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King, Johnson, and the Terrible, Glorious Thirty-first Day of March

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his last Sunday sermon on March 31, 1968, at Washington's still-uncompleted National Cathedral. Some three thousand people jammed the cavernous sanctuary to hear him; another thousand listened on speakers set up outside and in a room at the nearby St. Albans School.[1]

The sermon, one of the greatest of his career, centered around the upcoming Poor People's Campaign, in which hundreds would camp on the Mall and carry out demonstrations around the capital. They would come from around the country, many by mule train, a host of Americans of all types—black, white, Hispanic, Native American, coming from the South, Appalachia, and the Southwest. For King, this was to be the apotheosis of his lifelong activism: not just civil rights, but human rights, the right to a decent living, the right from fear and want. It was, he said, the least a country as rich as his could do for its downtrodden.

Like Rip Van Winkle, King told his audience, America risked "sleeping through a revolution." His voice booming over the loudspeakers, King said, "There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today. In a sense it is a

triple revolution: that is, a technological revolution, with the impact of automation and cybernation; then there is a revolution in weaponry, with the emergence of atomic and nuclear weapons of warfare; then there is a human rights revolution, with the freedom explosion that is taking place all over the world."

Then, dipping into one of his favorite Gospel parables—that of Dives, a wealthy man, and Lazarus, a beggar who sat outside his door—King explained that Dives went to hell not because he was rich but because he refused to help where he could. So, too, he said, would the United States be damned if in its abundance it refused to help those in need, both at home and abroad. "There is nothing new about poverty," he said. "What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will."[2]

The question of will was one King had confronted often in recent months. The past few years had not been kind to the civil rights leader. Since his success at Selma and the resulting passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, King had been trying to broaden the scope of his movement, both in its reach—out west, up north—and scope—taking on housing discrimination, poverty, and the war. But the public, the media, and the political establishment increasingly saw him in a negative light, a has-been who achieved great victories earlier in the decade but who had no answers for the new issues of the day. Even Walter Fauntroy, his loyal Washington representative, called King a "spent force." That previous fall his literary agent had been unable to find a single magazine to excerpt his latest book.[3]

King had been gradually losing support since 1965, but his real slide in the public's eye began on April 4, 1967, when he delivered a scathing critique of the Vietnam War at New York's Riverside Church. King had never addressed the war publicly before. Why now? Because, he told the overflow crowd of thousands, whenever he went into the streets to try to tamp down riots and urban violence, people asked, "What about Vietnam?" If violence is wrong, why is America overseas killing thousands, to no clear end? "Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government." [4] The audience erupted in applause.

But King's reception beyond the Upper West Side was not so positive. The speech was almost universally panned. Johnson's staff immediately saw it as a thinly veiled attack on the president. John Roche, Johnson's academic liaison, told the president in a memo that King, "who is inordinately ambitious and quite stupid (a bad combination) . . . is painting himself into a corner with a bunch of losers."[5] King caught flak from Jewish war veterans (who saw his extreme pacifism as an implicit criticism of World War II), the *Washington Post* editorial board, and thousands of letter-writing Americans. Johnson went after King with a vengeance, at one point even ordering the Internal Revenue Service to investigate his tax returns.[6]

The widespread condemnation sent King into a deep funk, one compounded by the massive riots in Newark and Detroit that summer. On Labor Day weekend he gave the keynote speech at a gathering of New Left groups, the Conference for a New Politics, in Chicago; he was shouted down by black radicals crying, "Kill whitey!"[7] As he told two of his advisers, "There were dark days before, but this is the darkest."[8]

King was also in the midst of a personal, intellectual change. He had always seen economic and social justice as necessary counterparts to racial justice, but between 1955 and 1965 his activism had focused on the last of the three. The Watts riots and a summer spent organizing in Chicago made him reassess. In May 1967, he told workers in New York City that the movement needed a second phase, an effort to change not just racial laws, but the unjust allocation of national resources that upheld poverty and economic division. The achievements of the civil rights era were necessary and remarkable, but, he conceded, they did little for lower-class blacks, in the South and elsewhere. If anything, he said in January 1968, "The plight of the Negro poor, the masses of Negroes, has worsened over the last few years."[9]

King soon realized he needed a new project, a way to fuse the successful strategies of his southern civil rights efforts with his new emphasis on poverty and the war. And, over the course of the fall and early winter, he hit on a plan: the Poor People's Campaign.

