

## 'The Vantage Point'

# Through a Texas Window, Reflections on the Presidency

By Chester L. Cooper

ACCORDING TO the best available authority on the matter, President Lyndon Johnson does not actually arrive at a decision "until he publicly announces that decision and acts upon it." And so when, at long last, and after what may have been one of the longest volleys of a manuscript between

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author and publisher in recent history, Mr. Johnson agreed to let the presses roll, we can confidently assume that the rumors of the past few years have been correct: Lyndon Baines Johnson has decided to publish his memoirs.

The patient Messrs. Holt, Rinehart and Winston must have had mixed feelings, comprised equally of relief and concern, about the timing of Mr. Johnson's decision. Between last winter, the originally contemplated date, and this autumn, when the memoirs were finally made available, another publication appeared which cheated both author and publisher out of what otherwise would have been some of the juiciest tidbits in "The Vantage Point." According to the trade gossip, Mr. Johnson and his staff were either too weary or too distraught by late spring to go through the manuscript yet once again in order to accommodate the revelations of The Pentagon Papers. If so, this was unfortunate. From the reader's "vantage point," which has been expanded recently through the courtesy of Daniel Ellsberg, one more critical massaging of the Johnson text would have served both the book and the author well. Although the "newsbreaks" which Ellsberg had snatched away could not have been retrieved, "The Vantage Point" could have been more useful for all readers groping for a fuller understanding of the American experience in Vietnam and of President Johnson himself.

A President's urge to tell his side of the story must be overwhelming and it is no wonder that our chief executives, if their lives outlast their terms, have a burning desire to "put the record straight." Harry Truman, in a characteristically direct way, sets much the same tone as Lyndon Johnson in the preface to his own "Memoirs": "The events, as I saw them and as I put them down here, I hope may prove helpful in informing some people and in setting others straight on the facts." And Dwight Eisenhower, in his preface to "The White House Years" writes "This . . . is an account of my presidential years as I see them . . ." Johnson, even more than Truman, and much more than Eisenhower, must have felt an urgent need to reach out to the American people once he was free from the constraints of his office. He is frank to note in his preface, "I have not written these chapters to say 'This

is how it was,' but to say 'This is how I saw it from my vantage point.'" "The Vantage Point" is thus Johnson's side of the complex story of what happened in and to America from the moment of nightmare in November 1963 when Kenneth O'Donnell said "He's gone," to the moment of solemnity in January 1969 when Richard Nixon intoned, "So help me, God."

The early months of planning how to tell this story must have been difficult for the author and the staff of writers that accompanied him from Washington to Austin. What emerged is an intricately developed structure which bridges the presidential campaigns of 1960 and 1968 and which relies on major developments with respect to Vietnam for its intervening chronological flow. Inserted here and there in the text are chapters dealing with other foreign problems and with domestic issues. The result is a separate, pigeonholed complication of issues rather than an integrated, related whole. Perhaps this is a consequence of drafting on a committee basis.

One suspects that each of the folk to whom Mr. Johnson, in his preface, indicates he is "particularly indebted" set to work on assigned chapters (old Washington hands could probably make an accurate guess as to who drafted what). Whether this was the case or not, the full-bodied, vintage Johnson comes through only in an occasional expression of outrage at unresponsive and irresponsible legislators, "the media," and, of course, the public dissenters and leakers within his official family.

Mr. Johnson's canvas is largely painted in pastels. There are few heroes (Dean Rusk is one that stands straight and tall) and no villains. Indeed, with the exception of Rusk, McNamara and Abe Fortas, most of President Johnson's associates — cabinet members and White House staff members — are gray and faceless errand boys who glide in and out of the story. Perhaps that is how he actually "saw" them. We are told little or nothing about Johnson's well publicized feuds with U Thant, Lester Pearson, Harold Wilson, Bill Fulbright or Gene McCarthy.

The themes selected for dominant treatment are obvious and understandable. Johnson, rightly, felt that his record on domestic legislation was slighted by a hostile press and an ungrateful public; about a third of "The Vantage Point," four well-written lively chapters and bits of others, are devoted to this subject. The problem of his re-

lations with the Kennedys' clearly troubled Johnson; a great deal of space with some interesting new material (see, for example, the record of his meeting with Bobby Kennedy on April 3 two months before the assassination) is devoted to convincing the current reader and the future historian that he and Jack regarded each other with mutual affection and that he and Bobby respected each other even though the relationship was not always cordial. Finally there was Vietnam — the issue which Johnson felt was most misunderstood; almost half the book deals with Vietnam; which, despite Johnson's protestations to the contrary, tells us something about his priorities.

