

Preface: The JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes

In the summer of 1973, the nation was transfixed by the nationally televised “Watergate” hearings into charges of illegal activities by the Nixon White House. On July 16, in testimony before the Senate Watergate committee, presidential aide Alexander Butterfield dropped a Molotov cocktail into the highly combustible Watergate scandal by revealing that President Richard M. Nixon had installed a voice-activated taping system in the White House to secretly record his meetings and discussions. Congress then subpoenaed the tapes; the President refused to turn them over and instead released a set of strategically edited transcripts. Ultimately the Supreme Court ruled unanimously against Nixon—and the rest is history.

The day after Butterfield’s revelation, in an announcement that attracted a great deal of media attention, the director of the Kennedy Library, Dan H. Fenn, Jr., revealed that audio recordings of meetings dealing with “highly sensitive national defense and foreign policy,” as well as tapes of presidential telephone conversations, had also been made during the Kennedy administration.¹

These tapes included most of the secret meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, convened by President Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. The Ex-

¹Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., special assistant to President Kennedy, had reflected the views of many of his former White House colleagues by dismissing the possibility of secret taping by JFK as “absolutely inconceivable. It was not the sort of thing Kennedy would have done. The people in the White House then would not have thought of doing something like that.” (*Harvard Crimson*, July 27, 1973, 1, 6)

Comm recordings provide an incomparable chance to scrutinize history exactly as it unfolded during the most dangerous event in the four and a half decades of the Cold War. The purpose of this book is to tell the unique story of those meetings in narrative form for the first time, and particularly to document the substance and quality of JFK's leadership.

Most readers are familiar with the "heroic" version of the Cuban missile crisis—initially fashioned by journalists in the first years after the event, encouraged by JFK himself, popularized by the writings of Kennedy administration insiders like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Theodore Sorensen, and given wide currency in dramatizations such as "The Missiles of October." In this version, the courageous young American president, always cool under fire, successfully resisted the aggressive designs of the Soviet Union and its puppet regime in Cuba to win a decisive victory over Communism. And, even more important, having learned sobering lessons on the nuclear brink, Kennedy reached out to the Soviet Union and Cuba (secretly) in his last year in office and began the process of détente—reflected in his June 1963 American University speech urging a rethinking of Cold War dogma, the establishment of the Moscow-Washington Hot Line and the negotiation and ratification of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This view, in far more sophisticated form, achieved academic legitimacy in 1971 with the publication of Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision*, which depicted JFK's handling of the missile crisis as a model for rational presidential crisis management in the nuclear age.

This heroic consensus did not last long. In the 1970s and the 1980s, in the wake of the Vietnam war and the expanding documentary record on national security issues, revisionist historians called attention to JFK's secret war against Cuba, particularly Operation Mongoose, which encompassed sabotage and subversion against the Cuban economy, plots to overthrow and/or assassinate Castro and "contingency plans" to blockade, bomb or invade Cuba. Kennedy's heroic management of the crisis, measured against a more complete historical record, appeared to be largely a myth.

In addition, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, new evidence on the Soviet side of the story suggested that Khrushchev's original explanation for this dangerous gamble in Cuba had been fundamentally true: the Soviet leader had never intended the missiles in Cuba as an aggressive threat to the security of the United States, but rather as a defensive move to protect his Cuban allies from covert or overt

American attacks and as a desperate effort to give the U.S.S.R. relative parity in the nuclear balance of terror. And finally, these documents also demonstrated that the Kennedy administration, after October 1962, never backed away from plots to eliminate Castro.

Now, especially since the declassification of the tape recordings of JFK's secret meetings, scholars have had a rare opportunity to jump off the heroic vs. revisionist treadmill and forge a fresh, new and in-depth view of the most unique component of this historical event. In fact, until this book, virtually none of the crisis scholarship has systematically included or investigated the incomparable evidence found on these tapes. And, as it turns out, the ExComm meetings are far more interesting, complex and surprising than many of the heroic or revisionist protagonists ever imagined.

JFK, without question, bore a substantial share of the responsibility for the onset of the crisis,² but, when faced with the real probability of nuclear war, he used his formidable intellectual and political skill to prevent the outbreak of hostilities. The President helped steer American policy makers and ultimately the two superpowers away from an apocalyptic nuclear conflict. A hawk in public, he actually distrusted the military, was skeptical about military solutions to political problems and horrified by the prospect of nuclear war. The confrontational JFK sketched by revisionist historians is barely perceptible during the Cuban missile crisis meetings. With great deliberation and subtlety, the President measured each move and countermove with an eye toward averting a nuclear exchange—which he dramatically declared could be “the final failure.”

