On 22 November 1963, at approximately 2:38 P.M. (CST), Lyndon B. Johnson stood in the middle of Air Force One, raised his right hand, and inherited the agenda of an assassinated president. Cecil Stoughton’s camera captured that morbid scene in black-and-white photographs that have become iconic images in American history. Three days after President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. suggested to the new president that “one of the great tributes that we can pay in memory of President Kennedy is to try to enact some of the great, progressive policies that he sought to initiate.” President Johnson promised that he would not “give up an inch” and that King could “count on” his commitment. Seven and a half months later, on 2 July 1964, Johnson sat at a table in the East Room of the White House and signed the Civil Rights Act. Reverend King and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy were among the several dozen politicians and civil rights activists crowded together to witness the event in person, while a national audience watched the event live on television. Forged from years of grassroots organizing and political maneuvering, this legislation would eventually force the dismantling of Jim Crow, the approximately seventy-year-old system of racial segregation in the United States. The bill gave the federal government the power to desegregate public accommodations, fight against workplace discrimination, speed up public school desegregation, mediate racial disputes, and restrict several other discriminatory practices.

For his most important moment since the assassination, President Johnson wore a dark suit and wire-rimmed glasses. He had his hair slicked back in the style of the day. Using a restrained, deliberate voice, he spoke directly into the camera and in a ten-minute message called on the American people to comply with this effort “to eliminate the last vestiges of injustice in our beloved country” and “to close the springs of racial poison.” He then handed out souvenir pens like postpartum cigars, giving a whole handful to Robert Kennedy to take back to his assistants in the Justice Department. The president was also pleased—as he told the crowd surrounding the desk awaiting their pens—that the event occurred on his daughter Luci’s seventeenth birthday and on the ninth anniversary of his 1955 heart attack.

His elation did not last. Later that evening, in a mood described by White House aide Bill Moyers as “melancholy,” Johnson predicted that “we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.” That remark is one of the most telling (and frequently repeated) statements about race and politics from Johnson’s presidency. Unfortunately, those words were not recorded by any of the electronic equipment at the White House. Several hundred other conversations from that summer and fall, however, were captured by audio recorders, and the material on those once-secret recordings constitute one of the richest and most dramatic sources for exploring the politics of race in the Johnson era.
This digital volume documents almost two hundred presidential conversations involving significant discussions of race, politics, and the civil rights movement during the summer and fall of 1964. With a few notable exceptions, all of those conversations took place over the telephone, with President Johnson usually speaking either at the White House or the LBJ Ranch in Texas. These calls occurred generally in three chronological periods. For July and early August, the tapes tended to archive Johnson’s responses to white anti–civil rights violence in Mississippi and Georgia and to civil disorders in New York City and several other northeastern cities. From early August to early September, they focused on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenge and the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The final section of recordings, the smallest in size, covered aspects of the presidential campaign from the end of August to the election in early November.

6 July–5 November 1964

The volume begins in the midafternoon of 6 July, with President Johnson and Attorney General Robert Kennedy discussing the FBI’s “Mississippi Burning” case and the limits of federal authority in investigating the 21 June disappearance and presumed murder of three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Michael “Mickey” Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. It ends just before midnight on 5 November, two days after Johnson’s presidential victory, with the president chatting with National Urban League Director Whitney Young in the final conversation in a series of brief congratulatory calls with prominent black leaders. In between those moments, the White House Dictabelt audio recorders documented one of the United States’ most talkative presidents as he tried to implement the Civil Rights Act, negotiate his delicate relationship with Martin Luther King Jr., investigate high-profile civil rights murders by white supremacists, limit violence in ongoing school desegregation cases, and respond to racial unrest and civil disorders in northern cities.

The major topic of those tapes, though, was Johnson’s handling of the challenge posed by Mississippi’s Freedom Democrats. A primarily black-led group of civil rights activists from Mississippi, the MFDP intended to replace the white segregationists of the state’s regular Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention. Their struggle became one of the central national news stories of the summer. The telephone calls about the MFDP and almost every other recording in this volume show that Johnson’s early July concern about losing the South was not merely a lament about the long-term consequences of the Civil Rights Act, but about his immediate fears for his political future—and these conversations affirm that Johnson’s overriding concern in these months was to claim victory on 3 November.

