

“LET US CONTINUE” – Lyndon Johnson and the Rise and Fall of the “Liberal Hour”

After Kennedy’s tragic death, Johnson addressed the Congress and urged members to pass Kennedy’s legislative agenda as a tribute to the slain president. This was the very agenda that the southern members of his own Democratic party had refused to support during the previous two years. Now, however, the grieving public responded positively to Johnson’s efforts to push the Kennedy agenda, and Congress, sensing that opposing the public mood could be politically risky, allowed his Civil Rights bills to come to a vote.

Over the next two years, the landmark Civil Rights bills of 1964 and 1965 became law. The first ended segregation and empowered the federal government to enforce anti-segregation laws; the second gave black voters the protection of the federal government, making it a federal crime for white state and local officials to deny blacks their constitutional right to vote.

Similarly, Johnson was able to convince Congress to pass Kennedy’s tax cut and to take up legislation intended to fight poverty. (This was the beginning of the “War on Poverty” – more associated with the Johnson administration, than the Kennedy administration, but part of the same liberal, activist approach to government that characterized the first half of the 1960s.)

1964-1965 marked the high point of post-World War II liberalism. When Johnson won a landslide victory in the presidential election of 1964, it appeared that liberalism had secured a place as the dominant political ideology in the United States. Conservative Republican Barry Goldwater was only able to win his home state of Arizona and a handful of southern states that had turned against President Johnson due to his support for Kennedy’s Civil Rights agenda.

Nonetheless, within eight years the country would turn sharply to a more conservative position (obvious if one looks at the electoral maps of 1964 and 1972).

JFK vs LBJ

Johnson, who took over the presidency when Kennedy died, was an outsized Texan with an outsized ego. He had risen to power thanks to his uncanny ability to “persuade” fellow politicians to take his side and to support him with their votes in Congress. When gentle persuasion failed, Johnson was not above arm-twisting and bullying. The “Johnson treatment” was notorious in Washington and few politicians ever wished to be on the receiving end. (See Powerpoint slide)

Still, Johnson and his methods had proved remarkably successful over the years – not least after Kennedy’s assassination when Johnson skillfully rammed through Kennedy’s major legislative proposals during the brief window of time when the country was still in shock and longed to show its devotion to the dead President’s memory.

Johnson's demonstrated ability to win over his fellow politicians one by one never extended to an ability to win over his fellow Americans. He lacked Kennedy's charisma. If Kennedy was cool, calm, and collected, Johnson was loud, coarse, and mercurial. If Kennedy's humor was witty and ironic, Johnson's was earthy and often vulgar. His southern twang offended snobbish New York and Boston intellectuals, and yet his fellow southerners never fully embraced him – some considering him a “traitor” due to his support for Civil Rights. Unlike Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy before him and Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton after him, Johnson never “connected” personally with the American people. A compelling figure in person, he was terrible on television (in sharp contrast to Kennedy).

Johnson knew (or, more to the point, grudgingly admitted) that he would never be as well-liked as Kennedy. Lacking the former's charm and style, he had instead to rely on his political instincts, his ability to cajole and persuade those who were not initially willing to support his agenda, and, ultimately, the public's sense of duty to advance the martyred president's agenda.

Accordingly, Johnson took a two-track approach in the early months of his presidency. He applied the “Johnson treatment” to those Congressmen and Senators who seemed reluctant to support his agenda for Civil Rights, anti-poverty programs, a tax cut, and aid to education. But he also went on television before a joint session of Congress only five days after Kennedy's death to urge the people to honor Kennedy by letting their Senators and Representatives know that they wanted them to support the liberal agenda as a tribute to the slain president. Memorably, he declared, “Let us continue.” This was a nod to Kennedy's earlier declaration, “Let us begin.”

WHY THE SUDDEN “FALL” OF LIBERALISM?

