The President We Love to Blame

Vilification is the lot of U.S. presidents. But as even Richard M. Nixon found, leaving the White House can, in time, do wonders for one's reputation. An exception seems to be Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–73). In the 22 years since he left office, he has been reviled by biographers, lashed by assorted critics, and scorned by the public. Bitter memories of Vietnam, the "credibility gap," and the disappointments of the Great Society have not died. What has been lost, historian Robert Dallek argues, is an appreciation of the considerable merits and accomplishments of our 36th president.

by Robert Dallek

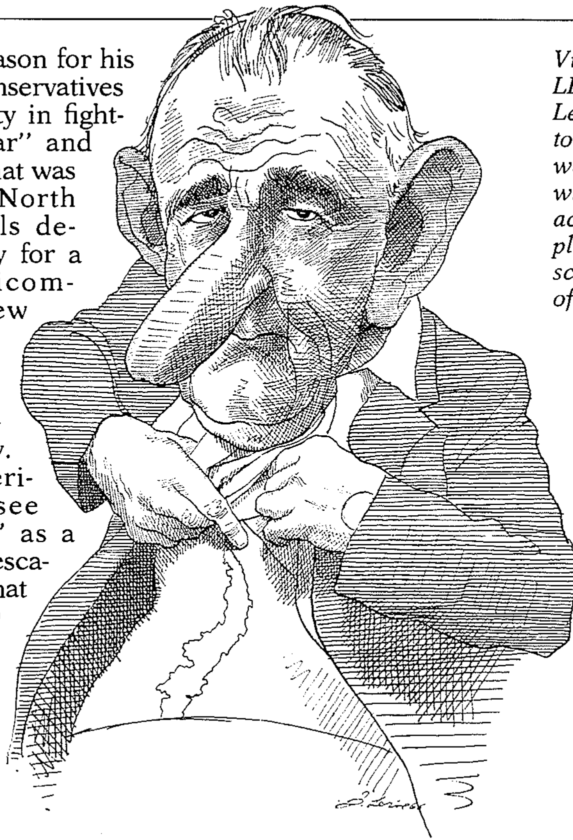
He was the dominant political figure of the 1960s. He challenged us to wipe out poverty, to end racial segregation, and to win a morally confusing war in a remote place. But Lyndon Baines Johnson has largely receded from the American memory. Where biographical studies of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Nixon abound, Johnson is something of an unloved orphan. Twenty-two years after he left the White House, and long after he christened a magnificent 11-story presidential library housing millions of pages of material, no historian has published a major research study of his life, and two journalists promising to do so, Ronnie Dugger and Robert Caro, have merely vilified him in books that only come up to the 1950s, the years of his Senate career.

This paucity of work, compared to the numerous biographies devoted to other presidents, partly reflects the public's low esteem for Johnson. A 1988 Harris poll on presidential performance from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan showed that Americans consistently ranked Johnson near or at the bottom of every category. Asked which of these presidents made them feel proudest of being an American, most inspired confidence in the White House, and could be trusted most in a crisis, respondents consistently put LBJ last, along with Gerald Ford and *behind* Richard M. Nixon.

Who will history view as the best among these presidents? Only one percent chose Johnson. The president best able to get things done? Three percent said Johnson, one percent more than said Jimmy Carter and two percent more than said Ford. And the president who set the highest moral standards? John F. Kennedy, Reagan, and Jimmy Carter, in that order, led the list. Johnson stood alone in last place, chosen by only one percent of the sample. Even Nixon fared better!

Johnson's distinction as the only president in American history to have lost a war

is certainly one reason for his poor standing. Conservatives deplore his timidity in fighting a "limited war" and his failure to do what was needed against North Vietnam. Liberals denounce his affinity for a knee-jerk anticommunism that drew the United States into a civil war that had little to do with U.S. national security. Many other Americans simply see "Johnson's war" as a pointless conflict, escalated by stealth, that claimed 58,000 American lives and divided and demoralized the country.



Vietnam was, and is, LBJ's chief scar. David Levine's classic 1968 cartoon was a takeoff on a well-known incident in which the president, often accused of vulgarity, displayed a fresh surgical scar to startled members of the press.

