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The Public Discourse



The Importance of Lyndon Johnson

Americans have always been ambivalent about their political leaders. Privately, most of us have strong personal feelings of respect or admiration for our presidents. But when we speak of them in public, we usually do so in a spirit of polite skepticism tinged by petty suspicion — as long as they are in office. Once they retire or die, however, we are more generous, and nearly every president is eventually remembered as a hero, or anyway an agreeable guy, of greater or lesser magnitude. These tensions in our attitude toward public men are healthy in a democracy, and over the years they have served us well. They have sustained the citizenry in a condition of neither total politicization nor total indifference; they have helped to assure public officials of enough authority to govern effectively but not enough to do so tyrannically; and they have deterred our presidents from entertaining an excessively exalted notion of themselves while still preserving an incentive for them to behave themselves in office by holding out the promise of eventual fame and vindication if they are good — or infamy and everlasting disgrace if they are bad.

At some point during the mid-1960s, this balanced view of presidents went into eclipse, and our public discussion of public men entered a long night of rancor, bellicosity, and general beastliness. Instead of ignoring our leaders most of the time, we became obsessed with them: instead of criticizing them, we began to revile and slander them; and instead of trying simply to vote them out of office when we found their performance unsatisfactory, we began to want to annihilate them, to drive them from public life in humiliation and disgrace by means of collective tantrum. This of course is how Lyndon Johnson's presidency ended, and when Richard Nixon assumed office not a few perpetrators of the public discourse began working to contrive a similar fate for him.

The problem with this beastly attitude toward public figures is not only that it is unjust to the mostly decent, mostly able men who make their careers in politics, or that it deters even better people from entering public life. The greater problem is that it confuses and distorts our general picture of what is going on in government, that this confusion makes it hard for us to understand the drift of events, and that our resulting misunderstanding of current affairs inexorably reduces our ability

to manage them. Now there are those who argue that such a derangement of democratic government is a good thing, on the theory that the worse matters get in the short run, the better we may hope they will eventually become over the long run through revolution or some other sort of radical change. But for those of us who try to live in the real world most of the time, the truth is that the worse things get, the worse things in fact are, period.

Happily, current indications are that the tide of beastliness has begun to recede and that our tradition of skeptical civility is slowly being recovered. It is not only that we hear less talk these days about America being the "cancer" of the human race, or that the effort to drive Nixon from office failed so spectacularly. The central sign of a turn-about in the national disposition toward presidents is to be found in our reaction to the recent death of Lyndon Johnson. Just four years after this extraordinary president was hounded out of office by the most venomous campaign of slander and abuse this country has experienced in a century, the news of his death occasioned a spontaneous and obviously genuine outpouring of respect, affection, and regret. Our public eulogies of the man, and the private thought they evoked, were not purely formulaic, as had often seemed the case with Harry Truman a month earlier, and they came from people who had bitterly opposed LBJ as well as from his die-hard supporters. Within days of the funeral, senators were opposing budget cuts in his name. There were press reports of plans to rehabilitate the memory of this man who had become an unperson in his party, and to install him next to Jefferson, Jackson, Wilson, and Roosevelt in the pantheon of Democratic greats. One had a feeling not only that a great if imperfect president had died (and who is ever perfect?), but also that we had all been unjust to him during his lifetime, and now knew it, and wanted somehow to make amends — in itself a good omen for the prospects of civility.

And so we have proceeded to make amends in the only way we can, by being generous in our assessment of Lyndon Johnson's "place in history" and in our institutionalized collective affections. He was "larger than life," we have begun to tell ourselves, a man of heroic dimensions — immensely energetic, ceaselessly in motion, insatiable in his appetite for using the powers of government to help people, insatiable also in his desire

for personal power and affection, endlessly ruthless and fabulously charming, brimming with strengths and flawed by their excesses, in sum, a veritable Paul Bunyan of American politics and statecraft. We have also begun to note the equally monumental legislative accomplishments of his presidency — the civil rights laws he proposed and pushed through Congress, the war on poverty, the housing legislation, the extraordinary period of economic boom, and all the other parts of his Great Society. We have not ignored his "failures," of course, and note has been duly made of the Vietnam war, the credibility gap, and his self-confessed failure as a "communicator" and "moral leader." Yet now that the war is over and another president is in the White House, these "faults" do not seem so glaring, and we seem ready to remember him as an American president of importance and stature, the Heroic Domestic Legislator.

