Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism

A Brief Biography with Documents

Bruce J. Schulman

THE BEDFORD SERIES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Boston University

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Foreword

The Bedford Series in History and Culture is designed so that readers can study the past as historians do.

The historian's first task is finding the evidence. Documents, letters, memoirs, interviews, pictures, movies, novels, or poems can provide facts and clues. Then the historian questions and compares the sources. There is more to do than in a courtroom, for hearsay evidence is welcome, and the historian is usually looking for answers beyond act and motive. Different views of an event may be as important as a single verdict. How a story is told may yield as much information as what it says.

Along the way the historian seeks help from other historians and perhaps from specialists in other disciplines. Finally, it is time to write, to decide on an interpretation and how to arrange the evidence for readers.

Each book in this series contains an important historical document or group of documents, each document a witness from the past and open to interpretation in different ways. The documents are combined with some element of historical narrative—an introduction or a biographical essay, for example—that provides students with an analysis of the primary source material and important background information about the world in which it was produced.

Each book in the series focuses on a specific topic within a specific historical period. Each provides a basis for lively thought and discussion about several aspects of the topic and the historian's role. Each is short enough (and inexpensive enough) to be a reasonable one-week assignment in a college course. Whether as classroom or personal reading, each book in the series provides firsthand experience of the challenge—and fun—of discovering, recreating, and interpreting the past.

Natalie Zemon Davis
Ernest R. May

Preface

Lyndon Baines Johnson transformed America. In achievements so grand that few politicians would have dared them and in humiliations so painful that no one, not even Johnson, could bear them, LBJ altered the way Americans worked, played, voted, lived and died. For his triumphs and his failures, Johnson has been admired, criticized, and reviled. His gigantic presence and volcanic personality have spawned vociferous debate and inspired biographies as large and monumental as Johnson himself.

This book is not one of them. While *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* does examine Johnson's character—his dishonesty, nobility, ambition, vulgarity, generosity, greed—this account focuses less on LBJ's personal traits and more on the ways he embodied the principles, obsessions, and contradictions of his era. The analytic biography that makes up the first part of this book attempts to immerse Johnson in his times; it portrays him as an emblematic figure, indeed *the* emblematic figure in the rise and fall of postwar American liberalism. The documents that make up the second part of this book revive the voices of historical actors and assemble a wide range of contemporary opinion. Addressing the great issues of Johnson's public life—civil rights, Vietnam and American foreign policy, the Great Society, and the fate of liberal reform—Johnson, his aides, his opponents, and his interpreters all speak of LBJ's ambitions, achievements, defeats, and legacy. Collected together, they reveal the complexity of Lyndon Johnson's character and the profound and continuing impact of his tumultuous presidency.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In assembling this little book, I have incurred unusually large debts. Six distinguished historians reviewed the manuscript for the publisher. Lewis L. Gould shared his expert knowledge of Johnson's career and corrected many embarrassing errors. Paul Boyer suggested ways to deepen the

historical context and slim down some of my "high calorie" prose. Laura Kalman's mastery of the historical record and of the art of biography contributed much to this book, as did Elizabeth Cobbs's incisive commentary and Philip Ethington's penetrating reading and provocative interpretations of Johnson and his milieu. David M. Kennedy examined the manuscript with his customary insight and care, displaying his uncanny knack for exposing the difficult issues I had tried to finesse and forcing me to confront them. Kennedy's obligations to this former student ended many years ago, but he has continued to support my work with candor, dedication, and grace. He sets a model as a scholar, colleague, and mentor that I have tried to emulate, without ever expecting to approach.

Mary Corey, Stephen Davis, Julie Reuben, Charles Romney, and Stewart Weaver read sections of this manuscript and contributed many useful suggestions. Robert Dallek offered the benefits of his unparalleled knowledge of Johnson and the presidency and his savvy advice about fashioning a brief interpretive essay.

Although born and bred in Texas, Lyndon Johnson spent most of his adult life in Washington, D.C. Fittingly, I completed the greater part of this book during a year-and-a-half sojourn in the nation's capital, in the hospitable surroundings of UCLA's Center for American Politics and Public Policy. I would like to thank Center Director Joel Aberbach for opening those splendid facilities to me; Washington Director Peter Skerry for welcoming me to Washington; UC Washington staff members Helen Chatalas, Caroline Hartzell, Melody Johnson, Dave Lewis, and Alverta Scott for providing a congenial setting; and especially, Program Administrator Darlene Otten, whose efforts made my stay particularly pleasant and productive.

