

Norman Nicholson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/19/1970
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Biographical Note

Norman Nicholson (1923-1972) was a member of the President's Commission on the Status of Women in 1962 and a member of the Citizen's Advisory Council to the Interdepartmental Commission on the Status of Women from 1963 to 1966. This interview focuses on Nicholson's time serving on the Commission on the Status of Women, the Equal Opportunities Committee, and the Missile Sites Labor Commission, among other topics.

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Norman Nicholson– JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

NORMAN NICHOLSON

November 18⁹, 1970
Oakland, California

By Ann M. Campbell

For the John F. Kennedy Library

CAMPBELL: Mr. Nicholson, maybe we could start by asking you to just briefly describe your career before 1961. How did you happen to reach the position you were in, being with the administration, which got you involved in the administration activities?

NICHOLSON: I spent sixteen years with the press, the latter twelve of which in Detroit for United Press, ^[INTERNATIONAL] Newsweek, and Time Incorporated. In that capacity I got to know Edgar Kaiser, who then was president of the real and only major industrial failures of the Kaiser empire, i.e. Kaiser-Frazer Automobiles at Willow Run. And

I watched him agonizingly go through the whole thing, desperately trying to get money, trying to take on General Motors, ^[CORPORATION] Ford, ^[Motor Company] Chrysler, ^[CORPORATION] and so forth, and reported same, including all the failures. One time he told me--this was about 1950--^{I WAS} at a party at a Kaiser executive's home, he was chatting with my wife and I, and he asked me if I could be teased into becoming the youngest vice president in the history of the automobile industry by going to work for Kaiser-Frazer, "which unfortunately," he said, "you have reported as a failure. I'll tell you this off the record. We're going to buy Willys-Overland and go into the Jeep business when we get out of this, and a new winter and summer and we'll see." At that time I still had the press in my blood and wanted to stay with the press, flattered as I was, and I said no. And in 1958, after telling the managing editor of Time to go to hell on the telephone, I just resigned flat. He said, "If you ever change your mind, let

me know." This was a good nine years later, and I got him out of a meeting in New York, asked him if he remembered me. He did, fortunately for me, and said, "You're on." I didn't know what that meant, but I came out here in due course time and became assistant to him, and in that capacity worked with him in settling the steel strike of 1959, some political Bay area politics, mostly of a non-partisan nature. I did a bewildering series of things, running around the world with and for him, traveled with him a great deal. I guess it became logical when he was tapped, in the early days of the Kennedy Administration, on three presidential commissions. This was done through Arthur Goldberg--one, as an envoy of the President before he became Secretary of Labor, talent scout, so to speak. ^{Exploratory talent scout} Then as Secretary of Labor, Edgar Kaiser became a member of three presidential commissions, which was unique, apparently, for any one person. And the understanding that Edgar Kaiser had

with Arthur Goldberg was they needed his name--his, the Kaiser name--because, at least we understood it from this end, that Mr. Kennedy was having trouble getting prominent business people attached to his commission efforts in these important fields. And that's why, I think, Edgar Kaiser was tapped three times rather than ^{ONE TIME} once. The deal was that I would attend the meetings, be his representative, and do "the work", with getting Mr. Kaiser's support when I needed it.

CAMPBELL: I've prepared sort of a list of separate questions about the commissions, then maybe we can put them together and discuss it in general. Had the particular problems of women in American society been of interest to Kaiser industries, or was this appointment just simply another singling out of Mr. Kaiser?

NICHOLSON: I think so. Mr. Kaiser does have--as his father did before him--a reputation of being a progressive man, a twentieth century man, not just looking backwards, but looking forwards

and believing, as he often says in his public speeches, and was saying at that time, that if business doesn't help me change--which is a recurrent theme of Edgar Kaiser's--then it has no right to complain about big government taking over things. If we don't step up to it--not just one company but business in general--then don't bitch, so to speak, when you get all these federal regulations, executive orders and so forth. So he had been on that platform, but to your specific point of progress of women, no, I would say that had not been a strong point of Kaiser, particularly because of the basic businesses we were in. Women, generally speaking, to this day don't have a major role in steel-making, and thus don't get promoted in steel-making, because it's dangerous, tough work. In some jobs you've got to be two hundred pounds and be strong as an ox to--and you're playing with white hot metal, so. . . . Also we're basically constructors, builders, contractors, and in most

of our building camps and outlying places are really rough stuff, and you don't go around hiring women bulldozer operators, and so forth. If you did, you'd have to have separate but equal facilities, which would be ~~getting~~^{damn} costly. So no, I would have to say that ~~that~~^{people} Kaiser had not had a record of finding capable women, employing them and putting them into jobs and so forth.

CAMPBELL: ~~Yes~~^{Yeah}. When you were first contacted about this commission, and perhaps attended the beginning meeting, did you feel that there was a general sense, a general understanding of what they hoped to accomplish?

NICHOLSON: No. In fact, we had a great deal of fun, because this, I thought--and still do--and I asked to get off this commission--not the commission but the interdepartmental committee, which I resigned from . . .

CAMPBELL: Did you indeed? That was . . .

