ABSTRACT

He Was Ours: Lyndon Baines Johnson and American Identity

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President Lyndon B. Johnson challenged his fellow citizens to build a Great Society based on traditional conceptions of American identity. Johnson's cultivation of a personal identity as a Texan, rather than a southerner, strengthened his determination to promote the Great Society as an American policy. A disciple of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, Johnson targeted civil rights, poverty, education, healthcare, and the general quality of life in the Great Society's domestic programs. Such massive liberal reforms proved controversial and divisive. Likewise, the Vietnam War, which Johnson often compared to World War II, provoked divisions and questions over America's true identity and purpose, despite his promotion of the war as an effort to build the Great Society abroad. Those divisions and questions, mirroring the complexities of the 1960s, affect Americans today and burden Lyndon Johnson, the Great Society, and the Vietnam War with complex historical legacies.

He Was Ours: Lyndon Baines Johnson and American Identity

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Chip and Jill Briscoe, and my brother, Leigh Briscoe,
who have each shown me unconditional love and support all of my life.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Lyndon Baines Johnson, the thirty-sixth president of the United States, is regarded by historians as one of the most important figures in the American twentieth century. Born and raised in humble beginnings in the Texas Hill Country, he had a meteoric ride in a political career that saw him serve as a congressional aide; President Franklin D. Roosevelt's director of the National Youth Administration in Texas; member of Congress; Senate majority leader; vice president; and ultimately, president of the United States. Johnson's career and life were filled with both glorious victories and crushing defeats. He was known for his dynamic personality, as a man who could be ruthless in political dealings but whose charisma drew people toward him and inspired intense mutual devotion. People who encountered him continually described Johnson as "larger than life."[1] Due to his presence and controversial career, Johnson remains one of the most complex and intriguing figures of the United States in the twentieth century.

The Texan developed grand visions for his state, his country, and his world. Speaking to the graduating class of the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson spoke of the ideals that had led him through his thirty year career in public service and proclaimed his hopes for the future. He stated that the success of the United States as a nation would be determined by the happiness of all its citizens. Surveying the country's history and challenging Americans to work for a positive future, the president declared, “For a century we labored to settle and to subdue a continent. For half a century we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all of our people. The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization.” LBJ then encouraged the graduates, claiming that “in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.” The president perceived this Great Society to be the next step of the United States in its progression through history. He admonished American citizens to fulfill the visions of America’s founders and to earn a special place in history. President Johnson further described the Great Society as “a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.” The end result for American citizens would be a sublime fate “almost beyond the bounds of our imagination.”[2] The term “Great Society” became a symbol of Lyndon Johnson’s dreams for his country and world during his presidency of 1963 to 1969.

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[1] Paul K. Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), vii.

Johnson saw himself as the heir to former Democratic presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and John F. Kennedy in their beliefs that an active federal government could improve the lives of its nation’s citizens. He desired his Great Society programs to surpass the accomplishments of Roosevelt’s New Deal, Truman’s Fair Deal, and Kennedy’s New Frontier. Giving his presidential nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on August 27, 1964,

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[2] “Remarks at the University of Michigan,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1969*, 10 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965-1970), 1: 704-707.

Johnson invoked what he saw as his legacy: “The Founding Fathers dreamed America before it was. The pioneers dreamed of great cities on the wilderness that they crossed. Our tomorrow is on its way.” He would continue the dreams of Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy. “We do offer the people a choice, a choice of continuing on the courageous and the compassionate course that has made this Nation the strongest and the freest and the most prosperous and the most peaceful nation in the history of mankind.” President Johnson committed the Democratic Party to be “an all-American party for all Americans,” renouncing partisanship among the nation’s citizens. He spoke of his conviction that the people of the United States would one day experience “an America that knows no North or South, no East or West—an America that is undivided by creed or color, and untorn by suspicion or strife.” President Johnson challenged his audience to work toward a Great Society, as this accomplishment would bring happiness not only to the United States but also to all of humankind.[3] He hoped to continue and better the works of his predecessors and build a Great Society on which to stake his historical legacy.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt remained one of Johnson’s cherished heroes throughout the Texan’s life. Johnson served as Roosevelt’s director of the National Youth Administration (NYA) in Texas during the 1930s in the midst of the Great Depression. The NYA was part of Roosevelt’s New Deal domestic program aimed at helping United States citizens survive the bleak years of the Great Depression. Johnson’s NYA provided jobs to many young Texans, including some African Americans and Mexican Americans. When he first ran for Congress in 1937, he campaigned as a strong supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal programs, and when serving in the U.S. House of Representatives, he remained a strong ally for President Roosevelt and his policies. Hubert H. Humphrey, a senator from Minnesota who served with Johnson in the Senate and later as his vice president, referred to Johnson as a "Rooseveltian Democrat," and recalled that the Texan loved reminding people that Franklin Roosevelt considered him as his protégé. Humphrey described Johnson as a believer in New Deal programs such as Social Security, a minimum wage for workers, economic help for impoverished areas, and federal aid to education.[4] Johnson was immensely proud of this legacy as a student of Roosevelt. William S. White, a national political columnist and longtime friend of Johnson, remembered similar impressions of LBJ. Early in their friendship White recognized Johnson's interest in the New Deal, "particularly in its aspects of attempting to deal with poverty and unemployment." White also commented that Johnson "was deeply concerned about ordinary people."[5] Whitney Young, a civil rights leader and former executive director of the Urban League, interpreted how he believed President Johnson felt about his Great Society programs: "I think he saw the Great Society as sort of a monument. In a way it would be going a step beyond what his great hero Franklin Roosevelt did."[6] Lyndon Johnson hoped to complete what Franklin Roosevelt began and build a better America for its citizens.

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[3] “Remarks Before the National Convention Upon Accepting the Nomination,” *Public Papers*, 2: 1009-1013.

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[4] Hubert H. Humphrey, Interview by Michael L. Gillette, June 20, 1977, Interview II, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and Hubert H. Humphrey, Interview by Michael L. Gillette, June 21, 1977, Interview III, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

[5] William S. White, Interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, March 5, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

[6] Whitney M. Young, Jr., Interview by Thomas Harrison Baker, June 18, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

Paul K. Conkin, a historian from Vanderbilt University and a Johnson biographer, also emphasized LBJ's desire to help ordinary people. Conkin explained, "He very much wanted to help the disadvantaged classes, as evidenced by civil rights and antipoverty programs. He loved to be the big daddy, the patron, and bask in the appreciation of people below him." Indeed a central theme of Conkin's biography of the president, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson*, is that LBJ saw himself as a caregiver and protector to those who could not care for or protect themselves. Johnson reveled in the notion of being a "big daddy" for people who needed his help. While this attitude implied characteristics of paternalism, President Johnson's conviction to provide for ordinary people came from a genuine concern for their welfare.[7]

Throughout his career in public service Lyndon Johnson yearned to be a worker for unity in the United States. He especially hoped to lessen the lasting divisions that remained between the northern and southern regions of the country. Johnson's native Texas Hill Country was different from the Deep South in many ways, as its geography prevented cotton from being king and promoted emphasis on farming and ranching. The hills of Texas also had few African Americans and other minorities as its residents, thereby creating few racial tensions. Lyndon Johnson himself never held a deep devotion to the South's Lost Cause. His historical love was for Texas and its creation through revolution against Mexico. Nevertheless, LBJ's Texas was a former state of the Confederacy, and thus possessed many similarities to Deep South states, especially a dominant Anglo culture and pervasive white hostility toward blacks. Johnson saw the divisions among southerners and northerners as dangerous to the well-being of the United States and as counterproductive to the South's, including Texas's hopes for progress. William S. White described President Johnson's desire for unity in the United States as his major concern during his nearly four decades of public service. White proclaimed that Johnson worked to be "an agent to get rid of the divisions following the Civil War, to get rid of the dichotomy, as he saw it, of two nations." The columnist believed that LBJ's largest domestic concern was the "sectional abrasion" in the United States.[8]

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[7] Paul K. Conkin, "Lyndon Johnson and the Outer South," in *Is There a Southern Political Tradition?*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 158; and Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*.

During the 1964 presidential election campaign Johnson described this hope for unity at a fundraising dinner in New Orleans. LBJ asked Americans not just for a victory in the upcoming presidential election, but also for a mandate to begin a new era of idealism in the United States. Calling for unity among the regions of America, President Johnson voiced his campaign platform: "The Federal Government exists not to grow larger, but to enlarge the individual potential and achievement of the people. The Federal Government exists not to subordinate the States, but to support them." Describing this platform, the president stressed unity but also appealed to his southern audience through acknowledgement of states' rights, an issue dear to the hearts of many in the South. President Johnson believed that both the states and the federal government could work together to achieve prosperity for all Americans. In a final appeal for unity, Johnson clarified to his audience, "I believe that every other man is actuated by the same motives that I think I am actuated by. He wants to do what is right."[9]

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[8] Conkin, "Lyndon Johnson and the Outer South," 151-57; and William S. White, Interview I.

[9] "Remarks at a Fundraising Dinner in New Orleans," *Public Papers*, 2: 1281-88.

Lyndon Johnson was proud to be a Texan. He had a special love for his home state. George R. Davis, minister of the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C., where President Johnson often attended religious services, believed that to understand LBJ and his complexities, one had to comprehend his Texas background. Davis considered Johnson to be of the Southwestern United States, with an "open, forthright, pioneer spirit." One of Johnson's favorite sayings throughout his political career was "Come, let us reason together," a summons to practice the art of compromising. According to Davis, this biblical statement is one of the chief mottos of the Christian Church of which LBJ was a member. Davis recalled his notion that President Johnson believed he could work out his religion through his chosen vocation in politics. Johnson, like members of the Christian Church, assumed a rationality of religion, one that focused on practicality and service. He grew up around strong religious traditions in his native Texas Hill Country that left permanent impressions on how he viewed life. The famous Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, a close friend to President Johnson, similarly recalled how LBJ had great interest in Christianity and prayed often. Graham often talked with him about the role religion had played in his life and remembered Johnson to be proud that his great-grandfather George W. Baines had been a Baptist minister and president of Baylor University. Christian religion was an important characteristic of Texas that President Johnson took with him throughout his life.[10]

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[10] George R. Davis, Interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, February 13, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; Billy Graham, interview by Monroe Billington, October 12, 1983, Special Interview, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and Robert

President Johnson saw the Great Society as the goal for which his country must continually work. For Johnson, the Great Society was ultimately the true character and destiny of the American people. In his presidential inauguration speech on January 20, 1965, he acknowledged that Americans of his time lived in a changing world, but he called for them to be comforted because, “Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people and on their faith.” President Johnson ended his speech proclaiming that the United States must work to build a Great Society, because the Great Society remained ever-changing: “It is the excitement of becoming—always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again—but always trying and always gaining.” LBJ welcomed the challenge, because in his view, the United States was defined by unexplored and future hopes: “For this is what America is all about. It is the uncrossed desert and the unclimbed ridge. It is the star that is not reached and the harvest that is sleeping in the unplowed ground.”[11]

Historian T. Harry Williams once referred to Johnson as “this tormented man from his tormented region who had such large visions of what his country might become.”[12] Williams referred to LBJ’s passion to create a Great Society that in its results would especially help the South move into the mainstream of American life. Williams thus also noted the complexity of Johnson himself as he struggled with his own demons and the political stigma of being from a southern state. LBJ’s Texas differed from other states of the old Confederacy in that it possessed both southern and western attributes.

Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 25-26.

[11] “The President’s Inaugural Address,” *Public Papers,* 1: 71-74.

[12] T. Harry Williams, “Huey, Lyndon, and Southern Radicalism,” *The Journal of American History* 60 (September 1973): 293.

Like many Texans, Johnson had little interest in his state's Confederate heritage and preferred to hearken back to the Lone Star State's founding and time as an independent nation. Throughout his life, while appreciating certain aspects of both southern and western cultures, Lyndon Johnson's sentimental loyalty belonged to Texas. Despite this priority for his home state, he recognized that Texas would always have a historical connection with other states of the South, and that Dixie's success or failure would impact the future of the Lone Star State.[13]

"Complexity" is the term that comes to mind when this historian studies Lyndon B. Johnson and his times. LBJ expressed idealism in his dreams for a Great Society in the United States and the world. He governed during years when many Americans began to question their conceptions of the nation's identity. Johnson himself sought to enact policies he believed symbolized his conception of American identity. French President Charles de Gaulle once made a fascinating comment about Americans' perceptions of themselves and their leaders. De Gaulle explained that President John F. Kennedy, with all the glamour and grandeur of Camelot he brought to his presidency, was actually the country's mask. Lyndon Johnson, with all his complexity and controversy, was America's real face.[14]

Johnson was a major player in United States politics for four decades, from the 1930s through the 1960s. He participated directly in many of the major historical events of the American twentieth century including the New Deal, World War II, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Great Society, and the Vietnam War. LBJ subscribed to twentieth century American liberalism and its belief that an active federal government could help its citizens. He believed in the idealism of the New Deal and the Great Society. Johnson helped bring Texas and the rest of the South out of the status quo and become more in tune to the rest of the nation. Like other Cold War Democrats, he was convinced that the United States must prevent communism from spreading throughout the world. This was the major philosophy behind President Johnson's conviction that the United States had to involve itself in the Vietnam War. He also saw foreign policy as an opportunity to spread the Great Society abroad. LBJ's policies in the Great Society and the Vietnam War grew out of beliefs about American identity at home and abroad. During his years in the presidency, however, Americans began questioning those notions, and continued to debate those issues for decades following Johnson's exit from the public arena. For these reasons, noted historian and LBJ biographer Robert Dallek, "Johnson is an excellent vehicle for studying America since the 1930s."[15]

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[13] Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, 7.

[14] Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 7.

The argument this master's thesis will seek to prove is that the complexities of Lyndon Baines Johnson and his Great Society mirrored the complexities of the United States and its evolving identity during the 1960s. In pursuing a Great Society at home and abroad, Johnson sought to honor historic conceptions of American identity and purpose. LBJ's concerns about civil rights, poverty, and quality of life impacted the domestic policies of his Great Society and will be examined along with how Americans reacted to these initiatives. The Vietnam War as the central policy of Johnson's Great Society abroad brought questions about American identity and purpose in the world and this development will be studied. Finally, this work will evaluate how Americans recall and perceive LBJ and his times. The story of Lyndon Johnson and his life is as much a story of the United States as it is the account of this one complicated individual. He and his country experienced triumph and tragedy together in their complex histories.

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[15] Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

The Great Society at Home

Lyndon Johnson hoped to build a Great Society for his fellow Americans in which all would have the opportunity to achieve fulfillment and happiness. He believed himself the heir to reformist Democratic presidents, especially his hero Franklin D. Roosevelt. Longtime LBJ aide Horace Busby explained that for Johnson "the Roosevelt legacy was the flame burning within." Busby asserted that President Johnson desired to imitate the success of President Roosevelt and the New Deal by carrying that legacy through his Great Society. While no doubt concerned about his historical legacy, LBJ was motivated as well by a sincere yearning to improve the lives of Americans. Busby recalled that Johnson throughout his life recited a similar philosophical speech to him: "People are good. . . . What the average folks want is very simple: peace, a roof over their heads, food on their tables, milk for their babies, a good job at good wages, a doctor when they need him, an education for their kids, a little something to live on when they're old, and a nice funeral when they die."[1] LBJ believed that American identity depended and thrived on the dream that all people in the country could live satisfying lives.

President Johnson's beliefs about the importance of civil rights, ending poverty, and improving quality of life permeated through his domestic Great Society. The fact that Johnson was from a state and region of the nation that historically favored states' rights as opposed to an active federal government and believed in a rigid segregation of the races meant that LBJ came a long way in developing his attitudes about those subjects. Andrew J. Young, Jr., a civil rights activist who worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), recalled that he and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement believed that defeating apartheid in the South might ultimately best be handled by a southerner who understood the racial situation in the region. Many African American leaders hoped that Lyndon Johnson could be this leader. Young recalled that his friend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the creator of the SCLC, often made the statement "that if a Southerner ever really gets converted then there is no better ally." Whitney M. Young, Jr., who served as executive director of the Urban League, spoke of a similar experience, asserting that "some of the best liberals I know are reconstructed Southerners." Whitney Young believed that LBJ as a southerner better understood the race problems of the South than many northerners, who often only had minimal contact with African Americans. He supposed that President Johnson brought a "quality of emotion" to civil rights issues and further stated: "I don't know anybody who exhibited a greater respect for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as far as black people are concerned." LBJ's convictions about the importance of equality in American identity provided hope among activists who had devoted their lives to fighting for this belief and cause.[2]

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[1] Horace Busby, *The Thirty-First of March: An Intimate Portrait of Lyndon Johnson's Final Days in Office* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 76-77, 86-87.

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[2] Andrew J. Young, Jr., Interview by Thomas H. Baker, June 18, 1970, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; Whitney M. Young, Jr., Interview by Thomas H. Baker, June 18, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 331-32.

While Johnson's values regarding American identity and the Great Society at home earned praise by many citizens, some Americans began to question this thinking as LBJ's years in the White House progressed. Many white southerners grew hostile to Johnson, seeing him as a betrayer of the southern way of life. Conversely, some African Americans, especially those in urban northern areas, believed the Johnson administration moved too slowly in its civil rights endeavors and was not fulfilling past promises for a Great Society. Citizens across the United States began to question the enormous amount of activity President Johnson's government took to build the Great Society at home. During stressful times in the White House, even LBJ at times called into question his notions about American identity. As Lyndon Johnson and the United States lived through the years of the Great Society at home, American identity became increasingly complex.

Before the Presidency

From the 1930s through the early 1960s, as Johnson served in the United States House of Representatives, Senate, and as vice president, the Texan, while promoting a New Deal belief in federal support for Americans in need, witnessed an evolution in his attitudes toward civil rights for minorities. As a congressman and senator from a state hostile to civil rights, Johnson early in his career did not support legislation dealing with this subject. While having a certain degree of sympathy for the plight of African Americans and other minorities, LBJ knew that as an elected official representing Texas any support of civil rights would in all likelihood lead to his political death. He took the attitude that he could do more for the United States's minorities by making sure he remained in political office. Catering to his Texas constituency on these issues did not earn him friends among African American leaders, especially during the 1950s as the Civil Rights Movement began gaining national attention. Roy Wilkins, a leader in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and future Johnson ally, recalled that in those years civil rights leaders did not consider LBJ a friend to their cause. Many activists later believed that Lyndon Johnson did not take a stand in support of their work for civil rights because of the conservative constituency that he represented.[3]

An event involving the Mexican American community showed LBJ's attitude toward race relations during those early years. When Johnson first entered the Senate in January of 1949, controversy grew when a funeral home in the small South Texas town of Three Rivers refused to perform burial services for Felix Longoria, a Mexican American who had served in the United States military. Longoria had been killed on a volunteer mission in the Philippines but was denied entombment in his hometown solely for the reason that he was Hispanic. Mexican Americans across Texas were outraged by this dishonor. Leaders of the American G.I. Forum, a civil rights organization for Mexican Americans, contacted Senator Johnson, whom they considered sympathetic to the plight of Hispanics, for help.

As a young man, Lyndon Johnson encountered a profound experience that significantly influenced his views on race and poverty. Pursuing a teaching degree at Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos, LBJ sought to gain practice in the classroom. During the 1928-1929 school year, he moved to the small South Texas town of Cotulla and taught middle school children in the community’s Hispanic school. White Americans and Mexican Americans were segregated from one another in their residences and their schools in those days. The grinding poverty and the racism that his students daily experienced in Cotulla shocked and appalled Johnson. LBJ worked tirelessly to help his students, and became the school’s principal. He convinced school administrators to purchase playground equipment and started extracurricular activities, such as sports, band, and debate, for his students. Johnson, showing aspects of paternalism, prohibited his students from speaking Spanish in the classroom and lectured them on the necessity of learning English and the possibility of success through hard work. Mexican Americans in Cotulla had never seen a white person take such interest in their children’s education. Johnson carried the Cotulla experience with him throughout his life, never forgetting the difficult conditions that his young Hispanic students daily endured.

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[3] Whitney M. Young, Jr., Interview I; and Roy Wilkins, Interview by Thomas H. Baker, April 1, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

LBJ’s days in Cotulla made him sympathize with the plight of Mexican Americans, and the Hispanic community was aware of this fact. The new senator himself was disturbed by the disrespect shown to the fallen Felix Longoria. Johnson, following pleas of help from Hispanic leaders, arranged for the late soldier to be buried with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Dr. Hector Garcia, founder of the American G.I. Forum, remembered that this act earned LBJ much admiration among Hispanics and renewed their confidence in American government. Working to provide Longoria with a proper funeral showed Johnson’s concern for Mexican Americans. Garcia stated that LBJ gave him advice following these events, proposing that, “You can achieve anything you want if you just take it easy and slowly.” Johnson’s words to Garcia illustrated a philosophy held by many Americans in regards to race issues that progress could be made if actions were taken in an orderly fashion. Lyndon Johnson followed this rubric while in both houses of Congress, having compassion toward the cause of equality but remaining aware of the political realities in his home state.[4]

On March 12, 1956, a resolution signed by most southern senators and representatives was introduced into the *Congressional Record*. The statement became known as “The Southern Manifesto” and condemned the United States Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in the case *Brown v. Board of Education* which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The Southern Manifesto was designed to encourage widespread white resistance to racial integration in the South. Few southern politicians in Congress refused to sign the document. One who did not place his name on the resolution, however, was Lyndon Johnson, who was then Senate majority leader. LBJ resented that the Manifesto was created to arouse white fear and encourage defiance of the Supreme Court. The senator wanted citizens of both races to comply with the law. He also knew that signing this document would put an end to his hopes for higher national office. Hubert Humphrey, a senator from Minnesota at the time of the Southern Manifesto, professed that Johnson “didn’t want to classify himself in those days as a southerner.” Supporting the resolution would pigeonhole LBJ as merely a regional politician. Humphrey noted that in later years Johnson was proud that he refused to sign the bitter Southern Manifesto. He was slowly but surely becoming more supportive of civil rights.[5]

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[4] Julie L. Pycior, *LBJ & Mexican Americans: The Paradox of Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 18-22, 68-73; and Hector Garcia, Interview by David G. McComb, July 9, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, care of LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

Senate Majority Leader Johnson's successful role in obtaining passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first such bill since Reconstruction, was a milestone in his political career. Johnson used all his legislative talent to prevent a southern filibuster on the bill, which had worked so many previous times to kill civil rights bills. He was determined to pass a civil rights bill that would initiate healing between the North and the South. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 allowed LBJ to shed labels of being a regional politician and effectively advanced him into the national spotlight. Many African Americans and white liberals were angered at Johnson's final product in the bill. They considered it to be an emasculated law, watered down with little actual power and only an act for politics. The common phrase in reference to the bill was that it was just "half a loaf." Despite this initial disappointment, in later years civil rights leaders saw the 1957 bill as an important first step toward later government action on civil rights. The Senate Majority Leader, basking in the glory of his victory, maintained that he would continue to win more progress on civil rights each year. He did not want to immediately initiate drastic change on the South all at once. As when he gave his advice to Dr. Garcia, LBJ believed he could bring the most good to minorities through patient perseverance.[6]

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[5] Tony Badger, "Southerners Who Refused to Sign the Southern Manifesto," *The Historical Journal* 42 (June 1999): 517-34; and Hubert H. Humphrey, Interview by Michael L. Gillette, June 21, 1977, Interview III, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

[6] Thurgood Marshall, Interview by Thomas H. Baker, July 10, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and Robert Mann, *The Walls of Jericho: Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Russell, and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 208-24.

