Introduction

Mark Atwood Lawrence

We live in LBJ's America. More than any other individual, Lyndon Baines Johnson shaped the era of American history that has played out since the 1960s and established the political and social milieu within which we live. Above all, his legislative accomplishments represent a breathtaking leap forward that profoundly reshaped the nation. LBJ championed transformative bills that extended civil rights to African Americans, Latinos, and other historically marginalized groups, definitively ending the Jim Crow era and opening the way to a more just America true to its founding principles. More broadly, under the banner of the Great Society, he extended the social safety net by creating economic opportunity for impoverished citizens left behind even as the nation experienced a level of prosperity never before seen in human history.

Bills signed by LBJ touched a myriad arenas of national life. The Immigration Act of 1965 transformed America's demographic makeup by opening the nation's doors to vastly expanded flows from non-white parts of the world. LBJ signed similarly important new laws aimed at protecting the environment, channeling federal dollars into education, assuring health care for vulnerable and elderly Americans, protecting consumers, and promoting the arts and humanities. Whenever Americans use their Medicare benefits, obtain a Pell grant for college, cast a vote free of racial barriers, send their kids to a Head Start program, buckle a seat belt, or flip on "Sesame Street," they are, often unknowingly, harkening back to the Johnson years. In so many respects, America saw advances during the Johnson administration that fulfilled its most basic and often elusive promises of opportunity.

On a more fundamental level, Lyndon Johnson led the way in establishing a new social contract at the core of American life by assigning the federal government a central role in assuring economic uplift, expanding rights, and even promoting more aesthetically and fulfilling lives for its citizens. Unquestionably, the United States had passed through periods of ambitious reform before, most notably during Reconstruction, the Progressive era, and the New Deal. But LBJ, ranging far beyond the ideas he had promoted as a young New Dealer in the 1930s, gave liberalism a new, modern form by promoting governmental activism not just to overcome political or economic crisis but to spread the benefits of the nation's spectacular post-1945 economic boom more widely and fairly. In an increasingly complex society, LBJ believed, Americans could not protect their interests and prosper simply by exercising individual freedom. Rather, full citizenship could be exercised only when government played an active role in removing structural barriers to individual success and leveling the playing fields on which Americans vied for opportunity. The purpose of government, as LBJ put it on one occasion in 1965, was to "do for others what they are unable to do for themselves" – a conception that remains persuasive to many Americans in the twenty-first century.[1]

Yet LBJ's accomplishments also hang heavy more than half a century later because of the reaction they inspired among many other Americans hostile to his expansive vision of government-driven reform. Hindsight enables us to see Johnson's presidency not only as a time of remarkable social advances but also as a period of acceleration for the conservative politics that gained further steam across the 1970s and became dominant in the 1980s. The modern conservative movement has taken different forms at different moments, but one theme has stayed constant: suspicion of a large and ostensibly invasive federal government. Expanded bureaucracy, contend conservatives from William F. Buckley in the 1950s to Donald Trump in the 2010s, empowered an unrepresentative technocratic elite while feeding on the earnings of hard-working Americans and stifling the genius of the free-enterprise system. In this view, LBJ-era projects to protect voting rights, assure medical care, and protect consumers, to name just a few, smacked of government overreach into areas best left to the states, if not to individuals. "Government is not the

solution to the problem; government *is* the problem," Ronald Reagan famously asserted in his 1981 inaugural address, rejecting the liberal creed that Johnson had espoused so energetically just a decade and a half earlier.[2] Reagan, another contender for the most influential American of recent decades, gained traction as a kind of anti-LBJ by blending traditional social mores with neoliberal economic principles. First as governor of California and then as president, Reagan persistently attacked the Great Society as wasteful, antithetical to core American principles, and conducive to social licentiousness by privileging the opinions of remote elites over the desires of ordinary citizens.

These reasons for antipathy to government dovetailed with another trend that surged as a consequence of LBJ's decisions: a widening sense that government could not be trusted. Opinion data show that faith in governmental institutions, including the federal government, increased steadily in the years leading up to about 1965. From that point onward, however, the trend turned strikingly in the opposite direction. True, confidence in government increased in the mid 1980s and again following the September 11 attacks, but it never came close to the levels (more than 75 percent expressing overall trust) reached in the early 1960s and sank to new lows (less than 20 percent expressing trust) in the 2010s.[3] This decline, a central feature of American life in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, flows, of course, from numerous causes, including the litany of scandals dating back to Watergate and the rise of antagonistic and increasingly fractured media eager to highlight government malfeasance. The turn toward distrust in the mid 1960s suggests, however, that the "credibility gap" flowing from LBJ's management of the Vietnam War played an outsize role in establishing a trend that would persist long after the last shots were fired in Southeast Asia. Again and again, LBJ declared either that the United States would not send combat forces to fight in Vietnam or, after that promise was broken, that US forces were accomplishing their objectives. Mounting evidence to the contrary called LBJ's competence and honesty into doubt. Consequently, trust in government sank from a high of 77 percent in 1964 to 62 percent just before LBJ left office. Later access to the administration's secret decision-making record affirmed that LBJ, like John F. Kennedy before him and Richard Nixon afterward, had consistently failed to level with

the American public. Trust in government generally – and in the presidency in particular – has never recovered.[4]

