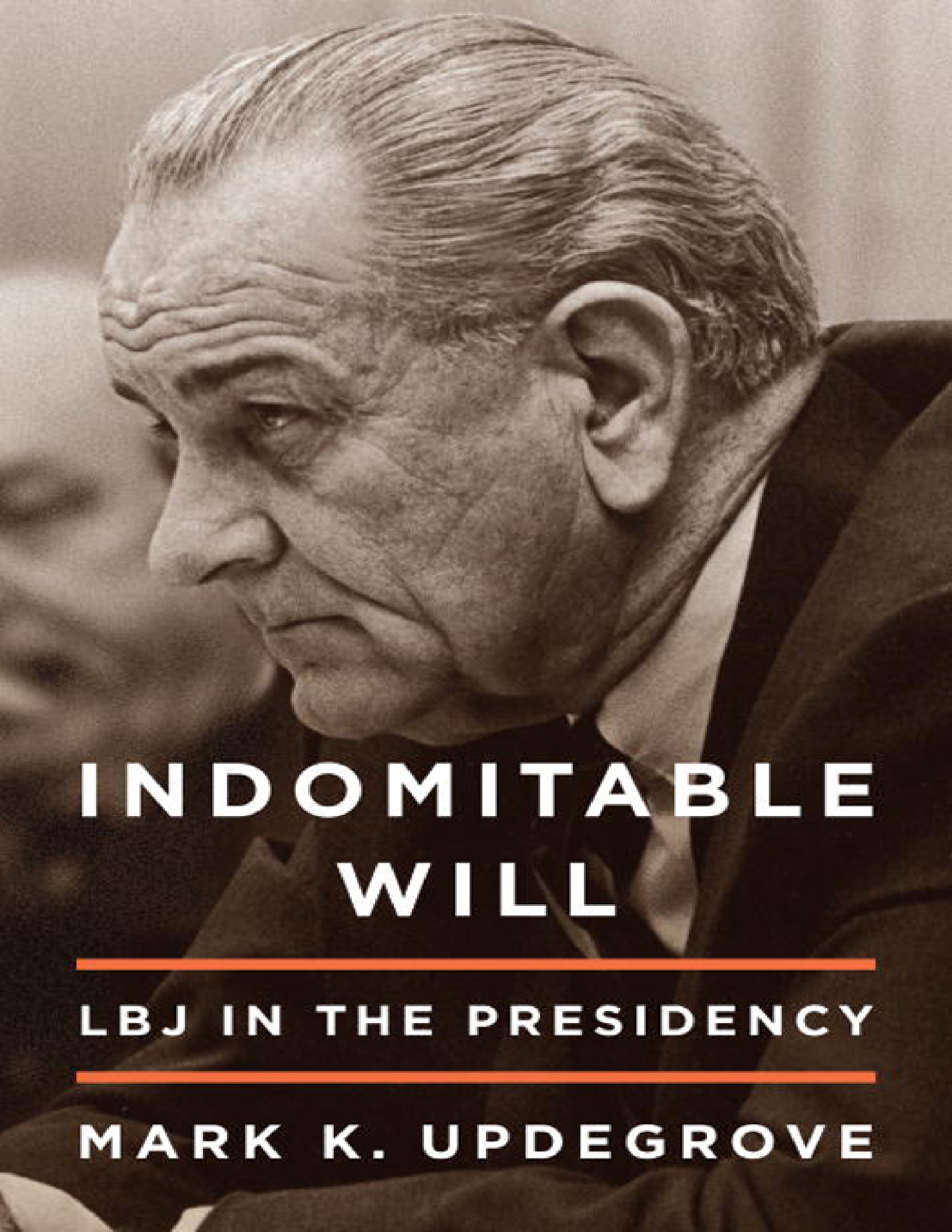
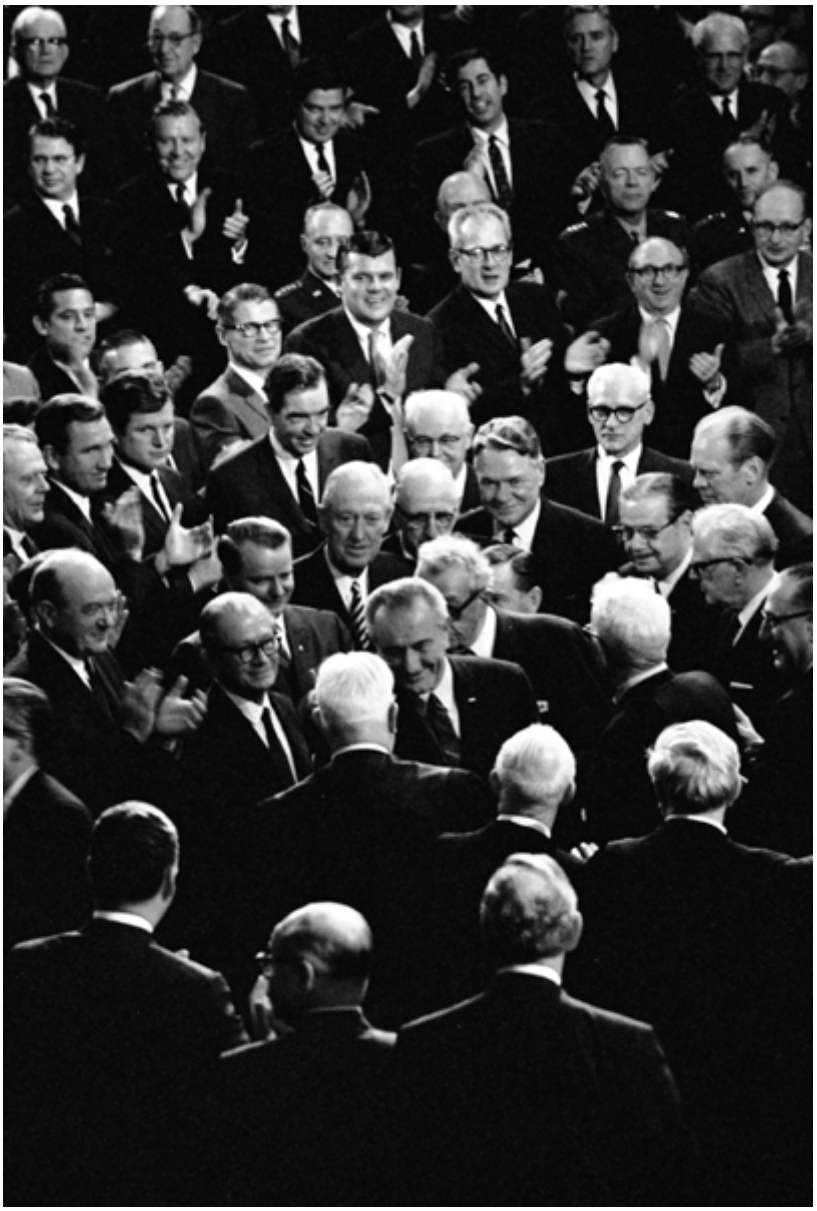


INDOMITABLE WILL

LBJ IN THE PRESIDENCY

MARK K. UPDEGROVE



LBJ surrounded by well-wishers following his last State of the Union address, January 14, 1969.

INDOMITABLE WILL

LBJ IN THE PRESIDENCY

MARK K. UPDEGROVE

CROWN PUBLISHERS
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FOR

Harry Middleton

AND

Bob Hardesty

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication

Acknowledgments
Index of Voices

INTRODUCTION

1. “A MAN WHO REMAINS A MYSTERY”

2. LOOKING AT THE LIVING, WISHING FOR THE DEAD

3. “LET US CONTINUE”

“He Knew Instinctively What to Do”
Big as Texas
Seeking the Ultimate to Do the Possible
“An American Bill”
The Kennedys

4. THE JOHNSON TREATMENT

“Bird”
“The Summertime of Our Lives”
Finishing Franklin Roosevelt’s Revolution
No Men with Umbrellas
The Public Man

5. “ALL THE WAY WITH LBJ”

Foreboding
“In Your Heart You Know He Might”
The Loophole

6. POWER AND GLORY

“We Shall Overcome”
A War for the Poor

"All the Education They Can Take"
Making Harry Truman's Dream Come True
Nature Was My Companion
"What Can You Do for Our Country?"
"The Fabulous Eighty-ninth Congress"
"Nearly Every Person in the World Is Good"

7. COMMANDER IN CHIEF

"What the Hell Is Vietnam Worth to Me?"
"Another Cuba"?
Lyndon Johnson's War

8. HAWKS AND DOVES

Fissures
Guns and Butter
A Question of Credibility

9. UNDER FIRE

"We're Burning Up!"
"The Hot Line Is Up"
Justice and Lawlessness
"Hey, Hey, LBJ …"
"Eyes Only—For the President"
Around the World in Four and a Half Days

10. "THE NIGHTMARE YEAR"

"One War at a Time"
No Light, Longer Tunnel
The Decision
March 31
End of a Dream
"What Is Happening to Us?"
Disappointment
HHH
Chicago
"Nixon's the One"

11. "THE GOLDEN COIN IS ALMOST SPENT"

A Smooth Transition

"Everything That Was in Me"

12. SUNSET

Photo Insert
Notes
Sources
Photo Credits
Index

Acknowledgments

Few projects of this scope come from one mind or set of hands. This book is no exception. I owe my deepest gratitude to those who helped me see it through.

First and foremost, my thanks go to my family. As she has with previous projects, my wife, Evie, encouraged me to set pen to paper and write to my heart's content—even though it took away from time spent with her and our beloved children, Charlie and Tallie. Her love and support—and that of Charlie and Tallie—has never wavered.

The same is true of my parents, John and Naomi Updegrove, who have always recognized and nurtured the best in their own children; my faithful siblings and their spouses, Susan and Glenn Crafford; Randall Updegrove; and Stuart and Christine Updegrove; and the Kaskey, Krombach, and Wiewel families. Likewise, I'm thankful to many loyal friends, among them, Don Carelton, David Dunham, Steve Huestis, David Hume Kennerly, Cathy Saypol, Nick Segal, and Ray Walter.

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Helping immeasurably throughout the project was my right hand, Meg Chapin, who became Meg Chapin Haden in its midst. I was also aided by Dolph Briscoe IV, who gave generously of his time to research facts and oral histories that are at the heart of the book. Well before I landed at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum as its director, I gained first-hand appreciation of the institution's reputation for archival excellence as an author of a previous work. This time, I was able to draw on its archivists as colleagues. Claudia Anderson, Tina Houston, and Regina Greenwell, all of whom have devoted nearly their entire careers to the LBJ Library, combed through the book's manuscript and provided their feedback, helping to ensure that my facts were straight and my perspective balanced. Any remaining errors, I can assure the reader, are my own. I also benefited from the expertise of Barbara Biffle, Barbara Cline, Sarah Cunningham, Laura Eggert, Allen Fisher, Nicole Hadad, Margaret Harman, Brian McNerney, and John Wilson. Other people at the Library, as well as at the LBJ Foundation and the National Archives, also contributed to this enterprise: Judy Allen, Renee Bair, Elizabeth Boone, Sandy Cohen, Parker Duffie, Sharon Fawcett, David Ferriero, Mary Herman, Mike MacDonald, Sarah McCracken, Marge Morton, Raine Pipkin, Chris Runkel, Janie Sides, Nancy Smith, and Anne Wheeler.

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Finally, I owe thanks to Harry Middleton and Bob Hardesty, to whom this volume is dedicated. Harry's fingerprints are all over this book. In thirty plus years at the helm of the LBJ Library, he amassed oral histories from most of the major participants of the administration, which are among the vast volumes of material accessible to scholars. It was Harry who, with the unshrinking Lady Bird Johnson's consent, opened 643 hours of taped telephone conversations from President Johnson to the public despite LBJ's wish that the tapes be sealed for fifty years after his death. All this was in keeping with LBJ's directive to tell the story of his administration "with the bark off," something he was confident Harry would take to heart when he appointed him to the position of LBJ Library director in 1971.

Bob also contributed to this book, not only directly like Harry, but by helping to put together and publishing the proceedings of symposia at the LBJ Library that shed additional light on President Johnson, who Bob has called "a mystery of a man." Harry and Bob's contributions make the enigmatic LBJ a little less mysterious.

I hope this book does, too.

—MKU
Austin, Texas

Index of Voices

Note: Individuals are identified in the context to which they would be most relevant to LBJ

Bess Abell: Lady Bird Johnson's White House social secretary, 1963–69

Carl Albert: U.S. representative, Oklahoma (D), 1947–77

Valerie Anders: wife of Apollo 8 astronaut Bill Anders **Chuck Bailey:** Washington correspondent, Cowles Publications

Bobby Baker: secretary to the Senate majority leader, 1955–63

George Ball: undersecretary of state, 1961–66; U.S. representative to the United Nations, 1968

Ben Barnes: speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, 1965–68; lieutenant governor of Texas, 1968–69

Carl Bernstein: metro reporter, *The Washington Post*

Phyllis Bonanno: personal assistant to President Johnson, 1968–69

Susan Borman: wife of Apollo 8 astronaut Frank Borman **John Brademas:** U.S. representative, Indiana (D), 1959–81

Jack Brooks: U.S. representative, Texas (D), 1953–95

McGeorge Bundy: special assistant to the president for National Security Affairs (National Security Advisor), 1961–66

William Bundy: assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 1964–69

David Burke: friend of the Kennedy family

Horace Busby: special assistant to the president, secretary of the Cabinet, 1963–65

George H. W. Bush: U.S. representative, Texas (R), 1967–71

Joe Califano: special assistant to the president, 1965–69

Liz Carpenter: Lady Bird Johnson's White House press secretary and staff director, 1963–69

Doug Cater: special assistant to the president, 1964–68

John Chancellor: political correspondent, NBC News, 1962–65; director of Voice of America, 1965–67

Marie Fehmer Chiarodo: personal secretary to the president, 1962–69

George Christian: White House press secretary, 1966–69

Ramsey Clark: assistant attorney general, 1961–65; deputy attorney general, 1965–66; acting attorney general, 1966–67; attorney general, 1967–69

Clark Clifford: member and chairman, President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 1961–68; secretary of defense, 1968–69

Wilbur Cohen: secretary of health, education and welfare, 1968–69

John Connally: LBJ congressional aide; Texas governor, 1963–69; and LBJ adviser

Chet Cooper: senior member National Security Council staff, 1964–66; special assistant to Ambassador Averell Harriman, 1966–67

Frank Cormier: White House correspondent, Associated Press

Walter Cronkite: CBS News anchor, 1950–81

George Davis: pastor, National City Christian Church, Washington, D.C., and friend of LBJ

James Davis: employee of the Johnson family, 1955–2007

Sid Davis: White House correspondent, Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, 1959–68

Willard Deason: manager, owner, KVET, Austin, 1949–65; college classmate and friend of LBJ

Everett Dirksen: Senate minority leader, Illinois (R), 1959–69

Ervin Duggan: staff assistant to the president, 1965–69

Dwight D. Eisenhower: president of the United States, 1953–61

James Farmer: civil rights activist, national director, Congress of Racial Equality, 1961–65; program director, NAACP, 1959–61; assistant secretary of health, education, and welfare for administration, 1969–70

Myer Feldman: deputy special counsel to the president, 1963–64; special counsel to the president, 1964–65

Gerald R. Ford: U.S. representative, Michigan (R), 1949–73, House minority leader, Michigan (R), 1965–73

Abe Fortas: associate justice, U.S. Supreme Court, 1965–69

Max Frankel: White House correspondent 1966–68, Washington bureau chief 1968–72, and executive director 1986–94, *The New York Times*

Orville Freeman: secretary of agriculture, 1961–69

J. William Fulbright: U.S. senator from Arkansas (D), 1945–74

James C. Gaither: staff assistant to the president in the War on Poverty, 1966–69

John Gardner: secretary of health, education, and welfare, 1965–68

Ernie Goldstein: special assistant to the president, 1967–69

Barry Goldwater: U.S. senator, Arizona (R), 1953–65, 1969–87

Richard Goodwin: speechwriter for John F. Kennedy, 1959–63; special assistant to the president, 1964–66

Billy Graham: evangelist and friend of LBJ

Joe Haggar: president of the Haggar Clothing Company

Fannie Lou Hamer: civil rights activist, vice chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party **Bob Hardesty:** assistant to the president, 1965–69

Bryce Harlow: senior adviser and counselor to Richard Nixon, 1968–71, 1973–74

George Hartzog: director, National Park Service, 1964–72

Betty Hickman: secretary to Senator Johnson; aide to the president

Sarah Hughes: judge, U.S. District Court, Northern District, Texas, 1961–75

Hubert H. Humphrey: U.S. senator, Minnesota (D), 1949–65; vice president, 1965–69

Haynes Johnson: reporter and editor, *Washington Evening Star,* 1957–69

Lady Bird Johnson: wife of LBJ; First Lady of the United States, 1963–69

Luci Johnson: younger daughter of Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson **Sam Houston Johnson:** LBJ's younger brother

Tom Johnson: special assistant to the president, 1965–69

Jim Jones: appointments secretary (chief of staff), 1965–69

Nicholas Katzenbach: U.S. deputy attorney general, 1962–65; U.S. attorney general, 1965–66; undersecretary of state, 1966–69

Jacqueline Kennedy: wife of John F. Kennedy, First Lady of the United States, 1961–63

Rose Kennedy: mother of John F. Kennedy

Ted Kennedy: U.S. senator, Massachusetts (D) 1962–2009

Douglas Kiker: reporter, *New York Herald Tribune*, 1963–66; NBC News correspondent, 1966–91

Martin Luther King Jr.: president, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1957–68

Robert Komer: National Security Council, 1961–66; special assistant for Vietnam, 1966; chief of pacification, 1967; General William Westmoreland's deputy for civil operations and revolutionary development and support (CORDS), 1967–68; U.S. ambassador to Turkey, 1968–69

Arthur Krim: chairman, Democratic National Finance Committee, 1966–68

John Lewis: chairman, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1963–66

Marilyn Lovell: wife of Apollo 8 astronaut Jim Lovell **Mike Mansfield:** U.S. senator, Montana (D), 1953–77

Thurgood Marshall: solicitor general, 1965–67; U.S. Supreme Court justice, 1967–91

John Bartlow Martin: speechwriter for John F. Kennedy, 1960–63; U.S. ambassador to the Dominican Republic, 1962–64; special envoy to the Dominican Republic, 1965

John McCormack: U.S. representative, Massachusetts (D), 1928–71; Speaker of the House of Representatives, 1962–71