It is commonplace for authors to acknowledge their publishers, but all too frequently (as many authors know) one can offer only perfunctory, dutiful expressions of gratitude. Not so in this case. The staff at Bedford Books, beginning with President and Publisher Chuck Christensen and History Editor Sabra Scribner, have won my admiration for their work and my sincere thanks for their consistent aid and support. Joan Feinberg, Niels Aaboe, Elizabeth Schaaf, Richard Keaveny, Karen Baart, and Nancy Ludlow all contributed to the completion of this book. Production Editor Anne Benaquist's rigorous and sensitive attention to the manuscript—her devotion to precision and clarity—rescued this book from many errors and inconsistencies. I owe particular gratitude to my developmental editor, Louise Townsend, who shepherded this book and its author through many difficult passages with enthusiasm, insight, and a sense of humor.

With patience and panache, Louise edited the biography, helped trim the documents, and guided this book through every stage of the development process.

Finally, Alice Killian read every page of the manuscript many times. Wrestling with the roughest of first drafts, her editing repeatedly turned odorous, murky mash into smooth, clear malt. In this, as in all other endeavors, she has been a loving and supportive partner.

Bruce J. Schulman

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PART ONE

Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism

For half a century, from the New Deal of the 1930s to the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, liberalism was the dominant political philosophy in the United States. Liberals prescribed active government as the cure for the nation's ills, and millions of Americans embraced that therapy. They turned to Washington to provide economic prosperity, international security, and some measure of social justice.

One man, Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), towered over the entire era from Roosevelt to Reagan—his long legs striding through the corridors of power, his outsized, homely features facing down his opponents. In a period when Americans shared his faith in the federal government's capacity to solve the nation's problems, Johnson personified liberal, activist government. His career traced the path of modern American liberalism—a path beginning with the New Deal, culminating in the Great Society and the Vietnam War, and, finally, pointing toward the conservative backlash of the 1970s and 1980s. At a time when Americans relied on the national government for relief from economic depression, security in old age, education of their children, homes for their families, and safety from foreign menace, Lyndon Johnson became the principal champion of liberal government. He was the architect of its most important legislative achievements and, also, a major agent of its eventual demise. More than any other politician of the past five decades, Lyndon

Johnson embodied the contradictions of political liberalism in post–World War II America, orchestrated its triumphs, and endured its agonies.

In historian Robert Dallek's words, it was an age "when politics was king," and Lyndon Johnson never strayed far from the throne.[1] "Now of course you have to understand," his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, explained, "above all he was a man steeped in politics. Politics was not an avocation with him. It was it. It was *the* vocation. It was his life, it was his religion, it was his family. . . . Every time you saw him it wasn't like seeing a man; it was like seeing an institution, a whole system that just encompassed you. Johnson thought he could pick up the globe and walk off with it."[2] The man and the era fused in that passion for politics, in a vision of political office as a platform for constructive action. "Some men want power simply to strut around the world and to hear the tune of 'Hail to the Chief,' " LBJ once remarked. "Others want it simply to build prestige, to collect antiques, and to buy pretty things. Well, I wanted power to give things to people, all sorts of things to all sorts of people. . . . "[3]

Politics mattered to Lyndon Johnson because he and his fellow liberals intended widespread and dramatic action. They harbored no doubts that government could and should improve American life. They had little sense of the limits of political action, the unintended, self-defeating consequences of some well-intentioned policies. Ironically, Johnson's own presidency alerted Americans to those dangers and shook their faith in the capacity of their president and their government to meet the challenges of modern life.

Johnson's career, then, offers an unparalleled opportunity for investigating United States politics and public policy from the 1930s to the 1970s. To study LBJ is to survey his times, for Johnson was a historical lightning rod, a huge presence that attracted and absorbed the great forces of his era.

In every sense, Johnson was big—in his overweening ambition, his vulgarity, his generosity, his greed. Texas Governor John B. Connally, a friend and one-time protégé of LBJ, maintained that "there is no adjective in the dictionary to describe him. He was cruel and kind, generous and greedy, sensitive and insensitive, crafty and naive, ruthless and thoughtful, simple in many ways yet extremely complex, caring and totally not caring. . . . As a matter of fact," Connally concluded, "it would take *every* adjective in the dictionary to describe him."[4]

Johnson left huge footprints wherever he stepped, overwhelming nearly everyone who crossed his path and achieving more than nearly any other American politician. He finally retired to Texas in defeat, his leadership and his liberalism repudiated by the American people.

