LYNDON B. JOHNSON: The Exercise of Power

By ROWLAND EVANS AND ROBERT NOVAK

Jubilant over his landslide victory, the new President faces the twin problems of war abroad and revolt at home.

By the spring of 1964, a half year after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson was well advanced in his plans to run for President and to prove, once and for all, that the nation would give him the awesome power of the Presidency on his own, that he really deserved the office that had fallen to him through the vagaries of politics and an assassin's bullet. But in that spring he still searched for some way to symbolize his Administration with the kind of catchy slogan that had been so helpful to other Presidents in the past—Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, Harry Truman and the Fair Deal and Jack Kennedy and his New Frontier.

For a while, the slogan "Better Deal" popped up in a few of the President's speeches, but it did not take hold. The absence of a slogan was symptomatic of Johnson's failure at that time to achieve a distinctive post-New Frontier image for his Administration. And until he did this, his full power as President would be incomplete.

Johnson's most important collaborator in finding both a slogan and an image was, ironically, not an old Johnson hand at all but a young man who epitomized the New Frontier. Precocious, impudent and iconoclastic, Richard Goodwin had taken his law degree at Harvard in 1958, clerked for Justice Felix Frankfurter, served as an investigator in the 1959 House hearings on television-quiz scandals, and written speeches in the 1960 campaign for Sen. John F. Kennedy before emerging as Latin American policymaker, first at the White House and then at the State Department.

Called upon in March to draft a speech for Johnson, Goodwin wrote of the challenge for America to resolve such problems as the poverty hidden beneath middle-class prosperity, and to move forward not just toward a rich and powerful society but to the "great society"—a phrase and a concept frequently discussed by social theoreticians of the past half century.

Johnson did not deliver the Goodwin speech, but he never forgot its key phrase. On April 23 he told a Democratic fund-raising dinner in Chicago: "We have been called upon—are you listening?—to build a great society of the highest order, a society not just for today or tomorrow, but for three or four generations to come." During the next month Johnson mentioned the "great society" in 16 separate speeches and statements.

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Lyndon Johnson had found his slogan, but it was not recognized as such until Goodwin wrote the President's May 22 speech for the University of Michigan graduation exercises. It began by saying:

Your imagination, your initiative and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.

The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community. . . .

But most of all, the Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished

work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.

The Great Society was not simply what Dick Goodwin's words prophesied. Like the New Deal and the New Frontier, it was the badge of *this* particular President and *this* particular Administration, of the uninhibited Johnsonian style, of the restless quest for new ways in which to use the presidential power, of the search for consensus, of Government programs made by Johnson, as distinguished from those inherited from Kennedy. And of those programs, none was so much a symbol of the Great Society as the War on Poverty.

The general outline of the anti-poverty program had been planned by Kennedy, but he had been hesitant about confronting a rebellious Congress with a new proposal that had undergone no gestation period. For that reason (as well as the need for budgetary restraint to create the proper atmosphere to cut taxes) Administration officials thought that the anti-poverty proposals would be included in the Kennedy program for 1964 but would not be pressed very hard. Rather, they were to become a major talking point in the 1964 campaign. Johnson, moreover, soon became enthusiastic about the anti-poverty program. He began looking at the plan as potentially *his* program, quite distinct from the programs inherited from John F. Kennedy under the transition pledge of "Let Us Continue."

On paper the poverty program had all the right political ingredients. It coincided with Johnson's visceral sympathy for the problems of the poor. Yet, as he envisioned it, the poverty program was scarcely revolutionary. It could be sold to the business community as a sensible step toward building the Great Society, with abundance—including profits—for all.

In his State of the Union Address on January 8, Johnson told Congress:

This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and Americans to join with me in that effort.

It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won.

Such well-meant but high-flown rhetoric continued through much of the year, exciting vast expectations of help among the poor—particularly the impoverished Negro in the slums of the big cities. But Johnson's War on Poverty was more a slogan, a concept, a laudable desire than a carefully structured plan of action.

