

Source Material: The 1997 Published Transcripts of the JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes: Too Good to Be True?

SHELDON M. STERN

Newton, Massachusetts

Scholars now have access to audiotapes of the meetings between President Kennedy and his advisers made during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Since 1997, a set of transcripts edited by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow has been available from the Harvard University Press. This article, by the former Kennedy Library historian who listened to these tapes between 1981 and 1996 and recently checked selections from the published book against the recorded words, reveals that the transcripts contain many errors that significantly distort the historical record. The author discusses a representative sample of these inaccuracies, suggests how they can mislead scholars, and argues that subsequent printings and future revised editions should document and identify all changes and corrections of the original 1997 transcripts.

In the fall of 1997, I learned that Harvard University Press was about to publish *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis*, complete transcripts of the tape-recorded missile crisis conversations between President Kennedy and his advisers, edited by the distinguished Professors Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow. I was astonished at the speed with which the transcriptions had been made ready for publication since the bulk of the recordings had not been opened by the John F. Kennedy Library until late in 1996 and early in 1997.

In my twenty-three years as historian at the Kennedy Library, I had done extensive work with sound recordings, particularly the missile crisis tapes. From my own long experience, I knew all too well how difficult and frustrating it could be to work with these noisy, low-fidelity reel-to-reel tapes. Yet, it was the historian's ultimate fantasy—the unique chance to be a fly on the wall in one of the most dramatic and dangerous moments in human history—to know, within the technical limits of the recordings, *exactly what happened*. Complete transcripts would be of inestimable value to historians, teachers, and lay readers alike.

Of course, I took for granted that the transcripts were accurate.

This article addresses the fact that the transcripts are, unfortunately, far less accurate than they could or should have been. A plethora of transcription errors distort the substance

Sheldon M. Stern, a historian and educational consultant, served as the historian at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston from 1977 through 1999.

of the discussions. Also, the omission or mistranscription of passages clearly audible in the original tapes raises troubling questions about the noise-reduction technology used by the editors. The present author reviewed these transcripts using a home tape player and low-tech Kennedy Library cassettes—without digital audiotape, a real-time timer, or any kind of noise-reduction system. Since the editors claim that the Presidential Recordings Project of the University of Virginia's Miller Center, under the direction of Dr. Zelikow, is now using more expensive and "far better technology" than available in 1997, scholars should be concerned about whether any technical problems have been overcome.

The editors explained that they had commissioned a team of professional court reporters to prepare a set of "draft transcripts" from the Kennedy Library tapes. Then, audio experts, using NONOISE, a "technically advanced noise-reduction system," had produced an improved set of tapes, subsequently checked by the court reporters to be sure that nothing had been lost. However, Professors May and Zelikow (1997) stressed their responsibility for the final product:

The two of us then worked with the tapes and the court reporters' drafts to produce the transcripts printed here. The laboriousness of this process would be hard to exaggerate. Each of us listened over and over to every sentence in the recordings. Even after a dozen replays at varying speeds, significant passages remained only partly comprehensible. . . . Notwithstanding the high professionalism of the court reporters, we had to amend and rewrite almost all their texts. For several especially difficult sessions, we prepared transcriptions ourselves from scratch. In a final stage, we asked some veterans of the Kennedy administration to review the tapes and our transcripts in order to clear up as many as possible of the remaining puzzles. The reader has here the best text we can produce, but it is certainly not perfect. We hope that some, perhaps many, will go to the original tapes. If they find an error or make out something we could not, we will enter the corrections in subsequent editions or printings of this volume. (P. xiii)

In one of the most dramatic moments on the tapes, during the October 18 meeting, John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) grimly refers to the ultimate nightmare of nuclear war as "the final failure." However, several months ago, I was unable to find those words in the May-Zelikow transcript. I found instead, "the prime failure" (p. 145). Convinced that I had made an error and that the editors were right because of their technically cleaner tapes, I fast-forwarded the recording and listened again: there was absolutely no question that Kennedy said "the final failure," not "the prime failure."

At that point, I decided to listen again to the entire tape and what I discovered left me dismayed. The transcript is marred by errors that undermine its practical value for historians, teachers, or the general reader. Despite the often-poor sound quality of the Kennedy Library cassettes, many of these mistranscriptions were nonetheless clear enough to be heard conclusively. Since the devil is in the details, we will examine specific examples, side by side, first from the October 18 meeting and then from a spot check of the other transcripts. There are dozens of additional errors, not cited below, in the October 18 transcript alone, and the problem persists with varying frequency, in *all* the transcripts.

