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Forum 25 (2020) on the Importance of White House Presidential Tapes in Scholarship

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Introduction by Matthew Evangelista, Cornell University

It was the third day of demonstrations around the White House. The president had called out some 10,000 military forces, including paratrooper units of the 82nd Airborne Division, to handle the protesters. His chief of staff proposed recruiting teamsters to provoke violence. The president enthusiastically agreed: “they’ve got guys who’ll go in and knock their heads off.” “Sure,” said his aide, “Murderers. Guys that really, you know, that’s what they really do... it’s the regular strikebuster-types and all that...hope they really hurt ‘em. You know, I mean go in with some real - and smash some noses.” Looking for ways to discredit the protesters and undermine their image for television audiences, the aide mentioned two prominent activists, Rennie Davis and Abbie Hoffman, who had been tried for conspiracy to riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago: “Fortunately, they’re all just really bad-lookin’ people. There’s no, there’s no, uh, semblance of respectability.” “Aren’t the Chicago Seven all Jews?” asked the president?¹

This conversation—whose unsettling echoes reverberate in today’s climate of protest and provocation—took place between Richard Nixon and H.R. Haldeman and was recorded on May 5, 1971. But it only became publicly known with the appearance of an article by Seymour Hersh on the front page of the *New York Times* more than ten years later.² For Americans of a certain age—and not only professional historians—periodic revelations of White House conversations captured on tape were newsworthy events, something to look forward to in the expectation of learning tantalizing new facts or confirming old suspicions (that Nixon was a foul-mouthed, anti-Semitic thug, for example).

The purpose of this forum is different: to assess the value (or ‘value added’) of tape recordings of White House conversations for our understanding of U.S. policy-making. Four accomplished scholars working at the intersection of history and political science offer their assessments of what the tapes can contribute to historical knowledge. They all find the tapes useful, even if the same conversation or meeting had been summarized in a “MemCon” or minutes. As Marc Trachtenberg points out, “compared to a transcript, the minutes of a meeting are very short.” He provides an example of transcripts of meetings during the Cuban Missile Crisis. “The October 16 [1962] transcript, covering two-and-a-half hours of discussion, runs to about 87 pages, whereas the minutes of some of the later high-level meetings are at most six or seven pages long.” Inevitably the note-taker must selectively decide what to emphasize and what to neglect. Trachtenberg detects a promising research project to discover whether there are any patterns evident in the selection.

So what do hearing the tapes or reading the transcripts add? For Trachtenberg, “in listening to the tapes, you had the sense that here was the real thing—that you could actually hear for yourself what was going on, that you were not dependent on how other people interpreted what was being said, but that you were in direct touch with the hard, historical reality.” Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security adviser and then secretary of state, was unaware at the time that the president was taping him and was subsequently dismissive of the value of the tapes (which often reveal him in an unflattering light, to say the least) for history. In an interview reported in Luke Nichter’s valuable contribution to this forum, Kissinger advised focusing on the “memoranda between the President and myself.” Nichter pushed back, arguing “what the tapes show that is different from a memorandum is a deliberative process involving which options were considered, why, and which one won out, and how he and Nixon reflected after the fact.” Kissinger conceded the point. Moreover, sometimes the tapes are the only source we have. Of the “Memos for the President’s Files” of Nixon’s conversations with Kissinger, for example, James Goldgeier and Elizabeth Saunders report the testimony of White House aide Alexander Butterfield that “we probably got 60 percent of these.” Nichter indicates that even for discussions with foreign leaders “Nixon discontinued the practice of making a Memorandum of Conversation for some meetings captured by his taping system,” including ones with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

¹ “Excerpts from White House Tape of a Nixon-Haldeman Talk in May 1971, *New York Times*, September 24, 1981, D26.

² Seymour M. Hersh, “1971 Tape Links Nixon to Plan to Use ‘Thugs,’” *New York Times*, September 24, 1981, A1.

Reinforcing his point that the tapes provide nuance and context that subsequent summaries often lack, Trachtenberg provides an example from the Cuban Missile Crisis. It took a long time, and many tape transcripts and oral histories, for scholars to realize the importance to resolving the conflict of Kennedy's secret offer to withdraw the US Jupiter missiles deployed in Turkey in return for Soviet withdrawal of missiles from Cuba. In retrospect, then, the toning down of Kennedy's sense of urgency by note-taker Bromley Smith is meaningful:

Smith made President Kennedy seem much less determined to consider a trade involving the Jupiter missiles in Turkey than he actually was. According to the transcript, for example, Kennedy was at one point clearly annoyed that the government had put this issue on the back burner. The Soviets had just come up with a new proposal involving that kind of trade: "Well," he asked, "have we gone to the Turkish government before this came out this week? I've talked about it now for a week. Have we had any conversations in Turkey, with the Turks?" And this is how Smith paraphrased that remark: "The President recalled that he had asked that consideration be given to the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey some days previously." The paraphrase was much milder than the original: Smith was pouring a lot of water into Kennedy's wine.

A particular strength of Trachtenberg's contribution is that he uses his examples to make broader methodological points and suggestions for future research. Regarding the comparison between taped discussions and minutes summarizing them, for example, he can "imagine someone publishing a nice paper doing that kind of comparison—showing, that is, how the differences between the two types of sources fall into a pattern, and explaining why systematic differences of that sort exist."

For political scientists James Goldgeier and Elizabeth Saunders, the tapes, as their essay title signals, offer insights into the *political* nature of presidential decisions. Tapes recorded in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis, they show, reveal political motivations that seem, let's say, inappropriate for decisions that literally put the fate of the earth at risk. They stress the tension between the judgment of Kennedy and his advisers that the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba did not meaningfully affect the military balance—given the overall preponderance of U.S. nuclear systems, including Jupiter missiles deployed in Turkey and within range of Moscow—and the perceived need to react in a decisive manner because of political pressures. The authors contrast the tension as evident from the tapes with its neglect in the subsequent MemCon composed by John McCone:

McNamara reiterated his view—which is not mentioned in the McCone memo—that the Soviets had not changed the military balance of power, and the problem was mainly political. While noting that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and others at the Pentagon disagreed, he asserted, "...it is not a military problem that we're facing. It's a political problem. It's a problem of holding the alliance together. It's a problem of properly conditioning [Soviet leader Nikita] Khrushchev for our future moves. And the problem of holding the alliance together, the problem of conditioning Khrushchev for our future moves, the problem of dealing with our domestic public, all requires action that, in my opinion, the shift in military balance does not require."³

Goldgeier and Saunders recount an instance of how domestic politics could influence and even distort foreign policy, as in the case of Lyndon B. Johnson and Vietnam:

As decisions about whether and how to escalate in Vietnam unfolded, for example, Johnson focused intently on former Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who was then serving as Ambassador in Saigon and was also a potential Johnson opponent in 1964. Johnson frequently complained about Lodge to aides and confidants in telephone calls but said that he could not

³ The authors quote the transcript from Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 84.

replace him—and indeed had to act on his recommendations—for fear of the political repercussions.

Note the range of examples that Goldgeier and Saunders include under the rubric “political.” One might argue that Johnson’s concern for the next election or McNamara’s “problem of dealing with our domestic public” are of a different quality than Kennedy’s concern for the impact of his decision on NATO allies or on the Soviet leader. The latter political considerations are at least directly relevant to foreign policy, even if they are not worth blowing up the world.

Luke Nichter, one of the leading experts on the Nixon tapes, makes a number of important points in his essay, not least the clarification that Kennedy was not the first president to tape:

From the moment Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered the thick Oval Office floor drilled to install wiring in 1940, to the bugged lamp on Truman’s desk, the manually-operated Dictabelt system of the Kennedy-Johnson years, to Nixon’s massive 3,432 hours of tapes, a total of six presidents have left as part of their legacies some of the most controversial sets of government records that are also arguably the most complicated ever to be managed by the National Archives and Records Administration.

His essay provides valuable detail about the systems established by presidents from Roosevelt through Nixon and he provides an overall assessment that all four forum participants share: “For scholars, the tapes do not replace traditional forms of research but rather augment them and can be incredibly rewarding.”

All of the contributors temper their enthusiasm for the tapes with words of caution. As Nichter warns, “tapes can give a listener a false sense of security; perhaps we believe something more because we *heard it ourselves*. They must be interpreted, corroborated, triangulated, and put in their proper context.” Goldgeier and Saunders describe one problem with using the tapes as historical evidence: “the presidents knew they were taping their meetings or phone calls, even if others in the room or on the telephone did not. We don’t know how much these leaders were talking not only to the people in the room, but to history.” More than two decades ago, William Safire, the former Nixon speechwriter and then *New York Times* columnist, put a darker spin on this observation. “Nobody stops to ask: What kind of chief executive secretly records the intimate advice of his visitors, with no concern for their privacy or reputations? I think the secret tapper has a serious character flaw.” In Safire’s view, “the tapes inherently lie.” Regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis tapes, for example: “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.”⁴

The forum participants tend to offer more benign assessments than Safire’s. As Nichter writes, “the most common reason why presidents taped was as a means of preserving a correct record of what was said by the president as well as in his presence.” According to Goldgeier and Saunders, the tapes’ “main purpose was to help the presidents write their memoirs.” President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had inherited the taping system in the White House from his predecessor, suggested precisely this rationale for using it to his successor. “Johnson spoke to Nixon about the taping system and encouraged him to use it as a way of ensuring accurate material for his eventual memoirs,” writes Nichter. Nixon had the system removed instead. Two years later he changed his mind and ordered the Secret Service to install a taping system in the White House and at Camp David, including on several telephone lines.

