

Assessing Lyndon Johnson

Nearly a decade after Lyndon Johnson's death in 1973, the body of literature focusing on his political career and his tumultuous Presidency is surprisingly thin. Compared to work done on his predecessor, there is but a trickle on Johnson—nothing that would compare in influence, sales, or scope with books like Arthur Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days* or Theodore Sorenson's *Kennedy*. Many crucial LBJ archives (e.g., those covering deliberations on Vietnam) have yet to be opened. But some new studies are in progress—notably those by Robert Caro (author of the prizewinning *Power Broker*) and journalist Ronnie Dugger. Lyndon Baines Johnson remains one of America's most enigmatic Presidents. Here, historian Robert Divine looks at what there is, so far, of a "Johnson literature."

by Robert A. Divine

"You will never work for or with a more complicated man than Lyndon Johnson so long as you live," Robert McNamara told Joseph Califano in 1965. "I guarantee it." The critics' easy stereotypes—Johnson as a Texas wheeler-dealer, a mad bomber in Vietnam—fade when one begins to probe into the complexity of the man's character and career.

The equally misleading images of Johnson as the peerless Senate majority leader or as the progenitor of the Great Society also distort his curiously mixed political record. The man who first went to Congress with only 27 percent of the vote, the candidate who lost on his first try for the

Senate, won the second by 87 votes seven days after the polls closed, and ran poorly against an unknown Republican college government teacher for his third term, the vice presidential candidate who barely held Texas for Kennedy and failed to halt Nixon's inroads into the South in 1960—all seem a far cry from the vaunted campaigner who surpassed Roosevelt's record 1936 landslide to defeat Barry Goldwater in 1964.

Far from being a figure with transparent motives and predictable behavior, Lyndon Johnson emerges from the existing literature as a complex and often inscrutable man whose contributions to America's

subsequent progress and problems have yet to be clearly evaluated.

The earliest books on Lyndon Johnson are the most one-sided. The first biography, written by an aide, Booth Mooney, in 1956 when Johnson began to develop presidential fever, is purely and simply a campaign document.

Mooney's *Lyndon Johnson Story*, updated in 1964, tells the credulous reader that Johnson won handily in his first race for Congress in 1937 and describes the 1948 Senate race as ending in "a melodramatic finish" without any reference to the crucial 202 late votes from Jim Wells County.

There is no mention of how Johnson built his personal fortune while serving the public, nor any explanation of his postwar abandonment of support for the pro-labor Taft-Hartley Act and the New Deal.

Mooney's book can be excused as a

campaign tract. There can be no such defense for the unabashed flattery that *New York Times* man William S. White heaps on Johnson in *The Professional: Lyndon B. Johnson*. Writing soon after Johnson succeeded Kennedy, White, a long-time friend of LBJ, apparently wanted to reassure the people that the reins of government were in good hands.

Those who had followed Johnson's Texas career must have been surprised to learn from White that there was "not an ounce of demagogy in him."

Even scholars were not immune to the Johnson influence. Three historians at Southwest Texas State (LBJ's alma mater), William C. Pool, Emmie Craddock, and David E. Conrad, collaborated on *Lyndon Baines Johnson: The Formative Years*. Though useful and reliable, with an especially informative chapter on Johnson's college years, this volume



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Time's Lyndon ascendant: After only five years in the U.S. Senate, Sam Rayburn's protégé is elected minority leader in 1953 (left). In 1960, LBJ announces his bid for the Presidency (middle). The bid fails, but Johnson inherits the Oval Office upon John F. Kennedy's assassination in November 1963. On New Year's Day 1965, he is hailed as Man of the Year: the shrewd statesman of humble origins (right). The building behind Johnson is his birthplace.

suffers from local chauvinism. Johnson's father is described as "an agrarian progressive" and his mother as "a tower of strength to her young children"; under their tutelage, LBJ grows to manhood infused with ideals based on the Constitution, the tenets of democracy, and political liberalism.

Johnson's political opponents quickly tried to set the record straight. Their books, though harsh and vengeful, are never dull.

"Drugstore Populist"

In 1964, J. Evetts Haley, a popular historian of Texas and far-right ideologue, wrote the classic account, *A Texan Looks at Lyndon: A Study in Illegitimate Power*. Haley tells his readers that Johnson is not a "typical Texan" but a product "of the strangely deranged times that have set the stage for his ambitious desires, his vanity and his evil genius."

