

**Claude J. Desautels Oral History Interview – JFK #2, 2/16/1977**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Desautels, Special Assistant to the President for Congressional Relations (1961-1966), discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) legislative agenda, JFK's relationship with House and Senate committee chairmen, and JFK's assassination, among other issues.

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Claude J. Desautels—JFK #2

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Second to Two Oral History Interviews

with

Claude J. Desautels

February 16, 1977  
Washington, D.C.

By William Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: Claude, we ended up in your previous interview you did with Lou [Louis F. Oberdorfer], he was asking you, in general terms, the occasions that you personally met with the President [John F. Kennedy] and you were just about finishing that statement when you got cut off.

DESAUTELS: Correct.

HARTIGAN: Do you want to recap anything that you've done. It's been quite a while between tapes, as you know.

DESAUTELS: Well, in terms of legislation, you remember the campaign in West Virginia, which was an eye opener for him in the poverty that existed there, and in the primary of 1960, he had made a commitment to the people of West Virginia that should he become president, one of his first priorities would be to assist areas such as that state who were in dire need at the time and others similar in other parts of the country. So one of the first proposals made to the Congress was to create the Area Redevelopment Act [Area Redevelopment Act of 1961]. That came early in the spring of 1961. My recollection is that it went to the Banking and Currency Committee of both the House and Senate. Again I believe Congressman Albert Rains [Albert M. Rains] of Alabama was chairman of that committee. He was a strong supporter of the proposal. The President enlarged the bill in

terms that it could apply to all parts of the country, not only to West Virginia. But it started initially to help West Virginia. So, it was all encompassing. And Albert Rains was our key leader in the committee. Larry [Lawrence F. O'Brien] worked very closely on it with him, met-with him several times. I don't recall after so many years to which subcommittee it went, but I do recall we were in constant contact with Chairman Rains. Besides that I think, I think it was Senator Sparkman [John J. Sparkman] who was chairman of the Banking [Committee Banking and Currency] and Urban Affairs [Senate Committee Banking, Housing

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and Urban Affairs] now they call it. Similarly, he was most helpful in the passage of that bill. My recollection is vague, it's been too long. I think it's one of the first bills he signed, or one of the major bills. There were other bills he signed prior. It's one of the major bills he signed. The other major bill, early in '61, that he was vitally concerned about and interested in, was the establishment and the creation of the Peace Corps. Now, Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], his brother-in-law, had been appointed as director, and Sarge was amazing. He personally lobbied every member of that House, and every member of the Senate. His lobby consisted of having breakfast, at around eight o'clock in the morning at the old Congressional Hotel, which is now called House Annex #1. He had a series of breakfasts over a number of weeks, and the ones he felt were not totally on board, he personally went back and saw them privately in their congressional offices. So the Peace Corps, as you know, was enacted. If anyone deserves credit outside the President, it was Sarge Shriver. No one worked so hard for the enactment of a bill as he did that year.

One of the things that he was very much interested in was the Cape Cod National Seashore Park [Cape Cod National Seashore], with which he had been familiar as senator from Massachusetts. That came out of the House Interior, which was chairmaned by my former boss, Congressman Wayne Aspinall [Wayne N. Aspinall] and that came through I think, by summer, and maybe early fall because I think... No, in the spring the committee went up to personally inspect and when the arrangement that President Kennedy had made with Aspinall when I left Congressman Aspinall, that I was to continue the relationship we had before, which consisted, among other things, of my going up there every Saturday at noontime to have lunch with Aspinall so, in other words, I could also keep track of legislation of interest, and this was one. I recall on many occasions, he said that we were going to Cape Cod, and we were going to have hearings, and I think, they passed, at least the House, early July of '61. I may be slightly off base on my dates. And it went through the Senate, I think, that same year.

Another major bill was.... Chile had suffered a very severe earthquake and, as this country has done over many years, there was enactment of a law [PL87-41] to help Chile in their reconstruction.

We had an Emergency Feed Grain Program [HR4510—PL87-5] that went through that year and a major housing bill [1961 Housing Act]. And I think we passed the first Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act. Of course, there was an increase in the minimum wage bill [Fair Labor Standards Amendments of 1961] that went through. We had a major education act that went through [Emergency Educational Aid Act of 1961]. And we passed, I think the first Saline Water Conversion Program [HR7916—PL87-295]. And, of

course, as you remember, he had been very concerned about our inadequate space program. The space program really got its start under President Kennedy. He had made a commitment at the time that we would have a man on the moon before the end of the decade, and we did.