Never in history, surely, has so much secret official material been made publicly available on a sensitive current problem as the American people now have at hand on Vietnam. Added to what the Pentagon Papers have divulged are many hitherto unpublished documents and informal memoranda that the President has incorporated in "The Vantage Point." One thing, at least seems clear after examining the two massive publications: neither, in itself, tells the full story; together they give us what surely must be enough to satisfy the normal intellectual appetite. The Pentagon Papers was weakest in terms of source material regarding White House and National Security Council decisions. With the exception of a few of McGeorge Bundy's papers which had found their way into Secretary McNamara's or John McNaughton's files, the Vietnam historians had no access to many of the key documents passed around the oval office, the cabinet room, or the White House basement. Since they were proscribed from interviewing any of the "principals," they had little opportunity to flesh out the gaps. To some extent, Mr. Johnson has filled the gaps, although obviously, we are not likely to know of material he, himself, set aside as still being too sensitive or controversial. What emerges from Lyndon Johnson's book is a thesis that is 180 degrees different from that reached by many after exposure to the Pentagon Papers: it is that American people were not misled by the Johnson administration; America's progressive escalation of the Vietnamese war was necessary and prudent.

It is no surprise that Lyndon Johnson maintains his conviction that every decision made on Vietnam was a wise one, reached only after careful thought, pondering all the evidence and consulting all available, knowledgeable advisers. There are apparently few

things he would have done differently, although two passages reveal some haunting and gnawing afterthoughts: The 1968 Tet offensive obviously left its mark and he wonders whether he should not have leveled with the American people. He feels he "made a mistake by not saying more about Vietnam" in the State of the Union report in January 1968. In a moving paragraph toward the close of the book, he broods about some of his decisions, particularly those involving American troop deployments and bombing.

Mr. Johnson did have doubts, of course. His sharp questioning of General Wheeler, who was arguing Westmoreland's case for substantial troop reinforcements in late February 1968, are revealing of a new Johnson state of mind. (In the end, only a few thousand reinforcements were sent, the first time Johnson refused a Westmoreland request). But he might have become more skeptical somewhat earlier in the process if he had been more hospitable to serious and constructive subordinates who had deep reservations about the course of American policy. There were many who, by 1966, hesitated to raise critical views for fear of Johnson's wrath or drawing down their "political capital" in the White House.

Johnson tells about how George Ball took issue with the majority view expressed in the cabinet room during the fateful week in late July 1965 when major American deployments were being discussed: "We discussed Ball's approach for a long time and in great detail . . . I felt the under secretary had not produced a sufficiently convincing case or a viable alternative." Although Mr. Johnson saw Ball as a 'devil's advocate,' the under secretary of state had genuine, serious doubts about the course of the administration's policy and to some sitting along the wall of the cabinet room that afternoon, it seemed that Ball was getting a polite *pro forma* hearing and that the arguments he

was advancing against sending another 75,000 troops to Vietnam to reinforce the 75,000 already there were ineffectually bouncing off a decision that had already been made.

Buried in Johnson's discussion of his July 1965 decision is a paragraph that gives us a new insight into Clark Clifford. This was the period when Clifford (together with Abe Fortas) was starching up the President's determination to escalate. Hear this: " . . . At this session . . . Clark Clifford was in a reflective and pessimistic mood. 'I don't believe we can win in South Vietnam' he said. 'If we send in 100,000 more men, the North Vietnamese will meet us. If North Vietnam runs out of men, the Chinese will send in volunteers . . . ' He urged that in the coming months we quietly probe possibilities with other countries for some way to get out honorably. 'I can't see anything but catastrophe for my country'."

Clifford, who was then chairman of the President's Advisory Committee in Intelligence, may have been influenced at the time by analyses emerging from the intelligence community, particularly the elaborately developed, carefully prepared and widely coordinated National Intelligence Estimates. As we have learned from the Pentagon Papers, the CIA, especially, was consistently bearish



