

## Vice Presidents of the United States Lyndon B. Johnson (1963)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.

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I think a fair assessment would be that there was a big sigh of relief when Johnson departed the Senate. Not that they didn't like Johnson . . . but he was so strong, and so difficult, and so tough, that it was a relief to get him over to the vice president's office.

—George A. Smathers

The only thing that astonished politicians and the press more than John F. Kennedy's offer of the vice-presidential nomination to Lyndon B. Johnson was Johnson's acceptance. Neither man particularly liked the other, and their styles contrasted starkly. Kennedy cultivated a smooth, sophisticated and self-deprecating image, while Johnson often appeared boorish, bullying and boastful. In the U.S. Senate, Johnson, as majority leader, for years had stood second only to the president of the United States in power and influence, whereas Kennedy was an unimpressive back bencher. Although Kennedy's choice for the second spot on the ticket dismayed his liberal supporters, the candidate recognized that Johnson could help him carry Texas and the South and that he would undoubtedly be easier to deal with as vice president than as majority leader. Johnson's reasons for accepting were more enigmatic, for he was trading a powerful job for a powerless one.

### **From Farm to Congress**

Johnson reached the dubious pinnacle of the vice-presidency after a remarkable climb to power in Washington. It started on a farm near Stonewall, Texas, where he was born on August 27, 1908, the son of the Texas politico, Sam Ealy Johnson, and his refined and demanding wife, Rebecca Baines Johnson. Sam Ealy Johnson served six terms in the Texas House of Representatives, faithfully supporting the interests of his constituents, until his various real estate, insurance brokering, and ranching ventures began to drag him into debt. Throughout his life, Lyndon Johnson never forgot the impact his father's economic disgrace had on his family.<sup>1</sup>

Graduating from high school in 1924, Johnson escaped both his family and the rugged Texas Hill Country by heading toward California in search of work. When nothing but hard labor turned up, Johnson returned home a year later and attended Southwest Texas State Teacher's College in San Marcos. Depleted funds forced him to leave college and spend a year as principal and teacher at a Mexican-American school in Cotulla, Texas, near the Mexican border. Years later he asserted, "You never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars in the face of a young child."<sup>2</sup>

When a candidate for governor failed to appear at a rally in 1930, Johnson delivered an impromptu campaign speech for him. This speech so impressed a candidate for the state senate, Welly Hopkins, that he recruited Johnson to manage his own successful campaign. Later, while Johnson was teaching high school in Houston, Hopkins recommended him to the newly elected Representative Richard Kleberg. Hired as Kleberg's secretary, Johnson arrived in Washington with a congressman more interested in golf than in legislating, a situation that gave the young aide the opportunity to take charge and make himself known. Directing Kleberg's staff, Johnson learned how Washington worked and also got himself elected Speaker of the Little Congress, an association of House staff members. In 1934, after he courted and married Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Taylor, Johnson sought wider career horizons and was soon appointed Texas state director of the National Youth Administration, a New Deal agency designed to help students afford to stay in school. Success in that job propelled him into a special election for Congress in 1937, campaigning under banners that proclaimed "Franklin D. and Lyndon B."<sup>3</sup>

### **A New Deal Congressman**

Johnson's victory began a thirty-two-year political career that would end in the White House. After the election, President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited Galveston, Texas, and warmly greeted the new congressman. FDR admired Johnson's vitality and predicted that someday he would become the "first Southern President" since the Civil War. Johnson had also become a protégé of his fellow Texan, Sam Rayburn, the future House Speaker, who guided much of his career. An active congressman, Johnson used his New Deal connections to bring rural electrification and other federal projects into his district, then, ambitious and in a hurry, he ran in a special election for the U.S. Senate in 1941. On election night, Johnson held a lead but announced his vote tallies too soon, allowing the opponent to "find" enough votes to defeat him. When America entered the Second World War, Johnson briefly served in uniform as a navy lieutenant commander. He received a silver star from General Douglas MacArthur for having flown as a passenger in a bomber that was attacked by Japanese planes (none of the others on board received a medal). When President Roosevelt called on members of Congress to choose between military and legislative service, Johnson returned to the House for the duration of the war. In 1948 he again ran for the Senate and fought a celebrated campaign for the Democratic nomination against the popular Governor Coke Stevenson. Having learned his lesson from the previous Senate race, Johnson held back on announcing his vote tallies and with the help of some friendly political machines eked out an 87-vote victory for which he was dubbed "Landslide Lyndon."<sup>4</sup>

