

Robert A. Lovett Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 07/20/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Robert A. Lovett
Interviewer: Dorothy Fosdick
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Biographical Note

Robert A. Lovett (1895-1986) was a member of the General Advisory Committee and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. This interview focuses on Lovett being offered the role of Secretary of Treasury and a lunch meeting with John F. Kennedy, among other topics.

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Robert A. Lovett– JFK #1

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JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Person Interviewed: The Honorable Robert A. Lovett

Address of Interviewee: 59 Wall Street, New York City

Date: July 20, 1964

Interviewer: Dorothy Fosdick

Others Present: ---

Organization Interviewee Associated with: Brown Brothers Harriman & Co.

Subject Matter Covered in Interview:

Mr. Lovett's meeting with the President-elect December 1, 1960 in Georgetown - period of the formation of the Cabinet, the discussion of desirable qualifications for State, Defense and Treasury posts, suggestions of names, etc.

Robert F. Lovett
Dorothy Fordick

Q. Mr. Lovett, when did you first meet President Kennedy and what were your early impressions of him? Was it when he was a Senator?

A. My best recollection is that I first met President Kennedy when he was Senator. I had met him in a social way at one or two dinners but my first real meeting, in the sense which I believe that you have in mind, was when I was a witness before Senate Committees on which he sat.

Q. How did you find him as an interrogator or as a member of the Senate Committee and what were your impressions of him in that role?

A. He seemed to me to be extremely alert with a rather wry, humorous approach to some of the sections of the problem, and he was a persistent and well-informed questioner. I instinctively liked him and I thought his preparation for his questions showed good staff work.

Q. Were you in touch with President Kennedy during the election campaign? Or did he first get in touch with you after the election?

A. President Kennedy got in touch with me after the election by sending up to see me Clark Clifford with whom I had worked during the time of President Truman.

Q. What was Clark Clifford's mission, and how did your discussion with him go?

A. As I recall it, Clark Clifford called me about November 28, 1960 and said that Senator Kennedy had asked him to come up to see me in New York. I agreed to meet him next morning in my office in New York and Clark told me that the Senator was trying to collect a group of men from whom he would select his Cabinet. He said that the President-elect had made some careful inquiries and that he was anxious to talk to me about becoming Secretary of the Treasury. I told Clifford that I felt deeply honored by the suggestion that the President had made; that I assumed this recommendation of my name

had come from biased friends; and that I was distressed to have to say that I felt that for physical reasons alone it would not be possible for me to accept. I went into some detail with Clifford and he urged me not to give an answer - even on the grounds of physical health - without again talking to the doctors because, as Clifford said, no one should lightly turn down an opportunity to be of service at a time like this. He stressed the fact that I had had rather unique experience in Government and that my duties as a citizen were not fully discharged by prior service. This was said in a rather jesting fashion. But it was clear that Clifford felt that longer and deeper consideration should be given to it by me. Clifford went on to say that the coincidence of having had experience in the Military Departments and in the Department of State, combined with the fact that my profession was that of international banking, constituted "a rather unique package" - to use his expression. After a considerable amount of discussion, during which I raised the added point that it would be very difficult to keep up with a group of 40-year old touch-football players when a man had reached 65, he said that the Treasury suggestion was, in part, made because the President believed that it could be so staffed by me as to make the demands less onerous than any of the other Cabinet posts for which my name had been discussed.

In the circumstances I agreed with Clifford, before giving the final answer, to talk it over with my doctors. Accordingly, I called Dr. Atchley on that afternoon and stopped by to see him at Presbyterian Hospital. He confirmed my general apprehension about undertaking this type of responsibility in light of my history of severe hemorrhages and the fact that there was a good possibility that correction would have to be made by major surgery. I called Clifford next morning and told him of this conversation and he said that the doctor's views put a different light on the matter but that, even so, the President-elect wanted me to

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come down and see him and that he would communicate with me again. Some time later in the day the President called and asked me to come down to have lunch with him a couple of days thereafter and I, of course, accepted.

Q. It would be fine if you would describe in some detail - and with some of the local color - the meeting that you had with the President-elect on December 1st in Georgetown, when you had a chance to see him at close hand and get an impression of his characteristics of mind and his approach to the problems of those early days.

