THE MODERN
American Presidency

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Foreword by Richard Norton Smith

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The Souring of the Modern Presidency

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson

After two decades of uninterrupted growth in the power of the modern presidency, the 1960s saw the first signs of popular questioning about the increasing authority of the American executive. The skepticism did not begin during the opening three years of that decade, when John F. Kennedy was in the White House. The way in which Kennedy approached the office, however, laid the foundation for the problems that Lyndon B. Johnson encountered in foreign policy. Both men conducted their administrations in a manner that rejected the institutional precedents set under Dwight D. Eisenhower. The results did not suggest that notable improvements in presidential leadership had occurred.

John F. Kennedy became president in January 1961 with one of the thinnest policy backgrounds of any chief executive in the twentieth century. After three terms in the House of Representatives, from 1947 to 1953, Kennedy won a Senate seat in 1952 and gained a landslide reelection six years later. Never much interested in legislation, the Massachusetts senator spent his first term in uncertain health and in his second immediately began a presidential run. His involvement in labor reform legislation in 1959 represented his one serious commitment to Capitol Hill. Perhaps because he was not tied to a legislative record, Kennedy proved to be an excellent presidential candidate, whose rhetoric aroused powerful expectations about how he would get the nation "moving again." The exact means of achieving such goals, however, were left undefined when his presidency got under way, following his narrow victory over Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 election.[1]

Kennedy had been thinking about the nature of presidential leadership since his student days at Harvard, and his writings when in Congress, even though largely drafted by others, had returned to the same theme. Yet he had not formulated a clear sense of how he would conduct the day-to-day business of the White House except that he would not emulate his predecessor. The advice that he received about organizing the White House played down Eisenhower's arrangements and looked to a return to the practices and techniques of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Kennedy and his men believed that the staffing arrangements under Eisenhower had been too formal and too structured. The result had been that the president, in their opinion, had been insulated from new ideas and fresh thinking. Under the new president, the staff would be more loose and less tied to the bureaucratic routine so that the White House could be a more energetic and innovative place for the 1960s.

This approach represented a return to the Democratic style of the presidency, where generalists ranged into different areas and dealt with issues and problems as they arose. While it put a premium on spontaneity and quick thinking, it also allowed less time for the framing of opposing alternatives on policy matters. The president himself did not like being tied to formal procedures, and that ethos permeated his administration. In practice, the fabled freshness and élan of the Kennedy era turned out to have serious weaknesses when it came to practical implementation.[2]

Despite some initial stumbles, Kennedy showed a deft touch in handling the public relations aspect of the presidency. At the suggestion of his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, the president took the next step with press conferences and began holding them live for a national television audience. The byplay between president and journalists was fascinating, and Kennedy enjoyed the experience of give-and-take. The first such conference was held on 25 January 1961 in the State Department auditorium. There had been some grumbles from newsmen about the change when it was first announced after the elections. James Reston, the influential columnist of the *New York Times*, dubbed it "the goofiest idea since the hula hoop." But the departure was such a natural extension of what had been done under Eisenhower that it caught on at once. After all, the president had reached an audience estimated at 60 million people.[3]

The Kennedy press conferences emerged as one of the popular media events of the early 1960s. The president prepared for them in a systematic manner, since any gaffe would be magnified for the television audience. These

intensive rehearsals served the purpose of informing Kennedy about pending issues, which, with his quick mind, he absorbed rapidly. Since the event had not yet evolved into a media spectacular, a fair degree of actual news was elicited from the president as well. The telecasts did help to transform the reporters from faceless scribes into media celebrities in their own right. That process, in turn, would intensify the examination of the workings of the presidency as a means of generating ratings for television itself.

As time passed, however, some people in network television thought that Kennedy relied too heavily on the press conference format and should be doing more in other areas. "The rough consensus" was that "the President has not made as good use of TV as others," as Jack Gould, the *New York Times* television critic, reported to his superiors in April 1963. Reporters would have preferred more interviews with Kennedy to explore issues in depth, but that would have raised questions of cost for the networks and equal time constraints as far as the Republicans were concerned.[4]

At a time when the presidency was still an object of deference, the media helped Kennedy take the celebrity aspects of his position to new levels of international superstar status. His apparent youthful energy (which did not take into account his weak back and reliance on painkillers) and the glamour of his young and beautiful wife Jacqueline contributed to the public impression that vitality and exuberance had reappeared in the White House for the first time since Theodore Roosevelt had occupied the office at the turn of the century. "The palpable love affair between the White House and a jade called Culture shows signs of reaching an impassioned peak this year," gushed two writers in the *New York Times* in January 1962. On a more mundane level, Hollywood helped the cause with an implausible film about the president's combat experiences as a PT-boat commander in the South Pacific. The movie was a commercial failure.[5]

The president and his wife contrived to create an atmosphere of elegance and sophistication that captivated the nation. The president was depicted as

