

Roger L. Stevens Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 1/22/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Roger L. Stevens
Interviewer: August Heckscher
Date of Interview: January 22, 1964
Location: Washington, D.C.
Length: 28 pages

Biographical Note

Roger L. Stevens (1910 - 1999) was Special Assistant to the President on the Arts (1964-1968); Chairman of National Council on the Arts (1965-1969); and Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (1964-1968). This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s interest in the cultural legacy of the U.S., Stevens' role in planning and fundraising for the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and Stevens' admiration for JFK, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

Stevens, Roger L., recorded interview by August Heckscher, on January 22, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Roger L. Stevens—JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

ROGER L. STEVENS

January 22, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By August Heckscher

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HECKSCHER: Roger, perhaps you would begin by telling us of your first contacts with President Kennedy and how these led to your becoming the Chairman of the Board of what was then called the Cultural Center.

STEVENS: My first contact with President Kennedy was the result of a request on his part that I have lunch with him when he was a Senator. It was December 1959. Needless to say, I accepted his invitation and we met at the Century and had a lunch that

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lasted nearly until four o'clock.

HECKSCHER: He came up to New York for the occasion?

STEVENS: He came to New York for the occasion. I had been active in Stevenson's campaign during the primaries and also as a money raiser for the Democratic Party, and he wanted my advice as to his plans on the primaries and his campaign towards achieving the nomination as the President.

HECKSCHER: Were you a Kennedy man at that time?

STEVENS: Well, I was in a peculiar position at that time. I, of course, had worked for Adlai Stevenson in two campaigns and while I greatly admired the President, I was in a position, as a number of us were, that we had to stick with Stevenson until he took a firm position, although I did not think he could be re-nominated. So we talked about the various problems and affairs that could lead to securing delegates

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in each State. And he went over each State in which he intended to enter the primaries. I think the thing that interested me most was whether or not he should enter California. I urged very strongly that he not enter California because I felt that in 1956 Adlai Stevenson had used up so much strength in fighting the primary ballot out there that he had very little left for the Presidential race, even if it had been closer. He was completely exhausted after six months of climbing up and down that huge state of California. The late President then said that he felt the same and that he had not planned to enter California and he was trying to find out if his opinion was correct.

HECKSCHER: This was in the Century Club in their main dining room? You didn't have a private dining room?

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STEVENS: No, we were in a corner of the main dining room. I think people would have been very surprised if they had really known what our conversation was about.

HECKSCHER: Lots of things are done at the Century Club, but I didn't know that Senator Kennedy's Presidential campaign began there too.

STEVENS: I doubt if his campaign began there. I think he was campaigning for President for many years. But he certainly laid a very careful ground for preparation so that he was thoroughly ready for each state and all the problems that were involved.

HECKSCHER: At that time, I suppose he was not thinking of the program or the kind of things his Administration would do if he were elected?

STEVENS: Well, I didn't know him well enough to question him on those points. I think he was doing first things first, and the

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first thing was to secure the nomination.

HECKSCHER: And what was your impression after that? Did you think he had more of a chance for the nomination than you had thought before? I mean, did he impress you favorably?

STEVENS: Well, the last words that I said to him at that luncheon were that if, from what I had learned as a result of my experience in the 1956 race, I was to advise him what to do, he was doing everything absolutely correctly.

HECKSCHER: Then, when was the next time that you saw him after that?

STEVENS: Well, I met him during the campaign from time to time. I wasn't very active in the campaign. I did some money raising for him. But I didn't really see him again after he was elected until I got a message asking that I become head of what was then

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known as the National Cultural Center. Since I have always felt strongly about the fact that culture has been a backward number, you might say, in this country, and that our image abroad has been badly damaged by our materialistic outlook, I felt it was a very constructive thing to do -- to put that project across.

HECKSCHER: Was he naming a whole new Board of Trustees for the Cultural Center?

STEVENS: Well, the Cultural Center trustees rotate. Three are available every two years. At that time, the Board consisted of thirty members -- fifteen from the Government and fifteen public members. Some of them had resigned as a result of the change of Administration, but there were and still are a number of holdovers from the Eisenhower Administration. We have always felt that was a good thing because we have taken

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the position that we are non-partisan. The Center was started by Eisenhower and undertaken by Kennedy as something that should be done for the country.

HECKSCHER: How did he get hold of you at this time? Did he telephone you, or did you go down to the White House?