The package consisted of measures to set up various programs—the Job Corps, for example—intended to train, educate and, in general, raise the living standards of poor Americans. Johnson insisted that this package be passed by Congress before the 1964 election, and he employed every technique of pressure to rush its passage, for this was *his* bill, not Jack Kennedy's. He needed it now, in the summer of 1964, to put the Great Society imprint on the Administration and to dramatize his consolidation of power.

Passage in the Senate was no problem, but a close vote loomed in the less pliable House in the first week of August. Republican congressmen from Pennsylvania were incredulous when Stuart Saunders, board chairman of the Pennsylvania Railroad, personally telephoned them to solicit support for the poverty bill. President Johnson, of course, was the voice behind Saunders's voice. He had recruited a powerful phalanx of industrialists, businessmen and newspaper editors to telephone reluctant congressmen and urge them to vote for the poverty program. None of these amateur lobbyists had the vaguest idea of the highly debatable contents of the program, but Johnson had convinced them that something, *anything*, must be passed in this field.

In his furious lobbying for votes, Johnson did not even hesitate to turn against one of the chief planners of the program in order to get it passed by Congress. The planner was Adam Yarmolinsky, an exceedingly able but abrasive and tough liberal intellectual who had left his job as special assistant to Secretary of Defense McNamara to work on the plan with Sargent Shriver, President Kennedy's brother-in-law and the head of the Peace Corps, who had been put in charge of the program. Although Yarmolinsky had impeccable anti-Communist credentials, he had been the victim for years of a vicious right-wing smear charging him with being a subversive. During the crucial week of debate on the bill in the House, a kangaroo court on Yarmolinsky was held in the office of Speaker John McCormack. With Shriver present, conservative Democrats from North and South Carolina delivered an ultimatum: They would vote "no" on the key vote the next day unless they had absolute assurance that Yarmolinsky would be excluded from any part of the new program's administration.

Yarmolinsky, who was the administrative dynamo behind Shriver, was slated to be Deputy Director of the new Office of Economic Opportunity. But Shriver, at the congressmen's insistence, made a phone call to Johnson, and the President then and there agreed to sacrifice Yarmolinsky to get the votes. After the bill was passed, 226-184, Johnson refused even to admit that Yarmolinsky had ever worked on the program.

On August 15 during a press conference in the White House Rose Garden, after two newspaper columns by these authors had appeared recounting the whole sordid business—Johnson asserted: "Mr. Yarmolinsky is employed by the Defense Department. . . . No one, to repeat, to emphasize, no one at any time, any place, anywhere, suggested to me anyone for any of these places [in the anti-poverty program]. The first information that I had that Mr. Yarmolinsky was, in effect, appointed to one of these places that did not exist was the columnist rumor that you talked about. . . . We [do not] plan to make any assignment because some columnists think we ought to."

Yarmolinsky was only one of many sacrifices that Lyndon Johnson was willing to make to cure the first big bill of the Great Society. The excruciating problems of exactly how the poor could best and most systematically be lifted from the rut of poverty were glossed over in the mad rush to put a program on paper and hurry it through Congress. The high priority on quick approval subverted intelligent debate in Congress, which might have improved the program. But even more significantly, the President seemed willing to mortgage the future by planting among the poor hopes and expectations of such magnitude that they could not be met.

Yet these sacrifices did produce results of considerable value. The scope of the poverty program passed by Congress exceeded any level that could have been adopted in 1964 under Kennedy. Public awareness of poverty in the United States, virtually nonexistent a year earlier, was now pervasive. But most important, Johnson had made the War on Poverty part of the national consensus. It was not only bad politics but quite immoral to question the propriety of the Government's attack on poverty. And finally, the poverty program indelibly stamped the imprint of Johnson's Great Society on the Government.

