



Seeing Things Through for JFK

by JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

**THE VANTAGE POINT:
Perspectives of the Presidency
1963-1969**

by Lyndon Baines Johnson

Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 636 pp., \$15

Around Iona Station, Ontario, in the early part of this century William Archibald Galbraith was a man of about the same public stature, I would say, as Samuel Ealy Johnson in the neighborhood of Johnson City, Texas. He was a farmer as well as part-time politician and, probably, a bit poorer than Johnson. The Ontario Agricultural College, which I attended in the same years that Lyndon Baines Johnson was at Southwest Texas State, was no better calculated to give a student a sense of academic superiority. I stirred some unjustified resentment a few years back by describing it as possibly the worst though certainly the cheapest center of academic excellence in the English-speaking world. In the ensuing years I have made it on the raffish fringe of the Harvard establishment but with only a fraction of the impact which L.B.J. had on the Washington (and Dallas, Houston, Fort Worth and Austin) power elites.

I make these comparisons because early in this book Lyndon Johnson says that he has always been disadvantaged and in degree persecuted by the Eastern aristocracy and meritocracy because of his unfortunate Southern background. The reviews of this book by various members of the Eastern literary establishment could easily in-

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tensify this feeling. This one, I would like to remind him, is by an at least equally authentic member of our particular counterculture.

Partly for this reason, no doubt, there is a great deal in the book I would commend or defend. One of the first reactions of critics to the proofs, I hear, is the feeling that very little is new. It is not so. New to all of us who have known, listened to and (more often than not) rejoiced in L.B.J.'s polemical skills over the years is the soft-spoken kindness of the volume. He is simply not sore at anyone; he treats everyone (almost everyone) with a kind of avuncular magnanimity which is almost without parallel in political memoirs and totally without precedent in his own past practice. Only the most careful reader will get a whiff of the vintage Johnson—as when Clark Clifford is heard urging consideration in 1968 for 500,000 to one million *more* men for Vietnam; or when L.B.J.'s relations with Robert Kennedy are described as usually "cordial though never overly warm"; or when Townsend Hoopes gets omitted entirely from the index (he rates a generic mention as one of several un-informed lower echelon Pentagon civilians); or when Fulbright is mentioned as more difficult to please with peaceful gestures than Ho Chi Minh.

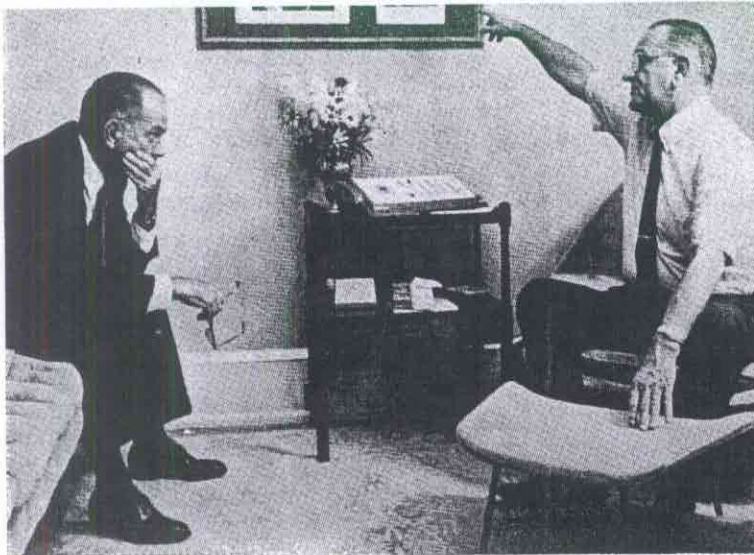
New also is the picture of Johnson as Hamlet, a man tortured by the call of public duty on the one hand and, on the other, a rending aversion to anything smacking of ambition, or interfering with family, grandchildren, fire-side or ranch. It is hard to believe how badly L.B.J. always wanted to escape from the distractions of politics and public office, and in point of fact no one will.

