

THE PRESIDENCY/HUGH SIDNEY

L.B.J., Hoover and Domestic Spying

As the mists of a decade of White House conspiracy are rolled back, there is a better view of Lyndon Johnson. The new trails of CIA and FBI domestic spying, however uncertain as yet, lead back to his Oval Office and that towering figure of contradictions. Those ravaged patrons of Richard Nixon are quick to suggest that L.B.J. was as bad as or worse than the disgraced 37th President. But that has not yet been proved.

What seems more likely is that there was an unusual combination of people and events in the mid-1960s. There was J. Edgar Hoover, the aging head of the FBI, who kept in his private safe the hottest files on important people and dribbled the information out to Presidents when it served his power-hungry purpose. Hoover knew his man; Johnson had a voracious appetite for gossip. Then there was Cartha (Deke) DeLoach, Hoover's deputy, who felt that he might be named Hoover's replacement under Johnson. DeLoach became a courier to the White House of the juicy gleanings from the FBI.

And then there was Johnson, schooled in the tangles of Texas politics, tutored by Master Plotter Franklin Roosevelt, tempered in the Senate's school of the deal, and ultimately a man who believed that there were no accidents in politics, only conspiracies. He armored himself with intimate knowledge of those he believed conspired against him, which was almost everybody. "I don't trust anybody but Lady Bird," he once said, "and sometimes I'm not sure about her."

He never accepted the findings of the Warren Commission and believed always that John Kennedy's assassination was a conspiracy by Communists in retaliation for a reported effort by Kennedy to have Fidel Castro killed. He believed that the race riots in the ghettos and the peace marches in the streets were being paid for by the Red Chinese. "I know there is Chinese Communist money there," he kept telling his aides.

L.B.J. was convinced that Bobby Kennedy had bugged him all during the time that he was Vice President. He frequently called the CIA "Murder Incorporated" because he believed that the CIA had gone ahead and killed South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem against Kennedy's wishes. He had a further notion that the CIA was somehow linked with the Mafia.

He read and reported with relish the findings of the Treasury in the biggest tax cases. He bragged once that he knew within minutes what Senator William Fulbright, then chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, had said at lunch at the Soviet embassy or what Soviet contacts had told other members of Congress at cocktail parties. He insisted that the Soviets were building Viet Nam opposition in Congress and the press. He slapped his thigh with delight when he got a report from the FBI about a prominent Republican Senator who frequented a select Chicago bordello and had some kinky sexual preferences, all of which were reported in detail. The information came from a madam who was an FBI informer.

As the 1968 Democratic Convention approached, the FBI sent Johnson almost daily reports on the people and events of that unsettled time. One Johnson aide remembers that there was information about the activities of Congressmen and Senators. The FBI reports were often included in the President's night reading, and sometimes they were such "garbage," as

one man said, that Johnson aides thought they were not fit for the President to see. They were sent back to the bureau.

Shortly after Johnson took office, the transcript and tapes of Martin Luther King's bedroom activities were spirited to him. He read the accounts, which an aide described as being "like an erotic book." He listened to the tapes that even had the noises of the bedsprings.

When a Johnson assistant once defended King's antiwar activities, L.B.J. exploded: "Goddammit, if only you could hear what that hypocritical preacher does sexually." The aide tried to joke. "Sounds good, Mr. President," he said. A huge grin appeared momentarily on Johnson's face, but he quickly caught it and returned to his threatening self.

An aide remembers being with Johnson and Hoover when Hoover was reporting on important people linked to the gambling world. Johnson was fascinated, but hesitant. How did Hoover know these things? he asked. Because of wiretaps, Hoover told the President. Then Hoover would drop a tidbit or two. Johnson was all ears, but he would protest, "All right, all right," as if he wanted Hoover to stop. Hoover did not stop. He kept on talking, and L.B.J. kept on listening. Johnson was hooked and Hoover knew it.

Yet for all of this, Johnson sometimes denounced bugging as if it were original sin. "The worst thing in our society would be to not be able to pick up a phone for fear of it being tapped," he told one of his men. "I don't want any wiretapping," he said when he was designing the Safe Streets Act. However, Senator John McClellan talked him into including a provision for wiretapping. The Congress then provided more authority than agreed upon, so Johnson ordered the Justice Department not to use that power.

At one point Johnson became so angry at Hoover and the bureau that he ordered his Secret Service detail chief, Rufus Youngblood, to go over to Justice and

take over the FBI. Youngblood went there, wandered around for a few days, but the order was never formalized. Two of Johnson's closest friends warned L.B.J. that Hoover was disregarding the civil liberties of many people. It was then that Johnson gave his pungent summation of why he kept Hoover: "I would rather have him inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in."

None of the Johnson men remembers any written orders to the FBI or the CIA on all this dirty linen. The material just came in, and Johnson seemed to understand. But then there came a day when that changed, at least with the FBI. After Johnson had announced that he would not seek re-election in 1968, he learned from an intelligence report that Anna Chennault, widow of famed World War II Flying Tiger General Claire Chennault and a money raiser for the 1968 Nixon campaign, had got in touch with the Saigon government. It was suspected, at the least, that she was urging them not to cooperate with Johnson in his last days, but wait for Nixon to be elected. The belief in the White House then was that a high Republican traveling with Vice Presidential Candidate Spiro Agnew had got to Mme. Chennault to urge her to carry the message to Saigon. When Johnson demanded to know who the contact on the Agnew plane might have been, the FBI's proven ability to detect such sources suddenly and mysteriously faltered. As one of Johnson's most trusted men put it last week, "The power had passed." Indeed it had. Another conspirator was about to enter the White House, and the FBI was getting ready for him.



HOOPER & JOHNSON AT THE WHITE HOUSE IN 1967