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LBJ AND THE GREAT SOCIETY: PRELUDES TO THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY AND OBAMACARE

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Thank you very much for that nice introduction, Mark. I should say first off I like it a lot more than the introduction I got a number of years back when I was lecturing in the Soviet Union. My host on that occasion--who I would like to think had an imperfect command of English--introduced me by saying, “Professor Dallek is the author of several distinguished works; they are the kinds of books that once you put them down, you can't pick them up again.” Not music to the author's ears. I also like to begin these talks with an anecdote I love about my son, who when he was four years old said to me one day, “Daddy,” he said, “you're a doctor, aren't you?” I said, “Well, yeah but not like your doctor, not like your pediatrician.” He said, “Oh I know that because you're also a historian.” Well I was delighted he could make this distinction at so tender an age, but then he wanted to know, “Does that mean that you make people in the past feel better?”

So let's see what I can do for Lyndon Johnson today. Next week on April 17 for the fifth time, I and a group of other presidential historians will be having dinner with President Obama, and it's been a fascinating experience to meet with and have a kind of close and intimate dinner; there are only about 12, 14 of us in the room, and he invites us to talk freely. But what he's most keenly interested in is hearing from us about historical analogies: what is there in the past, particularly in the history of the American presidency, that could be useful to him in his conduct of current affairs? And whenever I go to those dinners I have in mind a book by the ***920** late Harvard historian Ernest May called “Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy, [1] because this is a dicey business, telling a president about past events, or past developments that might be appropriate in his conduct of office on current problems, dilemmas. Obama, of course, is struggling now. His agenda is anything but moving forward. Wages, advanced education for preschoolers, immigration, gun control; he's not been able to make any progress on this. And I've thought a lot about, “What can I say to him in this coming dinner that might be useful in terms of the experience of Lyndon Johnson?” Now Johnson, as Mark [Kende] was saying, is very much back in focus--very much back in the news. The symposium at the LBJ Library this week had all the ex-presidents except for George H. W. Bush, who lent his name to it as well even though he wasn't there--but Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter. What's so fascinating about this is that Bill Clinton, two weeks before he was elected, came to the LBJ Library to give a talk. Very large, enthusiastic audience. He did not say a word in that talk about Lyndon Johnson. Nothing. Not a word. The Johnson people were furious. I talked to them about it. They were so angry. And I think now along with the fact that last week The New York Times with Peter Baker's front page article about Obama's connection to Johnson and Johnson's comeback, [2] a Washington Post article this week by Karen Tumulty about Lyndon Johnson: back in focus. [3]

So the first question I would address: what is there about Johnson that now seems to give him this, sort of, compelling appeal? Well, the guy was a phenom. Unlike the President and the Dean, I was about 107 years old when he was on the scene. I remember him very well. And into that bargain I spent 14 years--seven years going to the Johnson Library for each of the two volumes I wrote about him, Lone Star Rising [4] and Flawed Giant. [5] If you pick ***921** up his memoir [6] and turn the front page, turn the front cover, you will see a listing of 208 reform measures. Two hundred eight reforms that he signed into law: civil rights; voting rights; Medicare and Medicaid; federal aid to elementary, secondary, and higher education; the 1965 immigration statute, which represented a huge change from the National Origins Act of 1924. Johnson called that Act, the original Act, a racist piece of legislation, and he wiped it away with that '65 law. A host of environmental and consumer protections: clear air, clean harbors, clean oceans. I don't have the list before me, I have it over there, but it goes on and on: child safety, traffic safety. You read this list, and it's just stunning: national public radio, public television, the Freedom of Information Act, and a scent of a study of cancer and heart disease and blood disorders. Congressman Smith and I spoke last night about the fact that Johnson pushed forward the state interhighway legislation that Eisenhower proposed. He left a phenomenal mark on the country. The first question that one needs to ask if you are going to say anything to Obama about the Johnson example is: How did he do it? How could he have accomplished so much? Because you know, he eclipsed Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson. He loved FDR, he thought of FDR he said, as his daddy, as his mentor, and he wanted to eclipse him as well. How did he do it?

