

Pierre Salinger

Post 5/31/74

JFK's White House:

'I'm the President'

How would John Kennedy have sounded to the American people if a tape recorder had been at work 24 hours a day during the 1,000 days of his Presidency? That's a question I've been asked to answer every day since the Nixon tapes were made public.

It is a difficult question to answer without seeming to be self-serving or hypocritical.

There would have been some "expletives deleted." Far fewer than appear in the Nixon transcript, but President Kennedy was not above using a little profanity to illustrate or underline a point.

There would have been some "characterizations deleted." President Kennedy knew who his political enemies were (he did not need to keep a list) and on at least one occasion I heard him call Richard Nixon a "characterization and expletive deleted."

But a transcript of a Presidential conversation from the Kennedy White House would not have needed the initial "P" in front of the quotations of the President.

First: I never heard anyone address John Kennedy as anything other than Mr. President or Sir. There was a feeling of reverence for the institution of the Presidency on the part of everyone who entered the Oval Office during that administration. That reverence for the Presidency was understood by everyone including the President, himself.

That is not to say there was anything monarchical about the atmosphere in the President's office. It was relaxed. You didn't have to spend your time with the President standing at attention. There were jokes and idle chatter, as well as discussion of serious business. But you had the feeling, as Harry Truman expressed it, that you were in a place that the people of the United States had "loaned" you for awhile.

Second: There was never any doubt who was in charge. Sometimes, as you read the Nixon transcripts, you get the feeling that the President of the United States wasn't even in the room while all this discussion was going on, even if P was. I will not pretend that every meeting, every problem confronted ended up with a crisp and precise solution. Politics sometimes entails putting off decision. But Presi-

Leaving aside their special relevance to an investigation of Watergate crimes and improprieties, President Nixon's tape transcripts have provided a unique glimpse of the character of the President and the men around him, and of their way of transacting business. Today, in the second of a series of articles by associates (devoted partisans all) of former Presidents, former White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger reminisces about the ambiance in the Kennedy White House.

dent Kennedy was in charge all the time. You could argue with him, you could try to persuade him, but you didn't interrupt him by saying "hey you."

One of the major differences of the Kennedy White House was that you didn't have a praetorian guard outside his door putting him off from access to discussion. Kenneth O'Donnell, the appointments secretary, who guarded one door, was a tough protector of the President's time, but if you had a need to see the President, you saw him. Mrs. Evelyn Lincoln, the President's secretary, who guarded the other door, was like a sieve. The result was that the President was in communication with the outside world and, for a President, that is a prime requirement.

As to President Kennedy's relations with the press, there were days when he picked up a paper and hated what he read — and said so in very colorful language. He would frequently order me to remonstrate with this or that reporter, generally ignoring the reporter, knowing that the next day the President would agree with the wisdom of never having made the call. He occasionally called reporters himself, but I consider that a healthy outlet for a President, and infinitely better than sulking in the corner vowing revenge. And finally, the President understood one great truth about the relationship between the Presidency and the press

— and that is that they fundamentally have to be adversaries. You can try to persuade them that you are doing the right thing, but you can't expect them to become a cheering section or another branch of government.

But probably the greatest difference in listening to Kennedy tapes would have been the realization that the President was able to step back and look at himself with a critical eye. He never took himself too seriously. He knew he was not infallible. And he knew that when he asked for the job in the first place, he inherited its responsibilities and its heartaches as well as its prerogatives and its power.

The angriest John Kennedy I ever



saw was after the Bay of Pigs when he heard that a member of his Cabinet had had a background press conference relieving the President of all blame for the disaster and trying to pin the responsibility on the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA.

"Call that (expletive deleted)," he told me "and tell him to shut his mouth. I'm the President and I'm responsible for any errors of this administration."

He made a public declaration to that effect and two weeks later the Gallup Poll showed he had an 83 per cent approval rating, the highest of his Presidency. "I hope I don't have to keep on making mistakes like that one to keep my popularity up," he told me grimly.

No human being on this earth could permit himself to be taped over a long period of time, publish those tapes and not have said something that offended people. That is true of John Kennedy as well as anyone.

But mixed in with the rough and tumble business of politics, what I remember most about what was said in the Kennedy White House was idealism, humor, a sense of purpose and a will to assume the burdens of leadership.

I almost wish we had had a tape recorder present. It would at least have put a lie to the worst canard of them all — "that politics has always been the same."

Monday: Emmet John Hughes on President Eisenhower.