

LBJ in His Own Words

Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964 edited and with commentary by Michael R. Beschloss. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. 591 pp. \$30 cloth)

Last year produced no less than three books of presidential tapes, each giving rise to a reappraisal of its president's tenure. JFK may now be better remembered for his decisive decision-making that averted a nuclear war with the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Nixon, having burnished his reputation before his death, will again be properly remembered as a scheming, unscrupulous villain. And our own LBJ?

With the deft hand of editor Michael Beschloss, LBJ's early presidency in the aftermath of JFK's assassination comes to life in *Taking Charge*, where every obscure reference is painstakingly footnoted to make intelligible the characters and events involved. As one *New York Times* reviewer wrote, Johnson comes across, unlike his somewhat austere, uncomfortable television persona, as "earthy, emotional and manipulative"—as Texans know him from the lore of LBJ memory kept alive by such great works as Billie Lee Brammer's thinly veiled profile in *The Gay Place*.

Taking Charge is a breathtaking interior perspective of the White House, one we shall never hear again in the aftermath of Watergate. From the opening sequence when Johnson is captured on tape calling John Kennedy's mother to console her, we are drawn in to hear how LBJ responds to the new responsibilities of power as the great and minor issues of the day loom before him—the assassination, civil rights, Vietnam, his own financial scandals—and as a presidential election awaits.

RELATIONS WITH THE KENNEDYS

On assuming power, Johnson attempts to honor his predecessor by continuing JFK's priorities without chasing away all the Kennedy men, carefully cultivating relationships with the most trusted and able like Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy. Johnson comes across in conversation with the Kennedy clan as a respectful and humble ally. At the same time, in private, Johnson continually rages, in a fear bordering on paranoia, that Bobby Kennedy is plotting against him for the Democratic nomination and later, when Johnson has wrapped up the nomination, to be his running mate.

JOHNSON'S PLACE IN HISTORY

There is ample material here to justify one's preconceived opinions of Johnson, good or ill, for LBJ is a giant figure of immense contradictions, able at one moment to curry favor (without resorting to racial epithets) with old school racist Southern Democrats by claiming he had little to do with the civil rights legislation before him, while the next moment on the phone with Martin Luther King or the NAACP's Roy Wilkins eagerly supporting that same legislation.

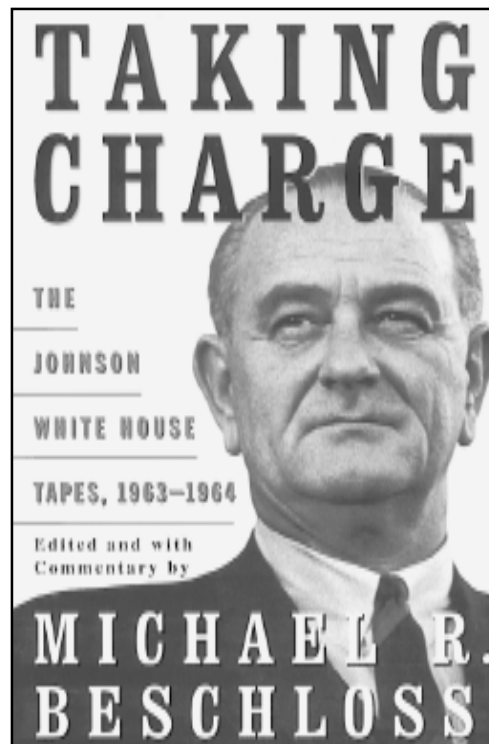
If one is keen to see the worst in Johnson—for example, that he used his political position to enhance his personal fortune—the passages about his business dealings are troubling.

Moreover, Johnson's eschewal of the use of racial epithets might be regarded by some as self-censorship for the tapes and for posterity, but throughout the book, Johnson and history are revealed, as Lady Bird said was his wish, "with the bark off." Upon cleansing the historical record of unflattering episodes, LBJ would have simply edited out conversations like the one in which he secures *The Houston Chronicle* endorsement in exchange for his support for a bank merger.

Ultimately, one must draw one's judgment of Johnson based on the long-term trajectory of what he did rather than, as interesting as it may be, what he said.

