The PRESIDENTIAL RECORDINGS

JOHN F. KENNEDY

THE GREAT CRISES, VOLUME ONE

JULY 30–AUGUST 1962

Timothy Naftali
Editor, Volume One

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

Patricia Dunn
Assistant Editor

Philip Zelikow and Ernest May
General Editors

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY • NEW YORK • LONDON

Portions of this three-volume set were previously published by Harvard University Press in *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*
by Philip D. Zelikow and Ernest R. May.

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to Permissions,
W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110

The text of this book is composed in Bell, with the display set in Bell and Bell Semi-Bold
Composition by Tom Ernst
Manufacturing by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group
Book design by Dana Sloan
Production manager: Andrew Marasia

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

John F. Kennedy : the great crises.
p. cm. (The presidential recordings)
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
Contents: v. 1. July 30–August 1962 / Timothy Naftali, editor—v. 2. September 4–October 20, 1962 / Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, editors—v. 3. October 22–28, 1962 / Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, editors.
ISBN 0-393-04954-X
1. United States—Politics and government—1961–1963—Sources. 2. United States—Foreign relations—1961–1963—Sources. 3. Crisis management—United States—History—20th century—Sources. 4. Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917–1963—Archives. I. Naftali, Timothy J. II. Zelikow, Philip, 1954– III. May, Ernest R. IV. Series.

E841.J58 2001
973.922—dc21 2001030053

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Introduction: Five Hundred Days

BY TIMOTHY NAFTALI

It was July 1962, just past his five-hundredth day in office, and John F. Kennedy was becoming concerned about the fate of his presidency. He had set the bar high. A friend, the writer Gore Vidal, noted in an early portrait of the President that Kennedy "intends to be great."[1] At stake was not simply personal glory. Having been elected at 43, Kennedy symbolized the coming of age of a new generation of Americans. On a cold day in January 1961 the junior officers of World War II had trooped to Washington, D.C., to replace the aging generals of the Eisenhower administration. Kennedy challenged these young leaders, as he did himself, to seek a New Frontier, whether that frontier lay in the inner cities or in outer space. Like the men assembled by Frank Sinatra's Danny Ocean in the 1960 Rat Pack film, *Ocean's Eleven*, the New Frontiersmen were united by a code of honor earned through the hardship of the Depression and the experience of fighting in World War II. Kennedy himself had not experienced the Depression. His father had made his money during Prohibition, leaving the family well fortified during the difficulties of the 1930s. But he understood combat. In 1943, a PT boat he commanded was rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer. Kennedy had saved his crew. Too ironic by nature to cast himself in the role of political savior, Kennedy nevertheless took seriously that as president, he carried the hopes of his generation. And he worried that it might seem he was letting his peers down.

In mid-1962 Kennedy could be excused if he doubted he would ever have a lasting effect on the American consciousness. That summer his presidency was not going terribly well. Kennedy had just suffered a telling legislative failure. In what the *Los Angeles Times* described as "Kennedy's Blackest Week with Congress," his plan for medical assistance for the elderly had been defeated on July 21, 1962, by a slim mar-

1. Gore Vidal, *United States: Essays 1952–1992* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 803.

gin in the Senate, despite a overwhelming Democratic majority in that body.[2] The outcome had stung Kennedy, who reacted by holding a press conference the night of the Senate vote to decry this "most serious defeat for every American family."[3]

That legislative failure was the latest in a series of signs that the Kennedy magic was not having the effect that many had hoped and he had expected. The key areas of his presidency were marked by frustration and mistakes, high promise but middling result. The U.S. economy, for example, was in the doldrums. The hoped for expansion after the recessions of the late Eisenhower years had not happened. Despite Kennedy's promise to "get the country moving again," unemployment hovered at 5½ percent, much lower than what the United States would experience in the 1970s and 1980s, but for this period unacceptably high. Business investment was also falling short of administration projections, though corporate earnings were strong and rising. And there were signs that the U.S. economy might even get weaker. New orders for durable goods—a bellwether for the industrial economy of the 1950s and 1960s—had been falling since January 1962. The stock market had taken a 25 percent tumble in the spring and had not recovered. Finally, due to outflows in foreign aid, overseas investment, and the cost of military operations and installations around the world, the U.S. balance of payments situation was difficult. The gold supply was down to its lowest level since the Depression.[4]

