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Biographical Note

Birkhead was finance director for the Democratic National Committee from 1958-1959 and assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture for Congressional Liaison from 1961-1966. In this interview, he discusses specific agriculture legislation during the Kennedy administration, including among others the 1962 farm bill and 1963 wheat referendum, and Southern members of Congress, among other issues.

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Kenneth M. Birkhead—JFK #3

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Third of Three Oral History Interviews

with

Kenneth M. Birkhead

September 1, 1967
Washington, D.C.

By Larry Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: All right, last time, Mr. Birkhead, we talked about the legislation in 1961. And I thought we might start by talking about the '62 legislation. Now the '61 legislation, at least the controversial parts, Title I had failed. These had been identified closely with Willard Cochrane [Willard W. Cochrane]. As a result of this, did his role in relation to writing the '62 legislation change any?

BIRKHEAD: No, I wouldn't say that it really changed very much. He was an integral part of preparing the legislation. Obviously, because of the difficulty we'd run into in '61, we had to restructure all of our thinking, and therefore we didn't take the same approach in '62 as we did in '61. But Willard was still an integral part of it. It seems to me it was '62 when we prepared our pamphlet, Agriculture.... What did we call it? Program for the Sixties, ABCD, Abundance Balance Conservation and Development. And this sort of became our Bible for the program in '62. And Willard Cochrane did much of the preparation of this.

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HACKMAN: I'd heard that John Baker [John A. Baker] played a larger role in '62 than he had previously. Would you say that's accurate?

BIRKHEAD: I wouldn't say he necessarily played a larger role. He played probably a somewhat more prominent role in '62 than he did in '61. But this, I don't think, was so much because of his lack of interest or his concern with the '61 bill. He was a new Assistant Secretary. He had a tremendous job of taking on the responsibility of running the Forest Service, the Soil Conservation Service, REA [Rural Electrification Administration], FHA [Farmers Home Administration], and the other programs under his direction in '61. And he just didn't have as much time to devote to the legislation in '61.

HACKMAN: All right then, in relation to your efforts on the Hill in '62, what do you recall—maybe we could start out with the Senate committee where there were some key decisions made and some important parts of the bill were voted down by the committee. And, then, I believe Senator Ellender [Allen Joseph Ellender] got a couple of amendments coming back on the floor of the Senate? Do you recall anything about that?

BIRKHEAD: I should have given some thought to this. I know we had a difficult time in both houses. I don't specifically remember, at this point, those that were voted down in '62 in the Senate. I remembered we prepared for this whole thing by the Secretary [Orville L. Freeman] having some meetings. We had a dinner with the—he invited all of the members of the House and Senate committees out to his home. And we unveiled that night, in a sense, inaugurated the ABCD pamphlet, tried to lay the groundwork. We made a real effort to try to lay the groundwork for the '62 program. I can't remember the things that were voted down in the Senate. I know it was tough sledding all the way through, and I just can't remember specifically at this point.

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HACKMAN: I think in the Senate the key vote came in April, I believe it was on a Friday the thirteenth. The deciding vote, I believe, was against the mandatory feed grains bill. The vote was cast by Senator John Sherman Cooper. You thought, I believe you had the Cooper vote and then something changed it.

BIRKHEAD: You're right. Now I'm beginning to recall it. We thought Mr. Cooper would vote, and we lost his vote. And we had some difficulty with Senator Johnston [Olin D. Johnston] of South Carolina who was with us, but in the committee didn't understand all of the procedure taking place. And when we ended up, we lost eight to seven.

HACKMAN: Right. That's right.

BIRKHEAD. And lost the mandatory feed grain program.

HACKMAN: And then I believe Senator Mundt [Karl E. Mundt] put up an

amendment which passed—or, not an amendment but a change in the committee—and that, in effect, gave the farmers a choice between either voluntary or mandatory wheat plan.

BIRKHEAD: Yes. He had a dual system. They could either participate or not participate, as I remember it, he had a dual system. They voted on this. And, in a sense, it was like voting for—I don't know, I can't think of an analogy—but it was a real strange kind of voting structure that would have occurred because of his amendment. It was nearly an impossible kind of thing.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything specifically, or your general impressions of Senator Ellender's role in all of this? As it worked out, he had to make a major effort to get the bill, the committee bill, amended on the floor. Then the House let it die in the House...

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BIRKHEAD: It was defeated in the House. Senator Ellender favored the mandatory feed grain program. And this was the tough part of the bill, the feed grain program. There was a lot of opposition to the feed grain program because it would have been a mandatory program. And the argument was made that we were going to keep even the small guy who grew ten acres of corn to feed a cow that he milked for his own personal use, we were going to keep him from even growing that amount. It was just too much of an invasion of the privacy of the farmer. And there was this—we attempted to try to overcome this by passing, or by exempting the first twenty-five acres of any farmer's production as a means of getting around this. But, Senator Ellender felt very strongly that a voluntary feed grain program, voluntary wheat program, voluntary any kind of a program, would be so terribly expensive, and wouldn't really do the job. He worked very hard on the floor and upset the eight to seven vote in the committee. And the Senate did adopt a mandatory feed grain program, as well as a mandatory wheat program. In the House, the bill went to the floor with both mandatory wheat, mandatory feed grain. We thought we had the vote. We counted it up. We knew it was very close, but we thought we had it. But late one evening, the vote came and we lost, 205 to 215. A shift of six votes would have passed it, but we worked and the leadership of the House worked as hard as they could, and the votes were just not there. And I think it was the toughest phone call I ever had to make was to call the Secretary of Agriculture and tell him that his bill had failed. Because up until about the time the vote came, we thought—the vote was on recommittal vote, not on a final passage—we thought we had it made because generally the votes were going fairly well, although there was a lot of complaint on the floor that the debate was dragging out, that Mr. Cooley [Harold D. Cooley] was not taking the kind of leadership he should. This was the time when actually for a brief period the House had adopted an

