

Myer Feldman Oral History Interview – JFK#14, 9/21/1968
Administrative Information

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Interviewer: John F. Stewart

Date of Interview: September 21, 1968

Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.

Length: 56 pages*

*There is no page 29.

Biographical Note

Feldman, (1914 - 2007); Legislative assistant to Senator John F. Kennedy (1958-1961); Deputy Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964); Counsel to the President (1964-1965), discusses developing a program on mental retardation, drafting legislation, and John F. Kennedy's relationship with the Cabinet, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

Myer Feldman, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, September 21, 1968, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Myer Feldman – JFK #14

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Fourteenth Oral History Interview

with

MYER FELDMAN

September 21, 1968
Washington, D.C.

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Where did the whole idea of having a big study of mental retardation come from? And were there any negative aspects to the whole thing? Were you, for example, fearful that politically this might not be a good idea to have a huge study of mental retardation and get so involved in it?

FELDMAN: No. From the very beginning the alternatives were not whether you should have one or not have one. The alternatives were not whether you should do something in the area of mental

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retardation or not do anything in the area of mental retardation. We were certain from the very beginning – from the very first time I talked to John F. Kennedy and I talked to him then with Eunice Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] – we were certain that this was something that had to be done. Something had to be done for the mentally retarded kids in the country. We went through with him the large numbers of people that were affected. It doesn't matter whether you take the six million figure or whether you take the twenty million figure. You can get different figures depending upon who you consider is affected. You take a larger figure if....[door bell rings, tape stopped] It was absolutely clear that something had to be done.

Now, the alternatives were these: one, you could develop a program yourself without any real outside assistance; two, you could develop a program which we could

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submit to the Congress with some outside assistance; or, three, we could have a panel selected, which itself would be part of the program, and it would make recommendations, and then we could take those recommendations which the panel made which we decided to pursue. It made more sense to have a topflight panel because it gave us greater flexibility. We could either take what they recommended, or we could take a part of what they recommended, or we could reject it. In any event, we were going to have a program. If we got a topflight group of people in different disciplines who would go into this problem and make recommendations to us, we decided that would give us the best base for legislation.

STEWART: Going back a little bit, did the initial impetus for this whole thing come from Mrs. Shriver?

FELDMAN: Yes. Yes. Eunice Shriver. And she and Sarge [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] did most of the work in selecting

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the panel. I discussed it with them, we went over the names, but the ones that were finally selected were those that she and Sarge recommended. Now, having applied the panel and having given them a very broad charter – in the Archives you must have the speech that Kennedy made to them – he met with them. He met with them twice. And in each instance, prior to the time he met with them, he and Eunice and I met with him and went over the kinds of thing that he ought to tell them.

I suppose your next question ought to be: How familiar was he with it? Well, he wasn't intimately familiar with the problems of the mentally retarded, and he didn't know any of the details of what things we were going to look into, but he was sympathetic. And he had a desire to do whatever was necessary.

STEWART: Did he openly talk, to you, for example, about his sister, and was this much of a factor in his

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interest?

FELDMAN: No. No. No, he did not discuss with me his sister; nor did Eunice or Sarge. That we all knew, and I don't know whether the Kennedys talked about their sister in private or not. Eunice talked to me about her sister, but not in terms of this being something that we ought to take into account. Eunice would talk about her sister only in a rather casual way to illustrate something that we were

planning or something we were doing. Or she would assume that I knew where her sister was and what her sister was doing, and she'd say, "We have a benefit at such and such a place. Do you think the President – she didn't say President; she called him Jack – do you think Jack could send a telegram?" I said, "Sure." And I'd draft a telegram which would be sent. So we'd talk about the sister only as somebody who was under somebody's care, who was dear to them, but not as somebody who was going to be

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benefited by the program or who had any real relationship to the program. The sister was well taken care of so she didn't form any factor in this. The important person, I think, was Eunice Shriver from the very beginning. I remember the message – no, I guess, we're ahead of ourselves now.

STEWART: Right. Between the time the panel was formed and the time the report was in draft form, you didn't have much to do with the actual operations of the panel or...

FELDMAN: Oh, yes. Certainly.

STEWART: Oh, did you?

FELDMAN: I met with them a number of times. I would not meet – I knew everything they were doing. Whenever they had a problem they would come to me normally. If they had something they had to get from anybody in government, they would come to me and I would try to take care of it. I was aware of the

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formation of the subcommittees and of what the subcommittees were doing and what kind of things they were drafting. I did not meet with any of the subcommittees, but whenever there was a meeting of the full panel, I would attend it. So I was aware of everything going on. At the time the report was finally drafted, of course, I went over it.

STEWART: That's a source of some controversy. You went over it, and then I guess you gave it to some people in the Bureau of the Budget, and this was all before it was actually presented to the President.

FELDMAN: That's correct.

STEWART: And there was some criticism, by people on the panel that this was their report and why should the Bureau of the Budget and a lot of other people get a crack at it before the President saw it?