First, ambition. The guy, frankly, was a driven lunatic. He worked night and day. When he was the head of the National Youth Administration of Texas, he got a bunch of young kids from the Sam Houston High School in Houston who had been his students when he taught debate there. And he had them working for him. And if one of these kids would take a break to go into the bathroom, Johnson would jump up and go and bang on the door and say, “Can't you do that on your own time?!” He worked them 12, 14, 16 hours a day. And he was a workaholic. He had telephones constantly going, radio, television; he just was so driven and he had to, above all, he had to be the best. He got the first car telephone of any senator in Washington when he was Senate Majority Leader in '56-'60. Everett Dirksen, who was the Republican minority leader and a rival, also got a phone. He called Johnson up and he said, “Lyndon, I want you to be the first one I called on my new car telephone.” And Johnson said, “Can you hang on a second, Ev? My other phone is ringing.”

***922** When they tell him about John Kennedy's womanizing, he'd bang the table and say, “God dammit to hell. I had more women by accident than he ever had by design.” He just was not going to be outdone. So ambition, drive, political skill. The guy spent 23 years in the House and the Senate. He had an extraordinary congressional career. But when he got to the House and then got to the Senate he didn't want to serve on any particular committee. What he wanted was leadership. What he wanted was to have control. He had an aide named Bobby Baker. Some of you may remember that name. He of course later went to prison. Johnson forgot he ever knew him at that point. But, Baker was the eyes and ears, and Johnson collected intelligence on every one of the senators. Would his wife want to go on a congressional junket? What did he like to drink? Was he happy with his parking space? What legislation would help get him reelected? No detail was too small for Johnson to incorporate into his digest, so to speak, so that he could influence these guys. And he was a deal maker. A deal maker.

There are other stories of how Everett Dirksen would come in when he was President. They would sit kneecap to kneecap in the small hideaway office, drinking bourbon and branch water and Dirksen would say, “Mr. President, I have this fine young man in my home state of Illinois who deserves, I think, to be a judge.” And Johnson would say, “Ev, we're going to look into that.” The deal was cut. Dirksen was going to get that judgeship for his constituent, and Johnson was going to get Dirksen's votes on a particular piece of legislation. Now, one of the problems currently is: can you do that anymore? CNN would be all over it like a bee on honey. They'd call it corruption. But this is how Johnson worked. On Saturday afternoons in Washington, CSPAN radio plays the Johnson tapes. Have you ever listened to any of these? You want to see a guy at work in managing the Congress? He would call these people up: “This is your President calling. I

need your help, you see." He'd came off in this sort of cautious, ingratiating way, but if you weren't cooperative, then he'd start to bully you. "You're going to do what I tell you to do." Somebody once said, "Lyndon,"--who was six foot, three and a half--"when he backed you into a corner and began breathing in your mouth, you knew you were finished." A Republican congressman from Massachusetts by the name of Silvio Conte said later, "I was in Congress for 32 years, never had a call from a president until LBJ. He would call me up." And he said, "I nearly fell out of my seat. I'll never forget it." And of course, Conte was a convert. He began voting for what Johnson wanted him to vote for.

Last story about him as a politician. In 1958, Richard Nixon went to ***923** Latin America; you may recall this some of you. In Caracas, Venezuela, he was stoned, spat upon, and he came back to a hero's welcome at Andrews Air Force Base. Johnson, majority leader, was out there to embrace him. A couple of days later, a young reporter caught up with Johnson on Capitol Hill and said, "Senator, I saw you out there the other day embracing Vice President Nixon. I thought you told me last week that this guy was nothing but chicken shit." And Johnson said, "Son, what you've got to understand is that in politics, overnight, chicken shit can turn to chicken salad."

He was practical, pragmatic, but again, a last story here, he could bully people. In 1965, when the voting rights bill was on the agenda, George Wallace was governor of Alabama. There was the danger of violence, of bloodshed, and Wallace--who had larger ambitions--didn't want to be burdened with that business of having bloodshed in his state. He called Johnson up and he said, "Can I come and talk to you because I would like you to federalize the Alabama National Guard." Johnson said, "Sure, come in." He comes in, and Johnson brings him to the Oval Office. Now, Wallace was a man of about five foot, seven and a half. Johnson is six foot, three and a half. He sits Wallace down in this couch with very soft cushions, and Wallace now is about five foot, four. Johnson pulls up a chair next to him with this cushion that makes him now about seven feet tall. And he leans over Wallace and he says, "George, why don't you let the Negroes vote?" And Wallace says, "Oh, Mr. President, I don't control that, that is controlled by the registrars." And Johnson says, "Don't you shit me none, George. Don't you shit me none." Wallace later said, "If I didn't get out of there when I did, he would have had me out on the south lawn, coming out with civil rights." He was masterful as a politician.

