

To Run or Not to Run?

'60 Doubts Recur in '64

This is the third of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"THE 1964 CAMPAIGN"

Throughout the period between the 1956 convention and the 1960 convention, when my name was placed in nomination, I was aware, and gratefully so, of the growing interest in me expressed by people who approved of the way I was handling my job in the Senate. But I never encouraged any effort to promote me as a Presidential candidate.

My position had not changed when the political campaign season of 1960 came around. I still had no enthusiasm for running. Once again Sam Rayburn tried to force me into the race.

My objections were consistently the same: I was satisfied with my job, and a Southerner could not, and probably should not, be elected.

Finally, the Speaker presented his argument this way: Even if I did not win, he thought I could run a better race against John Kennedy for the nomination than any of the other candidates, none of whom could command substantial Southern support. If a strong contest were not made, he said, it would look as if the Catholic bosses behind Kennedy were running the Democratic party. He went down the list—Carmine De Sapio in New York, David Lawrence in Pennsylvania, Michael DiSalle in Ohio, Richard Daley in Chicago, Pat Brown in California.



For the Democratic party to win, he said, we would have to show great diversified strength.

Mr. Rayburn was very much afraid of Richard Nixon's being elected. He believed Nixon had called him and President Truman traitors. Nixon always denied this. (Later Nixon showed me the words he had said that led to what he considered Mr. Rayburn's misunderstanding, and it seemed to me

See JOHNSON, A11, Col. 1



United Press International

With Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Mr. Johnson attends a dinner for John F. Kennedy Memorial Library supporters in New York in June, 1964.



Photo by Ceell Staughton

Campaigning in Pennsylvania in the summer of 1964, President Johnson reaches for voters' outstretched hands.



Pictorial Parade Photo

Barry Goldwater, 1964 GOP candidate, offered voters "a choice, not an echo."



Associated Press

John Kennedy congratulates his running mate at 1960 Democratic Convention.

JOHNSON, From A1

that he was being open and honest about it.) But the Speaker went to his grave believing that Nixon had impugned his patriotism, and he did not want Nixon to be President.

Shortly after that, on June 23, Philip Graham, publisher of The Washington Post, privately and personally made much the same argument for my candidacy. Graham strongly believed that a contest would be good for the party and, incidentally, for my leadership in the Senate. He offered to make a contribution to launch the race and to help me prepare the statement announcing that I would try for the nomination.

So only six days before the convention opened on July 11, in the auditorium of the new Senate Office Building in an open press conference, I reluctantly announced my candidacy for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency with a statement Graham helped me prepare. Once I was committed, I fought with all the energy I

possessed.

The night John Kennedy won the nomination, I sent him a telegram of congratulations.

The phone woke me about an hour after midnight. The caller was Speaker Rayburn. He told me he had heard that I was to be offered the Vice Presidential nomination, and he hoped that under no circumstances would I accept it. I thought it was most unlikely that I would be offered the nomination, but I assured him that I had no intention of accepting it if it were offered. I had not wanted the top spot on the ticket; the second spot appealed to me considerably less.

I went back to sleep. A few hours later the phone awakened me again. This time it was Jack Kennedy. He said he would like to come by and talk to me. I suggested that I come to see him instead, but he insisted that he would come to my room. He arrived about midmorning. He said he had given a lot of thought to putting together a ticket that could win the election. Adlai Stevenson's two defeats, he said, were very much on his mind. He had thought it over carefully and had concluded that he wanted me on the ticket with him. He told me frankly that he had also considered Senators Stuart Symington and Henry Jackson and Governor Orville Freeman of Minnesota, but that he did not believe any of them could assure support in the Southern states, which he thought was crucial. He was sure I would attract such support, so he was asking me to be his Vice Presidential running mate.

I thanked him for his frankness and his consideration of me, but I told him that I was interested only in being the party's Majority Leader in the Senate and in helping him to get a strong program enacted when he was elected. Anyway, I said, I had assured Speaker Rayburn that I would not take the second spot. Kennedy asked if I had any objection to his talking to Mr. Rayburn.

