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Oral History Interview
with

RICHARD MASLAND

March 8, 1968
Washington, D. C.

By John F. Stewart
For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Okay, well, why don't you just start out by briefly describing, or in however much depth you want to go, your relationship with the Kennedys before the Administration and how you got involved with them during the Kennedy Administration.

MASLAND: I think my first contact with the Kennedy family was shortly after I began to work at the National Institutes of Health. I had previously completed a survey of research approaches to the problem of mental retardation with some recommendations for types of research that seemed to me would be fruitful. I believe it was probably because of this and through referral from some of my associates that Mrs. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, or others in the Kennedy Foundation, wrote to me asking for my suggestions as to what a foundation might do to promote research in the prevention of mental retardation. I prepared a reply in which I reviewed the various types of research activities relating to mental retardation, and made a recommendation that the Foundation might wish to provide support for key investigators in the university environment and might also consider the establishment of a certain number of centers within which a group of people could be mobilized to mount a really strong effort.

It had been my major thesis that one of the important deterrents to strong research efforts in mental retardation was the fact that those responsible for taking care of the mentally retarded were not located within the university environment, where a major segment of the national research effort was located. The national research effort has increasingly become multidisciplinary in character. The only places where a multidisciplinary team is available is likely to be in a university environment. Therefore one of my major recommendations was that efforts should be made to develop, within the universities, a responsibility for providing care for the mentally retarded and, in association with this, there should be developed research centers, with multidisciplinary teams concerned with retardation.
I believe that the Foundation must have had similar advice along the same lines from many sources. At any rate, shortly after this they launched a program to establish centers.

The Foundation also had another objective that was quite crucial to a strengthened national effort for the mentally retarded. They believed that, if the problem of mental retardation could be established as an important component of the research program of certain outstanding universities, it would serve to highlight the respectability of such research and it would serve to document the fact that such research could be useful and productive. Consequently, the establishment of the Kennedy centers in the several universities which ensued was a reflection of those two objectives: the creation of multidisciplinary teams within the research environment, and the creation of such teams within environments of outstanding universities through which its usefulness would be recognized. Well, then from about 1950 until the national effort was launched along somewhat similar lines, I worked with the Foundation in making project site visits to prospective locations and suggesting outstanding scientists who might become the key figures in such centers.

You have inquired about the other important activity which developed after the Kennedy Administration launched their program for mental retardation. This has to do with the activities of the President's Panel on Mental Retardation. My only involvement there had to do with the recommendations of certain members of the panel. I don't remember whether I was contacted by members of the Kennedy family, although I'm sure I discussed it with them, or whether these inquiries came through channels within the Department. But I was asked to recommend members of the commission, and I was among those who had recommended Leonard Mayo as chairman of that committee. I think other than that, that's about the extent of my involvement.

STEWART: As far as the establishment of the panel, were you involved in any of the discussions that led to the decisions to set up this commission? This would have been early in 1961.

MASLAND: '51. '61...

STEWART: '61.

MASLAND: Yes. I was wrong earlier when I spoke of 1950. It was actually from 1960 on that I was involved in these activities with the Kennedy Foundation. I don't recall. I know that we had a number of discussions in the course of the visits with the Kennedy Foundation, and I don't recall being specifically involved in the planning for the establishment of the panel.

STEWART: Was there any doubt in your mind, do you recall, at the time, of the need for such a panel?

MASLAND: Here I can speak only in generalities. I speak quite frankly about my own attitudes, as I recall them. I believe that I would have been favorable to the establishment of the panel. A movement
of this sort would highlight the importance of this area of need—which is
tremendous national importance—as evidenced by the fact that I had made
this one of my own personal major efforts during the preceding two or three
years. So my recollection is in being enthusiastic regarding the establish-
ment of the panel and the efforts to focus greater national attention on
this need.

I was not enthusiastic about the establishment of the separate Institute
for this, feeling that you don't have to build a new house to have a nursery.
It is not always necessary to create a completely separate administrative
structure in order to focus on an area of need, and sometimes by doing so you
interfere with strong ongoing programs which have a more orderly organizational
base. I have to confess that my attitude in this respect may have been the
narrow-minded view of an administrator who was seeing an area of research in
which he had a deep interest allocated to another governmental agency. So my
views here may not have been completely objective.

STEWART: Was there, in fact, strong opposition to the establishment of the
new Institute?