### **A Southern Moderate**

Johnson rode into the Senate in 1949 on the political wave that returned Harry Truman to the White House and Democratic majorities to both houses of Congress. His class of freshmen senators included Democrats Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, Robert Kerr of Oklahoma, Clinton Anderson of New Mexico, Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, and Paul Douglas of Illinois. Seeking to establish himself quickly against this formidable competition, Senator-elect Johnson called in the Senate's twenty-year-old chief telephone page, Bobby Baker, who had already gained a reputation as a head counter. "Mr. Baker, I understand you know where the bodies are buried in the Senate," he began their critical relationship by remarking. "I gotta tell you, Mr. Baker, that my state is much more conservative than the national Democratic party. I got elected by just eighty-seven votes and I ran against a caveman."<sup>5</sup>

Johnson sought to move to a middle ground that would enable him to rise in the national ranks of his party without losing his base in Texas. Just as Sam Rayburn had promoted Johnson's career in the House, Georgia Senator Richard Russell became the Senate mentor for the young Texan. Russell, a powerful, highly respected "senator's senator," might have served as Democratic floor leader in the Senate, except that he could not follow the Truman administration's lead on civil rights. He therefore preferred to exercise his influence as chairman of the Armed Services Committee and of the Southern Caucus. Johnson won the affection of the bachelor senator by adopting

Russell as part of his family, inviting the Georgian to his Washington home on lonely Sundays and to Texas for Thanksgiving. Russell not only placed Johnson on the Armed Services Committee but made him chairman of its Preparedness Subcommittee. In 1952 Russell formally entered the race for the Democratic nomination for president, in part to prevent another "Dixiecrat" boycott of the party like the one that had occurred in 1948. Russell's defense of racial segregation, however, doomed his nomination—and served as a vivid example to Johnson of the need to rise above the image of a southern senator if he wished to realize his national ambitions.<sup>6</sup>

Turmoil in the Democratic ranks elevated Johnson swiftly in the Senate. In 1950 the Democratic majority leader and whip were both defeated for reelection. Democrats then chose Arizona Senator Ernest McFarland for leader and the freshman Johnson as their new whip. Two years later, MacFarland was himself defeated. At first Johnson urged Russell to take the leadership, already knowing that the Georgia senator did not want the job. When Russell declined, Johnson asked his support for his own bid, arguing that the prestige of the office would help his reelection in Texas. Although a handful of liberal Democrats backed Montana Senator James Murray for the post, Johnson with Russell's backing was overwhelmingly elected Democratic floor leader. He was still serving in his first senatorial term.<sup>7</sup>

### **Democratic Leader**

Johnson led Senate Democrats during the entire eight years of the Republican Eisenhower administration, as minority leader for the first two years and as majority leader for the last six. The two parties were so evenly balanced that during Johnson's minority leadership the death and replacement of senators occasionally gave the Democrats a majority of the senators. After the 1954 election, the switch of Oregon Senator Wayne Morse from independent status helped give the Democrats a slim majority, but the party faced a deep internal division between southern conservatives, who opposed civil rights legislation, and northern liberals, who advocated racial integration. As Johnson moved to the center of his party, he worked to prevent an open split, commenting that his major concern was to keep Senator Russell and other southern conservatives "from walking across the aisle and embracing [Republican leader] Everett Dirksen."<sup>8</sup>

As majority leader, Lyndon Johnson demonstrated unrelenting energy, ambition, attention to detail, and an overwhelming personality. His close aide John Connally described Johnson as: cruel and kind, generous and greedy, sensitive and insensitive, crafty and naive, ruthless and thoughtful, simple in many ways yet extremely complex, caring and totally not caring; he could overwhelm people with kindness and turn around and be cruel and petty towards those same people; he knew how to use people in politics in the way nobody else could that I know of.

