

The American presidency—America itself—has never been the same since Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908–73) assumed the office in November 1963. Thirty-seven years later, the national agenda is still significantly defined by issues he put there with the Great Society, civil rights legislation, and Vietnam. Even his critics agree that Johnson was one of our most complex and fascinating presidents. Here, historian Lewis L. Gould details the emerging revisionist view of his presidency, and two top LBJ aides recall the White House years.

The Revised LBJ

by Lewis L. Gould

Last December, George McGovern suggested in the *New York Times* that, apart from Woodrow Wilson and the two Roosevelts, Lyndon Johnson was “the greatest president since Abraham Lincoln.” It was a startling change of heart for the former senator from South Dakota, once a fervent opponent of LBJ’s Vietnam policies and the Democratic Party’s antiwar presidential nominee in 1972. McGovern’s reappraisal followed on the heels of another surprising outburst of revisionism by a long-time LBJ critic. At the Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas, Harvard University economist (and Kennedy intimate) John Kenneth Galbraith declared, “Next only to [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, and in some respects more so, Lyndon Johnson was the most effective advocate of humane social change in the United States in this century.” While not seeking to minimize the tragedy of the Vietnam War, Galbraith lamented that its overwhelming legacy had relegated Johnson’s Great Society to “the historical backwater.”

After 30 years in presidential purgatory, LBJ and his historical fortunes are in

ascendancy. Vice President Al Gore has listed Johnson among the presidents he most admires. *Boston Globe* columnist David Shribman calls LBJ “the hottest political figure in the nation right now.” In the academy and the political arena alike, there is renewed interest in the large visions that drove Lyndon Johnson and a fresh desire to modify the historical picture of his presidency.

Johnson left the White House in January 1969 a repudiated chief executive, his reputation seemingly in permanent eclipse. The disaster of Vietnam, the failure of the War on Poverty, and, later, the decline of the Democratic Party all appeared to flow from his mistakes as president. He was widely condemned for deceiving the American people about Vietnam. His Great Society became the prime target of critics of big government. The martyred John F. Kennedy’s stock stayed high, but in public opinion polls Johnson fell to the bottom rank among postwar presidents.

Johnson’s reputation probably bottomed out in the early 1980s with the onset of journalist Robert Caro’s extended biographi-



LBJ enjoyed the halcyon days after the 1964 election at his Texas ranch.

cal—and polemical—assessment of his life and times. Excerpted amid great fanfare in national magazines, the first two volumes, *The Path to Power* (1982) and *Means of Ascent* (1990), painted a highly unflattering picture of Johnson’s rise from congressional aide to New Deal congressman to U.S. senator. Caro portrayed LBJ as “unencumbered by even the slightest excess weight of ideology, of philosophy, of principles, of beliefs.” He was a man of “utter ruthlessness and a seemingly bottomless capacity for deceit, deception, and betrayal.”

But Caro’s flawed portrait of the young LBJ—and particularly his use of the racist and reactionary former Texas governor, Coke Stevenson, as a virtuous foil to the villainous young Johnson—redounded in some ways to the president’s favor. It stimulated other Johnson researchers to craft a more balanced, nuanced portrait of the man,

bringing forth Paul Conkin’s *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Johnson* (1987), Robert Dallek’s *Lone Star Rising* (1991) and *Flawed Giant* (1998), and Irwin and Debi Unger’s *LBJ: A Life* (1999). Dallek, for example, calls LBJ’s presidency “a story of great achievements and terrible failure, of lasting gains and unforgettable losses.” Johnson, Dallek continues, “faithfully reflects the country’s greatness and limitations.”

One essential element of the scholarly reappraisal of LBJ has been decades in the making. Despite his well-deserved reputation for secretiveness and his hatred of leaks, Johnson decided on a policy of openness for the records of his administration when

he set up his presidential library. The Nixons tried for years in court to cordon off large parts of the historical record, and the Kennedys have been slow in opening their files. But the decision to lay many of the facts of Johnson’s presidency in plain view has served his historical image well. It has given scholars new insights into the inner workings of his presidency and stimulated fresh thinking about Johnson and his era.*

The 1993 decision to release the audiotapes of Johnson White House conversations

*Much of the new scholarship appears in historical journals. L. Patrick Hughes’s “To Meet Fire with Fire: Lyndon Johnson, Tom Miller, and Home-Front Politics” in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (April 1997) is representative of the more balanced appraisals of LBJ’s formative years. Many scholarly articles are collected in the three volumes of *The Johnson Years* (1981–1994), edited by University of Texas historian Robert Divine.

gave another lift to LBJ's standing among scholars and researchers. Historian Michael Beschloss's *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964* (1997) revealed the style and character of a complex president in action. Beschloss called the recordings "a vital new means of understanding Lyndon Johnson, who, as we have known from a rich offering of journalism, memoir, history, and biography, was such a different person in private from in public."

Whatever the propriety of recording presidential conversations in the first place, the essential Johnson, master of "The Treatment," was now on full display in hours and hours of conversations with congressional leaders, government officials, and others. LBJ's voice—cajoling, threatening, persuading, and imploring—reintroduced an inescapably human note into the historical record. While his famous character flaws emerge in abundance from the tapes, it is more difficult to demonize a man who seems so alive in the room with listeners. The tapes also give nuance and shading to historical events—Johnson's commitment to passage of the civil rights laws, his doubts about Vietnam—that work to Johnson's benefit.

