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Recalling the Legal Services Corporation’s Critical First Steps

Roger C. Cramton
Cornell Law School, rcc10@cornell.edu

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An accidental encounter on a beautiful spring day in April, 1975, led to my formal involvement with the nascent Legal Services Corporation (LSC). I had come to Washington, D.C., to attend a meeting of the Commission on Revision of the Federal Court System (often referred to as the Hruska Commission after its chair, Senator Roman Hruska of Nebraska). A luncheon break led to a stroll through Lafayette Park, where I ran into an acquaintance from my three years of appointive office during the Nixon Administration. My friend, who had stayed on under President Ford as an official in the White House Personnel Office, asked my advice about a current personnel problem that had turned into a political embarrassment: appointment of the eleven members of the Board of Directors of the newly created Legal Services Corporation.

The LSC Act of 1974 was the result of nine years of political warfare over the Office of Economic Opportunity's Legal Services Program—the Johnson Administration's foray into publicly-funded civil legal assistance for the poor through the creation of an executive-branch agency. The legislation, a compromise between President Nixon and the program's congressional supporters and opponents, was the last major bill signed by President Nixon in June, 1974, before he resigned. The Act required that a board of directors be appointed before the legal services program could be transferred to the Corporation. (In the 1970s, public funding of legal services was a front-page story everywhere. The political centrality of the program continued through the Reagan years, but now discussions of legal services issues can be found, if at all, only in small stories. Maybe it's just as well that legal services issues fly under the radar of public attention.)

President Ford appointed a full slate of nominees in early 1975, but three of them provoked a storm of reaction from the organized bar and legal services supporters. Former Congresswoman Edith Green had sponsored an amendment that restricted backup center activities, and William Knecht had severely criticized California Rural Legal Assistance. Both were said to be opposed to publicly funded legal assistance. The third, Denison Kitchel, was known only as the manager of Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign. Eventually, it became clear that these nominees would not be confirmed by a Senate controlled by Democrats.

President Ford, my friend told me, needed to resolve the political issue by appointing knowledgeable and sensible lawyers who would be quickly confirmed. He also needed to appoint a chair. Although subsequent chairs were to be chosen by the board itself, President Nixon had insisted—and the Act provided—that the initial chair was to be designated by the President.

I proposed my law school classmate, Bob Kutak, to chair and direct the Corporation. He had served as a legislative assistant to Senator Hruska after law school, and was active in the American Bar Association, including activities that involved delivery of legal
services. In May, 1975, my White House friend called to inform me that Mr. Kutak could not serve as chair because of prior obligations. Instead, Mr. Kutak had offered his own suggestion as to who should serve as LSC’s first chair: Roger Cramton. President Ford, I was told, seconded my nomination.

So, in the summer of 1975, after checking with my university president to make sure the assignment would not interfere with my responsibilities as dean of the Cornell Law School, I agreed to serve. President Ford submitted the names of seven new nominees for LSC’s eleven-member board, and on July 9, 1975, we were confirmed by the United States Senate. Five days later, we were sworn in, and held our first meeting.

Our initial problems were large, complex, and vital. During the four-year controversy over the establishment of LSC, legal services funding had remained at $71.5 million per year. This static funding occurred during a period of high inflation, resulting in high turnover of staff lawyers, program reductions, and poor morale. Moreover, at that time the program was not a national program, but was largely concentrated in major cities, with a bias toward the northeast and California. Ambiguous statutory language concerning “backup centers”—which provided substantive support to LSC grantees—threatened their continuance, and needed prompt attention. Even more crucially, LSC was starting out with no executive leadership, no staff, no offices, and no equipment.

Funding and operational needs received the attention of the Board at our initial meeting. For fiscal year 1976 we agreed upon an appropriation request to Congress of $96 million, an increase which—if granted—would begin to compensate for four years of relatively high inflation. We also began an intensive search for an LSC president and vice president who could provide the inspired leadership the program deserved.

But first, more immediate needs had to be addressed. After our initial board meeting, I worked in the evenings with a small group of legal services volunteers from around the country to draft, type, and copy our initial appropriations request. Through the courtesy of Leo Levin, the executive director of the Hruska Commission, we were allowed to use the Commission’s office after business hours. I remember finally finishing the typing, assembly, and photocopying of the required sixty copies at 3:00 a.m., just seven hours before I was to testify in front of the House Appropriations Committee.

Fortunately, that late night work paid off. Congress approved a LSC budget increase to $88 million for fiscal year 1976 (later increased to $92.3 million with the passage of an additional supplemental appropriation).

That same year, the board acquired imaginative and resourceful temporary help when Louis Oberdorfer, an able and public-spirited Washington lawyer on sabbatical from his law firm, agreed to provide executive leadership on an interim basis. He brought in David Tatel to work alongside him, and they provided indispensable leadership during LSC’s formative period. (Today, Judge Oberdorfer is a senior district judge, and Judge Tatel is a circuit court judge.) Mr. Oberdorfer and Mr. Tatel were aided by Robert Shea of the American Red Cross, whose experience in meeting the emergency needs wrought by natural disasters was a great help to LSC in employing staff, organizing offices, and carrying out a myriad of everyday tasks. Finally, Donald Coppock, former head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s Border Patrol, was ingenious in meeting LSC’s infrastructure and equipment needs.
It was eventually decided that the legal services centers would be permitted to provide expertise to local programs that were helping clients in need of specialized assistance.