

# *Source Material: Presidential Recordings as Presidential Data: Assessing LBJ's Presidential Persuasive Attempts*

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*This paper evaluates the usefulness of one currently available set of presidential recordings, those of President Lyndon Johnson. It demonstrates that these recordings constitute a sample of the president's phone conversations and a reasonable representation of his contacts with others. It demonstrates the use of these data in assessing presidential persuasion and activities. It also suggests how popular presentations of these data, through other published means, have distorted the picture of presidential activities.*

If presidents lead by persuasion, then how they communicate their ideas, with whom they speak, about what, and to what effect constitute the central evidence of leaders in action. Yet, because the modern presidency remains a closed institution, our theoretical and empirical analyses of these critical persuasive exchanges rest on very scant evidence. The advent of portable recording devices, particularly the common dictation machine, created an unparalleled opportunity for presidents to record their activities. And for those wishing to become "archival participants" in the

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presidential process [Sullivan 1992, 1993], the use of these devices has created an unprecedented opportunity.

This article describes one collection of these emerging presidential recordings, those released by the Johnson Presidential Library, and evaluates their qualities as a database. It concludes that these presidential recordings represent a potentially significant resource, a sample of the president's activities. This article also suggests how useful these data may become by illustrating their use in developing a theory of persuasion. And by assessing Michael Beschloss's book *Taking Charge*, advertised by its publishers as a research resource, it demonstrates how, without proper controls, such efforts can misrepresent the realities of presidential work.

### ***Presidential Recordings as a Research Question***

Thanks to Watergate, presidential recordings have a limited history, covering the four presidencies from Eisenhower through Nixon. Briefly at the beginning of his administration, President Ford discontinued all White House record keeping, including his presidential diary. When it became obvious that the White House needed this record-keeping to carry out its daily business, the president resumed the presidential diary but did not reinstitute the audio recording system. The advent of these recordings raises two kinds of questions, those having to do with their archival presentation and those having to do with their usefulness in research.

The archival issues involve the development of transcripts for the tape recordings. Often the recordings challenge the researcher, because they often have a great deal of background noise and other elements making them difficult to understand. Transcriptions, produced by sophisticated services, often provide useful written presentations that help the researcher "hear" the recordings. In some instances, transcripts actually accompany the currently available presidential recordings. The Kennedy Library initially transcribed many of its presidential recordings while the Nixon Papers Project has not. The Johnson recordings present an interesting challenge. Initially, the Johnson White House staff produced transcripts of the recordings as part of their regular activities. When the Johnson Library began releasing recordings, and probably based on how much staff time producing transcripts consumed, the National Archives set policy *not* to make transcripts. In effect, the recordings themselves constitute the only official "record" for preservation. For most researchers, this transcription question has a simple policy answer – making transcripts slows down access.

In addition, though, transcriptions have generated authenticity problems that the Archives has chosen to avoid. Consider this example (though it does not directly involve the National Archives). In the week following the Kennedy assassination, the White House hosted head of state missions from America's most important allies. The president's schedule, therefore, contained a number of meetings with foreign leaders and ambassadors sprinkled between his other activities. In one phone conversation with Kennedy staffer Theodore Sorenson, the president apologizes for having to go, blaming his pressing schedule. "I have tha Pakastani Amba's'dor waitin' for me," he tells Sorenson. However, in the transcript of that conversation produced by the Johnson White House staff *during the press of business*, the president breaks off his conversation by apologizing that, "...I have a *pack of bastards* waiting for me [emphasis added]." Given these sorts of gaffs and the delay entailed in transcription, doing one's own makes more sense.

On its face, the chance to eavesdrop on presidential conversations would seem a wonderful research opportunity. However, two research objections to using presidential recordings seem

worth considering. First, critics suggest that recordings do not capture the president's activities. Instead, they capture what the president thought *a priori* would *sound* presidential. As such, the recordings constitute nothing more than a window on the president's *message*. Second, since presidential recordings only capture a single presidency, their analysis would not fill our need for broader research. Once we know what President Johnson did or said, for example, what actually do we know about other presidents or presidents in general?