Three. Number three. The guy was sincere about the issue of minority rights. He identified with them. He believed in this. He was a Texan, and in those days, he felt that Texans suffered from bias from a kind of contempt from people from the Northeast. He used to make fun of what he called the "Harvards." When he taught an elementary school for one year in Cotulla, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, he had these Mexican-American kids. He would bring them toothpaste and toothbrushes to improve their dental hygiene. He would bring them food so they could have a healthy breakfast, you see. In 1935, he became the head of the Texas National Youth Administration--Roosevelt's NYA. He later was identified as the best Head Director of any National Youth Administration state program in the country. He would occasionally spend a night at a black college in Texas. He was fiercely ambitious. He wanted to run for Congress. He wanted to be a ***924** senator. He thought vaguely about being the president. If it were known at the time that he spent a night at the black college in this strictly segregated era, it would've destroyed his opportunity to run for high office. He used to tell the story about his black cook, Zephyr Wright. When he was Vice President, he asked him to drive one of his cars back to Texas, to Austin. And she later told him that as she got into the Deep South, mind you an era of strict segregation, she couldn't find a bathroom to go to, and she said she stopped the car and she'd go and squat at the side of the road to urinate. Johnson was outraged by this. He was furious about it. He used to get letters when he was the head of the NYA from black kids who would say, "Can I be an engineer?"; "Can I be a pilot?"; "Could I be an officer in the Army?" His heart went out to them because what he believed in was the idea of opportunity--that they should have a chance to achieve as much as they possibly could. So, I think this compassion, this commitment to the disadvantaged was very important in shaping his agenda.

Finally, I'd say, there were the circumstances that made a huge difference in allowing him to get 208 bills passed. First of all, there was Kennedy's assassination. You read Johnson's speeches, and in the first 10, 12 months before he is elected

in his own right, he is constantly invoking the name of the martyred president, John Kennedy. He said in his first speech before a joint session, "President Kennedy said let us begin. I said you let us continue." [7] And he invokes Kennedy's memory to get the tax cut through, to get the civil rights bill passed, the voting rights bill passed, to get Medicare passed, because these were on Kennedy's list of bills which had been stymied in the Congress. In addition to Kennedy's assassination is the fact that he had the fabulous good fortune of running against Barry Goldwater in 1964. Goldwater was a dream opponent. Goldwater talked about privatizing Social Security. He joked, saying, "We ought to think about lobbying one into the men's room of the Kremlin." Bill Moyers, Johnson's press secretary, then came up with the most famous negative political ad of American history: the daisy field ad. [8] Have any of you seen this? The daisy field ad. This little girl, blonde, beautiful kid, sitting in a daisy field. She picks the flower up, picks off the petals counting down ten, nine, eight--gets down to zero, and the bomb goes off in the background. And underneath it says, "Vote for Lyndon Johnson. Secure her future." Johnson, after that ad ran, ***925** calls Moyers up and he says, "Get over here to the White House, Bill. The White House switchboard is lit up like a Christmas tree." Moyers comes in. Johnson's with about 12 people, and he starts dressing down Moyers. "You're going to ruin me, man. This is terrible. What did you do to me?" And Moyers says, "Mr. President, we're not going to run it again. Only once. We're not going to run it again." Johnson says, "Okay, okay." Moyers has to leave. As he walks out, Johnson walks around to the White House elevator. As he's about to get in the elevator, Johnson says, "You don't think we should run it again, Bill?" He knew it was a brilliantly effective ad. They never ran it again, but they didn't have to. So Johnson won, of course, this landslide victory. And he carried into the Congress with him two-thirds Democratic, liberal majorities in both the House and the Senate, which gave him the opportunity in the first, roughly, 18 months of his term to pass a host of legislation before Vietnam set in and really crippled his Great Society.