Johnson has also been hurt by his reputation as a political operator who lied to the public throughout his career and made himself rich during the 1940s and '50s by exploiting his connections at the Federal Communications Commission to develop lucrative radio and television properties. Stories of Johnson's wheeling and dealing are legion. One of my favorites concerns a visit Johnson made to former president Harry S. Truman's home in Independence, Missouri, in the fall of 1968. "Harry," Johnson said, "you and Bess are getting on in years. You ought to have an Army medical corpsman living with you in this big old house."

"Really, Lyndon, can I have that?" Truman asked. "Of course, you can. You're an ex-president of the United States. I'll arrange it," Johnson replied.

After LBJ left the White House in 1969, a reporter caught up with him one day on the banks of the Pedernales. "Is it true that you have an Army medical corpsman living here on the ranch with you?" the journalist asked. "Of course it's true," Johnson said. "Harry Truman has one."

A backlash against Johnson's Great Society social programs has also taken its toll. As journalist Nicholas Lemann wrote not long ago in the *Atlantic* (December 1988): "There is a widespread perception that the federal government's efforts to help the poor during the 1960s were almost unlimited; that despite them poverty became more severe, not less; and that the reason poverty increased is that all those government programs backfired and left their intended beneficiaries worse off. The truth is that the percentage of poor Americans went down substantially in the 1960s." Nevertheless, it is the negative perception rather than the positive reality of the War on Poverty that shapes the public view of LBJ.

The few Johnson biographies that have appeared since he left the White House have sent his already tarnished reputation into a free fall. I think here particularly of Dugger's *The Politician* (1982) and the first two volumes of Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (1982 and 1990) as well as *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (1988), the recollections of Richard

Goodwin, a Kennedy-Johnson aide. Goodwin depicts Johnson as an emotionally unstable personality, so "paranoid" about Vietnam critics that Goodwin consulted a psychiatrist and considered public disclosure of Johnson's state of mind. In his bestselling books, Robert Caro has portrayed Johnson as an unprincipled scoundrel—a self-serving, deceitful, power-hungry opportunist. Caro writes of LBJ's "hunger for power... not to improve the lives of others, but to manipulate and dominate them.... It was a hunger so fierce and consuming that no consideration of morality or ethics, no cost to himself—or to anyone else—could stand before it." Johnson had, Caro says, "a seemingly bottomless capacity for deceit, deception, and betrayal."

It is instructive to compare the post-presidential reputations of Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson. Unlike LBJ, Nixon has won a measure of public redemption. His dogged 17-year campaign to convince Americans (yet again) of his virtues partly explains this. The waning of the Cold War and the triumph of detente, with which the Nixon presidency is closely associated, has also served Nixon's cause. But his resignation from the White House in 1974, which is generally seen as the worst public humiliation ever suffered by an American president, may have played the largest part. Nixon's implicit admission of fallibility has won him a degree of public forgiveness. By contrast, Johnson did not live long enough—for only four years after he left office—to work at repairing his reputation. He never acknowledged any failing—never "'fessed up" or asked forgiveness for mistakes or wrongdoing. It is a great irony of history that Nixon, the Republican who identified with and sought to serve the interests of the well-to-do, has come to be seen as a sort of fallible common man. But Johnson, the populist who tried to help the disadvantaged, is remembered as a man apart from the people, a kind of arrogant potentate too imperious to acknowledge weaknesses common to ordinary men.

The popular perception of Johnson is captured in a drawing that accompanied Lemann's *Atlantic* article. Dressed in a blue Napoleonic uniform with gold epaulettes, a red sash, medals, and saber at his side, Johnson sits at a dressing table smiling at himself in a mirror that reflects not only his image but that of two black cherubs holding a halo above his head. A gold pocket watch and a photograph of an avuncular FDR are on the dressing table. It is a portrait of a totally self-absorbed, grandiose character intent only on his image in history.

