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LBJ IN HISTORY

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Most Americans now believe that it was Oswald who killed John Kennedy, and most would also agree that it was the Vietnam war that brought about the political death of Lyndon Johnson. My own feeling is that he was destroyed politically not by the war alone but by the impact of the war on a civilization which was already in revolution, even before he speeded up the war and committed American troops—in fact, even before John Kennedy was shot at Dallas and before Johnson took the oath of office on that fateful day.

Johnson himself, in "The Vantage Point" (Holt, Rinehart), which is his *Apologia pro vita sua*, doesn't go in for such fruitless speculation. He was always a man of action, a *managing* man mostly, not a reflective one. We can't roll back American history, to see what would have happened to America and to Johnson himself if he had not made the fatal decision to escalate. Would he have survived the domestic turmoil successfully? Would he have run again in 1968, despite what he tells us about his reluctance? Would he have been elected again?

The answer is guesswork. But some things we do know about him, and the book—despite its careful imprecision on such matters—tends to confirm them. We know that Johnson prided himself on his can-do capacities in handling men and events, just as his mentor and hero FDR did. He was happiest as a legislator and liked nothing better than to show he could do

the impossible in persuading, placating, bulldozing, bargaining, and bombarding his fellow-legislators into getting legislation through. As a lawgiver he out-Napoleoned Napoleon and out-Hammurabied Hammurabi. He could smite a resister hip and thigh, or charm and jolly him into agreement.

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This was also, alas, his undoing. As a managing man he was confronted by the prospect of having to manage a messy war which would be made messier by escalation, and also a turbulent society at home. He had three Democratic forerunners—Wilson, FDR, and Truman—who had been domestic reformers and also war Presidents. If they had managed it, then why not he? Moreover he had been Vice President to a fourth Democrat, John Kennedy, who had waded in the shallow waters of the Vietnam war but largely kept away from the depths and rapids.

We shall probably never know how Johnson felt about the Kennedys. The book doesn't tell us, because he didn't write a confessional memoir (what President has?) but wrote carefully for the record, in the hope of persuading the historians after having been unable to manage history. Johnson carried over the Kennedy aides and tried to carry over the Kennedy policies. But he felt uncomfortable with them. He was a non-Kennedy, a non-Easterner, a non-Harvard man, a non-intellectual. He was earthy, profane, often vulgar as judged by their standards.

What must have given him some sense of security was the thought that he could outdo John Kennedy as a political craftsman. Where Kennedy had failed with the Senate and House, on his legislative program, Johnson succeeded. Could he also carry off the venture of going through with the Vietnam war, as a can-do President, where Kennedy had only dabbled with it?

If these were the springs of his war decisions, then there was a hubris in him—an arrogance of personal drive as well as an arrogance of power—for which he paid tragically. As the going got harder, he grew more intense, shriller, more frenetic, more willing to practice deception (and doubtless self-deceptions) which badly damaged his credibility. He tried to hold everything under control, to keep the air war on its targets, to hold every string in his own hands. But everything came apart.

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He was an activist, and also in his own way a moralist. After bringing millions of people out of poverty into employment, out of segregation into civil rights and education, he was chagrined at getting no credit for it. FDR had been given credit for his reforms, so had Harry Truman, but not he. The fact is that neither Roosevelt nor Truman had operated within a civilization in revolution. Johnson did.

One must read his book with a measure of compassion, and with wonder. The man who knew the vulnerabilities of so many people, and how to use them, didn't understand how fragile and vulnerable a society could be when the young lost their belief in it. The man who constantly said, "Tell me what is right and I'll do it," didn't sense the deep currents of conscience about a war in distant jungles, under alien skies, that tore America apart—and also put an end to his Presidency.