



# Lyndon's Legacy:

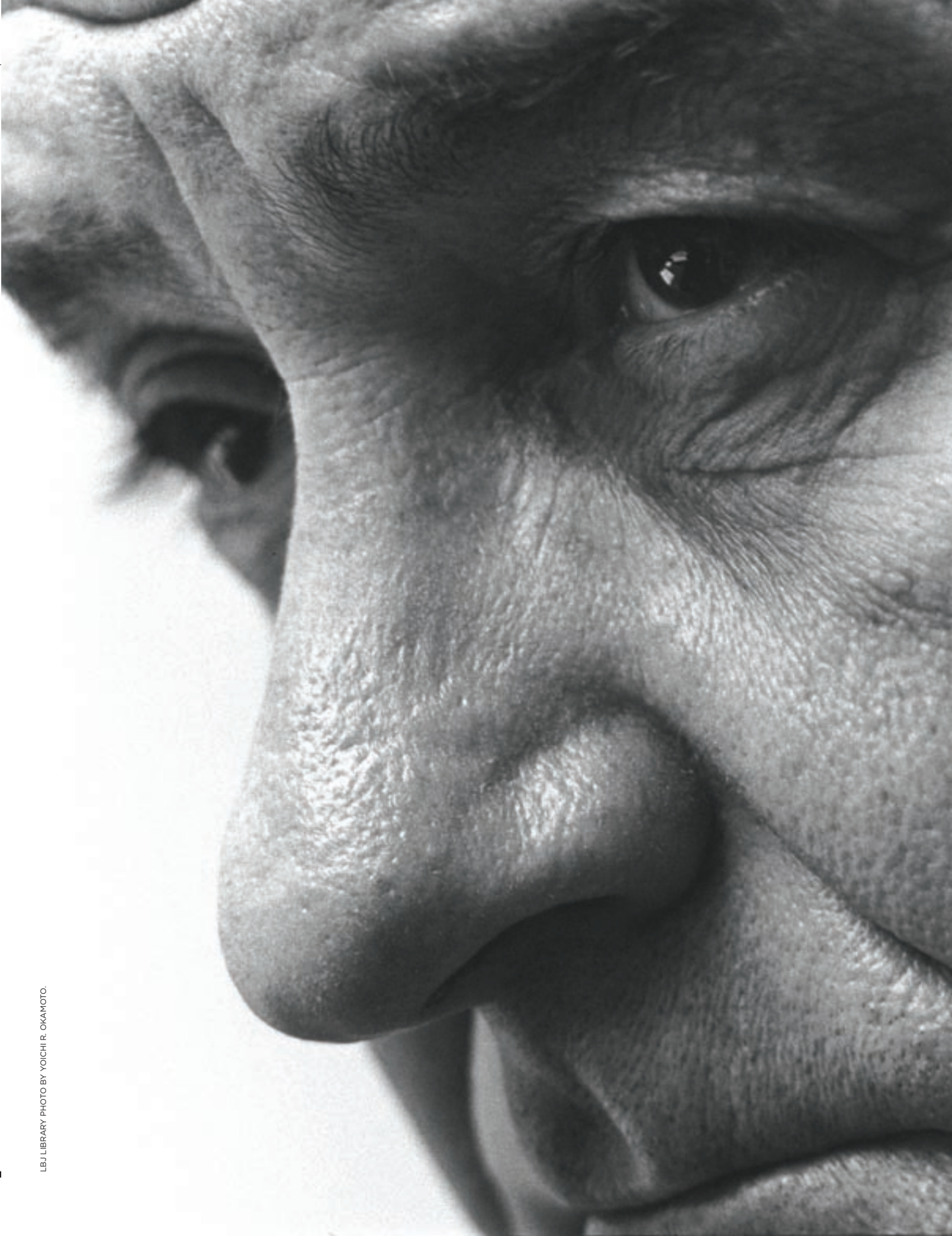
In Death As in Life,  
LBJ's Century-Old  
Shadow Looms Large

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LBJ LIBRARY PHOTO BY YOICHI R. OKAMOTO.



