

Part I

PRE-PRESIDENTIAL YEARS

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Chapter One

THE CHANGING SOUTH

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Lyndon Johnson's contemporaries could not decide whether he was really a Southerner. Hubert Humphrey insisted that Johnson "did not consider himself a Southerner" while A. Willis Robertson said that he and other Southerners "called him Southern." Clinton Anderson commented that "while he was Democratic leader, Lyndon Johnson was as Southern as hominy grits." On the other hand, Stuart Alsop suggested that LBJ was a "Westerner at heart rather than a Southerner." William S. White avoided any definitive conclusion, reminding readers that the Texan came from a historically Confederate State while declaring that he had never heard LBJ speak nostalgically about the old South. Johnson himself did not help to clarify things in his memoir, *The Vantage Point* (1971). He explained that in "Stonewall and Johnson City I never was part of the Old Confederacy," yet, "that Southern heritage meant a great deal to me."

Left with such incongruous viewpoints, historians have drawn a wide range of conclusions about LBJ as Southerner. Ronnie Dugger, in *The Politician: From Frontier to Master of the Senate* (1980), placed Johnson at the crossroads of regions: "He was a wild Christian, a woman-ridden outlaw, complexly mixed from the day of his birth in the slave-owning whites' honor-ridden South, the Indian-fighting range riders' West, and the state that gloried in itself as if it was still a nation. . . And just here, in the rocky fracture of the one great American state that is both South and West, Lyndon Johnson received his being" (pp. 26–7). Paul Conkin, in *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon B. Johnson* (1986), drew a similar conclusion: "Born at the unclear boundaries of South and West, he [Johnson] never fully identified with either and, as political need dictated, alternatively claimed one or the other" (p. 7). In *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908–1960* (1991), Robert Dallek argued that LBJ, despite "Southern roots," was not a "professional Southerner" like Richard Russell, and his main contribution lay in his "nationalization of the South and the West" (pp. 7–8, 139, 380). Robert Caro, in *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (2002), by contrast, emphasized a twenty year period when Johnson had been "not merely a member of the Senate's Southern anti-civil rights bloc, but an active member . . . one of

the South's strategists" (p. xv). In *The White House Looks South* (2005), Bill Leuchtenberg analyzed a broad range of commentary on Johnson's Southernness to conclude that however hard LBJ tried to become a national politician, the Texan "could never altogether overcome his reputation as a sectionalist" (p. 332). And Randall Woods, in *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (2006), focused on Johnson's personal vision for the region, suggesting that LBJ was most Southern in his tireless advocacy for an economically, politically, and socially modern South (pp. 134–5).

Part of the problem in describing Johnson as a Southerner rests in static, reductionist definitions of the "South." Southern historians have provided a familiar checklist of essential regional characteristics. Ulrich Phillips in his 1928 *American Historical Review* article "The Central Theme of Southern History" identified the first and most essential of Southern traits, its preoccupation with race. Twelve Southerners in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) added the idea that agrarian traditions, besieged by industrialization and modernization, were fundamentally Southern. W. J. Cash in *The Mind of the South* (1941) mixed in religious bigotry, anti-intellectualism, and a history of bondage that set the South apart from the North and adrift from the national quest for equality and liberty. Sheldon Hackney in an article entitled "Southern Violence," for the *American Historical Review* (1969) and John Shelton Reed in his book *The Enduring South* (1972) aggregated and synthesized traits to conclude that the South's underlying characteristic was a regional sense of grievance and a particular "siege mentality" based on its experiences during Reconstruction. David Hackett Fischer's book *Albion's Seed* (1989) associated the South primarily with its Scotch Irish linguistic and cultural roots, while Ray Arsenault in "The Folklore of Southern Demagoguery," an article found in the book *Is There a Southern Political Tradition?* (1996), identified a unique Southern political style that played on the passions and prejudices of the region's people. And Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (1986) identified unique Southern constructions of honor and codes of violent behavior.

These attempts to describe the heart of the Southern identity, while enlightening, emphasize continuity over change. Yet as C. Vann Woodward reminded his readers in *The Burden of Southern History* (1968), the standard list of Southern characteristics, however accurate in a given period, "often changes markedly over the years, sometimes under one's very eyes" (pp. ix, 27–8). John Egerton in *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (1974) went as far as suggesting that the South over time was even losing its distinctiveness. More recently James C. Cobb's *Away Down South* (2005) argued that Southern identity was best explained not by a list of static traits but by the points at which those traits were challenged and changed. Recognizing continuity within change and the relativity of perception, Cobb maintained, was the key to understanding the South.

Johnson, like the South, was far from static. His and the region's identity shifted depending on active personal and political relationships. Along with many of his fellow Southerners, LBJ was sometimes parochial, demagogic, and preoccupied with race, while at other times he was nationalist, moderate, and progressive. He changed, and the South changed. Johnson biographers, as a whole, have described this ebb and flow while not always fully recognizing its significance. Five phases of LBJ's Southern identity emerge from these works – his ancestry and youth; his pre-political career; his time as a regional representative; his move to become a national leader; and his

presidency. Tracing biographers' treatments of Johnson's evolving identity as a Southerner through these phases reveals a South as dynamic as the man himself.