Transcripts of these meeting tapes can be invaluable, but they must inevitably reflect the weakness and flaws of the tapes themselves: frequent interruptions, garbled and rambling exchanges, inexplicable noises, overlapping comments, conversational dead ends and a great deal of repetition. By their very nature, transcripts must endeavor to present *all* the words and are often dense, forbidding and impenetrable to the non-specialist. The interpretive narrative in this book, on the other hand, seeks to bring the discussions to life as a clear, coherent story for the first time, making the concentrated, distilled essence completely understandable to both the scholar and the general reader.

The narrative format also aims to transform this complex, often redundant primary source, the ExComm tapes, into a lucid, user-friendly

²This key question is discussed in detail in the Introduction.

secondary source by eliminating peripherals, concentrating on essentials and citing only the indispensable material. Readers can now follow consistent themes, ideas, issues and the role of specific individuals as never before possible. The key moments of stress, doubt, decision, resolution—and even humor—are, in effect, accentuated and underscored by separating them from the background chatter, repetition and substantive cul-de-sacs which characterize the unedited tapes. In addition, the author has chosen to transcribe many verbal false starts, to include colloquial speech and to highlight words emphasized or inflected by the speakers themselves to help the reader grasp as completely and accurately as possible the meaning, intent and human dimension of these impromptu discussions. The participants, obviously, did not know how this potential nuclear showdown would turn out, and their uncertainty, strikingly captured in narrative form, often gives the discussions the nerve-racking quality of a work of fiction. But, of course, this unique story—indelibly documented on audio tape—is history, not fiction.

Listening to the JFK Tapes

A quarter of a century after “Watergate” revealed the existence of presidential recordings, it is now widely acknowledged that some taping was done by every president from Franklin D. Roosevelt through Richard Nixon.³ Hundreds of hours of tapes have been declassified, the vast majority from the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations. These White House recordings provide a distinctive glimpse into some of the most intimate moments of presidential history: FDR, during the 1940 presidential campaign, trying to persuade civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph to cancel a march on Washington against racial discrimination; JFK working to retain the support of former President and General Dwight Eisenhower during the Cuban missile crisis; Lyndon Johnson speculating with J. Edgar Hoover about the Kennedy assassination; and, of course, Richard Nixon discussing hush money for the Watergate burglars.

On the day of Jimmy Carter’s inauguration, January 20, 1977, after more than a decade of teaching United States history on the college level, I was appointed Historian at the John F. Kennedy Library in Mas-

³Gerald Ford, on his first day as President, ordered the removal of all White House taping equipment. (Richard Norton Smith to Sheldon M. Stern, January 27, 2003)

sachusetts.⁴ I spent the next few years researching classified materials as background preparation for conducting scores of taped oral history interviews; later I verified the accuracy of the transcripts. I also worked for several months editing JFK's recorded telephone conversations—my first in-depth experience listening to White House recordings.

Then, in 1981–82, as part of my preparatory research for a series of oral history interviews on foreign policy in the Kennedy administration, I began listening to the tapes of the Cuban missile crisis ExComm meetings. The Kennedy Library was also preparing for their eventual declassification and I was very likely the first non-member of the ExComm to hear and evaluate precisely what happened at these meetings; I was definitely the first professional historian to review these tapes. In 1983, I received an award from the Archivist of the United States for “careful and perceptive editing” of the JFK tapes. This experience would prove to be the most important of my historical career.

It is difficult to capture the intellectual and physical demands of working on these tape recordings. I sat for many hours at a stretch, wearing headphones, in front of a Tandberg reel-to-reel tape deck, the state-of-the-art equipment of the period, my foot on a pedal that allowed me to fast-forward, reverse, play or stop the tape.⁵ The clunky and heavy Tandberg unit was difficult to move and awkward to operate; and, since it lacked a real-time timer, locating a specific moment on a tape could be incredibly frustrating. The first time I put a tape on the deck and pressed the play button was unforgettable. The tape sounded like an FM radio station without frequency lock—the voices almost drowned out by intense background hiss. I was concerned at first that it might be impossible to ever understand these conversations. (Dolby noise reduction appeared later in the 1980s, but the Kennedy Library, as a matter of policy, never used any noise reduction technology in order to avoid adulterating the sound of the originals. I listened to copies made directly from the master tapes themselves.)

To complicate the task even further, the recordings are also marred by distracting and extraneous sounds: a smoker emptying his pipe into an ashtray on the table, water being poured from a pitcher into a glass, coughing, sneezing, nose-blowing and throat-clearing, a knock on the

⁴After an FBI investigation, I was granted the national security clearances required for access to Top Secret classified materials. This book, of course, does not refer to any portions of the tapes that remain closed.