Final point about this: one can look back at these programs, and one can say, "Reagan said we fought a war on poverty, and poverty won." I think it's unfair. When Johnson took office, 22 percent of the population was making, families were making under $3,000 a year. By the end of his presidency, it had dropped to about 12 percent. Now there's a lot of argument about this. There are many people who say it was because of all the spending on the Vietnam War that generated jobs and opportunity. But, however you cut it, poverty was cut down substantially. And to this day, of course, it's still I think about 14 percent. Now, 14 percent of the current population is much greater than the 12 percent and 22 percent that Johnson faced in the 1960s. Medicare became a program that is embraced by all. Nobody argues about Medicare anymore. It's like Social Security. It's a program that reaches into every corner of the society.

And dare I tell you one more anecdote about that. Johnson is worried, after he gets that bill passed, that the AMA is going to give him grief. So he calls the leaders of the AMA to Washington and has the men ostensibly talk about the fact that he needs more doctors going to Vietnam. And he talks to them, and they say, "Yes, Mr. President. We certainly will try and recruit doctors to go to Vietnam." And Johnson says to Moyers, "Call in the press!" The press comes in, and Johnson says, "These fine gentlemen from the American Medical Association have agreed to try and recruit doctors to go to Vietnam." Johnson had planted a question in one of the journalists, who then says, "Well, what do they say about Medicare, Mr. President?" And Johnson says, "What do they think? They're patriots. My god, man, they are for it! Aren't they?! Tell them, tell them!" And these doctors are shrinking ***926** back and saying, "Oh yes, Mr. President, oh yes. . ." So it gets them on record before the press that this is what they are committed to.

Final point here. Civil rights. Johnson understood that when he got that civil rights bill passed, it was going to change not only relations between the races in the South, but it was going to have a dramatic impact on the South itself. You know, in the '50s, early '60s, many people in this country looked upon the South as sort of the crazy aunt you hid in the attic because it was so bizarre, this system of apartheid, you see. Johnson understood that once you ended racial segregation, you were also going to integrate the South into the rest of the country. Look what's happened. Before Johnson did this, Southerners could not run for president. Since Johnson, not only did you have Johnson, you've had Bill Clinton, you've

had the two Bushes, you've had Jimmy Carter, Al Gore from a border state. It changed the economy of the South. There is a new book out by a Stanford economic historian, Gavin Wright [9] laying out the economic consequences of the changes in the South as a consequence of civil rights and voting rights. They would become a much more prosperous area of the country, and of course the irony is, as Johnson understood, that the South was going to go Republican. He said that to Moyers. "Bill," he said, "I think we've given away the South for as far into the future as any of us can see."

So, final question. Why shouldn't I talk of Johnson to Obama? Why shouldn't I say to him, "Mr. President, look at this extraordinary record. Here is a model for how you go ahead and get your progressive agenda passed."? I'll tell you why I won't do it. First of all, I want to be invited back to more dinners. But Johnson, first of all, remains in pretty bad standing in this country. In 2010 there was a poll asking American to assess the last nine presidents from John Kennedy to George W. Bush. [10] Kennedy came out on top with 85-percent approval. The only one close to him was Reagan with 74 percent. Nixon at the bottom with 29 percent. George W., 47. And Johnson 49 percent. In another recent poll, Johnson is now down to 42 percent. Another poll, in which 68 percent of Americans say that they think of Johnson as only an ordinary or only an average or below-average president. He just doesn't have this hold on the public's imagination.

***927** Why? First and foremost: Vietnam. This shadow of Vietnam continues to dog him--in particular, the fact that people felt he deceived the country. He lied to them about what was happening there. Now Johnson couldn't believe that, as he put it, these little guys running around the jungle in black pajamas could stand up to the American military. And he kept saying, "Light at the end of the tunnel. Light at the end of the tunnel." And some wit finally said, "Yeah, sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel is from the onrushing train." It was a disaster. And what really hurt Johnson was that he now had what was called the credibility gap. You've heard of this? The credibility gap. How do you know when LBJ is telling the truth? When he pulls his earlobe or rubs his chin, he's telling the truth. When he moves his lips, you know he's lying. He didn't think it was funny. But it was so telling as to how he had lost the public's trust. He no longer had credibility with the country. Then there's also the fact that people just don't like him. They see him as a rather cruel, vulgar personality. And of course he had the misfortune to come after John Kennedy. Kennedy, who was so admired, who has become a kind of iconic figure. And Johnson, compared to him, is remembered as crude, vulgar, and of course, the famous David Levine cartoon. Remember that cartoon of Johnson picking up his shirt holding, showing off his abdominal scar which was in the form of Vietnam? And so, people are really put off by him personally.