My critique of *The Kennedy Tapes*, discussing at length a representative sample of the errors printed below, appeared in the May 2000 *Atlantic Monthly* (Stern 2000). In their letter to the *Atlantic* responding to this critique, as well as on the Miller Center Web site and in a national mailing, the editors claim that

none of these amendments is very important. None of it changes what a reader of the transcripts takes away concerning the essence or even the minute details of the deliberations that took place in the Oval Office and Cabinet Room in those terrifying thirteen days of October 1962. (May and Zelikow 2000, 13)

The author has therefore provided here a far more thorough catalog of some of the significant errors thus far identified, to provide scholars with a broader sample on which to base their own conclusions about the importance of these mistakes. Space limitations make it impossible to provide extensive discussion of *how* these errors distort the substance of the discussions: for analysis of a number of these examples and their impact on meaning and interpretation, readers are referred to the author's article in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Stern 2000). The following article should be regarded as a document or source text with which scholars may evaluate for themselves the importance of the problems in an influential and widely distributed historical resource—problems its editors have essentially denied even exist.

(All the errors from the first printing were subsequently rechecked in the fourth and most recent printing. Words in brackets in *The Kennedy Tapes* were added by the editors for clarification and are not actually on the tapes.)

The Kennedy Tapes

Author's Revisions

Thursday, October 18, 11:00 A.M.

- | | |
|--|---|
| McCone: . . . based on the photography from Sunday, October 14, and 2 [flights] from Monday, October 15. These are completely read out. We continued to run [flights] yesterday. (p. 122) | McCone: . . . photography of the 1 mission on Sunday, October 14, 2 on Monday, October 15. These are quite completely read out. There were six missions run yesterday. |
| Taylor: Have any electronic emissions from the AA [antiaircraft radars for the SAMs] been picked up by the report that came in? (p. 126) | Taylor: Have any electronic emissions from the S-A-Ms been picked up by any reports they had, which were showing life? |
| Rusk: . . . I think they would be critically encouraged to go ahead and eventually feel like they've got it made . . . (p. 127) | Rusk: . . . I think they would be greatly encouraged to go adventuring, and would feel that they've got it made . . . |
| Rusk: . . . and we were going in with United Nations blessing. (p. 129) | Rusk: . . . and we were going in as part of a general United Nations commitment. |
| Rusk: But I suppose the only way we have of [using that is] getting [a] two-thirds vote to take necessary action. But if we made an effort and failed to get the two-thirds vote [unclear], then at least we will have tried as far as the American people are concerned. We'll have done that. (p. 129) | Rusk: I would suppose there would be no real difficulty in getting a two-thirds vote in favor of necessary action. But if we made an effort and failed to get the two-thirds vote, which I doubt would be the result, then at least we would have tried as far as the American people are concerned, to have done . . . to have done our . . . to have done our best on that. |
| McNamara: . . . we would consider nothing short of a full invasion as a military action. (p. 131) | McNamara: . . . we would consider nothing short of a full invasion as practicable military action. |

- | | |
|---|--|
| Taylor: They'll be operational at the same time. (p. 132) | Taylor: They may be operational at any time. |
| JFK: I would think you [the Soviets would] have to go on the defensive, are not going to commit nuclear weapons to be used against the United States from Cuba . . . (p. 133) | JFK: I would think you have to go on the assumption that they're not going to permit nuclear weapons to be used against the United States from Cuba. |
| JFK: If we have a communication with Moscow . . . (p. 136) | JFK: How quick is our communication with Moscow? |
| JFK: It wouldn't really have to be a call, would it? (p. 136) | RFK: [not JFK]: It wouldn't really have to go in code, would it? |
| (First Printing): RFK: . . . you've got the invasion of Russian ships . . . (p. 138) | RFK: . . . you've got the examination of Russian ships . . . |
| (Fourth Printing): corrected (p. 138) | |
| Thompson: . . . since Castro's gone this far in denying it . . . (p. 140) | Thompson: since Castro's gone this far in conniving it . . . |

Tuesday, October 16, 11:50 A.M.

