

INTERVIEW WITH
Wilbur J. Cohen

by

Maclyn P. Burg
Oral Historian

on

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for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



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William J. Cohen
Donor

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This interview is being conducted with Dean Wilbur J. Cohen in Dean Cohen's office on the University of Michigan campus, Ann Arbor, Michigan. The date is March 31, 1976. Present for the interview, Dean Cohen and Dr. Maclyn Burg of the Eisenhower Library staff.

DR. BURG: May I ask when and where you were born, sir?

DEAN COHEN: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on June 10, 1913, and I attended schools in Milwaukee and went to the University of Wisconsin where I graduated in economics in 1934.



DR. BURG: Oh, in economics. May I ask who taught you that? Who was the major professor?

DEAN COHEN: My major professors were Professors Selig Perlman, John R. Commons, and Edwin E. Witte. And I had such professors as Ralph Litton in anthropology and E. A. [Edward Alsworth] Ross in sociology and John [Merriman] Gaus and Alexander Mecklejohn--very, very distinguished group of teachers.

DR. BURG: Yes, some well-known men. Of course Wisconsin had that reputation, too, and still does.

DEAN COHEN: Yes, and still does.

BURG: Now with that degree, what line did your career take then?

COHEN: I was brought to Washington in 1934 by Professor Witte, who became the executive director of the President's cabinet committee on economic security which drafted the original Social Security Act. I was his research assistant. And upon the conclusion of the work of the committee and the passage of the Social Security Act, I became the assistant to one of the members of the Social Security Board, Mr. Arthur J. Altmeyer. And I held various positions in the Social Security Board from 1935 through 1955 when I left the government to become a professor of public welfare administration in the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan.

BURG: So you came here.

COHEN: I came here; I did not return to Wisconsin. I came here and then I was professor of public welfare administration for five years until after the election of President Kennedy when he appointed me the chairman of his



task force on health and social security. And upon making my report to him in January of 1961, he then appointed me assistant secretary of health, education and welfare. I held that position for about five years until June of 1965 when President Johnson made me under secretary of health, education and welfare which I held until 1968 when I became secretary of health, education and welfare after the resignation of John Gardner.

BURG: Quite a career. What had you been doing prior to going to Washington in '34?

COHEN: I was just finishing my undergraduate work.

BURG: Undergraduate work?

COHEN: Yes, I never did go back to get my graduate work. I'm one of these few people at the University of Michigan with nothing but a Ph.B.

BURG: What is that?

COHEN: It's a Bachelor of Philosophy. There have been about two or three people here like myself who've come back and



taken academic positions after we have finished our government work without our advanced graduate work. We consider ourselves a very small group of people.

BURG: I imagine you do. And look what kind of crowds it brings into your office; think about that sometime!

COHEN: Yes, yes, I see.

BURG: I think you're being paid back. Now, we noted that one of your jobs in the Social Security Administration was director of the division of research and statistics for a period of time, 1953-56. Could you tell me something about that work? Well for one thing of course in that agency you're coping with something brand new, really a tremendous social experiment in the United States. Now was your division aimed at collecting data that had never been collected before and was going to be needed to further these plans?

COHEN: Yes, the purpose of the division of research and statistics under Mr. Altmeyer's leadership was not only to collect the data but to do the research evaluation that led



to new program development. Mr. Altmeyer was a Ph.D. himself from the University of Wisconsin in economics, and he continued the kind of work Professor Witte did, who got me started in this, in which he assumed that in order to develop new programs there had to be a good deal of what we would now call evaluation and development. And the research and statistic staff of the Social Security Administration was responsible for developing ideas on national health insurance, on disability insurance, on a whole group of programs.



Now when we come to that I would like to tell you of two or three problems that arose because I assume you're trying to direct this mainly in relation to President Eisenhower in this work. And of course I served for 1953, '54 and '55 while President Eisenhower was President. And while I had no direct contact with him during those three years, there were a number of problems that arose which I would like to comment on during his administration.

BURG: Exactly what we'd like to hear.

COHEN: Then I want to go back because I had one direct

contact with Mr. Eisenhower when he was chief of staff.

BURG: Oh, you did?



COHEN: Yes. I was the director of research in 1947 for the [Karl T.] Compton Universal Military Training Commission, and General Eisenhower was chief of staff. My main responsibility in '47 under President Truman that year was to develop a plan for universal military training that did not impede the ability of young people to go on to college. And in that respect we had to have a good deal of contact with General Eisenhower and his staff members. I believe that several of those experiences with universal military training and General Eisenhower at that time, have never really been developed in terms of the Eisenhower biographical material that I'm aware of, in any case.

BURG: I think you're quite correct.

COHEN: And I would like to make a few comments on that and give you some suggestions for some further oral history development in that area.

