The PRESIDENTIAL RECORDINGS

JOHN F. KENNEDY

THE GREAT CRISES, VOLUME TWO

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Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow
Editors, Volume Two

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The Presidential Recordings Project

BY PHILIP ZELIKOW AND ERNEST MAY

Between 1940 and 1973, presidents of the United States secretly recorded hundreds of their meetings and conversations in the White House. Though some recorded a lot and others just a little, they created a unique and irreplaceable source for understanding not only their presidencies and times but the presidency as an institution and, indeed, the essential process of high-level decision making.

These recordings of course do not displace more traditional sources such as official documents, private diaries and letters, memoirs, and contemporaneous journalism. They augment these sources much as photographs, films, and recordings augment printed records of presidents' public appearances. But they do much more than that.

Because the recordings capture an entire meeting or conversation, not just highlights caught by a minute-taker or recalled afterward in a memorandum or memoir, they have or can have two distinctive qualities. In the first place, they can catch the whole complex of considerations that weigh on a president's action choice. Most of those present at a meeting with a president know chiefly the subject of that meeting. Even key staff advisers have compartmented responsibilities. Tapes or transcripts of successive meetings or conversations can reveal interlocked concerns of which only the president was aware. They can provide hard evidence, not just bases for inference, about presidential motivations.

Desk diaries, public and private papers of presidents, and memoirs and oral histories by aides, family, and friends all show how varied and difficult were the presidents' responsibilities and how little time they had for meeting those responsibilities. But only the tapes provide a clear picture of how these responsibilities constantly converged—how a president could be simultaneously, not consecutively, a commander in chief worrying about war, a policymaker conscious that his missteps in economic policy could bring on a market collapse, a chief mediator among interest groups, a chief administrator for a myriad of public programs, a spokesperson for the interests and aspirations of the nation, a head of a sprawling political party, and more.

The tapes reveal not only what presidents said but what they heard. For everyone, there is some difference between learning by ear and by

eye. Action-focused individuals ordinarily take in more of what is said to them than of what they read, especially when they can directly question a speaker. A document read aloud to a president had a much better chance of registering than the same document simply placed in the in-box. Though hearing and reading can both be selective, tapes probably show, better than any other records, the information and advice guiding presidential choices.

Perhaps most usefully, the secret tapes record, as do no other sources, the *processes* that produce decisions. Presidential advisers can be heard debating with one another. They adapt to the arguments of the others. They sometimes change their minds. The common positions at the end of a meeting are not necessarily those taken by any person at the outset. The president's own views have often been reshaped. Sometimes there has been a basic shift in definition of an issue or of the stakes involved. Hardly anyone ever has a clear memory of such changes. Yet, with the tape, a listener now can hear those changes taking place—can follow, as nowhere else, the logic of high-stakes decision making.

Casting about for analogies, we have thought often of Pompeii. As the ruins uncovered there have given students of Greco-Roman civilization knowledge not to be found anywhere else, in any form, so the presidential recordings give students of the presidency, of U.S. and world history, and of decision making knowledge simply without parallel or counterpart. They are a kind of time machine, allowing us to go back and be in the room as history was being made. And, unlike even the finest archaeological site, what we uncover are the words and deliberations of the people themselves in the moment of action, not just the accounts, summary notes, or after-the-fact reconstructions they left behind.

Of the six presidents who used secret recording devices, three did so extensively. Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower recorded to a limited extent. John Kennedy, however, after installing an elaborate taping system in July 1962, used it frequently during the 16 months before his murder in November 1963. Using a different system, Lyndon Johnson made recordings throughout his presidency, especially in 1968, his last, tumultuous year in office. Richard Nixon, after two years without using any recording devices, installed a system which, because voice activated, captured every conversation in a room with a microphone.

The existence of Nixon's system came to light in July 1973 during congressional hearings on administration involvement in the 1972 Watergate burglary. Segments of tape obtained by Congress provided a major basis for the impeachment proceedings that led to Nixon's later resignation.

The Watergate hearings brought an end to secret taping. Afterward, it became unlawful to record conversations without knowledge and consent. As the ruins of Pompeii reveal details of Greco-Roman life only up to August of 79 A.D., when lava from Vesuvius buried the city, so secret recordings reveal the inner workings of the U.S. presidency only from 1940—and especially 1962—down to mid-1973.

On the premise that these recordings will remain important historical sources for centuries to come, the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs plans to produce transcripts and aids for using all accessible recordings for all six presidencies. We started with the methods and style we used in 1996–97 to produce a then-unprecedented volume of its kind, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Though that volume improved on the then-available transcripts of a few Kennedy administration meetings, we kept trying to find ways to make the transcripts still better. This was a process of trial and error.

Our initial hope was that professional transcribers, like court reporters, could do much of the primary transcription. That did not work out well. For those untrained in the history of the period, transcribing presidential tapes can be a bit like assembling a jigsaw puzzle without being able to see the picture on the puzzle box, and this is especially true when the audio quality is bad. Tapes of telephone conversations tend to be much easier, both because the speakers are using a machine that was linked to the original recording system (usually a Dictaphone in this case) and because there are generally only two participants in the telephone conversation. Recordings of meetings are much harder to transcribe. Most Kennedy recordings are of meetings; most Johnson recordings (and all those publicly released so far) are of telephone conversations.