Above all, Johnson was a compromiser, a broker, and a master of the art of the deal. His hands-on method of persuading other senators, with its sweet talk, threats, and exaggerated facial expressions and body language, became widely known as "the treatment."<sup>9</sup>

Other politicians, regardless of party, admired Johnson as a virtuoso at their craft. Republican Representative Gerald Ford met Johnson in 1957 when they served on a bipartisan House-Senate committee to draft new legislation on space policy. "Johnson elected himself chairman," Ford recalled, "and boy, did he operate." The Senate leader did not twist arms, but "the pressure of his presence and the strength of his voice and the movement of his body made it hard to say no." A keen judge of people, Johnson knew how far to push and when to coax. "Any compromise that Lyndon made," Ford concluded, "he got better than fifty percent." Johnson insisted that his only power as majority leader was the power to persuade. But his friend George Smathers, senator from Florida, noted that "persuasion" often meant doing favors: putting senators on desired committees, sending them on trips, arranging for campaign contributions, and even getting them honorary college degrees. "He was a consummate artist," said Smathers. "How he did it, a color here, a little red here, a little purple there, beautiful."<sup>10</sup>

Senator Smathers was with Johnson on the weekend in 1955 when the majority leader suffered his first heart attack. When doctors advised Johnson that it would take weeks of recuperation before he could return to the Senate, Johnson delegated Smathers to stand in for him as floor leader. "We never saw Johnson again for some forty days, although he began to call us on the telephone in about a week," Smathers recalled. "Just ran us crazy talking to him on the phone, getting things done. He was the most hard-driving guy I ever saw in my life." The heart attack made

Johnson pace himself differently than before. Periodically, he would leave Washington to spend time on his ranch in the Texas Hill Country. Typically, however, Johnson could not relinquish control and made the Senate adjust to his schedule. Whenever Johnson was absent, little could take place. Although the Democratic whip, Montana Senator Mike Mansfield, tried to move legislation along, Democratic Secretary Bobby Baker would circulate through the chamber advising senators to stall because "Johnson wants this kept on the burner for a while." When Johnson returned he would insist on passing things in a rush: "We've got to get this damn thing done tonight!" By letting measures pile up, sufficient pressure would have built up to pass everything in short order. "Who can remember," asked one journalist, "when one legislator so dominated Congress?"<sup>11</sup>

## Civil Rights

The majority leader's signal achievement was the passage in 1957 of the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction. It served as a large step in his transformation from southerner to national figure. His patron, Richard Russell, had given Johnson "elbowroom" to move toward the center, protecting him from attack on the right and exempting him from signing "The Southern Manifesto" against the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Although Johnson's move may have had an element of cynical maneuvering, those closest to him believed that he also felt genuine compassion for African Americans, for the poor, and for the disadvantaged. He spoke often of the hardships of his own childhood, and those memories seemed to inspire him to achieve something significant with his life. "Nobody needed to talk to him about why it's important to get ahead," George Smathers commented. "He was preaching that all the time to everybody."<sup>12</sup>