George McGovern: U.S. representative, South Dakota (D), 1957–61; U.S. senator, South Dakota (D), 1963–81

Robert McNamara: secretary of defense, 1961–68; president of World Bank Group, 1968–81

Jack McNulty: staff assistant, 1966–68

Harry McPherson: deputy undersecretary of the Army for international affairs, 1963–64; special assistant to the secretary of the army for civil functions, 1963–64; assistant secretary of state in the bureau of educational and cultural affairs, 1964–65; special assistant and counsel to the president 1965–66; special counsel to the president, 1966–69

Marianne Means: White House correspondent and columnist, Hearst Newspapers, 1958–2008

Harry Middleton: staff assistant to the president, 1967–69; director, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, 1971–2001

Scooter Miller: political supporter of LBJ

Wilbur Mills: U.S. representative, Arkansas (D), 1939–77; chairman of the committee on ways and means, 1957–74

Walter Mondale: U.S. senator, Minnesota (D), 1964–76

Bill Moyers: special assistant to the president, 1963–67; White House press secretary, 1965–67

Lawrence F. O'Brien: special assistant to the president for congressional relations, 1961–65; postmaster general, 1965–68; chairman, Democratic National Committee, 1968–69 and 1970–72

Kenneth O'Donnell: appointment secretary (chief of staff) to John F. Kennedy, 1961–63; special assistant to the president, 1963–65; executive director, Democratic National Committee, 1964–65

Wright Patman: U.S. representative, Texas (D), 1929–76

Jake Pickle: U.S. representative, Texas (D), 1963–95

W. DeVier Pierson: chief counsel, Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, 1965–67; special counsel, 1967–69

Phil Potter: city editor, White House and Senate correspondent, and bureau chief in New Delhi and London, *Baltimore Sun*

George Reedy: special assistant to Vice President Johnson, 1961–63; White House press secretary, 1964–66

Lynda Johnson Robb: elder daughter of Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson

Chuck Roberts: White House correspondent, *Newsweek,* 1951–72

Hugh Robinson: U.S. Army aide to the president, 1965–69

Warren Rogers: bureau chief and chief Washington correspondent, Hearst Newspapers, 1963–66; and Washington editor 1966–69, and Washington bureau chief 1969–70, *Look* magazine **Walt Rostow:** special assistant for national security affairs (national security advisor), 1966–69

Dean Rusk: secretary of state, 1961–69

Richard Russell: U.S. senator, Georgia (D), 1933–71

Ray Scherer: White House correspondent, NBC, 1947–75

Sargent Shriver: director, Peace Corps, 1961–66; director, Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964–68

Hugh Sidey: Washington correspondent, *Life* magazine, 1955–57, and *Time* magazine, 1957–96

Robert Strauss: friend of LBJ; lawyer, founder, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, 1945–present **James Symington:** director, President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, 1965–66; chief of protocol, State Department, 1966–68

Larry Temple: special counsel to the president, 1967–69

Helen Thomas: White House correspondent, United Press International, 1943–2000

Bob Thompson: White House correspondent, *The Los Angeles Times*; Washington bureau chief, Hearst Newspapers **Homer Thornberry:** U.S. representative, Texas (D), 1949–63; United States district judge for the western district of Texas, 1963–65, circuit judge of the United States Court of Appeals of the Fifth Judicial Circuit, 1965–95

Stewart Udall: U.S. representative, Arizona (D), 1955–61; secretary of the interior, 1961–69

Jack Valenti: special assistant to the president, 1963–66

Richard Valeriani: NBC news correspondent, 1964–88

Earl Warren: chief justice, U.S. Supreme Court, 1953–69; chairman, Warren Commission, 1963–64

Robert C. Weaver: secretary of housing and urban development, 1966–68

Lee C. White: assistant special counsel, 1961–63; associate counsel, 1963–65; special counsel to the president, 1965–66

William S. White: syndicated columnist, United Feature Syndicate, 1958–73

Tom Wicker: Washington Bureau staff 1960–64; bureau chief 1964–68; associate editor 1968–85, *The New York Times*

Roger Wilkins: assistant attorney general, 1965–69

Roy Wilkins: executive secretary 1955–64, and executive director, 1964–77, NAACP

Warren Woodward: Johnson congressional aide, 1948–53; employee of KTBC and friend of LBJ

Andrew Young: administrator Citizen Education Program, 1961–64; executive director 1964–70, Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Introduction

History, in its most cursory form, is often a beauty contest: abbreviated judgments based on imagery and sound bites that commonly have substance yielding to superficiality.

The image of George Washington, the stolid, brave general on horseback, is consistent with the formidable legacy he left (minus legends of wooden teeth). The enigmatic, idealistic Thomas Jefferson—like Washington, tall for his day at over six feet—also cuts a dashing figure in history, reflected in the statue romantically peering from the Jefferson Memorial in the capital's Tidal Basin.

Other presidential founding fathers, while essential to the country's beginning, don't fare so well. John Adams, who had the misfortune of following Washington into the presidency, was further hampered by a portly frame and an irascible, acerbic nature that complemented his physical appearance. The dry and diminutive James Madison, who crafted the Constitution and ruled the White House in a venerable eight-year run, was described by a contemporary as a "withered little Apple John." He followed Jefferson into office and, two hundred years later, remains eclipsed by his predecessor's long shadow. Madison is seldom given his historical due; nor is Adams, though resurrected in recent years through biographical treatment by historian David McCullough and an HBO miniseries.

When it comes to our modern presidents, photographs, broadcast footage, and sound bites have disproportionate influence on how we view our leaders in retrospect, favoring the most graceful, attractive, visionary, and eloquent. History blows a kiss to Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan in that regard, while becoming chaste with their immediate successors: Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and George H. W. Bush. That's not to suggest that the latter presidents should necessarily merit better critical appraisal than the former, or that image isn't a crucial element for public figures, as any K Street consultant will attest, but simply that Truman, Johnson, and Bush are held back by their own relative shortcomings in the image department.

Throughout his presidency, Truman battled public perceptions of himself as a prosaic little man—often a sniping partisan—out of his depth in the Oval Office, particulary when likened to the titanic FDR. Bush had his own image problems. Though boasting patrician good looks, he admitted to falling short on "the vision thing" and, upon leaving office after failing to win a second term, lamented that Americans didn't know his own "heartbeat." Like Truman, Bush came up short when contrasted with his predecessor, Reagan, who radiated heartbeat, which one could practically see thumping beneath the pocket square of his suit jacket. (Both Truman and Bush would fine some measure of

vindication during their lifetimes as the public belatedly came to appreciate their steady hands and strength of character.)

But perhaps more than any, Johnson is given short shrift through historical shorthand. Though tall at six foot three, the long-eared, droopy-eyed LBJ would win no beauty contests, especially relative to the graceful Kennedy. Unlike Kennedy, Johnson didn't photograph well. The best-known images of LBJ are born of tragedy, bookending his presidency: a somber former vice president being sworn into the presidency on *Air Force One,* flanked by his wife, Lady Bird, and the newly widowed and shell-shocked first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy; and an emotionally wrought commander-in-chief toward the end of his reign, head down on the White House Cabinet Room table, agonizing over a tape recording from his son-in-law, Chuck Robb, in Vietnam. Other famous photographs from Johnson's White House years are hardly the stuff of presidential greatness, suggesting a cowboy crudeness incongruous in the White House: the president lifting his shirt to reveal his gallbladder scar to members of the press or holding up his beagle by its ears.

Nor did Johnson play well on television. Just as the medium expanded Kennedy and Reagan, it shrank the "bigger-than-life" LBJ, who kept his oversize personality in check when the camera lights were on for the sake of appearing "presidential." Instead, Johnson came off as a neutered version of himself, subduing the dynamism that made him the most effective legislator of his time. "Television never really caught a true picture of the man," recalled Ray Scherer, NBC News's White House correspondent during the Johnson years. "Somehow he was too big for the twenty-one inch tube." Maybe the best-known video clip of Johnson is from his last year in the White House, when the embattled president announced to a shocked nation, "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president."

And though he was an effective public speaker, Johnson's rhetoric and delivery generally didn't achieve heights beyond the marginal, at least by White House standards.

None of these areas does justice to the thirty-sixth president.

In fact, there are few who knew him who wouldn't describe Lyndon Johnson as a great man. Flawed, yes, and not always good, but great. Moreover, almost anyone who was exposed to him has a story worth telling. When one was in his presence, his kinetic energy, mental intensity, and aura of power were palpable; he was always the biggest man in the room—the most colorful, complex, and enigmatic, too. "Allowing for shades of subtlety," wrote Johnson aide Bob Hardesty, reflecting on his former boss, "there were as many LBJs as there were people who knew him. Each individual had a unique perspective on him—and as often as not these perspectives were contradictory."

Along with almost everyone who knew Johnson, John Connally, an early Johnson campaign manager and friend, who achieved his own political success as governor of Texas, picked up on Hardesty's theme: "There is no adjective in the dictionary to describe [Johnson]," he mused, "He was cruel and kind, generous and greedy, sensitive

and insensitive, crafty and naive, ruthless and thoughtful, simple in many ways and yet extremely complex, caring and totally not caring; he could overwhelm people with kindness and turn around and be cruel and petty toward those same people; he knew how to use people in politics in the way nobody else could that I know of. As a matter of fact, it would take every adjective in the dictionary to describe him." Like Shakespeare's King Lear before him, Johnson seemed to ask, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?"

But what is consistent is that all of those qualities added up to a giant of a man, and they help explain Johnson's prodigious achievements, which can't be ignored by history. More than any president since his mentor, Franklin Roosevelt, Johnson got things done. His "Great Society," with its flurry of laws delivering social change, bears testimony to his force of personality and triumph of will. As veteran journalist and president watcher Helen Thomas put it, "I think [Johnson] did monogram our society in his time here.… In the first place, I thought he had no peers—maybe FDR—in terms of what he did for the general welfare with the Great Society: Medicare, Head Start, federal aid to education, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, all those things." LBJ's sweeping reform in the areas of civil rights, education, health care, immigration, the arts and humanities, and the environment changed forever the face and heart of America and the way we live.

Still, Johnson gets little credit for it. In the contentious 2008 Democratic presidential primaries that saw party favorite, Hillary Clinton, square off against upstart Barack Obama, Clinton was excoriated when she allowed, "[Martin Luther] King's dream began to be realized when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It took a president to get it done." A barrage of critics charged that Clinton's comment diminished King and was tinged with racism. But is there any doubt that a president might have an essential role in seeing a landmark law to fruition, particularly the first major piece of civil rights legislation since Reconstruction? As civil rights leader and former lieutenant to Martin Luther King, Andrew Young, put it later, "Martin Luther King understood that we would not have been able to be successful if we didn't have a president with the kind of [political] skill [as Lyndon Johnson], and while [King] loved President Kennedy, and knew that President Kennedy gave his life [for his country], he said, 'I'm not sure President Kennedy could have done this for us.' "

Yet when Barack Obama became president in 2009, maybe the most historic milestone in the nation's long struggle for civil rights, Johnson was generally not among those on the short list of people who came to mind in ensuring that that day would come. As historian Douglas Brinkley wrote in an essay in *Barack Obama: The Official Inauguration Book*, reflecting the sentiments of many, "The baton had been passed from Lincoln to the Roosevelts to the Kennedys and King to this man [Obama]." It likely wouldn't have surprised Johnson, who was given to bouts of self-pity and was particularly thin-skinned over the backseat he had taken to the Kennedy brothers.

In his forward to that same book though, congressman and civil rights hero John Lewis wrote that after the bloody campaign in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, "President Johnson made one of the most meaningful speeches that any American president has made in modern times on the question of voting rights and civil rights. The most powerful nation on the face of the earth had heard the cries of pain and the hymns and protests of an oppressed people, and this government was prepared to act"—resulting in the passage of the Voting Rights Act and transformational political power and social change for people of color. But then, King and Lewis knew Johnson, worked with him, and saw firsthand the difference he made.

In understanding Johnson, *seeing* was believing. Those who witnessed "the Johnson treatment" up close appreciated Johnson's ability to get people who mattered to say yes—even to the most controversial reforms. Leon Jaworski, best known for his stint as Watergate special prosecutor, said of Johnson, "This man makes the greatest, most persuasive talk to a small group of anyone I have ever known. I have never known his equal." Lady Bird Johnson called her husband "the last of the courthouse politicians," those who commanded the attention of a gathering of folks within earshot from the steps of a courthouse, and he was certainly among the best. "People, not TV studios, were adrenaline to him," Liz Carpenter, a longtime Johnson aide, observed. "They were not only his adrenaline, they were his cause, and he wanted to seize his moment and take his chance with them." Those qualities and skills, plus a fierce desire to do right, led to a societal transformation that has not since been achieved by any of his successors.

There, too, was Vietnam, the inherited war Johnson didn't bargain for and never overcame. In the eyes of history, Vietnam dances around Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Nixon, flirting with them, but it attaches itself to Johnson, clinging to him by the light of day. As Helen Thomas quickly added to her accolades for Johnson, "Vietnam, of course, was his great tragedy." For Johnson, who longed for greatness and a place in the pantheon of presidents, Vietnam was indeed a tragedy. "I knew from the start that if I left the woman I love—the Great Society—in order to fight that bitch of a war, then I would lose everything. All my programs. All my hopes. All my dreams," historian Doris Kearns Goodwin recalled Johnson lamenting in his winter years. While the Great Society added immeasurably to the utopian optimism that marked the dawn of the sixties era, Vietnam, an ill-fated war that saw the loss of more than thirty-six thousand American troops by the time Johnson left office—fifty-eight thousand when the war was over in 1975—was the conflict that ultimately divided the nation.

Clare Booth Luce, playwright and wife of *Time* magazine founder Henry Luce, famously lectured incumbent presidents that they would be remembered in one sentence: "Lincoln: He freed the slaves," she would illustrate. If so, Johnson's sentence surely has *Vietnam* in it, and if it's long enough, it may include the prodigious accomplishments of the Great Society—in particular those involving civil rights—as a triumphant counterbalance. Had the Great Society marked the end of his presidency and Vietnam the beginning, and not the other way around, the sentence may have been different. But it

was Vietnam that brought Johnson's once-auspicious presidency to an end, punctuating his obstreperous tenure.

Compounding Johnson's challenges in any historical judgment—abbreviated or otherwise—is his protean nature, which makes him an easy mark for historical revisionism. Among the most extreme examples came in 2004, when the History Channel broadcast a special implicating him as a conspirator in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Never mind that the documentary was based on conspiracy theories that held no water, Johnson, undeniably power hungry and ambitious, could be retrofitted into the implausible storyline. (In the wake of outrage from Presidents Carter and Ford and former Johnson aides, among others, the History Channel issued to Lady Bird Johnson "deepest apologies" over choosing to air the program.)

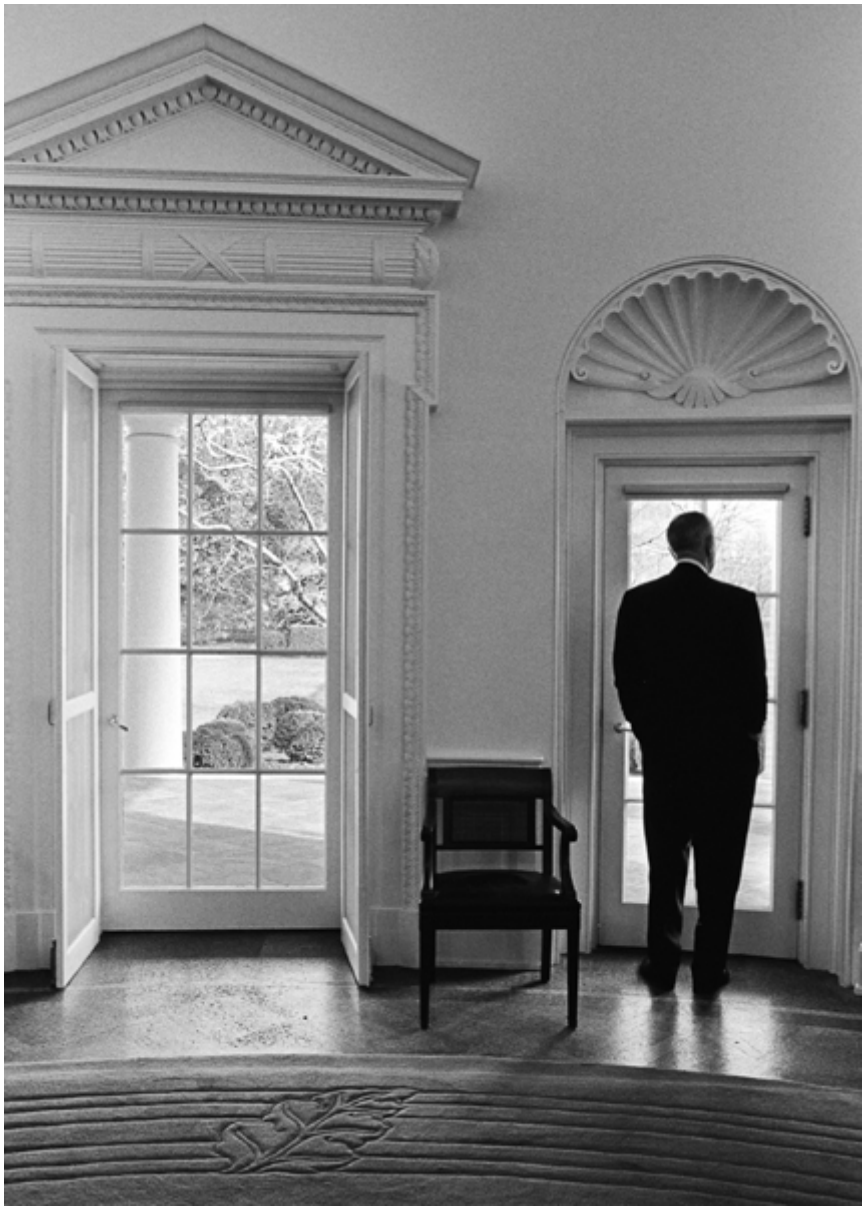
Even responsible biographers, drawing on the rich tapestry of Johnson's life and personality, can craft an account that is factually accurate but unduly skewed, given the subject's enormous breadth and inherent contradictions. As Connally once told Robert Caro, in response to Caro's celebrated biographies of Johnson's early and Senate years, "Every time you could put a dark twist to something Johnson did, you did it. You never paint the bright side. You never give him credit for anything that's virtuous or noble or reasonable or fair or rational." Walter Cronkite agreed, characterizing Caro's portrait of Johnson as "one-sided." "I don't really believe that [Johnson] was all evil," Cronkite said. "He had an ugly side. Many of us do, I suppose." Johnson used to joke about the Depression-era schoolteacher in desperate need of a job who was asked by the school board whether he taught that the world was round or flat. "I can teach it either way," he replied. Those interpreting Johnson's life and legacy have the same leeway.

