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- Naftali:** Secretary Butz, I'm Tim Naftali. I'm Director-Designate of the Richard Nixon Library, and we're here today to do an oral interview with you as part of the Richard Nixon Presidential Oral History Project. It's April 13, 2007, and we're in West Lafayette, Indiana. Dr. Butz, I was going to ask you whether you had any interactions with Vice President Richard Nixon when you were Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower administration. I wanted to ask you about Ezra Taft Benson and Vice President Nixon.
- Butz:** I always had contact with the Vice {resident. He's the one that does the work. The President's out taking bows in public. If you want anything done, you get the Vice President to do it.
- Naftali:** Well, did the Vice President share Ezra Taft Benson's thinking about agriculture? Because I know that, I mean, he was, in many ways, your mentor, and you worked for him. Was he close to Richard Nixon in the Eisenhower period?
- Butz:** I think reasonably so. He was on the job. Nixon was out making speeches.
- Naftali:** In the 1960 campaign, there was quite a challenge for Nixon. Nixon actually, I think, asked Eisenhower to send Benson on some travel overseas because he was concerned about the effect on the farm vote, of being too close to Benson.
- Butz:** Well, Benson was Mormon, he was a very likeable Mormon, and it was hard to change him to be a politician. And this was Nixon's problem, so he sent him away.
- Naftali:** So he sent him away?
- Butz:** Mm-hmm.
- Naftali:** Did you participate at all in the 1960 campaign?
- Butz:** Yeah, virtually, one way or another.
- Naftali:** Now in 1964, you helped the Goldwater campaign, didn't you?
- Butz:** I what?
- Naftali:** You helped the Goldwater campaign in 1964?
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- Butz:** That's right. This was entirely different from the Nixon campaign. Both were effective, but they were different.
- Naftali:** How would you describe the differences?
- Butz:** Well, the Nixon campaign was primarily according to principles. The Goldwater campaign was more personal, you got down to the -- to the personalities involved.
- Naftali:** You mean the personality of Goldwater?
- Butz:** Mm-hmm.
- Naftali:** Could you describe that personality?
- Butz:** Well, doesn't take much to describe it. He was like everybody else.
- Naftali:** Well, but you said that the personality mattered more than in the Nixon campaign.
- Butz:** Mm-hmm, well, I think that's right. One was close and personal and warm. The other was distant and formal.
- Naftali:** In 1968, you run for governor of Indiana.
- Butz:** Yeah, for a while.
- Naftali:** For a while. We've spent a -- Paul Musgrave and I spent yesterday with Bill Ruckelshaus, who sends his best. He was running for Senate, I think, in 1968. What was the Nixon campaign like in Indiana in 1968? What do you remember of it?
- Butz:** Well, he was pretty formal, in sharp contrast to other campaigns that were warm and personal. Nixon's were -- Nixon's were more like the book prescribed it.
- Naftali:** Did you campaign with him in Indiana? You must have, I guess, that year.
- Butz:** Oh, yes.
- Naftali:** Do you remember any experience from that campaign where you were campaigning with him?
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Butz: Oh, Nixon was warm and personal when you got to know him. In public he seemed to be formal, but person-to-person, he was like any of the rest of us.

Naftali: Was it surprising to you when you were asked to come to Washington again to be in his Cabinet?

Earl L. Butz

[Unintelligible]

Naftali: How did it happen that he named you Secretary of Agriculture?

Butz: Gosh, I don't know. I guess he had trouble filling the spot.

Naftali: Oh, you're probably not giving yourself enough credit. Do you recall -- you were at Purdue when the call came to you. What did you hope to accomplish when you got to Washington, when you got there as Secretary?

Butz: Well, they were hoping to represent farmers, so often, that position was simply formal. They had to fill it and they put somebody in that had a name. They put me there because I was close to agriculture. I knew it. I knew the leaders, I knew the industry and they wanted to take advantage of that.

Naftali: Did they -- did you sense that there was also a hope that you could help Nixon in the farm states in the '72 campaign?

Butz: Mm-hmm, well, I did that. I campaigned, and I think effectively carried -- I think he had really carried all the farm states as I recall. That was kind of unusual for any candidate.

Naftali: Well, the only farm state he lost was Massachusetts.

