

Robert C. Weaver Oral History Interview –JFK #5, 12/19/1985
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Weaver, Robert C.; Administrator, Housing and Home Finance Agency (1961 - 1966). Weaver discusses his background and involvement in housing and urban renewal with the Housing and Home Finance Agency. He discusses issues regarding legislation, budgets, and support for his work, among other issues.

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INTERVIEW WITH DR. ROBERT C. WEAVER

On December 19, 1985 in Washington, D. C.

DR. WEAVER: There are two books that you may know that I find I don't agree with in their entirety but I think are very helpful, not only about me but about this whole subject. One is Harold Wolman's *The Politics of Federal Housing* and the other one is by Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities*, Oxford University Press in 1975.

Now I don't agree with him because he criticizes us, say that all we did was take the ideas about housing that were over on the shelf rather than creating a lot of new ones. Of course he expected us to recreate the wheel, and we did take a lot of those ideas. But, hell, we'd contributed a lot of ideas, too, and they've got a lot of good features in them, I think.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Those are two good ones. Okay. Shall we start. I thought I'd give a little introduction.

This is Morton Schussheim, and today I'm talking about housing with Bob Weaver. Dr. Robert C. Weaver was appointed the first Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development by President Lyndon Johnson in 1966. Prior to that he was Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency from 1961 through 1965.

Now, Bob, I've known you since 1955, when you became Rent Administrator in New York State under Governor Averell Harriman. Could you go back a bit and tell us about your education and how you first became involved in housing?

DR. WEAVER: Surely. I grew up in Washington, D. C., finished Dunbar High School,

went to Harvard College, graduated from college cum laude and then, with the Depression stage on, I finished the residence requirements for my doctorate, taught a year, went back and did my thesis and then came out, having finished the thesis in the summer of 1933, and got my degree awarded in February, 1934.

That summer a friend of mine, whom I had known in high school and had roomed with one year at Harvard, was finishing law school. He and I became very much concerned with and intrigued by the NRA codes. We were quite worried that there was no voice and no discussion and no attention given to the impact of these codes upon Black Americans. (Of course, we weren't Black in those days; we were Negroes.) But in any event, he and I decided we should do something about it.

So with the brashness that comes with youth, we set up an organization called the Negro Industrial League. We got the NAACP and the Urban League and some of the church organizations behind it, and we appeared at the code hearings, giving evidence about the impact of the codes on Black labor. This attracted a lot of attention and favorable comment. It ended with that organization's becoming the Joint Committee on National Recovery and later the National Negro Congress.

In the interim, after the summer was over, I couldn't find a job in Washington which I wanted, so I went back to North Carolina to Greensboro at A&T College, which was a State college, and resumed teaching but kept in touch with the Joint Committee and did some research on what was happening to the tobacco industry. This called me to the attention of Clark Foreman, who was the Advisor on Negro Affairs to the Secretary of Interior, Harold L. Ickes, who was also the Administrator of the Public Works Administration. I was offered a job as Foreman's associate which I accepted; in a year's time I became the Advisor on Negro Affairs.

Well, I had started out in engineering but I had given it up because it interfered with my social life in that there were afternoon classes and heavy assignments. That was not consistent with my courting at the time; so I went into economics. But I always had an interest in housing. I was an electrician by trade, I liked to do things with my hands, and I like to build. So I gave special attention to the Housing Division of PWA which initiated the first public housing program of the Federal government. I must say, most of the literature asserts it was started in the United States Housing Act of 1937 and the United States Housing Authority was the first Federal agency involved. That is not true.

PWA low-rent housing was rather important in that it was a Federal program, and certain things could be done and were done under a federally directly administered program that could not have been done in one which started under local authorities. Thus, it seemed to present a somewhat unique opportunity to develop enlightened racial policies and practices. With this in mind, I asked Ickes to designate me a consultant to the Housing Division of PWA. He asked me (I was only 26 at the time), "Young man, what do you know about housing?"

I said, "Very little." He said, "That's fine. You'll do well. None of those other so-and-so's know anything about it either." So that was how I got into housing.

But it was not accidental because I was very much interested in the field, both because of my concern for social affairs and because of my interest in construction per se. When the United States Housing Authority was established in 1938, under the 1937 Act, I became a Special Assistant to Nathan Straus, who was the first administrator of USHA, and again my work was largely in race relations and was instrumental in perpetuation of most of the favorable policies and practices initiated by PWA.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Going back, way back, as a child were you aware of slum conditions and bad living arrangements?

DR. WEAVER: Yes. I lived in a Washington suburb into which my grandparents had moved in the middle eighteen nineties. In it there were about 3,000 families, including only 7 or 8 Black households. It was integrated spatially alone, for the most part; although some of our neighbors did speak and some did visit, but they were very, very few.

I took a streetcar to go--speaking of bussing--to a segregated school, but it was a little different from recent school bussing because my parents had to pay the streetcar fare for me and my brother to have the "privilege" of not being able to go to the neighborhood school. So my great enthusiasm for neighborhood schools has been somewhat dimmed by that experience. In the process I went past and through slum conditions which surrounded some parts of the neighborhood which the school I attended served. And of course there was tremendous housing deprivation elsewhere among Blacks in Washington, although with the emerging relatively middle-class Black population, there was a fairly substantial segment that lived in decent housing. And I was aware of this, too.

Then when I was in Boston I found some, believe it or not, slum areas in the city and in Cambridge. And there I found that the slum areas were not as predominantly minority as they had been in Washington.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: These were what?

DR. WEAVER: Irish for the most part. And they often lived in three-story frame tenements, which were fire traps of the first order, even more dangerous housing than that in Washington. And older.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Boston is an older city. Now, when you worked in Washington with Secretary Ickes and Clark Foreman, was housing then viewed as part of a larger movement? Was it related to concerns with the poor or with public works or with beautification of cities? What were the tie-ins?