During the Watergate crisis, when the extent of Nixon’s “bugging himself” became known, one of his legal advisers explained that a similar system had been in operation under LBJ. Johnson’s adviser Joseph A. Califano Jr. deemed the claim “a damned outrageous smear, a total smear on a dead President,” and the Secret Service denied ever having

⁴ William Safire, “White House Tapes,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1997, sec. 4, p. 15.

installed a recording system for previous presidents.⁵ Nichter reports that both of these denials were false: Califano admitted to him in an interview that he was aware of the Johnson tapes, and Nichter names the two agents who installed Kennedy's system. Sometimes the urge to discredit a sitting president leads observers to forget the practices of his predecessors.⁶

Donald Trump's presidency has made some—including our forum participants—wonder whether recordings of his conversations exist for future study by historians. In his bizarre *pas de deux* with James Comey, the president and the FBI director both publicly expressed the wish that their conversations had been taped, but it seems unlikely that they were. Even the “transcript,” released by the White House, of Trump's infamous telephone conversation with the Ukrainian president—which led to impeachment—was not transcribed from a recording, but consisted of notes taken by staff members who “listen and memorialize the conversation in written form as the conversation takes place.”⁷ Although Nichter mentions recordings of the “eighteen interviews Trump gave to Bob Woodward for his book, *Rage*,” he concludes that, “as far as we know, no president since Nixon has recorded in any kind of comprehensive way.”

Future historians face a daunting task of reconstructing presidential decisions from email (on private as well as government servers), phone texts, tweets, and even meetings with foreign leaders when the interpreters are ordered to destroy their notes. Preserving such evidence will pose a major challenge to archivists. In the meantime, the task of transcribing and making widely available the existing tapes from Roosevelt to Nixon is far from complete. Nichter makes a number of valuable suggestions for their preservation and use, including digital history projects “in which textual analysis and other computational manipulation could be performed to derive higher meaning from a large corpus of transcripts.” I could imagine an application to foreign-policy decisions of the sort of analysis that Tali Mendelberg and her colleagues have undertaken to identify gender dynamics in small-group discussions and other institutions.⁸

We know that gender plays a role even in decisions made exclusively by men. Consider Fredrik Logevall's compelling study, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*. In his thorough assessment and take-down of the main explanations offered for Johnson's decision to expand U.S. military involvement in Vietnam following Kennedy's assassination, Logevall seems to leave only one explanation standing: Johnson “saw the war as a test of his own manliness.”⁹ A fascinating future project for some enterprising historian or political scientist might examine the dynamics of taped White House meetings to track the gendered nature of conflictual or cooperative responses to crisis decision-making, for example. In any event, as the essays presented here affirm, White House presidential tapes offer a unique and rich source of insight into U.S. policy, even as the practice of taping itself is history.

Participants:

⁵ R.W. Apple, “Taping in Johnson Era both Alleged and Denied,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1973, A1.

⁶ On immigration, for example, see “All Presidents Are Deporters in Chief,” editorial, *New York Times*, July 19, 2019; on compliance with laws of war, see Matthew Evangelista, “Donald Trump and the Limits of International Law,” *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Roundtable 1-5L*, May 24, 2017, <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5L-Trump-IR>.

⁷ The White House, “Telephone conversation with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine,” Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, July 25, 2019, 9:03-9:33 a.m. EDT, declassified September 24, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Unclassified09.2019.pdf>

⁸ Princeton University, “Tali Mendelberg, Publications” (webpage), n.d., <https://scholar.princeton.edu/talim/published>.

⁹ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 393.

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Essay by James Goldgeier, American University, and Elizabeth N. Saunders, Georgetown University¹

We live in an era when the president frequently says out loud exactly what he thinks, and what ought to be private, confidential, or even classified national security matters, including their political implications, are available for us all to hear and in some cases, see. So it is easy to forget how hard it is to gain access to unvarnished presidential-level debate about crucial national security choices.

But anyone who has studied U.S. presidential decision-making knows how difficult it is to reconstruct a policy choice and understand the motivations and reasoning that led to a particular outcome. Doing so requires consulting with a range of sources: newspapers and secondary sources, documents in American and other archives, memoirs, and for recent presidents, interviews.

Three presidents—John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon—have provided us with unparalleled peeks into their decision-making by creating voluminous tape recordings.² That they decided to do so to help them write their memoirs demonstrates their understanding of the shortcomings of the archival record.

The three presidencies vary significantly in the types and levels of recording. Kennedy's recordings total more than 248 hours of White House meetings and 12 hours of telephone conversations; Johnson meanwhile recorded more than 642 hours of mostly telephone conversations from 1963-69. Although Nixon entered office in January 1969, he did not begin taping until February 1971. From that point through July 1973, he recorded more than 3,700 hours of his meetings and phone calls.³ Importantly, unlike Kennedy and Johnson, who chose what to tape, Nixon's taping machine was voice activated (with manual backup).

But the tapes come with their own sets of problems for the scholar. They don't cover everything that was happening in a given decision process. Even transcripts produced by experts have been prone to error, demonstrating how hard it is to decipher them. And the presidents knew they were taping their meetings or phone calls, even if others in the room or on the telephone did not. We don't know how much these leaders were talking not only to the people in the room, but to history.

Still, tapes provide the scholar with something tantalizing: transporting one back to a moment in time, and allowing one to gain more insight into the presidential personality. As Nixon archivist Samuel W. Rushay, Jr. describes,

When I put on headphones, inserted a tape into my tape machine, and pressed "play," I was instantly shuttled back in time to the years 1971–1973. There is immediacy to the tapes; they give the listener a sense of experiencing history as it happens. One becomes a "fly on the wall," eavesdropping in the White House as decisions are made and history unfolds. One hears as Nixon strategizes about foreign and domestic policies; obsesses about public and media relations; crafts a speech; plots acts of revenge against his enemies; reflects on the role of the presidency in American life; deals with Congress; performs ceremonial duties; discusses issues, politics, and scheduling; and otherwise proceeds through his workday. Nixon could be petty, bigoted, profane,

¹ The authors thank Agneska Bloch and Stephen Dyer for their research assistance.

² The tapes created by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and Dwight D. Eisenhower are much more limited.

³ Maura F. Porter, "Presidential Tapes Allow Eavesdropping on History," *Prologue Magazine* 35:2 (Summer 2003): 42-43; see also Lee Sigelman, "The Presentation of Self in Presidential Life: Onstage and Backstage with Johnson and Nixon," *Political Communication* 18:1 (2001): 1-22.

obtuse, and small-minded in one breath, and statesmanlike, pensive, diplomatic, far-sighted, and insightful in the next. It is a fascinating mix that sheds considerable light not only on the 37th President but also on the institution of the modern American presidency.⁴

In this essay, we start with a discussion of what documents do and do not tell us on their own. We then turn to one of the most important lessons learned from the existence of presidential tapes: they are a reminder that presidents, like any other leaders, are political, and their decisions are often driven by domestic political calculations that even their closest foreign policy advisers are often unable or unwilling to admit publicly. We illustrate this point through a discussion of Kennedy's deliberations during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. We close by noting the broader benefits of having tapes for scholarly research on the presidency but also key lessons for using any scholarly material to reconstruct events.

Aren't documents enough?

Our access to presidential tapes is limited. Since they led to Nixon's downfall, no president since has taped, at least as far as we know. It is worth asking, then, what do we really get out of them? After all, documents alone can tell us a great deal.

But the documentary record has significant limitations. As National Security Archive Director Tom Blanton argues, scholars need to carefully consider the document's origin story.⁵ Who wrote the document? Why did they write it? Who was their audience? What was the impact of the document? Who kept the document, who released the document, and if it was secret, what was secret about it? If it was a memorandum of conversation, who was the notetaker? Is it an information document or an action document? Who had to read the document before it was approved?

Furthermore, there may be different documentary records of the same conversation—each of which provide a very different perspective, as Fred Greenstein and Richard Immerman showed in their analysis of the famous meeting between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Kennedy the day before the latter's inauguration in January 1961.⁶

Documents are typically not transcripts: even a Memorandum of Conversation (MemCon) is the result of someone taking notes. And if the notetaker was a participant in the conversation, the notes are likely to be less detailed. Notetakers may also purposely omit details or leave something out when the document is sent around to other agencies. And unlike the tapes, which presidents created to help them reconstruct the historical record, government officials who create MemCons are not writing for future scholars; they are writing as part of the policy process to help guide those in the government and perhaps even the president himself.⁷

⁴ Samuel W. Rushay, Jr., "Listening to Nixon: An Archivist's Reflections on His Work with the White House Tapes," *Prologue Magazine* 39:3 (Fall 2007) at: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/tapes.html>.

⁵ The authors greatly benefited from Blanton's remarks, which one or both authors heard annually at the George Washington University Summer Institute on Conducting Archival Research, from 2003-10. These questions come from notes taken during his annual presentations.

⁶ Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *The Journal of American History* 79:2 (September 1992): 568-587.

⁷ See the discussion, for example, in James Goldgeier, "There Are No Notes on Trump's Meeting with Putin. That's a Big Deal," *The Monkey Cage at the Washington Post*, July 19, 2017 (revised version republished on July 13, 2018 and January 12, 2019); <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/19/there-are-no-notes-on-trumps-meeting-with-putin-thats-a-big-deal/>.

Presidents as political

So what, specifically, do we get from tapes that we often cannot get from documents? As mentioned, one big takeaway from the tapes is the reminder that presidents are political animals, even when making national security decisions.