The state of the U.S. economy that summer seemed to confirm some of the early criticisms of the young President. Conservative businessmen had always been wary of Kennedy, who seemed too liberal despite the views of his businessman father, Joseph P. Kennedy. As president-elect Kennedy had averted a run on the U.S. dollar by assuring Wall Street that the liberal economist and Kennedy adviser John Kenneth Galbraith would not be designated secretary of the Treasury. Nominating instead Republican C. Douglas Dillon (who brought with him the talented financier Robert Roosa to handle foreign economic policy), Kennedy purchased an uneasy truce with Big Business, but by the summer of 1962 that truce seemed increasingly untenable. In April Kennedy had used his

---

2. *Los Angeles Times*, 22 July 1962.
3. *New York Times*, 22 July 1962.
4. The United States covered 30 percent of the infrastructural cost of NATO; this meant an annual outflow to Europe of $1.5 billion. In the Kennedy era, exchange rates, the relationship between national currencies, were fixed and imbalances in the accounts of the major Western economies were redeemable in gold.

power to talk down the U.S. steel industry, which had announced a price hike. Steel prices returned to their pre-showdown level—a victory for the administration. But the defeat of Big Steel spread fears of more government intervention and the Dow Jones industrials plummeted. "Not since the days of FDR and the New Deal," intoned the magazine *Newsweek*, "had the level of attack on a President, his family, and his policies seemed quite so heated."[5] Becoming popular with some businessmen were buttons emblazoned with "I Miss Ike."

The condition of the economy also inspired some criticism from the Left.[6] Keynesian economists were pushing the President to ward off a recession by stimulating the economy. In a reversal of the politics of the 1980s and 1990s, the Left advocated a tax cut, while the Right argued that tax cuts were unacceptable because they were inflationary. Liberals were impatiently waiting for Kennedy to act on a tax plan.

Criticism of the President was not simply directed at the economic performance of his administration. A little less than two hundred years earlier, the country had rid itself of George III and the Hanoverian dynasty. The Kennedys now seemed to some to be acting as if they were the country's newest royal line. Just after the election, John Kennedy had appointed his brother Robert to his cabinet as Attorney General. The younger Kennedy had run the campaign for John F. Kennedy but lacked extensive judicial experience. More than a year later, Bobby Kennedy seemed to be working out in his job, though newspaper accounts of the horseplay around the Kennedy pool in Virginia were confirming an image of the Kennedys as spoiled and immature. But the most recent challenge to the President's reputation was a storm of protest over the attempt to extend presidential coattails to an even younger member of the clan. That summer Edward M. "Ted" Kennedy announced that he would be running for the U.S. Senate from Massachusetts. "We could take Jack and Jackie and Bobby and Caroline," said one wag, "but Teddy was too much."[7]

In foreign affairs, the Kennedy record was also not flattering. Kennedy had criticized Eisenhower for his unimaginative foreign policy, accusing him both of having missed opportunities to reduce the chance of nuclear war with the Soviet Union and of having undermined U.S. interests in the Third World. In the initial months of his term, Kennedy had initiated more dialogue with the Soviets, at times involving his

---

5. "Kennedy and His Critics," *Newsweek*, 16 July 1962.
6. *New Republic*, 16 July 1962.
7. "Kennedy and His Critics," *Newsweek*, 16 July 1962.

brother as a secret back channel to Moscow. Yet relations with Moscow seemed to be worse now than they had been in January 1961. A summit conference with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in June 1961 had turned out badly, with the two leaders' disagreeing over the preconditions for peace and stability in the world. As a result, there was little movement on controlling the nuclear arms race or even on getting a superpower ban on testing nuclear weapons in the atmosphere or underground. The latter goal was of special interest to the President, who saw a nuclear test ban as essential to preventing the diffusion of nuclear technology to nonnuclear states.

