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Aiken, the Irish Minister for External Affairs, 1957-69, recalls his first meetings with John F. Kennedy, and discusses nuclear proliferation, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Bay of Pigs invasion, among other foreign policy issues.

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FRANK AIKEN

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Oral History Interview

with

FRANK AIKEN

September 15, 1966
Iveagh House
Dublin, Ireland

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Aiken, perhaps we could begin by your telling us when you first met John Kennedy.

AIKEN: It was in 1948. Mr. De Valera [Eamon De Valera] was out of office at that time, and I went with him on a trip to the United States. Coming back we landed at Boston at the airport. It was about 12 o'clock at night, and among the many people who were there to greet him was young John F. Kennedy. He was then a member of Congress.

O'CONNOR: I didn't realize it had been that long ago that you had met him. I didn't know you had contact with him before he became President.

AIKEN: Oh yes, I did. The President, of course, President De Valera, knew him longer than I did because he had met him here with his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.].

O'CONNOR: Yes, I see. I had forgotten that. I didn't realize that. Okay then, what were the next contacts you may have had with him?

AIKEN: Well, I had met him just for a second in the, when President Sean O'Kelly [Sean Thomas O'Kelly] was over in the United States on an official visit. He was then a member of the Senate. During our visit to the Congress, we met Senator Kennedy.

O'CONNOR: I don't suppose you have any particular memories of him, whether he had impressed you or not impressed you…?

AIKEN: Well, when I met him first in 1948, he was a very young man, very full of life, very friendly, and we were both very much taken with him. I got to know him during the few days he was in Ireland. I was around with him most of the time. I was seeing that all the arrangements would go according to plan. They were very intricate arrangements. There were a big group of Americans, and American reporters, but although it was a very

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intricate operation, it was a very pleasant one. He was very easy to get on with; he had a great sense of humor.

O'CONNOR: Did you have any troubles at all in making the arrangements? Or were there any arrangements that you…?

AIKEN: Ah, no. They were well-planned ahead. Before he arrived in Ireland, a couple of his staff were here for a week or so, and we set up everything. But the tour was very interesting. It was interesting to see the reaction of the people. And I was down with him in the old Kennedy home in Westford on that occasion.

O'CONNOR: Yes. I talked with Andrew Mahan down there.

AIKEN: Yes, but he was wonderful in the way he could keep so many balls in the air at the same time. On the occasion he made the great speech here in the [Inaudible], earlier that day we had gone to Harbor Hill. He placed a wreath on the grave of the 1916 men. So he was due then in the [Inaudible] in ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. And coming down the street

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we were in an open car, and he was making notes on his speech, making slight amendments on the speech. And there were great crowds along where we were, and he would make a note, and he would wave his hand, and continued to write and wave again. And I said to a friend of mine who was in the car with us, "It's a pity he couldn't wave his foot." [Laughter]

O'CONNOR: He almost could do that. Well, you know a state visit like that, a formal visit, can be a pretty exhausting affair, and…

AIKEN: Well, it was very exhausting, but he was always ready for more. And going through Cork, I remember, he had this habit of jumping, of pulling up and going over to greet people which I didn't like [Laughter] because we had to be at a lunch with--he was giving a lunch to the President later that day, and it was my job to get him back in time for the lunch, why…. [Laughter] I tried to coax him along to keep time.

O'CONNOR: I guess that didn't please the secret service men either very much, to have him jumping out of the car to shake hands with people.

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AIKEN: Well, Ireland is different you know, I mean everybody was friendly. The crowds just loved him.

O'CONNOR: Okay, as much as I like to hear you talk about the man, I'd also like to hear you mention a few things about really the policy of the Kennedy Administration. Since you are Minister of External Affairs, and this is really the field that you're most concerned with, do you have any particular memories about that?

