

## The Atlantic Monthly: The Assassination Tapes

By Max Holland

Lyndon Johnson secretly recorded many of his telephone conversations as President. The tapes provide our only window into his thoughts after hearing what was then a rumor about CIA plots to assassinate Fidel Castro—information that shaped Johnson's views of both JFK's assassination and his own presidency.

---

In July of 1973, six months after the death of Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Atlantic* published an article by a journalist and former Johnson speechwriter named Leo Janos. "The Last Days of the President," about LBJ in retirement, was elegiac in tone and fact, save for one dissonant paragraph—in which Johnson volunteered his opinion that President John F. Kennedy's assassination had been the result of a conspiracy organized from Cuba. "I never believed that [Lee Harvey] Oswald acted alone, although I can accept that he pulled the trigger," he explained to Janos. Johnson thought such a conspiracy had formed in retaliation for U.S. plots to assassinate Fidel Castro; he had found after taking office that the government "had been operating a damned Murder Inc. in the Caribbean."

Johnson's assertion generated just a ripple of attention at the time, ten years after the assassination. Conspiracy theories about the assassination had become a cottage industry, and the fact that even a former President believed in one was interesting, but only mildly so. Then, too, Kennedy's mythic stature left no room for an allegation of this nature, and Johnson's well-known penchant for exaggeration worked against him. Besides, it was easy to discount the views of a President whose term had given rise to the phrase "credibility gap." After his bitterly divisive years in office the public wanted none of Johnson's regrets, reminiscences, or revelations.

Johnson's remark was dismissed until 1975, when an extraordinary series of events, ignited by the Watergate break-in, culminated in the baring of the Central Intelligence Agency's darkest secrets—including the fact that it had indeed tried during the early 1960s to assassinate Fidel Castro. Still, the story behind Johnson's indiscretion to Janos has never been adequately understood or explained. Surely Johnson appreciated the likely consequences if his words were taken at face value. They could be devastating to the government and the nation to which he had devoted the greater portion of his life. To

answer the question of why Johnson spoke out is to understand how he himself saw his presidency.

It is possible to reconstruct the story only because Johnson secretly recorded many of his telephone conversations. Without these recordings—history with the bark off—vital information would be altogether missing. Not one of the millions of documents in the Johnson Library reveals the President's own thoughts soon after hearing what was then a rumor about CIA plots against Castro; only the recordings do. It is virtually an article of faith among historians that the war in Vietnam was the overwhelming reason the President left office a worn, bitter, and disillusioned man. But the assassination-related tapes paint a more nuanced picture—one in which Johnson's view of the assassination weighed as heavily on him as the war.

We pick up the story just after the November 1966 elections. The Republican Party had come roaring back after being trounced in 1964. The biggest bone in the President's throat, though, was not the Republicans but his own party. The once impregnable Johnson, whose roots were certifiably southern but who had governed from the left, was seen as increasingly vulnerable because of the midterm election results. He was losing the support of the party intelligentsia—a crucial segment, and one that he had always found frustratingly elusive. On the domestic front, liberals charged the President with doing too little to alleviate poverty, discrimination, and the problems of America's inner cities; as for foreign policy, there was only Vietnam.

One barometer was especially telling in Johnson's eyes: polls pitting the President against Senator Robert Kennedy, the only person considered a serious obstacle to Johnson's renomination in 1968. The idea that Johnson might face a challenge from his own party was extraordinarily disheartening. That his putative challenger was Robert Kennedy was infuriating. The most painful presidential transition in American history was bound to have had difficulties. But JFK's brother had been a unique problem for Johnson since the day of the assassination, when RFK had acted as if Johnson were an undeserving pretender rather than the legitimate successor to the presidency.

By the winter of 1967 Johnson's handling of the transition, once widely viewed as flawless, was coming under criticism. New books and press reports had kindled relentless controversy over the official version of the assassination—that is, the Warren Report, which had concluded that the shots that killed President Kennedy were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald, and that no evidence existed that Oswald was part of a conspiracy, foreign or domestic. For the first time since the report's release, in September of 1964, a plurality of Americans believed that the assassination was the culmination of a conspiracy. No less damaging to Johnson was the serialization of William Manchester's forthcoming *The Death of a President* (1967). Manchester revealed that severe strains lay behind the pageantry that had gripped America for four days in November of 1963. But, conspicuously, only one major figure emerged without dignity. Manchester depicted LBJ as an unworthy successor to JFK, a crude and boorish Vice President who had grabbed the nation's highest office with unseemly haste. Taken together, these developments continually reminded Americans of the violent and abrupt manner in which Johnson had

become President. The assassination was a wound in the body politic that had not healed, and was not being allowed to.

As he grappled with what amounted to an existential attack on his presidency, Johnson recorded two revealing telephone calls in early 1967.

On Monday, February 20, Johnson called Ramsey Clark, the acting Attorney General, because of an astonishing news story published on Friday afternoon in the *New Orleans States-Item*. The Orleans Parish district attorney, Jim Garrison, had "launched an intensive investigation into the circumstances surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy," alleging that there had been a conspiracy. Although his legal reach was limited, Garrison had subpoena power over the jurisdiction in which, he claimed, the conspiracy had been hatched.

