

ABSTRACT

Manic Depression: Lyndon Johnson and the 1965 Watts Riots

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When Lyndon Johnson inherited the presidency from President Kennedy, he attempted to fulfill the social vision JFK left behind, while at the same time harnessing the unique opportunity to institute his own, even further-reaching political agenda. Beginning with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Johnson manipulated America's affection of Kennedy, as well as the growing influence of Martin Luther King, to rouse Americans' consciences into the acceptance of further Civil Rights legislation, the culmination being the passage of the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. Despite the overflowing sentiment of optimism from Johnson that the tide was turning, five days later the Watts Riots erupted, essentially destroying the naive illusion of social and racial progress. The result was the unveiling of the failure of Johnson's paternalistic approach to all facets of political life. Instead of LBJ being able to provide easy solutions and fatherly bestowments, Johnson tragically ushered in an era of increasing black militancy and white backlash.

Manic Depression: Lyndon Johnson and the 1965 Watts Riots

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1. Introduction	1
The Ticking Clock	
From Jubilation to Despair	
Symptoms of a Larger Illness	
2. Camelot Come True for LBJ	9
The Pitfalls and Possibilities of following a Political Legend	
Seizing Election and Implementing Policy	
The 1964 Election and the Birth of the Great Society	
The Race against Time	
Lyndon Johnson's Paternalistic Nature	
3. 1965: Soaring Hopes and Shattered Dreams	28
Lyndon Johnson's First Inauguration as Elected President	
The Quest for a Voting Rights Act	
Selma, Alabama and America's Conscience	
President Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" Speech to Congress	
LBJ's Commencement Address at Howard University	
4. "How Could This Have Happened?"	55
Lyndon Johnson's Reaction to the Watts Riots	
Martin Luther King's Reaction to the Watts Riots	

An Already Squeamish White America Says Stop	
The Rise of a Militant Black Voice and the Rejection of Patience	
The Black Panther Party	
5. <i>Whitewash over Watts</i>	77
The Rapid Pace of the McCone Commission	
The “Riffraff” Theory	
The UCLA Los Angeles Riot Study (LARS)	
6. Conclusion	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY	110

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Ticking Clock

When Lyndon Johnson was handed the reins of executive power in 1963, he inherited a powerful, yet dangerous, gift from his predecessor. The popularity and tragedy of John F. Kennedy afforded Johnson a level of nationwide support and credibility that he could not have had on his own, but at the same time he was cursed with the seemingly inescapable fate of never being able to completely fulfill the political legacy that Kennedy had begun. The task of following a political icon such as JFK was inherently fraught with perils, but whether Johnson liked it or not, it was his burden to bear.

Although LBJ was keenly aware that the shadow cast by JFK could potentially dim his own political star, he was also pragmatic enough to realize that the ongoing presence of the former president was unavoidable. Rather than distancing himself from Kennedy in an effort to assert his individuality, Johnson instead embraced the enthusiasm and momentum that Kennedy had generated, in an effort to fuel his own political and social visions. Put rather cynically, Johnson knew he could exploit the American people's love of Kennedy as a means to achieve the passing of Civil Rights legislation that JFK had been in favor of, which would inevitably allow him to usher in his own legislative agenda further down the line.

Johnson also realized, however, that there was an incredibly short window of time in which he could ride the cresting wave created by the Kennedy's assassination, and that

the clock began ticking the second he took the oath of office. Realizing the political landscape, Lyndon Johnson decided to mount an all-out blitzkrieg on the social, economic and racial injustices crippling America, knowing that the support he enjoyed from the American people and Congress was ever-fleeting. Unfortunately, there was no way of knowing exactly when the support and goodwill created by Kennedy would come to an abrupt end.

Keeping that in mind, Johnson made the most of his opportunity. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, which Kennedy had supported, quickly gained Congressional passage, which only added to the momentum that LBJ enjoyed. The legislation led to genuine improvement in the effort to destroy segregation and discrimination, and the hopes and expectations of countless Americans rose. The culmination of the support for LBJ could clearly be seen in the incredible landslide victory that Johnson enjoyed in the 1964 election. As the optimism continued into 1965, fueled as well by a booming economy, Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King knew they were treading through perilous waters, but they remained hopeful that even more gains could be made in their struggle for civil rights.

In the summer of 1965, a turning point seemed to have arrived, as MLK led the march from Selma, Alabama, in response to the illegal denial of African Americans' right to vote. The brutal treatment the marchers received outraged not only African Americans, but also a large segment of white America. The indignation at the violent denial of the right to vote to American citizens, coupled with the aura of support from John F. Kennedy's legacy, gave leaders like MLK and LBJ the moral authority to continue moving forward on the march toward social justice and equality. Now that

white Americans, perhaps most immediately those in Congress, were genuinely interested in the struggle for civil rights, an increase in the power to seriously get things done seemed clear. But time was of the essence.

From Jubilation to Despair

In the wake of Martin Luther King's historic actions in Alabama, President Johnson's political power soared to an all-time high. He had successfully harnessed the power that JFK had left behind, and augmented it by using his most trusted leaders in the Civil Rights movement to rouse American support in favor of social equality through events such as the March from Selma. Perhaps the most important byproduct of the political outrage created by Selma was the fact that it played a crucial role in galvanizing Congress to pass the 1965 Voting Right Act, legislation that LBJ and most other leaders thought impossible only a few months earlier. Hopes of many Americans were raised to a new high, and well-planned legislation seemed to be the answer to all of America's problems. Jubilation in the wake of the Voting Rights Act made LBJ appear completely capable of fulfilling JFK's unfinished agenda.

Lyndon Johnson was genuinely optimistic that America had indeed turned a corner, and he was hopeful that legislation such as the Voting Rights Act was proof that significant inroads could be made in eliminating the quagmire of social, racial and economic injustices crippling America. Prominent civil rights leaders such as King were equally optimistic after the Voting Rights Act was passed, and it seemed as though the president's plan to usher America into a new era of equality just might become a reality.

Less than a week later, however, this naïve idealism collapsed in extraordinary fashion, as rioting by chronically poverty-stricken African Americans broke out in the

Watts section of Los Angeles. The sense of achievement and optimism produced by the signing of the Voting Rights Act was matched by an equally surprising, disturbing and dividing blow in the violence of the Watts riots. The true damage of the riots was not only the massive loss of life and property, but also the symbolic shattering of President Johnson's approach to dealing with social injustice. The residents of Watts were essentially saying that gestures such as Voting Rights were not what they needed, for legislation alone did not address the actual social and economic problems. Frustrated African Americans wanted not simply improvement in the realm of racial discrimination. They wanted abundant economic opportunities. In other words, they were saying that Johnson and King's chosen approach to civil rights would never work.

After the initial shock, however, MLK, like many African Americans, expressed sympathy for the rioters and the desperation driving them to violence. In stark contrast, white Americans, already leery of the full ramifications of the Civil Rights movement, expressed outrage toward the violence, and criticized civil rights leaders, including both King and Johnson, for causing the problem. The majority of white Americans simply did not accept such violence, but African Americans on the other side were equally adamant that they could not live in such impoverished conditions any longer. The events of Selma had helped bring black and white Americans closer together, but the divisiveness of the Watts riots tragically made them opposed to one another like no time since the Civil War and Reconstruction. Lyndon Johnson's window of opportunity had closed shut.

The manic-depressive momentum swing between the Voting Rights Act and the Watts riots crippled LBJ's presidency, leaving Americans, both white and black alike, wondering how conditions had deteriorated so quickly and so drastically. Every bit of

political promotion that Johnson had done leading up to the Voting Rights Act seemed to have evaporated. The situation suddenly seemed grim, and President Johnson would have had to concede the fact that the last drop of the John F. Kennedy magic had run out. The only thing LBJ could do was ask himself how such a shocking turn of events could have happened, and how he might best control the damage.

Symptoms of a Larger Illness

The Watts riots were not simply a random twist of fate that appeared out of thin air to tarnish Johnson's legacy. On the contrary, they actually served to shed light on a host of political, social and economic miscalculations that led to the surprise disaster. In their haste to fix all of America's problems while morale was still high, the Johnson Administration became paternalistic and controlling in its approach to civil rights, which ultimately served to poison efforts at social justice and ruin their initial success. Even if LBJ and other politicians, Democratic and Republican alike, making these decisions genuinely desired social justice, the way they chose to engage in reform eventually led to more racial disharmony in America.

The successful passage of the Voting Rights Act was indeed a monumental achievement for the Johnson Administration, but it also revealed the fact that many officials missed the fundamental problem: African Americans struggling in poverty were fed up with bureaucratic gestures like the Voting Right Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the War on Poverty. They were also tired of being told to wait patiently for their salvation. Although politicians and civil rights leaders cheered in the wake of such

legislation, the people who should have benefited most from civil rights legislation were reaching the breaking point in their endless wait for concrete change.

The right to vote was not at the top of a lot of their list of priorities, so what they perceived as more political posturing only infuriated them more. Languishing and fuming in crime-infested ghettos, access to public facilities did nothing to alleviate their suffering. The War on Poverty seemed like nothing more than a band-aid. They wanted decent jobs, housing and schools, and opportunities for their children. The Johnson Administration may have made progress in addressing the problems plaguing Southern African Americans, but it was clear that an inadequate amount of attention had been paid to those suffering across the nation.

The fact that the Watts riots came as such a surprise accounts for much of its profound and lasting impact on the minds of Americans, and Johnson himself was one of the most intensely affected by the events. The president was so crushed by the outbreak of the riots that he essentially entered a state of seclusion at his Texas ranch. Even his closest aides could not reach him for several days, and it was obvious that even LBJ had been caught off-guard by the urban disturbance.¹ Johnson's uncharacteristic behavior in the wake of the Watts riots illustrated just how surprised he really was, but perhaps LBJ should not have been surprised at all.

Although the Johnson Administration had achieved unprecedented success in the battle for social justice, the Watts riots dramatically exposed the President's approach to Civil Rights as being fundamentally dysfunctional. His methods in dealing with nearly every facet of the Civil Rights Movement reeked of paternalism, naiveté and hubris, and

¹ Joseph A. Califano, *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 54-58.

the Watts Riots essentially unveiled those flaws. LBJ was racing against time to fulfill his dreams, yet he was asking beleaguered to simply wait patiently. The necessity of a fast-paced approach to initiate change, and the reality of how slowly such political and social change could actually occur, simply did not meld.

This thesis will examine the Johnson Administration's efforts in the Civil Rights Movement leading up to and including the Watts riots, and will show how the Administration's paternalistic handling of events ultimately had a detrimental effect on its efforts to achieve equality. By focusing on Johnson's rise to executive power, the speeches he made in an attempt to sell his plan, and the manner in which he attempted to control the actions of the most prominent civil rights leaders, Johnson's overconfidence comes to the forefront.

Johnson's overbearing and controlling approach only served to create more problems than it solved. His goal was to bring Americans of all races closer together, but instead events such as the Watts riots actually stimulated more racial hostility than solidarity and social harmony. Unfortunately, by the time the Watts riots occurred, Johnson's flaws were too deeply ingrained, and the borrowed time he enjoyed from JFK had quickly run out and disappeared finally. While it is true that legislation such as the 1966 Civil Rights Act did finally address national, as opposed to exclusively Southern, problems, it was simply too late.

By overlooking the true problems plaguing African Americans, LBJ missed his chance to enact even more radical legislation. Even worse, the Vietnam War would soon sap the funds necessary to achieve his dreams, and the urban riots that would occur in subsequent years underscored the ongoing flaws in LBJ's approach. Lyndon Johnson's

political power quickly deteriorated even further, ultimately culminating in his decision not to seek reelection in 1968. Although the political landscape that Johnson was forced to confront in 1968 was indeed chaotic and insurmountable, the real turning point came in August of 1965, when the Watts Riots dealt a mortal blow to the grandiose and precious plans of Lyndon Johnson.

CHAPTER TWO

Camelot Come True for LBJ

The Pitfalls and Possibilities of following a Political Legend

During his time as president, John F. Kennedy was able to provoke an ever-expanding sense of optimism in the American people like no other president had in American history. Kennedy preached about the possibilities the country had for moving forward on the path to progress, and an incredible number of Americans bought into these hopes and promises. JFK assured an improved life for all segments, and all ethnicities of the American public, and there truly was belief that the president was not merely making grandiose promises that could not be fulfilled. Whether it was besting the Soviets in the arena of space exploration, stimulating the economy to soaring new heights, or bestowing American minorities with new hope, it seemed as though John F. Kennedy could accomplish anything.

Because many Americans revered Kennedy as a sort of political superhero bent on ushering America into a new era of international glory, his assassination created an equally massive sense of tragedy and despair. This reality placed Lyndon Johnson in a most precarious situation, and it was unclear how the public would react to the man fated to fill Kennedy's shoes. Johnson himself was quite wary of how he would be looked at by the American people, saying, "I became president. But for millions of Americans I was still illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper....And then there were the bigots and the dividers and the Eastern intellectuals, who were waiting to knock me down before I could even begin to

stand up. The whole thing was almost unbearable.”¹ Even the often hubristic LBJ realized what an incredible set of obstacles were placed before him as he attempted to follow this political legend.

In addition to those who would no doubt attempt to discredit the presidential replacement, Johnson also had to contend with the lack of exposure that the seemingly powerless post of Vice President had cursed him with. According to Robert Dallek, “In the first days of his presidency, only 5 percent of the public felt they knew very much about LBJ, while 67 percent said they know next to nothing about him,” and perhaps most damningly, “Seventy percent of the country had doubts about how it could ‘carry on without’ Kennedy.”² Clearly Johnson had his work cut out for him if he intended to harness the passion that Kennedy invoked, rather than be crushed under the weight of it.

Despite all signs pointing to probable failure for Kennedy’s successor, Johnson defied the odds. Perhaps the reason LBJ was able to successfully navigate a situation so obviously fraught with perils was his resolve to confront the issues, rather than avoiding them. Johnson described his shrewd technique, saying, “A nation stunned, shaken to its very heart, had to be reassured that the government was not in a state of paralysis. I had to convince everyone everywhere that the country would go forward...Any hesitation or wavering, any false step, any sign of self-doubt, could have been disastrous.... The times cried out for leadership.”³ If ever there was a politician who was capable of grabbing the reigns of power with a firm grasp, it was Lyndon Johnson, and there is little doubt that

¹ Lyndon Johnson quoted by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1976), 170.

² Robert Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 145.

³ Lyndon Johnson quoted in *Ibid.*

this “take charge” attitude was a large reason why he was able to harness the power of JFK’s legacy, rather than succumbing to a more dismal fate. As Doris Kearns Goodwin astutely described LBJ’s efforts, “Clearly, there were both opportunities and dangers in Johnson’s situation; the point is that Lyndon Johnson capitalized on the advantages.”⁴

LBJ was indeed able to grasp his own share of political power, but it must also be understood that this was not accomplished by making radical changes in policy and practice. On the contrary, Johnson’s success stemmed from his efforts to create a seamless and smooth transition from one Administration to the next. Again, Johnson did not shy away from the tragedy of JFK, but rather used it to his advantage as a means of rallying American support for himself. In a speech to Congress only a few days after Kennedy’s assassination, he urged the country “to do away with uncertainty and doubt,” and to be certain, “that from the brutal loss of our leader we will derive not weakness, but strength; that we can and will act and act now.”⁵ Where some less than self-assured politicians would have cowered in the presence of such a challenge, Lyndon Johnson embraced it as the chance he had been waiting for to carve out his own political legacy.

Underscoring even further his intentions to resume Kennedy’s plans, LBJ said, “Let us begin. Today, in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow American, let us continue.”⁶ This statement illustrates not only LBJ’s desire to embed himself with the American people’s trust in Kennedy, but also to further support by declaring it a “moment of new resolve.” In other words, LBJ was hoping not only to

⁴ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* 171.

⁵ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Dallek, *Lyndon Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 146.

⁶ Lyndon Johnson quoted in *Ibid.*, 146.

harness the support that JFK had created for him, but to argue that an even more massive level of commitment was required from the American people because of the tragic way in which this political visionary was cut down in his prime. Johnson's efforts to "create a sense of continuity and unity in the country" were indeed successful, evidenced by the fact that at the first of the year his approval rating was 79 percent, with only 3 percent disapproving of his performance.⁷ It is hard to imagine that anyone could have assumed the power of the presidency with such authority in the aftermath of such a dramatic tragedy, but undoubtedly Lyndon Johnson had done just that.

Seizing Election and Implementing Policy

Lyndon Johnson knew exactly what he was doing by closely linking himself to John F. Kennedy. Now that he had gained the trust of the American people in the wake of JFK's death, he knew he had to use it to accomplish the changes he believed America so desperately needed. Johnson was keenly aware of this, saying, "Everything I had ever learned in the history books taught me that martyrs have to die for causes. John Kennedy had died. But his 'cause' was not really clear. That was my job. I had to take the dead man's programs and turn it into a martyr's cause."⁸ Johnson's words border on the macabre, but that did not mean that he was not correct in his beliefs.

In a November 27 speech to Congress, Johnson illustrated the shrewd technique of invoking Kennedy as a means to achieving his own political goals, saying that "no...eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest

⁷ Ibid., 147.