In the presidential election year of 1964, what soon came to be known in the Johnson White House as The Bobby Problem commanded more attention and consumed more energy and raw emotion than any other single concern of state. It *was* a matter of state, transcending the old and deepening conflict of personality between Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy. In his heart Johnson regarded Bobby Kennedy as the one possible obstacle to his complete take-over of the Democratic Party, and unless he could assume control of the party in his own right and on his own terms, he could not feel secure in exercising the full powers of the Presidency.

Johnson made no secret of his determination to cut down Bobby Kennedy. Bobby stirred more controversy and engendered less affection than did his older brother, and ran well behind the new President in simplistic Gallup Poll competition. But Bobby was the symbol now of the emotion and sentimentality that swept the country after Dallas. He was custodian of the Kennedy dream.

The President spent hour after hour discussing The Bobby Problem in the early months of 1964. If he took Bobby Kennedy on the presidential ticket with him, he told friends, his Presidency

(Left) Democratic nominees Johnson and Humphrey, with their wives and (center) Mrs. Hubert Humphrey III, salute delegates at the 1964 convention in Atlantic City.

(Right) Nose to nose in apparent amity, President and Bobby Kennedy discuss latter's campaign for the Senate.

Johnson himself selected the targets for bombing in North Vietnam.

would become a transitory episode between two Kennedys. He rejected that out of hand. He wanted a Great Society Administration, a Johnson Administration. "I don't want to get elected because of the Kennedys," Johnson told a member of the Irish Mafia in the spring of 1964. "I want to get elected on my own. That's a perfectly normal feeling, isn't it?"

Could Johnson arbitrarily exclude Bobby Kennedy without provoking a revolt fueled by the emotions that welled up from Dallas? The answer was: Of course he could. But Johnson was uncertain. He conjured up one picture after another of what might happen to him if, as he thought, he overplayed his hand in excluding Kennedy from the ticket. The Bobby Problem became an obsession, and all the Texas-based politicians who now surrounded him in Washington and who, like Johnson himself, had not learned how complete the power of the Presidency really was, played on that obsession and magnified it.

This concern was typified by an incident at the Gridiron Club's annual dinner on April 24, 1964. There, in the midst of the merrymaking, White House aide Walter Jenkins spotted Larry O'Brien, one of President Kennedy's closest advisers. Taking O'Brien off to a corner, Jenkins gravely argued that President Johnson should have total freedom to select his own running mate. O'Brien gravely listened, but he was astonished at Jenkins's nervousness. O'Brien knew that the President could pick his second man by the merest flick of his finger. But Johnson and his Texas politicians hadn't learned that rule of American politics.

As for Robert Kennedy himself, there is no question that the Attorney General wanted to be asked by Johnson to go on the ticket. Although he said privately that he would accept only if the President agreed to specific conditions, outlining precisely what his duties would be, it is virtually certain that if he had been asked by Johnson, he would have accepted. But Kennedy knew that no write-in campaign or other clumsy power play would put him on the ticket. He had to keep at least a veneer of cordial relations with Johnson.

That was not difficult in early 1964, for the policy disagreements that were to break out between them came much later. Kennedy truly regarded Johnson's first months in office as a period of thorough accomplishment. Johnson was working closely with him on the civil-rights front, never once turning down a suggestion from the Attorney General on that subject. Kennedy said publicly on March 12 that he had the "highest regard" for the President. "Our relations are friendly," he said. "He has always been kind to me, to my family, and to Mrs. [John F.] Kennedy, both as Vice President and since then."

But those words scarcely eased the concern in the Johnson camp, especially when abortive Draft Kennedy movements sprang up in New Hampshire and Wisconsin. Although Kennedy had nothing to do with either campaign, the President decided drastic action was needed. It took the form of an unprecedented pressure play that not even Franklin Roosevelt at the height of his power would have contemplated. In mid-April, one month after the New Hampshire primary, former Democratic Sen. Scott Lucas persuaded all nine county Democratic chairmen in his downstate Illinois district to sign a pledge reading:

Be it . . . resolved that President Lyndon B. Johnson, when nominated for President on the Democratic ticket, shall have the free choice of selecting his running mate as Vice President.

