

Olin E. Teague Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 3/15/1977
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Olin Teague (1910-1981) served as a Congressman from Texas between 1947 and 1978. This interview focuses on Teague's relationship with John F. Kennedy (JFK), JFK's congressional career, and Teague's contributions to JFK's presidential campaign, among other issues.

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Olin E. Teague—JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

OLIN TEAGUE

March 15, 1977
Washington, D.C.

By Bill Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: This is Bill Hartigan. The date is March 15, 1977 and I'm visiting Congressman Olin Teague from Texas, in Washington. The purpose of my visit is to interview the Congressman on behalf of the oral history department of the John F. Kennedy Library. I want to thank you for the time you have given us this morning to do this interview and we'll just get on with the first question which is usually when and where did you first meet President Kennedy?

TEAGUE: Well, Bill, that was thirty years ago. I first met Jack Kennedy when we were both assigned to the Committee on the District of Columbia. And that was in January of 1947.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall from your early days in the Congress you went to the Congress just prior to the....

TEAGUE: I was selected in August of '46 at a special election, but of course the Congress did not convene until January, so I was practically up here alone. Everybody had gone home from August until January.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall anything with reference to your freshman orientation, you and the then Congressman Kennedy?

TEAGUE: I only remember having a freshman orientation and meeting him at that time which, when we were being assigned committees, and through that committee we became good friends. When you're a freshman there is very little work in your office. You never hear from anybody except your constituents. While as you stay in Congress and get some seniority you begin to hear from people out of your district, other parts of your state and other parts of the country. But at that time we had a lot of time to sit on the floor and discuss politics and discuss what was good for our country and what wasn't. Jack and I both had come out of a combat situation in World War II and we had some rather positive ideas as to, for example, veterans' programs, which even though I was on the committee and Jack wasn't, but he was very much interested in what happened in the veterans' affairs field.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall any of the other congressmen that you and he or he as an individual sort of associated with?

TEAGUE: Well, Bill, there were a number. We had a rather large freshman class that year, all of them coming out of World War II. George Smathers from Florida, who later became a United States senator, Richard Nixon of California who later became a senator, a president and a vice president, Thruston Morton from Kentucky who later became a United States senator and who played a very important part in the Republican party and Glen Davis of Wisconsin. It was a large freshman class, and it was a closely-knitted group of young men. I suppose we were like the young men who came out of Vietnam, we had some rather definite ideas on our own. I guess we, for example, there was a general pension bill in the veteran program that year that the veteran groups wanted very much, which would have paid every man who ever wore a uniform a hundred dollars a month. Well, Jack Kennedy and myself, and a number of others including Glen Davis and George Smatehrs, Thruston Morton, we were more interested in the widows, disabled and the orphans of men who had been killed in the war. And that was not really the popular position to take. So we had a lot of things in common and worked very closely together.

HARTIGAN: What were your early impressions of him when you first met him?

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TEAGUE: Well, Bill, I think my first impression of Jack Kennedy was that he was very much his own boss. He had very positive ideas on what was good and what was bad for this country of ours. And he didn't hesitate to express them and he didn't hesitate to vote regardless of pressure. There was tremendous pressure in the veteran field at that time. And that was the thing that we worked together most on. Jack

studied very hard, he worked quietly very hard, he was not a man that was talking a lot or seeking publicity. He was concentrating on trying to inform himself on what he thought was right. I was impressed very much in the fact that he was an independent person, he was completely honest intellectually, and was trying desperately to figure out what was best for this country.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall any of his activities with reference to some of the unpopular positions he has taken, with reference to veterans' affairs I know he...

TEAGUE: Well, the veterans' affairs thing was the biggest, Bill. The other committee that Jack was on was education and labor. At that time we had the Taft-Hartley Law up for a vote. Jack played some part in that. But it was thirty years ago, and I just don't remember a lot of detail on that bill, but it was one of the very controversial when it was considered in that first congress.

HARTIGAN: There was a piece of legislation relative to housing of veterans that the....