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amendment which said that there could not be more employees of the Department of Agriculture than there were farmers in the country. This was adopted on a voice vote, but it was defeated on a teller vote in the House. The legislative situation on the floor got pretty wild for awhile. Some members got very unhappy about this. And I think, probably, we lost a few votes because of this. But some people said we lost enough votes because of the parliamentary difficulties on the floor. To have passed the bill—I'm not sure of this, I just don't, despite the way we thought we had the House counted—I just don't think we had the votes. We had some opposition to it from some people who were, generally, some of the Administration's strong supporters, such as Congressman Neal Smith [Neal Edward Smith] of Iowa was not in favor of the mandatory feed grain program. And this was what defeated us. And we went down to defeat by ten votes.

HACKMAN: Right. Well, after that vote in the House, then the House committee, I believe Cooley and Bob Poage [W.R. Poage] decided to let the thing ride or to die. There was some discussion and I believe some efforts had to be made to get the thing started again for Senator Ellender, to start over in the Senate. Do you remember making efforts...

BIRKHEAD: Well, what happened: That night after, when I called the Secretary and said that we had been defeated, he said, "What should we do?" We talked a little bit and we suggested that he ought to get up to the Hill immediately and meet with Cooley, and let's put the whole thing back together. And so the Secretary and the Under Secretary [Charles S. Murphy] and some that were waiting here at the Department sort of had a victory celebration I guess you'd call it—jumped in the car and came up to the Hill. And I had Mr. Cooley and Mr. Poage and a couple of other members, and we went to Mr. Cooley's office and discussed for quite a while about what we should do. And they decided to immediately hold hearings again.

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That was a bad night for the Secretary. Just by way of an aside, he'd just lost this first major bill he'd had before the Congress, and rushing downstairs to get in his car to go up to the Hill, there was a new guard on the door who didn't know him. The guard, for a moment, refused to let the Secretary out of the building because he didn't have a pass, and the guard didn't know him, and the Secretary was quite unhappy at that point. But, finally the Under Secretary who did have a pass, talked the guard into letting the Secretary out of the building so he could come up to the Hill to discuss the bill. We did have this meeting. We came back to the Department later and spent a good part of the night discussing what to do. We decided to go back, as far as the House was concerned, and convene hearings right away, and get whatever we could in the House so we could get back to the Senate, and let the Senate then take the leadership in trying to pass the legislation. Which they did. Mr. Ellender was willing and still stood firm on his position in favor of the mandatory program. We, of course, lost the mandatory feed grain part of it. We passed it with the mandatory wheat program

HACKMAN: Do you remember when that vote came up, then, again in the

House, it lost on the first roll call. And then it won on the second roll call they had a second one. Do you remember anything effort to, after it had failed, to get it going again?

BIRKHEAD: Did it actually lose on the first?

HACKMAN: I thought it...

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BIRKHEAD: Well, we came back to keep the bill alive. We came back with a very modified program which passed rather overwhelmingly one of the biggest votes we ever got up there because actually it wasn't much of a program at all. Then the Senate re-passed the bill with mandatory wheat and voluntary feed grains. And then it came back to the House, and I didn't realize, I didn't remember that we lost on one vote.

HACKMAN: Well, as it worked out, in the conferences where the minority signed the report, they wouldn't sign the majority report which included the plan for the '63 wheat referendum with the two certificate plan. So it went back to the House as it had been agreed to in the conference. And the first time on a roll call in the House, it failed. And, then, what I had heard was that Hale Boggs [Thomas Hale Boggs] took a large role in getting the thing passed on a second vote.

BIRKHEAD: I don't think we actually lost at that point. The first time they had gone through the vote, we were short about four votes. And Hale Boggs and the Speaker and Carl Albert [Carl B. Albert], all three who were in the well, had some hard conversations with some members and changed enough votes to get it passed. Yes, this is actually what happened. We didn't actually—there was not an announced vote on which we lost, I don't think, but we were short at the end of the count. This happens often in the House on close votes. And we were short about four votes. Hale Boggs and the Speaker and Mr. Albert went to work and changed enough votes to get it through finally.

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HACKMAN: Talking in terms of this whole '62 effort, several things have been suggested as reasons that agriculture legislation had such a problem in '62, one of them being the Billie Sol Estes affair. How much effect did you think that had on your effort on the Hill?

