

Reflections

After Dallas

Part 2/5/70
This is the fifth in a series excerpted from the book
My Brother Lyndon.

By Sam Houston Johnson

At the moment President Kennedy was shot, I was having lunch with my brother-in-law, Oscar Bobbitt, at his home in Austin, Texas. It was also my home, for I had been living with him and my sister Becky since my retirement from government service in 1960.

The telephone rang as we were about to have our soup, and Bobbi grabbed it off the cabinet near his chair. Almost instantly he let out a gasp and the phone nearly dropped from his trembling hand. His eye bulged with fright.

"For God's sake, what happened?" I asked.

"Lyndon's been shot," he said. "So has Kennedy."

In those first hectic and confused moments, Rufus Youngblood had pounced on Lyndon in the second car and slammed him to the floor to protect him. The jolt had injured Lyndon, and he was still in pain when he got to the Parkland Memorial Hospital. Seeing him bent forward and holding his chest, some reporters naturally assumed he had also been shot. I was overwhelmed with a sadness so heavy I could hardly bear it.

And it wasn't only Kennedy I was sorry for—I was also sorry for my brother, who had just taken over the most thankless job in the world.

No job is more demanding or more onerous, more subject to public abuse. The average citizen couldn't care less what the president of General Motors thinks or does; but the President of the United States can't even pull his dog's ears without raising a storm of criticism from a bunch of old ladies in tennis shoes.

It was quickly apparent that many of the Kennedy people resented and even hated Lyndon simply because the assassination had occurred in Texas. They somehow associated Dallas with LBJ and some of them were heard bitterly asking: "Who had the most to gain from Kennedy's death?"

I hadn't minded being away from Washington during my brother's vice-presidency because I wouldn't want to see him humiliated; but now that he was in the White House, I sorely regretted my physical incapacity. With my back almost constantly aching from walking with a pronounced limp or lugging a heavy built-up boot, I had to take more sedatives than one ought to take. Sometimes bourbon and gin were a lot more satisfactory.

Whenever things got too gloomy and oppressive, I might have to go on a toot to get away from it all. That's exactly how I felt a few days after Kennedy was killed. I called up an old friend and asked him to join me for a quick holiday in San Antonio.

"I want to get away from everybody," I said. "This

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damn house has been swarming with reporters and all kinds of sweet-weather friends."

"Sure, Sam, I'll be glad to. But where are you going to hide yourself, buddy?"

"That's easy," I said. "You get us a suite at the El Tropicano Hotel in your name, and we won't let anyone know I'm there except my sister Becky. I want her to know in case Lyndon should call."

That afternoon, as we were getting settled, the phone started ringing and then stopped before I could pick it up. Then it rang again and the hotel operator almost shouted in my ear, "The White House is c-c-alling," she stammered. "It's the r-r-real White H-H-House calling, Mr. J-J-Johnson!"

"Just a moment," I said. "I'll take it in the bedroom. Please switch it there."

But when I got to the next room the operator told me the call had been interrupted—that the President would call me back in a few minutes.

Finally the call came through, with the operator breathlessly saying, "It's him! It's the President of the United States calling."

Then Lyndon's voice came over the wire. "Hi, Sam Houston, how y' doing?"

"Fine, Lyndon, everything's fine here."

"Sorry about that first call. I got involved in a hurry-up conference, so I decided to wait till I got back home to call you. I'm still living at the Elms, you know. Just got in."

"I imagine you're pretty busy," I said.

"Never been busier," he said. "But I've been waiting for a chance to talk with you and to let you know how much I appreciate all you've done for me, Sam Houston. I wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for you."

"Lyndon," I said. "I had nothing to do with Oswald."

He gasped, sputtered, and then exploded. What an explosion! I have never heard him so angry.

"Goddammit, Sam!" he shouted. "What the hell kind of a remark is that? Here I come all the way home to have a serious talk with you, and you come out with a damned stupid crack like that! Why in the hell can't you ever be serious, you crazy ass? You make your lousy sick jokes about everything . . ."

He went on like that, getting angrier and angrier, for about 20 minutes. And I kept expecting him to slam the phone down like a sledgehammer, but he went on talking at full fury. Finally, in a tired, somewhat despairing voice, he said, "I'll call you some other time."