That caricature has a basis in fact. Johnson needed to hold center stage and to advance himself at every turn. Reared in poverty in the remote Texas Hill Country, Johnson was driven by the power of an ambition that was, as somebody once said of Abraham Lincoln's, "a little engine that knew no rest." It helped carry him to the U.S. House of Representatives (1937) and Senate (1948), the vice presidency, and the White House. But ambition alone did not give LBJ the wherewithal, the inner confidence, to imagine himself in Congress or the Oval Office. In one of the many paradoxes that shaped his life, Johnson was not simply an impoverished farm boy who made good. He also possessed a family history—his ancestors included congressmen, a governor, prominent Baptists, a college president, and a father who was a state legislator—which gave initial stirrings to his dreams. Although he suffered painful self-doubts throughout his life, he considered his heritage a birthright to govern and lead. As an elementary school teacher in Cotulla, Texas, as director of the New Deal's National Youth Administration in Texas between 1935 and 1937, and during his 32 years in Washington, Johnson could be utterly self-serving,

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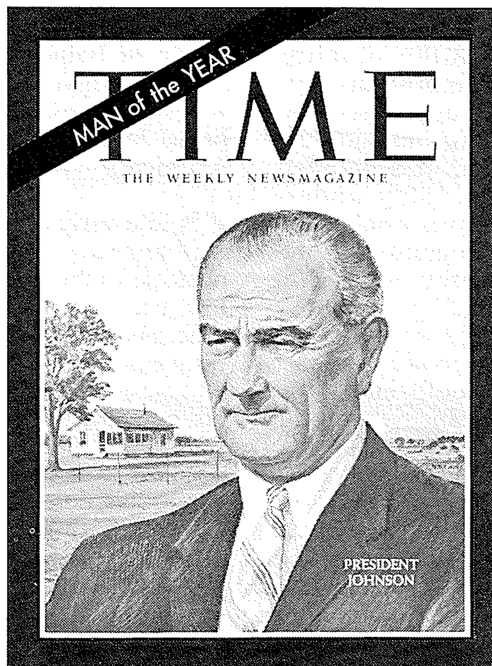
but he also had a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*, which made him eager to improve the lot of the less fortunate. While acknowledging LBJ's many flaws, Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles once wrote that his "almost manic vitality was purposefully, intelligently, compassionately used. He could turn mean and sour, but... he had a lot more than himself and his place in history on his mind."

Even so, Johnson was, as former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson once told him to his face, "not a very likeable person." He needed to be the best, to outdo everybody. As Nicolas Lemann writes, Johnson "wanted to set world records in politics, as a star athlete would in sports. 'Get those coonskins up on the wall,' he would tell people around him." Above all, he wanted to surpass his mentor FDR by passing more reform legislation and winning a bigger electoral victory than Roosevelt had in 1936. When he was presented with a set of presidents' State of the Union messages, Johnson said: "You know, my recent State of the Union Address was shorter than Mr. Kennedy's 1963 speech. But everyone thought mine was longer, because I was interrupted for applause more often than he was."



Better days: after LBJ won a 61 percent landslide over Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964.

Johnson's driven, overbearing personality is, however, only part of the story. *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker remembers Johnson as "a human puzzle so complicated nobody could ever understand it." Baker, who covered the Senate for the *Times* during the late 1950s, when Johnson was majority leader, describes the upper house as filled with a cast of remarkable men. Yet, all of them, "from a writer's point of view... were long magazine pieces who might at best, with plenty of coffee and cigarettes, be stretched into thin campaign biographies. Johnson was the exception. Johnson was a flesh-and-blood, three-volume biography, and if you ever got it written you'd discover after publication that you'd missed the key point or got the interpretation completely wrong and needed a fourth volume to set things right. He was a character out of a Russian novel, one of those human complications that filled the imagination of Dostoevsky, a storm of warring human instincts: sinner and saint, buffoon and statesman, cynic and sentimentalist, a man torn between hungers for immortality and self-destruction."

Not only have we been content with one- and two-dimensional portraits of LBJ, we have also focused too much attention on Johnson himself, at the expense of larger historical themes. I am not suggesting that a Johnson biography relegate the man to a secondary role that neglects his colorful personality and the ways in which he used the sheer force of his character to advance himself and his ends. But when unsavory revelations are related with little emphasis on Johnson's contribution to the transformation of America between 1937 and 1969, we are left with an ahistorical portrait of a self-serving man who made little difference in recent American history.

When Charles de Gaulle came to the United States for John Kennedy's funeral in 1963, he made an interesting comparison. This man Kennedy, de Gaulle said, was the country's mask. But this man Johnson was the country's real face. De

Gaulle's observation has much to recommend it: Johnson is an excellent vehicle for studying America since the 1930s.

