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The Remaking of the President: 1969

pro was back on television last night, al and outrageous and, yes, engaging as it wasn't enough to have read the tran- the news stories in advance. You had and hear Lyndon Baines Johnson himself, resident, former Senate Majority Leader, miliar, mobile face grinning and grimacing cowering. It was vintage Johnson, mean one ent, magnanimous the next, self-confident, pitying, telling the tall tales as only he can d them, which is to say arrestingly, even when ou can't believe it didn't happen the way he says t happened.

It was like old times, and you couldn't escape the sense, inevitable when powerful personalities leave the scene, that he looked somehow bigger and broader and deeper than what we now have—that they just don't make them like that anymore. Or perhaps it's just the contrast between his successor—smooth and studied and controlled—and this earthy, pungent son of Texas whose greatest failing may well have been that he never drew enough on his greatest strength, the raw force that came from his frontier origins which made him a natural leader and which he now thinks was crippling because it made him *regional*.

It was all there last night, the instinct to over- power with hyperbole and sheer audacity and simple reiteration, until it becomes easier to be- lieve him than to argue back. He once told Charles Roberts of Newsweek, who wrote it in his book, LBJ's Inner Circle, that he had made the decision to bomb North Vietnam four months before he actually did, which would have put it back in October 1964, towards the end of the campaign, when, as a matter of actual fact just such a proposal from our Saigon Embassy was *vetoed* in the White House. He may have concluded then that he would have to do something sometime to rescue our crumbling position in Vietnam, once he had dis- posed of Barry Goldwater, but that is quite a dif- ferent thing. He buttressed his decision to inter- vene in the Dominican Republic with wild stores of bullets flying through the American Embassy and the Ambassador hiding under his desk, and anybody who had ever seen the Ambassador—or the desk—knew *that* couldn't be. Facts have al- ways had a special meaning to this man, a relative

after it had actually convened? About the most—or the best—you can say about it all is that whatever the truth of this or that is, the former President genuinely believes that what he is reciting now is The Truth. If he is deceiving somebody it may not be us as much as himself.

In any case we will never know for sure. Least of all will we ever know whether he could have beaten Mr. Nixon, which assertion is crucial to his central argument—that he wasn't "run out of the Presidency." This is what gnaws at him, this is what he wants to prove: that this hard-eyed, rough, tough Texan was *not run off the range*, and it is human enough to want to prove it. But even if you accept it, you don't prove much because there is so much more to it than that, and so much more to the man. Complex, volatile, given to towering highs and crashing lows and to more than his share of self-doubt in the bad times, it would not be surprising if he gave way to despair about his capacity to govern. For he also had more than his share of vicissitudes, not all of his own making, to deal with along the way. Vietnam was not entirely his, nor the eruption of the ghettos; by 1968, things were not going his way.

So it would also not be surprising if he had planned, in a sort of contingency way, to give up the Presidency, and thought it through long before he did it, because, as one of his closest associates used to say, "win was the key word; he would change anytime in order to win." This is another way of saying that he would change anytime in order *not* to lose—not the Presidency, necessarily, but not to lose in another way, with history, by not being able to govern for most of the last year of his term.

This had nothing to do with his background, however much he may now claim humble origins as a fatal handicap. Other Presidents have had a hard early life and Lyndon Johnson governed just fine when things *were* going his way. What it had to do with was very largely the war, and the way he got so deeply into it, and his own miscalculations about how it could be conducted and how quickly and cheaply won; this is what destroyed his effectiveness in the end, this and the unrest at home which fed on the war and which he had no answer for.

But this would be too complex—and too candid—for the story he wants to tell us, so he has tidied it all up and given it the logic of hindsight, and also some new exclusive insights which we must take on faith. He is going to present it to us in two more installments and we wouldn't want to miss any of it.

It is good theatre and it is nice to have Lyndon Johnson back in the bright lights. About the only other thing you can say about it is God help the historians.

value, you might say, so it is probably hopeless to try to untangle the inconsistencies between what he now says about his approach to the Presidency and his political intentions in 1964 or 1968 with what he was saying—and doing—at the time. How to square his deep concern with forewarning the 1968 Convention of his non-availability as a candidate five months in advance so as not to shatter the party, with his transitory readiness to shock the 1964 Convention with a similar withdrawal