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Part of the Way with LBJ

The Shifting Legacies of Lyndon Johnson

Mark Atwood Lawrence

Lorsque Lyndon B. Johnson quitta la Maison-Blanche en 1969, peu d'Américains ressentirent de la tristesse ou du respect pour le président. La guerre du Vietnam avait entaché sa réputation, tout autant que les critiques à l'encontre de sa *Great Society*, qui avait, accusait-on, donné bien trop de pouvoir au gouvernement fédéral. Cependant, plus récemment, la réputation de Johnson s'est considérablement améliorée. En 2020, des journalistes ont même élevé Johnson au rang de standard auquel juger la présidence Biden. Ce chapitre examine les trois raisons majeures de cette réévaluation. En premier lieu, il suggère que la mise à disposition de nouveaux documents a permis une analyse plus détaillée et nuancée du président par les historiens et biographes. Ensuite, il met en évidence le fait que les controverses liées à la guerre du Vietnam se sont atténuées, permettant ainsi d'ouvrir le champ d'analyse de ses accomplissements en matière de politique intérieure. Enfin, le caractère hyper-partisan de l'espace politique du XXIe siècle a créé un désir presque nostalgique pour l'approche bipartisane et pragmatique incarnée par Lyndon B. Johnson. Cette démonstration se conclut toutefois par une mise en garde : la réévaluation de la présidence Johnson se confronte aux limites de la guerre du Vietnam, qui compromettra toujours l'héritage du président.

Mots-clés : réputation, héritages, recherche académique, biographie, culture populaire

A great leader?

A striking headline appeared over an online story by veteran National Public Radio (NPR) reporter Ron Elving on April 17, 2021: "Can Biden Join FDR and LBJ in the Democratic Party's Pantheon?". It was a conspicuously

provocative question about the ultimate legacy of President Joseph R. Biden, who hadn't even spent 100 days in the Oval Office. But it was also a remarkable query for the assessment it implied about one of Biden's predecessors. President Lyndon B. Johnson, suggested NPR, was a great leader against whom other presidents might be judged (Elving, 2021).

Hardly anyone would contest that President Franklin D. Roosevelt ranks among the greats of the Democratic Party. But LBJ? His stature is an entirely different matter. When Johnson left the White House, he was shrouded in controversy and bedeviled by low approval ratings. Broad swaths of his own party had disowned him. In fact, he might not have been able to win the Democratic nomination for a presidential run in 1968 if he had decided to pursue it. Despairing of his chances amid the twin crises in Vietnam and America's burning cities, Johnson stunned the nation in a televised speech on March 31, 1968, announcing that he would not run for another full term. LBJ's fragile health had something to do with that decision, but there is little question that he was driven as well by despair over his crumbling political viability. Few presidents have ended their terms in such an aura of failure.

In the 21st century, however, something curious has happened. A Democratic Party outcast, long reviled on left and right and forgotten by just about everyone else, has regained a good deal of the luster that he had possessed in the years when he dominated American politics and performed innumerable feats of legislative mastery. This favorable trend reached a new peak in the Biden years, with LBJ – as in Elving's article – sometimes offered up as a model to which other presidents might aspire in order to assure their own reputations for bold vision and effective leadership. Throughout American history, many presidents have seen their standing improve as time passed following their departures from office. Harry S. Truman and George H.W. Bush stand out among 20th century chief executives for the dramatic reassessments they have undergone. Even by this standard, though, the meteoric improvement of Johnson's reputation is notable. This essay asks how we can explain this transformation and what might lie in store as Americans continue to reckon with the 36th President.