⁵Tandberg units may also have been used in the White House to make the Kennedy meeting recordings.

door, the ringing of a telephone, the siren of an emergency vehicle passing on the street, the shouts of children at play on the White House grounds, and, most frequently, secondary conversations and people talking at the same time. In addition, there were persistent clanking noises on many tapes which sounded remarkably like a venting steam radiator. I finally checked the weather page in the *Washington Post* and was able to rule out that possibility; it was too mild in Washington that week for White House radiators to have been overheating. To this day, I don't have a clue about the source of this irksome noise.

These auditory complications frequently required listening to the same words several dozen times (in some cases, unfortunately, to no avail). Some voices, it turned out, were much harder to pick up because the individuals were seated at the opposite end of the table from the microphones hidden in light fixtures on the wall behind the President's chair in the Cabinet Room. But, after a few very tense and exasperating days, I began to develop an ear for the task and patience for the work. To my great relief, I also discovered that the first tape I played had been unusually substandard. (Some tapes had likely deteriorated due to inadequate storage and preservation.) The project became progressively more fascinating and exhilarating, but always remained laborious. It required absolute and undivided concentration (for example, I routinely disconnected my telephone). I quickly learned that missing even a second or two could mean losing a key part of a conversation and that the misidentification of just one word could dramatically alter both the speaker's intent and the historical record. There is, after all, a world of difference between someone saying "ever" as opposed to "never," or "I think" as opposed to "I don't think."

The most important requirements for reviewing these tapes were a broad knowledge of the history of the period, familiarity with the background and views of the individuals involved, the ability to recognize voices (listening first to oral history interviews was often helpful) and the attentiveness to pick up even fragmentary details and remarks. Some voices were distinctive, such as the Boston twang of the Kennedy brothers or the soft southern drawl of Secretary of State Dean Rusk. However, the quality of the voices could vary from meeting to meeting depending on where an individual sat in relation to the microphone or even from slight imperfections in the speed at which the tape was recorded. The White House taping device, by our standards, was technically archaic and decidedly low fidelity. McGeorge Bundy, for example, a member of ExComm who obviously knew all the other partici-

pants, listened to a number of meeting tapes in the early 1980s and had trouble identifying the voices of several of his former colleagues.

The discussions did not move forward with the consistent momentum or progression of a board meeting with a written agenda; rather, they plodded back and forth, with a great deal of repetition and many dead ends. Many participants often spoke in grammatically awkward sentence fragments—no one more than JFK himself. They could be blindly self-righteous and cynical (discussing, for example, American covert actions against Cuba), but also remarkably idealistic (expressing moral qualms, for example, about a sneak attack on Cuba). Often, the most important decisions, such as choosing the quarantine as the first step in the American response, happened without an explicit or overt statement at any recorded ExComm meeting. Everyone simply recognized that the President had decided and adjusted their responses accordingly.

Likewise, on the issue that produced the most ExComm friction—JFK's support for Nikita Khrushchev's offer to trade the missiles in Turkey and Cuba—the tapes prove incontrovertibly that the President, surprisingly and ironically, found himself supported *at times* by advisers who were not his political or ideological allies or intimates, such as John McCone (a Republican with close ties to former President Eisenhower), George Ball (an Adlai Stevenson friend and loyalist) and the temperamental Lyndon Johnson. JFK's most trusted insiders, Robert Kennedy, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and Theodore Sorensen, as well as the second tier of advisers, Dean Rusk, Llewellyn Thompson, Maxwell Taylor and C. Douglas Dillon, generally opposed the trade.

Listening to these tapes, in any case, was the historian's ultimate fantasy—the unique chance to be the fly on the wall in one of the most perilous moments in human history—to know, within the technical limits of the recordings, *exactly what happened*. Even at the most frustrating moments, when, for example, I had to give up and accept that I could not understand a key remark or exchange, I realized how fortunate I was to have the privilege and responsibility of reviewing these one-of-a-kind historical records.

JFK's share of the culpability for the onset of the crisis does not diminish his cautious and thoughtful leadership once the crisis had reached a potentially fatal flashpoint. The ExComm tapes prove that John F. Kennedy played a decisive role in preventing the world from slipping into the nuclear abyss. If the ExComm decisions had been

made by majority vote then war, very likely nuclear war, would almost certainly have been the result. Of course, as we now know, JFK did have some essential help from his counterpart in the U.S.S.R.; Khrushchev too, resisted pressure from his own military and his ally Fidel Castro to escalate the crisis.

