

**George D. Aiken Oral History Interview – JFK #1, 4/25/1964**  
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**Creator:** George D. Aiken

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**Biographical Note**

Aiken, a long-serving Republican senator of Vermont, discusses his dealings with John F. Kennedy in the Senate and during the Kennedy administration on issues such as the Battle Act amendment, the Test Ban Treaty, the Passamaquoddy Project, wheat sales to Russia and Aiken's trip to Moscow, among other issues.

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Signed:

  
George D. Aiken

Date:

Feb 26 - 1971

# SENATOR GEORGE D. AIKEN

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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE D. AIKEN

April 25, 1964

By Pat Holt

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HOLT: Senator, do you remember the first time you met John Kennedy?

AIKEN: No, Pat, I don't remember the first time that I met him. I knew him casually before he came to the Senate, but I didn't know, him very well until after he became a member of the Senate.

HOLT: Do you remember your first impression of him when you became aware of his being in the Senate?

AIKEN: Well, if you want the truth, I'll have to say that I really didn't get too much of an impression of him when he first came to the Senate. He was not too much of a mixer, as I recall. Did not force his attentions upon any of us. And I won't say that my impressions of his first days in the Senate, or the first weeks or months, were very distinct.

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HOLT: When did you first suspect that he was serious as a presidential candidate?

AIKEN: Well, it was.... He moved into an office next to mine, as I recall it, in the first of January in '57. It was sometime along in '58 I began to notice the cameras, and coils of wire, outside the office, and then it became apparent that he was

seriously interested in seeking higher public office. The television people were there, well, I won't say daily, but very, very frequently.

HOLT: Did the fact that he had an office next to yours, or across the hall from yours, make any difference in your relationship? Were you any closer to him after he moved his office..?

AIKEN: Well, I think it helped bring us a little closer together, although we had other matters in common,

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too. Interests in international affairs; the fact that we were both from New England; the fact that we had people who didn't think too highly of us, and that was more or less applied to both of us. And other things did serve to bring us closer together as time went on.

HOLT: What people didn't think too highly of you?

AIKEN: I think we both offended the electric utilities at different times. And, of course, there were others, too. You know, President Kennedy came from what might be called a rather conservative town. And a good many of the people in his town, Boston, had very conservative views. I used to say that they regarded the northern New England states as colonies, rather than states. And he seemed to be an exception to the rule. That

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he felt that the whole country was important including Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine.

HOLT: I suppose one demonstration of this was the Saint Lawrence Seaway.

AIKEN: Well, that was a very outstanding demonstration. In fact, one of the local newspapers of Boston intimated in an editorial at one time that they were not surprised at my taking that line, but they certainly were surprised at Senator Kennedy supporting the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project. And some of the most vigorous opposition to the development of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project came from the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, and from the utility companies that had their headquarters in the city of Boston. When President Kennedy voted for the construction of the Seaway, and the Power Project, that, I think,

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was the first time I realized that he had a great deal of courage, because he was voting against the desires of influential people in his own community and his own state.

HOLT: Did you ever discuss this with him?

AIKEN: I can't recall, but I think it was... I think he was one of the Senators whose support we had hoped for. And there must have been some reason for that hope.

HOLT: In 1958, he sponsored an amendment to the Battle Act which was added to the Foreign Aid Bill by the Foreign Relations Committee, and was defeated in the Senate by one vote. And the following year, you and he co-sponsored a separate bill which had the same provisions, which passed the Senate as a separate bill but died in the House. Do you remember any conversations you had with

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him about this bill--this Battle Act Amendment?

AIKEN: Yes, I recall that...his coming into the office and saying that he had been asked to introduce the bill, and that the State Department and President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] wanted it to be bipartisan and asked if I would be co-sponsor. And he and I were the sponsors, the introducers, of that amendment to the Battle Act.

HOLT: Was there anything more to it than that?

