

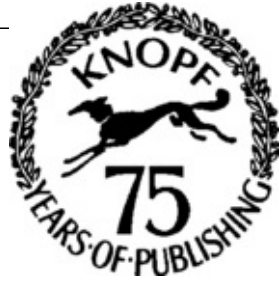


THE WARS OF WATERGATE

THE LAST CRISIS OF
RICHARD NIXON

STANLEY I. KUTLER

A K N O P F  B O O K



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OF RICHARD NIXON

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For Jeff, David, Susan Anne, Andy

and

Sandy

At the coming of the seventh month, when the people of Israel were in their towns, all the people gathered as one body in the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had enjoined upon Israel. On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand; and he read from it, facing the square in front of the Water Gate, from early morning till noon.

NEHEMIAH 8:2

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S.I.K.

Madison, Wisconsin

August 10, 1989

PREFACE

Some fifteen years after Richard Nixon resigned as President of the United States, Watergate remains contested history. Nixon and his partisans still proclaim his innocence, or they dismiss the affair as a minor stumble when measured against his great achievements, or they minimize his responsibility by comparing his sins to similar sins of his predecessor. Nevertheless, apologists and their opponents can agree on the importance of the case: there is no account, no judgment, no history of Nixon without Watergate.

While Watergate is a familiar story for those who were involved and who remember it, for many others today it is merely a word or symbol, dimly recalled or barely and imperfectly understood. This book is addressed to these varied audiences. The perspective of time and the evidence contained in once-unavailable documents add new dimensions to the familiar story of Watergate. The French historian Jules Michelet suggested that history is the “action of bringing things back to life.” But as we revitalize “things,” we also must comprehend them; otherwise the memory will disappear, and we will have learned only to forget.

I hope this book will be a reminder of the importance of most of the characters and the seriousness of the events it describes. Watergate was more than a burglary at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in June 1972, more even than the political and legal consequences of that act. The ensuing drama, culminating in Richard Nixon’s resignation in August 1974, was rooted in the tumultuous events of the 1960s in the United States and abroad, and in the personality and history of Nixon himself, going back to his first presidential term and earlier. Since his resignation, Watergate has echoed loudly in our public life. In its time, and since, Watergate raised weighty issues of governance, especially concerning the role of the presidency and its relation to other institutions in the governmental apparatus.

And yet, though Watergate has implications that go to the heart of our political and constitutional system, Richard Nixon unquestionably stands at the center of that larger story as well. He must be acknowledged as one of a handful of dominant political figures in the United States for more than a quarter-century, but controversy persistently followed and fueled his long public career, making him one of the most divisive personalities in our recent public life. By Nixon’s own assessment, Watergate was essentially one more episode in a series of wars and clashes with long-despised enemies. “I had thrown down a gauntlet to Congress, the bureaucracy, the media, and the Washington establishment and challenged them to engage in epic battle,” he noted in his memoirs. Nixon thrived on conflict, conflict that ineluctably resulted from a lifetime of accumulated resentments, both personal and political.

The Watergate break-in parted the veil on the Nixon Administration’s dubious tactics—the “White House horrors,” as former Attorney General John Mitchell called them. The fury of the response led eventually to the second serious attempt in our history to impeach a president. Despite the vast power and resources of his office, Nixon eventually found himself involved in an inescapable struggle, unable to turn adversity into opportunity as he had done so often throughout his career. Watergate proved fatal to his political life and undoubtedly will haunt his historical reputation. History will record a fair share of the significant

achievements of Nixon's presidency, but Watergate will be the spot that will not out.

Although Nixon is the leading actor in the Watergate drama, this book is neither biography nor a full-length account of his presidency. He has had a generous number of biographers, and undoubtedly their interpretations will provoke as much heat and division as Nixon himself did throughout his career. His Administration's programs and policies deserve, and they are receiving, careful attention. *The Wars of Watergate*, however, focuses on the indelible reasons for his downfall and disgrace. Watergate dominated Richard Nixon's presidency. We cannot disentangle Nixon's domestic and foreign activities either from his unremitting warfare against real and imagined enemies at home or from the weighty burden of self-knowledge about his role in the Watergate cover-up. These consumed him, eventually resulting in a fatal self-inflicted wound.