CIVIL RIGHTS

On the issue of civil rights, Johnson's achievement was enormous. Where Kennedy's bill had languished from June 1963 up until his death, Johnson, appealing to the dead President's memory, succeeded finally in July 1964 to pass the comprehensive bill which put an end to Jim Crow. It took great courage for Johnson to campaign for civil rights in Georgia in May 1964 where, in the footnotes, we read that LBJ says before thousands: "Full participation in our society can no longer be denied to men because of their race or their religion or the region in which they live" (341). Though Johnson is positively giddy with the passage of the civil rights bill, his party, as he feared it might, later lost the South as a result of such a stand. After Johnson was instrumental in securing the passage of a rather weak civil rights bill in 1957 (the first such bill in eighty years), Northern liberals were highly skeptical of his commitment to the issue. To this charge of being a redneck reactionary, Johnson is forever



sensitive. At times, such as when the all-white Mississippi delegation to the 1964 Democratic convention is almost involved in a bitter floor fight with civil rights activists who wanted an integrated delegation, this label as provincial rube—just a graduate of Southwest Texas State Teachers College—makes him think seriously about dropping out of the presidential race.

Aside from this sense of inadequacy, Johnson throughout is preoccupied by the political ramifications of moral stands. Worried that a highly public fight at the convention over the Mississippi delegation would divide the party and drive away Southern Democrats, LBJ fumes to the NAACP President: “If I were the Negro...I’d just let Mississippi [the all-white delegation] sit up on the platform, if they wanted to, and I’d stand at attention and salute the son of a bitch. Then I’d nominate Johnson for President...and the next four years, I’d see the promised land” (517).

Likewise, in assessing the election prospects of liberal Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough, Johnson says presciently to union leader Walter Reuther: “They’ll wind up having Tower in the Senate and having Bush in the Senate. That’s the way they’re going. Of course, Yarborough is a very weak candidate. Civil rights and union labor and the Negro thing is not the way to get elected in a state that elects Connally by 72 percent” (386).

Johnson is thus revealed to be a consummate politician of conscience, biding time until the moment was ripe for legislation of substance to come to the floor. Knowing that he couldn’t “make a Southerner change his spots,” as Johnson tells Roy Wilkins, Johnson makes the politically savvy decision to appeal to Republicans, as the party of Lincoln, to ensure the legislation’s passage.

VIETNAM

Johnson’s political calculations combined with a fixation on the polls (not such a recent phenomenon) may have led us into the debacle of Vietnam. Throughout the book, Johnson reveals his grave doubts as to the wisdom of a widened conflict in Southeast Asia. Speaking with his mentor, South Carolina’s Senator Richard Russell, LBJ agonizes over the possibility of sending more troops:

I’ve got a little old sergeant that works for me over at the house and he’s got six children and I just put him up as the United States Army, Air Force, and Navy every time I think about making this decision and think about sending that father of those six kids in there. And what the hell are we going to get out of his doing it? And it just makes the chills run up my back. (369)

Still, Johnson sees no way, without being subject to Republican charges of being soft on Communists, to cut and run unless some Vietnamese leader asks the U.S. to leave. Where it has long been thought that the situation in the Gulf of Tonkin was cynically used by the Johnson administration to expand the war in Vietnam, the record here reveals a much more hesitant Johnson, eager to keep Vietnam on the back burner until after the election.

When American warships were said to have come under fire in the Gulf, LBJ wishes to play down the issue and the American response. Only when the press, without independent confirmation, begins to report the attacks does Johnson, fearful that the Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater will use the incident against him, decide to make the fateful decision to expand the war. It could be reasonably argued that, given LBJ’s conviction that America’s disengagement would lead to a Communist Southeast Asia, it was only a matter of time until he would be forced to take such a step.

The tragedy of Vietnam is only a distant cloud in this book. As Johnson continued taping throughout his entire administration, we will have to wait for the subsequent volumes by Beschloss to read how Johnson regarded the disastrous sequence of events after the 1964 election that ultimately led him to retire from politics in 1968. It should be well worth the wait.



LBJ age 5-6

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photo by Mark Busby

LBJ’s childhood home, Johnson City, Texas