

Mary Lasker Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 04/18/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Mary Lasker
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Biographical Note

Mary Lasker was a well-known and successful health activist and philanthropist; co-founder of the Lasker Foundation; founder of the National Health Education Committee; the president of the Birth Control Federation of America; the winner of a Presidential Medal of Freedom (1969) and the Congressional Gold Medal (1989); and a personal acquaintance of John F. Kennedy [JFK] and later, after his death, a close friend of several members of JFK's family. In this interview Lasker discusses her work lobbying for different health and medical programs such as a presidential commission on strokes; her encounters with JFK, both in the White House and socially; her friendship with Adlai E. Stevenson and his experience during the 1960 presidential campaigns; and her work on the National Cultural Center Board which she suggested be renamed as a memorial for JFK, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

With

MARY LASKER

New York City, New York
April 18, 1966

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: The obvious place to start is the first recollection you have of meeting John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy].

LASKER: I first met him on the Hill in the Capitol someplace with Florence Mahoney. Florence Mahoney was a friend of his and is a friend of mine, whose husband was publisher of the *Miami Journal*, and who came to live in Washington after she was divorced. She had known Kennedy since the early forties or late thirties. She'd always liked him and, in fact, was always devoted to him. And she often talked to me about him and said that he was surely going to be President sometime. Well, when I met him, and he was this very, very skinny, and very young looking congressman, I thought, "Florence is a wonderful girl and I'm very fond of her, but this is a very unlikely candidate for President." He looked incredibly young. His arms were too long for his coat, his pants were not fitting—or the bottoms were turned up. He was really a very unimpressive looking candidate for President at that time.

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However, he was always very cheerful, and he was often teasing Florence about being interested in birth control. Florence is very interested in birth control as a public health problem, and so am I. And he was always saying to her, "Well, have you any new methods?"

Or, “What is the situation?” There would always be some crack about it. And even when he’d see me alone in the halls in Congress he’d say hello to me and say, “How is Florence, and how is she getting along with birth control?”

Well, little did he realize, or did any of us realize, that later on he would be the first President to make any official kind of statement on the subject of birth control. He said, as President, that countries which wanted help in family planning could ask the U.S. Government for it. This gave great hope to the health services of the AID [Agency for International Development] group, the administration of AID. His statement encouraged other countries to ask for birth control methods. He probably didn’t realize that it would make an opening by which you could drive for much more action. This is being done now because Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] has gone further, really buoyed up by the success of Kennedy’s initial opening statement on birth control. But I thought Kennedy was charming, and Florence’s affection was so great for him that I was influenced by her to help him when he was ill of malaria.

I had never met him when I first heard of him, and she told me that he was sick with malaria—this must have been 1943 or ’44—in a hospital in the South. I had just heard that there was a new drug for malaria, and I persuaded my husband, Albert Lasker [Albert D. Lasker], to call up his father, Joseph P. Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], and tell Joe Kennedy about this drug because Florence was so worried about Jack Kennedy’s illness. And I thought, “Well, this is so serious that I must try to get word that there is something that could be done, because otherwise, people with malaria untreated go on and on and on and on and nothing stopped or suppressed it until the new drugs were discovered during World War II.” I forget whether the drug was chloroquin or something else. But at any rate, although I never knew whether he got the drug or not, I recall vividly attempting to help him through bringing the new drug for malaria to the attention of his father.

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Well, time went on, and he became a Senator. Florence and I, I remember, gave a dinner dance in honor of Lady Jackson, Barbara Ward [Lady Barbara Ward Jackson] the economist. Do you know her?

MORRISSEY: I know of her.

LASKER: You ought to get her; she’d have a lot to say about the President because she...

MORRISSEY: I think she’s been interviewed by...

LASKER: By somebody else?

MORRISSEY: Walter [Walt Whitman Rostow] and Elspeth Rostow [Elspeth Davies Rostow].

LASKER: Oh, well, that’s good. Well, we gave a dinner dance—maybe in ’59—at

the F Street Club to which Senator Kennedy came. The dinner was in honor of Barbara. And I remember—I think they met there that night—I remember I was aware of his being there and of his being very lively. I think of Barbara dancing with him and, you know, making some pleasant remark about him.

Then, maybe shortly after that, or somewhat before it, I remember dining with him and Mrs. Kennedy, Jacqueline [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis], at Mrs. Mahoney's house. It must have been in '59 or late '58 because Jack was very worried about the attitude of Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] toward him. He thought of me as from New York, and I think he probably thought I knew Mrs. Roosevelt, which indeed I did. And he said to me, "Now why is she so much against me?" And I said, "Well, I really don't know what her attitude is, but I know one thing: She's a person who's *very fair*, and the thing for you to do is go to see her and ask her, because whatever she has to say or to criticize about you, she'll tell you and you'll be able to clear it up." Now, eventually, he did go to see her; I don't know how soon after that. But, you remember, he did see her in the campaign, and they did become friendly. I don't remember whether he wanted to see her at once after this, or not, but I remember that he was very anxious about her attitude. And I remember how charming and really very shy Jackie was that night.

