# Reappraising the Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson

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American presidencies get reappraised, but not on a regular and predictable schedule. Anniversaries are one occasion; the the occurrence of major events or trends that bring remembrance can be another. The 1960s and 1970s, years of contention and conflict, have seemed ripe for a look rooted in realism, some sympathy, a bit of humility, and, maybe, a bit of neo-patriotism. Lyndon B. Johnson's time in the White House, it seems to me, is ripe for revisionism. Already, recent years have seen some attention being given to reassessment of the "promise" of President John F. Kennedy, and the "failures" of President Richard M. Nixon. Ours has not yet been a time, however, for general change in attitude toward the importance in history of the dynamic president who served during the five years between the "martyred" JFK and the "disgraced" RMN. This is true in spite of the appearance of some specialized volumes, an overly jovial stage play, a feeble TV reenactment of the pre-presidential years, and continuing analysis of the Johnson presidential archives.

My own years spent in appraisal of President Johnson, which resulted in the book *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (Lawrence, Kansas: the American Presidency Series of the University Press of Kansas, 1983) may (or may not) be leading to increased willingness to rethink this controversial presidency. The President Johnson sketch by Henry Graff in *The American Presidency* (New York: Scribners, 1984) has to be addressed. Those who undertake this task will simply have to reendure the emotional pain of reliving, vicariously, the divisive issues of LBJ's stormy years.

How shall we go about judging the contours of the influence of President Lyndon B. Johnson in history? By continuing to describe his personality and character quirks? Contemporary journalism doted on such an approach, and yesterday's version continues to be the fare of the mass media. Surely the time has come to get down to cases: ascertain what he sought to do; find out the extent to which he achieved what he sought; and then weigh the consequences of Johnson-induced change over time. We should appraise deeds, not concentrate interminably (and superficially) on "style." Johnson was, after all, a mover and a doer. He sought massive change, and he got it. And some changes that can be tied to this president were surely not in the national or world interest, either then or later.

While my book focused on the role of this presidency in *making a difference*, I did not ignore *the person* of the president and those around him. Still, there has been some muttering, chiefly by Alonzo L. Hamby in *The American Spectator* (June 1984) that all evaluations of this presidency must begin and end with concentration on the

person of "LBJ", he of the allegedly crude personality traits and supposedly flawed character. Any such procedure will surely sell books and get acceptance for articles. But the dedicated and trained historian will certainly want to rise above this temptation and, instead, concentrate on substance—in this case, public policy and its consequences. Bibliographic essays edited by Robert A. Divine entitled *The Johnson Years* (Lawrence, Kansas: 1987, 2 vols) and a Johnson Library bibliography will help.

My methodological premise was born in yesteryear, but it seems sound today. While I had the privilege of taking a number of courses in historiography in my lifetime (historiography: the principles, theory, and history of historical writing), much of the detail I once learned has been forgotten. Nevertheless, several truisms remain imbedded in the memory. Relevant here is the concept, that in evaluating great figures of the past, emphasis should be placed on *what was done* rather than *what was said* (and the manner of the saying!). While what the great figure was like as a person has much interest, especially for those preparing full biographies, what really counts in the long run of events is what a leader did. What the leader said must be studied, of course; and what he was like in both character and personality should not be avoided. Overall, what the leader sought to do, and what he actually did do in his area of responsibility is what is really vital. It should be central in our textbook accounts.

Sixteen years have passed since the death of highly controversial President Johnson, twenty-five years since he entered office, and twenty since he left Washington for the Ranch by the Perdenales River in the Hill Country of Texas. Appraisal of his presidency in one major poll of historians showed him to be rated 10th from the top among our presidents. John F. Kennedy was three below him; Harry S. Truman just above him. It would not take much for LBJ to pass both Truman and Jackson, should a new attitude toward him somehow develop, such has occurred in Eisenhower's rise in esteem by scholars. On the other hand, only a slight increase in hostility would drop him below James K. Polk and Kennedy. (The Walter Mondale campaign of 1984, which seems never to have acknowledged his existence, did nothing to help.) The four "most controversial" presidents are said to be Richard Nixon, Herbert Hoover, Andrew Jackson, and Lyndon Johnson. These are said, as a result, to be the ones most likely to change their rankings over the decades. What chance is there for Johnson revisionism? Everything depends on the nature of "the record" as depicted by historians.

