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Lyndon Johnson, The Great Society, and the Assumption of the Presidency in the Pages of The  
Nation 1964-1970

In 1964, The Economic Opportunity Act, the opening shot in The War On Poverty and a core program of the Great Society, was signed by President Lyndon Johnson. In *The Nation*, the liberal intelligentsia reacted with a mix of curiosity and pessimism. One writer interpreted the ambitious new programs as actually backwards-looking, writing, “The Great Society is to be achieved by extending the basic precepts of the New Deal...That the Great Society is so rooted in the past can be explained by the President’s political origins. Mr. Johnson was weaned on the New Deal as a young Congressman, lost it in the postwar world as he found his way to great wealth, the majority-leadership and the Vice Presidency, and has at last regained it in the Presidency”.<sup>1</sup> Another looked apprehensively at the balance between the two major parties, arguing that the increasing popularity of the democratic party, the threat of it becoming nearly unchallenged by Republicans through electoral maneuvering in which the Republican rightward shift allowed for the Democrats to take up the entire center of politics. They wrote, “When one party dominates, the possibility of wheeling-dealing corruption is ever present. This is the case in any society with a dominant Center party. When liberals of convenience manage the program and there is no effective force to check or correct the course, the achievement is apt to be limited, falling far short of what is both technically possible and morally desirable”.<sup>2</sup> As The Great Society went from prospective legislation to the law of the land, writers at the magazine continued trying to make sense of a program whose legacy is still debated today. As it became

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<sup>1</sup>Rousseas, Stephen W. *Nation* 200, no. 19 (May 10, 1965): 499–501.

<sup>2</sup>Hamilton, Richard F. 1965. *Nation* 201 (17): 384–87.

clear that Johnson's term was going poorly, writers began to mourn the potential of The Great Society. In an article called "Requiem For A Great Society", a writer blamed the failure of the Great Society on Johnson almost exclusively, writing, "The truth is that Johnson never really transcended his past experience. His political style was fixed, and it was probably inevitable that this program should be sundered by the age-old tension between ends and means. While the Great Society's stated objectives were equal to our highest aspirations, Johnson failed to understand that these goals could never be reached by the traditional methods of interest politics".<sup>3</sup>

The Economic Opportunity Act established the Office of Economic Opportunity, and began the eleven-pronged initial assault<sup>4</sup>, but its most important contribution was to rethink the methodology of anti-poverty programs. The War on Poverty programs superseded local and state governments. Even more controversially, the doctrine of Maximum Feasible Participation embedded into the act attempted, with various degrees of success, to share power with local groups.<sup>5</sup> The Great Society has been interpreted and re-interpreted by historians, from its impact on the civil rights movement to its conceptions of gender. As the programs at its heart recede further and further into historical memory, analysis of the Great Society has increasingly been focused on the interplay between federal programs, local groups attempting to wield power as mandated by those programs, and the differing levels of success they had in asserting their

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<sup>3</sup> Drukman, Mason. 1968. *Nation* 206 (20): 627-29

<sup>4</sup> Including: Loans to Rural Families, Work Study for College Students, and the Creation of VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)

<sup>5</sup> This three word clause became one of the primary battlegrounds of the Great Society, and was quickly removed in the Nixon administration's re-working of the Great Society

independence from local governments, used to a more paternalistic model of anti-poverty initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

*The Nation's* writers did not have a monopoly on interpreting The Great Society---more accurately, they reacted to and were part of a broader discourse. No single voice was as important to this conversation as Lyndon Johnson.<sup>7</sup> And it was that voice that gave the opening sales pitch for The Great Society to his country. In a speech at the University of Michigan<sup>8</sup>, Johnson unfurled the blueprints for the most ambitious domestic program in American history. He announced lofty, almost utopian plans to realize the potential of the most prosperous country in world history by transforming it into a juster, more egalitarian, and more compassionate place, saying, “Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society”, and “But most of all, the Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor”.<sup>9</sup> Johnson does gesture at more concrete aims as the speech continues, but the speech as a whole is defined by a

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<sup>6</sup> The 2011 book *The War on Poverty: A Grassroots History* is both influential and emblematic of modern historiographical trends