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Well, in the campaign of '60, I knew all the candidates—all the Democratic candidates. All of them I knew better than I knew Senator Kennedy. I had supported Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] in '52 and in '56, and I realized that Stevenson, while he was not an official candidate, would be bitterly annoyed by his friends that didn't give him support, but not at all grateful if they did. However, he had broken the way, it seemed to me, to get some things done during the last two campaigns or at least kept the liberal attitude alive in the United States during those eight years of Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] "becalm-ment"—it's not a good word, but that's really what it was. As I was really a great friend of Stevenson's at the time, I felt that I had to support him, which I did. I did know Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] well, and I knew Johnson well because I had known Johnson as Majority Leader of the Senate. I also knew Symington [Stuart Symington, II] better than I knew Kennedy. So nobody from the Kennedy camp ever came to see me, except once in Europe—I think in the summer of '59. His mother [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy], whom I didn't really know, asked me to lunch at the Ritz. And I had the feeling she was thinking about asking me to support her son, and then for some reason or other she never really came down to saying, "Will you do it?" I didn't know any of his sisters except Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver], and that very casually. I didn't know Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], I'd met him only casually. I really wasn't close to them as a group at all. And, as you see from what I told you, I didn't know the President at all well.

After the nomination, in '60, Bill Walton [William Walton] came to see me because he knew that I was a national Democratic campaign contributor in the past and asked me if I wouldn't contribute to Kennedy's campaign. I said yes, I'd be glad to, but that I'd like to see the President. He took me to see him the Hotel Carlyle. We had a short conversation, a very pleasant talk about what his general attitudes were going to be, or what I hoped his general attitudes were going to be, and that was that. It might have taken ten minutes.

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And then, a little bit later, Stewart Udall [Stewart L. Udall], who was a friend of mine in the House, came up to New York and asked me to go with him to the press conference where President-elect Kennedy was going to announce Udall's appointment as the Secretary of the Interior. I was very delighted and flattered about this, and Udall came to the house to pick me up. And he said, "Now I have an idea I want to tell the President. See what you think of it." I said, "What is it?" He said, "I want to have Robert Frost read a poem or write a poem for the Inauguration. What do you think?" I said, "I think it's terrific!" So we went to the Carlyle. The President, you know, did business with a flash of an eye; it didn't take him long to listen to anything. Stewart told him about this, and the President said immediately, "Well it's a good idea. Yes, certainly. Why don't we do it? Will you take care of this?" And Stewart Udall said yes, and that was it. That was the beginning of the Frost episode. After that the doors were open, and there was a huge press conference, and that was all over.

After his election, which seemed terribly exciting and incredibly *close*—I really had suffered because I thought Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] would be a disaster of such unparalleled proportion that I didn't know what to do—I was anxious that the people I knew were going to be able to have good jobs in the new Administration, and some seemed to be very well taken care of by Sargent Shriver. Bill Blair [William McCormick Blair, Jr.] was one of the people I was concerned about. Bill, of course, is much more close to both the Kennedys and to Shriver than I. He was, as you know, appointed to be the Ambassador to Denmark. I thought his appointments were very good.

You've certainly had the story about the Secretary of State business. Stevenson was bitterly disappointed. I wouldn't know really why because I don't know really why he should have expected to be Secretary of State, considering all the things that had gone on, but at any rate he really did. Oh, he was very undecided for days about whether or not he'd accept the job of being Ambassador to the UN. And I remember Bill Blair said, "Now you and Marietta [Marietta Endicott Peabody Tree] had better persuade him about this because, you know, it would just be ridiculous if he isn't." So Marietta and I did the best we could. I won't say it was because of us, but, as you know, he finally accepted and really did a very good job.

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MORRISSEY: Did you get involved with the selection of someone for HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare]?

LASKER: No, because that was really all done before the election. You know, Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff] supporters. There was no question about who that would be, and then there were so few jobs under Ribicoff that they were given mostly to people who had supported, done some conspicuous service—not necessarily people who were geniuses in education of health, I think it's fair to say. Ribicoff appointed Boisfeuillet Jones as his assistant for health at my suggestion. Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] was involved in some appointments when he was Secretary of the Cabinet.

MORRISSEY: Yes, at that time.

LASKER: Anyway, he had something to do about some appointments. I guess they looked down the list of who were the contributors, and they decided, you know, that these people should be employed in some useful way. They thought about what would be suitable. I remember Fred calling up and saying to me one day, "Listen, the President wants you to be on the National Cultural Center Board." And I thought, "Oh my God!" I said, "That's not suitable for me." And he said, "Oh yes, it is. It is very important." I said, "Well, what do you need to do?" He said, "Well, it's a thing set up by Congress, and they have to raise seventy-six million dollars." And I said, "How much have they got?" "Well, about two million." And I said, "Fred, this is awful. I don't think it's good at all." But then I thought, "What am I going to do if I don't do anything that the President asks me to do or even try to do it? Then when I ask him for the things that I'm interested in, like things in the field of health, he may think, 'Well, that's a very unfriendly attitude, you know, and he may not feel that he has to give any great attention to me.'"

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MORRISSEY: Had you known Fred Dutton previously?

