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978-0-521-42479-0 - Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963-1968
Edited by Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker

Excerpt

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Introduction

WARREN I. COHEN

In 1968, shortly after Lyndon Johnson announced his decision to retire, a member of his staff prepared an assessment of Soviet–American relations during the Johnson presidency and called the president’s tenure “the most productive period in the history of our relations, despite Vietnam.”¹ A few months later, the Department of State in its internal history of the era described it as one of Soviet–American “coolness,” of conflict and cooperation, with conflict dominant.² Of course, during the intervening months the Soviets had led their Warsaw pact allies in an invasion of Czechoslovakia, precluding the agreement on strategic arms control with which Johnson had intended to cap his career. But the conflicting estimates of the central relationship of the Cold War provide a useful framework for studying Lyndon Johnson’s foreign policy – and its frustrations. It is against the background of the strategic competition between Moscow and Washington that the events analyzed in this book – in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East – come into focus.

John F. Kennedy’s legacy to Lyndon Johnson was a world, including America’s NATO allies, increasingly less responsive to American leadership. Kennedy left Johnson a people who were losing interest in foreign aid, which seemed to be accomplishing little, and in the United Nations, which had become a forum for newly emergent states not sympathetic to American values or con-

1. “Box Score of Soviet and Eastern European Developments, 1963–1968” [dated June 4, 1968], Subject File, Box 18, “Progress – Foreign Policy Since 1964,” National Security File, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter / LBJ Library).

2. “The Soviet Union and the United States,” Administrative History of the Department of State, vol. 1, chapter 3, LBJ Library.

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cerns. And he left Johnson a war that was going poorly in Vietnam. But the world seemed less dangerous as Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev groped toward détente after the Cuban missile crisis. The limited test ban treaty of 1963 constituted enormous progress over the confrontation of October 1962, when the world was closer to nuclear war than anyone had imagined.³

Retreating from the brink, Khrushchev and his advisers reached two not altogether compatible conclusions about the nuclear age. First, war was unthinkable, and finding a way to compete peacefully with the United States was imperative. Second, the Soviet Union could never again confront the United States from a position of strategic inferiority. It would have to accelerate the deployment of its intercontinental missile force.⁴ In other words: pray for peace, prepare for war.

On December 5, 1963, the National Security Council met in Washington to discuss Soviet military capabilities. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara detailed the enormous advantage the United States had in first-strike capability, the result of the buildup of strategic forces over which he and Kennedy had presided from 1961 to 1963. He warned, nonetheless, that there would be no winner in a nuclear exchange. Secretary of State Dean Rusk stressed the enormous effort the Soviets were making to overcome both their economic problems and American nuclear superiority. He insisted that the United States could not relax its efforts to contain Soviet influence. At the beginning and again at the end of the meeting, the president read from a prepared statement: "The greatest single requirement is that we find a way to ensure the survival of civilization in the nuclear age. A nuclear war will be the death of all our hopes and it is our task to see that it does not happen."⁵

Johnson, no less sincere in his concern than Khrushchev, immediately proposed a freeze on strategic missiles and cutbacks in plu-

3. See recent revelations about Soviet tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba and indications that the decision to use them had been vested in the local commander. Raymond L. Garthoff, "The Havana Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis," in Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 1 (Spring 1992): 2-4.

4. R. Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy, 1917-1991* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 243.

5. Summary Record of NSC Meeting, December 5, 1963, NSC Meetings File, Box 1, National Security File, LBJ Library.

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onium production. Given the tremendous American advantage of the moment, the Soviet response was tepid, and the effort collapsed when agreement on verification procedures could not be reached. The Soviets were not willing to reveal the full extent of their vulnerability. In fact, in the mid-1960s, Soviet and American strategic policies were asynchronous. The United States, having invested heavily in a massive strategic buildup in the early 1960s, was facing budgetary pressures that could be alleviated only by capping its forces. The Soviets, having been left behind in the early 1960s and humiliated during the missile crisis, were gathering all available resources in an attempt to match or surpass American strategic power. It was not an ideal climate for agreement on arms limitation. Moreover, the removal of Khrushchev in October 1964 brought to power a group of men, especially Leonid Brezhnev, more responsive to the Soviet military-industrial complex than Khrushchev had been.⁶