Lyndon Johnson used the telephone to help talk his way to an autumn landslide. Transcripts of his recorded calls provide readers with an insider’s perspective on his attempts to keep racial antagonisms from dividing the Democratic Party and, particularly, to minimize the effects of a phenomenon most frequently referred to as white backlash. On the phone, President Johnson repeatedly emphasized his appeal to moderate white conservatives. He preferred to play up what he called the “frontlash,” meaning moderate Republicans who were shifting their votes to the national Democratic ticket, instead of the emergent narrative about white defections to the Republican Party and its nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona. Throughout these conversations, Johnson conceded that the
virulently segregationist states of the deep South (Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina) were a lost cause for his campaign, but he hoped to maintain enough support from moderate whites in the border South and from working-class whites outside the South to offset those departures. Complicating this task was his desire to avoid policies and rhetoric that might alienate African Americans across the country.

In preparation for the November election, Johnson tried to get tough on the Ku Klux Klan, on urban rioters, on anything even remotely linked to Communists, and in a controversial move, on civil rights activists from Mississippi. To do that, he relied on the Justice Department, particularly the FBI. Johnson’s tapes reveal his complicated relationship with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, his dependence on the FBI as a tool to respond to local problems, and his rapport with J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI’s legendary director serving in his fourth decade at the helm. Hoover’s influence was so substantial in Washington, DC, that his nominal boss, Robert Kennedy, had to ask President Johnson—a well-known rival and antagonist—for assistance in gathering information about what was happening inside the FBI. All three men and their institutions found themselves consumed by white terrorism in Dixie and, to a lesser degree, black rebellion in northeastern cities.

**Mississippi, the Klan, and Urban Uprisings**

For Lyndon Johnson, this was the summer of Mississippi. Almost two-thirds of his recorded conversations on race and civil rights dealt at some level with the Magnolia State, with the Mississippi Burning case dominating affairs from July through early August and the MFDP challenge for the rest of August. Mississippi Burning was the case name (known in the FBI by the abbreviation MIBURN) for the massive investigation into the 21 June disappearance of three civil rights organizers who were looking into the arson of a rural church near Philadelphia, Mississippi. James Chaney, a twenty-two-year-old black man, had grown up in the nearby town of Meridian and was a seasoned activist with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Mickey Schwerner, a white, Jewish twenty-four-year-old from New York, had helped run the CORE office in Meridian along with his wife, Rita, and others. Andrew Goodman, a twenty-year-old white Jewish student from Hunter College in New York City, was a volunteer on his first trip to Mississippi.

The FBI initiated its investigation into the Freedom Summer disappearances on 22 June. On 23 June, President Johnson began receiving up-to-the-minute reports and pressed into service a wide variety of federal assets, including aircraft and personnel from the military. That afternoon, FBI Director Hoover and Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach informed the president that they believed the activists had been murdered. By July, a reported 153 agents were working the case under the direction of Inspector Joseph Sullivan and Special Agent-in-Charge Roy K. Moore. On 10 July, the FBI opened a field office for Mississippi led by Special Agent Moore.

This move did not discourage Klan violence in the South. The next evening in northern Georgia, in what would become another FBI case, Klan members shot and killed Lieutenant Colonel Lemuel Penn, an African American Army Reserve officer and school administrator, as he and two other black officers were driving back to Washington, DC, after training exercises at Fort Benning. Two days after that, back in Mississippi, a fisherman in Louisiana found the torso of a black man floating in an
oxbow lake across the state line near the Mississippi River town of Vicksburg. Speculating that this body might be that of James Chaney, FBI investigators rushed to the scene and discovered the scattered, decomposing corpses of two missing young black men, Henry Hezekiah Dee and Charles Moore. Investigators later learned that Moore and Dee had been abducted and murdered by white supremacists in the Klan-ridden Natchez area two months earlier.

