CHAPTER 1

Power and Purpose: LBJ in the Presidency

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He could be as ruthless as he was compassionate, as volcanic as he was composed, as callous as he was considerate, and as confident as he was insecure. He was, as presidential assistant Bill D. Moyers recalled, "thirteen of the most interesting and difficult men I ever met."[1] Lyndon Baines Johnson – a man with outsized appetites and boundless ambition, and almost equally bottomless doubts – is a figure so compelling that he has inspired Hollywood movies, a Broadway play, and multi-volume biographies. Indeed, the force of his personality and the magnitude of his impact make him a character of operatic proportions. From his foundational achievements on civil rights, health care, education, and the environment, to his role in expanding a disastrous war in Southeast Asia, to his imprint on the role of government in American life, Johnson occupies a central place in the modern history of the United States.

We have come to know LBJ most intimately through numerous studies of his life and times.[2] Upwards of twenty major books have chronicled the former president, depicting him as a "flawed giant," the "master of the Senate," an "architect of American ambition," and as "Big Daddy from the Pedernales."[3] These assessments have evolved as several archives, especially the LBJ Presidential Library, have released their records on the man and his administration. Initially, these titles painted Johnson with a broad brush but have since rendered him in greater detail; they have also come to treat him as a more complicated figure. Early accounts found him to be a benevolent populist or a power-hungry politico, but recent works are more nuanced, acknowledging his flaws and his

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strengths, as well as his achievements and failures. The writing has also advanced from presenting LBJ as focused largely on domestic affairs – mostly approvingly – toward highlighting his broader engagement with foreign policy, oftentimes for ill. This trend toward presenting a more multifaceted Johnson has become standard fare in studies of his full career. Johnson's manifold flaws, inconsistencies, and paradoxes, and their impact on his policymaking, now enliven a broader literature that incorporates the increasing complexity of the America he sought to govern and the world he tried to understand.

LBJ's approach to those challenges provides a window into his persona and its impact on his presidency. His strengths and weaknesses are evident in several dimensions of his management style, including his use of people, his workday habits, his pursuit of information, and his decision-making process. Each of them shaped his triumphs as well as his failures and persisted throughout his life and career, as would the principles he gleaned at an early age – both the idealistic as well as the less ennobling. Collectively, these aspects of LBJ reveal much about the man and his presidency and provide a backdrop for deeper exploration of his legacy and significance.

RISE TO POWER

Biographers have often described LBJ's identity as rooted in the twinned dynamics of family and geography. Johnson grew up in the hardscrabble Texas Hill Country, west of the state capital in Austin. The product of a mother who was alternately distant and attentive, and a father who was harsh and often absent, Johnson, the eldest of five children, grew up as "an emotional orphan," in the words of historian Robert Dallek. Yet it was from his parents, according to another biographer, Randall Woods, that Johnson acquired his commitment to social justice, an ethic he absorbed while accompanying his father – a member of the Texas state legislature – on campaign stops, eventually traveling to Austin to witness the hurly-burly of state house politics.[4] Lessons about compassion and privation also came from family circumstances, as faulty land speculation left his parents' finances in shambles; the attendant humiliations would haunt Johnson thereafter. Ever in need of attention, young Lyndon acted

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out, his restless energy and keen intellect contributing to bratty, oppositional, and unruly behavior. Ultimately channeling those impulses, Johnson succeeded in school, excelling in debate and graduating as president of a miniscule senior class (see Figure 1.1). He then made his way to Southwest Texas State Teachers College. Short of money to finish his studies, Johnson briefly left San Marcos to teach a group of largely impoverished Mexican American children in Cotulla. The experience made a deep impression on him, sparking a desire to help the disadvantaged and to engender within them a sense of dignity and possibility.

After graduating from college, Johnson took a teaching position in Houston before heading to Washington in 1931 to work for Rep. Richard Kleberg (D–Texas), who hailed from a sprawling cattle and oil district. Johnson worked tirelessly for Kleberg – much harder than the congressman, actually – and ingratiated himself with coworkers,

1.1. Debate coach Lyndon Johnson poses with his championship team on the steps of Sam Houston High School in Houston, Texas.
Credit: LBJ Presidential Library photo, photographer unknown

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constituents, and other congressional staffers, amassing a knowledge of rules and procedures and the power that flowed from them. It was during this period that Johnson met and married – within the span of three months – Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Taylor, who would remain central to Johnson's life and career, providing sage advice, keen insight, and extraordinary industry.

By 1935, Johnson had left Kleberg to become state director of the National Youth Administration, one of the projects President Franklin D. Roosevelt created under the banner of the New Deal. Johnson's frenetic pace and constant networking stood him in good stead two years later when he pursued and won a congressional seat representing his own Hill Country district. Thereafter, he supported Roosevelt to the hilt, earning the president's appreciation during his "court-packing" and executive reorganization controversies, as well as during the economic recession of 1937–38. Roosevelt, in turn, became a model for the congressman's own career. Johnson even adopted the moniker "LBJ" out of admiration for FDR and sought to emulate, and ultimately surpass, his hero as both a politician and a president.

For Johnson, though, the road to the White House ran through the Senate. After a failed bid in 1941, he emerged victorious in 1948, but only after prevailing in the Democratic primary by a mere eighty-seven votes – a contest replete with charges of malfeasance that earned him the sardonic nickname "Landslide Lyndon." (See Figure 1.2.) His political talents on full display thereafter, Johnson became Democratic whip and, in 1953, Minority Leader; after reelection the following year in a cycle that produced a Democratic majority, LBJ became Senate Majority Leader. For the next six years, he proved himself that body's master, forging party unity between Southern conservatives and Northern liberals and passing the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction. He also positioned himself for national office, distancing himself from Southern senators on voting rights, on the Senate's cloture rules requiring supermajorities to end debates, and on school integration. Johnson declined to sign the Southern Manifesto opposing the Supreme Court's 1955 Brown decision mandating school desegregation. Though the compromises he struck limited the impact of several legislative measures, they served his personal and policy needs, preserving

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1.2. Among Lyndon Johnson's innovations during his run for Senate in 1948 was his use of a helicopter to travel around Texas. Here, he uses a microphone hung around his neck to address a crowd in Caldwell on June 26.
Credit: LBJ Presidential Library photo by Harry H. Bowers

his stature as a party leader while seeding the ground for more substantive advances toward racial justice. But aware of his waning power in an expanding liberal caucus – the 1958 election altered the composition of the Democratic bloc in the upper chamber – Johnson recognized the difficulties ahead in balancing his colleagues' interests and ideologies. Increasingly, he eyed a run at the White House.

