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Biographical Note

Lincoln was the personal secretary to John F. Kennedy [JFK] from 1953 until 1963, and the author of *My Twelve Years with John F. Kennedy* (1965) and *Kennedy and Johnson* (1968). In this interview Lincoln discusses how she started working for JFK when he was in Congress; moving JFK from the House of Representatives to the Senate; JFK's Senate office organization; Senator JFK's relationship with the Massachusetts press; Senator JFK's speeches and decisions; and Senator JFK's travels between Massachusetts and Washington, D.C., among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Evelyn N. Lincoln

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Oral History Interview

with

EVELYN N. LINCOLN

April 2, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Frederick L. Holborn

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HOLBORN: Now? Can you hear me now?

LINCOLN: Okay.

HOLBORN: If we talk at this level, does it pick it up? Just keep talking.

LINCOLN: Alright. Shall we, shall we begin our oral....

HOLBORN: Let's see if we can start now.

LINCOLN: Is this okay? Now were ready to....

HOLBORN: This is the first interview with Mrs. Lincoln. This is Fred Holborn. We're sitting at Mrs. Lincoln's desk in the Executive Office Building, Monday morning, April 2, 1964. Evelyn, in this first hour's interview, I think we should try to deal with those first years you were working for the president, the first term of his senate career. And, perhaps, we might start very informally, and you just tell how it was that you first came to know about Mr. Kennedy and how it was that you first came to work

for him.

LINCOLN: Okay. In the spring of 1952, I was working for Congressman Forrester [Elijah Lewis Forrester] of Georgia, and, as you know, a Southern congressman does not have to put forth as much effort to stay in as a congressman as perhaps someone from a Northern state. Therefore, there was not very much work to do in the office. So I looked around to see where I might go, where I might have some more challenging work to do. And, in doing so, I noticed that there was a young congressman by the name of Kennedy who seemed very, to have very potential, potentiality. I knew Ted Reardon [Timothy J. "Ted" Reardon, Jr.], so I got in touch with Ted Reardon and ask him if there was anything I could do in the Kennedy/Henry Cabot Lodge race. He said, "Yes." They were looking for a volunteer who could help at night. And so I used to go up to the office at night and type on a, on a book that they were getting up on Lodge's voting record. And then later I did some general typing and also with envelopes and things that you do in a campaign. I kept in constant touch with them after they went up to Boston to start the campaign. And.... But I didn't do anything further until after he had, until after the election. I might add that I felt so strongly that he would win that I sent him a wire the day before the election congratulating him on his winning the senatorial race. And, as it turned out, that was the first telegram he had received congratulating him on his victory.

HOLBORN: You knew more than most of the voters of Massachusetts.

LINCOLN: I don't know about that, but I just felt that he would win.

HOLBORN: And when was it that you actually first met him personally?

LINCOLN: I met him in the spring of 1952 when I was working up in the office. When I was doing some typing, he came out of his office and walked over to me and asked me what my name was; and what I was doing; and was the light okay; and how about my chair; did it suit me; and how long was it going to take to do what I was doing?

HOLBORN: At that time he was in Massachusetts a great deal of the time.

LINCOLN: That's right. That's right. He was spending most of the weekends and some part of the week up there going through the factories.

HOLBORN: And those were also years when Congress adjourned early.

LINCOLN: That's right. It certainly did.

HOLBORN: This book that you're working on, this was a big black book on Lodge's

record that was used throughout the campaign.

LINCOLN: That was right. Ted Reardon was working on that, and he was.... This was before Kennedy had announced that he was going to run, and they were running, getting this book on Lodge's record in order to see, to evaluate whether or not it was possible to win.

HOLBORN: At the time he announced, was there general optimism, did you feel, in the office among his friends? Or did it seem like a very chancy thing when it first was announced?

LINCOLN: Well, as I said to Ted Reardon before he announced, I said, "Is he crazy? Doesn't he know that Henry Cabot Lodge is solid up there in Massachusetts?" And Ted Reardon said to me something which I will always remember, "Well, we take a champion, and we know we're going to win, and we generally do."

HOLBORN: So, in his own close staff members there really was considerable optimism even then.

LINCOLN: Yes, yes. Ted Reardon led me to believe that there wasn't any reason why he couldn't win.

HOLBORN: Do you recall roughly what month it was when he did announce?

LINCOLN: I don't know really. I think it was either in February or in March or somewhere along in there. I couldn't give an exact date.

HOLBORN: It was really when Lodge was at his peak then, New Hampshire primary for Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower].

LINCOLN: That's right. He was out working for Eisenhower.

HOLBORN: Well, and then after the election how did your association develop then?