AIKEN: Yes. Well, as you know, when we heard of his assassination everybody was really heartbroken. But I saw one--I said to a friend of mine, "Well, thank God we had him, for three years." And what I had particularly in mind was Cuba. When the Russians started to put in the missiles into Cuba, it was a very very dangerous period in the world's history. And if somebody had been in office then who hadn't his background, his training, his outlook, and his great skill we might easily have had a world war starting at that moment. However, he had the mental training and the moral stamina required to deal with the situation like that, and to deal

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with it without bringing on a world war. I think a great deal of his moral strength came from the suffering that he underwent during the course of his hospitalization with his injuries. He was sure of himself, and sure of his cause, and just didn't have to overact, and be more violent than another man might have felt himself compelled to be in order to prove himself. He had already proved himself to himself which is the first thing.

O'CONNOR: Well, other than that, another matter that was very important during the Kennedy Administration was the matter of disarmament and arms control,

things of this sort. This was a question that Ireland had been very interested in prior to the Kennedy Administration.

AIKEN: Well, we introduced the first resolution on stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, and it took us nearly four years to get a final resolution through. I was always afraid that if the weapons spread to more countries, that they'd fall into

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some hands that weren't restrained by what they had to lose. They would have more to gain than to lose--a revolutionary or some small country with, in a particularly violent frame of mind. And we introduced this resolution in 1959, I think, but we had no support from them. The great countries were against it at that time.

O'CONNOR: You had even no support from the United States really, at that time, did you?

AIKEN: No, we hadn't. Both the United States and Russia denounced it the moment the resolution appeared--the draft of the resolution appeared. And it was opposed also by the small countries. One of them which is a dictatorship denounced it because, as its delegate claimed, every nation had the right to its bomb. [Laughter] No one in his country had a right to a vote, but every nation had a right to the bomb according to his notion of democracy. But, I said I was glad that we had Kennedy for the three

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years because I felt that if we could stop the spread of the nuclear weapons to smaller countries and could keep at confined to the great countries that had a lot to lose, there would be a chance that they wouldn't go through with a nuclear threat. And when the Russians started to cross the sea with the nuclear weapons for Cuba, we were approached by--I was in New York at that time--I was approached by Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] just before Kennedy made the announcement of the blockade of Cuba, and I was delighted that he was taking it in that way, that he issued the order to the Navy to keep the bombs out of Cuba.

O'CONNOR: What specifically did Adlai Stevenson approach you about? What did he have….

AIKEN: Well, we were on the Security Council. Ireland was a member of the Security Council. Ireland was a member of the Security Council in that year, and the…. Now what was the sequence? There was a rumor. No, I don't think there was a rumor, but Kennedy was going to speak. He

had heard... I mean they'd got the information, they'd got the photographs of the Missile sites in Cuba, and he was going to make a speech to the Nation saying that they were going to institute this blockade. And Adlai Stevenson told us, told myself and the Irish permanent representative that this speech was going to be made, and I was very glad to hear that that was how he was going to deal with the matter rather than an attack upon Cuba direct. And I was happy that the showdown was going to come in the middle of the Atlantic between these two great powers rather than something happening say on the German border, and the whole thing going on fire before any possibility of stopping it, before it would spread all over. Well, he made that speech as you know, the blockade went in, and the next day the American mission, Governor Stevenson was then in charge, put in a resolution asking the Russians to withdraw this threat of sighting missiles

in Cuba, and the Russians put in another resolution in which they demanded that the Americans should withdraw their illegal blockade. So these two resolutions were before the Security Counsel, it was called together, and we put our name to speak on the matter. And it was the second day I was called upon to speak, perhaps it was the third day, and as I was due to speak, the two fleets were getting very close together in the middle of the Atlantic. But I was happy that as I said, it was in the Atlantic.

O'CONNOR: Rather than Europe or in Cuba?

AIKEN: Yes, so our suggestion was that as the two resolutions after making their demands wound up by suggesting negotiations, that we should take the last part of the two resolutions first, which called for negotiations, and start negotiations.

