

U.S. History II

27 October 2004

Lyndon Johnson

Presidents are not created anew the day they first enter the Oval Office. Their previous life experiences and the traits formed by those experiences are part of their decision-making as presidents. Many theories have been created to explain the inner minds of men in general and presidents specifically. The theories created by Daniel J. Levinson and Harold D. Lasswell are especially useful for studying the biography of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream, written by Doris Kearns.

Levinson's theory focuses on the male lifespan and was created out of a study written about in his book, The Seasons of a Man's Life. Using the lives of forty men as a basis, Levinson divided up the lifespan into different stages. These stages tend to be periods of relative stability broken up by times of self-examination, which may or may not be painful and lead to upheaval in men's lives. Johnson's life did not conform to the model perfectly but it is still a useful tool in coming to an understanding of this very complex man.

The first major period of self-examination and change in Levinson's model is the Early Adult Transition. This is a time, typically falling between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, when a young man seeks to establish independence away from his parents. Entering the adult world is often an intimidating task with youthful desires and parental expectations coming into conflict (Levinson 56-57). Johnson graduated from high school in his Texas hometown at the

age of sixteen in 1924. Some of his friends planned on going to California to work. The conflict between desire and expectation is expressed by Johnson's reminiscences of his decision:

Going was one hell of a problem . . . I decided I'd just say to my mother and father that I was going West with the boys. I knew it would be an emotional scene, but one night I decided to look them straight in the eye and reveal my plans. But when I reached the front door of my house, I began to shiver uncontrollably. At last, I went in. . . . I tried to speak, but I couldn't say a goddamn word. I lost my nerve (Kearns 43).

Johnson did end up going to California with his friends. He snuck out of the house and stayed in California for two years. He was not, however, able to make this transition smoothly. The emotional ties that bound him to his parents, especially his mother, were not modified in any way. This avoidance of direct confrontation was characteristic of Johnson, who preferred compromise as a method of problem resolution and was seemingly unable to create an effective solution when compromise was impossible.

After the Early Adult Transition, a period of relative stability follows. During this time, the young man continues to meet the challenges of entering adulthood. The young man will have a Dream (Levinson 90). Johnson's Dream was to be in politics and he went after that Dream with remarkable tenacity and ability. At twenty-three, he became a legislative secretary to Rep. Richard Kleberg and used his position to gain a great deal of knowledge about the inner workings of the House of Representatives. In 1935, when Johnson was twenty-seven, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the National Youth Administration. Immediately Johnson marshaled sufficient support for his nomination as the NYA Director for Texas, becoming the youngest NYA Director in the country. Through persistence, Johnson was remarkably capable of achieving early success toward the Dream.

A common occurrence in this period of a man's life is the making of a love match (Levinson 57). Johnson met Claudia "Lady Bird" Taylor in 1934 when he was twenty-six. Less than three months later, they were married. Even in this matter of the heart, Johnson's direct approach to getting what he wanted was consistent: "Let's get married. Not next year, after you've done over the house, but about two weeks from now, or right away. . . . We either do it now, or we never will" (Kearns 82). Johnson recognized in Lady Bird intelligence combined with a deeply supportive and giving nature that would sustain him during calm and controversy. She was quite affected by his powerful presence and developed a close connection with him during their brief courtship. Although Kearns does not provide a great deal of detail on Johnson's adult family life, she portrays a positive marriage partnership. Johnson's proposal of marriage was definitely the soundest choice he made in his early adulthood and arguable the best of his lifetime.

After a man's twenties follows the Age Thirty Transition (Levinson 58). Johnson's transition began in 1937 when he was twenty-nine, a year in which he won election to the House of Representatives and his father, Sam Johnson, died. Johnson was working as the NYA Director but he continued to keep one eye on his Dream. In 1937, a congressman from Texas died and a special election was scheduled to fill his empty seat. Johnson ran and won but the campaign was not easy. Shortly before the election, Johnson's appendix became inflamed and was removed. This was the first in a pattern of pre-election health problems. Not long after the election, Sam Johnson suffered another major heart attack. He never fully recovered and was brought home by Lyndon, where he died shortly thereafter.

