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Mr. Johnson's Legacy

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By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—On March 30, 1967, President Johnson had all the Democratic state chairmen to the White House for a reception. As each shook the President's hand, a photograph was taken—to be sent to the chairman as a useful political memento.

At a dinner that night in the Washington Hilton, Mr. Johnson spoke with great effect of what he had done for the poor and the disadvantaged of America. Suddenly he said he had come to the point in his speech where Mrs. Johnson had told him to stop, but he was going on. He spoke about Vietnam, calling the war a vital defense of freedom and denouncing the critics as traitors.

When he finished, all but two of the people in the room rose and applauded. Those two never received the picture taken of them with the President.

That characteristic vignette makes a useful corrective to the statesman-like portrait Lyndon Johnson paints of himself in the Vietnam passages of his memoirs. He was not calm and detached on the war; he was fiercely committed to military victory, and he could be petty or vindictive toward anyone who disagreed.

As excerpted in the newspapers, the memoirs are a sad exercise in Johnsonian self-justification, showing no signs of new insight or regret on Vietnam. Among other things the former President quotes from such men as Robert McNamara and Senator J. W. Fulbright to show that they once favored his war policy. But of course all that really shows is that they eventually recognized the destructive cost of the war, while it is doubtful that he ever did.

But his principal effort, by way of enlisting retroactive supporters, is to suggest that President Kennedy would have sent American combat forces to Vietnam had he lived. He quotes a second-hand newspaper account of a 1961 Fulbright-Kennedy meeting and says it pointed up what everyone in the Administration knew: "That keeping our word might mean spilling our blood."

Then Mr. Johnson tries to associate President Kennedy with a 1961 report by Gen. Maxwell Taylor that urged a U.S. ground combat commitment. Kennedy never rejected that proposal, the memoirs say; he just deferred action on it. But when a President does not approve a plan, not even after two years, he has rejected it.

John Kennedy, when he came to consider Vietnam, was profoundly skeptical of military advisers who urged the commitment of American combat forces. As Arthur Schlesinger has per-

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suasively argued in *The New York Review of Books*, Kennedy had had the same advice in regard to the Bay of Pigs and Laos—and rejected it. And he also knew very well the history of the French war in Indochina.

No one can prove what President Kennedy would or would not have done in Vietnam. But those who contend that he would have followed the Johnson course of massive American intervention have a good deal of Kennedy history to overcome, and they can hardly make the case with evidence as feeble and self-serving as appears in the newspaper extracts of the Johnson memoirs.

The whole Johnson account of Vietnam can be measured against the mass of historical material already available. For example, Don Oberdorfer's superlative new book on the 1968 Tet offensive, "Tet!", leaves threadbare Mr. Johnson's assertion that he knew all about it ahead of time.

But it is in a wider sense that the reality of the Vietnam war—and of its reflection in the Johnson White House—is missing from these memoirs.

Reality was a President who took the United States into a major land war without ever telling his people that he was doing so.

Reality was the decision to drop more bombs on a small peasant country than fell on Europe in World War II—and then to be surprised and regretful when it turned out that there had been fearful civilian casualties.

Reality was the widespread use of deadly herbicides for the first time in any war, despite scientific warnings that there could be lasting damage to the vegetation and the people of Vietnam.

Reality was the arrogance of Washington's assumption of the right to decide the mode of life—and death—in a wholly different society thousands of miles away.

Reality was a President who long resisted arguments for bombing halts and real peace approaches, who abused or humiliated critics, who only when he saw public opinion turning against him changed his line and told Clark Clifford: "I've got to get me a peace proposal."

Self-justification is an inevitable human trait, and a man as big and proud as Lyndon Johnson could hardly be expected to suppress it. But by returning to the defense of his Vietnam policies he only reminds us of the years that so deeply wounded the Presidency and the country.