THE VICE PRESIDENCY

Johnson had long thought about the presidency and actively considered mounting a bid in 1956. But he failed to declare his candidacy publicly – not the last time he exhibited ambivalence at a pivotal moment in his career. He also turned down a proposal from Joseph P. Kennedy, the former ambassador to the United Kingdom and father of Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy, to bankroll a Democratic ticket with Johnson in the top spot and JFK as his running mate; his snub contributed to

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lasting enmity between Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy, if not between LBJ and JFK. Although Jack fell short in a spirited race for the vice-presidential slot, he emerged from the 1956 convention a rising star, gaining national exposure in the process. But even as Johnson acknowledged Kennedy's strong showing and his stirring oratory, he failed to grasp the import of the Kennedy phenomenon, seriously underestimating the power of Jack's ambitions and resources. By the time Kennedy announced his presidential candidacy in January 1960, he had assembled a powerful machine and collected pledged delegates across the country. With a sizable war chest and field-tested experience, Kennedy scored primary wins in Wisconsin and West Virginia, and cruised to the convention in Los Angeles with considerable momentum. Johnson, late once more to the presidential field, tried to slow the rush, playing up Jack's medical issues and Joe's appeasement of Hitler, but to no avail. Kennedy won the nomination on the first ballot.

Still, Kennedy's background posed problems for the general election. As a young, Catholic, and comparatively inexperienced senator from the Northeast, JFK needed to balance the ticket with a seasoned politician who could offset his perceived liabilities. Lyndon Johnson – Senate Majority Leader, Protestant, and Southwesterner – fit the bill. Despite the now heightened rancor between the Kennedy and Johnson organizations, the wisdom of choosing LBJ for the second slot was undeniable. Johnson, anticipating his diminished role in the Senate and his presumed culpability for a Kennedy loss should he stay off the ticket, accepted Kennedy's invitation. He also saw the vice presidency as a backdoor to the presidency. "I'm a betting man," Johnson remarked, knowing that one out of four American presidents had died in office, "and this is the only chance I got."[5] But confusion and consternation reigned in Los Angeles after Bobby sought to talk Lyndon out of running, thereby deepening the acrimony between the two men and the two camps. Johnson proved his worth nonetheless as Kennedy won Texas and several Southern states that November, despite JFK's progressive signaling on civil rights.

The bitterness remained, however, and marked the thousand days of Johnson's vice presidency. Widely regarded as the low point in his life and career, the period was littered with indignities and

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humiliations. Kennedy rebuffed LBJ's bid for a more robust portfolio, and Senate Democrats resisted his effort to lead their caucus. He then became the butt of jokes among the Kennedy crowd. Aides addressed him by his first name instead of by his honorific and lampooned him as "Uncle Cornpone" at social gatherings. Kennedy looked to stroke Johnson's ego and include him on major decisions, but staffers tried to freeze him out. The president got on well enough with Johnson – he was partly amused by him, partly cautious of him – but their time together in the Senate likely left a residual wariness that never fully subsided.[6]

Still, Johnson played his part in the administration, combining the substantive with the ceremonial. He chaired the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO), headed the Space Council, and represented the country abroad. But even those duties occasioned nasty rebukes. Criticizing Johnson's leadership of the PCEEO, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and others – including the president – complained about Johnson's performance and sullen demeanor at White House meetings. Johnson thought he should make his views known to JFK only in private and thus largely refrained from speaking at cabinet or National Security Council (NSC) discussions. But his silence continued to alienate him from colleagues who failed to consult him proactively on policy or even on legislative strategy, underscoring his lack of power and further undermining his sense of self.[7]

Compounding his troubles, the rumor mill was rife with speculation that Kennedy might drop LBJ from the 1964 presidential ticket. Johnson suspected that Robert Kennedy was behind the effort and saw Justice Department inquiries into the disgraced Bobby Baker, Johnson's protégé during his Senate days, as part of a plan to undermine LBJ's standing. Johnson may not have wanted the nomination anyway, telling aides of his interest in returning to Texas and running a newspaper or becoming president of his alma mater. According to aide Horace Busby, Johnson allegedly looked to inform Kennedy of those plans on the evening of Friday, November 22, 1963, when he and Lady Bird were to host the president and Jacqueline Kennedy at the LBJ Ranch as part of a pre-campaign swing through Texas.[8]

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TRANSITION

Developments that afternoon changed his calculations, along with those of everyone else. The traumas of the day and the decisions that followed have long been retold from several angles. For Johnson, they included the protocols for leaving Dallas, assuming the presidency, investigating Kennedy's murder, and mourning JFK. Johnson's every move conditioned appraisals of his leadership, his previous irrelevance now vanishing in an instant. Landing in Washington early that Friday evening, the new president caucused for roughly three hours in his suite at the Executive Office Building, just west of the White House. Congressmen, staffers, secretaries, personal aides, the Secret Service – a raft of people came in and out while LBJ worked the phones. He then returned to his residence in northwest Washington, accompanied by Cliff Carter, Bill Moyers, and Jack Valenti – aides and associates who also hailed from Texas – strategizing until 3 o'clock in the morning. Indicative of his ability to focus and project calm in moments of crisis, Johnson coolly and competently mapped out an agenda for the road ahead.[9]

His plans included an address to Congress following Kennedy's burial to convey a sense of stability and continuity. Of signal importance, Johnson pledged to ratify Kennedy's foreign aid, tax cut, and civil rights bills, making their passage tributes to a martyr's cause. But he also sought to expand upon the Kennedy program. Pronouncing JFK "a little too conservative for my tastes," Johnson intended to provide broader access to health care, more educational opportunities, and a better standard of living – in effect, to build a more compassionate and equitable society. His commitment to those goals, and particularly to civil rights, revealed more than just political good sense; when asked about the wisdom of moving forward with civil rights legislation, Johnson, replied, "Well, what the hell's the presidency for?" It was an early sign of his fealty not only to Kennedy's full agenda, which he would now expand, but to the moral force behind it.