None of this might have made much difference if the course of history itself had not cast LBJ's record in a new light. After the West's victory in the Cold War, Vietnam no longer seemed a symbol of American overconfidence in fighting communism. The war had proved to be neither a harbinger of nuclear confrontation nor, in the clearer moral light at the end of the Cold War, damning evidence of American moral equivalence with the Cold War enemy. (A recent book that takes a fuller look at LBJ's foreign affairs legacy is *The Foreign Policies of Lyndon Johnson: Beyond Vietnam* [1999], edited by H. W. Brands.) The stunning victory over Iraq in the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91, meanwhile, has taken some of the edge off the humiliation of the American defeat in Vietnam.

Historians continue to indict Johnson's

Vietnam policies. The conventional view—that Vietnam was "Lyndon Johnson's War," a product of his commitment to the premises of containment and his unwillingness to see Vietnam go the way of China—still commands adherents. Frank Logevall, in his recent book *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (1999), makes the case that Kennedy and Johnson, along with their foreign policy advisers, were not reluctant to escalate American involvement during 1963–65 but did so deliberately, and also turned away peace offers. But some of the newest scholarship shifts the emphasis away from Johnson (albeit without lessening criticism of his leadership), pointing to relentless pressures exerted by the U.S. military and intelligence communities for wider American intervention. John Kenneth Galbraith cited a new book presenting some of this evidence, David Kaiser's *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (2000), in arguing for a fresh look at Johnson's legacy. Other scholarship provides needed perspective on LBJ's performance as commander in chief by highlighting the continuity of errors and failures from the administrations of Eisenhower to Nixon.

History has also brought renewed appreciation of Johnson's courageous approach to America's continuing racial divide. In 1992, when President George Bush seemed slow to react to the violence that erupted in Los Angeles—a clear echo of the long, hot summers of the 1960s—many commentators went back to LBJ's pivotal 1965 civil rights address at Howard University: "It is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity," Johnson said. "All our citizens must have the ability to walk through these gates."

No president had spoken words like that—and backed them with action—in a quarter of a century. The *Boston Globe's* David Shribman recently seized on Johnson's largeness of vision to explain the current reconsideration of LBJ: At a time when the presidency seems small,

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Democrats, “and perhaps the nation,” are yearning for “a president with big dreams, big plans and a big sense of self-confidence.”

Johnson, moreover, was able to deliver, enacting not only the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but the Medicare bill, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Immigration Act, and the Economic Opportunity Act. (*Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society* [1998], by John A. Andrew III, offers a balanced appraisal of Johnson’s domestic record.) He was far more effective with Congress than either fellow southern Democrat Jimmy Carter or titular southerner George Bush.

Only one post-LBJ president has come close to matching Johnson’s ambition, and his failures have played a significant role in raising LBJ’s standing. In Bill Clinton the nation found a southern politician whose appetites exceeded Johnson’s—and then some. The Lewinsky scandal and Clinton’s impeachment made Johnson’s personal peccadilloes, from summoning staff members to confer while he was seated on the john to careening around the LBJ ranch in his limousine with a beer in hand, seem almost quaint in their relative innocence and discretion. The Texas twang and Hill Country manner that made Johnson seem boorish and vulgar now seem at least to have the virtue of not being slick. Far more important, of course, the 36th president looks like a much larger *political* leader when measured against the 42nd. Where Johnson risked a great deal to pursue great purposes such as the War on Poverty, the Great Society, and civil rights, knowingly jeopardizing not only his own political welfare but the future of his party, Clinton and his adviser Dick Morris used their political capital for small causes and petty political advantage.



Johnson revisionism, however, has inherent limits. The Vietnam War can be put in perspective, but it will not go away. As the Democratic Party looks back nostalgically to the Johnson years, it should also remember that LBJ’s failings as a party politician produced many of the institutional weaknesses and difficulties that have plagued it since the 1960s. At a time when

Republicans were building a broader electoral base by reaching out to small donors, for example, Johnson relied on big campaign contributors, letting the electoral grassroots of the Democrats wither. The party was also hurt by the oddly devout insistence of this most political man that a president must remain above purely partisan politics.

Yet Johnson will continue to fascinate scholars. Wherever the biographer or scholar looks to understand major developments in the United States during the 20th century—from civil rights to the emergence of the Sunbelt, from the world role of the United States to the shape of the political parties—there is Lyndon Johnson, posed squarely in the midst of four significant decades. Whenever one becomes convinced that Johnson was truly a great man and a significant president, a reminder of his pettiness and lack of grace provides a rude shock. But when one is sure that he was no more than a caricature of everything boorish and tawdry in a Texas male, there is a reminder of his noble stands on civil rights and the disadvantaged, and then he seems the great president he so desperately wanted to be. LBJ never believed that historians would give him a fair shake, but he might have been pleased to know that he has achieved the status of an enigma, all but certain to be the subject of endless speculation and revision. □

Two of Lyndon Johnson's closest aides, Harry McPherson and Jack Valenti, answered questions from an invited audience at a Wilson Center Director's Forum last fall. They were introduced by the Center's Director, Lee H. Hamilton.

