1964 Transcripts Show LBJ Uncertain on Vietna

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In the first few months after he assumed the presidency following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson was unsure about how to handle the growing American involvement in Vietnam, according to new material released yesterday by the LBJ Library.

Transcripts of secretly taped telephone calls the new president had with his advisers show Johnson repeatedly asked his defense secretary, Robert S. McNamara, and his national security adviser, the late McGeorge Bundy, for simple explanations of what was happening in the war. His requests came he tried to figure out where to go with an issue that would ultimately roil the country and lead to Johnson's 1968 decision not to seek a second term.

"The tapes reveal a Johnson very different from the Oliver Stone caricature of a president coming to office hellbent in getting deeply involved in a war in Vietnam," presidential historian Michael Beschloss said yesterday, referring to Stone's film "JFK," which implied Kennedy was assassinated because he opposed expanding the war in Vietnam. Beschloss, who has reviewed the materials is writing a book based on hundreds of the Johnson presidential tapes to be released in coming months.

"What is a one-sentence statement of what our policy is out there?" Johnson asked McNamara in a telephone call March 21, 1964, one of 78 taped conversations released yesterday. McNamara was calling to say he was sending the president a speech the defense secretary was planning to give the next week to "take a lot of the heat off of you on that Vietnam issue."

In an earlier conversation with McNamara on March 2, Johnson ruminated about the choices facing him on Vietnam and his desire for a memo from the defense secretary: "a couple of pages . . . four-letter words and short sentences, several paragraphs so I can read it and study it and commit it to memory, not for the purpose of using it now."

He then went on to outline three options for dealing with Vietnam that he could present to the American public. "We could send our own divisions in there and our own Marines in there and they could start attacking the Viet Cong," Johnson said. "We could come out of there . . . and as soon as we get out they could swallow up South Vietnam. . . . Or we can say this is the Vietnamese war and they've got 200,000 men, they're untrained, and we've got to bring their morale up . . . and we can train them how to fight . . . and the 200,000 ultimately will be able to take care of these 25,000 [Vietcong] and that after considering all of these . . . it seems offers the best alternative to follow."

In a phrase that grimly forecast the future, Johnson added, "Then, if the latter has failed, then, we have to make another decision, but at this point it has not failed."

Beschloss said the newly released tapes show "a president agonized by a number of conflicting purposes. He wants to do what's right by the Free World; he is worried that he will be criticized by Kennedy people if he strays from his [Kennedy's] intentions. And he wants to make sure the Republicans cannot denounce him for being soft on communism."

The transcripts also show the new president was concerned that his staff was putting forward an administration line on committing forces to Vietnam before Johnson was ready. In a sharp March 4, 1964, call to Walt Rostow, one of his national security advisers, Johnson asked if Rostow had told then-Washington Post diplomatic correspondent Chalmers Roberts that a speech by Johnson earlier that week had meant "an offensive in North Vietnam" was on the horizon?

When Rostow responded by saying he had talked to Roberts and other reporters about the administration's position "to hold Southeast Asia," Johnson retorted: "Number one . . . I wouldn't talk to them [reporters] at all. Number two . . . the president doesn't know the position of the administration, so you can't know it."

"What we are seeing," Beschloss said, "rather than a president who has fiercely made up his mind and unwilling to listen to advice . . . we see a president at a genuine pivotal point."

A more familiar picture of Johnson bullying his staff comes through in a Feb. 1, 1964, call to R. Sargent Shriver, a Kennedy brother-in-law who was then head of the Peace Corps. Johnson breaks the ne Shriver that in a news conf two hours hence Johnson will Shriver to head a $1 billion p program because, Johnson sa needed to satisfy the press something . . . I don't want to decisive."

Shriver protested, saying he ed time to prepare the Peace for his departure. He also v time to study how a povert gram was going to be run.

Johnson replied, "Hell no. T studied and studied. They w know who in the hell's going this, and it's leaked all ov newspapers for weeks and that you're going to do it, and be shooting me with ques they're already doing it."

FILE PHOTO/THE WASHING

President Johnson confers with R. Sargent Shriver, who was appointed to head a $1 billion poverty program in 1

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