"Swept Down a Hole of Obscurity"

LBJ found a few small pleasures on January 20, 1969, the day he surrendered the presidency to Richard M. Nixon. There was the lighthearted banter with the incoming President about the Johnsons' beloved dog, Yuki. There was the hospitality of his Defense Secretary, Clark Clifford, who hosted LBJ and his family for lunch following the inauguration. And there was the warm reception from two or three thousand well-wishers gathered at Andrews Air Force Base, despite the bone-chilling cold, to see him off on his flight back home to the Texas Hill Country. Johnson turned down the chance to address the throng from the microphone set up for the occasion, rushing instead to shake the innumerable outstretched hands and basking in appreciation that reminded onlookers of scenes from LBJ's early political career. "We'll miss you, Mr. President," declared a placard. "Vaya Con Dios," read another (Sheehan, 1969: 25).

Such sentiments were not, however, widely shared around the nation. To be sure, LBJ's poll numbers at the end of his term were hardly disastrous, with a Gallup Poll showing an approval rating of just under 50 percent in early January 1969. Yet approval had bottomed out at 35 percent four months earlier, and some of the subsequent improvement no doubt reflected flickering regard for a tragic figure nearing the merciful end of his presidency (Woolley & Peters 2025). The cold reality was that Johnson had fallen into disrepute among young and liberal members of his own party even as he faced a rising conservative movement critical of both the war in Vietnam and his Great Society social programs. On both left and right, that is, he had lost much of the support that had made possible his landslide victory in the 1964 presidential contest. A huge number of voters who had supported LBJ in that race abandoned the Democrats just four years later (Nichter, 2023: 219). For a man who craved approval, it was a bitter pill. Visitors to LBJ's ranch in the Texas Hill Country encountered a moody, even unstable, ex-President. Oklahoma Senator Fred Harris called Johnson "totally withdrawn," while former LBJ speechwriter Bob Hardesty found him "impossible to live with" and consumed by "self-pity" (Dallek, 1998: 605–7). His reputation gained nothing from the 1971 publication of *The Vantage Point*, one of the clunkiest memoirs by an American President (Johnson, 1971).

Johnson's disconnect from the nation he had once led was reciprocated by an American public inclined to forget a President synonymous with war, civil unrest, economic downturn, and political division. Whereas historians and biographers had flocked to John and Robert Kennedy as subjects for analysis, writing on LBJ was "surprisingly thin," noted journalist David Halberstam (Halberstam, 1971: 1). Historian Robert A. Divine used precisely the same words – "surprisingly thin" – 12 years later in an article surveying the trickle of studies about Johnson that had appeared to that point (Divine, 1982: 142–50). The best way for a would-be author to overcome meager interest in Johnson, quipped Halberstam, might be to write a book entitled "Between Two Kennedys," a nod to the endless appeal of the assassinated JFK and the emerging Ted.

The Democratic Party also kept its distance. Only one candidate for the party's 1972 presidential nomination, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington, bothered to visit LBJ at his Texas ranch. At the Democratic convention later that year, LBJ's portrait was relegated to a small annex featuring pictures of congressional leaders, while photos of a dozen party luminaries like FDR and Truman festooned the main convention hall. "[T]he name and the record of Mr. Johnson, who left the White House only three and a half years ago, are left almost entirely unmentioned," wrote *New York Times* correspondent Warren Weaver. The former President had invoked his shaky health in declining an invitation to speak at the convention, reported Weaver, but Johnson knew many delegates shunned him as the "ultimate symbol" of the Vietnam War (Weaver, 1972: 12). "Johnson is the war and the war is poison," noted one party strategist interviewed by the *Times* (Lydon, 1973: 18).

Johnson's death in January 1973 relieved Democrats of awkward questions about his place in the party. LBJ's funeral received respectful coverage, with news stories emphasizing the sadness of the occasion and the turbulence of the era during which he had been President. The moment passed quickly, however, and LBJ, his body interred in a family cemetery in the remote Texas Hill Country, faded again from public discussion. An *Atlantic* account of Johnson's final years noted he had been "swept down a hole of obscurity" (Janos, 1973).