BIRKHEAD: Oh, I don't really think the Billie Sol Estes affair had that much effect actually on votes. There was a lot of talk about Billie Sol Estes, more than he deserved because it was the first real chink in the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] armor, if you could call it this. And it was beefed up a lot

to appear as if it was some kind of a terrible scar on the integrity of the Kennedy Administration. But, I don't really think that—I am not aware of any votes that the Billie Sol Estes thing affected. Now, some members, for various political reasons of their own, who were opposed to the legislation to begin with used, talked about the Billie Sol Estes thing. But I'm not aware of any person, any vote that we lost because of the Billie Sol Estes. And by the time most of the votes came, it was pretty evident that Billie Sol Estes may have fleeced some of the finance companies, but that he really hadn't gotten anything out of the federal government, or had he had any major influence on anybody in the Department of Agriculture, gotten any special things out of the Department of Agriculture. But I really, I'm not aware of any vote that we might of had if it hadn't been for Billie Sol Estes. Some guys used it as one of the reasons they voted against the legislation, but they were opposed to the legislation before Billie Sol Estes.

HACKMAN: Do you have any memories of what you thought were the biggest reasons that the legislation had a hard time passing?

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BIRKHEAD: The biggest—I think there were two or three reasons. One, some of the urban members were just disenchanted with farm legislation generally. Although some of them were willing to take Freeman and the President's word that this was a means for reducing the surpluses and trying to bring some order out of chaos, there were some urban members that just plain were opposed to any kind of farm legislation. They thought it was expensive and wasteful. It wasn't a way to solve what was called the farm problem—surpluses, low farm prices, etc.

The Republicans generally made this a policy matter, that they were going to oppose the farm legislation of the administration. And I actually had some Republicans who told me privately that if it had not been made such a cause among the Republicans to vote against it, that they would have voted for it. They thought it had some merit, but that under the circumstances, under the pressures from the Republican leadership, they would not support it. The Farm Bureau [American Farm Bureau Federation] had some effect on the voting in some areas. They had enough strength. Generally, the farmers—the real farmers, not the professional farmers, but the real farmers—generally favored the legislation. And in most instances when the farmers were here lobbying, most of the farm organizations, other than the Farm Bureau, favored the legislation. But I think its two biggest problems were the fact that it was a Republican policy, sometimes officially announced, sometimes unofficial, to oppose it; and some of the urban members who just sort of took a dim view of farm legislation, period. They thought it was all a waste of effort.

HACKMAN: What about the fact that it was an election year? How did that tie in with all of this, or did it?

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BIRKHEAD: Well, I think it probably influenced the Republicans some,

although we had had equal kind of opposition in '61 from the Republican side. The opposition was just about as strong in '61 as it was in '62 and continued to be strong in the succeeding years. I think, obviously, in any congressional or presidential year it has some effect. But I don't think it was a major effect.

HACKMAN: What about the rise in farm income in '61, mainly as a result of some of the legislation put through in '61? Did this create a certain amount of apathy on the part of some people in wanting the legislation?

BIRKHEAD: Oh, maybe a little bit. I don't think, though, that it had a lot of effect. It creates some apathy. I have always had a feeling that the farmers are up and down just about the way their farm income goes. And if it's up, why, they're relaxed; if it's down, they're quite violent. It had gone up and this relaxed some. But generally, the farmers favor, have favored and I think still continue to favor, some kind of federal programs. I think that they may not have, in total, pushed as hard in '62 with the prices up, but they continued to push pretty hard. I don't think it had a big impact.

HACKMAN: You talked earlier about some people expressing the opinion that Congressman Hoeven [Charles B. Hoeven] in the House had not taken a great deal of leadership, or displayed a great deal of leadership. Was this a continuing problem?

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BIRKHEAD: He never—he took leadership in sort of a strange way. Yeah, it was.... He never appeared as a leader in the way some of the Republicans have, yet he—and I don't remember exactly what I said before—but....

HACKMAN: No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I was thinking of Cooley. I had the two mixed up. That's who you mentioned.

BIRKHEAD: Oh, Cooley. Yes. Hoeven didn't stand up and speak a lot as a leader, but he did a pretty good job of organizing the Republican opposition to legislation. Cooley didn't always take the kind of leadership that some of them would have hoped he had would. They felt that he was too relaxed, and at times sort of felt that he'd get the legislation to the floor, but the leadership of the Congress, the majority leader, the speaker, and the whip ought to get the bills passed; that he really didn't take the kind of leadership on the floor of the House that say, a Wilbur Mills [Wilbur Daigh Mills] does when he has a bill up, or a Wayne Aspinall [Wayne N. Aspinall] of the Interior Committee, or some of the others. He was rather lax in his running of the House when the bill was up. Because, in a sense, when the House is meeting as the Committee of the Whole on a bill, the chairman of the committee is really

the leader and should have the House pretty well under his control, if he's going to get a bill through. And they just didn't feel that Cooley did that, took that kind of leadership.

HACKMAN: Well, was Senator Ellender's leadership in great contrast?

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BIRKHEAD: In great contrast. He pretty well dominated the proceedings in the Senate when a bill was up, a great contrast between the two.

HACKMAN: Did the relationship with Senator Ellender change appreciably over the years, '61, '62, '63, as far as how you went about working with him?

