

Anthony J. Celebrezze Oral History Interview—JFK #2
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Celebrezze, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (1962-1965), discusses mental health and mental retardation programs and legislation during the Kennedy administration, and John F. Kennedy's assassination, among other issues.

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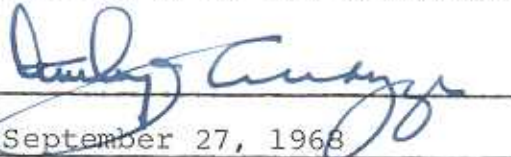
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Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Anthony J. Celebrezze

By William A. Geoghegan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GEOGHEGAN: This is a continuation of the interview of Secretary Celebrezze. Mr. Secretary, would you comment generally on President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] interest in mental health and mental retardation programs?

CELEBREZZE: Well, President Kennedy always expressed a keen interest and a keen desire to do more in the field of mental health and mental retardation. As a result of his deep interest in it, there were committees appointed to study the question thoroughly, and out of those reports came perhaps the most far-reaching legislation dealing with mental health and mental retardation than at any time in the history of this country. His basic concern was that the children who had incidences of mental retardation, that if we could reach them fast enough and train them, that they could become useful, self-supporting citizens. And also, his other interest was that in the prenatal care and the research work necessary to find out the causes of mental retardation, that if we stepped up our program in this area that many children who were born mentally retarded could be saved. And, as you know, a great deal of research work was done both inside and outside the government, and as a result certain tests were developed. In certain instances now, if we get to the

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individual soon enough and give him a test, we can prevent a degree of mental retardation. And I think that's a great contribution to humanity.

Also, the individuals that were mentally retarded and in which there was nothing much that could be done for them because of their inadequate learning ability, he wanted us to develop a program where these individuals could be employed and become self-sustaining. And as a result of that, as you know, a directive went to the various departments in government and also an appeal went to private industry to give employment to mentally retarded individuals. And many of the departments, including the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, did employ. I think we have about twenty on the payroll now. These individuals are doing very good work within the limit of their mental capacity, but the point is that they're happy and they're self-sustaining, they're earning their way. I think that of all the programs that the President was interested, this one was closest to his heart, particularly mental retardation. And it's another one of the many great contributions that he made to this country and to humanity during his tenure of office.

GEOGHEGAN: Do you recall any specific legislative items which were introduced or passed on this subject during President Kennedy's Administration?

CELEBREZZE: Yes. As I stated earlier, the most far-reaching legislation dealing with mental health and mental retardation was passed by the 88th Congress running into the millions of dollars, not only for research. The basic problem that the President had in mind was building community centers to treat mental retardation rather than these large institutional buildings that we had. And out of the mental health, the mental retardation program, it is now possible in cooperation with the states to build community centers where the parents of the child or, in the event of mental health, where the wife or the husband or the children can visit the parent regularly without

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having to cross the state, and give them an opportunity of taking them home during the weekends. And I think that this, plus the fact that he wanted to start a greater effort in research by building research facilities close to universities or in conjunction with universities for the purpose of doing research both in mental health and mental retardation—that bill passed. We have seen very good results as a result of that legislation.

GEOGHEGAN: Did you ever discuss these subjects mental health and mental retardation, directly with the President, do you recall?

CELEBREZZE: Yes, on occasions. As I stated earlier, the President generally had a great deal of confidence (from what I could determine) in the members of his Cabinet and didn't want to be bothered with details. He generally gave you the overall, made the overall policy decision, made his wishes known to you in what direction that he wanted to move, and then it was up to you to implement that and get the program on the road.

GEOGHEGAN: Mr. Secretary, I'd like to turn our attention to the tragic events of President Kennedy's death. Do you recall when the last time was that

you saw President Kennedy?

