

## Bearing witness to the presidency

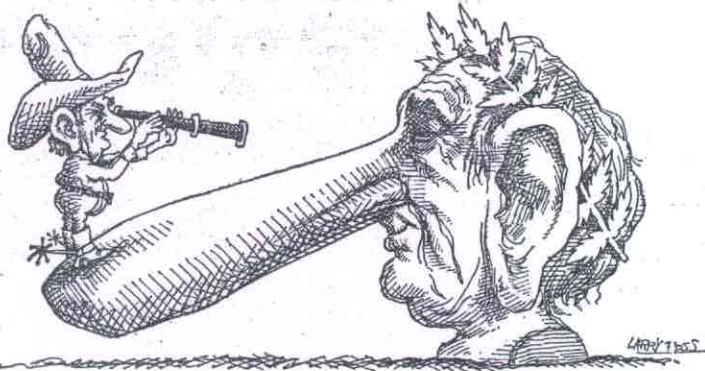
### The Vantage Point:

Perspectives of the Presidency,  
1963-1969

By Lyndon Baines Johnson.

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

Reviewed by RONNIE DUGGER



"Lyndon's book is wretched, completely repulsive." That is the only reference in an otherwise witty letter I have received from one of my otherwise wittiest correspondents. It is a useful review, not because it's only six words long, although that is certainly a virtue, but because it expresses the way many people, angry with the war and still sick of Johnson, feel: Book, just go away.

It will not. It is a primary document about recent events that continue to shape our private and public lives. As it was released, the newspapers were filled with the news of the Senate's rejection of the foreign aid bill as militaristic and spendthrift and Communist China's plans to take her seat in the United Nations, from which Taiwan has been expelled. These events, the rebellion against the postwar foreign aid program and the turning of the majority of the UN against the United States, were also a kind of review of Johnson's book. They are consequences of his Vietnam policy, which two-fifths of his book attempts to justify.

So anyone seriously interested in why we have been where we have been as a nation since World War II, and what we can do to change should read it, not because Johnson tells us these things, but because by reflecting on what he says we can a little better figure them out.

*The Vantage Point* is a partisan book, as Johnson fairly tells us. Damaging episodes are left out, areas of failure glossed over, political advantages omitted, to make the man's decisions seem more admirable. He has selectively revealed, to serve his own purposes, "secret" consultations, documents, and reports. (This is legal for presidential self-justification, but apparently, in the view of the present administration, illegal for others.) This is a former president's brief for himself and his associates, but he is fully entitled to have written it, and we should be glad that he has. The synoptic history of his years, and of the war, has yet to be written.

Nevertheless, Johnson's book has a large value and interest. He is telling us, with very significant exceptions, how he was thinking when he did what he did. Different parts will strike different readers as dubious or insincere; one wants to quibble now and again, and one runs across an occasional mind-boggler: that to him "consensus" meant getting done politically what needed to be done "regardless of the political implications," for instance; that in sending 23,000 troops to Santo Domingo, "We were not using force to impose a political solution"; that "Most politicians are men of principle dedicated to the national interest." But there will be no revival of the anger with his administration's well-earned "credibility gap." He does not close that gap, but in explaining himself with increased candor, he fills it in some. The book has many meanings because it tells of many things, so it is less interesting to generalize about it than to consider its meanings severally. The text is six parts foreign policy to four parts domestic, a measure of our increasingly intimate membership in the human family, and Johnson gives Vietnam three pages to every two for the rest of the world.

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A major cause of the Vietnam disaster and of the failure of the Alliance for Progress is the widespread view in Congress and the government—especially the Pentagon—that reform in distant nations is not our concern, but stopping communism with force is. Johnson agrees with this view. In one paragraph, he states his belief that "it was too much to expect young and undeveloped countries" like Vietnam "to create modern democratic institutions" while resisting guerrillas and organizing their economies, and that "the main objective at present was to help them resist those using force against them." With these statements, Johnson fixes the responsibility for the militarization of his foreign policy firmly upon his own convictions.