Garrison, then forty-five, was considered a responsible, reform-minded prosecutor, albeit one with a decided flair for publicity. Like most district attorneys, he was politically ambitious. There was little on the record to suggest that he was, as it turned out, a cunning demagogue the likes of which had not been seen since the days of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Thus the almost universal response to Garrison's action was *He must have something*. By the time the President called Clark, New Orleans was at the center of a media maelstrom.



**Ramsey Clark with President Lyndon Johnson in the Oval Office, March 23, 1967.**  
(Credit: LBJ Library Photo by Yoichi Okamoto)

Clark was especially discomfited by one "nutty" aspect of the story—a rumor that Garrison was linking Johnson to the conspiracy. As fantastic as it sounded, the rumor seemed to have a credible source: the Democratic representative Hale Boggs, whose district encompassed much of New Orleans, and who had served on the Warren Commission.

Perhaps to Clark's surprise, Johnson responded to the story with equanimity, without swearing or even muttering to himself when he heard what Garrison was reported to be saying. As it happened, the rumor from New Orleans was far from the wildest one making the rounds. Johnson asked Clark if he had heard an even more fantastic rumor—one that had been personally conveyed to the President on January 16 by Drew Pearson, a syndicated columnist who was considered something of a renegade by his peers. The

story was that the CIA had sent men into Cuba on a mission to assassinate Fidel Castro after the 1961 Bay of Pigs debacle. Pearson also said that Robert Kennedy had been directly involved.

Little wonder that Johnson received the news from New Orleans with such restraint. He professed to Clark that he found Pearson's story "incredible," but he could hardly have done otherwise. It would have been political suicide for Johnson to spread, or be associated with spreading, a rumor so potentially damaging to Kennedy. Johnson probably believed that if Garrison was on to anything, it might be strands from Pearson's story—which, after all, led back to Washington. Garrison might simply have been mistaken about which Washington doorstep the scandal led to. Johnson was not worried about being personally implicated by either story.

As he always did when faced with a ticklish political-legal problem, Johnson had consulted at length with his longtime counsel, Abe Fortas, even though Fortas was by then on the Supreme Court. Johnson's idea of what to do about the Garrison and Pearson developments was essentially the advice Fortas had given him: watch them both carefully; start a file; don't interfere; see how they play out.

---

### **MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1967, 9:40 A.M.** **Call to Acting Attorney General Ramsey Clark**

CLARK: I think that what he [Jim Garrison] is workin' on must be the associations that Oswald had in the three or four months that he was down there [in New Orleans] in '62 [and] '63. I doubt ... I think it'd just be incredible if he [Garrison] had anything that went beyond that. I think this subject is so volatile and emotional, though, that it could get confused and obscured.

[*Uncomfortably and hesitantly*] I had heard that Hale Boggs was sayin' [that] he—Garrison—was sayin' that ... or privately around town [was saying] that it [the assassination] could be traced back [to you] ... or that you could be found in it someplace, which ... I can't believe he's been sayin' that. The Bureau says they haven't heard any such thing, and they got lots of eyes and ears.

'Course, that was a [credible] fella like Hale Boggs. But Hale gets pretty emotional about people [like Garrison] that he really doesn't like, and people who have fought him and been against him, and I would be more inclined to attribute it to that. Either that, or this guy Garrison [is] just completely off his rocker.

JOHNSON: Who did Hale tell this to?

CLARK [*somewhat in disbelief*]: Apparently Marvin [Watson].<sup>1</sup>

## Washington Decoded

JOHNSON [*aside to Watson, who was in the room*]: [Did] Hale tell you that—Hale Boggs—that this fella [Garrison, this] district attorney down there, said that this is traced to me or somethin'?

WATSON: Privately he [Garrison] was using your name as having known about it [the assassination]. I said [to Boggs], Will you give this information to Barefoot Sanders?<sup>2</sup> Ramsey was out of town—this was Saturday night. [Boggs] said, I sure will. So I asked the operator to get Barefoot and Ramsey together, and they did.

JOHNSON [*to Clark*]: Yeah, I don't know about it. They don't ever let me in on it, Marvin and Jake [Jacobsen] over here, so you have to call me direct.<sup>3</sup>

CLARK: Well—

JOHNSON: They just think this stuff's for them.

CLARK: Such nutty things that ... it's awfully explosive but ... The press, really, has quite a jaundiced eye about it ... and about Garrison, so far.<sup>4</sup> I had several press interviews out in Des Moines [on] Saturday evening and afternoon, and the thrust of their questions is, What kind of nut is this?

JOHNSON: Two things I think. You know [there's] this story going around about the CIA and their tryin' to get ... sendin' in the folks to get [Fidel] Castro.

CLARK: To assassinate Castro.

JOHNSON: Have you got that full story laid out in front of you, and [do you] know what it is? Has anybody ever told you all the story?

CLARK: No.

JOHNSON: I think you oughta have that. I don't ... it's incredible. I don't believe there's a thing in the world to it, and I don't think we oughta seriously consider it. But I think you oughta know about it.

CLARK: Who would I get it from?

