

John A. Carver, Jr. Oral History Interview – JFK#10, 12/22/1969
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Biographical Note

Carver was Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Public Lands Management from 1961 to 1964, Under Secretary of the Interior from 1965 to 1966, and Commissioner of the Federal Power Commission from 1966 to 1972. In this interview Carver discusses his role in the Department of the Interior; some successes and difficulties in running the Indian Bureau and programs for Indians; Interior Secretary Stewart L. Udall's leadership style; and the transition from President John F. Kennedy to President Lyndon B. Johnson in terms of Interior matters, among other issues.

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Tenth Oral History Interview

With

JOHN A. CARVER, JR.

December 22, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: All right. What I have this morning are largely reminiscence, reflective, general type things. Let me ask as a starter, looking back, how do you recall your own role in the Department: what were your contributions as an administrator, as a policy-maker, that you think are important?

CARVER: Well, I guess I've alluded to those...

MOSS: More or less. I'd sort of like to tie it up.

CARVER: ...in times past. There were a number of diverse programs for which I was responsible, and it'll take the historians to say which

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among them were the more important. I've identified frequently the territorial policies as being of great interest to me and where I thought we made some genuine contributions. We, I think, laid the groundwork for the subsequently attained Elective Governorship Bill, and I don't think anybody is ever going to know really what a great accomplishment that was. It's the one thing I can identify where we created and then enforced a firm policy which I regard myself as the author of. That was that policy which

was variously known as the Declaration of St. Thomas, or the Declaration of Agnano, in the case of the two territories, which said, in effect, that the governors would not be treated as subordinates in the Interior Department, but would instead be considered as the political leaders, administrators of those self-governing territories and would be allowed, indeed, to make mistakes. That's a hard policy to enforce,

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with respect to government officials. The Congress doesn't like to allow that leeway if mistakes occur. They will pay lip service to the leeway in advance, but if things go sour—and sometimes things do because this is an imperfect world—you get a lot of trouble out of it.

The Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] Administration came in by a very narrow majority, and the challenge to us in the public land management areas domestically, at least this I identified as being important, were to establish an atmosphere of cooperation toward conservation objectives between the user groups and the non-user or the conservation groups. And I think basically that was a considerable success. Here again, it involved establishing and then enforcing a policy in a direction which sometimes was more difficult than the alternative. It's very easy to yield to the siren song of being the good guys, you know, and to wear the white hats. You have

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to really keep your eye on the ball in this business in order to see that the long-term interests of the country may be far better served by taking a firm position occasionally, as against some of the more militant or outspoken leaders in the Congress, or in the private sector in the conservation area.

Of course we were greatly aided in this because—well, two things: The conservation movement was greatly preoccupied with what leadership Udall [Stewart L. Udall] was giving in making the Department a national Department and going for the big parks or new parks and new ideas in this thing. So I was left a pretty free hand to work toward a healthier climate in the public land areas. So, as I've reflected on it in the past, I felt that one measure of our great success in this area was that in 1964 the Interior Department wasn't the opponent in most of the Western political campaigns. We had in fact established for the Kennedy and

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later the Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] Administrations a reputation of being fair and honorable in our treatment of the people who use the public lands, by and large. At the same time, we hadn't gotten at cross purposes with the principal conservation groups. It was an era of good feeling.

As to the administrative or operational parts of the job, I think what were effective administrators in the sense of getting the structure or the bureaucracy to respond effectively to the policy leadership of the Administration. I think that's a major...

MOSS: How was this done?

CARVER: Well, it's a psychological kind of a leadership proposition. I recall that when we came into office I called a staff meeting of all of the bureau chiefs and of the staff that I inherited. I may have told you of this before. And I told them, in effect, that as far as I was concerned we all worked for the United States of America, that they didn't work for

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me, and that I felt that the Department of the Interior was fundamentally interested in conservation and the public interest and therefore, I wanted all of them to stay, at least for the time being. And thereafter, so far as I know, politics was kept pretty much out of this even though there was quite a little bit of pressure on us from time to time to move some of these people.

Another thing was to tell the bureaus that we would pay attention to the protocol of the hierarchy, that we wouldn't displace the bureau chiefs by going down around them to their section heads. Once in a while I violated this—the Secretary violated it too—but we tempered that violation by recognizing that that's what we were doing, being candid about it. We didn't try to fool anybody when from time to time we short-circuited things in order to get some specific objective outlined.

