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In mid-December 1967, a new year appeared on the horizon. Many Americans, including President Lyndon Johnson, hoped for a better year with fewer riots and antiwar protests as well as a possible breakthrough to end the quagmire in Vietnam. However, none anticipated society worsening, but it did. Little could have prepared Americans for what would happen as the nightmare year of 1968 loomed, which would test the country and world, including the leader of the most powerful nation on earth.

As many prepared for Christmas and New Year celebrations, at 11:35 a.m. on December 17, 1967, President Johnson called his personal pilot, Air Force Brigadier General James Cross, after learning about the drowning death of Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt.

“Cross,” the president said, “we may want to go to Australia tomorrow. You better get my big plane out and make sure it’s ready to go.”

The experienced pilot panicked, admitting his “heart rate shot up” as the intercontinental version of the Boeing 707 lay in pieces at a hangar at JFK Airport in New York.

“Mr. President,” Cross replied, “you’ll recall, sir, that I sent you a note two weeks ago that the big plane is in the Lockheed Air Service contract facility in New York and it won’t be ready for forty-five days.”

Immediately, Johnson responded: “Well, go up there, get it fixed and get it back down here. We plan to leave tomorrow.”

Cross protested vigorously and the president finally agreed to take one of the backup 707s, although he complained: “Now, I don’t like those planes. They don’t have good sound-proofing and I don’t like the seats and they don’t have a bed in them like I’m used to.”

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Then, he added, “you Air Force people always seem to be able to find some way to make me feel uncomfortable.”¹

Two days later, the plane lifted off for the long trip across the Pacific, first stopping in Hawaii and Pago Pago, American Samoa, before landing in Canberra. While honoring his faithful ally, Johnson spent significant time meeting with President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam and President Park Chung-hee of South Korea, whose nearly 50,000 troops in Vietnam constituted the largest non-US and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces.

After attending the funeral, Air Force One headed to a US F-105 fighter/bomber base in Thailand before landing at the large base at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam. Thousands of US servicemen greeted the president, who handed out medals to soldiers, some removed from the jungles for the ceremony.

He gave a short speech to selected officers highlighting an enemy hoping to outlast the Americans and break their will, “but we’re not going to yield. And we’re not going to shimmy.”² Then, Johnson told the large group of assembled troops that America “had come from the valleys and the depths of despondency to the heights and the cliffs, where we know now that the enemy can never win.”³

Then, once more, he jumped on the plane for a long ride first to Karachi, Pakistan, to meet Prime Minister Ayub Khan before jetting to Rome to talk with Pope Paul VI, a consultation facilitated by his former aide, Jack Valenti.

On arriving, Johnson outlined his views on the war, to which the pope emphasized: “We must declare our position to the world as friends of peace and foes of war.” But, quickly he added: “Could I be an intermediary for you and say what I know to be true, that the U.S. truly wants peace?”

The response pleased the president, who hoped the pope might influence President Thieu, a Catholic, to move toward negotiations. He talked about how people in Texas liked to have stickers on their Fords, “Made in Texas by Texans.” “I would like a slogan in Saigon that says, ‘Peace in South Vietnam made by the Vietnamese,’” Johnson remarked.

They ultimately agreed to a joint statement about their discussion. The pope objected to a line “we will never surrender South Vietnam

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to aggression or attack,” afraid it would appear he endorsed the war. The president struck it and left pleased with the outcome. He immediately boarded the plane for the final leg home, reaching the ranch on Christmas Eve.

In less than five days, the president flew more than 28,210 miles and spent 59 ½ hours in the sky and a total of 112 hours away from the White House.

Lady Bird Johnson observed when he arrived home on December 24, “Lyndon was riding high . . . he hoped by his presence in Vietnam to give evidence of his special feeling as Commander-in-Chief for those troops, and he had made one further effort toward peace by meeting with the Pope.”⁴

But, while feeling good about the trip, the president and his family had experienced a tough year in 1967. In many cases, Vietnam lay at the heart of most problems plaguing the administration. Across the country, people marched in the streets and some picketed outside the White House chanting: “Hey, Hey, LBJ, how many children did you kill today?”

Nothing frustrated Johnson more than Vietnam. Early on, he lamented, “I feel like a hitchhiker on a Texas highway in the middle of a hailstorm; I can’t run, I can’t hide, and I can’t make it go away.”⁵

People around him recognized the toll it extracted. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach lamented, “Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam – It got in the way of everything.”⁶ Jack Valenti stressed “it was the Vietnam War that cut the arteries of the LBJ Administration.”⁷

Even those outside his inner circle recognized the strain. Senator George McGovern (D-SD) left a dinner party at the White House in late 1967 and described LBJ as “a tortured and confused man – literally tortured by the mess he has gotten into in Vietnam. He is restless, almost like a caged animal.”⁸

But, he would not retreat, and it caused horrific outbursts. In a private meeting, reporters pestered Johnson to explain the US involvement in Vietnam. A shocked US Ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, watched as “LBJ unzipped his fly, drew out his substantial organ, and declared, ‘This is why!’”⁹

Vietnam alienated important sectors of society and widened the chasm between Johnson and his chief political rival, Robert Kennedy.

