

LBJ: Reluctant President

By Don Oberdorfer
Washington Post Staff Writer

Former President Lyndon B. Johnson, in the first installment of his televised and published memoirs, said he never wanted the presidency and in fact doubted his ability to fulfill all the functions of the job.

"I always felt that every job that I had was really too big for me," he said in a filmed interview with the Columbia Broadcasting System, which purchased the rights to his broadcast reminiscences of his public career.

"It's been very clear to me that I had certain serious disadvantages . . . upbringing . . . limited educational advantages, geography, where my mother was when I was born and the preju-

dices that exist, and in general, summed up in one sentence, a general inability to stimulate, inspire and unite all the people of the country, which I think is an essential function of the presidency," he said.

Mr. Johnson's version of his own personality and ambitions may come as a surprise—perhaps even a shock—to many people in political Washington who are unused to thinking of him as hesitant about either his powers or his ability.

As Mr. Johnson tells it, he was a reluctant candidate for President from the very start and never changed his views.

He said he almost pulled out of the 1964 presidential race during the Dem-

ocratic National Convention, which nominated him by acclamation.

In 1968, he said, he was certain he would have won if he had run, but had determined long in advance to decline the nomination.

Mr. Johnson blamed the eventual 1968 Democratic nominee, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, for losing his own election by moving away from the LBJ Vietnam policy in the celebrated Salt Lake City speech. Except for that speech, Mr. Johnson indicated, the South Vietnamese might have agreed to a peace conference before the election and thus boosted Humphrey over the top with American voters.

See JOHNSON, A5, Col. 1



Associated Press

His wife, Lady Bird, was his most trusted adviser when it came to running or not running for President, Lyndon B. Johnson discloses.

JOHNSON, From A1

Humphrey replied Friday: "I did what I thought was right and responsible at Salt Lake City. I did not play politics with Vietnam during the campaign nor have I played politics with this serious issue since the campaign."

Reached at his home in Waverly, Minn., Humphrey said that "The fact is that the Salt Lake City speech did become public policy (on Oct. 31 when Mr. Johnson stopped the bombing). I doubt that the speech had anything to do with the failure of the South Vietnamese to appear at the conference table."

Whatever the benefit to historians of these retrospective revelations—and there is certain to be much debate about some of them—the first televised hour of Johnson-on-Johnson is without question an absorbing and extraordinary closeup of a man who was President for more than half of the 1960s, and who is now determined to give his own version.

The program will be presented at 7:30 tonight over CBS television. An earlier screening was made available to newsmen as the basis for stories to be published today.

Titled "Why I Chose Not to Run," this first program was filmed in mid-September and in late October in the living room of a guest house at the LBJ Ranch in Texas and subsequently cut and edited by CBS. A second hour-long interview centering on the March 31, 1968, decision to stop bombing most of North Vietnam is scheduled for broadcast Feb. 6. A third program covering Mr. Johnson's relations with the Kennedy family is planned for later in 1970.

"The White House Years," the first volume of the Johnson printed memoirs covering his long career in public life, is scheduled to be published in midsummer by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, a subsidiary of CBS. Future programs in the CBS Television series, one of them covering the Tonkin Gulf episode and its aftermath, are planned for next season. CBS reportedly agreed to pay Mr. Johnson something over \$300,000 for the television broadcasts, which, in turn, are sold to commercial sponsors.

Grayer and Heavier

The Lyndon Johnson who emerges from retirement to a return engagement on the nation's television screens tonight appears to be a little grayer and a little heavier than the man who left the White House Jan. 20.

During some of the early scenes, a slight tic can be seen in the muscles of the right side of his face, but some friends noticed that before he left Washington. His Texas staff says his health is excellent, and he seemed in

the filmed sequences to be relaxed and contented.

"For really the first time in all of my life—for the first time that I can remember—I'm just doing exactly what I want to do," he told interviewer Walter Cronkite. He is shown touring his LBJ ranch in a big convertible, inspecting the property and instructing a ranch hand in his duties.

Asked if he misses the presidency, Mr. Johnson replied: "Most of it I miss good." He says that he can go to bed after the 10 o'clock news at night and sleep until daylight the next day—an experience he could not recall in the five years he was in the White House.

"The real horror was to be sleeping soundly about 3:30 or 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and have the telephone ring and the operator say, 'Sorry to wake you, Mr. President,'" he recalled. "There's just a second between the time the operator got me on the line until she could get Mr. (Walt W.) Rostow in the Situation Room or Mr. (McGeorge) Bundy in the Situation Room, or maybe Secretary (Dean) Rusk or Secretary (Robert) McNamara, Secretary (Clark) Clifford. And we went through the horrors of hell that 30 seconds or minute or two minutes."

