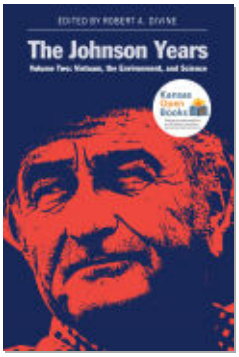
1. The Johnson Revival: A Bibliographical Appraisal



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Introduction

1 | The Johnson Revival: A Bibliographical Appraisal

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IN THE FIRST DECADE after the death of Lyndon Baines Johnson, there were surprisingly few books published about this controversial president. Both biographers and historians seemed to share in the public's desire not to be reminded of a figure who had presided over such a stormy and disruptive period in American life. In the "me decade" of the 1970s, Johnson faded from memory, along with his Great Society and the trauma associated with the Vietnam War. The only book on LBJ to attract much attention was Doris Kearns's *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, but even this well-written account achieved only brief popularity.[1]

The growing historical blackout came to an abrupt end in the early 1980s with a marked revival of interest in Johnson and his policies. The election of Ronald Reagan and the subsequent assault on many of the Great Society programs of the sixties led to new scholarly attention on Johnson's legislative program and its subsequent impact on American life. Even more dramatic was the renewal of interest in Vietnam, which was manifested in the striking popularity of the PBS series and Stanley Karnow's accompanying book, *Vietnam: A History.* As the American people began to come to terms with a war they had tried to forget, Johnson once again became a central figure. And finally, biographers began to take up the challenge inherent in chronicling Johnson's remarkable rise to power and his equally dramatic fall from grace. The realization that so little was known about a man who had played such a major role in recent American history helped to stimulate a new wave of Johnson literature.

The result was to subject Lyndon Johnson and his policies to a critical scrutiny that was long overdue. Most of these biographies and historical studies were hostile toward LBJ, portraying him in an unfriendly light and subjecting his motives and actions to very painstaking analysis. Yet, even Johnson partisans could take some comfort in the fact that the long years of neglect were finally over; their hero was at last getting the historical attention he had always craved and was no longer the victim of a collective scholarly amnesia.

I

The publication in 1982 of three books on LBJ's political career marked the beginning of the Johnson revival. Two were biographies that focused on his early career, primarily in Texas and in the House; the third was a memoir that concentrated on his Senate years. All three were by journalists who painted a bleak picture of Johnson as a scheming and unlikable politician, but there were notable differences in their approaches and conclusions.

By far the most ambitious work, and clearly the best written and most absorbing, was the first volume of Robert A. Caro's planned three-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson, *The Path to Power.* Using his skills as an investigative journalist, he combined extensive research in the materials at the Johnson Library with exhaustive interviews with everyone he could find who had known or worked with Johnson, including many who had never been interviewed before and were eager to tell their stories, which were often very critical of LBJ, to a sympathetic listener. The result was a book that offered a great deal of new information on Johnson's life and career through his first, unsuccessful Senate race in 1941 and that presented Johnson in a uniformly negative light.

Bothered at first by the secrecy with which LBJ surrounded himself, Caro finally found the theme that illuminated his entire political career, and then proceeded, in nearly 800 pages, to elaborate on it. The "dark thread" that Caro uncovered was Johnson's vaunting ambition, "a hunger for power in its most naked form, for power not to improve the lives of others, but to manipulate and dominate them, to bend them to his will." Caro discovered that once the secret was out, the mystery of Lyndon Johnson disappeared: LBJ was a man of great political skill who used his talents solely to advance his own career without regard to ideas, principles, or friendships. By the end of the 1930s Johnson had "displayed a genius for discerning a path to power, an utter ruthlessness in destroying obstacles in that path, and a seemingly bottomless capacity for deceit, deception and betrayal in moving along it."[2]

The key to understanding Johnson, Caro argues, is to focus on his extraordinary ambition, which he hid so carefully from contemporaries. Yet it is the revealing observations of some of those around Johnson who confided in Caro that he relies on so heavily. Thus, several times the reader is reminded of the comment of a childhood playmate that Johnson as a boy was already a "natural born leader," but "if he couldn't lead, he didn't care much about playing."[3] And

the statement by a secretary in the 1930s, when LBJ was a congressional assistant, that Johnson possessed "a burning ambition to be somebody," is repeated later, along with the added comment, "He couldn't stand not being somebody—just could not *stand* it." "He wanted to be *somebody.*"[4] Caro uses such observations to conclude that from the time LBJ first arrived in Washington as a powerless young congressional aide, he was bent on a secret plan to advance through the House and the Senate to become president.

