

**Orville L. Freeman Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 12/15/1964**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Orville L. Freeman, Governor of Minnesota (1954-1961), U.S. Secretary of Agriculture (1961-1969), and builder of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, discusses the USDA's role in feeding the poor and John F. Kennedy's stance on agriculture, among other issues.

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Orville L. Freeman

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Orville E. Freeman – JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

ORVILLE L. FREEMAN

December 15, 1964  
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

**MORRISSEY:** At the end of our last interview, you were telling about the circumstances of your appointment to the secretaryship of agriculture. You said that John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] thought it would be wise, since you're from the Midwest, that the under secretary be a southerner. I asked if that's how Mr. Charles Murphy [Charles S. Murphy] got into the picture. You said, "No, it wasn't," that how Mr. Murphy got into the picture was an interesting story. We didn't have time to hear that story. Could you tell it now?

**FREEMAN:** Yes. As I said, the president did not make any requests or direct any actions to take on agriculture, except this one question of a southern under secretary. This was, of course, a critical question because the under secretary is a very key person; and also, there were quite a number of people seeking that assignment and a good deal of pressure from the Hill. I wanted to get someone who would command political support, but I was even more concerned to get someone that could do a good job.

One day I was down talking to David Lloyd (who is now deceased) in an office he had downtown, working on some issue material. He mentioned to me that Charlie Murphy might be interested in being under secretary. This had never occurred to me, but I told Lloyd to ask Murphy to call me, which he did when I was in Congressman Blatnik's [John A. Blatnik] office. He indicated his interest, pointing out that he had, many years before, worked

as a draftsman for the Senate committee on agriculture [and Forestry], when he had first left Duke Law School. I immediately resolved that this was an excellent idea and that I'd

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like to have Charlie for under secretary, but I didn't find any political support for it on the Hill.

When I reviewed the matter with Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.], who was doing some work on this for the president and also with Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan], they thought that would be all right. Although, I must say, they weren't particularly excited about it. I then proceeded to take a run at the different people in Congress. The general reaction was that Murphy's fine, but he really isn't a southerner because he's lived in Washington all this time. Furthermore, I had already said, somewhat facetiously, that I didn't know anything about agriculture and he wasn't an agriculturalist either. Now there'd be not only a secretary who didn't "know anything," but also an under secretary. But I persisted; and finally they came around when I, in effect, said that I was going to do this anyway. But I said it gently enough so that no one took offense. In the meantime, I had asked Charlie Murphy to do a little work around town, which he knows how to do. And Harry Truman [Harry S. Truman] put in a little hand. As a matter of fact, he called me up in Minnesota on the day after Christmas about it. So the thing finally came into focus. I managed to get pretty good support and not too much grumbling.

There never really was any question with the president on it. He knew Charlie, thought very highly of him, and was very pleased to go along. As a matter of fact, on all of the appointments up and down the line I made, he would refer to them from time to time, and he'd comment and report to me calls he received from one or another people on the Hill, but there was no effort, even where presidential appointees were concerned, to dictate as to whom I should select. So I put together, trying to give attention to geographical areas, the wishes of key people on the Hill, and others, but always I was primarily concerned with the kind of people we were going to get. I was determined to get the best kind of a team I could to run the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture]. I was pretty much on my own in doing so, although I kept in contact with various staff people in the White House from time to time.

MORRISSEY: In one of the weekly reports you wrote to President Kennedy, you mentioned indirectly that he was very mindful of the fact that he had gotten votes from the southeastern states in the 1960 election—I suppose the two Carolinas and Georgia. Was this ever a consideration in appointing a person as under secretary, that he should come from this region?

FREEMAN: No, he didn't pinpoint the region particularly, as I recall except to point out that we did need to have

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someone from the South as under secretary because he had had a good

deal of attention from certain areas in connection with who would be secretary of agriculture. The only one I recall particularly that he expressed a direct concern about was Dick Russell [Richard B. Russell]. He did feel that Dick Russell was influential and that his attitudes and recommendations should be given consideration. I did, then, end up designating an assistant secretary from Georgia; and that seemed to take care of it.

MORRISSEY: Is that John Duncan?

FREEMAN: That was John Duncan. Then, Horace Godfrey [Horace D. Godfrey] from North Carolina, who became administrator of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, was also a presidential appointment. He was actually a career man who had been in the Department for twenty-five years but had strong backing from North Carolina people and from Harold Cooley [Harold D. Cooley], the chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall, offhand, this reference the president made to the significance of those votes in the southern states?

FREEMAN: I don't recall anything specific, except he was conscious really, as much of the influence of the southeastern states in the Congress as he was in the election, I think. Of course, it goes without saying that a number of key posts with high seniority in both the Senate and the House are from the South. The agriculture committees were loaded from the South.

MORRISSEY: I'd noticed that, yes.

FREEMAN: Therefore, we had to just keep our lines clear in that regard. But by the same token, as I say, there was no real pressure to ever take anyone for political reasons at all and certainly never any indication other than that I should get competent people.

MORRISSEY: Since you were a cabinet member of an administration that took a strong position on civil rights, and agriculture had to deal with representatives in both houses of the Congress from the South, did this create any special problems for you in trying to get your legislative program through?

FREEMAN: Well, interestingly enough, it did not. I don't know to this day if the members of the committees were aware of the fact that I had been active in civil rights

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movements. They all knew, certainly, that I had worked very closely with Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] and had been identified accordingly in the national public eye. They could have found out very quickly that I had passed fair employment practices legislation as

governor and had taken a strong stand for housing legislation and made a number of presentations on this subject around the country. But it really never seemed to come up particularly; it was not an issue. I've always had the feeling when dealing with most of the members of Congress from the South that they would just like to be left alone on this subject. They are not very proud of the history, the position, or the situation. If you have to do something and they can stay out of it, and you pay them the courtesy of letting them know, then you go right ahead, and they would just as soon not discuss it. I can't recall one instance where Democrats from the South have ever badgered me or even particularly brought this subject up; they just stay a mile away from it and so do I. We had a couple of instances where we had to move in, such as feeding programs when race was important. But even then people like Jamie Whitten [Jamie L. Whitten] from Mississippi, who is notoriously tabbed as being anti-civil rights, anti-Negro, had frequently been quite cooperative, up to a point, if they can stay out of it themselves.

MORRISSEY: One of the first acts that President Kennedy took after inauguration was to issue an executive order to speed surplus food to needy families. Were you involved in this?

FREEMAN: Yes, I was. This was all very exciting because three of the very early actions that the president took revolved about food and food use. I think his campaign, particularly the one in West Virginia, made a very strong imprint on him. He hadn't realized, as many of us don't until we get on the ground, how miserable some of the conditions were and how little people had to eat—if I recall rightly the distribution at that time, in West Virginia in the fall of 1960, was about \$1.60 per month per person. The commodities were limited to corn meal, flour, dried milk, and not much else. That was about it. There were a few other novel items. He signed an executive order stepping this up, so in a few months we had twelve items, including meat, butter, peanut butter, and a number of other protein items. The value, if I recall, was in the neighborhood of \$6.50 a month. This was the first executive order, and we were naturally excited about it because it had to do with this department, and it came out very promptly. If I remember rightly, it came out the day after he took office. So this was much in his consciousness.

