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Historians and the Many Lyndon Johnsons: A Review Essay

By KENT B. GERMANY

LBJ: Architect of American Ambition. By Randall B. Woods. (New York and other cities: Free Press, c. 2006. Pp. [xii], 1007. \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-684-83458-0.)

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON DIED ALONE IN HIS ROOM ON A MONDAY. He was sixty-four. He called for help, and then his bad heart finally quit. It was two days after Richard M. Nixon's second inauguration—what would have been the end of Johnson's second term had he run and won in 1968—and about a week before the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on Vietnam.¹ The man lowered into the caliche of the LBJ Ranch in the Texas hill country in late January 1973 would not be soon forgotten. He has become one of the most chronicled figures in modern United States history, the subject of over twenty significant biographical works published by both commercial and academic presses since 1966, including two multivolume efforts (by contrast, biographers of John F. Kennedy have managed so far to fit JFK into one). On average, a major new treatment of LBJ has been published every two years, and these works are the products of leading biographers and storytellers from their respective generations. Their accolades are too long to list but include several Pulitzer Prizes, the Bancroft Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Francis Parkman Prize.² Johnson's own memoirs, *The Vantage Point*, required

¹ Johnson's passing was also about one month after Harry S Truman's death.

² Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* (New York, 1966); Alfred Steinberg, *Sam Johnson's Boy: A Close-Up of the President from Texas* (New York, 1968); Tom Wicker, *JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality upon Politics* (New York, 1968); Eric F. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York, 1969); Sam Houston Johnson with Enrique Hank Lopez, *My Brother Lyndon* (New York, 1970); Jack Valenti, *A Very Human President* (New York, 1975); Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, 1976); Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York, 1980); George Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir* (New York, 1982); Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate* (New York, 1982); Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York, 1982); Caro,

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an elite staff of professionals to complete. Robert L. Hardesty and Harry Middleton, speechwriters and aides to LBJ, oversaw an enterprise involving Walt W. Rostow, William J. Jorden, Doris Kearns, and others.³ Even Johnson's home in Texas is the subject of a first-rate history.⁴

Other writers have produced approximately 250 Ph.D. dissertations, well over one hundred books, and countless articles regarding specific aspects of Johnson's career and his policies.⁵ Most of those works are not biographies but focus on the times in which he lived, treating Johnson as a part of other stories. As president during the high point of liberal electoral strength in the mid-1960s, LBJ is a key figure in the literature dealing with race, poverty, Vietnam, civil rights, tax cuts, the urban crisis, the cold war, the Democratic Party, or any Great Society legislation, as well as the politics of immigration, land conservation, environmental protection, education at all levels, and the proliferation of liberation movements. And Johnson is not a subject merely for students of the 1960s. Having come of age politically during the New Deal, World War II, and the early cold war, Johnson is important to scholars examining public works, economic development, military preparedness, anticommunism, the expansion of American power across the globe, and the workings of Congress

The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent (New York, 1990); Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (New York, 2002); Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908–1960* (New York, 1991); Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York, 1998); Paul K. Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Boston, 1986); Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud That Defined a Decade* (New York, 1997); Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, *LBJ: A Life* (New York, 1999); Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston, 1994); William E. Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Baton Rouge, 2005); John L. Bullion, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York, 2008). Biographical treatments focusing on Johnson as president include Vaughn Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (Lawrence, Kans., 1983); Joseph A. Califano Jr., *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (New York, 1991); Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter? The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (New York, 1996); W. Marvin Watson with Sherwin Markman, *Chief of Staff: Lyndon Johnson and His Presidency* (New York, 2004); and Horace Busby, *The Thirty-First of March: An Intimate Portrait of Lyndon Johnson's Final Days in Office* (New York, 2005).

³Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York, 1971); Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 14–16; Hal K. Rothman, *LBJ's Texas White House: "Our Heart's Home"* (College Station, Tex., 2001), 246, 248; Leo Janos, "The Last Days of the President: LBJ in Retirement," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1973, pp. 35–41; Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York, 2006), 880.

⁴Rothman, *LBJ's Texas White House*.

⁵The figure of 250 dissertations comes from a keyword search of the Proquest/UMI database of dissertations and theses.

and Washington, D.C.⁶ The extensive inquiry involving Johnson is more remarkable considering that historiographical trends at the time of his death and over the following decades encouraged scholars to focus more attention toward social and cultural issues and away from political histories, especially of national political figures. Yet LBJ cut a historical swath too large to be ignored.

Part of the reason that writers have paid so much attention to LBJ is the size of the documentary record. For students of politics and policy, Lyndon Johnson left one of the largest collections of historical evidence in world history. Media coverage during his lifetime was especially intense since the assassination of John F. Kennedy had aroused a historic level of interest in the American presidency. This "first draft" of history is vast. For example, Johnson appeared in about 4,000 articles published by the *Washington Post* and 3,600 by the *New York Times* during his five years in the White House.⁷ Millions of documents from federal departments and agencies under his control stand stacked at National Archives facilities in the nation's capital and at regional depositories across the country. In May 1971 LBJ opened his presidential library in Austin, Texas, with typical audacity: "It is all here," he declared, "the story of our time with the bark off."⁸ Within its ten-story travertine skin, the LBJ Presidential Library and Museum houses almost 30,000 cubic feet of archival materials (approximately 45 million documents), stored in red boxes visible in towering display to visitors of the museum.⁹ Official documents rarely do justice to the personality of LBJ, their formality obscuring so much about the man.¹⁰ Oral histories have helped fill this void and are likely the single most important source for trying to

⁶This essay does not explore that extraordinarily vast literature. Key overviews can be found in Robert A. Divine, ed., *Exploring the Johnson Years* (Austin, 1981); Divine, ed., *The Johnson Years*. Vol. II: *Vietnam, the Environment, and Science* (Lawrence, Kans., 1987); Divine, ed., *The Johnson Years*. Vol. III: *LBJ at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, Kans., 1994); Mitchell B. Lerner, ed., *Looking Back at LBJ: White House Politics in a New Light* (Lawrence, Kans., 2005); and Gary R. Hess, "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History*, 18 (Spring 1994), 239–64.

⁷These numbers derive from a word search for *Lyndon* and *Johnson* in the Proquest Historical Newspapers Database.

⁸The phrase is now used as the slogan for the LBJ Library: <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/aboutus.hom/aboutus-home.shtm>.

⁹In 2009 the LBJ Library estimated that it held 25,012 cubic feet of textual materials and 3,903 of audiovisual materials. Claudia Anderson, supervisory archivist of LBJ Library, to Kent Germany, January 9, 2009, in the possession of the author; see also "Information for Researchers," <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/resinfo.asp>.

¹⁰Johnson himself steadfastly rejected attempts by the writers of *The Vantage Point* to insert his down-home personality into his memoirs. Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 14–15.

figure out who LBJ really was and what he really stood for. In addition to the many interviews conducted by scholars, journalists, and documentarians for their research, the LBJ Library's ambitious oral history project has captured the recollections of over 1,230 people who had been in the Johnson orbit.¹¹

The newest resource for peeling off LBJ's "bark" is approximately 800 hours of secretly recorded conversations and meetings. Although those tapes were initially to remain sealed for fifty years after Johnson's death, the U.S. Congress mandated in 1992 the opening of material related to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and those tapes began to be made available to the public in 1993. The Johnson family and the LBJ Library decided to take the opportunity to open the rest of the tapes and soon after initiated a long-term project of releasing chronological sections of the recordings as they became ready. Fifteen years later, in December 2008, the library made public the final installment of the 642 hours of telephone conversations (at least those sections that did not violate security or deed-of-gift restrictions). Still classified, though, are some pre-presidential recordings and almost all of the 143 meeting tapes recorded during 1968, which the library plans to release in the future.¹² These LBJ tapes have introduced a private Johnson to a nation more familiar with his purposefully stoic and statesmanlike public persona. Since the mid-1990s, LBJ's actual voice has found a receptive general audience and has helped reintroduce a man disparaged in his own time.¹³

Johnson was more than just a president during a momentous era. He was a historical whirlwind unto himself. He is a biographer's dream, having possessed a personality that matched the turbulence and energy of his times. His ego was so large, his mind so meticulous, his visions

¹¹ "LBJ Library Oral History Collection," http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/oralhistory.hom/com_ohlist.asp.

