

The Case for Lyndon Johnson



by John Kenneth Galbraith

Foreword

The candidacy of Senator Goldwater presents an interesting problem for anyone, even a President of the United States, who runs against him. The Senator holds, in effect, that a very large proportion — perhaps most — of the steps taken in the last thirty years, whether by Democratic or Republican administrations, to achieve social and economic improvement have been misguided. And so have almost all of the things that have been done — from the founding of the United Nations to Point IV to the partial nuclear test ban — to promote peace and advance the comity of nations. This is unparalleled in our political history. The tendency of our political candidates, it has been often observed, is to find a broad middle ground on which to conduct their campaigns. Our basic political tradition is convergent, not divergent. Senator Goldwater departs sharply from that tradition.

And here is the problem. Senator Goldwater's positions, even as altered (and sometimes contradicted) from day to day, are so startling that they have attracted a disproportionate share of attention in this campaign. A man who promises to strengthen the social security system, support collective bargaining, affirms his support of TVA, makes proposals for improving the farm program or who has a design for strengthening the peace-keeping activities of the United Nations gets very little attention. But let him demand that social security be made voluntary, that TVA be sold, that farm price supports be abandoned, a national right-to-work law be passed or that we withdraw from the United Nations and, quite naturally, he gets headlines. There is more news when he seems to modify or reverse some of these stands.

And he gets not only headlines but also the attention of the opposing politicians. A politician, like a hunter, responds to the tempting target. This, plus the fact that a certain measure of combativeness is one of the pleasures of our politics, means that we are having a campaign devoted largely to the radical and contradictory doctrines

of Senator Goldwater. And this has been despite the fact that the American people show little sign of needing help in making up their minds about the Senator or the consequences of making him President. As the further result we have given comparatively little attention to the remarkable man we have as the alternative. This has been President Johnson's problem in this campaign. A President cannot dwell on his qualifications. Meanwhile everyone else has been talking about the Senator. We are resting on the fact that President Johnson is the better of the two men. That, as many people realize, is not good enough. And it does much less than justice to Lyndon Johnson.

This short brief is the case for President Johnson. It makes only passing mention of Senator Goldwater. It is not, I trust, the usual political hyperbole with which, in a bipartisan way, we so often insult the intelligence of the American people. I do not propose to make the President, along with Moses and Pericles, one of the trinity of great lawgivers of the past five thousand years. I will argue that we haven't had a better qualified man for the post in our time, and that he is one of the best qualified in our history. I propose to make the case by checking his qualifications as unemotionally as possible against the requirements of the great post to which, by all evidence, we are electing him for the next four years. I have known Lyndon Johnson as Senator, Majority Leader, Vice-President and President for a considerable length of time. On one or two occasions, events have thrown us closely together. I would not, I suppose, be writing this brief if I could not speak from the assurance of this acquaintance. But the evidence on which I draw, and on which I base this case, is available to every citizen.

The Measure of a President

What are the qualities one seeks in a President? By what standards do we judge a man for this post?

There will never be a fully agreed upon list of qualifications. But history, experience and common sense sug-

gest four requirements. On the importance of these, I venture to think there will be some agreement.

First, and above all, a President must have the gift of leadership. Our great Presidents, without exception, have been strong Presidents. Under our system of government, the Presidency is the source of the initiative. It is with him, not with the Congress, not with the Courts, that the action begins. And it is the President who sustains movement, who keeps things going. A President must have the will and the ability to lead.

Second, a President must be a man who has stood the test of political achievement. He must have experience. The Presidency cannot be a training ground in government for the amateur, gifted or ungifted. Above all, in this age, it cannot be a lottery on which we gamble and hope for the best. Given the responsibility for all humankind which presently reposes in this office, we must seek, so far as it is possible, for proven performance.

Third, to be a good President, a man must act within the broad American consensus. He must have broad approval for what he does; he must also win such approval. He must not be narrowly committed to any single doctrine or theory of public action, which he pursues without regard for public reaction. This requires a word of explanation.