JOHNSON: I've had it from three or four [sources]. I've forgotten who's come in here. I'll have to check it.

CLARK: Does the Bureau have it?

JOHNSON: No, I don't think so. You might ask 'em. Pearson—Drew Pearson—came [in] and gave it to me. [Pearson] said [Edward] Morgan<sup>5</sup> told him ... [Morgan is James] Hoffa's lawyer. He [Morgan] says that they have a man that was involved, that was

## Washington Decoded

brought in to the CIA, with a number of others, and instructed by the CIA and the Attorney General [Robert Kennedy] to assassinate Castro after the Bay of Pigs [in 1961].<sup>6</sup>

CLARK [*uncomfortably*]: I've heard that ... you know, I've heard that much. I just haven't heard [any] names, and places, and ...

JOHNSON: Well, let's see who it is ... let's see. I think it would be—[it would] look very bad on us if we'd had it reported to us [a] number of times and we just didn't pay any [attention]—just laughed ... if this is true.

He [Morgan] says that his [client's] limitation—let's check it and see if [the statute of] limitation[s] does run out in November ... they say that the limitation runs out in November.<sup>7</sup> I don't know about this conspiracy, or how much—how many years [the statute of limitations runs]—

CLARK: [It'd] be six years, all right, which would be November, probably. But it [the statute of limitations would] not [run out] for a concealed situation.

JOHNSON: Well, that's what I'd think. But anyway, he [Pearson] says in November he's [Rosselli's] going to tell it. And that—

CLARK: Mr. Pearson is [going to publish the story]?

JOHNSON: No. This individual [Rosselli].<sup>8</sup>

CLARK: This individual?

JOHNSON: Yeah. And these lawyers [Morgan, for one] have it.

There's just all kinds of things that come to me every day. I don't pay any attention to 'em, but maybe I was a little worried this mornin' because one of my lawyer friends told me I oughta call you and talk to you about it.<sup>9</sup> So [that] you'll have a file that protects you, that you just don't look like they report these things to us and we just throw 'em overboard and say, Well, we don't like 'em and it['s] not what we wanna hear. So we're not gonna do anything about it.

But anyway, [the story is] that following this, Castro said—they [the plotters] had these pills, and they're supposed to take 'em when they caught 'em, and they didn't get to take their pills—so he [Castro] tortured 'em. And they told him all about it, and who was present and why they did it. So he [Castro] said, okay. We'll just take care of that. So then he called Oswald and a group in, and told them to ... about this meetin', and go set it up and get the job done.

CLARK: Uh-hmm.

JOHNSON: Now that's their story. And I talked to Abe [Fortas] about it first, and he just said, Well, it's so incredible that ... he'd do it.<sup>10</sup>

*[Brief discussion of controversy over FBI wiretapping.]*

Now here's what I called about. I just think that if you haven't heard that, maybe you oughta put yourself in a position to either hear Pearson or whoever's circulatin' it. There've been two or three here circulatin' it to me, and Pearson was just one of 'em. But I've forgotten who the others are.<sup>11</sup> They were reputable people, or they wouldn't [have] gotten in here.

CLARK: Pearson was in last week.

JOHNSON: Who?

CLARK: I said, Pearson was in to see me last week and sat here for thirty [or] forty minutes [and] never mentioned anything about it.

JOHNSON: Well, he came to see me ... came to see me in the [Executive] Mansion, oh, I'd say a month ago.<sup>12</sup> And there was before that, one or two others, but I can't remember who. They were responsible people. But it sounded just so [wild]... just like your tellin' me that Lady Bird was taking dope. I just wouldn't pay much attention to it. If I'm seein' her every day, I just don't believe that that was involved.

Anyway, I'll try to think of the other names and give 'em to you. He's the only one I can remember now, and I don't credit it ... I credit it ninety-nine [and] ninety-nine one-hundredths percent untrue. But that's somethin' I think we oughta know has been reported, and y'all oughta do what you think oughta be done to protect yourself.

*[Clark and the President continue to discuss how to monitor Garrison's investigation without seeming to be either too interested or too uninterested.]*

---

By late February several of Jim Garrison's top aides were begging him to drop his investigation. The sudden death (from a brain aneurysm) of his ostensible chief witness, David Ferrie, was a golden opportunity, they privately told him: it provided a perfect excuse to halt the probe. "Are you crazy?" Garrison responded. "Don't you realize that we are on the verge of solving one of the crimes of the century?"<sup>13</sup>

On March 1 Garrison ordered the arrest of Clay Shaw, one of New Orleans's most esteemed and civic-minded businessmen, for conspiring to assassinate President Kennedy. The city was dumbstruck, as were some of the aides in the DA's office. But few people other than Shaw's friends and lawyers believed that a district attorney would be so

reckless and irresponsible as to arrest a man without substantial evidence. *Garrison must have something.*

These events unfolded while John Connally, the governor of Texas, who had been wounded in the Kennedy assassination, was in New York publicizing the next World's Fair, which was scheduled to open in San Antonio in April of 1968. Although Connally was bent on generating attention for the exposition, reporters wanted only to talk to him about the arrest. The feverish reporting eventually got to Connally, who had always concurred with the overall findings of the Warren Commission even though he disputed its "single-bullet theory."<sup>14</sup> Now his certitude was shaken.