A. I went down to Washington the night before the scheduled lunch, in order to be sure to arrive in time because of the extremely cold, wintry weather we were having - there was a very heavy fall of snow. President Kennedy had asked me to come to his house in Georgetown on "N" Street and to be there about 1 o'clock. I took a taxi and we went through the Georgetown Streets, piled high with snow on either side, crossed Wisconsin Avenue, went into "N" Street and, to my horror, I saw standing in front of a brick house on the right-hand side of the road, a group of heavily-coated and gloved newspaper men. I recognized about a dozen out of the perhaps twenty that were standing there. These dozen were men that had the runs in the Pentagon and in the Department of State and, when the taxi drew up in front of the house and I clambered out, I saw that the men were dressed in everything from goose-shooting mackinacs and peaked caps with earmuffs to a more sedate type of city dress with two or three mufflers wrapped around their necks and particularly their ears. They naturally asked what was up. I didn't know. I commented on their sartorial splendor. It was bitterly cold. When I went into the house, the first person I saw in the corridor was Caroline in a suit of bright red flannel overalls. Her Father was sitting in the living room, the first on the left, and rose to greet me cordially when I came in.

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After greeting the President and safely dodging a rather shifty end-run by Caroline, who had a small-sized football clutched to her bosom, these were the circumstances in which I first saw the tremendous charm of this young man. His reaction to Caroline's interruption was amused, tolerant and affectionate and there was absolutely no embarrassment in the arrangements he made to get rid of her.

We sat down facing each other in front of the fireplace and President Kennedy said that Clifford had reported to him my answer and had also said that I had agreed to discuss the matter with the doctors in whose care I had been for some years. I told Senator Kennedy how greatly touched I was at his thoughtfulness in permitting me to consider, with their advice, this great honor which his invitation did me and that I regretted boring him with a recital of my various ills. I then briefly told him about the surgery which the doctors had indicated they thought would inevitably be necessary and that I felt sure it would be a disservice to him and to the Administration and to the country for him to have a member of his Cabinet incapacitated for a long period of weeks or months at the crucial stage of getting policies laid out and organization effected. He was sympathetic and understanding and said that his father had had some of the same problems; that he was aware of the fact, without being reminded by me, that I was only a few years younger than his father, but that he had decided, after consultation with a number of trusted advisers, that he wanted to make the invitation himself because he felt that he did not know many men actively in business and because he knew of no one with the training in government service and in business which I was reported to have had. Nevertheless, he said that, from his own experience, he understood how limiting physical problems could be on one's wishes and activities and that he hoped that the Treasury position was a type of activity that would not be too demanding

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on me. I assured him that the Treasury post, while less onerous than Defense or State, was nevertheless of extreme importance in the present circumstances and that I did not believe that anyone could do it if he had to limit the number of hours a day he expected to work or should approach it without a determination to give the job everything he had.

The problem of the Treasury was discussed at some length during luncheon, which was most attractively served in the dining room which was at the end of the hall. During lunch he was interrupted twice by his secretary, Mrs. Lincoln, who brought in some telephone notes, and toward the end of lunch I told the President that I realized the pressure under which he was then operating and that I would consider it a favor if he would tell me when his time was up and not have me engage in that rather transparent device of pulling back the cuff in order to see what the wristwatch said.

Q. Did the President-elect follow up his suggestion about the Treasury post with a discussion of the possibility that you might take on some other responsibility - some other Cabinet post?

A. Yes, he did. During the luncheon discussion and in connection with the comment that I had made about the seriousness of the problems confronting the country, internationally as well as domestically, the President-elect suddenly smiled - a rather small smile - and said he hoped that I would understand that he would have been more than happy to have me back in the old post in the Department of Defense or as Secretary of State but that his advisers had warned him that I had some physical limitations which they had felt the Treasury Department would not exceed. I must confess that this show of trust and confidence was a very moving thing and I found it difficult to put into words the appreciation I felt for his attitude.

Q. I might note that as things turned out, your doctors' views were actually borne out. You have had to undergo major surgery - on at least two occasions - since that conversation. After the President-elect

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had accepted your personal reasons for not being in a position to take a Cabinet post, did he ask you about other possibilities? Did you get into a discussion of people who might fill the Treasury post, or the State Defense posts?

A. Yes, we did. We spent quite a lot of time, as a matter of fact, on two subjects, following a quick discussion of the major problems in Defense, State and Treasury. First, the type of attention which the departments needed, from my point-of-view, in order to be fully effective. And, second, samples of individuals who, in my opinion, could fulfill the requirements and turn in a good job in those positions. He was extremely interested in this portion of the conversation and we spent, I think, most of the time of the visit in conversation about the type of person he should try to get and the difference between intelligence or even brilliance on the one hand and the sine qua non of good judgment on the other. Having done a lot of worrying on this area over a long period of time, I was delighted to see the President's obvious interest in exploring these elements in the process of selection of his Cabinet.

I suggested that we start at the easy end first, which was Treasury - and pointed out that there were several types of competence which were, I thought, immediately available to him, all of which would meet the essentials of having a national reputation, or at least being nationally-known; of being regarded as a skilled professional in the financial markets and as being enough of a student of economics not to be flustered by the professionals and the academicians as they were inclined to speak a strange language, perhaps intentionally. The President was very amusing in his comments on many of the men currently holding important positions in the financial community.