Most of us pride ourselves on the firmness of our political views. We are liberals. Or we are conservatives, in the old and reputable sense of the term. Or we hold some position in between. Or we are modern conservatives with our revolt against the world as it exists. No doubt it is well that the citizen have a set of guiding principles of this kind; it gives him a set of rules, befitting to his temperament, needs and experience, which he can apply to new ideas, new proposals, new legislation as it comes along. W. S. Gilbert spoke with approval in the last century of a system in which each child born into the world alive was either a small liberal or a small conservative. Doubtless he was right. But a President cannot surrender to a similar controlling theory. He

cannot divorce himself from those who hold views that are different from his own; he must at all times be conscious of the beliefs and interests of all the people. He cannot, of course, have the agreement of everyone. But if his actions are not to be divisive, they must reflect a broad acceptance by the people; they cannot reflect narrowly preconceived notions of his own. This is why liberal Presidents have always been, in many of their actions, the despair of liberals. And it is why more conservative Presidents (again in the old sense of the term) have often seemed outrageously liberal to many of their followers. Unlike their followers, the Presidents had to find a broader area of agreement.

Finally, a President must have an instinct for all the people. He must be suspicious of the fashionable, vocal, wealthy, organized or bureaucratically ensconced minority which is most articulate, waxes most indignant, speaks in the most sophisticated language, exerts the greatest political pressure or has most immediate access to him. In a democracy the wants of the people *are* the national interest. "When the people revolt the people are always right." The greatest errors in statecraft are made by those who mistake the persuasive case of some fashionable or powerful minority for the voice of the people. "It is not the voice of the farmer that the Congressman hears," a famous farm leader once observed, "but that of the manicured sons of toil." A President must be able to distinguish between the voice of the people and that of the comfortable and manicured men who speak so persistently in their name.

Doubtless there are other requirements of a good President — skillful oratory, an attractive family, a sense of style. One gathers that kindness to dogs, moderate driving speeds and a willingness to keep out of crowds are also important. But my concern is with serious matters; it will perhaps be agreed that the above list, if not complete, covers the imperative requirements of the job.

Now, does Lyndon Johnson meet these tests?

The Johnson Score

On October 5th of this year, reflecting on the work of the 88th Congress, which it described as "One of the most productive in history," the *New York Times* went on to say:

"Few would deny . . . that Mr. Johnson has proved a master of the subtle, tense yet potentially productive relationship between President and Congress. His accession to office and the record of achievement that followed reinforces a belief that many students of Congress have long held — that it responds to strong, shrewd, ruthless but pragmatic leadership . . . Only a strong and astute President really can [provide such leadership]."

This is not an unqualified endorsement; I shall return, in a moment, to the suggestion that Mr. Johnson's methods may be too vigorous. But it scarcely leaves in doubt his ability to meet the test of Presidential leadership. And there are the results to prove it. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, marking the strongest effort yet made to end discrimination in employment, the use of public accommodations and the exercise of public rights; the tax cut, marking a historic decision to use taxation as an instrument for expanding economic activity and increasing employment and output; the anti-poverty legislation marking the beginning of a specific attack on the residual privation of an otherwise prosperous society; the urban mass transport bill, marking the beginning of an attack on urban traffic congestion (if Americans have lately lost any freedom it is that of freedom of movement on their streets and highways) are all fruits of this leadership. So was a large volume of more routine legislation. For the first time in years, as a direct result of Presidential strategy and intervention, the Congress passed a foreign aid bill in almost the amount requested. Foes of foreign aid no longer emerged from the battle with the principal credit as the result of their successful efforts to cut back

requests for funds — requests which allowed in advance for the success of the enemies of the policy.

But these were not the first examples of the Johnson talent for getting people to follow his lead. During the Kennedy years he, of course, shared in the making of legislative strategy although the post of Vice-President accords little practical leverage on legislative matters. The real test came earlier. For seven years from the beginning of 1953 to the end of 1960 he was first Senate Democratic Minority Leader and then the most effective Majority Leader of modern times. From 1954 on, President Eisenhower no longer had a Republican majority in Congress. Historians will almost certainly agree that this was no misfortune, for instead he had Lyndon Johnson. The Senate worked well in these years and it worked because Johnson led. Among its achievements — and Johnson's achievements — was the first civil rights legislation in nearly one hundred years. History has an interesting way of rewarding its participants. In this election — 1964 — a great majority of liberal Republicans are supporting the man who did most for Eisenhower in Congress.

But Johnson's achievements are broader than those of a Majority Leader. From 1948, the year he was first elected to the Senate, until 1960 he was the dominant power in Texas politics. In the years from 1949 on, he became the dominant influence in the United States Senate. Neither the state of Texas nor the Senate accord power as an act of grace; in both it has to be earned. Texas, more than perhaps any other state, is a graveyard of politicians — of men briefly in the sun who disappear forever. The Senate quietly absorbs the average member into its own mass. Johnson stayed the course in Texas and he emerged in a mere four years a dominant influence in the Senate because he knew how to lead.