The most surprising manifestation of this unexpected trait was in 1964 (*sic*) when Johnson, by then President, had great difficulty deciding whether to run for a full term. He did not make up his mind until the Democrats had been

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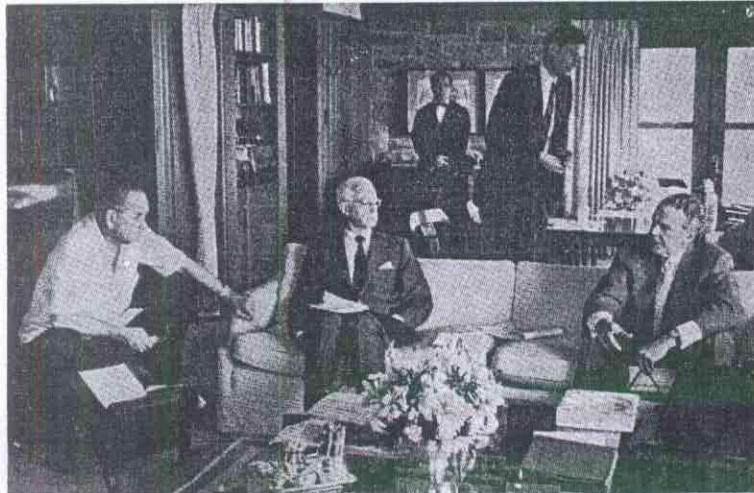
Senator J. William Fulbright, Foreign Relations Committee chairman, and Lyndon Johnson—"more difficult to please with peaceful gestures than Ho Chi Minh."

"The Johnson competence was not confined to domestic matters. Where his own intelligence and experience were engaged, he was equally good on foreign policy."



Johnson and Nixon—"avuncular."

LBJ, Ellsworth Bunker (center) and senior advisers confer about talks with North Vietnam—"Of the intelligence of Hanoi, Lyndon Johnson is clearly persuaded."



in session for two days at Atlantic City. It was a state of the Presidential mind that none of us along the boardwalk in our innocence at all suspected. Had his decision gone the other way—had Ladybird, whom he credits with persuading him, been instead adverse—the effect when it reached that convention would have been less than that of a hundred-foot tidal wave. But not much.

When L.B.J. is concocting a whopper of this imaginative magnitude you can almost sense the glow of professional pride. Perhaps one should be less admiring than I am. It is art for art's sake and it doesn't always interfere with the truth. In this case, only a few pages on, he details the Byzantine or, more accurately, the Johnsonian (for one doubts that anyone in Byzantium was quite his equal) maneuvers by which in the weeks preceding his decision he had worked to win general approval for the Vice President he wanted and to ensure that it wasn't Robert Kennedy, whom he did not want. (In another imaginative passage he explains that personally Bobby was just fine and most welcome but he would have weakened the ticket down in the border states.) For anyone who wasn't running, this was a great deal of unnecessary work. I can testify that it took up a good bit of Presidential time because, for a brief moment in 1964, I was the broker between the President and Kennedy and discharged my duties with such inspired impartiality that I persuaded each principal that I was the hopeless dupe of the other.

Besides the news of L.B.J.'s rejection of worldly ambition, much more is new. He took almost no interest in what the Democrats were doing at Chicago in 1968. He had no thought of firing (or easing out) Bob McNamara. Similarly much more. One must understand L.B.J.'s rather special approach to history—his test is not so much what happened as what he believes he can persuade other people to believe and he is ever an optimist. But to say that this work is without originality is to reflect a very narrow view.

There is another and more substantial virtue to this history—one that reflects Lyndon Johnson at his best. He has organized his book not chronologically but by the major efforts of his administration—civil rights legislation, federal support for education, help to housing, the war on poverty, the model cities program, and defeat of the Communists (usually referred to as aggressors) in Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam.