First conceived of by Robert Kennedy and given shape by activist Marian Wright, the campaign would be a latter-day Bonus Army, bringing hundreds of poor Americans of all races and regions to the capital, where they would camp on the Mall and conduct sit-ins on Capitol Hill. Wright first presented the plan to King at a September 1967

Southern Christian Leadership Conference meeting in rural Virginia, but the bulk of the planning took place during a five-day retreat in Frogmore, South Carolina, that winter.[10] To dramatize the event, which was scheduled for mid-April, participants would converge on the capital by foot and mule train. Once there, they would build Resurrection City, a massive shantytown on the Mall, positioned with the national monuments in the background.

The mere presence of so many poor people in Washington would be disruptive, they realized. Andrew Young, one of King's closest advisers, imagined "a thousand people in need of health and medical attention sitting around District hospitals."[11] Such aggressive posturing made others in the SCLC to blanch; as executive director William Rutherford recounted, "Almost no one on the staff thought that the next priority, the next major movement, should be focused on poor people or the question of poverty in America."[12]

The truth was, no one, not even King, knew what to expect once everyone arrived in the city. It was one thing to organize a march. But what to do with hundreds of desperately poor people, so far from home? How do you feed them? How do you keep them engaged—and calm? King promised to maintain peace, and he worked tirelessly that winter to bring militants such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown onto his side.

But he didn't help matters by making predictions—which sounded like veiled threats—about what would happen if no federal action came of the Poor People's Campaign. "We are not coming to Washington to engage in any histrionic action," he said days before he was killed, "nor are we coming to tear up Washington. I don't like to predict violence, but if nothing is done between now and June to raise ghetto hope, I feel this summer will not only be as bad, but worse than last year."[13]

It didn't really matter what King said, though. Fear of the campaign was rampant among the public, the media, and Congress. As one op-ed writer put it in the *Washington Evening Star*, "There is no point in blinding ourselves to the obvious: Martin Luther King's plans for massive demonstrations and civil disobedience in Washington will create conditions that could lead to a tragic riot."[14]

Already agitated by the past summer's riots and afraid of a repeat, or worse, in 1968, the federal government looked at the Poor People's Campaign from inside a bunker. Congress held hearings.

The D.C. Police Department developed extensive antiriot plans. Hotline phones, linked to the police, were installed in Senate offices. And the FBI deployed a massive effort to subvert the entire project, going so far as to plant stories among southern blacks that the SCLC would bring them to Washington and then refuse to take them home.[15] But it didn't work—by March 1968, hundreds were getting ready to move on the capital.

In early 1968, though, events transpired that would fatefully divert King from his planning. On February 12 thousands of city garbage workers went on strike in Memphis, calling for higher wages and better working conditions; pay rates had stagnated for years, and two workers had recently been killed by a malfunctioning garbage compactor.

Memphis is a city of the South, but it is somehow misplaced within it. Though Tennessee had relatively few blacks in 1968, they made up 40 percent of Memphis's citizenry. While the city had a strong, educated black middle class, 58 percent of its black population was poor, 10 percent higher than the national average and four times the rate for the city's whites.[16] And though Tennessee was not a Deep South state, in its culture and politics Memphis was all but an extension of Mississippi—it is said that the Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel. And Memphis mixed the worst of northern and southern racism: Legal segregation was firmly established, and where it wasn't, a thick layer of housing and workplace discrimination kept blacks down. Whites wistfully called it Bluff City; many blacks called it an urban plantation.

In the 1960s, Memphis was run by Henry Loeb, a patrician Memphian who in 1967 won 90 percent of the white vote on a platform mixing law and order and urban pride. Loeb's tall, thin frame and upper-class education (Brown) gave him the air of a minor European nobleman, and whites loved him. But he was despised by the city's blacks, who saw him as an obstinate bigot. Predictably, Loeb played precisely that part in the strike, refusing to even recognize the strikers and denying any possibility of negotiations. As he told its leaders at their first meeting, "This is not New York. Nobody can break the law. You are putting my back up against the wall, and I am not going to budge."[17] With the solid backing of the city's white business

community, Loeb figured that he could wait out the protesters. With the sanitary workers on strike, the city slowly filled with the aroma of sautéing garbage, made worse by the rising temperatures of an early, muggy spring.

