

## Tales from the LBJ Tapes: History with the Bark Off

By Max Holland

From his first evening as president in November 1963, until his departure from the Oval Office in January 1969, Lyndon B. Johnson secretly recorded many of his telephone conversations.

When these tape recordings began to be released in 1993 in response to the 1992 John F. Kennedy Records Collection Act, I was eager to study them for new insights into the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963 and its aftermath. Conspiracy buffs had long put forward one theory after another, distorting virtually every primary source of information about the Kennedy assassination, often beyond recognition. I thought that the LBJ tapes bearing on the assassination would escape this fate because they would be widely accessible and easily understandable. How could the plain words from a tape recording be twisted to mean something else? In retrospect, that was extremely naïve.

One of the clearest examples of how the recorded information has been misrepresented can be found in Michael Beschloss's 1997 book, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964*. Beschloss presented a very important conversation between President Johnson and Senator Richard B. Russell (D-Georgia) from the evening of Friday, September 18, 1964. Earlier that day, the Warren Commission, on which Russell sat, had met for the last time to settle outstanding differences over the final draft of its written statement, known as the *Warren Report*.

One of Russell's key reservations was that he did not want to rule out a conspiracy. He had insisted that since the Warren Commission had not had unhindered access to the records of the communist governments of the Soviet Union and Cuba, its *Report* could not state unreservedly that Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's accused assassin, had acted alone.

The Commission's other members agreed with Russell's reservation to an extent, and ultimately, the language in the final draft was modified to assuage him. As Russell spoke to explain this process to Johnson on the evening of September 18, 1964, he said, "I tried my best to get in a dissent, but they'd come 'round [and] trade me out of it by givin' me a little old thread of it."

Beschloss's rendering of the Russell-Johnson conversation, however, was markedly different. According to his transcription, Russell told the president that "I tried my best to get in a dissent, but they'd come 'round and trade me out of it by giving me a little old *threat*" [emphasis added]. Consequently, the implication was left that Chief Justice Earl

Warren, along with other esteemed members of the investigating panel, had threatened the senior senator from Georgia, one of the most powerful men in Washington at the time. Moreover, Beschloss's rendering suggested that Russell, against his better judgment, had bowed to this unspecified "threat" for the purpose of making the *Warren Report* unanimous and pacifying the American people—even if the truth had to be sacrificed in the process.

The thrust of this conversation as presented in the Beschloss book could hardly have been more misleading. Still, Beschloss's misrepresentation is only one of many mischaracterizations of the Johnson recordings that have appeared over the last few years in books both notable and obscure, and in prominent magazines like *The Weekly Standard*.

Apart from the need to set the record straight, a reliable rendition of the secret tape recordings allows us to relive the assassination from an entirely novel and invaluable perspective—that of Lyndon Johnson himself.

LBJ had the perfect vehicle, of course, for telling the rawest truths about his presidency, namely his own 1971 memoir, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969*. It was a stilted and predictable book, however, completely drained of vital juices. None of the dramatic tales conveyed by the LBJ tapes are to be found in his memoir—or if they are, they have been sanitized and air-brushed almost beyond recognition.

A good example is the story behind the Warren Commission's formation. In his memoir, LBJ stated that the idea for the panel was first suggested to him by Eugene Rostow, then the dean of Yale Law School, just a few hours after Lee Harvey Oswald's death on November 24, 1963. Oswald had been in the basement of the Dallas police headquarters by Jack Ruby, a self-appointed vigilante.

Johnson wrote that "[Secretary of State] Dean Rusk and columnist Joseph Alsop soon made the same recommendation to me." Thus, his memoir leaves the impression that the new president immediately found the proposal for an investigation attractive and did not hesitate to implement it, announcing the appointment of the Commission one week after the assassination.

