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Biographical Note

Baker, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture from 1962 to 1969, discusses the National Farmers' Union's involvement in the 1960 Democratic National Convention, John F. Kennedy's positions on agricultural issues during the presidential campaign, and Kennedy administration agricultural policy, among other issues.

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John A. Baker

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN A. BAKER

June 28, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By George A. Barnes

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BARNES: Mr. Baker, will you recall, if you can, the time and circumstances of your first personal meeting with, or acquaintance with, John F. Kennedy?

BAKER: This would have been sometime probably in 1951 or 1952, George, in the course of normal legislative liaison with members of Congress, when I was the Washington representative of the National Farmers' Union.

BARNES: Your position, then, took you to the Hill very often, and you did come to know Senator Kennedy at that time?

BAKER: Correct.

BARNES: Did you and the members of your farm organization, and so far as you know, members of other farm organizations, have the feeling that the Senator was sympathetic towards the problems of American agriculture?

BAKER: Not at that time in any significant or unusual way. He had been a member of the House and later elected by a very wide majority to the Senate. No one really thought of him as being unusual at that time, in our circles, other than as an outstanding and brilliant member of the House and Senate from New England.

BARNES: Was he associated in any way either for or against any important farm legislation?

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BAKER: Well, he had a voting record of always cutting the agricultural conservation program appropriation from the usual \$250 million a year to \$150 million a year, and I believe that our old voting records show that a time or two he voted for the sliding scale as distinct from a more firm and higher level price support.

BARNES: I gather that one of the principal issues in agricultural policy at the time was a question between the flexible and the firm high price supports, is that correct?

BAKER: Well, I never did use your terminology, George. Possibly those on Senator Kennedy's side at the time did. We compared firm and desirable price support levels with the sliding scale. During the early 1950's Senator Kennedy, as was true of many Senators and Congressmen from New England representing the poultry and dairy feed-using areas, voted for lower price support levels on wheat and feed grains.

The first time I remember personally recognizing Senator Kennedy as someone considerably out of the ordinary as Senators go was during the 1956 Democratic convention in Chicago. We were going all out to nominate Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] for Vice-President. Suddenly and dramatically, Senator Kennedy emerged as the very important and barely defeated candidate for that nomination.

BARNES: You say "we" were going all out for Senator Humphrey. Who was "we"?

BAKER: Well, these were mainly the people who were in National Farmers' Union leadership positions and associated groups around the country.

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BARNES: Now, a little later on, Mr. Baker, in the pre-convention period--I think Senator Kennedy announced as early as January 1960 that he was a candidate for the presidency--did the Farmers' Union take a particular interest in his farm attitudes?

BAKER: Well, prior to 1960, back in the early spring of 1959, I got a telephone call over at my office from Senator Kennedy's office saying the Senator would like to see me. I always answered that kind of call by saying, "Of course I'd like to see the Senator"--and went up to see him.

Mr. Kennedy said they had just completed a poll of farm opinion around the country, and the poll indicated the people who were saying what farmers were talking about, and articulating their desires, was the National Farmers' Union. He hadn't much close contact with the National Farmers' Union since there were very few organizations in his home state

of Massachusetts, or in New England generally. He wanted to know if I would be willing to accept the responsibility of trying to educate him on what farmers were thinking, what their feelings were, what their aspirations were. In a matter of several months, lasting up into the summer months of 1959, he asked that a draft bill be prepared for his use which, if enacted, would help farmers attain all the aspirations that his poll and our program indicated they held.

There was an interesting incident in this connection some three or four months after this first contact. One day Mabel Snyder, who at that time was working for Senator Humphrey, showed me a note she

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had just received from Senator Humphrey. "I feel the hot breath of Boston-baked beans down my throat! See if you can get John Baker to write me a farm bill!"