Achilles in the White House

A discussion with Harry McPherson and Jack Valenti

Lee Hamilton: I'm going to take the privilege of asking the first question. I'd just like to know how it was to work for Lyndon Johnson. I knew Johnson very casually. He came to campaign for me in 1966, when I was running for reelection early in my career as a congressman. He came to the post office in Jeffersonville, Indiana. Not one of the major events of his administration, but it was a very important event for me. What was it like to work for Lyndon Johnson, one of the legendary figures of American history?

Jack Valenti: Working for Lyndon Johnson was like living on the end of a runway. He was the most formidable political leader I have ever known. I wrote a book about Lyndon Johnson called *A Very Human President*, published by W. W. Norton. I wanted to call the book "Achilles in the White House." I thought, of all the creations in literature, both fictional and mythical, the one who most mesmerizes me is Achilles, the leading figure in *The Iliad*. His anger and his pride, his commanding

presence, fill that story, even when he's off-stage. It was his high energy and his leadership qualities that sometimes led him to an excess of flawed action.

Johnson more closely resembles Achilles than any other political figure I know. Almost anything you can say about Johnson had a tinge of truth in it, good or bad. He was vengeful and bullying. He was kind and thoughtful. He was petty and sometimes duplicitous. But he was also visionary, energetic, a man whose goal it was to be the greatest American president, doing the greatest amount of good for the American nation. He got caught up in a war whose commitments he could not break, whose tenacity he simply did not perceive, and whose end, with all of his efforts, he could not achieve. I would sum him up with the words of the novelist Ralph Ellison, who, two nights before Johnson left office, said to him, "Mr. President, because of Vietnam, you're going to have to settle just for being the greatest American president we've ever had on behalf of the under-



White House aide Jack Valenti had the president's ear for a private conversation in 1965.

educated young, the poor and the old, the sick and the black. But, Mr. President, that's not a bad epitaph."

Harry McPherson: I have been thinking about Johnson a lot because I've been reading presidential historian Michael Beschloss's book *Taking Charge*, and listening occasionally to the Johnson tapes on C-SPAN radio. In the tapes, one can hear LBJ at his best and at his most tedious, because, despite the fact that he was everything Jack said on the side of high powered and fully engaged, sometimes he could be boring as hell. You'd just want to get away from him, because he just talked and talked. He was usually ventilating. Poor Jack, in his year and a half at the White House, probably had to take more of it than I did. You can hear that on these tapes. You also hear a lot of other things.

The tapes that have been released so far come from the first year of Johnson's presidency, a year when I think it is not unfair to say that Lyndon Johnson earned the everlasting thanks of the American people

for the character of his response to suddenly being thrown into the presidency in the wake of an assassination, in Johnson's home state, of a very popular man. Imagine the weight, the burden, the danger that rested on Lyndon Johnson, starting November 22, 1963, and for the next year, and then look at what he did. The best image for this that I've been able to come up with is of a man suddenly thrown into the pilot house of a boat that is in a storm and is just spinning around, with the wheel out of control. The captain is dead. And the man thrust into this terrible situation grabs the wheel and brings that vessel back into the course it should be on—to the everlasting relief of its crew. That's what Johnson did. Even if you hated Johnson, as Barry Goldwater and his allies did in that race in 1964, even if you held him in what Speaker of the House John McCormack once called "minimum high regard," as some people did, you had to say about that performance that it was quite extraordinary.

What you hear on these tapes, and what really brings Johnson back to me, is



On November 22, 1963, Federal District Judge Sarah T. Hughes administered the oath of office to Lyndon Johnson aboard Air Force One at Love Field in Dallas.

a tirelessly insistent person. Lyndon Johnson never had a conversation with anybody that was purposeless. He was intending to get something out of everyone he talked to. You'd just have this feeling of this constant pushing on people, whether it's the staff or a senator or Jacqueline Kennedy. There is something that he was conveying with Mrs. Kennedy. It's a tremendous need to convey affection and to let her know that anything she wants is hers to command. You'd have to say that one of his purposes was to earn her support, so that she would tell those around her that Lyndon Johnson was being good about things.

On one of the tapes, Johnson is trying to pass the antipoverty bill. The vote is coming up in the House in a couple of days. He's got a lot of guys who are giv-

ing him grief. He calls Secretary of Defense Bob McNamara.

"Bob! I'm having a really hard time with some of these people on this poverty bill. One of them is a fellow from Abilene, Texas. It's a very *Christian* town [I've never heard that word used in quite that way!], but it has a really mean fellow for a congressman, Omar Burleson. You've got some training planes there in a little base."

McNamara says, "Uh-huh."

Johnson says, "Well, you do. You've got some training planes there. Now, I want you to get the word to this fellow Burleson that you're thinking about moving those planes out of there."

McNamara says, "Okay."

Johnson says, "Then you've got a base over in Shreveport, Barksdale. You've got

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a lot of B-52s over there. If there's anybody meaner than Omar Burleson, it's a fellow named Joe Waggoner. Oh, he's mean! And they're really hurting me on this poverty bill. Now you get the word to him that you're going to have to move those B-52s up to Kansas. When they call you about these this afternoon, you tell them that they better talk to the president about it, because he sure is worried about that poverty bill."

You could tell that McNamara was dumbfounded. McNamara, like most of us, thought of politicians as people who give you something, if you vote with them. *Senator, you give me the vote on that and we're going to think very well of putting that base in there.* Here was somebody saying, *If that SOB doesn't give me a vote, if he gives me trouble on this poverty bill, we're going to take his air force away from him.*

That was classic LBJ. The tapes are worth hearing. Sometimes you want to turn them off and listen to the opera, but they are pretty good opera in themselves.