The real history, in fact, is far more complicated and compelling. To be sure, Eugene Rostow was among the first to suggest the creation of an independent commission. But the president initially, and rather vehemently, *rejected* the idea after consulting his *de facto* counsel, the Washington lawyer Abe Fortas, whom Johnson would appoint to the Supreme Court in 1965. Fortas strongly cautioned against getting the White House involved in any way with an investigation into the murder of LBJ predecessor. Ever mindful of Southern sensitivities, the two men also believed that such a commission would set a bad precedent. It would inject the federal government into what was a state matter because, hard as it is to believe, killing a president was not a capital crime under federal statutes in 1963.

The Johnson persisted in rejecting the idea of a commission until he had lunch on November 26 with his Senate mentor, Richard B. Russell, a man who commanded Johnson's utmost respect and attention. By this time, Congress was stirring into action, and that was a cause of great concern to both men. The Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Internal Security, chaired by James Eastland (D-Mississippi) had announced its intention to hold hearings, which meant that hearings by the House Judiciary Committee could not be far behind. There were also strong signs that the House Un-American Activities Committee was going to enter the fray, on the grounds that Oswald had been affiliated with such left-wing groups as the Havana-funded Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

None of the chairmen of these committees enjoyed a stellar reputation for fairness and objectivity. Eastland, for example, was infamous for finding communists everywhere, from the State Department to *The New York Times* and the civil rights movement. Any investigation by his subcommittee was likely to identify Oswald as an instrument of international communism, irregardless of the true facts.

Simultaneously, Senator Russell worried that these headline-hunting congressional panels would inadvertently expose CIA sources and methods. Through "technical means"—namely, wiretaps—the CIA had obtained vital evidence pertaining to Oswald's visits to the Soviet and Cuban missions in Mexico City just six weeks before the assassination. Inadvertent exposure of these sources and methods would not only compromise an invaluable counter-intelligence tool, but would also prove extremely embarrassing to the government of Mexico. Much of the CIA's surveillance of communist diplomatic activities there was conducted with the full connivance of Mexican authorities.

Consequently, on November 29 it was not the sheer brilliance of the idea that persuaded President Johnson to appoint what would become known as the Warren Commission. Rather, it was a pragmatic decision, forced upon the president in order to abort competing and potentially meddlesome inquiries by Congress.

If the once-secret LBJ recordings did not exist, this story would never be known, because it is hardly reflected in the paper trail. It was captured vividly on the LBJ tapes because the Commission had to be assembled in great haste, largely by telephone over the Thanksgiving Day holiday weekend. Most of the senators and representatives Johnson had to consult were out of town, and thus the taped telephone conversations reflect the progress of his decision-making in minute detail, including the precise political calculations that went into the selection of each member of the seven-man panel.

The tapes also shed considerable new light on Johnson's troubled relationship with Robert F. Kennedy, initially the attorney general during the Kennedy and early Johnson administrations, and subsequently, the junior senator from New York. RFK and LBJ were like oil and water; their personalities clashed and grated on one another, fundamentally and irrevocably.

Years before the assassination, the rift between the two men had become unbridgeable because of events during the race for the 1960 Democratic nomination. During the Democratic convention in Los Angeles, the Johnson forces had raised questions about JFK's health—he suffered from Addison's disease—and reminded Americans about the appeasement-minded stance and virulent anti-Semitism of Joseph P. Kennedy, the family patriarch. Then, after John Kennedy invited Johnson to become his running mate, RFK tried to force LBJ off the ticket. Neither Lyndon Johnson nor Robert Kennedy would ever forget or forgive these transgressions.

The assassination itself was RFK's worst nightmare realized. What made it all the harder, though, was that the Democratic politician whom RFK detested above all others was the man who inherited "Jack's office." Worse, because Johnson had become president in the third year of JFK's term, he was entitled to serve out that term and to run for the presidency two more times. Potentially, he stood to be the longest-serving president since FDR. This would have required RFK and other Kennedy men to put their ambitions on the back burner for nine years, which is several lifetimes in politics.

