



Angel in Mink

Mary Lasker

THE STORY OF MARY LASKER'S CRUSADE FOR
MEDICAL RESEARCH AND THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

BY SHIRLEY HALEY



She is the most influential American you've never heard of. Because of her gifts and grit, the United States boasts the world's preeminent biomedical research institution. She was a quick study, a brilliant networker, and a formidable figure. She called herself a citizen advocate, and she advocated for the health of the nation.

This is Mary Lasker's story.

Americans now recognize the National Institutes of Health as the national treasure that it is, but when she began her crusade, her first challenge was persuading elected leaders and federal officials that the health of the American public was even their problem.

Armed with the knowledge she was right, and supported by her husband, the famed ad man Albert Lasker, and close friend Florence Mahoney, she built a coalition of noted physicians and scientists that fundamentally changed how we think about medical research funding. In New York she supported the arts and theater. For a few months every year, she traveled to Europe, rented a villa in France or Italy, and entertained all the right people. She incorporated her mission for medical research with her place in high society. She was a socialite on a mission. She was an Angel in Mink.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Production Data

Haley, Shirley

Angel in Mink: The Story of Mary Lasker's Crusade for Medical Research and the
National Institutes of Health / Shirley Haley

Includes bibliographical references and index.

LCCN: 2022907693
ISBN: 979-8-9861342-0-8
An ebook edition of this title is also available.

First edition

Book design by GD Squared
www.gdsquared.com

DEDICATION

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO BRADIE METHENY

1936-2019

Telling Mary Lasker's story was the dream of Bradie Metheny, a journalist, author, publisher, and master storyteller who never met a stranger. That story is now being told thanks to the highly impactful ACT for NIH Foundation and its founder and chairman, Jed Manocherian, who fell in love with the story of Mary after he began his own efforts to increase funding for the National Institutes of Health almost a decade ago.

For Bradie, the opportunity came too late. Shortly after he was offered the project, the cancer he had fought for years took him in December 2019. Bradie was once an effective advocate for medical research in his own right: He plied the halls of Congress with his avuncular Missouri charm as a citizen advocate seeking benefits for NIH. On one occasion he found himself among the crowd in the same room with Mary, and he was drawn in by her charisma.

I am honored to have been Bradie's writing partner. And I am proud to have authored the story of the amazing woman few have ever heard of and to whom we owe so much.

— Shirley Haley

A NOTE FROM ACT FOR NIH FOUNDATION

Readers may ask why a foundation dedicated to advancing biomedical research in the 21st century has sponsored a biography of Mary Lasker, a woman born in 1900. It is the foundation's hope that this definitive biography of one of the most consequential public health and medical research advocates in our nation's history will be an inspiration to those who want to leverage the purse and power of government to improve the human condition.

Mary Lasker's unrelenting efforts are a case study in how individuals or organizations can masterfully and profoundly impact public policy to address compelling societal challenges. She created a new model of political advocacy and in the process cultivated lifelong personal relationships with presidents, first ladies, and members of Congress. These government leaders responded to her passion, persuasive arguments, and personal charm.

Among her achievements, she played a pivotal role over half a century in helping the National Institutes of Health become the nation's preeminent biomedical science organization, and the largest funder of medical research in the world. Because of Mary Lasker, NIH had the funds to support research that led to the discovery of countless treatments, cures, and vaccines that have spared tens of millions across the globe from the ravages of disease.

Mike Stephens, the first president of ACT for NIH, had a front-row seat. Over a thirty-year career on the legislative staff of the appropriations committee that funds the NIH, Mike had numerous interactions with Mary Lasker and grew to admire her immensely. He also was close friends with two retired health policy reporters, Shirley Haley and Bradie Metheny, who had long dreamed of writing such a book. The result of the partnership between the authors and the foundation, which Mike has coordinated, is *Angel in Mink*.

— Jed Manocherian
Founder and Chairman

ACT *for* **NIH**
FOUNDATION

A NOTE FROM THE LASKER FOUNDATION

Mary Lasker always thought big. Thanks to relentless dedication, social finesse, and political prowess, her legacy is as big today as her vision was throughout her life. Yet Mary Lasker’s story has not been as widely told as it deserves — until now. In the pages of this meticulously researched book, readers will revel in Mary Lasker’s journey through the halls of power and science, a journey that was key to positioning the United States as the world leader in medical research. Her call to action — “If you think research is expensive, try disease” — remains as true today as ever. As we battle a pandemic and rally to increase public trust in science, this book is a timely reminder of the need to invest in medical research, use science to guide our public health policy, and come together to improve the health of our world.

— Claire Pomeroy, MD, MBA
President, Lasker Foundation

A NOTE ABOUT SOURCES

Much of the material in this narrative is drawn from a series of interviews with Mary conducted over 20 years from October 1962 to August 1982 by historian and author John T. Mason Jr. for the Columbia University Libraries Oral History Research Office's Notable New Yorkers collection.

Mary's recollections are subject to the quirks of human memory, and in the instances where they run counter to other sources, we have either corroborated her account, found a common thread, or noted in the text when there is a discrepancy.

Given her achievements, there is surprisingly little research available on Mary Lasker, so the source for most references to her in other books and publications are these same oral history interviews. Likewise, Mary's relationship with her husband Albert is described in depth only in John Gunther's beautifully written biography *Taken At The Flood: The Story of Albert D. Lasker*, to which we also turned for the story of Albert's illness and death.

ANGEL IN MINK



PRAISE FOR MARY LASKER AND ANGEL IN MINK

“Mary Lasker can be fairly characterized as the godmother of the National Institutes of Health. Touched by the tragedies of preventable diseases, she had a vision of a grand partnership between the government and American science to ameliorate this suffering. Often in her own words through extensive use of her oral history interviews, *Angel in Mink* vividly tells the story of Lasker’s tireless advocacy over five decades to make this vision a reality by creating and expanding the modern National Institutes of Health. She was impatient for progress and said she hated lobbying — but she was always prepared, collegial, and compelling. This is an important read for anyone wanting to know more about the history of biomedical research, citizen advocacy, and the role of women in leading social change.”

Francis Collins, MD, PhD, *Director of the National Institutes of Health, 2009-2021*

“Humanist, philanthropist, activist — Mary Lasker has inspired understanding and productive legislation which improved the lot of mankind. In medical research, in adding grace and beauty to the environment and in exhorting her fellow citizens to rally to the cause of progress, she has made a lasting imprint on the quality of life in this country.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson, *in awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Mary Lasker on January 20, 1969*

“As the single, driving force behind convincing the Congress to make the funding of medical research a national priority, Mary Lasker has saved the lives of countless Americans.”

U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi, *on September 15, 1987, in sponsoring legislation to award a Congressional Gold Medal to Mary Lasker*

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*“She had such charm.
Everybody loved her for everything she did.”*
—Deeda Blair, longtime friend

P R O L O G U E

The determined click of Mary Lasker’s high heels echoed down the marble halls of the Senate Office Building. It was early fall 1944, and she was on Capitol Hill to see U.S. Sen. Claude Pepper about his coming hearings on the state of the nation’s health and to again press the need for strong government investment in medical research. She felt good about the progress she and her friend and ally Florence Mahoney had made with the senator, and as she wound her way up the grand staircase toward his offices, her busy mind worked on next steps in her campaign to make medical research a national priority.

Heads turned as Mary made her way to Pepper’s office. She was a striking woman, always dressed in richly colored designer fashions, her dark hair arranged in a stylish bouffant. She radiated confidence and anticipated success at whatever she attempted. For good reason. At forty-three, she was a successful businesswoman and a serious collector of modern European art. She had survived an early marriage to an alcoholic and recently remarried a wonderful, dashing millionaire.

“There was something about the way she looked: She had a very special presence,” said her friend Deeda Blair in a 2021 interview.

Over the course of five decades, she would transform the federal government’s relationship with medical research and help create

the National Institutes of Health, the most productive biomedical research institution in the world.

Starting with no experience but armed with strong convictions and the backing of a like-minded, wealthy husband, she charged ahead. She learned on the job how best to approach members of Congress, and it could reasonably be said that she raised the art of lobbying to a new level. She worked with and befriended presidents and first ladies, and became a familiar figure at White House functions.

She was hands-on when it came to door-to-door calls on members of Congress whose votes she needed. The work wasn't easy. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," she said in a 1978 interview. "It's so hard to know what will appeal to them, what you can say that will turn them around fast. ... You could spend a lot of time with them, but if you don't get them in six minutes, you haven't got them."

"Mary was always congenial," Florence Mahoney said of her in a 1995 interview with author Bradie Metheny. "I never noticed she was intimidating to politicians. If she was, it may have been because she had access to presidents."

And yet, though her work has touched millions of lives, Mary Lasker is largely unknown to people outside of the Washington, D.C., and New York City circles in which she traveled. Through her efforts and those of a cadre of collaborators, the NIH went from one institute with limited resources to multiple institutes that are fueling a revolution in biomedicine. Steered by Mary, the NIH budget grew from just under \$3 million in 1945 to more than \$4 billion in 1984, the year the NIH named a building in her honor. Even so, that was never enough for Mary compared to the misery caused by dread disease. She couldn't understand when members of Congress and federal government officials failed to understand at least the business proposition that investing in a healthy population would lead to greater economic gains.

PROLOGUE

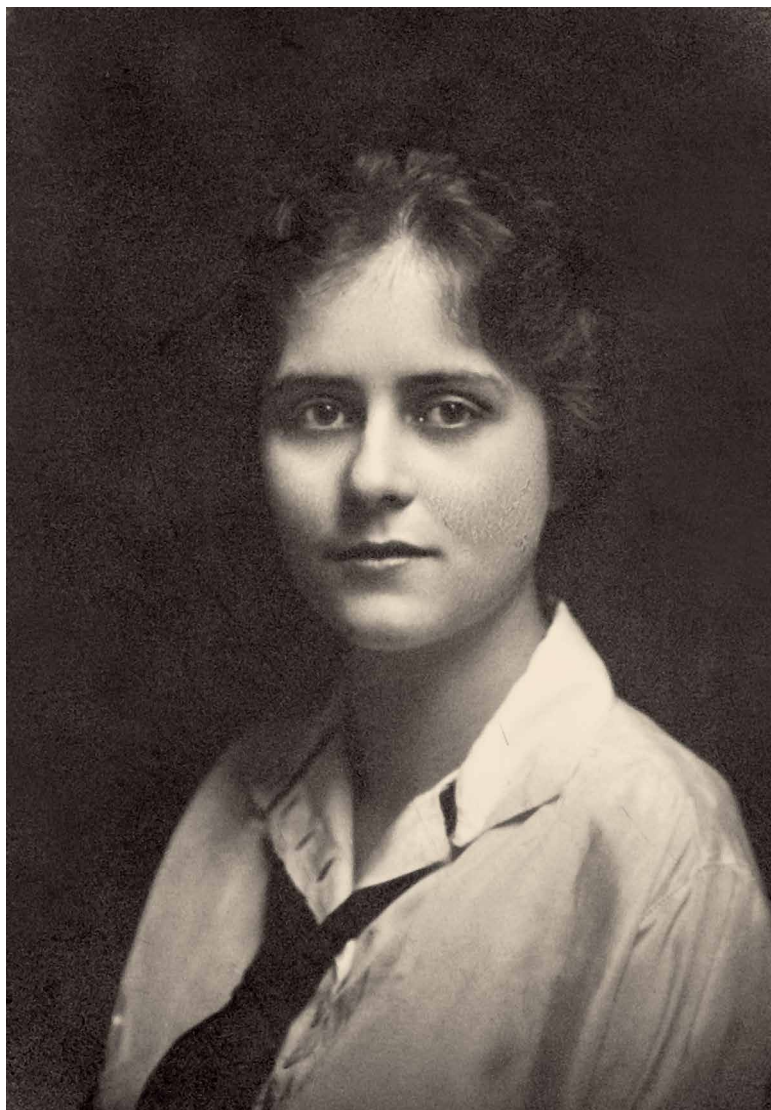
Mary never rested. When she wasn't dining with presidents and twisting elbows on Capitol Hill, she was traveling frequently through Europe. She entertained purposefully — with a gift for getting the right mix of people in a room. She acquired and curated a priceless art collection. After growing up in a quiet Wisconsin town, she couldn't get enough of the world, and she found her calling in advocating for an end to the diseases she saw shortening the lives of the people around her.

Albert Lasker was every bit as dedicated as Mary to improving the nation's health. He also was infatuated with his gorgeous, headstrong young wife. And Mary was just as in love with her handsome, distinguished husband. He admired the way she had made her way in the world, and she thought he was the most intelligent man she had ever met. It was a great partnership fated to last barely more than a decade.

Mary surrounded herself with a key group of friends and colleagues as dedicated as she and Florence to progress in medical research. She called on medical experts like pioneer cardiovascular surgeon Dr. Michael DeBakey and the famed oncologist Dr. Sidney Farber and disease-oriented societies to tell their stories to Congress. She recruited veteran lobbyists like Mike Gorman and Luke Quinn and worked closely with lawmakers such as John Fogarty and Lister Hill, all to win the funding increases she knew would lead to cures.

Near the end of her career, she would be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, two of the highest honors available to a U.S. citizen.

But between Mary's meeting with Sen. Pepper in 1944 and that lofty recognition in 1989 lies the inspiring story of an incredible woman whose unflagging dedication to medical research earned her the respect of generations.



Mary Woodard in the early 1920s.

Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute

1

A SEED IS PLANTED

1918 – 1922

Bright and spirited, Mary Woodard embraced the life of a college freshman at the University of Wisconsin in 1918. Making the most of the freedom she had craved, she socialized until all hours, then got up early the next day to attend the lectures she found almost as stimulating. She was fifty miles and a world away from small-town life in Watertown, where at an early age she had turned to reading as an escape from perpetual boredom.

“I was exposed to freedom for the first time and to a lot of parties and to a lot of running around with boys,” Mary recalled later. “I really wore myself out because I wanted to be moderately good as a student as well.”

It was during sorority rush season that first fall in 1918 that the exhausting pace caught up with her, and she fell victim to the flu going around. “I remember being rushed at the Kappa Kappa

Gamma house and feeling very ill, and finally nearly collapsing and being taken to the infirmary,” she said. There Mary found herself surrounded by flu victims, many sicker than she: “Nobody knew what to do for us.” At the time, Mary didn’t know how lucky she was to recover. The flu going around turned out to be a pandemic.

By October 1918, American troops had been fighting in World War I for more than a year. There was a killer working at home as well. Cities were gripped with fear: School was canceled; places of worship, theaters, and other places of “public amusement” were shuttered. During October alone, 195,000 Americans died, making it the deadliest month in U.S. history. Though the 1918-



The home at 400 North Washington Street in Watertown, Wisconsin, where Mary grew up. Here members of the Woodard family set out for the Harvest Jubilee and Carnival Parade in 1899.

Watertown Historical Society

1919 Influenza Pandemic lasted only fifteen months, it sickened 500 million people and killed fifty million around the world. In the United States, 675,000 persons died from influenza or its complications. On the University of Wisconsin’s campus in Madison, nearly 1,600 students — a third of the student body — fell ill, and forty-eight died.

The experience of lying helpless as those around her suffered planted a seed of resolve in young Mary that “if the time would come, and I felt sure it would, when I would have some leisure and some money, that I would try to do something about finding new knowledge against this disease and others ... because I could see that there was a terrible deficit here.”

A SEED IS PLANTED

On the mend and back in circulation, Mary joined the Delta Gamma sorority. She was enjoying life in the sorority house when her mother pulled the plug in her sophomore year. Whether in reaction to the influenza scare, Mary's active social life, or both, Sara Woodard pointed out to an exhausted Mary that it was in her best interest to leave school, rest, and maybe move on to Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There she wouldn't have the camaraderie of her Wisconsin friends, and her social life might cool down.

After she had been home a while, Mary and her mother traveled south, spending an "extremely dull" few weeks in North Carolina before moving on to Washington, D.C., where Mary indulged her love of theater and her lifelong passion for flowers. "The cherry trees were all in full bloom, and this made a most enormous impression on me," Mary recalled. "My feelings about flowers and planting were influenced by this sight, and my mother, of course, was enchanted."

That trip brought Mary closer to her mother, with whom she had always had a good relationship, and whom she loved and respected. She would end up modeling her mother's philosophies and choices in much of her own life.

FROM IRELAND TO CHICAGO

Sara Woodard was "very vivacious, good looking, very civic minded and very responsive to beauty of any kind," Mary said in one of a series of interviews she gave for Columbia University's Notable New Yorkers oral history collection. Her mother was painfully honest yet also had a natural talent for selling any idea or thing she wanted.

In 1879, Sara, then seventeen and called Sara Johnson, emigrated from Ireland to Canada to live with her older brother. Soon after she

arrived, he was killed in an accident. Sara soon found shelter with friends and relatives in Chicago. She used her talent for sales and before long headed the dress department at Carson & Pirie, forerunner of Carson Pirie Scott, a Midwest department store chain.

One day while Sara was exploring the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, chaperoned by her cousin, he introduced her to Frank Elwin Woodard. "My father was very shy, and how they got together is really astonishing to me," Mary said. "That cousin must have worked quite hard on them."

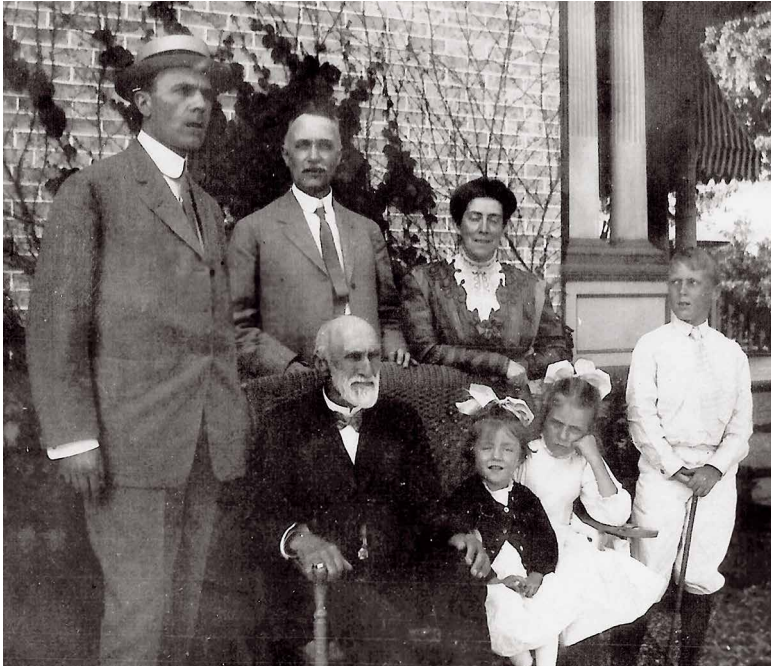
Frank and Sara married in 1896, and Sara went with Frank to live in Watertown, Wisconsin, and begin life as a banker's wife and civic activist.

Sara was almost forty years old when she gave birth on November 30, 1900, to Mary. Six years later, they had a second daughter, whom she and Frank allowed Mary to name Alice for reasons forgotten. Alice and Mary remained close and later worked together on philanthropic projects.

The Woodards lived in what Mary described as a nice house on a large lot with the luxury, for a house built around 1890, of two bathrooms. "It was as handsome as any house in the town," she said. "We had two horses and a carriage, a buggy."

Mary was a sickly child prone to painful mastoid infections — severe infections of the bone behind the ear — in an era when there were no real medicines to cure or comfort her. She and her mother went south for the winter for years in the belief that warmer weather would be better for Mary's health. Mary recalled a conversation at her childhood sick bed where she heard a woman tell her mother, "Sara, I don't think you'll ever raise her."

"I took refuge in books very early," Mary recalled. "From the time I was about three or four I recall being bored and not having



An unhappy Mary Woodard sits for a family portrait about 1909 in Watertown, Wisconsin. Seated with her are her grandfather Marshall Woodard and her younger sister, Alice. Standing behind are her uncle William Woodard, left, and her parents, Frank and Sara Woodard. At right is a cousin.

Watertown Historical Society

enough to do that interested me.” Until she reached college, she was bored frequently.

Mary’s relationship with her mother, based on mutual interests and a shared enjoyment of life, differed from her relationship with her father. As a child Frank had traveled to Wisconsin from Lake Sunapee, New Hampshire, with his parents, whom Mary described as “very, very puritanical in their point of view about everything, very good people.” Frank was a prosperous banker,

a good provider who loved natural beauty but lacked feeling for art or conversation, said Mary. She described him as “very reliable, very responsible, and very silent.” It wasn’t that her father was bad tempered or irritable, he just naturally didn’t have a need to talk, said Mary, adding that she wasn’t so much frightened by his silence as irked by it. She found her grandfather to be more responsive and lively than her father and more accepting of new things but observed that “they were both very admirable men, who were considered the backbone of the community.”

A NEWFOUND PASSION

Mary found Radcliffe rather “blue stocking,” but she thought as long as she were going to college she might as well go where the good professors were. She felt it would be “easier and less dull to learn from them.” It wasn’t long before she changed her major from English to art history. She became “tremendously influenced” by the fine arts professors and formed lifelong relationships with individuals who would become resources for her when she struck out on her own. As she found value in her education, she began to mature into an intelligent, headstrong woman with appreciable social skills and a strong sense of independence.

Her parents agreed that she need not travel to Europe during the summer, as many of her classmates did, and that was fine with Mary. She spent time with Radcliffe friend Janet Fairbank at the Fairbank summer place on Lake Geneva in Wisconsin. Janet’s mother, Janet Ayer Fairbank, was active in the Democratic Party, advocated for women’s right to vote, and wrote novels. Among her works was *The Smiths*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1925.

The women’s suffrage movement was one of the broad influences nurturing Mary’s independence. Parades for women’s rights

and suffrage were being held in Boston and around the country, culminating in the 19th Amendment establishing a nationwide right to vote in August 1920 during Mary's college years. "It was a terrifically important and great time," Mary said.

It is difficult to know exactly what gets someone started down a particular path, what allows someone to do more, what erases fear. Looking back, Mary said she thought it was a fight she had with her father while she was at Radcliffe that gave her the courage and determination to make her own way.

In late November 1920, when she was leaving Boston for the long trip back home to Watertown for the holidays, a cutting winter wind blew across the platform at the train station, wrapping her long dress against her legs and sending shivers up her spine. It wasn't until after lunch, as she poured a second cup of tea from the sterling silver teapot in the dining car, that she realized the chill was gone. She began to think about asking her parents for a new coat: nothing expensive, not mink or fox, simply a good, warm coat, possibly of rabbit or raccoon.

At nineteen, she had pretty, dark hair she liked to wear in a cloud of fluffy curls around her face. Her clothes were good quality but not overly expensive, and she dressed attractively in colors that accentuated her figure. "To look nice should be a right for every woman," she declared whenever an opportunity presented itself. At times, she had thought about becoming a designer.

After she had been home for a few days, she asked her mother about the possibility of getting the new coat. She knew her mother was well taken care of, but her father could be miserly about some things. Sara told her to ask her father. Mary anticipated an argument, and sure enough, he replied, "Why don't you just wear long underwear?"

The incident sparked an anger in Mary that was a reaction to years observing her father's pettiness with her mother over the smallest household expenditures. The remark "absolutely enraged me," she said.

"I decided that never again would a man speak to me like that," she said. As she waited on the platform for the train back to school, wearing the raccoon coat her mother bought her, she vowed she would always be independent and earn her own money.

2

FINDING HER WAY IN THE BIG CITY

1923 – 1934

Mary graduated cum laude from Radcliffe in February 1923, and after a European tour that included a stint taking art classes at Oxford University, she determined to make her way in New York City. After all, “no respectable girl would ever think of going home to a small town in the Middle West” after leaving an Eastern college. Watertown, Wisconsin, was “absolutely too dull for words,” and there certainly were no interesting men.

Her father took a dim view of her decision. While Frank warned her she could never earn enough to live on, Sara stood by their daughter and “explained to him that he could just supplement whatever it was I earned,” Mary recalled.

ANGEL IN MINK



Mary Woodard, recently graduated from Radcliffe, joins her family for a portrait in front of her childhood home. Mary is standing in the back in profile, turning to her uncle, Myron Woodard, in glasses, and sister, Alice. Seated in front, from left, are her parents, Sara and Frank. Seated in the middle is her grandfather Marshall Woodard.

Watertown Historical Society

She started life in New York as a resident of the Allerton Hotel for Women, on the corner of East 57th Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, now the Renaissance New York Hotel 57. The Allerton, built as a residence for young professional women, was completed in 1923, perfect timing for Mary's arrival in Manhattan.

Her first job was in commission sales at the Eric Galleries, where she started at \$9 a week, temporarily affirming her father's grim prediction, though sometimes she earned as much as \$23 a week. Eric Galleries gave her sales experience, but more importantly, it gave her a job in New York City. She figured she would eventually get something else, and she did.

After about three months at the Eric Galleries, she moved on to the Reinhardt Galleries, where she was hired to run exhibitions for a salary of \$50 a week. Frank Woodard “was practically stunned,” and Mary was on her way.

Mary’s Radcliffe education and connections had paid off. “I was the only art dealer in New York City, as far as I know, that had any training in the history of art,” she said. She landed the Reinhardt job as the result of a letter of introduction from Paul Sachs. An art lover, he was once a partner at Goldman Sachs, his family’s investment firm, but quit to go into teaching. He wound up in the Fine Arts Department at Harvard, where Mary made his acquaintance as a Radcliffe student.

For Mary, the job at Reinhardt Galleries slowly developed into a romance with owner Paul Reinhardt. “I was very attracted to him because he had a great feeling for pictures, and he was a very pleasant and agreeable man,” Mary said. But he was a heavy drinker and recalling that her mother had an alcoholic brother who ruined his family, Mary was hesitant to get emotionally involved. It took Reinhardt giving up drink for a whole year to convince her “he could probably do it,” and they were married May 21, 1926.

Paul and Mary Reinhardt enjoyed life together. They made yearly buying trips to London and Paris, and depending on the year, the gallery did well, in her opinion. “It wasn’t a huge business, but if the pictures had been intelligently bought,” Mary said, “one made a moderate amount of money, and there was no income tax.” She estimated that “depending on what we had,” the gallery took in about a half million to a million dollars a year.

The Reinhardts set about building a small but respected collection of contemporary French paintings. Early purchases were works by Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Amedeo Modigliani, artists sought after in Europe but still undiscovered by many American

collectors. In 1926 or 1927, the Reinhardts had an exhibit of paintings by Matisse at which not one painting or watercolor sold. Mary called the exhibit “profoundly unsuccessful.” Fast forward to 1965 and a friend told her he had recently paid \$85,000 for a Matisse.

MATISSE, CHAGALL, PICASSO

Mary would develop a personal relationship with both Matisse and Marc Chagall, whom she visited many times at his home in Venice. The first time she went was in 1961 to buy a watercolor as a present for her friend Bill Blair and his bride-to-be Deeda Gerlach. Chagall’s wife tactfully advised Mary that she didn’t want to pay that much for a wedding gift but might look at a book of lithographs. Mary then went to her friend Pierre Matisse, Henri’s son, who was an art dealer, and casually asked, “What is the price of a Chagall watercolor

these days?” He responded that a good one was probably around \$16,000. She was stunned. She had thought \$2,000 or \$3,000, as she had purchased one in 1950 for \$600.

Picasso, she said, was a different matter. When she was first in the business, she bought pieces from the artist’s famous Blue Period for \$800 or \$900 in Paris and sold them in New York for \$2,000 or \$3,000. She didn’t meet him until 1950 or 1951, when she arranged through a dealer to buy from him directly because there never



Mary in 1926, the year she married Paul Reinhardt.

Lasker Foundation

seemed to be any of his works on the market. She found him “almost radioactive” with vitality, “so alive, so interested, so gesticulating.” He spoke in French with a Spanish accent, so it was difficult for her to communicate with him. Nonetheless, she bought five larger paintings and two small ones, and he gave her a small picture.

Mary recalled during her postgraduate European tour in 1923 being “overwhelmed with excitement” to be gazing at actual paintings after seeing only slides and reproductions. “Rapturous” over the color in a Matisse flower picture, she asked the price. For \$600, the unemployed college grad could have had the painting but not the trip home.

THE CRASH

On her trips with Reinhardt, she enjoyed visiting English country houses, where they were introduced by friends or other dealers or where someone in need of cash was selling. They didn’t buy a lot of art, Mary said, but she found the homes beautiful, particularly the English gardens, which she sometimes went to see “just for fun.”

Then came the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Even though the wealthy were still rich, they weren’t interested in buying expensive paintings, Mary explained. “And instead of thinking of what other business he could go into or what else to do,” she said, Reinhardt tried to wait it out. While he was waiting, “he really became an alcoholic.”

Mary was “in absolute despair” that she couldn’t help her husband stop drinking. “I couldn’t get him to do anything, and I finally decided that I couldn’t survive, myself, any longer, that I would just collapse if I were to continue,” she said. “I gradually left the gallery, did no more work on it” after about 1930.

Money got so tight, she was forced to sell paintings by Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, and Marie Laurencin. “They had gone up

somewhat in value, and I sold them at a profit, [but] I still regret selling and wish I had them this minute,” she lamented later. Mary would remain a connoisseur and collector for the rest of her life, lending her expertise as a way to cement her friendship with people in a position to help her. She would contribute to and serve on Jacqueline Kennedy’s Fine Arts Committee for the White House, and when President Lyndon B. Johnson was decorating his office, she found scenes of the American Southwest by Frederic Remington or Charles Russell that didn’t depict Native Americans, because of the shame Johnson felt over the way they were treated.

ALWAYS STRIVING

While the gallery foundered, Mary renewed her vow of financial independence and began to cast about for a new interest.

She spent about a year and a half trying to no avail to publish a high-quality movie magazine distributed through theater chains. The effort was not without reward. She met with an ad agency representative at Lord & Thomas, who confirmed that she would never break into publishing but pointed her in the direction of “fashion, patterns or something.” At this same time, the concept of chain stores caught her attention. She was captivated by the idea that convincing a buyer to carry a single product that sold for a small amount could result in thousands of sales that amounted to “a decent living.”

Mary and her friend Mary McSweeney, with whom she had brainstormed the movie magazine idea, then hit on the idea of creating an inexpensive line of dress sewing patterns that would copy the fashions of the stars and sell at chain stores. Hollywood Patterns was born. They took the idea to McSweeney’s husband, who worked for Conde Nast, the *Vogue* magazine publisher that also produced expensive patterns for high-end fashions.

FINDING HER WAY IN THE BIG CITY



Three examples from the Hollywood Patterns business that Mary launched in the middle of the Great Depression.

Images courtesy of Emily Brown



“It took us a long time to turn the thing around and design the right kind of dresses,” Mary recalled. In the end, she persuaded Conde Nast to agree to make the patterns and get releases to use the movie stars’ pictures on the envelopes. The patterns went on sale in F.W. Woolworth stores, and other chains Mary had never heard of, including W.T. Grant and J.J. Newberry’s. She got a fraction of a percent on every pattern sold, but the timing was unfortunate. On the same day they hit the shelves — March 6, 1933 — newly elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt called a bank holiday to halt runs on deposits. The patterns, however, were a success. “Gradually I got to have a fairly decent income from this,” she said. Conde Nast operated the Hollywood Pattern Co. until 1946.

During that time, Mary got to know Raymond Loewy, a French designer who had started his career in fashion illustrating *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* but was attracted to the burgeoning field of industrial design. “He’s truly a genius [with] excellent ideas, and they were practical,” Mary said. She decided that in addition to the pattern business, she would try earning commissions from Loewy by connecting him with contacts and clients. As it turned out, she did well, getting him “just enough additional business so that it helped him really get into the big time,” she said. She forged a lifelong friendship with Loewy and his wife, Viola, and Loewy went on to become known as the father of industrial design.

It was Loewy whom Mary contacted to design the distinctive blue and white of President John F. Kennedy’s Air Force One, with the “United States of America” boldly printed along the fuselage. Mary provided a small painting by Jean Eve and a Braque lithograph to decorate the president’s compartment, earning her the gratitude of the president and first lady. Loewy’s influence extended from redesigning Pennsylvania Railroad’s

steam locomotive to designing logos for Exxon, Shell, and Lucky Strike cigarettes.

A DIVORCE AND A FRESH START

Mary divorced Paul Reinhardt in 1934 in Reno, Nevada, because, she said, “I thought I’d better help myself by not being a victim any longer.” She was accompanied on the trip by her great friend Kay Swift, an accomplished composer — she penned the jazz standard “Can’t We Be Friends?” — and the first woman to score a Broadway musical, “Fine and Dandy.” Swift was there to divorce her husband James Paul Warburg, likely because of her longtime affair with composer George Gershwin.

Reinhardt eventually remarried. “I was so happy that he had found someone who was charming and that he was happy with,” Mary said. She supported him financially on and off until his death in 1945 because she said it would have been difficult for them to live comfortably without help.

The business skills Mary honed as a young woman who was resolved first to make her own way, then thrive during the Depression, as well as the social skills she learned at her mother’s elbow, began to converge with her frustration with the world’s medical ignorance. As a sickly child, she found no relief — comfort or cure — from doctors. Once an adult, Mary, though still frail, could do something about sickness.

“When I started to make an outline of what my major motivations were in doing anything,” she said, “I found out that it all went back to my violent reaction and hostility to illness for myself or for anybody else.”

3

MARY AND ALBERT

1939 – 1940

Mary cherished her weekends. They were a welcome break from the hectic weekday pace, and she loved meeting friends for lunch on Saturdays at any one of several favorite places. One particular Saturday in 1939 turned out to be memorable. In fact, it transformed her life. On this day, the first of April, Mary was introduced to her future husband — not once, but three times — by friends dining at the 21 Club.

It was spring in the big city, and as Mary looked about her apartment, she was proud that it was hers. It was a small penthouse on East 52nd Street. She had a maid, not one who lived in, but one who came daily, and she was growing “marvelous” flowers on her terraces, she recalled.

She stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. She was on her way to lunch with Rosita Winston, wife of real estate developer Norman Winston. Winston had invested in suburban real estate during the Depression that he would turn into tract homes for the expanding middle class after World War II. The couple later founded the Norman & Rosita Winston Foundation, which funds human rights causes.

The 21 Club was, and remained until its closing in 2020, an insider haunt for the rich and famous, including flashy actors, authors, and sports stars, as well as more understated but notable industrialists and powerbrokers. The 21 evolved from a high-class speakeasy during Prohibition to a quirky bar and restaurant known for its shabby-chic cachet. The ceiling of the mahogany-paneled Bar Room eventually was hung with donated toys bearing corporate logos, as well as football and hockey helmets and other sports memorabilia, each connected to a famous personality.

The four-story brownstone on West 52nd Street was a quick ride across town for Mary. When she arrived that spring day, Mary walked through an ornate cast-iron gate and up a stairway beginning to be lined with colorful lawn jockeys donated by racing stables and horse owners. Inside, she moved comfortably among the distinguished clientele.

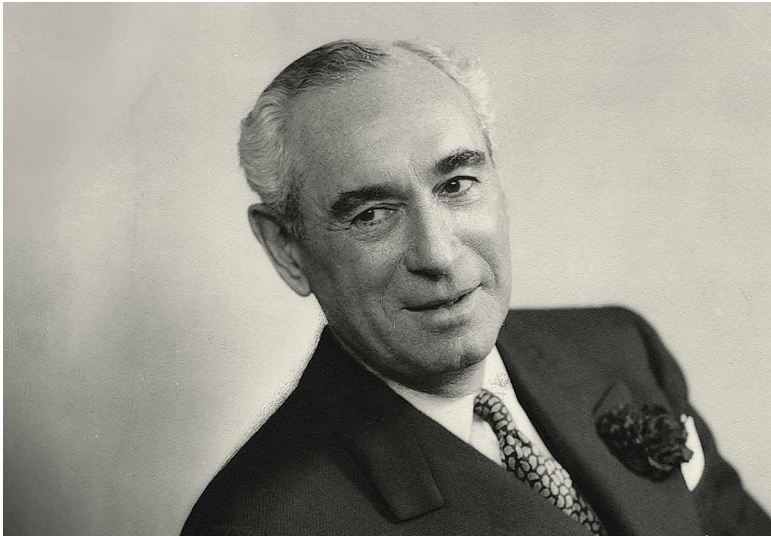
In the dining room was investment banker and philanthropist Lewis Strauss, who knew Mary and would make one of the introductions. Strauss' parents had died of cancer, and in 1937 he established the Lewis and Rosa Strauss Memorial Fund for physics research into radium as a cancer treatment. His interest in physics led him ultimately to chairmanship of the Atomic Energy Commission under President Dwight Eisenhower.

Dining nearby was Max Epstein, whom Mary knew as an important art collector and who would make the second introduction. Epstein balanced the chairmanship of General American Tank Car, a builder of railroad tank cars and box cars, with his love of art. He was on the board of the Art Institute of Chicago and collected Old Masters.

At a table near Mary and Rosita sat three distinguished gentlemen. General Robert Wood, a World War I veteran, was retiring that year as president of Sears, Roebuck, which he had guided from catalog sales in rural America to urban department store success. Wood opposed the U.S. entering the looming war in Europe. The second member of the party was Colonel William Donovan. Nicknamed “Wild Bill” by his troops during World War I, Donovan, who had gone back to his law practice after the war (and did some information gathering for the government on the side), went on to head the country’s intelligence services during World War II and helped form the Central Intelligence Agency. Donovan knew Mary and would provide the third introduction.

Joining the two retired military men was Albert Lasker, who owned the successful Chicago-based advertising agency Lord & Thomas. His novel ideas for using images and slogans to sell a product earned him the moniker “father of modern advertising.” He popularized California oranges as a health food for Sunkist and introduced disposable handkerchiefs called Kleenex. He owned half of the Pepsodent Co. of Chicago, maker of the popular toothpaste. Notably, in the 1920s he wrote the Lucky Strike jingle “Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet,” at once legitimizing a woman’s right to smoke and attracting women to the product. In addition to commercial advertising, he did publicity for the Republican Party and became the first ad man to work for a

MARY AND ALBERT



Albert and Mary Lasker married in 1940, the year this portrait of Mary was taken.

Lasker Foundation

president when he supervised publicity and wrote speeches for candidate Warren G. Harding in 1920. His high-pressure life had taken its toll, and he was ready to get out of the business.

Both Strauss and Epstein introduced Mary and Albert after lunch, and as the diners mingled in the hall and on the stairs leaving the restaurant, they were introduced again, this time by Donovan.

Mary had noticed Albert in the dining room and found him striking, but she didn't catch his name until the second or third time they were introduced. A tall man with white hair and dark eyebrows, he was "very arresting looking," but she was a little put out that he didn't seem to notice her as he passed her table when he was going to the telephone. Evidently, it was Donovan who later got Albert to focus on the stunning brunette he had just been introduced to three times. Mary found out later that Donovan had sung her praises, telling Albert she was "very enterprising" and "interested in all kinds of business."

Albert was intrigued to learn Mary was divorced, possibly because he was in the midst of untangling an unfortunate marriage himself. He had married actress Doris Kenyon in 1938 after the 1936 death of his wife Flora, with whom he had shared 34 years of marriage and had three children. The marriage to Kenyon lasted a matter of months.

Mary considered Bill Donovan a "fantastic person, an extraordinary person" and a great friend. "I've never known anyone who was more interested in my interests and was more helpful to me, outside of Albert," she said. Indeed, over the years Donovan proved a valuable member of Mary's cadre of supporters.

A ROUGH START

The next afternoon, Sunday, Mary got a phone call from Alva Gimbel, whose husband, Bernard, headed the Gimbels department store chain. The Gimbels had invited Lasker to their country house in Greenwich, Connecticut, the following weekend and were anxious to have Mary join them. The next day, Monday, she got another phone call, this time from Epstein, inviting her for cocktails in two days at five o'clock. Mary, preoccupied with her mother's ill health, missed some of the details of the conversation, but agreed to stop by. She arrived at Epstein's apartment at the Ritz-Carlton at six o'clock — fashionably late — assuming it was a cocktail party. To her surprise, she was expected for dinner; she found only her host and Albert in attendance. Albert, who had "an absolute phobia about being on time," was peeved. Mary charmed him, calmly bringing the conversation around to his interests. Now oriented to the reason he had asked Epstein to stage the meeting, Lasker took over the conversation and engaged Mary. Everybody relaxed and soon were completely entertained, she recalled. He said he was going to the Gimbels' house for the weekend, and Mary coyly told him she would be there for lunch.

As the evening at Epstein's went on, Mary was surprised by Albert's knowledge of things that interested her, such as flowers. Lasker declared the gardens at his Lake Forest, Illinois, country estate glorious and, in particular, wanted to show her the beautiful flower borders. When Mary touched on her love of sailing while she was at school in New England, Albert offered to take her on a cruise of Lake Michigan on the yacht he shared with Kenneth Smith, with whom he owned Pepsodent toothpaste. The yacht had a crew of 25. Though Lasker might have come off as pompous to others, in Mary's eyes he was simply stating facts. She began to be

impressed by Albert, whom she found “downright positive” about what he would do and what he had done, all the while “extremely lively and entertaining.”

That Sunday at the Gimbels’ house in Greenwich, Mary and Albert took a long walk before lunch, and as they got to know each other they began to discuss more serious topics, including the prospect of world war, then weighing heavily on Albert’s mind. Mary decided at that point that Albert Lasker was the most brilliant man she had met. But there was a cloud over that brilliance: He was very “agitated and nervous.”

They got together twice more that spring, for dinner on his birthday May 1 and again at a dinner with mutual friends, followed by more conversation at the 21 Club. On June 21, Mary and Kay Swift gave a party at Mary’s penthouse, and among the guests was a now-divorced Albert, ostensibly in town from Chicago to attend the 1939 World’s Fair.