Another major obstacle to improvement of Soviet–American relations was the intensification of the war in Vietnam early in 1965. Soviet support for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in its long struggle against the United States was necessitated by Moscow’s claim to be the champion of all peoples fighting wars of national liberation. Moreover, there were obvious gains for the Soviets as America’s blood, treasure, and honor were squandered in southeast Asia. But the U.S. bombing of Hanoi in February 1965, while Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin was visiting there, embarrassed Kosygin, allegedly the politburo’s strongest opponent of increased military spending, and resulted in an increase in mistrust and hostility in Moscow.⁷ On the other hand, the extraordinary concentration of America’s efforts on Vietnam, as evidenced in the essays in this volume, was possible only because Johnson and his advisers never feared a Soviet attack, because of the lack of strategic concern in Washington. Despite the Soviet military buildup, despite enormous Soviet support for Hanoi, the president’s men were confident of American superiority and of the potential for détente with the Soviets.

6. Harry Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Detente* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 80–3, 92–5.

7. Georgi Arbatov, *The System: An Insider’s Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 117.

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One important reason for Washington's confidence in the long-run promise of improved relations with the Soviet Union was the series of bilateral and multilateral agreements the two countries reached in the 1960s – examples of what Dean Rusk called “the little threads that bind.”⁸ Gradually the one-time allies were re-learning the value of cooperation, finding areas of mutual benefit, building trust. They signed their first bilateral agreement, a consular convention, in 1964; overcame a series of obstacles, including the opposition of J. Edgar Hoover; and ratified it in 1967. There were agreements on fishing in the Pacific and Atlantic, on the rescue and return of astronauts, and on civil air transport. They agreed to prohibit the stationing of weapons of mass destruction in outer space, and, most important, they finally agreed in July 1968 on a treaty to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Slowly, in the end too slowly for the Johnson administration to sign, they edged toward agreement on strategic arms limitation.⁹

Johnson and supporters of his vision for a Great Society were disinclined to spend more on missiles after the surge of deployments of the early 1960s. As the Soviet buildup proceeded in the mid-1960s, the administration, specifically McNamara, sought a cost-effective way to respond. By 1964, McNamara had been persuaded that there was no way to defend the United States against a nuclear exchange, that deterrence was the only answer. He also concluded that an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system, such as the Soviets were beginning to deploy around Moscow, was unworkable, that it would merely stimulate production of offensive weapons and be overwhelmed by them.¹⁰ Understanding that the Soviets, too, would have to be assured of their security, McNamara concluded that a balance of terror – mutually assured destruction – was the appropriate formula. When the Soviets had deployed weapons sufficient to assure them of a second-strike capability, to assure them of their ability to retaliate against an American nuclear attack, when they

8. See Warren I. Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (Totowa, N.J.: Cooper Square, 1980), 37, 84, 284.

9. “U.S. Soviet Relations” April 1, 1968, Subject File, Box 19, “Foreign Affairs Data Sheets,” National Security File, LBJ Library.

10. Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, and Thomas W. Wolfe, “History of the Strategic Arms Competition 1945–1972,” II OSD Historical Office (March 1981), 800–2, National Security Archive; Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 197–9.

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had reached a rough parity in strategic missiles with the United States, the arms race might end and the danger begin to recede.

McNamara ultimately won conditional approval from Johnson for negotiations with the Soviets to limit ABM deployments. He had six months in which to win an agreement. An approach in January 1967 failed, however, and Kosygin evinced little interest in limiting defensive weapons when he met with McNamara and Johnson at Glassboro, New Jersey, in June of that year.¹¹ Given the fact that the Soviets had an operational ABM system in 1967 and the president was disinclined to be held responsible for an “ABM gap,” McNamara was forced in September to announce plans for the United States to build twelve ABM sites.¹² Soviet interest was whetted immediately, and the course toward what eventually became SALT I, the first strategic arms limitation agreement, was set. The agreement likely would have been signed in late 1968 had it not been for the Soviet repression of Czechoslovakia in August of that year and the election of Richard Nixon.

The June 1967 Glassboro meeting between Johnson and Kosygin was itself a modest indicator of the relative stability Soviet–American relations had achieved, despite the war in Vietnam. The “hot line” had been used for the first time a few days earlier to avert confrontation in the Middle East and, face to face, the two leaders continued their discussion of that region and discussed Vietnam and arms control issues as well. But National Security Adviser Walt Rostow’s hope for further movement on extricating the United States from Vietnam received no more encouragement than McNamara’s for strategic arms limits.¹³

However much the dark shadow of America’s war in Vietnam hung over all other activities, it did not prevent the Soviets from seeking a major strategic arms limitation agreement once they had made the internal political decision to put a ceiling on their own deployments. After their huge SS-9s were in place, they could feel

11. For an interesting report on Soviet impressions of McNamara’s presentation, indicating that he told Kosygin and Johnson far more than they wanted to know, see memorandum of conversation between Boris N. Sedov (a known KGB officer) and Raymond Garthoff, June 28, 1967, “Soviet Impressions of Hollybush,” National Security Archive.
12. May et al., “Strategic Arms Competition,” 803; Shapley, *McNamara*, 199–200.
13. For Rostow’s hopes, see Rostow memorandum for Johnson, June 21, 1967, Country File, USSR, Hollybush (II), Box 230, National Security File, LBJ Library.