There are, evidently, no Khrushchev tapes.⁶ But, the Kennedy tapes present historians with a unique opportunity to accurately assess presidential leadership in the most perilous moment of the Cold War. Many presidents have faced extremely grave crises, but never before or since has the survival of human civilization been at stake in a few short weeks of extremely dangerous deliberations and never before or since have their unique and secret discussions been recorded and preserved. And, given the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Cuban missile crisis will hopefully remain, for policy makers and scholars, the only “case study” of a full-scale nuclear showdown between military superpowers. The tapes clearly reveal that a peaceful resolution was far from inevitable; the crisis could easily have ended in catastrophe despite the best intentions of leaders in Washington and Moscow.

The national security clearances required to serve as Kennedy Library historian allowed me to listen to the tapes, but barred me from publishing anything or from speaking publicly about these classified materials. It was both exasperating and amusing, for example, when a prominent historian told me in the early 1980s that JFK had been the ultimate macho cold warrior in recklessly rejecting Khrushchev’s offer to trade U.S. missiles in Turkey for Soviet missiles in Cuba. Of course, having already heard these tapes, I knew that JFK had pushed the missile trade despite strenuous opposition from nearly all his advisers. I could only say, “You may be in for some major surprises when these tapes are declassified.” Some historians will resist these conclusions, but my response is to provide the most accurate citations and rest my case *on the evidence*.

Finally, many readers are undoubtedly aware that transcripts of the October 16–29 Cuban missile crisis tapes were published in 1997.⁷ I

⁶“Unfortunately, Nikita Khrushchev did not bequeath a set of tapes of the crisis-era Presidium meetings to historians.” (Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “Soviet Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” in James G. Blight and David A. Welch, eds., *Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (London, Frank Cass, 1998), 83)

⁷Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

discovered early in 2000, however, that these transcripts were marred by serious errors and wrote two articles documenting this indisputable fact.⁸ The Miller Center at the University of Virginia has now prepared a revised and significantly improved set of missile crisis transcripts (through October 28).⁹ Nonetheless, my examination of the new edition revealed that many troubling inaccuracies remain.¹⁰

Since there are so many examples in which our conflicting transcriptions affect the substance of the historical record, it would be impossible to identify and explain every case without overwhelming the flow and integrity of this ExComm narrative. Instead, this problem has been thoroughly addressed in the Appendix to this book.

Origins of the JFK Tapes

There is, regrettably, no definitive answer to the intriguing question of why President Kennedy installed the first effective White House taping system for recording discussions in the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room. Evelyn Lincoln, JFK's personal secretary in the Senate and later in the White House, recalled that the President was enraged after the April 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster when several advisers who had supported the invasion in closed meetings claimed later to have opposed it; she also maintained that the President simply wanted accurate records for writing his memoirs. These explanations of JFK's motives are more complementary than contradictory, but they fail to explain why he did not begin taping for more than a year after the 1961 Cuban fiasco.

Robert Bouck, the Secret Service agent who actually installed the recording devices, later claimed that the president personally asked him to set up the taping system but never mentioned a reason. Bouck speculated that JFK wanted a reliable record of conversations dealing with U.S.-Soviet relations. In any case, it seems reasonable to conclude that Kennedy's decision was triggered by a desire to create an accurate

⁸Sheldon M. Stern, "What JFK Really Said," *Atlantic Monthly* 285 (May 2000), 122–28 and "Source Material: The 1997 Published Transcripts of the JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes: Too Good to be True?," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30 (September 2000), 586–93. In addition, see my exchange of letters with the editors, *Atlantic Monthly* 286 (August 2000), 13, and *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30 (December 2000), 791–99.

⁹Philip Zelikow, Timothy Naftali, Ernest May, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: Volumes 1–3, The Great Crises* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). This edition, however, verifies reliable starting times for most of the meetings.

¹⁰Sheldon M. Stern, "The JFK Tapes: Round Two," *Reviews in American History* 30 (2002), 680–88.

record of his administration for his personal use after he left the White House.¹¹

In the early summer of 1962, Bouck installed taping systems in the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room. The actual recording device was confined to one of two rooms in the basement—either directly beneath the Oval Office or in Evelyn Lincoln’s nearby private file room.¹² The President did not have access to the tape recorder itself; that is, he could not personally press the play, record, stop or rewind buttons. JFK could only turn the system on or off in the Oval Office by hitting a “very sensitive” switch concealed in a pen socket on his desk, in a bookend near his favorite chair or in a table in front of his desk. The Cabinet Room switch was installed on the underside of the conference table in front of JFK’s chair. The Oval Office microphones were hidden in the desk knee well and in a table across the room; the Cabinet Room microphones were mounted on the outside wall directly behind JFK’s chair in spaces that once held light fixtures.¹³

A separate Dictaphone taping system was installed in the Oval Office and possibly in the President’s bedroom around September 1962, to record telephone conversations. When the President decided to record a call, he pressed a button on his desk to turn on a light on Evelyn Lincoln’s desk; she then turned on the dictabelt recording system (which she could also activate on her own).