Regardless of their motivations for initiating them, White House recordings became routine during each administration. These routine efforts recorded more than "presidential" conversations. Even a brief examination of the limited number of transcripts that have appeared in Michael Beshcross's *Taking Charge* [1997] will suggest that the Johnson recordings, for example, capture a wide range of presidential and not so presidential moments. And, of course, Nixon's tape recordings captured the full range of that president's moments, as well. In such recordings as these, the presidents set administrative policies, how to handle speech requests, visitations, meetings, staff memos, *etc.*. Sometimes, after answering the president's desk phone, an aide has simply held the receiver while the president continued his meeting, effectively making a record of that meeting as an accident of the other process. Or an annex to another phone conversation captures the president complaining about staff operations. In one case, President Johnson goes on a brief tirade about the ineffectiveness of the White House phone system, just three days after the Kennedy assassination. In another he chides confidante Abe Fortas for wanting to bring important Democratic party donors to see the president.

Regardless of the motivation for making them, then, presidential recordings end up capturing a "sample" of what presidents do and say. How we properly answer this first objection about reliability, then, rests not on how we assess the initial presidential motivation but instead on how we assess these recordings as data samples. The next section addresses this question.

We can address the second objection about generalizability by suggesting that we consider presidents as something like comets. By analogy, one might ask would it serve us to observe systematically the Haley's Comet, that singular comet most accessible, purely by chance, to our available research apparatus? Haley certainly has a unique orbit and it surely possesses other unique characteristics. In the natural sciences, though, we take no critical notice whatsoever of researchers' elaborate plans to study this unique comet. Instead, we find their endeavors acceptable as a matter of scientific inquiry. By analogy, then, might we consider the systematic study of a single president also a worthwhile effort? The argument against such singular presidential observations, then, must rest on the claim that every president faces such special circumstances with such unique experiences and skills as to constitute completely special data. The *uniqueness* of these data claims, itself, constitutes only a methodological assertion, however. We ought to require evidence of this assertion in quantities at least equal to the evidence we require supporting the notion that any presidency has considerable in common with other administrations. Certainly, the more we subject the notion of presidential uniqueness to systematic analysis using proper controls and competing variables, the less these claims of presidential uniqueness seem supportable. For example, Hager and Sullivan 1994 test models of presidential activities, including a number of empirical models suggesting the importance of presidential individuality. In all of these tests, the models of individuality – of so-called "president centered" explanations – did not perform well by comparison with models suggesting the importance of institutional variables – so called "presidency centered" explanations.

In light of how this proposition of unique presidencies seems to have faltered, we suggest that an in-depth study of those presidents for which we have the data might prove useful. Later, and with these data, we might evaluate whether some circumstances (and which those might be) have undermined the usefulness of specific historical observations. Arguments against the validity of observing presidents ought to occur, however, in light of specific findings rather than *a priori*. Therefore, let us amass specific observations and study these in a systematic way and then determine what we know of individual presidents or of presidencies.

### ***Evaluating the Johnson Samples***

The characteristics of samples, then, become the important aspects in judging the usefulness of these data. To date, the Johnson Library has released all of those recordings it can locate having to do with the Kennedy assassination and recordings from November 1963 through October 1964 on any subject. We can characterize these recordings in terms of their date and time, duration, location, subjects discussed, and those individuals involved. In this way, we can create variables with which to evaluate this sample of the president's activities: what kind of a sample do these recordings constitute? Can we have confidence that analyzing the recordings tells us something useful about the president's contacts?

Using White House diary data originally provided by James Best, we have developed an empirical model of Johnson's activities.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 summarizes some selected characteristics of three important data segments: all the president's contacts, his phone calls, and those calls the White House recorded.

The president's diary records some 15,000 contacts during this period. In keeping with Johnson lore, almost half of the president's contacts occurred over the phone. Of those, the White House recorded about 3,000 or 41%. Also consistent with Johnson's emphasis on legislative leadership, the White House appears to have over-sampled conversations with Members of Congress while it under-sampled contacts with White House staff. The other groups noted in the table suggest that for these the recordings come very close to representing the diary totals.

