

# Window Into the White House

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**Have you ever wanted to eavesdrop** on American presidents as they deliberate, agonize, debate, discuss, or reflect on key policy issues? An exciting online resource, [www.whitehousetapes.org](http://www.whitehousetapes.org), makes this possible. From 1940–1973, six presidents (from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Richard M. Nixon) secretly taped almost 5,000 hours of conversations, including telephone calls, meetings, and memoirs. Hosted and maintained by the Presidential Recordings Program at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs, [whitehousetapes.org](http://whitehousetapes.org) offers free access to presidential recordings covering myriad topics that range from the significant—World War II, the Cold War, the Space Race, the War on Poverty, the Civil Rights Movement, the Cuban Missile Crisis—to the mundane—President Lyndon B. Johnson ordering some custom-made pants. All presidential recordings, declassified and released by the respective presidential libraries, are available on the website. In addition, the site offers links to numerous recordings that the Miller Center has augmented to include a scrolling transcript with the audio, so teachers and students can both see and hear the conversation as it plays (see Figure 1). Each of these recordings provides an introduction that details contextual information such as the date, topic and participants, as well as the type of recording (e.g., telephone conversation, meeting, or memoir).

Designed for use by the research and teaching communities, [whitehousetapes.org](http://whitehousetapes.org) provides teachers and students the opportunity to learn more about how American presidents have made decisions and exercised leadership during pivotal moments in United States history.<sup>1</sup> These fascinating historical sources offer students the opportunity to explore the presidency beyond the pages of the textbook. They practice key historical thinking skills as they listen, analyze, and discuss the revealing conversations that often provide conflicting viewpoints on events in history. In this article, we highlight the resources available on this site for teaching about a topic that continues to be both controversial and extremely relevant to the current political debate: the Vietnam War.

## The Vietnam Recordings

The website’s Vietnam tapes include conversations from the administrations of presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon, with the earliest stemming from 1962—the year Kennedy instituted his taping system—to the spring of 1973, when Nixon dismantled his own taping operation. These tapes capture some of the key moments in presidential decision making about the war, from the build-up of the U.S. advisory mission to the final



Figure 1.



Bill Cowell edits an original tape from the Nixon White House at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington in this undated photo. For two decades, President Nixon's White House tapes have been preserved and protected in a cold storage vault at the National Archives.

(AP Photo/National Archives)

withdrawal of American troops. These tapes highlight, as no other document can, the complexity of the challenge confronting these statesmen.

The Vietnam recordings are particularly helpful in illuminating various policymaking dynamics, including the role of presidential advisers, tensions between the executive and legislative branches of government, the role of electoral politics, and the challenges of managing the media. Students can hear Kennedy ruminating on topics such as the critical reporting of the American press corps in Vietnam, the possibility of withdrawing U.S. troops, and America's involvement in the overthrow of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. President Johnson also comes alive in these recordings as listeners hear him "work over" members of Congress, discuss the pros and cons of escalating the war, and anguish over the wisdom of committing American blood and treasure. Materials from the Nixon recordings are likewise illuminating, as they detail the 37th president's stormy

relationship with the media, his own thoughts on escalating and de-escalating American involvement in Vietnam, and the political calculus that underlay his endgame for the war.

Collectively, these tapes offer a unique window into a period in American history that is perhaps unparalleled in its array of personalities, political change, and drama. They cover scenes from the massive transformation of American life that resulted not only from Vietnam, but from the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and the political realignment of the country. These tapes therefore provide a portrait of three politicians, at the height of their political powers, as they strove to shape both the country and the world around them. But they do so by humanizing the president and the presidency—a role and an office too frequently characterized by mythology—revealing the messy business of crafting national policy and the personal qualities of those who make it.

## The Vietnam Recordings and the Classroom

To facilitate use of this site by teachers and their students, Marc Selterstone, a historian and assistant professor at the Miller Center, has constructed a Digital Classroom Initiative (DCI) at [www.whitehousetapes.org/classroom](http://www.whitehousetapes.org/classroom) (see Figure 2). The "topics" link on the menu offers visitors a variety of recordings organized into



Figure 2.

broad historical themes including Civil Rights; the Economy; Foreign Policy & National Security; Law; Politics; Space;

the War on Poverty; and Presidents: the Human Dimension. To access resources on Vietnam, click on “Foreign Policy & National Security” and then select “Vietnam.” The first section of the site offers a series of virtual exhibits that explore different aspects of the Vietnam War. “The Great What If” explores a fascinating question: What if President John F. Kennedy had lived out his term—would he have made good on an expressed desire to withdraw American troops from Vietnam? The exhibit includes a series of conversations over the course of October 2 through October 5, 1963, in which Kennedy and his advisers debate the merits of withdrawing the bulk of American troops from Vietnam by the end of 1965. It also provides related resources, including articles and other relevant recordings.