DR. WEAVER: Well, of course there were several established housing programs, of which public housing was the last. There was a Home Owners' Loan Corporation, FHA, and several others. Most of the housing programs were designed for two primary purposes--three primary purposes. First, to shore up the financial institutions of this country because there were a tremendous number of foreclosures, a tremendous number of mortgages in difficulty, and if something hadn't been done the whole structure would have fallen apart. Secondly, an objective was to give some impetus to the building industry and to the economy from the point of view of employment primarily, and to the home building industry from the point of view of keeping it together.

Agencies such as FHA, as you know, had a dual concern. First it made a contribution to the above two primary objectives. But in addition it supported what was considered a very socially and politically desirable institution, home ownership. Also, it greatly changed the structure of home mortgages. It extended their period; it reduced the downpayment, and it lowered significantly the prevalence of short-term, high cost junior mortgages.

Now, public housing sort of came in at the tail end. It was authorized by a single clause in Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act. But it, too, soon took on a dual nature because when the United States Housing Act, which Leon Keyserling, Charlie Abrams, and others developed, was passed, it said that one of the purposes--in fact, I believe the first purpose--of public housing was to sustain the economy. And the second purpose was to provide decent housing which would have social and economic benefits for the disadvantaged. It was not only a social program from the beginning but also an economic program.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: If you advance now through several decades, you were there at the dawn of the Kennedy administration and you put together the President's housing program and message. At that time, in 1961, what factors, what conditions, what trends

shaped the thinking, yours and that of your associates and the people in the Kennedy administration, about housing and urban affairs?

DR. WEAVER: Well, as you know because you were a part of it, what I did was to set up a task force, bringing in people like you and Saul Klamman and five or six others whose names escape me now, as well as some people who were in the Housing and Home Finance Agency--HHFA. I was fortunate when I came to Washington in that I had had a great deal of contact with HHFA because I had been with organizations, particularly the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, which were constantly pressuring the HHFA, and I knew people like Neal Hardy and others. Indeed, Neal was one of those who served with us--Carter McFarland also did so. Thus, I was able to utilize talent from the inside as well as bring in talent from the outside. One of the things that I have learned is that there is great advantage in using the bureaucracy. It knows where all the bodies are buried; it can save you from attempting to reinvent the wheel; and it can tell you, "Look, they tried that 5 years ago and it was a horrible flop." And I think we had a very, very good, certainly a very knowledgeable, task force.

I think, too, that what we were concerned with--at least what I know I was concerned with--probably two or three major objectives. The first one was that I wanted to revitalize the housing industry because of both its economic and social impact. Secondly, I wanted to humanize urban renewal. And, incidentally, I had done a good deal--not a great deal, but quite a bit--of writing pointing out the deficiencies of urban renewal. Then I finally found myself in the unique position of administering a program of which I had been critical. I also was anxious to expand public housing because I felt that public housing, despite all of its difficulties, and it has some difficulties, was meeting a need that no other program met and a need which was quite vital.

One of the things that we did early both to revitalize the housing industry and to make urban renewal more humane and more humanly oriented was to establish the first Federal program for moderate-income housing, Section 221(d)(3), which as you will recall was an innovative program in that it used the Federal National Mortgage Association--Fannie Mae--as well as FHA. It was, however, also modeled to some degree on the Mitchell Lama program in New York in which Charles Abrams and I had been a part of the development.

I also was concerned with housing for the elderly because it seemed to me this was a program that was greatly needed. I wasn't at that time quite so intimately connected with the elderly as I am now, although my parents were. Fortunately, they didn't need any assistance in housing. But I could visualize what could have happened to them and others that I knew if circumstances had been different. So that these were some of the main things.

One of the other things--and you and I shared this with many of the others on the task force--was a desire to increase the amount of research in the agency. HHFA dealt with a large segment of the housing industry, but its budget for research was minuscule. I must say we didn't have great success in that initially, although we did improve the situation before it was all over.

And we also tried in those years--I think you directed the programs--to do some demonstration projects, to experiment, so that we could learn how things worked, what did work, what didn't work, and so forth. I also had a notion, which was shared by some people and not by others, that it was terribly important to have some advance acquisition of land for housing and residential use, stealing the idea of course particularly from Scandinavia, especially Sweden which I visited early in my tenure of office. The notion of land banks and acquisition or optioning of land had great appeal to me. And this in turn was related to a concern which I had for making planning more effective. Already HHFA had begun to finance

the training of a large number of planners, but the purpose that we had in mind was to have planning as a condition for many of the Federal activities.

I might say that the idea of advanced acquisition of land was laughed out of the Senate by that great orator Mr. Dirksen, who said that should be a part of the space program and not of the housing program. But, in any event, after 8 years in office I left Washington almost in the same condition as far as advanced acquisition of land for residential use was concerned. But I still advocate it.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: But you did get passage of a permanent open space land program.

DR. WEAVER: Yes. I was going to say we went after the whole package in the '61 Act. What we were able to retain was, I think, a \$50 million loan-grant program, something of that sort, for the acquisition of land for public uses, like parks, future land for parks and open space, and related public purposes. So we got a little bit of the loaf, but certainly not the whole loaf.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: And you did try to link housing with land development--utilities, road systems, and recreational space and so on.

DR. WEAVER: Later, of course--I guess it was either early in the Johnson years or in the latter part of the Kennedy years while HHFA still existed--we also got the new communities legislation passed, the authorization for it in HHFA, and then finally the right to issue bonds for the advance acquisition of land in new communities in the early days of HUD. It was expanded further in the 1968 Act. Subsequently, new communities were really accepted in the early Nixon years and became a part of their program until it was a victim of the 1973 moratorium.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Some people might say, "Why did you folks push for a moderate-

income housing program like that 221(d)(3)? Why didn't you go directly to the lowest income and expand housing at that level?"

