Johnson, Lyndon Baines (27 Aug. 1908-22 Jan. 1973), thirty-sixth president of the United States, was born near Stonewall, Texas, the son of Sam Ealy Johnson, Jr., a farmer and politician, and Rebekah Baines, a sometime teacher. Sam Ealy eked out a modest living and served as a state legislator for several years. Lyndon was the couple's first child and by all accounts the favorite of Rebekah, who was determined that her son should have a proper education. From grade school on, Lyndon demonstrated a keen interest in politics, particularly his father's Populist orientation, passing out campaign literature and eagerly listening to political discussions when Sam Ealy's cronies visited the Johnson household.

Although he had done well in high school, Lyndon failed the entrance exams for Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos. Disappointed, he and several friends set out for California to make their fortunes, but he returned soon. Working as a day laborer building roads near Johnson City convinced him to try for college again. With Rebekah's tutoring and several preparatory courses, he barely passed the entrance exams to Southwest Texas State and was accepted in 1927.

At San Marcos Johnson dabbled in campus politics while studying to be a teacher--a common path at that time for aspirants to political careers, including one of Johnson's lifelong mentors in politics, fellow Texan Sam Rayburn. Several permanent traits emerged from Johnson's early years. One was a knack for getting along with elders through attention and flattery, which later served Johnson well during his early years in politics and during his tenure as Senate majority leader. Another was his penchant for exaggeration, especially concerning his family's supposedly desperate circumstances during his youth. Accompanied by reporters on one trip to his Texas ranch in the 1950s, for example, he pointed to a tiny shedlike building, declaring that he was born there. Fortunately, his mother was there to set the story straight.

Johnson's stories had a parablelike quality about them, suited to Texas politics of the day. They also revealed something about the man. For instance, he liked to repeat the story of an applicant for a teaching position in rural Texas during the depression who, when asked how he would teach about the earth, said he could teach it either way--round or flat.

Johnson left San Marcos in 1930 to begin a high-school teaching career. As a teacher, Johnson observed the plight of poor Mexican-American pupils, which reinforced his Populist views. In November 1931, Sam Ealy recommended his son for a position in the office of Richard Kleberg, a newly elected member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Impressed with Lyndon, Kleberg hired him as his secretary. Johnson arrived in Washington, where he remained until he returned to his ranch at the end of his presidency.

A wealthy rancher, Kleberg preferred golf to the wearisome duties of a congressional representative and left the running of his office to Johnson and one other assistant. For Johnson these were his real "school years," during which he learned and polished the skills necessary to be a successful politician. He soon established himself outside of Kleberg's limited domain as a leader in the so-called Little Congress, made up of congressional assistants from the representatives' offices.

In September 1934, he met Claudia Alta Taylor, a recent University of Texas graduate, and twenty-four hours later he asked her to marry him. They were married in November. Henceforward, she was known by her childhood nickname, Lady Bird. Their daughters, Lynda Bird and Luci Baines, would add two more "LBJs" to the family.

In 1935, at the behest of Sam Rayburn and two Texas congressional leaders, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Johnson to head the state branch of the National Youth Administration. Part of the original New Deal package, the NYA sought to provide unemployed youth with education and training for gainful employment. Johnson's dedication and accomplishments soon dispelled any doubts about his ability to take charge of a major program. He gained recognition for his skills as a manager as well as for developing programs that served the educational and employment needs of blacks and Mexican-Americans as well as whites.

Having vowed that he would return to Washington as an elected representative to Congress, Johnson did just that in 1938, identifying himself closely with Roosevelt despite the growing anti-New Deal sentiment of Democratic conservatives across the South. Roosevelt was taken with this self-appointed protégé, predicting to aides that the next generation would see a power shift to the South and West, "and this boy could well be the first Southern President."

Throughout his life, Johnson brooded about his lack of impressive academic credentials. He suspected that the "Harvards" around Roosevelt held men like himself in contempt. During his presidency, he often told White House visitors that he had inherited the brainiest cabinet any president ever had, filled with Ivy League Ph.D.'s--and they all worked for *him*. When problems occurred during his presidency, he was prone to blame the "intellectuals," who he believed had never liked or understood him.

Johnson displayed his political prowess and determination almost immediately upon entering Congress. Determined to obtain federal aid for projects on the lower Colorado River to bring electricity to the Texas hill country, Representative Johnson lobbied effectively for his goals. He established early a "can-do" pattern that justified his reputation as a man who could make Washington work for his constituents, first the residents of the Texas hill country, then his wealthy backers atop the rapidly developing economy of the Southwest, and, finally, all the beneficiaries of the Great Society programs.

