

George P. Miller Oral History Interview – JFK#1, June 18, 1964
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Biographical Note

George P. Miller (1891-1982) was a Representative from California from 1945 to 1973 and the chairman of the Science and Astronautics Committee from 1961 to 1973. This interview focuses on Miller's time serving on the District Committee with John F. Kennedy and the role of science in the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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By George P. Miller

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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE P. MILLER

June 18, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me about the first time you met John Kennedy?

MILLER: I met him on about the first day he came to Congress, when we met all of the new men. I had known about his record, as many people had, and we were all very proud to have him in the House. Shortly after he was here he was assigned to the District Committee, a Committee assignment which junior members often receive. I was a member of the District Committee, so we served on it together for about four years.

 The District Committee, as you know, is usually dominated by people from the Deep South. Those of us who came from other parts of the country sometimes had other views. We had a bill up to establish a sales tax in Washington. A number of us, with Kennedy taking the lead, fought to exempt meals costing up to a dollar and a quarter on the grounds that too many girls working here in Washington had to eat out. This would be a burden on them. Exempting these meals wouldn't affect the big-time spenders, such as lobbyists, who spend more money for meals.

 We were not successful. We offered an amendment on the floor, although we didn't think we had a chance. On a voice vote it lost. But we offered a motion to recommit, instructing the Committee to carry this, and to our surprise, and to the surprise of some of the old-timers on the Committee, it carried. It wasn't until he was well out of Congress and off

the Committee on the District of Columbia, and I had left the District of Columbia Committee, that the Committee succeeded in putting the sales tax on meals over a dollar and a quarter. So this is one of the things that I look back on with a great deal of nostalgia. I think it is indicative of President Kennedy, who was a man independently wealthy, as we all know, but who did have the little people's welfare at heart. I was glad to

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join him. Coming out of that we formed a friendship that was lasting, and one that I enjoyed.

I didn't see too much of him after he was President because the President has a tremendous burden to carry, and I don't think that he should be bothered by his former colleagues just for the sake of the prestige of going down there. I was called to the White House on several occasions in connection with my work as Chairman of the Committee on Science and Astronautics, a subject in which he was vitally interested, as you remember. I had the pleasure of making the trip with him when he first visited Cape Canaveral, now Cape Kennedy, Huntsville, Houston, and other facilities of NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration]. To me he was a most human individual, who understood little people in this country and worked for their benefit and welfare, and the sincerity that he evidenced in this was one of the reasons why he was elected, one of the reasons why he was so popular, one of the reasons why he is so missed today.

MORRISSEY: Going back to your friendship with John Kennedy when you both were serving on the House District Committee, do you have any other recollection of any of his legislative activities?

MILLER: On the District Committee he did serve as Chairman of the Subcommittee to study the transit problems here in the District, and I had the privilege of serving on that Subcommittee too. He made a very fine report, perhaps one of the best reports that had ever been made on this subject. Of course our contacts in the House were almost daily, but I don't know that I had any other official contact with him in that respect, other than we always voted together.

MORRISSEY: Any other specific recollections of your relationship with him when you both were in the House?

MILLER: Well, you know that one of the places you generally get acquainted with members and get to know them real well was in the Dining Room. Because of a back condition that he incurred in the Pacific, he never attended the Dining Room--he had to eat in his office. His sisters--one of his sisters used to be there generally to take care of this so that you didn't get to see him at meal times, as much as you saw some of the others. But there was always the usual contact, the ribbing that goes on over in the House, and he was always in the thick of it since he had a keen sense of humor.

My daughter, Anne, who is now married and has three children, was then in high school, and she thought that John Kennedy was great. He had met her and he never forgot her. Every time I would see him, no matter where it was, he would always ask for my daughter, in that good New England accent. Incidentally, when he came out on one of the first trips that he made to the Pacific Coast, he landed at the San Francisco Airport and they had a dinner at the Airport--

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he didn't even go into town. My daughter was over and my grandson, and I had the privilege of introducing my grandson to him. Chris was only about seven, but this was a big day in his life--to meet his idol. Both the President and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] sent pictures to Chris. They're very proudly displayed on the wall in Chris' bedroom, signed by them.

MORRISSEY: How did you view the Senator's campaign for the Democratic nomination in 1960?