The facts of Johnson's upbringing and heritage have been repeated by historians without significant variation. Johnson was born and raised in Texas, a state of the old Confederacy. The Hill Country of his youth was agriculturally dependent and suffered the residual effects of slavery, Civil War, and Reconstruction. Johnson biographers agreed that he was most definitely Southern by the particular geographic and historic circumstances of his birth. LBJ's great-great-grandfather on his father's side was an Anglo-Celt immigrant, Georgia farmer, and slave owner. His father's grandfather was a slave holder in Alabama who migrated with his family to Texas the year Texas became a state. His father's father and uncles fought for the Confederacy, and his father inherited Populist political leanings. Johnson's mother's family originally came to North Carolina from Scotland. Her grandfather was a Baptist preacher and legislator in Alabama who migrated to Texas in the 1850s. Her father was a Confederate veteran. She attended Baylor University as a literature major and at one point even planned to make a career of writing novels about the Old South. LBJ married a Southerner as well. Lady Bird Johnson grew up in a Southern mansion on a cotton plantation near the border between Texas and Louisiana. Her family had deep roots in Alabama and boasted several Confederate veterans.

That Johnson spoke Southern, some historians have suggested, was indicative of his regional identity as well. As Kent Germany pointed out in a Miller Center article entitled "I'm Not Lying About That One': Manhood, LBJ, and the Politics of Speaking Southern" (2002), Johnson shared a common language with Southerners that reinforced his bond with regionalists throughout his life. LBJ and other Southerners talked about hunting, football, the weather, honor, manhood, politics, and even race in an idiosyncratic Southern way. Perhaps most tellingly, Robert Caro highlighted in *Means of Ascent* (1990), when Johnson wanted to, he had the "slow drawl of the South: when Lyndon Johnson said 'Negroes,' for example, it came out, despite all that speech coaches could do, as 'Nigroes,' close to 'niggers'" (p. xviii).

Yet several historians have pointed out that Johnson was never as fully Southern as blood, soil, and accent might suggest. His father had been something of a political rebel and had foresworn some of the more typical Southern routes to power, like acquiescing to the Ku Klux Klan. Nor was Johnson's hometown environment fully Southern in its racial makeup or attitudes. Ronnie Dugger wrote in *The Politician* (1980), Lyndon Johnson may have "absorbed the Southern heritage from his parents, but there was little in the daily life of the town to make him a racist" (p. 71). Dugger drew on comments Johnson himself made in *The Vantage Point* (1971): "There were no 'darkies' or plantations in the arid hill country where I grew up. I never sat on my parents' or grandparents' knees listening to nostalgic tales of the ante-bellum South." Being Southern gave him "a feeling of belonging and a sense of continuity," but he was embarrassed by the "certain parochial feelings that flared up defensively whenever Northerners described the South as 'a blot on our national conscience' or 'a stain on our country's democracy'" (p. 155). Several biographers, in addition, argued that the place and environment of Johnson's birth and youth made him western as much as Southern. Ronnie Dugger, Paul Conkin, and Randall Woods, among others, emphasized that Texas was at the crossroads of regions. The state was big enough and diverse enough to claim many cultural identities. And some historians deemphasized region as a critical

influence altogether. Johnson's Southern roots are certainly downplayed in Doris Kearns' *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (1976), while things Southern are conspicuously missing from Robert A. Caro's biography of Johnson's early years *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (1982). On the whole, the South as commonly conceived was certainly a part of Johnson's heritage and upbringing but proved only marginally useful to historians in identifying who he was.

Historians' discussions of Johnson's early career addressed endemic Southern problems, namely race, education, and poverty. Most agreed that Johnson did not easily fit the poor, anti-intellectual, racist Southern stereotype, but he nevertheless had to conform in particular ways to his time and place in a Southern setting. His teaching job in Cotulla marked the first test of his public decisions about racial prejudice and segregation. In his first job out of college, Johnson taught at a segregated Mexican-American grade school near the Mexican border. Robert Dallek in *Lone Star Rising* (1991) noted LBJ's compassion for his students amidst the poverty, prejudice, and illiteracy of Cotulla. Their wretched living conditions, Dallek wrote, struck a "sympathetic chord" in Johnson that inspired the Texan's desire to nourish their "little brown bodies," minds, and souls. Dallek's rendering implicitly contrasted Southern and non-Southern traits in Johnson. Johnson's whipping of Spanish students who dared speak English in class arguably smacked of a stereotypically Southern nativism, but Johnson's compassion for minorities and desire for their equal status in society did not (pp. 78–80). Other biographers examining Johnson's early career offer alternative arguments for balancing LBJ's Southern and non-Southern traits. Randall Woods in *LBJ* (2006) emphasized the political risk Johnson took on behalf of Mexican children. The larger Southern white population of Cotulla, Woods argued, considered LBJ's embracing of the latino community "dangerously subversive" (pp. 62–5). Robert Caro in *Master of the Senate* (2002), on the other hand, concluded that Johnson's "compassion" invariably took a back seat to "calculation." He argued that LBJ was more complicit than not in the segregationist system that kept minorities subservient. Johnson's experience teaching Mexican students, Caro maintained, was less a rebellion against Southern racial norms than racist paternalism (pp. 732–4).