- | | |
|--|--|
| Lundahl: . . . this is the first time we have been able to watch them on photography. . . (p. 50) | Lundahl: . . . this is the first time we have been able to catch them on photography. . . |
| McNamara: This is one of the most important thoughts we face in properly interpreting the readiness of these missiles. (p. 50) | McNamara: This is one of the most important problems we face in properly interpreting the readiness of these missiles. |

Thursday, October 18, Near Midnight

- | | |
|---|--|
| JFK: . . . he stated the first strike as being most likely to achieve. . . (pp. 171-72) | JFK: . . . he favored the first strike as being less likely to produce . . . as being most likely to achieve . . . |
|---|--|

Friday, October 19, 9:45 A.M.

- | | |
|--|--|
| JFK: Communication, targeting, and an integrated air-defense system are now gaining operational status. (p. 177) | JFK: [reading] "Communication, targeting, and an integrated air-defense system are now nearing operational status." [stops reading and asks] What does that mean—integrated? |
| Anderson: . . . although we do recognize that will be very fast. (p. 179) | Anderson: . . . although we do recognize they're moving very fast. |
| Wheeler: . . . will give us increasing assurance that we really have gone after the offensive capability of the Cuban/Soviets corner. (p. 180) | Wheeler: . . . will give us increasing assurance that we really have got the offensive capability of the Cuban Soviets cornered. |
| LeMay: You're in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President. | LeMay: In other words, you're in a pretty bad fix at the present time. |
| JFK: What did you say? | JFK: What'd you say? |
| LeMay: You're in a pretty bad fix. | LeMay: I say, you're in a pretty bad fix. |
| JFK: [Kennedy makes an unclear, joking, reply.] (p. 182) | JFK: You're in with me. [laughs] |

Taylor: We have been deterred, to my view, from getting ready to invade Cuba, as I think you know. On the other hand, now that we see that it's not much going to be a place where they need a little supply of mobile missiles . . . (pp. 183-84)

Taylor: It may have been a deterrent to my enthusiasm for an invasion of Cuba, as I think you know. On the other hand, now that we see that it's not just going to be a place where they needle us by mobile missiles . . .

Monday, October 22, 11:30 A.M.

(First Printing): Bundy: I don't think there's any harm in having a neutral-nation inspection instead of sanitization. The rest will follow. You can't have everything in one bite. (p. 216)

Bundy: I don't think there's any harm in having a neutral-nation proposal for immediate inspection instead of sanitization. The rest would follow. Don't forget, you can't have everything in one bite.

(Fourth Printing): Bundy: I don't think there's any harm in having a neutral nation for immediate inspection and sort of sanitization. The rest will follow. You can't have everything in one bite. (p. 216)

(First Printing): RFK: . . . in view of the fact that they're going to come back on Turkey, whether it would be well if Dean Rusk tries the argument that was so effective about why we started to build these alliances around the world. (pp. 217-18)

RFK: . . . in view of the fact that they're going to come back on Turkey and Italy, whether it would be well as Dean Rusk recalled last night, and I thought was so effective, as to why we started to build these alliances around the world.

(Fourth Printing): RFK: . . . in view of the fact that they're going to come back on Turkey and Italy, whether it would be well if Dean Rusk tries the argument that was so effective about why we started to build these alliances around the world. (pp. 217-18)

JFK: I don't suppose we have to have a formal press conference [unclear]. There'll be a lot of things we won't want to discuss. So . . . background. (p. 219)

JFK: I don't think we have to have a formal press conference by the secretary tomorrow. There are a lot of things we don't want to discuss. So I think it's gotta be on background.

Monday, October 22, 3:00 P.M.

JFK: Khrushchev will not complete this without a response . . . (p. 230)

JFK: Khrushchev will not take this without a response . . .

JFK: I want to say very clearly to the military that I recognize the appreciable problems in any military action we have to take in Cuba by the warning we're now giving. (p. 231)

JFK: I want to say very clearly to the military that I recognize we increase your problems in any military action we have to take in Cuba by the warning we're now giving.

JFK: . . . I think we get shocked, and the [damage to the] alliance might have been nearly fatal. Particularly [since] I think we would have excused very drastic action by Khrushchev. (p. 231)

JFK: I think the shock to the alliance might have been nearly fatal, particularly as it would have excused very drastic action by Khrushchev.