"No, of course not," I said.

He left then and went to Mr. Rayburn's room. Soon afterward the Speaker came to see me. He had a recommendation which astonished me. He said he thought that I should go on the ticket with Kennedy. I pointed out to him that only a few hours earlier he had told me under no circumstances should I do that. Now he was asking just the opposite. Why?

I remember his words very clearly. "Because," he said, "I'm a damn sight wiser man this morning than I was last night." Kennedy had persuaded him that without me on the ticket he could not carry the South, perhaps not even one Southern state. That would guarantee the election to the Republicans.

Bobby Kennedy came to my room later that morning. He said he thought I ought to know that Walter Reuther and Governor G. Mennen Williams of Michigan were both very upset that John Kennedy had decided to put a

Southerner on the ticket. I told Bobby that I appreciated his concern, but that his information did not greatly surprise me. Later Bobby talked to Mr. Rayburn and John Connally and told them he thought I should be made Democratic National Chairman. Mr. Rayburn—as he later reported it to me—asked him: "Who speaks for the Kennedys?" When Bobby replied that it was Jack Kennedy, Rayburn made it clear that Jack Kennedy was the only one he would listen to.

Phil Graham also urged me to take the Vice Presidential nomination. So did Jim Rowe, a friend of mine of long standing, who was knowledgeable about politics and the Washington scene.

Graham and Rowe visited my room together, where they learned of the exchange between Speaker Rayburn and Bobby Kennedy. Graham got in touch with Jack Kennedy. Following Graham's visit, Senator Kennedy called me on the phone and told me he was going to make a statement to the press that I was to be on the ticket with him. He asked me to make a similar announcement.

Four years later I was in the White House. But I had decidedly mixed feelings about whether I wanted to seek a four-year term there in my own right. On the one hand, I had a zest for the job, some very clear ideas about what should be accomplished, and confidence in my ability to work with the Congress in getting it done. On the other hand, I experienced a reluctance which must be viewed in the perspective of those days.

I discussed this matter with several people—Senator Dick Russell of Georgia, Walter Jenkins of my staff, friends

from home like Jesse Kellam and Judge A. W. Moursund, and of course Lady Bird.

This was the memo she gave me on May 14, written by hand on several sheets torn from a stenographer's notebook:

I. If you do get out

We will most probably return to the ranch to live.

1. In the course of the next few months—on until we are forgotten—we will be criticized and our motives questioned—"What skeletons in the closet"—what fear of what disclosures—caused you to make this decision? etc. etc.

This will be more painful.

2. There will be a wave of feeling, national this time and not largely statewide of—"You let us down"—keen, even bitter disappointment—similar to the wave of feeling after you accepted the Vice Presidency job with Kennedy.

This will be more painful.

3. You may live longer, and certainly you will have more time for the hill country you love, and for me and Lynda and Luci. And that we'll all love.

But Lynda and Luci will in a year or so cease to be permanent residents of our life—only available for occasional companionship.

4. You will have various ranch lands, small banking interests, and presumably the TV to use up your talents and your hours.

They are chicken-feed compared to what you are used to.

That may be relaxing for a while. I think it is not enough for you at 56. And I dread seeing you semi-idle, frustrated, looking back at what you left. I dread seeing you look at Mr. X running the country and thinking you could have done it better.

You may look around for a scape-goat. I do not want to be it.

You may drink too much — for

lack of a higher calling.

II. If you do *not* get out

You will most probably be elected President.

1. In the course of the campaign and in the ensuing years, you—and I—and the children—will certainly get criticized and cut up, for things we have done, or maybe partly-in-a-way have done — and for others that we never did at all.

That will be painful.

2. You are bound to make *some* bad decisions, be unable to achieve some high-vaulting ambitions, be disappointed at the inadequacies of some helpers—or perhaps of your own.