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FELDMAN: Well, my job as Assistant to the President was to try to avoid anything that would be embarrassing to him. Secondly, my job as somebody who was interested in the field was to advise the panel, even though I wasn't a member, on things that might provide some difficulty for the panel. In order to do that, I had to go over the report first and make sure that there weren't any outlandish recommendations which would make the – outlandish, not from the standpoint of the panel, but outlandish from the standpoint of the public and the Congress to which the report was addressed.

STEWART: Well, it was addressed to the President.

FELDMAN: I know. No, no. But it really was addressed to the Congress and to the general public. It's through the President.

STEWART: Yes. All right.

FELDMAN: Now, if the panel had matters in there that would cause members of Congress to say, well, this was

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just a group of people who were unrealistic, who didn't know what the processes of government were like, the whole report wouldn't gain much attention. Similarly, if it had things that were dangerous to various other special interest groups that had considerable influence, it would be under a good many handicaps and it would never get off the ground. So I think I was helping the panel in giving it a pretty close look and in sending it to the Bureau of the Budget.

I sent it to the Bureau of the Budget chiefly for another reason; that was to avoid embarrassing the President. If the recommendations of the panel were such that the President could not carry them out, and if the differences between what the President did and what the panel recommended were such that they might be criticized, then I wanted to try to get the thing redrafted so that it wouldn't have that result. And that was why I sent it to the Bureau of the

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Budget.

STEWART: At the same time, though, didn't you leave yourself open to criticism that this body was less than the totally independent group that was recommending....

FELDMAN: Sure, sure. They didn't have to accept the changes we suggested. They could always write it themselves. They could even have written a minority report if they wanted. And in at least one instance I think some of them considered that. I don't think that would have been in their interest. I don't think it would have been in the interest of the program. And I recognized this, of course. In any Task Force report – this is in the nature of a task force report – there is some guidance from the person to whom it's addressed. They're not completely independent, except in very rare instances. And this just was no exception, that's all.

STEWART: What kind of a role did Leonard Mayo generally play? Was it totally satisfactory as far as you and the President were concerned?

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FELDMAN: Leonard Mayo was a good chairman in the sense that he didn't favor any particular point of view, he kept the meeting going, and he administered the subcommittees well. I don't think he made much of a constructive contribution to the panel reports. It was more an administrative contribution to the panel reports. I think the most valuable general person in terms of substantive matters in the Report was Dr. Tarjan [George Tarjan]. He was the vice chairman. I think Leonard was good; I wouldn't say he was an outstanding chairman.

STEWART: Were you always confident that the legislation would have no problem?

FELDMAN: No. No. I knew from the beginning it would have problems, and it did have problems. I was confident that we'd get something, because when you have the power of the President and when you have an appealing program like this – this program was one of those that you really can't

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vote against. So I was sure we would have some kind of program, but I knew it had a great many difficulties because anything that required spending money for a limited group of people would have difficulty. And this it did. Also it was new. Nothing like this had ever been done before. And whether people said so or not, they'd criticize this kind of application of resources on the ground that the President was doing this as a personal matter, not in the national interest. So whether they made that argument or not, that would be in the back of the minds of a good many people. But on the other hand, it had to be nonpartisan. You had to have Republican support as well as the Democrats. So I knew there would be difficulties, and there were, but I always felt that we'd get some kind of a program.

STEWART: One of the other controversial aspects was the combining of the mental retardation and the

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mental health messages and then the eventual combining of the legislation, I guess just the construction parts of it. Do you recall this?

FELDMAN: Sure, sure. Then and now, the mental retardation people don't want to be confused with the mental health people. There's always been a good deal of jealousy between the two organizations. The mental retardation people feel that theirs is a more important effort and involves more people, and yet they've been less adequately funded. So one of the major points that was made in the general panel report was that mental retardation was not mental health. This ran through all of the discussions. Then when the message came to be drafted, one of the criticisms, as you indicate, was that they seemed to confuse the two.

STEWART: Well, why were they put together?

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FELDMAN: Well, I think I did that over – I suggested it anyhow – over the objections of the Shrivvers. The Shrivvers were more interested in mental retardation than they were in mental health. But I thought that, even though they're separate and different, we could make that separation in the message – and we did, and pointed out the different areas that were affected – but mental retardation would gain some strength from mental health forces, and similarly mental health would gain some strength from the mental retardation forces. So I thought that as a tactical matter it was best to put the two together, and the President agreed with me.

Secondly, I confess that I've never been sympathetic to the dichotomy between mental health and mental retardation. I think they should be working together and not at cross purposes. I'm interested in both, and I think John F. Kennedy was interested in both, so he agreed that it made

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more sense to put the two together and try to unify the forces.