I certainly couldn't blame him for bawling me out. He was dead right. There is no earthly justification for a remark like that, no possible explanation. I mention this incident now only because it reflects how my brother must have felt about all the ugly insinuations that were made about Kennedy being killed in Texas.

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With almost 30 years' experience in the House, the Senate, and the executive branch, Lyndon moved into

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the presidency with a sure knowledge of the vast, intricate machinery of government. As the strongest majority leader in recent history, he was no stranger to power and therefore wasn't awed or confused by his new responsibilities.

He used only what he needed and when he needed it, always acutely aware of the limits of power as well as its potential. He also knew there were power brokers at every level of government and in every sector of the community outside the government—people he had to work with in order to maximize the powers of his office.

In the midst of a whirlwind of administrative maneuvering, Lyndon phoned me in mid-December and asked if I would handle the preparations for a big Christmas celebration at the ranch for all the Johnson and Baines relatives, young and old.

"This will be my first Christmas as President," he said. "And I want to spend it with my own kin."

He also said he wanted me to come back to Washington with him after the holidays. I told him we'd have to discuss that later on.

Seventy-four of our kinfolk—aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, and in-laws from all branches of both Lyndon's and Lady Bird's families—showed up at the ranch in their Sunday best. I don't imagine anyone had a better time than Aunt Jessie, who was 78 years old and sweet 'n sharp as apple cider. She beamed when Lyndon gave her a bear hug and kissed her cheek.

"How'm I doing?" he asked.

"You're doin' all right so far," she said, arching her back so as to look him in the eye. "But don't you let your britches ride too high, Lyndon. Don't let those people brag on you too much and make you go forgetting you're just plain folks like the rest of us."

"Don't you worry 'bout me, honey," said Lyndon, hugging her again. "I know you won't let me, Aunt Jessie."

When we had finished our huge dinner, Aunt Jessie

took me aside on the big front porch and gave me some heart-to-heart advice for my brother.

"I didn't want to hog all his time with all these other kin wanting to visit with him," she said, fingering an old jade medallion. "But I want you to tell Lyndon something else for me, Sam Houston.

"Tell him to stick with the Jews and never do nothing against them. Now, they're God's chosen people, you know. Says so right in the Bible, and don't you ever doubt it.

"The best thing Harry Truman ever did was create the state of Israel. That was the right thing to do because they didn't have a homeland to call their own. Why, when he did that, Sam Houston, whether he figured on it or not, he had that next election right in the bag. Tom Dewey didn't have no more chance than a pig in a dog race.

"So you tell Lyndon never to let the Jews down. They're the best people in the world to have on your side. In politics or anything else."

Aside from Aunt Jessie's candid advice about not letting his britches ride too high, most of the Johnson-Baines kinfolk were content to just bask in the warmth and glory of Lyndon's presence. He seemed bigger than life to them, as if the presidency had actually increased his size (six feet three inches) and made him too big for an ordinary room. It was his incredible animal vigor and brute magnetism that made him so expansive.

Curiously enough, I felt a shade of awe myself, though nowhere near as much as the others. After all, he was the President, the most powerful man in the world, and that alone made him more than just another brother.

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Lyndon never seemed to have a chance to relax for more than a half hour. I wondered how he could possibly avoid another heart attack.

"You've got to slow down," I told him one evening just before the new year. "This pace will kill you, Lyndon."

"Don't you go to worrying about me," he said, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs out. "I'll pace myself, Sam Houston. These first few weeks have been kinda hectic, but things will settle down pretty soon. Ain't near as bad as being vice president. Not being able to do anything will wear you down sooner than hard work."

That's as close as he ever came to admitting that he had been chomping at the bit for three frustrating years, and I could see that the heavy grind of presidential work was actually good for him. His eyes were clear and sharp, his hands strong and steady, his voice firm and commanding. He was in many ways younger and stronger than he had been since his near-fatal heart attack in 1955.

Bearing in mind his explosive reaction when I made that crack about Oswald (incidentally, not a word was said about that during the entire holidays), I wasn't quite sure what he had in mind when he again asked me to come back to Washington with him.

"I want you to stay at the White House, Sam Houston," he said. "There's a room ready for you in the family quarters."

"Well, now, that's fine, Lyndon. But what do you want me to do around there?"

"Come and see how you like it first, and we'll talk about that later on."

Still wondering what might be in store for me, I packed my bags on New Year's eve.