Although the civil rights bill had been proposed by the Eisenhower administration and was ostensibly managed by Republican leader William Knowland, it was Lyndon Johnson who fashioned the compromises that led to its passage. In return for significant modifications in the bill, he persuaded southern conservatives not to filibuster, and he advised northern liberals to accept his deal as the best they could get. The fact that Congress passed any civil rights bill held symbolic significance, but angry liberals felt that the watered-down bill simply elevated "symbol over substance." Liberals pointed out that the bill provided southern blacks with little protection for either civil or voting rights. Criticism came from the right as well. One columnist in Dallas wrote that "Johnson did his party a great favor by his engineering of the Civil Rights Bill of 1957, but he did himself no good at all in Texas."<sup>13</sup> During those congresses when the Senate was almost evenly divided, Johnson perfected his role as cautious broker. Then a severe economic recession triggered a Democratic landslide in the congressional elections of 1958. The Senate Democratic majority of 49 to 47 in the Eighty-fifth Congress swelled to 65 to 35 in the Eighty-sixth Congress, with the added margin of four Democratic seats from the newly admitted states of Alaska and Hawaii. Liberals who entered in the new class quickly became impatient with Johnson's moderate approach. While the majority leader sought to appease the newcomers with appointments to major committees, he found himself attacked as a dictator by mavericks like Pennsylvania's Joseph Clark and Wisconsin's William Proxmire. They demanded more meetings of the Democratic Conference so that other senators could have a say in setting the party's agenda. Johnson held his own, telling Proxmire that "it does not take much courage, I may say, to make the leadership a punching bag." But he faced a quandary, as his aide Harry McPherson noted, since "he had enough Democrats behind him to create major expectations, but not enough to override the President's vetoes."<sup>14</sup>

Johnson found it harder to control the larger majority but still retained his firm hand on the leadership and enjoyed the "perks" of office. When the new Senate Office Building (later named the Dirksen Building) opened in 1958, it allowed many committees to move out of the Capitol. Johnson took over the District of Columbia Committee's two-room suite just outside the Senate chamber, turning it into his leadership office. The larger of the two rooms — dubbed the "Taj Mahal" by reporters — with its elegant frescoed ceilings, crystal chandelier, and marble fireplace, symbolized the preeminence of the majority leader. "Behind his desk in his imperial suite," wrote one journalist, "Johnson is the nerve center of the whole legislative process."<sup>15</sup> (Later, during Johnson's vice-presidency, the Senate named the room in his honor.)

As the election of 1960 approached, several senators jumped into the presidential race, but Lyndon Johnson held back. Some joked that, as Democratic leader under Eisenhower, Johnson had already served eight years as president and was constitutionally ineligible to run. Despite the power and prestige of his office, however, its duties kept him from stumping the country as did Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy. Rather than enter the primaries and challenge Kennedy (whom he privately derided as "Sonny Boy"), Johnson chose to wage his presidential campaign

through House Speaker Rayburn and other powerful congressional leaders, confident that they could corral their state delegations at the Democratic National Convention in support of his candidacy. "He thought that national politics were the same as Senate politics," said Howard Shuman, a Senate staff member who observed Johnson at the time. "He tried to get the nomination by calling himself a Westerner and combining the southern and mountain states to give him the nomination. That is the way he dominated the Senate." But Johnson was caught off-guard by Kennedy's savvy and sophisticated campaign, with advanced polling techniques identifying those issues that would strengthen or weaken the candidate in every state. As Johnson later told Bobby Baker, if he learned anything from the campaign it was "that Jack Kennedy's a lot tougher, and maybe a lot smarter, than I thought he was."<sup>16</sup>

Johnson waited until July 5, 1960, to announce his formal candidacy and then fought a bitter fight against the front-running Kennedy. When the two met at the convention on July 12 to address a joint session of the Texas and Minnesota delegations, Johnson portrayed himself as the diligent legislator who had fought the good fight, dutifully answering every quorum call on the recent civil rights bill, in contrast to Kennedy, who had missed all of the quorum calls while out campaigning. Kennedy refused to be baited. He wittily commended Johnson's perfect record on quorum calls and strongly endorsed him—for majority leader.<sup>17</sup>

