



The American Presidency: Lyndon Johnson Professor Sir Vernon Bogdanor FBA CBE

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In my last lecture, we ended with the tragic assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. As is the law in America, he was succeeded by his Vice President, Lyndon Johnson, who remained President until 1969.

Lyndon Johnson was born 100 years ago this year, in 1908, but I think it is significant that most people here would probably not remember that anniversary. There has been no commemoration of it in the press, as far as I know, and in a way, that is surprising because he was a very important President. However, he lacked the glamour of Kennedy, and though he achieved more perhaps, arguably, than any President of the 20th Century except for Roosevelt, he is seen as the first of the failed Presidents.

Up to now, the Presidents I have been talking about - Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy - can all be seen, perhaps with different degrees of confidence, as successful Presidents, but now we enter a period of failed Presidents, and Johnson is arguably the first of them. He was followed by Nixon, who was forced to resign in disgrace after the Watergate episode in 1974, and then he was succeeded by Ford, who was defeated in 1976, and then Carter, who was a one-term President, until we get to Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Johnson was seen as a failed President primarily because of the Vietnam War, which he escalated very considerably and got American ground troops involved, and also because of the seeming breakdown of American society at the end of his term, with urban riots and student riots. Whether that is fair or not, it is for you to judge at the end of my talk.

The most important fact about Johnson is that he was a Southerner. He was born in Texas, and he was the first President representing a Southern state since the Civil War, though since him, there have been four Southern Presidents and only three non-Southern Presidents. The four Southern Presidents are the two Bushes, father and son, Carter and Clinton, and the non-Southern ones are Nixon, Reagan and Ford. So you have this paradox that there were no Southern Presidents from the end of the Civil War in 1865 until Johnson nearly 100 years later in 1963, but since then there have been four out of seven Southern Presidents. That change was partly a result of reforms initiated by Lyndon Johnson, which had the effect of integrating the South into the American mainstream, and that was a large part of his aim, because at the time of his birth, and indeed until the 1960s, the South was most definitely not integrated into the United States mainstream. It was separate, and the main reason for that was race, because, in the South, until the 1960s, you still had segregation, occasionally lynch law, and in effect most black people in the Deep South had no vote because the vote was not a federal responsibility at that time, it was a state responsibility, and the states of the Deep South made sure that black people could not vote.

There is a very good example from the current Secretary of State in America, Condoleezza Rice: when her father, who was a minister of the church, tried to register to vote, he was asked by the democratic official in the relevant institution if he could guess the number of beans in a bag that he held up and that was a test as to whether you could vote or not. So in effect, blacks were debarred from voting, and subject to all sorts of humiliations.

Lyndon Johnson was fond of telling the story of when he used to drive up from Texas back to Washington with his wife and his black cook in the car. They used to stop occasionally to use the facilities on the way back, at petrol stations and so on, but the black cook was not allowed to use these facilities. He said to some business leaders that he met in the 1960s: "Is that the kind of country you want? It's not the kind of country I want."

Segregation not only divided white from black, but it also divided the South from the rest of the country, and it was Lyndon Johnson's aim to integrate the South with the rest of the country, and in that he succeeded.

He was born in fairly poor circumstances, though perhaps like many Americans, and not only Americans, he exaggerated those circumstances. His father was a small farmer, not well-off but not in the worst throes of poverty, and he became a state legislator in Texas. Johnson lacked the advantages of John F. Kennedy - he lacked the advantage of wealth - and he lacked what Franklin Roosevelt had - a rather patrician and aristocratic background. He is perhaps most similar amongst Presidents to Truman or Eisenhower, who both grew up in fairly poor circumstances.

He became, from the early years, a New Deal Liberal, supporter of Franklin Roosevelt, whom he greatly admired, and he became a Congressman in 1934. He first stood for the Senate in 1941, but he failed to get in through what seemed a mishap, because when the votes were counted, it seemed that Lyndon Johnson was a long way ahead, but then, towards the end of the count, a number of boxes were found in a far part of the state which went 90% for his opponent and Johnson was defeated. Roosevelt rebuked him and said, "The first law of Texan politics, Lyndon, is you sit on the ballot boxes until they're counted!"

