TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1971

By Lyndon B. Johnson: War on Poverty and the 1964 Campaign

A Reluctant Candidate Decided To Run Only at the Last Minute

INSTALLMENT III

Following is the third of 11 installments of excerpts from Lyndon Baines Johnson's memoirs of his Presidential years, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston on Nov. 1 under the title "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969":

THE first full day of my Presidency was loaded with the urgencies of government in crisis. When I recall that day, I think of people: people entering my office, people leaving my office, people meeting in my office, people waiting in my reception room, a steady stream of people. They included former Presidents, Cabinet officers, leaders of Congress and staff members.

Among the latter was Walter Heller, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, who came to see me at 7:40 in the evening. He wanted to tell me about the research recently conducted on the problem of poverty. Early in November he had asked the departments and agencies of the Federal Government for ideas that could be used in developing a program to alleviate poverty. He said that he had discussed the subject with John Kennedy three days before his assassination.

"I'm interested," I responded. "I'm sympathetic. Go ahead. Give it the highest priority. Push ahead full tilt."

Work on the program continued through December. I announced at a news conference that poverty legislation would be "high on the agenda of priority" in our requests to Congress in 1964.

Walter Heller and Budget Director Kermit Gordon had been thinking in terms of a pilot venture to be carried out in a limited number of "demonstration project" cities. But I urged them to broaden their scope. I was certain that we could not start small and hope to propel a program through the Congress. It had to be big and bold and hit the whole nation with real impact.

On Jan. 8, 1964, in my first State of the Union address to the Congress, I announced: "This Administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America."

I concluded [later] that the program should be handled by an independent agency in the executive branch, reporting directly to the President. I wanted a strong man at its head. A number of names were proposed. I decided on Sargent Shriver. He had demonstrated ability as Director of the Peace Corps.

Shriver took over the directorship of the poverty program on Feb. 1, 1964. I told him he would have to work fast. Not only did I want to propel a program through the Congress immediately but I wanted the plan to produce visible results, so that there would be no question about Congress's continuing the effort with adequate funding in the years ahead.

Only six weeks after the task force had first assembled, the program was ready to go. On March 16 I approved it and sent it to the Congress.

We did everything we could to keep the poor people in the headlines while the bill was in committee. Many Cabinet officers and other high-ranking Government officials took up the poor people's cause in their speeches across the country, and they received good press coverage. Lady Bird and I made a special trip to the Middle West and through the scarred mountains of Appalachia to focus the nation's attention on the problem of poverty.

After the bill was reported out of the Education and Labor Committee, it went to the House Rules Committee, where the octogenarian chairman, Howard Smith of Virginia, made no secret of his fear that such an act would be used as a tool to force integration.

The bill was approved by the Senate on July 23 by a vote of 61 to 34. When the final vote in the House came, on Aug. 8, the result reflected the strong effort we had all made. The tally was 226 to 185, a margin of victory much wider than we had expected.

JULY 20, 1967, was another day when conservatives mounted an attack, this time a day of shame and defeat. On that day a simple, uncomplicated bill came before the House of Representatives which proposed to provide Federal grants to local neighborhoods for developing and carrying out rat control and extermination efforts. I had recommended this important project in my message that year on urban and rural poverty, and I had deliberately separated it from the rest of my program in the hope of making more fortunate American people aware of the terrible problem of rats in our urban ghettos.

Everything seemed in order for quick and easy passage of the bill. But something happened in the House that afternoon, something shameful and sad. A handful of Republicans joined together not merely to defeat the bill but to try to make low comedy of the entire program. Congressman Joel Broyhill, a Republican from Virginia, helped set the tone: "Mr. Speaker, I think the 'rat smart thing' for us to do is to vote down this rat bill 'rat now.'"

The floodgates opened. The House, as it is prone to do on occasion, had a field day—laughing about high commissioners of rats, hordes of rat bureaucrats and enormous demands for rat patronage; jesting about the new civil "rats" bill, "throwing money down a rathole," and "discriminating between city and country rats." At the end of this burlesque the rat bill was defeated by a vote of 207 to 176. The old Republican-conservative Democratic coalition had won again.

When I heard the description of this sorry spectacle, I felt outraged and ashamed. I was ashamed of myself for not having prepared the House of Representatives and the nation to approach this issue more intelligently and with a proper sense of urgency. I tried to remedy the situation by issuing a statement immediately: "The effect of today's House action in denying a rule to the Rat Extermination Act is a cruel blow to the children of America." I kept at it on succeeding days. The bill became a personal challenge. I was determined not to compound my error by failing to help build public sentiment.