The place where this kind of policy—

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and here we get an overlap with the territorial policy, really—you really get far better performance out of people if you give them a certain amount of leeway and let them develop their own aspirations and goals and then work toward them. In the territories, of course, you have this special kind of problem because you're dealing with the Congress, but just with the Parks Service or the others, this meant quite a bit.

Now, of course, the famous calling to account of the Parks Service in that speech I gave in 1963 represented the other side of that coin. They also have to be tuned in with the Department and the Administration's objectives. So—as I've said in a dozen ways, I guess, the observation by Stephen Bailey that in this business the public man sees the essential ambiguity of most of these questions, gave us a kind of a balance on it.

It would be unfair to pass up the Indian Bureau. It was, of course, the biggest bureau

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that I had to supervise. I had the greatest confidence in Philleo Nash, and as I've indicated before, a confidence which the Secretary didn't always share. But I believe that here again we can conclude that at least for the first four years, the Administration came up a big winner in Indian policy. It lost some points on the Hill, as I've indicated before, in some of the legislative fights; it lost some of the legislative fights. But the really important thing for a national administration is to have the reputation of being rather pro-Indian, and I think that

reputation was there and was deserved. And when we took our lumps, as we sometimes did, it was worth it.

Now the Indian Bureau is virtually impossible to administer, and sometimes it didn't look like it was administered very well, but if you compare that four years with what's going on now or what happened in the

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later years after Nash left, I think one could conclude that that was a golden age. Certainly we didn't have the Indians camping on Alcatraz, and the nearest thing we had to it—another thing that I've described—was that Miccosukee problem down in Florida, where they were demonstrating at the United Nations, and going to Cuba and so on. We solved that one, and we solved it well.

MOSS: A couple of weeks ago, there was an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about Indians, and it didn't really have much to say about the Kennedy-Johnson Administrations except to say that the bad things slowed down. Is this fair?

CARVER: Well, it's very, very difficult to run ethnic programs. Rather than getting farther from ethnic programs, we're getting more and more of them now. It runs against the American ethic, really, to have programs which are based upon the man's bloodlines or the color of his skin, and I resisted that resistance

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strongly. That was another policy point which was established in that speech I gave up in New York real early. No matter how much pressure I was going to get, I was going to stick to that trusteeship over the land as the unifying force for policy, rather than the color of the man's skin. Now this didn't mean we'd have less programs, it didn't mean we'd be less solicitous or less concerned or less sensitive, but it did mean that we would at least follow the principle that our ultimate policy objective was truly to have the Indians a part of the mainstream of American life. And you can't ever get that if you treat them as Indians.

Now, here, again it's a kind of ambiguous proposition, and maybe on balance we'll have to give it up. It looks like we're going to have to give it up. We didn't have anything even remotely resembling a call for Red Power six or seven years ago. I think I consider it too bad when

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Pat Moynihan [Daniel Patrick Moynihan] came out with that book of his about the Negro, you know. He in effect said we ought to look toward a bureau of Negro affairs. Right now this Philadelphia Plan is based upon the same idea. Fundamentally I disagree with this, although I suppose we're so far down the road we can't indulge the kind of pure kind of thinking that I try to in treating all American citizens alike. That doesn't seem to be the

modern ethic on it. But I'm afraid we're just getting in deeper and deeper now. And we went through this business of having a bureau of Negro affairs, you know, the Freedman's Bureau back after the Civil War. We have to look at that history.

I don't know. At least I think we were more successful during the Kennedy-Johnson early years in going the other direction. And that involved sometimes going up to the Hill and saying tough things; like telling them that really income tax or other tax benefits

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to Indians were counterproductive because it gave them an economic vested interest in staying Indians. That's what the problem was and is. Nobody likes to be in a minority group unless being in that minority group means you don't pay taxes, and that's a pretty good American objective is to get out of paying taxes.

MOSS: Can you think of anything that with the benefit of hindsight you would have done differently, or not done at all?

