

Interview with John R. Block
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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Thursday, July 9, 2009. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today it's my honor to interview the former Secretary of Agriculture, John Block. Good afternoon Mr. Secretary.

Block: Good afternoon Mark.

DePue: You're going to take us from about 125 to somewhere around 130 hours, I would hope, by the time we are done of video interviews that we've done on every single aspect of agriculture in Illinois. History and how it's practiced today. Farmers, business leaders, academicians, and leading government officials like yourself. This is one of the interviews we would consider the icing on the cake if you will and I've been looking forward to doing this interview for a long time, but I'm talking too much. Let's start with the basics. When and where were you born?

Block: Well, first let me say that I'm honored to be a part of the project. Because I think American agriculture and Illinois agriculture, in particular, needs to be recognized. Now, your question about ... I was born in Galesburg, Illinois in 1935.

DePue: And you grew up in the Galesburg area?

Block: I grew up on the family farm in Knox County near Knoxville. Went to a one room country school and later on the Knoxville High School.

DePue: What were your parent's names?

- Block: My mother was named Madeline and her maiden name was Young and my father's name was Julius and the first year or two we lived in a house that was actually owned by my grandfather and my father was working in town. This is when I was just born and then about a year later, my grandfather who owned this farm down on Spoon River needed somebody to farm it. My father, who was really not a farmer and had grown up in Knoxville was assigned to take over the farm. My mother, Dad and I ended up on the farm and that's the farm I grew up on.
- DePue: How far back was your family able to trace their ancestors through Knox County?
- Block: It goes back to my great-grandfather. It's right there on Spoon River near the Wolf covered bridge. My great-grandfather owned land on both sides of the river. By the time it had been inherited and changed over the years, the farm of 212 acres that my grandfather owned, that's actually where we were at the time.
- DePue: Had he come from a different part of the United States or from across the ocean?
- Block: Well, he come across the ocean and then south and then ended up there over a period of time.
- DePue: Okay, do you know when that occurred?
- Block: No, I don't have the timing on that.
- DePue: What country did he come
- Block: Actually, I'll say the covered bridge was named the Wolf covered bridge and he was a Wolf. He was really British. The bridge, I think, was dedicated in 1848. That's a while back.
- DePue: That's still a long way back.
- Block: Yeah, that's a while back [laugh].
- DePue: Well, I'll put you on the spot here Mr. Secretary. Do you know if you had any ancestors that fought in the Civil War then?
- Block: No, I don't know.
- DePue: Okay.
- Block: Not that I know of let's say.
- DePue: Okay. Well, tell us a little bit about growing up on the farm, on a small farm in rural Illinois at that time.
- Block: Well, I think it gives a young man or a young lady a perspective you don't get in the cities. I mean we had to work. I know that we helped milk cows, 12 cows by

hand. And if that doesn't get your attention, nothing will. Morning and night. I went to a one room country school. Rode my pony to school many times. At the school we had two outhouses, no running water, just a pitcher pump out there and a coal fired stove for the winter time to keep us warm and one teacher, eight kids, and two of the eight were my sisters, so we didn't have a lot of different peers around to work with. It was fine, we had good teachers and after eight years I went on to high school in Knoxville. We used to hunt squirrels in the woods and I rode my pony in the woods and the dog would run and chase squirrels and I'd either shoot them with a slingshot or scare them out of the tree and the dog would catch them. And when I got to be a little older, not very old, maybe about 12, I'd shoot them with a 22 rifle. You know we did all those things that country kids do and it was a great life. We had no gymnasium but we had a basketball hoop outdoors and my Dad coached our basketball team. Now if you can even imagine with eight kids, we didn't have a lot of fire power but we teamed up with another country school and made enough kids that we could have a team and we played some of the local schools around there when we were in grade school. So, we did a lot of things that even kids here do today but it was just a little different situation.

DePue: How would you rate the education you got in this one room schoolhouse?

Block: Well, I thought it was very good. I mean, I can't complain. My gosh, I went on to high school and not to brag about it, but I was valedictorian. You can't brag too much, only 40 kids in my class. But still, I think it was a very good start in this country school and the teachers there; we had two different ones over the time and they gave us a lot of attention.

DePue: This is a good way I think sometimes to get people to understand what growing up was like for you. So, tell me what your morning chores were before you went to a typical day at school.

Block: Well, usually it just depended on the day but I had chickens to feed and some times I fed them at night or in the morning. We had a hen house with chickens in there and at night I had to gather eggs some times and in the mornings you go out and help milk the cows. My grandfather lived with us for most of those years when we were on the farm and he helped us milk too. We separated the milk in our basement. I say separated, you had to separate out the cream and so the cream we could have, and then we'd have skim milk. When you take the cream off of the milk, all you've got is skim milk left. Of course, today people are drinking skim milk. They are trying to keep their fat down but we fed the skim milk to the pigs. We didn't drink skim milk and so that was part of the way we did it.

DePue: You said you were milking 12 cows every day?

Block: Yeah, 10 or 12. You know, it seemed like 15 but I think it was about 10 or 12.

DePue: How long would that take?

- Block: Well, we'd do it in an hour and a half or something like that usually. I didn't have to do it every day and later on when we got to high school, my Dad, I don't know why he had this revelation but, to our delight, mine and my two sisters, he sold the cows. And milking was over.
- DePue: But by that time I would suspect you had one heck of a grip.
- Block: Yeah, I still got that grip. I think. Yeah, you learn how to grip.
- DePue: When you were growing up in this house, did they have electricity?
- Block: We didn't have any electricity the first five or six years and then we got electricity. I think it was when I was about six years old we got electricity. And then when I got to high school, maybe a sophomore, we got our first television. And, so we watched whatever was on there. My grandfather loved to watch the wrestling. He thought it was real but I think they were just putting on a show then like they put on a show today.
- DePue: Do you remember the day when electricity came to the farm?
- Block: No, I don't remember that day specifically but when it came, of course, then we were able to get a bathroom in, because before we just had our outhouse. We had to make some changes which were revolutionary. But you know as kids you don't think much about it. We didn't think a lot about it, but in retrospect I really think about it.
- DePue: The importance of something as basic as electricity?
- Block: Oh yeah, I mean people wouldn't even imagine today without it.
- DePue: Well, you already revealed that one of the changes that subsequently came was you got indoor plumbing.
- Block: Well, that came, yeah that came afterwards but it came fairly soon after we got electricity.
- DePue: That might be the other creature comfort people couldn't imagine living without.
- Block: But we never had indoor plumbing at the grade school, where I went to school.
- DePue: And you were already close to your teens by the time you finished there.
- Block: Well, eighth grade you know you're going to be 13 or something like that.
- DePue: You already mentioned also that your high school class was 40?
- Block: About 40, 43 or 44.

DePue: What were your goals, as you're getting a little bit close to the time of graduation, what were you thinking you wanted to do with your life?

Block: Well, I don't think I knew and that's not so uncommon today. I knew that I had always worked hard on academics and played sports, played baseball and basketball and football. When you have a small school, everybody has to play or you won't have any teams. I did that and I hadn't decided what I wanted to do. I knew I wasn't a good enough athlete to go on and play athletics so, which I did, I loved athletics, I just knew I was going to go to college some place and that was a foregone conclusion and, that was it.

DePue: Was that something your parents were strongly encouraging you to do.

Block: I think it was just expected. I don't know. They did not graduate, either one of them from college, although they went a year or two but the depression hit and they had to leave it. But it was just expected. I went, my sisters went, neighbors up the road, they went. It was pretty well, that's kind of what we were expected to do.

DePue: But Mr. Secretary, this is at a time when I would guess that most people coming from rural America weren't thinking well, we're going to go to college, that's what everybody does these days, go to college.

Block: Yeah, I know, but I guess this was a unique and an advantage that we had maybe in our family and in our little neighborhood. I look at my high school class, I can't tell you what percent went but I'd say 30 percent of them went to college. At least some college.

DePue: Was your father hoping you were going to come back to the farm?

Block: He might have been but he never pushed me on it, ever. And that was always a kind of possibility, so he didn't push me.

DePue: Well, I know that you got an appointment to West Point when you actually went off to college. Why West Point? Why did you apply to the Academy?

Block: First of all I didn't know where I was going to go and I had been accepted at Northwestern University and surprisingly I was going to study speech and dramatics. I don't know what I thought I'd do with it but I had given talks in 4-H and FFA so I guess I thought maybe I was good enough at it I could use that to propel myself someplace else. But I had a friend that lived in Galesburg and he had been ... he was going at the time to Annapolis, the Naval Academy. And I talked to him and it sounded very glamorous and exciting so I knew I had to get a hold of my Congressman, Congressman Chipperfield and I did and he said "I have no appointments available to the Naval Academy. I have one appointment available to West Point Military Academy. If you're interested we've got an exam at x date you can take it with the other kids that were interested. So I took

the exam and I guess somehow I did well enough that he gave me the appointment.

DePue: Had this friend not told you about what it was like to be a plebe at one of the Academies?

Block: No, nobody, well, no, he didn't tell me how hard it was and how rough it was and I had read a book on West Point after I thought maybe I was going to get the appointment, might get the appointment. I read a book on it and it was so glamorous and exciting, it didn't tell any of the facts of the hazing or how hard plebe year is. So I went there, you know kind of in the dark [laugh] as to what I'd expect.

DePue: I'm always curious about motivations for a military career in particular, and a few years before that everybody growing up in high school would have been watching every single aspect of the Second World War. Now I know that the Korean War wasn't covered nearly as much but were you paying attention to what was going on in that war?

Block: Well, I think we paid more attention during the Second World War and I was just a really little kid then. But we were still drawing pictures of Japanese planes and German planes with swastikas on 'em. I remember that quite well. At the same time, young enough not to really appreciate some of the horrors of war and all of the difficulty and the sadness that can come of it.

DePue: You've already eluded to, that you didn't know as much about West Point or that first year's experience as maybe you would have liked later on. What was it like for the first few months there?

Block: Well, the first few months, that's in the summer time, and it's called beast barracks at West Point and it's just marching and training and the upper classmen are getting on your back and you stand up straight and crack your shoulders back and down and there's certain things you have to memorize and quote to them and if you can't do it, then they're going to brace you up against the wall and you're going to do ten push ups. I mean, it's just almost endless, you can just imagine. And we had a lot of forced marches. We had to learn how to march and about face and salute and all these things and we, of course as plebes, the upper classmen were there drilling us and, as you might guess, we couldn't do anything right [laugh]. Even if we did they'd never let you know. It was a hard summer and then we got right in to the fall academics and the first year was hard for me. I didn't get very good grades; I passed but it wasn't very good. I was not satisfied. Then as second year, after about the first three or four months, I came to realize that the debate club, which I wanted to join—that's back in my speech and dramatics stuff—I wanted to join that club and I did. And then I came to realize in my second year that if you make the Dean's List, you can take debate trips to different places. But if you're not on the Dean's List you couldn't go. I know it's motivation, I guess, but within a month or two I was on the Dean's List [laugh].

And then I went on debate trips, I mean to the four corners of the United States over the years, over the next three years and competed in debates with my partners.

DePue: Those first couple of years, was there ever a point in time you said to yourself, you know, I'm not sure that this military stuff is what I want to do with my life?

Block: Well, I especially thought that in my first year. The first few months and into the second year a little bit but mostly that first year because it was a hard year. You get hazed all year and I got enough demerits one time—and when you get too many demerits that means your tie is crooked, your shoes aren't shined or whatever, you get too many, your room's not cleaned, you get too many demerits—I don't remember the number—then you have to walk the area. And that means you walk back and forth, back and forth, for an hour or two hours and I had to walk off maybe ten hours worth of demerits, ten hours. And once I did that, I never did that again either. I didn't like that so that was the end of that too.

DePue: What year did you graduate?

Block: I graduated in 1957.

DePue: And what happened after that?

Block: Well, I went to Fort Benning, Georgia for basic officer training, Ranger school and airborne school.

DePue: Was that the home of the infantry school at the time?

Block: Yeah, it's infantry. I went infantry. I had a choice to make: what do you want to do? Do you want go artillery, you want to go infantry, you want to go signal corps? At that time you could go Air Force too, because there was no Air Force Academy.

DePue: This was 1957, right?

Block: Yep, no Air Force Academy. But I chose infantry. I don't know, I just thought of being out on the ground; I'd spent a lot of time hunting squirrels in the woods so it's got to be perfectly natural for me.

DePue: You know, I was just thinking about that. That's the perfect thing, as a background for an infantry man.

Block: Yeah, that's right. I had my start early on up and down the hills and cross the creek and behind the trees and bushes riding a horse. Only thing is we don't have horses in the Army anymore. Anyway, that's what I did, I did that.

DePue: Well you not only did that, you went to the infantry basic officer's course and you mentioned also you went to airborne school? And then to ranger school?

Block: Yeah, the last thing we did was after ranger school which is a lot of map work and learning how to maneuver to find your target. I liked ranger school a lot. That was very challenging. I love that. Now, I like navigation.

DePue: And today the reputation for ranger school is one of the toughest schools in the military and washes out at a high percentage of people who start.

Block: Well, I don't know but I liked it. I did very well at it and I loved that job. The way it functioned, you have an officer that was grading the group would assign somebody a patrol leader. Say you're a patrol leader and these are your eight guys on your patrol. Here's the mission and here's the target. That's what you do when you're a patrol leader. So I had my share of times as a patrol leader. The other thing is, the patrol leader had the ability to say I want so and so and so and so to navigate for me, to get me to the target. Because I mean it's not easy going through the woods and trees and over the streets and across the waters and fording the streams and so I was one of the navigators. My partner and I navigated almost every one of our missions. I liked ranger school and then I went to airborne school and jumped out of airplanes. I liked that. I liked that enough but it wasn't so much that I liked it; you say well why did you jump out of perfectly good airplanes? I did it because they paid an extra \$100 a month and that was good enough for me. Then I went to the 101st Airborne Division because I was airborne and I did jump out of airplanes and I was with them until I left the Army and returned to the farm.

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DePue: Where was the 101st stationed at that time?

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Block: They were at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

DePue: You got there, was it still in '57 or was it early 1958?

Block: It was '58.

DePue: I know that by that time there had to be a lot of veterans in the 101st that had been at Little Rock, Arkansas when the division was called up there with the ...

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Block: I liked my experience there a lot. In fact, I liked it enough I thought, I really seriously considered staying in the Army and then going on to my next post because I had a lot of friends, classmates, I had several classmates that were there with me. They make you a platoon leader in the rifle platoon in the infantry and you rely on your platoon sergeant; he's really your coach. You never admit it quite. You're supposed to be in charge and he will let you be in charge as long as you don't screw it up. And then he'll probably help you get things straightened out. It's another part of a learning process.

DePue: I've always heard the stories that the smart second lieutenant is the one who finds himself a good platoon sergeant and then pays attention to him.

Block: That's right, that's right. I assure you, I did.

- DePue: 1960 though, as I understand, was the year you resigned from the Army. What was the rationale for stepping away from the military career and going back home?
- Block: Well, I had served the obligation, the amount of time I was obligated to serve and I felt that it was time to make a decision. You could go on and on and then later decide but why waste the time, let's decide. Either decide you're going to stay in the military or do something else. And I don't know, I liked agriculture and I loved the farm and my father, as I said, never pushed me but the door was open if I wanted to come back. And that's what I decided to do.
- DePue: What was it about farming that especially appealed to you? At that time at least.
- Block: Yeah, I wasn't milking those cows by hand. Oh, I don't know, I just think it was the independence that you have as a farmer.
- DePue: Something you did not have in the military.
- Block: No, you don't. Not that I disliked the military, I loved it, but I wanted the independence to manage something for myself. I liked the outdoors and I always liked livestock and crops and growing things. And I think it's a good wholesome life. There's a lot to like about it.
- DePue: What I'd like to have now as we gone in to this important transition for you, if you can kind of lay out in the next few years, this is the middle of 1960 I would guess, over the next few years what you did to develop the farm over time.
- Block: Well, we started off renting a farm from someone that my father knew, better than I, but I knew them. And we rented another farm so we had about 400 acres instead of 200.
- DePue: When you say "we" were you in partnership ...
- Block: My father and I. He invited me back and we became partners in the farming business. So we rented another farm. That's really what we did the first year or two or three. I had my eyes on expanding. I came back to do something. And at the time after about three years of farming those two farms, my former father-in-law, since passed away, helped me buy another farm. And so it was my farm, but he did help me. We bought the farm and then added another one. And that was my home place where I lived throughout my years on the farm before I got into government work. During that timeframe, [we worked on] expanding the hog operation. We started off with a couple hundred pigs or something like that. I built some farrowing crates by hand out of 2x4's according to the University of Illinois manual on how to build farrowing crates, so we expanded the hog production a little and just started trying to grow gradually with farm land and with a little more livestock.

DePue: I hope this doesn't sound the wrong way, but so many of the people of your generation who thought they wanted to make farming their career would have gone to someplace like the University of Illinois, which has an outstanding agricultural school there. How did you learn the trade yourself, if you will?

Block: Well, I know it has a great agricultural school and I have a lot of really close friends who have gone there but having grown up and spent that many years working the farm, I thought I knew quite a bit about it and you can always learn. Life is a constant learning process so I was learning as we went along. That's the way it worked for me.

DePue: What was agriculture like in the United States in the early and mid '60's?

Block: Well, it was really hard. I mean ...

DePue: I know the late '40's and early '50's were heydays for agriculture.

Block: Well, I'm thinking it was hard in the '60s, that it was hard work, which I accepted. You know I was young, I was strong and you've got a lot of work in the hog barns with the hogs and sorting and cleaning barns with a pitchfork sometimes, a lot of hand work, the cropping was never as easy as it is today. I think people today don't realize that but we had more weed problems and we'd end up having to go out in the field some times and cut them by hand, the soy beans field we'd try and clean them up and today with the technology and

Roundup Ready¹ and things like that; there isn't a weed in the field. Even a bad farmer's got clean fields today. In those days, you had to work like the devil to have a halfway clean field. We worked hard. It was hard work and it was gradual and we worked at it over many years. I had, well I guess it was just my nature to try to expand the farm, and we kept growing the farm business.

DePue: Were there profits to be made in farming in the mid-'60s?

Block: We were making money. We made enough money that you could expand. If we didn't make any money we wouldn't have been able to expand. We made enough money to buy a farm once in a while. A hundred acres here, a hundred acres there

¹ **Glyphosate** (*N*-(phosphonomethyl)glycine) is a broad-spectrum systemic herbicide used to kill weeds, especially annual broadleaf weeds and grasses known to compete with commercial crops grown around the globe. It was discovered to be a herbicide by [Monsanto](#) chemist [John E. Franz](#) in 1970. Monsanto brought it to market in the 1970s under the trade name **Roundup**, and Monsanto's last commercially relevant United States patent expired in 2000. Called by experts in herbicides "virtually ideal" due to its broad spectrum and low toxicity compared with other herbicides, glyphosate was quickly adopted by farmers. Use increased even more when Monsanto introduced glyphosate-resistant crops, enabling farmers to kill weeds without killing their crops. In 2007 glyphosate was the most used herbicide in the United States agricultural sector, with 180 to 185 million pounds (82,000 to 84,000 tonnes) applied, and the second most used in home and garden market where users applied 5 to 8 million pounds (2,300 to 3,600 tonnes); additionally industry, commerce and government applied 13 to 15 million pounds (5,900 to 6,800 tonnes). While glyphosate has been approved by regulatory bodies worldwide and is widely used, concerns about its effects on humans and the environment persist <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glyphosate> (accessed February 15, 2013).

and I did that. And we made some money on hogs -- we always called the hogs the mortgage lifter. I firmly believe they were. And so we did well with them and we just kept growing and **growing** over the years.

