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LBJ REVISITED

Robert Caro has spent seven years researching President Lyndon B. Johnson; the result is one volume of biography, an article in last month's Atlantic Monthly, and two more volumes in the oven. He has concluded that LBJ was ambitious and unprincipled, that he understood that money is useful in politics, and that he was an amoral wheeler-dealer.

What is more interesting than Caro's conclusions is a recent criticism of Caro by Ben Wattenberg in the Washington Post. Wattenberg, who was an LBJ speech-writer in the mid-1960s, defends his old boss against Caro's charges by saying, "There is a central dilemma that such an analysis must face up to; how did it happen that such an unprincipled man did so many principled things against his own best interests?"

Wattenberg's "Exhibit A" of LBJ's "principled things" is his support of civil rights legislation, which Wattenberg describes as an unpopular cause. But Johnson was not a stupid man; he knew that his support of civil rights would greatly enhance his image with the liberals (who had never really accepted him). LBJ knew that short-term political losses in the south would be more than made up by long-term political gains in the media.

Wattenberg's "Exhibit B" of LBJ's "principled things" is his support of the Vietnam War. But that, too, can be explained in terms of unprincipled politics rather than an idealistic desire to engage in what Ronald Reagan later called a "noble" effort.

The first shots in the Vietnam War were fired on August 2 and 4, 1964, when several Communist motor torpedo boats attacked the U.S. Seventh Fleet. LBJ was in the midst of a bitter presidential election campaign in which he was promising peace through strength in conventional weapons. To maintain his pre-election credibility, on August 5 he responded with the first military attacks on North Vietnam and the large-scale deployment of U.S. troops to Southeast Asia.

Of course, he never dreamed that he was starting a ten-year brutal war. But he didn't know how to extricate himself. His psychological entrapment is best explained by his "Luci's Little Monks" story.

Johnson was so paralyzed with fear that Vietnam would turn into a nuclear war that he refused to order any action that might suggest to the enemy that we had the courage to win the war. When he reluctantly gave permission to attack the oil storage facilities at Haiphong on June 28, 1966, he couldn't sleep that night and told his daughter Luci: "Your daddy may go down in history as having started World War III. You may not wake up tomorrow."

So Luci, to quiet his fears, suggested that they go to pray at St. Dominic's Church in southwest Washington, which was run by an order of brothers Luci called her "Little Monks." They went together, late that night in the rain. After their return to the White House, the reports of the bombing raid came in. There had been no miscalculation; no Soviet ships had been hit; no missile attack had been launched against the United States.

LBJ himself told this story to personal friends many times; it finally surfaced publicly after he told it at a White House dinner for the Supreme Court Justices. Johnson felt he couldn't win the Vietnam War without plunging us into nuclear war, and he couldn't pull out except at the cost of defeat and political disgrace.

When LBJ succeeded to the Presidency in 1963, he had less than a year to bring the liberals to his side, to woo the voters, and to assure his own reelection. His plan of action was to go all out for a "Great Society" which would provide much bigger federal spending schemes than anything conceived by the New Deal, Fair Deal, or New Frontier.

The Great Society was fantastically expensive. LBJ was afraid to raise taxes and afraid to order deficits which would send the budget over $100 billion. So he took the billions out of the strategic defense budget, which he cut almost in half. As he said in the East Room of the White House in offering a Great Society handout to one special-interest group, "We are taking money from tanks and bombs and we are putting it into minds and stomachs and hearts."

LBJ bled the strategic defense budget to finance at least one subsidy or benefit to appeal directly to each major segment of the population; at the same time he reduced taxes, thus generating the euphoric feeling that the benefits cost us nothing. He financed the Great Society out of the strategic defense budget; and the result is the Russian superiority in strategic weapons which Ronald Reagan's charts showed so effectively on national television.