

**Wilbur J. Cohen Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 11/11/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Wilbur J. Cohen

**Interviewer:** Charles T. Morrissey

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**Biographical Note**

Cohen, Assistant Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (1961-1965), discusses assisting John F. Kennedy (JFK) in drafting Social Security and welfare legislation, JFK's Task Force on Health and Social Security, and his own confirmation as Assistant Secretary for Legislation in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, among other issues.

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Wilbur J. Cohen – JFK #1

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First of Three Oral History Interviews

with

Wilbur J. Cohen

November 11, 1964  
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Do you want to start by telling about the first time you came into the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] orbit?

COHEN: The first meeting I ever had with John F. Kennedy was probably during the period from 1948 to 1950. I don't recall the exact date, but it was during the time he was a member of the House of Representatives. I was then a civil servant in the Social Security Administration in charge of the development and drafting of Social

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Security legislation. I think it was Leo Goodman, a longtime personal friend of mine, who had been working with the labor unions, who arranged a luncheon meeting with Kennedy to discuss some ideas I had to raise wage and living levels in the South so industry would not move out of Massachusetts and New England to take advantage of the lower wage scales in the South. Kennedy had been working in developing a plan for trying to keep the textile industry and other industries in Massachusetts and New England which were moving to the South. Leo Goodman and I had discussed this a number of times and he had told Kennedy about some of my ideas and he arranged the luncheon meeting.

The basic idea that I had was to urge Kennedy to sponsor and support various economic and welfare measures that would

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give the South more federal money so that it could raise the living level of its people, its economic standards, and the general wage level and thus not be such a competitive threat to Northern industry. In other words, my idea of what was needed was a long term program that would narrow the gap between the North and South by using the federal financial resources to improve these conditions in the South. I especially advocated use of an equalization formula in any federal grants to the states, by which I mean utilizing a formula based on per capita income of the states in an inverse relationship so that the lower the per capita income of a state, the more it could get from federal funds, in an effort to make the federal funds more significant in the southern states.

Kennedy listened very attentively to

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all the points I made and asked a number of questions. He appeared to accept my general thesis which I think, as I look back on it, is also the general thesis that he accepted as part of his general philosophy while he was president. But he was very reluctant to accept the specific suggestion I made for use of an equalization grant. He commented that this would mean Massachusetts taxpayers would have to pay still higher income taxes to help the Southern states. I could tell from his facial expression at the time that whatever economic and substantive value such an idea had, it did not appeal to him politically. After all, he was still a member of the House from Massachusetts and he still had to get elected as a member of the House. His whole political fortunes and whatever other aspirations he had, depended upon his getting

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elected in Massachusetts. I could easily understand his reluctance to propose a specific set of formulas which might be attacked in Massachusetts as a redistribution of income from the rich to the poor. However, the fact of the matter is that a good deal of federal legislation does incorporate this kind of an equalization formula and Kennedy himself never took a vigorous position against it. However, I don't think he ever vigorously supported it. He tried to recognize its merits and not get himself entwined or enmeshed in a set of political difficulties which would make it difficult for him to get elected from Massachusetts.

Our conversation at that time did not lead to the drafting of any specific bills as far as I can recall, nor to the development of any specific policies or speeches. I

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had the feeling then and, as I look back on it, that the meeting was part of an intelligent and up-and-coming congressman's effort to search out new ideas and to try to fill out his thinking

with specifics. I think this is the kind of ordeal a young congressman goes through in trying to see how the needs of his district fit in with national objectives and aspirations and how he can make a contribution. I liked Kennedy from this first meeting but certainly gave no special thought to his potentialities or how this meeting might affect my future relationship to him. The meeting did leave a positive reaction in my mind about him in the sense that I felt he was a man who was trying to deal with and work with these important and complex problems. It was on this basis that I responded later to a request from Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], after Kennedy

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became a senator, to assist him in drafting Social Security legislation including matters relating to the aged, dependent children, unemployment insurance, and social insurance generally. As I look back upon this particular first meeting, I do see however that the seeds of what I believed and he believed were certainly consistent. Whatever impact I and other people had in his thinking on this problem, it certainly was apparent that there was a mutuality of interests. This, of course, grew with the years and provided, I think, the base upon which my work with him and Ted Sorensen and Myer Feldman grew into what it did become and to my ultimately being selected for the Assistant Secretary for Legislation in which all of these matters of health, education and welfare, which we briefly touched on in this first meeting,

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came to be my assignment in the Kennedy Administration.

The next association that I can recall with Kennedy came, I believe, when he was a senator. It came largely through Ted Sorensen. Sorensen had worked in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare—then known as the Federal Security Agency—in about 1951 or 1952 in the General Counsel's office. Although I didn't have any direct association with him at the time, I would think that he probably knew of me and then when he went to work in 1952 or 1953 for the Special Joint Committee on Railroad Retirement under the chairmanship of Senator Paul Douglas [Paul H. Douglas] of Illinois, our relationship began to develop. At the request of Senator Douglas' staff, I had prepared some materials for this committee and I testified along with Robert J. Myers, the Chief Actuary

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of the Social Security Administration. It was through these contacts that I became friendly with Ted Sorensen and subsequently, at his invitation, my wife [Eloise Cohen] and I visited him and his wife, Camilla [Camilla Palmer], and their children [Eric, Stephen, and Philip Sorensen] in their very modest home at the time. Our social relationships were not very extensive but they were very friendly. In the course of the years we did see each other from time to time but living in distant parts of the town, we didn't see each other frequently, but the times that we did see each other we were friendly and we enjoyed each other's companionship.