DePue: What kind of farm specifically did you have? I think you've kind of laid it out but if you could be a little bit more specific.

Block: Well, we farmed corn and especially at first but later on, we started maybe soy beans, maybe a third soy beans, a little oats, some hay because we had cows, we had about 30 cows that would calve every year and we grew the cow herds a little. I think back we did a lot of things we really concentrated on the farm itself. When I look back, a few years before when I was a kid, the size of the farm stayed pretty stable during that timeframe but when I came back to the farm we started growing the farm in a lot of different ways. And then I had a family, I had a son and two daughters so we had three kids on the farm and after a few years they had to be in 4-H, as I was, and show their pigs at the county fairs and all those kind of things that I felt were important in my growing up would be important to them.

DePue: The grain that you grew, was that primarily for the livestock you had?

Block: It was mostly livestock. We didn't sell very much. In the early years, the corn was harvested on the ear. We were harvesting ear corn. You know, today we shell everything, but it was ear corn elevating it up in to an ear corn crib; as I said, it was hard work then but you know we did it and we got ahead.

DePue: You've described how over time this has been growing. I know that, I think it was maybe in the mid or late '70s you were looking at I read 3,000 acres and something like 6,000 hogs you were finishing every year.

Block: Yeah, we got up to that range.

DePue: That had to put you in a pretty elite status as far as farmers were concerned I would think.

Block: Well, we certainly would have been one of the bigger farms in the county. You know, we'd probably be one of the bigger ones in this state; certainly not the biggest. But still a big farm in those times, you get 6,000 head of hogs and we had barns to farrow our litters in, but they weren't modern barns. And we were farrowing in the '60s and in the '70s, baby pigs out in the woods in the trees, under the trees and pastures. We'd have them fenced off and farrow 30, 40, 50 litters in a unit, and then move anybody who hadn't farrowed goes on to the next farrow so they would be of the same age. And we stayed with that program of farrowing pigs in the woods in the timberland in the summers until, actually I was out in Washington and we finally had to quit because the coyotes kept eating too many pigs. We couldn't farrow enough pigs to feed those coyotes; that was it.

- DePue: You need to take that .22 down and maybe something a little bit bigger and have some fun hunting coyotes I would think.
- Block: Yeah, my son and guys on the farm hunted a little bit. But they couldn't get them all. Not even close.
- DePue: With that size a farm by the mid-'70s, I assume your son's of age where he's very, very helpful on the farm. Did you need to have some extra labor or was it something that you and he could manage primarily?
- Block: No, we had some extra labor. My son ended up going to the university in Florida, Stetson University. When he was in high school, he actually helped plant corn some when he was in high school and then he went down to Stetson for four years, then came back to the farm. He came back about the time that I went to Washington in 1980.
- DePue: Okay. From that time period, again trying to focus on this, from 1960 and you came back to farm to the late '70s. In those early years was it your design, I think I'm going to try to grow this farm as quickly and as large as I can. Or did that just evolve over time?
- Block: Well, I could say it kind of evolved but I'm sure it was part of my game plan to expand if I had the resources to do it and the manpower. We had to have some extra hired help, some employees to help us over that timeframe, which we did. And, you know when we had enough manpower to do the work, and enough resources to expand, and the opportunity was there, we did it. We didn't do it in big gulps. We didn't go out and build huge barns or buy 500 acres, it was 100 here, 100 there, maybe 200 sometimes. We just kind of grew things over time.
- DePue: One of the resources that any farmer needs is capital, is cash. Were you taking the money that you'd gotten from your last year's crop and your last year's sales to purchase new land or were you borrowing a lot as well?
- Block: Well, I certainly borrowed on land. I've always borrowed maybe 60 percent of the cost, 70 percent. And the rest would have to be cash that had been made selling hogs, corn, whatever, and then borrow the rest. We always, to the extent we could over the years have not borrowed much money for the operational side of the business. We borrowed to buy land.
- DePue: Okay. Very much part of the story that we're going to get in to when you get in to government is the problem that American agriculture has always faced, and it's the incredible success and the productivity of farmers that often times leads to these huge price fluctuations and it's like anything else in a free market, it's supply and demand, and many cases the supply is much larger than the demand that was out there. What was that like in the late 1960's going up to about 1972. Were those lean years for farming in that respect?

Block: They're lean in one respect because the prices had stayed pretty low and they just couldn't seem to make a move. They never really made a good move until Secretary Earl Butz sold grain to the Soviet Union.

DePue: That was 1972?

Block: That was in the '70s. And then they jumped up and that really did make a difference. And, not only did grain jump up, but hogs. I'd sold hogs for \$12 a hundred weight. Twelve cents a pound. And they jumped up to 22 cents a pound—almost overnight; everything went up to a new plateau and we liked that. We thought it was terrific and in some ways it went up and then it came back down but it really found a new level.

DePue: Did it sustain that through most of the '70s then?

Block: Yes, it sustained that ...

DePue: We don't want to get too far ...

Block: Agriculture is an up and down business as we all know. It's like riding a roller coaster so you have to live through it but on balance, we hit a new plateau and it was for the most part sustained. So instead of corn being worth a dollar a bushel, now it was worth two dollars. Something like that.

DePue: I know that farming didn't take up all your time, well maybe indirectly it did. In 1969 I think you're 33 years old at the time and you're named one of the outstanding young farmers in America. How did that happen? You were obviously catching somebody's attention.

Block: Honestly, a lot of things I know how they happened but that particular one: I was a member of the Jaycees, because this is a Jaycee Outstanding Young Farmer program and I was a member of the Jaycees in Knoxville, Illinois. They wanted to have an entry in that and they entered me. You fill out these papers and whatever and I don't know, I made it. That's what happened. (laughs)

DePue: You mentioned before your love of debate and obviously a part of that is being able to frame arguments in your mind and be able to express them in a very coherent way. I guess I'm kind of leading in to some of the other aspects of your life that you really got involved with at the time. You were in the Illinois Farm Bureau and apparently over time became more and more involved with that.

Block: I was an active Farm Bureau member in Knox County and eventually was a President of the County Farm Bureau. I actually ran for Vice President of the Illinois Farm Bureau twice. I lost both times. (laughs) Anyway, it was fine, I don't regret trying. And then, eventually, even before that—I got to back up a little bit. I was on the County Farm Bureau Young Farmers Committee and then I was on the state Young Farmers Committee and then eventually was on the national Young Farmers Committee and I chaired the American Farm Bureau

Young Farmers Committee, it's a Farm Bureau Committee. As chairman of the national Farm Bureau Young Farmers Committee, I sat in as a board member on the American Farm Bureau Board of Directors. Not that I said a lot because I didn't, because I was the junior guy by a long shot. But that was great experience and I did that and I had been active in Corn Growers a little bit but never anything as much as Farm Bureau.

DePue: Pork Producers Association?

Block: And Pork Producers, yes.

DePue: How about the Illinois Agriculture Association. What specifically is that?

Block: Well, Illinois Agriculture Association is the Illinois Farm Bureau, that's who they are.

DePue: Okay, same thing?

Block: That's who they are. Illinois Agriculture Association, Illinois Farm Bureau, that's it.

DePue: Okay. And I would assume that's giving you a lot of exposure. Knox County certainly. Illinois as well. But also at the national level then.

Block: Well, it did and I think that without jumping ahead too much, I'll just relate this: my activities and leadership in Farm Bureau and other things in this state gave me some exposure that I think gave some attention to the fact that I might be able to serve the state of Illinois as the state Director of Agriculture.

DePue: Okay.

Block: Otherwise, I wouldn't have been known; they wouldn't have seen me.

DePue: Well, we are at that point in our discussion here. 1977, Jim Thompson, Big Jim Thompson, Republican candidate for governor, wins the election in '76 and takes over the office in '77. How did he come to select you as his Director of the Department of Agriculture for Illinois?

Block: Well, in that case, I can't give you the names, but more than one member of the legislature, Republicans in the party, had advised the governor that he might want to take a look at me. Keep in mind he came from the city. He didn't know farms at all and so when my name surfaced, he invited me to come down to Springfield and interview, which I did. Honestly, I thought it was just kind of a wild trip, because I didn't anticipate anything. But as it turned out, we had a great interview and he asked me to serve as the state Director of Agriculture. I had to think about that a lot because that meant my son was off to college, he wasn't at home; my Dad was there, he was my partner but I was going to go to Springfield and I wouldn't be there to help. Now we had two or three good men working for

us. I really have to compliment my father for taking it on his shoulders to run that farm while I was in Springfield. Now I have to say I would come back on the weekends usually. You know it's not that far. So on the weekends I'd be on the farm some but he was running it day-to-day.

DePue: I'd like to have you tell us a little bit about your perceptions of Jim Thompson the politician, Jim Thompson the man, because he has this larger than life persona to a certain extent in Illinois.

Block: Well, I think he should have. I mean he's been the governor longer than anybody else.

DePue: Fourteen years.

Block: Fourteen years. And you don't get elected and elected if you're really bad. I think he's a great guy. What he always did—and I have to say one of the similarities between him and Ronald Reagan—he never tried to micromanage what you're doing. He picked what he thought were good people to run their part of state government and he let them do it. He always did that to me. And I have great respect for him. He was just a terrific person and is a terrific person. Larger than life—I think he's earned it.

DePue: Well, Mr. Secretary, I'm going to ask you to put your modesty aside for just a bit. What was it about you that Jim Thompson found appealing and the reason he selected you?

Block: Maybe you should interview Jim Thompson.

DePue: Well, he's on the list for a different project.

Block: Well I think he knew, he understood that I really knew agriculture and I'm sure that he talked to some of these members of the General Assembly and others that knew me better than he did. The Illinois Farm Bureau. I'm sure that's how he got it because you don't make selections like that completely in the dark. At the same time, there's something to be said for just being able to have a good feel for things. I think we fit together very well.

DePue: One of the comments that I read someplace that Jim Thompson said was "Well, it's time that we have an airborne ranger in Illinois politics."

Block: Well, that's a good point. I like that. And now that you mention it, I remember that he said that. (laughs) It didn't ring a bell at first.

DePue: It is a kind of thing that Thompson was known to say. He was a colorful guy.

Block: He was very good.

- DePue: Hm, but still this is going to be a big change. What surprised you about going down to Springfield and taking over as Director?
- Block: Well, in one respect, it was fairly comfortable because the State Fair was under our jurisdiction and I'd shown hogs at the State Fair many times when I was in high school and when I was in FFA, Future Farmers [of America]. So I had experienced that. Of course that's not running the Department of Agriculture but I was a little bit at home there. That's where our offices were. Beyond that, I think the most surprising thing was that I'd never had [the] experience of working with the legislature. In Illinois, it's the legislature. Not that I didn't know anybody. I knew some, but I didn't know how you had to work with them to get certain things passed. I was not well schooled in the politics of government at that point in time. I certainly learned. It was good. It was a good learning experience. But I had to learn it.
- DePue: Thompson could have selected somebody who was more of an insider, more of ...somebody who understood better the machinery of government, but he selected you.
- Block: Yea, he did.
- DePue: And I know that it didn't take you long before you were working with the legislature to pass important legislation.
- Block: Oh yeah, and then I got along well with them. In fact, both sides of the aisle. So it worked fine but it was just I had to get it figured out.
- DePue: How would you describe your politics at that time?
- Block: Well, I think I've always been basically conservative. I certainly was a Republican in that regard and my mother was a Republican.
- DePue: Active in county politics?
- Block: No, but my grandfather had been active in the county board. My mother's father. So in that respect, maybe I had a little Republican blood in me. But at the same time I guess I just kind of fit in with Republicans more than Democrats and I had voted more Republican. But not totally, not every time, every thing.
- DePue: Tell me a little bit about the working within a bureaucracy, in a state bureaucracy, you're the new guy. You're still pretty young at that point in time and lot of the people I'm sure you had working under you had been in that organization for years if not decades. They're quite a bit older and knew an awful lot more about the institution. How did they accept you?
- Block: Well, one thing is that talking about working with the legislature, we had people on the staff that worked with them. And they knew it anyway. Now, I was at least wise enough to listen to them. And I worked great with them. We had a

great team. We actually loved working together and we played basketball at the noon hour in one of the buildings there at the fairgrounds. It had a hoop at each end and we'd play full court and we just did a lot of things together so I loved working with my team at the Illinois Department of Agriculture. It was a real pleasure, it made it maybe kind of easier to have the transition to go ahead and work with the legislature and accomplish the responsibilities that you have as a Director of Agriculture.

DePue: I believe one of the first bills that you endeavored to work through the process was the Farmland Taxation Bill and that's probably the wrong title for it, but does that ring a bell to you?

Block: It does, a little bit. And I'll tell who I relied on so much there was Dick Davidson. He was the Director of Government Affairs for me. He did a terrific job and has always done a good job in Illinois. So ...

DePue: What was the purpose of that legislation?

Block: I don't ... I don't remember what it was.

DePue: Okay.

Block: Tell me. You don't know either.

DePue: [laugh] No, I apologize for putting you on the spot. What little I read about it

Block: That's alright. I've been put on the spot a lot of times.

DePue: I imagine you have and probably in front of Congress a few times.

Block: I mean it was something to do with savings and taxes, but I don't remember.

DePue: Yeah, it was that farm taxes were higher than perhaps the corresponding taxes that somebody living in the city or not engaged in farming was, so that this would be balanced out over time, so you're changing the tax assessment.

Block: I thought it was related to property taxes.

DePue: Yes, property taxes.

Block: Property taxes, yeah. Property taxes has always been a little bit of a burr under the saddle for farm people because you have to own a lot of property and you have to have a lot of machinery and equipment and you get taxed on everything. It's always been a little problem.

DePue: And part of a theme that's always run through Illinois politics for the last three or four decades is dialogue about increasing income taxes at the same time you're reducing property taxes. And suburbanites are big in that issue as well because

they're paying a lot of the educational bill but also farmers who obviously are using their land for a different purpose. So ... sorry for that but next one, Soil and Water Conservation Act was another one.

Block: No, that was very important. The Department of Agriculture in Illinois has always had a major role to play in soil and water conservation. We really focused hard on that, tried to get legislation that would help us get the job done.

DePue: Did you work also with grain elevators and the issues of bankruptcy with grain elevators?

Block: Yes, because we have legislation that protects the farmers that have grain in these elevators so we have to inspect them and be on top of it so that they can pay their bills and we don't get in to a lot of trouble. We have that division too, working with grain elevators.

DePue: Something I hadn't ever thought about before but, like any other business, grain elevators can go bankrupt. What's the problem that farmers suddenly encounter if a grain elevator goes bankrupt?

Block: Well, you don't get paid for the corn that you've got stored at the grain elevator. It's a very bad problem. In fact, it did happen to us on our farm one time, years ago, a long time ago. But, I'd say it was probably in the early '60s, in the sixties when I first came back. I haven't been back too long. We had a grain elevator in Knox County go broke. Never got the corn, never got any money. So ...that prompted the Department of Agriculture later on to get legislation to protect farmers.

DePue: That suggests that farmers don't necessarily sell their grain outright to a grain elevator. They're renting the storage space?

Block: Yeah, effectively you put it in there and you pay them rent; you pay them so many cents a bushel to store your grain there. And then you wait till later on and you say, okay, I've stored it here for five months and the price has gone up x amount, sell it.

DePue: Now, we're getting in to the gambling side of farming, aren't we?

Block: It's all gambling. (laughs) It's a constant gamble.

DePue: And again, I haven't done this for a living like you have. It fascinates me. Explain the process of deciding how you want to market your grain once you've got it.

Block: Just like everything else, there's all kinds of marketing plans and how you do it, and how you shouldn't do it. I'll tell you how we've always done it. On selling grain, we try not to sell below what we consider to be our cost of production. Because if you sell it below your cost of production, you're going to lose money.

So once it gets up to where you're making a little money, then you better sell some. If it goes up, sell a little more. Up, sell a little more. Up, sell a little more. Sell a little more. If it goes down, maybe sell a little bit. And pretty soon it drops down again and then the year's over and you sell the rest of it below the cost of production probably. You can't keep it around. I mean, it's a very hard racket and you just hope that you can sell more of it above the cost of production.

DePue: Is there a temptation among farmers that you're watching the price creep up and you say, I'm going to wait until it gets a little bit higher because it's going to keep going up and then before you know it, the thing collapses?

Block: It happens every ... not some times, it happens every time. But, hopefully, you didn't save too much for the collapse.

DePue: Okay, 1977 to 1981. Those are the years you're working for Governor Thompson as the Director of the Department of Agriculture. Anything else that you want to talk about during those years – legislation or activities you involved with?

Block: Well, activities, I was involved with the Association of State Departments of Agriculture. So I did get involved in that. Every state has a Director of Agriculture or an administrator of agriculture, whatever they call them. We have a state association of state departments of agriculture. So I was involved in that and I was a vice-chairman of that towards the end of my time. I had been elected as vice-chair and that's pretty interesting because we would work together and develop a policy that we would recommend to the federal government for agriculture. And they still do it today. The state departments of agriculture association does have a policy recommendation. So, I did that. That's one thing that I did that I thought it was really pretty interesting and in terms of travel, I traveled all over the state of Illinois and spoke at, I don't know, I can't name you how many events that I spoke at. But, I also led a mission to China at the behest of Governor Thompson to strengthen our trading relationship.

DePue: I think at that time was still in its infancy. Was it not?

Block: China was still a Communist country. We did not have an ambassador there. But we were allowed to travel there as an agricultural delegation and I went over there with about 12 people. The Dean of Agriculture was with us from the University of Illinois, Orville Bentley. We had a representative from John Deere and that's Hans Becherer. At the time he was responsible for John Deere sales in the Far East. Eventually he became CEO of John Deere—ten years later or whatever. We had others on the trip and I can't remember them all but we went to China and we spent three weeks over there, maybe two and a half weeks.

One interesting thing – we took a gift to the Chinese and you'd say, what do you take to the Chinese? Well, it wasn't my brilliant idea but we took a pig, a purebred Yorkshire boar pig. One of the reasons behind it was we knew the Chinese mother sows had raised big litters—14 pigs—but they didn't look good.

They weren't meaty. They were really ugly. But cross them with a good looking Yorkshire boar and maybe you'd get the best of the two. So, that was the plan and we took our boar pig and he flew in the plane with us. Not in first class. (laughs) He was in cargo in the plane. But that's still amazing. We flew there. We landed in Beijing and you know how busy O'Hare is and all these airports. We landed in Beijing and there was nothing going on. I mean it was '78 or '76, somewhere in there. I forgot the year. We had landed and we all came off the plane and stood there and the Chinese minister of agriculture met us. And, we started unloading our gift, our purebred Yorkshire boar. He stood about four feet high and he was a good looking animal. We named that boar Big Jim, after our Governor, (laughs) and he wasn't even with us.

DePue: Does he know that he has a pig named after him?

Block: Yeah, he knows all about it. I told him all about it. Anyway, that was our gift to the Chinese and without getting into it, they used it and he bred a lot of sows, they had a lot of pigs. But he eventually got sick. Some disease they have had in China that we didn't have and he died.

DePue: What was your impression of the state of agriculture in China? I mean, here you grew up on a farm that had no electricity, had no indoor plumbing at the time but you'd seen this revolution occur in the United States in farming. Where were they at?