There were two or three instances that spring and summer that kind of stand out in my memory and help characterize the man that was later President of the United States, whose term was so tragically shortened. Several different times in the course of our regular legislative business President Patton [James G. Patton] and I would ask Senator Kennedy to come off the floor for 10 or 15 minutes to discuss our problem with us. We also practiced this with other Senators, of course, in the process of legislative business. One of the things that impressed me about Senator Kennedy was that in a 10-minute interview he would listen about 9 or 9 ½ minutes of the time, and maybe ask a question or make a comment in the other ½ minute, whereas the average of the others would be to talk 9 ½ minutes and Mr. Patton and I would get the other half minute. Yet in many ways this man expressed himself more graphically in the half minute he used, and certainly absorbed from us more than we came to talked to him about. In any event, it is one of the things I remember about him. He was a very polite, firm, strong young man, who was willing to listen and ask questions rather than to monopolize the conversation.

Another instance that we were amused about, and more and more it had become a part of the folklore of those of us who know about it. One day during the late spring of 1959, President Patton of the Farmers' Union had given some very important all-morning testimony

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to the House Agriculture Committee on the farm bill. We had an appointment with Senator Kennedy for about 12:10 p.m. in his office, so we went directly from the committee room where Mr. Patton had testified to Mr. Kennedy's office. When we were ushered into Senator Kennedy's inner office, he was sitting at the desk reading a copy of the statement President Patton had just given over at the House Agriculture Committee. After we left, Mr. Patton said, "It could have been staged, but I'm equally impressed that he thought it was important enough to stage it!"

BARNES: Mr. Baker, is this period you're talking about now, May 1959...

BAKER: This was early 1959. At this time, incidentally, our sympathies and aspirations were with Humphrey in the various primaries.

BARNES: Did Senator Kennedy during this period comment to you about his own knowledge or lack of knowledge of agriculture? Was he quite frank about this?

BAKER: Yes, he said he was accustomed to understanding and examining the problems of New England agriculture, but he did not feel at home in agriculture of the rest of the country generally. This was why he had this poll taken. The poll indicated the same kind of results that our program had as to what aspirations farmers had. He figured the place to go to find out what those were--whether we were supporting him or not--was the people that the poll indicated knew what the farmers wanted.

BARNES: Did you feel that he also had other advisers at the time he consulted with you--other farm organizations?

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BAKER: He did not have in that same intimate fashion. I think I would have known if he had. After the draft bill was completed he then circulated it to all the known farm leaders, national, state, and many local and community group leaders and asked them to make comment. In the meantime, as he had been doing throughout his congressional career, he worked very closely with the National Federation of Dairy Cooperatives and undoubtedly just as he listened to our views politely on so many occasions he listened to everyone. It was sometime in 1958 or 1959 that he decided to support the type of general agricultural legislation that Democrats in the Senate were supporting in opposition to Ezra Taft Benson's program, and if I remember correctly, voted to override President Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] veto on a number of occasions on farm bills.

BARNES: Now, leaving this period of early 1959...we move on from there, Mr. Baker. Thus far we have dealt almost entirely with a personal relationship with the Senator.

BAKER: In the fall of 1959 and in the winter and early spring of 1960 Senator Kennedy was aware and appreciative of our commitment to Senator Humphrey's candidacy and did not in any way trespass or infringe on this, or make any impossible demands in connection with this. We didn't actually see very much of each other in the fall of 1959, the winter of that year and spring of 1960 until after the West Virginia primary.

BARNES: When Senator Humphrey was through?

BAKER: Yes.

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BARNES: During this period, did Senator Kennedy, as far as you know, look to other sources for advice on agricultural matters? I ask this because I understand he did consult rather often with Clinton Anderson [Clinton P. Anderson] on general agriculture.

BAKER: This he had done during his entire tenure in the Senate.

BARNES: And Senator Anderson's general posture toward agricultural policy was somewhat different from that of the Farmer's Union?

BAKER: This is correct.

BARNES: Nevertheless, Senator Kennedy did call repeatedly on the Farmer's Union for help and advice?

BAKER: Right

BARNES: Were you active with the Senator prior to the opening of the convention in July 1960 in Los Angeles?

BAKER: Following the West Virginia primary, the general leadership brackets of the farm machinery could not make up their minds what to do because of conflicting aspirations and pressures. There was an air of uncertainty in our relationships with Senator Kennedy. In my own mind I was convinced that Senator Kennedy was going to be the nominee and would be a successful one. Other higher ranking members of Farmers' Union hierarchy had other ideas, so that we were not in a position to move clearly and fully in any particular direction from the time of the West Virginia primary until the week before the opening of the convention in Los Angeles.

