

To do good and cast a shadow

A Political Education

By Harry McPherson.
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By RONNIE DUGGER

Harry McPherson was one of the best young men with Lyndon Johnson, humane, a liberal moderate, and intelligent — a Texas lawyer who reads literature and history for pleasure. His book therefore has a lot going for it, especially surprise. He worked loyally for Johnson for 13 years, assisting him in quelling the Senate liberals in the late fifties and writing his Vietnam speeches at the height of the war. His book therefore also has a lot going against it, especially, again, surprise. The author's skill is evident in his keeping the pleasure he gives offhand and catching the disappointment he causes offguard.

He writes well, and sometimes with a detached awareness of the situations he was in. His sensibility perceives his experience in literary and historical analogies and contrasts which are pleasing and are not overdone. His sketch of his drive up from Texas to Washington to join Johnson's staff in 1956 and his paragraphs on himself among military men in the Pentagon have quality one would welcome in a novel.

A chapter giving "brief lives" of the Senators sparkles and flashes with insight and choice detail, descriptions of pettifoggery and vainglory, a few acute dislikes that are not disguised, and he "tells tales out of school" on the Senators: the bottle was a problem for Chavez; Hennings was an alcoholic; Kefauver was usually late and sometimes befuddled; Frear wore a jeweled fraternity pin designating his oil company, and Robertson of Virginia said African diplomats "dropped out of the trees with umbrellas and attache cases."

In its bulk, the book is an amble over well-trod ground, our political history seen through Johnson's career from the time of his domination of the Senate to the end of his Presidency. There are arguable contributions to the discussion of a variety of issues, but apart from these and some often amusing anecdotes, there is not much new about issues or the

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social realities beyond. This is more a book about men.

Anecdotes, of course, sometimes reveal more than disquisitions. A few days before Robert McNamara left office as Secretary of Defense, he had lunch with his successor Clark Clifford, Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, McPherson, and others. McPherson relates:

"McNamara, obviously on edge, condemned the bombing — North and South. He recited the comparative figures, so many tons dropped on Germany and Japan and North Korea, so many more on Vietnam. It's not just that it isn't preventing the supplies from getting down the trail. It's destroying the countryside in the South. It's making lasting enemies. And still the damned Air Force wants more." Rusk stared at his drink: Clifford looked searchingly at McNamara, but said nothing."

Four years later, and still the damned Air Force wants more.

McPherson's book is most interesting as an invitation from a sensitive and ambitious man to learn what he says he has learned in his career in government. We meet Harry, and we take a class he is teaching in political experience. We are asked, by what he teaches, to respond to him. In a brief review one cannot do justice to the problems his book, so perceived, presents.

Begin, merely, with a few clues. He joins Johnson partly "to do good," partly "to cast a shadow . . . and therefore exist." J.F.K. is killed, and before the tears come (which they do), he wonders, "What would this mean for my career? Selfish Texas bastard, the President is dead." When Bill Moyers invited him to leave a high post at State to come to the White House, the understanding passes between them that "for ambitious young men there was no comparison" between the jobs.

It is McPherson's theme that young and happy moral idealism is converted to doubt by power and the complexity of political reality, and that the justified person in politics dwells in ambiguity, foregoing moral clarity. . . . Liberal speculation, followed by conservative compromise. . . . To yield to that necessity was to act responsibly." But was it? In the situations that educated McPherson, the rebellion against the war and the failures of the cities italicize the question and give the answer, but he does not make this connection. He teaches compromise in complexity, and the miseducated result is the depreciation of being principled as the foundation of independence and the

requirement of leadership.

His first lesson, for example. Just arrived, "a Southern liberal in Washington," he was introduced to Johnson and listened to the debate on whether to control the price of natural gas. If you don't, captive consumers including the poor pay more money for gas and have less for groceries. But listening to oil-state Senators, of whom his new employer was one, McPherson decided, "I could live with logic, even if its results were obnoxious to liberals. . . . I sought refuge in the very complexity of issues which, I believed, the moralists could not comprehend. . . ."

Letting go of moral imagination in the tangles of lobby-inspired logic, like killing the redbird and the bluebird because they are too clear in the thicket. One thinks, too, of the red and the black, and of Stendhal himself. The mistake was thinking that political morality has become illogical when all that's happened is that one has lost sight of it; the rhetorical dishonesty was the implication that "the moralists" cannot think as well about complexity as "the realists."

McPherson found himself seeking to forward the conservative purposes of Senator Richard Russell "because his character and professionalism were magnetic to me." He knew what he was doing, and he knew his own integrity was the issue this posed. Senator Paul Douglas regarded him and Bobby Baker as "fundamentally bound to the Establishment that opposed [Douglas], and we were. It troubled me that I was not always on the side of one whose views were so close to my own, but I had chosen effectiveness over prophecy, and I was stuck with the consequences."

In the White House, McPherson was getting things done for the poor, the minorities, civil liberties. There was that to weigh, and it had good weight. But whether one is glad that a good-seeking man stays near a power-seeking man is not as simple a question as it seems at once. What if the powerful man is using the good one for evil more than the good one is using the powerful one for good? At what point should a moral man rebel against the captain of a ship that is set on an immoral course? McPherson was an advocate of the war, and he believed in bombing the North into mid-1967, but his doubts had intensified by the end of that year. His role in writing Johnson's swan-song peace speech gave him moral relief, but there is no hint he'd have left had the decision gone

otherwise. It is the troubling deficiency of this book as literature that McPherson gives us only glimpses of the scenes in the hellish drama of conscience one imagines he went through. One can but listen to the hints he gives of his relationship with Johnson and hear the echoes as he defends familiar Johnsonisms as his own views.

William Arrowsmith, the classicist and teacher, has said that what the young want in their teachers now are models of committed integrity. McPherson presents himself as a model of committed compromise. The ambiguity McPherson, Camus-like, celebrates abides in the relationships between and the sometime merging of these models in his life. He can guess, of course, what chance he has as a model of integrity with many of the antiwar young, whom he malignly assaults with a passage wrenched from Jefferson for the purpose, inaccurately quoting it and omitting pertinent context. Having so done, he returns to ambiguity.

He tells us of his having written two plays — one on the moral dilemma of whether to participate in building a nuclear missile — in which his purpose was "only to prove that all decisions are ambiguous. . . ." He says that in his plays, as on the Senate floor, he "lacked a clear point of view." There is a deeper invitation here, and in the whole of his book, that his readers appreciate him, that we approve his staying with Johnson, his roles in the Senate and the White House. He is asking us for our consenting imaginative participation in a lifestyle of equivocation, a misuse of ambiguity, the extents of his own compromises in his career with Johnson. There is no serious way to respond to his book without responding to this invitation. Do we wish to regard Stennis of Mississippi, or Russell of Georgia, or Johnson of Texas — or Douglas of Illinois, or the antiwar movement, or the 1968 eavesdropping act as McPherson, operatively and guiltfully, does?

What matters, what is indispensably required, in public servants, is that they have and act on a sufficiency of moral imagination and moral intelligence. In literary finish this seems to be the best of the memoirs yet published on the Johnson domination — much better than the first volume of Johnson's own. As writing and as an experience of this mild, well-read, and engaging McPherson, "A Political Education" is a pleasure. As a learning and a teaching, it fails. ■