MILLER: Well, I thought that he put on one of the finest and most constructive campaigns that I have ever seen. He met the "Big Bad Wolf" in debate, the man who was supposed to be the great debater in the House, who slaughtered them all; and he humbled him. He had him reaching for his handkerchief to mop his brow because the studio was too hot. This, I think, was one of the turning points. I think he dethroned the "King" during those debates. He showed the incisiveness and correctness of his mind; that he was well-prepared and knew what he was talking about.

Later in the campaign I had the privilege of introducing him at the Oakland Auditorium to the largest crowd that we have ever had in that place. Every seat--it holds about 12,000 people--was taken. We had a hard time complying with the fire rules to keep the aisles open, and there were about six to eight thousand people outside who couldn't get into the Auditorium. He made a fine speech that night. He twitted me on saying that we served together for twelve years. He said he didn't like to remember years.

Of course, I was with him at the Cow Palace in San Francisco later in the campaign at the speech in which he outlined the Peace Corps. I also had the privilege of introducing him another time in Oakland, down at DeFremery Park. This was an overflow crowd from another speech and the crowd was enthusiastic and wild. We spoke from the bed of a truck that had been fitted up because of the haste in putting the appearance together for the thousands of people in the park.

After we got back here, of course, I saw him on the floor when he'd come up to the Capitol. I was called to the White House on several occasions as Chairman of the Committee on Science and Astronautics because of his great interest in the Space Program and discussed it with him. He gave it emphasis; he implemented it; and he put us on our way to success in exploring outer space for peaceful purposes. This is one of the great accomplishments of his Administration and is one of the things that will go down in history

as a great accomplishment when many of the widely heralded events of today will have been forgotten. The space achievement will be a continuous monument to him.

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MORRISSEY: Had you familiarized yourself with matters of space and science generally before Representative Overton Brooks died?

MILLER: Well, I was on the Armed Services Committee for about ten years; and in the beginning, all of the space effort was in the Army or the Navy. I had naturally followed that. Then when the Committee on Science and Astronautics was established, I applied for membership on it. My seniority allowed me to take the number two spot. As a matter of fact Mr. McCormack [John William McCormack], the Speaker, served on the Committee and could have been Chairman. He was Chairman of the Select Committee which was responsible for the establishment of this Committee, but he would not accept it so he insisted on going to the bottom of the Committee--that made me next to Mr. Brooks. Of course, I followed all developments, read and did everything I could to prepare myself for the job of serving on the Committee; and then when Mr. Brooks died unexpectedly, I took over the chairmanship. I have some background in the field; I am a civil engineer by training and profession so this gives me a bit of background for the Committee.

I am very proud of the Committee. It's done a great job and it has been able to do this because President Kennedy, as I say, set the pattern which I am very glad to say President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] has carried out. It gives us preeminence in this important field that will redound to the prestige of this country to our own benefit in years to come.

MORRISSEY: I understand you envisioned the role of your Committee as something concerned with more than just space but with science generally in the government.

MILLER: The name of the Committee is The Committee on Science and Astronautics. Whereas astronautics is one of the big functions of the Committee, the most important is the field of science. Of course, as a new committee, we found ourselves with the necessity of authorizing money for NASA. This started out the first year of the Committee at \$1.8 billion and \$3.2 billion, then jumped into the \$5 billion bracket.

Now this is an awesome job particularly when you have new people on the Committee. Last year the number of members on the Committee was raised from 25 to 31. We had an attrition of 4, that gave us 10 new members, one third of the Committee who knew nothing about it. This caused a lot of work. We had to educate these people as we went along. We're reaching the point now where we do not have to spend so much time with NASA, and we're going into the other disciplines of science.

One of the agencies over which we have jurisdiction is the National Science Foundation, and another is the National Bureau of

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Standards, and lastly science in general. This is a challenge because we are now certainly in the age of science. With the taxpayers providing ever-increasing amounts of money for scientific projects we must become cognizant of the fall-off from science--the unforeseen benefits to mankind. Then we must see how you align the universities with this emphasis and need for scientific research. Many of the top-flight universities in the country, because of their preeminence in some field of science, are getting more money today from the Federal Government and from foundations to do scientific research than they get from their endowments or from their states. Now the problem that confronts the universities today is what are they going to do? Are they going to maintain themselves as purely educational institutions and climb back into their ivory towers, lead a monastic life and say we're not concerned with the welfare of the country? We're going to educate men; educate men's minds. Or with the great expertise that they have in science--should they spread this out and use it in industry and lend itself to industry for the benefit of mankind? This is the problem which universities are struggling with today. President Clark Kerr of the University of California, one of the foremost educators in the country, has recently written a book called *The Uses of the University* in which he stresses this. And you can go to any university, any university president, and this is the thing that concerns him, concerns us. We have an excellent committee under Mr. Daddario [Emilio Q. Daddario] of Connecticut, who is doing a fine job in this field.