Sorensen then began to call me from time to time for comments on material relating to old age and social security and it was about that time, after leaving Senator Douglas' committee, that he went to work with Senator Kennedy and he continued to call

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me on these matters of social security and welfare bills and other proposals. Senator Kennedy wanted to introduce some bills in these fields, and Sorensen called me about the bills and about the drafting and the justification and the statements that were introduced in the record. In this way our associations grew and we developed a mutual confidence in each other.

In the course of those sessions and meetings in his office, I would naturally see Senator Kennedy from time to time. These meetings with the Senator were not extensive. I would spend a lot of time with Mr. Sorensen, but the meetings with Kennedy would be brief and friendly in discussing some various points. And in that way all of us got acquainted and there was a certain, you might say, an *esprit de corps* among us. I would even stop in from time to time at

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the Kennedy office when I was in the building and was thus able unexpectedly to talk with them about things that were on their minds. I thus became better acquainted with all the members of the staff in the office, with Senator Kennedy and came to know Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], Myer Feldman, Lee White [Lee C. White], Pamela Turnure and all the people who later became quite significant personalities in the Kennedy group, including also Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.], Fred Holborn [Frederick L. Holborn], and Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin]. From this kind of frequent and informal associations they felt and I felt that I was kind of an "old shoe" member of the Kennedy group when Kennedy was still not yet in the main running for the presidency. I think it was that feeling of friendship and mutual confidence that made them think of me in relation to appointing me an Assistant Secretary when

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he became President.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any recollections of any specific problems in regard to these proposals that the Senator wanted to introduce?

COHEN            On January 15, 1956, after a good deal of consideration, I left the government in Washington and became a professor at the University of Michigan. I found myself more and more unhappy at being in the Eisenhower Administration [Dwight D. Eisenhower] and although I had weathered the main storm of 1953 and 1954, which was the most perilous period, when finally the calm came I decided it was time for me to leave. On January 9, 1956, my friends and colleagues gave me a going away party and I received a number of communications from friends and senators

and congressmen. Although I didn't pay much special attention to it at that time, I did get a telegram from Senator Kennedy. Undoubtedly, the telegram was

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written by somebody other than the Senator, and I think most likely by Ted Sorensen, but it is interesting to note that the telegram ends with the prediction that I would come back to Washington some time. I'd like to read the key point in that telegram because, looking back on it, I think that it must have been in the mind of Sorensen and perhaps thus also in that of the President. I would say that if it was in the mind of Sorensen, it was automatically in the mind of the President, that someday if Kennedy became president, I would play some role in it. The letter I received was signed by Senator John F. Kennedy and was typed on a Western Union blank and concludes as follows: "I congratulate Wilbur Cohen and the University of Michigan upon his new assignment, but I give fair warning to them both that I hope the day is not too far distant when

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Wilbur Cohen, who is, after all, Mr. Social Security himself, will return to Washington and to public service in the kind of high office he deserves."

After I went to the University of Michigan my contacts with the Kennedy office increased and expanded in scope. I think they increased for two reasons: first, I was free from whatever limitations previously existed in my being a civil servant in the Eisenhower Administration, and, second, because Kennedy and Sorensen themselves were interested in the preparation of speeches and bills and ideas on Social Security legislation as Senator Kennedy entered into the contest in 1956 for the vice presidency and obviously, later as he thought in his own mind he was going for the presidency.

I frequently stopped in Senator Kennedy's office. I was always greeted very friendly and told to sit down and start working and

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to help us on something and we're glad you're here and what ideas do you have—we're working on such and such a speech or such a bill and what do you think and would you take this back with you and write it up or come down and do such and such.

In 1956, I became a special consultant on aging to the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare of which Senator Lister Hill of Alabama was chairman and Senator Kennedy was a member. In the course of preparing materials for the committee I prepared a bill on aging which Senators Hill and Kennedy jointly introduced. This bill was not enacted into law during that period of time and subsequently became the basis for legislation which I developed for President Kennedy and he recommended in 1962 in his special message on aging which was the first special message on aging which any President ever developed.

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Senator Kennedy and his staff at this time consciously went about the task of developing a practical program of progressive policies in a number of major subject areas. And, of course, areas like aging and Social Security naturally had a certain prominence in this.