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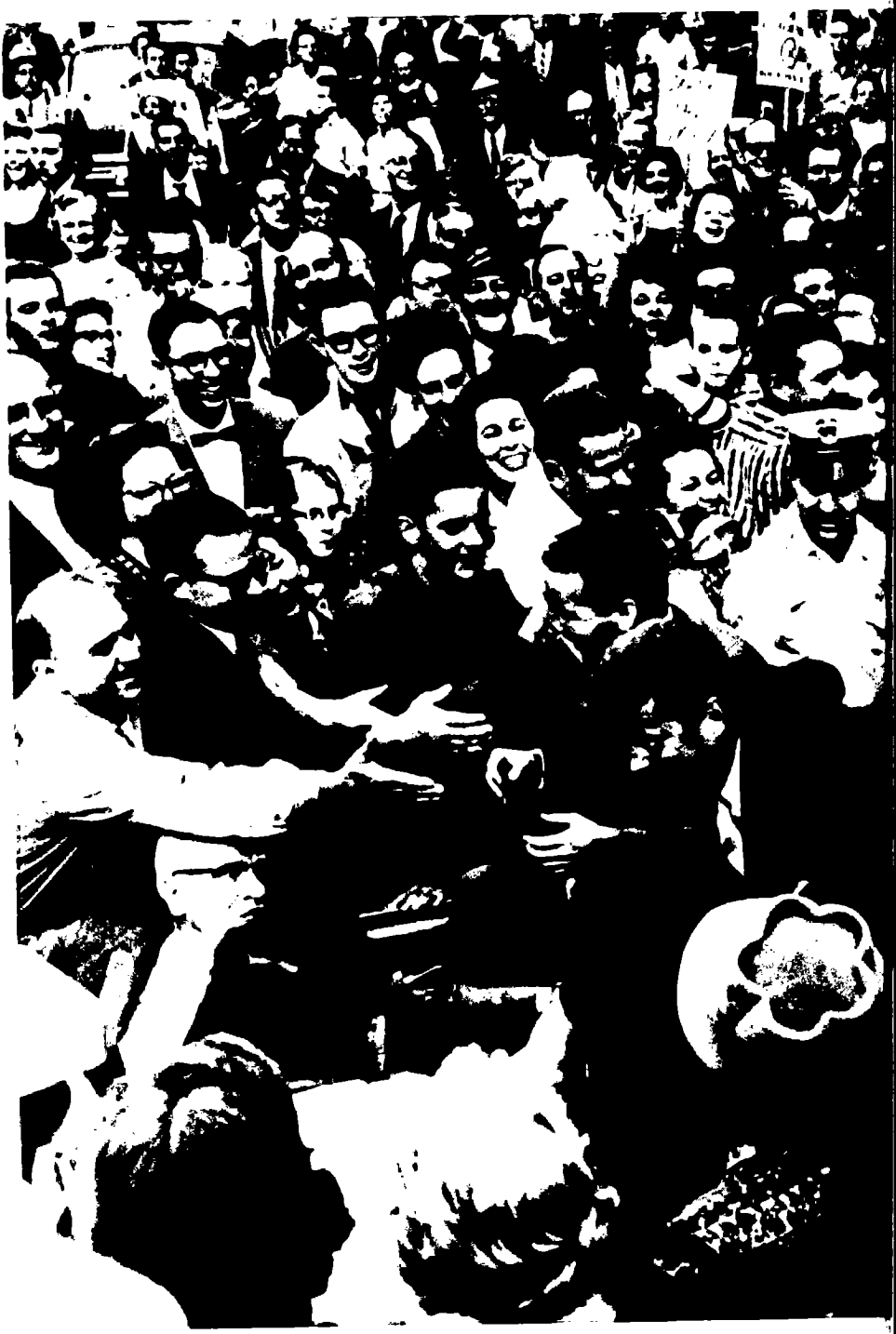
Following page: John F. Kennedy was a celebrity from the moment he sought the presidency. An enthusiastic crowd presses the candidate as he campaigns in Charlotte, North Carolina, in October 1960, and Kennedy's face expresses some of the dismay that went with the process. (Photograph by Bruce Roberts, from the Roberts Collection, CN 11468, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.)

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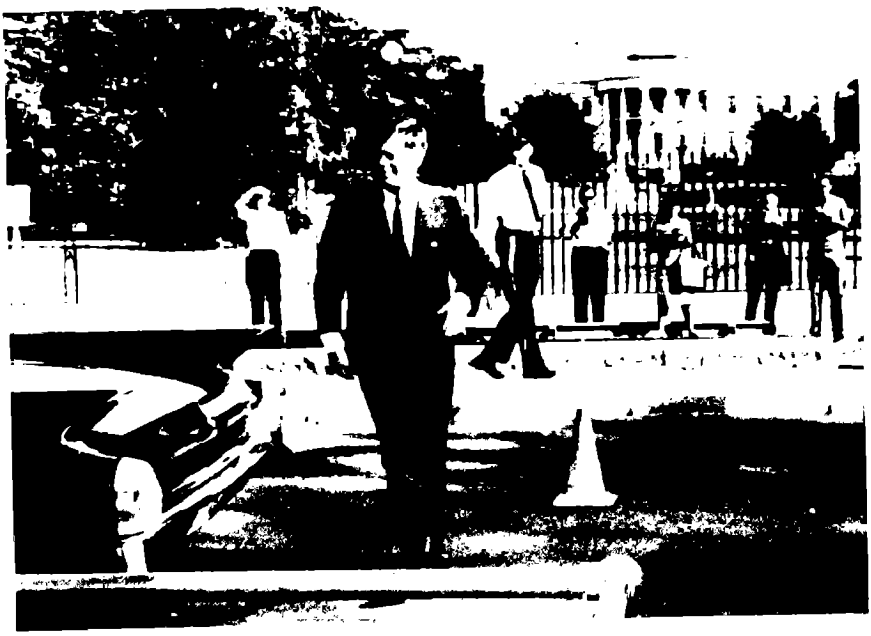

