

Bertram S. Brown, Oral History Interview—JFK#1, 8/6/1968
Administrative Information

Creator: Bertram S. Brown
Interviewer: John F. Stewart
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Biographical Note

Brown was a staff psychiatrist at the Mental Health Study Center, (1960-1961); special assistant to the President (1961-1963); chief of the Community Mental Health Facilities Branch (1964-1966), associate director of the Mental Health Service Program (1966), and deputy director (1967-1970), at the National Institute of Mental Health; and special assistant to the President on Mental Retardation (1962-1966). In this interview he discusses his background in mental health research, his relationship with Dr. Janet G. Travell, and his introduction to R. Sargent Shriver, Jr. and Eunice Kennedy Shriver, among other issues.

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First of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Bertram S. Brown

Bethesda, Maryland

August 6, 1968

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Well, let me ask you the very general question of how you first got involved with Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] or the Kennedy Foundation [Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Memorial Foundation]?

BROWN: Well, my entrée or contact was very predominantly or almost solely through Dr. Travell [Janet G. Travell]. It's just worth a half a minute of the nature of my relationship with Dr. Travell since that played a critical role for me, and a sort of a subtle and not too well understood role for the retardation effort through Dr. Travell's relationship with the President [John F. Kennedy] and Mrs. Shriver, Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], and others.

I went to Cornell Medical School, '52 to '56, and Dr. Travell was a professor of pharmacology there at the time. And without going into detail, I had a medical condition—muscle pains, sciatic—which is rather identical to the President's, though I didn't know it at the time. And Dr. Travell became my physician, and I became one of her loyal supporters since she cured me and saved me from the knife. During the course of this relationship with her and I, which grew in depth even during these medical school years, she became interested in the fact that I was interested in mental retardation.

During my second year in medical school, which is '53 to '54, I did a paper on the whole field of mental retardation. And I have a copy of the paper which you might find interesting. What happened was nothing in the way of a stimulus having to do with the personal family member or any of the usual motivations for people to get into retardation, but rather went to visit Letchworth Village where Dr. Jervis [George A. Jervis], who has

played a big role in the Kennedy mental retardation interest, taught. I was astounded by what I saw, and then spent the whole year reviewing the field. And in order to do this, I had to go to the Academy of Medicine, all sorts of places, because they had nothing at Cornell on mental retardation.

What I subsequently found out is that Dr. Travell had transmitted this paper to the Kennedy Foundation during '54 and '55 and '56, and it played somewhere between a major and a minor role, either through its content or through her influence, in the switch of the Kennedy Foundation from a custodial charity, giving effort to the fact that they ought to emphasize research. This is something I didn't find out until 1960, but you can imagine what a thrill it was to find out that a medical student paper had this kind of, even if it were minor, impact—deciding impact. I think the paper now, which would be twelve years old, still reads as well; I'd be proud of it now. You're welcome to look at it. It essentially says, we don't know enough; it's a terribly important problem; more research is needed.

Well, during the '56 to '60 period Dr. Travell had, obviously, a lot of contact with the family, with some of their interests in retardation, some of the research advisors that the Kennedy Foundation started to bring in. I would occasionally get questions from her about people in the field. And during those years I was in training first in pediatrics, perfectly respectable, where I did biochemical work which is what you need as an entrée into the Kennedy acceptability. So I looked like a biological scientist. And even though I went off into psychiatry, which was sort of unacceptable, I had excellent credentials in biochemistry, pediatrics, and retardation.

During those years, I can't remember all the contacts, but occasionally I'd be asked to who's important here, and what's going on in phenylketonuria [PKU], and kept up in the field. In addition to the fact that again, during my psychiatric residency days in Harvard, '57 to '60, I became active in the field of the retarded offender, where I still remain literally the country's only guy working on the mentally retarded offender.

STEWART: Really?

BROWN: Yes. And in this sense I was continuing to accumulate very strong credentials in the retardation field, even though I was in psychiatry.

STEWART: Excuse me. Were all your contacts through Dr. Travell, or most of them?

BROWN: Most of them were through Dr. Travell, but I remember occasional contact with this Sarge Shriver, or a letter to Shriver. She'd share some correspondence, or she would send me on a letter of his and I would answer. This sort of thing—or help her to prepare an answer. So I had this indirect relationship with the family. So when she finally—and here my memory gets hazy—my first contact with Sarge Shriver was at the Mayflower Hotel, pre-election, the summer of 19—would it be '61 or....

STEWART: '60.

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BROWN: '60, where she very skillfully arranged for me to meet Sarge Shriver to talk about mental retardation. As a matter of fact, he was upstairs meeting with some Negro and urban and labor groups. At that time, waiting in the lobby, she was a little more businesslike and tense than she usually is, because she's usually quite gracious and elegant. And she told me at that time, in the summer of 1960, that she had shared my paper, and this was the Sarge Shriver that I'd had this indirect contact with, and big things were going to happen in retardation when and if Kennedy got elected.