Caro uses the various incidents in Johnson's early career to plot out the methods and techniques that LBJ used to fulfill his hidden agenda. From his first plunge into political maneuvering in college through his first great setback in the 1941 Senate race, Johnson is portrayed as a ruthless, deceitful, and utterly immoral man, intent only on his own advancement. Asserting that LBJ cared nothing about ideology, Caro argues that he supported the New Deal purely out of expediency and repudiated it after 1941, when it no longer suited his political purposes. Friendships were equally dispensable; people, from worshipful aides such as Gene Latimer, who was driven to drink by working overtime for Johnson, to powerful patrons such as Sam Rayburn, were cast aside or subtly undermined when their usefulness was at an end.

The difficulty with this interpretation of Johnson is Caro's failure to explain LBJ's success. The reader is left to wonder why only Robert Caro, years later, could discern so clearly the evil nature of Lyndon Johnson and why so many contemporaries were taken in by Johnson's apparent duplicity. Nor does Caro succeed in explaining how LBJ was able to build up such a network of loyal and hard-working associates, men who stayed with him despite bad treatment and few tangible rewards and were crucial elements in his political advancement. The suggestion that some men like to be bullied or dominated hardly explains Johnson's appeal to the talented band of associates he gathered about him from his college days and his service as director of the National Youth Administration (NYA) in Texas. The failure to consider any more-human qualities that Johnson may have possessed, aside from naked ambition and the power to manipulate, casts considerable doubt on the dark portrait that Caro paints.

The second biography that appeared in 1982, Ronnie Dugger's *The Politician*, offers an equally critical view of LBJ, but one that differs considerably from Caro's account. Dugger is also a journalist but, unlike Caro, a crusading one who had opposed Johnson in the 1950s and was fascinated by what made his adversary tick. Relying on Texas newspapers, selected files in the Johnson Library, some interviews,

including key ones with the president himself in late 1967 and early 1968, and the existing Johnson literature, Dugger writes a critical account of Johnson's career through the early fifties, with a few flashes ahead to Vietnam, which he explains as a result of LBJ's embodiment of such frontier values as pride and false courage. Dugger's main concern, however, is with ideology as he attempts to explain why Johnson did not live up to Dugger's own liberal principles.

In contrast to Caro, Dugger views Johnson as a genuine New Dealer, a man with principles who abandoned them under the spur of ambition. Thus he portrays LBJ as a "true crusader" in his days as director of the NYA in Texas and, unlike Caro, not simply as using his NYA position for a stepping stone to Congress.[5] Dugger is particularly impressed that during the thirties, Johnson was willing to aid blacks with educational support and public housing at a time when it was not politically advantageous, a topic that is reserved for a later volume in Caro's biography.

The tragedy, as Dugger sees it, is that Johnson's commitment to the New Deal and to humanitarian reform was not strong enough to withstand the pull of ambition. Claiming that Johnson had no long-range goals but, rather, that he was a man of impulse who reacted instinctively to opportunity, Dugger traces LBJ's fortuitous partnership with Herman and George Brown and his subsequent corruption as a "back-sliding liberal" who became enmeshed in helping Brown and Root become a huge government contractor by giving them inside information and assistance.[6] Caro, aided by a key interview with George Brown, had traced this same development; but Caro saw it as a predictable part of the larger pattern of LBJ's path to power.

Thus, though both Dugger and Caro view Johnson as an opportunistic politician who had abandoned the New Deal by the 1940s, their interpretations are quite different. Dugger regrets that LBJ had become an ardent Cold Warrior, engaging in Red-baiting and anti-union activities, while Caro finds it perfectly understandable. Dugger sees Johnson as a flawed but potentially decent political leader, a complex man who was both vindictive and compassionate, both charming and vicious, both selfish and generous—a man who, he says, "was everything that is human." And his great regret is that Johnson had not chosen a different course, "one that lay latent in him," and thus turned against the New Deal and the peaceful world that Dugger hoped would be possible after World War II.[7] In other words, Dugger writes more out of sorrow than out of anger as he describes a Johnson who betrayed his own best instincts.

The third 1982 book on LBJ was George Reedy's *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir.* Less ambitious than either Caro or Dugger, Reedy was content to try to think through his own ambivalent feelings toward a man he had served as a Senate aide and presidential press secretary. Reedy agreed with many of the negative aspects of Johnson's character, but he also found in LBJ some redeeming qualities. Trying to explain how he could work so long and hard for a man he often detested, Reedy said it was Johnson's occasional acts of courage and genuine legislative achievement that made it all worthwhile. In the 1950s, Reedy explained, several times he was ready to leave his vulgar and insensitive boss when LBJ "would do something so magnificent that all of his nasty characteristics would fade."[8] In particular, Reedy cites Johnson's role in arranging for the censure of Joe McCarthy and LBJ's skillful maneuvering in behalf of the 1957 Civil Rights Act as examples of genuine statesmanship.

