

Samuel B. Lewis Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 08/05/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Samuel B. Lewis
Interviewer: Nelson Aldrich
Date of Interview: August 5, 1965
Place of Interview: New York City
Length: 15 pages

Biographical Note

Samuel B. Lewis was the vice president and general manager of the Carlyle Hotel in New York City. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's stays at the Carlyle Hotel during his presidency and the presidential suite where he stayed, among other topics.

Access

Open

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed October 11, 1965, copyright of these materials has passed to the United States Government upon the death of the interviewee. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Samuel B. Lewis, recorded interview by Nelson Aldrich, August 5, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Gift of Personal Statement

by Mr. Samuel B. Lewis

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, Samuel B. Lewis, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and a transcript of a personal statement approved by me on August 24th, 1965 and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this document is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

3. A revision of the above stipulation governing access to the aforesaid document may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States or his designee if it appears desirable to revise the conditions herein stipulated.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

5. The donor retains to himself during his lifetime all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument. After the death of the donor, the aforesaid literary property rights will pass to the United States of America.

Signed

Samuel B. Lewis

Dated

Aug. 24th 1965

Accepted

Wynne L. Larson
Archivist of the United States

Date

Oct. 11, 1965

Samuel B. Lewis– JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	John F. Kennedy's [JFK] stay at the Carlyle Hotel in November 1960
2	JFK's stay at the hotel as a senator
3	Public's reaction to JFK's arrival
4	Decorations in the Presidential Suite
5	Layout of the Presidential Suite
6	Security at the hotel
7	Other guests' reactions to JFK
8	JFK's interactions with the staff
9	Greeting JFK when he arrived
11	Effect of JFK's visits on the Carlyle Hotel's business
12	Housing various heads of state
13	Location of the Carlyle Hotel
15	JFK going to the theater

Oral History Interview

with

SAMUEL B. LEWIS

August 5, 1965
New York City, New York

By Nelson Aldrich

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ALDRICH: Mr. Lewis, was President Kennedy the first President-in-office to stay at the hotel [Carlyle Hotel]?

LEWIS: He was the first President-in-office, yes, to stay at the hotel.

ALDRICH: Do you remember the first time he came to the hotel as President?

LEWIS: Well, as President-elect he came here in the last part of November, 1960, right after Thanksgiving, and at that time he stayed with us the longest period of time during his term in office. Five days.

ALDRICH: What room did he stay in?

LEWIS: He stayed in what was then the first Presidential Suite, Apartment 34-B, which is directly across the hall from the largest suite that we made available and decorated as a Presidential Suite for him and Mrs. Kennedy the following year.

ALDRICH: Was 34-B a large suite?

[-1 -]

LEWIS: 34-B has the same number of rooms as 34-A which is directly across the hall and was later the Presidential Suite, but the rooms are somewhat smaller and, of course, the panoramic view from 34-B was not nearly as nice as 34-A.

ALDRICH: Was Mrs. Kennedy with him on that trip?

LEWIS: Mrs. Kennedy was with him, yes.

ALDRICH: I believe he had just come back from Palm Beach.

LEWIS: That is correct.

ALDRICH: Had he stayed at the hotel as a Senator?

LEWIS: He had been here I believe once as a Senator and I'll tell you how he happened to come to the hotel. His sister-in-law, Princess Radziwill and Prince Radziwill stayed here for quite some time prior to that and were thoroughly familiar with the hotel and liked it very, very much and it was through them that Senator Kennedy came to stay at the Carlyle and later as President-elect and then President.

ALDRICH: I see, in other words it was not through Mr. Truman?

LEWIS: No, definitely not.

ALDRICH: Do you remember the occasion when he came as a Senator?

LEWIS: Yes, very vaguely. I don't really remember it because -- it isn't that a Senator is not important, everyone is important to us -- but any number of Ambassadors and Senators stay here. He was important to us at that time, of course, as a Senator but I think more so because

[-2 -]

he was a Kennedy, and because his sister-in-law stayed here.

ALDRICH: Did you meet Senator Kennedy at that time?

LEWIS: Yes, I did.

ALDRICH: What was your impression of him?

LEWIS: I was very, very favorably impressed. I don't think that is the right adjective to use because he had such a tremendous personality you couldn't help but be impressed. He left an everlasting impression on me, each and every time he came here. You would think, well, this is it, but every time it was more and more and more. He had this tremendous personality and interest in you -- he always had time not only to say hello but to inquire about things in the hotel, and about many different employees later on when he became more familiar with everything here.