*"I do understand power, whatever else may be said about me. I know where to look for it and how to use it."*

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON

# “Shakespearean.”

That's the word you hear over and over when the subject of Lyndon Baines Johnson arises. Our only born-and-raised Texan president, he exerted an outsized presence in life and still casts a decades-long shadow, even after having been under the Hill Country earth for 35 years.

All the shades of the human condition that Shakespeare splashed in vivid hues across the Globe Theatre stage were alive and often at war in LBJ's 6-foot-3-inch frame. His life was a yeasty stew of outsized triumphs, tragic flaws and headlong ambitions leavened by a nearly boundless compassion, razor-sharp intellect and deft political skills. He was a fulminating, scatological, idealistic, calculating, bawdy, blaspheming manipulator who would nevertheless go on to become the greatest White House champion for the dispossessed since Abraham Lincoln.

"He wanted to throw open the doors of opportunity to everyone," says his daughter, Luci Baines Johnson. "He always said an education was the best passport out of poverty." She adds with a laugh, "He wanted to create more taxpayers!"

Texas and the rest of the country will have a chance to take measure of the man anew, thanks to the "Lyndon B. Johnson Centennial Celebration: Celebrating His Can-Do Spirit." This year marks the 100th anniversary of Johnson's birth—August 27, 1908—and a series of events (see "Lyndon B. Johnson Centennial Celebration," page 117) set to run throughout 2008 is being readied in Austin, Johnson City and Washington, D.C. The idea is to examine, commemorate and celebrate Johnson and his legacy and, just maybe, introduce him to the generations who have come of age since this complicated figure took his last breath in 1973.

"He was not tragic in the Shakespearean sense of tragedy, but there's something damned close to it in the way he was trapped by Vietnam," says Harry Middleton, who worked with Johnson in the White House and went on to direct the LBJ Library and Museum for 30 years. "I think the real Johnson could be captured by a dramatist as a historian never could."

Johnson's gargantuan personality was set against the backdrop of the most momentous and turbulent time—barring the Civil War—in American history. His life spanned the closing of the frontier, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam, the exploration of space, the ascendancy of great social movements and decades of cultural and psychic turmoil.





Inaugural Ball, 1965



Shaped by those events, Johnson laid his hands on the biggest levers of power in the country and, in former U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan's words, "changed government forever. He stripped government of its neutrality and made it an agent on behalf of the people." With his Great Society programs, he ushered in an era of Big Government and legislative activism that many still celebrate and just as many have come to decry.

In every argument today about the future of entitlement programs like Medicare, in every initiative to address stubbornly lingering pockets of inequality and disenfranchisement, in every debate over putting Americans in harm's way in faraway lands, there is an echo of Johnson and his legacy.

He came into the national consciousness with shattering suddenness: The whiplash crack of three rifle shots on a sunny November day in Dallas ended the John F. Kennedy era and catapulted Johnson into the harsh spotlight of the largest center ring on earth. For many citizens alive on that day (and many more who have seen the image in history books), their first indelible impression of him was the photo taken on Air Force One, his massive hand covering a Catholic missal as he took the oath of office, a shell-shocked Jacqueline Kennedy standing at his side.

LBJ has not yet passed beyond our collective memory. We still mourn the loss of his wife, Lady Bird, who left this world just months ago. His children and many of his political intimates are still alive and sharing their first-hand experiences. The issues he wrestled with—civil rights, education, poverty, health care, the environment—are challenges that still loom large in this election year. His *bête noire*, Vietnam, lingers on like a bad hangover, even as the country binges on another seemingly intractable war in a strange and far-off land. But the elemental, larger-than-life figure of the man himself seems as remote as Ozymandias.