STEWART: That's interesting. No one else recalled any anticipations like this.

BROWN: Really?

STEWART: Yes, or perhaps I haven't asked the right people. But you say there was, she definitely....

BROWN: Oh yes, she was getting me ready for what subsequently happened.

STEWART: Really? During the summer of '60.

BROWN: Yes. And I remember, then Shriver came down and I met him and at that time he was, you know, gracious. And I didn't know what to make of the fact that the guy would come out of a big political meeting to meet this essentially twenty-eight year old commissioned corps first lieutenant. I remember our first contacts, Shriver and I, quite well because he said, "We've really got to do something." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, what we got to do is get together Nobel Prize winners into the back wards of state institutions." He had this naïve idea—and I'm not sure at this point whether it's stupid or very smart, but this notion, which I don't think has changed one iota, is that you have to take a Joshua Lederberg, who's made a god, or Wendell Stanley [Wendell M. Stanley] and put them next to a retarded kid, and somehow something will happen. I remember handling the situation myself by saying I wasn't sure that was the most productive way to go about it, but I did agree that maybe an effort that encompassed a childcare expert on a back ward and a Nobel Prize effort, that that was the level that retardation had to be approached. I think that's what Shriver heard from me, that he was somebody who was interested in the Nobel Prize thing, which he had a lot of respect for but not much understanding, and also had been on back wards of retardation.

And that was maybe a ten minute conversation in the hall, and that was the end of it, though the dividends, of course, came later when Dr. Travell, through the President and I suppose Shriver was obviously involved. Of course, he's the one who wanted me to handle it.

STEWART: There wasn't any talk, was there, of using any of this in the campaign or injecting it into any speeches the President might give on the nation's

health problems or a potential program?

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BROWN: Well, yes and no. I remember some discussion at the time over what was probably Wilbur Cohen's [Wilbur J. Cohen] task force on childcare. Other people were involved, and how much to get this into the election campaign....

STEWART: Well, that actually came later. That didn't come until after the—it came during the transition period, after November.

BROWN: After November, right. But the discussions were what to do about childcare and children and pediatrics. See, pediatrics, broadly conceived, was the acceptable rubric under which they could forward their interests in retardation. And the most acceptable pediatricians were people like Bob Cooke [Robert E. Cooke] who were terribly interested in retardation but also very well known and renowned pediatricians. So the discussion was sort of more around childcare and pediatrics, and we got to do something for children, and we've got to do something in the field of prevention. But that's all I remember.

STEWART: To what extent, do you recall, were you knowledgeable about Rosemary's [Rosemary Kennedy] condition, the fact of Rosemary's existence at that time?

BROWN: I remember it just being mentioned by Dr. Travell, and I didn't explore it too deeply. I just was aware of it, but not very deeply or intimately.

STEWART: Let me follow that up a little bit. Were you at all involved in the decision that apparently later was made to openly talk about this?

BROWN: No.

STEWART: Because it wasn't until, well, actually it wasn't until Mrs. Shriver's article, I think, in 1962 that it was really openly discussed.

BROWN: I wasn't directly involved. I might have been indirectly involved since it was so well known—or at least among the people we're talking about. There didn't seem any point in holding it back, and it was a courageous step forward. I do know that among my own intimates there was a great deal of discussion about what her actual diagnosis of illness was. And there's a strong feeling—now this is indirectly—that it may well be retardation, because retardation's a complex matter of just being intellectually behind, but that the genesis might well have been a more emotional or psychotic illness really. So that the issue or the relationship of the mental health of psychiatric to the mental retardation thing is not only, in this sense, a national health politics

issue, or social welfare politics, but really gets down to the genesis of what was the nature of Rosemary's illness. My own understanding, from sources that I respect, that she may well have had a schizophrenic illness, and that this

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whole thing is a massive denial calling it retardation because of the unacceptability of the fact that it's really a psychotic illness which would really be a fantastic metamorphosis of the whole issue.

STEWART: Well, I suppose, eventually, there must be some records that will come up, you know, that will definitely prove one way or the other what it is.

BROWN: Or it may not be provable, you see.

STEWART: Well, yes.

BROWN: By the substance or nature of the illness itself, one of the unsolved issues right now, say, has to do with autistic kids, autism. And these are obviously retarded and they're obviously psychotic, and which one is primary is unknown. So when you get down to early childhood severe, or not severe, significant retardation, the whole relationship of the emotional-psychological to the familial-cultural-genetic is exactly what we're trying to research. Which is why it's such an arbitrary division between retardation and emotional or psychiatric.