Another exhibit, “The Gulf of Tonkin, 1964,” explores the recordings that capture Johnson and his advisers discussing the Tonkin Gulf Incident of 1964. These tapes reveal the contradictory and incomplete reports flowing into Washington, as well as Johnson’s own doubt about the veracity of the intelligence he was receiving prior to passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The exhibit includes excerpts from LBJ’s presidential diary around the time of the event, offering insight into the multiple issues and crises facing Johnson on a day-to-day basis.

Additional resources on Vietnam are also available via the “Vietnam” link. Visitors can listen to conversations covering the Wheeler Mission of January 1963, press coverage of the war, the Diem Coup of November 1963, the escalation of American military involvement, the impact of the war at home, and President Nixon’s plan for ensuring that a “decent interval” existed between a U.S. withdrawal and the fall of Saigon. These resources, as well as the virtual exhibits, all lend themselves to classroom use.

### Strategies for Classroom Use

Whitehousetapes.org offers a wonderful opportunity to teach students how to think about the recordings—as both a historical source and as a means of

learning more about the policymaking and personalities of presidents. The DCI site provides suggestions for classroom use through content-specific lessons and instructional activities. Teachers can access these resources by clicking on the “Classroom” link on the front page or by scrolling to the bottom of each subject-specific page.

### Sound Recording Analysis: Pre-Post-During Listening Activities

Another resource for teachers interested in using recordings in the classroom is the “Sound Recording Analysis Worksheet” available on the National Archives website ([www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/sound\\_recording\\_analysis\\_worksheet.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/sound_recording_analysis_worksheet.pdf)). This worksheet emphasizes the importance of pre-listening, during-listening, and post-listening strategies, and the recordings on this site raise particular questions and issues to consider.

*Pre-listening:* Before listening to a presidential recording, it is important to ensure that students have the requisite background knowledge so that they are aware of (a) the historical context of each recording and (b) the roles and responsibilities of the people featured in the recordings. The contexts surrounding each recording are often quite complex. Presidents rarely have the luxury of dealing with one event at a time; for example, at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, Johnson was also contending with a race riot in New Jersey and the discovery of the bodies of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. To establish context, students can identify the date and time of the recording, use the links to the presidential diaries to investigate other meetings and events on the president’s calendar and think about the host of issues facing the president on that date and time in history. The online resource [presidentialtimeline.org](http://presidentialtimeline.org) offers a visual timeline that helps contextualize events during a particular presidency.

The recordings often feature many names—people either directly involved in the conversation or mentioned during the recording. For example, in a dictated memoir on the South Vietnamese coup

and the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, Kennedy refers to the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Maxwell Taylor; Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Director of Central Intelligence John McCone, Ambassador to Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.; Undersecretary of State Averell Harriman, Undersecretary of State George Ball; Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman; National Security Council aide Michael Forrestal; and the head of the U.S. military assistance command, Vietnam, General Paul Harkins. Basic background information on those mentioned or involved in the conversation can add richness to the listening experience. A useful source for this information is the website [www.americanpresident.org](http://www.americanpresident.org) (also maintained by the Miller Center), which provides in-depth background on each president, a list of key figures in each administration, and links to presidential speeches and other resources. Similarly, many recordings reference historical events that will need to be identified and defined.

*During-Listening:* The web-based “transcript + audio” feature makes it easy to simultaneously read and hear the conversation. The scrolling transcript highlights the sentence as it becomes audible, and the recording can be paused at any time. The audio offers the listener a window into the emotions of the president; while listening, students can think about the mood, tone, and language heard in the recording. There might be surprises. For example, in the dictated memoir mentioned earlier, President Kennedy, less than three weeks before his own assassination, is reflecting on the murder and overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. While Kennedy was recording, his children, John John (aged 3) and Caroline (aged 6) join their father for a few moments. Kennedy laughingly asks his children to speak into the recorder; we hear John John talking about the seasons, and Caroline giggling while saying “your horses.” They leave, and Kennedy returns to his reflection. The tone and

the mood during this recording change abruptly—from anguish and thoughtfulness, to that of a loving father, and back to that of a reflective leader. Asking students to listen carefully to these nuances adds a human element to our presidents and influences how we think about what we hear.