In the end, Nixon offered his own eerie, albeit unintended, insight into his downfall: "[N]ever be petty," he told loyal members of his Administration as he departed the White House on August 9, 1974, and "always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself." It was just such corrosive hatred, however, that decisively shaped Nixon's own behavior, his career, and eventually his historical standing. The net result was a wholly unprecedented testing of the American political and constitutional system, in which Richard Nixon and Watergate are forever entwined—figures and events truly unique and unforgettable.

TRIUMPH AND FOREBODING: ELECTION NIGHT 1972

The victory was spectacular. Richard Nixon, who had contested two of the closest elections in American presidential history, was overwhelmingly re-elected on November 7, 1972. Save for Massachusetts and the District of Columbia, Nixon swept the Electoral College vote and captured over 60 percent of the popular vote. It was to be his last electoral campaign. “[M]ake it the best,” he had told his Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, in September. Nixon’s triumph rivaled Franklin D. Roosevelt’s in 1936 and Lyndon Baines Johnson’s in 1964; and like them, President Nixon would quickly discover that the electorate’s mandates were neither absolute nor irrevocable.

From the outset, the enormous victory was not quite satisfactory to Nixon or his family. The President’s daughters, Tricia and Julie, petulantly complained that Democratic candidate George McGovern had not conceded gracefully enough, describing his congratulatory message as ‘cold and arch,’ presumably because he had expressed the “hope” that the President would provide peace abroad and justice at home. Nixon himself, for all his outward satisfaction, privately found his joy muted on Election Day night. His reasons ranged from the banal to the serious.

The President worried that a temporary cap on his tooth might fall off if he smiled too broadly. He fretted about having to confront another Democrat-dominated Congress and his inability to end the Vietnam war. He felt more sadness than relief at having fought his last election campaign. Most of all, Nixon would remember, he felt “a foreboding” that dampened his enthusiasm. Perhaps, he later mused, “the marring effects of Watergate may have played a part.” On election eve, he had noted in his diary that Watergate was the only “sour note” of the moment. “This,” he admitted, “was really stupidity on the part of a number of people.”¹

The President’s Press Secretary had smugly labeled the incident a “third-rate burglary” after police captured five men within the national headquarters of the Democratic Party at the Watergate office complex on June 17, 1972. At the time, the event had sounded only a minor discordant theme in the campaign, barely acknowledged outside Washington. The President and several close aides nevertheless had cause for concern. They realized that an inquiry into the Watergate affair might link the White House to the burglary and its aftermath, and expose a pattern of unethical and illegal conduct condoned and encouraged by the President himself. Nixon later claimed that “when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal.”² He knew better.

On election night, therefore, when celebration was in order, Nixon nursed festering grievances. His public image clashed with what he knew to be reality, and he reacted, with anger, resentment, and perhaps even fear, as he had so often done in the past. Within hours Haldeman asked for resignations throughout the Administration, quickly dampening the joy of the President’s loyal supporters. The signs of Nixon’s overwhelming victory had been apparent for months. Yet during that time, and in the immediate aftermath of the election,

the President rubbed old wounds and planned revenge on his “enemies.” Magnanimity, generosity, and tolerance simply did not exist in his political vocabulary. He spurred his chief aides to find men to direct the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Internal Revenue Service who would do his personal bidding and fill his personal political needs. On September 15, 1972, he called White House Counsel John W. Dean III to the Oval Office and told him to “remember all the trouble” the President’s foes had caused. “We’ll have a chance to get back at them one day,” Nixon promised, adding that he intended to utilize the FBI and other agencies to harass his political antagonists. Nixon also thanked his young aide for his work in containing the Watergate affair. At the time, he undoubtedly never considered that enemies and friends alike eventually would hear the conversation, which he himself had taped.³

The re-election, then, produced nothing but contradictions. Where confidence should have abounded, confusion reigned; instead of joy, resentment surged through the White House; and whereas “peace abroad and justice at home” should have dominated the President’s concerns, the “sour note” of Watergate was to echo through the remainder of Richard Nixon’s presidency. Still, victory did, naturally enough, generate a measure of optimism, and some of the President’s entourage looked forward to four more years of achievement. As Nixon began his new term on January 20, 1973, he presented his chief aides and Cabinet members with a four-year calendar in-scribed: “The Presidential term which begins today consists of 1,460 days—no more, no less.... [T]hey can stand out as great days for America, and great moments in the history of the world.”