MASLAND: There was resistance within the NIH/National Institutes of Health/?
As to whether it extended beyond this in the Department, I don't
know. The NIH is continually under pressure for the establish-
ment of new institutes having some narrow, or specific, objective, and it is
my impression that the administration of NIH was unenthusiastic about the
establishment of the new Institute.

It is also characteristic of NIH to roll with the punch when something
does happen that you don't like and to find ways in which an unavoidable
change may possibly be turned to achieve objectives which you already have.
The establishment of the Child Health Institute made it possible for NIH
to provide a home for programs in child development and, particularly, in
the area of the behavioral sciences, an area which we had been finding quite
difficult to move in with the responsibility scattered among several of the
other institutes.

STEWART: The reason I asked you about whether there was any question as to
the advisability of establishing the President's panel was that
it would seem to me that there might be some question, given the
state of research and the state of knowledge in the field of mental retarda-
tion, whether at that point, in 1961, it was advisable to really expand the
whole federal effort to that great a degree, or whether perhaps more had to
be done before they were ready for this effort. Was this, in fact, a ques-
tion, do you recall?

MASLAND: That question always comes up whenever an effort is made to
generate a research effort on the basis of need rather than
opportunity. The purists in science are likely to take the
position that you have to permit science to evolve in accordance with the
state of science; that you cannot move faster than the broad base of science
moves forward. I am not one of those who believes that. I think that it is
absolutely essential to maintain the strongest possible support for a broad base of scientific effort and for undirected research. But I think that history provides many examples of instances where research advances have been accomplished because people set out to make those advances. So I would not have been one of those who was opposed to a President's panel and to efforts to generate a greater awareness of this problem carried out through political rather than scientific channels. I think there are a number of instances which could be cited where this has proven to be productive.

STEWART: As far as your own programs were concerned, were there major criticisms in the latter 1950's of the direction that your efforts were taking, or NIH's efforts in general in the field of mental retardation were taking, that people hoped would be changed with the coming of a new Administration, or didn't this make any difference?

MASLAND: The major program of the Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness, starting in the mid-1950's with the development of the so-called Collaborative Perinatal Project--do you think I should recount the history of that? It's a little tangential, but it bears on this question that you asked.

STEWART: Yes, to a certain extent, I think it would be...

MASLAND: Well, this project was a deliberate effort on the part of the Institute to generate a greater concern and a greater effort in the study of the prenatal and perinatal factors responsible for various types of congenital and infantile neurological diseases, including cerebral palsy and mental retardation. The effort ultimately resulted in a large clinical study which involved the examination, ultimately, of fifty thousand women during the course of pregnancy and the follow-up examinations of their children. The thesis was that by establishing correlations between the circumstances and events of pregnancy and the characteristics of the child it would be possible to determine a cause and effect relationship. This study was launched on a very large scale, with thirteen of the major university centers involved. The expenditures reached as much as seven million dollars a year by 1962 or '63. A great many people were involved. It was a deliberately programmed effort. The members of this Institute went to a number of universities and said, "This is an important area of research and we want you to work with us on it. Large sums of money will be available if you are willing to move on this." This aroused violent criticism on the part of many others in the scientific community who objected to this way of generating a national research effort. They felt that the research proposal and the general atmosphere was pedestrian and that it would be harmful in bringing young people away from more productive areas of research. They took the view that advances in science, in general, stem from the imaginative and creative work of a single individual and that such group efforts are relatively nonproductive, especially when considered in relationship to the vast sums of money which are involved.

In spite of this fact, the Institute has persisted with this effort.
It has had continuing criticism from large segments of the scientific community. Its productivity remains unproven, although I personally have the greatest confidence that it has already made a very significant impact on this field of research, both directly and indirectly, and that its contributions to the knowledge of the factors operating in pregnancy relevant to mental retardation will be considerable.

This is not answering your original question. I don’t recall that anyone anticipated that alterations in the Administration would have a significant influence on this type of policy.

STEWART: What I’m trying to get at is some discussion of the situation that the Kennedy Administration was facing in January of ’61. What were the alternatives, as far as the directions they could possibly take as far as your program was concerned? Was it a matter only of more resources or more funds?

MASLAND: I think we might phrase your question in another way and ask ourselves: In 1961, what were the factors which limited the research efforts in mental retardation? The limiting factor was manpower—and possibly, to some extent, laboratory space. A second limiting factor probably was public education—not public education, but scientific knowledge. There is faddism in research, just as there is faddism in any other endeavor. Even by 1961, there was probably inadequate recognition within major segments of the scientific community of the research needs and the research opportunities in this field.

