# Lyndon Johnson & the American Dream

*by*

DORIS KEARNS

# LYNDON JOHNSON *and the* AMERICAN DREAM

1817

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS

*New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London*

Portions of this book originally appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* and *McCall's*.



*Designed by Dorothy Schmiderer*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kearns, Doris.
Lyndon Johnson and the American dream.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Johnson, Lyndon Baines, Pres. U.S., 1908–1973.
I. Title.
E847.K42 1976 973.923'092'4 [B] 75–42831
ISBN 0–06–012284–6

*To the memory of*
*my mother and father*
*and to*
*Richard and Bert Neustadt*

# *Preface*

LYNDON JOHNSON'S LIFE took him through a succession of public institutions: the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Vice-Presidency, and the Presidency. He first came to Washington when Herbert Hoover was still President; his public career spanned the depression, the New Deal, World War II, Korea, postwar economic expansion, the cold war, the Eisenhower years, the New Frontier, the Great Society, and Vietnam. He was a candidate for office from a fairly liberal congressional district with a populist tradition, then from a conservative state dominated by powerful economic interests, and, finally, his constituency was the entire nation.

This staggering diversity of historical circumstances and public institutions, which constituted the changing environments of Lyndon Johnson's public life, provides an unusual opportunity for understanding the interplay between personality and institutions in America. Lyndon Johnson's character, his favorite methods of acquiring power and of using that power, his personal strengths and weaknesses, can all be viewed in different contexts, thus providing an invaluable look at both the changeless dynamics of power and the changing structure of the American political system in the past forty years.

On a still larger canvas, Lyndon Johnson's story provides a pano-

ramic view of the changing nature of American life in the twentieth century. The world in which Johnson grew up was a different world from the one he came to lead. He grew up in an America where almost every household contained the text and the message of Horatio Alger —the triumph of character, determination, and will over all adversity. Success or failure was determined entirely by the individual himself; structural barriers simply did not exist. In weekly college newspaper editorials on getting ahead, playing the game, and striving to succeed, Johnson preached that with industry, temperance, promptness, and generosity the persistent man would inevitably triumph. All his life Johnson retained the belief that any problem could be solved by personal force. He believed he could make a friend of anyone—Nikita Khrushchev, Ho Chi Minh, Charles de Gaulle—if only he could sit alone with him in a room and talk. Indeed, there were few who could resist the influence of his personal presence. He possessed a wholly intuitive and profound capacity to see into other men's natures. His greatest gift of leadership was the ability to understand, persuade, and subdue; that gift was an indispensable attribute of his success in college in the 1920s, in the National Youth Administration in the 1930s, and in the Congress in the 1940s and '50s.

And Johnson believed that, when success came, it must be used to benefit others. Whether it was Lyndon the college student producing accomplishments for his mother, the husband and father producing wealth and security for his family, the Majority Leader producing legislation and electoral victory for his party, or the President of his country producing a Great Society for his people and what he believed to be progress for Southeast Asia—the desire to benefit others was ever the prime motive for his quest for power. The power he gained made good works possible, and good works, he believed, brought love and gratitude.

Yet this man of such intensely personal gifts, who received understanding and transmitted influence through other men's eyes, was destined as President to deal with an enemy abroad and power groups at home (blacks, students, the peace movement) who were unsusceptible to personal persuasion and ungrateful for his "gifts," was compelled to reach out to a constituency of two hundred million citizens while sitting alone in his office staring into the lens of a camera, and was required to sit at the head of a gargantuan bureaucracy largely managed by people he could neither know nor observe. The war in Vietnam and the

rising domestic unrest challenged the traditional American faith in the capacity of the American government to do good for others at home and abroad. The course of events in the 1960s seemed to show that paternalism—the wish to reform, reshape, and control—was inextricably bound to American generosity, and that American benevolence was often tyrannical.

It was, however, impossible for Johnson to understand the tumult in the streets, the continuing capacity of the North Vietnamese to resist his will, or his own steadily deteriorating popularity. After all, he believed, he had given more laws, more houses, more medical services, more loans, and more promises to more people than any other President in history. Surely he had earned the love and gratitude of the American people. Yet as he looked around him in 1967 and 1968 he saw only paralyzing bitterness and hatred. Uncomprehending and deeply hurt as he was, it was natural that he would seek the cause of his decline in the personal animosity and motives of individual enemies—the press, the Eastern intellectuals, and the Kennedys—and even more natural, though surprising at first glance, that he would decide to withdraw from the world of politics and go back to the place where he was born, where, at least, as his father had told him years before, "The people know when you're sick and care when you die."