Fortunately for the workers, the strike drew national union support, along with the backing of major civil rights groups. Organizers and supporters flocked to the town, and the strike soon became a national news story. The *New York Times* called it "the current major civil rights confrontation in the nation."[18]

The strike proved irresistible to King. It was, in part, a must-do for the embattled civil rights leader—how could he afford *not* to be involved in the civil rights issue of the year, especially if it were to eclipse his own plans? Plus, it had been almost three years since the Selma–Montgomery march, one of the last unalloyed expressions of nonviolent mass resistance by blacks to receive national attention. But more important was the precise nature of the campaign. Melding civil rights and labor rights, it struck to the core of his evolving message: the need to empower workers and push back against economic injustice. Going against the express wishes of his advisers, who wanted him to focus on the Poor People's Campaign, King decided to visit the city.

His first trip to Memphis came on March 18, when he spoke to an overcapacity crowd of between nine thousand and fifteen thousand at Mason Temple. For the first time in months, thousands had come to hear him, not mock him. King spoke for more than an hour, almost completely extemporaneously. "You are here tonight to demand that Memphis will do something about the conditions that our brothers face as they work day in and day out for the well-being of the total community," he told the cheering audience. Now, he concluded, "the thing for you to do is stay together, and say to everybody in this community that you are going to stick it out to the end until every demand is met, and that you are gonna say, 'We ain't gonna let nobody turn us around.'"[19]

The speech left him drained. "Martin was visually shaken by all this, for this kind of support was unprecedented in the Movement," recalled James Lawson, a Nashville civil rights and labor activist who was helping lead the strike. "No one had ever been able to get these numbers out before."[20] But the reception gave King momentum. He quickly put forth a proposal: he would come back to Memphis and

lead a march to support the strikers. Though he immediately drew criticism from whites and even some blacks for inserting himself, uninvited, into a local issue, the strike leaders were overjoyed—King's national prominence, sullied as it was, would give newfound speed to a movement that until then was at a stalemate with the city's power structure. It worked, too: as soon as King announced his plan, white business leaders began to openly question whether Loeb's intransigence was the best strategy.

Early on March 28, thousands began to gather at Clayborn Temple downtown, waiting for King to arrive at 10:00 A.M. But his plane was delayed, and he didn't arrive until 10:30. By then the crowd was growing restless; the air was humid, and it was growing hotter.

They began marching. Signs began appearing in the crowd reading LOEB EAT SHIT. As they reached Main Street, those in front—King, Young, Lawson—began to hear commotion behind them. Several militant groups, along with a klatch of assorted hangers-on, had decided to embarrass King by turning the march into a riot. They were breaking windows, looting, and harassing onlookers.

His aides quickly whisked King away. It didn't take long for the police, already standing by in riot gear, to move in. What followed was several hours of mayhem: police, who had stood by while the strikers turned their city into an open-air garbage dump, wielded their batons and tear gas with glee. Marchers who sought refuge in Clayborn Temple were ordered out, and as they left the building they were beaten by waiting cops. The sole fatality, sixteen-year-old Larry Payne, was shotgunned in the stomach by a cop who claimed he was wielding a knife, though witnesses said the boy had both hands raised. "Instead of King's nonviolent 'dress rehearsal' for the Poor People's Campaign," historian Michael Honey wrote, "the Memphis march left behind a wasteland."[21]

King was hardly to blame, but that was not the way the regional press—goaded by the FBI—spun things. The Bureau sent anonymous missives to its press contacts the next day, elements of which soon appeared in editorials in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* and the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. The St. Louis paper predicted that the Memphis riot was a "prelude to a massive bloodbath" in Washington, while the *Commercial Appeal* labeled King a "hypocrite."[22] But in other cases it didn't take the FBI's prodding—the *New York Times* called on King to

cancel the Poor People's Campaign in Memphis's wake. King headed back to Washington to give his Sunday sermon. Forlorn, he declared the Poor People's Campaign "doomed."[23]

It was the evening of March 31, the night before King's final Sunday sermon, and Lyndon Johnson had gathered his inner circle at the White House. For weeks the president had been planning a national address on the war and taxes, and he was having his closest staff members write the final draft. It would, among other things, announce a unilateral bombing halt over most of North Vietnam, along with a request for peace negotiations. Though the entire country was planning to watch the address, its precise contents were a secret.