NICHOLSON: . . . in candor, because I told the Vice President--or then President--Johnson in the letter--

which he responded to rather ^{early} quickly I might suggest--that I was far more interested, had a track record in, and was going to continue my work in equal employment opportunity, in the broadest sense of the word, minorities, and that the women's fight--although I was sympathetic to many parts of it--was not my particular cup of tea, and I'd rather devote my efforts corporately and personally to equal employment opportunity in the broader ^{est} sense.

CAMPBELL: Did it become clear, as the work of this commission progressed, if there was a real desire to promote specific legislation, or was the intent just to sort of highlight problems, perhaps educate the public?

NICHOLSON: In retrospect I think it probably was courageous. Right now a ~~President~~ of the United States couldn't have such a showcase committee and get away with it, because of the intelligent growing movement. I don't mean the fem lib types who don't admit they're women. This is the strange thing that I think most women

disagree with, and I know most men do. But there is an increased awareness that women's economic and legal rights are not--that they are being discriminated against in the fullest sense of the word, and this is wrong. And at that time in the early '60's, it was pretty courageous of Kennedy to have such a committee, even though those of us on it who were reasonably sophisticated knew it was showcase, and that it couldn't accomplish that much. But it did give any important women in the United States, who had strong feelings, a vehicle to get into the White House, to make their views known. And we were hampered, frankly, quite a bit because Mrs. [Anna Eleanor] Roosevelt was the chair. She was a charming lady, but she was quite deaf at the time, didn't chair an effective meeting. Esther Peterson did everything she could to move it, make it work, but we all had to--and properly so--bow kind of to Mrs. Roosevelt.

CAMPBELL: Did you sense a potential for cooperation

between the Women's Commission and the ~~Pres-~~
 ident's Committee on Equal Employment Oppor-
 tunity?

NICHOLSON: No, there was no link-up between them. ^{philosophical} ~~That's~~
~~how clear~~ ^{there} it was, and I was on both committees
 and . . .

CAMPBELL: I know.

NICHOLSON: So we didn't--I think most people kind of, oh
 well, to be blunt, said, "Well, President
 Kennedy thinks this is intelligent to have at
 this time. It's not an action committee."
 We're now talking about the ~~President's~~ Com-
 mission on the Status of Women. "But we'll
 vocalize the problem. We'll get a report out.
 We'll show ~~Administration~~ intent at least, and
 interest, and maybe buy some time on that sub-
 ject." But again I'm trying to get into per-
 spective that at that time it was a leadership
 role, whereas today such a tame commission
 probably would not be accepted^{able}.

CAMPBELL: Well, you've discussed a little bit your . . .

NICHOLSON: And unfortunately there was only one business

person on the committee--that was me--and one labor guy, [William F.] Bill Schnitzler, the number two man in the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations]. We were terribly outnumbered, the men on the committee. Senator [Maurine B.] Neuberger particularly was after me all the time saying, "I want to hear, Madam Chairman, from Mr. Nicholson what business is going to do, how soon Kaiser is going to have a woman vice president," and so forth and so on. And I said, "I hope to have a black vice president at Kaiser before we have a woman vice president." She even called ^{EDGAR} Mr. Kaiser to complain ^{about me} that I was being negative. But she wanted me to speak for the whole business community, and I said, "Look, I can't even speak for all ^{of} the Kaiser companies on this subject, ma'am." It was kind of a

. Several of us on it decided-- and we never fulfilled our promise--to write a musical comedy about it, because it would

have been funnier.

CAMPBELL: You're the first man that I've interviewed about the commission, and your perspective is different. It's a very interesting one.

NICHOLSON: Next to Esther Peterson, whom I admire and like, and thought was very sincere, the great majority of women on the commission were not realists, ^{they} ^{were} not pragmatists. With one exception, there wasn't an attractive woman on the commission. I mean, we should have had a belly dancer or something just to add some class.

CAMPBELL: To hear from another quarter. How about Dr. [Richard A.] Lester's role. There at least was a man, and his title was ~~Executive~~ Vice Chairman or something. Did he play an active role?

NICHOLSON: Oh yes. But he was kind of overwhelmed, I think, by the whole procedure and by Mrs. Roosevelt, whom we all had to--when I say this I don't mean it negatively--we had to bow to out of respect. But it was difficult, even

when we were getting to a point in a meeting, because she couldn't hear, and she just kept saying in her nice voice, "Oh, how wonderful. Very interesting." She really hadn't heard what the subject was, so she wasn't. . . . Dick Lester/^{who} was a gentle man, a little bit awed by being Vice chairman to her, I would assume, didn't want to interrupt and say, "Well come now, we're on this point," and so forth, because it would have been taken possibly as an insult or implied insult to Mrs. Roosevelt. ~~But~~ because of her position nobody was going to think so.

CAMPBELL: Do you have any particular recollections of sessions of the committee, anything that stands out in your mind?

NICHOLSON: One, there were too many women involved. There was a lot of intellectual flow, academicia, rather than reality. I think to be more active there should have been ^{actual} more people from labor and more people from the businesses. Because if there is--and there is--economic discrimination

against women in their promotability, it's primarily in business. What it did do, I think, more than anything else it moved government agencies. There was enough fire in there, enough leadership quotient, and I think the figures would prove this, that it gave the intelligent women activists--the Women's Bureau, the Department of Labor and other places--to move. It gave them clout to move. I think it helped--and government does lead out. Government leads out in equal employment opportunity of blacks, for example, as it does in women. So I would say its initial accomplishment was to move the government itself, through the vehicle of having a commission.