¹² John Powers, "The History of Presidential Audio Recordings and the Archival Issues Surrounding Their Use" (1996), available at "Johnson Tapes: Overview," <http://www.whitehousetapes.net/tapes/johnson/overview>; "The Final Chapter: Last segment of historic LBJ telephone conversations will be released on December 4, 2008," LBJ Library press release, December 3, 2008, http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/press.hom/press_releases_details.cfm?ID=136.

¹³ Since 1997, several collections of transcripts of the LBJ presidential recordings have been published, but these cover only a small proportion of the total pool of audio material produced. Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York, 1997); Beschloss, ed., *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York, 2001); Max Holland, *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes* (New York, 2004). An ongoing project is *Lyndon Johnson [Presidential Recordings Series]*. Vols. I-III: *The Kennedy Assassination and the Transfer of Power, November 1963-January 1964*, edited by Max Holland, Robert David Johnson, David Shreve, and Kent B. Germany (New York, 2005); Vols. IV-VI: *Toward the Great Society, February 1, 1964-May 31, 1964*, edited by Robert David Johnson, Kent B. Germany, David Shreve, and Guian A. McKee (New York, 2007); these volumes are hereinafter cited as *Lyndon Johnson [Presidential Recordings]*.

so vast, and his personality so engulfing and filled with so many contradictions that over twenty biographers have struggled to make sense of a man too entertaining to forget but too complex to ever fully capture. He was funny and foul and frenetic, and for a generation of Americans, he represented the failure of American liberalism. How could a man so exquisitely skilled at creating consensus leave the nation more polarized than it had been in almost a century? The man who was elected to the White House by one of the widest margins in U.S. history and pushed through as much legislation as any other American politician now seems to be remembered best by the public for succeeding an assassinated hero, steering the country into a quagmire in Vietnam, cheating on his saintly wife, exposing his stitched-up belly, using profanity, picking up dogs by their ears, swimming naked with advisers in the White House pool, and emptying his bowels while conducting official business. Of all those issues, Johnson's reputation suffers the most from his management of the Vietnam War, something that has overshadowed his civil rights and domestic policy accomplishments and caused Johnson himself to regret his handling of "the woman I really loved—the Great Society."¹⁴ As a result, major national Democratic leaders have dared not speak his name for the past quarter century. One inartful attempt by New York senator Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary campaign backfired famously.¹⁵ Thankfully, historians have not shared that reluctance and have been relentless in unveiling their many Lyndon Johnsons.

The word most often used to describe this man is *legendary*, whether about his ambition or his insecurity, his temper or his compassion, his need to dominate or his tendency to want to run away. For so many of his chroniclers, Johnson lived his life like a cliché of postmodernism, rootless and relative, a human being shifting shape to fit whatever the

¹⁴ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 251.

¹⁵ In the days preceding the January 26 South Carolina Democratic primary, Senator Clinton created a storm of commentary when she used a historical reference to President Johnson and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to contrast her political experience against that of her chief rival, Barack Obama. "Dr. King's dream," she explained, "began to be realized when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when he was able to get through Congress something that President Kennedy was hopeful to do, the president before had not even tried, but it took a president to get it done." A New York *Times* editorial found it "baffling" that she would compare herself to Vietnam-tainted Johnson and "hard to escape the distasteful implication that a black man needed the help of a white man to effect change." Bill Moyers, "Moyers on Clinton, Obama, King and Johnson," *Bill Moyers Journal*, January 18, 2008, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/01182008/profile4.html> (first quotation); Patrick Healy and Jeff Zeleny, "Clinton and Obama Spar over Remark about Dr. King," New York *Times*, January 13, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/us/politics/13cnd-campaign.html>; "Unite, Not Divide, Really This Time," New York *Times*, January 9, 2008, p. A18 (second and third quotations).

moment demanded. One of the chief challenges of Johnson's biographers has been to separate the legend from the reality—and to realize when the legend has created its own reality. Despite those voluminous records, or perhaps because of them, interpretations of Lyndon Johnson are as restless as the man himself, and this was a man who claimed to sometimes gain and lose ten or fifteen pounds in a month.¹⁶ As Johnson confidant and White House aide Bill Moyers explained in 2005, "he was thirteen of the most interesting men I ever met—and not all of them were appealing."¹⁷ Francis M. Bator, deputy national security adviser, described a common pattern to encounters with the president. In "Act 1," LBJ was "full of extravagance and razzmatazz" where "literal truth was not the point—and he expected you to understand that." Soon after came "Act 2," when Johnson was "focused, tight-lipped," and brimming with questions, a cagey and wily interrogator with a serious task before him. McGeorge Bundy, Johnson's national security adviser (initially called the special assistant for national security affairs), surmised that LBJ just did not like to be understood.¹⁸

LBJ could not stay still in life, and he has not in death. His biographers, nevertheless, have arrived at some basic points of consensus on Johnson the human being. He was, foremost, a product of his contradictions. He was his father's son, a man's man who drank tall whiskey and took to wild things and was prone to boldness and bare fists, yet he was also his mother's child, constantly seeking affection and affirmation while obsessing over ambitions and anxieties. For many writers, Johnson was simultaneously a brash big-daddy cowboy chasing up the dreams of his people and a vulnerable giant with the covers pulled up to his chin.¹⁹ This compassionate man who could charm a room for hours was also a petulant and emotionally insecure creature whose almost unquenchable need to control the people around him was rivaled only

¹⁶Conversation between LBJ and Joe Haggar, August 9, 1964, 1:17 P.M., Citation #4851, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings (Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, Austin, Tex.; hereinafter cited as LBJ Library); hereinafter cited as White House Tapes.

¹⁷Moyers's statement at approximately forty-three minutes on the audio recording of "Living History: On Lyndon B. Johnson," panel discussion with Bill Moyers, Ted Sorensen, Timothy Naftali, Robert David Johnson, and Kent Germany, May 9, 2005, at 92nd Street Y, New York, New York; recording in possession of the author and available from the 92nd Street Y.

¹⁸Francis M. Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," American Academy of Arts and Sciences Occasional Paper, 2007, pp. 4–5 (first, second, and third quotations on 4; fourth and fifth quotations on 5), available online at <http://www.amacad.org/publications/nogoodChoices.aspx>.

¹⁹Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*; Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 17.

by his extreme energy and need to be recognized as a great man. Along with Johnson's tireless, obsessive work ethic, these battling identities produced a human skilled at identifying sources of power and building more power from them, constantly cultivating eminent men and popular women in a well-worn pattern. Sometimes this person was a force for good, sometimes not.

In a New Year's Day 1964 telephone call with Helen Gahagan Douglas, the well-known actress and former congresswoman from California whom several historians have identified as a former mistress of LBJ's, the president offered the sage advice that power lay in "what you emphasize."²⁰ LBJ spent a lifetime deciding what to emphasize about himself, and writers have devoted millions of words trying to figure it out. Randall Bennett Woods, the John A. Cooper Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Arkansas and author of the award-winning *Fulbright: A Biography* (New York, 1995), is the most recent biographer to address Johnson's "habit of inventing versions of himself and putting them up for inspection and approval" (p. 639). Depending on the circumstances, according to Woods, he could be "Johnson the Son of the Tenant Farmer, Johnson the Great Compromiser, Johnson the All-Knowing, Johnson the Humble, Johnson the Warrior, Johnson the Dove, Johnson the Romantic, Johnson the Hard-Headed Pragmatist, Johnson the Preserver of Traditions, Johnson the Crusader for Social Justice, Johnson the Magnanimous, Johnson the Vindictive" or "Johnson the Uncouth," "LBJ the Hick," "Lyndon the Satyr," and "Johnson the Usurper" (pp. 639, 644, 645). Previous biographers have offered up Johnson the big daddy, the southerner-westerner-Texan, the American dreamer, the politician, the father's son, the rising star, the flawed giant, the Periclean paradox (domestic dreams undone by war), the very human, the tragedy, the pathbreaker, the ascender, and the master.

