Abstract (summary)

Such aficionados will be quite impatient with Max Holland’s annotated compilation of transcripts of official communications during and after the assassination. For one thing, much of the material is already available elsewhere, particularly in Michael Beschloss’ “Taking Charge: The [Lyndon B. Johnson] White House Tapes, 1963-64,” published in 1997. And then there is Holland’s palpable contempt for “the assassination research community,” as it prefers to be called. He serves his footnotes with pepper, writing, at one point, that Oliver Stone’s “JFK” enjoys “the distinction of being the only American feature film produced during the Cold War to have, as its very axis, a lie manufactured in the KGB’s disinformation factories.” (Yeah, but the cinematography was pretty good.)

Holland, who is at work on a history of the Warren Commission, evidently prefers to give it the benefit of the doubt. The body “might not have known about contemporaneous American-hatched plots to kill Castro,” he writes. “But it certainly examined [Lee Harvey Oswald’s] links to Cuba as carefully and minutely as possible - indeed, as if it did know.” Holland thinks that Johnson “may charitably be forgiven” for his later doubts. “Ultimately, he was mistaken.”

Full Text


People sometimes have a naive faith in the power of original documents to provide them direct access to the past. Historians offer interpretations. But the primary sources give you history itself, without all the degrees of separation. Right? Well, no, actually not right. Malarkey, in fact - though of an understandable sort. For it seems as if traces of the past ought to penetrate a document, like radioactive particles, giving it an aura, so that tiny particles of an event are transmitted straight into one's system.

Certainly, that is how amateur historians - to use a more polite term than "conspiracy buffs" - have long treated every fragment issuing from the Kennedy assassination. For 30 years, they have scrutinized every frame of Zapruder’s home movie camera record of the presidential motorcade, sure that it held the secret. But with no consensus about what that secret might be, some of them have lately reasoned (if that’s the word for it) that the film must be a fake.

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Readers not driven by a hunger for fresh clues may be the ideal audience for "The Kennedy Assassination Tapes." It is a book offering a special kind of evidence: namely, that people on the scene moved as if in a fog, with the history unfolding around them often concealed from view. The panic and confusion recorded in the first hundred pages or so are palpable.

But it is the record of the following weeks - during which the Warren Commission was assembled amidst a potential chaos of initiatives by various agencies and committees preparing to launch investigations - that ought to give the lie to that basic faith in the world’s orderliness that is usually implicit in the conspiratorial mindset.

The transcripts at this stage do become somewhat redundant, as the new president moves, with incredible finesse, amid a force field of conflicting authorities and tremendous egos. Still, for all the repetition, it is fascinating to watch Lyndon Johnson in action. The centerpiece of this section is undoubtedly his long conversation, one week after the assassination, with Richard Russell - a conservative Southern senator, once LBJ’s mentor, who is reluctant to stay on the commission once he learns that liberal Supreme Court justice Earl Warren will be the chairman.

The president unleashes every ounce of his own abundant good-ole- boy charm - a mixture of jokes, flattery, threats and appeals to patriotism. "You're my man on that commission. And you gonna do it! And don't tell me what you can do and what you can't because...I can't arrest you. And I'm not gonna put the FBI on you, but you're goddamned sure gonna serve, I'll tell you that!" When Russell continues to protest, Johnson says, "Well, of course you don't like Warren, but you'll like him 'fore it's over with." LBJ gets his way.

With hindsight, every step he takes is charged with dramatic irony. In trying to give the public some reassuring sense of what happened that morning in Dallas, the president enlists the help of impressive authority figures such as J. Edgar Hoover from the FBI and former CIA director Allen Dulles. As the last third of the book documents, LBJ himself will come to doubt the commission’s finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted strictly on his own - suspecting, rather, that the assassination may have been payback for covert U.S. operations in Cuba.

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Others have taken documentation of LBJ’s doubts as definitive proof that he knew ... whatever. I think we should interpret them as evidence that LBJ grasped the essential puzzle of the assassination. The unanswered question is not “Who killed Kennedy?” The genuine enigma, rather, may never be solved: Who was Lee Harvey Oswald? And why did he put himself into the history books?

Illustration
Caption: AP PHOTO - Lyndon Johnson is sworn in as president after the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

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