

## Books of The Times

# An Appointment in Samarra

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**THE VANTAGE POINT.** Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969. By Lyndon Baines Johnson. 636 pages. Illustrated. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$15.

The story has it, as you may recall, that one day a rich man's servant learned that Death was seeking him. So to avoid the meeting, he fled to Samarra. On the very same day, the rich man was walking in the market place and encountered Death, who inquired after the servant. "He has gone away," the rich man said. "I am sorry," Death replied, "for I had hoped to meet him this day, and tonight I have an appointment in Samarra." The story is pertinent to Lyndon Baines Johnson's memoir of his years as President. For if we substitute Mr. Johnson for the servant in the tale, and if we read for Death the popular image of Mr. Johnson's Presidency—namely, that he was a natural politician who came to grief over his foreign policy in Vietnam, then "The Vantage Point" is Mr. Johnson's flight to Samarra—a fatal rendezvous with the very thing he is trying to avoid.

Everything in Mr. Johnson's book seems calculated to alter our image of him. He built the Great Society by banging heads together and twisting arms? Not at all. He built it, all right—one of the most impressive domestic programs in modern American history—but only through statesmanlike negotiation with legislators he respected. "Wild images have been concocted to describe this process of persuasion," he writes. "A great deal of mystery surrounds the President's role. But the real task of persuasion is far less glamorous than the imagined one. It is tough, demanding work," not a matter of trading patronage for votes, or handing out punishments and rewards.

## Maximum Consultation

He shot from the hip in Vietnam? Hunkered down and stuck blindly to a disastrous course in the face of advice to the contrary? Not a bit of it, he argues. His conduct was integral with American foreign policy since 1945. His every decision was carefully weighed after maximum consulta-

tion with experts he trusted. And far from being the chaotic debacle it seemed, our conduct of the war was a reasonable (if extremely painful) success: The turning back of the 1968 Tet offensive was a great military victory for South Vietnam that probably turned the tide and brought Hanoi to the negotiating tables (although, he admits, Tet was badly presented to the American people and was therefore a psychological defeat). What's more, it was scarcely Mr. Johnson's fault that the war continued, but Hanoi's for refusing our many overtures of peace.

Even one's relatively insignificant impressions of his years in the White House



Lyndon B. Johnson

are false. He did not relish the power of his office, never wanted to be President in the first place, not even when former Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy broached the idea back in 1956. There was never the slightest enmity between Mr. Johnson and any members of the Kennedy family: He felt deeply loyal to J.F.K., stayed on the best of terms with Jackie, never disliked Bobby (although he never felt close to him), and visited Teddy in the hospital when Teddy was recovering from his back injury. In fact, he felt no enmity toward anyone—not toward Robert S. McNamara when he resigned as Secretary of Defense in 1967, and not toward Wilbur D. Mills, House Ways and Means Committee chairman, during the 10 per cent tax-surge fight in 1968.

Indeed, it seems we were even mistaken to think of L.B.J. as a larger-than-life, thicker-than-flesh, richer-than-blood political legend of our times, if this book is any evidence. For judging from its tepid language and its pop-magazine organization, the author was never even a tint more colorful than Calvin Coolidge.

All of which may be true, newsworthy and interesting to read (except, of course, for the colorless image of Mr. Johnson, which I simply refuse to believe). But what of the deeper impression his book leaves behind?

It is a curious one, for the facts are knocked all askew by the style of their presentation. For instance, Mr. Johnson treats his domestic program with justified pride. Yet so sappy is the language with which he describes its forging—so puffed up with bromides, platitudes and phrases such as "it had always grieved me greatly" or "this was the happiest day my life"—that its weight boils down to nothing.

## Details Are Minute

For instance, fully a third of the book is devoted exclusively to Vietnam. Yet Mr. Johnson is so careful here—his details are so infinitesimally minute; his prose so lacking in any character at all—that the reader's mind is quite thoroughly anesthetized. Moreover, not once in his lengthy defense does he confront a single issue that has bothered serious protesters of the war—issues such as France's colonialism, or why the elections promised by the Geneva accords of 1954 were never held (a question, incidentally, on which the recently published Pentagon Papers have shed rather damaging light).

And, for instance, the only sections of these memoirs that have anything resembling a compelling narrative drive or a genuine sense of conviction behind them are those concerning Mr. Johnson's legislative dealings. For it is only here that Mr. Johnson seems to have something to say, instead of a pose to put on or a record to defend compulsively.

So despite all the news, the picture that finally emerges is one of a President who was comfortable with the legislative process, who was a social planner by instinct, and who was deeply ill at ease over Vietnam. Or, in other words, a President who was a natural politician who came to grief over his foreign policy in Vietnam—precisely the image he was trying to dispel. And thus it is that he arrives at his fatal appointment in Samarra.