Hugh Sidey

Reach Out and Twist an Arm

"PEOPLE WERE GRIEVIN' AND CRYIN' AND HIDIN' their babies under the bed," Lyndon Johnson once recalled about the hours and days following the assassination of John Kennedy in Dallas. "It wasn't my choice, but I was the only President they had. I did the best I knew how."

And he did it his way. The privately coarse and coercive Johnson was etched in fascinating detail in tapes and transcripts released last week by the L.B.J. Library of some of the hundreds of phone calls Johnson made to power brokers and political friends as he sought to steady the government and reassure the country in the days following the Kennedy assassination. They reveal, like few things before, this tumultuous man who responded to duty, this raw and rough-riding man of power who gloried in authority and drama even while being sensitive to tragedy.

"I can't sit still," he told House Speaker John McCormack, who was trying to work out a time after the Kennedy funeral for Johnson to address a joint session of Congress. "I've got to keep the government going. I met with the Cabinet this afternoon. We've got the budget to resolve next week. But I don't want the family to feel that I am having any lack of respect, so I have a delicate wire to walk there."

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He asked columnist Walter Lippmann, "Could I drop by and bum a drink off of you?" Replied Lippmann: "Come right along."

Georgia's venerable Senator Richard Russell had been instrumental in making Johnson Senate majority leader, and a deferential L.B.J. had always claimed, "Dick Russell is like a daddy to me." Being President brought some change. "You never turned your country down," said Johnson, whose voice on the tape hammered at Russell's reluctance to serve on what would become the Warren Commission to investigate J.F.K.'s death. "Well, I could," responded Russell. "Well, this is not me; this is your country," said Johnson. "You're going to do it, and don't tell me what you can do and what you can't, because I can't arrest you, and I'm not going to put the FBI on you, but you're goddam sure going to serve, I'll tell you that." Russell knew he was beaten and finally replied, "I'm at your command, and I'll do anything . . . where the country is involved." Johnson hammered him again: "You're going to be at my command as long as I'm here."

Johnson, himself a master political conspirator, had deep suspicions about Kennedy's murder. "How many shots were fired," he asked FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in another call. Three, Hoover replied. "Any of them fired at me?" No, said Hoover. "All three at the President?" asked L.B.J., seeming to wonder. "All three at the President," responded Hoover.

The extensive exchanges between Johnson and Hoover illuminate a wary but important relationship of the time. Johnson loved the inside dirt that Hoover, then 68, often whispered to him. Hoover used his confidential files to hang on to power long past retirement age. Once when an aide suggested Johnson get rid of Hoover, the President replied, "Son, when you have a skunk it is better to have him inside the tent pissing out than outside pissing in."

Often after Johnson won his way over someone, he would tell the story to others with relish, burnishing and enlarging the tale as he went. He did that in another call to Senator Russell relating how he had persuaded Chief Justice Earl Warren to chair the assassination commission. "You know what happened? Bobby [Kennedy] and them went up to see [Warren] today, and he turned them down cold and said no. Two hours later, I called him and ordered him down here, and he didn't want to come, and I insisted he come. He came down here, and he told me 'no' twice . . . And I said, 'All I want you to do is look at the facts and bring any other facts you want in here and determine who killed the President, and I think you can put on your uniform of World War I . . . fat as you are . . . and do anything you could to save one American life . . . And I'm surprised that you, the Chief Justice of the United States, would turn me down.' And he started crying. He said, 'Well, I won't turn you down. I'll just do whatever you say.' "

These tapes show Johnson at a time when he thought he could talk openly and unctuously to the media. His wilder moments, while they were the endless topic of inside gossip and mirth, rarely surfaced in print. That time would end within a few months, but not before he had one last fling at fulsome flattery. From a call to the New York *Times*' Arthur Krock: "Well, Arthur, you're a mighty wonderful friend . . . and I need you now more than I ever did before, and I read your column just this minute . . . and I just thought how fortunate I was to have known you and to have your confidence." To Katharine Graham, head of the Washington *Post:* "Hello, my sweetheart, how are you . . . You know, there's only one thing I dislike about this job . . . that I'm married and I can't ever get to see you. I hear that sweet voice on the telephone . . . and I would like to break out of here and be like one of these young animals down on my ranch, jump a fence."

The rough-and-tumble, folksy ways had worked well for Johnson in the Senate's closed and clubby atmosphere and made him respected and feared among the Capitol's insiders. But his style often raised ridicule and suspicion in the national spotlight where he had to dwell as President. Life-and-death issues like the cold war and Vietnam required, more than anything, calm, study and courage—not theatrics. ■