BIRKHEAD: No. I would say it was pretty much the same. The Secretary, when he became Secretary, one of the first, for obvious reasons and rightfully so, one of the first things he did was to go sit down with the chairmen of the two committees. Senator Ellender and the Secretary found that they didn't always agree on a lot of things. And they didn't agree on a lot of things. But Senator Ellender felt that he liked Freeman. And it was quite a contrast to the previous eight years where he had little or no relationship, or close personal relationships, with the Secretary of Agriculture from '53 to '60. Now he had this kind of personal relationship, and they went to ball games together.... So I think our relationships with the Senator were generally about the same through these times. We had our ups and downs. Sometimes he wanted something that we couldn't do, or didn't feel we could do, and sometimes we urged him to do something which he didn't feel he could do. But it was always a good relationship.

HACKMAN: I'd heard that you were generally in line, but that cotton often created a problem.

BIRKHEAD: Cotton was one of the ones that was a problem. Senator Ellender felt that we should reduce the price of cotton and cut down the costs of program and we disagreed with this. But, as I say, we had many instances where there was disagreement. We had quite a sharp disagreement with Senator Ellender when we passed the cotton bill in '65. We actually worked on the floor to defeat his position in '65, and did defeat his position. He had prevailed in the committee, but under the leadership of Senator Talmadge [Herman Eugene Talmadge] who took the

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Administration position on the floor, we defeated Senator Ellender on the floor in '65. But we had these disagreements, but I don't think this ever really hurt our relationships with him. He understood and we understood.

HACKMAN: Could you comment on what type of problems were presented by the fact that most of the, or a large number of the people on the committees, both in the House and Senate, were from the South?

BIRKHEAD: Well, this broached many problems. It broached problems, obviously, because of the votes that these same members cast on, particularly on civil rights, but on many economic matters where they tended to be more conservative. And if we were going to pass a farm bill, we had to get big chunks of our votes from New York City, from Chicago, from Wayne County, from Philadelphia, from Pittsburgh, and places like this. Some of the members, from time to time, would say, "I don't know why I should vote for your bills. I've never gotten a vote out of any of your people for—any of the agriculture people—for any legislation that I'm interested in." This was one problem, although, usually when the showdown came, you lost, really, very few votes. And when I say very few, really less than a handful of votes because of this. They'd express this view, but I don't think it had that much impact. You tended to have members in the South, the southeast of the country, who are more conditioned to control programs, cotton, peanuts, tobacco. Therefore, you had more interest in, more understanding on their part, more support back home for control programs, mandatory programs. Yet, they were dealing with—wheat and feed grains were the principal ones we dealt with in those early days. The members from the Middle West and the grain areas were less accustomed, less conditioned, to mandatory programs. So you had a dichotomy here with the leadership on some of the committees conditioned to control programs, and the ones most affected by the programs not conditioned to them. And this brought on some problems, particularly, in the committees. Had some things like this, but...

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HACKMAN: Well, some of the people who were from the corn and wheat areas were Republicans who were on the committees. Were there any of these people you could work fairly closely with?

BIRKHEAD: We had very few of them. Some of them we could work with, but we couldn't get their support. Really, the only member from these areas that we had any support from at all was Congressman Weaver [Phillip Hart Weaver] of Nebraska who was defeated in a primary when they redistricted Nebraska in '62. But we got little or no support from any of the others. Some of them really wouldn't talk to us about programs; others would discuss them with you, but would give you no support on the floor.

The truth of the matter is, however, it was a Republican, a member of the House agriculture committee who really first made the breakthrough to the kind of programs that we eventually passed. And these were the low supports with production payments on top of them. And this Congressman Quie [Albert H. Quie] of Minnesota who had not favored our programs, but in the course of the conference in '62 had proposed this idea for feed grains of low loan rates and for payments on top which we honestly had felt we could not get through the Congress. But once he proposed it, we had to support it. Then

we began to move down this road. So it was a Republican, who had really not voted for us, who proposed this. One night we were sitting up there late, outside the room while the committee was inside on a conference. And they came out and said, "What would you think of this?" We really couldn't believe it was going to be this way. We had sort of wished it could be, and didn't think we could make it. This was a proposal that really came from Quie. So that, although he didn't vote for us very often on the floor, he did propose this and the conference reported it out.

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HACKMAN: Speaking of Southern Senators, you'd mentioned the last time Henry Wilson [Henry Hall Wilson], and I'd heard that he was very good at working with people from the South. What kind of help did he give you here?

BIRKHEAD: Well, Henry did—Henry was more on the House side. He did have good contacts in the South. Henry was more on the House side though, rather than on the Senate side. The major effort in the Senate was by Mike Manatos [Mike N. Manatos]. I think, probably, with the Southern Senators, the Secretary did more of the lobbying with them than anybody. Wilson was so tied down with House legislation and the problems in the House that he didn't have much time to work on Southern members. But, I think probably, more of the lobbying with the Southern members was done by Secretary Freeman, than by anybody.

HACKMAN: Did the Administration's policies in the civil rights area present problems to you to any great degree in getting agriculture legislation?