⁸ LBJ quoted in Ibid., 149.

possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long.”⁹ Johnson also strongly advocated the passage of an \$11 billion tax cut that Kennedy had championed as the instrument to rouse a struggling economy.¹⁰ This was Johnson way of using Kennedy as a martyr, and the move had the dual effect. First, it guaranteed support for a variety of political programs that Johnson wanted past, second, it made whatever LBJ might advocate in the future seem like the proper carrying out of a martyr’s wishes, and not the political maneuverings of a conniving politician, as many had labeled LBJ.

This was indeed a brilliant move by Johnson, for he was able to harness great support due to the reverence for Kennedy. On the other hand, however, he was also putting his own political agenda into place, because he was not merely exploiting people’s love of Kennedy, but rather he merely shared many of the same ideas for liberal reform that Kennedy had. In other words, it looked as though Johnson was the noble caretaker of Kennedy’s legacy, but in reality he was actually getting all of the legislation he wanted successfully implemented by invoking the ghost of JFK as the basis for the legitimacy of these legislations. By doing this, Johnson afforded himself a level of autonomy, while still appearing to be carrying out Kennedy’s political wishes. The more Johnson could associate himself with Kennedy in the minds of Americans, the better chance he had for election in the 1964 campaign.

Although it is true that Johnson continued to link his political programs with those of Kennedy’s, by 1964 he had already begun to turn up the heat in some areas Kennedy never had. Perhaps the most notable was the manner in which Johnson declared all-out

⁹ LBJ quoted in *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

war on poverty. Johnson announced his plan during the 1964 State of the Union Address, saying, “This Administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America....Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it, and above all, to prevent it.”¹¹ These indeed were ambitious aims, but it seems that LBJ was genuinely confident that he was the political colossus capable of doing it.

Johnson continued to push the envelope further than ever, asking the next session of Congress to do “more for civil rights than the last hundred sessions combined”; to enact “the most far-reaching tax cut of our time”; to achieve “the most effective, efficient foreign aid program ever; and...to build more homes, more schools, more libraries, and more hospitals than any single session of Congress in the history of our Republic. All this and more can and must be done. It can be done by this summer.”¹² Johnson was no longer simply asking for what Kennedy had wanted, but rather was now demanding that even more drastic steps be taken than even Kennedy had dreamed of. Demands such as these reflected not only LBJ’s resolve to make the most of the time in which he enjoyed support, but also showed the overconfidence and hubris that marked Johnson’s plans to change America for the better.

The 1964 Election and the Birth of the Great Society

During the first few months of his Administration, Lyndon Johnson had done a brilliant job of using the tragic death of John Kennedy as a means of galvanizing support for the most important aspects of the liberal agenda: Kennedy’s tax cut, the war on poverty, and civil rights. Even JFK himself would have been proud of the way Johnson

¹¹ LBJ quoted in *Ibid.*, 148.

¹² LBJ quoted in *Ibid.*, 148.

acted as steward of his ambitious political aims, but the fact remained that these steps were essentially just that: Kennedy's goals, and not Johnson's. LBJ had to convince Americans that he was not merely the caretaker of Kennedy's dreams. Instead he had to convince the public that his vision, which went even further than Kennedy's, was worthy of their confidence.

The most concrete way of determining whether or not the American people were willing to buy into Johnson's incredible vision was the outcome of the 1964 election. In order for Johnson to put his own personal mark on the history of the United States, he would have to be elected President for a full term. Indeed, Johnson had done a shrewd job of linking himself to JFK, but seeking election on his own would require him to present himself personally to the American people, and to convince them that his motives were true and altruistic. Using Kennedy as a martyr in order to achieve political goals could only take him so far, and the real test would be whether Americans would actually buy into Johnson's personal vision for a new America. Fortunately for LBJ, the American people gave him a resounding vote of approval as he was elected President by an unprecedented majority, thus legitimizing Johnson in the minds of Americans, as well as in the mind of LBJ himself.

The result of this electoral victory "had given an independent legitimacy to his Presidency, his own ambitions and intentions detached from any responsibility for another's legacy. This enabled him to accelerate and more openly express his uniquely personal influence over the conduct of national affairs."¹³ This meant that Americans believed in Johnson's plans, and his election was perhaps the greatest source of

¹³ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 213.

momentum that would spur LBJ on a rollercoaster journey in an effort to fix America. The American people had already shown that they considered LBJ as a worthy caretaker of Kennedy's political dreams, but now Johnson was on his own, and he was free to raise the political stakes in ways Kennedy never had a chance to.

Even before his elected as President, Lyndon Johnson expressed this sentiment in dramatic terms during the spring of 1964. In a speech at the University of Michigan, he outlined a program that would go beyond the vision of John Kennedy, and instead would reflect his own ideas. The "Great Society" would be not just a continuation of Kennedy's work, but "one that would be his creation, his gift, and the monument to his leadership."¹⁴ In other words, LBJ was no longer just following in the footsteps of JFK, but rather he now had embarked upon a journey to outdo his predecessor, as well as his personal political idol Franklin D. Roosevelt. Johnson recognized that he had a golden opportunity to enact this vision, perhaps most importantly because of the incredible economic abundance that America was enjoying. LBJ hoped that instead of simply making the rich richer, the opportunity could also be harnessed to make the entire country more prosperous, with respect to all social and racial backgrounds.

Recognizing the possibilities of this economic abundance, Johnson said that "the challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life," to prevent "old values" from being "buried under unbridled growth."¹⁵ Johnson hoped that the "Great Society" would be one in which "men are more concerned with the quality of their goals rather than the quantity of their

¹⁴ Ibid., 210.

¹⁵ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Ibid., 210.

goods...where the demands of morality, and the needs of the spirit, can be realized in the life of the nation.”¹⁶ Johnson knew that the economic prosperity was proof that America was making progress, but he pleaded with Americans not to squander this golden opportunity. Instead he wanted to finally bring the segments of American society previously excluded into the abundant national fold.

The fact that there was such economic abundance gave credence to Johnson’s vision, for it showed that progress was not simply a utopian ideal that he was idealistically pleading for, but rather a concrete goal that could be achieved if Americans would only embrace it as an actual possibility.¹⁷ In other words, the fact that America was growing so spectacularly in the economic realm was proof that progress was the unavoidable result of his methods, and that the nation should embrace a similar inevitability in the social realm as well.

Johnson also realized, however, that while the United States did indeed have the resources necessary to change the social conditions of the country, simply obtaining the support of a nation bursting with abundance was not enough. He knew that it would take more than him merely outlining how these changes were to take place, but rather that he would have to have the full cooperation of the country. Johnson said, “We have enough to do it all....We’re the wealthiest nation in the world. And I cannot see why, if we have the will to do it, we can’t provide for our own happiness, education, health, and environment....Everyone’s a little selfish,” but “We need to appeal to everyone to

¹⁶ Lyndon Johnson quoted in *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

restrain their appetite. We're greedy, but not short on the wherewithal to meet our problems.”¹⁸

The Race against Time

In the year following Kennedy's death, Lyndon Johnson had achieved what seemed nearly impossible. He was able to successfully navigate the perilous transition in Presidential Administrations, fulfill the dying wishes of a martyr, and turn the momentum into a stepping stone for achieving his even more grand visions. Johnson must have been giddy at the level of support he enjoyed as the year 1965 drew nigh, but he was also always aware that the clock continued to tick. He knew that the residual support he enjoyed from Kennedy, the legitimacy afforded him by the landslide election of 1964, and the robust American economy could only last so long. In other words, he was keenly aware that 1965 might be his only chance to mold the country in his image. As Joseph Califano, Johnson's top domestic advisor, put it, “LBJ knew that the sympathy generated by John Kennedy's assassination and the huge margin of his own presidential victory in 1964 gave him a unique opportunity to change America, if he could move fast enough.”¹⁹ Again, it was painfully obvious that time was of the essence.

Johnson was forced to work quickly not only to keep the support of white America on his side, but also because of the reaction black America would have to unprecedented changes in their situation. As Califano put it, “Lyndon Johnson saw himself in a desperate race against time as he fought to remedy the damage generations of

¹⁸ Lyndon Johnson quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Joseph A. Califano, *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 11.

prejudice had inflicted on black Americans. He was always in a hurry because he feared that once black Americans sensed the prospect of a better life, their acceptance of discrimination would turn to impatience and dissatisfaction with progress however real, and they would subvert their own cause.”²⁰ African Americans had never known anything but oppression in this country, and it was unclear just how they would react once they got a taste of what was rightfully theirs.

These realities placed Lyndon Johnson in an exceedingly difficult spot. Circumstances forced him to attempt the enactment of social change more dramatic than America had seen since the era of Reconstruction, yet it also had to be done in the shortest amount of time possible. As the year 1965 began, the possibilities seemed endless, but the pitfalls were equally visible as well. Instead of dwelling on the possibility of failure, however, LBJ instead decided to go full steam ahead. Even though LBJ was the consummate politician who always had to be concerned about his own political standing, his Southern roots and firsthand experiences with poverty and injustice weighed even heavier on his heart.

Califano poignantly described this, saying, “For most Americans in the early 1960’s, racial tension had a southern accent....Lyndon Johnson’s Texas roots gave him plenty of raw, firsthand experience with racial discrimination, but by the time he became Vice President he saw civil rights for black Americans as far more than a southern matter. He saw it as an overarching issue of his time. In the spring of 1963, when John Kennedy reported some advisers’ concern about the political negatives of pushing for Negro rights, Johnson had argued that ‘civil rights for the Negro is a moral issue, not a political

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

one.”²¹ Even if there was to be political trouble ahead, LBJ’s conscience still urged him to move forward.

Time, however, was not the only factor that Johnson had to contend with. Although the “take charge” mindset that LBJ exhibited certainly contributed to his ability to accomplish political goals quickly, his incessant need for control of every situation threatened to poison his dreams as well. This need for control went beyond Johnson merely being what many might call a “control freak,” and instead was a symptom of his ingrained paternalistic attitude toward politics and life. Although a paternalistic approach is not necessarily a completely negative way to approach an office with the amount of power that President of the United States entails, the way in which Johnson did it was harmful. He portrayed himself as essentially being the great, benevolent provider of all that was good for America, yielding an unbalanced amount of overconfidence considering the political maelstrom that lay in front of him. In addition, the reality of a paternalistic approach entails demanding that those who are being provided for wait patiently for their endowment. The problem was, however, African Americans were tired of waiting, and telling them to do so was a perilous approach. Nevertheless, it was the approach that Johnson had chosen.

Lyndon Johnson’s Paternalistic Nature

When seeking to understand why Lyndon Johnson’s social and political attitudes were so obviously colored with paternalism, one need only examine a single precedent: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Nearly every single political problem that confronted Lyndon Johnson was always looked at through the eyes of FDR. Johnson freely admitted

²¹ Ibid., 53.

the tremendous influence FDR had on him, saying, “I don’t know that I’d ever have ever come to Congress if it hadn’t been for him. But I do know I got my first great desire for public office because of them.”²² Johnson also credited FDR with his deep interest in the American presidency, saying, “I have felt a deep interest in studying the American Presidency ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt first brought me into the White House when I was only twenty-seven.”²³

FDR, however, was more than simply a source of motivation for LBJ. Roosevelt’s political life truly served as a model for study in the mind of Johnson, and in countless ways LBJ modeled his behavior and approach after the historic president he greatly revered. Even though it was the 1960’s, one could easily tell that Lyndon Johnson was still a 1930’s New Dealer. As John Kenneth Galbraith put it, “Johnson...was truly a Roosevelt man; FDR was ever in his mind as a model of what a good President should be. As with many of our generation when young, Johnson knew his political position only when the President had stated it.”²⁴

Johnson echoed this paternalism, saying, “He was just like a daddy to me always; he always talked to me just that way. He was the one person I ever knew—anywhere—who was never afraid....I know some of them called it demagoguery; they can call it anything they want, but you can be damn sure that the only test he had was this: Was it

²² Lyndon Johnson quoted by William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 122.

²³ Lyndon B. Johnson, *My Hope for America* (New York: Random House, 1964), 14.

²⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith quoted by Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR*, 122.

good for the folks?”²⁵ Just as FDR had done, Johnson himself would also walk the fine line between the fatherly provider, and the charismatic demagogue.

The fatherly relationship was cemented with the death of FDR. A secretary described Johnson’s dramatic reaction to the death, saying, “His grief was just unreal. He just literally wasn’t taking telephone calls and he just literally shut himself up. His grief was vast and deep and he was crying tears. Manly tears, but he actually felt like and expressed this in these terms, that it was just like losing his father.”²⁶ The loss of his political idol FDR was no doubt traumatic, but now that the father figure was gone, it was Johnson’s chance to play daddy. FDR’s was the model that Johnson had chosen to cure America’s ills, and the outcome of Johnson’s presidency rested on the success of such an approach.

A major part of Johnson’s paternalistic approach was his attempt to seize control of a situation, in order to mold it how he saw most fit. He told civil rights leader Charles Evers, “If you want to change the system, get in it and make what you want to make out of it.”²⁷ This quote is quintessentially LBJ, for it shows his willingness to do whatever was necessary, even if it meant bending the rules. He obviously felt most comfortable when he was in the driver’s seat, but he also knew that there were inevitably situations that demanded cooperation from others. Faced with that reality, Johnson’s approach was to control who he was forced to cooperate with. If he had to work with others, then those others had to be on the exact same page he was. This was exceptionally true of his

²⁵ Ibid., 121.

²⁶ Ibid., 122.

²⁷ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Stephen F. Lawson, “Mixing Moderation with Militancy” in Robert A. Divine, *The Johnson Years* (Vol. 3): *LBJ at Home and Abroad*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 82.

approach to the civil rights movement as well as any other facet of his political life. Stephen Lawson stated that LBJ, “Artful in the give-and-take legislative horse trading, Johnson sought out black leaders who knew how to strike a bargain.”²⁸ If a leader had a similar mindset to LBJ, the President knew it was someone he could use to further his agenda.

It was important for Johnson to find these civil rights leaders that he could trust, for even if he wanted to, he could not do everything on his own. Lawson said, “Johnson was astute enough to realize that he could not state-manage the rapidly unfolding Civil Rights drama...he discerned that civil rights leaders would have to retain their independence or their credibility would be challenged by more militant blacks.”²⁹

Johnson knew he had to enlist the influence of these civil rights leaders, but he was also careful to retain his paternalistic control over the situation as well, which meant that there were strict limits on the power Johnson allowed his allies to enjoy.

Lawson described this, saying, “Naturally there were limits to Johnson’s tolerance of criticism, and his patience with individuals lasted as long as they shared his fundamental values and faith in working through the political system.” Johnson found these political kindred spirits in leaders such as, A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, and most of all Roy Wilkins.³⁰ These leaders certainly enjoyed a boost by being brought into the political bosom of LBJ, but they also faced a unique problem as a result. According to Lawson, “One consequence for black leaders such as Wilkins, Young and Randolph

²⁸ Ibid., 83.

²⁹ Ibid., 83.

³⁰ Ibid., 85, 86.

who identified so closely with Johnson was that the relationship narrowed the limits within which they might disagree with the White House. Those individuals who strayed too far from the acceptable boundaries risked falling out of presidential favor.”³¹ In other words, these leaders enjoyed the bounty the fatherly LBJ was willing to provide, but only as long as they towed the company line.

A good example of a leader who crossed the line with LBJ was CORE director James Farmer. Although Johnson liked Farmer, he also believed that the demonstrations his organization was involved in were doing more harm than good. “The Administration emphatically warned CORE to refrain from staging street demonstrations which might ‘get people’s backs up’, and instead lobby for legislation and trying to coordinate its activities through the White House.”³² It is crucial to understand how Farmer was never welcomed by LBJ as his more trusted leaders. Even though Farmer and CORE were after the same goals as the Johnson Administration, that is equality for blacks, because he did not follow orders from the paternalistic Johnson, Farmer was essentially shunned. As Lawson put it, “Given CORE’s increasing militancy, Johnson never felt comfortable with Farmer, who in contrast to Wilkins, Young and Randolph, did not show the kind of loyalty the president demanded.”³³ Simply put, with LBJ it was “either my way or the highway.”

Johnson’s need for control is understandable given the nature of the presidency, but the problem was that the control became less about fixing America, and more about

³¹ Ibid., 86.

³² Ibid., 86; see also Letter, Lyndon B. Johnson to James Farmer, 6/29/65, WHCF, HU 2, LBJ Library.

³³ Lawson, “Mixing Moderation and Militancy,” 86.

Lyndon Johnson fixing America. Perhaps it was his never-ending drive to prove all the sneering Eastern intellectuals wrong, but LBJ clearly wanted to make a mark in history equaled by no previous executive. And he truly believed he could do it. Johnson's mindset began to stray from that of the benevolent provider to a more hubristic and corrosive attitude that he could do anything.

Johnson said in his book *My Hope for America*, "Since World War II, we have multiplied our capabilities as never before, but we have not put them to the fullest use. We have the capacity to abolish hunger. We have the capacity to end poverty and to eliminate most diseases. We even have the capacity to unsnarl traffic."³⁴ These promises are the paramount of grandiosity, but the disturbing part is that Johnson actually believed them. Although Johnson's book was written with the mission of helping him gain support for the 1964 election, and therefore extravagant promises should not be surprising, what Johnson said is still noteworthy. Perhaps the most subtly important phrase of his quote is the "after World War II" part. LBJ's statement spoke volumes about what his mission really was: to "out-Roosevelt" Franklin Roosevelt. Armed with the post-war weapons at his disposal, Johnson truly believed he could do this. He would approach matters just as his mentor had, except this round the timing was right. Instead of the Great Depression that FDR was forced to navigate, LBJ was blessed with an economy seemingly busting at the seams.