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*"He was cut 10 sizes larger than any of us. This made him coarser, more intemperate, more ambitious, more cunning and more devious than ordinary people. But it also made him more generous, more intelligent, more progressive, more hopeful for the country."*

—BILL MOYERS

**G**us Sanchez reaches out to straighten the small paperweight on his desk. It's a rectangular hunk of green-veined black stone, like marble, about the length and width of a fat man's index finger. On one side, embossed in gold, is the uppercase phrase, "CAN DO." On the other is a Chinese ideogram. Sanchez is the chief ranger in charge of interpretation and education at the LBJ National Historical Park, which encompasses not only Johnson's boyhood home in Johnson City but also the LBJ Ranch 14 miles away in Stonewall.

"A lot of Johnson's men had one of those," he muses, turning the stone idly. "This is a replica. But if you were a person who could get the job done, you got one." The ideogram on the back, he explains, translates roughly to, "Whatever you envision can be achieved."



LBJ meets with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders.

The theme of the LBJ Centennial is "Celebrating His Can-Do Spirit," and, recalls Middleton, "We were all subjected to that slogan." Middleton, a former Associated Press reporter from New York, was enlisted into the Johnson White House as a speechwriter for the last two years of the administration and, alongside Bob Hardesty, he assisted LBJ on his 1971 memoir, *The Vantage Point*. Today, five years after stepping down from his post at the LBJ Library, he—along with Hardesty—is in charge of coordinating the Texas-based events for the LBJ Centennial.

"Anybody that worked for him would never think of saying, 'That can't be done,'" Middleton says. "That was just a phrase you didn't use. 'Can-Do' embodied his philosophy."

It's no surprise that "Can-Do" became Lyndon Johnson's mantra for overcoming obstacles. He had, in his life, so many obstacles to overcome, beginning with the poverty of his youth, which landed on him with full force when his father, Sam Ealy Johnson Jr., went broke in the early 1920s trying to farm the ancestral Johnson acreage along the Pedernales River. The experience, coupled with his natural ambition, seemed to inculcate in Johnson an irresistible compulsion to strive, overcome and win at whatever the cost.

"The quality that journalists would describe as 'energy,'" wrote Johnson biographer Robert Caro, "was really desperation and fear, the fear of a man fleeing something terrible."

It was more than that, says Luci: "He grew up with the idea of public service. His father served six terms in the Texas Legislature and his mother was one of only two women in Blanco County with a college degree. He understood the importance of service and education to get anywhere."



PHOTOS BY YOICHI R. OKAMOTO (LEFT) AND CECIL STOUGHTON (RIGHT), COURTESY LBJ LIBRARY.

The obligation of service, the white-hot ambition—and maybe fear, too—were the lashes that drove him to campaign feverishly for Congress in 1937. In his first years as a New Deal Congressman, he helped obtain authorization to build the chain of dams on the Colorado River that not only tamed the river and created the Highland Lakes but at long last brought electricity to the primeval Texas Hill Country. But the glacially slow seniority system in the House of Representatives threatened to bleed the life out of his ambitions. The chance to effect the lasting change he envisioned (He was “one of Roosevelt’s boys,” says Luci) on a national scale could come only through leadership in the Senate—and eventually, the presidency.

Getting to the Senate, and succeeding in it, posed its own formidable obstacles. Having seen his victory stolen out from under him by W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel in 1941, Johnson and his minions went to great lengths to steal the 1948 election for themselves. LBJ won the primary by 87 disputed votes, earning him the lasting sobriquet of “Landslide Lyndon.”

After rising to Senate majority leader, the last obstacle Johnson had to overcome in his lifelong pursuit of the presidency was the indelible fact of his origins. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal and Johnson’s experience teaching school to poor Mexican-American kids in far South Texas in 1928 and ’29 had awoken in LBJ a passion for social justice. He was of the South, but he saw that the South could never advance politically, socially or economically unless the walls of segregation were breached. Johnson’s 1957 civil rights bill, an anemic compromise though it was, was the first crack in those walls.