I believe also that people like Fogarty [John E. Fogarty], who at that time were interested in mental health, were easier to convince – and he was a power in any health legislation – were more easily influenced by a program that would include something on mental health as well as mental retardation. As political matter, it's much more saleable that way. Remember, at that stage, even today, you have to sell mental retardation, you have to tell people that these people are there. You don't have to tell them about mental health.

STEWART: It's interesting because I've heard so many mental retardation people talk about mental health being carried along on their bandwagon, rather than the other way around.

FELDMAN: They say that mental retardation is carried along on the...

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STEWART: No, that the mental health program has been on the bandwagon of mental retardation.

FELDMAN: Oh, well, I think during the Kennedy years the mental health program was carried along on the mental retardation bandwagon, but I think since the Kennedy years mental retardation has been helped by the mental health program.

STEWART: There was a problem in determining exactly how this new program would be implemented, or how the whole thing could be given some real visibility. And it was decided to set up Stafford Warren as a special assistant, and there was some controversy over that, I believe. Do you recall that?

FELDMAN: Yes.

STEWART: Do you recall that? You were opposed to that I guess?

FELDMAN: I wasn't opposed to it so much as I felt that I wasn't quite sure what Warren would do. He didn't have a job description that was very

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specific, and I had some difficulty in visualizing what his function would be. I finally supported it. I supported it at the urging of Sarge Shriver. He was very insistent upon that. He had two or three others first that he suggested for the position. He wanted somebody really outstanding who would be put on the White House staff. I said that whenever there's an important program, the first thing that the group that's interested in it wants is somebody on the White House staff that will shepherd that program, and it really isn't the best way to handle it in most instances.

But Sarge urged that if somebody would do that, somebody who had that as their sole interest, it would work out well. He did most of the interviewing, he and Eunice did most of the interviewing. He finally interviewed Staff Warren, and he said this fellow had outstanding credentials – I don't have to go through all that – that everybody would recognize that the

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President was interested in it, that he could represent the President. He went through all the other things: he had the publicity that he could generate and the interest he could generate in Congress and throughout the country; the private sources of funds that might become available because of his interest; things he could write; how he could make sure that other

government divisions would do it. He said, “Certainly I wouldn’t have time to do it,” and he was right. So I guess in the end I said, “Well, let’s try it.” And we did try it. I think it had a doubtful success. Sarge and Eunice later on lost their faith in Warren, and ultimately, of course, he left the White House, and they didn’t replace him.

STEWART: There was nothing specific that he did that....

FELDMAN: Oh no, no, no. I think that the prophesies that I made, things that I forecast, really

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came true. It’s very difficult for somebody that doesn’t have a fixed responsibility, a real job to do. This is true of lots of presidential offices. It’s true of the Food for Peace Program that was in the White House under George McGovern. George is a very able administrator, very competent person, a very knowledgeable person. He knows government; he knows the Congress and everything else. Yet he had an immense problem with the Food for Peace Program because there weren’t clear lines of authority and he didn’t have independent funds of any substantial size that he could use.

Secondly, the title White House Assistant is not particularly important. I think this is where a Consumer’s Assistant to the President fails, too. What is important is the relationship between that person and the President. If the public

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generally, if the people in the Executive Branch, if the Congress know that there is a close relationship between the White House Assistant and the President, then he or she is effective. If, on the other hand, they have a feeling that they can’t get into the President at all – this is true of Cabinet officers, too – if they have that kind of feeling, the person is not effective. I think that’s why today Clark Clifford is effective as Secretary of Defense. They know his relationship to the President. I think it’s a reason why some Cabinet officers during the time of the Kennedy presidency, who did not see John F. Kennedy very often, were less than completely effective. Access to the President is very important.

Now Staff Warren had no access to the President. I don’t think he saw the President more than once in the entire time he was Special Assistant. He used to come into see me to say, “Well, don’t you think

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it would be a good idea if I went in and saw the President and told him about my budget problems?” for instance. I said, “Don’t bother the President with a problem like that. If you have anything that you need, we’ll get it for you.” So, for all those reasons, I don’t think the special office worked out so well.

STEWART: I guess the only thing is the creation of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, which is related but it's not totally related, I guess. There was some opposition to this, I guess, from Shannon [James A. Shannon] and other people in NIH [National Institutes of Health].

FELDMAN: Yes, there were. There was considerable opposition in fact. They said it didn't fit in with the other institutes. The other institutes were specific institutes for a particular disease, and this wasn't an institute to handle any particular disease. This was just a general kind

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of institute so they said it didn't belong in the NIH. They also opposed it, I think, on the ground that it would draw funds from what they considered more important projects. But, of course, it was formed over his objection.

STEWART: I've heard that part of gaining at least tacit approval of it was setting up the other Institute of...

FELDMAN: General....

STEWART: General Medicine? General? What was it? It was the Division of Medical Science that they raised to an Institute.

