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WHY LBJ BOWED OUT

Politics, his legacy, mortality and the war led to his decision to walk away from power.

March 30, 2008 | James R. Jones | James R. Jones was appointments secretary to President Johnson in 1968. he later served in Congress, as U.S. ambassador to Mexico and as chief executive of the American Stock Exchange. He is now a partner at the law firm Manatt, Phelps & Phillips.

Forty years ago tomorrow, President Lyndon B. Johnson shocked the nation with his televised announcement that he would not run for another term as president.

“I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president,” he said on that night in 1968.

Since then, there has been much speculation about what motivated his decision. Many believe he dropped out because he feared he would lose and wanted to avoid the humiliation.

As appointments secretary to Johnson -- the position now known as chief of staff -- I followed the ups and downs of the president’s decision-making process closely, and I am convinced that fear of losing was not why he declined to run. In fact, just prior to his March 31 speech, we instructed our pollster, Oliver Quayle, to do an in-depth survey pitting Johnson against all of his competitors in both parties. Johnson defeated every Democrat and Republican candidate by relatively wide margins.

The poll was conducted about the time of the New Hampshire primary. Because Johnson had not said definitively one way or the other whether he would be seeking the nomination, insurgent Minnesota Sen. Eugene McCarthy was the only serious candidate on the Democratic ballot. Even though McCarthy did much better than anyone expected, the fact is that Johnson won the primary with 49% of the vote -- all on write-ins.

From my vantage point, the president had begun seriously

considering not running much earlier, in September 1967. That's when the president asked Texas Gov. John Connally to join him and Lady Bird Johnson for a weekend at the LBJ Ranch near Stonewall, Texas. The only others invited that weekend were the president's top secretary, Marie Fehmer, and me. Connally and the Johnsons rode around the ranch in the president's Lincoln Continental convertible (usually with the top down and the heat or air conditioning on full blast, depending on the weather) and talked at length over meals about whether to run again. Connally argued that Johnson should retire. Mrs. Johnson, in a more delicate and indirect style, implied that she also hoped the president would not run again.

As a 28-year-old who had been working closely with President Johnson for only three years, I could not believe that this man who so relished politics and governing would voluntarily walk away from such power. Clearly, I was only beginning to understand the Lyndon Johnson persona.

In December 1967, we were again at the LBJ Ranch during the Christmas season. One of my tasks there was to coordinate the writing of the 1968 State of the Union address, which was to be given the following month. During that process of exchanging speech ideas and drafts, the president asked me to contact one of his former staffers and speechwriters, Horace Busby, and have him draft a separate conclusion -- what Johnson referred to as a "peroration" -- announcing that he would not seek reelection. Busby's writing was to remain totally confidential from all except the president and me. It was kept separate -- typewritten on one sheet of paper that Johnson carried in his pocket.

When the president completed his address on Jan. 17 without reading the Busby peroration, I assumed he had changed his mind and would run for reelection. Johnson's explanation, however, was that he had left the only copy of Busby's remarks on his bedroom night table and therefore decided not to make the announcement. Over the next couple of months, we had several more discussions at the end of the workday about whether he should run. He told me that he still had important legislation he wanted to move through Congress and felt that if he had announced in January, he would have become an immediate lame duck, powerless to move the Congress.

In these late-evening talks, he gave several reasons for not running again. He said his father and grandfather had both died at age 64, and he felt that he would not complete a second term as he would be 64 during the last year of that term. (As it turned out, Johnson died in retirement at 64.) He said that he had

always been so busy with his political life that he had never fully enjoyed participating in the growing up of his daughters and that he wanted the time to have that experience with his grandchildren.

But I believe that the most important reason he decided not to run again was his passionate desire to conclude the Vietnam War honorably. His middle-of-the-night awakenings to get the casualties report; his ongoing concern about the safety of his son-in-law, Chuck Robb, who was a Marine officer in the thick of heavy combat; his personal sense of responsibility each time he met with troops soon to be heading to Vietnam; and his growing sense of the futility of achieving total victory -- all of this had taken a toll on his vitality.

In many of our discussions, he said that if he did not seek reelection, he would be free to explore all options to conclude the war. If he did run, however, politics would interfere. "What if the opportunity came late in the campaign; I might want to wait until after the election for fear it might be misinterpreted and cost us votes," he once said, "and then the opportunity might have been lost."

Johnson was an avid student of history. More than anything, he wanted his presidency to be judged well by history. His foreboding was that the war would overshadow all of his domestic accomplishments.

In March, in addition to ordering the Quayle poll, Johnson asked for information on President Truman's 1952 announcement that he would not run again. That speech was made on March 30 -- about as late as Johnson felt a candidate could possibly wait to decide.

On Friday, March 29, 1968, Johnson held a Rose Garden session with White House journalists, announcing that he would make a televised address Sunday. That evening, he asked White House press secretary George Christian; my predecessor, Marvin Watson; and me to have a drink in his private office just off the Oval Office. He asked us whether he should announce on Sunday that he would not run again. Our advice was straightforward, splitting 2-1 that he had to run. Christian was the no vote; I argued that at this late date, Johnson had to run because to drop out now would splinter the Democratic Party in the fall.

The rest of that weekend was a blur as the speechwriters cranked out draft after draft announcing a significant shift in our Vietnam policy designed to lure the North Vietnamese and

their allies to seriously consider a settlement to the war. I contacted Busby to write the peroration again, putting him in the White House family quarters in order to keep his work secret from other speechwriters and staff.

Early Sunday morning, the president summoned me to the White House to join him and his daughter, Luci, at Catholic Mass at St. Dominic's in southwest Washington. During Mass, he instructed me to call Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, who was to go to Mexico that morning, to ask him to postpone leaving until we could visit him at his apartment after the church service.

At the apartment, Johnson, Humphrey and I took seats in the vice president's small study. Handing the speech to Humphrey, Johnson said he wanted Humphrey's comments. Reading through the main text, Humphrey was his usual ebullient self, with many positive comments. Then came the "I will not seek" peroration. Humphrey became short of breath, as if he was having an anxiety attack. He looked up, speechless. Johnson admonished Humphrey not to say anything because the decision to make the announcement wasn't final. Humphrey's eyes moistened. Then, perhaps thinking of his failed 1960 campaign for the Democratic nomination against John F. Kennedy and of Robert Kennedy's recent entry into the '68 race, Humphrey said, "There's no way I can beat the Kennedys." Johnson gave him encouragement, and we left to go back to the White House.

After many more rewrites, the president asked me about an hour before the scheduled 9 p.m. speech to tell the technician -- and only the technician -- to put the peroration on the TelePrompTer.

Once the speech began, I returned to my office to call Humphrey, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, congressional leaders and a few others.

When the speech was over, it was as if Johnson had regained several years. He had a new bounce and in short order was talking about what we needed to do concerning the war and the remaining legislative agenda. But only four days later, LBJ's confidence and optimism were badly battered when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, touching off riots in several cities.

As for me, a very young man who thought he was so seasoned, I had witnessed another dimension to Lyndon Johnson. He pursued purpose even at the cost of power.
