

J. Edgar Hoover

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ABC NEWS NIGHTLINE #3267 Air Date: November 30, 1993

LBJ Phone Calls Following Kennedy Assassination

ANNOUNCER: November 30th, 1993.

TV CORRESPONDENT: [November 22nd, 1963]

President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas, Texas. Three shots rang out and the President...

KOPPEL: [voice-over] From the moment of the Kennedy assassination, it was clear that an official investigation was going to have to take place, but how to go about it? It was one of the new president's first major problems.

Pres. LYNDON JOHNSON: A lot of people are charging Khrushchev killed Kennedy, and Castro killed Kennedy, and everybody else killed Kennedy. Now, we've had 60 FBI agents working for seven days, and they've got the story, and they've got the fingerprints, and they've got everything else, but the American people and the world have got to know who killed Kennedy and why, and somebody's got to evaluate that report. And if they don't, why, if Khrushchev moved on us, he could kill 39 million in an hour.

For me, it is a deep personal tragedy.

TED KOPPEL: [voice-over] Tonight, just released, the phone conversations of President Lyndon Johnson in the days immediately following the Kennedy assassination.

ANNOUNCER: This is ABC News Nightline. Reporting from Washington, Ted Koppel.

KOPPEL: It will do absolutely nothing to deflect all the conspiracy theories. It provides very little in the way of information that has not been available in one form or another for years. And yet, what you are about to hear is one of the most extraordinary historical documents ever released. It is only a few days after the assassination of President Kennedy. Lyndon Johnson has just assumed the presidency and, understandably, he is obsessed with learning as much as he can about the murder of his predecessor and with finding a way to control how that information reaches the American public. One of Johnson's primary sources of information is the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover.

Imagine for a moment if someone suggested taking you back in time to that moment, and enabling you to eavesdrop on the conversation between Hoover and Johnson. That is precisely what the Johnson Library in Austin, Texas has just done. Today it released tape recordings of President Johnson's telephone conversations for the period of November 22nd, 1963 to November 30th of the same year.

The excerpt you will hear first has President Johnson questioning J. Edgar Hoover about the number of gunshots fired at the Kennedy motorcade.

[November 29, 1963]

Pres. LYNDON B. JOHNSON: How many— how many— how many shots were fired?

J. EDGAR HOOVER, FBI Director 1924-1972: Three.

Pres. JOHNSON: Any of them fired at me?

Mr. HOOVER: No, there were no—

Pres. JOHNSON: All three at the President?

Mr. HOOVER: All three at the President, and we have them. Two of the shots fired at the President were splintered, but they had characteristics of them so that our ballistics expert was able to prove that they were fired by this gun. The third shot—

Pres. JOHNSON: Now, the—

Mr. HOOVER: —the third shot, which hit the President — he was hit by the first and the third the second shot hit the governor — the third shot is a completely — is a complete bullet, that wasn't shattered, and that rolled out of the President's head. That tore a large part of the President's head off. And in trying to massage his heart at the — on — at the hospital — or on the way to the hospital, they apparently loosened that and that fell onto the stretcher, and we recovered that. And we have that and we have the gun here also.

Pres. JOHNSON: Were they aiming at the President?

Mr. HOOVER: They were aiming directly at the President. There's no question about that. This telescopic lens which I have looked through, it brings a person as close to you as if they were sitting right beside you. And we also have tested the fact that you could fire — those three shots were fired within three seconds. There's been some stories going around in the papers and so forth that — that there must have been more than one man because no one man could fire those shots in the time that they were fired. We've disproved that by the actual tests we've made.

Pres. JOHNSON: How'd it happen to hit Connally [crosstalk]?

Mr. HOOVER: Connally turned. Connally turned to the President at — when the first shot was fired. And I think in that — in that turning, it was where he got hit.

Pres. JOHNSON: If he hadn't turned, he probably wouldn't have gotten hit.

Mr. HOOVER: I think that's very likely.

Pres. JOHNSON: But the President got hit with the second one?

Mr. HOOVER: No. No, the President wasn't hit with the second one.

Pres. JOHNSON: I say if he — if Connally hadn't been in his way?

Mr. HOOVER: Oh, yes, yes, the President no doubt would have been hit.

Pres. JOHNSON: He would have been hit three times.