LBJ's work with black minorities as director of Texas's National Youth Administration (NYA) offered historians additional points of debate regarding Johnson's Southern racial attitudes. Ronnie Dugger (1980) demonstrated that as NYA director, "Johnson began using his public power covertly on behalf of blacks." LBJ visited Negro colleges, offered surplus funds earmarked for white colleges to black colleges, and applied administrative savings to black needs (pp. 187–8). Randall Woods concluded that "if Johnson had had his preference, the Texas NYA would have been completely color-blind," but the author also added that "the state director realized there were limits." As Johnson put it to Chuck Corson, "the racial question during the last 100 years in Texas, has resolved itself into a definite system of mores and customs which cannot be upset overnight" (p. 113). Johnson's recognition of Southern political realities in part drove his reluctance to appoint a black member to the NYA state advisory board. Robert Dallek concluded that "it was clear to him [Johnson] that a reputation as a successful state director and all that would mean for his political future partly depended on satisfying the demands from Washington for action in behalf of blacks without touching off local racial antagonisms." Dallek (1991) acknowledged the idea that "Lyndon's position on blacks was purely expediency," but he added that while

the Texan's "Southern roots and an attitude common to his place and time moved him in private to speak of blacks as 'niggers' and describe them in official correspondence as 'negroes,' he was warmly disposed to giving disadvantaged blacks opportunities for education and employment which allowed them to help themselves" (pp. 137-9).

Biographers agreed that Johnson was at his most Southern in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Even though LBJ was a devoted New Dealer, Ronnie Dugger explained, Southern political expectations limited the Texan's ability to support legislation that posed an overt challenge to segregation. LBJ supported the minimum wage and farming legislation that helped his black and Mexican constituents, "but on legislation that could be recognized as pro-black, Johnson seemed to be just another Southern racist" (pp. 215-16). By the late 1940s and into the early 1950s, Dugger argued, Johnson's Southern conservatism intensified into "Red-baiting and reaction." In 1948 Johnson ran for the Senate on a ticket opposing communists, labor unions, and civil rights reform. Johnson "threw his Stetson into the crowd," Dugger wrote, "and then he condemned proposals for the equal opportunity laws he would later administer, stormed against civil rights bills he would later sign into law, blasted labor bosses he would later court, and pledged to fight the socialized medicine his medicare would later resemble" (pp. 307-17). Eric Goldman suggested in *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (1969) that while Johnson's political views on race and the economy were not fundamentally as extreme as many of his Southern colleagues, he publicly identified himself with Southerners. Goldman described Johnson's political style in these years as "Fergusonism" after the famed Texas politicians Ma and Pa Ferguson. The author argued that this approach was not as fundamentally racist or anti-corporate as common Southern demagoguery. Nevertheless, when Johnson appealed to "we of the South," fighting federal laws designed to "enslave a minority [the South]" in his 1949 inaugural Senate speech, it was just pure down home Dixie (p. 45). Ultimately, Theodore H. White calculated in his book *The Making of the President, 1964* (1965), Johnson voted "as a Southerner, with the other Southerners, no less than 39 times on matters of civil rights" between 1940 and 1960 (p. 303). As Bill Leuchtenberg contended in *The White House Looks South* (2005), "a national identity Johnson may have had, but for two decades no one could differentiate his behavior from that of any other Southern congressman who dutifully followed the lead of ardent white supremacists" (pp. 245-6).

Whether Johnson's Southern conservative jag was the result of political necessity or personal proclivity has been debated among scholars. Johnson frequently altered his public persona to suit particular audiences. Robert Caro wrote in *Master of the Senate* (2002) that LBJ's "accent changed depending on whom he was talking to" but especially in front of Southerners, Johnson adopted a "syrupy Southern drawl" (p. xv). Complicating matters, Johnson was apt to hold seemingly contradictory, inconsistent, even erratic personal opinions about the most definitively Southern issue, race. Johnson "niggered" his black employee, Robert Parker, unmercifully when white Southern racists were around, many biographers have pointed out, but LBJ also gave a black woman his seat on a segregated Washington D. C. streetcar. In discussing Johnson's opposition to the Fair Employment Protection Commission, anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation in the mid-1940s Robert Dallek wrote, "While Johnson genuinely wished to see greater opportunities and improved conditions for blacks that would ultimately serve all Southerners, he also shared conventional Southern attitudes

toward blacks” (1991: 276–8). Yet as Randall Woods suggested, in arguing his opposition to the FEPC, Johnson never justified his position in terms of race; rather LBJ contended that the legislation enacting the FEPC violated the sanctity of contract between employer and employee. There was, Woods argued, “at the core of LBJ’s attitude toward African Americans, a floor beneath which he would not sink.” Even at his most Southern, Johnson believed “that blacks must be part of the body politic.” Nevertheless, Woods conceded, LBJ also knew that “there was nothing more useless than a politically dead liberal.” By going along with the South, Johnson had better opportunities to win bread and butter issues that were really more important to all of his constituents, including blacks (pp. 188–9).