LASKER: Yes, I knew him when he worked for Pat Brown [Edmund G. Brown], and he was a Stevenson supporter in '56. So I went to a meeting of the National Cultural Center Board, and I've never been so discouraged about anything. I realized from looking around at the Board members that some of them were federal officials who were known never to be able to raise private money and certainly couldn't give any, you know. The few people that could give any money—one of them had already given a million dollars.... The rest of us weren't likely to make up the deficit of seventy-odd million dollars. So I asked for an appointment with President Kennedy.

I remember I came into the room on a lovely sort of warm day—it must have been in June or early July—on the second floor of the White House, you know, the oval sitting room, and he looked so well and so handsome. He said, "Well, now what is the problem?" He sat down in his rocking chair. I said, "Well, you've put me on this National Cultural Center Board, and I have the feeling that a seventy million dollar building is too big for the size of the community. I don't see how we'll raise the money because it just doesn't seem to be in the wood. The community itself hasn't given it; it seems to me to be very difficult to raise substantial money around the country." And he said, "Well, what do you suggest I do?" And I said, "Well, why don't you ask the advice of Roger Stevens [Roger L. Stevens], Bob Dowling [Robert W. Dowling], and Maxwell Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor]." He said, "Maxwell Taylor! Why he's down here helping me." I said, "Yes, but he's just come from the Lincoln Center. At least he knows something about the building of a big center. He's at least been exposed to the size of the problem, and they could have some survey done to see whether this thing is too big or not, and whether it's going to have too many seats, more seats than you could fill." And I said, "You know, you and I don't want to be associated with any failures." And he said, "No that's right. All right." So the next time I went to the meeting of

the National Cultural Center—which might have been six months later, or some months later—he had gotten LeMoyne Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings], who was his great friend. Have you interviewed him? You haven't interviewed him.

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MORRISSEY: He's been interviewed, but I didn't do it.

LASKER: He was on the Board to more or less represent him, really, and he had gotten Roger Stevens and some other people to survey the size of the problem, and the Cultural Center's size was reduced to forty-six million. Stone [Edward Durell Stone] had made a new drawing and readjusted the whole concept—Ed Stone, the architect—to a smaller plan for which I've always been profoundly grateful. Well, even then it was a gigantic job and was really terribly difficult, but Roger and LeMoyne Billings were very determined about this, and Roger was made the Chairman of the Board—Roger Stevens.

LeMoyne had ideas that you could raise money from American business corporations, and Roger was going to raise it from foundations and from wherever one could. We soon found that unless the President was in some way associated with it, it was practically impossible to do anything. Well, the President indeed took a great deal of interest in it, and he did ask Rusk [Dean Rusk] to ask the Rockefeller Foundation for money. They gave a million dollars in the spring of '63. He did get Black [Eugene R. Black] to ask the Ford Foundation for some money, and they did give five million dollars. He did somehow or other convey to the Paul Mellons that money was needed, and they gave a half million dollars. He gave one hundred thousand dollars himself. So he really, through his influence, raised six and a half million dollars right there. Now that was a tremendous help in those days.

I remember going to see him and his saying, "What is it that makes it so difficult about raising money for the Cultural Center?" He said, "Is it that the people don't like the Kennedys?" And I said, "No, it's not that; it's that people in the country aren't as interested in culture on the whole. The word is a bad word and corporations and rich people don't think of Washington as their home. They think of it as the kind of a place that's sending out punitive taxes and making rules and regulations that don't always please them. It has nothing whatever to do with the Kennedys." He was tremendously interested and puzzled about why it was so hard to do anything in this field. He was very interested in the progress of the Center and talked about it a great deal with Lem Billings frequently. Well, shall I go on about the Center and finish that?

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MORRISSEY: Why don't you?

LASKER: And then I'll go back on the others. The President promised Lem in the fall of '63 to give a dinner for about thirty couples, who would be the leading rich people of the United States, with the hope that afterwards we could get very substantial amounts of money from them. And we always hoped that he would

ask the Congress for the last fifteen million, although he felt that there was a great deal of hostility in the Congress toward anything cultural at that time. But as Kirwan [Michael J. Kirwan] has asked him to give the money for the....

MORRISSEY: Aquarium?

LASKER: Aquarium. I think that at that moment he said to Kirwan, "Well," you know, "are you going to help me with the National Center in the end when we need some money?" And it was more or less a feeling that if he went along with the aquarium that Kirwan would help him finish up the Cultural Center. That was really fifteen million that was needed for a garage under the Center, for a parking garage, which would be self-liquidating in any case. So he had it very much on his mind. Lem spent a lot of time on it with him, Lem Billings. And Kennedy made a charming speech about the Center at a national, closed circuit television dinner—do you remember it, in November of '62?—and earlier in that fall he received the new model of it at Newport and commented on it during a press conference. He was altogether enthusiastic about the Center.

When he died, the first thing I thought of was—when I was able to think of anything—that this Center should be a memorial to him. There was no center of performing arts in Washington, and he had shown great interest and enthusiasm for it. I remember going to see Johnson the night before Kennedy's funeral and asking Johnson if he would be in favor of this. And Johnson said, "Well, I...." You know, he was so distraught that it was very hard to get any final commitment about anything from him. He said, "I think so. Take it up with Abe Fortas [Abraham Fortas]." Well, Abe was there, and I said, "I'll call you about it in the morning."