The cloud of Watergate and the unknown mocked that note of optimism. On Christmas Day, 1972, James McCord, indicted for his role in the Watergate burglary, ominously threatened to implicate the White House. Presidential speechwriter Patrick Buchanan had warned Nixon that Watergate was a growing problem, although he probably did not realize the extent of the President’s own involvement. Meanwhile, Leonard Garment, a White House aide and former law partner of Nixon’s, had his own sense of foreboding. Quoting José Ortega y Gasset, he wrote: “‘We do not know what is happening, and *that* is what is happening.’”⁴

Richard Nixon knew.

BOOK ONE

**OF TIME
AND THE MAN**

**DISCORD, DISORDER,
AND RICHARD NIXON**

BREAKING FAITH: THE 1960S

The Age of Watergate witnessed the nation's most sustained political conflict and severe constitutional crisis since the Great Depression. Attention centered first on the role of the Committee to Re-elect the President in the break-in at the Washington headquarters of the Democratic National Committee. The burglary at the Watergate complex not only raised questions about the integrity of the political process, but eventually made an issue of the President's personal role in the event and its aftermath. And subsequent revelations uncovered what Nixon's key political lieutenant, former Attorney General John Mitchell characterized as the "White House horrors"—the numerous instances of officially sanctioned criminal activity and abuses of power, as well as obstruction of justice, that had preceded and followed the Watergate break-in.

These events all fall under the "generic term of 'Watergate'," as Congress labeled them in 1974 law. History is disciplined by context, and the Watergate affair cannot be bounded by the flurry of events from the burglary on June 17, 1972, to the President's resignation on August 9, 1974. Watergate involved the political behavior of the President and his men, and the critical assault on their authority, that began during Nixon's first term. Some of that behavior, and some of that critical assault, had its roots in the tumultuous events of the 1960s.¹ The struggles in that decade over civil rights and over the control of the cities, and above all over the war in Vietnam, brought dramatic divisions and violence to American society and resulted in the destabilization of both civil and social institutions. Furious protests swirled initially around President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a symbol of and a scapegoat for the nation's ills and anxieties. A tidal wave of political and media criticism eventually swept Johnson from the White House, discredited, despised, and desperately searching for historic vindication.

Richard Nixon promised the nation in 1968 that he would "bring us together." But during his watch, the divisions persisted and even widened. He, even more than Johnson, became a focal point for the furies and frustrations that wracked American society. "Watergate" increasingly defined his Administration, and it provided the "sword," as Nixon himself characterized it, for dissident interests to use in successfully mounting their challenge to vested power and authority. Nixon had unfortunately inherited a vastly weakened and increasingly vulnerable presidency. That institutional crisis, together with his own political past, which made him one of the most divisive figures in America, culminated in his unprecedented resignation as President.

We must also look to Nixon's long public career to explain his conduct as President. His personality, his lengthy tenure in the political arena, and his behavior in prominent events of the previous quarter-century clearly conditioned much of his presidency. Those years were ones of preparation for his ambition; they also molded and shaped those special qualities that anticipated the disaster that befell him. With Richard Milhous Nixon's election to the

presidency in 1968, the times and the man came together—and Watergate was the result.

John F. Kennedy heralded a new public perception and involvement with the presidency, personalizing it with carefully crafted mannerisms. His vigor, wit, and candor quickly captured the imagination of the nation, despite his razor-thin margin of victory in 1960. The young President appealed to the nation's emerging youth, forcefully identifying with their hopes and aspirations. Americans found themselves riveted to the President as the center of public life, particularly as the media emphasized the glamour and vitality of Kennedy, his wife, and his family.