Johnson continued through the Age Thirty Transition while serving in the House of Representatives. His desire to participate more fully in the adult world and to further his Dream

led him to run in a special Senate election, which he lost. "Looking back on his defeat, Johnson described the months that followed as 'the most miserable in my life. I felt terribly rejected, and I began to think about leaving politics and going home to make money. In the end, I just couldn't bear to leave Washington, where at least I still had my seat in the House'" (Kearns 93-94). Johnson was able to reconcile the loss of the Senate seat with his established political position, even though restlessness with that very position led him to enter the election. Johnson's Dream guided him through his Age Thirty Transition and kept him focused.

Following the Age Thirty Transition is a period of Settling Down. No longer young, the man is fully into adulthood and is living out his earlier choices (Levinson 59). Despite the interruption of World War II, Johnson's thirties were a period of stability. With the exception of a twelve-month stint in the Navy, Johnson remained within Congress, stimulated by the challenges of the war and the post-war world. Johnson also laid the foundations for great economic success during these years through his sound investments.

The greatest opportunity for growth is the Mid-Life Transition, which generally occurs between the ages of forty and forty-five. Ironically, the Mid-Life Transition can be a time of great pain, confusion, and personal upheaval (Levinson 60). For Johnson, this was a time of success and continued fulfillment of his Dream. These successes, however, may have hampered Johnson's process of self-examination and hindered his progress in the long run.

After years in the House of Representatives, Johnson sensed that "something was missing from [his] life" (Kearns 100). In 1948, when he was forty, a Senate seat was vacated, providing another opportunity for Johnson to excel. Johnson agonized over the decision to enter the Senate election and risk his House seat. Finally, after much convincing from family and friends, Johnson declared his candidacy. Three weeks prior to the election, he was hospitalized

with kidney stones, for which he refused surgery. The election was his but by a mere 87 votes. Despite the less than resounding support from his constituents, Johnson excelled in the Senate. He was party whip at age forty-two and Minority Leader at age forty-five.

Johnson missed a chance during this time to work on himself and deal with his issues surrounding the polarities of young/old and destruction/creation, which are universal issues for men in the Mid-Life Transition (Levinson 197). They were especially crucial for Johnson. Mortality was a difficult issue for him, especially the idea that he would not be around to influence his place in history. “Those memoirs are the last chance I’ve got with the history books, and I’ve got to do it right” (Kearns 13). “History makes the judgment on decisions made and actions taken’, he wrote in his book. But history was, he knew, in the hands of the historians, none of whom could be trusted to handle his presidency fairly” (356). Johnson’s aging bothered him most because it would mean the end of that unique personal influence he was able to use so often to persuade people. Johnson was also deeply concerned that the Great Society would be destroyed with the Vietnam War. But he did not seem to accept that it was his decisions that made the Vietnam War and destroyed the Great Society, his creation.

Unfortunately, Levinson’s model does not provide a basis for studying Johnson’s presidency. An important element in Levinson’s concept of the Early Adult Transition is that of the mentor relationship (90). None of Johnson’s mentor relationships truly conform to the letter of the Levinson model. They do, however, match up in spirit and were crucial to Johnson’s early successes and his legislative career.

When Johnson was at San Marcos College, he perceived that a close relationship with the president, Cecil Evans, would be beneficial. Working up from maintenance jobs, Johnson was appointed to the president’s staff and immediately set out to make himself indispensable. He

was soon a valued member of the president's staff and a close friend of Mr. Evans himself.

Johnson formed a similar relationship with a government professor, Harry Greene. What began with Johnson's questions after every class evolved into a daily discussion that was beneficial for both parties. Johnson had an ability for sensing who could teach him the most about any given situation.