CAMPBELL: Yes. Now you were on a separate committee that concerned itself with--well I think it began to be called the Committee on Government Contracts and later the name was changed to Committee on Private Employment. Did that committee meet as a separate entity very much?

NICHOLSON: It wasn't very active.

CAMPBELL: It wasn't very active. I came across some . . .

NICHOLSON: Well, I was always inhibited, because I couldn't guarantee these women militants--no matter how right they might have been--any cooperation from Kaiser at that . . . So then I couldn't speak for business, because I couldn't really promise major movement ⁱⁿ ~~from~~ Kaiser. And I was constantly on the spot from, you know, presidents of female colleges, from Senator Neuberger and the like. "What are you going to do?" Meaning not me personally, but as business, since I was the only business guy there.

CAMPBELL: It's a difficult position. I just discovered, in a summary of that particular committee's discussion, that there seemed to be some concern about a potential executive order, that the President could put out. I believe the committee recommended what could fairly be called an executive order without teeth, and Caroline Ware, who was labor--UAW ^{INTERNATIONAL UNION OF} [Automobile,

~~Aircraft~~^{AEROSPACE} and Agricultural Implement Workers of America] I think, Dr. Caroline Ware wrote some sort of dissenting opinion, ^{legally} that this wasn't adequate. Was this the sort of thing that had really been hashed out in a committee session?

NICHOLSON: I think we agreed that if we could say some things ^{IN AGREEMENT} which we did, ~~(in other words)~~ this includes the men on the committee, myself included, ~~;~~ did agree that women should have every right to exploit every talent they have in the business world and be recognized for same, and that this was not the case, and we were distressed at this, and felt that should be corrected. It is now being corrected by executive orders and so forth. We felt also--and I shared this feeling strongly and could happily sign--that women in some states, particularly, were very legally discriminated against, particularly some of the Southern states, i.e. couldn't be on a jury, which made no sense. And those kind of things we were

in--there was no question about unanimity of feeling. We dropped the unanimity when it comes to, "Okay, how tough are we going to get about this," or, "How tough, not are we going to get, how tough are we going to urge the President of the United States to get?" It was an educational process, out of which, as you know, came--I don't know how many there are now--many state commissions on the status of women. So it did result in that. It did focused educational attention on the problem in--I think it's fair to say--a not too militant way, a fairly tame way, but at least focused on it.

CAMPBELL: Were you involved at all--I sense there was a delicate issue in family planning in this commission, maybe an overconcern for the President's feelings about family planning. Were you involved in that back and forth at all?

NICHOLSON: Not too much.

CAMPBELL: Did you feel there was utility in extending

the life of the commission into this Citizens' Advisory Council business?

NICHOLSON: I very frankly thought that was showcase and that's when I resigned. I didn't think it could accomplish anything at that point, that hadn't been accomplished. And as I said, most honestly, I was more interested in equal employment opportunity, and other activities to me had a higher priority in the American system. My friend Eileen Hernandez still doesn't agree with me.

CAMPBELL: Let's move on to the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Again, do you recall the initial contact about this group, which was set up in the spring of 1961?

NICHOLSON: All of the contacts, vis-a-vis me at least, came directly to Edgar Kaiser, to my knowledge all from Arthur Goldberg, rather than from the President.

CAMPBELL: What were your early impressions of the membership of this committee?

NICHOLSON: I was quite impressed.

CAMPBELL: And do you feel that at the outset there was a rather clear understanding of what the mandate was?

NICHOLSON: Well, an awful lot clearer than it had been under [Dwight D.] Eisenhower's executive order, with [Richard M.] Nixon serving as chair, of then a ~~President's~~ Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, which obviously did nothing and had no mandate to do ^{anything} ~~it~~. We felt, on the committee--and we had reason to from the ~~President~~ of the United States, from Vice President Johnson who chaired, from [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy the Attorney General, from other people--that ^{YEAH} ~~yes~~, they wanted to get something done here. It wasn't a showcase.

CAMPBELL: Was there an initial feeling among some private members of the committee that Vice President Johnson might be reluctant to back this thing?

NICHOLSON: I felt just the contrary. I felt that he, under some difficulties, exerted a tremendous

amount of quiet leadership, more so, I felt-- right or wrong, this was just a personal feeling--than President Kennedy was showing publicly. And I did not have access to his private views on this. I'm talking about in that context at that time of history, Johnson was Mr. Visible. Johnson was ^{SAYING} taking the tough ~~ones~~ ^{things}, and particularly noticeable because he was a Southerner, and from whence he'd come.

CAMPBELL: How about your general impressions of the early operations of the committee? There have been some suggestions that agendas weren't made available to you people, and there was a question of how funds would be gained, and that perhaps some private members felt they weren't fully participating.

NICHOLSON: I didn't really share that opinion. A lot of this comes from the very bitter feud between John Feild and Vice President Johnson. He took on the Vice President, and you don't take on the Vice President of the United States

on the front page of the New York Times and expect to--not just a question of survival as a person--as an effective participant with the ~~Vice~~ President in any activity. Feild and some others--^{our}~~an~~ Episcopalian dean . . .

CAMPBELL: Dean [Francis B., Jr.] Sayre.

