

**Charles J. Lewin Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 12/08/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Charles J. Lewin  
**Interviewer:** Ed Martin  
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**Biographical Note**

Charles J. Lewin (1902-1965) was a reporter, editor, and general manager of the *New Bedford Standard Times* and president of the *Cape Cod Standard Times*. This interview focuses on Lewin's personal and professional interactions with John F. Kennedy [JFK] during JFK's time as president, among other topics.

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By Charles J. Lewin

to the

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Date June 12, 1968

Charles J. Lewin– JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

CHARLES J. LEWIN

December 8, 1964  
New Bedford, Massachusetts

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

**MARTIN:** Charlie, after the election of the President did you attend the Inaugural?

**LEWIN:** Yes, I was invited to the Inaugural, received a telephone call from Joe Kennedy asking if we'd like to go, and I told him we certainly would. So we received invitations to the Inaugural ceremonies, and my wife and I went to Washington. As you will recall, there was a tremendous snowstorm in that period. In fact, Washington was virtually tied up by the snow that had fallen, and the city authorities obviously were unable to cope with the amount of snow because it was so unusual in Washington. Well, we stayed at the Sheraton Park Hotel, and I remember having gone down to Senator Kennedy's office in the Senate Office Building to pay my respects and at that time I met various members of the secretariat, [Joseph W.] Joe McIntyre was there, and Joseph P. Kennedy was there, too. He asked me if we were all taken care of, and I said we were, and he said he would like us to be his guests for the Inaugural gala that night. And we accepted the invitation quickly. Well, that afternoon we got a call to the effect that Carroll Rosenbloom, who was the owner

of the Baltimore Colts football team, was bringing over some tickets for us, that he would deliver them at the hotel. And this did come about rather late in the evening because it was impossible for Mr. Rosenbloom or almost anybody else to get the kind of transportation one needed to get around town.

It happened that at the hotel there were other persons from Massachusetts, and we did run into Senator Antone Silva, who represents the third Bristol District in the State Senate of Massachusetts. Well, Senator Silva went to a function that evening, and his wife remained at the hotel. The Senator didn't return for hour after hour, and his wife was quite concerned about where he was. In fact, she was almost in a panic about it. And she wasn't able to get to the quarters that had been reserved for the Silva family. So we arranged for her to occupy our room at the Sheraton Park Hotel while she was waiting for the Senator to get back from the occasion that he was attending.

After almost two hours of waiting, we were able to get a cab to take us to the Armory at which the gala was being held, and there we learned that many of the entertainers who were to attend had been delayed in arriving. So that actually it was midnight or later before the show got under way. Sitting in the Kennedy box with us were Joseph Timilty of Boston and some New York friends of the Kennedy family. And since the box was the Kennedy box, we were very close to the stage and could see Peter Lawford and Frank Sinatra running the show, as they did, together. It was one of the greatest variety shows that I have ever seen. It also was one of the most moving because there were some tremendous addresses, readings delivered by such persons as Frederic March and Anthony Quinn, songs by Ethel Merman and many other top artists of the day. I remember looking up at Mr. Kennedy as he arrived with the President-elect and the First Lady-to-be, and we had a few laughs about the incident afterward, because when Joseph P. Kennedy took off his overcoat, off came also his tails of his dress suit, so that he stood up in the spotlight with only his boiled shirt on and quickly had to retrieve his long tails from the inside of the overcoat to which they had become frozen, I guess.

In any event, the show lasted until about three in the morning and the President made a very wonderful short address of appreciation to the fund raisers who had done so well for him in the campaign and who had produced the gala. He looked very bright and cheerful and in his best demeanor that evening. We wondered how he was going to be able to get up early enough in the morning to go to his Inaugural, but as we all know, he didn't sleep much and did appear at the Inaugural in his finest moment probably, having prepared and delivered an Inaugural, the phrases of which will live forever in American historic addresses. His statement, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," his call to the youth of the United States, his challenge to the allies and other countries to work with our country in the maintenance and sustenance of world peace are immortal as Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, in my opinion.