Connally called Johnson to discuss some of the reports he'd just heard. He probably expected the President to be intrigued by the news, for two reasons. He knew that Johnson's thinking often gravitated toward conspiratorial explanations. And the story Connally was hearing cast Robert Kennedy in a very unflattering light. Johnson, however, was not impressed. Initially the Garrison probe and the Pearson story had tended to reinforce each other in his mind, insofar as he had attached any credibility to them. But by now the FBI had convinced him that Garrison was a charlatan. And Abe Fortas had pointed out that upon close inspection, Drew Pearson's story seemed full of holes.

---

**THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 1967, 9:22 P.M.**  
**Call From Texas Governor John Connally**

CONNALLY: I'm sorry to bother you. Can you listen to me for about five minutes?

JOHNSON: Sure.

CONNALLY: All day today I have been interviewed up here ... they're continually breaking stories on this conspiracy thing ... based on what this fella, this DA in New Orleans talks about, [this DA] named Garrison.

I have just been interviewed again. And of course, I just simply say that I know nothing about it. But a newsman named Paul Smith has just been here to interview me again. They have a long story on the radio tonight, over WINS, a news radio station here in New York. Charley Payne is the [WINS] general manager, and [has] talked to me off and on all day [trying to keep] me posted on it. They [WINS] supposedly have a story from a man who saw the files in Garrison's office ... he is the DA in New Orleans. I don't have the whole story, but here's what they say.

That Garrison has information that would prove that there were four assassination [teams] ... assassins in the United States, sent here by [Fidel] Castro, or Castro's people. [Sent]

not by Castro himself, but one of his lieutenants. One team was picked up in New York ... but did not ... was picked up and interviewed by the FBI and the Secret Service, but did not reveal a great deal of information which was available.

One of the teams was composed of Lee Harvey Oswald; this fella [Clay] Shaw, that has just been arrested in New Orleans yesterday; and the [deceased] man [David] Ferrie; plus one other man. They were teams of four. And there were two other teams that I know nothing about.

WINS Radio has had some reporters, according to the media here, in Cuba ... working on various angles of this thing for the past [few] days. They also have a team of reporters in New Orleans with Garrison. In Cuba they found, according—[and] this is very confidential, and all of this is not goin' on the air ... at all.<sup>15</sup> But in Cuba ... and the two reporters that they had there were working from different angles and came together with exactly the same story.

The story—that they're not going to publish—is that after the [1962] missile crisis, President Kennedy and [Nikita] Khrushchev had made a deal to leave Castro in power. But about six months after the missile crisis was over, the CIA was instructed to assassinate Castro ... and sent teams into Cuba. Some of 'em were captured and tortured, and Castro and his people—and I assume Che Guevara—heard the whole story.<sup>16</sup> The information they have here, which they're not gonna run, is that President Kennedy did not [issue] the order to the CIA, but that some other person extremely close to President Kennedy did. They did not name the man ... but the inference was very clear. The inference was ... that it was his brother [who] ordered the CIA to send a team into Cuba to assassinate Castro. Then one of Castro's lieutenants, as a reprisal measure, sent four teams in[to] the United States to assassinate President Kennedy. [And] that Lee Harvey Oswald was [one of the] members of the team operating out of New Orleans.

Now this is the story that they think they have. This is the information that was given to me tonight, less than an hour ago, by a reporter named Paul Smith who came here to [indistinct] Charley Payne, whom I knew in Texas. [Payne was] a radio man down there and he's now the general manager of WINS.

I thought this would be of interest to you. I know nothing more about it than that, but I thought you oughta know that.

JOHNSON: Good. This is confidential too. We've had that story on about three occasions, and the people here say that there's no basis for it.

CONNALLY: Hmm.

JOHNSON: I have had some ... I've given a lot of thought to it. First, one of [Jimmy] Hoffa's lawyers went to one of our mutual friends—

CONNALLY: Yeah.

## Washington Decoded

JOHNSON: —and asked him to come and relay that to us ... just about like you have related it.<sup>17</sup> [A] week or two passed, and then Pearson came to me, Drew Pearson—

CONNALLY: Yeah.

JOHNSON: —[and he] told me that the lawyer, Edward Morgan here [in Washington], had told him the same thing and said that they would plead ... they would tell all the story after November when the [statute of] limitation[s] ran out. I don't know ... our lawyer [Ramsey Clark] said they couldn't believe that there's any [statute of] limitation[s] on a [concealed] conspiracy, but ... [Then] I talked to another one or two of our good lawyers that I have recognized—

CONNALLY: Yes, sir.

JOHNSON: —[who's] pretty high-placed, a few months ago—

CONNALLY: Yes, sir.<sup>18</sup>

JOHNSON: He evaluated [it] pretty carefully and said that it was ridiculous.

With this CIA thing breaking and the thing turning, as it did, in reconstructing the requests that were made of me back there, at the [beginning], right after I became President, I have talked to some more [people] about it, and I've got the A[ttorney] G[eneral] coming down to see me tomorrow night ... to spend a weekend with me.<sup>19</sup> I thought I'd go over it with him again just so that they could ... so [the FBI director J. Edgar] Hoover and 'em could watch it very carefully.