To bring matters full circle back to JFK, Johnson's final plea for power was to link JFK, his source of credibility, and FDR, his source of guidance. Invoking the ghosts of both leaders, Johnson said, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy are gone. But

³⁴ Johnson, *My Hope for America*, 22.

our people still dream their dreams and we will carry on.”³⁵ Johnson also stressed the continuity between the two leaders saying that although “John F. Kennedy was taken suddenly from us...the principles and the purposes for which he labored continue to live. Our system of government was shocked, but not paralyzed, and it began quickly to move again toward the high goals of America’s destiny. This continuity of purpose—from man to man, from administration to administration—is the secret of our strength as a party.” Johnson continued, “A generation ago Franklin Roosevelt said that the world must be founded on four freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. When Roosevelt spoke, only a few nations in the world enjoyed those freedoms. A generation later, due in great measure to American leadership, those same freedoms flourish in many other parts of the world.”³⁶ On the surface, what Johnson is saying should certainly not be criticized, for all he is saying is that he believes in the American ideals. The problematic part, however, is using FDR and JFK respective bodies of work as reasoning why LBJ himself should be allowed to bestow his fatherly vision on the children of America. In other words, he was essentially saying that because FDR and JFK were so good for America, Lyndon Johnson would be as well.

Regardless of how he persuaded the American public, in 1965 Lyndon Johnson got his chance to serve as elected president. While the prospect of a strong, fatherly figure certainly appealed to many Americans as being positive, it is easy to see why others were slightly more wary toward the idea. Lyndon Johnson certainly cannot be classified as a leader advocating anything other than equality for all Americans, but he

³⁵ Ibid., 49.

³⁶ Ibid., 127.

was still walking a dangerous tightrope. Although this may be somewhat extreme, where some people see a good-natured fatherly provider, others might see something else: painful memories of the “benevolent” slaveholder. While many white Americans at the time probably would have found this statement absurd, a large segment of African Americans might not have found it as farfetched. Blacks did not simply want to be provided for. They wanted an equal chance to fulfill their own dreams with the freedom and dignity they deserved. Only time would tell if Johnson’s approach would gain him credence in the African American community, or whether it would backfire and project the image that he was just another white politician with no desire to help blacks.

This troublesome question remained to be answered, but as his elected presidency began in 1965, Lyndon Johnson seemed to be bringing all the pieces of the puzzle together to facilitate true social change in America. He had harnessed the influence of a martyred Kennedy, linked himself with the equally paternalistic FDR, and had a trusted group of influential black leaders under his control. The question was, however, how long LBJ could walk the tightrope between provider and paternalist. How long would the “Kennedy magic” keep working for LBJ? And how long would African Americans continue to wait patiently to once again be provided for? The year 1965 held the answer to these questions.

CHAPTER THREE

1965: Soaring Hopes and Shattered Dreams

When January 1965 began, Lyndon Johnson was at the peak of his political career, having received the assuring votes of Americans in the landslide election of 1964. Johnson knew reveled in the limitless potential he seemed to have at his fingertips, and he planned on squeezing every last drop he could out of his opportunity. Just a few weeks prior, in December of 1964, LBJ boasted at his ranch to visiting Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach about the opportunity the landslide gave him to pass all sorts of social legislation.¹ Although he knew full well that he would have to also manage the escalating situation in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson was determined to make his Great Society, as well as the War on Poverty, historic successes.

The confidence Johnson had achieved in the minds of the American people, as well as a growing number of Congressmen, gave him the authority to wage his war on social ills. The fact that the American economy was more robust than ever gave him the essential capital he needed to fight this war. In addition to money, however, he would need legislation to enact real change. Among other issues, Johnson coveted a Voting Rights Act to dispel the problem of discrimination against black voters, but such bills were still too controversial to pass through Congress. Johnson had the

¹ Nicholas Katzenbach, *Some of It Was Fun: Working with RFK and LBJ* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008),155.

means and the will to achieve his dreams, the only question was whether he could sell it completely to Congress and the American public.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance public speeches played in LBJ's efforts to the dramatic events that unfolded in 1965. Just as his mentor FDR had done, Johnson knew he had to reach out and speak directly to the public to sell his executive agenda. One of the most important speeches Johnson gave was his very first speech as the elected President of the United States. On January 20, 1965, he took the oath of office for the first time as the elected executive, and delivered an address bounding with optimism and confidence that concrete change was possible. Johnson was aware of how difficult his task would be, but he was determined to go full speed ahead with as much force as possible.

Lyndon Johnson's First Inauguration as Elected President

In his Inauguration Address, LBJ speaks about the destiny of an entire generation, one that is at a historic crossroads for the possibility of social change. He said, "For every generation, there is a destiny. For some, history decides. For this generation, the choice must be our own...because ours is a time of change—rapid and fantastic change...shaking old values and uprooting old ways."² In LBJ's mind, change was not just a dream, but a real possibility, if not an inevitability. The only catch was that Americans needed to embrace the change, rather than fight it. The shaking of old values did not mean a revolution in thinking, but rather a call to purify the American democracy as the founding fathers would have.

² Lyndon Johnson, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1965. Available at <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/inauguration/index.shtm>.

Johnson said that the founding fathers “came here...to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union...it binds us still...If we keep its terms we shall flourish.”³ In order to keep this covenant, however, America would have to become a nation where liberty, justice and union truly existed in law and spirit. Therefore, as Johnson believed, there needed to be immediate political action designed to attack inequality and injustice at its core.

Johnson first attacks the subject of injustice, saying that “justice was the promise that all who made the journey would share in the fruits of the land,”⁴ but that tragically this was not the reality. He said, “In a land of great wealth, families must not live in hopeless poverty. In a land rich in harvest, children just must not go hungry....For more than thirty years that I have served this Nation, I have believed that this injustice to our people, this waste of our resources, was our real enemy....I have learned and I know that it will not surrender easily.” But Johnson also saw hope in the future, believing that “...change has given us new weapons. Before this generation of Americans is finished, this enemy will not only retreat—it will be conquered.” This exuberant confidence borders on arrogance considering he was basically proposing an end to social problems as old as civilization itself.

Johnson, however, was determined to make this justice a reality, and stated, “Justice requires us to remember: when any citizen denies his fellow, saying: His color is not mine or his beliefs are strange and different, in that moment he betrays

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

America, though his forebears created this Nation.”⁵ Again, Johnson invokes the founding to paint his agenda as being exactly what the founding fathers would do in his shoes. By saying it is an affront to America to deny someone their basic rights, Johnson was trying to create a new impetus for Americans to end discrimination: patriotic pride in America.

The end of discrimination in law would certainly be an achievement, but he also knew that “...more is required. Men want to be part of a common enterprise—a cause greater than themselves. And each of us must find a way to advance the purpose of the Nation, thus finding new purposes for ourselves. With this, we will simply become a nation of strangers.”⁶ In other words, Johnson was saying that it was not just enough to cease open discrimination against others, but rather it would actually require Americans of all races to truly embrace each other as social equals.

Pragmatically, Johnson even addressed those with the deepest entrenched racial outlooks by appealing to their desire for economic prosperity. According to LBJ, even if one had only selfish motives, it would be to their benefit to comply with this change, for “by working shoulder to shoulder together we can increase the bounty for all.”⁷ This would benefit all Americans, and therefore Johnson implored the public to “reject any among us who seek to reopen old wounds and rekindle old hatreds. They stand in the way of a seeking Nation.”⁸ This was a time to move forward, and a time to keep from falling into the same racial traps that had been

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

snagging America since its birth. The best way to move forward, according to Johnson, was to stop dwelling on what makes us different, and rather emphasize what everyone could rally around.

He said, “Let us now join reason to faith and action to experience, to transform our unity of interest into a unity of purpose. For the hour and the day and the time are here to achieve progress without strife, to achieve change without hatred; not without difference of opinion but without the deep and abiding divisions which scar the Union for generations.”⁹ Change was possible, but everyone would have to work together to finally achieve it. Whatever needed to be done would be. Just like his mentor FDR, Johnson was open to anything. He said, “I do not believe that the Great Society is the ordered, changeless, and sterile battalion of the ants. It is the excitement of becoming—always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again—but always trying and always gaining.”¹⁰ If everyone just kept their eye on the prize, slow, steady progress could be made, but only by working together.

The changes Johnson hoped would result still seemed frightening to those fearing drastic reform, but he firmly believed that we must embrace, and not reject the new. Johnson said, “Is our world gone? We say farewell. Is a new world coming? We welcome it—and we will bend it to the hopes of man.”¹¹ For LBJ, a new world meant a better world, but one that would require tweaking, particularly with regard to legislation. With the tsunami of optimism behind him, Johnson wanted to enact new

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

laws that would foster social equality and unity, and he aimed to succeed with flying colors.

The Quest for a Voting Rights Act

By 1965, the changes induced by the 1964 Civil Rights Act were beginning to take effect, but it remained clear that much further legislation needed to be enacted in order to address gaps in the law. The most coveted of these new Civil Rights laws, sought by both MLK and LBJ, was the passing of a Voting Rights Act. Although the 1964 Civil Rights Act was helping to promote integration, the stipulations concerning voting rights were, as Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach put it, “woefully inadequate.” He said that the 1964 Act dealt with “mainly expedited appeals in cases where registration was denied,” because “decisions were in the hands of state court judges, who routinely denied blacks the rights to register, usually on literacy grounds.”¹² It was becoming apparent that the issue of blacks being denied the right to vote was not simply going to disappear. For Johnson, the necessary answer to the problem lied in the Voting Rights Bill.

Getting a Voting Rights Bill through Congress, however, was not exactly an easy task. When Johnson met with Dr. King in December of 1964, he explained that although he wanted to get a Voting Rights Bill through Congress as much as King did, the timing was simply not right. Johnson said, “Martin, you’re right about that. I’m going to do it eventually, but I can’t get a voting rights bill through in this session of Congress....I can’t get it through because I need the votes of the Southern

¹² Katzenbach, *Some of it Was Fun*, 162.

bloc....”¹³ LBJ knew he had to be cautious about upsetting the Southern Senators, lest he imperil his Great Society programs, therefore it seemed as though the present situation would not allow a Voting Rights bill. Circumstances would change, however.

Selma, Alabama and America's Conscience

Even though at the beginning of 1965 a Voting Rights Bill seemed unlikely hope, a confluence of events would converge to make it, instead, a reality. What Johnson needed was a way to sweep everyone in America into an emotional frenzy that would make a Voting Rights Act seem like the most important political issue on the table. The catalyst which sparked this enkindling of public fervor was Martin Luther King, as he led a non-violent group of black protesters from Selma, Alabama in pursuit of their just right to vote. Despite the peaceful nature of the protest, they were met by a stunningly violent white police response.

Because the events received nationally televised coverage, Americans of all races were forced to immediately take notice. African Americans across the country were fuming, but even more importantly, whites across the country joined them in their outrage. They could not believe that a peaceful group of American citizens seeking nothing but to exercise their right to vote would be treated in such a barbaric manner. Many white Americans, including those in Congress, could no longer ignore the need for immediate progress in the arena of voting rights.

¹³ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Clayborne Carson (ed.) (New York: Warner Books, 1988), 270-271.

The focus placed on Selma by Martin Luther King had succeeded, for the entire nation paid attention to what had transpired there. King's role was crucial in rousing the public's collective conscience, but someone still had to sell them on the idea that a Voting Rights act was the solution to everyone's problems. Lyndon Johnson knew this, and also knew that he would have to grab a firm hold of the public's heartstrings if he was going to convince the nation of the need for a voting rights act. Johnson described his revulsion at the events of "Bloody Sunday," saying, "What happened in Selma was an American tragedy. It is wrong to do violence to peaceful citizens in the streets of their town. It is wrong to deny Americans the right to vote. It is wrong to deny any person full equality because of the color of his skin."¹⁴ There were no shades of gray in Johnson's words. Denying a citizen their right to vote was simply un-American.

With the moral authority firmly on his side, Lyndon Johnson knew that the time was right to get a Voting Rights Act passed. In a prepared statement at a press conference on February 4, 1965, Johnson said, "I should like to say that all Americans should be indignant when one American is denied the right to vote. The loss of that right to a single citizen undermines the freedom of every citizen. That is why all of us should be concerned with the efforts of our fellow Americans to register to vote in Alabama....I intend to see that the right [to vote] is secured for all our citizens."¹⁵ Voting rights had now become a national issue for all Americans, and everyone was forced to demand a solution to the tumor infesting the democracy. The

¹⁴ Lyndon Johnson quoted by Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws that Changed America* (New York: Mariner Books, 2005), 307.

¹⁵ Lyndon Johnson quoted by *Ibid.*, 267.

denial of an American citizen's right to vote through violence was simply not acceptable, and the time had come for the President to address the subject in even more detail.

President Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" Speech to Congress

In his January inaugural address, Lyndon Johnson had waxed poetic about the need to seize the opportunity for change, but he never directly mentioned a specific piece of legislation. Given the uproar and empathy concerning voting rights generated by the events in Selma, however, Johnson now had the opportunity to offer a tangible solution to an exposed problem: a Voting Rights Act. Though the events at Selma had given precious political momentum to LBJ, he was keenly aware that it was quickly fleeting. Johnson said, "It would probably not take long for those aroused emotions [of Selma] to melt away. It was important to move at once, if we were to achieve anything permanent from this transitory mood."¹⁶ Statements such as this reveal the fact that LBJ was always aware that the clock was ticking. Therefore, in an effort to achieve a permanent victory for America, Johnson delivered one of, if not the most, important speeches in his entire career.

On March 15, 1965, Lyndon Johnson stood before Congress and made, as Martin Luther King put it, "one of the most eloquent, unequivocal and passionate pleas for human rights ever made by a President of the United States."¹⁷ Just as LBJ began his Inauguration address by invoking the memory of America's founding, again he conjured up patriotic memories of the past, then preceding to fuse them with

¹⁶ LBJ quoted in *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁷ Martin Luther King, *Autobiography*, 288.

the current situation. Johnson said, “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.”¹⁸ Johnson’s deliberate attempt to put Selma in the same company as Lexington and Concord of the American Revolution lent incredible credence to his cause.

Martin Luther King described the importance of this tactic, saying, “When President Johnson declared that Selma, Alabama, is joined in American history with Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox, he honored not only our embattled Negroes, but the overwhelming majority of the nation, Negro and white. The victory in Selma is now being written in Congress. Before long, more than a million Negroes will be new voters—and psychologically, new people.”¹⁹ Using Selma was a means to an end, hoping to give a vote to those denied it for so long. It was not, however, a cause for celebration. Johnson said, “There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma,” but also believed that “there is cause for hope and faith in our democracy in what is happening here tonight.”²⁰

For Johnson, the matter was simple: “Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.” In order to provide this justice, Johnson believed the final securing of all Americans’ right to vote was of primary importance. Johnson wanted to give dignity to all Americans,

¹⁸ Lyndon Johnson, Speech to Congress, March 15, 1965, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650315.asp>.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, *Autobiography*, 289.

²⁰ Lyndon Johnson, March 15, 1965 Speech to Congress

but said that “This dignity cannot be found in a man’s possessions; it cannot be found in his power, or in his position. It really rests on his right to be treated as a man equal in opportunity to all others. It says that he shall share in freedom, he shall choose his leaders, educate his children, and provide for his family according to his ability and his merits as a human being.”

Again referring to the founders, Johnson said, “Our fathers believed that if this noble view of the rights of man was to flourish, it must be rooted in democracy. The most basic right of all was the right to choose your own leaders. The history of this country, in large measure, is the history of the expansion of that right to all of our people. Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and most difficult. But about this there can and should be no argument. Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote...” This was not the reality, however, as Johnson well knew. He said that “the harsh fact is that in many places in this country, men and women are kept from voting simply because they are Negroes. Every device of which human ingenuity is capable has been used to deny this right.” For LBJ, this was simply not acceptable.

Johnson realized that concrete action needed to be taken. He said, “Experience has clearly shown that the existing process of law cannot overcome systematic and ingenious discrimination. No law that we now have on the books—and I have helped to put three of them there—can ensure the right to vote when local officials are determined to deny it. In such a case our duty must be clear to all of us. The Constitution says that no person shall be kept from voting because of his race or his color. We have all sworn an oath before God to support and to defend that

Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath.” The way to defend the oath was to vote for the Voting Rights bill that Johnson pledged to send to Congress days later.

LBJ vowed that the bill would “strike down restrictions to voting in all elections—Federal, State and local—which have been used to deny Negroes the right to vote. This bill will establish a simple, uniform standard which cannot be used, however ingenious the effort, to flout our Constitution. It will provide for citizens to be registered by officials of the United States Government if the State officials refuse them. It will eliminate tedious, unnecessary lawsuits which delay the right to vote. Finally, this legislation will ensure that properly registered individuals are not prohibited from voting.”²¹ Clearly Johnson was adamant about clearing the path for every single eligible American citizen to exercise his or her right to vote without any sort of intrusion.

He also recognized, however, again showing his fidelity to FDR’s method of experimentation, that a Voting Right bill would have to be a malleable work of democracy, fitted to suit the unique needs of the American Republic. Johnson said, “I will welcome the suggestions from all of the Members of Congress—I have no doubt that I will get some—on ways and means to strengthen this law and to make it effective. But experience has plainly shown that this is the only path to carry out the command of the Constitution.” This was a shrewd move on Johnson’s part, because it forced even his foes in Congress to at least come up with a better solution if they did not like the president’s Voting Right bill.