CARVER: Oh, well, of course you can think of a lot of mistakes you've made. I suppose if I were to just turn inward and look at myself, I'd say that I really didn't ever quite accommodate to being a dedicated deputy to Stewart Udall. I tend, I suppose, to blame him for not using me, but when I'm honest about it, I can say that I likely could have done much better if I hadn't been so damned independent about it. I don't think it would have made much difference;

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I think I still would have left the Department when I did, under about the same circumstances, but I would have felt better about that tour as Under Secretary. Looking back on my whole career, I'm proud of the work I've done, as a lawyer and as an assistant to a senator, and as Assistant Secretary of the Interior, but I'm not proud of my role as Under Secretary, and yet I didn't ever feel insecure, or unable to do the job, it just didn't work out right. And maybe it would have worked better if I'd gotten it earlier, or if I hadn't gotten it at all, as it turned out.

MOSS: What was the problem?

CARVER: Oh, I guess we've described the problems at some length, but what I'm trying to indicate now is not what the problems were but rather a kind of a feeling that represented some failure on my part, something I could have done better than I didn't. Now, you know, it's a whole fabric of relationships there.

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MOSS: Putting it a slightly different way, what kind of man made a good Udall administrator?

CARVER: Well, Stewart did not really value the skill of administration, and I suppose that's why he succeeded in some ways. He wasn't preoccupied with how well somebody was doing, he was really more preoccupied with where they got, or where they took him, more accurately. Floyd Dominy [Floyd E. Dominy] was an outstanding administrator, but there was a lot of trouble between Dominy and Udall. I can't think of any time when he really honestly thought about whether a man used the right techniques; kept his staff properly motivated, had follow up, set goals for them and checked on them, gave them recognition, and so on. It was pretty much a seat-of-the-pants operation on his part.

So what kind of a man does it take to be a Udall administrator? He used them up pretty good. Even the best of them had to be always looking out for the—or being aware of the fact

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that it wasn't really a partnership, that the Secretary had objectives of his own, and the measure of their success was going to be their contribution to his objectives not their objectives. Now those people who could adjust to this, and take their programs forward, sort of in phase with it, came out really well. But a guy like Nash, you know, who is really fundamentally more interested in the Indians than either himself or Udall, just didn't mesh. I don't think Stewart ever really wanted to do great things for the Indians so much as he wanted to do great things for the Indians so it will make him look good. And I think Nash on the other hand really didn't give a damn how good he looked so long as he could make some progress in these areas. That may be a harsh judgment on Stewart. Certainly I got along fine with him in the finest possible fashion as Assistant Secretary.

But if you went through his assistant secretaries

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and the others we used (and I think we have from time to time), you'd have a hard time finding any pattern. Even guys like Orren Beaty, you know, who gave their whole lives to him, I think were always aware that this was a labor of love on their part, that they couldn't really hope to be a part of any great thing for the future.

MOSS: In another vein, in several speeches in late 1963—for instance, there was a speech to the Annual Institute of Government at Idaho State University at Pocatello, on 14 November, and a speech to the California and the Challenges of Growth Conference at the University of California at Riverside, this was 7 October, '63—you seemed to repeatedly emphasize the benefits to local and state governments and private citizens from public land management by the federal government, and specifically, you were countering the argument that public lands were a loss of potential tax revenue. Where was the opposite

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point of view coming from, do you recall?

CARVER: Oh yes, we were pulling the teeth in advance for the customary political issue. I've indicated before that in that '64 campaign we had those teeth pulled. Well, this is what we were doing. As a matter of fact, we were successful in that particular campaign, and it was a thought-out proposition.

MOSS: Okay. When did this, the thinking on '64 originate? When did it start? When were you gearing up for '64?

CARVER: Well, I suppose that we were thinking about Kennedy's reelection campaign in the terms of, you know, the role of the Department of the Interior. I suppose, really, we were thinking of that when we got that first big conservation tour, which was real early.

MOSS: '62. Summer of '62.

CARVER: Kennedy didn't get any votes out there. That was a challenge to us. We were bound and determined, you know, to do what we could.