FELDMAN: That's right. Yes, that's right. It was General Medicine Institute. Well, when he made the argument that there weren't any specific ones, he said, "If you're going to have this kind of thing, you can make that an institute, too. I don't know that that was part of a bargain. I don't know that we ever had Jim Shannon's support. I don't think that we did. I don't think Jim Shannon ever supported it. The Institute languished for awhile

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without any support from him or from the Congress. Ultimately, it did get some funds and did go into business. But Jim Shannon, never, even to this day, thought it was a good idea.

STEWART: That's all. Is there anything else about mental retardation?

FELDMAN: Well, you haven't asked about the message, and the way in which it was drafted, and how we went about it.

STEWART: There was an inclusion at the last minute, wasn't there, of the university related facilities?

FELDMAN: No. The message was drafted – I think what we did first was went through the report and tried to find out what we could use in the message that was useful. Then I did a draft of the message. I went over it with Budget, and I showed it to Eunice and Sarge. I showed it to HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare]. We

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got a few changes, not an awful lot.

And then I remember Eunice and I went to see the President. He was in his bedroom. That seems to be where we often had meetings. And we went over the message with the President in his bedroom. The President's comment was, "Do you think it's all right, Mike?" And I said, "Yes, I think it's great." And he turned to Eunice and he said, "Well, what do you think of it?" And she said, you know, she thinks it's superb, and she doesn't think anything ought to be changed in it, she went through what had been done on it by other people and where it came from. He wasn't much interested in the background of the message. He was just interested really in getting my advice and Eunice's advice. And he read it through and he didn't make any changes. That's very unusual. Almost every message he ever sent to Congress he made changes in. But he saw it for the first

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time then, and that's substantially the form in which it went over the Hill. So, I guess, John F. Kennedy felt that on mental retardation matters, Eunice was the expert. He was willing to take her advice on what ought to be done. And I think he was right. She was the expert. She does know, perhaps, more about it than anybody in the country.

STEWART: Well, she tells this story – and I've heard this story from a few other people and it's still a little confusing in my mind – about some last minute changes in the draft of the special message that were worked out at her house one evening. Robert Cooke from Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, was there, and I think she said you were, and a few other people. And they were trying to come up with something that would give some real appeal, and they came up with this university related...

FELDMAN: Well, that wasn't – I remember...

STEWART: ...medical centers, among other things.

FELDMAN: I remember the meeting, but that wasn't to go over

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the message. That was a meeting designed to decide what could be done to bring the universities into it. And I think Bob Cooke did advance the idea originally, and we did decide this was something that probably we could get

Congress to do. But that wasn't after the message was drafted. That was before the message was drafted. We decided to put that in before I'd circulated it. It wasn't something put in after the circulation.

STEWART: Well. All right.

FELDMAN: Just in the course of developing ideas.

STEWART: But he – again; they were talking about seeing a draft or at least some ideas on paper, but it was probably preliminary to anything that would have been circulated. Again, is there anything else on that?

FELDMAN: The only other thing that isn't covered is perhaps what happened after the message got on the Hill and the problems on the Hill. I don't know whether anybody's discussed that with you.

STEWART: Yes, to a certain extent. There weren't any

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serious problems, were there?

FELDMAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. After it got on the Hill, I remember we had problems with Paul Rogers. Sarge and I decided to have lunch with Rogers and the Chairman of the Committee, Oren Harris. Oren Harris was sympathetic; Rogers, we were told, was not. But by this luncheon and by subsequent meetings which I had and which Sarge had with Rogers and with Harris we worked out most of Rogers' problems. But at one point Harris said he wasn't going to take it to the floor because he just didn't have the votes. So I don't think it had easy sailing at all, if that's the impression that others have given you.

STEWART: Well, it is, yes.

FELDMAN: Oh, no. Nothing like that. The lunch was the suggestion of Oren Harris so that we could get – not only Rogers was there. Rogers was there;

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Harris was there; there were two or three other Congressmen. But it was Oren Harris' suggestion because he thought he needed additional support, and he thought maybe if Sarge and I came up for lunch we could convince them. We didn't try to convince them so much as to talk in generalities and tell them how important this was, and they didn't try to argue on the substantive issues so much as...

STEWART: It was the period of...

FELDMAN: That's right. It was the period of time that they were most concerned with. They didn't want to appropriate all this money at that time. But it was worked out.

STEWART: Well, as I say...

FELDMAN: And we didn't have any trouble in the Senate.

STEWART: No.

FELDMAN: The House is where we had the difficulty. One other thing I suppose I ought to mention, on the

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mental health part of it I also talked to Mary Lasker to see whether or not I couldn't get her help. And she and some of her people exhibited their normal concern about having mental retardation associated with mental health, but since both of them were joined together, they decided they'd support both. And they did.

STEWART: As I say, I'd like to ask you some questions about the White House staff in general, beginning: one, do you ever recall any real serious discussions with the President about the organization or functioning of his immediate staff? Do you recall him ever being very concerned about exactly who was doing what and whether people were communicating with each other and so forth?