Like the many writers before him, Woods tries to identify the sources of Johnson's multiple personas and to crack the conundrums that made up so much of Johnson's life, while trying to tell the larger story of his role in American history. Taking on this task requires an ambitiousness of scope befitting the subject, and Woods's *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* follows through admirably, despite the need to constrain the

²⁰ Conversation between LBJ and Helen Gahagan Douglas, January 1, 1964, in *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], III, 11. The writing on Johnson's relationship with Douglas tends to rely on recollections by Johnson aide Horace Busby. Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*, 141-45; Woods, *LBJ*, 367; Unger and Unger, *LBJ*, 82; Ingrid Winther Scobie, *Center Stage: Helen Gahagan Douglas, a Life* (New York, 1992), 171-72.

final product to one volume. The result is an eloquent and relatively concise synthesis of LBJ as a person, a politician, and a president that offers a bold interpretation of the thirty-sixth commander in chief. Woods's biography is not the final word. This subject will almost certainly never have a last word, but Woods's *LBJ* is a book that cannot be ignored by scholars trying to sort out Johnson and the world he affected. It does suffer, however, from several errors in detail that can erode a reader's confidence. Commenters at Amazon.com and other online forums have compiled extended lists of inaccuracies and leveled extensive criticism toward Woods's book.²¹ A testament to Woods's skill as an interpreter, the book's fresh analysis, convincing synthesis, and deep research outweigh those unfortunate and mostly minor mistakes to make this study an essential part of the literature on Johnson and his times. The portrait is a compelling one that inevitably raises more questions than it settles, as Woods exposes the reader to the persistent tension between Lyndon Johnson's civic ideals and the realities of securing and then using power in modern America. Johnson's life becomes the classic case of politics as the art of the possible.

Woods, like others before him, highlights the grandiosity of Johnson's vision and his actions. For Woods, however, Johnson is more than merely a transformational figure who made important things happen in one era. He is also a transitional figure whose life story was central to the moving of the nation from one era to another. Johnson was the president who really built the bridge to the twenty-first century. LBJ was America, and the two grew into behemoths together after the

²¹ Most of the inaccuracies are minor. On the Zapruder film of Kennedy's assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy's outfit is visibly and memorably pink, but Woods refers to her "green suit"; he correctly returns to pink later in the book (pp. 3, 418). Woods also misidentifies the home state of at least three senators (while identifying them correctly in other places [pp. 241/303, 282/303, 382/514]), puts Willard Wirtz at a meeting when he meant Alvin Wirtz (p. 197), and labels the Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway as the Tennessee-Tom Bigby, an error also made by White House transcribers (p. 477). In another, more serious inconsistency, Woods has civil rights activist James Chaney being "beaten to death" instead of dying from gunshot wounds (p. 478). A few other examples involve pacing and ambiguities. For example, Woods has LBJ declaring "unconditional war on poverty," and then Woods discusses the president's failure to sleep well in the first few days after Kennedy's assassination, but LBJ did not declare a war on poverty until his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, six weeks later (pp. 432-33, 449-50). In another example, the timing of crucial telephone calls with Mississippi senator James O. Eastland and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover in the "Mississippi Burning" investigation are switched in order (p. 479; see Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge*, 432-34). For another quibble, promotional material on the dust jacket claims that the book benefited from "thousands of hours" of White House tapes, when the LBJ Library identifies the number at 642 hours, and fewer than 500 hours of recordings had been released before the publication of this book. Other lists of errors can be found on the user review section of the book's page at Amazon.com and in Iwan Morgan's review in the *American Historical Review*, 112 (April 2007), 529-30.

Great Depression. Representing more than a synthesis of the voluminous secondary literature, Woods's book relies heavily on oral history and on primary research from the LBJ Library to argue that Johnson actually believed in something besides the accumulation of power: he had core principles and morals drawn from his family, his religion, his nationalism, and his experiences in rural Texas. For most of his career, LBJ was a closet liberal who yearned to break free, but he was too smart or cautious to do it too prominently. Building on the concept of Johnson as a "liberal nationalist," articulated by Robert Dallek in his two-volume biography from the 1990s, Woods finds Johnson's liberalism and his nationalism nearly indivisible.²² In this view, one cannot adequately explore Johnson or liberalism or American power from the New Deal forward without analyzing the ways they built upon each other. In the 1930s and 1940s, according to Woods, Johnson embraced a "new American nationalism" and became its apostle in Texas, "calling on Texans to abandon their parochialism, their fears, their deliberate ignorance and become part of an emerging consensus in behalf of social justice and internationalism" (p. 156). One of Johnson's primary motivations was to modernize Texas (and the South and Southwest), including its economy, its infrastructure, and its conceptions of equality and citizenship. Johnson took this perspective and his overflow of energy to Washington, D.C., and became the "architect of American ambition."

Johnson's role as civic architect began in the Texas hill country, and in Woods's hands, LBJ's early life there becomes prelude to the later Great Society, a place where the future president developed the ideals and values that defined his administration. Whereas prominent LBJ biographer Robert A. Caro sees this young Johnson as being turned into the "dark" Lyndon in Texas, Woods finds that Johnson's rural experiences fed his compassion and sense of justice.²³ To his credit, Woods takes seriously the role of religion in Johnson's early life and beyond, providing readers with insight into one of the most overlooked facets of Johnson's personality and worldview. This aspect of Woods's work gets top billing, as the book's dust jacket describes Johnson's politics as being rooted in "a liberal Texas tradition of public service and a strong belief in the public good" and as being "based on a liberal Christian tradition." "For the Johnsons," Woods declares, "social justice, public

²² Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, chap. 15.

²³ Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, xix–xx; Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, xxvi–xxvii.

service, and community building were unquestioned values" (p. 27). As early as the age of nineteen, Johnson "was drawn to the notion of living the life of a principled politician closely connected to his people" (p. 49). He had "realized that the American political system was a process, not a state," and that it could be used for "social good" or "social evil" (p. 55). While Robert Caro finds corrosive patterns in Johnson's time at Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos, Woods emphasizes the ideas that emerged from Johnson's time teaching poor, underprivileged Mexican American students in Cotulla, Texas.²⁴ One of the fruits of this experience came in his first term in Congress, when Johnson came to believe that building a coalition among whites, blacks, and Hispanics was essential for the modernization of Texas and the South. The predominant LBJ "pattern" was to "use the ideals that underlay the system to defeat the flaws that threatened to corrupt it" (p. 63). For Johnson, "utopia was an inclusive society dedicated to orderly growth" (p. 67).

Lessons absorbed from the religious-civic culture of central Texas infused Johnson's approaches to the three most famous issues of his presidency: civil rights, Vietnam, and the Great Society. While the president was devoted to the separation of church and state, he was guided by a Niebuhrian sense that "believers" had to undermine evil wherever it existed and to "do it with a vengeance." According to Woods, Johnson "was both motivated by feelings of Christian charity and compassion, and determined to use religion in his quest to realize an American Utopia" (p. 465). Johnson's use of the "Judeo-Christian ethic" in arguing for civil rights legislation as president proved to be "a watershed in twentieth-century political history" (p. 475). It bound the fight against poverty to the civil rights struggle and cemented Johnson's commitment to addressing inequalities in the United States. Woods, like others, finds those efforts to be Johnson's most important legacy. The book ends with the words of the celebrated writer Ralph Ellison. Since Johnson was not loved by either liberals or conservatives, he "would 'have to settle for being recognized as the greatest American President for the poor and for the Negroes'" (p. 884).

