

From: LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON THE VANTAGE POINT NEW YORK: HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON, 1971. "I feel like I have already been here a year" 27

With that single shot the outrage of a nation turned to skepticism and doubt. The atmosphere was poisonous and had to be cleared. I was aware of some of the implications that grew out of that skepticism and doubt. Russia was not immune to them. Neither was Cuba. Neither was the State of Texas. Neither was the new President of the United States.

Lady Bird had told me a story when I finally arrived at our home in northwest Washington on the night of November 22. She and Liz Carpenter had driven home immediately after our arrival at the White House, while I stayed on to work. On their way to our house, Liz had commented: "It's a terrible thing to say, but the salvation of Texas is that the Governor was hit."

And Lady Bird replied: "Don't think I haven't thought of that. I only wish it could have been me."

Now, with Oswald dead, even a wounded Governor could not quell the doubts. In addition, we were aware of stories that Castro, still smarting over the Bay of Pigs and only lately accusing us of sending CIA agents into the country to assassinate him, was the perpetrator of the Oswald assassination plot. These rumors were another compelling reason that a thorough study had to be made of the Dallas tragedy at once. Out of the nation's suspicions, out of the nation's need for facts, the Warren Commission was born.

The idea of a national commission was first mentioned to me by Eugene Rostow of the Yale Law School. He called the White House the day Oswald was shot and suggested that with the prime suspect now dead, a blue-ribbon commission was needed to ascertain the facts. Dean Rusk and columnist Joseph Alsop soon made the same recommendation to me.

While I was considering what sort of investigative body to commission for this task, two facts became abundantly clear. First, this could not be an agency of the Executive branch. The commission had to be composed of men who were known to be beyond pressure and above suspicion. Second, this represented too large an issue for the Texas authorities to handle alone. Several columnists reported that a "Texas commission" would be set up. Waggoner Carr, the Attorney General of Texas, considered setting up a board of inquiry. I urged him to examine every possible aspect and to explore all avenues fully, but I also told him that I hoped he would sit in on the national commission, and that is what he wisely did.

The commission had to be bipartisan, and I felt that we needed a Republican chairman whose judicial ability and fairness were unquestioned. I don't believe I ever considered anyone but Chief Justice Earl Warren for chairman. I was not an intimate of the Chief Justice. We had never spent ten minutes alone together, but to me he was the personification of justice and fairness in this country.

I knew it was not a good precedent to involve the Supreme Court in such an investigation. Chief Justice Warren knew this too and was vigor-

ously opposed to it. I called him in anyway. Before he came, he sent word through a third party that he would not accept the assignment. He opposed serving on constitutional grounds. He said that if asked, he would refuse. He thought the President should be informed of that.

Early in my life I learned that doing the impossible frequently was necessary to get the job done. There was no doubt in my mind that the Chief Justice had to be convinced that it was his duty to accept the chairmanship of the commission. We had to bring the nation through that bloody tragedy, and Warren's personal integrity was a key element in assuring that all the facts would be unearthed and that the conclusions would be credible.

When the Chief Justice came into my office and sat down, I told him that I knew what he was going to say to me but that there was one thing no one else had said to him: In World War I he had put a rifle to his shoulder and offered to give his life, if necessary, to save his country. I said I didn't care who brought me a message about how opposed he was to this assignment. When the country is confronted with threatening divisions and suspicions, I said, and its foundation is being rocked, and the President of the United States says that you are the only man who can handle the matter, you won't say "no," will you?  
He swallowed hard and said, "No, sir."

I had always had great respect for Chief Justice Warren. From that moment on I became his great advocate as well.

As for the makeup of the rest of the commission, I appointed the two men Bobby Kennedy asked me to put on it—Allen Dulles and John McCloy—immediately. Then I called each of the prospective members personally and obtained his agreement to serve. The final roster of the commission members included Chief Justice Warren, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, Representative Hale Boggs of Louisiana, Representative Gerald Ford of Michigan, former CIA Director Allen W. Dulles of Washington, and former U.S. High Commissioner of Germany John J. McCloy of New York. They all served with great distinction and great sacrifice.

The Warren Commission brought us through a very critical time in our history. I believe it fair to say that the commission was dispassionate and just.

If the days immediately following John Kennedy's death called for leadership, they also underlined the need for a renewed sense of national unity. I saw my primary task as building a consensus throughout the country, so that we could stop bickering and quarreling and get on with the job at hand. Unfortunately, the word "consensus" came to be profoundly misunderstood.