Tensions in Mississippi and in Washington continued to intensify after that gruesome discovery. On 21 July, two civil rights lawyers went missing in the river town of Natchez, and the FBI received alarming death threats against Martin Luther King Jr. during his appearance in the Delta town of Greenwood, home of the suspected murderer of Medgar Evers, the NAACP state director killed in June 1963. Throughout the day, Johnson stayed in close contact with J. Edgar Hoover and Robert Kennedy, recording three calls with the FBI director and five with the Attorney General. The hectic day ended without violence; no attempts were made on King’s life, and the two attorneys were located (they had merely failed to check in while on the road). Those events in Mississippi were minor compared to developments in New York City. A few days earlier, Lieutenant Thomas R. Gilligan, a white police officer, had shot and killed James Powell, a fifteen-year-old black male, in Harlem. Clashes between young black residents and the police escalated into what the Johnson administration called the “Harlem Riots.” After seeking advice on a public statement, Johnson issued a strong one late on 21 July condemning the disturbances and calling for law and order. Equating the disorders in New York to recent Klan violence in the South, he explained that “American citizens have a right to protection of life and limb—whether driving along a highway in Georgia, a road in Mississippi, or a street in New York City.” He argued that most Americans would “reject resolutely those who espouse violence no matter what the cause” and added that “evil acts of the past are never rectified by evil acts of the present.”

These disturbances in the urban Northeast worried the administration deeply, as they offered Barry Goldwater and the Republicans a potentially devastating issue to expand the much talked about white backlash. To the president’s surprise, Goldwater actually asked for a meeting at the White House to address the role of race in the campaign. After some internal discussion with advisers, Johnson agreed. On 24 July, the Republican nominee slipped in through the Southwest Gate to avoid the press and then sat down with Johnson for a little over fifteen minutes. With Johnson’s speakerphone recorders catching as much as they could, Goldwater told the president that this “situation” had him more “worried” than anything before in his life and that if either of their campaigns did “anything to incite trouble” over racial issues, then they would “never forgive ourselves.” Johnson countered that they should talk about it in their campaigns as they should any serious issue, just be responsible about it. After the meeting, Johnson’s staff released a statement that both had agreed to avoid increasing “racial tensions.” Civil disorders continued in the weeks ahead, but did not become defining issues of the campaign. Goldwater’s seeming personal aversion to exploiting the matter contributed to this, but at least as important were other stories that eclipsed them in the weeks ahead.

One bombshell was Johnson’s decision to exclude Robert Kennedy as a running mate. Johnson informed Kennedy in private on 29 July—delivering the news to the public on 30 July—that no Cabinet officer would be considered for the vice-presidential slot, thereby eliminating the attorney general from consideration. Other major stories followed soon after. On 2–4 August, serious civil
disorders occurred in New Jersey, but they were overshadowed by developments on the same days that became defining moments of the 1960s. Attacks (and erroneous reports of attacks) on U.S. ships by North Vietnamese boats in the Gulf of Tonkin provided the justification for a bombing reprisal and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and the discovery of the bodies of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman in Mississippi confirmed the nation’s worst fears about the southern way of life. In a moment of notable coincidence, President Johnson was in a major meeting on 4 August about the U.S. response in Vietnam when he received word from the FBI about the bodies in Mississippi. Adding to the narrative of southern white terrorism, the FBI announced arrests of Lemuel Penn’s murderers two days later. After that, the president helped to manage a potentially violent desegregation of public schools in a Klan-heavy area of Louisiana that ended without much incident.