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this essay, which is very interested in the way in which Johnson and his team tried to present The Great Society, it is useful to remember that “President Johnson” was a collectively constructed figure, whose image was shaped by both the administration’s public relations team and public understanding

<sup>8</sup> Johnson’s choice of delivering the speech at the founding campus of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) is a perfect example of Johnson’s political savvy and his attempt at consensus popularity

<sup>9</sup> Gettleman, M. E., and D. Mermelstein. *The Great Society Reader: the Failure of American Liberalism*. Vintage Books, 1967.

participatory, community-based, spirit and an interest in the psychological, spiritual, and emotional nature of the program as well as its more material aims.

There is a fundamental dissonance between these different ways of understanding The Great Society. For modern historians, The Great Society has become defined by its least famous participants, by the ways in which it devolved power, and the way it challenged traditional power structures. Lyndon Johnson's sales pitch for The Great Society is bombastic, but presents a collective vision of The Great Society and a collective struggle for it. The writers at *The Nation* understood The Great Society in a fundamentally different way. When analyzing this massive collection of programs, again and again The Great Society is understood through the lens of President Johnson. Johnson's faults are The Great Society's faults; his personality is imprinted into the program.

While the specific interpretations and analyses of Johnson and The Great Society in *The Nation* are idiosyncratic, the framework with which they approach the issue is consistent between writers. In an editorial entitled "Another Johnson Gimmick", its author, reporting on a relatively minor loan repayment bill, wrote that "the President will probably get his way on the expanded loan participation plan for which he has been cracking the whip with exceptional sharpness. The plan is one of those legislative gimmicks that will add millions to the taxpayers' burden but will no doubt improve the President's image as a great economizer and budget slicer". Later, they continued down this path, writing, "Ordinarily the Democrats are partisans of 'Low Interest,' but the President's arm twisting has kept them in line thus far".<sup>10</sup> For this writer, Lyndon Johnson is the primary actor within the American political system. Although he has to deal with the unruly Democratic Party, Johnson is able to force through his preferred legislation,

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<sup>10</sup>1966. *Nation* 202 (21): 602-6.

even when that legislation goes against the beliefs or self-interest of individual representatives. Furthermore, Johnson's actions are framed as, if not sinister, underhanded---prioritizing his image above all other concerns. This brief, barely two page report commenting on recent developments in congress is unremarkable except for the way in which President Johnson, and the role of the office of the presidency, is characterized. The accuracy of this reporting is not important. Instead, the way in which writers at *The Nation* understood Johnson as such an all-consuming figure is the lens in which the collection of articles about The Great Society during the Johnson administration offers insights into the minds of the liberal thought leaders who wrote for the magazine.

Johnson's personality is treated as explanatory by *The Nation's* writers. More specifically, when they go about interpreting The Great Society and The War on Poverty, again and again they rely on Lyndon Johnson's personality, his unique strengths and weaknesses, to make sense of his domestic programs. Whether reacting to the plans and proposals in 1964 and 1965 or looking back on its perceived failure in 1968 and 1969, this framework recurs throughout the pages of *The Nation*. For example, in a 1968 piece titled "Requiem For the Great Society". Writing little over a month after Johnson had announced he would not be seeking reelection, the author argues that, contrary to the resounding feeling of victory, or at least relief that Johnson's duplicitous presence would finally exit the White House, Johnson's presidency was a tragic failure. He continues, "I shall suggest to you...why the fall of the House of Johnson has tragic implications for all of us".<sup>11</sup> The bulk of the essay consists of an analysis of why exactly the potential of the Great Society was squandered by Johnson. First, he highlights the contradiction between Lyndon Johnson's political style and personal history and The Great

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<sup>11</sup>Drukman, Mason. 1968. *Nation* 206 (20): 627-29

Society's call for community. He writes, "Community presupposes that citizens can depend upon one another in a fundamental way for social, economic and even psychological support. Thus, it seemed odd that Johnson, a consensus practitioner of long standing, should transcend his background in political brokerage for a new position of such radical dimension. The truth is that Johnson never really transcended his past experience. His political style was fixed".<sup>12</sup> In this view, The Great Society's success hinged on Johnson's own political evolution---The Great Society could only succeed if its break with traditional politics was accompanied by Johnson's. Without that, it was doomed.