NICHOLSON: . . . were very suspicious. I think John Feild unnecessarily--even though I like John personally and still see him socially--I think he got himself in an emotional bind. He was talking--while ~~Executive~~ Director of the committee--was talking it down. I think he was strong for the Kennedys, but he had doubts about Lyndon Johnson because of their personal lack of being able to get along, consequent challenge type of situation rather than cooperative. He didn't help any to this point. In other words he was lobbying really against Johnson, or the efficacy of Johnson, which I didn't share, though I shared some of his feelings.

CAMPBELL: What was your perception of the early effectiveness

and sort of role of Robert Troutman?

NICHOLSON: I thought he was terrible.

CAMPBELL: Did you? Could you explain in what way?

NICHOLSON: Well, I really got to know some of his activities at the very beginnings of Plans for Progress. He invented the name Plans for Progress. He, to my knowledge, got Lockheed ^[A major corporation] to sign the first Plans for Progress "document" out of Marietta, Georgia. Then he was kind of given his head to get, enlist other major corporations in this voluntary movement, which at that time was very controversial. I saw great promise in it. I believed in Johnson sincerely at that time--and Hobart Taylor as for that matter--and saw this as a tremendous weapon. Because when you can get Edgar Kaiser to sign a document to the President of the United States saying, "Hey, we in Kaiser, all of our plants in thirty states and so forth, are going to try a hell of a lot better. We're going to start an affirmative action program." This I know worked in Kaiser. Matter of fact,

our chief executive officer signed it. So while it was being at that time, the Urban League, Whitney Young was dinging Plants for Progress as a showcase business, a government phony, as Roy Wilkins was, the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. And they came in a year's time to change their mind, by the way. I was for Plants for Progress, and I thought Troutman was hurting it. Troutman is a promoter. Troutman would go see, say, the president of General Electric, to get him to sign the document, kind of winking--I was told by people who were there--that, "Hey, won't you sign this? It will help the Administration and so forth. And don't worry too much about enforcement." And so I discussed this with Edgar Kaiser, and I thought this was going to wreck, the already controversial embryonic, Plants for Progress, and I thought that would have been a damn shame. So I ^{told Edgar, I was going to} thought ~~maybe I could~~ blow the whistle on this guy, and Edgar said, "If

you know what you're talking about, go ahead."

I talked to Jack Conway, whom I'd known for years in the Detroit days ever since I met Walter Reuther, to, "Let's do something." So we asked for an appointment with the Vice President. He saw us and asked if another party could be in the room, and yes, and that was Mr. [Abraham] Fortas who took notes and

Conway let me do the talking and supported me. I took him through my concerns about problems which, in an already controversial program, if this continued would come down to the embarrassment of the Administration, which I didn't want to see, and frankly more selfishly to the embarrassment of the U.S. business community, which was "in partnership" with government in a unique but, you know, very pioneering and fumbling effort. But I thought it could have the efficacy, but I didn't think it could under Troutman's leadership, AND I NAMED CASES, bing, bing, bing
The Vice President heard me out very carefully

and then said, a bit to my horror, "Would you mind repeating that, just what you said, Mr. Nicholson, in front of another gentleman?" I said, "No sir." He goes out, opens the door and brings in Troutman. So then there's four of us in the room, and I repeated the whole ^{do} thing, and he resigned on the spot.

CAMPBELL: He did?

NICHOLSON: Yes. The ~~Vice~~ President telling him that precipitous action was required. He wasn't urging Mr. Troutman's resignation. "But Mr. Nicholson says and thinks those things about me, and he represents Mr. Kaiser and is supported by Mr. Reuther. I resign, Mr. Vice President." And he did forthwith.

CAMPBELL: Without an adequate response to your charges?

NICHOLSON: He just didn't like the fact that I. . . . My suspicion is that since Johnson didn't defend him on the spot, he sensed that. You know, Johnson certainly wasn't demanding his resignation. He resigned right then and there.

CAMPBELL: Then the story that is published of [Kenneth P.]

Kenny O'Donnell being involved in that resignation is not accurate?

NICHOLSON: It might have been[^] I do not know Mr. O'Donnell's role subsequent or preceding that.

CAMPBELL: Do you recall the chronology? Was the announcement made to the press rather shortly afterward?

NICHOLSON: I just don't recall. He just wasn't around anymore, whereupon Hobart Taylor really emerged as the guy who was running this show.

CAMPBELL: You indicated that this sort of approach that you objected to--is it possible to recall a particular incident in which Mr. Troutman was probably not an effective . . .

NICHOLSON: I don't care to go into specific details that I didn't see personally. I had good information, and I had government employees who were willing to resign if necessary to back my story--which I told the vice President--who had been with him on some of these trips. I didn't like his approach to the committee because I thought, frankly, the issue was too

goddamn serious, that you don't need a promoting Madison Avenue approach to the situation, a showcase approach.

CAMPBELL: How about Robert Kennedy's activities with the committee? Was he active in the early days?