He got in the Senate on his second opportunity in 1948, and at that time, he was, in a sense, at home in the Senate because it was dominated by Southerners. The Senate was like a Southern club and Washington was a Southern city. The reason for that was that the rules of the Senate at that time gave great weight to seniority, that the important committee chairmanships went to the most senior Senators, and those senior Senators were all Democrats for the South, and the reason for that was that the South was a one-party state. The Republican Party, until the 1970s, did not compete effectively in the South because it was the party of Lincoln and the Northerners in the Civil War. Therefore no Republican would get anywhere in the South, and the only real battle in the South was the Democratic Primary, but whoever won that would get the Senate seat. Everyone else in the rest of the country had to fight a competitive race, so they were not likely to last in the Senate that long because when there was a swing against their party, they would be out, but the Democrats in the South did not have to fight such a race, so the key committee positions all went to Southerners. But, for the very reasons I have given, Southern Democrats could not be national leaders because they were segregationists, so it was a club but a kind of a very odd sort of club, and the Southern Democrats of course had very little in common with the Democrats in the North, who tended to be liberals and committed to racial equality. So the Southern Democrats were, as it were, in the Democratic Party for purely historical reasons relating to the Civil War, and they were in a permanent minority status but nevertheless they held the key positions.

However, Johnson sought to transcend this minority status. He wanted to be the captain of the Senate and not, as it were, the captive of the South. He wanted to be more than a sectional leader; he wanted to be a national leader. He first showed his independence quite early in the Senate.

In 1956, the Southern Senators organised what they called a "Southern Manifesto" in which they condemned a recent and famous decision of the Supreme Court in 1954 - Brown versus Board of Education - which said that segregation in education was unconstitutional. The Southern Senators organised a "Southern Manifesto" in which they condemned that decision, but Johnson was the only Southern Senator not to sign it. So he early showed that he was independent.

But despite this, he made rapid progress in the Senate. He was an admired and liked member of the club, and in 1953, he became the Leader of the Democrats in the Senate. He was a Minority Leader, because at that time the Republicans were in control, but two years later, in 1955, the Democrats won it back, and he became the Majority Leader of the Senate, and indeed the youngest Majority Leader in modern American history. That was where he made his reputation, as Majority Leader of the Senate. He was enormously skilled, and perhaps the most skilled in American history, and I do not think that it is an exaggeration to say that he devoted his whole life to studying the Senators, what sort of people they were, how they would vote, how you could win their votes and how you could get a consensus for necessary reforms. He spent his whole time in the Senate not so much on the Senate floor but in the rooms outside - the cloakrooms and everywhere else - and it was once said of him that he never won a vote on the Senate floor but never lost a vote outside it. He knew every Senator well, he would do them favours, and he knew exactly what to do, and indeed then, and really for the rest of his life, he had no other interest than politics. He never read a book, as far as I am aware; he never listened to music. He once said, "I don't think about politics more than 18 hours a day." He spent his whole time in the Senate winning over opinion. When faced with a Republican President, who was Eisenhower, and many Democrats said, "Well, your job is to oppose Eisenhower and show he's a poor President," he said, "No, that's not the job; the business of the

opposition in the Senate is not to oppose, but to cooperate and see what we can get through cooperation." So he worked very closely with Eisenhower, particularly on foreign policy, but also on domestic policy, and you can argue that he was in effect almost a co-President with Eisenhower during this period. His great skill was at building a consensual coalition in Congress.

But it was not merely that. He was sometimes dismissed as merely a wheeler-dealer and operator but he wasn't that. He had clear aims that he wanted to achieve, but he thought they were best achieved by going with the grain of the Senate and not by seeking unrealistic achievement. In particular, his great ability was to bring hostile groups together.

