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Don't distort JFK view of LBJ



RICHARD REEVES

This is not only the anniversary of the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated, it is also the day that Vice President Lyndon Johnson became president of the United States. They had served three years together, an odd couple, the cool, rich Boston Yankee and the superheated populist from the Hill Country west of Austin.

The conventional wisdom then was that Mr. Kennedy never wanted Mr. Johnson, the majority leader of the Senate, as his running mate in 1960. Further, it was said, Mr. Kennedy had no regard for Mr. Johnson's advice and counsel — and that he actually intended to dump Mr. Johnson from the ticket in 1964.

That's all wrong. To begin with, Sen. Kennedy always knew that Sen. Johnson would be his strongest running mate. He wanted to win, and the only way to do that was to carry Texas and to hold the Democratic South with a running mate at least marginally acceptable to Northern Democrats.

In researching my book, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, it was quickly obvious that Mr. Kennedy saw his vice president as a proud, moody and difficult man. He also wondered whether Mr. Johnson was a coward.

When he asked Mr. Johnson to go to South Vietnam, he was shocked when the vice president replied, "Mr. President, I don't want to embarrass you by getting my head blown off in Saigon."

Mr. Kennedy said, "Don't worry, Lyndon, if anything happens to you, Sam Rayburn and I will give you the biggest funeral Austin, Texas, ever saw."

Mr. Johnson did go, and he plunged into crowds there the way he did back in Texas. And when Mr. Kennedy heard that his staff was calling the vice president "Col. Cornpone," he chewed out one of his most important aides, Kenny O'Donnell:

"I just want you to know one thing. Lyndon Johnson was majority leader of the U.S. Senate; he was elected to office several times by the people. He was the No. 1 Democrat in the United States, elected by us to be our leader. I'm president of the United States. He doesn't like that. He thinks he's 10 times more important than I am; he happens to be that kind of a fellow. But he thinks you're nothing but a clerk. Just keep that right in your mind. . . . Elected officials have a code no matter whether they like each other or hate each other . . . you have never been elected to anything by anybody, and you are dealing with a very insecure, sensitive man with a huge ego."

It was in civil rights that Mr. Johnson played his most important role by helping persuade the president that the time had come for the government to take sides in the developing civil war between white Southern governments and demonstrating Negroes. The president had been trying to stay above the struggle.

On June 11, 1963, as National Guard troops moved onto the campus of the University of Alabama to protect the first two black students admitted that day, Mr. Kennedy went on national

television to say:

"This is not a legal or legislative issue alone . . . we are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution. . . . It is time to act in the Congress, in your state and local legislative body, and above all, in all of our daily lives. A great change is at hand, and our test, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all."

On Nov. 18, 1963, President Kennedy toured Florida with Sen. George Smathers in the first testing of the political waters for the 1964 campaign. Mr. Smathers brought up newspaper stories speculating that Mr. Kennedy was considering dropping Mr. Johnson as his running mate. Mr. Kennedy replied:

"George, you have some intelligence. I presume. Can you see me now in a terrible fight with Lyndon Johnson, which means I'll blow the South? You know, I love this job, I love every second of it. . . . Smathers, you just haven't got any sense. If Lyndon thinks that, he ought to think about it. I don't want to get licked. I really don't care whether Lyndon gets licked, but I don't want to get licked, and he's going to be my vice president because he helps me!"

Richard Reeves' column is distributed by the Universal Press Syndicate.

VIEWPOINTS

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