For example, Johnson's part in the "nationalization" of the South and the West, as they were integrated into the national economy, is a largely neglected piece of American history. Johnson was a materialist who saw the economic transformation of both sections as essential to their well-being. In this he was hardly typical. Economist Gavin Wright argues in *Old South, New South* (1986) that most southern congressmen and senators in the 1930s were more concerned with maintaining "the separateness of the southern labor market . . . than with bringing federal money into their districts" and states. Yet, Wright says, the basis for maintaining the South's economic isolation or separation was already being thoroughly undermined. "Under the incentives established by the New Deal farm programs, plantation tenancy was disintegrating, and sharecroppers were being turned into footloose wage laborers. At the same time, federal labor policies had sharply raised the level of base wage rates in the South, effectively blocking the low-wage expansion path for regional industry."

Johnson supported all of the New Deal legislation and agencies, from the Works Progress Administration to the Farm Security Administration, that could speed the transformation of southern economic life. Through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Public Works Administration, and the Rural Electrification Administration, among others, the New Deal raised living standards and transformed the lives of southerners and westerners. "We no longer farm in Mississippi cotton fields," novelist William Faulkner said. "We farm now in Washington corridors and congressional committee rooms." No one in the House or Senate was a more active farmer than Johnson. By the early 1950s, partly because of Johnson's efforts, south-central Texas had been transformed into a more prosperous region by dams built on the Lower Colorado River; Texas had more military airfields than any other state in the Union; and the Sunbelt was on the verge of becoming the dominant political and economic force in American life.

Yet Johnson's most important role may have been as a pioneer in reaching out to the disadvantaged and combatting racial segregation. For all his self-serving ambition, Johnson never forgot his childhood poverty. He did not become involved in these efforts simply when it became politically expedient, during the late 1950s and early 1960s. As early as the 1930s, he exerted himself consistently on behalf of black, Hispanic, and poor white Texans, and he secretly aided Jewish refugees from the Nazis to enter the United States. (Sensitized to the issue by the plight of the Austrian Jewish musician Erich Leinsdorf, whom he helped to obtain a visa in 1938, Johnson began working with a prominent Jewish businessman from Austin, Texas, to bring Jews out of Europe through Latin America.)

Quite early in his political career, Johnson saw racial discrimination as an obstacle to the South's economic progress. According to Harry McPherson, a longtime LBJ aide, Johnson was "your typical southern liberal who would have done a lot more in the field of civil rights early in his career had it been possible; but the very naked reality was that if you did take a position . . . it was almost certain that you would be defeated . . . by a bigot . . . .But Johnson was one of those men who early on disbelieved in the southern racial system and who thought that salvation for the South lay through economic progress for everybody." As head of the Texas National Youth Administration and afterward as a congressman, Johnson kept trying to assure that a share of New Deal student grants, job training, agricultural subsidies, and low-rent public housing went to blacks—at a time when blacks in Texas were in no position to reward him with votes. And after the mid-1950s, when southern blacks began challenging segregation, Johnson believed that no southerner would win the White House without confronting the civil rights question.

Johnson also believed that the race question diverted the South from attending to its economic and educational woes. As Johnson later told his biographer Doris Kearns, author of *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (1976), the South during

the 1940s and '50s was "on the verge of new possibilities for rapid expansion. However, the realization of these possibilities was far from certain... Among the most significant determinants of southern prospects would be the willingness of southern leadership to accept the inevitability of some progress on civil rights and get on with the business of the future."