*

The Prologue to this book attempts to establish the circumstances under which I had access to some of the personal material and conversations from which I formed many of my judgments about Johnson's childhood and crucial aspects of his psychic structure. Johnson talked to me in the last five years of his life; moving backward in time from his stormy Presidency, to his years as Majority Leader of the Senate, to his early years in the Congress, and finally, as death chipped away at the defenses of a lifetime, to his memories of childhood. It is, as Erik Erikson has pointed out, important to know not only what a man says about his life but under what conditions and at what stage in his life he speaks. Therefore the description of the nature of my relationship with Johnson is intended to help establish the psychological relevance of my evidence.

Following this description, I discuss Johnson's childhood and the years of his early youth. Here, as elsewhere throughout the book, I wish the reader to know Lyndon Johnson emotionally, to be able to experi-

ence vicariously the feelings that he experienced, to understand why he behaved as he did. And through his various experiences within his family and his cultural setting, I observe the formation of certain patterns of behavior, which stayed with him through the rest of his life.

Having examined Johnson's characteristic ways of dealing with the world, my study turns to an examination of each of the successive institutions Johnson encountered from the time in 1931 when he became secretary to Congressman Richard Kleberg to his dramatic withdrawal from politics in 1968. In portraying Johnson's career, I do not attempt to give a balanced treatment to every stage, nor to analyze in equal depth the many policies and measures he sponsored. In each chapter, I have chosen those events and policies which, in my judgment, best enable us to understand the private man beneath the public figure and best reveal the interplay of influence between leadership, institutional structure, and historical conditions. Taken as a whole, these chapters will, I believe, help us to understand why it was possible for Johnson to be hugely successful in some settings and not in others, and, beyond that, to recognize that the very patterns of behavior and belief responsible for his greatest successes contained within them the seeds of his ultimate failure.

This analytical narrative is followed by an Epilogue describing Johnson's final years of life on the ranch. Up to this point we shall have witnessed Johnson only as a man of power—acquiring power, exercising it, or, when young, hopeful of obtaining it. Here, by looking at that one time when both the reality and the hope of power were gone, we shall see how powerful and fixed were those qualities which drove him into politics and public life, how well he understood, just below the surface of consciousness, the necessities of his own survival, and how formidably American he was.

DORIS KEARNS

# CONTENTS

# *Prologue*

IN THE SPRING OF 1967, I was nominated for the White House Fellows program. The program was designed to allow young people to work as special assistants to the President and members of his Cabinet. At a conference house in Virginia, a committee of Cabinet members, government officials, and journalists interviewed the finalists. At the time, I was a candidate for a Harvard Ph.D. in Government preparing for an academic career and wanted some opportunity for actual experience in government. And yet, at best, my desire to join the Johnson administration was equivocal. So during the interviews I made no effort to conceal my antiwar activities and made it clear I could not work on anything to do with the war, but believed strongly in the domestic programs of the Great Society, particularly in the area of civil rights. These admissions did not seem to perturb the committee, many of whom, like John Oakes, editorial page editor of the *New York Times,* and John Gardner, Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, were themselves opposed to the war.

My selection was to be announced in a White House ceremony the first week of May. A month before, I had coauthored an article for the *New Republic.* This essay, "How to Remove LBJ in 1968"—the *New Republic* chose the title—argued for a new political party to be formed

from an alliance of blacks, poor, the lower middle class, and women—a party that might give a voice to the presently unrepresented and, at the very least, bring about "the removal of Johnson, Rusk and Rostow from power in the American government" by splitting the normal Democratic vote and ensuring victory for a Republican Party which, we assumed, "scenting victory, will avoid their urge to nominate Nixon or Reagan."[1]* The reasoning is a clear demonstration that purity of intention is no substitute for political knowledge.

A week before the article was to appear, on May 7, 1967, I went to the White House for the ceremony and the dance that would follow. There, I first met Lyndon Johnson. He was already in the ballroom when I entered. His appearance startled me. The picture in my mind had been a caricature: the sly televised politician, his features locked into virtual immobility, eyes squinting, ears that seemed to dangle like thick pendants affixed to the sides of his head. Now I saw a ruddy giant of a man with a strong mobile face, and a presence whose manifest energy dominated an entire room filled with Senators, Representatives, Cabinet officials, White House staff members, and reporters. Beginning each dance with a different woman, he moved gracefully across the floor.