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There's one little.... We had a minor, in '61, we used to call it a minor tax bill, a minor tax reform bill. And we were planning the following year a major reform tax bill. Wilbur Mills was chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and the bill passed the House, oh at the tail end of the session, just before they adjourned, and we did not have any idea how fast it would move in the Senate. The chairman at the time was Senator Byrd [Harry F. Byrd, Jr.] of Virginia, a great gentleman, but sometimes if he didn't like a particular piece of legislation, he would bury it forever in the committee. Early in January of '62 I went to a black tie dinner. At the dinner, the hosts, one of the key hosts had invited many members of Congress and other cabinet officers and so called V.I.P.s, to an after dinner drink in their suite at the Statler Hotel. I was up there and I ran into the chairman, Senator Byrd of Virginia. He called me over, introduced me to his son. He called me over, said "You tell the President on Monday, you tell Larry...." Oh first, I asked him how the bill looked... did he plan to hold hearings and report that bill fairly rapidly in the new session. He said on Monday morning, you can tell the President, you can tell Larry, "I don't like the bill, but I'm not going to delay it. I just may delay it a little bit." So Monday morning I told Larry who in turn advised the President, that we probably would get a bill by April. He might just delay it a little bit, in other words, his hearings, if I recall, didn't start 'til probably the first, or early March and I think he had about a month of hearings—maybe not that long, maybe three weeks—and it came out of committee, he voted against it, as he told me he would, but he kept his word. I think it was on the floor by early May, and it passed and then, of course, in conference with the House and Senate, and it got enacted in '62 [Revenue Act of 1962]. I'm talking about 1962. It had passed the House late, just before they adjourned for the year in '61. But I'll never forget it, with that Virginia accent of his, "I like the President, I like him very much, I want to help him, I don't like it a bit, I don't like the bill, but you can tell him I'll get it enacted. I'm just going to delay it a little bit."

I think that's some of the major.... Well, we had a Mexican farm workers recruitment program. Also he wanted to have a better relationship with Latin America and we had an inter-American cooperation bill that went through. One of the major fights we had, of course, we've always had it, was foreign aid, a great deal of difficulty on foreign aid [Foreign Assistance Act of 1962], particularly on increased appropriations than the authorization. The chairman of the appropriation subcommittee on foreign aid [Subcommittee on Foreign Operations] was Otto Passman [Otto Ernest Passman] former Congressman Passman, of Louisiana, and although a very nice gentleman, very courtly, southern gentleman, he could be very difficult. And we had to mount a major campaign to get the bill out of his subcommittee.

Congressman Conte, Sylvio Conte [Sylvio O. Conte] of Massachusetts, a Republican was the ranking minority and he was most helpful in getting the necessary funds for the program. [Interruption]

On reflection, on the space program, as you know, as you recall, the Russians had launched Sputnik in the late fifties and the then Senator Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] of Texas was chairman of the Senate space committee [Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences]. At that time, against the, with the opposition of the Administration, he tried to increase the space program—he was most vocal in his views—but received little encouragement from the executive branch.

HARTIGAN: This was under Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower].

DESAUTELS: This was under President Eisenhower. And when President Kennedy came in, he made a comment that we were going to have a man on the moon within a decade, which was also the views now, of the now Vice President Lyndon Johnson, then Vice President Lyndon Johnson. So the Vice President was most helpful on the Senate side, played a key role in marshalling support for the legislation and the increased appropriations. Senator Moss [Frank E. Moss] of Utah, so was Senator Symington [Stuart Symington II] of Missouri, Stuart Symington, Senator Stennis [John C. Stennis] of Mississippi and Senator Cannon [Howard W. Cannon] of Nevada, Howard Cannon of Nevada. On the House side, two played a key part in support of the program: now Chairman Olin Teague [Olin E. Teague] of Texas, who was better known as Tiger Teague, former Congressman Joe Karth [Joseph E. Karth] of Minnesota, were among the key fellows, the key members in both Houses were strong support. Overall in the Congress, there was some opposition. Some felt it should be better spent on domestic needs, such as health and education, but the President was determined that we had to match and do better than our Russian friends had done and, Webb [James E. Webb] was technical advisor to the president on pushing the program.

HARTIGAN: Jim.

DESAUTELS: Jim Webb.

[Interruption]

HARTIGAN: Pursuing the President's wishes to have this bill successfully passed, did you run into anything unusual in the procedure of guiding this bill, you and Larry?

DESAUTELS: My recollection is that it was one of the first items that was on the agenda for the leadership breakfasts until the program had passed both houses of Congress. It was the first item, well one of the first items, of course, we had Area Redevelopment Act, the Peace Corps, but it was one of the high priorities, let's put it that way, one of the very high priorities of the first year of President Kennedy's term of office. He was personally, vitally interested. Larry, of course, stayed in close touch, in contact with Lyndon Johnson, the Vice President, and the Senators that I mentioned, the

chairman, Tiger Teague on the House side. We met with them, went to their offices and met with them on a number of occasions and that was one of our major priorities.