Mr. HOOVER: He would have been hit three times. On the fifth floor of that building where we found the

gun and the wrapping paper in which the gun was wrapped, had been wrapped, and upon which we found the full fingerprints of this man Oswald, we— on that floor we found the three empty shells that had been fired, and one shell that had not been fired. In other words, there were four shells, apparently. And he had— he had fired three, but didn't fire the fourth one.

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, your conclusion is, (A), he's the one that did it, (B), the man he's after was the President, and (C), he would have hit him three times but the governor turned—

Mr. HOOVER: I think that's correct.

Pres. JOHNSON: —four, that there's no connection between he and Ruby that you can detect now, and five, whether he was connected with the Cuban operation with money, you are trying to—

Mr. HOOVER: That's what we're trying to nail down now. Because he was strongly pro-Castro, he was strongly anti-American, and he had been in correspondence — which we have — with the Soviet embassy here in Washington, and with the American Civil Liberties Union, and with the— this committee we call Fair Play to Cuba. We have copies of the correspondence.

Pres. JOHNSON: Where did he work in the building, on this same floor?

Mr. HOOVER: He had access on all floors.

Pres. JOHNSON: But where was his office?

Mr. HOOVER: Well, he didn't have any particular office. He would— orders came in for certain books, and some books would be on the first floor, second floor, third floor and so forth.

Pres. JOHNSON: But he didn't— he didn't have any particular place he was stationed?

Mr. HOOVER: No, he had no particular place where he was stationed at all. He was just a general packer of the requisitions that came in for the schoolbooks from the Dallas schools there. And therefore he had access, perfectly proper access, to the fifth floor and to the sixth floor. Usually most of the employees are down on lower floors.

Pres. JOHNSON: Did anybody hear— anybody see him on the fifth floor?

Mr. HOOVER: Yes, he was seen on the fifth floor by one of the workmen there before the assassination took place. He was seen there. So that he got—

Pres. JOHNSON: And you've got— did you get a picture of him shooting?

Mr. HOOVER: Oh, no. There was no picture taken of him shooting.

Pres. JOHNSON: Then what was this picture that that fellow sold for \$25,000?

Mr. HOOVER: That was a picture taken of the parade and showing Mrs. Kennedy climbing out of the back seat. You see, there was no Secret Service man standing on the back of the car.

Pres. JOHNSON: Mm-hmm.

Mr. HOOVER: Usually this— the presidential car, in the past, has had steps on the back next to the bumpers, and there have usually been one on either side, standing on those steps at the back bumper. Now, whether the President asked that that not be done, we don't know. And the bubble top was not up. But the bubble top wasn't worth a damn anyway because they're made entirely of plastic.

Pres. JOHNSON: Mm-hmm.

Mr. HOOVER: And much to my surprise, the Secret Service do not have any armored cars.

Pres. JOHNSON: Do you have— do you have a bulletproof car?

Mr. HOOVER: Oh, yes, I do. I think—

Pres. JOHNSON: Do you think I ought to have one?

Mr. HOOVER: I think you most certainly should have one. It seems to me that the President ought to always be in a bulletproof car. It certainly would prevent anything like this ever happening again.

Pres. JOHNSON: Yes. I guess—

Mr. HOOVER: I mean, you could have a thousand Secret Service men on guard and still a sniper can snipe you from up in the window if you are exposed, like the President was, but he can't do it if you have a— if you have a solid-top bulletproof top [*unintelligible*], as it should be.

Pres. JOHNSON: You mean if I ride around my ranch, I ought to be in a bulletproof car?

Mr. HOOVER: Well, I would certainly think so, Mr. President. It seems to me that that car down at your ranch there, the little car that we rode around in when I was down there, I think that ought to be bulletproof. It's perfectly easy for somebody to get onto the ranch.

Pres. JOHNSON: You think those— you think those entrances all ought to be guarded, though, don't you?

Mr. HOOVER: Oh, I think by all means. I think by all means. I think you've got to recognize— you've got to really almost be in the capacity of a so-called prisoner, because without that security, anything can be done. Now, we've gotten a lot of letters and phone calls over the last three or four, five days. We got one about this parade the other day, as to— that they were— they were going to try to kill you then. And I talked with the attorney general about it. I was very much opposed to that marching at the White House.

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, we— the Secret Service told them not to, but the family felt otherwise.

Mr. HOOVER: Well, I guess— that's what Bobby told me, but when I heard of it, I talked with the Secret Service, and they were very much opposed to it. I was very much opposed to it, because it was even worse than down there at Dallas.