After Pablo Picasso painted his now-famous portrait of Gertrude Stein, which was criticized at the time for not accurately capturing his subject, he replied, "It doesn't look like her now, but it will." History's distortions can resonate similarly, becoming conventional wisdom as impressions congeal. It may help to explain the delta in public perceptions of LBJ versus those of presidential scholars. In a 2010 Gallup poll in which Americans were asked to rank the nine presidents of the last fifty years—from Kennedy through George W. Bush—Johnson came in seventh, after Jimmy Carter and just ahead of George W. Bush and Richard Nixon. At the same time, presidential scholars—those who have combed through the record and taken measure beyond the surface—typically rank Johnson in the second quintile of *all* presidents, on a plane with other "near greats" such as Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Truman, and just short of the pantheon reserved for Washington, Lincoln, and FDR.

The essence of Lyndon Johnson cannot be adequately captured through the lens of a camera, behind a microphone, under a klieg light, or by way of any desultory account. He is best remembered up close by those who knew him, and in myriad accounts. Even then, he remains elusive.

This book aims to provide a portrait of Johnson through the stories and recollections of the people who were there with him day in and day out during his presidency—living

with him, working alongside him, covering him in the White House press pool—and through Johnson's own recollections and his own words, in phone conversations as history was being made. It is not meant to be a definitive presidential biography, but a collection of impressions illuminating the totality of who he was, what he did, and what it meant. For it is through firsthand narrative more than anything that Lyndon Johnson—who teemed with vitality throughout his sixty-four years and remains enigmatic nearly four decades after his passing—comes to life.



LBJ in the Oval Office, January 24, 1966.

Chapter 1
"A MAN WHO REMAINS A MYSTERY"

"How do you capture the essence of a man whose 'essence' was like quicksilver?" Bob Hardesty, a White House speechwriter from 1966 to the end of Johnson's term in 1969, once asked of his former boss. "How can you capture a man who remains a mystery even to those who knew him best?" It is a question that will go unanswered in these pages. Any attempt to answer it in any depth or with any degree of certainty would be pure folly. Though it is a journey worth taking.

JACK VALENTI, special assistant to the president, 1963–66: I frankly didn't understand him. I loved him, and I followed him, but I sure as hell didn't fathom all that made him tick.

[S]ince the first time I met him, my opinions about him never changed. It was like being in the jungle and meeting a magnificent panther, silken, silent, ready to spring, and you are a bit afraid and at the same time fascinated by the animal.

HARRY MIDDLETON, staff assistant to the president, 1967–69; director, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, 1971–2001: There have been good books written about LBJ, not great ones. There are just too many nuances in him. It would take a dramatist, not an author, to capture LBJ.

WARREN ROGERS, White House correspondent, Hearst Newspapers and *Look* magazine: I've known or interviewed every president since Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson is absolutely the most overwhelming human being I've ever known in my life. Anything you want to say about him: good, bad, compassionate, ruthless; everything.

WILBUR COHEN, secretary of health, education, and welfare, 1968–69: He was a complex, contradictory personality. I have heard him, when we were on the [LBJ] Ranch going by and watching the animals, refer to all sorts of sexual characteristics of the animals and of people, and then five minutes later you could stand on the hillside there watching the sunset and you'd find a man who was a poet describing the sunset

and the relationship of the land to the people and his hopes and aspirations for people. And it seems to me that people who talk about his crudity do not understand that this was an earthy man … a combination of Boccaccio and Machiavelli and John Keats.

HUGH SIDEY, Washington correspondent, *Time* and *Life* magazines: Lyndon Johnson was the single most fascinating human being I have met in my life and I doubt no matter how extended my years be that the record will be challenged. Within hours of meeting him when he stood astride the U.S. Senate as majority leader, I was ushered into his office and given "the treatment," complete with chest thumping, leg and arm squeezing, LBJ's Texas stories and admonitions to take care of him and he would take care of me. Once he made it to the White House, he was even larger and more important than before, natural grist for a column.

JOHN CONNALLY, LBJ congressional aide, Texas governor, 1963–69, and LBJ adviser: He was an extremely ambitious man. He was dedicated to his career. His whole life was politics. He didn't read books. I don't want to embarrass his family, but I might ask them if they ever remember him reading a book. I don't ever remember him reading a book.

That is not to say he wasn't intelligent, or that he wasn't informed or that he wasn't interested. But he didn't have time to read books. He was committed to succeeding as a politician.

MARIANNE MEANS, White House correspondent, Hearst Newspapers: Johnson got his kicks out of working. He was a workaholic. He enjoyed it all; he didn't want to miss a minute. He wanted to be in charge every second.

JOSEPH CALIFANO, special assistant to the president, 1965–69: The Lyndon Johnson I worked with was brave and brutal, compassionate and cruel, incredibly intelligent and infuriatingly insensitive, with a shrewd and uncanny instinct for the jugular of his adversaries. He could be altruistic and petty, caring and crude, generous and petulant, blatantly honest and calculatingly devious—all within the same few minutes. He had a marvelous, if crude, sense of humor. Once he made up his mind, his determination to succeed usually ran over or around whoever and whatever got in his way. He used his prodigious energy—which produced second, third and fourth winds, as others, allies and adversaries alike, slumped in exhaustion—to mount a social revolution and to control everything and everyone around him. He gave new meaning to the word *Machiavellian*, as he gave new hope to the disadvantaged.

MYER FELDMAN, special counsel to the president, 1964–65: I think Lyndon Johnson had great virtues and great vices, depending on whether that particular day he was emphasizing the vices or the virtues, you liked or disliked him. You couldn't say that you liked Lyndon Johnson all the time. It was equally impossible to say that you disliked Lyndon Johnson all the time—but he was a very strong personality, and he had big swings.

MARIE FEHMER CHIARODO, personal secretary to LBJ, 1962–69: [Johnson] was a man of appetites. He worked too hard, lived too rough, and felt too much. I didn't like him all of the time, but I respected him most of the time.

WILLARD DEASON, Johnson friend and supporter: He was a young man always in a hurry; and then he was a middle-aged man always in a hurry.

I used to say that he could see around a corner. He had an intuitive thing about him. He understood what was happening and what was going to happen, and he could tell you.

WARREN WOODWARD, LBJ congressional aide, 1948–53, and friend: On the question of his ambition to be president. I grew up in a time when our mothers and fathers told us that our highest ambition should be to grow up to be president. So in that sense every American child wanted to be president. But the contention that it was for the power—to be president just for the power—I don't agree with that. If he wanted to be president it was because he saw it as a vehicle to get something done for people. That was his ultimate position. That is why the notion that he was consumed by the lust for power is not entirely accurate. It was necessary to have power to accomplish things.

GEORGE CHRISTIAN, White House press secretary, 1966–69: In my book, President Johnson gave it all he had. He might have been ornery at times, he might have been too tough for folks, he was probably less lovable than he wanted to be. But I have never had one shred of doubt concerning his motivations, and that motivation was to change the lives of people he thought were being shortchanged by the system.

LIZ CARPENTER, Lady Bird Johnson's White House press secretary and staff director, 1963–69: Looking back on LBJ and his problems, I think he makes subsequent presidents seem—well, listless, heartless, certainly colorless, and maybe a little chicken.

LEE C. WHITE, special counsel to the president, 1965–66: It was no secret that Lyndon Johnson was a very complex human being. He could be charming, slightly outrageous, extremely thoughtful and considerate, vindictive, sensitive, profane, sentimental, mean, demanding, overbearing, persuasive, crafty, and shrewd. Above all, he was intelligent and focused. High on his agenda were the issues of racial discrimination and problems of the poor. His empathy for the blacks who had been treated so badly and for the poor, regardless of their color, was deep in him, and he was willing to do what needed to be done to try to solve their fundamental problems.

BILL MOYERS, special assistant to the president; 1963–67, White House press secretary, 1965–67: [A]nyone who knew him knew that he could be abusive, hard, sometimes callous, deceptive, often distrustful. Anybody who knew him knew all of those things about him. And yet from this ugly and mean man came a program, a philosophy, a purpose that transcended what we knew about him.…

The seminal moment of the Johnson years came in a press conference when Jim Deakin of the *St. Louis Dispatch* asked him, "Mr. President, I don't understand why for all these years you were either indifferent to or opposed to the advance of civil rights in Texas, and you suddenly turn around and are doing what you're doing in the White House."

The president replied (and this is only a paraphrase), "Isn't it wonderful that after all those years of keeping my hand on the scale, you might say, I have a chance to put right what for so long I helped to keep wrong?"

That is the mystery of Lyndon Johnson. I'm astonished that that much good happened in the world where civilization is but a veneer, where selfishness is exploited and encouraged and people are urged to look out for number one. I'm surprised that anything good and decent occurs.…

The question is, why did a man as flawed as any human vessel that was ever made rouse a nation to reach beyond itself in such a time?

Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson with Jacqueline Kennedy on board Air Force One, Love Field, Dallas, Texas, November 22, 1963.

Chapter 2
LOOKING AT THE LIVING, WISHING FOR THE DEAD

The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy inhabits a place deep in America's collective consciousness along with the grainy frames of the home movie taken by Abraham Zapruder from a pedestal in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Those of a certain age can recall in vivid detail where they were, and the shock they felt when they heard the news that the president had fallen prey to assassination. Those who were there in Dallas to witness his murder experienced a horror that was difficult to escape, even years later. "Dallas has always been a nightmare for me," recalled Lyndon Johnson of the tragedy that would heap the burdens of the presidency upon him upon his hearing the words "He's gone," spoken by a Kennedy aide in a hospital waiting room. "I don't want to think about it any more than I have to."

LIZ CARPENTER: [Lyndon Johnson] arrived center stage during a national tragedy. And inevitably, as Lady Bird said so poignantly at the time, "People looked at the living and wished for the dead."

JACK VALENTI: God, how well I remember how it all began. The motorcade moved slowly, confidently, under a sky wiped clear of clouds, before a throng of people who were cheerful and warmly hospitable. Then it happened, a senseless act of mindless malice; a gallant young president slain in the streets of Dallas, a nightmare so unimaginable that you could not believe it, an evil so monstrous you could not contemplate it.

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON (LBJ): We left Fort Worth [on *Air Force Two*] ahead of the president's *Air Force One.* We landed in Dallas around 11:30. We—Mrs. Johnson and I—got off the plane and shook hands with the group that was there to receive the president, and we moved back with the dignitaries and welcomed the president and Mrs. Kennedy as they came off the plane. He was happy, smiling, and I think he was stimulated by the previous day's Fort Worth experiences. And Mrs. Kennedy was radiant and looked charming and beautiful in that pink hat and pink suit.

They got in a big Lincoln with Governor [John] Connally because the president always rides with the first man of the state when the first man of the nation comes to visit. They got in the big Lincoln and drove away, and Mrs. Johnson and Senator [Ralph] Yarborough and I got in the car that was driven by a patrolman, and Rufus Youngblood was our Secret Service escort. And as we continued to drive, once we heard some sound. Some thought it was a firecracker, some thought it was a gun, some thought it was a muffler on a car backfiring or something. But very shortly after the sound, the first sound, just almost instantaneously, the very competent, cautious Secret Serviceman jumped over the front seat and shoved me to the bottom of the Lincoln. He told Mrs. Johnson and Senator Yarborough to lean over as fast as they could so they could get their head below the back seat. He got on top of me and he put his body between me and the crowd. And he had his knees in my back and his elbows in my back and a good two hundred pounds all over me. And the car was speeding up. He had a microphone from the front seat that he'd pulled over with him as he came over, a two-way radio talking and there was a lot of traffic on the radio and you could hear them talking back and forth, and one of them said: "Let's get out of here quick."

[T]he next thing, we were on our way to the hospital. They just almost shoved us into the hospital, into the first room that they'd come to down the corridor. They pulled all the shades in the room, closed it, and we sat there and endured the agony and waited for reports that came in from time to time.

LADY BIRD JOHNSON: Through it all Lyndon was remarkably calm and quiet. He suggested that the presidential plane be moved to another part of the field. He spoke of going back out to the plane in unmarked cars. Every face that came in [to the hospital waiting room], you searched for the answer. I think the face I kept seeing the answer on was the face of Kenny O'Donnell, who loved President Kennedy so much.

It was Lyndon who spoke of it first, although I knew I would not leave without doing it. He said, "You had better try to see Jackie and Nellie [Connally]." We didn't know what happened to John [Connally].

I asked the Secret Service if I could be taken to them. They began to lead me up one corridor and down another. Suddenly I found myself face to face with Jackie in a small hallway. I believe it was right outside the operating room. You always think of someone like her as being insulated, protected. She was quite alone. I don't think I ever saw anyone so much alone in my life. I went up to her, put my arms around her, and said something to her. I'm sure it was something like "God help us all," because my feelings for her were too tumultuous to put into words.

And then I went to see Nellie. There it was different, because Nellie and I have gone through so many things together since 1938. I hugged her tight and we both cried and I said, "Nellie, John is going to be all right." And Nellie said, "Yes, John's going to be all right."

I turned and went back to the small white room where Lyndon was. Mac Kilduff, the president's pressman on this trip, and Kenny O'Donnell were coming and going. I think it was from Kenny's face that I first knew the truth and from Kenny's voice that I first heard the words, "The President is dead." Mr. Kilduff entered and said to Lyndon, "Mr. President."

JACK BROOKS, U.S. representative, Texas (D), 1953–95: [Johnson] was very sober during this period, very straight-faced, very cautious, thinking, planning; thinking about what needed to be done and what had to be done. There are a lot of changes, you understand, a lot of problems involved, and he was thinking about them. And the Secret Service wanted him to leave, get out of there.

We just stood there and waited a minute and [LBJ] said, "Well, Jack, you go in the car with Bird and take Bird in the second car and I'll take the first car, and we'll have two cars meet us at that side entrance there." So the Secret Service set up a couple cars and we went out and got in them.

LBJ: [S]omewhere in my mind, I knew there might be more. I knew that this conceivably could be part of something even bigger. So I said let's go back to Washington as soon as we can.

We went in an unmarked car and I remember leaning back over the back of the seat, all the way back.

We went on *Air Force One.* Just as they told us to.

I called the Attorney General [Bobby Kennedy] from the plane and I asked him if I should come back to Washington and take the oath. He said he would call me back, but he thought offhand I should take the oath there. He was calm and unexcited.…

Everyone was saying, "Let's get this plane off the ground." I said, "No, we'll wait for Mrs. Kennedy." She came on.

HOMER THORNBERRY, U.S. representative, Texas (D), 1949–63: Mrs. Kennedy came on the plane and the other Kennedy people. The president was solicitous of all their concerns and wanted them to be in the room when he was sworn in. He asked if Mrs. Kennedy did not want to be present. They administered the oath. The president was as calm and collected as I believe I have ever seen him.

LBJ: Deputy Attorney General Mr. [Nicholas] Katzenbach dictated the form of the oath to one of the secretaries aboard the plane.

I thought of Sarah Hughes, an old friend who is the judge of the U.S. District Court in Dallas. We telephoned Judge Hughes's office. She was not there, but she returned the

call in a few minutes and said she would be at the airplane in ten minutes. I asked that arrangements be made to permit her to have access to the airplane.

A few minutes later Mrs. Kennedy and the president's coffin arrived. Mrs. Johnson and I spoke to her. We tried to comfort her but our words seemed inadequate. She went into the private quarters of the plane.

KENNETH O'DONNELL, special assistant to President Kennedy, 1961–63: We get on this airplane and I'm urging them to take off. We don't know that Johnson's on the plane. [Godfrey] McHugh runs up to the pilot, who's our pilot—and that's the first time we knew we were on *Air Force One*—told him to take off and then somebody said, "Tell O'Donnell he's not the commander-in-chief anymore. President Johnson is on the plane."

So then I went in to see the president. Before I could say anything, he said he'd talked to Bobby and that Bobby told him to be sworn in right there. On the surface it doesn't make any sense, because he's the president of the United States the minute they say "you're dead." You don't even need to be sworn in. I think the man wanted to be sworn in in Texas, and there's nothing really wrong with that except if you've got a crisis and a conspiracy you ought to be up in the airplane, which I thought at the time. But that's not my business, he's president. I was just concerned about Jackie.

I went up to see him get sworn in and I'm trying to get them to get moving. He said to me, "Would you ask Mrs. Kennedy to come stand here?" I said, "You can't do that! The poor kid has had enough for one day, to sit here and hear that oath that she heard a few years ago! You just can't do that, Mr. President!" He said, "Well, she said she wanted to do it." I said, "Well, I just don't believe that."

I was pacing up and down the hall, I was waiting for her to come out. You don't break into a lady's bedroom quite often, and the President of the United States's wife. I paced up and down for five minutes and I'm hysterical myself now, so I finally walked in. I said, "Do you want to go out there?" She said, "Yes, I think I ought to. At least I owe that much to the country." So I said, "Fine."

There's no question in my mind that Lyndon Johnson wanted to be sworn in by Judge Sarah T. Hughes, an old family friend, and he was afraid somebody was going to take this thing away from him if he didn't get it quick.

SARAH HUGHES, judge, U.S. District Court, Northern District, Texas, 1961–75: I walked into the compartment and there were a lot of people there; the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson were there and neither—none of us said anything. I embraced them both and then the Vice President said, "Mrs. Kennedy wants to be here. We'll wait for her." She had come from the hospital and was in the rear of the airplane. So we waited a few minutes and she did come out and he, Vice President Johnson, told her to stand on

his left and Mrs. Johnson on his right. And I leaned over to her and said, "I loved your husband very much."

Mrs. Johnson turned to her and told her who I was; that I was a district judge appointed by her husband.

Then I repeated the oath of office and the Vice President repeated it after me, he had his hand up—one hand up, and the other one on this book.

[Then] he immediately leaned over and kissed his wife and Mrs. Kennedy, and I said something to him that the country was behind him and I knew that he would make a great President. He turned around and said to the pilot, "Let's be airborne."

Then I went home.

■ ■ ■

Allegations of Johnson's insensitive behavior toward Mrs. Kennedy and Kennedy aides while on board *Air Force One* have been made repeatedly through the years, though not at the time. They began with the serialization of William Manchester's book *The Death of a President* in *Look* magazine in 1966 and continue to surface periodically, but by almost all credible accounts, Johnson's behavior was exemplary. Johnson believed that Manchester's book was a covert effort on Bobby Kennedy's part to undermine him as Kennedy contemplated his own bid for the presidency in 1968—"No question about it."

