

Oral History Interview

with

PETER LAWFORD

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Los Angeles, California

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Why don't we begin by my asking you if you recall when you first met President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]. What were the circumstances and where?

LAWFORD: Do you want to try a level here because I'm soft, I speak softly, but do you just want to see?

STEWART: Yes, it's okay.

LAWFORD: You said what? I'm sorry.

STEWART: I was asking if you recall when you first met President Kennedy and what your impressions of him were?

[-1-]

LAWFORD: It was directly after the war and he was going in and out of, I guess, R and R [Rest and Recuperation] places, you know, as he still had that, you know, the original injury. And I met him at Gary Cooper's house

with... It's funny, I remember at the same time I met Chuck Spalding [Charles B. Spalding] and his wife--they were both in the service, Chuck and Betty--and he said, "How do you do," and "How do you do", and he looked terribly, terribly thin, and very sort of weak. He was very nice, and it was... It was nondescript there was nothing. At that point if somebody had said, "That's going to be the President of the United States," you know, I... Because I hadn't sat and talked with the man; I never even got a chance to.

And then after that through the years, I met his sister [Mrs. Patricia Kennedy Lawford], I met Pat in '49. We were

[-2-]

sort of thrown together here and there, different things. I got to know him, but I didn't really get to know him until after I was married, which was in '54. I shouldn't say that, it was probably a couple of years before that we started having...but not the relationship we finally wound up having which was a marvelous one, and one I'm very, very grateful for. We, I think had hit it off, because he loved my business. He loved anything to do with the arts and with the motion pictures, and he was always terribly interested in my business which never ceased to amaze me. I mean, more than a passing, more than a surface thing, which I think he got from his father. Because his father was involved in the motion picture business, as you know. I think that's probably where he got it. He used to read *Variety* like I read *Variety*.

[-3-]

Not the daily *Variety* but the weekly. And he knew what was going on.

For instance, one day after he was President, I was talking to him on the phone and he said, "What did *Ocean's Eleven* do?", which is a picture that we made, soon after 1960. He said, "How's it doing?" I said, "Well, it's doing... It's first time around, it's been out two weeks." He said, "What about England?" I said, "We haven't opened there yet." And he said, "I read (again in *Variety*) I read a gross in some town." I was not aware of that gross, and he said, "That wasn't as strong as it was in Boston." For instance, you know, that kind of interest. Now perhaps he didn't know the grosses; he was interested in that particular picture because I was involved in it. But he did have a tremendous grasp of my business especially, which impressed me, which impressed

[-4-]

every actor he came in contact with. And the same thing applies to painters, or Frost [Robert Frost], you know, people like that he just admired.

STEWART: Well, were you, you weren't married to his sister but you knew him during the 1952 campaign when he ran for the Senate. Do you recall that at all?

LAWFORD: Yes, but I was not involved in that campaign. You know, I didn't work in that. In '60 is where I did most of my little contributions in '60.

STEWART: Do you recall anything about his attitude toward his work in Congress or his career in Congress and then in the Senate? He would've been in the Senate by the time you got to know him. Was he always totally serious about his work?

LAWFORD: Completely involved at all times and loved it and never, never questioned, "Oh, I've got to go, and so and so, and that you've got to be there because they're calling your name."

[-5-]

Another marvelous thing about him, to depart a minute from what you are saying, there's a projection of what you're saying. His interest in everything was just, you know, to watch it was something incredible. And, of course, they all have that, the whole family.

STEWART: It's often been said, for example, that his attitude about his career changed quite drastically after he was married. Well, he was married when you...in '53, '54.

LAWFORD: He was married just before me.

STEWART: So you really didn't know him before that.

LAWFORD: No, not well. And I didn't go, I wasn't asked to the wedding, because I didn't know him that well.

STEWART: When you first got to know him well which would've been after 1954, was there always a general, good discussion of politics when you saw him, for example, at the home in Hyannis Port or where ever it was?