Mississippi’s Freedom Democrats and the Democratic National Convention

While sidelining Robert Kennedy, managing murder investigations, and responding to civil disorders were major matters on the White House agenda in late July and August, no issue—with the possible exception of taking military action against North Vietnam after the Tonkin Incident—took up more of Johnson’s time on the phone than his effort to curtail Mississippi’s Freedom Democrats. In all, Johnson held over seventy telephone calls trying to manage the threat posed by civil rights organizers to his coronation in Atlantic City as the undisputed leader of the Democratic Party. As recorded on those tapes, he worked through a variety of strategies to suppress the MFDP challenge, hoping to strike a balance that would calm the worries of white racial moderates without turning off African Americans and white liberals. Those tapes capture an unfiltered Lyndon Johnson as he reached out methodically to key advisers, southern politicians, Democratic Party leaders, labor union representatives, and a few major national civil rights figures, at one point becoming so frustrated with the process that he announced to three of his confidants that he planned to withdraw from the presidential race. “I do not believe I can physically and mentally carry the responsibilities of the bomb and the world and the Nigras and the South,” he mewled to longtime aide Walter Jenkins. The party would be better off with someone younger, “better-prepared,” “better-trained,” and “Harvard-educated.” The President quickly moved on from that near-tearful tantrum, and two days later accepted the nomination.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had emerged from decades of local black resistance to Jim Crow. Its immediate origins dated to the August 1962 creation of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an entity that brought together several groups engaged in voter registration campaigns and civil rights organizing, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Led by Robert Moses, Dave Dennis, and others, COFO directed voting rights activism in Mississippi and developed two efforts critical to events in 1964. In the Freedom Vote of November 1963, over eighty-three thousand African Americans cast ballots in their own mock gubernatorial election. Taking the governor’s slot was Aaron Henry, a black dentist from the delta town of Clarksdale who was the state NAACP president, while the lieutenant governor position went to Ed King, a white Methodist minister from Jackson who served students at the historically black Tougaloo College in Jackson. The
other key COFO effort was its Summer Project, better known as Freedom Summer, that was set to bring approximately one thousand college-age students to Mississippi to assist in voter campaigns, Freedom Schools, and other organizing activities. The state government of Mississippi referred to it as the “Invasion of Mississippi by Northern College Students.”

On 26 April 1964, activists with ties to COFO added another initiative, establishing the MFDP as a way to challenge the state’s all-white Democratic Party during that summer and to establish a political foundation to continue the challenge in the future. The membership of the MFDP was almost entirely African American. Michael Sistrom, a leading historian of the organization, identifies the only white members as Ed King and three Freedom Summer volunteers. Initially, its top priority was to seat its own delegates at the Democratic National Convention, and several days after its founding, MFDP opened an office in Atlantic City to coordinate its response there. To get its delegates recognized as legitimate representatives from Mississippi, the party first had to get past the convention’s Credentials Committee. That struggle came to dominate the national convention and to define the Freedom Party. It tested the MFDP’s leadership model and, perhaps most important, its perception in national political circles.

Reflecting the influences of SNCC and CORE, the Freedom Democratic Party was based on grassroots leadership and emphasized participatory democracy. While the party had several key leaders and such advisers as Robert Moses, Lawrence Guyot, Fannie Lou Hamer, Aaron Henry, Ed King, Annie Devine, and Victoria Gray Adams, its structure depended on the participation of all of its members and elected delegates. During the summer, the party selected those delegates at the local level and then held a statewide convention on 6 August. Soon after that, on 21 August, the sixty-eight delegates headed to Atlantic City to take on the segregationist regular Mississippi delegation. As they realized more clearly in New Jersey, they also had to confront Lyndon Johnson, the leadership of the Democratic Party, and the FBI. Representing the Freedom Democrats in this fight was Joseph Rauh, the nation’s leading labor-union attorney and member of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action who was also a Democratic delegate from Washington, DC. Vital support at the convention came from Edith Green, the formidable Oregon congresswoman on the Credentials Committee who championed the Freedom Party and circulated an MFDP-favored plan to split Mississippi’s seats between the MFDP and the regular delegates willing to remain loyal to the Johnson ticket. Key figures from the MFDP involved in negotiations with Johnson’s emissaries included Moses, Henry, King, and Adams. Fannie Lou Hamer was marginalized by the White House but became a favorite of television news reporters. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was not a member of the MFDP, but did serve in an advisory role at the convention as did Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP; Bayard Rustin, March on Washington organizer and mentor to Robert Moses; and James Farmer, director of CORE.