When public interest finally revived in the 1980s, greater scrutiny of the 36th President did not mean an improved reputation. The appearance of Robert Caro's *The Path to Power* in 1982 – the first volume of a promised trilogy – delved into Johnson's life with the staggering depth and eloquence that Caro had brought to bear in his Pulitzer-winning biography of New York City political boss Robert Moses. Underlying the LBJ project was a fundamental contention – rather novel at that time – that the 36th President really mattered. Understanding LBJ was, in fact, "essential to understanding the history of the United States in the twentieth century," asserted Caro (Caro, 1982: xvi). To be "essential" was not, however, to be admired. Caro painted LBJ in decidedly unflattering colors. The young Johnson came across as an unlikable egotist driven by a desire to escape the deep poverty he had experienced as a child to grasp for power, money, and stature wherever he could find it. His dedication to the New Deal, in Caro's telling, revealed more about his ability to craft a winning political image than about any genuine principles.

Caro's second volume, *Means of Ascent*, published in 1990, took an even dimmer view of LBJ in the years when he rose from an obscure member of the House of Representatives to Texas's junior Senator. That ascent, suggested Caro, owed much to an embellished record of service in World War II, a tacit bargain with disreputable and deeply conservative Texas financiers, personal wealth accumulated through manipulation and deceit, willingness to say whatever voters wanted to hear, and above all vote-stealing in the 1948 election for the Senate seat. In all these ways, wrote Caro, Johnson "stretched the rules" of the political game beyond the breaking point, "pushing deeper into the ethical and legal no-man's-land beyond them than others were willing to go" (Caro, 1990: 398).

Meanwhile, Johnson remained a pariah among prominent Democrats even as they, along with some Republicans, wrapped themselves in the memory of President John F. Kennedy. Historian Bernard von Bothmer notes that only two Democratic aspirants for the presidency – civil rights icon Jesse Jackson in 1988 and New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley in 2000 – spoke in any depth about their admiration for LBJ. From 1969 to 2004, notes von Bothmer, just one presidential nominee, Jimmy Carter in 1976, devoted as much as a single sentence solely to Johnson in his

acceptance speech at the party's national convention. In 1980, Carter lumped LBJ together with Humphrey, whereas in 1992 Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis mentioned him alongside JFK. Otherwise, Johnson was not mentioned at all. Perhaps most remarkably, von Bothmer adds, 1992 nominee Bill Clinton kept silent about LBJ even though he privately felt deep admiration for his fellow Southerner. More than 20 years after he left office, notes von Bothmer, Johnson was still "political poison" (von Bothmer, 2010: 142).

Opinion polls show that Clinton and other Democratic aspirants for high office had reason to feel this way. In 1990, a Gallup Poll demonstrated that only 40 percent of Americans approved of Johnson's performance as President – even lower than when he had left office in 1969 (Clymer, 1993: E3). And things didn't get much better for LBJ in the years that followed. Zogby surveys of attitudes toward U.S. presidents conducted between 2006 and 2008 revealed that the public ranked LBJ 10th among the 12 men who had held the White House since the start of World War II, ranking him ahead of only Nixon and Gerald R. Ford (von Bothmer, 2010: 141). Between 1999 and 2007, seven Gallup polls that asked respondents to name the greatest President in American history came to a similar conclusion. Johnson was the only President from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush not to be mentioned by 1 percent in any poll, a remarkable result given that even unlikely suspects such as Nixon, Ford, and Jimmy Carter managed to clear that low bar (Saad, 2007).

Johnson's low stature undoubtedly flowed mostly from his indelible association with the war in Vietnam. LBJ took the lion's share of blame not only for committing U.S. combat forces to Southeast Asia but also for refusing to level with the American people about the challenges that lay ahead or the costs that could be expected in trying to meet them. Antiwar critics had, of course, reviled LBJ since the war years, and little changed on the leftward end of the political spectrum in the years that followed. What shifted during the 1980s and 1990s was the growing popularity of a view, popularized above all by President Ronald Reagan, that Johnson and other liberals had refused to authorize sufficient force to achieve American objectives in Vietnam. Reagan's 1980 pledge never again to "ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war

our government is afraid to let them win" resonated with segments of the American public that had agitated for more decisive action during the war or found Reagan's logic appealing at a time of resurgent desire to use U.S. power abroad (Reagan, 1980). Thus did LBJ lose favor with the one group that approved of his performance in Vietnam, hawks who believed he did the right thing by acting to block communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Now virtually no one found anything to admire about Johnson's handling of the war.

