

A Necessary Reinterpretation: Using the Kennedy and Johnson Tapes as a Biographical and Historical Source

Richard M. Filipink Jr.

THE RELEASE OF PRESIDENTIAL RECORDINGS by the Kennedy and Johnson Libraries has forced historians to re-examine their interpretations of foreign policy decisions in the 1960s, a crucial element in the biographies of both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. In particular, President Kennedy's secret recording of meetings during the period from August 1963 to the coup in Saigon in November the same year has contributed to significant changes in the way his behaviour during the crisis is perceived, while President Johnson's recording of telephone calls and office discussions has begun to alter our understanding of his thought processes regarding Vietnam. In this paper, I wish to address three issues regarding the Kennedy and Johnson tapes, both for biographers and for historians of these presidential administrations.

First, I will open a discussion on the methodology adopted by historians when dealing with the evidence presented by the tapes. It would seem that voice recordings would be an unimpeachable source.

Yet my experiences—I have worked with tapes from both presidents—suggest that there are potential problems for researchers.

Next, I will briefly discuss how the release of the Vietnam tapes fits into an already evolving reinterpretation of Kennedy's role in the growing chaos in Vietnam. Kennedy administration officials had already begun to shift the focus from Kennedy as Cold Warrior to Kennedy as statesman. The tapes and the way they were declassified and interpreted dovetailed nicely with this conceptual change. Finally, I will discuss how the Johnson tapes have affected my own research on the post-presidential career of Dwight Eisenhower and his influence on American foreign policy during the 1960s, focusing on a comparative discussion of two parallel sources for the same conversations.

Using the Tapes

The most obvious problem that arises when using the tapes is the sound quality produced by 1960s recording devices. Despite heroic efforts by the presidential libraries and the Miller Center, there will continue to be unintelligible portions on many of the tapes. There are numerous other potential barriers to understanding. One problem is accents, especially those of the two presidents. Another difficulty is distinguishing who is speaking during large meetings. Additionally, there are voices speaking over each other and problems with ambient noise and the placement of the microphones.

A more substantive problem is the dependability of the tapes as a historical source. Sheldon Stern makes a case for the reliability of the tapes in the preface to *Averting "The Final Failure."* Stern contends that the primary argument against using the tapes—the suspicion that JFK (and LBJ) were able to use these manually operated recording systems to tape selectively and thus manipulate the historical record—is “plainly groundless.”¹ Stern points out that, in Kennedy's case, many of the tapes are of meetings of large groups of people and would be impossible to manipulate; that JFK never intended or imagined that anyone else would hear the tapes; that people tend to forget they are being taped over the course of a long meeting; and finally, that since

Kennedy did not know how the events would ultimately turn out, he could not have known what the most favourable position for posterity would be.² Presumably, with the exception of point one, Stern's arguments could be applied to the Johnson tapes as well.

Although Stern makes an excellent argument, caution in using the tapes is still warranted. The Kennedy brothers alone knew that the taping was taking place. Johnson chose which discussions should be recorded. Johnson, and possibly Kennedy, had conversations transcribed for personal use. And on the Kennedy tapes, the least talkative person, next to the vice president, is President Kennedy himself.

The tapes are an excellent source if their context is maintained and if historians exercise some caution. Generations of leaders were able to write their memoirs and have biographers tell their stories without recordings. With such new sources available for exploitation, historical researchers must ask questions about their provenance. What motive underlay the tapes' creation? It seems clear that the men making the recordings planned to control access to them. The Kennedy Library initially refused to acknowledge the tapes' existence; Lyndon Johnson wanted tapes produced during his administration sealed until fifty years after his death. Both men were evidently more interested in recording the words of others than their own, and a biographer must take that into account.

