

The Successor Is Worthy

By WILLIAM S. WHITE

WASHINGTON — When there is death in the family there is shock and horror and grief, and then there is — terribly and inevitably — the harsh awareness that life must go on for those who are left.

When there is death in the national family, death removing the very central arch of the power and purposes of the Western World as brutal death has removed John Fitzgerald Kennedy, horror and grief are inexpressibly multiplied.

But one thought, one emotion, must master all others.

This that the Republic of the United States of America must go on, under the command now of a new President, Lyndon Baines Johnson. It is he upon whom the great burden has now fallen, and it does not seem wrong to thank Providence that the successor is worthy of both the man who has gone and of the country they have both always loved and served, wryly, toughly, un sentimentally, and gallantly well.

If ever in all our history there was an hour when men must put aside all that is small, all that is angry and ugly and petty partisan in our national life, this is, supremely, that hour. For unless all the people, the parties, the factions, the regions, the races, the clashing private interests, can summon up among themselves the sense and honor to unite behind the new President, the United States of America will face perils of disunity it has not known before.

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Who is this man, Lyndon Johnson, who must have the support, the help, and the understanding of all

who are in the United States and of all they have and are?

What I am now about to say I should never in ordinary circumstances have said, for in ordinary circumstances it would be name-dropping in its most tasteless form. But because of the special circumstances, I say it, so that readers may have some standard to measure the worth of my evidence.

For 30 years — since he was a slim and eager young secretary to a Texas congressman — I have intimately known Lyndon Johnson as I have never known any other public — or private — man. I have known no other man of more true tolerance, if a tolerance sometimes hidden behind the brusque mannerisms of a master of his profession — politics — sometimes impatient of slower minds and always impatient with those of smaller motives than his own. I have known no other man of truer compassion — to the poor and dispossessed, yes, but also to those of more favored states who, too, sometimes weep silently in the night from fears, the anxieties, the pitiless pressures and private despairs which never wholly exempt any part of humankind.

I have known no man of more true devotion to this country — all of it, North and South, East and West, black and white and brown and yellow. And I have known no public man, anywhere in the world, with a greater talent — indeed a greater genius — who has given greater service, sometimes at a high cost to himself, to that old ideal of one nation indivisible under God and of justice for all so far as justice can be found in a world none of us ever made.

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But precisely because he is a political genius, pre-

cisely because he has all his public life been too busy doing things — and too proud — to explain things about himself, this man has had his tireless detractors to a degree rarely seen in American politics.

I have said this is no time for bitterness; accordingly this is no time to go forward with this theme. It is a time, however, a desperately necessary time, to appeal to them right here in print too drop the little animosities of the past.

For I say, weighing my words in full awareness of their implications, that I have never known a truly first-rate man in either party who, truly knowing Mr. Johnson, has ever hated or despised or undervalued his incredible capacities, simple dislike and simple disagreement on principle being set aside.

He has his faults, but this can be said of him: there is not anywhere in him an ounce of littleness; he is larger than life in every sense, including his complete inability to comprehend really little purposes in others.

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I have said that I have been and have remained his friend through the greater part of the life span of us both; but I have also on many occasions been a critical friend on public issues, and may no doubt be on many occasions again. For among the largenesses of Lyndon Johnson is that one form of criticism, and one alone, can move him to swear like the combat naval officers he once was — he who can also weep for others like a child. This is the criticism of malice based on motives that are small and ugly.

This is a great political figure, a great and natural leader. But this is also, first and foremost and always a man, M-A-N.