Influences of hill country church life and mainstream postwar Protestantism extended to foreign policy as well, with Johnson's views representing "a kind of Christian internationalism" (p. 486). He was a "Christian realist" who focused on containing communism through

²⁴Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, 141–60, 174–201.

military power and providing foreign aid and who identified "compassion" as being as important to American policy as "freedom, democracy, and free enterprise" (pp. 501, 502). His approach to the world was "a natural outgrowth of his background, his family, the milieu in which he grew up, his concepts of right and wrong" (p. 487). Vietnam was primarily an extension of LBJ's career-long struggle for "double containment"—the "containment of communism abroad and anticommunism at home" (p. 624). The framework that led to the escalation in Southeast Asia "stemmed from his Christian idealism," though "strategic perceptions" guided his conduct of the war (p. 503).

Woods provides an invaluable overview of the decisions made to escalate the war in 1964 and early 1965. Johnson was committed to protecting American "credibility," defined crisply by Woods as "the age-old notion that . . . nations were only as good as their word" (p. 512). Vietnam, however, exposed the difficulties in keeping the commitments that were so vital for international alliances. The president and his advisers tried to balance the questionable "viability" of the South Vietnamese regime against the need to maintain "the credibility of the United States with its cold war allies" (p. 596). The perception of the United States around the diplomatic world trumped the increasing unlikelihood that the government in South Vietnam could ever sustain itself. Johnson and his advisers muddled through by adhering to "the shibboleths of the monolithic communist threat, the domino theory, the Munich analogy, and the Social Gospel," while being confused by "the complexities of fighting a limited war designed to persuade rather than destroy, of a guerrilla conflict in which it was difficult to tell friend from foe, of defending an autocratic military regime in South Vietnam in the name of freedom and democracy" (p. 618).

Overall, Woods's portrayal of LBJ is sympathetic and filled with respect for the man, but it is not an exercise in hagiography or hero worship. With little hesitation, Woods delves into LBJ's depression and psychological deterioration after 1965. He also readily reveals Johnson's anger and aggressiveness, his refusal to apologize, and his ever-unfolding contradictions; Johnson's mother, Woods writes, had given birth to "a man-child and a messiah complex" (p. 20). Woods's Johnson may have had messianic dreams of saving his people, but he was certainly no angel. Woods delivers an unflinching account of LBJ's rough and often demeaning treatment of his friends and underlings, as well as his marital infidelities and his efforts to control the women in his life, including demands that they improve their appearance and function faithfully in subservient roles. Johnson had many women in his

life throughout his sixty-four years. While his mother was perhaps the most important psychologically, no one was more significant than his wife, Lady Bird. The demure and intelligent journalism student from an affluent East Texas family captured Johnson's attention in 1934, and the two remained together until his death in 1973. Lady Bird devoted her life to LBJ and was an invaluable assistant, friend, and adviser. According to a chorus of friends and family, she was a saint. And she was tough. Once, during Johnson's 1948 Senate race, she was driving to a campaign event when she had a wreck that caused her car to roll over twice. Injured but undeterred, she took care of her passenger, got another ride, and still made it to the event—on time and in such a confident manner that LBJ did not learn about the crash until late that evening.

Like all of LBJ's biographers, Woods has deep respect for Lady Bird, but he conscientiously avoids placing her on a pedestal, as either saint or martyr. In particular, he points out that her devotion to Lyndon meant that LBJ came first, even before the children whom she loved dearly. Her time away from them meant that the family's assistant Willie Day Taylor often served as a "surrogate mother" (p. 247). While Johnson demanded loyalty from his aides, employees, and family members, he did not return that faithfulness to Lady Bird and engaged in numerous extramarital affairs. The two mistresses who get the most attention are Alice Glass, the tall and beautiful fiancée of one of LBJ's dearest mentors, Texas liberal and millionaire Charles E. Marsh, and Helen Gahagan Douglas, the actress and California congresswoman who served with LBJ on Capitol Hill. Woods links LBJ's womanizing with a larger "urge . . . to seduce" that "was almost irresistible." Instead of protesting, Woods claims, Lady Bird tended "to attempt to ingratiate herself with the seduced" (p. 288). Accustomed to her own father's flings, she tolerated the relationships as long as they did not imperil the marriage. While LBJ's liaisons were certainly "hurtful," they were only one part of "two strong personalities work[ing] out the ground rules" for what became a thirty-eight-year marriage (p. 137).

As the most recent of almost two dozen LBJ biographers, Woods covers ground visited by many others over the years. He builds on this rich secondary literature, owing much to works by Doris Kearns, Ronnie Dugger, Robert Dallek, Alfred Steinberg, and Jan Jarboe Russell, a biographer of Lady Bird.²⁵ Woods's work is more exhaustive

²⁵ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*; Dugger, *Politician*; Steinberg, *Sam Johnson's Boy*; Jan Jarboe Russell, *Lady Bird: A Biography of Mrs. Johnson* (New York, 1999).

in scope than other single-volume treatments, such as Irwin Unger and Debi Unger's *LBJ: A Life* (1999), which situates Johnson in the long narrative of twentieth-century liberalism; Vaughn Davis Bornet's *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (1983), which focuses on the White House years; Bruce J. Schulman's concise, classroom-oriented *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents* (1994); and Paul K. Conkin's *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson* (1986), which pays close attention to the power of the Texas landscape on Johnson and is another book easily accessible to students. In terms of scope and in overall themes, Woods's study is probably most closely in step with Robert Dallek's *Lone Star Rising* (1991) and *Flawed Giant* (1998), which were repackaged into the one-volume *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (2004) on the heels of Dallek's best-selling *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (2003).²⁶

In the tradition of weighty, comprehensive, multivolume biographies intended to stand for the ages, Dallek's volumes have emerged as the books from the 1980s and 1990s most often cited by scholars, and they have been a major reason for the rise in positive assessments of LBJ—a process aided tremendously by the early release of some of LBJ's White House recordings. Disturbed by observing what he called “a hatred of Johnson that passes the bounds of common sense,” Dallek offered a reappraisal of LBJ that focused on the Texan's “consuming ambition” and his “considerable vision.”²⁷ Lauding LBJ as “one of the most important historical figures of our time,” Dallek, like Woods, emphasized Johnson's key role in the “nationalization” of Texas and its neighboring regions, his dedication to building a strong state apparatus, his advocacy of “state capitalism,” and his commitment to improving the lives of the poor and segregated.²⁸ Dallek anticipated an improvement in LBJ's reputation as more people continued to weigh his contributions against his failings. In a candid response to Robert Caro and other LBJ detractors, Dallek advised that “we need to see [Johnson's] life not as a chance to indulge our sense of moral superiority, but as a way to gain an understanding of many subjects crucial to this country's past, present, and future.” For Johnson, politics was “a dirty business in which only the most

²⁶ Robert Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (New York, 2004); Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston, 2003).

²⁷ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, vii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, viii (first quotation), 7 (second quotation), 8 (third quotation).

manipulative succeeded. He did not come to this simply out of some flaw in his character."²⁹

Oxford University Press openly marketed Dallek's re-interpretation as a corrective to Robert Caro's best-selling series *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.³⁰ Woods's book is less direct; it simply ignores Caro's work. This is a striking omission since Caro's first volume, *The Path to Power* (1982), an over 850-page examination of Johnson from his birth through World War II, became one of the most widely read books on LBJ. Its sequel, the 506-page *Means of Ascent* (1990), focused on Johnson's scandal-tinged 1948 election to the U.S. Senate over Coke Robert Stevenson, a man admired by Caro as a model cowboy-American driven by moral courage and principles, the antithesis of LBJ. The third volume in the projected four-volume series, *Master of the Senate*, was published twelve years later in 2002. This almost 1,200-page history of LBJ's life in the Senate, and particularly as Senate majority leader in the 1950s, earned Caro his second Pulitzer Prize for biography, eighteen years after having secured that honor for *The Power Broker*, an equally detailed depiction of New York urban planning bulldog Robert Moses.³¹

While it is an overstatement to say that all-things-LBJ must come back to Robert Caro, the award-winning journalist's 1982 portrait of Johnson was so powerful and relied on such apparently deep research that it instantly redefined the popular interpretation of Johnson. After all, Caro was one of the world's most-heralded biographers, and he was so committed to the story that this privileged Princeton man decided to move to the Texas hill country to better understand the place that produced Lyndon Johnson. The choice was a wise one, as *The Path to Power* reached a wide audience and earned a place on the New York Times's decade-ending review of best sellers of the 1980s.³² The first volume of Caro's Johnson biography is deserving of the widespread praise it received for being a model for the genre. Caro is a master investigator and storyteller. The books on Johnson that followed *The Path to Power*—and most of the major works that followed were by academics—were, at some level, responses to this work, whether intended or not.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10 (first quotation), 9 (second quotation).

