

**Presidential Tapes and Historical Interpretation:
RAH on *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes***

*The Kennedy Assassination Tapes:
The White House Conversations of
Lyndon B. Johnson Regarding the Assassination,
the Warren Commission, and the Aftermath*

By Max Holland
Alfred A. Knopf. 453 pp. \$26.95

By Sheldon M. Stern

Max Holland's book is important for two key reasons. First, it increases our understanding of the impact and legacy of one of the most searing events of twentieth-century American history: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. second, the book raises significant questions about listening to and transcribing presidential tapes. Any scholarly assessment of this book that fails to address these methodological issues would be, at best, incomplete, or at worst, pointless.

Holland's work proves, in a level of detail never before possible, that Lyndon Baines Johnson's succession to the presidency on November 22, 1963, was the most traumatic in American history—more so than earlier presidential assassinations (1865, 1881, and 1901) because television permitted the American people and the world to become virtual participants in the event. An American born in 1850 could, by age 51, personally remember the assassinations of three presidents. But, by 1963, relatively few Americans could recall the shooting of William McKinley and the elaborate protection of the president seemed to rule out another assassination.

Fortunately for historians, beginning on the evening of the day he took the presidential oath in Texas, Lyndon Johnson recorded nearly all his telephone conversations. It is almost impossible to communicate, in mere words, the degree to which these tapes capture LBJ's persona and leadership skills. Many historians have tried, for example, to describe the legendary "Johnson treatment." But, Holland's transcription of these tapes makes it possible to be a virtual ear-witness to that phenomenon. The "treatment" could include flattery, guile, humor, appeals to self-sacrifice and patriotism, deceit, arm-twisting, and intimidation, but ultimately relied on LBJ's instinctive understanding of human nature. Johnson recognized that politics was first and foremost a living network of human relationships. He embodied, a former aide recalled, "the finest quality of a politician. It was a sense of the direction of political power. . . . He did not merely content

himself by getting ahead of those forces. He mastered the art of directing them.”^[1]

These insights are hardly new: biographers Robert Dallek and Robert Caro have plumbed the depths of Johnson’s character, and historian Michael Beschloss has already transcribed and annotated many of the LBJ tapes. Max Holland, however, makes a unique contribution by focusing exclusively on the Johnson tapes relating to the JFK assassination—demonstrating conclusively, and tragically, that LBJ was never able to put behind him the terrible circumstances of his accession to the presidency. Johnson’s inability to escape that legacy began within hours of the deadly shots in Dallas. LBJ’s relationship with Robert Kennedy—who had enjoyed unique status in his brother’s administration—had been a festering sore since RFK had humiliated Johnson by trying to reverse JFK’s decision to select the proud Texan as his running mate in 1960. LBJ had faded into the background during the Kennedy era, convinced that he did not have the respect of many JFK intimates. A devastating joke circulating in Washington in the summer of 1963, that eventually got back to Johnson himself, said it all: “Lyndon who?”

On the evening of November 22, 1963, RFK boarded *Air Force One*, which had carried his slain brother’s body back to Washington, and reportedly ignored the new president as he hurried to comfort Jacqueline Kennedy. Stories soon circulated that LBJ had rushed to take the oath in Texas against RFK’s wishes and had decided to immediately occupy the Oval Office. Johnson became convinced that RFK and Kennedy loyalists had spread these stories because they would always regard him, in Holland’s words, as “an unworthy successor if not a pretender.” Johnson’s first Cabinet meeting the next day seemed to prove the point: RFK arrived late (LBJ believed intentionally) and reportedly sat “wordlessly throughout the twenty-five minute meeting, brooding and listless.” Later that day Johnson observed bitterly, “What can I do? I do not want to get into a fight with the Kennedy family. . . . [T]he aura of Kennedy is important to all of us.” LBJ continued to worry about what he perceived as RFK’s efforts to undermine his legitimacy as president. Days later a severely depressed Kennedy behaved with “indifference bordering on hostility” at a meeting with Johnson that failed completely to bridge their mutual “misunderstandings” (pp. 68, 80-1, 114).

At the same time, Johnson made repeated calls to Jacqueline Kennedy in an effort to offer solace and keep alive at least one connection to the “Kennedy aura.” “The tenderness in his voice,” Holland observes, “is impossible to convey in a transcript and this is a side of Johnson the public will never glimpse.” “I want to be as *nice* and *affectionate* and *considerate* and *thoughtful* of Mrs. Kennedy as I can during these days,” Johnson told press secretary Pierre Salinger. But, he added shrewdly, “And I just think that’s good *politics*.” He even proposed helping the former First Lady overcome her depression by appointing her ambassador to Mexico: “It would electrify the Western hemisphere, . . .” he exclaimed colorfully. “She’d just walk out on that balcony and look down at ‘em, and they’d just *pee all* over themselves every day.” In fact, Mrs. Kennedy was despondent and “barely able to function,” and the idea was dropped (pp. 213, 223, 225).