A picture that was taken at the Inaugural resulted in an amusing experience a year or so later which I'd like to tell you about. The photograph caught the eye of the Kennedy family, and Mr. Joseph P. Kennedy asked me if I could get a copy of the picture so that it could be placed in the family scrapbook. He said that he had seen the picture in color in the Miami Herald. It included the photographs of Ann Gargan, Mr. Joseph P. Kennedy's niece, and the First Lady and Mr. [Chester V.] Clifton, a Naval Aide of the President, and the then Vice President, Lyndon Johnson, and Mrs. Johnson. I wrote to the Miami Herald and asked them if they had the print of the photograph, saying that the Kennedy family would like to have it, and my friend on the Herald, who was the managing editor at the time, said that the picture had been taken by a very famous photographer employed by the Detroit Free Press, and the Detroit Free Press, also a John Knight paper, had the negative. So I got in touch with the photographer, a man by the name of Tony Spina, who later did a remarkable sequence of photographs of Pope John in Rome. And I told Spina that the Kennedys would like that picture very much, and he said he would be glad to furnish some prints of the picture. And he did

send two or three to me, and he said one of those he'd like very much to have autographed by President Kennedy. So when I received the prints, I sent one to Hyannis Port, Mr. Kennedy having gone to the Riviera for the summer, and the other I held until his return at his suggestion. He said that the President would be at Hyannis Port around Labor Day and suggested that I then send the photograph to Hyannis Port at which time Mr. Kennedy would have returned from France. So I held the photograph, and about Labor Day I sent it to Hyannis Port and reminded Mr. Kennedy that he was to ask the President to autograph it for Mr. Spina and then to send it back to me, and I would return it to Mr. Spina with the autograph of the President of the United States. Well, several weeks elapsed after I sent the picture to Hyannis Port, and I heard nothing about it. So in a conversation with Mr. Kennedy in the early part of November, as I recall it, he asked me, he said, "Did you get that picture back from the White House with the autograph for Spina?" indicating his considerateness because he had a lot of things on his mind, yet wanted to be sure that having received the picture by courtesy of the photographer, he wanted to reciprocate. So I said, "Well, I haven't got it." And he said, "Well, I certainly will take care of that." And he called the White House on another phone while I was talking with him and said that he would like to have that picture autographed and sent back just as soon as possible. So, in about a week or two I got a big package from the White House, and I assumed that it was the photograph. It was. I opened it, and I found out that the President of the United States had autographed the picture to me instead of to Mr. Spina. He had written on it, "To Charlie Lewin--my very best wishes. John F. Kennedy." So I told this to Joe Kennedy, and explosively he said, "Well, we're going to get that picture for Spina. Do you have another copy of it?" And I said, "Yes. . . ." [Tape cut out for a few words]

MARTIN: Do you have opinions or recollections concerning the people President Kennedy named to his Administration?

LEWIN: I do have recollections concerning two appointees to the Cabinet. And I don't want to give the impression that anything that we may have said in New Bedford had any final effect on the selection of members of the Cabinet. I don't want to appear to be presumptuous at all. But in the early days of the formation of the Cabinet, Mr. Joseph P. Kennedy talked with me about two or three of the positions that were to be filled. I volunteered to him that Basil Brewer, the publisher of the Standard Times, at that time, had been greatly impressed by Douglas Dillon, as I had. And a speech that Mr. Dillon had made on the continent of Europe concerning the financial relationship of the United States with its allies had impressed us very much and had seemed to be the type of thinking that we hoped would prevail in the Administration with respect to financial policies. So I said to Mr. Kennedy that we thought that Douglas Dillon would be an excellent choice for Secretary of the Treasury. And I said that Mr. Brewer especially felt that he should be given consideration. Well, Mr. Kennedy said he would present this suggestion to the incoming President, and within a few days he called me back and he said, "Now, we are very much interested in Dillon. Does Basil know Mr. Dillon?" I said, "So far as I know, he doesn't. But I do know that he has studied his career very thoroughly and has felt all along that he would be a fine person to fill the secretaryship." Mr. Kennedy said, "Well, we certainly would give that every thought." And, as you know, when the Cabinet appointments were made, Douglas Dillon was selected to be Secretary of the Treasury.

