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"I'm Not Lying About That One": Manhood, LBJ, and the Politics of Speaking Southern

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A Conversation with **TED KOPPEL**

Joyce Davis on Islam and
Martyrdom

Anna K. Nelson on Lessons
from the Cold War
for Homeland Security

Sidney Milkis: Presidential
Greatness and American Politics

LBJ: Speaking Southern

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MILLER CENTER
of Public Affairs

ON THE COVER: Ted Koppel speaking at Monticello, July 17, 2002. Photograph by Margaret Edwards.

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BY KENT GERMANY

“I’m Not Lying About That One” MANHOOD, LBJ, AND THE POLITICS OF SPEAKING SOUTHERN

A. W. Moursund: No, he made an awful good shot yesterday. He shot a deer. I think, about 350 yards, right through the neck.

Richard Russell: Well, that’s wonderful.

Moursund: He really did. You know, I’m not lying about that one.

Lyndon Johnson herded cows, shot deer, and drank beer while driving fast. He knew the best ways to remove a bull’s testicles, and he had an appreciation for the scars on his own body. He kept hound dogs as pets and rambunctious Texans as friends. He grabbed both of them by the ears when necessary. He could carouse and cavort and stay up long into the night delighting and dominating groups of friends and associates. He told dirty jokes and had a remarkable ability to come up with a story to illustrate a point or to enliven a conversation. Like countless southerners, he relished few things more than a good showdown or a tall tale. He was a classic southern “hell of a fellow” who had mastered the intricacies of life at full-tilt. That mastery was not contrived, but a product of experiences absorbed in the rural South and West.¹ He consistently invoked his sense of place, family, and culture, and his telephone conversations overflow with references to the same. He clearly cherished his Hill Country and spent a lifetime watching it turn purple at dusk.² Anyone who spoke with him long enough could realize the long reach of those roots. They could see traces of Cousin Oriole, Aunt Frank, his mother Rebekah, his father Sam, or numerous others.

Lyndon Johnson was a Texan who was expert at speaking southern. His presidential recordings show him blending both identities as a way to ease into poli-

¹ For an exploration of Johnson’s use of southern and western identities, see Paul Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Boston: Twayne, 1986).

² The most thorough treatment of the influence of the Hill Country on Johnson’s life is Hal K. Rothman’s *“Our Heart’s Home”: LBJ’s Texas White House* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A & M University Press, 2001).

cy matters. As a Texan, Johnson talked big, celebrated big, recollected big, owned big, and loved big. Cows, ranches, boats, airplanes, cars, friends, deals, legislation, and achievements represented more than meat or metal or medals. They proved that he was a man, and, in many ways, they flowed from a vernacular of manhood that guided interactions between southern men (and, to an extent, exchanges with southern women). Being a Texan in the 1960s, especially while being president of the United States, required straddling the heritage of the Texas Hill Country and the demands of Washington's Capitol Hill. For Johnson, the language and symbols of southern masculinity helped provide common ground with a group of conservative southern politicians, which, in turn, assisted the art of the possible.

What follows are selected transcripts from two conversations in early January 1964 between President Johnson and two powerful southern politicians. They offer a very brief glimpse into the often arcane political relations of a region where familiarity with booze, blood sports, and ball games served as essential evidence of cultural belonging, not just as perfunctory social lubrication.³ In the first conversation, President Johnson touches base on New Year's Day with Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, who was Johnson's mentor and longtime friend—and was arguably the most influential southerner in Washington, D.C., save for Johnson himself. Senator Russell, the president, two of the president's closest Texas friends, and, briefly, Lady Bird Johnson rehash old times, discuss the whipping that the University of Texas had put on Roger Staubach and the Navy Midshipmen in the Cotton Bowl, and engage in the rituals of ribbing and bragging associated with serious deer hunting.

In between those moments, Johnson explores policy toward West Germany, wheat sales to the Soviet Union, aid to Indonesia, and the defense industry in Georgia. In the second conversation, President Johnson speaks to Oren Harris, a Democratic member of Congress from a prime duck-hunting area in Arkansas, who was also an important figure in the development of the Supersonic Transport aircraft (SST). For students wanting to know how southern men talked in the 1960s, these conversations

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DAVID COLEMAN

Lyndon Johnson was a Texan who was expert at speaking southern. His presidential recordings show him blending both identities as a way to ease into policy matters. As a Texan, Johnson talked big, celebrated big, recollected big, owned big, and loved big.

offer the words of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Russell, A. W. Moursund, Wesley West, and Oren Harris on two exceptionally cold days in the first winter of the Johnson presidency.