ALDRICH: Well, to go back to that time following the election in November of 1960, can you give us some idea of the special arrangements, you, as manager of the hotel, made for his presence?

LEWIS: Well, we thought we had done everything possible that one could to receive a President-elect for four or five days, but we underestimated the people here in the city and the excitement he created. For example, when he arrived, there were fully 2,000 people on the corners of Park Avenue and 76th Street and on Madison Avenue and 76th Street. There were 250 policemen around the block, not to

[-3-]

mention numerous special agents, and although we were not equipped to handle crowds like that it was amazing how smoothly it went. Everything went off beautifully and I think it did so because he had a lot to do with it. Everything went so smoothly. One other item, though, I think there were about 50 newsmen in the lobby twenty-four hours a day -- that was the only problem but it wasn't too bad.

ALDRICH: It's a rather small lobby...

LEWIS: Very small, yes.

ALDRICH: Did they camp out, so to speak, on the floor...?

LEWIS: Oh yes, but we got accustomed to them and, of course, we wanted to be nice to everyone. These people worked unusual hours, the press-men who were here all night, the policemen who were here all night, and we made sure they had sandwiches and coffee and something to make them feel that they were not isolated somewhere and that they had to just wait out the eight or nine hours on duty.

ALDRICH: What other special arrangements were made at that time?

LEWIS: Well, we had a maitre d'hotel and his assistant stay around the clock to take any orders that might come from the apartment. We special maids assigned to

the apartment and, of course, the apartment itself had been especially decorated for his use. We had a great deal of art because both he and Mrs. Kennedy were interested in art. We had numerous valuable paintings in the apartment that appealed to both

[-4-]

he and Mrs. Kennedy, plus antique furniture -- several pieces that they like very, very much. But, of course, what they did like more than anything was the beautiful, panoramic view of the city through this huge picture window they had. Just fantastic.

ALDRICH: Who decorated the apartment?

LEWIS: French and Company.

ALDRICH: I know that Mrs. Kennedy was terribly impressed.

LEWIS: Yes, she was. She knew Mr. Samuels of French and Company, and she was consulted several times after the first visit about different things that they liked. Incidentally, French and Company is under the same ownership as the Carlyle and it was because of that it was very easy for us to bring things into the apartment that we wanted or that the President and Mrs. Kennedy wanted.

ALDRICH: Could you describe the arrangements of the rooms in this Presidential Suite?

LEWIS: Yes, the Suite is a duplex on the 34th and 35th floor. The downstairs area consisted of a living room, facing south with a beautiful view of Manhattan, especially at night. It is tremendously breathtaking to see all the lights on. Then, there was the library, a full sized dining room, a kitchen and a maid's room on the first floor. On the upstairs floor there were just two bedrooms, a glass-enclosed solarium, and two terraces.

[-5-]

ALDRICH: How did you insure the privacy of Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy?

LEWIS: Well, of course, the special agents, the Secret Service, took care of that. For instance the apartment is on top of the building. There is nothing above it but an elevator motor room, a water tank, a little extra space, but the signal corp took over that area for their equipment, and, of course, they had special agents placed up there in the hallway outside the elevators. There were two special agents around the clock with a telephone and then in the downstairs lobby, there would be two agents and a telephone and anyone who wanted to go to the floor or who inquired, were referred to them; they cleared them first and they either went up or they didn't. Then they were checked again when they got off the elevator and then, of course, the police took all precautionary measures about

packages and flowers and things. We had a special room for the bomb squad and any packages or flowers or things of that nature coming in, why they checked it out first.

ALDRICH: What was done about maid service?

LEWIS: All employees assigned to the apartment, waiters, maitre d'hotels, assistant housekeepers, maids, were all thoroughly screened and checked out prior to the President arriving at the hotel. They simply worked with the agent in charge, as to when they could get into the apartment and take care of things. Usually, once President and Mrs. Kennedy got into the apartment they did not want to be bothered.

[-6 -]

ALDRICH: Did they give any dinners there, or did they go out for dinner?

LEWIS: He went out mostly for dinner although he did have several small dinners in the apartment. For instance, on his first visit here after being elected, all the cabinet members-to-be came to the apartment at various times for talks and meetings of all kinds and there would be luncheons there and dinners of that type.

ALDRICH: How did the other guests feel about this deluge?