BOB HARDESTY, assistant to the president, 1965–69: There weren't any rumors about any hostility or resentment during that whole period. It really didn't start until the Manchester book and if that had been going on, it would have leaked out.

LBJ: If it existed, it was unbelievable hypocrisy [the Kennedys] practiced. Manchester's book was Bobby's announcement for the Presidency [in 1968]. It was part of a calculated effort to destroy me.

CHUCK ROBERTS, White House correspondent, *Newsweek*: Bill Manchester reported an instance in which Johnson was crude, boorish, inconsiderate of Jackie Kennedy and unseemly in his haste to take power. As one of the three reporters who witnessed that takeover when he took the oath of office aboard *Air Force One*, and then one of two who flew back to Washington aboard *Air Force One*, I want to set the record straight.

Far from being crude and inconsiderate, Lyndon Johnson was thoughtful, cool, and compassionate in the terrible four hours from the time President Kennedy died until his plane landed at Andrews. His decision to take the oath of office in Dallas that day and to fly home aboard *Air Force One*, the plane with the best communications gear, was

eminently sound considering the uncertain world situation created by the assassination; and equally sound, Manchester notwithstanding, was his decision to fly home with Kennedy's body instead of shipping the dead President home in a backup plane with a corporal's guard of presidential aides.

Even as he took over the reins of government, LBJ couldn't have been more considerate of Jackie and Kennedy's bereaved staff, and in my opinion those were four of his finest hours, at the very start of his presidency.

LBJ: It was a peculiar situation that [the Kennedy aides] sat in the back and never would come up and join us. Afterward [Mrs. Kennedy] joined me in his office and very frankly—I wouldn't want to say this in [my] book, but I thought [the aides] were just wine heads. They were just drinkers, just one drink after another coming to them trying to drown their sorrow, and we weren't drinking, of course. We didn't have anything. They were drinking, and I just thought they didn't want to—they were bereaved and wanted to be there [by themselves] and I went back and asked them to come and join us, tried to talk to them about the arrangements.

■ ■ ■

After taking off from Love Field in Dallas, the Johnsons placed a static-filled call to Rose Kennedy, the fallen president's mother.

Air Force One: *Yes, Mrs. Kennedy. I have, uh, Mr. Johnson for you here.*

Rose Kennedy: *Yes, thank you. Hello?*

LBJ: *Mrs. Kennedy?*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Yes, yes?*

LBJ: *Mrs. Ken—*

Mrs. Kennedy: *—yes, yes, Mr. President. Yes—*

LBJ: *I wish to God there was something I could do, and I wanted to tell you that we were grieving with you.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Yes. Well, thanks a mil—thanks very much.*

LBJ: *Here's [Lady] Bird.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Thank you very much. I know. I know you loved Jack, and he loved you. [Unclear]—*

Mrs. Johnson: *Mrs. Kennedy, we feel like we've just had—*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Yes, all right.*

Mrs. Johnson: *We're glad the nation had your son—*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Yes, yes.*

Mrs. Johnson: *—as long as it did.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Well, thank you, Lady Bird. Thank you very much. Goodbye.*

Mrs. Johnson: *Love—*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Yes.*

Mrs. Johnson: *Love and prayers to all of you.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Yes. Thank you very much. Goodbye ... goodbye ... goodbye.*

■ ■ ■

Air Force One touched down at Andrews Air Force Base at close to 6:00 p.m. Upon landing, a stricken Bobby Kennedy boarded the plane and pushed up the aisle, brushing by the new president without acknowledging him. "Where's Jackie? I need to see Jackie," he said to no one in particular. After waiting for the deceased president's casket to be unloaded, and Bobby and Mrs. Kennedy and the Kennedy aides to discharge the aircraft, President and Mrs. Johnson and their aides descended the ramp to the dark uncertainty the next few weeks would bring.

MARIE FEHMER CHIARODO: [The flight was] uneventful. It was very quick as far as we were concerned. We arrived in Washington, landed at Andrews. There were lots of lights. I remember [Johnson] saying, "Get everybody together." In other words, he didn't want his people to get lost. He was very kind about that. I remember asking the Secret Service agents, "Where do [we] go?" And they said, "I don't know. Do the best you can."

JACK BROOKS: I was a little disappointed in the attitude when we landed. Bobby Kennedy came to the back of the plane there, and they brought the coffin off and they went off, kind of shoving; a little bit of a bad deal. I thought it was in very poor taste on their part and they shouldn't have been doing it that way.

LIZ CARPENTER: It seemed like minutes when we landed in Washington; so much was happening. Your mind was so dull, but one of the thoughts that went through my mind on the plane was "someone is in charge." The words Lady Bird has once used —"Lyndon is a good man in an emergency"—kept going through my mind.

I'd seen this once before in an Arizona hotel when we received a call at 3 a.m. that [Mrs. Johnson's] brother, Tony Taylor, had had a heart attack. I'd awakened them to tell them and I could hear Vice President Johnson just take over and run things.… He got on the phone and got [a] plane to fly to Dallas to pick him up while she was getting dressed

and packed, and talking to members of the family. I was struck at the time with what a comforting thing it was to have a man who really ran everything for her. Again those words—"a good man to have in an emergency"—kept coming to me.

He was in charge—and as I look back, I think now that the United States was never without a president.

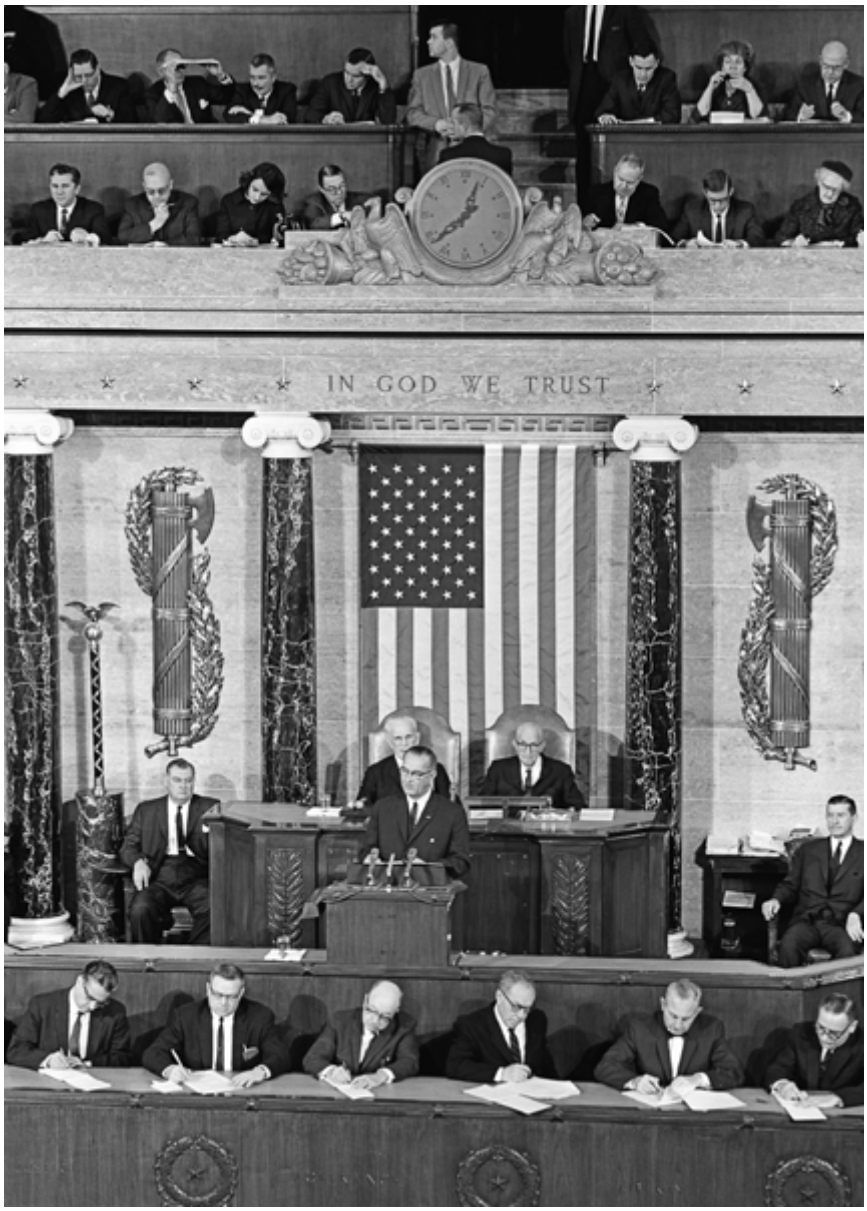
■ ■ ■

Facing the harsh lights and television cameras on the tarmac, President Johnson publicly spoke his first words as president, a fifty-eight-word statement crafted by Liz Carpenter on the plane and edited by Johnson.

> *This is a sad time for all people. We have suffered a loss that cannot be weighed. For me, it is a deep personal tragedy. I know that the world shares the sorrow that Mrs. Kennedy and her family bear. I will do my best. That is all I can do. I ask for your help—and God's.*

JACK VALENTI: Twelve hours later [after the assassination], LBJ was in his home in Spring Valley [which the Johnsons called The Elms, in northwest Washington, D.C.], three trusted friends by his side—the late Cliff Carter, Bill Moyers, and myself. He lay on his huge bed in his pajamas watching television, as the world, holding its breath in anxiety and fear, considered that this alien cowboy [had] suddenly become the leader of the United States. That night he ruminated about the days that lay ahead, sketching out what he planned to do, in almost five hours that we sat there with him. Though none of us who listened realized it at the time, he was revealing the design of the Great Society. He had not yet given it a name, but he knew with stunning precision the mountaintop to which he was going to summon the people. As he said later, "Now that I have the power, I [mean] to use it."

LBJ: What we wanted to do for the country is what we did. It was that simple. I really wanted a country where the Congress and the Government would provide education for every kid from Head Start to adult education by '75, and we got those going—health, conservation, pollution, consumption and on down and that is what we did. This is what I wanted to see done in Civil Rights and this is what we have done about it. We wanted a country where a man could own his own home and we got it and we provided in the last Housing Act the framework where it can be done, where there can be equality in housing. We were a long way from it when I came in.



LBJ addresses a joint session of Congress, November 27, 1963.

Chapter 3
"LET US CONTINUE"

"HE KNEW INSTINCTIVELY WHAT TO DO"

At 12:30 P.M. on Wednesday, November 27, 1963, Johnson appeared before a joint session of Congress and quietly, solemnly addressed the nation for the first time since his brief statement after landing at Andrews five days earlier.

> *All I have I would have given gladly not to be standing here today.*
>
> *The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time. Today John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives on in the immortal words and works that he left behind. He lives on in the hearts of his countrymen.*
>
> *No words are sad enough to express our sense of loss. No words are strong enough to express our determination to continue the forward thrust of America that he began ...*
>
> *An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the presidency. I am here today to say I need your help; I cannot bear this burden alone. I need the help of all Americans, and all America. This nation has experienced a profound shock, and in this critical moment, it is our duty, yours and mine, as the government of the United States, to do away with uncertainty and doubt and delay, and to show that we are capable of decisive action; that from the brutal loss of our leader we will derive not weakness but strength; that we can and will act and act now ...*
>
> *On the twentieth day of January, in 1961, John F. Kennedy told his countrymen that our national work would not be finished "in the first thousand days, nor in the lifetime of this administration, not even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet." But, he said, "let us begin."*
>
> *Today, in this moment of new resolve, I would say to my fellow Americans, let us continue.*

In that sentiment, *let us continue*, nearly all Americans, and certainly Congress, were united. But the ground on which Johnson trod as he continued his address was at the

core of what began dividing the country even before its founding—and was at the root of its most pronounced contradiction. It portended Johnson's bold legislative agenda even before he had settled into the White House.

> *First, no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long. We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter—and to write it in the books of law.*
>
> *I urge you again, as I did in 1957 and again in 1960, to enact a civil rights law so that we can move forward to eliminate from this nation every trace of discrimination and oppression that is based upon race or color. There could be no greater source of strength to this nation both at home and abroad.*

While a supportive Congress had welcomed Johnson into the House chamber with an eruption of applause before he began his remarks, many, particularly those from the South and from Johnson's own party, met those words with a hard silence.

Johnson then went on to press for a second Kennedy initiative, one that would become another of his immediate priorities.

> *And second, no act of ours could more fittingly continue the work of President Kennedy than the early passage of the tax bill for which he fought all this long year. This bill is designed to increase our national income and Federal revenues, and to provide insurance against recession ...*
>
> *I profoundly hope that the tragedy and the torment of these terrible days will bind us together in new fellowship, making us one people in our hour of sorrow. So let us here highly resolve that John Fitzgerald Kennedy did not live—or die—in vain. And on this Thanksgiving Eve, as we gather to ask the Lord's blessing, and give him our thanks, let us unite in those familiar and cherished words:*
>
> *America, America*
>
> *God shed His grace on thee,*
>
> *And crown thy good with brotherhood*
>
> *From sea to shining sea.*

Unity was much on Johnson's mind as he began his new role. "What I wanted to do more than anything," he wrote later, "was to try to unite the leaders of the

administration, the leaders of the two parties, and the leaders of Congress—for a while at least until we could get Congress into action." As with Truman in the wake of the death of his predecessor, Franklin Roosevelt, Johnson asked all the members of Kennedy's Cabinet and top officials to remain in place. True, Johnson was conscious of their loyalties to Kennedy, but that was the point. He believed himself to be "a caretaker of both [Kennedy's] people and policies." Some, such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, would remain with Johnson for all or most of his terms in office. Others, such as aides Theodore Sorensen and Kenneth O'Donnell, and the former president's brother, Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, would fall away before Johnson got elected to the presidency in his own right.

BARRY GOLDWATER, U.S. senator, Arizona (R), 1953–65, 1969–87: Many people told him to clean house. I concentrated on my pet subject which was [getting rid of] McNamara, but I know [Senator Everett] Dirksen used to plead with him [to] get rid of this group or that. Dirksen called me one night and said, "If you've got any influence on Lyndon, would you tell him the risk he's running in keeping his group of about four people in these jobs?" I said, "Well, I don't have any effect on him, Ev. I've tried to get him to fire McNamara," which he would never do. I think it was that there again, it would upset the Kennedys.

■ ■ ■

Johnson took the issues before him with great urgency. Exigency was an endemic part of his nature even during relatively placid times; such was his sense of importance in anything he undertook. "Do it now!" he would often demand of his staff. "Not next week. Not tomorrow. Not later today. Now!" But after he took over the presidency, that sense was heightened by his feeling that the tide of goodwill that followed his triumphant speech before Congress would quickly recede. He believed that the East Coast–dominated media—and the eastern establishment in general—would be out to get him.

LBJ: I told [*New York Times* journalist] Scotty Reston I'd have to do it all in six months to eight months. The Eastern media will have the wells so poisoned by that time that that's all the time I have. They'll be peeing on the fire. I said I don't think any man from Johnson City, Texas, can survive that long.

LADY BIRD JOHNSON: One of the things about the White House is that you know from the moment you walk in there that this has a time limitation. You don't know

exactly what it is; it may be the four years you were elected for, or death, but you know it's got a time limitation. And that's one reason why you do as much as you can do, because you know that this will never happen again, and you can form up the energy from somewhere within you to go more, do more, for this limited time.

■ ■ ■

That urgency further fueled a prodigious work ethic that would become a hallmark of Johnson's presidency, and he grew frustrated early on in his presidency that those on Capitol Hill didn't share it. In a phone conversation with *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham on December 2 (which turned into a monologue by Johnson), the president urged Graham to use the paper to expose Congress's excessive vacation schedules and lack of initiative:

> *[T]here wasn't a human here [in Washington last week]. And they're not here now. And they're not working now. And they're not passing anything.... So I'd like for [the* Post*] to be asking these fellows, "Where did you spend your Thanksgiving holidays? Tell me about it, was it warm and nice?" And write a little story about it.... [Dick] Russell advocates going home at four-thirty and [Mike] Mansfield's wife says he can't meet after five o'clock.... You can't run your business doing that! Now you had better take these broad outlines and give [them] to your people and say ... I don't care what you cover in the sex route, but let's cover some of these folks' vacations. Not in a mean way, but just point up that ... these things haven't been done and we've paid 'em to do 'em. ... Of course, a part of their job [is] at home, and in an election year they'll be at home, but they oughtn't to go home until they do something to go home to talk about.*

■ ■ ■

The shadow of John F. Kennedy hovered over Johnson as he set about his new responsibilities. In many ways it would not recede even after Johnson's own election as president. As the myth of "Camelot" began to grow in the wake of Kennedy's death, strengthening over time, Kennedy set an inevitable, and impossible, standard by which Johnson would be measured. Comparisons between the two men on image, style, and matters of policy, and speculations about the wiser, more prudent course Kennedy would have taken, invariably favored Kennedy. No one was more aware of this than Johnson.

LBJ: I had problems in my conduct of the office being contrasted with President Kennedy's conduct in office, with my manner of dealing with things and his manner,

with my accent and his accent, with my background and his background. He was a great public hero and anything that I did that someone didn't approve of, they would always feel that President Kennedy wouldn't have done that—that he wouldn't have done it that way, that he wouldn't have made that mistake.

HUBERT HUMPHREY, vice president, 1965–69: Kennedy became much more of a hero as he became more of a martyr. The fact is that his weakness and flaws were quickly forgotten, particularly by the Democrats. Johnson was constantly compared to Kennedy, and that was like comparing a heavyweight boxer to a ballet dancer.

Of course, every presidency has its own personality. Kennedy's had great grace and charm and class. Johnson's presidency was more like a developer moving into an area that needs rehabilitation, renovation, rebuilding. It isn't pretty at times. There's a lot of debris laying [*sic*] around, but all at once you see new structures coming up, and it may not be all quite finished, but the structures are there.

He was a builder above all. He was a muscular, glandular, political man. Not an intellectual but bright. Not a talker, a doer. Kennedy was more a talker.

But I think when you look back, you will see that with Johnson—he didn't get all the little paintings on the wall, and he didn't get the gold plate on the dome and didn't shine up the doorknobs, but he got the foundation in, got the sidewalks up, got the beams put across. The structure was there.