BIRKHEAD: Not really, no. Oh, there were—you would get into discussions and arguments, and the members on the Hill knew Orville Freeman's background and his feeling about civil rights. But it was just—they knew I had worked before, long before coming to the department here, on civil rights legislation on the Hill and other kinds of things. But, really I'd had, and I'm sure, I don't think the Secretary had, that I'm aware of, any real discussions. And it really didn't bother us very much. The only time I think it probably did bother us was on a food stamp program. We went into a committee one time with enough votes to pass the food stamp bill, or program, out of the committee. And it was the day after there had been considerable commotion on the floor in connection with some civil rights activity which I can't remember now. And Gathings [Ezekiel Candler Gathings] and a couple of other of the Southern members were

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unhappy, and they decided they were going to assert their position a little bit. And the food stamp one was the first one they had a chance to vote on, and they voted against the food stamp bill. Now, they later voted for it. They told me at the time of the committee

meeting they were going to be for it. But once the doors were closed, the executive session, they voted against the food stamp bill. One member told me later that Mr. Gathings and a couple of others had made some comments in there about civil rights and the fact that the food stamp program was basically a program that was going to help Negroes. And he was unhappy about what the Administration was doing in civil rights. He just wasn't going to support the program. But, it didn't cause major problems, no.

HACKMAN: Could you tell any difference at all in '63 when the Administration actually put up civil rights legislation as opposed to previously, when they mostly took executive action?

BIRKHEAD: This was the time when this food stamp vote occurred. Other than that, I really don't remember a case where I could honestly say civil rights really affected the program.

HACKMAN: Did the—talking about difficulties the Administration had, let's say, in other areas with Southern Congressmen—did the Administration ever work with the Department of Agriculture in using, let's say, cotton supports, or tobacco supports, or something like this, working out a favorable stand on this from the Southern people's point of view to get votes on their other legislation?

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BIRKHEAD: Well, they often called on us to try work with some of the members from southern areas in behalf of other legislation, non-agriculture legislation. I never—I'm not aware of anytime or any guy who said, "Look, if you'll go along with us on this, we'll do such-and-such on the cotton program." We did work with members and were assigned members to talk to about other legislation. Not on the basis of saying we'll do this for that, but on the basis that we knew them, we worked with them, we knew their problems, we knew their problems back home, and this kind of thing. It may have happened, but if it did, I wasn't aware of it.

HACKMAN: Switching to something else, we talked last time about working with some of the agricultural groups, the Grange and American Farm Bureau and these people. Did you try to get support of other groups, for instance, labor groups, in behalf of your legislation?

BIRKHEAD: We did. We worked with labor. We worked on PL 480. We worked with religious groups who were interested in foreign feeding. We tried to bring all kinds of groups in. Each time we had major farm legislation up, I always arranged for the Secretary to go down at one of the regular legislative meeting's that the AF of L-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] holds each week when they bring all of their legislative people in. The Secretary would always go down and explain to them what the

legislation was; what it was about; why he thought it was important to labor; what the significance of it was; etc. We worked very closely with labor organizations. We worked with any other groups that we could find that we had any reason to believe would be interested in the legislation. But labor, generally, except in a couple of instances, supported farm legislation pretty strongly.

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HACKMAN: Speaking in terms of the opposition, particularly the American Farm Bureau, were they effective in getting other groups of a similar ideological stance to work against your bills?

BIRKHEAD: I have a feeling they did. We used to get—there used to be considerable efforts on the Hill. We used to—oh, the John Birch Society, I know, had some people in once working on some California members in connection with a farm bill. And we can't believe that it would have been other than some contact the Farm Bureau had made with them. They were very successful in bringing bankers in and some of the banking organizations. They had the Chamber of Commerce working on some legislation. They make use of other groups. I can't always, I can't prove that the other groups got into it because the Farm Bureau asked them. It may have been the other groups were just, would have been in anyway. The Farm Bureau just pushed them along and helped them get deeper into it.

HACKMAN: Speaking in terms of problems in getting legislation passed, how important did you think that Mr. Kennedy's small margin of victory in 1960 was to efforts in passing legislation? Did this....

BIRKHEAD: Gee, I'm not sure how to answer that. In passing the first farm bill in '61, this was during the period when there was a strong feeling of support for the President, and although we passed it just by a few votes, we really didn't have to do very much cold lobbying among the Democrats. They were just all out for it. I never, I honestly don't remember of ever having heard discussion in terms of the small victory in '60. There were a lot of Democrats that stuck with the farm legislation through the years Mr. Kennedy was alive just because of their support of Mr. Kennedy. I had a member say to me, "Is the President really for this?" And I said, "Yup." "Okay, I'll be for it, too." So there were a lot of votes up there that—I can't say if I said, "Well, I'm not sure whether the President...." or, "The President's against it," or something, whether they would have automatically then been against it. But many of the members asked me, "Is the President really

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for it?" When Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and Henry Wilson would show up at such times as they could get in to helping on a particular bill, I know we started picking up votes.

HACKMAN: Did you feel that, well, you said before that O'Brien's office didn't get involved in anything but the very major legislation.

BIRKHEAD: Yeah, this is right.

HACKMAN: Did you feel the Administration ever gave up too easily on getting legislation?

