MUTUAL CONTEMPT

Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud That Defined a Decade

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To my parents, Susan and Barry,
and to Nancy

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Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere.

—Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*

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Introduction

Lyndon Johnson and Robert Kennedy loathed each other. "This man," Kennedy said of Johnson, " . . . is mean, bitter, vicious—an animal in many ways." Johnson considered Kennedy a "grandstanding little runt." Their mutual contempt was so acute, their bitterness so intense and abiding, they could scarcely speak in each other's presence. When they did speak, cordiality quickly gave way to uneasy silence or a shouting match. Alone or with friends and assistants, each man ranted and obsessed, sulked and brooded about the other. Kennedy and Johnson spent the 1960s listening for footsteps, looking over their shoulders, making few important decisions without first considering the feud.

Politics, of course, is full of heated rivalries. The rancorous debates of the 1990s have buried the romantic (or cynical) notion that political differences can be finessed by an after-hours whiskey among gentlemen. Still, Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich are no Johnson and Kennedy. The rivalry between LBJ and RFK was of a different magnitude—and of greater importance—than any of the postwar era. Their antagonism spawned political turf battles across the United States. It divided constituencies the two men once shared and weakened their party by forcing its members to choose between them. It captivated the newly powerful media that portrayed every disagreement between Johnson and Kennedy as part of a prolonged battle for the presidency or a claim on the legacy of the fallen JFK. It helped propel one man to the Senate and drive the other from the White House.

Lyndon Johnson and Bobby Kennedy were a study in contrast—so dissimilar in background, character, and even appearance that they seemed natural antagonists. It was as if one were designed to confound the other.

Six feet three inches tall, Johnson towered over Kennedy, crowding him, threatening to back him across a room. Kennedy, half a foot shorter, was solid but slight; perpetually hunched, he kept his distance. Johnson, bedecked in gold rings, watches, and cufflinks, gloried in newfound wealth. He was immaculately, almost dandily, groomed. The rumpled Kennedy seemed embarrassed by his own trust fund ("You're lucky you've been born poor," he told a friend, cryptically). Kennedy spoke in monosyllables that some perceived as shyness, others as diffidence. He was often witty but never sparkling. Johnson delivered monologues, great torrents of effortless, endless, earthy language. From Kennedy's childhood, it was bombastic boors—people like LBJ—who drove Bobby out of a room and into his shell, muttering words of disapproval. Johnson trafficked in tall tales; Kennedy despised "liars."

It was an elemental clash of personalities—"a matter of chemistry," as Johnson put it in his memoirs. It was also generational. LBJ and RFK bracketed the era of the Second World War. Though Johnson survived a brief firefight during a congressional junket and Kennedy volunteered for the Navy, neither man saw real combat; during the unifying experience of the era they were observers, not participants or brothers-in-arms. To Johnson, born in 1908, Bobby was a "snot-nosed kid." To Bobby, seventeen years younger, Johnson was an anachronism.

Culture as much as chemistry divided the two men, and the socioeconomic chasm between them was wider than any generation gap. Johnson often stressed his humble roots, but he also boasted of an impressive Southern heritage. "Listen, goddammit," he once said, "my ancestors were teachers and lawyers and college presidents and governors when the Kennedys in this country were still tending bar." Though the Johnson family's fortunes swung erratically between comfort and poverty, they considered themselves something better than average Hill Country folk. Lyndon's father, Sam, was a shrewd political maverick and state legislator. His mother, Rebekah, read Browning and Tennyson and political biographies. The Johnsons earned a certain notoriety (both respect and ridicule) in the Hill Country of Texas, but of course the Hill Country, during Lyndon's youth, was about as isolated a place as one found in the vast United States; in the Age of Radio, the Hill Country was largely without radios and entirely without electricity.

In the boyhood homes of Robert Francis Kennedy, electricity was taken for granted. There were homes in Bronxville, Hyannis Port, and Palm Beach—each one a marker of status and very public success. By 1938, Bobby's father, Joseph, was U.S. ambassador to Great Britain and his winsome brood were well known to any reader of *Life* magazine. Compared to the Johnsons, one of whom fought in the Revolutionary

War, the Kennedys were newcomers to the United States, part of the Irish influx of the mid-nineteenth century. But even when the Kennedys were "tending bar" in turn-of-the-century Boston (Bobby's grandfather, Patrick J. Kennedy, was a saloonkeeper), they were prospering and dabbling in politics (he was also a ward boss). Bobby's mother, Rose, was the daughter of John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, a former congressman and mayor of Boston. Bobby's political heritage was as deeply felt as LBJ's, though the Kennedy family mantle fell predominantly on the shoulders of Bobby's older brothers, Joseph Jr. and John. The young Kennedys shared a grand sense of possibility and entitlement: "my father," Bobby recalled, "used his money to free us."