Students of Johnson’s relationship with his colleagues point out that LBJ’s most Southern period was also a matter of establishing a base of power in Congress. During his early years in the Senate, Johnson went out of his way to associate most closely in public and private with Southerners. His allegiance to the Southern bloc and especially to Senator Richard Russell of Georgia was unquestioned. When Johnson arrived in 1949, Russell’s Southern caucus headed several Senate committees and had managed to ride herd, in alliance with Senate Republicans, over most liberal Democratic initiatives, especially civil rights. Johnson sought Russell out, flattered him, befriended him, fed him Southern food, had his daughters call him Uncle Dick, made sure he found a desk next to Russell in the Senate chamber, and acquired a spot on Russell’s Armed Services Committee. Russell saw in Johnson a man with remarkable political abilities and the potential to one day overcome the nation’s bias against the South and become president. The men differed on questions of race, but they were bound by a common vision for their home region. As John A. Goldsmith wrote in *Colleagues: Richard B. Russell and His Apprentice Lyndon B. Johnson* (1998), the men “both looked to a time when the South could be returned to the mainstream of the country’s political and economic life” (p. 12). And they were both dedicated to keeping the South solidly within the Democratic Party.

Yet many authors have suggested that LBJ’s senatorial alliances had limits as well. Johnson, for example, refused to attend Southern caucus strategy meetings. Indeed, Doris Kearns pointed out in *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (1976), he was the only Southerner besides Estes Kefauver of Tennessee not to do so. “Having openly and effectively allied himself with the Southern position,” Kearns wrote, Johnson “felt free to decline Russell’s invitation to join the Southern caucus.” LBJ “always found ways to serve those he needed, and conform to their standards and values,” she explained, “but he never submitted his will, never became a devoted and unquestioning subordinate” (p. 111). Robert Dallek put it differently. “Behind the scenes Johnson left no doubt with Southern senators where he stood,” even while his public justifications for siding with Southerners did not conform to their more racist and conservative arguments. In arguing for the South’s right to filibuster, Johnson was careful not to fit the Southern “hater” image. “The filibuster is not a Southern creation,” Johnson said, “it belongs to all the Nation, and to all the minorities – racial, religious, political, economic, or otherwise.” “When we of the South rise here to speak against this resolution or to speak against the civil rights proposals, we are not speaking against the Negro race. We are not attempting to keep alive the old flames of hate and bigotry” (pp. 365–6). Robert Mann noted in *Walls of Jericho* (1996), Johnson’s relationships in the Senate were not exclusively with Southerners. Most important was the alliance he built

with freshman Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. Humphrey, of course, had gained national attention after delivering the fiery pro-civil rights speech that precipitated the Dixiecrat revolt in 1948. Humphrey would be among the few Senate liberals of his day convinced that Johnson would join them when it was politically possible for him to do so.

LBJ's most Southern period came to an end in 1956 and 1957. In these years Johnson actively began to shed the regionalist label. He was one of only three Southern senators in 1956 not to sign the Southern Manifesto condemning the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, even though LBJ's mentor, Richard Russell, was among the Manifesto's principle drafters. As Russell biographer Gilbert Fite wrote in *Richard B. Russell Jr.: Senator from Georgia* (1991), the Georgian never pressured Johnson to sign. Russell had sponsored Johnson's rise to majority leader, did not want to compromise the Texan's power to unify the Democratic Party, and did not want to ruin the South's best hope to win the presidency (p. 336). And as Mississippi Senator John Stennis, another of Russell's protégés, recalled, "we wanted him [LBJ] to sign it, but at the same time we recognized that he wasn't just a Senator from Texas, he was a leader and he had a different responsibility in that degree. It wasn't held against him, I'll put it that way, by the Southerners that he didn't sign it" (Leuchtenburg, 2005: 252). Nevertheless, many historians consider Johnson's refusal to sign the Manifesto as an important personal and political milestone. Randall Woods maintained that Johnson long "believed that civil rights was an issue whose time was coming" (p. 304). However, it wasn't until 1956, Robert Dallek argued, that the pressure on Senate liberals to consider some kind of civil rights legislation that reinforced the *Brown* decision had become "irresistible" (p. 497). Robert Caro emphasized Johnson's ambition rather than a personal dedication to civil rights or changing political opinions about segregation. In his book *Master of the Senate* (2002), Caro argued that Johnson's "great goal," his "master plan" was to win the presidency. Rather than the brave act of principle that liberal Oregon Senator Richard Neuberger attributed to Johnson in refusing to sign the Manifesto, Caro insisted that LBJ was driven primarily by an obsessive quest for political power (pp. 473–4, 785–90).

Caro extended this argument to explain Johnson's sponsorship of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, the most significant rebellion against the South to that point in LBJ's career. According to Caro, when Johnson lost the 1956 presidential nomination, the Texan came to believe "that you couldn't win the nomination as the 'Southern candidate,' that you had to have substantial northern support, and that northern antipathy to him ran very deep – had devastating implications for his chances to win the nomination in 1960." Johnson understood that he "had no choice," Caro wrote, and that "there was only one way to change his image in liberals' eyes: to support the cause that mattered to them above all others; that so long as he didn't change his position on civil rights, it didn't matter what he did for them on other issues." At the same time, LBJ "had to keep the states of the Old Confederacy on his side" in order to win the presidency (2002: 832, 850). Thus LBJ famously struck the middle ground in ushering the 1957 Civil Rights Act through Congress. His support of the first major civil rights legislation since reconstruction certainly appeased northern liberals, while his help in stripping the legislation of federal enforcement power catered to Southern demands. Caro prioritized Johnson's motives in championing the compromise: "During Lyndon Johnson's previous political life, compassion had constantly been in conflict with ambition, and

invariably ambition had won. Given the imperatives of his nature, in such a conflict, it had been inevitable that the ambition would win. For the compassion to be released, to express itself in concrete accomplishments, it would have to be compatible with the ambition, pointing in the same direction. And now, at last, in 1957, it was” (2002: 862).