NICHOLSON: Yes. Just one anecdote that really startled me--~~s~~pecifically, and I don't name the date-- I think it might have been the fourth or fifth meeting of the committee, but don't hold me to that. It was early in the committee's activities. He often came in a little bit late to the meetings, you know, with an entourage, Burke Marshall or whoever--showcase, I mean really, a striding entrance. And it was obvious--though I couldn't prove it--there was unspoken hostility between the chairman, Lyndon Johnson, and him. Lyndon Johnson as chairman was always more than courtly and the deep ~~s~~outhern smoothness handled it. But for example one time at X meeting he came in, and was immediately--we were discussing other

points, but the chairman of the committee, Mr. Johnson, immediately gave him the floor. In his sharp ^{and important} voice, he immediately started asking questions. He asked Secretary [Robert S.] McNamara's representative Adam Yarmolinsky, he said, "Mr. Yarmolinsky, how many people does the DOD [Department of Defense] have full time in the field of equal employment opportunity?" And Mr. Yarmolinsky answered--don't hold me to the figure--something like four hundred and sixty-eight, but he named an exact figure in the four hundreds. "Thank you. Excellent. My brother will be very pleased. That's the kind of activity we want, because the government must be a leader in these activities, in business and labor to lead also. Mr. [James E.] Webb, NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration], how many people do you have full time," and very sharply questioned Mr. Webb, "in the field of equal employment opportunity in your agency, sir?" "One and a half. One of my assistants,"

Mr. Webb said, "is full time, and one I believe spends about half his time." "This is disgraceful," Mr. Kennedy rather shrilly took him on and said he was shocked. His brother would be shocked, and he would tell his brother about NASA's lack of interest in this vital Administration program. Webb nearly blew his stack-- I thought ^{there} he was ^{going TO BE A FIST FIGHT.} ~~just going to turn~~ HE TURNED absolutely purple--and demanded the floor again and said, "All of our people in management are active in the field of ~~equal~~ employment opportunity, myself included. I'd rather have all of our people working on it than 468 people full time. So my answer was not disrespectful, sir. And I said one and a half because that's the simple truth of the matter. And now I would ask you, in general, to stack up the NASA record of employment and promotion-- Huntsville, Alabama et cetera, et cetera, et cetera--as against DOD's record, and I think that's where I should be judged on this matter." It was a very sharp interchange, with Mr.

Johnson doing the best he could to defend Mr. Webb, backing his play but letting Webb carry the hostility of the thing, whereupon Kennedy, again expressing his shock--which I thought was unfair because Mr. Webb, to my satisfaction, had explained himself quite well--Kennedy stalks out with his entourage, period. He often made that kind of ten minute appearance at a meeting, very sharp, indicating his brother's very strong support of the committee's work, but then challenging some issue, in a sense often challenging Johnson, or trying to put Johnson on the spot, it appeared to me.

CAMPBELL: Did private members of the committee begin to form some sort of opinion of the, then, Attorney General out of this?

NICHOLSON: Possibly. I wouldn't ^{QUOTE} poll anyone else.

CAMPBELL: I wondered if this sort of participation was welcomed?

NICHOLSON: Well I think so, because I think some of the people like Dean Sayre, who often was the leader of the opposition, were expressing their

lack of belief in the sincerity of the committee's work, and they would applaud such a challenging appearance by Mr. Kennedy.

CAMPBELL: Were you at the meeting which has been reported in published sources at which Dean Sayre made I think an unfavorable report of a Saint Louis regional educational sort of effort?

NICHOLSON: ~~I might.~~ Right

CAMPBELL: Is the report accurate that reports that he was then berated by the ~~Vice~~ President for forty-five minutes?

NICHOLSON: It was a sharp interchange, shall we say, ~~intellectually.~~ AND A LENGTHY ONE.

CAMPBELL: Do you have some recollections of that time when I guess the committee staff rejected the Lockheed report, which then sort of led to Mr. Troutman's negotiations with them and their finally voluntary agreement to ~~I think~~ change?

NICHOLSON: ^{I THINK.} Many of us were on the platform that we had to be action oriented. Now, this is vis-a-vis the Women's Commission. We had to do something.

We had to blow the whistle on some of these companies, especially the early ones who signed the document, pledged affirmative action and weren't moving, that we'd have no efficacy if we didn't blow the whistle.

CAMPBELL: I wondered if you got involved at all--or for example, I think some of the Lockheed negotiations went on in Burbank--were you personally asked to intercede in anything like that?

NICHOLSON: No. When that was delivered, that document, that was a fait accompli, as far as I was concerned.

CAMPBELL: There was also, I think, some criticism that the committee just didn't meet often enough. Do you think that's valid?

NICHOLSON: In retrospect, possibly. But I think a lot of this came because of the internal staff conflicts: Feild versus Hobart Taylor versus Lyndon Johnson. There was a period there of--gee, it seems in retrospect, and you're testing my memory--six months at least of quite a bit of confusion. There was open hostility between

the executive director, Feild, and the ~~vice~~
~~President~~. Now what caused that and what the
background to that was, whether Feild was, in
fact, getting orders from the White House vis-
a-vis as against Johnson, I have no idea. But
there was an unnecessary period it seemed to
me of confusion, and ^{I think} Dean Sayre and some
others on the committee, thus without knowing
the practical politics of what was going on,
felt that the committee was slowing down,
wasn't going to come to grips with the prob-
lem, didn't have efficacy. I think they
honestly did. I happened to know Hobart Taylor
very, very well at the time, and John Feild
very well at the time and was involved per-
sonally, so though I didn't like some of these
unnecessary arguments, I thought the issue was
too important. It's like if you're going into
a war, you and I might not like each other but
if we're in the same company we'd better--if
you're feeding an ammo belt into my machine
gun, stop your hatred for the moment because

here comes the enemy. Let's work together. But I think from their vantage point, such as Dean Sayre, probably was sincere, thinking that

CAMPBELL: You've spoken of your involvement in Mr. Troutman's departure. I wondered if you were involved at all in John Feild's departure, which came along shortly?

