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A bountiful trip to Lyndon B. Johnson's presidential library

By ALLAN BONNER

AUSTIN, TEXAS—I've heard the secret tapes. The President of the United States offering \$25,000 and telling the caller not to reveal that he has a secret pipeline to the Whitehouse. The caller calls back, the deal is done and both move on with their agendas.

Watergate? Nixon? G. Gordon Liddy? No. I've just been listening to Lyndon Baines Johnson's dictabelt recordings from long before Nixon was even a credible candidate in 1968.

The LBJ Library and Museum is at the University of Texas in Austin. This is the presidency which began in a macabre act of violence in Dealey Plaza a few hours down the road in Dallas, and ended with tens of thousands of deaths in Vietnam, race riots in cities across America, and the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. It is thus ghoulishly fitting that this Presidential Library should be a short walk from the tower from which the so-called Texas sniper inexplicably shot 14 passersby on Aug. 1, 1966.

As with the Johnson years, nothing is ever simple. Each solution presents a new problem worse than the last. Going forward, standing still, and falling back are not options.

Those who use the sniper case as a case for gun control, for example, must confront the fact that Johnson used a rifle, not the traditionally misused handgun. Gun control advocates must also confront the fact that a few Texans pulled their own rifles out of their pickup trucks and returned fire. Otherwise, there might have been more killings.

Death penalty advocates must confront the biology of the event. The sniper is said to have had a lesion at the back of his brain. It has subsequently been found that if that lesion is surgically removed, the patient ceases to have the offending symptoms which can lead to antisocial and violent behaviour.

But Johnson had no surgeon to remove the lesion of Vietnam or the injustices at lunch counters or the fires of Detroit. He could only return some fire, pass legislation, and throw what water he had on his burning cities.

And pass legislation he did. The already consummate legislator, negotiator, and deal-maker was not shy in augmenting his formidable skills with reference to the fact that the best memorial the country could give his slain predecessor was the passing of civil rights legislation. In death, John F. Kennedy worked well and tirelessly for Johnson. Some 1,000 bills were passed.

But in the end, the war and social turmoil were too much. The Great Society initiatives, notably the war on poverty, could not be funded and the war ravaged the country's youth whether they went to Vietnam or not. The war ravaged the politics of the country and haunts the Democratic Party still. They fear being labelled either soft or single-issue politicians. So sitting Johnson exited the field, vowing not to seek or accept his party's nomination for president.

Hard as you try, it is others who decide what your reputation and legacy are. You can project what you want, but projection is not acceptance. Judging from the Library and Museum displays, Johnson would like to be remembered as

an aggressive legislator and someone who had a vision for U.S. domestic policy that could not be realized because of the Vietnam War that Eisenhower and Kennedy left him.

There are four dictabelt recordings you can listen to in the lobby. One is referenced above—a legitimate and effective lobby and counter-lobby with a senator and the president. The next is a conversation with Martin Luther King Jr. in which the president thanks King for paving the way for change. He asks King to drop in on him when he is next in Washington and pledges all possible support.

Another is Johnson brow-beating senator Richard Russell to get him to sit on the Warren Commission Investigating the Assassination of President Kennedy. The senator interrupts to say he doesn't like chief justice Earl Warren and doesn't want to sit on a commission with him. That's about the last thing the Senator gets

to say. Johnson says he doesn't care, that's not an issue, it's not him personally who is asking but the country, you have to say yes to your country, and you're gonna do it and that's all there is to it.

This is classic Johnson. In person you get what was called "the treatment." He was in your face, towering over you, tapping your chest and not taking no for an answer. It's intimidating enough on the phone. In person it must have been devastating.

There are two nice touches in the library, and one involves a human. A giant of a man impersonates LBJ in a speech on the Senate floor. He discusses politics and legislation. The other touch is not human—it's an automaton interpretation of LBJ in which visitors can hear a series of recordings of actual Johnson jokes and anecdotes. He was a good storyteller.

The final dictabelt recording a visitor can hear is on the subject of Vietnam. Johnson sounds tired and resigned—much more so than in his post-assassination call with Senator Russell, in which he's invigorated by getting the task done.

In his Vietnam call, Johnson just laments that it's a mess. Ramping up won't work and neither will pulling out, because that'll put the enemy right in "my smokehouse." Through the Texas homilies, there's terrible fatigue in the president's voice.

If only he'd known that he could have withdrawn with perhaps tens of thousands of fewer American casualties and a couple of million fewer Vietnamese deaths, and nobody in the smokehouse.

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