The Case of the Escaped Dog

Three new books have been added to the scores already written about the politics of the 1960s, President Kennedy's assassination and the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies. The most valuable, to historians and ordinary readers alike, will be W. Marvin Watson's account of his time as Lyndon Johnson's chief of staff.

Chief of Staff: Lyndon Johnson and His Presidency (Thomas Dunne, $25.95), written in collaboration with Watson's former White House aide Sherwin Markman, is important because it reflects Johnson's perceptions and thinking from 1963-68. From my tenure as assistant to Vice President Hubert Humphrey, I retain an indelible mental picture of Watson that defined one part of his role. My office window in Humphrey's Executive Office Building suite overlooked the rear windows of the Oval Office and the meshed-fence area behind it in which LBJ's beagles, Him and Her, often frolicked.

One clear summer day I watched Him and Her leap repeatedly against the fence, trying to tear it down and escape to the outside world. Finally, one of the dogs landed atop the fence, teetered, came down on the outside and raced toward the ellipse. Johnson must have seen the same thing I did. Moments later Watson, wearing a gray suit and vest and black wingtip shoes, broke running from the West Wing basement door in the direction the escaped beagle had taken. Some 10 minutes later he returned, sweating and rumpled, carrying Johnson's dog in his arms.

Watson was the man LBJ counted on to retrieve his dog. He also managed Johnson's schedule, guarded his door, vetted his judicial and policy appointments, weighed in on large and small policy and political issues, hired and fired staff, handled sensitive files and matters, and served as his confidante. Watson delivered the eulogy at LBJ's January 1973 funeral at the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C.

Watson's strength was his loyalty to Johnson and his fidelity to what he perceived as his wishes. His inherent weakness was that, as a former Johnson campaign worker from a small town in east Texas, he came to his vital job lacking knowledge of the wider international and national worlds. He thus provided Johnson with a narrowed mirror image of the president's own views rather than an independent and balancing larger view. (Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton would similarly pick Georgia and Arkansas loyalists—Hamilton Jordan and Mack McLarty, respectively—as their chiefs of staff.)

Johnson was a man of enormous talent and accomplishment, including the enactment in a short period of landmark legislation that surely will rank him as one of the most effective presidents. Yet his insecurities made him unable to free himself from Vietnam or his continuing obsessions with loyalty, news leaks, the activities of the Kennedy family, or any action within his administration or the White House that might presuppose his decisions or limit his options. Like President George W. Bush, Johnson tended to think in "with us or against us" terms. Watson, for his part, was in frequent contact with the FBI and susceptible to any reports of communist influence in the civil rights and peace movements.

Watson recounts Johnson's feeling that Humphrey had a "poisonous" habit of talking to the media, which caused the president to cease confiding in him and (though Watson fails to mention it) to stop including him in national security discussions. Watson tells how he fired or triggered resignations from White House colleagues McGeorge Bundy, Richard Goodwin, Bill Moyers and Robert Kintner and explores their failings. He relates his activities as LBJ's agent at the 1968 Democratic Convention without recognizing how they disrupted the nominating and platform processes and foiled the convention climate.

Watson was and remains a God-fearing and patriotic family man who worked tirelessly for a president in whom he believed. Johnson bears responsibility for both the successes and failures of his presidency and the actions taken on his behalf.

Doubter-in-Chief

Unlike Chief of Staff, Max Holland's The Kennedy Assassination Tapes (Knopf, $26.95) offers us little new. However, it usefully gathers in one place transcripts of LBJ White House tapes dealing with the JFK assassination and its aftermath. Its accompanying narrative gives context to the events of the time. The transcripts go well beyond the subject of the assassination and deal repetitively with Johnson's well-known frictions with Robert Kennedy and his less-known exchanges with Jacqueline Kennedy.

As the transcripts underscore, LBJ's view of the assassinated nation changed over time. Johnson came to doubt the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone, especially after Johnson learned that, as attorney general, Robert Kennedy had—with CIA and mob involvement—coordinated Kennedy administration attemps to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro.

We may never know the facts of the matter. More than 40 years later, dotted lines between Oswald, Cuban front organizations, a Soviet KGB officer in Mexico, the CIA and its former agents, the Chicago mob and its henchman Jack Ruby remain unconnected. Ruby's killing of Oswald certainly had the earmarks of a professional shoot-the-shooter wipe out. One thing is certain: Johnson had nothing to do with it and, in fact, had warned Kennedy against going to Dallas or Nov. 22, 1963, because of the poisonous political climate there.

Reaching Out to Moderates

Reaching Out to the Bipartisan Center, by Sean J. Savage (State Univ. of New York, $35), relies on secondary sources and previously published work to trace the nation's Democratic Party's evolution between the Eisenhower and Nixon years. The author, an associate professor of political science at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, has written earlier volumes on Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman's roles as party leaders.

Savage concludes that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, while attempting to extend their party's base by co-opting the middle ground in the presidential elections of 1960 and 1964, neglected to strengthen the party internally. "The image, unfortunate legacy of JFK's and LBJ's presidential leadership of the Democratic Party," Savage writes, "is that it left the organization, rules, and processes of participative in their party unprepared and unable to resolve the disintegrating effects of dissenension and develop a new intraparty consensus that could accommodate the Democratic Party's coalition, policy agenda, and ideology that would make it competitive in future presidential elections as Richard Nixon assumed the presidency." He credits Robert Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, Edmund Muskie and former party chairman Larry O'Brien with having understood by the late 1960s that a rethink of party processes and procedures was necessary.

But Savage's thesis is not convincing. Any president would choose to attempt to throw a net over the middle ground and onto moderate/independent territory that would facilitate or party will let That is the way elections are won and legislative majorities formed. The Democratic Party's intraparty squabbles and its subsequent presidential election defeats in 1968 and 1972, were not due to earlier party leaders' failure to recognize and reform internal party processes. Rather, they were due to the real divisions in the party and the public's view about Vietnam, race and the welfare state. Process matters. But issues matter more, especially when they have to do with war, peace and central values in U.S. society.