The underside of the Kennedy years—the President's extramarital affairs, his compromises with segregationists, his ineffectiveness in dealing with Congress, his Administration's plots to assassinate foreign leaders, and the growing combat involvement in Vietnam—was either hidden or studiously ignored. Kennedy and his advisers skillfully managed to convey the impression of a leader who was at once a liberal and a conservative, a hard-line anticommunist and a statesman genuinely committed to new directions for reducing Cold War tensions.

Kennedy's assassination in Dallas in November 1963 elevated him instantly to demigod sainthood, leaving both his admirers and his enemies to vent their wrath and frustrations on his successor. Kennedy's death began a mystique that grew through much of the 1960s, a mystique which, however distorted, haunted Lyndon B. Johnson. There was no escape for Johnson. Beginning with his surprise selection as John F. Kennedy's running mate in 1960 and continuing through Johnson's sorrow-laden succession in 1963 and Robert F. Kennedy's challenge in 1968, the Kennedys hung like a brooding omnipresence in Johnson's sky, alternately shaping and paralyzing his presidency.

When Johnson, on assuming the presidency, said, "Let us continue," he meant to realize the fallen Kennedy's promise of renewed energy and purpose in government. Johnson understood the need to assuage the sense of national grief, yet he instinctively sensed as well the opportunity to capitalize on the memory of the late President to attain desirable political results and create his own memorial. Within days, Johnson revitalized his coalition-building talents and organized a new national consensus on behalf of longstanding and innovative liberal agendas. Like the creatures entering Noah's Ark two by two, they called or came to the White House: Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, Martin Luther King, Jr., and George Wallace, Senators Mike Mansfield and Everett Dirksen, the heads of the AFL-CIO and the National Association of Manufacturers, and then, of course, the world leaders—all anxious to gain the new President's ear while he, just as eagerly, worked to bring them aboard *his* ship. Kennedy's promises had stalled on the two shoals of civil rights legislation and tax-cutting. Johnson would not just jawbone, but deliver.

Deliver he did, and at a frenzied pace for the next six months, dazzling friends and dismaying foes. The Kennedy New Frontier program faded into memory as Johnson stamped his own Great Society brand on a breathtaking cascade of legislation. By the time of the 1964 presidential election, he had secured both the Tax Reduction and Civil Rights acts. New laws and new ideas abounded—urban mass transit, clean air, wilderness preserves, manpower retraining, and a variety of antipoverty measures. Lyndon Johnson had apparently never met a constituency he disliked.

The tax and civil rights laws appeared to assure Johnson's historical reputation. Both had

seemed hopelessly elusive during Kennedy's short tenure; Johnson, however, moved deftly and surely through the familiar congressional jungle and emerged with his original goals largely intact. As Senate Majority Leader in the 1950s, Johnson had repeatedly frustrated his liberal allies with what seemed to them an all-too-ready acceptance of half-loaves. But not during the halcyon early days of his presidency. The tax cut, co-opted in part by Keynesianism from orthodox Republican doctrine, ensured a further takeoff for the reigning prosperity. Johnson's civil rights legislation induced a national orgy of self-congratulation and raised hopes for a new era of peaceful racial relations. The Supreme Court's invalidation of segregation ten years earlier at last had a legislative imprimatur and the blessing of a Southern President.

On every front, Johnson commanded and directed a succession of triumphs. The opposition—what there was of it—was in total disarray. "I am a fellow that likes small parties," Johnson quipped, "and the Republican party is about the size I like." The President's power was immense, almost absolute. "He's getting everything through the Congress but the abolition of the Republican party," James Reston wrote in the *New York Times*, "and he hasn't tried that yet."

And yet, despite Johnson's triumphs, a White House aide noted, "something was wrong, drastically wrong." Johnson himself acknowledged that his support was "like a Western river, broad but not deep." Kennedy loyalists nipped at the President's heels, snickered at his Texan roots and mannerisms, claimed he was succeeding only because of sympathy for the martyr Kennedy, and, most of all, complained about something they called "style." The Pedernal did not flow through Camelot.