The key to Johnson's appeal, according to Reedy, was his dynamic personality and his many-sided nature. LBJ's contradictions fascinated Reedy: "He was a tremendous figure—a combination of complexities and simplicities that bewildered all observers." At times very shrewd, he could also be "astoundingly gullible in the selection of his personal advisers."[9] As one who worked for him, Reedy admits that LBJ was "a miserable person—a bully, sadist, lout, and egotist"—who took "special delight in humiliating those who had cast in their lot with him." But most of all Reedy was impressed by the sheer audacity and force of Johnson's personality: "He may have been a son of a bitch but he was a colossal son of a bitch."[10]

Unlike both Caro and Dugger, however, Reedy does view Johnson as a man who cared about issues. He admits that Johnson did not formulate any coherent ideology and that he preferred always to talk tactics rather than strategy, but he senses in him a profound kinship for the underdog in society. Rebutting the charge that LBJ cared only about his own political fortunes, Reedy said such a feeling was not "shared by blacks or Appalachians or Chicanos or by poor people generally. They could see much of themselves in him."[11] For all of LBJ's concern with mastering the political currents of his time, Reedy believes, "he usually tried to ride them in the direction of uplift for the poor and downtrodden." Unpleasant as he was in his dealings with individuals, he genuinely tried "to do something for the masses."[12]

But even Reedy does not try to suggest that Johnson espoused any definable ideology beyond a vague desire to " 'be for the people—spelled pee-pul.' "[13] For all LBJ's skill at political maneuvering, he lacked any clear sense of purpose or a vision of what he hoped to

achieve. Reedy echoes Dugger, who notes that Johnson was so caught up in the present that he never speculated about the future. One reason for his cultivation of political patrons such as Alvin Wirtz, Sam Rayburn, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, beyond immediate political opportunism, Reedy suggests, may have been to share in their larger vision of what was desirable. Without dreams of his own, LBJ had to borrow those of the men he admired most. Yet, even though he lacked the ability to chart a course for the nation to follow, he possessed remarkable skills in making government work effectively, skills that led Reedy to conclude that of all our presidents, Johnson "should be rated as the master tactician of all times."[14]

II

Historians as well as journalists have taken part in the Johnson revival. Interested more in LBJ's record in the White House than in his earlier political career, they have focused on two broad areas—the Great Society and the Vietnam War. Scholars have probed both into Johnson's attempts to carry out a broad program of domestic reform and into his flawed efforts to contain communism in Southeast Asia. Like the biographers, they have adopted a critical stance that has led to some very hostile judgments.

There has been one major effort to assess the entire sweep of the Johnson administration at home and abroad—Vaughn Davis Bornet's *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson.* Bornet's book, part of a series on individual American presidencies, is based on both the body of Johnson literature and on research in the files of the Johnson Library. Written before much of the newer work on Johnson had appeared, it is an uneven book that does not reach any coherent or persuasive conclusions. Yet Bornet's survey does succeed in capturing the breadth of the Johnson administration's efforts to bring about change in American life; it is particularly helpful on the various Great Society programs.

The book's main weakness is the author's ambivalence toward Johnson. Bornet leans over backwards in his effort to be fair, but the result is an awkward balancing of positive and negative judgments. Thus, on the Great Society, Bornet credits Johnson with good intentions, along with substantial achievements in a few areas, notably education and civil rights. But he thinks that the Great Society failed because Johnson promised far more than he could deliver. Even the record of legislative output is misleading, Bornet argues, because as a result, "so many impractical and/or untested laws emerged, laws

that much later would require modification, amendment, abandonment, or repeal." He thinks LBJ was guilty of "overpromising of utopia," but at the same time he credits him with "at least trying to strike effective blows against injustice, extremes of poverty, and the failure to educate the young."[15]

Similarly, Bornet sees "great virtue" in LBJ's attempt to halt communism in Southeast Asia, calling the effort in Vietnam "definitely worth trying." But Bornet faults Johnson for not doing enough and for failing to be honest with the American people. According to Bornet, Johnson "was unwilling to use much of the power the nation had and . . . would not take risks that real escalation of the war seemed to entail."[16] Once more LBJ is praised for his good intentions but damned for his failure to follow through. "Johnson cautiously avoided full commitment of his and the nation's resources," Bornet charges, "to any of the expensive causes he espoused, at home or abroad."[17] Yet it can be argued that it was not Johnson's caution and restraint that were at fault but that it was his more fundamental failure to think through both his sweeping legislative programs and his foreign-policy adventures.

