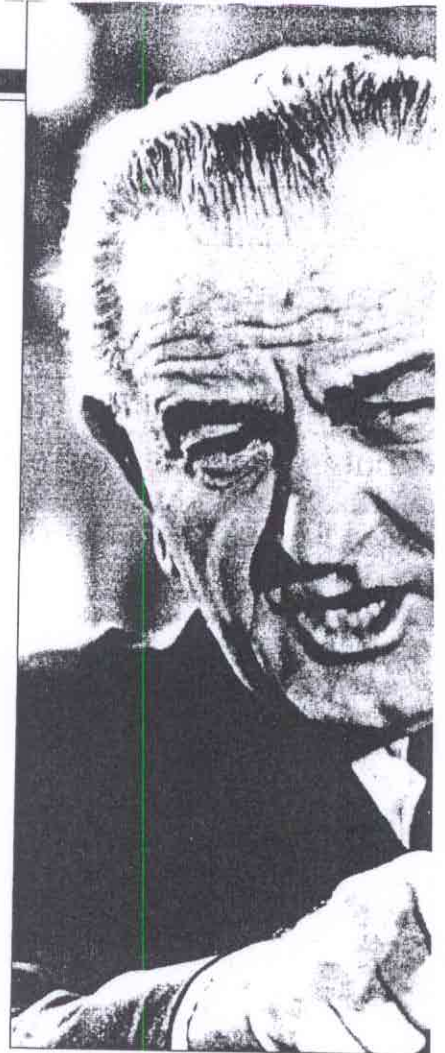


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SPECIAL REPORT

LBJ secretly recorded the private moments in an era of war and riot. An exclusive glimpse at how power really works. BY MICHAEL R. BESCHLOSS

The Johnson Tapes



AS LYNDON JOHNSON WAS dying of heart disease in January 1973, he reminded his personal aide, Mildred Stegall, to safeguard the cache of tape recordings of his private presidential conversations. He wanted them kept secret for at least another 50 years, and some of them, he instructed, should never be made public. Fortunately, Johnson's widow, Lady Bird, has chosen to honor a different wish of her husband's: that history be written "with the bark off." The tapes, excerpted here from "Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964" (which will be published this week by Simon & Schuster), capture the 36th president as he assumes power after the assassination of John F. Kennedy and grapples with the tumultuous issues of his age, starting with civil rights and Vietnam.

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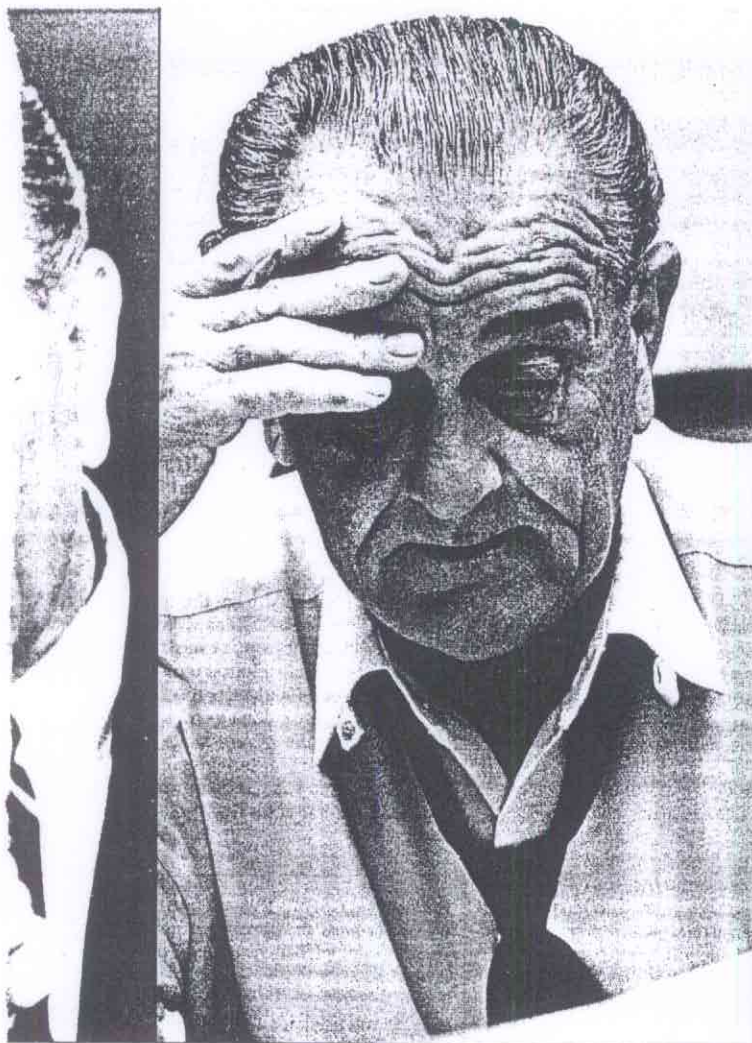
We will probably never again get such an intimate glimpse of a presidency from beginning to end. Roosevelt and Eisenhower taped a few of their conversations, Kennedy more, and Nixon recorded about half of his White House years—until he was found out. But only Johnson kept the secret tape recorders running from the first hour of his presidency to the end. "Johnson was obsessed with recording everything," said Richard Nixon. "We know what my problems were with that crap, but ... Johnson worshipped it." The news that Nixon had bugged the Oval Office caused such public outrage that no president today would even dream of systematically recording his private conversations.