Other factors also worked against LBJ's reputation during the 1980s and 1990s. The fact that John F. Kennedy (along with FDR and Reagan) vied for the top slot in all the public-opinion polls about presidential greatness attests to one of the principal reasons for Johnson's unpopularity. He was simply overshadowed by the charismatic younger man who preceded him. The tragic circumstances surrounding JFK's death, along with the inspirational tone he established during his thousand days in the Oval Office and his shrewd management of dangerous Cold War crises, generated a fulsome sense of greatness and a promise of even greater things if he had not been cut down in the prime of life. By contrast, Johnson seemed an old man – he always looked older than his actual age – and probably suffered from a Southern drawl that many Americans associated with anti-intellectualism. The enthusiasm of many liberals for the slain Bobby no doubt also tarnished LBJ, a boorish interloper who seemed to steal a spotlight rightfully belonging to the Kennedys.

To the extent that Americans acknowledged the Johnson administration's domestic accomplishments, many were as likely to view them critically as to see them as major steps forward. The 1980s and 1990s were, after all, a period of surging conservatism when growing numbers of Americans expressed hostility to a federal government that had ostensibly grown larger and more invasive as a consequence of LBJ's Great Society. Broad respect for the principle of individual liberty, combined with growing societal intolerance for explicit racism, fueled acceptance of the civil rights bills that LBJ signed into law. But Great Society measures to fight poverty, assure medical care, protect consumers, promote the arts, and boost the federal role in education smacked of government overreach into areas best left to the States if not to individuals. Such

programs seemed to empower unrepresentative technocrats while feeding on the earnings of hard-working Americans and stifling the genius of the free-enterprise system. "In the present crisis, government is not the solution to the problem; government *is* the problem," Reagan famously declared in 1981, rejecting the creed that LBJ had espoused a decade and a half before (Reagan,1981). The extent to which Reagan's assertion represented not merely a Republican viewpoint but a pillar of a new political era became clear in 1996, when a Democratic ~President largely agreed. "The era of big government is over," Clinton declared in 1996 (Clinton, 1996). There could hardly have been more striking evidence that the political order within which Johnson had thrived was no more.

Second coming

How, then, can we explain the remarkable improvement in LBJ's image in the first quarter of the 21st century? At least three explanations account for this trend. First is the steady accretion of archival material related to the career, especially the presidency, of Johnson. The explosive growth of available records in the 1990s fueled a flurry of writing about the LBJ presidency that delved in unprecedented detail into the complexities of his personality, his political style, and the dilemmas he faced at home and abroad. Old simplicities fell apart under the weight of new evidence. Monumental new studies – especially the two-volume biography by Robert Dallek (Dallek, 1991; Dallek, 1998) and the single-volume *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* by Randall B. Woods (Woods, 2006) – cast Johnson in a sympathetic light as a man who, for all his shortcomings, aimed to uplift Americans left behind by the nation's staggering postwar prosperity. Even Caro's take on LBJ improved in the third and fourth volumes, published in 2002 and 2012, respectively. This new view of LBJ gradually gained traction with readers. Surveys by the Siena College Research Institute, C-SPAN, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other polling organizations showed that presidential historians – as distinct from the broader American public – increasingly placed LBJ in the top quartile of all American presidents. Some polls of experts even began placing LBJ in the top 10.