DR. WEAVER: There were two reasons for that in my mind. The first reason was that one of the things I was very much interested in was to have significantly more economic diversification in urban renewal areas. Urban renewal had gotten the name of "Negro removal." Low-income families were displaced often from desirable geographical areas and replaced by higher-income families. In order to get both economic and racial dispersion in those areas, it seemed to me that you would have to have some public housing, some moderate-income housing, and some upper-income housing. We did not have a moderate-income housing program, and in New York City I had seen, as you had seen, with the Mitchell Lama program that you could have in those redevelopment areas an economic mixture. It's much easier to mix moderate- and high-income than it is to mix moderate-income and public housing. And secondly, by this time public housing was in very, very great difficulty, both politically and from a point of view of public acceptance. The site problem in public housing was tremendously difficult.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: If you look back now, do you think you might have combined it with some sort of rent supplement or housing allowance for very low-income families to be able to rent some of the units in a moderate-income development?

DR. WEAVER: Yes and no. But, you know, the first real national rent supplement program was one that I initiated for people who were displaced under urban renewal. That was in 1964. And it included, as I recall, a grant covering the first 2 years of rent or \$500 for home owners. Subsequently, it went up to 4 years by the 1968 Act. And it became the basis for the comprehensive Federal relocation housing program. So the idea was there.

On the other hand, I don't know whether I would have gone for rent

supplements in tandem with Section 221(d)(3) because at that time it seemed to me--it seemed to all of us, I believe--that we had such a shortage of housing and thus the emphasis on new construction. And it was because of the success of the earlier programs which increased the supply of housing that housing allowances became viable. If you had had housing allowances in the shortage situation that was there, they wouldn't have worked. And housing allowances are greatly limited today because of the shortage situation. I think that I would advocate now, as I have advocated, both housing allowances and new construction; and I think the mix has to vary from time to time and from location to location.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Now you mentioned before that you tried to recast urban renewal from a wholesale bulldozer approach to less family displacement--

DR. WEAVER: And a lot of that meant rehabilitation of existing housing.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: The first tools that were developed in 1961 didn't seem to be terribly successful. Did we ever get any good handles on rehabilitation for moderate-income people, especially rehabilitation of rental housing?

DR. WEAVER: Yes, we did. But it was a very slow and difficult process. It was difficult for several reasons. In the first place, we did not have--and we are just now developing--an industry in rehabilitation for lower-income occupancy. Rehabilitation is, as you know, complicated in that it requires quite a different technique from new construction. It also presents a very, very complex problem as far as trying to establish what the costs are going to be. And since it is so problematical--and it's problematical because you are dealing with a situation similar to that in medicine before you had the x-rays--and you never know what's going to be on the inside. The beams may all have to be replaced, or there may be other structural defects. You know that the mechanical parts of the housing--the plumbing, heating and electrical system--usually have to be completely replaced. We had discovered by the time

HHFA was phased out that the most successful rehabilitations were in the typical brick row houses with relatively high ceilings that you find in places like Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Wilmington, and Washington where you can leave all new mechanical conduits exposed and then hide them under a lowered ceiling. The complex rehabilitation for multiple units, particularly elevator buildings, is just now coming into play. And it's still having difficulties.

Incidentally, the best rehabilitation that was done is usually, as I put it, not cost-conscious. For example, the thing that has happened in Washington's Georgetown or Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia or in Greenwich Village, where you rehabilitate old buildings but don't care how much it costs to do so because the market will take care of it. But that obviously wasn't the type of rehabilitation you're talking about and that I was interested in.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Right. That's gentrification. That you didn't need the Federal government to induce; it was taking place in the private market.

Did you run into a lot of opposition from interest groups when you tried to recast urban renewal --the urban renewal officials in the cities, the mayors and so on? Did you take on a big battle?

DR. WEAVER: Oh, yes. And I not only took a great battle there but I took on a great battle within HHFA.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: How so?

DR. WEAVER: Because HHFA was--of course, you know nothing about this--HHFA developed in the Urban Renewal Administration a lobby of its own up on the Hill and a constituency of its own out in the cities and it resisted the attempts. First it resisted the attempts that I made for better relocation. I worked on this assiduously, and I did make some

progress. But it was progress in spite of, not all, but in spite of much of the bureaucracy. Secondly, we ran into difficulty when we started talking about having diversification in economic groups because the urban renewal myth was that urban renewal would do all things to and for the central city, and it was asserted that for every public dollar spent, I think, it would be six dollars that they said would be generated by private enterprise. Well, I thought that was hooey from the start and wrote a book saying that it was so during my time of tenure in the office, which did not endear me to some of the urban renewal proponents.

On the other hand, we were able--and this was largely possible after we became a department when I was able to get control over urban renewal to a degree that I had not been before--and then we were able to do better relocation. We were able to do better redevelopment. And we were also able to get citizen participation in the process and citizen participation of the people who were living on the site as well as city-wide organization which didn't have much interest in the concerns of the people who were already living there. This was finally done, but as I have often said, as you will recall, I preferred seduction to rape in administrative changes. However, there I wasn't particularly consistent. After strong resistance from the affected operators, I simply ordered the edict and said it was to be done, period, and it was done.

And the mayors were ambivalent. The mayors wanted credit for urban renewal, and yet they were a little squeamish because the lead time was so great. Thus, the mayor who took all of the opposition to a proposed redevelopment was out of office often by the time any of the goodies came, and his successor got the credit and he had caught the hell for it.

Another thing that I think we did was to be concerned with what I called digestibility. In other words, there would be warehousing of urban renewal grants. For example, some local redevelopment agencies would get grant after grant, and they wouldn't move on them, just

have the money committed. This was not only uneconomic but it was bad for the program because it got charged with enormous expenditures which it hadn't made only to be criticized because it was moving so slowly. This created much greater citizen opposition because to have an area lie fallow, as happened in St. Louis and almost cost the mayor his reelection, is probably the worst possible way to do a program of this type.

