

The JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes

In the summer of 1973, the nation was captivated by the televised “Watergate” hearings into charges of illegal activities in Richard Nixon’s White House. On July 16, presidential aide Alexander Butterfield revealed that President Nixon had installed a voice-activated taping system to secretly record his meetings and discussions. Congress subpoenaed the tapes but the president refused to comply. The Supreme Court unanimously ordered their release—and the rest is history.

A day after Butterfield’s revelation, the John F. Kennedy Library disclosed that audio recordings of presidential meetings and telephone conversations had also been made during the Kennedy administration. These tapes included most of the secret meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The “heroic” version of the Cuban missile crisis had already become well established by the 1970s. This view, encouraged by JFK himself, popularized by the writings of journalists and Kennedy administration insiders, and dramatized in the 1974 film *The Missiles of October*, depicted the courageous young American president successfully resisting nuclear blackmail by the Soviet Union and its puppet regime in Cuba and winning a decisive victory over communism. And, according to this viewpoint, after his sobering experience on the nuclear brink, Kennedy reached out to his adversaries and began the process of détente—reflected in 1963 in his American University speech urging a rethinking of Cold War beliefs, the establishment of the Moscow-

This heroic viewpoint, however, did not last. In the wake of opposition to the Vietnam war and the declassification of key foreign policy documents from the 1960s, critical historians (often called “revisionists”) uncovered new details about JFK’s “secret war” against Cuba, particularly Operation Mongoose, that included sabotage and subversion against the Cuban economy, plots to overthrow and/or assassinate Castro, and “contingency plans” to blockade, bomb, or reinvade Cuba.

In addition, after the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, new evidence available from Soviet archives suggested that Nikita Khrushchev’s original explanation for shipping missiles to Cuba had been fundamentally true: the Soviet leader had never intended these weapons as a threat to the security of the United States, but rather considered their deployment a defensive move to protect his Cuban allies from American attacks and as a desperate effort to give the U.S.S.R. the appearance of equality in the nuclear balance of power.

JFK’s covert war against Cuba had clearly contributed to instigating the missile crisis. Nonetheless, as the ExComm tapes reveal, when faced with the real likelihood of nuclear war, Kennedy used all his intellectual and political skill to prevent the outbreak of hostilities. The president helped steer American policy makers and the two superpowers away from a nuclear conflict. A hawk in public, he actually distrusted the military, was skeptical about military solutions to political problems, and was horrified by the thought of nuclear war. The confrontational JFK depicted by the revisionists is all but imperceptible during the secret ExComm meetings. The president measured each move and countermove with an eye toward averting a nuclear exchange—which he somberly declared would be “the final failure.”

The published transcripts of these secret tapes provide essential insights into the ExComm decision-making process, but they also reflect the flaws in the tapes themselves: frequent interruptions, garbled and rambling exchanges, baffling 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 can be dense and impenetrable to the non-specialist. However, the condensed interpretive narrative in this book, about half the length of the original full-length version, seeks to bring these discussions to life as a clear, coherent story, making the essence of the discussions completely understandable to general readers and especially to young people.

dant primary source, the ExComm tapes, into a more usable secondary source by concentrating on essentials and citing only the indispensable material. Readers can follow 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, emphasized by separating them from the background chatter and repetition of the unedited tapes, helping the reader to grasp as completely and accurately as possible the meaning, intent, and human dimension of these spontaneous 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-wracking quality of a work of fiction. But, of course, this unique story—permanently documented on audiotape—is not fiction.

My experience with presidential tapes began soon after I became historian at the John F. Kennedy Library in 1977. I initially edited some of the president's recorded telephone conversations—my first in-depth experience listening to White House recordings. Then, in the early 1980s, as part of my preparation for conducting a series of oral history interviews on foreign policy in the Kennedy administration, I began listening to the Cuban missile crisis meeting tapes. The Kennedy Library was preparing for their eventual declassification, and I was almost certainly the first non-member of the ExComm to hear precisely what happened at *all* these meetings; I was definitely the first professional historian to hear all these tapes.