### **The 1960 Election**

The next day, Kennedy won the Democratic nomination on the first ballot and then had twenty-four hours to select a vice president. He had given no indication of having made up his mind in advance. The party's pragmatists urged Kennedy to choose Johnson in order to carry Texas and the South, but conservatives like Richard Russell urged Johnson to stay off the liberal-leaning ticket. Still recalling the bitter experience of "Cactus Jack" Garner, who traded the House speakership for the vice-presidency with Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rayburn and the Texas delegation adamantly opposed the notion that Johnson should give up the majority leadership for the hollow status of being vice president. Liberal Democrats reacted negatively to Johnson as a wheeler-dealer, and Robert Kennedy, as the campaign manager, had given his word to labor leaders and civil rights groups that Johnson would never be the vice-presidential candidate. When John Kennedy reported that he would offer the second spot to Johnson, his brother interpreted the move as only a token gesture of party solidarity, since Johnson had told people he would never accept the second spot. Then Johnson astonished both brothers by accepting. Considering the choice a terrible mistake, Robert Kennedy was delegated to talk the Texan out of running. Going to Johnson's suite, he proposed that the Texas become instead the Democratic party's national chairman. But a tearful Johnson declared, "I want to be Vice President, and, if the President will have me, I'll join him in making a fight for it." John Kennedy chose to retain him on the ticket, but the animosity between Johnson and Robert Kennedy never diminished.<sup>18</sup>

Pondering why Johnson had accepted, some of his aides thought that he saw no future in being Kennedy's majority leader. If he succeeded in enacting the party platform, the credit would have gone to the president. If he failed, the blame would have been his. Since the Texas state legislature had passed a law permitting Johnson to run for reelection to the Senate at the same time that he sought national office, Johnson may also have been gambling that Kennedy would lose to Richard Nixon, leaving Johnson as majority leader with a Republican in the White House. Another factor, mentioned by Johnson's friends, was that Lady Bird Johnson had influenced his decision by reasoning that, after his heart attack, the vice-presidency would be less strenuous than the majority leadership. Johnson offered his own reason when he called Richard Russell and explained that, if he had declined the vice-presidency, he would have been "left out" of party affairs in the future.<sup>19</sup>

Before the campaign could begin, the Kennedy-Johnson ticket had to return to Washington for a post-convention session of the Senate. On the assumption that he would be the party's standard bearer, Johnson had devised this session to demonstrate his legislative prowess and launch his fall campaign. Instead, he found himself playing second fiddle. Republican senators mocked the majority leader, asking if he had cleared moves in advance with "your leader." When the Democratic Policy Committee met for its regular luncheon, everyone waited to see whether Kennedy would bounce Johnson from his usual place at the head of the table. Kennedy dodged the issue by not showing up. With the Republican presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, presiding over the Senate as vice president, Senate Republicans were not likely to hand Kennedy any victories. The session failed dismally.<sup>20</sup>

In the fall, Johnson campaigned intensely, conducting a memorable train ride through the South. He also pressed for a joint appearance of the Democratic candidates somewhere in Texas. They arranged the meeting at the airport in

Amarillo, where campaign advance men stopped all air traffic during the brief ceremonies so that the candidates could address the crowd. But they had not counted on the Republican-leaning airline pilots, who deliberately ran the engines of their planes in order to drown out the speakers. At the close of the ruined appearance, a photographer snapped a concerned Kennedy placing his hand on Johnson's shoulder, trying to calm his angry, gesticulating running mate. Then, just before the election, Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson were jeered and jostled by a hostile crowd of right-wingers in Dallas, Texas. Dismayed over this event, Senator Richard Russell cut short a tour of Europe and flew to Texas to campaign for Johnson. News of Russell's endorsement was carried in newspapers throughout Dixie, helping to solidify the Democratic ticket's hold on the increasingly unsolid South.<sup>21</sup>

