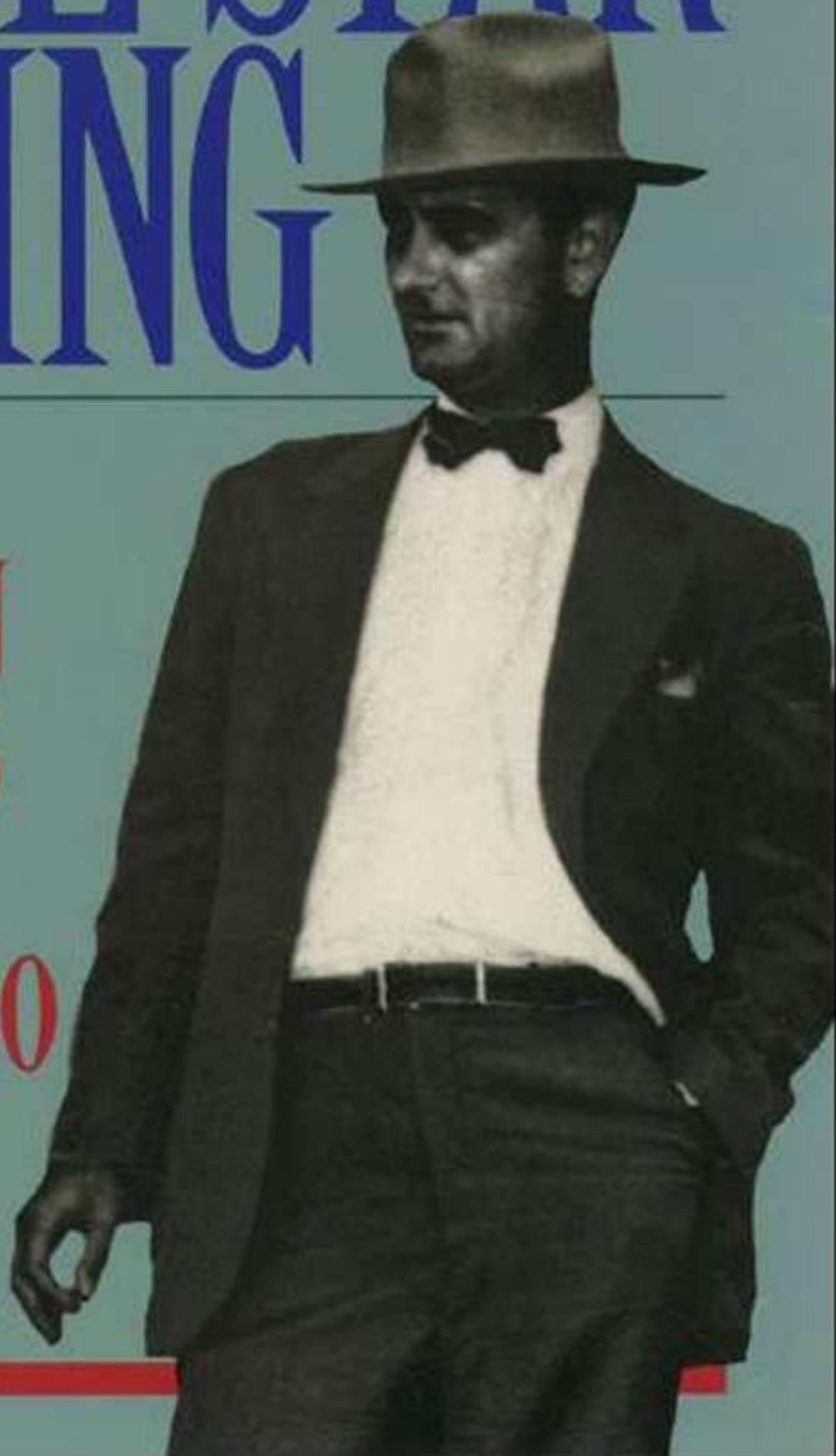




# LONE STAR RISING

LYNDON  
JOHNSON  
AND HIS  
TIMES  
1908-1960  
ROBERT  
DALLEK



## **Lone Star Rising**

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**Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1908–1960**

**ROBERT DALLEK**

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*For Matthew and Rebecca*

## Preface

THE reputations of most Presidents after they leave the White House suffer an eclipse. In time, however, they make something of a come-back. Passions over controversial questions subside and achievements are balanced against shortcomings.