Butz: Massachusetts?

Naftali: That was the only one he lost.

Butz: Farm state. Massachusetts grows Cape cod.

Naftali: Well, cranberries, too. Don't forget cranberries, sir. But can you -- I know it's a long time ago, but can you recall anything of the 1972 campaign?

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- Butz:** Oh gosh, it seemed like any other political campaign. Your personalities are involved. You've got to play up the personalities in any political campaign. This was especially true of Presidential campaigns.
- Naftali:** I was wondering if you remembered anything of your trip to Moscow, when you negotiated the wheat deal. Do you?
- Butz:** No, like most Presidential deals, the details were negotiated by somebody else, by experts, and the politicians take credit for it.
- Naftali:** Well, thank you for your candor, although you've always been known for your candor. Tell me about -- do you remember going to Moscow? Do you remember that trip?
- Butz:** Oh, yes. Going to Moscow was -- for a Cabinet member, it was like any other trip, I think. You're there for public relations purposes. The real detail is done by some of your staff.
- Naftali:** Do you remember some of the personalities of those that were in the Cabinet with you? We've talked a bit about Nixon. Who did you work with? Who were some of your colleagues in the Nixon Cabinet that you recall?
- Butz:** Oh, gosh, it's been so long, when I was -- and I was young then. I've forgotten some of the details, but we teamed up with groups in the Cabinet. And so when you got things done, you kind of traded off.
- Naftali:** Actually, they made you a super Cabinet member. In early 1973, you were supposed to be in charge of natural resources, which made you one of the four chief Cabinet members, put you in sort of, as they said, the super Cabinet. Do you recall any conversations with President Nixon about the super Cabinet or becoming, as I said, the -- responsible for several different departments at once?
- Butz:** Oh, I think so. I don't recall it. My relationship with Nixon was kind of a personal one. I was in a sense, I should say, his political advisor, especially in agriculture. Somebody else took care of the technical details.
- Naftali:** Did he listen to you?
- Butz:** Oh, yes. Oh yeah, he was very cooperative as long as you were on his side.
- Naftali:** Well, were you always on his side?
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- Butz:** No.
- Naftali:** Do you remember why you might not have been? Why did you disagree with him?
- Butz:** Well, I was there in the interest of agriculture, agricultural people and the whole food sector. And I used to fight for my interests like any other Cabinet member fought for his interests.
- Naftali:** Did you -- do you remember disagreeing on DDT, for example, or something like that or the use of -- do you recall any of the disagreements you had with the President?
- Butz:** Well, yeah, I don't recall the details, but there were times I stood up for what I believed in, and I sometimes pushed it right to the Presidency.
- Naftali:** You tried very hard to encourage the American farmer to look less to -- to wean themselves from price supports and issues like that, to be more free-market oriented.
- Butz:** Well, I'd like to see that, but I don't think that's going to occur. They're used to depending on government supports, and I think they will always continue to do that.
- Naftali:** How sympathetic was President Nixon to this particular view, your view of what the farmer should do?
- Butz:** Oh, reasonably so. I was a pretty strong voice in the Cabinet, and I think he -- I had a political backing, and that gave me strength in the Cabinet.
- Naftali:** Mel Laird was someone else who had strength in the Cabinet, political strength in the Cabinet.
- Butz:** Mm-hmm.
- Naftali:** Do you remember working with Mel Laird or...
- Butz:** I don't recall the details, but yeah, we worked together sometimes. We worked with anybody who could help us get the job done.
- Naftali:** Do you remember working at all with Charles Colson, who helped shape President Nixon's electoral strategy?
- Butz:** Mm-hmm, yeah, I joined his campaign. He was campaign chief, and I helped. The agricultural vote was important, and they enlisted my aid to get it.
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- Naftali:** Can you recall any stories from, you know, your time in the White House visiting the President that you'd like to share with us, put on the record?
- Butz:** Oh, no, I don't recall any scraps we had like that. You're bound to have disagreements and insist on the proper solution. In my case, I had access to the President, which gave me, I think, unusual power in the Cabinet.
- Naftali:** Did he ever ask you to do things, for you to help him bring the Cabinet along? Do you --
- Butz:** Oh, yes.
- Naftali:** You've worked for three -- closely with three American Presidents: Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford. Could you tell us a little bit how these men differed from each other, compare them a bit for us.
- Butz:** Yes, for example, you work for Eisenhower, you work with Nixon, made the efforts.
- Naftali:** What about Ford?
- Butz:** Ford? Well, he was a genial, interesting chap that -- I think he was there more for public relations than for anything else.
- Naftali:** So when you say -- you say you worked for Eisenhower. When you say you worked for Eisenhower, was it because he was a general, he was a little bit more formal. Is that why?