About that time also, came the executive order setting up the office of the Food for Peace director. This actually was a reflection of his interest in his field of food and food use and, in part, the

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desire to get some attention by taking constructive action early, and in part, I think, it reflected the fact that now-Senator George McGovern [George S. McGovern] had been an active candidate for the secretary of agriculture.

Actually, I think the Food for Peace thing might have been better thought through if it had been held up awhile because, although it is doing quite well now, it was a bit sticky at the time because, of course, the Director of Food for Peace is not a director of anything; the program is administered in the State Department AID [Agency for International



Development] agency and the Department of Agriculture and there was no executive authority in the Food for Peace director. It was really a staff job as a residential assistant. This created some confusion, but never anything serious.

The third action, following shortly thereafter, was to announce the food stamp plan on a pilot basis. This I checked into right after taking office and discovered that the act which had been passed by Congress, which I think would have run out in 1961, was not workable. So we cast around because I felt there ought to be a good stamp program, I hit upon the scheme that we might declare any foods which did not bring 90 percent of parity, as in surplus. If they were in surplus under the Section 32 "Direct Distribution Authority," we were able to read enough legal authority into this to go ahead under this somewhat shaky legal foundation and finance the pilot food stamp program out of Section 32 funds that didn't have to be appropriated.

It was only a few weeks after the redistribution announcement that I sent the president a memorandum about what could be done and the next thing I knew he had not only designated—no, it didn't take a presidential executive order, come to think of it; it was something I did from here—he announced at a press conference the six places around the country where the pilot programs would be started. I read about this in the newspaper—I've forgotten where I was—and I was somewhat amused. Apparently what happened was that when he looked at a statement prepared for his press conference, he felt that announcement of the pilot food stamp program was pretty thin without the announcement of where they were going to be. So, in a matter of hours he called the department for suggestions and just went ahead and made the announcements. All of a sudden we were in the food stamp business.

MORRISSEY: How much forewarning did you have about the first executive order regarding the surplus food?

FREEMAN: I don't remember precisely the details on that now—it is in my diary—but I knew all about it and had worked with it and it was understood that this should be an early

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action. I think the president was anxious to have a number of constructive actions to take, and to take very quickly once he assumed office, and this was one of them. This was actually the first.

MORRISSEY: As time went on after the 1961 inaugural, were more definite efforts made to coordinate what agriculture, what AID, what commerce were doing in regard to food, Food for Peace program, rural development and this sort of thing?

FREEMAN: Well, yes and no. There was a focus of attention on coordination which revolved around the State Department, the AID agency, and the ambassadors, all of which were very confused when the administration

took office. Food was never a central part of this, nor was agricultural technical assistance, and I felt very strongly it should be over the years. Food and agriculture never did get adequate attention. I had felt that the AID agency ought not be an operating agency, at least not in the full sweep of the functions whereby they would hire people to place in the field, but that they rather ought to use the resources of the operating agencies and serve in a planning and coordinating function. I never quite succeeded in getting this point across. We struggled with it for several years until finally I was instrumental in getting the basic AID legislation amended to provide by law that this should be done. Then when David Bell [David E. Bell] became administrator of the AID agency, this thing began to shape up. But otherwise the political events were always in the driver's seat and somehow or other, though I tried it at the staff level and brought this to the president's attention a number of times, it never really got through.

MORRISSEY: Were efforts made to coordinate your own department's interests, in confronting the European Common Market, with the State Department activities?

FREEMAN: Yes. This was another story which, because of the immediacy and the pressing nature of the problem, it did get high level attention. The AID organization matter tended to get put off and get lost in the shuffle because it was something that there were different feelings about and it never did really come into sharp focus. I might add that it is working very well now, with the AID agency contract for services with this department and with some others.

The G.A.T.T. [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] negotiations were another thing. The so-called "Dillon round" was coming to a close. We had, for all practical purposes, concluded that negotiations except for agriculture, and the question now was what about agriculture? It

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had been left at the end of the roll. I was concerned about this because the U.S. agricultural position was very weak. The negotiator had agreed to permit, or at least had not violently objected or fought very hard, the variable fee system to be applied by the EEC [European Economic Community]. This was poison where American exports were concerned. They were in effect giving away bindings on most of those things to most of the members of the six, and getting nothing whatsoever in return in agriculture. The big argument was made by the Commerce Department and by Howard Peterson [Howard C. Peterson], the president's special appointee, in the Kennedy round or the Trade Expansion Act drive, that we had done well in industry and that if we got stuffy in agriculture we were going to lose a good deal. I did not believe that, and I prevailed. Neither did the president. We had just been put in a whole by the previous position, which was one that we ought to give anything in agriculture in order to get something on industry.

When I brought this to the president's attention he was concerned about it. This had a long and complicated history of trips to Europe and back again, but he stood very fast on this and insisted that we had to do something and get some kind of arrangements for agriculture

before we would close out those negotiations. On one occasion when I was out of town or going out on a speaking tour, Charles Murphy and I were in the office and he suddenly told Charlie Murphy to go to Europe with Howard Peterson and see what he could negotiate because I couldn't go. They then had a conference and the president states that certain things should be insisted upon, one of which was a sort of standby agreement which would say that trade on the items of question should be maintained at a level commensurate with September of 1960, as I recall.

From the time that they left the president's office and went to the airport, the State Department fellows had changed the position. Luckily there was time for Charlie Murphy to get on the telephone and call back to Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] in the White House and get it clear and verified that the president's position had been a strong one on this because their attitude consistently in these matters—that of the political arm of state that said that the Kennedy round had to prevail regardless, and in effect, the economic consequences on American agriculture be damned—tended to prevail. Such an agreement was finally consummated. All the predictions of doom and gloom and the loss of industrial concessions predicted by George Ball [George W. Ball] and Howard Peterson and the rest did not prove to be true. We did negotiate a standby agreement that covered at least the variable fee items, and when they set heavy fees on poultry, we did go to the G.A.T.T., we did get an award of some thirty million dollars, and the resulting tariff that we imposed on certain liqueurs, champagne, wine and Volkswagens are about the only thing that we have done either before or since

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to ever let the people in Western Europe and their governments know that we really meant about agriculture. But President Kennedy understood this. As a matter of fact, the last conversation I had with him he said to me—I had just returned from a trip to Europe in which we had been reviewing further this difficult problem with the EEC insisting on these variable fees which make us residual suppliers and which will cut American exports very significantly and we had been fussing over this for then almost three years—and he said to me the last time I saw him in November of 1963, two days before he was assassinated, that he was coming to the opinion that the whole Kennedy round had been oversold; that he was not at all sure that it was in our own national interest.

MORRISSEY:            Would it be fair to say that John Kennedy, because of his urban, northeastern background, did not have a feel for domestic agricultural problems?