So far, Lyndon Johnson is a case apart. His public standing since 1969 has plummeted, and an upturn seems nowhere in sight. “Lyndon Johnson was clearly a monster of ambition, greed, and cruelty,” one historian wrote in 1990. “What’s not to loathe?” In the view of one journalist, “No... politician ever did more than he to destroy the country.” There are reasons enough to dislike Lyndon Johnson: certain aspects of his private behavior offended any one with the least sense of propriety, and his public actions violated legal and democratic standards on which the American system of government is supposed to rest. But there exists a hatred of Johnson that passes the bounds of common sense and contributes nothing to historical understanding.\*

We now need a balanced biography that draws on the massive documentary record and focuses less on Johnson the man and more on his larger impact. Johnson’s importance in twentieth-century history is too great for us to dismiss him as little more than a contemptible character whose principal distinguishing feature was the advancement of Lyndon Johnson. He was a man of consuming ambition, but he was also a politician with considerable vision that he carried to fruition during a long career. From his earliest days in Congress he was a liberal nationalist, an advocate of Federal programs that had a redefining influence on American life. His efforts to promote the national well-being by helping the least affluent help themselves and to end racial segregation as a prelude to southern economic advance and expanded political power were acts of genuine statesmanship. They had their beginnings in Johnson’s pre-presidential years reconstructed in this volume. Johnson was also a representative figure. His election campaigns, accumulation of wealth, and manipulation of power speak volumes about the way American politics and business worked in the four decades after 1930.

The work for this book has taken over seven years. It rests upon research in over a hundred manuscript collections around the country, hundreds of oral histories, and numerous interviews. Additional years of study will precede the publication of a second volume. I hope the combined work will stand as the scholarly biography of Johnson for the foreseeable future. At the very least, I believe it represents a significant advance on where we have been in understanding the man and his times.

This is not to suggest, however, that arguments about Johnson and his historical significance will end. Quite the contrary, the materials for studying his life are so vast and his actions so controversial that we will be debating his role in national and international affairs for a long time to come. Rather than close the discussion about

Johnson, then, I hope my biography will enlarge interest and become the starting point for sustained consideration of one of the most important historical figures of our time.

*Los Angeles*  
*December 1990*

R.D.

## Acknowledgments

ALTHOUGH books about recent American political leaders customarily ascribe authorship to one person, an army of people is needed to make such studies possible.

How far would I have gotten without the work of others who organized and opened the mass of papers housed at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library? I am indebted to Harry Middleton, the Library's Director, who is devoted to making the record of Lyndon Johnson's life and career available as quickly and fully as possible. I have also been the beneficiary of Harry Middleton's efforts to encourage Lyndon Johnson's closest associates to grant me interviews. The Library's staff was unstinting in its help: Molly Chesney, Charles Corkran, Kathy Frankum, Theodore Gittinger, Regina Greenwell, Linda Hanson, Tina Houston, David Humphrey, Lawrence Reed, E. Philip Scott, Robert Tissing, Shellynne Wucher, and Gary Yarrington. Three people have been especially kind and helpful. Claudia Anderson put her masterful command of the LBJ pre-presidential papers at my disposal. Her help was indispensable. The same was true of Michael Gillette, head of the oral history division, whose knowledge of the Johnson years is incomparable. Nancy Smith, who now works in the Office of Presidential Libraries, National Archives, Washington, D.C., helped guide my research in the crucial opening stages of the book. The Lyndon B. Johnson Foundation aided my research with two timely grants.

