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Preface

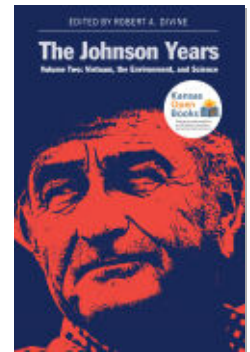
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Preface

IN 1981 I EDITED a collection of essays entitled *Exploring the Johnson Years*, in which seven scholars surveyed major issues of the 1960s, ranging from the Vietnam War to the civil-rights movement, to demonstrate the rich veins of previously untapped material available in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. Although the essays dealt with many of the important themes that concerned the Johnson administration, they could not cover all areas of historical interest.

The present volume is designed to broaden and extend the coverage of the Johnson years by treating topics that were not included in the first collection. Once again, with generous support from the Lyndon B. Johnson Foundation and with close cooperation from the staff of the Johnson Library, the authors have searched through the files in Austin that are relevant to their subjects and then have related their archival findings to the existing literature. They have written both to extend our present understanding of significant aspects of the sixties and to point the way to topics and resources that scholars could profitably develop in the future.

Rather than force the authors into a standard format, I encouraged them to write their essays along whatever lines seemed most appropriate. As a result, their contributions fall into three categories. First, several have chosen to offer a general survey of the Johnson Library's holdings on a broad issue of national policy. Thus, in dealing with the opposition to the Vietnam War and environmental policy, Charles DeBenedetti and Martin Melosi have sketched out the larger issues of national policy and have pointed out the types of material available in the library for more detailed studies of these topics. Lewis Gould, Donald Kettl, and Clarence Lasby, on the other hand, have written much more intensive essays on more limited subjects to show how the library's holdings can be used to bring little-known but important aspects of national policy in the 1960s into focus. Finally, Burton Kaufman and I have combined these two approaches in writing essays that survey broad areas but also include some detailed coverage of selected portions. Despite the difference in method, the resulting essays all strive for the same goal—to demonstrate the wide variety of materials available and to encourage other scholars to join in ex-

ploring the Johnson Library so as to enhance our understanding of a stormy and controversial decade of the recent past.

While by design there is no single theme to the essays, two elements tend to appear with great frequency. The first is the Vietnam War. From the time of the escalation in 1965, it casts an ever-greater shadow over nearly all aspects of national policy, from the debate over tax policy to the funding of such areas dear to Lyndon Johnson's heart as health and space. Although only Charles DeBenedetti's essay on the antiwar movement deals directly with the Vietnam experience, nearly all reflect the growing absorption of Johnson and his staff with the war in Southeast Asia. By the late 1960s, Vietnam not only was creating a budget squeeze that hurt nearly every other administrative program; it also was distracting the White House from all other issues and was poisoning the administration's relations with Congress and the press.

The other unifying element in the essays is the elusive presence of Lyndon Johnson. He is the central figure in nearly all the essays, dominating his administration and setting priorities by the sheer force of his personality as well as the power of his office. At the same time, it is almost impossible to be sure what LBJ really felt and thought about the issues of his administration. The common dilemma facing all the authors is the absence of material in the library by Johnson himself. Vast numbers of memos and reports reflect the advice from the bureaucracy and his aides, but very few documents reveal Johnson's own personal reaction. Occasionally there is a scrawled handwritten comment at the bottom of a memorandum, indicating the president's pleasure or disfavor; usually, however, there is only a terse yes or no or a cryptic comment, such as "See me about this."

The difficulty lies with Johnson's personal style. Secretive by nature, he hated to reveal his innermost thoughts on paper. Instead, he favored oral communication, either by telephone or, preferably, in person, where he could question, cajole, flatter, or intimidate whomever he was dealing with. The scholar is thus forced to rely on the recollections of others, either in oral histories or in contemporary memoranda, on what Johnson told them and what they thought he really meant. Only very rarely does one find a document that indicates LBJ's private feelings and thoughts.

Yet despite this handicap, the essays in this collection do offer new insight into the character and leadership qualities of Lyndon Johnson. In particular, they cast doubt on the usual stereotypes of LBJ as the opportunistic wheeler-dealer, intent on building a legislative

record though not caring about the issues, or the super hawk, ruthlessly pursuing a belligerent foreign policy. Instead, these essays reveal the complexity of Johnson as president and his genuine commitment to such diverse causes as the conquest of disease, the protection of the environment, and the exploration of outer space. The LBJ in these pages is a very human figure who understands the corrosive impact of the Vietnam War on his administration and who struggles to try to preserve the domestic programs that he fought so long and hard to achieve. By suggesting the contradictions that undercut so many of the positive aspects of Johnson's actions, the contributors to this volume add greatly to our knowledge of this deceptively elusive president. The ultimate success of these essays, however, will depend on the degree to which they challenge other historians to join in the effort to arrive at a fuller understanding of Johnson's vital but flawed legacy to the nation.