Last I would say, the changed circumstances. It's such a different world from the one Lyndon Johnson occupied. And most of all, people have lost faith and trust in government. John Kennedy's assassination to this day, something like 55 percent of Americans believe there is an undisclosed conspiracy and that the people behind the killing of Kennedy, a number of them were either in the CIA or in the military because they were so worried that Kennedy was moving in the direction of détente with the Soviet Union. And they also, many people, subscribed to the notion that Johnson had a hand in killing him, which is nonsense. Absolute nonsense. But there is a certain belief in this.

In addition to Kennedy's assassination, the loss of trust in government. Nixon and Watergate. Nixon holding a press conference in which he said, "I am not a crook." A President who has to go before the country and say, "I am not a crook." This is the end of his presidency. It's ruination. The Church Committee hearings in 1975, which revealed so much skullduggery by the CIA; assassination plots in the Congo; against Castro in Cuba; Bill Clinton, waving his finger, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," undercuts people's trust in leadership and government. The Iraq war; no ***928** weapons of mass destruction; Snowden now with these revelations about the CIA and the tapping of phones, the listening in on phones; and yesterday, The New York Times carried this story about what doctors receive from Medicare [11] and this ophthalmologist who got like $21 million. What the hell does he do? I mean, does he cure blindness? But people then, you see, it undercuts faith in government. So let me end with two very brief anecdotes about Franklin Roosevelt, which strike to me a note of difference.

After FDR died on April 12--this is the 69th anniversary today of his death. After he died, they transported the body on a train to take it back to Hyde Park, New York. A man stood sobbing by the railway tracks, and somebody next to him said, “Did you know the president?” And he said, “No, but he knew me. He knew me.” After Roosevelt died, somebody stopped Mrs. Roosevelt on the street and said to her, “I miss the way your husband used to speak to me about my government.” Just think of it. Speak to me about my government. You just can't imagine that now. So, in a sense, what I'm saying to you is: Johnson deserves to be remembered for phenomenal achievements in the domestic arena. He still deserves to be condemned, I think, for the misjudgment on Vietnam, but I've got to come up with some other lessons if I want to have any influence on Obama, I guess. So if any of you've got ideas, I won't give you credit, but I'll steal them. Thanks for being so kind.

***929 Discussion**

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Drake University Law School

Professor Mark Kende (moderator): I want to thank Dr. Dallek for those insightful remarks and see if anyone on the dais here has any questions or comments or thoughts regarding those remarks.

Professor Neil Siegel: I want to thank you as well as you make history come alive, and I wish I could take your classes. So, I have brilliant advice that you can give to the President. I might have mentioned it last night at dinner when we were having some wine. First, this is brilliant so it doesn't leave this room. First, keep the Senate, and second, take the House. That's my advice. In case he hasn't thought of it. But it does lead to my question, which is, I think you identify a series of extraordinary personal and professional characteristics, character traits, and then at the end, you talk about circumstances. And I am trying to imagine Lyndon Johnson president today, and I'm wondering if that last factor, circumstances, overwhelms everything else. So if you imagine him president today, in a regime of divided government, with the Republican Party today, not the Republican Party of the '60s, which I think are very different parties. What would Lyndon Johnson be able to do differently than this President? I mean, would he be able to schmooze, bully, intimidate, wine, dine, in a way that would make any kind of a meaningful difference?

Dr. Robert Dallek: Well, it's a wonderful question, and I think there's no question that Johnson being Johnson, he would have tried to do it. But I just don't think it would work nowadays. And part of it is the problem with the 24/7 news cycle. And we talked to President Obama about that. Because we said to him: “Is there any way for you to get away from this? How do you deal with the fact that you're under a microscope so constantly?” And he said, well, at the end of the day around 9 o'clock, what he tries to do is forget about the day's events. He watches sports. He tries to have dinner every evening with his daughters, who he's very attached to. But, he can't escape. So somebody, Michelle Obama was at the particular dinner, she told me he'd been there once, that somebody asked her, “Can he go to Camp David?” And she said, “Eh, he's an urban guy; he doesn't like going there.” See, so I just don't think that Johnson himself could pull it off, and in fact, his ***930** negatives, his crudeness, would be that picture of him holding up the beagles by the ears. That would be a constant on television, and I just don't think he could carry it off then.

