of school and took off for California. "I'm not some conformist middle-class personality. I could never be bureaucratized." Of course, it was unfair of the young to cast Johnson in so dark a role, but he also did not perceive the genuine impulses behind their own, somewhat different, American dream.

More interesting and less understandable than Johnson's inability to relate to the critical few was his inability to retain the support of that large majority—which by and large shared his attitudes about work, progress, economic success, and the importance of maintaining America's position in the world. They, like Lyndon Johnson, tended to be patriotic and proud of the fact that America had never lost a war. And also like Lyndon Johnson, the majority of Americans still believed in anti-Communism and in America's right and responsibility to intervene in support of small nations threatened by the enemy. After investing so much, the people wanted to believe their investment had been worthwhile. However discouraged they became about the long and appalling course of the war, they strongly opposed the tactics of the critics, especially when the critique became associated with rioting, disruption, bomb-throwing, and desecration of the flag.

But Johnson never took the steps that would have been necessary to mobilize this majority. Afraid of arousing the emotions of the masses, he refused publicly to turn his critics into enemies of the people and he kept his own public statements on the war to a minimum. Obsessed with criticism from the left and the right, he simply assumed the support of the middle, an assumption that could not be tested so long as the Congress, the party system, and the peace movement remained incapable of defining viable alternatives to the administration's policy. In the absence of these alternatives, it appeared that only a small minority was visibly in opposition to the President's actions in Vietnam. And it was the virtually unanimous belief of other politicians that his renomination was inevitable, and that his chances for re-election were good. But—as the next chapter illustrates—one of the constitutional checks on executive power remained intact: the requirement of periodic elections. And once the presidential primaries opened up the mechanisms of choice, this public consensus was tested and it was clear that Lyndon Johnson's support had collapsed.

Chapter 12 / THE WITHDRAWAL

After three years of persisting in the same policy, Lyndon Johnson finally decided on March 31, 1968, both to de-escalate the war and to withdraw from politics. Why? This chapter suggests that the Tet offensive and the presidential primaries changed the prism through which Johnson viewed the war and his Presidency. Reality returned as the checks and balances of the American political system came back into play.

The success of the enemy's sudden attack against what had until then appeared to be impregnable areas deep within South Vietnam suddenly exposed the falsity of the administration's optimistic progress reports. Until Tet, Vietcong forces had chosen to fight in jungles or villages, striking quickly and moving on, their true vitality hidden and, therefore, more easily concealed from the American people. Now the news of captured cities, and the films of skirmishes shown on the TV screen night after night, exhibited the other side's strength. Surely an enemy with the resilience and the resources to mount an attack on the scale of the Tet offensive was not on the verge of collapse. Though Tet may not have surprised Johnson—he later claimed in his memoirs that his advisers had predicted the offensive weeks in advance—it certainly made the man who proclaimed his foresight only after the fact look
surprised. What happened at Tet taught the American public an entirely different lesson from the one Johnson had intended to convey.

As the ever-impending peace—created throughout the late fall of 1967 by the optimistic tone of administration statements—gave way to the reality of continuing war, public support for Lyndon Johnson dropped to the lowest point ever. In the space of six weeks, between late January and early March of 1968, the percentage of Americans who approved of Johnson's handling of the Presidency dropped from 48 to 36 percent, while the percentage of those who supported his handling of the war dropped from 40 to 26 percent. This decline in public support was both father and child of an equally dramatic decline in media support. Between January and March, seven major newspapers, among them the Wall Street Journal, the New York Post, and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, moved from general support of the administration's war policy to sharp criticism. Life, Look, Time, Newsweek, CBS, and NBC, each in its own way, came out against the war. And the erosion of support did not stop with the public and the press; it also affected the Congress, the Democratic Party, the Cabinet and the White House staff. Even the members of the Senior Advisory Group, who, until Tet, had been among Johnson's strongest supporters, now turned against his war policy. In a March meeting at the White House, McGeorge Bundy reported to Johnson the group's consensus that the present policy could not achieve its objective without virtually unlimited resources, that it was no longer being supported by a majority of the American people, and that significant changes were therefore required.²

