Dear Senator Lehman:

This is in response to your request of June 30, 1956, concerning a letter from seamen aboard the Steamer Norman J. Kopmeier who have been actively employed on the Great Lakes and high seas continuously for more than 25 years. These seamen advocate amending existing statutory authority in order to provide medical care for seamen, who have voluntarily retired or who have been retired because of disability.

There have been a number of legislative proposals in this direction, one of the most recent of which is S. 255, a bill "to authorize free medical, surgical and dental treatment and hospitalization at Public Health Service hospitals for seamen having at least a certain period of maritime service." This bill would amend the Public Health Service Act so as to extend medical care benefits indefinitely to persons having not less than 30 years of service as seamen.

At the present time only those seamen who are active in this occupation are entitled to receive medical care and hospitalization as beneficiaries of the Public Health Service. To be eligible for care, a seaman must present evidence showing that he has had at least sixty days of substantially continuous sea service terminating not more than 90 days previously. The ninety-day period may be extended if the seaman has not definitely changed his occupation and (a) has been receiving medical care at Service facilities or at non-Service expense, or (b) he has been unable to ship out because of closure of navigation or economic conditions resulting in decreased shipping and consequent lack of opportunity for employment.

While the statutory authorization for medical care for seamen does not include any explicit definition of Congressional intent, it is apparent from its long legislative history that the primary objectives are related to the national interest in recruiting and retaining the personnel required for the operation of an efficient merchant marine. The instant bill would increase the scope of this medical care program for merchant seamen by adding a benefit which is primarily a retirement benefit rather than a benefit geared to active service.

This Department has submitted a report on S. 255 to the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, stating that as a matter of principle the Federal Government should not thus extend its
existing responsibilities and recommending against enactment of the bill. It was suggested that the views of other departments and agencies, including the Departments of Commerce and Labor, would be of interest to the committee in the consideration of the bill.

If we may be of any further assistance in this matter, please let us know.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Hon. Herbert H. Lehman
United States Senate

Enclosure