BURG: Excellent. Couldn't be better.

COHEN: So let me start with that first because chronologically that occurred first. When President Truman decided that he was in favor of a universal military training program and appointed the board that dealt with that, they decided that they needed a research person, and I was recommended to, I think Sam [Samuel I.] Rosenman.



BURG: Judge Rosenman.

COHEN: Judge Rosenman, whom I had worked with very closely over a number of years. So I became the director of research and the man who was the executive director of that organization is a man by the name of Jack Ohly, O-h-l-y. I urge that you interview him.

BURG: Where would we find him, sir? Do you know.

COHEN: I haven't the slightest idea. I would imagine he might live in the Washington area. He might be a retired governmental employee. I think he worked for the defense department at one time. I have had no contact with him for

twenty-five or thirty years, so I have no way of knowing. But he was the executive director and you might be able to find his name through the civil service retirement system if that's available to you. Now why do I mention this as important? The key issue in this universal military training was, sixteen weeks of training and training every boy in a universal program. Parents might not like it, but the big question is, isn't this going to take a year out of the boy's life which will defer his going to college. And so we tried, with the help of many other people in the commission, to work out a program that in his high school year he would leave high school in April or May, go into military training during the summer, come out in October and still be able to register for his freshman year maybe a month or two weeks or three weeks late. The essence of that whole business was how did that fit in with the military training that was necessary in terms of their problem. General Eisenhower was chief of staff at that time and I want to make two points. One--he did not seem to realize the seriousness of that problem being presented to the committee, and he was very deficient



in his staff work in helping the commission. When he did appear before the commission to discuss that, his presentation was so inadequate that he was rebuked by Mrs. Rosenberg, who later became an assistant secretary of defense herself--the only woman who's been as assistant secretary of defense--Mrs. Anna Rosenberg who was a member of the commission. Because his failure to be able to handle the analysis of the problem as it affected the educational programs made the whole problem of their analysis difficult. And the reason for that was that several members of the commission were academic people. The president of Princeton was a member; the president of Georgetown University was a member; Compton had been the president of MIT, if he wasn't at that time. And of course they were not going to recommend anything which didn't have General Eisenhower's not only complete support militarily, but didn't competently handle the question of the impact on the educational system. That was my only contact with General Eisenhower. He was very affable and personable and took the criticism quite well, but that experience always remained with me for a long period of time because I left with a feeling of incompetence on his part.



BURG: And that was 1947, Dean Cohen.

COHEN: Yes. My experience may be random and incomplete, but I must say that I am one of those who, although I have not read much, I have never been a great admirer of General Eisenhower. I felt that that one experience I had plus the subsequent things I know about him make me believe that he was overrated. And I continue that view to this day. But, as I'm perfectly willing to admit, my evidence is scanty, highly personal, and I would urge you to talk with other members of that commission about that experience. And, of course, while President Truman made the report, nothing ever happened. Now whether it would have happened more successfully had Eisenhower done something better in that meeting or in connection with the report, I have no way of knowing. But as far as I know too, Eisenhower, when he became President, never picked up the idea, but that would be something I think some historian ought to look into. What was his view on universal military training; why did he fail to exercise leadership in '47; and why did he fail to, at any time in the future, pick up the idea if



he and the military people were so enamored of it in the post-war period.

BURG: Did he offer, at that meeting, any defense, any statement as to why he was not prepared on this?

COHEN: Yes, he said that he had been out on an inspection trip and he had not been able to brief himself adequately before the meeting. Now I cannot believe that he would leave such an important matter to briefing himself the night before on a matter in which a presidential commission had been appointed. Now if this had been some little committee--but here was a special presidential--meeting in the White House, we met in the White House. I think this is a neglected little aspect of his background and experience in national policy which I have never heard about, and I don't know whether there's anything else in the library about this era, but I would suggest that there may be a little vignette there that ought to be looked into.

BURG: You bet. You know as I think about it, the only thing that comes to mind, if one looked at it from the



military standpoint, would be to say: Splendid plan but it means training thousands upon thousands of young men in this brief span within the twelve months and then the training facilities lie idle--



COHEN: He may have decided, and this is what's worth looking into, that despite the public posture that the military had in favor of it, that he didn't think of it as of high priority. I've often thought of that. Maybe Eisenhower said, "Well, it's fine for all you guys to advocate, but it isn't that important, and it isn't going to happen, and let's just deal with it on that basis." Now if that's what the history records show, I think you ought to look up the records because that is a different story, and I think there's probably some basis to that. That his view may have been different on it than other people.

BURG: Yes. But it really isn't like him not to know what he's coping with when he walks into the meeting, and that interests me too.