The five year Johnson presidency, late 1963 to early 1969, clearly made a difference in the United States, whatever the nature of the man (or the way he appeared to be when filtered in imagery through the media). First, of course, there was the Great Society, featuring efforts to improve education, alleviate poverty, provide financing for medical care for the aged and poor, and change a multitude of other things. Accompanying this was the long and bloody undeclared Vietnam War, ever escalating, and staggering in its consequences.

It was in the Johnson years that much that was *new* came into being. The Arts and the Humanities gained federal funding. Consumerism would be monitored by a zealous federal agency. Cabinet level departments in Housing and Transportation were created. The New Conservation and beautification program of the Johnson husband and wife team paved the way for later (and more extreme) environmentalism.

A new immigration law eliminated some old abuses. The elderly could sell the homestead, free of federal taxes, up to a $100,000 maximum.

Then there were the three famous and epoch-making Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968, protecting voting rights, prohibiting discrimination, and helping to achieve fairness in obtaining housing. Progress was made through executive orders in rights for women employed in the federal government. A housing law sought to put a new roof over the heads of thousands of families.

Foreign affairs saw the Soviets still deterred from a thermonuclear strike. A nuclear nonproliferation treaty was signed. Glassboro was the locale for Soviet-American talks. The president handled crises competently in Panama, Guantanamo Bay (Cuba), and—accompanied with much controversy—in the Dominican Republic. Johnson personally supervised a massive program that gave vast quantities of wheat for India, but overseas economic aid did not grow. A Puenta del Este conference (in which he took special pride) carried forward on earlier Eisenhower and Kennedy policies of cooperation toward Latin America.

When a liberal mind surveys these years it quickly zeros in approvingly on the exceedingly long lists of new legislation. Viewing these law-making successes positively, former Johnson aide Joseph Califano, Jr. alleges, "Greatness must be measured by productivity. . . . Start with George Washington and study the problems in relation to the solutions. Lyndon Johnson is in a class by himself." The conservative observer of the same record naturally emerges with overt distaste! Radicals, as usual, scoff at these efforts to "shore up capitalism." Still, all such analysts are focusing on what is *central*. None waste their time by continuing to focus judgmental powers on the person of what some dubbed "the cornpone president."

The sheer bulk of White House-backed legislation had its own fallout, then and later. Said *Time* in early 1969, "All too often, big federal spending has produced not social miracles but merely a swollen bureaucracy and the anger of those who feel cheated by the gap between promise and performance." The president's budget director told him in 1966 that "states, cities, depressed areas, and individuals have been led to expect immediate delivery of benefits from Great Society programs to a degree that is not realistic." Frustration and loss of credibility would be the result, he predicted. As to this theme, Johnson observed in his inimitable way, "It's a little like whiskey. It is good. But if you drink too much it comes up on you."

Members of the opposition party naturally had their own reservations. Senator Howard Baker astutely judged the Administration's record at the time of Johnson's death. The president, he said, "showed us what could be accomplished through government action—and what could never be accomplished through government action." While LBJ had demonstrated what "government could do for people," he had at the same time shown "what people and nations must do for themselves."

There are still observers of the modern scene who believe that causing large numbers of laws to be passed stamps one as a "socialist." Here, of course, is a concept with little merit. Looking merely at the thrust of the charge, it has to be said in refutation that the Lyndon Johnson who represented his Austin, Texas constituency for so many years never questioned the capitalist system or its basis in the profit system. By 1969,

he and his talented wife had benefited from the American way in business and economics to the extent of perhaps fifteen millions accumulated aggressively from the marketplace.

Because of Vietnam, the public naturally thinks of this controversial leader as a "wartime president." Yet he (and Secretary of State Dean Rusk) saw the overall performance quite differently. Thermonuclear war with the Soviet Union had been avoided! China had not been provoked into entering the war in Southeast Asia—as had been the case in Korea! The President could tell the Pan American Union at one point that it had been "a great privilege to work with all of you toward peace and freedom in this world." By such remarks, he clearly meant that the world in his years had been spared ultimate catastrophe. The Vietnam War, whatever its growing intensity, had played an appropriate role in deterrence. At the same time, confrontations in this hemisphere with conventional weapons (such as Kennedy's Bay of Pigs misadventure) had been avoided.

