According to conventional wisdom, it was the relentlessly disastrous reports on the Vietnam War and the failure of his wartime policies that drove Lyndon Johnson from the presidency. His speech to the nation on March 31, 1968, announcing in somber tones that he would not be a candidate for re-election, surely created the image of a man so embittered and disillusioned by the war that he could not continue.

But other concerns, according to Max Holland, weighed as heavily on him as did the war. Those concerns were the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the controversies surrounding the investigations into how the assassination happened, the legacy it left for Johnson, and the effects it would have on his own presidential legacy. The assassination was the subject of many conversations between Johnson and those around him. What was said face-to-face we can only surmise, but Johnson secretly captured many hours of telephone conversations in tape recordings.

In this painstakingly edited and copiously footnoted collection of transcripts of those conversations, Holland provides evidence to support his assertion about the weight the assassination placed on Johnson's shoulders. So meticulously are the conversations transcribed and placed in context that one can hear Johnson's colloquial speech patterns as he gives orders to his press secretary, fellow Texan Bill Moyers, and plots strategies with Abe Fortas, another Texan, who remained his confidant even after he was named to the Supreme Court.

Johnson enjoyed a reputation as a manipulator, and the tapes are filled with manipulations.

For Jacqueline Kennedy he exuded affection. He made J. Edgar Hoover feel indispensable even though, with good reason, he did not trust him. He used members of the press, such as Joseph Alsop and Jack Anderson, to influence or control the reporting of news. He worked covertly with publishers to suppress parts of articles he considered dangerous, misleading or just plain wrong.

There was one important figure whom Lyndon Johnson could not manipulate or control. That was Robert F. Kennedy, his antagonist from the moment John F. Kennedy selected Johnson as his running mate in 1960. The unconcealed feuding between Johnson and President Kennedy's brother, whom he inherited as attorney general, amounted to mutual contempt.

How interesting can it be to read transcripts of phone conversations? Very interesting indeed. At times this book is almost a thriller. Holland establishes the circumstances surrounding the conversations and keeps the story moving by drawing on other sources.

Caption: photo
Photo - Book cover, "The Kennedy Assassination Tapes"
Memo: Myron A. Marty is a Drake University professor emeritus living in Monticello, Ill.

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