FREEMAN:             No, it would not be fair to say that at all. He said in the campaign, and he said when he presented us to the nation over television that day in Georgetown, that agriculture was America's number one domestic problem. I think that he felt it very keenly. As a matter of fact, he was very well informed about agriculture. He would always say, "Don't talk to me about agriculture. I don't understand anything about it and I don't want to talk about it." He was, I think, somewhat peeved that, particularly in the middle west, the farmers had not given him the vote; that his

position on agriculture matters, which was clear and which he proceeded to carry forth pursuant to his campaign statements, was not appreciated, But he did understand it. And I always had the feeling that despite the fact that he nominally dealt with it perfunctorily and pretty much left it up to me—although he was always willing to see me about it, which I frequently requested—but having begun from a very parochial point of view in the Congress representing a congressional district from Massachusetts, having in the Senate come early under the influence of Clinton Anderson [Clinton P. Anderson], who was a strong, flexible support person against most of the farm programs of this administration and of the previous one, he then had occasion to study this particularly when he raised his sights from his own state to nationwide. He did have some exposure to this. This was probably the key reason why he was not nominated vice president in 1956. Having had a very bad voting record on agricultural matters, the farm states generally, mine and others, went strongly against him, including some people who had no time whatsoever for Kefauver [Carey Estes Kefauver], simply on the farm thing because it would have been political suicide. Actually, if he had been nominated vice president in 1956, I don't think I would have been reelected governor of Minnesota. So having gone full circle and both because of his own interest and his intelligence and also because he was raising his sights nationwide

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politically, he had an unusual exposure and in a sense, I think, completely reversed his own thinking and changed from anti-government farm program, a so-called flexible support person to a much more positive position. The net result was that he had been through the mill on these issues and, in terms of basic agricultural economics and the history of them and the political implications of them, really understood them quite well. He was pretty thoroughly and adequately informed on agriculture.

MORRISSEY: Did he have any long-range solutions for some of the major problems of agriculture?

FREEMAN: Yes indeed, we had long-range solutions right from the beginning. We never thought in terms of just putting out the fire except to the extent that that was all we could do at the time and place when our long-range plans had not been accepted by the Congress. The first effort we made, which I recommended to him and he agreed, was that rather than try to pass a farm program, we would try to set up a procedure to establish farm programs. That was the essence of the Agriculture Act of 1961. We went for broke in a sense and went out to try and get from the Congress authority similar to that which the executive branch had in the Administrative Procedure Act, where a plan can be submitted to the Congress and if they do not act on it within thirty days it will become law. I knew that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to pass farm legislation and, therefore we ought to get a procedure by which we could implement various commodity programs. So this bill would provide for the election by the procedures themselves of advisory committees. The committees would then sit with the secretary of agriculture, and we would work out a program which would be submitted to the Congress.

He sent a special message up on it, and it almost passed. I think if we had had just a few breaks we might have made it, but some administrative procedure proposals which were ill-advised went up to the Hill and they were not well received. One of them was particularly irritating to Sam Rayburn [Samuel T. Rayburn]. At a critical moment when we needed some real help from him and it was allegedly available, I recall vividly going to his office when he said in no certain terms that this would not pass the House even if it got out of committee. Given the narrow margin at best, that meant that without the Speaker it was dead.

So the first effort was a long-term one. We always recognized that you had to go commodity by commodity and there was no single pattern or plan for all agriculture. The following year—in the meantime, of course, the first act passed by Congress was the emergency feed grain bill, which the president got strongly behind, and which

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provided for a voluntary program of cutting back production, because we had such tremendous surpluses and they were growing with no place to put the grain. That passes, and passed soon enough to go into effect in 1961.

When I started it everyone said that was impossible, you couldn't conceivably get a bill through Congress and get it out on the field to operate in the same crop year. Well, we did it. I've forgotten when he sent the bill up to the Congress now, but it was early in February after I had had some advisory committees in here and we had worked it over. I think it passed early in March. It went through Congress in less than a month. And early in May we were out in the field. The program worked quite effectively.

The second year we put together a long-term, ten-year program. We called it the ABCD program: abundance, balance, conservation, and development, which included all of those elements. It was designed to put agriculture into a balanced position and to build the rural communities with alternative economic opportunities in the next ten years. This again—I won't go into the details—was a long, bitter fight which we lost by a couple of votes in the House. We then went forward to pass that year again and extension of the feed grain program through 1963, as I recall, and a wheat program based on the feed grain voluntary principle for 1962 and provision for a referendum on a mandatory wheat program for 1963. 1963 was the year of the wheat referendum. When it failed it was clear we couldn't pass mandatory program.

What we tried to do in 1962 was to get so-called mandatory programs where you could curtail production enough so you could balance supply and demand and get a decent price and income out of the marketplace instead of out of the government. This the farmers turned down when Congress refused to pass the feed grain bill with mandatory controls, and when the farmers themselves voted down the wheat referendum. So then we had to go back to the '61 and '62 feed grain principle. By this time the feed grain program was working satisfactorily, except that it was costing too much.

We had a very difficult time making the transfer from saying that there wouldn't be any wheat program if the farmers didn't vote for it in the referendum, to moving ourselves and the Congress around to passing a wheat program in 1964. That took a lot of doing. We had to make a decision we had taken, all of us, that there wouldn't be any wheat program,

and which we felt was the case when we took it because it couldn't be passed through Congress until in 1964 gradually there came

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to front what is today the voluntary certificate wheat program. This actually is an excellent program which accomplishes the same purposes at no cost to the taxpayer. But we couldn't have passed that through Congress before the wheat referendum failed because they were determined to have a mandatory program for wheat. In any event—I use this in the way of background—we always have had it clearly in mind that there would be, because of applied technology, fewer farmers, but that we ought to cushion this adjustment for those who were moving out; that we needed to provide for them alternative economic opportunities in rural America. That is why the rural area development program was developed. The poverty program was, of course, something the president was deeply concerned with and was in the mill at the time of his assassination. As a matter of fact, we had a staff papers in great detail in the White House as early as August of 1963. So we always had in mind where we were going to go. We always, I think, understood the forces at play. The difficult thing was dealing with the individual commodity programs that were real difficult to pass through Congress. I sometimes thought that we would have been smarter if we hadn't passed any legislation in 1964; if we had waited another year and let the whole business go to hell in a basket, and as prices began to drop radically the farmers would have been ready to take some strong medicine. They would have supported mandatory programs, we could have passed them, and we would have had workable farm programs. But of course that wasn't practical because in the first place, it would be pretty cold-blooded to disregard the welfare of that many people. Second, it would have an adverse effect on the national economy. Third, you would never know you were going to get licked until you get licked. We just had to try. We had every resource, every help from the president and his staff that anyone could ask for, and we just worked like dogs night and day. I spent more time up on the Hill than I spent in my office. We came very close on the feed grain mandatory provision in 1962, very close. Of course, the wheat referendum was the clincher and it made it clear that the American farmers, after some thirty years of mandatory programs on wheat and feed grain, simply weren't going to sit still for them any longer. So in the commodities we had had to adjust, and we will be doing so this year again, adjusting, to the individual commodity, to what kind of political support it can command, or what are the prejudices and emotions, what kind of workable program, can you put together; just playing it by ear and trying to get what we can get falling short of what we would like, but always moving forward.

MORRISSEY: In regard to legislative matters, would you coordinate your efforts on the Hill with those of Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and people in his office in the White House?