Johnson's greatest difficulty, it would appear, was the absence of a definable ideology. Intent on passing bills in Congress and on fighting communism, he lacked a set of principles to guide him in these activities. Yet Bornet dodges this whole question, commenting only that LBJ's ideology "is not easy to capsulize."[18] In failing to probe into the impact of Johnson's ideological weakness, Bornet is unable to offer a consistent explanation of why, despite his good intentions, LBJ could not either sustain his Great Society or win in Vietnam. Bornet's long chapter on Johnson's concern over the state of his health dictating his decision to step down in 1968, while interesting, still does not offset the fact that Johnson had lost the confidence of the American people on both domestic and foreign-policy issues. The contrast between the initial success of a new president stepping in to restore the nation's faith after the tragic Kennedy assassination and the scorn heaped on a failed leader rejected by a disillusioned nation calls for a more incisive explanation than poor health. Instead, Bornet concludes with the contradictory observation that the Johnson presidency was a "brilliant tour de force" yet one that "saw the nation in turmoil, with loss of faith in the system itself."[19]

III

The Great Society, which is often viewed as Johnson's most substantial achievement as president, came under critical fire in the

early 1980s. Two assessments, one by a historian and one by a social scientist, challenged the traditional belief that LBJ had presided over a period of remarkable social progress at home.

Allen J. Matusow, writing from a New Left perspective yet also drawing upon conservative attacks on liberalism, has offered a broad-ranging critique of the Great Society and of LBJ's War on Poverty in particular in *The Unraveling of America.* Although his conclusions were damaging to Johnson, Matusow's main target was mainstream American liberalism, not LBJ. Indeed, unlike Caro, Matusow was willing to concede that despite past inconsistency in ideology, President Johnson was a sincere advocate of reform who was out to "confound his critics by doing good" and to prove that he could be a more effective occupant of the White House than either Kennedy or Roosevelt.[20] Matusow gives LBJ especially high marks in the area of civil rights, calling his actions in passing the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts "the greatest achievement of his tenure."[21] LBJ's only failure in this area, the author contends, was when he failed to support the effort to end educational and economic discrimination in the North.

It is liberalism, not Johnson's character, that Matusow sees as fatally flawed. LBJ, like Kennedy, was a "corporate liberal"—one who "unashamedly asserted the benevolence of large corporations and defended the existing distribution of wealth and power in America." The clearest example of this devotion to bolstering the existing corporate structure of America was the tax cut proposed by Kennedy and enacted by Johnson in 1964. This measure, Matusow argues, "sought no redistribution of wealth and power"; its sole purpose was "lubrication of the system, not its reform."[22]

Matusow's primary concern is with the War on Poverty. The problem, he contends, lay not in Johnson's excessive rhetoric but in a faulty concept of the nature of poverty in America. Democratic liberals saw it as a fixed condition, defined in 1963 as any family with an income below $3,000. In reality, poverty was a relative state that embraced 20 percent of the population—the one in five American families who did not share fully in the nation's abundance. By 1968 the poverty line had moved up to $7,500, but 20 percent of the population fell below that mark of "relative deprivation." The only way to eradicate poverty, according to Matusow, was to move against its source—namely, inequality of income. "It followed that, to attack poverty, the government would have to reduce inequality, to redistribute income, in short, to raise up the poor by casting down the rich." "By American standards," Matusow concludes, "this was radicalism, and nobody in the Johnson White House ever considered it."[23]

Instead of a genuine onslaught involving income transfers to ensure that the lowest 20 percent of the population would receive more than 5 percent of the national income, Johnson engaged in ameliorative programs to train poor youth, to provide better educational opportunities, to furnish health care for the aged and the poor, and to improve housing in the slums. None of these programs proved successful, according to Matusow, because none was aimed at the fundamental problem of income redistribution. Unwilling to take risks or to anger important interest groups, LBJ waged a crusade without casualties and therefore without victories. "This then," Matusow concludes, "may serve as the epitaph of the famous War on Poverty—'Declared but Never Fought.' "[24]

Contrary to the conventional view that the Vietnam War doomed the poverty effort, Matusow believes that Vietnam proved to be "an inefficient but highly successful antipoverty program, the only one in the Johnson years that actually worked."[25] The military effort helped the poor by stimulating a demand for labor that particularly helped unskilled workers and blacks. Unfortunately, the resulting inflationary pressures eventually eroded the short-term benefits and contributed to the economic malaise of the 1970s, which proved to be equally hard on the poor and on the well-to-do.

Long before then, however, the triumph of liberalism had led to its demise. In 1968, Hubert Humphrey received almost 12 million fewer votes than Johnson had in 1964. The repudiation of the Democrats was due to far more than an unpopular war or a failed president, Matusow contends. It represented the "massive defection of the electorate from the liberalism that had guided the country since 1960. Liberals had once promised to manage the economy, solve the race problem, reduce poverty, and keep the peace. These promises not only remained unfulfilled; each of them would be mocked by the traumatic events of this election year."[26]

Powerful as is Matusow's indictment of the liberal failure in the 1960s, it is lacking in a realistic understanding of what was possible. His arguments for more sweeping reform and the large-scale redistribution of income ignore the nature of the American political system. Much like the similar New Left critique of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Matusow's commitment to a more radical agenda, one that called for structural change rather than piecemeal reform, clashes with what was historically feasible. Yet his indictment of liberalism and of LBJ's faithful devotion to it helps to explain the tragedy that overcame both the nation and Lyndon Johnson during this tumultuous decade.