‘THE END FOR A LONG TIME’

Even as Mary was throwing parties in New York, she was planning a trip to Europe. She had received an invitation from her friend Audrey Bouverie, who was the second wife of Chicago retail heir Marshall Field III when she and Mary met in 1937, introduced by Donovan. She was now married to Peter Pleydell-Bouverie and lived in London. Bouverie was anxious for Mary to attend the balls during the height of the season because she felt it would be “the end for a long time.”

Mary asked Albert before she arranged her travel when he thought a world war would start. He predicted the early fall of 1939, as soon as the harvest was finished, and he urged her to be home by the middle of July because the conflict might start as early as the first of August.

War looming, Mary sailed for Europe on June 27, 1939, a week after seeing Albert at the party she hosted with Swift. Mary recalled Audrey Bouverie explaining the situation this way: “We can’t tell when war will happen, but if it is about to happen, then we should enjoy our lives now and as they now are and as much as we can.”

On July 4, the night after Mary arrived, she and Bouverie dined with the duke and duchess of Kent and other luminaries, including Prince Aly Khan and his first wife, Joan Guinness of the Guinness breweries family, and Adele Astaire, who performed for decades with her brother, Fred, before marrying Lord Charles Cavendish. Also in attendance was Donovan, who had flown in on one of the first commercial transatlantic flights to Europe. Mary was captivated by Bouverie’s Regent’s Park home. “It was one of the most beautiful houses I’ve ever seen, with marvelous flowers. The gardens of Regent’s Park that were around the house were lighted ... and the house overlooked a small pond.”

When Mary went anywhere new, she made the most of every opportunity to meet people, especially those in the limelight or with power in government. This war-threatened visit to London was no different: Her social calendar was jam-packed.

Margaret Sanger, whom Mary admired for her work in the birth control movement, had given her a letter of introduction to H.G. Wells, but when she asked Wells to visit her at the Bouveries’ home, he invited her to a small dinner at his house instead. Mary found Wells “charming” and “quite old,” and recalled the “charming old countess who was a great friend of his.” Wells, a life-long womanizer, ended his days in the arms of Moura Budberg, also known as Countess Benckendorff, twenty-seven years his junior. Mary asked Wells if he could arrange for her to meet his friend

Sigmund Freud, and he said he would try but later let her know Freud was too ill. Freud died two months later of throat cancer.

Communications pioneer David Sarnoff, president of the Radio Corporation of America, had given her a letter of introduction to Joseph Kennedy, U.S. ambassador to Great Britain. Kennedy enjoyed London society but his anti-war rhetoric did him in; President Franklin D. Roosevelt called him home in 1940 shortly before the bombs began to fall. When Kennedy and Mary met, he invited her to the ballet the night of July 6. At the invitation of the Bouveries, they continued on to “a great ball” at Holland House. It was the only private party at which the king and queen of England appeared during the season, and they attracted huge crowds in the enormous house.

“The queen looked a dream of prettiness, with marvelous jewels,” Mary recalled. At one point, when the opportunity presented itself in the crowd, Peter Bouverie turned to Mary and introduced Clementine Churchill, wife of Winston, soon to be prime minister. Peter adroitly turned her away from the statesman, explaining that Churchill was drunk. Holland House, set on acres of beautifully manicured lawn and woodlands, was largely destroyed during the London Blitz a year later.

Audrey Bouverie invited Mary to a party at Blenheim Palace for the July 7 debut of Lady Sarah Churchill, cousin of Winston Churchill. The facade of the palace was lit for the first time, and Mary was enchanted. What had impressed her as a “grandiose and tasteless” building in a daytime tour during her graduation trip to Europe was now “a fairy scene.” There were arrangements of huge delphiniums and other flowers throughout the palace, which looked spectacular because there were enough people in it, she said, estimating 1,000 guests attended the ball. The women were

wonderfully dressed and the men were in formal attire with full military decorations. “It was absolutely superb.”

Finally, heeding Audrey Bouverie’s advice that life might never be the same, Mary traveled to Paris, where she spent sentimental days enjoying the luxury accommodations at the Paris Ritz and strolling through the beautiful city and its gardens. She boarded the *RMS Queen Mary* on July 15, 1939, for the trip home. Less than a year later, the Ritz Paris served as headquarters of the German air force, the Luftwaffe, with Hermann Goering taking over the lavish Imperial Suite.

Germany invaded Poland on September 1, beginning World War II in the fall of 1939, just as Albert predicted.

‘VERY INTRIGUED’

When Mary arrived home, Albert was in New York on business and again they got together frequently, but at the beginning of August he left for his country home in Lake Forest, a wealthy community 28 miles north of Chicago on Lake Michigan.

Thinking back, Mary said she was “very intrigued with him, no doubt about it.” When interest turned to romance is unclear, but their relationship grew until it troubled her mother, who had come to live with her after Frank died. Albert was nearly twenty years older than Mary, which concerned Sara. “She was absolutely shocked and took a very dim view,” said Mary, adding, “I didn’t care how old he was. I was determined to see him because I thought he was the most interesting man I knew.”

A few weeks after Lasker left New York, Mary traveled to Chicago to visit Janet Fairbank, her school chum from Radcliffe, where their intelligence and determination had drawn them together. Fairbank had a beautiful singing voice, but her family’s wealth

proved a social barrier to a career as a professional opera singer. She turned to performing recitals featuring modern American music she felt deserved to be heard. *The New York Times* called her “a boon to young composers.”

The college friends spent a morning touring eight houses and gardens in Lake Forest, then stopped at Albert’s for lunch. His home was a large-scale French Provincial farmhouse on a 350-acre estate called Mill Road Farm. “It was the best designed and kept place I have ever seen,” said Mary. “It was incomparably the best place in the Middle West, and probably the best-run and best all over country house in the United States.” Among other modern touches, “It was air conditioned, and it was in beautiful taste. It had marvelous gardens, wonderful swimming pools, a superb golf course, but it was not pretentious looking.” Mary found the small movie theater enchanting.

Mary spent a night at Lasker’s estate with him and one of his children before continuing on to San Francisco to take in the Golden Gate International Exposition. While she was there, she received a distressing call from Albert, who said he was “very tired and worn out.” He told her a friend had sent a plane to Chicago to take him and a nurse to an Arizona ranch for a rest: He was in a state of nervous exhaustion. Albert stayed in Arizona for more than two months in “almost complete isolation,” leaving the ranch weekly to make a 90-mile trek to the nearest phone to call Mary.

When Albert returned to New York in November, he and Mary resumed their relationship. She felt comfortable enough with him to talk about his near-perpetual distress. She recalled *Bacchanale*, a ballet based on the life of the mad king of Bavaria that was inspired by Freudian concepts, and the story “had a profound and dramatic effect” on him, she said. “He hadn’t realized that one’s

subconscious played such an enormous part in one's life. He had been one of those people of action who had really not dared to take the time to look under the surface, under his own surface or anybody else's. He was very intuitive, but he really didn't know that there was a whole world of unconsciousness that you could explore."

The subject broached, Mary began to nudge Albert toward seeing a psychotherapist. "I realized that he was distressed about something that he wasn't able to face," she said. Once Mary identified a problem, she was a quietly persistent force.

She persuaded him to see Robert Loeb, an internist at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, who pronounced him physically healthy. Mary suggested the doctor urge Albert to see a psychoanalyst, to which the internist replied, "What! Send that wonderful man to a psychoanalyst?" She recalled responding, possibly a bit firmly, "Yes. Why not? He needs help." Loeb acquiesced, saying the doctor he recommended at least would not harm Albert. In December 1939, Albert started seeing Dr. George Daniel, who used a technique of analysis that was "a great help to Albert," said Mary. "It gave Albert tremendous relief in what was really a mild and certainly not a thorough-going psychoanalysis ... and he was enormously helped."

A 2010 biography of Lasker by Jeffrey Cruikshank and Arthur Schultz theorized that Albert suffered from depressive episodes associated with what is now known as Bipolar II Disorder, but which Albert had probably accepted as the result of his high-pressure life. Common today, psychotherapy or "talk therapy" was then controversial, but Mary, who had become interested in mental illness in the late 1920s, had read Sigmund Freud and urged her then-husband, Paul Reinhardt, to consider seeking psychiatric help for his alcoholism.

By the time Albert went into therapy, said Mary, “I realized that I was in love with him, and around this same time, he realized that he was in love with me.” What should have been a blissful time of romance and second chances turned into a stressful time of mixed emotions for Mary. In early January 1940, her mother became ill with an undefined circulatory ailment. She died on January 9 of what was probably a cerebral hemorrhage. She was seventy-seven.

Mary attributed her love of flowers to her mother and remembered being impressed as a child with Sara’s beautification efforts in Watertown. As a bride, Sara had found her new home’s lack of parks intolerable and convinced her husband to donate money for building parks. In New York, Sara joined the Outdoor Cleanliness Association and, as Mary told it, her testimony against the lax regulation of smoke from the city’s chimneys resulted in Consolidated Edison putting scrubbers on its smokestacks. It was innovative, and the company “considered her a terrible, terrible problem, a menace,” Mary said, but she managed it nonetheless. If she had lived, “the whole place would be cleaner, and the cleaning bills of the citizens of New York would have been reduced enormously.”

“I was deeply resentful that nothing could be done to help her,” Mary said. Like her father’s death in 1933 after a series of strokes, “it was considered the will of God, that nothing could be done about it medically, and this I bitterly resented.” She resolved to apply her will and resources in coming years to try to “help the situation.”

NO PAGEANTRY NECESSARY

Mary’s relationship with Albert appears to have begun as a meeting of the minds that grew into love. The courtship was not without romantic gestures: Whether Mary traveled in the U.S. or abroad,

Albert always called, and on at least two occasions he sent elaborate flower arrangements to her in Europe.

The things that intrigued Mary most about Albert were his interest in public affairs and his brilliance in business and advertising. She apparently was being courted by an unnamed beau when she and Albert met. This beau, who was “furious that I knew Albert and liked him,” went to Roy Durstine, a rival ad man, looking for dirt on Albert to discourage her interest in him. The jealous suitor found no comfort in what he heard. Mary said Durstine told him he considered Albert a business genius who not only knew how to tell a client about advertising, but how to advise him about changes in his business to make more money.

Mary and Albert married in a discreet ceremony conducted in the New York County Courthouse chambers of Supreme Court Justice Lloyd Church on June 21, 1940, fifteen months after they met at Club 21. The judge “brought his robes down hidden in a newspaper accompanied by two very bedraggled-looking clerks who stood up.” She recalled the judge saying, “I believe this is all that’s required under the laws of the State of New York. Two dollars, please.” Not the kind of pageantry one would have expected for Mary, but the ceremony was kept secret precisely to avoid an enormous wedding with long lists of friends and relatives. That “was just more than we wanted to do,” she said.

The couple had a short sailing honeymoon on Long Island Sound on a yacht Albert chartered, but the majority of their honeymoon was spent at the national political conventions. Albert was an Illinois delegate at the Republican convention in Philadelphia. Frontrunners Robert Taft, a senator from Ohio, and Thomas Dewey, a U.S. attorney, had solicited his support, while Mary urged his backing for underdog Wendell Willkie, president of the

big utility holding company Commonwealth & Southern. Willkie was present at the party she and Swift gave shortly before Mary left for Europe, and she recalled being attracted by his personality and thinking he would be a good candidate. As she recalled later, when she brought up the possibility of a Willkie candidacy with Albert, he said it was “madness” to have the head of a utility discussed as a presidential candidate.

Albert’s ideas about politics and the world order, however, were in flux. According to his biographers, by the time he and Mary attended the convention he was no longer an isolationist, in part because of Mary’s temperate influence and certainly because he saw Adolf Hitler as a threat. He felt Taft was too isolationist and did not care for Dewey. He moved behind Willkie and his one-world view. As the convention voting deadlocked, Mary said it was Albert who managed to swing the Illinois delegation to Willkie and secure him the nomination.

After a few days back in New York, the honeymooners headed to Chicago for the Democratic convention, which handily nominated Roosevelt, who went on to an unprecedented third term. “I didn’t know anything about either party really. And that my candidate should finally get the nomination from the Republicans was very elating,” commented Mary.

From the beginning of their marriage, Albert was “absolutely staggered” by Mary’s ability to live on what he considered a small income. He told Mary he married her for her money, she said later with a chuckle. Albert thought women should have independence and also be given anything they wanted, she said. For a while she tried nobly to keep her own books, but eventually Albert won her over. Albert began to look after all the money, which annoyed her, though she remained a successful businesswoman. In addition to

Hollywood Patterns, she still received commissions from Loewy. She managed her own investments and some for her sister, Alice. She kept up with the stock market and read companies' annual reports.

For most of 1940, Mary was occupied mainly with her business affairs. She was still attracted to art, paintings especially, but while she was on her own after her divorce she had followed up on other interests, including progress in medicine, where she pondered "the extent of the problem." Her belief in the value of psychoanalysis deepened after she befriended Franz Alexander, founder of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, and Karl Menninger, a founder of the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, both pioneers in the field. In 1937, she had become active in what was then called the Birth Control League. It wasn't until fall 1940 that she turned her full attention back to that work.

The newlyweds lived at 29 Beekman Place, a seven-story redbrick townhouse they first rented in 1940 from William S. Paley, who turned the Columbia Broadcasting System into one of the three major television networks. They bought it in September 1946 and began at once to renovate the ultramodern interior favored by the Paleys. The next year, construction began on the United Nations headquarters complex a couple blocks south.

For his part, Albert would find in Mary the inspiration to redirect his energy and business acumen to philanthropy. With his support, she would find her calling as an advocate for the nation's health.

4

BEGINNING HER LIFE'S WORK

1940 – 1947

Albert was not the sort of multimillionaire who showed off what he could do with his money. He was a self-made man interested in what he could do with his ideas, and he loved people and new experiences. He had a contagious sense of humor, he gave money to causes that interested him, sometimes offhandedly, and he was smitten with Mary. She found she was deeply in love with him.

One day during that marvelous exploratory spring and summer of 1939, Albert asked Mary what she wanted out of life, what was it that she was most interested in. She recalled telling him national health insurance and research against cancer and other dread diseases. “For that you don’t need my kind of money, you need

federal money, and I will show you how to get it,” he said. “Federal money is only our money in another pocket.” With those words, he helped Mary change the world.

“At that time, I really didn’t realize how much his point of view about the kind of money it took to get anything done would mean, but as I look back on it, it was a key factor in whatever we’ve been able to do,” Mary said.

One of the common interests they discovered was support of the birth control movement. “Imagine my pleasure and joy” at hearing Albert say he felt the failure to control births was one of the most important human health problems, said Mary. She was delighted to learn that Albert and his family had been interested for years in family planning. His sisters, Etta, Florina, and Loula, were liberal minded and favored birth control when it was considered avant-garde, Mary said. Together, they supported Margaret Sanger, who founded the American Birth Control League in 1921, which became the Birth Control Federation of America in the late 1930s and was renamed Planned Parenthood of America in 1942. Mary took Albert to meet Sanger in her country home near Fishkill, New York, in the spring of 1940 shortly before they were married.

The first contribution they made together was a \$10,000 gift in 1939 to the Birth Control Federation of America’s campaign to get more Southern states to include family planning in their public health programs. In 1936, just three years earlier, a court case instigated by Sanger had succeeded in lifting the legal veil, allowing discussions of contraception between women and their physicians unless it was prohibited by a local law. The American Medical Association soon recognized family planning as part of medical practice. Until then, the 1873 Comstock Act had blocked physicians from receiving or distributing such information. The

act's anti-obscenity provision declared discussions of contraception obscene, lewd, and lascivious. In a 1930 pronouncement, Pope Pius XII reminded Catholics that contraception was a sin.

In a letter dated November 12, 1939, Sanger thanked Albert for the contribution to what she called the Negro Project, and noted Albert's concern that "poor white people down South are not much better off than the Negroes," but she added that her focus was on the Black population because "they are just left out of the services in most states."

Sanger's Negro Project has been condemned as eugenics, a racist attempt to reduce the Black population, and Mary and Albert have been implicated by association. However, according to the 2010 Cruikshank and Schultz biography, Albert and his sisters had supported the work of the Birth Control Federation since the 1920s in response to their mother's belief that they should help women, and he shared Mary's belief that people should have the right to control the size of their families and have the means and education to do that. Mary thought too many babies were born by chance, not choice, creating an economic problem and resentment by unwanted children. She even believed birth control could diminish the possibility of war, and later looked forward to wide use of the Pill. She assumed Sanger's program would be more successful in the South "because there weren't many Catholics, so there wasn't so much opposition."

AN UNPLEASANT JOB DONE WELL

Albert had experience in government as a result of the 1920 presidential campaign, when he handled publicity for Warren G. Harding, the Republican senator who won the presidency in a landslide victory over Ohio Governor James M. Cox and his

vice-presidential hopeful, a young Franklin D. Roosevelt. Cox went back to building his newspaper empire and, despite the hostilities of the campaign, he and Albert developed a friendship.

After a fumbled attempt to appoint Albert secretary of commerce, Harding tapped him to dismantle the United States Shipping Board, an unpleasant job he agreed to take for two years. Congress created the board in 1916 to establish a merchant fleet, but it was quickly retasked with transporting troops and supplies during World War I. When Lasker took over in 1921, two years after the war's end, his job was to salvage or liquidate a poorly managed, mostly obsolete, partly wooden-hulled fleet of more than 2,000 that cost millions to maintain. Before he left, the government coffers were in better shape. Albert's biographer, John Gunther, wrote that the day Albert started, the seaworthy portion of the fleet alone was losing more than \$150 million a year, and the board had \$5 million in the treasury. When he left, losses had been cut to \$50 million a year, and the board had \$425 million in the bank.

Albert scrapped some of the ships, including the obsolete wooden craft, for \$30 a ton, a move that drew criticism for "throwing our ships away." He turned one into a luxury ocean liner, but he had trouble getting people back onto the seas because of Prohibition; nobody wanted to sail on a dry ship. In the end, when he tried to get a bill passed that would aid the new merchant marine he had organized, he ran into political scheming in Congress. That loss left him with a decided aversion to Washington.

"He hated Washington, and he hated to go to Washington, but he knew it, and he knew what it took to get anything done there," Mary said. "He knew a great deal about legislation and the mechanics of legislation and the psychology of politicians." He taught Mary everything he knew, which, added to her natural

self-confidence and strength of character, made her a considerable force to be reckoned with.

A WHITE HOUSE GUEST

Mary and Albert continued working together to support the Birth Control League after their marriage in 1940, though they found the going “unbelievably sticky and difficult,” said Mary. Despite the 1936 legal victory, changing attitudes was slow, and birth control continued to be a hushed conversation. As Mary saw it, people’s inability to manage the size of their families challenged the nation’s economy, as well as women’s independence, health, and well-being.

The failure of the media to stand up to print advertisers and radio program sponsors who punished outlets that touched the subject frustrated Mary. The situation is “mixed up with the greatest amount of hypocrisy and prudery I have ever known,” she said. “There were Catholic city editors on every paper, and there were Catholic advertisers who complained everywhere, and it was altogether very complicated.”

The Cowles brothers, publishers of *Look* magazine, sympathized and ran an article that cost them three cancelled pages of advertising, said Mary, adding that Albert made sure his ad firm, Lord & Thomas, made it up to them.

Mary maintained that “as long as Albert was interested in it, as long as he had a great deal of influence in the press and radio ... this was the best possible cause [he] could use it for.”

Then, in 1941, a breakthrough. Mary was friends with Anna Rosenberg, a woman she had met at the Democratic national convention. Rosenberg, who had been with President Roosevelt and his wife, Eleanor, since their early days in politics, had visited

Mary to plan a campaign to get the first lady to advocate at the federal level. Rosenberg introduced Mary to Eleanor.

Rosenberg was “enormously energetic” and “extremely helpful,” said Mary. She was a wonderful friend and valuable resource, particularly in the early going, when Mary knew few members of Congress or officials in the administration. Rosenberg had those connections. Mary had good instincts about people and situations. With Rosenberg’s help and her usual aplomb, she easily made the transition from big business and high society to the White House. Her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt lasted until Eleanor’s death in 1962.

Through Eleanor, Mary got an appointment in October with Warren Draper, deputy surgeon general of the Public Health Service, where she made her case for federal support of family planning. Mary may not have known that birth control and its association with healthy families was a subtle part of the public health campaign Draper and his boss, Surgeon General Thomas Parran, were conducting against venereal disease. Though the Roosevelt administration never endorsed birth control, it’s possible that, in addition to Eleanor Roosevelt’s request, Draper took the meeting with Mary because he was interested in what she had to say. In any event, according to Mary, Draper said that while the Public Health Service would not initiate funding for such programs, if an individual state were to ask for the funds, the request would receive “favorable consideration.” Mary counted Draper’s recognition of the issue a first for the Public Health Service, though she suspected the policy was a nod to her sponsor, the first lady, and not to her persuasiveness. Nonetheless, she asked him to put it in writing and later looked back on that letter as an historic document.

That night, Eleanor Roosevelt invited her to spend the night in the White House. The Roosevelts were not known for their lavish

lifestyle. Mary described her room over the main portico as “high and narrow and dark, with a brass bed and furniture of nonde-script nature, but a good big bathroom.” When she headed down for dinner, she found herself in the elevator with the president. She said, “ ‘I’m Mary Lasker,’ and he said, ‘I know,’ ” she recalled. During dinner, Roosevelt referred to birth control as “a politically hot potato” but noted the success of a program in Puerto Rico, where the Catholic Church had agreed to refer to it as “adult sex hygiene.” After that, “We started to get somewhere on the situation,” Mary said. She deemed Roosevelt’s positive observation progress, called it “marvelous,” and left Washington optimistic.

For Mary, that was the first of many White House dinners, luncheons, functions, and drop-in visits spanning decades and administrations — but she didn’t sleep over again until the 1960s, when she was friends with Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson.

After that visit, Eleanor Roosevelt paved the way for Mary to speak with other administration officials in hopes of educating them on the subject and ultimately invited her to host what Mary referred to as a “revolutionary” luncheon at the White House, with the goal of putting Public Health Service officials and leaders in the family planning movement together in the same room. The date was set for December 8, 1941. On December 7, a Sunday, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Amazingly, the lunch was not canceled, but Eleanor Roosevelt accompanied the president to the Capitol for FDR’s “Day of Infamy” speech and the declaration of war against Japan. Mary stalwartly hosted the luncheon alone, but the topic was “completely overshadowed ... and the Public Health Service, without the presence of Mrs. Roosevelt, escaped having to do anything about the problem at all,” she said. “It was as if the whole idea were swept away,” and “everything was put off for a long, long time.”

Mary carried on with family planning through 1942, though progress was slow and the effort increasingly discouraging. She found working with the volunteer organization “extremely frustrating and difficult.” The volunteers were very motivated but had few skills, she complained, explaining that you “can’t fire them ... you can’t direct them, and you can’t be sure they’ll do what you say they should.” During that year, the Laskers did score a small victory. Albert, reasoning that “birth control” equated in the male mind to “abstinence,” convinced the board to change the organization’s name to Planned Parenthood. Mary never gave up on family planning, but neither was she dogged about it; she resigned from the Planned Parenthood board in 1943.

THE START OF SOMETHING BIG

In the early 1940s, Albert and Mary began thinking about different ways to promote public awareness of medical research and encourage its financial support.

Albert had had a disappointing experience funding research. He had donated \$1 million to the University of Chicago in the early 1930s to create a program to study the diseases of aging, including cancer and heart disease. Consumed by his advertising business, however, Albert had no time to oversee it. The researcher who headed the project moved on to Harvard, and it foundered. In 1939, Robert Hutchins, the university president, persuaded Albert to release the funds for general use. The story horrified Mary, who commented that a year’s interest alone on that sum would have supported a healthy research grant at the time. Mary said the couple resolved that they would not let future efforts be “so casually lost.”

In 1942, they first talked about creating a foundation that would not just dispense awards to promote meritorious research but also compile

and distribute data about diseases and the health of the nation. As well, they envisioned the awards raising public awareness of advancements in medical science and the need for research funding.

From 1944 through 1949, they financed an award presented by the National Committee Against Mental Illness and the National Committee for Mental Hygiene. They had a similar arrangement with Planned Parenthood, and those awards were given from 1945 through 1965.

In 1946, their idea for a nonprofit organization to promote biomedical science was born, and the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation presented its first round of awards. In the inaugural group of honorees was Dr. Carl Cori, whose research with his wife Gerty Cori in how enzymes convert glycogen into glucose would the next year earn them a Nobel Prize. As more Lasker Award winners went on to win Nobels, the Lasker Award became a bellwether for future Nobel laureates. (Read more about the lasting legacy of the Lasker Awards in the appendix.)

TWO NUTS

During the war years, the Laskers periodically took the train to Miami to visit Florence and Dan Mahoney and Albert's old friend Cox, the newspaper publisher and former governor of Ohio. Albert introduced Mary to the Mahoneys early in their relationship, and Florence and Mary bonded over their shared enthusiasm for improving the nation's health.

Dan was publisher of the *Miami Daily News*, a Cox newspaper. Gregarious and gifted at public relations and advertising, Dan married into the Cox newspaper empire. His first wife, Cox's daughter Helen, died in 1921, and he and Florence Stephenson were wed in 1926. Mary found Dan to be a charming and public-spirited man. She and Florence "talked a great deal about how

to get Planned Parenthood clinics expanded and about other medical problems.” She was especially encouraged by Florence’s interest in “the maneuver of it,” and she was convinced she and Florence could effect change.

Mary was impressed by the apparent ease with which Florence moved in political circles as a result of her relationship with Cox. “She didn’t see any problem about going to see a governor in a state house ... or going to see people in Washington, for that matter,” said Mary. Florence had already had some success lobbying the Florida legislature to address mental health issues. They enjoyed finding and attending medical meetings on topics that interested them, and when they couldn’t meet they kept up a running correspondence, all the while collecting information and contacts. Florence began visiting Mary in New York every fall.

Florence told biographer Judith Robinson that the two women had an immediate rapport “because I liked anybody who was intelligent.” In the beginning, “we didn’t think of backing ‘causes’ at all — we were just talking about things we were interested in,” said Mahoney. She recalled that at times their constant discussions of medical subjects bored Albert and “around him we had to be quiet.”

“One thing led to another. And I think neither one of us could have done it alone. It took cooperation — and ideas,” Florence said. “Once we got interested in something, we went around to all the places to see what was going on. When we heard of something unusual, we would go see the people involved.”

Looking back, Mary said that Florence “gave me companionship, which I needed, because in the beginning we were so completely alone, and [our style of advocacy] was so strange to people that if I’d been alone, people would have thought I was a solitary nut. If there were two people, it was more unusual for there to be two nuts.”

5

GATHERING A TEAM

1940 – 1947

Mary was determined that cures could be found for the diseases she saw shortening people's lives, and it pained her that more people in positions of power didn't feel the way she did. She felt compelled to remedy the situation. She didn't know yet how much she didn't know, but ignorance makes all things possible, and she had the determination, charm, and savvy to deal with Congress, the federal bureaucracy, and the medical establishment.

She had an incredible mind for managing people and projects, and her friend Florence Mahoney was an able partner as capable as she. Florence "was ingenious about the handling of people," said Mary. "After I was completely exhausted, she would start." Florence made friends with people Mary said it would have been impossible for her to get close to.

In different ways over the years, Mary said she would have been happy if someone else had done the work or if someone else had come in and taken over, but “strangely enough, relatively few people have arisen to help us on any scale.”

She discovered early on that medical research was a difficult fiscal sell in Congress, an attitude that set her teeth on edge. She frequently commented that neither Congress nor, for that matter, the likes of the Rockefeller Foundation, had any concept that “any part of our gross national product or of our total tax income” should go toward the major diseases that were “making people die terrible deaths” and undermining the economy.

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The research juggernaut known as the National Institutes of Health started out in 1887 as a one-room Staten Island laboratory created within the Marine Hospital Service. It was called the Hygienic Laboratory, and it was charged with combating infectious diseases like cholera. In 1902, the lab, by then relocated to Washington, came under a reorganization that changed the Marine Hospital Service into the Public Health and Marine Hospital Service and created within it a formal program to research infectious diseases. Then in 1912, the laboratory’s remit was broadened to include non-infectious diseases, and its parent agency’s name was shortened to Public Health Service.

Joseph Ransdell, a Louisiana Democrat, sponsored legislation in 1930 to change the name of the lab to the National Institute — note the singular; no *s* — of Health, and authorized the agency to award fellowships to research basic biological and medical problems. The Ransdell Act came in response to a plea from chemists who had served in the Chemical Warfare Service during World War I

and wanted to apply their knowledge to medicine. They had hoped to establish an institute for chemotherapeutic research with private-sector backing, but the Depression stymied them, and they turned to Congress for federal funding.

While the Ransdell Act was a watershed for public funding of medical research, the funding didn't amount to much. In both 1938 and 1939, NIH was funded at \$64,000.

Congress established the National Cancer Institute as an independent agency in 1937 in response to a growing awareness of the disease among constituents. The National Cancer Institute's relationship to the National Institute of Health at that point was not clear. Still, the cancer institute had its own building on the new NIH campus being constructed in Bethesda, Maryland. Importantly, the cancer institute was authorized to award grants to non-federal scientists and to fund fellowships at the NIH to train researchers, setting up the current NIH's grant structure and its commitment to training. In both 1938 and in 1939, the National Cancer Institute received \$400,000.

In peacetime, very little of that money went to support research in universities or non-profit institutions, and, in any event, those organizations shunned federal involvement, fearing that if they accepted federal money, government control was sure to follow. Members of Congress and the administration also believed that government-funded research would compete with private and for-profit organizations.

WARTIME MEDICINE

At the start of World War II, the NIH became part of a joint effort at military medical research initiated in 1941 by President Roosevelt. The Committee on Medical Research comprised representatives

from the Army, the Navy, and the Public Health Service's parent, the Federal Security Agency (a precursor to the current Department of Health and Human Services), as well as four civilian scientists. NIH Director Rolla E. Dyer, an infectious disease specialist, became the Public Health Service representative.

The Committee on Medical Research was organized under the Office of Scientific Research and Development, established by Roosevelt to coordinate research across all disciplines to support the war effort. The Office of Scientific Research and Development was headed by Vannevar Bush, a former dean of engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a staunch advocate of the hard sciences. During the war, the Committee on Medical Research backed development of vaccines and antibiotics such as penicillin, as well as research on malaria and other diseases that affected the military. The committee distributed \$24 million in contracts to 133 universities, foundations, and industrial laboratories, according to a 1993 monograph by Dr. Donald Fredrickson titled "Biomedical Science and the Cultural Warp."

As the war wound down, ending the wartime medical research effort was in keeping with the belief among members of Congress in the importance of the country's agrarian way of life; agricultural research was simply a higher priority. Postwar medical research did, however, have its congressional champions, and on July 3, 1944, Roosevelt signed into law the Public Health Service Act. The act reorganized and strengthened the Public Health Service and, importantly, empowered the National Institute of Health to broadly fund and conduct medical research. It also officially tucked the National Cancer Institute into the National Institute of Health.

Mary may have been ignorant of all that. What she did know was that in her lifetime she had seen too many people, including her parents,

suffer or die from what she knew were preventable or curable diseases. She would be undaunted in her efforts to build support — public and private — for research to combat those diseases.

SEN. CLAUDE PEPPER

In March 1944, Albert and Mary set out for their annual Florida trip, stopping first in Palm Beach, then going to Miami for a visit with the Mahoneys. As the couples spent time together, Mary and Florence began to talk in earnest about how little was going



Sen. Claude Pepper, a Florida Democrat, also served in the House.

CQ Roll Call via AP

on in medical research. Mary told them she had read about a program of military medical research — the Committee on Medical Research — that was still worth about \$15 million. She didn't want to see that kind of effort dry up when it could benefit the country in peacetime, but it was set to disband in anticipation of the war's end.

As they strategized, Mary recalled having been introduced to Florida Sen. Claude Pepper at a restaurant in New York City and said she thought Pepper might help on the legislative front. Pepper, a Democrat, chaired the Senate Committee on Education and Labor's Subcommittee on Wartime Health and Education and was interested in the nation's health in light of the abysmal condition of the men who turned out for the draft. The subcommittee reported

that at least 40 percent of the 22 million men, or between 8 million and 9 million men, were found unfit for service, and another 1.5 million were rendered fit only after they were inducted and given medical and dental care.

As luck would have it, Pepper was a friend and neighbor of the Mahoneys. Seizing on the fact that Pepper was running for reelection, Albert suggested that Cox and Mahoney offer to back him in the Cox newspapers with the hope of gaining his support down the line for medical research. The Mahoneys invited Pepper to dinner.

Over dinner, Mary and Florence bent Pepper's ear about the breakthroughs to come out of the Committee on Medical Research and the importance of medical research continuing after the war. Apparently, he listened. Pepper went home that night with media support from the Mahoneys and campaign funds from the Laskers.

That summer, Pepper sent two members of his staff to New York to talk with Albert and Mary about information-gathering hearings. Mary again made her case for the continuation of the Committee on Medical Research and offered to supply disease data and materials for what turned out to be four hearings held in September and December 1944 gauging the health and fitness of the civilian population and exploring how to produce a healthy citizenry for a future draft. Pepper went on to hold similar hearings over a span of three years, initiating the public conversation about government involvement in supporting the public's health.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of Mary's working relationship with Claude Pepper. While Pepper may have acted initially in response to their interest and political help, "our interest ... eventually evoked his interest," said Mary. "The more he fought and helped us, the more interested and involved he himself

became, and he made an enormous contribution” to the growth of the National Institutes of Health over time, “tremendous. It can’t be overestimated what he did.”

The admiration was mutual. In his 1987 autobiography, *Pepper: Eyewitness to a Century*, Pepper calls Mary “a genuine ‘angel’ who has done so much to obtain federal aid for disease research.”

Pepper was convinced the unfortunate national health situation revealed by the draft could be remedied by federal investment in national insurance, hospitals, and medical research. His advocacy on this issue was a hallmark of his service in Congress. He would prove to be a major ally for Mary.

It was no accident that the Lasker Foundation honored Pepper in 1967 with the Albert Lasker Public Service Award for leadership in medical research for his “continuing dedication to medical legislation in both houses of Congress.” It was a thank you and a pat on the back for a job well done.

DR. CORNELIUS RHOADS

After watching the September hearings and witnessing graphic testimony about the deplorable health of World War II draftees, Mary and Florence felt they needed an expert from the medical world to shore up Pepper’s support for federal investment in the peacetime health of the citizenry. “Pepper thought we were very nice, but what did we know about the need for medical research; we certainly weren’t doctors,” Mary said. But she knew just the man for the job.

During summer 1943, Mary and Albert had spent a few weeks at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, an elegant place that still exists as a five-star resort. In her reading, Mary came across a pamphlet from the New York City Cancer Committee that piqued her interest. Dr. Cornelius “Dusty” Rhoads was a research

oncologist and administrator at New York's Memorial Hospital for Cancer Research (later the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center). He had written that a hospital or research group could make great strides against cancer with \$500,000 annually for a few years. She was incensed to think that "\$500,000 wouldn't even be a suitable sum for an advertising campaign for toothpaste," yet it could accomplish so much in the hands of cancer researchers. When she got back to New York, she arranged a meeting with Rhoads, who was on leave with the Army, where, as Colonel Rhoads, he headed the Medical Division of the Chemical Warfare Service. She was impressed by his "determined far-sighted vision" of how to attack cancer, making him in her mind an ideal witness to offer Pepper.

Over dinner, she and Florence told Rhoads they needed a "competent medical authority" to go with them to see Pepper and explain the need for medical research. By the time they had finished eating, Mary said Rhoads was "used to the idea, and he began to agree with us." The next day, Rhoads joined the women and Pepper for lunch in the Senate Dining Room, where Pepper asked Mary to make a list of suggested witnesses for the hearings in December. She gave him a roster of notable physicians, including Rhoads, who became the first of a succession of effective witnesses they recruited over the years.

In his opening remarks at the December 14, 1944, hearings, Pepper noted the Committee on Medical Research's wartime achievements and asked whether the nation should maintain that momentum or "see a dwindling of the funds and opportunities" and a resulting failure in progress against diseases that "take a heavy toll of civilian health." Pepper called for the establishment of a proper federal research agency to pay for medical research. He filed a bill to create a National Medical Research Foundation.

Florence and Mary had succeeded in getting their proposition heard in Congress, and their style of citizen advocacy was on its way. “We were the grassroots rising!” Mary exclaimed, looking back.

CITIZEN PETITIONERS

The Pepper hearings were influential. They were the first hearings wrought by Mary and Florence’s “health syndicate,” as Elizabeth Brenner Drew dubbed their corps of friends and contacts in a 1967 article in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine. Drew concluded the pair’s unique and successful lobbying style had become an important “historical phenomenon.”

Mary rankled at the word “lobbyist,” arguing that she and Florence weren’t paid, they simply were “citizen petitioners for the public welfare and survival.” Mary said she did her best work indirectly, behind the scenes. “Our greatest success is when we’re not considered effective at all, when people are influenced by us without even knowing it.”

In that vein, around the same time Pepper was putting the hearings together, Mary approached Anna Rosenberg, who had an office in the East Wing of the White House, asking whether the medical research and funding enjoyed by the Committee on Medical Research might continue in some fashion. Rosenberg asked Mary to put her thoughts in a memo, which Rosenberg took to Roosevelt. The president then asked his top adviser and speech writer, Samuel Rosenman, to compose a letter posing four questions to Vannevar Bush at the Office of Scientific Research and Development. The president’s letter asked how federal support for scientific research in public and private institutions — in medicine, on one hand, and in the rest of science, on the other — might continue in peacetime.

GATHERING A TEAM

Roosevelt never got the answers to those questions. He died April 12, 1945, and his vice president, Harry Truman, found himself responsible for ending the war in the Pacific and ensuring postwar prosperity.

Bush's response came in July in a report titled *Science: The Endless Frontier*, which proposed a centralized approach to federally funded research. In September, just days after Japan officially surrendered, President Truman delivered a special message to Congress presenting a program for conversion to peacetime. He urged legislation for the establishment of a single federal research agency that would, among other duties, promote and support research in medicine, public health, and allied fields.

A MIDNIGHT RAID

The idea of a federally supported research agency was advancing, but the fate of the Committee on Medical Research projects and their funding was still up in the air.

A proposal by Democratic Sen. Warren Magnuson of Washington to create a single, overarching National Science Foundation that would include medical research was under consideration by Congress, but a bill that could be approved by Congress and make its way to Truman's desk would be five years in the making.



Sen. Warren Magnuson, Democrat from Washington.

U.S. Senate Historical Office

When NIH Director Dyer was called in 1945 to testify, he pointed out that the Public Health Service already had the authority for health and medical research that was envisioned for the proposed foundation. He expressed his concern for the independence of his agency. The NIH budget for fiscal 1945 was \$2.8 million, with research grant funding at \$180,000. To protect its status as the federal government's medical research agency in the face of the National Science Foundation proposal, NIH needed to grow. Transferring the Committee on Medical Research's wartime contracts to the National Institute of Health would increase the agency's funding and, importantly, keep the research going. But government demobilization was proceeding at a snail's pace, and the Committee on Medical Research contracts and their funding were in danger of expiring before anyone acted.

The problem was solved when A.N. Richards, a pharmacologist from the University of Pennsylvania who headed the Committee on Medical Research, undertook a bit of intrigue. Receiving no response to repeated queries about shutting down his unit, he and the other members of the committee decided to act.

Dyer and Richards planned an after-hours meeting in January 1946 to redistribute the Committee on Medical Research contracts and their associated funding, according to an account by Stephen Strickland in his 1972 book *Politics, Science, and Dread Disease*. In addition to Richards and Dyer, two others attended: Rear Admiral Harold W. Smith of the Navy and Colonel J.S. Simmons of the Army. However it was managed, the contracts were saved for the National Institute of Health and peacetime medical research.

Reportedly, Richards went through the wartime contracts one by one, asking each time who wanted it, and the others deferred to Dyer every time. When they were finished, research grant funding

at NIH went from \$180,000 in 1945 to \$850,000 in 1946 and in 1947, the year most of the contracts were transferred, it went to \$4 million.

With its new contracts, NIH needed more manpower and more administration, and Congress stepped up with a spending proposal for fiscal 1947 that included a total of \$8 million, a more than tenfold increase over the agency's allotment at the beginning of the war.

Mary may never have known about that meeting, though it's possible she met Dyer when he testified at the same Pepper hearing as Rhoads, but a case can be made that the chain of events she set off by influencing the course of those hearings on the nation's health and then passing that memo to Roosevelt resulted in the Committee on Medical Research funds being saved for medical research.



COUP AT THE CANCER SOCIETY

1943 – 1946

Mary's activist career began not with the 1944 Pepper hearings on producing a healthy citizenry but a year earlier with an effort to assess private support for cancer research. She had come away from her discussions with research oncologist Cornelius Rhoads with a grasp of the funding problem, but it was a personal event that sealed her resolve to do something about it.

In spring 1943, Maria Amosio, a cook in the Laskers' Manhattan townhouse, died of cancer. Her passing touched Mary deeply and rekindled her grief for the cancer victims she had known. Mary remembered visiting her mother's laundress, whom she knew only as Mrs. Belter, when she was four or five years old. The woman had

just undergone a double mastectomy, and the sight of her lying in bed, miserable, horrified young Mary.

Decades later, in 1930, Kay Swift's mother, Ellen, who had no idea what the lump in her breast meant until it was too late, had died of cancer. That memory also came tumbling back, along with Mary's youthful promise to do something about the disease if ever she was in a position to do so.