FREEMAN: Yes. Very Closely.

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MORRISSEY: Who would carry the ball primarily?

FREEMAN: Oh, I would carry the ball, but at the crucial time—after the matter had gotten out of committee and would get up in the Rules Committee in the house and we would start dealing with the Speaker—then they would move in. We didn't have any serious problems in the Senate because once we got out of committee in the Senate there would be no problem passing it on the floor of the Senate. But in the House it was a fight all the way. We would pretty well carry the ball in getting it out of committee with some help from them and from the president. When I tried to get some of these bills out of committee, President Kennedy called members of the House Agriculture Committee on a number of occasions. But I would pretty well carry the ball then, but once it moved into the Rules Committee and on the Speaker's desk, then Larry would move in and we would work together on it.

MORRISSEY: When you first became secretary I have the impression from reading your weekly reports that in two respects primarily, the heritage left to you by your predecessor proved difficult. Not just that Benson [Ezra Taft Benson] had evidently convinced a lot of people about his view of agriculture, but also what is called the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] "farewell budget" created all sorts of problems for you.

FREEMAN: It really did. One of the nastiest things I've been working on this very day that Benson did was in cotton. During November, just before the election of 1960, he increased the acreage on cotton by about two and a half million acres which got us off on a bad foot. He also dropped the price supports on everything all the way up and down the line. He didn't make these announcements, but it was built into the budget. We had to reverse these and across the board we modestly increased price supports pursuant to the president's position that farm income was of deep concern. You increased farm income by increasing price supports, not by dropping them.

MORRISSEY: I would rather a good share of your time at the outset was as a salesman, really, trying to sell the president's program as opposed to the Benson program.

FREEMAN: Yes, it was. In selling agriculture, I think that Benson's great disservice to the country and the Department of Agriculture was in the field of public relations because in the process of his struggles to stamp out the commodity programs, he slapped a label of surplus and subsidy on the back of every American farm producer and we haven't been able to scrape it off yet. The net

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results was that American agriculture had a black eye and too many people were happy to believe this, not looking at the facts of the enormous production and the very low food costs of the American people and the tremendous job done with food to help our needy and around

the world. But the general attitude of the people was that this is just a handout and agriculture is a mess and no one could do anything about it anyway. Everybody would say to me, “why did you take that awful job? No one could make anything of that; it is just a lousy operation from top to bottom.” This was the tough thing, which I knew would not be available consistently because agriculture isn’t of that much burning interest to the great majority of our people. So I jumped at every opportunity the first year to do that. Plus I spent as much time on the Hill as I did in my office trying to tell the story to congressmen and trying to develop good working relationships with the members of the committees.

MORRISSEY: I also had the impression from reading these weekly reports that as time went by it became evident that many people were getting benefits from the new agricultural programs. On the other hand—I think you mentioned especially in the western and mid-western areas—the people who were getting the benefits were politically still not at ease with the Kennedy administration.

FREEMAN: I don’t know exactly what you mean by that.

MORRISSEY: I’ll put it this way. Before the assassination, but looking forward to the 1964 election, I would gather there was still strong opposition to the president from rural areas in the west, far west, and middle west, but that these areas on paper had done very well during his first years, agriculturally.

FREEMAN: I don’t think so. I think that by 1963 the fact they had done better was reflecting itself in a changed attitude. I think he would have done well in those areas if he had run again in 1964. He may not have run as well as President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], but I think he might have run very close to as well. He didn’t fit the prototype of a farmer quite as well as Johnson does. On the other hand, despite the complaints, we made some progress. But of course, we are far short of what we said we wanted to do. I think he would have done rather well in the farm areas. Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater], after all, gave us an opportunity to sharpen the issue when he came out against the farm programs and scared the life out of farmers. President Kennedy could have capitalized on that just as well as President Johnson did.

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MORRISSEY: What role did President Kennedy expect his cabinet members to play?

FREEMAN: Well, he was a very pragmatic man. He expected us to run our own department. I felt it was something in the nature of a compliment that I very seldom had to go to him. I dealt with Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and with Mike Feldman in the White House, both of whom are very able, and I could usually get a decision from them on most things. The president would call me from time to time when something would come to his attention, but really not very often. I would review the various questions with them. I had good working relationships with Dave Bell in the Bureau of the Budget then and with Walter Heller [Walter Wolfgang Heller], the Council



of Economic Advisers, and we just did our job. When I needed some help the president would give it to me, and when he had a question he would call me, but I really felt that he had enough to do; if I could run my shop, he was paying me the greatest compliment he could pay me by just, in effect, leaving me alone.

MORRISSEY: Did he expect the meeting of the cabinet to actually provide a consensus on policy?

FREEMAN: No, no. I think these were pretty much perfunctory. I can't remember very many cabinet meetings that amounted to very much. I think most of the cabinet felt that the cabinet was not really used as an influential policy group. This, so far, is pretty much the case with President Johnson as well. I think there is merit in this. As governor I started out having kind of cabinet meetings, so to speak, of administrative heads in the state government. I found that it got to be a very time-consuming kind of thing with a lot of busy people listening to a lot of minutiae from someone else that they really weren't concerned with.

On the other hand, I think both presidents miss a bet when they come down to policy questions by not putting a policy question to the cabinet and getting an expression. I don't think either one wants or should particularly seek a consensus that would be mandatory like the British system where they have to get it pretty much. I think it is quite clear both are strong men and strong leaders, and they are not going to fail to move because a majority of the cabinet might not agree. The cabinet really collectively very seldom—perhaps once or twice—sat down and bumped heads on an issue where you would have an opportunity to probe a question. On the other hand, in the case of each of us this was done on issues of importance that affected us in our own operations. Half a dozen times I went to the president with issues where there would be half dozen people present who had a

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direct interest and he would make a decision when the case had been presented from varying viewpoints. In terms of overall policy, what should the budget be, what is the judgment to balance in terms of spending, services, effective national economy versus the debt, and the level of spending as political issues, how do we balance these, this kind of issues, some perhaps with a trade question, some others I might name where I think he could have profited from using the cabinet. But neither president has done so. Cabinet meetings, I think, are just put on as often as they can put them on so there won't be criticism and the cabinet won't be ridiculed for not doing what in the public eye they are supposed to do. I certainly think weekly cabinet meetings would be a waste of time, but I do think cabinet meetings on broad-ranging policy issues would be useful and neither President Kennedy or President Johnson has used the cabinet that way to any extent.

MORRISSEY: Did you have the feeling that the president tended to value advice from cabinet members who had been in politics—like yourself, Udall [Stewart L. Udall], and Governor Hodges [Luther H. Hodges]—rather

than those who had never run a race and either won it or lost it?

FREEMAN: Yes, I think this was much in his mind. I think those who had been in political maelstrom have their own club like most professions. They tend to feel, and properly so, that one who had been tested in this might have a little sharper judgments about some things than otherwise. I never heard him make any direct reference to it. I had the feeling that this was a factor as he weighed the recommendations that some of us made.

MORRISSEY: I had never seen any evidence that he ever did make such a reference, but I had the feeling myself that it might be so.

FREEMAN: Yes, I think it was.