Crucial to this reappraisal was the public release of audio recordings that Johnson had secretly made during his presidency, an astonishing resource capturing almost 700 hours of LBJ's telephone conversations with aides, Cabinet secretaries, members of Congress, family members, and other interlocutors. Through periodic releases of this material, the last of which occurred in 2008, it became possible to appreciate Johnson with unprecedented nuance. A man well known for his larger-than-life personality became even more intriguing when it became possible to hear him, in real time, agonize about Vietnam, express genuine passion about domestic reforms, strategize about legislation, joke with his associates, tend to mundane tasks like ordering new trousers, and subject subordinates to the "Johnson treatment" – the persuasive techniques with which he bent other people to his will. If some of these conversations revealed indecision or bad temper, many also revealed LBJ as a man of noble purposes, strategic acumen, and genuine compassion. Very few recordings reflected crudeness or vulgarity, while many showed genuine mastery of policy (Beschloss, 1997: 547–53).

Two examples illustrate the way the tapes captured LBJ's passion for improving the lives of people at the margins of American life and his ability to connect on a human level. On January 15, 1965, the White House recording system captured LBJ strategizing with civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. about the steps needed to generate political support for a sweeping bill aimed at removing barriers to Black voting in the South. Far from a mere bystander while Black leaders set the agenda, Johnson spoke enthusiastically about "equality for all" and urged Black activists to call attention to the most egregious forms of disfranchisement in the South. Confronted with the ugly realities, everyday Americans would conclude, "Well, that's not right. That's not fair," LBJ insisted, anticipating precisely the scenario that would play out following bloody demonstrations in Selma, Alabama.[1] On March 6, the President displayed similar strategic vision during a call with Vice President Hubert Humphrey that touched on the ways in which civil rights advances depended on winning passage of the administration's education priorities.

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[1] Transcript, Johnson and King, January 15, 1965. http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/400506/.

"They can't work in a filling station putting water in a radiator," LBJ said of African Americans seeking greater economic opportunity, "unless they can read and write 'cause they got to go and punch the cash register, and they don't know which [button] to punch".[2]

Even on the subject of Vietnam, the tapes showed LBJ's keen awareness of the human costs of escalation. "I look at this sergeant of mine this morning," Johnson mused during a call with National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy on May 27, 1964, referring to one of his military aides. "[He's] got six little old [children] …, and I just thought about ordering those kids in there, and what in the hell am I ordering him out there for?"[3] Such evidence didn't, of course, suggest that LBJ made the right decisions about Vietnam, but it helped erode old claims that the President welcomed war or gave no thought to the problems American forces would confront if they took on a major combat role. Even critics, in short, had to reckon with a President balancing competing pressures and seeking alternatives to a larger war.

The second explanation for LBJ's improving stature in American life is the simple passage of time since the Vietnam fiasco, easily the darkest mark on Johnson's legacy and a key barrier to understanding his presidency in all its complexity. Vietnam lost a good deal of its radioactivity in American politics during the 1990s, when the Cold War and the controversies it spawned ceased to matter as much. The elections of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, each of whom had evaded service in Vietnam, attested to the war's declining salience. If the frustrating war in Iraq rekindled public discourse about Vietnam after 2003, Americans showed willingness to put the war behind them in 2008 when they elected Barack Obama, who had little to say about the war and embodied a new, post-Vietnam generation. Just as revealing, Hollywood abandoned the polemical approach with which it had tackled the Vietnam War during the 1970s and 1980s, largely ignoring the war but approaching it

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2 Transcript, Johnson and Humphrey, March 6, 1965. https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4005077/.

3 Transcript, Johnson and Bundy, May 27, 1964. https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9060284/.

dispassionately when it did take up the subject. Films as diverse as "We Were Soldiers Once" (2002) and "Tropic Thunder" (2008) took deadly earnest and wildly satiric approaches, respectively, but eschewed the old questions about the war's purpose or morality. Washington's frustrations in Iraq and Afghanistan may also have helped blunt controversy over Vietnam by showing that the latter was hardly a unique disaster in American history.