So then, what are the steps which an organization or an agency can take to foster an area of research? First, you can provide publicity. I think this was the major contribution of the President’s panel and, to some extent, may have been one of the most important values in the establishment of a separate Institute.

Then the second thing that needs to be done is to provide training for people who wish to enter research in this field. This was being done even before the President’s panel and the establishment of the new Institute, and, unfortunately, no amount of money and no amount of publicity will create the individuals with competence to provide the training programs. This, I think, has been one of the major bottlenecks in the development of the program. We had started a training program in pediatric neurology shortly after I came to the Institute in ’58 or so, but the impact of that program had been very limited because there were only three or four people with the competence to provide such training.

Well, now with the stimulus which this whole program has given, this training activity has progressively increased. As quickly as people come off the training line, they’re put to work training other people. So you have a geometrical progression in this program. In addition, the Child Health Institute and other agencies have set up training programs without quite the narrow research orientation and objective which is the responsibility of this Institute, so that a great many more people have been trained.

Then, I suppose, the third thing that can be done to strengthen the research effort is the creation of research centers. I think this is a very
powerful means. The availability of research space has been a bottleneck for research. At a time when there is a shortage of laboratory research space, the creation of laboratory space with a specific defined objective provides for that area of research an unusual opportunity. It is one of the strongest possible ways of forcing people into an area of research which you wish to develop. So, the establishment of the university-based centers, with authorities and funds for construction and with the Kennedy Foundation providing matching money, was one of the strongest possible ways to move this area of research forward.

In addition, it is true that the research center also provides a strong lever. It puts resources in the hands of people with a categorical objective and makes it possible for them to recruit into their area of interest individuals from other related disciplines whose talents are needed. One of the really difficult problems in medical research now is the means whereby individuals with various talents and various techniques can be assembled into a working group to bring their various talents to bear on a certain research area. The creation of a research center provides this opportunity for recruitment of individuals of scientific capabilities, individuals not necessarily trained for the specific program objective or research objective that you have in mind.

There is one other way of promoting research which we have not exploited in this country, possibly because it is not as productive as some of us think it might be. This is the use of industry. There is instrumentation that could be developed by industry, but biomedical research has not turned to industry the way the [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] Space Agency and the military are accustomed to doing. The academician is uncomfortable in this relationship. Most of us have been burned a few times because we're not accustomed to the profit motive. We expect everybody to be good boys and just work for us like anything for the fun of it. The fact remains that there is a potential and a capability in industry which has not been exploited and which none of the legislation relative to mental retardation has attempted to exploit, to my knowledge.

STEWART: Was there any discussion of this or similar new directions during the Kennedy Administration?

MASLAND: Not to my knowledge, no. I don't know whether this was discussed with the President's Panel; I don't have any recollection of such a conversation. I think what you're getting at is whether there were other suggestions made to the President's Panel, or to the Administration, of things that people felt might be done which were not implemented. I don't recall, at the moment, that there were any.
STEWART: Well, of course, there were a few items in the recommendations of the President's Panel that weren't accepted, the establishment of an Institute of Learning, for example.

MASLAND: Was that actually in that recommendation? I've forgotten.

STEWART: I believe it was.

MASLAND: Yes.

STEWART: If it wasn't in the final recommendations, it was at least--and I'm pretty sure it was.

MASLAND: I recall now that it was discussed.

STEWART: Are there any other recommendations of the President's Panel that you recall disagreeing with to any great extent?

MASLAND: I don't recall any. I would have to go back and read over that report before I could be sure.

STEWART: But, certainly, there's nothing that stands out in your mind?

MASLAND: No.

STEWART: Do you think then, in general, that the Panel accomplished its purpose? Accomplished it adequately? There was not...

MASLAND: Yes. I do. Yes.

STEWART: ...more that could have been done? I believe when the Kennedy Administration took office, of course, there were a number of revisions to the budget that was then before Congress, the Eisenhower--it would have been fiscal '62--budget. There were substantial increases. I have the figures for your institute, and I think it went from about ten million to fifteen million in the revised Kennedy fiscal '62 budget. In general, were there any problems in handling such an increase, or did you have a sufficient backlog or opportunities that would permit you to spend this type of increase?

MASLAND: I would have to go back over our budget's history to know exactly which years were involved, but there were several years during the period that I have been
director of this Institute when we did not spend the funds that were made available to us. These funds were then returned to the Treasury. However, the increases that we were not able to spend were not sums which had been provided in the President's budget. These were increases which were voted by the Congress on those several years. I think one year we may have had as much as a four million dollar unspent amount.

