

George H. Taylor Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 8/12/1977
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George H. Taylor (1907-1986) was a chauffeur and valet for John F. Kennedy from 1936 until 1946. This interview focuses on Taylor's relationship with John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), the various roles Taylor held in working for JFK, and Taylor's reasons for leaving JFK's employment, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

George H. Taylor

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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE H. TAYLOR

August 12, 1977
Boston, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Going back to your earliest recollections of your contacts with JFK [John F. Kennedy]....

TAYLOR: Yeah. My earliest recollections are.... I was introduced first to Jack by his brother Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], and Joe and Jack were very close as brothers, also Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy]. Of course, I didn't meet Bobby till Bobby was.... When Bobby Kennedy was then about fourteen -- I forget what school he was going to, but I think that Joe and Jack both were at Choate [Choate School], and Jack had, before Choate, had gone to Middlesex [Middlesex School], Middlesex Academy, not Middlesex Academy, Milton Academy. And, well, I had the contract of taking care of their clothes. I was doing valetieral [sic] work.

STERN: You owned your own business?

TAYLOR: I owned my own little.... I had this little shop on the corner of Plimpton Street in Cambridge, Plimpton and Mt. Auburn [Street]. The house has since been torn down. We would talk.... Weekends we would get together,

have a few drinks. Joe and I -- Joe Junior and I -- would drink quite a little, but Jack was a person that didn't particularly care about alcoholics [sic]. Anything like scotch he might take one, but that's all he would.... He never really cared for booze.

STERN: Did you ever see any sign of rivalry between the brothers?

TAYLOR: Yes. It seemed to me that they were always, they were.... As I remember now, I think they were both about the same class, because Joe had taken time out for other things -- being in London with his father [Joseph P. Kenney, Sr.], who was the ambassador to the Court of St. James's -- and they were about the same class. Each weekend they would compare notes as to how they were progressing. When they would have their exams, they would.... They were all top of their class, and they would all get A's or B's. Jack and Joe, if one didn't get an A, they would say, "Well, why? Didn't you study? Did you play too much? What's the score here?" And it seemed like Joe was like the father to the whole group. He was, he had a very paternal feeling to Jack, and I think Jack did resent this, because Jack liked to be more or less at times a party by himself and Joe was very, I would use the word, he used to boss Jack quite a bit.

STERN: And did Jack resent that, do you think?

TAYLOR: I think Jack did resent it. Now a lot of people think that when Jack first would come to college, he came to Harvard [Harvard College]. He didn't come to Harvard, he went to Princeton [Princeton University], where most of his friends were, and I think that's one of the reasons why, I think he wanted to be away on his own, away from Joe. Though they really were good brothers, sometimes it's better they were not together every day. They get tired of each other, like married people. So when Joe Kennedy Senior, the father, learned that Jack had started to go to Princeton -- he was ambassador to the Court of St. James at the time -- and he came back especially to go to Princeton and get Jack out, and enroll him at Harvard.

Of course I liked that. I thought it was a good idea because I just, that's the way I, because of his coming to Harvard that's how I got to know him. And he was considered an egghead, more or less, because he was so, he always wanted top marks, A and B. As a matter of fact, I think when he graduated from college that he was either cum laude or magna cum laude.

STERN: Can you tell me how you came to work for him?

TAYLOR: Well, Joe.... This was during the football season. Joe and Jack and all the people, the rich boys at Harvard, would get cocktails and punches at all the important games, such as Harvard, Holy Cross [College of the Holy Cross], Yale [Yale University], Dartmouth [Dartmouth College], and Brown [Brown University],

and I was the one that would make the punches and serve these people. I was well known. I known.... I was well known by a lot of the people at Harvard, the club men, the rich men's sons.

So I began to drink pretty heavy at some of these parties, and now and then I'd just say -- I'd be tired and I'd say -- "Well, listen, boys, the party's over now," which I had no right to do, but I was under the influence.

Some of the parties had to do with the Harvard Dramatic Club, through the Hasty Pudding Club, which was sort of, more or less, a dramatic club, and they invited such stars as Tallulah Bankhead [Tallulah B. Bankhead], whom I met, and Sally Rand, the bubble dancer, and what's this fellow that played baseball, for the Red Sox, he pitched, Dean, Dizzy Dean [Jay Hanna Dean]. He was invited to the, one of these punch parties that I was serving.