³⁰ Chris Goodrich, "A Different Take on LBJ from Oxford U.P.," *Publisher's Weekly*, May 17, 1991, pp. 34–35.

³¹ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1974).

³² "Best Sellers," *New York Times*, December 24, 1989, p. E7.

Caro's portrait was not flattering, and it rankled LBJ supporters for decades.³³ It stood out in 1982 for its severity, and it continues to be the most damning appraisal of LBJ-the-person published by a nonpartisan author. No other major biographical work has come as close to seeing Johnson as driven by his shady impulses or as blinded by his rage for power. At times, Woods and Caro seem to be writing about different people. Woods makes a powerful commentary on this issue by finding only one item worthy of citation from Caro's over 2,500 pages on Johnson, and that matter regarded Johnson's father (p. 886n33).

In Caro's *The Path to Power*, Lyndon Johnson is a lying, cheating, thieving, domineering, adulterous, solipsistic narcissist whose severe personality defects damaged the lives of almost anyone who met him and remained in his life for very long. Those defects manifested themselves in Johnson's behavior early in life, especially as a student at Southwest Texas State Teachers College, and continued to bedevil him and those around him until his death. From a prodigious amount of research, especially personal interviews, Caro identified three prominent patterns that represented the essence of Lyndon Johnson. In one, Johnson since childhood was an amoral being who answered only to his ambition and to "the morality of the ballot box."³⁴ This conquest-by-almost-any-means defined Johnson's romantic relationships, his elections in college, his rise within the so-called Little Congress of Capitol Hill aides, his own congressional races, and most clearly, his election to the U.S. Senate in 1948 by a mere eighty-seven votes. Johnson, Caro wrote, had a "hunger [for power] so fierce and consuming that no consideration of morality or ethics, no cost to himself—or to anyone else—could stand before it."³⁵ A "desperate thirst for attention and admiration" made LBJ a "mixture of bootlicker and bully."³⁶ His prevailing personality traits were a "frantic, almost desperate aggressiveness," a "need to dominate," a "tendency to exaggeration," "viciousness and cruelty," and "fear" and insecurity.³⁷ Johnson's "path to power" was made possible by "utter ruthlessness in destroying obstacles in that path" and "a seemingly bottomless capacity for deceit, deception and betrayal."³⁸ Similar to previous biographers,

³³ David Barboza, "An L.B.J. Feud Finally Ends: Johnson's Library and Robert Caro Make Up," *ibid.*, May 22, 2003, pp. E1, E10.

³⁴ Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, 705.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xix.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 185 (first quotation), 194 (second quotation).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xx; see also Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*, 232.

Caro noted the dual and competing influences of Johnson's parents. Caro's take, though, was that Johnson missed out on their most important trait: "that they were idealists who stuck to their ideals. . . . [and] to principle."³⁹

The second pattern emphasized by Caro was Johnson's ability to use other people's wealth to build power for himself and to use that power to build his own wealth, particularly through the financial empire surrounding the KTBC radio and television enterprises owned by the Johnson family. Few Americans realized "the dimensions of his greed" or "its intensity."⁴⁰ Four rich Texans made Lyndon Johnson a national figure in the 1930s and 1940s. Most intensively chronicled are Herman and George Brown, the fabulously successful owners of Brown and Root Construction Company. Aided by Alvin J. Wirtz, the New Deal official who was also Brown and Root's attorney and associate who worked "the shadows," the Browns provided a seemingly bottomless source of funding for LBJ's campaigns and for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.⁴¹ In turn, Johnson used his influence in the New Deal to secure congressional authorization and appropriations for several Brown and Root projects, the most famous of which was the Marshall Ford Dam outside Austin that helped bring electricity to the hill country. Johnson also leveraged the Browns' support to spread campaign money to congressional candidates across the nation. Their fund-raising secured invaluable allies for LBJ and helped make the Democratic Party a far more effective force in local races.

The two other key Texas figures that Caro highlighted were Charles Marsh, the newspaper publisher and oil businessman, and Sid Richardson, Marsh's business partner and legendary oil pioneer. Marsh harbored a fatherly fondness for LBJ and helped bankroll a number of Johnson's campaigns. Marsh liked Johnson so much that he offered to give him all the oil lands he had developed with Richardson. As Caro pointed out in the opening of *The Path to Power*, the young Johnson had the foresight to turn the offer down for fear that it would "kill" his national political aspirations.⁴² Johnson returned the favor of Marsh's mentorship by having an almost decade-long affair with Marsh's Texas-born lover, Alice Glass, often meeting with her at Longlea, Marsh's

³⁹ Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, 137.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 373 (quotation), 627–28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xiii–xiv (quotation on xiv).

elegant Virginia manor that Glass designed after ones she had seen on her travels in Great Britain.⁴³

A third Caro pattern relies on a classic metaphor, with threads both "bright and dark" running intertwined throughout Johnson's life. The compassionate and democratic Johnson was too often overshadowed by the venal and tyrannical Johnson, while the passionate and strong-willed political genius competed with the coward who fled from many hard fights and who suffered a major health crisis after nearly every major career crisis. For Caro, Johnson's darkest times came not from the Kennedy envy of his years as vice president but during the seven years of congressional purgatory he endured between his defeat in 1941 in the Senate race against a man nicknamed "Pass the Biscuits, Pappy" (W. Lee O'Daniel) and his miraculous victory in 1948 over Coke Stevenson. Having the path to power blocked for those years caused some of Johnson's worst attributes to rise to the top, and he unleashed them in his struggle to seize a spot in the Senate.⁴⁴

For Caro, a New Yorker, Texas was toxic to LBJ. For Woods, a native Texan, it was regenerative. Woods's opening lines broadcast a central mission. "Texas and Lyndon Johnson are inseparable," he writes. "Both have been caricatured beyond recognition by historians" (p. 5). Johnson was a product of small-town Texas where locals took pride in their spot of earth and valued the sense of community there, all while resisting the persistent encroachments on one's privacy. As Numan V. Bartley has pointed out, Johnson came along at a time when the folk cultures of these communities were being decimated by economic expansion and rural out-migration.⁴⁵ In this regard, historians and journalists have used Johnson as a vehicle for exploring southern identity. Was he more western or southern or mostly that thing called Texan? Was Texas more western or southern or uniquely American? There is no clear answer to those difficult questions, but for Woods, Paul Conkin, Hal K. Rothman, and Ronnie Dugger, one thing is clear: the South and the West were vital to Johnson's identity and to the image he projected to the public. Conkin structured his 1986 study *Big Daddy from the Pedernales* around Johnson's identity as both southerner and westerner, noting Johnson's affinity for playing the cowboy. Rothman's *LBJ's Texas White House: "Our Heart's Home"* (2001) takes the story deep into the hill country, exploring Johnson's spiritual and financial connections to his home

⁴³ *Ibid.*, chap. 25.

⁴⁴ Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, xxvi (quotation), xxviii.