Mary was puzzled and infuriated by what she saw as a lack of progress treating cancer. The primary treatment at the dawn of the 20th century — surgery — was the main option forty years later. When Amosio died, Mary decided it was time to fulfill her youthful vow and "think seriously about the cancer problem."

Fear of cancer was pervasive and powerful. The word alone was avoided as if it were a bad talisman, uttered only in whispers. Mary had not been immune to that fear growing up. As an adult, she learned more about the disease, allowing her to deal with it without paralyzing fear. Amosio's death sparked outrage and a search for answers, which led Mary to ask, "if not me, who?"

So when she visited the offices of the American Society for the Control of Cancer and discovered it supported no research at all, she found her first major cause. And the story of how the stodgy cancer society was transformed from an old boys club for oncologists into a fundraising organization for cancer research was the story of Mary's first big advocacy effort.

NOT A CENT FOR RESEARCH

When Florence Mahoney came up from Florida in September 1943, she and Mary paid a call on Clarence Cook "C.C." Little, the director of the American Society for the Control of Cancer, to ask about the scope of the society's research funding. Little was

a prominent geneticist who divided his time between the cancer society and his genetics laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine, where he was developing strains of laboratory mice for medical research. Today, Jackson Laboratory is a key global source for mouse models of disease and conducts human genomic research.

To their dismay, Little, who was also a cancer researcher, revealed that the 36-year-old organization had never raised a cent for research, despite having collected about \$285,000 in 1942 and \$372,000 in 1943 for other purposes. Flabbergasted, Mary and Florence resolved to change that.

Mary also learned from Little that a few years after Albert's brother, Harry, died of cancer in the early 1930s, he and his sisters donated \$50,000 to the cancer society with the proviso that the gift's income be used to publish educational pamphlets. "Unfortunately, Albert never supervised the pamphlets or some dynamite could have been put in the organization much earlier," she recalled. Now she wondered about getting her husband involved.

Albert had always been supportive of Mary's advocacy, and he financed the work, but "he didn't want to hear about the details," Mary said. As much as he wanted to see progress, "medical problems and illnesses frightened him, and he knew absolutely nothing about them and didn't want to learn." As well, "God knows he couldn't stand such nonsense" as working with the likes of the cancer society. Nevertheless, she realized she needed his active participation.

After their meeting, Little phoned Mary to ask whether Albert might serve on the society's board and help with publicity. She told him that her husband likely wasn't interested but she would introduce Little to Emerson Foote. Foote was a protégé of Albert's at Lord & Thomas, and after buying Albert's ownership stake in 1942, he headed the successor company, Foote, Cone & Belding.

He agreed to join the board, and Mary had an entrée into the cancer society. Foote turned out to be a vital ally.

With Foote's help, the society's 1944 campaign raised \$832,000, more than double the 1943 total but inadequate for Mary's plan to support research. The society lacked organization and fundraising expertise, not to mention the will to raise the necessary millions, so she and Foote hatched a plan to hire an expert for the 1945 campaign. If the society would allow them to bring in their own fundraiser, a man named Leo Casey, Mary said she would pay his \$18,000 salary. Mary felt they were on the way to "opening new vistas" for the organization. But progress was not to come so easily.

Casey, who had worked on Wendell Willkie's 1940 presidential campaign as well as with Albert, turned out to be a better campaign organizer than a fundraiser. He was gone by January 1945. Mary and Foote did achieve one organizational victory, however: In 1945 they got the group to change its name from the American Society for the Control of Cancer, which Mary felt offered no hope for a cure, to the American Cancer Society. She would have preferred the American Society Against Cancer.

With or without a professional rainmaker, Mary and Foote were determined to raise research funds. During the summer of 1944, they met with Lois Mattox Miller, a medical reporter and editor with *Reader's Digest*, and laid out their argument for cancer research. Foote and Mattox Miller crafted a short piece for the October issue that elicited about \$75,000 in contributions to the American Cancer Society. He and Mattox Miller went on to publish two more shorts in spring 1945 that raised the total to about \$125,000.

Mary kept generating money for the cancer society. She arranged for a payment from her work with designer Raymond Loewy to go to the society on the condition it be used to establish

the organization's first research fund. In December 1945, Albert conditioned the sale of his stock in Pepsodent toothpaste to Lever Brothers on a gift of \$50,000 per year for five years to the cancer society. When Albert presented that first check to the society, he specified that it be used to support research. At that point, however, Albert was still dubious about becoming actively involved with Mary and Foote's venture. (Mary said that unfortunately the handshake agreement with Lever Brothers didn't last, and the cancer society saw only \$100,000 of the promised quarter million dollars.)

To Mary's dismay, rather than exciting the society about the possibilities, the influx of funds threw the cancer society into disarray. The treasurer was "terribly annoyed" about having to open all the donation envelopes, and by the beginning of 1945, the plans for the campaign had become "chaotic." Mary was drained by the obstinacy and didn't know whether to let the campaign unfold and see what happened or step in and hire another fundraiser.

She confided her frustration to Mattox Miller and found renewed energy in her response: "Are you going to let all the people continue to die?" Her resolve strengthened, Mary decided to hire the organization founded by John Price Jones, who is credited with developing modern fundraising in much the way Albert is known for fathering modern advertising. She pitched her offer to hire the company to the cancer society's leadership with the caveat that 25 percent of the funds raised in the 1945 campaign be reserved for research, and they accepted.

MARY PLOTS A TAKEOVER

About that time, Mary pulled off a coup that was the beginning of the end for the "obstructionist" doctors who dominated the cancer society. She asked Foote to invite her to a board meeting

where she proposed that 50 percent of the board comprise outstanding leaders from outside the medical community. Mary thought the board agreed to her idea “rather casually.” By May 1, 1945, several corporate executives had been appointed and were trying their best to change the society’s culture. They included pharmaceutical industry executive Elmer Bobst, industrialist and investment banker James Adams, and Eric Johnston, who was stepping down as president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and about to take over leadership of the Motion Picture Association of America. Adams, who became a general partner at Lazard in 1948, stayed with the cancer society, serving as chair of the executive, research, and legislative committees and testifying on behalf of cancer research over the years. As part of the campaign, Foote and Albert used their pull with the radio networks, and the word “cancer” began to pop up in programs, most notably in an episode of the beloved comedy series *Fibber McGee and Molly*. The campaign was a success, but as donations began to come in, the treasurer was again overwhelmed by the thought of dealing with all that money.

As the contributions began to add up, the society’s members began to balk at outsiders telling them what to do, but it was too late. Mary said the doctors were “incredibly mean and difficult,” but the housecleaning had begun. By that fall, Little, the society’s director, who had been in Maine during much of the transition, had resigned, as had the key obstructionists on the board.

Albert finally realized there was a “real possibility of making ... a dent in this picture,” and from the minute he was elected to the board he was “passionately interested,” said Mary. He did, however, remark that it would have been simpler to start the cancer society from scratch. In 1947, Albert persuaded Bill

Donovan, the war hero, intelligence officer, and former U.S. attorney, to join the board, and he became chairman. “He added great strength to the society and contributed the work of his law firm freely,” Mary said.

The 1945 campaign raised nearly \$4.3 million, of which \$960,000 was set aside for the first year of research funding. Mary was proud that, as far as she knew, this was the first time a substantial fund was dedicated solely to cancer research. With administrative matters in hand, Mary turned to the challenge of managing the research money. For that, she again called upon Dr. Rhoads.

Rhoads, who had been serving quietly on the board, felt the doctors in the society, as a whole, lacked the vision required to make progress against the disease. He recommended asking the National Research Council to act as the cancer society’s agent for disbursing the funds. The council established a Committee on Growth with panels representing facets of cancer research; Rhoads was named chair.

By 1946, the cancer society was funding \$2.5 million in cancer research. The entire budget of the National Institute of Health’s National Cancer Institute was just \$500,000. Mary found that gap disturbing. “After you’ve worked with a voluntary society on a major problem like cancer, you see, well, there should also be federal money,” Mary said.

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Mary became aware in March 1946 of a bill headed into hearings that would increase the National Cancer Institute’s research budget by \$100,000. It was sponsored in the Senate by Claude Pepper and in the House by Matthew Neely of West Virginia — who as a senator in 1937 had championed the bill to create the cancer institute.

Another sponsor of that 1937 legislation was freshman Rep. Warren Magnuson. He went on to fill a Senate vacancy in 1944, where, like Pepper, he supported medical research and Mary.

Mary determined the cancer society should testify in support of the Neely bill and convinced Albert to sell the idea to the members, who, in her opinion, saw government funding as competition. Albert succeeded by helping them see federal research support as an extension of their own fundraising efforts — his “it’s all our money in a different pocket” argument proving effective again. Albert, Rhoads, Bobst, and Adams, who then headed the cancer society, testified. They backed away from the bill, however, when it was rewritten to put the funds under the control of the surgeon general, who headed the Public Health Service. They felt the Public Health Service had shown little interest in meaningful funding of medical research.

Though they were also disappointed, Mary and Florence continued to work to support the bill, but it failed. Nonetheless, the National Cancer Institute testimony established a precedent for voluntary health organizations testifying before Congress, and making the public-private connection was another advocacy milestone for Mary.

Importantly, Mary believed their efforts awakened the Public Health Service to the fact that “if outsiders like me kept busy,” something might happen, and the agency was emboldened to ask for and get \$14 million for fiscal 1948, the first substantial research funding it had ever requested. That success gave Mary the idea that “we could probably get going in other areas within the Public Health Service.” It was the beginning of an amazing run of growth for both Mary and medical research.

7

CREATING THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

1945 – 1946

The mid-1940s and early 1950s were the most intense of Mary's research advocacy. The learning curve was steep, but Mary and Florence caught on quickly, using their intellect, courage, social skills, influence, and fortunes to advance the cause of medical research.

The pair became experts in the legislative process — both the textbook version and the sausage-making reality. They recognized the importance of applying outside pressure to that process. They recruited and created citizen's groups, took out newspaper advertisements, and

appealed to syndicated columnists to rally public support and sway lawmakers.

They were effective because of the many skills they brought to the table but also because they weren't out for personal gain. That made a big difference to legislators looking for the catch in every pitch they heard.

During this period, Mary and Florence were the main force behind the establishment of the four institutes that resulted in the National Institute of Health adding an s and becoming the National Institutes of Health. The four newcomers were the National Heart Institute (now Heart, Lung, and Blood), the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Arthritis and Metabolic Diseases (now Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases), and the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness (now Neurological Disorders and Stroke).

"We didn't realize the significance of what we were doing," Florence told author Bradie Metheny in a 1995 interview. "To tell you the truth, it was just a day-to-day operation. We were very innocent." Even after they established their credentials on Capitol Hill, "Mary was always congenial. I never noticed that she was intimidating to politicians. If she was, it may have been because she had access to presidents," Florence said.

Florence talked about the easy way in which she and Mary collaborated. Through her connection to the Cox newspaper syndicate, Florence was able to get information and have articles published. "Mary was the strategist on figures and making the case," Florence said. They weren't entirely without Washington experience: Mary had been no stranger in the Roosevelt White House, and both came to enjoy considerable access during the Truman administration.

Everyone assumed the private sector was researching cancer. But an American Cancer Society survey revealed that the Rockefeller Foundation, for example, which was thought to be doing a lot of research, was in fact spending very little, about \$50,000, said Mary. Surprised that the foundation wasn't investing more, she followed up with the head oncologist at the foundation and was told there were simply no ideas. "If there aren't any ideas, we'd better start and make some," she exclaimed to Albert and anyone else within hearing. "If you assign a certain amount of money in an area, if you have any intelligence and good direction, the chances are that you can get something accomplished in the area."

That philosophy became a guiding principle of her advocacy. For Mary, every budget increase called for another, as research opportunities opened up and breakthroughs were made.

WORKING WITH TRUMAN

In May 1945, Mary received a call from Samuel Rosenman, who had been with the Roosevelts since their early days in politics and now worked for President Truman. Rosenman was the first to hold the position of White House counsel, a position created by Roosevelt, and was credited with coining the term "New Deal." Mary had become friends with Rosenman and his wife, Dorothy, through Anna Rosenberg.

Rosenberg, who recently had served the Roosevelt administration in capacities related to the war effort, continued in public service. In 1950, she was appointed assistant secretary of defense for manpower and personnel, at the time the highest defense post held by a woman. From the time Mary met Rosenberg during her honeymoon stop at the 1940 Democratic convention to the 1944 presidential election, Mary said her "knowledge and feeling about politics were

incredibly more educated and changed completely as a result of that friendship.”

Mary had worked through Rosenberg and Rosenman to persuade Roosevelt to deliver a first-of-its-kind message to Congress addressing the health of the American people. A major component of the message was to have been a call for national health insurance. After Roosevelt died in April 1945, Mary believed that Truman wanted to carry out everything his predecessor had planned. As Mary recalled it, the gist of that May 1945 phone call with Rosenman was, “Come down and talk to me about what you want in this health message.”

Over dinner at the Wardman Park, a stately eight-story, redbrick hotel on Connecticut Avenue that opened during the 1918 pandemic and closed as a result of the 2020 pandemic, Mary liked what she read when she reviewed Rosenman’s draft message but asked for a reference to mental illness. Rosenman added it.

By fall, Mary began to worry that the health message had been set aside in the flurry of activity at the war’s end. Thinking her appearance would demonstrate grassroots interest, she worked through Rosenberg to get an appointment with Truman on September 8 to introduce herself and urge him to go ahead with the message. Mary told Truman he would be the first president to show any interest in the health of the people, and he agreed to do it. Mary said Truman told her he was interested in the general idea of health insurance because when he was a county judge he saw families in trouble for lack of money for medical care.

She found Truman to be “sympathetic about health programs without knowing anything about the field,” and she and Florence went on to develop a productive relationship with him. “The president was friendly and spoke freely about everything, including ‘the

pinheads in Congress,’ ” said Mary. “He was always at odds with the Congress,” which had taken a conservative turn in the 1944 election. As Truman’s presidency progressed, Mary and Florence visited often with him in the White House and occasionally dined alone with him and his wife, Bess.

Truman sent his health message to Congress on November 19, 1945. It was the first of three during his presidency. One section promoted “well-directed and continuously supported” medical research, with an emphasis on cancer and on “the special need for research on mental diseases and abnormalities.” He called for the government to undertake a “broad program to strengthen professional education in medicine and related fields and to encourage and support medical research.” Finally, he backed creation of a national health insurance system, which he strenuously argued would not be socialized medicine.

“No president had ever been willing to discuss a health program or national health insurance in any public statement,” Mary said. “And Roosevelt had never been willing to do anything about it until he suddenly agreed to include it in the promised health message a month before his inauguration.” By carrying out Roosevelt’s plan to call for a national health insurance system, Truman introduced it as a serious part of the national health policy conversation.

Shortly before the message was sent over, Rosenman asked Mary to rally public support for the president’s recommendations, which included the sure-to-be-controversial call for universal health insurance. He suggested placing newspaper ads in Washington and New York a few days after the message hit Congress. With Rosenberg’s help, Mary recruited influencers of that time — including Eleanor Roosevelt, the Coxes, and the Mahoneys — who were willing to lend their names to support the health message in

principle. Albert paid for ads in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Washington Star*.

Mary later admitted she couldn't say the president's messages or the newspaper ads influenced Congress "in any measurable way" because she and Florence still had to fight every time for lawmakers' attention, but it gave them confidence that the president had delivered the message.

MENTAL HEALTH: THE FIRST INSTITUTE

That well-inserted wording on mental health may have laid the groundwork for Truman to sign the National Mental Health Act in July 1946, authorizing a National Institute of Mental Health. The legislative process itself taught Mary and Florence a new lesson in dealing with Congress.

It's no surprise Mary and Florence chose mental health for their first attempt to convince Congress of the need for a novel institute at the National Institute of Health. They were involved already in efforts for reforms and public education.

Mary first became interested in the field of mental illness in the late 1920s. She had read parts of a book by Sigmund Freud and urged her then-husband, Paul Reinhardt, to consider seeking psychiatric help for alcoholism. Her effort and ultimately the marriage failed, but she continued to believe in Freud, calling him one of the greatest men who lived in the last 100 or even 500 years.

She credited her own limited psychoanalysis with giving her the "stamina and persistence" she was able to summon in the course of her work. "It helped me profoundly to at least go forward without hostility toward people ... because of their lack of insight into what they were doing and [without] dislike because of their poor behavior," she said. Mary had successfully introduced Albert to

psychotherapy during their courtship, and she believed it helped him to understand and deal with his depression.

She had stayed apprised of advances in mental health and corresponded with experts. Florence's interest in the field had led her to lobby the Florida legislature to improve treatment for patients at mental health facilities.

One of their first actions was to establish the National Committee on Mental Health, which enlisted a number of state governors as honorary chairs and had no staff. It served mainly as Mary and Florence's office in Washington.

The story of the bill to create a mental health institute is vintage Mary, demonstrating her instincts and determination, as well as a modicum of luck. In 1942 or 1943, Mary was invited to join a voluntary organization called the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, which was headed by Dr. George Stevenson, an accomplished psychiatrist, neurologist, and advocate for the mentally ill.

As Mary told the story, in early 1945 she suggested to Stevenson that he contact the Public Health Service with the idea of creating a mental health institute along the lines of the National Cancer Institute. The Public Health Service already had a Division of Mental Hygiene, and its leadership liked the idea of building on it in order to meet the needs of veterans as well as the general public. Mary gathered facts and figures on the paucity of physicians trained to work with the mentally ill and passed the information along to nationally syndicated columnist Thomas Stokes, who covered Washington. That column was read by Rep. Percy Priest, who was already interested in improving the quality of mental health facilities and treatment, particularly following the war. The Tennessee Democrat then worked with the Public Health Service to introduce the National Neuropsychiatric Act in March 1945.

“In other words, it was ‘from Tinkers to Evers to Chance’ that this thing got done,” Mary said in 1963. (The expression comes from a 1910 poem about a trio of Chicago Cubs infielders who turned spectacular double plays.)

Priest chaired a subcommittee of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee (currently the House Committee on Energy and Commerce), an authorizing committee whose broad mandate encompassed health care, including mental health and substance abuse. Authorizing committees are empowered to create programs under the federal government. The Priest bill proposed strengthening the existing mental health division within the Public Health Service and providing funds to train psychiatrists. Mary and Florence met with Priest, liked the bill, and prevailed upon Pepper to introduce it in the Senate.

Mary admitted she and Florence couldn’t claim credit for the bill’s passage in the House, which was due to the efforts of Priest and his allies, but said the duo spent a great deal of time in Washington working for Pepper’s support. “We had dinner parties, we went to see him in his office, we did everything you could think of,” said Mary.

Entertaining was key to Mary and Florence’s basic strategy. In all of their entertaining over the years, they carefully planned who should be brought together for the cause of medical research. “The nice part,” said Florence, “was I liked the people who were involved. They were people you wanted to work with,” she told Metheny. Florence also persuaded the editors of the *Miami Daily News* and *The Washington Post* to editorialize on the need for a mental health institute.

All the while she was promoting the National Institute of Mental Health bill, Mary was also embroiled in the effort to move the

\$100 million Neely cancer funding bill to the House floor. She became too involved in promoting that bill to follow the nuances of promoting and tracking the Priest bill. To make sure she was getting the latest intelligence on the mental health bill's movement through committees, Mary suggested to the leaders of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene that they hire a lobbyist to help them get the bill through Congress and keep the organization and Mary apprised of its progress. They agreed if Mary would foot the bill. Lynn Adams, whom Mary later referred to as "a very devoted but not very brilliant young man," got the job.

According to the Robinson biography, it was the National Committee on Mental Health, which Mary and Florence had formed and Mary supported financially, to whom Mary turned with the suggestion to hire a lobbyist. The committee agreed to the plan if she would pay his salary, and she hired Adams.

'SO NAIVE AT THE TIME'

As it moved through the legislative process, the mental health bill evolved into the National Mental Health Act, which called for creation of a National Institute of Mental Health modeled on the original National Cancer Institute. Shortly after Truman signed the bill into law on July 3, 1946, Mary and Florence learned they had missed an important lesson in the mechanics of Congress. While they were instrumental in securing the mental health institute's authorization, in order to get the new institute funded, they would have to start all over, this time making friends on the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. They were embarrassed.

The bill to create the institute contained an authorization level of \$17 million for training and research, and we thought that was "tantamount to getting the money," said Mary. "Florence and I

were so naive at the time.” She directed Adams to work on the funding issue, but in the end “we had to do the bulk of the work ourselves, as usual.”

A year passed while Mary pressed Pepper to influence the appropriations committee to put up mental health funding. Finally, in July 1947, \$458,000 was appropriated for mental health for fiscal 1948. Because the National Institute of Mental Health was not officially established, the funds went to the Public Health Service’s Division of Mental Hygiene, which used it that same month to award the first-ever mental health research grant — to a professor at Indiana University for a project titled the “Basic Nature of the Learning Process.” The division was abolished when the National Institute of Mental Health was formally established on April 15, 1949. The institute’s first appropriation, which was for 1950, was \$9.2 million.

Mary’s activities through the years made a big impression on the psychiatric community, which was eager after the war to care for those who had served, as well as to upgrade mental hospitals, according to Barbara Armstrong in a 1980 article for the American Psychiatric Association journal *Hospital & Community Psychiatry*.

The psychiatric association was eager to support the new institute but slow to mobilize. “We didn’t feel that we could take the lead in lobbying for mental health or psychiatry. We felt it beneath our dignity. It was not quite appropriate for a stodgy professional society,” retired association public affairs director Robbie Robinson told Armstrong. Robinson said Mary and her associates were the “only ones who had enough courage to do any lobbying.”

Mary’s energy for the mental health cause never flagged. Steve Lawton, who served as chief counsel to the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health and the Environment from

1970 to 1979, was also quoted in Armstrong's article, describing Mary's effectiveness in face-to-face meetings.

"She is as good a lobbyist as I ever ran into," he said. "She would come in, sit down, and look you right in the eye and instead of lecturing you or asking you for something, she would say, 'If you were trying to make a pitch for this, what would you say?' Before you knew it, you were arguing her case for her."

Once the American Cancer Society broke the ice by appealing directly to Congress for research funding, voluntary health organizations began to realize they had a duty beyond educating the public with flyers. They engaged Congress to argue for research to develop treatments and cures, and they began to hire lobbyists and federal relations staff to educate lawmakers about the needs of their members.

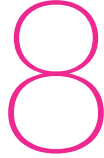
Mary went on to use lobbyists effectively over the years to keep her posted on the workings of the Hill, recruit and support witnesses, and educate members of Congress and their staff on matters important to medical research and the National Institutes of Health.

Efforts to rally the National Committee for Mental Hygiene to lobby Congress to fund the nascent institute came to naught. Mary hired the John Price Jones group (to the tune of \$10,000) to organize a fundraising plan for the committee. But the committee took the opposite tack. It merged with other small volunteer groups and formed a new entity whose board was dominated by members opposed to taking federal funds to support research, which meant the group would definitely not be lobbying on behalf of the new institute.

Mary's answer was to charge the National Committee Against Mental Illness (the former National Committee on Mental Health), with the dual mission of public education and lobbying

for the National Institute of Mental Health. The operation was still financed by Mary.

The committee carried on “rather ineffectually” under Adams until 1953, said Mary, when Mike Gorman, who had worked for her in other capacities, took over as executive secretary. Gorman, a journalist, had written powerful exposés on the state of mental health facilities in his native Oklahoma and elsewhere, and, like Mary, had observed that since no one else was moving to improve the situation, it was up to him to take action. He had become a force for change in mental health. Florence had recognized Gorman’s work, which included a book titled *Oklahoma Attacks its Snake Pits*, and recruited him to come to Florida, where he directed his campaign at Florida’s mental health services while working for her husband at the *Miami Daily News*.



CREATING THE NATIONAL HEART INSTITUTE

1946 – 1949

In the waning days of summer 1946, despite the spectacular success creating the National Institute of Mental Health, Mary found herself in a melancholy mood. She had been ill with jaundice most of the summer, with a lot of time to reflect on what she had accomplished and where she was going.

The American Cancer Society was reorganized and re-energized. More members of Congress were beginning to back increased funding for cancer research. And she and Florence had shepherded through Congress the mental health institute.

Still, Mary's thoughts drifted to memories of her parents, and she dwelled on the ridiculous notion that their deaths from heart disease was somehow God's will.

Her father had suffered from hardening of the arteries, which led to a series of strokes before he died in 1933. The doctors at the time had told her it was the will of God, "which God knows it was not and is not," she fumed.

By the time her mother experienced what was probably a heart attack in 1939, Mary knew some of the country's leading cardiologists, but their answers were no better than what she had heard in 1933. "They all wrote back to me and said nothing was being done. There was nothing you could do." A year later, as she and Albert were beginning to talk about marriage, her mother suffered a stroke and died.

The entire situation — her parents' deaths and the state of heart health — saddened and infuriated her. It was about this time she discovered that the Public Health Service budget lacked money specifically for research into diseases of the heart or circulation.

That wouldn't do. Outrage burned away her melancholy, and Mary began making plans. Her first step was to find out what the American Heart Association was doing to support research.

She and Lois Mattox Miller, the *Reader's Digest* reporter and editor, visited the heart association's medical director, Dr. Charles Connor, to inquire about the organization's research plans. This time she was neither shocked that he seemed surprised at the question nor astonished to hear the association had no plans to support research. Nor was she surprised to learn the heart association's fundraising to support public education was paltry, less than \$100,000.

In December 1947, falling back on her experience with the cancer society, she again enlisted Emerson Foote to help with the group's fundraising. But by early 1948, it was clear to Mary that "Foote was just playing around the edges because he finally saw that the doctors and the laymen who were there were not going to be very sympathetic, and he was busy with other things."

She decided not to press further on the association's behalf for fear of turning away members willing to testify independently for federal funding for research and training in the field. In a 1963 interview, she recalled the association as "a bunch of very conservative, rather small-minded cardiologists, who, as a core, have been too conservative to really want to make big progress fast."

Mary and Albert had spent some time in Florida over the 1947 New Year, and when she got back, "as a result of [her] feeling that the heart association was not very dynamic," she went to see Sen. Pepper about legislation to create a national heart research institute.

Pepper was amenable to the idea and asked her to draft a bill. She paid a visit to Dr. Leonard Scheele, the head of the National Cancer Institute, who said the proposed bill should be written in the same vein as the 1937 cancer institute legislation. Mary credited Scheele's appointment at the institute for the Public Health Service's enlightenment following her campaign for cancer funding. She said that Scheele "was willing to think in bigger terms and he was very cooperative." She felt he "realized that outside pressure was going to be successful eventually, and that they'd better start within their own organization." After Truman appointed Scheele surgeon general in 1948, he worked along with Mary, voluntary organizations, and members of Congress to advance Public Health Service medical research until he resigned in 1956 to take a position at Warner-Lambert Pharmaceutical.

Although she knew leading heart researchers, Mary didn't consult them on her plan because she knew they were trying to raise money for the heart association. However, knowing the Public Health Service was eventually going to want more detail, she drew up "a simple bill" she thought would stir up the doctors and get them to argue among themselves about what was needed "until we finally got something the following year." She remembered mailing it to Pepper in February 1947 during a stop in Cincinnati on her way with Florence to Los Angeles.

MARSHALING ALLIES

Seeing the heart institute established turned out to be more of a test than Mary anticipated. Nonetheless, she sized up the situation at every turn and adapted to the challenge. In a 1998 editorial celebrating the 50th anniversary of the heart institute's founding, *Texas Heart Journal* Executive Editor James Bagg Jr. cited an interview with the institute's director Claude Lenfant, who lauded Mary's efforts as an example of "how much of a difference an individual can make — and not just in the lives of a few, but for the many." Calling her a "keen politician," Lenfant said Mary "could marshal all of the players who turn policy into reality — the public, government officials, and the biomedical community itself."

Upon their return from California in April 1947, Mary and Florence headed to Washington to see about hearings, only to discover the bill Pepper introduced in February was foundering. The Senate had flipped from Democrat to Republican in the November 1946 midterm elections, and Pepper no longer held the chairmanship of the Wartime Health and Education subcommittee, and the bill went nowhere.

That turn of events gave Mary the opportunity to make a powerful new friend. Pepper introduced her to Sen. Styles Bridges, who

now chaired the full Senate Appropriations Committee, and, importantly, had recently recovered from a heart attack. Mary found the New Hampshire Republican to be “generous and broad minded” when it came to getting money for medical research, and he became helpful in getting the heart act passed, as well as in getting money for medical research as time went on. He also was among the several members Mary supported with campaign contributions through the years because, she said, “The only way you could get Bridges’ attention or an appointment with him was to be a contributor. It is a sad but true fact.”

Of course, Bridges wasn’t a rarity on Capitol Hill. “You’ve either got to be able to control money or votes or you can’t even get the attention of politicians,” Mary said.

Bridges agreed to be a sponsor on a heart research bill to be introduced later, and upon hearing there were no funds earmarked for heart research at the Public Health Service, he offered to hold an informal hearing to consider directing money specifically for heart research — called a deficiency appropriation — if Mary could line up witnesses. She did.

In early June 1947, Mary testified, along with Pepper, NIH representatives, and representatives from the heart association, which Mary felt was inspired to get involved by the introduction of the original Pepper bill. After the others had asked for \$3 million, Mary laid out the facts and figures. She stressed that heart disease was the leading cause of death in the United States and that the need for research on the heart and circulation was critical. In the end, they got only \$500,000, but Mary called it a beginning.

More determined than ever to see a dedicated institute for heart research, Mary asked Bridges if he would introduce a bill in January 1948. Mary said he agreed to consider it, but he advised

her not to ask for the \$1 million authorization she had in mind because “a specific amount of money will frighten the boys off from voting.” He promised adequate funding if the bill passed.

Mary next brought the bill up with Surgeon General Thomas Parran, who also was hesitant. Mary was flummoxed. “Imagine! It’s the main cause of death, and I was asking the head of the Public Health Service if he would be in favor of a bill to create an institute similar to one already in existence regarding the second cause of death, and he was very cautious and said he would have to think it over.” That it required any thought at all baffled her. Parran phoned a couple of days later to say he favored the bill, and with that Mary and Albert left for a rest in Florida.

After the break, Mary arrived home with a plan. First, she made the rounds in Washington, starting with Oscar Ewing, a lawyer and Truman confidant who headed the Federal Security Agency, a precursor to today’s Department of Health and Human Services. (Ewing’s wife, a friend of Mary’s, suffered from severe hypertension.) At that point, Ewing “didn’t help, but he was in accord,” she said. “He didn’t make trouble either.”

Then she checked in with Scheele at the cancer institute, Parran, and Dyer, who still headed NIH. Scheele and Dyer agreed that \$15 million was a good authorization level for the proposed institute’s budget. Recalling Dyer’s testimony a few years earlier that the whole of the Public Health Service needed little more than \$2 million to operate effectively, Mary took Dyer’s support as a concession. By January 22, 1948, they had settled on a working budget of \$15 million.

To rally public support for the new institute, Mary and Albert, along with Foote, formed the National Heart Committee, which urged citizens to write their representatives and senators. The

Laskers asked for no money from the members of the committee but put about \$25,000 into the effort. Mary considered it a sound investment.

Mary and Florence visited Capitol Hill to put the finishing touches on the bill's introduction. In the Senate, they had lined up Pepper, Bridges, James Murray of Montana, and Irving Ives of New York, who was recruited by Rosenberg, but they needed someone with influence to introduce the bill in the House. For that they went to see Rep. Frank Keefe, a Wisconsin Republican who chaired the appropriations subcommittee in charge of Public Health Service funding. Keefe was generally in favor of a heart institute, but when Mary showed him a letter of support from a Wisconsin friend of hers — who happened to be CEO of Kimberly-Clark, which at that time was located in his district — he was keen to sponsor the bill. In addition, Florence recruited George Smathers, the representative from her district in Florida, to co-sponsor. In the end, Jacob Javits of New York and Charles Wolverton of New Jersey filed a similar bill in the House, a turn that got Mary's attention because Wolverton chaired the authorization committee that would consider the bill.

Mary and Rosenberg sent out telegrams signed by distinguished individuals, including Wild Bill Donovan and Foote, to seventy-five leading citizens and key physicians in the heart association, asking them to support creation of a federal institute for heart research.

Next came the push to be sure a heart institute bill would get hearings in the House and Senate. Mary was anxious because she didn't know well the Republicans in control of the relevant committees, but she mobilized the National Heart Committee to bombard the committee members with messages supporting the bill.

A WHISTLE-STOP ADVENTURE

Mary and Albert left for Palm Springs, California, on February 10, though it wasn't much of a break as Mary burned up the telephone lines to Washington and New York to arrange hearings and witnesses. During their stay in Palm Springs, Albert was approached with a proposal that he and Mary help establish an arthritis and rheumatism foundation, a proposition Albert was uncharacteristically disinclined to consider because he was feeling drained and unwell. They returned on April 15.

After what Mary called "much difficulty and anxiety," the Senate subcommittee heard testimony in late March or early April. Wolverton held hearings in the House the first week in May, and, though she preferred to stay in the background, Mary reluctantly testified along with the experts she had assembled. She found herself touched by that hearing. "I felt it was the beginning of something very important, and I was really very emotionally moved about the testimony," she recalled.

Mary didn't often testify. "Other people can do it much better, and I don't need to," she said, adding that "congressmen and senators like to hear from doctors because they think they may get a little free advice."

The challenge now was to get the bill's final version to the floor for a vote in each chamber, a significant task because the members were anxious to get home to campaign. In addition, it was a presidential election year; the national conventions were coming up at the end of June with Truman vying for a full term in office.

The Senate passed the bill in May, but the House was an ordeal and another learning experience for Mary and Florence. Because Priest, the Tennessee representative, had handled the House version of the mental health bill, she was unaware of the procedural

differences involved in getting a bill to the floor in the House. “I never realized such horrors could exist, that there could be such complications,” she exclaimed when telling the story. In order to get a vote on the House floor, the bill had to go through the House Rules Committee, which controlled when a bill could be brought up.

This time it was Albert who came to the rescue. Using his influence with Illinois Republicans, he phoned Werner Schroeder, a GOP national committeeman, who phoned Rep. Leo Allen, chairman of the House Rules Committee, and asked him to move the bill. “When my husband telephoned someone and asked a favor, they felt such a charge of dynamic energy they acted immediately,” Mary said. The bill was passed in the House the next day.

Then came the excitement of tracking down the president to get his signature. Ewing and Clark Clifford, who had taken over from Samuel Rosenman in 1946 as Truman’s top adviser, determined that a barnstorming whistle-stop train tour around the country would be the best way to energize the campaign of their underdog candidate. During the summer and fall of 1948, Truman made three sweeps of the country, the first of which was a cross-country trip to California.

Mary had assumed Truman would sign the finished bill on June 11 before he left Washington, but she discovered it had never gone to his desk. A legal department functionary had set it aside because of a one-word difference in the language of the House and Senate versions. Without the president’s signature before the end of the legislative session, it would be back to the drawing board for the whole effort. Panicked, Mary swung into action.

She first contacted Ewing to straighten out the legal issue. Then she worked through Rosenberg to get the White House to put the bill in a special mail pouch to be sent by air to meet Truman’s train in San Francisco that day. Finally, she telegraphed his staff on the

train and beseeched them to bring the bill to the president's attention. At the same time, Florence phoned and telegraphed Clifford and begged him to see that the president signed it. Their all-out effort succeeded: Truman signed the bill on June 16, 1948, just three days before the end of the session. In addition to creating the National Heart Institute, the bill added an s to the parent agency, making it the National Institutes of Health.

With victory in hand, Mary and Florence set out to convince the Senate to approve a \$9 million deficiency appropriation before the members left town. Ewing and Scheele went to the Hill to plead their case to lawmakers frantic to finish the session and adjourn. The Senate appropriations subcommittee gave them \$1 million, and the House and Senate conference committee for the bill — which reconciles differences between the versions passed by each chamber — halved it to \$500,000 during its meeting on June 19, the day Congress adjourned after a twenty-four-hour session. Together with \$1.2 million earmarked for heart research in the regular National Institutes of Health appropriation that year, the new institute had \$1.7 million to work with when it was officially established on August 1, 1948. “This,” observed Mary, “is how we got little bits of money together for the main cause of death.”

On January 19, 1949, the Laskers returned from a respite in Boca Raton, Florida, and Mary, with Anna Rosenberg and Florence, attended Truman's inauguration. It was a sunny day, and from their seats in front of the Capitol the ceremony was a “simple, picturesque, dramatic scene,” she recalled.

Two days later, she went to see Pepper and Murray about legislation to create an arthritis institute.



THE INSTITUTE IDEA CATCHES ON

1949 – 1950

Mary had envisioned the mental health and heart institutes, but the idea of an arthritis institute was brought to her. She seized the opportunity to fight a crippling disease that degraded the quality of life for tens of thousands and left too many people dependent.

Early on, Mary and Albert had determined that the lobbying power of a strong lay organization was essential for getting meaningful federal funds directed toward research on a disease. Consequently, Mary was sorely tempted to get on board when Albert was approached about establishing an arthritis and rheumatism foundation while they were in Palm Springs

in February 1948, despite the fact she was in nonstop phone conversations involving House and Senate hearings on the heart institute bill.

Albert, however, was tired, not feeling well, and not anxious to think about anything new or see her involved in more phone calls or meetings. Strong-willed, generous, and gregarious, Albert nonetheless was approaching seventy, and his health was failing. To get him to relax, the Laskers traveled to Europe, as well as to Florida, Arizona, and — most often — California, where Mary kept up with her research advocacy long-distance, and Albert coached from the sidelines and rested.

In Palm Springs, the Laskers stayed at La Quinta, a lovely, tranquil resort of Spanish-style cottages built in the 1920s as an escape for Hollywood glitterati and world-weary moguls. The grounds were made for strolling and the paths lined with mounds of beautiful flowers, a perfect environment for Mary. The resort exists today with much of the old flavor preserved and the addition of championship golf.

Arthritis raised difficult memories, as with other afflictions on which Mary focused. She remembered her grandfather, “a wonderful man” who lived with her family, sitting with his hands spread out, inflamed with rheumatoid arthritis. “When his hands weren’t painful, he still hadn’t the use of his joints,” she said. “I realized how much immobility it caused him, and I was always sad about that.”

As with many health issues, Mary also saw it in an economic context. Arthritis cut down on the days people could work, and it “pauperizes many people who would otherwise be taxpayers,” she said, noting that when people are unable to work, they become an expense to themselves and to others.

When they returned to New York, the Laskers stayed in the home of their old friend Raymond Loewy in Sands Point, a private enclave on the North Shore of Long Island not far from Manhattan. There they met with Dr. Cornelius Traeger, the man who had approached Albert at La Quinta about funding an arthritis foundation, and Floyd Odlum to discuss a proposal Mary had put together. She and Albert would put up \$25,000 for the new foundation, to be called the Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation, with the understanding that Odlum would head the organization and raise another \$125,000 in seed money for a fundraising campaign. Albert warmed to the idea and wrote the bylaws for the new foundation.

Odlum, who suffered from crippling arthritis, was an industrialist who made a fortune by accurately predicting the Wall Street Crash of 1929. He accepted the deal, raised the cash, and headed the foundation for many years.

Traeger headed the Rheumatism Council, which was later absorbed into the Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation. Neither Mary nor Albert was officially involved, but Mary got Emerson Foote to join the board.

ON TO WASHINGTON

It was with the encouragement of Odlum and Traeger that Mary went to Capitol Hill a few days after Truman's January 1949 inaugural festivities to recruit sponsors for a bill to establish an arthritis research institute. She first approached Claude Pepper and James Murray on the Senate side, then visited Percy Priest, Frank Keefe, and Jacob Javits in the House. Rep. George Smathers, whom Florence had recruited to support the heart bill, also turned out to be an enthusiastic supporter because his father was bedridden by the disease.



Albert and Mary Lasker arrive in New York in October 1949 aboard the *Queen Mary* after a monthlong trip to Europe, where they researched health systems.

AP photo by Anthony Camerano

Hearings were held in the House and Senate that spring, with Odlum and Traeger among the experts testifying. The bill appeared to be on its way. Then an interesting movement took hold in Congress. Perhaps as a result of Mary's success with heart and mental illness, a number of new bills with which she had no connection were filed seeking new institutes that would conduct research into multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy.

The Senate was in a quandary, and the Public Health Service was overwhelmed at the thought of managing so many new institutes at once, but Mary didn't have much sympathy for the problems of administrators compared with those of people suffering from diseases. "The Public Health Service was not terribly motivated by the anxieties of human sufferings," Mary said.

The opposition was led by Assistant Surgeon General Norman Topping, a Public Health Service veteran who was against creation of any more disease-specific institutes in the evolving National Institutes of Health. The dispute came to a head during a hearing when Topping and Pepper went toe-to-toe in a debate. Mary said Topping was very disagreeable about it, but the more he argued, the more determined Pepper became. Finally, Pepper said, "All right. I've heard what your views are. Now, we're going to do it." Eventually the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee, chaired by James Murray, solved the problem by sorting the bills into only two new institutes then rolling the bills into an omnibus research bill. Mary's proposed arthritis institute became the National Institute of Arthritis and Metabolic Diseases. The other would be the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness.

Earlier, while Mary was working on the arthritis bill, she had been approached by a group involved in the problem of blindness. She was shocked when they told her that in 1948 the federal and state governments invested about \$38.5 million in welfare aid alone to the blind and less than a million dollars in vision research. She immediately phoned Rep. Andrew Biemiller of Wisconsin, who chaired the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, and asked him to introduce a blindness institute bill. He was quick to agree, she discovered, because his mother was blind.