Looking more closely at the Vietnam War, an important theme (as I have tried to spell it out from archival research) is that from the very beginning on November 22, 1963, this leader was determined to "carry on" the Kennedy policies as he and the Kennedy team he carefully retained in office understood them to be. Entering office only days after Kennedy insiders acquiesced in the deposing of Diem, the longtime ruler of South Vietnam, President Johnson was repeatedly informed by the secret intelligence he was getting that Saigon was the center of a state in chaos. It was evident that there would have to be vast, sustained, imaginative, and inevitably bloody effort if the Kennedy hopes for a long-lived, viable state were to be salvaged. This truth I found to be thoroughly documented in Johnson Library manuscripts declassified after 1975.

President Kennedy, in my studied opinion, was by no means on a withdrawal course in fall, 1963, whatever loyally hopeful partisans would try to contend in later years. Already looking toward reelection in 1964, JFK abhored the slightest appearance of another humiliation rooted in miscalculation and indecision like the Bay of Pigs. Next, Kennedy had gambled that thermonuclear war would not take place during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He had waged a secret CIA war in Laos. It seems quite incredible that Kennedy would have reacted much differently from his successor in late 1964 and the early months of 1965, at least, although how later policy toward Vietnam would have developed in his hands remain a total mystery.

Johnson did, in any case, continue in 1963–64 the Kennedy crusade to establish a democratic and independent state centered around Saigon. That state was the new homeland for perhaps a million refugees (including Catholics) from the North. At Tonkin Gulf the Kennedy-Johnson team found that its uncompromising determination to prevail led to a logical outcome: further escalation. As the shooting war developed into a major battleground for conventional armies in 1965, the president failed to define and to seek "victory" in the traditional sense. In the Johnson years the enemy's supplies from the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact countries, and China would not be cut off, for the President shied away from such controversial measures as those to be adopted eventually by President Nixon.

Thus Hanoi was not to be invaded. North Vietnam was to be permitted safe sanctuary in a portion of Cambodia. A multitude of enemy-serving restrictions on pilot judgment would make the off and on bombing effort ineffective, thus guaranteeing major losses of planes and the creation of the prisoner problem that would loom so large in the next decade. Henry Kissinger has put the resulting situation well. The Johnson administration undertook "a commitment large enough to hazard our global position" but executed it "with so much hesitation as to defeat their purpose."

Fallout on the home front from the Vietnam adventure was immense. It has been said, "The more the United States did to preserve an independent identity for South Vietnam, the more America's own identity changed." Here the reference is to the many consequences of that long war: the killed and wounded and their loved ones at home; the effects of the selective draft on those who submitted to it, those who gained exemption, and those who resisted or fled. Moreover, there were many side effects traceable to the quick rotation of so many hundreds of thousands of young servicemen through Southeast Asia.

America changed rapidly in the Johnson years. The social developments were major: a drug culture; a generation gap; stimulation of interest in exotic religions; changes in codes of personal conduct; some erosion of the work ethic; and, during the time of the expanded use of "the pill," changes in sexual mores that affected the traditional family as an institution. The controversial war's upheavals stimulated and accelerated many such developments (just as earlier wars had left their own indelible marks).

Because of the war that he so considerably escalated, Lyndon Johnson is considered by many to have been both an evil man and a deplored president. Here, the semantics present problems, for it was the historian Lord Acton who observed, "Great men are almost always bad men." Without endorsing or debating so dramatic a point, it needs to be said that many aspects of the leadership of this president stamp him clearly as "great" in accomplishment. His impact has been felt in many areas of American life. It was no less a person than Melville B. Grosvenor of *National Geographic* magazine who wrote to assure LBJ that he was "the greatest conservation president." For example, Johnson added 4,848,000 acres to the public domain and 44 new areas to the National Park Service. With Lady Bird's enthusiastic collaboration, the national capital was beautiful anew, and progress was made against billboard blight and visible junkyards. Path breaking legislation furthered clean air; water quality; the wilderness, wild rivers, and trails; and progress in handling solid waste disposal. LBJ's was to be the first presidential message ever given on natural beauty.