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By the following morning after the funeral, Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] and others had already introduced a bill—not doing what I thought should be done, and that was for Congress to give the whole amount of money and start to build at once. But the Fulbright bill was to match the money, matching fifty-fifty with the money that was either raised or to be raised. We still would have had a long way to go because we had, at that time, we had only about eleven million dollars, and we'd had an awful time getting that. We would have had to raise another twelve million dollars.

Well, finally, what was done—the Johnson Administration strongly supported this and so did Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] when he was working in the White House—what was finally done was that the money for the garage was made a loan for a long period. In other words, fourteen million was for the garage, and this was in the form of a repayable loan; and half the money, fifteen and a half million, was to be provided providing the other fifteen and a half million dollars was raised.

Well, the bill went through, I think, in February of '64, and the rest of the money was finally raised by July first of '65 with the most terrific difficulties because the Kennedy family's interest in this was very minimal. They did not seem to realize, neither Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] or Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis], seemed to realize or recall, his interest in the Center. They hadn't ever been present at the meetings that

I'd been at with the President—they really took very little interest at first in the Center as his memorial because their interest was entirely focused on the Kennedy Library, and they somehow or another felt that the Center was a competition.

I remember going to see Bobby in February of '64, when he was very uncertain about the whole thing, and I said to him, "You know, I'm interested in the Library *and* in the Kennedy Center. Your brother deserves two memorials, and I want to give a hundred thousand dollars to each of them." And I gave him a check for the Library for fifty thousand dollars, you know, as a payment or expression of interest in both things. But, Bobby, as you know, is not really interested in art or in the performing arts. He may become sometime one of the greatest patrons ever known, but in this present part of his life, now, this is not one of the things that he's really aware of. Don't you think that's fair to say?

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MORRISSEY: Do you recall President Kennedy ever commenting on the dispute as to whether the Center should go down by the river or should be uptown?

LASKER: Yes, I remember that he settled the dispute—at least he thought he had settled the dispute—by saying it should be on the Potomac, in the fall of '63. There was no doubt about what he thought or said, but as far as I know he didn't write a letter about it. I just remember the dispute and his saying to Lem Billings, "It should be on the Potomac. That's the best place." But there was a lot of pressure for it to be someplace else.

The Center, as you know, is being built. There's a hole dug for it on the Potomac. We're hoping we'll be able to get bids fairly soon. There're complications about being able to select the bidders because if you have to let it out to everybody, advertize it for everybody to bid on, then you may get a very poor contractor as the lowest bidder. But I think that all will be resolved in a few weeks, and so it will go ahead. It's a beautiful building. I've been trying to get a sculptor to do a good full length figure of the President—at least we've got a start on one—as a memorial for the river side of the building.

MORRISSEY: You haven't mentioned in any of this the name of August Heckscher [August Heckscher II], and I was wondering if you were involved in how he came to be a member of the White House staff.

LASKER: No. I always thought he was a very good writer and a good speaker, and I know him, but I never had anything to do with it. He had a sort of general interest in the arts and was interested in the Arts Council, but he wasn't really involved very much in the Kennedy Center planning, and he didn't have anything to do with fund raising, certainly. He may have made some comments about it, but he didn't have anything to do with the.... The people that made the Center happen were the President, first—President Kennedy—and then Stevens, Ralph Becker [Ralph E. Becker], and LeMoyne Billings. Those were the three people that really made it happen because without any one of them

it would have fallen down, because the money would not have been raised. Then, when the Congress made it a National Memorial to Kennedy and offered half of the money, this was the other necessary ingredient. I don't think there was enough private money in Washington, enough interest in the country in Washington's cultural atmosphere, to have raised the rest of the money from private sources—at least not without the undivided attention of the Kennedy family, which was divided with the Library.

Well, my other contact with the President was—let's see, one of the most charming parties at the White House that I went to during the Kennedy Administration was for the President of the Sudan, who was very spectacular looking in a military uniform—he was coal black, as I recall it. I remember the President introducing me to him and saying something very—oh, I don't know—exaggeratedly complimentary. Really, I'm seldom embarrassed by flattery, but this really embarrassed me because I was sure the President of the Sudan didn't believe him. It was, I think, the first time that a stage and a company of players from Stratford, Connecticut, gave a performance at the White House. I think it was the first time that a stage had been put up in the East Room. These actors and actresses gave short scenes from Shakespeare, including a wonderful scene from "Henry the Fifth," the Agincourt speech. I think it was the first time that the White House had ever given as entertainment any serious drama or made any effort at any high-minded or very serious after dinner entertainment. To me it was very beautiful and touching, and I was very moved by it.

Another party that I enjoyed very much there—that didn't have this same feeling because I don't recall that there was any entertainment; I think it was a dance afterwards—was a party in January of '63 in honor of the Vice President, Johnson, Speaker McCormack [John W. McCormack], and the Justices of the Supreme Court. The White House was already quite a bit rehabilitated and looked very charming and made it great pleasure for people. The evening was really spoiled for me because I had a marvelous dress, I thought, by St. Laurent [Yves St. Laurent]—a blue dress sprinkled with embroideries of tiny crystal snowflakes. And as I got out of my car, by some mischance a huge spot of grease got on it. But huge, like, you know, that big! I was trapped because although I

was on time, I didn't have time enough to have a maid—and, indeed, no maid could have taken it all out. And there I was, with this fancy dress and this huge black spot at the side. I was self-conscious all evening.