Question: LBJ was such a strong personality, I wonder whether either of you have discovered over the years that you adopted any of his habits, or tactics, or techniques?

Valenti: The answer is yes, which is sometimes a source of consternation, dismay, and frustration to the people who work around me. What LBJ did (as my wife put it) was, he stretched you. He made you leap beyond the perimeters of what you thought were the outer boundaries of your ability. You found yourself capable of doing things that you never thought you could achieve before. He was merciless in cross-examining you, if you took issue with him, because he always wanted to know whether you were posturing, or plying him with blandishments, or whether you really had something to say. While he never said, "That's good, I'm going to follow your advice," sometimes you would find, if you stood up under that merciless, inex-

haustible cross-examination, maybe a day or two later, you'd find him saying or doing what you had urged him to do, or not to do.

A second thing is that Johnson did not believe in accomplishing 99 percent of a job. He wanted 105 and 110 percent. And he didn't want excuses.

The third thing was details. He asked endless questions. If you were going to go see Senator William Fulbright, or you were going over to talk to Vice President Hubert Humphrey about something, or Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen, he would question you in exceeding depth about what you were going to ask—questions you had never thought of before.

The result of all of that is that I know I'm an ogre to people with whom I work, because I've found myself, without even realizing it, doing my LBJ bit. But it has allowed me to enjoy some minor triumphs and to avoid some gratuitous blunders.

Johnson had something that I think most public figures don't have. He had conviction. A man or woman without conviction is going to be right only by accident. Conviction means that you do not take "no" for an answer. You plunge into rapid waters, where others have drowned, but that tide will take you in a direction that you want to go. Therefore, you do it. You may drown. But on the other hand, if you survive the falls at the end, you will have done something noble and perhaps in the long-range interests of this country.

McPherson: I think of two things that I've tried to learn from him. One was to think a little beyond the next hour. Johnson was the smartest man I ever knew, not necessarily the wisest, but the smartest. He had an amazing ability to see out beyond the next couple of steps. He anticipated failure by people. When people told him they would do things, he anticipated they probably wouldn't. So he figured something else he had to have out there when they failed. He was



Harry McPherson, right, at work in the Oval Office with LBJ, “the smartest man I ever knew.”

constantly thinking ahead. That was one of his great powers.

The second thing I got from Johnson is a question I have asked of many people in my law firm over the years. I once went in to Johnson, just full of myself because I had really understood some particularly recondite problem. I said, “Mr. President, if you do this, you’re going to fall off the cliff over here.” I explained why. “And if you go that way, it’s even worse. And even if you go down the center. . . .” I was very proud of myself for having analyzed these three, very unattractive choices. When I finished, I just sat there, expecting to get an “A” on my paper. Johnson looked at me, not maliciously, and said: “Therefore?”

Therefore? That’s very important to ask, particularly, I find, of young lawyers just out of law school, because they just love to get into the cases and show a client how he’s in a box and there’s no way for him to get where he wants to get. I don’t know how many of you have heard people say about lawyers, They

just tell you what you can’t do; they don’t tell you how to get there. Lyndon Johnson’s “Therefore?” was a good question for me to put to them.

Question: I wonder if you could describe dealing with the shock of the Kennedy assassination during the early days of the Johnson administration.

Valenti: I was present at the unhappy creation. My advertising agency, Weekley & Valenti, by command of Lyndon Johnson, was handling the press on the ill-starred visit of the president and the vice president to Texas. Johnson had called me in early October and said, “I think this is a bad move by the president”—not because he thought it would be harmful, but because the Democratic Party in Texas at that time was in terrible discord. The governor, John Connally, and the senior senator, Ralph Yarborough, hated each other. They raised hatred to a new artistic level. Johnson just thought it was a bad time to be there. So I was with him in San

Antonio and Houston. Flew to Fort Worth, spent the night. On to Dallas. Then we were going to climax, November 22nd, in Austin, with a huge fundraising dinner.

When we landed in Dallas, I got in the motorcade, about six cars back. When we came around Dealey Plaza, I didn't hear the shot, but the car in front went from 10 miles an hour to 80, like A. J. Foyt was driving. I said, "I think the president is probably late for his speech at the Dallas Trade Mart." I told the driver to go over there as expeditiously as possible. We got to the Dallas Trade Mart and there were about 2,500 people, but no president. Then we knew that something was desperately wrong. A Secret Service man told me that the president had been shot, the governor had been shot. He got a deputy sheriff's car and herded me and Liz Carpenter [a Johnson aide], Pamela Turnure, who was Mrs. Kennedy's press secretary, and Evelyn Lincoln, the president's secretary, and took us to Parkland Hospital. There I'm wandering around outside a stainless steel door in the basement, that I was later told was the emergency operating room, where the dead, lifeless body of the 35th president was lying.

Cliff Carter [Johnson's chief political agent] came up to me and said, "The vice president wants to see you right now." There was just a beat of hesitation. Then he said, "The president is dead, you know." I started sobbing. He said, "Get hold of yourself. We've got to get to the vice president." We went to a room where Johnson had been sequestered. It was empty when I arrived there, except for one Secret Service man, whom we all knew, named Lem Johns. He said, "I'm to take you to Air Force One, Mr. Valenti. The vice president wants you."

