

David Epstein

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Presidential Histories

The first known effort at recording every presidential utterance for the sake of history appears to be a failure, yet the effort was consistent with the ever-expanding enterprise to preserve papers and memorabilia touching upon every facet of a President's life. Franklin D. Roosevelt, an inveterate collector, gave impetus to this process by establishing the first presidential library and each successor has faithfully followed, utilizing technology to expand the bounds of recordation.

The purported purpose of the White House tapes was to preserve a verbatim record of the President's conversations. But President Nixon, as of this moment the only judge as to the historical value of these tapes, has stated, "... as in any verbatim recording of informal conversations, they (the tapes) contain comments that persons with different perspectives and motivations would inevitably interpret in different ways."

Rep. Gerald Ford (R-Mich.), has pointed out that the tapes reflect continuous conversations with as many as 10 persons and references to Watergate cover only a small part of any given conversation. He echoes the assertion that the transcript is ambiguous in ascertaining anyone's role in the affair.

Quite apart from Watergate and the issues regarding the release of specific portions to either confirm or deny the John Dean accusations, the question remains whether a verbatim record is necessary or desirable to serve the needs of history, and, indeed, whether the incessant efforts to collect materials regarding a particular President for preservation in a library has not exceeded rational needs.

Probably Mr. Nixon as historian is right: verbatim transcripts of bits and pieces of conversation, occurring in various places and with different participants, do not give a clear understanding of the particular roles of individuals, especially where identification of an individual voice is difficult and considering that the machine records only parts of a conversation when several persons are commenting simultaneously.

Thus, imagine the distortion which would affect a 21st century historian relying only on the White House tapes to reconstruct the most significant

events of the Nixon administration between June 1972 and April 1973. First, John Mitchell, according to his testimony, decided not even to mention Watergate for the President's own good during meetings with Mr. Nixon. Second, Mr. Nixon has said that the verbatim transcripts are misleading "and could be accurately understood or interpreted only by reference to an enormous number of other documents and tapes . . ." If the select committee with its staff and computer assistance could not be entrusted to under-

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stand the tapes then certainly a lone historian, unless he devotes a lifetime will not.

Technology affects the preservation process for each President. The Eisenhower Library has 17 million pieces of paper covering the career of a man who was a world leader for more than 20 years and general of the greatest armada in history, while the Kennedy Library, due in large measure to the Xerox machine and the growth of the White House staff, has 15 million pieces of paper for the 1,000 days of its existence; and the LBJ Library has 32 million pieces of paper, among which are 500,000 photographs, many the product of a single photographer whose primary function was to capture continuously the LBJ image and establish this extraordinary album.

Today technology offers the possibility for total recordation of every instant in a President's life: tape recorders for every utterance; photocopying machines for every document; film and video cassettes for every movement. At the time of inauguration the President, in addition to acquiring a Secret Service bodyguard, could also be wired not only for sound but also with sensors to record vital body functions: blood pressure, respiration, and pulse, much like the astronauts, so as to know how the President responded when confronted with major decisions. Voices activated switches and verbatim recording is part of a logical progression in the technology of presidential history.

Regardless of technological feasibility,

should every instant of a President's life and of those persons remotely connected be preserved in excruciating detail? At a point, the process of recording affects the very act performed, much like the tourist who misses the trip because of an obsession to photograph the family in front of each monument. A verbatim transcript, as every trial lawyer knows, is an inhibition on frank discussion because of the importance of speaking for the record. The chance remark of an aide, spoken without concern for the record, may better serve the President than a subsequent record.

Apparently, as Watergate testimony suggests, the awe ascribed to the presidential office is such that persons do not raise matters unless invited or questioned. The protocol surrounding monarchies is similar and the general demise of that institution may have resulted from the failure of the courtier or subject to make the chance comment, rambling observation, or suggest the farfetched thought which would have made the kingdom more understandable to the King. Freer interchanges with Presidents will undoubtedly occur if less is on the record rather than more. The significance of presidential discussions will not be lessened even if the exquisite precision of historical detail suffers. There is little legislative history for the Ten Commandments.

Finally, in attempting to embalm and preserve every moment of every President, we are ascribing a Pharaonic significance to the man and the office, out of all proportion to the constitutional design which merely created a Chief Executive.

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