Mark Kende: Other questions or comments from the panelists? I'll just throw one in. In terms of not necessarily, I don't know what advice to suggest you should give to the President, but what about the argument some have made that part of the problem with Obamacare was the way it was not sold? That it was relentlessly attacked with millions of dollars of advertisements, etc., and here you have a man who ran incredible political campaigns, was incredibly effective, and

yet in terms of the selling of Obamacare that it wasn't sold. In other words, could he have taken better advantage of the 24/7 media, or advertising, etc., or is that not something that would have made a difference?

Robert Dallek: You know Mark, I think the great problem that he's had with Obamacare is something here that Johnson understood. When Johnson passed federal aid to elementary, secondary, and higher education, a few of his aides said to him, "Mr. President, some of that money is going to wealthy school districts." And Johnson said, "That's just fine. If you want to get something that's going to take hold in the country, you can't just do it for the poor." And the knock on the Affordable Care Act is that it's really focused on those without insurance, and the idea is that, well they're poor. And you need to make these programs work by reaching into the middle class. And that's what Medicare does, and that's what Social Security does. I think this has been the Achilles's heel of it, so to speak. And then also, of course, they've knocked him about for the fact that some middle-class people have been losing their health insurance and are being compelled to . . . . Now, my wife has spent her career in health policy, and we have friends who are in the Administration who have worked on this, and believe me, some of them have complained bitterly about the fact that it's been a bureaucratic nightmare--that it's just not been effectively done. I don't know how you do it effectively, but this has been a real burden for him. And you know he's very interested--he talked to us about his legacy. He's very interested in his legacy, and this is going to be, I think, on the domestic side, the biggest part of it. I should also tell you, as a final joke here, or comment, he complained to us about Congress, and in particular about Michele Bachmann, so I said to him, "Well, Mr. President, my wife tells me I can only tell one joke at each of these dinners." I said to him, "Well, Mr. President, I guess you know what Mark Twain said about congressmen." He shook his head, and I said, "Mark Twain said, 'Suppose you're a congressman and suppose you're an idiot, but I repeat myself.'" Obviously, I've had some ***931** good friends in Congress who [weren't] fond of that, but he liked it.

Mark Kende: Questions from the audience?

Audience Member: How much did Kennedy pick up?

Robert Dallek: It's such an interesting question because I've written two books on Kennedy. I've speculated on this like many. I don't think Kennedy ever would have been as ambitious to do everything that Johnson did with the War on Poverty and the Great Society, but I think if, and he himself said, Kennedy said, "If we get to run against Goldwater next year, we're going to get to bed much earlier on election night than we did in 1960," because he knew that they would really beat up on Goldwater very effectively. I think he would have gotten civil rights and the big tax cut and federal aid to education and Medicare: those four things that were on his agenda. But I think he was a foreign policy President, and that's his focus. I do think, if he had lived, I think there was a chance for some kind of accommodation with Cuba. It was a reach, but there were already conversations going on about this, and I think we would have come closer to having detente with the Soviet Union. Kennedy's greatest achievement was on nuclear weapons. He was frightened to death that he might have to pull that nuclear trigger. And after the Cuban Missile Crisis, he met with the Joint Chiefs. He had held them at arm's length throughout the Crisis because they wanted to bomb and invade. And they said to him, "Mr. President, you've been had. Khrushchev is hiding the missiles in caves, the White House leaked this to the press," and Khrushchev wrote him a note, "I'm no caveman." "But Kennedy," they tell him, "you better lay a plan to go into Cuba, because he still has those missiles, man." They make a plan, and part of the plan is to drop a one-megaton nuclear bomb on Cuba. Imagine what it would have done to the south coast of Florida, let alone to Cuba. It would have turned it into a pile of rubble. Kennedy, he just thought they were over the top. I published a piece in the Atlantic out of that recent book I wrote called JFK vs. the Joint Chiefs; they didn't like him; he didn't like them. But, you know, in public they had to get along, but you get behind the scenes and you see. So, Mac Bundy, who I interviewed for my books, he said, "Between Kennedy and Johnson, different man, different time, different results." No, I don't think Kennedy would have done nearly as much in domestic affairs as Johnson did.