We got into a police car. Air Force One, which was a 707 in those days, had been removed to a remote corner of the field. There were now two cordons of heavily armed and menacing-looking men guarding that plane. Even with a

Secret Service man, I had a problem getting on that airplane. When I got on, Johnson was sitting in the center of the plane, which was the presidential office. The forward of the plane was about 30 seats for press and staff. Aft of that office was the presidential bedroom. Then the galley, where the Secret Service men were. Johnson beckoned to me and said, "I want you on my staff. You're going to fly back with me on Air Force One." I had no idea what being "on his staff" meant. He didn't give me an alternative. His "therefore" was: "You're going to serve and you're going to fly back." So my life, as I had known it previously, disappeared. My life and the nation's underwent cataclysmic change.

What I saw was what Harry said about '64. I saw a man putting under harness all of his volatile passions and exhibiting to all who saw him a coolness and a calmness and a poise that, to the rest of us, near hysterical, was almost bewilderingly magic.

He made two quick decisions. As Harry said, he looked ahead. He played politics like a grand chess master—six to seven moves down the board. He made two quick decisions in those minutes, an hour after he became president. Everyone in Washington wanted him to fly out now, get in the air. But his first decision was, "I'm not leaving this airport till the body of John Kennedy comes aboard." If he had left, he knew, the headlines would be, "So eager to be president, he left behind the president in Dallas."

The second decision was even more astonishing. He said, "I'm going to be sworn in on this airplane. I've asked Judge Sarah Hughes to come aboard to swear me in." I didn't know it, nor did anybody else, but what he wanted was to have a picture taken of that swearing-in, with his arm upraised, with Mrs. Kennedy on his left, his wife on his right—to show that the president is dead, long live the president, that the Kennedy legacy lives on. Because when he landed, that picture was going to be

developed and then flashed all over the world. It was shown endlessly on every television station that very day.

When we got back, we landed at Andrews Air Force Base, and then went by chopper from Andrews to the White House. Took seven minutes by air to get there. I had never visited the White House, not even as a tourist. Never been inside it. Here I am, going to get a special tour with the 36th president of the United States as my guide. We got through the diplomatic reception room and then through the west basement. He did not use the Oval Office for three days. Did not use it. He operated out of his vice presidential office on the third floor of the Executive Office Building.

That night, when he finally decided to leave, about 10 o'clock, he said, "Come on with me. Spend the night with me. As a matter of fact, until your family gets up here, you can live with me." And I did. I lived at his house for 11 days before he moved into the White House. Then I lived on the third floor of the mansion for a month. If any of you are ever on *Jeopardy*, and somebody asks you who are the only two special assistants to a president who have actually resided at the mansion, you can say "Harry Hopkins with Roosevelt, and Jack Valenti with Johnson."

Bill Moyers [deputy director of the Peace Corps and then special assistant to Johnson] and Cliff Carter also spent that night. We went into Johnson's bedroom about 11 o'clock at night. He had now been president for about 10 hours. He got into his pajamas and sat on this vast bed. Mrs. Johnson and their daughters were sleeping in other rooms. I sat to the left of him on the bed, Moyers on the right, and Carter on the right side of the bed. We were up with him until about four in the morning, watching television, as commentators all over the world were inspecting this unruly cowboy who was now the leader of the free world.

In those four to five hours, as Harry says, he talked—not wanting us to give

him any advice, but just wanting a sounding board. That night, musing, he sketched out what later became the Great Society. I had no idea (as Harry would testify) what this really meant at the time. He said, "I'm going to pass Kennedy's civil rights bill. Goddamn, it's been hung up in the Senate too long. I'm not going to change one word. I'm going to pass it. Then I'm going to pass Harry Truman's health insurance bill." That became Medicare. Then he said, "I'm going to make it plain that everybody in this country is going to be able to vote." He didn't say, "I'm going to have a voting rights act," but he said, "I'm going to make sure everybody is going to vote. Then I'm going to have an education bill that's going to let kids in this country get all the education they can take, and the federal government is going to help them."

Now, mind you, this guy has been president for 10 hours, and he sketched out for us what became the Great Society, attacking social ills in this country across the widest range. He realized that, because of the encrusted public attitudes and the stratified social structure, you couldn't attack one issue here and one there; it had to be across the broad expanse of the society, using every available weapon, and hitting them on every front, in order to achieve a breakthrough.

I say, with Harry, that the finest hours of Lyndon Johnson were in the first week of his presidency. Five days after that night in the White House, he went to a joint session of Congress and said, "John Kennedy said, 'Let us begin,' and I say, let us continue," wrapping himself in the Kennedy legacy as an armor plate. Then he began this ceaseless march, in serried ranks, across the political environment. It was an incredible performance—a man throwing himself into the most difficult job in the world, without warning, and yet, in a way, all of his 24 years in the Congress and his three years as vice president had prepared him in a way that no other single

man has ever been prepared to be president.

Question: Most people would agree that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was probably one of President Johnson's greatest achievements and legacies. But that was not a sure thing at the time, even though there was a wave of sympathy for getting things done after Kennedy's assassination. One of the people who was turned around finally was Everett Dirksen, who had served alongside him in the Senate and was the minority leader. I wonder to what extent President Johnson's personal political style and his relationships with members of the Congress made a difference in turning things around on the Civil Rights Act.

