The PRESIDENTIAL RECORDINGS

JOHN F. KENNEDY

THE GREAT CRISES, VOLUME ONE

JULY 30–AUGUST 1962

Timothy Naftali
Editor, Volume One

George Eliades
Francis Gavin
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Jonathan Rosenberg
David Shreve
Associate Editors, Volume One

Patricia Dunn
Assistant Editor

Philip Zelikow and Ernest May
General Editors

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Preface to John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Volumes 1–3

BY PHILIP ZELIKOW AND ERNEST MAY

These three volumes in the Miller Center Presidential Recordings series cover the three months after Kennedy first began to tape-record meetings.

Before and after becoming president, Kennedy had made use of a recording device called a Dictaphone, mostly for dictating letters or notes. In the summer of 1962 he asked Secret Service Agent Robert Bouck to conceal recording devices in the Cabinet Room, the Oval Office, and a study/library in the Mansion. Without explaining why, Bouck obtained Tandberg reel-to-reel tape recorders, high-quality machines for the period, from the U.S. Army Signal Corps. He placed two of these machines in the basement of the West Wing of the White House in a room reserved for storing private presidential files. He placed another in the basement of the Executive Mansion.

The West Wing machines were connected by wire to two microphones in the Cabinet Room and two in the Oval Office. Those in the Cabinet Room were on the outside wall, placed in two spots covered by drapes where once there had been wall fixtures. They were activated by a switch at the President's place at the Cabinet table, easily mistaken for a buzzer press. Of the microphones in the Oval Office, one was in the kneehole of the President's desk, the other concealed in a coffee table across the room. Each could be turned on or off with a single push on an inconspicuous button.

We do not know where the microphone in the study of the Mansion was located. In any case, Bouck, who had chief responsibility for the system, said in 1976, in an oral history interview, that President Kennedy "did almost no recording in the Mansion." Of the machine in the basement of the Mansion, he said: "Except for one or two short recordings, I don't think it was ever used." So far, except possibly for one short recording included in these volumes, no tape from the Mansion machine has turned up.

President Kennedy also had a Dictaphone hooked up to a telephone in the Oval Office and possibly also to a telephone in his bedroom. He

could activate it, and so could his private secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, who knew of the secret microphones, often made sure that they were turned off if the President had forgotten to do so, and took charge of finished reels of tape when they were brought to her by Bouck or Bouck's assistant, Agent Chester Miller.

Though Kennedy's brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy's secretary, Angie Novello, certainly knew of the tapes and dictabelts by some point in 1963, it is not clear that they had this knowledge earlier. Anecdotes suggest that the President's close aide and scheduler, Kenneth O'Donnell, might have known about the system and might have told another aide, Dave Powers, but the anecdotes are unsupported. Most White House insiders, including counsel Theodore Sorensen, who had been Kennedy's closest aide in the Senate, were astonished when they learned later that their words had been secretly captured on tape.

After Kennedy's assassination, Evelyn Lincoln was quickly displaced by President Johnson's secretaries. She arranged, however, for the Secret Service agents to pull out all the microphones, wires, and recorders and took the tapes and dictabelts to her newly assigned offices in the Executive Office Building, adjacent to the White House. Though Robert Kennedy had charge of these and all other records from the Kennedy White House, Lincoln retained physical custody.

During Kennedy's presidency, only a small number of conversations were transcribed. Though Lincoln attempted to make some other transcripts, she never had much time for doing so. George Dalton, a former Navy Petty Officer and general chore man for the Kennedy family, took on the job. "Dalton transcripts" have not been released, but everyone who has seen them uses terms like *fragmentary*, *terrible to unreliable*, *awful*, or *garbage*.