On Sept. 20 the House reconsidered its action. With the heat of public indignation upon them, the Republicans had stopped laughing. By a 44-vote margin the House voted to add a rat control amendment to our Partnership for Health bill.

IN the early months of 1964, whenever I was asked about my intentions to campaign for a full term in the White House, I replied that I had not yet made firm plans. Many members of the press found this hard to understand, especially from a President who was very active. Actually, my activity was directed toward getting the country moving on the programs John F. Kennedy had pleaded for, which had been stalled in the Congress when he died. But it was widely interpreted in press reports to mean that I was racing hard to capture the Democratic nomination.

While I had not ruled out the possibility of running for the Presidency, I was beset with many doubts and reservations about the wisdom of doing so—doubts I had long felt; doubts that were not dispelled by holding the office.

The first serious mention I remember of my being a possible Presidential candidate appeared in a Time magazine cover story on June 22, 1953, when I was minority leader of the Senate. Part of that story is worth quoting:

"Occasionally a Democrat will speculate on whether Lyndon Johnson, the party's key man of 1953, may himself be the party's Presidential candidate in 1956. Johnson's thoughts do not run that way. . . . When asked about the Presidency, Johnson says: 'I'm not smart enough to make a President. I come from the wrong part of the country. I like the Senate job; it's the best job I've ever had. I want to stay here.'"

I repeated that sentiment often in the years that followed. Most of the time it went unnoticed.

Throughout the period between the 1956 convention and the 1960 convention, when my name was placed in nomination, I was aware, and gratefully so, of the growing interest in me expressed by people who approved of the way I was handling my job in the Senate. But I never encouraged any effort to promote me as a Presidential candidate. My position had not changed when the political campaign season of 1960 came around. I still had no enthusiasm for running.

Once again Sam Rayburn tried to force me into the race. He presented his argument this way: Even if I did not win, he thought I could run a better race against John Kennedy for the nomination than any of the other candidates, none of whom could command substantial Southern support. If a strong contest were not made, he said, it would look as if the Catholic bosses behind Kennedy were running the Democratic party.

Mr. Rayburn was very much afraid of Richard Nixon's being elected. He believed Nixon had called him and President Truman traitors. Nixon always denied this. (Later Nixon showed me the words he had said that led to what he considered Mr. Rayburn's misunderstanding, and it seemed to me that he was being open and honest about it.) But the Speaker went to his grave believing that Nixon had impugned his patriotism, and he did not want Nixon to be President.

Only six days before the convention opened on July 11, in the auditorium of the new Senate Office Building in an open press conference, I reluctantly announced my candidacy for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency. Once I was committed, I fought with all the energy I possessed.

The night John Kennedy won the nomination, I sent him a telegram of congratulations. Then I went to bed. The phone woke me about an hour after midnight. The caller was Speaker Rayburn. He told me he had heard that I was to be offered the Vice-Presidential nomination, and he hoped that under no circumstances would I accept it. I thought it was most unlikely that I would be offered the nomination, but I assured him that I had no intention of accepting it if it were offered. I had not wanted the top spot on the ticket; the second spot appealed to me considerably less.

I went back to sleep. A few hours later the phone awakened me again. This time it was Jack Kennedy. He said he would like to come by and talk to me. I suggested that I come to see him instead, but he insisted that he would come to my room. He arrived about midmorning. He said he had given a lot of thought to putting together a ticket that could win the election. Adlai Stevenson's two defeats, he said, were very much on his mind. He had thought it over carefully and had concluded that he wanted me on the ticket with him.

I thanked him for his frankness and his consideration of me, but I told him that I was interested only in being the party's majority leader in the Senate and in helping him to get a strong program enacted when he was elected. Anyway, I said, I had assured Speaker Rayburn that I would not take the second spot. Kennedy asked if I had any objection to his talking to Mr. Rayburn.

"No, of course not," I said.

He left then and went to Mr. Rayburn's room. Soon afterward the Speaker came to see me. He had a recommendation which astonished me. He said he thought that I should go on the ticket with Kennedy. I pointed out to him that only a few hours earlier he had told me under no circumstances should I do that. Now he was asking just the opposite. Why?

I remember his words very clearly. "Because," he said, "I'm a damn sight wiser man this morning than I was last night." Kennedy had persuaded him that without me on the ticket he could not carry the South, perhaps not even one

Y. R. Okamoto

President Johnson valued the opinion of his wife. In May, 1964, Lady Bird encouraged him to seek office.