MORRISSEY: Did you concern yourself with jurisdictional problems between all these agencies concerned with science?

MILLER: We don't have very much trouble with that, strange as it may seem. It was thought that we were going to have a big fight over Telstar to see if Congressman Oren Harris' Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce or our Committee would take jurisdiction over it. We're not a committee that has anything to do with regulatory agencies; that's Mr. Harris' business. So we had no trouble in reaching an understanding. When it comes to orbiting, to designing, to working in the technical field and research, he has no interest. We don't concern ourselves with the regulatory phases of scientific achievements. But again, unfortunately, too many members of Congress are not too conversant with the scientific community and just how to deal with it, and frankly, they're too often inclined to leave it to us.

MORRISSEY: How about the relationship between government and industry? Have you got involved in this in your Committee work?

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MILLER: Yes, this necessarily has to come in. NASA's contribution to industry today is great. It's replacing, to a degree, the work in the field of aerospace that the airplane companies did. All of the people who make

planes have been engaged in space work so that naturally we have to be concerned with it. But I believe that the companies who have been successful--the big companies in the aerospace field--are headed by people who are dedicated. They're interested in profit, but they're also interested in the reputation of their companies and in the reputation of their engineers. I can see that a company that just got into this business for the pure profit motive, and wanted to violate good laws of ethics, laws which are, perhaps, unwritten laws, would have a very hard time keeping good scientists on their staffs just as the universities have when they do not encourage and appreciate their scientists. These fellows can afford to be very selective.

MORRISSEY: Tell me about your campaign to adopt the metric system.

MILLER: Well, Senator Pell [Claiborne deBorda Pell] is very much interested in this. We're going to have hearings on this soon, and we hope to bring the bill to the floor in the near future. There is an acceptance of the metric system--that it is right and should be adopted. The opposition came to it by virtue of the fact that we asked \$500,000 for a study to determine its impact and how to lessen this impact on the people. The man who led the fight against it admits that the metric system is good, but he said, "You don't need to do this, just adopt it."

Well, if you adopt the metric system without preparing the people for it the impact would be great. Women who sew, and most women sew, would have to be re-educated as to the pattern. When they would have to buy goods by the meter rather than by the yard, there would be a great to-do over the thing. If you go back into history you will see that when we changed to the present type of year from the so-called "old style" they had a lag of twenty-two days. George Washington was born on February twenty-second, "new style"; February eleven, "old style". It took sixty years or more--they had to get a generation used to it.

So it will be a generation to get away from our old system of measurement. If you said tomorrow you are going to use the metric system and the housewife went down to buy beef and she had to buy it in kilos, if she didn't know her proportions she would be all off. So it is going to be hard to introduce it in certain areas. The automobile industry isn't going to like it because they are all set up according to the other system. On the other hand the pharmaceutical industry has already gone to it. It's official in this country. As a matter of fact we use the metric standard translated into yards--we say by the yard is so much--90.93 or

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something of a meter, but in the military you had to adopt it because our Allies and everyone else uses the metric system and it's necessary that we adopt it if we are going to trade with the world because you can't sell in pounds where people are used to buying in kilos. This makes it very hard for American firms to compete in the foreign market. In the foreign market today the French and the Israelis have taken a great share of the market that we used to have in this country for canned grapefruit, for example. These other countries are getting into this field, so if we are going to compete, we've got to compete on their terms.

There are only two countries, England and this country, that held out, and I told you that I was on this trip with the President down to Houston, and one of the people who was along was a Sir Solly Zuckerman, a great British scientist. His job corresponds to Harold Brown's job in the British Defense Industry. He was talking to a number of our people--Jerry Wiesner [Jerome B. Wiesner] was along and others--and I came up to where they were sitting and I said, "Could I change the subject?" And they said, "What do you want?" And I said to Sir Solly, "What would you think if we adopted the metric system in this country?" He jumped up and said, "You do it and that will force us to do it, and we want to do it." Now they've been trying to change the measurement system in England, but resistance comes in again, just the same type of resistance that comes here.