BIRKHEAD: No. Honestly, the only instance that I can remember when I could honestly say that I think if the Administration had hung a little tougher on agriculture legislation was when the Congress had before it the community development district bill. This was last year. And this was going to be tied onto another bill at the end of the session. This is a bill which provides for funds for multi-county planning in rural areas. I think if they had hung a little tougher on this one, I think we might have passed that bill last year. Other than this, I can't say that I remember anytime when the Administration gave up too early or gave up too easily. I think, generally, the support from the White House, from the Administration forces, generally was excellent. I think as much as in the years that I've been around Washington, I never remember an Administration which gave such full, all out support for agriculture legislation.

HACKMAN: Were there any great differences between your role in relation to the Kennedy Administration and the Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] Administration? How do the two as far as effectiveness on the Hill?

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BIRKHEAD: I can't honestly say there was a great deal of difference because I think you had this carry over of the kind of Hill activity under Mr. Johnson you had under Mr. Kennedy, organized by Larry O'Brien. You had different personalities at the top. Mr. Johnson was more readily available, maybe, to make phone calls to the Hill than Mr. Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy wanted to be sure that we'd done everything possible before he made some calls. Mr. Johnson was sometimes quicker, I think, to make calls than Mr. Kennedy. But, the pattern of running the general congressional program was so similar under Mr. Johnson that I don't think there was a great deal of difference.

HACKMAN: All right. Talking about '63 now, specifically the wheat referendum, what was your role in promoting this at that time? Or were you involved much in that?

BIRKHEAD: Well, my principal role was to try to get as much support for the referendum from congressional people as I could. And I tried to get as many members as I could to make speeches, to talk to their people back home, to promote the referendum, as possible. I did spend a lot of time

helping members get material together for speeches, helping them get prepared for radio programs, and this kind of thing, to talk about the referendum, the importance of the referendum, and to, whenever I could, to get them to speak favorably for the referendum.

HACKMAN: What do you recall about the feeling in the Department toward legislation if the referendum should fail?

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BIRKHEAD: I think honestly that the Department, up to a point, felt so clearly that the referendum was going to pass that I don't think there was ever any real thought given to this. This was one of those things where, you know, a candidate just's automatically going to win. Nobody could—this was a little like '48 when Dewey [Thomas E. Dewey] was going to automatically win. And Mr. Kiplinger [Willard Monroe Kiplinger] put out a newsletter saying what the Dewey Administration will do. And *Chicago Tribune* had a headline, “Dewey defeats Truman [Harry S. Truman].” Nobody really, for a long time—I think there was a period of a few days before the vote when there was actually beginning to be some concern—but think everybody was so sure it was going to pass that I don't think anybody really had given a lot of thought to this. The thought was more how we were going to run it after it passed than it was what would we do if it failed.

HACKMAN: Well, then, what do you remember after it did fail about...

BIRKHEAD: Well, there was a lot of shock and there was a lot of consideration about what we should do. There were a lot of proposals as to what we should do until a proposal came along that set up a voluntary wheat program similar to the voluntary feed grain program. And this was a suggestion that actually originated with Walter Wilcox who was then the legislative agriculture specialist in the Library of Congress, is now our Director of Agricultural Economics and working with Ben Stong [Benton J. Stong] who is legislative assistant to Senator McGovern [George S. McGovern]. Really, out of these two guys came the real drive to go to this kind of thing. Up to that point, we'd floundered around considerably down here as to what we should do.

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HACKMAN: Do you remember anything about feelings of Senator Ellender and Congressman Cooley?

BIRKHEAD: Well, Senator Ellender was pretty discouraged with the whole thing. He was not in favor of a voluntary wheat program, just as he had never really been in favor of voluntary feed grain program. It was going to cost too much and it wouldn't work. And he wanted—there was a period then that he wanted to go back and repass.... I remember I had a session with him once and he said, “Well, we've just got to repass, start all over again and pass the mandatory

feed grain and a mandatory wheat program, and go back and get another vote from them next year.” I think there was more feeling in the Department that probably what we should just do was not to have a wheat program for a year and have a vote again next year, which was possible under the legislation, and see if it wouldn't pass then after there had been no wheat program for a year. If the Department at that point had been forced to make a decision, I think this is what probably the decision might have been.

HACKMAN: In '63, in general, in the attitude of the Department toward new legislation, did you feel that you should slow down in '63 since Congress had been pushed pretty hard with major bills in '61 and '62? Was that a factor?

BIRKHEAD: Yes. This was a factor. It was felt that we had gone to the well, and gone to the well pretty hard, and we just sort of let up a little bit and not try to push too hard because we had pushed hard.

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HACKMAN: I want to ask you about dairy legislation all the way through. It seems like it was very difficult in those years to get anything really accomplished in the dairy area. Why do you feel that was so?

[BREAK IN TAPE]

[END SIDE I, BEGIN SIDE II]

BIRKHEAD: This is principally, I think, because the dairy people, you've got the sharp difference between the manufactured milk areas in Minnesota and Wisconsin—and the Minnesota part of it has nothing to do with Orville Freeman, it's just happenstance that he's from Minnesota—and the fluid milk areas, the other part of the milk shed out in the Middle West. You just never could get any kind of real agreement between the two as to what should be done. You had proposals by both sides as to what ought to be done. You just never could get the two together to agree on anything. They had considerable strength in the Congress from the manufacturing milk areas, principally Minnesota and Wisconsin. It's just one of those cases where you never could get any real agreement as to what kind of program might be forthcoming.