It is difficult to describe the intellectual and physical demands of working on these recordings. I sat for hours at a time, 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. The clunky and heavy Tandberg unit was difficult to move and operate; and, since it did not have a real-time timer, finding a specific moment on a tape could be incredibly frustrating. The first tape I played actually sounded like an FM radio station without frequency lock, the voices almost drowned out by intense background hiss. Dolby noise reduction appeared later in the 1980s, but the Kennedy Library never used this type of technology in order to avoid altering the originals. I listened to copies made directly from the White House originals.

To complicate the task even further, the recordings were also marred by distracting sounds: a smoker emptying his pipe into an ashtray on

sneezing, nose-blowing and throat-clearing, 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 that sounded remarkably like a venting steam radiator. I checked the weather charts for that week and confirmed that it was too mild in Washington for White House radiators to have been overheating. To this day, I don't have a clue about the source of that exasperating noise.

These complications frequently required listening to the same words scores of times (in some cases, unfortunately, without success). Some voices were much harder to pick up because the speakers were seated at the opposite end of the table from the microphones concealed in wall fixtures behind the president's chair in the Cabinet Room. But, after a few very frustrating 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 not been typical. (Some tapes had likely deteriorated due to poor storage and preservation.) The project became more and more fascinating but always required absolute concentration (for example, I routinely disconnected my telephone). I quickly learned that missing even a second or two could alter both the speaker's intent and the historical record. There is a world of difference between someone saying "ever" as opposed to "never," or "I think" as opposed to "I don't think."

Reviewing these tapes required detailed knowledge of the Cold War era, familiarity with the views of the participants, the attentiveness to pick up even fragmentary remarks, and the ability to recognize voices. (I had interviewed many of the participants for Kennedy Library programs and was very familiar with most voices.) Some of the 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 sound quality of each voice could vary from meeting to meeting depending on where each 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 was technically primitive by today's standards. McGeorge Bundy, for example, a member of ExComm, listened to some tapes in the early 1980s and could not identify the voices of several of his former colleagues.

The ExComm discussions did not move forward with the momen-

back and forth, with a great deal of repetition and many dead ends. Many participants often spoke in ungrammatical sentence fragments—no one more than JFK himself. They could be blindly self-righteous and cynical when discussing, for example, American covert actions against Cuba, but also remarkably idealistic in expressing moral doubts about a sneak attack on Cuba. Often, the most important decisions, such as choosing the blockade as the first step in the American response, happened without an explicit statement at any recorded meeting. Everyone simply recognized that the president had decided and acted accordingly.

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

JFK's share of the responsibility for the onset of the crisis does not diminish his cautious and thoughtful leadership once the situation had reached a potentially fatal flashpoint. The ExComm tapes prove conclusively that John 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. The tapes 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. 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, especially from his ally Fidel Castro, to escalate the crisis.

There are, apparently, no Khrushchev tapes. The Kennedy tapes, however, present a unique opportunity to observe 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 dangerous deliberations, and never before or since have secret discussions such as these been recorded and preserved. And, given the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis will hopefully remain the only "case study" of a full-scale nuclear showdown between military superpowers.

Kennedy installed the first conceivably White House taping system. Evelyn Lincoln, JFK's personal secretary, recalled that the president was enraged after the 1961 Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba when several advisers who had supported the plan in closed meetings claimed later to have opposed it; she also maintained that the president simply wanted accurate records for writing his memoirs. Robert Bouck, the Secret Service agent who installed the recording devices, claimed that the president asked him to set up the taping system but never gave a reason. It seems reasonable that Kennedy's decision did reflect a desire to create an accurate source for preparing his memoirs after he left the White House. These explanations, however, fail to explain why JFK did not begin taping for more than a year after the Bay of Pigs.

In the early summer of 1962, Bouck installed taping systems in the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room. The actual recording device was in the White House basement. 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 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 knee well of his desk 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. A separate Dictaphone taping system was later installed in the Oval Office, and possibly in the president's bedroom, to record telephone conversations.

