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# The Political Tale of the Tape: Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Their Successors

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**Abstract.** This article describes some of the putative positive and negative features of recording political decisionmaking as it occurs.

Three recent books (see below) include analyses of taped (audiotape) United States (US) Presidential decisionmaking. The authors and reviewers of these books view the tapes as quite valuable in better understanding decisionmakers; their advisers; and the decisionmaking leading to policies, programs, and actions. They also suggest there are problems in tape analysis. (1) As the ratio of what was taped to what wasn't decreases, difficulties arise in evaluating any specific tape. (2) A decisionmaker may consciously be "on" for the tape to "look good" for posterity--or future legal challenges. (3) A decisionmakers may try and "entrap" someone by attempting to induce unflattering verbal behavior.

Some reviewers even advocate taping everything and doing it openly. The results should be "under lock and key," protected from subpoena or lawsuit for an appropriate time. (Hertzberg [see below] advocated for about 40 years. Other commentators might advocate for an approximation of so-called "real time," if huge issues of security classification and political sensitivities could somehow be resolved.) Not only will there be a "complete" record of decision making, but also the notion of always talking for posterity might induce more moral, ethical, and even effective decisionmaking. Having "posterity in the room" also might induce more long-term analysis, more strategic thinking, and protect somewhat against the many pressures to deal mostly with the short-term.

Even if the political, legal, technical, and logistical problems with the above could be ironed out, there could be psychological consequences that mitigate against the policy. For the President and advisers would have a much higher public self-consciousness than they would ordinarily--and both public and private self-consciousnesses often have tangible effects. Take the President: he might be more likely to (1) articulate public rather than private aspects of the self; (2) recall public rather than private self-relevant information; (3) activate the public rather than the private "ought" self; (4) experience more conformity and anxiety and less self-esteem and motivation for risk-taking and innovation; and (5) be in touch with less consistent aspects of the private self. All of this could have significant effects on what would be discussed, how the discussion would be analyzed, and what decision would eventually be made.

So posterity might be in the room with the President and advisers. So might a different psychology with unknowable consequences. (See Agatstein, F.C., & Buchanan, D.B. (1984). Public and private self-consciousness and the recall of self-relevant information. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 10, 314-325; Hertzberg, H. (November 17, 1997). Tales of the tapes. *The New Yorker*, pp. 11-12; Nasby, W. (1996). Private and public self-consciousness and articulation of the ought self from private and public vantages. *Journal of Personality*, 64, 131-156; Nasby, W. (1989). Private and public self-consciousness and articulation of the self-schema. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 117-123; Siegrist, M. (1996). The influence of self-consciousness on the internal consistency of different scales. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 20, 115-117; Tunnell, G. (1984). The discrepancy between private and public

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selves: Public self-consciousness and its correlates. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48, 549-555.)  
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