

THE GHOSTS THAT HAUNTED LBJ

The true story of his decision to withdraw

BY DREW PEARSON

LYNDON JOHNSON LOVED THE White House, and it was a big wrench for him to decide to leave it. Late at night when he couldn't sleep, he would pad around in his pajamas and his bare feet, seeing the ghosts of other Presidents, a long succession of men who had sat in those rooms, making decisions, molding American history.

He could see Lincoln bending over the telegraph key that brought him the discouraging news of the Civil War—battles lost, men killed, sections of the nation turning against him. He could see FDR, with his green eyeshade, reading reports of men unemployed, Works Progress projects started. The President had lived through those days as Youth Administrator in Texas. And he could see Harry Truman on the back porch that the Missourian had ordered built—despite a storm of architectural criticism—facing the south lawn and the fountain where Caroline Kennedy later kept her Easter ducks. Beyond the fountain in the moonlight was the clean, straight shaft of the Washington Monument, a tribute to a President who was more reviled than almost any other President. People today have forgotten the criticism of Washington, just as they have forgotten how Truman was excoriated. Lyndon John-

son wondered if they would forget the criticism of him.

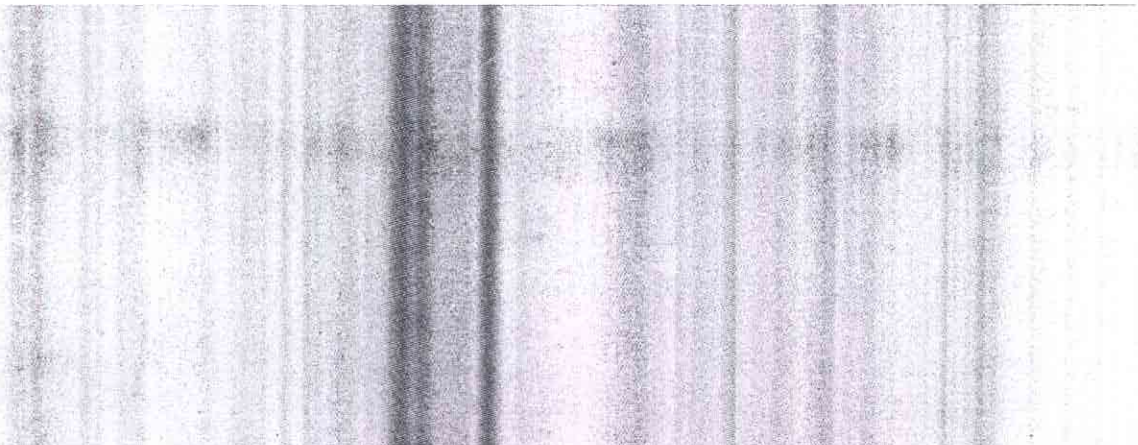
He looked out at the fence around the south lawn. Six men had scaled its iron paling last year, bent on killing him, and 12,000 letters had been sent him threatening his life. "What's the use of being President," he had once confided, "when the country is divided, when you have war in the streets, when white men are against black men, when the Congress won't pass a tax bill, when the dollar is in jeopardy, and when the press distorts everything you do?"

"I think I could get renominated. I think I could get reelected. But the stockholders are dissatisfied. Perhaps we need a new President."

He had tried. He had been the first Southern President in about a half century, yet he had passed more civil rights bills than any man in history, dating back to the days when he was a senator from Texas. He had appointed the first Negro to the Cabinet, the first Negro to the Supreme Court, a Negro as mayor of Washington. He had gotten through the biggest educational budget in history, an antipoverty program, housing projects for the big cities, medical care for the elderly, after three Presidents before him had failed. He had tried
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hard. Yet out there in the moonlight was the iron fence over which six men had climbed, bent on killing him.

One of the ghosts he could see was Woodrow Wilson, thin and pale, in his wheelchair, crippled from a stroke. That ghost was one of the first factors influencing the big decision.

"I could see myself as another Woodrow Wilson," he had mused. "It would not be fair to the country.

"When you've had a heart attack as I did, when you've been down in the valley of the shadow of death, you have to think carefully about these things. I came out of that heart attack not remembering anything. It was like when you have cataracts and a film passes over your eyes.

"My grandmother had a stroke when she was sixty and had to spend her life in a wheelchair. I remember her, as a little boy—that wheelchair and my grandmother. My father had a stroke at sixty, and my uncle had one at fifty-eight. God has been good to me. I have made a remarkable recovery from the heart attack. But these are things you have to consider when you are President, and Lady Bird and I began to consider them as early as 1964. 'We'll count every day,' said Lady Bird, and she began counting the days until the end of 1968."

EVEN THOUGH Lady Bird had been counting, the President had not entirely made up his mind. He was one of the most headstrong, determined, dedicated, dominating Presidents ever to occupy the White House. He had an amazing knowledge of Government, almost every detail of every bureau. He loved his job. He loved the White House. Yet he finally withdrew. Why?

For many months, he had talked with his closest friends about bowing out at the end of 1968, but no one ever took him seriously. He would tell the Vice President: "I may not run again. You'd better get out around the country so people will know who you are."

Then, when Humphrey took his advice, LBJ would sometimes call long distance to ask: "Where the devil have you been?"

"I've been taking your advice and getting out around the country."

"You'd better get back and stick to your job here at home!" The President had changed his mind.

During 1967, however, Lyndon Johnson more frequently discussed the idea of not running again—with his old friend, Gov. John Connally of Texas, with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Justice Abe Fortas, Clark Clifford, Marvin Watson, George Christian and Gen. William Westmoreland.

This was why McNamara took the World Bank presidency when he did. He suspected the President would not be around after 1968. Washington rumormongers inspired news stories that Johnson had fired McNamara, and McNamara couldn't answer without giving away the possibility that LBJ might not run again.

Last November, the President even wrote out a statement of withdrawal and carried it around in his pocket, showing it to a few close friends. After he returned from the memorial service for Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt and the subsequent trip around the world, Horace Busby, the President's former assistant, prepared a special memorandum for him, agreeing that the State of the Union message should be the occasion for his announcement, but warning that the President would erode his power with Congress after the announcement, just as Eisenhower had lost his influence after the 1958 Republican congressional setback.

"I have this doubt," Busby stated. "In 1958, you had to go to the UN, to keep the world from regarding Eisenhower as a lame-duck, impotent President. It is possible that making yourself a 'lame duck' might have unforeseeably serious consequences abroad without offsetting gains at home."

Busby then affixed this postscript: "But in 1958, Eisenhower's Party had suffered a severe defeat and was reduced to minority status in Congress."

It was tentatively decided that the President would announce his decision toward the end of his State of the Union message on January 17. Governor Connally was especially interested, and on January 16, telephoned the White House to see if the President had changed his mind. Johnson did not call back. The die appeared to be cast.

The statement the President planned to insert into his State of the Union message read:

"Under our system, ordained and established nearly 200 years ago, the one office which is the office of all the people is the office which it is my responsibility to hold. Among all the governments of man, no trust is greater—none so awesome—as the trust which rests here and here alone.

"It is a trust which no man who occupies this office can ever regard as merely his own. Concern for self, concern for party, concern for petty and passing matters must never—and I pray shall never—move any man in his faithful and unfearing discharge of the duties of that great trust.

"This year the Constitution and the calendar decree that the people shall decide who is to occupy this office for the next four years. All the world is watching and listening and waiting. Among our friends—as among our foes—there will be those eager to discern in our decision a direction favorable—or unfavorable—to them. As at other times in our history, I believe it is now imperative for the world to understand that the decision of the American people in their elections is their decision alone.

"It must be clear that the policies to which the United States is committed—the policies which the American people have supported under successive Administrations—are policies above partisanship.

"It must be clear that the office of the Presidency—the office of all the people—is itself an Office and a Trust above partisanship.

"It must be clear that to the Office of the Presidency there is only one key and that key is in the hands of the American people only.

"For the imperative and urgent tasks immediately before us, in the quest for peace, in the defense of freedom, in the pursuit of international stability, in the unending and unrelenting efforts for justice and opportunity here at home, the strength and effectiveness of this Office must in no way be diluted or distracted by partisan concerns.

"Believing this as I do—and as I have for all the years I have served the public trust in the Nation's Capital—it is my conclusion and my abiding conviction now that I should not involve the Office of the Presidency in the partisanship of this political year. Accordingly, I shall not seek—and will not accept—the nomination of my party for another term as your President."

THE PRESIDENT studied the statement. He half-memorized it so that he could say it without giving it to the teleprompter typist, in order to prevent a leak before the State of the Union message was delivered. He gave it to Lady Bird, and she tinkered with it, putting brackets around one or two words that she thought might be changed. She went to the beauty parlor and then to the Capitol ahead of her husband to be with the Senate wives.

Governor Connally called that morning to tell the President to go ahead. "You'll never have a better forum," he said.

The State of the Union message went off on schedule. There was a reasonable amount of applause from the Democrats, almost none from the Republicans.

"When I got to the right place in the message," the President later told Vice President Humphrey, "I reached into my pocket to get

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Lynda Bird talked about Chuck "as if he was never coming back."

the excerpt, and found it wasn't there. I had given it to Lady Bird before she went off to the beauty parlor. When I got back home, I raised Cain with Lady Bird.

"What the dickens did you do with that message?" I asked her. Then we went into the bedroom and found it by my telephone. I don't know how it got there. I guess I must have put it there myself."

Actually, the President was not too irked with Lady Bird. For he was still torn, still doubtful of the time and place to announce his big decision. He was fairly sure he was going to make it. But if he made it early, at the very start of Congress, his legislation would suffer. As a Senator, he had learned that a President quickly lost his power once he became a lame duck. LBJ didn't want to lose power; he had too much legislation to pass—including a landmark open-housing clause in the Civil Rights Bill. He revised his scheduling for the announcement of the big decision.

Shortly after the State of the Union message, the international front erupted. First, there was the North Korean capture of the U.S.S. *Pueblo*; then, the Tet offensive—a crushing blow to the President. He could not believe the advice of his military men that there was nothing under the sun they could do to retrieve the ship without either killing the crew or precipitating another war—perhaps a world war. Then came the raid on gold and the weakening of the dollar.

The President would not announce his retirement under fire. He waited.

But as he waited, the country became more divided. Sen. Eugene McCarthy used the war to win what amounted to victory in the New Hampshire primary. Robert Kennedy threw his hat into the ring with a blast against the war, and followed it with the opinion that the Administration was responsible for draft-card burning and narcotic addiction among American youth. The President dug out the speech Kennedy had delivered at a New York fund-raising dinner only last June, in which he had extolled Lyndon Johnson as fitting Webster's definition of greatness. He read over that speech. He remembered how he had toured New York State for the Senator when Kennedy faced a very difficult election race against Sen. Kenneth Keating; how he had kept Kennedy on as Attorney General; how he had tried to help him get his mind off his dead brother. More ghosts haunted Johnson.

The fact remained: Kennedy's injection of the war and himself into the Presidential race were increasing division and bitterness in the nation, and at a time when there was so much to do: so many bills to pass, so much rebuilding necessary.

The President decided to emulate his old mentor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and deliver a fireside chat on peace. He had two recommendations before him—one from the new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, to stop bombing all of North Vietnam except for the southern triangle through which men and supplies were pouring south; the other from UN Ambassador Arthur Goldberg that he stop bombing altogether. He decided to accept one of them and appeal to Ho Chi Minh for peace. This, he hoped, would pull the country together.

And, in order to remove himself as a political issue, he figured that the moment might have come to announce his decision. It might impress Ho Chi Minh that now was the time to talk.

The final clincher came at 6:30 a.m. on Sunday morning, March

31, when Lynda Bird arrived from the West Coast.

It is no secret that the President is fond of his daughters. "I got to talking to my daughters," he confided to a friend. "They're fine girls, married to fine boys. Pat Nugent had been down in Austin trying to get into the war, but his outfit wasn't going to be called, and he finally came back here to his old outfit near Washington. Chuck Robb has been in the Marine Corps about seven years. He could be mustered out any time. He kept trying to go to Vietnam. He didn't have to go, but he maneuvered around trying to get there.

"Finally, he succeeded, and Lynda Bird went out to the West Coast to see him off. She got to the airport ahead of him because he chose to go with his men by bus. It took them an hour.

"She waited for him. Then the television cameras came in, trying to take pictures of them. They trampled one lady with a small child and pushed some children out of the way. You know how some photographers are. Television cameramen can be even rougher. And if you belong to a network, you think you own the world.

"It got so that nobody could say good-bye, and Chuck and Lynda couldn't say anything to each other. Finally, he went into the plane thirty minutes early and sat down so the TV cameramen would let the other people alone.

"The next morning, Lynda Bird was due to come back at about 6:30. She flew the Red Eye Special all night. Lady Bird and I decided that we wanted to meet her. We didn't want her coming into the White House all alone. So we left word with the Secret Service to notify us thirty minutes in advance. We were awake and lying in bed before the Secret Service called. I pulled a pair of britches over my pajamas, and we went out to the South Gate to meet her.

"She was pale as a ghost. She talked to me about what a fine boy Chuck was, in the past tense, as if he was never coming back. And she said, 'Daddy, I want to ask you a question. Why do we have to fight over there when so many people are opposed to the war? Why do we have to send 200 boys over there in Chuck's company when there's so much opposition here at home to the war?'"

THE PRESIDENT announced his decision to withdraw at 9:40 p.m. that night. For some time, the President had set the ending of the war as his No. 1 goal. More recently, he had become convinced that if he were a candidate for reelection, he couldn't achieve that goal. Much as he loved the White House, much as he loved his work, he had become too controversial, too bitterly criticized. His motives were too suspect. So he decided to put everything he had—his future in politics, his whole stack—on one big gamble for peace.

Something of this came out in a call he paid on Vice President Humphrey that Sunday morning. He telephoned the Vice President to say that he wanted to drop by the Humphrey apartment and see him on the way to church. Mr. Humphrey was due to leave by jet for Mexico City at noon to sign Protocol II of the Treaty of Tlatelolco, dealing with nuclear nonproliferation. But not even the Vice President declines to see the President.

President Johnson arrived at the Humphrey apartment in Southwest Washington. Accompanying him were the Nugents and James Jones, one of his secretaries.

The two men met privately in a side room. The President asked Humphrey to read over the text of the fireside talk he was giving to the American people that night. He had prepared two conclusions for the speech.

"Read this one first," he said.

"It's a great peroration for peace," the Vice President commented after reading it. "Nobody would say you are not absolutely sincere in your determination to achieve peace."

"Read the other," said the President.
"He fumbled around in his pocket," the Vice President said later. "You know how he is. He pulls up his pants, reaches into his pockets. He's a walking file cabinet, with papers you'd never expect anyone to carry around with him. He can even hand papers to the Director of the Budget when he can't find them. He pulled out the second conclusion of the speech. I read it, and I confess that tears came to my eyes."

The President then told how he thought Lady Bird had gone off to the beauty parlor with the excerpt announcing his retirement.

"You can't do this," said the Vice President.

"But if I don't do it, they won't take this peace proposal seriously. They won't believe that I mean it."

The Vice President argued that they would. He pleaded with the President to change his mind, to run again. He knew that despite the opposition of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, despite the opposition of Sen. Eugene McCarthy, the President could easily get the nomination. But the President was adamant.

"No, they won't believe it worth a damn," he said, and there were tears in his eyes. "The time is getting short," the President said. "We've got to get peace in Vietnam. And I think with me bowing out, the other side is more likely to negotiate."

"There's another thing," he added. "I'm tired. I'm getting old. All the men in my family have a record of not living much over the age of 60. I'll be 60 this summer. I've had a heart attack. My health is pretty good. I think my chart is as good as yours. But I'm not sure I could live out another term. And that's not the way I want to end my life."

"Maybe you're right, Mr. President," Humphrey finally conceded.

"When I do this, I've got to play it straight," the President said.

"I can't come out for any favorite to succeed me. People would say I was just putting across my man. But I want you to know you've been a great Vice President. I was a B-1 Vice President. You've been a Triple A-plus Vice President."

The Vice President had a hard time expressing himself. He mumbled something to the effect that Johnson would go down in history as one of the greatest Presidents. The President got up, went into the next room, and kissed Mrs. Humphrey. He hugged her affectionately. Then he turned toward her husband and put his finger to his lips in a parting command to say nothing.

"What's the matter with the President?" Mrs. Humphrey asked her husband after Johnson left.

"Nothing," said Humphrey. "He's got an important speech to deliver tonight."

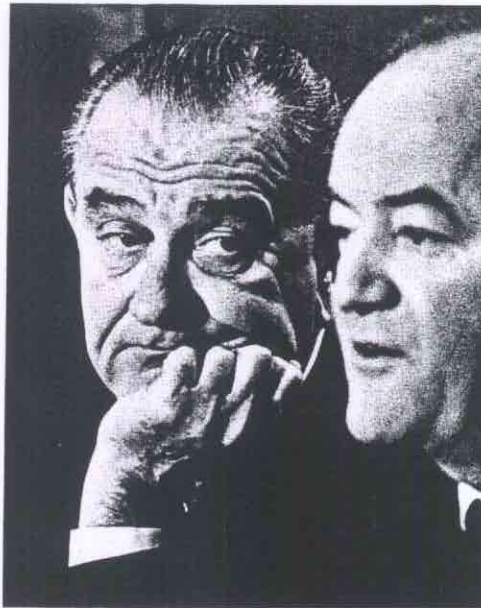
"There's something wrong with him," said Muriel Humphrey. "The way he held me, I'm sure there's something wrong."

Back at the White House, the President oscillated between Horace Busby in the Treaty Room, the residence part of the White House, and his staff in the West Wing.

LBJ rather enjoyed the suspense. He had made up his mind. There only remained the exact wording and the timing. But he loves drama, and he enjoyed that last day before the world knew that he would not run for another term.

At luncheon, the family talked of nothing else but the decision. The girls were a little nonplussed. It was a new idea to them. They had been plunged suddenly into the public eye when their father became President. They had adjusted themselves, and now they would have to readjust to a life without the Secret Service, without limousines, without helicopters. They were not quite sure they wanted their father to retire. Lady Bird said little. It was obvious she agreed with the decision.

The President telephoned Governor Connally in Texas. He also talked to Secretary Rusk, on a plane flying to New Zealand. The Presi-



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dent notified his staunch political supporters, such as Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, that an important message was to be delivered, but he gave no hint of what it might contain.

The political polls that day showed the President leading all the other candidates. He had been assured that he could get 1,700 delegates at the Democratic convention. He was ahead. "But," he remarked, "five years is long enough." If he served another term, he would be President for the second longest period in history—second only to Franklin Roosevelt.

At about five o'clock, the President started rehearsing his speech. The children listened, still unbelieving, still a little sad. At six, the President was notified that he would have to have the copy ready for the teleprompter by seven. The Signal Corps operator would then start typing the script for the 9 p.m. deadline. To avoid leaks, one Signal Corpsman was given the copy. When he received it, the White House staff knew that there would be no turning back.

In Mexico City that night, President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz went to the American Embassy. It was the first time that a Mexican President had ever visited the American Embassy. He did it, he said, in honor of President Johnson, who had been his close personal friend.

Vice President Humphrey in Mexico City had received a telephone call from Marvin Watson, in the White House, saying that the No. 2 conclusion of the speech was being used. The Vice President told the guests in the American Embassy, "This is going to be an important speech." The President of Mexico listened intently as the President of the United States said:

"Fifty-two months and ten days ago, in a moment of tragedy and trauma, the duties of this office fell upon me."

As the President of the United States began his historic words, "Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term," Muriel Humphrey began to sniffle. She had had a woman's intuition that something was about to happen. As the President concluded, she burst into tears.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked Humphrey. "You're not merely the Vice President. You're my husband."

There is no record of what the Vice President said. The President of Mexico looked very solemn. He had lost one of his best friends.

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