Whatever the cause, dwindling preoccupation with Vietnam opened space for thinking anew about the Johnson presidency. Journalists, scriptwriters, and politicians gradually followed the lead of historians who gave LBJ increasingly high marks as they rediscovered accomplishments long obscured by the war. In May 2014, around the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the *Washington Post* ran a four-part series highlighting the breadth and ambition of the Great Society (Tumulty, 2014). At nearly the same time, the LBJ Presidential Library hosted a three-day event branded the "Civil Rights Summit." Amid heavy media attention, a trio of former presidents – Carter, Clinton, and George W. Bush – along with incumbent Obama traveled to Austin to pay tribute to LBJ's political courage in pursuing civil rights and social justice. "Because of the Civil Rights Movement, because of the laws Lyndon Johnson signed, new doors of opportunity swung open," Obama asserted in a keynote address that acknowledged LBJ as wholeheartedly as any President ever had (Obama, 2014). Taking stock of the event, *The New York Times* noted LBJ's "evolving" legacy (Rothstein, 2014: C1). Just how far that evolution had progressed was clear in a separate front-page story comparing Obama's signing of minor legislation aimed at fighting employment discrimination with the momentous bills LBJ had signed half a century earlier. Johnson's array of accomplishments had represented a "high-water mark for American presidents pushing through sweeping legislation," and no President since LBJ had approached "that level of legislative success," wrote *Times* correspondent Peter Baker (Baker, 2014).

Popular culture also took another look at LBJ as many of the same problems that preoccupied the United States in the 1960s – race relations, voting rights, poverty, immigration, and the environment – gained new urgency. Playwright Robert Schenkkan presented LBJ in a mostly

sympathetic light in his Emmy Award-winning Broadway play "All the Way," which debuted in 2014 and was later adapted as an HBO movie. Johnson's accomplishments in the arena of civil rights also took center stage in "LBJ," a Hollywood film directed by Rob Reiner. Although Johnson received less favorable treatment in HBO's "The Path to War" (2002), Ava DuVernay's "Selma" (2014), and the third season of Netflix's "The Crown" (2019), the flurry of attention helped elevate Johnson as a fascinating historical figure who played key roles in some of the most important decisions of his era.

If the declining salience of the Vietnam War encouraged new appreciation for Johnson, another major trend of the early 21st century – political dysfunction rooted in hyper-partisanship – offers a third explanation for LBJ's improved standing. In contrast to national leaders who can barely tolerate being in the same room together, Johnson stands out as the epitome of level-headed moderation and skill in the arts of persuasion and coalition-building. Numerous pundits see his commitment to pragmatic problem-solving and his ability to work across the aisle as qualities sorely lacking in a later era. A leader sometimes mocked as the archetype of the flesh-pressing, arm-twisting, deal-making political animal could, it turned out, be a model to be emulated in the right circumstances. LBJ's non-doctrinaire brand of politics drew particular attention in 2020, when former Vice President Biden emerged as the Democratic nominee for President. Numerous commentators highlighted remarkable similarities between the two men. Both came from humble backgrounds, spent long years in the Senate, and rose to the vice presidency as understudies to younger, more charismatic leaders. Pundits enthused as well about the commitment to political pragmatism and bipartisanship that the two men seemed to share.

At the same time, the Great Society appeared relevant as a model for what might be accomplished by a President who combined such skills with a commitment to transformational change. In a roundabout way, President Donald J. Trump helped highlight Johnson's accomplishments by targeting signature achievements of the Great Society, such as voting rights, Medicare, and early-childhood education (Zeitz, 2016). But it was Biden's early initiatives to rebuild the nation's infrastructure, fight

climate change, expand childcare, revise the tax code, and much else that drew comparisons to the LBJ period. Along with Roosevelt's New Deal, Johnson's Great Society suddenly became a reference point for understanding the breadth and scale of change that Biden had in mind. The *New Yorker* asked in the spring of 2021 if Biden was the "second coming" of LBJ or FDR, while Elving's NPR piece inquired whether Biden deserved a place alongside the same two forebears (Glasser, 2021). Never before had a sitting President been compared so extensively to LBJ.