Kennedy and Vietnam

Interpretations of the Kennedy administration record on Vietnam have evolved even more quickly than those of the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the Kennedy presidency, biographers, looking to stress the late president's Cold War commitments, spoke of the need for containment in Southeast Asia, and the necessity of an American presence in South Vietnam. For example, in an oral history interview conducted by John Barlow Martin in 1964, Robert Kennedy stated, "The President felt that he had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and that we should win the war in Vietnam."³ When asked what that overwhelming reason was, Kennedy replied, "The loss

of all of Southeast Asia if you lost Vietnam. I think everybody was quite clear that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall.”⁴ When further asked if there was ever “any consideration given to pulling out,” he replied with a flat no, and when asked if the president would have proposed using ground forces if the South Vietnamese were about to lose, Kennedy replied, “We’d face that when we came to it.”⁵ In his 1965 biography of the late president, Arthur Schlesinger lauded the success brought by the increased military commitment made in 1962 and referred to the presence in Vietnam of sixteen thousand American “troops” by the end of the administration (and 132 killed), and the uncertainty surrounding future policy choices after the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem.⁶ As the war in Vietnam began to go sour, however, and especially after Robert Kennedy emerged as an opponent of American involvement, the brief Cold War emphasis was replaced by a sustained denial that the president had had any plans for escalation of the war effort, and implications that a withdrawal would have been imminent, had Kennedy lived. This revisionist approach became even more pronounced as the debacle of Vietnam became clear and was even seen in the wake of the release of the Pentagon Papers. For example, when Arthur Schlesinger later wrote his biography of Robert Kennedy, he portrayed the president—at least after his re-election—as consistently and unequivocally against an American military solution in Vietnam regardless of the circumstances or consequences.⁷ No longer were the earliest American soldiers in Vietnam called “troops”; Schlesinger was careful to always refer to them as “advisors,” downplaying their participation in combat, while portraying the president as the only administration official willing to stand up to the military and refuse to countenance a significant intervention.

The manner in which the tapes of the 1963 meetings regarding Vietnam were released, and the way they were interpreted by administration officials, enhanced this revision of Kennedy’s policy and intentions. Howard Jones, in his comparative study of the two assassinations in November, argues that the recently released tapes and papers definitively prove that Kennedy never intended to resort to the use of the American military to rescue the South Vietnamese gov-

ernment from its failings, and that the assassination in Dallas was ultimately more important to the ensuing history of the conflict than was the assassination of South Vietnamese leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, in Saigon. In particular, Jones cites the tapes of the 2nd to 5th of October meetings of Kennedy's principal advisors as the primary evidence of Kennedy's intention to curtail the American presence in Vietnam by the end of 1965. Concentrating on the words of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Jones asserts that Kennedy committed himself to the withdrawal of one thousand troops by the end of 1963 as the first step towards a total withdrawal, regardless of the military situation in Vietnam.⁸

A further issue must be considered with respect to the Kennedy tapes on Vietnam: the issue of how the tapes have been released. The Kennedy tapes have been declassified in a somewhat odd fashion in comparison to the method used by the Johnson Library. With the exception of taped material relating to Kennedy's assassination, which had to be released early to facilitate investigations, the Johnson Library adopted a systematic approach—reviewing, declassifying, and releasing its tapes chronologically. The Kennedy Library, on the other hand, has been more selective in how it has released its tapes. This selectivity has produced numerous anomalies. For example, historians have already begun to use the declassified tapes of the meetings from early October 1963, but have been unable to access the still-classified tapes of meetings on Vietnam that took place between 26 August and 30 September. These meetings include a discussion of the decision to approve the 24 August cable to Saigon that gave the green light to a coup against the Diem government. They include, in particular, the 31 August meeting where McNamara agreed with Secretary of State Dean Rusk's assertion, "We will not pull out of Vietnam until the war is won."⁹ Without these tapes, the context of the October meetings is partially lost. The texts of the meetings about Vietnam show that most of the discussion from late August through late October focused on the issue of a coup, an issue that deeply divided Kennedy's advisors; yet the tapes that have been declassified have emphasized the discussion of troop withdrawal. The library's decision to release the tapes out of

sequence has been problematic and has contributed to criticisms of their methodology.