But Tet alone could not have produced the dramatic decline in Johnson's fortunes without the presidential primaries, which finally provided effective expression of the mounting dissent. Even before Tet, the mood of the electorate had begun to swing against the Johnson administration as exasperation at the President's handling of the war combined with a loss of confidence in his handling of the racial situation. When Johnson began his Presidency in 1963, eight out of ten Americans—as measured by the Gallup poll's question "Do you approve or disapprove of the way the President is handling his job?"—approved of his actions. By the end of the following year his level of support had dropped to seven out of ten. The year after that, 1965, it was down to six out of ten; by 1966 to five out of ten, and by 1967 to four out of ten. In other words, with each year in office, Johnson lost one supporter in ten.³

Commentators and journalists writing at the time interpreted Johnson's diminishing support as a reflection of changing attitudes: from hawk to dove on Vietnam, from liberal to conservative on civil rights. But later studies provide a different interpretation of Johnson's loss: they suggest that what changed between 1964 and 1968 was not people's attitudes toward the policies Johnson espoused—in 1968 the majority of Americans still supported Johnson's position on Vietnam, on Medicare, open housing, desegregation, and equal employment—but their level of trust in Johnson's capacity to cope with domestic and international problems.⁴

A leader's authority comes from the public's belief in his right and ability to rule, in the willingness of individuals to suspend their own judgment and accept their leader's because they trust him and the system he represents. By 1968 Johnson had lost this trust. The issue was not simply Johnson's loss of popularity; it was his loss of credibility. A majority of people believed he regularly lied to them. And that belief soon spread from matters of personal biography to high matters of state. When asked in 1964 which party was most likely to avoid a larger war, the majority of Americans had chosen the Democrats. This confidence was destroyed in the ensuing four years of bombing and fighting in Vietnam. In 1968 the same question drew a majority for the Republicans.⁵

Unhappiness about the war and the protesters, the blacks and the bigots, the young and their critics, attached itself to the man in the White House. Too much outcry, too many riots, too many demonstrations: the nation seemed in a state of continual unrest and, as the people saw it, the President—the man at the nation's center—was to blame. Accordingly, the turbulent sixties became Lyndon Johnson's problem just as the depression had become Herbert Hoover's problem and the "mess in Washington" had become Harry Truman's problem.⁶

Few politicians at the time gauged the depth of the public discontent or its political power to unseat an incumbent President. Even after Tet, notwithstanding the deprecating chatter in Washington, it was simply assumed—by Democrats and Republicans alike—that Lyndon Johnson would be the party's nominee. When, in December, 1967, Senator Eugene McCarthy, supported by thousands of antiwar activists, had entered his name on the ballot for the New Hampshire primary, his challenge was regarded by official Washington as a somewhat baffling exercise begun by a hitherto stable member of the Senate
liberal establishment. Two weeks before the primary, a *Time* magazine poll showed McCarthy with only 11 percent of the vote. Weeks of canvassing, going from door to door in every part of the state, however, had shown that the voters were anxious and upset—about the war, the economy, the general state of the country, and Lyndon Johnson. “You know when I first thought I might have a chance?” McCarthy said. “When I realized that you could go into any bar in the country and insult Lyndon Johnson and nobody would punch you in the nose.” In the final days before the vote, these submerged feelings had surfaced, albeit too late to influence the calculations of observers.

When the polls of the New Hampshire primary closed, Washington was boggled by the results—42 percent for McCarthy, scarcely known to New Hampshire citizens two months before. McCarthy’s “victory” was hailed by the doves as a triumph over the hawks, an expression of the public’s reversal on the war issue. But McCarthy’s support in New Hampshire came from hawks as well as doves; in fact, among his supporters, those who believed Johnson should exercise more force in Vietnam outnumbered those who believed in less force by a margin of 3-2. Apparently, the sole common denominator was a deep dissatisfaction with the Johnson administration. Though McCarthy’s views on many issues were contradictory to the views of many of his supporters, he was an alternative to Lyndon Johnson, the best and only vehicle for expressing anger and frustration at the incumbent administration.

The surprising totals in New Hampshire convinced Robert Kennedy to enter the race. Kennedy had considered running even before New Hampshire, but had concluded that if he were the first to step forward, he would be accused of running to express a scarcely disguised vendetta against Johnson, of splitting the party, of spoiling the election. But after New Hampshire the party was split anyway. Its prospects in the election seemed uncertain, if not already ruined. So Robert F. Kennedy seized his chance for a candidacy that would no longer see as a vendetta. On Saturday morning, March 16, 1968, in the same Senate Caucus Room where his brother had announced eight years before, he began the second Kennedy quest for the Presidency.