The essay moves onto another key lens for understanding the Great Society's failure, Vietnam. Here, he lays the blame again on Johnson's personal failings. Observers, both at the time and after have argued that by pursuing the Vietnam War, Johnson doomed his domestic programs. The author concurs, writing, "I said earlier that even partial fulfillment of the Great Society would have meant a good deal. But even partial success was impossible once the Vietnamese War went its terrible way".<sup>13</sup> However, again here he returns to Johnson's personality as the main reason why this was the case. Pointing out that Johnson relied on the voices of the same hardline anti-communist thinkers that been brought into the White House by JFK. He writes, "his strategy of escalation seems to have been, at least in the beginning, as much as a function of unconcern with foreign affairs as of hard-line attitudes".<sup>14</sup> Continuing, he traces the continued escalation of the way, and Johnson's continued refusal to accept alternatives, writing, "Whether or not Johnson was personally committed to such views, he became committed to the men who held them, for the politics of interest places a higher premium on

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<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> ibid

<sup>14</sup> ibid

loyalty to men than it does on fidelity to position. It was not long, therefore, before defense of policy and defense of men coincided, and Johnson himself, despite his training in the school of compromise, grew almost into a caricature of the anti-Communist ideologue. Once that happened, the Great Society was doomed".<sup>15</sup> In this version, the Great Society's success hinged upon Johnson moving against the tide of established thinkers. Instead, because he was at first uninterested in foreign policy, and later because he, stuck in his old school, horse-trading political mindset, is unable to do so. Again, the spotlight is permanently fixed on Johnson and his personal defects---*Johnson's* politics of interest, *Johnson's* inability to break free of that political style---those are the reasons that the Great Society failed.<sup>16</sup>

Writers at *The Nation* were not writing in a vacuum. Nor were they interpreting the actions of President Johnson or programs The Great Society in one. They operated within traditions of liberal thought, of analysis of the presidency, of understanding Lyndon Johnson, and countless others. Moreover, presidents do not simply act and let others interpret their actions. They try to manage public perception for obvious reasons, as they are elected officials, as well as attempting to shape, in real time, how people understand them and their actions.

Johnson's personality, the subject of such explanatory power in *The Nation*, is also the subject of intense scrutiny from biographers and historians. Johnson's character was defined by his mental flexibility---best demonstrated during his tenure as Senate Majority Leader---able to hold together a democratic party that threatened to collapse in on itself at any moment.<sup>17</sup> He

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Inside the essay is a cartoon of Johnson riding a donkey backwards, with the donkey travelling away from a sign pointing to The Great Society. Johnson, dressed like a cowboy, looks toward The Great Society but travels the opposite direction

<sup>17</sup> The 1957 Civil Rights Act is emblematic of his political skills. Johnson, both aware that his presidential ambitions would never be realized if he was seen as a Southerner and that, as conditions for Black people in the South became more publicized (especially in the case of the Emmet Till murder and subsequent trial), the tide was gradually turning against segregation, needed to prove that the democratic

understood the fundamental incoherency of the Democratic Party that he led, and was able to be just enough things to just enough people to wield power. Johnson was relentlessly ambitious, a genius politician, funny, charming, impossibly hard-working, amoral, cynical, compassionate, crude, abusive, brave, and almost every other adjective all at once. As president, he seemed wooden, inauthentic, and mechanical on television, but in person he could be a hurricane. The unique scale of Johnson's personality makes some of the significance *The Nation's* writers placed on it understandable.