An equally provocative critique of Johnson's domestic social program has come from the opposite end of the political spectrum. In *Losing Ground*, Charles Murray, a neoconservative, contends that it was precisely the policies that Matusow advocates—attempts to transfer income—that interrupted slow but steady progress in the lessening of poverty. Surveying social policy from 1950 to 1980, Murray contends that the percentage of Americans who were mired in poverty had declined from 30 percent in 1950 to 13 percent by 1968. But then changes in the welfare program that began under Johnson led to a leveling off in the poverty level, so that by 1980, 13 percent of all Americans were still below the poverty line.[27]

Unlike Matusow, Murray focuses, not on the familiar Great Society legislation, but on changes in social policy that began during the last years of the Johnson administration and reached their full impact during the 1970s. He blames, not LBJ, but the intelligentsia, primarily academics and journalists, for fostering an "elite wisdom," which called for changes in social programs that made welfare more attractive than low-paying jobs. The greatest shift, however, was in favor of transfer payments, such as supplemental security income, food stamps, and other forms of welfare for working people. The changes that began under LBJ were often small in scale, but they would snowball in the future. Thus the number of people who were eligible for food stamps, which had increased from less than 0.5 million in 1963 to 2.1 million by 1968, had reached 21.1 million by 1980.[28]

Murray has relatively little to say about Johnson's impact on social policy. He glides over most of the Great Society programs, not even mentioning the historic changes in health care that were brought about by Medicare and Medicaid. He is equally vague on precisely who was responsible for the change in rules that he claims made it "profitable for the poor to behave in the short term in ways that were destructive in the long term."[29] And he fails to show how and why welfare policies that were designed to alleviate poverty suddenly included the kind of transfer payments that Matusow found so alien to Johnson's Great Society approach.

Despite their sharp ideological differences, Murray and Matusow agree that the War on Poverty failed. Neither author blames Johnson personally for this failure; rather, both see it as the product of flawed ideology. For Murray, the villains are "the upper echelons of academia, journalism, publishing, and the vast network of foundations, institutes, and research centers" who in the late 1960s reached agreement on a new social policy that "represented an abrupt shift with the past." Matusow is much more precise in assigning responsibility,

stating that "the War on Poverty was destined to be one of the great failures of twentieth-century liberalism."[30]

The irony is that Lyndon Johnson, the man whom Robert Caro and many others have accused of lacking any ideology, is now seen as the man whose reform program floundered because of the liberal ideas that he followed as president. In waging war on poverty and in trying to use the power of government to create a Great Society, LBJ failed, not because of compromise or manipulation, but solely out of devotion to ideas and principles that proved to be fatally flawed.

IV

The revival of interest in Johnson reached its peak on the most controversial of all his policies—the Vietnam War. In the early 1980s, scholars began a careful reconsideration of Johnson's decisions in regard to Vietnam, one based on an examination of the evidence rather than on the emotional reaction that had colored so many of the earlier studies. Although nearly all the authors were still critical of Johnson, holding him responsible for America's failure in Vietnam, he began to be seen, not as the villain, but as yet another victim of this great tragedy.

Larry Berman, a political scientist, offered the most revealing new assessment of Johnson's Vietnam policy in his 1982 book, *Planning a Tragedy.* Using recently opened materials at the Johnson Library, Berman narrowed his focus to the critical decision in July, 1965, to commit the United States to full participation in the ground fighting in South Vietnam by authorizing the dispatch of another fifty thousand troops. Berman was particularly intent on examining the advisory process that Johnson had employed in reaching this critical decision, notably the dialogue between Undersecretary of State George W. Ball, who advocated a "tactical withdrawal," and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who favored open-ended military escalation.[31]

Berman concluded that the president had used the advisory process to reach a prearranged decision for the controlled escalation of the conflict. Convinced that Johnson sincerely believed that South Vietnam was of vital strategic interest to the United States, Berman believes that LBJ never had any intention of pulling out of Vietnam. During the debate, the entire burden of proof was placed on those like Ball, who argued for withdrawal, and not on those who favored staying on, thereby preventing any fair weighing of the alternatives. At the same time, however, LBJ signaled to his national-security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, his desire to avoid an all-out military commitment in Vietnam.[32]