STEVENS: One of his Administrative Assistants (Fred Dutton) called me and asked

me if I would take it, which of course is normal procedure in any government post. Then, after I had said that I would, I came down to meet him and was sworn in.

HECKSCHER: When was that? What month, do you remember?

STEVENS: It was in the Fall of 1961.

HECKSCHER: You mean right after his election?

STEVENS: Fall of '61. It couldn't have been. It was September of '62.

HECKSCHER: I see. You hadn't heard from him then in a direct way between his Inauguration and the following Autumn.

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STEVENS: I'm afraid we have got this year mixed up. It was 1961.

HECKSCHER: I see. After his election, but before his Inaugural.

STEVENS: No, he would have been inaugurated in early 1961.

HECKSCHER: I see. Did he give you the impression at that time that he felt that the Cultural Center was an important development in his Administration?

STEVENS: I think that the Center was one of the things that interested him most during his Administration, as evidenced by the fact that he was always anxious and willing to talk about the Center at all times. He did everything he could possibly do to help us in our very difficult money-raising program. I might say that the first time that I really went over the Center with him was after I had

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studied the plans of the previous group and found that they were contemplating a huge Lincoln Center-type development which would have run close to \$75 million dollars. It didn't seem to me practical that Washington should have such a large institution, so I went to the President and recommended that we cut it down to three auditoriums, with an estimated cost of \$31 million, and that these auditoriums would not be equipped for repertory, but would be made artistically as beautiful as possible. He approved the plan and we set our money-raising goal at that time at \$31 million. This was without regard to any parking plans that we might have had.

HECKSCHER: Did he mention to you at the time the possibility of going to the Congress

to round out the money you would raise privately?

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STEVENS: Well, he always felt that we could not get any money from Congress unless we had done a substantial bit of fundraising on our own. He was hoping we could finish the job privately, but he was willing to go to Congress, as I said before, if we had raised a substantial amount of money.

HECKSCHER: Did he ever talk to you at all about the possibility of Congress giving money annually for the maintenance of the Center or for the support of its program?

STEVENS: Well, we never really got into that in the early part of the fundraising days. I had this plan of a closed circuit television which we hoped would raise an immense amount of money which everyone felt had an excellent chance of success. In the first few months after my appointment, we concentrated on that. The idea was that

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the Center would put together a huge television show and sent it out on closed circuit, as they do on political fundraising, and that we would have as sponsors, local groups such as symphony orchestras and repertory companies and the like. Unfortunately, the communities were very loathe to let even half the proceeds get away from them.

HECKSCHER: That was the formula you proposed -- half to remain at home --

STEVENS: Half to remain at home. We would furnish the show and they would furnish the manpower to sell the tickets. There was a great deal of opposition, especially among the symphony groups, who at first seemed enthusiastic in their response. So, unfortunately, the television show was what one might term, not a success. It ran too long and it didn't raise much money.

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HECKSCHER: Did the President express any disappointment to you personally when it was over?

STEVENS: I must say that as far as I was concerned, the President was so nice about it that from then on I was what you might term "his devoted slave," because here I had gone to all the trouble to put this together and it had been a flop and we had expected to raise anywhere from \$5 to \$10 million and he had every reason to be cross about it. Especially since the program had run so long. And I never will forget when I

went into to see him a few days afterwards and I said, "Mr. President, I'm terribly sorry about the television program. It hasn't worked as well as it should. And I'm especially sorry that it has run so long." And he replied, in his most gracious fashion, "You know, Roger, these actors are just like politicians aren't they?"

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When they start talking, they don't want to stop." And I thought that was a most magnificent way to take me off the spot. And because of his attitude, from then on I was willing to see that Center was built or else.

HECKSCHER: Had he shown any signs of impatience the night itself? You must have watched him closely. He sat there until the end I recollect.

STEVENS: Yes, he sat right until the end. And he had had a very hard day, because I know he had been with Mikoyan for three hours before he came over, and it's remarkable that he could stand such a long show. Actually, the show itself was rather entertaining, but unfortunately the performers, when they got in front of the President, all extended their performance so that it ran an hour longer than was

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scheduled. However, from that time on, where we failed financially, we apparently put ourselves on the map from a public relations point of view. And in the next year we went from about a million and a half, which had been collected in the previous five years, to around \$12 million dollars.

HECKSCHER: That was before the President's death?

STEVENS: Yes.

HECKSCHER: He was interested in helping you by turning the White House over for one or two receptions, I think.