We are fortunate in having our money on the decimal system. Thomas Jefferson tried to adopt it in this country. He did get us to adopt it for money and the people accepted it, but they wouldn't accept the other thing. If you go down to Monticello you will see that among other things he had an instrument that he measured with and it's divided into feet and dimes--one-tenths in feet. He used it wherever he could. We've got to come to it. We'll come to it. We'll get into the stride with the rest of the world. I'm hopeful that we can do it very shortly--all of the professional people are for it.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any specific recollections of these trips with the President, down to Huntsville, or Canaveral?

MILLER: Oh, well, of course, you know you get on a plane with the President--this big plane generally has forty or fifty guests on it--and a number of his staff and then a number of Secret Service men in the back of the plane. He is up front and what generally happens is that his secretary, maybe Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] or whoever is traveling with him, comes back and says, "The President would like to see you." You go up and spend perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes with him, just talking. If you have an interest in some subject, you bring it up; if not, just the pleasantries of the day, and when

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you leave then another member of Congress or another member of the official family, who happens to be on the plane, is brought in. It's always a pleasant thing, but I have no particular remembrance of any little incidents that occurred--things always ran rather smoothly. It was always a nice way to travel.

MORRISSEY: Any recollections of these meetings at the White House with the President?

MILLER: Yes. We discussed the cost of the space program and whether it was worthwhile, and whether these costs were justified. We talked about the buildings at Cape Kennedy. We have the largest building in the world down there designed to house the Saturn.

MORRISSEY: Was he ever concerned about the criticism of the large amount of money being appropriated for the program?

MILLER: Yes, he was. I think we all were. We all were concerned with it. We all were trying to make sure that the money that's appropriated is used to the best advantage. He was concerned with it but I don't think he was concerned with it to the place where he ever thought of changing the program because he realized that it must go on. We discussed it and discussed the tempo of the program and that sort of thing.

I remember a visit with him at the White House that might be interesting to relate.

When he went out to California in 1962 I had the privilege of going out with him and accompanying him to the University of California for the presentation of an honorary degree. He landed at the Naval Air Station in Alameda. He is the first President to have put foot in Alameda though he didn't travel very far into the city--merely left the Air Station and drove through a tunnel into Oakland. However, he was in the city limits of Alameda for some twenty minutes. The city fathers had a medal struck, about three inches in diameter, commemorating the fact that he had been there, and they wanted to present this to him and asked me to be an intermediary. I had the privilege of going down there and presenting it to President Kennedy on behalf of the Mayor and the people of Alameda. Now he gathered medals and mementoes and baubles from all over the world but he was particularly struck that they had done this. He said, "Am I really the first President who was ever there, George?" I said, "Yes, Mr. President, you are the first President who ever put foot in Alameda" and he said, "Well, this is fine, we're going to put it right up here." You know he had a shelf on which he had a number of things that were very dear to him and this was put right up on the shelf.

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Now some time later I was down with some people to the White House. The President wasn't there but his staff took us through the White House and took us into the President's office, and I knew where he had put it so when we got in there I said, "Well, let's see if it's still here." I walked over and there was the medal still on the shelf. I reported that back home and this was well received. One of the newspapers out there was a great admirer of the President--and it made quite a story in Alameda. The medal was still on the shelf and still in his office. I presume now that it will be up in the Kennedy Library.

MORRISSEY: I am sure it will be.

MILLER: I certainly hope so.

MORRISSEY: Did you have much to do in your capacity as Chairman of the Science and Astronautics Committee with the Scientific Adviser to the President or the Federal Council on Science?

MILLER: Oh, yes. I was very friendly with them. I worked very closely with them in this field and other fields. I have always been quite close to and worked very closely with not only the Scientific Adviser but with the different councils and scientific members of the departments. There are now assistant secretaries for science in various departments. The Air Force, the Army, and the Navy each have assistant secretaries for science and research and development. DOD has one, of course; Harold Brown, who I mentioned before. The Department of the Interior has one; the Department of Commerce has one; the Department of State has one. I've worked very closely with these people and worked closely with some scientific attaches abroad.

MORRISSEY: What's your position about a separate Department of Science?

