

Surprisingly, Lyndon Johnson never thought we could prevail in Vietnam. An exclusive excerpt from his secret tapes. BY MICHAEL BESCHLOSS

'I DON'T SEE ANY WAY OF WINNING'

AS GEORGE W. BUSH LAUNCHES AMERICA'S war on terrorism, we are watching a great turn of the historical wheel from the start of our last momentous war—in 1965, when Lyndon Johnson took us into the catastrophe of Vietnam.

"We learned some very important lessons in Vietnam," President Bush said last month. There are some echoes: a debate over ground troops and advisers; strong resistance on the ground; an uncertain future. But, for the moment at least, most Americans are determined to fight what we consider an essential war against terrorism. By contrast, in 1965 most of us knew or cared little about Vietnam and had not the remotest idea that LBJ's war could

ultimately kill 58,000 Americans, grind on for 10 years and culminate in America's first defeat.

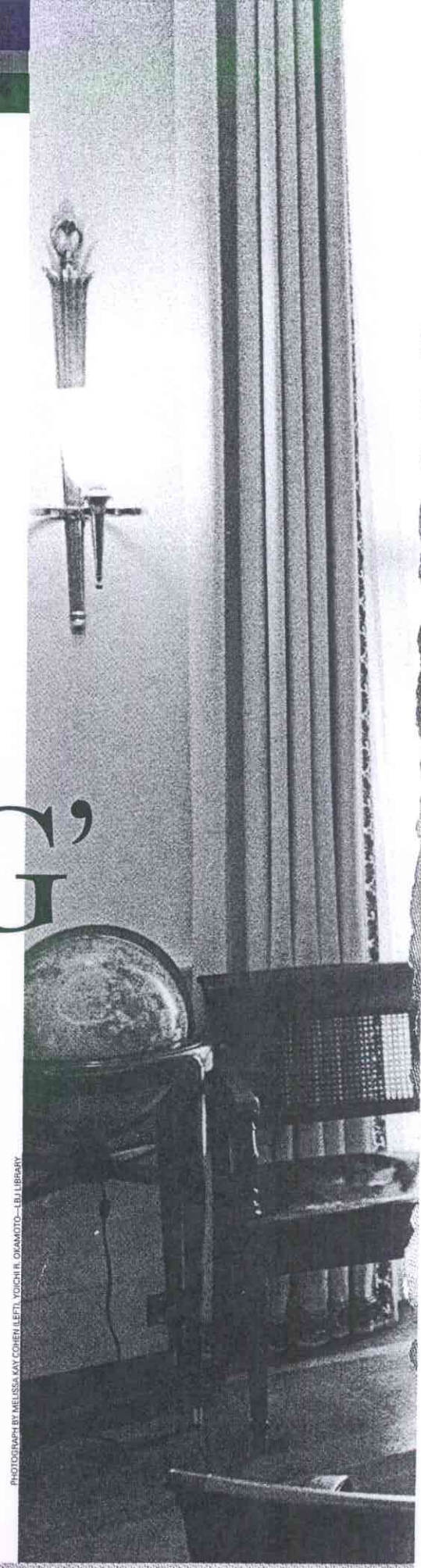
Until now, most of us presumed that LBJ launched the struggle with confidence that America could win. Indeed, in August 1965, at the moment he sent the first large number of ground combat troops to Vietnam, Johnson assured a Washington audience: "America wins the wars that she undertakes. Make no mistake about it!"

But that's not what he was really thinking. Only now can we know the best-kept and most tragic secret of Johnson's presidency: throughout the months he escalated the war from bombing to ground forces to actual combat, in private he consistently predicted to intimates that America could never win the war in Vietnam.

Johnson's secret is revealed in the thousands of tapes from 1964 and 1965 he made on his own



From "Reaching for Glory," by Michael Beschloss. © 2001 by Michael Beschloss. To be published by Simon & Schuster.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA KAY COHEN (LEFT), YOSHIKI U. OKAMOTO—ILLUSTRATION

**Lonely days: 'Oh,
I'm having hell!'**
LBJ told
Harry Truman



covert White House taping system. I have transcribed and explained these recordings, newly released by the Johnson Presidential Library, in my new book "Reaching for Glory," which will be published by Simon & Schuster this week. In the book I also include never-before-released private daily diary tapes made by LBJ's astute and protective wife, Lady Bird, recording her feelings and fears about the president's psychological and emotional state.