Biden's legacy will no doubt be a matter of debate for years to come, just as his performance drew sharply differing assessments as his presidency unfolded. In 2022, historian Timothy Naftali dismissed the notion that Biden's accomplishments would ever compare to LBJ's as a "delusion" (Naftali, 2022). A year later, by contrast, historian Heather Cox Richardson praised Biden for landmark domestic reform measures that "echoed" bills signed by LBJ and FDR (Cox Richardson, 2023: 247). Where Naftali and Richardson agreed, of course, was in holding up Johnson as the standard for measuring success. Indeed, LBJ's new stature in American life appeared increasingly secure. Amid surging concern about economic inequality, racial prejudice, immigration, and environmental degradation, LBJ's brand of liberalism, rooted in confidence about the ability of the federal government to target the nation's problems and enthusiasm for the bold activism that the Democrats had abandoned in the 1980s and 1990s, seemed certain to endure as a model for some Americans of what might be possible. The Supreme Court's 2020 ruling that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act protected gay and transgender Americans – categories that LBJ and his colleagues scarcely considered – from employment discrimination showed just how important the Johnson presidency might be to progressive ambitions more than half a century after their passage (Liptak, 2020).

On the other side of the political spectrum, conservative critics of government overreach have numerous targets to choose among, including Ted Kennedy, Obama, Biden, and others who have made their mark in recent decades. But, shorn of at least some of his Vietnam baggage, Johnson might continue to come into sharper focus, at least for historically minded commentators, as the President who ushered in the massive

backlash against expanded rights and federal activism that he espoused. In the words of columnist Matt Lewis, LBJ set "inordinately high expectations domestically that he just couldn't meet," precisely the same phenomenon that conservatives saw play out among liberal champions of costly new social programs in the 21st century. For evidence of the limitations on federal activism, critics often point to statistics showing the long-term failure of LBJ's anti-poverty programs to cut into the nation's poverty rate. The complexity of the data makes it possible to defend a wide array of positions about the overall impact of Johnson's programs. But there is little doubt that the Johnson presidency, even for critics, belongs at the center of the debate over a question that remains crucial to the nation's wellbeing in the third decade of the new century: what is the role of the federal government in creating opportunity and social mobility?

The next half-century

In 2023, the 50th anniversary of LBJ's death spurred a flurry of commentary noting how much had changed in Americans' appraisals of Johnson (e.g. Pengelly, 2023; Waxman, 2023). But few reports and op-eds asked what might lie ahead in the next half century as Americans continue to reassess their recent past. Though historians are poor prognosticators, it's a question worth considering. It stands to reason that a revitalization of liberal politics in the years ahead would continue to reinforce LBJ's importance as a major figure with much to teach us about vision and leadership. There are, however, limits on how much LBJ's reputation might improve even if the United States, in a post-Trump era, moves toward a new era of liberal activism fueled by socioeconomic inequalities, climate change, and other challenges that seem to require federal activism. The reason is the same factor that has done so much damage to LBJ's place in American life over the past 50 years: the Vietnam War. The war has declined in significance over the past three decades for the reasons examined in this essay. And yet it will never disappear as a key element of LBJ's presidency. The social, economic, political, and cultural consequences of the war are too deeply entrenched to imagine such a possibility. Moreover, LBJ must ultimately share credit for the Great Society with Congress, the principal architect of domestic policy in the American constitutional system. As

President and Commander-in-Chief, however, he bears principal responsibility in the arenas of foreign and military policy. In these domains, LBJ's reputation remains – and is likely to remain – weak.

