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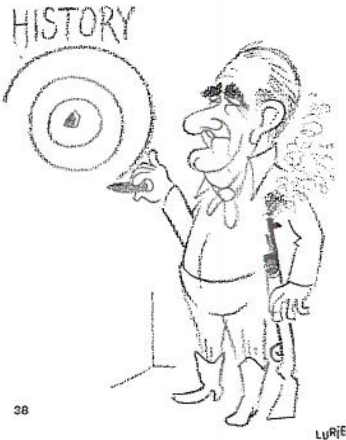
The five years of L.B.J.

We shall be hearing more from Lyndon Johnson, not only in his last days as President, but thereafter as a lecturer and author, perhaps as senator again, certainly as a leading citizen. We may even come to think more highly of his administration than is now common. When he first took office during the national shock of President Kennedy's assassination, Johnson said his primary aim was to unify the American people, and for quite a while he did. Toward the end, after the country's deep divisions and his own unpopularity forced him to renounce a second term last March, he said he would rest his case with the historians. What are they likely to say?

Not even the journalists agree on that. Arthur Krock, dean emeritus of the Washington press corps, thinks the Johnson Presidency was an unmitigated disaster, while L.B.J.'s fellow Texan William S. White all but canonizes him. Even those who have worked for Johnson seem unsure; his achievements have plenty of admirers, but the man himself has few fervent fans. His has been the most puzzling administration of this century. His enormous political skill, energy and intelligence—and his unabashed delight in the use of power—have put him in the tradition of our most activist Presidents. His first full year in office, 1964, made him look like a potentially great President. In that year's election, with a big assist from Goldwater, he scored the greatest popular margin ever (61.1%). Yet by 1966 he had sunk lower in the Gallup poll than any other President but Truman (for one spell). By 1967 Richard Rovere of *The New Yorker* could reckon that "what may well be a majority of the American people are persuaded that the President is a dishonest and dishonorable man. This comes close to being a national disaster."



The precipitous change in Johnson's fortunes is most readily explained by the Vietnam war, to which he remained committed longer and more staunchly than did national opinion. Yet when in 1965 he first sent bombers into North Vietnam and U.S. troops to the aid of the Saigon government (which otherwise would have fallen), most Americans applauded this "escalation." In fact that year was Johnson's best as far as legislative accomplishment is concerned. He submitted twice as many bills as in '64 and got about two thirds of them passed. By then he had given the remnants of the Kennedy program his personal stamp and extended it under the rubric of the "Great Society." He had put through a major tax cut, two strong civil rights acts, Medicare, aid to education, and ten War on Poverty programs. He was also beginning to act (as one journalist put it) as "curator of his own reputation," and himself announced that the 1965 record was "the greatest outpouring of creative legislation in the history of this nation," which maybe it was.

The decline began in his third year. Vietnam preoccupied the President to the neglect of other growing problems, notably urban riots, inflation and the balance-of-payments crisis. It was in 1966 that he should have set some national priorities and demanded a tax increase. That might have been unpopular in a congressional election year, but the Democrats lost 50 seats anyway.

And soon Johnson was, in his own words, "hunkered up like a rabbit in a hailstorm." His Vietnam strategy in 1967 was producing more and more bloodshed without much visible progress. In the Detroit riots, his delay in sending federal troops seemed more politically self-serving than an effort to calm the nation. Senator Fulbright started studying "the overextension of executive powers." Johnson cut his press conferences by half and stopped almost all public appearances for fear of catcalls and riots. Instead of a Great Society, he now seemed to have a sick society on his hands. His own "bloodless assassination" in March temporarily made him less a national scapegoat, but did not heal the sickness.

In accounting for his political failures, one must first mention his attempt to turn the national unity of early '64 into a permanent bipartisan "consensus." He sought and briefly held the broad support of half a dozen different constituencies—business, labor, Negroes, farmers, ethnic minorities, even liberals. He delighted to prove by the polls that natural enemies thought Johnson was their friend. His hunger for popularity led him to try to manipulate this artificial consensus without regard to the Democratic party organization, which decayed under his neglect.

But events soon began to unravel his consensus at both ends. He had done sincere and mighty deeds on behalf of Negroes, but a little progress made Negroes increasingly impatient for more. As to Vietnam, he had actually pursued a cautious strategy, neither hawk nor dove; but it became increasingly difficult to persuade the American people that the war was either a moral or a winning proposition.

Johnson has been adroit in pushing the piecemeal programs labeled Great Society, but that is not what the pieces finally added up to; they sometimes seem rather the last echoes of the New Deal of 30 years ago, and Johnson's borrowed rhetoric could not give them a 1970 flavor. "Somehow we must ignite a fire in the breast of this land, a flaming spirit of adventure," said Johnson in April '64. That is one thing he never could do. Had he ignited only the Democrats, and kept a normal opposition in his gunsights as did F.D.R. or Truman, he might have "divided in order to save us" (in Professor Clinton Rossiter's formula) and made the Great Society a more convincing aspiration. But he had learned politics in a one-party state and tried to make a Johnson party of the whole nation.

If this reflects a defect in the Johnson character, it is of no petty dimension. If his failures were outsize, so was what he attempted. Probably he tried to do too much of it himself, trusting no legate, absorbed in trivial details, playing too many cards too close to his chest. It is less than just to blame everything on Johnson the dissimulator, the self-huckstering author of his own "credibility gap." He is a deliberate man who has perhaps been too fond of "preserving his options," but these defects have their virtues in the leader of a nuclear power. He is an extremely intelligent man whose problems nevertheless outdistanced the remedies he understood, *i.e.*, power and money. Certainly military power was not enough in Vietnam, and more and more of our domestic problems carry no federal price tag.

"Popularity is a crime from the moment it is sought," said George Savile, the English royalist, nearly three centuries ago. It is certainly a mistake for the leader of a great nation to make popularity his overriding goal.

Johnson did not always follow the obviously popular course, as in Vietnam. There the relative costs and benefits of our involvement are not fully known and will weigh heavily in the assessment of his years in office. It is not yet clear whether he will be ranked as a successful President, but he gave the job full measure, and the confusing and dangerous times he bestrode will make the Johnson Presidency an indisputably important one.