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HARTIGAN: Did the President frequently personally make contact with the chairman of the various committees and/or members?

DESAUTELS: Well, the first year, '61, as you know, he personally invited, we brought down at his suggestion, every chairman of House committees and Senate committees. So every chairman of major and minor committees, so called minor, came down and personally met with the President. Of course, we gave the more important committees priority in coming down, such as the Rules Committee, as we had problems there, as you recall, Agriculture Committee [Committee on Agriculture and Forestry], Armed Services Committee; Banking and Currency Committee, committees that dealt with the priority items. Of course, Chairman Mills, the same thing with Senator Byrd, their counterparts on the Senate side, Senator Sparkman. He spent about, I think approximately a half an hour with every chairman. I think we blocked with the assistance of Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], who was the appointment secretary, we would block two half hours a week until he had seen them all.

HARTIGAN: This was a continuous thing.

DESAUTELS: Yes. 'Til he saw them all.

HARTIGAN: And then, did that, did the frequency of his visit with the various members and chairmen of the various committees increase as the time for presenting bills came into effect. Did he spend a great deal of his time doing that, or was that...

DESAUTELS: You mean prior to the submission of a...

HARTIGAN: While you folks were processing, engineering the strategy behind a bill, did he meet frequently with them or did most of that, was most of that handled by you and Larry?

DESAUTEIS: Well, we felt he was the sort of the ace in the pack, and Larry did not feel we should use the prestige of the office unless absolutely necessary. If we could get the members support without taking time on the President's already loaded schedule, we didn't. If it became necessary, Larry would suggest a meeting, or possibly a phone call to the member. We didn't overdo it. We tried to balance it, have a proper balance. But whenever he was asked, he never refused.

HARTIGAN: But, you and Larry in planning this, purposely did not want to make it an every day occurrence, or waste his time and effort.

DESAUTELS: That's correct.

HARTIGAN: You held it for a real big gun, so to speak.

DESAUTELS: That's correct.

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HARTIGAN: So, it wasn't.... It was an unusual thing for a congressman if you had to bring him before the President...

DESAUTELS: Yes.

HARTIGAN: ... to talk to. I see. Those were pretty much the major bills in '60 and the beginning of '62.

DESAUTEIS: Sixty-one.

HARTIGAN: Sixty-one and sixty-two. [Interruption]... bringing it up to January of '62, as a result of his annual message to Congress, he announced a certain piece of legislation in that message.

DESAUTELS: Yes.

HARTIGAN: Do you care to comment on that?

DESAUTELS: Well, as you recall, in December of '61, the President and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] had gone to Mexico City. Mrs. Kennedy had spoken in Spanish and the Mexican population went wild, excuse me, enthusiastic. She had been very pleased that there was a meeting of international heads of state of Latin America. He came back very pleased with the trip, determined that we were going to give more attention to Latin America. He announced to the Congress in his State of the Union message the proposed Alliance for Progress. And he asked for appropriation, a Special long term appropriation of three billion dollars. He wanted to combine that with our Food for Peace and our Export-Import Bank and other resources. This would provide at least a billion more a year in new support through the Alliance for Progress. In February of '62, there was another conference held, I think, I believe it was in Chile. Senator Wayne Morse [Wayne L. Morse], who was then chairman of the subcommittee on Latin America [Subcommittee on American Republican Affairs] of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was head of our delegation. The President put so much attention to this conference that most unusual, he authorized and personally expressed his goodbyes at a special ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House and the members of the delegation left by chopper, by helicopter, to go to Andrews Air Force Base to board *Air Force One* for the trip.

One of the members of the delegation was a special assistant to the President, Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin]. While there, Dick Goodwin held private meetings with one of Fidel Castro's closest advisers, Che Guevara [Che Guevara]. These meetings appeared in the press here and caused some consternation, again because of the importance attached to this trip. He requested that when the U.S. delegation landed, that they be flown directly by helicopter to the South Lawn so that he could get a first hand report from the chairman of the delegation, in this case, Senator Wayne Morse. Shortly

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afterwards, Senator Morse was quite a forceful force in the Senate. He's one of the few persons who came to the Congress as a Republican in 1960, 1956 excuse me, well in the mid-fifties. He changed from Republican to an Independent and changed to Democrat in, I believe it was in 1958. He stayed a Democrat for the rest of his career. He was quite disturbed by the private meetings held between Che Guevara and Dick Goodwin of the White House staff. He contacted Larry, requested that Dick Goodwin appear at a hearing before his subcommittee to discuss his meetings and made comments that if Dick Goodwin did not appear voluntarily, he would subpoena him. Larry was the mediator, because in those days, members of the President's staff, because of the confidential relationship, did not testify before committees of the Congress. So, Larry, as mediator, worked out a private meeting, an off-record meeting, between Senator Morse and members of his subcommittee. The staff had to coach Dick how to handle himself. When the day of the hearing came, Mike Manatos [Mike N. Manatos], who was our Senate liaison person, accompanied Dick to the hearing. And my recollection is that Mike reported to Larry that the meeting had gone very well.