I have already said there were two groups within the Democratic Party - the Southern Democrats and the Northern Democrats - and there were also the Republicans who were, on the whole, fairly conservative. The great danger that Johnson saw was that the Southern Democrats would join with the Republicans as a conservative block, frustrating any change or reform. Johnson's main aim was to prevent that happening; to ensure that both wings of the Democratic Party worked together. This meant he had to be much more conservative than many of his liberal friends would like, because he depended on the Southern Democrats. For that very reason, he had to downplay his concern for matters such as civil rights. He said you could not achieve much, given that, in practice, Congress was dominated by conservatives.

However, despite all that, he was an extremely successful Majority Leader, and hoped, and I think assumed, that this would lead him to the Presidency in 1960. He had great respect and popularity amongst Democrats in the Senate and thought that would be it, but he failed to understand that, by that time in America, the Senate was less important in nominations, and the important thing was to win the Primary Elections which the Senators had no influence over. He faced a candidate whom I think he at first underestimated as simply young and inexperienced, John F. Kennedy, who had very little respect in the Senate, but had a great deal of popularity in the country. Kennedy was very much a junior person in the Senate, and he relied on Johnson to get him key appointments. I think Johnson saw him as junior and inexperienced, who made little mark as a Senator, and Johnson thought of him as a rich amateur who had bought the nomination with his father's money. Kennedy, in turn, thought of Johnson as a hick from the South and as someone who could not, because of his sectional allegiances, and, as Kennedy once said, because of his accent, simply could not be elected as President. Perhaps each underestimated the other. They were bitter opponents and, as we know, Kennedy got the nomination, and then, very surprisingly, offered the Vice Presidential nomination to Johnson.

The general reason given for that fact, which surprised many, was that Kennedy badly needed to ensure that he carried the South, and that Johnson would ensure that Texas became Democrat. In fact, Texas, in a first break in the solid South, only just went for Kennedy in the 1960 Election. They were upset by Kennedy's promises on civil rights and many of them voted Republican. Indeed, it is arguable that without Johnson on the ticket, Kennedy would not have won Texas, and if he had not won Texas, he would not have won the Election. So it paid off that he chose Johnson as his Vice-President.

But, to be fair to Kennedy, I think there is a second reason. Those who were at my last lecture will remember that Kennedy was always very conscious of his poor health, and he always felt instinctively he would not live long, and he had almost died twice before he became President - he had been given the last rites twice by the priest at his church. I think he felt that if anything did happen to him, Johnson would make a good President.

Another problem is: why did Johnson accept the Vice Presidency? This is a valid question because the Vice Presidency is not worth very much in normal times. Johnson had expressed great scorn for Kennedy, and one of Johnson's allies said to him, "Only the other day, you said that Kennedys, in his own language, were chicken dirt" and Kennedy, he said, "Son, when you've been in politics as long as I have, you'll realise that overnight chicken dirt can turn into chicken salad!" So he took the nomination, and he was Vice President. It was a very uneasy relationship: Johnson felt he ought to be President, and Kennedy and the people round Kennedy were rather patronising towards Johnson and thought he had no role to play.

Of course, all that ended in 1963 when Kennedy was assassinated. Johnson said to Congress that the best memorial to Kennedy would be to carry out his programme. Kennedy said, "Let us begin"; Johnson said, "Let us continue" and his main priority was to secure legislation on civil rights which Kennedy, rather late in his term, had put forward, but was bogged down in Congress, in the House Rules Committee, and seemed to be completely blocked. Johnson said, "If you really want a memorial to Kennedy, you must pass this legislation." He said, "No memorial or oration or elegy could more eloquently honour President

Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill, for which he fought so long. We have talked long enough about equal rights in this country. We have talked for 100 years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter and write it in the books of law."