²¹ Ibid.

In addition to addressing his potential political rivals, LBJ also spoke directly to an unfortunate segment of American society which he knew full well existed. Although not exclusively relegated to the American South, there were obviously some Americans who fundamentally disagreed with either African Americans being allowed to vote, or at least cringed at the fact that the Federal Government was once again meddling in what should be state affairs. Because of the extensive unresolved feelings many Southern whites were still grappling with, dating back to the beginning of Reconstruction, a Federal intrusion on State authority conjured up memories of the dark times of the Civil War.

President Johnson offered these states' rights diehards a solution, however, stating, "To those who seek to avoid action by their National Government in their own communities; who want to and who seek to maintain purely local control over election, the answer is simple: Open your polling places to all your people. Allow men and women to register and vote whatever the color of their skin. Extend the rights of citizenship to every citizen of this land." Johnson was not asking Southerners to wage another states' rights battle, but rather he was calmly pointing out that this particular issue was not a challenge to their autonomy. There was only a moral issue at stake, and therefore there should be no need to protest such a necessity.

Johnson's appeals to Southerners seemed to have a positive effect. By March of 1965, the seemingly unbreakable Southern bloc had apparently cracked, and the tide had begun to turn. According to a March 4, 1965, memo from Jim Jones to White House aide Marvin Watson, "...Senator Russell Long spoke in strong support of the Voting Rights bill....Long said he is planning to get 11 of the 22 Southern

Senators to support the bill and he will carry these 11 votes into the Southern caucus in hopes of thwarting a big filibuster attempt....These are the 11 he hopes to crack the old Confederacy block. I'm convinced he wasn't saying all this for White House consumption, because he did not know that I worked here."²² Perhaps the pervasive racism in the South was weakening, at least at the Congressional level. There was still, however, a great deal of progress to be fought for.

LBJ's Commencement Address at Howard University

Lyndon Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" speech provided the proverbial nudge that the Voting Rights Act needed to burrow its way through Congress. LBJ had seemingly been given Congressional mandate, and thus the Act would inevitably become a law. The only question was when. Certainly the President's speech alone did not single-handedly create and pass the much needed change in legislation, but it did put into words what millions of Americans, both black and white, had been trying to say for too long. It was clear, at least to those in Congress, that the time had come for a Voting Rights Act, and there was little chance of arguing with the ideals that LBJ had put forth in his March speech. Two months before the bill would successfully pass, President Johnson portrayed a very confident attitude when he gave the Commencement Address at Howard University on June 6, 1965.

Although the "We Shall Overcome" speech was the probably the most important of Johnson's 1965 addresses, his speech to the graduates of Howard was indeed historic for a variety of reasons. It would still be two more months before the Voting Rights Act would become law, but Johnson seemed confident that it was

²² Memo, Jim Jones to Marvin Watson, 3/17/65, Ex HU 2-7, WHCF, LBJ Library.

almost a foregone conclusion. LBJ said in his speech, “No act of my entire administration will give me greater satisfaction than the day when my signature makes this bill...the law of this land.”²³ Johnson was passionate about this issue, for he knew that “in far too many ways American Negroes have been another nation: deprived of freedom, crippled by hatred, the doors of opportunity closed to hope.” But he also believed that “In our time, change has come to this Nation.” There was little doubt in Johnson’s words of the bill’s success, and firmly believed that “the voting rights bill will be the latest, and among the most important, in a long series of victories.”²⁴

The passing of the Voting Right Act would mean a great deal with regard to the securing of African Americans’ right to vote, but it also served a symbolic purpose. Johnson believed the bill represented a new beginning for America as a whole. He said, “That beginning is freedom; and the barriers to that freedom are tumbling down. Freedom is the right to share, share fully and equally, in American society—to vote, hold a job, to enter a public place, to go to school. It is the right to be treated in every part of our national life as a person equal in dignity and promise to all others.”²⁵ Johnson then gave praise to the courageous protesters and demonstrators for attracting the nation’s attention, saying “The American Negro, acting with impressive restraint, has peacefully protested and marched, entered the courtrooms and the seats of government, demanding a justice that has long been

²³ Lyndon Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University: “To Fulfill These Rights,” Available at: <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

denied. The voice of the Negro was the call to action. But it is a tribute to America that, once aroused, the courts and the Congress, the President and most of the people, have been the allies of progress.”²⁶ It appears as though Johnson is roundly supporting the protestors, but a more cynical person might say that this was a tactic intended to curb demonstration activity. Regardless of his intentions, his remarks were positive, and the beginning of the speech seemed like a celebration of the long battled for Voting Rights Act.

Despite this initial fountain of optimism, Johnson’s speech takes an abrupt and decidedly more serious turn. Although he did believe that the voting rights act was a victory for freedom, he also realized that “...freedom is not enough. 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.”²⁷ He continued, “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others.’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.”²⁸

The President’s statements are crucial to note, for they touch on a point fundamental to the understanding of the Voting Rights Act’s shortcomings. Symbolism aside, essentially what the legislation did was only give people the right

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

to vote who were already supposed to have it. In other words, this really was not the quantum leap in civil rights progress that Johnson portrayed it to be. In reality, little concrete progress had been made. These people may have secured their right to vote, but the conditions many were living in were simply not any better because of a civil rights gesture. The Voting Rights act was indeed a success, but there was still an uphill battle to fight.

In his speech, LBJ addressed the strategy for moving into the next stage of the fight for equality. He said, “This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equality but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and quality as a result. For the task is to give 20 million Negroes the same chance as every other American to learn and grow, to work and share in society, to develop their abilities—physical, mental and spiritual, and to pursue their individual happiness.”²⁹ The only way to achieve this goal, as Johnson stated, was for Americans to actually accept one another, not just in law, but in action and mindset. Unless this happened, African Americans would never truly be free.

The reasons the African American Community experienced such inequality were of course complicated, but Johnson tried to get to the heart of the problem. He said, “We are not completely sure why this is. We know the causes are complex and subtle. But we do know the two broad basic reasons. And we do know that we have to act.”³⁰ The first reason was that “Negroes are trapped...in inherited, gateless

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

poverty. They lack training and skills. They are shut in, in slums, without decent medical care. Public and private poverty combine to cripple their capacities.”³¹ As a solution, Johnson said, “We are trying to attack these evils through our poverty program, through our education program, through our medical care and our other health programs, and a dozen more of the Great Society programs that are aimed at the root causes of this poverty.”³² Clearly Johnson believed his Great Society could help cure America’s poverty problem, but the second reason for the inequality was not something that legislation could attack.

Johnson said that “there is a second cause—much more difficult to explain, more deeply grounded, more desperate in its force. It is the devastating heritage of long years of slavery; and a century of oppression, hatred, and justice. For Negro poverty is not white poverty. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences—deep, corrosive, obstinate differences—radiating painful roots into the community, and into the family, and the nature of the individual.”³³ LBJ also pointed out that “these differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe.”³⁴

As well as being an unpleasant reality to face, Johnson also said that, “For the Negro they are a constant reminder of oppression. For the white they are a constant reminder of guilt. But they must be faced and they must be dealt with and they must

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

be overcome, if we are ever to reach the time when the only difference between Negroes and whites is the color of their skin.”³⁵ Here again, the president was attempted to seek solutions to a seemingly impossible problem: the task of overcoming America’s black-white divide, a mission for which there still today is no truly effective strategy. If we knew how to cure prejudice we would, but it’s just not logical. The next best step for LBJ, however, was at least getting the issues out in the open to be confronted. Johnson said, “Much of the Negro Community is buried under a blanket of history and circumstance. It is not a lasting solution to lift just one corner of that blanket. We must stand on all sides and we must raise the entire cover if we are to liberate our fellow citizens.”³⁶ Overcoming centuries of bigotry and hatred was obviously incredibly difficult, but Johnson believed it was even more foolish not to at least try.

In addition to addressing the issue of blacks and whites accepting one another, Johnson delved into several of the roots causes of poverty that also needed to be fixed. The slums were the biggest area of concern, for “most of these Negroes live together—a separated people.” He said that “Men are shaped by their world. When it is a world of decay, ringed by an invisible wall, when escape is arduous and uncertain, and the saving pressures of a more hopeful society are unknown, it can cripple the youth and it can desolate the men.”³⁷ Johnson also cited unemployment as a problem area, saying, “There is also the burden that a dark skin can add to the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

search for a productive place in our society. Unemployment strikes most swiftly and broadly at the Negro, and this burden erodes hope. Blighted hope breeds despair. Despair brings indifference to the learning which offers a way out. And despair, coupled with indifference, is often the source of destructive rebellion against the fabric of society.”³⁸ These statements seem almost prophetic in light of the fact that the Watts riots would explode two months later, displaying the inevitable response to these very problems.

The most important problem, Johnson believed, was the chronic lack of stability plaguing the African American family. Johnson said, “Perhaps most important—its influence radiating to every part of life—is the breakdown of the Negro family structure. For this, most of all, white America must accept responsibility. It flows from centuries of oppression and persecution of the Negro man. It flows from the long years of degradation and discrimination, which have attacked his dignity and assaulted his ability to produce for his family.”³⁹

Johnson believed that fixing this problem was of paramount importance, saying “The family is the cornerstone of our society....So unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together—all the rest: schools, and playgrounds, and public assistance, and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation.”⁴⁰ The emphasis on the breakdown of the Negro family most likely

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

stemmed from the Johnson Administration's attention to the March 1965 Moynihan Report, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, whose sole focus was the attempt to find a way to restore the black male to a situation of authority.

The problem of the breakdown of the Negro family was clearly a concern for LBJ, but it was also a dilemma for which there were few answers. The same could be said for most of the issues that Johnson discussed in his Howard University speech. Some of the problems had solutions, but some simply did not. What makes Lyndon Johnson's speech at Howard University important was that he admitted how seemingly insurmountable these crises were. Johnson was optimistic about fixing the problems, but nevertheless he admitted that a Voting Rights act was only a short step toward real equality. Although his speech was warmly received by many, looking back it seems more of an admission of failure, rather than a triumph.

While a direct link between the Watts riots and the Howard University speech cannot be proven, there is little doubt that many struggling African Americans in the summer of 1965 who heard that speech must have been fuming. They had endured hardships for generations, and basically the Administration's only answer was a Voting Rights act. If that was the Administration's idea of progress, then their way was not a viable one. Non-violent resistance looked good on paper, but in reality it was not helping the black community with much beyond access to voting booths and water fountains. The passage of the Voting Rights act appeared imminent, but to a great deal of African Americans, it was the final fruitless gesture that confirmed their suspicions that no real help was coming. If Lyndon Johnson had been aware that

such a volatile brew of anger and disappointment was stewing, perhaps he would not have reacted so celebratory with the signing of the Voting Rights Act.

The Passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act

The hardships facing the Civil Rights movement addressed in his speech at Howard University may have revealed the limitations of the Voting Right Act, but its signing on August 6, 1965, still seemed like a time for jubilation for some. In many ways, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was the absolute pinnacle of achievement for Lyndon Johnson as president. The legislation stood as a monument to what could be accomplished when black and white political leaders worked in concert with each other to achieve the same goal. The result of their cooperation was the fulfillment of a one hundred year-old promise of the vote made to African Americans. There was certainly reason to rejoice for those invested in achieving equality, and the optimism that permeated 1965 reached a fever pitch with the passing of the Voting Rights act. If the nation's conscience could again be aroused to facilitate legislation, there would be no limit to what kinds of legislation that Lyndon Johnson could get put on the fast track through Congress.

As the president addressed the crowd in the Capitol Rotunda at the signing of the Voting Rights Act, his focus was not on the problems yet to be solved, but rather on the successful vanquishing of one singular, yet important foe: voter discrimination. Johnson said, "There were those who said that this is a many-sided and very complex problem. But however viewed, the denial of the right to vote is still a deadly wrong.

And the time for injustice has gone.”⁴¹ Even if voting rights could not solve every problem, at least it solved this one, which was quite an accomplishment.

Johnson said, “Today is a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that has ever been won on any battlefield. Yet to seize the meaning of this day, we must recall darker times. Three and a half centuries ago the first Negroes arrived at Jamestown....They came in darkness and they came in chains. And today we strike away the last major shackle of those fierce and ancient bonds. Today the Negro and the American story fuse and blend.”⁴² Here Johnson speaks in somewhat hyperbolic terms, coming uncomfortably close to saying that the passing of the Voting rights act makes up for the injustices of the past.

He also goes too far by saying that “Today...perhaps the last of the legal barriers is tumbling.”⁴³ Yes, voting rights had been addressed thoroughly, but there were still legal barriers preventing blacks from enjoying full equality, the politicians had just not yet figured out which parts of our government were unintentionally, or purposely, constructed to keep African Americans in poverty. Although the euphoria of the Voting Rights victory certainly augmented LBJ’s optimism, it seems as though he had put the cart before the horse to a certain degree. As previously stated, when boiled down to its fundamental core, the Voting Rights act was nothing more than a band-aid on a gaping, festering wound. African Americans suffering most from poverty must have found little consolation in knowing they could elect officials to a

⁴¹ Lyndon Johnson, “Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda at the Signing of the Voting Rights Act,” August, 6, 1965, Available at: <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650806.asp>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

government which they had little faith in. It must have been equally insulting to see a white president announcing that he was solving racial inequality with incomprehensibly complicated legislative gestures.

Despite the limitations of the act, Johnson was confident it would change things. He also realized, however, that the successful implementation of the new measures required African Americans to use the vote Johnson had worked to bestow upon them. He said, “So, through this act, and its enforcement, an important instrument of freedom passes into the hands of millions of our citizens. But that instrument must be used. President and Congresses, laws and lawsuits can open the doors to the polling places and open the doors to the wondrous rewards which await the wise use of the ballot. But only the individual Negro, and all others who have been denied the right to vote, can really walk through those doors, and can use that right, and can transform the vote into an instrument of justice and fulfillment.”⁴⁴

The president continued his plea to African Americans, imploring them, “So, let me now say to every Negro in this country: You must register. You must vote. You must learn, so your choice advances your interest and the interest of our beloved Nation. Your future, and your children’s future, depend upon it, and I don’t believe that you are going to let them down.”⁴⁵ In order for these new voters to receive the education they needed, Johnson said that the new challenge for black leaders was to move away from demonstrations, and instead focus on educating their newly empowered flock. Johnson said, “This act is not only a victory for Negro leadership. This act is a great challenge to that leadership. It is a challenge which cannot be met

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

simply by protests and demonstrations. It means that dedicated leaders must work around the clock to teach people their rights and their responsibilities and to lead them to exercise those rights and to fulfill those responsibilities and those duties to their country. If you do this, then you will find, as others have found before you, that the vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.”⁴⁶ This statement appears to be an attempt by LBJ to empower black voters, but one can also see it as a ploy to quell protests in an effort to retain paternalistic control over the civil rights movement.

Despite subtly controlling statements, Johnson also received praise from some of his most trusted civil rights leaders. Martin Luther King was confident that the Voting Rights Act had “brought us the grand alliance of the children of light in this nation and made possible changes in our political and economic life heretofore undreamed of. With President Johnson, SCLC viewed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as ‘one of the most monumental laws in the history of American freedom.’”⁴⁷ One of the most telling reactions to the passing of the Voting Rights Act came from the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), John Lewis. Although SNCC would soon transform into one of the most radically anti-white groups in the Civil Rights movement, Lewis was clearly optimistic about the success of the Voting Rights Act. In an eloquently written letter to the president just after the legislation was signed, Lewis declared, “Today this nation attained another milestone

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Autobiography*, 289.

in the progress of American democracy. The occasion of the signing into law of the Voting Rights Bill of 1965 is every bit as momentous and significant in the cause of Negro rights as the Emancipation Proclamation or the 1954 Supreme Court decision declaring racial segregation in the Nation's schools illegal."⁴⁸ The fact that Lewis compared the Voting Rights Act to the historic 1954 case illustrates the feeling that progressive racial reform might be slowly moving forward in America.

Lewis went on to commend Johnson personally, saying, "On behalf of the SNCC, and the Negro people of the deep South, whose courage, determination and abiding faith in the democratic principles of their Nation, dramatized the need for this bill, I wish to thank you for your timely and wise leadership in the passage of this legislation. There can be no doubt that legislation of the range and thoroughness of this Bill could not have been possible without the approval and strong support of the President....None will soon forget the force and urgency of your message to the Congress, when you expressed the determination of this Nation that no group of citizens should be denied the basic right to the ballot."⁴⁹

Receiving praise from a leader such as Lewis no doubt pleased the ego of Johnson greatly. It was one thing to enjoy the accolades from his close circle of approved Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, but Lewis's remarks showed the effect the success of the Voting Rights Act had on the entire spectrum of those concerned with racial equality. Certainly such high praise like this served to inflate the ever-expanding ego of the president to an all-time euphoric high. It

⁴⁸ Letter, John Lewis to Lyndon Johnson, 8/6/65, Ex HU 2, Box 55, WHCF, LBJ Library.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

seemed as though anything could be conquered with cooperation and legislation, and August of 1965, for a brief moment, looked like one of the most historic months in the history of race relations in America. Unfortunately, the breaking point for Johnson lay just eight days around the corner, when the Watts Riots would shatter his hubristic sense of political invincibility. As much as the Voting Rights Act had served to galvanize support for the progressing Civil Rights movement, the Watts riots brought all the momentum to an immediate halt. Tragically, it was a disaster that the Johnson Administration would never fully recover from.

