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S.F. CHRONICLE - 12/27/94

The Kennedy Tapes: Privacy Betrayed

"I WANT YOU to be careful about your profanity," President John F. Kennedy told Dave Powers, a confidant, in the Oval Office one day in 1962, "because I don't want to hear your bad words coming back at me."

That puzzled Powers. According to a JFK Library oral historian, he then went to Kenneth O'Donnell, JFK's most intimate political aide, and said, "Kenny, what the hell is he talking about?" O'Donnell replied: "Well, he's got this taping system installed in there."

That nugget about the first systematic invasion of privacy by a U.S. president came up in research I did last week after the release of tape recordings by the Kennedy Library regarding the Cuban missile crisis.

In those JFK-serving tapes, two Democratic senators — Richard Russell of Georgia and J. Wil-

liam Fulbright of Arkansas — were shown to be hawks urging an all-out invasion of Cuba. They were unaware that Kennedy had pressed a button under the Cabinet table activating microphones in wall sconces behind his chair.

In a room beneath the Oval Office, a tape machine secretly recorded scores of such meetings. Kennedy was so pleased with the notion of being the only one in a meeting aware of being recorded that he extended the taping, begun in the summer of 1962, to telephone conversations. He touched a button that signaled his secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, to record on a Dictabelt the calls he selected.

The first telephone caller so taped was his wife Jacqueline. This tape was later removed from the files, along with four numbered audiotapes of official meetings that Kennedy family members and their lawyers presumably

felt showed embarrassing or illegal actions.

In the "finding aid," a Library historian writes: "That at least some items were removed cannot be doubted." What's still there? Plenty — 248 hours of meetings and 12 hours of telephone conversations.

The index shows Kennedy taped calls to Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, who had not pulled that trick on their predecessors. JFK felt the need to record a gallbladder discussion with future President Lyndon Johnson, who followed the Kennedy precedent of secret taping.

Kennedy taped Ted Sorensen about a speech and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. about the Profumo scandal. He recorded RFK aide Jack Rosenthal about a death in Mississippi, lawyer Clark Clifford about an impending Washington Post article, Senator George Smathers about press criticism of JFK and Senator Russell Long about 1964 election prospects.

Hundreds of people who spoke to the president with the reasonable expectation of privacy were betrayed. And a nation that was dismayed and infuriated at the revelation of the Nixon taping system in 1973 can see today where that sleazy business began in earnest: in 1962, at the personal direction of Kennedy. My purpose here is not to exonerate Nixon with the "everybody did it" excuse, because not every president in the tape era did it.

And Kennedy did it the careful way, selecting the occasions himself and — with a handful of exceptions, since expurgated — speaking in the knowledge that he was playing to history, unlike Nixon, who let a voice-activated system record his profanities, slurs and abuse of power.

The purpose of my late-hitting harangue is to underscore the

evil of electronic eavesdropping. The 260 hours of the Kennedy tapes are a reminder that we need new laws to protect us from ever more sophisticated intrusions on our privacy.

Kennedy's precedent-setting actions were rooted in mistrust of loyal colleagues and the absence of an ethical compass. He probably rationalized this systematic wrong as being "for history." But it backfired; his secret taping impugns his character far more than any peccadillo. Life is not always unfair.

N.Y. Times Service