Max Holland does a yeoman’s job of taking to task earlier authors who selectively used the conversations to advance everything from theories about JFK having been killed as retribution for the murder of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem to overstating Lyndon B. Johnson’s eventual disagreements with the Warren Commission’s conclusions. And because of his vast knowledge of the commission (Holland won a 2001 J. Anthony Lukas Award for his work in progress, “A Need to Know: Inside the Warren Commission”), he presents adequate background to anchor every conversation. The succinct annotations accompanying the transcripts provide necessary, and often lively, information about their proper context. And Holland knows the subject well enough to point out when fleeting and otherwise unnoticeable references are about the Warren Commission.

Also “The Kennedy Assassination Tapes” corrects a much-referenced conversation between LBJ and Richard Russell, his close friend and Warren Commission member, in which Russell says to Johnson, “Well, I don’t believe it,” and Johnson replies, “I don’t either.” Although this has mostly been cited as meaning the two did not share the commission’s lone-assassin conclusion, it referred instead to Russell’s doubts about the single-bullet theory. Russell, who admits frankly in that talk that he is not conversant with all the evidence before the commission, had spent much of his time investigating whether [Lee Harvey Oswald] was part of a communist conspiracy. Although forensics had been Russell’s weak spot, it did not stop him from dismissing the single-bullet theory. (It would take nearly 30 years for science to establish the theory as fact and demonstrate unequivocally that Russell’s and many others’ doubts were misplaced.)

“When Johnson proclaims that he doesn’t believe in the single-bullet theory either,” writes Holland, “it is a blatant example of his tendency to speak for effect. He has not studied the issue; indeed he doesn’t understand what the issue is. He is just trying to agree with his old mentor [Russell] and get to the subject he really wants to talk about: Vietnam.”

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Despite its all-encompassing title, no single volume could include every talk LBJ had in the White House connected to some aspect of Kennedy’s death. There is no coverage, for instance, of Johnson’s conversations with and about the Secret Service in the months following the assassination. Holland says he omitted this material because he did “not consider it particularly illuminating.” But it is natural that many readers might want to know what the new president thought about his own personal safety, as well as what he thought of the Secret Service’s responsibility for having lost his predecessor.

Instead, Holland’s focus is primarily one decision -- albeit a major one -- that LBJ confronted in the immediate aftermath of Kennedy’s murder: how to mount an investigation that would satisfy the public desire to know what happened while keeping such a probe from becoming fodder for political or personal gain. Holland shines when covering Johnson’s initial reluctance to create such a panel and skillfully follows the president’s eventual conversion to its appointment.

Holland broadly defines “assassination-related” conversations and ventures into several barely tangential subjects, including LBJ’s deep-seated personal dislike of Robert F. Kennedy and his fight with RFK over control of the Democratic Party, and how Johnson grappled with the transition of power, including his intimate dealings with the CIA and FBI. Because LBJ was colorful, salty and outspoken in the privacy of the Oval Office -- where he seemingly forgot or did not care that every word was recorded for posterity -- many transcripts provide an informative and entertaining look inside the crucial years of the new administration.

But voluminous transcripts can make for tedious reading. Holland tackles this challenge by doing his best to forge the materials into a cogent and readable history. Instead of presenting the full verbatim transcripts, he often edits them for readability while trying to maintain their accuracy and context. For the most part, he succeeds admirably. He does not strip Johnson of his distinctive Southern dialect or often blunt approach.

In many instances, “The Kennedy Assassination Tapes” explains how certain myths and inaccuracies about the assassination began. Holland’s deconstruction of an important, oft-cited conversation between FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover and LBJ, early on the day after the assassination, is a prime example. Hoover, as was typical of him, was unwilling to admit to the president that he didn’t have all the facts at his fingertips. So while trying to answer every Johnson inquiry, the FBI director passed along a considerable amount of misinformation, including his mistaken belief that the CIA station in Mexico City had photo
surveillance of Lee Harvey Oswald on a recent visit to the Soviet Embassy there. In fact, the CIA had photographed a different person, and that error led to much unfounded speculation that someone was impersonating Oswald to frame him as a communist sympathizer. Moreover, it was in this conversation, as Holland writes, that "ultimately, Hoover's propagation of half-facts and half-truths leaves Johnson with the impression that at least one other man may have been involved." That impression stayed with Johnson.

Also "The Kennedy Assassination Tapes" corrects a much-referred-to conversation between LBJ and Richard Russell, his close friend and Warren Commission member, in which Russell says to Johnson, "Well, I don't believe it," and Johnson replies, "I don't either." Although this has mostly been cited as meaning the two did not share the commission's lone-assassin conclusion, it referred instead to Russell's doubts about the single-bullet theory. Russell, who admits frankly in that talk that he is not conversant with all the evidence before the commission, had spent much of his time investigating whether Oswald was part of a communist conspiracy. Although forensics had been Russell's weak spot, it did not stop him from dismissing the single-bullet theory. (It would take nearly 30 years for science to establish the theory as fact and demonstrate unequivocally that Russell's and many others' doubts were misplaced.) "When Johnson proclaims that he doesn't believe in the single-bullet theory either," writes Holland, "it is a blatant example of his tendency to speak for effect. He has not studied the issue; indeed he doesn't understand what the issue is. He is just trying to agree with his old mentor [Russell] and get to the subject he really wants to talk about: Vietnam."

Before turning to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Russell tells Johnson, "I tried my best to get in a dis-sent, but they'd come 'round and trade me out of it by givin' me a little old threat of it." Holland points out that in the foreword to historian Michael R. Beschloss' bestseller "Taking Charge," Beschloss transcribed that sentence incorrectly, quoting Russell as saying, "they'd come 'round and trade me out of it by giving me a little old threat." That mistake fueled conspiracy speculation that the Warren Commission used threats to force unanimity at the expense of the truth.

"The Kennedy Assassination Tapes" confirms what other studies have revealed: that LBJ's paramount concern was whether a Cuban-Castro connection motivated Oswald, and whether such a discovery by the commission might force him into a massive military retaliation against the Communist island. Fortunately for Johnson, that reckoning never came. But, as Holland asserts, the transcripts reveal that the subject of Kennedy's murder weighed as heavily on LBJ in his first term in office as did the Vietnam War.

Despite its insights, "The Kennedy Assassination Tapes" might be hard-pressed to find a wide circle of readers. Those looking for broader insights into LBJ might first gravitate to Robert Dallek's wonderful "Flawed Giant." And although Holland takes Beschloss to task for some misinterpretation of the tapes in "Taking Charge," he covers little new ground. Holland is a deft writer and observer, and JFK assassination researchers and historians are almost certain to add this valuable book to their collections, but others without as much interest in the minutiae might find it a more difficult read and wish for a considerably smaller tome.*

Illustration

Credit: Gerald Posner is the author of numerous books, including "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK" and, most recently, "Why America Slept: The Failure to Prevent 9/11."

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