A number of other people and institutions helped advance my work in a variety of ways. Norman D. Brown, Robert A. Divine, and Clarence G. Lasby of the University of Texas and Louis S. Gomolak of Southwest Texas State University shared materials and insights with me. Christie Bourgeois, J. Kaaz Doyle, Craig H. Roell, and Stacy Rozek, graduate students at the University of Texas, performed a variety of tasks for which I am grateful. Larry Temple, an Austin attorney and former member of President Johnson's staff, and George Christian, LBJ's press secretary, helped arrange an interview with former Governor John B. Connally and showed me other kindnesses. No two people made my visits to Austin more satisfying than Elspeth and Walt W. Rostow. They have given new meaning to the term southern hospitality.

In Los Angeles, Ruth Behling, an undergraduate at UCLA, and Brian VanDeMark, a former graduate student at UCLA and now assistant professor of history at the U.S. Naval Academy, saved me precious time by their cheerful performance of research chores. Ruth Behling, Christie Bourgeois, and Kenneth Kurz, a graduate student at UCLA, helped by reading proof, as did Lorris Gosman. John and Sandra Brice generously shared materials they had gathered for a docudrama on LBJ. The UCLA Academic Senate and International and Overseas Programs supported my work with generous research grants. James and GERALYN Goodman have provided me with a marvelous collection of LBJ memorabilia.

The staffs of university libraries, state historical societies, and presidential

libraries all over the country assisted me in the search for LBJ materials. Their contributions are reflected in the notes and sources listed at the end of the book. I wish to single out for special thanks several people who helped me gather materials: H.G. Dulany, Director of the Sam Rayburn Library, Carol Ebell at the University of Georgia, for help with the Richard Russell Papers, Gary E. Elliott, who shared his materials on Senator Alan Bible, Dr. Susan Falb, Archivist at the FBI, George D. Hedrick, who helped with the Hubert H. Humphrey Papers, Professor James H. Neal of Middle Tennessee State University, for help with the Albert Gore, Sr., Papers, Bradley S. Phillips of Munger, Tolles, & Olson, Los Angeles, who volunteered his help with an FOIA request to the FBI, Dr. Donald Ritchie of the Senate Historical Office, and Professor Athan Theoharis of Marquette University, who shared FBI materials on LBJ and gave me the benefit of his expertise.

I wish to thank the University of Virginia for permission to use material from the Harry F. Byrd, Sr., Papers and Myer Feldman for agreeing to my use of his oral history interview at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

I am grateful to Ed Cray, Murray Fromson, Sam Kernell, Daniel Kevles, Stanley I. Kutler, Peter Loewenberg, and Bruce Schulman for offering me their judgments on some of my ideas. Irving Bernstein, my colleague in the political science department, was especially helpful in this respect. Edward A. Goldstein, Max Holland, Lawrence W. Levine, William E. Leuchtenburg, and Richard Weiss read and criticized the manuscript. The book is better in every respect for their generous help. I am indebted to Harold Zellman for suggesting the title.

I am particularly grateful to three other people. Lewis L. Gould has given me the benefit of his masterful knowledge of Texas history and Lyndon Johnson. He pointed me to research collections, discussed my ideas, read the manuscript with the greatest of care, and made suggestions for cuts and additions which have enriched the book. He is a scholar in every sense of the word.

Sheldon Meyer, executive vice president of the Oxford University Press, saw the virtues of publishing an LBJ biography from the moment I proposed it to him. His enthusiasm for the project matches my own. His close reading of the manuscript produced a number of excellent suggestions that have significantly improved the book. I could not ask for a more understanding and helpful publisher. Likewise, Leona Capeless gave me the benefit of her wise counsel on numerous points in the manuscript. As with an earlier book, she applied a professional standard that makes working with her a special pleasure.

Geraldine Dallek, my wife, has once again maintained a keen interest in my work that helped sustain me. She has good-naturedly listened to my repeated renderings of LBJ stories and, like me, finds LBJ so fascinating a character that she looks forward to yet another volume on his life and times. My children, Matthew and Rebecca, also shared in this project in special ways. Matthew helped with some of the research, both in Texas and Los Angeles, and along with Rebecca, read parts of the manuscript. They gave me access to the current college-age generation, which has no direct memories of LBJ. The book convinced them that Johnson deserves the extended attention I'm giving him. They now know that he made a difference in the world they inherited.