The results were no better in the Third World. Efforts to remove Cuban strongman Fidel Castro in early 1961 had led to the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs, where a 1,200-man Cuban emigré army was stopped at the beach and captured. A presidential promise to provide some air cover to the force was rescinded at the eleventh hour, and the United States, for all Kennedy's efforts to limit his public exposure to the failure, received the brunt of criticism for the affair from Bogotá to Berlin. Meanwhile carrots seemed to be as unproductive as sticks in pushing the administration's goals. Having announced the Alliance for Progress in March 1961 as a long-term crusade to combat Communism and shore up Latin America's fledgling democracies through trade and economic assistance, Kennedy found these goals seemingly incompatible in the short run. By mid-1962, military leaders had removed friendly elected governments in Argentina and Peru and were threatening to do the same in Brazil, the largest country in Latin America. These coups posed a threat to the cherished concepts of constitutionalism and democracy in the region and a challenge to the spirit of the Alliance for Progress. Yet the dilemma for Kennedy was that the political generals in Latin America shared his assessment of the threat to regional stability from Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union to a greater extent than did the democrats they overthrew. Should the United States work with these generals or not? The only possible exception to this dismal picture of U.S. policy in the Third World was in Southeast Asia, where a cease-fire had been negotiated in landlocked Laos. But even there the policy had flaws: Kennedy knew that the North Vietnamese were not fully respecting their promise to let Laos be neutral in the Cold War. Moreover, further south in the region there was no cease-fire of any kind. Kennedy had made very little headway in helping the South Vietnamese defend themselves.

By the standards of the presidents who succeeded him, John F. Kennedy was extremely popular as he neared the midterm elections of 1962. Yet Kennedy had reason not to be pleased with the polls that sum-

mer. The recent defeats in Congress, uncertainty over the future course of the U.S. economy, and the bashing by his critics had taken their toll. Kennedy's public approval rating had dipped below 70 percent. For all the glamor of the Kennedy White House and all the freshness of spirit brought by this handsome young leader with the photogenic family, Kennedy was now less popular than Dwight Eisenhower had been.

It was in this moment of disappointment that Kennedy decided to create an unprecedented record of his actions as president. He had long believed that few if any outsiders could understand the burdens of office.[8] A few months earlier Kennedy had gotten into a spirited debate with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the Harvard historian who served as one of his special assistants in the White House, about how historians evaluated presidential performance. Schlesinger had provoked the exchange by asking Kennedy's opinion of a system to rank U.S. presidents. "Only the President himself can know," Kennedy replied, "what his real pressures and his real alternatives are."[9] A less self-conscious leader might well have shrugged off the inevitable chasm between the way he saw his leadership and how it was perceived by others. But Kennedy was an atypical politician in that he was also an historian at heart. In his senior year at Harvard he had written an analysis of British foreign policy before World War II. The thesis, published as *Why England Slept*, was the work of a young man who believed that democracies needed strong, vital leadership to fight dictatorships. That belief and the need to chronicle the struggles of the powerful never left Kennedy.

In mid-July 1962, Kennedy directed his Secret Service staff to install a recording system to tape his conversations in the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room, and the residential portion of the White House. This was not unheard of for a U.S. president. To varying degrees, three of Kennedy's predecessors had made secret tapes. But these had been small-scale operations, limited to the Oval Office and, at least in the case of Roosevelt and Truman, rarely used. Kennedy had in mind something bigger.[10] By the time of Dallas, 16 months later, he had recorded over 270 hours of high-level deliberations in the White House.

---

8. Author's Interview with Theodore Sorensen, April 2000.

9. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1965), p. 619. On 29 July 1962 the *New York Times* published the first presidential ranking since 1948, which was done by Schlesinger's father, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr.