Robert Dallek, among others, acknowledged that Johnson’s presidential ambitions stretched back to as early as 1953 and that he certainly leveraged Russell’s and other Southerners, desire to have one of Dixie’s sons elected president, but, Dallek reminded his readers, the Texan was just as motivated by genuine desires to unify the country and modernize the South. Dallek suggested that LBJ used the 1957 Civil Rights Bill to “transform him from a Southern or regional leader into a national spokesman.” Along with his genuine “sympathy for racial equality,” Johnson’s hopes that an end to racial animosity in the South would allow the Democratic Party to reunite for progressive change were equally important motives (1991: 517–20). Johnson’s 1957 turn to embrace civil rights legislation openly, moreover, came in the same year that President Dwight Eisenhower mobilized troops to enforce desegregation in the Little Rock crisis, the year that historian Numan Bartley in *The Rise of Massive Resistance* (1969) regarded as the beginning of the end of Southern resistance to segregation. And as David Chappell described in *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (1996), LBJ was part of a white South that was hardly monolithic or static in its opposition to civil rights. He was one of many Southern white moderates who became crucial agents of federal authority keeping racial extremists in check and easing the transition to a desegregated and modern South (p. xxiii).

In a chapter entitled “Southerner with a National Face,” Bill Leuchtenberg wrote that from the time of Johnson’s “decisive departure” from the South in 1957, the Texan “broke more and more consistently with his old friends” (p. 267). Yet implied in Leuchtenberg’s title, taken from a William S. White article in the *New York Times*, was the idea that Johnson’s escape from his regional roots after 1957 was incomplete, perhaps even superficial. Johnson, the author suggested, even in his national period from 1957 to 1963, remained a Southerner.

After 1957 Johnson less frequently sought the advice of his mentor, Richard Russell, especially on civil rights issues, and increasingly drew the ire of segregationist Southerners who considered him a traitor to his homeland. But Russell and the Southern bloc still kept Johnson close. Robert Dallek considered the contention “largely justified” that in helping to pass the 1960 Civil Rights Act, “Johnson conspired with Richard Russell to pass a weak civil rights bill that would have a limited impact on the South and help Johnson win the presidential nomination.” Johnson’s support of the bill, Dallek maintained, reinforced his position of “responsible moderation” between Senate Southerners and liberals (p. 563). At the same time, Johnson appeared to be resigned to the fact that he might never escape the Southern label. Doris Kearns wrote that twelve years after his failed run for president in 1960, Johnson believed “that no matter how shrewdly he had planned his strategy, his Southern heritage would have prevented his nomination” (p. 167). Johnson’s lackluster on-again-off-again campaign suggested that he might have believed as much at the time of the election. As Bill Leuchtenberg (2005) noted, Johnson repeated on several occasions in the years and months leading up to the 1960 election that “they will never allow a Southerner to be nominated.” According to Leuchtenberg, Johnson “shucked off his Southern identity” and made

himself over into a westerner on the assumption the cowboy image had more popular appeal, but never completely escaped (pp. 271–2). The lost cause, for Johnson, had become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Johnson's regional liability ironically turned into an asset when John F. Kennedy asked him to take the vice president's slot. The Kennedys needed Johnson to hold the South together for the Democratic Party and the ticket and hoped to have him concentrate his campaign efforts in the region. Johnson's campaign advisors, however, considered the race an opportunity for LBJ to further cast off his regionalism and become a national politician. As Bill Leuchtenberg suggested, Johnson proved that he could still rally the South while building his national credentials. A month before the election, Johnson campaigned in eight Southern states where he played up his good old boy image, thickening his accent, playing Dixie over loud speakers, waving Confederate flags, and citing his grandfather's loyalty to the South during the Civil War. So outrageous were some of his antics that journalists dubbed Johnson's train the "Cornball Express" or the "Cornpone Special." But Johnson also played the nationalist when opportunity arose, embracing national unity over sectional division. In standard campaign speeches, Johnson proclaimed that "the South, like every other section of the nation, realizes that its best interests lie in the election of a truly national ticket – not a ticket which seeks to play different sections of the country against each other" and he would "never speak as a Southerner to Southerners," but as "an American to Americans." The most important effect of his speeches, Leuchtenberg (2005) argued, was to stress Southern political success *within* the national Democratic Party (pp. 281–90).

Indeed as Leuchtenberg, Robert Dallek, Randall Woods, and others have argued, Johnson's advocacy of a post-civil rights South effectively drove a political wedge between Southern extremists and Southern moderates. A campaign stop at Dallas's Adolphus Hotel made the case. When a crowd of radical conservatives assaulted Johnson and Lady Bird in the lobby, shouting "Traitor," "Socialist," and "Judas," some reportedly even spitting at the couple, LBJ made sure that he and his wife's pace through the gauntlet was slow enough that reporters could capture the mob's wrath. The incident led to a groundswell of sympathy in the state and region, and according to George Reedy, the mob's treatment of Lady Bird so upset Richard Russell that it played significantly in his decision to speak on behalf of the Kennedy-Johnson ticket in Texas and South Carolina.

