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# Lyndon Johnson: Strong Old Pro Is at the Helm

THIS IS a Thanksgiving season that is something of a mockery of the name. But one thing we can be thankful for: In Lyndon B. Johnson we have an old pro with the gift for a steadying hand at the head of a nation that was taken by horrifying surprise when the assassin's bullet hit John F. Kennedy. Johnson was once the master of the United States senate, and the senate has always been something to master.

Although I never could deny the charm of Kennedy's personality (it worked even on those who were most dubious of his ideas), I could have been called a "Johnson man" back in 1960 when I was busy with a commission to write magazine profiles of the five most likely Democratic candidates for president. During the past three years it was hard to know precisely what Johnson was doing, so out of sight does a vice-president sink. But the impression of a strong old pro has always persisted. Surely a man of Johnson's capacities, which were manifested through a long life of politics of the most taxing kind, cannot have been softened by a relatively short period spent in a largely ceremonial office.

LOOKING OVER that 1960 profile of Johnson that I spent a month in doing, I find myself vastly hopeful for the safety of the United States in a world that is menaced, as usual by the Communists. Let me quote myself, as of

the July 2, 1960, issue of William Buckley's National Review. After listing what appeared to me to be Lyndon's "drawbacks," such as falling between two stools on a number of domestic issues, I wrote:

"Against all these drawbacks one compensating factor looms like the Jungfrau: Lyndon Johnson is a man, not an extension of an IBM machine."

He was a man to command respect when he said, in Reno, Nev.:

"I am not prepared to apologize to Mr. Khrushchev. Are you? I am not prepared to send regrets to Mr. Khrushchev. Are you?" This was Johnson's response to Khrushchev's pose of outraged innocence which came hard on the heels of the U-2 incident. Alone among the Democratic candidates for president at the time, Johnson had warned Khrushchev that he had better stop "being sanctimonious" in "making pious protestations" of innocence when it came to spying.

IN 1960, Johnson seemed to me as much of a westerner as he was a southerner, though Kennedy put him on the ticket to save the south. He was a man who stood "a very small distance left of center." "Conservatives," I said, "who hope to rid America of the handout philosophy shouldn't expect too much from him. But conservatives have less to fear, domestically,

from Johnson than from any of the other Democratic candidates."

The appealing thing about the man, as it seemed in the pre-convention weeks of 1960, was that "whenever there has been a crisis Johnson has instinctively recognized that the only possible way of remaining free in the same world with Soviet Russia is to refuse accommodation on Communist purposes. In the days before the French abdication in Indochina Johnson lined up initially with Nixon on the desirability of fighting for Dienbienphu . . . In 1955, he supported the Dulles policy on Quemoy and Matsu. He has opposed the attempt of Communist China to bully its way into the United Nations; he has refused to sanction aid to Nasser as long as the Suez canal is closed to ships which touch at Israeli ports; he has been for a greater reliance on private investment in bringing aid to underdeveloped regions; he is for channelling military aid through the defense department. . . . He didn't like the Khrushchev visit to the United States; and he has announced himself to be no great friend of summitry, though he favors keeping lines of negotiation open."

That is how Johnson seemed to me in 1960, before he more or less vanished from public view in the innocuous office of the vice-presidency. If he still stands where he used to stand, he will be a man for our time.