In the arena of international affairs, too, we live in LBJ's America. True, the first years of Johnson's presidency feel far removed from the global environment confronting the United States in the early twenty-first century. In 1964 and 1965, the United States arguably sat at the very zenith of its postwar power, wielding economic, military, political, and cultural influence on a monumental scale. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, struggled to exert power beyond its borders. The following years, however, confronted Washington with the question that has bedeviled American leaders ever since: how to shore up US power in the face of economic and strategic overreach and relative decline. During the 1990s and again for a moment following the September 11 attacks, US policymakers seemed to have mastered the problem; new eras of American dominance and purpose seemed to be at hand. For the most part, though, presidents since the mid 1960s have faced the questions of how to balance international commitments against the demands of domestic renewal, and how to exert US leadership in a world less eager for American solutions than it had once been. LBJ compounded his own difficulties by choosing to Americanize the war in Vietnam, but he also confronted problems that would have existed even without the chaos in Indochina: a weakening American position in the global economy, declining prestige in the developing world, and rising challenges from superpower rivals whose material capabilities increasingly matched their pretensions to global authority. LBJ also faced – and, to a largely unrecognized degree, creatively engaged – emerging global problems all too familiar in the twenty-first century: disease, environmental degradation, resource depletion, food scarcity, and family planning.[5] Viewed with a sufficiently wide lens, Lyndon Johnson was the first president of the era in which we still live.

Rooted in a conviction of LBJ's profound importance to American life, this volume brings together some of the most accomplished scholars of American history in the 1960s and offers a fresh look at Lyndon Baines Johnson. The chapters delve into different dimensions of LBJ's life and presidency, drawing on deep research to offer new insights about his approach to politics and policymaking while

providing a fresh gloss on the vast existing scholarship on the Johnson presidency.[6] Chapters examine the administration's momentous decisions in both the domestic and international realms while setting them within the context of the 1960s. In this way, the book explores "LBJ's America" in a literal sense; it examines the country whose main stage he bestrode from 1963 to 1969. But the chapters also explore the ways in which LBJ's legacies lived on after his departure from the White House and, in fact, long after his death in January 1973, almost exactly half a century before the publication of this collection. Taken together, the essays highlight the transformative quality of the Johnson presidency and the profound ways it, for good or ill, created a nation that might reasonably be called "LBJ's America."

In some respects, admittedly, Lyndon Johnson hardly seems to merit this sort of stature in contemporary American history. Born into poverty in 1908, LBJ led an early life that harkened back to the nineteenth century far more than it heralded the twenty-first. The Texas Hill Country of his youth, an outwardly verdant but fundamentally fragile ecosystem, was a land of rare booms and inescapable busts for families like the Johnsons. To be sure, the young LBJ enjoyed certain unusual advantages that gave him a broader perspective than most of his peers. His father, Sam, who served five terms in the Texas legislature, exposed Lyndon to the comparatively cosmopolitan world of Austin and encouraged his son's interest in politics. His college-educated mother, Rebekah, encouraged her son to get an education and to think broadly. From his earliest days, Rebekah would later boast, Lyndon "possessed a highly inquisitive mind."[7] Still, the basic realities of his early life were poverty, physical hardship, and limited horizons that hardly bespoke a career of accomplishment at the highest echelons of national, much less global, power.

Of course, Lyndon Johnson, driven by relentless ambition as well as a sense of humiliation about his humble origins, managed to overcome those circumstances and forge a remarkable career in national politics spanning three decades. Hindsight enables us to see, though, that his rise through the House and Senate to the vice presidency and presidency owed as much to his mastery of the mid twentieth-century idiom of American politics as any feel for the future. He won a House seat in

1935 by hitching himself to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and casting himself as a loyal foot soldier of the New Deal. During the next two decades in Congress, Johnson rose to prominence not by crafting forward-looking legislation but through his command of relatively mundane political arts: skillfully distributing funds from wealthy Texas donors, channeling federal largesse back to his patrons and constituents, cultivating the party bosses who controlled Mexican American votes, and exploiting the potential of minor leadership positions that no one else wanted.[8] When it came to substantive policy issues, LBJ was, in the words of historian Kent Germany, "a cliché of postmodernism" who repeatedly shifted shape "to fit whatever the moment demanded."[9] Only in the late 1950s did LBJ start to identify closely with the strongly liberal agenda he would pursue as president. But even in those years LBJ's most conspicuous assets as a leader – his pragmatism, willingness to work across party lines, and aversion to both ideological extremes – seem remote from the partisan and ideologically charged political world of the twenty-first century.

