

# Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson (November 22, 1963-January 10, 1969)

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Essay by Bruce J. Schulman (guest post)\*



Lyndon B. Johnson built his career--and became one of the nation's most effective Senate leaders--through his mastery of face-to-face contact. Applying his famous "Treatment," LBJ pleased, cajoled, flattered, teased, and threatened colleagues and rivals. He would grab people by the lapels, speak right into their faces, and convince them they had always wanted to vote the way Johnson insisted. He could share whiskey and off-color stories with some colleagues, hold detailed policy discussions with others, toast their successes, and mourn their losses. Syndicated newspaper columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak vividly described the Johnson Treatment as:

supplication, accusation, cajolery, exuberance, scorn, tears, complaint, the hint of threat. It was all of these together. Its velocity was breathtaking, and it was all in one direction. Interjections from the target were rare. Johnson anticipated them before they could be spoken. He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling.<sup>1</sup>

While President Johnson never abandoned in-person persuasion, the scheduling and security demands of the White House forced him to rely more heavily on indirect forms of communication. Like Muddy Waters plugging in his electric guitar or Laurel and Hardy making the transition from silent film to talkies, LBJ became maestro of the telephone. He had the Army Signal Corps install scores of special POTUS lines (an acronym for "President of the United States") so that he could communicate instantly with officials around the government. Once, the President called Domestic Policy Advisor Joseph Califano and learned that Califano had gone to the bathroom. "Isn't there a phone in there?" Johnson asked and demanded that one be hooked up right away. Califano returned to his office and called the President immediately, but ignored the order to install the bathroom phone. The very next day, the President called again and found his aide similarly employed. "I told you to put a phone in that toilet," he screamed at Califano's hapless secretary. A few minutes later, two Signal Corps technicians arrived and installed a phone in the restroom.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson spent so many hours on the phone that the artist commissioned to capture him in stone sculpted a piece of Johnson running, the receiver of a telephone in one ear, the base cradled in his hand. Those phone calls make up the bulk of the Johnson presidential recordings. Between November 1963, when he became president upon the death of John F. Kennedy, and the inauguration of his successor in January 1969, LBJ secretly recorded roughly 800 hours of conversations.

Previous chief executives had made sporadic use of recording devices. Franklin D. Roosevelt hid a microphone in a lamp on his desk in the Oval Office, mainly to record press conferences. He also taped a few private conversations on a large machine in the West Wing basement. Dwight D. Eisenhower occasionally used a Dictaphone. Both FDR and Ike made little use of the recordings.<sup>3</sup> In July 1962, President John F. Kennedy placed concealed microphones in Cabinet room light fixtures and in his desk in the Oval Office. When Kennedy flipped a switch (he could edit the tapes, choosing to record only parts of any conversation), the hidden microphones transmitted to a reel-to-reel recorder in the White House basement. Kennedy also made dictabelt recordings of a few telephone conversations, signaling his personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, to turn on the machine.<sup>4</sup>

Johnson substantially expanded the system. As Senate Majority leader, LBJ had often asked close aides to listen in on his telephone conversations and make short-hand notes without informing the other party. As Vice President, Johnson used an Edison Voicewriter, a dictation device, to secretly tape some of his telephone exchanges on round red plastic platters. After becoming president, Johnson placed new microphones in the Cabinet room and Oval Office and installed devices in the kneeholes of his secretaries' desks, in the Situation Room, in his White House bedroom, and at the LBJ ranch in Texas. If he wanted a conversation recorded, he summoned a secretary and twirled his finger in the air. Johnson himself--or one of his valets--operated the equipment in his bedroom and at the LBJ ranch.<sup>5</sup>

The tapes provide a particularly extensive record of President Johnson's first weeks in office; in November and December 1963, he recorded over 800 conversations in only 39 days. Johnson continued making heavy use of the Dictabelt system in 1964, but after he won election in his right that November, the number of recordings dropped. Almost all of them consist of telephone conversations that LBJ made during his time in office (in the final months of his presidency, Johnson began recording some face-to-face meetings).<sup>6</sup>