To create "Taking Charge," the first of several volumes, I have listened hard to the hundreds of hours of just-opened, often-scratchy Johnson tapes to decipher exactly what LBJ and his foes and intimates told each other in secret from JFK's murder to the eve of LBJ's victory in 1964. The book offers 553 pages of the most startling encounters and explains how they change

what we know about the history of our times. I had no privileged access to the tapes; no member of the Johnson circle has seen the book before publication. The tapes unveil Johnson's suspicion that Kennedy was killed by an international conspiracy, his tortured doubts that America could ever win a war in Vietnam and his emotional private threats in August 1964, on the verge of winning the century's largest national landslide, to throw the presidency away and retire to Texas.

Why did LBJ tape people without their knowledge? Certainly he wished to harvest heroic quotations for his memoirs. He also wanted leverage in dealing with people like Nixon, Bobby Kennedy, George Wallace, Martin Luther King Jr. and J. Edgar Hoover—an undeniable record of what they had confided and promised him. Johnson originally planned to choose which conversations would be taped or not, but it soon proved difficult for the harried president to remember when to turn the recorder off.

In his speeches and press conferences,



From the beginning of his presidency to the very end, LBJ kept the recorders running

Johnson strained to sound statesmanlike. The tapes reveal him as the far more mesmerizing man he really was—earthy, vulnerable, suspicious, affectionate, devious, explosive, funny and domineering. For someone so concerned about his public image, it is curious that he didn't simply destroy the tapes. But then again Johnson may have realized that, in the end, history might reward him: the recordings show him in the engine room of one of the most turbulent decades in our history, twisting senators' arms and, while plunging into the Vietnam abyss, taking grand political risks for the black and the poor. Perhaps Johnson also sensed that the most durable characters in American history, like his heroes Andrew Jackson and Huey Long, are the most spellbinding.

The Kennedy Assassination

When JFK is killed in Dallas, Johnson almost immediately suspects a conspiracy.

"What raced through my mind was that if they had shot our president, driving down there, who would they shoot next?" he says on the tapes. "And what was going on in Washington? And when would the missiles be coming? ... I was fearful that the communists were trying to take us over." Two hours after the murder, fleeing Dallas on Air Force One, LBJ calls Kennedy's mother in Hyannis Port.

LBJ: Mrs. Kennedy?

ROSE KENNEDY: Yes, yes, Mr. President!

LBJ: I wish to God there was something that I could do ... We're grieving with you.

ROSE KENNEDY: Yes, well, thank you very much. That's very nice. I know. I know you loved Jack and he loved you.

LADY BIRD JOHNSON: Mrs. Kennedy, we feel lucky—

ROSE KENNEDY: Yes, all right.

LADY BIRD: We're glad that the nation had your son as long as it did—

ROSE KENNEDY: Well, thank you for that, Lady Bird ... [weeping] Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

Johnson is told by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover the next day that covert surveillance reveals that the accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, visited the Cuban and Soviet Embassies in Mexico City in September 1963.