- Butz:** Some people felt that way. You had to get to know him. When you got to know Ike, he was a pretty personable chap. If you regarded him still as General Eisenhower, it was harder to work with him.
- Naftali:** And you said you worked with Nixon?
- Butz:** I hope I did. I tried to, and I believe I did.
- Naftali:** Could you tell us a little bit of -- how would you describe him as a man? Since you did spend so much time with him, I mean.
- Butz:** How would I describe him right now?
- Naftali:** Richard Nixon as a man.
- Butz:** Richard Nixon, well, I'd describe Nixon as an extremely intelligent chap, capable, but a loner.
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- Naftali:** What was that -- how would you -- how would a man like you connect with him? He was a loner, so what did you have to do to build respect and trust?
- Butz:** Well in my case, I just went ahead and did my job and insisted on doing whatever was best for the department and won out, I don't know why.
- Naftali:** Well, I can know. What were your greatest challenges as Secretary of Agriculture, when you think about it now?
- Butz:** Well, I think the greatest challenge I faced was to get along with the non-agriculture departments. You had to have their cooperation to succeed, and that was one of my goals.
- Naftali:** And do you think you succeeded?
- Butz:** Reasonably so.
- Naftali:** What do you think was your most important achievement while you were Secretary of Agriculture?
- Butz:** Most important achievement? Oh gosh, I don't know. I think perhaps the most important one was to give the agricultural sector of America the place it deserves. It's pretty important. The food sector is basic in America, and it now has a voice. I didn't have a voice when I became secretary.
- Naftali:** Orville Freeman didn't give it a voice?
- Butz:** No, not very much.
- Naftali:** When you were Secretary of Agriculture, there was a world food crisis, or there seemed to be.
- Butz:** Mm-hmm.
- Naftali:** For the students that come to our museum, it will be a shock to them. Right now, we're enjoying plenty in the world of -- why was there a food crisis during this period? Why did you have it in '72 and again in '74?
- Butz:** Well, I think we had kind of a world food failure a time or two, and that made it seem like a crisis. We got close to the point where we had to tighten our belts, so there's nothing serious about it. It just became kind of a press-cut crisis.
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- Naftali:** Was that a little bit like the energy crisis in that time?
- Butz:** That's right.
- Naftali:** Because I heard some of your colleagues say that we really didn't need to have the energy crisis that we went through.
- Butz:** Mm-hmm, we were a long ways from getting hungry.
- Naftali:** You've enjoyed a long and successful career. How is the world different today for the American farmer than it was when you were Secretary of Agriculture?
- Butz:** Well, that's such a hard question to answer. When I was Secretary, agriculture had kind of a back seat. I made it -- I moved it to the front. I made agriculture a bargaining tool. We had food, and I moved food forward as a primary bargaining tool.
- Naftali:** Bargaining tool at home and overseas as well?
- Butz:** Both places.
- Naftali:** You pushed for agricultural exports -- you -- rather than creating surpluses at home. You wanted us to trade more abroad. Do you remember some of the places you traveled, other than Russia, as Secretary of Agriculture, to encourage exports?
- Butz:** Oh gosh, I don't know. I really did a lot of traveling. I have a -- I have a very -- I have a very broad gift of gab and they used me for public relations purposes.
- Naftali:** Do you recall any foreign leaders that you met, other than Brezhnev?
- Butz:** Well, I don't need to recall anybody besides Brezhnev. He was a powerful spokesman, and the rest of them I felt were cooperators more than they were leaders.
- Naftali:** Do you -- I wanted to -- I actually wrote a book about Khrushchev at one point, and I was looking at the life of Bob Garst. Do you remember Bob Garst, the great Iowa farm --
- Butz:** Who?
- Naftali:** Garst, the Iowa farmer?
- Butz:** No.
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- Naftali:** What do you remember of the Watergate period?
- Butz:** Watergate?
- Naftali:** Watergate period.
- Butz:** Well, the Watergate episode was largely -- well, it was propelled by the press. It made a good story. They made the most of it. It wasn't nearly that serious or that important.
- Naftali:** Well, where were you the day that President Nixon resigned?
- Butz:** Where were I?
- Naftali:** Where were you that day? Were you there when he left on the helicopter that day?
- Butz:** Mm-hmm, yeah. Well, it could have been a crisis in American history. It wasn't. We made a smooth transition from Nixon to his successor. I think that's a characteristic of the American governmental system. You have transfer of power smoothly.
- Naftali:** So you were then when he said goodbye and left?
- Butz:** Mm-hmm, kind of a dramatic moment when the President says goodbye, but he said it gracefully, and he said it truthfully, and I think that made it go across.
- Naftali:** Do you remember the first few weeks with the new President and what that transition was like with Ford?