In 1958 Ted Sorensen asked me to work with Mike Feldman in developing a program for the Senator on the aged. I prepared materials and a number of suggestions from which Mike Feldman and I eventually constructed a ten-point program which was called "A Bill of Rights for our Elder Citizens" which Senator Kennedy put in the *Congressional Record* on August 19, 1958. This material was used repeatedly during the 1960 campaign along with material advocating hospital insurance for the aged through Social Security which was popularly called Medicare. President Kennedy was the first president

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to send to Congress a special message on aging and it was significant to me that such a young man could be so concerned about the problems of the aging. In all my association I truly believe he was concerned about them. I think his advocacy of this program was one which, along with many others, brought him support in areas where people felt this man of wealth and intelligence was really concerned about the welfare of people in their communities. So I think this ten-point program which Feldman and I developed was very consequential in the unfolding of Kennedy's philosophy and as a key point in the New Frontier proposals.

In 1960, then, I became a Vice Chairman of Senior Citizens for Kennedy and I was also one of thirty-two persons who endorsed Senator Kennedy's positive response to the challenge of aged. This statement of Senator

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Kennedy was at that time, I believe, prepared by Sidney Spector who later was appointed to the Housing and Home Finance Administration as Assistant Administrator. All of these activities relating to aging resulted in the broadest and best known program for the aged which any presidential candidate since FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] had developed.

Another area in which I worked with Kennedy and his assistants was in the field of unemployment insurance. During the consideration of the temporary unemployment compensation legislation in 1958, which was a very complicated legislative controversy, Sorensen and I discussed various amendments, both on unemployment insurance and other areas, that Senator Kennedy might sponsor. Sorensen and Kennedy were very anxious that Kennedy have specific and constructive suggestions to make and not just general ideas.

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This was typical of Kennedy and an objective of Sorensen. They wanted to say not merely that they were for something in general that was good and that everybody agreed upon but to come up with a practical pinpointed suggestion that advanced that general idea in some concrete manifestation. It was typical, I think, of the Kennedy mentality to say, "Let's not just talk in general, but let's find some way to get moving in that direction." So I would

naturally come up with ideas, some of which would be rejected and some of which would be accepted or modified, some of which were put in speeches, and so on.

It was during this time that I came up with the idea, which had been discussed from time to time, that one of the big limitations in the existing welfare legislation was the fact that federal funds under Aid

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to Dependent children could not be used to pay for meeting the needs of the children of an unemployed parent. This didn't go to the basic problem of improving unemployment insurance, but it went to the problem that after a man exhausted his unemployment insurance, or he didn't have any unemployment insurance, and he was completely down and out, then the only way he could get welfare in many states would be to desert his children. If he deserted his children then they had no father, they could get assistance financed with federal funds. But if the father stayed home and tried to do something for his family, in many communities they'd say, "You're just unemployed. We can't give you anything." When I told this to Sorensen and Kennedy they were very much upset about the situation. The conditions seemed to be inconsistent with the very strong feeling

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that Kennedy had about the integrity of family life and keeping the family together. So I suggested, to remedy this fact, that federal legislation for Aid to Dependent Children should be amended to add to the Aid For Dependent children where the children were the children of unemployed parents. Both Sorensen and Kennedy liked this idea very much since it met a very practical need and also, I think, because it was a little bit different than what other people were talking about. It gave a little individual touch to Kennedy's contribution to dealing with the subject.

On May 26, 1958, Senator Kennedy introduced this idea as an amendment to the unemployment compensation bill and he reintroduced it several times thereafter as amendments to other bills. Thus began a development which culminated in the passage of the legislation

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to accomplish this in 1961 which Kennedy recommended when he was president. One of the first things the President did after he came into the presidency was to take this proposal that I had suggested to him in 1958, and he recommended it to Congress. It was adopted for a one year period. He then recommended its extension in the Public Welfare Amendments of 1962 for a five-year period. Thus, this rather interesting little discussion in 1958 had some far reaching effect, and this particular amendment had a very consequential effect on the whole recasting of welfare legislation in the United States.

I should point out at this point that when President Kennedy did appoint me chairman of the Task Force on Health and Social Security, I included this recommendation as one of a number of recommendations in my

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report. When I went to see him in the Carlyle Hotel to present the report to him, he turned over the pages rapidly, and when he saw this recommendation, he said to me, "That's one of the first things that I want you to do, Wilbur. I want you to get that provision for the dependent children passed." And I said, "Why, of course, Mr. President." Mr. Sorensen and I worked it out, and we included it in his recommendations to Congress, and it was passed within a few months. That little aspect of his having looked over my report in January of 1961 and found that recommendation and having recalled our past discussion indicated, I think, how strongly the President felt about this matter of doing something for children, his concern for the integrity of family life. It also illustrated to me the kind of total recall Kennedy had that

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once you talked with him about something and got him to be for something he could recall it almost instantly at a later date and you didn't have to have a great deal of additional discussion about doing it. He just said go ahead and do it. And this particular amendment, as I said, had a great impact in resulting in the reconsideration of the whole welfare program in 1961 and '62. It resulted in the passage of the Public Welfare Amendments of 1962 which were the most thorough overhaul of our welfare laws that occurred since they had been passed in the New Deal in 1935. So this particular amendment not only had a great deal to do with helping children but really was a very consequential element which resulted in a very far reaching reexamination of all of the aspects of our welfare legislation.