Originally short of funds and audio expertise, we initially worked almost entirely with ordinary cassette copies of the tapes. We later began relying on more expensive Digital Audio Tape (DAT) technology. We tried out other technical fixes, starting in 1996 with a standard noise reduction technique (called NONOISE in the trade). The results were disappointing. We have since tried out other, much more sophisticated techniques suggested by some sound studios. Though we have learned these techniques can sometimes be vital for especially murky material suffering from unusual interference, there is an offsetting risk of additional distortion and loss of data, including the subtle changes in tone that can affect accurate speaker identification. Two of our scholars, Timothy Naftali and George Eliades, were especially critical experimenters in this learning process.

The same two scholars helped the growing team stumble on a more

useful bit of hardware. Looking for a way for two scholars to listen simultaneously to the same DAT copies, Eliades suggested use of a multiple outlet headphone amplifier (Rane's Mojo amplifier). Eliades and Naftali also discovered that this hardware dramatically improved our ability to boost the audio signal from the tapes. We are continuing to tinker with the hardware, including more use of CD-ROM technology. We welcome suggestions for further improvement.

The most fundamental improvements in transcription so far, though, have not come from machines. They came from people. Introduction of a team method for reviewing transcripts, an innovation developed and managed mainly by Naftali, has helped reduce the most intractable source of error—the cognitive expectations and limitations of an individual listener. For instance, when you expect to hear a word in an ambiguous bit of sound, you often hear it. Even without particular expectations, different listeners hear different things. So we have utilized a special kind of "peer review" in this new realm of basic historical research.

The talents required from our scholars are demanding. They must be excellent historians, knowledgeable about the events and people of the period. They must also have a particular temperament. Anthropologists and archaeologists used to taking infinite pains at a dig, teaspoon or toothbrush in hand, might call this a talent for "field work." So we are especially grateful to the historians, listed on the title page of the volumes, who have displayed the knowledge, the patience, and the discipline this work requires, rewarded by a constant sense of discovery.

In consultation with our editorial advisory board and our scholars, we developed a number of methodological principles for the Miller Center's work. Among the most important are:

First, the work is done by trained professional historians who have done deep research on the period covered by the tapes and on some of the central themes of the meetings and conversations. They are listed on the title page as associate and volume editors. The historians not only delve into documentary sources but sometimes interview living participants who can help us comprehend the taped discussions. Our voice identifications are based on sample clips we have compiled and on our research. On occasion our list of participants in a meeting differs from the log of President Kennedy's secretary, Evelyn Lincoln. We list only the names of participants whose voices we can identify. Our research has also turned up a few minor cataloguing errors made at the time or later.

Second, each volume uses the team method. Since few people always speak in complete grammatical sentences, the transcriber has to infer and create paragraphs, commas, semicolons, periods, and such. Usually

one or two scholars painstakingly produce a primary draft, including the introductory scene setters and explanatory annotations. Two or more scholars then carefully go over that transcript, individually or sometimes two listening at the same time, with their suggestions usually going back to the primary transcriber. In the case of often-difficult meeting tapes, like the Kennedy recordings, every transcript has benefited from at least four listeners. The volume editors remain accountable for checking the quality and accuracy of all the work in their volume, knitting together the whole. All of this work is then reviewed by the general editors, with the regular advice of members of the project's editorial advisory board.

Third, we use the best technology that the project can afford. As of 2001, we work from DAT copies of the recordings (not the less expensive analog cassettes ordinarily sold to the public by presidential libraries). Our transcribers are now moving toward transferring this digital data onto CD-ROMs. Each transcriber at least uses a professional quality DAT machine and AKG K240 headphones with the signal boosted by a headphone amplifier. Each listens to a DAT copy of the library master, checking with a DAT from which sound engineers have attempted to remove extraneous background noise.

Fourth, we aim at completeness. Over time, others using the transcripts and listening to the tapes may be able to fill in passages marked [*unclear*]. Although the Miller Center volumes are intended to be authoritative reference works, they will always be subject to minor amendments. Editors of these volumes will endeavor to issue periodic updates. We use ellipses in our transcripts in order to indicate that the speaker paused or trailed off, not to indicate that material has been omitted.

Fifth, we strive to make the transcripts accessible to and readable by anyone interested in history, including students. As the U.S. government's National Archives has pointed out, the actual records are the tapes themselves and all transcripts are subjective interpretations. For instance, our team omits verbal debris such as the "uh"s that dot almost anyone's speech. Listeners unconsciously filter out such debris as they understand what someone is saying. Judgments must be made. Someone says, for example, "sixteen . . . uh, sixty. . . . " The transcriber has to decide whether the slip was significant or not. But the judgment calls are usually no more difficult than those involved in deciding where to insert punctuation or paragraphing. In the effort to be exhaustive, sometimes there is a temptation to overtranscribe, catching every fragmentary utterance, however unclear or peripheral. But the result on the page can add too much intrusive static, making the substance less understandable

now than it was to listeners at the time. Obviously, what to include and omit, balancing coherence and comprehension against the completeness of the record, also requires subjective judgment. The object is to give the reader or user the truest possible sense of the actual dialogue as the participants themselves could have understood it (had they been paying attention).

Sixth, we go one step further by including in each volume explanations and annotations intended to enable readers or users to understand the background and circumstances of a particular conversation or meeting. With rare exceptions, we do not add information that participants would not have known. Nor do we comment often on the significance of items of information, except as it might have been recognized by the participants. As with other great historical sources, interpretations will have to accumulate over future decades and centuries.