The words of Lyndon Johnson that ring most resoundingly down the corridors of history are not his slurs or his coarse epi-



President Johnson signs the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1964.

thets but the call to action he gave the nation in a televised address before Congress on March 15, 1965, calling for a Voting Rights Act.

Caro, in *Means of Ascent*, the second volume in his mammoth Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of LBJ, describes the scene in magnificent fashion: “‘This time, on this issue,’ he said now, ‘there must be no delay, no hesitation and no compromise. ... Their cause must be our cause, too,’ Lyndon Johnson said. ‘Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.’

“Briefly, he paused again. He always had so much trouble in his speeches with the emphasis on the words, but he got it right this time. The next four words fell like sledgehammers. ‘And we shall overcome.’”

Watching the speech in Alabama, added Caro, “Martin Luther King began to cry.”

**2008 CENTENNIAL  
EVENT: JULY 4 Head  
to Johnson City to  
celebrate the signing  
of the Civil Rights Act  
of 1964.**

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*“You really felt as if a Saint Bernard had licked your face for an hour, had pawed you all over. ... He never just shook hands with you. One hand was shaking your hand; the other hand was always someplace else, exploring you, examining you.”*

— BEN BRADLEE, VICE PRESIDENT AND FORMER EDITOR OF *THE WASHINGTON POST*, ON “THE JOHNSON TREATMENT”

**L** yndon Johnson grew up in Johnson City (named for his father’s cousin, not Lyndon himself, as many believe), observing what might be called retail politics—the suspender-snapping speechmakers on the courthouse square, the sweat-soaked pols shaking hands with farmers and housewives at a county-seat barbecue on a broiling summer day.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Family members and friends in front of Johnson's birthplace in Stonewall, Texas, in 1910; The 1928 Southwest Texas State Teachers College Debate Team: (from left) Elmer Graham, Prof. Howard Mell Greene (debate coach) and LBJ; With his wife and mother seated behind him, LBJ stumps in his hometown, Johnson City, during his 1941 U.S. Senate campaign; Johnson and Mrs. Mattie Malone examine an electric light fixture in Carthage, Texas, in 1941; LBJ in 1915.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LBJ gives the victory sign on election night 1964 at the Driskill Hotel; LBJ's presidential swearing in aboard Air Force One at Dallas' Love Field after John F. Kennedy's assassination; President Lyndon B. Johnson addresses a 1966 pro-war crowd in Indianapolis; LBJ signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders look on; President LBJ and Vice President-Elect Hubert Humphrey after the 1964 election.



Johnson, before he was through, would use the bulliest pulpits ever conceived up until that time—the mighty trumpets of radio and television and the globe-girdling wire services—to appeal to millions of people simultaneously. But for him, politics was forever a literal contact sport: invasive, hands-on and overpowering. “The Johnson Treatment” became perhaps the most powerful weapon in his arsenal of one-on-one persuasion.

“Its velocity was breathtaking, and it was all in one direction,” Washington columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote of The Treatment. “Interjections from the target were rare. Johnson anticipated them before they could be spoken. He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling. From his pockets poured clippings, memos, statistics. Mimicry, humor and the genius of analogy made The Treatment an almost hypnotic experience and rendered the target stunned and helpless.”

By all accounts, Johnson drove his staff as hard as he drove himself, if not harder. Early on, he took to hiring husband-and-wife teams in his congressional offices, because, as author and onetime Capitol Hill staffer Larry L. King quoted him, “I don’t want some wife at home cryin’ about the cornbread getting cold while her husband’s busy doin’ something for me.”

Biographers detailed instances of almost studied cruelty in which Johnson berated or humiliated staff members over the years, sometimes

while seated on the toilet (“A means of control,” Caro asserted).