McPherson: I think Jack knows more about this than I do, because he was

there, and I didn't get there till '65. But I have read a lot about it and I had the civil rights brief in the White House when I got there finally. The answer is: a lot. Johnson used every connection and every friendship he had. He was the guide for Hubert Humphrey, particularly in telling Hubert that he had to make Everett Dirksen a hero, and telling Everett that he could be just like Lincoln: You're both from Illinois. Here's an opportunity for you to be a great man.

This period of civil rights legislating had begun in 1957, when Johnson was majority leader. He put through the first civil rights bill in 80 years, since the post-Civil War days. It was a very modest bill. In fact, so modest that I'm not sure anybody got to register to vote because of that bill. But it was a civil rights bill and it had a civil rights commission in it and it had various federal injunctions against



LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act at the Capitol on August 6, 1965. Present at the ceremony were civil rights leaders, including Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Clarence Mitchell.

behavior that was discriminatory. Then he did it again in 1960. These were tiny steps.

Along in '63, Kennedy offered this big bill, which was going nowhere. A lot was happening in the country. Lyndon Johnson is justly praised for being the manager from the White House of the civil rights legislation of '64 and then, in '65, the Voting Rights Act. But he was taking advantage, brilliantly, of a tidal wave of public passion (not too strong a word) out in the country, a determination that we do something about discrimination practiced by states and cities against African Americans. This was the time of the buses that went down to the South with freedom riders. This was the time of the sit-ins, when young blacks were sitting at lunch counters and getting beaten up.

Martin Luther King played a very interesting role in this time. I once wrote that King was, in an almost religious sense, the suffering servant of this movement. Every time something awful happened to Martin Luther King, the United States did something, in a legislative way, a statutory way, to advance the cause of civil rights. King and his people were hosed down in Birmingham and had dogs let go on them, and King, of course, was imprisoned in 1960. One of the responses of the nation to that was the '64 act. King was beaten at the bridge in Selma in 1965. And the big response was the passage of the Voting Rights Act. King was assassinated in 1968, and the country responded with the Fair Housing Act. So each time the streets were doing a lot to create the conditions for the passage of legislation. Johnson was a legislator who embraced that.

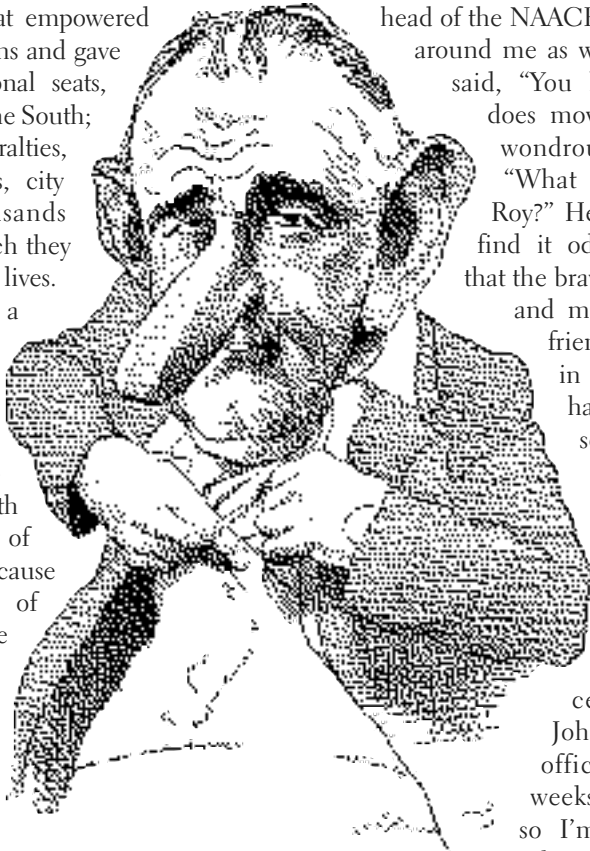
One of the unforgettable moments for me in 1965 was when I had just come to the White House. I got to go up to the Capitol when Johnson went up to make the voting rights speech to a joint session. This was right after Selma and all that. I found myself sitting on the floor of the House, a White House staff member sitting among a number of congressmen,

including a couple of hard-bitten southern conservatives, when Lyndon Johnson said, "The word in America is 'We shall overcome,' and I tell you, we shall overcome." Those were the words of the civil rights hymn and the words of Martin Luther King—King was sitting up in the balcony—[and] the entire joint session of the Congress stood, except for about 30 southerners, one of whom was sitting right next to me. As the southerner Lyndon Johnson said, "And we shall overcome," this man said, "Goddamn!" I'll never forget that: *Here was a traitor, here was a southerner saying the civil rights words.*

Johnson used everything he could to pass that bill, including the sacrifice of his own political sense. One part of Johnson's political sense told him that the nation had to have this, and that he had to have it. As a southerner, he had to show the nation that he was an American, not just a southerner and a Texan. One way to do that was to get the civil rights legislation through. He also knew that the Democratic Party could not fail, despite its southern roots, to respond to that momentum, that demand out in the country. The other part of him [was reflected when Bill Moyers] came in on the evening of the passage of the Voting Rights Act. This act finally did it. This act finally gave Negro Americans the muscle, the instrument they could use to assure that they would vote. Johnson, having had a wonderful day signing the bill, everybody around him praising him, was sitting, Bill says, with his head in his hands at his desk. Bill said, "Mr. President, it's the greatest day of your presidency." Johnson said, "Yes, and it's the day we gave the South to the Republican Party for the rest of our lifetimes."