10. Franklin Roosevelt had a system installed in a closet of the Oval Office in the summer of 1940. Although it appears that Roosevelt lost interest in this system after he was elected to an unprecedented third term in 1940, he never ordered its removal. Harry Truman inherited the

Robert Kennedy once joked that among the things their father had taught the brothers was "never write it down."[11] John F. Kennedy, despite a love for language and history, had followed his father's advice for over a year in the White House. But now he wanted a fuller record. The difficulties of his presidency had set the stage for this decision to install a taping system. Kennedy assumed that historians would not get his presidency right and secret recordings would give him fodder for a future memoir. But the precise timing of Kennedy's decision to tape and the enthusiasm with which he used the machine once the decision was made were more likely the result of his desire to be sure to chronicle one particular challenge of the many swirling about him that summer.

Amidst the many difficulties at home, Kennedy concluded that the United States faced its greatest foreign danger since the early 1940s. The President sensed that events were pushing the United States and the Soviet Union closer to war than they had been for some time. Earlier in the year, Kennedy had read Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, a well-written history of the coming of World War I. Kennedy, who read widely, would on occasion come across something that profoundly influenced him. Tuchman's work was important to him in that the narrative demonstrated how none of the major players in Europe at the time—German chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the Russian czar Nicholas II, or British foreign minister Edward Grey—had wanted war.[12] Yet war was the sum total of all of their actions.

Kennedy saw a disturbing parallel between 1914 and 1962. Instead of the Balkans, the tinderbox this time would be Adolf Hitler's former capital, Berlin. As partners in the Grand Alliance against fascism, the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union had in 1945 each earned the right to occupy the city. Since November 1958, however, the Soviets had intermittently threatened unilateral action to change the postwar status quo and end the Allied occupation of the western sectors of Berlin. In the late spring of 1962 Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had resumed pressure on the West to quit Berlin, insisting that otherwise

---

system and used it intermittently. He left just over ten hours of tapes from 1945 and 1948. Dwight Eisenhower used a different system and taped quite a few meetings from 1954 to 1956, though only about a dozen hours have been found by the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

11. Quoted in Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy, His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p.172. Robert Kennedy made this comment in a note to the director of central intelligence John McCone on 2 May 1962.

12. Robert Kennedy recounted this in *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 62.

peace would be impossible in Central Europe. Kennedy, for his part, was very clear that the United States would never abandon West Berlin. "It is a vital interest of the United States," Kennedy told the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, on July 17.[13] Nevertheless, Khrushchev would not let up. In the third week of July, when negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union ground to a halt over the future of a Western presence in the German city, Khrushchev warned U.S. ambassador Llewellyn Thompson that "he would have no choice but to proceed with a signature of [a peace] treaty [with East Germany] after which our rights there, including right of access, would end."[14] Khrushchev made no secret about expecting a major crisis in the fall. He even asked Thompson whether Kennedy wanted the Berlin question "brought to a head" before or after the midterm elections in the United States.[15]

What made the Berlin issue so difficult was that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) could not defend West Berlin if Khrushchev lost patience and sought a forceful solution. West Berlin was about 100 miles inside the territory of East Germany and could easily be swallowed up by the Soviet force stationed in East Germany. Even if Khrushchev decided not to invade, this NATO enclave was in a perilous position. The Soviets could starve West Berlin into submission by closing down all access routes, including those by air, between West Germany and the city. Weighing down file cabinets in the White House were contingency plans listing responses to various Soviet actions against the city. What would the West do if the Kremlin announced that the East Germans were in charge of all access routes to West Berlin and then the East German government closed them? How would NATO respond if the Soviets prevented the use of Allied airfields? Conversely, would the Soviets react with force to a NATO move to defend West Berlin? Would this chain of events lead to nuclear war?