Lyndon Johnson’s legislative skill in the Senate catapulted him into a figure of national prominence. That became clear when Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, the 1960 Democratic nominee for president, named him as his vice presidential running mate. Some civil rights leaders such as Roy Wilkins were disturbed that Kennedy would choose a southerner to join his election ticket, but other African Americans, in light of his recent voting record, expressed hope that LBJ would continue to develop in his racial attitudes. Thurgood Marshall, legal counselor to the NAACP, recalled being surprised by the Johnson choice but optimistic that he would prove worthy. Marshall continued, “In my book Texas is not South; it’s Southwest,” and “his record wasn’t that bad.” Clearly many minorities found more comfort in having a New Deal Texan as the vice presidential nominee than an individual from a Deep South state.[7] Senator Kennedy chose Johnson to help his popularity in the South, particularly in LBJ’s home state of Texas, and Johnson did not disappoint Kennedy. In 1960, the Kennedy-Johnson ticket won a close election that vaulted them into the two highest offices in the land. Lyndon Johnson now had not only Texans but also all Americans as his constituents.

LBJ’s years as vice president, from 1961 to 1963, were at times discouraging because he was not consulted often in major decisions of governance by various others in the Kennedy administration. Nevertheless, in the vice presidency Johnson experienced conversion from lukewarm supporter of civil rights to strong believer in the justness of the cause for racial equality. President Kennedy appointed his vice president to lead the new President’s Committee on Equal Employment. The committee studied complaints of racial discrimination in the workforce across the United States and revealed to Johnson many of the injustices that blacks daily faced. NAACP leader Roy Wilkins remembered being impressed by LBJ’s personal concern for black Americans while leading the Committee on Equal Employment. The vice president used one of his favorite tools, the telephone, to call prominent people across the country to persuade them to hire more African Americans. He also traveled extensively during his vice presidency on goodwill tours for President Kennedy. Those international experiences convinced Johnson that his country must end southern segregation for the good of its reputation, as the United States’s racial climate met with disdain abroad. Wilkins recalled a profound encounter with the vice president shortly after he returned from a visit to Senegal. Discussing his recent assignment, Johnson confessed to Wilkins, “You know, in Senegal, when I looked in the eyes of the mothers there they had the same look as the people in Texas, the mothers in Texas. . . . All mothers want the best for their children. And the mothers in Senegal were no different from the white mothers in Texas.” The words deeply moved Wilkins and gave him increased confidence in the Texan. Meetings with people of color at home and abroad further enlightened Vice President Johnson about the necessity of equal civil rights for all people.[8]

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[7] Thurgood Marshall, Interview I.

Lyndon Johnson’s most famous speech as vice president occurred on Memorial Day, May 30, 1963, at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during a ceremony honoring the centennial anniversary of the epic Civil War battle and President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. The day memorialized a monumental event in the history of the United States and offered a grand opportunity for Vice President Johnson to speak about race and American identity. In his words, Johnson showed how far he had come in his thinking on civil rights. He spoke of the chronic inequality of the black American, as a century had passed since the end of slavery, but African Americans continued to live in subjugation. LBJ called for all Americans to practice perseverance in bringing genuine freedom to blacks. He issued a warning to his fellow citizens: "Unless we are willing to yield up our destiny of greatness among the civilizations of history, Americans—white and Negro together—must be about the business of resolving the challenge which confronts us now." Johnson described his country's identity and his fears about its stability in this critical time: "Our nation found its soul in honor on these fields of Gettysburg one hundred years ago. We must not lose that soul in dishonor now on the fields of hate." The nation and its identity were at stake, and the Texan called for unity among races and regions in efforts to pursue equality. He closed his speech by professing that until the Emancipation Proclamation was truly fulfilled and African Americans had equal opportunity, the United States would not possess actual freedom. Johnson in this speech portrayed hope and idealism for the country. He showed his optimism about what he saw as America's destiny.[9]

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[8] Roy Wilkins, Interview I; and Paul K. Conkin, “Lyndon Johnson and the Outer South,” in *Is There a Southern Political Tradition?*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 161.

Although not asked his opinion on many matters of government in these years, Vice President Johnson did seek to give advice to President Kennedy when the administration began pursuing a new civil rights bill. He spoke to Theodore C. Sorensen, a key aide to President Kennedy, and discussed how the White House should approach southerners in regards to the civil rights bill. Johnson believed that Kennedy should raise the morality of the civil rights cause with southerners. LBJ explained to Sorensen that if President Kennedy "goes down there and looks them in the eyes and states the moral issue and the Christian issue, and he does it face to face, these southerners at least respect his courage. They feel that they're on the losing side of an issue of conscience." The statement expressed knowledge of southern culture with regards to the region's attitudes toward religion and honor. Johnson desired to bring his intimate understanding of the South to the Kennedy administration to help with its civil rights goals.[10]

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[9] Press Release, "May 30, 1963, Remarks by Vice President, Memorial Day, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania," Statements File, Box 80, LBJ Library.

Let Us Continue

Lyndon Baines Johnson became the thirty-sixth president of the United States by the most tragic of circumstances on November 22, 1963. On that day President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson had both been participating in a Texas tour to gather political support for the approaching 1964 presidential election. Shocked by Kennedy's death, Johnson immediately took the presidential oath of office aboard Air Force One at Dallas's Love Field and returned to Washington.

Johnson knew that he must assure Americans that he was capable of leading their country through a dangerous and uncertain time. He would have to gain the trust of his fellow citizens, many of whom knew little about the new president. Americans looked to the president of the United States as a critical representative of their nation's identity. LBJ decided that he would adhere, to the best of his efforts in his administration, a theme of continuity from the presidency of John F. Kennedy. He hoped this ideal would assuage fears about both the stability of the country and its identity. Johnson later recalled in his memoirs, “I felt from the very first day in office that I had to carry on for President Kennedy. . . . I did what I believed he would have wanted me to do. I never wavered from that sense of responsibility, even after I was elected in my own right, up to my last day in office.”[11]

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[10] Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 374-75.

President Johnson then contacted other members of the Kennedy administration to ask them to remain with him in the government. He believed keeping these individuals in his administration would provide continuity and a measure of stability for the country. The new president encouraged Kennedy officials that their country and he himself needed them now more than ever. Johnson successfully convinced them to stay in Washington for the time being, and many remained with him throughout his years in the White House. LBJ soon developed close relationships in particular with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Having leaders from the previous administration continue their work in Johnson’s administration helped him garner confidence from the American people.[12]

President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress and the entire nation on November 27, 1963, to discuss the national tragedy and explain how his government would remain true to the late president’s ideals. LBJ recalled President Kennedy’s words at his inaugural address where he challenged the country with his admonishment, “let us begin,” saying to the nation now in this moment of testing, “let us continue.” He asked for unity in the nation and for the help of all Americans as he governed through a time of mourning. The new president pledged to carry President Kennedy's domestic policy hopes forward, beginning with the civil rights bill. Johnson proclaimed, "No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long. We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law." LBJ committed himself fully to civil rights, calling for an end to racial discrimination and asserting that accomplishing this goal would strengthen the nation. Finally, he challenged his fellow citizens, saying, "Let us meet in action, in tolerance, and in mutual understanding. John Kennedy's death commands what his life conveyed—that America must move forward. The time has come for Americans of all races and creeds and political beliefs to understand and to respect one another." He further expressed his hope that the traumatic experience would unify the American people as they sought to comfort one another's sorrow. President Johnson believed that for his country's identity to remain stable the United States would need to move forward and continue in its dreams of progress for the future.[13]

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[11] Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 19.

[12] Ibid., 18-21.

Lyndon Johnson knew that despite his record of recent support for civil rights initiatives, many African Americans were uneasy about now having a southern president. He quickly went to work to assuage these fears and to promote the passage of the civil rights bill. During the first several months of his administration, the new president talked on the telephone and met with many civil rights leaders. Only two days after becoming president, he visited on the phone with Whitney Young of the National Urban League and described the effort he planned to give to making the civil rights bill a reality. Johnson expounded, “And kind of like that fellow said, ‘What’s the difference between a Texas Ranger and a Texas Sheriff? . . . Well, when you hit a Ranger he just keeps coming.’ So, that’s kind of the fight we want to get in.” LBJ thus used an example of Texas lore to prove to Young that he was serious about fighting for civil rights. The two men continued their conversation by discussing how hate, particularly racial hatred, was extremely perilous for the nation. The president described hate as “a cancer that just eats out our national existence.” The proposed civil rights bill was mandatory to stop this problem. Young in later years remembered President Johnson’s efforts to calm civil rights leaders’ fears about his place of birth. Young expressed that LBJ “wanted very much to convey that not only did we not have to worry but he wanted to do far more than any other President.”[14]

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[13] "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1969*, 10 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965-1970), 1: 8-10.

President Johnson invited many African American leaders to the White House to discuss the pending civil rights bill during the first days of his administration. Martin Luther King, Jr., of the SCLC; Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were some of the notable figures who met with the president. They found LBJ’s excitement about working for civil rights impressive as the president strived to convince the leaders about his dedication to the cause. He welcomed them to come to speak with him in the future when they had other ideas and issues they believed were important for the nation. Johnson made clear the fact that he would not allow the civil rights legislation to be watered down and weakened. He would only accept a strong civil rights law. Over the next several months, President Johnson met with civil rights leaders to discuss legislative strategy for the bill and to ponder future civil rights ideas. Following his initial meeting with Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., commented to reporters: "I was very impressed by the president's awareness of the need of civil rights and the depth of his concern. As a southerner, I am happy to know that a fellow southerner is in the White House who is concerned about civil rights."[15]

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[14] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 18; Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 28-30; and Whitney M. Young, Jr., Interview I.

While Lyndon Johnson's loyalty was primarily with Texas as opposed to the rest of the South, he had to acknowledge his state's historic connection with the troubled region. As a southerner, President Johnson's advocacy of civil rights was a real political risk that exposed him to possible rejection by Lone Star State and other southern voters in future elections. LBJ's beliefs regarding this explosive issue further put in jeopardy his personal relationships with old friends from the South, such as his longtime mentor from his days in the Senate, Richard Russell of Georgia. Despite these concerns, LBJ recognized that his home state and region needed to rid themselves of the horrors of racism and injustice.[16]

Johnson often told friends and foes alike a story from his Senate years involving his cook, Zephyr Wright, and his maid, Helen Williams, both African American women.

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[15] Roy Wilkins, Interview I; A. Philip Randolph, Interview by Thomas H. Baker, October 29, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; James Farmer, Interview by Harri Baker, October 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws That Changed America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 65-67.

[16] Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 24.

At the close of each congressional session, Williams's husband Gene drove the women in the Johnsons's car from Washington to the LBJ Ranch in Texas. On one occasion, Senator Johnson asked Gene Williams to take the Johnsons's pet dog along with them. Williams hesitated and explained to the senator how difficult it was traveling through the South for African Americans. The Johnson employees spent many extra hours on their journeys looking for places that would provide them with food and lodging. Most of these locations in the segregated South were miles off the main roads. Williams illustrated to LBJ that taking a dog on their trip to Texas would make things even more difficult for them. Life was very problematic for African Americans in the segregated South.[17]

Williams's story significantly impacted the senator's changing views about civil rights. Johnson recalled in his memoirs, "Of course, I knew that such discrimination existed throughout the South. We all knew it. But somehow we had deluded ourselves into believing that the black people around us were happy and satisfied; into thinking that the bad and ugly things were going on somewhere else, happening to other people." Many white southerners like Johnson grew up with this attitude toward African Americans. Johnson explained his experience in the Texas Hill Country further by stating, "I never sat on my parents' or grandparents' knees listening to nostalgic tales of the antebellum South. In Stonewall and Johnson City I never was a part of the Old Confederacy. But I was part of Texas. My roots were in its soil. I felt a special identification with its history and its people. And Texas is a part of the South." LBJ's identity regarding race changed during his years in politics, especially as he moved from

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[17] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 154; and James Farmer, Interview I.

Senate majority leader to vice president to president. He confessed, “I was part of America growing up.” Johnson realized that racism affected not only blacks but also the rest of Americans as well. Referring to Gene Williams’s experiences with intolerance, he understood, “His problem was also mine: as a Texan, a Southerner, and an American.” Racial injustice threatened the progress of the entire nation.[18]

That conviction made President Johnson even more determined to make the civil rights bill a reality. The awesome powers of the presidency caused Johnson to give much reflection on the Civil Rights Movement. He elucidated, “In that house of decision, the White House, a man becomes his commitments. He understands who he really is. He learns what he genuinely wants to be.” LBJ further elaborated, “I knew that, as President and as a man, I would use every ounce of strength I possessed to gain justice for the black American.” Early in his presidency Johnson dedicated himself to the cause of racial justice. As could be expected, embracing civil rights disappointed many of the president’s old southern friends. Johnson’s mentor from the Senate, Richard Russell, an ardent segregationist from Georgia, made a comment to LBJ aide Bill Moyers implying that the new president had betrayed and had begun the destruction of the southern way of life. Senator Russell lamented, “Now you tell Lyndon that I’ve been expecting the rod for a long time, and I’m sorry that it’s from his hand the rod must be wielded, but I’d rather it be his hand than anybody else’s I know. Tell him to cry a little when he uses it.”[19]

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[18] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 155.

[19] Ibid., 157; and Mann, *The Walls of Jericho*, 392-93.

Declaring War on Poverty

As President Johnson comforted the nation following President Kennedy's death and pushed for civil rights legislation, he sought to continue the legacy of the New Deal in his presidency. On January 8, 1964, the president gave his annual State of the Union message to a joint session of Congress and initiated what would become a major theme of his presidency. He raised a critical problem that the country now faced, insisting, "Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity." Johnson proclaimed to his audience, "This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort." The president committed his government to working to solve the national problem of poverty. This campaign, called the "War on Poverty," would not be easy or quick, but was imperative for the well-being of the United States. President Johnson's program would involve cooperation between the national, state, and local governments and give attention to both urban and rural locales. He stressed that the War on Poverty would focus on improvements in the areas of education, healthcare, housing, job training, and employment opportunity. LBJ promised that the 1964 federal budget would be designed to provide hope for all Americans. Johnson trusted that the whole country would benefit from the War on Poverty's programs by bringing a better quality of life throughout the nation. He also used this speech to promote the civil rights bill, calling it a "moral issue" for the United States. The president reminded his fellow citizens, "Today, Americans of all races stand side by side in Berlin and in Vietnam. They died side by side in Korea.

Surely they can work and eat and travel side by side in their own country." LBJ concluded his message to Congress and the nation by encouraging Americans to have faith in their country's goals of an end to poverty and a beginning of true freedom for all.[20]

Johnson assistant Joseph A. Califano described the War on Poverty as a continuation of the New Deal. LBJ viewed himself as the heir to Franklin Roosevelt and his policies. Califano explained that the War on Poverty aimed to help Americans "get in positions where they could be on their own and where they could pull off their own share of the economic pie." To accomplish these goals, the administration emphasized improving job training, education, and healthcare. "It was a 'hand up' rather than a 'handout.'"[21] The War on Poverty was a manifestation of the convictions Johnson possessed about helping ordinary people throughout his years in public life. Some politicians often referred to LBJ as a "Populist," a term used for progressives from his region of the country that dated back to the populist movement of the late nineteenth century. President Johnson welcomed this label, as it further showed his reformist characteristics. He possessed a genuine desire to better the lives of Americans living in poverty. The president recollected in his memoirs, "I determined that this Populist politician would be the one who finally gave poor Americans some representation and helped them find their voice and improve their lot."[22]

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[20] "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," *Public Papers*, 1: 112-18.

[21] Miller, *Lyndon*, 442.

[22] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 69-72.

President Johnson named Sargent Shriver, President Kennedy's brother-in-law and director of the Peace Corps, to lead the War on Poverty. A telephone conversation between the two men on February 1, 1964, the day Johnson announced Shriver's appointment, underscored the importance LBJ placed on the War on Poverty. The president exclaimed to Shriver, "You'll have more influence in this administration than any man in it." LBJ had the highest hopes for his new program, commenting with excitement, "The sky's the limit. You just make this thing work, period." He perceived the War on Poverty to be crucial for the United States's progress and identity, asserting, "This is number one on the domestic front. Next to peace in the world, this is the most important."[23]

The Courtship of Everett Dirksen

As President Johnson waged his War on Poverty, he also pressured Congress to act on the civil rights bill. He made Senator Hubert Humphrey, a longtime champion for civil rights, as the bill's manager in the Congress. Johnson and Humphrey had known and worked together for several years in the Senate and enjoyed a measure of camaraderie. LBJ implied that Humphrey's successful leadership with the civil rights legislation might earn him a spot on the upcoming presidential election ticket as the nominee for the vice presidency. Gregarious and ambitious, the Minnesota senator devoted himself to the cause. Johnson and Humphrey agreed that for civil rights to be successful in Congress, winning the support of Republican Senator Everett Dirksen would be a necessity. Dirksen served as the Senate minority leader and commanded much influence over his Republican colleagues. Cooperation with Republicans would aid the Johnson administration in overcoming the resistance of southern politicians to the civil rights bill. Johnson and Humphrey were well acquainted with Dirksen from their years in the Senate. The president challenged Humphrey that they must court the Senate minority leader to their side by any means necessary. The Minnesota senator remembered that early on in his presidency LBJ made him aware of this objective, ordering him, "You make up your mind now that you've got to spend time with Ev Dirksen. You've got to play to Ev Dirksen. You've got to let him have a piece of the action. He's got to look good all the time." President Johnson persisted throughout the debates over the civil rights bill, "You get in there to see Dirksen! You drink with Dirksen! You talk to Dirksen! You listen to Dirksen!" Johnson and Humphrey knew that gaining the Senate minority leader's support of the civil rights legislation would bring more approval across the nation of their actions for black equality.[24]

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[23] Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 211-13.

As he commanded Humphrey to woo the Senate minority leader, Johnson himself labored to gather Dirksen's approval as well. A telephone conversation between the two politicians on May 13, 1964, showed this effort as well as LBJ's hope that civil rights legislation would be a positive development for American identity. The president proclaimed to the Republican senator, "We don't want this to be a Democratic bill. We want it to be an American bill." Johnson continued by flattering Dirksen and comparing him to another leader from his native state of Illinois, the Great Emancipator Abraham Lincoln. LBJ hailed Dirksen as a dynamic individual in Lincoln's mold. He bragged, "You're worthy of the Land of Lincoln. And the Man from Illinois is going to pass the bill, and I'll see that you get proper attention and credit." With many such statements,

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[24] Hubert H. Humphrey, Interview III.

President Johnson convinced the Republican leader that he would achieve a glorious place in history because of his efforts to ensure passage of the civil rights legislation.[25]

Launching the Great Society at Home

On May 22, 1964, President Johnson, giving the commencement address at the University of Michigan, solidified his dreams for the Great Society. The speech was permeated with Johnson's beliefs about American identity and was the origin of the term "Great Society." LBJ expressed, "The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time." The president decreed to his audience that those goals were only the beginning stages of the Great Society. American identity and the Great Society required educational opportunities for all, productive leisure time, and preservation of the nation's beauty in nature. The Great Society was a goal that required constant work from citizens in the hopes of bettering their country. The president illustrated that the Great Society would be built "in our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms."

Johnson argued that the United States's population growth in the next forty to fifty years would require its citizens to "rebuild the entire urban United States." American cities of the 1960s suffered from urban decay, traffic, housing shortages, and loneliness and indifference among their inhabitants. LBJ stressed that his country must remedy these urban problems. He suggested that underdeveloped areas of the United States continued to exist and should be helped, professing, "Today the frontier of imagination and innovation is inside those cities and not beyond their borders." The president encouraged his audience, "It will be the task of your generation to make the

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[25] Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 350.

American city a place where future generations will come, not only to live but to live the good life." The current generation faced a historic opportunity, in his view, that would continue the progress of American identity.

President Johnson reminded his listeners that the United States had long prided itself in being "America the beautiful." He worried that pollution was threatening the natural appearance of the United States. An ugly America threatened American self-esteem. LBJ warned, "Once our natural splendor is destroyed, it can never be recaptured. And once man can no longer walk with beauty or wonder at nature his spirit will wither and his sustenance be wasted." The Great Society required a people committed to protecting their natural environment.

The classroom was crucial to the success of the Great Society. Johnson advised, "Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination." Many Americans had little education and thus suffered lost potential in their lives. Classrooms throughout the country were overcrowded, filled with underpaid or unqualified teachers, and lacked enough resources. LBJ saw poverty as a major cause of problems in education and argued further that the nation must develop methods to better train teachers and keep children interested in learning. Improvements in education would bring success in the Great Society.