Surely the most important reason for LBJ's low profile in the long flow of American history is the wariness among later liberals to spotlight his accomplishments. For many political leaders and intellectuals broadly supportive of Johnson's Great Society agenda it was John F. Kennedy – or perhaps the Kennedy family more generally – who gets the lion's share of credit for bold leadership during the 1960s. Pervasive anti-Southern biases in elite American society, fascination with JFK's youthful charisma and enduring image, and broad sympathy for a heroic figure cut down in his prime made it almost impossible for LBJ to reap the accolades he deserved, precisely as the Texan feared during his vice presidency and presidency. Still more damaging to Johnson's historical profile was his pivotal role in the escalation of the Vietnam War, a catastrophe that led to more than 58,000 American deaths, deep divisions among the American public, and profound damage to the very liberal agenda that LBJ championed. For many Americans across the political spectrum, the stench of Vietnam clung so heavily around LBJ as to obscure almost everything else that he achieved across his long career. A public opinion poll conducted in 2009 showed just how dimly Americans regarded Johnson. Of nine presidents who held office from 1953 to 1993, Johnson ranked seventh, beating

out only the one-term Jimmy Carter and the scandal-ridden Richard Nixon. (Kennedy finished first, significantly ahead of Ronald Reagan and Dwight Eisenhower in second and third places, respectively.)[10] Unsurprisingly, liberals running for office, including Democratic candidates for president, proudly connected themselves to FDR and JFK while mostly avoiding any mention of LBJ; there was nothing to be gained from associating with so unpopular a figure.

Much has changed in recent years, however, enabling us to understand Lyndon Johnson in fresh ways. For at least three reasons, LBJ's crucial roles in shaping contemporary America, especially his positive achievements, are now easier to see than ever before. First is the simple availability of abundant new evidence about LBJ's life and times. Ongoing declassification of national security records and continued processing of other textual materials have provided historians and biographers with an ever-larger trove of documents to comb through at the National Archives, the LBJ Presidential Library, and other repositories. But the biggest development came with the public release of audio recordings LBJ had secretly made during his presidency, an astonishing resource capturing some 632 hours of the president's telephone conversations with aides, members of Congress, family, world leaders, and other interlocutors. Through periodic releases of this material, the last of which occurred in 2008, it became possible to appreciate Johnson with unprecedented nuance and complexity. A man well known for his larger-than-life persona became even more intriguing when it became possible to hear him, in real time, agonize about Vietnam, strategize about the legislation he supported, joke with his associates, order new trousers, and wield the famous "Johnson Treatment" – the blend of persuasion and coercion with which he bent other people to his will. Such rich material, combined with the breathtaking paradoxes of the man in question, help account for the fact that LBJ remains a popular subject of new research a half-century after his death.[11]

A second reason for LBJ's new stature in American life is the dulling of passions stirred by the Vietnam War, easily the darkest mark on Johnson's legacy and the principal barrier to viewing him in richer hues. Changed perceptions do not, it is important to note, flow from any fundamental reappraisal of LBJ's role in the decisions that led to the

debacle in Southeast Asia. Many historians agree that newly available evidence casts an unfavorable light on Johnson by demonstrating his failure to heed innumerable warning signs that escalation would lead to disaster.[12] Rather, perceptions of LBJ have shifted as Vietnam lost some of its radioactivity in American political culture over the decades since the end of the Cold War. The decline of Vietnam as a theme in American politics played out to some extent during the 1990s but has been particularly striking since 2008, when the American electorate rejected Republican presidential contender John McCain, a military hero of the Vietnam era, in favor of Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who had little to say about the war and embodied a new, post-Vietnam generation gradually assuming its place in US leadership circles. Deepening frustrations in Iraq and Afghanistan may also have blunted controversies connected to Vietnam by showing that the latter was hardly a unique fiasco in American history.