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And I think we went about it in a wise way. We weren't very partisan about it, but we were bound and determined to lay these old Eastern prejudices to rest. And the inner feelings of those people is the bad, old Uncle Sam. So we had to go out and preach the gospel that's here, and basically we had to do it as I was trying to do it: laying out facts to them, trying to make them think this thing through again, telling them that the United States of America as a proprietor of land in those areas was carrying its share of the load. I can recall conveying that kind of a vein to Udall some of these relationships that are in that Riverside speech and even surprising him, you know, that you had that kind of data which would show that just a transfer of the lands to the states or the local governments and so on, far from being a boon to them, would present some real losses of revenue.

I think that most telling one was the one about the

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highway money. If the state of California gets X number of percentage more matching money because of the existence of that federal land than Iowa, that certainly is a benefit you've got to ascribe to the federal ownership of land there and offset that against any taxes you might collect out of it. And we denatured that argument pretty well, I think.

MOSS: Why were the particular forums chosen? Were they simply available, or was there something about them?

CARVER: Oh, I don't.... The question of choosing your forums, you've never had all that much choice.

MOSS: Yes, I wondered about that.

CARVER: You get the invitations, and maybe you get more than you accept, but.... I don't remember how I got that one at Riverside. But I recall that I enjoyed it. I sat on the podium with Clark Kerr, talking about some of these things. Basically, you know, they were rather

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small ripples, but some of them developed, and were developed thereafter so that a lot of people began to use the ammunition which we'd served up in some of these things.

MOSS: Do you recall any specific instructions, either from the White House or from the Democratic National Committee, in say the late spring of '63 to start gearing up for '64?

CARVER: Oh, I don't recall anything specific, but certainly, you know, we're political animals, certainly we were gearing up for it. We'd have been derelict in our duty if we hadn't been always concerned.

MOSS: So this was something that you simply assumed and were doing...

CARVER: Oh absolutely!

MOSS: ...and were doing naturally, rather than something you had to be reminded to do.

CARVER: I think it's kind of a saving grace that we always felt that the best politics was good government. I don't recall us ever really

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being blatantly partisan, quite often just the opposite. We were working as hard as we could for example, knowing that that country was basically Republican, we didn't ever get ourselves in some of these sticky local races. We were interested in the main chance, which was John F. Kennedy up until he was killed, and then thereafter, in a somewhat different way in preserving that program which, of course, Johnson had carried forward very strongly.

MOSS: Okay, let me ask you this. How did the transition from Kennedy to Johnson go, from your point of view? What was the impact of the

assassination, first on you and on your people, and then, how did the transition to Johnson go?

CARVER: Well, you know, you feel awful just thinking about it. I was having lunch that day with Oscar Chapman [Oscar L. Chapman], which I frequently did—I found him a wise counselor. And we were so preoccupied with our conversations about many things that

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we were not aware during the luncheon, and it wasn't until I got out and got into the car that our driver told us. I went back to the building and went down to the basement and got into my own car and listened to the radio until it was certain that he was dead. And of course we were all just undone.

We began to function again, I guess, after the funeral. The first point that came up was the matter of the resignations. I called the Secretary's office and said I was sending a resignation over to the White House unless they had any instructions to the contrary. It was rather odd because they called over to find out, and we were told that they were not to be forwarded. I sent one up to the Secretary's office, you know, I wanted one to be there. I wanted the President to have his control. And it was only a matter of a couple of days later that the word came back that the resignations were expected which was entirely

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proper; it was a new President. But if you recall, the Johnson line from the very beginning was to carry forward the Kennedy program, to get it enacted, to do a lot of these things in memory or in honor of the assassinated President. So I can only recall rather a speedup of much of the legislative work. There was in fact, at that moment, an atmosphere for taking action in areas which were pretty well stalled.

MOSS: All right. Is the focus on the Congress or on the Department or on both?

CARVER: Well, the focus basically was on the Congress, at that moment, as I remember it. It was to get that program enacted. That focus of course shifted pretty soon. But Udall had arranged for Charlie Boatner [Charles K. Boatner] to come over to be the Parks Service public information guy, and the first thing that the Secretary did was to bring Boatner up into the front office, which was a wise thing because Boatner was

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our resident Johnsonologist. And I tell you that was a big difference.

MOSS: In what way?

CARVER: The Johnson way of doing things was something we all had to really study. Kennedy had been much more relaxed and much more assured of himself. But I can recall once fairly soon, Johnson went around and visited all the Departments. And he came in and spoke to the assembled personnel of the Interior Department, and at this moment in time I became first familiar with his preoccupation to be sure that the cameras were only on one side of him and that sort of thing. It was sort of a vanity about these things that I'd never been aware of, if it existed with Kennedy.