AIKEN: Oh, yes. Yes. The idea at that time was that it would probably be good for the West if we did have closer relationships with Poland and Yugoslavia. Poland had not then, and has not to this day, put land under government control as some of the other communist countries have. They

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haven't nationalized the land. Yugoslavia has only nationalized what land, I believe, that the government has been able to purchase. Yugoslavia was showing, and had shown for some years, every intention of not being a satellite of the Russian government. And President Eisenhower and Senator Kennedy, and a good many of us, felt that closer relationship with these two countries would perhaps create more of a split among the communist group of countries and be just good business for us. And so, I supported that each time that it was up before the Congress, and I think the results have been all that we anticipated.

HOLT: Well, unless there's something else about his Senate years that you think of, let's move on now to the period when he was President. And I

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have this list of times that you saw him when he was President. That is, the times you saw him in the White House. The first one on there is a Congressional Coffee Hour on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May in 1961. Do you remember anything about that?

AIKEN: Actually, I don't remember about that one. Apparently there were several members from the Senate that met with the President at the White House that evening, but I'll have to admit that I don't recall the purpose of the meeting.

HOLT: Did you have any contact with him, as President, in connection with the Bay of Pigs invasion, or Cuba in general?

AIKEN: Not until after the invasion at the Bay of Pigs had ended disastrously. It was either the following day, or the second day after the Bay of Pigs

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fiasco, I received a call from the White House asking me to come down. The President was in a somber mood. I sometimes think that was the time when he realized the immensity of the Presidential office. He didn't have anything special on his mind, except apparently just wanted to talk. And....

HOLT: Were you alone with him at this time?

AIKEN: I was alone at that time.

HOLT: And what did he say?

AIKEN: Well, as I say, he talked over the situation and was.... But apparently felt the need of discussing it with someone. I don't recall that he arrived at any momentous decisions because of that interview, but the time comes when everybody feels they have to talk with somebody, and that, I suppose, was why he asked me to come down and talk.

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HOLT: Were there any other occasions like this when he asked you to come down and talk?

AIKEN: I don't recall any when we talked separately, except when there might be several there and we'd get off in a corner and discuss particular matters. That happens, of course, at a good many Presidential conferences when perhaps a dozen would be invited and the President may have something particular to talk with one of them about. I have no particular times in mind, but I know there were some such times.

HOLT: If you don't have any particular times in mind, do you have any particular subjects in mind that he discussed on occasions like this?

AIKEN: Well, in the latter.... Yes, he would talk with me about foreign matters. About other matters, too.

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But I won't say that I was a particular confidante at these times. Not at least, not until the last year of his administration.

HOLT: Well, in the last year, is there anything specific that you remember about these occasions?

AIKEN: Yes, as I recall it, I talked with him about a good many things during the last year. Of course international matters, the signing of the Test Ban Treaty, the sale of--proposal to sell--wheat to Russia and other communist countries, and, well, we met there once in a while when I was a member of the Status of Women Commission, and off-hand I don't remember all of the occasions, but it was a matter of record.

HOLT: Well, let's talk about this Test Ban Treaty a little bit. What was your part in that?

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AIKEN: Well. I just heard by way of the grapevine that the President wanted to send a Congressional Delegation--a delegation from the Senate--to Moscow to attend the final meeting, and at which it was expected that the Test Ban Treaty would be signed by the representatives of Russia, the United States, and Great Britain. As I say, at first that was grapevine information. And, finally, it was--I don't recall what day it was--around the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, perhaps the 26<sup>th</sup>, I received a call from the White House asking if I would be willing to go to Moscow with a delegation, and intimating that--very strongly--that no effort would be made to send a delegation unless I went. The President didn't want a delegation unless it was bipartisan.

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HOLT: You say you received a call from the White House. Was this from the President, or from someone else?

AIKEN: No, it was immediately following on of the leadership meetings, and Senator Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield] had evidently been delegated to call me. And I well recall that conversation! Senator Mansfield started out by saying,

“Don’t say ‘no’” until he could tell his story. And then he finally convinced me that it was important that I should go, and although I would have given most anything not to have gone, I did agree to go. And we did have a bipartisan committee of Senators go over there. We sat in on the last meetings, some very important meetings, which led up to the signing of the Test Ban Treat itself.

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HOLT: Did you ever discuss this with the President?

