

The White House Tapes: Something Missing?

By Donald Gibson, Ph. D.

In 1997, Simon and Schuster published *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*. Editing and commentary are by Michael R. Beschloss. The book presents transcriptions of White House tapes beginning on the day of President Kennedy's assassination and continuing into 1964. A new and more fully automated taping system had been installed in the White House during President Kennedy's final trip.

The focus of this brief discussion will be quite narrow. We will look only at the way Beschloss (or someone at Simon & Schuster) treated two extremely important phone calls. Full and accurate transcriptions of those calls do provide a crucial part of the story of how the Warren Commission was created. Such transcripts are available at the LBJ Library. The creation of the Commission was a critical part of the initial stage of the cover-up, similar in importance to the activities of certain media entities during the hours following the assassination, and of the Alan Belmont-J. Edgar Hoover controlled FBI operation.

These two phone calls, one on November 24th and the other on the 25th, are the beginning of an effort to get President Lyndon Johnson to a) create a presidential commission to review evidence gathered by the FBI and perhaps do a small investigation, and then to b) issue an official report carrying the full weight of the federal government behind it. LBJ was opposed to this and did not give in until sometime between the afternoon of November 25 and November 28. (Note: For a full description of how the Commission was created, see the author's articles in *Probe*, May-June, 1996, and July-August, 1996, or *Mid-America: An Historical Review*, Fall, 1997.)

The first person to suggest a presidential commission to the White House was Eugene Rostow, Dean of the Yale Law School and a member, with Allen Dulles and John J. McCloy, of the then fairly exclusive Council on Foreign Relations. Rostow began this effort within minutes of Oswald's murder on November 24. Until Oswald was murdered, the Texas authorities had clear priority (although the FBI had partly usurped that priority). Rostow first tried to get Deputy Attorney General Katzenbach to press for a commission, but he became concerned that Katzenbach was not going to act on this so he called Bill Moyers, aide to President Johnson. Rostow got Moyers to promise that he would bring up the idea of a commission with LBJ.

How does Beschloss (or Simon & Schuster) handle this first attempt to get LBJ to create a commission? He doesn't. Incredibly, he decides to exclude this call from the book. An eminent historian has a phone call relating to the creation of the most famous and controversial presidential commission in American history and he just leaves it out. He does include a conversation later in the same afternoon between LBJ and Representative Jack Brooks which is devoted to dinner plans.

A transcript of the other important call related to the creation of the Warren Commission is in the book. Well...sort of. Less than 24 hours after Rostow's calls to Katzenbach and Moyers, quintessential establishment journalist Joe Alsop called and made a more aggressive pitch to President Johnson. This time it was directly to LBJ.

Beschloss presents only part of this other historic phone call. His editing job conceals some of what is significant in this call. Also, he prefaces the transcript with his own comment which supposedly summarizes the meaning of the call. Beschloss writes:

Johnson prods one of the most powerful columnists of the time to turn *Washington Post* colleagues against the notion of a commission. (p. 32)

This is an extraordinary misrepresentation of this phone call. The purpose of the phone call was to convince Johnson to create a commission. Beschloss gives the call a different purpose and he implies that Johnson made the call and spent most of the call on the matter of the *Washington Post*. In order to do this, you would have to eliminate the first three lines of the transcript which show that Alsop called the President. Then one has to pretend that something that was, at most, secondary was primary. Beschloss does both.

There are a number of instances where significant content is excluded or misrepresented through the editing of this crucial phone conversation. For example, on page thirty-four of the book, about two-thirds of the way down the page, there are three dots at the end of LBJ's statement that if he sets up a commission he will "ruin both procedures" already in place. Those three dots represent sixteen lines spoken by Alsop. Among other things, those lines contain one of the four references in this phone call to former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and an unexplained reference to "things that the FBI says can't be used" in the report on the assassination.

On page thirty-five, six lines down from the top, Alsop is saying "I'm just suggesting." In this line, and in the next, there are three dots inserted. The reader will be mistaken if he or she assumes that those dots represent a pause or some irrelevant comment. They represent about eight lines of Alsop's words. Those words included another important reference to Dean Acheson which clearly indicates that it is Acheson who is pushing for the creation of a commission and that Alsop's phone call is on behalf of that effort.

Why would anyone decide to edit out this material? This is the second time that Acheson's name has been edited out and along with Beschloss' misleading prefatory comment, it fundamentally alters this conversation.

Dozens of lines are eliminated near the end of the conversation. Amongst the text that Beschloss deleted is yet another reference to Dean Acheson, wherein Alsop makes one last attempt to get LBJ to promise that he will talk to Acheson. LBJ does promise to do so. Alsop refers to Acheson four times in this call which was made for the purpose of talking LBJ into setting up a presidential commission. Beschloss eliminated three of those references and did other things to make this call into something it was not. There is still enough there to allow the reader to see that Alsop is pushing LBJ to create a commission. To conceal that entirely, Beschloss or Simon & Schuster would have had to have done with Alsop's phone call what they did with Rostow's: exclude it altogether. Is this a case of extreme incompetence and carelessness; or worse? People familiar with these matters will also be familiar with this choice of hypotheses. ♦