As he signed several of these historic bills on the outdoors, Johnson said, "When future historians write of this era, I believe they will note that ours was the generation that finally faced up to the accumulated problems of our American life." Thus, "We are going to preserve at least a part of what God gave us." Here in the Johnson years was planted the roots of moderate environmental action in government.

The president was to be praised in 1980 by the National Consumers League for "enhancing consumer representation in government decision-making." The National Organization for Women in one of its first resolutions said Johnson had already done

by 1966 "more than any other president to focus national attention on the importance of bringing women into the mainstream of public and private employment." The drama critic of the *Washington Post* would say that his services to the arts and humanities exceeded those of *all* his predecessors in the White House put together. (An exception is Eisenhower, whose own role in the arts, including planning what became the Kennedy Center, has been overlooked.) Here, in conservation-environmentalism, consumerism, financing of the arts and humanities, and equity for employed women are four areas of Johnson-induced progress in which he was dubbed the "greatest." But there is much more.

This leader deserves to be called the "civil rights president"—that is, if the Lincoln who freed the slaves be excluded. The three major acts of the LBJ years, in 1964, 1965, and 1968 resulted, to be sure, from many factors: from nonviolent protest by Martin Luther King and others; from violence in the streets and fear of more; and from action taken by the courts, the Congress, and other presidents in earlier years. But the proximate cause of passage of these bills was the dogged, uncompromising determination and brilliant leadership of President Johnson and his determined team. Said the first black on the Supreme Court, Justice Thurgood Marshall (a Johnson appointee), "It has been rewarding to serve under a president who has led the nation to historic gains in the pursuit of equal justice under law."

While not cure-alls, the civil rights acts of the 1960s were very effective. By 1978, George Wallace could be quoted as saying, "Segregation is over. And it's better that it is over . . . because it's never coming back." What the federal government forced on "us" had "turned out for the best." Surely it takes nothing from Lyndon Johnson to say that the struggle for racial justice and equal opportunity still is being waged in the courts and the Congress, twenty years after he left office.

The Age of Space was born in the Eisenhower-Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon decade, but credit as a rule is casually assigned to Kennedy. Actually, it was Eisenhower, with Johnson's support, who founded NASA; it was a Johnson-chaired committee that recommended Project Apollo to JFK, and the burden of its yearly funding fell to Kennedy's successor. NASA administrator James Webb did work mightily with the Congress in those years; still, his president backed him all the way against those in the science, defense, education, and anti-poverty areas who sought maximum dollars for their own causes. The successful moon landing and return came less than a year after LBJ left for Texas.

The Great Society rightly remains controversial. Goals, after all, were too often unrealistic; many ideas were untried; appropriations added up to considerable totals, but were inadequate for implementing most laws fully; administration was lackluster; too much was attempted. The major thrust may have been misdirected from the outset. Still, here was, overall, a noble effort. In 1973 it was a Republican of presidential stature who observed, "If Johnson fell short of achieving the Great Society, it was not for a lack of good intentions." Many Americans increasingly wonder how to bring about a rebirth of the Johnson era's self-starting determination to war against American poverty.

On the other hand, the Great Society of those years was something of an ad-

ministrative disaster. It was in the 1980s that two well qualified researchers from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, not unfriendly to Johnson, had to conclude, "The cumulative effect of Great Society legislation was to produce far greater problems of executive structure and coordination than had existed at any other time, except perhaps during the Civil War, the Great Depression, and World War II." These problems were judged to threaten permanently the capacity of the federal administrative system to fulfill policy objectives.

At the same time, one part of the Great Society crusade—the effort to upgrade the nation's educational establishment—had dramatic effects (whatever the modest funding). The figures show this conclusively. Post secondary classrooms became community colleges; teachers colleges became diversified liberal arts colleges containing business and sometimes law enforcement programs; and many four year colleges developed into universities. Educational opportunity for minorities and the poor blossomed. Percentages of high school and college graduates greatly increased, in part due to the operation of a successful work-study program. Head Start, aimed at preschoolers, surely had beneficial effects overall, whatever the difficulty initially in proving its purely academic worth. Today it is the educational program given greatest increased support by the Bush administration. Referring to Johnson's hope (now a Bush hope) of being remembered as "the Education President," the *Chronicle of Higher Education* said in 1973, "Many observers believe he earned that title."