COHEN: Yes, the image of him has always been that he's been

briefed and staffed before he went into any meeting.

BURG: And the very next year, of course, he goes to Columbia University. He puts on the academic hat, and it would be interesting to chase it into that period of time, too.

COHEN: Of course he probably didn't know that in '47, that he was going to have the academic hat.



BURG: I don't think so.

COHEN: I don't think so, but in any case it'd be interesting to trace this in a number of different ways. This experience remained sharp in my mind for thirty years.

BURG: Yes, well of course I was interested, too, because at that time, the time you were meeting, I was just a couple of years, one year actually, out of the army myself, drafted late in World War II, and therefore I'd had the equivalent of about sixteen months of military training and then began my college career far better able to cope with it than I would have straight out of high school. There's just no doubt in my mind.

COHEN: You might look at the report of the Universal Military Training Commission called "Universal Training." I think the word military was left out of the report because they also talked about training people who couldn't be used militarily for other public service functions. There is a full report and it might be that there are some materials in the Eisenhower Library relating to that report and its preparation that you ought to look at ahead of time.



BURG: I think the report is there; I believe it's there.

COHEN: Well that completes my only direct, personal, eyeball-to-eyeball meeting with General Eisenhower. But during this period, from 1947 through 1955, I was with the Social Security Administration. When General Eisenhower won the election, my name was put on a list of about five other names by the Republican National Committee to be fired when General Eisenhower became President.

BURG: Did you ever know who led that move?

COHEN: Yes sir. The person who I am informed led that move was Carl Curtis of Nebraska, the present senator from Nebraska,

who was then a congressman. He presented a list to Mrs. [Oveta Culp] Hobby, who General Eisenhower selected as the first secretary of HEW, and, in the course of time--. I never physically saw the list. There was such a list. I talked with a person once who saw it. I never saw it so I can't tell you all the people who are on it, but I know some of the names that were on it. Mrs. Hobby invited many of those people to either resign, retire, or take another job, all of whom did so, except myself. I refused. I did not feel that it was justified for me to be--I was a civil servant--so Mrs. Hobby then put me on the Schedule C list, which is an exempt position. And after about a year or two of back and forth, they offered me a demotion, which I took. The demotion was to be the director of research and statistics. I actually held a higher position. I did receive several letters of people saying, "we're glad to see that the Eisenhower administration has now promoted you," because it sounded better. But I was demoted one grade with a thousand dollars a year reduction in salary, which I was willing to take after long negotiations that were handled through the then under secretary, Nelson Rockefeller.



BURG: I'll be darned.

COHEN: Nelson Rockefeller, whom I knew very well, was the person who in a sense made the counter offer rather than firing me to demote me and keep me on. However, what happened is, subsequently, I stayed '53 and '54 while Mrs. Hobby was there and ultimately decided to take my appointment here at the University of Michigan. At about the time I had made my decision, Mrs. Hobby left and Marion Folsom, the under secretary of the treasury became the secretary of HEW who was a very close friend of mine. He urged me not to resign. My wife said, "We've already made the decision and let's go." And we did and I've never regretted it. So after these three years of great emotional travail for me in the Eisenhower administration, Mr. Folsom tried to reverse the situation but I came here as a full professor in 1956.

What had happened during that period of time is that Mr. Curtis strongly objected to the social security system and its fundamental philosophy which I and these other people had been a party to. He was an advocate of what I



would call the [Alf] Landon philosophy--which gets us off in another track about the Landon campaign of '36 which I could explain to you--but in any case the Curtis-Landon philosophy was to have a social security system that was basically a flat payment to everybody like the old Townsend plan--x dollars a month to everybody, financed all out of general revenues. I was a strong opponent to that. Mr. Curtis became the chairman of a sub-committee before the House Committee of Ways and Means trying to investigate the system. And he kept up a barrage of attack on the program and people like myself who had been a party to it from 1934 through 1952, believing that, with Eisenhower being elected as the first Republican since FDR, there would be a major revolution in the social security system and the first thing to do was to fire the main philosophical leaders. And he believed that Mrs. Hobby, Nelson Rockefeller, President Eisenhower and others would support him in that. But what happened was, he did not realize that there were other factors in mind. And I'll just jump ahead to the conclusion that Mrs. Hobby and Nelson Rockefeller refused to accept his recommendations as the Congress also did not. And President Eisenhower in 1954,



the second year of his term, affirmed the principles of the Social Security Act in the, I think, rather outstanding decision that all of them made--that it was right. And thus Mr. Curtis was roundly defeated in his effort to get a basic revision of the program. By 1954, however, everybody else had either retired or been fired or replaced except me. I was the only one that was left. But there are two reasons why Mr. Curtis was unsuccessful. One was, of course, Nelson Rockefeller was a strong advocate of the Social Security. The other was Mr. Folsom, who was under secretary of the treasury. And basically what President Eisenhower did --and I've never seen the file material in the library-- I've meant sometimes to go there and see what there is in the library--but President Eisenhower made, I think, the most important policy decision that I think he made in the domestic field in accepting the fundamental postulates of the contributory, earnings-related, social security system; so that, when Congress completed their action in '54, for the first time in American history you could say there was truly a bi-partisan support of it. A Democratic program passed by Congress from '35 to '53 was reaffirmed by the first