NICHOLSON: No. I knew of it, and I knew all the workings, because I was friends with both camps, so to speak. I know that Hobart Taylor would have had John stay on, ^{and} had offered him a job to stay on.

CAMPBELL: I've heard that.

NICHOLSON: I know that ^{to be} ~~is~~ true. But John is a fighting bantam rooster and a likable guy and I'm sure very sincere, but he got a real emotional hang up about this, and he wasn't about to cooperate, period. He thought Hobart was just a smooth phony, you see, and I didn't.

CAMPBELL: What seemed to be the major focus of Feild's objection to. . . .

- NICHOLSON: Well, from conversations with him, I believe that he distrusted the Vice President and the motivation of the Vice President--which he scarcely, he didn't conceal very well.
- CAMPBELL: Were you involved at all in the decision to ask Mr. [Theodore W.] Kheel to come in and do a review, Theodore Kheel, with a sort of analysis of committee operations. I think it was 1962.
- NICHOLSON: I was in favor of it. I mean, I wasn't involved or I wasn't one of the real motivators.
- CAMPBELL: Did you see that as something that could be helpful in straightening out this sort of personnel staff problems of the committee?
- NICHOLSON: More and more I got interested in the Plants for Progress concept. That's what I was pushing and trying to convince people I know, such as Whitney Young, "Hey, give this a fighting chance. This can work." That's the reason I wasn't after Troutman as a guy who was committing illegalities, but I just thought we just couldn't afford that type of leadership at this

tenuous time.

CAMPBELL: He wasn't the appropriate representative.

NICHOLSON: Not because of the _____ by any means,
just because he _____, and you don't
sell a Whitney Young by Madison Avenue stuff.

CAMPBELL: Did you feel that the committee perhaps lost
some clout because it never cancelled a gov-
ernment contract?

NICHOLSON: Several of us would have hoped that we would,
not just to get a patsy, but, I mean, when we
had a real case to do it.

CAMPBELL: Was there any indication that real cases ex-
isted and weren't . . .

NICHOLSON: Newport News.

CAMPBELL: Weren't perceived? ^{WAS} ~~Is~~ this the sort of thing
that was really ever discussed in committee
sessions?

NICHOLSON: Oh yes, but more importantly discussed by
members in their own caucuses.

CAMPBELL: Yes. Did it seem clear that the Administra-
tion was simply just not ready to take on a
Newport News ship-building. . . .

NICHOLSON: But they finally did.

CAMPBELL: ^{Yes} Yes, finally.

NICHOLSON: If I recall, wasn't that the first thing they really publicly leaned on somebody?

CAMPBELL: Yes, but this was I believe after the Kennedy years, I believe.

NICHOLSON: You see in the field of equal employment opportunity I've always been a fan of Lyndon Johnson--not always a fan of his in toto--but I respected his position here. I thought he at that time was giving more public leadership than I'm sure--honestly I'm sure--that John Kennedy would have. But he, one, unfortunately didn't fulfill his term or fulfill his promise. And he was pretty busy on other things at that time.

CAMPBELL: Well, he was. I wondered also if you had a feeling that the Administration should move a little more quickly on civil rights legislation, which, as you know, was really only introduced in 1963.

NICHOLSON: Yes, I did, because as ^{a CITIZEN THAT'S} ~~I said this thing is~~

one of my bags, and I really think this is vital.

CAMPBELL: Yes. Was that the sort of thing you ever discussed with Kennedy people or with people from the White House? I would be interested to know what their response was.

NICHOLSON: No, I didn't know the O'Donnells. At that period, I was working more closely with Johnson's people, ^{with} the George Reedys, with the Hobart Taylors. I knew them much better. Now another--I was also on a fourth one, incidentally, a Presidential task force to create HUD [Housing and Urban Development], recommendations on--it was to be a new agency. How should it be structured? What should its prerogatives and responsibilities be? Edgar Kaiser was appointed to that, and of course I went to all the meetings. These were White House weekends--we spent the weekends in the White House for several months working with [Harry C.] McPherson, with [Joseph A., Jr.] Califano. ^H put again, that was under Johnson.

CAMPBELL: That was under Johnson, yes.

NICHOLSON: And I knew those people quite well. And again Jack Conway and I--because Reuther didn't make those meetings either, and Whitney Young and such--we recommended what HUD should do: demonstration cities and so forth, to Ben Heineman and people like that.

CAMPBELL: Do you have other recollections of the Equal Opportunities Committee? The effectiveness was much greater, I suppose, in your. . . .