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Journalist William White wrote in December 1966: “President Johnson has had to bear a frightful burden in the unremitting hostility of the Kennedy cult and its common attitude that the man in the White House is not simply a constitutional successor to another man slain in memorable tragedy but only a crude usurper.”¹⁰

It was a mutual contempt. LBJ often used the term “that boy” that became according to one reporter, “Johnson’s unloving *nom de guerre* for Robert F. Kennedy.”¹¹ The White House kept files on Bobby’s public appearances, including speeches, press releases, and television shows going back to 1964.¹²

The war also led to a significant break between Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr., who increasingly denounced the war by 1967. Since the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Johnson and King had sought new dragons to slay in the struggle for civil rights, but neither achieved much success as King shifted to economic issues and Johnson focused on fair housing.

However, the summer of 1967 exposed continuing frustrations with unfulfilled expectations after the major civil rights victories. In July, race riots broke out in Newark and Detroit. In the Motor City, police raided an African American club, which provoked a confrontation that led to rioting and looting. Governor George Romney ordered in the National Guard, which one journalist characterized as a “ragged, jittery, hair-triggered lot,” in which one soldier emphasized: “I’m gonna shoot anything that moves and is black.”¹³

The police and guard proved incapable of stopping (or even containing) the violence. Finally, President Johnson dispatched federal troops, lamenting: “Well, I guess it is just a matter of minutes before federal troops start shooting women and children.” For three days, troops patrolled at bayonet point. In the aftermath, forty-three people lay dead, with more than 2,000 injured, 4,000 in police custody, and millions of dollars of damage.¹⁴

Throughout, the president and his advisors endured criticisms from both parties. The Republican Coordinating Committee stated “widespread rioting and violent civil righters have grown to a national crisis since the present Administration took office.” Some Democrats agreed, including his old mentor Richard Russell of Georgia, who charged that Johnson’s War on Poverty stoked the flames.¹⁵

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Vietnam and race relations, along with crime, dominated the president's agenda in 1967, but many other challenges existed in the balance of payments, rising deficits, and foreign relations during the perplexing year. It was an extremely difficult year.

But nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared Johnson and his countrymen for what lay on the horizon as the New Year rang in only a week after he returned from his round-the-world trip.

LBJ ultimately underscored about 1968: "I recall vividly the frustration and genuine anguish I experienced so often during the final year of my administration. I sometimes felt that I was living in a continuous nightmare."¹⁶

Many around the president concurred, including Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford. He remembered that his long-time secretary, Mary Weiler, told him: "That was a year that lasted five years. I thought it was going to kill you." Clifford acknowledged: "It was the most difficult year of my life, a year of partial success and ultimate frustration."¹⁷

Many others recognized 1968 and the challenges. A few months into the year, journalist Richard Rovere wrote in *Atlantic Monthly*: "Never in our history has the individual seemed as wretched and despairing as he is today; and seldom have free men anywhere felt so thwarted and powerless in their relations to government democratically chosen . . . Never have disaffection, alienation, and frustration been more widespread."¹⁸

The polls supported Rovere's portrayal. By December 1968, one found that 28 percent of Americans were "substantially alienated" from the mainstream.¹⁹ Such numbers led pollster George Gallup to conclude in, "all the time we've been operating, thirty-two years now, I've never known a time like this – when people are so disillusioned and cynical."²⁰

By the end of the year, the country appeared in disarray, worn out by constant crises. While some found hope in the election of Richard Nixon, most people gladly ushered 1968 out at 11:59 p.m. on December 31. Few years in American history would be so tumultuous and disorienting and few that experienced it wanted it replicated, including the president.

This book reviews a series of crises and challenges in 1968 primarily through the eyes of Lyndon Johnson, one of the most powerful persons on earth. There have been excellent works written on the nightmare year by others, including journalist Jules Witcover and historian David Farber,

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but they cover a large swath of the year from many perspectives.²¹ This work instead extensively focuses on one individual whose position provides particular insights into the turbulent year.

In a way, the book is also a microbiography of Lyndon Johnson, focusing on one critical year as opposed to a lifetime. There are excellent biographies by historians including Randall Woods, Robert Caro, and Robert Dallek on the president.²² However, they cover many years and sometimes cannot give more than a little attention to his crisis management skills covered in detail in this book, like the Czech Intervention or Chennault Affair.

Finally, at the other extreme are specialized books by authors such as Mitch Lerner and Clay Risen that dive deeply into individual subjects covered in this monograph, such as the *Pueblo* Affair or the turmoil following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.²³ In these accounts, President Johnson often disappears for long periods of time as the authors focus on other actors and contexts.

Ultimately, this book looks at 1968 through the eyes of Johnson and those closest to him, especially Lady Bird and the president's staff and cabinet to show how he managed the ghastly year. The coverage is not comprehensive, as it only touches tangentially on other important events such as the Poor People's March, but it establishes the patterns of how President Johnson dealt with the many challenges that arose that year.