Republican President in the post-Roosevelt period. And this whole story of that decision has only briefly been in most public documents. But I consider it, in the domestic policy field, one of the epic-making decisions of Eisenhower which was absolutely correct and desirable and set the American social policy on a new course in domestic policy history.

BURG: Mr. Curtis was trying desperately to run against an enormous current the other direction.

COHEN: He certainly was, and, although he is still the senator from Nebraska and has continued his attacks--for instance in 1961 when I appeared before the Senate Finance Committee for my senatorial nomination, he was still after me and he voted against me. He voted against my nomination even though such conservatives as Harry Byrd, Sr. and Senator [Robert] Kerr and Senator [Clinton] Anderson all voted for me--he voted against me in what he still considered my difference of opinion with him, although it's--it's in the Congress, all in the Congressional Record and the hearing. And he's still a member and, while I think his views are still the same today, I think he has finally after forty



years recognized that he is in the minority on that decision.

BURG: And he thinks Social Security may last.

COHEN: May last, yes. I think he thinks it may last now and he's on the crucial committee, but that whole story of Curtis and his relation to the Republican National Committee and the Eisenhower administration, I have only seen that written up in one book in my life and that is a biography of George Meany. There is a biography of George Meany which came out about two or three years ago which tells something which I never knew before in which George Meany went to see Nelson Rockefeller and told him not to fire Wilbur Cohen. And that's the only point that I know that I've ever read publicly of this kind of internal discussion about that problem, other than the public documents relating to Mr. Curtis's advocacy of a different kind of system and his failure to get a vote in favor of his plan. As chairman of the subcommittee of the Ways and Means Committee he was not able to get all of the Republicans--one Republican didn't go along with him--and thus he was not able to sustain his view even among his congressional colleagues.



BURG: It's obviously safe to say that Curtis is one of the leaders of that move against Social Security. Was he literally the one man who pushed for that, or were there others who--

COHEN: Well in the 1953 period I feel he was the almost sole person. Now if you go back to 1935, '36 during the Landon campaign, that's different. And I have a whole exchange of correspondence with Mr. Landon on that. But I think he represented the view he did in '53 in which he was almost alone in his view. By '53 people like Mr. Folsom, who represented the business interests, and the Chamber of Commerce and the NAM [National Association of Manufacturers], whom you think might be on his side, had already forgotten about the whole thing. He had no substantial allies and the thing all collapsed.

Now, why did it collapse and why did Hobby, Rockefeller and Folsom adhere to the fundamental decision of Social Security? I went to Rockefeller and I said to him, because I knew him personally, I've worked with him during the war, and I said to him, "Look, I don't understand this whole thing. The Social Security system which makes the employee



pay half of the cost and gives him benefits in relation to his effort by his wages is much more related to a free, competitive, capitalist system than the egalitarianism of giving everybody the same out of the income taxes." I said, "Carl Curtis is a populist in a sense. He wants a kind of system that reflected the 1900 of the United States; a kind of egalitarianism, populism, simplistic notion. But if you believe in a free enterprise, work incentive system, then you give more to people who earn more, who pay more, and by making them pay half you're creating a sense of responsibility for it." I said, "I think the argument on the Republican side is in favor of Social Security." I said, "I'm sorry to have to say it, but it's true."

Rockefeller said, "You're correct." He went to Mrs. Hobby; this was confirmed by Folsom; and I think was appealing to Eisenhower. But I'd be very much interested in what's in the files. During that period of time I was largely persona non grata because of Curtis's attack on me, and these attacks were engendered as well by a former employee named Marjorie Shearon, S-h-e-a-r-o-n, who in 1961 wrote a book about me, and a lot of other people, about how all of this activity in



favor of this free enterprise, social security system was a communist plot.

BURG: Yes, that figures, doesn't it?

COHEN: And I think it would be well to look into the role of Mrs. Shearon in the Eisenhower administration, because she ultimately embarrassed them a great deal. She had originally worked for Senator Robert Taft. But her viewpoint on all of these things was so extreme that even they could not encompass it in it, but she was for some twenty years a great source of criticism against all of us who had been involved in that program.