But while Biemiller did introduce a House bill, it was too late to introduce a companion bill in the Senate. For a solution, she turned to Murray, who was able to include blindness in the omnibus bill, which would have to be approved by both houses. "The whole blindness thing was done just like that because these men were all in sympathy with the idea," said Mary. It was included in

the second new institute, the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness, “entirely as a result of my suggestion.” The Omnibus Medical Research Act wouldn’t be signed into law until August 15, 1950, and the two new institutes established until November 22.

Looking back, Mary pointed out that creating an arthritis-focused lay organization in order to foster creation of a national arthritis institute “was done with complete calculation on my part that this was what would happen — hope and calculation.” Mary credited Odlum’s leadership of the Arthritis Foundation for bringing the rheumatologists to the table. She had learned from her experience with the cancer society and the heart association that “unless you had intelligent lay leadership, you probably couldn’t get the doctors to do anything.” Odlum’s leadership skills were especially effective against a groundswell of resistance to federal involvement in medical research that Mary attributed to a fear of socialized medicine. He convinced the doctors in the field that the bill to create the institute was not an act of socialism and urged them to support it, she said.

She considered ongoing lay involvement crucial once an institute was established. “It’s the only thing that gives outsiders any real say over the administration of federal funds,” she asserted. The omnibus bill contained a stipulation that all institutes, either existing or to come, could request funding for construction of research facilities, and that each was to have lay representatives and physicians on its advisory council. Until then, only the heart institute’s authorization, as a result of Mary’s intercession, contained the provision regarding lay involvement.

Founding legislation for each institute includes establishment of a national advisory council made up of scientists engaged in

research and lay people interested in the mission or focus of the institute. The councils typically meet three times a year; members are appointed by either the department secretary or the president, usually for a four-year term. In 1950, Surgeon General Leonard Scheele appointed Mary to the advisory council to the heart institute, the first layperson to serve in that position.

In open sessions, councils discuss issues and hear presentations relevant to the overall mission of the institute. In closed session, members consider grant applications and other funding requests that have already been reviewed by a panel of experts who are, for the most part, non-federal scientists. The second review addresses the significance, relevance, and impact of the proposed research on the institute's mission. Mary kept close to the institutes she sponsored, seeking appointment to their advisory councils. She also sought a seat on the councils of other institutes where she thought the director showed mettle. She met in person with the directors yearly or sent a surrogate to keep up with progress.

THE MORE THE MERRIER

Support for medicine-related bills proved infectious in the Senate. Along with the omnibus bill, Murray and Pepper had backed the Aid to Medical Education bill, which called for funding to support medical schools; a Local Public Health Units bill to provide full-time public health services to people living in underserved counties; and the Survey of Sickness bill, which called for a census of people suffering from major disabling diseases, such as cancer, arthritis, and mental illness. All of them cleared the Senate in late August or early September, along with the omnibus bill. The House, however, turned into a source of regret for Mary.

The Survey of Sickness bill was particularly important to Mary, who thought the data would be vital to understanding the scope of the problem and help prioritize research and funding. In August 1949, she and Albert had met with Biemiller over lunch at the Ritz in Paris. Biemiller had been on a fact-finding tour of the British health insurance system with other members of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. Albert and Mary were in Europe for the first time since the war, also to see first-hand how health insurance was working in Great Britain, as well as in France.

They discussed the group of bills the Senate had passed and urged him to take them up, which he vowed to do when he returned to Washington at the end of September. However, when the time came, Biemiller begged off because a key member of his committee was going to be away until the end of October, and Congress was headed for a December 1 recess. He didn't consider it worthwhile to push the three remaining medical bills through in the time remaining in 1949, and he told Mary he was confident that the House would take them up when it went back into session in January.

In January 1950, however, new forces came into play, and only the omnibus bill was approved. The American Medical Association had begun to organize against bills associated with medicine in general because its members feared they might lead to national health insurance, which to them meant socialized medicine. Mary was aggravated in particular by the medical association's labeling of the Aid to Medical Education bill as a "fringe bill" that could somehow lead to national health insurance. Murray and Rep. John Fogarty of Rhode Island reintroduced the survey bill in 1951, but medical association lobbying rendered the effort futile. (Eventually, a bill to provide a continuing survey of sickness and disability was passed in 1956 during the Eisenhower administration.)



Rep. John Fogarty, Democrat
from Rhode Island.

U.S. House Historical Office

Mary's gut told her she should make the quick trip from New York to Washington because all Biemiller needed was someone to focus his attention on the matter at hand — one of Mary's specialties. "We had the votes and it was all doable. . . . We could have had this whole thing done," she lamented. "I didn't go, and it turned out to be wrong not to." Albert, who was not feeling well, had urged her to stay home. "He said, 'It won't matter. It can be done in January,'" she recalled. "I had a terrible feeling it would

matter," Mary said, "and because I was worried about my husband, I gave in and didn't go down."

A BIG 'WHAT IF'

Mary and Florence's fears for the future of establishing a federal agency specifically for medical research were reawakened in April 1950 when Congress finally passed a bill to establish the National Science Foundation, an independent agency governed by a National Science Board appointed by the president. The bill contained no language specifically stating that its functions were not to interfere with medical research at the National Institutes of Health. It did specify that one of the agency's four divisions be devoted to medical research. The issue, however, was resolved to Mary's satisfaction when Biemiller and Priest managed to add

“noninterference” language in the conference report accompanying the bill. Language in a conference report does not have the force of law but does let administrators know what lawmakers were thinking.

The National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation have functioned compatibly for decades. The science foundation’s medical research division was never really activated because the NIH was funding so much research, and the foundation’s small medical science program eventually was combined with its biology division. The science foundation does, however, invest in the kind of expensive, multi-use research tools and facilities that most medical schools can’t afford to buy. Five years earlier, in spring 1945, Mary and Florence had looked at the possibilities for medical research in the context of the proposed National Science Foundation and “decided that we’d have to go about getting medical research in some other way,” said Mary. And they had. In those intervening years, “We got the Public Health Service deeply committed to the field of medical research, and the Public Health Service was really where medical research belonged.”

Mary did admit that, as the proposal to create the science foundation worked its slow way through Congress, she had begun to fear the bill undermined the importance of medical research. Though she had originally supported the proposal, she feared there would be a push to put the NIH under the National Science Foundation. “This we managed to avoid, thank goodness,” Mary said.

‘NOBLE CONSPIRATORS’

From the time Albert advised Mary in 1939 that it would take federal funding to make the progress she envisioned to the 1950 Omnibus Medical Research Act, Mary and Florence acquired a corps of

supporters often referred to as their “noble conspirators,” as well as the tactical skills to deploy them to best effect. Powerful friends from the private sector included Emerson Foote, the advertising and fundraising mastermind, and media giant David Sarnoff. Elmer Bobst, a leader in the pharmaceutical industry, made an effective hearing witness and board member. He also provided access to Eisenhower’s and Nixon’s inner circles. Florence herself was as politically savvy as she was amiable. Her access to the Cox newspaper empire through her husband allowed for coverage of the issues they championed, and her habit of carrying her press pass whenever she went to the Hill got her through the occasional closed door.

Involvement of the non-profit disease societies provided support from their membership, as well as witnesses like Odium and Traeger to testify in Congress. Mary made it her business to stay in touch with top researchers like heart surgeon Michael DeBakey and oncologist Sidney Farber and often called on them for testimony and advice.

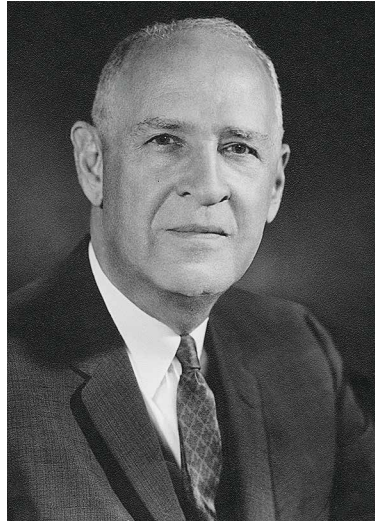
In every new administration she found a way to befriend insiders and, as in the case of Roosevelt and Truman, gain access to the Oval Office. Friends like Rosenberg and Samuel Rosenman, who were close to Roosevelt and to some extent Truman, but who remained accessible wherever they served, led to relationships with others at the top, such as Clifford, a great friend of Florence’s. Mary also forged relationships with leaders in other parts of the administration: Surgeon General Scheele, for example, who broke the mold of Public Health Service officials resistant to change and growth, and Oscar Ewing, who headed the Federal Security Agency and was a friend of Truman’s.

In addition to her relationship with Claude Pepper, which set the model, by 1950, Mary had befriended Warren Magnuson, the senator

from Washington, who would become a stalwart advocate for medical research; Rhode Island Rep. John Fogarty, who declined an opportunity to move to the Senate in order to maintain chairmanship of the House Appropriations Labor, Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittee, where he could oversee medical research funding; and Sen. Lister Hill of Alabama, who from his positions as chair of both the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee and the Senate Appropriations Labor-Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittee, oversaw authorization and funding for the medical programs he championed.

With each new Congress and presidency, Mary and her allies would face challenges and opportunities for medical research that would require her to deploy her advocacy skills time and again to great effect.

But before she could look to the future, a larger challenge arose. A medical workup in December 1949 failed to identify a reason for Albert's ill health, yet a malignant tumor was growing in his intestines, and the cancer was spreading to his lymph nodes. In a few months, he would be diagnosed with advanced cancer, and Mary's quest for research into the disease and its cures would take on added meaning.



Sen. Lister Hill, Democrat from Alabama.

U.S. Senate Historical Office

10

‘DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR’

1950 – 1952

Despite Albert’s ill health, the Laskers steamed to Europe at the end of February 1950. The timing put them in the Paris Ritz on May 1 for Albert’s 70th birthday. Albert was in a festive mood and enjoyed celebrating with family and a few close friends.

A few days after the party, Albert and his sisters set out for the newly established state of Israel. Albert had developed a desire to explore his heritage, and his sisters, with whom he had remained close, were only too glad to accompany him on a private, sixteen-day tour. An associate had gone to Israel a month earlier to make arrangements, including hiring a car and driver and scheduling meetings “with people who could give me light,” said Albert. The

settled part of the country was no larger than the state of Rhode Island and “easily accessible” in sixteen days, he said.

Albert was the son of a Prussian Jew who had immigrated to the U.S. in 1856 to get away from antisemitism. He eventually settled in Galveston, Texas, where Albert and his siblings grew up.

While Albert and Mary rarely traveled separately, on this occasion Mary stayed in Paris, and she and Anna Rosenberg enjoyed shopping at the city's top art galleries.

Albert and Mary returned home in late May, buoyed and rested. Albert — who under Mary's influence had become a collector in his own right — was delighted with her Paris purchases. And he arrived from Israel with a deep sense of satisfaction. “There is a feeling of belonging in Israel that there is in no other place on earth,” he said in an interview for Columbia University's Notable New Yorkers oral history archive. “The dignity of every man is complete within himself.”

Hard realities soon intruded. Appropriations for the cancer, heart, and mental health institutes were bogged down in the Senate. Mary's instinct was to head for Washington and engage in battle, but Albert's abdominal malady had returned, and he was again admitted to the hospital. In June, exploratory surgery revealed a cancerous tumor in his colon, and on July 5 he underwent major surgery to remove the malignancy and the associated lymph nodes. Knowing lymph node involvement meant a possible return of the disease, Mary kept up a brave front. She knew in her heart that as much as Albert wanted to see progress against deadly diseases, he knew nothing about them and didn't want to learn. By all reports, Albert was never told he had cancer, possibly because his brother Harry had died miserably of the illness. “He hated and feared this disease so much that the shock of knowledge would

have been too much for him to bear,” his friend and biographer John Gunther wrote.

As far as Albert was concerned, he was on the road to recovery.

A NEW COUNTRY HOME

While Albert was hospitalized after the surgery, Mary went back to work. “I really knew now as I had never known before how critically important funds for research in cancer and heart could be,” she said. The appropriations for the mental health, cancer, and heart institutes finally went to the Senate floor, and she and Florence were determined to get additional funds added through amendments.

Mary rallied her troops. Florence and Mike Gorman, the journalist health advocate who had become an invaluable ally, went to Washington, joining Luke Quinn, who worked as a lobbyist for the American Cancer Society as well as part time for Mary (who contributed to the cancer society to cover his salary there). Rosenberg, now an assistant secretary of defense, joined them while Mary worked the phones from New York.

When the bill went to the Senate floor in June, Claude Pepper, Warren Magnuson, James Murray, and Matthew Neely moved to add \$64 million across the three institutes. When that failed, they proposed half that figure and still lost by five votes.

Their failure, Mary thought, was due to Pepper being a lame duck. He lost a nasty primary fight to Rep. George Smathers in May.

Mary spent time that fall indulging herself in the search for a country home. Albert gave the opulent Mill Road Farm to the University of Chicago in December 1939, just a few months before their wedding, and she had since kept her eye out for a suitable replacement. In October, she found what she was looking for about 90 miles north of Manhattan in the hamlet of Amenia, N.Y.

Heathcote Farm was understated compared to Mill Road but every bit as elegant. She filled the grounds with expansive beds of flowers, and she and Albert filled the house with art.

By November, Albert was out of the hospital and energized for their advocacy work. On November 9, 1950, Mary and Albert, accompanied by a cadre of physicians, including oncologist Cornelius Rhoads, went to Washington to lay out their case before Frederick Lawton, director of the Bureau of the Budget. The couple was determined to get upstream of the appropriations committees in their quest for increased research funds for the next fiscal year.

The Bureau of the Budget, now the Office of Management and Budget, prepares an annual budget blueprint for Congress that outlines the administration's priorities and recommends spending levels for discretionary programs; it is known familiarly as the president's budget. The lion's share of federal spending, such as Social Security, is not included in annual appropriations. The blueprint is based on budget proposals prepared with the various federal departments. For NIH, the administration's proposal would have been based on the budget NIH ironed out with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which then sent it up to the Bureau of the Budget, where it was evaluated once more. The president's budget typically is released in late January or early February, followed by House and Senate appropriations hearings in the spring, where, in this case, Mary's citizen witnesses, along with other public witnesses, asked for additional funds for NIH. The committees also have the power to cut. Mary planned to get money added to the bureau's recommendations for the institutes in case lawmakers decided to accept the president's proposed numbers as they appeared in the budget or reduce them.



Albert and Mary attend the American Cancer Society's annual dinner in 1950.

American Cancer Society

Having always had to fight for additional funding “the hard way, from the floor of the House and Senate,” Mary didn’t anticipate tremendous success with the budget bureau. The essential problem was the same to Mary: Bureaucrats like Lawton failed to understand that if people were able to stay in good health, they earned income, some of which came back to the government in the form of taxes, more tax income than the amount spent on medical research. Despite the information they presented him, “he considered our appeal purely emotional and was basically unsympathetic,” she said, though they did manage to persuade Lawton to add about a million dollars each for the mental health and heart institutes. Mary’s resolve to see medical research funding increased before the budget arrived in Congress, however, was not dampened.

On December 5, the Laskers returned to Washington as guests of Truman’s daughter, Margaret, who had achieved some recognition as a concert soprano, to attend her performance at Constitution Hall. They would join “The Lyons Den” columnist Leonard Lyons and his wife, Sylvia. It turned out to be the concert that received an unfavorable review by *Washington Post* music critic Paul Hume, evoking the infamous and widely published retort from her father threatening, essentially, to beat up Hume should they ever meet — and creating an embarrassment for the Truman White House. The *Post* did not publish the letter, which Truman’s staff said he wrote as a father, not as president, while Hume downplayed it, noting the sudden death on the day of the concert of Truman’s friend and press secretary, as well as the stresses of the presidency.

Unaware of the gathering storm, Mary early the next morning began her strategy for dealing with the Bureau of the Budget. She had arranged an appointment with the president in which she asked him to appoint a White House liaison to the bureau to

represent her and other citizen health advocates. She suggested David Stowe, his administrative assistant, and Truman agreed.

Mary hoped that Stowe would make sure the budget office didn't alter the president's recommendations for research funding, thus eliminating the need for her to go running back to the president "every time something went wrong."

"He was supposed to speak from the White House to help us a little," Mary said. Unfortunately, Stowe had been chief examiner for the budget bureau before joining Truman's staff and may have been of the bureau's miserly mindset.

On her way out of the meeting, Mary learned Margaret had invited the Laskers and the Lyonses, as well as David and Lizette Sarnoff to lunch with her parents the next day at Blair House, the guest house located across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House where the Trumans were staying while the White House was undergoing renovations.

Mary recalled that Truman was congenial during lunch, even though that was the morning he had fired off the irate missive. "The evening papers that night were full of the letter, but we had no hint of his displeasure that noon," she said.

TAKING ON THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

The American Medical Association was on record since 1920 opposing compulsory health insurance, and it again flexed its prodigious lobbying muscle in the mid-1940s. The impetus was Truman's 1945 call to provide services to Americans on all economic levels, fund medical research and medical education, and establish a national insurance plan.

Republicans took control of both the House and Senate in the 1946 elections. The medical association, anticipating that Truman

would lose his re-election bid and that Republicans would maintain control of Congress, was confident the issue was put to rest. But with Truman's victory in 1948 came a Democratic majority in Congress, and the organization, which had spent \$1.5 million on lobbying in 1945, raised the ante by putting a \$25 surcharge on its membership dues in 1948 for the fight against what it labeled socialized medicine.

Democrats hung on to the majority in the 1950 midterm elections, but conservatives from both parties, known as the Conservative Coalition, who were opposed to government growth, managed to foil bills aimed at implementing Truman's health programs.

With 1952 elections on the horizon, Mary was concerned about the increasingly conservative climate, and she had a plan. Early in 1951, while she and Albert were enjoying their annual month's stay at La Quinta, she resolved to take on the American Medical Association.

In addition to invigorating the argument for a national health insurance plan, she wanted to energize Truman's health care proposals ahead of the 1952 elections. By then Albert was not well enough for an aggressive advertising and publicity campaign, but she had a strategy in mind. The medical association might be experiencing "delusions of grandeur" after its successes in 1950, but it couldn't be allowed to have its way in 1952.

Group health plans were popping up all over the country, but the coverage was inconsistent. Mary had followed the development of plans like Blue Cross since the 1930s, when she was troubled by her ex-husband's inability to pay his medical bills. "All my life I've felt that sometimes I was a catalytic influence or that I could help sell an idea," she said. "It wasn't feasible for me to do anything [until I married Albert] because I was working."

In 1942, she was contacted by Winslow Carlton, a Roosevelt administration veteran who in 1938 founded Group Health Insurance, an early community-based, nonprofit insurance plan. Carlton needed \$10,000 to establish an insurance plan in New York City, and Mary persuaded Albert to contribute the funds. Group Health Insurance became the Northeast's first community-based nonprofit insurance plan. Mary served on its board in the beginning as it struggled to find subscribers. She enlisted Planned Parenthood; Foote, Cone & Belding; Radio Corporation of America's New York Office employees, and American Tobacco, a former customer of Albert's. She also turned to friends, including Norman Winston and Anna Rosenberg, to help gin up business. By 1954, the plan had about 250,000 subscribers and was growing.

A year after she was approached by Carlton, Mary became involved with a second insurance venture. The Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York was a program fostered by David M. Heyman, a financier and philanthropist who advocated for health services. He and Mary had become acquainted in the 1930s. At the time, said Mary, "He was the only layman I knew that was deeply interested in medicine and its application to people on a large scale."

Heyman was president of his family's charity, the New York Foundation, from 1937 to 1966 and worked with New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia to devise the plan, which was established in 1947. Mary and Albert signed the charter and Mary was proud of how successful it was.

"The [Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York] has done a splendid and unique service to hundreds of thousands of people," she said. "It's really still a local plan, and the truth is that the only

solution to getting medical care to everybody who really needs it is to have a national health insurance under Social Security under which everybody would pay as they pay for unemployment insurance.”

Another charter signee of note was Henry J. Kaiser, who in 1942 had founded Kaiser Permanente, the first voluntary group plan in the country to offer comprehensive medical care, including medical facilities, on a large scale. By August 1944, more than 90 percent of the employees at Kaiser’s shipyard in Richmond, Washington, had enrolled. The shipyards were shut down at the end of the war, but the health plan expanded to other industries and enrolled workers’ families. Kaiser Permanente is now among the largest nonprofit insurance plans in the U.S.

A national insurance plan was featured in Truman’s initial 1945 health message to Congress and followed up by a legislative proposal, but Republicans scuttled the effort. The bill was introduced in the Senate by New York Democrat Robert Wagner and Montana’s James Murray and in the House by John Dingell Sr., a Democrat from Michigan. Known as the Wagner-Murray-Dingell plan, it had attracted vigorous debate but was doomed when Republicans took over both the House and Senate in 1946.

The idea of national health insurance was more popular in the 1940s with the public than it was in Congress. In a poll from the National Opinion Research Center, an independent institute founded in 1941 at the University of Chicago, sixty-eight percent of respondents supported government health insurance through Social Security. Among those opposed, thirty-eight percent said it represented government overreach. After Truman called for a national health plan in his November 1945 health message to Congress, a Gallup poll found that fifty-nine percent approved of the plan, while twenty-five percent disapproved. But by 1950,

as the American Medical Association got its message out, public opinion turned strongly negative in Gallup polling. A National Opinion Research Center poll in 1953 showed just thirty percent of respondents supported such a plan.

During the 1948 campaign, Truman didn't promote universal health insurance as vigorously as Mary would have liked, though it was clearly on his mind May 1 when he addressed the National Health Assembly conference in Washington, D.C. The conference was organized by Oscar Ewing, the Federal Security Agency chief, a strong proponent of greater health protections for all Americans, including insurance. The conference's goal was to develop a ten-year plan for the health and welfare of the country.

On the eve of his historic whistle-stop campaign tour, Truman called for a plan that would include better access to medical care, especially for the middle class, who were neither rich enough to pay nor poor enough for public assistance.

Mary, who had left the ailing Albert to travel alone to the meeting, sat with Ewing and the president. "Truman spoke quite well," said Mary, "and he clearly irritated the AMA's representatives at the meeting." In a 1969 oral history interview for the Truman Library, Ewing pulled no punches in his description of the medical association's opposition to government involvement in medicine, asserting, "AMA wanted to be the exclusive sovereign of medicine. They didn't want government to have anything to do with medicine. They had a very powerful lobby."

THE FIGHT GETS DIRTY

In the fall of 1949, the American Medical Association hired Campaigns Inc., a conservative political consulting firm founded by the husband-and-wife team of Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter.

Mary called them “an energetic and able team” hired to “prevent all action in health legislation.” In 1950 and 1951, the association spent more than \$2 million a year to defeat the president’s plan and the lawmakers who supported it, Mary said, and the association “was flying high, wide, and handsome with lies and distortions about everything” the president proposed. Although Pepper had attracted criticism on other fronts, Mary blamed his defeat in the 1950 primary on the same tactic used by the medical association and Whitaker and Baxter: red-baiting. In the McCarthy era of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the words communist and socialist were insults; Smathers tagged Claude as Red Pepper to great effect.

It followed that by the early days of 1951, Mary had realized that “we would not be able in any way to match their lies with effectively told truths with our existing spokesmen. ... I started to think about how the president and the party could best be armed so as not to lose as a result of this terrific propaganda onslaught.”

Ultimately, she conceived the idea of a presidential health commission, a group of high-minded people who could work objectively and publicly on the problem of the nation’s health, and she resolved to talk to Truman about it. She met with the president in February during a quick trip back to Washington to attend a meeting of the heart institute’s advisory council; she didn’t want to leave Albert alone in California for long, but neither did she want to waste time getting the commission idea up and running. She presented Truman with an outline drawn up by Gorman, but while Truman approved of the idea and even made some suggestions, the president had not acted by the time Mary and Albert returned home together in April.

On April 19, she and Florence met in Washington with India Edwards, vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, to build party support for the commission. Joining them was Gorman, whom Mary had loaned to the committee for several months, Stowe, and the DNC's publicity director. Mary was worried that pushing Truman too hard to promote national health insurance might be dangerous to the Democratic party in the 1952 elections, yet something had to be done to gain broad public support of the president's health program. In the end, the group agreed to recommend that the president appoint a health commission.

A LAST TRIP TO PARIS

On May 1, 1951, Albert's seventy-first birthday, they boarded the *Queen Mary* for what would be their last trip together to Paris.

When the Laskers returned in June, there again had been no action on the commission. In July, Mary went to see Truman, only to be told he had decided the time was not right for a health commission. In September, she and Florence returned to Washington with evidence to prove the time for a countermove was right. Florence had acquired a copy of a memo outlining the American Medical Association's strategy to defeat a Pennsylvania congressman based on the assumption he would support a national health insurance plan.

Mary took the outline to Stowe, whom she said was shocked at the ramifications for the Democratic Party should the campaign be enacted on a national scale. Stowe took the document to Truman, urging him to act. To make sure they touched all bases, Mary and Florence meanwhile sought out Clark Clifford, who had left the White House, and asked him to help them get to the president's current legal counsel, Charles Murphy. They urged Clifford and

Murphy to get Truman to appoint the commission. Finally, recognizing that Mary's strategy was a positive, forward-looking action he could present to the voters, Truman agreed. The commission would be announced the week of October 1, 1951, and it would make its report in one year, in time to highlight its recommendations in the campaign.

Convening the commission, however, was a drawn-out affair. Truman didn't sign the executive order to create it until December 29, 1951, and member selection was a frustrating process. Candidates were carefully vetted, but when some declined to serve because of the charged political atmosphere, more prospects had to be identified, vetted, and invited.

The greatest challenge was in selecting a chairman. Finally, Howard Rusk, the rehabilitation champion who had become Truman's health adviser, suggested Dr. Paul Magnuson, the former medical director of the Veterans Administration, whom Mary considered strong-minded and independent. "He was a friend of the AMA Board of Trustees and yet not likely to be a yes man to them," she said. Among the board's fifteen members were representatives from the medical professions, medical education, research institutions, and labor unions, including legendary labor leader and activist Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers.

The three members Mary insisted on were Reuther, Dean Clark, general director of the Massachusetts General Hospital; and Elizabeth Magee, general secretary of the National Consumers League.

Great care was taken in formulating the roster to ensure participants were "above any suspicion of being politically motivated and whose judgment would be respected," Stowe said in a 1963 oral history interview for the Truman Library. Mary seconded his remarks, noting that Stowe checked all the names

with her and was “most cooperative.” For his part, Ewing said the commission was Mary’s idea, and that he “personally went over the lists to make sure no one was appointed who was openly hostile to national health insurance” or “went up and down the street damning the president.”

In his statement on establishing the commission, Truman pointed out his abiding interest in “safeguarding and improving” the public’s health but stressed that attempts by his administration to solve many problems had met “enthusiastic support from some quarters and bitter opposition from others” — a reference to the AMA. He said they failed to offer “suggestions that were better than the measures” he had endorsed and had confused the public.

The Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation wouldn’t release its final report — all five volumes of it — until December 1952, long after it could have impacted the results of the election in November. Though it was widely circulated, the commission’s report was largely unheeded, and it was unlikely it would have in any way slowed the conservative landslide that Mary saw coming in La Quinta when she accused the American Medical Association of “delusions of grandeur.”

Truman said he hoped the incoming administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower would give “careful consideration” to its findings, which included the need to provide comprehensive health care to all Americans.

Mary grasped for a silver lining — “It did educate and familiarize people a little bit with what the problems were,” she said — but she was disappointed that many of the report’s conclusions were reached based on stale data and that the commission didn’t make any surveys of sickness or do fresh studies.

And the American Medical Association? Having butted heads with Dr. Magnuson over several issues during the commission's work, it was cautious in its attacks on the report's recommendations.

Just as the report did nothing for Democratic candidates, Mary's attempt to take the medical association down a peg or two did nothing to stop it from becoming one of the powerful lobbying groups on Capitol Hill. The American Medical Association would remain a thorn in Mary's side for years.

11

‘REALLY ABSOLUTE HELL’

1952

By the end of January 1952, Albert’s abdominal pains had returned, and in February he returned to the hospital where surgery showed the cancer had spread and there was nothing to be done. Mary moved into the hospital and stayed near him for the next few months.

At first they strategized together and enjoyed each other’s company as they always had, but Albert began to fade at the end of May. He slipped into a coma and died with her at his side on May 30, 1952. He was seventy-three. Mary had a mausoleum built for him in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Sleepy Hollow, New York, which she found beautiful.

Mary was comforted by the fact that Albert had been aware enough in early May to appreciate that the House and Senate conference on appropriations had given the National Cancer Institute a \$5.5 million increase. Of course, both Laskers wanted more, but Mary said it still “gave him pleasure in the last few weeks of his life.”

Albert loved the work of Henri Matisse, and Mary said he was thrilled at the opportunity to meet him when they were in the South of France in 1949. After hearing that Albert had entered the hospital in 1952, Matisse “wrote him a charming letter decorated with butterflies saying how sorry he was that he was ill,” she said. She had the letter framed and hung in her home.

After Albert’s death, thinking a stained-glass window designed by Matisse might add cheer to the simple design of the mausoleum, she contacted the artist through his son and asked if he would create a design for the stained glass. He was happy to oblige, but when “Ivy in Flower” arrived Mary found the design and colors too intense for the size of the mausoleum, so the window was never done. She did, however, donate the 10-feet-by-10-feet paper model — a medium called a “cutout,” with each ivy leaf and berry cut from hand-painted paper and glued on a second sheet — to the Dallas Museum of Art, where “it is rarely on view because it is a light-sensitive work on paper.” In 1953, Mary loaned sixty-nine paintings from the Lasker collection to the museum for a month-long exhibit to benefit the American Cancer Society in Albert’s honor.

Rep. John Fogarty of Rhode Island sent Mary one of the many tributes to Albert, writing, “You can be sure that the good he did in his life will not end now. It will be carried on by others because of his great principles, and I assure you I shall do everything in my power to be among them.”

STRENGTH AND DETERMINATION

After Albert's death, Mary plunged into the life and purpose she had created. Though Beekman Place, the seven-story townhouse she and Albert shared in the city, as well as their country home upstate in Amenia, echoed with memories of Albert's laughter, thoughtfulness, and counsel, Mary didn't dwell openly on her loss. She had been a determined and independent woman when they met, and it never occurred to her not to persevere.

She and Florence defied the notion that women of their means were dilettantes; they were a formidable and knowledgeable team devoted to the work before them. They found in each other a like-minded, intelligent friend driven to make a difference in society.

Less than a month after Albert's death, at the end of June 1952, Mary was back in Washington to attend a meeting of the advisory council of the National Heart Institute — and to drop in on Truman for a chat about his health policy legacy.

For Mary, across congresses and presidencies, the goal of making the players understand the value of medical research was always the same. Even as the playing field constantly changed, Mary was continually planning. She was determined the final Truman budget proposal contain a healthy allocation for the institutes she championed within the National Institutes of Health; she wanted to set a precedent for the next administration and cement Truman's legacy of support for medical research.

Truman had given up his bid for a second full term after losing to Estes Kefauver in the February 1952 New Hampshire primary. Conservative opposition had thwarted bills to enact his domestic agenda, the Korean War was slogging on, and red fear pervaded the American psyche. In early January, Mary and Florence had stopped by the White House to ask how he liked his new commission and found him world weary and already planning not to run.

As Mary recounted it, Truman said, "I've just finished 30 consecutive years in elective office and none of it was because of my seeking." He went on to say that Bess was worn out by all her duties, and he didn't think she could last another four years. And the White House was no place for his daughter, Margaret, who was "at a great disadvantage by my being president."

Nonetheless, the Truman administration carried on with the business of government, through the coming elections and right up until his term ended in January 1952. Part of that business was to produce a budget proposal for fiscal 1954, which at the time would have run from July 1, 1953 to June 30, 1954.

Mary and Florence had consulted with health organizations as well as the NIH directors and members of their advisory councils and settled on a total of about \$122 million that they reasoned could be used effectively in 1954 by the National Heart Institute (\$37 million), the National Institute of Mental Health (\$27 million), the National Cancer Institute (\$25 million), the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness (\$15 million), and the National Institute of Arthritis and Metabolic Diseases, which studied diabetes and endocrine



Mary Lasker receives the fourteenth annual Clement Cleveland Award in March 1952 from Dr. John Gerster, honorary chairman of the New York City Cancer Committee, and Anna Rosenberg, assistant U.S. secretary of defense.

AP photo by Jacob Harris

and gastrointestinal maladies (\$18 million). It was a big number, they knew, but they had the facts and figures to back it up, so that's what they took to the president.

On a Sunday afternoon after the June council meeting, they went to see Truman and asked him "point blank" to write a letter to Frederick Lawton, the budget director, instructing him to set the funding levels they proposed. Mary argued that making sure adequate funds were available for the institutes created as part of his health program would be a good legacy. They left him with the documents to support the amount they proposed for each institute.

Truman smiled and said, "You will see. There will be an improvement." They took that to mean, Mary said later, "that he would actually do something about it."

As insurance, before she left town Mary phoned Dr. Wallace Graham, Truman's personal physician and consultant on medical issues, and asked him to be sure Truman followed through. She was annoyed to discover that the president had already dumped all the documents she and Florence gave him on Graham's desk and told him to deal with Lawton. "As charming a man as Graham was, he was a surgeon and not at all involved with research," Mary said, and he was not prepared to argue her case to the budget director. She decided the best course of action was to arrange an educational meeting between Graham and Surgeon General Scheele, who had oversight of NIH. There was always the danger that Scheele, as a member of the administration, wouldn't actively support figures above what the budget was likely to allow; still, he was the best person for the job. She was leaving for Paris in a week for a change and a rest, but she arranged for Luke Quinn to accompany Graham to a meeting with Scheele sometime in July.

While in Paris, Mary arranged to meet with Dr. Howard Rusk, who pioneered the discipline of rehabilitation medicine internationally, starting with programs for the Army Air Corps to help physically and mentally disabled airmen after World War II. Mary knew of him as the founder of the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at New York University (now Rusk Rehabilitation at NYU Langone Health) and from his column in *The New York Times*. She thought him a persuasive man who would make an “outstanding spokesman” for the cause of medical research funding — if she and her group could get him to broaden his focus beyond rehabilitation. At their meeting, she argued that through medical research and improved health the need for rehabilitation could be delayed to later stages of life. She invited him to join their next visit with Truman regarding the coming budget.

Europe might have been a change, but Mary couldn't rest. Nervous that Truman wouldn't get her NIH figures to Lawton before the budget was finished, she changed her plans and went home early at the beginning of September. When she and Florence met with the president on September 8 for an update, they took Rusk with them. As she feared, Rusk put the emphasis of his plea on funds for rehabilitation and in her opinion made no real pitch for research. Still, he had been recruited into Mary's cadre of advocates.

During the meeting they were told Graham had drafted the letter, but no one on Truman's staff could tell her whether it had been delivered to Lawton. Mary called Graham, who also was unsure of the letter's status but said he would look into it. Florence, who was a genius at pleasant persistence, kept after Graham until he finally assured her it had been sent. But Mary was uneasy. At the beginning of October, she decided to pursue another angle. She asked Lynn Adams at the National Committee Against Mental

Illness to call the budget office and ask whether there might be an increase for the National Institute of Mental Health. Adams was told not to count on it, and Mary realized the entire budget for medical research was in trouble. She later referred to the whole affair as “really absolute hell.”

She and Florence went into emergency mode and contacted Matthew Connelly, the president’s appointment secretary, who advised them that the only way to get anything done at this point was through Bess Truman, whom Mary knew to be “charming and powerful” but who rarely exercised her influence. Mary thought, “You’re telling us this now?”

But the always-sociable Florence knew what to do. She had, toward the end of 1951, developed a great friendship with Bess and won her support for medical research. Florence got in touch with Bess, who took the problem up with Harry, who punted it to his administrative assistant David Stowe, who, Mary noted, “should have been handling the matter in the first place.” Stowe told the budget office to add \$10 million to the institutes’ 1954 budgets for research and training.

Ever hopeful, Mary then decided to go back to the president for an increase in support for research facilities construction to make up for time lost during wartime restrictions on civilian use of steel. On October 9, she and Anna Rosenberg were ushered into a “sunny, large, handsome, and cheerful” study on the second floor of the newly refurbished White House, where they found Truman in a good mood. Rosenberg, who knew because of her position at the Defense Department that plenty of steel was now available, did most of the talking. Though neither woman held out hope for action in the closing weeks of the presidential election campaign, Truman did agree to contact the budget office about adding \$40 million to the budget for research facilities.

Rosenberg was visiting Mary in Amenia one Saturday at the end of November — after the Democrats had lost the election — when they decided to phone the president, chat for a bit, and check on those construction funds. As expected, Truman had not acted. “He said he would take the matter up, but nothing happened and time wore on,” said Mary. Rosenberg, however, was persistent, and Truman eventually turned the problem over to Stowe, who was overwhelmed with tying up the loose ends of the Truman administration. Stowe said he thought they might only get \$5 million, but he would make the effort. Mary was discouraged, but consoled herself that \$5 million was better than nothing.

Then an amazing thing happened. Stowe called her and in an agitated but triumphant tone told her the people in the budget office had turned him down, and it made him so angry he went straight to “the boss.” Stowe asked Truman to write a memo saying \$15 million was to be put into the NIH budget for construction of research facilities across the board, and Stowe delivered it personally.

Within an hour Scheele, intuiting the source of the proposed windfall, called Mary to ask how she would like the funds distributed among the institutes, should they be appropriated. The Truman 1954 budget proposal was finalized with an additional \$25 million over what Congress had appropriated for 1953.

Florence’s networking, Anna’s experience, and Mary’s strategic thinking had been rewarded. But was it fated to be an empty victory? The NIH budget would soon be in the hands of the Republican administration being formed by President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower. As well, both houses of Congress would have a Republican majority — for the first time in more than two decades — with belt tightening on their minds.

12

THE REAL BATTLE GETS UNDERWAY

1953

So far in their campaign for medical research, Mary and Florence had been working with receptive Democratic administrations. Their chief obstacle had been lawmakers of both parties who were hidebound to convention or simply ignorant of the need and potential of federally funded medical research.

With Republicans in control, the pair anticipated a more difficult environment, full of decision-makers who were unwilling to listen, or worse, openly opposed to their crusade.

By this time, Mary understood the budget and appropriations process and the key players, but the coming presidential transition added the complexity of dealing with two presidents and their

budgets, a new Congress, and a changing American political landscape. Regardless, she knew that one-on-one advocacy with key members would remain essential to gaining the funding increases she wanted. She had been successful with that tactic so far, and she trusted it wouldn't fail her now — once the new players got to know her. While her goals remained aggressive based on her personal conviction of the need, she sensed that Republicans in general did not like to spend, and they still weren't convinced that the government should be in the medical research business. Getting the level of funding she had in mind would be an uphill slog.

By the end of January 1953, Mary and Florence couldn't afford to wait any longer to engage the new administration. Their first target was Oveta Culp Hobby, the new head of the Federal Security Administration. Eisenhower had tapped Hobby based on her service in World War II leading the Women's Army Corps, which she had tightened up and restructured into a respected component of the Army. Her husband, a former governor of Texas, owned the *Houston Post*, where Hobby had been president and editor before going into public relations for the War Department, a position that led to her service in the Army.

Mary and Florence were acquainted with Hobby from Washington society gatherings and felt generally friendly toward her, so Florence invited her to dinner, which turned out to be a congenial evening but not the meeting of minds they had hoped for.

Hobby, said Mary, was unaware of their efforts behind the progress that had been made in increasing funding for medical research — and she didn't care. She had no idea “to what lengths we went about,” Mary said.

In Mary's opinion, Hobby's priority was to gain cabinet status for the Federal Security Administration, and for that she needed

the support of Congress and at least passive approval from the American Medical Association, which Hobby acknowledged she didn't know well. Mary described Hobby as an able manager, but careful, cautious, and ambitious. Hobby got her wish. From the beginning of his administration, Eisenhower invited Hobby to sit in on cabinet meetings, and on April 11, 1953, the Federal Security Administration became the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare with Hobby as its inaugural secretary. (It would be renamed the Department of Health and Human Services in 1980.)

Mary and Florence held out hope they could bring Hobby around. To that end, they arranged for her to meet with Gorman and Dr. Russell Lee, an outspoken general practitioner from California, who had been a member of Truman's health commission. Lee had narrowly yet successfully led the opposition when AMA leadership proposed to its House of Delegates that it condemn the recommendations in the commission's report. Florence arranged the meeting, but Gorman and Lee apparently did little to impress Hobby, who, Mary observed years later, was always "horrified at my activities" for medical research.

Mary and Florence came away from that trip feeling the momentum in Washington was to cut spending and reject any idea or program sponsored by the Truman administration. Eisenhower was out to restrict government spending, which meant redrafting the budget proposal for fiscal 1954 on which Mary and company had expended so much energy.

Neither Mary nor Florence would enter the White House again until John F. Kennedy took office, though Rosenberg was acquainted with Eisenhower and attempted to advise him on medical research. Without great access to the executive branch, Mary and her allies needed to cultivate friends in the new Republican Congress.

While Mary was back in Washington for the February meeting of the advisory council of the National Heart Institute, she arranged to meet Joseph Dodge, the new director of the budget. Dodge had resigned as president of Detroit Bank to join the Eisenhower administration, and Mary, thinking he might be better impressed by her wealth than her advocacy, presented him with a letter of introduction from the president of Bankers Trust, where she kept a great deal of money. She brought with her Sen. Matthew Neely, who did most of the talking as they presented Dodge with the Truman budget for NIH, as well as data on the need for research facilities construction that the Public Health Service had solicited from the deans of the nation's medical schools. Dodge, reported Mary, seemed "interested but noncommittal."