(First Printing): JFK: And second, what happens when work [unclear]. (p. 231)

JFK: And second, what happens when work on the bases goes on?

(Fourth Printing): JFK: And second, what happens if work on the bases goes on. (p. 231)

Tuesday, October 23, 10:00 A.M.

McCone: . . . there's evidence of extensive camouflage. [To an aide] I'd like to see those pictures. (p. 289)

McCone: . . . there's evidence of extensive camouflage. I'd like you to see those pictures—they're significant.

JFK: . . . There will be some spraying all around about the crisis' beginnings, and we just have that problem of . . . (p. 289)

JFK: . . . There'll be some straying all around [by reporters]. Arthur Krock's [*New York Times*] just beginning . . . then we just have that problem of . . .

McCone: . . . his view of this thing, as a facilitator. (p. 292)

McCone: . . . his view of this thing, as a soldier. [referring to Eisenhower]

Tuesday, October 23, 6:00 P.M.

McNamara: The legal foundation is, such an act can be confused [with evasive action]. (p. 325)

McNamara: The legal foundation of such an act is confused.

JFK: What we're going to do is stop and take possession of offensive military weapons into Cuba. . . . is it then harder to name them in a way which may not be desirable? More challenging? (pp. 329-30)

JFK: What we're going to do is stop the introduction of offensive military weapons into Cuba. . . . Does it hit them harder to name them in a way which may not be desirable? Is it more challenging than it needs to be?

JFK: Now, what do we do tomorrow morning when these 8 [Soviet] vessels continue to sail on? We're all clear about how we enter? (p. 333)

JFK: Now, what do we do tomorrow morning when these 8 vessels continue to sail on? We're all clear about how we handle it?

McCone: Shoot the rudders off them, don't you?

The following excerpt from the October 24 morning transcript is especially striking: note that "[unclear]" appears five times and entire phrases are completely absent. Rusk is actually reading rather than speaking extemporaneously and, as a result, this uninterrupted portion of his remarks can be heard without particular difficulty on the Kennedy Library cassettes:

The Kennedy Tapes

Author's Revisions

Wednesday, October 24, 10:00 A.M.

Rusk: His [Khrushchev's] public line seems designed to leave him with some option to back off, if he chooses. The impression of a pure U.S.-Cuban fracas will be hard to maintain once we're in a U.S.-Soviet incident at sea. On balance we think the probable Soviet [unclear] is to provoke such an incident, in the expectation that the result [unclear] will stimulate pressures on the U.S. to end the quarantine. Here lies the very kinds of compromise proposed. This will gain time for the Soviets to determine whether the U.S. [unclear] on the issues, and whether the [unclear] Soviet line that the [unclear] are defensive can be sustained . . . (p. 351)

Rusk: [reading] In spite of their threats of resistance to U.S. efforts to stop Soviet ships, his [Khrushchev's] public line seems designed to leave him with some option to back off, if he chooses. Clearly the fiction of a pure U.S.-Cuban fracas will be hard to maintain once there's a U.S.-Soviet incident at sea. On balance we think it probable the Soviets will risk such an incident, in the expectation that the resultant further rise in tension will stimulate pressures on the U.S. to end the quarantine. And here lies the various kinds of compromise proposed. This will gain time for the Soviets to determine whether the U.S. has made a plausible case on the issues, in essence, or the Soviet line that any communist weapon is defensive can be sustained . . .

Thursday, October 25, 10:00 A.M.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>(First Printing): Unidentified: The other explanation might be that they're counting on taking political action against the [unclear] when we did that. Afraid this will spread [unclear]. (p. 410)</p> <p>(Fourth Printing): Unidentified: The other explanation might be that they're counting on taking forceful action against the [unclear] when we intercept. Afraid this will spread [unclear]. (p. 410)</p> <p>(First Printing): Dillon?: I thought the statement last night was pretty good. [Unclear] the significance of it. (p. 412)</p> <p>(Fourth Printing): McCone: I thought the statement last night was pretty good. [Unclear] the significance of it. (p. 412)</p> | <p>Nitze: The other explanation might be that they're counting on taking forceful action against the first one we intercept.</p> <p>McCone: That's right.</p> <p>Nitze: Afraid this will spread the war at sea . . .</p>
<p>McCone [not Dillon]: I thought the statement last night was pretty good—had altered his course and we don't know the significance of it.</p> |
|--|---|