You look at Congress today and you see that, until recently, the Speaker was from Georgia, the majority leader was from Texas, the majority whip was from Texas—all these, southern Republicans. And look at the grip that southern Republicans have. Trent Lott running the Senate. That flowed

from the act that empowered African Americans and gave them congressional seats, House seats, in the South; gave them mayoralties, county councils, city councils—thousands of places in which they could affect their lives. It really made a new life for them, gave them power, and also changed the politics of the South and, arguably, of the Congress because the response of much of the white South was to abandon the Democratic party.



Valenti: I want to come in with some intimate glimpses into Johnson on this. Let me go further than Harry. Without Lyndon Johnson, none of these civil rights acts would have passed. He deployed us on the field. I was assigned southern congressmen because I talk like them. I would say, “Mr. Congressman, if you vote for this civil rights bill, the president will never forget. If you vote against him, he will always remember.” We played hardball.

Right after the voting rights bill was passed, we asked all the great black leaders to come in to the Cabinet Room. They came in—A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Height, who’s still working, Bayard Rustin, and Clarence Mitchell. There was an air of religious jubilation in the place—everybody feeling a kind of epiphany that had taken over the country. *Free at last, thank God Almighty, free at last!* As we left the room, Roy Wilkins, who I think is probably the greatest civil rights leader that ever lived, bar none, who was

head of the NAACP, wrapped his arm around me as we walked out and said, “You know, Jack, God does move in strange and wondrous ways.” I said, “What do you mean, Roy?” He said, “Don’t you find it odd and wonderful that the bravest, most effective and most compassionate friend that the Negro in America has ever had turns out to be a southern president?”

My final story is about where Lyndon Johnson got that rejoinder to Bill Moyers. In December of 1963, Johnson had been in office only three weeks. I’m living there, so I’m with him, day and night—which I don’t recommend, because it’s a 20-hour day. On a Sunday morning, he said, “Call Dick Russell and ask him to come over.” Richard Brevard Russell was the senior senator from Georgia and probably the single most illustrious, prestigious man in the Senate. If he had not been head of the segregationist forces in the Senate, he would have been president of the United States, and a great president. You have to go back to 1952, when the post of Democratic leader in the Senate fell open. Ernest McFarland was beaten in Arizona and all the senators said, “Dick Russell, you be our leader.” He said, “No, Lyndon Johnson should be our leader.” Johnson was 44 years old, in the fourth year of his first term in the Senate, and he became leader and the greatest parliamentary commander the Senate has ever known. So Russell made him leader.

When Russell arrives—he’s about my size, gleaming bald head, penetrating blue eyes—Johnson, who is six-feet-four,



Georgia Senator Richard B. Russell gets “The Treatment” from LBJ. Pass civil rights laws, said Russell, and “you’ll lose the South forever.”

grabs him and embraces him. They sit down on the couch overlooking the Rose Garden in the West Wing, Johnson in a wingback chair, their knees touching. I’m sitting to the right of Russell.

The president says to him, “Dick, I love you and I owe you. I wouldn’t have been leader without you. I wouldn’t have been vice president, and I wouldn’t have been president. So everything I am, I owe to you, and that’s why I wanted to tell you face to face, because I love you: don’t get in my way on this civil rights bill, Dick, or I’m going to run you down.”

And Russell said, in the soft accents of his rolling Georgia countryside, “Well, Mr. President, you very well may do that. But if you do, I promise, you’ll not

only lose the election, but you’ll lose the South forever.”

In all the years I knew Lyndon Johnson after that, I was never prouder of him than when he answered Russell. He put his arm on him in an affectionate way and said, “Dick, you may be right. But if that’s the price I’ve got to pay, I’m going to gladly pay it.”

To me, that sums up what leadership is about: wisdom and courage and a great carelessness of self—putting to hazard your political future to do what you think is right by the people you have, by solemn oath, sworn to serve.

Question: I want to pick up on the quotation from Ralph Ellison that Mr. Valenti mentioned. I suspect that Ellison, like many of us in the ’60s, saw the Great Society not as the solution to these

problems, but really as only the first step to more legislation in all these areas. Of course, the next steps never happened. In fact, the very legislation of the Great Society was often used as a weapon against further progress. “We tried this in the ’60s and it failed.” Johnson foresaw that the Republican Party would take the South as a result of his civil rights measures; perhaps he even foresaw the subsequent backlash against the Great Society. Did this great strategist see the tragedy of his own success?

McPherson: I would question the assumption that there has been such a backlash. When you look at what the Johnson administration achieved in the Great Society, and look at what still

exists, it's virtually all there. It is inconceivable for us older Americans that Medicare should be undone. There is no backlash against Medicare. There may be problems with its administration, here and there, but nobody is going to undo that. Nor will they undo the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Nor the consumer legislation. Nor the environmental legislation.

Civil rights was the hot button. We sure did fail in our efforts to rebuild the core of cities. We had a Model Cities program and it failed. It didn't have the money, didn't have the knowledge of how to do it. But let's take the African American segment of the population and look at where they are in economic terms, educational terms, social terms, and so on, compared with where they were in the early '60s. There has been an enormous benefit in the number of people who have been able to get out of poverty and into upper-income work. There has been a baffling growth in poverty among single parents, which has continued and multiplied.