STERN: Played the Cardinals [St. Louis Cardinals], yeah. St. Louis, right?

TAYLOR: Yeah. And he, Joe as a matter of fact, I think he was a secretary of, or the treasurer of his class -- the permanent class secretary of the graduating class from Harvard. Jack -- I'll probably go a little ahead of myself at the time -- but Jack finally became an overseer of the Harvard faculty....

STERN: That was years later.

TAYLOR: Harvard.... Years later, yes.

STERN: Why don't we concentrate for the time being on your relationship with Jack, how you came to work for him, what you did for him, and how your relationship with him ended?

TAYLOR: Yes. Well, we.... A lot of the times I'd be down to the Winthrop House where he lived, and Tommy [Thomas Bilodeau] and I, we'd sit down over a few drinks and we would talk about politics. Jack was very interested in politics, so we, Tommy, and Bilodeau, Tom Bilodeau, who was a great football player as well as a baseball player....

STERN: Did you ever...? Were you ever aware of Jack being ill or for having...?

TAYLOR: I knew that Jack had a problem with the.... One time they had thought he had -- what is that cancer of the blood? -- cancer of the blood. They thought he had that. What is it called? Leukemia. Is it leukemia or lakemia?

STERN: Leukemia.

TAYLOR: Leukemia. And he was... Joe said to me, "George, Jack is going to the Lahey Clinic [Lahey Clinic Foundation]. They think he's got something wrong with his body, and they think it might be leukemia." And I didn't know, at that time, much about the disease, I didn't know it was cancer, but they found that he didn't have that, but he had something that bothered him a lot. What it was, I don't remember offhand now.

STERN: What about the back injury?

TAYLOR: Well, the back injury came, got more severe. His back, he had a weak back, it seems, but....

STERN: This is an important point. Did you.... Are you aware of whether or not he had back problems before the football injury or whether they came from the football injury?

TAYLOR: I really, I can't say as I.... Jack didn't do much complaining, but I know that he had asthma, and I had asthma. He was telling me, "George, when you find something that gets, takes care of your asthma, get the same thing for me." And it seemed like the first thing I got was a, some sort of an atomizer, and at that time twenty bucks was a lot of money, so I got one for me and got one for Jack, which he paid me back. But the injury, I, it got steadily worse, and he didn't.... I think he was turned down first when he tried to enlist in the army, or the navy, whichever it was -- he did try to enlist -- but then finally he did get in the navy. I knew about his problem because he had to wear a girdle, and there was a bit, there was a corset place in Boston that took care of athletes with back troubles. And I was one of the people, I was the one that was to keep that particular girdle that he wore in repair 'cause of it.... He had trouble, if he carried a suitcase in one hand, he'd have to have another something to balance so that it wouldn't be, wouldn't trouble him.

STERN: Is this while he was still a student, or after the war?

TAYLOR: That was still while he was still a student.

STERN: I see.

TAYLOR: And then after the war things got worse, and I knew he went to Lahey Clinic, and that they were planning an operation on his back, and during that operation.... Jack called me one day. He said, "George, now do you want to take this time off, or do you want to take a vacation? I'm going to have an operation, and my father would like to have you drive him, as he's going to make a survey in Massachusetts. The reason that big companies are leaving Massachusetts, and Tobin,

Governor Tobin [Maurice J. Tobin]....

STERN: This is the economic survey, right, ordered by Governor Tobin?

TAYLOR: Tobin, yes. And so I drove the father during this survey, and I stopped at good hotels, in Pittsfield, and we worked all through the state, north shore, and Lawrence, Lowell....

STERN: What kind of a man was he?

TAYLOR: Well, I'll tell you, sometimes he was very talkative, other things he was very quiet, and most of the two months or so that we went to the places he was a very.... Well now, for instance, in the theater which he had in Hyannis, they would send -- because of his connection with the motion pictures in Hollywood -- plays, players, and programs.... He had Gloria Swanson, who was one of his people that he managed. So they would send him some of the first plays produced, and he would see them, show them at his house -- he had a big auditorium downstairs which they used, and neighbors came in, and whatever new movie that was in production, people would see it. One of the movies he had there was *The Lost Weekend*. I forget the star.