His account of everything except the defeat of aggression is wonderfully stamped by the Johnson personality and shows why, on domestic issues, he was (or could have been) the most

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effective Chief Executive in this century. He had, as this book makes clear, a superb sense of priority—of the urgency of the problems of race, the cities, education, medical care, and the poor. He was far better than Kennedy (and I think than Roosevelt) in winning the requisite response from the Congress. Toward the end of this book, in one of its best passages, he outlines the Johnson techniques for wringing action from a reluctant congressman. No one can doubt that it is by a master of the craft. It was hard work, which he did not delegate. He got on the phone himself—or got the backsliders down to the White House for some intense education. He also made sure that the leaders were informed of legislation in advance and got proper credit when it passed. And, finally, when he got the legislation he put excellent men in charge. His appointments at H.U.D. and H.E.W.—Bob Weaver and especially Robert Wood, Charles Haar, John Gardner and Wilbur Cohen—were among the best ever. The book takes an earthy, energetic pride in these achievements. The pride is justified—which is saying something where Lyndon Johnson is concerned.

The Johnson competence was not confined to domestic matters. Where his own intelligence and experience were engaged, he was equally good on foreign policy. One example greatly impressed me. Back in the Eisenhower years the U.S. made a long-term agreement (Public Law 480) to supply India with grain against the deposit of rupees. The action combined compassion with alleviation of our own wheat surplus. It also always worried me for it appreciably reduced the feeling of urgency with which Indian politicians and officials approached the problem of the domestic food supply. I never got beyond speeches warning of the danger. In 1966, when the Indians had a bad year, they appealed to the President for help. Johnson sensed the danger. He supplied the food but under short-term arrangements of considerable uncertainty. The criticism both at home and from India (as he here tells) was bitter. His knowledge of agriculture and politicians was also unerring. He helped at least a little to increase the sense of urgency behind the green revolution.

Alas, on foreign policy this personal knowledge was not generally available. There will be many explanations of Lyndon Johnson. Since he is a complicated man, most will feel that the explanations must be complicated. My thought has long been that a simple one will survive: He was excellent on the problems of which he was personally in command and that included, in particular, anything having to do with the United States. He failed when he had to rely on advisers. Until he became



"... and finally, may I remind you that I was one of the earliest outspoken critics of the war?"

Vice President he had not seriously bothered his mind with most problems of foreign policy. So here he relied not on himself but on the Cold War civilians and the military, and this was fatal. This book confirms the diagnosis and shows, regrettably, that he is still under their influence.

By 1963, when Lyndon Johnson became President, it had become evident, not to a few but to many, that the automatic anti-Communism of the old foreign policy establishment, including the old Dulles group in the State Department and their allies in the Pentagon, was a formula for disaster. These men saw Communism as an all-embracing conspiracy reaching out to every corner of the world. Believing this they attributed any violent reaction to grievance anywhere in the world to the Communists. They dismissed contrary evidence as erroneous and contrary opinion as naïve. Since they viewed any spread of Communism as inimical to the American interest and believed that all disorder was caused by Communists, there was a powerful case for American intervention whenever there was insurrection anywhere in the world. By 1964, the danger of this view was widely accepted. It was the principal reason President Kennedy did not intend to

continue Dean Rusk as Secretary. It was the subject of the first conversation I had with Johnson as President—on the day after Kennedy's murder. That we were being victimized by this doctrine was taken for granted by Arthur Schlesinger, Richard Goodwin, Carl Kaysen, more cautiously by Averell Harriman, such Senators as Wayne Morse, Ernest Gruening and William Fulbright, and by numerous others. The problem was not the doctrine but how to deal with it in a bureaucracy and country that had been so dangerously oversold on the simplicities of the Cold War.

Lyndon Johnson bought both the advisers and the doctrine. He yields nothing in this book. In 1964 some American children in the Canal Zone raised the flag in front of the high school. Riots followed and the Panama government used the ensuing disorders for another try at revising the unequal treaty on the Canal. Rusk promptly identified the long arm of international Communism by way of Castro in the disorder. L.B.J. still does. "... irritation over the unfortunate flag incident was understandable. But the Panamanian students' reaction had served as a trigger to obviously well-planned anti-American demonstrations." Blame is on the Communists, not the ancient griev-

ance. After the military descent on the Dominican Republic in 1965, there was an unparalleled effort to identify the Communists who had led the insurgency and thus occasioned the action. It failed. As Theodore Draper and others have sufficiently established, the disciplined Communist cadres imagined by Washington simply did not exist. But they are back and powerfully in command in this book. (However, L.B.J. has had second thoughts about that story of Tap Bennett, the beleaguered Ambassador, telephoning from under the table while the bullets whistled overhead. It's been dropped and it was good too.)