The well-meaning intervention by Washington in the higher education theatre had measurable fallout—consequences on which egalitarian educators have been altogether too quiet. Equality gained at the expense of freedom. Says Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The federal government has acquired the power to shut down any university it chooses." To this, *Harpers* added, "In exchange for federal aid, universities and colleges have surrendered their independence to the government." It seems safe to say that few of the institutions now dependent on the billions in federal money can now imagine life without it. Academic freedom, in the sense of untrameled decision-making, lost out as part of the price paid for the many buildings, library holdings, equipment, faculty training programs, and grants of every description. Efforts in the mid-1980s to cut federal grants to education (or the performing arts) met with passionate protests from those affected.

Opening wide the academic gates in the 1960s was a mixed blessing. Older faculty members can remember the higher standards in student grading and work requirements they once had (for freshmen, at least) before the draft of the 1960s and early 1970s, and the entry of an array of only partly qualified and variably motivated students, changed the higher education climate. Nor did the junior and senior years of high school escape dilution as what may well have been elitism gave way to mass education. It was, of course, an inestimable boon when the Johnson education acts gave and loaned money to keep students in school. However, some who stayed on should not have, for classroom discipline suffered through the presence of the poorly motivated. Repayment of college loan obligations was far from universal, even from successful college graduates. No doubt many factors other than Johnson legislation must have contributed to the decline in American academic standards in modern times.

The oversold War on Poverty was intended to be financed by a niggardly one percent of the federal budget of that day. Its dynamic title was modified, after several months, in a Johnson speech, to "Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty." This was more realistic, but it also proved unattainable. In any case, the anti-poverty effort was, as a coordinated, named, and recognized activity, Lyndon Johnson's—not Kennedy's (whatever his unformulated—and naturally unlegislated—hopes for 1964 and later). It was Theodore Sorensen, a loyal Kennedy supporter, who said, "It will be unfortunate if Johnson's massive accomplishments . . . in domestic areas remain obscured by the bitter controversies over his Vietnamese policy."

President Johnson in the overall international arena would be accused of an arrogance of power. There is something to the charge, for here was an aggressively anti-communist and pro-American, activist, president. But a kinder way of putting the concentration on advancing American interests was Walt Rostow's: the president had tried to build "a structure of world arrangements of partnership." After all, from Kennedy he had inherited treaties with 42 allies. Some 429 American "major installations" and about 2,000 minor ones were located in almost every non-Communist country. He emulated his predecessor, who had sought a powerful international posture for the United States. This Kennedy-selected vice president was providing the continuity expected in foreign affairs. Said Johnson to the Congress, "To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace." This point of view remains United States policy a quarter of a century later.

The free world in Johnson's years rested under the American nuclear umbrella. Yet, said the nation's spokesman, "Peace is our mission." Strength would bring safety to all free peoples." Here were ambitious words, but this commander in chief has been accused of letting our strategic forces slide. He could have done more. The nation had a vast lead over the USSR at the beginning of 1964. The Soviets did catch up to a notable degree during his years. The balance sheet in strategic weapons at the end (1969) showed the nation with 1056 ICBMs, the USSR with 900. Submarine weapons were 650 to 75; international bombers 600 to 150 and their deliverable warheads 4,200 to 1,200. Clearly, the inexorable direction had been toward parity in numbers, but the U.S. claimed to lead in accuracy, if not in "throw weight."

There were changes of emphasis in military preparedness. The area of missiles and strategic forces declined in the budget from $10.4 to $7.6 billion; "conventional," meanwhile, grew from $17.9 to $32.4 billion. Many new or updated weapons underwent R & D, looking toward the 1970s and later. Was the nation safer at the end of those years? The basis for debate into the 1980s was laid, and the question cannot be answered definitively here. In any case, there would be no Soviet attack then or later. This was an incalculable but little noted plus.

In perspective, President Lyndon Johnson should be remembered for the seriousness of his unremitting effort, with the help of an exceptionally able team—one that history has largely forgotten—to use government to benefit people at home and abroad. At home, they used (really, considerably over-used) the federal government as lawgiver, trying to benefit and serve the people. At the same time, however, came the over-regulating of private institutions and the usurping of power from state and local

governments. To this writer, and many others, here was an unwholesome use of power.