AIKEN: I believe I did at one time before the day which I consented to go. I’m not too clear on that, but I did know what he was thinking.

HOLT: What was he thinking?

AIKEN: Well, he was thinking that he wanted me to go to Moscow. And I was trying to think of some way not to go to Moscow. But finally, I gave in.

HOLT: Why did you not want to go to Moscow?

AIKEN: Because, Pat, when I have a few days from my work in Washington, I like to go home.

HOLT: You’d rather go to Vermont?

AIKEN: I’d rather go to Vermont. After all, it took about the same time to get to Moscow that it takes me to drive to Vermont.

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HOLT: I guess that’s a good reason. You mentioned, also, the question of wheat sales to Russia. What were your contacts with the President about that?

AIKEN: Well, of course, when we were in Moscow at the signing of the Test Ban Treaty, we sensed that Russia was having some difficulties--economic difficulties. In fact, I got the impression through a conversation with one of the higher Russian officials. We didn’t know, at that time, whether it was crop failure, although Secretary Freeman had rather guessed that it might be crop failure because he had been over there shortly before and they had not let him go in through the usual good agricultural areas. And so, we got the idea that they were having troubles, and

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soon after we got back, it developed that these troubles were primarily a shortage in their wheat crop and other crops, due to the drought. It was late in September, I would say, when

the President was making what was billed as a non-political trip through the West. And he called me one night from Wyoming where he was staying (I think the Glacier National Park-- the day before he went up to Montana), to find out what I thought about whether we should sell wheat to Russia and the other Eastern European countries or not. I told him that inasmuch as our allies of the Western World were buying our wheat and selling it to Russia, I thought it was worth trying to sell that wheat direct. I did advise him not to seek

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legislation for that purpose, however, because I doubted if the House would approve any such legislation. Or, if they did, it would come so late as to not do any good. He said he didn't think that they had to have legislation; that the attorneys of the Departments were working on it. And it developed they did not need the legislation. And so, arrangements were made to sell the wheat to Russia. The country was sounded out. Some of us were invited down to the White House to discuss that more in detail a little later on. I think this came in October, as I recall it. And the matter was gone into further at that time. There was some objection on the part of some of the members of Congress to selling wheat to Russia. But so far as I could see, we were foolish to go on selling

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the wheat to Russia, other communist countries, through a third party.

HOLT: There was an off-the-record meeting of legislative leaders in regard to the wheat situation on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October.

AIKEN: Yes, that's the time, I'm sure.

HOLT: Do you remember anything specific about that meeting? You, and Senators Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] and Mansfield were there.

AIKEN: As I recall it, there were about eight or nine, possibly ten, members of the Congress were there. It was at that time that I again reiterated my belief that it would be well to sell wheat directly to Russia. It was pointed out that it would be sold on normal terms, although it later developed that it was sold on cash terms, what was sold to Russia. And I well recall saying to the President, as we were getting up to leave,

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that I thought it was a good idea to see what we could do towards effecting a trade of this kind, and then I added, "I won't guarantee, however, that it won't be messed up in the administration of it." And that almost happened.

HOLT: What did the President say about this, if anything?

AIKEN: Well, of course, the President laughed. I said "I don't guarantee that you won't mess it up. But it's worth a try."

HOLT: You also mentioned a moment ago the Status of Women Commission. What were your contacts with the President about that?

AIKEN: My contacts on that, at first, were indirect. Mrs. Peterson, Assistant Secretary of Labor--she was in charge of the Women's Division at

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the Department of Labor at that time--called me when I was at my home in Vermont (on the rare occasions I could get to Vermont), and stated they wanted to get two members of the House and two of the Senate on that Commission. They had two women--two women members from the House on the Commission. They had Senator Neuberger of Oregon from the State, and asked me if I would be the other member. Well, I felt a little funny about being the only male Congressional member on that Commission, but I told Mrs. Peterson that if I would help out--could help out--any, that I would be glad to go on as a member. I'm glad that I did because, while I couldn't attend every meeting or look after the detail work as some of the other members could, I like to think that I did a little good through

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my membership. And I think that the results of this Commission have been very helpful. At least, more qualified women are being employed in government than was the case a few years ago.