Aside from sketching out his legislative goals, Johnson's first order of business was to prevent a mass resignation of Kennedy aides. He did so by telling cabinet and White House officials that he needed them more than

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JFK ever did. Johnson succeeded, and his ability to win over those who had showed him little but contempt revealed a political genius that had remained largely dormant since 1961. Speechwriters Ted Sorensen and Dick Goodwin agreed to stay on, as did Appointments Secretary Kenny O'Donnell, legislative liaison Larry O'Brien, and presidential assistant Arthur Schlesinger. The most senior officials, serving in White House and cabinet positions, continued to serve as well, including, for a time, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. For Johnson, the political optics of their retention were at least as important as the substantive advice they provided. Were they to leave en masse or even in dribs and drabs, the loss of confidence would be devastating for LBJ's immediate priorities, as well as for his electoral prospects that November.[10]

To help him personally navigate the turbulence of those difficult weeks and months, Johnson turned to more familiar faces. Most of them hailed from Texas and had been with him for years. Moyers had been a Senate staffer, a liaison between the Johnson and Kennedy camps, and then deputy director of the Peace Corps; Jack Valenti had run an advertising firm before managing the 1960 Kennedy–Johnson campaign in Texas; Cliff Carter had helped Johnson contest a House seat in 1937; Horace Busby was a liberal journalist who worked for Johnson's Senate campaign in 1948 and remained connected to him thereafter; and George Reedy, the only non-Texan in the group, had been writing speeches for Johnson since 1951. But first among equals was Walter Jenkins, who had been with Johnson since 1939 and was the most loyal of aides, the one who often smoothed the waters that Johnson left in his wake. Collectively, they had accustomed themselves to Johnson's operating style and were best positioned to help him succeed.

Yet his most important adviser, arguably, was Lady Bird. She had seen him climb every rung of the political ladder, counseled him through doubt and depression, managed his office during his absences, and nursed him back to health after his many maladies; through the generosity of her father, she had even bankrolled his early political rise. According to historian Julia Sweig, Lady Bird was nothing short of central to LBJ's entire political career, furnishing tactical advice and strategic counsel. Her critique of a 1964 LBJ press conference, captured on a White House recording system that taped many of the president's

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phone calls, is a masterclass in unvarnished critique. The First Lady assessed not only the substance of LBJ's answers but also his delivery, his appearance, and his cadence; ultimately, Mrs. Johnson gave her husband's performance a "good B-plus."[11] She also played the key role in steeling him for the 1964 presidential campaign, a contest Johnson repeatedly thought of abandoning. Lady Bird outlined LBJ's options that spring, a time when he felt "trapped" in the presidency, and later in August, when he considered declining the Democratic nomination. She did likewise in 1967 and 1968 when LBJ was considering his political future.[12] She was, quite simply, indispensable.

Johnson relied on Lady Bird and his other advisers not only to realize Kennedy's agenda but also to continue the work of Democratic presidents dating back to Franklin Roosevelt. In fact, he aimed to surpass FDR's achievements and secure what Roosevelt had termed "freedom from want." By the first week of January 1964, Johnson had declared a "War on Poverty," to be waged with all the energy he and his administration could muster. He regarded it as a moral duty, inspired not only by his own experiences of privation but also by his religiosity and its call for social justice. Beyond his commitment to enhancing the social and economic safety nets, Johnson sought to enable his fellow citizens to develop their own gifts and thereby contribute to a more productive and inclusive country. Through a range of measures related to the arts, the land, and the environment, as well as through foundational advances in civil rights, immigration, education, health care, transportation, and housing, Johnson's "Great Society" sought to protect Americans from the ravages of economic inequality and racial prejudice and to help the least fortunate, as well as the more privileged, lead lives of greater meaning and dignity. In short, he aimed to transform the qualitative experience of what it meant to be an American.

JOHNSON IN ACTION

He would do so by outworking, outthinking, and outhustling those around him, habits he had long ago adopted and brought with him into the White House. Aides describe his schedule as "unending," with LBJ using "every waking minute of the day."[13] Even his exercise regimen,

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which involved brisk walks around the White House or swims in its pool, were occasions for chatting up journalists and strategizing with advisers. His days began early, with Johnson usually waking between 6 and 7 a.m., and aides flowing into his second-floor bedroom shortly thereafter (see Figure 1.3); these included Moyers and Valenti during the transition period, Valenti, Jake Jacobsen, and Marvin Watson after LBJ's election in 1964, and Larry Temple and Jim Jones in the final years of his presidency. Remaining in bed, Johnson reviewed memos from the previous

1.3. During his presidency, as throughout his career, Lyndon Johnson rarely stopped working. Aides often briefed him in the early morning before he changed out of his pajamas, as in this photo taken on April 27, 1966.
Credit: LBJ Presidential Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

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night's reading, a stack of documents that would often number 100 pages or more. He frequently passed them to Lady Bird if she was awake; if asleep, she would cover her head with the bedding. Upon starting her own day, she would excuse herself to an adjoining bedroom in the presidential suite while LBJ continued his briefing.

Breakfast and the morning newspapers would arrive – tea and toast for the president, along with the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Wall Street Journal* – plus the overnight cables and the previous day's *Congressional Record*. Johnson digested them all, with one eye on a specially constructed television console that allowed him to watch all three networks at once. Thereafter, he reviewed the day's schedule with aides, amending it based on his reading and placing phone calls from bed. He would continue his morning rundown while showering, shaving, and attending to all manner of hygiene in full view of his assistants before heading downstairs to the West Wing.

Johnson usually arrived in the Oval Office by 10 a.m. to continue what had begun hours earlier. He worked the phones – a vital facet of his management style – and met with White House staffers, legislators, cabinet officials, visiting dignitaries, and influential private individuals; guests might include journalists, lawyers, labor leaders, civil rights activists, and business executives. Meetings stretched into the afternoon, with Johnson eating lunch in the mansion between 1 and 4 p.m., either before or after a midday nap; he had begun the practice of afternoon napping following a heart attack in 1955. Changing into pajamas and climbing into bed, he sometimes succeeded in falling asleep, though he frequently worked straight through the next couple of hours, surrounded by aides and, at times, by Lady Bird. After another shower and change of clothes, Johnson reemerged in the Oval Office ready to start his "second day," which often extended well into the evening, sometimes past midnight. Those hours included state functions as well as private dinners, with the meals themselves beginning as late as 8:30 or 9 p.m. Johnson frequently received a massage before bedtime, and on those occasions when Lady Bird was out of town, he made sure he had company until the moment he fell asleep. As he told Califano, "I don't like to sleep alone ever since my

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heart attack," a scare he suffered in July 1955.[14] He then turned to his reading, marking up memos with actions to pursue the following day.