Lyndon Johnson looked to several people to assist him. Four of them had formed the core of his White House inner circle since the Kennedy assassination. Press Secretary George Reedy, a University of Chicago–trained journalist and intellectual who had worked with Johnson since 1949, did his best to manage the headstrong Johnson’s dealings with the press, while offering key campaign advice about ways to portray Barry Goldwater. The other three were from Texas. Walter Jenkins had been with Johnson for almost a quarter century and was the centerpiece of the president’s information-gathering
system; Princeton historian and fellow White House aide Eric Goldman called him “as close to a chief of staff as the Johnson White House could have.” Jack Valenti, an advertising executive from Houston, helped oversee the schedule and offered advice on most matters before the president, while Bill Moyers, a journalist and young Baptist minister who later became press secretary, was an all-around political aide.

For gathering intelligence on white southern political leaders, Johnson leaned on his Texas protégé, Governor John Connally; Georgia governor Carl Sanders; Louisiana congressman and House majority whip Hale Boggs; and Florida senator and Senate majority whip George Smathers. Perhaps his most intense lobbying went toward a tireless defender of segregation, James O. Eastland, his old friend from the Senate whom Johnson tracked down to a variety of locales in the Mississippi delta during the most frantic days of negotiation. For managing the Freedom Democrats’ challenge, the president’s top two lieutenants were Minnesota senator and Senate majority leader Hubert H. Humphrey and United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther. Humphrey had been a prominent civil rights advocate for two decades and was known for his speech at the 1948 Democratic National Convention that contributed to the Dixiecrat revolt. Reuther, one of the most powerful Democrats in the country, had helped to organize the March on Washington and to provide funding for several civil rights organizations. Several other key figures who appear in the transcripts are White House aide Kenneth O’Donnell (a Kennedy loyalist who had remained with Johnson after the assassination), Oklahoma attorney and Clark Clifford law associate Tom Finney, Credentials Committee chair and former Pennsylvania governor David Lawrence, Democratic National Committee liaison Clifton Carter, and Democratic National Committee chair John Bailey.

Johnson’s most controversial assistance came from the FBI. Since becoming President, Johnson’s relationship with the Secret Service had deteriorated, and on occasion he threatened to bring in replacements from the FBI to serve on his security detail. For the convention, he followed through on those threats to an extent, inviting a “special squad” to help the Secret Service and to maintain order. Led by Cartha “Deke” DeLoach, an assistant director of the FBI who was a principal liaison to the White House, a unit of almost thirty agents monitored wiretaps of Martin Luther King Jr.’s hotel room and the MFDP’s convention headquarters, and they worked undercover as infiltrators and fake news reporters. According to a congressional investigation in 1975, these agents provided a “steady stream” of critical information about the MFDP challenge to the White House, primarily to Johnson aide Walter Jenkins. Most of the information passed along was “purely political and only tangentially related to possible civil disturbances,” and it provided “the most intimate details of the plans of individuals supporting the MFDP’s challenge.”

Clearly, the president was operating from a position of strength. He also was adhering to party rules and traditions, and according to them, the all-white regular delegates from Mississippi had a strong claim to be seated at the convention. The state’s Democratic electors had not renounced Johnson for another candidate and had voted to remain unpledged to any candidate until after Atlantic City. President Johnson was not counting on their support but was willing to recognize their legitimacy as long as they agreed to sign a vague loyalty oath. The Freedom Democrats, on the other hand, had a more difficult task. For them to be seated, they had to have their challenge taken up by the whole convention. To do that, they needed eleven members of the 110-member Credentials Committee to
sign a minority report, and then they needed eight state delegations to push for a roll call that would require the convention to take up the matter on the floor. In mid-August, the outlook for the MFDP was good. Historian Michael Sistrom estimated that thirty-seven credentials committee members were in “sympathy” with the Freedom Democrats.25