President Johnson's speech to the graduating class of the University of Michigan raised high goals, and he knew the task would not be easy. His government had programs working on bettering the cities, the countryside, and the classrooms, but he admitted they did not have all the solutions to these issues. To better achieve the Great Society, the president promised his citizens that he would call numerous White House conferences regarding those subjects. He would invite the best minds from across the country and the world to attend the meetings and propose initiatives to help build the Great Society. The president again reminded his audience that the current generation had the opportunity to make history. He needed their help, explaining, “We have the power to shape the civilization that we want. But we need your will, your labor, your hearts, if we are to build that kind of society.” For Johnson, the Great Society continued the progress he saw in his view of American history and identity. He expressed idealism about his country’s purposes. Concluding his speech, President Johnson encouraged his fellow Americans: “Those who came to this land sought to build more than just a new country. They sought a new world. . . . You can make their vision our reality. So let us from this moment begin our work so that in the future men will look back and say: It was then, after a long and weary way, that man turned the exploits of his genius to the full enrichment of his life.” The purposes of the Johnson presidency were now launched with full force.[26]

Johnson earned the first major achievement of his Great Society on July 2, 1964, with the Congressional passage of the civil rights legislation for which he had devoted so much energy during the first months of his presidency. Hubert Humphrey and the president successfully courted the Senate Republican leader Everett Dirksen to support the bill. Dirksen in turn influenced many of his fellow party members to join the cause. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a landmark law that prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and employment on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or religion. The Act was a monumental victory in the Civil Rights Movement. President

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[26] “Remarks at the University of Michigan,” *Public Papers*, 1: 704-707.

Johnson was thrilled with the achievement and soon sought further progress in civil rights. Prior to signing the bill, the president in a telephone call confided to NAACP leader Roy Wilkins, “We’ve got a long, hard fight ahead, but if we work together, we’ll find the answers. ‘Cause we’re right. We’re right.” LBJ knew that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was an important triumph in the progress of the nation and its identity.[27]

President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the East Room of the White House surrounded by government officials and civil rights leaders. Radio and television broadcasts carried his remarks to the nation. The president began by acknowledging that racism and hatred had unfortunately become part of the human tradition. He then exclaimed, “But it cannot continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. The principles of our freedom forbid it. Morality forbids it. And the law I will sign tonight forbids it.” Racism and hatred were anathema to the ideals for which the United States stood. Johnson recalled that John F. Kennedy had first proposed the law and explained that it received support from more than two-thirds of the members of both houses of Congress. The bill was bipartisan, as both Democrats and Republicans worked to make it reality. He also asserted that the majority of American citizens approved of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. LBJ knew that the law would benefit all Americans in the long term as it worked to defeat racial prejudice. Finally, President Johnson vowed to use his executive powers to enforce the civil rights legislation.

LBJ continued to speak to his fellow citizens about the law’s goals and how they could be supportive of its aims. He made reference to his home region, illustrating, “Its purpose is not to punish. Its purpose is not to divide, but to end divisions—divisions which have all lasted too long. Its purpose is national, not regional." The president desired the Act to usher into the United States a goal he had worked for throughout his career, that of national unity. The purpose of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was to ensure equality and justice and to promote freedom for all Americans. President Johnson called for all people across the United States to commit themselves to ending racial injustice and supporting national unity. He closed his remarks with religious overtones by reminding the American people of what he saw as their destiny, proclaiming, "Let us hasten that day when our unmeasured strength and our unbounded spirit will be free to do the great works ordained for this Nation by the just and wise God who is the Father of us all." Lyndon Johnson believed that with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the United States had moved closer to its destiny of greatness.[28]

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[27] Mann, *The Walls of Jericho,* 513-15; and Beschloss, *Taking Charge,* 448-49.

President Johnson won a great victory with the passage of that civil rights legislation, but the variety of emotions he expressed during the days after signing the bill illustrated the complexity of the man and his times. As noted previously in his conversation with Roy Wilkins, Johnson yearned for more victories in the battles for civil rights. Hubert Humphrey recalled LBJ's longing to protect voting rights for African Americans. Johnson believed the power of the vote would significantly aid in the struggle for black equality. Humphrey remembered Johnson explaining to him, "When the Negroes get that, they'll have every politician, north and south, east and west, kissing their ass, begging for their support." The right to vote meant that African Americans could remove racist politicians from their elected offices, and Johnson believed this would be critical in the fight for civil rights.[29]

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[28] "Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill," *Public Papers*, 2: 842-44.

Though he desired more success in civil rights following this victory, in the Oval Office after the signing ceremony Johnson was in a somber mood. White House aide Bill Moyers, perplexed by the president's state of mind, inquired why he was not savoring the victory. LBJ's answer, as future events would prove all too true, was keenly observant. Johnson lamented, "It is an important gain, but I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come." The president possessed strong affection for the southern United States, particularly his home state of Texas, and he recognized the difficult changes the new law would bring to that region.[30]

Despite such political foreboding, Lyndon Johnson knew this day marked a great victory for the country and for him personally. Lady Bird Johnson, the president's wife, recalled in her memoirs the drama of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The First Lady wrote that the experience reminded her of her husband's long days and nights in the Senate while working to obtain passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Mrs. Johnson had brought him hot meals and changes of clothes night after night as he worked to make the bill a law. President Johnson similarly had given much of himself in making the Civil Rights Act of 1964 a reality. Lady Bird Johnson realized how important her husband's actions had been in the struggle for civil rights. With an attitude similar to the president's continual drive for victory, the First Lady wrote, "This was just another step in a long chain of steps." Though that was true, both Mr. and Mrs. Johnson knew how special July 2, 1964, had been. Lady Bird Johnson relished, “This was one of those rare nights, starry in every way, when one does not think about tomorrow, a wonderful sense of euphoria rarely attained.”[31]

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[29] Miller, *Lyndon*, 453.

[30] Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 154.

President Johnson himself described in his memoirs the personal fulfillment of signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. At the law’s ceremony, he thought of his black employee Gene Williams and how difficult it had been for him to drive the Johnsons’ pet dog back to Texas. Now Johnson had done something about the problem of racism. Referring to when Williams had spoken to LBJ about a black person’s difficulty in traveling through the South in the 1950s, the president wrote, “That had been the day I first realized the sad truth: that to the extent Negroes were imprisoned, so was I. On this day, July 2, 1964, I knew the positive side of that same truth: that to the extent Negroes were free, really free, so was I. And so was my country.”[32]

Campaigning for the Great Society at Home

As the 1964 presidential election approached, Lyndon Johnson realized his candidacy would provide American voters with a referendum on his Great Society. The president rewarded Hubert Humphrey’s work on the civil rights legislation by naming him as his vice presidential running mate. LBJ hoped for a strong mandate in the presidential election, not only for himself but also for his policies. Johnson addressed those issues in his nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on August 27, 1964. Invoking a central belief that shaped his Great Society policies, Johnson declared, “Every American has the right to be treated as a person." All citizens should be able to obtain employment, education, vote in elections, and be judged according to their own merits as people. President Johnson claimed this to be the policy of his government and of the Democratic Party. He pursued confidence in his ideas from the electorate. He requested, "I ask the American people for a mandate to begin. This Nation—this generation—in this hour, has man's first chance to build the Great Society—a place where the meaning of man's life matches the marvels of man's labor." He pleaded with the American people to join him in building a Great Society at home. The president argued that from the days of the New Deal to the current War on Poverty progressive politicians had worked to expand freedom for all people in the United States. He admonished his audience, "And every American knows in his heart that this is right." Johnson attempted to persuade voters that his Great Society was a true expression of American identity.[33]

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[31] Lady Bird Johnson, *A White House Diary* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 173-75.

[32] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 160.

President Johnson's most famous speech of the 1964 campaign addressed the problem of racism in the South. On October 9, 1964, the president spoke at a fundraising dinner in the historic southern city of New Orleans, Louisiana. He discussed his opinion of the necessity of modernizing the South and bringing the region to an equal level with the rest of the United States. LBJ referred to Robert E. Lee, the southern general during the Civil War, who following the conflict admonished the people of the South to rid themselves of their harsh feelings and promise loyalty to the United States. Unity in the nation would bring progress to the South. Johnson saw immense opportunity in the southern states to make the region grow economically and culturally, if only it would rid itself of racism and bitterness toward the rest of the country. The president dreamed that the War on Poverty and the Great Society would greatly help the southern states modernize.

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[33] "Remarks Before the National Convention Upon Accepting the Nomination," *Public Papers*, 2: 1009-1013.

Racism, LBJ argued, prevented the South from achieving modernization. President Johnson confidently told his southern audience that whatever their opinion, he was going to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The law was positive for the entire nation. Southerners must not let opponents of the bill stir up their fears in an attempt to increase hatred. To explain further the detrimental effect racial prejudice had on the South, Johnson told a moving story. LBJ's mentor, fellow Texan Sam Rayburn, who served many years as Speaker of the House in the United States Congress, had described to Johnson an encounter he once had with an aging southern senator. The old politician mourned to Rayburn how certain special interests had exploited the South's economic resources for years and shipped them to other regions of the nation. Laborers of the South made terribly low wages. The elderly senator argued that the southern region of the United States could be prosperous if only it focused more on economic problems. He complained to the young representative that he wished he could return to his home state and deliver a speech on this subject. Johnson told his southern audience with great emotion what the troubled senator then confided to Rayburn, "I would like to go back down there and make them one more Democratic speech. . . . The poor old State, they haven't heard a Democratic speech in thirty years. All they ever hear at election time is Nigra, Nigra, Nigra."

The southern audience initially was silent with shock, but then rose and gave the president an eight-minute standing ovation. The speech was Lyndon Johnson at his political best. He explained to his listeners the adverse effect bigotry was having on their region and gave them hope of what their communities could be. President Johnson followed the advice he had advocated to President Kennedy that civil rights should be made a moral issue to the South. The New Orleans speech received much national press and boosted Johnson's already strong campaign.[34]

In a similar commentary on the subject of race and the South, longtime Johnson aide Harry McPherson, himself also a Texan, described in his memoirs his belief that the South could be prosperous if it changed its prejudiced ways. McPherson judged that Johnson held the same opinion regarding race, "namely, that it obsessed the South and diverted it from attending to its economic and educational problems; that it produced among white Southerners an angry defensiveness and parochialism." McPherson, like Johnson, hoped that the problem could be overcome through federal law and lead to the modernization of the South.[35]

To continue his efforts to have the 1964 presidential election become a referendum on his Great Society, President Johnson wrote a short campaign book entitled *My Hope For America* summarizing his beliefs about his policies and American identity.[36] The work illustrated, as the titled suggested, LBJ's hope and dream for what the United States might become. The president began by reiterating his wish to be a representative in the White House for all Americans. He stressed the justness of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the positive effect it would bring to the nation. Johnson next discussed the War on Poverty and how crucial the program was for the nation. LBJ then surveyed his domestic Great Society programs and how they complimented American identity. *My Hope For America* asked the nation's citizens to continue with the president in creating the Great Society.

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[34] "Remarks at a Fundraising Dinner in New Orleans," *Public Papers*, 2: 1281-88; and Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 224-25.

[35] Harry McPherson, *A Political Education: A Washington Memoir* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 152-53.

[36] Lyndon B. Johnson, *My Hope For America* (New York: Random House, 1964).

Ultimately, President Johnson received a mandate from the American people, as he vanquished the Republican presidential nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, in the election. LBJ received 61 percent of the popular vote, to that date the largest percentage in United States history. He won forty-four states, while Goldwater carried only six. Johnson's triumph increased as the Democratic Party also won large majorities in both houses of Congress. Lyndon Johnson won election in his own right and perceived that voters had given their approval to his Great Society. He now prepared for more work that would bring him further glory.[37]

Basking in the Glow of Victory

In the months of late 1964 and early 1965, President Johnson savored his election victory and began planning his administration's next courses of action. On January 4, 1965, in his annual State of the Union message to Congress, he described his goals for the upcoming years. He spoke of the Great Society at home, declaring, "We seek to establish a harmony between man and society which will allow each of us to enlarge the meaning of his life and all of us to elevate the quality of our civilization." He reminded listeners that establishing the Great Society would require the help of all Americans for many generations to come and that it would remain a constant challenge. The president proposed that the Congress continue its efforts to support poor areas of the country through the War on Poverty and also guarantee and protect the right to vote for all American citizens. He stressed that the United States have improvements in education and healthcare to provide for the well-being of its citizens. Johnson also called for conservation efforts to protect what he called “the beauty of America” and asked for appropriations to support the arts and sciences across the nation. President Johnson vowed to work with Congress on each of these initiatives to build the Great Society. He concluded his message to Congress by urging Americans to continue what he saw as their historic destiny in building a truly great nation. LBJ recalled the nation’s founders, who possessed “a dream of a continent to be conquered, a world to be won, a nation to be made.” He said he had tried to continue that American dream through developing his Great Society programs and that all citizens must interpret how to best fulfill the founders’ visions. The state of the Union was, in Johnson’s view, how it had been for each generation of Americans: “Free and restless, growing and full of hope.”[38]

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[37] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 183-84.

A telephone conversation on January 15, 1965, between President Johnson and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) typified LBJ’s high expectations for his new term as chief executive. He stressed to King the importance of passing pending education, poverty, and healthcare bills and lobbied him to have his own fellow civil rights leaders pressure Congress for their enactment. The president knew he must act quickly while he still held political capital from his large electoral victory. King and Johnson next talked about future plans for naming African Americans to key posts in the government and the positive effect such acts would have on the black community. LBJ and King also discussed the critical need for a strong voting rights law and the power it would bring to black Americans. King appealed to Johnson's political needs by describing how widespread African American voting could help progressive politicians. He told the president, "It's so important to get Negroes registered to vote in large numbers in the South. It would be this coalition of the Negro vote and the moderate white vote that will really make the new South." King and Johnson both had dreams that their native region of the country would modernize and prosper. LBJ explained to the civil rights leader regarding the proposed voting rights bill, "The greatest achievement of my administration . . . was the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But I think this will be bigger, because it'll do things that even that '64 act couldn't do."[39]

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[38] “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” *Public Papers*, 1: 1-9.

Lyndon Johnson was inaugurated for his first full term as president on January 20, 1965. In his inaugural address, he spoke to his fellow citizens about American identity and the issue of change in the world. LBJ recognized that the world of the 1960s was one of change, as nations multiplied and technology advanced. He expressed confidence in his country, asserting, "Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people and on their faith." American identity subscribed to a strong belief in freedom, tolerance, and equal justice for all as its core values. President Johnson proclaimed that the United States must keep that historic identity and work to prevent any deficiencies in these traits across the nation. Americans would have differences of opinions but a common unity must always keep them together. The president urged, "So let us reject any among us who seek to reopen old wounds and rekindle old hatreds. They stand in the way of a seeking nation." The United States must continue its efforts to build a Great Society at home. Johnson expressed his conviction that hard labor and perseverance would bring divine blessing to the country. Invoking a type of civil religion in his perceptions of American identity, the president exalted his fellow citizens to be mindful, “that democracy rests on faith, that freedom asks more than it gives, and the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored.” LBJ’s notions about his country’s identity expressed high idealism. President Johnson closed his address by promising to govern to the best of his abilities and asking the American people to “look within your own hearts to the old promises and to the old dreams.” According to the president, the historic conceptions of American identity would guide citizens best in their future.[40]

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[39] Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 159-63.

Marvin Watson, who served as President Johnson’s chief of staff, wrote in his memoirs that LBJ determined to make 1965 the year in which he accomplished many of his goals. Watson stated that Johnson realized by 1966 many members of the large Democratic majority in Congress would be focusing on the approaching mid-term elections. The politicians would be less likely to support the president on bold new initiatives. Because of these political realities, throughout 1965 Johnson devoted his efforts to persuading Congress to pass the laws he proposed. Watson claimed that the president particularly desired a strong voting rights bill, even though he knew it would seriously affect the power of the Democratic Party in the South. Watson wrote of LBJ: “He believed with all his heart that it was his responsibility, his mission, his opportunity, and his privilege to seize the moment granted to him and take full advantage of the huge Democratic majorities."[41]

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[40] “The President’s Inaugural Address,” *Public Papers*, 1: 71-74.

Laboring for the Great Society at Home

Successful passage of a strong voting rights bill was by no means guaranteed, regardless of President Johnson's large Democratic majority in Congress. Events outside LBJ's control brought the issue of voting rights to the center of the nation's attention. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, civil rights leaders and their supporters attempted to walk from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol in Montgomery to demonstrate the need for federal voting rights protection. In what became known as "Bloody Sunday," Alabama state troopers and local police officers prevented the marchers from crossing the main bridge leading out of the city. Angry racist whites stood near the bridge shouting at the civil rights activists. The state troopers and police officers bludgeoned the demonstrators with clubs and whips, causing many injuries and sending the protestors fleeing. Televisions around the nation interrupted scheduled programming to broadcast the brutal event. In the coming days, more tension and violence continued between local whites and protestors from around the country who came to Selma, Alabama, to support the cause of voting rights. Martin Luther King, Jr., went to Selma to help fellow civil rights leaders determine how best to continue the march. Citizens from around the nation called for President Johnson to order segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace to protect the demonstrators in their march to the state capitol and urged the federal government to enact strong voting rights legislation. The president, troubled by the crisis the events brought to his administration and to the country, determined to use “Bloody Sunday” as an opportunity to show the necessity of voting rights legislation.[42]

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[41] W. Marvin Watson, *Chief of Staff: Lyndon Johnson and His Presidency* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), 117, 120.

On Monday, March 15, 1965, President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress in a message televised to the nation in response to the events at Selma. LBJ gave the greatest speech of his political life. He painted a picture to the country of his conception of American identity. Johnson invoked how historic the time was in the nation’s history. Beginning, the president exclaimed, “At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.” He stated that many citizens for too long had been denied their rights due to the color of their skin. They had suffered unbearably, and at last their cries of agony had come to the forefront of the United States’s conscience. LBJ explained that the nation throughout its history had faced numerous crises, but not often had the United States encountered a problem that challenged its very core identity. He declared, “The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation.”

Racism affected and harmed the entire United States. President Johnson extolled his listeners, “There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.” All Americans had the right to be treated with equality and to pursue happiness. The president invoked famous American sayings that described the identity of the United States such as, “All men are created equal," "Government by consent of the governed," and, "Give me liberty or give me death," warning that prejudice conflicted with the values permeating through those words.

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[42] Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 278-308.

LBJ proclaimed that there could be no argument with the fact that every American citizen possessed the right to vote. Voting was the key tool for building American democracy. For too long, racist individuals had developed numerous methods to prevent African Americans and other minorities from voting. Literacy tests, poll taxes, intimidation, and outright rejection of voter applications had kept many Americans from the ballot box. President Johnson now asked Congress for a strong law that would protect the right to vote for every American, regardless of the color of their skin. Discrimination against Americans because of their race must end.

The president begged the United States to act now to solve this problem. He declared, "It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country." The issue of voting rights was not a conflict between the national and states' governments. Johnson insisted, "There is no issue of states' rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights." The cause for voting rights related to the fight for social justice for all humanity.

Next, President Johnson moved to the heart of his speech. He proposed that even if the United States created a voting rights law, the movement for civil rights for all Americans would not be finished. Black Americans were now engaged in a struggle against racism in all parts of the nation. LBJ asserted to his fellow citizens, "Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice." Then the president paused for several seconds and emphatically proclaimed the words of an old black spiritual that was the motto of the Civil Rights Movement, “And we shall overcome!” The crowd in the halls of Congress rose to their feet and roared with approving applause. President Johnson had illustrated his hopes for his country.

LBJ spoke of how difficult the race issue was, and acknowledged his southern heritage. He realized that lifelong attitudes of many southerners would be difficult for them to unlearn, but that must happen. Johnson referred to the nation’s history, bemoaning, “A century has passed . . . since the Negro was freed. And he is not fully free tonight. It was more than a hundred years ago that Abraham Lincoln . . . signed the Emancipation Proclamation, but emancipation is a proclamation and not a fact. . . . The time of justice has now come. . . . It is right in the eyes of man and God that it should come. And when it does, I think that day will brighten the lives of every American.” The entire country would benefit from extending equality to all and renouncing prejudice. Johnson believed that racism had blinded many Americans into devoting their energies to maintain a system of hatred. The United States must truly unite to build a Great Society. President Johnson, in an attempt to prevent all blame for racism being leveled at the South, warned that no region of the country should be given special punishment. He professed, “There is really no part of America where the promise of equality has been fully kept. . . . This is one Nation.” He encouraged all Americans to look within themselves and to work to end injustice in their communities.

The president continued by explaining, “The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this Nation. . . . He has called upon us to make good the promise of America." African Americans made the United States realize that its citizens were not remaining true to their nation's expressed ideals: freedom, equality, and justice. Black Americans had fought heroically for their rights as citizens of the United States and in turn had greatly bettered the country. President Johnson vowed to enforce voting rights across the nation and pleaded for peace in Selma.

LBJ ended his speech by describing how African Americans and other minorities must be given the opportunity to pursue happy lives in the United States. He acknowledged that the proposed voting rights legislation was a civil rights bill, but he claimed that indeed most of his Great Society policies were about civil rights, as they aimed at helping people of all colors. Johnson believed that all Americans must have the prospect for education and healthcare. The president closed his remarkable address with a personal story that illustrated the purpose of his administration and how his opinion of American identity had been shaped. He spoke with conviction:

> My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican American school. Few of them could speak English, and I couldn't speak much Spanish. My students were poor and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them. But they knew it was so, because I saw it in their eyes. I often walked home late in the afternoon, after the classes were finished, wishing there was more that I could do. But all I knew was to teach them the little that I knew, hoping that it might help them against the hardships that lay ahead.
>
> Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child.
>
> I never thought then, in 1928, that I would be standing here in 1965. It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country.
>
> But now I do have that chance—and I'll let you in on a secret—I mean to use it!