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## **Lone Star Rising**

## Introduction LBJ in History

LYNDON Johnson, the dominant political figure of the sixties who challenged us to wipe out poverty, end racial segregation, and win a morally confusing war in a remote place, has receded from our minds. Where biographical studies of FDR, Truman, Kennedy, and Nixon abound, Johnson is something of an unloved orphan. Twenty-two years after he left the White House, christened a magnificent eleven-story presidential library, and ordered the opening of thirty-two million pages of material housed there, no historian had published a major research study of his life and two journalists promising to do so had vilified him in books that only came up to the fifties, the years of his Senate career.<sup>1</sup>

The paucity of work alongside of other presidential biographies partly reflects the public's current low esteem for Johnson. A November 1988 Louis Harris poll on presidential performance from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan consistently ranked Johnson near or at the bottom of eleven categories. Asked which of these Presidents made people feel proudest of being an American, most inspired confidence in the White House, and could be trusted most in a crisis, respondents consistently put LBJ last along side of Gerald Ford and behind Richard Nixon. Who will history view as the best among these Presidents? Only 1 percent chose Johnson. The President best able to get things done? Three percent said Johnson, 1 percent more than said Jimmy Carter and 2 percent more than said Ford. And the President setting the highest moral standards? JFK, Reagan, and Carter, in that order, led the list. Johnson stood alone in last place, chosen by only 1 percent of the sample. Even Richard Nixon fared better with 2 percent of the vote.<sup>2</sup>

One biographer and historian has puzzled over the popular appeal of this negative portrait of LBJ. "May be Johnson has become so hated in our time that Americans want him reduced to caricature, want him presented as ... [someone] who deceived us with his promise of the Great Society, who took away *our* idealism and *our* humanity in the flames of Vietnam. Maybe Johnson has become a scapegoat for our collective guilt over the war, and all our woes and shattered dreams that followed."<sup>3</sup>

Johnson's distinction as the only President in American history to have lost a war is certainly one reason for his poor ratings. Conservatives deplore his timidity in fighting a "limited war," his failure to do what needed to be done against North Vietnam. Liberals denounce his affinity for a knee-jerk anticommunism that involved us in a civil war having less to do with U.S. national security than Vietnamese aspirations to replace Western imperial control with national self-determination. Middle Americans find some appeal in both arguments, but for the most part see "Johnson's war" as a pointless exercise that took 58,000 American lives and divided and demoralized the country.

Johnson's reputation as a political operator who lied to the public and enriched

himself in office by exploiting connections at the Federal Communications Commission to acquire and develop lucrative radio and television properties has also contributed to negative public feelings about him. Stories of Johnson's wheeling and dealing are legion. One of my favorites describes a visit Johnson made to Harry Truman's home in Independence, Missouri, in the fall of 1968. "Harry," Johnson said, "you and Bess are getting on in years. You ought to have an Army medical corpsman living with you in this big old house." "Really, Lyndon, can I have that?" Truman asked. "Of course, you can. You're an ex-President of the United States. I'll arrange it," Johnson replied. Six months after LBJ left the White House a reporter caught up with him one day on the banks of the Pedernales. "Is it true that you have an Army medical corpsman living here on the ranch with you?" the journalist asked. "Of course it's true," Johnson said. "Harry Truman has one."<sup>4</sup>

A backlash against Johnson's Great Society, and Federal social programs favoring minorities, has also taken its toll on his standing. In an article on the War on Poverty in the December 1988 issue of *The Atlantic*, Nicholas Lemann wrote: "There is a widespread perception that the federal government's efforts to help the poor during the sixties were almost unlimited; that despite them poverty became more severe, not less; and that the reason poverty increased is that all those government programs backfired and left their intended beneficiaries worse off. The truth is that the percentage of poor Americans went down substantially in the sixties." Nevertheless, it is the negative perception rather than the positive reality of the War on Poverty that currently shapes the public view of LBJ.<sup>5</sup>

As for the principal reforms of the Johnson presidency—Civil Rights, Voting Rights, Medicare, Medicaid, and Federal aid to education—which most Americans see as essential to a just society, Johnson gets little or no credit for them. Only 6 percent of the Harris poll thought that Johnson's extraordinary reforms gave him claim to being the best President among the last nine in domestic affairs.