Nowhere in these tapes did I find Johnson making a single serious prediction of victory in Vietnam—the kind Americans heard in public when he exhorted American soldiers to "nail the coonskin to the wall." In contrast to the swaggering LBJ I saw on television as a 9-year-old boy, the private Johnson I have heard on these tapes is a driven, frightened, angry and suspicious man. Over and over he moans to those around him that he is "depressed" and "scared to death" that the war will end in catastrophe. The LBJ of the tapes is a man committing acts he knows will shatter him, his presidency and the country, but who feels utterly powerless to stop himself.

The Johnson of the tapes is convinced that he must not pull out of Vietnam. "If you let a bully come in and chase you out of your front yard," he says, "tomorrow he'll be on your porch, and the next day he'll rape your wife in your own bed." Still, he insists, he cannot defeat the Viet Cong "bully" without using nuclear weapons and "kicking off World War III."

On the tapes he confides his most dangerous private thoughts to Lady Bird. To her he cries, "I can't get out [of Vietnam], and I can't finish it with what I have got. And I don't know what the hell to do!" He adds, "I'm not temperamentally equipped to be commander in chief."

He tells her that deciding what to do about Vietnam is "like being in an airplane—and I have to choose between crashing the plane or jumping out. I do not have a parachute." In her diary recordings, Lady Bird observes that Lyndon "feels chained" and suffers from "this fog of depression": "It's having an erosive effect on his personality."

On Feb. 26, 1965, when Johnson orders his secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, to launch Operation Rolling Thunder, which will drop more bombs on the North Vietnamese than on all of Europe in World War II, he is melancholy. "Now we're off to bombing these people," he says. "We're over that hurdle. I don't think anything is going to be as bad as losing, and I don't see any way of winning."

When I heard those words, I felt the hair

No way out:
With the
troops in 1966



*He lectures Secretary of State
Dean Rusk:*

rise on the back of my neck and wished I could turn back time, tug the president's sleeve and implore him not to do it.

A week later, when he decides to send Marine battalions to Vietnam, Johnson gloomily tells Senate Armed Services chairman Richard Russell, "The great trouble I'm under [is that] a man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere. But there ain't no daylight in Vietnam. There's not a bit."

LBJ had once hoped that his monumental efforts for civil rights, voting rights, Medicare and education would earn him a place alongside Lincoln and FDR. But by August 1965, the political realist in him knew Vietnam would kill those dreams. Lady Bird describes how her "distraught" husband sank into depression. Some of Johnson's aides were so worried about him that they went to psychiatrists for help.

Thrashing about in his sleep as he opts to enter a hopeless war, the Johnson of the tapes awakens before dawn and bellows, "I don't want to get in a war and I don't see any way out of it. I've got to call up 600,000 boys, make them leave their homes and their families."

At his side, a horrified Lady Bird lay listening. "It was as though he were talking out loud, not especially to me," she says. "I hope the refrain hasn't been in his mind all night long. ... When he is pierced, I bleed. It's a bad time all around."

There is every indication that, unlike Johnson, President Bush believes exactly what he told Congress in September—that our ultimate victory is "certain." But as the new war unfolds, the secret Johnson tapes add a haunting and important new lesson to what we can all learn from Lyndon Johnson's ordeal: when Americans are asked to sacrifice blood and treasure, one of our most significant weapons will be a president who, in his private mind and heart, really foresees some way of winning the war.

FEBRUARY 11, 1965 *Into her tape recorder, Lady Bird confides her fears as Lyndon starts the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign.*



JOIN MICHAEL BESCHLOSS FOR A LIVE TALK ABOUT LBJ ON FRIDAY, NOV. 9, AT NOON, EST, ON NEWSWEEK.MSNBC.COM

“ Now we're off to bombing these people ... I don't think anything is going to be as bad as losing, and I don't see any way of winning. ”

—LYNDON JOHNSON, *Feb. 26, 1965*

LADY BIRD: Vietnam, the long nights with phone calls about planes going out ... the necessity of [Lyndon's] giving orders that would produce God knows what cataclysmic results. He said, "I'm too sentimental to give the orders." Somehow I could not wish him not to hurt when he gives the orders.