***Table 1. Distribution of Contacts***

<i>Contact with</i>	<i>Noted in</i>	<i>In percentage of total</i>	
		<i>White House</i>	<i>Diary</i>
		<i>Phone Calls</i>	
		<i>All calls</i>	<i>Recorded</i>
Members of Congress	12.9	13.7	21.7
White House Staff	42.2	52.5	34.4
Executive Branch Personnel	3.4	2.8	4.5
Family members	1.8	2.3	1.5
Friends and Confidantes	3.9	4.7	5.0
Press	3.6	2.6	3.8
Business Leaders	0.7	0.4	0.6
Residual category	31.5	100.0	21
Total number of contacts	15,369	7,124	2,954

<sup>1</sup> These data were extensively corrected for transcription errors and some omissions. They were also supplemented with data from the records of the phone recordings themselves.

To address the issue of over sampling congressional contacts, we can assess the degree to which the recorded conversations capture peculiar characteristics or specific member types, or if in fact the additional numbers merely reflect more emphasis on recording congressional contacts. As one answer to this question, we have compared the means for these data segments on 42 descriptors of Members of Congress. These variables included fourteen member characteristics (e.g., seniority, ADA and other support scores, peer groups, electoral success), twenty constituency descriptors (e.g., region, labor characteristics, employment, demographics), and eight descriptors of positions within various institutional settings (e.g., party leadership positions, committee chairs, committee seniority).

If the over-sampling of recordings represents a mere enthusiasm for congressional contacts, then we would expect to find few statistically significant differences in means between those members contacted on the phone and those members recorded by the White House. With one slight statistical caveat: given a 95% confidence level and the number of variables involved, we would expect to observe a significant difference in at least one variable (i.e., a *false* positive finding) with a probability of 0.88. Thus, to observe a single variable as generating a significant difference would itself not support the claim that the recorded data set differed from the broader segment of phone calls.

Table 2 summarizes our findings on the differences between the recorded and the phone calls data segments for Members of Congress. We do observe one statistically significant difference on party membership. Apparently, the White House recorded a slightly higher proportion of those phone calls made to Republicans than warranted by the general rate of calling Republicans. The president talked with Republican members about 6% of the time he talked with Members, but about 9% of recorded calls with Members involved Republicans. This difference amounts to having recorded fourteen more calls than the normal rate. This small difference between the two segments suggests that the discrepancy probably reflects a statistical effect, given our standard of confidence, rather than representing any real difference. Thus, while the White House recorded more of the president's calls involving Members of Congress, they did so without any apparent bias. So, we can conclude that, with some minor adjustments, the recorded conversations presents a reasonably representation of the larger segment of phone conversations.

### ***Applications of Recordings***

If recorded phone calls can represent the population of phone conversations, then what can we learn from them? This section describes the application of these data to the president's business of persuading others – with whom do they speak, about what, and to what effect? It covers two of these three topics: the targets and the topics of their persuasion. We leave to later analysis the more difficult question of assessing whether these conversations had the hoped for effect.

***Table 2. Summary of Comparisons, Contacts with Members of Congress***

		<i>Phone Calls</i>	
		<i>All calls</i>	<i>Recorded</i>
Constituency Characteristics	20 variables	No differences	
Member Characteristics	13 variables	No differences	
	Party membership (Democrat)	93.7	91.4
Institutional Characteristics	8 variables	No differences	

***Persuasive Exchange***

This team has begun examining persuasive strategies (e.g., Sullivan 1998 and Hora, Keele, McNoldy, Pettis, and Sullivan 1999). We have categorized types of persuasive appeals, ranging from the use of “bargaining techniques” like citing “collective responsibilities” for governing to what psychologists call “compliance-gaining” techniques [e.g., see Perloff 1993]. In effect, then, the recordings provide researchers an opportunity to build a model of how presidential persuasion proceeds. In that model, one clear empirical pattern seems apparent: we can identify the universal application of a “head of state” appeal.

Table 3 summarizes how President Johnson used appeals distributed across the type of potential follower. The table indicates three general patterns. First, the president persuaded members of Congress far more often than he persuaded others with whom he talked. The magnitude of these differences between the average use of persuasive appeals for others rather than Members averaged around 3.5 times more often. Presumably with the White House staff (with whom he had the most contact) and with members of the Executive establishment, the president actually issued orders. In effect, then we can measure the degree to which presidential power rests on presidential persuasion relative to presidential command.