LEWIS: Well, in the beginning, some of the people didn't like the crowds on the street and the fact that the sidewalks were blocked off at various times, and they were checking very carefully on anyone going into the hotel. But they eventually grew to like this and as a matter of fact, I think that every time the President arrived there would probably be 200 people in our small lobby. And most of them were guests and their friends so they couldn't have disliked it very much. They must have approved of it very much because they would skip luncheon and dinner and everything else just to be there when he arrived -- just to have a view of him and the First Lady.

ALDRICH: So there were no cancellations of rooms or anything like that?

LEWIS: Oh no, nothing like that.

ALDRICH: This is primarily a residential hotel...

LEWIS: Indeed it is, yes. That is another thing that made it so nice because after President and Mrs. Kennedy started coming here often, they

[-7 -]

began to recognize faces among the guests.

ALDRICH: How many times, all told, did the President come here?

LEWIS: Well, I would guess a minimum of twenty times while he was in office, and Mrs. Kennedy perhaps double that.

ALDRICH: Do any of these occasions stick, particularly, in your memory?

LEWIS: Yes, I think the one that stands out above all was the time -- the only time really -- that the two children were here. Mrs. Kennedy came with the two children and she had been here for two or three days and this was so wonderful. I think he seemed to have, more than anything else in New York City, a sense of freedom which is very difficult for a President to have. But he would take the two children and actually walk through 76th Street to the Park with the Secret Service following or he would walk down Park Avenue. I thought it was wonderful that here was the President walking down the street just like any citizen here in the city. It's amazing. Everyone recognized him -- but he kept going and didn't stop -- he enjoyed that. It was the only time that the family was here at one time.

ALDRICH: Were the children put up in the same apartment?

LEWIS: Yes, oh yes. They were all in the same apartment.

ALDRICH: Did any stories come back to you from the help -- waiters, etc., about the President?

LEWIS: Well, except that he was very friendly with everyone and he made

[-8 -]

them all at ease around him. I think that was one of the nicest things that I can say about both he and Mrs. Kennedy -- it didn't matter who it was, whether it was a waiter, a maid, a scrub woman or a clerk, they always made them feel at ease -- they never made them feel as though they had some fear or complex they had to deal with or to be shy or anything like that. I think that was the nicest thing -- they were natural with them -- that was it.

ALDRICH: Each time that he came, did you greet him?

LEWIS: I did, yes -- I have numerous clippings and a beautiful colored picture he sent me which is autographed. I certainly will keep those as long as I live, all of the possessions I have of his visits here -- many of them.

ALDRICH: How did he greet you?

LEWIS: Well, after he knew me so well, he called me by my first name, Sam. All the agents used to come at that time -- usually it was the same ones and especially his staff that he brought with him -- they were usually ten or twelve, Mrs. Lincoln, everyone -- all the same people: Pierre Salinger. Everyone called me Sam.

ALDRICH: Were they all billeted in the hotel?

LEWIS: Oh yes.

ALDRICH: How about telephones?

[-9-]

LEWIS: Well, there is a White House switchboard on the third floor -- and any calls coming in through our switchboard were simply re-routed to the White House switchboard and that was all handled by them. They had four operators here all the time. In other words the switchboard was activated any time they were coming in and we had no problems at all with the telephone.

ALDRICH: Did he always give you advance notice before coming?

LEWIS: Most of the time, yes, we had two or three days but sometimes it would be very short notice. I'll tell you something that I thought was so wonderful that was typical of President Kennedy. Mr. Dowling, who is the owner of the Carlyle and a great friend of the President, (he worked very hard during his election) came in to see me one Saturday and he said, "Sam, I wonder if you could contact Mrs. Lincoln at the White House and see if I might have a word with the President on the phone." So I put the call through and I simply handed the receiver to Mr. Dowling. I said they were putting the call through but the President himself answered the phone. When the White House rang for Mrs. Lincoln, instead of Mrs. Lincoln answering the phone the President answered and he said, "I happened to be walking by."

ALDRICH: Can you make any comparisons between ex-President Truman's visits and those of President Kennedy?