It is often difficult to glean domestic political motives from documents, or even interviews. As Ernest May noted in *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, “the direct evidence of connections between the foreign policy debates and the presidential contest is sparse and ambiguous. It is not at all surprising that scholars have overlooked it. American statesmen have always had an aversion to admitting, even to themselves, that their opinions on foreign policy could be affected by private interest.”⁸ In their study of how successive presidents tried not to lose the Vietnam War, Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts are even blunter, noting that “Domestic politics is a dirty phrase in the inner sanctums of foreign policymaking. Officials involved in such policymaking rarely write memos with any explicit reference to domestic affairs and seldom even talk about them except to friends and newspapermen off the record.”⁹

It is indeed rare to find detailed discussion of domestic political motives in memos. Apart from the distaste for memorializing political considerations, career foreign policy professionals tend on the whole to be less attuned to domestic politics. There are exceptions, of course, but one of the shocking aspects of the memorandum of conversation of President Donald Trump’s telephone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was how clearly it showed Trump’s domestic political motives—an exception that helps prove the rule.¹⁰

The tapes we have from Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon show that political considerations in national security decisions are, however, far from exceptional. They also demonstrate that top foreign policy advisers, who are typically political appointees, were, in fact, well aware of these pressures and discussed the options accordingly.¹¹

Consider the early meetings on the Cuban Missile Crisis. On the morning of Tuesday, October 16, Kennedy discussed the news of the missiles with his team and immediately made clear his view that the weapons—which could enable a nuclear attack from within the Western hemisphere—did not really change the military threat that already existed from the Soviet Union. After all, as Kennedy put it, “they’ve got enough to blow us up now anyway.” Instead, referring both to the domestic and international situation, he viewed the situation as a “political struggle as much as military.”¹² In part

⁸ Ernest May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), x.

⁹ Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings Press, 1975), 221.

¹⁰ In the voluminous set of records of the many meetings and phone calls between President Bill Clinton and Russian president Boris Yeltsin, one MemCon stands out precisely because Clinton discusses the impact of NATO enlargement on his domestic politics compared to Yeltsin’s. See “Summary report on One-On-One Meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin,” St. Catherine’s Hall, The Kremlin, May 10, 1995, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568>, 290–96. For a general discussion of those materials, see James Goldgeier, “Bill and Boris: A Window into a Most Important Post-Cold War Relationship,” *Texas National Security Review* 1:4 (August 2018); available at <https://tnsr.org/2018/08/bill-and-boris-a-window-into-a-most-important-post-cold-war-relationship/>.

¹¹ On presidential advisers as political actors, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, “Leaders, Advisers, and the Political Origins of Elite Support for War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62:10 (2018): 2118–2149.

¹² Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 62.

that was due to comments he made the month before. On September 4, Kennedy said publicly that the Soviets had delivered defensive weapons to Cuba, but, he noted, “Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise.”¹³

At the October 16 meeting, he referred to his September commitment. “Last month I said we weren’t going to [allow it]. Last month, I should have said that we don’t care. But when we said we’re *not* going to, and then they go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then I would think that our risks increase.”¹⁴ After Kennedy left the meeting, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara also mulled this issue over: “I asked myself: ‘Well, what is it then if it isn’t a military problem?’ And the answer he came up with? “This is a domestic political problem. In the announcement we didn’t say we’d go in and not [that] we’d kill them. We said we’d act. Well, how will we act?”¹⁵

Comparing memos and tapes during the crisis also shows that the political candor of the tapes did not often percolate into the written record. For example, on Thursday morning, October 18, 1962, Kennedy met with his top advisers to discuss options in the light of updated intelligence. A “memorandum for the file” summarizing the meeting, which was drafted by CIA director John McCone, records that in a discussion of whether to try diplomacy first, “President Kennedy was non-committal, however he seemed to continually raise questions of reactions of our allies, NATO, South America, public opinion and others.”¹⁶ But the transcript from the tape of this meeting gives a much fuller picture of Kennedy’s concerns about how an attack without warning would look and whether or not it would affect the Soviet reaction. And McNamara reiterated his view—which is not mentioned in the McCone memo—that the Soviets had not changed the military balance of power, and the problem was mainly political. While noting that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and others at the Pentagon disagreed, he asserted, “. . .it is not a military problem that we’re facing. It’s a political problem. It’s a problem of holding the alliance together. It’s a problem of properly conditioning [Soviet leader Nikita] Khrushchev for our future moves. And the problem of holding the alliance together, the problem of conditioning Khrushchev for our future moves, the problem of dealing with our domestic public, all requires action that, in my opinion, the shift in military balance does not require.”¹⁷

One of the most shocking exchanges about domestic politics in the Executive Committee (ExComm) meetings captured by the tapes occurred between Kennedy and Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay on October 19. LeMay stated,

“There’s one other factor that I didn’t mention that’s not quite in our field, [which] is the political factor. But you invited us to comment on this at one time. And that is that we have had a talk about Cuba and the SAM sites down there. And you have made some pretty strong statements about their being defensive and that we would take action against offensive weapons. I think that a blockade and political talk would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a

¹³ “Cuban Crisis: A Step-by-Step Review,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1962, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/10/19/home/crisis-review.html>.

¹⁴ May and Zelikow, 62. As Robert Divine put it in discussing the May and Zelikow book, the tapes “show a John Kennedy who is often more concerned about appearances than reality—more worried about perception than substance.” Robert A. Divine, “The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow; Michael R. Beschloss, “Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964,” *Political Science Quarterly* 113:2 (Summer, 1998): 308.

¹⁵ May and Zelikow, 70.

¹⁶ John McCone, “Memorandum for the File,” October 19, 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, Vol. XI, Doc. 28, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d28>.

¹⁷ May and Zelikow, 84.

pretty weak response to this. And I'm sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way, too. In other words, you're in a pretty bad fix at the present time."

JFK responded, "What did you say?" Brazenly, LeMay repeated, "You're in a pretty bad fix." JFK replied, "You're in there with me. Personally."¹⁸

Johnson and Nixon, of course, spoke in far blunter and sometimes cruder political terms in making decisions about war and peace, particularly in the Vietnam War.¹⁹ The tapes are a particularly important source for Johnson, who, unlike Kennedy and Nixon, was not inclined to write much himself. The tapes are where scholars can really see Johnson's acute awareness of domestic political implications intersect with his tendency to dominate aides.

These tendencies appear in military operations of varying size and significance. As Alan McPherson notes, the tapes changed the views of scholars on Johnson's role in the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, a deployment that involved more than 40,000 troops. The tapes "reveal that Johnson was more responsible than previously thought for the intelligence failures and hasty decision-making that marked the intervention," McPherson observes, and they also show that the president was "more concerned with the domestic political fallout from the fear of 'another Cuba' in the Western Hemisphere than he was with the reality itself of a communist takeover."²⁰ Indeed, the tapes show Johnson pushing his advisers to help him pin the uprising in Santo Domingo on Cuban leader Fidel Castro, despite their repeated warnings that there was little evidence of outside interference on the island.²¹

Domestic politics also loomed over Johnson's decisions in Vietnam. As decisions about whether and how to escalate in Vietnam unfolded, for example, Johnson focused intently on former Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who was then serving as Ambassador in Saigon and was also a potential Johnson opponent in 1964. Johnson frequently complained about Lodge to aides and confidants in telephone calls but said that he could not replace him—and indeed had to act on his recommendations—for fear of the political repercussions.²² In March 1964, he told Secretary of State Dean Rusk by phone that Lodge was "thinking of New Hampshire" and that the administration must respond to Lodge's cables by "complimenting him and agreeing with him...I think that we got to build that record. . . . I think we got to watch what that fellow says."²³ Kennedy, of course, had appointed Lodge for Republican cover, but Johnson's language shows in blunt terms how much potential criticism from a rival loomed over his day-to-day policy choices.

¹⁸ May and Zelikow, 117.

¹⁹ See, for example, Sigelman, "The Presentation of Self;" Michael Beschloss, ed., *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-65* (Simon & Schuster, 2001); Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics: The Nixon Tapes, the Vietnam War, and the Casualties of Reelection* (University of Virginia Press, 2015).

²⁰ Alan McPherson, "Misled by Himself: What the Johnson Tapes Reveal about the Dominican Intervention of 1965," *Latin American Research Review* 38:2 (2003): 129.

²¹ See, for example, conversations summarized in Editorial Note, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Vol. XXXII, Doc. 48, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v32/d48>.

²² For a discussion, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, "War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force," *Security Studies* 24:3 (2015): 491-492.

²³ Johnson with Rusk, telephone conversation, 2 March 1964, in Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 261-262.

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Tapes have their own origin story

Nixon's political statements on the tapes are justifiably famous, and their role in his downfall makes it particularly important to consider why he taped at all. Indeed, just as Blanton advised scholars to consider the origins and purpose of documents, we must also consider why and for whom presidents tape. Whereas documents were written for real time government work, tapes did little for actual policymaking; they were not designed for that purpose. Nor were they designed to help scholars; their main purpose was to help the presidents write their memoirs.

Nixon aide Alexander Butterfield explained how the tapes came in handy for him as a key person responsible for helping Nixon create the historical record:

He was—he really cared about the history. And the interesting thing is, beginning with the Nixon administration in January [19]69, we initiated a program called “Memos for the President’s File,” so someone sat in on every meeting, even meetings with his own staff people...We had sort of a “trusted staff member” in there taking notes, and after a while the president said, “Don’t take notes, because that does tend to inhibit the guest. So sit in there and soak up as much as you can, but as soon as you leave the meeting, go back to your desk and just write out, forget grammar and punctuation, just write out the essence of what happened in that meeting.” And those were due in to me. So I was running—most of my time was taken up with running around beating people about the head and ears getting the memo. They were due in to me in 24 hours, and I kept the memos for the president’s file. Kissinger was the worst because his meetings were the most complex, and he wasn’t about to sit down afterwards and dictate a memo for me. And uh, we never did get them all. We probably got 60 percent of these. So when the tapes came along, I was sort of secretly and initially relieved. I thought, “Oh boy, I don’t have to follow up on these memos,” but we didn’t stop that procedure. So, we had two things going: the tapes, and the Memos for the President’s File.²⁴

Nixon’s Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman explained that they turned to the tapes after a failure to bring aboard the perfect note-taker:

We thought of the perfect person who could prepare memorandums that would record, not only the intangibles of feeling and tone, but everything, possibly every word. This was General Vernon Walters, who later became deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Ambassador to the United Nations. He has a phenomenal memory. I was once present at a dinner at which German Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger gave a speech, ten minutes or so in length, which was, at its conclusion, badly translated into English. The other Germans present began to thump the table, as if to say, “That’s not correct.” At that point General Walters rose from his seat and gave a perfect translation of what the chancellor had said, from memory, without help. This was certainly the perfect man to be our note-taker. I had the assignment of offering him the job. I very naively called him in and made the offer, adding that his president needed him. He drew himself up and inflated himself to full general-size height and breadth, inserted his array of medals right in front of my nose, and said, in effect, “I am a general in the United States Army, I am a commander of troops. I am not a secretary to anybody.”²⁵

And so, they taped.