Southern state. That would guarantee the election to the Republicans.

Bobby Kennedy came to my room later that morning. He said he thought I ought to know that Walter Reuther and Gov. G. Mennen Williams of Michigan were both very upset that John Kennedy had decided to put a Southerner on the ticket. I told Bobby that I appreciated his concern, but that his information did not greatly surprise me. Later Bobby talked to Mr. Rayburn and John Connally and told them he thought I should be made Democratic National Chairman. Mr. Rayburn—as he later reported it to me—asked him: "Who speaks for the Kennedys?" When Bobby replied that it was Jack Kennedy, Rayburn made it clear that Jack Kennedy was the only one he would listen to.

Senator Kennedy called me on the phone and told me he was going to make a statement to the press that I was to be on the ticket with him. He asked me to make a similar announcement. We both made out statements and that settled the matter—until that night. Then Mr. Rayburn informed me that Walker Stone, a newspaperman and a personal friend of both the Speaker and myself, had just told him that a wild story was making the rounds to the effect that Mr. Rayburn and I had threatened John Kennedy with defeat if he did not put me on the ticket. A number of people were convinced that Bobby had leaked the story to satisfy those to whom he had given assurance that I would not be selected.

Mr. Rayburn told me he was going to nail this lie right away. He apparently did so with a single telephone call to the candidate. The newspapers the next morning carried Senator Kennedy's forceful denial that there was any truth to the story. Kennedy and I went on from that day to join forces and campaign, and win.

FOUR years later I was in the White House. But I had decidedly mixed feelings about whether I wanted to seek a four-year term there in my own right. On the one hand I had a zest for the job, some very clear ideas about what should be accomplished and confidence in my ability to work with the Congress in getting it done. On the other hand I experienced a reluctance which must be viewed in the perspective of those days.

I had come to the White House in the cruelest way possible, as the result of a murderer's bullet. I had taken my oath of office in a climate of national anguish. I knew clearly enough, in those early months in the White House, that the Presidency of the United States was a prize with a heavy price.

There was, in addition, the constant uncertainty as to whether my health would stand up through a full four-year term. The strain of my work in the Senate had helped to bring on my severe heart attack when I was only 46. Now I was nine years older. All these considerations made retirement look exceedingly welcome.

I discussed this matter with several people—Senator Dick Russell of Georgia, Walter Jenkins of my staff, friends from home like Jesse Kellam and Judge A. W. Moursund, and of course Lady Bird. She and I went over it many times, from every viewpoint. That spring of 1964 I asked her to summarize and put down on paper the pros and cons and her own conclusions. This was the memo she gave me on May 14, written by hand on several sheets torn from a stenographer's notebook:

I. If you do get out
We will most probably return to the ranch to live.
1. In the course of the next few months—or until we are forgotten—we will be criticized and our motives questioned—"What skeletons in the closet"—what fear of what disclosures—caused you to make this decision? etc. etc.
That will be painful.
2. There will be a wave of feeling, national this time and not largely statewide of—"You let us down"—keen, even bitter disappointment—similar to the wave of feeling after you accepted the Vice Presidency job with Kennedy.
This will be more painful.
3. You may live longer, and certainly you will have more time for the hill country you love, and for me and Lynda and Luci. And that we'll all love.
But Lynda and Luci will in a year or so cease to be permanent residents of our life—only available for occasional companionship.
4. You will have various ranch lands, small banking interests and presumably TV to use up your talents and your hours.
They are chicken-feed compared to what you are used to.
That may be relaxing for a while. I think it is not enough for you at 56. And I dread seeing you semi-idle, frustrated, looking back at what you left. I dread seeing you look at Mr. X running the country and thinking you could have done it better.
You may look around for a scape-goat. I do not want to be it.
You may drink too much—for lack of a higher calling.

II. If you do *not* get out
You will most probably be elected President.
1. In the course of the campaign and in the ensuing years, you—and I—and the children—will certainly get criticized and cut up, for things we have done, or maybe partly-in-a-way have done—and for others that we never did at all.
That will be painful.
2. You are bound to make *some* bad decisions, be unable to achieve some high-vaulting ambitions, be disappointed at the inadequacies of some helpers—or perhaps of your own.
That will be painful even more.
3. You may die earlier than you would otherwise. Nobody can tell that—as the last six months show. . . .