Lucas did not discuss this resolution with the President himself, but the President knew about it. The resolution was quickly sent around the country, *sub rosa*, by key Johnson politicians who, it was hoped, would have it adopted by *all* delegations to the National Convention at Atlantic City. But two small Eastern states—New Jersey and Rhode Island—angrily balked at signing the pledge, and the idea was dropped. So ended another of Johnson's maneuvers to solve The Bobby Problem, which he still considered a threat late in July, just four weeks before the convention.

Johnson knew that the last feeble beating of Bobby-for-Vice-President hopes could not be permitted to continue into the National Convention itself, where the confusion and grief for John Kennedy might somehow produce a climate of revolt. On Monday, July 27, the President telephoned the Attorney General and arranged for a meeting at the White House two days later.

When Bobby Kennedy walked into the President's Oval Office at 1 P.M. on Wednesday, Johnson came at once to the point. Kennedy, said the President, would probably run the country on his own someday, but Johnson wanted him to know that he did not plan to put him on the ticket in 1964. The reason, Johnson said, was that he had decided Kennedy was not the Democrat who as Vice President could contribute the most to the party, to the country, or to the President. In a reversal of roles in their confrontation at the 1960 convention, Johnson offered Kennedy any foreign diplomatic post he wanted, and any Cabinet post, if and when incumbent Cabinet members resigned.

Kennedy accepted this verdict quietly and told Johnson he would do everything he could to help in the election. There was some discussion of how the President's decision would be announced, but nothing was decided. Johnson hoped to solve The Bobby Problem in the most expeditious way: a voluntary withdrawal by Kennedy himself. But when Kennedy continued to refuse to jump overboard, Johnson now moved to the alternative strategy he had devised to push Bobby over with a minimum political risk. On Thursday evening, July 30, the President unexpectedly went before television cameras at the White House and read an announcement without precedent in American history: "I have reached the conclusion that it would be inadvisable for me to recommend to the convention any member of my Cabinet or any of those who meet regularly with the Cabinet."

Senator Humphrey was first informed by a telephone call from a reporter. After hanging up the phone, Humphrey remarked to an aide that the reporter who had called him was invariably reliable but must be having hallucinations now. Humphrey could not believe the story. Other politicians were equally incredulous. In shooting down Bobby Kennedy, the President had performed a mass execution of his entire Cabinet as well as two vice-presidential dark horses "who meet regularly with the Cabinet," Adlai Stevenson and Sargent Shriver.

All of Washington guffawed at the clumsiness and transparency of the ploy—although a case could be made that it did muffle the blow against the Kennedys and thereby minimized the reaction of Kennedy forces in the party. Although every politician and newsman in the country knew Johnson was aiming only at Bobby Kennedy, the President had a plausible argument to the contrary. He couldn't spare any of his valued Cabinet aides, and that was as true of the other nine as it was of Bobby Kennedy.

On Friday, July 31, convinced that at last he had found the final solution to The Bobby Problem, Johnson could contain himself no longer. Eight months of caution and restraint in dealing with the dead President's brother ended in explosive Johnsonian exuberance. Johnson invited newsmen to his office throughout that day to relate his showdown with Kennedy in terms that were highly favorable to himself and considerably less favorable to Kennedy. Mimicry, exaggeration, overvivid description—all Johnson's conversational techniques—were brought to bear on

Parade down New York's Fifth Avenue in March, 1966, began as protest of Johnson's Vietnam policy but also showed signs of displeasure on Santo Domingo, Watts.

Bobby Kennedy in the presence of newsmen for the first time since the assassination. Newspaper accounts giving details of the Wednesday meeting, as supplied by the President, began to appear in print as Kennedy went off to Hyannis Port for the weekend.

