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The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban
Missile Crisis (review)

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During the Cold War, however, the strategic imperatives changed. The modified “containment” doctrine that the United States employed against the Communist bloc was inherently defensive, designed to preclude direct superpower confrontation. Unlimited military intervention was out of the question. This left the CIA in the unenviable position of nurturing clandestine movements that would ultimately be left to wither on the vine. The story of one such tragic case is expertly told by Kenneth Conboy and the late James Morrison in *The CIA’s Secret War in Tibet*.

The narrative encompasses the entire history of U.S. efforts to support armed Tibetan opposition to Chinese rule: from the seizure of Lhasa in August 1951 and subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama, to the rout of the last Tibetan guerrilla redoubt by the Royal Nepalese Army in 1974. It is a record of almost unmitigated failure. Despite nearly a quarter century of attempts and a deep resentment of the Chinese presence within the country, the CIA never succeeded in establishing even a rudimentary permanent intelligence network within the country.

Conboy and Morrison suggest several reasons for the Tibet program’s shortcomings. Short-term planning at Langley, domestic U.S. political considerations, and ridiculous bureaucratic sniping between the Agency’s Near East and Far East Divisions all had a deleterious influence. Cultural factors also came into play. Tibetan agents who had been raised to conduct life in harmony with the rhythm of the seasons had to be taught novel western concepts like the 24-hour clock. The greatest impediment, however, was the often-lukewarm diplomatic and logistical support provided by neighboring powers—particularly India.

Effectively locating the CIA’s clandestine struggle in Tibet within the context of the shifting axis of Indian-U.S.-Chinese relations is *Secret War’s* greatest accomplishment. Conboy and Morrison show how even as Indian public opinion took a decidedly anti-American turn during the 1950s and 1960s, Nehru secretly aligned his country with the United States on the Tibetan issue. Revealing these subtle undercurrents in international relations is the *raison d’être* of intelligence history.

The CIA’s Secret War in Tibet is a solid, meticulously researched contribution to our understanding of U.S. clandestine policy and international relations in South Asia. Like M. R. D. Foot’s *SOE in France*, Conboy and Morrison’s work is a superb case study on intelligence that will stand the test of time.

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The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Edited by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002. ISBN 0-393-32259-9. Notes. Index. Pp. lvi, 514. \$17.95.

In a recent Hollywood movie, the head of a New York law firm interviews

a prospective partner. Aware that the young lawyer has never lost a case, winning in fact sixty-four straight convictions as prosecutor, he asks: "What's your secret?" The answer is that he knew how to pick a jury, because for years—though the bar association would have disapproved—he listened to juries deliberate, thanks to a hole in the jury room wall.

With the 1997 publication by Harvard University Press of a selective compilation of transcripts made from a secret taping system installed in the White House Cabinet Room and Oval Office in the summer of 1962, historians began eavesdropping on another jury. The National Security Council's Executive Committee was a body that once weighed the fate of civilization for thirteen days. The published tapes of its conversations constitute perhaps the most famous and revealing "hole in the wall" in American history.

With two hundred fewer pages than the 716-page first edition, this "Concise Edition" does make "listening" easier. But "Concise" proves to be misleading, a misnomer in fact. This is not, as one might expect, an exercise in miniaturization. More than the removal of ostensibly superfluous conversation has taken place. There have been additions to the text as well as subtractions. Besides wholesale deletions, marked by frequent ellipses, some sections have been revised or expanded. And entirely new material has been introduced, perhaps the most significant being abridged transcripts of White House meetings on September 4 and 29, along with transcribed tapes of President Kennedy's telephone conversations with Dean Rusk and Lincoln White on October 26 and with former Presidents Eisenhower, Truman, and Hoover on October 28.

Clearly, the editors have substantially improved the initial version of the tapes. Upgrading was made possible by enhanced tape quality (so-called DAT copies), better headphone amplifiers, and the expertise of an editorial team at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs where coeditor Zelikow serves as Director. Previously unidentified voices are now recognized. Not a few misidentifications are corrected: for example, Arthur Lundahl and Marshall Carter flip-flop on occasion, Ted Sorensen turns out to be George Ball at times, and John McCone is no longer confused with Roswell Gilpatric. Some of what was once unclear has been figured out, and in at least one instance, with eye-opening effect: in his lone meeting with the JCS on October 19 President Kennedy's quick and deft wit, provoked by the impudence of a cocky General Curtis Le May, has been successfully retrieved.

Other notable refinements abound. Representative samples, involving altered meanings, must suffice. All exhibit the elusiveness of the spoken word and are a warning to those who trust transcriptions uncritically. There is, as well, the suggestion in the second edition that relocating the project to Charlottesville improved comprehension of troublesome Southern accents. Take the fate of remarks by Senator Richard Russell and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, fellow Georgians. A Russell admonition to JFK has evolved from an hallucinatory "I could not space out" to a more sensible "I could not stay silent." Another bit of counsel to the commander-in-chief from the powerful

chairman of the Armed Services Committee to “Wait’ was actually its antithesis, namely, “there’s no use in waiting.” And when Rusk’s October 23d comment about Soviet ships approaching the naval blockade turns out to be “that could well be the baby food ships” rather than “that could well be the biggest of the ships,” the Secretary’s composure and wry sense of humor are much better appreciated.

In fairness, other regional ways of speaking probably caused difficulties too, as illustrated by Robert Kennedy’s reference on October 23d to British Ambassador “David Ormsby-Gore,” originally heard and recorded as “General de Gaulle,” no small mistake indeed. There is also General Maxwell Taylor’s supposed self-description as a “pessimist” which has been revised to “I’m impressed with this.” Finally, if the curious reader compares JFK’s appraisal of Nikita Khrushchev’s motives for putting MRBMs/IRBMs into Cuba on page 267 of the “Concise Edition” and on page 438 of the 1997 edition, the historical benefits of new technology and superb editors are on display.

Combined with its many strengths, especially its greater reliability, this edition has two puzzling weaknesses. The first is that compelling criteria for the major omissions (and additions) are never made explicit, which means that serious students of the Missile Crisis must still consult those lengthy parts excised from the Harvard edition. The second shortcoming, closely related to the first, is that its numerous ellipses are never referenced to that earlier edition.

As a college freshman, this reviewer turned eighteen on Saturday, 27 October 1962, fully convinced then that he would not celebrate another birthday. A lifetime curiosity as to how he did makes this remarkable “hole in the wall” personally irresistible. The “Concise Edition” should be a must assignment for all upper-level courses on twentieth-century U.S. diplomatic and military history. And for anyone who prefers to be prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, and presiding judge at the same time. Take a look, and render your own verdict on JFK and his advisers.

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Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East.

By Michael B. Oren. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-19-515174-7. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xv, 446. \$30.00.

“We have screwed every Arab country” was the crass verdict of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Haim Bar-Lev, speaking to the cabinet a few days after the end of the Six Day War. But a reluctant screwing it was, according to Michael Oren, in his acclaimed history of the war. He efficiently summarizes political-military events leading up to the