Bouck and another agent, Chester Miller, maintained the recording system in the Oval Office and Cabinet Room and changed the tapes. Since the reel-to-reel tapes could record for a maximum of about two hours, Bouck subsequently installed a second backup tape machine which was automatically activated if the first machine ran out of tape. “As a matter of fact,” Bouck later added, “I seem to recall that for awhile I had a third stand-by machine.” The agents put the tapes in a plain sealed envelope and turned them over to Mrs. Lincoln for storage in a locked cabinet near her White House desk. “It was my under-

¹¹Robert Bouck Oral History Interview, 1976, Oral History Collection [hereafter OHC], John F. Kennedy Library [hereafter JFKL], 2.

¹²Bouck Oral History, 3; Bouck also installed a tape machine in a study in the Executive Mansion, but it was virtually never used.

¹³Robert Bouck Interview, 1995, cited in Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998), 7–8; Stephanie Fawcett, “The JFK White House Recordings,” Paper presented to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, 1997, 2, 4–5. Bouck claimed in his Kennedy Library Interview that the Oval Office switch was “a little push button under the Oval Office desk.” (5)

standing,” Bouck recalled, “that from her appointment book she could pretty well tell what was on the tapes. She and the President had a very close liaison to when he was taping. I never really knew what he taped.”¹⁴

On November 22, 1963, after receiving confirmation of the President’s death in Texas, Robert Kennedy apparently instructed Bouck to disconnect the Oval Office–Cabinet Room taping system.¹⁵ Some historians initially questioned whether the attorney general even knew about the secret tapes, but, given the intensely personal and intimate relationship between the Kennedy brothers, it is impossible to imagine that JFK would or could have kept such a secret from his most trusted adviser and confidant. In addition, new evidence, discussed below, has eliminated all doubts about RFK’s knowledge of the tapes.¹⁶

The records of the Kennedy administration, including the tapes, were temporarily moved to the National Archives in Washington and later transferred to the Federal Records Center in Waltham, Massachusetts to await construction of the permanent John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. The Kennedy tapes, however, were not initially turned over with the materials covered by the deed of gift that donated President Kennedy’s White House records to the federal government. Recordings of private family matters were permanently excluded from the deed.

Finally, in 1976, the tapes were legally deeded to the Kennedy Library and the National Archives. The Library listed its holdings of Presidential Recordings at 248 hours of meeting tapes and 12 hours of telephone dictabelts (about 4 additional hours were accessioned in 1998).¹⁷

¹⁴Bouck Oral History, 3–4. Unfortunately, “there appear to be no receipts, memoranda, letters, notes or other documents contemporary to the Kennedy administration that deal with the recordings systems and their installation.” (Special Supplement to the Register of Presidential Recordings, April 15, 1985, JFKL, 53)

¹⁵This account, confirmed by Bundy, also claims that RFK was actually disconnecting the system when Lyndon Johnson entered the Oval Office. However, Robert Bouck denies that RFK was present. (Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 276, 451)

¹⁶Bouck claims that JFK once asked Kenneth O’Donnell and David Powers to limit their use of profanity in the Oval Office. Former JFK Library director Dan Fenn, who also served in the Kennedy White House, believes JFK’s tongue-in-cheek remark convinced these aides that a taping system existed. (Bouck Oral History, 13; telephone conversation with Dan H. Fenn, Jr., January 16, 2003) However, JFK had no reason to believe these recordings would ever be made public (see further discussion below).

¹⁷The meeting tapes, in addition to the Cuban missile crisis, cover a wide spectrum of domestic and foreign issues: such as civil rights, railroad work rules, the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Soviet Union, Berlin, Latin America, India, Africa and Southeast Asia.

Since the original plan to build the Library on the campus of Harvard University was delayed and eventually abandoned, the tapes remained in the temporary Waltham site until the permanent Kennedy Library at Columbia Point in Boston opened in October, 1979.

Opening the JFK Tapes

Soon after President Kennedy's death, RFK appears to have asked Evelyn Lincoln to transcribe some tapes. She may have worked on them briefly, but Bouck does not believe that Lincoln did any transcribing. Eventually George Dalton, a junior naval officer detailed to the White House, with equipment supplied by Bouck, took over this task. Dalton, who "did not know most of the names and terms," produced some extremely inaccurate and fragmentary transcripts before abandoning the project sometime before the existence of the tapes was publicly confirmed in 1973.¹⁸