My turn to dance with the President came in the middle of the evening. He walked up to me and began to talk. "Do your men ever dance at Harvard?" he teased. "Of course they do," I said. "Bull," he responded. "I know what goes on up there. And I bet they can't dance like I'm dancing right now." With that, he started to move me in wide circles around the floor. "I have one question," he asked suddenly. "Do you have a lot of energy? It's important for me to know." "Well," I replied, surprised at how easy it seemed to make small talk with him, "I hear you need only five hours of sleep, but I need only four so it stands to reason that I've got even more energy than you. In fact," I continued, even more surprised to find myself confiding in him, "I hate going to bed at night and I love waking up in the morning."[2]

Abruptly, Johnson interrupted to say that at my age he had also hated to sleep, but now his burdens with the war were such that sleep represented a welcome escape.

The dance ended, but as Johnson moved away, he said in a loud whisper that he had already decided that I should be the White House

*Notes begin on page 401.

Fellow assigned to work for him on the White House staff.

It was not to be that simple. The next week the issue of the *New Republic* containing my article appeared in Washington. There was a flurry in the press, which was evidently amused at the idea that Lyndon Johnson had tried to waltz the New Left and had been spurned. A commentator on the 6 P.M. news even speculated that I might be an agent from the New Left who had been infiltrated into the Fellows program to get close to the President in order to change his mind about the war. The articles were light in tone, but I found the publicity embarrassing. The media were trying to turn me into a heroine of the peace movement, while, in fact, I was going to work in an administration against which my friends and colleagues were protesting and beginning to organize. My sense of guilt at going to work in Washington returned, intensified by the fact that the publicity threatened to make trouble for the entire staff of the White House Fellows program who had helped select me; who were dedicated people, sincere believers in the value of their work, and whom I had come to like and respect. I had heard of the President's reaction to earlier, more trivial public embarrassments. I could easily imagine his punishing, or even canceling, the entire White House Fellows program for its error in selecting me. He had already abolished the annual Medal of Freedom award because he did not approve of some who had been selected to receive it, among them critics of his Vietnam policies. I considered, and discussed with friends, the advisability of resigning. But then, a few days later, I received a phone call from Postmaster General Larry O'Brien, who told me that, despite the rumors, the President still wanted me to come to Washington and participate in the program. There was no further talk of my working for the President directly.

I was assigned to the Labor Department, where, to my great satisfaction, I was put to work on skill-training and education projects for young city blacks. Shortly after the Fellows assembled in the fall, we were invited to an informal discussion with the President, which became—as did so many of his meetings in that last year and a half—a monologue on the importance of our war effort in Vietnam. After finishing, he said he had time for only one question, swiveled abruptly, and pointed directly at me. "You," he commanded. Startled, mentally immobilized by my surprise, I found my lips forming the words I had been thinking the moment before: "Don't you understand—how can you possibly not understand—how deep and serious the country's op-

position to the war in Vietnam is?" Neither I nor my colleagues could hear his mumbled reply, but his veiled look of anger was unmistakable. The session was closed. Once again I left the White House, for what was surely the last time, shaken by the unintended encounter.

Through my work in the Labor Department, I began to feel that some steps, however gradual, were being taken to improve the lives of black Americans. But on April 4, 1968, four days after Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race, civil rights leader Martin Luther King was shot and killed and all progress came to a halt as large-scale riots broke out in more than twelve major cities.

The next morning I was at work in the Labor Department when we were told that Johnson was planning a major speech to a joint session of Congress. He had asked Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz—who had written speeches for Adlai Stevenson—to help prepare a draft. For three days, while entire blocks of Washington were aflame, a small group of us, designated by Secretary Wirtz, worked late into the night, driving home exhausted through uncanny, deserted streets, halted periodically at barricades where armed soldiers looked inside the car. Finally, we finished a draft that called for a "massive effort" to improve ghetto life, to be paid for by transferring money from the defense budget and Highway Trust Fund, and by raising taxes on the more affluent. We had convinced ourselves that King's martyrdom had created a moment of opportunity equal to that of his march on Selma, that the President could speak now as he had spoken then, and that Congress and the country would respond—this time to the denial of economic justice—as they had then to the denial of legal equality. We were undoubtedly wrong. Too much had changed since 1965—for Johnson and, even more, for the country. At the last minute Johnson canceled plans for the speech. A canvass of opinion in Congress had convinced him that the riots had destroyed whatever sense of injustice, compassion, or guilt King's death had produced; that the country was in no mood for progressive words on race.