O'CONNOR: You know, everyone remembers favorably the Cuban Missile Crisis. But there was another episode that dealt with Cuba that need not bring such favorable

memories and that of course, was the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Well, I wonder what your feeling was of John Kennedy or of the American State Department, the foreign policy of the United States at that time. It must not have been so favorable, or at least I wouldn't think it would be so favorable.

AIKEN: No, it wasn't. I think I told you, speaking to you before, that when Kennedy was declared elected, the President-elect in November of 1960. I went to see Adlai Stevenson when he was appointed. I asked for an appointment, and I went to see him in his office, and I talked to him about the reports that

had appeared in the American papers that a number of these Cuban exiles were being trained in the United States and in Guatemala with the intention of invading Cuba. And I appealed to him not to, that when Kennedy got in, he should disperse these people, not allow them to live together in their thousands in any particular town but to scatter them all over the United States.

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They had a right and a duty to give them political asylum, but it was their duty to prevent them from organizing to invade with American territory as a base. I saw Adlai Stevenson on that. I also saw the gentleman who afterwards became Assistant Secretary of State, and then ambassador to India.

O'CONNOR: Was it Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith]?

AIKEN: No, but Galbraith…

O'CONNOR: Chester Bowles [Chester B. Bowles]?

AIKEN: Chester Bowles. I saw him too in New York at that time, and I repeated the appeal to him, urging that when Kennedy came in, he should disperse these people, put an end to this; that this was going to have a very bad effect on the whole of Latin America; and that it wasn't right for America to do it. I understood, of course, how Americans regard these revolutions organized and supplied from outside. It has been the American pattern of changing governments all over. It was this last century this happened. Castro himself had organized his group in the United States

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when he took over. But the time had come when that in my opinion, should stop, for the sake of good relation between American States and for the good name of the United States. So I…

O'CONNOR: Let me just stop this….

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

O'CONNOR: You had just mentioned that you were really appealing to both Adlai Stevenson and Chester Bowles.

AIKEN: Yes. Well the next thing they heard, of course, was that they had picked.

O'CONNOR: By the way what sort of reaction did you get from those two men?

AIKEN: Well, they listened to me, I thought, with the understanding of our point of view.

O'CONNOR: Could you tell whether they were really in sympathy with your point of view, or not?

AIKEN: I thought they were, yes.

O'CONNOR: Because it's an interesting question when the actual decision regarding the invasion of the Bay of Pigs was concerned. It's an interesting question to find out if anyone really spoke against

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it, within the United States Government. For example, if Adlai Stevenson spoke against it, or if Chester Bowles or anyone else spoke against it.

AIKEN: Well, I really don't know that. I'm afraid I haven't had time to read all these books that came out. There may be some inkling of it then. But they appeared to grasp my point at any rate. However, I could understand that it was difficult for Kennedy coming in, to take this action at once. The whole thing, it just grew without anybody applying his mind to the problem to get a solution, to try and bring the whole thing to an end. But when the Bay of Pigs occurred, we were all appalled. But I was very glad that Kennedy didn't yield to the appeals that were made to him by military staff and others to have an American aerial strike. That would have been utterly disastrous. And although I thought he should have prevented the thing from occurring. I was very glad that he didn't, having

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made one mistake of letting it go, that he didn't make the second graver error of involving American forces in the thing.

O'CONNOR: You mentioned that you had spoken to Adlai Stevenson and Chester Bowles about this and you also mentioned that, having spoken to Adlai Stevenson later on. Did you ever speak to him later on about the very fact of the Bay of Pigs or anything of that sort?

AIKEN: Ah no. I didn't. I did speak to Bowles. I said, "Well, you've made this mistake, and well, the just man falls ten times a day, but a just nation falls

a hundred times a day." I said, "You have to just forget about this, turn your minds to…" I wrote him that actually, immediately after the Bay of Pigs, to forget about it, to behave better afterwards. [Laughter]

O'CONNOR: Well, another question that interests me. We mentioned the matter of disarmament, and Ireland's role in disarmament, but did you find much change

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in the United States or in your ability, or your representative's ability to approach the United States on the question of disarmament?