One of the various areas of my work in the field of aging in which I was engaged

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in 1960 was to be chairman of the advisory committee of an organization called Retirement Advisors, Incorporated, in New York City. As the chairman of this committee I became acquainted with a man by the name of Eliot Janeway, who was a member of the committee appointed by Martin Segal [Martin E. Segal] who was head of Retirement Advisors, Incorporated. I worked with this committee on various aspects of aging which tied in with my general interest in aging. In May 1960 he called me from New York City late one night, between eleven and twelve o'clock, while I was in Ann Arbor. He asked me to join in a newspaper advertisement endorsing Lyndon B. Johnson for president. Janeway was reported to have been close to Lyndon Johnson and his friends, as well as to Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther]. Someone told me that Janeway had been one of Mr. Johnson's investment counselors.

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But I told Janeway that I could not do anything about publicly supporting Lyndon Johnson because I was supporting John Kennedy for president. He talked with me for over an hour on

the telephone, urging, begging, cajoling, and even, in a way, threatening me in order to let him use my name in the advertisement which would appear shortly in the *New York Times*. It appeared to me that what was wanted was the names of some professors and intellectuals who would endorse Johnson so that particularly their university titles could show up in the newspaper advertisement. Undoubtedly, this was due to the fact that so many faculty and other intellectual people were supporting Kennedy. The Johnson ad was published in the Wednesday, June 1, 1960, issue of the *New York Times*. It only contained the names of about five faculty

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members altogether but it was interesting that there was this attempt on the part of the people supporting Johnson who were competing for the nomination.

During that period of time I had a number of sessions with Sorensen and on a number of times Sorensen talked with me about various kinds of problems that Kennedy was faced with in connection with both getting the nomination and running for the presidency. One particular idea that I mentioned to him seemed to strike a great deal of interest in Sorensen's mind. What I'm going to say I wouldn't say I took the credit for; perhaps the same idea came from a number of other sources and maybe there was a sort of "simultaneous invention" involved in this idea. But it grew out of the fact that Sorensen said, "Well, if we get the nomination, how do we go about

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getting all the information we need when we run for president?" I said, "Well, since I've been out in Michigan, I found that they have a very interesting arrangement in the Democratic Party there. Each election somebody would be selected as a director for research for the state campaign, and this state director of research would try to pull in as many different intellectuals and academic experts and ask them to prepare papers on every subject which they felt that a candidate could use. I pointed out various people that had that job, and I had been in charge one year. We brought together 30 or 40 people from Michigan and few from outside, and we gave each one of them an assignment—education, health, Soviet policy, or on foreign trade, and so forth. Sorensen was very fascinated with this idea and asked me to describe it in

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some detail. I am not saying that this was the origin of the idea of Kennedy pulling together a lot of brain trusters during the campaign; nevertheless, it may have helped to fix the idea more firmly in Sorensen's mind. I'm sure he discussed it with Kennedy, and out of that during the campaign grew the large group of people that Kennedy utilized under the more or less general tutelage of Archibald Cox.

During the campaign I met with Cox several times. There was an attempt to get ideas and get material for use by the President. This was rather interesting because both Sorensen and Feldman and White over the years had collected a vast amount of data, information,

background material, and they were probably the three best informed people on more subjects than anyone

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could imagine. But nevertheless, I think they felt that they had to have access to other ideas and to be sure that they got new and creative ideas into their thinking. I also think they were very politically conscious of bringing in these kind of intellectuals who, by the very act of bringing them in, would give support and strength to the Kennedy candidacy. In any case, I met with Cox a couple of times in Washington. It was during this time that I met with Cox that a very interesting development occurred regarding what eventually came to be the Kennedy proposal for the Peace Corps.

I was having dinner with Cox at the University Club, and in going over some of the ideas, the Peace Corps idea was discussed. Cox in a sense said to me,

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“Is this something that you could take on to get some material on or some information? We’re trying to assign some of these topics to different people.” I said yes. I thought that the idea was interesting, and I was very much in favor of it, and I thought that I could do something about it. So I took it as an area of my responsibility.

When I got back to the University of Michigan, I got in touch with one of my friends, Professor Samuel P. Hayes, and I asked him if he had any ideas on this. He was teaching International Economics [subsequently he became Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association]. He was very much interested in the idea. I asked him if he would draw up a memorandum that I could send to Mr. Cox for Kennedy. Hayes was delighted to do it. We discussed it,

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and he drew up a draft of a memorandum. We went over it, and he was so enthusiastic about it he said he would like to talk with some of the other members of the faculty and particularly with some of his graduate students about the idea. I said that would be fine because he wanted to see what foreign students particularly would think about the idea. And out of this came a memorandum which Hayes and I later sent to Cox and to Sorensen. I don’t know the whole background or the many forces and factors that made the Peace Corps, and I assume this was only one small bit in terms of the many other people like Congressman Reuss [Henry S. Reuss] and Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] and a number of other people who were thinking about the same idea. I have no way of knowing what part the memorandum played,

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for instance, in the speech made by President Kennedy in California during the campaign in which he came out with that idea. I did telephone to Mike Feldman in California right before

Kennedy made that speech expressing what was in the memo. Whether the speech had already been written when I talked to him or whether my telephone call did have some part to play in reaffirming the interest in that, I don't know.