The tapes and dictabelts migrated with President Kennedy's papers. First they moved to the main National Archives building in downtown Washington, D.C. Herman Kahn (an archivist, not the strategic analyst) was responsible for them within the National Archives system; Robert Kennedy was the custodian for materials belonging to the family, including all the tapes. Robert Kennedy disclosed the existence of the tapes in 1965 to Burke Marshall, a legal scholar and former Justice Department colleague. Lincoln and Dalton were looking after the materials, and Dalton was attempting some transcripts. The papers and the tapes then were moved to a federal records depository in Waltham, Massachusetts. In the summer and fall of 1967, when Robert Kennedy drafted his famous memoir of the Cuban missile crisis, *Thirteen Days*, he used what-

ever transcripts existed and almost certainly listened to tapes. Passages in the book which refer to "diaries" seem nearly all to be based on the secret recordings.[1]

After Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, custody of President Kennedy's private papers became the primary responsibility of Senator Edward Kennedy (Burke Marshall represented Jacqueline Kennedy's interests). Dalton was employed by Senator Kennedy, and either some tapes or some of Dalton's transcripts or both may have been moved into Senator Kennedy's own files. Despite occasional rumors, none of the custodians publicly acknowledged that the tapes existed.

When Nixon's taping system was revealed in 1973 and Congress was seeking access to those tapes, Senator Kennedy was a member of the inquiring Judiciary Committee. With rumors by then rife, he and the family quickly confirmed that President Kennedy had, indeed, also secretly taped meetings and conversations in the White House. They publicly promised to turn the tapes over to the National Archives. During the next two years they negotiated a deed of gift that put in the hands of archivists at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, Massachusetts, all tapes except those dealing with private family affairs.

According to Richard Burke, a longtime member of Senator Kennedy's staff, Dalton was instructed by the late Steven Smith, Senator Kennedy's brother-in-law, to remove sensitive documents from the Kennedy papers and to cull the tapes in order to protect the family's reputation. Burke also claims that he read transcripts by Dalton from Oval Office dictabelts of conversations with Marilyn Monroe and Judith Exner and that Dalton had erased potentially embarrassing passages.[2] But Burke is an undependable source. A book he wrote about his years with the senator is full not only of errors but of outright inventions. Yet there are others, including at least one Kennedy Library archivist who received the tapes, who suspected that between 1973 and 1975, Dalton—possibly assisted by Kennedy aide Dave Powers and retired archivist and Kennedy family employee Frank Harrington—looked at the tapes to see what should be removed without leaving any record or documentation

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1. See Timothy Naftali, "The Origins of 'Thirteen Days,'" *Miller Center Report* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 23–24.

2. Philip Bennett, "Mystery Surrounds Role of JFK Tapes Transcriber," *Boston Globe*, 31 March 1993, p. 1; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), pp. 454–55.

of their work. Dalton has refused to discuss what he did. Senator Kennedy's then–chief of staff, when interviewed in 1993 by the *Boston Globe* reporter Philip Bennett, denied that Dalton had worked on the tapes at the direction of Senator Kennedy, but Burke Marshall told Philip Zelikow in February 2000 that he thought Dalton had been working on the tapes for the Senator, at least in general.

In 1975, tapes recording about 248 hours of meetings and 12 hours of telephone conversations became part of the President's Office Files at the library. While a treasure trove for history, this handover did not include all the recordings that President Kennedy had made, nor were all the recordings complete.

Fortunately perhaps, the Secret Service agents had originally numbered and catalogued the reels of meeting tapes in a simple way, so removals and anomalies are easily noticed. There are a few. Three tapes were received by the library with reels containing "separate tape segments." It is possible that they had been cut and spliced, for two of these tapes, including the one made on August 22, 1962, concerned intelligence issues and may have involved discussion of covert efforts to assassinate Castro. The Kennedy Library archivist Alan Goodrich says, however, that the "separate tape segments" may exist simply because the Secret Service agents were winding some partial reels of tape together to fill out the reels of blank tape being fed into the machine.