CHAPTER FOUR

“How Could This Have Happened?”

The Watts Riots were the worst racial disorder in American history. The violence endured for six days, and resulted in 34 deaths, more than 856 injuries, 3,100 arrests, and \$200 million in property damage. More than 1500 Californian National Guardsmen were called in, along with 1,000 law enforcement officers.¹ Bearing these figures in mind, it is obvious why the Watts Riots stood as such a disturbing and frightening occurrence in the minds of a great deal of Americans. How could Los Angeles, a seemingly idyllic paradise with such abundant wealth, be the site of such a catastrophic event? Even more importantly, how could such racial rebellion occur just days after the Johnson Administration proclaimed a bold victory for racial progress with the passage of the Voting Rights Act?

Many citizens across the country were shocked that such racial violence could occur on the pristine West coast, in large part because Americans had become familiar with the South as the designated civil rights battleground. Martin Luther King, however, explained why Watts should have been seen as the volatile powder keg that it was. King said, “In the South there is something of shared poverty, Negro and white. In the North, white existence only steps away, glares with conspicuous consumption. Even television becomes incendiary, when it beams pictures of affluent homes and multitudinous consumer products at the aching poor, living in wretched

¹ Robert Mann, *When Freedom Would Triumph: The Civil Rights Struggle in Congress, 1954-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 251.

homes.” As a result, King said, “Los Angeles could have expected riots because it is the luminous symbol of luxurious living for whites. Watts is closer to it, and yet farther from it, than any other Negro community in the country.” He explained the riots, saying, “The looting in Watts was a form of social protest very common through the ages as a dramatic and destructive gesture of the poor toward symbols of their needs.”² King did not condone the violence of the rioters, but at the same time, he easily understood how their frustration had reached the boiling point.

The Watts Riots shed light not only on the systemic problems that the city of Los Angeles suffered from, but also served as a symbolic response of frustration and fury from America’s truly poor, those who were aching for help. These African Americans who were supposedly benefiting from Johnson’s approach to curing social ills were boldly declaring that what was being done was simply not working. As if a direct repudiation of the Johnson’s Administration’s tactics was not enough, the violent manner in which the citizens of Watts made their protest was even more damaging. Not only was the progress that Lyndon Johnson spoke of at the signing of the Voting Rights Act revealed to be exaggeration at best, but now a seeming rejection of nonviolence had been introduced.

This was an incredibly difficult pill for white Americans to swallow. Until the Watts Riots, many white Americans had been able to sympathize with oppressed blacks, because it was the moral thing to do. Once black protest began to navigate away from nonviolent resistance, however, things became instantly ambivalent. Many of those who were on the fence about civil rights before were blown

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Clayborne Carson (ed.) (New York: Warner Books, 1988), 293.

completely to the conservative side. It was one thing to support Martin Luther King and the oppressed citizens of Selma, but there was no possible way a decent white American could respond with anything but disgust in the face of a burning American city. It was no longer convenient for whites to support the Civil Rights Movement, and instead it became increasingly more of a stigma. Couple this intense hardening of racial battle lines with the escalation in Vietnam, and you have one incredible explosion.

The reaction to this earth-shattering event was severe for whites, but blacks Americans reacted with an equally intense force. Their response, however, was quite different. Many reacted with sympathy for those suffering in poverty, and became even more adamant about the need for immediate change, even if it meant adjusting the methods of achieving it. The clash of conflicting black and white reactions to the riots combined to create a deadly poison that was released by the racial violence during the Watts riots. Any headway that had been made towards both sides of the race relations table trusting each other was abruptly halted, and progress towards racial harmony seemed to have been thrown in reverse.

Essentially, whites now became even more conservative, and blacks became even more radical, thus creating a fatal dynamic within the Civil Rights movement that would change things completely. Although only 34 people actually died during the Watts riots, the devastation that they caused politically and socially cannot be measured. Black Power was a child of Watts, and once born, a squeamish white public could never accept the existence of such a militant mindset. Couple a

paradigm shift on both sides of the battle for racial equality with a major escalation in Vietnam the same year, and the result was disaster.

The shock of the Watts riots was intensified by the fact that everything seemed to be on track. The long struggle from Selma to the passing of the Voting Right Act in August of 1965 was indeed arduous, but many felt as though maybe a corner had been turned in the battle for equality. Five days later, however, these optimistic hopes were blindsided by the unthinkable. LBJ famously asked himself, “How could this have happened, after all I’ve done...?” Answering Lyndon Johnson’s question is fundamental not only to explaining the Watts riots, but also in explaining why the Civil Rights movement in general did not succeed on the path that LBJ thought he had so artfully placed it on. Johnson had attempting to keep everything within his control in a paternalistic manner, but ultimately it was this fatal flaw that doomed things from the beginning.

Gerald Horne, the author of a book on the Watts Riots and its effect on the 1960’s, describes the incredible wound the Johnson Administration’s approach toward civil rights took as a result of the riots. He quotes Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell as saying the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act were “absolutely of no value or meaning to Negroes in the North,”³ and this went for Los Angeles as well. Roger Wilkins recalled the riots vividly, saying, “Watts hit Washington like a thunderstorm,” effectively, as Horne put it, “washing away illusions about what it would take to dissolve centuries of encrusted racism.” Johnson

³ Adam Clayton Powell quoted by Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960’s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 298.

had attempted to bestow the bounty of America to blacks in a controlling manner, and but instead it was blowing up in his face.⁴

Lyndon Johnson's Reaction to the Watts Riots

No one had ever before seen the racial violence like that witnessed at Watts, and Americans across the country were shocked by the events. President Johnson joined these Americans in their disbelief. He was profoundly appalled and disappointed by the terrible tragedy, and conveyed these feeling overtly. Johnson asked his trusted aid Jack Valenti, “How is it possible? After all we’ve accomplished. How could it be?”⁵ Johnson furiously inquired, “Why didn’t the police and firemen bring this under control? Didn’t anyone plan? Didn’t anyone understand this undercurrent of dissatisfaction and these desperate feelings?”⁶ Johnson was finally starting to see the holes in his plan for social change, but it was simply too late.

Fearing that patience had finally worn thin within the black community, Johnson colorfully prognosticated, “Negroes will end up pissing in the aisles of the Senate,” and “will once again take unwise actions out of frustration, impatience, and anger.”⁷ It seems as though LBJ knew that the time for his patient, yet paternalistic, approach to civil right had come to an end. As Nick Kotz described LBJ’s response, it went from “one of anger and self-pity to a deep sadness and fear that his dreams for the Great Society would be doomed by nihilistic rioters and an angry white backlash

⁴ Ibid., 286.

⁵ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 340.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Ibid., 341.

against civil rights and poverty programs.”⁸ The President stood to lose everything that he had worked so hard for.

It was not until August 14, however, that LBJ authorized a public statement to be made about the Watts riots. Johnson said, “The events of the past two in Los Angeles are tragic and shocking...I urge every person in a position of leadership to make every effort to restore order in Los Angeles. Killing, rioting and looting are contrary to the best traditions of this country.”⁹ Johnson continued, “We are deeply committed to the fulfillment of every American’s constitutional rights. We have worked hard to protect those rights but rights will not be won with violence. Equal rights carry equal responsibilities.” *The New York Times* aptly described this speech as having a “disturbed and depressing” tone.¹⁰ One might even say that LBJ was delivering a eulogy at the funeral of his political dreams.

In addition to creating roadblocks for his social programs, Johnson also realized finally what an enormous problem urban riots posed to the country. If it could happen in Watts, it could happen anywhere. Whereas the Johnson Administration had paid minimal attention to previous smaller racial disturbances in places such as Harlem, racial unrest in the ghettos now had the president’s full attention. Johnson said, “We are on a powder keg in a dozen places. You have no idea of the depth of feeling of these people. I see some of the boys that have worked for me, have two thousand years of persecution, and now they suffer from it. They

⁸ Ibid., 341.

⁹ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Ibid., 340.

¹⁰ Ibid., 341.

have absolutely nothing to live for; 40 percent of them are unemployed. These youngsters live with rats and have no place to sleep, and they all start from broken homes and illegitimate families...And we have isolated them, and they are all in one area, and when they move in, why we move out...We have just got to find some way to wipe out these ghettos and find some housing and put them to work.”¹¹

Although President Johnson was one hundred percent correct in the assessment of the situation, it tragically came far too late. By the time the problem had been truly considered worthy of attention, it had already infected the entire urban sector of America. Worst of all, this was a problem for which there were far more questions than answers. As President Johnson faced the harsh realities of these consequences, Martin Luther King would also be forced to cope with the events.

Martin Luther King's Reaction to the Watts Riots

In the aftermath of the Watts riots, African Americans were forced to confront an even more difficult situation than their white counterparts. Blacks were given an incredibly complex amalgam of emotions to process. On one hand, the violence that occurred was horrific, but on the other hand the rioters were simply crying out in the only way they could think. As a result, many African Americans, including prominent civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, simultaneously felt disappointment and understanding toward the rioters. They knew what their fellow African Americans were going through, and they wanted to help, but they also knew that expressions of violent rage did nothing to help progress in any direction.

¹¹ Lyndon Johnson quoted in *Ibid.*, 341.

Pragmatic black leaders like King had already been walking a delicate tightrope with the American public, and it was obvious that the brutal events witnessed at Watts went against everything he had been working for. MLK continually insisted that the method of nonviolence was the only legitimate way to seek change, but the Watts riots embodied the diametric opposite of what King wanted his fellow African Americans to do. At the same time, however, he could not blame the rioters for their obvious feelings of helplessness. These emotions struck a chord with King as he conducted a firsthand investigation of Watts in the wake of the riots. Given that King knew he was entering hostile territory, it certainly speaks to his character that he chose to mix among the residents of Watts in an effort to understand why things had gone so wrong. King said, "I had been warned not to visit. We were told that the people were in no mood to hear talk of nonviolence."¹² Despite the warnings, King knew he had an obligation to visit Watts, and to understand exactly what these oppressed people were thinking.

If nothing else, King should be commended for his historical contribution of a direct primary source relating to the understanding of the Watts riots. King's visit to Watts goes far beyond that, however. The seven page chapter that King devotes to the riots in his autobiography is brief, but it is also perhaps the most telling source available if one truly wants to understand why the riots happened, what the residents of Watts were trying to say, and how King himself reacted to an event that was so incredibly crucial to the success of his agenda, as well as the ultimate welfare of the country. His actions while in Los Angeles, as well as his commentary relating to the

¹² Martin Luther King, *Autobiography*, 290.

events, speak volumes about just how monumental of an earthquake the Watts riots truly were.

King's initial attitude while in Watts was one of caution, empathy, and a desire to educate the people of Watts on how to properly achieve progress. The response of empathy was understandable, but ultimately King condemns the violent methods that the rioters chose to employ. The rioters defended their violence to King, telling him, "We know that a riot is not that answer, but we've been down here suffering for a long time and nobody cared. Now at least they know we're here. A riot may not be *the* way, but it is *a* way."¹³ King realized that this type of thinking was dangerous, not just for the residents of Watts, but for African Americans across the country.

King described the philosophy as the "new nationalist mood gripping a good many ghetto inhabitants. It rejected the alliance with white liberals as a means of social change. It affirmed the fact that black men act alone in their own interest only, because nobody really cares."¹⁴ Even though King did not always agree with white leaders, he knew that they could not simply be cut out of the picture. He also knew that the fastest way to alienate said white leaders was to become increasingly violent, militant, and dangerous. Black militancy was the lurking monster that both Martin Luther King and Lyndon Johnson hoped would never find its way to American society. Unfortunately, their wishes would go unfulfilled.

¹³ Watts resident quoted by MLK, *Autobiography*, 294.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

The philosophy of Black Power, black unity, and complete distrust of white government institutions spread like wildfire among African Americans in the second half of the 1960's. The Civil Rights Movement was surely making progress, but blacks living in real poverty had had enough. They wanted change now, and they were not willing to wait in line any more. Until Watts, nonviolence had been the mantra of whites and blacks alike, but the patience inherent with the method was no longer manageable. Blacks who were tired of waiting flocked to the Black Power movement, because it promised change by any means necessary. As blacks across the country embraced Black Power, they by default rejected Martin Luther King's consistent call for nonviolent methods for change.

King realized all too well the disrupting influence this rejection of his method of nonviolence would have on the cohesiveness of the Civil Rights movement. As a result, he made a desperate plea to the people of Watts to heed his advice. King said, "Let me say first of all that I profoundly deplore the events that have occurred in Los Angeles in these last few tragic days. I believe and have said on many occasions that violence is not the answer to social conflict whether it is engaged in by white people in Alabama or by Negroes in Los Angeles. Violence is all the more regrettable in this period in light of the tremendous nonviolent sacrifices that both Negro and white people together have endured to bring justice to all men."¹⁵ Despite King's noble effort, his voice did not resonate with the citizens of Watts the way it had with the American public during the events at Selma.

¹⁵ Ibid., 291.

These people did not need a nationally televised demonstration to tell them blacks were being discriminated against, because they had been living the realities of poverty and discrimination long before the American public decided to start caring. King said, “The nonviolent movement of the South means little to them since we had been fighting for rights which theoretically were already theirs.”¹⁶ More than ever black Americans living in poverty felt that such victories were just mere political gestures and empty promises. The result of these feelings led to an increased distrust of whites. King described this, saying, “There were serious doubts that the white community was in any way concerned. There also was a growing disillusionment and resentment toward the Negro middle class and the leadership which it had produced. This ever-widening breach was a serious factor which led to a feeling on the part of ghetto imprisoned Negroes that they were alone in their struggle and had to resort to any method to gain attention to their plight.”¹⁷ The rioters certainly got the attention that they wanted, but they still needed to come up with a solution besides burning their city down.

The people of Watts really did not care that a vote that should have already been theirs was won, because it did nothing concrete to alleviate their suffering. The answer the citizens of Watts provided focused on two main points: unemployment and police brutality. During his visit to Watts, King listened to the words of various speakers, and he said that “the objective of the people with whom I talked was consistently work and dignity. It was as though the speeches had been rehearsed, but

¹⁶ Ibid., 291.

¹⁷ Ibid. 291.

on every corner the theme was the same. Unless some work could be found for the unemployed and underemployed, we would continually face the possibility of this kind of outbreak at every encounter with police authority. At a time when the Negro's aspirations were at a peak, his actual conditions of employment, education, and housing were worsening."¹⁸ King again emphasized the importance of employment in Watts, saying, "All other advances in education, family life, and the moral climate of the community were dependent upon the ability of the masses of Negroes to earn a living in this wealthy society of ours."¹⁹

Unemployment was certainly a root cause of the problems in Watts, but the technical cause of the riots did stem from an incidence of police brutality. King said that the "issue of police brutality loomed as one of major significance. The slightest discourtesy on the part of an officer of the law was a deprivation of the dignity that most of the residents of Watts came west seeking. Whether it was true or not, the Negro of the ghetto was convinced that his dealings with the police denied him that dignity and respect to which he was entitled as a citizen and a human being. This produced a sullen, hostile attitude which resulted in a spiral of hatred on the part of both the officer and the Negro. This whole reaction complex was often coupled with fear on the part of both parties. Every encounter between a Negro and the police in the hovering hostility of the ghetto was a potential outburst."²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 293.

¹⁹ Ibid., 293.

²⁰ Ibid., 292.

Despite the fever that surrounded the Black Power movement, King implored African Americans to continue to adhere to his philosophy of nonviolence. King shrewdly argued that the Watts riots resulted in “more human loss than had been suffered in ten years of nonviolent direct action, which produced the revolutionary social changes in the South.”²¹ In addition to underscoring just how important the Watts riots were on American history, King makes an illuminating point about the incredible amount of violence that actually occurred during the riots. King deplored this violence. Not only did it inevitably breed tragedy, he realized that it was also counterproductive to the very people who were seeking help.

King said, “Violence only serves to harden the resistance of the white reactionary and relieve that white liberal of guilt, which might motivate him to action, and thereby leaves the condition unchanged and embittered. The backlash of violence is felt far beyond the borders of the community where it takes place. Whites are arming themselves in Selma and across Alabama in the expectation that rioting will spread South. In this kind of atmosphere a single drunken disorderly Negro could set off the panic button that might result in the killing of many innocent Negroes.”²² It was easy for blacks to rail against nonviolence for its slow pace, but they could not argue with the fact that violence could very well end up getting them killed, either while committing it, or during the backlash from it.

King also understood, however, that it was not enough to censure violence without offering his own set of solutions. He said that a “mere condemnation of

²¹ Ibid., 294.

²² Ibid., 294

violence is empty without understanding the daily violence that our society inflicts upon many of its members. The violence of poverty and humiliation hurts as intensely as the violence of the club. This is a situation that calls for statesmanship and creative leadership, of which I do not see evidence in Los Angeles. What we did find was a blind intransigence and ignorance of the tremendous social forces that were at work there. And so long as this stubborn attitude was maintained by responsible authorities, I could only see the situation worsening.”²³ Clearly King was pessimistic about the situation, but ultimately he responded with a more positive tone.