In Kennedy's eyes, the danger posed by the geography of Berlin was magnified by the personality of his adversary. A year earlier in Vienna, at their only meeting, Kennedy had tried to engage Khrushchev on the problem of misunderstanding and miscalculation in international politics. The effort was a painful failure. Every time the U.S. president raised

---

13. Memorandum of Conversation, 17 July 1962, *FRUS*, 15: 223–24.
14. Telegram from the U.S. Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, 26 July 1962, *FRUS*, 15: 253.
15. Telegram from the U.S. Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, 25 July 1962, *FRUS*, 15: 252–53.

his concern over the disastrous consequences of a misunderstanding between the two superpowers, the Soviet leader responded as if it was only Moscow that was ever misunderstood.

Kennedy did not want a war, and despite his suspicions of Khrushchev, he assumed that the Soviets were equally disinclined. Yet the superpower conflict was intensifying over Berlin, making a miscalculation more likely and potentially catastrophic in its result. The Soviet Union and the United States had nuclear weapons in Europe that might figure in any struggle there. In these circumstances, a detailed record of the steps the United States was taking to defend its position in Central Europe could be of great historical importance. Rather than starting a journal on July 30, 1962, however, John F. Kennedy opted to begin a program of taping key conversations with his advisers.

Kennedy was no stranger to the tape recorder. The Dictaphone, a machine the size of a suitcase that sat on an credenza, was standard issue in U.S. offices in the mid-1950s. President Eisenhower used one. When he was a senator, Kennedy had used his Dictaphone as an administrative convenience. Kennedy dictated first drafts of his speeches into the machine, which a secretary would transcribe and his aide, Theodore Sorensen, would then polish. By the standards of the twenty-first century, this was an unusual system for a political leader. Ordinarily the speech writer produces the first draft, which the leader then edits and improves. But Senator Kennedy understood the issues he was writing about, and when the subject was foreign policy, he knew more than his staff. Moreover his staff was very small, and it was a polished literary style that he needed, not ideas.[16] On occasion, Kennedy used the machine to dictate notes after an important meeting, but in those days he did not intentionally tape the meetings themselves.[17]

The most lasting use of taping in Kennedy's Senate period came as a

---

16. The earliest surviving Kennedy senatorial tapes were made in mid-January 1954. One has Kennedy preparing a speech attacking President Eisenhower's new foreign policy strategy for relying too heavily on the threat of nuclear war to deter Soviet aggression. While dictating this speech, Kennedy called Sorensen in and mused with him over some of the phrasing. Forgetting to turn off his dictating machine, the resulting conversation was recorded. Kennedy ultimately delivered this speech on 21 January 1954 to the Cathedral Club in Brooklyn, New York. See Dictabelt MR 77-18:2, John F. Kennedy Library.

17. In June 1954, during the Geneva conference over the future of Indochina, Vice President Richard Nixon dropped by to discuss with Kennedy the situation in Southeast Asia. Despite their political differences, the two men were friendly. Nixon's office was actually across the hall from Kennedy's and the Vice President often popped his head in. Kennedy did not record this conversation, but after the meeting he dictated his recollections (see Dictabelt MR 77 18:10, John F. Kennedy Library).

result of his decision to author a book on congressional leaders who had championed unpopular causes. Kennedy first conceived the idea for what would become *Profiles in Courage* in the fall of 1954.[18] Originally the goal was to produce a long article for a national magazine, but a series of health setbacks in 1954–55—his back was operated on twice in six months—left Kennedy with time on his hands.[19] So he began to think of writing a book. In February 1955, Kennedy had his Dictaphone machine brought south to Palm Beach, where he was convalescing. Over the next three months, the tape recorder served as the young Senator's lifeline to the activity of his Senate office. Part of the time he used it to keep up with his official correspondence, but the rest of the time he used it to dictate at least 100 pages of notes for his *amanuensis,* Theodore Sorensen, who stayed in Washington. Kennedy's notes consisted of quotations and observations—his own and those of the historians whom he had read—which Sorensen apparently wove into a narrative.[20]

In his first year as president, Kennedy continued this practice of using tape recorders primarily as management tools. On the one Dictaphone tape (or dictabelt) that survives from 1961, Kennedy is dictating some of the earliest National Security Action Memoranda (NSAM) of his administration.[21] Earlier, during the campaign, Kennedy had used a tape recorder to dictate a piece on why he had entered politics.[22] Otherwise Kennedy taped neither telephone calls nor meetings in his office until mid-1962.