Notwithstanding his physical ailments, John F. Kennedy conveyed an impression of youthful vigor and energy that helped make him a presidential superstar. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

a sponsor of the arts and culture even though his reading tastes were conventional and his knowledge of music and art rudimentary at best. His fascination with the James Bond spy novels of Ian Fleming was made to appear more penetrating than President Eisenhower's fondness for westerns. Skillful speechwriting and the aura of his wife's love for early-nineteenth-century French decor helped push the notion that the age of Theodore and Edith Roosevelt had been recaptured. In so doing John and Jacqueline Kennedy established expectations for cultural leadership in the White House that their successors would find difficult to equal.[6]

Artifice and a healthy dose of deceit had always been part of the presidency. Under Kennedy, media management and outright deception reflected some troubling aspects of the modern chief executive. The president's casual view of his marriage vows, as well as his voracious sexual appetites, were known to many reporters and gossiped about in well-informed circles during the early 1960s. The press observed the code of silence that still shrouded the personal

lives of politicians (and protected their own dalliances) and did not delve into the president's many extramarital affairs or his involvements with women on the fringes of organized crime.[7]

Such a conspiracy of silence succeeded because the exploration of presidential lapses was still out of bounds for respectable press inquiry. During the Kennedy years there began to be some efforts among right-wing Republicans to bring the president's sins to light, and these scandalmongering books did attract an audience. For the most part, however, the Kennedy White House used the goodwill of the press to keep Kennedy's misdeeds in the shadows. Kennedy was a master at giving favored reporters such as Benjamin Bradlee of *Newsweek* the illusion of friendship and just enough access to satisfy their desire to be on the inside of events without making the journalists real players. When reporters did not succumb to presidential blandishments or contradicted the official line on a subject such as Vietnam, the president was quite willing to employ the more blatant forms of pressure with publishers and advertisers to bring the scribes back into line.[8]

Yet good relations with the press and media manipulation, though important to Kennedy, could take the new president only so far. Because he had made so much of his Democratic activism during the presidential campaign, he faced immediate comparisons with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the One Hundred Days of 1933. Indeed, the expectations of such a fruitful period arose even before Kennedy was elected. The situation of the two presidents could not have been more different in the objective circumstances that they confronted. In 1961, with the nation at peace and relatively prosperous, there was no national economic crisis or tangible sense of national urgency for Kennedy, despite his efforts to strike such a note in his inaugural address. Part of the point of Kennedy's strident language on that occasion was to arouse public opinion for the challenges the new president meant to pose. His election margin over Richard M. Nixon had been so narrow and his working majority in Congress so tenuous that ambitious national legislative programs were also out of the question. If Kennedy was to be a strong president and gain a second term in 1964, he would have to do so by presidential initiatives in foreign policy rather than as an architect of laws and programs.[9]

The levers of power in the White House established under Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower were there for Kennedy to grasp in 1961, but the machinery of the modern presidency did not come with instructions for its

wise use in all situations. The new president did not admire the formal institutions of government; indeed, he viewed them all with suspicion. The Department of State, for example, was to his mind a necessary but somewhat fossilized bureaucracy. Therefore he planned to run foreign policy from the White House and have the secretary of state, Dean Rusk, play only a subordinate role in overall policy making in foreign affairs. His national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, operated a little State Department from the White House. The resulting informality suited Kennedy's distaste for procedures that cramped his initiatives and required him to listen to people he found dull. The working theory was that organizational looseness would facilitate honest debate within the administration and thus make for better decision making, but that did not occur under Kennedy.[10]

In casual settings where the group dynamic emphasized quick thinking and crisp, articulate answers, the measured response or the thoughtful answer often became the casualty of the Kennedy zest for rapid-fire responses. Toughness was also prized, and a willingness to negotiate or to reject the hard position was less welcome. This was odd since Kennedy himself so often came to a more nuanced and less strident stance than many of his more assertive advisers. But in the cut and thrust of the debate, dissenting opinions on foreign policy did not receive as much attention as they sometimes deserved.

The first example of this trend was in the Bay of Pigs episode during spring 1961, when Kennedy dealt with the planning for an invasion of Cuba based on preparations started under Eisenhower. The informal and ad hoc way in which the decision was made meant that questioning voices about the venture were not heard in an effective manner. The result of not examining carefully the underlying presumptions of the scheme was a foreign policy fiasco that disrupted the momentum of the new administration at the outset and wounded the credibility and prestige of the United States.[11]

Following the Cuban debacle, Kennedy did not establish mechanisms to improve the manner in which advice came to him and was then evaluated. Instead, he placed more reliance on his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and on his speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, to screen potential decisions for possible dangers. This technique survived the Cuban Missile Crisis of fall 1962 when an Executive Committee (ExCom) of White House insiders dealt with the threat of a nuclear confrontation after the Soviet Union

deployed missiles in Cuba. The success in avoiding a catastrophe seemed to validate Kennedy's methods as president.[12]

In the case of Vietnam, however, the administration never implemented procedures that would have allowed for a careful assessment of the risks inherent in the mounting American involvement in Southeast Asia. With no one in the White House clearly in charge of the problem, Kennedy and his team accepted the premise that the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam must and could be defeated. Optimistic statements led the American people to believe that the conflict was being won.[13]

There was no means in the administration to frame the alternatives in Vietnam so that the potential costs of further intervention could be evaluated. When the situation deteriorated during fall 1963, Kennedy and his advisers immersed themselves in the plotting to topple the president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, without thinking through the ramifications that eventually included Diem's assassination.[14]

