

Dr Alton Ochsner

Dr Ochsner's resume included:

- ~ President of the American Cancer Society
- ~ President of the American College of Surgeons
- ~ President of the International Society of Surgeons
- ~ Chairman of the Section on Surgery for the American Medical Association
- ~ President of the Ochsner Medical Foundation
- ~ Recipient of the Distinguished Service Award of the American Medical Association, 1967
- ~ Recipient of honorary awards from Ireland, England, Greece, Spain, Nicaragua, Columbia, Honduras, Ecuador, Panama, Venezuela, and Japan

His Ochsner Foundation was one of the largest medical centers in the US, with annual revenue of almost \$300 million.

He was born in Kimball, South Dakota, May 4, 1896. He had five older sisters and no brothers. He went to University of South Dakota, then attended medical school at Washington University, in St Louis. His career was influenced and guided by his uncle, AJ Ochsner, chief of surgery at two hospitals in Chicago. AJ saw to it that Alton was trained by the best surgeons of that time. One of them was AJ himself, so Alton headed to Chicago to learn from his uncle. Young Alton fainted at his first three close encounters with surgery, but he was determined to be a surgeon. In 1922, AJ sent Alton to Europe for two years of residency in Germany and Switzerland. There, the young doctor distinguished himself in the area of blood transfusions.

Europe's first attempts at blood transfusions had not gone well, so the procedure was abandoned. Austrian doctor Karl Landsteiner figured out that blood first had to be typed and matched with the recipient. Europe wasn't interested in his method for safe transfusions, so Landsteiner moved to the US in 1912 and set up shop at AJ Ochsner's hospital in Chicago. That's where Alton learned how to do it, and his uncle bought him the equipment he needed. Alton took it with him to Europe, but Swiss doctors still weren't interested in blood transfusions. But, they agreed to give Alton a chance to convince them his method was safe. It started with a criminal who had been shot by police, because nobody would care much if he didn't survive the transfusion. He lived. Next up was a Swiss bank president with a ruptured ulcer and heavy blood loss. Swiss doctors did all they could, but it wasn't enough, so they let Alton have another crack at transfusion. It was their patient's only hope. Another successful transfusion. Suddenly, young Dr Ochsner was the blood transfusion king of Europe. He wrote (in German) his first medical article explaining how safe blood transfusion worked, which made him a celebrity at age 27.

He returned to the US in 1924, ready for the beginning of the golden age of medicine. In 1927 he worked as a teacher at University of Wisconsin, and after a year there he became Tulane Medical School's Head of Surgery. Many of the doctors there, older and well qualified for the job, resented the 31-year old, but Ochsner's success overshadowed their jealousy. He

continued to improve his skills in laboratory research during the 1930s and -40s, with a focus on finding practical medical solutions. He joined the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine's southern chapter, and in 1936 he was one of the first people to link smoking with lung cancer. In 1949 he became President of the American Cancer Society, and served on its Board of Directors. Another of its directors was William Donovan ("Wild Bill"), the founder and head of the US Office of Strategic Studies (which evolved into the CIA).

Later in his life Ochsner rejected the permissiveness of Dr Spock, embraced the idea of euthanasia, and admitted that he had not been perfect in the operating room, even though he was known for his surgical skills. Perhaps perfection could not have reasonably been expected of a man who performed some 20,000 surgical procedures over half a century.

When Ochsner suggested that Tulane (in New Orleans) build its own hospital, the board rejected the idea. So Alton and five of Tulane Medical School's department heads acted on their own, opening the Ochsner Clinic and Foundation Hospital, in spite of objections of New Orleans physicians who feared the Foundation's big-business approach to the practice of medicine. They appealed to the AMA, but that organization refused to stand in Ochsner's way. From the beginning, the Ochsner facility catered to the needs of the politically elite in Central and South America. New Orleans had long been the commercial bridge between the US and Latin America, so it made sense to make Ochsner's hospital the go-to place for Latin American leaders. The doctor himself made frequent trips to Central and South America, making friends with their rulers and promoting his hospital. By the 1980s so many patients came from that part of the world that Ochsner built a hotel and hired Spanish interpreters for Latin patients' relatives.