NICHOLSON: It was funny, yes. I thought it was a damn important committee and did get a lot of things done, despite the accusations it was moving too slowly, it was afraid to come to grips with an individual company and take them on, because I think Plans for Progress did a hell of a lot of good. If for no other reason, the efficacy of the committee I think was proven by Plans for Progress. Sadly, since then it's been wiped out because we were involved in a merger with NAB, the National Alliance of Businessmen. It was supposed to ^{have} been a

merger of equals, and we got wiped by the Administration--the Plans for Progress types. Because eight of us--there was an operating committee named, eight from NAB, eight from Plans for Progress. They had one meeting thereof, and I spoke to try to preserve some of the long term benefits of Plans for Progress. Plans for Progress, you see, was not a headline making device. We're talking about youth motivation, the educational problem. That's the long term solution, really, and that's what we were working on quietly. We got well over four hundred companies to do this. Okay, maybe only two hundred of them really went to work on it. But that's moving, when you get General Motors moving, when you get Lockheed, Kaiser, General Electric, and moving quietly. We didn't want headlines.

CAMPBELL: Did you find yourself with this more activist committee ever with your loyalties tested? Was it difficult for you as an officer of Kaiser to participate with these things?

NICHOLSON: No. Simultaneously back at the ranch, back in Oakland, I was trying to push Kaiser's equal employment program.

CAMPBELL: How about the Missile Sites Labor Commission? This might not take very long, but how effective was that group?

NICHOLSON: For a period, in my view, probably its first year, it was very effective. That commission was set up for very pointed reasons, not philosophical reasons.

CAMPBELL: What were they?

NICHOLSON: One, Senator [John L.] McClellan was breathing hard upon the whole missile sites program--even though with his anti-labor bias apparently, exaggerating some of the stories. There were plenty of pretty terrible stories, and our whole missile site program was being slowed down by a monstrous series of labor goofs. It was a way to get labor to move, to give them the cover by which they could ^{MOVE} --because the responsible people in labor, George Meany, Lane Kirkland and the like, wanted to get the

situation done, but in the reality of politics in the labor unions it's pretty tough to go in-- if I'm INTERNATIONAL ^{DISSENT} and tell a powerful regional vice president ^{TO GO IN} to just do something. But when I come in and, "Hey, my God, I'm on this Presidential committee, and they're not kidding." It gave them a device, because they had to clean their own house--a legitimate device by which they did move.

CAMPBELL: You've indicated that it . . .

NICHOLSON: Really it was a little war labor board, without the power they had.

CAMPBELL: You've indicated that the effectiveness was great in the first year. Were there some factors that led to a decline in effectiveness as time went on?

NICHOLSON: Yes, because one, we had the initial impetus of being in business for this purpose, would diminish by the very fact of ^{have} longevity. And once you accomplish the basic goals, then pretty soon we're settling grievances, rather than trying to get a whole turnaround in

attitudes.

CAMPBELL: The statistics question again--I think Missile Sites Labor Board was pretty good at chalking up how many incidents they'd worked with.

NICHOLSON: [James J.] Jim Reynolds did a hell of a job with that thing, by the way.

CAMPBELL: And there was great criticism from time to time, again from the people we talked about, about the statistics emanating from the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Did those statistics disturb you?

NICHOLSON: Not too badly.

CAMPBELL: I think we've done some of this in our discussion, but I wonder if--let me just sort of run down a little check list here that I've made to compare the committees, the commissions. How about the comparison of apparent support from the White House? I think we've almost done that.

NICHOLSON: Well, it was a problem and not easy to read on the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, because of the staff conflicts and the apparent

conflicts between not John Kennedy but Bobby Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and their respective people. We never quite saw that as much as--I think it was there. I think the White House was for the committee. But I think some of that effectiveness got lost in the apparent very delicate feuding going on between Lyndon Johnson and his people on one hand and White House people on the other hand. So that softened possibly its effectiveness in its early stages. The Missile Sites Committee, I think, was a specific one. Equal Employment Opportunity is a several decade battle, just as women's rights are. Missile sites things have to be solved right now. So I think that was an intelligent commission to appoint. We never had enough clout, we felt. ^{the EXECUTIVE ORDER} We spent half our time debating whether we could or could not do this in the executive order, and the poor staff-- which was quite weak by the way--didn't know what the hell to do. They'd call up, "Hey, can we dare tell this local UNION or this

contractor to cease and desist?" We really didn't have that power except weight of persuasion. And the Women's Commission was in education. It was a stage-setter, in my view, setting the ground rules for the future, bringing in a gentle way really the very real issue into national books. In other words, one was immediate action, the Missile Sites. One was long term educational, Women's, and Equal Employment Opportunity I think, most vital.

CAMPBELL: That's very interesting. How about a comparison of the interests and enthusiasm of participants on these?

NICHOLSON: Probably the enthusiasm, I was most impressed in the Women's ^{COMMISSION}, because of the predominantly women oriented group. Their personal enthusiasm was boundless. I mean they thought each meeting was as if they were going to sign the Magna Carta or something. Some of us, like Bill Schnitzler of labor, Dr. Henry David, a good friend, and one woman who was a Texas gal ~~by the name of~~ put on there by Johnson.

CAMPBELL: Oh, Mrs. Bobby.

NICHOLSON: Yes, a great lady. We were together on, "Let's get back to reality here, instead of having just an academician's love fest conversation," or viewing with alarm ^{type of} ~~that~~ situation. The enthusiasm, though, was boundless. What I'm trying to say is they took themselves--the majority of the women--in overseriousness. I can discuss with you, and be sincere, a serious problem, and I still think it's serious and I assume you will too, but that doesn't mean we can't look at it pragmatically and once in a while laugh at ourselves too.