In July 1962 Kennedy let only a few people know of his decision to

---

18. Theodore C. Sorensen to Senator John Kennedy, 23 November 1954, Personal Papers, Box 31, John F. Kennedy Library; Senator John Kennedy to Cass Canfield, 28 January 1955, Personal Papers, Box 31, John F. Kennedy Library; author's Interview with Theodore Sorensen, April 2000.

19. Kennedy hurt his back playing pickup football at Harvard and reinjured it when the PT boat he was commanding collided with a Japanese ship in the Pacific. His back started hurting again in 1954.

20. See Dictabelts MR77-18:25A, MR77-18:25B, MR77-18:26, and MR77-18:27A, John F. Kennedy Library. In these recordings, Kennedy is dictating notes for his chapter on Thomas Hart Benton. These notes were typed in Washington and then served as the basis for a chapter on Benton, a senator from Missouri in the mid–nineteenth century. The draft for that chapter, based in part on the notes from Senator Kennedy, was typed on Theodore Sorensen's typewriter in Washington. There is no draft in Kennedy's hand of the chapter. For a typescript of Kennedy's dictated notes on Benton, see Personal Papers, Box 35; for the Sorensen redraft, see Personal Papers, Box 28, Item 4, John F. Kennedy Library.

21. Dictabelt 45, Cassette L, Presidential Recordings Collection, John F. Kennedy Library. The NSAMs were instructions to the Cabinet or the White House staff from the President. This dictabelt contains NSAM 9–12, all issued 6 February 1961.

22. Dictabelt 39, Cassette K, continued on Dictabelt 40, Cassette L, Presidential Recordings Collection, John F. Kennedy Library.

initiate a program of secret taping in the White House. Besides the Secret Service team that installed the system and his secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, who would on occasion shut the system off for the President, Kennedy apparently told only his brother and, possibly, Kenneth O'Donnell.[23] He also kept to himself what criteria, if any, he would apply to what he recorded.[24]

The taping system went in over the weekend of July 28–29, while the President was at Hyannis Port.[25] Returning that Monday, Kennedy wasted no time in making full use of it. On that first day he would log four hours of taped conversation. The system had been set up so that Kennedy could initiate secret taping himself by inconspicuously pressing a button under his desk or by the coffee table in the Oval Office or by his leather chair at the long table in the Cabinet Room. Only once in the remaining 16 months of his life did Kennedy tire of taping his White House meetings. This lapse occurred in the heat of midterm campaigning in September 1962. Thereafter, especially when the focus of his concerns shifted from Berlin to Cuba, Kennedy recommitted himself to retaining an audio diary of his policymaking.

With these tapes, Kennedy preserved a striking portrait of a government in motion. The Kennedy administration is best understood as a league of factions that owed their allegiance to one man. The first faction was the Adlai Stevenson men, some of whom had switched their loyalty to Kennedy as late as 1960, once it became clear that their man, the two-time unsuccessful Democratic standard-bearer of the 1950s, could not win. These men—the most important being John Kenneth Galbraith, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., George Ball, and Stevenson himself—shared a belief

---

23. In conversations with the author, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, former Presidential Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, former Counsel to the President Theodore Sorensen, and Arthur Schlesinger have all denied knowing about the taping system when Kennedy was alive.

24. The opening segments of Richard Nixon's taping in February 1971 involves a discussion between him and his aide-de-camp H. R. Haldeman about the nature and purposes of the taping system. Kennedy left no such explanation. The Secret Service agent who installed the system, Robert Bouck, later recalled Kennedy telling him that he wanted a taping system because of his concerns about an impending major clash with the Soviet Union (Robert Bouck Oral History, John F. Kennedy Library). The pattern of his taping, however, suggests that though the Berlin crisis was a likely catalyst, Kennedy wanted to preserve more than a record of his foreign policymaking. Midsummer concerns over Berlin pushed him to begin a practice he had probably been contemplating for a while.