Johnson's primary mentor relationship was with Senator Richard Russell. Johnson arrived at the Senate and sensed what and who were necessary for success. The what was "... deference to the elders, hard work, a low profile, specialization, and an acquiescence to inner-club priorities" (Kearns 103). The who was Richard Russell. Russell's assistant Bill Jordan described Johnson's personality shift to accommodate his mentor:

"Johnson learned to observe amenities with Senator Russell, with other Senators he would just walk right into their offices . . . would just barge in single-mindedly. . . . But Russell was totally incapable of responding to that. He had an Old World courtliness. . . . So Johnson learned. He always referred to him as "Senator Russell" and always sent a note from the outer office saying he would like to come in" (104).

Although Johnson's relationship with Russell was based in a drive for success, Johnson did develop a genuine affinity with Russell for the Senate and a sense of responsibility for the older Senator. Looking back, Johnson said "He was my mentor and I wanted to take care of him" (105). Johnson split with Russell over the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Levinson's model anticipates this split in mentor relationships and in that respect Johnson's relationship with Russell fits the Levinson criteria very well (Levinson 100-101).

Harold Lasswell's theory is directed toward political office and the question of why certain people are drawn to it. Lasswell's theory indicates that there are certain characteristics

that people motivated to seek political office share (Burlingame). Johnson's Dream is rooted in his earliest childhood experiences and with Lasswell's theory of ambition the picture of Johnson can be completed.

People who seek political office generally have a parent that feels they married beneath their station. They then look to their child to achieve great success and redeem their poor choice. This is certainly true of Johnson's mother, Rebekah Baines Johnson. Kearns writes of Rebekah's early life as she described it to her young son: "Her parents had money, position, respectability. . . Her people – unlike their poor and ignorant neighbors along the Pedernales – were a proper, civilized breed of educators and preachers of European culture" (20). Johnson absorbed his mother's tales, however embellished, of her cultured past. He also absorbed her sense of disappointment in her marriage and her feeling that her father's suicide had left her no choice but to become Sam Johnson's wife. Lyndon Johnson once said "By the time my father came into the picture she'd given up" (20).

Johnson developed a deep sense of responsibility for his mother at a very young age. He was fully aware of his role as his mother's comforter and protector: "I promised that I would be there to protect her always. . . . I knew how much she needed me, that she needed me to take care of her" (Kearns 24). Johnson did accomplish a brief rebellion in running away to California but the role he had to play for his mother survived the physical separation and he spoke of her part in his decision to return home and seek office: "I would succeed where her own father had failed; I would go to the Capitol and talk about big ideas. She would never be disappointed in me again" (44). Rebekah Johnson's hold on her son's mind would continue through the rest of his life.

Rebekah Johnson also instilled in her son a deep sense of inferiority about his rural

upbringings. His grandfather told him stories of frontier heroism and his father was a rural politician but they were not enough to compensate. Johnson spoke about this feeling: “My daddy always told me . . . that if I brushed up against the grindstone of life, I’d come away with far more polish than I could ever get at Harvard or Yale. I wanted to believe him, but somehow I never could” (Kearns 42). The feeling that being from rural Texas made him not good enough was confirmed by the father of Carol Davis, Johnson’s first serious love. Johnson ended the relationship when Mr. Davis declared that Johnson was not good enough to marry his daughter: “I won’t let you, I won’t have my daughter marrying into that no-account Johnson family. . . . I’ve known that bunch all my life, one generation after another of shiftless dirt farmers and grubby politicians. . . . None of them will ever amount to a damn” (57). Johnson proved Mr. Davis wrong but the sting of that personal rejection confirmed Johnson’s feelings and he brought his feeling of inferiority with him into his political career.