In short, the limited success of the War on Poverty (followed by urban unrest in black neighborhoods) and the escalation of the Vietnam War turned many voters away from liberalism and eroded people's confidence in a “promising time.” They became more suspicious of government officials making promises and, more importantly, they began to wonder if government itself could really solve the difficult problems of poverty, racism, and threats to American interests around the world. Americans were no longer as sure that government could be counted on to “always or almost always” do the right thing.

OVERPROMISING: “GUNS AND BUTTER”

Johnson's willingness to “over-promise” began to undermine his popularity. He claimed the US could afford to escalate the war in Vietnam (which would cost a significant amount of money) AND also spend significant amounts of money on anti-poverty programs, job training programs, enforcement of civil rights laws, federal aid to public schools, food stamps, public housing assistance, and any number of other things. He was, some critics claimed, promising everything to everyone – pursuing an unwise and even reckless policy

of “guns and butter.” They had a point. Johnson made it clear that he believed that the United States, “a rich country,” could win the war in Vietnam (guns) AND the war on poverty at home (butter).

This would require a level of spending, however, that was not sustainable. Nor was it entirely clear that the war in Vietnam was “winnable” or that poverty could be eradicated for good. Johnson, it appeared to skeptics, was setting up himself (and the country) for disappointment and disillusionment.

URBAN UNREST AND INCREASING RACIAL TENSIONS

The Johnson administration’s domestic policies sparked divisions within the country along racial lines, though at first these divisions remained under the surface. Voicing opposition to the Civil Rights Movement was not a popular position and, in the 1964-65 period, most white politicians hesitated to do so openly, even if they suspected their white constituents might be open to such a position. Barry Goldwater, Johnson’s Republican opponent in the 1964 presidential election had done so, and had gone to defeat in a landslide. Few politicians wanted to be the “next Goldwater.”

After focusing so intently on Civil Rights legislation and on improving living conditions for blacks through his anti-poverty programs, Johnson expected blacks to be grateful. Instead, beginning in 1965 in Watts, a series of riots broke out in American northern and western cities.

The reaction to and assessment of these riots depended largely on one’s point of view (and, to be sure, one’s race). Blacks saw the riots as an explosion of frustration on the part of inner-city residents who did not have access to decent jobs, education, or housing and who were the victims of police brutality. Segregation may have been illegal, but blacks still lived in segregated ghettos with poor schools, marginal public services, violent streets, little access to good paying jobs, and terrible housing. They had seen little improvement in their daily lives despite the millions that had been spent on the War on Poverty and the passage of civil rights legislation.

On the other hand, many whites who had originally supported Kennedy and Johnson’s liberal policies reacted angrily to the riots and questioned why blacks would resort to violence and destroy property in their own neighborhoods – particularly at a time when it seemed the federal government was doing so much to help them. In part, whites’ reaction showed their own unfamiliarity with the actual conditions in the ghettos, but it also revealed their frustration and worry that their own status was beginning to decline.

To them, Johnson’s programs seemed to focus on helping blacks at the expense of poor and working-class whites. The support these social programs received from wealthy white liberals also kindled resentment among poor and working-class whites. In this sense, white resentment (or backlash) revealed both racial and class tensions. These whites would soon be referred to as the “Silent Majority” (as opposed to the

“noisy minority” that was rioting in the streets or protesting the Vietnam War.)

The silent majority preferred “law and order” to rioting and disorder. Supporting “law and order,” of course, was less controversial than opposing civil rights. Americans who might have been reluctant to say they opposed civil rights legislation were more comfortable insisting that all they were asking is that the law be followed and that people should not resort to violence or rioting to get their own way.

Politicians looking to push back against the dominant liberal mood quickly picked up on this semantic shift. For example, Ronald Reagan ran for governor of California in 1966 on a platform of “law and order” and expressed his frustration with black rioters and antiwar protesters in Berkeley. He ended up beating the popular Democratic incumbent, Pat Brown (father of Jerry Brown), in a landslide. Others did not fail to take notice of Reagan’s successful strategy of linking urban unrest and the antiwar protest movement – both of which were unpopular with middle-class white voters.