For the Kennedy-Arthurians, Johnson was the Black Knight, not fit to sit at the Round Table. Their contempt was publicly apparent, and the media dutifully reflected their mood. Jack Kennedy had been a favorite of press and television reporters as he successfully charmed and wooed them, despite his Administration's candid advocacy of news management. Mocked, even shunned, by his supposed allies, President Johnson yearned for love and acceptance from those who counted most—the people. But a wary, even hostile, media made gaining the public's affection a formidable task. Camelot, described by a British observer as an "idiotic Tennysonian fantasy" concocted by adoring Kennedy admirers in the media, symbolized the "resentful escapism" that bedeviled Johnson.²

The President had some tattered robes that lent substance to the criticism of his detractors. His successes paradoxically reinforced all the negative images of him as a wheeler-dealer, conniving hustler, and a manipulator cloaked in deceit and secrecy—images that had haunted Johnson pitilessly throughout his career. Questions centered on the personal fortune he and his wife had amassed during his years of public service, particularly in the government-regulated television business; his association with Billy Sol Estes, a shady entrepreneur who lavishly supported Texas politicians, including Johnson; and, most harmful of all, the corrupt dealings of his Senate aide and protégé, Bobby Baker. The President insisted he hardly knew Baker—"one of the great whoppers of American political history," as Johnson's former Press Secretary described it.³

The master politician could not elude the questions and innuendoes regarding his moral character. The United States' growing involvement in Indochina was intractable and unpopular enough, but Johnson's lack of moral authority compounded the difficulty. The

result was tragic for him, and for the nation.

President Johnson eagerly anticipated the 1964 election as a personal referendum, plebiscite offering him a ticket of admission to the White House in his own right rather than as an “accidental president”; 1964 would release him from the Kennedy bondage. His wish seemed to be granted. Whatever his personal merits, Lyndon Johnson was lucky—blessed, one might seem—in having an opponent that year who politically and emotionally terrified a substantial part of the American electorate. The President’s triumph over Senator Barry Goldwater rivaled Franklin D. Roosevelt’s landslide victory in 1936. Johnson’s victory was total, absolute, and, like so much else about him, excessive. The staggering dimensions of his election, with 61 percent of the popular vote, certainly gave him an exaggerated sense of his mandate. Ironically, however, the very scale of his victory served to heighten suspicions of him.

Barry Goldwater, the junior Senator from Arizona, had captured the Republican nomination on the strength of a dedicated, resourceful organization, and because of his appeal as a genuine political alternative. He also promised to “get tough” with the “international Communist conspiracy.” In May 1964, Goldwater urged greater American involvement in the war in South Vietnam. Specifically, he called for the bombing of supply routes in the North. When told that the dense jungle cover hid many of the trails, he suggested the possibility of “defoliation of the forests by low-yield atomic weapons.” Two months later, Goldwater said that victory in Vietnam was assured if the military were given a free hand.

No matter the outcome in 1964, Goldwater had sparked a movement to make conservatism respectable, and it proved to be a movement that would not roll over and die as political pundits insisted it must or should. Yet Goldwater’s moment of triumph also sealed his fate. When he told his loyal followers at the San Francisco Republican Convention in July that “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice [a]nd ... moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue,” many Americans regarded him as a moral monster commanding a pack of fanatics totally alien to the American mainstream.⁴ Actually, Goldwater’s words had a noble quality, but the context distorted the message into something sinister.

Goldwater’s hopes for upsetting the President in the 1964 election rested on his ability to persuade voters of Johnson’s moral defects. That image was ready-made and exploitable, but Goldwater could not overcome his own, larger negatives. Americans realized Johnson’s shortcomings, yet planned to vote for him. “Johnson leaves me cold, but I am going to ring doorbells for him,” said a St. Louis optometrist—hastily adding: “Goldwater is beyond belief.” Pollster Samuel Lubell described a Dayton, Ohio, precinct where early one-fourth of those who intended to vote for the President questioned his fundamental honesty. The eloquent voice of the Very Reverend Francis B. Sayre, Jr., of the Episcopal cathedral in the nation’s capital, a son-in-law of Woodrow Wilson, seemed to speak for many Americans. He deplored the “sterile choice” confronting the electorate, a choice between “a man of dangerous ignorance and devastating uncertainty” and “a man whose public house is splendid in its every appearance, but whose private lack of ethic must inevitably introduce termites to the very foundation.”⁵