Bouck was clearly wrong, however, in suggesting that no transcripts were prepared before November 22, 1963.¹⁹ A document recently found at the Kennedy Library by Timothy Naftali proves conclusively that RFK knew about the tapes and that some transcripts, possibly by Dalton, existed as early as August 9, 1963. On that date, Evelyn Lincoln apparently turned over 18 missile crisis transcripts to Robert Kennedy's secretary in the Justice Department—raising the intriguing possibility that RFK, and conceivably even JFK himself, might have seen some rough transcripts or even listened to some of the tapes in 1963.²⁰

¹⁸Kenneth O'Donnell, JFK's White House appointments secretary, later claimed that his secretary transcribed some of the recorded meetings and provided copies for him and the President, but "he was not sure who else may have received copies." (*Harvard Crimson*, July 27, 1973, 6) However, O'Donnell's former secretary, Pauline Fluett, has denied transcribing or even knowing about the tapes. She also insisted that Evelyn Lincoln could not even take dictation and "could never have transcribed anything." On the other hand, she seemed certain that JFK would have told O'Donnell about the secret taping system. (Telephone conversation with Pauline Fluett, January 15, 2003); Bouck Oral History, 4, 14)

¹⁹Bouck Oral History, 5, 14.

²⁰E. William Johnson, former Kennedy Library chief archivist, recalls that George Dalton was still working on transcripts in the early 1970s at the temporary Kennedy Library site in Waltham, Massachusetts. But, this newly discovered document indicates that Dalton, Lincoln or perhaps a Secret Service agent actually produced some transcripts during the Kennedy administration. However, the precise provenance of the still-classified "Dalton transcripts" may never be entirely unraveled. The attorney general's access to the tapes and these transcripts could explain the relatively accurate quotes from the ExComm meet-

In 1983, surviving members of the ExComm received letters advising them that the first recordings would soon be declassified. The first public opening of the missile crisis tapes took place soon after—just over 30 minutes of tape and sanitized transcripts of several hours from the first meeting on October 16—plus heavily edited transcripts from October 27, produced for the most part by McGeorge Bundy and donated to the Kennedy Library.²¹ However, transcribing was soon abandoned entirely because of prohibitive costs (since about one hundred hours are required to accurately transcribe one hour of tape). In 1994, the Library released nearly six hours of tapes from the meetings of October 18–22. But, researchers were on their own with the raw tapes. In order to provide some guidance at each opening, I answered questions from historians and journalists purchasing the recordings on audio cassettes.

Finally, on October 24, 1996, the Library opened more than 15 additional hours of tapes, from the meetings of October 23–29, bringing the total to over 20 hours. This enormous technical task was coordinated by Stephanie Fawcett, senior archivist in charge of national security declassification. She and I listened to the tapes independently and spent many days trying to reconcile differences in transcriptions and interpretation. Given the magnitude of the release, and the lack of transcripts for researchers, I wrote a 20-page guide to the new tapes, including extensive quotes. The guide was distributed at a press conference at which I discussed the impact of the newly released tapes on the historiography of the crisis and again responded to questions from scholars and reporters.

Two hours of tapes from the October 16 meetings were then declassified in early 1997, completing the release of all tapes from the critical thirteen days. In 1999, the Library released three hours of tapes from the post-crisis meetings through November 6; in 2000, nine hours of tape were opened, covering the sessions through November 16; in mid-2001, seven additional hours of tape, from the meetings through November 19, were declassified; and finally, later in 2001, two hours of

ings in *Thirteen Days*. RFK may actually have originally intended to use the transcripts to prepare a book on the missile crisis for JFK's planned 1964 reelection campaign. (see Timothy Naftali, "The Origins of 'Thirteen Days,'" *Miller Center Report* 15 (Summer 1999), 23–24)

²¹Bundy was granted access to the tapes because of "his dual role in 1962 as national security advisor and Executive Committee meeting participant, and his current work as an historian." (Foreword, *Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings Transcripts*, JFKL, 1983)

tapes were released from the meetings on November 20, the day President Kennedy formally ended the missile crisis by lifting the naval quarantine around Cuba—bringing the total from October 16 to November 20 to about forty-three hours.

The Historical Value of the JFK Tapes

Since the Kennedy taping system was manually activated (not voice activated like Nixon's) it was easily derailed by human carelessness or error. JFK sometimes recorded trivial discussions but curiously failed to record critical meetings such as his Oval Office confrontation with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko during the first week of the missile crisis. He generally neglected to turn the machine on until after a meeting had begun and sometimes forgot to turn it off so that the tape ran out. In at least one case, the tape was left running after a meeting and recorded the chatter of the White House cleaning crew.