He traces the origins of the Johnson fortune to his acquisition of Austin radio station KTBC and his subsequent manipulation of the Federal Communications Commission to achieve a television monopoly in central Texas. And he repeats the familiar Texas stories about Johnson's ties to Brown & Root, the Houston-based construction firm whose rise to wealth and power paralleled that of Lyndon Johnson.

Despite the intemperance of his attack, Haley does raise a critical ques-

tion that must be faced by Johnson's future biographers: Can he be viewed purely as a political manipulator or was there a set of beliefs that ran through his public life?

Robert Sherrill, a liberal writing during the Vietnam War in 1967, argues in *The Accidental President* that Johnson was totally without fixed principles. Disgusted at the thought of Johnson's being considered a liberal, Sherrill labels him "the Drugstore Populist."

In the most effective part of his book, Sherrill belittles Johnson's political reputation: "Johnson had climbed by successes so small that the cumulative grand success seems an accident, as indeed in more than one way it was." He points out how poorly Johnson did in all his campaigns except that of 1964.

The Political "Daddy"

By far the most sweeping critique of Johnson's career came in 1968 with Alfred Steinberg's 800-page biography, *Sam Johnson's Boy*, a curious mixture of fact and fancy. It is distorted by an adamant refusal to see Johnson as anything but a seeker after personal wealth and political power.

Steinberg's most original and striking contribution is the concept of the "political daddy." He analyzes Johnson's technique of finding a patron, an established politician who could adopt him as his protégé. Ac-

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ording to Steinberg, Johnson went through a series of such "daddies," ranging from the little known but influential Alvin Wirtz in Texas to such prominent national figures as Sam Rayburn and Franklin Roosevelt.

Carrying the Torch

Unlike many earlier critics, Steinberg does not ignore foreign and defense policy. He points out that LBJ was a child of the 1930s, obsessed with the fear of appeasement and the supposed lesson of Munich.

When Communist China intervened in the Korean War in 1950, Johnson blamed the Truman administration for the resulting American retreat. "For the common defense we have thrown up . . . chicken-wire, not a wall of armed might," Johnson told the Senate.

The escalation of the Vietnam War comes as no surprise to Steinberg; "Johnson's long-time militarism" flourished, destroying his "opportunity for greatness in the steaming jungles of far-off Asia."

A more sympathetic portrait of Lyndon Johnson emerges from the extensive memoir literature. In 1971, Johnson's own *Vantage Point* was billed as a personal perspective on his presidential years. In fact, it was written largely by six former White House aides, including Walt Rostow and Doris Kearns.

They did all the research and wrote the first drafts; Johnson then made the final revisions. At Johnson's insistence, the memoir focuses exclusively on public policy. The result is a bland and juiceless official history, without a trace of Johnson's flamboyant personality and earthy wisdom.

From the outset, Johnson is clearly intent on minimizing the theme of friction with the Kennedys. He in-

sists that his focus on continuity at home and in Indochina in 1963 and 1964 was based on emotional commitment, not shrewd politics. "Rightly or wrongly," Johnson maintains, "I felt from the very first day in office that I had to carry on for President Kennedy."

The theme of continuity with John Kennedy, the idea that Johnson was simply carrying out the mandate of his popular predecessor, permeates the volume. The reason for this emphasis becomes clear as the book unfolds: Johnson is as obsessed with Vietnam in his memoir as he was in the White House. Even though only five of the 23 chapters deal with Vietnam, they account for more than one-third of the book.

Failure to take a stand in South Vietnam, Johnson explains, would have meant the loss of all Southeast Asia to communism, a fearsome domestic debate that would have divided the nation, the loss of confidence in America by our allies, and above all, the global advance of Russia and China into the resulting vacuum of power.

LBJ on RFK

The personal sentiments so notably absent in *The Vantage Point* come out clearly in Sam Houston Johnson's memoir, *My Brother Lyndon*.

The President's intense dislike of Robert Kennedy is apparent in Lyndon's statement to his brother in 1964, "I don't need that little runt to win." Sam Johnson, perhaps reflecting Lyndon's feelings, blames the Vietnam War on the advisers LBJ had inherited from Kennedy, especially McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara. Above all, Sam Johnson perceives LBJ's insecurity about his own educational attainments when in the company of polished Ivy

Leaguers.

