

Preface

SOMETIME AFTER 9:00 A.M. on the morning of Tuesday, October 16, 1962, President John F. Kennedy's top aides received an urgent message: the president wanted them to drop their other appointments and report to the Cabinet Room of the White House for an urgent meeting. By the time they arrived, all were surely aware of the reason for the sudden summons: a U-2 spy plane, flying high (and undetected) over Cuba, had photographed Soviet nuclear missiles on the island, missiles that the president had declared, only the month before, would never be tolerated, and that Soviet Premier Khrushchev had promised would never be emplaced. Yet promises notwithstanding, there the missiles were, and with very little effort at concealment.

Thus began the most precarious days of the Cold War, when the United States and USSR squared off over the presence of history's most dangerous weapons on a sugar-exporting island country roughly the size of Pennsylvania, ninety miles from the tip of Florida.

Forests have been felled to supply the pages of books about the crisis, and vats of ink emptied making that very observation, so we have to ask the requisite question: Is there anything new to be said about these events? If the answer has been, time and again, yes, the reason is that new information about the crisis periodically gets released, as records become declassified and archives are opened up to journalists and scholars. And not just documents: in recent years extraordinary recordings of the deliberations of Kennedy's circle (the so-called ExComm), secretly made by Kennedy himself, have been released, providing us with an unprecedented (and, most likely, never-to-be-matched) view of a crisis of world-historical importance from the perspective of those at the helm, at least on the near side of the Iron Curtain.

These recordings are this book's *raison d'être*, the explanation for why a student of conversation (among other things) would immerse himself in Cold War history and risk the ire of established scholars. This book is about those tapes, and what they tell us about the role of talk in the decision-making process. My contention is that, contrary to most accounts, Kennedy's decisions were not the product of the clash of factions (e.g., hawks versus doves), or the haggling of parochially minded appointees, or a clear-sighted assessment of the risks, and least of all of a president forcing his will on submissive advisers. Rather, Kennedy's decisions were the outcome of talk about possible futures conducted pursuant to the rules, procedures, and vicissitudes of talk generally—related to how we ask and answer questions, tell stories, interrupt one another, justify our actions, and soft-pedal disagreement—conducted against the backdrop of

an impatient world that sometimes let talk run its course and sometimes cut it short.

The timing of this book is unintentionally serendipitous. October 2012 marks the fifty-year anniversary of the crisis, a time that will no doubt invite much reflection about an era before cell phones and the Internet, but well into the period in which humans could kill one another en masse, with the push of a button and the turn of a key. But another, more poignant and personal milestone has been marked as well. While I was working on this book on Halloween night of 2010, struggling to compose an entire sentence between intrusions from neighborhood children, I learned of the death of Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's former speech writer and (as I quickly confirmed) the last living member of the ExComm. (Robert McNamara had died the year before.) This was a disconcerting realization, both because I had been listening to their voices continuously for two years, and because I am around the age of the youngest of the ExComm members at the time of the crisis: Robert McNamara was forty-six, Ted Sorensen was forty-four, McGeorge Bundy was forty-three, and Robert Kennedy was not yet thirty-seven. Thus the men with whom I have recently spent so much of my time, some of them not much older than me (and one younger), are now gone, though thanks to Kennedy's hidden microphones it will always be possible to reenter the Cabinet Room and to listen in on their tense, searching, and occasionally humorous discussions.

This brings me to a more scholarly point. Most qualitative sociology, once written up, comes with an implicit injunction: trust me. That is because while years of ethnography and/or interviewing regularly generate mountains of transcripts and notes (or, these days, their digital counterparts), what ends up in books and articles is, by necessity, tremendously distilled, and rarely if ever are readers given access to the raw data; consequently, they have no choice but to trust that the author's distillation is a faithful one. And the situation really is not all that different in quantitative research, for although data are regularly made publicly available, there is rarely any way to track down the original respondents (in the case of survey data) so as to determine how well a survey measured what it was supposed to. Thus, as before, readers have no way of judging the accuracy of that representation, short of assuming the time and expense of a study of their own.

In this respect, this book is very different, for the audio recordings on which it is based are readily available to anyone with a computer and Internet connection. Further, whenever I quote from them, which is often, I provide the information that the reader will need to find the associated audio fragment in a matter of minutes. This allows for a level of reader engagement with the original data that is almost never possible, akin to being able to shadow an ethnographer or pose additional questions to interview or survey respondents. It will also facilitate further scholarly analysis, of which there is much more to be done. After all, students of interaction can easily spend years analyzing just

a few hours of conversation (and sometimes much less), whereas the ExComm recordings alone sum to more than twenty hours. Thus I say: let the discussion begin.