HOOVER: We have up here the tape and the photograph of the man who was at the Soviet Embassy, using Oswald's name. That picture and the tape do not correspond to this man's voice, nor to his appearance. In other words, it appears that there is a second person who was at the Soviet Embassy down there.

Johnson later badgers Hoover for more conspiracy evidence about Oswald and his accused murderer, Jack Ruby.

HOOVER: This angle in Mexico is giving us a great deal of trouble because the story there is of this man Oswald getting \$6,500 from the Cuban Embassy and then coming back to this country with it ...

LBJ: Have you got any relationship between the two [Oswald and Ruby] yet? ...

Was he ever in [Ruby's] bar?

HOOVER: There was a story that [Oswald] had been in the striptease joint that he had ... We've tied Oswald into this Cuban Fair Play Committee, which is financed, to some extent, by the Castro government.

LBJ: How many shots were fired? Three?

HOOVER: Three.

LBJ: Any of them fired at me?

HOOVER: No ... All three at the president ... He was hit by the first and third. The second shot hit the governor.

Hoover's report clashes with the later official version that one bullet missed, another pierced Kennedy's throat and struck Texas Gov. John Connally and a third fractured Kennedy's skull. Johnson and Hoover go on to speak as if the gunman were firing from in front, with Connally obscuring his view of JFK.

LBJ: Would the president've got hit with the second one ... if Connally hadn't been in his way?

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

Johnson suspects that Cuban leader Fidel Castro was a player in Kennedy's murder. But, as he says on the tapes, if Americans blame Castro or Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, the country could demand a retaliatory attack upon Cuba or the Soviet Union and "check us into a war that can kill 40 million Americans in an hour." In September 1964, Johnson's old patron, Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, a reluctant member of the Warren Commission, complains to LBJ that he has been forced against his will to sign its report that one of the shots fired hit both Kennedy and Connally. LBJ concedes that he also privately doubts the official version that a single gunman acted alone.

RUSSELL: I'm just worn out, fighting over that damned report ... They're trying to prove that the same bullet that hit Kennedy first was the one that hit Connally, went through him and through his hand, his bone, and into his leg ... Well, I don't believe it.

LBJ: I don't either.

RUSSELL: If a fellow was accurate enough to hit Kennedy right in the neck in one shot and knock his head off in the next one—and he's leaning up against his wife's head—and not even wound her, why, he didn't miss completely with that third shot.



LBJ privately believed that a foreign conspiracy killed Kennedy

Johnson's suspicions that Castro was behind Kennedy's murder gain new force in February 1967. He tells his attorney general, Ramsey Clark, that he cannot believe what he has just been told about the Kennedy administration's assassination attempts against the Cuban leader.

LBJ: It's incredible! ... They have a man that was ... instructed by the CIA and the attorney general [Robert Kennedy] to assassinate Castro after the Bay of Pigs ... They had these pills and they were supposed to take 'em [if Castro] caught 'em. And they didn't get to take their pills. So he tortured 'em and they told him all about it ... So ... he called Oswald and a group in and told them ... "Go ... get the job done" ... It sounded just like your telling me that Lady Bird was taking dope.

A Chat With Jackie

A July 4, 1964, call from the LBJ Ranch to Jacqueline Kennedy at Hyannis Port.

LBJ: I've been out in a boat. I got a sunburn, and I'll ... be blistered now.

JK: You'll look marvelous with a sunburn.

LBJ: ... Lynda's with us. Luci's in Washington having dates.

JK: I noticed she didn't come. I thought it was something sinister like that.

LBJ: She said that she wanted a very special birthday present. She just wanted to go one whole day without a [Secret Service] agent. What do you reckon happened? ...

JK: [laughs] I'd hate to think! And don't you!

The Road to Vietnam

Vietnam looms over LBJ's presidency from the start. February 1964: Johnson complains to Miami publisher John Knight that withdrawing now could unleash a "Who lost China?"-style campaign of Republican vengeance that could cost him the 1964 election. Still he shows that he knows, even this early, that it will be very difficult to win a conventional war that far from American shores.

LBJ: Run and let the dominoes start falling over—and God Almighty, what they said about us leaving China would just be warming up ... I see [Richard]

Nixon is raising hell about it today. [Arizona Sen. Barry] Goldwater too ...

