

TIMES, FRIDAY, MARCH 10, 1967

Washington: Walter Mitty in the White House

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, March 9 — Keeping up with Lyndon Johnson is quite a job. Last week he was a tiger in Bobby Kennedy's tank, raging at his dissenting critics. This week he is Mr. Cool, with a kind word for everybody and a special grant of "sincerity" for all those who differ with him.

It is like watching a great character actor playing different roles: the bold, defiant leader; the patient, sorrowful philosopher, the conniving tyrant, the poker player or the preacher. You name it and he can play it.

Will He Run?

This Walter Mitty streak keeps the capital in a state of constant doubt. Cabinet members rise and drop with his moods. So does the news. His low- and high-pressure areas are watched as carefully as the weather; and when he says, as he did in his last news conference, that he is not yet ready to make up his mind about whether to run for the Presidency again, the rumormongers have a ball.

Theodore C. Sorensen, biographer of and special counsel to President Kennedy, remarked at

Princeton the other day that President Johnson would be following a "historical pattern" if he chose not to seek re-election next year.

Pointing to Presidents Truman, Coolidge and Theodore Roosevelt, Mr. Sorensen said: "Of all the Vice Presidents who originally succeeded to the White House, as Mr. Johnson did by virtue of their predecessors' death, not a single one has ever sought to be re-elected for a second full term."

Mr. Johnson, however, has risen to the pinnacle of American political life, not by following historical patterns but by breaking them. The only pattern he is likely to follow on the 1968 decision is the normal pattern of delay.

He is by nature a cautious procrastinator. Life has taught him to expect the unexpected. He took over the leadership of his party in the Senate against the normal rules of age and seniority. He was stricken with a heart attack and almost lost his life in his middle forties at the apex of his powers. He took the Vice Presidency against the expectations and even advice of his closest friends, including his wife. And he succeeded to the Presidency precisely at the point

when he had given up all hope of ever achieving it.

He is not, in short, a predictable man, either by temperament or by fate. Even in 1964, in moods of disappointment or depression, he talked of not seeking the Presidency. "There is only one thing I want to do in this job," he once remarked to this reporter. "I want to unite this country." And he went on to suggest that this was going to be difficult because of the hostility to him in the press.

These moods pass, however, as quickly as they come, and though he will undoubtedly tease the Johnson-watchers about his future plans, it is difficult to imagine any set of circumstances that would lead him to retire voluntarily.

Serious illness might do it. A startling success in Vietnam might induce him to go back to the Perdanales as the architect of both military victory and the Great Society programs of the 89th Congress. But adversity in the war and unpopularity at the polls are not likely to make him think of retirement. Quite the opposite. And there is another more compelling reason to reject the notion of his retirement.

If he ever thought seriously

of giving up in 1968, he would have to face the prospect of handing over the leadership of his party to Robert Kennedy and going down in history as "the man of Vietnam" between the two Kennedy Presidencies. This is not the sort of thing that is likely to fill him with glee.

Humphrey-Kennedy

He has repaid Hubert Humphrey's personal loyalty by indicating that Humphrey is his choice for Vice President in 1968. But Humphrey's loyalty has cost him plenty among his liberal friends, and it is not at all sure that the Vice President could defeat Kennedy in a race for the Democratic Presidential nomination.

A great deal of nonsense has been printed lately about how the Johnson-Kennedy feud has turned into a kind of vicious blood-lust. This overstates the hard feelings over Vietnam, but the hard feelings are there and Mr. Johnson is likely to stop short of opening the White House door for "that boy," as he calls him.

That, at least, is the present Johnson mood. Next week there may be another, but it is not likely to be pro-Bobby.