

NEWS DAY

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LBJ's Recordings Make Sleepy

BOOK REVIEW

TAKING CHARGE: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964. Edited by Michael R. Beschloss. Simon & Schuster, 591 pp., \$30.

By David J. Garrow

LYNDON B. JOHNSON secretly tape-recorded some 9,500 telephone conversations — about 643 hours' worth — during his five-year (1963-1969) presidency.

Richard Nixon taped even more, at least until the 1973 revelation that marked the beginning of the end of his presidency, but while Nixon's heirs have fought to keep most of his recordings secret, the Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas, has begun making almost all of LBJ's recordings available to anyone who's interested.

"Taking Charge" contains an extensive selection of transcripts of Johnson recordings from Nov. 22, 1963, through August, 1964. It's certainly not light reading, but it undeniably offers the most important window into the real world of the modern presidency that we've ever seen.

Even if you're interested in how LBJ got the United States deeper and deeper into Vietnam, this book provides more

raw material than you may want. It's invaluable history, but it's not going to keep you up nights, either. Reading transcripts of other people's phone conversations is less exciting than you think — I've absorbed six years of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s — and with LBJ there's less humor, and fewer dirty jokes, than with King.

There are some good laughs, though. Maybe the best comes when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover tells Johnson his opinion of *The Washington Post*: "I frankly don't read it. I view it like the *Daily Worker*," the newspaper of the Communist Party USA. And don't miss the one where Johnson buddy Abe Fortas, whom LBJ later named to the U.S. Supreme Court, calls the president late one night to ask whether he would like to "come and go dancing" with Fortas and an unnamed woman who's not Fortas' wife. LBJ declines, citing too much work, but the transcript suggests that Fortas' idea of "dancing" didn't require any music. Editor Michael Beschloss, who otherwise stubs his toe only on three small details involv-



AP File Photo, 1964

Lyndon B. Johnson

ing civil rights, inexplicably declines to identify the woman in question.

Next to Johnson, the other dominant character in these conversations is U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. When talking with Kennedy himself, Johnson is friendly and respectful; when talking with almost anyone else, Johnson's obsessive belief that RFK is maneuvering to reclaim the presidency for the Kennedys manifests itself with an antipathy that's stunningly intense.

Johnson son-in-law Charles Robb, now a U.S. senator from Virginia, said on CNN's "Larry King Live" a few weeks ago that he didn't think anyone had ever faulted LBJ "for lacking self-confidence." Wrong — at least if Robb thought he knew the same man who appears on these tapes.

Johnson as president is relentlessly self-pitying, and sometimes he's so distressed by pessimistic expectations that it takes his wife, Lady Bird — who was clearly a major influence on LBJ's thinking — to set him back on a psychologically stable course.

Bedfellows

Several weeks after the 1964 Republican National Convention picked the disaster-bound presidential ticket of Barry Goldwater and William Miller (are you old enough to remember Miller's subsequent career in American Express television ads?), Johnson is preoccupied by fear that the Democratic Party's support of civil rights will allow Goldwater to sweep 15 or more quasi-southern states. Even Bobby Kennedy spurs Johnson's anxiety: "If it comes down to the question of civil rights, the Democrats are going to have a very tough time." Johnson agrees, telling RFK that "civil rights is something around our neck."

History credits Johnson with being our most pro-civil rights president ever, but these transcripts will require at least some modest revisions. Two of Johnson's closest allies, Texas Gov. John Connally and Georgia Sen. Richard Russell, both complain to the president about "niggers" without Johnson raising a peep, and in several other conversations editor Beschloss transcribes LBJ's own pronunciation of the noun in question as "nigras." Just how 'great was

Please see LBJ on Page B5

NewsDay
12/11/97

LBJ: Book on Tapes

LBJ from Page B3

Johnson's belief in racial equality? A whole lot less than we may have thought.

Johnson's deep discomfort with black activism is repeatedly manifest when civil rights proponents challenge the seating of the all-white Mississippi delegation at the Democrats' 1964 convention with their own integrated delegation. Johnson's approach to an issue that black leaders viewed as symbolically loaded was purely pragmatic: "There's not a damn vote that we can get by seating these folks." Even LBJ's vice presidential choice, Minnesota Sen. Hubert Humphrey, a noted civil rights champion, heartily recommends dismissing the Mississippi activists: "We're just not dealing with . . . emotionally stable people." Humphrey of course means the protesters, not LBJ.

Johnson becomes so deeply depressed over the supposed threat that the Mississippi tussle represents to his re-election that he seriously considers withdrawing from the race just two days before he's nominated by acclamation. "I know that I'm *not* the best in the country," he dejectedly tells aide George Reedy. A close reading of "Taking Charge" will convince you that Johnson was dead right. ■

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