Among other major legislation we passed that year was the Communication Satellite Act [Communication Satellite Act of 1962], which was part of the space program, which at that time we did not have. We also passed a major drug reform bill [Drug Amendments of 1962]. We passed the first educational television act. Of course, we also had the same problem with the foreign assistance. We passed a manpower development and training act [Manpower Training and Development Act of 1962].

[Interruption]

As you recall, I mentioned earlier, as part of the Alliance for Progress, the President wanted to increase and to expand Food for Peace. George McGovern [George S. McGovern], had been congressman from South Dakota, came in 1956 or 1958 election, I believe it was 1956. McGovern, then Congressman McGovern, announced for the United States Senate from South Dakota in 1960. And as you recall, one of the thorniest issues of the campaign was the religious issue. A lot of people did not know that McGovern was a Methodist, the son of a minister and were under the impression that he was a Catholic. Senator McGovern obviously lost the election in 1960. The President appointed him as director of the Food for Peace program so now Senator George McGovern, who later became the Democratic nominee for the president in 1972, was in charge of it and did a fantastic job, a tremendous job, and it was a great success and it's largely due to his personal participation as Director of the Food for Peace program.

[Interruption]

Among other major legislation that was enacted in 1962 was the establishment of a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. One of the bills that I'm familiar with is a reclamation project in Colorado, which was in Aspinwall's district, Congressman Aspinwall, the former chairman, and my former

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boss. He had been trying to enact that legislation since he came to Congress in 1949. He was very pleased that the President endorsed it and with the President's support, it passed the Congress that year. He, of course, attended the signing ceremony, and the president made sure.... As you know, the President used many pens when he signs a bill so that he can give the author or the sponsor, and others who assisted, so possibly he could use as many as thirty or forty pens to sign John F. Kennedy, and he made sure that the first one he used, went to Congressman, Chairman Wayne Aspinall of Colorado, and it's been one of the Congressman's prized possessions.

We had a Public Works Acceleration Act pass in 1962. And, of course, the treasury, the tax bill that I mentioned earlier in relation to Senator Byrd was passed.

We passed a student loan program and for the first time since the heydays of McCarthyism, the law, as recommended by President Kennedy, eliminated the entire Communist affidavit.

In 1962, we passed one of our major pieces of legislation, major because the President pushed so strongly for, the new trade bill [Trade Expansion Act of 1962], which now results in the so-called Kennedy rounds. That passed both houses in 1962. I think it started in the House in 1961, if I recall, and it was enacted in 1962 because, as you well know, some of these programs take two years to go through. My recollection is that the trade bill, which was a very different departure from previous trade legislation that the President recommended to Congress, passed the House in late '61, and then passed the Senate in 1962. It went to conference. The President was vitally interested in foreign trade. He realized its value to our economy, to our employment, and to our balance of payments and it was enacted in 1962. We passed the Welfare and Pension Plans Disclosure Act, amendments to the original bill. They were of great importance to millions of Americans.

We passed the major Immigration and Refugee Assistance Act, a migration refugee assistance bill [Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962].

[Interruption]

HARTIGAN: In all this legislation, would you care to comment on some of the leaders that you had to work with in the House and Senate that you felt as though were vitally, were kingpins in terms of getting the President's legislative programs passed?

DESAUTELS: Yes. I'm glad you brought it up. As a matter of fact, as you well know, Sam

Rayburn was Speaker of the House when John Kennedy became president, and the first thing Mr. Sam, as we all called him, did was to strengthen the Democratic Party's control of the Rules Committee because the Rules Committee more or less plays the role of policeman in the House. All bills reported from the various committees of the House are referred to the Rules Committee, and the Rules Committee, for whatever reason of their own, by

