

# Eavesdropping in the Oval Office

## TAKING CHARGE

### The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964

Edited by Michael R. Beschloss  
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By Richard J. Barnet

**P**RESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON taped about 9,500 of his private conversations, starting the day he took the oath of office and ending shortly before he left the White House. *Taking Charge*, the first volume in a series, is based on 240 hours of talk recorded during his first nine months in office. The historian Michael Beschloss, who selected and edited the tapes, provides a helpful commentary throughout the book, identifying the cast of characters whose words are being recorded without their knowledge. Occasionally, he will comment on the truthfulness or hidden significance of what Johnson is saying, but in most cases he wisely lets the president's words speak for themselves.

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The result is a fascinating portrait of an imposing, manipulative, driven, conflicted, and surprisingly vulnerable character whose political ambitions had suddenly been achieved under frightening circumstances. Johnson's immediate reaction to the assassination of John F. Kennedy was that it was a Soviet plot and that it might be followed by an all-out nuclear attack. But within days he was convinced that the Soviets were not involved. The great danger, as he explained to Sen. Richard Russell, was a congressional investigation in which "they're testifying that Khrushchev and Castro did this and did that and kicking us into a war that can kill forty million Americans in an hour."

The Warren Commission was an attempt to use the prestige of prominent Americans to forestall this and to forge a bipartisan consensus that would put conspiracy rumors to rest. In these transcripts, we see how Johnson sandbagged Russell to get him on the commission; the president announced the appointment before the Georgia Democrat had accepted and without telling him that Chief Justice Earl Warren, whom Russell profoundly disliked, had already agreed to serve as chairman.

The story of LBJ's relationship to Robert Kennedy has been told often, but the tapes make clear that he was obsessed with the dead presi- —Continued on page 11