Second and contrary to this general pattern of difference, the president used appeals to head of state responsibilities in a more evenly way. While the other appeals ranged around 3.5, the figure for Head of State stands at 1.4. For those other than members of Congress, the most often used persuasive appeal LBJ used involved his responsibilities as head of state. While others in the system share some of the president’s sources of persuasive appeal (e.g., differences in information on merits, common preferences, *etc.*) only the president can bear the responsibilities as the head of state. Hence, only the president can bring this appeal to bear on others, affording the president a special advantage, equally applicable in all situations and for all listeners. Given that uniquely presidential vantage, the president employs it more widely.

***Table 3. Use of Persuasive Appeals***

<i>Type of Persuasive Exchange</i>	<i>Type of Potential Follower</i>		<i>Difference</i>	
	<i>Others</i>	<i>Members of Congress</i>	<i>Statistical Significance</i>	<i>Magnitude</i>
Compliance-Gaining Techniques				
Merits of Policy Proposal	0.06	0.22	Yes	3.54
Bargaining Related Techniques				
Preferences for Policy	0.04	0.22	Yes	5.86
Information Asymmetries	0.08	0.32	Yes	4.19
Shared Collective Responsibilities	0.10	0.29	Yes	2.90
Long-standing Connection	0.08	0.20	Yes	2.62
Head of State Responsibilities	0.21	0.30	Yes	1.44

\*Significance (✓) measured at the .05 level.

The third pattern evident in Table 3 has to do with LBJ as persuader. Observers commonly characterize LBJ as a master of persuasion, knowing just what to say to those he wanted to persuade. As indicated by the averages, though, LBJ often relied on a wide variety of persuasive appeals instead of making one focussed appeal. Every category of appeal appeared in at least one-quarter of the exchanges with Members. In his conversations, then, President Johnson regularly employed a litany of arguments. Take, for example, LBJ's typical appeal for support of his food stamps bill in April of 1964. He would regularly repeat that "I can't be repudiated on this vote," that "you're better off with me than Charlie Halleck (the Republican leader) running things," and that "foreign powers would watch their votes for signs of weakness" in his leadership. In some instances, LBJ would add a note of familiarity or would refer to particular circumstances. "I've got four things to tell you, so hang onto your hat," he told Congressman Jones when lobbying in August 1964. He then listed two specific favors the administration had done Congressman Jones. But when he had finished with those particularistic items, LBJ launched into a standard litany on his subject. The precision of the president's appeal gave way to the weight of the president's onslaught.

### ***Topics of Conversation***

The use of arguments highlights the fact that presidential recordings constitute something of a record of the president's agenda. We have evaluated the content of LBJ's recorded conversations using the standard Clausen [1973] typology of topics (see also Sinclair 1982). Originally developed to categorize congressional voting using data from the Kennedy/Johnson period, the Clausen typology divided votes into five policy categories: Agriculture, International Involvement, Civil Liberties (including civil rights issues), Government Management of the Economy, and Social Welfare. These five categories seemed to summarize to a great deal how members voted. Clausen's model suggested that when voting on a specific policy question, members first identified how the specific question fit into one of these more general categories on which they had made general commitments. Members then decided how to cast their specific votes by referencing their well-established general positions on the broader issue. Policy debate in this model of decision-making, therefore revolved around the framing of specific votes.

***Table 4. Summary of Topics Using Clausen Typology***

<i>Topic of Contacts</i>	<i>Represented in % of Recorded Contacts</i>
Government Management	35.7
International Involvement	34.6
Viet Nam	8.2
Civil Liberties	22.7
Social Welfare	11.7
Agriculture Policy	10.2
Non-Clausen Topics	
White House Administration	10.2
Press	3.8
Investigations	9.0
Legislative Leadership	44.5
Total Number of Recorded Contacts	2,954

Table 4 describes the distribution of topics. Two results stand out from these data. First, a number of conversations do not fall into the Clausen typology. It seems safe to conclude that the range of presidential conversations varies more than that captured in congressional decisions. In addition, while observers regularly characterize Johnson's administration as one focused on civil rights, social welfare policy, and the Viet Nam war, the picture of topics before the president seems much more varied. Clearly, international involvement constituted a substantial part of the president's agenda, but the Viet Nam conflict represented less than one-quarter of that foreign policy agenda during the period under study. The bulk of LBJ's contacts involving foreign affairs focussed on Latin America and Western Europe, America's traditional areas of interest. The president actually spent more time discussing White House administration during this period than he did discussing Viet Nam. President Johnson's conversations focused primarily on his legislative leadership and the government's role in the economy and social regulation.