CAMPBELL: How about the staff work you alluded to, perhaps poor staff support on the Missile Sites Labor Commission? How about the staff work?

NICHOLSON: Yes, except for Jim Reynolds, but he wasn't staff.

CAMPBELL: Yes. What staff work, on the other--it was the two major. . . .

NICHOLSON: The staff work was quite excellent on the Women's Commission. The homework was done. Their

reports would be in. We had more documents than we could read.

CAMPBELL: I've seen those documents, yes.

NICHOLSON: Yes, there was excellent homework and intensity of staff service there, through Mrs. Peterson, her guidance. Excellent. Missile Sties, as I said, had a weak staff.

CAMPBELL: Did they largely come through the Labor Department also?

NICHOLSON: Yes. They were mostly tired, older type people, who constantly would get in the hair of Labor, and so forth. The business guys on the committee could talk turkey with labor, and the public leaders, no problem.. The staff couldn't.

CAMPBELL: That's a problem.

NICHOLSON: No really, if you have a commission and you put an executive director who has no clout with labor, is considered a has-been or never was, you don't have him call up George Meany and say, "Now, George, I want you to do this."

So we were hampered by that ~~in~~ activity .

And as I, I think, explained reasonably abundantly there was staff confusion on the early one.

CAMPBELL: Yes. And I believe that you've done a good job, really, of analyzing the outcome of the three groups. Is there anything^{else} that you can think of?

NICHOLSON: No, I just wouldn't--despite all the criticisms I wouldn't downgrade the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. I know Dean Sayre would probably disagree with me, or Eleen Hernandez, or Whitney Young might. But I still think it led to real action.

CAMPBELL: As I indicated before, I had a few questions about the price rise controversy in steel in April of 1962. Were you people here at Kaiser surprised at President Kennedy's very strong reaction to the [Roger M.] Blough announcement?

NICHOLSON: I suppose so--not shocked, but I mean taken aback a bit--because I think everybody was.

CAMPBELL: Did you generally have the feeling from the

outset that this was something that could perhaps have been handled in a more quiet manner, more efficiently, more effectively?

NICHOLSON: No, I really wouldn't have an introspective comment on that. It was handled effectively in the sense that he turned it around, you know.

CAMPBELL: What do you know about White House contacts--
at least
which I think were/several--with your firm
shortly after . . .

NICHOLSON: After the Inland [Steel Co.] announcement.

CAMPBELL: Yes.

NICHOLSON: Kennedy did call Edgar Kaiser on the assumption--which was correct--that Kaiser would have the same viewpoint as Inland. And the assumption was correct. The real purpose of the President's calls to Mr. Kaiser were to plead for, "If you feel that way." He was not trying to lean any other way but this-- and I was on the phone with Edgar Kaiser-- that, "If you feel, ^{INLAND DOES!} ~~as~~ it would be of great

help to this Administration's efforts to announce that feeling, or that decision, with alacrity."

CAMPBELL: Was Mr. Kaiser reluctant to do this, or perfectly willing?

NICHOLSON: We thought about it a bit. But I'm talking about . . . [Interruption] . . . it wasn't pressure, it was an announced appeal--was for timing. "If you're going to announce this, if you feel that way and if that's your decision--not to raise prices, i.e.--at this time, please say so just as fast as possible," on a personal plea basis. So the phone calls did result in an earlier announcement than we might have made. We would have made the same announcement, but maybe not in twenty-four hours.

CAMPBELL: I believe you indicated that you were the author of the Kaiser press release.

NICHOLSON: Well, we have many authors around here. I do the first drafts, and then Mr. Kaiser always edits, and Mr. [Eugene E., Jr.] Trefethen was

in the act, of course, with our chief attorneys. I do remember when Mr. Kaiser--as he would normally do, he's a great communicator--we were generally happy with the press release based on my draft, or working from that. It was a very simple one paragraph statement to say we weren't going to raise prices at this time. He called Mr. Kennedy and got him immediately, not really to get his approval but to say, "Hey, here's what we're going to say. Is this consistent with our previous conversation, Mr. President?" Mr. Kennedy--I've forgotten the exact words--wasn't quite happy with the release. He wanted it to be a little stronger. We haggled in a genial fashion about this and made a couple of changes at his request, but not too. . . .

CAMPBELL: I wondered if the good offices of Kaiser were pressed into service to talk with other people in the steel industry at that time?

NICHOLSON: I don't know if they were or not. I know we did not. We had gone through this whole thing

in the '59 steel strike, where we settled, and I went with Edgar Kaiser to see the president and board chairman of every other steel company, pleading with them to stop this stupid strike because there was no point in it. We couldn't convince them, so Mr. Kaiser took a ^{h.c.} walk. So we wouldn't--at that time it was one of the background purposes only, and Mr. Kaiser wasn't very popular in the steel industry. So he would have had the power of persuasion, which I suspect Mr. Kennedy was shrewd enough to know. I don't know if he asked Mr. Kaiser to lean on others. But if he did--and I'm saying if because I don't honestly know, because I wasn't in his office at the first conversation. I knew that the President called, but I didn't know the exact interchange. But I know I was working on a release immediately thereafter.

CAMPBELL: Well, I've come to the end of my questions. Are there other things that you recall about the Kennedy Administration?

NICHOLSON: No, because actually more of my more intense experiences were with the early Johnson Administration.