I remember that Raymond Loewy [Raymond Fernand Loewy], who did the interior of the President's plane, came to see me, not realizing that I knew the President, and asked me if I had any painting or any drawings that I would like to give for his plane; that he needed some to complete the interior. I had a small painting by Jean Eve and a Braque [Georges Braque] lithograph which he took. And he said, "Don't you want to give them?" And I said, "Yes, I'd be delighted to give them." That night the President and Jackie both remembered this and thanked me for them, which was really very sweet of them to remember.

I recall that after the President's death McHugh [Godfrey T. McHugh] said, "Now were those personal gifts and did they belong to the President. Or must they be given back—I

don't know—to the museum or something?" And I said, "No, they were personal gifts." "All right," he said, "I'll take them to the President's library," meaning that they would be given to the Library.

I remember that I sat next to General Maxwell Taylor and Mr. McCone [John A. McCone]. Seated, that night, the spot on my dress didn't show, and I felt better sitting. Another contact with the President happened in 1962—well, in, I think it was 1961, the President's father had a stroke. Wasn't it in the winter of '61?

MORRISSEY: I don't recall.

LASKER: Well, I think I'm right about it. I had always been very interested in the support of research in cancer and heart attack and strokes, but strokes had always been overlooked both by the Institute for Neurology and Blindness and by the National Heart Institute. Cancer, heart, and strokes now cause 71 percent of all deaths in the U.S. I was really quite desperate about it, and I felt that, as I had had to do with the establishment of both: I had been the first one to urge the establishment of the National Heart Institute and to urge the establishment of the Neurology and Blindness

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Institute. The Heart Institute was passed in 1948 and the Neurology and Blindness in '50. I found that, somehow or another, stroke, which is a hardening of the arteries in the brain, mostly—sometimes hemorrhage, but mostly hardening of the arteries of the brain or of the carotid artery of the neck—was really being overlooked and that stroke victims, which both my parents had been, too, had really little help. Whether you recovered or not was really largely by chance. And I realized the President must be very frustrated by his father's illness, too. So in the early summer of '62, I finally got an appointment to see him, and I said to him that I... I remember I saw him in his office, in his Executive Office, not in the White House, not in the....

MORRISSEY: West Wing?

LASKER: Yes. He looked very lively and very alert, and he always picked up everything that you said so quickly that it was a joy. I said, "I know what frustration you must have had finding that your father couldn't be really substantially helped through this struggle. And I want to tell you that this is a general thing for people, and that practically nothing is being done about it, and I think it would be wonderful if you would appoint a presidential commission on strokes." And he said, "Well, that sounds like a good idea. What do we do about it?" I said, "Well, I think you could get Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] down here and we'll see what..." You know, "Let's get started."

So he went out to Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and he said, "Kenny, where is Mike?" Well, Mike, by some mischance was gone to Philadelphia. Well, this was terrible because he couldn't summon him back instantly from Philadelphia. This might have

been Friday, and he was coming home Monday. And so he said, "All right, I'll take it up with Mike. Then give me a memo," which I did.

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Well, then I went to see Mike Feldman. In the meantime Mike had talked it over with—you know, the President's counsel, Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen]. And Sorensen said, "Oh, we mustn't have any more commissions on any disease that affects the President's family because we've got a commission on retardation. So we shouldn't have a commission on strokes." Well, this dashed me terribly because I realized that, you know, this is just one point of view. And I really didn't know what to do.

This all evolved, maybe, by July, and the end of summer I went away for a vacation. In the early winter I came back and I said, "Now, you know, really, we've got to do something about this because the President said he wanted it done." I remember sitting downstairs in the little dining room in the White House, and Sorensen, Feldman, and Dr. Farber [Sidney Farber] were there with me. Feldman said something about, "Well, why don't we attach it to some other disease?" I was saying that cancer and heart trouble were the main causes of death. He said, "Well, why don't we attach it to other diseases like cancer and heart and make it a commission on cancer, heart, and stroke?" I said, "That would be a wonderful idea. Fine, let's do it." All right, I took it up with the President; they took it up with the President; and the President said it was all right.

So then I said to Mike, "All right, what do we do next?" You know, "Here's a list of names of people that would be suitable for the commission; and this is what the commission should do; and these are the deficiencies in the field." And he said fine. Then he picked up the papers, and this was it. Well, I came to see him a couple more times, but, as you know only too well, Feldman had every other thing in the world on his desk, and this did not seem to be of the greatest importance—this was *not* a high priority in Mike's mind. And he was really desperately busy, just really desperately busy.

So time passed and nothing happened. The year rolled around and it was '63, and I came again to see the President in his office. I said, "You know, Ted Sorensen and Feldman had this wonderful idea not just to have a stroke commission, but to have a commission on cancer, heart, and stroke. Don't you agree with them?" "Oh yes," he said, "I think it's fine, and I think we should do it." He just was home from Berlin, and he was feeling very well and happy. I remember seeing a big German magazine with pictures of his

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triumphal visit to Berlin, probably around the first of July or so, on his sofa. And he said, "And I'll take it up with them." I said, "Fine, I'll take it up with them as soon as you have." I came back and Mike, by this time, was more interested in the thing and sort of decided, "Well, where are the papers? And who are we going to appoint? And who are they all, anyway? And who should be the chairman?" He wanted as chairman a Nobel Prize winner.