⁴⁵ Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945–1980* (Baton Rouge, 1995), 123–24.

lands. Ronnie Dugger's *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson* (1982) stands as the most nuanced treatment of Texas politics in all the literature on LBJ. Dugger covers Johnson from his birth through his U.S. Senate days and affirms both the corrupting capacity of Texas politics and Johnson's role in making the state more meaningful in the nation. As a legendary liberal reporter and founding editor of the *Texas Observer*, Dugger had covered LBJ and Texas politics for most of his life. Because of Johnson's respect for Dugger, the politician reached out to him on numerous occasions, despite Dugger's having been a longtime critic who had openly opposed Johnson many times in the pages of his publication. Dugger's version of LBJ places the center of the universe in the Lone Star State. Dugger found LBJ's influence so profound at home and in the rest of the United States after World War II that he labeled the era between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan as the "Johnson Period."⁴⁶

In *The Path to Power* and *Means of Ascent*, Caro found Texas to be a place that brought out some of the bright part of LBJ but mostly encouraged the dark. Texas tended to crush the dreams of common folk—the workers and the unlucky farmers and the hunchbacked elderly ladies of the hill country damaged by decades of carrying water to their homes. Oppressed by wealthy families and mammoth corporations who bought off favor wherever it was needed in whatever manner was needed, Texas was ripe for further abuse from an amoral boy with unquenchable desires. Lyndon Johnson stood between the exploiters and the exploited, ever ready to take what he could from either group to rule over them both.

In one of his most emphatic but ultimately least satisfying claims, Caro argued in a deterministic fashion that Texas, and the hill country in particular, had "formed" (Caro's emphasis) Johnson in his adolescence "into a shape so hard it would never change."⁴⁷ LBJ was a prodigy without principle who fit right into a system spoiled by oil money and defined by stolen elections. Most of *Means of Ascent*, the book about the 1948 Senate election, is a conceit for what was wrong with LBJ and his home state, how unprincipled opportunism and graft triumphed over the ruggedly handsome governor Coke Stevenson, the last gasp of a vanishing America that had lost out to thugs and thieves. Such adherence to this "pattern" formed in Texas weakens Caro's brilliant research and eloquent writing and turns LBJ into a caricature,

⁴⁶Dugger, *Politician*, 14.

⁴⁷Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, 201.

commentary familiar to Caro criticism since 1982.⁴⁸ Almost thirty years later, Caro's analysis of Johnson's character now seems to be less a pioneering portrait and more an intellectual trap. In Caro's volumes, what was unchangeable about Johnson was that he could change into anything to get his way, and getting his way was all that mattered. Anything Johnson did was in service to his self-interest and his unbending will. To borrow a favorite metaphor of Johnson's, Caro reduced LBJ to being a hound dog in heat who will not relent until fulfilling its destiny. Caro took away from Johnson what almost every other biographer highlights as Johnson's central trait: his capacity to evolve and learn and to gather copious amounts of information to do it. How could any human being with as wide a range of experiences as Lyndon Johnson not diverge from the psychological and behavioral patterns set in his youth? In Caro's first two volumes, and to a far lesser extent in the third, readers end up getting a portrait of Johnson's shadow instead of Johnson.

For a twenty-seven-year-old book published only nine years after its subject had died, *The Path to Power* has cast an impressive shadow in its own right. This impact is more remarkable since it was actually a latecomer to the field. At least seven writers had released prominent books on LBJ before Caro. The first serious publications came during Johnson's lifetime, and they tended to be engagingly written books by prominent journalists and aides who knew Johnson or had covered him extensively. The next wave came a few years after Johnson's death and were introspective works by Johnson intimates. Five years after that another group of writers, mostly journalists and a few academics, provided more in-depth treatments, with Robert Caro leading the way.

In 1966 conservative columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak drew on their experiences as Capitol Hill reporters to produce *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power*. Focusing on Johnson's career in the U.S. Senate and the White House, this political biography marveled at Johnson's political skills and set out themes that continue throughout the literature on Johnson. He was "bigger than life" and full of "contradiction that conceals the inner man." For them, "the Johnson paradox" involved a "conflict between objective and performance," public image and private action.⁴⁹ In their major conclusion, Evans and Novak found

⁴⁸Charles Trueheart, "LBJ and the Historian's Scalpel: Robert Caro and the Storm Over His Portrait of the Politician's 'Means of Ascent,'" *Washington Post*, March 21, 1990, pp. C1, C4.

⁴⁹Evans and Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 11.

that power was the "unifying" theme of Johnson's life and gave coherence to his inconsistencies. He was born with "the instinct of power" and "knew exactly where it rested, how to obtain it, and . . . how to exercise it," and he understood more about it "than any President in this century."⁵⁰ Evans and Novak pointed to Johnson's unrelenting style as one of the reasons for his successes, and they offered one of the most memorable descriptions of the infamous Johnson Treatment, the phrase given to Johnson's hands-on technique of persuasion: "Its tone could be supplication, accusation, cajolery, exuberance, scorn, tears, complaint, the hint of threat. It was all of these together. It ran the gamut of human emotions. Its velocity was breathtaking, and it was all in one direction. . . . He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling." It was a "hypnotic experience" that "rendered the target stunned and helpless."⁵¹ Evans and Novak's work was received well by critics, including a prominent endorsement by historian and JFK aide Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. as "the best picture of Lyndon Johnson we yet have."⁵²

Three other works soon followed. In 1968 the journalist and popular political biographer Alfred Steinberg published *Sam Johnson's Boy: A Close-Up of the President from Texas*, an 871-page tome highlighting the influence of LBJ's family and their Texas world. Tom Wicker, political reporter for the *New York Times*, provided a contemporary history of the Kennedy-Johnson presidencies in *JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality upon Politics* (1968). The most intimate treatment of this group was Eric F. Goldman's *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (1969). A Princeton historian chosen by President Johnson to replace Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as the administration's liaison to intellectuals, Goldman spent almost three years in the Johnson White House as special consultant to the president, leaving in the fall of 1966. *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* was the first substantial history of Johnson's tenure from the perspective of an administration official. Goldman was adamant,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12–13 (first, second, and third quotations on 12; fourth quotation on 13).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 115–16. The phrase "Johnson Treatment" had gained favor in the press during Johnson's Senate days. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Inside Report: The Treatment," *Washington Post*, December 4, 1963, p. A21.

⁵² Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Johnson's Ways: An Abiding Concern with the Politics of Problems Rather Than the Problems Themselves," *Book Week*, October 16, 1966, pp. 1–2 (quotation on 1). Schlesinger, the biographer of Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, never wrote substantially about LBJ. Johnson was not fond of the Harvard-trained historian and Kennedy confidant. See, for example, conversation between LBJ and Walker Stone, January 6, 1964, 3:48 P.M., *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], III, 180.

however, in claiming that his memoir/history was the story of someone inside the White House but not an "insider's" account, since he was never part of the inner circle.⁵³ Goldman offered a textured view of the workings of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and set out biographical sketches of White House aides and other Johnsonites. Like Evans and Novak, Goldman was an admirer of LBJ, but his conclusions were far more pessimistic, reflecting in part the bad news coming out of Vietnam in 1967 and early 1968. Goldman pronounced the administration a tragic failure before it was even over. Johnson was a "strong man overwhelmed" by the times. Seeing Johnson's personality as a primary reason for the tragedy, Goldman concluded that Johnson had "entered the White House unhailed, and functioned in it unloved." The president suffered from being "combatively, cumulatively insecure." He was "a mama's boy, overloved, overprotected and overpraised," who could not gain the respect of thinkers and policy makers that he needed, particularly because he was not educated well enough. In a devastating ending line, Goldman declared Johnson to have been "an extraordinarily gifted President who was the wrong man from the wrong place at the wrong time under the wrong circumstances."⁵⁴

The next wave of books came after Johnson's death and eclipsed the dismal appraisal given by Goldman. All of them were based extensively on sources of memory, whether their own or from others who knew Johnson.⁵⁵ In the mid-1970s two major works arrived at bookstores by people who knew Johnson well: longtime aide and confidant Jack Valenti and White House fellow and *Vantage Point* compiler Doris Kearns. The cushion of eight years helped bring about sympathetic accounts that offered correctives to Johnson's unpopular image, humanizing the leader vilified for escalating the Vietnam War. The Johnson in Valenti's and Kearns's pages was not Johnson the warmonger or the rube or the magical powerbroker. He was Johnson the hero and Johnson the sad little boy, with the reader being invited almost to pity someone who may have once been the most powerful individual in the world. Valenti, a Harvard Business School graduate from Houston, was the ultimate LBJ insider and booster who coordinated the ill-fated Kennedy-Johnson visit to Texas in November 1963. He

⁵³ Goldman, *Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, vi.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 530 (first quotation), 520 (second quotation), 521 (third and fourth quotations), 531 (fifth quotation).