TEAGUE: Jack was a very strong supporter on housing for veterans and took a great big interest in it and played a very important part in the housing of veterans. Now my district and Jack's were completely different. Mine comprised of a lot of small rural country towns, and housing in those areas was very difficult. We had what you call a direct loan program where the government could go directly into an area where there was no money available from banks and make loans. I was impressed that Jack, coming out of the city of Boston, and strictly a big city, would take the interest he did in rural veterans and whether they could get housing or not.

HARTIGAN: In 1947, just for recollection purposes, the ten so called key votes for 1947, I'll just show it to you and possibly it might recall some interesting.... [INTERRUPTION] Do you want to continue, Congressman, on some of your associations....

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TEAGUE: Well Bill, Jack and I used to sit on the floor and discuss, for example, happiness. Jack's background and mine were completely opposite. I came from a very good, a very religious background, but a very poor background. Jack came from a religious background, but I am sure quite wealthy. Jack and I, I remember one discussion of how a poor boy could get pleasure out of looking in a store window and looking at a bicycle or something he could not possibly afford, but which he knew was there, and if he could manage it, he could get it. Jack did not understand this kind of happiness. After he became the United States senator, we were in Warsaw, Poland one time. We were the only Americans in a hotel there and it was really after he went to the senate the only chance we ever had to sit and talk together. Jack remembered that conversation and brought it up and told about a run for the Senate that as I remember he

mentioned the dock workers in Boston, how he became acquainted with a lot of people that were in the low income group and that he had learned a lot about human beings in his campaign for the Senate that he hadn't learned in his House campaigns. That kind of discussion that were most interesting, and I never forgot the discussion we had. Of course, at that time none of us had a thought that Jack Kennedy would at some time be the president of the United States. The first picture I ever had made as a member of Congress was with Jack Kennedy, with Thruston Morton, with Richard Nixon and with a man named Don Jackson [Donald L. Jackson] of California. I still have that picture, and actually Jack Kennedy looked like a very, very young man at that time and of course he was young, but his picture looks like a little boy. I still have that picture.

HARTIGAN: I think I saw that picture on the wall at the Veterans' Administration in the office of Mahan.

TEAGUE: Yes. It is there, and Mr. Nixon didn't have that picture. And it had appeared in *Time* which _____ Had furnished Mr. Nixon when he became president. But it was a very interesting picture.

HARTIGAN: Yes. It is coincidental that I just saw it not too long ago. With reference to his associates, do you recall who he leaned towards for advice while he was a congressman?

TEAGUE: Well, Bill I think Jack Kennedy, as I said earlier was a very independent thinker and a very honest thinker. I don't think, well he was not clannish. His friends spread all throughout the Congress, Republicans, Democrats, what we would call liberals, conservatives. He was

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talking to everybody and was friendly with everybody. And in that he was very quiet and didn't talk a lot. When he talked he had something to say, and people listened to him. He was not looking for publicity as many members were. And as I said before, he did not bend to political pressure. Back then, for example, the American Legion had a representative named Colonel Taylor, and he was very aggressive, very domineering. And I remember hearing Jack talking with him, and he was trying to tell Jack how he was going to vote on the Veteran Bill. Jack told him that he was sorry but that that was not the way he was going to vote because it wasn't the right way to vote. But I don't think, Bill, that Jack ever was tied to any particular group. He associated with all the members and tried to get the viewpoints of all the different members. I don't think two freshman members would have been anymore different than Jack Kennedy and I, and yet we became very close friends and it remained that way, until he was assassinated as president. I spent considerable time talking with him flying from Fort Worth to Dallas the day he was assassinated, and I remember so well of his saying that he thought the Space Program needed a boost and that he was going to, what is now Cape Kennedy, for the next launching to try to give it a push. On the trip from Fort Worth to Dallas he handed

me the flight plan on the plane that the crew of the plane had given to him. And I still have that in my desk at the Capital. He was a most interesting man from the beginning. There could never have been a member of Congress more naive than I was when I came to Congress. Until the war I had never given a thought to government and I obviously, I don't know what Jack did before the war, but I know the war made him think about government. I know that he had many definite plans in his mind in his career in the government. Looking back, I can remember so many ways where he was looking ahead and trying to figure out what was best for our country.