In the course of our conversations, Mr. Kennedy raised the question of the Attorney General. And he raised the question specifically as to whether son, [Robert F. Kennedy] Bob would be a proper choice to fill the Attorney General post. From my own view, I said I thought Bob would do an excellent job because I had knowledge of the work that he had done in some of the congressional committees which had investigated crime and other important matters that affected the people of

the United States. Well, Mr. Kennedy, in a subsequent conversation, said that a poll had been taken in which a list of persons who were potential choices for Attorney General had been submitted to people throughout the country, and he said that the name of Bob led the list as a person who was favored by those who had been polled. So I, rather early in the game, got the distinct impression that Robert Kennedy would be named Attorney General of the United States by his brother, the President.

MARTIN: In the months that followed the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion, there was also this general comment as to who was to blame or how serious the mistake was, Charlie. In the light of what has happened since, how do you assess this decision not to bring in air cover at the landing?

LEWIN: My own feeling is that the Administration erred in not sending in air cover to fight with the landing troops and naval vessels that the government had encouraged to attack the [Fidel] Castro government in Cuba.

MARTIN: Well, now, in subsequent conversations, perhaps, with the President or some of his advisors, did you ever believe that he recognized this error immediately or did he ever recognize it as an error?

LEWIN: I think that he did recognize it as an error. I think he felt, as he looked back on it, that he should have given the word for air cover to have participated in that action.

MARTIN: He certainly later publicly assumed . . .

LEWIN: He assumed the responsibility. It was one of the most forthright, frank, candid statements of responsibility that I've ever seen in a head of state. And, of course, it was similar, you might say, to the responsibility that Eisenhower assumed when he said that

he was aware of the U-2 flight that Gary Powers had made over Russia.

MARTIN: Well, now there were prisoners taken in this Bay of Pigs invasion, and in subsequent months an occasion arose when arrangements were to be made to swap tractors for the prisoners. Do you have any recollections of that, Charlie?

LEWIN: Well, there was one day that I received a telephone call from Mr. Kennedy, Joseph P. Kennedy, who said that the White House was considering a plan to trade tractors, large tractors, in exchange for prisoners who had been taken by Castro. I was told that this matter had been discussed with several persons and that at least three of them felt that a trade of tractors for prisoners was a good idea, and they would endorse it publicly. The three persons who were said by Joe Kennedy to support this were Eliot R. Roosevelt, and [Richard] Cardinal Cushing, and Walter Reuther. And Mr. Kennedy asked me what I thought about it. I said that I did not think it was a good idea. I said I felt that the Cuban exiles who had formed an attack party on their homeland had done so in the full knowledge that they might be sacrificing their life or their freedom in an effort to save their homeland from the communist Castro, and I felt that to barter for their freedom with large tractors which would solidify the Castro government in Cuba, would enable it to produce the food that it needed, and would provide machines that could be used to make war would be a trade not in the best interests of the United States. I said that I felt that even the captives themselves, if they had a vote in the decision, would vote no.

And I recalled to Mr. Joseph P. Kennedy a situation, that I had recollected occurred in the Second World War when there was also a proposal made by negotiators to furnish tractors to the Nazi government and its allies in exchange for freedom of Jewish prisoners. I said that, too, it was my recollection, had been very controversial

and had not been consummated because once the negotiations started, the asking price of the Nazis kept on being increased from time to time. And he said that he'd like the documentation on that World War II situation, which I obtained for him by asking our Washington bureau to go to the official government agencies that had the information. I sent to Mr. Kennedy the details of the World War II incident, the exchange that had failed, but obviously I didn't prevail, and the weight of opinion was that the trade should be tried anyway.

Well, as we recall, Castro raised one objection after another to the original proposals made by the United States. He raised his asking price, he wasn't satisfied with this offer or that offer, and that negotiation was unsuccessful and fell through and the captives remained in custody of Castro until a much later date when Attorney [James B.] Donovan negotiated the release of some of them. And, of course, as we remember, the Attorney General of the United States and some others in the Administration obtained supplies of medicine, baby foods, and other non-war-making products which could be used for release of the prisoners.