Johnson always identified himself with the Texas hill country and its people, even after he became the owner of an Austin radio and television station (1943) and other enterprises. The acquisition of this valuable property, which Johnson had purchased with money that Lady Bird had inherited, became the basis for a personal fortune that eventually grew to several million dollars. It also brought Johnson under sharp criticism for alleged manipulations to obtain the necessary licenses from the Federal Communications Commission.

As his ambitions widened to include the possibility of a seat in the U.S. Senate, Johnson downplayed his support of New Deal policies, without, however, deserting Roosevelt. In 1941 an opportunity arose to run for a Senate seat in a special election, without giving up his House seat. Balancing his old-style Populist/New Deal attacks on the rich with assaults on "isms" and labor unions, Johnson ran a strong campaign, the most expensive in Texas history up to that point.

Even so, he lost a very close election to W. Lee O'Daniel. Strong evidence of vote fraud existed, but Johnson opted not to pursue the issue lest an investigation turn up irregularities on his side as well. Instead, he vowed not to be outmaneuvered ever again.

When it appeared that the United States might become involved in the Second World War, Johnson obtained a commission in the navy reserves. A few days after Pearl Harbor, he wrote Roosevelt, asking to be assigned to active duty. He was commissioned a lieutenant commander and sent to the Pacific on a presidential fact-finding mission to investigate conditions at General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters. Johnson's active duty tour lasted only a few months and included only one combat experience, when he tagged along on a bombing raid over Japanese-held territory. The mission came under heavy fire, and Johnson was awarded a Silver Star for bravery.

On 1 July 1942, President Roosevelt recalled all legislators to their duties in Washington, including a restless Lyndon Johnson. By 1947 he had served for a decade in the House and felt distant from the centers of power. Determined to rescue himself from early obscurity, Johnson decided to run again for the Senate. The incumbent, O'Daniel, had decided not to seek reelection in 1948, so Johnson faced off against the conservative Governor Coke Stevenson in the Democratic primary.

Postwar politics in Texas had continued to shift to the right, and Johnson kept pace. He stressed Cold War themes and declared his support for the Republican-sponsored Taft-Hartley Act that had sharply restricted the powers of labor unions. He also opposed the national Democratic party's stand on civil rights and federal ownership of offshore oil.

Johnson gained much attention during the campaign by using helicopters to get around the state quickly, but this innovation did not produce a clear-cut victory. Instead, the result looked like a dead heat. Charges and countercharges of vote fraud went to the U.S. Supreme Court, with Johnson finally prevailing--by eighty-seven votes. Thereafter he was sarcastically nicknamed "Landslide" Lyndon.

Johnson's Senate career prospered. With the powerful support of such figures as Georgia's Richard Russell, he was chosen Senate minority leader in 1953 and, after the Democrats regained control two years later, majority leader. He was seen by Russell and other southerners as a potential candidate for the White House. Johnson liked assuming the role of "centrist," often citing the biblical phrase, "Come let us reason together," as his credo. He liked to boast that he was more help to Dwight Eisenhower than most members of the president's own party.

Johnson's biggest senatorial challenge came with the Civil Rights Bill of 1957. In his previous years in the House and Senate, Johnson had always opposed civil rights legislation. However, although he attacked the original Republican version of the 1957 bill, he warned the southern bloc that some sort of civil rights bill was necessary to preserve national unity. Johnson attached key amendments that softened the bill's impact on southern segregationist practices, including a provision that required jury trials for those accused of certain civil rights violations. He was able to convince southern leaders to vote for closure to avoid facing a more radical civil rights bill; he convinced liberals, on the other hand, that the bill was the best package they could get without

doing irreparable damage to the Democratic party. A major legislative accomplishment for Johnson, the 1957 Civil Rights Act was the first such legislation since Reconstruction. Acclaimed in some quarters as the greatest majority leader of all time, Johnson took credit for bringing about this multilayered compromise. The energy Johnson displayed in this campaign undercut concerns about a massive heart attack he had suffered in 1955.