CELEBREZZE: Yes, I saw the President—I think it was two days before the assassination. It was the night that he was giving a reception for the members of the Court, the Supreme Court. Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] had just gotten back to Washington from her illness, and Anne [Anne Celebrezze], my wife, and I stopped and talked to them. I was rather chiding him a little for sending me out to Los Angeles in what I thought was a very hot spot with some problems that he was having out there with the Spanish speaking people, and he turned to Anne and says, “Well, that’s the reasons I send him there, because he does such a good job wherever I send him.” And that was the last time we saw him.

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GEOGHEGAN: And where were you at the time you heard the news of his assassination?

CELEBREZZE: I was sitting here at my desk. I was in a conference when my secretary came through the door, and I knew something was wrong because his face was white and he was stammering. And he told me then that the President had been shot. Quite a few of us then gathered in the office here and turned on the radio for more reports on it, and there was nothing but silence. We were all stunned.

GEOGHEGAN: Would you care to record your thoughts and your emotions at that time and during the next few days?

CELEBREZZE: Yes. I think that it was a state of, I had a mental state of absolute disbelief. I couldn’t bring myself around to the thought that we in America would commit such an act. We had read about it in other countries where there were revolutions and where the heads of government were assassinated or killed, but we just.... I couldn’t bring myself to believe that it could happen in America, but it did happen in America. I think much of it came out of the basic hatred and prejudices and discriminations that we still had in America and which the President dedicated his life to eliminate. And I was just absolutely saddened. I don’t think I could have felt any more saddened had I lost a member of the family.

GEOGHEGAN: Did the assassination cause any special problems here in your operation of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare?

CELEBREZZE: No, it didn’t. Everyone.... I had a staff meeting immediately after Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] was sworn in as president, and there was continuity. I impressed upon the heads of my department that under democracy government must keep moving and that we had an obligation to keep government moving, that the continuity of government under a democracy

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was very important and that we should give whatever support necessary to the new President, regardless of our feelings. And they responded nobly.

GEOGHEGAN: Do you recall your first official contact with President Johnson following the assassination?

CELEBREZZE: Well, I saw him first the night he came back with the body. I didn't speak to him at that time. My next contact with him was several weeks later, except that he did call a Cabinet meeting, as you recall, and asked us all to continue with our work. Then I had a talk to him sometime later in rather depth about the programs of the Department and what President Kennedy was very quietly interested in, and he told me to continue along those lines.

GEOGHEGAN: Mr. Secretary, before we conclude the interview, I was wondering if you would care to comment about any—or let me change that. Are there any criticisms that you have of the manner in which President Kennedy conducted his office from the point of view of how he approached the powers of the presidency or in his relations with the Cabinet or in his relations with Congress?

CELEBREZZE: No. I thought that he handled things fairly well in the duties imposed upon him as president of the United States. It was a difficult task. Of course, I had a great deal of admiration for him, and I thought he handled things very well. He grasped matters rather steadily and studied them and met issues head on. Personally, I think he brought such a richness to the office, both in stature, in mental capacity, and in his deep affection for humanity that I think that as time goes by, history will record that he was truly one of the greats.

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GEOGHEGAN: In what specific ways do you think he will be remembered most by the historians and by the people of this country?

CELEBREZZE: First, the great encouragement that he gave to the youth of this nation. I remember as he said in his Inauguration speech that a new generation had taken over. And if you scan the list of the individuals that were close to him, they were all young people, comparatively young people. And he brought a new freshness, a new approach, to government, and, as I say, he knew that certain things had to be done and he also knew that—as many of us know in public life—that when you start to change the status quo, you're going to have some difficulty, but that didn't discourage him. He brought a freshness, and, above all, I think that he brought a great deal of culture which we were lacking, not only to the White House, but brought a great interest nationally to the arts, which we needed.

GEOGHEGAN: Mr. Secretary, if there's nothing further, then we can conclude this interview at this time. Is that permissible with you?

CELEBREZZE: Yes.

GEOGHEGAN: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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