FELDMAN: Well, I don't remember anything specific. When we first went into the White House, Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], on my behalf I suppose, organized our

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section, the Special Counsel's Office. I discussed with Sorensen the division of functions, and he took that up with Kennedy. Now occasionally during the course of the time we were in the White House he would ask questions about who was doing what, and we would – I don't remember anything really specific except at one point I remember I was doing some things on the Hill, which was Larry O'Brien's [Lawrence F. O'Brien] responsibility, and he asked that I would make sure that Larry knew what was going on so that Larry would have the overall responsibility. Press matters always went through Pierre Salinger, and whenever we talked to newsmen, whenever we discussed White House press releases, or whenever we scheduled press conferences, we had to make sure that Pierre knew about it.

There are only two areas in which, I suppose, I became involved in some conflicts among the White House staff. Now one involved Kenny O'Donnell's [Kenneth P.

O'Donnell] operation. Kenny was very jealous of who had

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access to the President, even members of the White House staff. Well, neither Sorensen, nor I, nor Larry, nor certainly Pierre had any hesitancy in walking in on the President. Now sometimes I'd walk in through Kenny's side and sometimes I'd walk in through Evelyn's [Evelyn N. Lincoln] side. And although it never got to the level of any confrontation of any kind, I always had the feeling that Kenny wanted to know who was going in to see the President. And discussing this with Ted Sorensen, I remember Ted said, "Well, before going down, you ought to always call Kenny and ask him if the President's free." And I guess I followed that practice pretty generally after that, unless I just happened to be down there. Sometimes I'd just go in through Evelyn Lincoln's side. Or if it was late in the day, along about 8 o'clock when very often we had our meetings with the President, then of course, I didn't bother then. Nobody

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else – he didn't have any appointments at that time. And I would come in or Ted would or Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], and we'd just talk about what had happened during the day that we had to talk to him about.

The other part of the White House staff, I suppose, were more serious than that, and that was in my relationship with Bundy's office. Bundy had assigned Komer [Robert W. Komer] to the Middle East, and I also had responsibility for the Middle East by direct designation of the President. So I would get all of the reports dealing with the Middle East that came in from the field. And whenever there was a problem I would take it up with the President. Now Bundy also would send those same reports to Komer. Again, I don't think there was any conflict, but I'd just get a decision from him, and I never bothered to tell Bundy what the decision was. So sometimes

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he'd learn about it later. Now, he never said anything, but I suppose there was some – there wasn't any close meshing of things there.

Apart from that, I thought just about everybody on the staff had clear lines of authority. It wasn't anything like the Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] staff.

STEWART: Not by design, just by....

FELDMAN: Yes. It just worked out very well. Everybody knew what everybody else was doing. If I became involved on the Hill, I would check with Larry O'Brien. Occasionally, where I didn't and something would happen, I suppose it wasn't serious, but I would know that I should have done something, you know. In most instances he might be duplicating or he should know about it. So I think it worked much better than it did under Johnson. Johnson, you didn't have any of that.

When Johnson became President, everybody

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did everything. Organizationally, it was much better under Kennedy. I guess it was largely because everybody had worked with Kennedy through the campaign and before the campaign. Everybody knew what their responsibilities were. And in the White House we continued more or less what we had done prior to that time, what we had done during the campaign. Scheduling was still Kenny O'Donnell's job, and political relationships were still Larry O'Brien's. The press was still Salinger's, and speeches were still Sorensen's, and so on. So everybody knew what everybody else was doing and there wasn't any desire to impinge on anybody else's area.

I suppose the lines weren't clear sometimes because of the President. If I were in his office and he wanted somebody to talk to Kerr [Robert S. Kerr], for instance, he very often would say, "Why don't you go down and see Senator Kerr." Or I suppose occasionally – No,

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every substantive matter came to our office to either Sorensen or me or Lee White. But in all the other areas – or if he decided that we ought to talk to some newsmen about some column they've written and if I happened to be in his office and he knew I happened to know Rowly [Roland Evans, Jr.], he'd say, "Why don't you talk to him about that column." So the President himself didn't pay any attention to these lines, these jurisdictional lines, but the people working for him did pay attention to them, so it worked out all right.

STEWART: Following somewhat from that, was there a conscious decision to enlarge and expand the role of the Bureau of the Budget in matters? This is, again, something that people frequently talk about during the period. The Bureau of the Budget had more authority, more of a role in substantive things, than it had had previously.

FELDMAN: I don't believe the Bureau of the Budget or any

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person in the White House by virtue of his position had any expanded authority. I think in the case of the Bureau of the Budget and in the case even of Cabinet officers, which had clear lines of authority, the extent of the jurisdiction depended largely on the person. Kennedy had a great deal of confidence in Dave Bell [David E. Bell]. He thought he had a clear mind, he thought he had good advice, and he thought he had a good organization to support him. So for that reason he used the Bureau of the Budget a good deal more than his predecessor had used the Bureau of the Budget. The same thing is true of the way in which he used everybody on the White House staff and everybody in the Cabinet. Those people that he had confidence in and those people that would assume the responsibilities had their jurisdictions expanded. It didn't really matter what their titles were

or what they were doing. It's not

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a function of the organization; it's a function of the person.