When the Soviet Union launched the world's first space satellite, *Sputnik*, in October 1957, the nation's attention shifted again to national security concerns. Johnson was there to take the lead. Chairing a special Senate Preparedness Subcommittee, he held a series of hearings on the issue that brought daily newspaper headlines and prompted discussion about his availability as a presidential candidate in 1960. Yet Johnson seemed strangely unconcerned about the nominating process, perhaps unsure of his chances for success. His likely opponent, Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy, actively pursued a vigorous primary campaign in several states, while Johnson stayed in Washington, counting on the support of fellow senators for his nomination. In any event, Kennedy won the nomination on the first ballot.

To the shock of many liberal supporters, Kennedy asked Johnson to accept second place on the ticket; to the dismay of many Johnson supporters, he agreed. Kennedy's motive was obvious. A liberal Catholic from the North, Kennedy needed Johnson, a conservative Protestant from the South, to bring Texas and perhaps other Deep South states into the Democratic column. However, why Johnson accepted remains a mystery. Although most of his supporters at least initially advised against it, House Speaker Sam Rayburn, who hated the thought of Richard Nixon becoming president, eventually urged Lyndon to accept. Despite being both feared and looked down upon as "Senator Cornpone" by Kennedy's inner circle, and despite many signs that his place in the New Frontier would be at the rear, Johnson finally agreed.

Serving as vice president quickly became an ordeal for the man who had, more or less, shared power with President Eisenhower. Excluded from both deliberations and decisions, Johnson suffered many humiliations, some self-inflicted, as he searched for a meaningful role in the Kennedy administration. When Kennedy was assassinated on 22 November 1963, however, Johnson moved into the Oval Office with a sure-handed grasp of the requirements of the moment and with a vision for the future. On the day after the assassination, Johnson told a close Kennedy aide that he knew he lacked the late president's education, culture, and learning, but that he would try his best. "But don't expect me to absorb things as fast as you're used to." More surprising, he told another aide that the talk about his being a conservative was wide of the mark. "As a matter of fact," he said, "to tell the truth, John F. Kennedy was a little too conservative to suit my taste."

The transition between the two administrations was not without difficulties. Johnson both resented and depended on the Ivy League "intellectuals" he inherited from Kennedy--a bad combination that perhaps explains why he often tested subordinates' loyalty by subjecting them to humiliating or embarrassing situations. Moreover, Kennedy had displayed an almost instinctive understanding of how to use television to his advantage. He had an easy style and, when confronted with difficult or hostile questions, a ready wit. Johnson, however, was stiff and overly formal in front of the camera. He also had a tendency to speak too loudly, as if he were trying to project to the furthest row in the back of the Grange Hall.

In his first State of the Union message the following January, Johnson nevertheless struck exactly the right note of commitment for a nation still recovering from the shock of the assassination. He vowed, "Let us continue." Various pieces of New Frontier legislation had been stalled in congressional committees. Johnson, who had watched White House aides mishandle Congress, hoped to break the deadlock with a dramatic announcement that his administration would declare unconditional war on poverty. For ammunition to fight this war, Johnson backed an unprecedented series of bills to extend the federal government's responsibility for and assistance to the poor, especially in the inner city.

After fully exploiting the controversial conservative positions of his Republican adversary, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, Johnson won the 1964 election with a record plurality of more than 61 percent of the popular vote. He cautioned his advisers and aides, however, that the victory was not permanent. Every week that passed, he warned, would see the support erode, just as Roosevelt had seen his 1936 triumph melt away in the House and Senate within two years. After the 1964 Civil Rights Bill passed, he predicted to aides, "I think we just gave the South to the Republicans."

Nevertheless, Johnson pressed ahead, notching each legislative victory on pieces of paper that he carried around to display to White House visitors. His goal was to achieve what lay beyond the New Frontier in the Great Society. Johnson's strategy in fighting the war on poverty reflected a commonly held belief in that decade that no matter how deep-seated the problem was, it would ultimately yield to successful management techniques. Rejecting a massive federal public works program as too reminiscent of New Deal "welfarism," Johnson created the Office of Economic Opportunity as the principal agency to coordinate the various programs. The office encountered difficulties from the start. The administration sponsored bills calling for Community Action programs that would establish job-training centers along with more controversial bills that would grant funds to groups organized to challenge local bureaucracies. Big-city mayors welcomed federal funds but opposed what appeared to them to be federal sponsorship of alternative centers of authority. Headstart programs to provide impoverished inner-city children with preschool training, on the other hand, proved successful. Other legislation granted over a billion dollars to local school districts to fund efforts to equalize educational opportunities for poor children. The establishment of Medicare and Medicaid eased the burden of medical expenses for the elderly. The administration also backed legislation dealing with environmental concerns.