He recounts (as the Pentagon papers do, too, more fully) the evolution of the policy of tit-for-tat retaliation by bombardment in North Vietnam into "sustained reprisal," i.e., continuous bombing. He told the National Security Council (on July 27, 1965) that they had five choices: first, strategic (probably meaning nuclear) bombing; second, withdrawal; third, going on as is, losing; fourth, calling up the reserves, asking Congress for great sums of money, and going "on a war footing"; and fifth, "we can give our commanders in the field the men and supplies they say they need." He had decided on the fifth course.

This is the crux of his credibility problem. Courses four

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and five were both decisions to go to war, but they contained two principal alternatives—sudden escalation or gradual, and telling the people or not. He had decided on gradual escalation, and (as National Security Action Memorandum 328, in the Pentagon papers, shows as of April 6 that year) he had decided to deceive the people. His one attempt to justify this is a sentence quoting himself to the NSC in July: "I think we can get our people to support us without having to be too provocative and warlike."

The issues on the benign face of Johnson's book are really the same issues on the much more devious features of the Pentagon papers. Was not what Johnson calls "the use of force" a euphemism for violence, for war? Was the U.S. policy of "sustained reprisal" not a policy of aggression? Was going to war with troops in Vietnam necessary to our security?

Johnson writes of "the glory and agony" of the president's office, "the majestic view from his pinnacle of power." Addressing U.S. and South Vietnamese officials in 1966 in Honolulu (as per the Pentagon papers), he said of wanting to postpone crucial decisions, "I enjoy this agony." This turns my mind to a passage in Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore*:

Having myself lived through a couple of world wars and having read a certain amount of history, I am no longer disposed to take very seriously the professions of "war aims" that nations make. I think it is a serious deficiency on the part of historians and political writers that they so rarely interest themselves in biological and zoological phenomena.

Despite the attractive window-dressing of Walt Rostow's Asian theory and the idea of "world regionalism" as a stage toward one orderly world (a subject to which Johnson devotes a chapter), the frequency with which Johnson suspected reform movements abroad of being Reds-in-disguise is appalling. With its president taking that attitude, how could the United States array itself on the side of non-Communist and democratic reformers abroad? Such suspicions, Johnson tells us, underlay his military moves in Panama and the Dominican Republic. He "always believed" that if some of the principal militant Buddhists in Vietnam "were not actually pro-Communist, at least their movement had been deeply penetrated." He refers with hostility to "the radical Arab states," though he does not allege that they are Communist. But there is a steady drift of opposition to the serious non-Communist reformers abroad.

One of the justifications he claims in making his decisions on Vietnam is the rapprochement between Peking and Indonesia—an application of the domino theory. With equivocation characteristic of domestic McCarthyism, he says the forces that took over Indonesia in October 1965, "routed or destroyed the Communist organizers and forces who had tried to capture" the country. He says "we welcomed" news Indonesia had been saved from the Reds, "though we regretted the bloodshed involved," and again denies any U.S. complicity in the coup. But he does not specify or otherwise inform us about the attendant genocide of a reported 400,000 Indonesians, the village-to-village slaughter that was one of the great crimes of this century of mass crimes. Although his argument about Indonesia is guarded, at it has always been, one senses in it the anti-human cant of the thematic anti-communism and the exported McCarthyism of his administration.

The temptation to debate Vietnam endlessly is strong. Johnson enragingly misrepresents the content of the SEATO treaty. Here is General Taylor speaking of "when we must declare our intention to attack . . . in North Vietnam." There is not a word in Johnson's book about My Lai. But surely he understands that much of his argument is mirror-image propaganda, just as much of Hanoi's is. His theme is that he was completely right, but one knows from his tone and his sharing of the blame that this intelligent man has deep, concealed inner doubts, much as an intelligent bishop may have them, yet go on with his role in the church.