Beset by an increasingly conservative Congress, a debilitating war abroad, and growing dissent at home, Johnson had been whittled to a nub. The once-proud Texan who towered over his senatorial colleagues now walked stoop-shouldered through Washington. To make things worse, he was entering a presidential race with low approval numbers and a pair of intraparty challenges from Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. When journalist Theodore White visited the president in late March, he found him "exhausted. His eyes, behind the gold-rimmed eyeglasses, were not only nested in lines and wrinkles, but pouched in sockets blue with a permanent weariness."[24]

After banging out the portions on Vietnam and a related section on domestic policy, Johnson's chief counsel and close adviser Harry McPherson offered to write up a quick wrap-up.

"Don't worry," the president said. "I may have a little ending of my own." Without telling any of his staff, he then called his old speechwriter Horace Busby, now retired, at his Virginia home and told him to come in the next morning.[25]

Johnson slept poorly that night. Lady Bird, his wife, recalled that he tossed and turned, moaning. He was up at seven, against his wife's urging, to greet their daughter Lynda, who was arriving on a red-eye flight from California, where she had gone to see her new husband, Charles Robb, off to Vietnam. Her parents met her at the entrance to the Diplomatic Reception Room. "She looked like a ghost," Lady Bird recalled. "She'd had a sedative on the plane, slept a little, not

much—and it was, I think, partly emotion and partly the sedative that made her look so detached, like a wraith from another world."[26] The couple put her to bed, then went back to their own quarters. The president sagged in a chair, his body completely drained. Had he just sent his son-in-law off to die in a pointless war? "There was such pain in his eyes as I had not seen since his mother died," his wife said.[27]

That morning, March 31, the White House buzzed with the activity of two different efforts. Both revolved around that night's speech, but each was exclusive, even secretive, to the other. Johnson had Busby in the Treaty Room going over the end of the speech. Meanwhile, the president's foreign policy team flew around the offices preparing the press and the diplomatic community for the president's bombing halt. Later in the day Johnson, chain-drinking Cokes, huddled in the Yellow Room with national security adviser Walt Rostow, Ambassador-at-Large Averell Harriman, and Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, trying to telegraph to the USSR that the unilateral halt was for real.

The mood throughout the White House was tense. "We would meet in the West Hall by twos or threes, or all of us," recalled Lady Bird, "and look at each other helplessly, silent, or exploding with talk."[28]

Several hours before the speech, Johnson phoned McPherson. A fellow Texan, tall, laconic, bespectacled, McPherson had worked with Johnson in his Senate days before being called back to serve as chief counsel. But his real role was less well defined. He was a speechwriter, a domestic policy adviser, and a confidential sounding board.

Brilliant and loyal, McPherson could do anything the president asked, efficiently and quietly. Johnson had even once sent him, along with two black staffers, on a covert fact-finding mission to Harlem, where he interviewed cops, activists, and street preachers on the chances for civil unrest in the ghetto. Johnson devoured the resulting report. But McPherson was more than a lackey. According to Roche, he was one of the few men who could speak openly, even aggressively, with the president, "a guy who used to lay into Johnson, too. I mean he used to really sock it to him."[29]

Johnson asked McPherson what he thought of the speech. "It's pretty good," McPherson said.

"I've got an ending."

"So I've heard."

"What do you think?"

"I'm very sorry, Mr. President."

"Okay," Johnson replied. "So long, pardner."[30]

Otherwise, Johnson kept the conclusion secret until the last minute. Only at the last minute did he have his assistant Larry Temple call around to his cabinet members—he reached all but Secretary of State Dean Rusk—and let them know what was coming.

