Leonard Swett and said, “I may not have made as great a president as some other men, but I believe I have kept... discordant elements together as well as anyone could.”

## LYNDON B. JOHNSON

1963–1969

The Art of Political Bluster

A century has passed,” Lyndon Johnson once said boldly, “since... Abraham Lincoln... signed the Emancipation Proclamation... And yet the negro is not equal... The time of justice has now come.” It was the opening salvo of a personal war fought by one of the most ambitious professional politicians in the history of the nation.

Lyndon Baines Johnson was raised near Austin, Texas, in the years before the Great Depression. From early on he developed a deep and genuine compassion for the poor and the oppressed. “My first job after college,” he later recalled as president, “was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican-American school... My students were poor and they often came to class without breakfast and hungry. And they knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice... I never thought then, in 1928... that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country. But now I do have that chance. And... I mean to use it.”

Johnson could identify with the disenfranchised of society, for all his life he saw himself as an underdog, a poor boy who would have to do big things in order to prove himself. And to compensate for a deep sense of insecurity, he developed a burning need to excel. In 1934, he married Claudia Alta Taylor. Nicknamed “Lady Bird,” she became Johnson’s closest adviser and his financial supporter when he entered politics.

As a congressional aide and then a congressman himself, Johnson put in twelve hours a day, seven days a week, demanding the same effort from his entire staff. He soon became recognized as a political genius. After a failed run for the Senate in 1941, he turned his 1948 Senate campaign into the most extraordinary political event in Texas history. Using the methods of large traveling circuses, he sent advance men, musicians, and entertainers to lure people to his rallies. And his own dramatic arrival by helicopter, a rare sight in those days, ensured plenty of local media coverage. When he won the election by just eighty-seven votes, some probably obtained by illegal ballot-box stuffing, his opponents derided him as “Landslide Lyndon.”

LBJ was already becoming larger than life. He had a huge, unappeasable hunger to be loved, and a huge desire to manipulate everybody. And in the Senate, his career skyrocketed. In 1951 he became majority whip, and soon after, minority leader. In 1955, the forty-six-year-old Texan became the youngest majority leader in the Senate’s history.

But that same year, just as Johnson was being widely touted as the next president, he suffered a massive heart attack. For the first time in his life this chain-smoking, food-shoveling workaholic was forced to slow down. Unable to regain his political momentum fully, Johnson lost his 1960 bid for the presidency to John F. Kennedy. It was then, for the first time in his life, that Lyndon Johnson
lowered his political sights and agreed to serve as Kennedy's vice presidential running mate. In November they won a narrow victory in the national elections. "I wouldn't contend that any Vice President is ever fully informed of what the President is doing and thinking," LBJ later asserted. "I do believe that a Vice President . . . must be ready to step in and take over if something should ever happen to the President."

On November 22, 1963, Johnson traveled with the President to Texas on a political visit. Following in a car behind the Lincoln convertible in which the Kennedys rode, Johnson heard clearly the rifle shots that took the President's life. Just hours later, at 2:30 p.m., aboard Air Force One, with Jacqueline Kennedy by his side, LBJ took the oath of office. Five days later he addressed Congress as president. "All I have I would have gladly given not to be standing here today," he said. "The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time . . . An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the presidency." And then Johnson gave a simple pledge. "On the 20th day of January, in 1961, John F. Kennedy told his countrymen . . . 'let us begin.' Today, in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow Americans, 'let us continue.'"

But Lyndon Johnson was not content to simply continue what Kennedy had begun. Here, finally, was his chance to put all his ideals into action. In his State of the Union address to Congress seven weeks later, he did what no other president has ever done—he declared an "unconditional war on poverty" and pledged to end the long legacy of American racism. "This is not merely an economic issue," he said, "or a social, political, or international issue. It is a moral issue." He called his vision of America's future "The Great Society."

When Johnson became president in his own right in 1964, his ambitions rose with the opportunity he saw. Setting out to rid his home country, the South, of segregation, he wanted, as well, to literally end poverty in America. And he wanted to pass legislation at every opportunity. The endeavors exposed a well of idealism deep inside him. They also exposed a lack of restraint. No presidential leverage went unexploited. Johnson doled out public works projects, prized appointments, and photo opportunities to those who cooperated, and withheld them from those who did not. His tactics reinforced his image as the quintessential arm twister.

"I was on the phone with individual Senators way into the night, day and day after day," LBJ acknowledged. "A president is a political leader and he can never be above politics." If nothing else worked, Johnson knew how to shame a person into compliance, as he did when powerful Senator Richard Russell tried to avoid serving on the Warren Commission. "Don't tell me what you can do and what you can't," Johnson barked at Russell on the other end of a telephone, "because I can't arrest you, and I'm not going to put the FBI on you, but you're goddamn sure going to serve. I'll tell you that."

His political powers might well have gained Lyndon Johnson recognition as one of the country's most effective presidents ever, if it had not been for Vietnam. As the conflict in Southeast Asia escalated into an undeclared war, Johnson was determined not to let it divert Congressional attention away from his domestic legislation. So he escalated the war secretly, providing Congress with overly optimistic military reports in an effort to get complete support. As the death toll mounted to more than 500 American casualties each week, the country grew bitterly divided.

In Vietnam LBJ was faced with Ho Chi Minh, an opponent he couldn't master by his usual tactics of cajolery, persuasion, or intimidation. Faced by a war the President was unable to bring to a satisfying end, the people found
their sentiments changing. They wanted a commander-in-chief and a man of temperate judgment rather than a politician. But Johnson couldn’t change his style. There was not in Lyndon Johnson a saving moderation.

After the Democrats suffered a reversal in the 1966 mid-term elections, Johnson found his programs increasingly voted down in Congress. And the legislative skills by which he had forged strong coalitions in the past no longer seemed to work for him. On March 31, 1968, he abruptly pulled his name out of the upcoming presidential primaries. “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term of office as your President.”

All his life Lyndon Johnson used politics to do big things. In civil rights, in education, in poverty programs, and in conservation, he changed the face of American society. But in the end, politics failed him, exposing an insecure side of Johnson’s character—a side that he’d successfully covered up with political bluster all his professional life.

“Sometimes a President is prevented from achieving what he wants . . . by circumstances completely beyond his control,” he said not long afterward. “The crucible of the White House brings out the best and the worst in men. . . . [But] a President is not elected to do what’s wrong. His biggest problem is trying to find out what’s right and doing it. . . . And that’s a very big question mark in this very complicated world.”

AN INDEPENDENT CAST OF MIND

CHAPTER FOUR

Is independence of mind an admirable trait for a president or can extreme self-reliance work against the office?

The presidency as it was first created was meant to stand above all political factions and serve in the general public interest, an ideal first incarnated in George Washington. Independent-minded yet conciliatory, both a leader and a listener, Washington successfully held the young nation together. “You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies . . . which spring from [faction],” he warned his fellow Americans. “They tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.”

But disagreements between Washington’s secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton, and his secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, eventually led to a political rupture, exactly what Washington had warned against. To be politically successful by the late 1790s meant to be thoroughly aligned with one or the other of two national “parties,” the Federalists or the Democratic-Republicans.

John Adams was one of those few who was never so aligned. Though nominally a Federalist, he despised Alexander Hamilton, whom he saw as personally ambitious and as biased toward the wealthy. But he also deeply distrusted Thomas Jefferson, whom he considered naive for his belief in unfettered democracy and for his enthusiasm for the French Revolution. Attempting to mark out his own pathway, but lacking Washington’s extraordinary abilities, Adams ended