

Reflections

The Vietnam War

For 4470
By Sam Houston Johnson

This is the ninth of 12 installments of a special series excerpted from the book *My Brother Lyndon*.

As far as Vietnam is concerned, it is important to remember that Lyndon not only inherited a going war from John F. Kennedy, but Johnson also inherited the men who were Kennedy's principal advisers—Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara—all of whom advanced a strong and continuing effort against the Viet Cong.

Time and again, I have read and heard the repeated accusation that my brother had no rapport with intellectuals, that he disdained anyone with a fine education, especially if he had attended a fancy Ivy League college. Yet who could be more intellectual than Rusk, Bundy, McNamara, Walt Rostow, Dean Acheson, Abe Fortas and George Ball?

From what I heard during numerous breakfast and dinner conversations with Lyndon and Lady Bird, I gathered that Bundy had considerable influence in shaping our policy in Vietnam and in the Dominican Republic.

Eventually, Lyndon and his "favorite hawk" had a slight falling-out, though not with respect to our stand on Vietnam. Some people say Bunday was pushing too hard to become secretary of state, but I imagine it was something more personal than that. Perhaps, as Aunt Jessie would say, he was letting his britches ride too high.

Whatever their final feelings may have been, I think you would have to say that Bundy was a fairly loyal LBJ man. I, for one, can't say the same for Robert McNamara.

From the very beginning, Lyndon relied to a great extent upon the expertise and advice of McNamara, who

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seemed deeply committed to a firm and aggressive policy in Vietnam.

With his practical know-how as head of the Ford Motor Company, McNamara seemed to be a tough, pragmatic man who was able to view the war with the cool eye of a topnotch systems analyst. Flanked by his top aides, he made several trips to the battle front; and on the basis of his personal observations and careful technical calculations, he advanced some convincing arguments for a continued escalation of our military effort.

Adlai Stevenson once criticized McNamara for opposing the so-called "U Thant initiative with Hanoi" in 1964. He told Eric Sevaried that "McNamara flatly opposed the attempt. He said the South Vietnamese government would have to be informed and this would have a demoralizing effect on them; that government was shaky enough as it was . . ."

I think that was a logical assumption on McNamara's part: Thant's plan would certainly have demoralized

Saigon. But then McNamara tried to deny he had said it. That's precisely why I developed my doubts about him and subsequently wrote a long memorandum to my brother expressing those doubts.

Quite obviously, there were two McNamaras—one a hawk and the other a dove. It was fairly common knowledge in Washington that when he was around certain liberals—his Kennedy friends—McNamara would express all sorts of doubts about our course in Vietnam; but when he talked to Lyndon he was the gung-ho advocate of increased military pressure, always ready to prove his point with impressive charts and figures.

He wanted it both ways, he wanted to be an agonized liberal and a tough pragmatist at the same time.

If he really felt this country was on the wrong course, he was obviously deceiving his President and doing a great disservice to all of us. But if he was actually sincere in his advice to Lyndon, he had no business expressing contrary views to dovish liberals in order to curry favor with the Kennedy crowd.

Although Lyndon took no immediate action on my memo castigating McNamara for his wishy-washy, double-dealing attitude and his covert loyalty to Bobby Kennedy, I am sure he harbored increasing doubts about him. None of us were unhappy when Lyndon finally greased McNamara's path to the presidency of the World Bank.

Of the three principal Kennedy advisers who stayed on after the assassination, Dean Rusk was much more consistent than either Bundy or McNamara—certainly more loyal to the Johnson administration. At no time did he waver in his support of an escalated war against the Viet Cong, arguing again and again that the freedom of Southeast Asia hung in the balance. He stuck to his guns in the face of mounting opposition from his intellectual friends in the universities and foundations.

Perhaps history will show that Bundy, McNamara and Rusk were mistaken in their advice to Lyndon and that Generals Westmoreland and Abrams underestimated the enemy's will and capacity to fight.

But certainly no man can say that Lyndon Johnson acted arbitrarily, that he was shooting from the hip like a Texas sheriff. He not only consulted at great length with his inherited Kennedy braintrusts, he also sought the outside counsel of people like Dean Acheson, Clark Clifford and Abe Fortas. Later on, he had the benefit of the advice of a brilliant professor from MIT, Walt Rostow.

Anyone who ever talked privately with my brother soon realized that he was continuously weighing the pros and cons of every facet of the Vietnam conflict. Nothing depressed him more than the cruel statistics from the

battlefields, the number of Americans killed every day, the number wounded, civilian casualties on both sides, the devastation of property—all of which made the day-to-day decisions more difficult to make.

Believing that his policies would prevent even greater casualties at some future date, he was naturally hurt and angered by the accusations of beatnik students, misled peace movements, college professors and certain metropolitan editors who readily published cartoons depicting him as a bloody warmonger.

It was some comfort to know that most Americans supported him, that the public-opinion polls showed heavy majorities in favor of stopping the Communists now; but the mass demonstrations and certain televised Sen-

ate hearings were bound to affect him.

His entire family—even I—was exposed to the same flack. Several times, as I was sitting in a restaurant or bar minding my own business, someone would come up to me and make horrible accusations about my brother. Two or three of them had obviously stoked their courage with liquor.

One of them, a chubby middleaged man with horn-rimmed glasses and thin frizzy hair, was pulled back to his booth by an embarrassed wife. She came over to apologize afterwards and then shyly asked me for my autograph.

At Williams College in Massachusetts, I was publicly insulted by a grandstanding member of the faculty, whose hatred of my brother seemed pathological. His attack was so vicious and personal that several members of the audience—many of whom probably shared his opposition to the war in Vietnam—hissed at him and finally forced him to sit down.

Two or three days later, I mentioned the incident to Lyndon. "Stay away from those meetings," he told me. "You can't tell what kind of nuts are floating around these days."

"It wasn't as bad as you think," I said. "He was just blowing off steam. He's probably the meekest milktoast in town."

"They can be the most dangerous ones," he said. "You can't be too careful about those quiet little guys. They often carry the deepest grudges—against everybody. So don't go taking any chances. After all, you're my brother, and that alone might be enough to make some crazy bastard go off his rocker."

I couldn't tell to what extent, if any, Lyndon worried about being assassinated, but I worried about it occasionally. In an atmosphere of hatred and violence, anything can trigger a sick mind, and there was certainly plenty of hatred simmering near the surface during my brother's last three years in the presidency.

Rabid feelings could easily influence at least one lunatic one man out of 190 million. That's all it would take—another Harvey Oswald nursing who-knows-what kind of grudges against the world at large, some small insignificant nobody hungering for the instant prominence of a presidential assassin.

One also had to consider the violent mood in Washington itself. Aside from the periodic invasions of peace groups who came to picket the White House, the ever-increasing racial conflicts added to an atmosphere of explosive tension. More than once, when the subject came up at breakfast or dinner, Lyndon would wearily nod his head and look away with a baffled expression in his eyes.