They say that ... there's not anything to the Garrison story, [at] least Hoover says so, as near as he can tell. He says that they interviewed Ferrie, and they interviewed this other fella [Dean Andrews], very carefully and closely.<sup>20</sup> And the fella [Andrews] claims that he got a call from Oswald, but they [the FBI] can't find any record of it. And the doctor that had him [Andrews] under surveillance said that he wasn't in a position to talk on November the twenty-third, and [that] he [was] under very heavy sedation.

And that the [Clay] Shaw thing is a phony, and that Ferrie died of natural causes, and that that was a phony. But that—some of these same sources that were preventin' ... tryin' to involve this jail thing ... have been feeding stuff to Garrison as they did here.<sup>21</sup>

I don't know whether there's any basis for it or not. I noticed even Larry—Larry Blackmon, yesterday, was in to see me on another matter—and he started makin' a big pitch about this other situation.<sup>22</sup> So I don't know how much of it is being fed out through their network and through their channels, and how much of it anybody would know. It's pretty hard to see how ... we would know directly ... what Castro did.

CONNALLY: Yeah.

JOHNSON: The story varies a good deal. If you go to lookin' at it [hard], as Abe said, who is it that's seen Castro? Or heard from Castro? Or knows Castro ... that's [in a position to] ... [who] could be ... confirming all this? [Fortas said] that we just hear that this is what he did, but nobody points to how we hear it.

CONNALLY: Yeah.

JOHNSON: So we will look into it, and I appreciate very much your callin' me, and I'll try to bear this in mind. I may have you talk to the other fella when you get back home, just for a minute, because I think that it's somethin' we have to be aware of and watch, without gettin'—

CONNALLY: Caught either way. He [Payne] made me promise—

JOHNSON: —caught either way.

*[Brief discussion about Robert Kennedy's call for a pause in the bombing of North Vietnam.]*

CONNALLY: I just thought [that] since this was out in the communications—

JOHNSON: Yeah ... yeah, I think that's right. I think that's good ... and I think it's right. I think—

CONNALLY: I don't know how ... I don't know what either. I thought it might tie in with somethin' you knew, and I don't want to know anything. I don't need to know it, but I just wanted [you] to know—

JOHNSON: Well ... no ... I've told you all I know. That's all we know. And the FBI thinks that both Ferrie and Shaw are frauds—I mean, that Garrison is usin' 'em as a fraud, that they have interviewed both of 'em at great length.

CONNALLY: Yeah.

JOHNSON: They have heard these things, and they interviewed 'em back in [1963-1964], for the Warren Commission.<sup>23</sup> They do not give any credit to it, but we can't ever be sure, and we just want to keep watchin' and so on [and] so forth.

CONNALLY: Okay, sir. I'm sorry to disturb you.

JOHNSON: Thank you, Johnny.

---

On March 3, 1967, the day after Johnson spoke with Connally, Jack Anderson, Drew Pearson's associate, broke the story of the alleged plots against Castro.<sup>24</sup> The column began, "President Johnson is sitting on a political H-bomb, an unconfirmed report that Senator Robert Kennedy may have approved an assassination plot [against Castro] which then possibly backfired against his late brother." The column was so thinly sourced—it admitted that the story was a rumor—that *The Washington Post* and the *New York Post* refused to publish it. But hundreds of other newspapers went ahead. Anderson had rushed into print almost certainly because he feared being scooped by Jim Garrison. The column observed that the allegation it described "may have started New Orleans' flamboyant District Attorney Jim Garrison on his investigation of the Kennedy assassination," but that insiders "believe he is following the wrong trails."

Spurred on by the column, Ramsey Clark finally did what Johnson had suggested during their conversation on February 20: he asked the FBI what it knew about the matter. On March 6 the FBI prepared what is surely one of the most astonishing memoranda in its history. The heading alone was enough to set hearts palpitating at the CIA: "Central Intelligence Agency's Intentions to Send Hoodlums to Cuba to Assassinate Castro." The FBI knew far less than it thought it did about the covert operation, but its information was reliable on three vital points: the CIA did try to have Castro assassinated during the early 1960s; it employed members of the Cosa Nostra in this effort; and Attorney General Robert Kennedy knew about both the plots and the mob's involvement. Before receiving this memo, Johnson had dismissed the rumor as no more credible than the idea that his wife was on drugs. Now he had to grapple with the implications of the revelation and what he should do about it, if anything.

One of his first impulses was to talk to Chief Justice Earl Warren. In the early evening of March 13 Johnson met privately with Warren for forty minutes, with only Marvin Watson, the White House staffer who served as liaison with the FBI, in attendance. Little is known about this meeting. Since January, Warren had been aware of the story that the CIA had utilized the Mafia to try to assassinate Castro; Pearson had told him three days after telling Johnson. But until he stepped into the Oval Office that evening, he did not know that the story was true. Warren's rock-solid belief in the report that bears his name must have been weakened, at least momentarily.