And finally, one of the reasons that we were able to make some of the changes in urban renewal, particularly changes which involved housing for moderate- as well as for higher-income families, was because the demand for higher-income housing in the central cities at that time was much thinner than the proponents believed. So economics helped.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: And wasn't there a growing resistance in the Black community to being pushed out of neighborhoods?

DR. WEAVER: Oh definitely.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Did that pose a problem for you, by the way? Did organizations like the NAACP, the Urban League or the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing criticize you for not being stronger in stopping this bulldozer?

DR. WEAVER: I'll let you in on a secret. Some of that criticism, like from NAACP and certainly from the NCDH (of which I had been a founder, and past president over a decade before I came to Washington in 1961 and resumed the presidency in the early 1970s) was not something that I was unaware of being in the making. It enabled me to effect some changes which otherwise I would have found politically almost impossible to make. So that, yes, there was some opposition. Sometimes the opposition, I think, was unwarranted, but on the whole it became a tool which gave me maneuverability and gave me a clout to effect changes which otherwise I might not have been able to make.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: This is very interesting--how pressure groups operate to bring

about change. There were a number of groups that were deeply interested in housing--the home builders, the mayors, the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, and others. Now, were you able to work closely with them and were there, on the other hand, some times when their interest and your interest as the Federal Administrator or Secretary diverged?

DR. WEAVER: You know, that's a very complex situation because one of the great dangers in being Administrator or Secretary of activities like housing or what used to be HEW and is now HHS is that the Secretary or the Administrator always runs the danger of becoming captive. In other words, if he depends too much and gets too much in bed with these groups, then he forgets and he forgoes the public interest, which I think is his primary concern.

On the other hand, if he ignores them and if he remains antagonistic to them, they can frustrate most of what he wants to do. So it's a very difficult problem. My position was accentuated by the fact that I was Black. And some of these organizations at the outset of my involvement were sure that having a man of my racial identification was the death knell of their industries, because, first place, I was going to integrate them overnight and that was going to ruin them, and second place, was just the notion--it didn't give them prestige they felt. So that I think my difficulties were a little greater than they might have been otherwise since I was the first Black to head either HHFA or HUD. Initially the home builders were most unhappy to have me in HHFA. However, from the start, there was a small coterie of support so the situation was not overbearing. But, I had to be sure that I was able to get legislation through up on the Hill. And this was one of the first things or challenges that I had because if I had not been able to get the legislative package through, it would have been ascribed, I'm sure, primarily to my race and it would not only have been a reflection on me, but it would have been a reflection on any other Black who was in a similar position.

So that the first thing that I did was to work like hell to get a bill. And we got a comprehensive housing bill, took it over to the White House, and--I'll never forget--Sorensen read it and said, "Well, at least it's literate."

Then we pushed to get it up on the Hill early. In fact, I think ours was the first major legislation that got to the White House. It certainly was the first that got to the Congress and certainly the first that was enacted. And we got about 90 percent of what we asked for.

I might say, one of the interesting things to show how effectively Jack Kennedy (and I guess all the Kennedys, but certainly Jack Kennedy) used his staff--when I went to talk with the President about the message, he had it there and had it underlined and obviously Sorensen had read word for word and had briefed him on it. I don't think that he read every word, but he had such compatibility with Sorensen and Sorensen was able to raise the pertinent issues so that we had about a half hour's discussion on a very expensive and a very extensive bill, and the President approved it and sent it up to the Congress. And, as I say, it was the first major legislation that passed.

Now, nothing succeeds as does success. And after that point, while the home builders did not exactly embrace me, and while some still had great doubts about me, there was, I think, some degree of respect and some degree of relationship with them. And the same thing was true of the mortgage bankers who had not been as vehement in initial hostility. I never did attempt or succeed, and I wouldn't have succeeded if I had attempted, in getting the real estate industry's cooperation. The most I could say of them would be my loyal opposition, but the "loyal" is used in a peculiar sense in that phraseology. The public housing people I knew. They, of course, expected me to get them everything, which I did not do, and I think they were very disappointed when the moderate-income housing program was not placed under them. But as a practical matter, it would never have passed if it had been a part of public housing.

You don't take a new program which doesn't have too much support and put it in an agency which is in great difficulty. And I'm sure that they thought I was a turncoat, but I still feel that if I had it to do over again, I would do it the same way.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Who were your allies on the Hill in the Congress, the House, the Senate? Who were the people you worked with?

DR. WEAVER: The interesting thing was that they were a very small but very effective group. Both the Senators from New York, Jack Javits and the Senator from up-state, Kenneth Keating were very, very supportive. Paul Douglas was also very supportive as was Joe Clark. Lyndon Johnson was very helpful. And all of the Democratic members of the Senate Banking and Currency Committee were favorable, save a few from the South. In the House the same thing was true. I went to see both Rains and Sparkman--

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Now, they were Southerners from Alabama. Was that a complication?

DR. WEAVER: Well, there was an unwritten thing. I never discussed race with them and they never discussed race with me. We discussed housing. Sparkman had voted against my nomination both in the Committee and on the floor, and I recognize that he had to do this. After all, he was from Alabama and Mr. Wallace was then the Governor and had been unreconstructed up to that point. Rains and I got along very well but purely on a business basis. There was never any warm personal relationship there. I think there was some mutual respect. And from the very start when I went to see Sparkman, I told him I recognized that he had voted against me and I recognized I thought the reasons why, but I hoped that would not prevent him from supporting legislation if he felt the legislation was good.