⁵⁵ Other memoir/histories produced by LBJ associates besides those discussed below include Watson with Markman, *Chief of Staff*; Busby, *Thirty-First of March*; Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson*; and Johnson with Lopez, *My Brother Lyndon*.

joined Johnson's administration immediately after the assassination and remained one of his closest aides until taking over the Motion Picture Association of America in 1966. Valenti's *A Very Human President* (1975) was part memoir and part valediction to a fallen mentor. Valenti was, with little doubt, a Johnson loyalist. In 1965, the man whom LBJ called "a good Italian" received deep ridicule in the press for declaring in a speech that he slept "each night a little better, a little more confidently because Lyndon Johnson is my President."⁵⁶ Valenti's book is an unapologetic rendering of their relationship written with the exuberance of the public relations expert that Valenti was. Who else could get away with writing about "the sensual caress of power" and "the juice of this sensation" in a paragraph about the honor of being a presidential aide, while describing a young Bill Moyers as looking "fresh as a new-picked peach"?⁵⁷ Despite Valenti's penchant for flourishes, the Johnson who appears in these pages will be familiar to listeners of the White House tapes.

Doris Kearns got to know Johnson in a critical part of his life, the final four years, as he reflected on what had happened in the previous sixty. Kearns first met the president when she was a confident twenty-four-year-old Harvard graduate and White House fellow in May 1967. Johnson took a liking to her and eventually recruited her to assist with his memoirs.⁵⁸ After his death in 1973, Kearns turned her notes from those encounters into *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (1976), a fabulously popular work that stayed over thirteen weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list and remains a consistent seller in 2009.⁵⁹ Released in an era dominated by the Watergate scandal, Kearns's work was lauded by the *New York Times*'s reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt as "the most penetrating, fascinating political biography I have ever read."⁶⁰ The reason for the book's initial reception and continued success is Kearns's skill as a storyteller and her opportune access to Johnson. She constructed perhaps the most intimate portrait of LBJ ever written—in some ways a more revealing view than the one found in Lady

⁵⁶ Conversation between LBJ and Andy Hatcher, December 23, 1963, 10:15 P.M., in *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], II, 775 (first quotation); Valenti, *Very Human President*, 94–97 (second quotation on 95); Art Buchwald, "Capitol Punishment: Fighting Jack Valenti," *Washington Post*, July 6, 1965, p. A15.

⁵⁷ Valenti, *Very Human President*, 67 (first quotation), 68 (second quotation), 71 (third quotation).

⁵⁸ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 1–18.

⁵⁹ "Best Seller List," *New York Times Book Review*, September 26, 1976, p. 12.

⁶⁰ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Books of The Times," *New York Times*, May 7, 1976, p. C17.

Bird Johnson's *A White House Diary* (1970).⁶¹ In one of the book's most poignant scenes, Kearns described the "curious ritual" that developed at the LBJ Ranch in his retirement, as the former president came to her room at 5:30 A.M. to talk of his childhood. While she sat in a chair, he crawled into her bed, "pulling the sheets up to his neck, looking like a cold and frightened child." He later admitted to Kearns that she reminded him of his long-dead mother and that "he had come to imagine he was also talking with her, unraveling the story of his life." Kearns had the fresh-eyed perspective of someone who knew Johnson, but not so well or so dependently that it restrained her journalistic instincts. Like previous biographers, she carried the reader through the standard parts of LBJ's life—Texas, Capitol Hill, the Kennedys, Vietnam, the Great Society, the political collapse, and the end—but she distinguished her work by relying heavily on Johnson's words and using documents he provided to her (including about a dozen transcripts of secretly recorded telephone conversations).⁶²

Her rendering of Johnson in his own words has kept the work an indispensable resource, although Kearns's later bout with accusations of plagiarism and sloppy note-taking in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* may cause scholars to approach *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* with caution.⁶³ The nature of Kearns's research requires the reader to place great faith in her methods for documenting LBJ's memories because there is no effective way to check the accuracy of her remembrances of a deceased president. How much of the LBJ revealed here came from Johnson's mind or from Kearns's? Whatever the answer to that question, the prologue and epilogue to *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* are striking evocations of time and place, and they create a convincing portrait of a troubled dreamer coming to terms with his own life. The rest of the book remains relevant for its snapshot of early 1970s thinking on Johnson and for capturing Johnson's thoughts, but it does show signs of its age, particularly where Kearns tried to psychoanalyze Johnson after his death. Her mobilizing Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson to explain Lyndon Johnson shows the limits of putting dead people on the psychiatrist's couch. Johnson's mother and father

⁶¹ Lady Bird Johnson, *A White House Diary* (New York, 1970).

⁶² Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 17 (first and second quotations), 18 (third quotation), 412n25.

⁶³ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* (New York, 1987); Lynne McTaggart, "Fame Can't Excuse a Plagiarist," *New York Times*, March 16, 2002, p. A15; David D. Kirkpatrick, "Author Goodwin Resigns from Pulitzer Board: A Historian Retreats in a Battle over Plagiarism," *ibid.*, June 1, 2002, p. A9.

undoubtedly shaped his psyche and may well have developed in him a "powerful fear attached to the experience of intimacy." To support her claims, though, Kearns had to rely too often on unconvincing speculation about how Johnson "must have felt." Applying trendy psychological theories to LBJ now seems like psychological determinism, trying to cram the man into spaces that fit him worse than some of his ill-sewn Haggar pants. Kearns's assessment of LBJ's childhood and his developmental turmoil was compelling enough, though, to set in place the mother-father dualism in the study of LBJ's personality.⁶⁴

While these visions of LBJ were published over thirty years ago and seem to have been eclipsed by the research that followed, Kearns and Valenti may actually have come closer to capturing that elusive "real" LBJ because of their closeness to the source itself. No one can replicate Kearns's or Valenti's relationships with LBJ, but since 1993, students of LBJ have had access to the next best thing—his presidential recordings. No longer as reliant on the recollections of people who crossed paths with LBJ, scholars now can go directly to the source himself. These recordings do not replace oral histories and traditional documentary evidence, and they contain few, if any, smoking guns. They do give historians the chance to spend about seven hundred hours with the thirty-sixth president as he did his job. By providing an unprecedented perspective on LBJ the human, the White House tapes return us to the Lyndon who appears in the memoirs and histories by Valenti and Kearns, as well as by Lady Bird Johnson, White House domestic policy chief Joseph A. Califano Jr., and speechwriter Richard Goodwin.⁶⁵

The tapes offer an unrivaled aural experience, stretching the boundaries of historical interpretation beyond the page by situating the sounds of Johnson's life and of the White House itself. In some places there are burps and bodily noises and food on the lips. In others, there is loud laughter, deep sighing, and hot breathing, with microphones capturing tears as well as toilets.⁶⁶ The Dictabelt recorders often picked up

⁶⁴ Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 26. Two psychiatrists have put Johnson on that figurative couch and found him to be the "'Tragic Man'—the individual preoccupied with gaining inward 'succor' for his 'depleted' self." See Hyman L. Muslin and Thomas H. Jobe, *Lyndon Johnson: The Tragic Self: A Psychohistorical Portrait* (New York, 1991), 11.

⁶⁵ Lady Bird Johnson, *White House Diary*; Califano, *Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*; Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston, 1988).

