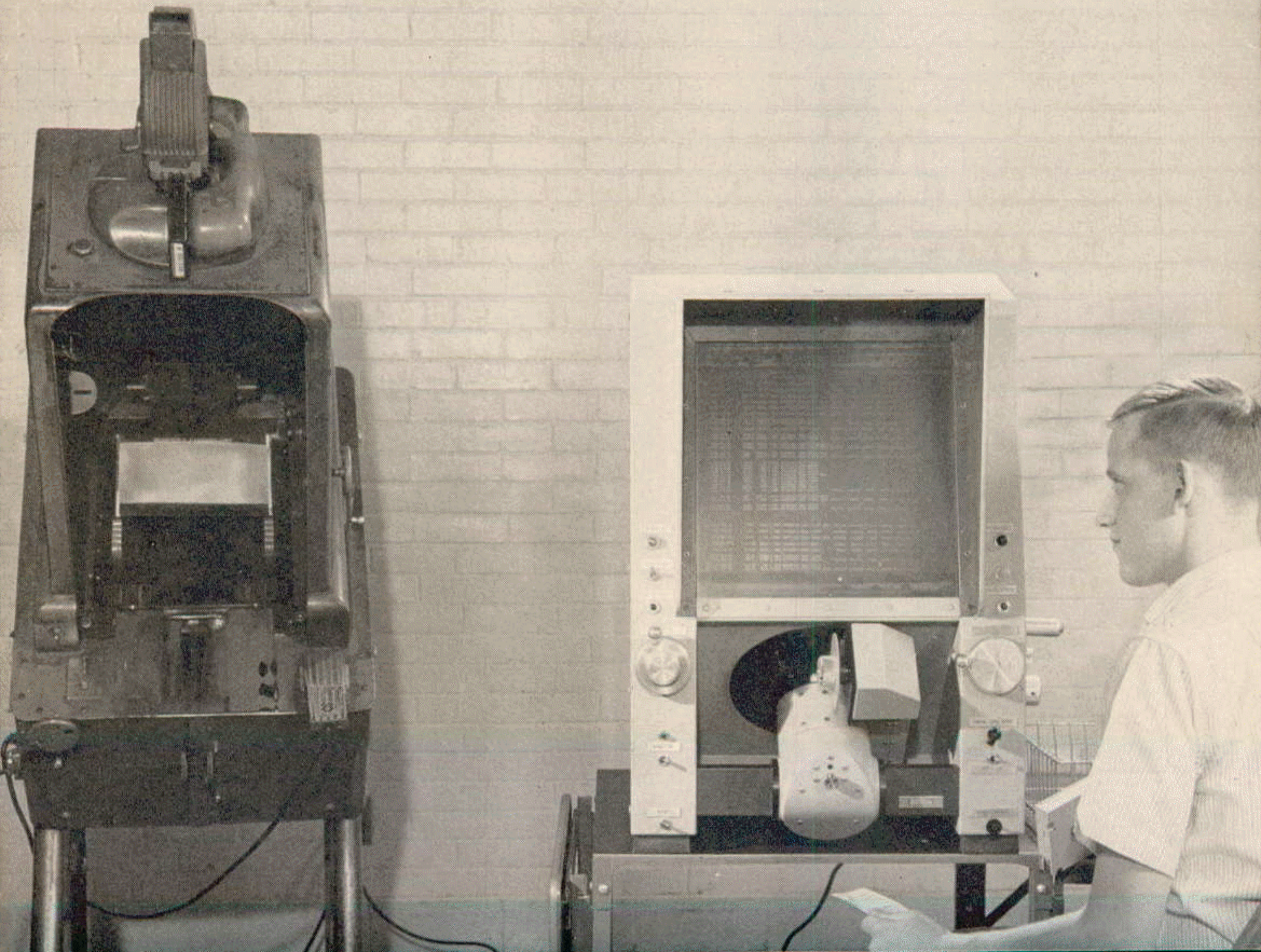


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MAY 1964

# Oasis





# John Corson Recalls. . .

## Former Director of BOASI Recounts

**W**HEN JOHN CORSON, DIRECTOR of the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance during much of its formative period, addressed a general staff meeting at the Social Security Administration headquarters recently, he evoked memories for many in the audience who had shared those stirring times with him.

John Corson is now professor of public and international affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, and a partner in a leading management consultant firm. But, earlier, from 1936 to 1938, he was Assistant Executive Director of the Social Security Board, and, for two periods between 1938 and 1944, he was Director of the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance.