The picture of Johnson that Berman paints is one of a "master of consensus," a leader who was gifted in manipulation engaged in a "delicate exercise of political juggling." The whole elaborate process of meetings and discussions raised crucial questions, including the likelihood of a war that would last at least five years and might involve as many as six hundred thousand troops. But the purpose of the advisory process was not to consider these possible consequences, Berman explains, but "to legitimize a previously selected option by creating the illusion that other views were being considered."[33]

Johnson's most difficult task was putting a rein on the military. In a crucial meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he had to secure their agreement to his concept of a controlled and limited American military effort in Vietnam. One by one he turned down the suggestions of the service chiefs for calling up the reserves, for putting the nation on a wartime footing, for making extensive air and naval attacks on North Vietnam. Johnson finally asked each of the military leaders if he agreed with the policy of limited escalation, and each reluctantly nodded agreement. Calling this scene "an extraordinary moment," Berman likens Johnson to a "lion tamer dealing with some of the great lions."[34] This virtuoso performance led to disaster. "The president committed the United States to fight a limited war against an enemy totally committed to revolutionary war," Berman points out. "He had weighed all the costs and then used his great talents to forge a marginal consensus—enough to get the United States into war, but insufficient for war termination."[35]

The reason for this grave misjudgment, Berman thinks, is LBJ's devotion to the Great Society. In July, 1965, Congress had already passed thirty-six major pieces of legislation, but twenty-six others, including Medicare and civil rights, were still awaiting action. Reluctant to withdraw from Vietnam, LBJ was also unwilling to sacrifice his domestic reforms for victory abroad. So he opted for a middle course in Vietnam, one that he thought he could pursue without destroying the Great Society. "In holding back from total commitment," Berman observes, "Johnson was juggling the Great Society, the war in Vietnam, and his hopes for the future." The result, Berman concludes, was inevitable: "the Great Society would crumble," and he would lose in Vietnam to an enemy that was waging "a total, not limited war." Lyndon Johnson "was the cause of his ultimate undoing"; the master manipulator had finally undertaken a political juggling act that was beyond even his great skill.[36]

Berman's critical but sympathetic analysis of Johnson's failure in Vietnam provided a basis for another, a more ideological, interpreta-

tion of that conflict. Beginning in 1978 with Guenther Lewy's *America in Vietnam*, a group of revisionist writers had been defending the American involvement in Vietnam in reaction to the prevailing historical condemnation. Now they could develop the argument that the American defeat in Vietnam was self-inflicted, and thus did not prove that the effort was wrong from the outset.

Military strategist Harry Summers was one of the first to argue that the United States could have prevailed in Vietnam. Challenging the conventional view that the American army unwisely used traditional methods in an antiguerrilla war calling for new counterinsurgency tactics, Summers claimed that the real enemy had been the North Vietnamese regulars, not the Vietcong guerrillas. Had the United States used World War II–type tactics and taken the strategic initiative, he claims, America could have prevailed in Vietnam.[37]

Summers blamed Johnson for imposing political restraints that forced the army to fight a defensive war that was bound to end in failure. Johnson's attempt to wage a limited war, his refusal to ask Congress to declare war, and, above all, his decision to "commit the Army without first committing the American people"—all led to disaster. In trying to protect the Great Society, he neglected his major responsibility. "The failure to invoke the national will," Summers wrote, "was one of the major strategic failures of the Vietnam war." But he claimed that the fault was not Johnson's alone. The refusal of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to insist on taking the strategic offensive in Vietnam, even to the point of threatening to resign and to challenge the president in a public debate, was equally unfortunate.[38]

Other Vietnam revisionist writers were more solicitous of Johnson in making the same basic point. Herbert Y . Schandler, a retired colonel whose earlier book had offered a dispassionate analysis of Johnson's 1968 decision not to seek reelection, added to the revisionist analysis in a contribution to a symposium on the Vietnam War in 1984. Drawing on the work of both Summers and Berman, Schandler analyzed the impact of "the Johnsonian compromise" on the conduct of the war. Schandler depicts Johnson as being caught between the hawks in the military, who wanted to wage unlimited war, and the doves in the peace movement at home, who were calling for American withdrawal; this resulted in a gradual military escalation that led, not to victory, but to a prolonged stalemate. Far from being a villain, Johnson became the victim of his own policies of moderation, "a careful President who weighed the alternatives as he saw them, limited each response, and took into account the opinion of the public."[39]

Neoconservative Norman Podhoretz defended Johnson's decision to fight to contain communism in Southeast Asia, but he regretted the fact that LBJ "was trying to save Vietnam on the political cheap." Johnson's refusal to jeopardize the Great Society by asking for a tax increase hurt, but even more damaging was his failure to use his powers of persuasion on the American people. "To be fought successfully," Podhoretz wrote, "the war had to have a convincing moral justification, and the failure to provide one doomed the entire enterprise."[40]

