogarty] was Chairman of the House Appropriation Committee, and he believed very firmly in the Employment Service job. So we came out with most of what we requested, what the Bureau of the Budget approved.

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HACKMAN: I'm interested in the transition between the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration and the Kennedy Administration. After the election was there a period of relative inaction or inactivity within the Department? Does this usually take place while you're waiting for a new administration to come in?

GOODWIN: Well, in terms of the initiation of actual new programs, I think that would be true. But it was a period of rather intensive activity in planning and trying to develop programs we thought that Mr. Kennedy would be interested in. He had campaigned on getting the country moving again, and we wanted to make our preparations and help as much as we could.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what your opinion was at that time of the Kennedy appointees within the Labor Department? Could you compare them maybe with the people who'd been there before?

GOODWIN: Well, we thought they were of high quality, the ones that were appointed by the Kennedy Administration. I think that the Labor Department had probably fared better in the appointments under the Eisenhower Administration than some departments. We had had Jim Mitchell [James P. Mitchell] as the Secretary, and he was a very high caliber man and had done a good job, I think. But the appointments that were made by Mr. Kennedy when he came in were certainly of the highest quality.

HACKMAN: Was the transition from the old to new administration fairly smooth, or what type of problems came up?

GOODWIN: It was fairly smooth, yes. There were very few problems.

HACKMAN: Could you comment on your personal relationship with Secretary Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] as far as the differences there might have been between that relationship and the relationship with earlier Secretaries? Did you work as closely with him, or was there ever a problem

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of having access to him.

GOODWIN: Well, I think I worked closely with him. I had worked fairly closely with Secretary Mitchell on certain things. This was particularly true of the bracero program, the importation of Mexican workers. He was very much interested in that and actually laid the groundwork for the elimination of Public Law 78 at a later date. But I did have access to Secretary Goldberg when he came in, and I don't think there was a really great deal of difference between the two on that point.

HACKMAN: Did their attitude toward the Bureau of Employment Security differ in any way?

GOODWIN: Well, it was an entirely different situation really. There were a lot of changes that came into the picture when Secretary Goldberg was appointed. For instance, he was responsible for the establishment of the manpower administration within the Department. This affected us because we had the Employment Service within the Bureau. This, of necessity, becomes the heart of any manpower machinery so that we were developing in new areas that were not there during the Eisenhower Administration.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what your feeling was about the President's economic message to Congress in February of 1961 when he directed the Secretary of Labor to improve the Employment Service? Did you feel that these improvements were needed?

GOODWIN: Oh, yes. And this, of course, tied in with what we had initiated and what we recommended on the budget.

HACKMAN: Right. I had wondered if that was the origin of this recommendation, or whether it originated at the White House.

GOODWIN: No, the Department here, and actually I think it was initiated in the Bureau originally. There was a recognition here of the need for

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improvement of the Employment Service, and we were completely in favor of it.

HACKMAN: Do you recall how successful the meetings that Secretary Goldberg arranged with the state labor commissioners and the Employment Security administrators from the states, how successful they were?

GOODWIN: Well, I think that they helped a lot. It demonstrated to the states that Secretary Goldberg was interested in what they were doing. It indicated to them that he was prepared to give backing to programs, and I think it gave the state administrators and their personnel a big uplift in what they were trying to achieve.

HACKMAN: Could you explain what problems you encountered in 1961 in getting this expansion and reorganization off the ground? For instance, in expanded counseling and placement services. Maybe we can run through several of these things.

GOODWIN: One of our basic problems was the recruitment of adequate personnel. There was a general shortage of counselors, for instance, and this represented one of the biggest needs as far as the Employment Service was concerned. We really had to do several things: We had to move in the direction of trying to get some improvement in the salaries of state agencies, the salaries they were paying to counselors; and we had to get some training started. We worked out some arrangements with universities; we developed a working relationship with a substantial number of universities in trying to get them interested in developing courses for more people to prepare them for entrance into the Employment Service. We got a number of things like this under way, and we've been building on that ever since.

HACKMAN: Did a lot of these people come from the staffs of the state agencies?

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GOODWIN: Yes, this is where the biggest problem was. You see, this being a federal-state program, a grant-in-aid program, the federal end of it is relatively small. We have a total in the unemployment insurance, the Employment Service, and the farm program of sixteen hundred employees as far as the federal is concerned. This includes our regional offices. Whereas, in the states, the total runs in the neighborhood of fifty-eight to sixty thousand employees. They're the ones that do the actual operating job, and when you think in terms of the strength of the Employment Service, you've got to look at what's available in that local office, how competent they are, and so on. So these programs that we started were designed to strengthen what the states

were doing in the local offices.

HACKMAN: Did you ever have any problems with the Civil Service Commission on getting new people in?

GOODWIN: In the Washington end?

HACKMAN: Right. On the federal level.

GOODWIN: On the federal level. Some. Not terrifically difficult problems, I think. We occasionally had problems, but I wouldn't account that as a major problem.

HACKMAN: Do you face pressures – maybe I shouldn't say pressures, but recommendations – from political people as far as appointments in the Bureau on the federal level at all?