The handful of biographies appearing on Johnson since he left the White House has sent his already tarnished reputation into a free fall. I think here particularly of Ronnie Dugger's *The Politician* (1982), Robert Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (1982 and 1990), and the revelations about Johnson in the recollections of Richard Goodwin, a Kennedy-Johnson aide. Goodwin depicts Johnson as an emotionally unstable personality. He describes him in 1965 as "paranoid" about Vietnam critics, whom Johnson called tools of the Soviets. Goodwin's concerns about Johnson's stability were so great that he consulted a psychiatrist and considered public disclosure of Johnson's troubled state of mind. Caro sees Johnson as an unprincipled scoundrel or self-serving, deceitful, power-hungry opportunist. Caro says that LBJ had "a hunger for power ... not to improve the lives of others, but to manipulate and dominate them. ... It was a hunger so fierce and consuming that no consideration of morality or ethics, no cost to himself—or to anyone else—could stand before it." Johnson had "a seemingly bottomless capacity for deceit, deception and betrayal."<sup>6</sup>

It is instructive to compare the post-presidential reputations of Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson. Unlike LBJ, Nixon has won a measure of public redemption. A fifteen-year campaign to convince Americans of his virtues partly explains his improved standing. The triumph of détente and the waning of the cold war, with which

the Nixon presidency is closely associated, has also served Nixon's cause. But his resignation from the White House, which is seen as the worst public humiliation ever suffered by an American President, may have played the largest part. Nixon's implicit admission of fallibility has won him some degree of public forgiveness. By contrast with Nixon, Johnson did not live long enough to work at repairing his reputation. Also, the principal issues with which Johnson's presidency is primarily associated—Vietnam and the Great Society—remain in bad odor. But perhaps most important, Johnson never acknowledged any failing—never fessed up or asked forgiveness for mistakes or wrongdoing. In perhaps the greatest ironies of their careers, Nixon, the Republican, who identified with and sought to serve the interests of advantaged Americans, is seen as a sort of fallible common man. Johnson, the populist, who sincerely wished to help the poorest among us, is remembered as a man apart from the people, a kind of arrogant potentate too imperious to acknowledge weaknesses common to ordinary men.

The state of public feeling about Johnson is perhaps best caught in a drawing of him accompanying *The Atlantic* article. Dressed in a blue Napoleonic uniform with gold epaulettes, a red sash, medals, and saber at his side, Johnson sits at a dressing table smiling at himself in a mirror that reflects not only his image but that of two black cherubs holding a halo above his head. Large ears, a jutting chin, and long pointed nose accent Johnson's prominent head. A photograph of an avuncular FDR and a gold pocket watch are on the dressing table. It is a portrait of a totally self-absorbed, grandiose character intent on his image in history.

The caricature of Johnson has a basis in fact. Johnson was a larger-than-life personality who needed to hold center stage and advance himself at every turn. In 1973, when Johnson's body lay in state at the LBJ Library in Austin, Harry Middleton, a former White House aide and now Library director, told someone to keep track of how many people went by the casket. "Why are you doing that?" another Johnson associate asked Middleton. "Because," Middleton replied, "I know that somewhere, sometime Johnson's going to ask me."<sup>7</sup>

Johnson overwhelmed most of his contemporaries. He needed to be the best, to outdo everybody, to surpass every presidential predecessor in every way possible. As Nicholas Lemann says, Johnson "wanted to set world records in politics, as a star athlete would in sports. 'Get those coonskins up on the wall,' he would tell people around him." Above all, he wanted to surpass his mentor FDR by passing more reform legislation and winning a bigger electoral victory than Roosevelt had in 1936. Johnson's strivings to be the best extended in many directions. Presented with a set of volumes containing the Presidents' State of the Union messages, Johnson asked the editor of the books which President had delivered the longest address. Told that it was Theodore Roosevelt, Johnson replied: "You know, my recent State of the Union Address was shorter than Mr. Kennedy's 1963 speech. But everyone thought mine was longer, because I was interrupted for applause more often than he was."<sup>8</sup>