HOLT: Let's go back a moment to the Test Ban Treaty and disarmament and atomic energy matters generally. Prior to the time that you were approached about going to Moscow, which was the time when the Test Ban Treaty was almost accomplished, prior to that time, during the long series of disarmament negotiations that took place, did you have any contact with the President about this subject generally?

AIKEN: I don't recall. I do recall the submission of a tentative agreement to the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate. I think that was

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exercising sound judgment. But I believe that that tentative agreement was submitted to us through the State Department by Secretary of State Dean Rusk [David Dean Rusk]. I'm not quite sure about that, but I think that that procedure really resulted in effecting the Test Ban Treaty, because the Executive Branch of government had submitted it to us approximately two weeks before it was signed in Moscow.

HOLT: As I recall, Secretary Rusk came up and met with the Committee.

AIKEN: That is my recollection, and certainly, submitting it to our Committee almost two weeks in advance of culminating the agreement, was sound strategy on the part of the Executive Branch.

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HOLT: There are several indications on this list of the President's appointments that he met with you and other members of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy from time to time, specifically, for example, there is--on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January, 1963, in the morning, he met with the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. This was at a time when Premier Fanfani [Amintore Fanfani] of Italy was here, and on that same day, the President publicly proposed that the Jupiter missiles in Italy be replaced by Polaris submarines in the Mediterranean. Was that the subject of this meeting, or was there another subject, or do you remember?

AIKEN: I would expect that what we call the proliferation of the Polaris missiles was the subject of that meeting. I am, besides being a member of

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the Foreign Relations Committee, I am also a member of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, as is Senator Hickenlooper [Bourke B. Hickenlooper]. And the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy has vigorously opposed proliferating atomic weapons, or atomic secrets, even among those countries which are supposed to be friendly to us. I would say at this time that our view was not the view of the President, who felt that we should be in closer collaboration with our NATO allies, even to the extent of having integrated crews on the submarines, and as I say, sharing more of our atomic weapons with them. That was where the Executive and Legislative Branches of government did disagree. I think they still do disagree.

HOLT: Do you remember any specifics of these meetings with the President when this question of the

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proliferation of atomic weapons was discussed?

AIKEN: No, I don't recall that the President took any emphatic part in that discussion. This idea to integrate the crews of the submarines and pass around the atomic weapons was an idea that came from the Defense Department, as I recall it, and that the President, as I further recall, was not insistent at the time that we meet with him. I'm pretty sure that this was the subject of our meeting at that time.

HOLT: This really goes into the question of the multilateral nuclear force, doesn't it?

AIKEN: That's right. That was about--well, not the beginning, but almost the beginning, of the proposal to have a multilateral nuclear force, and as I say, our Atomic Energy Committee had different

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thoughts from the Defense Department. We felt differently about it because of past experiences; we don't know today who our allies ten years from now may be.

HOLT: And your impression of this is that President Kennedy himself had no strong views one way or another?

AIKEN: I think he was actually seeking advice at that time on this matter.

HOLT: Is there anything else about the general field of atomic energy that you recall in your associations with him?

AIKEN: No. I would say that, in general, the research work and development of atomic energy had his full support. And of course, it did.... The Committee.... The only difference that I recall, the only serious difference I recall between the

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Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and the Executive Branch related to the integration of weapons, integration of the crews and staffs, and the proliferating of weapons.

HOLT: Well, let's go now to the question of the UN bond issue which came up in 1962 and which you played an active part in. What can you tell us about your relations with the President during...?

AIKEN: Well, that was very interesting, Pat. You know, it was just before Christmas, as I recall, that the United Nations adjourned for the season, and....

HOLT: This would have been in 1961.