My Conclusions

Stay in.
Realize it's going to be rough—but remember we worry much in advance about troubles that never happen!
Pace yourself, within the limits of your personality.
If you lose in November—it's all settled anyway!
If you win, let's do the best we can for 3 years and 3 or 4 months—and then, the Lord letting us live that long, announce in February or March 1968 that you are not a candidate for re-election.
You'll then be 59, and by the end of that term a mellow 60, and I believe the juices of life will be stilled enough to let you come home in relative peace and acceptance. (We may even have grandchildren.)

Your loving Wife

Through our years together I have come to value Lady Bird's opinion of me, my virtues and flaws. I have found her judgment generally excellent. But in this instance, although I respected her logic, I was not convinced. As spring of 1964 turned to summer and then summer began to pass, I remained uncertain.

The burden of national unity rests heaviest on one man, the President. And I did not believe, any more than I ever had, that the nation would unite indefinitely behind any Southerner. One reason the country could not rally behind a Southern President, I was convinced, was that the metropolitan press of the Eastern seaboard would never permit it. My experience in office had confirmed this reaction. I was not thinking just of the derisive articles about my style, my clothes, my manner, my accent, and my family—although I admit I received enough of that kind of treatment in my first few months as President to last a lifetime. I was also thinking of a more deep-seated and far-reaching attitude—a disdain for the South that seems to be woven into the fabric of Northern experience. This is a subject that deserves a more profound exploration than I can give it here—a subject that has never been sufficiently examined.

I expressed this feeling to James Reston of The New York Times in the spring of 1964. Scotty Reston disagreed with me, and a few days later he asked James Rowe to persuade me I was wrong. Jim wrote to me expressing his belief that as long as Reston and Walter Lippmann supported me, I would "get a good press" from the rest of the Washington news corps, who represent newspapers all over the country. But it was not long before those two reporters ceased to support me and began their tireless assaults on me and my Administration. When that happened, I could not help noting that it was hard to find many words of support anywhere in the Washington press corps or television media.

So throughout the spring and summer months of 1964, while it was widely and positively and authoritatively assumed that I would be the Democratic nominee, I privately wrestled with grave doubts.

I did not decide, fully and finally, until 3 o'clock on the afternoon of Aug. 25, the day after the Democratic convention opened in Atlantic City. I sat at my desk in the Oval Office and wrote out the following statement on a yellow pad:

"Forty-four months ago I was selected to be the Democratic Vice President. Because I felt I could best serve my country and my party, I left the majority leadership of the Senate to seek the Vice-Presidential post, believing I could help unify the country and thus better serve it.

"In the time given me, I did my best. On that fateful day last year I accepted the responsibilities of the Presidency, asking God's guidance and the help of all of the people. For nine months I've carried on as effectively as I could.

"Our country faces grave dangers. These dangers must be faced and met by a united people under a leader they do not doubt.

"After 33 years in political life most men acquire enemies, as ships accumulate barnacles. The times require leadership about which there is no doubt and a voice that men of all parties, sections and color can follow. I have learned after trying very hard that I am not that voice or that leader.

"Therefore, I shall carry forward with your help until the new President is sworn in next January and then go back home as I've wanted to since the day I took this job."

As soon as I had finished writing, I read the statement over the phone to George Reedy, my press secretary. His reaction was swift. Reedy said my decision had come too late and that my refusal to run would "just give the country to Goldwater." I replied that I would trust the democratic processes under which the country had been operating for 200 years. I told him I would decide by 3 o'clock that afternoon about the statement — if, how and when it should be released.

Later that day I received a note from my wife responding to my request for her reaction to the proposed statement I had written out. In a few words she hit me on two most sensitive and compelling points, telling me that what I planned to do would be wrong for my country and that it would show a lack of courage on my part. I decided finally that afternoon, after reversing my position of the morning and with a reluctance known to very few people, that I would accept my party's nomination.

THROUGHOUT this period, because I was keeping all my options open, I had to consider the question of the Vice-Presidential candidate. Among the most prominent names most widely and frequently mentioned were leading members of the administration. They included Bob McNamara, Dean Rusk, Adlai Stevenson, Sargent Shriver, Bobby Kennedy and Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman. Any one of these men could have made a good campaign for Vice President, some better than others. To my mind, however, the speculation centering on them as a group was unfortunate. Whether I was to be the Presidential candidate or not, and none of these men was aware of my own doubts, I was still going to be the President for the remainder of the year. I wanted the Cabinet members to do their jobs, without consideration—in their minds or anyone else's — of how their performances would affect their political fortunes. If they wanted to campaign for office, I thought they should resign from the Cabinet.