Lyndon Johnson's speech to the nation met with massive praise and approval throughout the United States.[43]

Many Americans were deeply inspired by the president's speech. D. B. Hardeman, a longtime aide of Sam Rayburn, was on the House floor during Johnson's address, and he believed the message to be "one of the great speeches of American history." He spoke of LBJ, "I never heard him deliver a speech with more power than that. Of course, he felt deeply what he was saying. And the thing hit you like a double whammy." Hardeman continued, "I think that was the real Lyndon Johnson."[44] The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was particularly moved by the president's words. John Lewis, a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), recollected being with King during Johnson's speech and seeing tears come to his eyes. King called President Johnson later that evening to express praise for his words and reflected, "It is ironic, Mr. President, that after a century, a southern white president would help lead the way toward the salvation of the Negro." Johnson thanked him, explaining, "You're the leader who is making it all possible. I'm just following along trying to do what's right." Both the civil rights leader and the Texas politician knew how important the recent events had been for calling upon the nation to live up to its professed identity. King, days later, illustrated, "Selma, Alabama, became a shining moment in the conscience of man."[45]

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[43] "Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise," *Public Papers*, 1: 281-87; and Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 307-314.

[44] Miller, *Lyndon*, 175-76.

[45] Kotz, *Judgment Days*, vi, 312-14.

Lyndon Johnson's reference in this monumental speech to his experience as a young man teaching Mexican American school children in the small town of Cotulla, Texas, demonstrated how significant the incident was in his own life. Wilbur J. Cohen, LBJ's Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, recollected how Johnson often spoke to him of those days. Cohen perceived that the experience with his impoverished students impacted the president throughout his life. The secretary explained, "It motivated him on the education bills, on his nondiscrimination, on civil rights. . . . I think when he saw those hungry children digging into garbage, it was the first time he had really seen grinding poverty." While Cohen acknowledged that LBJ had little money growing up in the Texas Hill Country, the poverty in Cotulla was much worse, and it appalled Johnson. The secretary further noted, "I think his conception of the presidency always was: 'If only I can do the same thing for my time that Roosevelt did for his.'"[46] Johnson longed to continue the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt and thereby help people like his former pupils in Cotulla. Dan Garcia, one of LBJ's former students who later became a civic leader in Cotulla, remembered that Johnson often told him and his classmates "that this country is a great big country of great liberties and opportunities for everybody, and that any individual by studying hard and working hard would possibly be able to become president of the United States."[47] Johnson from an early age had conveyed his perceptions of American identity to other people.

As President Johnson pleaded for a strong voting rights bill, his administration continued laboring for other domestic Great Society programs. Johnson wanted to surpass Franklin Roosevelt in greatness, especially in the first one hundred days of his new term, when he would have the most political clout. A telephone conversation between the president and his congressional liaison, Lawrence O'Brien, on April 9, 1965, as the education bill seemed assured passage portrayed his zeal for success. Referring to Roosevelt's historic social legislation of his first one hundred days as president, LBJ instructed his aide, "Roosevelt's got eleven. . . . They were not major bills at all. But you'll have one major one really with education. . . . Take a list of what you might jam through. . . . Now, what I want is twenty bills!"[48] Johnson clearly wanted to make the first one hundred days of his new term more successful than that of any other American president, even FDR.

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[46] Miller, *Lyndon*, 37-38.

[47] Ibid., 38-39.

President Johnson soon obtained an important victory with the passage of his education bill, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. On April 11, 1965, the president signed the bill on the front lawn of his old school house in Stonewall, Texas, with his first schoolteacher by his side. At the signing ceremony, LBJ noted that the United States had since its beginning possessed a commitment to education. Unfortunately, political discord too often had slowed the progress of education. The new law was a recommitment to strong education throughout the nation. Johnson labeled it "the most sweeping educational bill ever to come before Congress." He claimed that those who helped make the legislation successful would be remembered historically as "men and women who began a new day of greatness in American society." The president discussed the effects of the new law and affirmed that it would bring hope to the country's children. The Act ensured that over thirty million books would be placed in school libraries across the nation. Many schools would now have their first libraries.

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[48] Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, 276-77.

The law gave aid to state and local agencies to help with providing better education for their citizens. New teaching methods were included in the bill to help the nation's education system modernize. President Johnson declared that the new law continued "the revolution of the spirit against the tyranny of ignorance." He possessed high hopes for the recently passed legislation and stated his belief that no law he had signed or would sign could surpass the effect the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 would have on the future of the United States. LBJ urged, "Let us not delay in putting it to work." Quality education for all Americans was a crucial component of the Great Society at home.[49] Vice President Hubert Humphrey later described Johnson as "a nut on education." He said of the president, "He felt that education was the greatest thing that he could give to the people; he just believed in it, just like some people believe in miracle cures."[50]

Even as the voting rights legislation worked its way through Congress, President Johnson began to consider the next stage of the Civil Rights Movement. In a speech entitled "To Fulfill These Rights," Johnson expressed his view of the importance of remedying the historic causes of inequality and of ending poverty. He spoke at the June 1965 commencement exercises at Howard University, a historically black college in Washington, D.C. LBJ declared how proud he would be when the voting rights legislation soon became law. The bill would be immensely important in guaranteeing the freedom of African Americans. Despite this victory, granting freedom would not be enough, the Texan maintained. He elaborated, "You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. . . . It is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates." Johnson argued that such ability was the next stage of the struggle for civil rights, to grant true equality to all by providing opportunity for minorities throughout the nation. The widening economic gap between white Americans and African Americans had to be bridged. The president acknowledged that his Great Society programs had attempted to fight the brutal poverty which poisoned the nation, but proposed that more must be done to combat black poverty. The plight of African Americans was a result of "the devastating heritage of long years of slavery; and a century of oppression, hatred, and injustice." Vast effort would be required of black Americans to escape the effects of that cruel legacy, but effort alone would not be enough. African Americans must have help with overcoming the gulf of inequality. The speech marked the early stages of the federal government's interest in affirmative action programs aimed at overcoming historic racial injustices. Johnson further stated that he would call a White House conference known as "To Fulfill These Rights" to address the themes of his speech. The Howard University address marked a new direction in the Civil Rights Movement that focused upon bringing truly equal opportunity to American minorities.[51]

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[49] "Remarks in Johnson City, Texas, Upon Signing the Elementary and Secondary Education Bill," *Public Papers*, 1: 412-14.

[50] Miller, *Lyndon*, 496.

The Great Society at home won another triumph of significant importance with passage of the Medicare bill in July of 1965. President Johnson traveled to Independence, Missouri, to sign the law with former President Harry S. Truman by his side. Truman had long championed progress in healthcare. Medicare provided basic medical insurance for elderly Americans. LBJ heralded that the new law ensured that "every citizen will be able, in his productive years when he is earning, to insure himself against the ravages of illness in his old age." He again invoked the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt, lauding the legislation as a continuation of the historic Social Security Act of 1935. Medicare would especially help those Americans who were most in need. Mexican American civil rights leader Hector Garcia, himself a physician, described Medicare as "the most humanitarian thing that was ever done for our people." He was convinced the program brought dignity to the elderly, many of whom previously could not afford hospital care and often died at home. Garcia further argued that Medicare helped decrease racial discrimination in hospitals, as all recipients of the aid were treated in the same quarters of the facilities, regardless of color. The Medicare law was a monumental victory for the Johnson administration and the United States.[52]

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[51] "Commencement Address at Howard University: 'To Fulfill These Rights,'" *Public Papers*, 2: 635-40.

At long last, the voting rights legislation proposed by LBJ passed through Congress in the summer of 1965. Civil rights leaders and organizations had played major roles in lobbying for the bill across the country. Everett Dirksen had once again influenced many of his Republican colleagues to join with progressive Democrats to overcome southern opposition to the legislation. President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on August 6, 1965, in the Capitol Rotunda in the presence of a host of civil rights leaders and supportive politicians. The law guaranteed all Americans the right to vote, regardless of race, and gave the federal government power to enforce it. Johnson spoke of the horrors that African Americans had endured since the days of slavery and proclaimed, "Today we strike away the last major shackle of those fierce and ancient bonds. Today the Negro story and the American story fuse and blend."

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[52] "Remarks With President Truman at the Signing in Independence of the Medicare Bill," *Public Papers*, 2: 811-15; and Hector Garcia, Interview I.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a watershed law in the struggle for black equality. Finally, the United States had begun living up to its professed identity of freedom and equality. Echoing his speech at Howard University, LBJ argued that the battle for civil rights had only begun and must now shift toward bringing true equality and opportunity. He professed, "For it is not enough just to give men rights. They must be able to use those rights in their personal pursuit of happiness." The Texan called for more research into programs that would continue the effort to "forever end the special handicaps of those who are black in a Nation that happens to be mostly white."

President Johnson had a special message for people who had opposed the Voting Rights Act, particularly those in his home region. He recognized the difficulty many would face in changing the racist attitudes they had possessed all of their lives. He explained, "There is no room for injustice anywhere in the American mansion. But there is always room for understanding toward those who see the old ways crumbling. And to them today I say simply this: It must come. It is right that it should come. And when it has, you will find that a burden has been lifted from your shoulders, too." Johnson invoked his personal experience with throwing off the scourge of racism and how freeing this moment was for him. Now he fervently hoped that all white southerners could do the same.

The president closed his remarks by declaring the Voting Rights Act of 1965 a victory for the entire nation and its citizens. He asserted that the United States was stronger in its professed ideals because of the new law and that all Americans could now be even more proud of their country. Historian Paul K. Conkin observed, "In 1965 the Civil War finally ended" with the passage of the Voting Rights Act ensuring legal black equality in the South. The historic law marked a crucial turning point in bringing the segregationist South into mainstream America, a goal for which Lyndon Johnson had long labored.[53]

Guns and Butter

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a watershed accomplishment for the Johnson administration in its attempt to build a Great Society at home. In many ways, the law also marked the end of an era in Lyndon Johnson's presidency, as the nation in the late summer of 1965 became increasingly involved in military conflict in Vietnam. As President Johnson escalated the buildup of the United States's armed forces in Southeast Asia, he insisted that the country could continue building a Great Society at home while fighting a war in a foreign land. As he had foreseen, Johnson's political clout decreased as his election victory receded further into the past. The attrition of the conflict in Vietnam, changing attitudes toward the Civil Rights Movement, and domestic unrest caused many Americans to question LBJ and his beliefs in American identity. Before describing these challenges to Johnson's Great Society, it must be noted that the president accomplished several more significant victories in domestic policies during his remaining years in the White House. They came at a slower pace than the massive outpouring of social legislation during the Texan's first years in office, but his accomplishments continued to reflect his conception of how the Great Society enhanced American identity.

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[53] "Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda at the Signing of the Voting Rights Act," *Public Papers*, 2: 811-15; and Conkin, "Lyndon Johnson and the Outer South," 162-66.

In keeping with his beliefs in what he saw as the next stage of the Civil Rights Movement—granting equal opportunity to African Americans—President Johnson appointed several black leaders to high positions in his government. He granted each appointment much publicity to show his commitment to civil rights. One of the most important positions involved Thurgood Marshall, who had longed served as a lawyer for the NAACP. Johnson chose Marshall to be his solicitor general in 1965 and later appointed him to be an associate justice on the United States Supreme Court in 1967. Marshall was the first African American to serve on the highest court in the land. He later recalled that the president told him he hoped Marshall could be a model of inspiration for young African Americans. In the telephone conversation of July 7, 1965, when LBJ asked Marshall to be his solicitor general, Johnson exclaimed, "I want to do this job that Lincoln started, and I want to do it the right way. . . . I want to be the first president that really goes all the way." President Johnson also appointed the first African American to a cabinet level position when he selected Robert C. Weaver to lead the Department of Housing and Urban Development, an agency LBJ had created to help the nation's cities. The president appointed numerous other black individuals to key posts in the executive branch and in the federal courts.[54]

Johnson continued pressuring the Congress to pass new laws aimed at building a Great Society in the United States. On September 29, 1965, he signed the Arts and Humanities Act which created the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities. The bill provided federal funding for the arts and the humanities across the nation, supporting drama, music, film, and creativity in schools, universities, and communities.

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[54] Thurgood Marshall, Interview I; Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, 385-86; A. Philip Randolph, Interview I; and Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 356-57.

The new law aimed at improving the quality of Americans' lives, an expressed goal of the Great Society.[55]

Protection of the United States's natural environment became a cause to which both the president and his wife, Lady Bird Johnson, gave much attention. LBJ signed the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 into law on October 22, 1965. The legislation provided funds to the states to improve the appearance of highways and roadsides with landscaping and other scenic enhancements. The natural beauty of the United States was very important to the country and its future. President Johnson explained, "This America is the source of America's greatness. It is another part of America's soul as well." The natural environment of the United States had to be protected, according to Johnson. During the signing ceremony, LBJ reflected on how special nature had been to him as a young boy in Texas. He confessed, "When I was growing up, the land itself was life. And when the day seemed particularly harsh and bitter, the land was always there just as nature had left it—wild, rugged, beautiful, and changing." Johnson recalled how in his youth he loved to stretch out in the grass and watch the stars in the evening sky. The outdoors provided refuge from the turmoil of everyday life. The Texan was proud of this new law, and promised, "Beauty belongs to all the people. And so long as I am president, what has been divinely given to nature will not be taken recklessly away by man."[56]

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[55] Lyndon B. Johnson, *To Heal and to Build: The Programs of President Lyndon B. Johnson*, ed. James M. Burns (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), 393-96.

[56] "Remarks at the Signing of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965," *Public Papers*, 2: 1072-75.

Lyndon Johnson throughout his life enjoyed being out in the natural environment of the country. He and his family especially loved the LBJ Ranch, located near Stonewall, Texas. The Johnsons frequently retreated to the ranch to find relaxation. The LBJ Ranch was an important part of President Johnson's own identity. Vice President Hubert Humphrey later said of LBJ, "It was very significant how he identified his home. He went down to the ranch, he didn't go back to the plantation or even the farm. He went to the ranch. He was a westerner, he was a cattleman, he was an oilman, in the sense that he identified with the economy of the West." Johnson loved to take his guests all around his property, showing them his cattle and the wild deer that roamed the hills. He often drove his Lincoln Continental at high speeds around the ranch as he sipped beer, enjoying the visible shock on his guests' faces. Visitors to the LBJ Ranch were also frequently treated to lavish western-styled barbecues, complete with food servers dressed in full cowboy-style.

Johnson, typical of many in his home state, loved the southwestern heritage of Texas and what it represented. In 1965 he wrote the foreword to a new edition of historian Walter Prescott Webb's classic work *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*. President Johnson described how he saw the West to be important in United States history, as it was "a symbol of America's confidence that on beyond the moment . . . the world will be brighter, the future better." The West and its frontier had historically been where Americans searched for more opportunity to fulfill their dreams. Johnson argued that the western instinct still had relevance in the present, as it called upon the United States to "preserve the heritage of open country, clear skies, clean streams" and to "preserve the equality of opportunity, the dignity of the individual, the commitment to justice for all that derive from the spirit of the Frontier era." The LBJ Ranch and Johnson's methods of entertaining its visitors proved not only how much the president enjoyed American nature, but also how he sought to create a grand public image of himself based on a historic theme in American identity.[57]

On January 12, 1966, President Johnson delivered his annual State of the Union message to Congress. The theme of his speech was that the United States could continue building a domestic Great Society while fighting abroad in Vietnam. LBJ declared, "This Nation is mighty enough, its society is healthy enough, its people are strong enough, to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society here at home." Americans began referring to Johnson's claim as "Guns and Butter," meaning that the country could afford to pursue both of these ends. The president urged the American people to continue the progress made in civil rights, the War on Poverty, and other Great Society measures while also defending freedom against communism.[58]

For the rest of his years in the White House, Johnson proclaimed that the United States could have both guns and butter. However, as the Vietnam War dragged on with no end in sight, the federal government increasingly gave priority to guns. President Johnson nevertheless continued to hold firm in his belief that the Great Society at home would bring progress to the nation.

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[57] Hubert H. Humphrey, Interview by Michael L. Gillette, June 20, 1977, Interview II, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; Busby, *The Thirty-First of March*, 4; Miller, *Lyndon*, 490-94; Walter P. Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), ix-xi; and Hal K. Rothman, *LBJ's Texas White House: "Our Heart's Home"* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 3-7.

[58] "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," *Public Papers*, 1: 3-12.

Challenges to the Great Society at Home

Lyndon Johnson's Great Society suffered as the Vietnam War consumed more federal funding and public attention, and it also faced challenges and criticism from many Americans who questioned its priorities. James Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), reflected on problems many African Americans had with the Great Society at home in the later years of the Johnson administration. Farmer praised President Johnson's efforts with civil rights in his first years in the White House, especially with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He regretted that by the end of 1965, LBJ's major focus was on the conflict in Southeast Asia while civil rights were given less and less attention. Farmer further commented that the president had difficulty relating to militant factions of the Civil Rights Movement. The CORE leader elucidated, "My impression of Johnson was that with all of the goodwill that he had, that he did not have an in-depth understanding of the mood of black America. He was much better able to understand the black leaders whose orientation tended to be more to the middle-class and to being polite and courteous and being white, in other words." Young African Americans from lower economic classes, many of whom became increasingly involved in the emerging Black Power movement, did not trust the president or his Great Society schemes. Farmer also saw the 1966 "To Fulfill These Rights" White House Conference as a failure, as did most of the press, even though Farmer himself was a participant. In this conference, the administration appeared not to understand the emerging Black Power movement and simply came to predigested conclusions about the Civil Rights Movement, making LBJ seem out of touch with militant, sometimes violent, trends in the struggle for black equality.

Farmer further noted that President Johnson could be vindictive toward those civil rights leaders who refused to follow his orders. Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, James Farmer was one of the few civil rights spokespersons who would not consent to having a moratorium on demonstrations until after the presidential election, as requested by the president. Farmer noticed that a year later at the signing ceremony of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Johnson was especially cold to him and took a long time to pass him a commemorative pen used to make the bill a law. The CORE leader from that point on heard few requests for assistance and advice from the Johnson administration.[59]

By the middle of 1966, black nationalism and the Black Power movement were becoming important forces in the changing Civil Rights Movement. Lyndon Johnson had difficulty reconciling these philosophies with his conception of American identity, fearing that they would cause even further separatism between the races. Black nationalism held that African Americans should control the political, economic, and social institutions in their communities. Many individuals had advocated black nationalism throughout United States history, but the charismatic leader Malcolm X did much to increase its popularity among African Americans in the early 1960s. He saw the United States government as an oppressive institution that had subjected black Americans to victimization. Contrasting himself with Martin Luther King, Jr., in a speech in 1964, Malcolm X declared, “I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.” He was skeptical of Johnson’s commitment to black equality, exclaiming, “If he wasn’t good in Texas, he sure can’t be good in Washington, D.C. Because Texas is a lynch state. It is in the same breath as Mississippi. . . . If he’s for civil rights, let him go into the Senate next week and declare himself. Let him go in there and denounce the southern branch of his party.” In 1966 Stokely Carmichael, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), spoke for many young African Americans by calling for what he termed Black Power, a philosophy rooted in the tradition of black nationalism that similarly heralded African American empowerment and pride. President Johnson, bewildered and angered, began to see that not all Americans revered his conceptions of national identity. He lamented that a growing number of citizens did not trust his promises that the nation would one day experience true equality and justice for all Americans. LBJ feared militants’ calls for separatism and rejection of his pleas for national unity.[60]

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[59] James Farmer, Interview by Paige Mulhollan, July 20, 1971, Interview II, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

Increasingly, many civil rights leaders became disillusioned with the Vietnam War and its diversion of federal funding and attention from domestic problems. Andrew Young of the SCLC lamented that the conflict in Southeast Asia was “the kind of war that nobody could win, that was not really in the best interest of the United States, and that was seriously damaging the domestic progress we were making that was so necessary.” The later years of the Johnson presidency saw bitter race riots break out in many of the nation’s cities during the hot summers. Particularly devastating, in terms of property damage and loss of life, were the Watts riot in 1965, only days after LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act, and the Newark and Detroit riots in 1967. To many Americans, these urban riots illustrated the hopelessness many African Americans experienced in the nation’s cities, surrounded by grinding poverty and violent crime. Many in the Civil Rights Movement were convinced that the cities needed precious funds being sent to Vietnam. Young explained, “I think we always felt that the domestic crisis was more dangerous and therefore more important for the country.”[61]

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[60] Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” and Stokely Carmichael, “Toward Black Liberation,” in *The American Civil Rights Movement: Readings and Interpretations*, ed. Raymond D’Angelo (New York: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2001), 414-27, 435-38.

Following the urban violence of 1967, President Johnson appointed a bipartisan commission led by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner to study the race riots and recommend methods to prevent such events. The Kerner Commission issued a report to the president in February 1968 arguing that racism splitting the United States into separate white and black societies was the primary cause of the urban violence. The report called for massive increases in federal spending to alleviate the problem. LBJ received the report with ambivalence at best, angered that it perceived deficiencies in the administration’s budgeting priorities and that it provided no ideas about how to find more money for the recommended programs. Johnson gave little endorsement of the report or thanks to the members who served on the commission. Several civil rights leaders were disappointed by the president’s reaction. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP said Johnson should have accepted the report, as its rhetoric fit well with his government’s efforts to bring black equality to the nation. Wilkins claimed that LBJ himself had done more in this area than any other president and could have acknowledged the commission’s findings in a more favorable manner. Wilkins noted what he saw as the president’s reasons for his coolness toward the Kerner report, clarifying, “I think probably, maybe the word racism, white racism, frightened him. He didn't want to go down in history as the president who had pointed his finger at his own people."[62]

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[61] Andrew J. Young, Jr., Interview I; and Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 222-24, 411-18.