At 9:00 P.M. Johnson sat in his green leatherback chair in the Oval Office, facing a phalanx of television cameras. His family watched from the back of the room. Johnson exuded a calm rarely seen on his face of late, "a marvelous sort of repose overall," recalled Lady Bird.[31]

"Good evening, my fellow Americans: tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia," he began. "Tonight, I have ordered our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam, except in the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy buildup directly threatens Allied forward positions." He called on the Allies and the North Vietnamese to take the halt as an opening to talks, and accordingly to stop their own attacks and sit down to negotiations.

Then, after making a call for Congress to enact his proposed 10 percent tax surcharge, he changed the subject unexpectedly. "Throughout my entire public career," he said after a pause, "I have followed the personal philosophy that I am a free man, an American, a public servant, and a member of my party, in that order always and only." He had achieved great things, he said, his hands trembling slightly. But he had also become mired in partisanship, at precisely the time when America needed to be united and strong, at home and abroad.

"With America's sons in the fields far away," he said, looking down at his text, "with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the presidency of your country."

He paused again, then lifted his head. "Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president. But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong, a confident, and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honorable peace—and stands ready tonight to defend an honored cause—whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice

that duty may require. Thank you for listening. Good night and God bless all of you."[32]

Johnson's withdrawal from the race was long in coming. According to his press secretary, George Christian, he had been seriously weighing the decision since October,[33] and he had casually broached the subject with friends even earlier.[34] In January 1968 he had even had Busby, who had left the White House but still helped pen critical speeches, draft a withdrawal statement to slip into the State of the Union address, though he never read it.[35]

Nevertheless, it was clear to observers of the White House inside and out that Johnson was losing the verve that had driven him to early executive success. "Increasingly over the last two years," noted journalist Richard Rovere in the *New Yorker*, "the feeling had been growing that he had already retired, that he had taken himself out of the system, that he had been so seized by the martial spirit that he was no longer functioning as a vote-hungry, consensus-seeking American politician."[36] Nor, concluded the staff, was there much chance of things turning around before 1969. "I didn't see any room for improvement as long as he was in the White House," said McPherson. "And I thought that things were as awful as they could get."[37]

Befitting a man known for his vast internal contradictions, Johnson's reasons for withdrawing were complex and perhaps irreconcilable. Certainly he recognized that even with a great campaign team, he faced significant challenges in both the primaries and the general election. His ratings had plummeted after the Newark and Detroit riots of 1967, so low that at one point all six of his Republican challengers—even Pennsylvania governor William Scranton—were beating him in head-to-head matchups. [38] His health was a major concern; he had suffered a heart attack in 1955, and his doctors and wife feared he would not survive another. Too many Johnson family men had died early, and the president often spoke privately about wanting to spend time with his grandson on his Texas ranch before he died. And his staff was tired, too. "They are good men, but they are beyond asking the hard questions now," McPherson said.[39]

But looming over it all was the question of legacy. From the day in November 1963 when he was sworn in aboard *Air Force One*, Johnson

imagined himself a great legislative president, a true successor to Franklin Roosevelt, a man who would leave a record of great accomplishments in his wake and be remembered for them. And while he had achieved much already—Medicare, Medicaid, the War on Poverty, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act, to name a few of his accomplishments—Johnson still had much he wanted to do, and he feared that his unfinished domestic agenda and the shadow of a continuing war would doom him in history books. And history meant everything to Johnson. As he later told historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "If the American people don't love me, their descendants will."[40]

Johnson had nevertheless begun 1968 on a fast track. He came out with his legislative guns blazing at his State of the Union address, asking Congress to pass a raft of big-ticket items even as the mood of the nation was souring on Great Society activism. He called for, among many other things, a multinational oceanographic exploration program, expanded international aid, a $2.1 billion job training effort, and six million new low-income homes over the next ten years (though he got the biggest cheers for a proposed anticrime bill). "In January he was still willing to spend whatever capital he had left—and it was dwindling fast—to get his work done without waiting for the war to be over," his domestic policy adviser, Joseph Califano Jr., wrote in his memoirs. "Often, we put so many complex proposals out in a day that reporters were unable to write clearly about them."[41]