[-10-]

LEWIS: Well, if I made a comparison it would be, I think, on this basis, that whenever President Kennedy was arriving and the public had any inkling of it, it just electrified everyone right away and there was just this feeling in the air of tremendous excitement, you know. That was the big difference, and it was there, it was genuine, sincere. There would be these huge crowds all around waiting to just get a glimpse and he would always, it seemed to me, see one person in the crowd either in the front of the hotel or in the lobby that he knew before he was President, before he had been elected, and

no matter how much pressure was on him, he would stop and work his way through that crowd and go over and say hello. Everyone would look around and no one would know who it might be, but it was someone that he had known in the past and he never failed to say hello. That was the big difference, the thrill -- he thrilled everybody -- just to know that he was coming here. They were tremendously excited and they would stand for hours, I have seen people stand in front of the hotel for eight hours hoping he would come out of the building.

ALDRICH: How do you account for the popularity of this hotel with such distinguished visitors?

LEWIS: Well, there is no question about it, I think that it reached its top in popularity through President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy. Because after the new Presidential Suite was completed and redecorated, then

[-11-]

the former Presidential Suite became what is now known as the Prime Minister's Suite and it also supplements the Presidential Suite, for his party at the hotel. Now, to give you some examples. After President Kennedy stayed here a number of times, we had Prime Minister Nehru here twice. Nehru stayed here ten days once and on another occasion four days. We had Prime Minister Macmillan here, and the Prime Minister before him, Eden. Then we had numerous heads of these small countries in Africa come here, whose names I don't think I could pronounce if I knew them, but they were tremendously interesting people. They all began to come here. The U.N. delegations came here and it just mushroomed; it kept going and going. Then, again, on many occasions when the President was here, we would have a delegation from one of these new African countries. The fact that he could speak French made it very nice, he never hesitated to stop when he saw them in the lobby, to chat with them and exchange greetings, you see there was always something like that going on -- always.

ALDRICH: Now I'm going to ask you to blow your own horn for a bit, and tell me why you think this hotel is such a good one.

LEWIS: Well, first the hotel, although it is thirty-five years old, was beautifully planned by the architects. There is nothing today, I don't believe anywhere, they will compare with the apartments and what each

[-12-]

individual apartment has. In other words, we have something to sell here, a product. Now, it was up to us to go out and establish a reputation. I have been here thirty-five years and I would say a successful hotel means that there has been a successful person, a personality at the head. And, I believe that the first requirement of a successful hotel man is dedication to

the job. Because if you only make an average effort you would be swamped with problems in no time at all. That's about the best way I can put it.

ALDRICH: What about the location of the hotel?

LEWIS: Well, the location of the hotel, since 1945, is probably the best in New York City for this reason: this area within a period of about fifteen years has completely changed. This will undoubtedly be the art center of the world someday because I can recall prior to the war, there were no art dealers up here at all; and now from below 72nd Street up to 86th Street, there is a premium on commercial space for art dealers, antique dealers. The beginning of that, incidentally, was again Mr. Robert Dowling, who is President of the company which owns French Company and the hotel. He was instrumental in bringing the art world up here. The first people associated with the art world who came up here were the Parke-Bernet people. And this building across the street was put up especially for them and they were the first to move this neighborhood. After that, one by one,

[-13-]

they all began to move up here. If you go down the avenue here you see nothing but art and it's even mushroomed out into the side streets -- you can see many of the old brownstone houses that have been converted into art galleries now and that's what makes the neighborhood so wonderful and so interesting. In fact, after Labor Day, during the winter months there are thousands of people here on Saturday, in the neighborhood, and you have a feeling you are in Times Square sometimes because everybody is out looking at art, they are interested in art.

Incidentally, as you know, I'm on the third floor here and I can look right out on Madison Avenue. I happened to be looking out there once when President Kennedy came down on the elevator, got off on the second floor, walked down one flight and walked across the street into French and Company to look around. There was no one with him. Mrs. Kennedy always interested me too that way because we would be very excited here about her arrival and I would be waiting at the entrance on 76th Street to greet her, but she was so familiar with the hotel that she would get out of the car eight blocks below, walk up with the Secret Service men and window shop and then walk in to the Madison Avenue entrance and take the elevator and go up to the apartment and I would still be waiting on 76th Street. But the President never did anything like that.

[-14-]

ALDRICH: Can you think of any other anecdotes?

LEWIS: No I can't, there weren't too many of them. He did once go to the theatre that way I think -- escaped the Secret Service men and went to the theatre one

night and came back in. He caused a lot of excitement but he was that type of person. I think people loved him for that, he was doing the unexpected always, and always just another human being.

ALDRICH: Thank you very much, Mr. Lewis.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-15-]