Though facing serious challenges to his dream of building a Great Society at home, President Johnson seized an opportunity caused by tragic circumstances to win a significant victory in civil rights in the final year of his term in office. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Riots broke out in cities across the nation in outrage over King's murder. LBJ, as he did following President Kennedy's death, sensed a chance to pursue legislation that would honor the memory of the slain civil rights leader. This was vintage Lyndon Johnson, cajoling the Congress to pass a new civil rights bill. On April 11, 1968, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, a law that prohibited racial discrimination in the sale and the rental of housing. The president commented, "I do not exaggerate when I say that the proudest moments of my presidency have been times such as this when I have signed into law the promises of a century." He observed of the new law, "It proclaims that fair housing for all . . . is now a part of the American way of life." Johnson condemned the assassination of King and the urban rioting that had followed. He pleaded for continued work in achieving racial equality, proposing, "We have come some of the way, not near all of it. There is much yet to do." In the midst of crisis, LBJ had again won a victory for his Great Society and the United States.[63]

The success of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society at home continues to be debated among supporters and critics. Many Americans share the opinion of Wilbur J. Cohen,

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[62] Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 415-16, 515-17; and Roy Wilkins, Interview I.

[63] Transcript of Remarks of the President at the Ceremony for the Signing of the Civil Rights Bill of 1968, April 11, 1968, Statements Collection, LBJ Library; and Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 415-21.

Johnson's secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, that the Great Society was too idealistic. Cohen in later years confessed, "We tried to do too much in too many places in too short a time." However, many Great Society programs remain in operation today, significantly improving Americans' lives, including Medicare, Medicaid, educational reforms, environmental protection, and civil rights laws. Great Society supporters note that an important legacy of the Johnson administration was its awakening Americans to the existence of poverty in the country. LBJ's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Robert C. Weaver argued that the War on Poverty made mainstream America realize that, "Our cities were filled with poorly housed, badly educated, underemployed, desperate, unhappy Americans—many of them black." President Johnson maintained a similar opinion in his memoirs, proposing, "We started something in motion with the attack on poverty. . . . No one would ever again be able to ignore the poverty in our midst, and I believe that is enough to assure the final outcome and to change the way of life for millions of our fellow human beings."[64] LBJ sought greatness for himself and for his country in his attempt to build a Great Society at home based upon traditional beliefs about American identity with regard to freedom, equality, and justice. While he achieved impressive victories for his efforts, Johnson's inability to understand those who questioned his vision led to disappointments and setbacks in his presidency. Whether the Great Society at home is viewed by Americans as positive or negative, there can be no doubt that Lyndon Johnson's efforts to promote his concept of the nation's identity significantly impacted the history of the United States.

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[64] Miller, *Lyndon*, 444-45; and Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 87.

CHAPTER THREE

The Great Society Abroad

Lyndon Johnson wished to focus the majority of his presidency's attention on domestic endeavors as he dreamed of building a Great Society. While able to accomplish many goals at home, the longer Johnson remained in the White House, the more he found himself having to devote his primary focus to foreign affairs, especially the war in Vietnam. As American involvement in Southeast Asia seemed unavoidable, LBJ convinced himself, reluctantly but relentlessly, that Vietnam presented an opportunity to extend his Great Society abroad.

LBJ and much of his generation carried the memories of World War II with them throughout their lives. They never forgot how Europe and the United States were late in responding to Nazi Germany's bellicose aggression in the 1930s. Johnson considered this a tragic mistake, and was determined never to let a similar mistake happen again. Throughout his years as a congressman, senator, and vice president, the Texan gave unwavering support to the White House in times of international crises, regardless of the political party affiliation of the chief executive. Johnson believed that Americans should unite behind their president during times of foreign troubles.[1]

Following World War II the United States and the Soviet Union became engaged in consuming tensions that became known as the Cold War. Each country suspected the other of trying to promote its national ideology throughout the world at the expense of the other. The United States feared that the Soviet Union was determined to spread communism across the globe. Cold War intellectuals in the United States developed theories regarding how America should respond to the alleged communist aggression. Many advocated a "containment policy" in which the United States devoted effort to "containing" the spread of communism in developing countries. Containment was based on the proposition known as the "domino theory" which held that if one nation came under communist control it was only a matter of time before other countries in the region also succumbed to communism. The vast majority of American politicians in the Cold War era subscribed to both the containment policy and the domino theory, including Lyndon Johnson. American intellectuals continued theorizing through the 1950s and early 1960s about the best way for the United States ultimately to win the Cold War. Modernization of developing countries became a popular theory among several prominent Cold War era social scientists. The ideology of modernization argued that the United States could prevent the spread of communism in developing countries by helping these nations "modernize" through American investments in infrastructure, food, and other types of general aid aimed at bringing democracy to these unstable regions of the world. Modernization, seen as a form of international altruism by many Cold War liberals, gained the support of foreign policy makers in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.[2]

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[1] Horace Busby, *The Thirty-First of March: An Intimate Portrait of Lyndon Johnson's Final Days in Office* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 70-71.

Many of LBJ's advisors in foreign affairs were Kennedy-era intellectuals who professed great enthusiasm for modernization theory. Already a strong believer in the containment policy and the domino theory, LBJ soon easily found modernization to be an attractive basis for foreign policy. He perceived it as an opportunity to battle communism and to expand his Great Society to other countries, particularly Vietnam. However, Johnson quickly found that a complex world might be more than a little reluctant to subscribe to his views of American identity.

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[2] Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1-19.

The Vice President and Foreign Policy

As John Kennedy's vice president, Lyndon Johnson loyally supported his president's foreign policy goals. Walt W. Rostow, a professor of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) during the 1950s, was a key foreign policy advisor to both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Rostow also gained fame as a leading intellectual who supported modernization theory. He recalled hearing Vice President Johnson, who had just returned from a goodwill trip to Asia, speak "the best single speech on foreign aid I've ever heard." In that speech Johnson detailed his horror over seeing the bleak poverty and lack of adequate educational and health services in the Asian countries he visited. Rostow noted, "He made the link between what he had seen in our own country and seen as a young man in Texas with these poor people out in Asia. And he spoke of how much could be done in the span of one man's lifetime." Rostow also marked that occasion as the first time he realized how much LBJ loathed poverty. Johnson, now serving in the Kennedy administration, began to combine his convictions about domestic policies with new ideas about foreign policy.

Vice President Johnson's trip to Asia in May 1961 took him to the countries of South Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan, India, and Pakistan. Johnson reported to President Kennedy his conclusion that poverty, hunger, and disease threatened to encourage these Asian countries to look toward communism as an answer to their problems. He urged the Kennedy administration to provide a system of relief to these nations to counteract the appeal of communism. Rostow remembered LBJ telling him that during his Senate years he began to see Asia as being an important world player in the future. The push for statehood for Hawaii provided Senator Johnson with a vision of how powerful Asia could become on the world scene. Rostow wrote in a 1995 *London Times* article, "From the beginning to the end of his time as president, Johnson was governed by the conclusion he had reached in the late 1950s: namely, that Asia . . . mattered greatly to the future of America and was worth fighting for and nurturing." These convictions about the promise of Asia and the opportunity to provide relief abroad were critical in Johnson's later decisions about Vietnam during his presidency.[3]

Vice President Johnson's 1963 Memorial Day speech at the Gettysburg battlefield expressed an idealistic hope that one day the world would achieve total peace. LBJ, believing in the goals of the Kennedy administration's foreign policies, argued that the United States must promote justice around the world. He proclaimed, "Until the world knows no aggressors, until the arms of tyranny have been laid down, until freedom has risen up in every land, we shall maintain our vigil to make sure our sons who died on foreign fields shall not have died in vain." Johnson considered his nation to be the rightful promoter and protector of freedom and justice throughout the world.[4]

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[3] Walt W. Rostow, Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, March 21, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and Walt W. Rostow, "The Case for the War," in *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, by Robert S. McNamara (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 425-42.

[4] Press Release, "May 30, 1963, Remarks by Vice President, Memorial Day, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania," Statements File, Box 80, LBJ Library.

Let Us Continue

When Lyndon Johnson became the thirty-sixth president of the United States following the assassination of President Kennedy, he determined, as he did in domestic policies, to continue the martyred chief executive's goals in foreign affairs. In addition to his fellow American citizens, people throughout the world also wondered if and how the new president's foreign policies would differ from that of his predecessor. LBJ knew that he must quickly reassure the nation's allies that there would be no drastic changes in the United States's foreign initiatives. When President Johnson spoke to a joint session of Congress and to the shocked American people on November 27, 1963, he exclaimed, "Let us continue." Seeking to calm worried listeners around the world, he declared, "This nation will keep its commitments from South Vietnam to West Berlin. We will be unceasing in the search for peace; resourceful in our pursuit of areas of agreement even with those with whom we differ; and generous and loyal to those who join with us in common cause." Johnson promised that the United States would match strength with restraint in foreign relations. In continuing the Kennedy administration's policy of modernization for developing countries, LBJ vowed, "We will carry on the fight against poverty and misery and disease and ignorance, in other lands and in our own." He assured the world that he would continue all the foreign initiatives of the late President Kennedy, and he asked his fellow citizens for their help and support.[5]

In the early days of his presidency Johnson reiterated his promise that his administration would carry on the international goals of President Kennedy. In his first

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[5] "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1969*, 10 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965-1970), 1: 8-10.

State of the Union message on January 8, 1964, he described his government's philosophy in foreign affairs, stating, "Our ultimate goal is a world without war, a world made safe for diversity, in which all men, goods, and ideas can freely move across every border and every boundary." President Johnson promised to work for more international control of nuclear weapons and for new initiatives in the nation's space program. Adhering to modernization theory, he proposed that the United States use food as a method of encouraging peace through sale, trade, or donation of supplies to hungry nations on the condition that their leaders work for progress. LBJ further announced, "We must strengthen the ability of free nations everywhere to develop their independence and raise their standard of living, and thereby frustrate those who prey on poverty and chaos." The president asserted, "The rich must help the poor." He asked the nation to join him in promoting the development of countries in need around the world.[6]

When Lyndon Johnson became president, he determined to continue commitments made by previous administrations to preserving the independence of South Vietnam. North Vietnam, led by the communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, was determined to expel what they saw as western imperialists from their region of the world and to reunite their country. Members of the National Liberation Front (NLF), local guerillas in South Vietnam, likewise sought to rid their nation of imperialism and join the two Vietnams as one. Many American politicians and scholars throughout the Cold War believed that the United States must use the containment policy and ensure South Vietnamese independence, or risk losing all of Southeast Asia to communism via the domino theory. President Kennedy's predecessor in the Oval Office, Dwight

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[6] "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," *Public Papers*, 1: 112-18.

Eisenhower, had followed this doctrine regarding South Vietnam, as had Kennedy. President Johnson likewise believed that the United States must prevent South Vietnam from falling to communism. Most policy makers in his administration, many themselves holdovers from the Kennedy years, fully accepted modernization theory and believed that supporting South Vietnam was of utmost importance. Particularly important to President Johnson in that commitment were Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. LBJ was ultimately responsible for his actions in the Vietnam War, but there is credence to his Chief of Staff Marvin Watson's recent claim that the president was "following a national policy of Communist containment that had been consistent American doctrine since the first days of the Cold War."[7]

A telephone conversation on February 20, 1964, between President Johnson and Secretary McNamara further showed the administration's thought process regarding Vietnam. The commander in chief discussed how the containment policy had worked in the past for the United States in battling communism. He spoke of South Vietnam: "We're willing to train them. And we have found that over a period of time that we kept the Communists from spreading. We did it in Greece and Turkey with the Truman Doctrine, by sending them men. We did it in Western Europe by NATO." Johnson and McNamara agreed that the United States must continue to help strengthen South Vietnam so it could one day have secure independence.[8]

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[7] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002); and W. Marvin Watson, *Chief of Staff: Lyndon Johnson and His Presidency* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), 148-52.

[8] Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 248-50.

Despite being convinced that the United States must uphold its commitment to South Vietnam, President Johnson held inner doubts that this foreign policy ultimately would be successful. Telephone conversations on May 27, 1964, between LBJ and his Senate mentor Richard Russell and later with McGeorge Bundy, his national security advisor, illustrated the president's fears that American initiatives in Vietnam might prove disastrous. Russell confessed to his old friend that he had grave misgivings about whether the United States could achieve victory in Vietnam. Johnson agreed, and stated his anxiety about what the American people thought about the conflict. He worried, "I don't think the people of the country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less." Russell viewed Vietnam as a quandary, exclaiming, "It's a tragic situation. It's just one of those places where you can't win. Anything that you do is wrong." At the end of the telephone conversation LBJ spoke of a sergeant he knew well who had six children and could possibly be sent to Vietnam if the United States escalated its military presence in Southeast Asia. Johnson confided to his mentor, "Every time I think about making this decision and think about sending that father of those six kids in there . . . it just makes the chills run up my back." He agonized, "And what the hell are we going to get out of his doing it?"

The president also confessed his anxieties about Vietnam to McGeorge Bundy, a key advisor in foreign affairs. He worried that the United States might find itself in another stalemate, like the Korean War, and further risk causing Communist China to enter the conflict in support of North Vietnam. Johnson lamented, "It just worries the hell out of me. . . . I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think that we can get out. It's just the biggest damned mess that I ever saw." LBJ, arguing within himself, expressed, “Of course if you start running from the Communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen,” fearing that withdrawal from Vietnam would encourage future communist aggression. Bundy agreed with the president that the situation in Southeast Asia looked perilous, but voiced concern that the United States would lose credibility in the world if it left South Vietnam to its own ends. Though Lyndon Johnson publicly demonstrated confidence that American intervention in Vietnam must continue, he privately wrestled with many doubts.[9]

Throughout 1964, President Johnson publicly maintained that the United States must continue its commitment to Southeast Asia. At the signing of the Civil Rights Act in July, he spoke of the bravery of the nation’s founding generation and its willingness to go to war to promote freedom. LBJ claimed that the ideals of the first American revolutionaries continued to inspire people around the world in the present day who longed for freedom. The president declared in reference to the nation’s emerging foreign problems, “Those who founded our country knew that freedom would be secure only if each generation fought to renew and enlarge its meaning. From the minutemen at Concord to the soldiers in Vietnam, each generation has been equal to that trust.” Johnson appealed to Americans for support of his vision of the country’s historic responsibilities.[10]

In late August 1964, at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, in his presidential nomination acceptance speech Lyndon Johnson described his view of the United States’s role in international affairs. Foreshadowing his vision of the Great

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[9] Ibid., 363-73.

[10] “Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill,” *Public Papers*, 2: 842-44.

Society abroad, LBJ proclaimed, "America's cause is still the cause of all mankind." The United States must remain the major protector of democracy in the world. President Johnson affirmed that the nation was up to the cause, claiming its military power to be the strongest in all of history. He asserted that because of the continuation of President Kennedy's international policies, "our adversaries have learned again that we will never waver in the defense of freedom." Running for election to a full term as president, LBJ announced, "I pledge the firmness to defend freedom, the strength to support that firmness, and a constant, patient effort to move the world toward peace instead of war." In this address to the Democratic National Convention President Johnson promised to work for international peace but made clear he would be willing to use military power to defend American interests around the world.[11]

As President Johnson campaigned for election throughout the country in the fall of 1964, he vowed to continue the United States's historic foreign policies based on promotion of freedom and peace. At a fundraising dinner in New Orleans on October 9, 1964, the president issued strong statements about American foreign initiatives. He asked his fellow citizens for a mandate accepting his administration's international goals in the election. LBJ conversed about the events in the summer that had led to him asking the Congress for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. In early August, American naval ships patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin, located off the shores of North Vietnam, had allegedly come under attack from North Vietnamese torpedo boats. At President Johnson's request, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, giving him authority to do what seemed necessary to prevent and counter future attacks by North

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[11] "Remarks Before the National Convention Upon Accepting the Nomination," *Public Papers*, 2: 1009-1013.

Vietnam. LBJ later would use this congressional resolution as the legal basis for escalating the war in Vietnam. To his Louisiana audience on this October night in 1964, the president issued a stern warning: "Let no would-be conqueror ever mistake Uncle Sam. We do not seek any wars. But we are prepared and ready and willing to defend our freedom. And we are not about to yield it or sacrifice it or whittle it away to anybody."[12]

As mentioned earlier, Johnson wrote a campaign book entitled *My Hope For America*, describing his domestic and foreign agendas for the United States. In Cold War rhetoric the president wrote, "Communists, using force and intrigue, seek to bring about a communist-dominated world. Our convictions, our interests, our life as a nation demand that we resolutely oppose, with all of our might, that effort to dominate the world." Believing in the possibility of a Great Society abroad, LBJ advised, "I have in mind the change from the colonial era to an era when scores of new nations claim rights and recognition; the change from old to modern societies, which can bring to their peoples the advantages of modern science and technology." He reiterated his conviction that the United States had a moral obligation running deep in its history to help countries struggling for freedom. The Texan concluded, "Our aim in Vietnam, as in the rest of the world, is to help restore the peace and to re-establish a decent order."[13]

President Johnson easily defeated Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who had urged overtly aggressive military efforts to defeat North Vietnam, in a landside presidential election. Many Americans who voted for Johnson believed him to be less likely to escalate the American presence in Southeast Asia than was the bellicose Goldwater and were angered when the president in later years dramatically increased the nation's involvement in Vietnam. In his memoirs, LBJ countered those critics by reminding them that he committed his government to follow the foreign policies of his predecessors. He defended himself by asserting:

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[12] "Remarks at a Fundraising Dinner in New Orleans," *Public Papers*, 2: 1281-88; and Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 143-56.

[13] Lyndon B. Johnson, *My Hope For America* (New York: Random House, 1964), 61-69.

> The American people knew what they were voting for in 1964. They knew Lyndon Johnson was not going to pull up stakes and run. They knew I was not going to go back on my country's word. They knew I would not repudiate the pledges of my predecessors in the Presidency. They knew too that I was not going to wipe out Hanoi or use atom bombs to defoliate the Vietnamese jungles. I was going to do what had to be done to protect our interests and to keep our promises. And that is what I did.[14]

Following his election victory, President Johnson, seeing the situation in Vietnam worsening, began to stress more and more how beneficial modernization theory would be if applied successfully to Southeast Asia. His administration increasingly devoted attention to building a Great Society abroad. In his annual State of the Union message on January 4, 1965, the president promoted this theme. He argued that the country must reject isolationism and recognize that America's positive characteristics impacted the entire world. Proclaiming an international Great Society, Johnson asserted, "Our nation was created to help strike away the chains of ignorance and misery and tyranny wherever they keep man less than God means him to be." As he had often done in the past, LBJ reminded his fellow Americans that they had an opportunity to achieve excellence, encouraging, "We know that history is ours to make. And if there is great danger, there is now also the excitement of great expectations." President Johnson in high idealism stated that the United States's foreign goals were to extend progress and strengthen freedom around the world.[15]

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[14] Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 68.

LBJ was inaugurated for a full term as president on January 20, 1965. Giving his inaugural address, he spoke of the changing world and how the United States must relate to international affairs. Renouncing isolationism, President Johnson extolled, "The American covenant called on us to help show the way for the liberation of man." Helping other nations achieve progress might cause the U.S. to have to sacrifice lives and resources, but "that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant." Johnson carried this philosophy with him as the American presence in Vietnam increased.[16]

Laboring for the Great Society Abroad

During the first half of 1965, South Vietnam looked more each day like it would not be able to withstand the continual attacks by North Vietnam and the NLF. President Johnson perceived modernization ideology as the best way to strengthen South Vietnam. He hoped that bringing his Great Society to Southeast Asia would prevent a communist takeover of the region. On April 7, 1965, at Johns Hopkins University, the president delivered a critical speech describing these subjects. He began with a theme he had often employed: "Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change. This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Vietnam." The United States was in Vietnam to promote freedom and to battle the threat of communism, according to the Texan. He pleaded with North Vietnam to work with his government for a peaceful end to the conflict.

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[15] "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," *Public Papers*, 1: 1-9.

[16] "The President's Inaugural Address," *Public Papers*, 1: 71-74.

President Johnson, previewing a Great Society abroad, claimed that North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and all of Southeast Asia would benefit from a peaceful settlement. LBJ reminded his audience that Vietnam and most of that region lived in brutal poverty. He promised to work for peace in Southeast Asia, and he believed that modernization could help millions of Asians escape from the horrors of poverty. The president asked his country to help with the cause, declaring, "Now there must be a much more massive effort to improve the life of man in that conflict-torn corner of our world." He proposed that all the nations of Southeast Asia work together for progressive development, including North Vietnam: "We would hope that North Vietnam would take its place in the common effort just as soon as peaceful cooperation is possible." Johnson planned to ask Congress for a billion dollar investment to aid South Vietnam. The money would be used to develop the Mekong River to provide more food, water, and electricity in a similar way President Roosevelt's New Deal established the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The president stated that the funds also would promote better healthcare and education. He maintained that peace would be required to make the project an ultimate success, but the United States must begin this effort immediately. This was modernization ideology on a grand scale, devoted to preventing the spread of communism. President Johnson ended his message with a vow to continue to work for an end to war and poverty in the world. He requested that the American people join him in this quest. With idealism he expressed, "We can do all these things on a scale never dreamed of before."[17]

In his memoirs, LBJ reflected on the Great Society abroad. He observed, "If there was a Johnson Doctrine, these were its cornerstones: opposition to aggression; war against poverty, illiteracy, and disease; economic, social, and cultural cooperation on a regional basis; searching for reconciliation and peace." Johnson wrote that these were his goals for Southeast Asia and all the regions of the world. LBJ aide Erv S. Duggan later explained, "I think Johnson felt that after the war, this country could turn Vietnam, especially the Mekong Delta, into the Promised Land—the greatest country in the world. He had a terrific vision, although you could say it was quaint and naïve. He wanted a Marshall Plan for Vietnam." The president hoped that out of the horrors of war progress could come for the developing country of Vietnam.[18]

Nevertheless, Johnson could not shake his private fears about the outcome of American involvement in Vietnam. He confided these anxieties to Robert S. McNamara in telephone conversations in the early months of 1965. On February 26, 1965, while discussing the prospect of sending ground troops to Vietnam, the president confessed to his defense secretary, "I don't think anything is going to be as bad as losing, and I don't see any way of winning." Later, on March 6, agonizing over the decision to increase ground forces by sending two more Marine battalions, LBJ exclaimed, "We'll just go with it. . . . My answer is yes. But my judgment is no." Lady Bird Johnson noted in her diary entry of March 7, 1965, that President Johnson was despairing over the Vietnam issue. He lamented to her, “I can’t get out. I can’t finish it with what I have got. So what the hell can I do?” The crisis in Vietnam seemed more and more complex.[19]

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[17] "Address at Johns Hopkins University: 'Peace Without Conquest,'" *Public Papers*, 1: 394-99.