Another tape from August 1962 is simply blank. Several more numbered tape boxes, for tapes made in June 1963, had no tapes inside, though the library has "Dalton transcripts" for at least four of these missing tapes. The fact that still other tapes received by the library had been miswound suggests at least that they had been clumsily handled. Since the library has not yet issued its own forensic reports about the "separate tape fragments" or blank tape or made the original tape reels available for outside examination or released the existing "Dalton transcripts" for missing tapes, we cannot draw conclusive judgments about just what happened.

The dictabelt recordings never had any order. Lincoln seems to have filed them randomly. Some seem to have been partially overwritten. The Kennedy Library's numbers merely distinguish one item from another. They provide no guidance to chronological sequence or content. As with the meeting tapes, the Kennedy Library has attempted to date and identify the tapes, and the editors of these volumes have confirmed and, in various cases, amended this information as a result of further research. A number of dictabelts were taken by Lincoln without authorization for a private collection of Kennedy memorabilia. Some of these went to the

Kennedy Library after her death in 1995; others turned up in the hands of a collector who had befriended her. In 1998 the Kennedy Library was able to recover these dictabelts too, but there is no way of knowing whether there were others and, if so, what their fate was.

Once in the jurisdiction of the Archivist of the United States, the recordings were handled with thoroughgoing professionalism. The library remastered the tapes on a Magnecord 1022 for preservation. The dictabelts were copied onto new masters. All copies of the tapes, including those used for these books, derive from these new preservation masters.

Some minor anomalies were introduced as a result of the remastering. Listeners will occasionally hear a tape stop and the recording start up, replaying a sentence or two. That is an artifact of the remastering process, not the original White House taping. The original tapes were also recorded at relatively high density ($1\frac{7}{8}$ inches per second). The remastered tapes necessarily have different running speeds that produce subtle audio distortion. The new masters, for example, seem to have people talking slightly faster than they did at the time.

The library was initially at a loss as to how to make tapes available to the public. Many contain material still covered by security classification. Because of the poor sound quality of most of the tapes, it was not easy to identify sensitive passages. The library initially attempted to prepare its own transcripts and submit these for classification review. But the task was hard, the library staff was small, and funds were meager. Moreover, some archivists believed as a matter of principle that the library should not give official standing to transcripts that might contain transcribers' errors. In the view of the National Archives and Records Administration, only the tapes themselves are archival records. All transcripts are works of subjective interpretation. The effort at transcription came to an end in 1983, and almost all the tapes remained under lock and key.

In 1993 the library acquired new equipment and began putting the recordings onto Digital Audio Tape (DAT). These could be reviewed in Washington and digitally marked without transcripts. Changes in procedures, along with determined efforts by two archivists, Stephanie Fawcett and Mary Kennefick, accelerated the pace of declassification. Between 1996 and 2000 about half of the recordings in the Kennedy Library became available for public release; the rest await declassification review.

While the Kennedy Library has been careful to make no deletions or erasures from tapes and dictabelts in its possession, the copies publicly released, and used for these volumes, do have carefully annotated excisions of passages still security classified. These passages were excised

digitally, not literally, and remain intact on the library's preservation masters. It is to be hoped that future, more tolerant declassification reviews may someday release some of the material that currently is excised. But even for the sanitized tapes, the library issues no transcripts.

Our work on these tapes commenced in 1995. We obtained analog cassettes of tapes relating to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis as soon as they were released. Painstakingly, we listened to and transcribed those tapes. Each of us spent many hours listening to each hour of tape. Even so, our transcripts contained large numbers of notations for words or passages that were unclear or speakers that could not be identified. The resultant transcripts were published by Harvard University Press in 1997 as *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis.*

Because of support from the Governing Council of the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs, and W. W. Norton, the transcripts of meetings on the missile crisis in volumes 2 and 3 of this series are more complete and accurate than were our original products. We were able to decipher in those tapes large numbers of words and passages previously incomprehensible and to identify speakers with greater certainty. We were also able to draw on the assistance of other historians employed in the Miller Center's Presidential Recordings Project, employing and benefiting from the team method we describe in our general preface on the project.