I was helped, too, because I had appointed, as you know, Milt Semer who had been on the staff of the Banking and Currency Committee of the Senate, as my General Counsel, and

I let Milt Semer and Jack Conway, my deputy, do most of the initial lobbying up on the Hill so that my presence wouldn't be a red flag to those who opposed my appointment. But I kept in touch with the Congress, and as time went on I did more and more work on the Hill. If I had gone in, I think, full-speed ahead at the beginning, I don't think that they could have supported the proposed legislation, much less would have. But as time went on, my contacts up on the Hill involving mainly liberal Congressmen from the North and West, got to be very good and extended to people like the Congressman from Texas who was the great Populist, Wright Patman. We got along famously; he used to have me for catfish breakfast up on the Hill. Initially this presented a very great psychological problem for me, but the catfish turned out to be good.

And then the other thing that I think was terribly important for getting legislation was that we worked--I worked as well as my staff--very closely with the staffs of these committees. And as you know, the staffs are terribly important in the Congress, John Barriere in the House and there was Carl Coan and Dudley O'Neal in the Senate. Then there were others later on. But those were the people that we cultivated very, very assiduously and Milt did a very good job with them. Senator Muskie was another one that I found very helpful. Frank Horton, the Republican Congressman from Rochester, New York, was a constant supporter.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: And did you have any implacable foes?

DR. WEAVER: Well, most of the implacable foes were foes of my economic and social philosophy, the conservatives particularly on the Senate committee who were just opposed to public housing, opposed to the idea of moderate-income housing and so forth. And this was part political and part ideological.

And then of course, I had opposition in the House, Bill Widnall, the ranking minority member of the Banking and Currency Committee, was a conservative and a very adroit

operator. He often tried to water down the programs. And then there was a Congressman from North Carolina, who was the second ranking minority member on the Appropriations Committee in the House and an extremely able lawyer from Charlotte, Charles R. Jonas. We used to have some real big arguments and they were on substance and philosophy, as well as appropriations.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: When did this take place? In hearings or in personal encounters?

DR. WEAVER: In hearings. Then there was the Appropriations Committee, and the Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Independent Offices that handled HHFA's budget--what was his name--Albert Thomas. Albert Thomas knew more about HHFA than I did. And I made, I think, a very good move instinctively in the early hearings that I had. To go back, what we did there was we used to have dry runs. John Frantz, who was an extremely talented person in HHFA, one whom I gave recognition to, promoted, and so forth, would take the part of Albert Thomas and I would respond.

Frantz would ask me all the embarrassing questions and I would be prepared to answer them so that when I went up there I was able to give the impression that I knew what I was doing.

I remember one of the early hearings, if not the earliest hearing, Albert Thomas asked me some question and I said, "Mr. Chairman, may I go off the record?"

He said, "Yes."

"Mr. Chairman," I said, "honestly, I haven't the slightest comprehension of what your question means or what the answer to it is."

He responded, "You're damned right you don't because nobody knows what the answer is. I just wanted to see what you were going to do to me."

This established a very good relationship between the two of us, so much so that when I tried to get a new building for what became HUD but was then HHFA (we were in 26 sites as you will recall), I went to see him and he said, "Well, young man, how much money is this going to save the taxpayers?"

"I don't know, Mr. Chairman," I said. "My bureaucratic colleagues tell me it will save \$200 thousand or \$300 thousand a year, but I'm not sure of it. However, it will save a tremendous amount of time and it will give a great deal of efficiency."

"You're damned right," he said. "I thought you were going to hand me a lot of BS. All right. You'll get your building."

Then he told me how to handle it, and he gave me the structure and the approach to get Jack Brooks to approve. When the building was dedicated, I had the President ask Mr. Thomas's widow--he had died by then-- to attend. She sat on the podium and I made a tribute to him at that time.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: That was very nice, very nice. Well you know, Bob, we move down the years and we get to 1966 and we come to a credit crunch and housing gets clobbered. That was just an example of how sensitive housing is to changes in monetary conditions as well as tax laws. Now, do you feel as Administrator or Secretary that you were dealt in fully by the White House, by Treasury, Budget Bureau, the Council of Economic Advisers who shaped the economic policies that had a big impact on housing?

DR. WEAVER: Yes and no. I think that I participated in most of the discussions. I don't think, however, that I had the clout that some of the other departments or agencies had because housing did not have the priority in the budget that other activities did. And as you recall in some areas of I think we were fairly effective. For example, in setting the interest rate on FHA and VA housing. I think that we were influential there and very often were able

to get that interest rate to lead the market rather than follow it. And I think if we hadn't been in there it would have been sluggish and this would not have happened.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: That was at the beginning, though, 1961. You brought rates down somewhat. But going the other way--

DR. WEAVER: Well, in going up I think we prevented them from going up as quickly as they would have gone otherwise. Obviously you couldn't go but so far against the market. But it was my theory, and I think all of our theory, that we could lead the market slightly. And that was art; that wasn't science. On the other hand, I think that when the credit crunch really occurred, it was housing that was one of the first places that they looked to relieve it, but not to the degree that this present [Reagan] administration looks to see when there is a deficit that housing is the principal instrument for doing it. This did not occur during either the Kennedy or the Johnson years.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: This brings up another kind of issue. Conventional mortgage loans have become more and more important; FHA less so certainly by the 1960s. And some people have said that the people who were really making Federal housing policy as much or more than HHFA or HUD were over there in the Federal Home Loan Bank Board. Do you have any comment on that?

DR. WEAVER: Yes. I don't think that was true in the sixties. I think it became true subsequently. Anthony Downs, for example, writing in The Public Interest of all places, gave credit to the fact that the '68 Act and what happened in those programs gave housing a much higher priority than it had before. And I think this was the beginning of taking off in that direction. I think it could have continued in that direction.

On the other hand, you are never going to have the interests of housing in this country paramount over other economic considerations. It's a residual more than a basic leader. In

the late sixties, it appeared that housing could become a somewhat larger component. But it was still not in the leadership position, and I don't think it ever will be.