However, he faced the problem, as Kennedy had, that the conservative coalition in Congress could filibuster the legislation, and indeed, even a minority could do it in the Senate. To overcome a filibuster in the Senate, you needed the vote of two-thirds, and that meant you had to get the Republicans to support it. It was not enough to get the Democrats alone because there were enough Southern Democrats who could join with the Republicans to block it, and so you needed the consent of the opposition. Johnston got it. That was partly because of the feeling of guilt at the death of Kennedy, but I think there was more to it than that. A major part of it was Johnson's great skill, in particular in dealing with the Senate Minority Leader, Senator Dirksen, a Republican. It was through this that he managed to persuade Dirksen that his name would be remembered in history and so on if he helped pass this bill; he was extremely persuasive. He was always said to be a very difficult person to resist because he was a very big man, and he would cajole you and browbeat you and persuade you, and had fifty arguments for any course that he wanted to take. You might have three or four, but they would be blown aside by the many arguments that he had. Anyway, he persuaded Dirksen to support this and to overrule the filibuster.

He said to one liberal who interviewed him, "I really revere Congress." He said, "I am not for denouncing Congress all the time. I am not like you writers who think of Congressmen as archaic buffoons with tobacco drool running down their shirt." He said, "I got up at seven this morning to have breakfast with them. I don't have contempt for them." He had this practice of ensuring that any call from a Congressman or Senator to the White House was returned by him, as far as he could, within ten minutes. One Congressman was so shocked at this; he said no President had ever rung him before, and that he almost jumped out of his seat when he got the call. He treated Congress with great respect, care and attention.

The Civil Rights Act was a very major measure indeed in 1964. It banned racial discrimination in all public accommodation and employment, including schools. One member of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People said, after that was passed, that Johnson had made a greater contribution to giving a dignified and hopeful status to negroes than any other President, including Lincoln, Roosevelt and Kennedy.

After that act was passed, Johnson had a great stroke of luck in that the Republicans nominated Barry Goldwater in the presidential election of 1964. Goldwater was an extremist candidate, who made everybody rather fearful. He said that it would be a good idea to drop nuclear weapons, and I quote, "into the men's room in the Kremlin". He spoke in Florida to a group of retired people saying he was against federal social security, and he said that there should be no right to education - that a child has no right to education, at least provided by the state - and that in most cases he would get along very well without it. The Goldwater supporters had a slogan called "In your heart, you know he's right!" but the Johnston supporters replied, "But in your guts, you know he's nuts!" It should be said, at this point, that one of Goldwater's strongest supporters was Ronald Reagan, who was to become Governor of California in 1966.

At any rate, in the climate of those times, Goldwater failed hopelessly and there was a Democratic landslide. Goldwater, very significantly here, won only his home state of Arizona and five of the segregationist Southern states, which were moving into the Republican camp as a result of the Civil Rights Act, but every other state went to Johnson. He won the largest popular majority in American history up to that time. But in a sense, even more importantly, he brought with him very large Democratic majorities in Congress, so the conservative coalition in Congress of Southern Democrats and Republicans was broken, and the liberals now had a majority in Congress for the first time since 1938, near the end of Roosevelt's second term. This conservative coalition, which had a stranglehold on Congress, was now broken in the Johnson landslide.

Johnston felt Congress could work again, and very typically, on Election Night, when he was congratulated, he said, "Don't stay up late. There's work to be done. We are on our way to the Great Society." That was the phrase associated with him. Just as Kennedy, "The New Frontier" or Roosevelt, "The New Deal", Johnson was going to create "The Great Society".

His first measure in the Great Society, arguably even more important than the Civil Rights Act, was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which made voting rights a federal responsibility so that the states could no longer deny to black people the rights to vote. Johnson insisted that black people registered to vote, and he said, "The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls that imprison men because they are different from other men." I think the

Voting Rights Act is more important than the Brown decision of 1954 in the process of black emancipation in America, because although the Brown decision had said that segregated schools were unconstitutional, very little was done about it because the Southern states would not act and the federal government would not enforce it, and by the 1960s, only 2% of black people in the South attended bi-racial schools. But the Voting Rights Act gave black people a weapon, leverage if you like, which they were not slow to use, and by 1968, already 32% were in bi-racial schools. Even more importantly, it gave rise to a new breed of Southern politician - Southern liberal Democrats - of which the first, and perhaps the most prominent, was Jimmy Carter, the Governor of Georgia, who became President in 1976. He was a strongly desegregationist Governor. But even people who had been segregationists, like George Wallace, the Governor of Alabama, then changed their tune because of the power of the black vote in the South. So I think that was the most important reform; much more important, in my opinion, than the Brown decision.