King said that although “It was a crisis for the nonviolent movement,” ultimately “in spite of pockets of hostility in ghetto areas such as Watts, there was still overwhelming acceptance of the ideal of nonviolence.”²⁴ King’s optimism in the face of adversity is commendable, but unfortunately his hope that blacks would continue to embrace nonviolence faced a tremendous challenge in the black power movement.

An Already Squeamish White America Says Stop

In a letter to President Johnson, a Dr. Norman Noordhoff wrote, “It would appear as though that the hunt is on to find a scapegoat for the Watts area riots...The riots appear similar to a child throwing a temper tantrum and the parents immediately giving the child whatever he wants. In the present circumstances it appears as though these minority groups are using this particular method to get something for

²³ Ibid., 295.

²⁴ Ibid., 296.

nothing.”²⁵ This cynical viewpoint was not unique for white Americans after the Watts riots, and one can certainly understand what had caused them to become so bitter and distrustful.

The white backlash’s effect was indeed detrimental with regard to public opinion, but it also complicated political matters on the legislative level as well.²⁶ According to Kotz, “Johnson warned King that the successful political calculus that had produced their earlier victories for civil rights and poverty programs had been jarred not only by a white backlash—further fueled by the Watts riots—but also by telltale signs of a decline in the president’s own political power....Johnson explained that he had already spent much of the political capital he had won in the 1964 presidential landslide. As the election receded, he admitted ‘that the crowd is not supporting me anymore’...His opponents in Congress, Johnson complained, were ‘determined to destroy, to scandalize’ his poverty programs.”²⁷ The president’s mindset was clearly negative, and it is easy to see why it was so. Johnson admittedly had fired all of his guns in an effort to get the Voting Rights Act, and now there was nothing left in the armory.

To complicate matters, even what Johnson had managed to achieve up to the Watts riots was now wearingly seemingly thin. Johnson had longed for a solution to poverty, but his actual steps towards ending it went barely beyond rhetoric. Kotz

²⁵ Letter, Dr. Norman Noordhoff to Lyndon Johnson, 10/4/65, Commerce, CR S, WHCF, LBJ Library.

²⁶ See Memo, McGeorge Bundy to Lyndon Johnson, 8/22/65, Office Files of McGeorge Bundy, LBJ Library, for an example of how the Johnson Administration attempted to absorb the impact of the predicted white backlash.

²⁷ Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 344.

blames this on a lack of reflection on the Johnson Administration's part, saying, "In those earlier heady moments of passing Great Society and War on Poverty legislation, there was little immediate reflection by either president Johnson or civil rights leaders—including King—that the rhetorical claims for the poverty programs far exceeded any proven knowledge of what they might accomplish."²⁸

Perhaps most importantly, the effect of the white backlash extended beyond the realm of white America, and had profound effect on how blacks felt. President Johnson obviously had to come down on the side of law and order because of the backlash, but this inevitably produced rancor toward Johnson from blacks sympathetic to the rioters. Basically there was no way for Johnson to please everyone, and in fact he would be forced to seriously anger his choice of either black or white America. Stuck in the middle of this incredibly complex racial war was Martin Luther King. Johnson assured King that despite his tough law and order public stance, he was still eager to "find a cure, and go in and correct these conditions in the ghetto—housing, rats eating the children, hunger, unemployment. We are all God's children and we better get at it."²⁹ This however, was of little consolation to Dr. King, who was caught between his lifelong commitment to civil rights progress, and the understanding of why blacks were finally rejected his method of nonviolence.

The Rise of a Militant Black Voice and the Rejection of Patience

In the wake of the Watts Riots, African Americans across the country reacted with intense emotion as well. Although many were aware that such a violent display

²⁸ Ibid., 345.

²⁹ Lyndon Johnson quoted in Ibid., 345.

might only serve to slow down progress made by the Civil Rights Movement, they also could not help empathizing with their fellow African Americans who were suffering. For them, the alienation of white Americans paled in comparison to the importance of providing real help to Americans who needed it. President Johnson told the country, as he signed the Voting Rights Act, that everything was right on track, but Watts abruptly called this notion into question.

Robert Conot, the author of the book *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness*, assessed the destruction of this false sense of progress, saying, “Los Angeles, like other cities before and since, exploded into riot because Negroes were fed up and whites were fed pap. The Caucasian community did not know the score, and had no motivation for learning it. If one is permitted to generalize—and it is a generalization supported by polls—the middle-class white will back the Negro’s drive for statutory equality: the right to vote, the right to access to all public accommodations, the right to equal education, the right to equal job opportunity, the right to equal treatment in the courts. He will support, or at least not oppose, legislation to these ends. Without thinking about it much, he assumes that once such legislation is on the books the goal has been accomplished. That there is then no reason, unless it be his own deficiencies, for the Negro not to work himself up to a par with the Caucasian American.”³⁰ Here Conot aptly addresses the attitude that led to the previously discussed white backlash, for he recognizes the misinformed attitude that many whites had. As Conot continues, however, he also gets to the heart of how this

³⁰ Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 425.

attitude was viewed by blacks, and why such an attitude caused them an immense amount of frustration and anger.

Conot said, “To the Negro—at least the lower-class Negro—who cares not a whit about the ideal, whose only concern is his daily encounter with the end results of white attitudes, the policy of the Whips amounts to sheer hypocrisy. Psychologically he was able to deal far better with acknowledged prejudice than with a situation in which he keeps being told that he is equal, but finds himself less and less equal in the competition for jobs, and more and more segregated. Convinced that the *de jure* prohibitions had been removed only for the sake of looks, and that the whites were not about to life the *de facto* ones, he considered he had nothing to lose by rebelling.” Conot’s quote helps illustrate that the Watts riots were indeed a case of African Americans’ frustration with poverty and inequality. More importantly, however, it shows the added rage that came with the Johnson Administration’s promises that things would change.

In fact, it even showed that Johnson had perhaps done even more damage by promising these people change in the first place. A journalist named Harry Golden, in an August 16, 1965 newspaper article entitled “The Los Angeles Riots,” addressed this issue directly. He said, “Many authorities have already expressed the theory that the rioting and the pillaging are in a direct way influenced by the Civil Rights and Voting Bills passed by the Johnson Administration. These laws have filled Negroes with more hope, and because they have more hope they see their daily lives as that much more futile....We have at least twenty brands of toothpaste in this affluent society; a man living in a slum ghetto comprehends this and one day that affluence

which he does not share arouses his wrath and he explodes.”³¹ In his article, Golden absolutely hits the nail on the head. In addition to saying that Johnson’s approach to Civil Rights had been basically an illusion, Golden also believed that he made things worse than if he had just ignored the situation entirely. Regardless, blacks had grown weary of Johnson’s promises to provide, and they instead turned to a new voice.

The Black Panther Party

Circumstances looked bleak in the wake of the Watts riots with regard to black-white relations, but no one could have predicted the division and tension that would infest America for the remainder of the 1960’s, and beyond. Civil Rights organizations that had been cooperative with whites, most notably the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, now became exclusively black. This was obviously a tremendous setback for the Civil Rights movement, but it was not the most devastating blow. Compounding this problem was the rise of the Black Panther Party, an organization that essentially signaled the end for Lyndon Johnson’s idealistic and paternalistic vision of social change.

The BPP was born as a result of black Americans’ feelings of helplessness following the riots. At a time when both MLK and LBJ were calling for racial unity, the Black Panthers were preaching the exact opposite message. Their beliefs were strongly anti-white, and made no attempt to pretend that they believed that whites could help blacks. This kind of radical rhetoric was extremely corrosive to the vision of Lyndon Johnson. In fact this was his worst nightmare. There was simply no way to sell the Black Panthers to white America, and more to the point, they were not for

³¹ Newspaper Article, Harry Golden, “The Los Angeles Riots,” 8/16/65, HU 2, ST 5, WHCF, LBJ Library.

sale in the first place. In other words, the emergence of the Panthers was exactly what LBJ had feared, for they wielded tremendous influence, but influence that lay completely out of the president's hands.

As Stephen Lawson put it, "The President and the new black activists inhabiting the ghetto spoke a different language, one distinct from that which Johnson customarily heard from [Roy] Wilkins and [Whitney] Young. The chief executive could enter into a dialogue with middle class black leaders whose notion of civility and decorum conformed to his own, yet he had no way of speaking to young, impoverished African Americans who rejected his standards of behavior and rhetoric."³² Clearly LBJ's paternalistic controlling of his chosen civil rights leaders was no longer a viable option.

Johnson had always tried to keep his close circle of trusted civil rights leaders eating from his hand, but with the Panthers that was fundamentally impossible. The Black Panthers represented a retreat by African Americans from a moderate view, expressing hope for racial cooperation, to a militant position of black unity against white oppression. This retreat in turn caused conservative, and even liberal, Americans to retreat to their familiar bastion of white suspicion of the Civil Rights movement, especially now that it seemed to be developing a more militant tone with each passing day. In order to understand why white Americans were so scared, one need only examine writings of the leaders of the Black Panther Party:

Although the slogan "Black Power" would not be coined until 1966 by Stokeley Carmichael, Watts was the initial blast that gave the movement a voice.

³² Lawson, "Mixing Moderation with Militancy," 99.

Black Panther member Mumia Abu-Jamal said the party formed as a response to the disorganization and incoherency that unveiled itself during the chaos in Watts.³³ One of the founders of the Party, Huey Newton, said that the “Black Panther Party was formed because we wanted to oppose the evils in our community. We were grasping for organization.”³⁴ One of the results of this disorganization was that many poor blacks were missing out on the bounty of the Civil Rights Movement.

Newton acknowledged this, saying, “the goals and the ideologies of the BPP, a vanguard party totally committed to the liberation of those blacks who have been missed by almost every program and legislative change resulting from the Civil Rights Movement.”³⁵ Newton believed that the promises LBJ was making simply were not coming true. Instead of continuing to wait patiently, Newton instead said, “We encourage the people to strive for real goals: survival, liberation and freedom.”³⁶ Not only was Newton scoffing at Johnson’s paternalistic approach to helping blacks, he was also essentially raising the stakes. While Johnson and MLK were concerning themselves with Voting Rights, the Black Panther Party was taking about basic survival. When one puts survival and voting rights in the same discussion, the problem becomes clear. What use is a vote if you’re not alive to cast it? After Watts, it was impossible for Lyndon Johnson to sell that line to Americans anymore, whether

³³ Mumia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Philadelphia: South End Press, 2001), ix.

³⁴ Huey P. Newton in Toni Morrison(ed.), *To Die For the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Writers and Readers, Inc., 1999), 62.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

black or white. LBJ's paternalistic approach had ceased to provide the results he promised, and all he could do was try to figure out the next step.

CHAPTER FIVE

Whitewash Over Watts

The Johnson Administration, as well as the state and local government of California, were profoundly shocked by the violence of the Watts riots. In their minds, nothing could have been more un-American than a blatant and lawless disregard for the social order governing the country. In an effort to understand how such terrible chaos could have unveiled itself, a number of efforts were made to discover just exactly what had happened, and how such atrocities could be prevented in the future. The problem was, however, these attempts to explain the riots were just as flawed as the political approaches that had caused them.

In the wake of the Watts riots, the first step was to create a government commission whose goal would be to make sense of the ordeal. LBJ wanted John McCone, a former head of the CIA, to head the commission because of his staunchly conservative outlook. According to Gerald Horne, the reason for Johnson's conservative choice stemmed from a desire to dismiss Communism as having anything to do with the outbreak of the riots, because to be "soft on Communism" at the time was tantamount to "political suicide."¹ Johnson got his wish, as Governor Pat Brown of California chose Mr. Cone to head the Commission, in an effort to provide a credible foil to the Governor's liberal reputation.²

¹ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 283.

² *Ibid.*, 341.

Governor Brown asked McCone to “prepare an accurate chronology and description of the riots”; to “probe deeply the immediate and underlying causes of the riots”; and to “develop recommendations for action designed to prevent recurrence of these tragic disorders.”³ In addition to the conservative McCone, the other seven members who made up the commission were equally so. According to Fogelson, “Except for the two Negroes, who were anything but militant and exerted little influence over the commission, the commissioners were representative of California’s establishment. This was hardly auspicious because blue-ribbon commissions in the United States, unlike royal commissions in Great Britain, have as a rule sought political, as opposed to literal, truth. And the McCone commission was no exception.”⁴ In other words, even if there was sympathy for the rioting blacks, the commission would ultimately have to conclude that the breach of law and order trumped everything.

The Rapid Pace of the McCone Commission

In addition to its profoundly conservative nature, the McCone Commission began immediately and worked at an unbelievably rapid pace. It is not a surprise that a commission dealing with such important issues would be moving with such speed, but this was one of the factors that led to a serious shadow of doubt being cast on the report. Robert Fogelson of Columbia University strongly criticized this rapid pace. He said that

³ Governor Pat Brown quoted by Robert Blauner, , “Whitewash Over Watts: the failure of the McCone Commission Report” in Robert Fogelson (ed.), *Mass Violence in America: The Los Angeles Riots* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 167.

⁴ Robert Fogelson, “White on Black: A Critique of the McCone Commission on the Los Angeles Riots,” in *Ibid.*, 117

the Commission was “unduly hasty in its work,” and that the allotted “three months for the investigation,” were “exceedingly tight,” leading to “an extremely sketchy report.”⁵

Robert Blauner of the University of California at Berkeley further explained the hastiness of the commission. He said, “For what appears to have been political considerations connected with possible repercussions of the Watts affair on the 1966 gubernatorial campaign, the Commission was given December 1, 1965, as the deadline for the completion of its report. Thus only 100 days were available for a ‘deep and probing’ analysis of the most destructive incidents of racial violence in American history.”⁶ Blauner further said that, “In an atmosphere of speed-up that made work on an automobile assembly-line appear leisurely by comparison, the Commission held a series of sixty formal hearings before which eighty sworn witnesses,” ultimately presenting the findings “in the fanfare of television cameras on December 6,” after a “total expenditure of \$250,000.”⁷

Blauner railed against the Commission, both for the dearth of concrete work created, as well as the quality of the findings. He said that, “In view of the conditions under which it was hurried into existence, it should be no surprise that *Violence in the City—An End of a Beginning?* is a slim volume with only eighty-six pages of blown-up type. But the report of the McCone commission is not only brief, it is sketchy and superficial. Its tone and style are disturbing. There is much glib writing,” and “the depth of analysis of this fateful outbreak can be read by an average reader in less than an

⁵ Ibid., 116.

⁶ Robert Blauner, “Whitewash Over Watts: the failure of the McCone Commission Report” in Fogelson (ed.), 167.

⁷ Ibid., 168.

hour.”⁸ Blauner contrasted this brief report with the thorough examination that the Illinois Governor’s Commission provided on the 1919 Chicago race riots, which resulted in a book of 672 pages.⁹

Blauner’s criticisms went beyond that brevity of the McCone report, saying that “its content is disappointing both in its omissions and in underlying political and philosophical perspectives. There is almost nothing in the report that is new or that gives consideration to the unique conditions of Los Angeles life and politics. As Los Angeles councilman Bill Mills commented, most of the material in the report documents conditions in the Negro ghetto that have been common knowledge to sociologist and the informed public for a generation.”¹⁰ Still “more appalling” were “the report’s deeper failures. With a narrow legalistic perspective that approached the riots in terms of the sanctity of law and order, the commissioners were unable (or unwilling) to read any social or political meaning into the August terror.”¹¹

Clearly the critics of the McCone commission had viable gripes with the hastiness of the commission, and there is little doubt that such a serious investigation should not have been contingent upon political timetables. The fact that the body charged with figuring out what happened at Watts was a slave to political considerations certainly served to even further infuriate the poor citizens of Watts who were demanding change. Once again, the residents of Watts had been treated as mere pawns in a larger political chess game, and real help seemed as unlikely as ever.

⁸ Ibid., 169.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The “Riffraff Theory”

One of the most interesting topics relating to Watts was the fact that it did not have the slum-like appearance that a Northern ghetto, like Harlem for example, was usually expected to have. The McCone Commission was puzzled, saying, “While the Negro districts of Los Angeles are not urban gems, neither are they slums. Watts, for example, is a community consisting mostly of one and two-story houses, a third of which are owned by the occupants. In the riot area, most streets are wide and usually quite clean; there are trees, parks, and playgrounds. A Negro in Los Angeles has long been able to sit where he wants in a bus or a movie house, to shop where he wishes, to vote, and to use public facilities without discrimination. The opportunity to succeed is probably unequaled in any other major city.”¹²

This reality left the commission members scratching their head as to why a race riot would happen in Los Angeles, of all cities. The answer, or perhaps more accurately the rationalization, that they came up with was the mass exodus of African Americans from the South to the West Coast. The Commission said, “Perhaps the people of Los Angeles should have seen trouble gathering under the surface calm. In the last quarter century, the Negro population here has exploded. While the County’s population has trebled, the Negro population has increased almost tenfold from 75,000 in 1940 to 650,000 in 1965. Much of the increase came through migration from Southern states and many arrived with the anticipation that this dynamic city would somehow spell the end of life’s endless problems. To those who have come with high hopes and great expectations

¹² “Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?,” A Report by the Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, December 2, 1965 in Fogelson, *Mass Violence in America*, 3.

and see the success of others so close at hand, failure brings a special measure of frustration and disillusionment. Moreover, the fundamental problems, which are the same here as in the cities which were racked by the 1964 riots, are intensified by what may well be the least adequate network of public transportation in any major city in America.”¹³ It seems quite ridiculous to claim that a race riot of such magnitude was caused by an inefficient transit system, but the McCone Commission was intent on blaming the rapid migration of Negroes from the South for the riots.