The caricatures of Johnson as a driven, overbearing, self-centered personality capture only part of the man. *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker remembers Johnson as "a human puzzle so complicated nobody could ever understand it." Baker, who covered the Senate for the *Times* in the late fifties, describes the upper house as filled with remarkable men. All of them, "from a writer's point of view, ... were long

magazine pieces who might at best, with plenty of coffee and cigarettes, be stretched into thin campaign biographies. Johnson was the exception. Johnson was a flesh-and-blood, three-volume biography, and if you ever got it written you'd discover after publication that you'd missed the key point or got the interpretation completely wrong and needed a fourth volume to set things right. He was a character out of a Russian novel, one of those human complications that filled the imagination of Dostoyevsky, a storm of warring human instincts: sinner and saint, buffoon and statesman, cynic and sentimentalist, a man torn between hungers for immortality and self-destruction."

Johnson, another journalist says, was more complex than any Manichaeian picture of him can convey. He was not a case of good and evil living side by side but of "an unlovable man desperate to be loved, whose cynicism and idealism were mysteriously inseparable, all of a piece." This journalist quotes Robert Penn Warren's observation in *All the King's Men*: "A man's virtue may be the defect of his desire, as his crime may be but a function of his virtue." Lyndon Johnson was a study in ambiguity.<sup>9</sup>

Not only have we been content with one-and two-dimensional portraits of LBJ, we have also focused too much attention on Johnson at the expense of larger historical themes. I am not suggesting that a Johnson biography relegate the man to a secondary role that neglects his colorful personality and the ways in which he used the sheer force of his character to advance himself and his ends. The means by which Johnson sought and exercised power form a fascinating story that deserves to be told and retold. In the pages that follow, I have added a fresh body of detail about his political skulduggery and business dealings that made him wealthy. But when, as in the existing Johnson literature, unsavory revelations are related with little emphasis on Johnson's contribution to the transformation of America between 1937 and 1969, the years of LBJ's congressional and executive service, it leaves us with an unflattering portrait of a self-serving man who made little difference in recent American history. This, at least, is the image that seems to be reflected in the recent Harris poll.

We would do well to remember Charles de Gaulle's comment when he came to the United States for Kennedy's funeral in 1963. This man Kennedy, de Gaulle said, was the country's mask. But this man Johnson is the country's real face. It may be that Johnson tells us things about ourselves that we are not now eager to hear. But current mood should not define the historian's task. De Gaulle's observation has much to recommend it; Johnson is an excellent vehicle for studying America since the 1930s.<sup>10</sup>

Johnson's part in the nationalization of the South and the West or his conscious efforts to integrate the southern and western economies into the national life is a neglected piece of American history. Johnson saw the economic transformation of both sections as essential to their well-being. In this he was hardly typical. Economist Gavin Wright argues in *Old South, New South* (1986) that most southern congressmen and senators in the 1930s were more concerned with maintaining "the separateness of the southern labor market ... than with bringing federal money into their districts" and states. Yet, Wright says, the basis for maintaining the South's economic isolation or separation was already being thoroughly undermined. "Under the incentives established by the New Deal farm programs, plantation tenancy was disintegrating, and sharecroppers were being turned into footloose wage laborers. At the same time, federal labor policies had sharply raised the level of base wage rates in the South, effectively blocking the low-wage expansion path for regional industry. By the time of

World War II, the stage was set for a rapid transformation” of the southern economy. Johnson supported all the New Deal legislation and agencies—the Works Progress Administration, the National Youth Administration, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, and the Farm Security Administration—that helped transform southern economic life.<sup>11</sup>

Johnson was an even stronger advocate of state capitalism: New Deal policies designed to build industrial empires in the economically undeveloped South and West. Using the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Public Works Administration, and the Rural Electrification Administration to foster public power and industrial development, the New Deal raised living standards and transformed the lives of southerners and westerners. During and after World War II, the Federal government made these sections the continuing recipients of its largesse through defense spending. “We no longer farm in Mississippi cotton fields,” novelist William Faulkner said. “We farm now in Washington corridors and Congressional committee-rooms.” No one in the House and the Senate was more active in obtaining PWA, REA, and defense funds for his district, state, and region than Johnson. In part because of Johnson, by the early 1950s, south-central Texas had been transformed into a more prosperous region by dams built on the Lower Colorado River, Texas had more air bases than any other state in the Union, and the Sunbelt was on the verge of becoming the dominant political and economic force in American life.