BURG: Did Senator [Joseph] McCarthy ever pick up from her and launch himself at you?



COHEN: No. I do not recall that during the McCarthy period I was criticized at all, although I had to go through the usual loyalty examinations of security like everybody else did. But I don't recall that anybody in that--I was not in the state department, I think that's the reason.

BURG: Yes, that's the difference right there. How did Mrs.

Hobby handle the situation when she called you in--she had to talk with you and each of the others who'd been recommended to be removed--

COHEN: No, she never called me in. That was part of the problem. Mrs. Hobby never called me in. She called in the commissioner on social security, she and Mr. Rockefeller, and handled all of the discussions with them so that, on my appointment, I dealt with a Mr. [John W.] Tramburg, the commissioner of social security, who handled the discussion with Mrs. Hobby and Mr. Rockefeller. So it was always one step removed, which was perfectly proper because he was my superior.

BURG: You did not resent that or--

COHEN: No, I did not resent that. In fact I thought it was much better to handle it for two reasons. Tramburg, at one time, came back after a discussion and said, "Wilbur, I feel so strongly about this that if Mrs. Hobby and Mr. Rockefeller don't accept what you and I agree and you have to go, I will resign with you." So I had obviously an advocate in court and I am a great believer, well I--



[Interruption]

BURG: --were released, fought or made any attempt to stay on?

COHEN: No. Miss [Jane M.] Hoey, H-o-e-y, resigned rather than take a demotion. Mr. Falk--F-a-l-k--resigned rather than take a demotion. When I say demotion, she offered them another job if they wanted. Mr. Altmeyer retired. And I believe I was the fourth who didn't, but I don't know if there are any other names.

BURG: And I should ask you, although you have used the word demotion just now you corrected that and said another job. Were the jobs generally comparable as to grade and--

COHEN: Irrespective, they would have been considered a demotion because they were both bureau chiefs. So whether they were demotions in title or salary, they were viewed by these people as a demotion and by their friends, so there would have been no escaping from that. Although in my case, while it was a demotion, it sounded better. Being a director, you know, must mean you're being promoted.

BURG: Indeed--so your friends congratulated you.



COHEN: I got a letter or a telephone call from one of General Eisenhower's supporters who said, "I am so happy that the Republicans have finally recognized your merit."

And I said, "Mmmmm-ummm, thank you very much."

It so happened--I should touch on this, because this may come up, that one of my best personal friends was a very strong supporter of General Eisenhower and wrote a lot of speeches for him. I don't know what there is in the library about him. He ought to be interviewed if he hasn't so far. His name is Merlyn, M-e-r-l-y-n, S. Pitzele, P-i-t-z-e-l-e.

BURG: No, nothing has been done with him.

COHEN: Mr. Pitzele and I were undergraduates at Wisconsin together, and we have remained friends until this day, now forty years later. Mr. Pitzele is a man who became a communist in the late '30s, ultimately became a friend of Thomas Dewey, campaigned and wrote speeches for Dewey in '44-'48, and then was assigned in '52 to write the labor speeches for Eisenhower. And during all that period of time of both Dewey and Eisenhower he consulted with me over the telephone about my views on social security. I don't think



that's known and I don't think the whole oral history aspect of Mr. Pitzele in the Dewey-Eisenhower period have ever been really developed. And he lives in New York; he's semi-retired now. He had a set of subsequent difficulties that ruined his career practically, and I think he would be a very interesting candidate for an oral history about his relationships, not only with General Eisenhower but also with his particular assignment during part of the campaign was with the vice-presidential candidate, I think he was, Henry Cabot Lodge. Was Cabot Lodge the--

BURG: Lodge was once a vice-presidential candidate, yes.

COHEN: Maybe--I don't know what period, but anyway.

BURG: In the Nixon campaign, one of the Nixon campaigns.

COHEN: So I think that you also ought to look into the Pitzele relationship with Eisenhower and the inter-relationship with the Dewey Republican period.

BURG: And you know for a fact that he was a member of the party in the 1930s?



COHEN: The communist party? Oh, yes, that's public knowledge.

BURG: I wonder if it was public knowledge when they hired him for these various positions.

COHEN: When you say was he a member of the party, I don't know that he actually carried a card, but he was a very pro-communist. And after he broke with the communists in 1940, I helped him get a job on Business Week, a magazine where he later served for twenty or twenty-five years until there was another problem that came which you can find out when you interview him.

BURG: That's a fascinating career.

COHEN: Fascinating story, though, and Pitzele I think would be quite willing to tell you many things about the campaign and the relationship which have not generally been public knowledge.

BURG: Did he have to work much with Martin Durkin, do you remember, for that period of time that Durkin was there?

