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An Awkward Alliance

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JUDGMENT DAYS: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws That Changed America

By Nick Kotz. Houghton Mifflin. 522 pp. \$26

Lyndon Johnson's first speech to Congress as president featured a blunt challenge: "No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long." At the time of Kennedy's assassination and Johnson's ascension, the bill's prospects were bleak. But just seven months later, the new president signed the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law.

The oft told but always inspiring story of that bill's passage provides an uplifting start to Nick Kotz's finely honed portrait of the civil rights partnership that President Johnson and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. forged in the mid-1960s. Kotz confronts a difficult task, and not only because of how much already has been written about the two men. The King-Johnson relationship, never close or frank, deteriorated from wary and formal to simply nonexistent toward the end of Johnson's presidency.

Yet Judgment Days provides a fresh and vivid account of the two men's interactions. Some of the new details come from FBI memoranda to the White House that the Johnson Presidential Library has finally opened to researchers; others come from that library's ongoing release of the hundreds of telephone conversations that Johnson surreptitiously recorded during his presidency.

Johnson championed the era's two greatest civil rights legislative milestones, the 1964 act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, but the tapes of his phone calls reveal that in private his pronunciation of "Negro" sometimes left much to be desired. Kotz also emphasizes that the president's personal feelings about King were "mixed" and "highly conflicted," and he rightly attributes Johnson's ambivalence to the unending stream of hostile and sometimes distorted reports furnished him by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Memos detailing King's non-monogamous personal life were among a deluge of titillating dirt on scores of public figures that the FBI sent Johnson. Kotz quotes one of the president's closest friends, Sen. Richard Russell (D-Ga.), to whom Johnson described the report's salacious content, as telling his private diary that Johnson "loves it." But what most troubled Johnson was Hoover's accusation that King's closest adviser, New York lawyer Stanley Levison, was a secret communist who wielded decisive influence over King. Like John and Robert Kennedy before him, Johnson never pressed Hoover for the supporting evidence, which would have shown that while Levison had previously been an important Communist Party henchman, nothing in his

heavily wiretapped relationship with King betrayed any signs of current communist loyalty or manipulative intent.

Yet Johnson accepted the FBI's claims without question. Speaking with Minnesota Sen. Hubert Humphrey just before the 1964 Democratic National Convention at which Humphrey became Johnson's running mate, the president warned him about King: "The Communists have got hold of him, and they're managing and directing him every day." Johnson's fear that civil rights activists would disrupt that 1964 nominating convention led him to instigate an FBI surveillance operation that Kotz accurately calls "an unprecedented program of illegal political espionage." No disorder occurred, but agents disguised themselves as journalists and wiretapped both King and Mississippi activists who were challenging their state's all-white convention delegation.

Just four months later, however, that same president, now newly elected in his own right, told his attorney general that "I want you to undertake the greatest midnight legislative drafting" since the 1930s to prepare a powerful voting rights bill for the incoming Congress. That unpublicized initiative stole a march on King, who was preparing to launch a major voting rights campaign in Selma, Ala. When segregationist lawmen's violent excesses landed the Selma protests on the nation's front pages, Johnson went before Congress to call for passage of his bill in a speech that Kotz rightly calls "the zenith" of his presidency. The Voting Rights Act became law less than five months later, but within days of its enactment the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles erupted into furious racial rioting. The violence left both King and Johnson despondent, with the president so "depressed and withdrawn," Kotz reports, that "he refused to accept urgent telephone calls" requesting military assistance.

Paranoia, depression and self-pity troubled Johnson throughout his presidency; King too suffered painful bouts of exhaustion and gloom. For both men, the agony of the Vietnam War eclipsed even their anguish over Watts, and when King first publicly criticized U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, Johnson upbraided him in a recorded conversation. Members of Congress had "the impression that you are against me in Vietnam," and "you better not leave that impression," Johnson warned. "I want peace as much as you do, and more so, because I am the fellow that wakes up in the morning with a report that fifty of our boys died last night. . . . Let's not get this country divided." But their split over the war soon expanded to domestic issues, as King organized a Poor People's Campaign to seek anti-poverty initiatives that Vietnam-related spending was precluding Johnson from pursuing.

Johnson and King spoke privately for the last time in November 1966, 18 months before King's assassination in April 1968. After 1965, both men experienced mostly "frustration and sorrow," and their previously cooperative relationship dissolved into mutual antipathy. Judgment Days ends on that plaintive note, but Kotz's thorough and thoughtful book rightly emphasizes that "without both Johnson and King, the civil rights revolution might have ended with fewer accomplishments and even greater trauma" than it did. *

David J. Garrow is the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference."