

LBJ'S 1968

The year 1968 was unprecedented in terms of upheaval on numerous scales: political, military, economic, social, cultural. In the United States, perhaps no one was more undone by the events of 1968 than President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Kyle Longley leads his readers on a behind-the-scenes tour of what Johnson characterized as the “year of a continuous nightmare.” Longley explores how LBJ perceived the most significant events of 1968, including the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and the violent Democratic National Convention in Chicago. His responses to the crises were sometimes effective but often tragic, and LBJ’s refusal to seek reelection underscores his recognition of the challenges facing the country in 1968. As much a biography of a single year as it is of LBJ, *LBJ’s 1968* vividly captures the tumult that dominated the headlines on local and global levels.

Kyle Longley is Snell Family Dean’s Distinguished Professor of History and Political Science at Arizona State University. He is the author of numerous books, including *In the Eagle’s Shadow: The United States and Latin America*, *Senator Albert Gore, Sr.*, and *The Morenci Marines: A Tale of a Small Town and the Vietnam War*.

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*Power, Politics, and the Presidency in
America's Year of Upheaval*

Kyle Longley

Arizona State University



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To my great friends, Bob Brigham and Laura Belmonte

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This project grew out of spending a lot of time in Austin, Texas, starting when I was a young boy, as we often traveled there for sporting events. Over the years, I continued visiting Austin and Central Texas. At one point, we lived in Comfort, Texas, only a short distance away from Stonewall, Texas, where I remember often traveling by the ranch of President Lyndon Johnson on our way to Austin or surrounding towns such as Dripping Springs, where my father took football teams to play.

As I grew older, I began appreciating the history of the region, including that of a place strongly shaped by Johnson. Everywhere I turned, his legacy shone. It was on the streets, waterways (including Lake LBJ), and education, with a significant number of schools honoring him. In addition, the LBJ Library towered above the University of Texas, and the Lady Bird Wildflower Center provided a welcome refuge from urban life. Everywhere in Central Texas, LBJ's shadow loomed large, whether people understood it or not.

Ultimately, my youthful interest in LBJ intersected with my research, including a biography of Senator Albert Gore, Sr., who in many ways paralleled Johnson's rise to power. The Tennessean was raised in a small town and overcame many obstacles to rise to the Senate, just like LBJ. Johnson often appears in Gore's story, both as an antagonist and a protagonist.

Then, I spent a number of years writing two books on the experiences of combat soldiers in Vietnam. Johnson's name became synonymous with the Vietnam War and the suffering of the country and its servicemen in the quagmire that developed. Often, the soldiers criticized their commander-in-chief, who took them deep into the conflict without a

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solution of how to win or extricate the United States from the morass. At one point, I even reviewed the letters the president sent to the families of the young men from the small town of Morenci, Arizona, who died in the war.

As Johnson kept reappearing in my work, I also became increasingly interested in the anniversaries of the Johnson presidency, ranging from the assassination of John Kennedy to the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and the Watts Riots. Often his legacy appears in the news due to the rapid rate of change implemented by Johnson in the environment, health care, civil rights, and government economic programs during his presidency. This ultimately brought me to the idea of looking at Johnson's most trying year of 1968, when the wheels appeared to be coming off in the United States and the world. It has been a rapid whirlwind of a project, but one that I have thoroughly enjoyed researching and writing.

There are many people to thank for assisting me. George Herring, my doctoral advisor and a dean of the historians of the Vietnam War and US foreign relations, read many of the chapters in the book and provided excellent editorial advice. He remains the single most important intellectual influence in my life as well as a good friend who never anticipated the frequent phone calls and correspondence years after he sent me out into the academic world. Along with his wonderful wife, Dottie, he continues to provide significant guidance and support in all of my endeavors.

Others have devoted their time and expertise to this project. Mitch Lerner, Clay Risen, Greg Daddis, and Ken Hughes took time out of their busy schedules to review chapters, providing wonderful comments and helping me tighten the presentation. Others who lived the history, including Larry Temple, Tom Johnson, Jim Jones, and Joseph Califano, read individual chapters and provided feedback from a personal viewpoint of someone involved in policymaking. Their support was invaluable.

I also have been blessed with being a member of a wonderful community of scholars, especially in the field of US foreign relations and some colleagues in the History Department at Arizona State. I would add pages to the book if I thanked them personally, but they know who they are as we have shared many meals and drinks around Tempe and

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at conferences, where we discussed various projects including this one. Their research and writing also has expanded my limits of learning, helping me better understand the world and the role of the United States in it. I am blessed to have such an amazing group of scholars with whom to work, as well as a good group of students that includes wonderful undergraduates, Chiara Hommel and Kaycee Miller, who provided research support for the project.