Probably the most devastating social fact of the past 30 years has been the growth of single parenthood in the cities. When Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor, came to see me in 1965 with the Moynihan Report, which showed that an upturn in employment was not being matched by a downturn in single parenthood, the percentage of African American single-parent children (i.e., children being born to an unwed mother) was about 18 percent; whereas now, in many cities, it's 90. That has been perfectly devastating. That, plus crack cocaine, has made the central part of cities impregnable to programs of any kind that we've tried so far. Not just Lyndon Johnson's programs, but Richard Nixon's programs and anybody else's.

There was a fatigue with government effort. One of the ironies of the Johnson administration is that it cleaned the cupboard of legislation. It cleaned out the agenda of aggressive government social

effort that had been building up since the 1930s, which had been part of Harry Truman's campaign in 1948, and which Democrats had wanted to pass for a long time. It finally got passed in 1964 and '65. Ever since then, Democrats have been looking around for something to do that would capture the public's excitement, that would cause people to march in the streets and say, "We've got to have this!" It's hard to think of what you've got to have.

This puts me in mind of something that I said once to a Maryland congressman, a wonderful man, Steny Hoyer. It was right after several people had been killed in the Washington area. A woman was hanging curtains in her home in a public housing project and was shot by mistake. The next day, another woman and a child were shot by accident—drug wars. I told Steny Hoyer: "If I lived in your district and that were happening, I would just camp out in your congressional office and say, 'I'm not leaving until you get the National Guard in here and the drug enforcement people, until we do something about this. We can't live this way as Americans.'"

We do have awful urban problems. You're right, they're not fixed. I don't think the country knows how to fix them. But I don't think people have turned their backs on the Great Society. Even Ronald Reagan did not dismantle the Great Society. He may have starved parts of it, but he didn't break it up.

Question: Michael Beschloss's book *Taking Charge* has some fascinating transcripts of conversations between Lyndon Johnson and Richard Russell during the earliest days of the Johnson presidency. Talking about Vietnam, these two guys, who were the biggest hawks around, sound like Fulbright and Senator Mike Mansfield did, four or five years later. Given the clarity with which they saw the Vietnam question in 1963 and early '64, why in the world didn't they act on it that way then, instead of waiting until it consumed them?

McPherson: There's about an eight-page conversation between Johnson and Russell in the Beschloss book—I've read it five times—that makes you want to yell, *Listen to what you're saying and act!* But if you read to the end of it, both of them agreed that there was no political way to act on their sense of foreboding. They both say, there's no way out of this, politically. They didn't mean just for the Democratic Party; they meant for the nation and the Congress, given the way the tide had been flowing for all the years since the Cold War began.

Valenti: Let me certify what I'm about to say. I attended every Vietnam meeting, from the first day of the Johnson administration until June 1966. I made copious notes. They are in the LBJ Library. First, people forget that on the day Johnson became president, we had 1,600 soldiers in Vietnam. They were there. The question that nobody ever asks, in any discussion that I've ever had with scholars and students and just plain people, is: If there had not been an American soldier in Vietnam, would Johnson have sent them? That's one of those "what-if" questions you can't answer. But I've thought about that a long time.

Johnson's sole objective was to get out of Vietnam. Now, therefore, the question is: how? How to do it without bringing down the wrath of the country? At that time, every newspaper in the United States was for our being there. Bobby Kennedy had gone to Saigon in 1962 just 10 months before and said, "We will not desert you. We will stay with you. We will not allow this aggression to continue." In September of 1963, President Kennedy was on David Brinkley's TV news show. Brinkley said, "Do you believe in the domino theory?" Kennedy said, "I most certainly do, which is why we're going to stay in Vietnam and deter this aggression."

Now, in that context, Johnson could not have simply (as we say in Texas) "hailed ass" and pulled out before any-

body ever understood we were going to lose that war—because in '63 nobody thought that.

So Johnson's main objective, from day one, was: "I gotta get out." The military says, "If we can do a little here and a little there"—and then we begin to bomb in 1965, because Pleiku was attacked, and we had to answer, so the first bombing began. The hope was that we could cause the North Vietnamese to go to the negotiating table. We could sit down with them and "reason together" and then get out of there. But we could not bring the North Vietnamese to the table.

If there were blunders in this whole thing, they were first, that we misunderstood and misapplied our knowledge of the tenacity of the North Vietnamese. Charles DeGaulle told Kennedy in 1962, "Get out of there! Don't ever go in there, because these people will fight for a generation or two generations."

Second, we never prepared the American people for a retreat without bringing down the wrath of the Goldwater people, calling Johnson a coward, a poltroon, the first American president to lose a war. We're throwing the whole country into disarray. So we went in in incremental ways—a little more, a little more, interdict here, get them there, and maybe, in time, we could negotiate.

This is a subject we could take eight days on, and we'd still only scratch the surface. But keep in mind Johnson's sole motivation: get out of there. I remember, after these meetings, he'd go back to the Oval Office and say, "Oh, my God! If I could just sit down with Ho Chi Minh, I could work this out and get our butts out of there!" Money was being taken away from his Great Society and going into Vietnam. He hated it! But we all know how history goes.

I'll end with a little quotation from William Hazlitt, who said, "Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be." □