The death of Diem serves as a final example of the fascination during the Kennedy years with sinister gimmicks and trickery as tools of presidential action. The Bay of Pigs left the president with a strong animus against Fidel Castro and the conviction that any means was justified to bring down the Cuban ruler. That view led in turn to a bizarre series of plots to kill Castro. Although the defenders of the president have asserted that these schemes went forward without his knowledge, it is clear that John and Robert Kennedy created a climate in the White House where such covert ventures received implicit sanction at the highest levels. The administration was fortunate that these ill-advised plots did not become public knowledge until more than a decade after Kennedy's death. The idea that strong presidents could work outside the law to accomplish their foreign policy goals was a creed with dangerous implications.[15]

The president also brought technology and secrecy into the Oval Office with the installation of the most elaborate presidential tape-recording arrangement up to that time. Created to monitor what visitors said to Kennedy and to furnish him with materials for his memoirs, the recording machinery was state of the art for 1962. Its existence was closely guarded from all but a few of his advisers, and the resulting tapes do illuminate many of the important events of Kennedy's presidency, especially the Cuban Missile Crisis. The ethics of taping individuals without their knowledge did not trouble President

Kennedy, whose view of morality tended to be flexible in any circumstances. The Kennedys also had no qualms about widespread wiretapping of his friends and enemies to plug leaks and to gather damaging evidence for use against suspected individuals.[16]

During the Kennedy presidency, the system of record keeping that had maintained the papers of each president since the Taft administration finally broke down under the weight of the paper that came to the White House each year. To replace the numerical filing system, archivists in the Executive Mansion turned to a categorical arrangement under broad subject headings, with subdivisions for executive and general documents. A confidential file system was kept for more sensitive records, along with detailed chronicles of the president's calendar and daily movements. In addition, a White House name file tracked the individual letters and memoranda of people who interacted with the presidency. As these documents proliferated and as presidential libraries came into use, the records of the presidency provided a fascinating cross-section of American opinion on the nation's highest office. The modern presidency was in that sense one of the most historically accessible institutions in the nation, with a precise documentation of the behavior and thoughts of its occupants.

The Kennedy administration also used the services of a pollster, Lou Harris, whose firm often worked for Democratic clients. The president followed these surveys closely since the narrowness of his 1960 victory was always in his mind. Harris did not come into the White House as an official member of the staff so that a distance could be maintained between the president and the molding of public opinion. The continuous mode of campaigning that reached its peak under Richard Nixon was already in formation under Kennedy.[17]

As part of its crusade against organized crime, the Kennedy administration sent one of their trusted aides, Carmine Bellino, to the Internal Revenue Service as early as January 1961 to look into returns of persons whom the White House suspected of mob ties. Later, as conservative opposition to the White House surged, the Kennedys used the IRS to undermine support for the right-wing movement and to cast doubt on these conservatives' credibility as critics of the Democratic president. Though these tactics did not go as far as those that occurred under Richard Nixon, the pressures of the Kennedy administration on the tax-collecting agency illustrated that modern presidents of all political stripes could abuse executive authority when it suited them.[18]

Kennedy's domestic priorities were less ambitious than his foreign policy pursuits. In part, the lack of a working majority in the House of Representatives limited his options. The new administration had to expend much of its political capital in 1961 simply to reshape the House Rules Committee so that legislation it favored might receive floor action. Kennedy retained the Office of Congressional Relations that Eisenhower had started. Lawrence "Larry" O'Brien, who had run Kennedy's presidential campaign, headed the operation. O'Brien and his staff became quite adept at handling the day-to-day work on Capitol Hill, and in a more favorable political environment the office would have been an efficient adjunct for the White House. The administration could not change the negative political arithmetic in Congress, however, and Kennedy's legislative program largely stalled between 1961 and 1963. A tax cut and a civil rights bill were in the pipeline by the time of his death, but they faced an uncertain future during a presidential election year.[19]

Despite the mixed record of his administration, Kennedy somehow represented the modern presidency at the height of its power and influence. The circumstances of his death and the legends that surrounded his life were indispensable to the president's favorable posthumous reputation. Decades after his murder he ranked in public opinion polls as one of the nation's greatest presidents. His standing with his fellow citizens seemed impervious to the steady erosion of his esteem among historians and political scientists during the 1980s and 1990s. More revelations fed the popular fascination about his life without detracting from the high regard in which average Americans held Kennedy and his wife.[20]

The Kennedys' biggest contribution to the modern presidency was glamour and celebrity. Not since Theodore Roosevelt had a chief executive garnered such elements of matinee-idol adoration as Jack Kennedy. Although some of this status derived from Kennedy's appealing personal qualities, it rested to a far larger degree on the elements of public relations and hype that had marked his career since he entered politics in 1946. There was always a sense of exaggeration in all of his prepresidential accomplishments. His first book, *Why England Slept* (1940), became a best-seller because his father bought up copies by the thousands. The wartime heroism Kennedy displayed in the South Pacific was elevated to mythical proportions with the timely assistance of a laudatory *Reader's Digest* article that became a staple of his early political campaigns. His Pulitzer Prize–winning book *Profiles in Courage* was a

largely ghostwritten project, and the award itself came through the intervention of a newspaperman, Arthur Krock of the *New York Times*, who was close to Kennedy's father.[21]

None of these contrivances was different from the behavior of other presidential hopefuls in individual cases of their own, but Kennedy permitted these promotional devices to occur on his behalf with little sense of shame or embarrassment. He cultivated a wry detachment from all his father did, but he was quite willing to profit from the political rewards of these manipulations. In many respects, John F. Kennedy was not so much made the president, in Theodore H. White's phrase, as marketed as one. With Kennedy, the culture of celebrity, which had been an element on the fringes of the White House for most of the century, became a central element in how the president was to be portrayed.

