LBJ recordings give insight into national tragedy

By GARY MACK Special Contributor

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ince the Kennedy assassination, public opinion surveys consistently show that most American adults do not believe the official “lone gunman” explanation. An early doubter was President Lyndon B. Johnson himself, President John F. Kennedy’s successor.

HISTORY

The Kennedy Assassination Tapes
Max Holland (Knopf, $26.95)

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Mr. Johnson privately questioned some of the no-conspiracy findings of the Warren Commission, his handpicked investigators. He wondered if Fidel Castro might have been involved, even though there was, and still is, no evidence for this. The public, however, never knew of Mr. Johnson’s concerns at the time or that he recorded phone calls in the Oval Office.

Thanks to the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum in Austin and the 1992 “JFK Act,” which forced the release of all secret documents about the assassination, anyone can listen to the recordings or read the transcripts to learn how the new president calmed the fears of a nation worried that the Russians or the Cubans killed Mr. Kennedy and that World War III was just moments away.

While many of the LBJ recordings have appeared in excerpted form in recent books, articles and TV shows, none of them put Mr. Johnson’s words in context as well as Max Holland has in The Kennedy Assassination Tapes. The author, a journalist and contributing editor to The Nation, even takes on fellow historian Michael Beschloss and others for misinterpreting some of the conversations.

Mr. Holland, however, appears to have made a few misjudgments of his own, especially with regard to the infamous Single Bullet Theory — which holds that one of three bullets must have injured both Mr. Kennedy and Gov. John Connally because the other two bullets were accounted for.

Mr. Holland notes that Mr. Johnson didn’t believe it because he didn’t understand it. Nellie Connally, the governor’s wife, didn’t believe it; she was angry that Parkland Hospital staff seemed more concerned about the president than her husband. Readers will search in vain for supporting documentation.

Still, Mr. Holland effectively taps the LBJ phone calls and offers an insightful analysis of how the new president responded to what happened in Dallas. To allay public fears, Mr. Johnson formed a bipartisan commission to evaluate the findings of the FBI, Secret Service, CIA, Dallas police and other groups.

He pushed, cajoled and called in favors to select commission members whose deliberations would be trusted. With Earl Warren, then chief justice of the Supreme Court and Mr. Johnson’s choice to head the commission, the new president struck fear in the jurist, saying there was a report (debunked days later) that Lee Harvey Oswald received “$6,500 in the Cuban consulate [in Mexico City], presumably as a down payment” for killing Kennedy. Mr. Johnson added that 40 million people would die if the United States and Soviet Union went to war over what happened. With tears in his eyes, Mr. Warren accepted the position.

Mr. Johnson’s once-private conversations with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and many other top government leaders and officials explain much — but somehow not quite enough — about what happened to President Kennedy and why. Max Holland’s fine account is the closest one can get to being a participant in the aftermath.

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