Johnson took charge of civil rights bills that had been stalled from the early days of the Kennedy administration. The high point of his public effort on behalf of the 1965 Voting Rights Bill came when he quoted Martin Luther King, Jr., to a joint session of Congress, vowing, "We shall overcome." Linking civil rights and the war on poverty, Johnson told a Howard University audience, "We must seek not just freedom but opportunity."

While happily surprised liberals and Democrats believed that the Goldwater "debacle" had left the opposition in disarray, Johnson continued to protect his right flank, sometimes justifying his actions after 1965 in escalating the Vietnam War as protection for his Great Society programs. He knew, however, that the war threatened to undo everything he had accomplished. During various discussions of the war, he compared himself to a man in a pilotless plane, a man about to jump into a deep pool, and a man in a car without a steering wheel. Neither these forebodings,

nor the advice of some of his oldest friends, prevented him from ordering a massive troop buildup beginning in the summer of 1965 that would eventually extend U.S. troop commitments to a total of half a million men.

At each escalation, whether the 1964 retaliation against North Vietnamese PT-boat bases, the start of the bombing campaign in early 1965, or the fateful 28 July 1965 decision to send 100,000 troops to Vietnam, Johnson insisted that he was only following the lead of his three predecessors, each of whom had made Cold War commitments to the conflict in Vietnam. At the time of Kennedy's assassination, there were 16,000 American "advisers" in Vietnam. Holdover Kennedy appointees assured the new president that the United States had the capability to defend South Vietnam against its internal and external enemies, as well as the moral obligation to do so. They were convinced that North Vietnam would eventually realize it simply could not defy the United States, but only if Johnson did not falter at the crucial moment, which always seemed close at hand. So Johnson sent troops, then bombs, then more troops and more bombs. However, by 1968, another election year, Johnson's strategies had produced neither military security for South Vietnam nor political security at home for the Great Society.

The Tet Offensive at the end of January shattered hopes that the war could be won within a reasonable period of time--if ever--and broke open the cracks in the Democratic coalition. The war on poverty had also gone on the defensive. It had never received the huge amounts of resources the military was granted to fight the war in Vietnam; its appropriations were a few billion, compared with $100 billion spent to try to save South Vietnam from communism. Riots in several large U.S. cities and protests on college campuses denouncing what was becoming known as "Mr. Johnson's War" gave Johnson's opponents, on both the left and the right, ammunition for their complaints.

On 31 March 1968 Johnson addressed the nation, announcing a bombing halt over most of North Vietnam in hopes that peace negotiations could begin and ending with a surprise statement that, in order to devote his full energies to the search for peace, he would neither seek nor accept renomination.

Johnson left office scorned as the author of the most unpopular war in the nation's history. He has been called an American Lear, brought down by his own stubbornness and insecurities. His Great Society programs also came under attack for seemingly promising too much and for creating an atmosphere of lawlessness, resulting in an upsurge of urban race riots in Los Angeles, Newark, and Detroit. His principal legacy, critics charged, was black outrage and white backlash. However, Johnson's tragic flaw was not the hubris of Greek drama. It lay in the contradictions that made up this complex man who so often undermined his accomplishments by trying to run the country the way he had run the Senate--by cornering and cajoling wavering individuals to get the votes he needed--and, paradoxically, by failing to trust his best instincts, taking advice instead from experts.

Johnson spent his last remaining years at his ranch, near his birthplace. At one of his last public appearances, sustained by heart medications, the former president called upon conferees at a meeting on civil rights in Austin to put aside their arguments to work for the future. He died after suffering a heart attack at his ranch.

Ultimately, Johnson's responsibility for the Vietnam War will be weighed against his efforts to ensure economic and political rights for the disenfranchised. The Great Society was full of promises, but it was also a vision that called upon Americans to live up to their responsibilities to one another. Lyndon Johnson will continue to command our attention as we look at the American past and to its future.

Bibliography

Johnson's papers are housed in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas. Johnson's biographers, not surprisingly, take very strong views about their subject. Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (1982) and *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (1990), is critical of Johnson, while Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908-1960* (1991), is sympathetic. A shorter account is Paul Conklin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson* (1986). Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson* (1982), combines research with knowing insight but is unremittingly harsh in its final judgments. To understand Johnson, one must also look at the interpretations offered in Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (1976), and Harry McPherson, *A Political Education* (1972).

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