On another note, the October tapes do lend insight into how little agency Kennedy and his aides attributed to the Vietnamese. Recordings of a meeting on 8 October 1963 reveal considerable frustration over the lack of information about when the coup against Diem would take place. McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor had met with the purported leader of the coup plot, General Duong Van (Big) Minh, while they were in South Vietnam the previous week. Both men complained that Minh would neither reveal who would be responsible for carrying out the coup nor give them a timetable for its implementation. Taylor told Kennedy, "we're wasting our time with Big Minh," while McNamara complained, "...I couldn't get a damn thing out of him."¹⁰ Neither man seemed to realize that the generals planning the coup were exercising caution for two understandable reasons. First, despite assurances offered to the generals in August that the administration would extend recognition and aid to a new South Vietnamese government, the Americans continued to supply aid and public support to the existing government, leaving the generals confused and wary. Second, a coup in 1960 against Diem had been thwarted, in part, by American support for discussions between the coup leaders and Diem that allowed the South Vietnamese ruler to bring in loyal forces to crush the coup. The tapes reveal that almost to the morning the coup took place, the Americans were persistent in their mistaken belief that they were in complete control of the situation.

Unfortunately, there are no tapes for the period after the coup, a time during which the situation in Vietnam deteriorated significantly and the question of what to do next began to come to the fore. The decision was ultimately made by Kennedy's successor.

Johnson, Eisenhower, and Vietnam

As mentioned earlier, the Johnson Library has been declassifying the tapes made by Lyndon Johnson chronologically (in May 2008, they reached April 1968). Use of the Johnson tapes is complicated by the

existence of transcripts and summaries of some of the conversations recorded. What follows is an example from my research of the impact that having access to a recording of the actual conversation can have. Former president Dwight Eisenhower was a key advisor to President Lyndon Johnson on the war in Vietnam. The two men conversed often in 1965 around the time that Johnson decided to escalate the American military presence in Southeast Asia. Eisenhower had his staff transcribe his conversations with Johnson as they listened in on another extension. The results provide evidence of the correctness of Dean Acheson's famous observation, "No one ever comes off second best in his mem-cons."¹¹ For a decade, Eisenhower's versions of the conversations shaped historical interpretation of these discussions; the tapes provide evidence that Johnson was not exactly the supplicant Eisenhower's memoranda portrayed him to be.

The best example of this phenomenon happened on 2 July 1965. Eisenhower telephoned Johnson half an hour before the president was to meet with his principal Vietnam advisors. After Johnson summarized what he thought his advisors would tell him, Eisenhower reiterated what he had told Johnson's liaison to Eisenhower, General Andrew Goodpaster, two weeks earlier: "...when you go into a place merely to hold sections or enclaves you are paying a price and not winning. When you appeal to force in an international situation involving military help for a nation, you have to go all out! This is a war, and as long as they are putting men down there, my advice is 'do what you have to do.'"¹² Once again appealing to Johnson's sense of commitment, Eisenhower continued, "We are not going to be run out of a free country we helped to establish." When Johnson argued that he was being told that escalation would cost the support of the British and Canadians, Eisenhower shot back, according to the transcript prepared by Eisenhower's aide, "We would still have the Australians and our own convictions."¹³

This author heard the exchange a little differently. The exchange came at the end of the conversation, and it sounded like Eisenhower said, "Well, you still got the Australians." Then he and Johnson laughed briefly. Eisenhower then said, "Australia and Korea."¹⁴ In this case, and in the quotation described below, the original transcript came from

Eisenhower's office and had been edited to strengthen at least the tone of the advice offered.