MORRISSEY: In regard to agricultural programs, was he concerned about the possibility that new programs might increase the price of food for consumers even though it might help farmers?

FREEMAN: I think not. He would tease me a bit about this. He was very concerned about this as a political issue because Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] had made the point during the campaign that the farm program of the Democratic platform would increase consumer prices 25 percent. This, of course, was complete nonsense. He had gotten

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some backwash on that, and he was sensitive to it. He said that the farm program had to accomplish three objectives: improve farm income, cut costs, and maintain consumer prices. So the political factor in this was always present. Fundamentally I think he agreed with what I said when I pointed out to him that the American people didn't pay enough for food, that was our problem. The farmer had been in the back seat in the scramble for the consumer dollar, that his share of the market basket had dropped significantly in the last ten years—from about fifty-one cents down to thirty-seven cents. The percentage that the American people spent for food was steadily dropping. You either are going to maintain farm income by getting the farmer stronger position in the marketplace or to give him some kind of subsidy. Therefore, we wanted to not be vulnerable to this charge, but if there was any merit in the charge, he knew enough about agriculture to not be concerned about that.

MORRISSEY: Could you comment on his style of operation, the way he made decisions, the way he timed decisions and implemented them?

FREEMAN: The decisions were made in terms of a policy and a direction late in the year or early in the following year for the legislative year to come. We would go down to Palm Beach in December and at that time a

good deal of work would have been done with the staff people and the programs and issues, the legislative message, and legislation would be pretty well worked out. In the fall, of course, the budget question would have been hammered out and the general policy in terms of the policy goals set down. He would rely very heavily on his key staff people, the directors of the Bureau of the Budget and the people in the White House. Then this conference of two or three hours would take place in which the issues were pretty well shaped. He would pass on them and make some judgment on them and then you were off. From then on the question was one of implementation except when an emergency arrived that called for his personal attention.

In the battle over cotton in 1963, for example, in the establishment of price supports, there was an effort in Congress to drop the price supports and to mandate the secretary of agriculture to set them at a certain level. When I got wind of it, I determined to set the price supports myself before Congress would have the chance to do so. I went to his office on only several hours notice, and in this case I was opposed in my determination to do this by the Council of Economic Advisers, the Bureau of the Budget, Feldman, Sorensen, and everybody else. The president sat and I presented the case and the reason for it and everyone else gave the reason against it. He then proceeded to examine the propositions as made, particularly directing some questions to Sorensen. This took about an hour, and then he just stood up and said, "We'll do what Orville says," and went back and sat at his

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desk and that was that. I came back to the office and announced the price supports.

MORRISSEY:            Would you say that way typical, making a decision on the spot like that?

FREEMAN:            I think so. It would be typical if he felt that the case had been adequately presented and the issues were clear; he wouldn't dawdle over it. He would make the decision then and it would be done. He did it in such a fashion that the general staff attitudes were so good in connection with him that the decisions were always accepted in good faith. Everyone had their hearing. One of the really fine and healthy things about the relationship was that in dealing with the staff people that I dealt with—and this I'm sure reflected the president's attitude—was that we were not discouraged but rather encouraged to bring a matter to the president if he wished. In the last analysis it would be his decision, although the staff people had really broad authority, much more so than they have now; or at least felt comfortable—how much it was defined in operation I don't know—to go ahead and make tentative decisions. This was good because in a government this big people have to make decisions, and there are a lot of them when agencies get into conflict on something that can only be decided in the White House. If the staff people feel free to make a good many decisions, and can make them without alienating or upsetting operating people, because they have access to the president if they feel it is that important, things get done. This was the general climate which was a very healthy one. I think the White House was well organized and the lines of authority for staff people were quite clear. The result was that the working relationships were generally very good.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any specific recollections of dealing with John Kennedy, say at Palm Beach when you were down there during the holiday seasons, any meetings with him, any particular phone calls?

FREEMAN: Oh, I have some very vivid recollections of both the occasions. In 1961 we went out in the afternoon about two o'clock, Charlie Murphy and myself, and we went into the living room there at Palm Beach. He had just come back from Mexico and had made a statement down there that he was Jackie Kennedy's [Jacqueline B. Kennedy] husband. He was very proud of the fact that she had been so enthusiastically received and had spoken Spanish so beautifully. He talked a little bit about that, and then we sat around for about three hours. I don't remember all the details. There were some budget questions. We got down actually to establishing the price support level on corn, which was a key budget question at

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that time, and we had a lively round about it and finally got it cleared up. I outline for him the ABCD program, a long-term mandatory program. He examined and we discussed each one and where we were going and why, the details in connection with it and the budget implications from it. In about two and a half hours we got it pretty well resolved.

In 1963 I had actually been over most of the stuff in the White House and had only briefly reviewed it with the president. Because we had gone forward then rather quickly, we didn't have so many questions. By then we had lost the fight for mandatory supports, and I had recommended that we just play it loose, that we don't send up any big, far-ranging program. I felt that I had driven the Congress about as hard as they could be driven for two years. It was now time to change pace and just let some things emanate from there. There was no legislation that at that point was particularly crucial except the feed grain bill which had to be extended. The wheat referendum was already called for by law. We had some problems about cotton, but that wasn't clear and we weren't sure how to move. The same was true of dairy. So there wasn't really, at this point, any clear direction and we just had to play by ear.

But then on New Year's Day I had a phone call in the middle of the day asking me to come down to Palm Beach the following day. I remember it very well because I had not planned to go down. I had expressed some disappointment to Mike Feldman because I had always looked forward to these sessions because it was very infrequent that you really had a chance to relax and command his full attention for a two or three hour span for this. Apparently Feldman mentioned it to him and he said, well, then tell him to come down. I got this call, and I remember it ruined the Minnesota-Wisconsin (or was it California or Washington) football game for me because I hadn't done any work on this and I didn't want to go down there without being prepared. I did go over to watch the football game, but I was thinking more about getting ready to go see the president than I was about the football game. It was a good football game, too. I did go back after that game and worked most of the night and then got down the following day. He had had a change of plans and asked me to stay over until the next day. This time I went out, and everyone had returned by this time and he

was alone. We sat in the patio—I have a picture here on the wall of this—and talked for a good two and half hours. There were a number of issues: cotton, feed grains, trade, should we change the name of the department, and strategic reserves that I was highly conscious of after the Cuba confrontation. We had a very, very delightful three-hour session. About this time Jackie and the children came out in bathing suits and went in the pool. He went and got one, got into a suit, and came back. I left then. When I left he waved good-bye to me and

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I remember him saying that “Here I am living it up in the swimming pool and you are going back to work. I bet it wasn’t that way when you were governor, was it?” I remember very vividly.

We would pretty well set the direction early in the year, and then as the issue arose we would adjust to them. As I say, not too many would have to go to the president at all.

MORRISSEY: At one time you were thinking of changing the name to the Department of Food, Forestry, and Agriculture, or something like that. What happened to this idea?