"Had we hit a Russian ship? Had an accident occurred? We have another Pueblo? Someone made a mistake—were we at war? Well, those experiences are gone."

Mr. Johnson said that part of the great sense of relief at handing over the presidency was that "I no longer had fear that I was the man that could make the mistake of involving the world in war, that I was no longer the

man that would have to carry the terrifying responsibility of protecting the lives of this country and maybe the entire world, unleashing the horrors of some of our great power if I felt that that was required." Whatever might come, he said, it was a relief to know. "I was going to be the cause of it."

Repeatedly during the filmed interview, Mr. Johnson portrayed himself as a man who had been almost overwhelmed by the power which had been thrust unsolicited into his hands, an impression much at odds with the almost universal conception of him as one who hungered for power, particularly presidential power, and who loved nothing so much as to utilize it.

At one point he conceded that it is deeply embedded in American belief that he sought power and liked to use it, but he added: "That has never been my feeling."

At one point he said, "I can't ever convince anybody, and I have no intention or desire to do so, but I have had rather serious questions in my mind about being President of the United States."

Back in 1955, he related, Joseph P. Kennedy telephoned him at the LBJ Ranch to offer his support and that of his son, Sen. John F. Kennedy, to Mr. Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination. "I told them that I had no ambitions to be President, that I would not be a candidate for the presidency, that I thought it would be a mistake for me to be a candidate," Mr. Johnson recalled.

Worked Hard for It

He was nominated for President as a favorite son at the 1956 Democratic Convention, and nominated again in 1960. He did not say so on television, but he worked hard for the nomination that year and announced for the race before the convention.

Mr. Johnson lost out to Sen. John F. Kennedy, who then selected the Texan as his vice-presidential running mate. Mr. Johnson succeeded to the presidency after President Kennedy's assassination in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963.

In May, 1964, he said in the filmed interview, he began discussing with his wife whether he should seek a term of his own in the White House. She said "you've got to do it," he related, but "with the understanding and with the knowledge that three years and three months from the time you take the oath—and that would make it March, 1968—you can say to the people that

you're not going to succeed to another term."

After discussions with close friends, including Gov. John Connally of Texas, Sen. Richard B. Russell of Georgia and Judge A. W. Morsund, he continued, he decided that despite his wife's advice he should not undertake a full term as President "because of the divisiveness that I could see ahead, because of the feeling of the Negro militants that was then asserting itself, because of the reaction of the South, and the attitude of the people of the North toward the South and vice-versa, and the reaction of the press media and how they reacted to things I said and did—my manner, my style, and how I—from my viewpoint how they twisted and imagined and built and magnified things that I didn't think were true."

On Aug. 26, 1964, Mr. Johnson said, he wrote out an announcement instructing the Democratic National Convention to select someone else for its nominee—he assumed it would be Robert F. Kennedy or Sen. Hubert Humphrey—because he had concluded that he himself was not the man to unite the country.

Had such a statement been delivered by Mr. Johnson at that point, it would have stunned the country and thrown the Democrats into utter confusion. On that day, the Democratic convention was rolling smoothly toward the Johnson nomination, apparently under the direction and control of his own political lieutenants.

Mr. Johnson said in the broadcast interview that he wrote the statement on Aug. 26 at 11:06, but he did not specify whether it was a.m. or p.m. At 11:03 p.m. that day he was nominated by acclamation as the Democratic Presidential nominee for 1964.

As Mr. Johnson recalls it now, it was his wife who dissuaded him from issuing the statement he had written, and persuaded him to run for President instead in 1964.

Asked why his determination not to run had never leaked to the press, Mr. Johnson replied that "I think this is one I controlled . . . I talked to people that I had known for years" and who would not break his confidence to curry favor with news media.

In the spring of 1967, Mr. Johnson said, he discussed his political future with Gov. Connally and told him then that he probably would not run for a second full term as President. In October, 1967, he said, he informed Secre-

tary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Presidential Assistant Rostow and Central Intelligence Director Richard Helms that as matters stood at that time, he did not think he would run.

In January, 1968, he continued, he discussed with Mrs. Johnson his determination not to run again. This time she was in agreement, he said, and helped him draft firm language renouncing the nomination. He had planned to carry the statement with him in his pocket to Capitol Hill on the occasion of the State of the Union Address that year, he recalled, but left it on a telephone table in the bedroom of the White House by mistake.