Lasswell’s theory also states that people who seek political office often have a deep need for deference (Burlingame). Rebekah’s affection for her son was conditional, given only when he was doing as she wished. Johnson repeated this pattern with his staff and advisers: “I was determined to make them more dependent on me than I was on them” (Kearns 242). When he became party leader in the Senate, he revised the rules governing committee appointments, a move that benefited freshman Senators and him. “He began his seemingly quixotic effort to transform the post of party leader – not only because he sensed concealed possibilities, but also because it soon became clear to him, as he later explained, that he ‘could no longer bear to be an apprentice to the elders, simply sitting back and taking their orders’” (Kearns 111). This pattern of gaining the maximum amount of control he could extended into Johnson’s personal friendships. Kearns described a man who “. . . wanted to be liked by everyone he met, but

defined friendship in terms of a willingness to accommodate his ends” (79).

Johnson’s personal psychology affected his presidency in many ways. His sense of rural inferiority colored his relationships with many powerful politicians, especially Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, for whom he had an intense hatred. Johnson’s need for deference also led to disaster in the form of the Vietnam War, when Johnson, buffered by men who did not voice dissent to his face, would not respond to the growing public discontent about the policy of escalation.

Works Cited

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Kearns, Doris. Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

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ASSIGNMENT Research Paper

	5 Exceeds Standard	4 Meets Standard	3.5 Nearly Meets Standard	3 Below Standard	2 Little Progress Toward Standard	0
Presentation	All guidelines followed; attention to visual appearance; MLA format applied with no errors	All guidelines followed; MLA format applied with few noticeable errors	Most guidelines followed; MLA format applied with some errors	Some guidelines followed; MLA format applied with many errors	Few guidelines followed; MLA format not applied	
Thesis and Content Development	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is very clear and strongly developed; many appropriate facts and details are included; thesis clearly identifies the purpose of the paper and engages with exceptional content and/or style	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is clear and well-developed; appropriate facts and details are included; thesis identifies the purpose of the paper and engages with strong content and/or style	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is generally clear and somewhat developed; some appropriate facts and details are included; thesis generally identifies the purpose of the paper and engages with good content and/or style	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is unclear and poorly developed; few appropriate facts and details are included; thesis does not identify the purpose of the paper and engages with weak content and/or style	A controlling idea is not developed; facts and details are not included; no thesis	
Organization	Outstanding order and structure enhances meaning; strong and varied use of transitions; conclusion effectively supports thesis and provides a strong sense of closure	Strong order and structure supports meaning; effective use of transitions; conclusion effectively supports thesis and provides sense of closure	Good order and structure supports meaning; some effective use of transitions; conclusion gives some support of thesis and provides some sense of closure	Weak order and structure detracts from meaning; ineffective use of transitions; conclusion gives little support of thesis and does not provide sense of closure	No order or structure; no transitions used; no conclusion or sense of closure	
Strategies	Creative use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	Effective use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	Some effective use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	Ineffective use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	No strategies used	
Discussion and Analysis	Exemplary discussion and analysis of research topic	Insightful discussion and analysis of research topic	Adequate discussion and analysis of research topic	Vague discussion and analysis of research topic	Incomplete or no discussion and analysis	
Research Sources	Outstanding research; exceeds required number and type of sources	Good research; required number and type of sources	Fair research; less than the required number and type of sources	Poor research; almost none of the required number and type of sources	None of the required number and type of sources included	
Word Choice	Exceptionally rich, lively, and precise language enhances meaning	Clear, precise language supports meaning	Somewhat clear and generally precise language creates adequate meaning	Weak limited language makes meaning unclear	Very limited language seriously impairs meaning	
Sentence Fluency	Sentences vary greatly in length and structure enhancing flow	Sentences vary in length and structure sustaining flow	Sentences vary slightly in length and structure restricting flow	Sentences vary little in length and structure disrupting flow	Sentences do not vary in length and structure inhibiting flow	
Conventions	No errors in grammar, usage, or spelling	Few noticeable errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	Some errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	Many errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	Excessive errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	
Revisions and Editing	Revisions and edits enhance writing or student has score of 90	Revisions and edits improve writing or student has score of 72	Revisions and edits improve writing somewhat	Revisions and edits improve writing very little	Revisions and edits do not improve writing	

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