Now I happen to have a rather vital interest in the Castro situation because our newspaper early in the day had evidence that Castro was a communist, and we published this, said he was a communist at the time that he was invited to the United States to appear before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and at the time he was invited to appear before a group of Harvard University students. [I, as a member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, wired George Healey, the editor of the New Orleans Times Picayune, who was President of the American Society, and told him that I thought that the invitation to Castro to appear as a guest of honor at the ASNE annual meeting was an insult to editors and newspapermen and Americans generally, that the invitation should be withdrawn, that I, for one, would not attend the meeting at which homage was to be paid to this communist murderer because even at that time he and his group were engaged in drumhead court martials

and sending people to executions without fair trials. It seemed to me that the official society of newspaper editors erred in giving him the backdrop of acceptance by such an important organization. Healey called me up, was very critical of me for having made the statement which I had given to the press wires, said I was only seeking publicity, and they were going to go through with the invitation to Castro. The State Department became involved also, and Roy Rubottom, who had been the person who served to extend the invitation to Castro, issued statements explaining why the State Department had given clearance to Castro. Soon after my statement was publicized, I received a cable from Havana asking me to go to Havana to debate with Castro. Well, I could never speak as long as Castro speaks, his harangues generally going four or five or six hours. So I cabled back that I was too busy to go to Havana, and to be very frank, I knew that if I went to Havana I might not come back to New Bedford for some time, at least.)

MARTIN: Charlie, were you ever invited down to the White House during President Kennedy's Administration?

LEWIN: My wife and I and Mr. Brewer and his wife were invited to be guests of the President and the First Lady at the memorable Pablo Casals concert, which was certainly one of the highlights in the social and cultural history of the White House, and certainly a highlight of my own experiences as a newspaperman.

MARTIN: Do you recall anything about that?

LEWIN: Well, I recall it vividly because it was such a spectacular and beautiful occasion. I remember that when we went into the White House, an equerry escorted us to the room in which the concert later was to be held, and there were introductions of government officials and persons who were leaders in the musical, literary, professional life of the nation. Then, after serving cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, there was a receiving line at which the President and his wife stood

greeting their guests, flanked by Governor Munoz Marin of Puerto Rico and his lady. The President was jocular and happy, and the First Lady was beautiful as usual. There were other members of the Kennedy family present, but I didn't see Joseph P. Kennedy there although his wife was present. And I asked the President when I greeted him in the receiving line where his father was, and he said, "Well, someone has to stay in Massachusetts to mind the store." At the dinner I recall having been seated with the Secretary of Labor, later Supreme Court Justice, Arthur Goldberg, and a number of persons who were in the top echelon of the government and cultural life, as I said, of the country. My wife was at another table, and she had the same experience of enjoying conversation with the brilliant group of persons at the table. After the dinner, we assembled in one of the large rooms of the White House, and Casals, with two associate musicians, began his concert. It was one of the most beautiful concerts I ever heard, and I am a lover of music. It was enthralling, really. After the concert the President arose and spoke briefly, and the governor of Puerto Rico spoke. And then, in a gesture which was knightly and courtly, in all of its aspects, the President of the United States called to the front of the audience Alice Longworth Roosevelt and told the group that Casals had last played in the White House when her father, Teddy Roosevelt, was President of the United States. It was a most gracious gesture and, of course, evoked murmurs of appreciation from the group in the room, and then the President extended his arm to Mrs. Longworth and escorted her from the room and thus ended probably the most brilliant evening that I ever have been permitted to attend.

MARTIN: Charlie, how much influence did the father have on his son as President of the United States?

LEWIN: In my opinion, the son had more influence on the father than the father had on the son, in the latter days of their relationship anyway, before Mr. Joseph P. Kennedy was stricken ill. I was at

Palm Beach in January of 1961 shortly after the President had assumed office. And the Kennedys invited my wife and me to have lunch with them, which we did. Joe Kennedy told a story that he said was attributed to Senator Barry Goldwater. Of course, Joe Kennedy knew he was a controversial figure. He said that he was the subject of conversation between Goldwater and another official, and someone said to Senator Goldwater, "Well, what would you do if Joe Kennedy were your father, and you were President of the United States?" And Joe took delight in saying, "Well, Goldwater said, 'If Joe Kennedy were my father, I'd lock him in a room at the White House, and every morning I'd go up to see him and I'd say, 'What should I do today, Dad?'"