KNIGHT: ... I hope we don't get involved in anything full-scale ... Long-range over there, the odds are certainly against us.

LBJ: ... Any time you got that many people against you that far from your home base, it's bad.

Johnson suggests to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in March that perhaps they should try to educate Americans about what is at stake.

LBJ: Do you think it's a mistake to explain ... Vietnam, and what we're faced with?

McNAMARA: I do think it would be wise for you to say as little as possible ... The signs I see coming through the cables are disturbing ... Poor morale in Vietnamese forces ... A tremendous amount of coup planning.

May 27, 1964: As Johnson says on the tapes, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are pounding him to "get in or get out" of Vietnam. He asks Russell, the Senate Armed Services chairman, how important South Vietnam is to America's world position.

RUSSELL: It isn't important a damn bit, with all these new missile systems.

LBJ: I guess it's important ... from the standpoint that ... if we don't pay any attention to this [SEATO] treaty [committing the U.S. to South Vietnam's defense] I don't guess they think we pay attention to any of them ... I don't think the people of the country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less ... We tell Khrushchev, we send China and

Hanoi and all of 'em word that we'll get out of there and stay out of there if they [the communists] will just quit raiding their neighbors. And they just say, "Screw you." All the senators are all saying, "Let's move, let's go into the North." They'd impeach a president that would run out, wouldn't they?

RUSSELL: I tell you it'll be the most expensive venture this country ever went into.

Johnson shares his worries that same day with national security adviser McGeorge Bundy.

LBJ: I stayed awake last night thinking of this thing ... It looks to me like we're getting into another Korea ... I don't think that we can fight them 10,000 miles away from home ... I don't think it's worth fighting for. And I don't think that we can get out. It's just the biggest damned mess that I ever saw.

BUNDY: It's an awful mess.

LBJ: ... I was looking at this sergeant of mine [Kenneth Gaddis, an LBJ valet] this morning. Got six little old kids, and he's getting out my things. And I just thought about ordering his kids in there. And what in the hell am I ordering him out there for? What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? ... What is it worth to this country? ... Of course, if you start running from the communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen.

BUNDY: ... And that is what the rest of that half of the world is going to think if this thing comes apart on us ...

LBJ: But everybody I talk to that's got any sense says, "Oh, my God, ple-e-ease give this thought." This is a terrible thing we're getting ready to do.

Johnson in June tells Russell of a conversation about Vietnam with a close friend in Johnson City, Texas.

LBJ: A. W. Moursund said to me last night, "Goddamn, there's not anything that'll destroy you as quick as pulling up stakes and running" ... I said, "Yeah, but I don't want to kill these folks." He said, "I don't give a damn. I didn't want to kill 'em in Korea, but if you don't stand up for America ... there's nothing that a fellow in Johnson City"—or Georgia or any other place—"they'll forgive you for anything except being weak" ...

RUSSELL: ... It'd take a half million men. They'd be bogged down in there for '0 years.



LBJ called Vietnam 'the biggest damned mess I ever saw'

Johnson tells McNamara that other friends are warning him that the U.S. position in Vietnam is about to collapse.

LBJ: They think we're about to lose the greatest race that the United States has ever lost, and it'd be the first time that we've ever turned a-tail and then shoved out of a place and come home ...

McNAMARA: I just don't believe we can be pushed out of there, Mr. President. We just can't allow it to be done. You wouldn't want to go down in history as having—

LBJ: Not at all. But how're we gonna avoid it? Suppose your government [in Saigon] collapsed today and another one came in and said, "Get the hell out!" What do we do?

McNAMARA: Oh, I agree it's a ticklish situation. But if we continue to show some signs of firmness it won't collapse.

Jousting With RFK

In July 1964 LBJ's rival, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, political heir to the dead president, frontally accuses Johnson of using the FBI to track his movements.

RFK: I understand that [J. Edgar Hoover] sends all kinds of reports over to you about me ...

LBJ: Not any that I have seen. What are you talking about?

RFK: ... I had understood that he had sent reports over about me plotting the overthrow of the [Johnson] government by force and violence. Leading a coup.

LBJ: No, no ... He never has said that.

Aug. 2, 1964: The U.S. destroyer Maddox is attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Johnson does not retaliate. The next day, ex-treasury secretary Robert Anderson, a confidant of former president Eisenhower whom LBJ considers the bellwether of moderate Republicans whose votes he wants in 1964, tells him he has been too soft.