The 1964 election seemed simple enough, with its apparent ideological conflict. But in truth, the clash was more complex, pitting Republican ideological concerns against Democratic programmatic agendas. One side had ideology without program; the other

programs largely devoid of any coherent philosophical scheme. Neither proved wholly satisfactory in the 1960s—and the problem continued to especially plague the Democrats for the next two decades. Following the election, a Maryland housewife thought the country was domestically “mixed up.” She bemoaned the lack of direction. “I think it’s very, very confused. People have lost the old rules and values by which they lived, and they haven’t got any new ones to substitute.”⁶

The President was not “mixed up”; if anything, the election puffed his well-endowed ego. Press Secretary George Reedy noted the change. American elections, Reedy observed, had “elements of sanctification,” but Johnson had advanced the concept “to one of deification.” The President’s natural wariness—even fear—toward the press turned to contempt. “I’ve been kissing asses all my life and I don’t have to kiss them anymore,” he declared. As for holding press conferences, Johnson instructed Reedy to “tell those press bastards of yours that I’ll see them when I want to and not before.”⁷

The 1964 campaign was a referendum on the welfare state, now three decades old. It also focused on the issues of war and peace, particularly highlighting the ominous developments in Southeast Asia. Johnson had a veritable monopoly on the peace corner. Speaking in Eufaula, Oklahoma, on September 25, he could not resist gilding the lily: “There are those that say you ought to go North and drop bombs, to try to wipe out supply lines, and they think that would escalate the war. We don’t want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. We don’t want to get involved ... with 700 million people and get tied down in a land war in Asia.”⁸ In the meantime, Barry Goldwater was the candidate who reputedly wanted to “lob one into the men’s room in the Kremlin.”

Johnson promised “peace for all Americans,” yet he repeatedly emphasized that what his predecessors and Congress had defined as vital national and world interests demanded an American presence in South Vietnam, as well as in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines. In other ways as well, his private actions did not match his public prudence. During the election campaign, Johnson approved numerous secret operations throughout Southeast Asia, including air operations against the North. On October 1, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy sent the President a memo acknowledging the probability that American forces would be engaged in “some air and land action in the Laotian corridor or even in North Vietnam within the next two months.”⁹

Johnson’s victory inevitably produced claims of a “mandate.” But as always in American politics, the question was, “Mandate for what?” For endorsing the President’s legislative record? Probably. For advancing the Great Society? Possibly. For sustaining the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing presidential retaliation for attacks on American personnel in Vietnam? Yes—at least, if such attacks were overt. For keeping American boys out of Asian wars? Certainly. Ironically, LBJ’s campaign rhetoric regarding the war established an image of apparent deception that would plague him in the years to come, as he led the nation deeper and deeper into the Vietnam quagmire.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident, early in August 1964, and Johnson’s subsequent dealings with Congress, eventually shaped that image of deception more than any other event of his presidency. The congressional resolution authorizing Johnson to retaliate against North Vietnamese attacks never escaped the smell of presidential duplicity. Whether Johnson used the occasion to fulfill longstanding plans for wider American involvement in the war, a

Senator J. William Fulbright later believed, or whether the resolution resulted from the President's fear that Goldwater and the Right would preempt him on the issue of standing up to Communism—or both—the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was a watershed not only for the Vietnam war but for the relationship between the executive and legislative branches for the next decade.¹⁰

What happened in the Tonkin Gulf on the nights of August 2 and 4 remains to this day somewhat cloudy. What is certain is that the Administration neither fully understood what had occurred nor reported the “incidents” fairly and fully. In January, Johnson had approved military plans for covert activities against North Vietnam—“dirty tricks,” as they were known. By early summer, these operations increased as South Vietnamese resistance deteriorated.