In 1957, three years after he became majority leader, Johnson pushed a largely symbolic civil rights bill through the Senate. Narrowly focused on voting rights, with no effective enforcement provisions, the bill was denounced as a sham. Eleanor Roosevelt called it "mere fakery." Prominent black leaders Ralph Bunche and A. Phillip Randolph thought it would have been better to have no bill. The liberal Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois disdainfully remarked that the bill "was like soup made from the shadow of a crow which had starved to death." Nevertheless, many civil rights proponents considered the bill a significant advance for the time. Former FDR adviser Benjamin Cohen called it "a great, historic event... the first time in over three quarters of a century [since 1875] that the Senate has taken positive action on a civil rights bill." Black civil rights leader Bayard Rustin thought it was a weak law that nevertheless would "establish a very important precedent." Rustin was right. The 1957 law was more symbol than substance, but it worked a radical change in legislative behavior. Effective civil rights legislation was no longer out of reach. The "mere fakery" of 1957 led directly to great victories seven years later: the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Likewise, Johnson's successful advocacy of Medicare and Medicaid as president rested upon precedents for federal health care for the aged and indigent that he helped lay earlier in his career. In 1956, over the objections of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Johnson drove a landmark Social Security bill through the Senate. By providing benefits to totally disabled persons at the age of 50 instead of 65, the bill began the transformation of Social Security, as Eisenhower complained, from a retirement plan to "a vehicle for broad social welfare schemes." "I happen to believe passionately in Social Security," Johnson wrote to labor leader George Meany. "I went through the Depression and saw what it did to our older people. A country that is as great as ours does little enough for them." Spending four 12-hour days on the floor of the Senate in the closing phase of the battle, Johnson won passage of the bill by 47 to 45. The crucial vote came from conservative Nevada Republican George (Molly) Malone, whom Johnson promised a tungsten subsidy that aided Nevada interests and boosted Malone's chances of reelection in 1958.

Passage of these early Social Security and civil rights reforms partly rested on Johnson's powerful hold on the Senate when he was majority leader—a hold that nobody since has rivaled. Johnson made personal persuasion into a science. The famous Johnson Treatment, as journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak called it, consisted of "supplication, accusation, cajolery, exuberance, scorn, tears, complaint, the hint of threat. It was all these together. It ran the gamut of human emotions. Its velocity was breathtaking, and it was all in one direction.... 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." Great preparation, however, preceded the Treatment. Johnson told reporter Sarah McClendon that he had "a complete study made of the life of each Senator. He knew everything about them, their weaknesses, their good and bad things. And this he needed, he felt, to work with those men and to get along with them." Clark Clifford, adviser to Democratic presidents since Truman, said that Johnson "played the Democrats in the Senate the way a skilled harpist would play a harp. He knew which string to pull at a particular time and how he could bring a fellow along."

In the White House, Johnson put all his political talent and drive for personal greatness in the service of a prosperous, progressive America, a Great Society liberated from prejudice and poverty. Declar-

ing "an unconditional war on poverty," Johnson launched in 1964 what one journalist called "the most bellicose program of social reform in history." In 1964–65, the president drove a host of reform bills through Congress that, in the words of one Washington reporter, "brought to a harvest a generation's backlog of ideas and social legislation." The list of new laws and agencies is long: Medicaid, Medicare, federal aid to education, Head Start, the Job Corps, Model Cities, pollution control, federal aid to the arts, and many more.

Diametrically opposed claims about the consequences of Johnson's Great Society programs have been a point of departure for evaluating his presidency. Though Johnson's advocates freely admit that his Great Society was "underfunded and oversold" and that part of what his administration did fell short of stated goals or failed completely, they nevertheless claim victory. They assert that between 1961 and 1969, as a result of a substantial tax cut in 1964 and the benefits extended to needy Americans, the nation's 22 percent poverty rate was cut in half. Charles Murray, the author of *Losing Ground* (1984), and other critics of the Great Society have argued that the programs "not only did not accomplish what they set out to do but often made things worse." Whatever economic gains the poor made, these critics say, came much less from the Great Society than from economic growth fueled by spending on the Vietnam War. The arguments on both sides represent a bit of overkill. The truth about the Great Society probably lies somewhere between.

The growing cost of the Vietnam War is often blamed for the demise of Great Society programs, but shrinking political support also hurt.

However one assesses Johnson's political effectiveness and vision in domestic affairs, all was overshadowed by his destructive limitations in foreign affairs. His shortcomings in dealing with foreign policy, notoriously Vietnam, were not the result of parochialism or ignorance of the world. Johnson spent over two decades involved in defense and foreign policy questions, as a member of the House Naval Affairs and the House and Senate Armed Services committees. In 1960, President Eisenhower told the *New York Times* that he could not understand how the Democrats could consider nominating an "inexperienced boy" like Kennedy, "or for that matter [Stuart] Symington or [Adlai E.] Stevenson. Lyndon Johnson . . . would be the best Democrat of them all as president from the viewpoint of responsible management of national affairs."