Well, we fussed about the chairman quite a bit, and finally we decided that, on the whole, Mike DeBakey [Michael E. DeBakey] would be the best. Although he wasn't a Nobel Prize winner, he'd still be very good. So he had this list, and he was going to appoint them. I

went to Europe, and I called him up from Paris, I remember, and I said, “When is it going to happen?” And he said, “Oh, it’s going to happen very soon. I’m going to get in touch with him and let you know.” Then, you know, eighty-two thousand things loaded on him—because he’s only one human being. So he said, “Well, I’m really waiting for you to come back because I want to ask you this and that,” or “Maybe you should be here when the announcement’s made,” or something like that. So I came back and I came to see him in early October, and he said, “All right now, we’re really getting ready.”

So then he did something; he talked to the Surgeon General [Luther L. Terry], who was *opposed* to it, and he had talked to Celebrezze [Anthony J. Celebrezze], then Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. Seventy-one percent of the deaths of the people of the United States are from cancer, heart and stroke. And what it was to be about were the creation of centers, with better treatment and more intensive clinical research on these problems. But the Surgeon General didn’t think well of that, and neither did the directors of the Cancer Institute or the Heart Institute. Action might make trouble, so they were against it. But, notwithstanding, Mike, all the same, became interested in it, really interested. I think he was always interested, but he was just terribly overworked. Finally he saw the President was for it and that I would be visiting him forever unless something happened. So he was going ahead. Besides, he got into it; you know, he really got the feel of it. The minute he really felt it, he really was interested. So we had the list of the people, and sort of a protocol of what they were to do. I came to see him maybe in the middle of November, and he said, “All right. We’re going to announce it during the week of the

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twenty-fifth,” on such and such a date. Then the death of the President, a catastrophe—for everything.

So I went immediately to Johnson—I went to him within forty-eight hours, really; I’m sure it was within forty-eight hours—and I said, “You know, one of the things the President was going to do was to appoint a commission on cancer, heart, and stroke.” He said to me, “Don’t tell me any more things the President was going to do; I’ve heard three hundred and fifty already.” I said, “That’s all very well, but this is about the main cause of death of the people in the United States. And Kennedy did promise to do this, and he was interested in it. And what’s more, you’re surely interested in it, too.” So he said, “Well, I guess you’re right.” So then he said, “Who is doing this?” And I said, “Mike Feldman.” It was back on Mike Feldman again. “First,” he said, “take it up with Abe Fortas.” Well, I went to see Abe Fortas.

It was very easy to take it up with him because Abe is very sympathetic to anything like this. And so he said to Johnson, “Yes, I think she’s right about it. You should do it.” So then it got to Mike. Well, Mike and I—by this time, you know, Mike was determined to do it. And I think in January—no, no, not in January—I think it was in March that the appointments were finally made, and President Johnson announced it on television. And DeBakey, one of our greatest surgeons, was made the chairman. More or less the people that were suggested were appointed. I think Johnson might have had six or seven very good ideas of people that he wanted on it. But it was done. They made an excellent report. They made the report to Johnson before the election in ’64. A very voluminous and very good report was

printed. It was embodied in legislation which passed last summer in '65. There is a council for these cancer, heart, and stroke centers which has been established. The first appropriation was twenty-five million dollars. The appropriation for fiscal '67 will be forty-five million dollars. This is the beginning of something that may change the average length of life. We hope it will.

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MORRISSEY: Did you raise that subject with President Johnson on the same visit you raised the one about naming the Cultural Center?

LASKER: I think I did. I think I did, and he told me to take both. I'm not sure whether it was.... No, I think I asked the Cultural Center the night before the funeral, and I came to him about the commission his first week in office. So not much time was lost about it. Although, I'm not sure that I might not have just casually mentioned.... No, no, no, I think I came to see him specially and had an appointment with him.

MORRISSEY: Who's that Dr. Farber that you mentioned?

LASKER: Farber of Boston. Sidney Farber was the head of the Children's Cancer Research Foundation in Boston.

MORRISSEY: Was he helping you with this?

LASKER: Well, he was one of the outstanding doctors who were interested in research in cancer and one of the great medical figures, medical statesmen.

MORRISSEY: I hadn't heard his name before and I was wondering if he was a person we should talk with.

LASKER: I don't think he knew the President. He knew Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy], but I don't think he ever met with the President. Nor did Mike DeBakey meet with him on this subject because he died too soon.

Well, that's it. That's not very much is it?

MORRISSEY: No, I think that's very good.
Did you have much contact with Dr. Stafford Warren [Stafford L. Warren] when he was on the White House staff?

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LASKER: No, I didn't. I admired very much what Eunice and Sargent Shriver were doing in the retardation field, but I thought that they were so competent at

it that they didn't need any help from me, and I just blessed them for what they were trying to accomplish.

MORRISSEY: Did you work with Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy on the renovation of the White House?