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a majority vote can bottle up a bill, kill it, prevent it from reaching the floor. We had a very difficult chairman at that time, Howard Smith [Howard W. Smith] of Virginia, and if Chairman Smith didn't like a certain piece of legislation, he would disappear to his farm in Virginia. He could be gone for weeks and days. This had happened under the previous President, not under President Kennedy, so when the Congress convened in January of '61, the first major fight that took place on the floor of the House was a resolution enlarging Democratic representation on the Rules Committee so that a majority could work its will and it was passed by about a twelve-vote-margin majority. Of the supporters of the proposal, we received the vote of twenty Republicans and without bipartisan support, obviously, we would have lost it. So Mr. Sam was a tower of strength in enacting the President's program. The majority leader at that time was, later Speaker John McCormack [John William McCormack] and Hale Boggs [Thomas Hale Boggs], former Congressman Hale Boggs, now deceased, of Louisiana, was the majority whip. As a matter of fact, as you recall, Speaker Sam died that year and the Congress and the president signed Rayburn Commemorative Medal. On the Senate side, the majority leader was, of course, Mike Mansfield. Mike had been a close friend of the President while they had served in the House together and again when he was in the Senate. In the fifties when President Kennedy went to the Senate, Mike Mansfield was majority whip to then Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson. So in 1961, Senator Mansfield succeeded to the post of majority leader. The new majority whip in '61 was Senator, later Vice President, now again Senator Hubert H. Humphrey. Hubert Humphrey was a tower of strength to the White House. And he did the work, he counted noses, and he would check with Larry and with the rest of the staff to see that the two headcounts would compare accurately. Mike Mansfield was gracious, most kind, always helpful but pretty much left head counting to Hubert Humphrey. As you know, unlike his predecessor, he did not believe in arm-twisting of the senators. So he personally did not lobby very hard, but he'd make sure that Hubert did and, of course, Hubert loved that kind of work. He's got so much energy that even twenty-four hours is not enough for him, he could go on forever.

HARTIGAN: So, the stories that we hear from the President himself while he was in the White House and even to date, from Kenny O'Donnell and others, praising Hubert Humphrey for his untireless work in the Congress on behalf of the man who defeated him is true. Is that correct? Right?

DESAUTELS: Oh yes, absolutely. Not only, as you say, he became very close with Kenny O'Donnell and, also with Larry, not only would they associate during the

day, but they saw each other socially in the evenings, frequently, whenever the Senator's schedule permitted it. And Larry has unlimited, like Kenny and others who have known him, and myself, unlimited high regard for Senator Humphrey. There's only one like him. He's a tower of strength. Recently when he underwent surgery at Kettering-Sloan [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center], Larry paid a visit on him and he was up and down the corridor, the eighth floor, cheering everybody up. If some person was going to surgery the next day, he would cheer him or her, by telling them,

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look at me, I look fine and you're going to come through just as well as I did. There was a nineteen-year-old girl who had gone through similar surgery. They could not get, the doctors could not get her to get out of bed and walk. He went to see her, he got her out of bed, she walked up and down the corridors with him. The next morning when the nurse who had been off duty that previous afternoon saw the girl walking up and down the corridor by herself, said to her, "What are you doing?" and she said "I made a commitment to the Senator." That's the kind of person he is. He is one of the greatest humane persons that anyone has ever met. [Interruption]

HARTIGAN: ... is concerned with reference to, in his legislative thinking that is, with reference to the youth and the education and equal rights and all that, he also felt very strongly with reference to the welfare and health of the elderly.

DESAUTELS: Yes.

HARTIGAN: Even though the bill didn't pass. Would you give us an explanation on that?

DESAUTELS: The bill was proposed in 1962, did not pass because at that time, the chairman of Ways and Means...

HARTIGAN: What did they call, excuse me, what was the name, Medicare bill for the aged?

DESAUTELS: Yes. Medicare.

HARTIGAN: Okay.

DESAUTELS: The bill did not pass because of the.... First of all I should back up a little bit. Bills which authorize funds to be used from revenues must originate in the House, as you know, under Constitution. So, the Senate could not act independently of the House, it to wait for House action. Chairman Mills at that time felt there was not enough support for the bill and refused to have his Ways and Means Committee consider legislation. As you know, it was finally enacted in 1964. After the 1964 election when President Johnson had made it, following up as one of his commitments to President Kennedy that Medicare was to be enacted so it was that it finally signed 1965. As a matter of

fact it was signed in the presence of President Truman [Harry S. Truman] at the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri. Just prior to President Kennedy, the only president who ever advocated this program was President Harry Truman.

And another big disappointment to the President in 1962 was the major aid to education program. He had sent.... The President recommended in 1961, a proposal for federal aid to public school construction and teachers' salaries. The bill had passed the Senate in 1961 and had received House committee approval, although the President felt that the legislation as reported provided minimum

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amount required by this country's needs. But he hoped that the bill would not be further weakened or withdrawn and he again urged passage in this session. It did come out of the House Education Labor Committee, however, the first members of the Catholic church, the high officials in the Catholic church, did not like the legislation, because it did not provide for aid to parochial schools, and now Chairman, then Congressman Jim Delaney [James J. Delaney] of New York refused to let it come out of the Rules Committee. That's one of the few defeats that we received in the Rules Committee during President Kennedy's life as president.