One of the great problems that housing has is the fact that so many of the considerations that affect housing are handled by agencies, departments and commissions whose basic orientation and basic concern is not housing. On the other hand, I think it is unrealistic, as some purists have urged, that HUD should take over all of those credit and financial agencies because they're important for it. During the Eisenhower administration, the White House successfully opposed proposals to expand housing programs. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson reversed that. There never has been strong leadership in the White House where housing concerns were coordinated and brought together.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Was that true under Kennedy and Johnson?

DR. WEAVER: Yes. But it was true under Kennedy and Johnson more in the matter of the coordination of the programs than lack of commitment to housing and urban development.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: But didn't they look to you to coordinate things? For example, in the sewer and water programs that were passed you got laws that said that there had to be planning as an envelope within which these facilities would be built. You pushed the Public Health Service, which was opposed to it, as I remember.

DR. WEAVER: We pushed there, and we got it in Public Health. But in the water and sewer program there was a situation where HHFA and Interior were doing similar projects. And I could never get either the White House or the Bureau of the Budget to deal with the matter. I remember one Saturday we sat down--I don't know whether you were there or not--but we sat down with the Bureau of the Budget people and the Secretary of Interior and they wishy-washed but didn't face the issue. With Model Cities the same thing was true.

In that instance, despite the convening authority in Executive Order 11297 [August 11, 1966], the White House did little to support HUD's efforts to secure inter-departmental and inter-agency cooperation especially in terms of anticipated categorical grants.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Yes. Well, you've talked about the nature of the subsidy programs that you pushed for, and they were mainly connected with new construction. Today some people say that the housing supply is adequate, just give low-income families money so they can afford to rent or buy the units at the going prices or rents on the market. What's your thought on that?

DR. WEAVER: I think that's an exaggeration. In the first place, there was at one time a loose housing market pretty much in urban centers in this country, and particularly in the central cities where the lower-income people are concentrated. In that period we began to get some upward mobility and improvement in the quality of housing for the disadvantaged and the low-income families. That, however, has long since passed in many cities, cities I know something about--Washington, Chicago, New York, and Boston. Not only is there a shortage of decent, low-income, affordable housing, but the cost of the housing has skyrocketed for all income groups.

The second problem is the notion that the average citizen, the low-income citizen, can go out and bargain effectively with the average landlord. When there is a scarcity of shelter for the poor, the situation of the tenant is comparable to that of a mouse negotiating with a lion. In the first place, they're not knowledgeable. In the second place, they don't have the economic whack and clout. In the third place, they don't have the stayability. They need housing and they need it now.

Finally, if you are going to be concerned, as I am concerned and I've always been concerned, with getting low-income and minority people to live in areas from which they have

been excluded, you are not going to do this in a large number of these areas because, even with the housing allowances, you will not get enough money given to them to supplement their income so they can afford what is the going rate. You have to create new housing or some rehabilitated housing for that income group.

And finally, the matter of limitations of the housing vouchers is most damning from an economic point of view because so much of employment is now outside of and remote from the centers of these concentrations, and transportation is becoming so expensive. I went yesterday from my midtown hotel out to see where I was born because they've put a new house there, and the subway fare was 80 cents each way and not in the rush hour. Our subway fare in New York is 90 cents, going up to \$1.00. And when people have to pay for two subways or a subway and a bus fare, it just makes going to a job far from where they're living almost impossible. So the idea of affordability, which is the basis of the present administration's asserting that housing is primarily a demand problem, is only part of it. And it's an inadequate part.

As I said earlier, I believe there has to be a mix. Now it certainly is true that you can use existing housing at a much more economical cost. One of the commentaries on that article I wrote for the JAPA in 1985 asserts that studies of the Urban Institute that I quote point out that subsidizing housing with housing vouchers is just about half as expensive as new construction is. So obviously, insofar as it is usable and as it does meet standards and as it is available, it should be utilized, but it isn't adequate.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: But there's a perception on the part of the proponents that appears to differ from yours on how the market works. There is the assumption that the market works pretty well for the consumer if he just has some money, and you seem to be implying that there has to be some Government role to protect or to inform or to add to the

ability of the individual to operate effectively in a private market.

DR. WEAVER: I would say that in housing the unsophisticated person is at a great disadvantage in the private market. He can be discriminated against because he's old or because he's Black or because she's pregnant or because they have children, because of any number of circumstances. And this means that without having some type of public intervention, the market does not function adequately. Also the filtering process has very, very grave difficulties in it as you get down near the bottom. It works very well up near the top, but the lower down you go, the less efficient it is. And this is the filtering process that they're talking about.

Now, it doesn't mean that you ignore filtering. But it does mean that you cannot depend upon that wholly in my opinion.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Well, at the beginning we started talking about some of the people who have had a large hand in housing matters in this country. Say, since the 1930s and during your professional life, who are some of the towering figures would you say?

DR. WEAVER: This is not going to be a complete list because it's off the top of my head and emphasizes those with whom I have worked. I would like to more or less differentiate between those who fall into two categories--the thinkers and the doers. And I'd like to take the thinkers first because I believe they're more important. I would start out with Ernest Fisher, who was at Columbia and trained so many of the housing economists in this country. Included among his disciples are people like Lou Winnick, Chester Rapkin and Frank Kristof, who incidentally is quite ill now. And then I would put some of the very creative people. Charles Abrams, I think, was one of the really creative thinkers. As I said earlier, when he's good, he's very, very good--and he's usually good. When he's bad, he's horrible. But I think he's left his great mark on housing. Leon Keyserling, Catherine Bauer Wurster, Bill

Wheaton are or have been significant as has Neal Hardy.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: You'd put Neal Hardy down as a thinker more than a doer?