3 The role of hunting in President Johnson's sizing up of his political associates has developed an almost legendary status in the literature on Johnson, particularly the hunting trips with Robert Kennedy in 1959 and John Kennedy in 1960. See John L. Bullion, *In the Boat with LBJ* (Plano, Tex.: Republic of Texas Press, 2001), 103-123; and William R. Manchester, *The Death of a President, November 20-November 25, 1963* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

JANUARY 1, 1964 8:32PM

To Richard Russell, President Johnson joined by Lady Bird Johnson, A. W. Moursund, and Wesley West⁴

President Johnson: Hello.

Richard Russell: Happy New Year, Mr. President.

President Johnson: Well, I called you up to get a New Year's gift off of you, and damned if you didn't beat me to it.

Russell: Yes, sir, I sure did.

President Johnson: I was just sitting here with a bunch of your roughneck friends. We're sitting here in the den. And there's Wesley [West] and A. W. [Moursund], and old A. W. said, "There's old Dick Russell's chair. You remember that night that he and Herman Brown came in here?"⁵

Russell: God, I'd hoped that the chair had disappeared.

President Johnson: [*laughing*] No, they've got it, and they call it—got a little brass plaque on it, it said, "This is where Dick Russell sat the night that A. W. and Herman Brown brought him in [from the] football game."

Russell: I'll tell you, that football team sure played ball today.

President Johnson: [*chuckling*] Huh?

Russell: That team sure played football today.

President Johnson: They did all right. Do you remember that night?

Russell: Not much about it. [*President Johnson laughs heartily.*] I don't remember much about it. [*Russell joins in the laughter.*]

President Johnson: [*laughing*] Well, we just wanted to call you up and tell you that you are a very much beloved man.

Russell: Well, you make me feel mighty good, Mr. President.

President Johnson: How is your family?

Russell: They're all fine, thank you.

President Johnson: Well, you tell that little—

Russell: We've got terrible weather out here, got ice and snow and trees breaking down and everything else. With the sleet, it's terrible.⁶

President Johnson: They tell me that there's no plane—they couldn't even bring me the courier plane today from Washington.

Russell: I'm sure that's true—it's just been terrible all up and down the seaboard.

President Johnson: I gave all your argument to [Ludwig] Erhard, and I wasn't very persuasive with him.⁷ [*Russell laughs.*] He got up that night at toast—after I took him out on the ranch and looked at deer, and just he and I were driving along in the front seat. And I said, "Would you give me one good reason why we ought to keep six [army] divisions over there?" And he looked at me and said, "Well, psychologically, it's very important to the German people because they'd get very disturbed if you pulled them out of there."

And I said, "Well, do you think we ought to, just for psychological reasons, spend all this \$6[00] or \$700 million?" "Well," he said, "the boys all like to stay there, too." I said, "Now, listen, Mr. Chancellor. There's not a single boy there that wouldn't like to be home with mama and papa tonight, this Christmas."

And that night, when he got up to respond to my toast, I told him that the Germans had launched me into politics. Dick Kleberg hired me.⁸ And the Americans had launched Erhard. And I said, "When I got in, I was a politician. I had to start to work on the budget and become an economist. And he was an economist, and he had to become a politician."⁹ [*Both laugh.*]

And the old man got up to reply—he said, "I got kind of disturbed this afternoon." [*Both laugh heartily.*] But he agreed to spend more money with us than he's been spending, and more than we're spending, and he

4 A. W. Moursund was one of President Johnson's closest friends from Texas, a substantial rancher, and a judge. Wesley West was a Texas businessman and owner of a nearby ranch. Tape WH6401.02, Citation #1128, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

5 Herman Brown was George Brown's brother, a co-founder of Brown and Root, and a major financial supporter of President Johnson.

6 A massive winter storm had plowed through the South, dropping over three inches of snow as far south as New Orleans, Louisiana. The storm had prevented Johnson from getting sensitive State Department memoranda that had to be flown in from Washington. "Century's Biggest Snow Surprises New Orleans," *Houston Post*, 1 January 1964, p. 8.

7 Ludwig Erhard was Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and had been the guest of honor at a barbecue held at the LBJ Ranch on December 28.

8 Kleberg was the Texas congressman who had brought Johnson to Washington as a congressional aide.

9 Erhard had served as minister of economics under Konrad Adenauer from 1949 to 1963.



COURTESY LYNDON JOHNSON PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY

agreed not to let Cuba have any more spare parts and things that they had been letting dribble out of there.