Suffice it to say that as a result of Hayes' and my participation in this, the idea began to be talked about on the University of Michigan campus, and it spread like wildfire. And a good many people, including faculty members, students as well as Millie Jeffries [Mildred Jeffrey] who was on the Michigan Youth Commission and who was Democratic National Committeewoman and was very influential in those groups, were enthusiastic about it

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and as a result, subsequently, when President Kennedy came to the Ann Arbor campus, he came out in support of the Peace Corps and students' interest in it. The Ann Arbor discussions on the Peace Corps came to be a rather significant point. I kept somewhat apart from the whole aspect of the Peace Corps—it was not one of my primary program interests. I never really worked on it intensively, but one day in 1962, when I was in Ted Sorensen's office in the White House, at the end of a conversation we had had on other substantive matters, he turned to me when everyone else had left and asked whether I had ever claimed to have had a role in the basic development of the Peace Corps idea. I was very much taken aback at this moment because that was the last thing that was on my mind. I said to him that I had never

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made such a claim, but I briefly told him of my work with Sam Hayes and Archibald Cox in 1960 and the telephone call to Mike Feldman in California. He then said to me that I should be very careful not to claim having had any significant role in the development of the Peace Corps idea because President Kennedy wouldn't like it. I left the conversation with a very strange feeling about the whole matter because I didn't know whether this was something that had come to the President's attention or to Sorensen's attention or whether somebody else had made some statement that magnified my role in it or had said something which I didn't say. But in any case, I don't know what my contribution was in this whole Peace Corps idea, but I'm sure that it was part of a very small piece of the complete picture.

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After the campaign was over in 1960, the President devoted himself to the task of how to formulate legislative recommendations in all the programs he had discussed and since there was another party in power in the White House he couldn't easily turn to the experts in the executive branch. He thus was in the position where he had to formulate his own recommendations free from and independent from access to all sources of extensive information. It was on this basis that I think the President finally decided to establish a number of task forces and I was asked to be the chairman of the Task Force on Health and Social Security.



It was Myer Feldman who called me on the phone in Ann Arbor about this matter and I said that I would be very happy to do anything that the President wanted me to do.

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Later on I had some discussions with Mr. Sorensen about it. I was free to appoint the members of the committee that I wanted and I made some suggestions which were approved. Subsequently, I got a call from Mr. Feldman asking me whether I would be willing to include two other people that the President would like to have on the task force. I said without even discussing the names, "Well, of course, if the President wants two people on the task force that's perfectly all right with me." It turned out that I didn't know the other two. One was Dr. Robert E. Cooke, a pediatrician from Johns Hopkins University, and the other was Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel prize winner from the University of California. I didn't ask at the time why these two people were being put on the task force but it turned out that this had a very significant factor in the whole development

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of subsequent legislation in the Kennedy Administration. The reason they were put on had to do with the interest of the President's family in mental retardation. I did not know this at the time, but this matter unfolded later and was the basis for including in our recommendations the recommendation for the establishment of a new National Child Health Institute that would deal with all the problems that involved child growth and development, including mental retardation. This obviously was due to the great interest particularly of the Kennedy foundation [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation] which spent a lot of money in the field of mental retardation and because of the special interest of Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] and Eunice Kennedy Shriver as growing out of the fact that Rosemary [Rosemary Kennedy], one of the Kennedy girls, had been mentally retarded and was in an institution.

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The Task Force that was appointed met a number of times. We tried to canvass a wide area of subjects. We had no staff people to do the work. As the chairman of the committee, I was the chairman, the executive director, and the secretary. While we attempted to contact various people, including people I knew in the government, we basically attempted to review materials that we knew were available from various sources and made our recommendations. I did arrange meetings with Dr. Burney, the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service, and Mr. Mitchell, the Commissioner of Social Security, and other people whom I knew and who were willing to give us their views.

While we had access to a considerable amount of information, I'm emphasizing the point that this was not the kind of a task

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force that developed position papers on a vast number of subjects, but we more or less took our accumulated knowledge and experience and tried to build our recommendations out of them. This we did. A great many of them were later accepted by President Kennedy and enacted into law. Some of them have not been enacted into law at this date, but I consider the work on that task force as exceedingly interesting and significant because it resulted in establishing framework of much that President Kennedy tried to do.

Certainly one of the major recommendations of that task force was the "Medicare" proposal which became a great controversial issue in the Kennedy Administration. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development was established. The Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents was accomplished, as were other recommendations dealing with child welfare

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medical education, etc.

