

Richard A. Lester Oral History Interview—JFK#2, 3/22/1974
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Lester was an economic advisor to John F. Kennedy's (JFK) presidential campaign (1960); an alternate delegate from New Jersey to the Democratic National Convention (1960); and Vice Chairman of the President's Commission on the Status of Women (1961-1963). In this interview, he discusses the President's Commission on the Status of Women, among other issues.

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Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Richard A. Lester

March 22, 1974

Firestone Library, Princeton University

By Cynthia Harrison

For the John F. Kennedy Library

LESTER: In my oral interview of December 24, 1970 I explained some of the factors that may have led to my appointment as vice chairman of the Commission [President's Commission on the Status of Women]. During the campaign I participated in a group of academics preparing material and offering advice. Professor Archibald Cox of Harvard served as a sort of leader of the group. He and I had been the neutrals in two major railroad arbitration cases involving the locomotive engineers in '56 and in '60. Then in 1961 I was on the President's Commission on the airlines dispute with Nathan Finesinger [Nathan P. Finesinger] and Keith Mann. I suppose it's out of that sort of background that I was appointed to the President's Commission on the Status of Women. It is possible that Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan], a former student of mine, had something to do with my appointment to the commission, also.

HARRISON: Yes, that was one of the first questions I was going to ask you: why you had been chosen.

LESTER: Well, there were other reasons I suppose, too. I knew Esther Peterson [Esther E. Peterson]. I had seen her in connection with the studies I had been making in Britain and Sweden. I met her and her husband [Oliver A. Peterson] in Belgium. He was the labor attaché in Belgium. Then he went to Sweden. And so I got to know Esther a bit in that connection. I guess

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I had seen her some in this country too, but I don't recall specific occasions.

HARRISON: She had been at Princeton?

LESTER: No. She had been with the trade union movement. She was with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers as a Washington representative, but that had only been somewhat recently, because earlier she had been with her husband in Europe.

HARRISON: I suppose the.... Another thing I wanted to do before we got on to some other things was why the commission was formed.

LESTER: Well, I think there were a variety of reasons. Esther Peterson would be in a better position to tell you that than I am. I think she's now head of the National Consumer's League located in Washington.

Perhaps one reason could be that Esther Peterson had seen some of the developments in Europe and particularly in Sweden where they were moving ahead more than we had in this country. Then there undoubtedly was a political reason as well. A new administration which didn't win by very much, certainly, was seeking support with new programs. A lot of concern and interest had developed about women's status in a number of women's groups: the professional women and the women's organization people who were on the commission, the Catholic women's group, the Negro women's groups, the church women's groups, and people in universities like Polly Bunting [Mary Ingraham Bunting], at Harvard. Women were becoming more aware of their inferior economic and legal position. Women had been moving more and more from colleges and universities into professional and administrative positions and became more aware of barriers to their advancement. Women were also getting into important positions in certain labor unions. Katherine Ellickson [Katherine P. Ellickson], Caroline Davis, and some in the clothing unions, whose names I can't recall, are examples.

Some of the steam for this movement came from people in Washington, women in government who felt that there was a great deal that could be done to improve the situation of women in the federal government itself. There were a number of young women whose husbands had been active in the Kennedy campaign and the Kennedy administration: Tony Chayes [Antonia H. Chayes] was one. Perhaps another was Pauli Murray who had a position in the Justice Department. There was some stirring in other parts of the federal government. I think it was a combination of things. Esther Peterson would be in a better position to know the details than I am.

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I believe that quite a bit of work had been done on the commission project, including the composition of the commission, before Esther and I went to see Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] about her serving as chairman of the commission. Apparently President

Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] had been in touch with Mrs. Roosevelt before Esther and I met with her in New York City, and she wanted to know more about the project before making a decision.

HARRISON: Would you comment on what the goals of the commission were?

LESTER: Yes. I think the goals are pretty well set forth here in the executive order. They included: the development and full utilization of women's abilities and capacities to contribute to the wellbeing of the nation, and affirmative steps that could be taken to eliminate discrimination and other barriers to women's employment in government and in industry. Our emphasis was on getting action. Throughout, there was a feeling that we should not just make another report, make another scholarly presentation. These people wanted results. Therefore we put emphasis on coming up with recommendations that would lead to results. The federal government controls federal employment, so we put stress on that—not only civilian employment, but armed forces as well, with quite a bit of stress on women being able to move up more in the military. We could have John Macy [John W. Macy, Jr.], the civil service commissioner, with the aid of one of his assistants work on that.

HARRISON: Evelyn Harrison.

LESTER: Yes, Evelyn Harrison. So there was another whole area. We wanted to do what we could in terms of direct federal employment in one form or another. Then there was legislation on civil and political rights—a great deal, we thought, could be done there in terms of women's actual rights, property rights, other kinds of rights. Then education, the whole area of education. We tried to pick out fields where something could be done right away. The whole area of labor legislation and labor standards, and social security. So I would say really that what we were trying to do was to select areas where we thought we could make a dent, make a change. We realized that this would be just a start, and that there would be some continuing work so that we wouldn't have the last word. There were, of course, differences of opinion within the commission. One of the things on which there was division was the question of an equal rights amendment to the Constitution. And the people, including Mrs. Roosevelt, Esther Peterson, and the labor union group, who had gotten in all these women's protective laws in the states, were not very supportive at that time of the proposal to seek to achieve equal rights for women by the

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difficult route of amendment to the Constitution. So we had some discussion of that in the commission and it was quite clear that we weren't going to get anywhere on that issue, that we would have been badly split.