### ***The Published Picture of Recordings***

Recently, a number of books, like Michael Beschloss's collection *Taking Charge*, have appeared purporting to provide data from these presidential recordings. Some scholars have taken advantage of what seems like a useful source and indeed, in his preface Mr. Beschloss, suggests that providing these transcripts for research constitutes the book's central justification. Our own evaluation suggests that scholars need to exercise restraint in utilizing these compendiums.

Beschloss transcribed only 455 conversations (or about 7% of the total phone calls and about 15% of the total number of recorded conversations released). As a result, the Beschloss book covers only a limited number of topics and contacts. We applied the same assessment for this small "sample within a sample" as we applied to the original sample of recorded conversations, i.e., how well do they represent the larger data set in terms of contacts and in terms of subject matter? The results seemed disappointing.

Using the Clausen typology, for example, Table 5 summarizes the distribution of Beschloss transcripts. The first column of data notes the actual distribution of topics. The second column indicates the distribution of topics in the Beschloss transcripts. The third column notes which constitute statistically significant deviations from the actual distribution. Of the ten topics and subtopics noted, the Beschloss distribution differs in a statistically significant way in six.

As we indicated earlier, President Johnson's devoted a good deal of his time to discussing Legislative Leadership, Government Management of the Economy, and International Involvement other than the Viet Nam conflict. Beschloss's rendition of the president's concerns, on the other hand, overemphasized International Involvement, particularly transcribing more than twice as many conversations on Viet Nam as necessary, and investigations of presidential associates (almost double the actual rate) while under representing conversations on government management of the economy by almost a quarter.<sup>2</sup> In addition to misrepresenting the nature of the president's concerns – creating the appearance of obsessing over investigations and Viet Nam – the Beschloss transcripts mis-depict the president's focus on his central responsibilities – like management of the economy. Beschloss simply cannot answer the question, "What does the president do?"

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<sup>2</sup> Using a proportional reduction in error adjustment for the lower bound of zero percentage, the under-representation amounts to 22% of the actual total.



**Table 5. Distribution of Topics in Beschloss Transcripts**

<i>Topic of Contacts</i>	<i>Represented in % of</i>		<i>Stat. Significant Misrepresentation?</i>
	<i>Recorded</i>	<i>Beschloss</i>	
Government Management	35.7	27.6	Under
International Involvement	34.6	42.6	Over
Viet Nam	8.2	18.9	Over
Civil Liberties	22.7	30.3	Over
Social Welfare	11.7	10.7	No
Agriculture Policy	10.2	5.9	Under
Non-Clausen Topics			
White House Administration	10.2	13.9	No
Press	3.8	4.3	No
Investigations	9.0	17.6	Over
Legislative Leadership	44.5	47.5	No
Total number of recorded contacts	2,954	455	

A simple example will illustrate the loss of this important opportunity to understand the office.<sup>3</sup> Take the recordings made on 5 August 1964. The diary records that President Johnson had some 90 contacts during that day. Of those, 57 involved phone calls and the White House recorded 27, a 10% deviation above the norm [using lambda]. That day, the president started off in Washington, flew to Syracuse to make a speech, and then returned to Washington to lobby for House passage of his poverty bill. The *New York Times* reported that morning that the President's bill faced stiff opposition: a decision from the Conference's policy board to make the vote against the president's bill a "Republican issue vote" and the expected defection of some 35-40 southern Democrats. The president's agenda that day also included concerns stemming from earlier attacks on American Navy vessels which would eventually lead to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and two civil rights enforcement issues, he talked with FBI Director Hoover about the case of missing civil rights activists in Mississippi and with Attorney General Robert Kennedy about desegregation enforcement.