The pages that follow retrace those footprints and reconstruct, as best they can, the story of Lyndon Baines Johnson and American liberalism.

NOTES

[1] Robert Dallek, conversation with the author, April 1992.
[2] Hubert H. Humphrey, quoted in Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: Ballantine, 1980), xvii.
[3] Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Signet, 1976), 57.
[4] John B. Connally, in Miller, *Lyndon,* xvi.

1

"The Perfect Roosevelt Man": Young Lyndon Johnson, 1908–1948

Johnson City, a tiny town in the Hill Country of central Texas, primped and preened in expectation of its most famous native. Lyndon Baines Johnson—congressman, senator, now president of the United States—was coming home. He was headed not to the LBJ Ranch, the spectacular spread he had built a few miles away, but to the town itself, to the shabby six-room schoolhouse where he had begun his rise to power. Johnson had almost single-handedly brought electricity and running water to the Hill Country, secured pensions for its elderly, and obtained subsidies for its hardscrabble farmers. He built the dams, the roads, the hospitals, and the schools.

This time, Lyndon Johnson carried one last great gift—for the Hill Country, the schools, and every poor, striving child in the nation. In Johnson City he would sign the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, a massive federal aid program for education designed, as Johnson often put it, to allow every student, no matter how poor or wretched, to "get as much schooling as he could take." Franklin D. Roosevelt, Johnson's idol and mentor, had sought such a comprehensive federal education law and failed. So, too, had LBJ's predecessor, John F. Kennedy. But Lyndon had delivered. "You take it from me," he explained, "I worked harder and longer on this measure than on any measure I ever worked on since I came to Washington in 1931." A boy of modest means from a starved, desolate land, he believed education the only escape from a life of want and squalor. "Education," President Johnson instructed the audience at the signing ceremony, "is the only valid passport from poverty."[1]

Few of LBJ's hometown neighbors ever had that passport stamped or found any other safe-conduct out of poverty. The unforgiving Hill Country wrecked many a family. One sign, posted on an abandoned farm during a severe drought near the end of the nineteenth century, expressed the

desolation of the region and the desperation of its people: "200 miles to nearest post office; 100 miles to wood; 20 miles to water; 6 inches to hell. God bless our home."[2]

Johnson's parents left that hard country life for Johnson City in 1913 when Lyndon turned five years old. But this metropolis, with a population of 323, offered little more comfort than the isolated farm. Without electricity or indoor plumbing, Johnson City boasted one bank with a total capital reserve of $23,000 and one "factory," a pitiful little cotton gin built out of corrugated tin. Nowhere could you buy a loaf of bread or fresh meat, and the nearest railroad bypassed the area, many miles away. "When I came to Johnson City," one neighbor remembered of those days, "I thought I had come to the end of the earth."[3]

That barren country formed the sometimes loving, sometimes ruthless man who created the compassionate Great Society and directed the cruel battle in Vietnam. It nurtured the fiery ambition that never let Johnson rest and vaulted him from the end of the earth to the most powerful office in the world. Resting just beyond the 98th meridian, the Hill Country straddled the boundary between the South and the West and divided the cotton-growing, fertile plantation region of east Texas from the arid, cowboy-and-rattlesnake country of the west. It was pure Texas and many were proud of it. Lyndon's father, Sam Ealy Johnson, Jr., had himself preserved the Alamo as a historic monument and shrine to state history. Nonetheless, Johnson City and its hilly environs stood apart from the rest of Texas; it had no oil to speak of, few wealthy men, and almost no blacks or Mexican Americans (and most Hill Country whites hoped to keep it that way). Everybody knew one another; it was a place, Lyndon's father said, where people know when you're sick and care when you die.

FROM THE HILL COUNTRY TO CAPITOL HILL

From the very beginning, Lyndon Johnson stood out. For three months after his birth in 1908, his parents could not even agree on a name for their long-eared, big-nosed boy. His mother, Rebekah Baines Johnson, an unusually refined woman for the uncouth prairie, treasured poetry, revered knowledge, and detested anything dirty or shabby. She insisted on filling her children's minds, even when neighbors thought she should worry more about feeding their growling stomachs. The boy's father cared little for the farming he did near the family's cabin on the Pedernales River and still less for the real estate work he pursued after moving his young family to town. Sam Johnson's passion was politics. He wanted to name