TAPES REVEAL LBJ'S STRUGGLES FOLLOWING KENNEDY'S SLAYING

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Because so much has been written about the Kennedy assassination, Max Holland decided to write another book on the subject. The problem with the army of predecessors who have already written about the assassination, Holland writes, is that "virtually every primary source of information about the assassination has been distorted over the past forty years, often beyond recognition." Virtually every primary federal source of information about the assassination is now out in the open - and subsequently distorted, Holland argues - in the wake of The President John F. Kennedy Records Collection Act of 1992. Even seemingly straightforward, routine tape recordings of President Johnson's phone conversations have been misrepresented or misunderstood - and there's no guarantee that Holland hasn't done the same - but he has at least concentrated on telling the story through the eyes of Lyndon Johnson. Or, more correctly, through Johnson's mouth, having painstakingly reviewed thousands of hours of taped telephone conversations (and radio transmissions from the day of the assassination). The story begins in Dallas, with transcripts of conversations among people trying their best to function in the face of their complete astonishment at the events of November 22, 1963. The conversations show a nation's leadership at one minute wondering aloud if Kennedy's killing was part of a larger plot, then wondering next whether it would be appropriate to remove his casket from Air Force One using a forklift. And there was certainly confusion over whether LBJ needed to be sworn in as president, or whether the office came automatically to him - an issue that infuriated an already Johnson-hostile Robert Kennedy. The first 50 pages or so that are devoted to November 22 bring back that day with a chilling immediacy to those of us old enough to remember it. Holland then turns to what constitutes the majority of the book: Johnson's transition from "emasculated" vice president to a president with one foot in the Kennedy aura, another in his own future. For example, it became a show of strength for Johnson to get the men who served under Kennedy to do the same for him as a way to prove to Robert Kennedy his fitness to lead. Johnson comes across here as a superb politician with unfortunate blind spots. He was uncritical of the information he was getting from FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, even when Hoover committed blatant mistakes, such as referring repeatedly to Jack Ruby as "Rubenstein." He was clumsy in his treatment of Jacqueline Kennedy, once making a show in front of female reporters of calling and trying to humor the bereaved widow. He was slow to appreciate the enormity of the problem posed by the public's curiosity about the assassination - and the delicacy it would take to deal with it in a way that was forthright, yet acceptable to different jurisdictions, both parties and even factions in Johnson's own party. Johnson addressed the multitude of problems by appointing what came to be known as the Warren Commission. The 40th anniversary of the Warren Commission Report provides the hook for Hastings' book. What emerges is a president trying to grapple with "the political legacy of a slain president who has suddenly taken on aspects of martyrdom." Anyone who ever thought that Johnson's political skills were lacking will be forever disabused of that conception as we see Johnson always calculating, always cajoling, always contemplating the political ramifications of the Kennedy assassination. Holland does yeoman's work in providing context for the transcripts, many of which are garbled or incomplete. He isn't shy about pointing out what he sees as the failures of earlier historians' interpretations in ways that sometimes appear
to bear the taint of academic pettiness. His skill as a historian, though, sometimes exceeds his skill as a writer, such as when he writes that Gerald Ford's future "was ahead of him." But what The Kennedy Assassination Tapes lacks in ease of readability - and this is a book that demands a reader's discipline and patience - it makes up for in thoroughness. Maybe it truly will be the last word on the Kennedy assassination - and none too soon at that. INFOBOX The Kennedy Assassination Tapes * By Max Holland. Alfred A. Knopf, 428 pages, $26.95. * Grade: B+

Caption: Photo
Lyndon B. Johnson's taped conversations in reaction to the Kennedy assassination offer keen insights to LBJ's political skills. YOICHI R. OKAMATO / 1964
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