

# Listening to Lyndon

*The private agony of a president with no way out.*

BY DAVID J. GARROW

**F**OUR YEARS AGO, MICHAEL BESCHLOSS published his first volume of President Lyndon B. Johnson's secretly-recorded telephone conversations that covered the period from November 1963 through August 1964. This second volume of edited transcripts advances the project through July 1965. Though phenomenally rich and valuable as historical documents, only dedicated political junkies will wish to plow through all of these dense—though often fascinating—conversations. Scholars of America's involvement in Vietnam will draw the greatest benefit from *Reaching for Glory*, though many other subjects, from the Dominican Republic to Johnson's own tormented psyche, are substantially illuminated.

None is so deeply fascinating as Johnson's intensely contradictory feelings about surreptitious wiretaps. Beschloss notes that the White House recordings rarely, if ever, reveal Johnson preening for the tape recorder or even speaking in a way that suggests he was conscious of it. But so thorough and purposeful was his taping that the recordings manage to capture both Johnson's fervent denunciations of wiretaps and his explicit pleasure in their results,

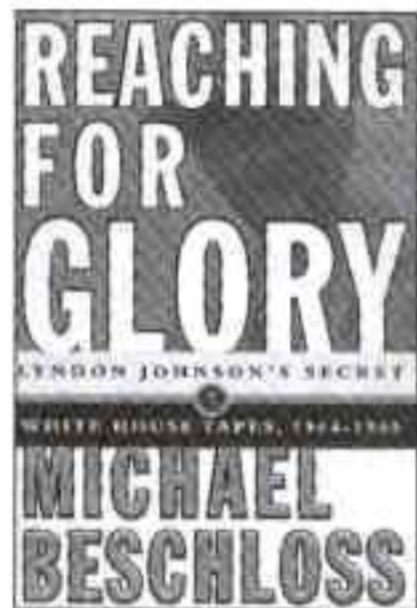
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In late March 1965, Johnson instructed Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach that the number of wiretaps be "brought to an irreducible minimum. And only in the gravest cases. I want you to authorize them, and then, by God, I want to know about them. I'm against wiretapping, period." But Johnson's conviction had one remarkable exception: "I assume that in one of our friends' cases"—he was speaking of King—"from what I have seen, that must be where the evidence comes from. I mean, on [his] Hawaii jaunts ... California, and with some of the women ... You know who I'm talking about?" "Yes," Katzenbach replied. Johnson added, "Nobody's ever told me that's where it comes from. And I don't want to know."

The contradiction was dramatic. "I'm a red-hot one-million-two percent civil liberties man, and I'm just against them," Johnson told Katzenbach a moment later. "I don't want any wiretapping around." Katzenbach noted that his predecessor, Robert F. Kennedy, had authorized King's wiretap, and Johnson did not order it removed.

But the president who so opposed tapping loved to tape his own conversations with people who were unaware that their words were being memorialized for the ages. During 1964 and 1965, Johnson's most constant subject of conversation was Vietnam, and his two most frequent interlocutors were Secretary of



REACHING FOR GLORY:  
Lyndon Johnson's Secret  
White House Tapes, 1964-65  
by Michael Beschloss  
Simon & Schuster, \$30.00

Defense Robert McNamara and Georgia senator Richard Russell. *Reaching for Glory* ought to significantly enhance Russell's historical reputation, for the transcripts repeatedly reveal the hawkish senator's grave doubts about American military involvement in Vietnam from the outset. "I wish we could figure out some way to get out of that, Mr. President," Russell told Johnson in November 1964.

But rather than accept the impregnable political coverage that a conservative like Russell could provide for a decision to downscale American intervention in Vietnam, Johnson couldn't bring himself to consider abandoning America's military commitment. "I don't believe I can walk out," he told the political columnist Drew Pearson in March 1965. "If I did, they'd take Thailand ... They'd take Cambodia ... They'd take Burma ... They'd take Indonesia ... They'd take India ... They'd come right back and take the Philippines ... I'd be another [Neville] Chamberlain."

Yet Johnson's attitude, which was shared by McNamara, resulted in doing little more than seemed necessary to avoid outright defeat. Instead, their professed hope was that, in time, the North Vietnamese would decide to negotiate a peaceful settlement. But

as early as June 1965, Johnson confessed to Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield that "we think they are winning. Now, if WE think they're winning, can you imagine what THEY think?"