But when Johnson was congratulated on this reform, he said, "You know, I've lost the South for the Democratic Party." What he meant was that the old one-party South had been broken up, and the South became competitive again, because race was taken out of politics. With a competitive election, it was more likely to be Republican than Democrat, because the South was basically conservative, with a small "c", and so once you had got this issue of race out of the way, the fact the Republicans were the party of Lincoln would be forgotten, they would now compete as a conservative party, and they would gain strength very rapidly in the South. Johnson foresaw that would happen when he said, "I've lost the South for the Democrats."

It is very interesting, if you look at the history of the period since Johnson's death, that the only two Presidents elected from the Democratic Party since Johnson have both been from the South: Carter and Clinton - Carter from Georgia, and Clinton from Arkansas. The South has become pivotal, and whereas the Democrats used to be able to rely automatically on the Southern states, that was no longer so, and they found they could only win if they could break into this Republican strength in the South, and that needed a Democrat from the South. Of course, if Obama wins in November, that would break that rule, but the only two Democrat Presidents have been from the South.

Johnson was not content with civil rights reforms and voting rights; he also began a massive programme of federal aid to elementary and secondary education, and that was possible with desegregation, because you could not have federal aid, clearly, to segregated schools. Once you had desegregation, the federal government could play a much larger role, and he particularly ensured that money was put into the inner cities to compensatory education programmes.

He also launched a massive programme of expansion in aid for higher education, particularly to poor colleges, attended primarily by black students, and as a result of that, by the 1990s, and I suspect still today, America spent around twice as much per student as most other industrial countries. We all think of America as a free enterprise country, but in fact, Johnson brought the federal government very heavily into education at all levels.

He also much more controversially brought the federal government into the field of healthcare. This was through the Medicare programme for those over 65, half of whom had no health insurance. This Medicaid programme gave federal matching grants to those states prepared to institute health programmes, but he could not go further and make health or education federal responsibilities. Under the American Constitution, they are state responsibilities, so it depended on the states whether anything happened. By the 1990s, America still had the largest percentage of its people without health insurance in the industrialised world; around 15% without any health insurance. Presidents since him, particularly Clinton, have tried to institute a federal health insurance programme, but have failed because of American dislike of what they think of as socialism or socialised medicine, so that did not go as far perhaps as Johnston and others might have hoped.

The health programme was denounced by the new Governor of California in 1966, Ronald Reagan, who said it was "an advanced wave of socialism, which will invade every area of freedom in this country" and would compel Americans to spend their sunset years "telling our children and our children's children what it was like in America when men were free." Reagan did not seek to dismantle that programme when he himself came to office.

With all these reforms, you would think that Johnson would have been enormously popular, and that American society would be peaceful and progressive and so on, but that did not happen. The Johnson Administration was shocked in the summer of 1965 and then every summer in the rest of his term, when riots in black areas of the inner cities began to break out, not in the South, where the attention had been

concentrated, but in the North. It was clear that there had been what you might call a revolution of rising expectations amongst the black community and they were no longer prepared to put up with circumstances that they had put up with for too long.

The riots first broke out in Watts, a black district of Los Angeles, where three-quarters of the adult black males were unemployed. I think Johnson found it difficult to understand the causes of these riots. He said, "What do they want? I am giving them boom times and more good legislation than anybody else did, and what do they do? Attack and sneer! Could FDR do better? Could anyone do better? What do they want?!"

So, at the same time when you have got what you might call the culmination of liberal hopes in America, namely this powerful move towards racial equality, you also had the sudden end to liberal hopes, that there were social and economic problems, deep-seated problems, in the black community which liberals did not know how to deal with. There were two reactions to this.