Operationally, Johnson preserved and augmented Kennedy's use of task forces to address a range of policy matters. He used them frequently in the formation of domestic policy, assembling teams of academics, government officials, and business and labor leaders to study and then make proposals on a host of subjects. Much of his Great Society emerged out of this process, with Moyers coordinating the workings of fifteen such bodies during 1964, and Califano developing and coordinating a more integrated interagency process beginning in 1965. By the end of the administration, Johnson had relied on the insights and recommendations of over 100 task forces.[15]

Johnson used this ad hoc approach less frequently in managing foreign policy, but he was no less partial to the improvisation it offered. In fact, he came to prefer the less structured approach of smaller, makeshift gatherings to formal meetings of the NSC, which, by statute necessitated the presence of officials Johnson sometimes sought to exclude. As a result, Johnson relied on frequent but episodic "Tuesday Lunches" to consider the thorniest of issues with his most senior aides. Those sessions not only allowed for more candid discussions but also reduced the risk of leaks. Assessments of their value varied; attendees generally appreciated the ability to speak frankly, while the uninvited abhorred the lack of rigor and structure. Although they were hardly the primary vehicles for exploring pressing policy matters, the lunches did serve as a means for addressing the most critical issues confronting the administration. But they also derailed the more robust give-and-take that would have benefited LBJ's decision-making, particularly on Vietnam.[16]

As for his approach to legislating, Johnson understood the dynamics of moving bills through Congress as well as any lawmaker in American history. Central to his talents was his ability to align the interests of disparate groups around a common proposal by making sure that each could enjoy sufficient benefits to garner their support. His knowledge of the Senate – both its power centers and its rules – was particularly important in advancing Kennedy's program and then his own. Prying the tax cut out of the Senate Finance Committee, for instance, involved Johnson grasping that its chair, Senator Harry

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F. Byrd (D-Virginia), wanted the federal budget for fiscal year 1965 to come in under $100 billion. Likewise, his maneuvering to force the 1964 civil rights bill out of the House Rules Committee and onto the House floor, or his courting of Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen (R-Illinois) to help break a Southern filibuster on civil rights, testified to his political savvy.

Aside from marshaling that vast institutional knowledge, Johnson made great use of his formidable persuasive skills. Honed during a lifelong pursuit of power in its many forms, they served as the bedrock of Johnson's political climb and success. Collectively, they came to be known as "the treatment," a full-body assault that often overwhelmed those on the receiving end. According to columnist Mary McGrory, it involved "an incredible, potent mixture of persuasion, badgering, flattery, threats, reminders of past favors and future advantages."[17] It often came with a dose of physicality, as the *Washington Post*'s Ben Bradlee noted, leaving its recipients feeling as though "a St. Bernard had licked your face for an hour" and "pawed you all over."[18] The treatment could take many forms. Examples from Johnson's White House tapes are legion, including the president's strongarming of Senator Richard B. Russell (D-Georgia) onto the Warren Commission, his badgering of Rep. Charles A. Halleck into granting a rule on civil rights legislation, and his bullying of Sargent Shriver into running the War on Poverty.[19] Califano also recalls a novel instance in which Johnson peppered him on urban renewal, transportation, and fair housing during a swim at the LBJ Ranch, all while the president maneuvered him into the deep end of the pool; only later did Califano realize that he was treading water while LBJ was standing on the pool floor.[20] Photographs of Johnson leaning over hapless figures – friends and foes alike – offer visual confirmation of the treatment's more physical dimensions. The president plied his talents on whole groups as well. Historian Randall Woods recounts LBJ's deft absorption of complaints about Medicare from the American Medical Association, in turns flattering and appealing to its delegates' better instincts during a July 1965 meeting at the White House. Not only did Johnson gain their support, but he convinced several to volunteer for medical service in Vietnam.[21]

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Johnson's ability to prevail in these encounters often flowed from his unwillingness to take no for an answer. Again, the examples are voluminous. One involves the president convincing Governor Carl Sanders (D-Georgia) to visit the LBJ Ranch after the 1964 election, a politically delicate trip, since Johnson had lost Georgia and Sanders was its only senior official to have supported Johnson in the contest. Not only did Johnson wear down Sanders in a series of phone calls, but he also apologized for putting him in such an uncomfortable position, something Johnson rarely did in a meaningful way. He was simply relentless, a trait he exhibited in politics as well as in his personal life, including in sexual relationships. As he framed it – graphically – for labor leader Walter Reuther, "You don't ever get something unless you ask for it."[22]

But Johnson also succeeded because he was simply an effective communicator, at least in private, informal settings. He would charm and cajole, tailoring his language to whomever he was addressing. Conversations with Southern politicos, for instance, often featured more syrupy cadences than those with Northern figures, with LBJ calibrating his identity, according to historian Kent Germany, to great effect.[23] He was also funny, as his White House tapes reveal again and again; the finding aids for those recordings at the Johnson Library even include a subject section for "humor and mimicry," an apt category given the frequency with which he entertained those on the other end of the line. The humor was frequently ribald and very much of an era that presupposed traditional gender norms. But it also transcended them. Lecturing his speechwriters about their need for brevity, Johnson asked whether they could count to "four." It was "like making love to a woman," Johnson explained. "If you don't get your idea across in the first four minutes, you won't do it. Four sentences to a paragraph. Four letters to a word. The most important words in the English language all have four letters. Home. Love. Food. Land. Peace. I know, 'peace' has five letters, but any damn fool knows it should have four."[24]

LBJ's use of people was as comprehensive as his efforts to lobby them. As Califano recalled, Johnson "felt entitled to every available lever, to help from every person, every branch of government, every business and labor leader. . . . He wanted to control everything." So complete was his desire for command that LBJ chafed at aides being beyond his reach and

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even complained when cabinet officials were away from Washington.[25] He often compensated by providing them with additional phone lines for their bathrooms or cars – wherever they might be when he needed their counsel. And that input often included topics outside their areas of expertise; Johnson frequently asked his most senior aides, including cabinet officials, to chime in on administrative matters, political considerations, and personnel. This was especially true as Johnson closed out his caretaker administration and looked toward a full-term presidency. For instance, after acknowledging that National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy was "carrying more work" than he should, Johnson nevertheless asked Bundy to extend his "influence" over a range of additional matters. "I'm going to tell them all, all the staff, that you're number one here at the White House, and I want all of them to carry out any suggestions you make. And if you see something you don't like, why, say so."[26]