AIKEN: 1961 is correct. And just before adjournment, they had approved a policy of deficit financing. A lot of the members of the UN were way behind their dues, or well behind. In fact, I think

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over eighty of them. And there were ninety-nine, as I recall, that in 1960 (four-fifths of them) were behind in their dues. And they seemed to get the idea that they'd better go onto deficit financing. So they asked for approval of the sale of two hundred million dollars worth of

bonds. And I'm afraid they expected the United States to buy a good share of those bonds. I took rather strong exception to that. I felt that if the United Nations went onto deficit financing, that they would forget even more about paying the assessments which they were supposed to pay to the United Nations and as time went on, they'd be doing business on borrowed money, selling more bonds. In fact, I was pretty sure at the time that they contemplated extending the sale of bonds up to, possibly, two billion dollars

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rather than two hundred million. It didn't make sense to me. I feel that every member of the United Nations has a certain responsibility and when they feel that they can't pay fifteen or twenty thousand dollars a year in assessments, then I felt that the United Nations was on the way to becoming a weak organization. And so I took very vigorous exception to the financing the United Nations through borrowed money to that extent.

Apparently the President had not been kept informed of this plan--fully informed--and one morning there came out in the newspapers an article by one of our best known columnists which contained, as I felt, a great many inaccuracies in regard to the financing

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of the United Nations and in regard to the position which I was taking. It appears that this columnist had gotten information from one of the officials of the State Department. I believe that was the first time that the President realized that he was being bypassed in this planning for deficit financing of the UN. And, as a matter of fact, the Congress had also been bypassed, and I'm not sure that the Secretary of State himself was fully aware of what was going on. When the President found out what had happened, he directed two of his assistants, Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], to come up to the Hill. We were to meet in Senator Mansfield's office; to sit down with me and write the pending legislation to my satisfaction. I understand, too that President Kennedy also called leading officials

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of the State Department together and, to use old-fashioned language, read them the riot act and told them he never wanted to hear of anything like that again. He knew that they had been bypassing me, had not been furnishing information to which I was entitled, and he really told them that he didn't want to hear of anything more like that. We finally got legislation through which, while it provided for the sale of some bonds and incurring of some indebtedness, rather, through the sale of some bonds, the legislation was not unsatisfactory to me. And that was one instance of where the President was clearly being bypassed by his representatives at the UN, and when he found out he didn't like it and the situation was corrected.

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HOLT: Well, let's move now to the Peace Corps. Did you have any discussions or contracts with him in regard to the development of the Peace Corps?

AIKEN: Not directly. I was advised about the Peace Corps. I learned about the Peace Corps more from the fact that an organization in my home town in Vermont--the Experiment in International Living--was instrumental in helping the administration set up the Peace Corps. And Mr. Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.], who became the Director of the Peace Corps, and has been for some years now, was--had been, in the past, connected with this organization in my home town. Therefore, I was interested in it. I had my fingers crossed, however, on the Peace Corps because it seemed to me that it offered an exceptional opportunity to get into difficulties. However, I'm very happy to say that three years,

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four years, after the establishment of the Peace Corps, I have had no complaint whatsoever on its operation. In fact, I get letters saying that, well, we should turn more of our State Department business over to the Peace Corps. I don't think they really mean that, but it's really been a venture that turned out successfully when it had every chance in the world to fail. And the President's faith in this venture, I think is one of the outstanding things to the credit of his Administration.

HOLT: I recall once or twice during meetings with the Foreign Relations Committee, you cautioned Mr. Shriver, and possibly other representatives of the Administration, against the use of the term "Peace Corps" in connection with the Domestic Peace Corps, as it was called at one time.

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Did you ever talk to the President about this?

AIKEN: I don't recall whether I did or not. I do recall advising Mr. Shriver not to get mixed up with the Domestic Peace Corps, which seemed to me to have more of a political flavor than the international Peace Corps. And I'd say he's done a good job. So far he hasn't become involved, and this is April 25<sup>th</sup>, isn't it?

HOLT: Yes. Well, two other things. At any time during the almost three years that Kennedy was President, did you discuss the foreign aid program, or foreign aid matters, with him?

AIKEN: Oh, I think so. I couldn't name the dates when that was done, but I think that on most of the visits which I made to the White House while he was President, that there would be some discussion relative to foreign aid.

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HOLT: Do you recall--forgetting about the dates--and the specific instances...? Do you recall the general nature of these discussions?