Working to complete our assignment in less than two years, there was pressure to get as much done in the way of action and recommendations for action that we could. There was pressure not to wait for the commission's report itself but to get action on items as soon as

we could get agreement on them. That's why we did a great deal in the federal government—in the civil service in the armed services—as we went along.

HARRISON: Respecting the armed services, was there any discussion as there is now, of opening the different service academies for women?

LESTER: I don't believe that the academies were really discussed. We did consider opening up promotion opportunities so that there wouldn't be a lid on how far up women could go in the services themselves.

HARRISON: Was the discussion in terms of integration, sexual integration of the armed services or parallel paths that women took?

LESTER: I don't recall that we discussed any parallel paths, but it would be true that the WAACS [Women's Army Auxiliary Corps] and the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] could go up fairly high in rank. I believe that it was finally agreed that both on the military side and the civil side there would be no lid on women's advancement.

HARRISON: Did the President express any kind of a personal interest in the commission? Did you feel that he did have a personal interest in the commission—and perhaps we could tie that into his attitudes toward women? You were aware of those?

LESTER: Let me try to answer by beginning with this picture of the President with some members of the commission. It was taken at the commission's first meeting—a group that was around the table. Do you know who those people are?

HARRISON: One I know is Secretary Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg], Mrs. Roosevelt.

LESTER: Well that's Senator Aiken [George D. Aiken], a Republican with whom the President had close relations, Esther Peterson, Congresswomen Edith

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Green [Edith S. Green], with whom the President served in the House, and John Macy. Other prominent members included his brother Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], Orville Freeman [Orville L. Freeman], Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff], Senator Neuberger [Maurine B. Neuberger], and Polly Bunting of Radcliffe-Harvard whom the President surely knew personally.

Obviously, strong, independently-minded people were appointed on the Commission. Mrs. Roosevelt had supported Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] in the 1956 and 1960 conventions to which I was a delegate from New Jersey. I had no evidence suggesting that President Kennedy was not supportive of the commission's work and specific

recommendations. And so far as I know, none of the Kennedy women played a significant part in this particular project.

HARRISON: Did the Kennedy women play any part?

LESTER: Well, I didn't see any.

HARRISON: I know, for example, that one of the things that the commission recommended was the appointment of more women to high governmental posts, and this was one area that Kennedy was criticized on from, as you mention, the business and professional women clubs and women in the Democratic National Committee, and I wonder if you have any ideas to what would account for his reluctance to appoint women to high governmental posts.

LESTER: I don't know. I didn't know that there was any reluctance. When one looks over the membership of the commission and observes the names of women appearing in the back of our report who participated in the commission's work, one finds that women and their concerns and interests were well represented. There were a significant number of prominent women operating in fairly high-level positions in the Kennedy administration. To mention a few, one was Katherine Elkus White, former mayor of Red Bank, N.J., who was appointed ambassador to Denmark. Another was Dorothy Jacobson [Dorothy H. Jacobson], assistant secretary of agriculture. A third was Katie Louchheim [Kathleen Louchheim] deputy assistant secretary in the State Department. The available supply of able women seeking appointment to high office in the new administration apparently was fairly thin.

HARRISON: Aside from the statistical evidence of women moving into the labor force in increasing numbers, were there other kinds of external pressure on the commission? You know, covering change.

LESTER: Not that I was aware of. To some extent that was not necessary. Many of the women members

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represented their organizations. Partly we did meet and talk with people in the women's and professional associations because on the commission you had people who to a considerable extent represented the organized elements.

HARRISON: Was there any awareness on the part of the commission that they were...?
[Interruption]

LESTER: There were a number of people on the commission who were especially active. Among them were Edith Green and Marguerite Rawalt, go down

through the list of women that were on the commission. I would say that Mrs. Roosevelt was exceedingly effective. She commanded a great deal of respect. Margaret Hickey [Margaret A. Hickey] of *Ladies Home Journal*, also was respected. She had been giving a great deal of thought and attention to the whole question of women's rights and women's status and what women could do to improve their status. I wouldn't be as aware as some members would have been of pressures on members. I think they would have been more likely to have gotten to Esther Peterson and members representing women's organizations.

HARRISON: Did the commission receive much mail from the "average woman" for example?

LESTER: I don't know. It may have been accumulated somewhere. We had that series of meetings with interest groups and in special subject areas such as the media. We got a lot of reaction from that series of meetings, but it wasn't systematically assembled and summarized so far as I know.

HARRISON: Which member of the commission impressed you the most? Was it Mrs. Roosevelt or...