*The Nation's* writers assume that The Great Society could have been realized, if not for Johnson occupying the presidency. Simultaneously, inside the White House, attempts to streamline the unwieldy federal bureaucracy came to a much different conclusion. Johnson, like presidents before him<sup>18</sup>, was interested in streamlining the White House and faced pressure to do so by those interested in efficient government. Furthermore, the scale of The Great Society begged for a corresponding re-organization of a White House that had created entirely new bureaucratic knots. During the Eisenhower administration, studies of the presidency revealed fundamental problems in its ability to govern. Arnold quotes Milton Eisenhower, who said, "I am absolutely convinced that the task...is an impossible one, that the responsibilities cannot be redeemed as the Constitution and the laws require, and this constantly becomes more acute as

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party and the senate could act (additionally, Black voters were becoming more and more important and if the Republican party could pass a civil rights bill it could doom the Democratic party). His challenge was to both convince the Southern senators to avoid filibustering the bill and prevent liberal senators from crafting a bill that genuinely challenged segregation, which would surely result in an embarrassing and prolonged filibuster, while also convincing enough liberal senators to vote for the bill in order for it to pass. The result was the first Civil Rights bill to pass the senate since reconstruction and an almost completely toothless bill.

<sup>18</sup> Throughout the 20th century, presidents semi-frequently either studied or implemented reorganization proposals. Eisenhower, under pressure from conservative Republicans via the second Hoover Commission (a collection of conservatives concerned with what they saw as an increasingly wasteful government), even implemented some of the Presidential Advisor's Committee on Government Organization's (PACGO) recommendations, although by the time Eisenhower did the recommendations had both shifted much of its focus to the legislative branch and had won reelection and was no longer concerned with the right wing of his party.

our country grows...and the responsibilities of the President increase”.<sup>19</sup> The massive programs of the Great Society were accompanied by yet another overlapping layer of bureaucracy.

Johnson, at least before administration collapsed, was interested in reorganization. Multiple plans were commissioned and considered, although as Johnson’s political strength waned he gradually lost interest in them. However, the reports signal just how fundamental the problems in the White House were. For example, the White House had no ability to evaluate its programs. “This paper highlighted for the task force the paucity of evaluation of programs in government. It suggests a necessary connection between basic research on social problems and the analysis of program performance. The paper observed that there was virtually no organized effort in government to analyze the social mechanisms of the problems addressed by policy”.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, “As staff director Bohlen put the issue: ‘The staff has reservation about the desirability, efficacy, and utility (*especially to the President*) of superimposing a Presidential structure on top of a host of rather fundamental weakness and problems within the structure of American Government, which the new volume of complex domestic social programs has exposed””.<sup>21</sup> And although The Great Society’s ambition revealed weaknesses, “[Columbia Professor Wallace Sayre] saw them as connected to the traditional issue of presidential management ‘the needs of the president require that his leadership over the executive agencies in Washington be greatly improved in strength before he is asked to risk his resources in field coordination of the executive agencies, particularly to equip regional officials with the power of decision””.<sup>22</sup> While *The Nation*’s writers saw a President either unable or unwilling to fulfill the

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<sup>19</sup> Arnold, Peri E. *Making the Managerial Presidency: Comprehensive Reorganization Planning, 1905-1996*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

dream of The Great Society, the people brought in to study the organization of the government suggest that the American Government itself was a significant problem, and made the large-scale, inter-department coordination required to accomplish a program as complicated as The Great Society almost impossible.

As President, Johnson's personality was also becoming the focus of media coverage because of the evolving nature of the media. For much of American history, the president communicated to a relatively small group of people. Technological development opened up mass communication, and politicians gradually realized its potential. As radios became ubiquitous, Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats created a more intimate relationship between the president and the nation, his voice suddenly beamed into homes across the country. Truman institutionalized what FDR created, establishing norms like presidential press conferences.

Television became a fundamental part of American life during the 1950s, and Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy understood the effects of the new medium and took advantage of it. The radio brought a president's voice into americans' homes; television brought in the president's face. This brought a new level of intimacy to the relationship between the president and the people. Eisenhower took full advantage of the more personal relationship.<sup>23</sup> Benefitting from an unassailable image as the general in charge of D-Day, he calmly won two terms on the strength of his general popularity. In Mary Stuckey's words, "one cannot conceive of the eighteenth-century electorate announcing that they liked George (or John or Tom Jim); yet the slogan most often associated with the 1950s is undoubtedly 'I like Ike'".<sup>24</sup> Eisenhower

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<sup>23</sup> His vice presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, was similarly adept at rudimentary television-based public relations. During the 1952 campaign, a corruption scandal threatened to force him to resign from the ticket, but after a television address in which he preserved his nomination by presenting himself as a common man who took money from wealthy donors but only to buy his children a dog, the Checkers Speech, as it became known, both saved his political career and was an influential example of the possible power of television.