HARTIGAN: Do you recollect some of the members of his staff from the early days?

TEAGUE: Well, I think the staff members I remember most were Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] who was Congressional liaison person at that time, and Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell].

HARTIGAN: Well, I mean back then when he was in the Congress. He had Billy Sutton [William F. Sutton] there and Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.].

TEAGUE: No. Bill. I did not know his staff.

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HARTIGAN: I think we went through some of the Legislative programs that he was involved in, and being on....

TEAGUE: I mean except for that veteran fight, and I told you about him, when the bill got to the floor, the general pension bill, and in that debate Jack made the statement that there hadn't been a new idea come out of the American Legion since 1917. That statement haunted him for many, many years. And when he was candidate for president, at the American Legion convention in Miami, Florida, the American Legion made copies of the *Congressional Record* of that day and put them in the seats at each delegate to the convention. Jack, who was as I said a candidate for president, called me in Texas and asked me if I'd go across to Miami to see what could be done about that statement. Well, eventually when he went from Miami over to Miami Beach, on the way across we discussed this and he made up his mind to say that since the date he made that remark that he learned a lot about the American Legion, and he praised the American Legion for all the good things they had done and complimented them on, for example the Little League program, and the interest they had taken in veterans. The fact that he disagreed with them that one time, I don't think was ever mentioned again. And the bill got to the floor, and I made the motion to recommit it. On the first roll call the recommittal was defeated by one vote. Then Mr. McCormack [John W. McCormack] made the motion, asked for a recount because the vote was so close. They found one member who was recorded wrong. So they took one off the yeas and added one to the nays and the motion to recommit was defeated. The next day Jack and I both received a flood of telegrams saying they were going to beat us

for our action on that bill. But looking back, I am so convinced that we were right, the fact that he had been in actual combat in the ocean, and I had been in combat on the ground in infantry. But we were much interested in the disabled and the widows and the orphans. I think it has turned out today that the veterans groups follow that philosophy rather closely.

HARTIGAN: It took a lot of courage and foresight to recognize the fact that it would be very easy to be emotional about the veterans' issues, rather than looking down the road to what really is going to count twenty years into it.

TEAGUE: Well, that is true, Bill. Everybody wants to do what's right. It's like you want to do what's right for your children, but it isn't always right to give them everything they want. And coming up the ladder the

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same thing was true veterans. Jack and I both worked on what we call today the War Orphan Scholarship Bill. And there were a number of young widows from Boston were involved in that. And today that is acknowledged as one of our really good pieces of legislation where we gave an orphan or a widow the same educational benefits that the father would have gotten if he had lived. That was a piece of legislation that we sponsored and worked on, after a number of years we passed it.

HARTIGAN: How would you rate him with reference to his activities with his colleagues from the New England region?

TEAGUE: Oh. Well, he did wonderfully with them, Bill. In fact, I don't believe there was another member of the New England area that got along with all the other members as well as Jack did, because he was so willing to look at two sides of the question. He could certainly disagree with you without being disagreeable. He had that ability to make everybody respect him and to listen to him. And I think that was, sure helped him later on when he was a candidate for president, that the members remembered him and remember that kind of a man.

HARTIGAN: At the time that you were serving with him, and looking back, I suppose it's an interesting analysis of serving with two men who eventually became president and even had a contest between them for it. I'm speaking of Nixon and President Kennedy, now. I suppose looking back it is more interesting than the time it was happening. Was there ever any indication that these men would show leadership to the extent that we would be taking each other on in years to come?