Although Sam clearly idolized his brother, the book has many glimpses of the dark side of LBJ—his ruthless bullying of overworked aides, his inability to apologize for his excesses. And the author gives an insight into the President's monumental ego when he describes how LBJ began to organize his papers and clippings for posterity in 1957 by establishing a trained archivist in the Old Senate Office Building.

None of these unedifying but human qualities appears in Jack Valenti's memoir, despite its title, *A Very Human President*. Like Valenti's service as a presidential aide, the book is one long paean to the chief.

The most perceptive and eloquent of all the memoirs is Harry McPherson's *Political Education*. McPherson was a young Texan who went directly from law school to work as a legislative aide to Johnson in 1956; 10 years later, he served as White House counsel and speech writer. McPherson admired Johnson, but he was always aware of the President's limitations.

Whales and Minnows

The most revealing passages deal with Johnson's handling of Congress. As majority leader, he introduced his young assistant to the facts of life in the Senate, showing him how to win the support of the "whales," such as Senators Richard Russell (D.-La.) and Robert Kerr (D.-Okla.), and to avoid wasting time on the "minnows." McPherson came to understand, as Steinberg never did, why Johnson took such a hawkish stand on national defense: It was the price the Democrats had to pay during the Cold War to get their social welfare measures through Congress.

Far more than William White,

McPherson demonstrates that Johnson was "a master craftsman of politics." After the landslide victory in 1964, McPherson was puzzled by Johnson's haste in enacting the Great Society. "Doesn't matter what kind of majority you come in with," the President explained. "You've got just one year when they treat you right, and before they start worrying about themselves."

Coming on Strong

McPherson believes that Johnson had a definite political ideology—he views LBJ as a Southern populist with a distaste for large industrial corporations and a genuine sympathy for the poor. But it is a mistake, he thinks, to label Johnson a Southerner. "His true province was not the South," McPherson explains. "It was Washington."

Two other memoirs, George E. Reedy's *The Twilight of the Presidency* and Joseph A. Califano's *A Presidential Nation*, were written as extended commentaries on the political system rather than as accounts of the authors' years spent as Johnson aides. Yet both give indirect evidence about the character of the Johnson Presidency.

Reedy describes how Johnson "mistook the alert, taut, well-groomed young men around him [in the White House] for 'American youth' and could never comprehend the origins of the long-haired, slovenly attired youngsters who hooted at him so savagely when he traveled."

Some of the best insights into Lyndon Johnson come from the journalists who observed him at first hand from the time he emerged as a national figure in the 1950s. Their accounts, however, tend to be rich in anecdotes but skimpy on analysis.

The most satisfying book by newsmen on Johnson's involvement in national politics is *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power*, by columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. Writing in 1966, they survey his career in the Senate, as Vice President, and during the first two years of his Presidency.

They are at their best in depicting his success as Senate majority leader, which they attribute to two factors—the Johnson “network” and the Johnson “treatment.”

The network was the group of Senators, both Democratic and Republican, liberal and conservative, whom Johnson could call on when he needed votes on the Senate floor. He won the loyalty of some by giving them the committee assignments they desired, others received prize office assignments, still others got trips abroad at the taxpayers' expense or strategic campaign contributions.

The key to the whole system was the “treatment.” As described by Evans and Novak, Johnson would use the treatment whenever he had the opportunity for direct, one-on-one contact with a fellow Senator. Sometimes, he relied on threats and accusations, sometimes on flattery, cajolery, even tears.

Playing by Ear

Above all, he used physical domination. “He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling. From his pockets poured clippings, memos, statistics. Mimicry, humor, and the genius of analogy made the Treatment an almost hypnotic experience and rendered the target stunned and helpless.”

Two other journalists, Philip Geyelin and Tom Wicker, are less

flattering but quite perceptive in describing Johnson's approach to foreign policy.

Geyelin gives the fullest account in *Lyndon B. Johnson and the World*. Writing in 1966, he describes Johnson's foreign policy as President with growing apprehension over the Dominican Republic intervention and the slow escalation of the Vietnam War.

Yet he credits Johnson with considerable expertise on defense matters and the ability to play power politics. He was, Geyelin contends, in large measure “a self-taught statesman; he couldn't read the music, but he had come a long way on his ability to play by ear.”