²⁴ Alexander Butterfield Explains the Nixon Taping System, John F. Kennedy Library, Presidential Tapes conference, February 16, 2003, unofficial transcript, <https://millercenter.org/alexander-butterfield-explains-nixon-taping-system>.

²⁵ H.R. Haldeman, “The Nixon White House Tapes: The Decision to Record Presidential Conversations” *Prologue Magazine* 30:2 (Summer 1998), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1988/summer/haldeman.html>.

Tapes are not a magic bullet

Given that they have their own backstory and limitations, scholars must be cautious with tapes. Just as no one document contains the unvarnished “truth,” neither do tapes allow scholars to avoid issues of interpretation and context. As McPherson notes, for example, “a spontaneous remark could be just that, not one’s considered judgment and much less a statement of policy.”²⁶

Furthermore, getting a clear transcript of what the tapes say can be challenging. Rushay reports how difficult it is even for a trained archivist to transcribe them correctly, “It can often take eight hours, an entire workday, to review one hour of tape.”²⁷ David Coleman of the Miller Center at the University of Virginia says that when working with the Kennedy tapes, “To understand conversations on most of the tapes, you have to forget about where you are and sit yourself at the table with Kennedy. It’s extraordinarily difficult to figure out some of the discussions without having already pored through the secondary literature and the mounds of memoranda and diaries and newspapers. Some of the tapes’ most important contributions to our understanding come in bits and pieces, in the nuances. You really have to be prepared intellectually to catch the meaning of those nuances.”²⁸ In the Dominican Republic case, McPherson notes that the Johnson tapes can be challenging to follow because “Johnson and his men improvised a dizzying array of code names and phrases in case third parties were tapping their lines.”²⁹

Perhaps the greatest demonstration of the challenge of the tapes concerns the effort by two leading scholars of American foreign policy, Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, to put together a book with transcripts from the Cuban Missile Crisis tapes. Sheldon Stern, a historian at the Kennedy Presidential Library for more than two decades, combed through the first edition of the May and Zelikow book and found numerous errors. There were words that were incorrect, and speakers incorrectly identified. If May and Zelikow can get it wrong, most of us could too. We are dependent on the archivists going the tapes and creating transcriptions to help guide us through the tapes when we listen.³⁰ (May and Zelikow fixed the errors for the 2002 edition.)³¹

And even if we had tapes of every meeting, tapes could still leave many statements—even entire conversations—open to interpretation. Consider Greenstein and Immerman’s analysis of the 1961 Eisenhower-Kennedy meeting. Joining the two presidents were the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Treasury, their designated

²⁶ McPherson, “Mislead by Himself,” 130.

²⁷ Rushay, “Listening to Nixon.”

²⁸ Kenneth W. Thompson, “Tapes, Scholars, and the Value of Community: One Perspective on the Future of Presidential History,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 79:3 (Summer 2003): 514-22. See also William Doyle, *Inside the Oval Office: The White House Tapes from FDR to Clinton* (New York: Kodansha America, Inc. 1999).

²⁹ McPherson, “Misled by Himself,” 130-131.

³⁰ Sheldon M. Stern, “What JFK Really Said,” *The Atlantic*, May 2000, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/05/what-jfk-really-said/306407/>. See also Sheldon M. Stern, “The 1997 Published Transcripts of the JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes: Too Good to Be True?” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30:3 (September 2000): 586-93; Terry Sullivan, “Confronting the Kennedy Tapes: The May-Zelikow Transcripts and the Stern Assessments,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30:3 (September 2000): 594-97.

³¹ The second edition is the one cited above in the discussions of the Cuban Missile Crisis meetings.

successors, and a staff aide on each side. Four participants, listening to the same conversation in real time, created records of the discussion on Laos, and had different interpretations of what they heard.

Clark Clifford, Kennedy's primary liaison with Eisenhower during the transition, wrote, "President Eisenhower stated that he considered Laos of such importance that if it reached the stage where we could not persuade others to act with us, then he would be willing, *as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally.*" McNamara's notes, meanwhile, stated, "President Eisenhower advised *against* unilateral action by the United States in connection with Laos." JFK created his own record, in which he reported that Ike "stated also that he felt we should intervene....I came away from that meeting feeling that the Eisenhower administration would support intervention—they felt it was preferable to a communist success in Laos." Eisenhower's chief of staff, Gen. William B. Persons, also created a record. When Kennedy asked for advice on Laos, according to Persons, "The President stated that unilateral action on the part of the United States would be very bad for our relations in that part of the world and would cause us to be 'tagged' as interventionists....The President pointed out that unilateral intervention on the part of the United States would be a last desperate effort to save Laos, stating that the loss of Laos would be the loss of the 'cork in the bottle,' and the beginning of the loss of most of the Far East." The authors conclude from combing the records that "No absolute answer is possible to the question of what Eisenhower told Kennedy, and, above all, what he meant."³²

Greenstein and Immerman's discussion reminds us how much work is involved in recreating understandings of decisions. Tapes do not let scholars off the hook from doing the rest of the archival work, such as examining other primary and secondary sources, and when possible, interviewing those who were involved in the decision-making. After all, what would a tape of the Eisenhower and Kennedy meeting have told us? It would have let us listen to what the participants said. And so while it would have answered the literal questions of "what Eisenhower told Kennedy," it would not necessarily have told us "what he meant" or perhaps more importantly, what the protagonists, particularly those who would go on to make decisions, heard. If those present at the meeting came away believing different things about the meaning of the participants' words, that in itself is more important than a scholar's interpretation after listening to the tape.

These concerns even complicate the use of tapes to study perceptions and misperceptions in presidential decision-making.³³ In cases like the Cuban Missile Crisis or the Dominican Republic intervention, where we have many tapes of crucial conversations, "the tapes leave many issues still clouded."³⁴ Tapes can certainly be helpful—for example, in comparing participants' documentary recollections against the spoken words—but they are not sufficient to understand the proclivities of the protagonists. In short, tapes contribute to, but do not end, scholarly debates.

Conclusion

In his testimony before Congress, former FBI director James Comey famously said, "Lordy, I hope there are tapes."³⁵ But the Trump era has made clear the limits of what tapes can tell us. When the president admits to private or political motives in news conferences or interviews, what more can tapes add? In national security decisions such as the surprise withdrawal from Syria in October 2018—a decision that reportedly took his advisers by surprise and played a significant role in the resignation of Secretary of Defense James Mattis in December of that year—Trump issued his decision on

³² Greenstein and Immerman, 568-587

³³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

³⁴ McPherson, "Misled by Himself," 131.

³⁵ "Comey Says, 'Lordy, I Hope there are Tapes,'" at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/comey-lordy-hope-tapes>.

Twitter.³⁶ It is not clear that tapes would shed much light on the choices of a president who confesses his motives readily and does not use the bureaucracy or his own appointees for deliberation or debate.

But although they are no cure-all, tapes nonetheless are a valuable tool for scholars in that they paint a picture of how democratic leaders arrive at crucial national security decisions. And even though presidents after Nixon did not tape (as far as we know), the candid discussions on the tapes we do have—especially of domestic politics—remind us what is missing in other sources. Armed with this knowledge, scholars can probe domestic or other sensitive motives in interviews, or try to find contemporaneous assessments in the archives of U.S. allies, who may have fewer scruples—or indeed, who may feel the urgent necessity of understanding such motives. Reconstructing national security decisions is almost always a process of triangulating sources, even in the presence of tapes. The value of tapes thus lives on even after Watergate turned the Oval Office recordings off.

³⁶ Paul Sonne, Josh Dawsey, and Missy Ryan, “Mattis Resigns after Clash with Trump over Troop Withdrawal from Syria and Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-announces-mattis-will-leave-as-defense-secretary-at-the-end-of-february/2018/12/20/e1a846ee-e147-11e8-ab2c-b31dcd53ca6b_story.html.

Essay by Luke A. Nichter, Texas A&M University, Central Texas

It is an honor to have been asked by Robert Jervis to take part in this roundtable on presidential recordings, in particular because there are more senior scholars—those from whom I learned—who are at least as qualified to talk about these unique records and their role in the production of historical scholarship. The invitation to participate is also serendipitous because I have been writing a history of these recordings for the White House Historical Association, which I believe will mark one of the first times, or perhaps the very first time, that the institution of the White House will officially openly discuss them. Controversial as each system was, the historical debates surrounding the decision of six presidents to record their conversations, as well as the content of those conversations, were hitherto seen as an effort best left to others. The shift began in recent years, at least in part as a result of conversations I had with William Seale, the recently deceased White House historian, who was a scholar and a proper Texas gentleman to boot. He is deeply missed. I wish we could have had even one more conversation.