But regarding Vietnam the doctrine of the omnipotent, centrally inspired, all-embracing Communist conspiracy gets its full play. It is central to a larger strategy of justification to which L.B.J., one senses, has given a good deal of thought. He has also had expert assistance. To those of us experienced in the dialectic it is evident that, recurrently, the voice is Jacob's voice but the hands are the hands of Esau—Esau being a pseudonym for Walt Whitman Rostow.

The first element of the justification consists in putting the Vietnam war firmly under the authority of John F. Kennedy. The opening paragraph of the third chapter begins:

As *Air Force One* carried us swiftly back to Washington after the tragedy in Dallas, I made a solemn private vow: I would devote every hour of every day during the remainder of John Kennedy's unfulfilled term to achieving the goals he had set. That meant seeing things through in Vietnam as well as coping with the many

other international and domestic problems he had faced. I made this promise not out of blind loyalty but because I was convinced that the broad lines of his policy, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, had been right. They were consistent with the goals the United States had been trying to accomplish in the world since 1945.

I had always thought that my Kennedy friends who have held that J.F.K. would never have done what Johnson did in Vietnam were being unfair: One cannot have the knowledge that allows one to compare what a dead man would have done with what a living one did. Johnson has now righted that wrong.

The next part of the justification consists in assuming the external inspiration for *everything* that has happened in Vietnam. It was all part of a larger Communist strategy. There is no civil war. The Viet Cong is scarcely mentioned. Nationalism is not a factor. The question that arises as to who guides the ultimate international strategy now that Moscow and Peking have fallen out is resolved, not too satisfactorily, by identifying international Communist aggression with Hanoi and not going back of that small capital. But the military ambition of international *cum* Hanoi Communism remains great. It extends to Malaysia, Thailand, and beyond—though no longer to the beaches of Hawaii. At the time of the Indonesian coup, General Suharto and his colleagues were encouraged to fight for their lives by the knowledge that we were in Saigon only a thousand miles or so away. So the defeat of Hanoi still has global implications. And were it not for outside

intervention South Vietnam would always have been as peaceful as a church social—with now, in addition, the democratic government we have helped to create. There has been speculation as to whether this history had to be rewritten in light of the Pentagon Papers. On this I have no opinion. But the chapter on how successfully we promoted free elections could have done with some updating.

The third element of the justification, the initial error of intervention having been covered by the need to abort the international conspiracy, is the protection of American lives. Some boys being there, more were always needed to give them help; bombing was always needed for their protection. The decisions to reinforce were always unanimous, a not surprising result since dissenters were first excluded and then encouraged to depart. George Ball was an exception. He gets some dubious praise here as a devil's advocate and a man who, however reluctantly, went along.

The final element in the justification was the continuing intransigence of Hanoi. Repeated overtures were made to them; their response was invariably negative. They were, in fact, impossible. Of the intransigence of Hanoi, Mr. Johnson is clearly persuaded. And he is almost persuasive. I confess that I never fully shared the belief of some of my friends that they would seize any excuse to rush to the conference table. But we were bombing them, as L.B.J. makes clear, to make the war costly to them—to make them see the greater wisdom of negotiating. The refusal of a small country to respond to peace overtures under such circumstances could be intransigence. More impartially viewed, it could be a refusal to be intimidated—to yield to force. Intransigence we deplore; refusal to knuckle under to force we understand and applaud. We understand it even better when we view Vietnam as one country and not two, and when we suppose, also, that the opposition sees itself as the custodian of national interest in opposition to the forces that once upheld the French and are now being upheld by the Americans. No more than our original need to intervene do these possibilities get debated in this volume.

The truth is that, like the effort itself, L.B.J.'s defense of his Vietnam policy is a misfortune. Partly it is so because the writing was guided by some of the same hands which guided the policy. Where Lyndon Johnson's own knowledge and instincts were decisive he was a good President. And he is good enough, as memoirists go, in telling about it. He was bad when he got into the hands of the Cold War strategists and still is.

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"I know! How about a 'mother and child'?"