Audience member: [Inaudible question]

Mark Kende: Let me just repeat the question for purposes we're videotaping this, so we want to make sure the question is generally that, are there ways of presentation that President Obama could utilize much more ***932** effectively and perhaps as effectively as someone like LBJ seemed to do by comparison?

Robert Dallek: I think it's an excellent point you were making because Obama, he's such a different person. I sat next to him at one dinner. There was no small talk. He's very much the academic. And Johnson--you were right--was full of this enthusiasm and this optimism and this expectation that we're going to get this done, and you know he used to say to some of his agents that they came into the problem and he'd say, "Don't tell me about your problems; tell me about how you're going to do it!" But Obama, he's more academic; he's very reserved. He's cautious. He's cautious and frankly, my feeling is that he's a black man who grew up in a white world in which he had to accommodate-- especially in politics--if he were going to get ahead. Now, I think essentially he wants a progressive record; he wants to give early childhood education; he wants to raise the minimum wage; his heart--we spoke at one of those dinners after that horror in Connecticut with the 20 children being killed, and he's very touched by the vulnerability of children. I've seen this in him. And he does give fabulous speeches, you know. They are terrific State of the Union addresses, but then where's the follow-through? What, you know there is something restrained about him, and my temptation, frankly, is to say to him at this dinner, "What's to be lost now, Mr. President? Go all out, you know. Push for--say to the Republicans: listen, you don't like Obamacare; you don't like the Affordable Care Act; tell me what you're going to do to replace it. You don't have an answer? Here's my answer: I'll slide a repeal of it, and then let's go to the single payer of everyone under Medicare." Well because that's not going to happen, . . . beat up on them! Fight back, you see. I mean, remember that first debate? That was such a good example of your point, that he was so cautious. And they told him afterwards, "You've got to strike hard." And he did fight more vigorously. And also, some friends of mine--who are much more savvy about politics than I am--have said, "It was too soon for him to become President; four years in the senate, he just didn't have the experience." But it's really interesting, what historians have been saying. Who knows what will happen over the next two years? Maybe you're right, and maybe he'll hold the Senate and win back the House.

Neil Siegel: It wasn't a prediction.

Mark Kende: We have a question from Professor Brown-Nagin.

Professor Tomiko Brown-Nagin: It's less of a question than a follow-up on an astute comment that was made from the audience about Obama's self-presentation. I would just amend the idea a bit that he presents always ***933** as an academic. I don't think that that's true; I think that Obama is capable of moments that are very powerful when he will call upon the legacy of the civil rights era. We've seen it this week when he's been very powerful in talking about Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society; he is capable of that. Certainly, it's true that a part of the reason that he is sometimes, I would say, sometimes he holds back--has to do with the politics of race--but mostly I would say what he has accommodated is the Republican Party, (or tried to accommodate) and his political calculation has not worked out. That is, I would say, that they've not tried to accommodate him very often. Moreover, his accommodation about how to pitch the Affordable Care Act--that is the market framework--did not work out so well. But he is capable of presenting himself as a progressive. When the politics haven't worked out, he hasn't been willing or maybe he is listening to advisors who haven't wanted him to really put his progressive face forward. But he has done it sometimes; it just hasn't been consistent is what I would say.

Audience member: [Inaudible]

Mark Kende: So the comment is, President Johnson might have also had the advantage of a very different Supreme Court on his side, in effect.

Robert Dallek: I agree, no question about it.

Audience member: [Inaudible]

Mark Kende: So the question is, could you talk about LBJ's relationship with Hubert Humphrey?