March 31, 1968, when he finally did announce that he would not run again, was the last possible time that he felt he could quit the race without depriving potential Democratic nominees of sufficient time to build a campaign. Mr. Johnson said the date was based on the precedent set by former President Harry S. Truman, who announced March 29, 1952, that he would not be a candidate to succeed himself that Fall.

Had no Doubt

Mr. Johnson said in the interview he had no doubt he could have won the election had he decided to run. He pointed out that Humphrey lost by only the narrowest margin and said that "with the powers available to me" he would have received more support from business and finance, labor and the farm community, than Humphrey was able to muster.

In answer to a question from Cronkite, Mr. Johnson said none of his advisers told him prior to March 31 that he was in political trouble. All urged him to do more politically, he recalled, because everybody concluded that 1968 "would be a rough year politically."

Mr. Johnson said that the campaigns of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, both of which were launched before his March 31 announcement, did not bother him because he knew he would not be in the race. He conceded that the McCarthy showing in the New Hampshire primary "did puzzle me" and said he didn't expect political opposition from McCarthy "who wanted to be Vice President and who had been my friend and been in my home a good deal."

In the end, the Presidential nomination went to Humphrey with help from

Johnson friends. While expressing "great admiration" for Humphrey, Mr. Johnson said that the then Vice-President's Sept. 30 campaign speech on Vietnam at Salt Lake City "hurt us in the election."

The Humphrey forces were seeking a way to move out from under the shadow of Mr. Johnson, particularly on the war issue, and the Salt Lake City speech advocating a total bombing halt in North Vietnam was the most dramatic expression of that desire. Most political observers felt at the time that it helped Humphrey greatly.

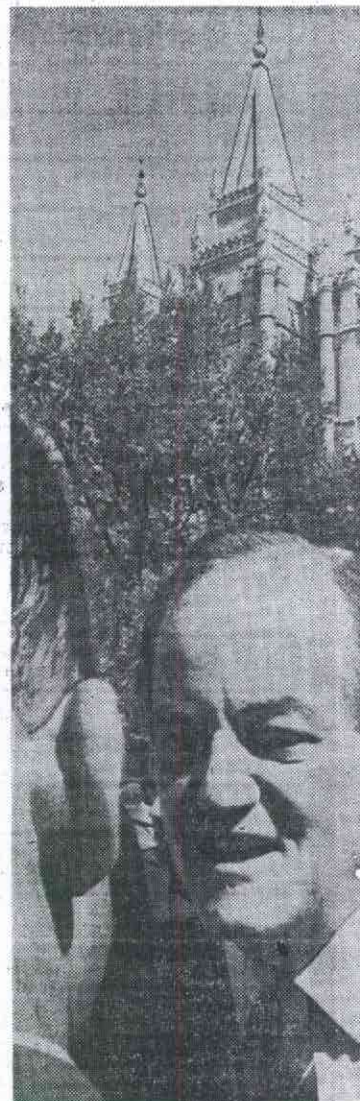
Mr. Johnson's calculation is quite different. "My feeling was that in that speech he (Humphrey) left the impression that he would stop the bombing, and that communicated to the country and to the world a shift of policy in this country, a change of position. . . I believe that was interpreted by the South Vietnamese and by others in this country as representing a change in policy. . . I think as a result that the South Vietnamese had become concerned enough that they decided they wouldn't go to the peace table 'til after the election, or that they would hold back," Mr. Johnson said.

If the peace conference had begun before election day, he added, "I think the people would have moved accordingly. And I think it would have been in the direction of the Democrats."

At several times during the televised interview, Mr. Johnson expressed his displeasure with news media. He implied that the Democratic Party's decision to hold its 1968 convention in Chicago caused great bitterness in the television industry because of the cost of setting up coverage in Miami for the Republicans and Chicago for the Democrats. Mr. Johnson disclaimed any interest in the site of the Chicago convention—"I couldn't have cared less," he said.

On the subject of the "credibility gap," the argument about Mr. Johnson's believability which generated much controversy during the later stages of his administration, the former President was blunt and direct.

"I never thought it was the President's credibility gap, I thought it was their credibility gap," he said. "But they owned the papers and the networks, I didn't. And they come out every day. And they could talk about my credibility, but there wasn't much I could do about their credibility."



Former Vice President Humphrey, in replay to TV comment by Ex-President Johnson, said his Salt Lake City speech about Vietnam, said: "I did what I thought was right and responsible."