STEWART: You said that Dr. Travell and yourself and possibly Sargent Shriver talked a little bit about what possibly could be done when and if President Kennedy won the election in November. Do you remember how specific these discussions were other than this general matter you mentioned about Shriver and the Nobel Prize people?

BROWN: Well, here I have difficulty with memory. Of course, I'm afraid that I would probably project more specificity into it than existed. At best the commission didn't come as much of a surprise as a mechanism for doing this, but I can't really remember whether it was actually discussed per se. But there was no doubt in my mind starting that June—I remember it was June, it comes back to me now because it must have been before the nomination—the idea that something was going to be done if Kennedy got this nomination and then the election, it was sure as shootin'.

STEWART: Just for background, exactly what were you doing during 1960, or during the period immediately preceding the Kennedy Administration?

BROWN: '57 to '60 I was at Mass. Mental Health Center and the Harvard School of Public Health and Training. I came down here July 1, 1960, to start my

career in the Public Health Service in the Commission Corps. I was a staff psychiatrist at the Mental Health Study Center.

STEWART: So you weren't actively involved in mental retardation within the federal government at that time at all?

BROWN: I was just finishing my psychiatric residency.

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STEWART: I see. And your association with mental retardation, well, this had been your area, though, in school.

BROWN: It was a high interest, continuous interest area which, in my own field, psychiatry, say, was so unique it's remained unique, which is sort of. . . . That is, you know, in residency you're supposed to go full time. Well, I was a moonlighter. I had a job half time as a senior psychiatrist for the Division of Legal Medicine, and I became the Director of Psychiatry at Norfolk prison, all this while being a resident. And in working for the Division of Legal Medicine, it was an outpatient setup, and I began to see the retarded prisoners and the retarded parolees and the retarded probationers. So I continued to work in that sense.

During the third year residence, '59-'60, and when I was in the School of Public Health—which you also weren't supposed to do, but I got residency credit for that—I did my research on services for the retarded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sort of surveying the public health, mental health, retardation. So what I was doing was working at it, but it had no particular relationship to the federal government; it was just a young maverick interested in the field.

STEWART: What I was leading up to is one of the things I think would be interesting, is to get some comments from people as to the specific things that the federal government either was doing wrong or wasn't doing enough of. Now, this, of course, is perhaps hard to pin down but were there, for example, any specific programs that had been blocked or that people couldn't get through the Eisenhower Administration [Dwight D. Eisenhower] during that whole period?

BROWN: I have two responses to that. First, I don't know whether Leonard Duhl [Leonard J. Duhl] is down on your list, but Lenny Duhl, as you can even see from the notes we looked at, was very close to the Shrivvers, closer at that time than I was; still is, I think, to some extent. He was the mental retardation man for NIMH [National Institutes of Mental Health] before I came in. He's the one who helped to fund the American Association of Mental Deficiency large grant, which was the predecessor to the Mental Retardation Panel. And he was the guy who was here when Fogarty [John E. Fogarty] in '57 finally got some money going. And he knows this kind of issue very, very well. He's excellent in forming. What I know, I would have picked up from him in the transition period.

STEWART: So he'd be the one to talk to. Your notes here, probably at least start in June according to this....

BROWN: Of '61, right.

STEWART: Right. Were you at all associated with, for example, Wilbur Cohen's task force that Dr. Cooke served on at the suggestion of the Shriver's?

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BROWN: Only through knowing about it through Len Duhl and some other contacts. I knew about it, but I wasn't associated with it. I had a normal, busy first year from June of '60 to June of '61 at this Mental Health Studies Center in Prince Georges County, just an Indian plowing in the fields.

STEWART: So from January to June there was no other association?

BROWN: Not that I can remember at the moment.

STEWART: Well, had the decision—perhaps you go into it here—but had the decision been made by June to actually form a commission?

BROWN: Yes, I think the notes there—I haven't looked at them, I should have probably, before we were talking—gives the flavor like when I finally got that call from Dr. Travell in Palm Springs June 10th, and then before you knew it I was together with Dick Masland [Richard Masland] and Len Duhl, and I found there had been a prior document. It's clear there had been at least a month or two of preliminary efforts and thinking that had gone on. So you get the flavor here from my notes of a whole set of efforts that I suddenly came in on; I was not involved in it personally.

STEWART: One of the things I'm trying to get at, it seems that there was an unusually long period of time and unusually long delay if there presumably was such urgency on this in December and January, and really nothing got going until later in the summer. And the question becomes why didn't something get going in March or April?

BROWN: I think it comes through a little bit here. Sarge Shriver, when he spoke to me—8 a.m. I receive a call from Sarge Shriver, you know, Monday, June 12th. He outlined that Wilbur Cohen was just too busy to get anything really done. Now what I have, you know, that comes back in the way of memory, is, "Jesus Christ, all these big shots, they just talk a good game, and Bert, you'd better get down and get something done." So I have the feeling of some frustration and a touch of anger. Everybody had been talking a good game, but nobody had been delivering the goods for the family or for the President. [Interruption]

STEWART: We're talking about a meeting on February 4, 1963, at the White House regarding the President's special message on mental illness and mental retardation.