FEBRUARY 15, 1965 *For fatherly comfort LBJ turns to former president Harry Truman, who launched his own unpopular, stalemated war in Korea.*

LBJ: Oh, I'm having hell!

TRUMAN: What's the trouble?

LBJ: ... The Vietnamese ... I've been reading history and saw how much hell you had [in Korea] and you handled it pretty good, and I just thought maybe I could learn something from you.

TRUMAN: ... You know how to do it. And I know you can do it.

LBJ: ... All I know to do out there is what I am doing. ... When they go in and kill your boys, you've got to hit back. And I'm not trying to spread the war and I'm not trying—

TRUMAN: You bet you have! You bust them in the nose every time you get a chance. They understand that language better than any other kind!

FEBRUARY 25, 1965 *LBJ has just sent B-57 jet bombers for the first time against North Vietnam. Worried about getting Medicare and the rest of his Great Society program through Congress in 1965, he is anxious not to arouse antiwar sentiment by letting Americans know that this is a major escalation of the war.*

all the time with that resolution.

FEBRUARY 26, 1965 *With the North Vietnamese on a rampage, LBJ is now under Pentagon pressure to send Marine battalions and other ground forces to Vietnam to defend American air bases. He knows that if Viet Cong guerrillas fire on them, they could enmesh the United States in a ground war fast. To McNamara:*

LBJ: The game now is in the fourth quarter, and it's about seventy-eight to nothing. We've got to try to rescue something. ... Get somebody to come up with what we can actually do to keep [the North Vietnamese] from splitting up the country. ... I'm scared to death of putting ground forces in, but I'm more frightened about losing a bunch of planes from lack of security.

MARCH 6, 1965 *To his old paternal confidant, Sen. Richard Russell, LBJ confesses how terrified he is that the presence of the Marines will draw the United States into a Vietnamese land war—and that the American people will realize what is about to happen.*

LBJ: I guess we've got no choice, but it scares the death out of me. I think everybody's going to think, "We're landing the Marines. We're off to battle!" ... Of course [the Viet Cong] are going to get them in a fight. Just sure as hell! They're not going to run. Then you're tied down [in a ground war]. ... But [American Commander William] Westmoreland and [Ambassador to Saigon Maxwell] Taylor come in every day saying, "Ple-e-ase send them on!" And the Joint

Chiefs say, "Ple-e-ase send them on!" And McNamara and Rusk say, "Send them on!" ... **RUSSELL:** We've gone so damn far, Mr. President, it scares the life out of me. But I don't know how to back up now. It looks to me like we just got in this thing, and there's no way out. ...

LBJ: ... And we're losing more every day. ... We're getting in worse.

RUSSELL: These Marines—they'll be killing a whole lot of friendly Vietnamese. They're going to shoot at everything that comes around those airplanes. ...

LBJ: Airplanes ain't worth a damn, Dick ... Bombing [everything]? ... I guess they can do it in an industrial city. I guess they can do it in New York. ... [But] that's the damndest thing I ever saw. The biggest fraud. Don't you get your hopes up that the Air Force is going to [win this war]. ...

RUSSELL: There's no end to the road. There's just nothing.

LBJ: The more bombs you drop, the more nations you scare, the more people you make mad, the more embassies you get—**RUSSELL:** We're going to wind up with the [Vietnamese] people mad as hell with us—[the very ones] we are [trying to save] by being in there. It's just awful. ... It's the biggest, worst mess I ever saw in my life. You couldn't have inherited a worse mess.

LBJ: Well, if they say I inherited, I'll be lucky. But they'll all say I created it!

MARCH 6, 1965 *Horrified that the American people will be alarmed by his decision to send Marines to Vietnam, LBJ asks McNamara whether the Marines could instead be disguised as "security battalions."*

LBJ: Here's what depresses me. ... The psychological impact [on the American people] of "the Marines are coming" is going to be a bad one. ... Every mother is going to say, "Uh-oh, this is it!" And I know that what we've done with these B-57s is just going to be Sunday school stuff, compared to the Marines. ... A Marine is a guy that's got a dagger in his hand. ... Can't you call them security battalions, similar to MPs [military police]? ...

McNAMARA: No, sir, we can't really say that. ... They're quite different from the MPs, and all the press knows it. We'd just be accused of falsifying the story.

LBJ: All right. We'll just go with it. ... My answer [on

whether to send the Marines] is yes. But my judgment is no. ... When are you going to issue the order?