- Butz:** Yeah, I remember that, but there were no great changes. The Presidency -- the President doesn't run the government. He's a public relations man. A whole host of workers, civil service, that run the government and they go right on regardless of who's President.
- Naftali:** What did you learn from your experience in government?
- Butz:** I learned to be careful with newsmen. Be careful of the questions they ask you. They'll trip you up if they can.
- Naftali:** So you prefer being, ultimately, in a university setting?
- Butz:** That's right.
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- Naftali:** Do you encourage young people to go into farming now?
- Butz:** Go into farming?
- Naftali:** Yeah, do you encourage young people to go into farming?
- Butz:** Well, yes, but farming's entirely different now than when I was growing up. When I was growing up, you were actually a farm worker as well as manager. It's not true now that so much of the farming is corporate management, corporate management from the top down. Well, I'd encourage them to go in but recognize where they're going.
- Naftali:** Just so people have some background, you grew up in Indiana. You farmed as a young boy, didn't you?
- Butz:** Mm-hmm.
- Naftali:** Where were you during the Depression?
- Butz:** Where was I during the Depression?
- Naftali:** You were here, were you --
- Butz:** I was a graduate student [unintelligible]. I missed the impact of the Depression. I was a graduate student on a graduate student wages, which was very close -- something below standard, I think, just barely above starvation.
- Naftali:** It hasn't changed, by the way.
- Butz:** No.
- Naftali:** So you missed the impact of the Depression?
- Butz:** What?
- Naftali:** You said you missed -- Where were you in World War II?
- Butz:** Where was I when?
- Naftali:** In World War II.
- Butz:** World War II, where was I? I guess -- I think back home on the Indiana farm, I believe.
- Naftali:** How many in your family? How many brothers and sisters?
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- Butz:** I have two sons and a wife.
- Naftali:** I meant when you were growing up.
- Butz:** When I was growing up?
- Naftali:** Yeah.
- Butz:** Well, there were two brothers and three sisters -- no, three brothers and two sisters. When I was growing up, we kind of worked as a team. My father was absent most of the time. He was manager of the county co-op, and that took him away. We kids "ran the business."
- Naftali:** Were you the first in the family to go into politics?
- Butz:** I haven't thought about that. I guess I was.
- Naftali:** Did you do any local politics before your 1968 run?
- Butz:** No, just -- just local politics.
- Naftali:** Oh, did you know Wendell Willkie?
- Butz:** Oh, yes.
- Naftali:** Tell us about Wendell Willkie, please.
- Butz:** Well, he was kind of like the rest of us. He had a reputation for -- not too good a reputation -- but he was a good, loyal worker, and I enjoyed working with him.
- Naftali:** He was a pretty interesting Presidential candidate, too.
- Butz:** That's right.
- Naftali:** Did you know Paul McNutt?
- Butz:** Not well.
- Naftali:** And how about Homer Capehart?
- Butz:** Well, I knew Homer in a way. I didn't know him personally.
- Naftali:** Did you work with Richard Lugar at any point?
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- Butz:** Work with Richard Lugar?
- Naftali:** Yes.
- Butz:** Oh, sure. [unintelligible] to work with Richard Lugar. He was a cooperative sort of fellow and easy to work with.
- Naftali:** Who were the -- when you were Secretary of Agriculture, who were the key Congressmen and Senators that you worked with that you remember?
- Butz:** When I was Secretary of Agriculture? Well, I worked very closely with Dick Lugar. Lugar was from Indiana. I knew him. I knew him before he got to Washington. It was easy to cooperate with him so, looking back, I worked with him and through him more than anybody.
- Naftali:** What about Bob Dole? Did you work with him?
- Butz:** Yeah, some. Bob was -- he's a different sort of fellow, but I worked with whoever I could cooperate with.
- Naftali:** Why was there such a tough fight for you to become Secretary of -- it was a bit of a fight for you to become Secretary of Agriculture. There were some people who were really tough. Was it because they still didn't like Ezra Benson? Was that part of it?
- Butz:** No, and they thought I would be a second Benson because I had worked with him as Assistant Secretary. They were afraid they'd just have continuation of Ezra. That wasn't true. I was there on my own. And they soon discovered that I was perhaps more difficult to work with than Benson was.
- Naftali:** Well, how were you different from -- well, you just told me. What were they afraid that you'd do that Benson did?
- Butz:** Well, I think primarily they were afraid I'd be more political than I would agricultural, and that was not true. I went in there to represent agriculture, tried to do that.
- Naftali:** I think some of them said that you weren't as supportive of the small farmer as they felt people should be in your position.
- Butz:** Well, in a sense, that's true, but that was the trend of the times then. The small farmer who didn't have a sideline of some kind was in difficulty, and the politicians who tried to maintain the small farmer in agriculture, I tried to make provisions for them moving to some place they could make a
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decent living. Let us combine agricultural resources and in sizes large enough to be efficient.