STEWART: So, neither you or Ted Sorensen or the President never made a conscious decision that, look, let's expand the role of the Bureau of Budget.

FELDMAN: No.

STEWART: It just came about?

FELDMAN: It came about by the force of Dave Bell's personality, I think. And when Dave was not involved, it didn't have that much. When it was Elmer Staats who was involved, the Bureau of the Budget was considerably reduced in the manner in which it was treated; it became more a technical branch to assist the White House, while with Dave Bell almost everything went through the Bureau of the Budget. No, I think the answer is clear that there was never any conscious attempt to expand the Bureau.

STEWART: Do you ever remember the President ever being concerned with how he was allocating his own time, whether in his day to day operations he was doing things as well and effectively as he could?

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FELDMAN: No. The only time that it was apparent the President wanted to use his time well, it seemed to me, was not really during the day; that was Kenny O'Donnell's job. He was always available for any member of the staff at any time during the day. But the time when it was necessary to speak quickly and get decisions promptly and not to waste his time was at the end of the day, when he really had a limited amount of time. Then in a half hour we'd accomplish a great deal. No, I don't think he was conscious of the time burdens. And I think other presidents have been. I think Lyndon Johnson is.

STEWART: Or even conscious of organizing the things, for example, as Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] presumably was, you know, trying to keep things as orderly and neat as....

FELDMAN: No, again, John F. Kennedy wanted as many memoranda as possible, and he didn't like the Eisenhower system of putting everything

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on one page because he was a very rapid reader. So to that extent I suppose he wanted to conserve his time, but I never heard him say anything about it, no.

STEWART: Could we run through the members of the Cabinet and briefly discuss: one, their relations with Kennedy; and two, his opinions of them?

FELDMAN: All right.

STEWART: Beginning with Dean Rusk.

FELDMAN: Well, I think the relationship to Dean Rusk started out very well. I believe he felt that he had selected a good man and that Dean Rusk would be one of the best Secretaries of State. But after a year of so, I felt at the times when we were all together that he still respected Rusk but he did not admire his judgment quite as much. So that it wasn't at the same high level that it was before. He thought Dean Rusk had become more like a typical Secretary of State, or a typical leader of the State Department

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perhaps. Kennedy always had an attitude toward the State Department that wasn't the highest. He always thought that they didn't do much of a job considering all the people they had. And he always felt that he had a problem of trying to get them to become more vigorous and perhaps more helpful to the American policy as he saw it. I guess his disappointment in Rusk stemmed from the fact that this just wasn't getting across to the people in the Department of State.

STEWART: Was there ever any thought of easing him out or....

FELDMAN: I never heard that, no. I've heard the stories that Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] tells, but I never heard this from the President.

STEWART: Was there every any talk of easing anyone out, namely, Hodges [Luther H. Hodges] or Day [J. Edward Day]?

FELDMAN: Oh, yes. I discussed Ed Day with the President in detail. I suppose the President didn't pay much attention to the Post Office Department and Ed Day never got in to see him. So when Ed

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Day expressed this in a letter to the President, the President was a little bit annoyed. And then when he followed that up with a very nasty kind of letter of resignation in which he threatened to publicize it, if it weren't accepted the following day – he gave the President

twenty-four hours to accept the letter of resignation. I was there when the President received it, and he said, "Well, gee, Day must be some kind of a nut. We ought to let him go as quickly as possible and as gently as possible." So I'm sure that Day would not have lasted very long. Hodges...

STEWART: But you weren't going to let him go under those circumstances?

FELDMAN: Well, we did let him go ultimately but not immediately. We didn't want to let him go with the kind of feeling he had expressed in the letter.

STEWART: And Robert Kennedy was selected to talk him out of it?

FELDMAN: Bobby talked to him about it, yes. I talked to

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him about it, too. Both of us talked to him. And I think that Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] talked to him also, but I'm not sure.

Now, Hodges – he didn't think he was a leader in either thought or action or in vigor in the Cabinet. But he didn't think he would have ever thought of forcing Luther Hodges out. I think he considered Luther Hodges as kind of a typical Secretary of Commerce and neither as good nor as bad as anybody else.

Let me say this about John F. Kennedy, I don't think he could ever fire anybody. I don't think he would have fired them. But some he was more pleased with than others.

STEWART: How about Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff] and Celebrezze [Anthony J. Celebrezze]? Was Ribicoff a disappointment generally?

FELDMAN: No. After he left, he had some nasty things to say about him. But as a Cabinet officer I

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thought that their relationship was pretty good. Ribicoff was dissatisfied. Ribicoff felt that, again, he didn't get in to see the President often enough, he didn't get a chance to discuss things he wanted to discuss with him. So that he was a little bit dissatisfied. But I didn't think Kennedy ever – and I handled that Department in part; Ted Sorensen handled it, too – but I didn't think that the President was dissatisfied with Ribicoff.

