

Ernest R. MAY & Philip D. ZELIKOW, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard UNIVERSITY Press, 1997, 728 p. Maps and photos included); Michael R. BESCHLESS, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1997, 591 p. Photos included) *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964.*

Many would argue that the most crucial year in this half of the 20th century was 1963 - the year when "Camelot" was destroyed by an assassin's bullets. The decline in American morale and morals began with that singular event leading downhill to its current Grand Jury hearing of President Bill Clinton's zipper problems (up? or down?). Fortunately or unfortunately as some may view it, there exist tape recordings of many of the significant

discussions in high office of the year before and the year after 1963. These have been transcribed and together with a contextualization and political analysis appear in Michael Beschloss's *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes 1963-64* and *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow.

These two books are about two very different Presidents in style and substance and the authors take two very different academic approaches to their subject matter. However, they share the commonality of the transcription. These are, of course, the transcriptions of audio tape recordings made during the Presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. They provide a verbatim account of what was said and when it was said in the White House at various times between October 1962 and August 1964. For the oral historian such transcriptions are the dynamic interplay of the moment; not the reminiscences of the actors but the action itself in word and emphasis. This is first-hand "history" - fly on the wall (or bug under the table) - you-are-there kind of history.

When using transcriptions, one is always a victim of the record - you can only go with what you have. The *Kennedy Tapes* is perhaps the best of the two in terms of the use of the transcripts. The authors have taken the most written about event in Kennedy's short-lived presidency - the October Crisis of 1962 - and provided the minute-by-minute tension that these thirteen days held for the handful of men who were deciding in essence the future of the world. Those of us of that age will remember the public tension of the time; for me on a university campus I will remember the haunted look of the American students as the call-up to the military was about to be made. The book notes that Richard Neustadt, a Professor at Columbia University stated that "these kids were literally scared for their lives." (288). The threat was that death could rain from the skies. Given the tenor of the discussions that JFK chaired, the spectre of global annihilation was in that room with a comfortable seat at Kennedy's elbow.

The second book by Beschloss *Taking Charge* is qualitatively different. It does not focus the reader on a specific crisis or a concentrated time period. It begins with the transcript of the call in the mid-afternoon of 22 November 1963 by President Johnson (and his wife Lady Bird) to Rose Kennedy, shortly after J.F. Kennedy was assassinated. It was Johnson's first telephone call since being sworn in as President. Beschloss then takes us through the succeeding nine months of Johnson's Presidency closing appropriately with a telephone discussion August 29, 1964 with his Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, about a new crisis in a country called

Vietnam. These are perhaps the two things we remember most about Johnson - Vietnam and his elevation to President on Kennedy's assassination. This book then is a more severely edited transcribed version of Johnson's attempts to grasp the tiller of a somewhat traumatized ship of state and with his distinctive political style, put his own stamp on the Office of President and prepare for his election to this office in November 1964.

Although in both books the politics and crisis management (especially in the May & Zelikow book) make riveting reading, what is of interest to an oral historian are the transcribed records of the Presidential discussions. These are not the memoirs by the major actors phrased with Olympus-like 20-20 hindsight and sold as best sellers decades later. These are the elusive answers to the historians five "w" questions of who said what to whom and where did they say it, when? Verifiable with the original voices! What more could one ask? If the world were only that simple.

Both books provide a context for the various discussions. *The Kennedy Tapes* include a lucid analysis of the October Crisis through an introduction and conclusion that brings the reader into the drama of confrontation and leaves the reader there without interruptions. *Taking Charge* is like Johnson himself rambling, ebullient and in some cases goes on too long. Nevertheless even with context in place one is still faced with the verity of the spoken word now written.

First of all, those who have followed the release of the Watergate tapes, will be surprised, (and pleased perhaps), with the clarity of expression (shown by Kennedy) and the lack of profanity by either President. Perhaps this changed as Johnson wandered deeper into the swamps of Vietnam. Certainly with regard to civil rights issues, the N-word was still a part of his Texas-bred vocabulary (515) however, it must be noted that he was a man of action who brought about legislative changes in American civil rights that J.F. Kennedy would never have managed.

Both Presidents were secretly taping their conversations and meetings and in Johnson's case, many of his telephone calls. The question for the researcher is then of control. When and why would the tape recorder be turned on or off? Was the President so engrossed in some meeting that he was oblivious to the tape recorder? In that case, which meetings and conversations and how do we know? One might think that during the October Crisis, Kennedy would be absorbed by the emergency but he does turn the tape recorder on and off at various times (p. 635). In Johnson's case, there are frequent times when his use of "terms of endearment" and his masterful word weaponry to cajole and manage others show that he has

either forgotten he is being taped or has decided to ignore it and doesn't care.

Even with these tapes, it is not enough. Although the transcriber could gauge sarcasm and innuendo, anger and angst in the dialogues, the visual aspect is not there. For example, in the cabinet room on October 24, 1963 as the crisis wears on, Robert Kennedy notes in his diary the stress his brother is under. "His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth and closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table." (355). These are moments of measure in non-verbal communication that an audio tape cannot deliver.

Nevertheless, the transcripts are comprehensively edited and this has added immeasurably to the historical record. Both books accurately describe the transcription process in some detail and both drive home the point that a transcription is a long, labourious and meticulous process. There are no "ums" or "ahs" to stumble over as the reader follows the dialogue. These are not simply books about two American Presidents adding yet another few hundred thousand words about the events surrounding their terms in office, but these transcripts assist the historian greatly in measuring for themselves - word and deed - how these men acted and reacted in times of great stress. It will however not be a record we will have of the succeeding administrations. After Nixon took the fall when he was entangled in his tapes, there is little evidence to suggest any President since then has taped conversations. Beschloss asked President Clinton if tapes were compiling his verbal records. Clinton just chuckled and shook his head (557). Something he should perhaps do more often.

As it stands then, the historical record of the American Presidents which could have gained so much from electronic taping have lost out to the infighting of partisan politics. Instead of a wealth of tapes stored and accessible at some distant time (30-50 years) we can only look back and see what might have been. Ah well, back to the documents, the memoirs, and the recorded reminiscences!

James H. Morrison