

The Destruction of a Presidency

By Alan Stein

Review of *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America* by James T. Patterson (Basic Books, 2012)

In his new book, James T. Patterson, a Bancroft Award-winning historian, promotes the idea that the Sixties actually began in 1965. This is not a new idea. As the author points out in his introduction, numerous writers have described 1965 as a “hinge” or turning point for America. Patterson states: “After 1965 for better and for worse . . . the United States would never be the same again.” With this as his thesis, he goes on to describe a year that began with hope and confidence and ended in turmoil and despair. Along the way he discusses cultural changes in music, television, movies and literature as the year evolved.

I am not, however, persuaded that 1965 was of such significance, nor do I think Patterson’s book demonstrates how 1965 produced lasting effects that forever changed the country. There is no doubt that 1965 was a dramatic year in America’s history and in the evolution of the Sixties, but I find little in this book or in my own recollections to lead me to choose 1965 over 1963 or 1968. The title of the book, *The Eve of Destruction*, refers to a song of the same name performed by Barry McGuire. Patterson says a “soundtrack for late 1964 . . . would be particularly upbeat” and mentions a number of songs in support of this argument. The implication is that “The Eve of Destruction” was symbolic of some profound cultural and political shift which is backed up with circumstantial correlations that do not connect cause with effect. I remember the “The Eve of Destruction” as a relatively minor and forgettable song of my youth, and in looking it up I found it was the number 1 record for exactly one week, and that it was displaced by “Hang on Sloopy.” (“Sloopy I

don't care what your daddy do / 'Cause you know Sloopy girl I'm in love with you"). If we use pop culture as a barometer of the political climate, I do not think cherry-picking a few songs or TV shows tell us much. Bob Dylan, the most celebrated protest artist of the Sixties, wrote his best-known anti-war and civil rights songs between 1961 and 1963; by 1965 he was moving in a different direction. It was in 1963 that he performed with Joan Baez and Peter Paul, and Mary at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, singing "Blowin' in the Wind." It was at this gathering of 250,000 people that Martin Luther King made his "I have a dream" speech, and it was the year that both President Kennedy and the African American civil rights leader Medgar Evers were assassinated. One could make a strong case for 1963 being a more significant and representative Sixties year than 1965.

The election of Kennedy ushered in the 1960s and gave birth to everything that became mythic about that era. And thus I can make the case that the Sixties actually began in 1960, and that this, too, was a more significant turning point in US history than 1965. As Kennedy said at the inauguration, "the torch has been passed to a new generation." US citizens elected a Catholic for the first time in their history, and Kennedy brought a style and energy to the office that was in dramatic contrast to the presidencies of FDR, Truman and Eisenhower. The Sixties was a decade of youth involvement in politics and culture, and this had a lasting impact, giving the US a youth-driven culture. This change was directly attributable to Kennedy. Kennedy inspired the youth of America, many under voting age, to serve their country, to get involved, to be physically active, and it was probably the first and maybe the last time that a generation became so engaged in the public discourse.

Everything we have come to know as the Sixties began in 1960 and evolved prior to 1965. Riots, James Meredith (the first African American to attend the University of Mississippi), the space program, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Berlin Wall, the Peace Corps, protest music, the Pill, *The Feminine Mystique* and the miniskirt—all preceded 1965. Patterson, however, focuses on the aftermath of the landslide victory of Lyndon Baines Johnson over Barry Goldwater. With the country recovering from the assassination of JFK, LBJ had stabilized the ship, and vowed to keep it on the course Kennedy had set for it. With Johnson's overwhelming election in 1964 (a reaffirmation of the Kennedy policies), and with a thriving economy, the *New York Times* was hailing a new Era of Good Feeling. At the lighting of the national Christmas tree, Johnson proclaimed, "These are the most hopeful times in all the years since Christ was born in Bethlehem." A strong economy, a renewed

sense of optimism, a progressive vision, and a war to eradicate poverty: it would be the second coming of the New Deal, now called the Great Society.

Patterson hangs his theory of the importance of 1965 on a demarcation between this Christmas message of hope and how it all unraveled so quickly. But could it have unraveled so quickly if something else were not already in place? Many processes of both social and biological evolution develop unnoticed until a threshold is crossed and the momentousness of the change becomes apparent. Was 1965 the threshold-crossing year for a process that began with Kennedy, or perhaps even earlier, say, in the shifts that allowed a young Catholic to be elected in 1960?

To understand the early and late Sixties requires, among other things, understanding the differences between JFK and LBJ. In *The Presidential Character*, political scientist James David Barber describes four presidential personality types. In this model Kennedy (like FDR) was active-positive, while Johnson was active-negative. Johnson is seen as a deeply conflicted man who was driven by his own insecurities to use aggression over others and achievements to compensate for his low self-esteem. While Kennedy and Roosevelt were more secure and could afford to be pragmatic and flexible and even fail, Johnson had to be right and was always looking for public confirmation.