### **Vice President Johnson**

Those who spent election night with Johnson later observed that he showed no signs of jubilation at the narrow victory over Richard Nixon and gave every impression of not wanting to become vice president. After the election, he used his influence to recommend candidates for cabinet appointment—especially Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright to be secretary of state, but Fulbright withdrew his name from consideration. The chief of staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Carl Marcy, recalled an encounter in the Democratic cloakroom where Johnson grabbed him by the lapels, breathed in his face and said: "What's wrong with Bill Fulbright? I had it set for him to be Secretary of State and he turned it down." Johnson helped to assure Senate approval of Robert Kennedy's nomination for attorney general by persuading conservative opponents to drop their request for a recorded vote, but when Johnson promoted his supporter Sarah T. Hughes for federal judge, Robert Kennedy rejected the sixty-four-year old Dallas lawyer as too old. Later, when Johnson was out of the country, House Speaker Sam Rayburn traded passage of an administration bill in return for Hughes' appointment. It was an object lesson in the power of the Speakership versus the powerlessness of the vice-presidency.<sup>22</sup>

Not intending to become an inactive vice president, Johnson retained the "Taj Mahal" as his office and anticipated keeping the rest of his authority as majority leader. He proposed that, as vice president, he continue to chair the meetings of the Democratic Conference. Although the new majority leader, Montana Senator Mike Mansfield, did not object, other senators warned him that the scheme would never work. As Hubert Humphrey observed, Johnson "was not an easy man to tell that you can't do something." When the Democratic Conference met on January 3, 1961, senator after senator stood to denounce the proposal, including some whom Johnson had considered his supporters. Although the conference voted 46 to 17 to permit the vice president to preside, it was clear that he could not play the role of "super majority leader." Afterwards, Johnson pulled back and seemed reluctant to approach senators and lobby for their votes. "I think a fair assessment would be that there was a big sigh of relief when Johnson departed the Senate," his friend George Smathers concluded. "Not that they didn't like Johnson . . . but he was so strong, and so difficult, and so tough, that it was a relief to get him over to the vice president's office." The Senate now shifted from "the benevolent dictatorship" of Lyndon Johnson to the more democratic leadership of Mike Mansfield. On the occasions when Johnson presided over the Senate, he habitually appeared bored.<sup>23</sup>

Facing constraints in his legislative role, Johnson sought to expand his activities within the executive branch. In addition to the Taj Mahal at the Capitol, he occupied a large suite in the Executive Office Building next to the White House. Johnson's staff prepared a draft of an executive order making the vice president in effect a deputy president, giving him "general supervision" over most space and defense programs. The proposal went to President Kennedy and never returned, although the president did appoint Johnson to chair the Space Council and the White House Committee on Equal Employment. These posts were not sufficient to halt the vice president's shrinking status. When Johnson entered the Democratic cloakroom, senators treated him courteously, but since he was no longer in a position to court their votes or distribute coveted committee assignments, he was no longer the center of their attention.<sup>24</sup>

Johnson grumbled in private but kept his silence in public and at White House meetings. President Kennedy always treated his vice president cordially, but the president's young aides, mostly ivy leaguers, snickered about "Uncle Cornpone." Acutely aware of their contempt, Johnson attended National Security Council and other policy-making sessions but said nothing unless questioned directly. He felt insecure and ignored and wore his feelings openly. "I cannot stand Johnson's damn long face," John Kennedy once complained to George Smathers. "He comes in, sits at the cabinet meetings, with his face all screwed up, never says anything. He looks so sad."<sup>25</sup>

Seeking to boost the vice president's spirits by giving him some public exposure, Kennedy sent Johnson on a string of foreign missions and goodwill tours. The elixir worked. Johnson attracted enthusiastic crowds and reveled in the press attention. Traveling in Pakistan in 1961, Johnson repeated a line that he often used while campaigning: "You-all come to Washington and see us sometime." To his surprise, an impoverished camel driver, Bashir Ahmed, took the invitation literally and set out for America. When the press mocked the story, Johnson arranged for the People-to-People program to pay the camel driver's costs, personally met him at the airport in New York and flew him to his Texas ranch, turning a potential joke into a public relations coup. On the negative side, Johnson's taste for hyperbole led him to proclaim South Vietnam's ill-fated President Ngo Dinh Diem to be the "Winston Churchill of Asia." These persistent journeys prompted *The Reporter* magazine to define the vice president as someone "who chases around continents in search of the duties of his office."<sup>26</sup>