<sup>24</sup> Stuckey, Mary E. *The President as Interpreter-in-Chief / Mary E. Stuckey*. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1991.

understood the effectiveness of his personal popularity and took care to shape his public image to maintain it. He presented himself as different from a politician, closer to an average person. He avoided negative campaigns, trying to maintain this anti-political style through his public humility and geniality.<sup>25</sup> Eisenhower carried that strategy into his television appearances, where he was adept at conveying honesty and frankness through the screen. However, television becoming the standard occasionally hurt Eisenhower, as “increased presidential speech led to the expectation that the president would speak. Eisenhower was criticized for not speaking out, or for not speaking out strongly enough, on the issue of civil rights. He was also criticized for not responding publicly to McCarthy”.<sup>26</sup> Television’s development gave the president the ability to address the nation at will. But that ability, combined with the need of television stations for news to cover, and the lucrative nature of presidential news, broke down some of the barriers between the president and the public.

The Kennedy administration is fundamentally connected to television---his victory is commonly attributed to his performance in the first televised presidential debates, while his assassination, and the subsequent assassination of Oswald, was experienced through television. The debate itself is notable for its dryness---Kennedy won through style instead of substance, appearing confident, handsome, and young, while Nixon looked uncomfortable and clammy---and this focus on style is emblematic of both television’s effects and Kennedy’s understanding of them.<sup>27</sup> Once in office, television continued to change the way the presidency operated.

Presidential press conferences were televised for the first time, instantly changing the way the

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<sup>25</sup> He also was able to rely on Vice President Nixon to attack in his place

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> It is unclear if the debates were actually the deciding factor in one of the closest Presidential elections ever, but because they were perceived as consequential it does not actually matter---politicians (most notably Nixon, his opponent) learned from Kennedy’s success either way.

president communicated information to the nation, allowing Kennedy to go over the head of an obstinate Congress unwilling to pass his legislative agenda. However, creating this pipeline also fundamentally changed the relationship between president and press. Presidential press had previously been primarily off-the-record---presidents were generally candid to the press---and reporters knew far more information than what they passed on to the public. But, as the televised press conference was primarily an opportunity to speak to the public, the press lost their privileged place near the president.<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, much like Eisenhower, understood that his popularity was primarily due to his image as a courageous and noble champion of America, and thus cultivated that image as much as possible. This is a problem for the president when “the requirements of public relations [seem] to supersede the requirements of governance. The rhetorical opportunities of the office [become] constrained by the need for a continual flow of presidential messages as television and the public habituate themselves to an expectation of a continual presidential presence”.<sup>29</sup> It was in Kennedy’s (and Eisenhower’s) interest to depict themselves as valiant crusaders, but the reality of presidential weakness in the face of a hostile legislature or bureaucracy meant that as the public image of the president became more important, and as presidents both became more adept at shaping their image, and more reliant on their public image to gain power, their “control of the rest of leadership is likely to slip away---congressional relations become a burden, both Congress and the bureaucracy become alien, enemies, for they impede the functioning of the ‘real’ government, the government centered in the White House. Once the understanding of the rest of the government as equally legitimate...is

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

lost or weakened, presidents return to mass leadership, this time because they have no other choice if they are to govern.<sup>30</sup>

Television beat Johnson into the presidency by only a few years. Johnson, who had successfully used the media to further his ambition throughout his career, understood the media and media members---in his helpfully vulgar style---as tools with which to increase his popularity.<sup>31</sup> As president, he was unable to control the media, and his attempts to do so contributed to a growing enmity between the White House and the press corps. Before winning his Senate election, Johnson, via his wife Lady Bird, acquired a radio station. The radio station works as a fitting symbol for much of Johnson's interactions with the press as president---although he had been on the cutting edge of politics for much of his life, he had not kept up with television's transformative effects---and his inability to adapt both made him unable to control his portrayal by the media and disliked by that media.<sup>32</sup>