Since stardom had raised Jack Kennedy to the White House, it was natural to continue these successful practices once he had taken the oath of office. From the new president's fragile medical condition to his sexual adventurism, these aspects of his life and character were carefully kept under wraps and out of the public gaze. Instead, Kennedy and his wife contrived occasions where their youth and vitality conveyed an aura of sophistication and good taste. With the impact of network television at its postwar height, a telegenic president and First Lady gave the nation its first true presidential glamour couple.

Because of the brevity of his term and the political stalemate that he faced, Kennedy did not have to ask the American people for any of the real sacrifices he had alluded to in his inaugural address. With prosperity returning and the boom of the 1960s getting under way, there was a rising tide that lifted his administration. Only toward the end of 1963 did the president address such issues as civil rights, where political capital would have to be expended and the authority of his office exercised. For the most part, Kennedy's time in office, even with the Cuban Missile Crisis and the developing problem in Vietnam, was a period when the modern presidency seemed to have mastered the demands of foreign and domestic affairs.

The assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas on 22 November 1963 marked a significant transformation in the history of the office that went well beyond the traumatic transfer of power to Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. The shock of Kennedy's death revealed the fragility of the institution and the social continuity it provided to the nation. The inability of the Warren Com-

mission, despite the plausibility of its conclusions, to persuade the country of the motive behind the president's death and the identity of his assassin fueled conspiracy theories that persisted four decades after the event. Meanwhile, the pain of the Vietnam War and Johnson's style as president would accelerate the process of doubting the value of modern presidents as powerful leaders of the nation.

The legend of John F. Kennedy as a president who would have avoided the Vietnam quagmire and forestalled the domestic upheavals of the 1960s, had he lived to win and serve a second term, proved a compelling tale. That it probably masked a more sober alternative of involvement in Southeast Asia and revelations of Kennedy's personal lapses did not detract from its force as a social mythology. For both of Kennedy's immediate successors, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon, the ghost of John F. Kennedy cast a shadow over their records and the development of the modern presidency.

With the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, the steady accretion of presidential power that had commenced at the turn of the century reached a turning point. As the Johnson administration became more enmeshed in Vietnam while simultaneously seeking social reform through the Great Society at home, voices on both ends of the political spectrum advanced critiques of presidential authority. What had seemed on the whole a healthy process of providing presidents with the means to meet the challenges of the postwar world was reappraised, and those means were seen as elements in an imperial presidency that overreached its constitutional and moral limits.

Such a result seemed unlikely in the immediate aftermath of Kennedy's death, when Lyndon Johnson grasped the power of the presidency with seemingly sure hands. The fifty-five-year-old Texan calmed a traumatized nation and emphasized that his administration would continue to follow Kennedy's policies. Indeed, it appeared that the former Senate majority leader might prove more adept than Kennedy had been in persuading Congress to adopt a tax cut bill and to pass legislation on civil rights. As an avowed heir of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Johnson was poised to enact the agenda of the post–New Deal that had been stalemated in Congress for a generation.[22]

Johnson himself came to the presidency rich in Washington experience and a lifetime of observing the occupants of the White House from Herbert Hoover on. He had overseen the National Youth Administration in Texas for a year and a half in the mid-1930s, but his recent experience had been in run-

ning his Senate staff. On Capitol Hill, he was notorious as a whimsical taskmaster, vituperative and bullying one moment and contrite and conciliatory the next. Managing the presidency and a White House staff of more than four hundred members would be a challenge for a driven man who relished such demands. Johnson was also anxious to establish himself as a great president, perhaps even outdoing his beloved Franklin D. Roosevelt.[23]

His first instinct was to stress the links between himself and Kennedy, even though his three years as vice president had been painful ones for the proud Johnson. "I think Kennedy thought I was autocratic, bossy, self-centered," Johnson recalled in 1969. The new president kept in place Kennedy's cabinet but gradually replaced the White House staff with people he believed he could trust. Throughout his presidency, he craved orderly decision making and smooth, efficient processing of presidential choices. He spent a great deal of his time in pursuit of that elusive goal. At various times, Bill Moyers, Robert Kintner, and Marvin Watson operated as a kind of de facto White House chief of staff, but in reality Johnson served in that post himself for most of his presidency.[24]

Johnson's management style combined tension, coercion, and blandishments. Rarely reflective himself, he discouraged careful deliberations about alternatives and emphasized initiative and self-starting among his advisers. He often emulated Franklin D. Roosevelt in setting two or three aides to deal with the same issue, in what one of the staffers called a "bear pit technique." In that sense, Johnson, like Kennedy, followed the Democratic method of using rival generalists rather than relying on Eisenhower's system of aides with well-defined areas of responsibility.[25]

The new president, however, was incapable of creating procedures and then letting the staff operate on their own. A lifetime of micromanaging the actions of his aides and the details of legislation disposed Johnson to believe that he knew more and could do better than most of the people who worked for him. He was probably correct that he could do their jobs better, but he could not simultaneously do all those tasks more successfully than all of his staffers could. The impulse to pick up the telephone and cut through the red tape was one he rarely resisted. Often his intervention led to impressive results. On other occasions, it simply stirred up confusion and muddied the waters. Even someone with Johnson's prodigious energies could not master every detail of how his government functioned on a daily basis.[26]