LASKER: Yes, I did. I gave the *first* check of \$10,000 for new furnishings, and they bought the Webster sofa and some chairs and a table, I think, which are in the Green Room. And I remember that the President was very surprised that anybody had given any money because, while he was very interested in the idea, it was a little bit slow in gathering momentum and getting people.... There wasn't a great flow of gifts of cash to begin with. People offered furniture or a painting or something like that, but there was very little cash money. I remember I was the first cash giver. I gave it the day that he received Shepard [Alan B. Shepard] at the White House after his successful space orbit. Jackie and Jayne Wrightsman and Florence Mahoney and I went to visit Henry du Pont [Henry Francis du Pont] at Winterthur to tour you know, to see his beautiful house. I remember giving Jackie the check in the plane that night, and she was so happy.

MORRISSEY: I was wondering if she had anticipated those activities before she became First Lady.

LASKER: I really don't know. I don't know about that; Jayne Wrightsman would know better. But Lem Billings says that the President was most enthusiastic about the idea and was the one that pushed the idea strongly, and that it was basically his idea, and that Jackie, you know, halfway was involved in it, got involved in it. I honestly don't know the first conversation.... I know that Jayne Wrightsman, who's a great friend of mine, did an enormous amount about it and helped Mrs. Kennedy very much. But I recall that I was the first giver of cash.

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Later on they needed a rug for the Blue Room and I gave that, or the money for that, which was selected by Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Wrightsman. And I think it really is a wonderful job. They did a beautiful job, don't you think?

MORRISSEY: Outstanding. Do you recall any additional face-to-face encounters with President Kennedy?

LASKER: Well, all my encounters with him were always agreeable and very fast. Florence and I met him and Jackie at Del Monte, California, when they were on their honeymoon one evening, while going to our rooms and we had a little talk with them. He mentioned that he remembered seeing pictures of my country house in *Vogue*. What a good visual memory!

I remember one night he came—the night before his Inauguration—to a party at Florence Mahoney's where dear President [Harry S. Truman] and Mrs. Truman [Elizabeth

Virginia “Bess” Wallace Truman] were. We were having a dinner for maybe twenty people, and suddenly the door opened and the President came in hatless, the about-to-be President came in hatless, with a few people sort of trailing behind him who were personal friends. I don’t recall that there were any Secret Service men. Maybe they were surrounding the house; there was nobody in the house. And he just sort of appeared like a neighbor and walked all around and talked to everybody and, after about half an hour, departed. He would do visits like that in the beginning of his Administration, I think, but then it got worse and worse and he couldn’t, you know.

MORRISSEY: Let me go back to the late 1950s and the early part of 1960 when a large question mark on the horizon for the Democratic Party was whether or not Governor Stevenson was a serious candidate for the nomination.

LASKER: Yes.

MORRISSEY: Did you discuss that with him?

LASKER: With Stevenson?

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MORRISSEY: Yes.

LASKER: Oh yes, often.

MORRISSEY: What were his feelings?

LASKER: Well, he had really, I must say, complicated feelings. I think that he didn’t want to be rejected the third time, which is very natural. His attitude was that he would not seek the nomination, but he would not refuse it if it were a nomination by acclamation. But he wouldn’t fight for it. Well, as you know, there were so many other people fighting for it that he had the feeling that it was conceivable that in the crossruffing of the other candidates it might turn out that *he* would be the chosen one. Now this didn’t fall right, but it conceivably might have. The Kennedy forces did too good a job.

MORRISSEY: During the time of...

LASKER: I felt that his attitude was too complicated for most people to understand. If he had really said, “I’m not going to fight for it because I don’t want to be rejected again, but I’ll take it if you want me to take it,” or said some simple words, it would have cleared the air, and then it would have been easier on his friends and easier on the country to decide what to do or think. But he was really quite complicated.

MORRISSEY: At the time of the Kennedy-Humphrey primary campaigns in Wisconsin and West Virginia, did you find that many of the old Stevenson supporters

of 1956 were coming to you now on behalf of Hubert Humphrey?

LASKER: No, I found that a lot of them were coming to me on behalf of Stevenson. The old supporters of Stevenson were still trying to support him. Mrs. Eugene Meyer [Agnes Elizabeth Ernst Meyer], I think, must be considered the greatest contributor to the effort to re-nominate him in '60. She was the biggest contributor of money, and you had to have some money. I think his reticence and his complicated attitude....

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He once told me that he had said to both Johnson and Kennedy that he would not run again, that he would not seek the nomination, and that he wouldn't be for one or the other, that he just would stand aside and not support anybody till after the nomination. If he had made no commitments and not said this, the whole thing might have taken a different course. But this was the way it was, you see. He'd gotten the '52 nomination spontaneously, more or less—or seemingly this way; it had fallen to him in '52 when he didn't want it. He fought for it in '56 in the hardest fight I've ever seen in my whole, entire life. I've never seen anything like it.

MORRISSEY: The primaries against Kefauver [Estes Kefauver]?

LASKER: Do you remember that? Yes, wasn't that terrible? This was the way, this was.... He had to behave the way he behaved, he felt.

MORRISSEY: I long had the feeling from a distance that that grueling primary campaign against Kefauver in '56 caused him very much to want to stay away from the primaries of 1960.

LASKER: Yes, I think you're right. And I think that '56 primary fight was expensive in every possible way. It was certainly physically exhausting; it was emotionally draining; it was very, very, very tough.