Inevitably, in our increasingly cynical era, analysts have questioned or even dismissed the historical value of the tapes made in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations because the two presidents knew they were being recorded and presumably could have manipulated the outcome to enhance their historical reputations. This view has been repeated again and again: JFK seemed "open and straightforward" but the value of the tapes "can only be diminished by the fact that the two key players of the crisis [JFK and RFK] knew they were being recorded." The apparent neutrality of the tapes is doubtful because "we can never determine how much either man tailored what he said in order to control the historical record." The tapes are "selective and somewhat misleading because the president could turn his tape recorder on and off at will." Even the editors of the 1997 edition of published transcripts seemed concerned about "the President selectively choosing what to record for posterity."²²

William Safire, columnist, author and one-time aide to President Nixon, pushed this argument much further in a specific response to the 1997 publication of transcripts of the missile crisis tapes. Safire declared that "the [JFK] tapes inherently lie. There pose the Kennedy

²²Hersh, *Dark Side*, 7–8, 351; Zachary Karabell, "Roll tape . . . Inside the White House with JFK, LBJ—and Overhearing Everyone Else," *Boston Globe*, October 19, 1997, P 1,5; Gil Troy, "JFK: Celebrity-in-Chief or Commander-in-Chief?" *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998), 634; May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, 691.

brothers knowing they are being recorded, taking care to speak for history—while their unsuspecting colleagues think aloud and contradict themselves the way honest people do in a crisis.” The ExComm tapes, Safire insisted, “do not present pure, raw history” since JFK knew the tape was rolling and could “turn the meetings into a charade of entrapment—half history-in-the-making, half-image-in-the-manipulating. And you can be sure of some outright deception . . . [by] the turning-off of the machine at key moments.”²³

This argument is plainly groundless:

First: perhaps, just perhaps, in a recorded phone conversation between two people, it might be possible to manipulate the discussion somewhat to shape the outcome (as in the case of Linda Tripp and Monica Lewinsky). But, in a large meeting of some 15 people, operating under enormous stress and tension, it would be tactically and physically impossible. JFK could turn the tape machine on and off in the Cabinet Room—the switch was under the table in front of his chair—but he did not have access to the fast-forward, rewind, play or record buttons that he would need for selective recording. And, even if he did have those controls, how would he have kept the participants from seeing what he was doing? Imagine, for example, that JFK wanted to edit out remarks made by Robert McNamara and said, “Wait a minute, Bob, my shoe is untied,” and reached under the table to rewind the tape and erase McNamara’s words. Of course he had no way of knowing when to stop since there was no visible counter and he could not have seen one anyway unless he stuck his head under the table.

Second: JFK would never in his wildest imagination have conceived of the possibility that we, the public, would ever hear these tapes. He thought of them, quite correctly, as private property and of course

²³William Safire, *New York Times*, October 12, 1997, Section 4, 15. Philip Zelikow and Ernest May report that “Three tapes were received by the [Kennedy] library with reels containing ‘separate tape segments.’ It is possible that they had been cut and spliced,” possibly to eliminate references to plots against Fidel Castro. (Zelikow and May, *The Presidential Recordings*, v. 3, xx) However, Allan Goodrich, the Kennedy Library’s senior audiovisual archivist, now concludes after reviewing the original archival processing notes that these reels “had two different types of tape—*Scotch* and *Ampex*—wound on them, and were not spliced together. This was obvious to us . . . since they were of different color. We spliced the two together in order to make masters. When we did, we realized that the segments were different meetings. How they came to be wound that way is something that maybe George Dalton could explain. We don’t have a clue.” (Allan Goodrich to Sheldon M. Stern, April 12, 2002)

could not foresee the Freedom of Information Act, “Watergate” and the Presidential Records Act which ultimately facilitated the opening of these confidential materials. He could have picked and chosen freely from the tapes when he wrote his memoirs—ignoring the frequent references to classified national security material and the potentially compromising personal and political remarks (especially on the recorded telephone conversations). Why would he need to “control” the content of the tapes when he was certain that historians and the public would not hear them unless he or his estate granted access to this portion of his personal property?²⁴

Third: Safire seems to have forgotten that the President he worked for, Richard Nixon, knew that he was being recorded and nevertheless did *not* try to tailor his remarks for the tapes. As we all know, he repeatedly incriminated himself. Why? Because even well into the “Watergate” investigation and hearings, he never thought that he would or could be compelled by the courts to release these personal and confidential recordings to the public. If he had believed it early enough, he could easily have destroyed the tapes and likely have saved his presidency.