STEVENS: He had receptions. Just a few days before he was killed, he had a luncheon for the leading business people in the country, and there was a great turnout. I would say half of who's who in big business was there. A lot of them are not too friendly. And, I must say, he got up and gave an

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off-the-cuff speech about the necessity of the cultural center that was the finest thing I'd ever heard him do. In fact, it was the only time in my life that I've ever written anyone a fan letter, and I thought that he certainly deserved it.

HECKSCHER: Was money raised directly as a result of that luncheon?

STEVENS: Right. Within the next few days, the business people involved came through with over a million dollars in gifts, and this was just because of the great selling job the President had done and not as a result of any pressures politically of any kind whatsoever.

HECKSCHER: Did you see Mrs. Kennedy during this period? Was she very involved in the Cultural Center?

STEVENS: Yes, I would see Mrs. Kennedy from time to time, especially when we had the first

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model done by Mr. Stone. We felt that it would be rather appropriate to unveil it in Newport, where the Kennedys were staying during the summer, so we had quite a show for the press and on television to unveil the new model that Stone had designed for the public.

HECKSCHER: Were you entirely satisfied with that model?

STEVENS: Well, I thought it was a very interesting result of a difficult architectural problem. Theaters, generally, are not easy to design in terms of beauty. In the last twenty years, especially in Europe, there have been any number of theaters built, and I can safely say that I feel that the Center as designed by Mr. Stone is much more attractive than any of the ones I've seen on the Continent.

HECKSCHER: Did you ever discuss with the President,

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the possibility of changing the site of the Cultural Center?

STEVENS: Well, the President, many times, discussed the site with me because as is well known, in the past few years, there has been a great deal of discussion among the citizens of Washington and the newspapers about the site, and I would list the pros and the cons of the site and I would say, "Mr. President, the decision of course, is yours, and we will do just as you wish." Well, with that great analytical mind of his, he would enumerate the pros and cons and say, "Well, I guess we'll keep the Center where we are." I think he was very anxious to have the Center finished during his Administration, and he was a person who felt it was more important to get things done than to quibble over theories.

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HECKSCHER: Were you, yourself, satisfied with the final decision?

STEVENS: Well, when I came into the Center, first I looked over all the available sites. I wouldn't say that this was the best site, if I had a choice of all of Washington, but as everyone knows, you don't have the choice of all of Washington. I felt under the circumstances, it was the best available site and we already had it, which was the most important factor. I think, actually, the public will be very happy with it, and I think when it's finished President Kennedy would have been very satisfied with the building dedicated to him.

HECKSCHER: Roger, what would you say was the President's main feeling about this? Did he see it as an asset to the city of Washington? Was it because he himself felt strongly about the performing arts? How did he

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develop such an interest in this?

STEVENS: I think that he instinctively had a feeling for the intellectual movements and ferments that are going on in the world. I think that he could see that, for a nation of our size not to have any facilities for the performing arts was disgraceful. I think he felt that it was something that should be remedied, and he wanted to be the first one who did it. He was interested in the performing arts, but I think it was more his desire that the country should have this much needed facility that was the driving force behind him.

HECKSCHER: He, himself, for most of this time, could not sit for any length of time at a play or a concert.

STEVENS: That's right.

HECKSCHER: He used to stay not more than three-quarters of an hour.

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STEVENS: He attended several plays that I've produced and sat through them and especially enjoyed "The Best Man," which was about a Presidential campaign.

HECKSCHER: He expressed his enjoyment to you, did he?

STEVENS: He liked it very much as far as I could see. Unfortunately anyone in his position generally had to keep his opinions to himself, but since that was a very entertaining play, I think --

HECKSCHER: Did he have contact with any of the other trustees, or did you act --

STEVENS: Well, his good friend, LeMoyne Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings], was a trustee, too, and I think his interest in the Center was best evidenced by the constant talks he had with Lem. Lem, of course, was an old friend of his dating back to rooming with him at prep school, and he used to spend weekends frequently with the President. I know

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that Lem reported that the President was constantly asking him about progress, so he was not only keeping in touch with me, but he was constantly in touch with Lem Billings, which was a great evidence of his interest.

HECKSCHER: And Lem Billings' major source of contact with the President, outside of personal things, was in connection with the Cultural Center?

STEVENS: Yes, that's right.