The meeting had two consequences. The Chief Justice was, of course, thoroughly conversant with the evidence against Oswald, and he probably renewed Johnson's confidence in that part of the Warren Report. But the finding that Oswald was responsible for all the shots fired in Dealey Plaza didn't rule out a conspiracy. And now there was more reason than ever to believe that Fidel Castro had instigated a counterplot in retaliation for attempts on his life. So Johnson, perhaps with Warren's encouragement, became determined to get the rest of the story from the CIA.

On March 22 he asked Richard Helms, who had been the CIA liaison to the Warren Commission in 1964 and the director of the Agency since June of 1966, to prepare a full report on the allegations in Anderson's column. It is not known whether the President divulged to Helms what he already knew from the FBI memorandum, or whether he

pretended to find the claim outlandish in order to test Helms's candor about such a sensitive matter. In either case, Johnson asked "[not] idly or in passing ... but asked directly, formally, and explicitly, in a tone and manner which did not admit of evasion," as the historian Thomas Powers has written.

The President is the one person whose requests for information the CIA must honor in full, and Helms had no alternative but to come back with a specific and complete answer. In early May he requested a private meeting with Johnson in order to present the results of an investigation conducted by the CIA's inspector general. The meeting, on May 10, began at 5:55 P.M. and lasted close to an hour. The gist of what Helms disclosed would become known only eight years later, when he testified before a Senate committee.

In that meeting, long before the fact became public knowledge, the President learned that CIA plots to assassinate Fidel Castro dated back to August of 1960—to the Eisenhower Administration, when plans for what became the Bay of Pigs invasion were reaching their final stage. In fact, Castro was supposed to be dead before the exiles landed. At the time, the idea of using members of the Cosa Nostra, which had its own interests in Cuba to protect, must have seemed clever.

The more interesting part, at least to Johnson, was what Helms told him next. After the Bay of Pigs debacle, rather than draw back, the Kennedy Administration redoubled its efforts. The injunction to the CIA was simple: get rid of Castro and his regime by any means possible, short of another invasion. The alliance with the Cosa Nostra persisted until 1962, and came to an end only because the mob bosses were never able to deliver. Efforts to remove Castro continued well into 1963. One of them was coming to a head at the time Kennedy was assassinated.

It is not known whether Johnson asked Helms under whose direction the CIA had acted. If he did, Helms presumably said that Robert Kennedy "personally managed the operation on the assassination of Castro." (This quotation is taken from what Helms told Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1975, after allegations of CIA wrongdoing began to surface in the press.) Then again, Johnson may not have bothered to ask. Edward Morgan had already told Drew Pearson about the former Attorney General's central role; in addition, it was common knowledge within the Administration that after the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy had made his brother the driving force behind the effort to overthrow Castro.

Knowing the President's conspiratorial turn of mind, Helms probably hastened to reassure Johnson that the CIA, the FBI, and the Warren Commission had all looked long and hard for a connection between Oswald and Cuba but had come up empty-handed. Persuading Johnson of that now, however, was a futile exercise (as later testimony by Helms suggests). The President was utterly convinced that something other than Oswald was behind Kennedy's assassination, and that that something involved Cuba.

One tantalizing but unanswerable question is what effect, if any, Johnson's knowledge had on Robert Kennedy's Hamlet-like indecisiveness in 1967 and early 1968 over

whether to challenge Johnson for the Democratic nomination. Kennedy probably considered the March 3 column a shot across his bow, because Pearson was known to be on very friendly terms with the President. For all Kennedy knew, *Johnson* was the source of the story, and the column was a harbinger of things to come should Kennedy decide to challenge him. (Kennedy finally did enter the race, in March of 1968.) Kennedy's response to the column, insofar as it is known, was to hurriedly search his files for any pertinent information. He also arranged to have lunch on March 4 with Richard Helms, who probably told him that the President hadn't yet asked anything about it. Still, the threat of disclosure loomed—and perhaps it motivated Kennedy's seemingly premature announcement that he fully intended to back Johnson's presumed bid for re-election. On March 2, in a dramatic address on the Senate floor, Kennedy had made his break with the Administration's policy on Vietnam official. Anderson's column appeared the next day. Two weeks later Kennedy pledged to support Johnson in 1968, calling him "an outstanding President."

Certainly, any attempt to publicize the truth would have been fraught with risks for Johnson. Kennedy partisans would have mounted a ferocious counterattack, and Johnson might have been unable to prove an allegation that would be perceived as monstrous. Also, a sitting President could hardly ignore the price the CIA and the United States would pay for admitting that the Agency had tried to assassinate Castro—and at that point, in 1967, Johnson fully expected to serve another full term. The final, unquantifiable factor was Johnson's residual loyalty to John Kennedy. Johnson had always tried to keep faith with that political partnership. As much as he might have been tempted to derail Robert Kennedy's ambition by publicizing the story, he had to have realized that JFK's reputation would have been sullied too. Johnson was "trapped between two Kennedys," in the words of the historian Paul Henggeler. "He could not openly attack Robert without implicitly attacking John."