Johnson initially opposed creating a presidential commission to investigate the

assassination but reversed course in the wake of intense pressure after Lee Harvey Oswald's televised murder. He finally realized that a presidential commission created by executive order would enable *him* to make all the appointments. The full "Johnson treatment" was required to persuade liberal Chief Justice Earl Warren to head the commission and convince conservative Senator Richard Russell of Georgia to serve under him—they detested each other. Holland's transcript of Johnson's late evening call to Russell on November 29 should be required reading for anyone trying to understand how government *really* works. Russell was angry at LBJ's cunning disingenuousness about appointing Warren and furious that the president had publicly announced the senator's acceptance *before placing the call*. However, realizing that he had been trapped, Russell reluctantly conceded, "I think you're sorta takin' advantage of me, Mr. President—but of course, I can't turn it down" (p. 201).

The LBJ-RFK relationship deteriorated further in 1964 after Johnson criticized JFK's complicity in the coup that led to the 1963 murder of President Diem of South Vietnam. Johnson suggested, in a conversation with RFK's friend Pierre Salinger, that the Kennedy shooting was "divine retribution" for the killing of Diem. He surely knew and perhaps intended that his words would be repeated to RFK—which made the gulf between them "ultimately impassable" (pp. 238-9). Nonetheless, later that year, the attorney general actively lobbied to be Johnson's running mate. Holland does not explain why RFK was willing to put himself in the same vulnerable position Johnson had occupied under JFK; LBJ would surely have enjoyed replicating his own humiliation by making life miserable for his powerless vice president. He finally eliminated RFK from consideration after allowing him to dangle in the wind for weeks. Nonetheless, Johnson remained fearful that Kennedy loyalists would somehow capture the convention and force RFK onto the ticket. Of course, Johnson's forces controlled the convention and the president won a full term with a popular (61 percent) and electoral landslide over Senator Barry Goldwater.

The release of the *Warren Report* at the height of the 1964 presidential campaign temporarily provided the nation with a plausible account of the assassination: Oswald had acted alone. At least at the outset, LBJ's handling of the investigation of the assassination of his predecessor—which Holland calls "the first significant decision of Johnson's presidency"—had been generally viewed as impeccable (p. 297). But, Holland relates, this "honeymoon" would last less than two years. Indeed, within a few months, J. Edgar Hoover publicly criticized the report for suggesting (correctly) that the FBI had failed to notify the Secret Service about the danger posed by Oswald in Dallas.

LBJ's already shaky ties to the "Kennedy aura" deteriorated even further when Mrs. Kennedy, emotionally unable to face returning to the White House, declined a 1965 invitation to attend a ceremony naming the East Garden in her honor. The press interpreted her decision as a snub or boycott of Lady Bird Johnson. LBJ fretted to defense secretary Robert McNamara, "I just don't want her to be against us," perhaps hoping, Holland implies, that McNamara might be able to persuade the former First Lady to avoid even the appearance of a public rift with the Johnsons (p. 294).

As LBJ's popularity plummeted in response to the war in Vietnam and a wave of urban

riots, the controversy over the assassination flared up yet again. By late 1966, four critiques of the *Warren Report* had been published and widely read, and many Americans had become convinced that there had been a conspiracy. The assassination, Holland declares, constituted “a wound in the body politic” that was not permitted to heal. Johnson’s rapid political decline after his 1964 landslide victory, Holland makes clear, cannot be fully explained by the Vietnam War or racial unrest. Instead, the president’s fate was also inextricably linked to the unraveling of his legitimacy in the face of new revelations about the events surrounding his bloody accession to the presidency.

These bitter suspicions were also stoked, aside from the *Warren Report*, by the emotional public controversy over an eagerly anticipated book about the assassination. Jacqueline Kennedy, Holland explains, with the full support of the Kennedy family (RFK personally handled the negotiations), attempted to control the writing of the “authorized” history of the assassination by personally selecting the author-journalist William Manchester (who even agreed to submit the manuscript for review).^[2] Rumors circulating by the fall of 1966, months before the book was published, suggested that Manchester, completely enthralled by the “‘Camelot’ metaphor,” had constructed a tendentiously negative portrayal of Johnson’s behavior in the immediate aftermath of the assassination (pp. 327, 333). Manchester had conducted over one thousand interviews but the wary and suspicious LBJ refused to cooperate (except for responding to some written questions).