HARTIGAN: Eventually, of course, that, as you mentioned, that bill became law.

DESAUTELS: Yes.

HARTIGAN: After his death.

DESAUTELS: After his death.

HARTIGAN: And, his.

DESAUTELS: He resubmitted it to the new Congress in 1963 and it was signed as one of the major pieces of legislation that passed one body, was awaiting action in the other body at the time of the assassination.

[END OF TAPE I]

DESAUTELS: On the civil rights bill, which we were discussing a few minutes ago as to when it was signed, the President recommended in '62 and again in the state of the Union in '63. He felt, for instance, that the right to vote should no longer be denied through such arbitrary devices on a local level, sometimes abuse, such as literacy tests, and poll taxes, and he repeated it again in his State of the Union of 1963.

HARTIGAN: Claude, do you think that we've covered about all the major legislation in '62?

DESAUTELS: I think we have in '62, yes.

HARTIGAN: What about your recollections on '63?

DESAUTELS: Well, '63, one of... I could now consider, I think most people do, the National Cultural Center Act, which resulted in the Kennedy Center [John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts] here in Washington, which was renamed the Kennedy Center after the assassination. One of the major bills in '63 was the outdoor recreation bill [Bureau of Outdoor Recreation]. And another one, that there again was the Shriver, this time, his sister, Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver]. We

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passed the first mental retardation facilities and community health center construction program [Mental Retardation Facilities Construction Act 1963]. I recall that Eunice was calling Larry constantly as to who she could contact, should contact, to get assistance in getting the bill passed by the Congress, in committees in both houses. I recall she headed a committee that had been studying the problem, as you well know, for years. It was very close to her heart. And I saw her in the White House many, many times, attending meetings of this committee, which drafted, prepared the legislation and gave the support for it, the need, the reasons why, the substance, the rationale, why the legislation was absolutely needed. And I think when the President, again when he signed the bill, he gave her the first pen, and I know he was very proud. He beamed from ear to ear when he gave her the pen.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall the last major piece of legislation that he signed?

DESAUTELS: Well, this was signed, I think my recollection, it was signed in September.

HARTIGAN: So that may have been one of the last major ones?

DESAUTELS: Maybe one of the last major ones. We also had passed Equal Pay Act of '63. In other words, no discrimination. And that was a major step in the sense that it's part of civil rights. We passed a major feed grain bill in 1963. We also had the same thing, a maternal and child health and mental retardation planning bill [Maternal and Child Health and Mental Retardation Planning Amendments of 1963] beside the one I mentioned about construction. That was part of the package that Eunice Shriver had worked so hard for.

HARTIGAN: Claude, do you recollect legislation that he had started that was not completed after his death, that was still...

DESAUTELS: Well, the three major were the reform tax bill... [Interruption]

HARTIGAN: The point I was trying to make was to find out if there was any legislation that never did get enacted, or passed upon, because of the untimely death of

President Kennedy. I know that we mentioned the three that [Interruption] the three major ones that did, but do you recall any of them that didn't, offhand?

DESAUTELS: No, I don't think...

HARTIGAN: That never saw the light of day because of the untimely death?

DESAUTELS: All the major bills that he had recommended, that had not been enacted at the time of the assassination, major bills, all were enacted in 1964. I mentioned those big three. There was another one. We had a problem with my former boss, Chairman Aspinall on the wilderness bill, which had been one of his priorities in the Congress. We had

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recommended to the President, and he concurred, that he invite Chairman Aspinall to come to his office, an afternoon meeting. The meeting was arranged. The Chairman met with the President. He made a commitment at that meeting that the bill, the wilderness bill, would be signed and on the President's desk before that Congress quit, in other words, by '64, before the election of 1964. I recall, since, as I mentioned earlier, I used to have lunch with him every Saturday. I think he saw the President like Wednesday or Thursday. Saturday at lunch, he told me about the meeting, how charming the President had been, asked him to sit in his rocking chair, although the chairman didn't have any problem with his back. He told him that he should get himself a similar chair. Aspinall said he would and he did, and Mrs. Aspinall [Julia Kuns Aspinall] was somewhat, quite ill. At the time of the assassination, they were on their way by car to Colorado, she was to enter the hospital in Denver for surgery. When he heard the news, he called me the next morning, very early about seven o'clock. He was in St. Louis. He says, "Claude, I feel terrible. I can't return. I've got to get Julia to the hospital in Denver. I'm going to try to get back in time for the funeral." I don't recall whether he made it. But anyway, he gave instructions to his staff immediately... [Interruption] to place a wreath on the door and to let it stay there for the full thirty days of the national mourning period. Congress, as you know, was in session. But Christmas was approaching. Some of the office who also had had wreaths, prior to the expiration of the thirty days took their wreaths off and put Christmas decorations. His staff asked him if they should do likewise, and he said, "No, it says thirty days of mourning, and you're going to honor the thirty days of mourning and you don't take off that wreath until the thirty days are up." That, to my knowledge, was the only office in the last few days before Christmas, well, the twenty-second up 'til around the twentieth or twenty-first, the only office that I saw that still carried that wreath. And on the bill, he kept telling me afterwards, "You'll get it, the President will sign it. I just wish President Kennedy was here to sign it, but it will get to President Johnson. He'll sign it." And, of course, he did.