Johnson’s role in reaching out to America’s disadvantaged and combating racial segregation was perhaps his most important contribution to recent U.S. history. For all his self-serving ambition, Johnson never forgot his childhood poverty. He had genuine and extraordinary compassion for the disadvantaged—not simply when it became politically convenient in the late fifties and early sixties, but dating from the thirties when he drove himself day and night to help black, Hispanic, and poor white Texans, and secretly aided Jewish refugees from the Nazis to enter the United States. And he saw New Deal, Fair Deal, and Great Society programs as not only helping the poorest among us but also serving the national well-being by expanding the material and spiritual riches of all Americans, particularly in the South. From early in his political career, Johnson saw racial discrimination as an obstacle to southern economic advance, and as early as the 1930s he acted upon his belief.

Lyndon Johnson was much more concerned about larger issues in American life than people have generally given him credit for. As the psychiatrist Robert Coles has written, Johnson was “a restless, extravagantly self-centered, brutishly expansive, manipulative, teasing and sly man, but he was also genuinely passionately interested in making life easier and more honorable for millions of terribly hard pressed working class men and women. His almost manic vitality was purposefully, intelligently, compassionately used. He could turn mean and sour, but ... he had a lot more than himself and his place in history on his mind.”<sup>12</sup>

LBJ’s role in the rise of the national security state also deserves more attention than it has received. From the moment he set foot in the House in 1937, Johnson was an advocate of greater defense spending. As a member of the House Naval Affairs and House and Senate Armed Services committees, he preached the importance of a strong defense and America’s role in protecting “the free world.” During the fifties, Johnson was an architect of bipartisan foreign and defense policies. He believed that the

country must speak with one voice in meeting the Communist threat and use secret operations as Eisenhower did in Iran and Guatemala to protect itself.

Johnson was also a great believer in centralized control over foreign affairs or what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has called the Imperial Presidency. Johnson's conviction that decisions on overseas actions should largely emanate from the Oval Office reflected itself in his later policies toward Vietnam. His secret machinations or escalation of American involvement in Southeast Asia without a stable congressional and public consensus, a condition that played a large part in destroying his presidency, grew out of an excessively reverential attitude toward presidential power and a life-long impulse to cut political corners. Johnson viewed politics as a dirty business in which only the most manipulative succeeded. He did not come to this simply out of some flaw in his character. He learned it from the rough and tumble that characterized Texas politics in the first half of the twentieth-century, and from his early political mentors in Texas and Washington—Alvin Wirtz, Maury Maverick, Sr., Sam Rayburn, Thomas G. Corcoran, Harold Ickes, and FDR. In short, Vietnam was not simply the product of judgments about what we needed to do in Southeast Asia but also of developments in twentieth-century American politics in which Johnson had a significant part.

Because Johnson stumbled so badly in dealing with Vietnam, we have forgotten his extraordinary effectiveness as a Senate Majority Leader in the fifties. In 1957, after Johnson had led the first civil rights law through the Senate in eighty-two years, the historian C. Vann Woodward described him as having “the genius of a Henry Clay,” the “Great Compromiser.” A visceral New Deal liberal with a practical talent for accommodating diverse interests as no politician had since FDR, Johnson was the greatest Majority Leader in American history.

If the way other Presidents' historical reputations have fallen and recovered is any measure, Johnson's current low standing is not permanent. He seems bound to make a comeback from the almost uniformly negative view the public now holds of him. Vietnam and his affinity for backroom dealings will always dog his reputation. But once biographers begin balancing these shortcomings with greater attention to his major historical contributions, Johnson's virtues will become more evident. More important, we need to see his life not as a chance to indulge our sense of moral superiority, but as a way to gain an understanding of many subjects crucial to this country's past, present, and future.

**Part One**  
**The Making of a Politician, 1908–1937**