One illustration of Johnson's obsession with the workings of his administration and his desire to control information was the use of the taping system in the White House to an even greater degree than Eisenhower and Kennedy had used it. Sensitive to his place in history, Johnson had been having aides make shorthand accounts of his telephone conversations since the early 1950s. Once he became president, he expanded the dictaphone recording system in the White House to include his bedroom, Camp David, and the LBJ Ranch in Texas. He insisted that immediate transcripts be made, and he often employed the record of a previous conversation when talking to a person he wished to influence.[27]

The results of the tape are riveting. They provide a record of Lyndon Johnson in action, cajoling, bullying, and persuading. For historians they are a treasure trove of data about the volcanic president at work. Although some people in Washington sensed that Johnson must be making a record of his conversations at the time, the existence of the taping system was not generally known during his presidency. He did disclose its operation to Richard Nixon in November 1968. Nixon resolved to have it removed and did not intend at the outset of his administration to use such a system for himself. Johnson's taping venture attested to the extent to which some modern presidents wielded all the tools of technology to exert control over their working environment and the political system.[28]

In contrast to Johnson's intense and often disorganized approach to managing his staff was his wife's orderly and innovative style as First Lady. Lady Bird Johnson brought in Elizabeth "Liz" Carpenter as staff director and press secretary. This appointment became the first step toward a genuine staffing structure for a president's wife. Subsequent additions to the First Lady's operation included aides to interact with Congress, to link with outside pressure groups, and to manage the media as a means of furthering the goals of her campaign to improve the environment. The emergence of a small bureaucracy, paralleling that of the president, to sustain the work of the First Lady was an important institutional contribution of the Johnson White House.[29]

Johnson was concerned with his own popularity as it affected his ability to lead, so he installed a pollster inside the White House to monitor the surveys that came in from Lou Harris and Johnson's favorite, Oliver Quayle. When the polls were favorable, the president flaunted them. After the Vietnam War produced discouraging numbers, the White House put out infor-

mation questioning the accuracy of the polls themselves. One aide drafted ghostwritten letters for others to write, raising issues about how the surveys were taken. More than any other president before him, Johnson wove polling into the daily operation of the presidency.[30]

Like Kennedy, Johnson also turned to the Internal Revenue Service to monitor and to discomfit political enemies. The number of White House requests for checks on tax returns went up significantly during Johnson's presidency. Dissenters from the war in Vietnam had their returns targeted. The radical magazine *Ramparts* came under scrutiny when it exposed links between the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Student Association. Yet Johnson's use of the IRS seems to have been more spasmodic than systematic in its approach. The precedent he set would impress Richard Nixon.[31]

Lyndon Johnson had risen to the presidency through the tangled world of Texas Democratic politics, and he brought great strengths and corresponding weaknesses to the Oval Office. On the positive side, he had amassed an unrivaled knowledge of how Washington operated. Though never bookish or a great reader, he had assembled through experience and the process of passing legislation for two decades a formidable grasp of the workings of Congress, bureaucratic agencies, and Washington politics. Probably no modern president better understood the legislative process and how to manipulate it. One-on-one, Johnson had impressive powers of persuasion, as his recently released taped telephone conversations make clear.

But with his strengths came accompanying weaknesses. Having mastered the one-party setting of Texas, Johnson never really understood the national Democrats and, more important, their Republican opponents. He thus believed that partisan differences were somewhat illusory and could readily be compromised in search of a bipartisan consensus. He did not devote much time to the internal structure of his party, and he shifted the fund-raising emphasis to wealthy donors beholden to the president for access and favors. In the process, the grass roots of the Democrats withered. He did not regard partisan politics as an ongoing process in the way that the Kennedy White House had done.[32]

An even greater personal failing was Johnson's lifelong tendency for exaggeration and deceit, even when those two qualities were not required to achieve a cherished result. A poor public speaker, he did even less well on

Few presidents have followed television coverage with more attention than Lyndon Johnson. He had three sets in the Oval Office so he could monitor the networks. In the end, few presidents have been more inept than Johnson in dealing with the television medium. (Photograph by Yoichi Okamoto, courtesy of the Lyndon B. Johnson Library.)

television. Combined with his distrust of reporters and the news media in general, these drawbacks made it uncomfortable for him to deal either with criticism or sustained political difficulties. Johnson had the potential to be a great president, but the downside of his personality left open the possibility of even more enduring failures as well.

His relationship with the media was one area where Johnson was never at ease as president. He had grown up with the compliant, amateurish reporters of the major Texas newspapers, who did the bidding of their conservative publishers. In his years in the House and especially as majority leader of the Senate, he had cultivated Capitol Hill scribes such as William S. White, who sang his praises and rarely posed hard questions. Although Johnson had extensive and lucrative radio and television holdings in Texas, he never grasped how video was reshaping the way politicians had to present themselves to the public. He remained resolutely old-fashioned in the way he gave speeches and approached the television camera.[33]

After the practiced grace of Jack Kennedy on television, Johnson seemed like a throwback to a preradio age. He was too gauche for the new medium and seemed awkward and out of touch. Never happy with criticism of his performances, he resisted efforts by aides to present him in less structured settings where he could be spontaneous and more appealing. Instead of adapting to conditions that he could not change, he continued to appear stiff and remote on television. As a result, his effectiveness as a communicator diminished just when his presidency most needed such talents.