Bouck and another agent maintained the recording system and changed the tapes. Since the reel-to-reel tapes could record for a maximum of about two hours, Bouck later installed a back-up tape machine which was automatically activated if the first machine ran out of tape. The agents put the tapes in a plain sealed envelope and turned them over to Mrs. Lincoln for storage.

On November 22, 1963, after receiving confirmation of the president's death in Texas, JFK's younger brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, instructed Bouck to disconnect the taping system. Two hundred forty-eight hours of meeting tapes and twelve hours of telephone conversations were eventually turned over to the John F. Kennedy Library. Between 1983 and 2001, all forty-three hours of tape from Oc-

the day JFK lifted the blockade around Cuba, were gradually declassified.

RFK appears to have asked Evelyn Lincoln to transcribe some tapes soon after JFK's death, but Bouck does not believe that Lincoln did any transcribing. Eventually George Dalton, a junior naval officer detailed to the White House, using equipment supplied by Bouck, took over this task. However, a document found recently at the Kennedy Library proves that some transcripts, probably by Dalton, existed as early as August 9, 1963. On that date, Lincoln apparently turned over eighteen missile crisis transcripts to Robert Kennedy's secretary in the Justice Department—raising the possibility that RFK, and even JFK himself, might have seen these very rough transcripts or even listened to some of the tapes in 1963. (The "Dalton transcripts" remain classified.)

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 he failed to record the critical Oval Office confrontation with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko during the first week of the crisis. He often 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 one case, the tape was left running and recorded the White House cleaning crew.

Inevitably, critics have questioned or even dismissed the historical value of these tapes because the two Kennedys knew they were being recorded and presumably could have manipulated the outcome to enhance their historical reputation. "The [JFK] tapes inherently lie," one commentator charged. "There pose the Kennedy 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." These tapes "do not present pure, raw history" since JFK 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."

This argument is plainly groundless. Perhaps in a recorded phone conversation between two people it might be possible to manipulate the discussion. But, in a meeting of some fifteen people, operating under enormous stress and tension, it would be physically impossible. JFK could turn the tape machine on and off in the Cabinet Room, but he did not have access to the controls he would need for selective record-

seeing what he was doing. There was no visible counter, and he could not have seen one unless he stuck his head under the table.

In any case, JFK would never have imagined that the public would ever hear these tapes. He thought of them as private property, *which they were legally at the time*, and could not foresee the Freedom of Information Act, “Watergate,” and the Presidential Records Act, which eventually led to opening these confidential materials. He could have picked and chosen from the tapes when he wrote his memoirs—ignoring frequent references to classified national security material and potentially embarrassing personal and political remarks (especially in the telephone conversations). Why would he need to control the content of the tapes when he was certain that historians and the public would never hear them unless he or his estate granted special access?

The “Watergate” tapes also confirm this point: President Nixon knew he was being recorded and nevertheless did *not* try to tailor his remarks for the tapes. Instead, he repeatedly incriminated himself. Why? Because even well into the “Watergate” investigation he never thought that he would or could be compelled by the courts to release these personal and confidential recordings.

Finally, 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 to “pose” for history, how could he have known which point of view would later be judged favorably by historians? What if, for example, the Russians had responded to the blockade, just as the Joint Chiefs had warned, by carrying out low-level bombing raids in Florida or by launching the nuclear missiles in Cuba at the U.S.? Historians today would still be listening to the same tapes (assuming any tapes or historians had survived), but with a very different outlook. It would then be the Chiefs who had turned out to be right; the blockade, just as they had predicted, would have proven to be a feeble and inadequate response, and air strikes to neutralize the missile sites and airfields—which we credit Kennedy for resisting—would appear to have been the best course after all. The same tapes could then be interpreted to make Kennedy look terribly negligent rather than diplomatically reasonable, *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 too knew about the taping system, but

tough strategy that would remove Castro and demonstrate American power to the Soviets. Yet, when he decided to write a book on the crisis and 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 would be “better” politically and would appeal to a nation deeply divided by the Vietnam War. 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.

JFK understood that history is not a play. There is no script. As he told the ExComm when the hazardous naval blockade around Cuba was about to go into effect, “What *we* are doing is throwing down a card on the table in a game which we don’t know the ending of.”