Block: Well, they were certainly a long ways behind us at the time. Even in the cities they were. You go in the country, even farther behind. I mean, they were planting everything out there by hand, everything by hand. They were digging ditches along the roads with shovels. They didn't have power equipment to dig a ditch. It was men with shovels. So, I mean, I'll tell you they are really way back. It was hand labor. And the other thing I noticed there were so many people. It's no wonder they didn't need machinery, they had enough people to dig it by hand. Of course things have changed a lot now, I know. But, it was an eye opener. The other thing that caught my attention is that they were always talking about Mao Tse-tung, the big leader of China. The women had straight hair, no curls, no make up. A lot of people in these Mao suits.

DePue: Was Mao still alive at that time?

Block: He was dead.

DePue: Yeah, he died in '76.

Block: They had a tomb for him.

DePue: But they were still revering him then?

Block: Yeah. They revered him. Absolutely.

- DePue: Were you tempted to say, well you need to do it this way when you were watching some of things they were doing?
- Block: No, I didn't tell them very much. I'm just learning, I wasn't really over there to tell them. We were there to develop a relationship. Hoping we would get more trade with them. And that's really what it was all about and with the expectation that they eventually would send a delegation back to the United States.
- DePue: I assume they were taking you on tours of what they had for agriculture and I assume that ...
- Block: Yes, we were in the rice fields and saw them planting rice and the livestock and the cattle and sows with those 15 baby pigs; ugly as the sows were, it was a pretty site though, that many pigs on one mother.
- DePue: Were these collective farms that you were visiting?
- Block: Yes, they were.
- DePue: Any impressions of the difference that collective farms, how that applied to their system?
- Block: Well, the collective farms ... according to our standards, they were very inefficient, of course, because they had way too much labor. We couldn't afford that much labor. But, since they had so much labor, I thought they did a pretty good job because they could be spending a lot of personal attention on everything. So, it's a little two-sided thing, but it was very interesting to see how they were doing it.
- DePue: Sounds like you're visiting a rice growing area, did you see any ... and you're coming from a place where it's all corn and soybeans at the time.
- Block: Yes, and we saw a lot more rice. We saw some other crops. Every day they'd have a dinner almost every night and host us and we ate all kinds of food — I didn't know what I was eating half the time. We were up right on the border of North Korea at one time and I heard they eat dogs up there. DePue: So you had to be in Manchuria at that time which is a different kind of an area for agriculture, I would think, than the main rice-growing areas.
- Block: Yes, but the dinner itself giving us all this food and, I asked them, I said, I don't know what this meat is. Do you eat dogs here? And they said, We don't eat dogs. The Koreans eat dogs. Well, that's only twenty-five miles away and I don't know if they didn't eat dogs but the food was good. And I never got sick. I rarely get sick anyway but I didn't get sick. I felt fine and saw a lot of agriculture and I know Hans Becherer from John Deere's perspective was looking at opportunities to sell John Deere equipment.

DePue: What were the commodities the United States or Illinois wanted to sell? Was it primarily grain or was it meat as well?

Block: It was mostly grain but, you know, we would sell anything. We could sell pork but it was mostly grain that we had in mind. In a lot of ways, we were almost too early because we didn't have real relations with them yet. But in other ways, it's good to get in on the ground floor and we were getting in on the ground floor. You know, early on. Incidentally, I was mentioning who was with us. Ed Madigan, and he eventually became the Secretary of Agriculture after me, but he was on our trip with us; he was a Congressman from Illinois at the time.

DePue: So he became the United States Secretary of Agriculture.

Block: Yes, he did. These United States.

DePue: Somewhere in this process, I assume while you are serving as the Director of the Department of Agriculture, you received the Governor's Outstanding Achievement Award. Do you recall that?

Block: I do and before I get in to that I want to mention one other Congressman that was with us on that trip to China.

DePue: Okay.

Block: That was Paul Findley. Paul Findley was the leading individual pushing for recognition of China in the House of Representatives or in the House in Illinois in the legislature. He was pushing that and that's one reason he had a real interest in that trip, so I want to really give him that proper recognition.

DePue: Okay. The Governor's Outstanding Achievement Award.

Block: Well, I've got that at home and I just appreciate it. It was a great tribute that I would end up getting that. I mean, I didn't plan on it. A lot of things happened to me in my lifetime I didn't plan on. And I've been recognized on occasion when I didn't expect it.

DePue: I assume this was Governor Thompson who gave this to you?

Block: Absolutely.

DePue: And you recall the reasons he gave for giving it to you? The achievements?

Block: I don't know that they were anything in particular. I thought it was overall. Was it something in particular?

DePue: No, I don't know.

Block: No. It was a general ...

DePue: Okay. I know, at least from the records you've traveled to other foreign countries as well, West Germany and, in particular, the Soviet Union or the Soviet bloc.

Block: Well, I led a People-to-People mission to the Soviet Union on one occasion. I think it was my last year.

DePue: September of 1980, I believe.

Block: Yeah, my last year as state Director of Agriculture and I put together a delegation of ag people and we went to the Soviet Union. We were over there and we were in Moscow and outside of Moscow and up to St. Petersburg and saw quite a bit of the Soviet Union, what you could see in about two weeks. It was a fascinating experience. Once again, it's important because they were a good trading partner with the United States—buying a fair amount of our agricultural products—and we wanted to strengthen that trade relationship.

DePue: Our timeline here now is important. You mentioned that the sales of grain to the Soviet Union really got started in a big way in 1972, and over the years through the 1970s those grain sales had only increased over time to the point where it's massive amounts of grain being sold. I would assume corn, soybeans, sorghum and other products? Then 1979, and the Soviets invade Afghanistan, and it's sometime in 1980 I know that President Carter decides to impose an embargo on that. Where was this trip to the Soviet Union in that timeline?

Block: Well, it was before that.

DePue: Okay.

Block: To the Soviet Union ... oh wait a minute now. What year did you say that it was, '79? The embargo?

DePue: The grain embargo is 1980.

Block: Yes, my trip to the Soviet Union was before that. When I was in the Soviet Union with my People-to-People delegation, they had a complaint to us and we didn't have any complaints to them. Their complaint to us was that we had boycotted the Olympics. We boycotted the Olympics because the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan [in 1979].² Then the United States boycotted the Olympics which were in the Soviet Union.

DePue: That was their showcase year.

Block: Why, they were going to show it off and then the United States, the most powerful country in the world, didn't go. We were objecting to their invasion of

² Sixty-one nations refused to compete in these games as a protest against Russia's invasion of Afghanistan. The summer games of 1980 were held in Moscow, Soviet Union. "Olympic Games Timeline", *History on the Net*, http://www.historyonthenet.com/Olympics/olympics_timeline.htm (accessed March 1, 2013).

Afghanistan at the time, so I got hit with that on several occasions when I was in the Soviet Union.

DePue: Was this primarily a trade mission? You were wanting to encourage them to purchase even more products from the United States?

Block: No, it was not. What it was is People-to-People. People-to-People is an organization that develops these exchanges and trips to other countries and, of course, I had an agricultural delegation so we went to see agriculture and we went to schools too, they took us to schools. It was educational and strengthened maybe some ties with Russia or the Soviet Union but [was] not a grain selling expedition as such.³

DePue: At this time, of course you know every single aspect and the insides and outs of American agriculture especially grain and livestock, you've been up close and experienced China, how does the Soviet Union compare to those?

Block: They were ahead of China. Soviet Union already had big farms, a lot of big farms. In some cases a lot of big machinery, and they had consolidated their farming operations. Individual private farms were gone. The government owned everything in the Soviet Union. And, I guess maybe they did in China when I was there but they still had to have a lot of little people operating. They just didn't have the machinery.

DePue: Well, during the times of these massive grain sales from the United States to the Soviet Union, there obviously was a lot of dialogue about what's wrong with the Soviet agricultural system. Why can't it be as efficient as the United States? Were you reflecting or seeing any of that?

Block: We did but the reality is ... First of all, we were agriculturalists but I don't think we could see that necessarily. I think we just assumed that the Communist system is inefficient. It's full of government bureaucracy and they don't have the right incentives so it's not going to work very well, and it wasn't working very well. And I think that's kind of our outlook on it and whether you could just see it but I think we just knew that the problem behind everything.

DePue: But in general, it sounds like it was a positive experience for you and your party?

Block: It was and it's a great learning experience. You know, you can't go to these other countries and see things and not come back without saying, I learned something, I got a better feel for it. Even if you can't put your finger on what you learned, you got a feel for the situation and you understand it a lot better.

³ In 1956, President Eisenhower proposed a peaceful solution for a war-ravaged world. That solution? Give everyday citizens of different countries the opportunity to meet and get to know each other, and the result will be understanding, friendship, and lasting peace. Out of this vision came the "People to People" movement and the inspiration for People to People Ambassador Programs. "Eisenhower's Legacy," *People to People Ambassador Programs*, <http://peopletopeople.com/about-us/eisenhowers-legacy>. (Accessed March 1, 2013)

DePue: From our timeline your discussion sounds like it couldn't have been too long after you came back from the Soviet Union that Carter imposed the grain embargo as well.

Block: It wasn't too long after that he imposed the grain embargo.

DePue: How did that change the landscape for agriculture?

Block: Well, it shoved down a whole lot of our exports because the Soviet Union was one of our biggest exporting partners. And, they always paid cash. Cash on the barrelhead. It's a great place to sell the product and [then] to have the President of the United States do that... I remember I was State Director of Agriculture when he imposed that grain embargo at the time. I was giving a speech in Springfield to some agricultural group, maybe a 100, 200 people, 300. I was up at the head table, I was eating, and somebody came and got me and said you've got a call from the Secretary of Agriculture's office in Washington.

DePue: Who was that at the time?

Block: At the time it was Bob Bergland.

DePue: Okay.

Block: So I went back and I took the call and it was not Bergland that called, it was his chief of staff, an individual that I had met before. I can't think of his name but he told me then flat out, Just for my information, the President has imposed a grain embargo on shipments of grain to the Soviet Union. And I just said, I can't hardly believe my ears that he would do this. Well, he's done this because he has to punish them for invading Afghanistan. So then I went on up and gave my speech and when I gave my speech I had to tell my audience what my phone call was all about and I said I don't support that the embargo. I said American farmers are going to suffer from this and it's not going to stop the Soviet Union from importing grain. They'll get it from somebody else. And, actually the next day, Governor Thompson also came out with a press release condemning the decision by Jimmy Carter. So that's kind of what we went through there.

DePue: Do you remember the reaction of the audience you were speaking to that day?

Block: After we broke up, I talked to a number of them and they just were very surprised. I think it caught agriculture by surprise. It caught me by surprise. I didn't expect it.

DePue: Walk us through then the impact. I mean, I think it's obvious but if you can walk us through the impact of that grain embargo on how that affects American farmers.

Block: Well, the prices just collapsed, especially on wheat but other grains and corn [too]. And, it was real because it cut those sales but it was psychological too.

Those kind of things really put a damper on prices so, the whole farming industry was really unhappy and angry. So, when Ronald Reagan started campaigning... and I'm getting ahead of myself ...

DePue: No, I think we're right on line here.

Block: That's one thing he campaigned against. He said, We ought to lift that grain embargo. It's hurting the American farmers; it's not getting anything done. That was part of his campaign through the heartland of the country.

DePue: Something that resonated in the heartland.

Block: Absolutely.

DePue: Nineteen seventy-nine: of course, the invasion, 1980 the boycott of the Olympics and then the grain embargo. The **grain embargo** has been tough in some other respects because you did have the oil embargo, he [President Carter] had the problems in the Middle East as well. And the economy is really in the tanks at that time also. You have high unemployment. You have high inflation rates. And probably the ...

Block: Interest rates.

DePue: And probably the worst part is the interest rates.

Block: Interest rates were off the chart. That hurt a lot of people. A lot of country banks got into trouble.

DePue: What was going on that the interest rates were that high, do you know?

Block: Well, part of it is, the Federal Reserve was pushing them up because we were experiencing inflation and he was trying to slow things down and get rid of that, and it just seemed like nothing was working right. I remember, I think that at the peak of that in '81 the unemployment rate in Knox County, my own county, was 15 percent. And that was really huge. So it was tough times.

DePue: But for farmers, they're kind of cushioned from unemployment; the toughest part of that equation would be interest rates for them?

Block: Yeah. Interest rates I think was the toughest part because farmers always have to borrow for production and some people have borrowed for farmland and whatever else and high interest rates, well, they can take a toll. And, some people went broke and some people had all kinds of problems.

DePue: So November of 1980 comes along, Reagan comes in on a landslide because of all of these factors we've already talked about plus the Iranian hostage crisis, and he finds himself the President of the United States. In January of 1981, I think Carter declares that we're going to have one more year at least of this grain

embargo and then a few weeks after that, Reagan comes into office and I would suspect that, maybe already by that time you'd gotten the call. Talk to us about your getting that appointment and how you got elevated to the point where Reagan was paying attention to ...

Block: Well, if I think of all the things in my lifetime that have surprised me, being appointed Secretary of Agriculture was the biggest surprise. I mean, I shook Ronald Reagan's hand one time as he was campaigning through Illinois. I didn't know him. I didn't know very many people in Congress, just two or three or four, but I had done a few things. I'd been to Russia, been to China and done a few things. But, my Governor, Jim Thompson, recommended me to be the Secretary of Agriculture to President Reagan. Senator Bob Dole of Kansas recommended to Ronald Reagan that I be considered for Secretary of Agriculture. Senator Bob Dole was a recognized leader of agriculture on the Senate ag committee, a very highly regarded person. As we all know, [he] later ran for President. But anyway, with those two individuals pushing, it kind of got the attention of Ronald Reagan.

I didn't know about it initially but I picked up the newspaper in my office in Springfield and read—this was in late November—that the writer had interviewed Senator Bob Dole and said, Well, we've got several Cabinet members that have been chosen by President-Elect Reagan but he hasn't chosen a Secretary of Agriculture. Do you have any recommendations? And Dole at the time knew he was going to be asked this. So the night before he had asked one of his staff people, Give me a list of names. He had names like Clayton Yeutter who had worked at the Department before and three or four others and this person that helped him get the names said, Well, we need a state director of agriculture; let's go with Block. He put my name in there and so I was just on the list of eight or nine guys, individuals. I read that at my office and I was astounded to see my name on that list.

So after that, I called up Senator Dole's office and said, You know you put my name on the list. I'd like to come out to meet you. Because I had never met him. And I went out, and I did, Senator Percy, my Senator from Illinois at the time, met me and brought me and introduced me to Senator Dole and then, he introduced me to Jesse Helms, on the Senate ag committee, from North Carolina, and some others. Then I went back to Illinois.

Still this is December, 1980, the clock is ticking, approaching Christmas, and hadn't heard anything, one way or the other really. I had read in the paper that some of those names for different reasons had dropped off the list. But my name is still on the list. So, I got a call from Ed Meese's office; he was assistant to the President and his office called and said, The President wants to meet with you. Can you come to California x, y, z?

It was about the twenty-second or -third of December and I flew to California. The President lived in Pacific Palisades and I went to the door, knocked on the

door. He was at his home. Nancy opened the door and welcomed me and I went in said hello to President-Elect Ronald Reagan and there was Ed Meese, Marty Anderson – Marty Anderson was an economist and advisor to the President – Mike Deaver was close counsel to the President always. And there may be been somebody else there but that was about it. We talked for two hours, had a great discussion about policy, philosophy and everything. I had an advantage: I was the only one in the room that knew anything about agriculture.

So, when it was over I went to the hotel. The phone rings. “This is Ronald Reagan. I want you to be my Secretary of Agriculture. Will you do it?” I said, “Mr. President, I would be proud to serve.” I had no expectations that would happen when I went to California and, you know, there we go.

DePue: When you had that conversation with Reagan and the other people that you mentioned, did you have a feel that Reagan understood the things and subject that you guys were talking about?

Block: Oh, I think we were definitely on the same wave length. I always was and throughout my time serving Ronald Reagan, and at that time, I think we felt comfortable together. That doesn't suggest that I was convinced he'd pick me like that but I know we were very comfortable.

DePue: Anything in particular where you seem to have a common understanding of issues?

Block: I think it was just that neither of us supported raising taxes and we didn't support excessive government regulations. These are themes of Ronald Reagan anyway and we fit together on the basic issues. Beyond that, I don't know, I think he knew, they'd done some research. You know they didn't just come out of the blue. They knew that I knew agriculture. That I was a farmer. Senator Bob Dole said, I want a hands-on farmer for Secretary and I definitely was a hands-on farmer. I fit that criteria pretty well so I think that kind of stuff helped the President make a decision. President Ronald Reagan, like Jim Thompson, would rely on their instinct on a lot of things. They had good instinct. They could figure things out. You get a lot of information but still, you have to rely eventually on your instinct to make that final judgment and that's how he did it.

DePue: This might be somewhat of an unfair question or an analogy but most people would say that Thompson was of the progressive Republican school and obviously Reagan was a conservative Republican. How would you fit into that spectrum?

Block: How would I fit? Well, I'm pretty conservative although I think in some ways I'm progressive. No, I think with Ronald Reagan on the issues that I was responsible for of agriculture, I was a perfect fit. You know, I was not a supporter on excessive government subsidies. I was never a supporter of trying to get everybody in the country on food stamps. Not that I was against food stamps, but

those on the left would like everybody on food stamps, I swear. And I think you've got to have a little more moderation there. But anyway, I was always on the same wave length with President Reagan on that.

It was not my role to play on the relationship with the Soviet Union. But in the end, I think the President did what I would have wanted to do myself. If there was somebody on the other side like Gorbachev that would reconcile some of the differences. And that worked too.

DePue: You already mentioned that one of the things that Bob Dole found appealing about you was that, for lack of a more sophisticated way of saying it, you weren't a political beast. You hadn't come up through the political system. You were still a farmer. Was that an appeal for Reagan as well and his people?

Block: I don't think it was any problem for him. It probably was an appeal because ... you know I'm sure that when you look at the Cabinet and the people chosen for a lot of the other jobs, they've got a certain number of political obligations they have to meet but there's some places where they can look for someone that doesn't necessarily fulfill a political role. Although I was a Republican, I knew Congressman Bob Michel and had even done a little pig roast for him one time at the farm.

DePue: Was he your Congressman at the time?

Block: Yeah. He was my Congressman. And I knew Senator Percy a little bit but I didn't know him as well.

DePue: What was the agenda that was discussed? What he wanted to accomplish as far as agriculture was concerned.

Block: Well, it was really quite general. As I say, there were not people in the room that could speak specifically to agriculture. But having spent a lot of time in Illinois and Eureka College, the President knew agriculture a little bit. He's not that far from the land and had his ranch in California. So, he was concerned about excessive government involvement and government trying to manage everything and we talked about some things like that. Soil conservation is very important to him. And the fact that we had a very good soil conservation effort in Illinois, **even at** the State Department of Agriculture, was something. He cared about that. Livestock – he liked showing hogs and cattle and he liked livestock and growing crops. Another line that he had, I know he said he chose a person named Mack Baldrige as his Secretary of Commerce. Mack Baldrige was a rodeo roper. Unfortunately, he got killed even while he was Secretary on a horse that went over on top of him and the saddle horn killed him. But that was Mack Baldrige, a rodeo roper. But he said, Oh, I've already selected a rodeo roper for my Cabinet. I [might] just as well have a marathon runner. And I ran marathons. Rodeo roper and a marathon [runner], that'll work out. [laugh] That's one thing he said. So, anyway, we went ahead. That was it.

