



Comments on Panel 37

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PANEL 37: A Necessary Reinterpretation of Presidential Power and Policy Making: The Secret Tapes of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon

Chair: **Brian Etheridge**, Louisiana Tech. University

“‘We Will Not Pull Out of Vietnam Until the War is Won’: A Comparative Discussion of the Evolving History of America in Vietnam from the Kennedy and Johnson Tapes” by **Richard M. Filipink**, Western Illinois University

“A Fresh Look at Policy-Making in the Nixon White House: Tales from the Nixon Tapes” by **Luke Nichter**, Bowling Green State University

“A Cancellation Crisis? The 1972 Easter Offensive & US-Soviet relations.” By **Rick Moss**, George Washington University

Commentator: **Ken Hughes**, Miller Center, University of Virginia

Ken Hughes, Richard M. Nixon Tapes Editor, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center, University of Virginia

I like to think that I’m sharing the podium with the vanguard of the “White House Tapes Generation” of historians of foreign policy, one that is taking full advantage of an opportunity that prior generations lacked, to examine diplomatic decision-making in a manner that comes as close as possible to the ideal as we’re ever likely to get.

Ideally, we would be able to study history the way Peabody and Sherman did in the old Rocky and Bullwinkle show. We’d use a time machine to go back and see for ourselves what really happened. The White House tapes let us do something like that.

Luke Nichter laments that scholars have not used the tapes as much as they could. The most underused tape collection is the biggest and the best, the Nixon tapes. Voice-activated recording produced unrivalled access to oval office decision-making during a critical 2½-year period during the Cold War. He and Rick Moss intend to rectify that partly by putting out their own book of Nixon tape transcripts dealing with a wide range of issues apart from Watergate, where Stanley Kutler did such groundbreaking work, and I’m sure we’ll learn a lot about Nixon’s approach to international economic policy, the Pentagon Papers leak, and especially the Moscow Summit. Luke and Rick find that Vietnam dominated foreign policy decision-making, and my own research on the tapes found the same.

Having sampled some of the transcripts they plan to publish, I know readers and scholars will find them illuminating.

Although the tapes have generally been underused, there are noteworthy, praiseworthy, in-every-way-worthy exceptions, two of them I want to single out.

“Inside the Pentagon Papers” by John Prados and Margaret Pratt Porter includes 28 pages of transcripts nestled in enough historical, constitutional, and legal context to fill a book that I found very helpful on a subject I’ve done some research on.

Jeffrey Kimball’s “The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy,” seems to me to be a model for wise and judicious use of the Nixon tapes. Kimball carefully places them in the context of everything else we know from available documentary sources, recognizing the tremendous value of the tapes without overstating that value or drawing unfounded conclusions from them. Kimball’s book represents, IMHO, the biggest contribution the tapes have made to diplomatic history.

Luke and Rick are using the tapes to answer the question, why did Nixon tape? There’s another neat quote from the first day of taping, when Nixon tells Haldeman and Butterfield, “I will not be transcribed.” That conversation I personally transcribed. It’s telling that Nixon at that point plans to use the system to screw those he believes are screwing him—IOW, to correct the record if a visitor to the oval office claims the president said something that he didn’t say. So now we know what reason Nixon privately gave for taping.

But does that mean we know what Nixon’s reason was for taping? This epistemological question—what do we really know from the tapes, what can we know from the tapes, is one that **Rich Filipink** insightfully examines in his paper.

For example, The Kennedy tapes from October 1963 are presented by some historians as proof that he planned to withdraw from Vietnam in 1965. Others, like my colleague Marc Selverstone and I, think they’re not conclusive. In listening to recordings of large meetings of many advisers, we must remember that President Kennedy could not speak with complete candor, since some of his subordinates had already demonstrated their willingness and ability to sabotage presidential decisions they disagreed with by selective leaks. Opponents of the coup plot to overthrow South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem had leaked news of the cable that made such a coup feasible, exposing the president to political jeopardy for a controversial move. In this context, it’s difficult to say, in listening to these tapes, when Kennedy is playing devil’s advocate, when he’s speaking his own mind, and when he’s just saying what he thinks his advisers want to hear to disarm them.

The tapes do give us some answers, but these answers often raise more subtle and complex questions. Or as we say in the PRP, just because a president says it on tape doesn't make it true.