Kennedy was furious and let Johnson know about it. Whatever slim hope existed for a Johnson-Kennedy *rapprochement* vanished that weekend. Now, Kennedy was convinced that Johnson saw poetic justice in their face-to-face encounter in the Oval Office. Johnson wanted to humiliate him, Kennedy believed, because Johnson had not forgotten that hot day in July, 1960, when Robert Kennedy, unaware that his brother's plan had changed, went to Johnson's hotel suite at Los Angeles to tell him he did not have to run for Vice President if he did not want to risk a floor fight.

In Johnson's mind, as in everybody else's, Hubert Humphrey was now the leading choice for vice-presidential nominee, but to feed his insatiable appetite for suspense, Johnson kept the world—and Humphrey—waiting for his decision. The convention was well under way before Humphrey finally learned that the nomination as Johnson's Vice President was his. When the two men met for a conference in the White House, Johnson told Humphrey that he must be exactly the Vice President that Johnson wanted him to be. He must be Johnson's man down to the tips of his toes, and he must do whatever Johnson asked him to; he must be able to share secrets that no one else would know; he must be prepared for special duties in space, and in civil rights, education and welfare, and agriculture. Humphrey responded in kind. *If* he were chosen as the vice-presidential nominee on the following day, Humphrey said, he would be the most loyal partner that any President could possibly have.

Campaigning in Indiana early in October, 1964, Lyndon Johnson flew the short hop from East Chicago to Indianapolis with Matthew Welsh, the Democratic Governor of Indiana, as his guest aboard Air Force One. Not since Franklin D. Roosevelt beat Alf Landon in 1936 had a Democratic candidate for President carried Indiana. Not since Harry Truman came within striking distance of Thomas E. Dewey in 1948 had the presidential contest there been close. Now, a beaming Welsh carried glad tidings for his party's leader. Based on his own political survey of the state, the governor predicted the President would carry Indiana with a comfortable 55 percent of the vote. Johnson's face darkened at the news. "God, that's close," he said without a trace of humor.

Actually, Johnson's victory had been assured on July 15, when the Republican Party's right wing seized control for the first time since 1924, ignored the consensus, and nominated Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona. Johnson knew full well that no miracle could save Goldwater. But once the Republicans had done the unthinkable and nominated him, Johnson became a man possessed with ambition not just to win, not just to win handsomely, but to win the *largest* presidential victory in the history of the country. A landslide vote would be the last and mightiest step in his consolidation of political power.