The hospital also catered to American celebrities. One of Ochsner's personal patients was Clint Murchison, a wealthy Texas oilman and good friend of LBJ. Clint had pitched in \$750,000 to help get the Ochsner Foundation built. Murchison also gave the doctor a Cadillac. But Murchison could afford to be so generous. He bought 30,000 acres of swamp land (possibly from Lady Bird Johnson) and turned it into what is now New Orleans East (about one-third of New Orleans). He knew from his friend LBJ that Interstate 10 and NASA's largest facility would send real estate prices soaring, making Murchison millions.

By age 65, Ochsner was positioned to spend most of his time on politics, having resigned as Chief of Surgery at Tulane in 1956, and having left Tulane's Board of Directors in 1961. (Other board members were not entirely comfortable with Ochsner's growing public political activities.) When Castro rose to power in Cuba's revolution in 1959, it was a direct blow to New Orleans in general and to Ochsner in particular. New Orleans' primary business was trade, and three-fourths of it was with Latin America. If revolutionaries like Castro seized power throughout Latin America, that would destroy New Orleans' economy. Furthermore, the elites ousted from power would no longer be able to hop on a plane and go to Ochsner's hospital in New Orleans. The doctor had achieved a great deal of business success, but it was now being threatened. The doctor was not the type to watch passively; he evolved into an anti-Communist activist.

In 1961, Ochsner founded the Information Council of the Americas (INCA) which spread anti-Communist propaganda across Latin American radio waves. His mission was to prevent Communist revolutions in Latin America. Ochsner served as its President and Chairman, and its Executive Director was Ed Butler. Dr Ochsner was at the center of a right-wing alliance between medicine and politics in New Orleans. But some who knew him cautioned that in the realm of

politics, Ochsner was rather naïve. He did not demonstrate political skills that approached his mastery of medicine.

He was also, according to FBI files, very active with several federal agencies, including the military and the FBI itself. In 1955 he was a consultant for the Army; in 1957 he was a consultant for the Air Force; also in 1957 he was cleared by the FBI for a “sensitive position” for the federal government, and Hoover himself cleared the doctor to act as an official contact for the FBI’s Special Agent in Charge of the New Orleans office. (Ochsner had already been performing surgery for that office at discount rates.) In 1959, the doctor was investigated again for another “sensitive position” at an undisclosed federal agency. In October of that year he accepted an assignment at that agency and severed ties with the FBI. What, exactly were these “sensitive positions”? Why did the military and the FBI need the services of that particular doctor when they already had lots of doctors at their disposal?

Meanwhile, Ochsner met and formed friendships with industrial giants, such as Bud Maytag of washing machine fame. He served on the Board of Directors of large companies. He had a meeting with Richard Nixon in the early 1960s. Ochsner’s second wife was even closer with Nixon.

When Jim Garrison (New Orleans’ District Attorney) conducted his investigation of the JFK murder, he discovered that the activities of Lee Harvey Oswald were closely linked to Ochsner and INCA. In 1967, the doctor was afraid he might be arrested. INCA’s records were flown to California, where Ed Butler locked them away in storage. Ochsner battled Garrison publicly, demonstrating that the good doctor was not averse to political mudslinging. For example, Ochsner obtained Garrison’s military medical records and found that Garrison, who had flown combat missions behind enemy lines in WWII, had experienced battle fatigue. He was grounded for a while due to mental exhaustion, and he received psychological counseling. Ochsner used that to brand the veteran pilot as having a mental problem. Then Ochsner attacked Mark Lane, who had been the first author to challenge the conclusions of the Warren Commission in his book *Rush to Judgment*. The doctor called Lane a sadist, masochist, and a Communist, hoping to weaken Garrison’s position by discrediting Lane and anyone else who questioned the Warren Commission.