■ ■ ■

Johnson, the prosaic builder, had an undeniable advantage over Kennedy, the inspiring visionary: He knew how to deal with Congress to get his agenda passed. He was passionate about it—consumed by it—in a way that Kennedy hadn't been. As an ambitious congressman from Texas's Tenth District and, later, in the Senate, where he advanced to become the majority leader during the Eisenhower administration, Johnson knew his way around Washington as well as anyone. "They say Jack Kennedy had style," he said. "But I'm the one who got the bills passed." The tragedy of Kennedy's death also created an opportunity for reform as the martyred president became a vessel for the progressive beliefs he was thought to have held, and the American public became receptive to the fulfillment of its perception of his vision.

SARGENT SHRIVER, director, Peace Corps, 1961–66; director, Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964–68: What would Lyndon Johnson have been without Kennedy? I don't know, nor does anyone else. I only know for a fact that when LBJ became president, he had an overwhelming ambition to pass into legislation the entire agenda which JFK had envisioned. I choose the word *envisioned* on purpose. JFK did not spell out the scope or scale, let alone the details, of the Peace Corps or a War on

Poverty or a new civil rights law or federal aid to education or Medicare or a bureaucracy capable of putting a man on the moon, not in ten years or twenty-five years or fifty years but immediately.

HUBERT HUMPHREY: Johnson knew how to woo people. He was a born political lover. Many looked upon Johnson as a heavy-handed man. That's not really true. He wasn't one of those Fifth Avenue, Madison Avenue penthouse lovers. He was from the ranch. But what I mean is he knew how to massage the senators. He knew which ones he could just push aside, he knew which ones he could threaten, and above all he knew which ones he'd have to spend time with and nourish along, to bring along, to make sure that they were coming along.

LIZ CARPENTER: I have always thought that you could describe presidents in almost a word. Kennedy inspired, which Johnson was not capable of doing, and Johnson delivered.

■ ■ ■

Moreover, Johnson's ability to achieve harmony beyond results and to bring people together, often through the mire, gave him the tools to move the nation forward in the wake of tragedy.

HUGH SIDEY: Johnson in my judgment was probably the only man in the United States who could have handled that transition. He'd been in Washington since 1937. As an administrative aide, House representative, senator, he'd lived through virtually every crisis in politics this country had had. He knew instinctively what to do.

BIG AS TEXAS

As the country got to know its new president, some intrinsic truths in his nature were becoming manifest. One was as plain as his drawl: he was a Texan through and through, oozing outsize Lone Star pride in keeping with the state's fixation on bigness. The Texas Hill Country where Lyndon Baines Johnson came into the world on August 27, 1908—with a portentous big entrance at an estimated eleven pounds—was as much a part of him as a knot in an old oak tree. "Now the light came in from the east, bringing a deep stillness," wrote Rebekah Baines Johnson while reflecting upon her son's birth, "a stillness so profound and so pervasive that it seemed as if the earth itself was listening." The newborn would grow to listen, in turn, to the Hill Country earth he trod on, and to its people. Any quest for understanding Johnson must begin there.

While his great-great-grandfather had not fought at the Alamo as Johnson had once claimed (straining his presidential credibility), the boast reflected less about Johnson's tendency toward mendacity than it did his yearning to claim a familial piece of Texas's most consecrated chapter. In fact, the Johnson family was among the earliest white settlers in the state. Johnson's great-uncle Jesse Thomas Johnson and his grandfather Sam Ealy Johnson migrated from Georgia to the Hill Country in the early 1850s, where they established a cattle ranch, driving their herd annually up the famed Chisholm Trail to Abilene, Kansas. The place on the map on which they established their ranch, in South Central Texas, would become known eponymously as Johnson City.

Johnson's father, Sam Ealy Johnson Jr., was born not far from there, in 1877, becoming, as a young man, a jack-of-all-trades: a barber, a teacher, a justice of the peace. Lacking the funds for law school, he set his sights on politics, gaining election, at age twenty-seven, as a member of the Texas legislature. The same year, he met Rebekah Baines, a reporter for the *Blanco County Gazette*, when she interviewed him in Austin on his new position, which had just been vacated by her father. Rebekah, who had attended Baylor Female College, came from a long line of educators and displayed unmistakable pride—some would say snobbery—in the accomplishments of her ancestors. Looking beyond pronounced differences in background and temperament, the couple married in 1907. Sam took his young bride to live in a small farmhouse in the Hill Country, fifty miles from Austin, an arduous two-day journey by dirt road and, with no electricity and running water, another world altogether.

LBJ: My father was outgoing and compassionate and trusting. He never met a stranger. He ran for office six times and was always elected. Mama made him quit. He'd stay out two or three years and then the people would make him go back. He was in the cattle business and cotton. Then the San Francisco earthquake came along and money went high. He went broke. He made a little fortune, two or three hundred thousand dollars, and then went broke again after World War I. And cotton went from forty-four cents down to six cents. But he never bellyached. He never griped. I remember him all through the thirties, through the Depression, as a rugged able man.

■ ■ ■

Rebekah, in the words of Johnson, "came out into the hills unprepared for the rough life there." It was clearly not something she had bargained for. "I was determined to overcome circumstances instead of letting them overwhelm me," she later reflected. "At last I realized that life is real and earnest and not the charming fairy tale of which I had so long dreamed." Compounding any broken illusions she may have had of her married life was her husband's rags-to-riches-to-rags economic fate, leaving the family struggling much of the time—though never as much as Johnson would later imply—and eventually taking a toll on Sam's health.

Lyndon was the couple's first child, arriving a year into their marriage. They would have four more, three daughters and another son, over the next eight years.

LBJ: I was three months old when I was named. My father and mother couldn't agree on a name. The people my father liked were heavy drinkers—pretty rough for a city girl. [My mother] didn't want me named after any of them.

Finally, there was a criminal lawyer—a country lawyer—named W. C. Linden. He would go on a drunk for a week after every case. My father liked him and he wanted to name me after him. My mother didn't care for the idea but she said finally that it was alright, she would go along with it if she could spell the name the way she wanted to. So that is what happened.

I was campaigning for Congress. An old man with a white carnation in his lapel came up and said, "That was a very good speech. I want to vote for you like I always have. The only thing I don't like about you is the way you spell your name." He then identified himself as W. C. Linden.

■ ■ ■

The name Lyndon may have been one of the few things Sam and Rebekah agreed on when it came to their eldest child. Rebekah wanted Lyndon to be cultured and refined. Sam held a decidedly more philistine view.

LBJ: One of the first things I remember was the time he cut my hair. When I was four or five I had long curls. He hated them. "He's a boy!" he'd say to my mother. "And you're making a sissy of him. You've got to cut those curls." My mother refused. Then one Sunday morning when she went off to church, he took the big scissors and cut off all my hair. When my mother came home, she refused to speak to him for a week.

■ ■ ■

Lyndon tended toward his father. "I wanted to copy my father always, emulate him, do the things he did," Johnson said. "He loved the outdoors and I grew to love the outdoors. He loved political life and public service. I followed him as a child and participated in it."

Lyndon began his formal education in a one-room schoolhouse, often riding to school on a donkey. His teacher remembered the young man dressed in oversize cowboy garb, outfitted in his father's Stetson and boots, which he wore over his own shoes. He rejected the cultural enlightenment his mother had hoped for. At age eight, when he declined to take the dance and violin lessons she insisted on, she responded much as she had when his father cut his hair. "For days after I quit those lessons," Johnson recalled,

"she walked around pretending I was dead." Johnson would, however, adopt his mother's conditional approach to love.

Though a rebellious youngster and an uninspired though able student, he, like his father before him, had dreams beyond those the Hill Country offered. Starting at a young age, he aimed big. At twelve he boasted to a classmate that he would one day be president of the United States. Two years later he decided, "I was not going to be the victim of a system which would allow the price of a commodity like cotton to drop from forty cents to six cents and destroy the homes of people like my own family."

After graduating high school as president of his six-member class at age fifteen, the young man went west, driving to California with a group of friends in a scaled-down Model T—no windshield, no roof—that they dubbed the Covered Wagon. Once there, Johnson "tramped" restlessly up and down the coast working menial jobs—dishwasher, waiter, farmhand, elevator operator—before becoming a clerk in a cousin's law practice. All the adventure got him was "thinner and more homesick"; maybe a little humbled, too. Within a little over a year, he was back in the Hill Country, where his father got him a job on a road crew. But though he was back home working steadily, he was still the prodigal son. After an arrest citation for disorderly conduct for his role in a brawl during a Saturday night dance, his mother wept at his bedside. "To think that my eldest born would turn out like this," she cried wearily.

LBJ: My mother tried to give me the love of books, tried to interest me in literary matter, dramatics, debating, teaching. I think except for her I might not have made it through high school and certainly not through college.

■ ■ ■

Not surprisingly, it was she who talked him into going to college. Tired of being a disappointment to his parents and dreading the blue-collar monotony that awaited him, Johnson eventually gave in to the idea. In 1927, after borrowing seventy-five dollars, he hitchhiked to San Marcos and enrolled at Southwest Texas State Teachers College. Once there, he would find that his high school, which stopped at eleventh grade, wasn't accredited. In order to gain admittance to the college, he would need to pass tests in English and plane geometry, the latter of which his mother would ensure by coming to San Marcos for three days of intensive coaching. Though he remained an average student, he distinguished himself on the school's debate team, while earning money as a janitor, administrative aide, and serving as editor of the *College Star*, the school's weekly newspaper.

He also found a talent for teaching. Before his junior year, facing financial difficulties, Johnson took a year off from school and went south to Cotulla, a small town of three thousand souls between Laredo and San Antonio. There he became a teacher at Welhausen School, a six-teacher elementary school for largely impoverished children of

Mexican descent. The sons and daughters of poor farmhands, Johnson's students were growing up in a segregated society where they were treated by the white population, in Johnson's words, "just worse than you'd treat a dog." Johnson threw himself into the task, pushing his students to achieve beyond the low expectations held for Americans of color in the early twentieth century, organizing a spate of teams and activities—everything from baseball and volleyball to debating and literary societies—to allow them to reach beyond themselves. He also did whatever he could to better their plight. Inexplicably forgetting his parents' modest means, he sent a letter to his mother back in the Hill Country asking her to send two hundred packages of toothpaste. "We will soon have 250 [students] in school," he wrote. "They are rather small and I think they would appreciate it very much."

"[H]e would ask questions about Texas history of us," recalled one of his students years later. "And he would mention the fact that this country is a great big country of great liberties and opportunities for everybody and that any individual by studying hard and working hard would possibly be able to become president of the United States." It was likely not a notion his students had entertained before.

While immersed in his responsibilities at the school, Johnson somehow found time to take correspondence courses for college credit, teach the school's janitor to read, and find his first taste of love in a relationship that didn't last with a "pretty girl," also a teacher, who lived thirty-five miles away. Though he would be gone within a year, back to college, the memory of his students, dirt poor, starved for hope and encouragement, and battling prejudice, would remain with him throughout his life.

After graduating from Southwest Texas State in 1930 as the Depression scourged the country, Johnson found work as a teacher at Sam Houston High School in Houston, earning an annual salary of $1,530. While he plied his trade with the same energy and success as he had in Cotulla, his interests, inevitably, turned to politics. Volunteering for a political friend of his father's in his spare time, Johnson found his prodigious work ethic and sheer competence, earning him a job in Washington as an aide to Congressman Richard Kleberg, who represented Corpus Christi and the surrounding areas.

In Washington, Johnson quickly made himself indispensable to Kleberg, gaining a keen understanding of the byzantine procedures and protocol under the Capitol dome, while seeing that the needs of Kleberg's constituents were tended to. His standout performance was recognized by his peers who, in 1933, elected him speaker of the "Little Congress," an organization of congressional aides. The following year, he met and married Lady Bird Taylor—as different from him in style and temperament as his father had been from his mother—wearing her down in a whirlwind eleven-week courtship that led to the altar. Her wealthy background, equanimity, and easy charm made Mrs. Johnson the perfect political wife, though she dreaded the thought of her husband's pursuit of politics. Earnest pleas urging him to resist the pull of the political arena proved as futile as pushing back the ocean's tide with a broom.

Johnson would seize his chance in 1937, at the tender age of twenty-eight. After an impressive two-year stint as the Texas director of the National Youth Administration, a youth-directed jobs program under President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Johnson won a seat as the U.S. representative of his home district, Texas's Tenth, after the incumbent, James "Ol' Buck" Buchanan, died suddenly. Johnson staged an unlikely underdog's victory to win Ol' Buck's seat, which the young up-and-comer would occupy for twelve years.

JOHN CONNALLY: I think in one sense [Johnson] had an undistinguished career in the [House]: He did not attach his name to a lot of legislation. That didn't alter the fact that he was interested in a great deal of legislation. He understood early on that it wasn't the author of legislation who passed the bill, but the individual who understood it, who was committed to it, dedicated to it, and most effective in pursuing it.

That was his history in both the House and the Senate. He didn't have a long list of bills with his name on them because he didn't operate that way. He was a man who picked his battleground. He did it religiously, he did it intelligently, he did it rationally. And he rarely lost in either the House or the Senate.

■ ■ ■

Three years later, in 1941, another death, this time of Texas senator Morris Sheppard, offered Johnson an opportunity for advancement to the U.S. Senate. A special election pitting the young congressman Johnson against W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, a conservative radio personality turned Texas governor, heavily favored Johnson, who benefited from FDR's long coattails in the Lone Star State. But when the ballots were counted, the election, initially too close to call, fell to O'Daniel by just over 1,300 votes. While voter fraud was alleged in both the Johnson and O'Daniel camps, Pappy took the office.

LBJ: I was elected to the Senate in 1941 when I was thirty-three years old. That election was stolen from me in Dallas; they kept counting votes until W. Lee O'Daniel won. He was a nonentity and a flour salesman.

■ ■ ■

Shortly after the loss, maintaining his House seat, Johnson entered World War II. Already a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve, Johnson became the first congressman to volunteer for active duty, sending President Roosevelt a letter on December 8, the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, requesting "active duty with the Fleet," and conducting inspections on the West Coast in the Pacific theater. He earned a Silver Star, pinned on him by Douglas MacArthur, when the only bombing mission he

participated in drew intensive enemy fire. Released from active duty in July 1942, Johnson returned to the House, where he soldiered on for the better part of the decade, twice becoming a father when Lynda Bird and Luci Baines were born in 1944 and 1947 respectively. (The additions of his daughters would bring the number of Johnson household inhabitants bearing the initials LBJ to four, a figure that would later increase to five when the family dog, Little Beagle Johnson, was included.)

In 1948 a second chance to win a Senate seat came when Senator O'Daniel stepped down. But another Texas governor waited in the wings. The popular former governor Coke Stevenson also had his eyes on the seat. Conscious of his narrow defeat for the office seven years earlier, Johnson waged a no-holds-barred primary campaign against Stevenson, traversing the state in a helicopter, a technological novelty that drew curiosity seekers, and countering his rival's charges that he was soft on communism with accusations of his own. A runoff election came down to a mere 87 votes of 988,295 cast, which gave a paltry win to Johnson. Once again, voter fraud was alleged against Johnson when voting irregularities turned up in three counties in the southern part of the state, though it was never proven. Johnson would go on to win the seat in a walk in the Democratically lopsided general election, easily defeating the Republican candidate, Jack Porter. But in January 1949 he entered the Senate derided as "Landslide Lyndon," under a cloud of suspicion that would hover over him for years to come.

It didn't much matter to his career. Senator Johnson thrived in his new surroundings, mastering the Senate's arcane procedures and rules of debate as he had in the House, and showing a deal-making prowess uncommon even among most tempered veterans in the chamber. He simply had a knack for making things go his way, knowing instinctively when to twist arms, trade horses, or inflate egos to hold sway with his colleagues. In the course of just six years, he would rise to Democratic minority whip, minority leader, and, at age forty-six in 1955, majority leader, by many accounts the century's most powerful.

LARRY TEMPLE, special counsel to the president, 1967–69: I heard [President Johnson] say a time or two, maybe more than that, that his happiest time was when he was Senate majority leader. Pretty interesting. [He] didn't say that he felt it was the most fulfilling time, didn't say that or use any term comparable to that. Just talking about the happiest time. My guess is that was a time when he could accomplish some things he wanted to get done, and he wasn't in a spotlight, with people backbiting and criticizing him, because nobody was paying that much attention, and they were once he was president. And yet he was able to get a lot of things done and accomplished because, from his standpoint, accomplishment meant legislation.

■ ■ ■

While ambition and events had swept Johnson into the corridors of power in the Capitol and momentously into the White House, making him a consummate Washington insider, the Hill Country was never far from his mind. Though the Johnson family eventually moved to a gated ten-bedroom mansion in northwest Washington—"Every time somebody calls it a chateau, I lose 50,000 votes back in Texas," Johnson once quipped—home was the LBJ Ranch along the Pedernales River in Stonewall, fifteen miles from Johnson City. The investment of Mrs. Johnson's family inheritance in an Austin radio station and other ventures added up substantially over time, allowing for the acquisition of the 250-acre property and ranch house from Johnson's widowed aunt Frank Martin in 1951. Johnson had grown up going to family gatherings there and helping his uncle Clarence as a ranch hand, with hopes of someday being a cattle rancher himself.

The 400 head of Hereford cattle roaming the ranch's expanded 2,700 acres testified to the fruition of Johnson's boyhood dream, as the modest ranch house grew to a rambling eight bedrooms and nine bathrooms. Johnson would retreat there often during his Washington years, including a stay of more than three months to convalesce after a nearly fatal heart attack sidelined him for almost half of 1955, the result of sixteen-hour working days and the three packs of Winston cigarettes he smoked daily. (When his doctor later insisted that he quit smoking, he replied, "I'd rather cut my pecker off.") It may have been fitting, then, that Mrs. Johnson called the ranch "our heart's home."

LADY BIRD JOHNSON: The sun is indomitable. You know if it is cloudy now the sun will come out in the next day or two. I fell in love with Texas Hill Country before I met Lyndon. It was a good courting country—a lot of wonderful places for picnics. I like the long twilight. I like the long horizon. You are part of the sky. There are lovely sunsets and at night you seem closer … the stars are so clear and bright.

LBJ: Here the sun seems to be a little brighter and the climate a little warmer, the air a little fresher and the people a little kinder and more interesting. It's dry country but there's always a breeze blowing and there is always sun here. We don't have dreariness. We don't have those dull gray skies when you look up. Here we have birds singing, flowers growing, girls smiling. And I guess it's a good deal in what you're accustomed to, and I still like to eat the food my mother cooked when I was a little boy, the types of food she cooked, and I still like to visit the scenes of my childhood.