Johnson wanted all his assistants to be similarly flexible. As he told Marvin Watson, a Texas friend who became his de facto chief of staff in 1965, White House aides were to be generalists, "can-do" people who were "willing and able to undertake any task" the president asked them to perform; there was to be "no order or rank" among them, as all reported directly to the president.[27] His was a "hub and spoke" approach to management, as Moyers describes it, with Johnson's staff reflecting "the personal needs of the President" rather than some formalized structural design. As much as that model provided Johnson with the hands-on contact he desired, his impulse to control White House and administration operations, especially its messaging, had its downsides. As political scientist Larry Berman observes, that centralization often resulted in the White House, rather than the executive branch departments, taking flack on a host of issues, a dynamic that generated conflict within the administration and often friction between Johnson and the press.[28]

Johnson's management style also featured his frequent use of contacts outside of Washington. These figures included elected officials – usually but not exclusively Democrats – as well as businessmen, lawyers, labor leaders, and financiers. He was particularly fond of speaking with current or former governors and big city mayors who could provide him with political insight, especially on dynamics in their locales. His conversation with newspaper magnate John S. Knight, whom Johnson wanted to

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deputize as a font of information, is indicative of these exchanges: "Pick up that phone and call me and tell me your ideas on things," Johnson said, "particularly when they differ from mine." Knight had numerous "sources of information" that Johnson lacked, and the president needed to "hear the other side." Indeed, Johnson wanted "to get it with the bark off."[29] It was a posture as vital to his own purposes as it would be for scholars researching them later on, as Johnson would note upon dedicating his presidential library in 1971.[30]

More sensitive conversations took place with figures LBJ had known for years, dating either to his time in the House or his run for the Senate. Political insiders James Rowe and Tom Corcoran, along with lawyer Eddie Weisl Sr., were valuable sounding boards as Johnson considered legislative, personnel, and administrative matters. His most trusted consiglieres were Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford; his association with Fortas dated to the late 1930s and with Clifford to the 1948 election, and both provided counsel on the most delicate of matters. They also functioned as head-hunters, tapping their networks for various administration positions. As two of the country's top lawyers, they provided legal as well as political strategy, with Fortas often backing the president's gambits and Clifford providing a more objective voice.[31]

As suggested by the variety and frequency of those many contacts, Johnson's desire for information was insatiable. In addition to his almost inhuman work habits, much of Johnson's success resulted from his absorption and mastery of detail about legislation, polling figures, and district concerns, as well as of lawmakers and their needs (and weaknesses); so consuming was his desire for knowledge about matters affecting him that he even prodded the staff at his Texas ranch for regular updates on crops, cattle, and the weather. His memory was extraordinary, and he used it to great effect. But he availed himself of every source of information at his disposal. Aside from his morning consumption of national and regional newspapers, Johnson remained current on late-breaking developments, hovering over the AP and UPI tickers in the Oval Office and barking out their contents to all within earshot. He was as least as consumed by the television news, which he watched on a three-set console in his office, just as he did in his bedroom and at the ranch. He even installed one of those units in his

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room at the Bethesda Naval Hospital while recuperating from gall bladder surgery in October 1965.[32]

He was frequently dismayed, however, by what he heard on those broadcasts and read in the press. Reports of reckless driving (and drinking) at the ranch or boorish behavior with aides and guests infuriated Johnson, who complained that the media routinely depicted him in the least favorable of lights. Its shabby treatment of him during the vice presidency now became darker, offering a more caricatured version of the man and his antics. Johnson, in turn, fed the beast. According to Woods, LBJ's response "to being portrayed as a coarse, crude cowboy was to act the coarsest, crudest cowboy he could imagine."[33] It did him no favors. Even when the opportunity arose to present himself more sympathetically, he was unable to do so. Insecure and resentful of the media's east coast bias – reinforced by LBJ succeeding the camera- and print-friendly JFK – Johnson overcompensated by trying to look "presidential." In so doing, he tightened up, coming across as stiff and calculating, devoid of the magic that worked so well in more personal and free–wheeling encounters.[34]

Johnson sought to improve that image by shuffling his staff and surrounding himself with more responsive aides. In fact, the turnover of personnel had been ongoing since 1964, when several Kennedy holdovers left due to their affection for JFK, their contempt for LBJ, or their absorption with Robert Kennedy's political fortunes. Others who stayed into 1965 and 1966, including Bundy and O'Brien, did so largely out of duty to the office or the country, or both. But the demands of working for Johnson – his incessant hectoring and obscenely long hours, which compounded the normal pressures of the White House – led some of his longest serving aides to leave as well. Two of Johnson's most thoughtful assistants, speechwriter Horace Busby and Press Secretary George Reedy, resigned in late 1965, having grown frustrated with and alienated from LBJ.

Of greater consequence was the loss of Walter Jenkins. Arrested on a "morals charge" in October 1964 related to a sexual encounter with another man at a local YMCA – gay sex was illegal at the time and associated with security risks and psychological instability – Jenkins left his position after Johnson learned of the incident. Although Jenkins had

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been with Johnson since 1939 and was serving as de facto chief of staff, LBJ's demand that he resign was swift and without much remorse. Johnson was concerned primarily with his electoral prospects, fearing Republicans would link the incident to corruption allegations surrounding Johnson aide Bobby Baker and rumblings about a scandal-plagued White House. But LBJ also feared its harm to the presidency and sought to shield the office – and his stewardship of it – from charges of lax security and a slow response.[35]

Arguably, though, Johnson's actions damaged his presidency more than the episode itself. He eventually replaced Jenkins, his most trusted and coolheaded aide, with Marvin Watson, a fellow Texan whose obsession with leaks and conspiracies mirrored the president's own, reinforcing his fears and destructive tendencies. More changes were to come. Moyers stepped in to fill Reedy's role, but he, too, fell short in Johnson's eyes, leaving at the end of 1966; thereafter, George Christian, another Texan but with no longstanding ties to Johnson, served out the remainder of the administration.[36] In the interim, Johnson hired former network executive Robert Kintner to help improve his standing. But Kintner's advice, including his recommendation that LBJ hold more press conferences, failed to turn the tide. Johnson continued to rail about his coverage, as well as about the ubiquity and perceived damage of press leaks.[37]

By then, the tenor of his presidency had shifted. Growing unrest about the pace and direction of societal change became manifest in Johnson's approval ratings, which tumbled from a high of 79 percent in February 1964 to the low 40s in 1966 and 1967 before bottoming out at 35 percent in August 1968; they would average 50 percent or less for most of his full term in office.[38] Those numbers tracked alongside an increasingly volatile electorate. Republican gains in the 1966 midterm elections – in Congress, state houses, and governors' mansions – rankled LBJ in the wake of his groundbreaking achievements, especially in the field of civil rights. But civil disorders and resistance to the spending and sweep of the Great Society – both of which contributed to GOP victories – heightened his frustrations. So did his running feud with Senator Robert Kennedy (D-New York), who, for Johnson, had become not just a nettlesome but also a dangerous figure. Bobby's challenge threatened Johnson's control

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of the Democratic Party and command of the policy narrative, and his critique of the administration positioned him for a possible presidential run. Collectively, these developments vexed and angered LBJ, an increasingly agitated and beleaguered figure seemingly trapped inside his own White House.