HARTIGAN: And that to your recollection, was the final one. There was no other bill that was left...

DESAUTELS: No major...

HARTIGAN: ... that didn't eventually come out, I mean?

DESAUTELS: Yes, no major. There may have been some minor ones.

HARTIGAN: Are there any other observations you would like to recap on, Claude, with reference to your serving under President Kennedy? [Interruption]

HARTIGAN: Claude, that little break we had, just seeing if we left anything undone. Is there any other general observation you would like to make before we... We've covered legislation pretty much, and

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now, are there any other general observations you would like to make?

DESAUTELS: Well, I'm sure, everybody who was here in the White House, as you well know, we worked six and sometimes seven days a week, fourteen and sixteen hours a day. Many times I would up having dinner in front of the eleven o'clock news. It was a great privilege, a great honor, particularly being there with any president of the United States, more so with President Kennedy, whom I had known for a good many years. I had some friends in the congressional liaison, under President Ford [Gerald R. Ford], and one of them invited me to lunch in the White House mess, day for day, one week exactly before the inaugural. When I got to the gate, the White House police officer was, George Montgomery, took one look at me and said "You're coming in to pick your new office, you're coming back," and I said, "No, never." I went inside and the chief usher of the West Wing was there. He said "You're in here to pick out to select your office, you're coming back." And I said, "No, never. I think, don't misunderstand me, I think it's a great privilege, it's a great opportunity, and anyone who has the chance to do it ought to take it. But I think it belongs to the younger generation. I had it, I have no regrets. I wouldn't trade a million dollars for it. But no thank you." Then I ran into Mack, the messenger. After lunch, my host, I said, you know, one thing I failed to do, and I've been there a couple of times when President Ford, for signing, when he signed the trade bill. I was invited to that. There again I was greeted by so many people, I forgot. I had never seen the Kennedy portraits, or the Johnson portraits for that matter. And I said "You've got to do me one favor. I've got to see the Kennedy portraits." So I did see the Kennedy portraits and the Johnson portraits, and I went upstairs, because the Kennedy portraits are in the hall, the main hall. Rex Scouten [Rex W. Scouten], the chief usher, said, "You're in here picking your office, you're coming back," and I said "No." Lee [Bruce Lee], the butler, the chief butler, that nice tall while-haired gentleman, he said, "Oh, Lee wants to see you, Bruce Lee, Bruce wants to see you." So I called Bruce, and Bruce said, "Oh, Mr. Desautels, you're coming back." And I said.... "You're in here picking your office" and I went through the Secret Service when we passed the President's office—I forgot the name of the agent—said the same thing "you're coming back." I ran into career-type secretaries, one who had been there, I guess came in as political,

one of Tish Baldrige's [Letitia Baldrige] assistants, and she said, "You don't remember me?" And I said, "Of course, I do." "I used to be here with Tish Baldrige, I've been here since Tish Baldrige's day." I ran into a girl who said she had been secretary to Joe Califano [Joseph A. Califano, Jr.] "You don't remember me?" And I said, "Yes, I do." "You're in here picking your office," and I said, "No, I'm not," for the reasons I've already said. So, I think it was a great privilege, a great opportunity, I enjoyed it thoroughly, but I wouldn't do it again. I don't think any of us would. No, we've got great memories, it was a great period, it was action time in town, you could feel it. And it was one of the greatest events of my life, I guess.

HARTIGAN: Claude, before closing, would you object to telling us where you were when the President was assassinated?