Russell: Well [*unclear*]

President Johnson: He agreed to raise his defense budget by a billion marks. He agreed that we could make some little moves from time to time, and he would try to explain them and get his people a little better conditioned. I think that we had a mighty good meeting, although we didn't get all your troops out right quick.

Russell: I didn't want to bring them all out right quick, but I—

President Johnson: I told him you were making those big Lockheed transports,¹⁰ and you wanted to see them used.

Russell: [*Chuckles a bit.*] Well, we . . . Really the, well . . . I was—no need—

President Johnson: I asked—have they talked—

Russell: I know you did a good job with him.

President Johnson: Have you talked to Indonesia? Have you talked to anybody about Indonesia?

Russell: No.

President Johnson: I told somebody in Washington that before I approved 25 million [dollars] in aid to them, I wanted to get your—

Russell: I wouldn't give them a damn cent, Mr. President.

President Johnson: I knew you wouldn't, but I want you to tell them why. I want them to give you that approval that they rushed to me with the secretary of state, and all of them said it's got to be done by the first of the year—

Russell: Now, [*unclear*] is that those people have got their own little coterie of thinking there in the State Department. They're good men all right. [Dean] Acheson, [John Foster] Dulles, and this man we've got there now, Rusk, are all mighty fine men. But they all get their advice from the same source, and they think

10 The Lockheed Company was producing the C-130 military transport plane at its enormous plant in Marietta, Georgia—Russell's home turf.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: He got up that night at toast—after I took him out on the ranch and looked at deer, and just he and I were driving along in the front seat. And I said, “Would you give me one good reason why we ought to keep six [army] divisions over there?”

through the same processes and they pee through the same quill.

There are several things that can be done that wouldn't cause the collapse they think it would.

President Johnson: Well, I asked somebody, I don't know who it was. I think it was Mac Bundy. But I told him I wouldn't act on it until I got a written memo from you. I want your opinion on it, and I want McNamara[s]. I asked McNamara, and McNamara kind of snorted, too.

Russell: Well, I talked to [Orville] Freeman tonight about the Durum wheat.¹¹

President Johnson: Yeah. I told—

Russell: [*Unclear.*]

President Johnson: Well, I told him to call you about that. What did you tell him?

Russell: I told him I hadn't been in favor of that wheat deal,¹² but since we've started into it, I saw no reason why that little \$800,000 extra subsidy should stall it all, that I'd defend him in the Senate on it.

President Johnson: Well, I wanted your judgment on it because I think that he tries, but I'm not sure he has the best judgment all the time.

Russell: No, he doesn't. But he tries, and he's enthusiastic and he's loyal.

President Johnson: Yes, I think all that's true. And I don't think he whips us around.

Russell: No. No, that's right—

President Johnson: He tries to get along with [James] Eastland and [Allen] Ellender¹³ and some of them . . .

Russell: Yes, he does. Yes, he does.

President Johnson: And he defends them in the cabinet meetings.

Russell: He does. He's a good man. He's not a heavyweight,

but he's good and he's loyal. And he does [*unclear*]—

President Johnson: How is Bobby [Russell] doing?¹⁴

Russell: He's doing fine.

President Johnson: He's not there, is he?

Russell: No sir. I had supper with his—up at his house the night before last, but I haven't seen him since then.

President Johnson: Well, give him my love, and tell him that if he didn't have such a damn good job, I'd give him a bad one.

Russell: Well, we talked about you—had a couple of fellows down there from Atlanta, thought they was big shots and all. Bobby was telling them about what a great man you was. [He said that] you was the greatest man ever been, make the greatest president the country had ever seen.

President Johnson: Well, not—

Russell: Your ears must have been burning. He made two or three speeches about you.

President Johnson: I would if he was up there to help me. But I hope you have a wonderful New Year. Wait a minute. A. W. wants to speak on behalf of me and Wesley [West] and a few of them here and say howdy, after this girl talks to you.

Russell: All right, sir.

The president then turned the phone over to Lady Bird.

Lady Bird Johnson: Senator?

Russell: Honey, how are you?

Lady Bird Johnson: Oh, I'm fine.

Russell: I've just been seeing you with great approval in the newsreel and in the paper.

Lady Bird Johnson: [*Chuckles.*] There's nobody's approval

11 Orville Freeman was secretary of agriculture.

12 In October 1963, President Kennedy had negotiated an arrangement to sell excess U.S. wheat to the Soviet Union.

13 James O. Eastland (D-Mississippi) and Allen Ellender (D-Louisiana) were two of the most important members of the Senate regarding agricultural matters.