The recordings reveal Johnson's political talent--his powers of persuasion and manipulation and sometimes even deception. In a series of conversations with his one-time mentor, Senator Richard Russell (D-GA), Johnson badgers the conservative southerner to join a commission investigating the Kennedy assassination with Earl Warren, the liberal Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who had authored the *Brown* decision making school segregation illegal. Unable to persuade Russell, Johnson simply announces the appointment. Outfoxed and angry, Russell complains that the President is taking advantage of him, but Johnson reminds the Senator of the service he has done Russell in the past and his expectation of loyalty. "I don't give a damn if you have to serve with a Republican," Johnson insists, "if you have to serve with a communist, if you have to serve with a Negro, or if you have to serve with a thug."<sup>7</sup>

But the recordings showcase more than the skills of a consummate politician, they also lay bare his private thoughts, especially his nagging doubts about the escalating war in Vietnam. In one May 1964 conversation with Russell, for example, Johnson makes clear his distrust of defense officials and foreign policy aides pushing for a show of power in Southeast Asia, his concern that escalation might divide the country and undermine his support in Congress, and his conviction that the United States was pursuing a failed strategy. But even though Russell offers him cover, and suggests withdrawal, Johnson also dwells on the potential political costs of retreat, the way his likely Republican opponents might label him weak; he even speculates that “they’d impeach a President, though, that would run out, wouldn’t they?”<sup>8</sup>

As far as LBJ was concerned, the tapes should have remain sealed for at least half a century.<sup>9</sup> They might have remained secret, except that his successor Richard Nixon installed an even more extensive taping system in 1971. Testifying before the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, the Senate panel investigating the Watergate scandals, in July 1973, White House aide Alexander Butterfield let slip the existence of Nixon's tapes. Butterfield's revelation electrified the nation, generating outrage that Nixon had taped aides and rivals without their knowledge or consent. In an effort to calm the uproar, the White House immediately revealed that Nixon had not been alone. The President's attorney informed the committee that Johnson had used similar recording equipment.<sup>10</sup> LBJ had consigned the recordings to the Johnson Library with an order that they remained sealed for at least 50 years after his death.

In his reflection on Johnson’s career published shortly after LBJ’s death, “New York Times” executive editor James (“Scotty”) Reston mused that LBJ loved the camera (no president had “collected more photographs of himself and his visitors than Mr. Johnson”), but that “the tape recorder was really the instrument he should have used.” Historians, Reston surmised:

...will never be able to sort out the glory and the tragedy unless they manage to collect the stories, listen to the tape recorders and forget the television, which was his downfall, and somehow hear him talking endlessly about his problems, his cunning contrivances, his feeling for the Congress, and particularly his affection for his lovely and remarkable wife, and his hard-scrabble land in Texas.<sup>11</sup>

While they never fully capture the glory and genius, the abundant triumphs and painful tragedy, of Johnson’s presidency, these remarkable recordings grant listeners unparalleled access to the White House during some of the nation’s most tumultuous years.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowland Evans and Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power*, (N.Y.: Signet Books, 1966), pp. 115-16.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Califano, Jr., *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 25-26.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Beschloss ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1998), p. 548. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), p. x.

<sup>4</sup> May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. x.

<sup>5</sup> Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, p. 549.

<sup>6</sup> In 1964, he continued to use the Dictabelt system heavily, recording over 4,600 conversations throughout the year. However, in 1965 and subsequent years, the number of Dictabelt recordings dropped sharply. In 1965, Johnson recorded approximately 1,780 conversations; in 1966, this number decreased to around 1240; and in 1967, Johnson recorded only about 350 conversations. The number of recorded conversations increased slightly in 1968, to around 560. Miller Center, "Johnson Secret White House Recordings: Collection Specifications, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/johnson-secret-white-house-recordings-collection-specifications>

<sup>7</sup> Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> "Lyndon Johnson and Richard Russell on 27 May 1964," Tape WH6405.10, Citations #3519, #3520, and #3521, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Toward the Great Society, vol. 6, ed. Guian A. McKee] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014-). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9060283>

<sup>9</sup> Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, p. 547.

<sup>10</sup> Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge*, p. 550

<sup>11</sup> James Reston, "The Glory and Tragedy of L.B.J.," *New York Times*, January 24, 1973, p. 41.