Numerous books about Johnson discuss this complex and contradictory man. Child of a mother who wanted her son to be educated and cultured, and of a Texas politician father who wanted his son to be tough, Johnson seemed forever to be measuring himself and others in terms of masculinity. For Johnson size mattered, and he was often using metaphors about power and virility. As a young politician who went to Congress during FDR's presidency, Johnson measured himself against this father figure, Roosevelt.

Though he does not break new ground or focus on how Johnson's personality contributed to the downfall of the latter half of 1965, Patterson presents all the familiar LBJ traits—the crudeness, aggressiveness and self-pity. Patterson points out that Johnson wanted to pursue the most ambitious domestic program of any president. This led him to “focus obsessively on trying to outdo (out-Roosevelt) Franklin D. Roosevelt.” Patterson quotes Johnson discussing Roosevelt's first 100 days with Larry O'Brien, who was the director of both Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960 and Johnson's in 1964: “Roosevelt's got eleven [bills through Congress] . . . They were not major bills at all.” Johnson contrasts this

with his own record of twelve bills, one of which he calls major and another “super major.” He adds that with the passage of the twelfth bill, “you’ll have the best Hundred Days. Better than he did!” (Indeed, as Patterson chronicles, the first half of 1965 saw incredible legislative achievements, including the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and immigration reform.)

But throughout all this LBJ was fighting the twin ghosts of FDR, the father figure he wanted to beat, and JFK, who he saw as weak and undeserving, but who was beloved, while LBJ himself always felt unappreciated. “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, when civil rights marchers protesting the denial of voting rights in Alabama were clubbed and tear-gassed by local and state police, was a catalyst for Johnson’s getting the great Voting Rights Act passed, but this in turn led to Johnson feeling unappreciated by the African American community. He had delivered what Kennedy had not, but he felt he was not getting sufficient credit. And then, as many African Americans became aware that new laws alone would not change the reality of their lives, they turned to the more radical leaders of the Black Panthers and of the Black Power movement more generally, and white support for the Civil Rights Movement began to wane.

Similarly, because of his world view and rigidity, Johnson was unable to cut his losses in Vietnam and ended up propping up a corrupt unpopular regime in Saigon even when it was clear there was no path to victory and that at best US troops were fighting for a stalemate. In essence he boxed himself and the country in a no-win situation. In his 1964 campaign against Barry Goldwater, Johnson depicted Goldwater as a dangerous warmonger and pledged, “We are not going to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” And then in 1965, obstinately refusing to be the “president who lost Vietnam,” Johnson reversed course. Soon Kennedy’s commitment of “advisers” was expanded to combat troops and daily bombing and body counts, and eventually to hundreds of thousands of US troops fighting a war that was not supported by the very people—American young men—who were being asked to fight it.

Patterson painstakingly details all these events and issues, and his description of 1965 may remind Baby Boomers of the incessant conflicts of the Sixties, many of which were generational. My contention is that 1965 was more a turning point for the Johnson presidency than for the country, above all because he chose to fight a war that he had

campaigns against fighting. Ultimately it was the war that undermined the Great Society and shifted the focus away from anything that had been accomplished on the domestic front, deeply dividing the country and creating the “generation gap” and “credibility gap” from which Johnson never recovered.

Would history, would the Sixties, have been different if Kennedy had not been killed? Kennedy said the torch had been passed to a new generation. With the presidency of Johnson it was passed back to the old generation. Where Kennedy inspired and engaged the youth and brought young people into the process, Johnson alienated them. Would Kennedy have escalated the war in Vietnam? Historians have debated this, but Kennedy would not have *had* to fight in Vietnam for psychological reasons. In the Bay of Pigs Kennedy showed his ability to cut his losses even if humiliated, and to take full responsibility publicly (and without negative impact on the public perception of him). Johnson, on the other hand, could not avoid a fight without feeling less a man and being concerned how others would perceive him.

Kennedy’s youth, charm, sense of humor, and intelligence came to define charisma, and, as when a parent dies and becomes idealized, so Kennedy with his death was forever frozen in memory. Johnson was an old-school professional politician who seemed by contrast slow, dull, and crude—totally lacking all the qualities that helped Kennedy connect. The mounting costs of the war, its violent impact on middle- and upper-middle-class young men who did not support it, and Johnson’s attempt to have both “guns and butter”—the war and his Great Society—eventually eroded his legislative accomplishments and defined Johnson as an embattled war president.

Ultimately, when writing about such a decade it is difficult to single out any one year. Each year has its dramatic events which build on one another. *The Eve of Destruction* is a great read about an exciting and important year. As someone who lived through it and has reflected on it, I wish Patterson had expanded his project to see the year within the larger context. While some of the events of 1968 and 1969 are mentioned in the epilogue, they are included as afterthoughts. While I do not think there is much evidence that 1965 signaled a dramatic change in America, it was certainly the midpoint in the process that defined the decade. The resurgence of the Republican Party, generational division, a country

turning against itself and against a powerful leader who had a vision of guiding the nation to a new Era of Good Feeling ended in the bitterness and defeat of Johnson and of the Democratic Party in 1968—another even more tumultuous year.

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