Friday, October 26, 10:00 A.M.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>JFK: Now, the only question I've got is how do we still justify this ship. Do we have to announce we have let the other ones through?</p> <p>McNamara: I don't believe we have announced it. (p. 446)</p> <p>McNamara: In any case, it was successful and I think the destroyers [unclear]. (p. 446)</p> | <p>JFK: Now, the only question I've got is how do we still justify searching this ship. Will we have to announce that we let the other ones through?</p> <p>McNamara: I don't believe we should announce it.</p> <p>McNamara: In any case, it's been successful and I think to do any good the story must be put out immediately.</p> |
|---|---|

Saturday, October 27, 4:00 P.M.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>JFK: . . . I don't think that we ought to leave it this way. (p. 524)</p> <p>Bundy: He said the knockdown of the Cuba trick [in the morning statement] had been very well received there. (p. 526)</p> <p>JFK: Obviously, they're not going to settle the Cuban question until they get some compensation on Cuba. (p. 528)</p> | <p>JFK: . . . I don't think that we ought to leave it this vague.</p> <p>Bundy: He said that the knockdown of the trip to Cuba had been very well received there.</p> <p>JFK: Obviously, they're not going to settle the Cuban question until they get some conversation on Cuba.</p> |
|--|---|

Monday, October 29, 10:10 A.M.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>JFK: I imagine the airports must be looking bad . . . (p. 656)</p> <p>(First Printing): JFK: We got the [unclear] signs of life to begin this air strike on Tuesday [October 30]. (p. 656)</p> <p>(Fourth Printing): corrected (p. 656)</p> <p>JFK: But we want you [unclear] to know that Adlai is our voice. (p. 659)</p> | <p>JFK: I imagine the Air Force must be a little mad. . .</p> <p>JFK: We had decided Saturday night to begin this air strike on Tuesday [October 30].</p> <p>JFK: But we want U Thant to know that Adlai is our voice.</p> |
|--|--|
-

One further error is particularly ironic: on October 18, Dean Rusk argues that before taking military action in Cuba, the United States should consult Khrushchev in the unlikely event that he agrees to remove the missiles. "But at least it will take that point out of the way," the editors quote Rusk, "and it's on the record." However, Rusk actually says, "for the historical record." The integrity of the historical record is indeed at issue here.

May and Zelikow, both highly regarded scholars, have assured readers that if in listening to the original tapes they discover errors or make out unclear remarks, corrections will be included in future editions or printings. In the fourth printing, two of the above errors have been corrected and five have been partially corrected (although two of these five changes also introduce new errors not present in the first printing). However, the great majority of errors remain unchanged. Also, in the fourth printing, the editors have neither acknowledged these corrections in the preface nor identified them in the text itself.

Of course, the editors and other historians would never assume that any transcript can be absolutely reliable or accurate. The tape itself must always remain the primary historical document. Nonetheless, as the editors affirm, "reliable transcripts—ideally, annotated transcripts—are essential to make the tapes intelligible." *The Kennedy Tapes* transcripts, however, require substantial work. The revisions suggested above will inevitably include some errors; the editing process can never be final or perfect. If the editors disagree with these findings, I would be delighted to listen to any of these disputed passages, in private or in public, using the Kennedy Library tapes or the NONOISE tapes. But scholars are invited to judge whether the editors are correct in asserting that the author's revisions do not, in fact, change "what a reader of the transcripts takes away concerning the essence or even the minute details of the deliberations that took place in the Oval Office and Cabinet Room in those terrifying thirteen days of October 1962."

Entirely new transcripts of the missile crisis tapes are now in preparation by the Miller Center, but that in no way addresses the fact that many thousands of the seriously flawed editions discussed above remain in libraries, schools, and private collections. Regrettably, the claims made for the accuracy and historical value of *The Kennedy Tapes* transcripts are clearly too good to be true.

References

- May, Ernest R., and Philip D. Zelikow. 1997. *The Kennedy tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban missile crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2000. What JFK really said [in Letters to the Editor]. *Atlantic Monthly* 286 (August): 13.
- Stern, M. Sheldon. 2000. What JFK really said. *Atlantic Monthly* 285 (May): 122-28.