Fourth: the most critical point, however, demonstrates that Safire’s argument is fatally flawed by what historians call “presentism.” JFK and the other missile crisis participants, we should never forget, *did not know the outcome of the crisis when they were in the middle of dealing with it*. Even if President Kennedy had tried, as Safire puts it, to “pose” for history, how could he have known which position taken during the discussions would ultimately be judged favorably by historians? What if, for example, the Russians had responded to the blockade, as the Joint Chiefs had warned, by carrying out low-level bombing raids in the southeastern U.S. or by launching the operational nuclear missiles in Cuba at the American mainland? Historians today would still be listening to the same tapes (assuming any tapes or historians had survived), but with a radically different outlook. It would then be the Chiefs who had turned out to be right: the blockade would have

²⁴“All actions taken with respect to the recordings from November 22, 1963 to May 6, 1976 [the date of transfer to the National Archives] were taken under the assumption that the materials were private property and that the executors of the Kennedy estate were fully within their legal and customary rights to examine the material prior to deciding which, if any of it, to withhold from the materials delivered to the National Archives for deposit in the Kennedy Library under the deed of gift.” (Special Supplement, JFKL, 56)

proven to be, as they had declared, a feeble and inadequate measure, and air strikes to neutralize the airfields and missile sites—which we laud Kennedy for resisting—would appear to have been the correct course after all. In other words, the same tapes could now be interpreted to make Kennedy look appallingly negligent rather than diplomatically reasonable, *if the outcome had been different*.²⁵

Alternatively, what if Khrushchev had not agreed on October 28 to remove the missiles, and the bombing and invasion planned for later that week had gone forward? Even assuming that Kennedy and Khrushchev could have avoided using nuclear weapons, a shaky assumption at best, there would still have been substantial casualties on both sides before some kind of cease-fire was *perhaps* reached through a neutral third party like the United Nations. Today, some scholars would denounce JFK for not demonstrating American firmness and grit by immediately attacking the missiles and drawing a “line in the sand” which would have deterred the Soviets from risking any military response; others would condemn President Kennedy for bombing and invading Cuba instead of publicly or privately agreeing to Khrushchev’s secret proposal to swap the Turkish and Cuban missiles. Again, the same tapes could then be interpreted to make Kennedy look weak and indecisive on the one hand, or irresponsible and reckless on the other, *if the outcome had been different*.

Robert Kennedy’s words on the tapes further highlight the fact that the participants could not know what position would seem “right” in the 20/20 vision of hindsight. RFK clearly knew of the taping system; but, during the meetings he took a generally hawkish stance, pushing for a tough strategy that would remove Castro and demonstrate American resolve to the Soviets. Yet, when he decided to write a book on the missile crisis (published posthumously) and to run for president in 1968, he downplayed his aggressive posture, painting himself as a persistent dove and conciliator. RFK knew only *after* the crisis had been resolved that a dovish position was “better” politically, and that having

²⁵The editors of the 1997 Harvard Press transcripts have revised their position, “Kennedy could not know how the crisis or discussions would come out, so he would not know what to say that would make him look good.” (Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, “Camelot Confidential,” *Diplomatic History* 22 (Fall 1998), 649) Similarly, in the 2001 Norton edition, the editors concluded that JFK had no way of knowing which 1962 viewpoint “would look good to posterity.” (Zelikow, *et al.*, *The Presidential Recordings*, v. 3, xxiii)

pursued a peaceful solution in 1962 would later seem very appealing to a nation divided by the Vietnam War.²⁶ He could not manipulate his image on the tapes any more than his brother since neither of them knew what was going to happen the next day or even the next hour.²⁷

JFK, of course, also understood that history is not a play. There is no script. As he told the ExComm when the perilous naval quarantine around Cuba was about to be implemented, “What *we* are doing is throwing down a card on the table in a game which we don’t know the ending of.” President Kennedy and the ExComm, notwithstanding their Cold War ideological convictions and blinders, had no choice but to deal with the stress and danger in the situation at hand to the best of their abilities—with no guarantee of success or even survival.²⁸

²⁶Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 232. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 26–84. Theodore Sorensen essentially constructed this extraordinarily influential book, which has never been out of print, from RFK’s notes.

²⁷When RFK met with Soviet ambassador Dobrynin late on the evening of October 23 and angrily defended the U.S. decision to stop Soviet ships heading to Cuba, he nonetheless grimly admitted “I don’t know how all this will end, but we intend to stop your ships.” (Alexander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *“One Hell of a Gamble”: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 253)

²⁸The film “Thirteen Days,” released in 2000, purports to dramatize the very meetings considered here. The script concocts a crucial role in the ExComm meetings for JFK aide Kenneth O’Donnell; this claim is pure fiction. The film does not even reveal that President Kennedy was taping the discussions, ignores the covert actions against Castro as well as Khrushchev’s motives for placing the missiles in Cuba and inaccurately casts Robert Kennedy as a consistent dove (in line with RFK’s book, but *not* with the tapes). As this volume demonstrates, the real story of these meetings is infinitely more exciting, compelling and revealing than anything Hollywood could invent.