One reaction, from people on the left, and a good example of this is Johnson's Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, was to understand the causes of these revolts. "Well," he said, "if I lived in a slum, and there were rats in the house I lived in, I'd riot myself!" That was one attitude, but that was a minority attitude.

The main attitude was that law and order had broken down, and that Johnson was not strong enough to restore it, and perhaps a stronger authority in the federal government was needed to keep order. That attitude was particularly strong amongst the white working class - poor whites if you like - people themselves not very well off, who said, "Well, we're not rioting - why are black people rioting?" And then, people on the left said, "Well, these white workers, they're racists themselves," which did not help, but what these riots were doing was to break up this reform coalition in the country just when it was so powerful in Congress. The white working class, which had been behind Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy and Johnson, was now swinging to the right, because they said that law and order is breaking down in the cities, and the Democratic Administration is not doing enough to stop it happening. So it seemed that this middle road of liberalism, which Johnson was championing, was under threat: both from radicals, from the left came a new generation of black radical leaders who though the older generation and more constitutionally-minded people had been too slow and they were not doing enough to improve conditions; and a revolution from the right with people saying that it is not black aspirations that are the problem - the problem is a breakdown of law and order. Reagan won the governorship of California in 1966 on that very ticket. California had had a Democratic Governor for many years, Pat Brown, and Nixon, after failing to be elected President in 1960, stood against him in 1962, but was defeated, but in 1966, Ronald Reagan defeated Pat Brown, and that was a sign of the growing strength of conservatism in America.

On the left, it appeared that the problems of the black minority were much deeper than mere legal discrimination: there were deep-seated social, economic and cultural problems which liberals did not know how to resolve. So that was the first huge and ominous crack in the Johnson programme. The second crack was the failure in Vietnam, which cuts across a number of presidencies, but particularly Johnson and Nixon.

When Johnson came to office, Kennedy had established a large number of American so-called advisors in South Vietnam to deal with the infiltration by the Communist North through the Vietcong into the South. Shortly before Kennedy was assassinated, there was an episode which made it very difficult for Johnson to withdraw, even if he had wanted to, because the American Ambassador to South Vietnam had reported to Kennedy that the regime in South Vietnam was very unpopular and, in particular, that it had antagonised the Buddhists. The Ambassador said that there are many people in the military who wish to launch a coup against this regime, and he took the view that South Vietnam would be in a stronger position and better able to defend itself if there was a new regime there - would Kennedy give the go-ahead? Kennedy did so, and there was a coup, but contrary to what Kennedy had expected, President Diem was overthrown - and not only overthrown, but murdered in the coup - and that was about three weeks before Kennedy's own assassination.

Johnson took the view, understandably, that if America had so involved itself in the affairs of South Vietnam as to determine its government, she could not simply then walk away and say "now you sort things out". He inherited what he thought was a commitment from previous Presidents, and that commitment was emphasised by Kennedy's brother, Bobby Kennedy, who stood for the Senate in New York in 1964. He was later to become a strong opponent of Johnson and an opponent of the War, but in 1964, when the War was escalating, he said that "to withdraw from Vietnam would be a repudiation of commitments undertaken and confirmed by three Administrations". So Johnson could also think that if he did withdraw from Vietnam,

the Kennedys, whom he had always distrusted, would denounce him as not having carried out Kennedy's legacy. With a good historical memory, he said, "Look what happened with Truman. He was accused of losing China, of not being strong enough in Korea. That damaged the Democrats and put Eisenhower in the White House. I don't want that to happen to me! I don't want my domestic reforms to be stymied because they think I'm weak abroad." He kept the same people who had advised Kennedy, and they said you must keep going in Vietnam.

I take the view - but this is very controversial and historians are about 50/50 on this - that Kennedy would not have escalated the war in Vietnam. I think that the Bay of Pigs, about which I spoke last time, the 1962 attempted invasion of Cuba, which failed, had put Kennedy rather against his advisors; he thought the experts are not always right and I must question what they do, and he was rather sceptical towards the experts.