President Johnson, Holland demonstrates, concluded (mistakenly) that RFK was the lingo whispering in Manchester’s ear in order to stir up controversy about the assassination: “it makes Bobby [Kennedy] look like a great hero and makes me look like a *son-of-a-bitch*.” Manchester’s approach seemed to cast President Johnson “in the worst possible light,” implying that he was somehow responsible “for the Dallas climate that . . . made the assassination possible.” In fact, Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson had been hissed and spat on by a screaming right-wing crowd in Dallas during the 1960 campaign. But, Manchester admitted in a letter to Jacqueline Kennedy, “though I tried desperately to suppress my bias against a certain eminent statesman who always reminded me of somebody in a Grade D movie on the Late Show, the prejudice [shows] through” (pp. 326-7).

The Kennedy family, concerned that the book would invade their privacy and could be interpreted as a “declaration of war” between the Kennedys and Johnson, went to court to halt publication. Nonetheless, LBJ’s “*de facto* counsel” and Supreme Court appointee, Justice Abe Fortas, warned that the lawsuit was a smoke screen—“they’re trying to go through the motions just to show that they tried to stop the thing.” Fortas clearly knew secrets about JFK’s private life and also sneered that Manchester had made the Kennedy marriage seem like “an *old-fashioned, storybook marriage*, you know, . . . [a] romantic love story. And [he] fawns all over them and licks their boots, and the same thing about Bobby.” The editors of *Look* magazine, about to release excerpts from the book, also believed that the “Kennedy goon squad” was leaking stories in order to discredit the 1963 transfer of power regardless of whether this damaging material was finally removed from the book. Even Johnson’s own men in the White House, Holland asserts, did not grasp

that a book carrying the Kennedy imprimatur and perceived as anti-LBJ constituted a profound “insult to Johnson’s identity, and very being, as a politician and president” (pp. 344-5, 348, 355).

Johnson overruled his staff by refusing to reply to Manchester’s allegations. Already under fire for a “credibility gap” in Vietnam, he declined to dignify these stories with a direct response. LBJ nonetheless understood, Holland makes clear, that the poison had been released into the political bloodstream and exclaimed in a December 1966 *cri de coeur*: “I don’t want to debate with ’em. I don’t think the president of this country at this time ought to. I think it’s just *unthinkable* that my *whole* morning would not be spent on the Vietnam [situation] or anything else, but be spent on this kind of stuff” (p. 371).

Within months, New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison’s bizarre claims about a conspiracy in the JFK assassination would become front-page news. It had become impossible, Holland explains, to “believe that a district attorney would be so reckless and irresponsible as to arrest a man [Clay Shaw] without substantial evidence.” In short, the public mistakenly assumed, “*Garrison must have something*” (p. 404).

Today, nearly thirty-two years after LBJ’s death, many Americans believe that Johnson was involved in the murder of his predecessor. In November 2003, marking the fortieth anniversary of the assassination, the History Channel broadcast a “documentary” claiming to “prove” this charge against Johnson. Later, the management of the History Channel was forced to backtrack and broadcast a withering attack by three leading historians on that baseless claim. Nonetheless, these suspicions remain very much alive. And, if that was not enough, the family of Martin Luther King, Jr. has reportedly endorsed a book that exculpates James Earl Ray and argues that Johnson, the greatest civil rights president since Lincoln, was behind the 1968 killing of MLK. LBJ’s historical reputation, at least to date, seems to suggest that just because he was prone to suspicion and paranoia doesn’t mean that many people have not actually been out to get him.

It is now uniquely possible, because of Holland’s careful transcription, analysis, and annotation of these unique primary sources to understand exactly how these bizarre developments came about. “It is virtually an article of faith among historians,” Holland concludes, “that the war in Vietnam was the overwhelming reason the president left office in 1969 a worn, bitter, and disillusioned man. Yet the assassination-related tapes paint a more nuanced portrait, one in which Johnson’s view of the assassination weighed as heavily on him as the war” (p. xxi).

Of course, this newly refined understanding of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency can only be as reliable as the transcriptions on which it rests. Michael Beschloss, as noted previously, has already published transcripts of many of these phone conversations.^[3] One reviewer, without listening to any of these tapes, concluded: “Much of Holland’s book is redundant with Michael Beschloss’s recent and better executed *Taking Charge*. . . . The bulk of the tapes” have “already been thoroughly digested, parsed and summarized by . . . Beschloss.”^[4] However, a careful evaluation of Holland’s book *should*, or perhaps

one might say, *must*, include *listening* to at least a sample of these tapes.