Leadership is not a formula for popularity. Some will always think that persuasion is unnecessarily energetic. The measures that are won will not be liked; it will be said that the wrong methods were used to win them.

Every strong leader will be called dictatorial or ruthless or — the presently fashionable term — a “wheeler-dealer.” Lincoln, both of the Roosevelts and Wilson were all effective leaders. All were described in similar terms. This is not unfair. There is a choice between those who lead and those who do not. But it is also certain that the great Presidents have been strong leaders.

Experience

On the matter of experience there is little room for argument. Lyndon Johnson is, by a wide margin, the most experienced figure in American political life. Indeed no other contender for the Presidency in our history has had such a comprehensive public career — he has been a member of the executive branch, an officer in the armed forces, a member of the House of Representatives, a Senator, Senate Minority Leader, Senate Majority Leader, Vice-President and President. In our annals there has been no more complete preparation.

It follows that we have a tested man; with this record, and given the exposure of American political life, there can be little that is unpredictable and little that is unknown. The election of Lyndon Johnson has no aspect of a lottery.

This may rob the inaugural next winter of some of its excitement. But it means that the future will be like the past. We shall have a studied and prudent response to new tasks, new problems, new conditions, new emergencies. There will be patient effort to reconcile diverse views, to reconcile conflicting ideas and interests. There will be no dramatic ultimatums, no violent initiatives. This is what experience insures us. Men who act emotionally, who shoot from the hip do not stay the course in American politics. They destroy themselves as they destroy others.

There is another aspect of this qualification which merits passing mention. In recent weeks a rash of literature, all derogatory, some openly scurrilous, has circulated

concerning the President of the United States and which has not spared past Presidents. (Indeed, President Eisenhower as a moderate Republican is a special target of literature being officially circulated in some states by Republican groups.) Perhaps this material should be regarded as a normal feature of political life. President Johnson has not yet been accused of having ancestors who were in the opium business as was the case with Roosevelt; he hasn't been made the instrument of a wealthy and ambitious parent as was said of John F. Kennedy. These are doubtless oversights — or perhaps it is too early in the campaign. However, little else has been omitted.

It is obvious that were there any substance to this literature it would long since have been exposed in the fierce glare of Texas and national politics. It is significant and indeed decisive that it has come to the surface only with the present campaign. Two matters only deserve mention.

It seems clear, though he has not yet been charged with any crime, that Bobby Baker abused official position. So, on occasion do bank tellers. But with us behavior is an individual responsibility; guilt is a matter of the individual and not of those whose good will or confidence is violated. We are not, and quite fortunately, electing Bobby Baker President. And his misdeeds are his own; they are not those of the man we are electing President. I doubt that we want to establish the principle that a man is responsible for the behavior of all men he has known, all who may have worked for him, or, indeed, all who have been his friends.

Political careers in the United States, have been frequently based on ownership of news media. Alexander Hamilton, Horace Greeley, James Cox, Frank Knox are distinguished examples. Their papers were a source of income and sometimes wealth; needless to say they vigorously promoted the political views and careers of the owners. The Johnsons early invested in radio and television. This foresight rewarded them handsomely. Until

this campaign it was a source of some congratulation. I recall, some six years ago, having these enterprises in Austin pointed out to me with pride by the Johnsons. My reaction was to think of it as an example of their energy and initiative. Had it been a newspaper or a group of papers there would still be no comment. Because it is a more modern communications development — and, also, because it was developed by the Johnsons and not inherited — their ownership has been cited adversely.

It is true that, unlike a newspaper, a radio and television station requires a public license. But there has been no suggestion of pressure in connection with the licensing of the Johnsons' station. Had there been such pressure it would hardly have been a secret in a bipartisan commission. And where it would be taken for granted that a newspaper would work for the political welfare of its owner, there has never been any similar suggestion of favoritism in connection with the Johnson enterprises. Possibly legislators should not own any publicly franchised enterprise. If so the rule should be enacted into law. But it has not, in the past, been either the law or the practice. This being so one is forced to conclude that the discussion of the Johnsons' business enterprises will not survive the election campaign.

Johnson and the American Consensus

No one will seriously suggest that the President is an ideologist of the right or left. There is proof of this in our every day conversation. Senator Goldwater describes himself as a conservative and he is so described. As many have observed this is a latter-day brand of conservatism which rebels and destroys rather than conserves but, be this as it may, he welcomes the label of conservative. President Johnson, by contrast, does not type himself and others do not type him. He does not describe himself as liberal or conservative, left or right; others do not so label him. That he is not so labeled suggests that his views are broadly responsive to the American consensus — to what people generally seek and believe.