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a little more secure about their deterrent capability. The threat of an ABM race when the Americans were perceived as retaining technological superiority was an excellent incentive to arms control – before the Americans could come up with a defensive system that could minimize Soviet second-strike potential. In June 1968, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko informed the Supreme Soviet that the time had come for strategic missile talks.¹⁴

On August 19, 1968, the Soviet Union agreed to begin negotiations toward limiting the deployment of strategic arms. On August 20, Warsaw Pact forces invaded Czechoslovakia. Johnson's planned announcement of a summit meeting had to be canceled. Brezhnev, Kosygin, and their colleagues apparently believed that their willingness to go ahead with the talks despite American atrocities in Vietnam would be reciprocated by American tolerance of their aberrant behavior in Czechoslovakia. If so, they had misread the American political climate. Momentum toward détente was lost. Much as Johnson would have liked to proceed with the summit, he recognized that the new repression in Czechoslovakia – the crushing of the Prague Spring – precluded public and congressional acceptance of a meeting with Soviet leaders. As late as November and December 1968, after the election of Richard Nixon, Johnson and Rostow cast about for a way to hold the talks, which they perceived as being in the interest of the Czechs as well as of all humanity – and of Lyndon Johnson – but the bell had tolled for the administration.¹⁵

Although the documentary record for the foreign relations of the United States in the Johnson era is only beginning to be published, an enormous amount of material has been declassified and is available at the LBJ Library. Scholars studying the 1960s continue to be amazed by the contrast between the Johnson and Kennedy presidential libraries. Declassification at the Kennedy Library has been

14. David Holloway, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 45; Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star*, 257.

15. Memoranda, Rostow for Johnson, November 20, 1968, and December 11, 1968, Files of Walt W. Rostow, "Strategic Missile Talks," Box 11, National Security File, LBJ Library.

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notoriously dilatory, and the staff has been almost as uncooperative as the old regime at the Hoover Institute at Stanford. The atmosphere in Austin is strikingly different. The archivists have earned a reputation for responsiveness, and David Humphrey in particular has demonstrated again and again just how critical archival support is to the advancement of scholarship. In brief, we concluded that a scholarly examination of the record of Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy was not only needed, but practicable.

In the pages that follow, several of America's leading diplomatic historians analyze the events of 1963–1968 and look closely at Lyndon Johnson's role. Two chapters focus on the American domestic context. The first, by Waldo Heinrichs, is an elegantly written sketch of the president: his personality, his work habits, and his view of the world. Walter LaFeber follows with a provocative discussion of the role of public opinion and foreign policy in the Johnson era, especially as related to the conflict in Vietnam.

The succeeding essays center on various regions of the world with particular attention to how the men and women in Washington devised responses. Richard H. Immerman, using the most recently declassified materials, offers fresh insights into Lyndon Johnson's war in Vietnam. Excepting only avoidance of nuclear catastrophe, no other foreign policy issue was of greater saliency to the public. None consumed more of the time and energy of the president and his advisers. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker writes of the Johnson administration's policies toward China, Japan, and Korea, as East Asia came to loom larger and larger in American concerns. Fear of a nuclear-armed China, writhing in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, and concern for Japan's markets in Southeast Asia, were sometimes put forward as explanations for the involvement of the United States in Vietnam. Robert J. McMahon completes the examination of Asian affairs with a perceptive look at relations with South Asia, especially the unending tension between India and Pakistan.

Despite the machinations of Charles de Gaulle and the "special relationship" with Great Britain, Germany loomed largest in alliance politics in the mid-1960s. Frank Costigliola writes incisively about NATO, about the concept of a multilateral nuclear force (MLF) to finesse the issue of who controlled the use of NATO's nu-

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clear weapons, and especially about Germany. Closer to home – and perhaps closer to Lyndon Johnson’s heart and interests – were the affairs of Latin America. Joseph S. Tulchin explains the complexities of American policy from the southern cone to the intervention in the Dominican Republic.