But though Johnson said nothing publicly to advance the story about the CIA's plots against Castro, there is little doubt that the secret weighed heavily on him. His reaction to the news that Robert Kennedy had been mortally wounded on June 5, 1968, shortly after midnight California time, is revealing. Johnson was awakened almost immediately, and was not able to sleep the rest of the night.<sup>25</sup> Between telephone calls to Ramsey Clark, J. Edgar Hoover, and James Rowley, the chief of the Secret Service, Johnson doodled on a memo from the previous day. In the first hours after the shooting virtually nothing was known about Kennedy's assassin. Johnson wondered if Castro had decided that his revenge would not be complete until both Kennedy brothers were dead. He scratched out a few disjointed words: "Costra [sic] Nostra ... Ed Morgan ... send in to get Castro ... planning." By late morning, however, it was clear that Sirhan Sirhan was a disturbed loner with no apparent ties to Cuba. Johnson dropped his idea of another Cuban-instigated conspiracy.<sup>26</sup>

In the months and years that followed, Johnson remained ambivalent, torn between his loyalty to John Kennedy and his antipathy toward Robert. In October of 1968, shortly before leaving office, he volunteered a piece of information to the veteran newsman Howard K. Smith, whom he deeply respected. "I'll tell you something [about John

Kennedy's murder] that will rock you," he said. "Kennedy was trying to get to Castro, but Castro got to him first." "I was rocked all right," Smith later recalled; he begged for details. But Johnson refused to provide any, saying only, "It will all come out one day." Johnson was so obviously worn down by the bitterness of his years in office that Smith was left wondering if he had just witnessed a last bit of Johnson blarney.

After leaving office Johnson continued to seesaw between discretion and an aching desire to let the truth come out. He was interviewed in September of 1969 for a series of programs about his presidency, which were to be broadcast on CBS in three installments. As they discussed President Kennedy's assassination, Walter Cronkite asked Johnson if he was satisfied that there had been no foreign conspiracy. "I can't honestly say that I've ever been completely relieved of the fact that there might have been international connections," Johnson replied. Cronkite pushed a little harder, asking if Johnson's suspicions involved Cuba. Johnson replied, "Oh, I don't think we ought to discuss the suspicions, because there's not any hard evidence that would lead me to the conclusion that Oswald was directed by a foreign government." Three weeks before the segment aired, Johnson had second thoughts; he insisted that the exchange be deleted, on grounds of "national security." CBS reluctantly obliged; but in April of 1970 the story that Johnson "expressed fundamental doubts about the Warren Commission's conclusion" during the Cronkite interview leaked out anyway.

On June 16, 1971, Johnson received Leo Janos, the Houston bureau chief for *Time* magazine, at the Johnson Library. The meeting occurred at a propitious moment. Three days earlier *The*

*New York Times* had published the first installment in what would become known as the Pentagon Papers, a secret study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. There was much to talk about, and Johnson was in an expansive mood. Over coffee after lunch the conversation turned briefly to President Kennedy. Confident that his former speechwriter would respect the ground rules (the conversation was off the record), Johnson not only reiterated what he had told Howard K. Smith in 1968 and Walter Cronkite in 1969 but went into more detail than he ever had before, making his pregnant "Murder Inc." remark—which Janos did not publish until after Johnson's death.

---

Conspiracy books usually treat John and Robert Kennedy as innocent babes who would not have thought about dirty tricks — much less assassination plots — against Castro. But the reality was very different.

---

Lyndon Johnson might be forgiven for jumping to his conclusion about a link between Castro and Lee Harvey Oswald. In any case, his opinion on who stood behind Oswald is not what is most significant about his revelation to Janos. Rather, Johnson was trying, somewhat awkwardly, to flesh out what was from his vantage point the central story of his years in office: the mutiny of liberal Democrats against his primacy, and their unfair treatment of him. If the CIA's attempts to assassinate Castro had been known more or less contemporaneously with JFK's assassination, the Kennedy mystique would have been punctured. The public's view of Johnson's ascension to power would not have soured; at

the very least, William Manchester would not have been able to violate the conventions by which reputable publishing houses then depicted sitting Presidents. Nor would a large faction of the Democratic Party have coalesced around Robert Kennedy had his clandestine activities been known.

Johnson's motives in telling Janos about "Murder Inc." in a conversation that was off the record can only be surmised. In all likelihood they reflect how, even in retirement, he remained deeply conflicted. Johnson was reluctant to release information during his lifetime that would have tarnished the Kennedy and Eisenhower presidencies. But he must have hoped that the truth would eventually surface, and that it would influence history's verdict on his own.

---

<sup>1</sup> Watson was a special assistant to the President.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Barefoot Sanders was the assistant attorney general in charge of the civil division at the Justice Department.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobsen was a special counsel to the President.