On the night of August 2, three Vietnamese PT boats attacked the American destroyer *Maddox*. The destroyer sank one. Intercepts of enemy radio traffic showed that the North believed the Americans had coordinated action with the South Vietnamese. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara later testified that the incident occurred thirty miles out to sea, when in fact the vessels had been only thirteen miles from shore. McNamara also denied any coordination, insisting that *Maddox* had been on a routine patrol mission. For the moment Johnson and his advisers decided not to escalate the action but vowed to maintain naval operations in the Gulf despite warnings from the naval commander on the scene that this constituted “an unacceptable risk.” The Pentagon ordered *Maddox* and another destroyer, *Turner Joy*, back into action on August 3. The next night, the commander radioed that North Vietnamese intercepts showed that the enemy believed the destroyers were preparing to attack their bases. Again, what happened is in dispute. The destroyers signaled that enemy boats were attacking; whether they had been sighted on radar or had actually attacked remains in question. No matter, the President left no doubt of his resolve to retaliate.

But Johnson needed congressional acquiescence—for political, hardly constitutional reasons. The pressures of the pending election, combined with his innate political caution, dictated that he seek congressional cooperation. By the evening of August 4, Johnson had secured promises of support from the leadership for both retaliation and a resolution authorizing executive initiatives. And that night, carrier-based aircraft attacked North Vietnamese naval stations and an oil depot on the Gulf, even while Pentagon wiretap operators were still seeking details of the attacks on the American destroyers.

Johnson prevailed on his Senate friends to secure the necessary resolution. Fulbright, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, steered the measure through—to his eventual regret. The Senator persuaded himself that the resolution would fend off Goldwater's hawkish appeals and that a limited American military response would set the stage for serious negotiations between the warring Vietnamese parties and the United States. Years later Fulbright realized that Johnson had ordered the destroyers back into action to provoke a “‘excuse’ which would allow him to retaliate militarily and, later, to play upon the ‘chauvinism’ of the Congress.”¹¹

Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI) pressed Fulbright the hardest. Nelson urged his colleagues to accept an amendment limiting the American role in Vietnam to “aid, training assistance and military advice.” Fulbright told Nelson that he agreed with the sentiment and was confident that the President shared the same view. But, responding to Johnson's prodding

Fulbright went on to say that amendments would only complicate the congressional process and send the wrong message to Hanoi. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, he insisted, was “harmless”; privately, he told colleagues that it offered the best opportunity “to pull the rug out from under Goldwater.” Only Senators Wayne Morse (D-OR) and Ernest Gruening (D-AK) resisted Fulbright’s pleadings. Strangely, as the nation turned against the war in 1968, both were defeated and shunned as the proverbial messengers of bad tidings. (Meanwhile, Johnson ordered the FBI to investigate Morse’s Oregon supporters.) That same year, Fulbright’s committee staff amassed damning evidence of the Administration’s duplicity. But as George Ball later noted, “if it wasn’t Tonkin Gulf, it would have been something else.”¹²

Johnson carried the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in his pocket, readily showing it to visitors who questioned his policies. He treated it as a blank check for congressional support, although Congress’s support was not unlimited, and in time, Johnson *and* the presidency paid a high interest for its use. The Gulf of Tonkin incident and its aftermath planted the seeds for a decade of discord and estrangement between the presidency and Congress over Vietnam policy.

Johnson’s smashing victory in 1964 swept a swollen Democratic majority into control of Congress. The Democrats gained 37 seats in the House of Representatives, giving them a 295–140 majority. In the Senate, with a 68–32 margin, the Democrats had nearly the same proportional control. The previous Congress had given the President much of what he had asked for in response to his considerable bargaining skills and out of sympathy for the martyred Kennedy. But this was very much Johnson’s Congress. Many newly elected representatives came from districts which were only marginally Democratic, or which Republicans had lost because of Goldwater’s liabilities. These representatives (many of whom served only one term) naturally looked to Johnson for leadership and guidance. He provided both in abundance.