14 Bobby Russell was the senator's nephew and a state judge in Georgia.

RUSSELL: They're good men all right. [Dean] Acheson, [John Foster] Dulles, and this man we've got there now, Rusk, are all mighty fine men. But they all get their advice from the same source, and they think through the same processes and they pee through the same quill.

that I want more than yours.

Russell: Oh, Lord, what a politician! No wonder Lyndon Johnson's president.

Lady Bird Johnson: And, listen, I—

Russell: No wonder he's president.

Lady Bird Johnson: I want to talk to you seriously about—I mentioned very briefly something about Tallulah Falls, and I've got plans about my trips to places that we both know. And I want to talk to you a little bit more about it.¹⁵

Russell: I'd be glad to.

Lady Bird Johnson: Now—

Russell: It's all right, but it's not of any maximum importance.

Lady Bird Johnson: Well, what I want is something that's a going concern—

Russell: There's a lot of [*unclear*] folks. They used to be poor mountain folks. But they all, there [are] paved roads up there now, and they can all get in and out.

Lady Bird Johnson: Mm-hmm. I want a going concern where I can be of some little use, *and* I just want to say that I hope there were a lot of Russells gathered around the Christmas dinner table and the New Year's dinner table.

Russell: We didn't have but 42 here at Christmas; a lot of them couldn't get in. But we had a big time.

Lady Bird Johnson: Well, all my love to you—

Russell: Are those two lovely daughters of yours at home, or where are they this Christmas?

Lady Bird Johnson: They were together with us at Christmas. And we had all of Lyndon's family at Christmas, and now we're having my family—about 15 Taylors.¹⁶ But my two children went with their dates to watch the big ball game.¹⁷

Russell: That was a terrific ball game. That Texas could beat any college team in the world today. I never saw a team play like they do.¹⁸

Lady Bird Johnson: [*Chuckles.*] They'll be back tomorrow. And I want—that Lynda Bird's going to come back up there.¹⁹ The main reason she's coming is because she wants to listen to smart people like you and get smarter.

Russell: She needs to be up there to help her daddy. She's a politician just like her mother. [*Lady Bird chuckles.*] [*Unclear.*]

Lady Bird Johnson: And here's Judge Moursund.

A. W. Moursund: Hi, Senator!

Russell: Judge, how are you?

Moursund: All right. Happy New Year to you.

Russell: Same to you, A. W., and many of them. I was getting along just fine here until Lyndon reminded me of that time I sort of disgraced myself over there and you had to take care of me.

Moursund: Oh, heck, he shouldn't have mentioned that. [*Russell laughs.*] He's just kidding.

Russell: That's all right.

Moursund: How'd you like old Texas today?

Russell: I want to tell you, they could whip any college football team that ever was assembled today.

15 Tallulah Falls was an isolated and economically depressed former resort town in the mountains of northwest Georgia near the South Carolina border. The First Lady was in the process of visiting several economically depressed areas.

16 Lady Bird, born Claudia Alta Taylor, was from the East Texas town of Karnack, which was less than ten miles from the Louisiana border and less than five miles from the Texas town of Uncertain.

17 Lynda Bird sat on the Navy side, while Lucy watched from a Texas section. Lynda Bird's fiancé, Lieutenant Bernard Rosenbach of Comfort, Texas, was an alumnus of Navy on active duty at sea. "Girls to Dallas," *San Angelo Standard-Times*, 1 January 1964; and Clayton Hickerson and Mike Cochran, "Johnson Girls See Game, But Get Much Protection," *San Angelo Standard-Times*, 2 January 1964, 3A.

18 The University of Texas Longhorns, coached by the legendary Darrell Royal, went undefeated and won the 1963 college football national championship. Earlier that day, they topped off their season by defeating the Naval Academy in the Cotton Bowl, which was a topic of conversation with most of the Johnson's callers.

19 Lynda Bird would be enrolling at George Washington University.

Harris: I've just been on a duck hunt and been way back in the woods and just got home.

President Johnson: Did you kill any?

Harris: Yes, we had pretty good luck.

*President Johnson: What do you do—just give them to your kinfolks, or are you going to bring me one?
. . . Listen, I'm worried about this supersonic thing.*

Moursund: They're working today, weren't they?

Russell: Navy had a good team, but they just looked like a high school out there trying to play Texas. They had a good team. I want to tell you, that number 70 for Texas was the most terrific tackle I ever saw.²⁰ In the line, he was taking two and three men out.

Moursund: Yes, he's tough. He sure is.