⁶⁶ Six weeks into Johnson's occupation of the Oval Office, Bill Moyers passed along this note to Johnson's secretary: "LBJ wants the toilet bowl in his john moved right back against the Wall. He can't sit on it now. He wants pictures of his wife and children in the lounge changed. Instead he wants pix of Ike and Kennedy. He wants a full call box in the lounge." Bill Moyers to

Johnson before and after telephone calls, chatting with staff or watching his three-screen television console. Mostly, though, they caught LBJ doing what he did best, talking one-on-one with whomever he had corralled into listening. One can hear the inimitable Johnson setting out fashion rules and giving advice on hairstyles to the women in his office and his family, cursing the Secret Service for being loose-lipped “bastards,” getting nostalgic about football, hunting, and drinking with his southern friends, or laying on the thick Johnson charm to a wide range of women he needed to sweet-talk and men he wanted for more elaborate things.⁶⁷ The tapes, however, represent more than a voyeuristic soundscape. Beyond the examples of the famed Johnson personality and the Johnson Treatment, there are many other hours of LBJ brooding about the dangerous game of Vietnam and the internal game with the Kennedy family, as well as hundreds of other topics, depending on the level of one’s historical imagination. Perhaps a majority of them, regardless of topic, tend to turn to the subject that dominates the recordings: how to manage information and how to influence the American people.

Although the collection, until recently, has been available only in sections and the tapes can be laborious to use, writers examining foreign relations, national security, and civil rights have begun to draw extensively from them. Taylor Branch used audio from the Kennedy White House in *Parting the Waters*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning work on Martin Luther King Jr. and his times, and from the Johnson collection in *Pillar of Fire* and *At Canaan’s Edge*, as did Nick Kotz in *Judgment Days*, his dual treatment of King and Johnson. Others using the recordings to write on Vietnam include Howard Jones, David Kaiser, and Gareth Porter.⁶⁸ The first Johnson biography to delve deeply into the

Juanita Roberts, January 1964, Folder Appointment File [Diary Backup] January 1964, Box 3, Appointments File, White House Central Files (LBJ Library).

⁶⁷ Conversation between LBJ and Floyd Boring, June 15, 1964, 5:50 P.M., Citation #3743, White House Tapes.

⁶⁸ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988); Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York, 1998); Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York, 2006); Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws That Changed America* (Boston, 2005); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York, 2003); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, 2005). Other examples of scholarship using presidential recordings as source material are David G. Coleman, “The Missiles of November, December, January, February . . . : The Problem of Acceptable Risk in the Cuban Missile Crisis Settlement,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9 (Summer 2007), 5–48; Marc Trachtenberg, “The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis” and “White

recordings, however, is Woods's *LBJ*, although fewer than half the tapes were publicly available during the production of his book. Woods uses the recordings to augment descriptions of key events in Johnson's administration and to provide nuance to policy discussions. Whether these recordings will substantially change the narratives about Lyndon Johnson remains unclear, but that is nothing new for the LBJ literature. Historians have never been content to accept the prevailing wisdom about the man, and these tapes will likely continue to add to the divergent visions.

One can find a Lyndon Johnson for any occasion in his recordings, including most of the thirteen men whom Bill Moyers knew as LBJ. While the recorded exchanges can improve our understanding of the presidency and the things it touched, they can just as easily distort it. Like all historical sources, the meaning of the tapes ultimately depends on the intent of those people who use them. A writer can set out a clear portrait of a rube with ribald tendencies, with Johnson describing the space between his "nuts" and his "bung hole" to the president of the Haggard clothing company, using the metaphor of cutting someone's "peter" off, or talking about bringing home a drunk Senator Richard B. Russell Jr. from a University of Texas football game.⁶⁹ One can focus on the insensitive Johnson, ridiculing overweight press secretary George Reedy for appearing slovenly in front of the press and advising him to "get you a corset if you have to," grouching at his aides for setting up "chickenshit appointments" with ambassadors while he was "trying to think," or stocking a Fourth of July boating excursion with "interesting men with good-looking wives that keep their mouths shut and would like to just really drive around and flirt with us a little bit."⁷⁰ One can celebrate Johnson as deeply empathetic, with him calling the parents of missing civil rights activists to give them "a

House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Introduction to Documents," *International Security*, 10 (Summer 1985), 137–63, 164–203; and Alan McPherson, "Misled by Himself: What the Johnson Tapes Reveal about the Dominican Intervention of 1965," *Latin American Research Review*, 38 (No. 2, 2003), 127–46.

⁶⁹ Conversation between LBJ and Joe Haggard, August 9, 1964, 1:17 P.M., Citation #4851, White House Tapes; conversation between LBJ and Larry O'Brien, December 23, 1963, 2:21 P.M., in *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], II, 731; conversation between LBJ and John McClellan, January 16, 1964, 4:20 P.M., *ibid.*, III, 564; conversation between LBJ and Richard Russell, January 1, 1964, 8:32 P.M., *ibid.*, III, 40, 45.

⁷⁰ Conversation between LBJ and George Reedy, January 25, 1964, 2:25 P.M., *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], III, 829 (first quotation); conversation between LBJ and Robert Anderson, January 7, 1964, 11:30 A.M., *ibid.*, 233 (second and third quotations); conversation between LBJ and Jesse Kellam, July 3, 1964, 12:43 P.M., Citation #4147, White House Tapes (fourth quotation).

little hope" and speaking in anguish about sending a soldier he saw every day at the White House into a war in Vietnam that could not be won.⁷¹

It is easy to find Johnson the relentless wheeler-dealer. Hoping to get a key vote on the 1964 tax cut bill, he told Connecticut senator Abraham A. Ribicoff, "You save my face this afternoon, and I'll save your face tomorrow." For the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Johnson needed Republican support, so he phoned bureaucrats at the Army Corps of Engineers to see what was holding up a favored waterway project of Senate minority leader and Illinois Republican Everett M. Dirksen, and Johnson lobbied NASA and the Atomic Energy Commission to fund programs at Indiana's Purdue University as a favor to House minority leader and Indiana Republican Charles A. Halleck.⁷² Johnson the whiner and quitter is there, too: on August 25, 1964—two days before accepting the Democratic nomination for president—he told aide Walter Jenkins that he planned to announce his withdrawal from the presidential race because he could not "physically and mentally carry the responsibilities" of the presidency, especially when the country could have "younger men and better prepared men and better trained men and Harvard-educated men."⁷³

The list of other examples of other Johnsons on the tapes could stretch for many pages. In *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, Randall Woods has drawn from some of them to construct a more human, if not humane, Lyndon Johnson as president. Scholars will have to wait to see how those resources affect the interpretation of Robert Caro, who is at work on his final volume, which is expected to cover the presidency. The impact of those recordings depends, as Johnson said, on "what you emphasize." Despite the tantalizing bits of information within them, these tapes are no historical cure-all. They are not magic keys

⁷¹Conversation between LBJ and Mrs. Nathan (Anne) Schwerner, June 23, 1964, 8:35 P.M., Citation #3882, White House Tapes (quotation); conversation between LBJ and Richard Russell, May 27, 1964, 10:55 A.M., and conversation between LBJ and McGeorge Bundy, May 27, 1964, 11:24 A.M., *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], VI, 884–85, 887–88.

⁷²Conversation between LBJ and Abraham Ribicoff, January 23, 1964, 1:14 P.M., *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], III, 746 (quotation); conversation between LBJ and Everett Dirksen, June 23, 1964, 6:00 P.M., Citation #3856, White House Tapes; conversation between LBJ and Jackson Graham, June 23, 1964, 6:18 P.M., Citation #3858, White House Tapes; conversation between LBJ and Glenn Seaborg, December 20, 1963, 5:00 P.M., *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], II, 546–47; conversations between LBJ and James Webb, January 18, 1964, 12:55 P.M., and January 21, 1964, 3:30 P.M., *Lyndon Johnson* [Presidential Recordings], III, 622, 694.

⁷³Conversation between LBJ and Walter Jenkins, August 25, 1964, 11:23 A.M., Citation #5177, White House Tapes.

for modern mysteries. They *are* hard to ignore, providing thousands of small moments—and many large ones—that give another generation of historians another route to explore the mountains left by Johnson. Nevertheless, future scholars are saddled with the same problems that all students of LBJ have experienced: how to fit a legend and a ghost onto a piece of paper. At least now those students have a legend and a ghost who can talk for hours.