Others have been very helpful along the way, including people working at numerous archives throughout the country. In particular, the amazing people at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library assisted me with gathering materials and have been advocates for this project, especially the outstanding archivists Allen Fisher and Brian McNerney. They spent countless hours helping me search for research materials and always updated me on potential finds. We enjoyed a number of wonderful meals together as they shared their expertise way beyond the normal hours of library operations. I also must acknowledge the wonderful Margaret Harman, who helped me track down the photographs for the book. I am happy that my next book will also be on LBJ, which will allow me to continue to work with the best people in the business.

I also want to thank a series of friends whom I have made over the past decade as I worked in the President's Enrichment Program (PEP) at Arizona State University. Again, there are too many names to mention, but they know how much I value their insights and support and the enjoyment that they bring to me in a special classroom, where they make me feel like a youngster in the room. The times spent in and out of the classroom are among the greatest benefits of being a professor.

Finally, I also owe special thanks to Dick and Alice "Dinky" Snell, who have buttressed my work with a generous fund with which to do research and attend conferences. For more than a decade they have been there for me, both as benefactors and friends. I thank them for being such good supporters, and this book has benefited significantly from their patronage.

Finally, I have many family and friends to thank for their encouragement and assistance along the way, including my parents, Joe and Chan, who have nurtured me over the past fifty-four years. They supported my passion for history, and my father especially provided me a great role

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model of what an educator should and could be. He also remains the toughest editor I have, but proudly brags about the work I do.

The same goes for two of my best friends; Dwayne Goetzel and his wife Dawn have been wonderful comrades, always providing someone to listen and provide words of encouragement as well as remind me of my Texas roots.

Of all my friends and family, the closest person to me remains my wife, Maria. The daughter of an academic, she knew the drill when we married. She has carried a heavy burden during the endless hours of my disappearances to research and write, including long trips to the archives and conferences. She also endured my constant talking about LBJ and provided encouragement during the times when roadblocks sometimes developed. She does all of this while working a job helping homeless families in the East Valley. Often people ask how I am so productive, and I respond that it is largely because of her.

Maria also provided coverage for me, as I had to take time away from my two sons, Sean who is seventeen and Drew who is twelve. Both are the truest pleasures of my life, and they have watched me sit at the computer working away for hours. But they also drew me away from work to be their coach in track and football, helping me destress and get out of the office and into the beautiful sunshine of Arizona.

One of the greatest joys over the past year or so has been Sean often asking me questions about the 1960s, Vietnam War, civil rights, and other topics that he learned about in his world and American history classes. He is a remarkably smart and gifted child who inspires his father to better explain to him and others the importance of understanding our common history.

Along with Sean, Drew proved my best distraction from the work. He is one of the most loveable kids in the world, who could easily pull me away to play, now even teaching me about lacrosse and how to use the stick. In the end, this was a group project, with Maria providing the emotional support and the boys the needed diversions away from very heavy topics. I truly love them.

In addition, I want to recognize the role of the people at Cambridge University Press. I have been blessed along the way with many excellent editors, but none surpass the excellence of Debbie Gershenowitz. She

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was in many ways as passionate about my project as I was, always maintaining her own special interest in the 1960s dating back to her days in doctoral studies. Both as an editor and a comrade, she remains someone who has pushed me to produce the best manuscript possible.

I also need to thank the production staff, led by Kristina Deusch, which put in many hours in copyediting, gathering and editing photos, and many other tasks. Others, including Sindhujaa Ayyappan, Joshua Penney, Kevin Hughes, and Robert Swanson, also made substantial contributions to the project. The Press has been very supportive of this book, and I truly appreciate it.

In conclusion, I want to highlight that I dedicate this book to two of my best friends in the world: Bob Brigham and Laura Belmonte.

Bob and his wonderful wife, Monica, remain friends I very much look forward to seeing when I can. We started graduate school at the University of Kentucky in the late 1980s. Bob and I were inseparable, despite being the strange mix of a Bostonian and a West Texan. We enjoyed taking classes together and team teaching, but especially playing softball and basketball against the faculty. Even when he went to Vassar and I to Arizona State, we remained close, even taking family vacations together. To this day, we spend most of our time at conferences together, always living up the good ole days while lamenting our teenagers and paying for college.

On the other hand, Laura is my sister from another mother. We have been friends for years now, and I have greatly enjoyed the time spent with Laura and her wonderful partner, Susie, at their home in Tulsa and at other events. We share a love of teaching and the students as well as research interests, but also a sense of justice in the world. She remains my sounding board for many of the challenges of the academic world, including being an administrator. However, what I most enjoy are our long walks and bike rides at conferences as we catch up on the world and plot the future. Her coming into my life has been such a blessing, and I look forward to many years together.