Naftali: And were you trying to find ways to help the small farmer make that transition into a better life?

Butz: Oh yeah, we had various provisions there. They wanted to get a better job, if possible, but it wasn't easy you had to stop being a small farmer unless they had some sideline income.

Naftali: Did you -- you were also responsible for the food stamp program, were you not?

Butz: Mm-hmm.

Naftali: What did you think of those programs from the '60's?

Butz: Well, the food stamp was a program that could be politically abused and sometimes was politically abused, but I regarded it primarily as a welfare program. Incidentally, food distribution was primarily welfare.

Naftali: Which -- did you feel that the Department of Agriculture should be in that business or should it be transferred to another department?

Butz: Well, the Department of Agriculture, in one sense, is a welfare department. You've got surplus food you give away, you've got various act -- several activities you do. In a sense, it is a welfare department.

Naftali: And that's the way it should be?

Butz: I think so.

Male Speaker

Switch tapes real quick.

Naftali: All right, thank you, thank you.

Naftali: My assistant is from Indiana, so he just asked me to ask you about a senator whom I've never heard of, but I'm going to ask you. Tell me when you're ready? Senator Jenner, do you remember Senator Jenner?

Butz: Jenner?

Naftali: Mm-hmm.

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- Butz:** Well, I didn't know him. The name is familiar, but I didn't know him personally.
- Naftali:** Tell me about -- tell me about Vietnam. This was not your responsibility but this was an era of student dissatisfaction, of the anti-war movement. You'd come from Purdue. How political a campus was Purdue when you left it to come to Washington?
- Butz:** Not very political. As a matter of fact, if you could get into politics at that time as a staff member, you very likely got in trouble one way or another. They now do get involved in government, they get involved in politics, but when I was there, this was a no-no.
- Naftali:** Can you tell us about to what extent did the Vietnam struggle affect your work at all as Secretary of Agriculture?
- Butz:** Oh, gosh, I don't recall. I tried to be primarily agricultural, to insist on agriculture having a voice, and agriculture should have a voice because food is one of the most important power factors in the world.
- Naftali:** Tell us, how useful were Cabinet meetings? What were they like?
- Butz:** How useful were Cabinet meetings?
- Naftali:** Under Nixon, first of all.
- Butz:** Well, under Nixon and Ford, they were different. You worked for Nixon, you worked with Ford, which is an essential difference, I think. And with Ford, he wanted you to be a part of decision-making, and you were that way.
- Naftali:** Whereas with Nixon, it was not that?
- Butz:** No, no, Nixon was a little aloof, but not personal, in contrast to Ford, who was right down, one of you.
- Naftali:** So you were saying also before that Eisenhower was aloof. Nixon was like Eisenhower in being aloof?
- Butz:** Well, in some respect, but only in some respects. Eisenhower was on the intelligent, kindness side, but Nixon was on the dictatorial side.
- Naftali:** So how would you get through to him because he did view you as an advisor, you said.
- Butz:** With Nixon?
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- Naftali:** Yeah.
- Butz:** I got to him because food is a powerful factor. It's one of the most powerful factors we have in government. With Nixon, by teaming up decisions affecting the food industry.
- Naftali:** So with Gerry Ford, or with President Ford, it was easier to establish a connection? Was that --
- Butz:** Was he what?
- Naftali:** It was easier to have a personal connection with President Ford.
- Butz:** Oh yes, that's right. Formal connection with Nixon, personal one with Ford.