HECKSCHER: Choate prep school and college. Did the President ever express impatience either at differences in the Board --

STEVENS: No. Actually, the President was most tolerant. He frequently would say, "I don't see how you people are ever going to raise the money for this." He said it was the worst money raising project that he knew. I don't know why it was

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so difficult. I think if I had ever known before it started, I would never have gotten into it, but the President was so marvelous about it and so tolerant and so forbearing that one just had to keep at it until it was done and we would have done it. And what exactly would have done -- we had enough money to build the first theater, and, if he hadn't been killed and we hadn't raised any more money, we would have gone ahead and built one theater, figuring we would add other theaters later on.

HECKSCHER: I'm going to come back to that and how the center became a Kennedy memorial, but first I want to ask you whether the President ever went back -- thinking of that first day at the Century Club that you spent with him -- to discuss politics. Did he ever refer to the campaign?

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STEVENS: No, I never discussed politics with him again.

HECKSCHER: Did he -- when you would go to see him, did he spend a little time, before you got down to the business of the day talking about general questions?

STEVENS: Well, I'm afraid that I, being very awed by the job of the Presidency, did not feel it was right for me to spend any time on idle gossip, and since he always was so willing to listen to our problems, I didn't want to impose upon him by other conversation.

HECKSCHER: How many times would you say you saw him in his office altogether? A dozen times?

STEVENS: I would say certainly a dozen and I talked to him on the phone on other occasions.

HECKSCHER: Now, to go back to what you were saying as to how the Cultural Center became the

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Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. When did the idea of making it a memorial first occur to you?

STEVENS: It occurred to me at the suggestion of Paul Hoffman. Paul had tried to do something with Hammerskjold and his unfortunate death occurred. He told me he had waited a long time afterward, and he felt it was a good idea to try to do something right away and, knowing the tremendous interest that the President had in the Center, I felt it was a very fitting memorial. I don't think most people realized --

HECKSCHER: When did you have this conversation with Paul Hoffman?

STEVENS: Oh, a week or so after the assassination.

HECKSCHER: And then did you bring that up to Johnson?

STEVENS: Well, we brought it up -- yes, we went to the Administration. You're right.

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I have forgotten the sequence, because we also talked to various Senators

of the committees, and we certainly had to talk to the White House. Everyone approved it. I remember that. And we had a letter from the White House.

HECKSCHER: President Johnson put himself very strongly behind it.

STEVENS: Very strongly behind it.

HECKSCHER: That was, if I remember correctly, December. Didn't the bill go through in December?

STEVENS: It went through the House in December.

HECKSCHER: Did you discuss that with President Johnson?

STEVENS: No, I've never had a direct discussion with President Johnson on the Kennedy Center.

HECKSCHER: Well, maybe we ought to cut it there, but I might ask you in conclusion when you sum up your impressions of the President, was there a difference between the way

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you saw him in his office and the popular image that people had of him on television and in the newspapers? You spoke of his kindness and I think that is something which someone would have to see him close in order to feel.

STEVENS: Well, he certainly was a most inspiring person to work for as far as I was concerned. As I say, this was a very difficult job, but on the other hand, he was the President of the United States and he had every right to expect results. He could have easily said, "I'm going to get someone else to do it, because you aren't raising this money fast enough," but instead of that, instead of criticizing it, as I said before, he was very forbearing and gentle and nice about it. Not only that, whenever I needed help to get a message through to some prominent person, he would

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arrange it. He couldn't have cooperated more fully.

HECKSCHER: Do you think he talked directly to people about culture at the White House, the receptions and the dinners. Do you think he occasionally talked to businessmen --

STEVENS: I don't think that he ever talked directly to people. I don't think he felt that

was part of the job of the Presidency. He was perfectly willing to arrange appointments, if necessary, for myself and for Lem Billings to see someone, but not any direct talk, except on these occasions when he would give a talk to a group of people.

HECKSCHER: And had he ever spoken to you about the completion of the buildings and how he looked forward to -- you say he wanted very much to see it done in his Administration.

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STEVENS: Yes, as I said before, we would have built just one theater first.

HECKSCHER: And he was ready to go ahead, was he?

STEVENS: He was ready to go ahead with one theater, with the theory of adding two later. I actually felt that we could raise all the money being the eternal optimist, especially with the help he was giving us, so I felt that we could wait a little longer and see if we could possibly do it all at once.

HECKSCHER: Did he ever speak to you about any of his other ideas in regards to the arts, Pennsylvania Avenue for example, or some of the work that I was doing?

STEVENS: No, I never talked to him about anything other than the Center when I saw him. As I said before I didn't feel I should waste his time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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