■ ■ ■

Though fortune had smiled on Johnson as bright as the Texas sun, the Hill Country imbued in him reminders of life's fragility and hardship. It was a place where the capriciousness of the land meant a single rainfall could spell the difference between want and plenty; where the women, bent from struggle, "aged before their time"; and

where word spread like a prairie wind when townsfolk died. He never forgot what it was to be poor, to want things. "Poverty was so common," he said later of the Hill Country, "we didn't even know it had a name." The rural populism he had learned at the knee of his father stuck, and he failed to understand the politicians from humble beginnings who met grand ambitions only to forget where they came from.

Johnson's proudest accomplishment in the House was bringing electrical power to the Pedernales Valley in 1939, a feat that required all of his political skill. The advent of electricity immeasurably eased lives throughout the Hill Country, particularly those of women, who, like his mother, endured daily rituals such as pumping water and stoking fires, often in oppressive heat, to cook and wash.

Even in Washington—or perhaps, especially in Washington—the Texas pride endemic in Johnson's character bubbled over even to the most casual observer. His speech was peppered with phrases that could have been plucked from a John Ford western:

"Best get there right quick."

"Much obliged."

"My daddy always said…"

He often addressed women as "ma'am," and was likely to treat them with a gentleman's deference, keeping in check the earthy profanity he was wont to use in the company of men. A gifted storyteller, he was seldom at a loss for one of the yarns that are as much a part of small-town Texas life as Main Street and Sunday school, liberally using them to underscore the points he was trying to make, or just to offer a thick helping of southern charm.

LBJ's toast at a White House state dinner for Maurice Yaméogo, president of Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), March 29, 1965, is one such example:

> *I was thinking about a story that occurred in my own hills of Texas when one of our elder statesmen found difficulty in his hearing. And he went to the doctor and the doctor examined him carefully and said, "Well, how much are you drinking these days?" And he said, well, he drank about a pint a day. And [the doctor] said, "Well, if you want to improve your hearing you're going to have to cut out your drinkin'."*
>
> *And about ninety days later, why, the fella went back to the doctor and the doctor examined him again and his hearing hadn't improved a bit, and he said, "Now, have you cut out your drinkin'?" And he said, "No." And [the doctor] said, "Now, I can't do anything for you unless you take my advice, follow my prescription. Didn't I tell you when you were here that you should cut out your drinkin' if you wanted to improve your hearing?" He said, "Yes." And [the doctor] said, "Why didn't you do it?" And he said, "Doctor, I got home and considered it, and I just decided I liked what I drank so much better'n what I heard."*

Though conscious that his humble background and drawl made him, at times, the object of derision among the eastern establishment that dominated the capital, the Georgetown crowd, Johnson never changed his stripes to suit his audience. Beyond the de rigueur "just folks" air worn by many southern politicians, Johnson wielded his Hill Country persona almost self-righteously. One could sense him thinking, *I'll show these rich Ivy League boys what this country boy can do*. His resentment toward them was as deep as his accent, and would intensify during his presidency. Despite braggadocio claims that his forefathers "were teachers and lawyers and college presidents and governors when the Kennedys of this country were still tending bar," and his rise in the world beyond the fictional bounds of Horatio Alger, his feelings of inferiority ran just as deep.

A 1965 article by Ed Lahey of Knight Newspapers pointed to this demon in Johnson's nature: "Lyndon Johnson has been fighting a certain something all his life: a sense of insecurity, the feeling of not being accepted. These are only a few expressions of this curse. Whatever you call this thing, Mr. Johnson has got it, period."

BOB HARDESTY: I think that there are times he suffered not from the thought that he was badly educated, but the thought that he came from a school whose degree wasn't honored very highly. I draw that distinction. I think that if he suffered as a southerner and suffered from [those] corn pone stories, he suffered it voluntarily. I can't believe that anybody who went to Washington, if he'd wanted to, couldn't have lost a good deal of his accent. A great many other people do. I think he had a great sense of place. He was a Texan. He was a man from the Hill Country.

DEAN RUSK, secretary of state, 1961–69: [T]he British Prime Minister was in Washington, Harold Wilson, and he had several people with him, and Lyndon Johnson had several people on his side and we sat down at a table. Lyndon Johnson looked around at the table and said, "Well, I see we have four Oxford men and three Cambridge men and four Harvard men and three Yale men and a man from San Marcos State Teachers College." Well, we all chuckled at that a bit, but I was never able to figure out whether this was real or whether he liked to put on a little bit of an act and tease people with it, a little bit like [Democratic senator] Sam Ervin saying, "I'm just a country lawyer from North Carolina." At that point, you better start sewing up your pockets.

HELEN THOMAS, White House correspondent, United Press International: [Johnson had] an inferiority complex about, not Texas per se, but he felt that southerners had not really made their mark in Washington, and that he hadn't gone to Harvard and Yale and that he wasn't Ivy League. He would say, "I've got all these Harvard boys in

my cabinet." You always felt there was a strain. He did have a deep inferiority complex. He overcame everything in his achievements, but it was always there. And a certain paranoia.

■ ■ ■

Even if Johnson was paranoid, it didn't mean that his distrust wasn't rooted in some inherent truth. In fact, there were many among the eastern establishment who looked askance at Johnson, passing judgment that didn't go much beyond the superficial. Johnson had made his political career in reading those with whom he dealt, how they thought, what made them tick. It was a good bet that he picked up on their prejudice and that, given his natural sensitivity and need for approval, it stung.

DEAN RUSK: I gave a long interview to a young woman who was completing a Ph.D. thesis for one of the big Midwestern universities. Her thesis was on the politics of the southern accent, and she had come to the conclusion that in other parts of the country, particularly on the northeastern seaboard, they would gladly take any accent in the world, Oxford, Yiddish, German, Russian, whatever it is, except a southern accent. They were simply convinced that a man with a southern accent is stupid.… [S]he was convinced that Lyndon Johnson suffered from this syndrome.

HUBERT HUMPHREY: He had to have people around him. Very much so. And his whole demeanor was one great big long reach. If you weren't there, he'd just reach a little further to get you. And if he couldn't get you physically, he'd pick up the phone and get you. If he couldn't get you that way, he'd send an airplane to get you. He'd get you.

Except for the "Beautiful People"—these were the people who had no love for Johnson and no respect for him. And he knew it. He tried desperately on one hand to get it, and on the other hand he was angry. Georgetown to him was the center of a political conspiracy against him and his administration.

LBJ: The greatest bigots in the world are the Democrats on the East Side of New York. [James] Eastland [U.S. senator from Mississippi and vocal opponent of civil rights] is charitable compared to an eastern bigot. Anyone south of the Mason-Dixon Line has two strikes against him as far as the eastern liberals are concerned. The best man I know in New York can't help but feel that way.

■ ■ ■

Though lacking in academic pedigree and cultural enlightenment, Johnson was hardly at a disadvantage intellectually, at least within the realm of Washington.

LARRY TEMPLE: I think he tended to exacerbate the problem by saying such things as "I have never read a book in twenty years," and yet he read [extensively] every night. He'd take his night reading in with a myriad of things. He may not have read a work of fiction, and he may not have read a book that was on the *New York Times* best seller list, but he was a very well read individual on what was happening in the country and what was happening in the world on a more current basis than anybody either in or out of government.

GEORGE CHRISTIAN: I doubt that President Johnson ever took the time or maybe never had the time for intellectual pursuits that some other people enjoy. I don't think he really felt that that was his bag, so to speak. He was street smart; he was educated very thoroughly in contemporary affairs. He learned a great deal from personal experiences.

HARRY MCPHERSON, special counsel to the president, 1966–69: If he wasn't the wisest man I ever knew, he was the smartest. He could process and collate things in his mind as fast as anyone I knew. He always wanted something from the person he was talking to, and he was high-minded and focused when trying to get it.

■ ■ ■

But any judgment of Johnson as lacking in polish—Ivy League or otherwise—was not unfounded. Along with his accent and Stetsons came an uncouth earthiness that could make him, in essence, his own caricature. The imperious, earthy LBJ would think nothing of leveraging a distinct home court advantage by meeting aides or lawmakers in his White House bathroom, like a king summoning subjects to his throne, and berating or wheedling them while he sat on the commode. On August 9, 1964, an Oval Office phone call from Johnson to Joe Haggar, scion of the founder of the Haggar Clothing Company, inventor of men's "slacks," shows not only the president's singular attention to detail and penchant for micromanagement, but also a cartoonish coarseness that, for him, wasn't altogether uncommon:

LBJ: *Mr. Haggar?*

Joe Haggar: *Yes, this is Joe Haggar.*

LBJ: *Joe, is your father the one that makes clothes?*

Haggar: *Yes, sir. We're all together.*

LBJ: *Uh-huh. Y'all made me some real lightweight slacks that he just made up on his own, sent to me three or four months ago. It's a kind of a light brown and a light green, rather soft green and soft brown.*

Haggar: *Yes, sir.*

LBJ: *And they're real lightweight. Now, I need about six pairs for summer wear.*

Haggar: *Yes, sir.*

LBJ: *I want a couple, maybe three, of the light brown, kind of an almost powder color, like a powder on a lady's face.*

Haggar: *Yes, sir.*

LBJ: *Then there were some green and some other light pair. If you had a blue in that or a black, then I'd have one blue and one black. I need about six pairs to wear around in the evening when I come in from work.*

Haggar: *Yes, sir.*

LBJ: *I need … they're about a half a inch too tight in the waist.*

Haggar: *Do you recall the exact size? I just want to make sure we get them right for you.*

LBJ: *No, I don't know. Y'all just guessed at them, I think, and sent them, but wouldn't you have the measurement there?*

Haggar: *We'll find them for you.*

LBJ: *I can send you a pair. I want them half an inch larger in the waist than they were before, except I want two or three inches of stuff left back in there, so I can take them up. I vary 10 or 15 pounds a month.*

Haggar: *All right, sir.*

LBJ: *So leave me at least two-and-a-half [or] three inches in the back where I can let them out or take them up and put a—make these a half an inch bigger in the waist. Make the pockets at least an inch longer. My money and my knife and everything fall out.*
Wait just a minute.
[Johnson puts Haggar on hold for about a minute and a half.]

LBJ: *Now, the pockets, when you sit down in a chair, the knife and your money comes out. So I need at least another inch in the pockets.*

Haggar: *Be fine.*

LBJ: *Yeah. Now, another thing: the crotch, down where your nuts hang, is always a little too tight. So when you make them up, give me an inch that I can let out there, because they cut me. They're just like riding a wire fence. These are almost—these are the best I've had anywhere in the United States.*

Haggar: *Fine.*

LBJ: *But, uh, when I gain a little weight they cut me under there. So, leave me … You never do have much of margin there, but see if you can't leave me an inch from where the zipper [belches audibly] ends around under my—back to my bunghole.*

Haggar: *All right, sir.*

LBJ: *So I can let it out there if I need to.*

Haggar: *Be fine.*

LBJ: *Now, be sure you got the best zippers in them. These are good that I have. And if you get those to me, I would sure be grateful.*

Haggar: *Fine. Where would you like them sent, please?*

LBJ: *White House.*

Haggar: *Fine.*

The phone exchange, it must be stated, is an anomaly among the 643 hours of recorded conversations from Johnson's White House tenure. While it may be among Johnson's most famous, showing up for a while as a staple on morning "zoo" radio, none of the other recorded conversations come close to its level of crudity. At the same time, though an extreme reflection of Johnson, it doesn't surprise those who knew him well.

A creature of excess, Johnson would eventually have a sea of custom slacks awaiting him at the LBJ Ranch, along with twenty-eight rooms (with Muzak piped into each), seventy-two phone lines, three planes, a helicopter, and a fleet of cars, including one convertible model that a prankish Johnson would drive into the Pedernales River without informing passengers that it was amphibious. Johnson would spend nearly a quarter of his 1,887 days in the presidency at what would become known as the Texas White House. Official Washington often journeyed there to do business, as did heads of state—German chancellor Ludwig Erhard, made a state visit to the ranch the month after Johnson took office, and other heads of state followed—giving Johnson a chance to show them a little unpretentious Texas hospitality and the wonders of his home soil.

LBJ: I had no regrets about going to Washington and spending a good part of my life there, but I've always found it possible and almost necessary to return to Texas. This country has always been a place where I could come and refill my cup, so to speak, and recharge myself for the more difficult days ahead. Here's where we come to rest our bones and collect our thoughts and to lay out our plans.

I visit with my neighbors, talk to them and my friends. You would be surprised how much—how they can clear up a lot of the things that seem pretty foggy to you when you get here.

■ ■ ■

Regardless of what was happening in the world—in Washington or Guantánamo Bay, Selma or Prague, Watts or Vietnam—there was a nurturing parcel of Johnson's beloved

Hill Country awaiting him in Stonewall. It was, he said later, "the one thing they can't take away from me."

LBJ: In Johnson City the old men sit out in front on the sidewalk and play dominoes all day long. And one of them, after I became president, said, "Old Lyndon sure has moved up in the world, hasn't he?" And the other one said, "Yeah, up the road about a half a mile."

SEEKING THE ULTIMATE TO DO THE POSSIBLE

In the messy aftermath of Dallas, lingering questions about the assassination represented Johnson's most pressing matter upon inheriting the presidency. As rumors of conspiracy began to swirl around the country and throughout the world—many implicating the Soviet Union and Cuba—Johnson feared that a nuclear attack could be triggered.

The assassination tainted Texas and, by extension, in the minds of some, clung to Johnson as a native of the state. No investigation by a Texas judicial authority, or certainly the Dallas Police, would get to the bottom of what actually happened on November 22. Nor would any congressional committee. Johnson quickly came to the conclusion that he would appoint "a high caliber, top flight, blue ribbon group that the whole world would have absolute confidence in" to investigate the assassination. He spent much of his first week in meetings and working the phones with his Cabinet, congressional leaders, and FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, to ensure that he had buy-in on the idea of the commission and that the seven members he would appoint would serve on it. The move fit a long-held and often expressed philosophy—"If they're with you at takeoff, they'll be with you at landing"—that would serve him well in the Oval Office.

On the evening of November 29, 1963, Johnson announced the commission, named for its chairman, Earl Warren, chief justice of the Supreme Court. The commission would also include U.S. senators Richard Russell and John Sherman Cooper, U.S. representatives Hale Boggs and Gerald Ford, former CIA director Allen Dulles, and former World Bank president John McCloy—though Warren and Russell were initial holdouts.

LBJ: I had no question about the Warren Report. I'm no student of it. All I know is this: I was no intimate of [Chief] Justice Warren. I didn't spend ten minutes with him in my life. But I concluded that this was something that [J. Edgar] Hoover and the Massachusetts and Texas courts could not handle. It was so much deeper in [the] affairs of men for the next several centuries. We had to seek the ultimate to do the possible. And who is the ultimate in this country from the standpoint of judiciousness and fairness

and the personification of justice? I thought it had to be Earl Warren, chief justice of the United States.

I know it was bad for the Court to get involved. And Warren knew it best of all and he was vigorously opposed to it.

I called him in.

Before he came I was told that Warren had said he wouldn't do it. He was constitutionally opposed. If I asked, he would say no. He thought the President should be informed of that.

Early in my life I was told that it was doing the impossible that makes you different. I was convinced this had to be done. I had to bring the nation through this thing.

EARL WARREN, chief justice, U.S. Supreme Court, 1953–69; chairman, Warren Commission, 1963–64: I had a call from the Solicitor General and the Deputy Attorney General. They said they wanted to see me, and I said, "Certainly, come right over." So they came over. They told me that the President was contemplating setting up a commission to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy, and they asked me if I would be a member of it. I think they asked me if I would be chairman of it, I'm not sure about that, but I know they asked me if I would be a member of it. And I told them I should not do that; that we had discussed many times in the Court some of the occurrences of the past—Justice Roberts when he went over on the Pearl Harbor affair; [Chief Justice] Bob Jackson when he went to Nuremburg; and some earlier ones too. And practically all of us had expressed the belief that it was not wise for members of the Supreme Court to accept positions on presidential commissions. I had personally expressed that view, and I still think as a general thing it's a sound rule. Because in the first place, we have enough work to do here [at the Court]; and in the second place, it does get you over into another department of government which is supposed to be separated.

And in about one hour I got a call from the White House and was asked if I could come up and see the President. And I said, "Certainly," so I went up there. And the President told me he was greatly disturbed by the rumors that were going around the world about conspiracy and so forth, and that he thought that it might—because it involved both [Nikita] Khrushchev and [Fidel] Castro—that it might even catapult us into a nuclear war if it got a head start, you know, kept growing. And he said that he had just been talking to McNamara, who was Secretary of Defense then, and that McNamara had told him that if we got into a nuclear war that at the first strike we would lose sixty million people. And he impressed upon me the great danger that was involved in having something develop from all of this talk. He said that he had talked to the leaders of both parties and that the members of Congress—Dick Russell and [Hale] Boggs on the Democratic side and [Gerald] Ford and [John Sherman] Cooper on the other side—and John McCloy from New York and Allen Dulles would be willing to serve on that

commission if I was to head it up. And he said, "I think this thing is of such importance that the world is entitled to have the thing presided over by the highest judicial officer in the United States." And he said to me, "You've worn a uniform, you were in the Army in World War I," and he said, "this job is more important than anything you ever did in the uniform."

And I said, "Well, Mr. President, I've told you what my views are, and I also told the Solicitor General and the Attorney General, but," I said, "things can get to a place where your own personal views shouldn't count. And if you think it is this important that I should do it, why, I'll consider that my own personal views don't count, and I will do it."

So that's the way it came about.

■ ■ ■

Richard Russell, Democratic senator from Georgia, also approached his appointment to the committee with reluctance, though his related to his antipathy for Warren. As with Warren, Johnson appealed to his patriotism:

LBJ: I called every man on that commission. Senator [Richard] Russell said, "You mean I have to serve on that commission with Warren?"

I said, "Yes, and don't tell me you're less patriotic than Earl Warren because I don't believe that—and he feels more strongly about this than you do."

Everybody Bobby [Kennedy] wanted to have me appoint, I appointed to that commission.