To be sure, recent scholarship has acknowledged that there is far more to LBJ's record in the realm of foreign affairs than the Vietnam War, and some of it improves his reputation. LBJ was, for example, dedicated to easing U.S.-Soviet tensions and engineered one of the most important arms-control agreements of the Cold War era, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. He simultaneously advanced other arms-control negotiations that came to fruition during the first Nixon administration. LBJ has also begun receiving a modicum of credit for the attention he paid to climate change, epidemic disease, resource scarcity, and other global problems that transcended geopolitics and constitute pressing challenges to humanity in the 21st century. All these developments, long obscured by the Vietnam War, deserve additional research that, once completed, will likely facilitate more nuanced judgments about Johnson (Gavin & Lawrence, 2014).

Yet there is no escaping the fact that recent scholarship on the Vietnam War has continued to paint LBJ in deeply unfavorable shades. Influential studies such as H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* (1997), Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War* (1999), David Kaiser's *American Tragedy* (2000), and Gregory A. Daddis's *Westmoreland's War* (2014) disagree on numerous points but concur that Johnson bears heavy responsibility for decisions that set the United States on the road to disaster. Drawing on abundant evidence that LBJ understood the risks of fighting a major war in Vietnam, these authors criticize him for unimaginative resort to containment, falling dominoes, and other Cold War clichés whose applicability to Vietnam he never seriously questioned. They criticize LBJ, too, for misleading the American public about U.S. prospects for victory and denying the true costs of the war. There has been scant improvement, then, in dominant assessments of LBJ's role in a war that caused extraordinary bloodshed, stirred deep social divisions, and profoundly undercut public trust in government.

In the end, then, the reappraisal of America's 36th President enables us to go part of the way with LBJ. Inescapably, we can now see him as

a leader of enormous consequence, both for the sweeping reforms he signed into law and for the era-defining conservative swing that those reforms helped inspire. But we can also still see, albeit with far more nuance than was once possible, his role in bringing about the biggest foreign-affairs catastrophe of the last century. The challenge is increasingly to explain how one presidency was capable of creative and daring breakthroughs in the domestic arena while behaving unimaginatively in the international realm. How were these two patterns connected, and how should the two pillars of Johnson's legacy be balanced against one another? These questions will likely keep scholars and biographers busy for a long time to come.

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LYNDON B. JOHNSON : ENTRE CONTINUITÉS ET RUPTURES

2025 marque une série d'anniversaires liés à la présidence de Lyndon B. Johnson. En matière de politique étrangère, 1965 voit le lancement de l'opération *Rolling Thunder*, tandis que 1975 est marquée par la déclaration du président Ford proclamant la fin la guerre du Vietnam. Sur le plan intérieur, 1965 est aussi l'année du vote par le Congrès du *Voting Rights Act* et du *Social Security Act*, instaurant Medicare et Medicaid.

L'énigme de la présidence Johnson – législateur aguerri, président impérial, puis président déchu – continue d'interroger. Cet ouvrage explore les multiples arcs narratifs de sa présidence, mettant en lumière l'articulation entre la personnalité de l'homme et les contextes politique et géopolitique d'alors. Car si Johnson a su tirer parti d'un climat social et politique favorable pour insuffler une impulsion législative hors du commun, le contraste est immense avec son bilan désastreux en matière de politique étrangère, résultante de la guerre du Vietnam.

Structuré en trois parties, l'ouvrage s'ouvre sur un regard général porté sur le président et son mandat, se poursuit avec une analyse de la question des droits citoyens et sociaux, et se conclut par une réflexion sur la guerre contre la pauvreté, pilier de sa « Grande Société ». Les contributions réunies ici mettent en lumière l'ampleur du travail accompli par Johnson et son administration, ses limites, et ses résonances dans l'Amérique d'aujourd'hui. La présidence Johnson apparaît alors comme une période de profondes mutations, révélant une société clivée, dont les fractures ne cesseront de s'amplifier.

Juristes, historiens et spécialistes de la civilisation américaine croisent ici leurs approches comparées pour éclairer la complexité d'une présidence dont l'héritage résonne encore dans les débats contemporains.

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