STERN: Ray Milland [Raymond A. Milland].

TAYLOR: Ray Milland. So one of the things we talked about the next day after seeing that, Joe Senior said to me, "George, after seeing *The Lost Weekend*, I bet you keep away from booze now." I says, "I tell you, no, Mr. Kennedy." I said, "I think I will never want to see a picture like that again." Because at that time I was pretty....

STERN: You mentioned something about being given charge of the wine cellar.

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. Now at that time I was, you know, from one party to another, and serving the cocktails and punches and so forth. I had gotten an alcoholic problem. And then I went down to Hyannis, Jack sent me down to talk with his father and make preparations for what I was to do. One of the things, my job was to tell the children which car they could have, and they also gave me the keys to the wine cellar. It was a big wine cellar, and they had many, all kinds of whiskeys, Haig and Haig Pinch bottled, and I was the one when anybody wanted a drink.... So, weekends I'd get myself a couple of bottles, and I'd put away for me and my friends. Pringe, their, the butler....

STERN: Pringe is his name?

[-5-]

TAYLOR: Pringe, P-R-I-N-G-E. He was an Englishman. He and I would get together weekends, and we'd sit up and talk, and we'd have ourselves a little party. I

never had anything to do with the family as far as working in the house. All the work I ever did was just driving if they wanted to go anywhere. Like Pat [Patricia Kennedy Lawford], that's Patricia, or Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] anywhere, or the grandfather who was there quite often. I would take him down to play golf, or to get massaged at the country club.

STERN: Were they aware of the fact that you had a drinking problem when they gave you the keys to the wine cellar?

TAYLOR: Well, Jack was, and his father was, but I don't think that they realized that my problem was as great as it was. It was really getting beyond me. As a matter of fact, I'd just as soon not had the keys, because alcohol and me were, we didn't work out together.

STERN: Did you ever see any evidence of Jack's relationship with his father, how they got along?

TAYLOR: Well, yeah. I did see, at the table they would talk politics, and they had -- what's her name? -- the wife of the publisher of *Time* magazine....

STERN: Clare Boothe Luce?

TAYLOR: Clare Boothe Luce, yes, she was a guest quite often. And the police commissioner, Joe Timilty [Joseph F. Timilty], was often a guest there; and Eddie Moore [Edward E. Moore], the grandfather's secretary, who Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] is named after, Edward Moore Kennedy; he was there about every week. And I became a friend of all of them, and especially the grandfather. The grandfather and I used to, he used to tell nice stories about [the] West End and how James Michael Curley was a good friend of his, as he learned a lot of oratory from James Michael Curley, and as I understand that Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] also learned a lot of politics and how to play the game of politics also.

STERN: Did you ever see any examples of conflict between Jack and his father?

TAYLOR: No, never except at the.... The only conflict I saw was between Jack's uncle, Joe Kane [Joseph L. Kane], who was a very interesting man, and he told me one day, he says, "You know, I taught Jack Kennedy all he knows about politics. And there's a lot of things yet I haven't told him, but he's getting so now he don't pay much attention to me." So, another thing I'd like to bring in here at this point is the time that Jack said to me, "George, I'm going to graduate soon, and I'm going to go into

politics. Maybe some day I'll be president of the United States." I said, "Jack, you have as much chance of getting to be president of the United States as you have in getting into the Porcellian Club." And it so happened that Mike Grace [Michael Grace], a classmate of Jack's, made the Porcellian Club, and Jack made the Spee Club.

The Spee Club was probably, well, they rate like this: Porcellian Club is the top; A.D. Club, where Hearst [William Randolph Hearst], the newspaper man, was once a member, that was the A.D. Club. The next club in mind would be the Deltic Club. It would be tied between the Deltic and the Fly Club. And the Spee Club could be one of the bottom clubs, along with the Owl [Owl Club]. It seems to me that Teddy or Bobby were, I'm not sure what clubs they made, but I know it wasn't the Porcellian Club, 'cause they....