“If I ever had any doubts about Johnson’s running,” James Rowe said, “I would have lost them the day Kennedy announced because he is not about to turn the country over to Bobby.” Lyndon Johnson, so formidable in the acquisition and use of power, so unyielding in the pursuit of those policies that were destroying his popularity, his programs, and his political support, would surely not refuse a challenge led by his most despised adversary.

In the days following Kennedy’s entrance into the race, the President’s actions seemed to confirm Rowe’s and many others’ assessment that at last Lyndon Johnson was riled and ready to fight.

On March 17, Johnson flew to Minneapolis to address a meeting of the National Farmers Union. Fists pounding the lectern, he truculently declared: “Your President has come here to ask you people and all the other people of this nation to join us in a total national effort to win the war, to win the peace, and to complete the job that must be done here at home. Make no mistake about it—I don’t want a man in here to go back thinking otherwise—we are going to win.” Back in Washington several days later, Johnson told the National Foreign Policy Conference at the State Department that “danger and sacrifice built this land.” He continued: “Today we are the Number One Nation. And we are going to stay the Number One Nation.” In the meantime, a major speech was planned for the end of March. The early drafts spelled out a tough and uncompromising stand: a refusal to consider a bombing halt without clear reciprocity, a call-up of fifty thousand reserves, and a demand that Congress pass the surtax as a measure of patriotic support. These were bellicose speeches, suggesting from the outside that Johnson had abandoned his middle-of-the-road approach in favor of all-out war.

But the predictions that Johnson would stand and fight, based as they were on familiarity with a number of his superficial traits—his tendency to overwhelm people in one-to-one confrontations or group sessions, his apparent pleasure in ridiculing his enemies in private, and his ruthless drive for power—ignored deeper layers of his personality. They failed to weigh his most consistent pattern of behavior: his profound aversion to conflict; his reliance, in the face of potentially disruptive situations, upon bargaining if at all possible; his terror of campaign speeches, where the size of the audience was beyond the reach of his personal abilities and skills. As we have seen, he had written out and, at the last moment, discarded a statement of withdrawal before the 1964 convention; just as, in 1948, he had prepared, and instructed an aide to issue, a resignation statement—an order ignored at Lady Bird’s advice—three weeks before his election to the U.S. Senate.
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All his life Johnson had believed that power was something you obtained if you had the energy and drive to work harder than everyone else. Power, in turn, made good works possible, and good works brought love and gratitude, which then provided the inspiration and vitality for further work. This formula informed Johnson’s personal experience: time and again he had been able to parlay his limited resources into substantial political holdings, rising from Congressman to Senator to Majority Leader to Vice President and finally to President. But now, three years after his landslide victory, the American people had, Johnson believed, broken the cycle of power, energy, and good works by denying him the appreciation he deserved for all that he had produced. Indeed, by Johnson’s assessment, his administration had produced more than any administration in history, and he could document his claim: he had given more laws, more houses, more medical services, more jobs to more people, than any other President. Surely, he had earned the love and gratitude of the American people. Yet as he looked around him in 1967 Johnson found only paralyzing bitterness. He could not comprehend the nature of the unrest or the cause of his unpopularity.

“How is it possible,” Johnson repeatedly asked, “that all these people could be so ungrateful to me after I had given them so much? Take the Negroes. I fought for them from the first day I came into office. I spilled my guts out in getting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through Congress. I put everything I had into that speech before the joint session in 1965. I tried to make it possible for every child of every color to grow up in a nice house, to eat a solid breakfast, to attend a decent school, and to get a good and lasting job. I asked so little in return. Just a little thanks. Just a little appreciation. That’s all. But look at what I got instead. Riots in 175 cities. Looting. Burning. Shooting. It ruined everything. Then take the students. I wanted to help them, too. I fought on their behalf for scholarships and loans and grants. I fought for better teachers and better schools. And look what I got back. Young people by the thousands leaving their universities, marching in the streets, chanting that horrible song about how many kids I had killed that day. And the poor, they, too, turned against me. When Congress cut the funds for the Great Society, they made me Mr. Villain. I remember once going to visit a poor family in Appalachia. They had seven children, all skinny and sick. I promised the mother and father I would make things better for them. I told them all my hopes for their future. They seemed real happy to talk with me, and I felt good about that. But then as I walked toward the door, I noticed two pictures on the shabby wall. One was Jesus Christ on the cross; the other was John Kennedy. I felt as if I’d been slapped in the face.”