- Naftali:** Tell me about --
- Butz:** But either can be effective if you know how to use it.
- Naftali:** Did you find that -- how interested in the farm issue was President Nixon?
- Butz:** Oh, not especially, I think. He kind of turned it over to the Secretary of Agriculture, who had to be cooperative, but he depended on him to deliver the goods.
- Naftali:** What about Ford? How interested was he in agricultural policy?
- Butz:** Ford was easy to work with, as I said a while ago. The difference is you work for Nixon, you work with Ford. You had a full partnership with Jerry Ford.
- Naftali:** Did you work at all with one of your successors, John Bloch?
- Butz:** Oh, some. Not very much.
- Naftali:** Did you find that any of your successors followed along with some of the principles that you'd started? I mean, do you see any?
- Butz:** Oh, I think so. That's because the principles outlast the secretary.
- Naftali:** And how would you describe the principles of a Butz department?
- Butz:** Principles of the Department of Agriculture? Well, the basic purpose, of course, is provide adequate food for the population. In my case, it was
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provide adequate food and to assist our foreign policy and with our foreign purchasing power. The chief source of expenditure we had foreign-wise, was food. This is a pretty valuable commodity, world-wide.

Naftali: Do you think that President Nixon, one of the reasons why he selected you, was he was concerned about the increased cost of food, the inflation in food and that he saw your ideas as possibly being able to bring down the price of food?

Butz: That could be, but I think basically he selected me because I was a pretty powerful spokesman. That's what he was looking for when he looked for the Secretary of Agriculture.

Naftali: While you were Secretary of Agriculture, what did you do to bring down the cost of food, because it's such a big problem then.

Butz: Well, the first thing is I took any production obstacles out of the way, if I could -- and put incentives there for food production, and it worked.

Naftali: Do you remember some of the obstacles you removed? Do you remember what you had to do?

Butz: Some of the obstacles? Oh, largely political, but I overcame them because the most effective political voice in America is food, if you use it properly. What mistakes do you think the Roosevelt administration made in handling the Depression on the farms?

Butz: Oh gosh, I don't know the Roosevelt administration. It was so far back, I forgot what it was like.

Naftali: Well, I ask simply because one of the -- in a sense, what you were dealing with in the consequences of the New Deal's farm policy. What did you try to correct from the Johnson administration?

Butz: Try to correct? Well, I tried to move away from production controls to the extent that I could possibly do it. I didn't want agriculture under tight governmental controls. I thought the market-controlled agriculture was best of all, and that's what I tried to promote.

Naftali: How well do you think you did trying to do that?

Butz: Oh, reasonably well. You know, the market prevails, whether you try or not.

Naftali: Are there any reflections that you'd like to record of your period of government for us in the Library?

- Butz:** No, I think I exposed everything that should be exposed. I think the press did that.
- Naftali:** Well, I meant your personal side, your view of what you think happened.
- Butz:** I don't think so. I was pretty satisfied as Secretary of Agriculture.
- Naftali:** Did you like living in Washington?
- Butz:** Well, I didn't live in Washington when we lived in Washington. We lived in Maryland, right across the border from the District, and as a consequence, didn't have all the District regulations to contend with.
- Naftali:** Well, Dr. Butz, thank you for your time.
- Butz:** You're welcome.
- Naftali:** I appreciate it.