President John F. Kennedy's controversial assassination never ceased to be an issue for Lyndon Johnson, not only during his administration but afterwards, asserts [Max Holland] whose new book, The Kennedy Assassination Tapes, is subtitled: "The White House conversations of Lyndon B. Johnson regarding the assassination, the Warren Commission, and the aftermath."

Johnson himself was far from a reliable witness. When the "Warren Report" became mired in controversy, it was Johnson's genuine suspicion that Robert Kennedy, whom he detested, was responsible. "Johnson could hardly be more wrong," Holland writes. "His suspicion is revealing only of his fixation on the senator and Johnson's proclivity to relate things that are not connected."

"Virtually every primary source of information about the assassination," he charges, "has been distorted over the past forty years, often beyond recognition."

A student of the Commission's history, he pays particular attention to alleged errors in Michael Beschloss' Taking Charge, (Simon & Schuster 1997), based on selected Johnson tapes. Holland meticulously annotates his own transcripts establishing the context of those conversations, the speakers' backgrounds, and political agendas, and comes to different conclusions.

Holland's argument is that the transcripts "constitute a kind of microhistory that requires one to be steeped in contemporary minutiae and sometimes in the events of a given hour, not only a given day."

The result is an extremely compelling read - with one hitch. It is essential to understand that all presidential recordings were at the discretion of President Johnson and that his taping habits varied. One should question the extent to which these (or any) transcripts provide a full or accurate echo of the issues.

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Other Kennedy loyalists were skeptical, however, including Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Richard Goodwin, and it's interesting to note, Holland says, that contrary to widespread perception, the "Warren Report" did not rule out a conspiracy.

This is but a footnote to the endless debate over who killed Kennedy, but written with such knowledge and attention to detail that one becomes fascinated, nonetheless.

Jeanne Nicholson is a frequent reviewer in Newport.

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