Johnson did not perhaps quite have Kennedy's self-confidence with the experts. He said, "If they advised Kennedy on that, they are advising me, they're probably right." He would not go against his advisors. Some people say this is wrong, that Kennedy would have done exactly the same, but it is not obviously totally clear.

What Johnson did was to escalate the War by bombing North Vietnam and by bombing the Vietcong bases in South Vietnam, and also, and this is the crucial step, moving American ground troops into South Vietnam, and by the end of his presidency, half a million American troops were fighting in Vietnam. So, from having been an Asian war fought by the Vietnamese with American advisors, it became an American war, and a very large American war. By 1970, the total tonnage of bombs dropped by America in Vietnam exceeded that dropped in all previous wars in human history.

Johnson did not do this with the aim of bombing North Vietnam to the Stone Age. What he wanted to do was to get a negotiated solution in Vietnam, to convince the North they could not take over the South. His opponents did not say simply that America should withdraw; what they said was if you were more liberal, if you stop bombing, if you take the ground troops out, then there will be negotiations. The truth is I think that no negotiated situation was possible. The North was determined to take over the South. They were prepared to lose many men because that didn't matter to the dictatorship. Ho Chi Minh, the Communist leader of the North, had fought a similar war against the French for years and had eventually driven the French out. He did not believe that a non-Asian power could endlessly fight in Asia against his guerrilla troops, and so it proved to be.

Johnson was not only criticised from the left of course, he was criticised from the right for fighting a limited war. They said, "Why don't you invade this tin-pot country, North Vietnam - they can't resist America." He said, "Well, I can't do that. There's a danger, if I do that, the Chinese will enter," as they had in Korea, "or the Russians will enter, and we will be in a war." So he took a middle way, and that is what liberals had said should be done. They had criticised Eisenhower in the 1950s for relying on massive retaliation, nuclear weapons, and so on, and they said the important thing is flexible response to ratchet things up until you get the enemy to surrender, and that is what Johnson did. So it was a liberal war, in a sense, so the right attacked Johnson for not being firm enough, and the left attacked him for going too far.

Here too, as with the urban riots, it seemed America was in trouble. The liberals had thought America could do anything: it could secure racial equality, abolish poverty and improve educational standards at home; abroad, it could conquer this army of guerrillas in pyjamas, as it were, it could easily be beaten, so how could they resist a great power like America? When all that did not happen of course, it ended the optimism that had marked American liberalism since the time of Roosevelt. People said, well, perhaps America cannot do all these things after all, and American society continued to polarise.

The most obvious feature of that polarisation was the student revolt against the Vietnam War, which reached its height in 1968. By that time participation in higher education in America had increased very rapidly. This was because of the baby boomers, one third of whom were at university, of the age group. This meant a very high participation rate for the period: eight million out of 25 million. Some people said, well, they were spoilt and had things too easy. Nixon, the Republican President, in 1969, said they were "a Spock-marked generation", after Benjamin Spock, the child psychologist who had advocated apparently liberal habits of child-rearing.

However, when we see the pictures, as we still do, marking the 1968 student revolts, we need to take into account the actual realities. The activist students were 2-3%. Those who participated in anti-War demonstrations were 20%. Opinion polls showed the majority of students were actually for the War, and

more pro the War than they had been for the Korean War, and that hostility to the War was much greater amongst older people than younger people. So you have got to be very careful when you see demonstrations: you see a large number of people, but statistically, they are meaningless. We think of the student as someone at Harvard or Berkeley, but they are only the elite students. Most American students were, shall we say, at Ohio State, or large state universities, and they were not against the War.

When Lyndon Johnson won the Democratic Primary Election in 1968, an anti-War Senator opposing him, Senator Eugene McCarthy, performed extremely well. This led Johnson to think that he should not stand again. Analysis afterwards showed the protest against Johnson was because he was not fighting the War toughly enough; not that the people voting for McCarthy were not against the War. So we must be careful when we say the student revolt represented majority opinion because it did not; it represented an elite minority, but obviously an important minority.