But, of course, this pleased Joe, but he knew that John was independent, had his own views, and he said to me on one occasion before the election, "You and I are prehistoric, antediluvian. The kind of conservative thinking that we have had is out of style. It's the new generation, the more progressive type of thinking that motivates Jack and the people who are with him." Of course, I never agreed that I was either antediluvian or prehistoric or even conservative, except in some basic principles of government. But I could see what Joe meant, what he intended to convey, and that was that some of the conservative viewpoints that were espoused by Robert A. Taft and which this newspaper and its publisher and editor had followed and approved, that this type of thinking was being swept along in the current of change. And, of course, to pay a bit of tribute to Senator Taft, he never was static in his thinking. He was always moving ahead, changing his views. I can remember when I presented to him a suggested change in the Taft-Hartley Act which had been presented to me by Bert Cole who was the head of the Boston Central Labor Union and a leader of the pressmen's union in Boston, and Taft took it and said, "It looks good to me, and I think it's something that we can accept to amend the law." And, of course, as you know, Taft was very advanced in his thinking on federal housing and, in fact,

at one time, one of the national real estate boards accused him of being communist in his thinking because he wanted to provide public housing. Well, this is an aside and doesn't really apply to the Kennedy years except that the Kennedys, as we know, John and Joe, had a very high respect and admiration of Robert A. Taft.

MARTIN: Well, do you believe, Charlie, that the father may have exercised some influence in the matter of appointments by his son?

LEWIN: I think there's no question about it. I'm sure that he did. I'm sure that he did. I also think that early in the Administration, though there was no criticism of J. Edgar Hoover, it is correct to believe that the Kennedy Administration was thinking of a successor to Hoover because the statement was made to me that Hoover had few years before the age of retirement would be upon him, and certainly there was a necessity to select a good man to replace him. And the name of Allen Dulles who was head of the CIA was raised in that connection in conversation in which I participated.

MARTIN: Now, following the father's stroke, do you think that affliction may have had some bearing on any direction the members of the family may have taken, on their thinking. I would assume that there was a sense of loss there because it deprived the Ambassador of many of his faculties. But was there anything that might have occurred as a result of that?

LEWIN: In my opinion, yes. In my opinion, influences that were not as stable, as well balanced, as mature as Joseph P. Kennedy had greater weight with the Administration, and possibly with the President, than had been the case when there was consultation with the father. I have reference to some matters of legislation that I feel were influenced by some of the more liberal associates of President Kennedy in the Administration, some courses of action that he might have been dissuaded

from taking if his father had been able to present his point of view, whether it be more conservative or whether it be more mature. But the younger and less well-seasoned advisors such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and that type of thinker had more sway than was the case when the opposite forces were pulling with the President.

**MARTIN:** Charlie, can you recall any other occasion when your services might have been called upon by the Kennedy Administration in Washington?

**LEWIN:** Well, I don't know whether my services were called on, but it was a pleasure for me to assist in a Massachusetts incident which was called to my attention by Kenny O'Donnell, one of the presidential assistants. Mr. O'Donnell called from the White House with respect to an appointment involving a cousin of President Kennedy, Ed Fitzgerald, who was in the state tax department. Fitzgerald was eligible for a promotion due to the retirement of the incumbent, but the nomination had been held up by the Governor's Executive Council. And O'Donnell said that it was held up because of the position taken by Governor's Council Ernest C. Stasiun of the First Councillor District in which New Bedford is and in which Hyannis Port is. O'Donnell asked me if I would get in touch with Stasiun to see why he was holding up the confirmation of Fitzgerald. I reached Governor's Councilor Stasiun in Boston and told him that I had received a call from the White House from Mr. O'Donnell inquiring about this. And he said, "Well, I didn't want to hurry on this confirmation. I did hold it up. I think there is another man in the department who may have more points and more experience and thus be more correctly the appointee." He said, "I'll give every consideration to this call of yours and from the White House." I said, "Well, Governor's Councilor, consideration, hell. I think you ought to vote to confirm this appointment." And I ended the conversation with him and called Mr. O'Donnell and told him the substance of Governor Councilor Stasiun's remarks. I

said, "What do you think I ought to tell the Governor's Councilor now?" He said, "You tell him that the President of the United States wants to know why he, Councilor Stasiun, is holding up the confirmation of the President's cousin." So as soon as I could reach Stasiun I delivered this message to him and within hours, either that day or the next day, Stasiun withdrew his veto and the promotion was confirmed by the Governor's Council.

**MARTIN:** This is the conclusion of part two of an interview with Charles J. Lewin of the New Bedford Standard Times. The date December 8, 1964, the interviewer Ed Martin of Senator Kennedy's staff.