[-6-]

LAWFORD: Well, it was constant, you know, even before I was married. Dinner, lunch was always taken up with--not only national but international politics. Stimulating, marvelous dinners and lunches, you know, and one of the things I got out of being involved with that whole scene was it made me--even though before being involved with the Kennedys or with John F., I was interested in what was happening to the world, as we all should be--but it opened up a whole other thing for me, which I'm also grateful for. And you really sort of had to get into it to stay alive in that group, because, you know, they have all the facts at their fingertips and who is running for Congress in that district and so and so and so, which I, of course, wouldn't be expected to know. So

you'd listen, pretty soon, suddenly I've figured out what was happening. But he, you know, is the kind of man you could sit and listen

[-7-]

to by the hour because he knew not a little about a lot of things, he knew a lot about a lot of things, which you don't find.

STEWART: Would he talk about his own personal work in the Senate issues that he was involved in, committees that he was working on and things like this?

LAWFORD: Oh, sure, there were discussions of things that he was particularly interested in and to see push through--his disappointments and his victories. But the thing that always really impressed me about him was the extraordinary awareness and marvelous common touch he had to just anyone--incredible.

STEWART: Do you recall any discussions of the whole business of Senator McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] in the early 1950's?

LAWFORD: No.

STEWART: This, of course, was an extremely controversial

[-8-]

thing because of, for one thing, because of the relationships between Ambassador Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy] and Senator McCarthy.

LAWFORD: Yes. I myself was not a McCarthy fan at all; and, as I think, probably our first misunderstanding I had with my wife was over that.

STEWART: Really?

LAWFORD: And so I let it drop there, you know, cool it, because, you know, she, because of the situation had a certain allegiance which was her business and it was fine, but it wasn't my thinking. But I never got into it with him.

STEWART: Did you get any impressions in these days, say in 1954-55 of the influence of Ambassador Kennedy on the political thinking of President Kennedy?

LAWFORD: On his thinking?

STEWART: On his general attitude about political problems.

[-9-]

LAWFORD: Oh, I think, Mr. Kennedy's knowledge and years of experience, you know, was worth its weight in gold to him, but I know they disagreed on certain things. And I don't think anybody ever made up John Kennedy's mind for him. I don't think anybody swayed him, including his father. He might have, I think he took what he wanted and then sifted it, you know, evaluated it, and then did what he wanted to do with it. But that was another thing about him, the fantastic grasp he had for everything. He'd just cut right through it. I've seen ten people in a room saying, "Well, I think this and this and this" and he... We all know this about him. I saw it happen a few times. It's scary the way he'd just go right to it. Zip.

STEWART: Can you recall any serious disagreements between his father and he over definite questions?

LAWFORD: No. I cannot really. But I know there were

[-10-]

different roads taken, but I don't really want to get into that.

STEWART: Even for historians of the future?

LAWFORD: They'll find it out from someone else. You see, I'm in a funny spot that, you know, me talking.

STEWART: I realize.

LAWFORD: It's difficult because even though I'm divorced, I'm still so fond of all of them. And I'm brainwashed by them because... I had an adoration for him, no question about that. But it's a fantastic family so that I'm just throwing that in because it makes it a little difficult for me, because my allegiance is still with them.

STEWART: Alright. Well let me ask you then, in 1956 of course he made a try for the vice presidency. Were you at the convention in Chicago? Do you recall that at all?

LAWFORD: No I wasn't. Yes, certainly I recall it, I was watching it, I watched it, on television, that close, close race. I remember at the time wondering, and I've

[-11-]

never asked the question which is interesting, why he really went for that. And I remember being sad that he lost it but at the same time glad because I, everybody could see what was going on, what would happen.

STEWART: Do you recall him being terribly upset about it, about losing?

LAWFORD: He was upset but he was one of those marvelous people who could literally shrug it off, you know. But he was one of the original "Better luck next time" kind of attitude, which was marvelous. He wasn't as upset as I thought he might be. Perhaps in his mind was 1960, because he made, as you know, became a national figure from that Convention. A lot of people, millions of people didn't know who Jack Kennedy was until he emerged there. And I remember one funny thing. It was right after that he came out here with Teddy Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen]. I went to

[-12-]

pick him up at the airport. And it was probably two weeks to three weeks afterward and going through the airport with the bags and stuff, a couple of people said, "That's him. There he is." And somebody else said "That's what his name, you know, the fellow at the Convention.", you know, that kind of thing. So I threw a joke at him, I said, "That's all you need, one television show, and you're bigger than I am in the airport." Because before they'd recognize me because they'd seen me in a picture, but they didn't know who he was. And I said, "This has got to stop," you know, we had those sort of jokes.