In his other dealings with the press, Johnson mingled contempt and deceit that multiplied his troubles over the life of his administration. Believing that every reporter had a price, whether it was inside access or ego gratification, Johnson initially approached Washington journalists after 1963 as though they were courtesans or lackeys. He told his press secretary George Reedy in April 1964 that reporters were "not the masters of the White House. They're just the servants and we give them what we want to give them." It did not take long for the working press to discern how the new president really felt about their work.[34]

When reporters were critical, despite presidential blandishments, Johnson soured on the press corps in general. Thereafter, he delighted in inflicting petty slights, such as unscheduled trips on weekends or other surprise announcements that disrupted the personal lives of the journalists. When news of potential presidential appointments leaked out, as it usually did in Washington, the president would select other candidates just to show the press his independence. These tactics did not change the behavior of the media; they made Lyndon Johnson look foolish and small.[35]

Johnson's larger problem with the Fourth Estate was his lifelong habit of dissembling. In Texas that had not been a journalistic issue because reporters did not say much about it. Even in the Senate, Johnson's tendency to play fast and loose with the truth had not hurt him. On the national stage, however, where every presidential utterance was scrutinized, reporters noticed and wrote how Johnson had deceived them about the size of his first budget in 1964 and other matters. The phrase that became current was Johnson's "credibility gap," a takeoff on the missile gap of a few years earlier. It was still inappropriate to dub the president an outright liar, but Johnson would soon make that possible.[36]

In operating the White House, Johnson kept in place the Office of Congressional Relations under Larry O'Brien, and it worked with even greater efficiency than during the Kennedy years. During the first two years of his presidency, before the political climate darkened in the wake of Vietnam and the race issue, Johnson enjoyed a string of legislative triumphs that enacted Kennedy's program and then pushed forward to pass the major elements of his own Great Society agenda. The laws poured out in what seemed an unstoppable flow — education, conservation, solutions to urban problems, and health care — as Johnson drove himself to realize his dream of exceeding Roosevelt and the New Deal.[37]

But by fall 1965 the receptivity of lawmakers to the president's legislative entreaties faded. The worsening situation in Southeast Asia and the impact of the racial unrest in the major cities diminished enthusiasm for his priorities. The Democrats elected to the House in his landslide win over Barry Goldwater saw their reelection prospects for 1966 darken. Though Johnson was still able to get some measures through in 1967 and 1968, the legislative magic of 1964 and 1965 had vanished. His skill with Congress proved to be transient and beyond repair by procedural changes within the White House.[38]

Part of Johnson's problems with Congress arose because of his willingness to engage a major social issue that Eisenhower had dodged and that Kennedy had dealt with seriously only in 1963. As a southerner, Johnson knew that critics were waiting to see what he would do about civil rights. The new president, despite his defenses of segregation laws in the past in Congress and his crude language in private, had a greater sense of the inequities that African Americans confronted than any other modern president. Even at the risk of spending political capital or placing in danger the traditional Democratic hold on the South, Johnson intended that broad civil rights legislation would be one of the legacies of his administration.[39]

Although he never forgot political calculations in his handling of the civil rights issue and sometimes fell short of his best impulses, Johnson put the moral authority of the White House behind black aspirations as no president before or since had done. The legislation of his era — the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 — attested to his commitment. So too did his appointment of blacks to the cabinet and other agencies as well as the nomination of Thurgood Marshall to the Su-

preme Court. Dedication to social justice has not been one of the hallmarks of the modern presidency, but that quality sets Lyndon Johnson apart from other chief executives after 1952.

The central issue of Johnson's performance in the White House, however, was the Vietnam War. On that conflict, Johnson rested the fate of his presidency and his historical reputation. Yet from the outset of his involvement with the problem, the president refused to face the true dimensions of the American presence in Southeast Asia. It was a dilemma to be managed and deferred so that his political position would not be threatened. He dodged the bullet through much of 1964 and then found himself enmeshed in the issue as his second term began in early 1965.[40]

The war did not interrupt Johnson's progress toward election in his own right in November 1964. Faced with the challenge from the embodiment of the new conservative spirit within the Republican party, Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona, Johnson was able to assemble the resources available to an incumbent president to defeat his outmatched rival in a landslide. In the way he handled the war during the contest, Johnson laid the groundwork for troubles to come.[41]

In the Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964, Johnson parlayed an ambiguous military encounter with North Vietnamese naval forces into an attack on the United States that convinced Congress to grant him virtually unlimited powers to repulse aggression in Southeast Asia. But the president and the military could not prevent all the facts of these muddled engagements from coming out some years later. When they did so, the revelations inflicted serious wounds on Johnson's political integrity and undercut his rationale for the war itself.

Ardent in his desire to achieve a blowout victory over Goldwater, Johnson raised the rhetorical stakes by promising neither an escalation nor a pullout from South Vietnam, once he was elected in his own right. As he put it on the campaign trail, stopping Southeast Asia from becoming Communist did not necessarily involve ordering "American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." Johnson qualified his remarks with comments about not pulling out of the region, either, and he no doubt assumed that the campaign language would serve its temporary purpose and then be filed away as a dead issue. After all, as one young man of draft age at that time recalled, "Re-

publican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater would send us to Vietnam, not Johnson."[42]

Television with its half hour of nightly news raised these promises above the level of previous campaign oratory and transformed them into solemn pledges to be broken at a president's peril. Johnson knew that contingency plans were going forward to intensify the war in Vietnam, but he could not tell that to the voters, lest he be seen as an advocate of war in the way his campaign operatives were depicting Goldwater. But the capacity of presidents to say one thing in public and do another in private was diminishing in ways that Johnson did not comprehend. The president relied on the mystique of his office and the people's faith in their leaders, but after Kennedy's death that too had begun to slip away.