So strong was Johnson’s need for affection, and so vital his need for public gratitude, that he experienced this rejection of his “good works” as an absolute rejection of himself. Denied the appreciation which not only empowered but sustained his self, the love which validated his identity, the anatomy which gave Lyndon Johnson’s ego its shape was dissolved. His energy and capacity to direct that energy outward abandoned him. Every presidential responsibility (speeches, conducting meetings, greeting visitors) took inordinate effort. The man who had battened on the goodwill of crowds, accelerating his pace in proportion to the crowd’s number and affection, now could not leave the White House without being harassed by demonstrators and pickets. He had once liked to unwind with reporters, Congressmen, and staff, holding forth upon his strategy for the Great Society. But now Vietnam dominated his every word and a savage rain of vituperation fell upon his staff, the Congress, and reporters.

Now he began to marshal all his resources to fashion a defense, and the energies absorbed in this task of defending the self were no longer available for the everyday demands of leadership. Even at small group meetings Johnson now seemed unaware of what those present were thinking or even talking about. He gave the impression of not seeing his audience at all, having lost his sensitivity to the subtleties of tone and emphasis. This was not simply the passive inattention of a tired mind; it was the active inattention of a preoccupied mind, a mind whose focus was increasingly limited in mobility and scope.

Johnson had traversed 1965, 1966, and most of 1967retreating into a dreamlike world in which the tide on both the war and the Great Society was just about to turn. By early 1968 this dream had died. Daily contact with the real world—with the evidence of a deepening inflation, with the results of the Tet offensive, and with the challenge of the primaries—was forcing Johnson back to reality. If the days of accomplishment were truly finished, as Johnson suspected, what then was the point? No good works, no love, no self-esteem. Only the endless repetiton of sordid, unhappy days. Johnson’s enthusiasm and
vitality steadily receded. He was really tired, and he knew it.

Hating the days, Johnson hated the nights even more. He began dreaming again the dream of paralysis that had haunted him since early childhood. Only this time he was lying in a bed in the Red Room of the White House, instead of sitting in a chair in the middle of the open plains. His head was still his, but from the neck down his body was the thin, paralyzed body that had been the affliction of both Woodrow Wilson and his own grandmother in their final years. All his presidential assistants were in the next room. He could hear them actively fighting with one another to divide up his power: Joe Califano wanted the legislative program; Walt Rostow wanted the decisions on foreign policy; Arthur Okun wanted to formulate the budget; and George Christian wanted to handle relations with the public. He could hear them, but he could not command them, for he could neither talk nor walk. He was sick and stilled, but not a single aide tried to protect him.

The dream terrified Johnson, waking from his sleep. Lying in the dark, he could find no peace until he got out of bed, and, by the light of a small flashlight, walked the halls of the White House to the place where Woodrow Wilson’s portrait hung. He found something soothing in the act of touching Wilson’s picture; he could sleep again. He was still Lyndon Johnson, and he was still alive and moving; it was Woodrow Wilson who was dead. This ritual, however, brought little lasting peace; when morning came, Johnson’s mind was again filled with fears. Only gradually did he recognize the resemblance between this dream and the stampede dream of his boyhood. Making the connection, his fears intensified; he was certain now that paralysis was his inevitable fate. Remembering his family’s history of early strokes, he feared from the first day of his Presidency was actually coming true. Immobilized, still in office nominally, yet not actually in control: this seemed to Johnson the worst situation imaginable. He could not rid himself of the suspicion that a mean God had set out to torture him in the cruelest manner possible. His suffering now no longer consisted of his usual melancholy; it was an acute throbbing pain, and he craved relief. More than anything he wanted peace and quiet. An end to the pain.14

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Through the fall and winter of 1967, Johnson later reported, the decision to withdraw from politics took hold. He discussed it, he wrote in a section of his memoirs that reads as if it were a defense attorney’s brief, with a number of people, among them John Connally, George Christian, General Westmoreland, William S. White, Horace Busby, and, of course, Lady Bird. He claimed he had considered announcing it at the end of the State of the Union message in early January, 1968; he had asked Horace Busby to write a draft statement. But when he got to the Capitol that night—and his explanation is not entirely convincing from this man of meticulous detail—he reached into his pocket and discovered that he had forgotten to bring it with him. The announcement was not made.15 Then between the end of January and the middle of March came the Tet offensive, McCarthy’s victory, the collapse of the gold market, the publication of the Riot Commission Report, and, most importantly, Robert Kennedy’s entrance into the presidential race.