Pres. JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

Mr. HOOVER: You were walking down the center of the street.

Pres. JOHNSON: Yes, I think that's right.

Mr. HOOVER: And if somebody on the sidewalk would dash out— I notice even on Pennsylvania Avenue here, I viewed the procession coming back from the Capitol, and while they had police assigned along the curbstone looking at the crowd, when the parade came along, the police turned around and looked at the parade, which was the worst thing to do. They also had a line of soldiers, but they were looking at the parade.

Pres. JOHNSON: I'm going to take every precaution I can—

Mr. HOOVER: I think you've got to.

Pres. JOHNSON: —and I know I want to talk to you and I wish you'd put down your thoughts on that a little bit, 'cause—

Mr. HOOVER: I will.

Pres. JOHNSON: —you're more than a— you're more than the head of the Federal Bureau, as far as I'm concerned, you're my brother and personal friends, and you have been for 25, 30 years.

Mr. HOOVER: Well, I certainly—I'll be very glad to, indeed. I certainly appreciate your confidence, I do.

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, thank you. Thank you [unintelligible].

KOPPEL: When we come back, how President Johnson tried at first to avoid the creation of the Warren Commission, changed his mind, and then strong-armed some of the most powerful men in the country into serving on the panel.

[Commercial break]

KOPPEL: President Johnson was trying to keep the investigation of the Kennedy assassination from spiraling out of control. He didn't want a bunch of congressional investigations, but he also wanted to avoid a blue-ribbon federal panel. As he told FBI director J. Edgar Hoover just three days after the assassination, the investigation should be conducted on a local level.

[November 25, 1963]

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, this thing, it's a state matter, too, and the state attorney general is young and able and prudent, and very cooperative with you. Now, if you get too many— too many cooks messing with the broth, it'd mess it up. And so I want you to know that, and you'll tell your press man that that's what's happening, and they can expect Wagner Carr [sp?], the attorney general of Texas, to make an announcement this morning—

Mr. HOOVER: Yeah.

Pres. JOHNSON: —of a state inquiry, and that you can offer them your full cooperation and vice versa, he'll do it with you.

KOPPEL: That same day, November 25th, 1963, President Johnson took a call from an old friend, newspaper columnist Joseph Alsop. Again, he worried about keeping the investigation under local supervision.

[November 25, 1963]

Pres. JOHNSON: This is under Texas law, and

they take all the— all the involvements and we don't send in a bunch of pocket [?] managers, that's the worst thing you could do right now.

JOSEPH ALSOP, "New York Herald Tribune Columnist: You think so.

Pres. JOHNSON: I know— well, we decided that the best thing to do is to counterattack.

Mr. ALSOP: Nobody— nobody— nobody—

Pres. JOHNSON: Number one, to put the FBI in full force, number two, to put the state in full force.

KOPPEL: Only a few days later, though, Lyndon Johnson had changed his mind. For both public relations and political reasons, Johnson had decided that he did want to form a blue-ribbon panel at the federal level. He began a telephone campaign, calling the most powerful members of Congress. He wanted them to squelch any congressional investigations. He wanted their approval for the panel that he had selected. And in classic Johnsonian fashion, he refused to take no for an answer from those he had chosen to serve on the panel.

His last call of the day went to his old friend and mentor, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia. Listen to how Russell is bulldozed into serving on what will come to be known as the Warren Commission.

[November 29, 1963]

Pres. JOHNSON: Dick?

Sen. RICHARD RUSSELL, (D), Georgia: Yes?

Pres. JOHNSON: I hate to bother you again, but—

Sen. RUSSELL: That's all right, Mr. President.

Pres. JOHNSON: —I wanted you to know that I've made an announcement.

Sen. RUSSELL: Well, an announcement of what?

Pres. JOHNSON: Of this special commission.

Sen. RUSSELL: Oh, you have already?

Pres. JOHNSON: Yes.

Sen. RUSSELL: Aha.

Pres. JOHNSON: And I've got— may I read it to you?

Sen. RUSSELL: Yes.

Pres. JOHNSON: "The President announced that he is appointing a special commission to study and report upon all the facts and circumstances relating to the assassination of the late president, John F. Kennedy, and the subsequent violent death of the man charged with the assassination. The President stated that the majority and minority leadership of the Senate and House had been consulted with respect of the full special commission. The members of the special commission are: Chief Justice Earl Warren, chairman; Senator Richard Russell, Georgia; Senator John Cooper, Kentucky; Representative Hale Boggs, Louisiana; Representative Gerald Ford, Michigan; Honorable Allen Dulles, Washington; Honorable John J. McCloy [sp?], New York."