STEWART: He made a few appearances during the 1956 campaign out here, didn't he, for Adlai Stevenson? Do you recall these at all?

LAWFORD: Yes. There was one, I think, at a hotel downtown--I've forgotten the name of that. His sister

[-13-]

used to go on a lot of those lectures. And as I say, I didn't really get into it until '59 and '60. And in '60 Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] gave me the job of trying to coordinate talent for shows and things for different cities. I was supposed to only handle the western states and it got to be national. I loved every minute of it. I never worked so hard, but it was good.

STEWART: Before we get into that, let me just ask you when, if you recall, when it became apparent to you that he was going to run in 1960. Was the discussion of it from '56 on or...

LAWFORD: '56 on.

STEWART: Was there ever any question? When was it firm in your mind that he was going to make a run for it?

LAWFORD: '57, in '57.

STEWART: It was openly talked about that he had made up his mind, that's what I'm getting at.

[-14-]

LAWFORD: Oh yes.

STEWART: There's no doubt about that.

LAWFORD: '57. I may be wrong, maybe the end of '57, '58 sometime around then.

STEWART: Was there ever any discussion in this period that he couldn't make it or that he might have to drop out, or were they always completely optimistic about the chances?

LAWFORD: No, completely optimistic about the chances. Even the Catholic thing really didn't bother them. I mean, it was a concern, but it didn't keep them up at night. His health, you know, that could have made him get out of it, that operation.

STEWART: He had the...

LAWFORD: ...the second operation, you know, which was--let me think of what year that was--'55.

STEWART: The end of '54 and '55.

LAWFORD: Yes, it was, I think, the beginning of '55, somewhere

[-15-]

then, that could've, you know, put him out of everything, because he was really ill with that back, but he fought his way through that, and, as you know, wrote the book while he was lying on his back.

STEWART: His health after that was never a question?

LAWFORD: There was a question in the minds of his opponents. Because I can remember at the campaign in the first week Johnson's [Lyndon Baines Johnson] people, India Edwards and Connally [John Connally], remember they got up and said, "Withdraw because of Addison's disease." So it was a concern with them, but never with him or the family, because he had that kind of guts, as they all do. And the man had novocaine probably twice a day in his back which probably has been told to you.

STEWART: Was there ever any talk of the vice presidency in 1960?

[-16-]

LAWFORD: About Johnson?

STEWART: No, about him accepting the vice presidency if he couldn't...

LAWFORD: No, I never heard any of that.

STEWART: What part did you have...

LAWFORD: You see, don't forget, that I lived out here, you know, and a lot of that talk, most of that talk was back east, and I wasn't part of it. I'm sure that Pat would know a lot more about those things.

STEWART: What part, if at all, did you have in the California situation or were you at all involved in California politics at the time? There was a considerable struggle and a considerable confusion over what Pat Brown [Edmund G. Brown] was going to do...

LAWFORD: Oh, I know.

STEWART: ...and the organization of the delegation and so forth. Did you have any part at all in that whole thing?

[-17-]

LAWFORD: No, Pat did because she was a delegate, Pat Brown made her a delegate.

STEWART: Were you at the Convention in 1960?

LAWFORD: Oh yes.

STEWART: What were you doing?

LAWFORD: I was just watching and helping and if I was told to do something, I'd do it, you know. Carry this here, take that there. And organizing the entertainment, helping. But nothing, you see, my part was not a vital part at all. So that's why I don't think historians are going to get too much out of what I have to say. I'm sure they will from other people.

STEWART: Alright. As far as the campaign is concerned then you were heavily involved in organizing entertainment at various functions.

LAWFORD: In my field. I was never sent to get Congressman So and So to swing over to So and So, you know.

[-18-]

I was not, and I don't think probably I'm equipped for that because I'm not, I like politics but I'm not politically minded. I said to him once a couple of years after the incident with the Addison's disease, I said, "Mr. President, that's one reason why I really couldn't get involved in your game at any level because of that kind of hypocrisy." I said, "How can you look that man in the eye, or Connally or India Edwards?" And he said, "That's it. I'm sure you work for producers you don't like. I said," To me, that's a little bit different. It's not stabbing a man like that." But he just...