Personal Failings

In *JFK and LBJ*, Tom Wicker argues that Johnson, handicapped by his Southern background, wheeler-dealer reputation, and inexperience in foreign policy, had little choice but to implement the Vietnam policy he had inherited from John Kennedy. Kennedy might have escaped from the Vietnam quagmire, but Johnson could not.

Most of the other reporters' books on Johnson fail to rise above reminiscence. Volumes such as Jack Bell's *Johnson Treatment*, Charles Roberts's *LBJ's Inner Circle*, Frank Cormier's *LBJ: The Way He Was*, Hugh Sidey's *Very Personal Presidency*, and Haynes Johnson and Richard Harwood's *Lyndon* describe in eye-opening detail Johnson's vanity, vulgarity, and pettiness as well as his gusto and exuberance.

By far the best reporter's account of the Johnson Presidency is *No Hail, No Farewell*, by British journalist Louis Heren. As a foreigner, Heren views Johnson dispassionately, noting both his coarse personal behavior

and his "superb" skills as a politician. Heren gives Johnson full credit for the passage of the stalled Kennedy legislative program in 1964 and 1965. But he also criticizes Johnson for attempting to rule rather than govern after his massive reelection victory in 1964. "With private wheeling and dealing, the control of most outlets of official information, and the occasional dishonesties," Heren asserts, "Johnson also avoided the further check of public oversight." Heren attributes LBJ's ultimate downfall more to external events than to personal failings. "To a large extent he was a victim of circumstance beyond his control." The real tragedy, as Heren sees it, lay not in Johnson's character but in the bankruptcy of the liberal tradition that he inherited from Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy.

"The old answers were often irrelevant," Heren claims, as the liberal also proved to be "captives rather than heirs of the past." So the President who enacted long overdue civil-rights legislation and prevailed on Congress to pass aid-to-education measures ended as the bewildered victim of black violence and campus protests. And, in Vietnam, Johnson took the Cold War liberalism of his predecessors and carried it to its logical conclusion. There were personal failings as well. The challenges Johnson faced were unprecedented—cultural revolution, a breakdown in law and order, massive racial unrest—but Heren feels that John Kennedy might have had the political sophistication, the appeal to youth, and the personal charisma to cope with the momentous upheavals of the mid-1960s. Johnson's political gifts worked

Time's Lyndon agonists: By November 1966 (left), Great Society programs are in place and nearly 380,000 U.S. troops are in Vietnam. LBJ is both wartime leader and bold innovator on the home front. Only 14 months later, things have soured (middle): Under fire from leaders of his own party, Johnson is depicted as King Lear. After Hanot's Tet offensive, Johnson calls for peace talks, then bows out of the 1968 presidential contest (right).

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very well in the Senate but not in the White House, where he had to lead 200 million Americans, not just 99 Senators. "National leadership could not be exercised from a back room," Heren concludes.

Scholarly analysis of Lyndon Johnson's career is still meager. There have been a few pioneers, however. Eric Goldman and Doris Kearns stand out.

Sam and Rebekah

Goldman combined his skill as a political historian with his experience as a presidential assistant from 1964 to 1966 to write the most reliable available account of Johnson's Presidency. In *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, Goldman describes the flowering of the Great Society in detail, perceiving it as the culmination of the reform movement that began with progressivism and continued with the New Deal.

In his search for an explanation of Johnson's failure as President, Goldman divides the blame between LBJ and the urban middle class. Lyndon Johnson, he claims, was his own worst enemy. Plagued by a deep-seated sense of personal insecurity, he tried desperately as President to win the respect and love of the people but succeeded only in bringing out his own worst qualities.

"Dubious whether people liked him," Goldman observes, "he pleaded, clawed, and maneuvered to have them love him."

Compounding the problem in the 1960s was what Goldman calls the emergence of "the Metroamericans"—the rising middle-class citizens of the cities and suburbs who prided themselves on their urbanity and sophistication. Influenced by a Northeastern-dominated media, Metroamericans compared Johnson

to the Kennedy they had idolized and found him wanting.

Doris Kearns offers a very different explanation for Johnson's failure in *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. Like Goldman, she combines the insights of a trained scholar with personal experience gained from service as a White House aide and ghost-writer.