Undaunted, Mary turned to educating the new Congress and arranged a luncheon for members of the House Appropriations Committee, at which Dr. Cornelius Rhoads talked about progress in cancer research. The luncheon was held at the Hotel Congressional, a residence hotel within dashing distance of the House office buildings that opened in 1948 as a response to the post-war housing shortage that left House members few options for a pied-a-terre. It was also a convenient place to host a lunch for busy representatives who possibly lived in the hotel.

In March, Rosenberg joined Mary for a break at La Quinta, during which they went to see Odum, who headed the Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation and was a high-profile Republican, at his ranch near Palm Springs. As they sat beside a hot-water pool overlooking the desert landscape, Mary told him about the headwind she faced in Washington and asked for help getting more funds for the National Institute of Arthritis and Metabolic Diseases. She had only met Eisenhower a few times and was afraid to approach him directly because she felt "no real connection with him at all," she confessed. Odum said he would telegram Eisenhower.

From Palm Springs, Mary and Anna went to the Z-Triangle ranch in Arizona, where Florence joined them. Mary and Florence, who already spent a good deal of time in Arizona with her sons, had purchased the 350-acre ranch together in 1947. The main structure was an attractive southwest-style pink stucco mansion with thirteen rooms arranged in a U around a courtyard.

On April 1, Mary phoned Scheele for an update. The surgeon general knew only that the entire Truman budget was being reworked. On April 10, she phoned Dr. James Van Slyke, the first director of the National Heart Institute, who was now an associate NIH director, to ask if he knew anything. Van Slyke concurred with Scheele about the budget in general, but he told her he had heard it would soon be announced that there were no construction funds for research facilities in the Eisenhower budget, putting the effort back to the fiscal 1953 level. All Mary could think was to be grateful for the money added to the Truman budget that gave Eisenhower something to cut.

Years later, Mary reflected that Eisenhower had no interest in the public's health. He "felt health was something people should take care of themselves," and that medical education should be funded by contributions from individuals and corporations. Government had no business in any of it. "It was a very curious attitude for anyone whose whole health care and [West Point] education had been paid for out of federal funds."

ON TO CONGRESS WITH SLEEVES ROLLED UP

With her progress through the budget office stymied, Mary's strategy turned to the House and Senate Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittees and full appropriations committees.

The full House committee was chaired by Republican Fred Busbey of Illinois, a diehard conservative and friend of the AMA. The ranking minority member, however, was a friend: John Fogarty, a union man from Rhode Island whom Mary described as a “naturally bright Irishman who had a heart but was very tough.”

In April, Mary and Florence left Arizona, Mary going to New York and Florence to Washington. Florence reported that the House subcommittee hearing had gone well, and that Fogarty had helped by asking leading questions of witnesses who could bring out vital points.

In early May, Mary traveled to Washington the day before the full committee was scheduled to mark up its 1954 Health, Education, and Welfare appropriations bill. (During the markup process, committee members debate a bill and offer amendments.) Over cocktails that night, Fogarty said it would be a tough fight. The next morning before the meeting, she went to see Busbey in his office and pitched him on the value of medical research to the economy, repeating her mantra that healthy people produce goods and pay taxes. She told him she was “a large taxpayer” and pointed out that funding medical research was, at its root, enlightened self-interest. She found him to be “very bland, rather amiable and offhand.”

She then went to Fogarty’s office to wait. When he returned, he looked to Mary as though he had been in a terrible fight; he was exhausted. “I have never seen him look so pale, and he said nothing for about 10 minutes,” she said. Finally she got out of him that he had managed an increase for the five institutes of about \$6 million, from about \$44 million to around \$50 million. From the way he looked, she knew he had gotten the maximum, and she hid her disappointment.

On May 19, Mary and Anna Rosenberg set out to test the Senate waters. They first visited Sen. Edward Thye of Minnesota, who chaired the Senate's appropriations subcommittee for Health, Education, and Welfare. Rosenberg had done him some favors while she was at the Defense Department. They started with the basics, explaining the need to fund medical research and giving him the same evidence Mary had given Truman for his last budget proposal. He was cordial and said he was sympathetic to an increase over the House figures.

They then visited Sen. Styles Bridges, who had helped Mary with the heart institute legislation in 1947 and who chaired the full committee, this time stressing the need for funds to support research facilities construction. Bridges said he would help, and they were elated. Mary told Bridges she "felt kindly toward him" because of his help earlier and offered to again support his coming campaign for reelection, though she was a Democrat (and she knew that as a Republican he could never lose in New Hampshire). They left the Hill with hope for getting an increase, though "just what it would be was in the lap of God and how much pressure we could exert on the senators" before they voted, she said.

That evening, Florence and Mary reprised the educational seminar they had held for the House appropriations committee, this time inviting a few members of the Senate committee and their wives to dinner at the graceful Georgetown home Florence had purchased after she and Dan divorced in 1950. Rhoads again gave an update on breakthroughs in cancer research and Dr. Jessie Marmorston, whose research Mary helped support, talked about her work in atherosclerosis.

Lister Hill and his wife were there, but Mary accepted that his primary concern was funding the Hill-Burton Act, a hospital

construction program. The skeptic they had hoped to impress, Democrat Richard Russell of Georgia, begged off because of a cold. They also invited Democrats John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Henry Jackson of Washington, who were not on the committee, but Mary and Florence wanted them to be familiar with the issues at stake in the event of a floor fight.

On May 21, Mary and Florence went to Capitol Hill to hear Fogarty defend the Health, Education, and Welfare budget on the House floor. "He did a stirring and superb job," said Mary. The \$6 million increase held. Unfortunately, a few weeks later, Fogarty had a heart attack and spent three months recuperating. With the House and Senate conference on the appropriations bill yet to be worked through, "the loss of him left us not knowing how to get along," she said. "He would have been a tower of strength on our side."

CORONATION OF A QUEEN

From Washington, Mary retired to Amenias for the weekend, and then, with an admittedly guilty conscience, she left May 27 on the *Queen Elizabeth* to attend the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. She had received an invitation, likely through her friend Audrey Bouverie, to view the June 2, 1953, celebration from a viewing stand in front of Apsley House, the Duke of Wellington's mansion, and felt it would be a special pleasure to take advantage of the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because it would be "so picturesque." Mary did her part to add to the charm of the occasion. For the coronation, she wore a navy blue satin suit with a "huge" antique diamond rose spray on the lapel and a small pillbox hat of tiny pastel flowers. To the ball that night she wore a Christian Dior gown of pink lace with a slender front and elaborate shirred back.

She didn't socialize in London for long, however. A few days later, she sailed for New York on the *United States* with the intention of being in Washington to "remind the men I had seen earlier of the facts and figures" before the Senate appropriations Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittee marked up its version of the 1954 spending bill. The hearings were held while she was gone, and Rosenberg had phoned her in London that Sen. Thye was planning his subcommittee markup for June 16. Mary implored her to ask the senator to put it off until June 18. In a testament to Mary's influence, Thye delayed the meeting for two days so she could be in town.

On the morning of June 16, Mary flew to Washington and stayed the night with Florence so they could head to the Hill first thing in the morning to exert pressure. They spoke once more with Thye, then took another crack at Milton Young of North Dakota, who Mary felt was a throwback because he valued agricultural research over research to benefit humans. They spent time with Dennis Chavez of New Mexico, a Democrat who had chaired the subcommittee in the last Congress and was the first Hispanic person elected to a full term in the U.S. Senate. She thought Chavez, whom she supported, was not good with details, and she wanted to go over the figures again. In the end, the subcommittee added \$4 million to the House figure, for an increase of only \$10 million over the Eisenhower budget. Mary began immediately to formulate a strategy for getting more funds added at the full Senate Appropriations Committee markup.

CRAZY UNEXPECTED THINGS

Mary again flew to Washington two weeks later to have a "preliminary conversation" with Sen. Bridges before the markup. During their

meeting, she assured him of her respect for what he had done and for “his unusual insight into the needs of research.” He asked her for a realistic figure, and though she wanted to shoot for the \$70 million total in the Truman budget, which contained the \$15 million increase for facilities construction, she conceded the best he could probably get in the full committee was an additional \$16 million, half for research and training and half for construction.

Bridges said he would go for the \$70 million if she would ask Chavez to propose it, and she took the message to Chavez “with great glee and pleasure.” A big part of a lobbyist’s — or a citizen activist’s — work is carrying messages back and forth among members of Congress, often discreetly, as they work out a deal, and in this case Mary was carrying good news.

She wrote the numbers for individual institutes down for Chavez and got him to agree to propose about half of the additional money for construction. Mary and Florence then went door-to-door visiting committee members and providing them with fact sheets listing research payoffs and how much productivity was lost due to illness and premature death. In a 1978 interview, at age seventy-eight, Mary said this intensive lobbying was the hardest thing she had ever done in life. Traveling to and through the various buildings to visit scattered offices and grabbing as many crucial, high-pressure minutes as they could with lawmakers was so time consuming and exhausting that she and Florence only met a scant handful of legislators a day. Time was short and she set priorities. “If they’re not crucial to the decision, they don’t receive a visit from me,” she said.

Senators Magnuson and Hill, as well as Willis Robertson of Virginia, all said they would support the agreed-upon figures in the full committee. When the time came, the committee voted to

increase only the amount proposed for research and training — no increase for facilities construction. Still, the full Senate committee voted about \$10 million more than the House had voted. “Chavez made the proposal but apparently didn’t fight very hard,” said Mary.

The total wasn’t spectacular compared to her goal, but it was more than had ever been voted for the five institutes. “We had done the best we could,” Mary said, adding that the increase had to survive on the Senate floor, and “one never knows what crazy unexpected things develop.”

The day the bill went to the Senate floor, Mary and Florence sat in the gallery, where several senators stopped to say hello and others recognized them from the floor. They were horrified to hear that Thye had noted in his introductory remarks that the committee had eliminated construction funds but planned to have the need investigated. As debate on the NIH section of the bill came up, Everett Dirksen, a Republican from Illinois whom Mary considered an obstructionist, came onto the floor. Dirksen proceeded to make “some completely ignorant and unfounded remarks” regarding cancer research, said Mary, and Magnuson responded by “turning on him like a tiger.” The discussion ended and the bill was finally passed around seven that evening — with the research budget increase included.

Though passing that milestone was satisfying, Mary couldn’t exhale yet because the House and Senate conference committee had to iron out the differences on the bill, and Fogarty, her House champion, remained in the hospital. The conference was set for the following Monday, and Mary begged Bridges to be there because “if there’s no one strong for you at the conference, you’ll lose everything.” She pictured conservative House committee members led by Busbey “sharpening their knives for economy.”

Mary retired to her farm in Amenias to wait. On the morning of the conference, she received a call that Bridges had been hit by a car, and the meeting was being delayed. Bridges, whose injuries were not severe, had asked to have it rescheduled so he could be there, an act Mary found “very honorable” because he had promised her he would attend. Mary used the time to phone all over the country to people she thought could influence Busbey, including the heads of the American Cancer Society, the Arthritis Foundation, and any other health organization she could think of, and asked them to contact the congressman.

In the end, however, Busbey and his House colleagues forced the Senate to cut their proposal by \$1 million, leaving the total for fiscal 1954 just under \$15 million more than the Eisenhower budget proposal of \$44 million. There were no funds for facilities construction. Still, Mary had successfully pushed through the largest-ever increase in medical research funding.

In addition to the five NIH institutes Mary fought for, the rest of NIH was “protected by the umbrella of the demand for funds” she and Florence had made for the five institutes, so they got about the money they had received in other years, she explained.

Mary had battled through every step of the funding process, beginning with a strategically brilliant move to push for big increases for her five institutes in the Truman budget, giving the Eisenhower administration something to hack at without cutting bone. Despite facing Republicans eager to cut spending and caring little for her agenda, Mary was tenacious.

She and Florence met with numerous lawmakers, cajoling and praising, debating and persuading. They supplied the hard facts members needed to make their case and helped iron out deals between lawmakers.

They first made their case for an increase to the leadership of the Republican majority and the Democratic minority on the House appropriations subcommittees. Then they followed the argument to the full House Appropriations Committee and finally through surrogates to the House floor. After that, they turned to the Senate side, first making their case to the leadership of the subcommittee, the full Senate Appropriations Committee, and then through surrogates on the Senate floor. Finally, Mary held her breath as members of the House and Senate appropriations committees met to hammer out a compromise bill that could be passed by both houses of Congress.

“Each move was so painfully made,” Mary said. That is the pattern she and Florence followed, with interesting variations, throughout their advocacy.

13

THE HOBBY BOOMERANG

1953 – 1955

Mary had been striving for more than a decade to cultivate an appreciation in the halls of Congress, the offices of government, and the consciousness of the American people for the value of medical research. The congressional action started over a friendly dinner one spring night in Florida when she and Florence convinced Sen. Claude Pepper to hold hearings on the nation's post-war medical needs. From there, Mary launched a citizen activist campaign that resulted in four new federal research institutes. Finally, she engaged in the ongoing struggle for sufficient funds to support that research. From the time of the Pepper hearings in 1944, when the government

spent roughly \$2 million on medical research, that funding grew to more than \$98 million in fiscal 1956.

That was the year “we broke the barrier of a miserly attitude toward medical research,” Mary said. The victory was the result of a new sympathy for research in Congress and in the Office of the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and it built on Mary’s and Florence’s success in 1953 and 1954 in the early months of the Eisenhower presidency. It was the “beginning of a new dawn for human health and well-being,” she said.

But that breakthrough didn’t happen overnight or without a fight. It was a critical time for the nascent NIH, and it highlighted Mary’s adaptability and determination in the face of what she would call “blind conservatism.”

In 1953, the Eisenhower administration had been determined to balance the federal budget, and Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Hobby had been determined that her department hold the line on spending, particularly in medical research, where Congress had indulged in a troublesome pattern of increases. Mary and Florence would be incensed when they discovered the lengths to which Hobby went to try to achieve her goal.

According to a narrative in Florence’s biography, during the conference meeting of the House and Senate appropriations committees on the fiscal 1954 spending bill for Health, Education, and Welfare agencies, Florence was in the press gallery observing the proceedings when a Senate aide brought her a note. It was from Hobby to the senators. In it she argued that appropriations for medical research had been generous, and it was time to let private ventures have the field. She was calling up the old bugaboo that the private sector would be discouraged from investing in research if the government got any more involved.

Hobby's argument had failed to convince the senators, who agreed to add \$10 million to the House's \$4 million increase. The total NIH appropriation for fiscal 1954 had come out at just under \$15 million more than the Eisenhower budget proposal of \$44 million, a result that challenged Hobby's resolve to hold the line on spending.

Sometime later, Mary was infuriated to discover that Hobby had sent a memo dated July 11, 1953, to Budget Director Dodge, apparently hoping he would somehow influence the Senate deliberations by urging senators to keep the House figures in future appropriations, a move Mary considered "an incredible attempt to interfere ... with what Congress wanted to vote" once they had received the administration's budget proposal. Mary saw it as a breach of the separation between the executive and legislative branches of the government.

In the memo to Dodge, Hobby argued that, "While it is clearly important from the standpoint of the public interest to move ahead with medical research, the question is one of rate of increase and of the distribution of funds." She stressed that "the great majority of scientific investigators in medical research who have demonstrated promising talent have been provided the opportunity to pursue their research interests." With that need satisfied, the modest increase in the House's allocation was preferable because it left room for the private sector to participate, while the larger Senate allocation might tend to discourage such participation. "Therefore, the House levels of appropriations in the medical research field would seem to deserve consideration," the memo read.

"I think it's just blind conservatism," said Mary. The amounts were tiny compared to the full federal budget, so the strong opposition

was galling to Mary. “It shows you just how blind people’s objections are to being defended against dying,” she said.

Mary and Florence turned Hobby’s action into an opportunity to inform the public about her apparent disregard for their health and welfare. That month they distributed copies of the message to influential journalist friends, who, importantly, had nationally syndicated columns.

Drew Pearson, an investigative reporter whose “Washington Merry-Go-Round” column was regularly picked up by newspapers across the country, led his August 4 column by noting that Hobby had asked senators to cut funds for cancer research at a time when a fellow senator, Robert Taft of Ohio (the Senate majority leader and an adviser to Eisenhower), lay in a New York hospital dying of the disease. Taft died on July 31, 1953.

The Senate, wrote Pearson, sees Hobby’s move as “balancing the budget at the expense of human life.” Pearson reported that Hobby contacted Dodge after the Senate increased the \$44 million she had budgeted for medical research to \$59 million. Hobby’s proposal for cancer was \$15.8 million, \$6.22 million less than the fiscal 1954 budget proposal prepared by the Truman administration. In an aside, Pearson noted that Hobby had at the same time sent a note to Eisenhower asking him to write to Thye, who chaired the Senate’s subcommittee for Health, Education, and Welfare appropriations, about adding \$150,000 for her new office.

In his “Washington Calling” column of the same date, Marquis Childs wrote, “As it is, dedicated believers in medical research such as Mrs. Albert Lasker and Mrs. Florence Mahoney spent weeks crusading on Capitol Hill to get Congress to approve present appropriations.” He went on to write, “If Taft’s colleagues want to

memorialize him, they could do no better than to start the search for the killer in a really big way.”

In the end, the National Cancer Institute was funded at \$20 million for fiscal 1954.

ONE STEP FORWARD

On August 4, the same day that Pearson laid into Hobby, Mary paid a social call on Nelson Rockefeller, who had been appointed Undersecretary of Health, Education, and Welfare.

Mary had always liked Rockefeller. He had persuaded her to join the board of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, and she hoped art might be common ground for sparking an enthusiasm for medical research. But when she began to talk about the importance of NIH research to improving the life of the average citizen, he countered that those kinds of discoveries aren’t made with money. She responded that she knew of no one who had made discoveries recently who wasn’t paid. “He obviously had no idea of the importance of medical research,” she concluded. “The meeting was completely unsuccessful.” She left downhearted at the thought she had made an enemy instead of a friend and never approached him again. “I thought it was hopeless,” she said.

She and Florence sailed for Europe the next day on the *Queen Elizabeth* for a change of scenery. When they returned September 1, she called Surgeon General Scheele for an update and was surprised to hear that during a budget discussion, Rockefeller had told him there was a great deal of pressure from activist groups for increased research funding, so those funds shouldn’t be cut too heavily. Nonetheless, she soon learned that planned cuts to the various institute budgets for fiscal 1955 would erase the gains they had painstakingly fought for during the last budget cycle.

Worse, Rockefeller's remark wouldn't be the most disingenuous pro-research message to come out of the administration. By mid-December, Mary learned that Eisenhower would include health in his January 1954 State of the Union Address, and that he would be delivering a health message to Congress soon after. Pleased, Mary felt there was no doubt the health messages she had urged Truman to send Congress were the reason Eisenhower felt he should show an interest. In his January 7 address, Eisenhower came out strongly against the socialization of medicine but gave a nod to limited government reinsurance services that would permit private and nonprofit insurance companies to offer broader protection to more families, a statement Mary again attributed to the public's interest in Truman's proposals. Eisenhower went on to say that the federal government should encourage research against dread diseases such as cancer and heart ailments.

In his January 18 health message to Congress, the president declared that "the Public Health Service should be strengthened in its research activities" through the NIH. Health had never been considered news in presidential messages, and Mary was heartened when news broadcasts featured Eisenhower's statements about medical research. The recognition alone was "some degree of triumph," she said. She feared, though, that Scheele was right in his opinion that the administration policy was to talk up the importance of health policy but not spend money.

True enough, the fiscal 1955 appropriations process did not go well for the research community. Intimidated by Hobby, the institute directors and Scheele stuck to the administration's meager budget proposal in their testimony, and the Senate added only enough money to bring the total NIH appropriation up to roughly the benchmark Truman budget request of \$70 million, of which \$59

million would go to Mary's five institutes. "It's really man against himself in the most extraordinary way," Mary said.

The news also wasn't good for their efforts to raise money for research facilities construction. Early in 1954, looking toward appropriations for fiscal 1955, Mary had gone to see Sen. Styles Bridges about funding for research facilities, and the New Hampshire senator had suggested that, in fact, it might be a good year to focus on that goal. Mary remembered him calling it unfinished business and agreeing it was worth another effort. Unfortunately, in the subcommittee markup, senators had argued that without a funding design in which universities would raise funds to match federal construction grants, they felt the more prestigious schools would have an unfair advantage in the competition for funds. Looking to the full appropriations committee markup, Bridges asked Mary and Florence to persuade Senators Willis Robertson, Lister Hill, Warren Magnuson, Harley Kilgore, and Dennis Chavez to back a proposal that \$15 million in matching funds be written into the Senate bill.

The whole plan was a disaster. The senators who had promised their support seemed confused, said Mary, and no construction funds were included in the appropriations bill. Bridges said Thye, the subcommittee chair, "evidently had too many fish to fry to make a fight for us," Mary recounted. In the end, when Mary went to see him after the markup, she said Bridges told her he felt that only a stand-alone bill outlining the matching grants provision would make it possible to get funds for the construction of research facilities.

POETIC JUSTICE

In the fall, Mary learned that Hobby would be an October 4 guest on the influential public affairs program *Meet the Press*, co-founded and produced by Lawrence Spivak. Mary contacted



Former President Harry Truman helps present an award with Mary to an honoree at the Lasker Foundation Awards dinner in November 1955 in Kansas City, Missouri.

Harry S. Truman Library & Museum

Spivak and told him Hobby should be asked why she didn't seek more funds for heart disease and cancer research, the two main causes of death. The evening the show aired, Mary and her secretary, Jane McDonough, were glued to the radio in Mary's living room, Jane poised to take note of Hobby's every comment. When Hobby said she relied on the advice of the advisory councils to the NIH institutes to formulate her budget requests to Congress, Mary was dumbfounded. "No council had ever been asked for any advice at all by Mrs. Hobby or anyone else in the Public Health Service!" she exclaimed. Over the next year, Mary and

Florence seized the opportunity to turn Hobby's remarks into poetic justice.

Mary and Florence valued their advisory council appointments because as council members they got a feel for what was going on in research and within the Public Health Service in general. The medical and lay people on the councils "were not well-informed about the mechanics of government," and to Mary and Florence's knowledge their fellow council members had no idea the pair had anything to do with creating four institutes or with funding them, along with the existing National Cancer Institute, Mary explained. They were advisers on whether one project was better than another and whether one should be funded if there was money for it, she said.

Nonetheless, Mary and Florence had some friends on the councils, and they encouraged them to contact Hobby's office to say they were pleased she was seeking their advice on their funding needs. "Of course the funds were much larger than anything they had ever thought possible," Mary said. The councils had recommended a total of \$97 million, with an additional \$42 million for construction.

The councils' resolutions were presented to the surgeon general, who passed them along to Hobby, who disregarded them, as did the Bureau of the Budget — and the president never saw them. The president's budget proposal for 1956 came out only \$5 million over what Congress had voted for in fiscal 1955. But Hobby's disregard for the recommendations of the five councils proved to be a critical error. It was the ammunition Mary and Florence gave Sen. Lister Hill to convince his colleagues to include in the Senate version of the fiscal 1956 appropriations bill the total amount they recommended.

A SLIGHT ADVANTAGE

The Democrats took back control of the House and Senate in the November 1954 midterm elections, claiming some seats thought solidly Republican. Prospects looked promising for a better funding climate for medical research. However, in the House, Democrat Clarence Cannon of Missouri, a strict fiscal conservative, was back in the chair of the appropriations Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittee, and John Taber of New York became the ranking Republican; they had simply switched leadership roles. As they had not supported Mary's efforts in the past, prospects remained dim for help from that quarter. In the Senate, though, Democrat Lister Hill was a strong supporter and Republican Styles Bridges was, Mary observed, "a great help in the clutches of the committee."

In spring 1955, Mary and Florence spent some time at the Z-Triangle ranch, and refreshed for the appropriations battle, they went to see Hill, who wasn't sure how he was going to sell the full Senate appropriations committee on increasing spending for the five institutes. Mary advised him to ask the senators why they would follow the advice of the budget bureau and Secretary Hobby, who don't hold hearings and don't look into research needs in any detail, over the advice of leading doctors and laymen appointed by the Public Health Service.

She gave Hill the names of the council members so he could do his own research, and he "did a marvelous job ... getting the committee to raise the funding for the five institutes by \$23 million" of the \$97 million the councils had suggested. The bill went to the Senate floor in mid-June and passed.

The problem, of course, was the conference with the House. Again, Mary lamented that "you can have all the friends you

want on one side, but if you don't have them on both sides, you're sunk." She was right. In conference, Hill managed to save only \$7 million of the increase for fiscal 1956. Still, \$23 million was an extraordinary increase going in and a sign of things to come. The government's medical research funding topped \$98 million, dwarfing the \$2 million spent in 1944. Spending was heading in the right direction — up.

At the end of July, Mary and Anna set out for Europe heartened by the news that Oveta Hobby had resigned, largely because of her department's oversight failures in the infamous Cutter Incident, in which tens of thousands of children were sickened by polio vaccines that mistakenly included the live virus. Fifty-one children were paralyzed, and five died.

Hobby never saw eye-to-eye with Mary, and Mary was not sorry to bid her farewell. The feeling was likely mutual.

Mary and Anna would spend the next two months in Europe. While they were abroad, events back home would change how the nation — and its leadership — thought about public health and medical research.

14

‘THE MOST LIFE-SAVING HEART ATTACK’

1955 – 1956

On September 24, 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower suffered a massive heart attack while vacationing at his wife Mamie’s childhood home in Colorado, precipitating a crash course for the nation in the biology of the heart, the nature of heart disease, and the latest in treatment. “It was the most life-saving heart attack that ever came to anyone,” Mary said.

The popular president began to feel ill while golfing the day before and, after a night thinking he had indigestion, was taken to a military hospital suffering from what was later diagnosed as a coronary thrombosis, a blood clot in his heart.

Within hours, Dr. Paul Dudley White, a celebrated cardiologist from Massachusetts General Hospital and a pioneer advocate for exercise and diet to prevent heart disease, was at the president’s bedside. On September 26, White, a frequent heart institute hearing witness for Mary, and colleagues gave what Mary called a brilliant press conference explaining how heart attacks are caused by the buildup of plaque, or cholesterol deposits, in the coronary arteries and the formation of blood clots that block the vessels. He said the damage could heal itself and the heart would strengthen in as early as two weeks. Mary considered it a forthright presentation that worked wonders to educate the public and allay their fears.

As a result of White’s press conference, the nation learned what a heart attack meant and how it should be treated. It was the first most people had heard of anticoagulants, or blood thinners, which had been administered to the president prior to White’s arrival by Thomas Mattingly and William Foley, early leaders in anticoagulant research with whom Mary also had consulted.

Mary marveled that Eisenhower couldn’t see the connection between the research that saved his life and the federal investment in medical research. “He was the beneficiary of research in anticoagulants and of advances in surgery, but he always felt that somehow or other government participation in research or government participation in anything but defense matters was wrong.”

A FRIEND AT THE TOP

When Mary and Anna Rosenberg returned from the continent in October, they went to meet Marion Folsom, the new secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, who had resigned from a top position at Eastman Kodak to serve in the Eisenhower administration.

At Kodak, Folsom had helped design a company-sponsored retirement program after World War I, and he was on a committee of civic leaders who were part of Roosevelt's Advisory Council on Economic Security, which explored the complex problems of poverty, old age, and health. Roosevelt thought the only long-term solution was a compulsory, old-age insurance system. Their work laid the foundation for the Social Security Act of 1935.

Rosenberg knew Folsom from his earlier work in Washington, but he and Mary had never met. She was enthralled when Folsom told her he had found research to be good for Kodak, and he didn't see why it wouldn't be good for human beings. He said he had been told that the Du Pont chemical company was spending \$63 million for research, and it seemed that compared to that, the amount spent by the Public Health Service to save lives was probably not enough. He mentioned he wanted to hear the views of a broad selection of people, and Mary offered to give him names, including those of a few doctors who might make a good special assistant for health. She sent all the material she had and was delighted to hear from Rosenberg that Folsom said it was the most useful material he had been offered.

SUCCESS!

By the beginning of November 1955, Mary was hearing that the Public Health Service planned to increase its budget proposals for the seven NIH institutes by \$25 million to \$30 million for fiscal 1957. In addition to the five institutes Mary championed, by the end of 1956 NIH also included the National Institute of Dental Research and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, which replaced the National Microbiological Institute. Mary called it "overwhelming and happy, joyful news."

"I think he just realized that if you could spend \$63 million for research in one industry, the ills of humans certainly needed more attention," she said.

Further, Folsom apparently was going to fight the Bureau of the Budget for the money and go directly to the president to get approval, which he did. "This was a fantastic change of policy after Secretary Hobby's miserable performance," Mary said. Eisenhower just went along, leaving Mary to wonder what might have been if Hobby had been pro-research.

Folsom held a news conference December 10 to announce that he was recommending the \$25 million to \$30 million increase for the NIH for fiscal year 1957. He also announced that he was reappointing Leonard Scheele as U.S. surgeon general, allaying Mary's fears that he too might lose his job because of the polio scandal. "Scheele was capable of splendid and fast action if he had the cooperation and sympathy of the head of HEW and clear legislative direction and enthusiasm from the committee chairs of Congress," said Mary. He was "not a natural crusader but an organizer and master of detail, of organization," who was able to "get along with a wide variety of characters."

The morning of the press conference, Folsom called Mary to say he had gotten the increase he asked for and to say that he hoped the people interested would try to hold the testimony to his figures. "In other words, we shouldn't ask for more than he had asked for," said Mary. "I made some enthusiastic remarks about his efforts but was noncommittal on what figures I would personally recommend."

Mary found the spring 1956 Senate Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittee hearings chaired by Hill impressive. Hill's "energy and sympathy for the field have undoubtedly changed the course of appropriations for medical research and

medical legislation,” she said. The budget allowed \$126 million for the seven institutes, with \$101 million of that for the five institutes under Mary’s wing. The advisory councils had recommended \$137 million, which Mary considered too small because they weren’t looking sufficiently ahead. The House appropriations committee added only \$10 million to the \$101 million, though she and Florence were pushing to get an additional \$25 million for the five and urged the witnesses to ask for more than the council recommendations.

Before the full appropriations committee met to mark up its bill, Hill urged Mary and Florence to go to all the members of the Senate subcommittee and tell them to go for the figures the council witnesses had agreed on, and they carried out the task. “This was what was necessary, and this entailed spending a lot of time and made my life revolve around what they did,” explained Mary. There was a lot on the line.

The bill had already passed the House with \$135 million. In the Senate, Hill got the full appropriations committee to approve a total of \$182 million for all of the institutes, and it was approved on the Senate floor. “The support of the Republicans made the other Democrats very compliant,” said Mary. It was an increase of more than \$84 million over the 1956 appropriation for all the institutes.

About ten days before the conference, Mary had lunch with Rep. John Fogarty, gave him a campaign contribution, and spoke about how well medical research had done as a result of his work on the House appropriations subcommittee. He agreed to push for the Senate figures, though the prospects didn’t look good given the conservative pressure from Rep. Clarence Cannon and Republicans. Fogarty offered an amendment on the House floor that the Senate numbers be adopted.

Mary and Florence went to work calling voluntary health organizations and asking them to send telegrams, at their expense if necessary, to every member in the House urging them to support Fogarty’s amendment to accept the Senate figures. Florence called friends and urged them to support Fogarty, and Mary’s lobbyists, Quinn and Gorman, worked to see that all the Democrats went to the floor to support him.

The first week in June, Fogarty brought the amendment to the House floor in opposition to his own subcommittee. Then Cannon gave an unexpected speech. “I know a bandwagon when I see one, and I’m going to get on,” he began, and Mary held her breath. “In a superheated, hysterically pressured atmosphere like this, nobody is going to vote against home and motherhood and free beer,” he continued, conceding the battle to Fogarty. He called Mary’s efforts “the most prodigious lobbying stunt ever pulled off in the House within his recollection,” and only three members voted against the enormous increase. The National Institutes of Health, funded at \$98 million the year before, was getting \$182 million.

It “was one of the most triumphant scenes Florence and I have ever witnessed on behalf of our cause, and it gave us both the deepest satisfaction,” said Mary. But if the activist campaign hadn’t succeeded and Cannon had not relented, the vote might not have gone their way, said Mary. “It was a hell of a chance to take, because if it hadn’t gone, we would have taken a terrible setback.”

“Consequently, as of July 1, 1956, the picture for medical research was brighter than it had ever been in the history of the world because there was this interest on the part of Republicans at last.” Of the contributions Lister Hill and John Fogarty made to medical science, Mary said, “no praise could be too great for what these two men have done in the field.”

15

BACK INTO THE FRAY

1956

Mary saw medical research holistically, recognizing that funding for the NIH was just part of what was needed to foster a medical establishment that would improve the health of all. So as she pushed appropriations bills through Congress, Mary supported measures to build laboratories and educate the scientists who would work in those buildings.

She was keen on bills or resolutions that would authorize surveys to reveal the depth of the nation's medical needs, and she had an affinity for promoting awareness and research support for the medical underpinnings of mental health.

Following the June 1956 victory that turned the congressional tide for federal research funding, Mary and Florence put their energy into the authorization bill that would create a research facilities construction program for public and nonprofit institutions.

The duo had failed to get a provision for matching funds for research facilities into the Senate appropriations bill for 1955. Afterward, Sen. Styles Bridges suggested that an authorization bill that laid out the matching funds plan might be the best chance for getting the program on the books permanently. Mary's heart sank at the prospect of a lone bill making its way through both the House and Senate authorizing committees, where it would be exposed to opposition from the AMA, which had shown itself hostile to medical legislation, arguing always that it might lead to socialized medicine.

Mary suggested to Bridges that he ask Sen. Lister Hill to co-sponsor the measure, thinking that if Hill's name were on the bill, "his interest would be greater in fighting for the funds" in light of the existing Hill-Burton Act, which provided funds for hospital construction. She also spoke with Hill, who said he would go along with Bridges. The Hill-Bridges bill, written with the help of the Public Health Service, outlined a simple 50-50 fund matching plan in which the government would pay half once the research institution had raised the other half. The AMA, of course, opposed it. Hill had held a hearing in spring 1956 on the need for research facilities, for which Mary lined up a number of expert witnesses. They included old friend Cornelius Rhoads, as well as Hudson Hoagland, a decorated neuroscientist who helped found the now-defunct Worcester Foundation for Biomedical Research, James Adams of the American Cancer Society, pediatric cancer researcher Sidney Farber from Boston Children's Hospital, arthritis and rheumatism authority Cornelius Traeger, and R. Lee Clark, the first president of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston and pioneer of the multidisciplinary team approach to treating cancer. In due course, Hill-Bridges passed the Senate without opposition.

The House was a different story. The Association of Deans had called the dean of the University of Tennessee medical school to Washington to persuade Percy Priest of Tennessee, who chaired the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, to propose an amendment to the bill that would expand the program to include general-purpose construction, “such as gymnasiums, libraries and everything else,” said Mary. Such an amendment would involve an immense amount of money, and “we felt research facilities would get the short end of the stick, which indeed they would.” In her opinion, the deans were pressuring Priest because they knew nothing about Washington, and had no people who had any know-how or leverage or talent to represent them. “It takes quite a lot of finding out about and then a great deal of determination, and it takes money to have someone spend their time [lobbying] unless they’re self-propelled, as Mrs. Mahoney and I were.”

Mary and Florence weren’t the only ones concerned about the proposed amendment. House Speaker John McCormack, a Democrat from Massachusetts, predicted that if it were allowed, Adam Clayton Powell, a Democrat who represented New York’s Harlem neighborhood, would call for an amendment to exclude segregated schools from funding eligibility. McCormack believed the Powell amendment would sink the bill because Southern Democrats would vote against it, and without their votes the bill wouldn’t pass. Mary put Quinn and Gorman to work gathering support for the Senate version of the bill.

Priest was working on his reelection primary and was embarrassed by the fact the deans were on his back about the amendment, Mary said. He went back to Tennessee and left Oren Harris in charge, which was just as good. Harris, a Democrat from Arkansas who was the

next ranking member of the committee, managed the bill very well, and “by some fantastic freak of luck,” John Rooney, a Democrat from Brooklyn, whom Mary had supported in his campaigns because of his enthusiasm for cancer research, was sitting in the chair when the research facilities bill came up. “He ruled the Republican protesters out of order, and the bill was passed.”

The Health Research Facilities Act was approved on July 30, 1956, establishing a program of matching grants for research construction in non-federal institutions. The act authorized funding for the program of \$30 million a year for three years. In reality, it provided for a building program on a much larger scale than the \$90 million federal contribution and changed the scope of medical research in the United States because, “really, people just had to have roofs over their heads to get going,” Mary said.

Of course, she felt compelled to argue that the amount was inadequate for the need, but she considered the matching funds concept a “terrific selling point because the people in the communities feel their dollars go twice as far, and it gives businessmen and deans and people who are interested tremendous energy to go out and raise money.”

Rep. Fogarty and Sen. Hill cooperated to put \$30 million for the Facilities Act into the final supplementary appropriations bill of the year, which came at the end of July, and Eisenhower signed it. Because it was signed after July 1, it was a fiscal 1957 appropriation, with \$30 million allotted for the first time for the construction of research facilities at medical schools and other research centers. Eisenhower, however, sent a letter saying he was disappointed that building funds for medical schools were not also made available.

Mary had hopes in 1956 for passage of a medical school construction bill, but one had been circulating in one form or another

since shortly after the war and no proposal had advanced. She laid that failure to the fact the deans never got behind it. “We had all we could do with trying to get research legislation and then the funds and then the research facilities construction bill passed. We felt the medical school construction bill was up to the deans and the presidents of the universities that had medical schools,” she said.

When she was approached at the National Advisory Cancer Council meeting by a medical school dean who asked her to compose a medical school brochure similar to the one she regularly circulated citing the payoffs from medical research, she turned him down because “it was just more.” She was frank: “I never made a huge effort on the medical school construction bill. ... We never put everything into it. To put everything into it meant Florence and I had to really concentrate on it, and We just didn’t have that much additional energy; we just couldn’t do it all. And we felt it was really the business of the universities to do it, and when it’s everybody’s business it’s nobody’s business.”

Going back to the summer of 1955, Mary and Florence had supported a bill by Lister Hill to establish a national mental health study that would provide “an objective, thorough and nationwide analysis and reevaluation of the human and economic problems of mental illness” in this country. The two of them secured most of the bill’s 29 sponsors through a campaign of personal visits, telegrams, and working the phone. In the House, the bill was introduced by Priest. He was not willing to tangle with medical school deans but had long advocated for mental health and championed the 1946 bill to establish the National Institute of Mental Health.

The bill established a Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health, comprising thirty-six organizations, which sent its report to Congress on December 31, 1960. Mary found the \$1.25 million

price tag on the project, which also raised money from voluntary agencies, “unconscionable” because “they really just made inquiries everywhere and collated the information.” As well, she feared the survey might be too elaborate and “just gather dust.” She came to see the commission’s report as the foundation for seminal efforts by President John F. Kennedy, who took office a few days after the report was released, to bolster mental health efforts nationwide.

Of the bills Mary regretted not going to Washington to push across the line at the end of the 1949 legislative session, the Survey of Sickness bill bothered her the most. The proposal called for a census of people suffering from major disabling or crippling diseases. “Without that survey, we don’t get any new facts and nobody knows on what scale action is necessary,” she argued at the time. But Albert had been ill and had asked her to stay with him.

The survey gained new life in 1956, reportedly thanks to Surgeon General Leonard Scheele and Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Marion Folsom. The National Morbidity Survey was signed into law by Eisenhower on July 3, around the same time as the research construction bill. The ongoing effort collects statistics on disease, injury, impairment, disability, and related topics through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics.

Looking to the coming 1956 presidential election, Mary urged Democratic Party leaders to include a health plank in their platform, and campaigning had begun in earnest to select a Democratic candidate to oppose Eisenhower. As well, she had developed a budding relationship with potential nominee Adlai Stevenson, and his second run at that nomination was getting interesting.

16

AN EYE ON ADLAI

1956 – 1957

Adlai Stevenson II was Illinois political royalty. His father was briefly Illinois secretary of state. His namesake grandfather was Grover Cleveland's vice president. And a great-grandfather was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln who inspired the Lincoln-Douglas debates and pushed Lincoln to run for president.

A gifted orator known for his sense of humor, Stevenson was elected Illinois governor in an upset victory in 1948, after serving in several federal and diplomatic positions during the Roosevelt administration. Shortly after the election, Adlai and his wife, Ellen, ended their 20-year marriage.

Adlai, who graduated from Princeton University and earned a law degree from Northwestern University, was known as a highbrow, a diplomat, and a ladies' man. Mary met Stevenson in the late 1940s

at a party given by Eleanor Roosevelt, but all Mary remembered about him then was that his home was in Libertyville, Illinois, near Albert's former country home in Lake Forest. It was Florence who enthusiastically followed Stevenson's 1952 campaign and attended the Democratic National Convention in July along with Bess and Harry Truman to cheer him on. She reported to Mary that his acceptance speech was "thrilling" and brought tears to her eyes; she was sure Eisenhower didn't have a chance.

Having escaped to Paris for a change of scenery following Albert's death in May, Mary got the news of Stevenson's 1952 nomination while strolling through one of the lavishly planted greenhouses she enjoyed in Paris's expansive Bois de Boulogne park. "It was ridiculously hot," she recalled. She was with an eclectic group: Lord Hastings Ismay, who was Winston Churchill's wartime chief of staff and had just been appointed the first secretary general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, British actress Leonora Corbett, and Baron Egmont van Zuylen, a diplomat and businessman whose mother was a Rothschild. Her companions were "curious and astonished" at Stevenson's nomination because he had appeared ambivalent about wanting it. That apparent ambivalence was a recurrent theme in Stevenson's political career and a character trait Mary grew to find challenging.