Most disturbing were developments in South Vietnam, an ally convulsed by civil strife, Cold War conflict, and the repeated collapse of its ruling regimes. Johnson had worried about escalating the war, a conflict he inherited from Kennedy with over 16,000 US military advisers already in country. But fearing the slide of Saigon's fortunes and Republican charges of weakness, LBJ initially increased America's troop strength by roughly 7,000 and authorized bombing attacks against North Vietnam. Those strikes, reprisals for the August 1964 incidents involving American ships in the Tonkin Gulf, effectively neutralized Vietnam as an issue in the 1964 election. But questions about those episodes reverberated throughout Washington, leaving Johnson unable to shake the skepticism surrounding his statements about them, as well as about other US actions abroad. His inflated description of hostilities in the Dominican Republic the following April and the alleged dangers they posed to Americans living there raised further questions about Johnson's truthfulness. The resulting "credibility gap" between presidential rhetoric and objective reality would last through the end of his term. Along with growing opposition to his handling of the Vietnam War, which Johnson continued to Americanize via the deployment of more than 500,000 troops, those doubts eroded the support he earned through his triumphs at home.[39]

In search of solace, Johnson frequently repaired to his ranch, located outside of Stonewall in the Texas Hill Country, roughly 70 miles west of Austin. Aside from his faith – Johnson was a member of the Disciples of Christ, though he was ecumenical in his church attendance – the ranch had become his spiritual center. It was "our heart's home," as Lady Bird put it, where LBJ took comfort in the land and its people and reenergized himself for his battles ahead. Acquired in 1950 from a relative's estate, the expansive homestead comprised approximately 400 acres, with the living quarters standing less than a mile from the spartan house of Johnson's birth. Its procurement ushered LBJ, as

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historian Hal Rothman notes, into the club of national leaders who laid claim to landed estates, conferring upon him a sense of arrival within the corridors of power.[40]

For LBJ, though, the ranch was more than just a symbol of his new-found status. It served as a refuge, allowing Johnson to move among people he understood and who, in turn, understood him. His trips to Stonewall invariably included visits with locals, including relatives who still lived in the area; they provided the sustenance largely missing from Washington. Indeed, the more grounded existence the ranch represented stood in contrast to the transience of DC, with its volatility and political posturing. Of course, the local land and weather were always fickle – no one was more aware of that than Johnson, given their impact on his youth – but his control over the Texas White House exceeded his command over the one up north. His exercise of that authority and the security it gave him brought increasing comfort to LBJ. So did the joys of managing its operations, which included a thriving cattle business and related water and crop concerns. The ranch was so vital to Johnson's well-being that he spent approximately 500 days there during his presidency, roughly a quarter of his time in office, as the challenges of Vietnam, civil unrest, and his own declining popularity became more evident and intractable.[41]

Indeed, Vietnam increasingly roiled the ranks of the White House itself. The war was a significant factor in the departures of Goodwin and Moyers, as well as Bundy, who was replaced by ardent hawk Walt Rostow, a figure who enabled Johnson's rigidity on the war. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was yet another casualty, his exit the result of accumulated doubts and internal demons. In fact, of the ten cabinet officials LBJ inherited, only four of them – Dean Rusk at State, Stewart Udall at Interior, Willard Wirtz at Labor, and Orville Freeman at Agriculture – remained to the end, while those Johnson elevated were largely known to him previously. Most significantly, longtime confidante Clark Clifford, who became secretary of defense in March 1968, played a major role in moving Johnson toward a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, a position LBJ adopted late that month. Baffled by the Tet Offensive, stung by a challenge for the Democratic presidential nomination, fearful of troubling economic indicators, and faced with the skepticism of the business

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and diplomatic elites, Johnson trimmed his sails. Not only did he scale back the bombing of North Vietnam and move toward peace talks, but he also withdrew himself as a candidate for president.

Although Johnson had long debated whether to run again, by 1968 he saw himself as a spent force. Speaking with Treasury Secretary Henry Fowler, he bemoaned his inability to win over legislators as frequently or as convincingly as he had during the glory years of 1965 and 1966. Rejecting Fowler's description of him as "master of the Senate," Johnson shot back, "I'm not master of a damn thing." He could not "make this Congress do one damn thing that I know of, or the last one, either."[42] While Johnson exaggerated his difficulties with the legislature, his power and standing were clearly cratering. Conversations about the 1968 presidential race with aides and associates, and particularly with Lady Bird, reveal a man racked by frustration and doubt. Health concerns, declining popularity, challenges to his leadership, the endless war in Vietnam – these were among the factors that led Johnson to forgo another term as president.

There were more shocks to come. The murder of Robert Kennedy, the odds-on favorite to win the Democratic nomination, made Vice President Hubert Humphrey the party's de facto standard bearer, a development that left many Democrats uneasy. Among them was the president himself. The Johnson–Humphrey relationship was never close, and LBJ was particularly scornful of Humphrey's talkative nature with the press.[43] Further, Humphrey's February 1965 memo to LBJ, in which he counseled the president to reject escalation in Vietnam, prompted a bitter response and his banishment from the highest counsels of power. Nor was Johnson much more inclined to solicit Humphrey's input on domestic affairs, telling Califano that he was "never" to let Humphrey attend any planning meeting on Great Society legislation.[44] That his vice president was now the Democrats' likely nominee inspired Johnson's less than full-throated support.[45] So conflicted was Johnson about the presidential contest that he briefly considered grabbing the nomination himself. But Lady Bird again provided sage advice at a critical moment, convincing her husband to let the thought pass.