COHEN: Oh, I worked a little with Durkin. I knew Martin



Durkin. I don't have any particular recollections of anything that is significant. I knew him before and that's about the substance of my relationship with him.

BURG: Did you have much of an opportunity to observe the way in which Mrs. Hobby operated?

COHEN: Yes, I did.

BURG: And can you give me an evaluation of--I know that's a brand-new job and she is a woman and keeping that in mind, what happens?

COHEN: Mrs. Hobby's whole relationship should be explored if it hasn't. Before I begin, let me point out to you that of the pictures I have on the wall of all former secretaries, there is no picture there of Mrs. Hobby with the other secretaries. She has never returned to meet with the other secretaries. Why that is, I don't know. I've only seen Mrs. Hobby twice in the last twenty-some years since she left. But I think that that's a very, very difficult thing. First, as the first secretary of HEW, with such strong people as Robert Taft believing that he knew more than she did about



the department--and probably correctly so--and Nelson Rockefeller as under secretary and Sherman Adams in the White House, she had, in my opinion, an exceedingly tough road to follow. Everybody was looking over her shoulder, particularly Sherman Adams.

BURG: Oh, he was.

COHEN: Sherman Adams is reported by someone, and I cannot remember now who told this to me, to once have said to Mrs. Hobby, "Well, Oveta, we got to watch you carefully because you're a Democrat." And I am told by whoever told it to me --and it might even have been Mrs. Hobby but I cannot any longer remember whether it was Mrs. Hobby, Rockefeller, someone--that of course that upset her very much, because as you know, her appointment was because she was such a close, good friend of General Eisenhower, or President Eisenhower, as a result of her WAC [Womens Army Corps] experience. And while she was a Democrat, I think she felt this personal belief, as many people did, in Eisenhower and she wanted to serve his administration and bring credit to his administration.



BURG: And in pre-1952 Texas, there was hardly anything else you could be.

COHEN: Yes, that is correct.

BURG: And exert any influence whatsoever in the state.

COHEN: Whatsoever. But as you know Mrs. Hobby left her DHEW position under a good deal of stress and strain because of the probable slip that she made with regard to the Salk vaccine. She publicly said, "Well how could we be expected to know that all the mothers would want it?" And it sounded like whatever she did say was kind of callous or unknowing, and she got a very bad press at the time for the miscalculations with the Salk vaccine.

BURG: And I remember the President came under tremendous fire in the press conferences, too, over that matter.

COHEN: Right. And I think Mrs. Hobby felt personally that she had made a mistake and had a certain guilt feeling about her error of judgment. But she also failed in a second and in some ways much more monumental way because she and Mr. Rockefeller, wanting to give President Eisenhower some kind



of a national health plan other than the Wagner-Murray-Dingall Bill, came up with a proposal for national reinsurance of health costs. Now what happened is she developed this plan, sent it up to Congress, to which the Democrats were uniformly against because of their criticism against it. I believe their criticism was substantial and valid, but that's not the point of my story now. What she miscalculated on was that when the matter came to the House of Representatives, the natural animosity to her that grew out of her Texas affiliations was such that Sam Rayburn got up on the floor of the Congress, got down from the rostrum as speaker, and opposed her program and it was defeated. Now why that was I've always assumed that what Rayburn did was to get back at her for taking that job as secretary of HEW without consulting him. In other words, Rayburn conceived of himself as the Texas chief magistrate, and I think one should look into the reason why he did that which absolutely terminated Mrs. Hobby's career as secretary, because of some slight that he felt that Mrs. Hobby gave him in relation to her appointment or some other matter that I do not know. But in any case it was the coup de grâce for her. Now she told me later that



the reason she had to leave at that time was that her husband was so ill that she had to go back and take over the paper. But when I came in to say good-bye to her on the last day, and she was in the office alone with me, she broke down and cried. It was one of the most emotional experiences I had in my life. Here she had been for a couple of years working to fire me, here she had--I'm sure she thought I was an albatross around her neck, that it would have been nicer if I would have left. But by the end, I think she had a genuine neutral attitude toward me to say the least. I'd helped her in connection with this '54 legislation, mainly through Rockefeller and Folsom, and at the end we didn't have much articulate discussion because she became so emotional she cried about her leaving and so on, that I never could figure out what it really meant. And I didn't press her.

BURG: But she never even under the stress of emotion and crying at that last meeting you had with her, she did not deviate from the story about her husband's illness.

COHEN: That is correct.



BURG: She didn't break down to the point where she said,
"Sam Rayburn has--"

COHEN: No, I knew nothing about that.

BURG: --"chopped me down."

COHEN: No, she said, "I'm sorry to have to leave; I'm going to miss everybody." And then cried and I shook her hand and tried to be a little bit affectionate without being too personal and left the room. My feeling was that she was trying to tell me something--that she felt that things had worked out for me and she was glad about it, but--

BURG: That you'd been promoted to director!