I told Jim Rowe and Bob McNamara in July that I had decided to stop all the speculation, so that people wouldn't feel that everyone in the Cabinet was running for Vice President and that the business of government had come to a halt. I therefore announced that it would be "inadvisable for me to recommend to the convention [for Vice President] any member of the Cabinet or any of those who meet regularly with the Cabinet."

Before releasing this statement, I personally notified each of the gentlemen concerned. My conversation with the Attorney General was the only one to receive substantial attention. My relationship with Bobby Kennedy from the earliest hours of my Presidency—and before that, as far back as the 1960 campaign—had usually been cordial, though never overly warm. John Kennedy and I had achieved real friendship. I doubt his younger brother and I would have arrived at genuine friendship if we had worked together for a lifetime. Too much separated us — too much history, too many differences in temperament. But we had, I believe, a regard for each other's abilities. I remember hearing early in 1964 that there were some anti-Bobby stories going around the Democratic National Committee. I called Cliff Carter at the committee headquarters and told him: "Don't ever participate in anything that is anti-Kennedy. If anyone else does, fire him."

I also knew the strength Bobby had given to his brother. I appreciated the offer he voluntarily and surprisingly made early in my Presidency to become Ambassador to Vietnam. He said that the Vietnam situation was "obviously the most important problem facing the United States" and he wanted me to know that if I felt he could help, he was at my service.

I did not accept his offer because I feared, as did Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, that the potential danger to the late President's brother was too great. But it was a courageous offer for him to make.

On July 29 I asked Bobby to come to my office. I told him I felt that no member of the President's Cabinet should be considered for the Vice-Presidential nomination. In addition, I said, in my judgment he would not be the Democrats' strongest Vice-Presidential candidate in 1964. In fairness to him, I wanted to tell him why I felt as I did. I explained that the Democratic ticket should have as much appeal as possible in the Middle West and the border states and stir as little adverse reaction as possible in the South. The reason this was necessary, I thought, was that Senator Barry Goldwater, whom the Republicans had just nominated as their standard bearer, would find his greatest strength in the South, the Southwest, the border states and possibly the Middle West.

I told the Attorney General that I was sure he would understand my decision and the factors that entered into it, because President Kennedy had had to make a similar decision in 1960. I told Bobby that I foresaw an excellent career of public service for him in the future and that I would do what I could to further his career.

The meeting between Bobby and me was later described in the press as a bitter occasion. It was not. We had a frank discussion, but there was no unpleasantness. When the conversation ended, I walked to the door with him. He looked at me and smiled and said words to this effect: "Well, I'm sorry that you've reached this conclusion, because I think I could have been of help to you."

I said: "Well, I think you will be of help to us—and to yourself too."

Shortly after this conversation took place, Bobby decided to run for the Senate in New York against Kenneth Keating. He asked me to help him. I willingly did to the best of my ability. I campaigned for him in New York City and throughout the state, first and foremost because I wanted him to win. I thought he would make a good Senator. But there was another important reason—the loyalty I felt to the memory of his brother. I had to disappoint a friend—Adlai Stevenson, who at that point had decided to seek the New York Senatorial nomination himself. He abandoned the idea when I told him I felt I must support Bobby. Stevenson was hurt, and my inability to encourage him constituted one of my deepest regrets about the New York campaign.

With the Cabinet officers eliminated from consideration, the list of Vice-Presidential possibilities narrowed considerably. Two men whom I looked upon as prospects were the Senators from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey had always been a strong contender, in my opinion, but I liked McCarthy and believed he should be considered. I was still reviewing various possibilities when I heard that Senator McCarthy intended to remove himself from consideration to support Humphrey. In the end, I concluded that Hubert Humphrey was the best choice in the light of all the circumstances.

THOUSANDS of words have been written and spoken about the size and nature of that victory in 1964 and what it portended. The words I liked best—for they were nearer to what I believe is the truth than any others—are these:

"In 1964 [President Johnson] won the greatest popular victory in modern times. . . . He has gained huge popularity, but he has never failed to spend it in the pursuit of his beliefs or in the interest of his country. He has led us to build schools and clinics and homes and hospitals, to clean the water and to clear the air, to rebuild the city and to recapture the beauty of the countryside, to educate children and to heal the sick and comfort the oppressed on a scale unmatched in our history."

Those words describe how I felt victory should be used. They are from a speech made by Senator Robert F. Kennedy to New York State Democrats almost three years after the 1964 Democratic landslide victory and only a year before his death.

Tomorrow: The Gulf of Tonkin crisis and the bombing