LINCOLN: Well, Kennedy went overseas, and he didn't come back until in December, and then later on, the last part of December, Mary Davis, who had been his secretary throughout his congressional term, decided that she didn't want to go over to the senate but was going to go with Congressman Holtzman [Lester Holtzman] of New York. Therefore, there was a vacancy and they thought of me and my interest. They asked me if I would join.

HOLBORN: You were the first of many Nebraskans to join the....

LINCOLN: Well, they never asked me what state I was from; what my religion was....

HOLBORN: Never a consideration?

LINCOLN: No.

HOLBORN: And so you started roughly the first of January....

LINCOLN: Well, I was sworn in the third of January, 1953.

HOLBORN: And then how, how was the Senate office organized that January?

LINCOLN: Well, it just so happened that I was the only one who had had any experience up on the Hill.

HOLBORN: How many years had you worked?

LINCOLN: I had been with Forrester for a year and a half, yeah, about a year and a half. And I was the only one that had any experience, and Mary Gallagher, Mary Barelli [Mary Barelli Gallagher] it was at that time, came from Massachusetts, Lois Goldberg [Lois Strode] from Massachusetts and Jean McGonigle [Jean McGonigle Mannix]. So I was the logical one to be his personal secretary. So that's the way....

HOLBORN: What do you remember when you first walked in the Senate office? It was the same office, right, room 362, during all those years?

LINCOLN: Well, you see, we were.... We couldn't get in through the Senate office for a while because Senator Kerr [Robert Samuel Kerr] had room 362. We had to wait until he could move down. I think he wanted to move down on the second floor. And so Congressman Utt [James Boyd Utt] had been chosen as the one to take Kennedy's office, in the House office building, so Kennedy told him to take one of the rooms, and then we would be out in the other room until our office was ready over at the Senate office building. So it was at least two or three days before we could go over there. And then one morning he told us that it was vacant. So we went over there, and normally they paint offices before you move in. Kennedy was so worried about the mail that we didn't think of painting the office. But we walked in, and there wasn't a thing in there. There were a couple telephones on the floor, no desks or anything. So we started from scratch.

HOLBORN: And who.... How many people were there roughly? Was Ted Reardon...?

LINCOLN: Well, Lois Goldberg, Mary Barelli: no, I don't think; yes, Mary Barelli. And

Jean McGonigle and I were the ones who walked in. And then, after a while, Ted Reardon came in. But that was the....

HOLBORN: Was Muggsy [John J. O'Leary?] with you then?

LINCOLN: Yes, he was. He was there and then, also, Langdon Marvin was part of the original office staff.

HOLBORN: When did Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] join you?

LINCOLN: He didn't come in until two or three weeks later.

HOLBORN: Do you remember when he was interviewed?

LINCOLN: Well, I think he might have been interviewed by Senator Kennedy over near the Senate floor. But over my desk came a letter from Bob Wallace [Robert Ash Wallace], with whom he worked on the committee, saying that Senator Douglas [Paul Howard Douglas] had recommended him very highly and also had his resume with him. So I think the senator had read that and then had interviewed Ted over.... But I don't recall him coming into the office before he reported to Dewey[?]....

HOLBORN: Did you attend his swearing in to the Senate?

LINCOLN: On the second of January, Ted Reardon called over and said the senator would like for me to be at the swearing-in ceremony on January third. So we all met over in his office in the House office building and walked over to the seats that were assigned for his staff.

HOLBORN: There weren't very many Democratic senators sworn in that year.

LINCOLN: No. And there weren't very many people in the gallery to watch him be sworn in, Senator Kennedy, to be sworn in either.

HOLBORN: [Inaudible]

LINCOLN: Yes. He walked outside the senator's office hall, and he seemed so ill at ease, so nervous, and, at that time, he was just conscious of the way he dressed. And his necktie, the short end was clear up by the collar and the long end down below his belly. And he was forever trying to stuff his necktie into his pants.

HOLBORN: Even on that day of the swearing-in?

LINCOLN: Yes. Yes. He was standing out in front trying to push the necktie down. It was way out of proportion.

HOLBORN: How did Senator Kennedy, as he then was in his early days in the office, did he ever have anything like a staff meeting? Did he ever make assignments in a group, or did everything just sort of develop as a natural way?

LINCOLN: Well, we just sort of looked at the ones that were there and decided, since Lois Goldberg had been married to a serviceman, perhaps she could handle the service cases. And then Mary Barelli, being an Italian, figured that she could take care of the immigration. And Jean McGonigle had worked in the campaign and knew quite a few people in Massachusetts and we figured that maybe she'd make a good receptionist because she would recognize people that came through the door. And, of course, Ted Reardon's the administrative assistant. And then later Ted Sorenson was the legislative assistant, oh, I don't know, a general confidante, I guess, of Senator Kennedy, and then Langdon Marvin was to handle the legislative matters. But, of course, he was only interested in airline subsidy.