When it came to style—of course, we wrote a lot of Presidential stuff—I went to some effort myself to try to go back through the records and sort of pick up the threads of how he spoke, what kind of a draft would you present to him which would

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be accepted. We wrote quite a little bit of stuff for him. We tried quite consciously to get sort of an earthy, back-to-the-land, populist kind of feel; to go back to his early interest in rural electrification and that sort of thing, and pull out those speeches and try to take advantage of that to get him sort of tuned in to the stuff that we were submitting for his first messages. I always had a considerable part, even after I was Under Secretary, in working on those messages. I think the Secretary always gave me a good deal of credit—sometimes he didn't use my work—of having a pretty good blue pencil and getting some of this bureaucratese strained out of these speeches and so on. So some of the Johnson rhetoric has originated right in my office.

But you had to do a quick study on the new man in a fashion which we'd never been conscious of doing, really, for Kennedy, if we had. But these crisp sentences, you know,

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and making things one, two, three, four, five, those programs, you know. That Johnson style later was tempered, but he wanted all those things kind of laid out.

Transitionally speaking, of course, we've mentioned in the past the fact that we were all pretty nervous for Stewart because of the old wound of Los Angeles. I think it's to the President's credit that he didn't take any—well anyway, it's just good fortune, but at any rate, no changes were made or contemplated right immediately and by the time any were to be made, why, Udall had gotten himself in pretty solid. Some of the ways I've told you here, and we've also discussed his working with Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson], in getting her sort of on our side, giving her some things to do which were important, and which a lot of staff work could be furnished on; you know, going out to those parks, and beautifying the roads, and so on.

MOSS: Okay, now as a last sort of windup, what is

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there that you can think of that we haven't covered, that you feel is important and you want to put into the record?

CARVER: Well, I don't know how many hours we've been talking—ten or fifteen, I suppose.

MOSS: Something like that.

CARVER: I haven't kept any notes or records to be sure this thing is encyclopedic. I suppose one of the things I ought to mention is some of the help I had throughout this period, people whose loyalties were basically to me. When I came in as Assistant Secretary, I was under some pressure to take Mike Kirwan's [Michael J. Kirwan] son-in-law [Robert E. Vaughan] as my special assistant—I think I've mentioned that. I insisted on having my own choice: a friend I'd known in law school here and a very brilliant lawyer from over in the Department of the Army, who happens still to be with me as my assistant here, Robert Mangan [Robert M. Mangan]. I think he is one of the most gifted craftsmen with the English language that

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I know. And although fundamentally I did most of my own work on speeches and so on, still, I guess the real gems that I can claim credit for, I have to be honest and say that his pen is responsible.

And eventually Stewart came to recognize what a genius I had down there in my office, and used him a great deal, particularly after I left. He stayed over there until the end of the Administration, working for Black [David S. Black] and for Luce [Charles F. Luce], both of whom recognized his talents as I had. But he was of an immense value to me.

Mrs. Movern [Verna Movern], whom you met here I kept on. She had been demoted by my predecessor. I gave her back her grade as one of my first acts, and since then, of course, having a veteran of thirty years in the Department looking after my interests really saved me a lot of grief and trouble.

And I don't think that anybody could do that job over there without having assistants, having people to

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support him. I would be unfair for me to claim all of the credit for some of the things that I've claimed credit for here because my name was on them. For example, I know that the Declaration of St. Thomas that I've mentioned two or three times before was written basically by Bob Mangan, and I think it's an enduring document. He wrote the letter which Kennedy sent to Wayne Aspinall [Wayne N. Aspinall], which set up the foundation or basis for the Public Land Law Review Commission. That's an historic document; it's an important one.

As to what else we might have left out, gee, I don't know. We talked earlier a great deal about the Alaska Railroad, and some of the other bureaus. The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation came into being while I was there. You get pretty encyclopedic here; I'm at a loss to point out any lacunae in this thing.

MOSS: There will be an opportunity of course, when you get the drafts to make footnotes and to

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add anything that you wish.

CARVER: Fine.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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