FREEMAN: This idea is very much in the forefront right now, and I am strongly urging it on President Johnson, that we should call it Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs. I felt then, and I feel more strongly now, that we operate under a cloud here because of the way people tend to think of this department. It is far-reaching and touches people’s lives probably more intimately than any other department of government, and in more intimate ways. But yet, because of the controversy about commodity programs, everyone thinks that the seven billion dollar budget of the department is all ladled out in great big shovelfuls to farmers. It is not merely a name, but to kind of clear the record and broaden the scope here that I think this is important. This is one of the things that I recommended to President Kennedy in December of 1963—rather January of 1962—and he was not favorably inclined at all. He said, and I think probably rightly so, that this would stir up a lot of controversy and what I should do is go out and get some support for it around the country, and then we would think about what we could do about changing the name.

MORRISSEY: Were you involved with the ins and outs of trying to get the trade expansion bill passed?

FREEMAN: Yes. I testified on the trade expansion bill a number of times and this, of course, was an integral part of the whole picture of legislative timing. We did a good deal of lobbying in connection with it. There were a lot of congressmen and senators who were extremely gun-shy because of the bad results of the Dillon round and because they were fearful of what would happen under this bill in terms of industrial dominance over agriculture and trade negotiations. So I was pretty intimately involved.

MORRISSEY: I get the impression that sugar gave you a difficult time.  
FREEMAN: Well, sugar always gives difficult time. Actually not as difficult as some because you just resign yourself to the fact that you don't have much influence over sugar.

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Washington is full of sugar lobbyist and most of the countries that have country quotas hire themselves a lobbyist and a lawyer. Frankly, it is one of the most questionable operations in the town and not a very pleasant one. A good many of them get fees on a percentage basis depending on the quota they can get, which is generally a mess. We tried to clean it up in part by moving toward local quotas scheme with fees. It has not worked too well and we are pretty much back to country quotas and will be next year. I never lost a great deal of sleep over sugar because I never kidded myself that I could do much about it anyway.

MORRISSEY: You mentioned a few things ago that there were only a couple of cabinet meetings in which people knocked heads together. Do you remember what issues prompted that head-knocking?

FREEMAN: Well, whenever we get a chance there would be one on this question of spending or not spending and budget or not budgeting, which would generally involve Udall, Wirtz [William Willard Wirtz], and Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] before then and myself. A much more conservative position being taken by Celebrezze [Anthony J. Celebrezze], or before him by Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff], and by Hodges. This was a matter of some issue. There was always a little sensitivity between Walter Heller and Douglas Dillon [Clarence Douglas Dillon]. That was, I think, more a matter of professional pride than anything else. There were never any real altercations; head-knocking is probably too strong a term. I think there should have been some more. Actually, most of the cabinet sessions, I'm afraid, were pretty perfunctory.

MORRISSEY: Going back to some of your face-to-face meetings with John Kennedy—you talked about the two in Florida—any recollections of any other occasions which you were...

FREEMAN: Oh, I can remember a good many of course. I recall during the height of the Billie Sol Estes hearings when the emotion was running strong and the press was attacking me bitterly. They were trying to make much of little, as the hearing conclusions two years later finally substantiated. I was supposed to present a group—I've forgotten what group it was—to the president. I was tied up making a speech downtown and when I got there it was late and I was thinking he had already met with them. I stuck my head in the office and he was alone and he motioned me to come over and he said that he had been looking at the paper and reading the attacks on me. He said to me kind of laughingly that "every day he was in this office he got to know more how Harry Truman felt,"

which was a whimsical comment which didn't do my morale any harm.

I remember one instance that I thought was very kind and thoughtful: I came in one Saturday morning after the wheat referendum. We had a long discussion as to how to handle this tricky problem—what to do next in terms of politics and also the economic question of farmers and no farm programs. I brought my son Mike [Michael O. Freeman] with me to the White House. He had a picture of himself and the president at the ball game and he had wanted the president to autograph it, so I brought him on in. After the president had autographed it (there were a lot of people running in and out before the thing settled down), he motioned to Mike and said, "Go over there and sit down," on one of the two sofas that faced each other with the rocking chair he sat in between on one end. Mike looked at me and I told him to do as he was told, and he went over and sat down. The president paid no more attention to him but he stayed there. The president and I talked then for well over an hour about the farm problem and what our strategy should be, and Mike was there listening to all this. He never said a thing, never acknowledged he was even there. It was very, very thoughtful of him. It was an experience that the boy, of course, will never forget, and I thought it was a very, very thoughtful thing for him to do.

Sessions with the president would usually involve a problem. I don't think anybody with any sensitivity goes over to pass the time of day with the president unless he is invited. So you would usually go for particular purpose. When you did, he would march in, sit down, hear the issue, talk about it for awhile and then he would either go out to get more information or he would make a decision. He would get right to the heart of the problem. He would read a memorandum with amazing rapidity and absorb most of the things that were in it. He would get to the heart of the issue very quickly, discuss it, and come up quite promptly with a course of action.

MORRISSEY: There were stories in the midsummer of 1963—I can recall one specifically in the *New York Times*—that you might be leaving the department for another post in the government. Do you remember any of these?

FREEMAN: Well, the secretary of agriculture is leaving for another post or is getting fired about every week. I got conditioned to this really early. In several instances I think there were public relations people representing special interests around town who intentionally foment this kind of thing. I think there are some professionals that sell their services just for this purpose,

and on occasion they have been known to hound and ride cabinet officers out of office. I never paid very much attention to it. I never had any reason to feel other than that I enjoyed the president's confidence and we never discussed any other assignment. I was right in the middle of trying to do what I wanted to do, I wasn't interested in trying to do anything else so these things didn't bother me very much.

When I had some problems during the Billie Sol Estes hearings he very quickly came out very strongly in his expression of confidence. He did the same thing after the failure of the wheat referendum when the Republicans on the hill were demanding that I be removed. He was queried about this at a press conference and he stated it was not true. He gave me credit for a number of things that had been done and quickly cut off questions on my removal. So I never had any particular feeling of insecurity. I had many unhappy hours during the Billie Sol Estes thing, which could have blown anyone out of the water politically. It was the first charge of corruption against the Kennedy administration and the press went crazy. It made no difference what the facts were; the irresponsible sensation reporters were determined to write the wildest kind of stories. The more responsible ones were so fearful that there might be some truth in the charges that they were unwilling to write anything at all. This went on for a good many months. When I survived that with strong presidential support, I never had any reason to feel insecure.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

MORRISSEY:            Could you tell me some of the details of your flight out over the Pacific at the time of the assassination, how the news came across, and so forth?

FREEMAN:            Yes. We had left in high good spirits that morning and had been out about an hour when they served breakfast. Some of us had been sitting visiting a bit in the forward cabin with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and I went back to sit with my wife. We had breakfast, and I recall quite clearly several people moving towards the front cabin when I was about halfway through breakfast with a very serious demeanor. Then someone—I think it was Bob Manning [Robert J. Manning]—came back and asked me to come to the forward cabin. I knew there was something unusual afoot, and I wanted to be in there. I was just handed a copy of a cable saying that the president was shot and his condition was uncertain. The shock was beyond description. It is the kind of thing that you don't believe is possible; it is so far beyond the range of expectation that you can't really quite comprehend its early impact. We didn't have any final

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information for some time. Everyone was of course conjecturing a bit then, and many of them thought that if he were shot in the head the chances of survival were pretty slim. I interjected a rather grim note on that; that it was not necessarily the case because I had been rather badly shot in the head myself and I was very much alive. Before we got the final confirmation that he had died there was some discussion of what should we do: Should we turn around and head for Washington? Should we turn around and go back to Hawaii. We did so, and about a half hour after the initial wire contact was made, information was gotten: the president had died. It was a pretty grim trip.

