Biographical Note
John Moss (1915-1997) was a congressman from California from 1953 to 1978. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy’s dealings with members of Congress and the handling of sensitive information during the Kennedy administration, particularly during the Cuban Missile Crisis, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN MOSS

April 13, 1965
Washington, D.C.
by Philip A. Stern

MR. STERN: This is Philip Stern recording at the Rayburn Building with Congressman John E. Moss of California, the Chairman of the Subcommittee of Government Operations on Information Policy. Congressman Moss, as I understand it, the first contacts that you had with President Kennedy where you had occasion to discuss with him matters of substance was during a 1957 or '58 visit to Sacramento, where he made a speech in which he showed himself well informed on the issues of information policy that you had been dealing with. Were there any conversations there that would throw light on his general attitude on this?

MR. MOSS: Yes. That was the first opportunity for detailed conversation with Senator Kennedy on the studies then under way by the Information Subcommittee. As a matter of fact, that was approximately the third year of the Subcommittee's existence. The press support for the work of the Subcommittee had built up rather markedly in that time, and the Senator evidenced a very comprehensive understanding of what we were doing. Clearly, he had followed the work of the Subcommittee. He voiced a strong conviction that it was necessary work, that far too much secrecy had developed in the executive departments
of government, and that Congress had to act to break it down. Senator Kennedy at that time also showed a very keen understanding of the political capital that would be inherent in any exposing of the Eisenhower Administration on a charge of withholding information, substantive information, from the American people.

MR. STERN: Are you talking about political advantage for the Democratic Party?

MR. MOSS: Political advantage to the Democratic Party or to any politician, who might want to exploit it.

MR. STERN: Your next contact, as I understand it, with the President was at a post-convention meeting, regarding some of the political tactics of the upcoming California campaign. This was between the time of the Democratic National Convention of 1960 and the beginning of the campaign itself, when Congress reconvened. Are there matters there that you discussed with President Kennedy that you think would be important for future students of his activities?

MR. MOSS: I don't think there's anything that relates specifically to information. I can say that in the discussions — they were discussions at the request of the members of the California Democratic Delegation in the House of Representatives to review the type of campaign then under way in California — the President showed at that time the very detailed grasp of all of the divisive problems which have
characterized California Democratic Party activities for many years. I think that it's just another indication of the thoroughness of his preparation for the campaign for the Presidency. That was very remarkable to me. I had been privileged to talk to other candidates, and as a politician who's been active in the Democratic Party back to 1938, I can thoroughly respect a fine technician. President Kennedy was an excellent technician in politics.

MR. STERN: During the 1960 political campaign that followed, one of the issues that much concerned the information policy area that you were dealing with, had to do with U.S.I.A. polls, which purported to show that U.S. prestige had fallen. Without getting into the factual background of that, which is a matter of public record, did you have any contacts with then Senator Kennedy concerning the release of those U.S.I.A. polls to the public?

MR. MOSS: Not directly. However, it was definitely arranged through my staff and the staff of the Kennedy campaign here in Washington, that the Committee would demand those polls. Nixon had very unwisely, I think, raised the question of the standing of the United States abroad, how well thought of we were. Kennedy, refuting the claims of Nixon, cited the results of a U.S.I.A. poll. Senator Fulbright then requested the polls so that they could be public, so that the public could be in a position to evaluate the truth
of Nixon's claim or the counter-charge of Kennedy. The Eisenhower Administration, incredible to me, refused those polls. When they refused them to the Senate Committee, it was immediately referred to my committee; and we went all out to get them. As a matter of fact, from the standpoint of political advantage, the refusal created an issue far more significant than whether or not we were well regarded abroad. Kennedy exploited that very effectively and, I think, with complete justification.

MR. STERN: Your first contact with him as President, as I understand it, took place in the spring of 1961, when the United States sent its first man into space in the Shepard Sub-orbital Flight. As I gather, there arose the question of whether or not there should continue to be full on-the-site press coverage, when there was the possibility of Shepard being burned up or some catastrophe happening before everybody's eyes, right on the launching pad at Cape Canaveral. As I understand it, you had a conversation with the President on that question.