HOLBORN: _____ airlines. Was it from the very beginning that you sort of adopted the policy of always having an open door?

LINCOLN: Yes, yes. At the very beginning we had a debate on that, but I, along with the senator, felt that it would be nice to keep the door open because he had had an open door over in the House side. And it was something that was almost unknown.

HOLBORN: Pretty heretical in the Senate, huh?

LINCOLN: Yes. Everything was so closed, and that would keep.... The reason for that, I think, is because that keeps people from dropping in, and they won't disturb you.

HOLBORN: Was there already a large volume of visitors in those years?

LINCOLN: Yes, oh, yes. And, of course, we had mail that had accumulated 'cause we hadn't been able to move into the office. So we worked nights, and we finally were set up to catch up on the mail. And he would come out and read the mail, and then he'd come out and wanted to know when we were going to get it answered, and he wanted to sign it. We used to put stacks of mail on his desk at night for him to sign.

HOLBORN: So he signed all of them?

LINCOLN: He signed everything.

HOLBORN: So he could look at all the mail in those days?

LINCOLN: He signed everything. We'd send over envelopes of mail to the floor, and he'd sit over there and sign it.

HOLBORN: Including case mail?

LINCOLN: Case mail, everything. And he read every plain bit of it, too. He'd catch errors and call you in, be real exasperated if you didn't get it right.

HOLBORN: That office, then, move into 362, was right opposite Vice President Nixon's [Richard M. Nixon] and remained that way until 1960.

LINCOLN: That's right. The whole time.

HOLBORN: Was there any contact between the two offices during those years?

LINCOLN: Yes. Rose Mary Woods and I were very good friends. In fact we used to have lunch together in those first years. As we got busier, we didn't go out to lunch as much. But it was very congenial, and we used to go from one office to the other, borrow ice cubes or Cokes. And the relationship was very nice. In fact, the vice president, at first, would stop in evenings and put up his feet on the desk there with Senator Kennedy and discuss things. But they too were there, meetings I mean, less and less as the time went on.

HOLBORN: Well, they knew each other because they had been on the same committee in the House.

LINCOLN: That's right. They came into the Congress the same year along with Kerr.

HOLBORN: And the relation with the Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall] office, was that noticeable from the very beginning? Was there constant communication between the Saltonstall and Kennedy offices?

LINCOLN: Oh, yes. Very, very much so. They were, I think. John Fisher[?]: yes, he was extremely nice. In fact, he gave my husband and I tickets to the Inaugural Gala out at Uline Ice Arena [aka; Washington Coliseum, post 1959]. We saw Fred Waring [Frederic Malcolm Waring].

HOLBORN: Was that the first inaugural you'd been to?

LINCOLN: That's right.

HOLBORN: Who were some of the other people that Kennedy saw frequently in those years in the congress?

LINCOLN: Well, it was mostly Massachusetts people that were dropping in. He was interested in the economy of New England because that was one of the things that he stressed during his campaign. And he immediately started to work on those three speeches to help the economy.

HOLBORN: That was really the big job of those first months in preparation....

LINCOLN: That's right. And they were given in May on three separate dates. And it was unheard of for a freshman senator to stand up and have so much time to put forth.

HOLBORN: But this was his main speech, so to speak.

LINCOLN: That's right.

HOLBORN: And was it prepared almost entirely in the office? Were there consultants that came in from the outside?

LINCOLN: Well, I think.... Yes, he had.... He would take it with him up to Massachusetts and have various people go over it. But basically I think that he and Sorenson were the two that.... But Sorenson also got ideas from men up at Harvard.

HOLBORN: Did you go listen to any of the speeches?

LINCOLN: Yes, I did. And we used to go over on lunch hour and sit and listen. And then, when he'd come back to the office, he'd say: "I saw you up in the gallery. How did you think I did?"

HOLBORN: And was there a reasonable audience in the Senate?

LINCOLN: No. No. There wasn't, you know, like it turned out later as he became known. It used to be packed. But, no, there wasn't that much interest.

HOLBORN: But he was satisfied with the attention he got back home: a lot of coverage in Massachusetts?

LINCOLN: Yes, indeed he did. Yes, he did, and he worked hard on.... He also went, you know, down South and made speeches to show the South to take away the industry from the New England area would be detrimental to the rest of the country in that you should not only look for your own benefit but to help out all parts of the country. And that was one reason he voted against the Saint Lawrence Seaway. I mean, he voted for the Saint Lawrence Seaway....