BARNES: From May to July?

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BAKER: Just about. My relationship with Senator Kennedy and the people in his office--primarily Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman], and Dr. Hadwigger, who was on a Political Science Association fellowship in Senator Kennedy's office--the same ones that I had worked with in drafting the farm bill a year earlier--stayed polite and close but not as committed allies.

BARNES: John, let me go back. The farm bill Senator Kennedy had drafted a year earlier, was it ever introduced?

BAKER: He did not introduce that bill. He sent it around the country to farm leaders for

their comments. In the meantime, Senator Humphrey, who is on the Senate Agricultural Committee, had introduced proposed legislation. There were some other bills--Senator Symington [(William) Stuart Symington] introduced a bill; and then Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] had also during this same early 1959 period made the statement that if Jim Patton could breed Humphrey and Talmadge [Herman Eugene Talmadge], then Baker could name the hybrid offspring! (There was a Talmadge-Humphrey Bill also pending during this period.)

Senator Kennedy, and I think correctly from this standpoint, not being a member of the Senate Agricultural Committee, said there was no particular good reason for his joining in this.... George, before we were interrupted by the insistent ringing of the Secretary's intercom bell I was saying that Senator Kennedy, correctly in my opinion, decided not to enter his bill into the phalanx of so many others that were being introduced in the summer of 1959. He rested on the circulation of this bill, rather widespread through the summer of 1959 and the fall of 1959, to farm leaders all over the country.

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BARNES: That was a flashback, John. We were about to the opening point of the convention, and I was asking what connection you had, if any, with the Kennedy pre-convention entourage, or with the campaign at that point?

BAKER: I was not associated with the Kennedy forces at that time. I went to Los Angeles several days early for the opening of the convention convinced that Senator Kennedy ought to get the nomination, and that I had to figure out some way to get the Farmers' Union so its delegates and friends would be in a position to help bring about this result. At that time it looked as if it were going to be rather close. President Patton hadn't made up his mind. About that time, if you will remember, Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] became, not personally, but through some very important friends of his, a relatively active candidate which he had not been prior to that time.

I remember the first thing I did when I got to Los Angeles was to make contact over at the headquarters hotel with Sarg Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.], Willard Cochrane [Willard W. Cochrane], and Mike Feldman. By that time, Dr. Cochrane had been on Mr. Kennedy's campaign staff for two or three months and....

BARNES: Had you known Dr. Cochrane before?

BAKER: I had known Dr. Cochrane since early 1946. We had been--in fact, he married a college schoolmate of mine. We had been neighbors and close friends for 15 years.

BARNES: So at Los Angeles you were immediately in touch with them, and did you at that time take part...

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BAKER: The main thing that I did--main key thing I did that first day or two working with Cochrane and Shriver--was to arrange for a long luncheon and afternoon meeting--between Patton and Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] to discuss the "ins and outs" of the relative merits of Kennedy versus Stevenson. In the course of Patton's meeting with Ken Galbraith they set up a meeting, I believe it was for Sunday, before the convention opened, for President Patton to meet with Senator Kennedy.

The Farmers' Union clan gathered in the lobby in two groups. A fairly large group gathered around me, by that time more or less acknowledged as a Kennedy "supporter," and another fairly large group gathered around Charley Brannon [Charles Brannon], former Secretary of Agriculture who was an out and out Symington supporter. We stood several yards apart and discussed what Patton and Kennedy might be saying to each other. Sometime later, Patton came down from the elevator, walked over to my group, and put his arm around my shoulder. We knew which way Patton was going!

In order to perform the bipartisan functions of a farm organization, we had prepared a campaign handbook for each of the Presidential candidates. Glenn Talbot, Jim Patton and I carried the campaign handbook over and spent a while with the Candidate Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] about its contents. We arranged a session and presented and discussed its contents with Candidate Kennedy.