By the time Johnson and his allies were finished at the end of August, the Freedom Democrats could not muster even eleven votes. What unfolded on the tapes was a painstaking process where Johnson worked relentlessly to bottle up the MFDP issue in the Credentials Committee and to put pressure on those delegates sympathetic to the Freedom Party. The transcripts in this volume cover in detail the complex twists and turns before the convention and then the pandemonium during it. Broken down, the basic narrative is that the regular Mississippi Democrats consistently rebuffed Johnson’s loyalty oath despite intense pressure put on Senator James O. Eastland by the president, and the MFDP refused to settle for any compromise that did not include at least an even split in seats between them and the regular Democrats, while the president and his advocates tried to minimize the damage.26

The Freedom Party came up in a few calls in July and increased steadily in prominence during August, becoming the dominant issue after the fourteenth of the month. The most intense period of phone calls lasted from Saturday, 22 August, the first day of the Credentials Committee hearings, until 26 August, the day before Johnson accepted the nomination. Nothing topped the drama of 22 August when a sharecropper-turned-organizer gave stunning testimony to the Credentials Committee. Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville took approximately ten minutes to tell an overflowing ballroom at the convention and a national television audience at home about the vicious reaction to her attempts to register to vote and to encourage others to do likewise. She had lost her job of eighteen years, been the target of shootings, and been beaten savagely by two black prisoners under the direct orders from the police, along with other harassment. She ended her speech with a question that haunted the proceedings. “If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now,” she declared, “I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings in America?”27 The national audience had to wait until the nightly news to see those concluding comments because the network coverage shifted to an impromptu press conference at the White House that many journalists thought might be the long-awaited announcement of Johnson’s running mate.

The next day, 23 August, Oregon congressman Al Ullman offered a surprise proposal to allow the Freedom Democrats two at-large seats, an idea that would form the core of the White House compromise.28 Two days of intense negotiations followed. Hubert Humphrey led the administration’s effort, and Walter Reuther flew in at Johnson’s request and pressured MFDP counsel Joseph Rauh. A new subcommittee chaired by Minnesota attorney general Walter Mondale (the future vice president under Jimmy Carter) worked around the clock to develop a solution. On 25 August, the Credentials Committee accepted a plan to require loyalty oaths from the regular Democrats, seat two Freedom Democrats (Aaron Henry and Ed King) as at-large delegates, admit the other MFDP delegates as special guests, and create a commission to reform the party’s rules to ensure racial inclusion in state delegations for the 1968 convention. The convention passed the plan later that evening. The decision enraged the Freedom Democrats, and with many delegates feeling that they had been hoodwinked,
they refused to accept the compromise in two separate votes, though several members used borrowed credentials to gain access to the floor and sit in an unoccupied Mississippi section. Soon, party members boarded buses back to Mississippi. The regular Mississippi Democrats did much the same, as all but three of them walked out of the convention. Although there was no southern walkout similar to the Dixiecrat movement of 1948, the three Mississippi regulars would later appeal to the White House for help in dealing with harassment back home. One of the Mississippi regular Democrats who remained, labor attorney Doug Wynn, was a family friend of the Johnsons who received extensive attention from the president.

On 27 August, Johnson accepted the nomination and then flew to his Texas ranch to recharge for the final two months of his campaign. On 5 September, Johnson spoke to Reuther about another campaign matter, and Reuther took the opportunity to congratulate Johnson’s handling of “the little problem” at Atlantic City. Johnson expressed relief at avoiding “what could have been the greatest debacle” in Democratic Party history. Had the MFDP succeeded, it would have run “all those white folks out” and would have “put us back to the Emancipation Proclamation 100 years ago.” Reuther agreed, explaining that the party would have “been ruined on both ends of the problem…. We’d have lost the South, and the North would have said, ‘What the hell? The Freedom Riders have captured the Democratic Party.’” Three weeks later, Johnson got a stark message about why the Freedom Party delegates were so unyielding in their fight against white domination in Mississippi. With his speakerphone recorder running, he welcomed to the Oval Office three black women from McComb, Mississippi, who told him in detail about their homes being bombed and their lives being threatened on a daily basis.

