

George Tarjan Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 5/12/1977
Administrative Information

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George Tarjan (1912-1991) was the Vice Chairman of the President's Panel on Mental Retardation between 1961 and 1962. This statement focuses on John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s compassion for people with intellectual disabilities, his commitment to improving public attitudes toward them, and the accomplishments of the President's Panel on Mental Retardation, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

George Tarjan

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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE TARJAN

May 12, 1977

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TARJAN: Fifteen years have passed since the President's Panel on Mental Retardation submitted its report to President Kennedy. Those years, obviously, have faded out some of the factual memory, but it's certainly easy for me, as the former vice-chairman of the panel, to reminisce about those very exciting days. I suppose one question that I should try to address myself, is some explanation, how it came about, that the panel submitted its report even before, well before the deadline. If I recall correctly the deadline for submission of the report was December 31, 1962, but in fact we submitted our final report on October 16. Many, if not all the reasons for this, I believe, were due to the personality and the characteristics of President Kennedy. He was a man who firmly believed in the country's excellence in technology, but from our point of view it is of great importance that he was also a man who believed equally strongly that this nation can do equally excellent things in the

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area of humanism. And not only did he believe in the nation's capacity to be concerned with its underprivileged population, but he knew that our accomplishments in these areas can be of equal importance than any accomplishment in the physical sciences.

He was also a man who could convey his deep concerns about our less fortunate citizens to any group, even to a group of essentially scientifically-minded individuals like

those on the panel were. He could generate enthusiasm, he could convey his deep-felt humanitarianism, in very few sentences and most effectively.

I think, in retrospect, one ought to reflect on the question, whether or not his humanistic interests were restricted to mental retardation essentially because of the family's involvement in this severe tragedy. And as I think back, I'm deeply impressed that mental retardation, though it concerned him personally, was only an example of his commitment to underprivileged human beings. His concern was equally great with any other group of handicapped or essentially underprivileged or impoverished people. An example I would like to use was his deep involvement and deep interest in what we today generally call mental retardation due to psycho-social disadvantage. Even though the type of mental retardation that the family knew could be today classified as one of the clinical types of retardation, that is, mental retardation that is associated with some actual

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involvement of the brain, when he learned, when President Kennedy learned about how underprivileged environmental conditions can produce, in vast number of youngsters, mental retardation that is not accompanied by clear and demonstrable impairment of the brain or central nervous system, his compassion for that group was equally deeply felt and equally strongly expressed.

A second characteristic of the President that so strongly motivated the panel had to do with his almost purely academic approach to any question. I will never forget the simple fact that when he asked a question, he attentively wanted to listen to the answers and the opinions of the panel, because he wanted to know them. He did not ask rhetorical questions. He asked questions and gave the impression that at the moment nothing was of greater importance than the opinions expressed by the panel or by individual members of the panel.

A third characteristic that was so strongly impressed upon me was his strict confidence in the panel itself, that the panel represented the best that could be selected, that it was composed of enthusiastic, hard-working, capable, and knowledgeable individuals, who will, in his judgment, as I said, produce the best possible resort for the turn of the decade for the early 1960s. It was in retrospect, no wonder, at least no wonder to me, that every panel member was ready to devote any amount of necessary time to get the report accomplished.

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I suppose a second question that could be raised, in light of the many presidential or congressional committees, commissions, and panels that have at times labored very hard but often produce relatively little, and this question basically would go as follows: Why was it that the panel could accomplish its work in two days less than a year and could produce a report that was practical, forward-looking, and written in a language that could relatively easily lead to implementation the necessary legislation and the necessary appropriations. Much of the credit for this aspect of our work, in my judgment, first goes to the composition of the panel. Second, to our consultant, Mrs. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, and I suppose thirdly substantial credit must go to our chairman, Leonard Mayo. The panel was an unusually

composed panel. Not all the people on the panel were in the area of mental retardation, but at least half of the group was fully versatile with all problems of retardation. But most of us came from professional lines, many of us primarily from scientific endeavors, quite a few operational people who worked in real life in the practical realities of issues, and therefore some of us were constantly inclined not only to be idealistic but to be practical and pragmatic at the same time.

