

## Case 19

# Support of the National Institutes of Health

*Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation, 1942*

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*Background.* Born in 1900, Mary Woodard had already achieved success as a businesswoman and art collector by the time she married advertising executive Albert Lasker in 1940. It was soon after that marriage, however, that Mrs. Lasker entered the medical research field—in which she would ultimately realize her greatest achievements. Motivated by her own childhood frailty, the early deaths of both her parents, and the loss of several other friends to disease, Mary Lasker turned her own outrage at the slow pace of medical research into the driving force behind a tremendously significant advocacy campaign, and behind the subsequent grant-making of the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation.

The Lasker Foundation was created in 1942, “with a mission that was novel at the time: to encourage federal financial support for biomedical research in the United States.”<sup>269</sup> At the time, such research was funded almost entirely by private interests, in particular such private philanthropies as the Rockefeller Foundation, the Markle Foundation, and the Commonwealth Fund.<sup>270</sup> Mary Lasker, who herself had no background—or aptitude, she used to joke—as a scientist, felt that the support of basic research into the causes of disease and disability was the key to finding cures. Deciding that the federal government was the only possible source of funds large enough to fund adequately the level of research she envisioned, Mary Lasker, as president of the Lasker Foundation, set out on an advocacy campaign that would last for the rest of her long life.

*Strategy.* Led by Mrs. Lasker, the Foundation served as “catalyst and conduit” for the increase of federal funding for medical research. Mrs. Lasker began by making use of her and her husband’s social and political connections to encourage members of Congress, as well as White House officials, to support increased appropriations for the study of disease. Mrs. Lasker was a tireless advocate and lobbyist who often put doctors and researchers in touch with the policymakers with the power to make available federal research grants. The primary beneficiary of Lasker’s work was the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Although it already existed in 1945, NIH was a tiny operation with funding of only \$2.4 million.<sup>271</sup> In Mary Lasker’s own words, she “would ask Congress to establish new branches such as the one for mental health and I got people to testify that the cancer institute needed money.”<sup>272</sup> It was a simple strategy, but it proved hugely effective.

Part of Mrs. Lasker’s effectiveness certainly flowed from her wealth and social skills. But most important was her tenacity. In addition to the many relationships she forged with congressmen, Mrs. Lasker had direct access to virtually every U.S. president from Franklin Roosevelt onward, and she was never afraid to lobby one directly. Though she was particularly close to President Lyndon Johnson, Mrs. Lasker was effective in her national lobbying across eleven administrations—both Republican and Democrat. The expenditures of the Foundation were very modest, with small appropriations going for direct research, and more going to support the prestigious Lasker Awards and an urban beautification program. But, by serving as a vehicle for Mary Lasker to pursue her extensive education and advocacy efforts, and as a convener for other medical research supporters from across the health research fields, the Foundation achieved outcomes vastly greater than the value of its inputs.

*Outcomes.* By continually encouraging Congress and the White House of the need for further research dollars, Mrs. Lasker became the primary advocate behind a massive increase of federal research dollars. In 1945, appropriations to NIH had totaled about \$2.4 million.<sup>273</sup> By 1985, this amount had skyrocketed to \$5.5 billion,<sup>274</sup> and in 2004, the NIH budget topped \$27.8 billion.<sup>275</sup> Much of

this increase was owing to the rise of such federal programs as Medicare and Medicaid, but much of it—including the creation of a multitude of new research centers focused on specific illnesses—was brought about by the campaigning of Mary Lasker, the Lasker Foundation, and such collaborators as Florence Mahoney, and Drs. Sidney Farber and Michael DeBakey.

*Impact.* The contributions of these private advocates, and in particular of Mrs. Lasker, have been widely acknowledged. In 1969, Mrs. Lasker received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. And in 1989, she was honored with the Congressional Gold Medal. At the time of her death in 1993, Mrs. Lasker—dubbed “the fairy godmother of medical research” by *Business Week* magazine—was still president of the Lasker Foundation, honorary president of the American Cancer Society, and vice-chairman of the board of trustees of the United Cerebral Palsy Research and Education Foundation.<sup>276</sup>

Mrs. Lasker credited her effectiveness in working for the immense growth of public funding for medical research to the Foundation. In late 1985, she wrote, “. . . for 40 years, all of us at the [Lasker] Foundation have been dedicated to education and motivating Congress to support the idea of more funds and a higher priority for medical research on the major causes of death and disability.”<sup>277</sup> According to Johnson White House aide Lawrence F. O'Brien, Mary Lasker and Florence Mahoney “played a significant role” in the creation of the Medicare program in 1965.<sup>278</sup> But the two were especially well known for their work campaigning on behalf of the National Institutes of Health. John Gardner, the former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, described NIH—now a massive agency with over 18,000 employees—as “practically a monument” to their efforts, and President Truman described the pair as “the most tireless, consistent, and effective crusaders” he had ever known.<sup>279</sup>

## Notes

269. Available from: <http://www.laskerfoundation.org>.

270. Claudia Levy, “Philanthropist Mary Lasker Dies at 93,” *Washington Post*, 2/23/1994.

271. Sana Siwolop and Jerry Brazda, “The Fairy Godmother of Medical Research,” *Business Week*, 7/14/1985.

272. Nadine Brozan, “Woman in the News: Mary Lasker; Lobbyist of a National Scale,” *New York Times*, 11/21/1985.

273. Siwolop, “The Fairy Godmother of Medical Research.”

274. *Ibid.*

275. Available from: <http://www.nih.gov/news/budgetfy2004/fy2004presidentsbudget.pdf>.

276. Eric Pace, “Mary W. Lasker, Philanthropist for Medical Research, Dies at 93,” *New York Times*, 2/23/1994.

277. Mary Lasker, “The Lasker Foundation: We’re Not That Rich,” *Business Week*, 8/11/1985.

278. Martin Weil, “Florence Mahoney Dies at 103; Helped to Establish NIH,” *Washington Post*, 11/30/2002.

279. *Ibid.*