If so, I believe that Lyndon Johnson will be remembered for the wrong reasons and appreciated in the wrong degree. To be sure, some elements of this emerging legend will not last and can simply be ignored. Our recollection of the heroic scale of the man will quickly fade; in twenty years, nobody will care that we found him "larger than life," or even know what we meant by this. Concerning his "failure" in Vietnam, it is certain only that he will be remembered as a president who faithfully executed and tried to sustain established American foreign policy; as for whether this will be counted in his favor or the reverse, future events alone will tell. But it does seem likely that the remainder of his current reputation — as a great domestic legislator and abysmal moral leader — will persist, and it is to this aspect of the emerging Johnson legend that I would take exception.

Now it is of course quite true that Johnson proposed and managed to have enacted a great deal of social legislation. And if what we mean by "great legislative accomplishment" is simply the passing of a lot of laws, then Johnson was a great legislator indeed. But this is like saying that a person who fiddles twenty-four hours a day is, by virtue of the sheer magnitude of his fiddling, a great violinist. Clearly this won't do: in music — and in government — the quality of the performance is crucial. And on this score, even Johnson's White House aides now admit that most of their legislative program was hastily

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conceived and badly crafted, designed more to win headlines than to accomplish practical social objectives. Within years of their enactment, many of the programs of Johnson's Great Society had rudely disappointed the expectations they had aroused, and some were utter failures by any standard — in spite of the ever-increasing appropriations they received under the first four years of the Nixon Administration. It now seems that a few of these programs may be terminated if President Nixon has his way, but bureaucracy and politics being what they are, most will persist — and grow — indefinitely. Survival, however, is not to be confused with success; and even many of these programs' strongest supporters have long since ceased to believe in their efficacy. So to judge from the quality of his works, Lyndon Johnson was emphatically not a great legislator; on the contrary, he may well have been the most inept and irresponsible legislative architect in our century.

It was rather as a moral leader that President Johnson excelled. By "moral leader" I do not mean, as do most of those who use the term today, a president who presents himself, and is accepted, as a saint rather than as a politician and who makes a specialty of intoning conventional liberal pieties. Such a person is not a leader, but a follower, and as Machiavelli showed, any statesman whose practice is sincerely wedded to any set of pieties is, in the end, the opposite of moral. A moral leader is just that: a person who, through his own efforts, brings about a substantial change in what his society takes to be its higher political purposes and standards. The bigger and more enduring

and more admirable the change, the greater the act of moral leadership.

During his five years as president, Lyndon Johnson brought about the most fundamental change in our established public pieties and opinions since Andrew Jackson. By word and by deed, through the force of his avuncular personality and the appeal of his compassion, and, yes, by his cunning, ruthlessness, opportunism, and deceit — since these too are elements of moral leadership — Lyndon Johnson established as the first principle of domestic legislation and as the central piety of our public discourse the ideal of improving and equalizing the structure of opportunity in American society. To be sure, he did not invent this idea; it had been in circulation for decades, and other presidents had adapted and borrowed from it. But before Johnson's presidency, governmental concern with opportunity had been adventitious in inspiration: Wilson, for instance, advocated reforms as a means of restoring an earlier order recently disturbed by industrialization; FDR defined the New Deal as a means of responding to a catastrophic economic crisis. Under Johnson, by contrast, the principle of improving the structure of opportunity was advanced for its own sake, as a good in itself, and as a priority in its own right. And with astonishing rapidity, this principle was accepted — in principle — throughout American society. Previously urged only by specialized minorities, this ideal, under Johnson's aegis, was embraced by Republicans as well as Democrats, conservatives as well as liberals and radicals. It is now the touchstone of our current national political orthodoxy in this new era of social policy.