Q. Do you recall something the President actually said about

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one or another of your colleagues in the business community?

A. Well, yes, I do. He mentioned the head of one of the large financial institutions and said that the man was so long-winded he couldn't understand him and that he hoped that wasn't an occupational disease of banking. I had suggested somewhat earlier in the discussion that I admired the endurance of the members of Congress who were faced with the necessity of sitting through so many long sessions, so this was a neat method of putting the monkey back on my back.

Q. Did you get into the discussion of specific names for the Treasury post at this time?

Q. Yes, we did - and the President was very interested in talking actualities rather than theoretical qualities and I told him that I thought there were three people who came to mind that would make excellent Secretaries of the Treasury and that, if I had the misfortune to be President-elect, I would certainly feel happy with any one of them. The men I named were Henry Alexander, of Morgan Guaranty; Jack McCloy, shortly to retire from Chase, and Eugene Black, due to retire from the World Bank. I said that I thought there were two of these that ought to go on any list when considering the Department of State and that, if they were so considered, I believed that Douglas Dillon ought to receive consideration for the Treasury post, as I felt that his experience in the State Department was a definite asset and that, while he had not been an active man in the banking community, he was familiar with its problems and I believe would receive the support of the banking community. He also had the advantage of being familiar with government procedures and this would be an important element in making the transition period under the new Administration easy and as painless as possible.

At no point did the President ask me what the politics of

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any of these men were; as a matter of fact, I didn't know what the politics of Eugene Black was, or of Henry Alexander, but I knew that McCloy was an Independent Republican and that Dillon had served in a Republican administration. I was very much impressed by the searching questions which the President asked as to the reasons why I listed these names. He obviously was concerned in getting quality regardless of the political party that the man belonged to because none of these men were truly political in the ordinary sense of being active in politics.

Q. Did you have about the same type of discussion with relation to the Department of Defense and the State Department?

A. Yes, we talked in about the same terms but in far less detail. The conversation about the Department of Defense was very largely concerned with what the Department needed, in my opinion, at this particular stage in the national security picture and in the light of our international obligations which were far heavier, I felt, than most people realized. I said that I thought there were several people of considerable competence who could do the job in the Department of Defense in so far as it concerned the operation of the military establishment but that there were very few people who were competent to deal with the basic problems in the Pentagon which was getting into the unnecessary duplication and the overlaying which had grown up under our system of operation. I felt that there should be a really careful analysis of the Department and that statistics should be developed which might help in pointing a way to a solution. The President seemed very interested in the points that were developed during the discussion and asked me if I would make out a list of people that I thought could do the job without considering whether or not they were available at the moment. I, of course, agreed to do so. The President said that he would ask Sargent Shriver, who apparently was serving as a sort of clearing

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house, or Clark Clifford, with whom he had been consulting on these matters, to get in touch with me in a day or so and suggested that, if I had any bright ideas, I might telephone him as soon as possible.

On the subject of the Department of State, we spent a long time, mainly because I had answered, in reply to a very direct question, that I thought this was the most difficult executive department, largely because it was virtually an extension of the President's personal powers under the Constitution, in addition to having duties which had grown up either through legislation or by custom. I recall that the President asked me if there was anything in particular wrong with the personnel in the department. I answered that I felt the average of articulate intelligence in the Department of State was higher than that of any of the departments with which I had come in contact in my three tours of duty but that they were less used to discipline. They were a "talking department" and not an "operating department" in the eyes of other executive agencies.

One of the amusing points which was developed during this part of the conversation was my effort to make it clear to the President-elect that a Secretary of State is made to look good - or actually to be good - largely by the President and by the degree of backing and trust given the Secretary of State, assuming that he - the Secretary - is a man of ability. The President-elect was way ahead of me on this point and we discussed the dangers inherent in attempting to operate the Department either out of his Presidential hat or as a one-man show in the fashion that Foster Dulles did. The President-elect said that one of his problems was that he did not know anybody who, in his opinion, was competent for this job and, therefore, would have to take largely on trust anyone who was finally proposed to him. Several names were mentioned indicating the

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advantages and disadvantages of certain types of experience and the necessity for getting a man who would avoid impulsive acts and be able to withstand the manifold pressures brought to bear on the Secretary of State, particularly by the Congress which appeared to have a plethora of incipient Secretaries of State available to them.