Abroad, the use of national power was also massive, as the nation cooperated with NATO, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS) and freedom-loving countries everywhere to contain Communism, the sworn enemy of democracy and freedom, within its existing boundaries. Not as dramatic as the implementation of the SEATO treaty, this allegiance to treaty commitments was appropriate to their intents and stated purposes. In my view, the anti-communist objective of the states who had signed these treaties was absolutely the right goal to have been pursuing. (Historians and writers who do not agree should at least not take out their ire on Johnson alone, for post World War II presidents have a commonality in this matter.)

In Southeast Asia, the entire Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon effort to erect a democratic, anti-communist South Vietnamese state turned out to be abortive. It is impossible to know if events had to develop so disastrously in the later era of Watergate and of Congressional determination to prevail in the foreign policy arena. Perhaps President Johnson waged his share of the war in such a way as to point inevitably toward the ultimate 1975 collapse that lost everything for which the nation had worked and planned. This political leader did definitely fail to leave in the Democratic Party a durable inclination to shore up South Vietnam in its later time of troubles. His intentions had been honorable enough, some still admitted, but here had been an ill-advised pursuit of a major uphill war waged without declaration (just with a controversial Tonkin Gulf Resolution). The hard-to-comprehend war had lacked the traditional goal of "victory," for the enemy was never supposed to be "conquered." Democratic Party leaders of the early 1970s cannot be blamed too much, perhaps, for unwillingness to "carry on" such a conflict very long in Johnson's memory. Meanwhile, there continued the pretense that Kennedy "surely" would have turned back from support of South Vietnam as the going got tough. I would surmise, even insist, that it is not a correct reading of the Kennedy character to say that he would have abandoned South Vietnam in its 1965 hour of need.

President Johnson will be remembered for the byproducts, the fallout, from the vast quantities of legislation passed skillfully with great rapidity—but without mature gestation—by a Congress where he nearly always knew how to get the votes. It takes only a little from him to say that the Congress was controlled in both houses by his own party first to last, in part because of his masterful, yet sly, political campaigning in 1964—and Republican suicide. Most other presidents who had legislative majorities left no such record of extensive law-making on behalf of basic change.

Properly associated with this Administration are many negatives: excessive bureaucratic controls that reduced freedom; and ill-considered financial policies that are still remembered as the "Guns and Butter" mythology. These set in motion the institutionalization of paralyzing inflation, acceptance of federal deficits, and climbing interest rates. The value of the consumer's dollar would slide routinely for years to come. There was in presidential speeches unrealistic over-promising. Utopia was conceptualized as imminent (especially in candidate LBJ's addresses of fall, 1964) as idealistic speechwriters, some of them left over from the "bear any burden" New Frontier speech

team—were allowed to put grandiose words in this normally plain-spoken man's mouth.

Too much cannot be said, however, about the block-busting effect that Johnson's well-honed legislative skills had when amplified by a well trained White House team of assistants. Many have found LBJ far superior to any other president in this aspect of leadership—Franklin Roosevelt not excepted. What former Senate leader Johnson did so successfully was, first, to develop a program of legislation; then to forge the necessary coalitions to carry the bills; and finally to perfect the timing that would be crucial to pacing consistent achievement. He used his enormous knowledge of the congressional mind to work out practical rewards and "punishments." His were the decisions that built the congressional liaison staff into such a potent force. LBJ had a sixth sense as to who were the "whales" and who the "minnows"—the leaders and the followers. The House majority leader of that day, Carl Albert, was not the only experienced contemporary to observe that the Johnson legislative performance as president was "far greater than [Franklin] Roosevelt's."

Why, then, has Johnson the president failed utterly to get his just due? Several possibilities may be advanced. First, he is still remembered for various flaws in his character and oddities in his personality (coarseness, crudeness, and crass dissimulation, thoughtlessness, self-serving) that, well publicized, helped to make him ineligible for such stereotypes as "typical American" or "father figure." Inept on TV, where he was unaccountably stiff, he did not display anything like "the wit and wisdom" of his predecessor. Never, despite his noble task force (brain trust) effort, did this tall Texan gain the vocal respect of "intellectuals."

An astute few recognized how skewed were the real Johnson priorities as measured in dollars. From 1965 to 1973, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) cost about $15 billion. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War cost $120 billion. But the federal government at least tried to offer "butter" as well as "guns," while seeking vigorously to gain public acceptance for anti-poverty efforts.

