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The Kennedy Transcripts

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, March 19—Benjamin Bradlee, executive editor of the Washington Post, was a close personal friend of President Kennedy. In "Conversations with Kennedy," a book transcribing his notes that is previewed in this month's Playboy magazine, Mr. Bradlee makes a few revelations, not all of them intentional:

On Kennedy's seduction of the press: As a Newsweek correspondent covering the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon campaign, Mr. Bradlee admits that he "wanted Kennedy to win." After his friend did win, Mr. Bradlee saw nothing improper in soliciting President Kennedy's advice—generously given—about which reporters to lure for Newsweek's Washington bureau. "If I was had," says editor Bradlee in a related context, "so be it"; not all of Newsweek's trusting readers will be so philosophical.

On Kennedy's use of language: Nothing we have read in other Presidential transcripts approaches the frequency and pungency of profanity that Mr. Bradlee unnecessarily ascribes to President Kennedy. Such lines as "they (deleted) us and we've got to try to (deleted) them," with the word I have deleted filled in, may add verisimilitude to the conversations, but are they really a contribution to history? Antedating John Dean by one full decade, Mr. Bradlee quotes President Kennedy directly as saying of steel-executive adversaries: "We're going to tuck it to them and (deleted) 'em."

On the abuse of power: Toasting Attorney General Robert Kennedy at a dinner party, the President referred to a telephone conversation with Tom Patton, president of Republic steel:

"Patton asked me, 'Why is it that all the telephones of all the steel executives in the country are being tapped?' And I told him that I thought he was being wholly unfair to the Attorney General and that I was sure that it wasn't true. And he asked me, 'Why is it that all the income-tax returns of all the steel executives in the country are being scrutinized?' And I told him that, too, was wholly unfair. . . . And then I called the Attorney General and asked him why he was tapping the telephones of all the steel executives and examining the tax returns of all the steel executives. . . . and the Attorney General told me that was wholly untrue and unfair." After what Mr. Bradlee describes as "another Stanislavsky ploy," President Kennedy added, "Of course, Patton was right."

On concern for history and tradition: When President Kennedy was told

of a rumor that his Air Force aide's girls "had taken a dip in the pool at noon. . . . It had been seen later jumping on the bed in the Lincoln Room," he directed Mrs. Kennedy to "get after" the aide, but not immediately. Mr. Bradlee found it "interesting" that the President did not question the rumor.

On two profiles in courage: President Kennedy confided to Mr. Bradlee that billionaire J. Paul Getty had paid only \$500 in income tax one year. Asked about tax reform to prevent this, the President's answer was "maybe after 1981." On another politically sensitive subject, Mr. Bradlee writes: "He said he was all for people's solving their problems by abortion and he specifically told me I could not use that for publication in Newsweek."

On insistence upon the rectitude of one's running mate: President Kennedy is quoted as saying he felt sure that

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Lyndon Johnson had not been "on the take since he was elected" Vice President. Before that, he said, "I'm not so sure."

On "hardball" campaign tactics: After quoting a Kennedy remark about Nelson Rockefeller that is unprintable here, Mr. Bradlee delicately drops a clue to the source of the vicious draft-dodger attack on Hubert Humphrey in the West Virginia primary: "It is interesting how often Kennedy referred to the war records of political opponents. He had even mentioned Eddie McCormack and Hubert Humphrey in this connection. . . ."

Nowhere in these early selections from the Kennedy transcripts is there the idealistic spirit and intellectual stimulus that we have been led to associate with the President. Deploring "kiss-and-tell journalism," Mr. Bradlee says President Kennedy approved of his record of "intimate details," but adds: "I was not convinced he knew how to write. These details might get—though I suspected Jackie did—but that's a number decade."

Think of it—only a few years to wait until the tapes and measurements of all the men in hot bathing suits who jumped on Mr. Lincoln's bed at midnight.

"Conversations with Kennedy" proves that if you are President, you do not have to install a secret taping system in order to guarantee the besmearing of your reputation. One trusted confidant who wants to write a gossip bestseller will do.

John F. Kennedy did not need a journalistic "cancer shield," he had Ben Bradlee for a friend.