His decision depressed me, and I was still disturbed when, a few weeks later, I met the President at a White House dinner. Shaking my hand, he politely asked how I was, and what I'd been doing. To my surprise, I found myself not simply responding, but launching into a speech of my own about the speech he should have given. He started to reply, but was interrupted by a photographer, who hurried him off

to pose with ice-skating star Peggy Fleming. We didn't talk again that evening.

The next day, however, the President's appointments secretary called to say that President Johnson wanted to see me at the White House at 5 P.M. When I walked into the Oval Office, the President was in the midst of signing documents and his back was turned. I stood there silently, looking across the great office at the figure intently bent over his desk, the man suddenly appearing like a symbol out of one of my high school textbooks. I cleared my throat to let him know I was there.

He swiveled in his chair and, without a greeting, in strong, almost accusing tones, said, "First you say I should be dumped from the ticket. Then you criticize me for not making a speech. I've got nine months left in office without another election. I want to use those months to do and say all the things that should be done and said simply because they're right. And you can help me. You should be happy now that you've had your way, and now that I've removed myself from the race, it is time for you to remove yourself from the Department of Labor and come to work for me until I have to leave. Anyway," he added, "I've decided to do some teaching when I leave office. I've always liked teaching. I should have been a teacher, and I want to practice on you. I want to do everything I can," he concluded, "to make the young people of America, especially you Harvards, understand what this political system is all about."[3]

*

So I became a member of the White House staff, my office door two doors away from that of the President. Through my windows as well as his appeared the swiftly intensifying beauties of Washington's half-Southern spring. His last there. Most of my work in the White House concerned itself with the development of manpower projects—my specialty from the Department of Labor—and I worked with Joe Califano and Larry Levinson, the chief staff members for domestic affairs, rather than with the President. With Johnson himself, my main role was to listen as he talked. At around 9 or 10 P.M., one or two evenings a week, I sat for an hour or two in the little sitting room next to the Oval Office while Johnson recounted his activities of the day, reading to me from the stack of memos and letters on his desk. As I

sat and listened to Johnson describe the details of his day, what he had done and how he had felt, the scene struck me as bewilderingly familiar. I could only think of my own childhood memory of my mother patiently listening to me, perched on a high stool in our kitchen, tell her in excruciating detail everything I had done that day at school.

My perceptions of him during those last nine months in the White House were as complicated and contradictory as he was himself. At one moment, he could be the statesman, grappling with the full range of responsibilities and executing his office with skill and intelligence. And since Lyndon Johnson's White House completely resonated with his personal moods and activities, it seemed to me at such times that I was at the center of government and power, of history itself. Moments later, the ambience could tilt toward absurdity when personal idiosyncrasy sent the very staff that had just been hard at work on matters of high policy off on a desperate search for huge quantities of a specific brand of peanut brittle which Lyndon Johnson needed within half an hour.

As President, Johnson could command detailed reports from any of his agencies and departments on almost any difficult question of state, and receive them within hours. But he also extended these prerogatives, and with the same urgency, to the most trivial of his personal desires. If he expressed a preference for a felt-tipped pen or a particular style of shirt, the manufacturer would be called upon to deliver three dozen within the hour. When he told his staff that he liked to read his reports in three-ring binders, 180 loose-leaf notebooks appeared almost immediately. The White House seemed to be a colossal warehouse, open twenty-four hours a day to accommodate the ever-shifting tastes of Lyndon Johnson.

Typically, when one morning he announced a new campaign to lose ten pounds, by late afternoon the White House was stocked with 150 pounds of cottage cheese, 275 containers of yoghurt, 40 loaves of diet bread, 15 boxes of Melba toast, and 10 pounds of his favorite diet candy, flown in by courier plane from his favorite store in San Antonio, Texas. The night the diet came to an end, gallons of ice cream and platters of homemade cookies suddenly found their way into the gleaming white refrigerators and stainless-steel kitchens. Aware that the slightest mishap could send Johnson into a fury, the domestic staff spent hours anticipating his most trifling whims. Informed of his preference for low-calorie drinks, the staff installed a special tap for Fresca in the cubbyhole immediately outside the Oval Office. Lyndon Johnson had

only to push a button on the arm of his chair and within seconds a glass of Fresca would appear.