But events in Vietnam soon brought Johnson back to earth. Since late 1967, North Vietnamese forces had been laying siege to a Marine base at Khe Sanh, a plateau near the borders with Laos and North Vietnam. It drove Johnson to insomnia; he had the Pentagon build a sand-table model of the Khe Sanh area in the White House basement, and he would pace around it at odd hours, often in his bathrobe in the middle of the night, taking a break to read the latest news dispatches or pore over reconnaissance photos.[42]

Khe Sanh was just a prelude to what began on the evening of January 31, 1968, at the height of the Tet holiday. Tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas launched attacks on cities and bases across South Vietnam, locations once believed untouchable by the Communists. They overran the northern city of Hue and held it for twenty-five days. They even stormed

the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The offensive surprised General William Westmoreland and the U.S. forces in the country, and it sent a shock wave of disbelief through the White House. "People were far calmer in Saigon than they were in Washington," said General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[43]

If Johnson was losing some sleep over Khe Sanh, the Tet Offensive chased away any chance of a good night's rest. He had let himself believe earlier reports that the Viet Cong was demoralized and beaten back. Now he would wander the halls late at night, staring at the portraits of past presidents. Add to this the USS *Pueblo* incident—in which North Korea captured a U.S. naval intelligence ship in the Yellow Sea, imprisoning the crew—and the president had little good to look to on the international scene.

In the short term, Tet actually produced a patriotic boost in support for Johnson's prosecution of the war. But by early March, the public had again soured significantly. On February 27, Walter Cronkite, the nation's most respected television news voice, declared it "more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."[44] After watching the broadcast, Johnson said, "That's it. If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America."

Nor did it help that Johnson's blue-ribbon panel investigating the Detroit, Newark, and other recent riots—the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, nicknamed the Kerner Commission after its chair, Illinois governor Otto Kerner—had come out in early March with a devastating indictment of American race relations and an implicit attack on Johnson's social policies. In an introduction written largely by New York mayor John Lindsay, the commission famously announced, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal," and it laid the blame squarely on "white racism": "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." Federal efforts had done little to help, and they "often seem self-defeating and contradictory." The country needed to overhaul and massively expand its programs aimed at blacks and the inner-city poor, everything from job training and creation to community relations and police reform. "Only a commitment to national action on an unprecedented scale," its

authors announced, "can shape a future compatible with the historic ideals of American society."[45] By some estimates, that meant $26 billion a year, on top of the current social policy bill of $59 billion, a war raging in Vietnam, and a rapidly expanding federal budget deficit.[46]

The due date for the final report had initially been late spring, but the commission felt it sufficiently urgent to move up its release. That, combined with an accidental leak to the *Washington Post*, meant that the report hit the White House unawares.[47] And if Johnson and his staff had been hoping the report would come and go unnoticed, they were sadly disappointed: It sold a hundred thousand copies in three days.

The administration went into crisis mode. Many recommended that Johnson engage with the report and accept it as a positive contribution. They even wrote up a speech, never delivered, in which Johnson would incorporate the commission's ideas into his own new list of policy proposals.[48] "The more I think about it, the more I fear that a cold reception to the Kerner Report is bad policy for us," wrote McPherson in a memo to Califano. "Unless something like this is done—meeting the report squarely and affirmatively, rather than coldly or evasively—I think we will be in trouble."[49] But the president, feeling personally insulted by the reports' conclusions, declined even to meet with the commissioners, and his public statement was limited to a few bland assessments.[50]

Johnson may also have understood the political risks of allying himself with so incendiary a statement. It became instant fodder for law-and-order conservatives. Richard Nixon said it "has put undue emphasis on the idea that we are in effect a racist society," while Ronald Reagan lashed it for failing "to recognize the efforts that have been made by millions of right-thinking people in this country." Even Vice President Hubert Humphrey backed away from supporting it fully. And countless members of Congress, mayors, and police chiefs attacked it for its implication that law enforcement was a cause of, rather than a cure for, riots. Miami police chief Walter Headley Jr. spoke for many nationwide when he said, "They still seem to be using the police as whipping boys. . . . Why shouldn't police departments be stockpiling lethal weapons? Weapons are being stockpiled in Vietnam, and this is a war too."[51]

Beset by critics on both sides of the political spectrum, on issues both foreign and domestic, Johnson's approval rating had evaporated—six weeks after Tet began, he had dropped from 48 percent to 36 percent

in overall approval, and from 40 percent to a mere 26 percent on the war itself.[52]

Slowly, he began to realize that the only hope of saving his legacy—and perhaps even the very idea of an activist, liberal government—was for him to sacrifice his political career. It would be a political Hail Mary—withdrawal from the race would remove him from the partisan scene, giving him capital and the maneuverability necessary to pass his legislative agenda and move the war toward a peaceful end. "Abdication," wrote Doris Kearns Goodwin in her biography of Johnson, "was thus the last remaining way to restore control, to turn rout into dignity, collapse into order."[53]

The germ of Johnson's withdrawal statement might have been growing inside him for weeks, but he didn't bring up it up with his advisers (other than Busby) until a March 28 lunch in the White House Flower Garden with domestic policy adviser Joseph Califano and McPherson.[54] With protesters outside the White House gates shouting, "Hey, hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?," Johnson rattled off the reasons for withdrawing.[55] He was worried about his health. He wanted to spend time with his family. Most important, he said, was that his political capital was gone. "I've asked Congress for too much for too long, and they're tired of me," McPherson recalled him saying.[56]

His chief counsel reminded his boss that there was still a lot on his agenda, that there were still many important items that only he could get through. "He said, 'You've got it exactly backwards,'" McPherson said. "'I'm the only one who can't do these things. Bobby, Gene, Nixon, any one of them would get a honeymoon from Congress in their first year. But not me. Cuz I've been, I've asked Congress for too much for too long. And they're tired of me.'"

Before the pair could convince him otherwise, his secretary called him in for an appointment, leaving his two senior advisers sitting in the early spring sunlight, stunned.[57]

Johnson didn't even tell Vice President Hubert Humphrey until the morning of the 31st. After church, he had jumped over to Humphrey's apartment, just a few blocks away (vice presidents didn't take up residence at the Naval Observatory until 1974). Accompanied by presidential adviser Jim Jones, Johnson and Humphrey went into the den,

where he handed him the speech. After reading it, Humphrey, who was packing to go to Mexico that night, began crying. This meant he was now the likely establishment candidate, running against senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Johnson put his right forefinger to his lips. "Don't mention this to anyone until Jim calls you in Mexico tonight," he said. "But you'd better start now planning your campaign for president."[58]

That afternoon the president even sat down with his campaign advisers, including his manager and former North Carolina governor Terry Sanford, to talk about the upcoming Wisconsin primary. It must have been a convincing act. "After spending all day at the White House Terry Sanford left for the airport under the impression that he was the campaign manager," said Roche. "Not only that, I had already put an LBJ '68 bumper sticker on my car and I was wearing an LBJ '68 button. We were left with fifteen thousand of the goddamn things."[59]

When he finished his speech, Johnson quietly stood and hugged Linda and Luci. The pair cried softly. Lady Bird went over and hugged him, too. "Nobly done, darling," she said. Then they all went to the Mansion.[60] The White House was silent. "We were stunned," recalled McPherson.[61]

And then the phones began ringing. First one, then another, then a cavalcade. All night, friends close and estranged alike called with congratulations and approval.[62] In their bedroom, Johnson sat on his bed talking on one line, while Lady Bird stood across the room on another. In between calls he joked and laughed with the close friends and aides who had gathered upstairs.

The White House media exploded in activity, clamoring for a further statement. Lady Bird finally emerged. "We have done a lot," she told reporters. "There's a lot left to do in the remaining months; maybe this is the only way to get it done."[63]

Johnson was already plotting his new agenda. As his wife recalled, "It seemed to me Lyndon was going at an even faster pace than before he made known his decision Sunday."[64] Califano reported that his feelers on Capitol Hill showed a Congress now willing to work with the president on a wide range of issues, foreign and domestic—housing,

peace in Vietnam, new civil rights bills, conservation, education, all would be revisited and reinvigorated.

"His demeanor was that of a new man," Busby recalled. "His conversation began to quicken with talk of what could be achieved over the balance of the year. There was fresh excitement and an old bite in his tone as he declared, 'We're going to get this show on the road again.'"[65]