

Kyle Longley. *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xv + 361 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-19303-1.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne Jr., revisiting the legacies of 1968, fittingly described that mad year as a “national horror,” which begged his follow-on question, “Was this what the beginning of Armageddon looked like?”[1] It certainly appeared so, then as well as now, fifty years removed. In a world capped tight by authoritarian oppression, racism, gender discrimination, economic inequality, regional conflict, and the elephant in the room—the threat of nuclear holocaust—in that fateful year enormous pressure from a remarkable array of protest movements passionately blew out the cork, spewing forth mayhem in all corners of the globe. In few places did this pressure erupt more so than the United States. The superficial veneer of social consensus and middle-class prosperity had already cracked to reveal the problems mentioned above and then some. If “the long hot summer” of 1967 shattered the looking glass, the events of 1968 destroyed it.

President Lyndon Johnson attempted to steer his country through the chaos that came to characterize this “year of upheaval.” Indeed, Johnson famously later wrote, “I sometimes felt that I was living in a continuous nightmare.”[2] In a stimulating and wonderfully engaging microbiography, historian Kyle Longley, recently the Snell Family Dean’s Distinguished Professor of History at Ari-

zona State University and now the new director the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, superbly explores how this most controversial of presidents lived and breathed that hellish year, in his aptly titled *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval*. Longley brings a fresh understanding, if not reluctant empathy, to this tortured, larger-than-life Texan, whose presidency was dogged by an unwinnable war in Southeast Asia and the worst domestic discord in over a hundred years.

Longley covers ground well trod: the Tet Offensive, LBJ’s March 31 announcement to not run for re-election, the shocking assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and the year-defining Democratic National Convention in Chicago. He also dissects off-the-beaten-track events, such as the Pueblo incident and LBJ’s politically miscalculated attempt to appoint Abe Fortas as chief justice of the Supreme Court. While numerous historians, biographer, journalists, and memoirists have explored these events and the year itself, Longley takes a unique approach—he gives us the most human portrait of LBJ in his “nightmare” year.

Longley paints a truly vivid picture of a man conflicted, indeed tormented, by the impossibility of reconciling his genuine desire to better socio-economic conditions for disadvantaged Americans

and his presumed obligation to counter the perceived communist threat to the free world with the political realities he faced at home and abroad. Such was a bitter pill for a consummate politician of LBJ's stature and ambition. Throughout, Longley shows an LBJ showing all the best and worst traits of his complex personality. Longley portrays LBJ at his best, for example, in deciding to give up the presidency, in his tremendous desire to bring together and heal the nation in the wake of King's murder, in his sincere offers of condolence and of the infinite assistance of his high office to the Kennedy family following RFK's assassination, and in his decision to not pursue charges of treason against Richard Nixon for wantonly undermining LBJ's effort to get the South Vietnamese government to the peace table in the fall of 1968. Through these events, one sees LBJ's fortitude, patience, and self-sacrifice for the common good, as he saw it. Longley's chapter on the March 31 speech is riveting, capturing the drama of that very day up to and through the speech that evening. His telling of RFK's death is gut-wrenching and perhaps shows LBJ, who frankly hated Bobby Kennedy, at his very best as he made available to the Kennedy family the operational power of the White House while making a conscious effort to avoid the spotlight as the nation mourned another Kennedy. Then there is LBJ at his worst—vain and manipulative, with a chip on his shoulder the size of Dallas. Longley details his double-dealing with Vice President Hubert Humphrey during the Chicago convention as well as LBJ's misguided effort to appoint his friend and associate justice of the Supreme Court Abe Fortas as chief justice. In both cases, Johnson struggled with having already made the decision to give up the presidency but unwilling to part with the power he now no longer held as a lame-duck president. Party politics and personal ambitions clouded LBJ's judgment, feeding, as Longley describes, his frequently petty “disingenuous” dealings with others, particularly during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago (p. 220). There, accord-

ing to journalist Drew Pearson, the president “seemed more interested in vindication for his own Vietnam policy than in the election of Hubert Humphrey” (pp. 225-26). Whether at his best or worst, LBJ was assuredly insecure, exhausted, and fearful of his legacy.

Longley's impeccable research draws from familiar sources, especially the oral histories and other materials from the LBJ Presidential Library, but his use of Lady Bird Johnson's diaries pops up time and again to add depth to his explanation of LBJ's internal struggles. No one knew the man better than she, and her diary, a treasury of that time in and of itself, reveals much about her view of these often tragic events as well as her intense loyalty along with her affectionate criticism of the man she loved, warts and all.

It easy to dislike LBJ. Vietnam alone makes that so. And now, fifty years beyond 1968, a narrative of this unlikeable tragic man continues to dominate national memory of that time. He was, still, a human being, complicated perhaps to the extreme, but one capable of and affected by the scope of human of emotion. Longley offers much to reconsider about Lyndon Baines Johnson, concluding that LBJ deserves empathy, no matter how reluctant. And it is a timely offering, as Longley shows a president who, though incredibly flawed and partially responsible for the troubles that swirled around him, tried to lead the nation through one of the most divisive periods in American history. Longley gives a critical look at the human side of LBJ, one that will stimulate specialists but is accessible to general readers. *LBJ's 1968* is a good book.

Notes

[1]. E. J. Dionne Jr., “Will We Ever Escape 1968?” *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2018.

[2]. Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 533.

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