MR. MOSS: I think that I should first make it clear that I had had a number of contacts with the President following his election and taking of office in January of 1961. I have been privileged to go to the White House several times for coffees and discussions with him. However, where we discussed anything relating to information, that occurred
about three days, maybe as much as five days, before the launching of Alan Shepard on the "Freedom 7." The President phoned me at my office over in the Cannon Building and said that he wanted to discuss the problems of coverage at Cape Canaveral, that he was concerned over the possibility that this launch might blow up on the pad. This would be a rather shocking thing for the American people to see; and yet, he could not justify in his own mind a closing of that launch on any basis of security. He seemed more to want to talk it out. I pointed out that from a practical standpoint, nothing could be done. Cape Canaveral was wide open to news coverage. It might be possible to close the area to newsmen, but it would be no difficult problem for them to rent rooms in motels or other buildings and using telescopic equipment, they could still photograph the launch and report on it. I thought, perhaps, the best course would be to advise the American people of the concern of the President, the possibility of failure, that certainly it was an inherent risk in any such undertaking. I felt that the American public could accept this fact. We discussed the unquestioned advantage to the United States from a successful launch open to the eyes of all the world. Of course, subsequently, the launch was successful. It did prove to give this nation a tremendous boost in the attitudes of other people toward the abilities of the United States in this space race.
MR. STERN: Was there any discussion as to who should try to warn the American people in advance about the possibility of a blow up? Did you suggest to him that he do it? As I understand it, James Webb, head of the Space Agency, finally did go on T.V. Was there any discussion of the President, himself, doing this?

MR. MOSS: No, there was not. The discussion was the need for alerting the American people, but nothing was said as to who would do the alerting. The President didn't suggest that the Committee do anything about it; and I had the utmost confidence that if the President determined to alert the people, he would either do it himself or select an appropriate spokesman.

MR. STERN: You mentioned a moment ago a few contacts with him between the time of his election and the time of this Shepard space shot, including your going to the White House. Is there anything in those conversations that you think would be of value to future historians?

MR. MOSS: The conversations were always general. The President attempted to keep in rather close touch with the Congress and through a series of coffees from the very beginning, would get just a small group of members together, normally up on the second floor and, over a highball, discuss problems then pressing on him or problems developing here on the Hill.
MR. STERN: Were these bipartisan coffees?

MR. MOSS: No, I attended no bipartisan coffees. We had enough problems with the Republicans at that time without making them privy to any of our strategy discussions.

MR. STERN: The next major issue that you had contact with the President on, as I understand it, concerns the question of executive privilege. This first came up in connection with an investigation that Senator McClellan was holding on the Senate side, on the question of the censorship of speeches by military officers and others in the Pentagon. There was a confrontation between the McClellan subcommittee and the President concerning releasing the name of an individual who had censored a particular speech. At that time, you and the President were in contact with each other.

MR. MOSS: As a matter of fact, I think here we have to go back a number of years, prior to the time that Kennedy became President. In the conversation I had with him in Sacramento and in several other conversations over the years, we had discussed the broad claim of executive privilege being used by the Eisenhower Administration. It had reached absurd proportions. Almost anyone in an executive department or agency of government would claim privilege against the Congress, and they relied on a letter President Eisenhower had directed to Secretary Stevens, Secretary of the Army, back on May 17, 1954. He had instructed the Secretary not
to respond to a query from Senator McCarthy. But that letter became the general basis for a claim of privilege which was abused but, nevertheless, supported by President Eisenhower. President Kennedy, as Senator Kennedy, agreed that this was an improper claim and agreed with the position I had in my continuing battle with the Eisenhower Administration that if a privilege existed (and the "if" is my own term), that at least it was personal to the President; and he would have to make the decision as to any need for claiming against the Congress.

MR. STERN: In each instance.

MR. MOSS: In each instance. Early in his Administration, in February, I believe, of 1961, we arranged an exchange of letters where President Kennedy would make it clear that he regarded the executive privilege as being personal to the President. Then, in the course of an investigation in the Senate, Secretary McNamara was requested to supply the names of persons who had actually censored speeches of military officers. The Secretary refused on the directions of the President. I then went back to the President with another letter, and this, again, was carefully prearranged, and raised the question of the abuse of the use of the letter to Secretary McNamara, pointing out the precedent of the May 17 letter of 1954. As a result of that, President Kennedy reaffirmed the fact that executive privilege would be directed by the
President in each instance. I believe that that's the chronology.

MR. STERN: Just to confirm and identify the correspondence that you had with the President; you wrote him, as I understand it, on February 15, 1962; and he replied on March 7, 1962...

MR. MOSS: That would be correct.

MR. STERN: ...in which he really affirmed your view that executive privilege could only be exercised or invoked by the President personally and on an instance by instance basis.

MR. MOSS: That's correct.

MR. STERN: You said that this was by prearrangement. Had you discussed this matter with him again just prior to this, or was this worked out with staff?

MR. MOSS: No, this was worked out with staff on the basis of discussions we, I believe, held on the train from either Chico or Marysville, California, to Sacramento, back at the time of the campaign.

MR. STERN: This is the 1960 Presidential...

MR. MOSS: 1960 Presidential campaign.

MR. STERN: Then later that year, at the end of 1962, there was the Cuban missile crisis; and there arose the question of what the Administration's posture would be in a short-of-war situation. I understand that the President made a speech to the American Newspaper Publishers Association Bureau of Advertising early in 1961, in which he suggested, possibly,
the establishment of some planning for a short-of-war censor-
ship situation. Were you involved in the preparation of that
speech in any way?