**Victory**

For the rest of the campaign, Johnson recorded a limited number of calls regarding race and/or civil rights. A hiccup occurred in mid-September concerning a restrictive covenant on some property once owned by the Johnsons, which disappeared quickly as an issue when the press revealed that the Republican vice-presidential candidate had one on his current home. Johnson’s recordings through the election touch on South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond’s shift to the Republican Party, the hostile reaction received by Lady Bird during her October whistle-stop campaign through the South, and episodes of voter intimidation in the South. The bulk of the recordings from this concluding section come from the days surrounding the 3 November election and focus on southern politics. In the end, Johnson had found the right balance to win a crushing victory, and the transcripts for this volume end with the flurry of congratulatory conversations on 3, 4, and 5 November.

Johnson’s balancing acts were not easy, and they tested his legendary political skills. In these transcripts, readers can find clear evidence of the famous Johnson Treatment—his relentless style of personal persuasion through physical dominance and irrepressible will. More than that, though, those conversations show that the power of the Johnson Treatment often came less from the avalanche of energy and flesh than the delicacy and sophistication of an ambitious man trying to find the least offensive middle way. The Lyndon Johnson captured on tape in the summer and fall of 1964 was compassionate and crude, confident and paranoid, careful and conspiratorial, a managerial genius whose machinations had threatened to rip apart the party he had worked so long to champion.
He dedicated himself to eradicating the Ku Klux Klan and finding the killers of civil rights activists, while also working diligently, and perhaps illegally, to suppress the efforts of grassroots civil rights activists to fight segregationists who had mocked the disappearance of the civil rights workers as a publicity stunt. Johnson basked publicly in the passage of the Civil Rights Act, but privately characterized it to southern leaders as a Kennedy bill and pointed out to them that Goldwater was the only presidential candidate who was a member of the NAACP. Johnson understood the serious problems of poverty and power in urban ghettos, but suspected that civil disorders there were parts of conspiracies involving Communists and/or wealthy radical conservatives from Texas determined to destroy him.

In the short term, his genius proved true. His efforts at negotiating tricky issues of race were successful in the fall, as he defeated Barry Goldwater by one of the largest margins in U.S. history, losing only the five expected Deep South states and Arizona. In the long term, however, Johnson’s summer of ’64 was less a moment of triumph than a temporary reprieve. Disillusionment from civil rights activists grew, white backlash became stronger and defined the next generation of U.S. politics, and in matters occurring in other conversations this summer, the path to a devastating war in Vietnam was set in place. Lyndon Johnson finally had his victory, but was only beginning to figure out what he really had. “I’m just kind of broken up,” he told Hubert Humphrey on election day, “I’m aching all over. I’ve got a headache, and my damn bones—[my] hip’s hurting, and I just…”’m just worn out.’

Notes


[5] This volume uses the phrase “civil rights movement” as the name for the predominantly black-led, grassroots movement that occurred in the post–World War II era (most notably in the American South). While some scholars and students prefer other terms such as “freedom struggle” or “black liberation
movement” that recognize that the long-term efforts went beyond the securing of rights, the editor will most frequently use “civil rights movement” because of its more widespread usage and popular identification.

[6] Of this volume’s nearly two hundred conversations, seventy-one involved the MFDP challenge.


[12] For the eighteen years prior to 1964, Mississippi had no FBI field office. In 1946, the FBI had closed its Jackson field office and oversaw Mississippi cases from its Memphis and New Orleans offices.


[15] President Johnson and Walter Jenkins, Conversation WH6408-36-5177; see also President Johnson and George Reedy, Conversation WH6408-36-5176; and President Johnson and A. W. Moursund, Conversation WH6408-36-5180.

Virgil Downing, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission investigator, “Invasion of Mississippi by Northern College Students,” 1 July 1964, re: June 29 and 30, Folder 1, July 1964, Box 136, Series 2, Sub-Series 7, Governor’s Subject Files, University of Southern Mississippi, Johnson (Paul B.) Family Papers, in Collection M191, Manuscript Collection, McCain Library and Archives.


Dittmer, Local People, p. 285.


President Johnson and Walter Jenkins, Conversation WH6408-34-5136, 5137.


Conversation WH6409-06-5505, 5506.

Conversation WH6411-01-6121.