A specialist in communications theory, who was not associated with the Vietnam revisionists, provided the most acute analysis of LBJ's dilemma in waging a limited war. In *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press*, Kathleen J. Turner used the extensive files in the LBJ Library to trace the president's concern with the way in which the media treated the war. At first, LBJ hoped the press would ignore the war and concentrate on the Great Society; after the escalation began in 1965, however, he was caught in what she describes as a "double bind—an inability to convince a large portion of the population that America was doing enough for Vietnam coupled with an inability to convince another large element that America was not doing too much." Trying to hew to a middle path in Vietnam, she argues, "Johnson's statements were neither sufficiently aggressive nor sufficiently conciliatory."[41]

The result was the emergence of the "credibility gap." Reporters thought that Johnson was deliberately holding back on the extent of the American involvement in Vietnam, when in reality he was trying to restrain public opinion in order to avoid a call for an all-out effort there. Thus he downplayed his July, 1965, decision to send an additional fifty thousand troops to Vietnam, vetoing an evening televised speech to the nation and instead announcing it at the opening of an afternoon press conference. "I think we can get our people to support us without having to be too provocative and warlike," he told his aides. As Turner points out, this policy led only to confusion and dissent. "The United States was engaged in military conflict, but hadn't declared war; . . . there was a wartime economy, but little austerity or sacrifice was required," she observes. "It simply didn't make sense to a growing proportion of the population."[42]

The most recent book on Johnson's Vietnam policy, *Intervention*, by George Kahin, a political scientist who specializes in Southeast Asian affairs, is surprisingly sympathetic to LBJ. Although Kahin is highly critical of the decision to escalate in 1965, he blames Johnson's predecessors in the White House, especially Dwight D. Eisenhower

and John F. Kennedy, for making commitments that LBJ felt forced to honor. In addition, Kahin accuses the advisers Johnson inherited, notably McGeorge Bundy, Maxwell D. Taylor, and Robert S. McNamara, for failing to give him alternatives other than escalation or withdrawal, usually labeled as "bugging out." Kahin even accuses these men of deliberate deception, such as holding back the true facts on the Gulf of Tonkin incident and not giving the president George Ball's initial proposal for a negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam. Kahin suggests that the advisers may well have confused what was best for the United States with what was best for their own careers. "It was usually not too difficult for these men to equate the U.S. national interest with their own reputations."[43]

Instead of the bloodthirsty hawk of legend, Johnson emerges from Kahin's book as a prudent, even cautious, leader who has grave doubts about escalation. Told that it is necessary to bomb North Vietnam to save a tottering government in the South, LBJ objects, informing the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he "did not wish to enter the patient in a 10-round bout, when he was in no shape to hold out for one round." And in the July, 1965, debate over troop commitment, it was the president, not his advisers, who kept raising the critical questions, asking at one point, "Are we starting something that in two or three years we simply can't finish?"[44] Thus Kahin portrays Johnson as the last dove in his own administration, the man who raised the right questions but received the wrong answers.

V

The portrait of Lyndon Johnson that is emerging from the recent literature is a very confused one. Unsympathetic biographers portray LBJ as an ambitious and amoral politician who either ignored or betrayed ideological concerns in advancing his career. Yet those who focus on the Great Society see in Johnson a genuine attempt to carry out the liberal program of his party and of such predecessors as Kennedy and Roosevelt. The failure that they document comes much more from flaws in the ideas than from defects in Johnson's character.

The new interpretation of Johnson's mistakes in Vietnam is even a greater departure from the conventional wisdom. Rather than being seen as a bloodthirsty and unrepentant war hawk, Johnson comes across as a reluctant warrior, a president who tried to find a middle path between all-out war and surrender in an area that he believed was vital for American security. Yet his efforts at moderation proved disastrous both for himself and for the nation. As Larry Berman com-

ments, "Lyndon Johnson's greatest fault as a political leader was that *he chose* not to choose between the Great Society and the war in Vietnam."[45]

Even though Johnson's stature as a human being and as a statesman has not risen with the new scholarship, his failure takes on a more tragic dimension. The harder he tried to carry out what he perceived to be his mission in the White House—reform legislation to improve the quality of life at home and an active foreign policy to protect the national security abroad—the more he met with scorn and rejection. LBJ must have sensed the underlying irony of the dilemma in which he found himself, saying to a journalist in 1967, "If history indicts us for Vietnam, I think it will be for fighting a war without trying to stir up patriotism."[46] Had Johnson abandoned the Great Society and had he embraced the war in Vietnam as a great national crusade, much as Wilson and Roosevelt had done with domestic reform during the two world wars, then he might have saved his presidency, and perhaps even his historical reputation. But driven on by his enormous ego, he tried to triumph both at home and abroad, and he lost out in both endeavors, thereby jeopardizing his place in history.