Both LBJ and RFK were weaned on politics, but politics of different sorts. As a child, Lyndon Johnson dogged his father's footsteps at the state legislature in Austin; he watched the long floor debates intently, springing up occasionally to wander the halls of the power elite. He loved campaigning, handing out literature at rallies and listening as his father chatted with farmers about crop yields and pending legislation. The younger Johnson was no less a politician: gregarious and ambitious in school, he "could reason you right out of your shoes," recalled a classmate. "If he wanted something, he knew how to go about getting it. . . . They should have named him the great persuader." Later, LBJ delighted in the sweaty personal tangle of local politics; there was little doubt he would end up in Austin, if not Washington.

Bobby's grandfather Honey Fitz had thrived in the ethnic hothouse of Boston politics. But Joseph Kennedy disdained the stereotype of the Irish politician—all blarney and backslapping—that his father-in-law epitomized. Joseph Kennedy's horizons were broader than Boston, and his ambitions for his boys were bigger. When Joe was at home, mealtime at the Kennedy household became a nightly forum on global affairs. "I can hardly remember a mealtime," Bobby later wrote, "when the conversation was not dominated by what Franklin D. Roosevelt was doing or what was happening in the world." Bobby did less of the talking than Joe Jr. or Jack, but he absorbed much that was said: one of his classmates at Milton Academy recalled that Bobby was better informed about international politics than any of his peers.

Predictably, both Johnson and Kennedy made it to Washington—Johnson first, as a congressional aide in the early 1930s. He climbed the ladder quickly, from aide to congressman to senator by 1949. Kennedy arrived in 1951, taking a job at the Justice Department after rejecting a run for Congress from Connecticut. For a time, they lived minutes from one another in northwest Washington and worked ten blocks apart on Pennsylvania Avenue; but they inhabited different worlds. Bobby

Kennedy was interested in public affairs but not so much in electoral politics. Politically he was (like JFK) a moderate Democrat, closer in ideology to northern, urban Republicans than to the liberal wing of his own party. Bobby was more a moralist than an operator, better suited to criminal investigations than Capitol Hill intrigue. And unlike John Kennedy, who treated fellow politicians with affable indifference, Bobby wore his contempt openly. "You can't get any work out of a politician," Bobby groused after running JFK's successful campaign for Senate in 1952. An interviewer observed that Bobby pronounced the word "politician" as if it were something "unclean and unwanted." Politics was the dirty business Bobby did for his brother. It was, Bobby later scoffed, "a hell of a way to make a living."

In Johnson's view, politics was the *only* way to make a living, and he reveled in it. Politics for Johnson was a personal art, and from his first days in Congress friends noted LBJ's unusual desire—and ability—to win people over. "You couldn't help but like him," one recalled. Johnson cultivated his colleagues and savored their company. To woo them or to conquer them, Johnson had to *know* them, had to understand their fears and desires. This he did masterfully, emerging during the course of the 1950s as the most powerful politician on Capitol Hill. Johnson stepped nimbly between the liberal and conservative wings of the Democratic Party, walking the line between his activist, New Deal instincts and conservative Southern constituency. "On many important occasions," recalled one House member, "it was impossible to know why he had voted a certain way, whether it was from conviction or political considerations." For Johnson this was a false distinction. While Bobby Kennedy's universe was starkly black-and-white, Johnson's was a broad band of muted grays.

What little they had in common only drove them farther apart. Both Johnson and Kennedy were vulnerable, volatile men. Bobby had always been sensitive, his sister Eunice recalled. The seventh of nine children, bullied by his older brothers, Bobby "got hurt easily. . . . He just either would look mad or he'd be a little sarcastic and talk back to you." But the Kennedys did not coddle children; the most vulnerable among them was the least likely to show it. By adulthood Bobby emerged as the toughest and most quick-tempered of the bunch. "Just fierce!" remembered a childhood friend. In 1954, as the Kennedys played touch football in a Georgetown park, a baseball landed on the field. A group of graduate students were hitting fly balls from the other end of the park, and the balls continued to rain upon the Kennedys until Bobby's younger brother Edward exchanged angry words with one of the students. A fight was coming. Bobby, far smaller and lighter than either Ted or his opponent, leaped between them, lunged at the student, and fought him in a bloody

brawl until they both collapsed in exhaustion. Thankfully, the incident did not make the newspapers. But Bobby's public reputation as a brawler of one kind or another dogged him for the rest of his years.