The Commission said that the rioters were marginal people, and that the riots were meaningless outbursts, propagated in large part by a discontent growing number of Southern transplants to the city. The McCone Commission concluded that only 10,000 blacks joined in the rioting, and that they were not representative of the Negro Community at large. These rioters were the “unemployed, ill-educated, delinquent, juvenile, and uprooted—in short, the riffraff.”¹⁴ This questionable theory was reassuring to both politicians, as well as the majority of white Americans, because it allowed for the belief that the Watts riots were not about race, but rather about failed immigration.

In other words, as Fogelson put it, “it follows that the Los Angeles riots reflected not so much the social problems inherent in modern Negro ghettos as the personal disabilities of recent Negro newcomers. It follows further that the violent acts, the assaults, arson, and theft, were not expressions of legitimate grievances and that they were, in the words of the McCone Commission, ‘formless, quite senseless,’ and by

¹³ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁴ Robert M. Fogelson, “White on Black: A Critique of the McCone Commission Report on the Lost Angeles Ritos.” In Fogelson (ed.), *Mass Violence in America: the Los Angeles Riots* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 118.

implication, meaningless. Hence future riots could be prevented in southcentral Los Angeles merely by elevating the riffraff without transforming the Negro ghetto—without, in effect, radically changing greater Los Angeles or seriously inconveniencing its white majority.”¹⁵ Fogelson’s seething indictment here is incredibly perceptive, and frustratingly accurate. Essentially, the McCone Commission was looking for a way to solve the problem without actually having to make any real sacrifices.

The riffraff theory was not only dangerous because of its intention on blaming the victim, but also for its complete lack of statistical foundation. Instead of conducting a detailed survey of riot participation, the McCone Commission “derived its estimate that only two percent of Los Angeles’ Negroes joined in the riots from the impressions of Mayor Samuel Yorty, Police Chief Parker, and other officials who had good reason to minimize the extent of participation. Furthermore, the commission based its conclusion that the rioters were the riffraff on nothing more than a statistical survey of the persons arrested during the rioting according to age, prior criminal record, and place of birth.”¹⁶ Bearing this in mind, the riffraff theory seemed to be a convenient way of producing a scapegoat for the horrific violence that took place, rather than a fact-based attempt at an explanation.

So why would the Commission put forth such a theory? Fogelson argued that, “The answer, I believe, can be traced to its conviction that no matter how grave the grievances, there are no legitimate grounds for violent protest—a conviction, shared by most whites and, until recently, most Negroes, which reflects the nation’s traditional

¹⁵ Ibid., 119.

¹⁶ Ibid., 120.

confidence in orderly social change.”¹⁷ In other words, for the Commission to draw any conclusion other than that the riffraff were to blame would have essentially been saying that the Watts riots were a legitimate cry for help against crushingly oppressive social injustices. Such lawlessness would never be tolerated by the majority of Americans, and to say anything besides would imply that violence was a legitimate means to enacting social and political change.

Even if one does not reject the riffraff theory for its flawed philosophical foundations, one merely has to examine the numbers to poke holes in the argument. According to the commission, there were only 10,000 blacks who participated in the riots. This is hard to believe considering the fact that over 4,000 were actually arrested for participation in the riots.¹⁸ For this to be true, it would mean that the Los Angeles police successfully arrested almost half of the actual rioters, which is an absolutely absurd notion. In light of this fact, it most likely was not just a small segment of disillusioned Southern immigrants who were acting as the inciting riffraff.

The riffraff theory is dangerous not only because it attempts to give easy answers to complex questions, but also because it is essentially a means of blaming the victim. As the Commission put it, “Many Negroes moved to the city in the last generation and are totally unprepared to meet the conditions of city life.” Bayard Rustin says, “it should be noted here that the burden of responsibility has already been placed on these hapless migrants to the cities. There is not one word about the conditions, economic as well as social, that have pushed Negroes out of the rural areas’ nor is there one word about

¹⁷ Ibid., 120

¹⁸ Ibid., 121.

whether the cities have been willing and able to meet the demand for jobs, adequate housing, proper schools.”¹⁹

Rustin also attacks the Commission’s focus on the fact that Watts did not mirror the look of the typical urban ghetto. He said, “A neighborhood such as Watts may seem beautiful when compared to much of Harlem (which, in turn, is an improvement over the Negro section of Mobile, Alabama)—but it is still a ghetto. The housing is run-down, public services are inferior, the listless penned-in atmosphere of segregation is oppressive. Absentee landlords are the rule, and most of the businesses are owned by whites: neglect and exploitation reign by day, and at night, as one Watts Negro tersely put it, ‘There’s just the cops and us.’”²⁰ Here, Rustin injects a much needed dose of reality into the Commission’s flawed view of Watts’ seemingly peaceful exterior. He also addresses another of the most important aspects of the riots: the relationship with the police and the community.

It is probably not surprising to most that the relationship between the police and the urban ghetto which they patrol might be tense, but the problems between the cops and the residents of Watts was particularly intriguing. Just as with the riffraff theory, the McCone Commission once again sought to place the blame for pervasive problems on the large number of migrants from the South.

The McCone commission claimed that a single standard of law enforcement was practiced throughout the city, and, as Fogelson put it, “The resentment of Negroes, they claimed, is due to their past mistreatment in the South and present maladjustment in the

¹⁹ Bayard Rustin, “The Watts ‘Manifesto’ & The McCone Report” in Fogelson, *Mass Violence in America*, 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

North, and not to the conduct of the police in the ghetto. Negroes vent their hostility toward patrolmen not as patrolmen, but as representatives of white society and white authority; the police are the recipients, not the source, of Negro resentment.”²¹ The reality was, however, that police brutality was a major issue. Just as MLK had discovered during his visit to Los Angeles, nearly every citizen of Watts had a reason to fear the police. The McCone Commission’s attempt to once again blame the victim was ill-founded, and the only possible explanation seems to be a desire for the state government not to admit a problem with its police force. Clearly the McCone Commission did not fulfill its goals of explaining the riots, and in many ways only served to worsen racial tensions across the nation.

The UCLA Los Angeles Riot Study (LARS)

It is clear that the McCone Commission’s report on the causes of, and solutions to, the Watts riots was woefully inadequate. Despite all its shortcomings, however, it is also true that the window of time it was given to reach its conclusions was demandingly small. In response to the hasty and incorrect conclusions, a group of sociologists and political scientists at UCLA decided to give the riots a more thorough investigation. The results of their inquiry were published in August of 1967, almost two years after the Watts riots had occurred. Their findings mirrored the criticisms that Fogelson, Rustin and Blauner levied prior to the LARS report, but they went even further with their critiques. The riffraff theory and the issue of police brutality receive a thorough debunking, but perhaps the most intriguing part of the LARS is the assessment of an

²¹ Fogelson, “White on Black,” 124-125.

increasingly militant segment of black politics that was rising to challenge the traditional method of politics championed by paternalists like Lyndon Johnson.

When examining the LARS report, one must understand the context in which it was released. The Watts riots in 1965 were an absolute shock to the nation, but by 1967, urban riots had spread throughout the nation. As a result, the LARS report attempted not only to explain what had occurred during the Watts riots of 1965, but also to provide insight into how the Administration could effectively battle the current pervasive existence of riots across the country. The report said, “A number of statements being made about the present riots resemble those made immediately after the Watts riots. Our data indicates that such statements about the Watts riots were erroneous.”²² This is unfortunate, because it essentially suggests that the proper lessons were not learned in the wake of the Watts riots. Not only were urban riots exponentially more widespread merely two years later, but the same excuses and incorrect analyses were still being employed.

Most notable of the continued flawed approaches was the continued adherence to the riffraff theory as an explanation for urban violence. The report stated, “There is a growing body of myths emerging about the riots. They center around the effort to distinguish between the ‘good Negro’ and the ‘bad Negro.’ A correlate is that the riots are usually the work of outside agitators or the ‘riffraff,’ or the ‘mad dog’ element of Negroes. This leads to the numbers game of guessing the percentage of ‘bad Negroes’ (2 to 5 percent seems to be popular) and to a rationalization of better use of police power to deal with them. In turn this tends to divert attention from the social ills responsible for

²² UCLA Los Angeles Riot Study (LARS), 8/1/67, Office Files of Joseph A. Califano, Box 58, Los Angeles Riots, LBJ Library.

the riots.”²³ Here the LARS report deftly explains why the riffraff theory is so dangerous, due to its inevitable move toward scapegoating and blaming of the victim.

The report, however, did not merely condemn the riffraff theory’s conjecture and speculation, for it provided a detailed assault of numerical data aimed at debunking the infamous riffraff theory. The report’s first complaint was in regard to the ridiculous claim that only 10,000 blacks participated in the riot in any form. Instead, the LARS report surmised that “up to 15 percent of the Negro adult population, or about 22,000 persons were active at some point during the rioting, and in more than a ‘spectator role.’” Furthermore, “an additional 35 or 40 percent of the Negro adult population, or at least and additional 51,000 persons, were active spectators to the disturbance.”²⁴ These numbers stand in stark contrast to the claim that only two percent of the black population of Los Angeles had anything to do with the riots.

In addition to refuting the number of riot participants, the LARS report also took umbrage with the claim that the rioters consisted exclusively of poor and ill-educated. The report instead concluded, “Support for the riot was as great among relatively well educated and economically advantaged as among poorly educated and economically disadvantaged in the curfew area.”²⁵ This is crucial to understand, for it indicates that the riots could not be merely explained as poor, uneducated riffraff acting out mindlessly, but rather that the people of Watts, regardless of their situation, were all equally fed up with

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

the pervasive discrimination and lack of fair treatment for the African American community.

The report also attacked the often used excuse that the rioters in Watts were simply recent migrants from the South who were incapable of acclimating themselves to life in Los Angeles. The report contended the opposite, saying, “Support for the riot was as great among relatively long time residents of South Central Los Angeles as it was among the more recent migrants from the South. Our data, furthermore, indicates that the majority of people in South Central Los Angeles are long time residents, thus dispelling the belief that the riot was a product of a recent influx of migrants from the South.”²⁶ Blaming the recent arrivals from the South provided an easy explanation for why the riots happened, but it did nothing to help any further understand why these riots were happening.

In addition to addressing the actual participants in the riot, the LARS report provided intriguing and telling information concerning the level of approval that the rioters received even from those who did not directly participate. According to the report’s data, “About 34 percent of the sample were somewhat favorable, or very favorable about what took place.” Another very important statistic was that “while the majority expressed disapproval of the violence and destruction, this was often coupled with an expression of empathy with the motive of those who participated, or a sense of pride that the Negro has brought world-wide attention to his problem.”²⁷ This is absolutely crucial to understanding why the riffraff theory is so flawed. The residents of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Los Angeles were not violence-mongering anarchists, but instead they actually deplored the violence. The fact that they empathized with the rioters, despite their aversion to the violence, shows just how desperate the situation was for poor ignored blacks living in America's ghettos.

In the wake of the Watts riots, many argued that the result would be an inevitable white backlash against the civil rights movement. Interestingly enough, however, this depended on which segment of Los Angeleans one asked. As the report claims, "Considerable optimism was shown over the results of the riot. Only about 20 percent felt that it would hurt the cause. Our study of the white population in the Los Angeles metropolitan area was in sharp contrast. Seventy-four percent believed it would hurt the cause of the Negro. Only 23 percent of the population in the curfew area felt that the riot increased that gap between the races, as contrasted with 71 percent in the white population. 51 percent of the population in the curfew area saw the whites as now being more sympathetic because of the riot, as contrasted with 32 percent in the white population." This statistics are depressing not only because they indicate the emergence of a white backlash against civil rights, but also because they show just how far black and white Americans were drifting away from each other.

The LARS report summed this reality up poignantly, saying, "The McCone Commission Report recommendations represented a maximum program to most whites, including most white leaders, but only a minimum and largely symbolic program to Negro leadership and followership alike." This statement essentially sums up why despite the soaring optimism of the Johnson Administration in 1965, the real progress achieved by the Civil Rights movement going forward would be stagnant at best. Black

and White Americans were simply on different pages, and the divide was only getting larger with each passing day.

In addition to the growing divide between blacks and whites concerning how much government assistance was important, the LARS report introduced another issue that was certain to split the two camps even further: the acceptance of violence as a viable option to African Americans, specifically in the black community. The LARS report described a “growing polarization of three groupings in the Negro community, namely, the ‘traditionalists,’ the ‘militants,’ and the ‘survivalists.’”²⁸ The description of these groupings cut to the heart of why LBJ’s traditional paternalistic handling of problems was becoming less likely to succeed than ever. The report said, “The Administration’s policies and programs vis-à-vis the Negro problem has tended to stress more the traditional model of individual success than viewing the problems of the group as a whole. As a result a pattern has been encouraged in the Negro Community which places premium on individual mobility rather than collective concern.”²⁹

This was a major problem for the Johnson Administration, because the African American community, generally speaking, was more community focused, rather than individually focused. Johnson’s paternalistic message was increasing falling on deaf ears, and as a result, the new ‘militant’ mindset began to garner credence. As the LARS report put it, “The ‘militants’ are no longer impressed with the upward mobility of the ‘traditionalists’ and tend to regard them with suspicion and as Uncle Toms. They are competing with the ‘traditionalists’ for the leadership role in delivering the ‘survivalists’

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

out of the wilderness. To do this they realize that they must develop economic and political power which they now refer to as ‘Black Power’³⁰

This development no doubt made Lyndon Johnson extremely anxious, because it threatened to decimate his credibility within the black community. As the LARS report put it, “For those whose plight and condition make them present oriented, the ‘militant’ offers the most attractive plan, pointing out as he does that the Negro has gained very little through the slow legislative processes and that results will come more immediately if the Negro takes matters into his own hands.”³¹ This new mindset stood against everything that LBJ wanted. Johnson’s desire was for blacks to wait patiently as he, the benevolent fatherly provider, bestowed the gifts of abundance upon them. This message however, had no resonance after the Watts riots. The violence may have been regrettable, but at least blacks were getting attention.

Johnson’s problem was not merely the decreasing influence he had within the Black Community, but also the problems that the inevitable white backlash would cause. The report describes the situation, saying, “The reaction of the white community to the ‘riot’ would indicate that there is a hardening of their position, a polarization of their attitudes into a potential white backlash, and an increased use of force. The militants, however, would argue that the whites are merely using the riots as a rationalization to avoid doing what they had not planned to do in the first place.”³² Once again, the LARS report astutely revealed the growing storm that inevitably was to separate black and white

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

America like never before. Just as blacks were becoming impatient and more susceptible to agreeing with the militant message, “the method of the ‘militants’ is creating fear and hostility in the white community.”³³ This truly was a recipe for social and political disaster. The LARS report should be commended for its brutal honesty, and genuine resolve to figure out solutions. Another report, however, is not worthy of the same commendation, though many believed the Johnson Administration to have taken its message to heart.

The Moynihan Report and Blaming the Victim

Before the Watts riots ever occurred in August of 1965, the U.S. Department of Labor had already taken steps to address the pervasive problems plaguing African Americans. The Moynihan Report, which was completed in March 1965, attempted to solve the crisis of worsening conditions for blacks living in urban communities. Although the report’s author, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, was certainly well-intentioned in his attempt to come up with answers to a fundamental problem in American society, his conclusions reflected the paternalistic approach to helping African Americans that President Lyndon Johnson so desperately clung to.

The report begins on the right track, identifying two main reasons why the situation for poor urban black families. According to the report, “First, the racist virus in the American blood stream still affects us: Negroes will encounter serious personal prejudice for at least another generation,” and also “Second, three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment have taken their toll on the Negro people.”³⁴ These are not

³³ Ibid.

revolutionary epiphanies by any means, and they rightfully place the blame upon a severely misguided American society that has wronged the black community for centuries. The problem with the report comes with its dangerous, and markedly racist, conclusion that the breakdown of the Negro family is the ultimate root cause.

According to the report, “The gap between the Negro and most other groups in American society is widening. The fundamental problem, in which this is most clearly the case, is that of family structure. The evidence—not final, but powerfully persuasive—is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling.”³⁵ The report continues, “A middle-class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated. . . . So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself.”³⁶ The problem with the report’s conclusions is not that it seeks to help strengthen the African American community, but rather that it singles blacks out as essentially being a major part of the problem. Even though the intentions were noble, it is still an undeniable case of blaming the victim.

The report further singles out blacks, saying “measures that have worked in the past, or would work for most groups in the present, will not work here. A national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure. This would be a new departure for Federal policy. And a

³⁴ The Moynihan Report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965, Available at: <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=primary/moynihan-report-1965>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

difficult one.”³⁷ While the report is correct that it would be a new departure for federal policy, the recommendations are far from a departure from LBJ’s paternalistic view of social reform. Basically the report echoes LBJ’s belief in the absolute necessity of a paternalistic provider. Nothing could be more paternalistic than saying that the Negro father needed to be restored to his rightful place as the benevolent bestower. There is little doubt that most black families would be stabilized by a higher percentage of male dominated households, but the implication is that blacks are wallowing in poverty because they refuse to fall in line and act like white Americans.