There is a sharper difference between the transcript and the recording found at the end of the conversation. According to the transcript, "Johnson asked Eisenhower plaintively 'Do you really think we can beat the Viet Cong?'"¹⁵ This quotation has been used in a number of works on Johnson and Vietnam to convey the impression or reinforce the assessment that Johnson was somewhat whiny and inclined to adopt the pose of martyr when it came to discussing Vietnam. The image of Johnson the supplicant who needs constant reassurance is hammered home.

After reading the quotation a few times and reading the memorandum in Eisenhower's papers, listening to the actual exchange came as something of a shock. In the recording, Johnson asked Eisenhower the fundamental military question, "Do you really think we can beat the Viet Cong?"¹⁶ His tone was, in the author's estimate, direct and matter-of-fact in seeking an answer to what was the key policy question. Johnson's voice sounded neither plaintive nor whiny; he sounded like a man seeking an expert opinion. Eisenhower's response was not quite as forthright as the question. Taking the point of view of a professional soldier who lacked sufficient intelligence on the situation, Eisenhower said he was not sure due to the uncertainty over how many in the Viet Cong forces were imported and how many were native Southerners. Eisenhower gave no indication that the question or tone were in any way inappropriate. Indeed, the only part of the discussion that might conceivably fit the stereotype of Johnson was the conclusion. Johnson closed the conversation by telling the General to think the matter over and that he would call again in a few weeks, telling Eisenhower that he was "the best Chief of Staff he has..."¹⁷ Although it is true that Johnson honestly valued Eisenhower's experience, it could be argued that his tone was a little obsequious.

Listening to the tape not only changes the perception of Johnson's behaviour, it increases access to what was discussed. Two issues not fully fleshed out in the memorandum, but important on the tape, involved Chinese and Soviet intervention and Congress. Earlier in the

conversation, Johnson angled for Eisenhower's support, saying that his advisors felt Hanoi should not be bombed, but that the harbours should be. The State Department, however, felt that this might result in Soviet or Chinese intervention. Johnson stated: "we must convince Russia that if she does not bring about some understanding we will have to go all out." Eisenhower agreed, but questioned whether the State Department understood the military situation and pointed out that Johnson "had held the door open for negotiations as wide as possible."¹⁸

Eisenhower said he was sorry to hear that the president would have to go to Congress for additional authority, and the president replied that he would have to do so because it would be necessary to call up the Reserves.¹⁹

Despite his concerns over the pace of escalation and his desire to avoid being blamed for it, Eisenhower, in the recorded conversations, appears to respect Johnson and empathize with him. Johnson may flatter Ike somewhat, but he rarely fits the stereotype of the needy, insecure novice on foreign and military affairs.

Conclusion

The gradual declassification of the secret recordings of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson are bringing about a necessary reinterpretation of the presidents' lives and policies by biographers and historians. Clearly, having access to the actual conversations about Vietnam policy conducted by Kennedy, Johnson, and their advisors within and outside their administrations is beneficial to historians provided they maintain both care and context in their use of the tapes. These brief observations, only scratching the surface, will ideally encourage others to share their own research experiences and yield further discussion.

Notes

- ¹ Sheldon Stern, *Averting "The Final Failure": John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), xxvii. Stern does leave the door open a bit on LBJ, pointing out that telephone conversations could have been manipulated.
- ² Stern, xxvii-xxx.
- ³ Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 394. Hereafter cited as RFK.
- ⁴ RFK, 394.
- ⁵ RFK, 395.
- ⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: JFK in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 548-550; 995-998.
- ⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 705. This is the source of the famous "sending troops is like taking a drink" quotation.
- ⁸ Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 379-381. Jones is not the only historian to make this argument, but his argument is the most reliant on the tapes.
- ⁹ *The Pentagon Papers: The Department of Defense History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Mike Gravel edition, volume 2 (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), 742-743.
- ¹⁰ Meeting of 8 October 1963, President's Office Files, Presidential Recordings Collection, Tape no. 114/A50 (cassette 2 of 3), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.
- ¹¹ Raymond Garthoff, *A Journey Through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 140.
- ¹² William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships. Part III: January-July 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 344. Hereafter cited as Gibbons III. This is the kind of advice Eisenhower had often offered, believing that "If you have to use force, use overwhelming force and save lives." Herbert Brownell with John Burke, *Advising Ike: The Memoirs of Attorney General Herbert Brownell* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), xv.
- ¹³ Gibbons III, 344. Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 2 July 1965, 11:02 AM, Citation #8303, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Recordings of Conversations and Meetings, Lyndon Baines Johnson

Library [LBJL].