- DePue: Okay. Now having heard that story, I just lost my next question I was going to ask you. I know what it was. This is my impression, that in general there are certain Secretaries at that level in the Cabinet positions that get a lot of attention and there are some that don't. I would generally say that Secretary of Agriculture isn't the kind of position that generates a lot of publicity. Did you have a sense at the time that you stepped into that position that that rule was going to be broken for your tenure?
- Block: I did not and I didn't have any particular expectations one way or the other. I don't even know if I cared about it one way or the other at the time. I was really focusing on this new job and new responsibility, which I didn't know much about and I knew I was going to have to get in with both feet and get it figured out and rely on a lot of help from other people, which I did.
- DePue: What was the agenda for goals that you put for yourself when you came to that job?
- Block: My number one goal was to get the President to lift the grain embargo. This is the biggest thing in the country, in the farm country. And, in fact, we had one Cabinet meeting at the Blair House before the President had been sworn in, and we had an agenda there. The President had Cap Weinberger speak about some defense issues and somebody something else. And then he said—after we'd spent an hour and a half on whatever—"Okay, that's the agenda. Anybody else have anything else they want to bring up?" I put my hand up and I said, "Mr. President, you've talked about lifting the grain embargo. Farmers are hurting in the country. I hope we can do it soon." And then I had a couple other members of the Cabinet jump all over my back. Not time, Weinberger said, "It's not time. We can't give the Soviets anything. Not going to lift the grain embargo." One or two other people jumped in there too. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the United Nations Ambassador, didn't want to lift the grain embargo. "We've got to punish the Soviet Union." I didn't have anybody to speak up for me at the time. So I just had to put it on hold until a little later on.
- DePue: How did you manage to convince him to do what he had promised to do in the election campaign?
- Block: Well, I started more working behind the scenes and I got a couple of other people. Secretary of Commerce Baldrige called me up and he says, I'll help you do this. And then, Bill Brock, he was the U.S. Trade Ambassador. Bill said, Let me know; I'll help you do this. I thought I had a good rapport with Ed Meese and I thought I would talk to him, which I did. In fact, Baldrige and I and Bill Brock, the three of us went over and met with Ed Meese. Ed Meese was sympathetic because he felt that the President needed to keep his promise to farmers in rural America. Effectively, that's what carried the day in the end. We would have

gotten it off a little sooner but the President was shot⁴ and was in the hospital for—I don't know, two weeks or whatever—recovering. So, it was about in April finally he called me in...

DePue: April of eighty-one?

Block: Yeah, he called us in. We had a Cabinet meeting and he announced it at the Cabinet meeting and that was it.

DePue: Okay.

Block: That's the first priority. After that we had a Farm Bill to write that first year in 1981 and I confess to this day, as much as we tried, I don't think that I, or the Reagan administration had a lot of input in that Farm Bill, as much as we wanted. We tried, but we didn't seem to have the influence that we wanted. It wasn't a bad Bill. It was more like a continuation of the last Bill.

DePue: Was it primarily coming from Congress?

Block: Congress did it and they did it almost, just the same as before. It wasn't until 1985 that we really cranked out a bill. We got one then that we thought moved us in the right direction towards less government control, more freedom to plant what you want and on and on.

DePue: We talked a little bit about you becoming the Director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Now you're at a different scale altogether. What was it like walking into that office and taking over something as huge as the USDA?

Block: Well, in a lot of ways if I had really thought about it, I would have maybe been overwhelmed. But in all honesty, I was just concentrating on the issues and people. Selecting my team. Because you've got a 100 Schedule C, political appointees, working out of the Department of Agriculture. Now, I didn't select 100 but I had to select about 12 or 15 that were really high level, right under me and right around under here. So that was the thing that was on my mind, finding the right people to get the job done. Because I knew I wasn't going to get to do it. There's too much going on. So, I really concentrated on that and they had a transition team that had been chosen of individuals that did know Washington that had been through it before. Dick Ling was one of them; he had worked at the Department of Agriculture before, and others. But I didn't know any of them. I didn't know them. But they met with me and they said we've got this list of people that would be good choices for the Under Secretary for farm programs or the Assistant Secretary for food safety or whatever. All these different jobs.

I relied on them a lot and then I had to interview people for all these jobs and I'd look over the list of people and I'd say, I'll interview these three or these four

⁴ A would-be assassin shot President Reagan on a sidewalk. He was seriously wounded but recovered well. Bill Brady, who was with him, received a bullet which permanently impaired him, leading to the Brady Bill.

or these two. I'm not going to interview the rest. These are the ones I'd like to look at. And, I'd ask them, they'd say, well okay those are good too. Let's interview those. So, I'd interview them and I'd pick them. The other thing I did do, I tried to do fast, because I was advised to do it fast.

I also reached out in the country and called individuals that I knew that had been, two or three that had been Jaycees Outstanding Young Farmers. Going back to that era. We talked about it earlier. I brought some of them in to work for me at the Department of Agriculture. I brought them clear in from Missouri and North Dakota and Ohio. I called them up and I remember Peter Myers in Missouri and he said, Oh, I can't do this. I got my farm to run, blah, blah, blah. And, I said, I want to talk to Mary – that's his wife. So I talked to her and I finally convinced him to come to town, do something. I need your help. So I brought in people out in the country that I knew from an earlier time in agriculture but I knew them to be good farmers, and good managers and know how to do things. They weren't political bureaucrats but they knew agriculture. So I brought some people like that in to work for me.

I brought others that were recommended to me by this advisory committee that were people from Washington that worked on the hill. So they knew the insides of Washington. So I had a mix there I submitted those names to the White House, Presidential personnel, and I did it relatively fast. They were, I can't say in a turmoil, but they were overwhelmed at the time and they said, Well, if you like them. You say they're alright. Okay. So they accepted them. And they got appointed and they came to work and I got my team started.

Now, the advantage of getting it done early is really unbelievably important. Because if you don't get this stuff done for six months or more, then the White House starts telling you who to take. Because they've got political obligations. They say, there's a friend of the President, you've got to give him a job. But I filled my jobs with great people and they served me well.

DePue: Anything memorable about your own confirmation hearing?

Block: They were fine. The questions were easy and, I don't mean easy, I mean I could answer them. There was no one out to get me. I had bipartisan support in the confirmation hearings so it just worked out fine.

DePue: Okay. On the agenda upfront you've already talked about, you were able to lift the grain embargo. But these are very tough times for agriculture in the United States. Explain why they were so difficult.

Block: Well, they were difficult because the interest rates were so high. I even went to meet with Paul Volcker, at the time at the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. He kept cranking up the interest rates trying to stop inflation and, of course, every time he cranked up the interest rates, that's going to hurt somebody that's got borrowed money out on the farm. We had a lot of banks go broke. Those were

pretty tough times in agriculture during the early '80s, during my tenure. We suffered quite a bit and it wasn't til towards the end of my time as Secretary of Agriculture that things really got better. These were very tough times and I'm happy that I was able to live through it without being bruised up too much.

DePue: Were there a high number of farm bankruptcies at that time?

Block: Oh yeah. I can't tell you how many but it was in the news. It's in the Wall Street Journal. It was well recognized that farm bankruptcies were serious. A lot of things were hurting agriculture. I mentioned earlier that even the unemployment was high in rural America. It was worse in rural America than it was in the cities.

DePue: You think the news media portrayed the problems in agriculture fairly? I mean it was certainly emotional to talk about things like farm bankruptcies.

Block: Well, I guess, it's just like the news always. They try to overdo things a little bit but it was pretty serious. I can't say that they were wrong in how they portrayed it. They probably overdid it, but still trying to paint a picture of the difficulty in rural America in some respects was good because I wanted people to understand that there were problems out there. I didn't want them to whitewash it or overlook it.

DePue: Okay. Let me just throw out a couple of figures here and get you to respond to these. As we've talked about how challenging things were for the farming at that time. Nineteen eighty-one, a year you really don't have much affect on in terms of implementing policy in 1981 versus what the farm **income** was going to be that year, but 1981 according to the figures I saw, net farm income was 30.1 billion. One year later it was 22 billion. That's a huge drop.

Block: That's huge. It was terrible in those times.

DePue: And seeing that going on and you've already talked about the problems of credit, how else did you want to try to approach dealing with that problem?

Block: Well, it's kind of interesting in my judgment. The worst thing we faced was the interest rate problem and the Federal Reserve had to help deal with that. The President, Ronald Reagan, the way he approached this recession and it was a problem for him for his re-election as well agriculture and for everybody in the country. But he did not come off of his way, his philosophy. His philosophy was to cut government spending and reduce government's management and involvement in everything. Open up trade, spending and regulations and cut taxes. These are what he stood for. He didn't change because we had a recession. And somehow we came out of the recession eventually and we did well. And I would just say, look at it today. We're trying to do all the other opposite things. We're trying to spend more money and try to tax more and regulate more and we're saying that'll get us out of a recession. I don't know. Why did it work the other way, the other time?

- DePue: Mr. Secretary, you're talking like a true Reagan conservative. I think it's 1983, the Department of Agriculture came out with the PIK program, the Payment in Kind program, and that gets us into lots of interesting discussions that I'm not sure my brain can even wrap around. But I want to start this discussion with a quote that I found that you had – "Reduce production, reduce surplus stock-holding and avoid increased budget outlays that would otherwise be necessary under the price support programs. It is unlikely our surplus will be substantially reduced any time soon by increasing exports. PIK is aimed at bringing supply more in line with demand." Boy, I don't know how you start with a description of PIK until you start talking about the way things were done beforehand.
- Block: Well, I think that's the whole thing. The federal government, according to the farm legislation at the time, would take grain under loan. Loan money to farmers for their grain and **then** if the price wasn't good enough, the way the law is written, the farmer would never take the grain back. He'd just keep his loan. And the government ends up with the grain. The government was accumulating grain. And we not only had grain, we had cheese in caves in Kansas. We had farm products that we were accumulating because of the way the law was written. That's one reason why we wanted to get rid of the surplus, which would eventually strengthen price if you get rid of that surplus.
- DePue: I could believe if you were selling millions of tons of grain to the Soviet Union every year and then that dries up, we're not talking about a little bit, a few commodities lying around the country.
- Block: We're not, but keep in mind the United States was in recession at the time and demand wasn't as good as it should be and so that hurts.
- DePue: So, demand internally was down as well?
- Block: Yeah, I mean, these were not good times in the United States. Unemployment in the United States in this time frame – I don't know whether it was '82, '83 – it hit 10.8 percent. We're crying about unemployment now and it isn't even at 10 percent yet. It was 10.8 at that time frame so there's a lot of things going on that were bad and we were trying to clean out the pantry in agriculture and get rid of some of this surplus so we could strengthen the price. DePue: Before you get too much farther, was there also a set-aside program that was at the same time?
- Block: We had them anyway, every year we had set-asides.
- DePue: Okay, explain what that is.
- Block: The set-aside program was that you would, in order to qualify for the loan for your grain or farm price support, you would have to set aside a certain amount of land. At the time it was maybe 10 percent of your corn acres. The set-aside means that you couldn't plant those corn acres to corn, you had to put them in grass and just mow it. DePue: Well, Mr. Secretary, this time you got a 3,000 acre farm back in Knox County. Were you participating in the set-aside program?

Block: No. I wasn't allowed to be in the farm program because I was the Secretary of Agriculture so I had to give all of that up. So, we got no supports, no subsidies, nothing while I was Secretary, but that went with the territory. So my farm, that my son and my Dad were running at the time in my absence, just had to live with it. That's the way it was.

DePue: But, still the government is encouraging farmers not to plant everything they have, I assume, so they can keep the supply down and therefore the price up a significant percentage.

Block: We weren't getting enough of it done because we had accumulated this grain we had on hand. If the price had gone up enough we could have sold it. But what we really did, we just dumped, we gave it back to the farmers. The farmers sold it. It was all over with.

DePue: So, that's the essence of the PIK program, the Payment in Kind?

Block: Yeah.

DePue: Can you talk about that in a little bit more detail of the mechanics of that?

Block: Well, I'll talk about how we got it done. We had this plan in mind to liquidate this corn, the grain surplus, but we needed to get it sold to the government, to the Congress, to the President. So, we called in this summit meeting of ag leaders. You know, they were all there: corn and wheat and rice and cotton and cattle and hogs. The leaders were all in and we met for a two day meeting with them, or three. We talked about all the things, we talked about all the problems we've got and how do we get ourselves straightened around. And this was one of the ideas we had. We put it on the table and eventually, collectively there was agreement that this is what we need to do, is a payment in kind, so pay farmers with grain instead of money. They could sell their grain and it would get rid of the grain. Farmers would get money for it when they sell it and that's payment in kind. Payment with grain. And we got it approved. David Stockman, who ran the Office of Management and Budget, even liked it. We got it cleared.

DePue: From the way you are describing it then, we still have a set-aside program where a certain percentage ...

Block: Oh, that was not going to be over until another Farm Bill because that's part of the 1981 Farm Bill. But each year, the government could decide how much would be set aside.

DePue: What was the goal then in terms of reducing production, agricultural production. Was there a percentage figure you put on it?

Block: Well, that would be from year to year. It could change depending on how much excess production we had. If you had too much production, they'd take more. It was the government was managing the farmers' planting decisions. Because you

couldn't, you wouldn't dare not be in the farm program because you wouldn't get your subsidies. But if you're going to get your subsidies, you had to not plant x amount of land. I mean, it was part of the farm program we wanted to change when we came to town and we couldn't change it in '81. But by '85, we were getting changes made. And, I had another thing I wanted to do in '85 on the farm program. I wanted to have a conservation reserve program that I had brought up, I would swear, four or five times in my early days as Secretary and I'd had a lot of staff people say, Ah, you can't do that. That's not going to work. Why are you going to do that? Well, we finally did.

DePue: Well, you mentioned subsidies and that's another big part of the equation that again, to somebody who is not in agriculture, like me, is hard to follow the trace the lines here. Explain how subsidies worked at that time.

Block: Well, at that time, you would be paid direct money – x amount depending. But direct money to set this land aside and be in the farm program, number one. Number two, you would qualify—after you harvested your corn—to you could put it under government loan. Effectively the government would loan you money on that corn as collateral. And what had happened before, as I said, the price had gone down on that collateral and the government had to take the corn. That's what happened with the subsidies.

DePue: So, that's how the stock ...

Block: It was a bad program. We were trying to change it. And we don't have that control program today.

DePue: Okay. So, there is lots of different sides to understanding this particular problem.

Block: It was so convoluted, I don't think we want to understand anymore. (laugh)

DePue: One of the things I've got here on my notes, the Commodity Credit Corporation. I think that's an aspect of the payment in kind, or ...

Block: They're the ones that would take ownership of the grain.

DePue: Okay, but that was a government institution?

Block: Yeah, government.

DePue: Okay, all of this is leading to something where you can have, put your own mark on the wall—you've alluded to it several times already—the 1985 Farm Bill. The Food Security Act, is that what the official name is?

Block: Yeah, I think so.

DePue: Okay. What was different, what were you trying to accomplish in the Reagan administration and now we're into a second administration and the economy is significantly better. But what were you trying to accomplish with that?

Block: Well, we wanted to do a couple of things. One, we wanted to get rid of the set-aside programs. You know, buying land out of production and let farmers grow for the market, whatever the market is. The other thing that we wanted to do, we had had this set-aside program, which was taking ten percent out of production. Let's say you had a beautiful 100 acres of flat, black land. To qualify for the farm program, you had to take ten acres of that 100 acres, ten percent out of production and just try to put grass on it and not use it. Well, that's ludicrous if it's the best land in the world, to not use it. You should go and find some bad land somewhere and set that aside or put it in grass. And so, the way the program worked, you couldn't. So, we just said, Let's have something else to take fragile land, erosive land, out of production and we started it. We introduced a conservation reserve program to try to get that passed. I brought it to the Cabinet. That's one thing Ronald Reagan always did. He had Cabinet meetings every two weeks or so and different Cabinet members were obligated to make certain presentations. And, I was supposed to make a presentation. This is in late 1984, but[it was] a presentation of what I thought we ought to have in the '85 farm program. And among other things, getting rid of the set aside stuff but I had also in there a conservation reserve. Because if you're going to take land out of production, if you're really going to do it, well, let's take bad land, erosive land out. So, we did. I presented it but I got beat up by Stockman and others. They didn't like the idea.

DePue: David Stockman, his budget guy?

Block: Yeah. So I lost on that one, but by April in '84, we were still working on Farm Bill stuff so I was not able to present the conservation reserve in our bill. Later on we made some adjustments in the spending in the Farm Bill and stuff and I found enough money to pay for the conservation reserve. I arranged with Senator Dick Lugar in Indiana and two or three other members of Congress to fly out to their farms. I flew out to Indiana one evening with the intention of announcing it the next day on Dick Lugar's farm. I was in Indianapolis at the hotel and I got a call that night from Stockman saying, What are you doing out in Indiana? And I said, Well, I'm going to announce the Conservation Reserve Program on Dick Lugar's farm tomorrow. He says, You can't do that. It's not cleared to do that. I said I got enough money now. I can do it and we're going to do it tomorrow. And then we did it. And we did it there and did it at a couple of other farms in Kansas and Nebraska. And that was it. I never heard another word from Stockman on it and that was the birth of the Conservation Reserve [Program] which now has about 35 million acres of erosive land protected from erosion, and no longer do we have the annual acreage set-aside.

DePue: The way the mechanism for that was were you paying farmers to take that land out of production?

Block: Yeah, we pay them. The government pays them. And if the government ever decides they don't want to pay them, don't have the money to pay them, or they decide it's not erosive, then it's up to the government to quit paying them. But at least we were not taking out of production the best land in the world.

DePue: Okay. Well, we need to wrap up today. I know you had a meeting to run to. We have plenty to talk about tomorrow. Just one other question while we're talking about this and that's the issue of the challenges you're getting that a lot of these programs were favoring the large farmers rather than the small guy.

Block: Well, it can be argued. Certainly large farmers are going to get more money. And I don't know what they mean when they talk about large farmers. If they're talking about huge corporate farms with ten million acres or a million acres or whatever, not ten but, you know, a million acres, that's one thing. But 90 some percent of the farms (noise in background)... let's skip this, that's too much noise.

DePue: Okay. We'll pick this up tomorrow?

Block: Let's do that tomorrow, because ...

DePue: We have plenty to talk about.

Block: That's ruining it there (the noise).

DePue: So, we'll just end this about a minute earlier than the tape recording but Mr. Secretary, it's been a lot of fun today. We're going to cover a lot more territory tomorrow. A lot of it's going to be asking your opinions on things. But, we'll pick it up then.

Block: Well, that's good. I probably have a lot of opinions. (laughs)

DePue: I like that.

Block: Alright.

DePue: Thank you.

Block: Thank you.

(end of interview #1 #2 continues)

Interview with John R. Block
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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: We are back. Today is July 10, 2009. My name is Mark DePue and I am the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. This is part two of our interview series with Secretary John Block, the former Secretary of Agriculture. Good morning, Mr. Secretary.

Block: Good morning and here we go again.

DePue: Absolutely. We had a great conversation yesterday and I'm looking forward to today's as well. As always happens, as soon as we got done talking yesterday, we were kind of interrupted by a (laughs) car alarm going off, but you made a very interesting comment about the nature of legislation and government programs as they relate to agriculture and how they change over time.