<sup>4</sup> Members of the press may have been privately skeptical, but Garrison was getting a lot of attention.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan was one of the toughest, shrewdest, and best-connected criminal lawyers in town. He was particularly well plugged in to the FBI, having worked in the Bureau for seven years before striking out on his own as a lawyer, in 1947. Morgan had also served as counsel to three congressional investigations, including the 1946 investigation into the Pearl Harbor attack and a 1950 Senate investigation into Communist penetration of the State Department. During the latter he became enmeshed in a bitter feud with Joe McCarthy, who accused Morgan of being a skilled "whitewasher" of embarrassing secrets.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson did not know the name of Morgan's client. He was John Rosselli, a member of the Cosa Nostra. Rosselli's name would not surface publicly until 1971, when the journalist Jack Anderson published it in a column.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan had apparently told Rosselli that the statute of limitations for conspiring to kill someone was six years, as long as the plot had failed. Therefore, according to Morgan, Rosselli could not be prosecuted after November of 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Pearson's diary suggests that he did intend to publish the story once the statute of limitations ran out and he heard Rosselli's complete account, assuming he received permission from Morgan.

<sup>9</sup> As he revealed a moment later, Johnson had talked to Abe Fortas.

<sup>10</sup> It is not clear whether, according to Johnson, Fortas found it incredible that RFK allegedly directed assassination plots against Castro or that Castro allegedly dared to retaliate.

<sup>11</sup> At this point Pearson is the only person known to have told Johnson about assassination plots directed against Castro. But in a conversation with Texas Governor John Connally in March, Johnson would again suggest that he had heard the story from someone in addition to Pearson.

<sup>12</sup> The meeting, which was off the record, had taken place on January 16, and lasted for an hour. In his diary Pearson wrote, "I told the president about Ed Morgan's law client ... Lyndon listened carefully and made no comment. There wasn't much he could say."

<sup>13</sup> This extraordinary confrontation between Garrison and his top assistants would remain a secret for sixteen years.

<sup>14</sup> The Warren Report posited that the bullet that hit President Kennedy in the base of his neck and exited from his throat also caused all of Connally's wounds.

<sup>15</sup> Connally was referring to the fact that WINS was reporting only half the story. It broadcast the claim that President Kennedy was "murdered by a group of plotters directed from Cuba," but refrained from reporting that the group had been sent in retaliation for U.S. plots on Castro's life.

<sup>16</sup> Major Ernesto "Che" Guevara, an Argentine Communist, had been a leader of the 1959 Cuban revolution. In 1967 there was a great mystery as to his whereabouts; he had not been seen in public for two years.

<sup>17</sup> It is unclear who this "mutual friend" was.

<sup>18</sup> Connally seemed to understand that Johnson was referring to Abe Fortas. The President had met with Fortas for seventy-five minutes on January 17, the day after he first heard Pearson's story.

<sup>19</sup> The "CIA thing" the President referred to involved recent revelations that the CIA had covertly financed nongovernmental anticommunist organizations both in the United States and abroad. By "requests made of me," Johnson probably meant the decision he'd had to make after November 22 about whether to continue covert subversion of Castro's regime. (This effort gradually diminished.)

<sup>20</sup> Andrews was a colorful Louisiana character: five foot seven and 240 pounds, he was a bona fide lawyer and, simultaneously, a huckster looking to make a name for himself. In November of 1963, while hospitalized for pneumonia, Andrews claimed to have received a mysterious call from a man asking him to represent the accused assassin. A thorough FBI investigation determined that Andrews was simply seeking some of the notoriety that any counsel for Oswald was sure to receive; the lead, like the FBI's contemporaneous

investigation of David Ferrie, turned up nothing with any bearing on the President's assassination. Four years later these would be the kinds of meaningless shards Garrison had the power to exploit.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson seems to have been suggesting that the same lawyers who fed Drew Pearson the story about assassination plots against Castro had been in contact with Garrison.

<sup>22</sup> A real-estate developer from Fort Worth, Blackmon was the president of the National Home Builders Association.

<sup>23</sup> Although the FBI had examined an allegation involving Ferrie, it had never investigated Clay Shaw in connection with the assassination. Johnson was probably just repeating what Ramsey Clark had said earlier in the day. In response to questions from the media, Clark erroneously asserted that Shaw had been investigated by the FBI in 1963, and cleared. Clark's error would not be acknowledged for three months.

<sup>24</sup> Pearson had told Johnson the story would not be published at least until November, but he had made that assurance before Garrison arrived on the scene. On the day of Clay Shaw's unexpected arrest, Pearson was en route to Latin America and apparently unreachable. Anderson, who often shared the byline on the column, took it upon himself to publish the story. "It was a poor story in the first place, and violated a confidence in the second place," Pearson later noted in his diary. "Finally it reflected on Bobby Kennedy without actually pinning the goods on him."

<sup>25</sup> "There was an air of unreality about the whole thing—a nightmare quality," Lady Bird Johnson wrote in her diary. "It couldn't be true. We must have dreamed it. It had all happened before."

<sup>26</sup> In his biography of Robert Kennedy, Evan Thomas suggested (on the basis of these handwritten notes) that Johnson toyed with the idea of reviving Pearson's story on June 4, the day Kennedy won the California primary and appeared headed for the Democratic nomination. But the notes, although written on a memo dated June 4, were clearly identified by the secretary who collected them as being from "June 5, 1968 a.m."—that is, after Kennedy had been shot. They probably indicate Johnson's initial thoughts about who might have been responsible for the attack, rather than any effort to cast aspersions on Kennedy's past.

---

This excerpt from *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes* (Knopf, 2004) was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in June 2004.