

## Tapes: Hearing a Wrong Leaning, er, Meaning

*By Max Holland*

Twenty-five years ago this month, a handful of captured conversations helped to bring down Richard M. Nixon's presidency. Given the demonstrated power of White House tapes to record, and sometimes alter, history, it's striking that it has taken all these years to flesh out a full account of surreptitious recording devices installed at the behest of presidents. The more than 3,500 hours of meetings and conversations tape-recorded during the Nixon presidency merely represent the apogee of a slow trend that began with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940, and greatly accelerated during the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

These recordings are presidential history with the bark off and will foster and sometimes force novel interpretations of even the most familiar events. Yet, when the source material is so raw--one is trafficking in micro-history--the potential for misunderstanding and misrepresentation is great. Sometimes, a single mis-heard word can make all the difference. Consider, for example, the rendering of a September 18, 1964 conversation in *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, historian Michael R. Beschloss's initial volume on the Johnson recordings.

The first minutes of this telephone conversation between Johnson and his mentor, Senator Richard B. Russell, concern the latter's participation on the Warren Commission, which was created to investigate the Kennedy assassination. That very day, after 10 arduous months, the panel had put the finishing touches on what would become known as the *Warren Report*. Johnson asked Russell if the commission's findings were unanimous. Russell replied, according to Beschloss's transcript, "Yes, sir. I tried my best to get in a dissent, but they'd come 'round and trade me out of it by giving me a little old threat."

The implication is that the senior senator from Georgia, one of Washington's most powerful men, signed the *Warren Report* under duress; that he was in fundamental disagreement with one or more of the commission's key findings, but bowed to an unspecified threat.

There's something wrong here. A Southern Democrat and staunch opponent of civil rights, Russell detested Chief Justice Earl Warren and the kind of jurisprudence the Warren Supreme Court practiced. In fact, Russell protested long and vigorously when Johnson informed the Georgian, on November 29, 1963, that he had been appointed to serve on the commission. It wasn't because Russell thought the duty unimportant; it was primarily because he didn't want to work with Warren on any matter. But Johnson insisted. "I don't give a damn if you have to serve with a Republican; if you have to serve with a Communist; if you have to serve with a Negro; if you have to serve with a thug,"

he stated. So Russell did serve. Still, the notion that a grudging participant like Russell would ever bow to a threat from a panel headed by Warren is astounding.

Listening to the tape, it becomes clear that Beschloss's transcription is incorrect. What Russell actually said is: "I tried my best to get in a dissent, but they'd come 'round and trade me out of it by giving me a little old *thread* of it."

Suddenly, the conversation makes sense. Russell came to the commission's last meeting on September 18 determined to register his opinion on two pivotal issues: whether a foreign conspiracy existed, and the sequence of the bullets that struck Kennedy and Texas Governor John B. Connally in Dallas's Dealey Plaza. Far from threatening the Georgian, Warren had labored that day to *oblige* him.

The chief justice believed it was inordinately important for the commission to deliver a unanimous decision to the American people. If complete agreement proved elusive, Russell, of all the members, could not be the lone dissenter. Russell was to conservative opinion what Warren was to liberal: a standard bearer and powerful influence. So along with the other panel members, Warren kept massaging the final language until it incorporated Russell's views. Finally, the senator could only assent.

Construing history from presidential recordings is an arduous but hardly thankless task. Yet, it requires being steeped in contemporary minutiae: events of a given day and sometimes a given hour; the nuances of every issue before the president; and the foibles of each individual unwittingly recorded for posterity. It might not even be an exaggeration to say that those who would interpret the recordings need to be as well-versed as these evocative voices were in their day.

Postscript: Despite an enormous volume of tape recordings waiting to be transcribed and annotated, Beschloss has not released another book of Johnson tapes since his second volume, *Reaching for Glory*, was published in 2001.