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DEBAUTELS: Well, maybe before I get to that, I want to tell you an incident. The day he left, I had gone to his bedroom to leave the list of his guests, the congressional guests who were going to accompany him on the trip. As you know, Texas has a very large delegation. Everyone could not be on *Air Force One* the whole route. And the Vice President was going, so somewhere on the plane when they hit their home towns, so some would go on *Air Force Two* and change at San Antonio to go on *Air Force One*, and vice versa. So, I'm coming back from the mansion to return to my office, and I pass Mrs. Lincoln's [Evelyn N. Lincoln] office. The president of the United States came out, President Kennedy came out, followed by Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] who was headed to the press office. As you know, Pierre [Pierre E. G. Salinger] was abroad, but Andy Hatcher [Andrew T. Hatcher] was handling it in his absence. He looked at me and he said "Now, you know Kenny O'Donnell's coming with me," and I said "Yes, Mr. President." He says, "You know that Larry O'Brien is coming with me," and I said "Yes, Mr. President." He said "Now, you're in charge," and I looked at him and said "I'm in charge?" He says, "You're in charge." He says, "Do me a favor, will you? Don't declare war while I'm gone." "Me, declare war?" That's the last time I saw him. The day of the assassination, of course, Larry was gone so I guess that left me, I was in charge of congressional liaison staff, not to declare war.

I had a friend of mine from college days who had lived here for a period of time, and later his company transferred him to their corporate headquarters in San Francisco. He had been in town all week, and of course, it was impossible for me to see him. So I said with the President and Larry out of town, and the Congress in a little recess, I invited him to visit the White House, the West Wing as well as the mansion. And then on Friday, I guess it was Friday, the assassination was on a Friday. Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] had started a habit when we could get away on Fridays and Congress was out of town, we would go to Chez François for lunch. So, we went to Chez François. And although there is a first come, first serve, no waiting, no reservation, the daughter of François knew me and knew Dick. So whenever she saw me, she put me at the head of the line. So my friend and I got a table and we ordered a drink. And the waitress came back with a tray, she said "Have you heard the news?" I said "What's the news?" She said, "The President has been shot." I looked at her

completely stunned and said, "That's not very funny." She had barely put the glasses down on the table when François came over and says, "You're Claude Desautels, aren't you?" And I said "Yes." He said, "The White House wants you on the phone, urgent." And I said, "Where do I take the call?" He said "Come in my office." So I went to his office, and the radio was on and I was hearing it. So I got the call, the White House operator says "Mr. Desautels, we're calling all the White House staff, would you hurry back?" I said "How bad is it?" She said "Well, we don't know." I said, "Well, I'll be right back." I came back and sat down, my friend said "What's happened?" So I told him and he said "Have your drink." I took a sip of it, and then like in a daze, I said, "I can't stay here, what am I doing here, I can't finish it." He said, "At least, have your drink." I took a sip and I said, "I can't stay here, I have to get back." He said, "I'll walk you back to the White House." So when I got there, the policeman said.... I said, "It's true?" And he said "Yes."

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"How bad is it?" "We don't know." So, I got to the West Wing, which is off the press office, the lobby was mobbed with the reporters. I went into Andy's office, watched the television set, and the reporters were asking questions. I was in no mood to talk. So within minutes, seconds, I disappeared into Larry's office, upstairs. And the staff was beginning to return from lunch, Henry [Henry Hall Wilson, Jr.] we all came back and listened to the news on T.V.

HARTIGAN: Claude, President Johnson eventually asked you to stay on, is that correct?

DESAUTELS: Well, he called us, I mean the congressional staff, Larry and us, and said he would appreciate our staying to help him. He said, "I've got to finish enacting his program and his recommendations to Congress. You've got an obligation to his memory to stay and help me." So, with that kind of a remark, what else could we do, we stayed and helped enact the Kennedy program.

HARTIGAN: Anything else you'd like to add, Claude, before we clear up?

DESAUTELS: I think that covers the whole....

HARTIGAN: Claude, one other thought I'd like you to pass, or think of, you know, keep on your mind for a while. Your papers and memorabilia that you've come across during the years in the Kennedy Administration.... The Library [John F. Kennedy Presidential Library], as you know, is in the process of being built, and the staff is quite anxious to get as many papers as they can from the people who were directly involved in the administration. So, if it would be agreeable, that you would look through your files and papers and anything you think that might be of value to the Library, and future historians coming in, would you agree to donate them to the Library?

DESAUTELS: Sure, be happy to.

HARTIGAN: And, if you like, we will send somebody from the archives down to go over them for you, and let you know what the status they're going to be in. They'll be properly cared for. And if, in your judgment, some of the material should be kept under lock for a while, we'll honor whatever request you put on them. So at some point, you let us know and we'll come down and look at the material you do have.

DESAUTELS: O.K. I'll be happy to do it.

HARTIGAN: All right, this is Bill Hartigan, September 16, finishing an oral interview with Claude Desautels.

DESAUTELS: February 16th.

HARTIGAN: February 16th, I'm sorry. Claude is very accurate. Thank you very much, Claude.

DESAUTELS: Thank you, Bill.

[END OF TAPE]

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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