Some questions nevertheless linger because of uncertainties, already described, concerning the completeness and integrity of the tapes now available. Why were they made? Did Kennedy use the on/off switch with a view to controlling, even distorting the historical record? Did others, after his murder, tamper with the tapes in order artificially to shape the record of events? In view of the possibility that a small fraction of the meeting tapes were removed or mangled after the fact, can they really be regarded as better sources than self-serving memoirs or oral histories? To the extent that they are valid, undoctored records of conversations and meetings, do they tell us much that could not be learned from other sources?

Our judgment is that any tampering with the tapes was so crude and ham handed that it extended only to removals. The extent of such removals may have been constrained by the original Secret Service cataloguing system. Since missing tapes would be noticed, too many missing tapes might cause an outcry and lead to unwelcome inquiries. So the removals of meeting tapes, if that is the explanation for the anomalies, were relatively limited. The situation of the dictabelts is different. Since they were not catalogued at the time they were made, we cannot know how many—if any—are missing.

The most plausible explanation for Kennedy's making secret tape recordings is that he wanted material to be used later in writing a memoir. Since he seems neither to have had transcripts made (with two minor exceptions in 1963) nor to have listened to any of the tapes, it is unlikely that he wanted them for current business. He had himself written histories and was by most accounts prone to asking historians' questions: How did this situation develop? What had previous administrations done? He knew how hard it was to answer such questions from surviving documentary records. And he faced the apparent likelihood that, even if reelected in 1964, he would be an out-of-work ex-president when not quite 51 years old.

Did Kennedy tape just to have material putting himself in a favorable light? On some occasions, he must have refrained from pushing an "on" button because he wanted no record of a meeting or conversation. Especially on early tapes, there are pauses at moments when the President was speaking of tactics for dealing with legislative leaders. Almost certainly, he made recordings only when he thought the occasions important. As a result, the tapes record relatively little humdrum White House business such as meetings with citizen delegations or conferences with congressmen and others about patronage.

Those who have spent much time with the tapes and those who have compared the tapes to their own experience working with Kennedy find no evidence that he taped only self-flattering moments. He often made statements or discussed ideas that would have greatly damaged him had they become public. Early in the missile crisis, for example, he mused about his own possible responsibility for having brought it on. "Last month I said we weren't going to [allow it]," he said. "Last month I should have said that we don't care." He never seemed to make speeches during a meeting for the benefit of future listeners. His occasional taped monologues were private dictation about something that had happened or what he was thinking, obviously for his own later reference.

Two other points apply. First, he had no reason to suppose that the tapes would ever be heard by anyone other than himself unless he chose to make them available. They were completely secret. Second, he could hardly have known just what statements or positions would look good to posterity, for neither he nor his colleagues could know how the stories would turn out.

The tapes of missile crisis debates establish far more clearly than any other records the reasons why Kennedy thought Soviet missiles in Cuba so dangerous and important. They make abundantly clear that his preoccupation was not with Cuba or the immediate threat to the United

States. He feared that, if he did not insist on removal of the missiles, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev would be emboldened to try to take over West Berlin, in which case he—Kennedy—would have only two choices. He would either have to abandon the two and a half million West Berliners theretofore protected by the United States, or he would have to use nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union, for there was no imaginable way of defending West Berlin with conventional military forces. The Soviet missiles in Cuba would then be a "knife in our guts" constraining the U.S. nuclear threats to save Berlin.

The tapes also explain as do no other sources Kennedy's approach to the Mississippi civil rights crisis. They show him worrying about international economics, specifically the drain on U.S. gold reserves, to such an extent that he questions whether the United States can or should continue to keep troops in Europe. The tapes in some instances disclose facts still hidden by walls of security classification, as, for example, that the Kennedy administration had plans to create an illegal CIA unit to investigate U.S. journalists and officials.

But the greatest value of these recordings does not reside in specific revelations. It comes, as is said in the general preface to the project, from giving a listener or reader unique insight into the presidency and presidential decision making. We are proud to be able to put this extraordinary source into the hands of students of history and politics.