Adopting the techniques of psychohistory and benefiting from a close personal relationship with LBJ during the years of his retirement, Kearns analyzes the relationship between Johnson and his parents to explain the central contradiction of his life—the quest for power and the desire for service. The quest for power came from his father, Sam Johnson, who introduced Lyndon to the coarse but exciting world of politics during his brief stint in the Texas legislature. His mother, Rebekah, on the other hand, was a genteel woman who valued idealism and service. Kearns claims that Rebekah withheld her love and affection from her son as a way to force him to give up his father's crude ways. As a result, "from the world of work and the conquest of ever-widening circles of men, Johnson hoped to obtain the steady love he had lacked as a child," Kearns writes.

Digging Deeper

The problem with Kearns's analysis of Lyndon Johnson is that it is too pat. In one fell psychological swoop, she accounts for all the contradictions in his political career.

Historians writing in the 1970s have shown greater interest in Johnson's political ideology than in his personal idiosyncrasies. Jim F. Heath stresses the theme of continuity with Kennedy in his book on the 1960s, *Decade of Disillusionment*.

Despite the obvious differences in style, the two Presidents, he contends, were very similar: Both were activists, both were in the progressive tradition in domestic policy, and both were ardent Cold Warriors. In particular, Heath sees Johnson as a genuine liberal who "saw the Great Society as going well beyond the work of his great hero, Franklin Roosevelt."

A genuine consensus, to use LBJ's favorite word, seems to be emerging out of the Johnson literature a decade after his passing.

The image of Johnson as a riverboat gambler, ruthless in his pursuit of power, a manipulator of men and events, is too strong for even his most ardent admirers to dismiss. But at the same time, historians have established a solid ideological base for his

Great Society programs and demonstrated that he acted out of conviction as well as expediency.

The real test facing future historians is to explain *why* Johnson failed to meet the challenges of the 1960s—notably racial unrest, social upheaval, and the divisive Indochina conflict. Simply to say that he was limited by the progressive and internationalist traditions of his generation or by his own early experience is to deny him the capacity for growth and change, a quality he displayed in abundance throughout his career in Congress. No, scholars must dig deeper than that.

Until they do, we are faced with the continuing enigma of Lyndon Johnson, the brilliant tactician who led the nation into strategic disaster in Vietnam and disorder at home.

AN LBJ BOOKLIST

Jack Bell, **The Johnson Treatment** (Harper, 1965)

Joseph A. Califano, **A Presidential Nation** (Norton, 1975); Frank Cormier, **LBJ: The Way He Was** (Doubleday, 1977)

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, **Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power** (New American Library, 1966)

Philip Geyelin, **Lyndon B. Johnson and the World** (Praeger, 1966); Eric F. Goldman, **The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson** (Knopf, 1969)

J. Evetts Haley, **A Texan Looks at Lyndon: A Study in Illegitimate Power** (Palo Duro, 1964); Jim F. Heath, **Decade of Disillusionment: The Kennedy-Johnson Years** (Ind. Univ., 1975); Louis Heren, **No Hail, No Farewell** (Harper, 1968)

Haynes Johnson and Richard Harwood, **Lyndon** (Praeger, 1973); Lyndon Baines Johnson, **The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency** (Holt, 1971); Sam Houston Johnson, **My Brother Lyndon** (Cowles, 1970)

Doris Kearns, **Lyndon Johnson and the Ameri-**

can Dream (Harper, 1976)

Harry McPherson, **A Political Education** (Little, Brown, 1972); Booth Mooney, **The Lyndon Johnson Story** (Farrar, 1956; rev. and expanded, 1964)

William C. Pool, Emmie Craddock, and David E. Conrad, **Lyndon Baines Johnson: The Formative Years** (Southwest Texas State College, 1965)

George E. Reedy, **The Twilight of the Presidency** (World, 1970); Charles Roberts, **LBJ's Inner Circle** (Delacorte, 1965)

Robert Sherrill, **The Accidental President** (Grossman, 1967); Hugh Sidey, **A Very Personal Presidency: Lyndon Johnson in the White House** (Deutsch, 1968); Alfred Steinberg, **Sam Johnson's Boy** (Macmillan, 1968)

Jack Valenti, **A Very Human President** (Norton, 1976)

William S. White, **The Professional: Lyndon B. Johnson** (Houghton, 1964); Tom Wicker, **JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality upon Politics** (Morrow, 1968)