That LBJ could without irony play both nationalist and Southerner was not unusual; indeed a dual identity was arguably part and parcel of being Southern dating back to before the Civil War. As historian Willard Gatewood (1977) wrote, "the Southerners' experience with separate nationhood endowed them with a double identity so that theirs is the only part of the country where a symbol of defiance against national authority, the Confederate flag, can be waved enthusiastically by one who considers himself a superpatriot of the 100% American variety." Johnson's ability to call on his Southern and national selves contributed significantly to the success of the campaign. As O. Douglas Weeks pointed out in an article for *The Changing Politics of the South*, Johnson's name on the ticket certainly made a difference in Texas (p. 222). It also made a difference in the region. Under Johnson's watch, the Democrats took six of the old Confederate states, losing only three to the Republicans, and one, Mississippi, to the independent segregationist ticket.

As vice president, Johnson's relationship with the South ran hot and cold. His support of Kennedy's acceleration of NASA turned out to be a boondoggle for Southern states, especially Florida and Texas, but Johnson also became more directly involved in leading civil rights initiatives as head of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Johnson clashed with Kennedy advisors over whether he was nationalist enough. As Randall Woods (2006) wrote, "the vice presidency bound LBJ to a body of men and women whose attitude toward him ranged from venomous hatred to mild, amused contempt" (p. 379). Indeed, as several historians have suggested, Johnson's sour relationship with Kennedy liberals, and Bobby Kennedy in particular, had a degree of regional prejudice at its root. In *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1978) wrote that it was a case of "Southwestern exaggeration against Yankee understatement" (p. 623). Jeff Shesol (1997) argued more recently in *Mutual Contempt* that "Northern liberals could not but acknowledge Johnson's legislative prowess. His Southernness, however, invited their suspicion, indifference, or hostility" (p. 13). Robert Kennedy especially, Shesol added, could be preoccupied with LBJ's "particular problem, being a Southerner" (pp. 161, 473). Conversely, Robert Dallek (1998) reminded readers in *Flawed Giant*, that Johnson was not only self-conscious that the Kennedys thought of him as a rube but that the Attorney General was apt to even be "vindictive or punitive" toward the South (pp. 211-12).

Southerners, meanwhile, felt Johnson had wandered too far from home to still be considered one of them. His commitment to civil rights, as Paul Conkin argued, deepened as head of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity where he witnessed the daily injustices confronted by blacks in the South. That his conversion was near complete became evident to Southerners in the spring of 1963, when Johnson traveled to Gettysburg for a special Memorial Day speech on the centennial of the famous address given by Abraham Lincoln. "Until justice is blind to color," Johnson declared, "emancipation will be a proclamation but emancipation will not be a fact." For northerners, Paul Conkin wrote, Johnson's "origins as a Southerner lent his numerous speeches on civil rights special impact," but for Southerners, Bill Leuchtenberg argued, the Gettysburg speech marked his descent from Southern grace. After the speech Johnson called Kennedy special counsel and speech writer Theodore Sorensen and told him that JFK should deliver a similar message in Mississippi. By playing up the moral issues of civil rights, the president would drive the demagogues and bigots into a hole. "Southerners might disagree, but they would respect his courage," Johnson said, "Kennedy might lose the South in 1964, but so be it." Taylor Branch (1998) in *Pillar of Fire* explained that because Johnson was "a Southern politician himself," he understood that "a hesitant public attitude signaled to segregationists that the administration feared showdown more than they did." A passive approach, Johnson knew, put the administration's commitment into question "among the Southern whites and Negroes alike" (p. 94). With the Gettysburg speech, Johnson let Southerners know that he was willing to let the administration and the Party abandon them.

After the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Johnson's sudden ascendancy to the presidency, the Texan immediately expanded the White House's support for civil rights. As he put it to Roy Wilkins in 1963, he was "free at last" from his Southern political bonds. Richard Russell and other Southern politicians who had long nurtured

the hope that LBJ would protect their interests as the first Southern president since Woodrow Wilson were sorely disappointed, at least on the issue they cared most about. Yet while Lyndon Johnson may have broken political ties with the Southern bloc over race issues, his administration's impact on the South not only in civil rights but also in sweeping social and economic reform proved greater than any other since Abraham Lincoln was president. Johnson, historians generally concluded, shaped the South as much as he was shaped by it.

For the first six months of his presidency, LBJ actively fought the Southern filibuster of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. Despite the possibility of failure and losing the South for the Democratic Party, Johnson, according to Randall Woods (2006), "never hesitated. . . Racial justice, Johnson believed, was just as much in the interest of Southern whites as Southern blacks" (p. 469). When the legislation passed in June, the president's split with the segregationist South and his legacy in transforming the region reached an apex. As Robert Dallek (1998) pointed out in *Flawed Giant*, Johnson had mixed feelings in signing the bill into law. While a victory for freedom, morality, and the health of the Republic, the president feared the act would lead to violent Southern reactions and tectonic political quakes. He told Bill Moyers on the evening that he signed the legislation, "I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come" (p. 120).