The die cast, LBJ counseled Humphrey on his selection of a running mate. It was yet another chance for Johnson to talk about

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personnel – a favorite topic – and to wax about the personal attribute he valued most: loyalty. Certainly, Johnson looked to hire uber-competent people with good judgment. But time and again, the president made clear that it was loyalty he prized above all. In conversation with Humphrey, he reflected on what might have been. "If I had one thing back," he said, "I'd appoint everybody like I appointed you vice president. If I had done that – started over new, why, I'd do it. Now . . . So that's what I want you to be careful about. And this thing loyalty, Hubert, there's not many of them that got it." It was, Johnson maintained, "the number-one quality."[46]

Humphrey would not get to test the proposition, as he lost that November to the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon. The popular vote was exceedingly close and might well have been affected by some dirty pool. Just days before voters went to the polls, the Nixon team injected itself into delicate diplomacy surrounding Vietnam, secretly and cynically discouraging Saigon from participating meaningfully in talks to end the war. The failure of those talks robbed Johnson of a political win before leaving office. It also may have robbed Humphrey of an electoral win, as the race had narrowed dramatically in its final week. Although Johnson knew of Nixon's "treason," as he described it, he refused to publicize it, fearing the impact of such knowledge on the fate of the war and on Nixon's presidency.[47] In a final act of probity, Johnson worked closely with the president-elect and his aides, doing all he could to facilitate the peaceful and orderly transfer of power.

POST-PRESIDENCY

Having played his role in the presidential transition, Johnson departed Washington for his beloved ranch. He had always wanted to return to the Hill Country, though he had never really left a place that remained part of his very being. He now threw himself into its operations, assuming hands-on roles in cattle and irrigation projects until health concerns led him to focus more on management. Johnson also looked to secure his place in history through major legacy projects: the opening of his presidential library and policy school at the University of Texas and the writing of his memoirs. His reflections, however, drained the very life out of Johnson's persona.

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Consistent with earlier efforts to look "presidential," Johnson smoothed out his rougher edges, obscuring much of what contributed to his political success. But aside from those endeavors, he largely shed his obsessions with the press and his image. According to Rothman, Johnson now lived "for the first time in his adult life, on personal rather than public terms." He let his hair down – quite literally – focusing on family and friends, enjoying golf and Texas football, and indulging his capacious appetites for eating, drinking, and smoking.[48] Increasingly, they took their toll.

He had never been a healthy man. Johnson had long run himself ragged, leading to repeated medical crises, particularly during moments of stress in his political life. He suffered debilitating ailments during his campaigns for the House in 1937 and the Senate in 1948 – severe stomach cramps in the former and an infected kidney stone in the latter – leaving observers to wonder how he could maintain not just his frenetic pace but any pace at all. The more frightening episode came in 1955 when he suffered his heart attack. Though he tried to pare back his consumption of food, alcohol, and cigarettes, the trials of his vice presidency, full of disappointment and depression, led him to abandon that self-control. While he took better care of himself in the White House, he still endured several health challenges, including pneumonia in January 1965, gall bladder surgery that October, and dual operations to repair a hernia and remove a throat polyp in 1966. Even when ostensibly healthy, he seemed frequently under the weather. LBJ's White House tapes capture his frequent snorts, sneezes, and belches, conveying not just his crudeness but also his overall countenance.[49]

Once in retirement, he released the reins that held his more destructive habits in check. His health deteriorated, and after a final public appearance at his library in late 1972, a call to arms to finish the work of securing civil rights, LBJ returned to his ranch. He died there on January 22, 1973, reaching for the telephone – and, as he feared, alone.

LEGACY

The juxtaposition of Johnson's passing and the Vietnam peace accords – Washington signed an agreement with Hanoi, Saigon, and South Vietnamese communists that same week – was impossible to miss.

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Reflections on LBJ would never have minimized his escalation of the war, but the proximity of his death and America's withdrawal from Vietnam ensured that both would be considered in the same breath. Indeed, Johnson's name had become sufficiently toxic for Democrats that they excluded his picture from those of party stalwarts displayed at their 1972 National Convention.[50] Republicans, on the other hand, sought to invoke LBJ as an object lesson during the country's rightward political shift. "The Federal Government declared war on poverty," mocked President Ronald Reagan in 1988, "and poverty won."[51] By the 1990s, the Democrats had subtly resurrected Johnson, if only to distance themselves from his perceived excesses and the liberalism he represented. President Bill Clinton, stung by his own failure to expand the social safety net, declared in 1996 that "the era of big government is over."[52] State-based social programs with the sweep and ambition of LBJ's approach were clearly a thing of the past.

In that moment, Johnson's wars at home and abroad came in for harsh treatment. Critics bashed his handling of both from all points on the political spectrum. Hawks on Vietnam found him insufficiently aggressive and overly concerned with domestic politics, while doves condemned him for personalizing and persisting in an unwinnable conflict; indeed, Vietnam will forever stain Johnson's record, compromising his good works for those on the left, while compounding his misdeeds for those on the right. As for his self-declared War on Poverty, conservatives fault him for a misplaced faith in government to solve deep-seated social problems, while liberals held that he short-changed his own programs and failed to do more to level the playing field. Following the economic ills and geopolitical hesitations of the 1970s, both of which became linked to the overreach of the 1960s, a more conservative America seemed to have rendered its verdict on LBJ. The subsequent economic recovery and assertive foreign policy associated with Reagan cast Johnson's image in further relief, as both seemed to indicate the triumph of conservative principles over liberal ones, with liberalism itself becoming something of a political dirty word.