THE QUAGMIRE OF VIETNAM

Johnson’s handling of the war also troubled voters and sharply divided public opinion. Johnson’s critics on the left believed the United States should pull out of Vietnam altogether while those on his right urged him to take steps to win the war immediately (perhaps even using nuclear weapons to do so).

Johnson had ordered a significant escalation of American involvement in Vietnam shortly after the 1964 election. Massive bombing of the North began with Operation Rolling Thunder. (By the time the war was over, the Americans had dropped more tonnage of bombs on North Vietnam than it had in all of World War II.) The number of ground troops headed to Vietnam also increased substantially between 1965 and 1968 (when the number hit a peak – see Powerpoint slide) and yet there was little evidence that the increased American military presence was doing anything to bring the South Vietnamese closer to victory over the North.

In fact, to frustrated Americans, the South’s army seemed satisfied letting the U.S. take up most of the responsibility for fighting the North. Some even questioned the extent to which the South Vietnamese people supported their government and its American ally.

Still, the majority of Americans continued to support the war; what they were beginning to question was Johnson’s handling of it. Though the anti-war movement was increasing in numbers from 1965-1967, it still represented a small minority, even though it was beginning to get significant media coverage. Meanwhile, the majority of Americans, as late as November 1967, supported a “tougher” policy in Vietnam than Johnson was pursuing. The prevailing attitude, it seemed, was “it was an error for us to have gotten involved in Vietnam in the first place. But now that we’re there, let’s win – or get out.”

Well aware of public opinion, at the end of 1967, the Johnson Administration launched a media blitz (called a “Success Initiative”) to paint as optimistic an account of the war as it could. Numerous officials insisted that victory (and therefore U. S. withdrawal) was “within sight” (though, significantly, no explicit definition of what would constitute “victory” was ever given.) Supposedly, there was “a light at the end of the tunnel.” The U. S. would win “soon” and finally extract its soldiers from the jungles of Vietnam. In many ways, such assurances resembled the rhetoric associated with the “promising time” of the early 1960s.

When Johnson convened a meeting of several highly-regarded foreign policy experts (the “wise men” – see Powerpoint slide) to solicit advice, the majority urged him to “talk up” the war and to continue conveying an optimistic message to the public. Even though they did admit “the war is not going well,” they insisted that “pulling out is impossible.”

Johnson agreed. He had no intention of being the “first American president to lose a war.” Curiously, however, Johnson himself admitted privately that he saw no way of winning the war. That said, he could not imagine losing it. The bombing would continue, but success would prove elusive. And the public, who wanted a quick end to the war (and preferably a victorious one) grew increasingly impatient and frustrated.

Tet Offensive and the “Credibility Gap”

Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, promised to offer the Americans a respite from fighting. The U. S. assumed the Vietnamese would not launch any major military operations during the traditional holiday celebrations.

Moreover, if the statements coming from the Johnson administration were to be believed, the North Vietnamese (and their Southern allies, the Viet Cong) were not capable of launching any such major attack. The South was secure; the capital, Saigon, was well-protected; and the American Embassy was impregnable.

In the wake of the Tet Offensive (launched on January 31, 1968), all of these assumptions proved to be nonsense. Coordinated attacks occurred throughout the South in more than 150 locations, and were especially violent in and around Saigon. The Americans and South Vietnamese had been caught entirely by surprise and, during the early days, it appeared the enemy had won a significant victory.

That such a widespread, coordinated attack had even occurred revealed that the Johnson administration’s assessment of the situation on the ground in Vietnam had been dead wrong, or, even worse, a lie.

The reaction in the U. S. was devastating to the Johnson administration. Many Americans who had previously supported the President and his policies (albeit tepidly) now seemed to turn against him. This did not mean that the majority favored withdrawal from Vietnam (the so-called “dove” position). Again, polls showed in the weeks after Tet that 61 percent of Americans declared themselves “hawks” (in support of a *tougher* stand

in Vietnam) while only 23 percent identified as “doves.” What mattered was that public confidence in Johnson’s ability to bring the war to a quick and successful close was evaporating. Many viewed his optimistic rhetoric with contempt – empty promises to be ignored.

