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Statement for the Record

House Task Force on Declassification of Federal Secrets: the JFK Files

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Thank you. It's an honor to address this committee today.

Historians are time travelers. I was just in 1947, when John F. Kennedy began his first term in the House. And now I find myself here, speaking to people who sit where he once sat, doing the kind of work he once did.

During JFK's eleven years in Congress: He questioned everything—not to impress, but to understand. He listened. He changed.

That took courage—not the kind that earned him a Purple Heart in World War II. Political courage is slower, quieter—and has the power to reshape a country.

His public service deepened from there. He wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book, established the Peace Corps. He governed in the crucible of the Cold War, civil rights, and the space race. He made mistakes—and learned from them. The Bay of Pigs taught him restraint, the value of failure, the strength in stepping back—and Americans noticed. By 1963, his approval rating peaked at 82 percent.

None of that was inevitable. He chose discipline over drama, substance over show.

Don't get me wrong—Jack Kennedy understood the power of media. He courted the press, worked the spotlight, shaped the moment. But only after he'd earned it.

That's why his name endures as a standard of greatness. The JFK Library's Profiles in Courage Award carries that legacy forward; it has honored George H.W. Bush, the heroes of 9/11, and Mike Pence for what history always notices: putting country first when it matters most.

Of course, JFK wasn't perfect. I've never studied a saint, let alone met one. I see history's boldfaced names on their best days and their worst. But complexity isn't a liability—unless you're cherry picking with an agenda.

Which brings me to today's hearing. The title uses charged words: obstruction, obfuscation, deception. But in the 132 days since the JFK assassination records were released, not even conspiracy theorists claim it upended the Warren Commission.

No hidden truths. No real disclosures. No shocking revelations. This wasn't history disrupted—it was history remastered: a 60th anniversary re-release with better resolution and the same ending.

There is something unprecedented in the files: Unredacted Social Security numbers and private information of living Americans. I've never seen anything like it—but given that most quality control has been fired, like the State Department's Historical Advisory Committee, I'm afraid it'll become the new normal.

Surely that resonates with a Congress that vigilantly protects its own records. You've preserved the right to classify your office's documents as private property.

I hope we talk about public trust--and what appears to fit into a larger pattern. The Kennedy Center is no longer bipartisan, the Rose Garden stripped of its historic character, USAID was gutted. Taken altogether, it's hard not to see this as an attempt to reduce a consequential leader to a grotesque spectacle—his legacy defined by how he died, not what he did.

On November 22, 1963, America lost John F. Kennedy—and with him, a sense of possibility. That's how I think of the archives, too: crammed with untold stories—ones we truly don't know. What an opportunity for the president—by default, our Historian-in-Chief, and by great good luck, in office as America approaches its 250th anniversary. But instead, tragedy begets tragedy.

In 1953, JFK entered the Senate. A year later, his colleagues censured Joseph McCarthy. Kennedy rose as McCarthy fell—a reminder that Americans tire of reckless spectacle, division, and demagoguery. They seek substance, accountability, and an authentic commitment to the public good.

I began by saying that historians are time travelers—we study the past to understand the present. These records make me wonder how this moment will be remembered. When future historians ask whether we met it with the courage it demanded—what will they find?

JFK understood how much depends on that. The real question is: do we?