TEAGUE: Well, Bill, there was indications, but at the time you didn't recognize it, and it was completely different. Now in President Nixon's first campaign, the stories we had that it was a very ruthless, a very partisan campaign, and he was very vocal. And with President Nixon, I think nobody would question the fact

that he played very much to the news media. The Hiss-Chambers [Alger Hiss] [Whittaker Chambers] case and all the way through, all his political campaigns were very partisan and very ruthless, actually, while Jack Kennedy's campaigns were rather quiet and subdued, but yet were very good. And they were much more on issues. What I know about the two people as they campaigned, President Nixon did a lot more criticizing his opponent than Jack ever did. Jack usually, as I knew, he ran on a program of his own, and more than just trying to pick on the faults of somebody

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who was his opponent. And yes, looking back it was very evident. At the time I didn't recognize it in either one of them. I was much closer, much closer to Jack Kennedy than I was to Richard Nixon, although if you're on a committee with someone, you just get to know them a lot better. I was never on a committee with Richard Nixon, nothing more than being a member of the freshmen class of 1947. I was friendly with President Nixon and we kept that friendly relationship through the years. I went to the White House the night that he announced his resignation. But they certainly both showed leadership, but they showed it in completely different ways.

HARTIGAN: It's ironic and interesting of course from an historical point of view that they both finally reached their goal, though.

TEAGUE: Right. It certainly is. After he went to the White House, our friendship became more pronounced. We had lots of disagreements over the VA [Veterans Administration] Medical Hospital, not with him but within the Congress there was a lot of controversy over the veteran hospital program, well, all veterans' programs. There were numerous times where he as president had to make a choice between my thinking and some others, and I was really amazed how many times he took my side instead of the other side. We discussed veteran benefits many times after he became president, and our friendship continued until the end.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall when he decided to run for Senate and any interesting events that happened leading up to that?

TEAGUE: No, Bill I don't. He had come along in the House to where he was becoming a real factor, and I was very surprised when he announced he was going to run for the Senate, even though it had been in the papers. But I never heard him say a word, in private, in conversation, that he was going to run for the Senate. When he ran for the Senate, it really surprised me.

HARTIGAN: Were you concerned as to the fact that he was taking on one of the strongest Republicans, or for that matter one of the strongest office holders in the state of Massachusetts, Senator Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge], at that time?

TEAGUE: Well, I think Bill, that was his history. His first campaign, for example, as I remember it, in

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talking to him about his race when he came to Congress, I don't think his Dad ever thought he could be elected. But he was. I remember that, and when he took on Lodge, who certainly was one of the leaders of that day. I wasn't surprised when he won.

HARTIGAN: Well, he worked very hard for it, of course.

TEAGUE: I'm sure.

HARTIGAN: Leading up to the Presidency, was there a time that you got the message or you got the information that he was running for President?

TEAGUE: Well, that was a long time ago, Bill. As I remember, we had a number of discussions about it. I didn't see him as much, of course, after he went to the Senate as I did when he was a member of the House. But he still came to the House whenever he had an opportunity, after he went to the Senate. Well, I was flabbergasted about anybody running for president. I did a lot more listening to him than I did saying anything. I think as far as I know, all his friends in the House encouraged him in what he was trying to do and offered their help. In fact, I don't know of a member of the House who didn't try to help him when he was running for president.

HARTIGAN: Did you participate, I know you did, into any recollections with reference to the presidential campaign of 1960?

TEAGUE: Well, yes. I went many places across the country and spoke to veterans' groups mostly. I tried to help in that way. Other than that, I don't remember doing much except in the veteran world. I did try to help any way I could with the veteran population.

HARTIGAN: When he was finally elected to the presidency, your friendship continued?

TEAGUE: Our friendship continued after he became president.

HARTIGAN: I know because I've seen you in the White House many times, so I'm sure that he discussed many things with you. Do you recollect interesting situations that took place?

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TEAGUE: No, none in particular, Bill, except in the veteran field. Veteran problems were important at that time and I went there numerous times on veteran problems. That's really all I remember, Bill, about that era.

HARTIGAN: Now you worked closely with his staff in the White House: Larry O'Brien, Kenny O'Donnell and Claude Desautels and several others. Do you recollect any legislation that required an extra effort on your part?

TEAGUE: Well, I remember more, Bill, of the fact that President Kennedy did have some problems in the South, and there was a feeling of people in the South that President Kennedy's staff was not, well he didn't care much for the people in the South. Now, that was his staff, not President Kennedy. But I remember numerous small evening get togethers with Kenny O'Donnell. Kenny O'Donnell was, I think, and Larry, Kenny even more than Larry, but Larry too, Larry O'Brien, of trying to improve relationships between those of us from the South and the White House and the New England area. I had more of that than I do of legislation. I don't remember the White House staff or President Kennedy coming to me very much on legislation outside the veteran field. But there was still a lot of veteran work going on. You know we rewrote the GI Bill...