Telephone conversation between LBJ and Richard Russell, November 29, 1963, 8:55 p.m.:

Richard Russell, U.S. Senator, Georgia (D), 1933–71: *Now, Mr. President, I don't have to tell you of my devotion to you, but I just can't serve on that commission. I'm highly honored that you'd think of me in connection with it. But I couldn't serve on it with Chief Justice Warren. I don't like that man. I don't have any confidence in him at all.... So you get John Stennis ...*

LBJ: *You've never turned your country down. This is not me. This is your country.... You're my man on that commission and you're going to do it! And don't tell me what you can do and what you can't because I can't arrest you and I'm not going to put the FBI on you. But you're goddamned sure going to serve, I'll tell you that.*

In the end, Johnson got his commission, and its conclusion that Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, deranged and determined, had acted alone. The seven men found no credible evidence that Oswald and Jack Ruby, who shot and killed Oswald as he

was being transferred from a Dallas city jail to a county jail on November 24, 1963, "were part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign to assassinate President Kennedy," a finding that has been widely disputed by conspiracy theorists since its publication but never credibly challenged. Though not articulated at the time, doubts remained with Johnson long after the 888-page report was drafted and submitted to him by Warren and the other commission members with little ceremony on September 24, 1964. In a segment that never made it into a three-part CBS interview with Walter Cronkite in early 1970, Johnson said, "I can't honestly say that I have ever been completely relieved of the fact that there might have been international connections [in the assassination of Kennedy]. I have not completely discounted it." While the statement was edited out of the interview when it aired in April of the same year, as Johnson invoked a long-held right among presidents to order the removal of material that might compromise national security, his sentiments later became known.

EARL WARREN: I've tried to figure why he said it. I know he was very devoted to Dick Russell, and I just sort of thought he said that somewhat to placate Dick Russell because Dick had previously made the same kind of statement, although he signed the report just like the rest of us, in which we said there was no evidence of anything of that kind.

I occasionally see someone who worked on it—either one of the lawyers or one of the members of the commission—and I ask them if they have ever heard of anything to discredit the report factually, and they say no, they've never heard anything. And I think that's true.

■ ■ ■

Whatever doubts Johnson may have harbored about the report's conclusion, he never disputed the importance of the commission itself.

LBJ: Can you imagine what would have happened if we had no inquest on Kennedy? If there had been no Warren Commission, we would have been as dead as slavery.

"AN AMERICAN BILL"

Conscious of asserting himself as president, Johnson pursued his legislative priorities with characteristic intensity. "We can pass the tax bill in a week," he told Senate minority leader Everett Dirksen, in a phone conversation on November 29, 1963, "but Civil Rights is gonna take so much longer." It would take him until the end of February

1964 to get his tax bill passed; but he was right that the Civil Rights Act would take longer to clear the hurdles posed by a reluctant Congress.

Given the intractability of racism in mid-twentieth-century America, it's a wonder that Johnson was optimistic that meaningful reform could come at all, let alone the legislation he was proposing, the most far-reaching since Reconstruction. Racism and bigotry blighted nearly every corner of the country, but was practiced most virulently and openly in the Deep South, where it was culturally ingrained. Second-class citizenry for people of color included separate and disparate schools and public facilities and discrimination in hiring and voting. Though Johnson's upbringing was as much southern as it was western, particularly as it related to attitudes toward race, he was never fully aware of the obstacles for American citizens of color until the 1950s. An exchange with Gene Williams, an African American man who, along with his wife, Helen, worked as domestic help for the Johnson family, gave Johnson clear perspective on how racism was an everyday fact of life.

LBJ: Well it might amaze you, but I think a black boy, who only finished elementary school [and] who drove my car back and forth from Texas after each session of Congress, had more to do with bringing about a semblance of equal justice in this country than any president from Lincoln to Johnson. We had to come back to Texas every year after the congressional session ended. And as plane schedules got better, Mrs. Johnson and I would fly back to Texas with the children. And it would be up to the black man that worked for us to drive our car and bring the cook and all the kitchen utensils and the baby's [necessities].

And he came in one evening after I finished a hectic session in the Senate and he said, "Senator, I's leaving in the morning about daylight. You got … anything else you want to send?" And I said, "Well, you going to take Beagle the dog?" And he said, "Yes, sir, yes, sir. Do I have to take Beagle?" And I said, "Why of course, Beagle's a member of the family. We can't leave him here all summer when we're in Texas. Why, why? Don't you want to take Beagle with you?" He said, "Yes, sir, I guess so."

Dejectedly he went back to the kitchen where he'd been washing dishes.

And I said, "Gene, come tell me why you don't want to take Beagle."

And he said—and these are his words, "A niggra has enough trouble getting through the South without a damn dog." And that for the first time really aroused in my consciousness the terrible injustice that we whites had perpetrated in a nation where men were supposed to be created equal for almost two centuries.

He elaborated some. He said: "We drive all day but when we want to go to the bathroom just like you all do, we have to go out a side road and our women have to get behind a tree because we can't go into a filling station like you do. We get hungry and we've got to eat just like you do, but we have to go across the tracks to a grocery store and get some cheese and crackers because we can't go in a café. Or if some hamburger

stand would take a chance on being insulted and try to get by them, we have to go around to the back and wait till everybody else is served to get something to eat. We drive hard all day long and it comes to 10 or 11 o'clock and Helen and I want to go to sleep. We can't go in a motel or a hotel. We have to drive across the tracks and find some boarding house way down there where they'll take us in for the night because we're not allowed in the hotels or motels in the country." He said, "You're not allowed in any place almost even across the tracks if you've got a damn dog you got to take with you."

I was chagrined at my insensitivity to my fellow man. And out of that conversation, when I got to be President, I urged in my first statement that we start on a course of equal justice for our fellow man.

■ ■ ■

His conscience heavy, Johnson championed the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and the Civil Rights Act of 1960 as Senate majority leader, overcoming the sectional rivalries that divided his party. Though the bills were rendered largely toothless in committee, their symbolism—the first civil rights legislation in nearly a hundred years—made them significant even if their effects weren't.

Johnson faced similar challenges in getting meaningful civil rights legislation through Congress as president in 1964.

His first hurdle toward the bill's passage was in the House, where it was hung up in the House Rules Committee, presided over by the openly racist Howard Worth "Judge" Smith, from Virginia's Eighth District. It was Smith's heavy hand that had gutted the earlier civil rights legislation. In an effort to outflank Smith, Johnson implored *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham to feature front-page articles every day on those House members who, by virtue of their passivity in not signing a petition to have the bill discharged from Smith's committee, prevented the bill from progressing:

> *Now every person that doesn't sign that petition has got to be fairly regarded as being anti-civil rights.... But I don't think any American can say that he won't let 'em have a hearing either in the committee or on the floor. That is worse than Hitler did. So we've got to get ready for that and we've got to get ready every day. Front page. In and out. Individuals. "Why are you against a hearing?" Point 'em up, and have their pictures, and have editorials, and have everything else that is in a dignified way for a hearing on the [House] floor. We've only got 150 Democrats; the rest of them are Southerners. So we've got to make every Republican [sign]. We ought to say, "Here is the party of Lincoln. Here is the image of Lincoln, and whoever it is that is against a hearing and against a vote in the House of Representatives, is not a man who believes in giving humanity a fair shake. Vote against it if he*

wants to. Let him do it. But don't let him refuse to sign that petition! Now if we could get that signed, that would practically break their back in the Senate because they could see that [this movement] here is a steamroller.

As the *Post* began featuring articles throwing light on the efforts of Smith and others on the Rules Committee to thwart the bill, pressure began to mount. When Smith's position and standing as committee chairman became tenuous, he agreed to hearings on the bill, to be conducted in early January. After three weeks of debate, the committee voted 11 to 4 to clear the bill and send it to the House floor. There it passed by a vote of 290 to 130.

JAKE PICKLE, U.S. representative, Texas (D), 1963–95: I voted for the Civil Rights Act, and it was not an easy vote for someone from my [Texas] district. We took the vote late that night, and then I went out with some friends. When I came in, early in the morning, the lady at the White House switchboard rang and said, "The President has been calling for you."

I said, "Well, I'll call in the morning."

She said, "No, he wants you to call [now]."

I said, "I will get him first thing in the morning."

She said, "No, it's the President himself calling and he said that's what you would say, that you would call in the morning. You've got to return that call [now]."

So I did return the call. And when I got him, the President said, "I … made a pledge to myself I was not going to let this night go by until I could call you and tell you that your President was immensely proud of your vote tonight." He remembered loyalty above almost anything else.

■ ■ ■

Johnson's hurdle in the Senate hit a little closer to home. Among those sitting silently in the House chamber on the evening of November 27, 1963, as Johnson made clear his intention of passing civil rights legislation, was the powerful Democratic senator and mentor to Johnson, Richard Russell, who had served in the body since 1933. Russell had opposed Kennedy's civil rights efforts, vowing to "resist to the bitter end any measure or any movement which would have a tendency to bring about social equality and intermingling and amalgamation of the races in our [southern] states." He would do the same to Johnson's attempts.

But Russell also knew that his old friend and Senate colleague would not allow a "watered-down, ineffective" bill as in 1957 and 1960. Johnson would accept nothing less than laws that rendered illegal the racial discrimination common in much of the country, particularly the South—and he had the legislative wherewithal to get it passed.

Accordingly, as the White House pushed for the passage of a civil rights bill in the summer of 1964, Russell closed ranks, lining up eighteen southern Democrats to filibuster the bill on the Senate floor, a tactic that had effectively diminished the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960.

ORVILLE FREEMAN, secretary of agriculture, 1961–69: I was visiting with Dick Russell. He was very reserved, very impressive, quiet, seldom spoke very strongly, and I hadn't any real intimacy with him. But suddenly he said to me, "Wait until that man Johnson learns what the power of the presidency can do. Things are going to happen around here."

And he said, "Why, the son of a bitch will tear your arm off at the shoulder and beat your head in with it."

I could hardly believe my ears. And then he said, "And he is going to pass the Civil Rights Bill. I am going to oppose it. I don't think Kennedy could have passed it. But mark my word, he is going to pass it."

WILLARD DEASON: Occasionally, when LBJ got lonesome, I got invited down to have breakfast with him. I went down one morning and he was putting on his shirt as he always did, tying his tie and talking and all at the same time, and he kind of looked down at the floor, sad, and he said, "You know, I've got to do a hell of a thing today."

"What's that Mr. President?"

He said, "I've got to run over Dick Russell."

JACK VALENTI: [H]e called to the White House the patriarch of the Senate, his friend, his mentor, the man who was the most responsible for making him majority leader: Richard Russell of Georgia. I sat with the two of them that day, Russell and the President almost knee-to-knee, these men with their long-held, loving friendship that bound them together. There on the second floor of the Executive Mansion, the living quarters of the President, they talked.

Johnson leaned toward Russell, as he was apt to do. He said, "Dick, I love you and I owe you. But I'm going to tell you something. I'm going to run over you if you challenge me on this civil-rights bill," which later became the Civil Rights Bill of 1964. "I aim to pass this bill, Dick, only this time there is going to be no caviling, no compromising, no holding back. This bill is going to pass. And no one is going to stand in my way. I just want you to know that."

Russell listened. He was quiet for a minute. Then he said in those familiar, softly rolling tones, "Well, Mr. President, you may do just that. But I'm here today to tell you it's going to cost you the election, and it's going to cost you the South."

Johnson was silent for a moment, listening intently. Then he spoke very, very quietly. "Dick, if that's the price for this bill, I will gladly pay it."

■ ■ ■

The Senate's filibuster began on March 26, 1964, and would last through fifty-seven days of debate. In its midst, Johnson cultivated Illinois Republican senator and minority leader Everett Dirksen, who was key to delivering what members of Johnson's own party were determined to scotch. As Senate minority leader, Dirksen could rally enough Republican support to invoke cloture, a Senate rule that would limit debate and call for an immediate vote on the bill, putting an end to Russell's filibuster.

Telephone conversation between LBJ and Everett Dirksen,
May 13, 1964, 4:30 p.m.:

Everett Dirksen, Senate minority leader, Illinois (R), 1959–69: *I talked to Dick [Russell] this morning and he gave me no comfort. I said, "Now, I thought that we vote on the Wednesday," meaning yesterday. But I said, "What are you going to do?" And he said, "Well, you're not going to vote this week, because we're going to keep the show going." I said, "Well, what about next week?" [He said,] "I can give you no commitment, because we'll have a caucus of our members Monday morning." Well, I said, "Dick, you're going to have to fish or cut bait, because I think that we've now gone far enough. And I think that we've been fair."*

LBJ: *Well, you've got—*

Dirksen: *So that's about where it stands.*

LBJ: *You've got ... that's exactly right. That's what you've got to do; you've got to take care of your own people, and you're doing that. And I saw the other day ... we don't want this to be a Democrat bill, we want it to be an American bill. And if these schools are out, they're coming out the end of this month, and if they're out and we haven't got a bill, we're in a hell of a shape. We're going to be in trouble, anyway.*

Dirksen: *Well, we're going to try.*

LBJ: *I saw your exhibit at the World's Fair, and it said, "The Land of Lincoln," so you're worthy of the "Land of Lincoln." And the man from Illinois is going to pass the bill, and see that you get proper attention and credit.*

Sensing the inevitability of defeat, Russell reluctantly put an end to his filibuster. As he had predicted, Johnson prevailed. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed on June 19, by almost three-quarters of the Senate vote, 73 votes to 27.

LUCI JOHNSON, younger daughter of Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson: After that piece of legislation was passed, he went and took the first pen and gave it to Everett Dirksen. And we got back into the car and I said, "Daddy, there were all those civil rights leaders up there! Why, why didn't you give that first pen, that most important pen, to, to one of these greater civil rights heroes?"

He looked at me again, shook his head, and said, "You, you don't get it, do you?" And I [said], "No, I don't!" And he said, "Because all those civil rights leaders were already for that legislation. I didn't have to do anything to convince them. It was Everett Dirksen, making the courageous stand that he did, stepping up to the plate like he did, and bringing the people he brought with him that made the difference, and made the civil rights leaders' dream, and my dream, come true. That's why he got the first pen."

■ ■ ■

Yet, despite its historic nature, the passage of the bill was not an exultant moment for the president.

BILL MOYERS: The night that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed, I found [Johnson] in his bedroom, exceedingly depressed. The headline of the bulldog edition of *The Washington Post* said, "Johnson Signs Civil Rights Act." The airwaves were full of the discussions about how unprecedented this was and historic, and yet he was depressed. I asked him why. He said, "I think we've just delivered the South to the Republican Party for the rest of my life, and yours."

That thought hasn't been lost on me.… We won that election but we lost the war, in time, because we lost the South.

JAMES DAVIS, employee of the Johnson family: The president told me, he said, "Look, I'm gonna get this Civil Rights Bill passed, but I'm going to lose a lot of friends." And he said, "[T]he country might go Republican, the South might go Republican," he told me that.

And I know one of his best friends, the senator from Georgia—What was his name? Russell—he used to come to the Ranch all the time [around] hunting season.

Well, after that Civil Rights Bill passed, I never saw Senator Russell from that day to this. [Russell did come to the ranch on November 23, 1964.]

JOHN GARDNER, secretary of health, education, and welfare, 1965–68: No one understood better than Lyndon Johnson that inertia of the political system and the deep resistance to cultural change. And no one was better equipped by temperament and experience to supply the enormous drive that was needed to deal with it. It was not the

kind of effort designed to win popularity contests. He pushed and he shoved; he hammered away, he left bruises, he lost friends, he angered many, and he never rested; he never rested. And the system was set in motion.

JOSEPH CALIFANO: To me no greater example of presidential courage exists than Lyndon Johnson's commitment in the area of civil rights. He fought for racial equality even when it hurt him and clobbered his party in the South.

THE KENNEDYS

Throughout his career as vice president and president and on into history, Lyndon Johnson would be inextricably tethered to the Kennedy family. It was John Kennedy's pragmatic political decision to put Johnson on the Democratic ticket as his running mate in 1960—over the protestations of his brother and campaign chief Bobby Kennedy—that ultimately propelled Johnson into the White House after Dallas, and it was Bobby Kennedy's resistance to Johnson's Vietnam policy as a high-profile New York senator that accelerated Johnson's already considerable woes in the latter years of his presidency.

Like all of his relationships, and reflecting his own nature, Johnson's relationships with the Kennedys were complicated—only more so. It was marked by a resentment that ate away at him in his weakest moments. Fiercely competitive, Johnson was one-upped by the Kennedys from the start. Their Ivy League polish, megawatt smiles, and acceptance by the eastern establishment were advantages to be sure, but nowhere more so than in Johnson's own mind. His resentment long predated either man's attainment of the Oval Office. "Kennedy was pathetic as a congressman and as a senator," Johnson reflected later. "He didn't know how to address the chair." Yet that winning image and those connections helped John Kennedy, a Senate backbencher, leapfrog over him, the all-powerful Senate majority leader, to capture the 1960 presidential nomination.

After Kennedy's assassination, as the history of his administration was being written, much of it through a gauzy Camelot veil, none of its glory reflected back on his vice president. This was particularly evident in accounts of Kennedy's crowning moment, his cool leadership in outmaneuvering the Soviet Union in the Cuban Missile Crisis, preventing what might have resulted in nuclear winter.

DEAN RUSK: One curious thing reflecting LBJ is the way those who have tried to re-create the Cuban Missile Crisis have ignored LBJ's role in it. He spent long periods of time with Kennedy alone in the Oval Office during that week of the crisis. He played a much stronger role in that crisis than has been noticed. Now, part of that [1974 ABC special] program "The Missiles of October" was clearly based on Bobby Kennedy's

little book *Thirteen Days*, and for all sorts of reasons that little book does not highlight in any way LBJ's role.

LBJ: Bobby's story on the missile crisis was another [William] Manchester deal. He said, "Also on occasion Johnson came in." They had thirty-seven meetings and I was in thirty-six of them. I missed one. I was in Honolulu at Kennedy's request. When he was out in Chicago and got that cold [that brought him back to Washington], we both agreed we had to show folks things were not so tense.

He called me back. I went swimming with him. He had Mac [McGeorge] Bundy brief me.

■ ■ ■

Most significantly, John and Bobby Kennedy were embraced by the media and the American public for the ideals that captured the best hopes of their era—civil rights and social justice—an impression deepened by their martyrdom and adding to their luster. Despite his remarkable political fortitude in putting those shared ideals into law, the same resplendent acknowledgment and esteem never found its way to Lyndon Johnson. For a man who craved approbation, that may have hurt most of all.

It may well have been, as many suspected, that President Kennedy would have fallen short in getting the Civil Rights Act passed. Martin Luther King Jr., among others, doubted that Kennedy could have gotten it through Congress. Though passage of the act owed much to Johnson's legislative prowess and political courage, most of the credit nevertheless went to Kennedy. If so, it was largely due to Johnson himself, who used Kennedy's martyrdom to impress upon reluctant congressmen that it was what Kennedy would have wanted—just as Johnson would have employed any effective tactic to get controversial legislation passed. Johnson also did the honorable thing by giving Kennedy credit for its passage, but paradoxically resented it when the achievement became more Kennedy's than his.