While McNamara warned the president that "we've got to slow down here and try to halt, at some point, the ground troop commitment," Johnson's steadfast refusal to do so left him no exit strategy, save the unlikely possibility of negotiations with Hanoi. Johnson recognized his dilemma. "They're winning," he confessed to Indiana senator Birch Bayh. "Why would they want to talk?" And Johnson was equally pessimistic with McNamara: "I don't believe they're ever going to quit. And I don't see ... that we have any ... plan for victory—militarily or diplomatically."

Publicly, Johnson professed optimism, especially in the supposed prospect of meaningful negotiations, but privately his pessimism manifested itself in conversation after conversation. He told Russell he would like to "find a way to get out without saying so." Russell heartily agreed. Yet Johnson's fear of appearing to "tuck tail and run" ultimately outweighed his (and Russell's) better judgment. "I'm doing my best to hold this thing in balance just as



President Johnson hands Senator Robert F. Kennedy a pen from a signing.

Simon & Schuster/Donald Stodery

long as I can," Johnson told Mansfield. "I can't run out. I'm not going to run in. I can't just sit there and let them be murdered. So I've got to put enough there to hold them and protect them."

### Lady Bird Sings

The profound tension between Johnson's public

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utterances and his private realizations led to serious emotional problems within weeks of his triumphal November 1964 reelection. Even that landslide victory did nothing to remedy Johnson's tremendous insecurities, feelings that were well-documented in Beschloss's earlier volume, *Taking Charge*.

That book highlighted Johnson's intense fear of

Robert F. Kennedy, a pattern that continues here. The "Kennedy people," Johnson complained to outgoing press secretary George Reedy in late 1964, "are more attractive ... better dinner partners ... and they are more exciting than we are socially .... Our trouble is, George, we do not have acquaintances" of such sophistication, because "San Marcos [State Teachers

College, Johnson's humble undergraduate institution] didn't produce them."

The most powerful and insightful passages in *Reaching for Glory*, however, come not from Lyndon

Johnson's recorded conversations but from contemporaneous diary passages that his wife, Lady Bird Johnson, privately dictated during their White House years and shared with Beschloss. Her accounts are of arguably greater historical value than Johnson's recordings, because she was a thoughtful and perceptive observer of her husband and those around

him. Students of the Johnson years inclined toward the belief that Lady Bird was a figure of little substantive import will discover her impressive sagaciousness in Beschloss's diary selections.

Shortly after Johnson's plaintive comments to Reedy, Mrs. Johnson mused to herself that "I sometimes wonder what Lyndon would have been like if, instead of being exposed in his youth to [his exceedingly modest home town of] Johnson City and a state teachers' college, he had been exposed to a sophisticated society of many facets and a school like Harvard"—the implication being that Johnson's self-doubts would have been far less burdensome had he enjoyed a more privileged background. Instead, what Beschloss accurately terms "Johnson's eternal dread of apocalypse just around the corner" haunts many of the



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President Johnson with Lady Bird Johnson eating breakfast before his inauguration.

book's conversations.