Block: I think that's something that I guess you learn to appreciate. I didn't necessarily when I went in to the Department think we could make a lot of big changes and we couldn't make huge changes. Farm program changes are evolutionary. There is a little bit done every time they write a farm bill; there's a little tweaking here and there. Sometimes bigger things than others. And in my judgment, one of the biggest things that we were able to get done when I was Secretary, was to move away from the annual land retirement program where the government would buy acres out of production and move to a conservation reserve, which is really taking out of production some of our land that's more fragile. That's a big thing. But over the years, we're still trying to get away from government intervention in agriculture. I say "we", some people don't want to get away but I think we should and let the free market system be more dominant.

DePue: We will certainly address some of those issues in terms of how opponents lined up in some of these initiatives that you had. But I thought that was a very important reflection that you had. When we did get interrupted yesterday, I had asked you about farm policies and the criticism that farm policies favor big farms versus small farms.

Block: Well, I don't think that's a very legitimate argument. Now, I understand we've put in limits on how much money could be spent or paid to an individual farm. Some of these are just huge massive farms. Okay, big corporate farms maybe in California, wherever they are, but the reality is you can't limit out the commercial farmers. Most of them are fairly big today and farms are getting bigger. And if you want to have a program that really reaches farmers, then you've got to include the farmers that are producing the food and fiber for the country. If you want to have a welfare program, then you just give something to little tiny farms. That's really the decision that I don't think we want, to have a welfare program. I think we want to have a program for agriculture.

DePue: In other words, you're going to have to deal with the big producers if you're going impact production and try to control production so you have the prices being supported?

Block: Well, it's not even as much as trying to control it. It's just to help farmers so they don't get run out of business. We all talked earlier about how it's a roller coaster, the prices in agriculture. Whether it's grain or livestock. And so, that's one thing the Department of Agriculture does. Some of the programs try to help provide a little bit of stability. It's not huge but a little bit of stability. And I've always felt that the farm programs, especially when they were giving out lots of money and trying to control everything, were really designed almost as a food subsidy. I mean really to help the consumers. It's a consumer program as much as a farmer program because we need the food.

DePue: We discussed yesterday one of the biggest challenges that farmers had in the early '80s was the very, very high interest rates that they were facing. Which gets me to a question about farm credit initiatives. Do you recall any actions that the Department was trying to take to solve that problem?

Block: Well, I think our biggest concern when those interest rates got so high was that we wanted to get them down. I met with Paul Volcker and maybe I talked about that already ...

DePue: Yes, you did a little bit.

Block: But we met with him. That was the biggest thing, trying to get the interest rates down generally speaking for farmers. We had a lot of banks going broke and there's just a lot of things to do. We just did the best we could.

DePue: Okay. Well, a lot of people were putting pressure on Volcker and I think that about the time you got in to the administration, it was something like 16 or 17 percent interest rates?

Block: Right. Paul Volcker, and I've seen him since and I know him; he's a tough old bird. You know, he stood his ground. His priority, although he knew it was hurting a lot of people, not just farmers, was to break the back of inflation. And frankly he did.

- DePue: It's quite a challenge when you're trying to balance inflation and unemployment rates and interest rates. Probably not necessarily the most popular guy in D.C. at the time. The 1985 Farm Bill then, is where we left off and that was why I was touching base with the evolutionary aspect of change. Was that the most significant legislation that was passed during your tenure?
- Block: Yes. In terms of farm program legislation, there's no question about it. That was significant because we moved in and created a conservation reserve program and we moved away from a lot of this other government control. We were quite proud of our success in that particular realm of negotiations for a new farm bill. So that was big and I said earlier, it's the first bill we passed in '81, it was written by the Congress and we really didn't have the influence we had hoped to have.
- DePue: What I wanted to ask you about now was what it takes to get a significant piece of legislation like the 1985 Bill passed? So, let's start with what you had to do to move that Bill forward and through Congress.
- Block: It's not as much political party, Republican versus Democrat, as it is region against region and different commodity groups and groups that have an interest in agriculture. It might be food safety people pushing for one thing and the dairy people have their own plan and the corn people and on and on. You got to try bring it all together in some kind of a reasonable way, and that was the challenge of it. We'd been through a lot between '81 and '85 with all these high interest rates. We had surpluses. We had the Payment In Kind program as we've already talked. We even had a whole herd dairy buy-out program. We had too many dairy cows, too much milk. The pricing collapsed. The government bought the cows and got rid of some of the cows. Well, that made the beef producers angry because it forced the price of beef down. But anyway, we did a lot of things. That was the back drop to writing that '85 Bill. And in some respects, I think that it kind of helped our position. There was more support for backing government out of this a little more and leaving it more to the market place. And that's probably the back drop that helped us and positioned us to get more done.
- DePue: That's a significant philosophical change in the approach to government involvement with agriculture. I'm going to put you on the spot Mr. Secretary and ask you, to the best of your memory from two decades ago now, what groups, what regions generally supported the changes you were trying to make and what were the opponents?
- Block: Well, generally the opponents would be, I would say, the Southeastern agriculture where they have the rice industry and some of them have relied more on farm support. The dairy industry always, historically, not as much today quite as it was then, but in those years they relied a lot on the government. The tobacco industry always relied on government.
- DePue: So, these are opponents?

Block: The way tobacco's changed, I mean they really had a lot of leverage then. Over the years they've lost their leverage and strength. Effectively the government just bought out all of those tobacco allotments. Tobacco was treated differently than other crops. Tobacco, you had an allotment to grow and sell tobacco. Ten acres, twenty acres, fifty acres allotted to you and later on they say we're going to get away from this. We'll just have a market system for tobacco. But everybody says, Yeah, but I got an allotment. That's something. It's important to my farm. It even adds to the value of my farm that I have a tobacco allotment. Well, the government went in and bought up the allotments and that was it. You know, paid the owner of the farm for the allotment. That's one way we've gotten out of some of the government management of agriculture.

DePue: So you mention that the southeastern part of the United States were generally opponents so Republican or Democrat, it didn't make any difference?

Block: No, it doesn't make any difference. I don't want to overemphasize how they were opponents but they were more for government subsidies and supports than some of the other parts. And the dairy industry always was for supports. And I can't say that we didn't have support, some challenges in other parts of the country. Then you go to the fruits and vegetables which don't have price support programs and they were often kind of angry that we were spending money on other crops and not on them. It's a balancing act.

DePue: Does that suggest that they were proponents or opponents to the changes?

Block: Usually proponents.

DePue: Okay. How about the western states and especially the livestock industry.

Block: Well, the livestock industry gets no direct subsidies. Everybody reads the big city papers and think that everybody is getting money, but pork producers weren't getting anything. Beef producers don't get anything. Chicken people don't get anything. And so they, generally speaking, wanted to move away from government intervention in agriculture and open the doors.

DePue: Okay. Do you remember any individuals in the legislature that were especially helpful in moving things forward for you?

Block: Well, Senator Dole from Kansas was. Jesse Helms chaired the Senate ag committee part of the time and he was always helpful. Kika de la Garza, a Democrat from Texas, chaired the ag committee when I was Secretary and he was a good guy and a good friend and was very helpful. On so many occasions he had to kind of deal with the political realities that I was a Republican and he was a Democrat. But he protected me from some Democrats that wanted my hide.
(laugh)

- DePue: Well, I'm somewhat surprised that you mentioned Jesse Helms because I would think he would, of all the people, he would be tied to the tobacco interest, if you will.
- Block: Well, maybe tobacco he was, but I'm thinking generally speaking, Jesse Helms was looking towards more freedom in agriculture and more of a market **economy**. He definitely is a conservative person on most issues. But you might be right on tobacco now that you mention that.
- DePue: Okay. How about the way different farm organizations lined up on either side of this. Obviously, the biggest one is the American Farm Bureau and you grew up in that system.
- Block: Well, I grew up in the American Farm Bureau and they were generally supportive of my policies, for the most part. There were times when they had to side with their constituents. The American Ag Movement⁵ was very active then and they really wanted more government subsidies and more government controls. They were not a supporter of reform in farm programs.
- DePue: Were they the organization that was sponsoring these tractorcades to D.C. prior to your administration?
- Block: Well, not with me but my predecessor, Bob Bergland. They had a big tractorcade when he was in there and the word is that they came into the Department of Ag building. At that time we didn't have all the security at the doors at the Department of Agriculture and they were coming in to get him. (laughs) He went out the back door, or something like that. I think it's fairly true. I might have embellished it a little bit but I got along pretty well with the American Ag Movement. They knew that I was not a supporter of their policies but we got along pretty well. I met with them and I was down in Texas and met with them down there and we got along.
- DePue: Okay. I might have the wrong timeframe for this one but the Farm Labor Union? Was that still active during your tenure?
- Block: Maybe, it was not high on my radar screen. No.

⁵ The American Agriculture Movement (AAM) originated among Great Plains farm men and women who, in 1977, protested government farm policy, specifically the 1973 and 1977 farm bills, that encouraged increased, large-scale production without corresponding high supports. An unstructured farmers' organization, AAM boldly dramatized the grievances of family farmers: a depressed farm economy, low prices, high operating costs, a disinterested government, and ineffective farm groups. Central to its goals then and now was the call for 100 percent of parity for all domestic and foreign consumer agriculture products. Achieving higher commodity prices has eluded AAM, as has the ability to sustain momentum, which diminished with the loss of media publicity in the early 1980s. Redirecting its strategy away from the early, naively conceived demonstrations toward more effective political lobbying, however, has enabled AAM to maintain a voice in agricultural policymaking. <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.pd.004>

- DePue: Okay. And one that perhaps, again I might be getting the timeframe wrong, but the organization that Caesar Chavez was trying to do in terms of migrant labor especially.
- Block: That was a problem for many years, not just when I was there, but he made it hard on the producers in California. Not that I got involved in it so much, but it was a problem for them and he did all that for just part of the realities of the day.
- DePue: It always got a lot of press. Were the producers in California and other states like that supportive of the measures you were trying to advance?
- Block: They were, but the fact that they were not part of the subsidy programs so they didn't get involved in that as much. But the general philosophy of the Reagan administration in our times was trying to reduce the role of government. They supported that. They felt that was good. So I had a lot of allies in California.
- DePue: Well, move on to a change here to a certain extent. We stressed yesterday a lot about the ultimate, underlying problem of agriculture in the United States was that farmers are so efficient and get to the point where they're over-producing so that the supply greatly exceeds the demand. And what I'm leading to here is how your administration, your tenure, you tried to increase demand. Let's start with exports with foreign trade in terms of discussing about that. Now we already had talked about eliminating the grain embargo. But I think it went way beyond that, did it not?
- Block: Well, it went beyond that. I think few people realize that the Department of Agriculture has a representative from the Department of Agriculture called the Foreign Agricultural Service. [There are] representatives in the embassies of probably 100 countries, working with the ambassador; part of their job is to expand our exports to these countries around the world. Given the fact that in agriculture we export about a third, twenty-five to thirty percent of what we produce. Listen, it makes exports really important. So we worked hard on that. We went to different countries. We tried to write trade agreements. We tried to get a lot of things done to expand the exports.

I might mention one trade agreement in particular since we already talked about how important the Soviet Union was as a customer. After President Reagan lifted the grain embargo, I was talking to the White House and to the Secretary of State. At that time it was George Schultz, and I said that I would like to write a long term grain agreement with the Soviets which would commit them to buying a rather large volume of grain. At that time, that was a big deal following on the heels of the grain embargo and Secretary Schultz said he would support it but he was not ready to support it. He asked me for some patience so I did. I had great trust in George Schultz and I waited. I did talk to him a time or two about it but about a year later, he said, Now I've got done what I needed to do with the Soviets. I don't know what it was that he was working on. He said, You've got a green light to write that trade agreement.

With the help of Bill Brock, who was U.S. Trade Ambassador, we wrote a long term grain agreement. I went to the Soviet Union and signed it and it got a lot of attention and it was a really big deal. So, we did that and that's just one example of one country. But, the effort was put into it. You know, of course I was in Japan, which is a huge customer of ours as they are today. I was in a host of countries. Thirty countries around the world. Every time I was abroad, part of the reason was to expand our trade with those countries.

DePue: I see where you returned to China in 1981.

Block: I went to China in '81 and I didn't stay quite as long as we maybe hoped to but that, too, having been in China when as a state Director of Agriculture, I went back again to try to improve our trading relationship with that country and I already had an entre, so it worked out very well.

DePue: Well, I know that you also had a chance to meet the Pope, and I'm wondering how that has to do with trying to increase sales abroad. Maybe it doesn't.

Block: Well, it doesn't hurt anything to be on good terms with the Pope. But, it was a privilege. We were in Rome for the World Food Programme. The World Food Programme—I just might add—happens to be the biggest program to help feed hungry people all around the world when they have real disasters. The United States is the biggest contributor to the World Food Programme and I was in Rome more than once but had this great opportunity to meet the Pope and it was short. I kind of shook hands and said hello and that was very, very, very good. And I think he probably prayed for me. I needed all the help I could get. (laughs)

DePue: Well, it's interesting that you mention that. We've been emphasizing foreign sales up to this point in time. But you had this incredible surplus when you come in to office and an incredible need across the world for helping people feed themselves. Was there a conscious decision then to increase foreign aid as a way to moderate commodity prices perhaps?

Block: It wasn't. We always used any opportunity we had to try to move our products. We had to be reasonable about it but if there is a demand somewhere, one way to reduce our surpluses was to send the food. I'll give you one example and I'm moving to another part of the world, but we were in Guatemala and we'd been in Guatemala and then we were going to El Salvador and Costa Rica. But we're in Guatemala and it was just a meeting with them, trading relationships and so forth. I met with the President or whatever his title was there. He hardly talked to me; it was like he was disengaged. He had something else going on. We visited but there was no connection. When I left, I was scratching my head; I don't have any idea what's going on. Well, we were delivering to them a gift of nonfat dry milk which they needed. We were getting rid of our surpluses but they needed it. I thought he'd be more appreciative but he had something else on his mind. We got in an airplane and we flew to Brazil and before we got to Brazil, we got the word back that there had been a coup and he had been taken out. There had been tanks

in the streets, right where we were when we'd gone in to the headquarters. I think they decided that they were going to have a coup but they didn't want to do it while I was giving them nonfat dry milk. (laughter)

But, we were giving food away around the world, trying to expand exports. In Japan, trying to open the door for our citrus and they were fighting it because there are a lot of tiny farmers in Japan. They didn't want a lot of our citrus, orange products. Working with California I was trying to help them with their produce to expand exports

DePue: You just mentioned something that kind of touches on the subject that I wanted to go to here. The United States wasn't necessarily the only country that was trying to sell its excess on to the open market, if you will. You had competitors. Canada obviously was a big one. The European Union, a lot of the European countries. I would think that South America was starting to emerge as an exporter, but I could be wrong on that. But Australia. So there was some competition. How did you deal with the competition?

Block: Well, let's start with the European Union. They always, at least in this respect, were an aggravation to us, because they used export subsidies. Their price supports in the European Union were, and still are, higher than anybody else in the world. So, their farmers are getting a pretty high price for their products. Let's say the price for wheat in that country was \$4.00 a bushel. And then, the government at that time in particular, would buy the price down to \$2.00 and then the government sold it on the world market for \$2.00. They were subsidizing exports. We were really angry about that and I couldn't get anything done. So I got support from the Office of Management and Budget and members of Congress. With several members of the Senate and the House, [we] announced a program. We said we're going to do export subsidies too and challenge the European Union if they keep doing this to us. We're going to fight fire with fire, is what I said. And we did that. And it caused a big uproar. My gosh, it was everybody screaming and hollering about it.

So since we're talking about tread I'll give you an import story. Australia, we competed with them on some things, especially products into Japan, whatever it might be. It might be wheat in to Japan. But, they were sending beef to the United States. I came in my office one morning and the next thing I knew somebody was in there who said, We have discovered that the Australians are sending product into the United States labeled as beef but we found out it is kangaroo meat. (laugh) They said shut down all imports from Australia. Well, I didn't do that but we discovered which plants, processing plants in Australia, were sending kangaroo meat over and calling it beef. We did close those operations down. Of course, the story going around was that Burger King, one of the fast food chains, was advertising on their menu, Home of the **Hopper**." (laughs)

- DePue: I can't imagine though with as much production and capability the United States had at that time for its own livestock industry, how was it that Australia could possibly be competitive in beef?
- Block: Well, I don't know but they have always sent some beef in here. And, of course, there's lamb. We get a lot of lamb from New Zealand and some from Australia so, anyway, I guess they could be competitive if they were using kangaroo meat. (laugh) That's the sum of the export story.
- DePue: Well, I ran across this phrase—and I think it describes a lot about what you've just discussed—that during your time there was an export subsidy arms race, so to speak. The thing kept escalating.
- Block: It did escalate for a while. Because when we challenged the European Union, they were challenging us back. It's just the way those kind of things go. That's the way it is.
- DePue: Okay. Let's turn to trying to increase internal consumption if you will, or domestic consumption. The thing that most people often times don't relate to the USDA but it's a big part of what you had to deal with, was something like the Food Stamp Program.
- Block: That's the thing that a lot of people don't appreciate. If you look at the Department of Agriculture, if you look at this big circle of money that's spent and things the USDA does, sixty percent of our budget is for food and nutrition. Food Stamps then were twenty billion dollars of the budget; now they're thirty billion dollars or more than thirty billion dollars. That's a huge part of a budget which might be a hundred billion dollars. I mean, it's almost a third of the budget right there. So Food Stamps are huge. The School Lunch Program is huge. We provide the food for School Lunch Programs. So you've got those two things together. That's a big outlet for food and, of course, I would say though, that during the Reagan administration we weren't trying to push excessive amounts of food to the Food Stamp Program; we were looking to try to get some control of it because it was a big drain on our budget, on the federal budget. So, we tried to do the best we could.

I even went on the Food Stamp Program [with] my family for a week. We went to the store and we knew how much money we could spend. We spent that much. It was all orchestrated and controlled and we lived off of that for a week. Didn't cheat and go out and buy a bunch of Twinkies or anything like that. Then I had a press conference to announce, Hey, it's not all bad; you can live on this. In fact, it's probably very healthy. Of course, the press beat me up and gave me a hard time about it. They said I was not fair to the poor that needed food stamps and they really needed more money and they need more food stamps.

DePue: Well, your story illustrates certainly what I recall from the Reagan years. The criticism from the media, from Democrats, that Reagan just wasn't compassionate. He didn't care about the poor.

Block: Right.

DePue: It kind of hit the news in very peculiar ways, did it not? I'm thinking in terms of ketchup.

Block: Well, ketchup is a vegetable (laugh), if that's what you're thinking about. Well, that's really kind of funny but people still today remember that. At least some people. They were analyzing the food that you could get for a Food Stamp Program and part of [it] could be a lot of things. It's going to be onions and beans and potatoes and ketchup. And, it should be counted. But the critics say, What? Are you counting ketchup for as a nutritious food? And, I didn't say it, but it's true, one of my guys on my team said, Hey, ketchup's a vegetable. Well, it is. It's a tomato. Effectively, with a little sugar and water and I don't know whatever else there is. It's a tomato. But, man did we get beat up; we got hammered on that.

DePue: And the joke on the late night talk shows.

Block: Oh yeah, we were a joke. Ketchup is a vegetable and they laughed at that.

DePue: Did that surprise you? That it played out that way?