Mary returned to the U.S. in early September, concerned about keeping pressure on Truman to position medical research well in his final budget proposal. She and Florence had decided they had better befriend the newly minted Democratic candidate in hopes of securing his help with medical research in the event he won the presidency. When she was approached by Stevenson fundraisers, Mary resolved to support his candidacy "fairly liberally" and collected contributions from Albert's sisters as well.

She insisted on presenting the money to Stevenson in person, operating on the theory that if she didn't tell him face-to-face what she expected he would consider her offering a goodwill gesture. That is how Mary and Florence found themselves navigating the murky depths of New York's Penn Station late one night in search of the Illinois governor's private train car. They found the car, but no candidate, and were forced to wait for his return from a Brooklyn rally. Eventually, they picked out a small group working its weary way down the tunnel toward them. Stevenson obviously had been told she would be there because as he grew nearer his demeanor changed, and he leaned in pleasantly to hear what she had to say. "Here's a contribution for you, but there are strings attached," said Mary. To which she recalled him responding, "I suppose they're ropes. Well, what is it?"

"If you're elected, I expect half an hour of your time, and if you're not, I expect a great deal more," she said. He laughed and replied, "That's settled. All right."

It didn't surprise him to get a contribution presented to him in that matter, said Mary: "It would take a lot to surprise him." Mary and Florence went out for drinks with Stevenson and his sister, Elizabeth "Buffie" Ives, and her husband, Ernest. Joining them was Bill Blair, Stevenson's law partner, confidant, and a key campaign adviser. In November, Florence went to Illinois to show their support, but Stevenson lost miserably, failing to carry even his home state.

A GREAT DEAL MORE

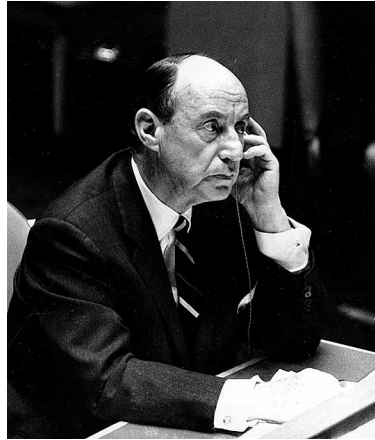
Mary and Adlai next met at the White House later that month over dinner with the Trumans and Florence. They ate downstairs in a small dining room, and, while the men dominated the conversation,

Mary thought it “at least very entertaining.” She found the post-loss Stevenson “quite serious and detached but agreeable.”

Time passed, and in spring 1955, Blair contacted her for help prepping Adlai for a speech he was to give at New York University’s medical school. Mary in turn recruited Cornelius Rhoads and Irving Wright to meet with Stevenson and invited Emerson Foote to sit in and help translate their comments into everyday language. She then

got Mike Gorman to write the speech, which supported medical research. Mary never did get Adlai to see the need for that research the way she did. The first time they talked about it, he tossed off a remark about believing in herbs and berries.

That summer Adlai and Blair spent a weekend with her and Florence at the farm in Amenia. It was the first time they had been there, and she remembered Blair remarking that she couldn’t be a Democrat because most Democrats didn’t live like that. Later, Florence disclosed to Mary that while she was riding up from the city with Stevenson and Blair, she and Adlai had gotten into a serious conversation, and she had come away with the impression that he was really quite conservative and almost petulant in his manner. Mary found herself in agreement with her friend to a certain extent but felt he also had traits that didn’t fit that judgment. “You simply can’t summarize his many characteristics with a small series of words,” she



Adlai Stevenson was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations from 1961 to 1965.

AP photo

argued. “He’s diverse and complex.” She also admired his ability to speak and write about complicated world issues eloquently.

In any event, the two women agreed they had to get to know him better because they were sure he would be the Democratic candidate in 1956, and they would need his help with research funding, health legislation, and especially health insurance.

In November 1955, Mary flew to Kansas City for an American Public Health Association meeting at which the Lasker Foundation gave awards and Bess Truman gave the keynote address. Mary then stopped in Chicago on her way home for a Democratic Party rally and dinner. Stevenson had been the lead contender to again be Democratic nominee — and had the unofficial blessing of party leaders — until Eisenhower’s heart attack in September. With the president appearing beatable, a handful of other perennial Democratic candidates, including Estes Kefauver and Averell Harriman, had begun to organize.

They all spoke at the dinner, but Stevenson was “by all odds” the best, said Mary, who recalled driving with Adlai’s sister, Buffie, and her husband to the International Amphitheatre outside the Union Stock Yards to hear him speak. The next morning he called and invited her to go to church with him, an invitation that startled her because she hadn’t been to church for years and didn’t think it would be appropriate. She declined but agreed to have lunch with him that day at a Chicago club. Also at the table were Buffie, along with Barbara Ward and Marietta Tree, whom Mary described as “great friends and admirers” of Stevenson’s. Columnists referred to them as the monied, intelligent, high-profile women with whom he surrounded himself.

In December, she invited Stevenson and Blair to New York, where they dined together then went to a performance of *Damn*

Yankees. She recalled trying the whole time to convince them of the benefits of medical research for the health and well-being of the nation, which Adlai continued to think was a “fixation or a whim” of hers.

In January 1956, Mary invited Stevenson to a dinner she was hosting at Beekman Place in honor of Eleanor Roosevelt. During a long phone conversation that Mary described as “much more personal” than they’d had before, he said he wished he were free to be with her that night because “there were too few women in his life.” The remark struck her as odd, but “what he meant by that at that time nobody will ever know, including himself,” she said. Shortly after that he invited her on a campaign trip to New Mexico and Arizona on a chartered plane. She had no appetite for riding from town to town on a crowded plane loaded with press and miscellaneous other people, where he would be “campaigning from coffee until midnight.” She declined and said she would meet him in Phoenix, where she and Florence stayed at the Arizona Biltmore, a distinctive, elegant, 1929 Frank Lloyd Wright collaboration more appealing to Mary than campaigning. Stevenson and Blair stayed elsewhere, but they visited often.

Though it was the dead of winter, Mary and Adlai drove up to Prescott one day to see the Z-Triangle ranch. As they traveled she and Adlai had a long conversation about the history of her interest in medical research going back to her childhood experiences. “He was very companionable,” she said. “He’s an exceptionally gifted conversationalist and a vivacious reporter, very entertaining.” The ninety-mile ride through “a marvelous, picturesque desert and on up into high mountains” was breathtaking, but it was miserably cold and snowing when they arrived and, as inconvenient as it was to stay in Phoenix when the ranch was so close, Mary had no desire to even get

out of the car. From Phoenix, Stevenson and Blair left to campaign in other Western states, and Mary and Florence headed east.

In March, it occurred to Mary that Adlai might benefit from a medical discussion about the possible effects of Eisenhower's heart attack on the campaign. She rounded up a blood researcher and visited him in Libertyville on her way to her annual stay at La Quinta. "Stevenson received us with a great deal of warmth and told me he was as happy as a child that we had come," said Mary. "He could express himself with great gaiety, and he could behave with gaiety, too, and when he did, he was charming."

While she was at La Quinta, Stevenson was defeated by Estes Kefauver in the Minnesota primary, not a good omen for the August convention in Chicago. Adlai always got along better with intellectuals than he did with tough politicians, she said of the competition with Kefauver. "In a way, he was very shy, even in 1956, and his manner was quite withdrawn compared with most politicians." Kefauver's folksy, get-out-among-the-people style was gaining him votes, and from then on Stevenson resolved to walk up and down the street shaking hands wherever he went, quite a contrast from an occasion she recalled when he was embarrassed at someone coming up to shake his hand in a theater. Realizing Stevenson needed substantial support, Mary promised him enough money to make her his largest individual supporter in the 1956 campaign.

THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Mary approached all of life with exuberance. As hard as she worked to support medical research, she also enjoyed a vibrant social life. She patronized the arts, attended movies and plays, hosted chic parties, and occasionally even invested in a Broadway show.

Adlai and Mary became a couple, at least in the newspapers. They popped up regularly in the society columns, and rumors occasionally had it that they were going to tie the knot. Mary laughed off those ideas, saying she and Adlai were “just friends,” but what friends they were. Mary folded Adlai — and his campaign — into her life without missing a beat. She lobbied for him behind the scenes. She appeared by his side when the going was tough.

She never lost sight of her higher priority. In spring 1956, Mary and Florence turned their attention back to Washington, where spring is appropriations season. From April through June, Congress was working on the fiscal 1957 appropriations bills, and Mary divided her attention between Adlai’s campaign for the White House and her campaign to increase research funding for NIH.

Marion Folsom, the new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare secretary, had gotten the president to agree to a significant increase in the federal budget proposal for the department, including NIH, and Mary and Florence gambled and won more than that for fiscal 1957. The team appealed to stakeholders across the country, who overwhelmed the offices of House members with telegrams urging them to support the increase, and won a concession speech on the House floor from the conservative chair of the House Health, Education, and Welfare appropriations subcommittee.

Amid the funding stress, Mary found time to fly to California, where gossip columnist Hedda Hopper reported on April 2 that she attended a politically charged cocktail party in Hollywood and then joined Adlai, who was campaigning in Los Angeles.

Back in Washington, by the start of June, Mary and Florence saw medical research launched into a new era of appreciation and increased funding. On June 18, Mary was off to Chicago with

Mike Gorman and his wife, Ernestine, who had breast cancer. Mary had arranged a consultation with Dr. Charles Huggins at the University of Chicago, whose research, supported in part by contributions from Albert's daughter Frances Brody and Mary, had established that many breast cancers are driven by hormones. (Unfortunately, Ernestine's cancer was advanced and, despite surgery and therapy, she would die in 1958.) Huggins would go on to be awarded a Nobel Prize in 1966 for his work on the link between hormones and prostate cancer.

While she was in Chicago, Mary visited Stevenson in Libertyville, where he was gearing up for the national convention. At dinner on June 19, he asked her advice on TV ads for his campaign, which, she said, he ultimately handed off to a lawyer friend who was nice but knew nothing about television. Though she attempted on several occasions to win him over to the idea of a TV public relations drive, Adlai "was very allergic to appearing on television," she said. "He wanted to speak to audiences." When he did make a television appearance, he wouldn't look directly into the camera and he didn't smile. And "he has a difficult face to photograph; the lighting should be carefully arranged for him."

Later in June, Stevenson and Blair came to see her in New York, where she hosted a dinner party for Adlai, after which they went to see *My Fair Lady* starring Julie Andrews and Rex Harrison. The indomitable Stevenson seemed tired, but the show appeared to raise his spirits.

In mid-July, Mary attended a Democratic fundraiser in Washington along with Florence, Lister Hill, and his wife, and others from their Washington circle. All the Democratic candidates spoke, but Mary again believed that Stevenson was "infinitely more effective." "He outclassed them all," she said.

In early August, with the convention fast approaching, Adlai was again in New York and headed upstate to Hyde Park for a visit with Eleanor Roosevelt. He and Mary drove up together, but he wanted to speak with Eleanor in private, so Mary went on to nearby Amenia. After talking with Eleanor, who urged him to come out strongly for civil rights, Adlai spent the night at the farm. "We had a pleasant visit," said Mary. It was a lovely summer and the roses were still in full bloom, she recalled. The next day they drove down to the city together and focused on the campaign.

Despite her intentions, Mary missed the convention. When she returned to the city, she realized she had tired herself out and caught cold, and with it came a backache that had her "doubled up, unable to stand upright." A series of doctors came to see her and offered advice but no cure, until a friend gave her some Miltown, an early tranquilizer, and she was able to rest and relax. Eleanor Roosevelt stopped to visit on her way to Chicago, and Mary watched the proceedings on television with her friend Bill Donovan, who was then eighty-two. Anna Rosenberg and Florence were in the convention hall and called frequently with updates. When Stevenson called the night he won, Mary said he sounded "elated but still under terrific control." Demonstrating his aggravating ambivalence, he left the choice of vice president up to the convention rather than exercising his right to choose a running mate. John Kennedy came close, but the ticket became Stevenson-Kefauver.

As the official party nominee, Adlai redoubled his campaigning. In mid-September he arrived in Washington, where he looked forward to a quiet dinner alone with Mary. He told her he thought he would win the presidency but was cautious because Eisenhower

had not yet begun campaigning. Looking back in a 1963 interview, Mary observed that “on that night Stevenson’s chances probably did look better than they ever had before and ever would again.” She remembered thinking how alive with energy and extraordinarily strong physically Adlai was. After nine months of campaigning he could go on without tiring. Personally, however, she felt that although he was charming, “in human relationships he lacked insights.”

A few weeks later, Stevenson’s campaign was in trouble, and the New York *Daily News* wrote that Mary had rented a yacht “where the Dem candidate could take a day of rest, if possible.” An international crisis had put Eisenhower’s military experience at the forefront of the public’s thinking just days before the election. At issue was a flashpoint in the Arab-Israeli conflict that closed the Suez Canal for several months starting October 29. Stevenson was criticized for not talking enough about foreign policy, and it was clear his chances of winning were evaporating. The yacht was a great place to avoid reporters. Finally, in an election-eve blunder, Stevenson made a tactless remark about Eisenhower’s heart condition, pointing out that if he should die in office it would be terrible to have a man like Richard Nixon inherit the presidency. Mary was sure he had been given bad advice by an aide and was too fatigued to think before he spoke.

The afternoon of the election, Mary and Florence flew to Chicago to join Adlai and his campaign in what she described as a “dreary brown suite” at the Blackstone Hotel, which had a history of hosting politicians and was said to be where the term “smoke-filled room” originated. The mood was somber when they arrived, and by early evening the returns were consistently bad for the Democrats. Around nine o’clock Stevenson conceded. “He

has enormous fortitude in the face of disaster, and he had it that night,” said Mary.

The next day she and Florence went with Blair to see his parents’ home, which featured a “very chic and beautiful indoor tennis court trimmed with ivy,” before moving on to spend a few days with Adlai at Libertyville, where they were joined by his sister, Buffie, and Marietta Tree.

On a freezing cold, snowy day Mary took a drive to see what had become of Albert’s Mill Road Farm and found it “in a mess.” Houses had been built along the golf course, and “obviously the estate was being lived in by many families, not just one.” The bones of the lovely French Provincial farmhouse were much the same, but it was dreary and old.

With the pressures of the campaign behind them, Mary and Adlai spent a lot more time together that winter. By January, the gossip columnists were again ringing wedding bells, though it’s possible Mary didn’t hear them. With a caveat that “no one is confirming it officially,” Drew Pearson announced in his January 23, 1957, column that close friends of Adlai’s were saying he and his old friend Mary Lasker would marry in the spring. Pearson noted of Mary that “her efforts are considered partly responsible for the large increases voted by Congress recently to experimentation for cancer, heart and other cures.”

Mary and Florence were back at their appropriations work in the spring, but the marvelous funding increase for medical research they had achieved for fiscal 1957 made it difficult to convince Congress they needed even more for fiscal 1958. In the end, they got \$28 million in new money for a total of about \$210 million for all of NIH, a figure that would have delighted them in earlier years, but now seemed like a failure.

17

FRUSTRATED WITH ADLAI

1959 – 1960

It was two years since Mary and Florence had overcome the tightfisted conservatives on the Appropriations Committee and achieved a significant increase in spending for medical research and training, and after a marginal increase for fiscal 1958, they were determined that their triumph not become a one-off victory. With the help of stalwarts John Fogarty in the House and Lister Hill in the Senate and after the “usual stress and strain of lobbying,” the National Institutes of Health came out of conference in June 1958 with an appropriation of \$294 million, a gain of \$84 million for fiscal 1959, three times the increase of the year before.

Mary was by then respected in the offices of Congress both for what she had accomplished and for the way in which she got it done. She could cut through the politics of a situation, see a practical solution, and set a course of action. No vacillating, no wasting a lawmaker's valuable time. She worried on occasion, but only after she had done everything she could, and there was nothing to do but watch the situation play out. Still, she was wary. Every session of Congress, every change of the political winds brought challenges. She was never complacent. But when the work was done, she knew how to relax.

Satisfied with the NIH appropriation, Mary and Florence left in July for London, then traveled on to Villa Balbianello on Lake Como. The 18th-century villa on a wooded promontory overlooking the lake, famous for its terraced gardens, is now a tourist attraction run by the National Trust of Italy and has played a prominent role in James Bond and *Star Wars* movies.

From there they traveled to Cap Ferrat on the French Riviera. They stayed at La Fiorentina, an elegant villa surrounded by formal gardens, where they were joined every year by friends. As with the dinner parties she and Florence hosted in the U.S., the house parties in France included a mix of wealthy and interesting friends, politicians, and scientists. The pair had a genius for putting the right people in a room together and making something happen for medical research. Judging from the uptick in gossip column writeups in the following months, it's a good guess one of those guests in the summer of 1958 was Adlai Stevenson.

In early 1959, Democratic presidential hopefuls began to position themselves for the 1960 election. Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy had been campaigning unofficially for months, if not years. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson of Texas was also

a strong expected contender, though not yet actively campaigning. A handful of other men considered running. Stevenson, while allowing his supporters to invest time and money in his potential candidacy, remained characteristically confounding. “His behavior was confusing to the public and to people close to him,” said Mary. “He said he was available, but he wasn’t a candidate.”

There was no mystery, however, about the amount of time he and Mary spent together. Reporting on a posh soiree, one columnist noted on January 24, 1959, that among the guests was “millionaire widow” Mary Lasker, “who is apt to show up whenever Adlai Stevenson is here, and he was here.” Then in March, they were seen vacationing in Jamaica, and syndicated columnist Walter Winchell again rang wedding bells, this time attributing the gossip to the couple’s friends: “Montego Bay has intimates ‘sure’ Thizzzzit!”

NIH ALWAYS THE PRIORITY

When she got back to Washington that spring, Mary was energized and ready to tackle the fiscal 1960 appropriations. Democrats had gained 13 Senate seats in the 1958 midterm elections, and Hill suggested she meet the new members of the Appropriations Committee, some of whom she had supported purely on grounds they were liberal Democrats. Instead of seeking them out one-on-one, she paid a call on Lyndon Johnson, whom she had gotten to know in his role as Senate majority leader and who was on the committee. She asked him if he would support the \$478 million budget she was promoting for NIH. As Mary told it, he was visibly staggered and asked her if it wasn’t too much. To which she replied, “Is it too much to stay alive?” On that, he agreed to make a speech and asked her to get him a draft.

Johnson asked her if she wanted anything else, to which she replied she would like to meet the new senators. He picked up



Mary attends a Lasker Foundation Awards dinner in 1959 with Eleanor Roosevelt and Rep. John Fogarty, left, the year the Democrat from Rhode Island was honored.

John E. Fogarty collection, Providence College Archives and Special Collections, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence College

the phone and asked his secretary to call Alan Bible of Nevada, Gale McGee of Wyoming, and Robert Byrd of West Virginia to his office. It seemed to Mary they arrived within seconds of the summons. They were new in the Senate and probably owed their seat on the Appropriations Committee to Johnson, she said, adding that they knew absolutely nothing about the NIH. “They were really naturally sympathetic, but the fact that Lyndon had asked them to meet me in his office probably made them agree

a little more quickly to go along.” She was made comfortable at a conference table with the senators, while Johnson was on the phone the entire fifteen-minute meeting.

While Mary’s money no doubt opened doors, getting senators to listen and then convincing them to vote the way she needed was never easy. “Money contributed is a help, but we have been working uphill on this crusade all along,” she said later. “Money doesn’t do much; it’s just an introduction, really.” None of her donations was particularly extravagant, she said, adding that it was simply one means by which to get in touch with people. She emphasized that she always gave as a citizen directly to the candidates or their committees, not through the Democratic Party.

A few weeks later, Johnson made what she judged a fine speech on the Senate floor and Hill was as superb as ever, but the conference dragged on because of the usual conservatives on the House side. “Any one of them could have voted with John Fogarty and we’d have had the whole increase,” she said, “but we finally ended up with \$400 million, an increase of \$106 million for fiscal 1960 over the year before.”

That fall the gossip columns were full of Mary and Adlai’s social life, but he remained inscrutable about another try at the presidency. In October, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* gossip columnist wrote that Adlai and Mary were “the most interesting duet in the U.S.” and that, “They saw a lot of each other in Europe and have continued here.” In November, Adlai escorted Mary to a City of Hope benefit dinner for medical research, where, as a special guest of the organization, he presented her with a citation for her philanthropic work with the Lasker Foundation. Then, in December, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Herb Lyon wrote that while Stevenson was “ever so attentive” to Mary at a charity dinner, he insisted they were just

friends. But, observed Lyon, “Adlai keeps denying he intends to run for President again, too?”

At speaking engagements, Stevenson sounded like a candidate, but his attitude away from the podium gave Mary an uncomfortable feeling that he was making no real effort on his own behalf.

She wasn’t the only one who found his indecisive behavior tedious. Guesses, public and private, at his possible strategies proliferated. *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist John M. Cummings on March 20 opined that Stevenson was positioning himself as a compromise candidate to unite the party at the national convention in Los Angeles, suggesting that Kennedy and Johnson would have the Democrats at loggerheads. Cummings also bitingly said of Stevenson that “of all the candidates, he is the least likely to be seriously hurt by defeat. He is used to it.” However, he went on to point out that among the wealthy intellectuals who would support his candidacy, Mary Lasker is “ready to dump a barrel of hard cash into the campaign.”

While it was Mary who had backed his 1956 effort to the hilt, it was journalist, activist, and philanthropist Agnes Meyer (mother of future *Washington Post* Publisher Katharine Graham) who underwrote the greater share of Stevenson’s 1960 campaign expenses. Mary later criticized Stevenson for letting Agnes continue spending when he wouldn’t commit. Mary did, however, admit to helping with money and ideas in the June and July runup to the convention: She paid for some “very good” print ads in major cities, as well as helping fund his Los Angeles headquarters.

GETTING HEALTH ON THE CONVENTION AGENDA

As fond as she was of Stevenson, his non-campaign didn’t distract Mary from her life’s work. Having failed to gain the attention of the Democratic Platform Committee ahead of the 1956 election,

she had picked up her crusade to have a White House Conference on Medical Research Against Heart Disease and Cancer inserted into the Democratic platform for 1960. She and Florence were appointed to the Platform Committee's Advisory Committee on Health, chaired by heart surgeon Michael DeBakey and populated by a number of other "good people." Still, she didn't trust that their recommendation would be supported up the line, so she assigned David Lloyd, a lobbyist who worked for her and who was on the Platform Committee, and Mike Gorman to champion the matter. In the end, the White House Conference became a plank in the Democratic platform. (President Kennedy later acted on the recommendation, and a conference was held April 22, 1961, when, unfortunately, the president was paying attention to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. The researchers left Washington feeling unheard, and Mary became more determined to see the conference through.)

In May, Mary was invited to attend The Conference on World Tensions at the University of Chicago and stayed with Adlai in Libertyville for a couple of days. Kennedy had just paid him a visit to ask for his support, and Stevenson had turned him down. "I believe his ego was involved and he secretly hoped that somehow there would be a stalemate at the convention and he would be nominated again in spite of everything," she said. He fought hard for the nomination in 1956, and while he was loath to fight again, Mary thought that Adlai felt he still had political appeal and it might come to him.

In July, she left for Los Angeles and the Democratic National Convention a week early to spend a day in Libertyville with Adlai and his children. At the convention, she and Florence stayed at the Beverly Hills Hotel, and Mary spent a great deal of time with Adlai

attending parties, rallies, and meetings at which he remained non-committal. Mary began to realize “he really thought the Kennedy forces would offset the Johnson forces and he would have a chance.”

At the convention, Mary ran into her friend Jean Kintner, whose husband Robert was president of NBC and had an impressive three television sets going simultaneously in his office at the convention hall. The Kintners gave her a floor pass, and she set out to take the temperature of the convention. She found the confusion and excitement of the floor “very colorful, picturesque, and bizarrely lit, with people wearing strange costumes.” It was all “terribly interesting,” she said, but as she made her rounds, she realized Stevenson didn’t have the support he needed to have a chance. Kennedy won the nomination handily on the first ballot, with double the votes of runner-up Johnson, whom he asked to join the ticket as vice president.

The next day, Mary again joined Jean in the NBC office, where they heard Johnson was arriving soon to accept the nomination. They went down to the entrance to greet the Johnsons and found themselves invited to join them backstage. The sound of the convention from the waiting area, she said, was “horrifying, very noisy and unruly,” and she was embarrassed by the number of boos she heard from the floor when Johnson was introduced. The following evening, she accompanied Stevenson to see Kennedy accept the nomination for president at the Memorial Coliseum. Adlai gave a “short, graceful” speech, she said, and when it was over they joined friends, including Florence, for dinner. That one night was the only time she ever saw him so “exhausted or completely depleted,” she said. “He was completely faint with exhaustion.”

At the beginning of November, Stevenson, who anticipated that Kennedy would appoint him secretary of state if he won the White

House, campaigned with the candidate in Southern California. Mary flew out to Los Angeles to see a Picasso exhibit Frances Brody had arranged, after which she joined Adlai at a rally. It turned out to be a frightening experience for Mary, who was sure they would be killed by the press of people surrounding their car as they drove in and out of the stadium filled with 25,000 enthusiastic Kennedy supporters. It amazed her that on the drive back to Beverly Hills, Stevenson and Kennedy remained cool and collected about the “tumult, the screaming, the shouting people and the roars of applause.” The next day, the couple drove up to San Francisco, where Stevenson gave a speech honoring James Watson, Francis Crick, and M.H.F. Wilkins — whose x-ray diffraction studies enabled Watson and Crick to identify the molecular structure of DNA — for winning the Lasker Award for Basic Medical Research.

The next day, Mary declined to accompany Adlai on a day trip back south for a campaign speech. “His idea of asking you to do something interesting and pleasant was to invite you along to Ventura, which meant an hour there and back on a plane, then have supper with a thousand people who came to shake his hand and eat dinner out of a box,” she said. “I didn’t see it as the most amusing thing on God’s earth, so I went to see the Royal Ballet at the opera house instead.” The next day they flew back to Libertyville, with Stevenson sure he was going to be offered the State Department post.

Mary had made it her business to get an appointment with Kennedy in October and ask him to appoint Stevenson as secretary of state if he won. When Kennedy responded that he was sure in the end everybody would be satisfied, she “knew darn well he wasn’t going to do it,” she said.

Kennedy narrowly defeated Vice President Richard Nixon for the presidency and turned to Dean Rusk, president of the Rockefeller

Foundation, to head up the State Department. “I think it came as a great surprise to [Adlai] after the election that Kennedy didn’t offer him the job,” Mary said. “Well, he didn’t.”

What Kennedy did offer to Adlai was the post of ambassador to the United Nations. Stevenson balked. Adlai’s law partner, Bill Blair, called Mary in desperation one bleak day in late November and asked her to talk Stevenson into taking the job. She “summoned her energy” and told him he could make a great contribution through the U.N., and that it would be unproductive to be “cross” about the State Department job because if he bore Kennedy any hostility, he wouldn’t be able to work with him. After she and a number of other people “made maximum effort,” he finally accepted. But when Mary went back to see him after Christmas to offer suggestions about whom he should appoint to his staff, she left frustrated about his indecisiveness and overall attitude.

“I felt probably that his pattern of behavior would never change,” she said. “He was difficult to be in rapport with for more than a short period of time” even though he could be charming in speech and manner when he wanted to be and wasn’t irritated. She had to admit she thought his behavior would never change. “I felt at the time it was very hard to have any relationship with him that was serious or satisfactory. ... It’s extremely disconcerting to try to have any deep rapport with anyone who is that volatile in his personal relationships.”

In April 1961, Blair, who was U.S. ambassador to Denmark, announced his engagement to socialite Deeda Gerlach. (It was this event that led Mary to ask Marc Chagall’s wife about gift ideas.) The news may have prompted Herb Lyon to write in his *Chicago Tribune* column that Adlai should “take a cue from Bill Blair and announce his own wedding plans” with Mary Lasker, who is “his

heart.” Lyon may have heard about something romantic from a confidant of Adlai’s, but had he consulted Mary’s friends, he surely would have gotten an earful about the futility of trying to have a serious relationship with the man. Nonetheless, Mary remained friends with Adlai, who still escorted her to various functions. Importantly, Mary and Deeda would develop a lasting friendship, and Deeda became a powerful activist for medical research.

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DEFENDING THE NIH: IS IT TOO BIG?

1959 - 1963

Mary Lasker believed to her core that medical research conducted and funded by the National Institutes of Health was paying direct dividends to America. She maintained that if enough funds were devoted to a problem, and the right people were attracted to the task, advances would be made and cures would be found.

She had succeeded spectacularly in bringing the government around to her way of thinking. When Mary entered a hearing room with her vibrant blue eyes and knowing smile, the air became energized — and that energy was contagious. She, Florence, and the other noble conspirators had driven funding for the National Institutes of Health from about \$2.8 million in 1946 to where their

citizens' request for fiscal 1962 was closing in on a billion dollars at \$968 million.

But starting with the Eisenhower administration, an unease had begun to spread among members of Congress and the administration concerning whether the NIH was in a position to effectively use those progressively larger funding increases.

The general attitude in 1957, when Congress gave the NIH a minimal increase over the bountiful allocation of fiscal 1956, was "well, you had it last year and you can't expect too much this year," said Mary, adding that the NIH leadership "were totally limp about anything more" and went along with the budget, which called for level funding.

By 1960, the agency's total budget was \$400 million. Mary's five original institutes claimed \$309 million of that amount. The rest went to the other two institutes and to the agency's internal research, administration, and other offices and divisions.

Concern that NIH was getting too much too fast prompted Republican Sen. Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts, the ranking minority member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, to suggest in June 1958 during the fiscal 1959 NIH budget negotiations that an outside committee assess whether the monies were being spent effectively and to report in 1960, before the 1961 appropriations process began. Lister Hill, the committee's chair — and a Mary stalwart — jumped to grant Saltonstall's request and formed a committee to determine not only whether funds for medical research were being efficiently spent but also whether they were sufficient.

The Committee of Consultants on Medical Research was probably not what Saltonstall had in mind. To head up the effort, Hill appointed Boisfeuillet "Bo" Jones, vice president for medical

affairs at Emory University. Mary and Gorman also suggested a number of their regular supporters for membership, among them Michael DeBakey, Sidney Farber, and Cornelius Traeger, and from the private sector, media executive David Sarnoff. The twelve consultants heard from at least a hundred witnesses, and came out with what Mary called “by all odds the best summary recommendations for medical research that had ever been presented on the national picture.”

The group, which presented its report to the appropriations committee in May 1960, made “an enormous contribution to the understanding of medical research in the Senate,” Mary said. She was ecstatic.

The report called for a federal investment in medical schools, medical libraries, and laboratories, as well as funding for regional clinical research centers and primate colonies for research. Medical school and research university representatives on the committee feared a coming shortage of medical researchers and family physicians and pointed out that medicine was the only science for which the government did not offer fellowships.

The committee reported that the National Institutes of Health, now under the leadership of Dr. James Shannon, a respected medical researcher and NIH veteran, was expending the funds with “remarkable efficiency,” maintaining “consistent high standards for the research supported,” and gaining “the confidence of the scientific community,” all while upholding the “traditional freedom of both institutions and investigators.” In fact, it found the funds, while generous, had not kept pace with the opportunities the money generated. Further, it found that those opportunities justified the expectation that through medical research the benefits to society of “longer, healthier and more productive lives” will be



Mary, second from left, and Anna Rosenberg, far left, help plant a tree with New York City Mayor Robert Wagner as part of Mary's urban beautification initiatives in about 1960.

Lasker Foundation

“far greater than the cost of the research.” Mary couldn’t have expressed it better herself.

Members of the committee testified that spring that “vast increases of money could be intelligently used immediately and that the total research effort should be at least between two and three billion dollars by 1970, including construction funds,” Mary said.

KEEPING UP

During the spring and summer of 1960, Mary found herself madly crisscrossing the country to keep up with her civic and social engagements, Adlai’s third try at the presidency, and NIH appropriations. “I cannot tell you how many trips to Washington and how many conferences and how many maneuvers we went through to get to this point,” she said of the final appropriations outcome, which was delayed past the July 1 start of the fiscal year to September 1960 because Congress recessed so members could attend the national conventions. The House figure for NIH was \$445 million, while the Senate voted \$664 million. For fiscal 1961, Congress settled on \$560 million.

Mary concluded that “Saltonstall’s effort to put a damper on the additional funds for medical research” had backfired, resulting not only in the increase but in greater support for NIH among senators. Fiscally cautious Eisenhower, however, threatened to veto the bill, and Mary and Florence were worried. Mary began to cast about for options, and a plan materialized. She contacted Dr. Jules Stein, an ophthalmologist and accomplished musician who had founded Music Corporation of America but given it up to support vision research. Stein became the moving force behind creation of a stand-alone eye institute in 1968.

Stein was friends with radio personality Freeman Gosden of *Amos 'n' Andy* fame, a golfing buddy of Eisenhower. The president had adopted a home on the grounds of the U.S. Navy's Fort Adams as his summer White House because of its proximity to the Newport Country Club. Gosden and the president had a date to play there in late July. (The historic Eisenhower House is now an attraction at Fort Adams State Park.)

Mary got Stein to ask Gosden to prevail upon the president to give him and Sydney Farber a few minutes of his time to explain their concerns for the nation's health if he vetoed funding for medical research. He agreed to the appointment, and they made their way to Newport, Rhode Island. Eisenhower was impressed with Farber's argument, which reportedly compared conducting medical research without funding to entering battle without funding for military arms, and he let the \$560 million for NIH go through.

THE EVE OF CAMELOT

The exuberance surrounding the Kennedy inauguration was uplifting after a lackluster eight years with Eisenhower. Mary didn't know the incoming president well, but she looked forward to working with the more liberal Democrats.

Two nights before the swearing in, President-elect Kennedy popped in for a visit at a dinner party in honor of Bess and Harry Truman at Florence's Georgetown home. "He just suddenly appeared like a neighbor and walked all around and talked to everybody and, after about half an hour, departed," said Mary. It was the kind of unexpected dropping in on friends you can't do when you become president. The next day, she and Florence lunched with the director of the National Gallery and did a little gallery hopping on their own, unaware a weather disaster loomed

over Washington's inauguration celebrations. They set out that evening to attend a few parties and the gala but found themselves in the "absolute, total chaos and helplessness" of Washington, D.C., in a snowstorm. They eventually cut their losses and headed home.

Thanks to the U.S. Corps of Engineers and hundreds of District of Columbia employees, by morning the snow and hundreds of abandoned vehicles had been cleared, and crowds were able to get to the Capitol. Mary declared the cleanup "miraculous." It was a clear, crisp day reminiscent of the Truman inauguration, and Sen. Carl Hayden of Arizona gave Florence seats behind the diplomatic corps in the front center of the platform. Mary recalled freezing despite her mink coat and white mink hat, but it was worthwhile to see Robert Frost read "The Gift Outright," the poem he composed in Kennedy's honor for the inauguration.

That evening she arrived at the D.C. National Guard Armory for the inaugural ball on the arm of Bo Jones. She had gotten to know Jones since the "trouble with Saltonstall" and successfully recommended him to Abraham Ribicoff, Kennedy's choice for secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, as adviser to the surgeon general on medical research.

Mary was not at all pleased with the setup in the Armory. The huge arena was hung with bunting in an attempt to dress it up, and the boxes for which people had paid thousands of dollars were mere spaces containing a small table and a couple of chairs marked off with more bunting. Mary and Jones didn't know anybody seated near their so-called box, so they headed up to the balcony to be near the president. On the way they ran into Frederick Richmond, a liberal New York political figure, who got them seats in a section behind the Kennedys. As the Kennedy party entered, "one got the

feeling of enormous freshness and youthfulness of spirit,” Mary recalled. Kennedy greeted them by name.

LIVING THE DREAM

As the Kennedy administration began the work of government, Mary became involved with establishing her credentials in Congress and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Then a new opportunity presented itself: Jacqueline Kennedy wanted to renovate the White House, and that was right up Mary’s alley. Mary’s influence, interactions, and duties in Washington were about to undergo a significant expansion. In spring 1961, Mary was enjoying lunch in the glamorous Romanoff’s restaurant in Beverly Hills with Albert’s son, Edward, when she got an interesting phone call.

Edward had left his father’s ad agency to join the Navy during World War II and headed to Hollywood at the war’s end to start a career as a movie producer. It was Edward who in the early days of Albert and Mary’s marriage when she insisted on keeping their expenses separate and made a joke of having no money had told his father, “You shouldn’t let Mary be without a large amount of cash.” Albert had written her a check on the spot for a million dollars on which he ended up paying \$350,000 in taxes.

While she and Edward were eating, Mary was approached by a waiter who said she had a call from the Johnson Moving Company, which she nearly brushed off until it dawned on her the call must be from the vice president. Kennedy had put Johnson in charge of a new Committee for Equal Employment Opportunity, the forerunner of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the vice president wanted Mary to help. She tried to beg off, claiming she had no expertise in that area, but he assured her

DEFENDING THE NIH: IS IT TOO BIG?

she would be a valuable addition because of her “good New York name.” Her thought process quickly went to, “Well, I need Lyndon, so I’d better say yes,” so she did.



Mary talks with President John F. Kennedy as Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson looks on during a meeting in April 1961 of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity at the White House.

JFK Presidential Library and Museum photo by Robert Knudsen

Shortly after, Mary received a call from Jayne Wrightsman, whom she knew and liked from her volunteer work with the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, asking her to be on a committee to assist Jacqueline Kennedy in her plan to renovate the White House. The Wrightsmans and Kennedys were neighbors in Palm Beach, and Jackie had asked her to help refurbish the old mansion with period furniture. Mary recalled thinking she hadn't noticed before how bad the White House looked because she was focused on the people she was there to meet. The last time it was renovated was during the Truman administration, and that work was more structural than decorative. The furniture was

all reproductions. The White House Fine Arts Committee was made up of knowledgeable and connected people whose goal was to acquire the furnishings and art for the project.



Mary was always impeccably dressed.

Lasker Foundation

Mary, Florence, Jayne, and Jackie were scheduled on May 8 to visit Winterthur, the Delaware home-turned-museum of Henry du Pont, who was chairing the committee. Winterthur houses in its 120 rooms a curated collection of 17th- and 18th-century American furnishings. But their trip was delayed by a White House reception to honor Alan

Shepard, the rest of the astronaut corps, and their families. Mary's group joined the party. She found the experience fascinating, particularly the

Rose Garden ceremony where the president presented Shepard with NASA's Distinguished Service Medal. She talked with Shepard for a few minutes and decided he was the most relaxed man she had ever encountered, "completely sure."

Later, on the plane home after a delightful visit with the du Ponts, Mary gave Jackie a check for \$10,000 to aid in the renovation. "I realized that what she needed was money, not things," she said. The committee raised a great deal of money to buy authentic pieces of furniture and art. Among the pieces purchased with Mary's donation were a Sheraton sofa originally owned by Daniel Webster and side chairs and decorative tables used in the Green Room. As the project progressed, Mary contributed a magnificent French Empire Savonnerie carpet for the Blue Room. As originally planned, pieces also were drawn from museum collections and the homes of prominent American families. A television audience of 80 million watched as the first lady led a tour of the renovated White House that aired on Valentine's Day 1962.

The Camelot years were a social feast for Mary. She was invited to a state dinner and festivities first for the president of Sudan and then the president of the Republic of the Congo, who spoke French but no English, and was seated next to Johnson, who spoke only English, so they communicated through translators. "The efforts of [the Kennedy administration] to make friends with African nations was terribly interesting to me," said Mary. "There was nothing second-class about the way they were entertained." She described the festivities for the Sudanese president as "one of the most charming parties she went to at the White House." A stage was set up, and a company of players created scenes from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Mary was "very moved by it."

Mary attended a party in honor of the vice president, Speaker of the House John McCormack, and the justices of the Supreme Court

in January 1963. She found it a splendid party, but her evening was compromised by a black oil spot on the Yves St. Laurent dress she'd had made in Paris. It was a lovely pale blue with hand-embroidered snowflakes, and she was sure everyone couldn't help but focus on the enormous spot. She had no time to wait for the maid to fetch cleaning fluid because "it would be too rude for words" to be absent when the president and vice president entered, so she went up to dinner with her head held high — and was relieved to realize the spot didn't show when she was seated at the table.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES

Heading into the fiscal 1962 appropriations season, Mary and Florence anticipated that the new administration would get their research funding plans back on track, but Kennedy turned out to be a deficit hawk. The idea persisted that NIH was getting more funds than it could use wisely, and differences were growing between Mary and NIH Director Shannon over the importance of targeted research versus time-consuming basic discovery research.

Mary backed targeted research, also known as translational research, because it took what was learned in basic research and applied it to a medical problem. For Mary, the goal was to cure diseases, not create chronic conditions from fatal ones. In her vision, a promising laboratory finding would be published immediately so it could be picked up and translated into a therapy, then moved quickly into clinical trials to be tested in patients.

She wanted the NIH to focus more on developing usable therapies, and her long-term plan was to get the NIH's mandate changed to task the institute directors with planning for not only the treatment but the control and elimination of diseases.

The targeted versus basic debate also affected lawmakers. They haggled over whether the funds should be earmarked by legislators for specific disease research to be conducted in specialized centers or allocated to the NIH institutes to be used in ways the directors and their advisory councils thought best. The delay drove the funding discussion into August, beyond the start of fiscal 1962 and after Mary and Florence had decamped for their summer hiatus in France.