Johnson, too, was easily wounded, and was more likely to show it than Kennedy. As a child, Lyndon greeted the slightest reprimand, rejection, or injury with howls of pain and pleas for sympathy. Even in the prime of his career, LBJ's self-pity was bottomless. On occasion he lashed out, like Kennedy, when upset; Johnson thought nothing of giving an aide or peer a vicious tongue-lashing in public. More often, though, Johnson sulked and sought reassurance. He bristled at the gentlest mockery, particularly of his background. At a radio and television correspondents' dinner in 1956, LBJ wore a new tuxedo, gray silk with black lapels. Senator Clinton Anderson of New Mexico pointed at Johnson's suit and chortled, "Every damned time you bring one of these rich Texans up here and introduce them to civilization, he goes completely hog-wild!" LBJ stood stone-faced and indignant. Cracks like these meant he was not being taken seriously, and despite a raucous sense of humor Johnson had never shown an ability to laugh at himself.

Johnson was vain, capricious, and occasionally cruel. Kennedy was curt, prickly, and thin-skinned. But they were also deeply compassionate, and there were other, more salutary similarities. LBJ and RFK shared a heartfelt concern for the disadvantaged—based, in part, on their common (if somewhat improbable) self-identification as underdogs. Kennedy was never as hard and pitiless as his early public image: once a "victim" himself in the rough-and-tumble of a competitive family, Bobby often rushed to the aid of "misfits." Despite his privileged upbringing, Bobby was, in one classmate's recollection, "an underdog in sports, with studies and girls, and as a Catholic." As Kennedy matured politically and personally, he emerged again as a zealous defender of the disenfranchised.

LBJ's populism was his father's legacy. Sam Johnson took up unpopular causes, defending tenant farmers against wealthy landlords and shielding German-Americans from prevailing prejudices. Part of this was posturing; Sam was at heart a political pragmatist, and so was Lyndon. When LBJ's constituents got what they wanted, so did he. Power was his reward for public virtue. But Johnson had also deeply imbibed the pieties of his upbringing: duty, sacrifice, and service. "Some men," Johnson reflected late in life, "want power simply to strut around the world and to hear the tune of 'Hail to the Chief.' Others want it simply to build prestige . . . and to buy pretty things. Well, I wanted power to give things to people—all sorts of things to all sorts of people, especially the poor and the blacks." In fact LBJ wanted power for all these reasons.

Both men were extremely ambitious, though there was little reason,

through much of the 1950s, to expect those ambitions to clash. The first exchange between Johnson and Kennedy was perfectly cordial. In October 1957, when the Soviet Union launched its Sputnik satellite, Senate Majority Leader Johnson made reference to RFK, then the aggressive chief counsel of a Senate investigative committee. "A successful investigation of Sputnik could only take place," Johnson observed, "if [it] had someone like young Kennedy handling it." Bobby recorded Johnson's comment in his diary, adding, "Am very pleased with myself."

In 1959, though, their careers collided. By year's end, Lyndon Johnson and Bobby Kennedy were combatants in the race for the Democratic nomination for president—Johnson on his own behalf, Kennedy on his brother John's. By January 1961, LBJ and RFK were bitter rivals in a battle for power within the Kennedy White House. A scant one thousand days later, they were competitors for the legacy of the martyred JFK, dueling heirs to the Kennedy throne. And finally, for two brief but brutal weeks in March 1968, Lyndon Johnson and Bobby Kennedy were contestants for the leadership of the Democratic Party and the presidency of the United States.

The story unfolds like a Greek tragedy played out on a nation's center stage. The protagonists are flawed, very human men, and their conflict illuminates not only their characters but their era. As historical figures, Johnson and Kennedy are forever entangled: one cannot fully comprehend either man without considering his relationship with the other. Their antagonism was, from the beginning, very personal, but it was also a complicated blend of politics, ideas, ambitions, and anxieties. Kennedy's challenge to Johnson says much about his own evolution as a public figure. LBJ's nervous response to the "Bobby problem" speaks volumes about the Johnson presidency. This became the defining relationship of their political lives.

Nor can one fully comprehend the 1960s without considering the Johnson-Kennedy feud. The issues that wrenched these two men apart—Vietnam, race, poverty—were at the heart of many personal and political cleavages in those years of division. But Johnson and Kennedy were not, like student demonstrators or civil rights workers, peripheral or anonymous figures. After John Kennedy's assassination, they were the political titans of the decade. They not only responded to issues but also shaped them. From the war in Vietnam to the war on poverty, from the "problem of the cities" to the collapse of the Democratic coalition, the major events of the sixties bear the imprint of this personal rivalry.

Politics, too, bore its mark. Johnson and Kennedy personalized, embodied, and crystallized growing rifts among Democrats. Their feud