Block: I don't know. Well, maybe it did. I didn't like the way it played out but I'd been around a little while realizing that anything can trigger something, a wild thing. I don't think that President Reagan at that time was a favorite of the national press. They were looking for things in the Reagan administration that they could get after him [about] because they didn't like his hawkish approach to international affairs and our relationship with the Soviet Union. They didn't like the idea he was trying to cut spending and cut budgets and I think that's one reason they took after him on anything and that was an easy target.

DePue: Were budget lines being cut for the Food Stamp Program?

Block: We tried to do a little bit of that. It didn't work a lot, but we got our arms around it reasonably well. At least it didn't just explode. We were trying to hold the line at that time because that was one of President Reagan's priorities. Get control of spending, cut taxes and reduce regulations, expand trade – that's what he wanted to do.

DePue: Were the budgets for food stamps over the years reduced or was the increase tampered down?

Block: I can't remember exactly whether over that period time or over the years. The reality is even if we got our arms around it for a while, it got away. Later on, as I

say, it's over 30 billion dollars now from 20 billion so it's hard ... even if you can slow things down for a while, it doesn't last forever.

DePue: Well, you had mentioned that sixty percent of your budget was for things like food stamps and School Lunch Programs, etc. What's the rest of that equation and how did the USDA break down?

Block: Well, most of what you read about in the papers is that all the money's spent on farm subsidies. But that's less than fifteen or twenty percent of the budget. As I said, food and nutrition is the biggest thing in there and then you've got a lot of other things that divide the thing up and where the money goes. Few people realize that the Forest Service is under the Department of Agriculture with nearly a hundred million acres of forest land in the United States. And we managed that. The Forest Service has roughly 40,000 employees. The whole of the Department of Agriculture has 120,000 roughly. So you see how big the Forest Service is. The Soil Conservation Service, under the Department of Agriculture, has 8,000 employees. There's things going on at the Department of Agriculture that we don't read much about. USDA has the food safety responsibility.

DePue: Food and Drug Administration, is that part of ...?

Block: Food and Drug Administration is not a part of Agriculture. But Agriculture has responsibility for the food safety of meat, poultry and eggs, which is a pretty big thing. The FDA's got the rest. And that's not under the Department of Agriculture. So, all of this is kind of complicated but you have to make it work.

DePue: You mentioned how large Forest Service was and that's an awful lot of acreage. Was that a money maker in terms of selling leases to developers or to timber companies or oil or gas drillers or things like that?

Block: I don't think that it was then and I don't think it ever has been a money maker. You know you have to build roads and things like that. Maybe they're making some money but there's enough other responsibilities that I don't think they make money, although I didn't follow it closely.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the extension service [Cooperative Extension System]. Because there's another aspect that most people overlook or just don't understand.

Block: Well, I think that's true but having grown up in Knox County with 4-H and so forth, the extension service has always been important to advising the farmers on a whole lot of technical issues and supporting the youth programs, including 4-H. Our extension service individual, Don Teal was his name, passed away since then but what a great guy and how important he was in Knox County.

DePue: How did that actually work then? I mean, it's an extension from what, if you will?

- Block: Well, the University of Illinois and then everything is tied in to the federal government. His role and what he did, I would say was mostly directed by the county, Knox County. A lot of counties, most counties had, rural counties had an extension, [and] I would call an extension individual helping in the county. But even that has been consolidated some and we don't have that today as we used to. Of course, we don't have as many farmers either. That's changed too.
- DePue: But their role is to advise farmers on modern technology, new techniques, the how to access government programs or all of the above?
- Block: A lot of things, could be all of the above. The government program though, was a little different because your connection there was the farm service office. Because every county then, and even today, not every county but most of them, have a farm service office [USDA Farm Service Agency]. At that time, and even today, I'd say there's 3,000 of those in the United States. And they are part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, whereas, the extension service is not. They work more closely with universities in the states.
- DePue: Okay. And primarily universities that are land grant colleges?
- Block: Yes, land grant.
- DePue: Okay. Uh, there are lots of other crops. Now, obviously, you came from a background from the heartland of the United States, probably sitting on some of the richest land in the world I would suspect at your farm. So, you got corn, soybeans, livestock, but we've alluded to a lot of the other crops as well. Any particular crops that you had oversight on that surprised you?
- Block: Well, I mentioned tobacco. So what I said before that was my biggest surprise, at how tobacco, you had a tobacco allotment. That was different. But, other crops, dairy, I know we milked cows by hand when I was a kid but I was not real close to dairy. I came to understand the power of the dairy lobby and what they could do. They stood behind me, supported the dairy farmers. So there is a lot of that. That might have been another surprise if there was a surprise. And as you say, I had a fairly good understanding of the wheat and feed grains, rice and cotton products which were other important products.
- DePue: You just mentioned cotton. I would imagine how traditionally cotton was the commodity that the southeast produced.
- Block: Yeah, and then, they have influence. They still do today but especially then. They had the influence.
- DePue: How about peanuts as a crop?
- Block: Well peanuts are another crop and if I recall I think we got away from the peanut support program too. Bought them out but not when I was there.

DePue: Okay, they still had some clout.

Block: They had their share of clout.

DePue: Well after all, the former President of the United States ...

Block: Yeah, I know. He didn't take away their clout and frankly I don't think I did either. If I did, I don't remember doing it.

DePue: Okay, how about on the livestock or poultry or ?

Block: Well, you know, we had Avian influenza and had to destroy a lot of chickens and in the hog industry, which I was very familiar with, there was serious concern about African swine fever. African swine fever is absolutely deadly to hogs. We had none of that in the whole western hemisphere but African swine fever was in China, Asia and some other parts of the world. We didn't want it in the western hemisphere and all of a sudden African swine fever showed up in the Dominican Republic, so what do you do? Our decision was, after we got it cleared with the Dominican government down there, was to kill, destroy, every pig on the island in the Dominican Republic. Every single pig. We offered a bounty to people that would get rid of their pigs and pay them for getting rid of their pigs. The federal government did that, the USDA did that. We had neighbors bringing neighbors pigs in. They wanted to collect the bounty down there. We destroyed every pig and then we re-populated it with clean stock and got rid of African swine fever. It's not in the western hemisphere today and we got rid of it then.

DePue: This might be after your time. Mad cow disease?

Block: That's very much after my time. We're living with it now. I think, in my judgment, it's historic now. It's over with and I don't see it being a big deal. I know that they had problems in Europe with mad cow disease especially because they were feeding a lot of the remains of cattle to cattle and that's where they traced it. But, as far as transmitting it to humans, I don't think there is any evidence that ever happened that I know of. In the U.S. we've only had in the last few years three mad cows. It was meaningless, frankly. But they made a big deal out of it.

DePue: Well, especially in Great Britain and there were allegations that it had been passed to the human population.

Block: Yeah, but it cost them a lot of money in Britain. The beef industry was just decimated.

DePue: During your tenure, what was done, what were your thoughts about promoting research education, technological developments?

Block: Well, I think we had some goals in mind to try to increase the budget for that and we made some progress but it was hard to do because we were, at the same time,

trying to get control of government spending. So we were putting some priority on that because we felt that that was important. And I still think it is today.

DePue: Was a lot of that through grants to universities, and especially land grant colleges?

Block: Yes, things like that, right.

DePue: Okay, let's kind of take a step back here. You've reflected on the overall organization of the Department of Agriculture and it's another one of those government programs that's huge and it has impact on every aspect of our lives in many cases. But I want you to talk about your personal life if you will. Living in D.C., what that was like, because you're a small town kid, in a rural community in west central Illinois and then suddenly you're plopped down in Washington, D.C. of all places. And commuting back and forth I would suspect.

Block: Well, it had been a conscious decision initially when I saw my name floating around as a possible candidate for Secretary of Agriculture. I had to decide, and our family talked about it: Do we want to go for this? Try for it? And that's when we decided, Yes, we'd like to do it and that's when I called Senator Dole's office and eventually went to D.C. so I had a real interest in it. But moving to Washington, being a Cabinet member of probably any President is an all-consuming job. You get there and it just consumes your life. It's a short time usually, not too many years and you have to do it this way. So when I got out here, we had to find a house to live in and we did.

Seemed like the first thing I was doing was trying to go to work. That first Cabinet meeting, I've already talked about that and then we had Cabinet meetings every two weeks almost. President Reagan was a stickler. Get in there and go to the Cabinet meetings and make your presentation or somebody else is making theirs and we'd all talk about it and shoot at each other if we didn't like the other guy's ideas and it was wide open. It was like a board meeting and all of the Cabinet members were the board members and President Reagan was the Chairman of the Board. We did that often and I would say that I've been disappointed that many Presidents since Ronald Reagan have not had regular Cabinet meetings, so departments are not connected. That was part of the drill out here.

The adjustment to this life, it's just like jumping in to a, I don't know, a pool or a lake and you have to swim. I jumped in, I had to swim. And I didn't have time to think about a lot of things on the periphery. I had to think about swimming and that's what I worked on and built relationships with other members of the Cabinet and other people I needed to have good relationships with.

My family, at the time, was pretty well grown and my son was graduated. He graduated from Stetson University. He was back on the farm with my Dad. So they kind of had the farm side covered. I would go back there, at that time, about

once a month for a weekend or something but I didn't go back all the time because I had so many other obligations. But I did get back and I was in contact with them and I'd talk about them and, of course, the rule was that I could not give them advice on ag things because I might have some proprietary knowledge. So I told my audience, I don't tell them how much corn to set aside or how much of this or that. But if I see a sow walking across that barnyard and she looks like she's about ready to have pigs, I turn to my son and I said, Get her in the barn, she's going to pig. At least I did that. I did that right. But it was a transition, but I've been through some before. I just did it.

DePue: With all these obligations you have, all the demands on your time, how do you find time to take up running seriously and enter marathons?

Block: Well, I did that early in the morning before I went to the office but I did run quite a bit. I was running maybe five or six days a week, maybe for forty-five minutes, not a long time. It was just my exercise to stay in shape and then I ran the Boston Marathon three times when I was Secretary. I ran the Marine Corp Marathon here in town once too. So, I did that and it was fun to do. Those are my running days. I ran nine marathons before it was all over.

DePue: Did you find those hours that you were running in the morning as good to reflect on the day coming?

Block: I was thinking about the day or the challenges. You never could get this job out of your mind when you're doing it. I talk about how all-consuming it was and it isn't that I didn't enjoy it. I liked the people I worked with. I had good people at USDA. I had friends in other departments that I worked with. I loved the agricultural industry and anything I could do to help move it ahead, I would be doing that. So, I liked the job. I enjoyed it.

DePue: Sounds like you had plenty of opportunity to do foreign travel. How about across the United States? How often were you on the road for that?

Block: Quite a bit. I should know but I think I was in about every state over a period of time. Speaking to groups, farm organizations, meeting with leaders in other states. It was just a very invigorating, exciting time. But it was important to stay focused on what we at the Department were trying to accomplish. And when you go out to these places, you're not just going out to have a pork bar-b-q, you're trying to accomplish things too. I worked on that. I might also say in terms of just outreach to agriculture, in my first year, I think it might have been in the second year, we had all the farmer co-ops, leaders in the co-ops, to my farm in Illinois and had a big discussion on policy and direction and where agriculture should be going. It was frankly a big success. We had a pig roast and one of our pigs got to be the host of the pig roast. And then, the next year, Vice President Bush was out there at the farm. We had all the farm leaders, not just co-ops, but corn growers and pork producers.

DePue: This doesn't sound like a small audience. How many were there?

Block: We probably had 150 or 100, maybe. Not 150, maybe 100 with a big pig roast and it was a very good occasion because first of all, they were delighted to be on my farm with me but, especially with the Vice President. The next year, and I didn't make the invitation this next year, President Mitterrand of France wanted to come to the United States and he wanted to look at our agriculture. He was trying to improve his image in agriculture. I think by going to a farm in the United States, he'd get a lot of publicity. And he did. He was on the farm and I've got pictures of handing him a baby pig and he's holding the baby pig. He looked a little surprised but he had that baby pig in his hand. I even did that to Vice President Bush, and he was more comfortable with a baby pig than Mitterrand was.

When Mitterrand was there, the President of France, he wanted to ride on the tractor. So he got in there and then he wanted to drive it. He couldn't speak very good English at all and I was in there with him. He wanted to drive the thing, so he was driving. I had it in a low gear. All the time the French press were everywhere, just like the President of the United States and press. They follow their President. Well, they were in front of the tractor taking pictures and Mitterrand reaches up and grabs the throttle and pulls the handle and starts going real fast. I reached up and I pushed it back. I said, "You're going to run over the press." (laugh) It was quite an exciting, interesting occasion. It worked out just fine.

DePue: My guess would be that your farm, roughly 3,000 acres at the time?

Block: Yeah.

DePue: Was much larger than the average farm in France.

Block: Oh yeah, well Europe has a lot of small farms. DePue: And I would guess also that France was one of those places that was really subsidizing their agriculture throughout .

Block: Well, all of Europe was under a big subsidy. All of the Western Europe, big subsidies. For Mitterrand it was a political thing for him to improve his image. Of course he was demanding better trade relations and I don't know what all. That was for consumption back in Europe, for his constituents back there. It worked well for him. The pictures of Mitterrand holding a baby pig, he and I were there and I gave him this pig; that picture was in every newspaper in France. He was there on a farm in the United States holding a pig.

DePue: How about the Soviets or the Chinese or countries like that—were they coming to the United States to see how we were doing things?

Block: Well, they were and, I just remembered ... I hosted another group. You see I mentioned that the United States had an agricultural representative in a hundred

countries. Well, the other major trading countries, they all have an agricultural representative in their embassies here in the United States. So I invited the agricultural counselors from all these countries to come to my farm. So, they were all there for another pig roast. We did pig roasts every year with different audiences so I had all of them there. I had some other ministers from a few other countries too. We just did a lot of things like that and that's all reaching out hoping to improve relations to expand trade.

DePue: Well, your son probably felt like he was on inspection every other year.

Block: Oh yeah, I've got pictures of my Dad and the Vice President standing there with me. I have pictures of my son with others. Great, great occasions.

DePue: Hopefully we can include some of those pictures in your interview collection.

Block: I'll be looking for them.

DePue: Okay, outstanding. More about being the Secretary of Agriculture, and we're getting close to the time where we're going to wrap things up. Are there some issues or things we have not talked about before we get to the kind of an overview of those years?

Block: Well, I don't know issues. Maybe we've done most of the issues.

DePue: Okay.

Block: We probably haven't but I can't just pull them out of thin air.

DePue: I understand, I put you on the spot here. I want you to reflect on working for Ronald Reagan, the man. What was that like? What was he like as far as you're concerned?

Block: Ronald Reagan was a great leader to work for. I think most anyone that worked for him would say that. He didn't micro-manage you. If you knew and understood his philosophy, what he expected of you, and then you stayed within those boundaries, he wouldn't bother and you could just do it the best you could. He had good support in the White House and people to work with. You work with him, work with Ed Meese. Ed Meese is really an important advisor to the President. I mentioned earlier these Cabinet meetings. I thought they were so vital because you would understand what other Cabinet members were trying to get done and you might be able to help them. And they would understand what I wanted to do. Maybe somebody's going to help me. Like I mentioned, that first Cabinet meeting when I said I wanted to lift the grain embargo. Well, I had two or three Cabinet members that didn't speak up then but came to me later and said, We'll help you get this done. Because they believed what I wanted to do was right. So, I think his style of leadership, if you understood his philosophy and then later on I came to realize how important his instinct was in making decisions that were so important to the United States and to every department. It was a

good team effort and I'm not suggesting everybody was always in agreement because we weren't. I said that we disagreed with each other in Cabinet meetings but in the final analysis we'd have to come to a conclusion and go ahead with it.

DePue: Early in his administration, the consensus of historians was that the media was rather kind to him. But that didn't stay that way, and later on he's criticized roundly for being slow, ignorant, the famous thing that he wanted everything reduced to one or two memorandums because he wasn't going to reach that much. I guess a couple of things that respond to the criticism that the media was giving him and the nature of the criticism itself, if you will.

Block: Well, I don't know. I think you just have to look at the results. The media might complain a lot. That's what media does but if you look at the results, if you think about the President's determination to keep the pressure on the Soviet Union until, frankly, they finally broke. They finally cried uncle and gave up. Now, they might not have given up if it weren't for Gorbachev⁶. I think he understood that the Soviet Union was broke.

DePue: Well, the pressure being that we were building up our military which forced them to build up their military?

Block: Yeah, we were building our military and missile defense systems. They couldn't compete. They were already spending—I don't know—forty percent of their budget on the military or sixty percent. They just could not compete with the United States. I'd been over to the Soviet Union. I'd seen their agriculture. It wasn't anything to write home about in a positive way. It was not very good. And the whole economy was not that strong. The President knew this. He kept the pressure on until finally Gorbachev offered to meet and try to have some arms reductions and release the strangle hold the Soviet Union had on Eastern Europe.

I know that there were some individuals such as Henry Kissinger and some others who were cautioning the President, "Don't go too far along with Gorbachev. He's just like all the rest of the Soviet dictators." But the President's instinct told him to believe Gorbachev to a point. He always said, "Trust, but verify." But he really did and he would not back up. He kept pushing ahead, pushing ahead, even though he had a lot of people trying to pull him back. Pushing ahead to change things with our relationship with the Soviet Union. Then the Soviet Union really collapsed. It didn't all collapse when I was there during Reagan's administration. It was over and done with by the time Reagan walked out the door.

DePue: Well, another aspect that brought a lot of criticism, especially from the press and liberals, was his concept about the economy. Now, this might be out of your lane a little bit but let's face it, agriculture is at the heart of the American economy. I

⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev, first President of the Soviet Union from 1988 to 1991.

want your reflections on supply side economics and where you stood in that particular issue.

Block: Well, I think that the President—I'd have to say—did a great job in dealing with our economic problems. We had a serious recession and he moved ahead in cutting taxes. He cut taxes and let people have more of their own money to spend and they'll spend it and that will strengthen the economy. It will create jobs. He was for cutting taxes, I mean all the time. And he had a good relationship with even the Democrats, many of the Democrats in Congress. And that's contrary to the situation today. They're at **loggerheads** and just beating each other all the time. That's another compliment to the President. His supply side economics, although it was not endorsed by everyone, it helped pull us out of that recession and it's worked over a period of time. I can't argue with it.

DePue: Well, he's had two elections that he won overwhelmingly. I'm curious if you were expected to participate and help with that 1984 election campaign.

Block: Most of the Cabinet would do that. I did. I gave speeches on the stump for supporting the President to agriculture groups in particular. Absolutely, I did that and so did most members of the Cabinet supporting the President.

DePue: Okay. Well you mentioned George [H. W.] Bush. Talk about your perceptions of George Bush because those are two different political apples to a certain extent.

Block: They are different, but George Bush was a great partner and supporter of Ronald Reagan. I remember when I first came to Washington and you asked me how I fit in and how it worked. They have all these balls and celebrations and the inauguration time. In the first day or two or three, or maybe four or five days, I didn't have a driver or a car. So on two or three occasions, the Vice President said, Hey, climb in with me. We went with the Vice President. But I grew to be a good friend. I consider myself today a good friend of former President Bush. He knew I was a runner, and he would run too. So, he'd invite me up to his place on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon to the Vice President's home and we'd jump in one of his limo's and he'd have two or three Secret Service guys and they'd take us to some location along the canal maybe. We'd run for three miles. He'd want a running partner, he'd have me. I'd go run with him all the time.