BROWN: Now, this particular meeting, which, if I remember correctly, was late in the afternoon, was, you know, the high point. All the drafts had been done, people had talked with each other. I was in Mike Feldman's [Myer Feldman] house the previous Sunday going over the last drafts, Bob Cooke was working on the last drafts, and everybody was having their fingers in it. But there it was.

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We were essentially majordomoed in by Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], who had this kind of chief of staff role. And I think you know the people in this; I don't have to go over it. Two couches lined up, Kennedy sitting in the rocking chair facing the line up. Some of us in the background, like Staff Warren [Stafford L. Warren] and I. And I considered it really a high privilege to be there. At one point Celebrezze [Anthony J. Celebrezze], rising to the importance of the occasion, somewhat formally said, "Mr. President, I want to congratulate you. This is really an outstanding program that you have here, but it sure is going to cost a lot of money," or something like this, sure would be expensive. Then I think Sorensen said to Wilbur, "Well, what is the five year cost of this program?" There was an 801 that had to be filed, and Wilbur Cohen rustled his papers and said, "Something like eight hundred fifty million dollars." And I'm pretty sure that was accurate. At which point, Kennedy was in his rocking chair; he had the transcript of the President's message before him, was ruffling through it; and he looked up and said, "Mr. Secretary, do you know what the five year cost of defense is?" This sort of stunned Celebrezze. He said, "Two hundred and fifty billion," which is really easy, five times fifty. "We can darn well afford this for the country." It was a very poignant and exciting moment.

The more interesting thing—and it's never going to be documented unless you get it out of me right now, which is what you're doing—is before we went into that meeting the drama and the dramatics and the tensions and the conflict in the outer office. I remember quite well going into one little room that was outside Kenny O'Donnell's [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] office, which is the immediate entrance to the President's office, but there was another room over there. And I was there, and Staff, and Celebrezze was looking through all these things. Meanwhile Eunice Shriver and Ted Sorensen were still talking about whether to have mental health and mental retardation or how to work out this conflict or that conflict. And Wilbur Cohen and Eunice really hadn't resolved their difficulties, and Celebrezze was over his head. And Sorensen just took charge by saying, "We're not going to discuss that when we're in with the President." And you could just see that he was one of the few people who could shut Eunice up so that the meeting would have a little more formal flavor for the review of the President's message. At the moment I confess to stupidity because I can't remember what the issue was; I remember the dynamics.

STEWART: Was it....

BROWN: It was a mental health, mental retardation issue. It was also a Wilbur Cohen-Eunice Shriver personality conflict. Those are the two things that I remember.

STEWART: Still the question of combing the messages, or that probably had been....

BROWN: No, part of it was the purity of the mental retardation as opposed to the mental health, whether to have the bridging passages. And I, of course, had been heavily involved, you see, and have given many speeches on the

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anatomy of the message, namely the two page overview of the two and then the separate plans for mental health and the separate plans for mental retardation. I think at that point Eunice was still pushing to have a separate message for mental retardation and the joining of the two, which was basically a programmatic and political decision, still ran against her grain.

STEWART: But that is interesting that Sorensen was able to, or was willing to speak up to the President's sister.

BROWN: It was to me. And, you know, I never had any lack of grasping what was going on, and that a president needs a Sorensen, if you know what I mean. He needs a man that can even handle his own family's problems in this kind of meeting. That doesn't mean that they didn't go back later to talk to the President.

STEWART: Is there anything else about the President's actions or decisions at that meeting that you can recall? Was this essentially to get his approval of the whole message that he was going to present to Congress?

BROWN: Yes. This was, after all, the President's message. Sorensen presented the fact that, you know, this was sort of historical and a first. Kennedy seemed to know this. Wilbur Cohen had all sorts of political and legislative agendas in mind. It was a brief meeting, maybe ten minutes—I don't really remember correctly—and disappointing in that sense. I don't think his actions were terribly significant other than giving general approval to the effort and some congratulatory warmth for people who had done their work. He didn't really go over it in very much detail, or edit or do any of those other things one would like to imagine that he would have done.

I do remember hanging around after the meeting and getting a big kick out of it. Kermit Gordon had just had the hell bawled out of him by, I think, Senator Byrd [Harry Flood Byrd] or somebody like that. And Kennedy went over and said, "Welcome to the club." And there was a lot of repartee that went on on a whole host of important issues, until they finally spotted me in the office and booted me out. [Laughter]

STEWART: They wondered how you remained.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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