The President received many of these task force reports (perhaps all of them, I don't know) but my time to give him the task force report was initially scheduled for Friday, January 6, at 12:30 p.m., but it was ultimately changed to Tuesday, January 10, at 10:00 a.m. at the Hotel Carlyle in New York. I went up there the night before with a mimeographed copy of my report and registered at the hotel. When I came down in the morning I found that President-elect Kennedy also had an appointment that morning with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt]. She and I rode up and down in the elevator several times together and obviously my appointment was delayed as a result of the meeting he had with her. There were lots of reporters in the downstairs lobby. Finally, I went to the

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meeting with President-elect Kennedy accompanied by Secretary-designate Ribicoff [Abraham Alexander Ribicoff]. We had to wait quite a while for the President in his apartment. He was running behind in his appointments. And while we were waiting for the President, Mr. Ribicoff talked with me as he had several times before about the possibility of the President appointing me to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. I had had such discussions with him and with Mr. Sorensen, but no particular commitment had been made during this time. Various ideas had been explored from time to time, and no definite commitment was made at that time. However, Ribicoff had said to me that he was very much impressed with the statement I had made in Washington during a previous conversation I had with him that before he considered me for any

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appointment in the Department he should know that I was a very controversial figure in the field of Health and Social Security because of my strong views on the expansion of the program and that I thought that it was best that he and the President shouldn't consider me for such a post because of the opposition to my views. And he said to me that he liked my frankness. Because of the very fact that I was so frank he felt that he would discuss with the

President appointing me as Assistant Secretary of the Department or some other position. I told him that I would not consider the position of Commissioner of Social Security but only the Assistant Secretary position. I did not tell him that the reason I wouldn't consider being Commissioner of Social Security was that a personal friend of mine was already the Commissioner and that

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I didn't want to be in the position of having to force out or demote a man whom I had known for twenty years for me to take the position.

I had sent to Ted Sorensen a copy of my task force report on Friday, January 6. When Mr. Ribicoff and I saw the President, Ted Sorensen and Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] were also with us. As soon as I handed him a copy of the report the President said the one thing he didn't want to repeat was the situation in connection with the Education Task Force report submitted by Mr. Frederick Hovde, president of Purdue University, where the papers played up the enormous billion dollar cost of all their recommendations. I thought this was significant because the President didn't like these big cost figures. He didn't want the idea getting over that he was a man who was just interested in

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spending a lot of money. The President looked at my report very briefly. He suggested that for publication we omit the last three recommendations in the report so that the newspapers would concentrate on the health and recommendations relating to "Medicare." So between Salinger and Sorensen and myself we took a number of copies of the report and tore off the pages that related to the last three recommendations so that they could be distributed immediately to the press. What we forgot is that the front part of the report talked about these last three recommendations and any newspaperman who read it carefully could see that something was missing. We did get a number of questions concerning that but were able to dodge answering exactly why this had been done. The President scanned my report very

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briefly by flipping over the pages, as he typically did, reading very quickly and getting the gist of it.

When I went down to the lobby of the hotel, I was surrounded by newspaper people. I was asked a lot of questions and later had a press conference in which I told about the recommendations and Mr. Ribicoff saying that they would be received and studied but didn't make any commitment on them. And then a short time later, I went back on the President's plane, the *Caroline*, with the President, with Ted Sorensen and as I recall, several other people on the plane, but the only one that I recall who was on that plane was George Kennan [George Frost Kennan] from Princeton University who was later designated the Ambassador to Yugoslavia. Kennan and I had a brief

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conversation in which he talked about the importance of Medicare and I talked about the importance of foreign policy which I think is a typical type of discussion that you might find in the Kennedy Administration.

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

COHEN: The task force which I headed included six other members: Dr. Dean Clark, Dr. James Dixon, and Herman M. Somers; the two members that had been suggested by Feldman, Dr. Robert E. Cooke and Joshua Lederberg. I had suggested that Elizabeth Wickenden be named a consultant to the task force, but as our work on the task force progressed, I included her as a full fledged member of the task force. Miss Wickenden, whose married name is Mrs. Arthur Goldschmidt, was a very good friend of Lyndon B. Johnson. I had known her for many years. Her participation on the task

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force acted somewhat as a bridge between the people who were Johnson people and those who were Kennedy people.

During the time that I was acting as chairman of the Kennedy Task Force on Health and Social Security I received an invitation from President Eisenhower to attend the White House Conference on Aging on January 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, 1961. I don't know the exact reason why I received such an invitation but after thinking it over, in mid-December 1960 I wrote to President Eisenhower expressing my doubts as to the advisability of attending the conference on the ground that the conference was stacked by groups of people and individuals opposing Kennedy's recommendation for hospital insurance through Social Security. I did not consult with anyone about sending my letter to President Eisenhower. I had

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been growing more troubled over the fact that if the conference came out with a recommendation against hospital insurance through Social Security just before President Kennedy took office and just before my task force report was to be published, it would be a blow against the recommendations that I strongly believed in. Somehow through some process that I am not aware of, Eve Edstrom, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, was able to find out about it through the Federal Security Agency, and it was released in Washington with a reply from former Congressman Robert Keen, Conference Chairman, whom I had known when he was a member of the House Committee on Ways and Means. My letter and the reply became a minor newspaper item and, of course, there was a lot of consideration about what this all meant. I