Robert Dallek: Sure, it was an interesting relationship. Humphrey and Johnson knew each other going way back into the Senate days, and he saw Humphrey as one of those fiery liberals, and he would try--when he was Senate Majority Leader-- he'd say, "Hubert, restrain yourself." In fact, Humphrey--most interesting anecdote here is--Humphrey wanted to go after Joseph McCarthy. And Johnson pulled him aside and said, "Hubert, don't do it. He eats liberals like you for breakfast." He said, "You wait, he's going to go after conservatives, and then we'll bring him down." And of course, once he went after the Army, McCarthy, that is, went after the Army, Johnson went to the head of the ABC television news--ABC was then known as the third network--and he said to them, "Put these Army McCarthy hearings on television. You'll get a big rating." And they did it. And of course what Johnson understood was, it revealed to the public what a bully McCarthy was. And because it brought him down. So Humphrey respected Johnson as someone who had a very keen political field for how this all worked. Humphrey wanted to be president, and the only road he saw ***934** to the presidency was through taking the vice presidency. And Johnson treated him very badly, when he was Vice President. I mean, he humiliated him. In some ways, Johnson felt he was repeating what the Kennedys had done to him. Johnson was miserable as Vice President. He began drinking to excess. Kennedy sent him out of the country on trips because he said at least it would give Lyndon a stage center which he would enjoy there. So, he treated Humphrey badly. Humphrey in '68, of course, running against Richard Nixon. The Johnson Administration had wiretaps in the Saigon Embassy, and they learned that Spiro Agnew, Nixon's running mate, had sent word through Madame Chennault to the Saigon government that they should not sign on to peace negotiations, which Johnson had launched in Paris, because they'll get a better deal from a Nixon presidency. Now Johnson was furious. There's something called the Logan Act, which says that private citizens, if they interfere in an ongoing international diplomatic negotiation, can be prosecuted. Johnson put that before Humphrey. And Humphrey decided that he wouldn't use it because if he used it, and Nixon were elected anyway, there would be an instant constitutional crisis. Little did he know there was going to be a constitutional crisis later anyway. But, Humphrey struggled with Johnson. Johnson wire tapped him; he was on top of everything Humphrey was doing because the last thing he was going to allow was for Humphrey to get out there and say, "We are going to make peace." Johnson just didn't want to be seen as losing that war, and Humphrey being the peacemaker. So Humphrey was really, his hands were tied. He should have broken with Johnson. He himself said that, right? He should have just broken with him at the end of that campaign. He probably could have even been elected. But, it was one of those sad facts of American history, and Humphrey I think made a misjudgment there, but on the other hand, there are some journalists in Washington who say what Humphrey did in not blowing the whistle on Nixon was an act of exceptional political decency. He was concerned not to provoke a constitutional crisis in the country. But I think it did severely hurt his chances of winning the White House.

Mark Kende: Other questions or comments?

Professor William Forbath: Could anyone as mean and vicious as Johnson; could anyone as kind of unhinged and profoundly bullying and mean and vicious, really survive a kind of scrutiny of a 24-hour news site and access that even kind of lowly congresspeople enjoy today to expose stuff that was behind closed doors?

Robert Dallek: You know, Bill, my feeling is, if they were phenomenally successful and they got things done, I think the public might ***935** be forgiving, because it's not as if they like these other people in politics or in Congress, so you would have to calibrate. But I think in general, you're right, people are not going to be very happy about some crude, overbearing, and that's the way Johnson was. He was a bully, and he carried his physicality. He was just such an overbearing character. I know one or two people that met him, and they said he surrounded you; he sort of overwhelmed you. And it could work to a degree in those days. Also, he didn't mind intimidating, you know. "You want that dam? You're going to goddamn vote for what I tell you to vote for." You listen to those tapes of how he gets the Warren Commission set up, you ever listen to those tapes? How Chief Justice Warren, he doesn't want to be on that commission; he doesn't think it's appropriate. The senator from Georgia, his old mentor, he didn't want to be on the commission. But Johnson told him, "You're going to do it. I am telling you, this is for the country. You're going to do it. You want a nuclear war? The people are beginning to think that the Cubans or the Russians killed Kennedy. We'll have a nuclear war. No, you have to." And this is why there was so much suspicion of that Warren Commission, because Johnson, sort of, in a sense, had the big head. I believe that Oswald was the only killer, but Johnson sort of was determined, "You bring back a report that says Oswald was the killer because I don't want to get into these difficulties where we might end up in a nuclear war." So, these analogies are so difficult to [draw].

Mark Kende: Well, I want to thank Dr. Dallek for a wonderful history lecture.

Footnotes

a1 Professor at the Stanford University Program in Washington, D.C., professor of history emeritus at UCLA, and the author of 12 books including a two-volume biography on President Lyndon Johnson. Previously taught at Columbia University, Oxford (Harmsworth Visiting Professor of American History), California Institute of Technology, Boston University, Dartmouth College (Montgomery Fellow), and The Citadel (Mark Clark Visiting Professor of History). Has written for The Atlantic, Newsweek, Vanity Fair, The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and other periodicals and newspapers.

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