HOLBORN: On the same grounds?

LINCOLN: On the same grounds.

HOLBORN: Do you feel that that was one of the most difficult decisions that he had to make?

LINCOLN: Well, I don't think it was difficult for him.

HOLBORN: Do you think he'd really worked it out philosophically?

LINCOLN: I think that was very easy for him because he saw the benefits for the middle west.

HOLBORN: You don't think he really ever looked back over his shoulder on that one.

LINCOLN: No, I don't think so. No, I think he saw farther ahead than some of the others up there.

HOLBORN: In those years did he have a good deal of the contact with the people in the press or just the Massachusetts press?

LINCOLN: Well, you know, he.... Because of his election, there was a great deal of interest, and the newspapers and magazines and the radio and TV stations were very interested in him. And his coverage was immense for a freshman senator.

HOLBORN: Did he subscribe to clipping service at the beginning of the senate?

LINCOLN: It wasn't too far after he became a senator. Yes, he got the meeting on clipping service; later also _____ when he became interested in a broader....

HOLBORN: But he never.... Did he ever, to your recollection, have any regular program like some senators do: TV or radio programs back to the state?

LINCOLN: Well, he thought of that, and there were many discussions. Ted Sorenson, Ted Reardon, and he would talk quite a bit about whether or not they should have, but it never really materialized. He would do tape-recording on various subjects that were sent back, and he also did tape-recordings with other senators and with congressmen for their districts or states.

HOLBORN: But he never really had his own program.

LINCOLN: Never. Never had a real week-to-week or month-to-month program. But there was quite a bit of discussion on that.

HOLBORN: How in those first two years, how, generally speaking, did he divide his time between Washington and the state? Was he back to the state almost every week or rather infrequently?

LINCOLN: I'd say about three weekends out of every month he would go back to Massachusetts the first year. Then, of course, in '54 he had such tremendous difficulty with his back that he didn't make quite as many trips back. And then naturally he was married, and he stayed here.

HOLBORN: How was his schedule arranged in those days? Were you largely responsible for it? How were invitations handled?

LINCOLN: Well, as I did most of the time, was, when he would get his mail naturally he'd go over it and he'd say: "Well, put this aside, and maybe I--I might go to this dinner." Or he'd say: "Yes, I will. I'll accept this." And that's the way the schedule.... And it didn't make any difference clear through up 'til he was, I'd say in 1959 when they worked out the firm schedule of commitments all over the United States, that he would go over the invitations himself to determine what he wanted to accept and what he didn't.

HOLBORN: You wrote the acceptances...?

LINCOLN: That's right. I handled all of them.

HOLBORN: And how did you work with the...? How large was the post office in those years? And how did...? Did they do any scheduling or did you simply inform them?

LINCOLN: Well, he would say that he was going up there, and then he would ask me to get in touch with Frank Morris[?], that he wanted to see this man and that man at this time at 122 Bowdoin or.... He was the one that did most of the deciding

who he was going to see and what he was going to do and that carried on even through the presidency.

HOLBORN: And his base in Boston in those years was 122 Bowdoin?

LINCOLN: That's right. That's right. He spent the weekend at 122 Bowdoin, and he'd go over maybe, if the family were over at Hyannis, he'd go over there.

HOLBORN: And usually he'd go up, it'd be Fridays, and so a two or three day weekend...?

LINCOLN: Yeah, about Friday. And then he'd come back Monday morning. So many of the, so much of the time--I think he didn't do in later years--was that he would get on the federal in Boston, which I think would leave around 11:30, and he'd get into Washington at 8:00 the next morning. And he might go over to the [Carol Arms?] to wash up, clean up, go down to the cafeteria and have breakfast and then come up to the office. He did that many times.

HOLBORN: And he became pretty allergic to trains then.

LINCOLN: Yes and.... He didn't do that much.

HOLBORN: In the old days, I understand, he used to go down to the station for lunch sometimes...?

LINCOLN: Oh, he loved the oyster stew down there. Oh, yes. He did that quite a bit.

HOLBORN: And then what happened in 1953, the first year after congress adjourned?

LINCOLN: Then he went to Europe. He took the trip to Europe before the wedding. I don't recall.... I think he went with Torby McDonald [Torbert H. McDonald], I'm not sure. I'd have to check into that. Then he came back and they were married on the twelfth of September. And then from there.... After the wedding they went to New York to spend the night. Then they went to Acapulco for the honeymoon. They stayed down there for about a week. From there they went out to California and stayed, I'd say, another week. And they came back.... He was in contact with the office. He'd come in and out a couple days at a time. And then I think it was in December that he went down to....

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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