More remote were the affairs of Africa and the Middle East, but intense public interest in the threat to Israel’s survival, growing Afro-American interest in African affairs, and the fear of Soviet influence in both regions denied Johnson and his aides any respite. Terrence Lyons illuminates the dark continent, casting light as well on the responses in Washington. My own contribution is an essay on the Middle East, in which I share my new-found understanding of Gamal Abdul Nasser and American behavior during and immediately after the Six Day War.

Together the chapters in this volume provide the most comprehensive and revealing study of Lyndon Johnson’s foreign policy that we have thus far – or are likely to get in the 1990s. What is still lacking is the documentation from “the other side.” With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet archives have suddenly become accessible to us, and in the next decade there is every reason to hope that we will see a reasonably complete record of Soviet activities through the 1960s. Chinese documents on a more selective basis have begun to be released, but their reliability will – and should – continue to be questioned until the Chinese government is more forthcoming. We may even live to see the relevant Vietnamese archival materials. But for the American side, thanks to David Humphrey and his colleagues, we are pleased to offer the following reflections.

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*Lyndon B. Johnson:
Change and Continuity*

WALDO HEINRICHS

The eight years of the Lyndon Baines Johnson vice presidency and presidency were the culmination of his life and career, but they were not simply the consequences of what went before. To some extent we are the sum of what we have been, prefigured by genetics, shaped by home, environment, and early adulthood; the past explains us. Yet we change, too: needs, expectations, and capabilities shift; personalities alter and psyches realign to meet new demands; we learn and often grow. The stages and current circumstances of our life also define us.

Johnson's election as vice president in 1960 marked the most radical departure in his life and career since he entered the national government in 1931. The executive branch was fundamentally different from the legislative, as America in the 1960s was from America in the 1950s. Biographies of Johnson naturally dwell on his antecedents, early childhood, and Texas background, and the value of these dimensions for understanding his presidency is undeniable. Conclusions about the younger Johnson cannot be indiscriminately carried forward to the presidential years, however. He faced wholly new challenges when he arrived in the executive branch, and it seems reasonable to suppose that these elicited novel as well as familiar responses. Vice President and President Johnson were not necessarily the same as Senate Majority Leader Johnson. Whether this was particularly the case in foreign affairs, which occupied much less of his time and interest in Congress than in the White House, is a question: was he less innovative and adaptable in this unfamiliar terrain than in dealing with domestic problems?

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Waldo Heinrichs

The Dynamics of Personality

No one who knew or has studied Lyndon Johnson can deny the primal force of his personality, nor its complexity, contradictions, ambiguities, and, for most, ultimately its mystery. Richard Goodwin notes his “immense vitality – intense . . . direct.” “When LBJ entered a room,” writes George Reedy, “everyone knew it immediately. . . . He was . . . the focal point of action.”¹ Johnson was a charming host and a hilarious mimic. He managed the transition after the death of President Kennedy with consummate skill, tact, and grace. He was a magical persuader. Yet seen by those close to him Johnson was also boorish and overbearing and could be sulky, tempestuous, and vindictive. Even so, he was sentimental and corny, and people found in some of his faults a naïve, childlike appeal. Johnson was both attractive and repellent.

Central to the dynamics of Johnson’s personality was ambition. This demanding, pushing, restless, storming man wanted not only to win but also to outstrip all previous winners: a legislative record that outshone the New Deal, a State of the Union speech interrupted more times by applause than Kennedy’s. His outsized ego must have yearned, beyond highest office, for a place on Mt. Rushmore. Johnson no doubt acquired a will to succeed at an early age, and his winning way with people nourished it. But his ambition was fed by insecurity as well.

Explorations of this dark side of Johnson’s personality have been speculative and contradictory. Doris Kearns Goodwin takes a psychoanalytic approach: “From the world of work and the conquest of ever-widening circles of men, Johnson hoped to obtain the steady love he had lacked as a child.” Robert Dallek acknowledges the young LBJ’s emotional deprivation, arising from a mother who conditioned love on performance and an overbearing father, but he balances this against the strengths that Johnson gained from his parents. Paul Conkin, shunning psychological explanation and debunking LBJ legends, argues persuasively that Lyndon had a “quite ordinary childhood.” Family and kin provided warmth, encour-

1. Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (New York: Little, Brown, 1988), 270; George Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir* (New York: Andrews and McMeel, 1982), 158.