BARNES: Mr. Baker, just let me go back a little bit to the convention period itself--the three or four days during the convention. So

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far as the Farmers' Union was concerned, as you say, the die was cast when Jim Patton came over to your group in the lobby--everybody then understood where the organization leadership would be? Did you then take any part in the agricultural plank for the convention, or the platform, or had you done so previously?

BAKER: As long as there has been a Farmers' Union organization, we have taken as big a part in drafting the platform of both parties as we were permitted. In my active employment with Farmers' Union, we had done so with permission to a much greater extent in 1952, 1956, and 1960 Democratic platforms than we were allowed to do in the Republican platform drafting, although we testified and presented our views to both. We felt that we probably played a more complete role both because of Farmers' Union leaders that were put on the platform drafting committee, and Farmers' Union allies that were chairman and members of the platform committee in 1960 than before--this was the high point in my experience with them.

An organization president does not dictate the votes of its members, or of its leaders, or allies who are attending a convention. This isn't the way it happens. All this does is give the framework or foundation from which you start working to bring about a particular result within a convention setting. The convention setting in Los Angeles was just about as difficult as you can imagine. The hotels were miles, and miles, and miles apart with state delegations widely separated. Contact was almost impossible by telephone, so considerable use was made of "walkie-talkie" radios or just a lot of individual, personal runners.

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One thing that we did that involved a number of people who are now in this Department in various positions, was to set up a series of farmers' breakfasts and meetings in which we invited all of the leading candidates for the Presidential nomination. We asked them to make presentations to these meetings of farmer delegates. Cochrane, Sarge Shriver and I did our best to have Jack Kennedy completely briefed on what was the most attractive thing to say and how to answer. We tried to get him to let us ask questions from the audience and he did.

Also, Kenneth Galbraith, Willard Cochrane, and I worked together on a statement on the farm issue, that at a crucial time during the convention, Jack Kennedy released to the press, which in effect stated that he would come back here for that special session of Congress and try to get some farm income-improving legislation enacted.

BARNES: That was issued during the convention period?

BAKER: Very early days of the convention--probably Tuesday. Senator Kennedy was nominated on the first ballot on July 15. Willard Cochrane and I were sitting side by side in the galleries when this occurred.

BARNES: I see. Are there other points of interest in your recollection up until the convention closed? I assume that was around the 15th?

BAKER: Not important enough for me to have underlined in my memory, and therefore not very significant.

BARNES: So now we move from the convention period into the active campaign period, the campaign against Vice-President Nixon. Can you tell me a little about a meeting on August 1, I believe, in Des Moines (it may have been elsewhere), in which the Senator joined with major

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Democratic farm leaders from the mid-west in attacking the Vice-President's views on farm policy? Do you recall that statement?

BAKER: I remember the statement. I stayed in Washington. Many of our state and national leaders were present, and assisted with the press conference in which this was done, but I did not personally go.

BARNES: Were you present at the Des Moines rally in the middle of August--August 21?

BAKER: No.

BARNES: In September, Candidate Kennedy issued a statement outlining the “six point farm program.” You were, of course, aware of this?

BAKER: Naturally. We call this the White Paper.

BARNES: I see.

BAKER: Dr. Cochrane and I did most of the work on that....

BARNES: During the campaign period did you travel at all with the Kennedy....

BAKER: No.

BARNES: You stayed in Washington?

BAKER: Mainly, yes. We had made our entire legislative staff available to Senator Kennedy to help all they could. We kept them in our own space because space was a problem, with the promise and agreement that I would do what I could to help guide and assist the “Farmers for Kennedy-Johnson” operation, but not as a part of it. We conferred on the average of 8 or 10 times a day during that period.

BARNES: Are you familiar with the speech in which Senator Kennedy outlined his farm program, and which was followed by an accusation by the Vice-President that the Kennedy farm plan would boost retail food prices 25 percent?

BAKER: Yes.

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BARNES: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

BAKER: This was about the same time when the opposition in a very smoothly created campaign was doing their best to scare Scandinavian Lutheran and Southern Baptist farmers of a Catholic president. The sheer overplaying of True D. Morse’s calculations by Vice-President Nixon in his speech in New Jersey was real good ammunition for use in farm areas on behalf of Senator Kennedy. We made full use of it!

