

The Kennedy Assassination Tapes:
HNN Review

The Kennedy Assassination Tapes:
The White House Conversations of
Lyndon B. Johnson Regarding the Assassination,
the Warren Commission, and the Aftermath

By Max Holland

Alfred A. Knopf. 453 pp. \$26.95

By Mel Ayton

Max Holland first established his credentials as a JFK assassination expert through his painstaking research into how conspiracy theorists had misled the public about the role the CIA and other intelligence agencies played in the assassination. He was also one of the first researchers to provide evidence which established that a Soviet disinformation campaign had been responsible in creating many myths about alleged US Government involvement in the death of JFK. Holland's research concerning Soviet efforts in the dissemination of false information about CIA involvement in the assassination is bolstered by Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin's *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*, which establishes the nature of KGB disinformation techniques in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s.

Holland's research into New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's bogus investigation of the assassination has never been seriously challenged. Together with Patricia Lambert's thorough examination of Garrison's investigation (*False Witness*) Holland's work has done much to demolish long-standing myths associated with the alleged New Orleans-based conspiracy to kill JFK. Through his excellent articles (in *The Nation*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *The Atlantic* and *American Heritage*) detailing how conspiracy theorists had skewered the truth about the assassination, Holland has provided the American public with an understanding of how and why conspiracy ideas captured the imagination of the American public for the past four decades. His research into the work of the Warren Commission also established how conspiracy theorists had wrongly concluded that Commission members deliberately sought to cover up the truth about the assassination. His forthcoming book about the Warren Commission is eagerly awaited.

It was therefore surprising to read a review of Max Holland's new book, *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes*, that did not recognise the author's previous contributions to the subject. I am always suspicious of anonymous reviews by newspapers and weeklies which cover subjects as complex as the JFK assassination. What credentials and authority do the reviewers possess and how much time have they spent researching the subject? With this in mind I read *Publishers Weekly* review of Max Holland's book.

It should be clear to many JFK assassination researchers that *Publishers Weekly* has not understood the importance of Holland's work and how it has advanced the knowledge and understanding of LBJ's role in the events of November 22, 1963. The magazine's writer maintains that "...much of Holland's book is redundant with Michael Beschloss's recent and better executed *Taking Charge* ...the bulk of the tapes in question...have for the most part, already been thoroughly digested, parsed and summarised..."

However, *Publishers Weekly* has misrepresented Holland's contribution. The writer is obviously unaware of the author's unique expertise in matching the contents of the tapes with his own erudition in the field of JFK assassination studies, an erudition that does not extend to most writers who previously used the LBJ presidential recordings. What differentiates Holland from previous writers is the way he combines his extensive knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the assassination and the subsequent government enquiries with his own work transcribing and interpreting the presidential recordings.

Although the books written by historians Michael Beschloss and Jeff Shesol (*Mutual Contempt*) have been rightly acclaimed they are, in part, flawed. Both writers have taken crucial assassination-related conversations out of context in their books *Taking Charge* and *Mutual Contempt*. Holland's superior knowledge and intimate familiarity with the presidential recordings has allowed him to correct the record. This can be no better exemplified than in the way Holland provides the correct context to many of the statements LBJ made about the assassination, the Warren Commission investigation and the endless speculation that went on between 1963/69 about the possibility of a conspiracy to murder President Kennedy.

Holland correctly relates how LBJ's oft-repeated assertions about a 'JFK conspiracy' have, over the years, led conspiracy advocates to lay claim to having 'proof' that a conspiracy existed. But Holland's background knowledge of the assassination and also his knowledge of the way LBJ verbalised his thoughts is crucial. As he demonstrates, comments made by Senator Richard Russell to LBJ – 'I don't believe it' – and LBJ's reply 'I don't believe it either' – have been misused by numerous writers to imply that both men rejected the conclusions of the Warren Commission investigation. However, as Holland correctly points out, both men were discussing the single-bullet theory, not the conclusions of the Warren Commission investigation. Holland also corrects previous interpretations by showing how both men's rejection of the single-bullet theory was not based on considered judgements but simple opinion. At the time of the conversation in question both men had not been privy to the ballistics evidence which supported the theory. And LBJ's manner of speaking, Holland states, his 'well-known penchant to exaggerate and speak for effect', has long been recognised by LBJ historians.

Furthermore, Holland, unlike Beschloss, puts the assassination-related conversations all in one volume together with his extensive added commentary. The result is a clearer understanding of what transpired when LBJ became embroiled in the conspiracy controversy and the related Warren investigation. Holland also takes the story to the

waning days of LBJ's presidency.

This excellent book quickly and decisively silences the conspiracy critics who believe that LBJ had a hand in the murder of his predecessor. And, whilst conceding that LBJ may have harboured fears that foreign involvement in the assassination was a clear possibility, Holland nevertheless presents LBJ's musings in the correct context of Cold War realities and the fears the conflict engendered; fears that led LBJ into speculation about whether or not Lee Harvey Oswald had been acting alone. LBJ had been conflicted as to whether or not conspirators murdered JFK. However, he was never able to substantiate his suspicions beyond simple guesswork. In the end he merely speculated that Castro was likely to blame.

This book is by far the most lucid and compelling account of the role President Johnson played in the investigation of President Kennedy's assassination. His book should be read not only by JFK assassination researchers but also future LBJ historians.

Mel Ayton is the author of *The JFK Assassination: Dispelling the Myths & Challenging the Conspiracy Theorists* (Woodfield, 2002); *A Racial Crime: James Earl Ray and the Murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (ArcheBooks, 2005), and *The Forgotten Terrorist: Sirhan Sirhan and the Murder of Senator Robert F. Kennedy* (Potomac, 2007).