

**Bryce N. Harlow Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/17/1977**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Bryce N. Harlow  
**Interviewer:** William Hartigan  
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**Biographical Note**

Harlow was a White House congressional liaison staff member, speechwriter, and presidential adviser under President Dwight D. Eisenhower; a speechwriter for Richard M. Nixon's 1960 presidential campaign; and assistant to the President for legislative and congressional affairs and later counselor to the President under President Nixon. In this interview Harlow discusses hearing about John F. Kennedy's assassination and Franklin D. Roosevelt's death, in 1963 and 1945 respectively; the possibility of a recorded interview or oral history with former President Nixon; and Nixon comforting Senator Edward M. Kennedy after the Chappaquiddick incident in 1969, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

With

BRYCE N. HARLOW

February 17, 1977

By William Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: Do you have any general observations you would like to make with reference to your experience relating to the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] Administration?

HARLOW: I guess the only thing really is that the last day of the campaign in 1960, we were leaving a motel in, I believe it was New York, the television sets were on in the lobby. And as the Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] entourage poured out of the motel to get into the cars to race to the airport to fly to California, I paused just for an instant to glance at the television. And there was Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis] and Jack, right there in the middle of that tube smiling and talking to the American people. And I glanced and stopped there for a moment and watched them. And I walked out of there and I thought to myself how in the world can anyone vote against a pair that is so incredibly lovely. And so I carried that with me onto the airplane. And I think my general observation is about like that. I think that our country had there briefly the most spectacularly attractive personalities. Two, pardon the expression, lovely young people, that the country has ever had, and probably ever will have, fantastic attractiveness personally. And it just was a kind of a flower that opened up and then the stem was plucked and away it went. And it was a remarkable thing, very remarkable.

HARTIGAN: Bryce, do you recall where you were when you heard about the assassination?

HARLOW: Oh, everybody does. I have never seen anybody, never met anyone that doesn't remember, like when Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] died. Yes, I was at lunch at the Hay Adams Hotel in Washington. And the maitre d' in the lunch room was a Polish officer in World War II. And he was very fond of me in the White House and so forth and he came over to my table. And he came over to me and said Mr. Harlow, "The President has just been shot." He didn't say killed because he didn't know. And I thought he was kidding. And I said, "Come on now." He said, "I am just telling, it was just over the radio." Well, I remember that day vividly. I think everybody does. I came back to my office and closed my office about 2:30; well, I was going home. It was a vast jolt, psychologically, and a very vast jolt and I remember Roosevelt's death the same thing. I was in the Army at the time, in General Marshall's [George C. Marshall] office and I was in the process of delivering a speech to one John McCormack [John William McCormack] of Massachusetts, who then was the Speaker of the House. And he'd asked me to write a speech on national security crime. And I spent all night writing that speech for him. And I was then a major, lieutenant colonel. And I was in an Army car, and I was driving over to the Washington Hotel to deliver the speech to John McCormack. The Army car had the radio on. The sergeant had on the radio. And over the radio came the word the President had just died in Georgia. And we just pulled up to the Washington Hotel. The place was in a hubbub, huge throng in the lobby, and I knew perfectly well that John McCormack would be instantly on his way to the White House as one of the leaders and that he would not be making the speech, and I wouldn't even be able to find him, so I went back to the Pentagon. And I remember that.

HARTIGAN: Were you in contact with any of the previous Administration officials such as Vice President Nixon after Kennedy's death? Were you aware of their reaction?

HARLOW: That's a very odd thing. I don't recollect that at all. It was just my own reaction.

HARTIGAN: Well, that's been mine, and I have often wondered for my own curiosity, although I thought it was an interesting historical point, how Nixon took this assassination.

HARLOW: I really don't know. Now that is very curious. I've doubtless talked to him about it, I guess, but I haven't any idea. At that time he was in New York practicing law.

HARTIGAN: Practicing law. Historically, Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] had passed away.

HARLOW: He passed away in 1969.

HARTIGAN: After that nobody seems to recollect, although he made statements publicly, didn't he?

HARLOW: Oh, yeah, sure.

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HARTIGAN: But, Nixon seems to be one that was overlooked.

HARLOW: Is that so.