I assume that one example I could use for this reason, for illustrating this point, is the fact that very early during our first meetings, we decided that we had two alternatives. We could assume that relatively little was known about mental

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retardation, which would have been a correct assumption, and we could have decided that what was needed for the panel's own work was a substantial amount of research. In my judgment, that would have slowed down the panel work substantially. We made a rather difficult early decision, and the decision went something along the following line. What is known can be found in the collective memory and the collective knowledge of the panel members, and what is to be envisioned for the future can be found in the forward-looking spirit of the panel members. Hence, we decided that we would focus more on our own collective thinking than on the delaying complications of long, long studies. This should not be interpreted that we did not do studies because we did many very important ones, one of which for instance led to the reclassification and typology of mental retardation. Another decision that we made early, the models must exist in other countries that we could effectively emulate. But basically, what the panel ultimately said originated in the knowledge of the panel members and in the vision of those same individuals.

It is, at least in my biased opinion, a historical fact that the panel was enormously effective. All one has to do fifteen years later and look at the national scene to be able to identify a host of enormously important steps that have been accomplished as a consequence of the panel report. I will just simply enumerate a few. The twelve mental retardation research centers which have broadened our knowledge base substantially during the past

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decade; the forty or so university affiliate facilities for interdisciplinary education of professionals in the field of mental retardation; the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development was also an essentially, at least an indirect consequence of the operations of the panel. So were the development of volunteer programs of which I would like to single out the foster grandparents program. Head Start, in many respects, the great improvement in the maternal and child health program in mental retardation. And equally important, the broadening of the special education field and the education of many special teachers. The changes in the employment situation, and I want to focus here quite clearly on the change in the attitude of the federal civil service system, which up to that time employed few, if any, mentally retarded individuals, and if they employed them, they employed them because they really were unaware of the fact that they were retarded. This changed

completely, and ever since that time the federal government is a successful employer of many retarded individuals. I left two other items for the tail end of these thoughts, essentially because I want to strongly emphasize them. I believe it was the panel's work and thinking that changed completely the basic approach to the care of the mentally retarded from large residential institutions to community-based programs. Notions that we have today could not have been generated had the panel not emphasized that the care, whenever possible, for a mentally retarded individual should be given in his own or her own

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community, and that some facilities though would have to be constructed, a major accomplishment would have to be a change in general attitude from segregation of the mentally retarded to integration of the mentally retarded individuals into his own community. Now, I left for the last point the enormous change that occurred in public attitude. Mentally retarded individuals were segregated prior to panel days, as much from attitudinal consequences as from factual considerations. And the fact that the President himself was deeply concerned about retardation, that he was willing to speak about the importance of national programs for retardation, changed that attitude completely and all the accomplishments we have today in part can be assigned to this change of public attitudes toward retardation and I cannot overemphasize the President's role in this respect.

Now let me try to focus, probably on one single event that impressed me most clearly about President Kennedy's relationship to the panel's work. And I can now clearly recall the day of October 16, 1962. The panel was ready to submit its report, it felt that it completely its task. But it happened to be a day where a great national crisis in the realm of international politics also occurred. And the question was immediately raised, whether or not the heavily-occupied President should take time out to meet with a panel presenting a domestic issue, and an issue that up to that point, was a very low priority in the public's mind. What happened was that the issue was of high

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priority in the President's mind, and not only did he meet with us, but I will never forget the length of time that he spent with us, the attentiveness with which he, I am sure, excluded from his thinking all other topics and focused and concentrated on the questions of the programs for mental retardation. In fact, very few of the panel members may be, probably of the members only I know that the President was preoccupied, or could have been preoccupied with other thoughts. And I will never forget, that when our meeting was over, how those panel members who did not know what happened elsewhere in the White House expressed their full and total admiration for the attentiveness of the President to our presentation, and expressed their firm beliefs that with the type of devotion, the type of commitment to issues of mental retardation, a decade of progress was assured. This in fact turned out to be the case with one modification. The progress lasted longer and still goes on, and is deeply rooted in the original commitment of the President, and in the original devotion

of Mrs. Shriver, Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] of the staff of the panel, and, if I may say so, all the panel members' commitment to their one year of work.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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