HACKMAN: Were people like Senator Proxmire [William Proxmire] and Senator McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] helpful in this? Or were there problems in working with these people?

BIRKHEAD: Well, there were problems because they were so strongly manufactured milk oriented that it was difficult to explain to them that what they proposed wouldn't necessarily be accepted in other places. They thought we just ought to be able to drive through whatever they proposed.

They were pretty difficult at times, particularly Senator Proxmire. He felt very strongly that we had done very poorly.

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HACKMAN: Now, Robert Lewis was handling a lot of the dairy proposals at that time. How effective was he in putting something together that could pass, or were there any problems here?

BIRKHEAD: Well, he was effective to the degree that he understood dairy, effective in trying to work on it. He tended to be more manufactured milk oriented than he was fluid oriented. And I think this probably sometimes caused some problem. But, I don't think it was possible during those days to really bring about any kind of an agreement in the milk thing. The lines were so clearly drawn and sharply delineated that it just wasn't possible.

HACKMAN: Well, moving to something else that came up in '63, and that was the wheat sale to Russia. Do you recall—well, there was some discussion in the Administration as to whether they should even bother with getting congressional okay on this, or whether it's just strictly an executive action. Do you remember that?

BIRKHEAD: I wasn't deeply involved in that. The Under Secretary, Charley Murphy, was the principal architect of whatever we did in connection with wheat sales to Russia. I was more of an errand boy on some matters in connection to it. I didn't have very much responsibility. There was a lot of discussion of whether we ought to do it without regard, I know I sat in on some of these discussions on whether we ought to get Hill agreement. But, I was never as deeply involved in it as were some of the others.

HACKMAN: Well, was that debate mainly because they were worried about getting it, have a difficult time in Congress?

[-84-]

BIRKHEAD: They felt they would have a difficult time in the Congress. Because when you bring this kind of thing up in the Congress, it always broaches the thing of, "He voted for the Communists." They waved this flag which I think obviously in this case was about as untrue as it was in some other cases. But, members are always worried that back home they may get hung with a charge that, "He voted for the Communists." So you do have some people that are jumpy about this. Well, I think it was greatly overplayed. I think that a lot of guys that it didn't make any difference whether they really felt this was for the Communists or not. They were just opposed to any of the Administration programs if they were Republicans. And they just used this as another excuse. Most of the Democrats supported, wouldn't pay any attention to this, but this flag was waved.

We had polls taken. Findley [Paul Findley] took a poll and sent it all along to the White House. In fact, the last doodle of—the Vice President had a copy of it on the wall up there. Louie Green [Louis Green] wrote a piece for the *Washington Post* on the significance of this doodle. And we worried with one part of it which was an x'ed out area up in the upper right hand corner. We couldn't figure out what the dickens that name was or the word was. Finally, it suddenly dawned on me that this was at a time when Findley's poll was floating around. And the word which the President had x'ed out—and this may be some kind of psychological thing, he was unhappy with this poll—but the word under there that we—gosh, we literally spent a month looking for that silly thing nearly every day—was the name Findley. The President had apparently in this Cabinet meeting had, or in this meeting at the White House, somebody raise the name Findley, and he had doodled it on his pad and then x'ed, crossed it out. But there was a lot of this kind of thing going on.

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HACKMAN: Something else in the same type area, the Food-for-Peace program. What type problems did this present to you, particularly with Senator Ellender who always seemed to object to this program?

BIRKHEAD: Well.... Yeah, Senator Ellender. He was never as much a—I think he had more of a reputation for being opposed to the Food-for-Peace kind of programs than he actually was opposed to them. His biggest concern with Food-for-Peace was that we were going to use it as a device to produce food for foreign shipment. He was never opposed to feeding, using surplus foods to feed people in other countries. He did not think that we should produce food for feeding other countries. This was always a difficult one to follow because a large majority of the rice in this country is really produced for PL 480 shipments. And, of course, rice is one of the major crops of Louisiana. But was never per se opposed to feeding people and per se opposed to PL 480. He was just opposed to using PL 480 as a device to produce food. So our problems with him mainly revolved around that, that we had to convince him if we were going to get any kind of bill out of there at all that we weren't going to use it as a device to produce food.

HACKMAN: On this Food-for-Peace thing, what do you recall about the feeling in the department in '61 when the Food-for-Peace program was put over in the executive department rather than working within the Department of Agriculture?

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BIRKHEAD: There was a lot of concern in the Department that we were going to lose control over it, that it was the food program and this divided authority was going to make it more difficult to run. I think my own feeling was that a lot of times this was more a concern about the structure of the program. I think the program worked pretty well. But we had a lot of arguments about

how it was structured and whether it was properly structured. And the people in the Department, the food experts, wanted to see it all neatly packaged in the Department of Agriculture, and they didn't like anybody else having any possible concern with it. In many of the meetings that I sat in where this argument raised, I used to stop at the end and say, "My gosh, we sat there for two hours and had a horrible discussion really about nothing," because the program was working. I think it was just more a concern for structure and neat form, and the feeling that somebody else might have a wee part of the pie. And the concern was really not called for.

HACKMAN: Skipping to something else, I just had a note here on the Trade Expansion Act in '62. Now, I know Herschel Newsom [Herschel David Newsom], for instance, had some trouble buying parts of this legislation. Do you remember any efforts that you made on its behalf to get some of these people to go along with this?