COHEN: Yes. But in any case I've seen her once since and she never said anything, so I never said anything to her. I've invited her several times to attend meetings with us, and she's turned them down. She has had very little relationship with this, but she and I have signed some common statements. There have been about three times in the last several years when former secretaries have signed



statements, and she has signed them and I have signed them. One was in the support of the Nixon family assistance welfare reform program and one was in connection with social security. But outside of that, she has had no real continuity with HEW or its programs or interests in the ensuing, what, twenty years.

BURG: Yes, yes so I've heard. May I ask you then about--

COHEN: But did you ever do an oral history--has she had an oral history?

[Interruption]

COHEN: You might also ask me, well how did I rehabilitate myself in Mrs. Hobby's eyes with all of these. Well I tend to think that I rehabilitated myself by my independent advocacy of sound positions, by my integrity, by my performance. It probably is not so. This Mrs. Marjorie Shearon in the course of this time got out a newsletter. And in the newsletter opposing some of her views she said, "The reason Mrs. Hobby has gotten where she has been is,



because she was a protege of Jesse Jones." And in this article she said, "Mrs. Hobby is very close, is close--dash--very close to Jesse Jones. Period." Or some such words, implying--

BURG: What an innuendo!

COHEN: Implying something beyond professional competence and relationship. As I understand it, Mrs. Hobby from that moment on no longer believed what Curtis and Shearon were telling her, because Mrs. Shearon was the source of the Curtis attacks, in part. And of course Mrs. Shearon had this reputation. She'd always take an idea and then she'd get so extreme about it, as in this case, that she'd lose her supporters. And I've always attributed the monumental change in Mrs. Hobby's attitude toward me and so on, is because Mrs. Shearon really showed that her remarks were quite unprofessional and what shall we say--



BURG: Vicious.

COHEN: Vicious, yes. But I would suggest that, may I ask this--have you interviewed Nelson Rockefeller?

BURG: We have him on our list and, of course, he was tied up and there was no way we could approach him.

COHEN: Yes, but if and when you can get him, I think you should explore the Hobby-Curtis-Cohen-Meany relationship. Now the reason I say that is, ever since that day Nelson Rockefeller has been most kind to me and I can only attribute it, again not to my ability or so on, but to the fact that he felt a sense of guilt about what he did. When he was governor of New York he used to call me--would I come up to see him. He would pay my way up there, would I advise him? Maybe he thought I had something to say. But for the ten or fifteen years after that, Nelson Rockefeller would call me and he would laugh several times when he would do it, and he said, "After all I'm now using as a consultant the man I was supposed to fire." Well at least he was humorous about it.

BURG: He kept remembering it, though.

COHEN: Oh, I think it stuck in his craw. I think he realized, this is my interpretation, that he had to do



something against his own judgment and that while I was perfectly willing to accept it at the time, I accepted the demotion and the reduction in pay. I lost two thousand dollars, a thousand dollars for two years. It's okay, but I'm glad I changed my mind, came to be a professor. It changed my life for me and it changed it for the good. I'm a believer that it's an ill wind sometimes that doesn't blow you a little good. That whole experience kind of made me rethink my professional goals. I decided I'd rather be a professor, and I have no regret. I don't think I would have ever been a secretary of HEW if I hadn't made that shift. By making that shift I became a professor. By becoming a professor, Kennedy used me. By Kennedy using me, he appointed me assistant secretary. By becoming assistant secretary I became under secretary; by under secretary I became secretary. So I say thank you, Mrs. Hobby and Nelson Rockefeller. I have nothing against you.

BURG: And Mr. Curtis, wherever you are.

COHEN: And Mr. Curtis, too. Wherever you are, Mr. Curtis, you were a blessing in disguise. Didn't seem that at that



point in history, but you can only tell about history after it's over.

BURG: The Nelson Rockefeller with whom you dealt and under whom you worked--what kind of a man was that Nelson Rockefeller?

COHEN: That Nelson Rockefeller at that time was, I thought, a exceedingly conscientious, liberal, intelligent, progressive man who wanted to do something constructive. And I think he followed in that tradition until about his last year or two of governorship when somehow he got the presidential ambition; he realized he'd have to be more conservative. And I think his views have become more conservative. But I would say from the period of time I first knew him, which would be in 1942 through 1972 let's say, thirty years, I found him a thoughtful, constructive man who wanted to use his talents in a way that was socially desirable. I have no way of judging it now because my last visit with him would be about a year ago.

BURG: But it would be wise for us to emphasize the fact that he was continuing to call you in for advice and consultation; therefore you continued to see him; you had a chance to observe a change in his demeanor.