Upon assuming the presidency, Johnson quickly attempted to integrate the media into his political system, rewarding positive coverage with access while isolating critical voices.<sup>33</sup> However, he found that the national media was unwilling to be a conduit for information. Journalism was becoming as interested in creating stories as relaying them. Not only was the president no longer privileged with complete control of their personal image, Johnson's person was far too fantastic to be ignored as material. Johnson had been part of national politics for

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Emblematic of his treatment of the media was his use of a military preparedness subcommittee during at the beginning of his senate career. Harry Truman had burst into national prominence and the vice presidency while head of a similar committee during World War Two; Johnson, although accomplishing little of note, made headlines by using staff, often former journalists, to ensure that he gave reporters enticing quotes.

<sup>32</sup> During his 1948 campaign for Senate he both used a helicopter to campaign across Texas and state-of-the-art polls with which he and his advisors won a seemingly unwinnable campaign (along with large scale election fraud)

<sup>33</sup> This was precisely the wheeling-and-dealing genius that Johnson used to dominate the Senate, a useful reminder that it was not just technological change that Johnson had not caught up with but a political environment that no longer rewarded his skillset. It is also something that Kennedy had done successfully, developing friendly relationships with individual journalists, sometimes even by asking for help.

decades; to his detriment, he knew how previous presidents had been granted protection by the media, notably both FDR's and Kennedy's health problems. Appearing "presidential" for those presidents was aided by a media who hid potentially image-altering information. But, because of both the increasing assertiveness of the media and Johnson's outsized personality, Johnson was not just unable to effectively control his image but actively portrayed in a negative personal light. Johnson's media strategy was obsessed with the need to appear presidential---but images of Johnson as a dignified statesman was hopelessly undercut by images of his personal foibles, while images of Johnson as a voice for the voiceless were undercut by images of him concealing bombings in Vietnam.

*The Nation's* writers analysis of The Great Society and President Johnson reflect, reveal, and contribute to the effects of media evolution on the presidency. The framework by which they understand The Great Society and its relationship to Johnson was developed in response to the changes in style and position of the presidency, even if those columnists didn't understand the long-term ramifications of the changes. They attempted to understand, and in doing so give a glimpse into the process by which the new standards of the presidency were internalized. Returning to the "Another Johnson Gimmick Editorial", the writer clearly views Johnson as more interested in style over substance, writing, "The President will probably get his way on the expanded loan-participation plan for which he has been cracking the whip with exceptional sharpness. The plan is one of those legislative gimmicks that will add millions to the taxpayers' burden but will no doubt improve the President's 'image' as a great economizer and budget slicer"<sup>34</sup>. Johnson wants to be seen as an economizer so he throws his weight behind a bill that will help him appear as one, despite the bill being, in the eyes of the writers, wasteful. The

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<sup>34</sup>1966. *Nation* 202 (21): 602-6.

contradictions inherent to the presidency reveal themselves in these sentences. The president needs to be conscious of their image and must actively work to maintain it, aware that his ability to govern depends on it, despite the fact that he constantly acts in opposition to that image---both as part of his day-to-day activities and while constructing it. Finally, Johnson's inability to meet this challenge is apparent. Johnson is unable to manage the gap between his image and his actions. Johnson's "credibility gap"<sup>35</sup> is often understood as a reflection of the secrecy and untrustworthiness of his administration, but the president relies on obfuscation and confusion of their actions in order to maintain their public image. Johnson's problem was the unsuccessful nature of his image crafting, which was so thin that even a minor legislative attempt at appearing economical could be immediately seen through by a writer at *The Nation*.

When read en masse, common links between The Great Society and Johnson in *The Nation* appear. Especially by the late 60s, analysis of the Great Society was nearly identical to analysis of Johnson's person. One writer puts it as bluntly as possible when describing its failure, writing, "A better explanation, however, rests more with the man than with events".<sup>36</sup> Just as before, he argues that what prevented The Great Society from being realized was Johnson's personal defects. Continuing, he says, "Johnson failed because essentially he is a fickle romantic (except in his own business life), a trifler (except in military matters). Much more concerned with defending his pride than with holding a people together, Johnson surrounded himself with and took advice from tired men, toadies and second-raters"<sup>37</sup>. Again, not only does this emphasize the link between Johnson's person and The Great Society, and not only does

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<sup>35</sup> I have generally avoided this term in my essay because it comes pre-packaged with assumptions about the role of the Presidency and their relationship to both the people and the media. What I mean by the term here is the problem of a public that no longer buys Johnson's version of himself.