STERN: That's very interesting. Okay. Can we get back to your relationship with Jack, how long you worked for him, what you did for him...

TAYLOR: Well, I was really....

STERN: ...and particularly how you, how your employment with him ended? Okay?

TAYLOR: Yes. My employment was a very happy relationship until he got so involved in politics, bringing in a lot of people, and, of course, in politics the new people push out the old-timers. And Patsy Mulkern [Patrick J. Mulkern] and Grace Burke.... As a matter of fact, Grace Burke was Jack's secretary until she died. She was there from the beginning until the end, and when they were, when they were looking for a good secretary, I was there while, during the time that Jack would interview these people. And so at the end of the day, Jack said to me, "George, which one do you think is the best?" By the way, Joe Kane, Jack's uncle, was there. And I said, "I think the best of them is that older lady, Grace Burke." And Grace Burke was.... Nobody else there would come out and say, they would never give their, their thoughts.

But I was the type that would say, I said, "Jack, I like Grace Burke. She's the one to get." And he did get Grace Burke. And so it happened that Grace Burke was, when Jack appointed Frank Morrissey [Francis X. Morrissey] as his administrative assistant in the Boston office, Grace Burke had to work under Frank Morrissey, and they didn't get along at all. Frank did everything in his way to get her fired, but she stayed with Jack until the end....

STERN: And he had something to do with your losing your job, too, didn't he?

TAYLOR: Yeah. And he wanted.... Oh, yes. And by the way, he wanted, it was all right for me to be his valet and shine his shoes, but he wanted to job of appointment secretary. Well, I would make, I had been doing it, and I was very satisfied. I was getting on fine until Frank Morrissey came, and he wanted the job.

Frank Morrissey came and told me, “George, I’m going to be Jack’s appointment secretary. You’re just going to take care of his shoes and his clothes, and take care of his girdle that he has to wear ‘cause of the difficulty, his back, the operation on his back is bothering him a lot, but he never talks about it.” But he had to have a, somebody to come in to give him a Swedish massage probably every other day, and under a light called a Some sort of a lamp. What do you call these lamps that have to do, that they use to make the skin darker? You have to wear glasses.

STERN: Sun lamp?

TAYLOR: Sort of a type of sun lamp. Anything I said to Jack, “Jack, look. I’ve been working for you for quite a while now, and you’ve taken away the part of the job I like, and you’ve given it to somebody I don’t like. Frank Morrissey told me, and I told him that if he wanted to get, that if you wanted to make a change, that I’d hear it from you and not from him.” Our friendship was such that that’s the way we worked it.

Jack did come to me and said, “George. Look, Frank Morrissey is a Boston College-educated lawyer, and he wants to be my appointment secretary, so as of now, you will just have to do with the cooking, the shoes, and my clothes.” I said, “Jack, to hell with you. The end of the week I’ll get through, because I’m only getting \$45 a week, and I know that you said I didn’t realize that there was a depression, and I was the one feeling it more than you, because you’ve got plenty of money, therefore as of Friday, I’ll be through.” And that was what terminated our friendship.

STERN: I see.

TAYLOR: Our relationship, not friendship. Relationship. I think it’s the word I should use.

STERN: What was this he said to you, that “We’re all feeling the financial pinch.” What was that?

TAYLOR: Yeah, he said, “George, don’t you realize that we have financial difficulties, and money is hard to come by, and I can only afford to give you \$45 a week?” I said, “Jack, I know you. Your father has got a lot of money, and I know that you could well afford to give me \$100 a week if you so chose. So therefore, Jack, we don’t need each other. This is it.”

And before I end this, I want to say that Bobby invited me to his marriage. And I accepted the invitation, but when the time came, I was financially embarrassed, and I couldn’t make the trip. I didn’t have the money. And when I finally met his wife Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy], I explained to him and his wife, whom I had just met, “The reason why I didn’t come is because I didn’t have the money.” And so they said that they

had made plans for me to meet their friends, and to be there.... They had hired a cottage for me in Greenwich, Connecticut, and they were very upset that I didn't come. And I think this about terminates what I wanted to bring.