25. Approximately a month later, Kennedy had a Dictaphone system attached to his and Evelyn Lincoln's telephones, so that he could secretly record telephone calls. He taped telephone calls until early November 1963.

that the United States faced a mortal enemy in Moscow. Nevertheless, with the transition from Stalin to Khrushchev in the early 1950s opportunities had opened to improve relations.[26] These men blamed the former secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, a Cold War hawk who doubted the possibility of a détente with the Soviet Union, for making U.S. foreign policy so rigid that Eisenhower could not exploit those opportunities. These men were also committed to domestic reform. They advocated to varying degrees an active role for government in achieving general economic growth and more widespread prosperity.

A second circle around Kennedy came from among the ranks of Republican internationalists. C. Douglas Dillon had been under secretary of state for John Foster Dulles. In January 1961, he became secretary of the Treasury for John Fitzgerald Kennedy. As managing partner of a major investment banking firm, Dillon was well respected on Wall Street and his economic views were generally conservative. He sought to keep government intervention in the economy to a minimum. Kennedy also gave most of his key national security posts to Republicans. He asked J. Edgar Hoover and Allen Dulles to stay at the helms of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency, respectively.[27] He recruited McGeorge Bundy, the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, to be his special assistant for national security affairs and Robert McNamara, the president of Ford Motor Company, to be his secretary of defense.

Although young people figured prominently on Kennedy's foreign policy team, the President always had time for those Washington veterans who had shaped the U.S. postwar policy of containing the Soviet Union. In his first year as president, Kennedy had called on the former Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy to formulate the administration's arms control strategy and similarly enlisted former Secretary of State Dean Acheson to sort out the Berlin tangle. Others Kennedy tapped informally. Robert Lovett, a former secretary of defense in the Truman administration who had refused a position in Kennedy's cabinet on

---

26. W. Averell Harriman expressed this view in *Peace with Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959). Harriman, Franklin Roosevelt's ambassador in Moscow in World War II, served in the Kennedy administration first as ambassador at large, then assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, and finally under secretary of state for political affairs. Thanks to his friendship with Robert Kennedy, Harriman would eventually move much closer to the center of the administration.

27. He would ask another Republican, John A. McCone, to replace Allen Dulles at the CIA after the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

account of health, was regularly asked for his foreign policy wisdom, and Clark Clifford, Truman's special assistant, served "of counsel" on all matters, personal and public. After the failure at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, Clifford received a formal appointment to the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

Finally there were the Kennedy loyalists. These were energetic young men who owed their principal allegiance not to any set of ideas but to the President himself. Sometimes called the Irish mafia because of its overwhelming Irish-American makeup, the group included Kenneth P. O'Donnell, who as the President's appointments secretary was Kennedy's principal doorkeeper; David Powers, a Mr. Fix-it and court jester who had been a loyal aide since Kennedy's first political campaign in 1946; and Lawrence O'Brien, an experienced Massachusetts political operative who kept track of congressional politics for the President. Even more important an adviser was Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's principal speech writer since 1954 and an unofficial domestic affairs coordinator in the White House. Another loyalist was Richard Goodwin at the State Department, who had worked with Robert Kennedy, when the younger Kennedy was with the Labor Rackets Subcommittee on the Hill. But the strongest and most powerful of the loyalists was Robert F. Kennedy himself, attorney general and still the most influential presidential brother in U.S. history.

Looking back at the Kennedy administration, McGeorge Bundy, who was in many ways an insider, believed there was a place where even he could not go, a circle within the inner circle. The President and the Attorney General kept some things to themselves, which Bundy later described as the "unsharables." As head of the Kennedy loyalists, Robert sometimes acted as a parliamentary whip for his brother, moving along these factions in the administration, making sure that when the time came, they voted with the President. His job was also to provoke the President's advisers, to stir the policy pot, so as to ensure that the President got to hear all sides of an argument, especially his own.[28] Robert Kennedy was strong willed and more impatient than his older brother.