GOODWIN: Well, I would not list this as a problem. We've had recommendations from political sources. During the period we're talking about here, we didn't have any.... We weren't asked to take people who weren't qualified. This is when it begins to be a problem. If you have to take on people who aren't qualified, then it's bad, but we did not have this kind of problem.

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HACKMAN: Could you at the federal level do anything to improve the recruitment and training at the state and local level, and if so, how did you go about this?

GOODWIN: Well, this is where we directed the efforts of the universities in large part. We made, for instance, a tie-up between these university consultants and the state employment security agencies. We got them working on interesting their students, their brighter students in going into this kind of work. We got them working with the state agencies on research programs in the state. They also gave us some advice for the federal end. But it was principally directed toward helping the states develop a better program.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any problems that came up in the Bureau of Employment and Security's role in this depressed area program after that had passed Congress?

GOODWIN: Well, we welcomed that program as an opportunity to take care of some of the problems that we'd been concerned with for a long time. We'd been classifying these areas as areas of labor surplus and as areas of persistent unemployment, and this made it possible for us to develop some projects

which would be helpful to them. I don't recall any particular problems. We worked with the Department of Commerce on this, and we had the usual administrative problems that come when you have two or more agencies working on the same thing. But they weren't bad, and it worked out very well and was very helpful.

HACKMAN: Could you explain why, in 1961, the decision was made to physically separate the Employment Service and the Unemployment Insurance Service at the local level?

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GOODWIN: Well, this was something that I had been interested in for many years. Back a good many years ago, I was regional director of the Social Security Board in Cleveland. Part of my region there was Detroit. And I remember I used to go over to Detroit during the period when the automobile industry was changing over and there was a lot of unemployment. And you'd go into those Employment Service offices there, and they would be just literally jammed, completely immobilized as far as doing any employment service work was concerned. Everyone was working on claims for the guys that were laid off in the automobile industry. And at the same time there were lots of employment opportunities available in the area – other types of business that weren't affected by the temporary closedown of the automobile industry. Well, this was a dramatic example of why the Employment Service and unemployment insurance need to be separated in the local office. So after I came here, we worked on this idea, and then it was presented as part of our program for this period. I'm not sure right now, let's see, whether we put this into effect in '62 or '63.

HACKMAN: I believe it was '62.

GOODWIN: I think it was '62. Yes, it must have been '62. We put it into effect first in the large areas. I think there were fifty-six cities of over a million population, and we first applied it to those. We didn't make it an absolute requirement of the states, but we did give them additional money if they were willing to do it. All but about two or three states were willing to do it, so we ended up with fifty-two or fifty-three areas set up on this basis. Since then we've extended it further. In some states now it applies to all offices regardless of size. We've had some objection to that, some opposition to that on the basis of it's a little more costly and when you get into the smaller offices, the advantages are not maybe as great. So we still have a policy of pushing this pretty hard for cities of two hundred thousand or over, but we don't push it for the small cities.

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HACKMAN: Did you take any other steps in the Kennedy period to change this "unemployment office" image that you felt the Bureau of Employment Security had?

GOODWIN: Well, we did. We tried to launch a public relations program designed to get away from this concept. We tried to discourage the use of some of the labels that had come in to bother us, and one of them was the use of the term "unemployment office" rather than employment office. We had some success in this, we have not eliminated the problem.

HACKMAN: What effect did the creation of the Office of Automation and Manpower in 1961 have on the Bureau?

GOODWIN: Well, I'd be less than frank with you if I didn't say that this created problems as far as the Bureau was concerned. There was a feeling, I think, throughout the Bureau that most of the manpower machinery was in the Bureau, and it would have been better if it had been built on that, rather than to set up new machinery involving manpower funds. But we accepted it in fairly good grace, I think, and went along and cooperated with it. But there was some friction, some problem as we worked it out.

HACKMAN: Do you know where the idea for the setting up of this office originated in '61, and before the Manpower Act had been passed, even, in '62?

GOODWIN: I'm not sure, no. I know that Secretary Goldberg was interested in it and made the decision that set it up within the Department. Where it originated as an idea, I'm not completely sure. I know some of the people that were interested in it and, I'm sure, influenced the decision, but I'm not sure who really had the key to that one.

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HACKMAN: Was there any problem of overlapping responsibility as far as the two offices?

GOODWIN: There was some. I don't think that this was a major problem. What developed here were, the new office developed responsibility in certain areas; these were recognized by the Bureau of Employment Security; and they tended to take responsibility in the research area. When the Manpower Development and Training Act was passed, the new office operated principally in that area. Although the Bureau was delegated – this was later – the Bureau was delegated responsibility for institutional training programs. But I think that what happened was that we worked out the special areas that each organization took the primary responsibility for, and it became a fairly smooth operation.

HACKMAN: What was your role in the manpower legislation that was proposed first in 1961 when it didn't pass? Had you helped write any of this legislation?

GOODWIN: No, I hadn't actually – the Bureau had helped, yes. I mean, we had developed part of it and furnished a good deal of information for it and had commented on it and made suggestions in connection with it.

HACKMAN: Can you comment, then, on the problems you faced in carrying out the temporary extended unemployment compensation act that was passed in '61?