Johnson is understandably aggrieved that he has got little credit for his accomplishments elsewhere in foreign policy—the nuclear proliferation and outer space treaties, multilateralizing food relief for India, agreements with Russia on civil aviation, fishing, cultural exchanges, consular matters, somewhat increased East-West trade, and laying the basis for the

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strategic arms talks. He is not credited with these accomplishments, although he should be, because Vietnam tended to poison all of them. On the other hand, the Alliance for Progress, already falling under Kennedy, took to the hospital under Johnson, and it is difficult to wax ecstatic about Johnson's role in the arms talks when he also approved the beginning of the ABM program. He never attained moral leadership in the uncommitted world and lost many of our traditional allies. That fact cannot be papered over by self-congratulatory chapters, however justified, on the Russian-U.S. agreements and the U.S. role in the Six-Day War.

His discussion of his evolution on civil rights from a compromised Southern politician into a penitent moderate and then a passionate champion of the blacks is convincing and in some passages it is moving. As his constituency and his power became national, he writes, "I was aware of the need for change inside myself." Surely on this question the place in history to which he aspires is already set aside for him.

With candor, he accepts the now general observation that many of the domestic achievements of his years were a closing of the books on the New Deal's "old agenda"—Medicare, voting rights, the war on poverty, federal aid to education—and he writes that the trouble came from the new problems, especially in the cities, which were not on the old agenda. He contends, not unconvincingly, that his administration's programs were "the components of an urban strategy for modern America." Acknowledging the failure of government efforts to get private industry to provide adequate housing for Americans, he says that if the situation continues he agrees that the federal government will have to become "the nation's house of last resort."

In just one phrase, he makes the necessary admission about all the domestic nostrums that we have had. Explaining the riots in the cities, he writes of "the withering of hope, the failure to change the dismal conditions of life..." In the one cryptic phrase I have italicized (he does not say "our failure," although that pronoun would have been natural) he concedes his perception of how insufficient the government's reforms are to the continuing misery of life among the urban poor. Later on he expatiates about the cities' physical decay, their slums crowded with people untrained for jobs, the tax base shrinking because of the flight to the suburbs, congestion, crime—but we get from him no

substantial new suggestions.

He argues that Vietnam was not to blame for Congress's refusal to fund the rebuilding of the cities, because without Vietnam, Congress would just have cut taxes. His chapter on the space program suggests that he has not changed his sense of the impossibilities. Here we are again in the "dark void of space," with the astronauts as folk heroes, and Johnson still hoping "we will move out to other planets." He even contends that "space was the platform from which the social revolution of the 1960s was launched." To blast off his mixed metaphor, he should have added, "into space."

Apart from food for India and wheat for the Eastern nations, there is nothing in the book about foreign aid, and there is not a word about farm policy. There is nothing here, either, about Johnson's own fortune, or his arrangements during his presidency for its continued growth under the control of close friends. Neither is there anything about the sources of his campaign money in 1964, the lush relationships between government and business in military contracts, or stopping the pollution of politics by big money. For all the help Johnson gives us as a civics teacher in this book, one would think that the country's various foreign policies spring whole from the brow of a government innocent of any connection with business. We are told nothing about the trends toward overconcentration of economic power during his years and nothing about anti-trust activity (perhaps because there was so little of it).

Johnson takes credit for whatever good legislation the Congress passed when he was president. Most of the credit for some of these laws and part of it for most of them belongs to him, but laws are made by and in Congress, or so at least they used to teach at the schoolhouse, and Johnson remembers this when he wishes to explain why some program he was for did not come to pass.