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happened to mention it when I was in an automobile riding with both Ted Sorensen and Ribicoff a few days after the whole matter came out in the newspaper. I was rather surprised

that they expressed rather strong dissatisfaction with my action. I don't know exactly what the reasons were in their minds. I got the definite feeling that neither of them wanted to have anything done that would seem to disturb the image of the Kennedy Administration and to be sure that nobody else got any kind of public attention or rocked the boat. In any case, I don't know exactly what was in the back of their minds but I was to see this same feature a number of times in both Sorensen and Ribicoff during the following months. They were always extremely apprehensive about anyone in the Kennedy Administration seeming to

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provoke a controversy or in any way to zoom to take some action which might seem to commit the President. I wasn't able to go to the White House conference when it opened because of my appointment with President-elect Kennedy at the Carlyle Hotel in New York on Tuesday, January 10, 1961, in order to present my task force report to him. I did put in an appearance at the White House Conference on Aging on Thursday, January 12, when I returned to Washington.

In connection with the preparation of the task force report, I did arrange for a meeting in Hartford, Connecticut, in which members of the task force were able to discuss in a preliminary way the recommendations with Mr. Ribicoff who was then still governor of Connecticut. And it was also arranged that Ted Sorensen would

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come up from Florida and participate in the discussions. I think this turned out to be a rather important session. In a way it was more important than the final submittal of the written report because the oral discussions that took place enabled Ribicoff to be briefed on a number of matters and to gain some kind of a consensus between Ribicoff, Sorensen, and myself which stood us in good stead in the ensuing weeks and months as we developed the policy papers, the presidential messages, and the legislation to implement the Kennedy program.

An interesting point which occurred during those discussions was that when I told Ribicoff that the Medicare proposal that had been introduced by Kennedy as a senator in 1960 provided for the benefits to begin at age 68, Ribicoff replied that he had campaigned with Kennedy all during the campaign in favor of benefits beginning

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at 65, and he had never even heard before that the Kennedy proposal began at age 68. He was always vigorously in favor of the benefits beginning at 65, but I always thought it was interesting that the man who became Secretary had not known about one of the most important details of the proposals which Kennedy had proposed while he was Senator.

I did not know really until sometime in January that Mr. Ribicoff and President Kennedy were going to designate me as the Assistant Secretary for Legislation in Health, Education, and Welfare. But I knew that my nomination would be subject to possibly opposition and even debate as turned out to be the case. So I touched base with a number of

people both before and after my nomination. Before the President announced my appointment, I

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telephoned Lloyd Rader [Lloyd E. Rader], the Oklahoma Director of Public Welfare, who was a good friend of Senator Robert S. Kerr [Robert Kerr] of Oklahoma, and asked him to get in touch with Senator Kerr as to what he thought about the President nominating me for this position. I did this because Kerr was an influential member of the Senate Finance Committee which would handle my nomination, and also because he had been the main opponent to the Medicare proposal in the Senate and had been this coauthor of the Kerr-Mills Bill which had been used to oppose President Kennedy's Medicare plan in 1960. Mr. Rader called me back very shortly after I talked with him and said that Senator Kerr would wholeheartedly support my nomination. This turned out to be very important, as I thought it would be, because opposition to my nomination would come primarily from medical

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associations as well as others who had supported Kerr as against Senator Kennedy.

Mr. Ribicoff asked me who he should check with regarding my nomination, and I suggested Senator Kerr as well as Senator Harry F. Byrd [Harry F. Byrd, Sr.], the chairman of the Finance Committee, as well as Chairman Wilbur D. Mills [Wilbur Mills] of the Ways and Means Committee. Ribicoff reported back that Senator Byrd had said that I was an honest and frank man. Kerr and Mills told him that I would be controversial, but I was the right man for the job. I went to see Senator Byrd myself a few days after the Inauguration to pay a courtesy call on him. The visit was somewhat formal. Senator Byrd talked most of the time, and I said very little. But the fact of the matter is that when the nomination came before the committee, Senator Byrd did support me and only

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Senator Carl Curtis of Nebraska publicly opposed me.

As I expected, my nomination was opposed by a number of medical people, and there was public opposition to my nomination by Mrs. Margery Shearon, who testified at length against me in the public hearings. Senators Kerr, Anderson [Clinton P. Anderson], and Douglas all came to my support. The written transcript of the hearings will show a good deal of opposition from the radical right to my nomination, including people who were in Birch Society clubs and the like.

The more important opposition, of course, came behind the scene. Dr. Anis [Edward R. Anis], from Florida, an influential doctor in the A.M.A. [American Medical Association], who later became President of the A.M.A., went to see Senator George Smathers [George A. Smathers] of Florida, who was a member of the Senate Finance Committee. I learned that Senator

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Smathers had had a conversation with Republican Senator Carl Curtis [Carl T. Curtis] and Chairman Harry F. Byrd and had suggested or discussed the possibility of the President withdrawing my nomination and giving me an appointment doing the same work but one which would not require Senate approval. When I heard this, I told it to Ted Sorensen. Subsequently, Sorensen told me that he told it to President Kennedy and that President Kennedy was extremely annoyed about the whole thing and had telephoned his old friend, Senator Smathers, and in a kind of hard boiled, indignant kind of way told Smathers to drop the whole idea and to see that my appointment was confirmed by the Senate.