[18] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 249; and Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 567.

Escalation of the Vietnam War

Lyndon Johnson long hoped that the conflict in Southeast Asia would not interfere with his main dream of pursuing a Great Society in the United States. Until July 1965, he had successfully been able to devote more of his attention to domestic rather that foreign policies. By this time, however, he could no longer delay making the decision of whether or not to escalate American military forces in Vietnam. The political and military situations in South Vietnam were deteriorating rapidly, and the United States had to act soon if it wanted to save the country from collapse. Comparing his predicament to those of his presidential predecessors Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, LBJ moaned, “Every time we have gotten near the culmination of our dreams, the war bells have rung.” Johnson could foresee that his Great Society at home might suffer from the Vietnam War and the Great Society abroad. The decision was immensely difficult. Years later in retirement he told his biographer Doris Kearns:

> “I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.

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[19] Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson’s Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 193-95, 213-16; and Lady Bird Johnson, *A White House Diary* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 247-48.

Johnson's harangue to Kearns, while perhaps exaggerated, illustrates how tormented the president was over whether or not to escalate the American military presence in Vietnam.[20]

Ultimately, President Johnson decided to escalate, sincerely believing in his own many public statements about the necessity of preventing South Vietnam from falling to communism. On July 28, 1965, he told the White House Press Corps of his decision to meet the military's request for more U.S. forces in Vietnam. The president stated that soon 125,000 soldiers would be in Vietnam, and more would be sent upon the request of American military leaders. He concluded by personally describing how difficult this decision was for him: "I do not find it easy to send the flower of our youth, our finest young men, into battle. . . . I have seen them in a thousand streets, of a hundred towns, in every state in this Union. . . . I think I know too how their mothers weep and how their families sorrow. This is the most agonizing and the most painful duty of your president."[21]

Thus, the United States found itself fully committed to preserving South Vietnamese independence. President Johnson continued believing and affirming to his fellow citizens the reasons he had chosen to escalate the American military presence in Southeast Asia. As described earlier, in his State of the Union message on January 12, 1966, the president proclaimed that the United States could create a Great Society at home while engaged in the Vietnam War. Americans repeatedly referred to this proposition as the ability to have both "Guns and Butter." Johnson asked the Congress to continue its investment in building a Great Society in Vietnam. He described a crucial part of his administration's foreign policy as "to help improve the life of man" across the world. President Johnson stated that he would encourage Congress to support healthcare and education initiatives to help the local populace in South Vietnam in order to strengthen this ally. LBJ reiterated that the United States was in Vietnam because of its historic commitment to protect freedom in that country.[22]

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[20] George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), xi; and Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1976), 251-53.

[21] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 151-53.

Trying to inspire his fellow Americans, President Johnson often used analogies filled with Texas history when seeking to motivate the country to stand strong in Vietnam. He recalled the fortitude of the Texas Ranger, one of his favorite stories. The Texan explained, "The Ranger is one that when you plug him . . . he just keeps coming. And we must let the rest of the world know that . . . if they ever hit us it is not going to stop us—we are just going to keep coming." He encouraged his military leaders to nail "the coonskin on the wall," urging them toward victory in Vietnam. Johnson often compared American soldiers fighting in Vietnam with the heroes of the 1836 battle of the Alamo, Texas's most hallowed shrine. He invoked the names of William Barret Travis, Jim Bowie, Davy Crockett, and James Bonham. Both the Texas revolutionaries and the American soldiers in Vietnam had possessed bravery. Ironically, LBJ hinted at the similarity the Alamo and Vietnam shared in their tragedy. The president once told his National Security Council, "Hell, Vietnam is just like the Alamo. . . . You were surrounded, and you damn well needed somebody. Well, by God, I'm going to go—and I thank the Lord that I've got men who want to go with me, from McNamara right on down to the littlest private who's carrying a gun." Traditional Texas heritage, with its glorification of honor, determination, and duty, complimented LBJ's beliefs regarding American identity. Johnson's Texas background supported his Great Society abroad as he fused his identity with his foreign policies.[23]

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[22] "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," *Public Papers*, 1: 3-12.

Anything for Peace

The Vietnam War dragged on throughout 1966 and 1967 with the United States unable to find a way to achieve victory or even a settlement with North Vietnam. As the conflict continued with no end, many Americans became disillusioned with the war, the Great Society abroad, and with President Johnson himself. The Vietnam War had bitterly divided the nation. LBJ Chief of Staff Marvin Watson reflected in his memoirs, "The president despised the war. It was killing Americans. It was destroying his dreams for a Great Society by sucking up immense amounts of money. . . . It was causing the disintegration of his public approval and thus his ability to lead the nation." Watson wrote that despite these effects, Johnson continued to believe that the Vietnam War was necessary for American national security in the world.[24]

LBJ maintained through early 1968 that the United States was making important progress in the Vietnam War, wanting to encourage the American people that the conflict would not last forever. Then came the Tet Offensive. On the Vietnamese New Year of Tet in late January of 1968, the North Vietnamese and the NLF launched a massive offensive in South Vietnam, attacking thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals and numerous other cities. NLF members reached the grounds of the United States embassy in the South Vietnam capital of Saigon. Ultimately, American and South Vietnamese forces across the region were able to repel the attacks and win a military victory, but the Tet Offensive proved to many in the United States that the Vietnam War was nowhere near reaching a conclusion. President Johnson’s prior assessments of progress in Vietnam seemed completely baseless. The Tet Offensive was a psychological blow to the American public.[25]

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[23] William E. Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 340-43; and 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: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 31-35, 144-45.

[24] Watson, *Chief of Staff*, 269-70.

Lyndon Johnson was again at a crucial turning point, and he knew it. Longtime aide Horace Busby recalled, “America’s agonies abroad and torments at home were centering squarely on him. He stood at the eye of a strange and swirling storm of unrest and division.” Busby recalled a conversation with the president on March 31, 1968, a day when LBJ would later announce a major decision about his Vietnam policy and his political future. Johnson spoke of the honor he had of being in the White House, and noted that many Americans were living much tougher lives just trying to survive and support their families. He told Busby, “We have to remember that here in this house no man who sits here can ever afford to think of himself first.”[26]

LBJ also had to make a critical decision about his political future, because 1968 was a presidential election year. He was facing tough challenges for the Democratic presidential nomination. Eugene McCarthy, a senator from Minnesota, had been an outspoken critic of his Vietnam policy and was running on a peace platform. McCarthy received a shocking 42 percent of the vote in the early New Hampshire Democratic primary, showing the president to be vulnerable. Soon afterward in March 1968, Robert

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[25] Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 151-55.

[26] Busby, *The Thirty-First of March*, 11, 192.

F. Kennedy, a senator from New York, entered the presidential race. Kennedy was the younger brother of the late president and had also criticized Johnson's foreign policies. President Johnson and Senator Kennedy had a long history of mutual distrust and tension. Besides politics, Johnson had concerns about his own health. He had privately discussed with close friends the likelihood of his not seeking another term since 1967. LBJ feared he would suffer some illness that would incapacitate him or that he might die in office. Billy Graham, the Baptist evangelist and personal friend of Johnson, recalled that the president told him in 1967 that he was seriously considering retirement when his term ended. He explained to Graham, "You know, my family are not long-livers. They die early. If I run again and get elected, I don't think it would be fair to the American people, because I'm not sure I could live out another term."[27]

All of these reasons were on President Johnson's mind when he made his critical decisions about the next stage of the Vietnam War and his political future. He spoke to Americans about these issues in a live television address on the evening of Sunday, March 31, 1968. The president announced his decision to halt the bombing over most of North Vietnam to encourage the North Vietnamese to begin productive negotiations for peace with the United States. He hoped this drastic new move would help end the war. Johnson reiterated his thinking about the American presence in Vietnam: "Throughout this entire, long period, I have been sustained by a single principle: that what we are doing now, in Vietnam, is vital not only to the security of Southeast Asia, but it is vital to the security of every American."

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[27] Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 522-29; and Billy Graham, Interview by Monroe Billington, October 12, 1983, Special Interview, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

President Johnson next discussed how he had worked throughout his public career for the promotion of unity among the American people. He regretted that the country was now divided over the issue of Vietnam and disruption at home. As president of all Americans, he stressed that he must emphasize unity as his main goal for the United States. He was unwilling to tarnish the office of the presidency by involving it in partisan politics in this election year. LBJ wanted to devote his efforts to bringing peace in Vietnam. Then he revealed his shocking decision:

> With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the presidency of your country.
>
> Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.

President Johnson committed himself to unifying a divided nation with these two monumental decisions.[28]

Speaking the next day in Chicago to the National Association of Broadcasters, LBJ revisited the previous night's speech and a philosophy that had been significant in his political career. He observed, "Sometimes I have been called a seeker of 'consensus'—more often in criticism than in praise. And I have never denied it. Because to heal and to build in support of something worthy is, I believe, a noble task. In the region of the country where I have spent my life, where brother was once divided against brother, this lesson has been burned deep into my memory."[29]

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[28] "Address to the Nation Announcing Steps To Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not To Seek Reelection," *Public Papers*, 1: 469-76.

[29] Lyndon B. Johnson, *To Heal and to Build: The Programs of President Lyndon B. Johnson*, ed. James M. Burns (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), 465-71.

Challenges to the Great Society Abroad

As noted, Lyndon Johnson faced many challenges to his vision of a Great Society abroad, principally because of the Vietnam War. LBJ aide Bill Moyers reflected on Johnson and his foreign policy, "I think he wrongly thought that the same assumptions prevailed there that prevailed here." Foreign policy advisor Robert Komer clarified this issue: "LBJ had no particular grasp of foreign cultures. . . . He was a people man, and he thought people everywhere were the same. He saw the Vietnamese farmer as being like the Texas farmer or the Oklahoma farmer." The two Johnson staffers recognized that LBJ could not move beyond his conception of American identity and its application to the world.[30] Journalist William S. White maintained that President Johnson suffered because of his rocky relationship with the national press. Many reporters saw him as a wheeler-dealer from Texas, and the president himself had little love for journalists. White, although himself friendly with Johnson, said that many of his colleagues in the media viewed LBJ as "essentially a raw frontiersman lacking sophistication."[31]

As described in the preceding chapter, many civil rights leaders became disillusioned with the Vietnam War and its violence as it took precious funds away from the Great Society at home. Particularly damaging for the president, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., announced his opposition to the war in April of 1967. Speaking at the Riverside Church in New York City, King declared his frustration that the conflict in Southeast Asia had diverted the Johnson administration's attention from the War on Poverty. He grieved about the poverty initiatives, "I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war." King echoed the sentiments of many Americans who believed their nation's true crisis lay in the poverty and racism of urban areas.[32]

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[30] Miller, *Lyndon*, 567.

[31] William S. White, Interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, March 10, 1969, Interview II, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

President Johnson also had trouble relating to many of the rebellious youth of the 1960s, an era when many Americans began to question traditional values about family, morality, patriotism, and their government. The baby-boomer generation born following World War II came of age in this era as the United States experienced unprecedented financial and material affluence. Many young people became uneasy by what they saw in American society and life. A generation gap emerged between younger and older generations as youth embraced a new counterculture that rejected the conformity and materialism they saw in their elders' lives. The counterculture adopted new methods of dress through wearing flamboyant clothing and letting their hair grow out. They experimented with drugs such as marijuana and LSD and promoted sexual freedom. Often termed "hippies" by their elders, this young generation found heroes in artists who expressed their anxiety about American life through music, literature, art, and film. For many committed to the counterculture, Lyndon Johnson became the chief symbol of conformist adults out of touch with their generation. Despite his accomplishments in progressive social causes, they could not forgive him for the despicable Vietnam War. Many other Americans likewise saw the conflict in Southeast Asia as yet another example of the United States's foreign imperialism. Johnson viewed the protesting youth and other critics as young idealists who had not experienced the real problems of the world. He was unable to understand their disillusionment.[33]

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[32] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," in *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents*, by Bruce J. Schulman (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995), 208-212.

The social unrest and rejection of his foreign policies by critics greatly disturbed the president. He was often the subject of vicious personal attacks by protestors, epitomized by the infamous chant, "Hey, hey LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?" Johnson later described to his confidant and biographer Doris Kearns how he handled the turmoil: "I read about all the troubles Lincoln had in conducting the Civil War. Yet he persevered and history rewarded him for the perseverance." LBJ, who in the past compared himself to President Lincoln regarding civil rights, found himself looking to the revered leader for inspiration in foreign policy. The Texan had trouble believing that so many Americans were disappointed with his administration. He confessed to Kearns, "Deep down I knew . . . that the American people loved me. After all that I'd done for them and given to them, how could they help but love me?" Johnson, who so desired unity in the country, found it difficult to accept the fact that his foreign endeavor in Vietnam deeply divided Americans.[34]

President Johnson, however, agonized continually about the lives of the American soldiers whom he commanded. William S. White, a sympathetic journalist and friend of LBJ, reflected on the president's despair. White recalled, "He often spoke with tears in his eyes . . . of our troops. . . . He had the most terrible concern for those men. I've seen him when an assistant would bring him a nightly battle report, and I've seen him cry at our casualties." White noted that the president frequently talked about his trips to see the soldiers in Vietnam. Chief of Staff Marvin Watson remembered similar experiences of President Johnson worrying about the soldiers in the field. Watson recalled, "Often, he could not sleep through the night, and the officers in the Situation Room would be surprised when a concerned President suddenly called or appeared." Adding to his anxiety, both of Johnson's sons-in-law, Charles Robb and Pat Nugent, served in Vietnam.[35]

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[33] Harry McPherson, *A Political Education: A Washington Memoir* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 443-49; Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 312, 331-34; and Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), xxxix-xlii.

[34] Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 314-15.

Doris Kearns, who spent much time with the Johnsons during their retirement at the LBJ Ranch, maintained that LBJ retained his convictions about the necessity of American intervention in Vietnam to his dying day. Despite these beliefs, Lyndon Johnson knew that the Vietnam War had become a tragedy for him, his presidency, and his nation. In his final State of the Union address on January 14, 1969, just days before leaving the White House, LBJ admitted to his fellow citizens, "I regret more than any of you know that it has not been possible to restore peace to South Vietnam."[36]

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[35] William S. White, Interview II; and Watson, *Chief of Staff*, 155, 291.

[36] Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 328-31; and "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," *Public Papers*, 2: 1263-70.

CHAPTER FOUR

Recollections and Perceptions

Lyndon Baines Johnson stands out as one of the most remarkable and complex individuals of the twentieth century. The years in which he lived brought monumental change to the nation. As this master's thesis has illustrated, LBJ was a central figure in much of this change, for better or worse. People who personally knew Johnson have varying recollections about him. Other Americans who were not acquainted with the president but lived through his era likewise possess contrasting memories. Persons who were not alive during LBJ's days also have differing perceptions of these subjects that speak much to the United States's collective memory of its past. This chapter will analyze several recollections and perceptions Americans have of Lyndon Johnson and his times.

Larger than Life

John B. Connally, a protégé of Johnson who became governor of Texas, once said of LBJ, "There is no adjective in the dictionary to describe him. . . . As a matter of fact it would take every adjective in the dictionary to describe him." Similarly, Wilbur J. Cohen, who served as Johnson's Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, recalled an experience when he visited the president at the LBJ Ranch and claimed he witnessed three different personalities of Johnson in one day. Early in the day Johnson acted purely presidential as he discussed policy issues. Later he showed Cohen his cattle and talked of breeding and raising them, sounding like an ordinary Texas cowboy. In the evening, the president and Cohen stopped at a hill on the ranch and watched the sunset. Johnson spoke of his love of the land, the beauty of nature, and his hopes for the American people in language Cohen described as "pure poetry." The secretary remembered thinking to himself when that day ended, "This man is larger than life." LBJ had in one day shown Cohen how complex a human being he truly was.[1]

Hubert Humphrey had a long association with Lyndon Johnson, serving with him in the United States Senate and as his vice president. He perceived LBJ as the epitome of the United States's complex identity. Humphrey explained, "He was an All-American president. He was really the history of this country, with all of the turmoil, the bombast, the sentiments, the passions. It was all there. All in one man." The former senator and vice president stressed that politics remained Lyndon Johnson's lifelong obsession. He represented and loved the Unites States's form of government. Humphrey affirmed, "It just poured out of him. Every time you saw him it wasn't like seeing a man; it was like seeing an institution, a whole system that just encompassed you." LBJ epitomized the complexities of the United States' institutions and history.[2]

Humphrey marveled at Johnson's ability throughout his career to lobby other members of Congress for votes on key issues. The Texan would flatter, beg, threaten, or plead with politicians according to their personalities in a method that became known as the "Johnson treatment." Humphrey argued that Johnson's way of courting votes had much to do with his personal identity. Humphrey asserted, "Johnson knew how to woo people. He was a born political lover. . . . Many people look upon Johnson as the heavyhanded man. That's not really true. He was sort of like a cowboy making love. . . . He was from the ranch. But what I mean is he knew how to massage the senators." The Texan did whatever necessary to accomplish his goals.[3]

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[1] Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), xv-xvi.

[2] Ibid., xvi-xvii.

Other individuals who personally knew Lyndon Johnson echoed Humphrey's assertion that the man represented the complexity of the United States. LBJ aide Jack Valenti confessed, "Johnson's kind of like life itself—you take the sunsets and sunrises, but you also take the avalanches, floods, and plagues." Johnson friend and *Washington Post* executive Katharine Graham said of the president, "Both his faults and his virtues were on a very big scale. I think his purposes were high, and he was a flamboyant, extraordinary, and fascinating personality."[4]

Johnson at Work

As Hubert Humphrey recognized, politics was life for LBJ, and he devoted himself to seeking excellence in his chosen vocation. In later years Washington journalist Sam Shaffer exclaimed, "I've covered Congress for twenty-eight years, and Lyndon Johnson was the only man I would call a genius—an authentic legislative genius." Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, a onetime Johnson friend whose relationship with the president was seriously damaged by their clashing views on the Vietnam War, remembered how effective LBJ had been as senate majority leader. Fulbright recounted, "He was a master at managing the Senate and at reconciling people with diametrically opposed views. Nobody could match him. He knew every personal interest of every member of the Senate just like he knew the palm of his hand."

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[3] Hubert H. Humphrey, Interview by Michael L. Gillette, June 21, 1977, Interview III, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

[4] Miller, *Lyndon,* 649-50.

Prominent historian and LBJ biographer Robert Dallek termed Johnson "the greatest Majority Leader in American history."[5]

Throughout his career in public service, Johnson was famous for his extreme work ethic. LBJ aide Horace Busby recalled in his memoirs that the Texan "worked longer and harder than any other public man of my acquaintance: fourteen, sixteen, sometimes even twenty hours a day, six or seven days a week." President Johnson often told people in jest, "I never think about politics more than eighteen hours a day." Walt W. Rostow, LBJ's national security advisor, observed that the president held himself to very high standards and similarly expected the utmost effort and responsibility from his staff. He wanted no scandals in his administration, a goal for which he was remarkably successful. Rostow further noted that Johnson heralded the United States government with the greatest respect and tried to lead his administration accordingly. The national security advisor believed that throughout his career Johnson was "determined to try to do things right in government—not only by the Constitution, but the way a government should be handled."[6]

Busby commented further on how national politics had dominated LBJ's life and how he left an extraordinary mark on the American political system. The longtime aide closed his memoirs by noting, "Once, for a while, Washington had been Lyndon Johnson's, as much as it had ever been any man's, and when he held the moment, he used it boldly, to complete in his last office the works to which he had committed himself in his first office. . . . But it remained that as Washington once was his, so Lyndon Johnson would always be Washington's."[7]

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[5] Ibid., 213; and Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 9-10.

[6] Horace Busby, *The Thirty-First of March: An Intimate Portrait of Lyndon Johnson's Final Days in Office* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 247; Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Walt W. Rostow, Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, March 21, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library.

The Legacy

The legacy of Lyndon Johnson's foreign and domestic policies remains controversial and complex. The Johnson presidency achieved exhilarating victories and suffered devastating failures. The tragedy of the Vietnam War will always haunt his legacy. In 1995, LBJ Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara published *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, a book reflecting upon the Johnson administration's rationale in going to war and the mistakes it made regarding Vietnam. McNamara insists that the Johnson government sought purposes in Southeast Asia that it perceived were in accordance with the United States' history and identity. He explained, "We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values." The former defense secretary then confessed that these decisions, though made with the best of intentions for the nation, were wrong. He elucidated, "I truly believe that we made an error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities." McNamara argued that President Johnson and his administration failed to recognize that the war in Vietnam was about politics in that divided country. They also underestimated the importance of nationalism among the Vietnamese people. He further recalled that the president was convinced that the Soviet Union and China were determined to achieve communist hegemony in

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[7] Busby, *The Thirty-First of March*, 250.

Southeast Asia. McNamara now believes his government gave too much emphasis to the containment policy. The defense secretary did note that President Johnson inherited a situation in Vietnam that was chaotic, dangerous, and immensely difficult.

McNamara left the Department of Defense in the spring of 1968. He and President Johnson had developed a close friendship during their years of serving together, but that relationship experienced tension as McNamara began advocating troop withdrawals from Vietnam during 1967. Prior to his exit from the Pentagon, LBJ awarded McNamara the Presidential Medal of Freedom in a special ceremony at the White House. The secretary of defense, filled with emotion, could not give his speech. McNamara discussed what he might have said on that day in his book *In Retrospect*:

> Today, I end 1,558 days of the most intimate association with the most complex individual I have ever known. Many in this room believe Lyndon Johnson is crude, mean, vindictive, scheming, untruthful. Perhaps at times he has shown each of these characteristics. But he is much, much more. I believe that in the decades ahead, history will judge him to have done more—for example, through such legislation as the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Great Society legislation—to alert us all to our responsibility toward the poor, the disadvantaged, and the victims of racial prejudice that any other political leader of our time. But for Vietnam, a war which he inherited—and which admittedly neither he nor we managed wisely—we would have been much further along in solving those problems.