The violent Southern reaction that Johnson predicted did not happen. The relative calm was in part, Randall Woods asserted, "due to the president's Southern roots and his determination to make integration and nondiscrimination a gift to the nation from the South, not something imposed on the region from the outside" (p. 480). The longer-term political consequences, however, were immense. As Political Scientists Earl Black and Merle Black pointed out in their works *Politics and Society in the South* (1987) and *The Vital South* (1992), between 1964 and 1968, the percentage of white Southerners voting for Republican presidential candidates grew from less than 50% to more than 70%. And as Dan Carter argued in *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963-1994* (1996), Southern reactions to the Civil Rights Act were indicative of a new, more subtle politics of race that favored Republican national candidates over Democrats. Yet, as Robert Dallek (1998) suggested in *Flawed Giant*, LBJ's willingness to risk the South in another sense cured "the region's social disease." "The election of Presidents from Georgia, Texas, and Arkansas during the next thirty years," Dallek wrote, testified "to the region's renewed influence in the nation anticipated by LBJ" (pp. 113-14). Indeed, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 arguably brought about the final collapse of massive resistance and ushered the South into a new era. As Numan Bartley wrote in *The New South, 1945-1980*, the Civil Rights Act "at least in regard to the South," was "clearly the most important domestic enactment of the post-World War II era." It effectively ended segregation in public accommodations and provided equal employment enforcement. And, according to Bartley, the Act effectively "broadened opportunities in the South and permitted blacks to record real advances in income relative to whites" (pp. 370-1).

Johnson may have lost some of the South in changing it, but he never conceded the region to the Republicans. During the 1964 presidential election campaign, when polls indicated that he might lose the entire region to Barry Goldwater, Lady Bird made an eight-state whistle-stop tour of Dixie that met a mixed reception of jeers and cheers. Many Southerners were still willing to support Johnson as a native son, even though

reluctant about the racial changes Johnson championed. As Lady Bird's tour ended in New Orleans, Johnson joined her and delivered a speech that many historians have argued epitomized his new relationship with his home region. Before an audience of fellow Southerners and fellow Americans, Johnson proclaimed, "If we are to heal our history and make this Nation whole, prosperity must know no Mason-Dixon line and opportunity must know no color line." Congress had voted for the Civil Rights Act and "whatever your views are, we have a Constitution and we have a Bill of Rights, and we have the law of the land." The president then paused, reflected on the meaning of his speech, and improvised a story he had heard once from Sam Rayburn. An old Southern Senator told Rayburn that practically all Southerners "ever hear at election time is 'Nigger, Nigger, Nigger,'" instead of fundamental democratic values. The integrated meeting responded with thunderous applause. Bill Leuchtenberg (2005) wrote of the speech, "Many of his most acerbic critics have affirmed that this was Johnson's finest hour. There was no way a northerner could have delivered that speech and have had it carry the same meaning. He spoke, in the words of Theodore White, "in the presence of other Southerners as a Southerner who had come to wisdom" (p. 320). Randall Woods argued that the New Orleans address, "of course," was an attempt to "cover the Confederate flag with the Stars and Stripes," but also, as Johnson sincerely told a fellow Texan, "we didn't want them to think they were left out. . . the only thing to do was go tell 'em we loved 'em" (p. 544).

Johnson won the 1964 election by 486 electoral votes to Goldwater's 52 and the popular vote by a 61% majority, the largest in American history. Barry Goldwater won only six states. Significantly, as Bernard Cosman pointed out in *Five States for Goldwater: Continuity and Change in Southern Presidential Voting Patterns* (1966), five of Goldwater's states were in the Deep South. Nevertheless as William Havard revealed in *The Changing Politics of the South* (1972) while Southern support for the national Democratic Party had been eroding since World War II, congressional delegations and state legislatures in the South remained solidly Democratic through the Johnson years. Also while Southern support for Johnson was 14% less than that given the party by voters in all other regions combined, he carried 51% of the popular vote in eleven ex-Confederate states, up from 49% for Kennedy. He also won Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (pp. 710–14).

Despite Southern objections, Johnson's and the Democrat's overwhelming victory created a mandate for sweeping social and economic reforms. Many historians argue, however, that the Great Society's anti-poverty programs ultimately had only limited impact in the South. Bruce Schulman, in *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (1991), concluded that while the Community Action Programs, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the food stamps program enabled Southern states and communities to expand social services, Southern administrators often diverted funds away from the most disadvantaged areas and kept upstart local activists at bay. And in *The New South*, Numan Bartley declared that "most antipoverty programs had limited measurable impact on Southern society." Relying heavily on Allen Matusow's book *Unraveling of America* (1984), Bartley maintained that while "the South harbored 44 percent of the nation's poor people," it "received 20 percent of the antipoverty program's expenditures." Education spending improved, he admitted, but Great Society programs generally increased expectations of the poor without delivering substantial reform and

in some Southern states “became embroiled in the struggles between competing Democratic factions” (1995: 367–70).