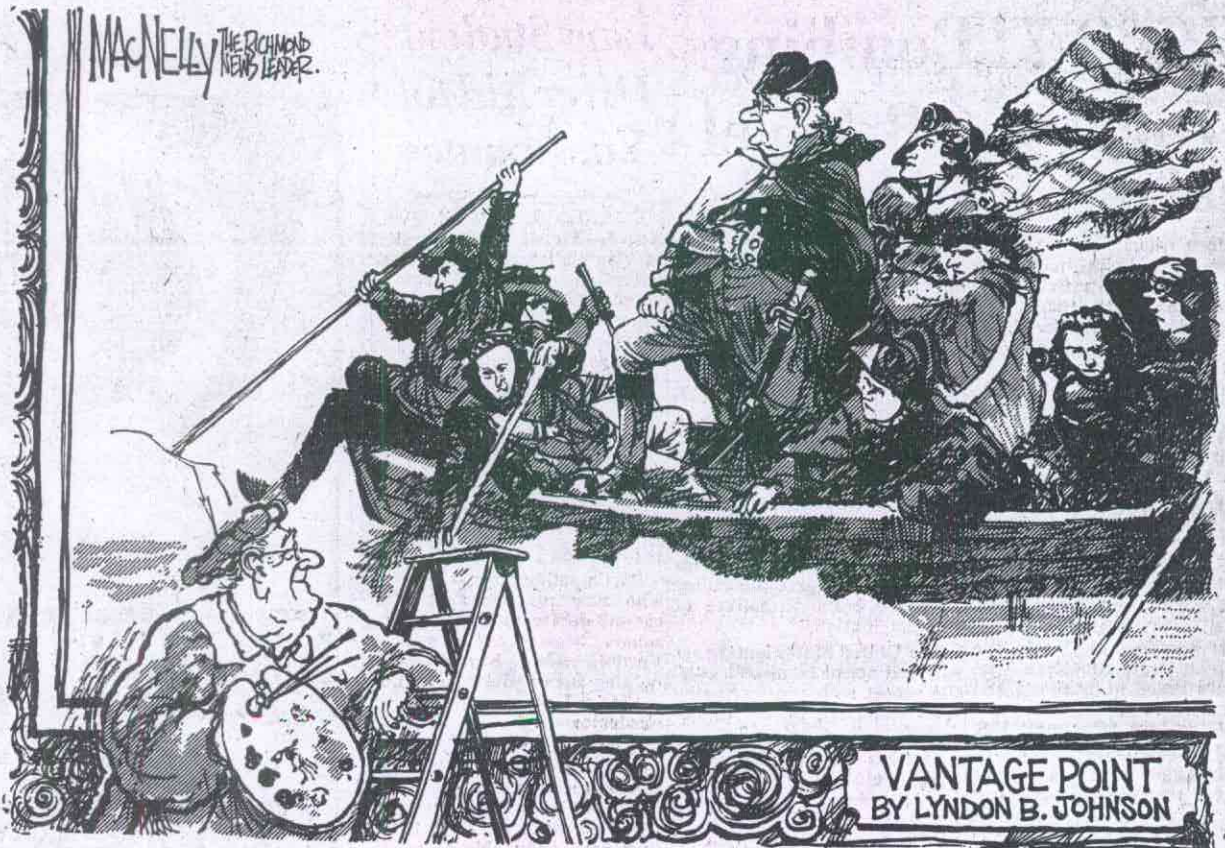
Wright in the Miami News.

(and, as it turned out, consistently right) on the validity of the "domino theory," the ability and readiness of the Communists to deal with American troop reinforcements and the utility of bombing North Vietnam. If these reports were made available to the President, there is no evidence of it in Mr. Johnson's book. He notes that "the information I received (on Vietnam) was more complete and balanced than anyone outside the mainstream of official reporting could possibly realize." But when he was agonizing about his post-Tet policy, he became aware that "staff officers from the State and Defense Departments and the CIA had given (his panel of "wise men") a fairly gloomy assessment. . . . I was bothered because that assessment did not square with the situation as I understood it. . . . I think the explanation was in part that the briefers . . . had used outdated information." Another explanation might be that the President had not always been given (or if given, he had not read, or if he had read, he had not hoisted in) the lugubrious as well as the more hopeful reports on the situation in both Vietnams.

The chapter dealing with Tet and the decisions of February and March 1968 (Chapter 17) provides valuable new material on the evolution of the final decision to switch to the negotiations track. There is great drama here and it is presented with skill and sensitivity. Dean Rusk, thus far an enigmatic figure, comes off bright and shining. In Mr. Johnson's book he is the hero of the piece, with Clark Clifford and the Pentagon staff playing the second lead. Clearly, the Pentagon Papers, the long and detailed New York Times piece and the various other accounts of what transpired during the late winter of 1968, (including my own account in "The Lost Crusade"), have barely scratched the surface. There is an obvious lesson here for all of us: Second-hand reports and partial information can prove to be very misleading.

Those of us who have found ourselves personally and emotionally involved in Vietnam during the period Mr. Johnson covers may, from another, lower vantage point, have seen the problem or parts of it very differently. How seriously, *really* seriously we conducted the "peace probes" is an obvious case in point. To what extent did international and domestic public relations dominate the timing and style of the quest to the detriment of the objective we sought? To what extent did Johnson's Byzantine-like mode of making major decisions prosecuting the war and seeking a negotiated solution make it virtually impossible for responsible officials to pursue either course effectively? Why was it that the administration became increasingly isolated from and increasingly besieged by the American public and the Congress? Why did not the President ask for a declaration of war so that the country could have frankly faced the impact of the Vietnam venture? Why did he not establish more effective government institutions to manage the unique military and civilian programs we had set in motion in Vietnam?

Perhaps this is carping. Lyndon Johnson told the story as he "saw it" and as he wanted us to see it. Like all men, he had occasional moments when he lacked clear focus and peripheral vision.



MacNelly in the Richmond News Leader.