King recalled Johnson once snarling at his staffers, “Half of you are crawlin’, half of you are walkin’ and none of you are runnin’!” Another time he barked at a hapless speechwriter, “Put something in there that will make me sound goddamn humble!”

“I never experienced those things I keep reading about,” Middleton says with gentle humor. “I always wondered if he didn’t like me very much because he never blew up at me.”

Despite all the Johnsonian tempests, the “Can-Do” gang flocked to work for him. Harry McPherson, Joseph Califano, Robert McNamara, Billy Lee Brammer, John Connally, Bill Moyers, Liz Carpenter and Middleton were just some of the gifted personalities who fell into LBJ’s orbit.

And as the array of Great Society legislation multiplied in dizzying profusion during the first half of the Johnson administration, so did those little stone “CAN DO” paperweights, popping up like mushrooms on desktops throughout the offices of the West Wing and the Executive Office Building.

\* \* \* \*

*“I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless.”*

— LBJ TO BIOGRAPHER DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN



President Lyndon B. Johnson awards the Distinguished Service Cross to 1st Lt. Marty A. Hammer.

**U**nfortunately, in his own way, Ho Chi Minh was a “Can-Do” guy, too. And in the end, he broke Lyndon Johnson.

Johnson didn’t begin the Vietnam War, nor did he end it. “He never sought it,” says Luci. But it was indisputably his war: When he came into office in 1963, 16,000 “advisers” were in the country; by the time he left in 1969, 536,000 troops were fighting. The war came to define him as sure as did the Great Society. It eventually consumed him: “I can’t get out,” he agonized to Lady Bird. “I can’t finish it with what I have got. So what the hell can I do?”

“Can-Do,” as it turned out, had a dark side. Johnson exhorted his generals to “nail the coonskin to the wall” and invoked the besieged defenders of the Alamo. He could not understand why all his vaunted rhetorical persuasion could not bring Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table, nor could he see why the mightiest nation on earth couldn’t militarily humble a pissant Third World backwater.

Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Gen. William Westmoreland in Vietnam and the Pentagon brass poisoned the well of public goodwill that LBJ had accrued in his 1964 landslide election victory by systematically deceiving the Congress, the press and the American people as to the costs and progress of the war. The deceit was incremental, the damage colossal. Johnson saw it all coming, like a train wreck he was powerless to prevent.

“One of the things I will always be grateful to Harry Middleton for is that he and my mother released those [secret White House] tapes,” says Luci. “You can hear him agonizing over the war. He sacrificed his political life to try to end the war. And his political life was, to a great extent, life itself.”

Johnson, as history records, withdrew from the 1968 presidential contest, saying, “I do not believe I should devote an hour or a day of my time to partisan [re-election] causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office.”

In the end, Middleton says, Johnson even modified his own favorite maxim. “In the final months of his life, he admitted it. He said man can do anything he sets his mind to,” Middleton recalls, “except find a way out of Vietnam.”

**2008 CENTENNIAL  
EVENT: MAY 26  
Attend a Johnson  
City Memorial Day  
tribute to service in  
Vietnam.**

PHOTO BY YOICHI R. OKAMOTO, COURTESY LBJ LIBRARY.

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"Any jackass can kick down a barn, but it takes a good carpenter to build one."

—LBJ, QUOTING HOUSE SPEAKER SAM RAYBURN

**J**ohnson lost the war—his portion of it, anyway—but the Great Society endures, albeit in truncated, mutated forms. Discrimination, poverty, inequality and health care crises are still with us. But many of the programs Johnson initiated are so intimately woven into the American fabric that they seem to have been in place forever.

"I grew up in an era when it was taken for granted that the races would be separated," says Luci. "But today, whether you're a flaming liberal or an arch-conservative, the idea of segregation is repugnant. And that change is forever."

"He was a controversial figure; Vietnam made him controversial," adds Middleton. "And his social programs made him controversial. But had he not existed and had not his social programs become a part of American life, we'd be a far different country right now."