So when Johnson began to bomb North Vietnam and introduce greater numbers of ground troops into South Vietnam in 1965, he delivered a telling blow to the political system of the United States itself and to the presidency in particular. Disguise it as he might with references to the commitments of earlier presidents to Southeast Asia, he confronted the American people with the spectacle of a president who had said one thing and then done another. The more he attempted to justify his course in televised speeches, the more inauthentic he came to appear.

Johnson was in a tough predicament. He believed with good reason that if he withdrew from South Vietnam the Republicans would raise the charge that he and his party were soft on Communism. That is why he had said at the outset of his presidency that he did not want South Vietnam "to go the way China went." At the same time, he knew that a war in Asia would frustrate his plans for domestic reform. He was also aware, as he told friends in 1964 and 1965, that he did not see how a war in Southeast Asia could be won. "A man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere," he said to Senator Richard Russell on 6 March 1965. "But there ain't no daylight in Vietnam. There's not a bit." Yet he did not feel secure enough to share his doubts with the American people. In a fateful set of decisions, the president hoped to be able to apply just enough military force to produce a negotiated settlement without becoming enmeshed in a quagmire in South Vietnam.[43]

These aims and the political finesse that would be required to accomplish them were beyond Johnson's prodigious talents as president. His background in Texas politics had not prepared him to communicate with the national

electorate. Moreover, he suffered in comparison to John F. Kennedy as a performer, but Johnson's problems were more pervasive than that drawback. In Texas, he had been able to get away with a mixture of pork barrel politics, disguised appeals to racial prejudice, and a modicum of anticommunism. He had never been required to defend his positions from reasoned attacks, from either the right or the left. For all the talk of the persuasive power of "the Johnson treatment," he had not so much convinced as bullied the people whose votes he needed.

But presidential coercion no longer worked in the 1960s. Johnson had to offer a rational argument for involvement in Vietnam. In so doing, he marshaled the weapons of the modern presidency through position papers, timely leaks, and a series of speeches. Once these rituals had been carried out, then it was up to the American people to support "their president." As Johnson often said, the nation has only one president at a time.

But for the first time in the history of the twentieth-century presidency, the assurances from the White House had to compete with images of the faraway war on television, where the fighting was not going as well as the Pentagon and the White House claimed. The administration was not used to a state of affairs that called into question the words of its spokesmen. In World War II and Korea, the reporters had supported the war effort, and the White House had accepted the presence of the press as a fact of life. Future presidencies would be less accommodating toward the media.

As the war in Vietnam became more bloody and stalemated, Johnson's domestic political base frayed under the pressure of dissent from the left among Democrats and increasing unhappiness among white voters on the right with the perceived consequences of the civil rights revolution. The urban riots of the mid-1960s and the long hot summers that they brought in their wake convinced many Americans that the Johnson White House had carried its War on Poverty and social programs too far. Republican arguments against big government proved politically powerful as the GOP made substantial gains in the 1966 congressional elections.

The last two years of Johnson's administration saw the power and the prestige of the presidency dwindle under a repeated series of shocks. The White House escalated the war in Vietnam through 1967, and the military was making plans to use even more troops the following year. As domestic dissent over these policies mounted, Johnson found himself more and more a prisoner in

the Executive Mansion, much as Woodrow Wilson had been nearly fifty years earlier during his illness. The ability of the president to move about the country in safety was much reduced. Only military bases offered secure venues for his appearances. The reach of the modern presidency remained long in terms of affecting the lives of Americans, but for the occupant of the White House the capacity to persuade his fellow citizens to follow unpopular policies had shrunk into a kind of presidential impotence.

By early 1968, the Tet Offensive against American and South Vietnamese forces convinced most Americans that the war in Asia could not be won on terms the nation could accept. Johnson's renomination by the Democratic party faced growing challenges from Senators Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota and Robert Kennedy of New York. With his political support collapsing and uncertain about his own health over another four years in office, Johnson announced in a nationwide television address on 31 March 1968 that he would not be a candidate for his party's nomination.[44]

The decision proved a fateful one in the evolution of the modern presidency. Harry S. Truman sixteen years earlier had been an unlikely candidate for what would have been almost a third full term when he announced his retirement in March 1952. Johnson, on the other hand, had been in the presidency a little more than four years and was widely presumed to have been seeking reelection when 1968 opened. His announcement meant that the inherent advantages of incumbency were not enough to protect a president from the effects of failed policies and pervasive popular discontent with him personally. Winning the presidency was thus a mixed achievement for a politician. It might secure the winner a place in history, but it could also provide a ticket to oblivion, even with all the imperial trappings of the office.

Lyndon Johnson's administration had thus shattered the mystique of the imperial presidency and made the position less imposing and more vulnerable. The mistakes he had made, other presidents had made before him. But Johnson's attempt to wage war abroad and to pursue social reform at home at the same time put a premium on a deft mastery of national politics that the Texan simply did not possess. In the process he wounded the institution of the presidency for more than a generation. Once skepticism about the legitimacy of the modern presidency was introduced into the American political system, it proved impossible to restore the credibility that had once attached to the office.

Johnson's successor, Richard M. Nixon, inherited the problems that his predecessor could not solve. Like Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953, Nixon had a chance to be a Republican peacemaker who ended war and restored a semblance of domestic peace. Instead, he approached the presidency as an extension of a partisan campaign, and the crimes of his administration deepened the wounds of the modern presidency in the 1960s.