STEWART: But you don't recall any problems with this revised budget in the early months of the Kennedy Administration?

MASLAND: No.

STEWART: When he first took office.

MASLAND: No.

STEWART: Let me ask you: Did you have any direct contact with the President during those three years?

MASLAND: I suppose, really, my only direct contact was at the time of the signing of the mental retardation, one of the major mental retardation acts. That happened to coincide with a meeting of the Association for Retarded Children, and the Association had arranged for President Kennedy to give me an award for my contribution to this field. So he came to the meeting of the NARC [National Association for Retarded Children] and donated a plaque to me. Then subsequently I went for the signing of the bill. At some subsequent time during his Administration, when there was a visit of the officials from Afghanistan, I was invited to the White House for dinner. But on none of these occasions did I have the opportunity for some informal conversation with the President. These were all official occasions when I shook his hand and had some opportunity to say a few words, nothing more than that.

STEWART: You hadn't, I assume, met him before he became President, or had known him to any great extent...

MASLAND: No.

STEWART: ...at all?

MASLAND: No.

STEWART: Are they waiting for you, or...

MASLAND: Yes.
STEWART: That's just about all the questions I have. There were other things that, conceivably, we could go into, but...

MASLAND: Well, you might reel them off. If there's anything that I think I have a...

STEWART: Well, I was just generally—correct me if I'm wrong—but as far as your programs were concerned, except for losing certain projects to the new Institute, there were very few changes, there were no additions during the Kennedy years, were there?

MASLAND: That's correct. The legislation having to do with mental retardation was so directed as to relate specifically to the Child Health Institute and, to my recollection, did not appropriate any funds directly to us. We were provided with adequate funds in the budget, so that our program moved ahead very well. Probably, to some extent at least, our program received a boost from publicity and from the increased interest in this general area which was generated by the President's Panel. But there was not a direct contribution to our program from that special legislation.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in the formulation or the handling of the legislation that was proposed by the President in 1963?

MASLAND: Very little. I had one meeting with the Secretary when some of the legislation was—that was [Anthony J.] Celebrezze—under discussion. I met on several occasions with members of the Kennedy family when they were having the legislation under review to make some suggestions. One of my major concerns in regard to the new legislation had to do with the relationship between research and service. You are probably aware that the Mental Health Institute differs from the other institutes of NIH in having a responsibility to provide services and service training, whereas the rest of the institutes have a responsibility only for research and training. It was my opinion at that time that there could have been developed a much stronger and more integrated program in mental retardation if that could have been centralized within the Institute, within the Child Health Institute. They could have been given the responsibility for a total program in mental retardation in all of its aspects. However, this was contrary to the organizational structure of HBW.

STEWART: In general, were you at all fearful that all of the publicity that was being given to mental retardation
would have an adverse effect by raising expectations higher than they could possibly be fulfilled?

MASLAND: I had much concern only in one relationship. I still have it. And when you asked a few moments ago about my reservations as far as the President's Panel, there is one. Here, again, I probably have a certain narrow vision. Within that report and in subsequent reports there is the repeated statement that seventy-five percent of the mentally retarded have no evidence of organic brain disease. That carries with it the implication that these are individuals who are basically normal individuals, and all you have to do is wave some kind of wand over them and they're going to be the same as everybody else. There are a number of weaknesses in this position. The fact is that our understanding of neuroanatomy and neuropathology is not adequate to recognize the types of major deviations of brain structure which may relate to intellectual competence. So the fact that we don't find grossly evident pathology in large proportions of the retarded doesn't mean it isn't there.

This has served as a basis, then, for the major push in the socio-economic element. Again, there is a failure to recognize that within the less favored segments of our population all three of the major elements responsible for mental retardation may be operating; that is, the genetic component, the health component, and the socioenvironment component. At the moment our major preoccupation is with the sociocultural element. There is a possibility that a period of disillusionment may occur, as happened some hundred years ago at the time of [Edouard] Seguin and of others who were enthusiastic about their accomplishments with the retarded.

I share the view of those who feel that we must make a major and continuing effort to provide the best possible educational opportunities for everyone, no matter how retarded they may appear to be. I think, however, that we need to be prepared for the possibility that major elements of the problem of mental retardation stem from other sources.

STEWART: Okay, thank you for...