MILLER: I don't think that that is necessary, though I have given it some thought, for the same reason I pointed out earlier. If you had a Department of Science would this tend to keep scientists to themselves or should we spread them out where you need them? Now you have great institutions like NIH. It's doing very well in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Would you want to pull it into a Department of Science? Would you want to pull the AEC in? Or should these be left to function and serve where they are now serving? Both of these agencies, the AEC and the NIH, are making great contributions in the field of science. Now we've got a number of interagency committees set up that are functioning very well--on Oceanography and one in the case of Weather. As you go on perhaps it's better to have people in these agencies doing their

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jobs and correlating them properly rather than to try to herd all of this into one single agency.

MORRISSEY: I've read that you are also an adviser to the UN Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space. How do you envision the relationship between this country's efforts in science with the efforts of other countries?

MILLER: Well, I think that great strides have been made in this particular field. For instance, in the matter of weather. Some years ago every time this Committee would meet--it meets in Geneva--we'd be confronted with difficulties. There are 24 member countries and about 6 of them are Iron Curtain countries. The Russians would usually lead off and they would be followed by the satellites with a great deal of criticism of the rest of the free world. And then we got into the field of weather and a year ago when the Committee had met and was ready to make its report, you'd think from the report coming from the Russians and their group that they had stolen some of the sheets out of our mimeograph machine. The only difference was that they had recommended grounds that there would be a void in the world weather picture over Red China, that Red China

should be admitted to the United Nations. The man presiding, an Australian, immediately ruled this recommendation out on the grounds that it was a political question and we were a scientific committee. Now this would have been the place to tee off and talk about capitalistic nations and all of this, but we did not. The Russians accepted it and within two months the Blagonravov-Dryden Agreement was entered into; it was afterwards confirmed. Now we have the weather question fairly well resolved.

This year the Committee discussed communications. They didn't get very far, but the Russians are beginning to be more reasonable in their approach. I think that part of this is Blagonravov [Anatoli A. Blagonravov], the Russian academician, who represents them, and who is very fond of Dr. Dryden [Hugh L. Dryden]. Blagonravov is a great scientist and we know that he has made agreements that have been vigorously protested by the political member of their staff, but Dr. Blagonravov had shoved this man aside--told him to shut up--but when Dr. Blagonravov comes back he is the man that's dominant, not the political man. This is a very small development but a very enlightening one. Maybe there's a little progress--and if we can agree on weather--if we can cooperate as we did in the International Geophysical Year--if we can go along with these things--maybe a catalyst might be formed which will bring the world together.

MORRISSEY: Did you become involved in any problems regarding the geographic distribution of space contracts in this country?

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MILLER: No. My position has always been and is one that these contracts should not be let on a geographic or regional basis. They should not be let for any reason other than to get the best equipment at the best price that you can reach. Politics or geography should not enter into it. There's always been a lot of criticism in some quarters because California gets a great deal of these contracts. We get a great deal of them because we have the know-how, because we've had good universities, and we've attracted a lot of scientists out there and where they go others want to follow. Other sections of the country are now building up their expertise, and if they can do it any better, then they will have every right to compete. This is the first consideration when you compete. I am perfectly willing to let California take its chances with the rest of the country.

MORRISSEY: I recall you predicted at one time that we would have women astronauts. Did you get much of a response to that?

MILLER: We got into this thing, and there was a group of women who wanted to become astronauts. We had a hearing and I asked Mr. Anfuso [Victor L. Anfuso], who is now a judge in New York, to handle the question and we had all kinds of recommendations. Women came forward--fliers who wanted to be astronauts. Miss Jacqueline Cochrane, the foremost woman flier in the country, took the position that women were physiologically and psychologically fitted to be astronauts, and with this I agree. But at that time and for the present, until we get deeper into this field, we

have to draw astronauts from competent test pilots, and unfortunately there aren't any women who could qualify in this respect. Now in the future there will be, but for the time being I am afraid we have got to confine our selection of astronauts to test pilots with proven ability.

MORRISSEY: I notice it is pushing ten-thirty. Do you have any other final comments you would like to make?

MILLER: No, sir, other than that I am happy to have served in the House with the late President Kennedy. I am happy to have had the privilege of knowing him, and to have called him friend. It was a great friendship and one that one can remember with pride because this man will go down in history as one of the great Presidents of this Nation.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much, Mr. Miller.