HARTIGAN: Right.

TEAGUE: ... and President Kennedy played a big part in that. He was very much for the GI Bill and very much interested in it. But he also knew we made a lot of mistakes in the first bill, and we were trying to improve the second bill. And that was worked on for a number of years and we finally passed up a second bill that has worked wonderfully well, and good for our country, I think.

HARTIGAN: Let me just see if there is anything here that would....

TEAGUE: I think Bill, you've picked my brain pretty good, all I know, all I remember.

HARTIGAN: I thought I might bring up some political aspects. For example, the 1956 Convention [Democratic National Convention], when he was recommended for the, he was on the ballot for the vice presidency at the Convention.

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TEAGUE: Well, Bill I was strictly an observer there and I was there, and was very much interested and watched what was going on. But I really played little part. I was more or less silently hoping for Jack Kennedy. But I played little part in the actual workings of the Convention.

HARTIGAN: I think I'm going to turn this before it gets....

[TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

HARTIGAN: ... for the presidency, the primaries of West Virginia has always been interesting....

TEAGUE: Bill, I had no part in that one.

HARTIGAN: You weren't involved in that one?

TEAGUE: No.

HARTIGAN: And the Convention in Los Angeles?

TEAGUE: Bill, I was there and I was in on practically every meeting that took place, but I just didn't participate a lot. I was just an observer and listening. I, of course, was in the middle of the Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] group. Mr. [?] was out there, and I was just kind of on the fringes, just listening to what was going on and watching what was going on. But I was not inside enough to know a lot of the details or anything like that. I was there when Kennedy came and talked to the Texas delegation. And, but any detailed remembrances, Bill, I just don't have.

HARTIGAN: That was, there were some unfortunate situations taking place at that time.

TEAGUE: Yes.

HARTIGAN: When were you aware of the fact he was going to pick Johnson for the vice presidency?

TEAGUE: I wasn't.

HARTIGAN: You weren't. That was...

TEAGUE: In fact, I don't know but from the background and the connection I'd had, I'm just sure that

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Jack Kennedy himself made that decision alone and nobody else had anything to do with it. In fact, I would suspect that everybody was, around Jack Kennedy, was against that, except Jack Kennedy. Many of us, Bill, always had a feeling that when Johnson was vice president, that he was pretty much on the outside of the White House group

except for President Kennedy and Kenny O'Donnell. And whether that was true I don't know. But there was always a feeling of that.

HARTIGAN: I have some experience in that regard. Bill Moyers, I remember came over to the White House one day and was interested in President Johnson being close to the White House physically. Kennedy called me into his office while Bill was there to work with Bill in establishing a vice president's office over in the Executive Office Building. That was the first time that the Vice President ever had an office down there. And I know for a fact that because my instructions were that we were to give Vice President Johnson's people every single thing they needed to build that office so it would be acceptable and worthy of the vice president. So I know you're right in that respect, on that one particular situation.

TEAGUE: Well, the one thing Bill, that I was involved in in watching the two work together, Johnson and President Kennedy, was on the space program.

HARTIGAN: Right.

TEAGUE: President Johnson handled the legislation in the Senate. I was on the committee from the beginning in the House and President Kennedy, after the Russians had had their success in space, was asking everybody what we could do to prove to the people of the United States and the world that the United States was capable of doing the same thing in space that the Russians had done. I stated a number of times in meeting between President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson over a space program and President Kennedy made Mr. Johnson, I don't know whether he called him a chairman or what, I think he did, of a committee on the space program. I just read recently where President Johnson said that one of the best things that ever happened to him in his life was when President Kennedy appointed him in charge of the space, what we were going to do in space. But certainly I think that President Kennedy made every effort to help the vice president. Back then there was certainly, the vice president was about at the bottom of the totem pole. I never saw a thing except complete harmony between President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson.