AIKEN: Yes, very much. There was a great difference. We were able to approach the United States delegation very much more freely and talk to them straight-forwardly, and realize that we wouldn't be misunderstood that there was any enmity in our point of view, that if we were talking strongly against something that they were doing, we were doing it not because we regard them as enemies but because we thought we were friends that we should tell how the matter appeared to us. I think a lot of these countries suffer greatly from people not talking their minds to them. We've always tried to do that.

O'CONNOR: Were there any other matters in which your point of view or the Irish point of view, let's say, conflicted to any extent with the American point of view. I'm thinking particularly now of matters in the UN?

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AIKEN: Ah no, the big one of course, there were two big ones; one was the question of the representation of China. I've always believed that it was, the world couldn't settle down unless Peking which was in control of the whole of China was represented. It was going to be difficult and not everything would be rosy in the garden when she got into the United Nations. It wasn't going to settle the thing, but at least she was there. She would be spoken to, and when the question of Tibet came up, we introduced a resolution damning them for that action. We were very sorry that they weren't there, and would have had to answer and justify themselves to the world for their aggression in Tibet. But I never believed that the price of admitting Peking to the United Nations should be to sell Formosa down the river. I think that the Formosan people, thirteen million of them there, their economy is very well-developed. I think facts

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largely to the good work that American aid did in Formosa. I have always believed that the Formosa should have her independence recognized and that she should be an ordinary member of the United Nations, and that the first thing to do was to negotiate. Carry out

all the negotiation that were necessary to get her, to get Formosa to apply for membership in her own right, and to get the Security Counsel and everybody to agree that she should be admitted. If that had happened, if it does happen, the China seat will be left vacant, and the Peking can take it whenever they want it. Well, that was the American John Foster Dulles and Cabot Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] was then the UN representative, he was very bitter about our voting to have the question discussed. This was in 1957, when I went in there first. It had been the practice up to then that the Americans opposed the discussion of the matter. We believed that it's a problem and the greater it is, the more ripe it is for

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discussion. And that this was a problem that should be open to free and open debate as long as anybody wanted to discuss it. I had two or three conferences because this thing went on for a couple of years. I had a couple of conferences with John Foster Dulles on that, in which he tried to change our vote on the matter, but we held to our point of view. Well that was one.

O'CONNOR: Well, I'd like to ask you something about that thought. That particular question of admission of red China, that is a point in which American policy did not change during the Kennedy Administration, at least not on the surface. I wonder if you were aware of any difference in attitude, or again this is a question perhaps of being, was it easier to approach the United States again about this particular question?

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AIKEN: Ah yes. It was much easier to discuss it…

O'CONNOR: Did you find more sympathy perhaps with your point of view when Kennedy was administrating or not? Do you think, for instance, you talked to John Foster Dulles about this, perhaps you talked to Dean Rusk [David Dean Rusk] or to Adlai Stevenson or to somebody else about this. I wonder if you found any more sympathy on their part than you had on John Foster Dulles' part?

AIKEN: Well, I think even with John Foster Dulles, it was a question of the political, the politics of it rather than the justice of it. [Inaudible] from the United Nation's point of view. I think the Kennedy Administration, there were more people in that administration who were in favor of making the arrangement that China should come in, that Formosa should also come in in its own right. There were a great number. There was a better climate of opinion around the White House and the State Department for that policy than there was under Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower].

O'CONNOR: Did you talk to anyone specifically though that you can remember who

you felt was quite sympathetic with that point of view?

