

THE LAST WORD

THE WAY IT REALLY WAS

Hard evidence like the LBJ tapes helps us cut through the fog of 'recovered political memory'

BY MEG GREENFIELD

I KEEP HAVING TO REMIND MYSELF THAT I TAKE A DIM, IF not actually alarmed, view of people's taping conversations without informing all the participants that they are doing so. The reason I am having so much trouble remembering that, by my own lights, I am supposed to be indignant is not just that I am engrossed in reading the newly printed transcripts of all this taping, starting with the Lyndon Johnson tapes as edited and explained by Michael Beschloss. It is also that I think the publication of such material is, or at least can be, a real public service. We stand to benefit on two important counts. The material may compel us to be more honest about ourselves, and it may help to shatter the brittle, oversimplified way in which we tend to see our politics and our politicians.

I'll start with the honesty part. "Recovered memory" is a term that shouldn't be confined to sexual recollections from childhood, now the subject of so much dispute as to which of them is or isn't genuine. Recovered political memory exists as well, and seems to me, if anything, far less reliable as a category. Whatever has become the generally accepted position on an issue, never mind how unaccepted it once was, is claimed to have been the position all along of practically everyone.

To illustrate with just a few examples: Apparently, everybody always thought that Harry Truman was a wonderful, gutsy, honest president; that the Vietnam War was a loser and we should get out; that Watergate represented a really big, serious, clear-cut offense, unlike the Whitewater and other Clinton travails, which are dismissed as marginal and overly complex by comparison. Everybody always apparently thought, as well, that McCarthyism was a bad thing, and that civil-rights legislation that upheld and enforced the principle of colorblind treatment of citizens by government was a good thing. And needless to say, everyone also always knew that the Soviet Union—both its political system and its domination of Eastern Europe—was going to collapse and disappear.

Well, as Walter Cronkite would have to say: that's not the way it was. There are conservatives who attack affirmative action with the pious statement that they are sticking with the original colorblind, Hubert Humphrey approach, who were never for that legislative initiative at the time. There are others who denounce what they call "McCarthyism on the left," but who, so far as I know, have never renounced their support of the original variety. There are liberals who supported the war for a long time (as I did) who remember only their much later antiwar position, and other liberals who say they always knew of the Soviets' weakness and imminent collapse and that is why they never favored tough-line politics—they were just waiting. Never mind that these were often the same people who had argued that the Soviet people

were perfectly satisfied with their system and it was arrogant and wrongheaded of us to think otherwise.

Having to confront documentary evidence of what we all were *really* thinking in the past, especially that which we evidently find too embarrassing to acknowledge, could add a little humility to our self-assuredness about what we think now on current issues. It could also lend a much needed dimension of reality to our vision of politics, making it less sharp-edged, less populated by all-good guys and all-bad guys, less punishing and vindictive and sanctimonious than it has become on all sides. This potential benefit would be reinforced by the second virtue of the publication of these tapes: the relentless, inarguable portrayal of our political leaders as the human beings they really were, not the subsequently glorified or dismissed or reviled figures who dance through our faulty recollections, our journalistic shorthand and our more tendentious history books.

Reading the Beschloss book, you will encounter the lifelike Lyndon Johnson. You can perceive the sincerity of some of what he does and the manipulative deviltry of some. You can appreciate the true intractability of some of the problems he faced. You can see the little meannesses—



his and those of others who were taunting him and thought of him as a usurper. You can begin to gauge what politics required to get some of that large, important legislation passed. And you can see that just about no one who appears in the cast is easily pigeonholed, neither Johnson nor Humphrey nor Robert Kennedy nor Richard Russell nor any of the lesser players: they have their more elevated moments and their more petty ones. What you understand better, as a result of reading all this, is the essential human comedy of politics, the daily tradings and greasings and bluffs and importunings and the rest that are required to make anything happen. Even in the much more sinister Nixon stuff that is now being released this is true. You get a sense of the weird dailiness of political life even as the participants were, in effect, running for cover.

I am not exactly infatuated with the state of our national political life just now. It has become too publicity- and poll-driven, too personalized, too liberated from any sense of shame and only slightly less liberated from any sense of overriding duty. I think when you read about Lyndon Johnson in this book, or about JFK and his advisers in the published tapes from the Cuban-missile-crisis period, you cannot help coming away with a feeling that you are dealing here with people of more conviction and seriousness than the electorate is serving up now.

But you know, that may simply be because in these newly revealed tapes we are seeing them more nearly as they really were than we ever had a chance to before. And this possibility is worth pondering, since it suggests that our own much derided contemporary leaders may show up (if anyone is still taping right now) better—more human, more understandable, more admirable even—than their tattered reputations at the moment would lead you to believe. The Johnson stuff happened a little over 30 years ago; likewise the Kennedy stuff. Thirty years from now will there be tapes that will alter people's perception of, say, Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich? You just jumped up and hollered, "No!" Don't be so sure. That's the message of these invaluable, newly published stories.

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