The student protests got worse when, in 1968, quite reasonably, the draft was extended to include students. This was because many people in America could not see why students should be exempt from the draft when their children were not. This was particularly the case concerning children of minority groups, black groups particularly, where the numbers were disproportionately being drafted to the War. In 1968, they were, and that increased the resentment at least of elite students from elite institutions.

While all this was happening, there were riots every summer, from 1965 onwards, the worst being in Detroit in 1968, where the Mayor said, "It looks like Berlin in 1945." 1968 was in fact a pivotal year in American history.

In addition to the students, you then had the hippies, which gained Reagan in California a lot of support because he opposed them, and it gained him larger majorities whenever there was an election in California. Reagan famously said that, "A hippy is someone who dresses like Tarzan, has hair like Jane, and smells like Cheetah." At that time, it was said that a liberal was merely a conservative who had not yet been mugged because crime seemed also to be rising.

Johnson decided, after the New Hampshire Primary, that he was not going to stand again in 1968, and that was a sad end to his career. In the Presidential Election of 1968, Nixon, the Republican candidate, just defeated Humphrey by a whisker, but there was also a third candidate in that Election which signified much about the American future. It was George Wallace, the Governor of Alabama, who had been a segregationist but who had widened his plank. It was not just that he was opposed to black emancipation. He said that tougher measures should be used to deal with crime and, of student protestors, he said if anyone got in front of his car, he would flatten them, and he said, "We've been ruled too much by professors who didn't know what they were doing," and it was time we had a much tougher policy both at home and abroad. His Vice Presidential candidate was a former Air Force General called Curtis LeMay, who said he would bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age. Wallace got a sizeable proportion of the vote, and if you include the Wallace and Nixon vote together, 57% voted against the Democrats. Humphrey got 43% of the total vote. Although he was just beaten by Nixon, it is a misleading statistic to look at that. The important figure is that the Johnson liberal programme was repudiated by 57% of the American voters, what Nixon called "the silent majority".

So you had the disintegration of American liberalism, and I think it is fair to say that if you look at the period up to then and since then, Johnson's presidency is pivotal: if you look to the period to the end of Johnson's presidency, from the time Roosevelt came to power in 1933 to 1969, 36 years, you had had liberal Democrat Presidents for all but eight years of that time. The one exception, who was Eisenhower, was a liberal President, a liberal Republican President. If you look from 1969 to now, nearly forty years on, the Republicans have been in power for all but twelve years of that period - 28 out of forty years - and the two Democrat Presidents, Carter and Clinton, from the South, broadly speaking, are from a more conservative wing of the Democratic Party.

So this is a pivotal presidency: it marks the end, if you like; the disintegration of American liberalism as a majority force. The response of people to the social and cultural antagonism that seemed to be tearing the country apart was to swing to the right. Johnson's presidency ended as the most turbulent presidency that America had seen since the pre-Civil War period, in the 1850s, and few at the time could understand the currents of change and upheaval that engulfed the 1960s. So you may say it is not fair to see it as a failed presidency, but you may say this is a great man caught in a turbulent period which he found difficult to understand.

There is a paradox at the end of Johnson's presidency, because Johnson saw himself as a great liberal, and he was destroyed, in a sense, by the liberal left for whom he did so much. He was not destroyed by the Republicans, who, on the whole, supported him in Vietnam; they thought perhaps he should be tougher but, on the whole, they supported him. But the beneficiaries of the destruction of Johnson were not the liberals of the left but the conservatives and the Republicans, and, as I say, the end of Johnson's presidency marks the beginning of the conservative ascendancy signified by the election of Richard Nixon, who, after 1962, having been defeated for the governorship of California, he seemed finally a dead politician of no significance, but he had this amazing resurrection, based on the idea of "a silent majority", the people, he said, who did not riot, who paid their taxes, who fought in Vietnam, who did not protest - decent citizens. They seemed the majority in America and they repudiated the Johnson presidency, which therefore seemed to them a failed presidency, but whether it was or not is for you to decide.

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