Russell: And he's not such a hell of a big fellow, either.

Moursund: No, he's just determined.

Russell: Yes. He's got the speed, and quick as a cat, too.

Moursund: How you feeling?

Russell: I'm feeling fine, A. W. I hope you are.

Moursund: Well, you had a nice holidays?

Russell: Yes, we've had a good time.

Moursund: Well, that's sure fine—

Russell: Y'all kill any deer out there?

Moursund: Yes, we did, and we miss you.

Russell: Well, I wished I could have been there. I hope the president didn't miss his turn as many times as he did that time he created that shortage of ammunition.

Moursund: No, he made an awful good shot yesterday. He shot a deer. I think, about 350 yards, right through the neck.²¹

Russell: Well, that's wonderful.

Moursund: He really did. You know, I'm not lying about that one. [*Both laugh heartily.*]

Russell: Well, that's all right. Nobody's ever killed one as far as I put that [*unclear*] shot, though.

Moursund: I know it. You—[*Both talk simultaneously.*]

Russell: I put him a mile and a half off.

Moursund: Well . . .

Russell: [*Unclear*] looked so serious and [*unclear*] those eyebrows, and I'd tell about it.

Moursund: It sure is good to hear you sound so well.

Russell: It's good to hear from you, A. W., and a Happy New Year to you and many of them.

Moursund: Here—Wesley wants to say something to you. Stay with it.

Russell: Wesley?

Wesley West: [*Unclear.*]

Russell: Wesley?

West: How are you, sir?

Russell: I haven't seen you in a coon's age.²²

West: Well, it's been too long, but we think this is a pretty fine way to start off the new year.

Russell: I haven't seen you in a coon's age. By golly, I've thought about you lots of times, wondered how you were getting along.

West: Well, we're not doing too well, but we don't know any better. We think everything's all right.

Russell: Oh, you're doing all right.

West: We think it's going to be all right, and we don't know of a better way to start off the new year than to—

Russell: You're doing it all right.

West: —get to talk to you and to be with such nice people out here.

Russell: You're doing all right. You're with a great man there that's going to be president for nine more years.

20 Scott Appleton wore the number 70. He was a consensus All-American tackle and a winner of the Outland Trophy, which was awarded to the best lineman in college football. His weight was listed at 239 pounds.

21 In a conversation earlier in the day with Harry Jersig, the head of the Lone Star Brewing Company, Johnson explained that he had killed two deer the previous morning.

22 This is a colloquial rural southern reference to a long period of time and not likely used here with any racial overtones.

West: I think that's about right.

Russell: And I'm certainly honored and pleased and gratified that you all talked to me.

West: Well, it's—

Russell: It's been a long time since I've seen you, Wesley; you'll have to come up there to Washington to see us sometime.

West: I'd like to do it. I sure would. I'd like to visit with you sometime. We miss you out here.

Russell: Well, I miss being out there, too.

West: Well, it's mighty nice to talk to you, and I hope—

Russell: Happy New Year to you.

West: Same to you, Senator.

Russell: I'll see you.

West: Fine and dandy. Bye-bye.

Russell: Bye. Good night.

[President Johnson and Congressman Harris turn to a discussion of the Supersonic Transport and then end their conversation with the following exchange.]

President Johnson: Goodbye, my friend.

Harris: Will do it.

President Johnson: Save me a duck.

Harris: I'll bring you one.

President Johnson: All right.

Harris: I'm going to bring it myself—

President Johnson: All right.

Harris: —so the Secret Service can't get into it.

President Johnson: Give your wife a hug for me.

Harris: Will do it. ♦

JANUARY 4, 1964 3:00PM

To Oren Harris²³

Oren Harris: . . . home in Arkansas.

President Johnson: Yeah.

Harris: I've just been on a duck hunt and been way back in the woods and just got home.

President Johnson: Did you kill any?

Harris: Yes, we had pretty good luck.

President Johnson: What do you do—just give them to your kinfolks, or are you going to bring me one?

Harris: I'll bring you one.

President Johnson: All right.

Harris: I'll bring you two.

President Johnson: Better be careful that that Secret Service don't poison me, now.

Harris: All right, I'll watch that, too.

President Johnson: Listen, I'm worried about this supersonic thing. The more I get into it, the more it concerns me, because there's so many unknown things about it.

23 Harris was an attorney from El Dorado, Arkansas, who had represented his district since 1941 and was a crucial player in the development of the transport project. In 1966, Johnson would appoint him to the federal bench in Arkansas. Tape WH6401.05, Citation #1179, Recordings of Telephone