ANDERSON: You're going to be running against a man who's a wild man on this subject [Republican nominee Barry Goldwater]. Any lack of firmness he'll make up ... This fellow's going to play all of the angles.

Worried, Johnson immediately telephones McNamara.

LBJ: Call a group of 15 or 20 people together from the [House and Senate] Armed Services, Foreign Relations ... I want to leave an impression on background ... that we're gonna be firm as hell ... The people that're calling me up want to be damned sure I don't pull 'em out and run ... Goldwater is raising so much hell about how he's gonna blow 'em off the moon.

The next morning, McNamara informs Johnson of a new message from the Gulf of Tonkin.

McNAMARA: We just had word by telephone from Admiral [Ulysses Grant] Sharp that the destroyer is under torpedo attack.

LBJ: [almost inaudible sound]

McNamara's information, we know now, was incorrect. There had been no second attack. But late on the afternoon of Aug. 4, the defense secretary and the Joint Chiefs had to assess the conflicting evidence before LBJ had to decide whether or not to declare to the world that there had been a second attack and retaliate against North Vietnam. Then, at 5:09 p.m., Johnson and McNamara discover that a premature report of a second attack has leaked to the press.

McNAMARA: The story has broken on the AP and the UP.

LBJ: [looking at wire-service copy in the Oval Office] Yeah, I see it.

Johnson fears that if he tells Americans that evidence of a second attack is sketchy or withholds the proposed retaliation against North Vietnam, Goldwater will charge him with

cowardice and cover-up. (Conceding in 1995 that there had been no second attack, McNamara said that the administration should not have retaliated.) After ordering the bombing of North Vietnam in response to the presumed provocation, Johnson asks his congressional lobbyist, Larry O'Brien, whether his War on Poverty bill might now get an unexpected boost.

LBJ: What effect [will] bombing the hell out of the Vietnamese tonight have on this bill? I'd think [Congress] would be a little more reluctant to vote against the president.

O'BRIEN: ... It certainly is not going to hurt us.

Johnson then wins from Congress the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that will let him "take all necessary steps, including the use of force," in Vietnam. He has this haunting exchange with South Carolina Sen. Olin Johnston.

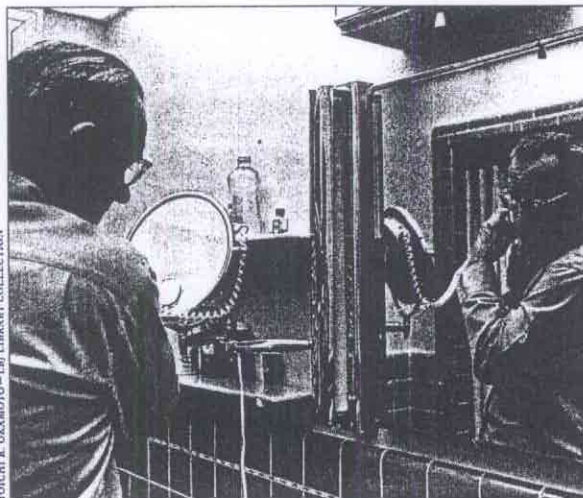
JOHNSTON: The newspapers called me today wanting to know if I was going to vote for you. I said, "Yes, I'm for keeping us out of war and I'm voting for Lyndon Johnson."

LBJ: Well, I don't know whether I can do that. I'm going to do my best, Olin.

The Art of the Deal

Johnson tells Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield in May 1964 that he might strike back at criticism of his family finances by using the FBI to investigate Republican campaign contributions.

LBJ: They've been down inspecting Miz Johnson's property in Texas, and they've harassed and harangued her every day since we've been here. She's about to have a nervous breakdown. They've gone to her farms and taken pictures of all the Negro shacks on it in poverty ... It's just pure cheap politics and they're using the Senate as a forum ... [Sen. Richard Russell] thought that they ought to ... let them know where the Senate stood ... He said [Senate Minority Leader Everett] Dirksen would be the first one to run because he didn't want it investigated. If he wanted to go into money, the Republicans have raised more money than anybody else. The FBI can look into their contributions and it won't look very good.