GOODWIN: Well, this was a state administered program, and we had the problem of getting agreements with all of the states. The program actually ran pretty smoothly on the administrative end of it. The states had had some experience with this type of program, and we had no difficulty in reaching agreements, so we didn't have any very difficult problems in administering that program.

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HACKMAN: Wasn't there a major study made in connection with this temporary extended unemployment compensation concerning the users of it?

GOODWIN: Yes. We made a study. This was really initiated by the Congress, and they authorized, five million dollars, as I recall, for a study of the characteristics of those who receive temporary unemployment insurance.

HACKMAN: Did this study handicap the Bureau as far as overburdening it and maybe creating problems in carrying out the other expansion programs that were taking place in this period?

GOODWIN: Well, I don't think so because this was carried on principally by people who would not have been involved in the other. We didn't have an adequate research staff to do a job we would have liked. One of the results of that was it took longer; we didn't get the results of some of that study until two or three years afterwards. So that an inadequate staff dragged it out much longer than it should have been, in fact.

HACKMAN: Could you comment on the relationship of the Bureau of Employment Security to the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities? Had you felt previously that discrimination was a major problem?

GOODWIN: Oh, yes. And we were very much interested in this. The Employment Service during World War II – our War Manpower Commission days – had played a major role in elimination of discrimination. During that period, of course, we had a strong motive in that there were shortages of personnel, and it

was comparatively easy to interest employers in the use of minority groups. But the Employment Service, as long as I've known anything about it, has had a program to deal with this problem, and the program has improved over the years. So we were very, very happy to see the support for this kind of a program finally

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leading to the legislation which has made possible to do a more effective job than we'd ever done before. We actually had, in the Bureau of Employment Security, policies which required the elimination of discrimination before the Civil Rights Act was passed. This went to the use or the policies in selecting administrative employees, the referral of workers to employment by the Employment Service, and covered all different aspects of discrimination. We didn't solve all the problems, and we still haven't eliminated all of the discrimination that exists, but we made a lot of progress.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what new efforts were made during the Kennedy period?

GOODWIN: Well, not specifically. I know it was later when we got the Civil Rights Act, of course, that we got the impetus to change our regulations. We took a big step in terms of moving from recommendations to the states to requirements of the states. This was the big change that we made in our program during the Kennedy Administration. We had the encouragement from the White House to do this. We had a problem of public backing and a problem of public relations that were involved in doing something through regulations. We felt that we had enough backing that it could be done, and so we went ahead with it.

HACKMAN: Were you ever in contact with anyone personally at the White House on this, or did you work through the President's committee, or how did this work?

GOODWIN: Well, those contacts were carried on by the Secretary's office, and we were not directly involved in them – although I was aware that they were going on, we were not directly involved in it.

HACKMAN: Would this have been handled by the then Assistant Secretary Holleman [Jerry R. Holleman] and Arthur Chapin [Arthur A. Chapin], I believe, was on that...

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GOODWIN: Chapin was not here at that time, I think. At least he wasn't in that job. Holleman was involved to some extent, and Mr. Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz], the present Secretary, may have been. He was Under Secretary at that time.

HACKMAN: What was the extent of the Bureau of Employment Security's involvement in this Plans for Progress program?

GOODWIN: Well, we worked very cooperatively with them. We had no direct participation that I'm aware of in the establishment of it, but we have worked very cooperatively with them; we've informed the state agencies who these employers are; and they've worked with them, and they've gotten support from them for getting additional employers in local communities that are willing to help break down the barriers against Negroes. It's been a very effective program as far as we're concerned, helping get practical results in breaking down discrimination.

HACKMAN: Did you encounter problems of resistance on the part of some of the regional offices in certain areas as far as this whole discrimination problem went, and how did you go about getting at this?

GOODWIN: We didn't have a major problem in the attitude of our regional offices. These are federal employees, and we have only eleven regional offices. Of course, there are two or three of them that are located in the South. But our own people adjusted to this pretty well. Now, our basic problem, really, was with the local offices. And here they're affected by attitudes of employers in that local area and the other people in the local area. They don't change easily. Frequently, it isn't an active opposition we get. It's the way that they've done things for generations, and they're just going to continue to do them. Sometimes it's the other, it's the active opposition, but you really get both kinds of things. So it's been necessary to have an active program of inspection and locating of discrimination. This has been carried out in the Department, as you may know, by a special unit in the Manpower Administration. Mr. Chapin is now the head of that.

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HACKMAN: How well did the minority group representatives that were set up in the regional offices work out? Was this successful?

GOODWIN: Well, they have improved things a lot. This problem is so big and so deeply ingrained, particularly in certain areas of the country, that it will be a long time before we get anything like perfection.

HACKMAN: Right. Where did most of these changes in this area originate? Was this within the Bureau or again at the department level?

GOODWIN: Well, many of them originated within the Bureau. I'd say that later in the development of the Civil Right Law and the program under that that they came from the Department. But the program I mentioned to you a little while ago that we put into effect before the civil rights program, that originated in the Bureau.

HACKMAN: Are you going to have to go now?

GOODWIN: I'm afraid so.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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