BARNES: In other words, the Nixon accusation backfired?

BAKER: Yes.

BARNES: Is it also possible that this might, however, have convinced the Kennedy campaign managers, and perhaps the candidate himself, that having made his

major statement on farm policy, he should not press it as an issue from then on?

BAKER: There were some who thought so. I never did share that. There was no indication I saw that was true.

BARNES: Did he subsequently, to your knowledge, take often--meet often with farm leaders?

BAKER: I saw no particular change from earlier periods.

BARNES: Your personal relationships with the Kennedy campaign group during this period of the active campaign were mainly by telephone--they went back to your very early days when he was Senator?

BAKER: Well, no, I was what you might call in the informal sense a part of the campaign staff. All my employees were. This was all we worked on for a period of about four months.

BARNES: I see, but you did not travel?

BAKER: No, I did not travel in the airplane.

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BARNES: All right now, this brings us again to November when the election took place.

BAKER: Well, I wanted to mention prior to that the two or three instances that kind of stand out in my memory, George. One was when Kennedy went to Billings, Montana, where he gave a very significant--the key speech--on power policy. Along about dusk the bus with Senator Kennedy and his staff, and the bus with all the reporters, drew up outside of, I believe, Municipal Auditorium. The sheer color and drama of it was impressive. Those people were truly impressed with the personal dignity and personality of the candidate himself. They were even more overjoyed after they heard his statement of his policies and his attitude about public power--power resources in general--reversing the "no new starts" policy of the previous administration.

BARNES: Pardon me, a what kind of policy?

BAKER: He promised to reverse the "no new starts" policy of the Eisenhower administration, in terms of power development. Later, of course, in the first budget to Congress, and in every one as president, some new starts were made toward moving America forward with greater power resources.

Another incident that President Kennedy did not participate in, but illustrates part of what happened on Election Day. We scheduled two meetings of three or four leaders from

every county in South Dakota. This meeting was held in Huron, with the express purpose of giving us a chance and them a chance to express their qualms and worries on the religious issue. We talked about everything under the sun that first day, except not a single person at the meeting brought up what we knew was worrying them. We gave them every chance under

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the sun. We would bring it up and ask for questions, make another statement and ask for questions, but still nothing would come from the audience even in the form of questions or critical comment. We let them think about it overnight and came back the next day. The dam started breaking, and by the middle of the afternoon we had that problem solved for the people who were in that room. But there just weren't enough of us to do it in every county in South Dakota, or Colorado, or the other States. We weren't able to overcome, even among those present, the fears that had been thrown up enough that they felt confident to go out to their own counties and hold similar meetings.

The speech in Dallas to the ministers, I believe, helped a lot but it never did fully overcome this among those of fundamentalist religions, and among those of formal organized religions. They just were scared to death that there was going to be a tunnel built from the Vatican to the White House underneath the Atlantic Ocean, and there wasn't any way to overcome this.

Now, the other thing that is interesting about the 1960 campaign and election is that it never was farmers, as such, that were worried more about the religious issue than they were about low farm prices, and on Election Day farm precincts reflected this. Precincts that were part farmers and part non-farmers did reflect the religious problem. The farmers--precincts that were almost solid farm votes--indicated a greater concern for low farm prices than they did worry about the Vatican. Later, after the election returns were available, Bob Lewis and

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I, and others, made a very thorough statistical analysis of this, and our results bore out the findings. The election results of many of those states, however, indicated the very great extent to which non-farm votes outnumbered true, full-time farmer votes--even in states like Kansas, Minnesota, and South Dakota.

BARNES: I'm not quite sure I perceive the significance of this, John. Would you like to elaborate just a little bit....

BAKER: Well, I'm sure, for example, that Oklahoma was won not on the merits of any of the issues, and not on the merits of two political parties or the two candidates. Oklahoma went to the Republican purely on the religious issue. This was in varying degrees all over the U.S.

BARNES: Are there other points about the campaign period you would like to mention? These have been very interesting.