But Rich raises an even more subtle and complex question in his discussion of LBJ's consultation with President Eisenhower on Vietnam. It's one thing to deceive your aides. It's another thing to deceive yourself. And Rich's comparison of the Eisenhower/Johnson phone recordings with the telcons prepared by Eisenhower's aides, well, it reminded me of one of the major themes of the now-defunct television show, "The Sopranos." Watching an episode "The Sopranos," viewers would see one version of the story enacted on screen, but we would also hear Tony Soprano give his version of the story to another character, and the differences between what we saw and what Tony said came partly from his desire to deceive whomever he was talking to, and partly from his desire to deceive himself.

Self-deception is a major theme that emerges from the Nixon tapes that I've listened to, and so the self-mythologizing that appears, from Rich's analysis, to have gone into the preparation of the Eisenhower telcons struck a chord with me. In Rich's account, the Eisenhower telcon seems to reflect the Republican self-image of strength, resolve and decisiveness in contrast to Democratic timidity, doubt and general wobbliness, while the tape recording itself does not. Even Johnson's reference to Ike as the best chief of staff he has can be explained as an example of his technique of manipulating people with hyperbolic praise. I loved this part of Rich's paper for illustrating so well how a teller can bias the tale, if the audience doesn't have access to the objective evidence account provided by a tape.

Rick Moss has done tremendous work on the Nixon tapes, in several senses of the word "tremendous." His output in transcripts, their quality, and the way he has put them in the context of primary and secondary sources have all been tremendous. Despite his prodigious research, he makes very modest claims for it in his paper on the Cancellation Crises of May 1972. While Rick rightly notes that the tapes add "a degree of depth, detail and the human element to the understanding of American decision-making," he concludes that "The Nixon tapes do not provide anything truly outrageous or different from what is already known from memoirs and secondary historical works."

In this way, Rick proves to be a model of scholarly restraint, resisting the common temptation toward overstating the value of one's own private stash of research. I would urge him, however, to make sure that he is at least stating—completely—the value of his research. In my own, the tapes have made not just a quantitative difference—adding detail, depth and human interest—but a qualitative difference, forcing reinterpretation of Nixon's exit from Vietnam. That may just not be the

case with the Cancellation Crises, and, again, I admire Rick's integrity for not overstating his claims.

Having read his paper and sampled his transcripts, I, for one, will not be content with memoirs, secondary sources and even declassified documents for a true picture of White House decision-making in the spring of 1972. Rick's work makes vivid the links between foreign policy and domestic politics, between public posturing and private calculation, in a way the other sources just cannot.

I love the May 2 quote: "How can you possibly go to the Soviet Union and toast to Brezhnev and Kosygin and sign a SALT agreement in the Great Hall of St. Peter when Russian tanks and guns are kicking the hell out of our ally in South Vietnam?"

The answer is, you can do it if the polls show that most people want the president to mine and bomb North Vietnam and to attend an arms control summit in Moscow. While publicly cultivating the image of a statesman who put the national interest ahead of his own political interests, Nixon kept a tight grip on the domestic political essentials. As Rick notes, and the tapes back him up, the political essential was Vietnam.

Richard Nixon could not win reelection in 1972 unless the South Vietnamese government was still standing on Election Day.

A May 4, 1972, transcript that Rick generously provided shows Nixon agreeing when he hears that John Connally, leader of Democrats for Nixon, has said, "You've got to face one fact: You cannot lose the war in Vietnam." The bombing and mining, which Nixon portrayed as an act of political courage to the American people, was an act of political calculation. "Don't worry about killing civilians," Haldeman quotes Connally as saying, "Go ahead and kill 'em." His reasoning was, again, political. Since war critics had accused Nixon of killing civilians for years, people already believed he was, so actually killing them would not harm him politically. Nixon agrees.

This conversation reveals the essence of the man in a way no memoir or document can, and I thank Rick for generously furnishing me with a transcript.

In conclusion, if any historian still wonders whether to go through the hassle of using these tapes, I'd like you to imagine you were on a member of a jury trying to decide whether, for example, a mafioso's mother had hired a hitman to kill her son. What evidence would you prefer to base your decision on:

1. The hitman's testimony.
2. The hitman's memoirs.

3. A memo the hitman wrote for a file that he knew would one day become public.
4. The hitman's diary.
5. Tape recordings of the hitman's conversations with the alleged client.

If you're a historian of any of the events covered by these tapes, you owe it to yourself and your readers not to settle for less than the best.

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