Why then did Johnson commit America's power and prestige in a risky land war in Asia? Like Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and most of America's foreign policy leaders after World War II, Johnson believed that communism threatened the American way of life and that any communist gain anywhere weakened the long-term U.S. effort to defeat the worldwide communist menace. And with the memory of the Allies' appeasement of Hitler still strong, Johnson and other American leaders saw resistance to communist aggression in Vietnam as a way to prevent a larger war. Withdrawal from Vietnam or a compromise that ended in a communist victory, Johnson also worried, would produce a new round of McCarthyism, the defeat of his administration, and an end to Great Society reforms.

The irony, of course, is that American involvement in Vietnam helped bring about exactly what it was supposed to prevent: It destroyed Johnson's presidency and his efforts to build a Great Society. Unanticipated problems in Vietnam went far to undermine Johnson. But the "credibil-

ity gap"—the public loss of confidence in his sincerity—played as large a part in Johnson's political demise. In dealing with Vietnam, Johnson forgot the lesson that Roosevelt had applied before Pearl Harbor: To maintain a policy abroad you need a stable consensus at home. Had Johnson allowed a national debate to occur and built a solid consensus for escalation, he could have blunted some of the criticism that Vietnam was essentially "Lyndon Johnson's war." More important, a less imperious or more democratic American involvement in Vietnam would have given Johnson leeway to withdraw gracefully from the conflict.

The question is: Why did so astute a politician so badly mismanage the domestic politics of Vietnam? The answer lies partly in Johnson's pre-presidential experience with foreign affairs. Presidents, and congressional leaders too, had often been high-handed and imperious when they were convinced they were serving the national interest abroad. Johnson, like most of his Capitol Hill counterparts, supported Truman's unilateral decision to fight in Korea, the Eisenhower administration's secret operations in Iran and Guatemala in 1953–54, and congressional resolutions in 1955 and 1957 endorsing executive freedom to defend Formosa and the Middle East. Johnson's Tonkin Gulf resolution of 1964 partly rested on these precedents of the Truman-Eisenhower era.

Johnson's affinity for secret machinations in foreign affairs also grew out of a life-long practice of cutting political corners. Johnson viewed politics as a dirty business in which only the manipulative succeeded. He did not come to this simply out of some flaw in his character. He learned it in the rough-and-tumble Texas politics of the first half of the 20th century. And almost every political figure Johnson admired or loathed, both in Texas and in Washington—Alvin Wirtz, Maury Maverick, Sr., Sam Rayburn, "Pappy" O'Daniel, Coke Stevenson, Thomas G. Corcoran, Harold Ickes, FDR, Harry Truman, Herbert Brownell, and Joseph, John, and Robert Kennedy—was certainly, in Johnson's view, a master manipulator. Johnson, for example, knew how FDR, Truman, and Eisenhower used the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to serve their political ends. In 1941, Roosevelt wanted the FBI to prevent O'Daniel supporters from changing votes in east Texas and stealing the Senate seat won by LBJ. The FBI arrived on the scene too late to make a difference. (Johnson refused to take legal action against O'Daniel for fear that it would lead to revelations about his own corrupt campaign practices.) Johnson knew that Truman had the FBI wiretap Tommy Corcoran's telephones when the former FDR aide and Democratic kingpin wanted to replace Truman with Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas as the Democratic presidential candidate in 1948. Johnson also knew that the Eisenhower administration had the FBI open a derogatory file on him in 1956 and even probe his tax returns. Johnson himself received a little help from J. Edgar Hoover in his own 1954 Senate reelection campaign.

Experience showed Johnson that secret operations were as much a part of politics as democratic discussions and public statements of policy. Consequently, when he believed that quick action for the good of the country was necessary in the Dominican Republic (in 1965) and Vietnam, he had few qualms about misleading the Congress and the public.

The coupling of Johnson and Vietnam goes a long way toward accounting for his current low standing in the polls. The animus toward Johnson may satisfy a continuing sense of moral revulsion toward the war. Historical understanding is, however, another matter. A more balanced assessment of Johnson must include his genuine contributions to American society during his long political career. Johnson was a figure whose election campaigns, accumulation of wealth, and manipulation of power in both domestic and foreign affairs say much about America during the four decades after 1930. We need to see his life not as a chance to indulge our sense of moral superiority but as a way to gain an understanding of many subjects crucial to this country's past and future.

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