I expected I knew Lyndon Johnson better than anyone on the airplane. Many people talked to my wife and myself about him because we knew him—not well, but we had had exposure over the years on repeated occasions. People just didn't know what to do or say;



everybody was kind of numb. We flew back to Hawaii and everybody stayed on the plane. Nobody wanted to get off. Dean Rusk left the plane, I think, for a few minutes to talk to reporters who were all lined up. We refueled, took off, and flew straight to Washington nonstop from Hawaii. Everyone kind of moved around and talked to everyone else very somberly and soberly. What we do now, how this happened, and what it was. We knew nothing about it, and there was much conjecture about what now and what kind of a president will Lyndon Johnson make. It was really pretty grim business.

MORRISSEY: Anything else you would like to put on tape in regard to the assassination or the funeral.

FREEMAN: No. I really don't feel like talking about it. I don't think I have much to contribute that hasn't already been thoroughly and well known.

MORRISSEY: Yes. This oral history program has included several interviews with people here in the Department of Agriculture. If a young man came along and wanted to write the story of agriculture policy during the Kennedy administration, whom would you suggest outside the department that he go talk to? Thinking of your critics as well as your supporters.

FREEMAN: Well, that is a good question. I've got lots of critics. I suppose the prime antagonist, in a sense, would be the Farm Bureau [American Farm Bureau Federation] and president Charlie Shuman [Charles B. Shuman], who I've had frequent contacts with, and some of their organizational people. One of these is their Secretary-Treasurer

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Roger Flemming, who I frankly, don't know very well. He has only been in my office once in four years, but he really runs the farm bureau. They of course are violently anti-government programs and have fought everything that I have advocated for four years. I expect this would be the place.

I think probably the reporter who has been consistently the most critical and antagonistic has been a fellow down at the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, Tennessee, by the name of Gerald Deering, in my judgment a very poor reporter and one who has been bought and paid for, but one nonetheless who has been on my back pretty consistently for the last four years. I don't know of anyone else who has been a particular critic. There have been a number of the trade magazines, so to speak, like the *Cattleman*, the *Farm Journal*, and others—particularly the various livestock and cattle publication—that are rather sharply critical of any kind of farm program. Their voice has been somewhat muted because we took quite far-ranging action last year to try and check the drop in cattle prices. I have tried to educate the cattlemen and I think they have a little better concept of farm problems and what things such as the feed grain program do for them. Actually, when I think about it, outside of the farm bureau and Deering, I don't think of anyone who has been particularly personally critical. Most papers are. It is to be expected that the *Chicago Tribune* will constantly write

editorials and do this very bad reporting. The *Wall Street Journal* editorials are always anti as they are antigovernment anyways. Otherwise, on a personal basis, I can't think of anyone who has really been a personal critic.

MORRISSEY: Is there any one farm journal which you would say is giving you the most fair coverage?

FREEMAN: Well, this kind of breaks down in terms of the organizations who support programs and those who don't. There really isn't an impartial third source in this sense. The farm bureau publications have been very antagonistic and, I think, less than accurate. The Farmers Union, on the other hand, the Grange, the Missouri Farmers Association, and most of the publications of the big corporatives have been generally friendly, not always so. The REA [Rural Electrification Administration], the soil conservation groups, the general conservation groups, the fish groups, the forestry groups, the wildlife people, the wilderness people. We have had a very strong forestry program. We had some problems early in the administration with the lumbering people, but I managed to get them very much in the fold, so to speak. We worked out some reforms in the contract on appraisal systems and a number of other things, so those relationships have ended up to be very good.

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I think that outside of the farm bureau, really, and occasionally the Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers will take a crack at me, but it has been mostly just general public disaffection with agriculture in general. A good bit of this Benson is responsible for. Plus inertia, because when you try and advocate a farm program it is always going to rock somebody's boat. It is easier to be against something than for something. The programs tend to be very technical and most members of Congress don't know and don't care and big organizations heavily financed like the Farm Bureau can make it very, very difficult to pass legislation. The same part is played in commodity groups quite effectively by the National Milk Producers Federation which has been a thorn in our side. It has been negative in legislation. And generally by the Cotton Council. The Cotton Council did a lot of damage in 1961 and 1962. By 1963 they wanted the cotton bill, so I managed to get that one passed. So actually, I never quite thought about it this way, but I would say that, as of now, there is nobody that is really very mad at me. That kind of worries me a little bit. It must be that I'm not doing anything.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any final, overriding impressions of either John Kennedy as president or of your service in the Kennedy Administration?

FREEMAN: Well, many. Yes. They are very difficult to articulate. I think anybody who had the opportunity to meet with President Kennedy over these years came to feel an enormous attraction for him. He was a tremendously attractive person. You also felt a great respect for his ability; even more than that, as far as my personal evaluations is concerned, for his incredible self-containment and

personal self-discipline and self-control. You always had the feeling that to some extent he was standing in the corner kind of looking at all of this with something of an air of detachment. Two instances of incredible self-containment and self-control both revolved around the Cuban affairs.

The first, the Bay of Pigs affair in 1961; he called a cabinet meeting. We did discuss this at some length, although it was more in the nature of a report or review than asking advice as to a course of action. At that time he didn't know what to do—he didn't know what had happened. But before that meeting began, he was a bit delayed, and I walked out through the French doors in the Cabinet room into the patio there looking out over the Rose Gardens. He was standing down outside the corner of the President's office talking to Ted Sorenson, obviously discussing what he was going to say that noon

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at a speech at the Press Club. As they were talking, the door on the other side opened and about thirty little children came frolicking out, creating quite a noise. He looked and saw Caroline and called to her. She came over and he picked her up and gave her a hug and a pat on the bottom and whispered something in her ear and teased her a little bit and sent her off with her little friends. At that point, if I had been in his position, I'm sure that I would not have heard and certainly would not have been interrupted. It would not have been possible for me to detach myself from what was a terrible crisis early in the administration. But he did very lightly and very matter-of-factly. I made a special note of this quality I had observed before but never under quite that kind of stress with quite that kind of an insignificant interruption. It was clear that this was not something he did on purpose; this was something he just did because you just don't get yourself that deeply involved. I think this is one of the things that he managed to keep in a kind of balance generally.

The other example of this—I saw many of them, but this stands out—also was on the Cuba thing when he called the cabinet together on the afternoon that he delivered the ultimatum to Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev] in relation to the missiles in Cuba. I had been in Philadelphia; I spoke that noon and then caught a special plane to get back for a four o'clock cabinet meeting. About four the cabinet was standing on the patio by the Rose Garden because he was using the Cabinet Room. A number of us were there. He had been meeting with the National Security Council, and then the president of one of the African countries had come to call on him. He brought him out through the French door—it was now a cold fall afternoon—and took him around and introduced him individually to each of us with an appropriate word and then walked him down and put him in his car. You would have thought that this was just another day's work and that there wasn't any crisis at all, and that he didn't have a care in the world. To me it was just incredible that with the amount of pressure he had been under and was under, and the far-reaching import of the decision that was in the process, that he could again detach himself to this extent.