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AIKEN: I don't remember. I couldn't say that anyone of them committed themselves in favor of it. But they listened to it, they had to listen to it. But there may have been an occasion when I had a formal conference with Rusk. I put it to him very strongly that this should be done. One of the things that I was disappointed that with the Kennedy Administration, with the previous one too, that the nuclear weapons, that more was not done to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. And this policy that was, evolved in Washington to, of the Multilateral Nuclear Force, I always thought that that didn't make sense; from a military point of view, and certainly from the point of view of European politics. It was just crazy. I always emphasized that any threat of giving the Germans the bomb, or access to the use of the bomb was confirming the hold that Russia had over Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Bulgaria, and all these countries because the one thing they

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feared most of all was the Germans getting the bomb. And this policy which seemed to lead to the Germans getting possession of the bomb was throwing all these countries more firmly into the Russian embrace. Their safety it would appear to them against another German invasion was the Russian army and the Russian nuclear weapons.

O'CONNOR: Well that was really a policy that got its greatest impetus during the Kennedy Administration.

AIKEN: It did, it did.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we've talked now about some of the disagreements, perhaps we should turn to, if there were any, some points of agreement. I was under the impression that there was at one time or another some rather close cooperation between the United States and Ireland in the United Nations particularly. Do you recall any of that sort of thing?

AIKEN: Yes. The cooperation of Cuba was whole-hearted and I think it was useful. Of course, from the point of view of world peace and of American

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interest too. We were one of the neutral countries on the Security Counsel, and the other neutral states on the Security Counsel at that time wanted us to join with them in a resolution demanding that the blockade should be withdrawn from Cuba. We refused to do that, and we argued very strongly that it was preferable to have a blockade than to allow the Russians to deliver the nuclear weapons into Cuba and perhaps bring on

a nuclear war in its train. And I think that the speech that I made on that occasion did stop the neutral nations pressing forward tabling a motion of this kind. I'll give you a copy of the speech I made.

O'CONNOR: I was under the impression also though that there was at least one instance when Ireland put forth a resolution in the Security Counsel or in perhaps the General Assembly and stood by the United States, where it was really something that Ireland was doing as a sort of favor to the United States?

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AIKEN: No, that wasn't the way it evolved. I mean we did discuss questions of what was the right thing to do. We had their approval ahead of time and had their cooperation in trying to get the thing through. One of the resolutions, again when we were on the Security Counsel, was the question of the India and Pakistan conflict over Kashmir. The Indians, I think, put on a motion to discuss the matter before the Security Counsel they couldn't just simply say, "No, we have no interest in the matter," that a resolution of some sort should be passed, and we negotiated around with the members of the Security Counsel with whom we were particularly close. One of them was America and we drafted the resolution and put it in calling on both India and Pakistan to sit down around the

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table and try and get a peace settlement negotiated, in conformity with previous resolutions that had been put on the matter.

O'CONNOR: That must not have pleased the Indians a great deal that you were doing that?

AIKEN: It didn't. They told us at that time that they regarded it as an unfriendly act. Khrishna Menon [Vengalil Krishnan Krishna Menon] said it at the Security Counsel in public that they regarded it as an unfriendly act. And as you know the United Nations in any session there are two or three hundred items, and within those two or three hundred items, there are dozens of clauses and amendments to clauses, and all that sort of thing. We discuss any difficulties freely with our friends, and we very often discuss them with the United States. We don't always see eye to eye on a particular amendment, or a particular resolution, but by and large we have.

O'CONNOR: Okay, let's get back very briefly on to the visit of John Kennedy to Ireland. Could you tell

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us how the visit came about, how it began, anything else about it?

AIKEN: Well, when he came in, I saw Dean Rusk. I said to him that while we didn't want to issue a formal invitation, we wanted him to convey to the President that anytime he felt like he had the time, the opportunity to come to Ireland that he would get a formal invitation to come. I had repeated that several occasions before he finally indicated that he was ready to get a formal invitation. I think that's the genesis of the thing.

O'CONNOR: You can't think of any more instances, or stories that relate to his particular visit here?