DR. WEAVER: Yes. I think he was better in that category. And then, of course, you have to add some of the lawyers who are thinkers and doers, but certainly in legislation they have made a great contribution. Ashley Foard, Hilbert Fefferman, and their associates have had tremendous impact. And some of the others in academia who don't come to mind immediately. Then you get people--I don't know how you would categorize some of them--some of the earlier people in the field of housing, like the guy I mentioned to you in architecture who helped write FHA--Miles Colean.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Is he a thinker or a doer on your list?

DR. WEAVER: I would say he was a thinker more than a doer.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: And some of the doers?

DR. WEAVER: From public housing I think Nathan Straus was an important person. And of course there are the key people in public housing in the local housing authorities who are hard to enumerate because there were so many of them. People like Elizabeth Wood and people like--

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Would you include Ernie Bohn?

DR. WEAVER: Ernie, I guess. I don't know. I wouldn't put him in there. Ernie was a great lobbyist. I'd put him in the category of leading politicians in housing like Nat Keith.

The chap from Baltimore who used to run urban renewal--Dick Steiner.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: A tall fellow. I know exactly who you mean. A nice guy.

DR. WEAVER: I think, too, that you would have to put down the guys who were with the Senate and House Banking and Currency Committee staffs--Carl Coan, Dudley O'Neal and John Barriere.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Okay.

DR. WEAVER: I would think of Anthony Downs, too, among the thinkers.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Tony Downs. Okay.

DR. WEAVER: I would say you and Henry Schechter.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Henry, I think--I saw him yesterday, by the way--think he did a lot.

DR. WEAVER: Yes. Now the operators--I would be restricted largely to those that I had contacts with and these are not the only ones who were important. I think, for example, Phil Brownstein, who incidentally I remember our lunching one day when we were looking for a successor to Neal Hardy and it was out of your fertile mind that you said, "What do you think of Phil Brownstein?" which immediately made me think of him.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: He handled himself so well at an NCDH meeting at Princeton that Ed Rutledge arranged.

DR. WEAVER: He's a very able guy. And I think I'd put Charlie Haar, too.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Really? As a doer?

DR. WEAVER: No, God, no. Not as a doer.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Okay. Put him on the think side. Okay. Bob Wood?

DR. WEAVER: Bob Wood ought to be on both sides. I'm trying to think about some of the people on the planning side. Marshall Kaplan was a--

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: A doer or a thinker?

DR. WEAVER: He was sort of all over the place.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Sort of. Since he came to mind, I'll put him down.

DR. WEAVER: I'm trying to think about the people on my staff.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: How about Jane Jacobs?

DR. WEAVER: Although I often took issue with her categorical contentions, I would list Ms. Jacobs among the thinkers. She challenged the growing notion that all great cities were doomed at a crucial time and set forth the role of new communities in a more realistic pattern than did many of their proponents.

Oh, I would put Stan Baughman as a doer.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: He was an administrator/operator. All right.

DR. WEAVER: John Frantz as an operator.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Operator, John, a smart man.

DR. WEAVER: Very little bit recognized outside of the fold.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Absolutely. Very little.

DR. WEAVER: And I think I'd have to put Albert Cole on there. He saw the light.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Okay. Maybe we can talk some more about it. We've covered a lot.

DR. WEAVER: I've got a little more time.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: If you were asked by some young people about career opportunities, would you encourage them to go into housing or city planning or urban affairs today?

DR. WEAVER: No.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: No? Why not?

DR. WEAVER: I don't think there's much to go into now.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: So what's happened to the housing movement in this country? Why is it on the wane?

DR. WEAVER: It's been decimated, beginning with the Nixon administration, and the morale has gone to hell. Many of the competent people that you and I were associated with

at the Federal level either retired early or shifted to other fields. I got, for example, a recent letter from Sarah Perrin, a retired HHFA and HUD lawyer, who was just bemoaning what's happening now. I don't think that housing offers the opportunity to do creative work or has the prestige that it had during the earlier period. Housing has gotten to the point where people have been convinced, largely by the neo-conservatives, that government can't do anything and that you should leave it to the private market. If we leave it to the private market, it's going to serve the people who really need help the least.

For example, as you know, if you look at the whole matter of subsidies, the greatest amount of Federal financial assistance that is given to housing is not given to the people who are disadvantaged; it's given to the advantaged people in the form of tax breaks that are given to homeowners, in the terms of the interest payments that are tax deductible, and if you add up the cost of that and compare it to the cost of the subsidies for lower-income housing which they say are so expensive, it's much greater. Incidentally, when help is given to the affluent, it isn't identified as a subsidy. It only becomes a subsidy when it's given to the people who need it and, in my opinion, the people for whom the public and the government should be most concerned.

Of course this has been accentuated under the present administration. So that I would not encourage young people to go into housing, certainly not at the Federal level today. There are some things going on at the local and state levels. Massachusetts is doing some very interesting things. New York is doing interesting things and will do more. But there's no way in God's world that either New York or Massachusetts or any other state can meet the housing needs because they don't have the resources.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: So all the talented people are going to go into business--MBA's and that sort of thing.

DR. WEAVER: Absolutely. And getting back to this actual de facto subsidy that's given to homeowners, I think it's uneconomic because most of these homes would be built if you didn't have these special privileges for them.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Maybe not as large or as sumptuous.

DR. WEAVER: No. But they would be built. And then demand would be met. Also you wouldn't get quite as much overbuilding as we are getting now, particularly in expensive residences, condominiums and cooperatives.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Is that part of the reason why the housing movement is in decline, because it's identified with help for the poor and the middle class have their own subsidies, but we don't call them that? The tax laws are a tremendous advantage for well-to-do people.

DR. WEAVER: Yes. I think that the reason that housing is in the condition that it is in, its current low state, starts with the Nixon years when housing--what was it--"housing for the future?"

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: "Housing in the Seventies".