MR. MOSS: No, I was not. The President sought the help, in advance
of any possible crisis, of the press. The press was
reluctant to voluntarily go into such an arrangement, so
the actual development of a policy was left hanging. However,
at the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, Pierre
Salinger, the Press Secretary to the President, contacted
my committee staff, I understand at the direction of the
President. We were kept informed as to the type of press
policies which the Administration was proposing. I think
that the President was very conscious of the possibility
of an issue developing from the handling of information,
and sufficient planning had not been done in advance for
the development of an orderly press program. As a matter
of fact, now here we are a few years later, and that state-
ment is just as valid today.

MR. STERN: You are referring to planning that possibly should go on
but had not gone on in the Office of Emergency Planning.

MR. MOSS: That's correct. At least it has not been formalized; it
has not been finalized.

MR. STERN: Did you ever bring up that failure of planning with President
Kennedy?

MR. MOSS: Not directly, myself, no. That was developed rather
carefully with his staff; Secretary Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Information; the former Assistant Secretary of State, Manning, for Public Information. It was explored rather carefully by Pierre Salinger. Salinger, I might add here, was extremely cooperative and again indicating that he was acting at all time in conformity with the President's instructions in dealing with the committee.

MR. STERN: You said that Pierre Salinger kept you advised of policies that were being developed in the Cuban missile crisis. Does that mean that he would call you and tell you what decisions had been made, or did he consult with you before the decisions were made?

MR. MOSS: No, we were kept informed. We were not, at that point, asked for advice; or I would have given advice that certainly would have avoided one of the strongest grounds for criticism for the handling of information during the Cuban crisis.

MR. STERN: Which was what?

MR. MOSS: The failure to permit press representatives aboard the ships so that there could be contemporary reporting by qualified reporters, even though release might have to be delayed until after the crisis had passed.

MR. STERN: You're talking about now the picket ships that went out...

MR. MOSS: ...that went out. That's correct.

MR. STERN: ...to intercept the communist ships that were going to Cuba.

MR. MOSS: That's right. I would hope that in any future difficulty
that we would always provide that type of reporting. I felt it an error then, and it would be just as great an error today.

MR. STERN: Did you communicate your views on that to Mr. Salinger at the time?

MR. MOSS: Yes, and in late November of '62, in a speech to the California Press Association, I took very sharp exception to the policies of the Administration, as they had evolved in the Cuban missile crisis, and stated that as soon as the Congress reconvened, I would hold hearings on the handling of information. At all times, my criticism was known in advance by the White House. We tried to work cooperatively; and we had cooperation — not always agreement — but always cooperation. We had it then in the hearings which were held in 1963, early in the session of the Congress.

MR. STERN: Were these hearings specifically on the information handling of the Cuban missile crisis? Or a more general hearing?

MR. MOSS: They were specifically on the handling of the Cuban missile crisis. A report was never issued because of the assassination of the President. Whenever a new administration comes in, it is necessary to re-establish a workable liaison and go back over all of the ground, and we're in the process now of doing that. I might say that at all times in my contacts with President Kennedy and his Administration, I had the feeling that the President was most dedicated to
keeping the American people informed. That was not the case in my dealings with the Eisenhower Administration for eight years. There, at no time, was there evidence of the personal involvement of the President in the information decisions, which were being made by the Administration.

MR. STERN: Did you take exception, too, to the decision not to allow pool reporters on the over-flights of Cuba to ascertain whether or not the missiles had been removed?

MR. MOSS: Yes. We also, later on after the death of the President, under this Johnson Administration, took exception to the failure to permit adequate coverage at Guantanamo during the flare-up there.

MR. STERN: When they threatened to cut the water?

MR. MOSS: That's correct. That was quickly overcome, but I feel very strongly that you should have any of these crisis areas covered by good reporters. I think that it's part of the preservation of the history of these periods that they be reported by competent professionals.

MR. STERN: Was there, during the Cuban missile crisis, any suggestion or consideration that you know of, in the Administration, of a formal censorship system of press dispatches concerning the...

MR. MOSS: I was informed by telephone, by Pierre Salinger, that this was a possibility under discussion at the time.

MR. STERN: Did you comment on it then, to him? I'm sure you did.
MR. MOSS: My staff was instructed to make it very clear to the Administration that we would not want any censorship that was not voluntarily agreed to by the media. The previous periods of war in which the United States has become engaged illustrated rather clearly that the media could be depended upon, given proper information, to censor themselves or to accept a code of censorship and administrate without having it forced on them.

MR. STERN: Did you get any indication that the President, himself, was involved in the decision not to impose any such censorship?

MR. MOSS: I had the strong feeling that the President, himself, was involved in every decision that was made during that very busy period of the Cuban crisis.