The Voting Rights Act of 1965, on the other hand, changed the South and Johnson’s relationship with Southerners permanently. Johnson had been reluctant to push segregationists too far or too fast on civil rights issues after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but violent clashes between police and protestors in Selma, Alabama ultimately moved him to act. If too aggressive, Robert Dallek wrote, LBJ could “alienate Southern moderates, antagonize centrists everywhere, and block passage of a voting rights act. On the other hand, if he did nothing to protect the marchers, it would deepen the rift between North and South and undermine his ability to lead a law through Congress.” In the end, after three hours of the “Johnson treatment” failed to garner George Wallace’s guarantees of protection for protestors, the president federalized 1800 Alabama national guardsmen to keep the peace and pushed the Voting Rights Act through Congress (1998: 212–20). “Even legislators of the Deep South,” Randall Woods wrote, “were not willing to argue publicly that qualified individuals did not have the right to vote” (p. 586). Paul Conkin concluded that “just as the 1964 act ended most legalized segregation in the South, so the voting act, in only three or four years, made the franchise available to almost all Southern blacks.” In Mississippi, black registration rose from 6% to 44% in three years. “The act transformed Southern politics,” Conkin argued, so much so that a “decade later, former race baiters like George Wallace of Alabama would campaign actively for black votes and, surprisingly, often get them” (p. 217). Indeed, Robert Dallek declared, the 1965 Voting Rights Act increased black electoral participation so much that “white politicians seeking black votes abandoned the region’s traditional racist demagoguery” (1998: 220–1).

Discussions of Johnson’s relationship with the South post-1965 have been relatively neglected by historians. Narratives of the black power movement and race riots focused more on northern cities rather than the South, and Johnson’s preoccupation with Vietnam dominated historical debates on the late presidency. A few historians, however, have argued that Johnson’s foreign policy in Vietnam was in part a function of his Southern roots. Andy Fry in *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789–1973* (2002) argued that “LBJ’s Southern sense of honor, manliness, and patriotism fused with driving ambition to produce a rigid adherence to containment in Southeast Asia. . . Like Southerners more generally, his limited appreciation of other nations and societies left him ‘culture-bound and vulnerable to clichés and stereotypes about world affairs’ and thereby unable to distinguish adequately among potential foes or to rethink the universal applicability of containment.” Fry considered Johnson’s support for a strong military to be “characteristically Southern” at the same time his suspicion of federal authority, especially military occupation, drew on Southern populist and lost cause traditions. Southerners, meanwhile, were among the most adamant supporters of containing communism and among the most critical of Johnson for losing the fight in Vietnam. Indeed the two most powerful Congressional opponents of Johnson’s policies in Vietnam were his Southern colleagues and former political allies, Richard Russell and J. William Fulbright (pp. 265–92).

The only other area where historians have commented on Johnson’s relationship with the South during the late 1960s concerned the effects of the white backlash on the

1968 presidential election. Bill Leuchtenberg (2005) wrote, “Vietnam expelled him [Johnson] from office, but it was the backlash in the South against his racial program that imperiled his party’s hold on the White House.” Johnson famously removed himself from consideration as the presidential nominee in March 1968, but his alienation of the South, Leuchtenberg concluded, doomed the Democratic nominee. “Johnson paid the price for his advocacy of civil rights when the Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey lost every Southern state save LBJ’s Texas and carried that only because of an increased turnout by blacks and Mexican Americans” (pp. 343–4). Johnson’s civil rights and Great Society agendas pushed liberalism to new limits that Southerners along with most Americans were unwilling to accept. He contributed more than any other politician before him to the “grand expectations” that historian James Patterson argued would not, and historian Allen Matusow suggested could not, be met. Johnson certainly contributed to the South’s abandoning the Democratic Party’s coalition, but this thesis, left unqualified, ignores other factors. Humphrey, the author of the Democrat’s 1948 civil rights platform, was among the least popular politicians among Southern voters. Also as Dan Carter suggested in *The Politics of Rage* (1995), Nixon and the Republicans, “Southern Strategy” successfully walked the tightrope between George Wallace’s racial reactionaries and “the South’s emerging middle-class suburban constituency, more in tune with traditional Republican economic conservatism than with old-style racism” (pp. 326–70). The thesis that Johnson alone spoiled the South for the Democratic Party also neglected important political changes in the South. The South since Johnson’s presidency, James Cobb reminded his readers, led the nation in black elected officials, proved to be “African Americans’ favorite place to work and live,” and boasted the successful Democratic presidential campaigns of two white Southerners, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton (p. 321).

Lyndon Johnson was a Southerner from a changing South. When the South needed federal aid to help modernize its economic institutions and bring it out of the Depression, Johnson was a New Dealer. When the South made its reactionary stand against intensified challenges to regional racial and political traditions after World War II, Johnson was a states’ rights segregationist. At a time when the South was most Southern, he was most Southern. And when the centrist South finally resigned itself to the inevitable conclusion that separate could not be equal in terms of race or region, Johnson championed the Second Reconstruction and national unity. Taken as a whole, the historical literature on Johnson and the South reveals a dynamic relationship between man and region. LBJ was Southern by birth and heritage. He spoke Southern, thought Southern, and was inextricably bound by his Southern identity. But the unqualified, static, continuity theses of the South cannot fully encompass his complex relationship with his home region. Johnson acquiesced to segregation, but he also showed great compassion for minorities and led a revolution in racial politics. He self-consciously defended Dixie against outside forces, lamenting the pace of social and political change, but he was also a nationalist who used the full power of the federal government to force the South to reform and modernize. He was a conservative demagogue who campaigned in defense of Southern honor and culture, but he was also a progressive liberal, championing representative institutions and the rule of law. Lyndon Johnson was truly a Southerner, but at a time when what it meant to be a Southerner was changing.

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