<sup>36</sup> Sherrill, Robert G. 1969. *Nation* 208 (2): 42-45.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

Johnson's person doom The Great Society, Johnson's flaws are both an inability to project a "presidential" image<sup>38</sup>, and being too focused on his personal image. This critique is echoed in an article entitled "Feuding Over Poverty" from 1964. The author, discussing the Mobilization For Youth program's involvement in radical activities such as tenant organization, the New York Daily News's smear campaign against them (with the help of the police), and the difference between Kennedy and Johnson, writes, "The new President made poverty a major issue, but he was not committed emotionally to Mobilization as Kennedy had been. Though Johnson called it one of the most promising anti-poverty projects, it did not bear his stamp at a time when he desperately wanted to accomplish something for himself".<sup>39</sup> Again, *The Nation's* writer's saw Johnson as too focused on his own personal image, unwilling to support an effective anti-poverty program because of his desire to differentiate himself from Kennedy. Furthermore, Johnson, unlike Kennedy, is unwilling to support the program when it desperately needs support, under attack by the New York political establishment. This is consistent with numerous examples of writers attacking Johnson for his devotion to polling and popularity---instead of a public servant he is a public opinion servant.

Johnson's performance issues made the situation irreparable. In the essay "The Great Society: An Old New Deal", the author puts this as bluntly as possible, writing, "In any evaluation of the Great Society, it is important to understand the President's attachment to this consensus approach. It follows but does not lead. Indeed, it represents the abdication of leadership. Its primary source of information is the poll. It reacts to crisis but does little to prevent them from materializing in the hope that somehow the periodic swellings will subside without an eruption. Above all, it wants to love and be loved by all, and by failing this to be

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<sup>38</sup> In the sense that he is seen as weak, lazy, and foolish, contrary to his attempts to be seen as "Presidential"

<sup>39</sup> Krosney, Herbert. 1964. *Nation* 199 (19): 455-61.

loved by as many as possible. Its supreme objective is to win elections, and elections can only be won, in its opinion, only if it can somehow divine where the consensus lies”.<sup>40</sup> This quotation contains both the relationship between Johnson and the media, and the contradictions inherent in the presidency and Johnson’s inability to manage them. While Johnson tries to appear “presidential”, he is a poor salesman. Because he is perceived as empty, doing whatever the polls say is most popular, his Great Society is empty, designed for popularity and image rather than function. Johnson, a genius politician, is unable to fulfill the duties of the presidency because the president does not operate as a politician. Instead, they are more like a combination of a celebrity and mascot. As politics is subsumed into television, good politicians become less valuable, especially compared to good tv. The writer lambasts Johnson for being self-interested, but Johnson’s real mistake is in being seen as self-interested. Image, style, and public relations suture the country to the president, disguising the gaps between the public goals and private actions of the president.<sup>41</sup> Johnson, unable to do so, could never be seen as “presidential”, and thus was subject to scrutiny. Once investigated, the gaps between his public and private administration, already bursting at the seams, defined his image, rather than the other way around.

Johnson’s struggles with the media anticipate the struggles that would become inherent in the modern presidency. His immediate predecessors, Eisenhower and Kennedy, began to face the constraints of a televised presidency---the contradiction between an increasingly hard to understand world and country and the stylistic language of television that rewards simple, easy-to-follow narratives---but they were able to maintain coherence through the strength of their

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<sup>40</sup> Rousseas, Stephen W. *Nation* 200, no. 19 (May 10, 1965): 499–501.