BIRKHEAD: We did. And I tried to work with them to explain to them the importance of the Trade Expansion Act as it related to agriculture. And if we didn't have some kind of balance here, agriculture was going to suffer. And if agriculture was too negative in its views about other products, that agriculture products were going to suffer. We had guys like John Dent [John Herman Dent] and others who were quite vociferous about their views about trade expansion, and gave us a hard time. John Dent, about that time, started voting against agriculture bills. I don't think he ever voted for one the rest of the time. He pretty consistently voted against them afterwards.

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HACKMAN: As a result of the trade expansion?

BIRKHEAD: He felt that agriculture was too anxious to expand trade. We were willing to see industrial trade that he thought was hurting people of his district, or industrial imports that he thought were hurting the people of his district. But there were a few individuals like this. I don't think it was a major thing. Most agriculture people went along pretty well in support of the Trade Expansion bill. It wasn't a major problem.

HACKMAN: I had just a couple of other general questions. One, on relationship with the Bureau of the Budget. It's always been said that the Agriculture Department in this period sort of felt it was the biggest victim, maybe, of an economy drive by the Administration. And there were continuing bickerings between the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of the Budget.

BIRKHEAD: Well, there were. There was a lot of feeling that the Bureau of the Budget was not agriculturally oriented, that there were no real agricultural experts in the Bureau; therefore, agriculture didn't have a real voice over there. These were the times when Kermit Gordon was making some

comments about agriculture and the cost of agriculture, and the fact that really—I guess the one that made people most unhappy was that we really only needed about a million farmers; we ought to get rid of the rest of them. All of this. And whenever any kind of question about the cost of agriculture programs was raised, no matter who it was that was really responsible for raising them, the Bureau of the Budget became the victim.

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Now, a lot of guys used the Bureau of the Budget as the whipping boy so that they wouldn't have to whip Orville Freeman. Although sometimes they knew that maybe Freeman was the one that was really behind it, they didn't want to say this about him. Some of Kermit's comments made it possible to use them as a whipping boy, so they got whipped. Of course, they get whipped for many things, it's just part of the game. But there was a lot of feeling. There was some feeling in the Department that, really, there was not a real agricultural expert in the Bureau and in the Council of Economic Advisers. There was a feeling if there had been somebody who had past experience in agriculture in both the Bureau and the Council sometimes, some of our problems might have been a little better understood. I don't know if this was true or not. I think, looking back over it, really we came out fairly well. Now, this doesn't mean that we didn't have some real knockdown drag outs with them. The Secretary would sometimes appeal over the head of the Director of the Bureau directly to the President. Sometimes he lost, sometimes he won. But, I don't think this, per se, makes the Bureau of the Budget into a villain. This is just the way the operation functions and properly should function.

HACKMAN: Just one other thing and that's on the advisory committees that were set up, on the commodity advisory committees. How important was their role in the actual legislation that developed? Did you feel that this was a good idea worked out well, that using these advisory committees over that period?

BIRKHEAD: What's ever going to happen to this tape? Is anybody ever going to hear it?

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HACKMAN: Yes. Well, I don't know if they'll hear it, they'll read the result of it. Why?

BIRKHEAD: My comment is that I don't think the advisory committees were of very much assistance at all, period. I think that sometimes some people tried to use them to promote their own ideas. I don't think we ever got any very good advice out of the advisory committees that really had very much effect on legislation. I think we took from the advisory committees what we wanted to take from them, and we forgot what we didn't want to take from them. I do think they had one thing that I guess you'd say was in their favor. They did give chance for leaders in various parts of agriculture to feel that they had a chance to make their views known.

But, I think the fact that in the last couple of years the advisory committees are meeting less and less and have less and less impact sort of indicates that I don't think they were very valuable.

HACKMAN: Well, I'd heard it said that it might have been simpler to have worked just completely through the leading farm organizations rather than to try to get some support out of a group where you had all of them joined together and bickering back and forth.

BIRKHEAD: I think there was an awful lot of effort that went into the advisory committee work that could have been better spent working with the farm organizations and the commodity groups themselves. We made a lot out of the advisory committees. And I guess it's important to have a place where people who were concerned with various programs have a chance to be heard at the highest levels of the government. But I don't think that, really, anything came out of the advisory committees. I guess this is heresy to say this because the Secretary is devoted to advisory committees. I guess rightly so. We should have these things. But I don't think, as far as farm legislation is concerned, anything very much came out of it.

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HACKMAN: Do you think that's pretty typical of what happened in other departments in most cases?

BIRKHEAD: I think so. I've often heard this, although I don't have experience with the others.

HACKMAN: Well, that's all the questions I have. Do you have any other comments you'd want to put on while we are talking?

BIRKHEAD: Gee, I do apologize for not having spent some time thinking back over this, but the last couple of weeks, it's just been rugged and I haven't had a chance to give much thought to it. No, I can't honestly add anything particular to it. I think really the best, if you reminded me of some things that—I've got a drawer down here full of notes and sometimes I'm going to put together for myself and remember, sort of nostalgically live through all this period. But I haven't had a chance to go through them recently.

[END OF INTERVIEWS]

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