The President's comments on the points that were raised delighted me because they were direct, perceptive and usually had a twist in the end as a sort of kicker. I recall that I began to feel concerned about the problem of staffing the Department of State, which any new Secretary would face, and that I emphasized the necessity of having the Secretary of State supplied with some alter ego to share the burden, particularly in view of the amount of foreign traveling now required, and also provided with a very hard-boiled administrative officer who could take the load of this large department off of his shoulders. During the discussion, it was brought out that the task of the new Secretary would be materially reduced, as would that of the President, if the Secretary could be someone known to the principal Western European governments, or at least with a record which could be appraised by Foreign Office observers. Senator Kennedy pressed me on this point again and I said that Eugene Black would be a name which would carry this acceptance and I felt Jack McCloy would be similarly easy to appraise.

Q. Were any other names mentioned in connection with the post of Secretary of State - beyond these two, and Douglas Dillon which you noted earlier?

A. I said that, since Senator Fulbright had a long background on foreign affairs, I assumed that his name would be on any list considered. President Kennedy replied that Senator Fulbright held a most important post as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee where his

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knowledge, background and interest could be very helpful in the development and furtherance of foreign policy and in Congressional cooperation. There were, however, political considerations arising out of the position of the Senator from Arkansas which President Kennedy felt would be a liability in dealing with international problems currently before the United Nations.

The President said that he had already invited one person to be an Assistant Secretary of State and, when I expressed surprise at this appointment before filling the top post in the department, he said that there were special circumstances which made the appointment desirable from his point-of-view. He said that I would read later in the day a newspaper announcement that the post of Assistant Secretary for African Affairs had been offered to G. Mennen Williams.

Q. Did the President-elect's mention of this particular appointment suggest that he had some doubts about this kind of appointment in principle and that it was, in any event, going to be an exception?

A. Yes, I think that the comment by the President-elect was, first of all, a courteous sharing of information which would be public property later in the day, but also I think he wanted me to know that he realized that there were certain problems associated with such appointments which could be of considerable embarrassment to the Secretary of State who might ultimately be selected. In other words, the appointment was made not from the point-of-view of the competence of the individual in a special field, nor was the Secretary of State given a chance to make recommendations for this post, but the appointment, if made, would clearly place Governor Williams in a special category of being a Presidential representative rather than being a State Department official reporting to the Secretary.

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The detail of the State Department's basic organization was discussed and considerable time was put on the problem presented by an active, alert and well-informed President finding an equally active, alert and well-informed man to head the Department of State and then working out an understanding between the two so that policy is agreed on in broad lines and the President will not feel it necessary to cross each "t" and dot each "i" in every policy directive necessarily issued by the Secretary of State.

The discussion about the Department of State more or less terminated the detailed portion of the visit and it was at this point that the President-elect said that he wanted me to help - with whatever formal title I felt appropriate - as an adviser to him and that he would count on me heavily in trying to find the right men for the jobs we had been discussing. I, of course, agreed to do my best and to hold myself at his disposal.

Q. How did the meeting break up?

A. After lunch, we moved back into the living room and, as it was getting late, I referred to Senator Kennedy's heavy schedule and suggested that he might have others waiting to see him. He said that they would be in shortly and that his secretary would let him know when they arrived. In a few minutes the door bell rang and I got up to leave and the President said "you probably noticed a large group of newspaper men outside." I said that I had seen them and recognized a substantial number, and he said "I had better come out with you then because they will have microphones shoved into your face the moment you step outdoors." He was quite correct. He opened the front door and 3 microphones blocked the way. The President was without hat or coat or even waistcoat. He stepped out, walked up to the microphones and told the press that he had invited me

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down for lunch, that he had hoped to get me to accept a post in the Cabinet and that, to his regret, it was not possible for me to do so for reasons of health which he understood and accepted. Someone asked him what Cabinet post had been offered and he said that he would have been delighted to have me in any one of three - State, Defense, or Treasury - and repeated again that it had been necessary for me to withdraw from public service which he regretted but that he had assurances that I would serve as a personal adviser from time to time.

During this whole time it was blowing a gale, icy cold - and there were shouts from off to the right from some CBS fellow, urging me to step over there and say a few words. The President grinned and said "I advise you not to get trapped into a press conference here." I said that was the last thing I wanted. He then asked me if I had a car waiting and I said that I had not but that I would walk up to Wisconsin and pick up a cab and go direct to the airport. He said "no, don't do that - that white car across the way will take you wherever you want to go" and he called one of the secret service men, introduced him (I think his name was Evans), and walked across the street in the slush - still hatless, waistcoatless, and with low shoes on - opened the rear door, put me into the car, and turned to the driver and said "take off."

In the conversation during the day the President had shown flashes of a kind of telegraphic wit, a very keen insight into a number of problems and an aptitude for quick comprehension which was very impressive. His final courtesy at the front door was an act of graciousness I will never forget.

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