At the center was John F. Kennedy. Kennedy disliked elaborate organizational charts and instead moved among his advisers, seeking what he needed from each of them. Captured on tape are the essential elements of Kennedy's management style. Self-confident and knowledgeable, Kennedy listened to briefings and then dominated meetings by questioning those around him. Whereas he expected clarity of thought and speech from

---

28. Author's Interview with McGeorge Bundy, 16 November 1995.

these advisers, Kennedy could himself be quite elliptical and often spoke in a rapid-fire shorthand. And whenever he forgot he was being taped, which happened a lot, Kennedy would slip into coarser phrases expressed in a distinctive Bostonian twang. Occasionally Kennedy left the recording machine on so long that he captured on tape the rhythm of a entire presidential day. Surprisingly, the young President seems not to have been in the habit of working long hours in the Oval Office. He came to the office late, took a long lunch, and usually left before 7:30 P.M. Perhaps much of the reason for the short day was Kennedy's ever-present physical ailments. He needed long naps and frequent therapeutic swims to loosen his back. He also liked to take his work upstairs to the Executive Mansion, where he could read in bed.

The tapes confirm that Kennedy was not the only power center in the Washington of 1962. Although Democrats controlled the House and Senate by wide margins, Kennedy lacked a working majority in the U.S. Congress.[29] British commentators in the nineteenth century had criticized the U.S. Constitution for being "all sail and no anchor." Kennedy was finding that in 1962 it was the other way around.[30] Southern Democrats formed a powerful bloc in Congress—controlling half of all committees in the House and 9 out of 16 in the Senate—and they generally opposed the administration's legislative agenda. In the past year they had joined with Republicans to defeat or delay Kennedy initiatives on Medicare, the farm bill, and floating a bond to fund the United Nations. Besides northern and midwestern Democrats, Kennedy could count only on the liberal wing of the Republican Party, senators like Jacob Javits of New York and Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts, to support him and then really only on foreign policy questions. The prospects for legislative action were so grim that by July 1962, there was some talk of Congress's just shutting down for the remainder of the session.

Finally, not all of the voices captured on tape were those of federal officials or legislators. To govern effectively, the President needed to create consensus outside Washington. As he considered tax reform, for example, Kennedy reached out to business leaders and economists to gauge where Washington could help Wall Street *and* Main Street. Local voices were even more significant in shaping John F. Kennedy's approach to civil rights. Kennedy's decision to tape coincided with a dramatic and violent turn in

---

29. House: Democrats 262, GOP 174 (1 vacancy); Senate: Democrats 64, GOP 35 (1 vacancy).
30. James Reston, "Kennedy and Capitol Hill: An Institutional Crisis," *New York Times*, 25 July 1962. Reston quoted the British historian Lord Macaulay.

the struggle for civil rights for African Americans. In the deep south, African Americans were pushing to do those things that most Americans had long taken for granted: to enroll in public universities, to eat at public lunch counters, to pray in houses of worship without fear of violence. Their appeals reached the Oval Office and Kennedy responded. Meanwhile, the opponents of change were not mute. Southern state leaders cautioned the young northern President not to push too fast to implement federal court decisions or to try to erase certain southern ways. As the tapes document dramatically, nearly every action by the Kennedy administration in support of the exercise by African Americans of their civil rights was to meet with a stubborn southern reaction. The civil rights struggle was not like those foreign crises for which Kennedy had calmly prepared himself, but it would mark his presidency just as profoundly.

This was John F. Kennedy's world when he started recording his official meetings. Although he would never know it, his presidency had hit a bottom of sorts in July 1962. The months ahead would bring his administration's greatest achievements and some of its greatest controversies. But all Kennedy could know as he left Cape Cod early on the morning of July 30, 1962, was that he faced enormous challenges. He sensed the very real possibility of a war with Russia. And there was always the chance of something unexpected and bad happening at home.

Kennedy's taping system was ready, and it was about to record the transformation of his presidency.