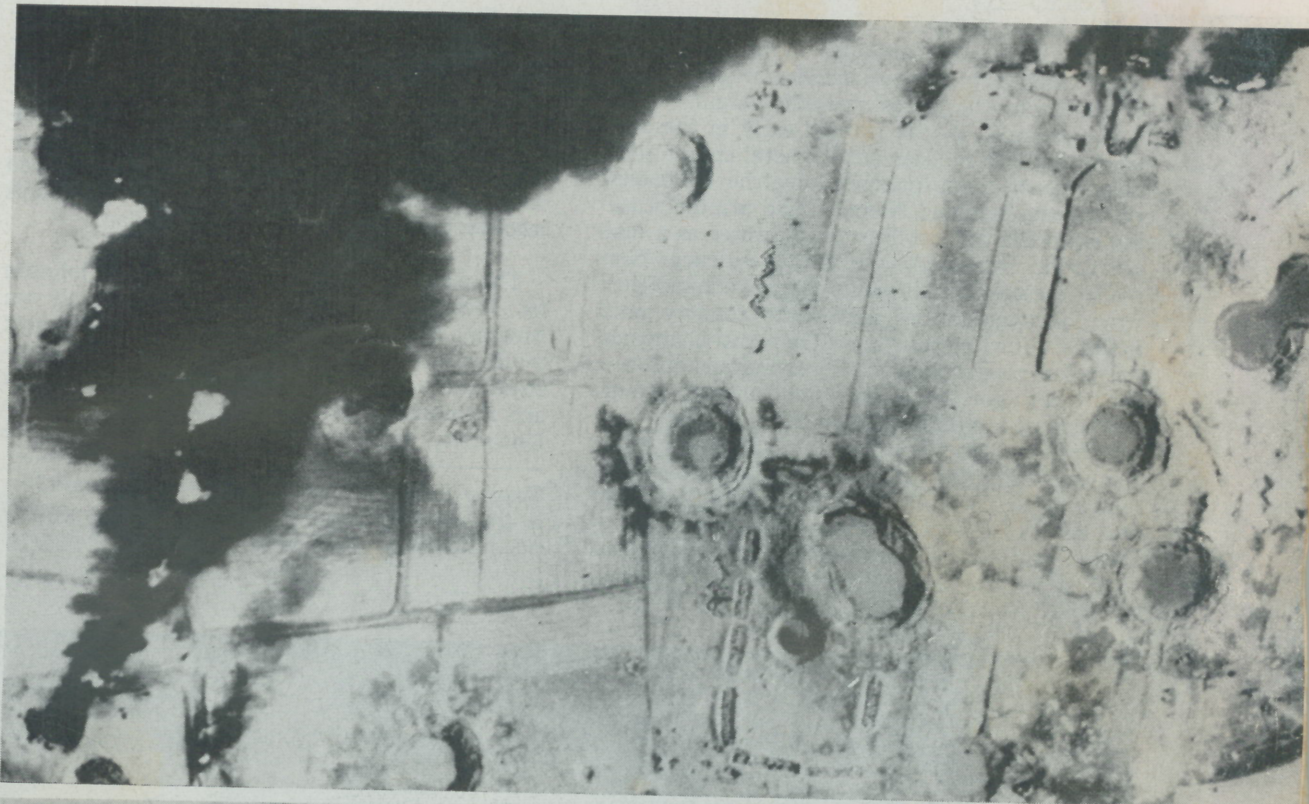
He had survived the crisis of confidence during the transition, put the stamp of the Great Society on his Administration, disposed of The Bobby Problem, and run a one-man convention at Atlantic City. Here now was the final goal: to win by so large a margin that the consensus he sought as the means to power would be ratified by an unprecedented electoral sweep.

Johnson's campaign was as disorganized and as madcap as his earlier campaigns had been, but this time he had the help of a cool professional politician, Larry O'Brien, who had been one of Kennedy's top political advisers and who had served brilliantly as the President's liaison man with Congress. In early September, Johnson instructed O'Brien to arrange a series of some 21 confidential regional meetings, in which he could take the measure of the political situation in every state. Until then, Johnson had done precious little about the campaign. Now he felt "out of touch," as he put it, and assigned O'Brien to be the presidential eyes and ears. As such, O'Brien took off on an intermittent tour that covered the country in six weeks.

The object was to talk politics to a dozen or so top leaders in every state. Behind locked doors in sessions lasting three or four hours, every detail of the campaign was ruthlessly laid out. O'Brien then locked himself in his hotel room and wrote a voluminous confidential report for the President. The instant each report was finished, it was sent by Western Union to the White House.

To the President, who had never had the benefit of such professional political help, the O'Brien reports became The Word. Their recommendations were carved up and parceled out among the members of the White House staff. The Democratic National Committee and Walter Jenkins were ordered to follow through. Johnson soon ordered Jenkins to have O'Brien's traveling staff, usually one secretary and one assistant, telephone his report to White House stenographers page-by-page, as it was finished, no matter how late at night, so that the recommendations could be acted upon with the least possible delay.

One element of campaign strategy, devised in extreme secrecy, was known as the Anti-Campaign. Conceived and nursed by Lyndon Johnson,



Johnson's decision to bomb targets in the North like the oil tanks near Dong Hoi (top) helped antagonize a powerful former ally, Sen. J. W. Fulbright (lower left).