*Post-Listening:* After summarizing the key points and content of the recording, a number of additional questions can be considered, including:

**What is the purpose of this recording?**

**What is the motive behind the recording—in other words, why is this president recording himself?**

**Who is the audience for this recording?**

**What do we learn about the president’s approach to policymaking?**

**What do we learn about the personality, the human component, of the president?**

If the recording addresses a specific decision, additional questions could include:

**What are the problems or issues under discussion?**

**What do the various people in this conversation appear to value? What evidence do you have to support this?**

**What is the decision that is made? Why does the group come to this decision?**

**What are the alternative actions or decisions that are possible? What are possible consequences of each alternative?**

**If you were one of the people in the recording, what would you decide? Why?**

Additional content-specific questions assist students in not only gaining a

deeper understanding of the content, but in analyzing the historical perspectives presented in each source. Also, graphic organizers such as a persuasion map, a time/order chart, or a timeline (see [www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/](http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/)) could facilitate discussion and comprehension of each recording.

### **Example: LBJ and the Logic of Escalation**

On July 2, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech in Petersburg, Virginia, to a chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. According to *The New York Times*, King declared that “the war in Vietnam must be stopped” and called for a “a negotiated settlement even with the Vietcong.” President Johnson, about to call up 100,000 American soldiers to go to Vietnam, did not appreciate these comments. In a telephone conversation on July 7, 1965, King and Johnson spend the first two-thirds of the call discussing the voting rights bill pending before Congress. King raises the issue of the Petersburg matter towards the end of the call and, in response, Johnson offers a detailed rationale for his war-fighting strategy. He highlights the risks of pulling out, as well as those for getting in too deeply.<sup>2</sup>

*Pre-Listening:* Before listening to this recording, it is important for students to understand the context of the time period including the challenges facing Johnson in Vietnam as well as his work to pass the voting rights bill in Congress. Also, in the recording, Johnson makes many references to “hot spots” in the Cold War (such as the Philippines, Formosa, Greece, Turkey, Iran, China) and ideas (domino theory, containment). Additionally, it is useful for students to have some background on Johnson’s relationship with King and some understanding of how the two leaders differed in their views toward escalation in Vietnam. Students could compare and contrast King and Johnson’s positions using a Venn Diagram ([www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/venn.pdf](http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/venn.pdf)).

*During-Listening:* The recording captures Johnson’s rationale for escala-

tion. Students can focus on the reasons Johnson lists for escalating the war, as well as pay attention to his tone and mood. Johnson sounds defensive but never ceases to act as a lobbyist for his position. He is actively advocating his perspective to King. The clip also reveals Johnson’s genuine self-doubt as he continues to make decisions about Vietnam.

*Post-Listening:* After discussing questions related to the recording (purpose, motive, audience) the class can discuss broader questions about the Vietnam policy as part of the Cold War. It can also compare and contrast this recording with others Johnson made on the same topic, and even explore the manner in which Kennedy and Nixon considered the related, if slightly different, challenges they faced in Southeast Asia. Further exploration of Johnson’s rationale might touch on the power of the “Munich” metaphor or the dangers of appeasement, fears harbored by Democrats of reliving the “loss of China” debate, and the manner in which Johnson depicts U.S. involvement in Vietnam as central to the continuing Cold War.

### **Sound Recordings and Historical Inquiry**

The audio recordings also lend themselves for use in student-centered research activities. The **NCSS Curriculum Standard 10 Time, Continuity, and Change**, emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to “systematically employ processes of critical historical inquiry to reconstruct and reinterpret the past, such as using a variety of sources and checking their credibility, validating and weighing evidence for claims, and searching for causality.”<sup>3</sup> The site “Historical Inquiry: Scaffolding Wise Practices in the History Classroom” ([www.historical-inquiry.com](http://www.historical-inquiry.com)), created by Peter Doolittle, David Hicks and Tom Ewing, offers an excellent resource for teaching students how to develop the capacity to engage in meaningful historical inquiry.<sup>4</sup> They offer a strategy, SCIM-C, which can teach students to engage in the “doing” of history and can scaffold how students learn how to conduct historical inquiry.