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HARTIGAN: I think your analysis is right. I believe that at some of the levels in both camps, from lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, there was some ripples. But as you went up the staff though, I know that to this day, for example, Bill Moyers and I and Kenny were very, very friendly and have been in subsequent elections. So that happens, I suppose, in large organizations.

TEAGUE: It's human. It had to happen that way. I always was so pleased with President Kennedy's overall broad conception of the whole thing. I was so

pleased with his meeting in Houston, Texas with the Protestant ministers. I think he did an unbelievable job.

HARTIGAN: I was at that, I was with the President and Dave Powers [David F. Powers] down there at that meeting.

TEAGUE: Good, good.

HARTIGAN: And it was a memorable occasion. I interviewed Tim May not too long ago for the Library, and he recollected, in quite great detail -- he was advance man for that you know -- and there was a lot of apprehension on the part of many people as to whether or not he should do what he was planning to do. Once again that was a decision...

TEAGUE: Bill, were you on the trip to Houston back up to Fort Worth and over to Dallas?

HARTIGAN: I wasn't there on the last one, no. I was there during the campaign.

TEAGUE: Well, I guess that was the only trip I made where I was with him most of the way. You know in Fort Worth a big cowboy Stetson hat is the big thing they give most dignitaries that come to Fort Worth. I will never forget at breakfast their giving the President a great big white Stetson hat and they just begged, pleaded, tried every way to get him to put that hat on. He never put it on.

HARTIGAN: I know, Congressman, you mentioned earlier that the day of the President's assassination that you were with him prior to that. Were you in on any of the plans before his trip to Texas.

TEAGUE: No. I had nothing to do with any of the plans before, except know that we're going and that kind

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of thing. There were a number of members of the Texas delegation in a car, well I think it was about the third or fourth car back. There was more than one line, there were a number of cars kind of doubled up in there. I think the members of the Texas delegation were in the third, fourth or fifth car. Anyway, when he was assassinated he had turned left on a street and we were about half way down the block coming right behind him. When the shots were fired I thought they were blanks. But evidently, the sound had bounced around among those buildings, and in training we had done a lot of blank firing and it had kind of a hollow sound to it. Then we saw their car take off very rapidly and when we ended up at Parkland Hospital, the car we were in was the car behind the President's car. But it was such a surprise, such a shock. It had been such a successful tour through town. We'd been

through the whole town and the whole city and passing the last high buildings before we got on to a freeway and gone to where they were to have the luncheon. That was quite a day.

HARTIGAN: One we'll never forget I imagine. The Warren Commission -- I don't know if you want to make any comments on that -- but they're regenerating interest in the, amongst your colleagues in Congress to reopen the assassination inquiry.

TEAGUE: Bill, I voted against that. And I voted against appropriation, and I'll vote against it next time. Whatever they prove, I don't know if it could help anybody. And I don't know if you can prove anything different. You may produce some evidence, but I have a lot of faith in the Warren Commission. I don't think by any stretch of the imagination that group of people would whitewash or try to change something that wasn't true. So I don't see that a reinvestigation can do any good for anybody. I opposed the reopening and I intend to continue to do so.

HARTIGAN: It seems that the family seems to be satisfied. And most of the people involved in it seemed to be satisfied.

TEAGUE: If the family were asking for it I think I would have a different feeling. I would let their thinking go above mine, but as of now, as far as I know there is no member of the family that wants it. I just think it's wrong to go back and dig that all up again. It's over, it's past, there's nothing you can do about it.

HARTIGAN: In recapping our little interview, Congressman,

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are there any final parting thoughts you'd like to make in reference to....

TEAGUE: Bill, I would only like to say that my association with President Kennedy was one of the most interesting parts of my life. Of course in the beginning, I had no idea what was to follow, but it was very rewarding, and I enjoyed it very, very much. I just only wish that he could have lived out his life and we could have known what would have happened. That's all, Bill.

HARTIGAN: Thank you very, very much, Congressman. I'm sure that the family and the Library will be very grateful for the time you've taken to give us this interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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