DR. WEAVER: "Housing in the Seventies" came out with absolutely false information, some absolutely false analyses of the existing housing programs. This is a very interesting thing. The Nixon administration initiated the moratorium on subsidized housing in January or February of 1973. It wasn't until 8 months later that they came up with the rationale for it in the publication identified above. And then when they did justify it, they justified it on very, very weak and sometimes absolutely fallacious grounds.

Let me go back. This was the beginning of an era of neo-conservatism. I would have to look back to the rise of the neoconservatives' assertions: first, that the poor and the needy were not as needy as they said they were. So they really didn't need this help. And then that

gave the basis for a housing program which would be demand-oriented. This, in turn, gave a rationale for coming out for housing allowances. As you will recall, this was the New Federalism, a part of Nixon's program.

But of course, as was pointed out at the time, when it came to funding, he proposed a little drop in the bucket, so he really didn't have any program. The whole notion that everything was a failure, that everything didn't work and therefore you shouldn't do it started there. And when James Lynn came in as Secretary of HUD, he came in to kill the programs, and he did an effective job. Carla Hills tried to something about it, but there wasn't too much she could do as Lynn was over there at OMB tying her hands. Pat Harris came in and did some corrective and innovative measures, but Carter was getting on his conservative movement and was pulling back so fast that it wasn't even funny.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Doesn't that suggest to you that the country doesn't care very much? These guys couldn't get away with that stuff if there was a deep-seated demand for it.

DR. WEAVER: It suggests to me what I've always known. And that is that there never has been and probably for some time won't be, short of a great upheaval, a very strong and articulate support for housing for the disadvantaged. That was why the 1968 Act was criticized on the basis that it was too omnibus, too inclusive, trying to get something, and tie in the housing for the disadvantaged with the other housing. This was why we went to the turnkey and the housing goals. And this was why we set up Ginnie Mae in order to be able to finance the effort.

You cannot have a housing program in this country and apparently not in Great Britain either, only for the low-income family. And today Reagan is cutting out the housing programs for the low-income families and talking about cutting out the housing for the others also.

One of the things that I did as soon as the Department was set up was to replace Milt

Semer who in my earlier years had been indispensable on the Hill and whose orientation was to work with the housing committees up on the Hill and forget about the other groups. A broad-backed coalition of the home builders and the mortgage bankers, but particularly the home builders and mayors and the church groups, the minority groups, the labor groups and so forth should push the department's legislation. I'm getting around to answering your question. If HUD is interested in housing for lower-income families, as it should be, it has to recognize that there is not great support for that. It therefore has to have a coalition of the politically powerful led by the home builders, who are the most politically potent of the groups in the housing industry, the mayors, and include the other groups (consumer, producer, and public interest) in order to be able to get the legislation through and in order to be able to make it respectable.

This is something that HUD has to do. Nobody else is going to do it. And this is something that HUD hasn't done since 1968.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Okay. A few more questions. If you were asked today to put together a housing program for this country, what would be some of the elements? What concerns would you have and--

DR. WEAVER: I don't know. I think that there has been so much damage done that it would be very difficult to achieve. I don't say that it can't be done. I think the answer to it is that you wouldn't start with the Department, you wouldn't start with an agency, you would start with the White House. You would have to have an articulate leadership which would be able to put the problem in perspective as to how important it is for the economy, how important it is for the social life and so forth. And this, combined with a change in philosophy from asking people, "Are you better off than you were five years ago?" to asking them, "Is the country better off and where is the country not healthy?"

I think that would be the terms under which it would have to be done, and I think that, as contrasted to what we did in terms of trying to get a program, you would have to get an atmosphere and a climate of concern for shelter as a social imperative.

Now, I suppose the only answer to this is going to be--and I hate to be this pessimistic--that the thing is going to get so bad that people are going to do it like they did when they set up the urban coalition, out of fear.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: A last question. You spent a lot of energy over you lifetime trying to promote fair housing and equal opportunity. How much progress has been made in this area since the nineteen forties and can Black children and other minority children look forward to less discrimination than faced your generation and mine?

DR. WEAVER: Well, some progress has been made largely in terms of breaking the white noose around the central city. Washington is a very good example. You see Blacks going into the suburbs, which are contiguous to the central city, the lower cost suburbs. But this is often an extension of the ghetto rather than a breaking down of the ghetto pattern. There is irony in that here in a time when we're getting more Blacks living in the suburbs, which is an advance, we're also getting an expansion of the pattern of residential segregation. When I wrote The Negro Ghetto in 1948, I was talking in terms of housing discrimination and segregation as being a lack of facilities and a lack of access to housing. That has been improved. The quality of housing for everybody has been improved and the quality of housing for minorities has been improved.

Yet, the ghetto patterns are still there, and the degree of housing segregation has been decreased only slightly if at all. I think Karl Taeuber indicates in his pieces recently that at the rate we're going now, it would take 50 years to abolish it. So I would say that the Black youngster of today can look for better housing and can look for a situation where, if he is

affluent, just upper middle class, he will have a chance to have much better housing choices than were available to his prototype 20 or 30 years ago. But the pattern of residential segregation is dissolving with all deliberate speed and even a little slower than that.

DR. SCHUSSHEIM: Thanks very much, Bob. This was very useful and we covered a lot of territory. I appreciate it.

DR. WEAVER: Incidentally, there's another book that you will find interesting if you haven't seen it. This is Redford and Bisset. It's on the administration during the Johnson years and the first chapter is on housing with emphasis upon the creation and structure of HUD. And he quotes a tremendous amount of primary sources, largely from the LBJ Library.

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Dr. Robert C. Weaver served as the Administrator of the U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency from 1961 to 1965 and became the first Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1966, continuing through 1968.

Dr. Morton J. Schussheim held the position of Assistant Administrator for Program Policy of the U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency from 1961 through 1965. At the time of this interview, he was Senior Specialist in Housing, Congressional Research Service, the Library of Congress.