- ¹⁴ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 2 July 1965, 11:02 AM, Citation #8303, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Recordings of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.
- ¹⁵ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: 10:55 a.m., 2 July 1965, Augusta-Walter Reed Series, Post-Presidential Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library [DDEL].
- ¹⁶ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 2 July 1965, 11:02 AM, Citation #8303, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Recordings of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.
- ¹⁷ Gibbons III, 345.
- ¹⁸ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: 10:55 a.m., 2 July 1965, Augusta-Walter Reed Series, Post-Presidential Papers, DDEL; Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 2 July 1965, 11:02 AM, Citation #8303, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Recordings of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.
- ¹⁹ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 2 July 1965, 11:02 AM, Citation #8303, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Recordings of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL. Ultimately, Johnson would change his mind on the reserve call-up issue, much to the annoyance of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Kennedy staff was also predominantly young. Its energy and commitment revitalized the nation, but its competence was soon called into question. In April 1961 Kennedy authorized a plan that had been initiated under Eisenhower for a covert invasion of Cuba to overthrow the.Â Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson standing by U.S. Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson as he takes the oath of office aboard Air Force One after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, November 22, 1963. Lyndon B. Johnson Library Photo. The Great Society. We use cookies to distinguish you from other users and to provide you with a better experience on our websites. Close this message to accept cookies or find out how to manage your cookie settings. Login Alert.Â There was, however, also a procedural part to his dissatisfaction: orthodoxy, whatever its actual content as a set of propositions, constrained leadership and action, the ability to wield power for whatever ends in an intelligent way. A symptomatic reading of this presupposes, then, some kind of concept of the cold war as orthodoxy, as US orthodoxy, against which Kennedy's alternative, deliberately inchoate and ambiguous as it ultimately proved, can be gauged. Though Kennedy had felt it necessary to be uncompromising in his demand for removal of the missiles from Cuba, he had been careful to put off to the last possible moment any action that could result in killing a Russian. Khrushchev had probably decided to drop his demand for quid pro quo removals from Turkey as a result of learning that a Soviet anti-aircraft missile in Cuba had shot down a US U-2 plane, killing the pilot.Â Ernest R May is Charles Warren Professor of History at Harvard University. He is co-editor (with Philip Zelikow) of *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (originally issued in 1997 and updated since) and of *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: the Great Crises* (3 volumes, issued in 2002). John F. Kennedy was the 35th President of the United States. Of Irish descent, John was born May 29, 1917 in Brookline Massachusetts. John was married to Jacqueline Lee Kennedy. They had four children Arabella, Caroline, John Jr., and Patrick. President Kennedy took office January 20, 1961 and served till he was assassinated in November 22, 1963 by Lee Harvey Oswald. He was 46 when he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Kennedy is the only Catholic President we have ever had in the United States ballot of the convention.[2] Kennedy chose Johnson to be his vice-presidential running mate, despite opposition from many liberal delegates and Kennedy's own staff, including his brother Robert F. Kennedy.[4] Kennedy believed that Johnson's presence on the ticket would appeal to Southern voters, and he thought that Johnson could serve as a valuable liaison to the Senate.[2].Â President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson take a leisurely stroll on the White House grounds. Fulgencio Batista, a Cuban dictator friendly towards the United States, had been forced out office in 1959 by the Cuban Revolution. Many in the United States, including Kennedy himself, had initially hoped that Batista's successor, Fidel Castro would preside over democratic reforms.