The opening introductory chapters of this book move from the January 1968 State of the Union through the historic March 31 speech when Johnson announced his decision not to seek reelection. In between, it highlights the global challenges of the seizure of the intelligence ship *Pueblo* by the North Koreans and subsequent hostage crisis that plagued LBJ throughout the year. It also focuses on the First Tet Offensive and its aftermath (late January–March 1968), diving deeply into how Vietnam fundamentally shaped his world and led to his isolation and frustration that culminated in his stunning speech on March 1968.

The second part, on the tragedies of the political violence of the year, looks at the challenges of dealing with the assassinations of MLK and RFK in April and June. For many, the death of the two icons, both of whom by that point had contentious relationships with LBJ, caused much disillusionment with the Great Society and America. It also highlighted

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the obstacles that remained to building off the successes of 1964 and 1965 regarding civil rights. The deaths opened old wounds and created new ones for a country already reeling from widespread protests regarding Vietnam.

The third section focuses on limits of presidential power in 1968 by looking at the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August that highlighted how the only weapons readily available to Johnson were rhetorical, not substantive. The nomination of Abe Fortas as Chief Justice and Homer Thornberry to the Supreme Court further underscored the diminution of LBJ's powers over Congress since the heady days of early in his presidency when he rammed through landmark legislation. The Chicago Democratic Convention also demonstrated how his power within his party had declined precipitously since 1964, something caused by his unending intransigence on Vietnam and unwillingness to surrender control of the party.

Finally, the book's concluding section traces the period of the presidential election through the transition of power in January 1969. In many ways, the Chennault Affair highlighted many elements of Johnson's personality in dealing with his own vice president, Hubert Humphrey, and the Republican nominee Richard Nixon. It, along with his last day in office, shows just how tired he appeared of the political battles and his desire to retreat into private life after an exhausting five years. By the end of 1968, Johnson, like much of the country, wanted to simply push a restart button, but conditions prevented it.

What emerge from the narrative are several trends regarding Johnson in the turbulent year of 1968. A series of crises dominated the year, and if one was keeping score in the most general senses, LBJ handled them very well. In fact, his closest domestic advisor, Joe Califano, stressed Johnson encountered challenges that would have made other presidents wilt under the pressure.²⁴

Many around Johnson recognized an underlying strength in being able to remain calm under pressure. Lady Bird often said so. For example, while flying on Air Force One to the capitol from Dallas on November 22, 1963, reporter Liz Carpenter sat in his seat and thanked God that "someone is in charge." Lady Bird approached her and told her, "Lyndon's a good man to have in an emergency."²⁵

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Johnson showed a skill at managing the crisis with patience and restraint when it would have been easy to overreact to the provocations of foreign countries or domestic rioters. He took time to weigh all the scenarios and to make decisions that limited escalation and reduced peripheral damage.

Beyond showing fortitude, he also demonstrated a political acumen for often creating something positive from the tragic. Sometimes it worked. It would be replicated a number of times, such as the passage of the Fair Housing Act after the assassination of MLK. Sometimes it failed or only had limited success. He tried to do the same after RFK's assassination on gun control, but he only achieved partial success.

Beyond crisis management, the book also underscores the centrality of the Vietnam War in the daily affairs of the president as he sought to salvage his legacy in 1968. It caused isolation and resentment, as he refused to acknowledge the mistakes of the past. After Tet, he tried desperately that year to extricate the United States with honor from Southeast Asia. However, Johnson failed because of his inflexibility and unwillingness to accept the shortcomings of his previous efforts, recalcitrant allies, and underhanded tactics by political opponents.

Johnson entered 1968 weakened by the divisive conflict in Vietnam and other factors, including the counterculture movement and race relations. Ultimately, the book shows the full extent of the diminution of power of arguably one of the most influential presidents in US history. After two years in office, only FDR surpassed LBJ in passing his legislative agenda. In 1965, US military forces remained formidable and respected for their prowess, and Americans projected significant economic and cultural power around the world.

However, as the chapters also show, in domestic politics and foreign policy by 1968 the president often failed to shape the world around him. At home, Johnson found himself increasingly swimming against a conservative tide of backlash created by civil rights, free speech, and the war in Vietnam. What followed were stinging defeats in politics, including federal taxes, nominations to the Supreme Court, and gun control. In foreign affairs, events unfolding in Pyongyang, Prague, Moscow, and Saigon underscored the limits of American power, particularly those of the president to sway the outcomes of events unfolding across the globe.

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Finally, the narrative highlights a complex and complicated man who in 1968 often displayed that he could be magnanimous and sympathetic, even toward those such as the family of his worst enemy or those rioting in the streets. But, then, he could turn on his loyal vice president in a fit of rage over the Vietnam plank. His pettiness often shone through, as well as his stubborn refusal to acknowledge a mistake or flawed policy such as the decisions in Vietnam. It was a trying year and the challenges amplified these traits, both the good and the bad.

In the end, *Time* proclaimed 1968 as: “One damn thing after another, indeed, also one tragic, surprising and perplexing thing after another . . . events have moved at the pace of an avant-garde movie edited by mad clutter.”²⁶ They were correct and Johnson had a front row seat to the entire drama that he desperately tried to manage under pressures endured by few American presidents.