MORRISSEY: Were there any other occasions on which you found yourself being a middle person between Mrs. Roosevelt and Senator Kennedy?

LASKER: No, no. You see, I didn't know him well enough, and I didn't know any of the people around him at that time well enough. I might have been had I known Lem Billings, whom I know well now. If I'd known him then, I might well have taken an entirely different role in the thing. I might have urged Stevenson to support Kennedy before the nomination. Or I might not have been successful, but I might.... I really just didn't.... I knew everybody else better, and the Kennedy forces made no effort to seek any help from me till after the nomination.

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MORRISSEY: You mentioned that ten minute discussion with Senator Kennedy when he was the candidate early in the 1960 campaign?

LASKER: Yes.

MORRISSEY: Did it seem to you at that time he was a little sensitive about the charge some people made that he wasn't liberal enough?

LASKER: No, he seemed very much as if he knew what he was going to do and everything was going to be all right.

MORRISSEY: [Laughter] Calmest man in the whole campaign organization.

LASKER: Yes. As if he would be able to take care of everything. As I got to see him campaign, he took on tremendous power and effectiveness as he became more and more successful as a speaker and a campaigner. His personality was more and more attractive, I thought, to people because he gained confidence. And his looks changed completely from what they had been four or five years before. He didn't look like the same person. Well, you know, barely; he became very handsome.

MORRISSEY: Did you get involved at all in the efforts to pass the Medicare legislation during the Kennedy Administration?

LASKER: Well, I had been involved in the efforts to have a Wagner [Robert F. Wagner]-Murray [Reid F. Murray]-Dingell [John D. Dingell, Sr.] comprehensive medical insurance bill starting in the early forties. I had sponsored a committee called the Committee for the Nation's Health, which was to support the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Bill, which was a comprehensive insurance bill, and I was enchanted when the President really went out and supported Medicare, even although I think that hospital care plus a voluntary medical care plan for people over sixty-five is not enough, it was what he felt he could manage. I was thrilled because Kennedy really gave it tremendous

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push and a lot of himself.

If Truman had done the same thing.... You know, I really was one of the people that interested Truman in health insurance in '45, and Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford] will tell you this. Florence Mahoney and I were constantly going to see him about it. And Truman would agree with us, and we'd try to get Clifford to write more about health insurance in Truman's speeches. And every once in awhile he would say something about it but he never put his heart into it, in his speeches. He agreed with us privately, but either Clifford was worried about it as a political thing or Truman was so moved about it that he didn't know quite how to express himself about it except privately. He said, "It's ridiculous. Of course we should have it." But then he never publicly espoused it until '48. And then the AMA

[American Medical Association] got so organized and were so threatening that it looked as if—when Truman wasn't having too easy a time, anyway, you remember, in '48....

[BEGIN TAPE I SIDE II]

LASKER: Florence Mahoney and I became alarmed by the violence of the AMA opposition and the *lack* of general national understanding or organized support. The labor unions, who had been for it in the early forties, had been using health insurance as a fringe benefit with employers so they weren't really organized strongly to support a general health insurance bill. Florence and I urged the President to appoint a commission called the President's Commission on the Nation's Health—it was the first presidential commission on health, believe or not. Truman appointed it early in '52 and asked for a report after the election. Yes; asked for a report after the election so that the campaign wouldn't be prejudiced by this health insurance issue because we thought the people would lose on local levels. The AMA was spending between two and four million dollars, and our side had very few spokesmen and very *little* money.

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So you can imagine my gratitude to Kennedy when he effectively spoke up for even a partial insurance plan. Of course, in the meantime, the senior citizens got busy, and there were groups that made themselves heard more effectively than anything we had in '48. But it was really, I think, Kennedy's personal zeal and effectiveness in speaking that did a tremendous lot for it, don't you agree?

MORRISSEY: Do you think I'm missing anything?

LASKER: I don't, honestly. I don't, honestly. The points that I wanted to make were that he was sympathetic to medical research, but it wasn't a first priority in his mind because, I think, he'd been sick a great deal and that health had been a problem to him. But when health is so much a problem to you, it's almost more than you can take on, to get into anything medical too deeply. It reminds you too much of your problem or your past problem and the problems of your family. And then the other thing I wanted to say was that in my contacts with him there was no doubt about his tremendous interest and willingness to do and support the idea of a national performing arts center. And he did it. It's *suitable* that it's named for him.

MORRISSEY: Well, thank you very much. If anything else comes to mind we can always add it to the tape.

LASKER: Yes. Well, I have thought about it quite a bit, and you know I am a friend of his mother's and of his sisters' now, and of Bobby's. But this has all come to pass recently—I was a friend of his mother's for the last 4 years. I got to know his mother through the Wrightsmans [Jayne Wrightsman and Charles B. Wrightsman], who brought her to visit me in the South of France, but that was in '62, I guess.

And she's visited me every year since. I've gotten to know Jean [Jean Kennedy Smith] and Sarge and Eunice better, not intimately. I was a great supporter of Bobby's, and I know them better now than I did. If I had known them as well in the fifties as I do now, I don't know what my relation with the President might have been.

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MORRISSEY: It'd be a much longer interview.

LASKER: Much longer, yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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