“I felt,” Johnson said, “that I was being chased on all sides by a giant stampede coming at me from all directions. On one side, the American people were stampeding me to do something about Vietnam. On another side, the inflationary economy was booming out of control. Up ahead were dozens of danger signs pointing to another summer of riots in the cities. I was being forced over the edge by rioting blacks, demonstrating students, marching welfare mothers, squawking professors, and hysterical reporters. And then the final straw. The thing I feared from the first day of my Presidency was actually coming true. Robert Kennedy had openly announced his intention to reclaim the throne in the memory of his brother. And the American people, swayed by the magic of the name, were dancing in the streets. The whole situation was unbearable for me. After thirty-seven years of public service, I deserved something more than being left alone in the middle of the plain, chased by stampedes on every side.”16

All his life Johnson had held before himself the image of the daring cowboy, the man with the capacity to outrun the wild herd, riding at a dead run in the dark of the night, knowing there were prairie dog holes all around. It was this definition of manly courage, opposed to what he saw as a feminine tendency to run away from responsibility, that had deterred Johnson in August, 1964, from abandoning the Presidency—and at that point the only stampede he faced was his own fear that the memorial film of John F. Kennedy would provoke a rush of demonstrators to Robert F. Kennedy. How much more difficult it would be for him now—when the stampede had already started—to justify his running away!
So Johnson found himself in an untenable position in early 1968. It was impossible to quit and impossible to stay. If he left office and went back to Texas, he would be acting like a coward; if he stayed for another four years, he would be paralyzed before his term was out. For months his position was all the more untenable because he did not know that it was untenable. He was in the grip of that supreme despair which, as Kierkegaard says, is not to know one is in despair. No matter how hard he tried to think it out, he got nowhere. One line of action was as bad as the other. No matter how hectic his activity, he could not drive the demons away. But then, Johnson explained, one day—exactly what day is not clear—he realized the total impossibility of his situation. The realization came to him in a dream. In the dream he saw himself swimming in a river. He was swimming from the center toward one shore. He swam and swam, but he never seemed to get any closer. He turned around to swim to the other shore, but again he got nowhere. He was simply going round and round in circles. The dream reminded Johnson of his grandfather's story about driving the cattle across the river, where they, too, got caught in a whirl, circling round and round in the same spot.  

Aware now of the bind he was in, Johnson finally found a way to extricate himself. He ingeniously reasoned that he could withdraw from politics without being seen as a coward. To follow his reasoning, we must understand the intensity of his concern for the verdict of history. The desire to leave something permanent behind as evidence of the work of a lifetime had been with him from the days of his youth, but never had it been so preoccupying a force as it was in the spring of 1968. At a time when the present was filled with unhappiness, Johnson turned to the future for uplift. Widen the constituency, flee once again from the pain of intimacy, multiply your resources. Looking ahead to posterity, Johnson began thinking that his current difficulties might prove to be a blessing in disguise. There was still the opportunity to restore his reputation if he acted nobly at this critical moment. "If the American people don't love me, their descendants will."  

Eyes fixed on the future, Johnson believed he would be judged by history for his success or failure in fulfilling three presidential functions: providing domestic peace and tranquillity, providing for the national security, and providing for the general welfare. In each area, he saw a conflict between his role as President of all the people and his role as candidate of the Democratic Party. In each area, he reasoned, he would be more likely to reach his goals if he was not a candidate, but a chief of state above the partisan battle.  