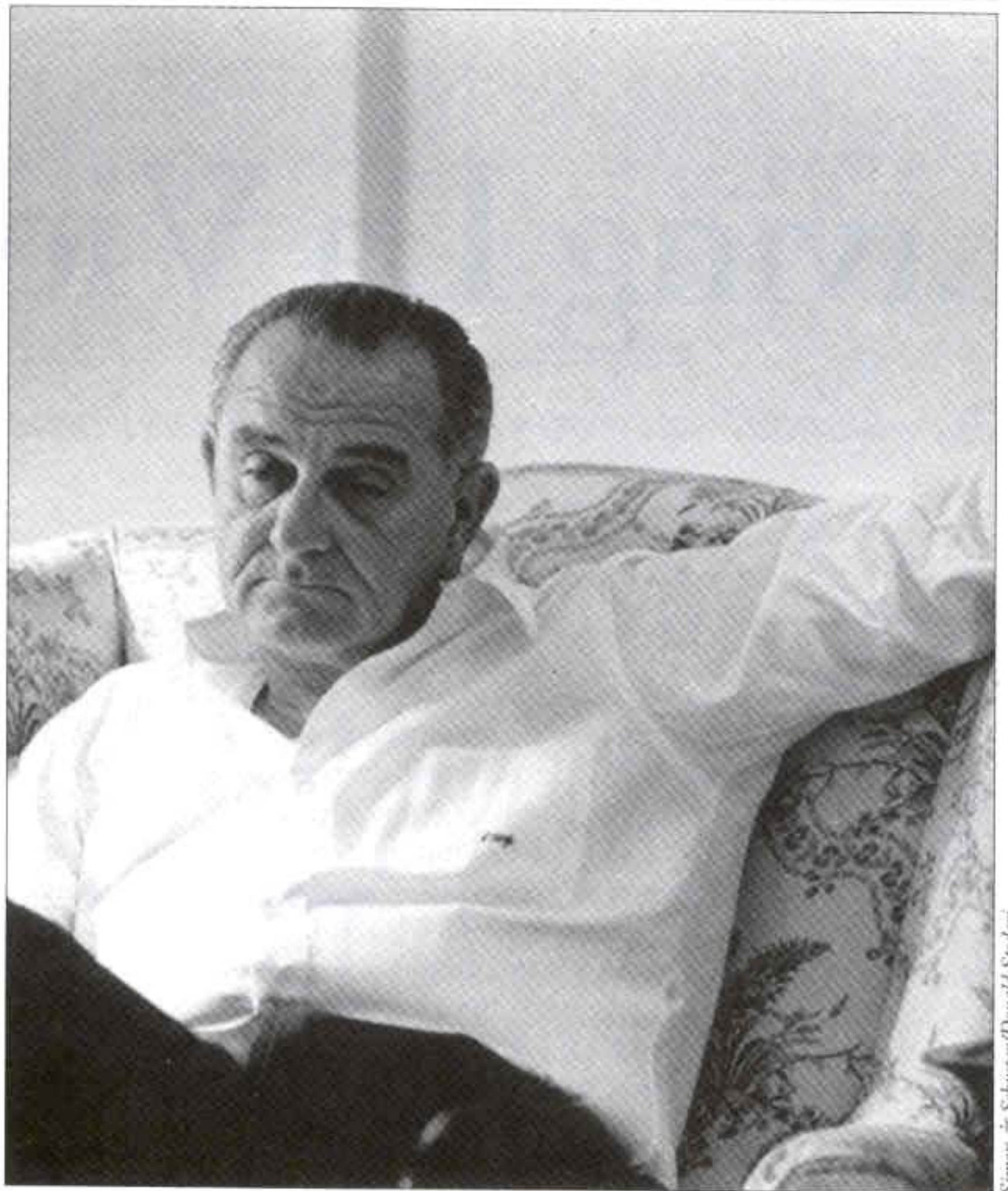
Johnson's fear of a devastating scandal was stoked not only by the close call he had experienced with his former congressional staffer Bobby Baker, whose personal finances became a Washington uproar that scorched Johnson, but also by the tremendously embarrassing October 1964 arrest of his closest staff aide, Walter Jenkins, for performing oral sex on another man in the basement restroom of a YMCA near the White House. Although Johnson probably suffered little or no political fallout from the Jenkins affair, Lady Bird recognized that her husband's fears were unquenchable.

"He lives in constant concern that somebody somewhere in his periphery will be mixed up, fairly or unfairly, in some shady business," Lady Bird said in early 1965. "The fear that haunts him is a sort of [Warren] Harding complex," something Johnson himself confirmed two months later while discussing the Baker case with Katzenbach: "I don't want to be a Harding!"

But it was the daily burden of the Vietnam War that exacted the greatest emotional toll on the president. In early February 1965, Lady Bird expressed surprise that Johnson had told Vice President Hubert Humphrey "something that I had heard so often, but did not really expect to come out of his mouth in front of anyone else. 'I'm not temperamentally equipped to be Commander-in-Chief,' he said ... 'I'm too sentimental to give the orders.'"

The constancy of Johnson's fears led his wife to believe that "this heavy load of tension and this fog of depression" were having "an erosive effect on his personality." She worried that his lack of sleep and his nightly preoccupation with American bombing missions was simply too draining. "He said, 'I want to be called every time somebody dies.' He can't separate himself from it."

By July 1965, Johnson had become, in the words of his second press secretary, Bill Moyers, "a tor-



*"He lives in constant concern that somebody somewhere in his periphery will be mixed up, fairly or unfairly, in some shady business," Lady Bird Johnson worried in 1965.*

mented man." Lady Bird Johnson's fears about her husband's emotional health were so profound that she admitted in mid-1965 to buying a black silk dress, "having, in the back of my mind when I bought it, the grim, unacknowledged thought that I might need a black dress for a funeral."

*Reaching for Glory* demonstrates in powerful detail that the tragedy of Vietnam was also a personal tragedy for Johnson himself, practically from the outset of his second term. The war's impact made his family's White House life "pure hell," his wife told Beschloss. And she, like her husband, had accurately sensed very early on just how the story would end. "Vietnam is getting worse every day," she quoted him as telling her in July of 1965. "I have the choice to go in with great casualty lists or to get out with disgrace. It's like being in an airplane and I have to choose between crashing the plane or jumping out. I do not have a parachute." Unfortunately, Lyndon Johnson never jumped. ●