The press attention garnered on foreign visits tended to evaporate as soon as Johnson returned to the Capitol. One reporter who had covered his years as majority leader spent an hour in the vice president's office and noticed a striking difference: not one other visitor appeared and the phone rang only once. Late in the afternoons, Johnson's aides would invite reporters from the Senate press gallery down for a drink with the vice president. "When a vice president calls he might have something to say," United Press reporter Roy McGhee reasoned. "Generally, he didn't, except blowing his own horn." Little substantive news ever came out of the meetings, and sometimes the press would leave with nothing to write about at all. The press considered Johnson no longer a significant player in Washington events. The television program "Candid Camera" exploited his growing obscurity by asking: who is Lyndon Johnson? People guessed a baseball player, an astronaut, anything but vice president of the United States.<sup>27</sup> Where Johnson most logically might have played a constructive role in helping pass the president's legislative agenda, he seemed to abdicate responsibility. John F. Kennedy had promised a vigorous administration, but his proposals on issues from Medicare to civil rights had stalled in Congress. The power of conservative southern Democratic committee chairmen, the death in November 1961 of Speaker Sam Rayburn, and the passive leadership style of Senator Mansfield combined to deadlock the legislative process. As part of the Kennedy administration, Johnson was moving leftward away from his former power base of southern conservatives, and this further reduced his effectiveness in planning legislative strategy. Harry McPherson noted that by mid-1963 the vice president seemed to share in the "general malaise" of the time, and that he "had grown heavy and looked miserable." Rumors persisted that he would be dropped from the Democratic ticket in 1964.

## A Scandal

Johnson saw Attorney General Robert Kennedy as his chief adversary, but rather than Bobby Kennedy, it was Democratic Majority Secretary Bobby Baker who most threatened his political survival. For years, Bobby Baker had been Johnson's alter ego, known as "Little Lyndon." Baker combined unlimited energy and ambition with poor judgment. While Johnson served as majority leader he dominated Baker's activities, telling him exactly what he wanted done. "Get so and so on the telephone," Johnson would snap his fingers, sending Baker off to relay the leader's wishes. Senator Mansfield retained Baker as the Democratic secretary, but left him to his own devices. During the 1960s, Baker devoted as much time to his own finances as he did to Senate business.<sup>28</sup>

Dabbling in everything from vending machines to motels and real estate ventures, Bobby Baker was sued by one of his partners in August 1963. This event triggered press inquiries into Baker's financial dealings and reports of his influence peddling. As the story unfolded, Johnson's name surfaced in connection with an insurance agent close to Baker who charged that he had given the vice president kickbacks in the form of gifts and advertising on the Johnson family television and radio stations as conditions for selling him an expensive life insurance policy. Republican senators demanded a full-fledged investigation, and on October 7, Baker resigned his Senate position. "I knew Johnson was petrified that he'd be dragged down," Baker later wrote; "he would show this by attempting to make light of our former relationship and saying that I had been more the Senate's employee than his own." One day, when Senator Russell rose to pay tribute to Harry McPherson, who was leaving to take a post at the Pentagon, Johnson as presiding officer called over one of the Democratic cloakroom staff and muttered: Now here's a boy—Harry McPherson—from Tyler, Texas. I brought him up here. I put him on the policy committee. . . . Now here is Senator Russell down there on the floor saying what a great man he is. . . . On the other hand, when I came here Bobby Baker was working here. . . . Then he gets in trouble. Everybody says he's my boy. But they don't say anything about Harry McPherson being my boy.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the negative publicity, John Kennedy gave every indication of keeping Lyndon Johnson as vice president during his second term. Late in 1963, reporter Charles Bartlett privately asked why he did not get another vice president. Kennedy replied that dumping Johnson would only hurt the Democratic ticket's chances in Texas. It was to mend political fences between Democratic factions in Texas that Kennedy traveled to Dallas in November 1963. Johnson met the official party and planned to entertain them at his ranch. The vice president was riding in a car behind Kennedy's limousine when shots were fired. When the motorcade rushed to the hospital, Johnson learned that Kennedy was dead. Taking the oath of office from Judge Sarah T. Hughes—herself a symbol of his limited influence as vice president—Johnson returned to Washington as president of the United States. Half of Kennedy's cabinet had been flying to a meeting in Tokyo when they received the news. As the plane changed course for home, someone spoke what they were all thinking: "I wonder what kind of a president Johnson will make?"<sup>30</sup>