Robert S. McNamara knew quite well how complex and tragic the Vietnam War had been for him, for President Johnson, and for the United States.[8]

As McNamara suggested, a critical legacy of the Johnson administration is its encouragement for the American people to work for racial justice and an end to poverty in the process of building a better nation. Journalist and LBJ friend William S. White asserted, “Nobody will understand Lyndon Johnson unless he understands that he was profoundly marked by early poverty of his own and of his friends, and that he has tremendous feeling for the deprived that is absolutely genuine." George R. Davis, pastor of the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C., where the president often attended services, discussed this subject and the turbulent times when LBJ was in the White House. Davis affirmed, "I wish lots of student groups could have conversed with him personally. He probably did more for the poor, the disinherited, and even young people, than most other presidents, and yet he took a beating from the so-called intellectual student community." The personal criticism from many who disagreed with him proved painful to LBJ, ever a leader who desired unity. The minister recalled how President Johnson loathed division in the country over the Vietnam War and the urban race riots. He wished to focus his energies on achieving progress for underprivileged Americans. Longtime Johnson staff member Harry McPherson perceived LBJ's years as the culmination of the liberal social reform begun by Franklin Roosevelt in the New Deal. Johnson symbolized its strengths and weaknesses, as many Americans began to question liberalism's effectiveness. McPherson concluded about Johnson, "He finished the old agenda, and by painful example taught us something about the new."[9]

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[8] Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), xx, 98-102, 315-17, 333.

Possibly Lyndon Johnson's greatest legacy lies in his efforts to promote racial justice and civil rights to all Americans. Many minority leaders in later years praised LBJ and his work to build a Great Society at home based on equality. A. Philip Randolph, president of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, proclaimed, “President Johnson has done more to advance the cause of civil rights than any other president in the history of the country, including Abraham Lincoln. I’ve made that statement all over the country, and I’ve found no vigorous opposition to it.” Roy Wilkins, a longtime leader in the NAACP, proudly stated that LBJ rose above his southern roots and “when the chips were down he used the great powers of the presidency on the side of the people who were deprived.” Thurgood Marshall, whom Johnson appointed as the first African American justice to the U.S. Supreme Court, in later years praised the president’s record in promoting human rights. Marshall exclaimed, “I just think Lyndon Johnson, insofar as minorities, civil rights, people in general, the inherent dignity of the individual human being—I don’t believe there has ever been a president to equal Lyndon Johnson—bar none!” Dr. Hector Garcia, founder of the American G.I. Forum and a prominent Mexican American civil rights leader, reflected, “To me Lyndon Johnson has been what I wish every Texan would be. . . . He was truly a people’s representative.” Garcia claimed that many Mexican Americans called President Johnson the Spanish term “Nuestro Verdadero Amigo,” which in English translates to “Our True Friend.” These civil rights leaders, like many other Americans, recognized that the Vietnam War remained a lingering detriment to LBJ’s legacy, but they stressed that Johnson’s commitment to civil rights, equality, and ending poverty must be praised. The famed African American novelist Ralph Ellison may have said it best when he reasoned, “Perhaps President Johnson will have to settle for being recognized as the greatest American president for the poor and the Negroes, but that, as I see it, is a very great honor indeed.”[10]

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[9] William S. White, Interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, March 10, 1969, Interview II, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; George R. Davis, Interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, February 13, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and Harry McPherson, *A Political Education: A Washington Memoir* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 454-55.

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[10] A. Philip Randolph, Interview by Thomas H. Baker, October 29, 1969,

Oral History Interviews Conducted by the Author

In order to understand fully Americans' varying recollections and perceptions of Lyndon Johnson and his complex times, the author of this master's thesis conducted several oral history interviews with individuals who lived through LBJ's era and others who were not yet born during the president's lifetime. The experience was rewarding and further illustrated the complexity of the man and his legacy for the United States.

People who knew Johnson personally harbor colorful memories of the man and his times. Dolph Briscoe, Jr., in addition to serving as governor of Texas from 1973 to 1979, developed a close friendship with LBJ and worked with him on many of his campaigns for public office.[11] He first met the future president in 1948 when Johnson defeated former Texas Governor Coke Stevenson in a highly controversial race for the United States Senate. Briscoe was a delegate from his hometown of Uvalde, Texas, to the meeting of the Texas Democratic Party in Fort Worth, where it declared LBJ the winner of the race by a mere eighty-seven votes. The delegates could not vote on the proceedings but could only watch what Briscoe termed "a fascinating time."

Briscoe stated that he became better acquainted with Lyndon Johnson as he helped with his Senate and presidential campaigns. While Johnson was in the Senate,

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Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; Roy Wilkins, Interview by Thomas H. Baker, April 1, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; Thurgood Marshall, Interview by Thomas H. Baker, July 10, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; Hector Garcia, Interview by David G. McComb, July 9, 1969, Interview I, Transcript, Internet Copy, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, care of LBJ Library Oral History Collection, LBJ Library; and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 327.

[11] Dolph Briscoe, Jr., oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on May 27, 2006, in Catarina, Texas; recording in Dolph Briscoe IV's possession).

Briscoe and his wife Janey hosted him on a trip he made to Uvalde to meet with constituents about water conservation. LBJ also wanted to visit Uvalde resident John Nance Garner, who had served as Franklin Roosevelt's first vice president. During that trip to Uvalde Johnson and Briscoe became close friends. The future Texas governor remembered being amazed by Johnson's political effectiveness. Briscoe asserted, "He was an excellent campaigner." Briscoe also described having to take LBJ to a doctor to dress an infection Johnson had near his right thumb as a result of shaking so many hands in his travels across Texas. Following the events in Uvalde, the Briscoes drove Johnson to the LBJ Ranch and met Lady Bird Johnson, whom Briscoe described as "a true lady." The experience was special for Briscoe. He reflected on his impressions of Johnson: "He was a fascinating fellow to be with. You never had to say anything and never got a word in. He made you feel like you had known him forever and were close friends. He had that ability to make people feel that they were almost a part of his family." Briscoe attributes much of LBJ's success to those traits.

Briscoe served as a Texas delegate to many of the Democratic National Conventions in which LBJ was a key player, including the 1960 gathering in Los Angeles. The Texas delegation supported Johnson for the presidential nomination, but it soon became clear that he would not win. Briscoe recalled that the Texans, especially Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, were shocked when John F. Kennedy, the Democratic presidential nominee, offered LBJ the vice presidential nomination. Despite initial disillusionment, the Texas delegation soon supported the Kennedy-Johnson ticket.

Lyndon Johnson later helped Briscoe win a significant victory that aided his political career. Briscoe, a cattle and goat rancher, had devoted much effort to pursuing the eradication of the screwworm, an insect that caused havoc for livestock owners by killing their animals through infection. While Johnson was in the Senate, he sought at Briscoe's request to obtain extra funds for the federal screwworm eradication program, over the objection of his mentor Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, who believed the appropriation to be a waste of money. Senator Johnson as majority leader kept the Senate in session late into the night until a tired Russell went home, relinquishing his fight against the bill. Once Russell left, LBJ passed the appropriations and adjourned the Senate. Similarly, when Johnson was president, he ordered his Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, to reverse the Department of Agriculture's policy to supporting the screwworm eradication program. Ultimately, the efforts to fight the ravages of the screwworm were successful and improved the lives of livestock owners across the southwestern United States. Briscoe believed this story illustrated the type of individual Johnson was, exclaiming, "If you were his friend, he would help you. He never forgot a friend." The Texas governor also thought this attitude explained why people who worked for him were so loyal to the man.

After President Johnson retired to the LBJ Ranch, Briscoe sometimes went to visit him. Briscoe characterized those years as difficult for the former president, because he had trouble adjusting to being out of the business to which he had devoted his entire life. Johnson made one of his final public appearances at Briscoe's gubernatorial inauguration in early 1973. Following the inauguration, the former president had lunch with the Briscoes at the Governor's Mansion, where LBJ sat himself at the head of the table and engaged in his famous storytelling. Briscoe was happy that Johnson enjoyed himself at the inauguration and could be there with the new governor's family and friends. With satisfaction Briscoe explained, “It meant a lot to me.” He ended his interview by stressing the importance that Lady Bird Johnson had in Lyndon Johnson’s life. Briscoe was convinced that LBJ never would have achieved his success without his wife. “She made the difference,” Briscoe concluded. “She is truly the first lady of the United States.”

Louise Sneed Vine worked from 1940 to 1949 at KTBC, the Johnsons’ radio station in Austin, Texas.[12] Vine developed a close friendship with the Johnsons, especially Mrs. Johnson. Vine first began working at the station during the summer after her junior year at the University of Texas. At first she worked as a receptionist and secretary but soon found herself in the accounting department. The station broadcast primarily news programs, increasingly focusing on World War II after the United States entered the war. During the war mainly women worked at KTBC while men were serving overseas. In addition to broadcasting the day’s events, the radio station featured a program that focused on issues of women’s interests.

Vine thoroughly enjoyed her work at KTBC and called it “a wonderful, wonderful time.” For forty-two months during World War II her fiancé Harry Vine served in the South Pacific, and her work at the station enabled her to keep up with the news of the war. John and Nellie Connally, future governor and first lady of Texas, and Austinite Richard “Cactus” Pryor worked at KTBC as well. When World War II ended, several men returned to work at the radio station, requiring new adjustments for the women who had become used leading the radio station, but that development did not detract from the family atmosphere. Her job at KTBC enabled Vine to help put her husband through law school at the University of Texas.

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[12] Louise Sneed Vine oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on June 17, 2005, in Austin, Texas; recording in Briscoe’s possession).

Vine first got to know Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson when the Johnsons bought the radio station shortly after Vine began working there. Vine and Mrs. Johnson spent an entire Sunday cleaning the radio station and became close friends. Vine stated that a "mutual respect and high regard" existed between her and the Johnsons. Working for Lyndon Johnson was difficult at times, as employees found themselves under the pressure of his expectations to work hard since he did so himself, but Vine saw Mrs. Johnson as a calming influence on the future president. She understood his preferences and communicated those notions to their employees. Vine holds a high admiration for Lady Bird Johnson, seeing her name as fitting because she was and remains "a real lady."

Vine believes President Johnson's historical legacy should stand upon the Great Society. The former Johnson employee claims that he did more for Texans and southerners than any other president in her lifetime. She specifically commends President Johnson's successes in civil rights for African Americans and other minorities. Protecting their right to vote was a major accomplishment for the president. Vine believes people have overlooked his service in the United States Senate when he was Senate Majority Leader and truly the "Master of the Senate." She insists that history should reflect these accomplishments. Vine sees Johnson as a successful president, except for his handling of the Vietnam War. In her view this conflict destroyed him emotionally and led to his early death. Vine contends that despite the failure of the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson achieved great success in his political career through his programs of the Great Society.

Persons who lived during the years of Lyndon Johnson possess memories that further illustrate the era's complexities. Lou Wetherbee, a library consultant who lives in Dallas, Texas, was born at the beginning of the baby boom generation in 1946 and grew up in the small South Texas town of Dilley.[13] She attended the University of Texas at Austin from 1964 to 1967 for a bachelor's degree and returned to complete a master's degree from 1969 to 1970. In 1968 she married Charlie Wetherbee, a graduate of the Texas A&M University Corps who was attending law school at the University of Texas. Mr. Wetherbee's involvement with the Texas A&M Corps required him to serve in the army, so the couple spent time in Maryland, Virginia, and Michigan for his basic training. During this time the Wetherbees had a growing realization that he would be sent to Vietnam. Mr. and Ms. Wetherbee both had reservations about the Vietnam War but believed their duty was to support their government. In 1970 Mr. Wetherbee received orders to go to Vietnam, where he spent a little less than a year. Ms. Wetherbee moved back to Austin to work in the Latin American Collection at the University of Texas.

Ms. Wetherbee described being apart from her husband during 1970 as "curious." She experienced increased anxiety about the validity of her country's purpose in fighting the Vietnam War. Ms. Wetherbee did not enjoy being a military wife. The expectations of following generals' orders and attending the various social gatherings for military families proved difficult. When Mr. Wetherbee returned from Vietnam he and his wife had to adjust to their experience with the war. Mr. Wetherbee was happy to be home but was quieter and seemed older to Ms. Wetherbee. To this day she wonders what the real impact of the Vietnam War was on her husband. She thinks he possibly became more cynical; not necessarily in an angry manner, but he appeared to be more of a realist. The couple remained in Austin for several years and divorced in 1975.

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[13] Lou Wetherbee oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on June 26, 2005, in Dallas, Texas; recording in Briscoe's possession).

Calling the Vietnam War “the defining event of my generation,” Ms. Wetherbee believes the conflict was a complete disaster for the United States. Her growing questioning of the war during the late 1960s turned into disagreement with the American presence in Vietnam. She came to believe that the United States entered the war with little understanding of the Southeast Asian country’s politics or culture. In her view, the Vietnam War was “a tragedy that destroyed the optimism in the national character” of the United States.

Wetherbee possesses mixed feelings about the 1960s. She took offense with “the extravagance of the 1960s,” with its excesses in alcohol, drugs, music and loosening of ethics and morality. She believes these excesses continue to the present day and harm American society. On the other hand, Wetherbee possesses great respect for those who worked for social change and desired kinder ways of living. She particularly is appreciative of the advancements in women’s rights during the 1960s. Wetherbee stated that she has had more opportunities than her mother and grandmother did, especially in her work. Wetherbee recognizes she has been able to use her education to develop a successful career of her own, unlike women of previous generations.

Along with her mixed opinion of the 1960s, Wetherbee has a complex view of the generation gap that existed between her generation and people her parents’ age. She believes her parents’ generation sacrificed for their children and gave them vast financial freedom. Many parents of the youth of the 1960s, while allowing their children financial freedom, did not allow them freedom to explore beyond traditional concepts of sexuality and religion. Sexuality remained a taboo subject and religion had to be traditional Christianity.

Wetherbee considers herself a strong admirer of Lyndon Johnson and his legacy. She believes that he was a true populist who sought to improve the lives of all Americans. Wetherbee sees herself as “a populist in many ways.” She commends his efforts in civil rights and helping the poor. To his detriment, Johnson believed his generals during the Vietnam War. She considers Johnson “one of the great presidents.”

Jill Briscoe, a housewife and mother from Carrizo Springs, Texas, remembers important aspects of LBJ and his times.[14] Briscoe was born in 1953 in Durham, North Carolina. Her father worked for Allstate Insurance and gained success in the company, enabling him to be promoted to higher positions. Concurrently, this improvement in job status meant that Briscoe, her brother, and her housewife mother moved around the country thirteen times from the 1950s through the 1970s. They lived in the Carolinas, Virginia, Texas, New Jersey, and finally Illinois, where Briscoe graduated from Lake Forest High School in 1971.

Briscoe remembered that every evening as she grew up her family sat together and watched the national news and that she and her brother had to remain silent. She described the newscasts about the Vietnam War as “a constant thing,” and saw President Johnson being “very serious and somber talking about the war.” Briscoe’s family was conservative, and she admitted that her parents influenced her to be supportive of the conflict in Southeast Asia. Her family liked President Johnson and related to him since they were also originally from the South. Her parents considered the press too harsh on

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[14] Jill Briscoe oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on April 16, 2006, in Carrizo Springs, Texas; recording in D. Briscoe’s possession).

LBJ and his mannerisms. Briscoe recalled sit-ins against the war at her high school in which protestors occupied administration offices. Her parents saw such demonstrators as, “young idealistic kids.”

Briscoe described her parents as being very tolerant of other races. From an early age, her parents taught her and her brother to reject the racism common in the South. Briscoe’s high school was predominantly white, but she maintained that the few African American students were among the most popular kids, often winning titles such as prom king and queen. Furthermore, she credits her generation for being much more tolerant of others. Briscoe explained, “Our generation tried to broaden our parents’ horizons.”

Chip Briscoe, a cattle rancher who lives in Carrizo Springs, Texas, discussed his recollections of LBJ and his times.[15] Briscoe was born in 1953 and grew up in Uvalde, Texas. His main recollection of Lyndon Johnson is seeing the president’s speech on March 31, 1968, in which he announced he would not be a candidate for reelection. Briscoe watched this speech with his father, who was surprised and disappointed by Johnson’s decision to leave the presidency at the end of his term.

Briscoe recalled vivid images of the Civil Rights Movement. He was impressed by Martin Luther King, Jr., and his speaking ability. As a young boy Briscoe saw part of King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech on television in 1963. Even as a small child, Briscoe viewed King as a “very eloquent speaker.” Briscoe reflected on the chaos of the racial violence of the 1960s, such as the urban riots and King’s assassination. He described those years as a disturbing period for the United States. Briscoe said the Civil

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[15] Chip Briscoe oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on May 29, 2006, in Carrizo Springs, Texas; recording in D. Briscoe’s possession).

Rights Movement gained much acceptance through television and music, as white Americans enjoyed African American musicians and groups such as the Supremes and the Four Tops. Popular culture played a large role in bringing about more racial tolerance.

Dr. Dean Young, a professor of statistics at Baylor University, likewise possesses complex recollections about the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson.[16] Young was born in 1947 and grew up in Artesia, New Mexico. He received a bachelor's degree from Texas Tech University in 1970 and later earned graduate degrees from Baylor University and the University of Texas at Dallas. He has taught at Baylor for thirty years. Young divides the 1960s into two time periods. In his view, the early part of the sixties to 1964 seemed much like the 1950s with its relative tranquility. After 1964 the times changed as people sought to ameliorate social injustice. He admires his generation for acting for change.

Young graduated from high school in 1965 and began college that fall. He recalls first hearing about the Vietnam War during this time. He initially supported the war out of a sense of duty to his country. He describes the political and social climate at Texas Tech University as conservative, but as the years went on a growing number of students began questioning and protesting the Vietnam War and other aspects of what they saw as social injustice. Young supported protests for civil rights but originally disagreed with protests against the war. He himself was drafted for military service but did not have to go to Vietnam because the lottery soon replaced the draft and Young drew a high number. He said that had he been drafted, he would have gone to Vietnam out of a sense of respect and duty to past generations of Americans who had served in wars.

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[16] Dean Young oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on July 3, 2005, in Waco, Texas; recording in Briscoe's possession).

Young soon found himself less supportive of the American presence in Vietnam. He, like so many other Americans, was horrified as he watched on live television the brutal execution of a Vietcong member by a South Vietnamese police chief after the Tet Offensive. He began to wonder what type of South Vietnamese leadership his country was supporting. Was it a government that accepted such disturbing street executions? Young recalled that this event caused him to oppose the United States's involvement in Vietnam. He further came to believe that his government was not being truthful about its progress in Southeast Asia and did not appear to be fighting the war for victory.

However, Young had a negative view of the counterculture during these years. He disliked the means members of this group used to reach their ends, even if he agreed with the ends. He specifically mentioned that some in the counterculture broke laws by taking over buildings and holding people captive. A lack of boundaries and rules, as well as the generation gap, disturbed Young. One time while visiting the University of Oklahoma he had an experience with the Free Speech Movement that lessened his opinion of the counterculture. An Arab-American man advocated killing all Jews and proclaimed his message was protected by freedom of speech. The encounter was difficult for Young to accept. On a positive note, Young stressed that music was important to his generation, especially folk singers such as Joan Baez.

Young also possessed a less than positive view of President Johnson. The president's background with allegations of election fraud in the 1948 Texas senatorial campaign troubled him. He believed the Great Society had major flaws in its premise that the country could overcome its problems through government programs. Young preferred more emphasis on self-reliance and also worried that many Great Society programs were run by corrupt bureaucrats. Most bothersome to Young was the fact that "the worst of Vietnam occurred under Johnson." He saw the president's legacy as dominated by the Vietnam War. Young knew many friends in high school and college who served in the conflict. Most of the people he knew joined the military, though some were drafted, especially those from lower socioeconomic classes. Young knew seven or eight people killed in the Vietnam War. Losing friends such as these was difficult for him and made him identify President Johnson with violent loss of life.

Young claims that the effect of the 1960s on the United States has been tremendous. As a professor, he encounters this legacy daily in the academic world. Young believes the 1960s led to an emphasis in universities on academic freedom and social justice. Most in the scholarly world support those concepts. He also sees the 1960s as influencing American political culture. In his view, people now more openly question the government and its policies. Americans continue debating their government's role in promoting and funding social justice. For Young, the legacy of the 1960s continues to the present day.

Dr. Young's wife, Joy Young, has unique recollections about the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson.[17] She was born in 1952 and grew up in Odessa, Texas. After graduating from high school in 1970, Joy Young earned a bachelor's degree in 1973 and a master's degree in 1977 at Baylor University. She currently teaches integrated business writing at Baylor.

Young describes herself as having "a happy and protected childhood" in a conservative family. Young recalls seeing haunting images of the Vietnam War on television that gave her nightmares. She often dreamed that she was an American soldier in Vietnam who died or who killed other people. During her Sunday night church training classes Young and other youth discussed the Vietnam War. She remembers widespread opinions on the war among church members. Some argued that killing enemy soldiers for one's country was not murder while others could not reconcile taking another human life with their faith. One of Young's best friends had two brothers who moved to Canada to avoid the draft. Ironically, their father managed an army surplus store. Young also had a cousin who served in Vietnam not on the frontlines but as a secretary, and when he returned home he moved out to a forest and remained in isolation for a long time. For Young, the Vietnam War was complex and confusing.

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[17] Joy Young oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on July 3, 2005, in Waco, Texas; recording in Briscoe's possession).