STEWART: Well, what basically did your work consist of during the campaign? You said you were organizing the....

LAWFORD: Yes, we did. Gosh, I was sending people out, I was coordinating is what I was doing. Appearing, MCing, coordinating--that was my

[-19-]

function. From New York to here, you know, they'd call and they'd say, "We need somebody." And wherever he went, naturally, we'd try to get all of the biggest names we could. He was very grateful.

STEWART: Who were some of the movie people who you picked who made significant contributions in the 1960 campaign?

LAWFORD: Frank Sinatra, I would say, and, oh gosh, name it. Unless they were Republicans, they all worked for him, all the top people. And Ella Fitzgerald, Sammy Davis, Dean [Dean Martin]. You can go on and on. Myrna Loy, Shelley Winters. Really the cream of our business came out for him. And it

really wasn't hard to get anybody to work; all you had to do was pick up the phone. If they weren't busy, they'd go.

STEWART: As far as the Administration is concerned, did

[-20-]

your relationships with him change considerably after he became President?

LAWFORD: I really am not, I don't think, equipped to describe this properly: What happens to a relationship as close as we were and suddenly it's "Mr. President". There's an intangible though which is very hard to put down, but there's suddenly--not as if somebody put a wall there--but there is just suddenly, it's not "Hey, Jack," it's Mr.... You know, you call him Jack like if you had been in the shower or something like that, but I found myself doing it all the time.

STEWART: Really?

LAWFORD: A lot of the time and got used to it, but the initial thing was a shock. But as far as a change between us, none at all. He didn't change. I probably changed in deference, whatever you want to call it, before the office. I became probably stilted in the first few months. But he

[-21-]

didn't, you know, he was like a kid with a great big marvelous new toy. Oh, he just wallowed in it, he loved it so, every aspect. I said to him one day... The biggest thrill he used to give me once in a while he'd say, "Where are you going?" I'd say, "I'm going so and so." And he'd say, "Why don't you fly with me?" And you know, Air Force One, you know. I'm one of those people; I don't get over those things. And I said to him one day sitting in the, just the two of us up forward in his executive little cabin, and I said, "What do you like best about all this, Mr. President?" And he said, in this order--Milt Ebbins [Milton Ebbins] was with me, the two of us, only three of us were sitting there--he said, he'd been in about six months, he said, "The work, the traveling conditions, and the White House switchboard." [Laughter]

[-22-]

And he said, "It's going to be terrible. Can you imagine us," he said, "in 1968? We're going to have to be waiting for our bags in the terminal," you know, because he had a humor that wouldn't stop, incredible sense of humor.

STEWART: What kind of a sense of humor? Was he one to tell stories or what kinds of jokes, was he a good storyteller?

LAWFORD: A very good storyteller and a great put on artist, one of the world's great put on artists. You know, he'd say to somebody, "Well, now, I don't know about that suit, you know, what do you think about that, you know, it's a good looking suit," and he'd drive somebody crazy. I'm just using that, it could be anything. Brittle and fast and quick, and well, the Kennedy wit we don't know about, incredible.

STEWART: Was he one to remember long stories or involved jokes to tell?

LAWFORD: He could--total recall, that man, total. Oh,

[-23-]

he used to do things that'd scare you, remember things that I'd forgotten. He was beautiful, a beautiful man.

STEWART: What about his ability to relax and tear himself away from the Presidency during his three years.

LAWFORD: Completely, completely. You know, it's like somebody said at 6 o'clock. Now you know I forgot when he was running, but he had, and I understand, that Mr. Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] had that capability of sleeping when he wanted to sleep, having fun when he wanted to have fun. Now, he had the same thing. Some horrendous thing would be going on and he'd be involved in the evening or in talking to you or whoever he was sitting next to at dinner, even though, you know, he could divorce himself, but never completely, he'd always have his finger on it. Mind constantly going, constantly. He'd be in the middle of something and say "Wait a minute," and ring somebody up and say, "Now what

[-24-]

about this," and so and so. "Do you think we should do that?" Like after dinner.