STERN: Okay. Let me just ask you one or two more points on these notes that you showed me.

TAYLOR: Why, sure.

STERN: This thing about Eunice Kennedy and the girls and the supper.

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. Another thing that disturbed me....

STERN: What year was that? Was that during the '46 campaign?

TAYLOR: That was during the time he was elected congressman.

STERN: 'Forty-six. Okay.

TAYLOR: He had asked me to get a bunch of _____ girls from Cambridge, and they were most usually college or high school people that give freely of their time, evenings. This went on for a few months, maybe three.

STERN: Volunteers?

TAYLOR: Volunteers, volunteering their time. And when Eunice and Lem....

STERN: Billings [K. LeMoyne Billings]?

TAYLOR: ...Billings, yes. That's a great help.... When they were there, they were friendly. And I know there's a feeney in.... And Cambridge is a very, was a very Democratic place, and Eunice would invite these white volunteers down to the, the name of the restaurant was the Honeybee, and invite them to eat anything they would like. And they would send the colored girls up sandwiches. And I spoke to Jack, and I told Jack. I said, "Jack, I think that's.... They're all giving their time. They're all human beings. Why segregate in this way, that you can't take the colored girls down with the white girls, if you're going to feed them upstairs. They're giving their time freely, and I don't think it's fair, and Hilda [Hilda Higgenbotham] doesn't think it's fair either."

STERN: Hilda was your girlfriend?

TAYLOR: Hilda was my girlfriend.

STERN: And what did Jack say?

TAYLOR: So Jack said, "George, you're thin-skinned. That's one of the things of the time." But I said, "In Cambridge, Jack, people that are very friendly, color doesn't, they don't have a color line here in Harvard Square and in Cambridge, and I think that it's something that you should know about. The people don't like it. They're talking about it." And so that was another.... Because of that is one of the reasons why I decided that I'd better get out of politics, I'd better leave Jack, and I did.

And these friends of mine helped me get on the wagon. I'd like to include it in this thing, while I'm here, is Stephen M. Castle, Mike Sullivan [Michael Sullivan], who was a politician in Cambridge, and his son is now the clerk of courts; Danny O'Brien [Daniel F. O'Brien], who's passed away, he was an undertaker and a politician, and a very good one; I didn't know the speaker of the House [House of Representatives] very well, Tip O'Neill [Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr.], I didn't know him, but I introduced Jack to a lot of people in Cambridge.

STERN: Did you have a particular role in the '46 campaign in terms of helping Jack to get introduced in the black neighborhoods?

TAYLOR: Well, yes. As a matter of fact, I planned.... He wanted me to get a group of black voters, and there was a club at that time called the Dunbar Club, and I went and got this, about four or five hundred color people interested in showing up for the meeting, and they made a good showing, and Jack wanted me to introduce him, but because of the fact that I had a, I stammered a little, I had a fellow named Leroy Johnson give the introduction. Jack was very pleased with the meeting, and he was very happy that we had a good showing, a good turnout. And people didn't know what happened to us when we broke away from each other.

STERN: I see. A couple of more things that you mentioned, in some of these notes. You introduced him to Pam Farrington [Pamela Farrington]?

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. Pam Farrington. Well, Hilda Higgenbotham worked for the Harriman [W. Averell Harriman] family, the Farringtons, and the family that owned the Boston Bruins, the Adams [Weston W. Adams] family. And she'd go doing day's work. She has certain days to go to each family. So Jack told me that he had met Pam Farrington, and he was interested in being introduced to her. So I told Hilda, Hilda told her, told Pam, and so Pam and Jack were.... We saw that they did meet, and that they became, they were friends. Pam was his girlfriend for at least eight, nine years. She really was so much in love with him and she thought that someday they would get married. Oh, by the way, the first Christmas together, Pam told Hilda, she said, "Hilda, do you know what Jack gave me for a Christmas present?" And Hilda said,

“What?” And so she said, “He gave me a book.” I think it was something like *The Robe*, or a book of that sort. And I think she was very.... I think she expected a little more than that.

But the people that did good, and stood by me in my period when I was hitting the bottle were -- they tried to get me off -- were Stephen M. Castle, my nurse, Mrs. Gunther Hirsh, and I think, I think that covers....