Of course, the stars of the Cabinet were Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon] and McNamara [Robert S. McNamara].

STEWART: Was there some regret about Udall [Stewart L. Udall], at least in the first year? He got into some awful flaps there.

FELDMAN: Yes, yes. Again, John F. Kennedy wasn't too familiar anyhow with most of the things that went on in the Department of the Interior and didn't pay a great deal of attention to it. He was more interested in foreign affairs and fiscal

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policy and defense. They were the three big Departments. He spent a lot of time on that. Interior was kind of a chore. So he expected Udall to take care of Interior. Now, insofar as Udall didn't always get everything done exactly the way he wanted him to, there was some dissatisfaction, but I don't think there was ever any thought that he would ever force Udall to resign.

STEWART: Who else do we have? Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz] and Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg]. Or Goldberg and Wirtz.

FELDMAN: He had a very, very high regard for Arthur Goldberg. Arthur was one of those who got in to see the President whenever he wanted to. And Arthur was very pleased with his position as Secretary of Labor. He was active; he ran his Department well; he had tough assignments which he always performed. I'd have to number him as one of the stars of the Cabinet. I remember when Arthur was appointed to the Supreme Court. I was with the President.

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The President told me he was going to appoint Arthur to the Supreme Court and his only compunction about it was, "Should I do it now or should I do it later? If I do it now, I'm deprived of one of my top Cabinet officers." So Arthur was, according to Kennedy, a brilliant member of the Cabinet.

STEWART: Was anyone else considered except Wirtz to replace him?

FELDMAN: No. No. The appointment was made pretty quickly, and it was announced at a press conference a half hour after the President decided to make the appointment. And at that time he said to me, he said, "Well, I guess that Bill Wirtz will be moved up." There may have been other suggestions; there always are other suggestions. But in Kennedy's mind it was clear from the beginning that Will Wirtz would succeed Arthur.

STEWART: Who really made the decision on Celebrezze?

FELDMAN: That was a tough one. That was a really tough

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one. I think a lot of names were – I know a lot of names were...I gave him some names, I don't even remember who. I know Sorensen gave him a list of names. I guess the President made the decision himself and he made it because Celebrezze had a good record as a politician, as somebody to bring people together as an administrator. That Department, we decided, needed an administrator more than anything else. He had been a good Mayor of Cleveland. And he's an Italian; that helped, too. We didn't have an Italian member of the Cabinet. So Celebrezze was appointed with high hopes.

STEWART: Yes. How about Gronouski [John A. Gronouski, Jr.]? Who selected him? Or how was he selected?

FELDMAN: I wasn't involved in that at all so I can't tell you how Gronouski was appointed. I didn't discuss it with the President. And I learned about it shortly before it was made public.

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So I really can't...When I was told about Gronouski, my comment was, "Who's he?"

STEWART: Was, in fact, Hodges on the way out in the last year, and was he to be replaced by who? Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.], I think, was the rumor.

FELDMAN: No, I don't believe that. I don't believe that at all and for a lot of reasons. Kennedy would never have replaced Luther Hodges. He felt that he was obligated to Luther. He was one of those who had supported him with the businessmen's committee originally. Although he didn't do much with Commerce, there wasn't much that could be done with Commerce. Franklin Roosevelt was anxious to get a Cabinet post but he had some defects that Kennedy was aware of. And I just don't believe that was in the cards.

STEWART: Yes. Do you ever recall getting into any major

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squabbles with the press over leaks or major squabbles with either the President or Pierre Salinger or others about leaks through the press?

FELDMAN: Oh, I was kidded about leaks a lot. I never got into any squabbles with them. When there was a column that would appear in Evans and Novak [Robert D. Novak] or that would appear in Drew Pearson or one of the other places where I had close friends, I'd get a call from Pierre or from Sorensen – never from the President though. And so they'd tell me, they'd kid me about it. The more important leaks were not to columnists because everyone knows those happen. The only

times I discussed leaks with the President were on serious matters when there were very small groups that had made an important decision and we'd read – Joe Slevin [Joseph R. Slevin], for instance, we knew had several stories which were accurate that reflected discussions when there were no more than four

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or five people with the President. In each instance we tried to find out how those leaks occurred. And I helped with that. And then I talked to the President about it. On national security matters, no, because I wasn't directly involved in national security matters, so those leaks I wasn't involved in. The leaks that dealt with the domestic economy that were serious we tried to uncover. We never succeeded in it.

STEWART: Well, what about the President's relations with Vice President Johnson?

FELDMAN: Oh, I think they were basically correct and usually rather formal. I think John F. Kennedy had a very high regard for Lyndon Johnson. I believe he thought he was an astute politician and that he knew how to handle the Congress. But because Lyndon Johnson didn't volunteer to undertake congressional responsibilities....