There was a brief period when former president Lyndon Johnson was still being praised for the nature and extent of his goals, efforts, and achievements. Critic Walter Cronkite conceded at LBJ's death, for example, that Johnson had been "a zealous public servant with a compelling dream of a better America—who made enormous strides to make that dream come true." To the politican from Texas, it is quite clear, his crusades for Medicare, Medicaid, education, and better law enforcement; against poverty; for better housing and model cities; for civil rights; and for a New Conservation were infinitely more than just "politics." He had his own ethic on such matters, so that he more than "carried on" for Kennedy. The man from Johnson City had his own inner compulsions as he sought massive change in the social fabric.

Here was a *president*. This leader cared enough to work astonishingly long days, and long into the nights, in the effort to pass legislation designed at making a better America. A citizen once wrote him, after his retirement, "Vietnam blinded us, your critics, to the accomplishments you made. You were a doing, acting president. . . . History will give you your credits. It will show how short-sighted we were." (Has this been a good prediction, so far?)

The Vietnam-tortured public of later years naturally withheld its approbation

as many contended that America had finally "lost a war." By the 1980s (at the time for twenty and twenty-five year memorializations of JFK's passing), TV reenactments viciously portrayed the vice president LBJ of that time as a buffoon who was utterly outclassed among the New Frontiersmen. It is TV, not historians, that can and does offer the public the recreation of the years of John and Jackie Kennedy, complete with built-in slander of LBJ. Is this in the public interest?

That such an opportunity is rooted in LBJ's frequent lack of personal self-discipline as a person does not help much. And it certainly cannot be avoided that so many who now work in their media tasks served unhappily in Vietnam, or live with some guilt, perhaps, for evading that obligation. The public needs to know historical truths that go far beyond "style" and "aspect." Johnson as a *person* was a vital matter at the time, of course. Moreover, the nature of any man who rules the White House remains fair game for biographers and dramatists. The spirit of the cynical 1967 play *Macbird* lives on in such pieces as Tom Wicker's "Hey, Hey, LBJ" for *Esquire* (December 1983). But this Administration was infinitely more than just a flawed "LBJ in action." Its activist record in laws placed on the books needs to be focused upon, first to last, for better or worse.

President Johnson was beyond any doubt a dynamic and effective political leader and lawgiver. He will long get, and deserve to get, outsized blame for the overcommitment in Vietnam and the negative consequences of his years in office. Whatever his personal flaws and official mistakes, however, he certainly was one who *tried*, first to last. At the close of my book, I ventured to observe, "He dared, cared, and shared of himself, and thereby very often carried the day." The President's many accomplishments stem in considerable measure from this fundamental trait.

What President Johnson did achieve continues to have deep meaning for the American people. In his case, revisionism by historians can justifiably be on actual *deeds*—even if it may be decided that there were too many of them, and that some, especially in his waging of unsuccessful war, worked out very poorly, whatever his hopeful intent.

We are unlikely ever again to see a leader in the White House who will be so effective a force for innovative change, much of it beneficial. In biographies, histories, and (especially) the media the time for a fresh look at President Lyndon B. Johnson is at hand. There are two good reasons: LBJ himself often said that "History will judge." It was one of the major motivations he had when he wore the hat of reformer. Second, our presidents carefully study the degree of acceptance of their predecessors when deciding where to place their energies while in office. What, we may well ask, is any president to think of history as judge if the balance of appraisal of so conspicuous a leader as Johnson fails the test of impartiality? There will not soon be a better time to start than the 1990s. After all, we are at the 25th anniversary of Johnson's second Civil Rights Act, two major Education acts, Medicare, the beginning of the Planning-Programming-Budgeting System, much environmental legislation, and a great deal more.

While remembering major deeds, however, history will not want to forget gross errors made by any president in foreign and domestic policy-making. At the same time, history will gradually come to minimize yesterday's small missteps and personal

deficiencies. All who mold the mind of the public and students must soon pick up the burden of rethinking and reinterpreting the Johnson presidency for the benefit of us all.

The ultimate reassessment, all will agree, should procede cautiously, with one eye on shifts in current standards, and the other on well-established canons of professionalism in rendering historical judgment on public figures. We must change our focus from LBJ *the person* to Lyndon B. Johnson *the president*.