Among the conversations that day, the President discussed with Secretary of Defense McNamara how to get particularly troublesome Members of Congress from Texas and Louisiana to ask for favors in order to build an account with them. LBJ wanted McNamara to float the story that he had a review underway considering closing air bases in specific congressional districts in Abilene, Texas and Shreveport, Louisiana, where Democrats had not helped President Kennedy. "We oughta make them come see us about something," he told McNamara. Following this conversation, LBJ embarked on a number of congressional phone calls both to troublesome House members showing up as "not Right" on his poverty head counts as well as those lobbying for the cause, like AFL-CIO President George Meany, Congressional director Lawrence O'Brien, and UAW President Walter Reuther. In all, the President called approximately 20 members about their positions and had two group meetings with other members. All Democrats, LBJ ran through a complex of persuasive appeals. He kidded with them, calling Appropriations Chairman and

<sup>3</sup> All of these transcripts taken from Recorded Tapes, White House Series, April 18 or August 5, 1964, LBJ Library.

fellow Texan George Mahon “Georgie,” for example, chiding him about being a “grandfather” who went to bed too early to catch the late breaking news. He praised some of them for their support on other issues without bringing up poverty at all. In a few instances, he reported favors that the administration would shortly bestow on them. He assured them that he though he wanted their votes, he would stand behind them “money, marbles, and chalk” regardless of the outcome. So, in typical fashion, the president had something specific to say to many of these targets for persuasion.

Yet, when he came to the heart of the matter – their support on the Office of Economic Opportunity bill – LBJ launched into a standard litany of arguments. He told each that the Republicans wanted to wreck his administration by repudiating his leadership on this his first *independent* policy proposal. They wanted to show the world that “I can pass a dead man’s bills, but not my own, the first I put my name and prestige on.” This vote, he told them, had become a test of wills. Losing on it would mirror FDR’s defeat on the Court plan. “They’ll say, ‘Well, he’s lost his leadership.’ And it will be like dominoes.” When members tried to deflect his pressure by saying they planned to do all they could to get him re-elected, LBJ simply said, “It won’t matter what happens in November if I am repudiated as leader.”

Finally, the President repeated a litany of value added that he had used earlier in the year on food stamps: “George, let me put it this way,” he told Mahon in a typical appeal. “I know one thing... I know I’m right on this.” Pausing between them to let each element sink in, he said, “I know I mean more to you,... and Lubbock,... and your district,... and your State,... and your grandchildren, than Charlie Halleck [the Republican House Leader] does.” The president emphasized the value of presidential assistance. “I’ll tell you this,” he told Congressman Bob Jones of Alabama, “if it costs you, I’ll guarantee... I don’t know what it will be thatja... that I can do but I’ll guarantee that I’ll more than make up with you with interest.” He repeated compromises he had made and listed new converts who might offer cover for the member. He released them from supporting the administration on other bills. “You can vote against ARA or that Appalachian bill [both coming up within a month]. Those are poverty votes. You can just say, ‘That’s my *poverty* vote.’” In short, the tape recordings show a president engaged in the process of domestic leadership on landmark legislation that would reshape the government’s relationship with the economy for decades. It shows him manufacturing credit through the Executive, instructing less proficient cabinet officers on the fine points of manipulating members. And it shows him deploying his typical persuasive approach: some personal notes but a dependence on burying the target under a barrage of arguments.

Of the 27 recordings from this day, Mr. Beschloss transcribes only two. In the first, Defense Secretary McNamara calls the president to update him on an air strike ordered in retaliation for the Tonkin attacks. That conversation lasts more than six minutes, yet Beschloss transcribes twelve lines. In the second, Secretary McNamara requests permission to order the ships and planes in the area to stand down from the engagement orders. That conversation lasted only 2.5 minutes, yet Beschloss transcribes eighteen lines. Clearly, these transcripts present a very narrowly defined picture of presidential activities. To rely on them, then, presents the researcher with a picture of the administration’s activities that have little scientific value. Instead the resultant image reflects only the editor’s personal judgments about the likely marketability of topics and their contribution to a specific story the editor wishes to tell without regard for the more varied one history presents.

Far more useful than these published pictures present, then, the president's recordings offer a clear and balanced image of what the president does and says to those he seeks to lead and persuade.

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