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This book was mostly researched and written over an intensive two-year period, which was only possible because I had the right people giving me the right input just when it was needed. Tukufu Zuberi, as chair of the Sociology Department at the University of Pennsylvania, kicked this book into high gear in June 2010, magically curing me of the delusion that it could not be written until I had explored every sociolinguistic and sociological angle. (Had I followed that impulse its release might have corresponded to the crisis's hundredth-year anniversary.) And then, days later, Eric Schwartz, of Princeton University Press, gave the book idea just the reception it needed and followed that up with successive waves of encouragement, affirmation, and later, a much-needed extension.

The manuscript was read in its entirety by several individuals who provided invaluable comments, including Ann Mische (who read it several times), Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Kwai Ng, John Heritage, and two anonymous Princeton University Press reviewers. Kwai and John deserve special mention for volunteering to read it on the spur of the moment at the 2010 American Sociological Association conference in Atlanta, and then actually doing so (the unfulfilled promise to read being standard practice in academe), though I hadn't previously known John and had only met Kwai once.

Several other people commented on portions of the book, including Melissa Wilde and four anonymous reviewers for the *American Journal of Sociology*. I am also grateful to colloquium and conference audiences at the University of Pennsylvania (especially Annette Lareau and Carolyn Chernoff), SUNY Stony Brook (especially Ivan Chase), the University of Chicago Booth School of Business (especially John Padgett and Ronald Burt), the Stanford University Graduate School of Business (especially William Ocasio and Jonathan Bendor), and the 2010 and 2011 American Sociological Association meetings in Atlanta and Las Vegas (especially John Heritage, Douglas Maynard, and Geoffrey Raymond). Finally, the contents of this book were a constant source of lively discussion in a course on social interaction that I cotaught with Randall Collins in fall of 2010. My thanks to all of the students for their precocious insights into many of the excerpts, and most of all to Randy, for vigorously pushing his Durkheimian perspective while making so much room in the course for my own. I trust the students were not too put off by the evident lack of dramaturgical coordination.

A succession of research assistants helped with the data coding behind the quantitative analysis in chapter 3, including Sarah Wanenchak (née Phipps), Sara Braun, and Matthew Fox. Matt also helped with the transcribing and

general data management, and read through the entire manuscript for typos, and has the additional distinction of having offered to work for free (though it didn't come to that). Sarah's undergraduate thesis on collaborative online fiction, and Matt's M.A. thesis on jury deliberations, were developed in symbiosis with this book, I believe to everyone's benefit.

While I became an avid student of the most recent and authoritative scholarship on the Cuban missile crisis, every so often what I really needed was a living person to help me fill in missing details. Philip Zelikow was that person, responding at length to a succession of questions, and almost always immediately, including during the period when (as former executive director of the 9/11 Commission) he was being hounded by the media following the death of Osama bin Laden. For that, and for his role in the tremendous project of getting the recordings transcribed and released, I am truly grateful.

Now let me back up several years. Eric Leifer and Harrison White piqued my interest in social interaction and language when I was a graduate student at Columbia but left it to me to answer the question as to why, and when, talk actually matters. Harrison also taught me to be suspicious of easy answers, especially involving rationality, and gave me license to look to the natural sciences for analogies, even as I am always asking, what would my friend Duncan Watts say about this one? And for professional support of many kinds, sometimes going back more than a few years, I am indebted to Peter Bearman, Charles Bosk, Aaron Cicourel, and Jerry Jacobs.

Closer to home now, my parents, Richard and Barbara Gibson, and brother, Craig, have for years been unwaveringly supportive of my career, and patient with the inconvenient demands that that has placed on my time (particularly during what were supposed to be family vacations). My partner, Ann Mische, has been a pillar of emotional and intellectual support, and her interest in the "sociology of the future" provided no small part of the inspiration for this book. Finally, I thank our son Jeremy, too young to read most of the words in this book (at least when they were originally set down on paper), but (almost) unfailingly patient when Dad needed to dedicate the first thirty minutes of every morning to his book. (In that exigency was born his love of drawing.) I made it up to him on other occasions, however, and if this book was delayed by the time I've spent with him, I have no regrets. To Ann and Jeremy, this book is lovingly dedicated.

Portions of chapter 1, and most of chapter 4, were previously published in the *American Journal of Sociology*.¹ The bulk of chapter 2, and a portion of chapter 3, previously appeared in *Qualitative Sociology*.² Both are reprinted with permission.