That will be painful even more.

3. You may die earlier than you would otherwise. Nobody can tell that — as the last six months show. . . .

My Conclusions

Stay in.

Realize it's going to be rough—but remember we worry much in advance about troubles that never happen!

Pace yourself, within the limits of your personality.

If you lose in November—it's all settled anyway!

If you win, let's do the best we can for 3 years and 3 or 4 months—and then, the Lord letting us live that long, announce in February or March 1968 that you are not a candidate for re-election.

You'll then be 59, and by the end of that term a mellow 60, and I believe the juices of life will be stilled enough to let you come home in relative peace and acceptance. (We may even have grandchildren.)

Your loving Wife

The burden of national unity rests heaviest on one man, the President. And I did not believe, any more than

I ever had, that the nation would unite indefinitely behind any Southerner. One reason the country could not rally behind a Southern President, I was convinced, was that the metropolitan press of the Eastern seaboard would never permit it. My experience in office had confirmed this reaction. I was not thinking just of the derisive articles about my style, my clothes, my manner, my accent, and my family—although I admit I received enough of that kind of treatment in my first few months as President to last a lifetime. I was also thinking of a more deep-seated and far-reaching attitude—a disdain for the South that seems to be woven into the fabric of Northern experience. This is a subject that deserves a more profound exploration than I can give it here—a subject that has never been sufficiently examined. Perhaps it all stems from the deep-rooted bitterness engendered by civil strife over a hundred years ago, for emotional clichés outlast all others and the Southern cliché is perhaps the most emotional of all. Perhaps someday new understanding will cause this bias to disappear from our national life, eventually. I hope so, but it is with us still. To my mind, these attitudes represent an automatic reflex, unconscious or deliberate, on the part of opinion molders of the North and East in the press and television.

I did not decide, fully and finally, until three o'clock on the afternoon of August 25, the day after the Democratic convention opened in Atlantic City. All the doubts that had been plaguing me for so long came to a head that morning. I knew all too well that time was running out and that an irrevocable decision would soon have to be made. I sat at my desk in the Oval Office and wrote out the following statement on a yellow pad:

44 months ago I was selected to be the Democratic Vice President. Because I felt I could best serve my country and my party, I left the Majority Leadership of the Senate to seek the Vice Presidential post, believing I could help unify the country and thus better serve it.

In the time given me, I did my best. On that fateful day last year I accepted the responsibilities of the Presidency, asking God's guidance and the help of all of the people. For nine months I've carried on as effectively as I could.

Our country faces grave dangers. These dangers must be faced and met by a united people under a leader they do not doubt.

After 33 years in political life most men acquire enemies, as ships accumulate barnacles. The times require leadership about which there is no doubt and a voice that men of all parties, sections and color can follow. I have learned after trying very

hard that I am not that voice or that leader.

Therefore, I shall carry forward with your help until the new President is sworn in next January and then go back home as I've wanted to since the day I took this job.

As soon as I had finished writing, I read the statement over the phone to George Reedy, my press secretary. His reaction was swift. Reedy said my decision had come too late and that my refusal to run would "just give the country to 'Goldwater.'" I replied that I would trust the democratic processes under which the country had been operating for two hundred years. I told him I would decide by three o'clock that afternoon about the statement—if, how, and when it should be released.

Later in the day I received a note from my wife responding to my request for her reaction to the proposed statement I had written out. Her answer read:

Beloved—

You are as brave a man as Harry Truman—or FDR—or Lincoln. You can go on to find some peace, some achievement amidst all the pain.

You may have been strong, patient, determined beyond any words of mine to express. I honor you for it. So does most of the country.

To step out now would be wrong for your country, and I can see nothing but a lonely wasteland for your future. Your friends would be frozen in embarrassed silence and your enemies jeering.

I am not afraid of Time or lies or losing money or defeat.