BAKER: No, except--this is purely a subjective memory of how I felt rather than anything about Jack Kennedy. The sheer ability of this man to absorb knowledge and information, and present it attractively and understandably just completely amazed all of us. The way in which he could subject himself to the discipline of preparing himself, as he did before the television debates, the huge amount of research both on broad philosophical and policy matters as well as specific details of information which he acquired and used ad lib, is still an amazing performance among men.

BARNES: Do you have any knowledge of how he did prepare himself? What was the mechanical process?

BAKER: No, I don't have any first hand knowledge. We prepared the material and the material we prepared went to Mike Feldman during most of the

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campaign. Mike did all of whatever was done as the next step, and that is the last we knew of it from direct participation. Some of the other people you will talk with, or other interviewers will talk to, will know how the plane was set up in the way of housekeeping, where the different parts of the briefings took place, and this sort of thing. I was not a first-hand observer or participant in those occasions.

BARNES: Before we leave the campaign period, did you as an official of the Farmers' Union have occasion to assess the attitude of the press in the farm areas of the country with respect to the candidate?

BAKER: Almost daily, yes.

BARNES: And what was your--what would you say the trend of press opinion was in the farm country?

BAKER: The editors and publishers were almost uniformly Republican, and the reporters and writers were almost uniformly for Jack Kennedy. The stories following the two candidates around on the front page usually gave Jack the best of it from an unbiased evaluation standpoint, whereas the editorials gave Nixon the best of it.

BARNES: Now we are about to come into the period of Mr. Kennedy's presidency. But, before that, were you present at a meeting in Washington with Mr. Kennedy--that is, he announced it on December 30, that it was to meet in January after he was inaugurated? Do you recall the meeting?

BAKER: What meeting was this, George?

BARNES: Well, apparently he announced that shortly after he was inaugurated he would meet in January in Washington with farm leaders.

BAKER: I don't remember those being the right dates. Seems to me more like it was either before Christmas, certainly in January before the inauguration.

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BARNES: That may have been.

BAKER: And he met with farm leaders in New York rather than Washington. I was at that meeting.

BARNES: What farm leaders were there?

BAKER: The president and one other from the American Farm Bureau, the National Grange, National Farmers' Co-operative--I believe, this is from memory--the National Farmers' Organization, National Farmers' Union, and Missouri Farmer's Association. I believe that was the group.

BARNES: Was there any consensus there, or did he seek to find a consensus of opinion of what farm policy ought to be? Were there disputes?

BAKER: There was no dispute, but there was no consensus either. This turned out to be more of a meeting in which he told them--he charged them--with coming to a consensus and welcomed their advice as to what he should do about farm policies. As I remember correctly there was not much exchange on substantive subject matter at all in terms of argumentative or debating. This was what it was about, and there was no real exchange of views or debate, if I remember correctly.

BARNES: In other words, he in effect held the door open to all and urged them to come in and talk to him?

BAKER: Right. And I remember riding back on the airplane from that meeting with the president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, who in the mood he was in on the airplane, was of the opinion we could, but that he was going to have to check with his Board which was then in meeting in Washington. Next time I saw him, following the next day back with his Board, they had been unable to accommodate their standing position to any kind of conciliatory or accommodation with the other groups.

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BARNES: So that from the very beginning the Farm Bureau Federation....

BAKER: But I had the feeling that president Shuman [Charles B. Shuman] himself in the presence of President-elect Kennedy was of the opinion that he wanted to, but was brought back to town later by some who had not been present in New York. But this is surmise and circumstantial as far as I am concerned. I just happened to be riding in the airplane in the seat next to Mr. Shuman on the way back to Washington, and both of us still had a very rosy glow from the attractive and persuasive personality of the new President.

BARNES: Along around December 15, the President announced Orville Freeman [Orville L. Freeman] would be his Secretary of Agriculture. Were you still associated with the Farmer's Union at that time?

BAKER: Yes.

BARNES: Was the Farmers' Union gratified by this appointment?

BAKER: Orville Freeman was our candidate in the some two or three weeks prior to that...we were overjoyed.

BARNES: In other words, you were the ones who put his name forward?

BAKER: Yes.