The contradictions extended into everything. As Commander in Chief, there was no doubt that he had to be able to be in immediate contact with the Pentagon, congressional leaders, foreign diplomats, and others in case an emergency should arise. But Johnson had embraced the possibilities offered by his presidential communications network with the unqualified excitement of an eleven-year-old who'd been given the world's biggest walkie-talkie. He had push-button phones installed in every place he might conceivably be—in his bathroom, in his bedroom, in his sitting room, in his dining room, in his theater, in his cars, on his motorboats, and on his planes. The pool at the White House and the pool at the ranch were both equipped with a special raft for a floating phone. The short-wave communications system enabled Johnson to reach any guest who was in a Lyndon B. Johnson car within twenty miles of his ranch house. His voice could be heard simultaneously on all of the thirteen loudspeakers installed around his Texas property. Buzzers buzzing, lights flashing, beepers whining—Johnson delighted in receiving and sending signals testifying to his existence at the center of the nation.

Television and radio were his constant companions. Hugging a transistor radio to his ear as he walked through the fields of his ranch or around the grounds of the White House, Johnson was a presidential teenager, listening not for music but for news. The transistor gave Johnson an exclusive beat, allowing him to play newscaster, dispensing bits and pieces of the latest news to his staff and guests. Since he liked to watch the evening news on all three networks at once, Johnson had the famous three-screen console built into the cabinet beside his desk in the Oval Office, and a duplicate installed in his bedroom. He had it equipped with an automatic control so he could tune in the sound of whichever network was, at that particular moment, commenting on him or his activities. To the left of the console stood the wire tickers —AP, UP, and Reuters—the keys steadily imprinting the bulletins across the unrolling paper. "Those tickers," Johnson later said, "were like friends tapping at my door for attention. I loved having them around. They kept me in touch with the outside world. They made me feel that I was truly in the center of things. I could stand beside the tickers for hours on end and never get lonely."[4]

Many dread loneliness, but "loneliness" for Johnson was not a

state of mind. He could not bear to be by himself, not for an evening or for an hour. Always there were people, in his office, at his house, in the swimming pool, even in the bathroom. At the Senate, as in the rooming house he first occupied when, at twenty-three, he came to Washington, he would roam the corridors looking for people to talk to, persuade, and learn from. But in the Oval Office there were moments when privacy was necessary; thus the news tickers were installed to create a continuing presence.

Not only companions, the tickers were an additional source of control—or a sense of control—over events. Immediately after reading an inaccurate or displeasing story on the AP ticker, Johnson would call newspaper editors, present them with his version of the facts, and insist upon a corrected story in the late city edition. Similarly, by carefully watching the coverage of a political event on the 6 P.M. news, Johnson could get the news director on the phone, and demand a correction before the same story reappeared on the 11 P.M. news.

Johnson's often baffling and contradictory but always dazzling display of energy extended to every aspect of his life. It seemed that, except when he slept, he was in constant motion. When he got hungry, he often invited whoever was with him at the time, whether it was the Secretary of the Treasury discussing the balance of payments or his personal secretary taking dictation, to join him at the family table. At night, after dinner, he would gather guests, staff, and family around. Then he sat and talked about anything he pleased until one or two in the morning. For long periods, conversation would lapse into monologue. To leave was unthinkable.

If Johnson was in high spirits, then an unmistakable air of life and vitality characterized his entire staff. Conversations were easy and pleasurable, luncheons stretched out, relations were cordial. Johnson, relaxed, was a superb storyteller. He could meet with any group and pick up something from the topic of conversation that reminded him of a story, which he would then proceed to tell in great detail, accompanied by mimicry and gestures and uproarious laughter. Johnson filled his anecdotes with inflated words and feelings. He could, to great effect, convincingly appear to recreate the look and the feel of any person in almost any situation, whether he himself had been there or not. But most of the stories had a point—one simple idea. Ribbing and teasing —usually associated with the details of another person's private personal life—were central to all Johnson's stories. By directing his ridi-