AIKEN: Ah well, there are very many, they've all risen up before this…

O'CONNOR: Well, okay just one last thing really then: much has been made particularly because of the visit, of John F. Kennedy's interest in Ireland. And I'd like to know whether you think that's really a myth

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or not? Was there any indication while he was President that he had any specific interest, strong interest, or strong feeling for Ireland because of his Irish background perhaps? I'm thinking, for instance, one way that a man might show, a President might show, his great love for Ireland would simply be by appointing a good ambassador as ambassador to Ireland. I've heard from various people criticism of the ambassador that John F. Kennedy did appoint to Ireland. I wondered if you care to comment on that? That was, of course, Ambassador McCloskey [Matthew H. McCloskey, Jr.] who was the first ambassador.

AIKEN: I suppose Ambassador McCloskey had been particularly close to the Democratic organization in raising funds. He was very active. And the American governments I think have a very bad habit of not appointing regular civil servants or members of the diplomatic corps. I don't think it's a good policy. They appoint too many people as a political reward. I don't think in this day

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and age Americans can afford to appoint diplomats on that basis. That's not to say now that McCloskey was a bad ambassador or anything of that kind. He was quite good. But I don't think it's the right way, I don't think it's the right basis upon which an American President should decide. And every country is important in the present age and I think the United States should be represented in all countries by professional diplomats, people who have the training, the required training, and who are thinking altogether of their career and not thinking of their bank or their business, when they're given the responsibility of representing the United States abroad.

O'CONNOR: Okay. This would reflect on the question that I asked you a little bit earlier

whether or not you felt that the myth, or maybe it's not a myth, of John F. Kennedy's interest in Ireland; is that true? Do you feel it is true, or do you feel it isn't?

AIKEN: Well, I think he had an interest in Ireland and would like to do anything he could for it, but

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of course, he was an American first. I would like to have seen him be a bit more active in getting a solution for partition. We urged him to do it. He perhaps did it quietly but he didn't disclose that fact.

O'CONNOR: Did you specifically talk to him about that?

AIKEN: Oh yes.

O'CONNOR: What sort of reaction did you get? Was he very much in favor of it, or was he at all concerned with it?

AIKEN: Well of course he had been linked with a resolution calling for the British to bring partition to an end when he was in the Senate and when he was in the Congress. But I appreciate also that an American President has a long list of problems and over the years, the relations between Great Britain and the United States have been very close, and they felt a great need to keep together so, in those circumstances great powers don't take any public action that might upset that

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relationship.

O'CONNOR: So that you could say in effect that despite whatever concern he might have had for Ireland his concern was not so great that he would undertake a great risk to assist Ireland under any condition.

AIKEN: Well now, what he did privately was one thing, but what he could say publicly was another. He didn't make any public declarations about the matter as President. He had done it before he became President for a long number of years. I hope however, I have no reason to believe that he didn't say something in private to the British that it was time that this anachronism should be cleared up.

O'CONNOR: Okay, unless you can think of any more instances or stories that we've missed, I suppose we could shut this up. There may be many that relate to

the visit here, many very interesting stories that reflect on the man's personality, the man's character. It's probably hard to recall.

AIKEN: Well, yes it is. Yes.

O'CONNOR: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Frank Aiken Oral History Transcript
Name List

Valera	De Valera, Eamon
Father	Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr.
O'Kelly	O'Kelly, Sean Thomas
Mahan	Mahan, Andrew
Stevenson	Stevenson, Adlai E.
Galbraith	Galbraith, John Kenneth
Bowles	Bowles, Chester B.
Castro	Castro, Fidel
Dulles	Dulles, John Foster
Lodge	Lodge, Henry Cabot
Rusk	Rusk, David Dean
Eisenhower	Eisenhower, Dwight D.
McCloskey	McCloskey, Matthew H., Jr.
Menon	Krishna Menon, Vengalil Krishnan