MR. STERN: During President Kennedy's tenure, Speaker Rayburn died, and Mr. McCormack stepped up to be Speaker of the House; and the whole ladder of the Democratic leadership in the House moved up one notch, and you became Deputy Whip.

MR. MOSS: I moved in at the bottom of that ladder, that's correct.

MR. STERN: Did you have any discussions with the President about putting your foot on the lowest rung?

MR. MOSS: No, that was a decision of Speaker McCormack and Majority Leader Carl Albert.

MR. STERN: As Deputy Whip, you would have been included in many of the White House conferences that previously you had not attended. Would that be correct?
MR. MOSS: Not very many of them because normally the Deputy Whip only attends if the Whip, Hale Boggs, is absent. However, I had to work much more closely with the White House staff -- men like Larry O'Brien -- on all of the legislative problems. I assume that I was included in more of the late afternoon coffee sessions for discussions of legislative problems with the President than would have been true had I not moved into that spot.

MR. STERN: Are there any incidents of conferences you may have attended in Hale Boggs' place -- in other words, your acting as Whip -- that you think would be of value to future historians?

MR. MOSS: Not that I can recall.

MR. STERN: Would there be any other contacts with the President on any other occasions that you think would be of value, either on politics or...

MR. MOSS: Well, of course, I was very flattered on one occasion at the White House to have the President urge me rather strongly to run for the United States Senate for the second seat from California.

MR. STERN: Would that have been against Senator Knowland?

MR. MOSS: That would have been against Senator Kuchel.

MR. STERN: Senator Kuchel. In what year? '62?

MR. MOSS: It would have been in the '62 campaign. At that time the President was very complimentary of the work I had been doing in the Congress. But having no interest in the
Senate, I expressed my appreciation but didn’t avail myself of the offer of backing.

**MR. STERN:** Any other incidents or contacts with the President that you think might throw a little light on his personality or his tenure or his political skills?

**MR. MOSS:** I think on the matter of his personality — and, of course, this has been recorded for history because of the excellent coverage of television — but I think the President’s personality was demonstrated in the area of competition with Bob Hope at the time that the President presented him with the medal. I think the President was a man of such keen wit and such an incisive grasp of the personality of others that he was always a delight. He was able to come up and match the best of our professionals. I was privileged to see this in the rather small group at the White House at the time of Harold MacMillan’s visit to Washington, when there were about sixteen of us, I think, for a luncheon for the Prime Minister. I think that the President charmed him completely with this very ready wit that struck down any of the reserve that the Prime Minister might have had in the discussions, which were very informal and very wide-ranging, covering the common problems of the United States and Great Britain.

**MR. STERN:** Getting back to one early contact that you had with then Senator Kennedy, this would have been at the 1956 Democratic
Mr. Moss: That's correct. I arrived in Chicago about ten days before the convention to meet with the Platform Committee in the open public hearings and then was designated as one of a small group that met around the clock for four or five days in the actual drafting of the language. I suppose that I became a member of a sub-subcommittee that was working on civil rights language. It was very difficult, and we finally felt that we had achieved the possible — perhaps Congressman Geller and Steve Mitchell are deserving of the greatest credit for that. The language had been very carefully circulated to President Truman and to Adlai Stevenson and to Mrs. Roosevelt, to quite a number of very liberal leaders in the fight for civil rights. It was acceptable to them. Congressman Dawson was on the subcommittee, and it was acceptable to him; and we felt that we had achieved a great deal. When I reported back to my own delegation, the
California delegation almost tore me apart. I had vigorous disagreement with the Democratic candidate for the United States Senate that year, Richard Richards, a disagreement which finally erupted in the convention, itself, when we were both called upon to present our views to the convention. Senator Kennedy found my predicament rather amusing, and in talking of the problem that I had — and it was a rather considerable one, leading, in fact, to my exclusion from the Platform Committee four years later, as punishment by my California friends — expressed his views. He was in substantial agreement with the type of language that we had come up with. I never felt that there was any substantive difference between what we had actually written and what many of the dissenters felt should have been included. It was, at best, an exercise in semantics and not one of substance. But it was, again, an exposition of the fact that the President was a man who had a strong sense of what was possible in politics and in government. We had achieved that possible in that instance.

**MR. STERN:** But he did not seem to side with the Richard Richards type of position, urging more of a cutting edge?

**MR. MOSS:** No, he did not.

**MR. STERN:** Did you get the feeling when you talked to him during the convention that he was out for the Vice Presidency, or was this a sort of last minute ...
MR. MOSS: No, I did not feel that he was out for the Vice Presidency, and I felt that the drive to try to get the nomination for him was a last minute decision. I was very active in my delegation to help him try to get it. I've always been happy that he didn't get it because I think that it might have prevented his achieving the victory of four years later and denied us his services as President.