Dejected and worried, LBJ considered bowing out of the 1964 race

Johnson's key political financier George Brown of the Houston construction firm Brown & Root and Houston Chronicle president John Jones have asked LBJ in January 1964 to overrule antitrust restrictions against a Houston bank merger. Though Johnson probably wants to approve the merger in any event, he uses the opportunity to solicit a written promise from Jones that the Chronicle will support him as long as he is president.

LBJ: They say if I approve the merger in Houston ... it'll be a very bad precedent. I wouldn't mind overriding that if I was overriding it for anything.

BROWN: To be perfectly honest with you, President Kennedy said he was going to approve it.

LBJ: No ... he told me that he was going to get that Chronicle right in his hip pocket to support him for the rest of his life or he wasn't going to give them the time of day ... [I want a letter saying] "the paper is going to support your administration as long as you're there. Sincerely, your friend, John Jones." ... I don't see a damn thing wrong with that ... Both Justice and Treasury will un-cock me right quick if I [approve the merger] ... and I ain't going to do it, George, unless John Jones is willing to say to me that he's my friend.

After Jones caves in, Johnson thanks him by telephone.

LBJ: John, much obliged for your letter—that thing [approval for the merger] was signed this morning.

JONES: Thank you very, very much, Mr. President.

LBJ: ... Give my love to your wife, and from here on out, we're partners.

Accused in the Bobby Baker scandal of financial machinations, including accepting the gift of a stereo set from Baker, his old Senate aide, Johnson tries to extricate himself by privately pointing out that Eisenhower while president accepted expensive gifts for his Pennsylvania farm from Pete Jones, W. G. Byars and other rich friends without public censure.

LBJ: Son-of-a-bitching Williams [Sen. John Williams of Delaware] got up today ... Because I took a record player from an employee ... He didn't say a word about Ike taking that tractor or those bulls or anything like that, and they were from private people ...

I took mine from a public employee working for me, and I thought it was all right.

Johnson hopes to prod Eisenhower to help muzzle Republicans who are lambasting LBJ about his relationship with Bobby Baker. Here he tacitly asks Ike's crony Robert Anderson to let the ex-president know that unless Eisenhower helps to stop the Baker scandal, it might next envelop him.

LBJ: I just want you to let him [Eisenhower] know that about two weeks ago, folks came in here and wanted me to authorize or get some information from [the Internal Revenue Service] on something about maintaining his farm ... Said it involved Pete Jones and somebody—Byars or Byler or somebody. And I said, "I don't know anything about it, and I don't want to know anything about it. And so you just ... get out of here."

Those in the 1990s who think of LBJ as a heedless big spender will be startled by the following complaint to a budget official after a talk with West Virginia Sen. Robert Byrd.

LBJ: Bob Byrd's just raising hell about us putting in this money ... in the [District of Columbia] budget for all these illegitimate kids. I told you to take that out. They want to just stay up there and breed and won't work and we have to feed them ... I told you we don't want to take care of all these illegitimate kids and we want to make 'em get out there and go to work ... This is a program of what they call welfare chiselers. Take 'em from the relief rolls.

The Private Doubts

In July 1964, Johnson unburdens himself to his old friend Texas Gov. John Connally.

LBJ: [I've] got problems with Khrushchev and Castro ... More damned problems than I can handle. I've got old enough and flabby enough that I can't surmount all the obstacles. Every man in my cabinet's a Kennedy man ... I haven't been able to change 'em, and I don't have the personnel if I could change 'em. They didn't go to San Marcos Teachers College [Johnson's alma mater] ... It's just agony ... I don't really know how to handle it all.

CONNALLY: Oh, yes, you do.

LBJ: No, I don't ... I don't have any standing in Chicago ... Iowa, Los Angeles, New York City. Now my judgment is we're gonna lose every Southern state, including Kentucky and Oklahoma and Missouri ... No use in being a crybaby. I just have to say that.

CONNALLY: It's not that bad.

LBJ: The South ain't gonna be for me. But they're [the Northerners] not gonna be for me on grounds that I'm a Southerner. Because I have no real rapport or anything in common with those folks. The only thing is I got possession of the office [of president] at the moment.