*The Vantage Point* is Johnson's claim to historic greatness, and I cannot think of any argument for it he has left out. His purpose is less to educate than to convince, less to enlighten than to overwhelm. This is the Maximum Johnson book: If he is right he is great, and maybe history (whatever that is) will so decree. His subtle intelligence, his intuition of and functioning within complexity, is manifest throughout, especially in the chapter on his quitting in 1968. He did not let logical difficulties among reasons pushing him toward a course of action prevent him from letting every reason have its weight. His suscepti-



bility to strong feelings also shows here many times: sometimes his sentiment, sometimes his sentimentality, sometimes his idealism, cynicism, loyalty, or contempt.

He really knows how to hurt a guy. The most attention Bill Moyers gets is the full paragraph devoted to his arrival in Dallas after the assassination in a small chartered private plane to get to Johnson's side. The most attention Senator Fulbright gets is likewise devoted to two of his least persuasive moments. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. is among those omitted from Johnson's listing of Kennedy holdovers who "put their country and their government ahead of personal feelings" and is never even mentioned. Neither is Eric Goldman, Johnson's "intellectual-in-residence" for three years and author of the 531-page tome entitled *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*.

Johnson's treatment of his vice president also seems designed to hurt. Humphrey is mentioned only perfunctorily through the first two-thirds of the book—in effect he is left out of the circle of "my principal advisers"—but Johnson makes sure we know that Humphrey told him he "hoped to God" that Johnson wouldn't step down as president and that Johnson thinks Humphrey's statement as a candidate that he would stop the bombing if elected helped cause Saigon's balking at the peace talks.

The chapters vary in seriousness, intelligence, and style. Some are detailed, others are illuminated by informative connections, others are banal. Probably there were too many ghost writers. With much of the research done in 1968-69 by federal agencies and much of the writing done by a shifting collective, the book is uneven, but at least it is plain that Johnson has spoken, written, or worked over each page carefully. His voice, personality, and personal purposes are evident throughout, and there are a fair number of the bursts of candor he is given to personally and when speaking extemporaneously.

The prose is dogged, sometimes bombastic, yet much more concise than his political speeches. But it is afflicted with crisis rhetoric. As a social sci-

entist recently indicated somewhere, our presidents have been bouncing us from one crisis to the next one at such a rate, we should begin to wonder if anything is merely a serious problem any more. The invocation of follow-the-leader instincts by the declaration of serial crises has become increasingly characteristic of the presidency as its power has grown gargantuan. The problem endangers not only the government's credibility but the people's calm; it is assumed that the people have no interest in the voice of reason.

The word "crisis" is not misused when talking about the Congress's refusal to reform almost anything in the early Sixties, India's 1965-67 food shortage, the Six-Day War, the collapsing cities. But Johnson also numbers among his "crises" the situation after Kennedy's assassination, the fact that more than half of a session's appropriations bills remained unpassed, the opposition to selling wheat to Communist nations, the situation in American education, NATO's financial difficulties, a renewal of tariff agreements, the balance of payments deficit, "the sterling crisis," "the gold crisis." These were important problems, but the point is how the president saw them: "My administration was never without at least one crisis," he tells us. In the spring of '67, "I seemed to wake up almost every morning with a new crisis staring me in the face." Again, "crises came to the president 'unbidden, and in legions.'" Such a state of mind can make a crisis out of what need not become one for this country. The alleged attacks on the USS *Maddox*, the revolution in the Dominican Republic, and the capture of the *Pueblo* come to mind.

We get so bogged down in mere national events that we do not have much time to think about the hundreds of millions of personal crises in the lives of people we are neglecting, hating, or bombing. At the same time we do not want our president to become any more harried and ragged of spirit than he can help. Johnson writes that when the presidency passed from him, he was glad, for it ran through his mind then that he would no longer have to make decisions that might start a world conflagration—"the nightmare of my having to be the man who pressed the button to start World War III was passing."

One hopes that Johnson will continue to contribute to dialogues about the national situation. And this book, his fullest say, deserves our attention. Perhaps some heaviness is cleared out of the air now and we can go on to the next phase of our history. □