McNAMARA: ... We'll make it late today so it will miss some of the morning [newspaper] editions. ... I'll handle it in a way that will minimize the announcement. But there's going to be a lot of headlines on it when it comes out.

LBJ [chuckles darkly]: You're telling me!

APRIL 18, 1965 *Lady Bird, into her tape recorder, on LBJ's sleepless nights:*

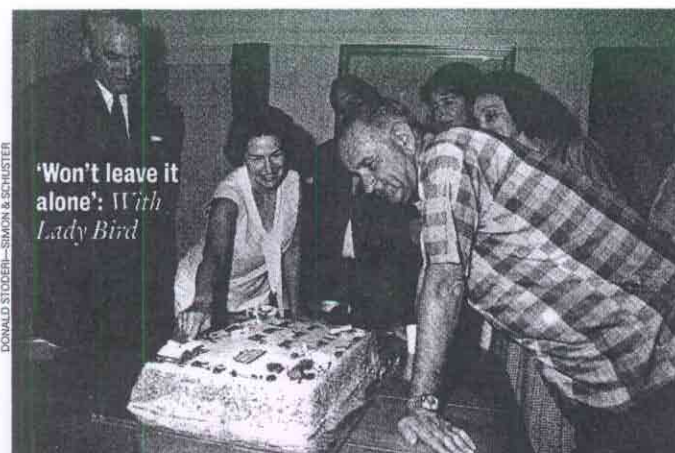
LADY BIRD: Lyndon [asks] to be waked up whenever there was an operation going out [over North Vietnam]. He won't leave it alone. He said, "I want to be called every time somebody dies." He can't separate himself from it. Actually I don't want him to, no matter how painful.

APRIL 29, 1965 *Exhausted, beleaguered, lonely, his suspicions growing, LBJ uses FBI files to warn Sen. Gale McGee of Wyoming that the communists are behind student anti-war demonstrations.*

LBJ: Every facility that the communist world has at its disposal is being used to divide us. One of the boys in this ... [antiwar] youth organization? His mother ... is one of the leaders of the Communist Party in this country. ... [FBI Director J.] Edgar Hoover was very upset about it. Brought [the files] over last night.

“Lyndon [is suffering from] this fog of depression ... [he] feels chained ... [and] it's having an erosive effect on his personality.”

—LADY BIRD JOHNSON, *March 13, 1965*



DONALD STODER—SMITH & SCHUSTER

JUNE 15, 1965 *To Indiana Sen. Birch Bayh, LBJ complains that U.S. soldiers in Vietnam are unmotivated.*

LBJ: [The Viet Cong] hope they can wear us out. And I really believe they'll last longer than we do. One of their boys gets down in a rut and he stays there for two days without water, food or anything and never moves. Waiting to ambush somebody. Now, an American? He stays there about twenty minutes and, God damn, he's got to get him a cigarette!

JUNE 10, 1965 *U.S. Commander William Westmoreland has now asked Johnson to send a hundred thousand combat troops to Vietnam. Feeling trapped, LBJ realizes that the war is racing out of his control.*

LBJ: Do you think that this is just the next step with them up the ladder?

McNAMARA: Yes. ... Westmoreland outlines in his cable the step beyond it. And he doesn't say that's the last.

LBJ: I don't guess anybody knows. ... But [the North Vietnamese have] got a pistol at our temple. ... And the only way we can react is to put a pistol at their temple. ... Do you know how far we're going to go?

McNAMARA: No.

LBJ: Or do the Joint Chiefs know? What human being knows? I would imagine if [the Viet Cong] wiped out a thousand boys tomorrow, we might go a hell of a lot further than we'd do if they wiped out just four.

McNAMARA: Sure. ... It is risky.

... This could be explained [to the public by saying] that there's been this continued Viet Cong buildup, and we have to respond to it.

LBJ: I wouldn't say that we have to respond. I'd say ... we must protect ourselves as best we can. ... Now, we don't say that putting these people in is going to win [the war], but we say if you don't put them in, you're going to lose substantially what you have. ... This is ... a holding action.

... Now, not a damn human thinks that fifty thousand or a hundred thousand or a hundred and fifty thousand [American troops] are going to end that war.

McNAMARA: That's right.

LBJ: And we're not getting out. ■