Historians should always be cautious about accepting appeals to authority. At a 1984 conference marking the centennial of the birth of Harry Truman, for example, Clark Clifford, the godfather of the post-New Deal Democratic party, spoke about his years in the Truman administration. The elegant, immaculately dressed Clifford dramatically recalled the events of April 12, 1945, when Vice President Truman was summoned secretly to the White House and told by Eleanor Roosevelt that FDR had died. Several striking details in Clifford's account of that historic event contradicted the authoritative account in Truman's own published memoirs. During the question-and-answer period, a scruffy, bearded young man got up and asked about those conspicuous discrepancies. Clifford, in a magisterial tone, replied that he had been there and personally remembered exactly what had happened that day. The audience broke into spontaneous applause for the distinguished, silver-haired speaker. Nonetheless, the unkempt young questioner's version was completely consistent with Truman's own account. And, in fact, Clifford was serving in the Navy and stationed in San Francisco on the day FDR died. He did not enter the White House for the first time or even meet President Truman until July 1945.

Reviewers as well may sometimes pay too much attention to appearances, titles, and affiliations rather than the specific content of the scholarly work they are evaluating. I have become keenly aware of this problem since publishing several articles identifying important errors in the two published versions of Cuban missile crisis transcripts.^[5] The reviews of these volumes, until my articles appeared, had been quite enthusiastic. But, not a single reviewer had ever listened to the tapes to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. As one historian later told me, "I simply assumed that scholars of that stature would get it right." I did too-discovering the errors quite by accident while writing my own narrative account of the missile crisis meetings.^[6]

"I have edited each conversation," Beschloss explains in his first volume, "to exclude extraneous material and repetition, but not where that might change the meaning. Ellipses appear where shorter parts of conversations have been pared; a larger break is used for longer deletions."^[7] Holland also outlines his transcription methodology in detail and acknowledges: "there is no single right way to do" transcripts (p. xiii). "Every tapes-based book seems to strike a somewhat different balance, and apart from accuracy, every approach is defensible so long as the rules are made plain" (p. xiii). Neither writer claims to provide "complete" transcripts. Transcribing is always a work in progress and no two transcripts will ever be identical. There can never be a definitive transcript-that is the nature of the beast.

Nonetheless, I listened to a dozen of these tapes online at: www.whitehousetapes.org and selected the Beschloss and Holland transcripts of LBJ's discussion with Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, recorded less than nine hours after JFK was gunned down, to illustrate some very important differences in their approaches to transcribing.

Beschloss transcribes this conversation as follows:

After meeting with leaders of Congress, Johnson calls Goldberg, formerly JFK's Secretary of Labor, whom LBJ had spotted at Andrews Air Force Base when *Air Force One* landed.

LBJ: I want you to be thinking about what I ought to do to try to bring all these elements together and unite the country to maintain and preserve our system in the world, because if it starts falling to pieces-and some of the extremists are going to be proceeding on the wrong assumption-why, we could deteriorate pretty quick.

Goldberg: It won't. I have no doubt about that.

LBJ: . . . Just think, think.

Goldberg: Anytime, anytime.

LBJ: I want to give some thought, by the way, whether we ought to have a Joint Session of Congress after and what would I say to them.[\[8\]](#)

Goldberg: I think we ought to.

LBJ: I want you to think about . . . how I ought to do it without-I mean, with dignity and reserve and without being down on my knees, but at the same time letting them know of my respect and confidence. . . .I'm totally inadequate, but I'll do my best. . . . I had a general meeting with the leaders tonight and, needless to say, the Republicans are really more united than the Democrats. Mansfield didn't say a word.[\[9\]](#)

Holland first explains that the new president phoned Goldberg in an effort to reach out to the liberal-labor wing of the Democratic party, which had opposed LBJ's nomination for vice president in 1960. Goldberg, secretary of labor until Kennedy nominated him to the Supreme Court in 1962, had developed warm ties to Johnson when they served on JFK's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity-which LBJ chaired. Holland's transcription begins:

LBJ: Arthur, I just . . . You've been such a wonderful friend. You and that great wife of yours have been such a comfort and strength to me in this administration that I just didn't want to leave my desk tonight without telling you that you're going to have to do some heavy thinkin' for me, and . . .

Goldberg: Dorothy and I came out to see you at the airport, [but] there were so many people around.

LBJ: No, I didn't [see you] . . . I didn't.[\[10\]](#) There's no one that I would have rather seen in the world than you, and I

Goldberg: The most-all we can say is . . . we pray, [and] we have *confidence* in you.