We even had one other race where the Secret Service was a sponsor. I don't know, it was three miles or whatever it was. It wasn't the 10K, but it was three or four miles. So we were doing that race. We're just getting ready to start the race and somebody came up to me from the Secret Service and said we've got a call from the White House and they want the Vice President back at the White House by—I don't know—12:00 or something. And I said, Well, we got time; let him run the race, he's here. Don't bother him. Just let him run. So, we did run. We ran the race and we got to the end and I said we've got to jump in the limo. We can't go home. We're going straight to the White House because that was after President Reagan had been shot and he's coming back from the hospital. So, the

Vice President has to be there to meet him. So, okay, fine. We jumped in the limo and raced to the White House and we got there. But in the process of getting there, they had already secured the suit for the Vice President. So, in the back of this limo, wherever we were, he changed and took off his running suit. Put on a suit and tie.

Me, nobody brought me any suit. I was still in my running clothes all sweaty. We got to the White House and the Vice President stepped forward and went on inside and went in the room there close to the oval office. He was there in time to meet the President. I, dressed as I was, was kind of hiding behind the door in another room. Well, I wasn't going to go out there in my running suit. I did get to say hello to the President and welcome him back. I was kind of sneaking around. I didn't know what to do. I was like a guy that was not dressed right.

DePue: Any other reflections on that day that the President was shot? That had to be very tense.

Block: I've got one reflection that I've forgotten to mention, but I had called up the day before. At this time, the President had not lifted the grain embargo yet. It was about March and I wanted to talk to him about it directly at that time. And they said, Well, you can't see him today. He's fully booked. They said, Tomorrow, he's booked but he's going to go give this speech at this hotel in town and if you want to meet him there and then ride back with him, then you could talk to him about the grain embargo or anything you want to talk to him about. Then ride with him in the limo. Well, I was going to do that and then my secretary said, "You know, you can't do that because x, y, z is here. They're meeting with you and you can't just get up and leave; let's find a different time to meet with the President." As it happened—for me, fortunately—the President got shot when he left the hotel and was getting in the limo.

DePue: So that meeting didn't happen.

Block: I could have been there, but I wasn't.

DePue: How much later then were you able to finally accomplish getting the embargo lifted?

Block: It was about three weeks later or maybe a month. Because the President, obviously, got shot, he was in the hospital. He's recovering. But soon after he did recover, we had a Cabinet meeting. He called us in and said that he would lift the grain embargo that day.

DePue: What was your initial thought when you heard the President had been shot?

Block: Well, I was shocked. All of the Cabinet—well, I can't say all of the Cabinet—most of the Cabinet was called to the White House. We gathered there as we kind of tried to sort out what was going on and where we're headed. It was a sad time for a while until we could see he was recovering.

DePue: Uh-hm, let's move on to 1986 and your decision now to step down from being Secretary of Agriculture. What led to that decision?

Block: Well, I always knew that it was not a permanent job. I had also come to realize that when I finished as Secretary, maybe it wouldn't be the most important or the best thing for me to do to go back to the farm necessarily. Because although I kept going back once a month anyway, but it would just be like another guy there to run things and I might be getting in the way of my son. He'd become pretty much running things by then and my father was there too, advising him. So, I thought if I could get a different job that would pay me more money than I'd ever made—not that it was huge, but it was still more than I made—I would.

I had a chance for what looked like a pretty good job related to food and agriculture, which was the grocery wholesalers association. It was a related business and so I kept that in mind. I was thinking about maybe stepping out and doing it early on in 1985, but we had a Farm Bill that was going to be written that year and I wanted to be involved in writing that Farm Bill because we hadn't had the kind of involvement the time before. And the '85 Bill was when I had things I wanted to get in there including the conservation reserve and some other things. So, I told this association and their leadership that I couldn't do it until after 1985. I had an obligation to the President to get that Farm Bill written and get it written the best we could. And so I stayed with the Farm Bill that year, worked on it, met with members of Congress constantly. I was on the hill, I almost lived on the hill. I didn't travel as much that year in '85 because my focus was on the Farm Bill and in the [final] analysis, we got it written. The President signed it just a few days before Christmas. After that I told the President and the administration that I was going to resign. I think it was March 1, my official resignation.

DePue: Okay. Take a step back a little bit. I'm curious about what it's like to testify in front of Congress on something as important as that Bill.

Block: Well, I was never uncomfortable doing it because I believed in what I was presenting and my arguments were, I thought, the right arguments. I remember in 1983 when a Congressman from Iowa asked to meet with me before I testified up on the hill. So I was up there on the hill outside the hearing room and I met with him. And he says, I just want to warn you, I'm going to call for your resignation today. Agriculture is in the pits and we're not doing well and we got high interest rates and I'm going to call for your resignation. And I said, Well, I can't do anything about that. I said, I'm doing my best. And so, we went in there and he called for my resignation but he had to have arranged this. He had every television camera in Iowa there because he was an Iowan Congressman, so he was promoting his own politics and his own future.

DePue: What party was he? Do you recall?

Block: Democrat. I never had a Republican call for my resignation. He was a Democrat. But the Chairman of the House Ag Committee, Kika de la Garza, a Democrat, let

this member from Iowa chew on me and pressure me for a while because they get to question for a certain period of time. Kika de la Garza, Chairman, I liked him, he was a friend of mine. He pulled the collar back on that guy that was questioning me and pretty soon he jerked him off and he said, "That's enough. You're out of here. We'll let somebody else ask questions now." So, the guy from Iowa had his day. He got all his television but he also got yanked back by the Chairman because he was a little over the top.

DePue: A fellow Democrat I would think. I mean this is the time ...?

Block: Oh yeah, a fellow Democrat, but de la Garza was always, I thought, quite fair, and he protected me. Not totally, he let me get chewed up a little bit, but he didn't let me get eaten alive. (laughs) And sometimes they might want to do that.

DePue: I want to read a quote from Reagan's letter to you when you did finally step down. Before that, just mentions the things that he's crediting you as especially important in terms of your service to the government and to his administration. Obviously, the 1985 Farm Bill, the PIK program, we talked about quite a bit yesterday, Farm Credit legislation and we talked about that this morning. Here's the quote: "That you have been an invaluable member of our team from day one. We knew we could always count on you." How much did that letter and the recognition from him, in particular, mean to you?

Block: Well, it meant a lot because having served the President and always doing the best I could. It's always important that the CEO tells you you're doing a good job. It was really, really important to me.

DePue: Was there ever a time that you didn't feel that you were in sync with what the President wanted to do?

Block: I don't think so. I think I felt I was in sync but it doesn't mean that I could always get done what he wanted and what I wanted done. You can't always do everything or even close to it. But I think we were on the same page and I think he knew that. It was a good relationship. I was very happy to serve him. And I appreciate his kind remarks.

DePue: What was your proudest moment, or accomplishment that you are most proud of?

Block: It's hard to say. I mean, early on it was getting that grain embargo lifted. I mean, a lot of the newspapers were saying that this is not going to happen. They said the President is too intent on putting the screws to the Soviet Union and he's not going lift the grain embargo. But he did anyway. So, that was a proud moment to beat that. But I think other moments, many different ones over time, getting the Farm Bill completed and signed. The '85 bill that was another big moment in time. Especially since I had decided to stay on to help get that done because it's a priority. I felt we wrote a good bill, working with the Congress and a bill that provided quite a bit of reform. And we wanted reform.

- DePue: Do you think that bill was important in terms of changing the direction of government's relationship with agriculture in a fundamental way?
- Block: It was. But I want to also remind everyone that it's an evolutionary process. This is an important step though in that evolution. A very big step but still there's always more to be done.
- DePue: Did the government over the next couple of decades ever get back to the point of purchasing large quantities of commodities and **storing them**?
- Block: No. We've gotten away from that. Fortunately, we don't really get deep into that anymore.
- DePue: How about disappointments? Anything you were especially disappointed you weren't able to accomplish?
- Block: Well, you know, I think it's my nature. I don't focus too much on the bad things (laugh). (pause). Well, I think in the area of trade, trying to get rid of a lot of the trade problems that we had. We made progress. Don't misunderstand that the countries are so concerned about their own industries and businesses that they'll throw up roadblocks and trade barriers that shouldn't be there. I finally concluded that you can't fix all of that. You just have to keep fighting through it. We've even got them today, I mean, we've got members of Congress that want to stop and ... We won't import any Chinese chicken. Well, now the Chinese are not importing our chicken. Well, we don't import their chickens anyway. But we sell a lot of chickens to China. Now, who's going to be the winner here? We're going to be the loser. We won't get to sell the chickens. And China wasn't selling us chickens anyway. If you get into these fights and it's kind of disappointing that you can't get everybody to be logical and let's deal with it straight out but it's not quite that way in this town.
- DePue: Mr. Secretary, we have about 15 minutes before you have to make that call and then we'll come back to things. But, 15 minutes gives us a chance to kind of move on beyond your time in Washington, D.C. Did you relocate or did you stay in town in terms of the new position that you had?
- Block: No, I stayed in town because I became the President of a wholesale food group which was National American Wholesale Grocers Association. We represented wholesalers all across the United States and we were right here. When I was Secretary of Agriculture I had a hundred thousand plus people working for me. And then I took over a trade association with less than forty people working for me. So, it was a transition but it was good. I liked it, I did.
- DePue: You left at a time when agriculture, as I understand, was still struggling through some things. I read someplace that prices in 1986 for commodities in general, were fifty-one percent of parity. Does that sound about right to your recollection?
- Block: That's about right.

- DePue: What does that mean to the layman in the first place?
- Block: Nothing (laugh). But supposedly parity means, supposedly, and it's based way back in history, some historic mark of time,
- DePue: Pre World War I, I believe.
- Block: Yeah. If prices are at x level, that's a reasonable price. Well, saying in 1986 they were at that reasonable level – a hundred percent of parity. They were half that. And you say, my gosh, agriculture is really in the pits. But agriculture changes a lot and it doesn't take into consideration the improvements in agriculture, the new efficiencies that agriculture has. So, actually parity can be a measuring stick but it's not relevant in that regard.
- DePue: Well, this is about the time though that these annual farm aid concerts began and Willie Nelson⁷ is the one that was most associated with that. Can you give us a little background of that?
- Block: Well, the farm aid concerts were started around there and I was invited to one with Willie one time because they wanted me to come and play my guitar and sing. Which is another thing that I did.
- DePue: Well, yeah, I hadn't heard about that.
- Block: Oh well, I mean there was a lot of farm events and if there was a country band there, I'd take the guitar away from somebody and do a couple of songs.
- DePue: Acoustic guitar I would assume.
- Block: Naw, just the regular ... they were electric, you know, **so they could hear you.** Mostly my singing was better than my plucking actually. But, I even had the opportunity to go to the Grand Old Opry and I was introduced by Roy Acuff and I sang two songs on the Grand Old Opry. Listen, to be Secretary of Agriculture, you got to be a jack of all trades (laugh).
- DePue: I didn't know musician was one of the trades.
- Block: No, I did that for fun. I rode horses in every country I was ever in. Riding horses in Argentina, and horses in Venezuela.
- DePue: It gave you an opportunity to tell people, Well, you know I was riding a pony to school every morning.
- Block: Yeah, I grew up on a horse.
- DePue: Uh-hm, but what was it that the farm aid concerts were trying to accomplish?

⁷ Nelson was a popular guitarist, country singer and activist.

Block: Well, they were supporting farmers and farm programs and but they were more in to spending for agriculture, controlling agriculture. I wasn't a big supporter of some of their policies. Although, basically they were supporting farmers and I was sympathetic to that and that was good.⁸ But, anyway as it turned out, I couldn't do this one that I was invited to and that was it.

DePue: Okay ...

Block: I even played a guitar and sang two songs in the U.S. Embassy in the Soviet Union. So, okay (laugh)

DePue: Well, I assume you were a big hit that time or at least they told you you were?

Block: Well, I was because they didn't see the Secretary of Agriculture strumming a guitar.

DePue: Memorable, well, the next President after George Bush, Sr., you got a President of the United States who's playing his saxophone on late night talk shows.

Block: Isn't that something.

DePue: I know that you also served as the President of Food Trade Association. Is that the same organization that you talked about before? Or did I get the name wrong?

Block: Well, it's the same.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Block: The Wholesale Grocers Association and they were later called the Food Distributors Association. Is it now National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors or is it the National Poultry and Food Distributors Association?

DePue: Okay. How did the farm back in Illinois then evolve from the timeframe you were there in the early '80s to the point in time now? Has it continued to grow?

Block: Yeah, it did continue to grow. In fact, in hog production we went from a 6,000, 3,000, 4,000 on up to 14,000 roughly, pigs per year. From birth to market. So, we built barns. We built a new hog barn every year or so through that timeframe to accommodate the growth in the hog production numbers. My son was managing things with my father and I'd go back periodically but they were on the ground doing it. So, we grew the business. Consistent with that we expanded our acreage. We were renting some but I continued to buy a farm now and then and

⁸ Willie Nelson, Neil Young and John Mellencamp organized the first Farm Aid concert in 1985 to raise awareness about the loss of family farms and to raise funds to keep farm families on their land. Dave Matthews joined the Farm Aid Board of Directors in 2001. Farm Aid has raised more than \$40 million to promote a strong and resilient family farm system of agriculture. Farm Aid is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to keep family farmers on their land. Farm Aid: Family farmers, good food, a better America, http://www.farmaid.org/site/c.qll5lhNVJsE/b.2723609/k.C8F1/About_Us.htm (accessed March 23, 2013)

my son would buy one maybe and my father and I joined forces and we bought some together too. Over that period of time there was this gradually ... we never over-extended you know in buying land, but we would buy a little bit as we went along. It adds up over forty years; it can add up.

DePue: And where is the farm size today?

Block: It's Knox County, Illinois near Galesburg, Knoxville, Illinois.

DePue: And the number of acres?

Block: Well, we've got about 5,000 but the family collectively owns about 4,000 of it.

DePue: And you rent the other?

Block: Yeah, we rent some additional. Maybe not quite 5,000.

DePue: Is it a share cropping arrangement or a ...?

Block: No, most everything is cash-rented today. In our business, and ... my son and I right now – my father passed away 12 years ago – so it's just my son and I own the operation. We own the corn and the machinery and the hogs and the business itself. The land is owned by others. The land might be owned by ... my son maybe owns some or I own some. And then the business itself rents from the guys that own the land. And, you know, that's the way that works.

DePue: Is it incorporated then?

Block: No.

DePue: Is that a change? Is the concept of how these are arranged from the days when you're growing up on the farm earlier?

Block: Well, when I grew up, I mean, you just ... we did do some sharecropping then mostly. But basically we just had our own farm, when I grew up we didn't rent stuff and ...

DePue: At what point in time did it become a corporation then, did it incorporate?

Block: Well, it didn't incorporate.

DePue: Oh, it did not.

Block: No, I mean, no, I don't want to get this too confused because my Dad and I did create a small corporation, a land corporation. But that was not the important thing. The important thing is the operating partnership – my son and I and before my son and I and my Dad – we ran the business. We owned the hogs. We owned the corn. We owned the machinery. We didn't own the land. The land was not

part of the partnership. The land was owned by individuals and the partnership would lease the land and pay the owners of the land to farm it.

DePue: Well, your comments reflect the complexities that modern farmers deal with today.

Block: Yeah, it is a little bit complex but when you think about it, it's a fairly simple concept. It's just the farming business rents land. And that's it. And if you can find it to rent and it's easier to find it to rent if it's family that owns it. You know, otherwise you're going to try to rent from somebody else that doesn't have any obligation or care about you and then they might rent it to Joe Blow down the road so you can't get it.

DePue: The next thing I would like to have you address and I'll let you decide if 5 minutes is enough to talk about this before you have to make your phone call, is how the technology of finishing hogs has changed from the timeframe that you've been involved with it.

Block: Okay, I can do that. When I was just a kid, you know, we had no heated barns. We didn't start farrowing litters until March, in the Spring. And we farrowed mostly in March and April and in the Fall. Now, we farrow litters of pigs the year round, because the barns are controlled. We have heat in the winter and we have farrowing crates for the sows. And as I say, when I was a kid we didn't have any heat and we had a little pig brooder there with a heat lamp for the babies to get underneath if they wanted to be warm if it was cold. And they weren't in a farrowing crate, they were in a hog house. So, that's changed just completely there. Beyond that, it's more specialized. Some people would just farrow baby pigs and then sell the babies or the grower pigs to someone else. We've always farrowed them, new babies, and fed them out to market. It's quite an amazing thing. A little pig weighs two pounds or whatever he is when he's born, and in six months, he weighs 270 pounds. He's off to market. So, it's changed and there's better nutrition in feeding the sows and stuff from when I was a kid.

DePue: Well, I know one of the new innovations is hog confinement facilities where the pig would, for their entire life, be in that facility and everything was controlled. Is that the case in your farm now?

Block: Well, they don't stay in the same building but they do stay from birth to market there in a building. They're not out rooting in the field. When I was a kid, of course, they were. They were out in the field. But our mother sows run in the field. Some people don't, but ours do. It's pasture breeding and they're in the field.

DePue: Well, when we pick this up after your break here I'll ask you about the hog waste. And that's a big issue today in a lot of circles so we'll be back at this in just a couple of minutes.

(end of interview #2 #3 continues)

Interview with John R. Block
Interview # AIS-V-L-2009-022.03
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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: We are back with former Secretary of Agriculture, John Block. This will be our last session. It's still the tenth of July. Good morning, Mr. Secretary.

Block: Good morning. It's once again a delight to be here.

DePue: Well, it's fascinating to talk to somebody who's lived the life that you have and has been involved in agriculture all these years. When we last broke off, we were talking about your own family's hog production, and we got into some areas now that have very much been in the news for the last few years. I prompted you last time that we would start with a discussion about waste, if you will, from a major facility like your son is now operating in terms of how to deal with the waste product.

Block: Well, first of all, our sow herds run in the fields so we don't have to deal with it there. But the finishing hogs, in particular, are in the barns and there is always the honey, the waste, to haul away or do something with it. We put it in a honey wagon and we knife it into the fields. The reality is, it probably saves us – probably, worth a hundred thousand dollars a year just in fertilizer value of the waste. So, it's a fairly valuable commodity, especially as expensive as fertilizer was last year. But fertilizer prices are down some now. I never considered it to be a problem. The problem of you having to haul it out, take it out to the field and knife it in, and you got to be sure you've got a field where you can put it. We usually plant some wheat every year. Wheat's not something we would necessarily grow as much of but you can harvest that in July which opens up these fields to take the honey out and get rid of the waste. So that's what we do. But the whole industry, they're still plagued with this problem. One of the problems is they have a lot of big huge hog farms, bigger than ours in some states, and they don't have the farm land to put the waste on where it could be used. I mean, it's valuable to us.

DePue: You recognize the phrase NIMBY – not in my backyard?