Whatever the cause, dwindling preoccupation with Vietnam created space for thinking anew about the Johnson presidency. The fiftieth anniversaries of LBJ's biggest legislative achievements in 1964 and 1965 provided abundant opportunities for fresh looks at his presidency in 2014 and 2015. In May 2014, the *Washington Post* ran a four-part series highlighting the breadth and ambition of the Great Society.[13] Around the same time, the LBJ Presidential Library hosted a three-day event branded the "Civil Rights Summit" to mark the half-century of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, an event that drew heavy media attention. A bipartisan trio of former presidents – Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush – along with the incumbent, President Obama, attended the event, each paying tribute to LBJ's political courage in pursuing the cause of civil rights and social justice. "Because of the Civil Rights Movement, because of the laws Lyndon Johnson signed, new doors of opportunity swung open," Obama asserted in his celebratory keynote address. "They swung open for you, they swung open for me. . .. That's why I'm standing here today, because of that effort, because of that legacy."[14] Taking stock of the event, the *New York Times* noted LBJ's "evolving" legacy. A president long lambasted by critics for Vietnam and defended by staunch loyalists increasingly appeared in a more complicated light that allowed attention to his remarkable accomplishments in the domestic arena.[15]

Media and popular culture also took another look at Johnson as the domains where he scored his biggest legislative triumphs – race relations, voting rights, poverty, immigration, and the environment – gained new urgency in American life. Polls of presidential historians conducted by C-SPAN in 2017 and 2021 ranked Johnson in the top quarter of American presidents (tenth in 2017 and eleventh in 2021), not quite in the pantheon reserved for Washington, Lincoln, and FDR but in a "near-great" category with JFK, Reagan, and Harry Truman.[16] Meanwhile, playwright Robert Schenkkan presented LBJ in a mostly sympathetic light in his Emmy Award–winning Broadway play *All the Way*, starring Bryan Cranston, which debuted in 2014 and was later adapted as an HBO movie.[17] Johnson's accomplishments in the field of civil rights also took center stage in *LBJ*, a Hollywood film directed by Rob Reiner and starring Woody Harrelson in the title role.[18] Although LBJ received less favorable treatment in HBO's *The Path to War* (2002), Ava DuVernay's 2014 film *Selma*, and the third season of Netflix's *The Crown* (2019), the flurry of attention still helped elevate Johnson as a major historical figure who played key roles in some of the most important decisions of his era.[19]

If the declining salience of the Vietnam War encouraged new efforts to see LBJ in all his complexity, another major trend of the early twenty-first century – the rise of ideologically driven hyper-partisanship – provides a third reason for resurgent interest in the Johnson presidency. In sharp contrast to national leaders who could barely tolerate being in the same room together, Johnson stood out as the epitome of level-headed moderation and skill in the arts of persuasion and coalition-building. Many pundits saw his commitment to rational problem-solving and his ability to work across the aisle as qualities sorely lacking – and desperately needed – in a later era. A leader sometimes mocked as the archetype of the flesh-pressing, arm-twisting, deal-making political animal could, it turned out, be a model to be emulated in the right circumstances. LBJ's non-doctrinaire brand of politics drew particular attention in 2020, when former Vice President Joe Biden emerged as the Democratic Party's nominee for president and then won the White House in November. Numerous commentators highlighted remarkable similarities between the two men. Both came from humble backgrounds, made names for themselves during long years in the Senate, and rose to the vice presidency

as understudies to younger, more charismatic leaders. More to the point, pundits enthused about the commitment to political pragmatism and bipartisanship that the two leaders seemed to share.

Most of all, LBJ's Great Society seemed relevant as a model for what might be accomplished by a leader who combined such skills with a commitment to transformational change. In a roundabout way, Donald Trump helped highlight Johnson's accomplishments by targeting signature Great Society achievements like voting rights, Medicare, and early-childhood education.[20] But it was Biden's sweeping early initiatives to rebuild the nation's infrastructure, fight climate change, expand childcare, revise the federal tax code, and much else that shined a bright spotlight on LBJ's legislative victories during the 1960s. Along with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Johnson's Great Society suddenly became a reference point for understanding the breadth and scale of change that Biden had in mind. The *New Yorker* asked in the spring of 2021 if Biden might be the "second coming" of LBJ or FDR, while National Public Radio inquired whether the new chief executive might ultimately join the "Democratic Party's Pantheon" headed by the same two forebears.[21] Never before had a sitting president been compared so extensively – and positively – to Lyndon Johnson.

Biden's legacy will no doubt be a matter of impassioned debate for many years, but LBJ's new stature in American life seemed likely to last. For some Americans, he appeared sure to endure as the embodiment of liberal ambition targeted at expanded rights and opportunities for the most vulnerable Americans. The salience of race, immigration, structural inequality, environmental degradation, and educational inadequacies in the twenty-first century made LBJ, rather than FDR (much less any Democrat since the 1960s), the obvious model of a president determined to mobilize the federal government to tackle urgent domestic woes. The Supreme Court's 2020 ruling that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act protected gay and transgender Americans – categories that LBJ and his colleagues scarcely considered – from employment discrimination showed just how important the Johnson presidency might be to progressive ambitions more than half a century later.[22]

On the other side of the spectrum, conservative critics of government overreach have numerous targets to choose among, including Ted