First, on questions of national security: Critics argued that Johnson's decision to halt the bombing north of the 20th parallel reflected a substantial change in policy shaped by the combination of the Tet offensive, the New Hampshire primary, his meeting with the "Wise Old Men"—George Ball, General Omar Bradley, Mac Bundy, Arthur Dean, Douglas Dillon, Abe Fortas, Robert Murphy, General Matthew Ridgway, and Cy Vance—and the appointment of Clark Clifford as Secretary of Defense. The critics were right in suggesting that Johnson was affected by these events, but they had not quite put their finger on the reason why. Johnson himself admitted that Tet had been a psychological victory for the North Vietnamese. He also admitted that his talks with Clifford and his meeting with his outside advisers reinforced his belief that many of his own people, not only the public at large, did not understand the "real" situation in Vietnam. Clifford's growing doubts undoubtedly posed a special problem for Johnson. When McNamara changed his mind on the war, his shift could be written off for many different reasons—his "idealism," his distaste for blood, his friendship with Robert Kennedy. But none of these motives could explain Clifford's shift. He was neither a dissenter nor a turncoat, but an emissary from the corporate world, a world of men apart from the personal and political motives which Johnson believed characterized most of the dissent, where the only standards of judgment were interest, utility, and power. "Now, I make it a practice to keep in touch with friends in business and the law across the land," Clifford explained at a meeting in late March, 1968. "I ask them their views about various matters. Until a few months ago, they were generally supportive of the war. ... Now all that has changed. There has been a tremendous erosion of support among these men ... these men now feel that we are in a hopeless bog. The idea of going deeper into the bog strikes them as mad. They want to see us get out of it. These are leaders of opinion in their communities. What they believe is sooner or later believed by many other people. It would be very difficult—I believe it would be impossible—for the President to maintain public support for the war without the support of these men."  

Then Johnson knew. The herald had finally arrived to report that
the walls were crumbling. Johnson was losing the support of the barons, and with it, his ability to lead. So he would change his tactics, but not his objectives and never his convictions. For this man, a master of compromising other men’s views, could not compromise his own, his record before his only remaining constituency, the judgment of history. The bombing halt would defuse the internal debate in the administration and particularly within his circle of officials and advisers. The compromise at the 20th parallel would—and did—have the effect of buying further time in the pursuit of military victory. It would—and did—afford Johnson the opportunity to initiate a policy of Vietnamization.

One might ask, then, what about all the military arguments that had repeatedly been made against curtailing or halting the bombing? Several new factors served to relieve Johnson of much of the pressure previously exerted by the military, as well as to neutralize the doubts in his own mind. First, Johnson had by 1968 let the military bomb almost everything they had previously complained they were not allowed to; the list of restricted targets had become very small indeed. By 1968 the only remaining options—closing Haiphong, bombing the agricultural dikes—carried in Johnson’s mind much too high a risk of Chinese intervention. Not only had most other targets been bombed—over and over—but doing so had not reduced the size of the war in the South nor improved our bargaining position with the North Vietnamese. Second, if the United States was in fact doing as well as Westmoreland claimed, then the curtailment of the bombing could proceed as it had always been meant someday to proceed—from a position of strength, not weakness. Finally, the alleged military risk of a bombing halt could be lessened further by the judicious employment of bombing missions below the 20th parallel.20

So it was that, in finally offering an end to the air war against the North, Johnson was not forced to see himself as a coward, running away from Vietnam. To the contrary, he convinced himself that he was the same man of courage, determined to save South Vietnam, daring a new initiative in a continuing course. Moreover, by coupling this initiative with withdrawal from the presidential race, he made sure that it would not be read as a political trick. If, on the other hand, it failed to produce negotiations, then at least Johnson had laid the groundwork for further escalation. If the situation in South Vietnam was as good as the military claimed, then it was just possible that Hanoi would finally come to the peace table. And if that happened, then Johnson believed that he would be honored by history for having mapped out a policy in Southeast Asia that had ensured America’s national security for years to come.

If concern for the future affected Johnson’s decisions about “national security,” it also affected his thinking about “the general welfare.” By the spring of 1968 the tax surcharge had become the most pressing domestic issue. Without the surtax the American economy was in danger and Johnson knew it. And the situation at home was substantially exacerbated by deepening financial problems abroad. British devaluation of the pound in late 1967 had triggered a general deterioration in the gold market and a crisis of confidence in the dollar. By the middle of March the gold market was in a state of panic. Speculation was rampant that the United States, too, might be forced to devalue.

