

The Johnson Years

The Paradoxes of Johnson . . . the Man

Editor's note: The 36th President of the United States fit no stereotypes, and perhaps that was one reason why he lost touch with the people, or they with him. This article, the first of five, examines the paradoxes of Johnson the man.

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Almost from the day he was born, it seemed, Lyndon Baines Johnson had the makings of a president—right alongside those elements that would contribute to the breaking of a president.

The story of his life could be told in such paradox.

Perhaps his wife, Lady Bird, put it best, years later. Recalling her first encounter with the impetuous young Texan, she said: "I knew I had met something remarkable, but I didn't know quite what."

Millions understand now what she meant.

Remarkable? Indeed. No one who chanced into that swirling, magnetic orbit could forget the experience. Lyndon Baines Johnson exuded a raw, frontier kind of strength; physically and psychologically, he overwhelmed.

Apart from his mentor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, perhaps no other public man in this century—not even John F. Kennedy, whose elegant ghost haunted Johnson to the end—understood so well the sources of power in the world's most powerful capital—or knew, in LBJ's idiom, which button to mash, and how hard, to make things happen.

That this talent, "the Johnson treatment," availed him little at the end did not diminish its impressiveness while it worked.

Lady Bird was right on another count, too. From the moment he set foot in Washington in 1931 as a congressional secretary to the moment he flew back to Texas in 1969 after relinquishing the presidency, nobody really knew quite what Lyndon Johnson was all about. He was a study in contradictions.

He was from the South, but no orthodox Southerner; from Texas, but not the stereotyped Texan; harsh and domineering with subordinates, yet capable of great kindness; a Democrat's Democrat, but no ideologue.

He could be eloquent and moving and persuasive in one moment, and orate like a man dictating to a stonemason in the next.

He could be open, ingratiating, simple, transparent. And he could be fiercely secretive, offensive, jealous, and enormously complex.

Johnson whipped through Congress more civil rights legislation than any president in history. Yet when he left the presidency, the nation's racial divisions were deeper than ever.

No president spent as much money and forged as much legislation to improve the quality of education. But at the end, the students and intellectuals were shouting for his scalp.

He pulled the country together when it was stumbling about in a daze after John Kennedy's murder. A year later the people were shouting "All the way with LBJ" and he won election

in his own right by the biggest landslide in history to that time.

But by 1968 the shouts in some antiwar quarters had turned to "Hey, Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" and his land was plagued by the greatest divisiveness since the Civil War.

There probably were more people out in the country like him than like his predecessor. Johnson was purely and aggressively American—a true frontier president in the tradition of Andy Jackson. But in the final judgment of his countrymen, it simply was not the time for a meat-and-potatoes man.

Nor was it the time for Johnson's consensus politics—"There's got to be some common meeting ground for everyone." That may well have been the remedy the nation needed; it was not what the nation wanted.

"In a sense," liberal Democrat Daniel P. Moynihan told Richard Nixon a year later, Lyndon Johnson "was the first American president to be toppled by a mob. No matter that it was a mob of college professors, millionaires, flower children, and Radcliffe girls. It was a mob that by early 1968 had effectively physically separated the presidency from the people."

And it happened to a man who had told the nation in 1965, in perhaps his most eloquent and memorable address:

"I want to be the president who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races and all regions and all parties."

"I want to be the president who helped to end war among the brothers of this earth."

It was not to be. The currents of the 1960s were running strong, if silent, well before Lyndon B. Johnson took the oath on that nightmarish Nov. 22, 1963. And later, reflectively, he said it simply was not given to him to lead the country out of itself.

He referred to his manner, his style, and said he was handicapped by "a general inability to stimulate, inspire, and unite all the people of the country, which I think is an essential function of the presidency."

"I have never really believed that I was the man to do that particular job . . . I never really felt that with all of my experience and my training and whatever expertise I had in 35 years of public service, that in the last analysis the people of every section would say, 'You tell us where to go and we'll go.' I just never did believe that . . ."

From the beginning, he was bedeviled by the word "style." He was a Texan in a city that had shed much of its Southernness and blended in with the East coast; a city that had made Jack Kennedy's Harvard accent its symbol, that reacted to the sudden new drawl as to scratching on a blackboard.

He deemed his critics snobs. Sam Houston Johnson wrote in his book "My Brother Lyndon": "I'm afraid that any pol-

iticians from the Deep South of Southwest (including my brother) are frequently damned by Northern liberals from the moment they open their mouths. They might be saying and thinking the same damned thing as some Harvard-educated congressman from the East, but they'll never get credit for it.

"It's all-out snobism against an accent, a mode of expression, a way of dressing, a way of eating—against a whole manner of living. I have even heard my brother's family ridiculed because they didn't have a fancy French chef in the White House kitchen, as if eating snails in garlic sauce will make you more civilized and human than eating plain meat and potatoes."