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STEWART: Did he want him to?

FELDMAN: A couple of times at breakfast it seemed to me that he was suggesting it. He'd ask Lyndon's advice. And it seemed to me that he was suggesting that Lyndon undertake some of the responsibilities for helping with particular legislative programs, but Lyndon wouldn't volunteer to do that and Kennedy wouldn't assign that to him. He did not involve Lyndon Johnson in some of the major things that Lyndon wanted to be involved in. He thought Lyndon had an ego that just was so great that it might handicap the Administration on occasions. So I would say that, although he had a great deal of respect for Lyndon that dated back to their Senate days, their relationship was not close, and he would not have assigned to Lyndon a major substantive responsibility and didn't, as a matter of fact. What he assigned to Lyndon were things that Lyndon would come to him and ask for. And he would give that to him because:

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one, he always did, Kennedy always wanted to keep peace in the family; and two, because he did think Lyndon had some capacity for organizing things, getting things done.

STEWART: You don't then recall any serious or lengthy discussion about, you know, what exactly do we do with the Vice President, or how do we treat him, or....

FELDMAN: Well, the Vice President called me on a couple of occasions to see if I wouldn't talk to the President about something. He was trying to plant something. I'd assume he'd talked to other members of the staff too. He'd say, "Would you talk to the President....?" I've even forgotten what they were about, but he'd say, "Would you...." Well, a couple of times Johnson became angry because of stories that emanated from the White House about his relationship to Kennedy in which he said that the White House staff was trying to cut him up. And he'd spend

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a half hour on the phone talking about it. I'm sure that he wanted me to tell the President about that. This would be the way that he would operate.

STEWART: Were you at all involved with the whole Bobby Baker [Robert G. Baker] thing?

FELDMAN: No. No, I wasn't involved in that at all.

STEWART: If you had to cite a few criticisms of the way Kennedy operated as president, could you? Or could you think of some things that either you or others were criticizing at the time or that looking back at it now you could criticize?

FELDMAN: Well, that's a tough question because I just don't think in those terms when I think of the Kennedy presidency. But let me think what – what you're saying is how it could have been improved?

STEWART: Yes.

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FELDMAN: Yes, I guess, each president operates in his own style, in the way he wants to have things done. Now Kennedy's style was not to use the Cabinet a great deal. I think he used the White House staff a great deal more than he used the Cabinet. I think in retrospect that was probably a mistake. Kennedy didn't believe in Cabinet meetings; nor do I. I think Cabinet meetings were a waste of time. However, you can call the Cabinet members in and assign them particular responsibilities and keep them involved in the operations of the government more than John F. Kennedy did. I suppose that in that respect I'd say it could be done better.

I guess Kennedy interested himself, as I said before, mostly in defense and foreign policy and in financial matters. He acquired quite a good deal of knowledge about the

Treasury and how it worked and financial and monetary systems. I guess he perhaps might have interested himself a little more in some of the other programs. My responsibility was agriculture above all others.

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He was always bored by the discussions of agriculture. He just couldn't get excited about the various agricultural programs. He was interested in the final result. I don't know whether that's good or bad. I suppose if you had a perfect president he would be interested equally in every one of the Cabinet departments and every one of the agencies.

Insofar as control or fixing of responsibility within the White House and the way the White House operated, I just couldn't have any criticism at all. I think the White House under John F. Kennedy operated better than under any president in history, certainly much better than under Johnson and much better than under Eisenhower and much better than under Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. I mean measured with those three I don't believe any president in history had a group of people around him who were so familiar with what the President wanted that we didn't have to consult him about every little thing. I don't believe there was ever this great reciprocal loyalty

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between the staff and the President that makes it operate efficiently. I don't believe that any president ever trusted his staff so much that the staff would know that the President would support them whatever the decisions they made. That saves a lot of the President's time. And I think that every White House staff tends to compete for access to the throne. The Kennedy staff did not. Everybody knew where they stood and everybody was satisfied with their position. I believe there are a few people who came in the White House with a greater esprit de corps and a greater real incentive to do a good job. So the White House staff operation was almost ideal. I can't imagine any president in history has had a better staff. I also think everybody on the staff was extremely competent. If I judged the Kennedy staff against any of the White House staffs I know, every other one suffers a good deal by comparison.

To come back to your question as to criticism, the criticism

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I might make would be of his relationships to the government departments. He kind of put them at almost a level below the White House staff. Maybe that's wrong.

STEWART: There were very few additions or deletions. I guess Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton], Goodwin [Robert Clifford Goodwin], and Harris Wofford [Harris L. Wofford, Jr.] were the only major people who actually left.

FELDMAN: I think everybody that came in with Kennedy almost committed themselves to stay with Kennedy until '68.

STEWART: Yes.

FELDMAN: And nobody planned to leave before then.

STEWART: Do you want to go on more, or....

FELDMAN: No.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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