### Unique Contribution

"I think," said Mr. Ball, on introducing the speaker, "there are really, among those who worked for the Social Security Board in the early days, three giants—Arthur Altmeyer (first Commissioner for Social Security), Wilbur Cohen (Assistant Secretary, Health, Education, and Welfare, who served with Social Security for 20 years), and John Corson . . . [who] have left more of their own personal mark on the institution . . . than any other individuals."

In summarizing "the unique things that John and his associates in those early days did," that have characterized our program and made it different, Commissioner Ball suggested three principal points.

John Corson and other pioneers had "a conviction that everything about the program and its administration should be designed for the benefit of the public . . . [for] service to the people in a friendly, helpful, sympathetic way in a face-to-face relationship in district offices [combined] with efficient and economic service behind the scenes," in processing the vast amount of paperwork, keeping of wage records, and handling other administrative detail.

Secondly, continued Mr. Ball, the program was considered to be part of a great cause, "a very significant part of the agelong war on poverty; John and his associates had much more than just a job—they had a mission."

And finally, these men had an "imaginative and pioneering attitude toward administration and management . . .

It takes administrators like John Corson," the Commissioner concluded, "to make a living reality out of a cause, out of an ideal."

Looking indeed "a little young for a legend," John Corson spoke of many pleasant memories from his years of association with Social Security in its beginnings. "If you don't look back on those early days with great satisfaction," he continued in a more serious vein, "there's something wrong with you, even those who came in later. For you—all of us—can claim that of the 180 million people in the United States of America, you're just a handful, really just a handful, that had the rare opportunity, the real privilege, of developing one of the social institutions of this country that is now *accepted*, and accepted in the fullest sense."

In the beginning this was not so; it was not even sure that the social security system had a future, at all. "In the year 1936," Mr. Corson noted, "it was very uncertain that the Supreme Court would hold it constitutional. . . . They thought they'd worked out a scheme for unemployment insurance that would hold under a Supreme Court ruling, but they didn't really believe that they had better, at the most, than a 50-50 chance of getting the old-age and survivors insurance provisions through the Supreme Court."

### Early Doubts

There also were many then who doubted that a system based on individual wage records could be administered. John Winant, first Chairman of the Social Security Board, was much concerned at the many expressions of uncertainty on this score. He invited a consultant to study our problems and advise us. After several months of study, this expert said, "It simply can't be done."

This was also the conclusion of a second outstanding consultant, who talked about "these millions and millions of little pieces of white paper that would inundate the Bureau"; it would be totally impossible to manage such a system.

"Well," Mr. Corson declared, "there are a couple of hundred people, many of them right here, some gone, that

# Early Agency Days

weathered these uncertainties and are responsible in considerable part for the fact that the American people do have a system of this sort. . . . It works very well.”

“I’m very proud of this Administration, infinitely proud of it,” the former Director exclaimed. He said he often hears Marion Folsom, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and a member of the 1963 Advisory Council on Social Security, make the statement that in his experience in government he never found any organization that exceeded the efficiency of the management of SSA. Every time this happens, “My chest swells,” Mr. Corson said, “and I say, ‘Yeah, I used to be there.’ ”

“I’m infinitely proud of this Administration,” he repeated, “because it has always seemed to me that it had a personality different from others.”

## Vital Organizations

“Can an organization have a personality?” he asked. “Having studied, I venture, at least 100 different organizations, I can assure you there are personalities attached to each organization.” Some, he said were slow and stolid, which got the work done, but unimaginatively; and some had character and honor, but no plans, no particular get-up-and-go. And some showed great pretense, but their luster would wear off; others cut corners, trading the public interest off for their own gain. “Then, some have character,” he concluded, “and are alive, are going somewhere.”

That’s the kind of personality he saw in Social Security. To John Corson, the OASI personality was “marked by a belief, a deep, earnest belief, that we were doing something worthwhile. . . . And yet we always wanted to do it progressively better. . . . And what’s more we knew we *could* do it a little better, and I emphasize that. We knew we could do it a little better. . . . I hope Social Security always will have that kind of personality. Indeed,” he concluded, “if in the years ahead you lose it, this old antique will be back to haunt you.”



John Corson (l.), former Director of the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, and Robert Ball, SSA Commissioner, leave the stage after a general staff meeting at the Central Office, to greet personally many of Mr. Corson’s associates from the early days in Social Security.