STEWART: Did you always have the impression, though, that he could totally relax or that he relaxed as much as he wanted to?

LAWFORD: Always. It wasn't a forced relaxed state. He loved Palm Springs. He came here, twice, I think, during the Administration. That and Florida. He was just happy as a clam. If he had the sun and a beach or a desert and a little golf which he only played about three times. I played with him a couple of times, when he was President.

STEWART: I've heard it said that he was the type of person who always wanted to know in advance what his day was going to be. He wasn't one, for example, on a weekend just to get up and slop around the apartment or something like that, that he had to have his whole day planned, or at least in his own mind what he was going to

[-25-]

do. Do you agree with that?

LAWFORD: Yes, I would agree with that, because it's a family trait. They know pretty much, the same kind of thing, what the day is going to be, whether it was pleasure or business. They're a well-organized group.

STEWART: Did you see him frequently in the White House when he was there? How frequently?

LAWFORD: Yes, I did, I was very lucky. Last few times I was asked the way it was fun, you know, I only went to one of those big formal things--two, three hundred people. But when it was fun was like eight or ten people on the second floor, when it was relaxed. It could've been anyone's house. And he was so proud of that house and what Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] had done to it, and was doing to it. And every time we'd go there, he'd just, it didn't matter, he'd come up from the office and he'd say, "God, you haven't seen the new Cezanne that Jackie bought,"

[-26-]

and run you downstairs to some Oval, Green, whatever Room and show it to you, and just really it was a joy for him, a joy to watch.

STEWART: What about his friends during those White House years? Again, a lot has been made of the fact that he presumably kept most of his old friends and picked up very few new friends, intimate friends while he was in the White House. Would you...

LAWFORD: No, I'd go along with that. Oh, sure. I agree with that. I don't know how close he was to Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] before, but I know maybe that grew, that relationship grew when he was in there. But, I mean, as fellows like Chuck Spalding [Charles F. Spalding], and Lem Billings [K. LeMoyne Billings], Red Fay [Paul B. Fay] all those fellows who were close to him, you know them, they were always around.

STEWART: Did you have any other involvement with the Administration or any kind of official or

[-27-]

semi-official....

LAWFORD: Me?

STEWART: Yes.

LAWFORD: No.

STEWART: Nothing at all?

LAWFORD: Oh, God, no. I was just an inlaw. I saw a lot of him and the White House because I did a picture there in '61 called *Advise and Consent*. And I was living in at the Sheraton. We were working in the old Senate building. And it was funny, it was an objective thing. Every night Jackie was out of town, she was in Glen Ora, I think, and he was by himself. Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] would call up about noon everyday at work and say, "What are you doing for dinner?" [Laughter] You know, "What are you doing for dinner," he wants you to come to dinner, of course and Milt, my manager. And he was very fond of Milt. The two of us, there used to be three of use for dinner seven nights in a row. He used

[-28-]

to go to bed about half past nine, quarter to ten with the music going. And one night, Milt and I were sitting like this in the little sitting room, probably the coziest part of the house, and we looked at each other and Milt said to me, "Do you realize that we've been here seven nights in a row?" I said, "Are you getting bored with it?" [Laughter] And he said, "No. But isn't that fantastic!" He says, "Look at me, who the hell am I? And look at you. Two nuts sitting in the White House." These things--they just happen and you remember them.

STEWART: Do you recall what his reactions were to that film?

LAWFORD: I don't know whether he ever saw it.

STEWART: Really?

LAWFORD: I'm sure he did. I can't remember whether he, I don't remember him saying anything about it.

[-29-]

STEWART: Well, it came out in '62 or '63.

LAWFORD: Yes, '62.

STEWART: I mean it was...

LAWFORD: It was in '62. But, there was an instance there of his awareness and he said, to me when he knew I was going to do it, he said, "When you get all squared away after the first couple of weeks," he said, "would you like to bring anybody in the company for dinner?", which I thought was very nice. Then he thought about it some more, and talked to Jackie about it. This was his volition, because I would never, you don't know me at all, but in my wildest dreams would I ever say, "Would you invite *Advise and Consent* company for lunch, or dinner." But he did it. And all I had suggested. I thought it'd be nice if maybe Otto Preminger and his wife, who was directing it, if he had them for a drink. But he asked everybody in the cast for lunch. And the two

[-30-]

of them came and were there for lunch. It was a terrific lunch. And you know, who does that, brother-in-law or no brother-in-law. But, there again is his interest in the business itself. He wanted to meet a couple of people in the cast and it was good, it was really good.