Johnson saw the deepest fears of his generation reflected in this situation. He believed that the stalemate on taxes was being interpreted abroad as a failure of the democratic process and a clear indication that America had neither the will nor the ability to control its economic affairs. The specter of 1929 haunted him daily; he worried that if the economy collapsed, history would subject Lyndon Johnson to endless abuse. Yet as long as he was a candidate, Johnson was convinced, the Republicans in Congress would stall the surtax, so they could campaign in the fall against “Johnson’s inflation” as well as “Johnson’s war.” Therefore, in this case, too, withdrawing from the race was the only answer. Here, too, posterity would see his abdication as an act of courage, not cowardice.

Withdrawing would also strengthen the President in his search for domestic peace. Johnson looked back to the previous summer and recalled the accusation that he had chosen a partisan course during the Detroit riots. If he reacted strongly to civil disorders, he would be accused of currying favor on the right; if he reacted temperately, he would be vulnerable to the opposite charge. Either charge might reduce his reputation in the annals of history. Johnson wanted to be remembered as the preserver of domestic peace, a man who had enforced the law with equity and fairness to all. But here, too, as with Vietnam and the tax bill, the favorable judgment of history could be better secured only by withdrawing from politics.21

Abdication was thus the last remaining way to restore control, to turn rout into dignity, collapse into order. It served to advance John-
son’s immediate purposes and his long-term goals. As the situation stood, Johnson was about to lose the Wisconsin primary and the forecasts looked equally dim for the primaries in Oregon, Indiana, and California. To win the nomination under these circumstances would have been—though possible—a Pyrrhic victory. It would have torn the nation apart. Johnson recognized this. His concerns for the present and the future, for national unity and posterity, for the war and the economy, joined together. He decided to retreat with honor.

Having made his decision in private, Johnson now made plans to share it with his countrymen on March 31, 1968. He addressed a nationwide TV audience that night from the White House. He began unceremoniously by reviewing his administration’s efforts to find a basis for constructive peace talks. He then moved directly to his proposal for a bombing halt: “I am taking the first step to de-escalate the conflict. Tonight I have ordered our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam, except in the area of the Demilitarized Zone.” This meant, he said, stopping the bombing in areas inhabited by “almost 90%” of North Vietnam’s population. “I call upon President Ho Chi Minh to respond positively and favorably to this new step of peace.”

He spoke gravely, gently; gone was the undertone of sarcasm, and the appearance of piety. He finished the section on Vietnam in thirty minutes. Then the moment came which would startle the nation. Even those who had read the phrases of abdication could not be certain he would read them, nor could Johnson himself—he had, after all, written out other withdrawals only to pull them back—until the irretrievable words rolled up on the Teleprompter: he glanced at Lady Bird and he hesitated for an inexpressible moment, which must have compressed the stormy inward clashes of a lifetime, then continued because the words were there, right in front of him, and the only way he could master his contradictions—the only way he ever knew—was to move ahead:

“This country’s ultimate strength lies in the unity of our people. There is division in the American house now. There is divisiveness among us all tonight. And holding the trust that is mine, as President of all the people, I cannot disregard the peril to the progress of the American people and the hope and prospect of peace for all people.

... With America’s sons in the fields far away, with America’s future under challenge right here at home... I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes. ... Accordingly, I shall not seek, and will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”

There was a mood of euphoria in the capital the next day. Even Johnson seemed pleased. What huge tensions must have been released. A few days later, Hanoi agreed to negotiate in Paris. To many, it seemed that the road to peace might now be open. The polls showed a sharp increase in Johnson’s popularity. And the President, who, a short time before, could speak publicly only at military installations, was once again cheered in the streets of Chicago.

Johnson began to speak excitedly of his plans for the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, and the writing of his memoirs. He set up a schedule of seminars and lectures for the following years and took pleasure in the large numbers of schools which were asking him to speak: Yale, and even Harvard.

In May, he returned, solaced and refreshed, from a visit with Harry Truman, one of the two living members of that exclusive group to which he would soon belong. “You know the great thing about Truman,” he told me, “is that once he makes up his mind about something—anything, including the A bomb—he never looks back and asks, ‘Should I have done it? Oh! Should I have done it?’ No, he just knows he made up his mind as best he could and that’s that. There’s no going back. I wish I had some of that quality, for there’s nothing worse than going back over a decision made, retracing the steps that led to it, and imagining what it’d be like if you took another turn. It can drive you crazy.