Sen. RUSSELL: Well, now, Mr. President, I know I don't have to tell you of my devotion to you, but I just can't serve on— on that commission. I'm highly honored you'd think about me in connection with it,

but I couldn't serve there with Chief Justice Warren. I don't like that man, and I don't have any confidence in him.

Pres. JOHNSON: You never turned your country down.

Sen. RUSSELL: Well, [*crosstalk*] I could.

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, this is not me, this is your country. But you've got— you're my man on that commission, and 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 goddamn sure going to serve, I'll tell you that. And the secretary of state came over here this afternoon. He's deeply concerned, Dick, about the idea that there's present throughout the communist world that Khrushchev killed Kennedy. Now, he didn't, he didn't have a damn thing to do with it—

Sen. RUSSELL: I don't think he did directly.

Pres. JOHNSON: Well.

Sen. RUSSELL: I know Khrushchev didn't, because he thought he'd get along better with Kennedy than anybody else.

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, all right, but we've got to have some people—

Sen. RUSSELL: I wouldn't be surprised if Castro had something—

Pres. JOHNSON: All right. Then, okay, that's what we want to know, and people have got confidence in you, and you can just be surprised or not surprised, they want to know what you think.

Sen. RUSSELL: Well, I'm not going to say anymore, Mr. President.

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, you—

Sen. RUSSELL: I'm at your command and I'll do anything you [*crosstalk*]—

Pres. JOHNSON: Well, you're damned sure going to be at my command—

Sen. RUSSELL: —where the country is involved.

Pres. JOHNSON: —you're going to be at my command as long as I'm here.

KOPPEL: When we return, LBJ biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin.

[*Commercial break*]

KOPPEL: There are few writers who knew President Johnson better than Doris Kearns Goodwin, the author of *Lyndon B. Johnson and the American Dream*. She joins us now from our Boston bureau.

What do you think, LBJ lives, huh?

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *Johnson Biographer*: Oh, boy, I'll tell you, this is the tip of the iceberg of what I imagine will be the richest political archive in American history. Lyndon Johnson on the phone is Lyndon Johnson, you're watching a political genius at work. It's like Ted Williams at bat, or Michael Jordan playing basketball. He's menacing, formidable, frustrating, fascinating, charming all at once, even in the same conversation he changes moods. It's going to be incredible.

KOPPEL: And the amazing thing is — and I guess we

have to remind a few of our younger viewers — I mean, Richard Russell, who was chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, was like a — was like a father to LBJ, one of the few men that he really respected, and if he could beat up on him that way, you can imagine what he did to people he didn't respect.

Ms. GOODWIN: Absolutely. What you see in that Russell conversation is the perfect mixture of LBJ. He starts out sort of wanting him, being flattering, and then he turns angry when Russell goes against it. And then he says, "You've just got to do it, you can't go any other way." That sort of formidable quality is never forgotten.

KOPPEL: There is also a piece of tape you hadn't heard yet, we're going to play it for you right now, where he is bragging to Russell about how he finally got Earl Warren to serve as chairman of what came to be known as the Warren Commission. Just give a listen here for a second.

[*November 29, 1963*]

Pres. JOHNSON: You know what happened? Bobby and them went up to see him today and he turned them down cold and said no.

Sen. RUSSELL: Yeah?

Pres. JOHNSON: 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 just pulled out what Hoover told me about the little incident in Mexico City, and I said, "Now, I don't want to— Mr. Khrushchev to be told tomorrow and be testifying before a camera that he killed this fellow, and that Castro killed him, and 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'd put on a uniform, World War I, fat as you are, and do anything you could to save one American life. Now, 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."

KOPPEL: Amazing, isn't it?

Ms. GOODWIN: You know, what it shows is that we always think of Johnson trading pork barrel and dams, et cetera. What he's really doing often is appealing to the patriotism of people. I remember seeing a transcript of a civil rights conversation with Dirksen in which he said, "You know, the NAACP will be flying your banner, Everett, if you'll come along with me. It's for your country." That's what he did with Warren, and that's what finally worked.

KOPPEL: What is so surprising, though, is, I mean, he's not dealing with a bunch of juveniles here. These are guys who have been around the track a little bit, and for them— I don't know whether it's a question of being taken in or whether they're just so overwhelmed by his personality.