Despite its misguided assertions that blacks should emulate their more prosperous white counterparts, the Moynihan Report does at least not directly blame blacks for the breakdown. In fact, it actually attempts to educate a seriously misinformed white public, saying, “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time. There is probably no single fact of Negro American life so little understood by whites.”³⁸ The reason the report cites for the ignorance is the lack of focus on the family issue, and instead says that, “The Negro situation is commonly perceived by whites in terms of the visible manifestation of discrimination and poverty, in part because Negro protest is directed against such obstacles, and in part, no doubt, because these are facts which involve the actions and attitudes of the white community as well.”³⁹ In other words, white Americans were able to understand the plight of many

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

blacks, because they were actually involved with either the eradication, or the perpetuation, of such maladies.

The problem of the Negro family breakdown, however, went unnoticed because whites did not realize, or did not want to admit, that generations of injustice had created the problem. The report said, “It is more difficult, however, for whites to perceive the effect that three centuries of exploitation have had on the fabric of Negro society itself. Here the consequences of the historic injustices done to Negro Americans are silent and hidden from view.”⁴⁰ These statements are absolutely true, because they place the plight of African Americans correctly on the shoulders of every previous generation of whites that had a hand in helping to destroy African American culture and society.

The problem, however, is the report’s obsession with making all black families mirror the structure of white American families, saying, “Unless this damage is repaired, all the effort to end discrimination and poverty and injustice will come to little. The role of the family in shaping character and ability is so pervasive as to be easily overlooked. The family is the basic social unit of American life” Of course, the damage needed to be repaired, but asking black people to make themselves into white people was simply not the answer. In fact, it just created more problems.

Once again addressing white America’s ignorance of the black family breakdown, the report said, “It may be hazarded that the reason family structure does not loom larger in public discussion of social issues is that people tend to assume that the nature of family life is about the same throughout American society. The mass media and the development of suburbia have created an image of the American family as a highly

⁴⁰ Ibid.

standardized phenomenon.” Therefore, “it is easy to assume that whatever it is that makes for differences among individuals or groups of individuals, it is not a different family structure.”⁴¹ Although the report’s assertions concerning white ignorance may be true, they hardly reach the heart of the issue. Poor African Americans were not sinking helplessly further into poverty just because middle class white Americans assumed that the black family was just like the white family.

Even more troubling is the report’s discussion of the family structure of other immigrant groups in American history, saying, “A number of immigrant groups were characterized by unusually strong family bonds; these groups have characteristically progressed more rapidly than others.”⁴² This statement essentially implies that African Americans are not thriving simply because they do not value a strong family enough. In addition to being incredibly racist, it ignores the terrible reality that many black families began to disintegrate when family members were sold to separate slaveholders. While the report does acknowledge the corrosive influence of slavery, it is also basically saying that blacks just do not want a tight-knit family bad enough.

Reinforcing the claim that family structure is a real possibility, the report then discusses the rise of the middle class black family as proof of its thesis. The report said, “There is considerable evidence that the Negro community is in fact dividing between a stable middle-class group that is steadily growing stronger and more successful, and an increasingly disorganized and disadvantaged lower-class group. There are indications, for example, that the middle-class Negro family puts a higher premium on family

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

stability and the conserving of family resources than does the white middle-class.”⁴³ The subtext of this statement is basically saying that not only should blacks emulate white American families, but that they should strive to be even ‘whiter’ in order to thrive.

To the Moynihan Report’s credit, it does recognize that “the lumping of Negroes in one statistical measurement very probably conceals the extent of the disorganization among the lower-class group. If conditions are improving for one and deterioration for another, the resultant statistical averages might show no change.”⁴⁴ The report correctly acknowledges the necessity to focus on helping those who need it most, but it is the manner in which it assesses blame for the situation. The first point is that “Nearly a Quarter of Urban Negro Marriages are Dissolved,” which inherently implies that if black couple would just stick it out together, they would not have as many problems.

The second point, that fact that “Nearly One-Quarter of Negro births are now illegitimate,” also points a finger at the victim. The third, and perhaps most misguided, statement deals with the perceived negativity that “almost one-fourth of Negro families are headed by females.” Yes, it is true that every child needs a father, but to say that a mother being the head of the household is a plague on society is an assumption based on white American values. It ignores the fact that maybe black and white Americans are not identical in every way. The report expresses shock at the fact that “the percent of nonwhite families headed by a female is more than double the percent for whites....Once

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

again, this measure of family disorganization is found to be diminishing among white families and increasing among Negro families.”⁴⁵

In an effort to explain the alarm at the rising number of female headed household, the report says that “the breakdown of the Negro family has led to a startling increase in welfare dependency,” saying, “The steady expansion of this welfare program, as of public assistance programs in general, can be taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States.”⁴⁶ This is an unfair assertion, for it assumes that the only reason black people are increasingly needing of welfare is because they simply cannot keep their families together like they should. It ignores the fact that racism, discrimination, injustice and *de facto* urban segregation are the true reasons why blacks are put at such an incredible disadvantage. If the Moynihan’s thesis were true, all that would have to happen would be for the father to return, and magically African Americans would be equally employed, equally treated and free from exploitation. Obviously this is hyperbole, but it shows the overly simplistic nature of the Moynihan Report, as well as its unfortunate *modus operandi* of blaming the victim.

Even if the report was spot on in its assertion that the absence of a black father was the root cause of all problems, its way of explaining is borderline offensive. As previously stated, the report does acknowledge the immeasurable damage that slavery caused the black family, but its focus on the black male plight during Reconstruction is off-putting. The report said that, “The Negro was given liberty, but not equality. Life

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

remained hazardous and marginal. Of the greatest importance, the Negro male, particularly in the South, became an object of intense hostility, an attitude unquestionably based in some measure of fear. When Jim Crow made its appearance toward the end of the 19th century, it may be speculated that it was the Negro male who was most humiliated thereby....Keeping the Negro ‘in his place’ can be translated as keeping the Negro male in his place: the female was not a threat to anyone”⁴⁷ While this statement is true, the conclusion that the report draws from it is disturbing.

The report asserts that, “Unquestionably, these events worked against the emergence of a strong father figure. The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male. The ‘sassy nigger[sic]’ was lynched.”⁴⁸ Reducing the discussion of black inequality to the disruption of animal instinct is profoundly racist, and borders dangerously on implying that African Americans are somehow more animalistic than whites. The results of this denial of animal ritual, according to the report, led to “in this situation, the Negro family made but little progress toward the middle-class pattern of present time.”⁴⁹ In other words, if black men would have simply been allowed to be cocky and arrogant, they would be properly equipped to stay at the head of their family, and thus more able to properly emulate what white America found acceptable as a family.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The report does redeem itself somewhat by admitting that a matriarchal family is not inherently inferior, saying, “There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement.” But the report then, argues, “However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro.”⁵⁰ The report’s assertion may be correct, but the only solution to this problem would be for black families to undergo a metamorphosis to be more like whites.

The report’s logic is that “the children of these families will perform as well or better than their white peers. They need no help from anyone, and ask none.” Although this is a logical statement, it is also tantamount to seeking an easy solution in which the “Negro problem” can once again be ignored. If black people would just turn themselves into white people, there would not even be a need for such discussions. Even the flawed report, however, acknowledges that the situation is not as simple as that, and instead calls for united national action in an effort to restore stability to the Negro family.

The stated goal of the report said, “The policy of the United States is to bring the Negro American to full and equal sharing in the responsibilities and rewards of citizenship. To this end, the programs of the Federal government bearing on this objective shall be designed to have the effect, directly or indirectly, of enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro American family.” Once again, the intentions of the study were grounded in genuine concern for social progress, but the method by which

⁵⁰ Ibid.

this equality was to be achieved was more or less cleaning up the familial mess that African Americans had made of their family structure.

Reading through the Moynihan report, it is easy to see why the inflammatory assertions might have caused such an uproar, which they indeed did. The outrage over the report was enhanced by negative media coverage, most notably by *New York Times* journalist Robert Novak, who helped perpetuate a myth that the Moynihan Report was a clandestine government document never meant for public consumption. The reality was, however, that the report was not a secret document, and instead was available for purchase in government stores for 45 cents.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the false myth was perpetuated by newspapers across the country, causing untold suspicion around the Johnson Administration. Most importantly, the Administration's interest in the report came to be viewed as their explanation for the Watts riots.⁵²

The reality is that Lyndon Johnson did not have anything personally to do with the construction of the Moynihan report, and it is safe to say that the president did not assume that a fractured Negro family structure was the ultimate explanation for Watts.⁵³ Regardless, the perception was that the Administration was indeed paying legitimate attention to the racist report, infuriating Americans, especially black Americans. It is also true that Johnson was not involved in the report issued by the McCone Commission, yet LBJ was once again blamed for the perceived whitewash, because it was the government's explanation.

⁵¹ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 370

⁵² *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵³ See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The President and the Negro: The Moment Lost," *Commentary*, 1967.

While Johnson should indeed not be held responsible for the bold assertions made by both commissions, the two works vividly display the political machine in which Johnson operated. He was in favor of conservative John McCone heading the commission, just as he had placed Daniel Patrick Moynihan in a high-ranking position in the Department of Labor. The reports may not have been the actual words of the president, but it mirrored the paternalistic thinking that he most certainly was guilty of. Though Johnson's intentions to help alleviate the suffering of African Americans may have been pure, once Watts hit, it was clear that LBJ simply had too many questions and not enough answers. More importantly, these were questions that should have been asked prior to a race riot the scale of Watts. By then, it was much too late to right the ship, and instead years of perpetual racial violence would plague to urban centers of America as Lyndon Johnson sat helplessly watching.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Despite his own soaring aspirations to carve out a legacy unrivaled by any previous President of the United States, the actual results for Lyndon Johnson were extremely tragic and heartbreaking. Instead, he has been forever condemned to be one of the easiest targets for criticism in American history. Ask any American for their opinion on LBJ, and the response will most likely be a negative one. Whether it be expressing misplaced anger towards the loss of John F. Kennedy, or unfairly shouldering the entire blame for the Vietnam War on Johnson, LBJ has become essentially a figure of infamy in American history. Yes, it is true that Johnson rose to executive power as a result of JFK's assassination, just as it is true that a great deal of blame for the Vietnam quagmire should be attributed to LBJ. This, however, is a myopic assessment of a much more complex historical figure.

It has never been proven, nor will it likely ever be proven, that Lyndon Johnson had anything to do with JFK's death. It is also true that the blood shed in the jungles of Vietnam is forever on the hands of far more people than just LBJ, like John F. Kennedy for one. The fact remains, however, that Johnson is blamed for these unfortunate historical realities in the court of public opinion. All of the wonderful, progressive legislation that LBJ was amazingly able to pass often escapes American's minds. One is not likely to hear allusions that the United States would be a far different country today if LBJ had never enjoyed his time in office. Most forget the

millions of African Americans whose lives he drastically improved, even if the improvements occurred gradually after his time in power.

Perhaps the reason Johnson receives so much blame is because of the unique time in which he lived. The 1960's were an incredibly tumultuous decade, seemingly fraught with more defeat than victory, and someone had to take the blame.

Unfortunately for LBJ, he stands today as America's scapegoat for basically everything that went wrong during the era. More important than the sadness that enveloped Americans concerning Kennedy's death was the profound sense anger and outrage. The true outlet for their anger should have been Lee Harvey Oswald, but it simply did not satisfy a grieving nation. The King of Camelot could not have simply have been dispatched by a murderous lunatic, it had to be more complex than that. It had to be an inside conspiracy.

Just as Americans chose to make a simple situation complex with the Kennedy assassination, they elected to do the opposite with the Vietnam War. They label it, simply, as "Johnson's War," as if LBJ's lifelong dream was to carelessly throw away the lives of patriotic Americans for a pointless cause. Americans choose to ignore the fact that preceding executives, including their beloved Kennedy, played a crucial role in America's continued involvement in the star-crossed Southeast Asian country and instead employ Johnson once again as the whipping boy. It is this pick-and-choose approach to assessing Johnson's time as president that has led to his undeniably tragic legacy. It is comfortable for many to think that if only Kennedy had not been killed, our country would today be a utopia. Lyndon Johnson continues to provide Americans with this comfort by playing the role of unwilling scapegoat.

While all of this is true, the fact also remains that LBJ was a tremendously flawed politician who made countless mistakes. His lust for power was unquenchable, even if it meant engaging in voter fraud, which he most certainly did prior to his time as executive. Once he achieved his dreams of becoming president, the inevitable sense of hubris set in as quickly as he could take the oath of office. He thought he could do anything and everything, and he tried to do just that. This, ultimately, was Johnson's greatest mistake: truly believing that he could do the impossible. The task of bestowing social and economic equality upon a nation crippled with centuries of injustice and discrimination was simply not realistic, but he was convinced he could do it. This would have been impossible for anyone even if there had been an inexplicable outbreak of worldwide peace, but instead he had to contend with the most complex war that America had ever fought: the Cold War. No amount of persuasion, however, could convince him that it simply was not possible to have both "guns and butter."

This overconfidence which convinced Johnson he could give the answer to any question, no matter how complex the inquiry, led to a pervasive desire to address all problems in a way that sought a singular and concrete answer. When attempting to explain the Kennedy assassination, he established the Warren Commission, whose sole job was to provide a single answer to the tragedy. The same can be said for the McCone Commission in the wake of the Watts riots, as well as the Moynihan Report which preceded the violence. Although the questions were complex, Lyndon Johnson always wanted neat, clean-cut answer to his inquiries, whose plan called for top-to-bottom action. The problem was, however, that the questions he was asking

demanding increasingly nuanced responses, colored more in shades of gray than in black and white. By deceiving the American public into a belief that easy answers were possible, he ultimately set up both black and white Americans for a dangerous disappointment. Lyndon Johnson's social failures were exacerbated even further by the chaos surrounding the Vietnam War. Just as his idol FDR had somewhat been saved by World War II, LBJ was condemned into historical infamy by the Vietnam conflict. Perhaps this was the final ironic failure of Lyndon B. Johnson's attempts to "out-Roosevelt" Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Whereas LBJ has been tragically misunderstood by history, the Watts Riots themselves have been sadly overlooked. A short reference to the racial rebellion is available in most texts dealing with America in the 1960's, but for the most part there has been an undeniable failure on the part of historians to address the landmark event properly. One of the most thought-provoking quotes came from Robert Conot, who made a bold prediction in his 1966 account of the riots. Conot said, "Had the Los Angeles riots of August, 1965, been an isolated phenomenon, it would merit only passing interest. But it is probable that future historians will regard it as significant a turning point in Negro-white relations in the United States as John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was in the drive against slavery. Just as Brown's raid polarized opposing forces in the slavery struggle, the Los Angeles riot symbolized the end of the era of Negro passivity—passivity that took the form of the doctrine of nonviolence, and the acceptance of white leadership in the civil rights struggle. In Los Angeles the Negro was going on record that he would no longer turn the other

cheek. That, frustrated and goaded, he would strike back, whether the response of violence was an appropriate one or no.”¹

In his quote, Conot correctly associates the appropriate amount of gravitas to the historical importance of the Watts riots. Unfortunately, many historians portray Watts as merely another 1960’s race riot, when in reality it was far more integral to the nation’s history than that. The Watts riots basically ruined LBJ’s presidency, derailed the civil rights movement, and scared an entire generation of Americans into fearing and loathing the militant, angry and dangerous Negro, who was perpetuated as a figure of malice and dread. As Johnson declined to run for re-election in 1968, it was clear that he knew himself that his dreams had been tragically shattered by a host of social and political forces. Johnson may have survived his term as president through 1968, but it is clear that the mortal blow was dealt years earlier, on August 11, 1965. Therefore, the Watts Riots should be held in the same regard as any landmark event of the 1960’s.

Just as many might harken back to Woodstock as the high point of the counter-culture movement, or cite the Tet Offensive as the jarring realization that America was doomed to stalemate in Vietnam, Americans should also remember that the Watts riots represented the point when African Americans refused to be accepted as anything less than equals in a country whose respect they had still not enjoyed. Black Americans deserved their just rewards, and their insistence upon exactly that was given a huge boost of momentum through the Watts riots. Even though many deplored the events for its breach of nonviolent principles, the riots also served as a

¹ Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness*, ix.

wakeup call to many that equality was simply not being fostered through the current approaches.

Beyond the scope of the 1960's, race relations in Los Angeles have continued to influence Americans history, the most obvious example being the riots which occurred during the early 1990's in response to Rodney King's incident with the LAPD. Although almost thirty years after the Watts riots broke out, deteriorated relations between the LAPD and the African Americans citizens of Los Angeles were as tense as ever. It seemed as though nothing had been learned from the Watts riots. Once again, violent riots had rocked Los Angeles, essentially because of the problem of police-community relations. This underscores the fact that the McCone Commission's attempts to downplay the police department's role in the riots was simply erroneous, and the fact that it was overlooked unfortunately led to history repeating itself less than 30 years later.

If there is anything to be learned in the wake of these unfortunate events, one would be wise to remember that explaining does not mean understanding. Lyndon Johnson truly believed he could explain anything, but the sad fact was that he truly did not understand everything. The reality is that there will always be tension between black and white Americans, but the key is to place a premium on understanding and empathy, rather than on explanations and excuses. Admitting that you do not have all the answers is not tantamount to resignation, but rather a sign of intelligence and willingness to seek the truth. If Lyndon Johnson had attempted to *understand* the anger of the citizens of Watts in 1965, he might not have been so inclined to *explain* their actions in such a paternalistic and simplistic manner.

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