But it is not enough to act within the consensus; a good President must also seek agreement for what must be done. Here again the President has shown himself to be effective. If the polls are a guide, he has won unparalleled approval for his conduct of his office during the last eleven months. And this has been despite (or perhaps because of) action on a succession of difficult and controversial measures. Tax reduction, the poverty program and above all the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were singularly controversial measures. Their residue is one of approval not antipathy. Not since Grover Cleveland has a Democratic President enjoyed such approval of businessmen as Johnson. Yet he has not sacrificed the confidence of the unions. In the election he will have the near unanimous support of Negroes; yet he continues to enjoy the esteem and support of southern Democratic leaders both in the Congress and in the states. The Democratic Party is not a notably tranquil organization. In no recent election have its various groups and factions been as fully unified behind its leader as in this one.

Political documents, of which this is one, regularly lose credibility and their audience emphasizing, more or less equally, both the obvious and the obviously untrue. Lyndon Johnson is not as polished an orator as Webster, Bryan and Franklin D. Roosevelt. He does not have the natural offhand effectiveness of John F. Kennedy. But oratory is only one instrument of political persuasion. In all of its dimensions, and on the record, President Johnson is plainly a master of persuasion. One must conclude that Lyndon Johnson not only acts within the American consensus but has an admirable and possibly a unique ability to guide it.

Johnson and the Democratic Ethic

In the spring of 1961, when I was Ambassador to India, our first official visitors were Vice-President and Mrs. Johnson. It was an important visit; throughout that part of the world Americans have long lived under the suspicion of having their alliance with officials and gov-

ernments and not with people. We give aid but it is to advance our own self-interest; we are rich and comfortable and not much concerned with the well-being of the average man.

The Vice-President set out to show that such attitudes formed no part of the Kennedy-Johnson policy. More traditional men in his entourage thought it flatly undignified for an American leader to go in among the crowds to tell of American attitudes in simple and unvarnished language. There was some surprise that in conversations with leaders he was less interested in the Cold War than the question of low cost electrification. The Vice-President was not especially gentle with his more orthodox advisers. But by his example and as reported over the press and radio, it was our judgment that he did more in a few days to tell what the Kennedy-Johnson administration stood for than an ordinary envoy would have accomplished in six months — or ever.

In Washington a thick curtain of fashionable discussion and advice keeps many men divorced from public attitudes. One hears with great solemnity that farm price supports are an intolerable interference with free markets, that the situation of the rich is desperate, that the time has come to teach the unions a lesson, that the Negroes are getting out of hand. On any question of foreign policy, a surprising number of people can always be counted upon to speak up for the abrupt use of force. We should send in the bombers, or call up a few divisions. These people do not speak for the average American. Those who call automatically for force rarely calculate the ultimate cost of war for they are not the ones who would pay it.

Johnson, we now know, looks well beyond these fashionable *cliches*. In these last months he has shown an excellent instinct for the public voice. He has shown it for a long while.

It would have been easy for a Texas Senator to go along with the Southern manifesto protesting the Su-

preme Court's decision on school desegregation. He would have won local applause. In a Republican administration he could easily have sat out the first civil rights battle. He would have been applauded for that and for compromising on the civil rights struggle when he became President. President Kennedy had gone too far; now we have the voice of restraint. He could have gone along with the critics, liberal as well as conservative, of foreign aid. He could have yielded to those who see little need for the attack on poverty. He could have encouraged those who attack public action with a dissertation on the dangers of big government. There would have been applause from respectable people on all these points. In all cases they would have been a small but articulate minority.

In all, he took the broad public as against the fashionable position. He proved, in other words, that he meets the last of the tests of a good President. He has an instinct, and by all present evidence an unerring one, for the democratic view.

Conclusion

It is open to anyone to make his own assessment of a President. But it is right to urge that it be systematic and well-considered. Perhaps the tests here applied are not the best and, as noted, they are not the only ones. But they are surely sensible and important ones. And given these tests, it is surely apparent that Lyndon Johnson measures up for the post. Certainly no one measures up better in our time. Certainly few have measured up better in our history. It is not enough that we elect President Johnson. Of that there seems little doubt. We must elect him with a sense of satisfaction in our opportunity and of warm pride in our man.



published by the

DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE

John M. Bailey, Chairman - Mrs. Margaret Price, Vice Chairman
1730 K Street, N. W. Washington, D.C. 20006