Young had a negative view of many aspects of the 1960s. The counterculture troubled Young because its followers seemed lost and poorly groomed. She initially was against the Civil Rights Movement and feared Martin Luther King because violence seemed to follow him wherever he went. Young maintains that she was not aware of the horrors being experienced by African Americans but later was shocked by derogatory comments made against blacks by members of her own family such as her uncle. She described herself as "very sheltered." Young also later came to view the Vietnam War as poorly run by her government. She believed that American leaders were not trying to win the conflict and were wasting American lives.

Young perceived President Johnson in an unenthusiastic manner. Her family had a low opinion of him and regarded him as "crooked" and bad for Texas, even though he was from the Lone Star State. She thought the Great Society was unrealistic and tended toward socialism. When asked about Lyndon Johnson's legacy she replied that she could not think of anything positive to say. Johnson's legacy, in her perspective, was continuing the Vietnam War, a dubious action.

Young believes that the 1960s significantly affected the course of United States history to the present day. She described the last years of the 1960s as "irresponsible freedom" and believes they changed the moral values of Americans. In her view, Americans are now more open about formerly taboo subjects such as sexuality and drugs. She sees less innocence and safety for children today because of the 1960s and its relaxation of traditional ethics. The United States continues to feel shock from losing the Vietnam War, and Americans are more skeptical toward their government. Young sees a positive legacy of the 1960s in a greater tolerance of other races. Working in a university environment, she has experienced students' expectations of more freedom in the classroom to discuss different viewpoints. Technology has further changed teaching styles from the classic lecture format to more professor-student interaction. For Young, Lyndon Johnson and the 1960s leave complex legacies.

Individuals who did not live during President Johnson's years and who did not experience the 1960s have differing perceptions that add much to the United States's collective memory of its past. Leigh Briscoe, a recent graduate of Baylor University, possesses significant knowledge of the 1960s and President Johnson.[18] Briscoe was born in 1984 and grew up in the small South Texas town of Carrizo Springs. When asked about his perception of the 1960s, he considers the Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, the Vietnam War, hippies, the liberalization of American society, and music. He regards the 1960s as a "period of great change."

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[18] Leigh Briscoe oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on July 8, 2005, in Waco, Texas; recording in D. Briscoe's possession).

Briscoe believes that many people in his generation do not have much of an opinion of the 1960s. He himself was taught a minimal amount about the 1960s in high school classes. Most history courses struggled to finish United States history through World War II. He does note that teachers focused on the Civil Rights Movement during Black History Month. Briscoe learned much about the 1960s on his own, through reading and by talking with other people. He believes that most of what people of his generation know about the 1960s is related to popular culture. Many identify with the music of this era performed by musicians such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix. People of his generation have also heard of hippies but largely do not understand the politics for which they stood.

Briscoe has detailed perceptions of themes from the 1960s. When he thinks of the counterculture he perceives it to be a backlash against the Vietnam War and the United States government. His knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement focuses on Martin Luther King, legislation signed by President Johnson, and black people being attacked by police dogs and water hoses while demonstrating for their rights. Briscoe regards the Vietnam War as "a black eye to America" that involved the draft and wasted lives in a failed attempt to prevent the domino theory from becoming reality.

Briscoe knows much about Lyndon Johnson and has a unique view of him. He presented a succinct summary of the president's life, describing his Texas roots, success in the United States Senate, dynamic personality, the Great Society, and the failure of the Vietnam War. He also discussed Lady Bird Johnson and the high respect Texans have for her. Briscoe sees President Johnson as “powerful, skillful, and ambitious.” He thinks Johnson was overall a good man who achieved success with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 but handled the war in Vietnam poorly.

Briscoe believes the era of the 1960s left a major impact on American life that continues to the present day. He believes the sexual revolution and more openness with drug use remain from the 1960s. Abortion rights and gay rights, so controversial today, grew out of this more openness about human sexuality. The Vietnam War affected United States foreign policy by making the country more hesitant to go to war to protect distant countries. Briscoe perceives the generation gap to have lessened since the 1960s, as parents tend to be more liberal now and have similar values as those of their children. Briscoe sees the 1960s as importantly influencing the history of the United States.

Margaret Allee, a senior at Baylor University, has specific perceptions of the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson.[19] She was born in 1984 and grew up in Laredo and Carrizo Springs, Texas. Members of her family, including her mother and her aunt, have influenced Allee in her seeing the 1960s as a time of confusion and searching.

Allee believes there are two basic views her generation has of the 1960s. One opinion sees the era as a “magical time period” with great music, freedom to experiment with drugs, and progressive social reforms. Another viewpoint perceives the 1960s as a time of waste. Members of her generation often look with pity upon seeing an “old burned out hippie” and think of the lives wasted through the failed Vietnam War. Allee also points out, similarly to Briscoe, that people her age think about music when they reflect on the 1960s. Music of that era speaks to young people though musicians such as

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[19] Margaret Allee oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on July 8, 2005, in Waco, Texas; recording in Briscoe’s possession).

Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and the Beatles. Perhaps music is one of the most enduring legacies of the 1960s.

When Allee thinks about the Vietnam War, she reflects on how it continues to hurt people physically and mentally today. Allee is saddened by seeing the vast amounts of homeless people in the United States, many of whom are Vietnam veterans. She recently traveled to San Francisco and was shocked by the number of homeless Vietnam veterans in the area. A friend of her mother who served in Vietnam was exposed to Agent Orange, a harmful chemical used in the war. His first child died at childbirth, his older daughter has a heart murmur, and his younger daughter was born with Down's syndrome. Doctors theorize his children have experienced health problems because of his exposure to Agent Orange in the Vietnam War. Allee states she was taught little in school about the Vietnam War or the 1960s. The small information that was covered in her classes used fiction and film to tell the story of the Vietnam War from soldiers' points of view. Allee believes many of her teachers may have been uncomfortable teaching their students about controversial subjects such as the Vietnam War and the counterculture since they themselves lived through those times.

Allee originally possessed limited knowledge of President Johnson. What she knew she had learned from her family members, some of whom such as Louise Sneed Vine, Allee's great aunt, knew him during his teaching days in Cotulla, Texas, or in later years. She also knew of his involvement with the Vietnam War, which left a negative impression of him. In April 2005, Allee traveled with the author of this work to the LBJ Presidential Library and Ranch. Following her experience at these places, Allee expressed a deeper knowledge of President Johnson and admired his efforts in the Great

Society. She had not previously known of those domestic initiatives and was surprised to learn that the Job Corps was a part of the Great Society. Allee's mother worked for the Job Corps in her early twenties. Allee thus gained a broader appreciation of President Johnson.

Phil Young, a statistics graduate student at Baylor University, has specific views of the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson.[20] Young is the son of Dean and Joy Young. He was born in 1981 and grew up in Waco, Texas. When asked what came to mind when he thinks of the 1960s, Young exclaimed, "Revolution against The Man!" or revolution against the government. He also thinks of youth rebellion, openness with sex and drugs, and a change in the social climate. Young said his familiarity with the era comes from listening to his father's recollections. His knowledge about Vietnam is heavily influenced by films such as *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Platoon*, and *Apocalypse Now*. Due to his father's influence and the themes of those movies, Young possesses a negative perception of the Vietnam War.

Young holds a mixed view of President Johnson. His parents were not particularly fond of him, and he could never remember Johnson when having to list the presidents in school. He believes Johnson is perhaps often overlooked. Young in recent years has read about Johnson and discussed him with friends and sees Johnson to be a more human figure who grieved over the Vietnam War. Young considers Johnson as a difficult figure to understand.

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[20] Phil Young oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on June 28, 2005, in Waco, Texas; recording in Briscoe's possession).

Tarren Oswald, a senior at Baylor University, admits she knows little about Lyndon Johnson and the 1960s.[21] Oswald was born in 1985 and grew up in Sulphur Springs, Texas. When asked what she thinks about when reflecting on the 1960s, she discussed President John F. Kennedy and his assassination. She also described her perceptions of drugs, hippies, and protests from the era. She was not familiar with the Vietnam War and knew little about the Civil Rights Movement except that Martin Luther King was a key figure. Oswald has limited knowledge of Lyndon Johnson beyond knowing he was an American president. She explained that she was not taught much at all in school about the 1960s, the Vietnam War, or Lyndon Johnson. Oswald admits that she represents a large portion of her generation that has very limited knowledge of the United States's past.

LBJ Across Texas

Across the Texas landscape many museums, institutions, and sites exist that tell unique stories about Lyndon Johnson. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum in Austin, Texas, is the most important site dedicated to studying the former president and his legacy.[22] The institution is part of a system of presidential libraries administered by the National Archives and Records Administration and was formally dedicated on May 22, 1971. The purpose of the LBJ Library and Museum is to preserve and make available for study Lyndon Johnson's papers and historical memorabilia. The

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[21] Tarren Oswald oral history interview (interviewed by Dolph Briscoe IV on July 8, 2005, in Waco, Texas; recording in Briscoe's possession).

[22] *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum* (Charlotte: C. Harrison Conroy, n.d.), This guidebook was purchased by the author at the institution's museum store; and "Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum," <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/>.

Library holds forty-five million pages of documents and the Museum offers numerous exhibits regarding Johnson's life and times. Often the Library and Museum presents temporary exhibits dealing with various topics and events in United States history.

The author of this thesis visited the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum on several occasions to evaluate the image this institution portrays of President Johnson to Americans today. The Library and Museum is truly spectacular. I first viewed a twenty-minute documentary of the life of Lyndon Johnson. The film is an important feature in the image the institution attempts to convey of the native Texan and surely has a significant impact on visitors. It surveys Johnson's life, focusing especially on his presidential years. I found the film to be accurate and was pleased by its presentation of controversial aspects of the Johnson administration, such as the Vietnam War and the growing opposition among Americans to that conflict. The documentary devoted much attention to President Johnson's successes in domestic reform through his Great Society programs. The movie also personalizes the former president in a way that encourages viewers to sympathize and identify with LBJ the man. The film states that Johnson deeply cared about helping others and did his best in accomplishing the Great Society measures and even in his prosecution of the hated Vietnam War. I see an aspect of deep tragedy in President Johnson and I came away from the documentary perceiving him as a man of convictions in a troublesome and complex time.

The image of President Johnson the film presents is largely how the museum's exhibits also portray him. The first floor of the museum tells the story of Lyndon Johnson and the United States during the entire span of the president's lifetime from 1908 to 1973. This observer found the display very moving. The exhibits begin with childhood pictures of Johnson and describe his humble beginnings. Also pictured are Lady Bird Johnson's early years, along with images of American history during that era emphasizing the United States's involvement in World War I. As the visitor walks through the exhibit he or she will find discussion about the decade of the 1920s with its lightened moral standards and growing popularity of the automobile. Presented with those images of the Jazz Age are high school pictures of the Johnsons.

The subsequent displays depict the years 1929 to 1940, focusing on the perils of the Great Depression and the growing threat of war in Europe. During this era Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson married. Johnson also began his career as a congressman during that time, and an important picture in the display shows the young LBJ meeting President Franklin D. Roosevelt, foreshadowing Johnson's later conviction about becoming the heir to FDR and the New Deal. An exhibit on the years 1941 to 1945 depict the United States and its involvement in World War II and show Johnson's actions as an officer in the U.S. Naval Reserve.

Displays pertaining to the 1950s focus upon Lyndon Johnson's rising career as a United States senator and eventual Senate majority leader. The exhibit shows the prominence of the Cold War in American life, previewing the future president's later justification for his escalation of American involvement in the Vietnam War. Emphasizing Johnson's commitment to civil rights, an emotional display shows relics from the segregated South such as signs, posters, and pictures that dramatize the trauma of racism. The exhibit suggests that Johnson will later work to end the evils of segregation. This observer was particularly moved by that exhibit. The years 1960 to 1963 describe Johnson in his role as vice president to President John F. Kennedy. A picture of the Berlin Wall depicts the heightening tensions of the Cold War, and an inspiring picture of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech presents growing national attention to the movement for racial equality.

The next sections are dedicated to exploring the presidential years of Lyndon Johnson. Pictures and descriptions show the dramatic circumstances of the Kennedy assassination, which thrust Johnson into the presidency. A handsome mural covers an entire wall showing copies of documents dealing with the Great Society. At the same instance, protruding from this wall are three-dimensional human faces of all ages and races showing how the domestic reforms of the Great Society impacted Americans of all backgrounds. The president is referred to as an “activist, pragmatist, and optimist” in his relentless pursuit of the Great Society’s reforms. Other sections of this exhibit highlight the president’s encouragement of space exploration and his frequent travels to foreign nations. Much of this exhibit explores the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, giving depictions of the new youth counterculture along with music from this decade playing in the background. Also included is discussion of Johnson’s role in the Vietnam War. The exhibits do not attempt to justify the president’s handling of the conflict in Southeast Asia but instead show the horror and complexity of this war. A display titled “Faces of the Vietnam War” presents pictures of young soldiers who actually served in this conflict. Attention is further given to the chaotic year 1968 with events such as the Tet Offensive, Johnson’s decision not to seek another term in office, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and urban race riots. Finally, a section in that exhibit describes Johnson’s life in retirement on his ranch in the Texas Hill Country.

The second floor of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum is equally impressive. Visitors look up to the tall ceiling and see through glass windows the third through seventh floors displaying bright red boxes holding archival collections of documents. An impressive brass mural lines the front wall showing portraits of Johnson with a succession of American presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy. The second floor also contains exotic foreign gifts presented to the Johnsons while they were in the White House, as well as presents from people all across the United States. This area of the facility also includes portraits of all the United States presidents and first ladies. There is even a life-size autotonomic recreation of LBJ that entertains visitors with humorous stories and recollections. The eighth floor recreates scenes from the Johnson White House. There is a full-scale recreation of the Oval Office. “The First Lady’s Gallery” commemorates the activities and accomplishments of Lady Bird Johnson throughout her life.

The Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum is truly a special institution that influences how Americans perceive one of their most controversial presidents. The Library and Museum presents Johnson as an interesting and complex individual who did his best in tumultuous and extremely difficult historic circumstances. Supporters of this facility regard President Johnson as someone to be remembered, honored, and appreciated. I was impressed by the Library and Museum’s willingness to discuss both positive and negative aspects of the president’s life and career. People who visit this special institution leave with a balanced understanding of President Johnson and his legacy.

Another significant site that influences Americans' perspectives on Lyndon Johnson is the LBJ Ranch, a state and national historical park near Johnson City and Stonewall, Texas.[23] Johnson City and Stonewall are small Texas towns deep in the Hill Country. Upon entering Johnson City visitors will see on the side of the highway a large sign proclaiming, "Johnson City Home Town of Lyndon B. Johnson," complete with a large cowboy hat at the top of the marker. In Johnson City there is a Visitor Center and Park Headquarters for the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Park. The facility presents tributes to President Johnson and printed guides are available to direct guests to the LBJ Ranch.

The LBJ Ranch is about fourteen miles west of Johnson City, very near Stonewall. The ranch is located on the beautiful banks of the Pedernales River in the Texas Hill Country. Once inside the ranch's boundaries, visitors find another headquarters with information about guided tours and self-guided tours. Driving across the ranch roads visitors observe the fenced-in "Texas White House" where the Johnson family lived. Several unique structures were recreated on the LBJ Ranch to provide visitors with a feeling of what Johnson's early years were like. Near the Pedernales River sits a remodeled early twentieth century schoolhouse, reminiscent of the school Johnson attended as a child, and emphasizing Johnson's belief in the importance of a quality education for all Americans. The former president's boyhood home also has been restored to show visitors how his childhood house appeared. Visitors can also walk to the

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[23] "Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and Historic Site," <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park/lbj/lbj.htm>; and "Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Park (National Park Service), <http://www.nps.gov/lyjo/>.

Johnson Family Cemetery and see the graves of President Johnson and other members of his family.

People visiting the LBJ Ranch cannot help but be struck by how important Texas was to Lyndon Johnson. The LBJ Ranch shows visitors where Johnson sought refuge and later retired. The ranch and boyhood home personalize Johnson. Visitors can identify with LBJ when they see the place of his upbringing and his family home throughout his life. As this chapter has illustrated, Lyndon Johnson and his times remain large across the United States in its landscape and in the minds of its citizens.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Lyndon Johnson left the White House on January 20, 1969. He and his wife retired to the LBJ Ranch near Stonewall. Being out of political office required major adjustments for the former president, but he found ways to occupy his time. Johnson enjoyed spending days with his family and managing his ranch. He worked on his memoirs and watched the progress of his presidential library and school of public affairs. Many friends came to visit the Johnsons at their ranch. Unfortunately, President Johnson's health began deteriorating seriously during his retirement.[1]

In December of 1972 the LBJ Library sponsored a symposium on civil rights, bringing in leaders from across the country, several whom had worked with President Johnson. The conference included participants from various factions of the Civil Rights Movement, the traditional as well as the more militant. The weather during the symposium turned out to be bitterly cold, and LBJ was not feeling well. Determined to attend the conference, however, the former president went against his doctor's orders and drove from his ranch to the Library. In what became one of his last public appearances, Lyndon Johnson gave one of the most moving speeches of his life.

The audience was surprised to see the ailing former president standing at the podium. Obviously in physical pain, Johnson popped nitroglycerine pills into his mouth. He spoke of his pride in his work for civil rights, declaring, "Of all the records that are housed in this Library . . . it is the record of this work which has brought us here that holds the most of myself within it and holds for me the most intimate meanings." Johnson asserted that he hoped the symposium would not merely focus on the accomplishments of his administration in civil rights but would discuss how to make progress in this field for the future. The United States still had so much work to accomplish in the efforts for racial equality, he insisted. Speaking of the historic discriminations suffered by blacks and other minorities in the United States, LBJ proclaimed that his country must continue the "effort to equalize the history of some of our people so that we may open opportunity equally for all of our people." Johnson believed this to be possible if proponents of civil rights maintained courage and determination.

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[1] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 601-23.

Following the applause for LBJ's speech, some of the more militant members of the audience demanded that the symposium not adjourn before organizing a group to issue a condemnation of the lackluster civil rights initiatives of President Richard Nixon. Arguing broke out among audience members, and President Johnson returned to the stage to address the crowd about the issue. LBJ spoke impromptu in a scene that was vintage Johnson. He wanted to discuss this issue from the perspective of a former president.

Johnson called on civil rights leaders to organize themselves and counsel with one another in a respectful manner, to acknowledge their differences, and to find common ground. The former president stressed that much remained to be accomplished in the Civil Rights Movement, therefore they all must work together. Reflecting on how the civil rights leaders should confront President Nixon, Johnson encouraged them to ask for a meeting but not to personally attack the chief executive. Pondering his own time in the

White House, LBJ explained, “I know the president wants to do what’s right. He doesn’t want to leave the presidency feeling that he’s been unfair, or unjust, or unequal to his fellow man.” Johnson insisted that being respectful toward President Nixon could lead to much progress in the struggle for racial equality.

Concluding his speech, President Johnson promised to continue to support the movement for equality for all Americans. He asserted, “While I can’t provide much go-go at this period of my life, I can provide a lot of hope and dream and encouragement and I’ll sell a few wormy calves now and then and contribute.” In closing, he proclaimed to his audience, “Let’s watch what’s been done and see that it’s preserved but let’s just say we have just begun; we’re starting, and let’s go on. Until every boy and girl born into this land, whatever state, whatever color, can stand on the same level ground, our job will not be done!” The crowd lavished applause on LBJ and rushed to greet him as he left the Library, understanding they had witnessed a truly memorable moment.[2]

President Johnson passed away only six weeks after the civil rights symposium. His health had continued to worsen. He died on January 22, 1973, at the LBJ Ranch. During January 24 and 25, 1973, Johnson’s body lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C. James Blundell, a longtime associate of LBJ, watched the crowd come through the Capitol to pay their respects to the late president. He estimated that 60 percent of the people were African American. Blundell recalled, “I listened to the conversations. One black woman, with a little girl, said, ‘People don’t know it, but he did more for us than anybody, any president, ever did.’ They were aware. That was his epitaph as far as I was concerned." President Johnson was buried in the Johnson family cemetery on the banks of the Pedernales River at the LBJ Ranch on January 25, 1973. His younger daughter, Luci Johnson, later reflected on the funeral services: "I remember a black man hobbled up. He was ninety-two years old. I tried to comfort him by telling him my father loved him and his people. 'Ma'am, you don't have to tell me he loved me. He showed he loved me. A tree would have had to fall over me to keep me from being here today.'"[3]

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[2] Transcript of Remarks by The Honorable Lyndon Baines Johnson, Civil Rights Symposium, December 12, 1972, Statements Collection, LBJ Library; and Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 680-85.

President Johnson's former chief of staff and old friend Marvin Watson gave LBJ's eulogy at his funeral service in the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C., earlier that day. Watson said of the late president, "He was ours, and we loved him beyond any telling of it. We shared his victories and his defeats."[4]

Watson's words summarize the major theme this master's thesis has emphasized. The complexities of Lyndon Baines Johnson and his Great Society mirrored the complexities of the United States and its shifting identity during the 1960s. In pursuing a Great Society at home and abroad, LBJ sought to honor historic conceptions of American identity and purpose. He achieved glorious victory with legislative accomplishments in civil rights, education, healthcare, and improving the quality of life for millions of Americans. At the same time, however, Johnson suffered massive failure in the Vietnam War and was haunted by racial turmoil in the nation's impoverished inner cities and increasing disillusionment with his administration at home. The complex story of Lyndon Johnson and his life is as much a story of the United States as it is an account of an extremely complicated individual. His triumph and tragedy symbolize the United States's prospects and limitations.

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[3] Miller, *Lyndon*, 677-79; and Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 622-23.

[4] W. Marvin Watson, *Chief of Staff: Lyndon Johnson and His Presidency* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), 312-13, 343-45.

Perhaps Lyndon Baines Johnson expressed the truth best in the closing of his final State of the Union message on January 14, 1969, only days before he left office. He stated, "I hope it may be said, a hundred years from now, that by working together we helped to make our country more just, more just for all of its people, as well as to insure and guarantee the blessings of liberty for all of our posterity. That is what I hope. But I believe that at least it will be said that we tried."[5]

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[5] "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1969*, 10 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965-1970), 2: 1263-70.

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