But however great his accomplishments, Lyndon Johnson did not settle everything. If his legislative program was important primarily as a series of eloquent symbolic gestures in behalf of his compelling — and classically American — conception of governmental purpose, it also embodied a distinctive and not so classically American theory of opportunity and of government's role in equalizing it, that of arbitrarily conferring special benefits and privileges in endless profusion by means of quotas, subsidies, regulations, and the like. Not only is this particular approach hotly — and in my opinion rightly — disputed these days, but it also appears to have failed. So we now find ourselves awaiting some better strategy for pursuing the Johnsonian goal. Inasmuch as the national commitment to that goal does not seem to have weakened, the candidate or party that can invent, and then dedicate itself to, a workable and morally acceptable strategy for reforming the American opportunity structure will almost certainly inherit the moral authority, and perhaps also the electoral power, of Lyndon Johnson as these were when he first mobilized public opinion in behalf of equal opportunity in 1964 and 1965. When that happens, we will have a new, or at any rate a reconstructed, majority party. We can expect, or at least hope, that the tide of beastliness will have receded much farther. And perhaps then we will be able to recall Lyndon Johnson for what he was: human, to be sure; slipshod and often misguided as a legislator, alas; but a moral leader of the first rank, and the author of the most fundamental political redefinition of America since 1828. □

George Swan

Racial Segregation and the Northern University

DeFumis v. Odegaard is on appeal before the Washington Supreme Court. The case was argued on May 15, 1972, and according to Assistant Deputy-Clerk Shriver in Olympia, the justices are still deliberating. — Ed.

An October 18, 1971 court decision on appeal during 1972, *DeFumis v. Odegaard*, is one which may prove to have a measurable impact upon higher education. In the *DeFumis* case, dealing with racial discrimination in law school entry, the trial judge was to find: "It seems to me that the law school here wished to achieve greater minority representation and in accomplishing this gave preference to the members of some races. . . . Some minority students were admitted whose college grades and aptitude test scores were so low that had they been whites their applications would have been summarily denied." The court therefore held: "The (non-minority member) plaintiff and others in this group, have not in my opinion been accorded the

equal protection of the law guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment."¹

The seeming double standard described above is found not only at one western law school, but also at universities as famous as, for example, Princeton or Cornell. At Princeton recently, "one admissions officer stated that every academically qualified black applicant for the class of 1975 was admitted — only about one out of every four such qualified white applicants was so lucky."² Cornell University "began in 1965 to bring in black students whose SAT scores averaged only 450 to 550." This was although among Cornell's students "the average scores are between 600 and 700."³ Even were it to affect admissions policies alone, *DeFumis v. Odegaard* would hence seem to be of immediate interest to scholars and to campus administrators.

In the light of *DeFumis*, it is significant that there are nonacademic areas in which even more prominent institutions than the University of Washington have been overtly committed to still other modes of racial discrimination. This

discrimination specifically has included segregated lounges, meeting rooms, houses, and dormitories. The more fashionable schools have been so engaged: e.g., Cornell, Columbia, Northwestern, and Notre Dame.

At Columbia University, a separate-but-equal dormitory lounge is administered by Columbia officials. This project was successfully promoted by the April 20, 1970 seizure of a R.O.T.C. office. Those members of the campus community who may or may not relax in this "Malcolm X Liberation Center" divide along racial lines: "The Liberation Center is open to all Black students, Black staff, and Black workers. The Center is also open to Black students and their guests. . . . A guest can be defined as someone who shares a common culture, heritage, color consciousness and is a son or daughter of Africa. . . ." ⁴

Segregated dormitory facilities are likewise an established fact at the University of Notre Dame. "In the fall of 1969, the University, acting upon requests from a large number of black students on campus, instituted what became known