STEWART: What were his likes and dislikes as far as films were concerned? Again there have been stories that he tired quickly of pictures and couldn't sit through the whole thing.

LAWFORD: He did, he did. No, there are two reasons for that: one is his back and the other, if it wasn't shaping up, he wouldn't waste time with it. He'd rather be off reading something, reading. But he loved films, and if it was good, he'd stay. But they better be good.

STEWART: Do any particular films stand out in your mind as ones that he especially liked? Or disliked?

[-31-]

LAWFORD: I have to wrack my brain. I'm trying to think of the years but... What was showing? Maybe we can come back to that. I really can't think. But he always had such good constructive criticism, like when *Ocean's* came out, he picked all the things that were wrong with it, just bang and he was right.

STEWART: One thing I forgot to ask you about was the Inauguration. What part did you have in the show that was put on at the Inaugural Ball?

LAWFORD: The gala?

STEWART: The gala.

LAWFORD: Well, Sinatra, the two of us, Frank worked very hard on it, got all those people together, and put that together. We were in Washington a couple of weeks before, and it was a job they said they'd never.... The goal was, I think, a million four and we got the million four in one night.

[-32-]

Because, there again, because now he's President anybody would come running, you know. But the people who'd worked hard were the people that we got, you know, to perform. And it turned out it really was a good show.

STEWART: The people who had worked during the campaign?

LAWFORD: During the campaign. Ella [Ella Fitzgerald], and Louis Prima. Of course, Olivia [Olivia de Havilland] didn't work in the campaign, but... Bette Davis had worked hard. And, you know, you try to give those people preference over other performers because they were there when they were needed. Luckily, they were all top people.

STEWART: Is there anything else about the Inauguration that really stands out in your mind as far as his reactions to the whole thing? Was there, for example, an air of unreality about the whole thing that....

[-33-]

LAWFORD: For me, it was complete unreality. To this day sometimes I do that. Part of the enormity of it as such, at least for me. But a rather bad thing happened the day of the Inauguration because I had a rotten cold, settled in here, and it turned into pleurisy. So the night of the Gala that we were talking about, it felt like a spear going through me. I had a temperature and all the rest of it. So the man told me, the doctor told me--remember there was a terrible snow storm--he said, "At your own risk." I thought to myself, "Well, this is purely stupid, it is now." I said to myself, "Well, I can see it again in '64. I'll see it in '64." So I stayed in bed with all the stuff the man had given me. I got up in the afternoon and went over for the swearing in. I came up the steps and he was talking to some, a lot of people around. He broke away and came over and

[-34-]

he said, "What happened to you?" And I told him. He had time to notice that I wasn't there which was pretty wild. And he said, "Come on, you've got to see it." And he started to walk me around the first floor, even though an awful lot of people were around. And that's, you know, as I said, he kept doing that. There was no, "Well, okay, so it's the White House," you

know, not him. He used to keep a check on visitors, how many under fifteen, how many over fifteen, you know. Dave Powers [David F. Powers] used to bring that in every day, really interested in that.

STEWART: This lasted through the whole three years?

LAWFORD: Yes. Oh, boy. And they kept growing in the three years, if you look at those lists of young people.

STEWART: Do you recall any major changes in him during the three years? Did so much of this get to be old hat after a while or was it always....

[-35-]

LAWFORD: No, no. He never lost that; he never lost that spirit. He would've had that now. He'd have had it if they'd let him run for twenty years; he was that kind of man. No, no, no, never became jaded that I saw at all, with any aspect of it, thrived on it. And as I said before, in that order, work...

STEWART: Well, we've gone over. You said 7:30, I think.
Is there anything else you want to add now? Bear in your mind that, you know, hopefully you're going to think this thing over and maybe we can go into it in more depth.

[-36-]