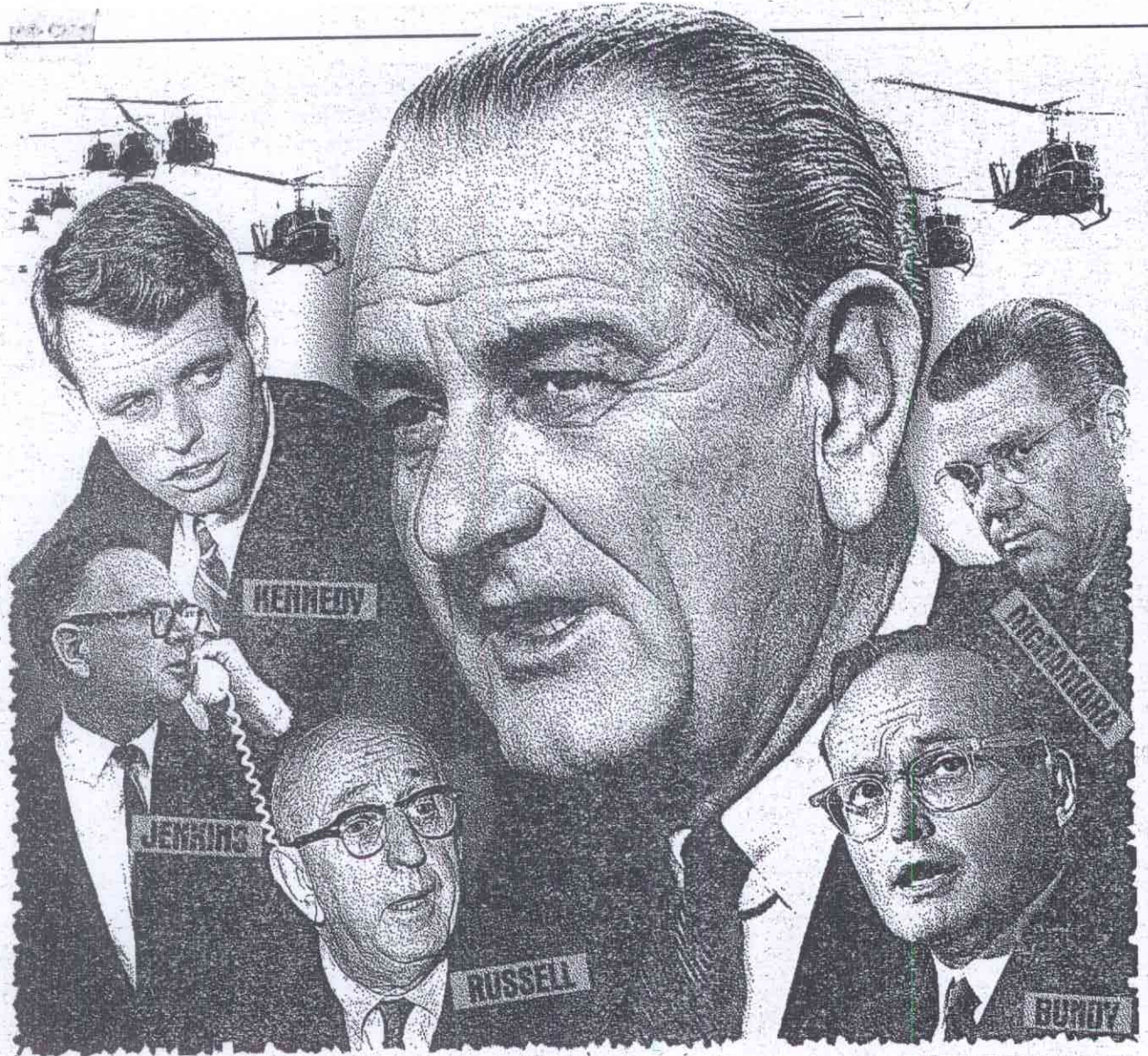


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# Johnson Tapes

Continued from page 1

dent's younger brother. Johnson was prone to see Bobby's hand in any unfavorable press account of his administration, and he was convinced that the attorney general was plotting to snatch the Democratic nomination from him in 1964. In one exchange early in his administration he objected to "a fanatical Kennedyite," as Beschloss describes him, who was working for the Democratic National Committee but was energetically pushing RFK's candidacy for vice president. When Johnson complained, Robert Kennedy defended the man by pointing out that "the President [JFK] liked the work he did." Johnson retorted, "I know it, Bobby, but I'm President and I don't like what he's doing, and... I don't want him." A "bitter, mean conversation... the meanest tone that I've heard," Kennedy later described the encounter. Yet Johnson was careful to avoid an open break with Bobby by holding out the hope that he would pick him as his running mate in 1964.

Throughout the time covered by this engrossing book, LBJ is preoccupied with two central issues, either of which could have derailed his presidency. The first is the Civil Rights Act, a Kennedy



President and Mrs. Lyndon Johnson with Jacqueline Kennedy on Air Force One two hours after President Kennedy's death

BY GERALD STOUGH-TON-LBJ LIBRARY COLLECTION

bill that had been stalled in Congress. We see him flattering and cajoling senators to enlist their support, and admonishing Hubert Humphrey for a wire service story in which he is quoted as saying that the president might compromise on the bill. "That's not my position. I'm against any amendment. I'm going to be against them right up until I sign them...."

The civil rights bill passes, but a crisis looms over the seating of the all-black Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Johnson is convinced that seating the blacks will cost him the election. The president tells his aide Walter Jenkins that he is going to quit and go home and shows him a statement he intended to make: "The times require... a voice that men of all parties and sections and color can follow... I am not that voice... I suggest... that no consideration be given to me because I am absolutely unavailable."

Was this a ploy to force a compromise at the convention? Probably. But his conversations just before the convention suggest that he was truly depressed. He was much more upset by attacks in the press than his public demeanor suggested, and having had a massive heart attack nine years earlier, he was worried whether he could stand the strain of four more years in the White House. "I don't want to be in this place [incapacitated] like [Woodrow] Wilson," he told Jenkins. But a compromise was reached on the Mississippi delegation and all talk of going back to Texas abruptly stopped.

The second critical issue is Vietnam. From the first the shadow of the war hung over the new administration. About a week after Johnson takes office, William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, tells the president, "I just think that it is a hell of a situation... I'll

be goddamned if I don't think it's hopeless." A few days later Sen. Russell tells him, "We should get out, but I don't know any way to get out." McGeorge Bundy tells him that "90 percent of the people" want no part of an Asian war. Johnson himself does not know what to do. He senses the disastrous consequences of sending troops to Vietnam, but he is not going to be the president who "lost" Southeast Asia. He desperately wants to postpone the tough decisions until after the election, but the North Vietnamese attack on a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin and the reports of a second attack (which probably did not take place) push him to authorize a retaliatory strike on North Vietnam. As the book ends, he is already contemplating the wider war he will tell the voters he does not seek.

There is a tragic quality to the discussions about Vietnam. At the highest levels of government, over a critical nine-month period, there is much talk of dominoes falling and the need to demonstrate force. But there is no precise analysis or even conjecture about the likely domestic and foreign policy consequences of waging war in Vietnam or of avoiding it. (It is hard to believe that Beschloss would not have included such conversations had they existed.) In the spring of 1964, Johnson tells Russell, "I don't think the people of the country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less." But the president knew they would care once the bodies came home. ■