Washington had seen nothing like it since the Hundred Days of the New Deal. “Johnson’s Congress” compiled a staggering legislative record. The sweeping, almost revolutionary Voting Rights Act and the long-sought Medicare program headed the list. Congress also created the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the new Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Arms Control Agency. It passed clean-air, clean-water, and highway-beautification measures to preserve the environment. It allocated new and enlarged grants for federal research on heart disease, cancer, and stroke, as well as a raft of new programs for the President’s “War on Poverty” including provisions for rent subsidies, manpower training, and Operation Head Start.

Ironically, however, as the President fulfilled the leading items on the liberal agenda, much of the liberal coalition began to desert him. The year after his sweeping victory, 1965, was an ambivalent period. The President’s legislative achievements deserved admiration, yet discordant notes filled the air. The summer witnessed outbreaks of violence in the black urban ghettos. Campus protests blossomed, questioning what had seemed to be sacred values of educational authority. Sappers penetrated the American Embassy in Saigon, protesters publicly burned draft cards, and that winter saw the first organized antiwar rally in Washington. By December, air strikes over North Vietnam had become routine, dropping tons of bombs—and yet they seemed only to strengthen the enemy’s resolve. By the end of the year, 200,000 Americans were in Vietnam.

Polls consistently reflected a widespread dislike for Johnson. Critics complained about his “lack of style,” notwithstanding a grudging respect for his achievements. But Johnson damaged himself by his actions more than by his manner. First, the war had escalated dramatically. The retaliatory raids had developed into a full-scale air war on the North, designed, as General Curtis LeMay said, to bomb it “back to the Stone Age.” Marines landed at Danang in March 1965, allegedly to protect American planes and pilots but actually with combat orders. Johnson was now haunted by his promises not to send American boys to fight Asian wars, and their false notes heightened the latent suspicions of his style and character. The heady successes of the 1964 election and in Congress afterward magnified those perceived traits of wheeling and dealing, deception, and furtiveness that clung to the President’s reputation like barnacles.

The notion of a “credibility gap” in the Administration symbolized the growing unease. In a speech at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, the President called for “unconditional discussions” for peace and outlined a scheme for a TVA-type development project for the Mekong River valley in Southeast Asia. Typically, a flurry of activity followed the speech to offer an impression of reality. Johnson pressured World Bank President Eugene Black to hear the project and promised him full support and a blue-ribbon panel to help implement the scheme. It never happened: no project, no panel, no support. Six weeks later, David White described the President’s “credibility gap.”¹³ Johnson’s tall Texas tales—that his grandfather fought at the Alamo, for example—no longer amused; instead, they appeared as part of a dangerous pattern underlining the reality that Johnson would not—or could not—tell the truth.

Johnson ordered his doctor to say that he drank only bourbon (a good American drink) when Washington circles knew he favored Scotch. He justified military intervention in the Dominican Republic by insisting that the rebels had beheaded people and that the American ambassador had been fired upon—none of which was true. Secrecy abounded regarding presidential nominations, budgets, travel plans, and programs. The President thus assured the limelight for himself, as only he could announce or authorize what was to be. If the press discovered a pending presidential appointment, Johnson sometimes would reverse his plan out of what seemed to many to be sheer perversity. The dean of Washington columnists, Arthur Krock, charged the President with “evasive rhetoric” whenever he escalated the war. One writer, who elaborated on the credibility gap and described Johnson as “one of the ablest Presidents this country has produced,” said that Johnson could be even better “if he would stop getting wounded every time a reporter or editorial writer takes issue with him at some point.” Johnson’s actions and thin-skinned reactions only widened the chasm between himself and the press.¹⁴

At the outset of his administration, Johnson had ostentatiously cultivated the press, hoping to emulate Kennedy’s success with reporters. He dispatched a special plane to bring James Reston of the *New York Times* to the President’s ranch on Christmas 1963. He bragged about having columnist Walter Lippmann to dinner. But when Lippmann turned hostile toward the Vietnam adventure, the President pointed to his repeated errors and delighted in salacious jokes about him. Other journalists described it as “the war on Walter Lippmann.” After the President courted reporters with a high-speed drive across his ranchlands, he became infuriated when they wrote about the adventure, including a description of Johnson sipping

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