The Johnson legacy also had to contend with the specter of JFK, a shadow that hung over LBJ's presidency but now haunted him in

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death as in life. Confronting the Kennedy mystique was one of Johnson's signal challenges following Dallas – competing with the memory of Jack, while managing the political challenge of Bobby – but renewed interest in JFK cast LBJ in even less favorable light.[53] Repeated praise of Kennedy for his handling of the Cuban missile crisis continued to lift Jack's profile, while speculation that he would have withdrawn from Vietnam or significantly de-Americanized the war further raised his stature. Johnson's reputation paled by comparison.[54]

The emergence of LBJ's White House tapes, however, changed the terms of debate. These materials, which became accessible in the late 1990s, provide more candid views of Johnson than were available through the oral histories and first-person accounts of his many aides. Comprising roughly 650 hours of telephone conversations and 150 hours of Cabinet-Room meetings, the tapes provide a unique window into Johnson's persona, political genius, and legislative strategy. While they have yet to fundamentally reshape perspectives on the Johnson presidency, they nevertheless have altered our understanding of discreet policy positions and political developments. One can no longer argue, for instance, that Johnson was eager for war in Vietnam, even if his dissembling on the war is now more evident, or that he was largely posturing in pursuit of civil rights, even if he retained a racialized view of social dynamics. Most usefully, the tapes have contextualized the written memoranda and personal reflections of aides, allowing audiences to experience LBJ in ways that approximate the more intimate, personal contact of contemporaries.[55]

The tapes, therefore, have been a boon to observers chronicling Johnson's life and career. Aided by the texture and authenticity these materials provide, biographers Robert Caro, Robert Dallek, and Randall Woods, among others, have used Johnson's presidential recordings to provide more rounded portraits of the man and his times. The Johnson they recount is consumed by ambition as well as animated by faith, a parochial politician eager to bring his region into the national mainstream, a compassionate champion of the downtrodden, and a paternalist at heart, with all that those postures imply for his programs

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at home and his actions abroad. Even for Caro, whose epic four volumes have thus far stretched into 1964, the darkness he has long seen in Johnson's *machtgier* – his lust for power – has now been lightened by LBJ's manifest commitment to social justice. Those attributes are also evident in several popular podcasts, including "LBJ's War" and "LBJ and the Great Society," which sustain the image of Johnson as a beleaguered and unsuccessful war president, as well as a committed though challenged social reformer.[56] The tapes, therefore, have added much greater complexity to the Johnson story, yielding works that neither avoid Johnson's foibles nor dilute his principles.

This more compassionate Johnson has also been the one that audiences have come to know through plays and films. *All the Way*, which premiered on stage and screen in 2012 and 2016, respectively, and which covers LBJ's caretaker presidency, is likely truest to the man himself. Concluding with Johnson's electoral victory in November 1964, it depicts the exercise of power and the constant tension between ethics and expediency. But Johnson's commitment to social justice rings clear throughout, a verdict less obvious in *Selma* (2014), which subordinates Johnson's principles to his pragmatism. While the bloody crackdown on civil rights activists by Alabama troopers surely affected the timing of voting rights legislation – the film captures the messy politics and ugly realities of effecting social change – Johnson had been angling for such a bill months before the events in question. Least accurate, but perhaps most sympathetic, is *LBJ* (2016), a film that begins Johnson's story with the 1960 presidential race and concludes with his speech to Congress following JFK's burial.

These and other films about Johnson, as historian Julian Zelizer observes, underplay or overlook LBJ's handling of Vietnam, perhaps the result of biases among their producers to rescue Johnson's liberal leanings and achievements from his more belligerent instincts and actions.[57] Even *All the Way*, the most celebrated of these works, fails to address Vietnam until roughly an hour into the film, and even then barely at all. But Vietnam lies at the center of *Path to War* (2004), the most comprehensive of Johnson biopics, which best reveals the intersection of foreign and domestic concerns. Michael Gambon's LBJ, like Bryan Cranston's in *All the Way*, captures Johnson's insecurities, his

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explosive temper, and his demanding nature. Yet Gambon also exudes a deer-in-the-headlights quality; his Johnson is a captive of events and a creature of advisers, highly reactive and beholden to fears of appeasement and falling dominoes. Although the film presents LBJ sympathetically as a reluctant warrior, his bitterness and reflex toward blaming others for his own misfortune likely leaves viewers questioning whether Johnson ever had the temperament for the job.

Despite Johnson's consistent standing in the presidential rankings – hovering around tenth in C-SPAN polling of presidential historians and around fifteenth in Siena College studies – Johnson's legacy will remain contested.[58] It could hardly be otherwise, given the drama attending his time in office. Ascending to the presidency after the murder of the charismatic and then-revered JFK; launching the most ambitious program of social welfare in the nation's history; expanding a ruinous war that for years was the most calamitous the country had endured; presiding over the crack-up of American civic life – part of the great "unraveling," in the words of historian Allen Matusow – those developments are among the most significant in modern US history.[59] The availability of LBJ's White House tapes and, in time, the release of his vice-presidential tapes and the full complement of his meeting tapes from 1968 will further shape his legacy. Indeed, the vast majority of Johnson's telephone tapes have yet to factor into published work, and their contents will likely imbue the Johnson story with new layers of subtlety in the years to come.

Regardless, Johnson himself will remain a focal point for America in the twenty-first century. His reemergence in the national consciousness since the 1990s has resulted not only from the availability of his tapes and the many works incorporating them but also from the times themselves. In the wake of not one but two military quagmires – Iraq and Afghanistan – Johnson's troubles in Vietnam may come to look increasingly like national and institutional failures rather than a more personal one. In fact, with policy in both eras suffering from conceits about counterinsurgency and nation-building, the distance between them, as historian Bruce Shulman observes, suggests that more deeply rooted dynamics are at work.[60] In addition, the COVID pandemic has refocused public attention on the virtues of an activist government, making the

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Johnson experience a touchpoint in the debate over federal responses to urgent national needs. Moreover, many of the issues LBJ sought to tackle, including race, poverty, education, immigration, voting rights, public health, and the environment, remain high on the social policy agenda, and will likely remain so.

LBJ's approach to these matters, as well as our understanding of the man himself, thus remain relevant in our day and age. Warrior, dove, pragmatist, romantic, revolutionary, institutionalist – Johnson inhabited a range of personas, each of which expressed his hopes, fears, vision, and philosophy, the sum of which combined in this most confounding individual. Johnson's presidency expressed itself in those contradictions, securing extraordinary gains on behalf of those marginalized at home while unleashing bloodshed on millions living abroad. His lifelong desire for recognition, his powerful wish to be loved, his surpassing need to control and to dominate, his deep-seated yearning to lift up the oppressed and ennoble the downtrodden – these attributes coalesced in a roughly five-year presidential tenure that harnessed the power of the state to effect fundamental change. We will continue to explore these conundrums and contradictions. How, for instance did this opponent of civil rights in his younger days become an ardent proponent in his autumn years, and how did his misgivings about war dissolve into a belief in its necessity? In addressing such questions, we will grapple with the challenges LBJ faced in pursuit of sweeping reform, the conditions necessary for its success, and the circumstances under which it may fail. His experience, therefore, serves as a valuable model for how an American president, and even Washington itself, might guide the country toward a better tomorrow.

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