In the final analysis I can't carry any of the burdens you talked of—so I know it's only your choice. But

I know you are as brave as any of the thirty-five.

I love you always.

Bird

In a few words she hit me on two most sensitive and compelling points, telling me that what I planned to do would be wrong for my country and that it would show a lack of courage on my part. The message I read most clearly in her note to me was that my announcement to the 1964 convention that I would not run would be taking the easy way out. I decided finally that afternoon, after reversing my position of the morning and with a reluctance known to very few people, that I would accept my party's nomination.

Throughout this period, because I was keeping all my options open, I had to consider the question of the Vice Presidential candidate.

My relationship with Bobby Kennedy from the earliest hours of my Presidency—and before that, as far back as the 1960 campaign—had usually been cordial, though never overly warm. John Kennedy and I had achieved real friendship. I doubt his younger brother and I would have arrived at genuine friendship if we had worked together for a lifetime. Too much separated us—too much history, too many differences in temperament. But we had, I believe, a regard for each other's abilities.

There were reports that Adlai Stevenson was thinking of stepping down from the United Nations, and I suggested to Bobby that he might want to consider representing our country in that post should a vacancy occur.

Shortly after this conversation took place, Bobby decided to run for the Senate in New York against Kenneth Keating. He asked me to help him. I willingly did to the best of my ability. I campaigned for him in New York City and throughout the state, first and foremost because I wanted him to win. I thought he would make a good senator. But there was another important reason—the loyalty I felt to the memory of his brother. I had to disappoint a friend—Adlai Stevenson, who at that point had decided to seek the New York senatorial nomination himself. He abandoned the idea when I told him that I felt I must support Bobby. Stevenson was hurt, and my inability to encourage him constituted one of my deepest regrets about the New York campaign.

With the Cabinet officers eliminated from consideration, the list of Vice Presidential possibilities narrowed considerably. I had said that I would make my recommendation if and when I became the Presidential nominee. I gave the matter extremely careful

thought. Two men whom I looked upon as prospects were the Senators from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey had always been a strong contender, in my opinion, but I liked McCarthy and believed he should be considered. I was still reviewing various possibilities when I heard that Senator McCarthy intended to remove himself from consideration to support Humphrey. From the White House I placed a telephone call to McCarthy in Atlantic City. When I reached him, I asked him not to announce that he was taking himself out of the running immediately. But McCarthy said it was too late; he had already given the press the text of his telegram to me, announcing his decision. In the end, I concluded that Hubert Humphrey was the best choice in the light of all the circumstances.

Barry Goldwater and I both coming from the Southwest, had been friends in the Senate. After I had accepted the Vice Presidential nomination on the Democratic ticket in 1960, I received a letter from Goldwater confessing to a "numb feeling of despair." He wrote that he found it "incredible to try to understand how you are going to try to embrace the socialist platform of your party . . . You were intended for great things, but I don't think you are going to achieve them now . . ."

I replied that "all of us have to decide for ourselves what represents a 'socialist platform' . . . It was unlikely that Goldwater and I would ever agree on social issues. Our separate experiences had shaped political philosophies in substantial opposition to each other. This was the nature of the political difference—Goldwater was entirely correct when he called his candidacy a "choice" not just an "echo"—that the campaign of 1964 offered to the voters of America. Our differences came to light most clearly on the two overriding questions of peace and domestic reform.

Suddenly, all the old nit-picking arguments that separated our parties had been swept aside. We were now engaged in a colossal debate over the very principles of our system of government. Would we cast aside thirty years of progress and reform and return to the days of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, or would we strengthen and build on the programs of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John Kennedy? Goldwater allowed no middle ground, and I accepted that challenge.

Not only did the voters give the Democratic ticket the most extensive plurality in history but they also sent to the Congress the largest Democratic majority since 1936.

From the book, THE VANTAGE POINT. Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969, by Lyndon Baines Johnson, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright (c) 1971 by HEC Public Affairs Foundation.