BARNES: For you this was a happy decision?

BAKER: Mike Feldman told me later that there were three names that remained on the coffee table at the end. Orville Freeman, Fred Heinkel [Fred V. Heinkel], and John Baker, who didn't even know he was a candidate. My name had apparently gone through the sieve every time, but nobody knew I was in it, so there was not anything adverse in that. The correct decision was made that after 10 or 12 years of overexposure as a Washington representative of one single farm organization, it would never do to make a person like that either Secretary or Under-Secretary of Agriculture. So I was

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surprised to have Mike tell me this in the first place, and in the second place, I was surprised when Orville Freeman decided to bring me over here with him! Everybody knew that I had been testifying maybe three or four times a week for 10 years on Capitol Hill, and my views and attitudes, my biases and prejudices were not a secret to anybody who bothered to read either congressional testimony, or most of the newspapers, or publications of the Farmers' Union.

I was surprised that Orville wanted to use me for one of the millstones around his neck when he came over here!

BARNES: I'm sure he doesn't feel that way about it. About what time--month or year--

did he bring you in, John? In other words, when were you appointed Assistant Secretary?

BAKER: Well, I came here on Inauguration Day and sat down in that chair over there.

BARNES: So you had been approached before--it was all settled?

BAKER: Well, he called me the same trip he came down here for his famous interview with the President-elect. This was the same time they called in to size them up before he made his final decision. We had been working for at least 15 years with Orville Freeman as Governor of Minnesota. He was one of the national heroes of the National Farmers' Union and had been all this time. It was not unnatural that he would call me up when he was in town, and I made our services fully available to him--any way we just turned the office loose to be of help to him.

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BARNES: Now we come into the period of the presidency. In the Department you have had a hand in shaping policy--agricultural policy of the Kennedy Administration since the very day of the inauguration. Would you like to comment on the way in which policy has been formulated, put forward, and then translated into action (just as a general operating principle)? Is there some definable process?

BAKER: You mean a description or an evaluation?

BARNES: Both.

BAKER: Well, in terms of a description, I've been a participant at this level--I have not participated to any great extent, to where I know who does what on which date and how they handle the documents at the White House level. So I couldn't give you a firsthand description. Secretary Freeman, following the same self-reliant policies of President Kennedy, was actually his own representative at the White House level. As an evaluation, looking back at the 3 ½ years, I'm convinced that there has been a skillful and overall national-interest handling of the so-called farm problem as any president could be asked to do. If politics is the "art of the possible," and I think it is, this had been very skillfully handled in a very, very difficult situation that is going to continue to be difficult for another 4 to 10 years. I'm thinking here of the big commodity programs.

BARNES: Yes.

BAKER: In terms of the other facets of our general operation, we've got commodity programs, we've got consumer programs, we've got community programs, and we've got foreign programs that are all tied together in

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what you might call the agricultural policy of the United States. In the field of community programs, which I have been more closely associated with over the 3 ½ years, we have had complete support and rather broad understanding by the White House and White House branches and staff people. As the rural part of moving America forward he talked about so much in the campaign, you would be a better judge of the consumer programs, George, than I would, and also of our participation in foreign affairs.

BARNES: Then you would say that during the incumbency of John F. Kennedy in the presidency, despite the fact that he was an urban oriented man, came to the presidency with relatively little background in agricultural affairs and problems, but despite this in his tenure, the kind of dynamic programs that were needed for agriculture didn't suffer from the want of attention or sympathy in the White House?

BAKER: George, I'd make it even broader than that. Both the commodity programs and the community programs where we lumped conservation, natural resource development, income and this kind of thing together, the underlying problems of American agriculture have been more fully explained, so the nation could understand them, than ever before in history. This relates both to what the President himself did, and what he allowed the rest of us to do, and encouraged us to do. The fact that farm income both per family and as a national total was raised above that of his predecessor was an earnest, demonstrable symbol of this. In the field of natural resources you're invariably

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reminded of the example of Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt], both out of eastern, urban backgrounds, in terms of being great conservation presidents. I was equally impressed after he became president. Remember when I mentioned that, when we talked to him off the Floor in the Senate, he listened instead of monopolizing the conversation? What few times I went with groups or on formal occasions and saw the President after he became president, this same characteristic seemed to be, if anything, even more pronounced. He could say more in seven sentences that at least seemed to have more meaning and more "spinderingdum" to it than any human being I ever knew.