Sometime later I met John O'Keefe, Senator Smathers' administrative assistant, on the street outside the Senate Office Building, and I casually and unpremeditatedly

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asked, "What does your boss have against me?" And O'Keefe said, "Why, he doesn't have anything against you, Wilbur." But as a result of this conversation, O'Keefe called me and said that Senator Smathers asked me to come to his office, which I did a few days later. Senator Smathers was most friendly. He said he not only had nothing against me but would support me. He said he had told Dr. Anis not to oppose my nomination because I would be confirmed anyhow by the Senate, and that if any medical care bill of any kind was ever passed, I would be called upon by Senator Kerr and Senator Smathers to do the drafting. Senator Smathers was as good as his word because Dr. Anis later published an article in which, while of course he didn't support me, he took my appointment for granted, and Smathers later supported my nomination

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not only in the committee but voted for me on the Senate floor.

My nomination went to the Senate on March 14, the public hearings were held on March 23, and the Senate confirmed me on April 6. Senate approval of my nomination delayed until Easter Week. The Senate Finance Committee had approved my nomination by a 13 to 1 vote with Carl Curtis in opposition. I was cross examined at length by Senator Curtis on my views on Social Security, poverty and welfare. When my nomination was brought up on the Senate floor as a "non-controversial" item which would not be voted on during Easter Week, most of the Senators were absent. Senator Curtis spoke in opposition and then unexpectedly Republican Senator John Williams [John Bell Williams] called for a vote. Only Senator Humphrey was on the floor. Mrs. Elizabeth Springer, the clerk

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of the committee, ran out to the Democratic cloakroom and was only able to recruit Senators Smathers, Holland [Spessard Lindsey Holland], and Mansfield [Mike Mansfield]. I was confirmed by a vote of 4 to 3 with Senators Curtis, Williams of Delaware, and Aiken [George D. Aiken] of Vermont voting against me. It probably would not have occurred if

President Kennedy had not personally participated to the extent of having talked to or called Senator Smathers to indicate his personal wish that I be confirmed.

President Kennedy never said a word to me about it. He never said a word to me about my nomination or my confirmation or about my views on the matter, but I took this illustration to be indicative of the confidence that the President had in me and the support he was willing to give people to whom he gave responsibility.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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April 20, 1981

Professor Hugh Davis Graham  
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Dear Dr. Graham:

This is in response to your letter of April 15.

I would like to say first that I think you would get a much better response to your questions by talking with Sam Halperin. I think he developed a better insight into Mrs. Green and Adam Clayton Powell than I did. They still remain enigmas to me. But for some light on these people, I will contribute a few comments.

Mrs. Green was a brilliant and hard working person. In my opinion, she wanted to be the "queen" of education legislation just as Adam Clayton Powell wanted to be the "king." They both had an image of their hopes and aspirations to be the "leaders" of education legislation just as did several others on the Committee. To assert this leadership they had to maintain a posture that sometimes defied explanation.

I believe Mrs. Green wanted to be Secretary of HEW. She thought her support of Kennedy in the Oregon primary gave her the entree to that position. When Secretary Ribicoff resigned in 1962, I think Mrs. Green hoped and expected to be appointed the Secretary. President Kennedy questioned me about her potentiality as Secretary at the time so I conclude there must have been some reality to her consideration for that post. I think the fact she was not appointed by President Kennedy resulted in her being more difficult in the 1963 handling of education legislation.

I can only add that from my close working relationship with Senator Wayne Morse on the education legislation, he also found it difficult to work cooperatively and constructively with Mrs. Green. This view was substantiated by my friends in Oregon (Mr. and Mrs. Norman Stoll). You should inquire of persons on the Committee then such as former Congressman Frank Thompson and John Brademas of their views. Since they are no longer in Congress, they may be willing to talk about both Mrs. Green and Mr. Powell.

Dr. Hugh Davis Graham  
April 20, 1981  
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My reference to how Adam Clayton Powell "goofed up" related to a second try on an education bill compromise in either 1961 or 1962. We had lost the first round and I came back with a second revised attempt which Powell rushed into a vote without adequate consultation and preparation. I don't recall the details just now since it occurred twenty years ago.

I also suggest you talk to Francis Keppel about Green and Powell.

The two persons who were most cooperative in helping us to handle education legislation were Wayne Morse and Carl Perkins.

One little anecdote. After the 1961 defeat of the education legislation in the House Rules Committee with Congressman Delaney the Chairman voting against us, President Kennedy called me in to the Oval Office and during the discussion of what we should do he said, "Wilbur, why couldn't you get one more Republican on the Rules Committee to vote with us?" Impetuously and somewhat annoyed, I retorted: "Mr. President, why can't you get one more Catholic?" The President shrugged his shoulders, half-smiled and dropped further discussion. We then went on to consider other alternatives.

Yours truly,



Wilbur J. Cohen  
Sid W. Richardson Professor  
of Public Affairs

WJC:pwj