LBJ: On civil rights, I recommended to the President [Kennedy] that no savings and loan association [or] FDIC bank could continue if they did not make loans [to people of color] for open housing. Bobby called and said, "What are you trying to do, defeat the President?" We didn't get any executive order [on civil rights] from Kennedy, but we [the Johnson administration] got it in a bill later. I would try to get Congress to pass it in a bill, and we passed that bill before the year [1964] was out.

But the media was so charmed [by Kennedy]. It was like a rattlesnake charming a rabbit. But I believe men will look back on this era, fifteen years or so from now, they will look back and say, "Okay, how did we do it?"

NICHOLAS KATZENBACH, attorney general, 1965–66; undersecretary of state, 1966–69: [Johnson] made a point of associating the 1964 [Civil Rights] Act with Kennedy, a very generous, very human thing to do. But he did believe in civil rights strongly and firmly and unequivocally, and wanted to be identified with that. That's why we got the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

■ ■ ■

Despite sentiments that were at times tainted by pettiness, Johnson also respected the Kennedy brothers for their intelligence and political savvy. In particular, it seemed that Johnson appreciated the role John Kennedy had grown into as a "great public hero." By some accounts, their relationship evolved throughout Kennedy's presidency—as Kennedy evolved as president—into one of greater admiration, even affection, though others didn't see it that way.

LBJ: [President Kennedy and I] were not like brothers, we were not constant companions. I don't recall that we ever had an element of bitterness or deep feeling enter into any of our discussions.… I don't think of any—even in the tenseness of the [1960] campaign that we, even in the periods when we were aligned on different sides of a question, which was very rare—that I ever saw any indication of anything but friendship and respect.

BARRY GOLDWATER: I think in the first two and a half years in his presidency he was awed by the Kennedys. I don't think he ever liked the Kennedys. I don't think he ever respected the Kennedys.… I know we could get under his skin by saying, "You know, Lyndon, you said that just like Jack would have said it," and then, God, he'd get red! I think there was sort of a natural resentment from a poor-born Texan toward a rich-born Massachusetts boy.

WARREN ROGERS: [Johnson] had a difficulty with the Kennedy image, as far as projecting himself on television or any other way. He was not treated too well as vice president under Kennedy, if you'll remember—not by Kennedy so much as by the Kennedy supporters, the Kennedy followers. There were jokes about Lyndon Johnson being uncouth and not quite as smooth as some of the Harvard people thought he should be. I don't think he got over that. I think he resented that at all times.

TED KENNEDY, U.S. senator, Massachusetts (D), 1962–2009: I always was under the understanding that the relationship between President Kennedy and Johnson was …

easy and cordial … based on a good deal of mutual respect and understanding.

■ ■ ■

Johnson's relationship with Bobby Kennedy was anything but easy and cordial. At best, Bobby Kennedy regarded Johnson warily, and no love was lost between the two men. Whatever contempt Kennedy had for Johnson, Johnson returned in kind.

LBJ: I thought I was dealing with a child. I never did understand Bobby. I never did understand how the press built him into the great figure he was. He came into public life as [Joseph] McCarthy's counsel and he was [John] McClellan's counsel and then tapped Martin Luther King's telephone wire.

It's hard for me to reconcile a man who had been McCarthy's counsel and McClellan's counsel when he investigated the labor situation—there's bound to be a little ambition there somewhere.

Martin Luther King's activity was financed by Kennedy. He tapped the phone with his right hand and gave him hundred dollar bills with his left.

TED KENNEDY: I think there were some obvious, strong personality differences between President Johnson and Senator Robert Kennedy. I think there was a strong belief, certainly on my part, that President Johnson had carried through the legacy of President Kennedy in terms of domestic policy. There was broad disagreement on Southeast Asia, which led to increasing kinds of personal antagonism between Senator Robert Kennedy and the President. I think there was a good deal of mutual respect for each other in terms of ability and concern and commitment.

GEORGE MCGOVERN, U.S. senator, South Dakota (D), 1963–81: Bobby had too much power to suit Lyndon and, you know, he hadn't earned it. He [had] earned it [only] because he was a brother to the president, and I think he also knew that Bobby played a key role in Jack winning the nomination in 1960 and defeating Lyndon Johnson. Bobby was given the role of being the tough guy, the guy to say no, and the guy to make the final decisions. I think that Johnson kind of liked Jack Kennedy but didn't like this little brat [who] was throwing his weight around.

BARRY GOLDWATER: It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for [Johnson] to have hidden [his feelings]. Any casual conversation that Bobby's name came up [in], you could see in his face right away that he just didn't like him.

HARRY MIDDLETON: [Johnson] would have liked a closer relationship with Kennedy, but he knew it couldn't have happened. He said, "We could have spent a lifetime trying to become close but there was too much separating us."

Johnson was like Will Rogers: He never met a man he didn't like. It was difficult for him to accept people who didn't like him. The animosity between Johnson and Kennedy sprang from Kennedy's point of view; Kennedy especially didn't like Johnson, and that was a thorn in [Johnson's] side.

■ ■ ■

Antagonisms between Johnson and Bobby Kennedy began brewing long before Johnson become president. After Johnson accepted John Kennedy's offer to join the ticket as his running mate at the 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, the disapproving Bobby Kennedy tried to get Johnson to back out.

JOHN CONNALLY: At the 1960 convention, Jack Kennedy came down to see Mr. Johnson and offered him the vice presidency, and within fifteen minutes Bobby Kennedy came down to the Johnson suite.

Mr. Johnson did not see him. Speaker [Sam] Rayburn and I met Bobby Kennedy, who said in effect, "Lyndon has to get off this ticket. Lyndon cannot be on this ticket. This convention is going to go crazy. It's going crazy. He's got to withdraw." The Speaker listened to this for a while and finally he just said, "Ah," and spit, and walked out of the room.

Bobby left. He came back a second time. Nobody would see him but me. I went again into the bedroom and visited with him. He said that the convention was in an uproar, that Walter Reuther was leading a revolt, and that Johnson had to withdraw; that it was a terrible mistake that his brother had made in naming Johnson to the ticket.

I said, "Bobby, you're talking to the wrong man. Your brother offered him the vice presidency. If he doesn't want him to have it, he has to withdraw it. Johnson is not now going to withdraw from the offer. Jack Kennedy has to withdraw it if indeed he wants it withdrawn. And it has to come directly from him."

Bobby came in a third time; I won't repeat the conversation, but essentially with the same purpose. I said, "Look, let's don't kid ourselves. Jack Kennedy could control this convention, Walter Reuther notwithstanding. Don't give me that. If there is some reason John Kennedy wants Lyndon Johnson off the ticket, he has to call him."

That call never came.

NICHOLAS KATZENBACH: [M]aybe President Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson understood politics at that point better than young Bobby.

LBJ: [Bobby] said Jack wanted me but he wanted me to know that the liberals will raise hell. He said Mennen Williams will raise hell.

I said, "Piss on Mennen Williams."

He said, "You know they'll embarrass you."

I said, "The only question is—is it good for the country and is it good for the Democratic Party?"

Prior to this, the President said, "Can I sell [it] to [Sam Rayburn]?"

Rayburn was against it because the Vice President is not as important as the Majority Leader. The vice president is generally like a Texas steer—he's lost his social standing in the society in which he resides. He's like a stuck pig in a screwing match.

Kennedy talked Rayburn into it. He said, "Mr. Rayburn, we can carry New York, Massachusetts, New England, but no Southern state unless we have something that will appeal to them." He asked, "Do you want Nixon to be President? He called you a traitor."

Rayburn always thought Nixon called him a traitor. Nixon brought me the speeches and they contained the phrase "treasonable to do that" or something like that. I thought Nixon's version was more just—but I lost the argument with Rayburn. Rayburn came in that morning and said, "You ought to do it [take the vice-presidential nomination]." I said, "How come you say this morning I ought to when last night you said I shouldn't?"

He said, "Because I'm a sadder and wiser and smarter man this morning than I was last night."

He said, "Nixon will ruin this country in eight years. And we're just as sure to have [Nixon] as God made little apples."

■ ■ ■

After Johnson took on the vice presidency, it was Bobby Kennedy, the president's attorney general and closest adviser, who often relegated Johnson to the sidelines.

LBJ: Bobby elbowed me out. Many times [John Kennedy] talked to me about the most intimate things one man can discuss. He asked me to do things [as vice president]. I'm sure Bobby didn't approve.

■ ■ ■

Bobby Kennedy's disapproval gave rise to Johnson's fear that one of the things Kennedy was trying to elbow him out of was the vice presidency itself, as rumors surfaced that Kennedy was working behind the scenes to remove Johnson from the 1964 ticket.

NICHOLAS KATZENBACH: I'm really quite confident that [Bobby] was not [working toward Johnson's removal from the ticket], that he regarded it as impossible. But I think Vice President Johnson was very concerned about that.

I think he took it more seriously than Bobby might have done. Sometimes Bobby made mistakes; we all do. But I think by that time, he wouldn't have made that big a mistake.

■ ■ ■

Bobby Kennedy hung on in the Johnson administration as attorney general, the post he had taken up under his brother, for almost ten months before resigning on September 3, 1964, after which Johnson gave the position over to Katzenbach.

NICHOLAS KATZENBACH: It must have given President Johnson pause when he named me attorney general, that I had worked as Bobby Kennedy's deputy. They did not get along well together. They were totally different kinds of people even though they shared many of the same objectives for society. They had such different personalities, such different ways of going about things.

I know Bobby Kennedy did not like LBJ. But he told me, "I cannot fault the President on his domestic programs. He has been magnificent." This was at the time he was criticizing him on Vietnam.

TED KENNEDY: [Robert Kennedy's] mood during that whole period throughout the latter part of 1963 and the early part of 1964—he wasn't really sort of thinking so much in terms of his own future or what plans he might have other than really spending time with Mrs. Kennedy and with the children, and really drawing within himself.

I remember—I think it was in the middle part of the winter of 1964—he mentioned to President Johnson his willingness to go to Saigon as an American ambassador over there. I know he had thought about this and made that offer, which President Johnson turned down. I heard afterwards it was primarily because he was concerned about the security of Robert Kennedy. So, in his mind he was thinking about—I'd say by early spring—alternatives.

DEAN RUSK: [Bobby] volunteered to LBJ to go to Saigon as our ambassador, and I vetoed it on the grounds that this country could not take another Kennedy tragedy and that Saigon was too dangerous a post for Bobby. Ironically, look what happened. If I had let him go to Saigon, maybe he'd still be alive. Who knows?

■ ■ ■

With the post in Saigon a closed door, Bobby Kennedy set his sights on the U.S. Senate, just as his brothers had done. Benefiting from Johnson's considerable help on the campaign trail, Kennedy secured a seat from New York in the fall—"This is ma boy," he told jubilant crowds as they appeared together, "I want you to elect ma boy!"—though it was not the fulfillment of Kennedy's ambitions. Throughout the bulk of Johnson's tenure in the White House, those ambitions and the inherent differences between Johnson and Kennedy would continue to create dissention between the two men—and problems for Johnson.

HARRY MCPHERSON: It must have been very difficult for [Johnson]. Here is this lightweight who hadn't done much of anything and this heavyweight who had been the all-powerful Senate majority leader and who had accomplished so much—Bobby Kennedy [had] worked for Joe McCarthy, and Johnson had brought McCarthy down. And the lightweight heaps contempt on the heavyweight, and Johnson regarded him in kind. Then Bobby crosses the finish line in the New York Senate race due to a gale force wind called LBJ.

■ ■ ■

Johnson's relationships with other members of the Kennedy family were strong. Kennedy patriarch Joe Kennedy held Johnson in the highest regard. As Ted Kennedy noted, had the presidential nomination gone to Johnson in 1956, Joe Kennedy supported the notion of JFK accepting a spot on the ticket as Johnson's running mate, a position he believed his son should otherwise have rejected.

TED KENNEDY: My first real direct contact with President Johnson was in an indirect way. It was at the time of the Democratic Convention [of 1956]. There was some speculation for two weeks prior to the nomination that President Kennedy might be interested in running for the vice presidential nomination. And there were conversations during the two or three days before the nomination itself with my father. My father was under a strong belief that President Kennedy should not make the effort to secure the vice presidential nomination. But the one exception to the rule in his conversations that I remember quite clearly was he felt that the only one that President Kennedy should serve as the vice president would be then-Senator Johnson. My father had a good deal of respect for Senator Johnson.

■ ■ ■

Not surprisingly, Joe Kennedy was supportive of Johnson as his son's running mate four years later, a factor that likely helped to override any objections by Bobby Kennedy.

TED KENNEDY: I remember [Johnson's] name being discussed by the President [Kennedy] and my father the day, or the evening, or two evenings, before the actual balloting, the nomination. Once again my father was sympathetic to that possibility. There were other names that were being considered: Senator [Henry] Jackson, Senator [Stuart] Symington, Senator [Hubert] Humphrey, and also Orville Freeman. And there was some consideration for one or two of the Midwestern governors. I've always believed the personal preference for [Johnson] had been my father's.

LBJ: With Joe and Rose, and Jackie and Ethel—and except for one incident with Teddy—our relations were always warm and friendly—non-political—they were all helpful to me. I have a feeling that Joe Kennedy felt his boy had no chance to be president except for what I did as majority leader.

■ ■ ■

Just as Johnson felt a responsibility as a "caretaker" of President Kennedy's people and policies, so he felt an obligation to his widow, Jacqueline Kennedy. As the machine of government kept humming in the wake of Kennedy's assassination, the Johnson family remained at their home, The Elms, for eleven days to allow Mrs. Kennedy and her two children, seven-year-old Caroline and two-year-old John, who would turn three on November 25, to remain at the White House, as a means of easing the pain of their transition. (The children continued to go to school at the White House until shortly before Christmas.) On November 26, the day after her husband's state funeral services in Washington, Mrs. Kennedy penned Johnson an eight-page letter thanking him for the kindnesses he had extended, including marching behind Kennedy's casket during the funeral procession. "You did not have to do that," she wrote, "I am sure that many people forbid you to take such a risk—but you did it anyway."

> *[M]ost of all Mr. President, thank you for the way you have always treated me—the way you and Lady Bird have always treated me—before, when Jack was alive, and now as President.*
>
> *I think the relationship of the Presidential and Vice Presidential families could be a rather strained one. From the history I have been reading ever since I came to the White House, I gather it often was in the past.*
>
> *But you were Jack's right arm—and I always thought the greatest act of a gentleman that I had seen on this earth—was how you—the Majority Leader when he came to the Senate as just another little freshman who looked up to you and took orders from you, could then*

serve as Vice President to a man who had served under you and been taught by you.

But more than that we were friends, all four of us.

After Mrs. Kennedy and her children moved out of the White House and into nearby Georgetown, Johnson remained attentive. Even Mrs. Johnson recognized that he could get a little "mushy" when it came to Mrs. Kennedy.

Telephone conversation between LBJ and Jacqueline Kennedy, December 2, 1963, 2:42 p.m.:

Mrs. Kennedy: *Mr. President?*

LBJ: *I just wanted you to know you are loved and by so many and so much.…*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Oh Mr. President—*

LBJ: *… and I am one of them.*

Mrs. Kennedy: I *tried, I didn't dare bother you again, but I got Kenny O'Donnell over here to give you a message if he ever saw you. Did he give it to you yet?*

LBJ: *No …*

Mrs. Kennedy: *About my letter? That was waiting for me last night?*

LBJ: *No … Listen, sweetie, now first thing you gotta learn—and you've got some things to learn—and one of 'em is that you don't bother me. You give me strength.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *But I wasn't gonna send you in one more letter—and I was just scared you'd answer it!*

LBJ: *Don't send me anything, don't send me anything. You just come over and put your arm around me. That's all you do. And when you haven't got anything else to do, let's take a walk. Let's walk around the backyard and let me tell you how much you mean to all of us and how we can carry on if you give us a little strength.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *But you know what I want to say to you about that letter? I know how rare a letter is in a president's handwriting. Do you know that I've got more in your handwriting than I do in Jack's now?*

LBJ: *Oh, well …*

Mrs. Kennedy: *And for you to write it at this time, and then to send me that thing today of, you know, your tape announcement and everything …*

LBJ: *I want you to just know this, that I told my mama a long time ago, when everybody else gave up about my election in '48 …*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Yeah?*

LBJ: *My mother and my wife and my sisters—and you females—got a lot of courage that we men don't have. And so we have to rely on you and depend on you and you've got something to do. You've got the president relying on you—and this is not the first one you've had! So, there're not many women, you know, running around with a good many presidents. So, you just, you just bear that in mind that you've got the biggest job of your life!*

Mrs. Kennedy: *[Laughter] She ran around with two presidents. That's what they'll say about me. [Both laughing] Okay. Any time!*

LBJ: *[Kissing sounds] Goodbye, darlin'.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *Thank you for calling, Mr. President. Goodbye.*

LBJ: *Bye, sweetie. Do come by.*

Mrs. Kennedy: *I will.*

The chummy White House stroll Johnson proposed would not come to pass. Despite his effusive attempts to win her approval—hers would have been a big feather in his cap—Mrs. Kennedy politely withheld it. Undoubtedly influenced by Bobby Kennedy and pained by seeing Johnson in the role that had been so elegantly filled by her late husband, Mrs. Kennedy pulled away from Johnson soon after returning to private life. Conversations with historian and Kennedy White House aide, Arthur Schlesinger, recorded in March 1964, and released in August 2011, reflect her less-than-charitable private view of Johnson, whose legacy, she knew, would one day compete with Kennedy's. Far from Kennedy's "right arm," she characterized Johnson as an egotist and a do-nothing vice president, and held little hope for him as president.

JACQUELINE KENNEDY [Y]ou know what's going to happen. Lyndon can ride on some of the great things Jack did, and a lot of them will go forward because they can't be stopped—civil rights, the tax bill, the gold drain stuff. And maybe he'll do something with the Alliance and everything, but when something really crisis happens [*sic*], that's when they're really going to miss Jack. And I just want [the people] to know that it's because they don't have that kind of president, and not because it was inevitable.

■ ■ ■

That Mrs. Kennedy failed to recognize that Johnson had already laudably faced the first days of his presidency, precipitously steeped in crisis in the wake of her husband's assassination, was understandable. Regardless, as the seeds of Kennedy's legend began to be sown, there would be sufficient crises ahead that would test the mettle of Lyndon Johnson.

Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson converse in the private residence of the White House, 1964