Ms. GOODWIN: I think it is a question of being overwhelmed. I mean, think of it. It's almost like this man is a camel, he doesn't eat, he doesn't drink, he's on that phone all day long, he's a different person to each one he talks to. I mean, the whole thing with Hoover is so interesting. That first conversation that we heard a part of

is really the beginning of a flowering of a new friendship between these two. Both men had been sort of undone by the Kennedy years, hating being vice president, on Johnson's part, Hoover hating being— knowing that he was going to have to retire. Suddenly now he says, "You're my brother, I'm going to be with you." It's very hard to resist that kind of intimacy. It's almost like loving the man.

KOPPEL: Talk a little bit about some of the facts that we heard coming out there. What's amazing to me is, this is just a few days after the assassination itself, and yet the account that we hear from J. Edgar Hoover, as he gives it now to Lyndon Johnson, no reason to believe that he is— that he is, you know, adding— maybe he left a few things out, in fact, I think he probably did leave a few things out. But it is remarkably like the final report that the Warren Commission ultimately produced, isn't it?

Ms. GOODWIN: Yeah. It's so interesting. I mean, it's clear from the start that very soon, Hoover came to the absolute conviction that Oswald had acted alone, and that's what he's telling Lyndon Johnson, essentially, yeah, these other rumors around, but essentially it was Oswald. And he's convinced that he doesn't want any other committee in there. He's so afraid that if another committee comes in, the FBI's own deficiencies in surveilling Oswald in the first place will come out. So Johnson's playing a tricky game even with Hoover. He first of all tells him, "No, no, I don't want another committee," and he truly doesn't, but eventually he has to convince Hoover that he's got to go with that blue-ribbon commission, which he does, and Hoover's mad as anything about that.

KOPPEL: What do you make of— Johnson clearly seemed to be a little bit paranoid about the possibility — understandably, just after an American president has been killed — that someone may be coming after him. There's that "Do you think they were shooting at me?" and then the question, you know, "You think I need a bulletproof car?" and what about down on the ranch, and Hoover then telling him "You're going to have to be, effectively, a prisoner down on the ranch."

Ms. GOODWIN: Right. No, it's very clear that, as you say, I think it is understandable that he was afraid, but it was also part of Lyndon Johnson's temperament to know that there were enemies out there, to feel that people were out to get him. And the interesting thing is when he says to Hoover at the end of that part, "You're my brother, you're going to protect me, right, because you'll protect someone who's part of your family," he was sort of saying to Hoover, "You're not going to let anything happen to me, right?" And then Hoover assigned FBI agents to protect Johnson, above the Secret Service, or with the Secret Service, which he'd never done before.

KOPPEL: Now, we have got or are going to get from the Johnson library, I guess, roughly 10 days worth of those audiotapes. What else should we be looking for? What should we be on the lookout for?

Ms. GOODWIN: Well, the interesting thing, just in terms of technique, will be to watch how he deals with every

member of that commission. There'll be a different way that he gets each one of them to join, whether it's Boggs, or whether it's Russell, as we've seen, or whether it's Warren and all the other people. But I think then the other thing that will be interesting to see is, is Johnson strong-arming them in any way? Is he trying to tell them what he thinks just like Hoover told the FBI what he thought? I don't know what's going to come out on that.

KOPPEL: What else are you looking for?

Ms. GOODWIN: I think the most important thing I'm looking for is Lyndon Johnson's personality, just as you said at the top of this, to come alive. This is a chance for historians, for people, for the public to see Johnson in a way that— he was so stiff on television. When he stood in front of that teleprompter, his whole personality drained away. In these telephone conversations, we're going to see this man live again. He's the most interesting politician— one of the most interesting, charming, menacing as he was that we've ever known. He's going to come back to life. He must be a happy man today. These tapes should have been done a long time ago, and maybe we wouldn't have forgotten him as we have.

KOPPEL: Well, thanks for sharing it with us. Ms. Goodwin, good to have you with us.

Ms. GOODWIN: Thank you.

KOPPEL: I'll be back in a moment.

[Commercial break]

KOPPEL: And a special word of thanks to our Austin Texas affiliate, KVUE-TV, for their help today in gathering these extraordinary tapes from the LBJ library.

That's our report for tonight. I'm Ted Koppel in Washington. For all of us here at ABC News, good night.

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