Herblock, the political cartoonist for the *Washington Post*, ridiculed Johnson and his (apparently false) claims that the war was going well. (See Herblock cartoons – Powerpoint slides).

In addition, the video and photographs coming out of Vietnam showed unspeakable brutality, not on the part of the Communists, but on the part of the South Vietnamese Army and the Americans. One South Vietnamese officer murdered a Viet Cong soldier in cold blood as camera men recorded the act (See Powerpoint slide). Such violence made many Americans question why the U. S. was supporting such people. Both “hawks” and “doves” expressed little confidence in the South Vietnamese military.

It also appeared that many South Vietnamese (to say nothing of the North Vietnamese) were willing to give their lives to the cause of ejecting the Americans from their country. Buddhist monks, for example, continued to set themselves on fire as a protest against the South Vietnamese government and its American ally. This suggested to doves that any kind of victory for the Americans was impossible. The very people we were defending wanted the U. S. to leave. To hawks, it meant that only a stepped-up U.S. military effort would bring the war to a close. Johnson, however, opposed both withdrawal and any significant escalation – and thereby pleased no one.

The relentless American bombing was also destroying villages and leaving Vietnamese civilians homeless and hopeless. Convinced such bombing of rural areas was the only way to “flush out” the enemy’s guerilla fighters, American officials declared somewhat awkwardly that they “had to destroy the village to save it” from the Communists. Such logic met with skepticism on the home front.

For the first time, the mainstream media began to criticize sharply the Johnson policies. *Life Magazine*’s critical account of the Tet Offensive was seen by hundreds of thousands of Americans. Walter Cronkite -- anchor of the CBS Evening News, and one of the most trusted men in America -- broke away from his long held “just the facts” approach to convey directly to the American people his own skepticism about the war. Though he did not call for an immediate withdrawal of American forces, Cronkite made it clear that the U. S. had to re-evaluate its position. The war’s likely outcome, he believed, was a stalemate. Given that victory seemed unlikely, Cronkite concluded, the process of de-escalation should begin.

In the weeks after the initial Tet Offensive, American troops once again proved superior to their North Vietnamese and Viet Cong counterparts. In fact, throughout the war the Americans never lost a conventional, set-piece battle. In this case, they drove the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong out of the positions to which they had initially advanced. The Viet Cong in particular suffered terrible losses and, for all intents and purposes, was

destroyed as a viable military force. The North Vietnamese were far from defeated, however. Though they retreated, they would survive to fight another day.

These American victories on the battlefield, however, did little to influence public opinion at home. Having over-promised, Johnson bore the wrath of an angry population that believed (with some just cause) that it had been deceived. The “rosy scenario” that the administration had painted and the reality on the ground seemed incompatible. One now frequently heard the phrase “**Credibility Gap**” – an indication that the public no longer trusted Johnson and, indeed, thought he and his spokesmen had been lying all along. When administration officials haplessly called attention to the post-Tet U.S. tactical victories, few – doves or hawks – were willing to listen. As Johnson himself conceded, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”

Not only did Americans lose their trust in Johnson and his administration’s handling of the Vietnam War, they lost trust in government altogether. This, in the long term, was the more significant legacy of the Vietnam War. Liberals had at the center of their political ideology a firm belief in positive, activist government and its ability to build a more prosperous, humane, and egalitarian society. There seemed little hope of advancing the liberal agenda, however, if trust in government was eroding. (Notably, it was eroding among more radical antiwar demonstrators on the left, “law and order” conservatives and pro-Vietnam war hawks on the right, AND among black and white Americans in the so-called Vital Center.) Subsequent scandals – Watergate in the 1970s, the Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s – would further erode public confidence in the federal government and its leaders, but the “credibility gap” that grew out of the Vietnam War marked the beginning of a trend that in the long term significantly undermined the liberal political worldview and made the optimism of the “promising time” of the early 1960s look hopelessly naïve.