The House and Senate conferees agreed to \$738 million for the National Institutes of Health, almost \$100 million less than the Senate bill, but still \$155 million more than the administration's proposed \$40 million increase. It was an embarrassment for the president, who reportedly had contacted Fogarty and asked him to hold to the budget proposal. The administration response to the increase was to impound \$60 million of the funding meant for medical research as part of government-wide cutbacks aimed at balancing the federal budget in fiscal 1963. Gorman reached out to Mary and Florence, who put their contacts to work. Given the large funding increases of recent years, their entreaties fell on deaf ears.

On top of that, the citizen witnesses she and Florence arranged to testify at the fiscal 1962 Senate appropriations hearings had addressed needs in specific diseases, but while fiscal 1962 did see increased funding based on that testimony, the bill did not earmark funds for specific diseases. The way Mary saw it, without specific congressional earmarks, the institute directors could not be forced to put the money toward areas of research lawmakers thought needed it most.

Mary was frustrated by the administrative system Shannon was creating to manage the research enterprise. Shannon was convinced that creating a foundation of research grounded in "solid basic knowledge" was an essential first step to finding the cures Mary

craved. He objected to creating the disease-specific research centers she envisioned and instead wanted to create a system of grants that she claimed “would mean nothing to anybody.” On that topic, she could have had more faith. Research Project Grants have become the backbone of the highly productive NIH grant system.

These individualized grants represent a broad-based approach to the discovery research with which Mary was so impatient. In general, they are awarded in response to a “funding opportunity announcement” (a request for proposals) to support a “discrete, specified, circumscribed” project by named investigators in an institution or organization. In 2020, NIH supported nearly 40,000 Research Project Grant awardees with about \$23 billion of its roughly \$40 billion allocation.

THE FOUNTAIN INVESTIGATIONS

Despite skepticism over NIH management, there was never a question as to whether progress against dread diseases was being made. Still, the shadow had been cast. An investigation begun in 1959 by Rep. Lawrence Fountain, a Democrat from North Carolina who chaired the House Government Operations Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations, issued its first report on management at NIH in April 1961. During his time in Congress, Fountain established himself as a watchdog and was the force behind creation of attorney general posts in federal departments, including Health, Education, and Welfare. During his investigations into the National Institutes of Health, he stressed that the value of the research was never in question. His initial inquiry was aimed at the agency’s administration of the thousands of grants at hundreds of institutions across the country.

Shannon found the management suggestions in the committee’s first report acceptable, and agreed to implement them. But during

a hearing called by Fountain to consider the committee's findings, Shannon, according to an account by historian Stephen P. Strickland, took umbrage at the idea Fountain was going to continue his investigations despite Shannon's initial cooperation. Shannon called the criticisms of his organization trivial compared to the work it was doing. He argued that his level of oversight of the enterprise had grown in proportion to the funds NIH was awarded.

Fountain was neither convinced by Shannon, nor inclined to suffer his insolence. In a second report, released in June 1962, Fountain basically accused Congress of forcing money on NIH that the agency couldn't handle. It was an impasse between the watchdogs and the scientists — and the people who championed the scientists' research, like Mary and like Fogarty and Hill. Members of Congress began quietly to pick sides.

In fall 1962, Mary and Florence heard that the American Medical Association planned to take advantage of the climate in Congress. The association was going to mount a campaign to discredit federal support of anything related to medicine to push back against any form of national insurance, including the proposed Medicare program. "I see evidence of this in the activities of the Fountain committee," said Mary. "We realized [the AMA] had taxed their membership \$50 per head, which would give them at least \$5 million with which to make mischief," Mary said. As well, Rep. Oren Harris, the Tennessee Democrat who chaired the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, the oversight committee for Health, Education and Welfare, was going to hold hearings in early 1963 on NIH and the Public Health Service in general. The hearings "would be sure to have the effect of casting doubt and being disparaging to the National Institutes of Health's operations," Mary concluded.

Mary and Florence soldiered on, preparing their expert witnesses and supporting their friends in Congress, but the implication was that they were part of the problem, and they were careful lest they jeopardize future gains. The witnesses were still carefully prepared and stuck to their agreed upon and quite reasonable citizens' funding requests in their testimony, said Mary. Overall the Kennedy administration did add about \$50 million a year to the budget proposal for NIH, a figure Kennedy felt to be a good increase "and that was supposed to be that," she said. "Naturally, we didn't think that was adequate and tried to get more." Mary believed Kennedy was sympathetic to medical research, but it wasn't a top priority.

When the time came to consider fiscal 1963 appropriations, not only did Fogarty defend the president's budget proposal, but the House voted for a smaller increase. Hill apparently agreed to go along with the proposition in exchange for bipartisan support in the Senate Appropriations Committee. The budget proposal was for \$930 million, and Congress reduced it by \$18 million to \$912 million. The next year, for fiscal 1964, the budget proposal was down \$15 million, and Kennedy asked for a review of the entire federal medical research program.

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LADY BIRD, LYNDON, AND MARY

1963 – 1964

Tragedy struck on November 22, 1963: President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Vice President Lyndon Johnson was left to proceed with his liberal domestic agenda, the increasingly controversial war in Vietnam, and the cold war with Russia.

The next evening, while Mary was reading after dinner, she was surprised by a call from President Johnson saying, “I want your support. I need your help.” It was one of hundreds of calls he made in the first days of his presidency. “There’s nothing more touching than the president of the United States saying this to an innocent citizen who’s sitting at home,” recalled Mary. It was a beguiling way to solicit support, and Mary was sure he got it.

Johnson asked when she was coming to Washington, and Mary said she would be arriving the next day to attend Kennedy's funeral. When she arrived, Johnson called to invite her to dinner with a handful of advisers, and she said she would come if she could bring Florence. After dinner, Johnson asked if it were true that Mary had gotten the NIH budget up to nearly a billion dollars, and when she said yes, he said, "Well, you ought to be cut ten percent." The remark "threw the fear of God into me," she recalled. She didn't know whether he really meant it, and she was afraid to ask.

Early in 1964, with Johnson's endorsement, a committee was appointed to carry out the NIH review Kennedy wanted and Dean Wooldridge, a physicist and aerospace engineer who once worked for Howard Hughes and had returned to the California Institute of Technology, where he gained a reputation for writing clearly about molecular and cellular processes in biology, was selected as chair. The committee comprised a disparate group of high-level men from the private and public sectors, none of whom was close to Mary. Their thorough, nationwide investigation, published in March 1965, concluded that the national research policy of conducting basic research to reveal leads to be followed by more directed efforts was practical, and NIH's operation was in good order. The committee's report buoyed Sen. Hill and Rep. Fogarty and affirmed their dedication to Mary and her goals. The mood in Congress swung in Mary and Florence's favor, and after two years of limited funding, the NIH appropriation for fiscal 1965, which had begun, was \$896 million, \$30 million more than the administration's budget proposal.

Mary was heartened by the call from Johnson. The two had hit it off while he was in the Senate, but as vice president his path didn't

often cross Mary's. Now she looked forward to a healthy working relationship with President Johnson, and her sway on Capitol Hill was as strong as ever. Mary's relationship with Johnson in the Senate had come from a confluence of interests and agendas. They both saw health and medical research as affecting not just quality of life but also poverty and racial justice. She and Clark Clifford had first approached Johnson in December 1958 with the idea of delivering a speech on the Senate floor that would summarize the issues facing the country from the minority point of view, a counter to Eisenhower's coming State of the Union address. Johnson had not made the speech Mary had in mind, but he used the material they gave him in other speeches, and, importantly, the contact was made.

During Johnson's final years in the Senate, Mary took every opportunity to visit him to talk about things in which he was interested or "something I was interested in that he became interested in," she said. They had developed a bond based on their common Protestant Northern Ireland roots: His family came from the same village her mother emigrated from — and her mother's maiden name was Johnson. In a way, "he thinks of me as being the female side of his family," she said. "I'm public spirited and sympathetic to tough causes."

She and Lady Bird Johnson grew closer during the harried days following the assassination. The first lady sought Mary's support and advice during the move to the White House from The Elms, the upscale home she and Lyndon had purchased in the Spring Valley neighborhood of Northwest Washington when he became vice president. Mary found the request charming. Those kinds of decisions were easy for her, but for the new first lady, who was adept at political and social situations, visualizing

and decorating a home were difficult. “She really wanted the reassurance of a friend,” said Mary, who was pleased she could offer her expertise.

When Johnson was elected to a full term in 1964, Lady Bird asked Mary to help with the inauguration. They wanted to make the launch of the Great Society the most artistically rich and visually beautiful event the city had seen.

There was no comparing the Johnson inaugural gala at the National Guard Armory with the disappointing Kennedy event beset by the freak snowstorm. The event on January 18, 1965, two nights before the swearing in, got the celebrating “off and whooping,” *The New York Times* reported on Page One. In contrast to the Kennedy fete, the armory was decorated “in the most lively and gay way,” recalled Mary. The event featured a variety show planned and run by her friend Richard Adler, of Broadway fame. Entertainment included Julie Andrews and Carol Burnett singing together, as well as Barbra Streisand and enough other Broadway stars that some shows had to close for the night. *The Times* wrote that the “most breath-taking moment of the show” featured Rudolf Nureyev performing “spectacular leaps in a virtuoso performance with Dame Margot Fonteyn.” Nureyev’s performance “staggered everyone with its beauty,” said Mary. She sat in the director’s box with Adler and his wife, Sally Ann Howes, who greeted the Johnsons with bouquets of white orchids.

On the eve of the inauguration, Mary co-chaired a concert with Johnson adviser Abe Fortas and his wife, Carolyn. Using decorations from the previous night’s gala, they dressed up Constitution Hall like it hadn’t been seen in more than a decade. Mary said that the Daughters of the American Revolution were horrified she was going to desecrate their hall, but “they couldn’t think of a

way to prevent it.” She decorated the president and vice president’s boxes with red and white carnations and the silk swags woven with stars and stripes they had brought from the gala. Guests were presented with red and white carnations as they arrived. Violinist Isaac Stern and pianist Van Cliburn, who was from Texas, performed. “I doubt the president ever sat through a concert before, but he was in extremely good humor and very interested in Mr. Cliburn’s playing,” said Mary.

Mary kept on her white coat trimmed in white mink during the concert because she had a terrible cold, and a chilly breeze flowed through the hall. So she was dressed for the frigid Washington winter when she left early to check the rooms she had set up at the State Department for the reception and dance in honor of the performers. She anticipated about 500 guests, and the “cast of characters was astonishing,” she said. She had decorated tables scattered about the ballroom where dancers could rest and talk. The tables were covered with pink tablecloths and decorated with pink, white, and pale-yellow carnations piled high on stands that resembled giant goblets. “Really, nobody had ever had as pretty a party in Washington as far as anybody could remember,” Mary said.

The guests moved around through the rooms in a pleasant daze of champagne, seeing people they had never seen before, Mary recalled. Even the president and first lady were very casually wandering around.

In contrast, the ball at the Sheraton Park — just one of many the night of the inauguration — couldn’t be called a ball. “It was a swarming,” Mary said. The 4,000 guests were so tightly packed they were unable to dance or mingle at all. “Our party was considered much better than any of the balls. Mr. Fortas was delighted with it.”

She spent “a pretty penny” helping finance the reception, but it was worth it, said Mary. “You can’t get it done right if you have to discuss it with too many other people. I don’t want to hear other people’s views about how it should be done. It’s less expensive in my time and energy to do it myself, and if it was wrong I’d have only myself to blame.”

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

Mary and Lady Bird found common ground in their appreciation of natural beauty, and Mary encouraged the first lady to follow up on her enjoyment of the wildflowers that had been planted along Texas highways by gardening clubs — Texas bluebonnets in particular — by encouraging a campaign to beautify the nation’s cities. Mary called it an “absolute revelation” that the president mentioned beautification in his January 1965 State of the Union speech and went on to host a White House Conference on Natural Beauty. She said she couldn’t recall any president who “ever called attention to the fact that America the beautiful is largely America the ugly, and it’s mostly man-made ugliness,” she said.

She urged Lady Bird to support the kind of change in Washington that Mary had pushed in New York City since the early 1940s, brightening and softening the concrete by planting flowers and trees and installing decorative lighting. When Lady Bird decided to devote one in a series of luncheons she hosted at the White House for “Woman Doers” to her beautification plans, she invited Mary to speak. “Come talk to us because you’re the godmother of this idea,” Mary recalled Lady Bird saying. She advised the January 27 luncheon guests to “plant masses of flowers where the masses pass.” She described her beautification projects, starting with planting daffodils and tulips for twenty blocks along Park

Avenue to show obstinate parks employees that flowers could survive automobile pollution.

Lady Bird held the first meeting of her Committee for a More Beautiful Capital on February 11, 1965, a committee the two women hoped would become a model for cities across the country.

Mary's beautification efforts in New York began in 1942 with a gift to the city of "many millions" of hardy chrysanthemum seeds and money to plant them in four Manhattan parks, as well as what was then Cadman Park in Brooklyn. *New York Times* columnist Meyer Berger wrote that the chrysanthemums were a gift to the city in memory of Mary's mother, who loved flowers and shuddered at the drab grayness of cities.

Mary and her sister, Alice Fordyce, created an organization called Annie Appleseed to give away mum seeds through a memorial gift named after their mother, Sara Woodard. In addition to the plantings in New York, Annie Appleseed mum seeds were sent to Veterans Affairs hospitals, city parks, housing projects, prisons, and as far away as London, wrote Berger in his "About New York" column of October 30, 1953. Writing ten years after Mary and Alice started the project, Berger describes mounded displays of chrysanthemums in "shades of soft white through bronze to deep maroon" still blooming in Bryant, Riverside, and Cadman Parks.



Mary is shown in the mid-1960s in front of a painting by Claude Monet. Mary switched majors to art history in college and was an avid art collector her entire life.

Lasker Foundation

Albert was never enthusiastic about Mary's dream of making New York more livable by planting trees and flowers. "He thought it was an amusing eccentricity that I had," Mary said. Before Albert's death in 1952, Mary had begun her Park Avenue demonstration project, planting tulips for about four blocks in the center divider to show what could be done. After his death, she decided lower Park Avenue deserved the same treatment, so she gave the parks commissioner money to plant both tulips and daffodils in alternating blocks. "The spring of 1957 was absolutely glorious. In fact, it was superb, and I was entranced by the beauty of it," she recalled.

To honor Albert's memory, she and his children sponsored the planting of 180 cherry trees and ivy to go under them in a park on the grounds of the new United Nations building, in sight of Mary's home at Beekman Place just north of the headquarters building. That planting was followed by a gift of some 40,000 daffodil bulbs naturalized throughout the park.

In 1956, Mary was joined in her New York beautification efforts by Anna Rosenberg, now Anna Rosenberg Hoffman, and in 1957 they formed Salute to the Seasons, a group of New Yorkers that arranged for seasonal flower displays along the major avenues and promoted street festivals. "They make the ugly, very ugly, streets look more bearable, I think," said Mary.

Mary also sponsored or leveraged funding to have thousands of trees planted in the city, always with the grudging support of the city's parks employees, she said. "We never did have a good Park Commissioner who was really terribly interested in beautification." In contrast, "the people of Washington are really absolutely charming about [beautification]," she said, adding that Lady Bird Johnson is fun to work with, and "there is nothing like the

presumed wish of the White House to move some federal officials to do something.”

In Washington, Mary sponsored the planting of daffodils, 100,000 of them, for Rock Creek Park. She arranged for the same kind of single flowering cherry trees famously planted around the Tidal Basin to line the drive around nearby Hains Point in honor of the Johnsons. She donated hundreds of dogwoods to decorate the Francis Scott Key Bridge, which connects Virginia with the Georgetown section of Washington, noting that the bridge was both a major entrance to the capital and located across from Florence’s house.

She wanted to add water jets, lit at night, along the edge of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool on the National Mall and azaleas planted along its edges, though that never came to be. She envisioned covering the grassy spaces at the entryways to the Capitol with massive flower displays and installing plantings in every possible grassy area. “There are so many small blank spaces that could be planted with a combination of small evergreens and a variety of azaleas,” she said. “It would be absolutely enchanting.”

Mary did manage a spectacular planting of nearly 10,000 azalea bushes the length of Pennsylvania Avenue from the foot of the Capitol to a block short of the White House, calling the \$30,000 price tag “just a small token contribution.” In addition, federal buildings along the route were to be planted with azaleas, to be supplemented with annuals during the spring and summer. Rose gardens were planted in several spots around the city, including a bed of 880 pink rose bushes at Union Station.

In many ways, Mary’s beautification efforts were part and parcel with her vision of improving Americans’ health.

20

BRANCHING OUT

1964 – 1967

In the late 1950s, Mary envisioned a nationwide system of regional medical centers that would conduct research and disseminate the results. She first got the idea adopted as part of the health plank in the Democratic Party platform during the 1960 presidential campaign, then saw it come close to fruition under Kennedy. Now her idea was being realized as part of Johnson's Great Society.

In 1963, Mary had pushed the idea for a White House Commission on Cancer, Heart Disease, and Stroke to the point where Mike Gorman had drafted a statement for Kennedy, and Myer "Mike" Feldman, a Kennedy confidant, had begun to vet names for the commission, which was to be announced at the end of November. As Mary conceived it, the commission would recommend a system of health centers with the explicit mission of finding cures for



Mary talks with President Johnson at the President's Ball in June 1966 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City.

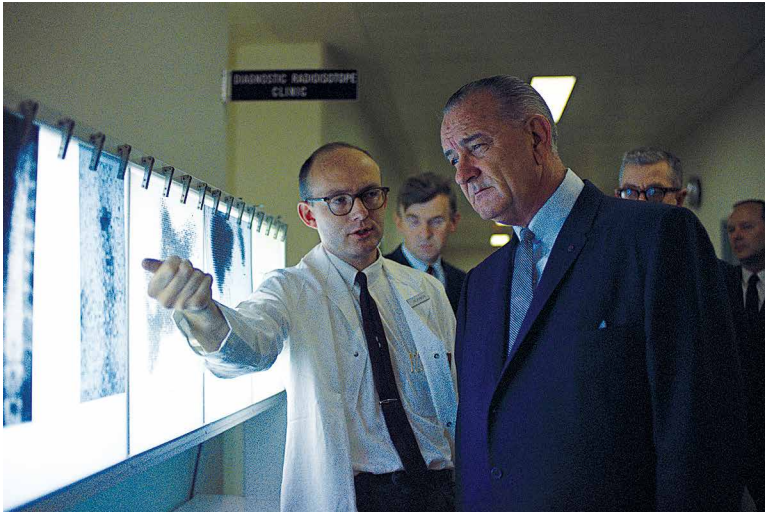
LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

cancer, heart disease, and stroke. In the end, the program would be celebrated for creating a network that coordinated research universities, medical centers, and hospitals to raise the quality of health care nationally.

After the assassination, “the whole thing about the commission evaporated for a few days,” said Mary. She didn’t bring it up at the dinner with Johnson the night before the funeral, but when she was in town December 4 for an advisory committee meeting at the NIH, she managed a few minutes with the president and asked him to consider appointing the members.

Johnson told her to take it up with adviser Abe Fortas, who liked the idea and sent it to Feldman, who agreed that the project ought to be pushed ahead. When the president called Mary to express his concern that the list of potential members didn’t include enough women, she was ready with an addendum that included Bess Truman and Florence Mahoney.

Johnson announced the commission in a February 1964 Health Message to Congress as part of an expansive agenda that included aid to medical education and establishment of the Medicare and Medicaid programs, which Mary had long believed were a logical extension of the 1935 Social Security program. While the benefits of medical research are “impressive and hopeful,” Johnson said, “the American people are not receiving the full benefits of what medical research has already accomplished.” For that reason, he said, he was creating a commission of “persons prominent in medicine and public affairs” who would “recommend steps to reduce the incidence of these diseases through new knowledge and more complete utilization of the medical knowledge we already have.” Their report was due by the end of the year.



President Johnson tours the Bethesda, Maryland, campus of the National Institutes of Health in July 1967.

LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

Mary thought highly of the commission. Led by heart surgeon Michael DeBakey, it was empowered to call witnesses and gather information from whatever sources it found useful. “They are outstanding laymen who question the present attitudes of conventional doctors, and they are outstanding doctors who don’t think in as sweeping terms of research.” For Mary, that meant they were more focused on translational rather than discovery research.

Mary believed that outstanding progress could be made if the commission’s friends in Congress saw that the recommendations were turned into legislation and funding was appropriated to implement them. Asked whether she wanted to join the commission, Mary said she thought her views were so well-known that her participation would prejudice the group’s impartiality. Besides, she said, “I can get more done not as a member because I can find out before the initial report what’s in it, and if I have ideas I can get them included.”

Johnson was “more sympathetic to health problems than any president I’ve ever known,” she said. “The report can be made a major segment in the president’s war against poverty because poverty makes disease and disease makes poverty.” At that time, the three diseases the commission targeted accounted for 71 percent of deaths in the country and cost about \$35 billion annually in lost income.

In its December 1964 report, the commission made 35 recommendations, chief among them creation of a regional system of medical facilities for patient care, research, and teaching. The commission recommended establishing 60 regional centers over five years — created where possible alongside a major medical institution — that would be strongly oriented toward clinical investigation and fundamental research, as well as teaching medicine.

The American Medical Association again was critical. In response, DeBakey took the opportunity during a panel discussion at the 1965 Health Conference of the New York Academy of Medicine to emphasize the federal government's responsibility for "strengthening and broadening" support for medical research as well as for medical education. The government would not, he stressed, directly run the proposed facilities.

The bill that created the regional medical programs as an amendment to the Public Health Service Act was introduced in the Senate by Lister Hill and in the House by Oren Harris, who had succeeded Percy Priest as chair of the House authorizing committee for Health, Education, and Welfare. The original authorization was for \$50 million. (Mary and the commission had hoped for \$350 million.) The president's budget proposed \$25 million in planning grants to get the program off the ground in 1966 with an increase for fiscal 1967 to \$45 million to fund operational grants. Mary later lamented the fact that "cancer, heart, and stroke" had been dropped from the title of the program "because the intention was to attack these major diseases." She laid the blame on NIH chief James Shannon and others at NIH, who "loathe having any specific goal attached to anything that they're doing."

Mary was in a meeting when she received a phone message to call the president's office immediately. Johnson told her the bill had just passed, "and this is on you." Her careful response was, "Well, it's certainly you. I couldn't have done anything about it by myself." Looking back, she said, "It was very sweet of him" that the first thing he thought of was to call her. "God knows it's taken my life's blood."

On October 6, 1965, Johnson signed into law the legislation establishing the regional medical programs. In his remarks, he

noted statistics for heart disease, cancer, and stroke and said, “With these grim facts in mind, and at the insistence of that lovely lady, Mrs. Mary Lasker, I appointed a commission to recommend national action to reduce the toll of these killer diseases.”

“Through grants to establish regional programs among our medical schools and clinical research institutes, we will unite our nation’s health resources. We will speed communication between the researcher and the student and the practicing physician.”

Mary had lofty expectations for the regional medical programs. Two years after the signing, she said, “Eventually, this should be a major force in the control and the elimination of cancer and eventually arteriosclerosis. People should have more chance to die of just old age.”

The program had ups and downs, enjoying peak funding of \$140 million in 1973. It was expanded to emphasize primary care, with the addition of prevention and rehabilitation services as well as kidney disease treatment programs, among other services. An emphasis was placed on health services delivery, including “physician extenders” such as nurse practitioners. By 1973, 54 regional medical programs were operational; however, the kidney disease program and an anti-smoking campaign were phased out. As part of budget



Mary and Lady Bird Johnson are presented with flower seeds in February 1967 outside the White House as part of the first lady's District of Columbia beautification efforts.

LBJ Library photo by Robert Knudsen



President Johnson greets Florence Mahoney at the Oval Office in July 1968 with his signature kiss of the head.

LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

cuts for fiscal 1974, the Nixon administration eliminated all program funding, and Congress struggled to provide support for one last year.

Late in 1974, Congress passed the National Health Planning and Resources Development Act, which consolidated functions formerly carried out by the regional medical programs with the Hill-Burton and Comprehensive Health Planning programs. The regional medical programs ceased to exist independently in 1976.

Mary had dreamed of a system devoted to research against cancer, heart disease, and stroke, but in retrospect, she concluded that “although all the right words are in the bill as far as doing research goes, clinical research, very little has gotten done.”

Instead, “the bill has worked out not as an advance to research at all but as a kind of adjunct to services, such as increasing intensive care units, to make what is already known a little better known in backward districts.”

In the end, the program would be celebrated for establishing a network of research universities, medical centers, and hospitals that raised the quality of health care, but Mary’s hopes for a concerted effort against cancer, heart disease, and stroke did not materialize.

GETTING NIH'S ATTENTION

About the same time the first regional medical program planning grants were being awarded, Mary tried another tactic to nudge the National Institutes of Health into doing more translational research. It was the night of the President's Club Dinner in New York on June 11, 1966. The President's Club was a group of ardent Democrats willing to pay a thousand dollars to dine with or dance at a party given in honor of the president.



Mary and Florence Mahoney talk with President Johnson in July 1968 in the Oval Office with other members of the National Health Education Committee, including, from left, Mike Gorman, Dr. Sidney Farber, Dr. Howard Rusk (facing the camera), and Dr. Michael DeBakey.

LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

ANGEL IN MINK

Mary was in charge of decorating the Waldorf Astoria for the ball. She started by creating a lowered ceiling with pink and red draperies of “rather pretty” material that she recalled was very inexpensive. She draped the boxes in pink and red and covered the tables with pink tablecloths. The centerpieces were tall bouquets of carnations and roses. Large, round, topiary trees blooming with pink and red flowers decorated the pink-and-red stage. “The whole atmosphere transformed the room,” said Mary. “The people at the Waldorf said they had never seen the ballroom look as good as it did that night.”



Mary presents a copy of the National Health Education Committee's health report to President Johnson in July 1968 in the Oval Office. Also seated is Florence Mahoney, and standing are other members of the noble conspirators, from left, Mike Gorman, Dr. Michael DeBakey, Dr. Sidney Farber, and Dr. Howard Rusk.

LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

She was seated next to Johnson, and during the course of conversation, she suggested that he call the heads of the NIH institutes together and ask what they were doing about curing the major causes of death and prolonging the prime of life of citizens.

The NIH community — the institutes and the thousands of researchers nationwide receiving grants — was fearful that Mary and other activists would co-opt its process, which depended on basic research that would eventually lead to discoveries that led to cures. It was the “eventually” that got to Mary.

In her opinion, the agency she had all but created had grown stodgy and lost its way. She wanted cures, but NIH’s authorizing language focused on the search for fundamental knowledge to “enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability” — not eliminate disease. Mary again wondered if she could get NIH’s mission statement changed by congressional action.

Such a change would correct what she saw as a lack of zeal. Congress assumed the mission to eradicate disease is implicit, she argued in a 1967 interview. “The general attitude [at NIH] is, there’s no hurry and we’re doing studies and projects.” If the authorization were amended, they would have to “face up to the fact that this is what was expected of them.” That was the attitude she conveyed to the president that night at the Waldorf. And Johnson was listening.

Later in June, Johnson invited NIH Director Shannon, the individual institute directors, Surgeon General William Stewart, and Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary John Gardner to the White House for a discussion he dubbed his “strategy council in the war against disease.”

The president told the group he was concerned that too much research was being conducted “for the sake of research alone,” reported *New York Times* journalist Robert Semple. Johnson was

“keenly interested” in knowing what the payoffs were for the health of the nation’s citizens. He exhorted them to shape their priorities to get the most out of existing programs instead of asking for more money.

Reaction to the meeting among the federally funded research community was immediate and negative, reflecting a fear that citizen activists had taken over the federal research agenda. In the end, Gardner had to call a meeting of leaders in the university research community to make clear the department’s priorities had not changed.

The acrimony persisted a year later, and on July 21, 1967, Johnson was compelled to mend fences. With some fanfare, he took the Marine One helicopter fifteen-some miles from the White House to the NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland, to tour the facilities and make a speech in which he called the agency “a billion-dollar success story.” He said he liked to visit at least once a year to see what the researchers were doing “in order to help them more.”

Johnson said that during the tour, Shannon and the NIH institute directors reported on “some of the matters we raised last year when we met at the White House,” emphasizing that, “I should like for them to know — and all the world to know — that I regard these men as my chiefs of staff in this war on the ancient enemies — sickness and disease.”

Mary’s efforts to push translational medicine might be seen as undermining the National Institutes of Health with its focus on basic science research, but it was compatible with the original reason for her advocacy — to cure disease. Her zeal for seeing discoveries translated into cures was legendary, and Johnson’s interest in the public welfare intersected with Mary’s goal of finding cures. Researchers weren’t so much worried about losing their funding as they were about losing their scientific freedom when Johnson

staged his White House meeting. Johnson's subsequent helicopter visit allayed scientists' fears and prompted them to begin thinking beyond the petri dish in a way that Mary never achieved.

MOVING ON

Unrest over the Vietnam War doomed Johnson's hopes for re-election. After barely winning as a write-in candidate in the March New Hampshire primary, Johnson dropped out, leaving the field open for his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, who became the Democratic candidate but lost to Richard Nixon.

In a 1969 interview, Mary observed that she had "always for years been friendly with the Johnsons," but the only important legislation that represented new money for health in his administration was the regional cancer, heart, and stroke centers. She hastened to add it was "a very important piece of legislation" that she hoped would "become more so."

Mary may have been disappointed in the Johnson era's medical legislation, but on Johnson's watch the NIH appropriation hit \$1 billion during economically troubled times, and while it didn't make giant gains, neither did it dip below that mark. Johnson signed Medicare and the state-focused Medicaid program into law July 30, 1965, recalling for Mary the work she and Albert did to forward the idea of universal insurance. The Medicare plan won popular support because of its focus on providing health security for people over 65. Mary immediately began to advocate for improvements on the original, including eventually extending Medicare to all citizens.

In 1965, the Lasker Foundation awarded Johnson the Albert Lasker Public Service Award for legislative leadership in medical research for his "outstanding contributions to the health of the people of the United States."

Mary remained friends with the Johnsons. Lady Bird Johnson asked Mary to join the committee for the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, to be built on the grounds of the University of Texas in Austin, so she flew there to spend Memorial Day weekend 1967 at the LBJ Ranch and tour the site in Austin. That evening, Lady Bird hosted a dinner in Mary's honor, inviting people from all over Texas, who flew their private planes in for the event. "The people were cultivated and delightful," said Mary, and "when dinner was over you could hear the planes getting into the air and flying off. It was charming." Mary served on the board of the Lyndon Johnson Foundation, which administers the Johnson Library.

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THE WAR ON CANCER

1969 – 1971

When Richard Nixon took office in January 1969, Mary braced for battle. On one front, she faced an administration she believed was unwilling to propose funding for medical research at what she considered a reasonable level. At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, Congress, a reliable ally in recent decades, didn't look like it was up for much of a fight. "It's perfectly possible we could lose a few hundred million dollars in a sudden move for economy unless we're strong in the defense of our funds," Mary realized.

Reasoning that "there's nothing the matter with this situation that very big research breakthroughs couldn't greatly improve" and believing that "people need to see important results coming from their investment," Mary decided her strongest defense would

be an all-out offensive, a drive to produce those results as a gift to the nation on the country's 200th birthday in 1976.

And the germ of the idea for an all-out effort to cure cancer, celebrated as the crowning achievement of Mary's advocacy, was formed. While the National Cancer Act's legacy is complicated, there's no doubt that with its creation, Mary Lasker put on a master class in citizen lobbying.

For this campaign, Mary would be without two key allies. Rep. John Fogarty had died suddenly of a heart attack two years earlier, and Sen. Lister Hill was now retiring after forty-three years in Congress. The situation was reminiscent of the 1950s. In other words, said Mary: "Totally no sympathy."

Compounding the problem, the Vietnam War was draining federal coffers and increasing the ranks of the deficit hawks in Congress. And still, despite investigative reports to the contrary, the belief persisted, particularly in the House, that the NIH was getting more money than it could use effectively.

Mary felt that Fogarty's death was "a catastrophe for medical research." He had been her rock on the House Appropriations Health, Education, and Welfare Subcommittee, where more than once, even when his party was in the minority, he had won the day for medical research.

Now, George Mahon, a Democrat from Lubbock, Texas, who was a careful man with a dime and had chaired the full Appropriations Committee since 1964, was packing the Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittee with lawmakers she felt had no interest in medicine. "Mahon always disliked Fogarty because he was able to carry the full committee with larger research appropriations," said Mary. This time Mahon made sure he got a committee that was "supine."

The new subcommittee chair was Daniel Flood of Pennsylvania, often referred to as Dandy Dan because of his colorful style and Salvador Dali-like waxed mustache. He had been treated for esophageal cancer in 1962, so Mary was disappointed to find he had no particular interest in medical research.

In the Senate, Hill's retirement left a void. Though a lame duck in 1968, he had remained a strong advocate until the end of the session. Despite his efforts, "for the first time in a long time, we came out with slightly less funding than the year before," Mary said. "We have never known such pressure or trouble. The amounts of money were very meager, and the opposition and stupidity on the House side was beyond anything you can imagine."

In the Senate, Warren Magnuson, a longtime Mary ally, succeeded Hill as chair of the Health, Education, and Welfare appropriations subcommittee. "When Magnuson decides he wants to do something, he's a formidable enemy, on the floor or in conference," said Mary, and while she doubted that he would be as devoted to the cause as Hill, she thought he would put up a fight in conference to counteract Mahon.


"We shall see what will develop," she said. "It's a new era."

A VERY PUBLIC EFFORT

It was no surprise that Nixon submitted his own budget request for fiscal 1970 rather than use the one prepared by the outgoing Johnson administration, and he confirmed Mary's fears by undercutting the already grim Johnson proposal for research. Mary defended Johnson, noting that if it weren't for the war in Vietnam, he would have supported increases.

As Mary related the story in a January 1970 interview, Magnuson began the new era by making a six-week trip to Hong Kong and

Mr. Nixon: You can cure cancer



If prayers are heard in Heaven, this prayer is heard the most:
"Dear God, please. Not cancer."

Still, more than 316,000 Americans died of cancer last year.

Thirty years, Mr. President, you have it in your power to begin to end this curse.

As you agonize over the Budget, we beg you to remember the agony of those 316,000 Americans. And their families.

We urge you to remember also that we spend more each day on military matters than each year on cancer research. And, last year, more than 21 times as much on space research as on cancer research.

We ask a better perspective, a better way to allocate our money to save hundreds of thou-

sands of lives each year.

America can do this. There is not a doubt in the minds of our top cancer researchers that the final answer to cancer can be found.

Already, 4 out of about 200 types of cancer can be cured with drugs. And 17 other drugs will cause temporary remission in 17 other types of cancer.

Dr. Sidney Farber, Past President of the American Cancer Society, believes: "We are as close to a cure for cancer. We lack only the will and the kind of money and comprehensive planning that would be putting a man on the moon."

Why, don't we try to conquer cancer by America's 50th birthday?

What a holiday that would be! Cancer could be then where smallpox, diphtheria and polio

are today—almost nonexistent.

If you fail us, Mr. President, this will happen: One in six Americans now alive, 34,000,000 people, will die of cancer unless new cures are found.

One in four Americans now alive, 51,000,000 people, will have cancer in the future.

We simply cannot afford this.

Our nation has the money on one hand and the skills on the other. We must, under your leadership, put our heads together and get this thing done.

Surely, this war against cancer has the support of 100% of the people. It is a war in which we lost 21 times more lives last year than we lost in Viet Nam last year. A war we can win and put the entire human race in our debt.

To the public, cancer patients, their friends and relatives:

Write or tele the President, urging him to put more funds behind cancer research. Or, please use this coupon.

Dear Mr. Nixon:
Cancer research needs more funds. Please provide them in your 1971 budget. Please.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Mail this coupon to: The President
The White House
Washington, D.C.

CITIZENS COMMITTEE FOR THE CONQUEST OF CANCER

800 United Nations Plaza, New York, N.Y., 10018; 1500 New York, N.Y., 10018; 1500 New York, N.Y., 10018

In December 1969, Mary went on the offensive, running this ad in a number of national publications, including *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

The Washington Post

not starting hearings on the bill until November. “It was something unheard of,” she said. By about December 10 he hadn’t called any citizen witnesses. Then, in three days of marathon sessions from 10 o’clock in the morning until seven or seven thirty at night, senators heard from not just Mary’s witnesses but 150 others about Nixon’s 1970 budget proposal. The lack of decorum distressed Mary, who declared the hearings a “shambles such as never been known before.”

“We still haven’t got final figures for [fiscal] 1970, and the [fiscal] year’s more than half gone,” Mary said.

Ultimately, however, the Senate added 10 percent over the House figure, taking the total NIH budget to \$1.2 billion. Senators threw in an additional \$100 million for the regional medical centers. In conference, Magnuson saved half the agency’s increase, for an appropriation of \$1.12 billion for fiscal 1970, and managed to keep the increase for the medical centers.

Despite Magnuson’s success, Mary was more certain than ever that a public effort was needed to revitalize support for medical research. She recognized the importance of some basic research, but she was deeply frustrated that the NIH leadership failed to share her sense of urgency in developing cures to save lives now.

Mary’s initial instinct was to pull the National Cancer Institute out of NIH altogether and get it away from the stifling ennui that mired the agency. The move seemed an odd choice for the woman who had done so much to create the NIH in the first place. But she thought it was the only way to focus the institute on cures. As the concept of an independent NCI evolved, however, the idea of literally separating the institute from the agency would prove untenable. Mary’s proposal, however, would succeed in sharpening the institute’s focus and elevating its independence within the Department of Health Education, and Welfare.

A QUANDARY

In May 1969, Mary approached Sen. Ralph Yarborough, a Texas Democrat she supported because of his liberal politics and his interest in fighting cancer. Yarborough chaired the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, the authorizing committee that dealt with agencies in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Yarborough and Mary conceived the idea of appointing an advisory body to his committee to make curing cancer a national priority. They called it the alliterative, if awkward, Committee of Consultants on the Conquest of Cancer.

Mary thought the National Cancer Institute might be just one part of this effort, and as the idea evolved, her plans got bolder. Looking to replicate the level of success of the July 1969 moon landing, Mary wondered if a NASA-like Cancer Conquest Administration was the real answer. She met with Yarborough twice before she went to Europe that year, but he was too engrossed in his election campaign to select the commission.

She was still looking for a White House contact in the new administration when, in the middle of October, she received a surprise luncheon invitation from Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. Despite his conservative leanings, Laird had supported medical research as a representative from Wisconsin during a term as Fogarty's Republican counterpart on the House appropriations Health, Education, and Welfare subcommittee. Laird had been advised by his staff to get to know influential people outside of the defense community, and Mary made the list. She seized the opportunity to cultivate a relationship with a high-ranking administration official and promote her ideas for conquering cancer. They met before lunch, and Laird said he would talk to Health, Education, and Welfare Department Secretary Robert Finch and the president himself, which he did.

It occurred to Mary that if the president could be persuaded to appoint a cancer commission, he would have to put the money in the budget or be embarrassed. Once it was in his budget proposal, Congress would likely go along with it.

Sensing an opening, Mary didn't want to waste it. She reached out to Elmer Bobst, the pharmaceutical executive who had helped her transform the American Cancer Society in the mid-1940s. Bobst just happened to be a Nixon confidant and adviser on health policy. Mary invited Bobst to her home in November to meet with Laurence Rockefeller, who chaired the board at Memorial Hospital (now Memorial Sloan Kettering), her old friend Emerson Foote, and Dr. Sidney Farber to talk about the war on cancer idea. Bobst liked it enough to take it to the president. Shortly after, Bobst reported that Nixon was interested, but too busy to talk until after the State of the Union address in January. Meanwhile, Laird reported at the end of December that he also had spoken with Nixon, and that the president would act soon.

Mary's rapid progress put her in a quandary. When she realized she was having success with Bobst, and hence the president, she went back to Yarborough and suggested that it would be better if the president formed a commission. Yarborough was furious and insisted that Nixon would do nothing to support a commission's recommendations. The senator promised to frame a Senate resolution and appoint the commission before the end of the year, but he didn't, and Congress was out until mid-January 1970.

ANOTHER ALLY MOVES ON

Mary's plan for a war on cancer that would pull the National Cancer Institute out of the National Institutes of Health was a step

too far for Florence. Florence had always been more interested in science for its own sake, and she just couldn't go along with the grand scheme.

"I thought it was a dumb thing to do — and unnecessary," Florence told biographer Judith Robinson. "We had spent all that time getting NIH organized," she said, adding that there was plenty of money for cancer research. She told Mary as much.

Next to Albert, Mary considered Florence her greatest ally; they had worked together for most of three decades, but Florence had always had her own priorities. For one, she wanted to see a new NIH institute to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of older adults established. Mary wasn't opposed to an institute on aging but just didn't feel strongly enough about it to take time away from finding cures for cancer and heart disease. Florence had been working toward the institute on aging since the 1960s. Nixon would finally sign the bill to create the National Institute on Aging as one of his last official acts, and it was established in 1974.

Their philosophical parting of ways didn't prevent Florence and Mary from remaining friends. But their policy interests were diverging, which meant the friends spent less time together. "You just don't see each other as much as if you were doing things together," Florence said.

A GIFT FOR AMERICA'S 200TH

In December 1969, with the aim of energizing her efforts with both Nixon and Yarborough, Mary ran her much-publicized, full-page advertisement declaring, "Mr. Nixon: You Can Cure Cancer" in *The New York Times*, the *New York Post*, and *The Washington Post*.