The tape recordings from late November 1966 do not change our understanding of the rift between the two men, but they deepen our comprehension of it. The new perspective is conveyed in conversations that Johnson had with Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, and with Bill Moyers, now a television commentator but then LBJ's press secretary. The discussions concerned a book that William Manchester was about to publish, entitled *The Death of a President*.

In 1964, Jacqueline Kennedy, the late president's widow, and Robert Kennedy had contracted with Manchester to write an authorized version of the assassination in an attempt to pre-empt other writers from exploiting the subject. Manchester was given privileged access to materials collected by the Warren Commission and exclusive access to everyone who counted in the Kennedy administration.

The Kennedys' imprimatur would have made Manchester's book significant regardless of the actual text. But no one was exactly prepared for what came from his pen. Manchester portrayed the Kennedy administration as the contemporary equivalent of the mythical Camelot of old Britain, and Johnson was depicted as an unworthy usurper who grabbed power with unseemly haste. Moreover, Johnson emerged as someone who epitomized the forces of violence and irrationality in Texas that allegedly led to the JFK assassination. It was almost as if Robert Kennedy had written a script for Manchester to follow.

The contrast between Manchester's account and what most Americans had thought was a dignified, if brutally swift, assumption of power by Johnson in 1963 could not have been more stark. When the Kennedys belatedly attempted to enjoin publication of Manchester's book in December 1966, it had the effect of turning a sure best-seller into an unprecedented publishing phenomenon.

It has long been recognized that Manchester violated the gentlemanly rules by which

reputable publishers—in this case Harper & Row—then treated sitting presidents. As Fortas vividly put it during one taped conversation with LBJ, Manchester's work represented nothing less than a "declaration of war" on Johnson by the Kennedy forces. Still, what had not been known was Johnson's private response to the so-called "battle of the book." The president's long and painful conversations with Fortas and Moyers reveal that Johnson regarded the book as nothing less than an existential attack on his legitimacy. It was one thing to attack his policies on Vietnam and civil rights, and Johnson was thin-skinned about that. But through Manchester, Robert Kennedy appeared bent on tarnishing Johnson's "finest hour"—his assumption of the presidency in 1963 under the most trying circumstances imaginable.

As seen by LBJ, recasting the transfer of power to Johnson's disadvantage was the first step in paving the way for a Kennedy restoration—not in 1972, after Johnson had served out his maximum time in office, but in 1968. And just as LBJ feared, RFK would indeed run in [1968](#), despite earlier repeated demurrals, until his own bid for the presidency was terminated by an assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, in June 1968, just hours after the New York senator had won the California primary.

The once-secret tapes from late 1966 also contain some surprising conversations with Abe Fortas. They reveal that Johnson even blamed then-Senator Robert Kennedy for mounting attacks on the *Warren Report*. After its publication in September 1964, the *Warren Report* had enjoyed a roughly two-year honeymoon in this country, during which most Americans believed that the Warren Commission had uttered the last word.

Beginning in the summer of 1966, however, critical books and articles began to be published in the mainstream media. *Life* magazine, which was then the most influential periodical in the country, and the now-defunct *Saturday Evening Post* both came out in favor of re-opening the investigation. Best-selling books, like Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* and Edward Epstein's *Inquest*, raised questions about the Commission's integrity, not all of which were easily dismissed. Johnson came to believe that these were part and parcel of Robert Kennedy's orchestrated campaign to delegitimize his presidency. Formation of the Warren Commission was arguably Johnson's first important decision, and if it could be shown that the Commission had not gotten to the bottom of what happened, Johnson would pay the political price.

It wasn't until 1967, when Johnson learned about the CIA's efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro in the early 1960s, that the president realized how wrong he had been to believe that Robert Kennedy ever fomented criticism of the Warren Report. No one had a greater stake in keeping that whole issue devoid of controversy than the attorney general. Because it was Robert F. Kennedy, after all, who had "personally managed the operation" to assassinate Castro after the Bay of Pigs, as CIA director Richard Helms told Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1975.