HARTIGAN: Yes, but someday we'll probably get to it. Hopefully, we would like to do an interview on President Nixon. It is interesting to note that they were freshman together in Congress and they were opponents, colleagues in the Senate, they were opponents in a very interesting election in our history, and they both eventually did become President. We will hopefully find a way to arrange an interview with President Nixon. I know he has had a lot of problems but in the interest of....

HARLOW: I was going to ask you that earlier, as a matter of fact, if you had talked to Nixon about that. I guess you are going to have to wait until his book is out.

HARTIGAN: I had sent a letter, I had the director send a letter to him through Mr. Miller [Herbert J. "Jack" Miller, Jr.] I am not sure what the status of it is. We would like to keep it very low key, hopefully in the interest of posterity because he always showed interest in the history of our country. And you know it's not until somebody passes away that you wish you did something. I don't know President Nixon, but I personally think if he was asked by the right person that he would agree to it. A lot of people don't agree with me, but I think he would.

HARLOW: I think he would. And I think it has to wait until he gets this book behind him, because it would interrupt very badly his thought processes. He'd have to almost rethink what he's been doing. But I would bet you that he would do that gladly afterwards. And maybe not gladly, it might be an uncomfortable thing for him. I don't know. He is a far more sensitive person than people credit him to be as you would expect. All public figures are caricatures. And, by way of example, I do recall, I don't know whether this was ever revealed, maybe not, but we had a bipartisan leadership meeting on some world crisis while Nixon was President, and it was very shortly after Chappaquiddick, when Teddy Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] was still a member of the leadership, and he had to come to the meeting. He didn't want to come. He was just back to the Senate. He had just gotten back to the Senate after the tragedy. And Mike Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield] made him come with him. He just insisted on his coming. And of course Mike was terribly concerned about him, and he forced him to come. He sat through the meeting, didn't say a word. And he just sat there, and he looked terrible and it was

terrible, and he was all messed up. And after the meeting adjourned, this was up in one of the famous rooms upstairs in the mansion, where the meeting was held. And so we went downstairs and were dismissed one by one, the members of Congress. And Nixon came down, too. And he and I were standing down there in the hall saying goodbye to the members. Teddy started to go past and the President said, "Just a minute, Senator, I would like to talk to you for a few minutes." And he took him over to the Oval Office and sat him down and talked to him for about thirty minutes about not letting this get him down, patting him on the back and comforting him. Imagine this, Richard Nixon to Teddy Kennedy. And I was just absolutely flabbergasted, of course knew Nixon well enough to know that he was not the ogre that people thought he was. I thought that

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was really quite something.

HARTIGAN: Isn't that interesting.

HARLOW: So I tell the story not to rub off something beautiful on Nixon but to give you the foretaste of the empathy that he doubtless has toward Jack Kennedy. And he would probably have some quite interesting revelations.

HARTIGAN: I think it would be a tragedy, Bryce, if we did not have him taped for the....

HARLOW: I do, too. I would hope he'd do it.

HARTIGAN: I think probably that he would be receptive to it, if he was asked.... I think you are right about the book. I feel that the book may be a plus in doing the tape afterwards because it certainly forces one to recall all the events and refresh their memories.

HARLOW: That's right. Of course, the book will have materials in there of value.

HARTIGAN: There is nothing that impresses a student.... Can you imagine if the kids could be privy to the tapes of Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln], for example. It kicks the imagination when you stop to think of it. I think that most leaders owe it to the various libraries, to be honest with you. They had the privilege of serving their country, and I think that most of them have the feeling and are receptive to it. Well, if you have any thoughts on it, Bryce, we would be [laughter].... Listen, we also, as you probably know, are interested in any letters or memorabilia that were in any way connected with the Kennedy era.

HARLOW: I didn't get any of the treasured presidential letters.

HARTIGAN: We would certainly be interested in any thought you might have on



formalizing a meeting in the future with President Nixon.

HARLOW: I think that he would probably do it, and I would encourage him to do it, and I think that if he would do it, it would be a credit to him. And good for him.

HARTIGAN: I think it certainly would. I really do. Well, we will be in touch and keep you up on the progress we make on it.

HARLOW: Yeah. I believe very strongly in this kind of thing.

HARTIGAN: Thank you very much, Bryce Harlow. This is Bill Hartigan, and that completes our interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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