The ad didn't mince words and went straight at the president. It opened:

If prayers are heard in Heaven, this prayer is heard the most:

"Dear God, please. Not cancer."

Still, more than 318,000 Americans died of cancer last year.

This year, Mr. President, you have it in your power to begin to end this curse.

It said that the U.S. spent more each day on military matters than each year on cancer research. It noted that four out of about two hundred types of cancer could be cured by drugs at the time, with drugs effective against seventeen other cancers. It quoted Dr. Farber referring to moon shots.

And then it went back hard at Nixon:

If you fail us, Mr. President, this will happen:

One in six Americans now alive, 34,000,000 people, will die of cancer unless new cures are found.

One in four Americans now alive, 51,000,000 people, will have cancer in the future.

We simply cannot afford this.

Our nation has the money on the one hand and the skills on the other. We must, under your leadership, put our hands together and get this thing done.

It closed by again raising the issue that ended Johnson's presidency and remained a divisive thorn in Nixon's side.

Surely, the war against cancer has the support of 100% of the people. It is a war in which we lost 21 times more lives last year than we lost in Viet Nam last year. A war we can win and put the entire human race in our debt.

The advertisement ran with a coupon for readers to clip and mail to the president to show their support.

“I think you’ve finally got to get the facts simply stated,” Mary said. “Some bright people will remember.” Her staff heard that the White House received between 6,000 and 8,000 letters in response to the ad.

A year later, Mary looked back on her effort and worried that since her first meeting with Yarborough she had expended a lot of energy with little return. “I tried to get Nixon to appoint a panel of consultants, then I worked on Yarborough and gave up on Nixon and concentrated on Yarborough,” she said.

In March 1970, Yarborough finally introduced a Senate resolution to establish the advisory panel, which would report to his committee, and Mary, with lobbyists Mike Gorman and Luke Quinn, managed to enlist forty-three cosponsors. The panel sought only \$250,000 to carry out the study, but Mary found it difficult and exhausting to talk to that many lawmakers and get them to sponsor it. When the resolution was accepted by the Senate, Yarborough had only one name to put forth for the 26-person panel, so Mary supplied the rest, including Bobst, Foote, Farber, Anna Rosenberg Hoffman, and William Blair. In total, the committee comprised 13 laypersons and 13 scientists.

“This Committee of Consultants for the Conquest of Cancer through research is, I hope, going to be a second effort, a big effort, to replace the big effort I made to get the Cancer, Heart, and Stroke commission appointed,” asserted Mary. “I should get a final answer in this decade, preferably by 1976, the 200th anniversary of our country.”

On December 4, 1970, the advisory panel presented its report to the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, which was chaired by Yarborough and included Edward Kennedy, Walter Mondale, Alan Cranston, Jacob Javits, and Adlai Stevenson III, who was continuing the Stevenson family political legacy after

winning a special election. The report recommended establishing an independent national cancer authority with the power to cut red tape and make substantial plans. The new entity would have a budget of \$800 million to \$1 billion by 1976. It would be an autonomous agency reporting to the president and to Congress, with an advisory council to be confirmed by the Senate.

Yarborough had been defeated in the November elections, but that didn't stop him from quickly introducing a bill in the Senate based on the panel's recommendations. In the House, the companion bill was sponsored by Democrats Harley Staggers of West Virginia and Claude Pepper, who had made a comeback in 1962 by winning a House seat in Florida. At the time, Mary hoped to see the bill passed by the summer of 1971, but the effort faced more work and a lot of compromise.

'REAL TROUBLE'

When the new Congress was seated in January 1971, Sen. Kennedy of Massachusetts chaired the NIH authorizing committee. Kennedy and Javits, the ranking Republican on the committee, reintroduced Yarborough's bill in the Senate.

Then, in his January 22, 1971, State of the Union address, Nixon called for an all-out attack on cancer and pledged \$100 million for an effort like those that landed Americans on the moon and split the atom.

"He really ignored the report of the panel and the size of the appropriation they had recommended," said Mary. "Bobst got him to say what he did, and \$100 million was a kind of a sop to the whole thing."

Meanwhile, Mary had gotten the American Cancer Society board of directors to pass a resolution supporting the Senate bill

and praising Nixon for his speech, resolving a latent conflict in its ranks over whether its fundraising would be imperiled if the government put more money in the pot. Nixon's announcement actually helped her cause with the cancer society, said Mary, because many members were conservative Republicans.

Mary asked Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana to give a luncheon in mid-February where there could be a bipartisan discussion of the bill. She paid for and went to the event, which was attended by thirty-six senators. Mary thought more senators would have attended, but it was close to Lincoln's Birthday and many of them had gone home to make speeches.

Then on February 18, the president unveiled his plan to create a Cancer Conquest program — within the NIH — with a director responsible to the president. His new Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary, Elliot Richardson, and NIH Director Robert Marston backed the proposal. Mary found herself making frequent trips to Washington to talk to individual senators, particularly Alan Cranston of California and Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, and found herself disheartened that their constituents at research universities were “opposed to the idea that anything could be done outside of the usual bureaucratic structure” and leaning on them to oppose the bill.

Cranston and Nelson, two members of the Kennedy committee, adamantly opposed disrupting the structure of NIH, so “we had a proposal from Nixon for business more-or-less as usual but a little more money, and two Democrats opposed to the bill,” said Mary. “I was alarmed and realized we were in real trouble.”

Then, Mary's sister, Alice, mentioned an Ann Landers column on breast cancer that had elicited 250,000 requests to the American Cancer Society for more information. Mary phoned

Eppie Lederer (Landers' real name), told her about her goal and the challenges to the bill, and wondered if Ann could inspire a write-in campaign urging senators to push the bill out of committee. Lederer read the bill and the background materials Mary sent her and wrote "a magnificent column." The column, which was published in April 1971, went to bat for the entire proposal, showing how spending on the Vietnam war, foreign aid, and the space program dwarfed cancer research, and it supported the idea of a NASA-like agency to manage the war on cancer. Lederer asked: "If this great country of ours can put a man on the moon, why can't we find a cure for cancer?"

The column reportedly resulted in at least half a million letters to the Senate.

A REMARKABLE COLLABORATION

By the end of May, however, it was obvious Mary's supporters still didn't have the votes, so she came up with a daring tactic. As Mary told the story, she called Elmer Bobst and said, "This is the time when if you could persuade the president to go along, we could make a giant step forward" and outlined her plan.

Bobst went to Nixon, and Nixon got Sen. Peter Dominick of Colorado, the next ranking Republican on the Senate committee after Javits, to introduce a Republican version of the bill, which Mary said she persuaded Kennedy to allow, even though it gave the Republicans the right to claim more credit. Satisfied his interests were being represented, "Nixon turned Richardson and everybody in the administration right around," said Mary. The historian Stephen Strickland said it "had become in effect the Kennedy-Nixon bill, a most remarkable measure because of the unlikely alliance it seemed to symbolize." Moreover, it was done

with the “blessing of Kennedy, Javits, and Mrs. Lasker.” While the cancer institute was to remain within the NIH, it was to be treated differently from its peers.

When the vote on the Senate floor came up, Cranston, who had been opposed to the bill, stood and said he was still opposed to it, but he was going to vote for it, “and he gave a tribute to me, saying I was the one who had organized support for the bill. I was really amazed that he realized whence the 60,000 letters he received had emerged,” she said.

Now Mary had to work her magic on a new opponent whose vocal opposition looked to be a problem during House hearings on the compromise bill. Rep. Paul Rogers of Florida, who chaired the Health subcommittee of Staggers’ authorizing committee, would be the one to call hearings on the bill, and he had sided with scientists and administrators at NIH to oppose giving the National Cancer Institute so much autonomy. The administrators had argued all along that interaction created by so many scientists in one place was conducive to discovery. They argued that once cancer was separated, activists supporting other institutes, heart in particular, might push for their independence, and the NIH as it was conceived would cease to exist.

Rogers “really is a man of good will. He just didn’t realize that NIH leadership just wanted to be a storehouse of information and basic research,” Mary said. “It wasn’t their mission to conquer anything.” She left for Europe on July 26 confident that he would move the bill along and that her witnesses would change his view of the situation.

Her long-standing disconnect with Shannon, who had been replaced by Marston, erupted during the debate. Shannon “deplored science policy making by uncritical zealots, by experts in

advertising and public relations, and by rapacious empire builders,” according to an article on Mary’s role in the war on cancer on the NIH National Library of Medicine’s *Profiles in Science* site.

Dr. Vincent DeVita, chief of the cancer institute’s Medicine Branch, was also opposed. The researchers just wanted to be left alone to do their work, he said. They didn’t like being told by politicians what they should do, and they firmly believed that “money does not buy ideas; you can’t just pour money into something.” (DeVita later said: “Of course it turned out to be totally wrong: Money does buy ideas.” The investment attracted brilliant scientists who came in and set up their labs and generated ideas.)

When Mary got a telegram that Rogers had set three days of hearings to begin September 13 or 14, she left early and got home on September 11 so she could hear the testimony. Mary said her side fared well, but thought they never underscored her conviction that the new National Cancer Institute should not answer to the NIH director because his philosophy was to not bring medicine down to the level of the patient. She got her materials together and had a private sit-down with Rogers.

Rogers received the information courteously and, on September 14, he sent her his subcommittee’s own proposal, which she agreed to after a few constructive changes. Getting the House and Senate bills to line up was another struggle, and the House bill, which Mary compared to a Rube Goldberg contraption, essentially won the day in conference after a great deal of posturing on both sides. The compromise legislation left the cancer institute in the NIH, but made its director a presidential appointment, and allowed for its budget request to go directly to the White House Office of Management and Budget instead of being part of the NIH budget — known

as the National Cancer Institute bypass budget. It authorized \$1.59 billion for cancer research over the next three years.

It was a beautiful December day in Washington when Nixon signed into law the National Cancer Act of 1971. The ceremony was held in the White House State Dining Room with about 250 people in attendance, many of whom had done their utmost to defeat the bill in one way or another, all taking a lot of credit and drinking coffee and chatting.

In his remarks, Nixon called the war on cancer a “total national commitment” by Congress, government, and volunteer agencies and expressed hope that, in the future, the law would be seen as the most significant action of his administration.

THE BITTER BATTLE LEFT SCARS

“The science writers were so much on the side of NIH because they saw it in terms of something established,” she said. “If it hadn’t been for me, there wouldn’t have been any NIH as it now exists, nor any money available. But they know nothing about it. They have no idea. Fortunately, or we wouldn’t have gotten as far as we got.”

The war on cancer may have been the apex of Mary’s achievements, but it was nowhere near the end of the campaigns Mary would wage. The Fourth of July 1976 — when she hoped for important results in the cancer war — was a disappointment, but promising discoveries were being reported regularly, and with each one came hope.

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MARY'S FINAL CAMPAIGN

1972 – 1994

The heavy oak door of the Senate committee room was opened slightly by the staffer standing guard against such things. Seeing who was there, he stood aside to allow a slight, dark-haired, immaculately groomed, and impeccably dressed woman to slide in.

It was late summer 1979, and the conference committee for the House and Senate Appropriations Committees was ironing out spending for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The legislators bent to the task, at least ten on either side of the table that filled the narrow, ornate room. Their aides sat on cushioned benches lining the walls behind them, sheafs of documents clutched to their chests.

The lawmakers and their aides were ensconced in one of the treasures of the U.S. Capitol Building. Belying its dowdy name as the Senate Full Appropriations Committee Room, it was a riot of tasteful color. The muraled ceiling and walls, decorated in swaths of majestic blue and red, were painted by famed muralist Constantino Brumidi. Two multi-tiered crystal chandeliers provided most of the light.

Conversation ceased. Aides leaned back and shuffled feet out of the way as Mary Lasker made her way through the crowd toward the head of the table and her longtime ally Sen. Warren Magnuson, first elected during World War II and now the president pro tempore of the Senate. Magnuson rose from his chair to honor the visitor. Magnuson first tried to make room for her at the table before his chief clerk raised the issue of protocol. A chair was found just behind Magnuson's right side for the woman who commanded a seat at the table when funding for the National Institutes of Health was being discussed. She stayed just long enough to let her presence be felt, then made her way quietly out of the room.

Finishing up her fifth decade navigating the federal bureaucracy, Mary felt she still had work to do. She had earned the deep respect of lawmakers, congressional aides, agency administrators, and public health officials — and for Mary, the 1970s and 1980s were filled with issue after issue that still needed her attention.

THE BATTLE GETS PERSONAL, AGAIN

In 1972, for the first time in sixteen years, Mary did not travel to Europe. Her sister Alice's husband, Almon "Al" Fordyce, was suffering a relapse of prostate cancer, and his prognosis didn't look good.

First diagnosed in 1967, he had gotten nearly five years of relief from an experimental drug called cyproterone, which now is used

in many countries but was never approved in the U.S. because of dangerous liver toxicity. In autumn 1971, as the House and Senate authorization committees dueled over the final version of the National Cancer Act, Al underwent surgery that could have killed him because of his heart condition, and in spring 1972 he was treated with cobalt radiation that appeared to do no good.

By the time Al finished his final radiation treatment in June, Mary had exhausted her contacts in the New York medical establishment and was in touch with the Veterans Administration, where they were looking into hormone therapies based on research going back to the 1940s and 1950s by Charles Huggins at the University of Chicago. But Al's cardiologist feared the Veterans Administration's experimental estrogen compound would be bad for his heart.

For Mary, Al's case illuminated the problem with cancer research. Therapeutic options, such as hormones, that had proven promising against some cancers were not being aggressively researched for use against other cancers.

Mary contacted a researcher at Lund University in Sweden, who was using an estrogen and nitrogen mustard compound with fairly good results in a large trial of patients who hadn't responded to surgery or estrogen alone, Mary said. She had read that in 65 percent of the cases, patients were getting a one-to-three-year remission, reduction of pain, and even reduction of their tumor. She persuaded the Veterans Administration to invite the researcher to the U.S. to consult, and she persuaded him to see Al, who felt tremendous relief from pain for about a month before the mustard component started to affect his blood pressure. No amount of dose balancing worked, and he died on September 24, 1972. The experience reinforced Mary's frustration with clinical efforts to fight cancer.

YOU CAN'T LEAVE EVERYTHING TO BUREAUCRATS

In 1972, Mike Gorman, with Mary's support, initiated a multifaceted national campaign against high blood pressure that proved highly effective at reaching the public. To achieve that, Mary and Mike put into play strategies they had learned over the years involving her contacts in Congress and the administration, as well as movers and shakers in the private sector.

"You can't leave everything to bureaucracies," she said. "Citizens have to be constantly in communication with their government, or a lot of very vital things get very [little] or no notice."

The campaign involved lobbying Congress to fund state public health programs to support screening clinics, a campaign of TV and radio spots by the Ad Council, newspaper and magazine stories, and the creation of Citizens for the Treatment of High Blood Pressure, headed by Gorman.

Mary attends the first meeting of the
National Cancer Institute's Advisory Board
in March 1972.

Lasker Foundation



MARY'S FINAL CAMPAIGN

The citizens group approached employers, industry groups, professional groups, schools, and anybody else who would let them in to urge employees, members, and citizens to get their blood pressure checked and explain its importance in preventing stroke and heart disease.

The impetus for the campaign was research published in 1970 by Dr. Edward Freis, a physician-scientist working at the Veterans Administration, that showed a significant decrease in stroke and congestive heart failure when people with even moderately high blood pressure were treated with medicines available since the 1950s. Freis won the Lasker Award for Clinical Medical Research in 1971.

With evidence in hand, Mary took the fight against high blood pressure and stroke directly to the people. In 1972, Mary, Deeda Blair, and Gorman approached Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Elliot Richardson with a plan to launch a national campaign



against high blood pressure. Richardson liked the idea and appointed the Hypertension Information and Education Advisory Committee, chaired by NIH Director Robert Marston, and an interagency working group, chaired by Dr. Theodore Cooper, who was the director of the National Heart and Lung Institute. Richardson was able to allot an initial \$10 million for training doctors and instructing the public.

By lobbying appropriators to add a little here and there to the appropriation for the Health Services Administration (the current Health Resources and Services Administration), Mary and Gorman managed to gain \$11 million over the next few years to be distributed to states for their programs. In 1976, their lobbying led to passage of a bill authorizing federal grants to state health departments for hypertension awareness programs. The bill authorized more than \$120 million for the states, which also spent more than \$50 million of their own money to establish blood pressure programs.

With the help of Howard Rusk, whom Mary first met as a pioneer in rehabilitation research, Mary, Gorman, Cooper, and Emerson Foote approached the Advertising Council, the nonprofit group famous for public service announcements such as “Loose Lips Sink Ships,” “The Toughest Job You’ll Ever Love,” and “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste.” They convinced the Ad Council to do a series of public service ads for radio, TV, and print circulation to be developed with NHLI funds. Mary’s favorite was titled “A Time Bomb on Your Chest.” She called it “very dramatic.”

On another front, Deeda and Bill Blair gave a luncheon for the presidents and top executives of pharmaceutical companies and raised more than \$100,000 for Gorman’s group.

Deaths declined. The drop “absolutely befogged the average doctor,” said Mary, who stated what she saw as the obvious cause:

In three years, the Ad Council campaign ran \$86 million worth of television, radio, and print ads, prompting countless people to ask their doctors about hypertension and getting medicine to treat it.

“The best they can do is to acknowledge that the deaths have gone down, but they say, ‘We don’t know whether the incidence of the disease has gone down,’ ” Mary said. She was so provoked by an editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by Robert Levy, who had taken over directorship of the National Heart and Lung Institute in September 1975, that noted the drop in deaths but called for research into the reason behind it that she wrote a letter to the editor saying Levy was too humble and the heart institute, which had funded production of the Ad Council promotion under Director Cooper, should really take credit. Mary said she received an “astonishing number” of positive responses to her retort.

“Oh sure, I pushed the Ad Council. I pushed the Heart Institute,” said Mary in 1979. “And the Ad Council is simply delighted with what they’ve done, and the Heart Institute is pretending they don’t know what they’ve done. Dr. Levy at least.” The root of Mary’s exasperation with Levy may have been owed to her frustration with his insistence on proof-by-science to substantiate the downturn, but there also might have been a bit of justifiable pique that Levy didn’t give a nod to the role his predecessor and his institute had in generating the visible results.

In November 1979, the results of the Hypertension Detection and Follow-Up Program, a clinical trial begun by the renamed National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, showed that systematic, aggressive treatment of hypertension saved lives.

Gorman was able to close down the citizen’s group in 1988, its job done and blood pressure checks part of routine health care.

GOING AROUND THE SYSTEM SHE BUILT

It took just seven years after Nixon declared war on cancer for Mary's frustration with the National Cancer Institute to build back up. In 1978, she became so disgusted with the research enterprise she had worked to build that she invested directly in the work of Dr. Jordan Gutterman, a researcher at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, who was studying a breast cancer therapy that the institute had apparently looked askance on. Mary had a history of supporting individual researchers whose work had come to her attention.

Mary was interested in the healing powers of interferon as a relatively non-toxic antiviral. Interferons are naturally occurring proteins that help the body modulate immune response. Mary knew interferon was being used to some effect to treat hepatitis and shingles — it had been very useful against her case of shingles in 1976 — but it had yet to be synthesized, and the natural product was expensive. The only person deriving natural interferon from white blood cells on any scale was Dr. Kari Cantell at the Red Cross in Helsinki, Finland. It was Mary's understanding that the National Cancer Institute had purchased a quantity of it and done nothing with it. "They thought it wouldn't work, and they were totally disinterested," she said.

Mary was anxious to see what it could do against cancer, particularly because her long-time assistant Jane McDonough's breast cancer had recurred. She also had heard about Dr. Hans Strander's success in Sweden using interferon against bone cancer, and that was enough for Mary. She sold nearly her entire collection of works by Japanese-French artist Leonard Tsuguharu Foujita to a Japanese collector, getting \$400,000 for eight prints and keeping just one print and one drawing for her collection.

In October 1977, she sent Deeda Blair and Gutterman to Stockholm to meet with Cantell and Strander and work out a purchase price for the interferon. An initial payment was passed through the Lasker Foundation to the Finnish Red Cross, and the interferon went to Gutterman at M.D. Anderson.

When the American Cancer Society heard she had spent that much money to buy a substantial amount of interferon, the board informed Mary she shouldn't have to put up the money, that there were funds available to buy the material and that they would put \$2 million toward its purchase. "Of course they're right, but they should have been doing this all long," said Mary, noting she had pledged another \$500,000 to the project and hoped the cancer society was willing to contribute more. "Nothing would have been found out and nothing would have been done if I hadn't been willing to put up this money, because it stunned the American Cancer Society," she said. "I did it out of sheer frustration at not being able to get any money for other sources for the investigation of this material."

In tandem with the research she funded privately, Mary began visiting pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies to keep an eye on their progress at synthesizing interferon. Through Charles Allen Jr., an investment banker and friend who was referred to in *The New York Times* as the shy Midas of Wall Street, Mary went to California to visit a biotech startup called Syntex that began as a company that synthesized therapeutic steroids out of a kind of medicinal yam from Mexico. She encouraged Syntex to get in touch with her friend Dr. Mathilde Krim at the Sloan-Kettering Institute about a collaboration on interferon, and Allen helped get a Syntex-Sloan Kettering Memorial Interferon Research Group financed. "I don't know how long it will take, but it will be exciting," said Mary.

Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical giant Roche had purified two kinds of organic interferon, and Deeda and Gutterman had met with the heads of that program in New Jersey to offer them white cells from which to purify interferon and urge them to get busy and produce it on a commercial scale.

In June 1980, Mary heard that Genentech, in South San Francisco, California, had synthesized three kinds of interferon. Mary had hopes for clinical Syntex trials in the next year; she had gone with Deeda and Gutterman to visit Genentech again in March.

While in California, they visited an early biotech startup in Berkeley called Cetus. Cetus started in 1971 working to clone and manipulate interferon, and the company created a proprietary interferon product, but the Food and Drug Administration approval process outlasted the company's funding, and in 1991 Cetus merged with Chiron, now part of Novartis AG. The FDA approval came in 1992, and the interferon product was approved for clinical use in 1993. Marketed as Betaseron, it is approved to treat multiple sclerosis. Syntex was eventually acquired by Roche and shut down.

As of 2021, researchers were investigating multiple types of interferon to combat a variety of cancers. One, marketed as Intron-A, is approved for use with other therapies for melanoma patients who have a high risk for recurrence of their disease.

WILL AND DETERMINATION

In 1981, Mary suffered a stroke, described by her traveling companion Deeda Blair as "serious, but she was not paralyzed." They were in London staying with Lord Geoffrey-Lloyd when Mary's maid found her one morning in her bathrobe on the bathroom floor. An ambulance took her to the private Wellington Hospital,

MARY'S FINAL CAMPAIGN

where she stayed for three months until she was able to travel home. Deeda stayed in London during her recovery.

When asked in a 1982 interview about her “difficulty” the year before, Mary said the last thing she recalled was reading a book in bed. “I don’t know yet what really happened,” she said. She and



Mary sits for a portrait in 1979 in her Manhattan home on Beekman Place, which was decorated in white to set off the artwork.

AP photo by Marty Reichenthal

Deeda had been in Venice, then Paris for a few days, before traveling to London. She didn't think it was the traveling that did her in, and she was adamant that she didn't normally have high blood pressure.

Mary was "amazing," in the hospital, said Deeda. "She lost none of her charm, and, curiously, she didn't talk about her illness." She was sure, however, that Mary asked the doctors plenty of questions when she wasn't there. Mary recalled that the doctors at Wellington Hospital were very pleasant and that "they were very anxious about me in the beginning," but she couldn't imagine why. When she left, she took two of her nurses home with her.

At home, she chafed against restrictions and was "absolutely furious" about being "cut off from talking to people." Deeda said, however, Mary resumed her routine in about seven months. She was "diminished" but fought through it and did everything she usually did. Deeda credited Mary's remarkable recovery to her will and determination.

About three years after the stroke, Mary announced she wanted to go to Paris for a new wardrobe. As Deeda told it, they first went to Hubert de Givenchy, where Mary ordered a charming black velvet jacket edged in sable. They planned to call on de Givenchy's life partner, designer Philippe Venet, but Mary, who had one of her nurses and her maid with her, was exhausted and wanted to return to the Ritz. So Deeda, who knew Mary's taste, went to Venet, "who really appreciated Mary." Deeda picked out some items and asked him to bring them to the hotel. Deeda modeled them for Mary, who ordered what she wanted, including robes "because she often didn't feel like getting dressed," and got a new designer wardrobe.

A SUITABLE HONOR

In September 1984, a building on the National Institutes of Health campus was named in Mary's honor. When she stepped to the podium at the dedication, Mary was eighty-three, and she didn't temper her message one iota. It was the same as when she first approached Sen. Claude Pepper with it in 1945: The nation's leaders must be made to understand that funding for medical research is good economics. Healthy people are productive people. When dread diseases don't cause painful, unnecessary deaths, they often greatly degrade quality of life, remove people from the workforce, and result in considerable medical debt. "With persistent research and *substantial* financial support, we should be able to further lower the death rate dramatically for all diseases," she declared as firmly as she had countless times over the years.

"The day the building was dedicated, I'd never seen her so spry and proud of herself," recalled Terry Lierman, a former chief clerk of the Senate Appropriations Committee who worked for Mary at the time as a lobbyist. "She was excited, and she was particularly pleased that the building was to be used for education."

Built in 1923, the building housing the Mary Woodard Lasker Center for Health Research and Education is appropriately classical for the woman it honors. The red-brick, neo-Georgian complex (officially Building 60) once was home to an order of cloistered nuns who raised cows and chickens, tended orchards and vegetables, and strolled the expansive flower gardens on the grounds. Eventually, as the NIH grew larger and the order grew smaller, the Sisters of the Visitation of Washington sold the property, known as "the Cloisters," to the agency in 1982.

"Mary was getting along, there was no building in her honor, and this beautiful building was being sold to NIH," said Lierman.

He went to see House Speaker Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill, a Massachusetts Democrat, who Lierman says “took about 1.3 seconds to say he thought it was a good idea.” The measure was approved by Congress and signed into law on May 24, 1984, by President Ronald Reagan. Lierman has the framed bill hanging on his living room wall.

“I hope this property and facility and others like it inspire young people and old to dedicate their lives to the furthering of medical knowledge that will alleviate suffering of people with cancer and other dread diseases,” Mary said on that September day. “There could be no nobler cause.” The Lasker Center houses students participating in the yearlong Medical Research Scholars Program, which started in 2012 to give medical, dental, and veterinary students interested in research an immersive experience in basic, clinical, and translational research.



Mary recognizes the applause during a ceremony in 1987 at Harvard where she was awarded an honorary degree. U.S. Rep. Thomas “Tip” O’Neill is at right.

Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute

Her speech at the dedication was typical of Mary: Waste no opportunity and keep working until the job was done. At the time of the dedication, she was lobbying for a separate arthritis institute, arguing that there was too much division of attention in the National Institute of Arthritis and Metabolic Diseases and that arthritis research should be better funded. The stand-alone institute never materialized, but in 1986 a reorganization created The National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases.



Mary attends her annual Christmas party in 1987, which was held at La Grenouille Restaurant in New York City.

Ron Galella via Getty Images

RETIRING TO A NEW RETREAT

Mary continued to call the seven-story townhouse at Beekman Place home long after Albert's death in 1952. Beekman Place, equal parts museum and residence, was decorated in white to better showcase the artwork. "You walked in and there was the Matisse, *Plum Blossoms*, in the dining room," Deeda Blair said. "I can't remember whether there were seven or nine Matisses. You went upstairs and there was van Gogh, *White Roses*, and I was just stunned. It was so beautiful and so interesting."

Mary also enjoyed escaping to Amenia, where she entertained, reveled in her gardens, and kept two black swans, but she sold the country estate in 1980. She bought a home in Greenwich, Connecticut,



Claude Pepper, Mary Lasker, and Terry Lierman.

Claude Pepper Library / Florida State University Special Collections and Archives

where she planted hundreds of roses and created English borders on either side of the property. She eventually left Beekman Place to stay in Greenwich full time. Deeda's husband, Bill Blair, visited Mary often during this period and, Deeda said, "they reminisced about Adlai Stevenson, they reminisced about everything."

Mary died of heart failure in Greenwich on February 21, 1994. She was ninety-three years old. She was buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Sleepy Hollow, New York, in the mausoleum near her beloved Albert.

Epilogue

MARY'S LEGACY

New generations of the flowers and trees planted by Mary bloom in New York, Washington, and Amenia. And the National Institutes of Health may soon have an entire division devoted to application-driven, as opposed to basic, curiosity-driven, medical research. Mary's vision for medical care in this country yielded great gains for the average American, but her penchant for working behind the scenes has left her name unknown outside of the social and political circles in which she traveled.

Mary was honored in many ways over the years for her accomplishments promoting medical research, as well as in beautification and the arts. "I get awards practically every year for something or other," she said in 1977. She said she had numerous doctorates, "but that does no good in the end." She was honored to receive them at the time, of course, but she didn't want to be awarded so much as she wanted science to succeed.

In academic circles, among her honorary doctorates are one in the humanities from Harvard University and one in law from Columbia University. In 1989, the Harvard School of Public Health established the Mary Woodard Lasker Professorship in Health Sciences.

During the last days of his administration in 1969, Lyndon Johnson called together a group of men, including Michael DeBakey, and one woman, Mary Lasker, to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, given for “an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.” Mary ticked more than one of those boxes. There was no ceremony, “it was done at the very end,” she said, adding that the medal was gold and “very pretty, with ribbons, really quite nice.” The citation “would satisfy anybody.” Among other accolades, the citation notes that Mary “inspired understanding and productive legislation which improved the lot of mankind” and that she “led her president and the Congress to greater heights for justice, for her people, and beauty for her land.”

“The only thing is, really,” Mary said, “I would much rather have had the money that we needed, not the words. I’d rather have had an exemption of medical research from cuts than to have any recognition of any kind.”

In 1987, Mary received a Four Freedoms Award from the Roosevelt Institute, which founded the award to celebrate the four freedoms named by President Roosevelt in his 1941 speech to Congress: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Mary’s award was for her work in support of freedom from want, which, in Roosevelt’s words,

encompassed “economic understandings which would secure every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants.”

Congress approved a Congressional Gold Medal on December 24, 1987, for Mary for her humanitarian contributions in medical research and education, urban beautification, and the fine arts. A congressional medal is struck in gold by the U.S. mint and unique to its recipient. Mary’s medal bears a classic profile of her with the words of the citation inscribed around it.

A bill must be filed requesting that the medal be awarded. At least two-thirds of the 435 House members must cosponsor the bill, and sixty-seven of the one hundred senators must support it. A hearing on the bill to authorize a medal for Mary was one of the first for Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California, who had just been sent to Congress by special election. President George H. W. Bush awarded the medal on behalf of Congress on April 21, 1989, saying Mary’s “good works and tireless efforts are legion.”

In her acceptance, Mary pointed out that research must be a national priority because “it’s good for trade, good for jobs, and vital for all Americans.” Never wasting an opportunity to advocate for her cause, she told Bush she was counting on him for his leadership in supporting research at NIH.

In 2009, a postage stamp with an image of Mary as a smiling young woman, her blue eyes flashing, was issued as part of the U.S. Postal Service’s Distinguished Americans series. The 78-cent stamp was officially issued in her hometown of Watertown, Wisconsin.

Mary transformed the federal government’s view of medical research and fostered a vast and productive research enterprise. She started with no experience but strong convictions and learned on the job how best to approach members of Congress. She raised the art of lobbying to a new and more effective level. She valued

the work of the lobbyists who were her eyes and ears on Capitol Hill, but she was hands-on when it came to making door-to-door calls on representatives and senators whose votes she needed.

“I’ve done lobbying for the last thirty years,” she said in a 1978 interview. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve done in life.” Lobbying is “terribly, terribly exhausting.”

“It’s so hard to know what will appeal to them, and what you can say that will turn them around fast,” she said, and it’s “very discouraging because whatever they do is always not enough.”

Mary lamented that no matter how much time was spent with members of Congress, they often had so much on their minds that “if you don’t get them in six minutes, you haven’t got them.” She always went into a meeting armed with colored charts and short

memos — nothing they couldn’t grasp at a glance — and left them with the latest list of accomplishments in the fight against cancer or another disease, and her recommendations.

On the receiving end of Mary’s attention, the view was a little different. Lawmakers whom Mary supported were compelled to give her time on their calendars, but as time passed, she was respected for her accomplishments and because they knew she wouldn’t waste their time. More often than not they stood when



she entered their office, and on one occasion an entire committee of U.S. senators stood when she entered a hearing room.

Mary was firm in her conviction that lay people had a place in the conversation about federal spending on the nation's health, and she had in her black book lists of influential and accomplished professionals, as well as prominent physicians and researchers whom she could call to Washington to defend their cause in whatever capacity Mary assigned them. Nationally known researchers came annually to the spring appropriations hearings to tell the story of accomplishments in their field and lay out the case for increased funding.

"If you are willing to have the ideas, if you are willing to pay people to work on the ideas, and you are willing to get people who in a general way think well of a cause that you are helping, to espouse it, but aren't going to give very much to it except maybe their names or their blessings, and attribute the work to them, you can get a lot done," she said in 1980. Florence Mahoney, in a 1995 interview with Bradie Metheny, said, "The nice part was Mary liked the people who were involved."

Research-related gains in average life expectancy for the period 1970 to 2000 had an estimated economic value of \$95 trillion, or about \$3.2 trillion per year, according to data from United for Medical Research, a group focused on employment and economic activity attributable to NIH extramural spending. By 2015, cancer rates had been dropping by more than 1 percent annually for fifteen years, each 1 percent drop representing a value of nearly \$500 billion to current and future Americans — more fruits of Mary's labors.

In 2021, President Joseph Biden included in his fiscal 2022 budget proposal a project of his own design as ambitious in scope as any war on cancer. Biden proposed the creation of an Advanced Research

Projects Agency for Health. It is modeled on the Department of Defense's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the champion of innovation that had a hand in developing the internet, GPS, the personal computer, and drones. As conceived by the administration, this health initiative would "transform breakthroughs in biomedicine into tangible solutions for all patients more rapidly than was previously thought possible." In short, Mary's vision for translational medicine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to many people for helping me bring Mary's story to light. For the opportunity and for his sponsorship, I am indebted to Mike Stephens, who acted as the book's project manager for ACT for NIH. Along with his many other duties, Mike provided feedback on drafts, he was a valuable resource on the history and workings of Congress, and he is a font of anecdotes from his days on the Hill.

Praise for my research assistant, the stalwart Alicia Winokur, whose perseverance and ingenuity at a time when access to resources was restricted by pandemic shutdowns, resulted in a more detailed and colorful story.

For helping me develop my draft into a fully publishable manuscript, I am indebted to editors Stephan Benzkofer and Matthew Nickerson.

Thanks to all the people who helped color in the details of Mary's world, including digging through boxes in dank closets for photographs and helping to put historical pictures in context. Among them are Melissa Lampe, with the Watertown Historical Society; Sonny Bailey at the American Cancer Society; and Claire Pomeroy, president of the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation.

And, finally, I want to thank my family for their support and the occasional motivational speech, and my friends, a couple of whom were courageous early readers, for their encouragement and feedback.

— Shirley Haley

LASKER AWARDS

The Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation in 2021 celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in the midst of an unprecedented period of biomedical discovery, spurred by advances in technology and scientific breakthroughs. Armed with ever-expanding knowledge of the human genome and the astounding ability to edit it, researchers and clinicians are not just adding new knowledge but entirely new fields of study.

The 2021 clinical award, now the Lasker-DeBakey Clinical Medical Research Award, went to the two scientists whose work made possible the highly effective mRNA COVID-19 vaccines. The Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award honored three scientists for the discovery of “light-sensitive microbial proteins that can activate or silence individual brain cells and for their use in developing optogenetics — a revolutionary technique for neuroscience.”

The foundation Albert and Mary established to honor and encourage physicians and scientists has become the highest U.S. honor bestowed on medical researchers and is often called America’s Nobels. From the beginning, when Dr. Carl Cori won a Lasker in 1946 and became a Nobel laureate in 1947, the Lasker-Nobel link has been extraordinary. More than 85 Lasker Award recipients have gone on to win a Nobel Prize.



The Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation has been honoring biomedical researchers and leaders since 1946.

Lasker Foundation via Getty Images

Mary said the awards were not only to honor those making outstanding contributions, but also as a way of staying informed about scientists conducting cutting-edge research. Importantly, the awards raise public awareness of the need to support research funding. Today, the foundation has adopted as a call to action words Mary used in her appeals to Congress: “If you think research is expensive, try disease.”

From the beginning of their marriage, Albert and Mary agreed they wanted to support and enlarge the field of medical research. At that point they didn’t know exactly how they would go about that, but Albert was in the process of liquidating his advertising agency, Lord & Thomas, and looking forward to devoting his time and resources to philanthropy. He, however, “had an absolute passion for anonymity in anything he did,” said Mary. “The fact that the awards had his name somehow embarrassed him. He never really paid any attention to them ... except that he allowed me to use his money to give them.”

Mary became president of the organization, while her sister, Alice Fordyce, was administrator and director of the awards program. When Albert died in 1952, Mary took her name off of the Albert and Mary Lasker award in Basic Medical Research and it became the Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award.

In addition to the awards program, which includes honors in basic research, clinical research, special achievement, and public service, the Lasker Foundation collects and disseminates disease data. It was the source of much of the information Mary used in her lobbying visits to members of Congress and to prepare witnesses. Currently, the foundation, in collaboration with Research!America, an alliance of advocacy organizations, maintains an extensive library of disease fact sheets on its website.

In 2014, the foundation announced the first winners of the annual Lasker Essay Contest. The competition, open to medical and health professions students, makes monetary awards to help with educational expenses. The goal of the program is to prime future scientists to become effective communicators on issues of biomedical research and policy.

LASKER AWARDS

Many of Mary and Florence's noble conspirators and allies — individuals and institutions — won Lasker awards. You can find a full list of winners and an explanation of their contributions — and a fascinating record of medical achievement through the decades — at www.laskerfoundation.org/all-awards-winners.

PEOPLE AND GROUPS IN 'ANGEL IN MINK' WHO RECEIVED AWARDS

Clinical Center of the National Institutes of Health | public service, 2011

Theodore Cooper | *public service*, 1978

Michael DeBakey | *clinical*, 1963

Vincent DeVita | *clinical*, 1972

Sidney Farber | *clinical*, 1966

Edward Freis | *clinical*, 1971

Eppie Lederer (Ann Landers) | *public service*, 1985

Lister Hill | *public service*, 1968

Lyndon Baines Johnson | *public service*, 1965

Warren Magnuson | *public service*, 1973

Menninger Foundation | *public service*, 1955

Thomas P. O'Neill | *public service*, 1991

Claude Pepper | *public service*, 1967

Planned Parenthood | *public service*, 2017

Elliot Richardson | *public service*, 1978

Howard Rusk | *public service*, 1952

Paul Dudley White | *clinical*, 1953

Some awards, while funded by the Laskers, were presented under the auspices of other groups, including Planned Parenthood and the National Committee Against Mental Illness, or were Lasker Foundation awards that are no longer given. The Lasker Foundation site refers to them as Special Public Health Awards, Special Awards, Group Awards, Lasker Awards given by the National Committee Against Mental Illness,

Lasker Awards given by Planned Parenthood–World Population, Lasker Awards given by the International Society for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled, and the Albert Lasker Medical Journalism Awards.

HONOREE, YEAR, AND AWARD CATEGORY

Alcoholics Anonymous | *group*, 1951

John E. Fogarty | *special*, 1959

Mike Gorman | *mental illness*, 1948

Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York | *group*, 1951

Lister Hill | *special*, 1959

Lois Mattox Miller | *journalism*, 1957 and 1963

William Menninger, | *mental illness*, 1944

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute | *special public health*, 1980

National Institutes of Health | *group*, 1946;

and special centennial public health, 1987

National Institutes of Health, Division of Research Grants | *group*, 1953

Thomas Parran | *special*, 1947

John D. Rockefeller III | *Planned Parenthood*, 1961

Howard Rusk | *rehabilitation of the disabled*, 1957;

and journalism for columns in The New York Times, 1959

Margaret Sanger | *Planned Parenthood*, 1950

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About the Author

Shirley Haley was retired from a career in science policy journalism when the opportunity to write this book came along, and she was drawn to the task of bringing the story of Mary Lasker to light.

With Washington Fax founder and publisher Bradie Metheny, Haley produced a daily news and analysis report covering the fiscal and science policy needs of the biomedical research enterprise. But Haley's work extended outside of Washington circles to national medical conferences at which new discoveries were reported and discussed, and from there she wrote knowledgeably about the emerging science. She interviewed and became acquainted with scientists and administrators on the National Institutes of Health campus as well as the leaders in biomedicine who traveled from research institutions across the country to support NIH in testimony before Congress. She also met and interviewed key supporters of medical research in Congress and their hard-working staff.

After Metheny moved on to other projects, Haley worked for another fifteen years as a journalist reporting on drug discovery and development, during which she continued to employ her gift for making difficult concepts and situations accessible to a broad audience.

Haley makes her home in a seaside town in Massachusetts with children, grandchildren, and grandpups nearby and a fairly sandy beach in the neighborhood.

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President Lyndon B. Johnson,

*in awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to
Mary Lasker on January 20, 1969*

"As the single, driving force behind convincing the Congress to make the funding of medical research a national priority, Mary Lasker has saved the lives of countless Americans."

U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi,

*on September 15, 1987, in sponsoring legislation to
award a Congressional Gold Medal to Mary Lasker*