He was a man, as everyone knows, who did not like extravagance of any kind in terms of length of speeches, in terms of language, in terms of personal decorum, whatever it may be. He revolutionized political style in a sense—no, he didn't revolutionize it because no one else has been able to do it. It is almost stock and trade that you don't undersell, you oversell what you say; you don't understate, you overstate. Where I come from we are

reasonably bombastic, and when we give a speech we give a speech. Sometimes it will run forty-five minutes if you really get warmed up. But he would invariably keep it short and disliked long statements or ostentatious language.

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We went up to dedicate the Gifford Pinchot Building which was turned over to the forestry department in the fall. We went on a conservation tour and I introduced him there and I had prepared some remarks and I had some points to make that were important to the Forestry Service that had, in part at least, been left out of this conservation tour. Most people in the United States don't know that the Forestry Service is in the Department of Agriculture anyway. This is sometimes a bit of a morale problem. So I had some things to say, since Gifford Pinchot was really chief of the Forestry Service and had done great things in this area. My statement ran to about two typewritten pages. We were sitting in his cabin in the plane flying up there, and when I handed this to him he quickly read it and turned to me and said, "That is fine, but can't you make it shorter?" I didn't make it shorter because there were some things that I had to say. He never said anything, but I think he was a little impatient through it.

In the course of this—we were having a discussion—I mentioned to him that I had spoken for three hours. I had been on what I called a "report and review session" when I made about ten appearances around the country in the fall following the wheat referendum. I went out myself to find out what the farmers were really thinking. These meetings would range up to five thousand people. I would speak briefly and then answer questions for as long as they wanted to stay, and in one case it ran for three hours. When I mentioned this he just shook his head. The thought that anybody could make a speech for three hours was to him completely appalling. He implied that I was pretty verbose fellow and proceeded to kid me about this all the time.

He would frequently kid me about agriculture and always about the budget. He would say that anybody that could spend as much money as I spend in agriculture ought to have a special kind of recognition out of the government. He always had the needle out on this. I think in part it was because he knew it would set under my skin, and he would tease me about it; and in part I think it expressed his own fundamental frustration that he had given a lot of time and interest and had actually reversed an earlier position in this field and hadn't gotten very much political mileage for his pains in the election of 1960. As I think back, as time wore on, he really did not—this kind of wore itself out. After 1962, or even after '61, there wasn't so much of this anymore.

But there was a certain style and a certain effectiveness that he had that was very compelling. One always felt very proud the way he would handle himself. He grew increasingly more articulate in the formal occasions where a toast would be made to foreign dignitaries.

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His speaking improved. I remember when I first knew him as a senator—I think it was back in '56 when we first appeared on a platform together—I frankly wasn't very much

impressed. When we campaigned in Wisconsin and West Virginia I wasn't particularly impressed. He was improving then. He was out in 1960 and spoke in Minnesota and did very poorly. He had a poor speech and I thought he had a poor delivery. Actually, I think he warmed up in the campaign of 1960, He began to relax he began to get the issue, and he began to come to the front. From then on he became increasingly more effective, although I don't think he was ever a greater orator. But he did have an appeal and he developed a style. And of course throughout all of this, as I say, it was a style of understatement because he disliked ostentations in any form and always refused to put on an Indian bonnet or a Mexican sombrero or whatever it might be.

The only time I ever saw him put on any head cover at all was on the same day he had turned down and refused to allow some very attractive Mexican girls in St. Paul, Minnesota, to put on his head a magnificent velvet, great big sombrero with a lot of beads and silver. They wanted to put it on his head and he would have no part of it. But that night we were up in Hibbing, Minnesota, and he spoke to about ten thousand miners. They brought him a miner's hardhat from the mines, and that he would put on. But he wouldn't put on the Mexican sombrero.

Another incident now—just looking at these pictures on the wall, the one coming down the steps—that was typical of this. We had called a dairy conference because we had had real problems getting dairy legislation. We hadn't gotten any through. This was in early 1962. One of the things we had talked about was the dairy problem, the fact that we hadn't gotten dairy legislation; the fact that we had heavy surplus, and thing just weren't good. We had a lot of criticism from dairy areas. He suggested that we should have a dairy conference. I already had scheduled conferences on rural area development and one other. In any event, at his request we scheduled a dairy conference and brought dairy people in from all over the country. This was also the time when the question of hypertension and too much fat content in the diet was very prominent. Cholesterol was much in the news and dairy consumption had fallen rather sharply. This had contributed to a heavy buildup of surpluses. So we called this conference and he agreed to come over and speak to us. I went over to get him, and coming back I said, "Now, Mr. President, on the podium there will be a glass of milk. It will be right down below the speaker's stand. When you finish speaking I want you to take out the glass of milk and drink a toast to the dairy farmers." He turned to me and kind of shook his head and said, "Don't you think that is pretty darn corny?" I said, "Well, it may be corny, Mr. President, but there will be people

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there from every dairy publication in the United States. You wanted to have a conference, and I think it is a good idea, but now give them a picture. Give them something to write about. It will do more good than anything else you have to say." He just grunted. He didn't say whether he would or wouldn't. We got over there, and he made the speech and finished, and I thought he wasn't going to do this. Then all of a sudden he reached down and said, "I want to wish you all good luck," or something—I've forgotten exactly what he said—and he took the quickest swallow I've ever seen in my life. He literally ran off the platform, and all the press photographers were screaming, "Do it again, do it again." He wouldn't do it again

for a minute. He literally went out of there in a dead run. In that picture up there on my wall I was just going down the steps after him, and I remember that very well.

But he was a very remarkable man in the respect. As I say, he made a virtue out of understatement instead of overstatement and added a dimension of significance of style and of class, together with his own extremely engaging and attractive personality which, of course, is quite extraordinary.

MORRISSEY:           The trip from the Pinchot Homestead up to Duluth, do you have any recollection of anything that happened on that trip?

FREEMAN:           Nothing that stands out particularly sharply. I remember that we had a very interesting conversation during the flight. We landed in Duluth and it was raining. It was a miserable day, and we transferred to helicopters and went out over the Apostle Islands to Lake Superior and landed over there somewhere close to Lake Superior where he spoke to some Wisconsin people. We then helicoptered back to Minnesota. I remember that night after he had spoken to the big crowd at the Duluth University of Minnesota auditorium, I brought several local Minnesotians—including the now new designated Senator Mondale [Walter F. Mondale]—up to see him. I subsequently recommended Mondale to be named to be the Kennedy campaign manager in the state of Minnesota. He received them very, very graciously and seemed very much in good spirits, and they were all quite captivated. Otherwise, I think that trip was relatively uneventful. I don't recall anything in particular.

MORRISSEY:           Well, thank you very much.

FREEMAN:           Will that do it?

MORRISSEY:           I think so.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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