LBJ: Well, don't be so damn modest and shy. I want you to come in and out [of the White House] now. I don't know what's proper and ethical, but [if] you're at the airport, you let me know it, because I need all the strength that you can give me.

Goldberg: We came out because we wanted to wish you well and also express our grief. But . . . look, if there's anything that I can do, just . . . I'm at your service.

LBJ: I want you to be thinkin' about what I ought to do try to bring all of these elements together and unite the country . . . and the main thing, preserve our system in the world. Because, if it starts fallin' to pieces, and some of the extremes go to gettin' a-proceeding on the wrong assumption, why we could deteriorate pretty [quick].

Washington Decoded

Goldberg: No, it won't. I have no doubt about that.

LBJ: I want you to think . . . just. . . think [in] capitals . . . *think, think, think*. And then talk to me tomorrow or [the] next day.

Goldberg: I will, any time.

LBJ: Now, I want to give some thought to whether we oughta have a joint session [of Congress], Truman did after [Roosevelt died].

Goldberg: I think you ought to.

LBJ: Well, what would we say to 'em? Think about it.

Goldberg: Well, I will.

LBJ: And I want you to think about who I [should] talk to on the delivery side, and *how* I oughta do it, without . . . with dignity and reserve and without being down on my knees, but [at] the same time, [as] a man who'll respect my confidence in 'em.

Goldberg: I will.

LBJ: And I just . . . there's nobody in town that I believe in more than you and I've just *got* to have your help.

Goldberg: Well, it's there for the asking, and we wish you every . . . good fortune in the world. You'll do well and we have complete confidence.

LBJ: Well, I'm

Goldberg: Dorothy's here, she wants to say hello to you.

LBJ: I'm totally inadequate to it, but I'll do my best.

Goldberg: No, no-not at all. And I'm at your service!

LBJ: Thank you, Arthur.

Goldberg: But here she is. [*aside to Mrs. Goldberg*] The vice president.

Mrs. Goldberg: [*perhaps realizing her husband's faux pas*] Mr. President!

LBJ: Hi, beloved. How are you?

[*Johnson exchanges best wishes with Dorothy Goldberg, then talks to Justice Goldberg again before the conversation ends.*] (Holland, pp. 59-61)

These transcripts are very different-in wording, sequence, organization, completeness, interpretation, and impact. General readers may be surprised that such dissimilar transcripts represent the same conversation; historians may be puzzled that Beschloss did not include the above-mentioned "larger break" for "longer deletions" to alert scholars that significant parts of the discussion had been omitted-especially before his transcript

begins. This reviewer, after listening carefully to the recording, found that Holland's version is more faithful to the *full substance* of the conversation and is clearly not "redundant with" the Beschloss transcript.

In any case, scholars intent on deciding for themselves what is repetitive, extraneous, or substantively important must listen to the tapes—the only authentic primary source. Presidential recordings, in the end, do not belong to any individual or organization; they are a public resource not a private preserve. The on-going process of listening, analyzing, criticizing, and revising is indispensable, in the final analysis, for expanding and refining our understanding of the unique historical evidence preserved on presidential tapes.

Sheldon M. Stern, formerly historian at the John E Kennedy Library, is the author of *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

[1] George Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Personal Memoir* (1982), 158.

[2] William Manchester, *The Death of a President* (1967).

[3] Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (1997), and *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (2001).

[4] *Publishers Weekly*, July 12, 2004.

[5] Sheldon M. Stern, "What JFK Really Said," *Atlantic Monthly* 285 (May 2000), 122-128; "Source Material: The 1997 Published Transcripts of the JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes: Too Good to be True?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30 (September 2000): 586-93; and "The JFK Tapes: Round Two," *Reviews in American History* 30 (2002): 680-8. The two published versions of the Cuban missile crisis transcripts under discussion are Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1997); and Philip Zelikow, Tim Naftali, Ernest May, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: Volumes 1-3, The Great Crises* (2001).

[6] Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (2003), esp. xx-xxi, 427-40.

[7] Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 552.

[8] Beschloss footnote 1: Meaning after the Kennedy funeral. As Johnson well recalled, Harry Truman had addressed a Joint Session of Congress after FDR's death.

[9] Beschloss footnote 2: Mike Mansfield of Montana, the Senate Majority Leader, was laconic under any circumstances, but this night he was stilled by the death of Kennedy, of whom he had been very fond back to their days in the Senate. (This transcript appears in Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 20-1.)

[10] Holland footnote 108: Both William Manchester and Michael Beschloss, in their respective books on the transition, suggest that Johnson called Goldberg after having spotted him in the crowd at Andrews. But according to the conversation, Johnson did not see Goldberg during the brief time he spent acknowledging dignitaries.

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