ANTI-WAR VS ANTI-PROTESTERS

White, working-class voters 55 years of age and older whose sons were serving in Vietnam opposed the war (even more than young people 18-29, who, in the aggregate, expressed strong support for the war). However, they did not approve of the loud minority of anti-war protesters. They viewed the protesters, fairly or not, as privileged, over-educated, spoiled, and un-American – despite agreeing with them that the Vietnam war was ill-advised. College educated protesters were able to avoid the draft, however the sons of the working class ended up doing the fighting and dying in Vietnam. This created sharp divisions within the nation based on class.

Harder to pinpoint was a clash of cultures. The more radical participants in the antiwar movement went beyond simply characterizing the American involvement as a “mistake.” Rather, it seemed to them consistent with what they saw as a long, violent, and imperialistic national history. By the late 1960s, some of the radicals had become not only antiwar, but pro-North Vietnam, believing that the Communists were the “good guys” in the conflict and that by resisting their “revolution,” the Americans were depriving the Vietnamese people of the benefits of Communism. They not only supported Communism

in Vietnam, but, in occasional flights of fancy, believed they could launch a radical revolution in America to overthrow the capitalist system.

The vast majority of Americans, even those who strongly opposed the war, were not willing to adopt this world view. They opposed the war as patriots, not as revolutionaries.

Indeed, as it grew more radical (and the media tended to give the more radical elements of the antiwar movement disproportionate coverage), the antiwar movement grew increasingly unpopular -- even as the war itself grew increasingly unpopular. Ultimately, though, the antiwar movement angered mainstream Americans even more than the war did.

“NIXON’S THE ONE”

Emerging from the political chaos of 1968 was a familiar figure – Richard M. Nixon, who had begun the decade as John F. Kennedy’s opponent in the presidential election of 1960.

Selling himself as the “New Nixon,” he pursued an electoral strategy that seemed predicated on exploiting the divisions within American society, though he did so without relying on overt appeals to white racism. He believed he could cobble together a majority of “average Americans” that resented the turmoil stirred up by the civil rights and antiwar movements. He appealed to the “non-shouters, the non-protestors, the law-abiding citizens” who longed for a return of “law and order” (a phrase he never precisely defined). On the war, Nixon led voters to believe he had a “secret plan” to end hostilities (though he himself never used that exact phrase). For his supporters, this was enough.

Many other Americans, though not especially enamored of Nixon, were troubled and exhausted by the events of the “hard year” of 1968 and were desperate for a return to stability. Ultimately, enough of them found Nixon’s message, if not the candidate himself, appealing. If nothing else, he conjured memories of the more placid times of the Eisenhower administration – before the upheaval of the 1960s had disrupted the country and complicated their own lives.

Lacking a clear positive message – “Nixon’s the One” was the best the campaign could do for a defining slogan – Nixon saw his lead over his Democratic opponent (Johnson’s Vice-president, Hubert Humphrey) diminish as the campaign continued. When Humphrey finally announced in the last weeks that he supported a negotiated settlement to the war in Vietnam that would bring home the American troops, it seemed the race had tightened to the point where it was “too close to call.” In the end, though, Nixon managed to eke out a victory. Despite the closeness of the election, Nixon portrayed his triumph as a decisive rejection of the Democratic party and its brand of activist liberalism.

To many, it appeared that a new era in American politics – a more conservative era – was beginning. To an extent, this was true, but the issues raised during the 1960s – as well as the Vietnam war – were not going away any time soon. That said, the mistrust of “big government” would gain traction among voters in the years ahead, making a liberal resurgence difficult.

Indeed, though he never became as popular among the American people as Roosevelt or even Kennedy, Nixon won re-election in 1972 by a landslide, trouncing his Democratic opponent George McGovern, an unapologetic liberal.

Within eight years, the electoral map had switched from nearly all blue to nearly all red. Liberalism’s “hour” was over and the divisions in the country – along racial, class, and educational lines as well as urban vs rural lines – were deeper than ever, with liberals feeling themselves an increasingly embattled minority, their confidence and optimism deeply shaken. The years ahead looked anything but “promising.”