COHEN: In its relation to me.

BURG: Yes.

COHEN: I don't say a change in demeanor to me because he was always--

BURG: No, not to you, no.

COHEN: --but I had the opportunity to observe mentally that I think he felt a sense of responsibility about what had happened, although he was not in control of all the situation, and that from the social standpoint he wanted to retain a relationship with me about areas that I was knowledgeable about.

BURG: Now I wanted to ask you--our records indicated that you'd been a consultant to the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, particularly on aging.

COHEN: That is correct.

BURG: Do you have anything to tell us about that work that you did?



COHEN: Well I was brought into that work at that period of time by Senator Lister Hill of Alabama. Senator Hill had been urged to appoint a special committee on aging, sub-committee on aging of his committee of which he was chairman, with a possibility that Senator John Kennedy might be chairman of that. He hadn't made up his mind about that whole business, about Kennedy and the sub-committee, and he called me in and asked me would I make a series of studies which would indicate whether that was a good idea. Was there a problem? Could the problem be met? What did I recommend? So I became a consultant to him and his committee and helped to develop a series of studies which were published which ended up into suggesting, yes there was a real problem there and the Senate committee ought to organize itself into a sub-committee. By the time I had completed that, Senator John Kennedy didn't have any interest in it anymore, so other things developed that weren't quite related to that kind of problem.

BURG: And I was going to ask you if that perhaps led into this chairmanship of the President's Task Force on Health and Social Security in 1960.



COHEN: Yes, it did, in another way. Out of that grew my work with Senator John F. Kennedy and his staff, and I helped develop, also around that time, Kennedy's ten-point program on aging. And I worked very closely with his two staff people, Ted Sorenson and Mike Feldman. And, as a result of that, they brought me closer and closer into consultation with Senator Kennedy and of course I helped campaign for him; I became the chairman of his task force. And I would guess that was one way that I got into that.

BURG: I realize we're running low on time. When the Eisenhower administration came in in '52, as you have so correctly pointed out, first Republican since 1932--was that initial year, the initial two years of the administration any kind of a surprise to you? Were you expecting a wave of reactionary behavior? What did you have in mind when that administration came in?

COHEN: Well, I don't know that I could accurately reflect it now because I guess my eyes are coated with what's happened since so I wouldn't trust my memory. I subsequently, I'd have to say, became convinced that the eight years of the



Eisenhower administration were sweeping social problems under the table; and, therefore, I wouldn't want to say what my view was at the time, because all I have in my brain right now is what I thought afterwards.

BURG: After January of '61 sometime you looked back and decided--

COHEN: No, that was 1955-56. When I decided to leave three years later my view was that it would not be possible during the Eisenhower administration to make any real social gains, and then this was confirmed by my biases and experiences. And I still have that view, that the great fault of the Eisenhower administration was its failure to deal with the emerging development of the inner cities and the black discontent and the civil rights movement and the educational needs of the post-war period and that the eruptions of the sixties were due to the negligence of the fifties. And I place that blame clearly on President Eisenhower. So I wouldn't want to say what my view was then because that didn't emerge until later. Although, my most immediate reason for leaving in 1955 was the projected unwillingness



of the Eisenhower administration and later my good friend Mr. Folsom to support disability insurance as an addition to social security, which did result in my feeling that I couldn't possibly stay in the Eisenhower administration even though they'd adopted social security in '54 when they were going to be vigorously opposed to disability insurance in 1956, which did occur. And I knew that because I'd had a lot of discussions with Mr. Folsom on it. And I'd be glad to discuss that with you at greater length because that whole issue, part of which I've written up in a book, I published part of that in a book called Retirement Policies and Social Security, that the University of California Press published in about 1957 or so, and I'd like to tell you about that, but that would take more time than we have today.



BURG: Let's keep that in mind and let me keep that book in mind, too. And since I know that you are headed out for Washington, DC, I'll bring this session to a close, thanking you very much.

[Interruption]

BURG: We'll add an additional memo on our next session, Dean Cohen would like to discuss with us the matter of disability insurance, the issue that appeared 1955-56--

COHEN: Yes, and that will bring in both Eisenhower, Vice-President Nixon, Mr. Folsom, and Rod Perkins. The second thing I want to tell is about the development of Medicare in relation to Secretary [Arthur] Flemming and President Eisenhower in 1960. I do not know that story first-hand, but I did get it from Secretary Flemming and I would also urge you to have Secretary Flemming give you that first-hand, because mine was second-hand. And then I would like to tell you one little story that Wilbur Mills told me about Eisenhower. Those are the three things for the next time.

BURG: The Wilbur Mills?

COHEN: Yes.

BURG: Oh, good. Thank you.