BARNES: You mentioned having gone to the White House after you became Assistant Secretary. Could you tell us the connections--several of them--on which you did have occasion to go over there? Were you there for the signing of any bills or anything similar?

BAKER: I was there for the signing of two or three bills, and I tried to remember when I knew you were coming down here which ones they were. I've got a blank on it, George. I'm sure one of them must have been the Agricultural Act of 1961, but for the life of me I can't remember that day with any clarity at all, except that among other things we all gathered around the desk in the traditional ceremony when he signed. Nothing sticks in my uniformed memory. (I decided for this interview I would go back and

look at any of my files or any of the papers I had accumulated, but let the things that were important enough to still be active in my mind be the things I'd tell you about instead. This is a subjective kind of history, because it's the things one person experienced and remembered rather than being a comprehensive or evaluated account.)

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BARNES: Your particular interest in the Department here has been in the area of rural development...

BAKER: Right.

BARNES: ...which takes in the whole conservation field--what you might call sociology, and rural life. Have you felt that the programs that have been put forward have been strong enough and bold enough? Do you feel that they could have been strengthened, or that more could have been done, or that we were going ahead as fast as practical considerations would allow us?

BAKER: I wouldn't be worth them having me over here if I thought the answer to that question was "yes!" Again, as I mentioned a moment ago, in the realm of political possibilities, I think a tremendous surge forward has been made. It would not necessarily add to this account to go into detail, but I still carry around with me in my coat pocket the cards that show that under President Kennedy's leadership we expanded credit available to farmers through Farmers' Home Administration three times last year over that of his predecessors. We have increased watershed completions--completion of watershed projects--we now complete five times as many a year as Eisenhower's high year. The work of the Forest Service--forest research--is nearly double now from the Eisenhower level; management of the national forests, and the amount of revenue that comes in from the national forests to the federal treasury are up 50 percent over the Eisenhower high year. These are just examples. I've got the whole list over there, but I won't burden

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you with that. These are all surges forward that are part of the essence of the Kennedy leadership. And they help keep perspective on this thing when you're constantly fighting the budget battle from day to day. You never get all you ask for. You could very easily get an attitude that you didn't get anywhere, so I like to have a record of 1960 compared with 1963 and see what we did do under Jack Kennedy's leadership. These are tremendous figures in the fields you mentioned.

BARNES: It well may be, Mr. Baker, that I will want to come back and talk to you some more about the details and the programs that were initiated and carried out under the presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. I think we are interested as much in the times, the circumstances, as the actions that he either initiated or which he

supported on the agricultural front. So it may be that we will want to continue this again, and go a little more into detail. Have you any final word on this....

BAKER: Well, there was one thing that went throughout this at the different stages of the pre-nomination campaign, the campaign itself, and as president, that I overlooked here.

Throughout, as a member of the House and as a member of the Senate, as a candidate for the nomination, as a candidate for president during the general election campaign, and as President, President Kennedy is unique in his often expressed concern--his concern and action--in encouraging and strengthening the cooperative movement in the United States, and particularly his concern for farmers' cooperatives, a self-help device by which farmers may attain their economic and social aspirations. His views of the Rural Electrification Cooperatives and Rural

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Telephone Cooperatives--strongly expressed as a candidate, and strongly-supported as President, have made him, I think, unique as a President of the United States.

BARNES: This is very interesting considering his own background and economic orientation. To what do you attribute this interest in cooperative idea?

BAKER: Very early association and continued association with the Milk Cooperatives in Massachusetts. He had learned this, and up to the last was a very close friend of the dairy farmers and their organizations.

BARNES: So this came out of his own political firsthand experience?

BAKER: Correct. It presumably was a part of his economic training and his own economic analysis of one of the free enterprise-private enterprise aspects of a good society.

BARNES: Thank you, Mr. Baker, and I may come back to see you before long.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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