“Truman was one of the few comforts I had all during the war,” Johnson continued. “Reminded me of all the hell he’d been through, but somehow he managed to ride it out. Ike was helpful, too. Once I complained to him about the trouble Fulbright and friends were making for me. He told me, ‘Why, I’d just go ahead and smack them, just pay no attention to these overeducated Senators, that’s all there is to it.’ Another time, when Fulbright was busy talking things over with his Russian friends, I said to Truman, ‘Imagine him not wanting the Russians to stop and wanting us to stop.’ Truman interrupted me:
to Eastland, Johnson's own, not completely inaccurate, but wholly wishful, analysis. Humphrey did appear to be a weak candidate, and McCarthy was an impossibility. Much of Humphrey's strength had been assembled and delivered by Johnson in the drive to halt Kennedy. Under such circumstances, it was natural to think that anything might happen, or might be made to happen. It was all illusion, of course. Johnson's candidacy would have caused an explosion, fragmenting, perhaps irrevocably, the Democratic Party. It might have been possible had he never withdrawn, but now Convention Hall would be crowded with delegates originally selected to support Kennedy and McCarthy, along with many Humphrey delegates who opposed Johnson and the war.

His increasing irritation was accompanied by a sharp renewal of interest in the military situation in Vietnam. He stepped up his consultations with the military. I thought from what he said—just hints, but ominous hints—that he might be planning a major escalation, hoping for a military victory that would transform the political scene. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, and others in the administration, shared this apprehension.

There is little doubt that, as the convention neared, Johnson began to feel that his withdrawal might not be irrevocable, that he might find vindication more real and immediate than the verdict of history—in the vote of the Democratic Party and American people. "Nixon can be beaten," he said over and over again. "He's like a Spanish horse who runs faster than anyone for the first nine lengths and then turns around and runs backward. You'll see," he predicted, "he'll do something wrong in the end. He always does."25 Indeed, Nixon lost several million votes in the closing weeks of the 1968 campaign, transforming a landslide into a squeaker. But not until he had become President was he to be beaten, as the lot of them have been in. Eastland says Hubert hasn't caught on. I'm the only one who can hold the South. I don't agree, but he is organizing something for me. And he says he is happy with Medicare. Can you imagine that?

"Senator Eastland was in to see me the other day," he said one evening in late July, "and he wants me to run. In fact, a lot of them have been in. Eastland says Hubert hasn't caught on. I'm the only one who can hold the South. I don't agree, but he is organizing something for me. And he says he is happy with Medicare. Can you imagine that? He also told me that Fortas will come out of committee in mid-November though Dirksen will leave us. He says that one thousand delegates can be delivered to Humphrey, but he's losing them. And he's afraid the convention will be a holocaust, with McCarthy walking out."27

Perhaps Eastland had said all this, but James Eastland of Mississippi had never before shown much knowledge or interest in national politics; and even at the time I suspected that I was hearing, attributed
meeting with Kosygin to lay the groundwork for a new détente, was canceled when Soviet forces invaded Czechoslovakia. Nor was he able to bring peace in Vietnam; despite the bombing halt announced on October 31, the stalemate on the war continued.

On January 20, 1969, Richard Nixon took the oath of office as the thirty-seventh President of the United States, and later that afternoon, the man who had come to Washington as a legislative assistant in the third year of the depression at the age of twenty-three, and served thirty-two years in public life as Congressman, Senator, Vice President, and President, returned to the hill country, where, as his father had told him, “The people know when you’re sick and care when you die.”

Epilogue

“THE LONG, HARD EFFORT was over now, and I was glad to see it end.” These were the words Lyndon Johnson used to describe his feelings upon his retirement from public life. The relief was both immense and genuine. Yet after thirty-two years of public service, with the end of his presidential responsibility, a terrible, perhaps impossible transition to the hill country awaited him.

In the final months of his Presidency, Johnson had laid the groundwork for his retirement. Preliminary plans for the LBJ School of Public Affairs and the LBJ Library had been made as well as a tentative schedule for a series of lectures at colleges and universities. Hundreds of thousands of file folders had been shipped to Austin to be sorted through for the library and for the work on the memoirs. A sketchy outline of the memoirs had been drawn up.

Almost immediately, however, it became apparent that none of these projects really engaged Johnson. The one he talked about the most was the memoirs, and at the start it seemed that after a few months rest he might turn his energies to the task. But he never did. Though he spent many hours thinking and talking about the book, he never concentrated his whole attention on it. His mind would wander, his conversations digress. In retrospect, given everything we know about his