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The JFK Tapes

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy and his family obviously were embarrassed by press revelations that John F. Kennedy had played that sordid little game of secretly recording his conversations with his top advisers and other Americans.

In what he surely considers an act of "openness," Ted Kennedy called for release to the public of the transcripts of those tapes at the soonest possible time.

There may be more bravery than wisdom in this suggestion, because those tapes will make bitter enemies of a lot of living people, including powerful Democrats, and they may serve most to tarnish the reputations of John and Robert Kennedy, who have become larger in death than they ever were in life.

My time at the United Nations, during the Cuban missile crisis, convinced me that Adlai Stevenson was probably the weakest, most indecisive man ever to be nominated twice for the presidency. Still, I doubt Stevenson's relatives and friends are ready to hear what JFK really thought about him.

Lyndon B. Johnson hated and distrusted the Kennedys. He was sure that Bobby Kennedy was bugging and wire-tapping even the places where Johnson vacationed, trying to compile evidence of sexual and other transgressions that would give JFK an excuse to pick another running mate in 1964. But does the Kennedy family really want to release tapes revealing that President Kennedy spoke of Johnson as a crass and crooked politician who, at all costs, had to be kept out of contact with senior Russians?

A lot more is involved than JFK's private views of Stevenson, Johnson, his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, or a lot of other people. Release of all these tapes carries great dangers to the reputations of the late president and his brother, Robert—unless Dan H. Fenn Jr. and others at the Kennedy Library in Boston drop a few 18-minute segments out of some of the tapes. This is possible.

The reputations of both John and Robert Kennedy have grown because of the circumstances under which the men died. This is a common development in this society. JFK is viewed as the liberal knight who improved on FDR and made Americans believe that they were on the verge of a glorious Camelot. Does anyone really want to hear tapes which reveal that JFK could out-curse Richard Nixon, was more interested in hearing about the mistress of the president of Finland than about U.S. problems in Finland, was out to muzzle the press, especially insofar as it stood in the way of his hawkish ideas regarding Indochina?

Does the Kennedy family want to let Americans, especially the Kennedy-haters, hear selected conversations suggesting that Bobby Kennedy didn't really give a damn about blacks and other minorities, and that if RFK had had his way, James Meredith would not have integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962 behind a shield of federal troops?

Aside from love of gossip, prurient interests and political opportunism, the tapes do offer Americans a chance to see how the presidency really operates.

Those tapes will reveal that Kennedy was as much a sucker for, and victim of, bogus "intelligence data" about Vietnam as was Johnson. Kennedy, therefore, was as eager to pour in more military "advisers" who would teach the South Vietnamese how to "bloody the noses" of the "aggressors from the north."

The historians will call these tapes a gold mine. Those whose reputations are tarnished will see a sewer.

If presidents insist on recording everything for history, they ought at least tell the other party that what he or she says is being recorded.

They'll get far more cautious advice. But that isn't all bad.