### Suddenly President

Lyndon Johnson underwent a remarkable transformation. The disaffected vice president grew into a remarkably active and determined president. He set out to heal a shocked nation, to enact Kennedy's legislative program, and to leave his own mark on the presidency. Freed from his obligations to the southern conservatives in the Senate, Johnson won passage of the most significant civil rights and voting rights legislation of the century. Following his landslide reelection in 1964, Johnson enacted the most sweeping domestic reforms since the New Deal. Few areas of American social and economic life were left untouched by his "Great Society" programs. Commented the liberal Democratic Senator Paul Douglas, "Had I been told in 1956 that ten years later I would be one of Lyndon Johnson's strongest supporters, I would have thought the seer was out of his mind."<sup>31</sup>

As president, Johnson played the ultimate majority leader, although as the chief executive he found there were some areas where he could not cut a deal. His civil rights triumphs could not stop racial turmoil and riots in American cities. Nor could his ability to ram the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress ensure a military victory in Southeast Asia. There his efforts to fortify the shaky government of South Vietnam led to America's longest and most unpopular war and ultimately to his withdrawal as a candidate for reelection in 1968. Returning to his Texas ranch a rejected and deeply wounded man, Lyndon Johnson died on January 23, 1973, just as the peace accords in Vietnam were being finalized. Recalling his old friend's career, George Smathers asserted that of all the people with whom he served Johnson "was far and away the man who accomplished the most, *by far*. He deserves to be remembered for the good things that he did, and not just to be remembered as sort of a lumbering, overbearing, sometimes crude individual who tried to dominate everybody he was with."<sup>32</sup>

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#### Notes:

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2. Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston, 1995), p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 18; Caro, *The Path to Power*, pp. 217-40, 261-68.
4. Schulman, p. 19; Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (New York, 1978), pp. 34, 40.
5. Bobby Baker, *Wheeling and Dealing: Confessions of a Capitol Hill Operator* (New York, 1978), pp. 34, 40.
6. John A. Goldsmith, *Colleagues: Richard B. Russell and His Apprentice, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Washington, 1993), pp. 9-30; Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908-1960* (New York, 1991), pp. 378-80.
7. Dallek, pp. 421-23; Bobby Baker, pp. 59-63.
8. Goldsmith, p. 73.
9. Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York, 1980), p. xvi; Harry McPherson, *A Political Education* (Boston, 1972), p. 159; Robert L. Riggs, "The South Could Rise Again: Lyndon Johnson and Others," in Eric Sevareid, ed., *Candidates 1960; Behind the Headlines in the Presidential Race* (New York, 1959), pp. 299-300; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* (New York, 1966), p. 104.
10. James Cannon, *Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History* (New York, 1994), p. 67; George A. Smathers, *United States Senator from Florida*, Oral History Interviews, 1989, (U.S. Senate Historical Office, Washington, DC), pp. 45, 74-75.
11. Smathers oral history, p. 22; *Darrell St. Claire: Assistant Secretary of the Senate*, Oral History Interviews, 1976-1978 (U.S. Senate Historical Office, Washington, DC), pp. 134, 214-15; Riggs, p. 295.
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