Notes

1. For an evaluation of the earlier body of books on Lyndon Johnson see my essay "The Johnson Literature," in *Exploring the Johnson Years*, ed. Robert A. Divine (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3–23. The most complete bibliography of books, articles, and dissertations on LBJ is the volume compiled by Craig Roell and members of the staff of the Johnson Library, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Bibliography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).
2. Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982), pp. xix, xx.
3. Ibid., pp. 71, 457, 552.
4. Ibid., pp. 229, 552.
5. Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 184.
6. Ibid., p. 254.
7. Ibid., pp. 12, 15.
8. George Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir* (New York: Andrews & McMeel, 1982), p. xiv.
9. Ibid., p. 9.
10. Ibid., pp. 157, 158.
11. Ibid., p. 78.
12. Ibid., p. 158.
13. Ibid., p. 14.
14. Ibid., p. 159.

15. Vaughn Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1983), pp. 120, 341, 342. Hugh Davis Graham offers a detailed and critical view of Johnson's contributions to educational reform in *The Uncertain Triumph: Federal Education Policy in the Kennedy and Johnson Years* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). While crediting the Great Society with giving enormous assistance to higher education, Graham is more critical of LBJ's efforts on behalf of elementary and secondary education. Johnson's decision in 1965 not to alter the aid-to-impacted-areas formula for funneling government aid to impoverished school districts resulted in legislation that "disproportionately aided the children of the middle class and even those who were well-to-do," rather than "the children of the poor." Graham attributes this decision to LBJ's fear that a more progressive formula might antagonize key figures in Congress and thus "would jeopardize the entire education bill" (*Uncertain Triumph*, pp. 75–76).

16. Bornet, *Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson*, pp. 337, 331.

17. Ibid., pp. 331–32.

18. Ibid., p. 339.

19. Ibid., p. 348.

20. Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 133.

21. Ibid., p. 180. Steven F. Lawson gives Johnson equally high marks for his insistence on implementing the 1965 Voting Rights Act; between 1966 and 1968, the number of blacks who were eligible to vote in the Deep South rose from 41 percent to 61 percent (see *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965–1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 39.

22. Matusow, *Unraveling*, pp. 33, 59.

23. Ibid., p. 220.

24. Ibid., p. 270.

25. Ibid., p. 175.

26. Ibid., p. 395.

27. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 57–58.

28. Ibid., pp. 43, 48.

29. Ibid., p. 9.

30. Ibid., p. 42; Matusow, *Unraveling*, p. 220. For a persuasive dissent from the view that the Great Society failed to overcome the problem of poverty see John E. Schwarz, *America's Hidden Success: A Reassessment of Twenty Years of Public Policy* (New York: Norton, 1983). Schwarz argues not only that poverty fell from 18 percent in 1960 to below 8 percent by the end of the 1970s but also that this achievement came as a result of deliberate government policy, not as a by-product of economic growth. Moreover, Schwarz contends that the uneven economic development of the 1970s, including the double-digit inflation, was the result of absorbing the baby-boom generation into the work force and was not a consequence of heavy government spending for either the Vietnam War or the Great Society. Between 1965 and 1980, some 29 million new workers joined the work force, thereby creating strains that Schwarz thinks the American economy handled remarkably well. Although he does not focus specifically on Lyndon Johnson and the Great

Society, Schwarz does offer a vigorous rebuttal to the claims of Matusow and Murray that the Great Society was a failure (*America's Hidden Success*, pp. 32, 39, 124–26, 131–32, 139).

31. Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1983), pp. 79–87.

32. Ibid., pp. 51, 93–94.

33. Ibid., pp. 112, 145.

34. Ibid., p. 126.

35. Ibid., pp. 93, 149.

36. Ibid., pp. 144, 145, 147, 149, 150.

37. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984), pp. 22–26. For a briefer statement of these views see Harry G. Summers, Jr., "Lessons: A Soldier's View," in *Vietnam as History: Ten Years after the Paris Peace Accords*, ed. Peter Braestrup (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 109–14.

38. Summers, *On Strategy*, pp. 35, 43, 168.

39. Herbert Y. Schandler, "America and Vietnam: The Failure of Strategy, 1965–67," in *Vietnam as History*, pp. 26, 32. Schandler's earlier book was *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

40. Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), pp. 80, 107–8.

41. Kathleen J. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 6.

42. Ibid., pp. 146–50, 164–65.

43. George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 245.

44. Ibid., pp. 239, 383.

45. Berman, *Planning*, p. 150.

46. Larry Berman, "Waiting for Smoking Guns: Presidential Decision-making and the Vietnam War, 1965–67," in *Vietnam as History*, p. 21.