On Aug. 25, 1964, the second day of the Democratic convention in Atlantic City, LBJ is about to be nominated unanimously and will go on to win a landslide victory against Barry Goldwater. But privately he is dejected over attacks by the press and by Southerners who hate the Civil Rights Act and blacks who want him to go faster. He tells aides George Reedy and Walter Jenkins that he is about to issue a statement that the nation needs a voice all Americans can follow and "I have learned, after trying very hard, that I am not that voice or that leader."

LBJ: I'm just writing out a little statement that I think I'm gonna make either at a press conference here or go up to Atlantic City this afternoon to make ... Then they can just pick the [candidate] they want ... I don't want this power of the Bomb. I just don't want these decisions I'm being required to make. I don't want the conniving that's required.

REEDY: This will throw the nation into quite an uproar, sir.

LBJ: I am absolutely positive that I cannot lead the South and the North ... And I don't want to lead the nation without my own state and without my own section. I am very convinced that the Negroes will not listen to me. They're not going to follow a white Southerner ... There are just bound to be a lot of [other candidates] that don't



Abe Fortas gets 'the Johnson Treatment'

have these doubts and these angers ... And the nation ought to have a chance to get the best available. That's who I want my children to have. And I know that I'm not.

REEDY: It's too late, sir ... You're the man that has to bear the brunt. But right now ... this just gives the country to Goldwater.

LBJ: That's all right. I don't care ... I think that he could do better than I can because—

REEDY: He can't, sir. He's just a child. And look at our side. We don't have anybody. The only man around I'd trust to be president would be McNamara, and he wouldn't stand a chance.

Targeting Wallace

In May 1964 Johnson instructs his press secretary, George Reedy, to try to leak damaging information gathered by the FBI against George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama who is challenging the president in the Democratic primaries and arousing white backlash against LBJ's civil-rights bill.

LBJ: Talk to [reporter] Phil Potter and see if he can't get that Baltimore Sun to ... expose Wallace. I think they ought to point out that Wallace is now under investigation for frauds, highway contracts in Alabama that are paying his expenses ... The FBI is now investigating it.

LBJ: ... I don't feel like that I want to live with my wife and my daughters and the things they're going through ... I know that a man ought to have the hide of a rhinoceros to be in this job. But I don't ... And I'm not seeking happiness. I'm just seeking a little comfort once in a while. I think I've earned it after 33 years. And I don't see any reason why I must die in it.

REEDY: I think you've earned it too, sir. But I don't think it's a question of having a hide of a rhinoceros. It's kind of a question of rising above these things.

LBJ: Well, I can't do that ... I have a desire to unite people. And the South is against me and the North is against me. And the Negroes are against me. And the press doesn't really have an affection for me—or an understanding. And I'm unable to give it to 'em. I try, but I just look in that Philadelphia Inquirer ... "A textbook caricature of a fast-dealing politician ... He has not aroused any excitement as a person or any emotion or enthusiasm as a human being ..."

REEDY: ... Much worse things than that have been said about presidents, sir. Abraham Lincoln was called a baboon.

LBJ: That's right. I'm not debating, I know that. I know another Johnson [Andrew Johnson] sat in this same place and suffered more anguish than I'm suffering. But I don't see any reason why I need to ... I don't believe there'll be many attacks on the orders I issue on Tonkin Gulf if I'm not a candidate ... Here at the crowning point in my life, when I need people's help, I haven't even got the loyal [staff] here ... So I just don't see any reason why I ought to seek the right to endure anguish ... People think I want great power. [But] what I want is great solace—and a little love. That's all I want.

JENKINS: You have a lot more [than] that.

LBJ: I think that some will charge [me] with cowardice—not wanting to face up to [the presidency]. But I'd just as soon be charged with being a coward as being charged with being a thief. Being charged with the things that they do say—being a manipulator and a conniver and a spend-thrift ... I've had doubts about whether a man born where I was born, raised like I was raised, could ever satisfy the Northern Jews and Catholics and union people ... I do not believe, Walter, that I can physically and mentally—Goldwater's had a couple of nervous breakdowns and I don't want to be ... like [Woodrow] Wilson [after his stroke]. And I do not believe I can physically and mentally carry the responsibilities of the Bomb and the world and the Negroes and the South ... Now there are younger men and better-prepared men and better-trained men and Harvard-educated men. And I know my own limitations.