LESTER: I would say Mrs. Roosevelt was the most impressive, in part because of the skillful, low-key way she handled the commission meetings. She knew what she wanted to achieve and how to get there without seeming to exert any control. It wasn't an easy thing to keep all of the members moving along together, yet having them feeling that they had full opportunity to express their views. Esther Peterson gained the respect and confidence of the members with the extent of her knowledge and understanding. One who put a great deal of work into it and was quite effective was Margaret Hickey. Edith Green was also impressive because of her experience in Congress and the assurance with which she spoke.

HARRISON: Would you say that the equal rights amendment was the biggest source of disagreement within the commission?

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LESTER: Perhaps. It never got up to a vote or anything like that.

HARRISON: What were some of the other issues that occasioned much debate or disagreement?

LESTER: I would have to go through the minutes of the commission meetings to answer that question with assurance.

HARRISON: Did the President's Commission ever meet with organized groups of women apart from the representatives on the commission? I know that the Royal

Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, which of course came out in a completely different time and context, in that it was fairly recent, crossed the country and met with women's groups in various parts of Canada, and I was wondering what the President's Commission...

LESTER: Well, we met with the sub-committees of committees and we met with individual lawyers. We had a special meeting with Negro women on the problems they had. We did not have organized groups making presentations to the commission, nor did we hold open hearings of that sort.

HARRISON: When you say that things weren't present, in terms of...

LESTER: ...of such organizations having programs that they wanted to present and explaining the things that they were pressing for.

HARRISON: So would you say that the President's Commission had more of a responsibility of leadership in terms of—to use a new phrase—raising the consciousness of America regarding the position of women.

LESTER: I think that's it. With Mrs. Roosevelt as chairman and the other members of the commission, people may have thought that their interests would be taken care of.

HARRISON: ...and say, "Well, everything is fine."

LESTER: Yes, they will work it out. At least I wasn't conscious of outside pressure groups seeking to address the commission or present position papers. The only possible case may have been the Equal Rights Amendment.

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HARRISON: Did you take a side in that controversy?

LESTER: I didn't have to. It never got to that. As far as I can recall, there wasn't in the commission any strong person openly pressing for the Equal Rights Amendment.

HARRISON: I think I remember reading that Marguerite Rawalt was one who was most in favor of it.

LESTER: I think she was. She is a lawyer. I'm sure you are right. But she decided not to press it openly in meetings of the commission.

HARRISON: Because she would have been beating her head against a stone wall?

LESTER: Yes. I don't think she would have gotten much support for it then. She was so interested in working out civil and political rights. She apparently thought she could accomplish more that way.

HARRISON: One of the issues that has only recently gotten tremendous amount of discussion among women's groups who are interested in those issues has been the issue of birth control and abortion. I know that birth control was dealt with very briefly in the report of the commission and abortion was not even mentioned. And I wondered if that had even come up at all, to any great extent. Was that just because nobody thought of it or was...

LESTER: We sought to focus on issues on which a good case could be made for corrective action on such grounds as inequity or efficient use of resources. Abortion is a very contentious issue that would have diverted us from our assignment.

HARRISON: What would you say that the impact of the commission was?

LESTER: The impact has taken a variety of forms and stimulated numerous results. As I have already stated, the commission had a significant impact on employment in the federal government by advancing opportunities for women and promoting equal treatment for them. Also it had an impact on government regulations affecting private employment. And it stimulated the formation of state commissions that carried the message to state government.

HARRISON: Citizens' advisory...

LESTER: Yes, advisory councils.

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HARRISON: Were you pleased with the number of recommendations that were implemented or...?

LESTER: Yes I have been. I did not participate very fully in the follow-up. I was asked if I would stay on in the federal council and later on if I would consider being chairman of that body after Margaret Hickey gave it up, the chairmanship of the council, but I only stayed on the council about a year after the commission ended. I felt that I wasn't the person to hold that position. It needed women's leadership.

HARRISON: Would you say that there was a relationship between the President's Commission and the resurgence of feminism?

LESTER: I am not really qualified to give a good answer to that question.

HARRISON: What role did the commission play in the passage of the Equal Pay Act that had been introduced so often after the Second World War and was it finally passed as a sort of a final act of the...

LESTER: The commission did play a role, especially Esther Peterson did.

HARRISON: You were chairman of the committee on private industry which—one of the things that it included was federal employment. And there was a dissent from the committee's report because of the fact that the committee had recommended voluntary compliance on the part of employers. Do you think that that was a correct position in retrospect?

LESTER: I think so. Because I don't think we had a chance of getting compulsory legislation at that time.

HARRISON: Well, those are all the questions I have. Are there any final comments that you'd like to make?

LESTER: Well, I would say this. I have been in and out of government quite a bit. There are certain times when you can really do a great deal to improve things by having a good idea and working it out. The Depression of the thirties was such a time. A war is another such time. In normal times, it is much harder to bring about great change. We are fortunate that the commission operated during the first two years of the Kennedy administration. Innovation was in the air. New ideas and programs were being developed and put into effect. It was a time of transition.

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Leaders of women were thinking in terms of actions to improve the situation of women. The recommendations of the commission came at the right time. In a sense they began a new movement for women's rights.

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[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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