<sup>41</sup> It also works proactively, as JFK discovered after the Bay of Pigs. Despite the embarrassing failure, his popularity kept rising, confounding the president.

personal image. Unable to weaponize his personal image, Johnson's<sup>42</sup> "public speech was often designed to obfuscate their actions, and who sought public support at the cost of public honesty. The slippage between presidential speech and presidential action became both clear and painful. Their successors have learned to present themselves so as to obscure this slippage, but presidents since Johnson seem to be more concerned with their images in the public mind than with the issues those images were thought to be based on. Their rhetoric shifted from emphasizing specific policies to emphasizing the legitimacy of the presidential role and rights to take action...the process of governance is wholly intermixed with the processes previously associated with electioneering"<sup>43</sup>. Johnson's presidency shows, and taught, just how dangerous this balancing act could be. Politicians had generally understood the best way to improve public image is a program like the Great Society---something that provides a clear benefit to a large number of people. The New Deal being the obvious model.<sup>44</sup> Roosevelt's immense popularity directly translated to political power---congressmen were scared of the consequences of opposing him. In Texas, the young, ambitious state youth administration leader, Lyndon Johnson, won a surprise victory over a crowded field by positioning himself as the most pro-Roosevelt candidate. Johnson, having spent his entire career learning how to work the levers of Congressional power, was successful in passing a New Deal type program, but it had little effect on his image. Instead, Johnson's legislative efforts were perceived only through the lens of his

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<sup>42</sup> Johnson and Nixon faced many of the same problems, but this essay is focused on Johnson's specific role, and thus arguments about either grouping them together or differentiating the two, while interesting, are outside the scope of this essay. Furthermore, while Johnson and Nixon are often grouped together in their public failures and tarnishing of the presidency, Nixon's downfall via Watergate was fundamentally different from Johnson's gradual loss of legitimacy.

<sup>43</sup> Stuckey, Mary E. *The President as Interpreter-in-Chief* / Mary E. Stuckey. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1991.

<sup>44</sup> Yet, The New Deal was not just a program, as I have shown, Roosevelt's utilization of radio was a profound shift in the relationship between president and people, combining with the desperation of the Great Depression and New Deal to create such a passionate base of support.

image---the equation seemed to have been reversed---his public image was not a result of the Great Society, The Great Society's perception was a result of his public image.

Not only did future presidents encounter the same constraints as Johnson, they learned from his failures.<sup>45</sup> In the immediate aftermath, presidents Ford and Carter generally avoided risk as much as possible when managing their images.<sup>46</sup> They found that an anti-image image, just like an anti-politics politics, ran into difficulty wielding power. An amusing example is the Chevy Chase influenced image of Ford as clumsy and bumbling---Ford encountered the same problems as Johnson---when the presidency takes place on television, coming across poorly is disastrous. And while Johnson's flamboyant Texan mannerisms, vulgarity, and fundamentally political nature rubbed reporters and the public the wrong way, especially over television which robbed Johnson of all of his strengths while displaying his weaknesses, Ford's mistake was simply to fall down, and without a strong public image, found himself defined by his satirists.

In this way, Johnson acts like a prism, glimpses of whom are visible in each successive president. Every president who followed him was faced with the same basic problems. Johnson undoubtedly failed---*The Nation*, along with the rest of the country, make clear that Johnson was not worthy of the job. But both nations were unaware and uninterested in the impossibility of Johnson's task. Johnson had no choice---he needed to try to control his image. He came into office without winning an election, one year before the next one. His predecessor did succeed at building his image, and combined with his death, he threatened to blot Johnson out completely. Johnson had built his power through political genius in the Senate. When he finally achieved his

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<sup>45</sup> They learned from his limited successes as well---he set the standard for presidential disaster visits, taking advantage of television to publicly comfort victims.

<sup>46</sup> This is of course more complicated than simply avoiding risk---the image of "I'm not projecting an image" is one that still requires projection---but the intricacies of the public relations strategies of the 70s presidents is beyond the scope of this essay.

lifelong obsession of the presidency, he found that his political skill was useless, while his faults were broadcasted for the world to see. Yet, through failure Johnson created the rubric for success. Johnson is reflected by subsequent presidents because subsequent presidents operated within the framework he established for the office. He was unable to smooth over the ever-increasing number of fissures that threatened to unravel the country, but by trying, he created the penumbra of a phantom president that could succeed. The combination of his specific circumstances and his specific person meant that he couldn't manage a position that had become a combination of mascot and oracle, but by trying he established the parameters his successors worked within.

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