AIKEN: Well, I expect that they were about the things that we had worked together on. The relations with our NATO allies; the foreign aid program, and those phases of international affairs which might have been current at the time.

HOLT: You're also a member of the Agriculture Committee and agricultural programs have occupied a good deal of time of Congress and the Administration in the last three years. Did you have any discussions or contacts with the President about agricultural policy?

AIKEN: Well, I can explain that easily. Up until the

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time he became a candidate for President, we always voted together on agricultural matters. When he became a candidate for the Presidency, he had to consider other parts of the country whose ideas were not always in accord with those of ours in New England. And consequently, while he was President, we did not always agree on agricultural policies. In fact, we disagreed. But he was taking a national viewpoint of the agricultural areas of the Central States and the North Central States. Probably as president it was not only his prerogative but good business for him to do so. I still represented Vermont and the interests of agriculture in the Northeastern United States, but that doesn't mean that

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we disagreed on everything, because we didn't. It was primarily a matter of price supports for agricultural commodities that we disagreed.... I think that he felt more kindly disposed towards from subsidies because of the position of many of his supporters in the West. And certainly, he felt more kindly disposed towards high farm subsidies than he did when he was representing Massachusetts in the Senate.

HOLT: Did you remember talking to him about this at any time?

AIKEN: Oh, I think we talked about it. But we understood each other very well as far as agricultural legislation was concerned.

HOLT: Well, let's see. What else have we got here?

AIKEN: Agricultural Act of 1961 we must have agreed upon

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because I attended the singing of it. I was invited the other day by President Johnson to attend the singing of an agricultural bill and I told him I would go down and attend his singing of a veto, but not the signing of a bill. So, I think we worked out a compromise legislation in 1961.

HOLT: There's another item here about the Passamaquoddy Project which is of great interest to New England. Do you remember any contact with him about that?

AIKEN: Yes. I went down.... There was a meeting on, I think it was the 16<sup>th</sup> of July, as I recall it, when Secretary Udall, the members of the Congress from the State of Maine were there, and some other interested parties. Secretary Udall at that time presented a report, the latest report,

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on the development of Passamaquoddy Tidal Power, and I was invited down because President Kennedy knew of my interest in developing low cost electric energy. We, as has been mentioned, voted together on the development of the St. Lawrence Power. And it seemed to me that the Passamaquoddy Tidal Power did hold a great deal of promise, not in the immediate future, but say ten or fifteen years from now, toward lowering the electric rates in New England, which are the highest of any part of the United States. I'm happy to say that since we got St. Lawrence Power, Vermont has been in a much more favorable position. But the President was interested in the development of power, and Passamaquoddy Bay. I don't suppose that the power

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interests of Boston ever forgave him for voting for the St. Lawrence development. Therefore, he didn't have too much to lose.

HOLT: This reminds me of the general subject of our relations with Canada in which you've been very interested. Did you ever discuss Canadian matters with the President?

AIKEN: Oh, I think so. I think so.... I think that our Interparliamentary Meetings with Canada began while President Kennedy was a member of the Senate. We've had seven of them now. And I'm sure that he was always interested in Canadian and United States relationships. He, naturally, would have been because Massachusetts has a very large French-Canadian population, and is closely connected with Canada in many ways.

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HOLT: Canada was the first foreign country he visited as President, I discovered the other day.

AIKEN: Yes. Yes, it was. And I think that alone indicated his very great interest in Canadian affairs.

HOLT: As a matter of fact, it was while he was planting a tree in Ottawa that he hurt his back.

AIKEN: Yes. Well, his interest in Canadian affairs was such that he became somewhat involved in the Canadian elections. The Diefenbaker people thought that he was not helping them any, and made it clear--although in the final analysis I think we kept out of the Canadian elections quite successfully.

HOLT: Do you remember any specifics about your contracts with him with respect to Canada?

[-41-]

AIKEN: Not specific, no. I think that our views on Canadian-US relations were probably identical.

HOLT: Well, I think this just about does it unless you think of something else.

AIKEN: That's all. If I think of something else....

[-42-]

[END OF INTERVIEW]