"Joe Califano said that history should make no mistake about it," Middleton adds. "He was a revolutionary and what he launched was a revolution."

Johnson's physical monuments in Austin and the Hill Country are pharaonic in scale: The chain of dams that create the Highland Lakes; the silver web of wires that "brought the lights" to the Hill Country; the bulk of the LBJ Library. But more than anywhere else, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society lives on in the people whose lives it transformed for the better.

"Last year, a young African-American officer laid a wreath on my father's grave," recalls Luci. "My mother had just gone, and it was my father's 99th birthday and it was a very personal time for me. And this young man took me aside and talked about how my father's programs helped enable him to go to college and advance in his career. And I felt like my father was going to rise right up and say, 'Well done!'"

From his perch at the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park, Sanchez recalls that joining the service was the only way out of the drudgery of farm life for the men of his family in McAllen. "All my uncles and cousins went to Vietnam as enlisted men because then you could go to college on the GI Bill," he says. "But by the time I came of age, there were college loans and grants, and I could choose. We could go to college and then join the service as officers. It makes a huge difference. LBJ gave me the choice that generations before me didn't have."

In an anonymous office park located behind a pawnshop in a blue-collar neighborhood of North Austin, James Strickland serves as executive director of Child Inc., the federal Head Start grantee serving some 2,000 families in Travis County.

Head Start, part of the torrent of domestic legislation LBJ steered into law in 1964 and '65, was among his prides and joys. One of the first Head Start programs was set up in Stonewall across the Pedernales from the LBJ Ranch, and Johnson visited the site often.

Today, Child Inc. is where the rubber meets the road. It is where all the high-flown rhetoric of the Great Society gets translated into real-world impact. Some of the clients, Strick-

land says, are aware of LBJ and his legacy; most aren't. But Johnson's impact remains profound. "We now have parents who were in our Head Start program showing up with their children and wanting to enroll them," Strickland says.

His own connection to LBJ is personal: "He was responsible for getting rural electrification to come to my grandma's house in Dripping Springs."

So if Johnson came striding through the door this minute, what would he make of his creation? Strickland doesn't hesitate. "He'd be pleased as punch!" he says emphatically. "He'd be tickled to death."

Johnson sounded a poignant note in his farewell State of the Union address before Congress in 1969, and his words, in this centennial year, are worth remembering:

"Now, it is time to leave," he said. "I hope it may be said, a hundred years from now, that by working together we helped to make our country more just, more just for all of its people, as well as to ensure and guarantee the blessings of liberty for all of our posterity. That is what I hope."

"But I believe that at least it will be said that we tried."

**2008 CENTENNIAL EVENT: AUGUST 27**  
The LBJ Library and Museum will feature a big birthday party for LBJ.



For information on Lyndon B. Johnson Centennial events taking place throughout the year, visit [lbj100.org](http://lbj100.org). The site contains updated calendars and links to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas State University (LBJ's alma mater) in San Marcos, Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Park in Johnson City (which also includes the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall). In addition to the listings throughout the accompanying story, here is a sampling of events:

**JAN. 1:** Launch of the LBJ Centennial Web site, [lbj100.org](http://lbj100.org), at the LBJ Library and Museum

**JAN. 20:** The University of Texas Innervision Gospel Choir presents a free concert in the Great Hall of the LBJ Library in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

**MARCH 8:** Participate in a guided tour of the LBJ Ranch with Luci Baines Johnson.

**APRIL 11-12:** Celebration of the signing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 at the LBJ National Historical Park

**MAY 19-22:** Celebrations in Washington, D.C.

**AUG. 27:** The LBJ Ranch will open the president's office at the "Texas White House" to public tours for the first time.

**SEPT. 6:** Bird-Dog Invitational Fly-In (LBJ Ranch)

**DEC. 21:** Christmas Lights at the LBJ Ranch