This roundtable is surprising for another reason. Nearly a half century after the disclosure of presidential taping, and 80 years after presidential taping actually began, there remains no central clearinghouse for the audio captured by six presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt through Richard Nixon. You cannot find them all on any website, and researchers undeterred by the 3,500 miles that separate the presidential libraries where they are stored must contend with a variety of outdated technologies in order to listen to them in person. There is no systematic effort to make transcripts from all of these administrations available, whether for scholarly dissemination or to answer public inquiries. It would be a vast project, but I believe it is doable. There are still hundreds of hours of tapes to be released for the first time, mainly those recorded during the Nixon administration, which amount to more than John F. Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson recorded in their entirety. Yet here I feign to say something definitive about these recordings. I am outmatched by the task.

Instead, I will say this: we remain in the early stages of a journey to learn about these recordings, make them broadly available to scholars and the public, and use them to interpret what they have to say about the presidency and the six administrations they document. I fear we have made little progress since our last substantial discussion about these recordings at the Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting in 2013, where the general consensus was that these recordings remain misunderstood and underutilized.¹ More recently, presidential tapes are back in the news. Media outlets have mined the White House conversations of Donald Trump—including actual tapes and rumors of tapes—including with FBI Director James Comey, an alleged political quid pro quo with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and the eighteen interviews Trump gave to Bob Woodward for his book, *Rage*.² But what happens to these historically important records once their news value has been depleted?

¹ In 2011, Laura Kalman and I discussed the possibility of putting together such a session for the 2013 Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting in San Francisco. I had just finished helping her with the transcript of a conversation between Richard Nixon and Warren Burger for some research that would become her fine book, *The Long Reach of the Sixties: LBJ, Nixon, and the Making of the Contemporary Supreme Court* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Our proposal was accepted, and Laura bravely agreed to chair “Taping History: A Roundtable on Presidential Recordings.” Besides Laura and me, the other members of the well-attended roundtable included Claudia Anderson, David Coleman, Regina Greenwell, Tim Naftali, and Bruce Schulman.

² Donald Trump denied taping his meetings with then FBI Director James Comey, after first suggesting he might have taped, when the issue was raised after Comey’s firing—an act that drew comparisons with Richard Nixon’s “Saturday Night Massacre” in October 1973. See Mark Lander and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Says He Did Not Tape Comey Conversations,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2017, A19. However, the Trump White House later released a transcript of a July 25, 2019, telephone conversation between Trump and Zelensky: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Unclassified09.2019.pdf>. In addition, Trump gave extensive recorded interviews to Bob Woodward, a portion of which have been made available by the *Washington Post*: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bob-woodward-rage-book-trump/2020/09/09/0368fe3c-efd2-11ea-b4bc-3a2098fc73d4_story.html. According to statute, official recordings and transcripts must be preserved according to the Presidential Records Act. It is important that unofficial recordings be preserved and made available for historical research purposes, too.

Given the recent growth of digital history projects, greater awareness of “born-digital” records,³ and greater appreciation for digital sustainability issues, I wonder whether some of the past discussion was simply premature. The best opportunity for the kind of scholarly and public service that I first envisioned while a graduate student in 2007 might be just around the corner. It is time we, as a discipline, have a conversation about a sustainable future for scholarly access to these recordings and I hope that that is one result of this roundtable. If this essay sounds in part like a proposal for action written primarily for a readership that is composed not of tapes aficionados, that is no coincidence. But before talking about where we might be headed, let’s talk about where we have been.

* * *

“Mr. Butterfield, are you aware of the installation of any listening devices in the Oval Office of the President?” Ervin Committee minority counsel Fred Thompson asked former Deputy Assistant to the President Alexander Butterfield during a televised hearing on July 16, 1973. “I was aware of listening devices. Yes, sir,” Butterfield responded. It was an explosive revelation, the first public disclosure of the existence of a White House taping system.⁴ The hearing by the Committee, more formally known as the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, occurred just weeks after former White House Counsel John W. Dean III’s testimony—the first, along with Butterfield’s, of the twin blows to the Nixon White House that would help to break the Watergate investigation wide open.

The tapes themselves would come to play a starring role in the investigation as, to paraphrase Senator Howard Baker (R-TN), they helped to document what the president knew and when he knew it. The next day, following Butterfield’s testimony, the *New York Times* featured a massive three-line headline, “Nixon Wired His Phone, Offices to Record All Conversations; Senators Will Seek the Tapes.”⁵ The existence of the tapes launched a constitutional showdown that within a year led all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court’s verdict in late July 1974 on executive privilege and the lawful subpoena of White House tapes as evidence in *U.S. vs. Nixon* remains one of the most significant rulings on presidential power in American history, and, less than two weeks later, it led directly to the first resignation of a U.S. president. Determined to avoid impeachment, Nixon announced his resignation in a live nationwide televised address on August 8, 1974, and departed the White House the next day, on August 9, just prior to the swearing in of the new President, Gerald R. Ford.

When the media raised questions about what possibly could have brought Nixon to the extraordinary action of bugging himself, White House Special Counsel J. Fred Buzhardt responded that “the system, which is still in use, is similar to that employed by the last Administration and which had been discontinued.” Nixon started taping in February 1971, in the third year of his five-and-a-half-year presidency. According to reporting by the *New York Times*, Buzhardt’s

³ See <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/b/born-digital> for more information. While not technically “born digital,” since these were analog recordings, access to them has been effectively born digital since the original recordings are fragile and thus are not served to researchers.

⁴ James M. Naughton, “Surprise Witness: Butterfield, Ex-Aide at White House, Tells of Listening Devices,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1973, 1. There is so much potential for historical analysis regarding these hearings, but we continue to lack a definitive deeply-researched book on Watergate. For example, we know now that Butterfield’s appearance was not a surprise at all. The televised hearings, including Butterfield’s, were often reenactments of previous interviews with committee staff. In addition, it is difficult to imagine a more outgunned counsel than Thompson, an assistant U.S. Attorney from Tennessee with no Washington experience at the time he agreed to join Senator Howard Baker’s minority committee staff. While the Democrats were prepared for all-out war, the Nixon White House was not even taking the hearings seriously enough to make sure Republicans on the Ervin Committee had the ability to properly respond to the agenda set by chief counsel Sam Dash. Surely no president being investigated for possible impeachment since has made a similar mistake.

⁵ “Nixon Wired His Phone, Offices to Record All Conversations; Senators Will Seek the Tapes,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1973, A1.

unsupported assertion was quickly attacked. As to whether the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson had ever taped, Joseph A. Califano Jr., who was one of Johnson's top advisors, said that Buzhardt's claim was "a damned outrageous smear, a total smear on a dead President." As to whether any presidents prior to Nixon had taped, a spokesperson for the U.S. Secret Service also contradicted Buzhardt, saying that the agency had installed hidden recording equipment at President Nixon's request but had never done similar work for any other administration, including Johnson's.⁶

While the conventional wisdom in 1973 was that only a president as paranoid as Richard Nixon would have bugged himself, what we know today is quite different. From the moment Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered the thick Oval Office floor drilled to install wiring in 1940, to the bugged lamp on Truman's desk, the manually-operated Dictabelt system of the Kennedy-Johnson years, to Nixon's massive 3,432 hours of tapes, a total of six presidents have left as part of their legacies some of the most controversial sets of government records that are also arguably the most complicated ever to be managed by the National Archives and Records Administration. The total number of hours does not include additional tapes that have gone missing. While Nixon is rightly criticized for an 18½ minute "gap" in the tapes—an erasure during the sixteenth conversation on reel 342, which has been the subject of unsuccessful CSI-type forensic audio investigations to recover the deleted content—it is likely that other tapes have also been altered or gone missing, including seven to ten hours of Kennedy tapes.⁷

The most common reason why presidents taped was as a means of preserving a correct record of what was said by the president as well as in his presence. Undoubtedly, the tapes will occupy the interest of historians for decades more, as still hundreds of hours of tapes remain unreleased to the public. For scholars, the tapes do not replace traditional forms of research but rather augment them and can be incredibly rewarding. Research on taped subjects cannot be done thoroughly without consulting the tapes, including the original audio, even though it continues to be the rare scholar who takes this approach. For these "indefatigable listeners," as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once called the few he expected to have the patience to listen to them, these surreptitiously recorded hours with top aides, journalists, and former and future leaders help to confirm what we have already learned from textual records, but sometimes this added texture modifies our understanding of even decades-past events.⁸

⁶ R.W. Apple, "Taping in Johnson Era both Alleged and Denied," *New York Times*, July 17, 1973, A1. In a conversation with Joseph Califano on June 27, 2018 in New York, he revealed to this writer that he was aware of the Johnson tapes at the time of this *New York Times* article – "or at least the telephone tapes," he said. While it is not surprising that those close to Johnson would want to defend his legacy, since he had died six months before and was not able to defend himself, what is truly puzzling is that even the U.S. Secret Service denied the existence of previous taping systems.

⁷ The conversations captured by the Kennedy taping system, installed and operated by U.S. Secret Service agents Robert Bouck and Chester Miller in addition to others, managed to stay secret for another ten years after the disclosure of the Nixon tapes – even though former John F. Kennedy Presidential Library Archivist Sheldon Stern, arguably the greatest living expert on the provenance of the 35th president's recordings, told this writer that knowledge of their existence began to spread following Butterfield's testimony. Even after the tapes moved to the physical custody of National Archives in 1964, from the Executive Office Building where Evelyn Lincoln assembled the President's Office Files on November 24, 1963, no employee of the National Archives had the combination to the cabinet in which the recordings were stored until 1975. In the interim, Kennedy representatives including Robert F. Kennedy Jr. were able to remove all Dictabelt recordings. When comparing the tape logs to actual tapes and transcripts of tapes for which there are no recordings, it is impossible to know how many went missing. My estimate, admittedly imperfect, is seven to ten hours – including the very first Dictabelt recorded and at least eight audiotapes. Email to author by Stacey Chandler, Archivist, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, February 14, 2020.

⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1982), 111. Kissinger's reaction was similar to those who felt betrayed when they learned of the existence of the taping system. After all, they were secretly recorded and would have no choice but to live with the existence of the tapes for the remainder of their lives. Another prominent school of thought was that of Nixon chief speechwriter Raymond Price, who, while being surprised when learning of the existence of the taping system, believed the president

The keen researcher can also identify tapes for which there is no comparable textual record.⁹ According to William Doyle, author of *Inside the Oval Office: The White House Tapes from FDR to Clinton*, the tapes provide “fly-on-the-wall drama of the presidents as executive in action behind closed doors, providing glimpses of the flesh-and-blood humanity of the executives who sat behind the Oval Office desk.”¹⁰ Where they are more complete in documenting a president’s time, they are a unique record that documents how decisions are made. During my first conversation with Henry Kissinger about the tapes in 2008, he cautioned me: “if you want to understand the policies of the Nixon administration, you must study the memoranda between the President and myself.” Being an overconfident scholar who had nearly defended his dissertation, I respectfully challenged his point of view. I asserted that what the tapes show that is different from a memorandum is a deliberative process involving which options were considered, why, and which one won out, and how he and Nixon reflected after the fact. Before the end of the meeting, he said, “I deeply respect the work that you do.”¹¹

* * *

In January 1940, following what Roosevelt considered to be deliberate distortions of his meeting with the Senate Military Affairs Committee, he sought a way to protect himself from being misquoted in the press during the upcoming 1940 presidential campaign. A continuous-film recording machine was installed in the basement of the White House during the summer of 1940, which mechanically recorded sounds on motion picture film. Wiring ran from the basement to a microphone concealed in a lamp on the president’s desk in the Oval Office. The machine recorded some eight hours of conversations, mostly comprised of fourteen of his total of twenty-one press conferences held between August 23 and November 8, 1940. It also captured a few private conversations, since, once it was switched on, its sound-activated capability would begin with even the slightest noise.¹² The recordings are generally of poor quality, although conversations on subjects such as World War II, civil rights, and Roosevelt’s 1940 rival for the presidency, Wendell Willkie, can be made out.

President Harry Truman inherited this recording system when he suddenly became President in April 1945. He made a small collection of about ten hours of recordings between 1945 and 1948 in the Oval Office, during which his voice can be heard talking to visitors and White House staff members or talking on the telephone, as well recordings of other people talking in his office. Most of the conversations are garbled, with only phrases and occasional sentences that can be discerned. Some contain long stretches when nothing can be heard except for background noise and static. A prominent exception is Truman’s May 23, 1945 press conference, in which every word can be understood.¹³ Both

was entitled to a private record of his conversations. Price, and others like Charles W. Colson, explained this view to the author – who has been the only historian regularly invited to attend White House staff reunions of the taping era since 2011.

⁹ For example, Nixon discontinued the practice of making a Memorandum of Conversation for some meetings captured by his taping system. Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev’s visit to the Oval Office on June 18, 1973, is one such occasion I wrote about when the tape was released in 2013: <http://nixontapes.org/chron55.html>. Also, it is possible to find occasions where Nixon recorded his diary in a location within range of his taping system’s microphones – tapes within tapes.

¹⁰ John Prados, ed., *The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 3. Also, see William Doyle, *Inside the Oval Office: The White House from FDR to Clinton* (New York: Kodansha America, Inc., 1999).

¹¹ Meeting with Henry Kissinger, New York, NY, June 23, 2008, 11:40 a.m.–12:35 p.m.

¹² Email to author by Matthew C. Hanson, Archivist, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, July 19, 2017.

¹³ Email to author by David Clark, Archivist, Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, July 19, 2017.

Roosevelt and Truman were limited in their use of taping on account of the primitive recording technology available at the time.

During the Eisenhower administration, a variety of meetings were recorded between 1953 and 1958, on both on the Oval Office taping system as well as a Dictabelt machine—the latter representing a new analog audio recording medium that had been invented in 1947. President Eisenhower became familiar with this new technology when he was earlier the President of Columbia University, where he made a number of Dictabelt recordings between September 1949 and June 1950. A total of at least twenty-six Oval Office meetings were probably recorded, although no tapes exist. Only ten Dictabelts covering five meetings have been located. A total of approximately fourteen and a half hours of audio have been discovered from both pre-presidential and presidential recordings. Participants in these meetings including foreign heads of state, congressman, cabinet members, and White House staff.¹⁴

With improvements in recording technology in the 1960s, presidents could make hundreds of hours of recordings. President Kennedy used a device called a Dictaphone both before and after becoming president, mostly for dictating correspondence. In July 1962, he asked U.S. Secret Service Agent Robert Bouck to install recording devices in the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room, and a study in the Mansion. Bouck used Tandberg reel-to-reel tape recorders and high-quality microphones that he obtained from the U.S. Army Signal Corps. He placed two of the machines in the basement of the West Wing in a room reserved for storing private presidential files. Another was installed in the basement of the Mansion. Microphones were concealed in unused light fixtures in the Cabinet Room as well as in the President's desk in the Oval Office.¹⁵ A total of approximately 260 hours of recordings were made on these systems.

Unlike earlier presidential taping systems, these were manually operated. Kennedy himself knew how to operate them, as did his personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln. Few others knew the system existed, including some who were closest to the President, such as Theodore Sorensen. A hidden switch had to be flipped on for each conversation, although on occasion the system was left on by accident and recorded additional conversations. At least one recording of Kennedy ordering the system to be switched off in the company of others can be heard, followed by the end of the recording. Presumably, recordings were made when it was in the President's interest, and they were not made when it was not in his interest. The system in the Mansion was rarely utilized. In a 1976 oral history, Bouck said “except for one or two short recordings, I don't think it was ever used.”¹⁶ The recording systems in the Cabinet Room and the Oval Office were another matter. Of the total of 248 hours of meetings and twelve hours of telephone conversations recorded, they are a treasure trove for history—especially on subjects like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and many other subjects. Yet the majority are not still not transcribed or easily accessible as of this writing, especially for conversations from 1963.

President Johnson inherited the Kennedy taping system on the day he became president, November 22, 1963, and some of the most dramatic moments to be recorded on his system were captured in its opening days, such as his conversations about the Kennedy assassination—especially with former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy.¹⁷ Like Kennedy before him,

¹⁴ Email to author by Kathy Struss, Audiovisual Archivist, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, July 21, 2017.

¹⁵ Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), x.

¹⁶ Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, “Preface to John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Volumes 1-3,” in Timothy Naftali, ed., *John F. Kennedy, The Presidential Records: The Great Crises, Volume One, July 30 – August 1962* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), xvii.

¹⁷ For example, see Michael Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) and *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

Johnson had a taping system in the Cabinet Room and in his hideaway office next the Oval Office. His greatest collection of recordings was made on a telephone in the Oval Office. These recordings were fed into a mixer and reel-to-reel recorders located in the West Wing basement.¹⁸ The system captured around 800 hours of meetings and telephone calls on subjects such as civil rights, Vietnam, the 1964 Democratic convention, and the series of unfolding crises and political events leading up to the 1968 election. The majority of these tapes remain un-transcribed.

Following Richard Nixon's victory in the presidential election during November 1968, Johnson spoke to Nixon about the taping system and encouraged him to use it as a way of ensuring accurate material for his eventual memoirs. While Nixon was known to have made Dictabelt recordings prior to becoming president, Johnson's taping equipment that was located next to the Oval Office, in what became Chief of Staff H.R. "Bob" Haldeman's office, was ordered removed. While Nixon made the decision not to record as Johnson had, several of his aides recorded their own meetings, telephone calls, and diaries, including Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, and Kissinger, in addition to Nixon's practice of making intermittent diary recordings.

President Nixon changed his mind two years later, requesting Al Wong of the U.S. Secret Service Technical Security Division to install a taping system. Besides the Oval Office, taping expanded to Nixon's office in room 180 of the Executive Office Building (EOB), three telephone lines in his Oval Office and EOB office, a telephone line in the Mansion in the Lincoln Sitting Room, the Cabinet Room, and his study at Camp David's Aspen Lodge and a telephone line there. The recordings fed into an old telephone frame room in the West Wing basement that was controlled by the Secret Service. These systems were mostly automatic, that is, they were sound-activated when Nixon came within range of one of them. The fact that the Nixon system did not make selective recordings is what contributed to the substantial quantity of recordings that were made, approximately 3,432 hours—more than all previous presidents combined.

The Nixon system operated from February 1971 to July 1973, and was dismantled two days after Butterfield's disclosure. The tapes tend to document well especially foreign policy from that period, including Vietnam, rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, and negotiations with the Soviet Union, but also domestic and economic policy and the 1972 elections. The tapes themselves played a starring role during the Watergate investigation, and the subpoenaed tapes, which were used as evidence, marked the first time that any significant quantities of tapes, or in this case tape transcripts, were made available to members of the public in the form of the publication of the ubiquitous yellow-covered volume *The White House Transcripts*, published by the *New York Times* in 1974.¹⁹

Following Nixon's resignation, and his pardon by Ford, the Congress passed the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974 (PRMPA). PRMPA retroactively nationalized Nixon's papers, and his tapes, and stipulated "the need to provide the public with the full truth, at the earliest reasonable date, of the abuses of government power popularly identified under the generic term 'Watergate.'"²⁰ The statute effectively required the National Archives to process and release to the public all Watergate material and tapes prior to the release of material on other subjects. It was an unprecedented action that itself shaped the Nixon historiography, culminating in the publication of arguably the most famous work on the Nixon tapes, Stanley Kutler's *Abuse of Power*.²¹ In more recent years, Nixon's vast trove of recordings has been probed for other subjects. Scholars of presidential recordings have learned that while tapes aid

¹⁸ Prados, 12.