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The SCIM-C approach asks students to summarize, contextualize, infer, monitor and corroborate historical sources. Within each of these steps there are four additional analyzing questions (see [www.historicalinquiry.com/scim/index.cfm](http://www.historicalinquiry.com/scim/index.cfm)). Teachers could employ the SCIM-C model when using individual audio recordings alone, or as part of a larger historical inquiry project. The audio recordings could also be used to generate specific historical questions for students to research.

### Example: JFK and “The Great What If”

As mentioned earlier, the site includes a virtual exhibit entitled “The Great What If,” an exhibit that explores whether, if he had lived out his term, President Kennedy would have withdrawn troops from Vietnam. The exhibit includes links to three specific conversations that address the issue of troop withdrawal. The questions posed in the exhibit could serve as an excellent issue for students to explore in class—that is, according to available evidence, “What if President John F. Kennedy had not been cut down by an assassin’s bullet and had lived out his term—and perhaps a subsequent one—as president of the United States? Would he have made good on an expressed desire to withdraw America troops from Vietnam and turn the fighting over to the South Vietnamese?” In other words, what did Kennedy plan to do in Vietnam? What evidence is there for our conclusions? How has our knowledge of Kennedy’s decision making changed over time?

Students could work individually or in small groups to investigate this issue. The audio recordings could serve as the first step in the students’ historical research. They could summarize the content offered in the tapes and then work to corroborate (or challenge) the information, using the SCIM-C model on all historical sources. Sources could include the following:

- Related audio clips (JFK Withdrawing 1,000 Troops from Vietnam, Parts I, II, II) [tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/exhibits/vietnam\\_withdrawal/](http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/exhibits/vietnam_withdrawal/)
- *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Documents 166 through 184 (available via the Vietnam page on the Digital Classroom Initiative).
- Fredrik Logevall’s “Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been,” in *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited*, ed. Mark J. White (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 19-62, which maintains that Kennedy might well have removed troops from Vietnam, but probably not until after the 1964 election.
- Excerpts from Howard Jones’s *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), a book-length account of Kennedy’s approach to Vietnam.
- Chapter 5 of Gareth Porter’s *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), which highlights Kennedy’s struggles with his advisers over the nature of the U.S. military commitment to Vietnam.
- James Galbraith’s, “Exit Strategy,” in the *Boston Review* (available via the Vietnam Page on the Digital Classroom Initiative). This article offers a concise version of the argument that Kennedy was committed to removing U.S. troops from Vietnam.

- Marc Selverstone's op-ed in the *Boston Globe* on March 9, 2006 (available via the Vietnam page on the Digital Classroom Initiative). This article provides background information about Kennedy's decision making in regards to Vietnam and examines the "what if" question.
- Excerpts from "An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963." Historian Dallek asserts that newly available documents indicate that Kennedy was planning to wind down troop commitments.
- Photographs and other historical evidence from the National Archives ([www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov)), the Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)), and the JFK Presidential Library ([www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org)).

Students could present their findings and draw connections between Vietnam and the present-day conversations related to troop withdrawals (and increases) in the current war in Iraq.

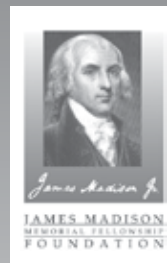
## Conclusion

The American public often wonders what goes on in the White House and how domestic and foreign policy are made. [Whitehousetapes.org](http://Whitehousetapes.org) provides an incredible window into the policy-making and personalities of six presidents as they negotiate complex and challenging events in our history. The site offers teachers invaluable historical sources that can enrich lessons on Vietnam (and many other topics) and assist in connecting key issues in the past to current problems facing our leaders today. Readily available to all, this digital resource opens up opportunities for students and teachers to study political history and political decision making during a tumultuous time. 📖

## Notes

1. Marc J. Selverstone, "Policy in the Making: A Look Inside the White House at War," *Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (October 2004): 63-65.
2. Kent Germany, Guian McKee, and Marc Selverstone, "LBJ and the Logic of Escalation" [tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/clips/1965\\_0707\\_king/](http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/clips/1965_0707_king/).
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994), 113.
4. Peter Doolittle, David Hicks, and Tom Ewing, "Introduction: The Doing of History" [www.historicalinquiry.com](http://www.historicalinquiry.com).

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