- Block: Well, that's true with lots of things besides, you know there's some people that don't want a hog farm in their backyard and they've had fights over that. Some people don't want windmills in their backyard either. So, you know ...
- DePue: That has not been an issue where your son is farming now?
- Block: No, we're ten miles from town. We're really out in the country and there's not going to be—well, I can't say not going to be—but it's not likely there'll be a problem there. And I think everyone realizes when we haul manure out and put it into the fields, that's, you know, it's a one-time thing but we need to do it because you've got to use that.
- DePue: Okay. I guess we're talking about that. Just the whole concept of factory farms and a lot of people now are objecting to these factories and making the statement that we're treating these animals inhumanely. How would you react to that?
- Block: Well, I think that's coming from a lot of people that don't know farming and they don't know agriculture. You cannot treat your pigs or calves in an inhumane way, treat them badly, and expect them to grow and produce and to make any money for you. Because anything that's treated badly is not going to be an efficient producer. I mean, the economics, if nothing else, tells us you got to treat the animals right and I think we do. I know there are examples where they weren't. But even when I was state director of agriculture in Illinois, we had people that were not taking care of their horses and they were starving. For different reasons, maybe they had no money to feed them. So, there are occasions where somebody is mistreating the animals. But for the most part, commercial farmers or factory farms, what do you want to call them, man, they are intent on doing things well in order to try to make a living.
- I've got very little sympathy for those that are criticizing so-called factory farms. I mean, I don't know what that exactly means. Do they think my farm's a factory farm? I don't know what it is. It is a commercial farm and we're in the business to produce food and sell it to make a living. But also by doing so, we're providing food for a lot of hungry people and anybody that thinks that you can go back to a one donkey farm, I mean, with a few chickens scratching in their backyard and pigs rooting out back, and milking a cow by hand, as we did when I was a kid. If they think that's the way to feed eleven billion people, which we're going to have on the planet here in the next few years, well, they're just absolutely wrong. You can't do it.
- DePue: Well, much of what we're going to be talking about from here on out is exactly this kind of stuff. It's how agriculture is being discussed in the last few years in today's society and in today's economy in a very fast-paced changing world that we live in. Same kind of discussion here. Well I just kind of lost my train of thought. Let me go back and take it up in this way.
- Block: Okay.

DePue: A little bit change of a direction, but in 1998 hog prices collapsed. And this has been a cyclical thing but that was an especially tough year in the hog market.

Block: Well, hog prices collapsed in 2008 and this last year they were down a lot. They've been down for a year and a half. It's very hard, you know, I always said that when prices are high, the hog barns smell just fine. When you get bad prices, they kind of stink. You can't help it. That's the reality, but it's a cyclical business. It goes up and down and up and down and that's just the way it is.

DePue: But those ups and downs always result in a lot of the producers going out of the business entirely.

Block: Well, that's right. And if you look back over history, the number of commercial farms declined. It's been declining all the time. But it's not just in the United States. It's in virtually every developed country in the world. Commercial farms are, they're less available. They produce more but they're less farm,s and I have said—all the time really—why is this happening. They say, How can we lose farms. It's because we have new technology to farm with. When you had to go out and hoe the weeds out of the crops, whatever it was, it takes so much labor that you had to have small farms. You couldn't hoe the weeds out of 4,000 acres. There aren't enough hoes and enough people to handle the hoes. But, 4,000 acres, you can control the weeds with genetically engineered seeds and just spray the Round Up on top and the weeds are gone. And the crop is growing. You know this thing is ringing again (phone rings) and I'm going to shut it off.

DePue: There's a piece of modern technology that we can do without for about a half an hour, Mr. Secretary.

Block: You know, I had this thing, I had it on when I made my phone call and I didn't get it shut off.

The technology today is so important and these critics of commercial farms and factory farms, they call them, they are wrong. If we don't use all the new technology, we're not going to be able to feed the world. There's more people in the world every year and every day and we need to have a means of raising our crops without as many people doing it. If you go back to these little farms that they're talking about, all these people are going to be back farming a little farm and then they're not going to be able to do all the other kinds of things we need to do in our economy. Our economy's got a lot of people employed in other ways. They're not in farming. We got 300,000 commercial farms today, or 200,000, I don't know. It's not very many. In the United States and countries all over the world, there are less people on the farms all the time because we have new great machines that will plant more. Bigger fields. We have chemical control for the weeds. We have genetic engineering to get higher yields. We have fertilizer and we apply the fertilizer in a precision way because we use satellites to tell us how much to put here, and how much to put there. It's becoming a very precise business and it's changed a lot.

- DePue: Well, you've touched on a lot of things there. What's your personal view then about the future of the family farm? Now, there's a phrase that has a lot of emotion attached to it.
- Block: It does and I think different people see it different ways. If you would read the big city newspapers, you would think that all the farms in the country, or most of the farming, was done by big corporations, which it isn't. More than ninety percent of our farms today are family farms. It's just that they've gotten bigger. I think family farms are going to be around for a long time and they will have to be big enough to be efficient. They can't be tiny. The tiny ones aren't efficient enough to feed the family unless you're just going to eat out of your own garden and then you won't have anything during the off-season unless you can butcher a hog, probably.
- DePue: Here's another one of the things that we've heard increasingly a lot about and in an age where right now the President of the United States is meeting other world leaders in Italy and yesterday's discussion was about greenhouse gasses and global warming. Some of that discussion ends up being a discussion about animals and greenhouse gasses that animals produce. Your reaction to that today?
- Block: Well, I've (laugh) ... Yeah, they're going to get rid of the cows because they're creating too much greenhouse gas.
- DePue: Well, what's another way of saying that? Are they more ...
- Block: I think they fart too much, the cows do. (laughs) But you know, this is all... First of all, I'm not sure that I buy into this the fact that the CO2 and the methane in the air is changing the atmosphere and ensures that we're going to have global warming. We might have global warming. We might have global cooling too because history shows that we had global cooling in the past and global warming. And we didn't have a lot of big cars and trucks and industrial equipment creating a lot of CO2 and methane and whatever else. So, there's a segment of people that are addressing this whole problem and I don't know, I'm just not sold on it yet. I've got an open mind. I just don't want to see them put the hammer on agriculture in rural America when they pass cap and trade legislation. I think there's better ways to deal with it than cap and trade. And I don't want to explain it because nobody understands it anyway.
- DePue: Well, cap and trade is very much in the headlines though right now. It's in the House.
- Block: I know it. It sure is. It's effectively a big tax. I don't know, we'll see what happens on that. That's just in the news and we don't know what we're going to do on it. But there's a fair number of people that are attacking animal agriculture. A lot of them are vegetarians. They get more attention than they deserve because the people at large in the country are not vegetarians. They're going to eat a steak and they're going to eat their pork chop and chicken and whatever there is. But

they're getting a lot of attention and they're trying to tell us how to run our farms and try to manage this and how to manage that. If they could find any little reason to criticize animal agriculture, they will. And that's part of this methane gas deal.

DePue: Another part of the whole debate in the last couple of years, I think it was probably about a year ago, that gas prices in the United States went in the neighborhood of \$4.00, \$4.25 per gallon. Now it's in the neighborhood of about \$2.60. A few months before it was down to about \$1.75 and \$1.80. So, it's been all over the place but part of that whole dialogue about the oil crisis and importing so much foreign oil and how do you replace that, has evolved around ethanol production as well. As a farmer whose farm is producing, I'm sure, tens of thousands of bushels of grain every year, if not more than that, can you discuss that a little bit for us?

Block: Well, even today I think, you know, a fair amount of our grain is going into ethanol. But, ...

DePue: Which is helping with prices for grain.

Block: Well, it's strengthened the price of corn, but the other thing from a farmer's point of view is, we like that. It's a market. It's just like trying to find an export market. We found another market and it's ethanol. My story on ethanol to start with, was when I was at the Illinois State Fair and I was the State Director of Agriculture, way back in the '70s, and this plane is flying over and it has a big flag on the back of it. It was flying low. It's just a one engine plane over the fairgrounds, and it says, Fuel by corn alcohol. Fueled with corn alcohol, or something like that. It didn't say ethanol. And then I was talking to representatives from ADM [Archer Daniels Midland] at an event we had and it was an ADM plane promoting ethanol, way back then. ADM is the biggest ethanol producer in the world, frankly. They were promoting it back in the '70s and over all these years ethanol was just kind of hanging in there, doing a certain amount of business, but not really growing. But when we get the high oil prices and we get concerned about energy security, then there's a lot more support for alternative energy and ethanol is the main one. We think that it might be wind, or it might be solar, but wind and solar are providing less than one percent of our energy, whereas, ethanol is up in the ten percent range. I mean, we're doing quite a bit with ethanol right now. And ethanol has helped to keep the price of fuel down, especially last year when it was so expensive anyway.

DePue: There has been criticism though about ethanol because one of the criticism is that it's not terribly efficient. You've got to put a lot of fuel in to the production cycle to get a little bit more out.

Block: Well, I think that all this conversion of fuel and so forth does cost something but we've got a lot better technology and some of the criticism is based on old, old numbers. Today, with the improved technology, I think anyone would have to say that ethanol is fairly efficient and certainly a cleaner burning fuel than

petroleum. And I'm not against petroleum either. I'm for everything. Anything and everything that we can find to reduce our reliance on foreign oil from countries that are maybe not very friendly, Venezuela and even in the Middle East sometimes. Let's try to find new sources of our own energy if we can.

DePue: Yet another criticism in ethanol production right now is that's pretty heavily subsidized. Of course, you're coming from a frame of reference here of Reagan and trying to get government out of that business a little bit more. Your thoughts on that.

Block: Well, I think if indeed we're serious about reducing our reliance on foreign oil, then I think we're going to have to subsidize some of these alternatives to give them a leg up and get them going as we go to the future. Anybody that would suggest that we don't subsidize oil, they're missing the boat, because of all the military that we've had around the world to protect our interest in oil. I mean, we've done that. In fact, even during former President Bush 1's tenure, Iraq invaded some countries including Saudi Arabia taking over land and we went in there and knocked them out, and ran them back home with their tail between their legs. You think we did it because we really love Saudi Arabia or Kuwait? No, we were protecting oil. And so we spent a lot of money. Anybody that starts telling you about subsidies for ethanol, I'm quick to remind them about the subsidies for oil too. Energy is so important. We just have to have it and we need to protect it or produce it somehow.

DePue: Well, very much at the heart of this discussion we've been having right here is what happened a year ago, or the last couple of years, in terms of commodity prices. It starts with the commodity price for oil going from sixty, seventy dollars a barrel up to about a hundred forty-five, down fifty dollars again, and wherever we're at now, but I know that commodity prices for grain, for cattle, for everything, has really fluctuated over the last year and a half. Can you talk about the impact of that?

Block: Well, I think it's very difficult for farmers. The livestock people had hard times because the cost of their feed went up. It was very hard on them. The grain people were enjoying the good price for their grain. So, it's just the way it is.

DePue: A frame of reference, if you can, Mr. Secretary, of where corn had historically been for the last two or three decades and where it got at the peak.

Block: Well, I had mentioned that when Earl Butz in the '70s sold grain to Russia, corn prices affectively jumped from a dollar a bushel to two. And, then when we had ethanol and the high energy prices this last summer, corn went up to six dollars or whatever it went up to. But effectively, even now it's dropped down to about three, maybe three and a quarter, depending. But, we've taken another jump. Is it a new plateau? Are we going back to two dollars? I don't think so. I think we're on a new plateau. We don't know where it'll be and it'll keep fluctuating up and down. But, that's fine. That's the way markets work.

- DePue: Is that all about supply and demand from your perspective or is there a lot of speculation in commodity markets like we've heard here lately?
- Block: Well, there probably was quite a bit last year and maybe there is now. But, there's always been speculation in commodity markets. I remember when, I don't remember who it was [who] tried to corner the soybean market. I mean, there's always been speculation in commodity markets. There's speculation in stocks. If everybody thinks the stock is going up, they're going to buy it. And it goes up. Then it comes down. I think that's kind of what's happened with commodities. I think if you're going to have a real market, markets are the function of what people think the value of something is. Is it going up or is it not?
- DePue: Well, everything you just talked about now suggests that farmers are the ultimate gamblers. They're gambling on whether it's going to rain. They're gambling that they're going to be hit with some kind of a pest that they don't know about. And now they've got to gamble with the market day in and day out as well. How difficult is it for a farmer to know how to market his crops?
- Block: Well they do gamble with the market but I don't want to suggest that this is the only time. We had five dollar corn in 1996 for a period of time. We've had these spikes and we've had it go down real low. So, we always deal with this erratic market. Now maybe, you could say it's worse than ever. Maybe it is. It could be. And certainly last year was way high and now it's down quite a bit. You know it's half what it was or something like that. So you've got to wonder where we're going from here. Are we going down or going up. But if you live in a global market, which we do, we're not the only ones living in this. The oil industry lives with these ups and downs. The copper, the steel – all these commodities, depending on what the situation is, live with the erratic markets. It is so hard to know how to hedge your bets, protect yourself against erratic swings. There are a lot of ethanol plants. They booked corn last summer and they were buying it for a high price, maybe six dollars a bushel. And the price went to three or four. And, it killed them. Some of them went broke. We had hog operations that bought a lot of corn at high prices and then the price went down and then hogs were down and they lost their tail. So, we all live with this. It's very hard. We don't market our hogs in advance. We market them week-by-week and we don't think we can outguess the market. On corn, we do try to find prices that are, in our judgment, profitable for us and we'll try to book some corn, at good prices. But you never know. You might have a whole year when the price is not good. So what are you going to do? You're going to sell it at a bad price.
- DePue: As a life long farmer and as a former Secretary of Agriculture, how much government involvement would you like to see in moderating those extremes?
- Block: I don't think the government should try to set prices. I think they have to just let the markets work. I would say that if there's, you know, some of this speculation maybe if they can corral a little bit of it and I'm not here to say how to do it, maybe they can do that. You got to have a market that works with people bidding

and betting on the future. That's what markets are. So, it's not easy, but I'll tell you I've lived with it all my farming years and we've done well. We've ridden this roller coaster up and down and we've hung on and we prospered on balance. We had bad times sometimes but on balance we prospered. And I think that's what you have to do.

DePue: Another phrase you hear ripped right out of the headlines, if you will, GMO's – Genetically Modified Organisms – and primarily we're talking about two things – grains that are modified, but also now a conversation about whether or not we want to do that with livestock. And, I would imagine in your life, this is a little bit different but in your lifetime, the hogs you were working with when you were a kid are completely different than the hogs you're raising today.

Block: We were trying to modify them. And we did. I've got pictures on my wall in my library of my father with a grand champion Duroc boar and he is big and fat. And then I got a picture of me, maybe some years later, with a grand champion Duroc gilt And she is not as fat, but she's still pretty fat. And then I got a picture of my son, when he was in high school with a grand champion Poland China boar and he is quite lean and hard as a rock. You look at him and the change over time and the producers, us farmers, were just reacting to what the consumer wants. So, through breeding we've changed all of this.

And GMO – genetic engineering – is going to change a lot of things too and it helps to make production more efficient. On grain, we couldn't produce what we produce today without genetically engineered seeds. It protects plants against pests ... the corn borer and the rootworm. You can have a corn plant and if it's got this trait inside the seed and inside the plant, these pests won't bother them. It just flourishes. When I was a kid, and even later on when I came back to the farm, you had to put down chemicals and pesticides and fight this stuff or else you just let the pests eat half your crop. And so, we've got a lot of new technology today that helps us, dramatic change.

DePue: So what do you say to those who are criticizing the use of GMO's, that it's not natural food?

Block: Well, they got their head in the sand. It is natural. It's regular food. It's not different. You cannot take and test this animal or this corn, this corn is genetically engineered, you cannot tell it from the corn over here that is supposedly organic. It's all the same. I'm not against the organic guy. If he wants organic and he wants to pay twice the price, fine. But, we got a lot of people who don't have a lot of money. We got poor people. They're looking for value. You've got to give them something they can afford. And that's what modern agricultural technology does. It makes it possible to give the consumer value that they would never have otherwise.

DePue: Okay. I'm afraid it's my clock now that's ticking. I'd love to be able to sit and talk to you all day about these things because I know that you've got a lot of wisdom and reflection to share with us, but we're at the point in time where we need to really wrap up, I'm afraid. So, let me ask you some more general questions as you look down the road in the future and look at the past, if you will.

What do you think is the most significant transformative aspect of agriculture that's changed in your lifetime? Let me just throw out a few options, if you will. Technological change, just the genetic aspects of agriculture, the scale of the size of things and how the products are marketed.

Block: All of the above. I mean, you can't isolate one from the other. All of those things we've talked about. The genetics are different. We've talked about the technology. We've talked about the machinery that lets you farm more acres. When my father came back to the farm and started farming when I was just a little kid, he could pick a hundred bushel of corn in a day. When I ride that combine in the fall, we pick and shell a hundred bushels of corn in seven minutes. I mean, you can't hardly imagine the change we've seen. And that's where we're at today and if you didn't have the new machinery and technology, the genetic engineering to protect the plants against weeds and pests of all kinds, you just wouldn't be able to feed the millions that we feed today.

DePue: What do you see for the future of farming in the United States?

Block: It's going to continue to change. I'm very optimistic, but I would also say that you have to have enough volume of operation to be successful and to succeed. And the reason is when you produce a lot of grain, or a lot of hogs or whatever, you don't need a lot of margin from everyone, every bushel, or every pig, to succeed financially. You just need a little margin. But if you only have twenty pigs and a little patch of corn, can you imagine the margin you'd need to prosper or to even raise your family? That's why modern farming, commercial farming, factory farms—call them what you want—they are providing great value to the customers and the people of the country. We raise our family on less than ten percent of our income from food. Less than ten percent for food. And developing countries, where they've got everybody scratching around and a couple of chickens around, they're spending half their income on food. They're not efficient in doing anything. In the future we will continue to look for new opportunities and options. I have no idea what they'll be because how many of us thought we'd see an agriculture today as it is if we were looking at it from forty years ago. We wouldn't see it. Nobody thought we'd have the internet today. (laughs) And that cell phone of mine that keeps going off – how many thought we'd have all of that? Nobody.

DePue: Does your son have any children?

Block: He has five kids and I don't know if anybody will farm or not.

- DePue: Well, here's my question for you, Mr. Secretary. I assume there's a boy in that mix someplace. What do you tell that young man, or even young ladies – I don't want to be too sexist about this – who says, "I think I want to stay on the farm and stay with agriculture."?"
- Block: Well, of course, if they want to do that, the door is open. My son would welcome them and I would too. I would hope somebody might, but I don't know. Everybody has their own opinion; they have to make their own decisions. My Dad didn't push me into it and I didn't push my son into it. He didn't go to an agricultural college any more than I did. He went to study business.
- DePue: What advice would you give them though?
- Block: I think there's a good future in agriculture. That's my advice and it's a good life. It's a good place to raise your kids. I think it's very good. I would never discourage it. But you've got to let them make their own decisions.
- DePue: Would you recommend that they go off to college and get that agriculturally related degree?
- Block: I'd recommend they get a degree. I think they have to decide what they want. A degree in business will help them, a degree in agriculture would help them – whatever they choose. Because the reality is, if you just think about it, most people that go into college don't end up working in the field they study. The majority don't. They go someplace else. But, it's a learning process and it's maturity, it's a great thing and they need to get that education.
- DePue: Any final reflections as we wrap then, Mr. Secretary?
- Block: Well, just as I said, I'm optimistic about the future. I'm very grateful. I have been blessed from day one with a wonderful family and growing up on the farm and all of the things that I have done. If I stood here and told you I planned it this way, no, I didn't. But I did take advantage of opportunities, or tried to, when they appeared. And I've just been very fortunate that a lot of opportunities have appeared and I've been able to do my best and I'm grateful for that chance.
- DePue: Well, you mentioned opportunity. For a long time, you and I have been looking for the opportunity to be able to sit down and have this conversation. I'm thrilled that we finally were able to get it accomplished. It's been nothing but a delight for me to listen to your reflections and stories about your long career in agriculture. So, thank you very much, Secretary Block.
- Block: It's been a pleasure. And I compliment you on your persistence.
- DePue: (laugh) It paid off.
- Block: It always does.

DePue: Okay, thank you.

(end of interview #3)