¹⁹ See Gerald Gold, ed., *The White House Tapes: Submission of Recorded Presidential Conversations to the Committee on the Judiciary of the House of Representatives by Presidential Richard Nixon* (New York: Viking, 1974).

²⁰ The text of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974 is available at: <https://www.archives.gov/about/laws/nara.html#2111-note>.

²¹ See Stanley I. Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

research, they also have the potential to distort findings unless they are interpreted correctly.²² One cannot do thorough research without them, but one cannot rely on them alone. Tapes can give a listener a false sense of security; perhaps we believe something more because we *heard it ourselves*. They must be interpreted, corroborated, triangulated, and put in their proper context. Even with tapes, the writing of history remains a collaborative process.

As far as we know, no president since Nixon has recorded in any kind of comprehensive way. Limited transcripts have been discovered at the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum that contain the words “Side A” and “Side B” at the top, suggesting that they were made from a cassette recording. When speculation surfaced in 2017 that President Donald Trump might have taped during the opening months of his presidency, the White House issued a strong but carefully-worded denial. Since then, additional records from the Trump Administration have surfaced that convince me either that Trump tapes, or has taped in the case where the recordings themselves are not being preserved after making a transcript. Even if we one day learn that more recent presidents taped, it could be decades until we discover the content of those recordings. Until then, we must assume that presidents since Nixon learned a valuable lesson from his experience during the Watergate and have generally decided not to tape—and certainly not comprehensively.

* * *

Where does that leave scholars? I am aware of no one who has comprehensively catalogued or transcribed the audio for Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower. Such work is badly needed, especially as interest in those presidencies remains high. The Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia has done more with the Kennedy and Johnson tapes than anyone, yet big gaps remain. The Miller Center brilliantly compiled the beautiful volumes that we all use, yet since the appointment of William Antholis in 2016, it seems to be reorienting strategically more in the direction of a Washington think tank. In addition, the commercial publishing industry has changed and the days of producing boxed sets at a retail price of \$150.00 or more are over. I have done more with the Nixon tapes than anyone, but again there are big gaps and I am near the limit of my technical ability without joining up with new partners. For example, an entirely unexplored dimension of the tapes is their application to the digital history projects of the kind at the History Lab at Columbia University, in which textual analysis and other computational manipulation could be performed to derive higher meaning from a large corpus of transcripts. There are numerous other books and articles that have used the tapes in some fashion, a kind of informal crowd-sourced effort, but no one has mined them all for original tape content.

I would like to overstay my welcome here for a final moment to call for an effort to make the audio captured by these six presidencies easily accessible to scholars and the public in the form of side-by-side searchable transcripts—of all conversations worth transcribing given a reasonable cost-benefit analysis for some that involve exceptionally poor audio quality. Some might never be transcribe-able, or perhaps technology will one day be available to help us—just as much of this conversation was not possible a generation ago. The institutions and scholars who have worked on the tapes to date should have the opportunity to provide input, as well as experts in digital history, digital publishing platforms, and sustainability. The effort should be focused on results—for scholars, the discipline, and a useful public service in the style of C-SPAN’s *American History TV*—and not which institution gets the credit. The results should not be buried behind a paywall, but presented in a way that we can build them into our courses and our research.

In an era in which history and the humanities are under attack, and we are all constantly on guard to demonstrate our worth, this could be a high-value project that could benefit our discipline and the broader public. And it could be a way

²² See, for example, Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes: 1971-1972* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014) and their sequel volume, *The Nixon Tapes: 1973* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015). These works were based on my website, <http://nixon tapes.org>, which was a collaboration with Richard A. Moss that was launched on July 11, 2007, the same day that the Nixon Presidential Library became the newest member of the federal National Archives and Records Administration system of Presidential Libraries.

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to ensure that these gifts that keep giving, for those of us who work with tapes regularly, continue to give for years to come.

Essay by Marc Trachtenberg, University of California, Los Angeles

In 1984 I first learned that some tapes of top-level meetings held during the Cuban Missile Crisis had been made available to researchers. I had run into McGeorge Bundy at a conference in New York (Bundy was at that point a professor of history at NYU) and he told me that the Kennedy Library had recently released a transcript of recordings made during the first day of the crisis, October 16, 1962; an audiocassette containing extracts from the original recording was also now available. For an historian, the release of that material was quite an extraordinary event, and I was surprised that I had not heard about it before. So I checked to see if the *New York Times* had said anything about it. It turned out that the *Times* had published an article about the release of the tapes. That report, however, had played down the importance of this material. The chief archivist at the Kennedy Library was quoted there as saying that the material being released contained “no surprises.” “It doesn’t change anything,” he said. “There is nothing new of substance.”¹

I found that hard to believe. A recording of that sort was bound to be an extraordinary source. So the next time I was at the Kennedy Library I bought a copy of the transcript and the cassette, and it soon became clear to me that there was a good deal that *was* new here. We had been led to believe, for example, that Robert Kennedy, the president’s brother, had been (as Arthur Schlesinger put it) a “dove from the start” and had stopped “the air-strike madness in its tracks.”² The new evidence, however, showed quite clearly that on that first day Robert Kennedy not only favored an invasion of Cuba but even wondered whether it would be possible to create some pretext for a war against that country—that is, whether the U.S. could “sink the *Maine* again or something.”³

But that type of statement is not what is so extraordinary about this material. You could easily imagine coming across that information about Robert Kennedy in the usual documents historians sooner or later get access to. In fact, the minutes which Bromley Smith, the executive secretary of the National Security Council, prepared of the key meetings held in the last few days of the crisis show very clearly that Robert Kennedy was, at that point, a strong supporter of an air strike on the missile sites in Cuba.⁴

The tapes (and the transcripts which often accompany them, which were extremely difficult to prepare but which are essential to making the tapes a useful source for the scholar) are important for a very different reason. In listening to the tapes, you had the sense that here was the real thing—that you could actually hear for yourself what was going on, that you were not dependent on how other people interpreted what was being said, but that you were in direct touch with the hard, historical reality. “Listening to these tapes,” as Sheldon Stern put it, gave you the chance to know, “within the technical limits of the recordings, *exactly what happened.*”⁵

¹ Fox Butterfield, “Library Releases Cuban Crisis Tapes,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1983, A3.

² Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert F. Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 531.

³ See Marc Trachtenberg, “White House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Introduction to Documents,” *International Security* 10:1 (Summer 1985), 166. See also Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 34.

⁴ See Trachtenberg, “White House Tapes,” 166-167.

⁵ Sheldon Stern, *Averting “the Final Failure”: John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), xix. Emphasis in original text.

Stern was referring to the Cuban Missile Crisis tapes, but I have had that same feeling when dealing with many other presidential recordings. Just listening to the tape of Richard Nixon's meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko on September 29, 1971, was, for example, quite an extraordinary experience.⁶ Here were the representatives of the two greatest military powers the world has ever known, each controlling thousands of thermonuclear weapons, and you could actually hear them talking with each other, in English with no one else around, about how the Arab-Israeli conflict, a problem which they recognized could conceivably have led to a world war, might be settled. And the unofficial nature of the meeting, which was too informal to have been recorded by an official note-taker, is one of the things that makes that tape so important. In that meeting Gromyko was able to say things he had not been able to say in the larger meeting, attended by a number of officials, which had immediately preceded it. In particular, Gromyko had not been able to assure Nixon that if an Arab-Israeli settlement was reached the USSR would withdraw practically all its military forces from the region.⁷ But he *was* able to make that offer in that informal meeting, and that meant, as Nixon himself later noted, that what Gromyko said needed to be taken seriously. He was "the last to trust the Russians," he pointed out, "and they're the last to trust me." But the Soviet foreign minister had not made that offer "in front of the others"—that is, the proposal had "not gone to the bureaucracy"—and that was "what made it so meaningful."⁸

So you can learn things from the tapes, things that formal documents are less likely to record. I don't want to push the point too far. In this case, for example, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Advisor, wrote up an account of the meeting he had with Gromyko the next day to confirm the offer, so an historian without access to the tapes could have reconstructed the basic story fairly accurately in the usual way.⁹ Still, there is nothing quite like actually hearing the conversation between Gromyko and Nixon. And what Nixon said about the credibility of Gromyko's offer points to another reason why this type of source is so important. There is a common view in the international relations literature that the more public a statement of policy is, the more credible it is, because if a political leader does not live up to it, he or she is more likely to be held accountable at home. As the Yale political scientist Alastair Smith put it, "foreign policy declarations are only credible when leaders suffer domestically if they fail to fulfill their commitments."¹⁰ And yet this particular example suggests that exactly the opposite might be the case—that public statements can be dismissed as grandstanding or pandering to the public, and that the most credible assurances might be the ones the fewest people know about. One can, in fact, imagine that idea serving as the basis of a dissertation.

But the key point here is that when you listen to these tapes you get a feel for how things actually work—for how political decisions get made and how governments reach understandings with each other—which you simply cannot get in any other way. The Missile Crisis is again a good case in point. You might have thought, given what was at stake, that the discussions would have been conducted in a highly organized, highly focused, way. But that is not the case at all. The discussions took the own course. People, and especially the president, felt free to think out loud; at times you get the impression that he was practically inviting people to tell him, if they could, what was wrong with his way of looking

⁶ The tape of this meeting (Tape 580-20) is available on Luke Nichter's [nixontapes.org](http://nixontapeaudio.org/chron2/rmn_e580c.mp3) website: http://nixontapeaudio.org/chron2/rmn_e580c.mp3; the section of interest begins at 39 minutes, 50 seconds on this mp3 and goes on for about another five minutes. The transcript of the tape was published in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1969-76*, vol. 13, 1051-1055.