STERN: Is there anything else you can...?

TAYLOR: Think of?

STERN: Tell me more about the relationship between Jack and this Pam Farrington?

TAYLOR: Well, yeah. I said to Jack the day after they had been out together, I said, “Jack, how’d you do?” I said, “You know what I’m talking about, how’d you do?” He said, “Okay.” I said, “Not on the first night, Jack.” He said, “Yes.” He said, “I always make it the first night. If not the first night, that’s the end of the relationship.” So that’s the way it went.

STERN: Okay. And one other thing. The account about the car. The incident concerning your car, the damage to the car. How did that come about?

TAYLOR: Jack said, “George, I’m going down to Poughkeepsie to.... Tommy and I, we’re going to meet, we have a date down there to meet some girls, and we’d like to exchange cars.” Jack had an old, old beat-up Ford, and my car was a brand-new Chrysler which I was buying on the installment plan, and they went to Poughkeepsie, they brought the car back. They told me that the door had opened up in which they were driving, about seventy or eighty miles an hour, and the door had been damaged, but it was being held together by rope. Tommy and Jack had held together the door by rope. And I didn’t.... I made it a point never to loan my car to anybody after that.

STERN: Can you give me any insights into the ‘46 campaign?

TAYLOR: Incidents?

STERN: I mean incidents, and things you may have done in it. The role of Jack’s father in the campaign.

TAYLOR: Yes. With Jack’s father, Jack gave, the father gave a big dinner at the place down there, Brockton where they make.... The Toll House. And it was a big elaborate thing. In the excitement of all this that I was going, I was invited

to attend this with.... I got terrifically sick just at the wrong time, and Jack's father had to send me home in an ambulance.

STERN: Oh, my goodness.

TAYLOR: My asthma bothered me so much. Something else I was going to say.... But as I said, the people that stuck by me was Mrs. Gunther Hirsh, the nurse, and Stephen Castle, who was the head of the Lehigh Petroleum Company, and I, as a matter of fact, he gave me a job.... I was drinking heavy at his house, too, and when he went and made a trip to Aspen, Colorado, he and his wife, to ski, he came back and he said, "George, boy, how are you?" And I said, "Mr. Castle, since you've been away, I've been drinking every day." And I said, "I'm not a slick, and I've got the shakes." And I said, "I'll tell you, Jack, it's the best I...." I mean, "Mr. Castle, it's better, I think, that I go back to sea." And I had made a few trips, I liked it. And I said, "I think that that's the thing for me, because I know I'm drinking too much, and I think that that...." But this man here's a man that did everything in the world to get me off, this Mrs. Castle did everything in the world to get me off the alcoholic, but he couldn't. But this nurse that I have here now, she was the one who said, "George, if you don't stop drinking, know what? I'm not going to work with you anymore. You've been a problem for, now, a couple of years that I've known you, and if you don't get off the whiskey, you're going to die. Your pulse is bad, you've got high blood pressure." And I saw the light, and I got away from drinking.

STERN: That's great. Is there anything else that you might want to add about Jack or his brother or...?

TAYLOR: I really liked Bobby an awful lot. He was sincere, and it so happened that when I went down to New York to the National Maritime Union trying to get a pension, or trying to get into the union, I should say, at first. Joe Curran [Joseph E. Curran].... Bobby was having his troubles with Hoffa [James R. Hoffa] and the union. Joe Curran, who was the leader of the National Maritime Union, and Hoffa were friends, and Bobby knew that they were pulling deals that were against the good of our unions. And Bobby said, "Joe Curran," who was the president of the National Maritime Union, "After I take care of Hoffa, you're next." So by their knowing that I was a friend of the Kennedys didn't help me at all in the maritime union. That when it came time.... When I'd put in about twenty-five years of going to sea, but, as I say, it wasn't steady, it was broken time, they refused to give me the pension which I think I deserved. So because of my heart condition, I was going to fight it, but I said, "Forget it. Let it go." Because my heart was so bad that there was.... As I said, I had passed out, I did die, and they revived me at the Massachusetts General Hospital.

[END OF INTERVIEW]