

A Larger Than Life President and Book

If you are into early Christmas shopping, a sure winner is Michael Beschloss's book of the actual tapes of Lyndon Johnson's first nine months as president. Be sure to get the six hours of tapes, too.

Seymour Hersh's book on the dark side of John F. Kennedy and Stanley Kutler's book on the additional Nixon tapes are more salacious. But when it comes to sheer marvelous history, "Taking Charge" is unbeatable.

Lyndon Johnson taped his entire presidency; Richard Nixon's taping system—which caused his downfall—only lasted

Politics & People

By Albert R. Hunt



two years. And the editing and annotations of Mr. Beschloss, a pre-eminent post-World War II historian, are extraordinary. (This is the first of three volumes.)

"This book captures Johnson, and Beschloss's footnotes are a marvelous primer for those times," says Harry McPherson, a top aide to Johnson.

We see the full Johnson: dominating and insecure; generous and petty; visionary and vindictive; present and myopic. There was nothing small about this Texan. He had one vocation, one hobby—politics. He flatters, cajoles, pressures, intimidates, pleads, deceives, self-pities—whatever it takes. He used the levers of political power as effectively as any American politician in this century, with the possible exception of Franklin Roosevelt.

The Johnson treatment, even 34 years later, is awesome. His target rarely gets a chance to come up for air. The president's own survival and the future of the country—hell, the Western world—are at stake over Sen. Abe Ribicoff changing his vote

on a tax measure or Saragat Shriver directing the war on poverty, a job that he plainly is not ready to accept. (In this instance, listening to the tape is even better than reading the transcript.)

This is one tough and, if necessary, duplicitous hombre. When the owner of the Houston Chronicle wants Johnson to secure Justice Department approval for a bank merger, the president extracts a quid pro quo: The publisher agrees, in writing, to support Lyndon Johnson forever! (Johnson reportedly had nothing to do with the eventual approval.)

On civil rights and poverty, the first Southern president this century is eloquent and passionate. Those who rise from poverty to achieve wealth or power usually divide into two groups: those who expunge the past and pretend anyone can do it, and those who never forget where they came from. Johnson was clearly among the latter; these tapes show his sincerity.

There is nothing in these nine months that approaches the criminality of the Nixon presidency. But today's ethical transgressions seem mild compared with presidential discussions of passing around envelopes of cash or Johnson's duplicitous efforts to cover up his dealing with former aide Bobby Baker or his disingenuous response to a Wall Street Journal story on how he used his government power to make a personal fortune.

Johnson's pettiness ranged from the really funny to the deeply disturbing. One month after taking office, this fabulously wealthy president personally calls a New York hardtresser to fly down that day to take care of his family and secretaries. But he pleads poverty and says he can't afford much more than transportation costs.

He's frightfully paranoid about the press and any political opponent. As president of the United States—with civil

rights, Vietnam and a presidential election facing him—he once becomes obsessed with the late Paul Corbin, a two-bit Kennedy political operative. From the start of his presidency, he is haunted by the specter of Bobby Kennedy.

Indeed, Mr. Beschloss and some former top Johnson aides believe one of the reasons he escalated the Vietnam War was fear that Robert F. Kennedy—later a dovish critic—would run against him from the right. In the first nine months of this presidency, before the ill-fated buildup began, Johnson's torment over Vietnam already is evident, usually framed in political, not strategic, terms.

But the most riveting passage is a seven-page (pages 363-70) discussion on May 27, 1964, with Sen. Richard Russell, the powerful pro-military chairman of the Armed Services Committee and a Johnson mentor. ("I haven't got any daddy, and you're going to be it," the president tells him a week after taking office, while cajoling him to serve on the JFK assassination panel with an archadversary, Chief Justice Earl Warren.) Sen. Russell warns that Vietnam would be worse than Korea: The U.S. would be bogged down in an Asian land war in which its vaunted superior air power would prove ineffective. "You can make a tremendous case for moving [getting] out, not as good a one for moving in," this Southern hawk presciently advised.

What are the contemporary lessons of this unparalleled look at presidential decision-making? One is that such intimate looks into the halls of power will be almost nonexistent in the post-Nixon world of sub-

poenas and countless investigations: diaries, much less tapes, are taboo. (Remember poor Josh Steiner, the young Treasury aide who was pilloried for his diaries a few years ago?) "We will be writing history from press releases, speeches and memos written to withstand leaks," worries Mr. Beschloss.

"Taking Charge" also is a vivid reminder of the supremacy of politics and persona in the affairs of state. Too many policy wonks in academia and in the media today don't understand this.

In the case of Lyndon Johnson, the ultimate tragedy of an extraordinary man

was that, at his core, he was insecure. Nowhere does this come through more powerfully than the many passages on Vietnam. Rather than relying on his own instincts—and the advice of his surrogate father, Sen. Russell—he was convinced that if he pulled out, he would be attacked by the editorial pages of major newspapers and by his nemesis, Bobby Kennedy.

Thus, in thinking about the next presidential election, as much as particular views on taxes, abortion or trade, an elusive question of character, especially how comfortable someone is with himself. Maybe, as is said, normal people don't get to be president but secure men do; witness Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Ford and Reagan. Anybody who cares about presidential elections or about American history—or who simply wants to have fun—should read and listen to these Johnson tapes.

TAKING CHARGE

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OF
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EDITED AND WITH
COMMENTARIES BY
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