⁷ Compare the parts of the two documents dealing with the Middle East in *FRUS 1969-76*, 13: 1039-1041 and 1051-1055.

⁸ Quoted in Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 205.

⁹ Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, September 30, 1971, *FRUS 1969-76*, 13: 1071-1078 (1071-1074 for the part dealing with the Middle East).

¹⁰ Alastair Smith, "International Crises and Domestic Politics," *American Political Science Review* 92:3 (September 1998), 623.

at things. Sometimes people would raise points which no one would then pick up on—Robert Kennedy’s talk on October 16 about invading Cuba is a good example—and in that way the idea would be dropped, at least for the time being. The process might have been unstructured, but that does not necessarily mean that the issues were not being dealt with effectively. Indeed, too structured a discussion at that point might actually have been counterproductive. You also get a feel for the role that affect plays in the decision-making process; you can sometimes hear the emotion in people’s voices (in the case of Robert McNamara, at times, in the Cuban Missile Crisis tapes), but sometimes you are struck by the cool and analytical way in which issues are approached.

Those are impressions you cannot get just by reading the usual sources. Compared to a transcript, the minutes of a meeting are very short. The October 16 transcript, covering two-and-a-half hours of discussion, runs to about 87 pages, whereas the minutes of some of the later high-level meetings are at most six or seven pages long. Obviously whoever prepared the minutes had to be very selective in reporting what was said. That account had to be more intelligible, more readily understandable, than a transcript would have been; uncertainties, inconsistencies, incomplete thoughts, even emotion, were filtered out. And it is not inconceivable that the note-taker’s own policy preferences might come into play, if only in an unconscious or semi-conscious way.

To flesh out this point, one could systematically compare the transcripts with the Bromley Smith minutes to those meetings for which both kinds of sources are available. I can, in fact, imagine someone publishing a nice paper doing that kind of comparison—showing, that is, how the differences between the two types of sources fall into a pattern, and explaining why systematic differences of that sort exist. The exercise would be worthwhile because the point here has a general methodological importance. It might tell you a good deal about why the standard sources, of which the Smith minutes are typical, cannot be expected to give you a full picture of what was actually going on; those insights could then be taken into account when one is trying to assess the evidentiary value of a particular set of historical sources.

To get some sense of what emerges from that kind of exercise, I looked at the minutes of the October 27 morning top-level meeting and compared them with the corresponding transcript. The differences were palpable. Smith made President Kennedy seem much less determined to consider a trade involving the Jupiter missiles in Turkey than he actually was. According to the transcript, for example, Kennedy was at one point clearly annoyed that the government had put this issue on the back burner. The Soviets had just come up with a new proposal involving that kind of trade: “Well,” he asked, “have we gone to the Turkish government before this came out this week? I’ve talked about it now for a week. Have we had any conversations in Turkey, with the Turks?” And this is how Smith paraphrased that remark: “The President recalled that he had asked that consideration be given to the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey some days previously.” The paraphrase was much milder than the original: Smith was pouring a lot of water into Kennedy’s wine.¹¹

So the tapes offer a sharper sense of what was going on than what you would get from ordinary documents. And if that is true even of meetings which were also recorded by a note-taker, it is even more true of much smaller meetings for which no notes were prepared. Since those are the meetings at which people could express themselves most freely, hearing what they had to say can be quite revealing. I gave the example above of the September 1971 Nixon-Gromyko meeting, but let me offer two other examples, the first also from the Nixon period and the second from 1963.

The Nixon example relates to U.S. Middle Eastern policy, and specifically to the question of how much pressure to place on Israel to convince it to agree to the peace terms the Americans favored. In the published documents, which are based

¹¹ I have used the version of the transcript published in Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 499. For the Smith minutes, see U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63*, vol. 11, 253. The accuracy of the May and Zelikow transcripts on many points has been questioned by Sheldon Stern, but he too transcribes this passage the same way. See Stern, *Averting the “Final Failure,”* 295.

mainly on the usual kinds of sources, there are many references to the need to “squeeze” Israel. In the volume of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1969 to 1972, the word “squeeze” appears in this context in about ten documents, one of which is from a transcript of a taped conversation between Nixon and Kissinger. The stronger term “brutalize” appears in this context only in two documents, both of which are transcripts of taped Nixon-Kissinger conversations. The tapes, generally speaking, offer a more unadulterated feel for what the thinking was than the more normal kinds of documents, although they do not fundamentally alter the basic understanding you get from those documents about what was going on.

The second example has to do with the tape of a meeting Kennedy had with his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, and his National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, on July 30, 1963. The three men were discussing another issue when suddenly McNamara brought up the question of an impending shift in American strategy for general nuclear war. “As a matter of fact,” he told the president, “we’re walking into a *very* controversial proposal on our ICBMs this year.” “Up to the present,” he noted, “we have said that we’re buying ICBMs to attack Soviet cities. We’ve also said we’re buying ICBMs to attack the Soviet nuclear forces.” But that was a “wasting argument.” To the extent that the Soviet missiles were still in place by the time America attacked, he pointed out, “their destruction by our ICBMs will not materially reduce the casualties in this country.” The president agreed with that, but what, he wondered, did that do “to the McNamara thesis?” He had in mind the “No Cities/Counterforce” targeting philosophy which McNamara had unveiled in the spring of 1962. Oh, McNamara answered, it did not change his thesis, it would just change the force levels. McNamara had not quite understood what Kennedy had been getting at, so the president made it clearer what he had had in mind: “But this idea that we’re just going to attack their means of delivery, instead of their [cities].” But then he added, “That was just that . . .”—with his voice trailing off, as though a thought had occurred to him which had made it unnecessary for him to complete the sentence. Bundy then remarked light-heartedly, “That was only good for about a year. . . .” He clearly was not taking the jettisoning of the “No Cities/Counterforce” strategy too seriously, and McNamara joined in with a light-hearted remark of his own about these nuclear strategies: “we’re running out of them, Mr. President.” And Kennedy took the point: “You don’t need that many more.” The idea was that counterforce was beyond reach—that, as McNamara put it, you just “can’t do that job”; the implication was the country had little choice now but to put all thought of effective nuclear war-fighting aside and settle for a simple strategy of deterrence, a strategy that would remain viable for years to come.¹²

This is an interesting exchange for a number of reasons. First, it tells us something about how nuclear strategy was then made. McNamara was simply *informing* the president that the official strategy was about to shift in a major way. He was not *proposing* a major shift, assuming that there were arguments pro and con and that it was the president who would decide which way to go after giving serious attention to all those arguments. And Kennedy did not seem to have any problem with that approach. It also shows that Kennedy was very skeptical about counterforce, but that in itself was not terribly surprising. What was striking was the way in which the strategy McNamara had outlined the previous year was treated. McNamara’s commitment to that strategy was so minimal that he scarcely seemed to know what Kennedy had in mind when he referred to the “McNamara thesis.” And Kennedy’s “that was just that . . .” remark also seemed to suggest that “No Cities/Counterforce” was never taken seriously in the first place, that the “McNamara thesis” had been put forward mainly to achieve certain political purposes. That point registered with particular force when I heard this passage in the tape, since I had already, for other reasons, come to the conclusion that the strategy outlined in the spring of 1962 was not to be taken at face value, but had been designed to rationalize the centralization of control over nuclear weapons in American hands within the NATO alliance—that is, to rationalize U.S. opposition to nuclear forces under

¹² Kennedy-McNamara-Bundy meeting, July 30, 1963, President’s Office Files, Tape 102/A38, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston (<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/MTG/JFKPOF-MTG-102-003/JFKPOF-MTG-102-003>). The passage begins at 11 minutes, 13 seconds, into the tape.

the control of the allies. But, still, I found the word “just” to be very revealing. It made me more confident that the conclusions I had already reached were correct.¹³

My point here is that little things—like the inclusion of the word “just”—can have significant interpretive value, and that the tapes are full of tidbits like that. Does that mean that the tapes have been transformative—that on a very basic level one would not have been able to reach fundamental conclusions without them? I have used the tapes in about four or five projects, and I would not say they were transformative in any of them.¹⁴ In each of these cases the basic story was clear enough from traditional sources. What difference then did the tapes make? In the movie “The Wizard of Oz,” the scenes from Dorothy’s ordinary life are filmed in black-and-white, but the dream sequence, the main part of the movie, is filmed in color. The tapes, it seems to me, are important because, when they exist, they allow us to make that kind of transition. When you listen to them, drawing on the extraordinary efforts of the State Department historians and others who have prepared the transcripts, the episode you are studying comes alive. A whole new dimension of meaning opens up. You perceive things you would never have been able to if the tapes had not been available. And I personally feel that for that reason alone it is tragic that the taping of presidential conversations is (apparently) no longer being done.

¹³ See Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 316-320; the passage from the tape is discussed on 319, n. 125.

¹⁴ Trachtenberg, “The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *International Security* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1985); Trachtenberg, “Kennedy, Vietnam and Audience Costs,” in H-Diplo/ISSF Forum on “Audience Costs and the Vietnam War” (November 2014), <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-3.pdf>; Trachtenberg “The United States and Strategic Arms Control during the Nixon-Kissinger Period: Building a Stable International System?” (unpublished); and “The USSR and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976” (also unpublished; third chapter in what I hope will be a book on “The Soviet Economic Decline and Great Power Politics, 1963-1991.” I did, however, find the Kissinger Transcripts (mainly of phone conversations), transcribed from tapes (subsequently destroyed), to be of fundamental value in a piece I co-authored with Galen Jackson called “A Self-Inflicted Wound? Henry Kissinger and the Ending of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War” (also unpublished).