So Washington gossiped and giggled about a president who had a soft-drink button installed in the Cabinet room and mispronounced the name of the drink; who expressed himself, privately, in the earthiest of barnyard analogy; who hollered down from the White House balcony to reporters to come see a real live poet, Carl Sandburg; who pointed to his daughter's loose-fitting dress and told his visitors it didn't mean what they thought; who pleaded with strike negotiators, late at night, to get it over with because "Lady Bird is waiting"; who engaged in staff conferences from the bathroom; who tore around the ranch at 90 miles an hour with a beer in

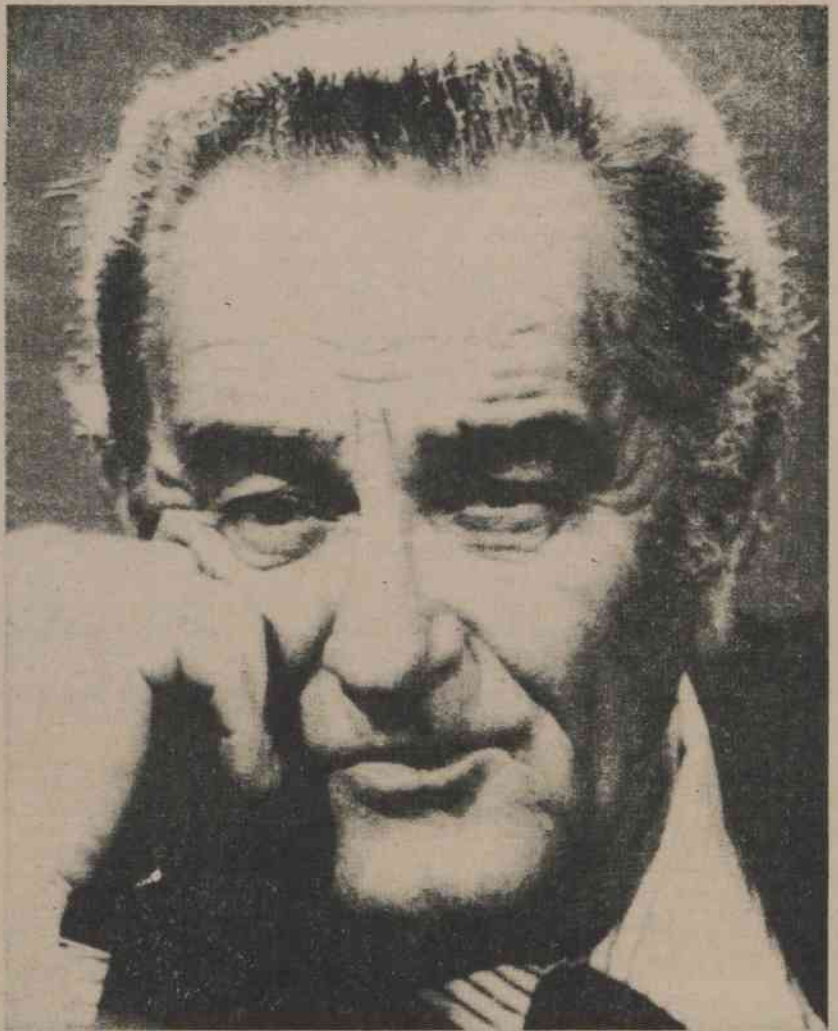
his hand (and no vice president to succeed him); who hiked up his shirt to show the world his new surgical scar.

For Johnson, politics was all there was. It was work, rest, recreation. Movies, theater, games, small talk—they all bored him. He might go for a boat ride on the Potomac or on Lake Lyndon B. Johnson—but the company, and the talk, were political.

Wheedling a vote, or trying to hire a staff man, or coaxing someone into the adminis-

tration, Johnson could turn the famous treatment on full blast. His hand pawed at his victim's arm as he stood chest to chest, his face literally on top of the other man's, his voice soft and cajoling, his eyes widening and scrunching up and occasionally welling with tears. He devoured single persons and small groups and usually got what he wanted. It worked for decades with senators, employes, prospective appointees, union men, friends, and even some foes.

But in the end, it wasn't enough to persuade a nation.



Lyndon B. Johnson: 1908-1973 (UPI 1972 Photo)

People In News

LONDON (AP) — American industrialist Howard Hughes was admitted to Britain for three months as a visitor even though he didn't have a valid U.S. passport, the House of Commons has been told.

A spokesman for the Home Office told Commons the billionaire recluse was admitted last month without a passport after satisfying immigration officials "about his nationality, identity and means."

Hughes, 68, flew to Britain from Managua aboard a private jet after the devastating December earthquake at the Nicaraguan capital, where he had been living. While spokesmen refuse to comment on his whereabouts, Hughes is reported to be living at the Inn on the Park Hotel near Buckingham Palace.

ROME (AP) — J. Paul Getty III has been released from jail and disorderly conduct charges against the grandson of oil billionaire J. Paul Getty have been dismissed.

Arrested Friday during clashes between police and leftist youths demonstrating against the Fascist party congress, young Getty claimed he was not a participant, only a passerby.

He was freed Monday.

Performs Rites

JETMORE, Kan. (AP) — Galen Rasmussen, 19, was sworn in as justice of the peace for Center Township here Friday and a few hours later performed his first marriage ceremony.