

THE MEMBER FROM JOHNSON CITY

In his recent biography of Lyndon Johnson, *Flawed Giant*, Robert Dallek writes, “During a private conversation with some reporters who pressed him to explain why we were in Vietnam, Johnson lost his patience. According to Arthur Goldberg, LBJ unzipped his fly, drew out his substantial organ and declared, ‘This is why!’”

Way back then, President Johnson could be confident that the reporters would not share this moment of presidential bonding with the public. Quaint questions of taste aside, it might not have struck them as news anyway. The president’s fascination with his substantial organ was an old story to the White House press corps.

I first heard of it when I was working on a profile of White House press secretary George Reedy for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Everybody in the press room had a glancing acquaintance with the President’s privates, which he was forever prodding and redistributing through his pants. And ambassadors calling to present their credentials sometimes had a closer acquaintance than that. It was Mr. Johnson’s occasional practice to invite new envoys for a swim in the small indoor pool built for FDR. Skinny-dipping was the long-established tradition, which allowed the President to establish genital dominance at the start of a diplomatic relationship.

Down on the LBJ ranch near Johnson City, Texas, Mr. Johnson liked to go fishing and whisky-drinking on

Johnson Lake with the Secret Service and a few close friends. The small boat had no facilities, which meant that the president had to relieve himself over the side like everybody else. As Mr. Johnson was zipping up, one of the agents told me, he always made the same little joke: "It ain't too cold, but it sure is deep."

Back in the White House, the President was well known for sharing the most private moments with his staff. Rather than interrupt himself, he would leave the door open when he went to the toilet so that cabinet members could watch him as he sat on the throne, issuing orders and so forth.

None of this made it into my George Reedy piece, of course, those being simple and innocent times except for race riots, draft resistance, campus revolt, drug-taking, free love, urban terrorism, and the carpet-bombing of small Southeast Asian nations by giant, eight-engined, Guam-based B-52s.

The George Reedy piece didn't make it into the magazine either, its subject having jumped or been pushed from his White House job before the article could run.

The same disaster was to happen soon enough to Lyndon Johnson himself, allowing Mr. Nixon and his trusty sidekick, Dr. Kissinger, to take over the war in January of 1969. The next month I became a very minor sidekick of Mr. Nixon myself, having been posted as press attaché to our embassy in Laos. The first person I met when I got off the plane was my former editor at *The Saturday Evening Post*, Don Schanche, who was in Vientiane to do research for a book.

Too much later, in a saloon called The Third Eye, I was going on about how pathetic it was for a big boy in his sixties like Johnson still to be bragging about his whopper. I

wandered off into a confused thesis to the effect that the former president's compulsion to live up to his penis might even have been what got all of us stuck over here in the Big Muddy, where it ain't too cold but it sure is deep.

"Johnson doesn't have a particularly big one," Schanche said, stopping me from further foolishness.

The Saturday Evening Post, it turned out, had once been planning a special issue on the Vietnam war. When the president heard about this he invited Mr. Schanche and another editor to Washington for the famous Johnson treatment. It included the Full Monty, poolside.

"I don't remember being impressed," Mr. Schanche told me. "If anything, it was a little smaller than average."

There went my thesis, which in any case had begun sounding shaky even to me. We weren't in Southeast Asia because the presidential organ was bigger than average, but because it was smaller. Another inch or two and—who knows?—Mr. Johnson might have had enough self-confidence to pull out harmlessly from Vietnam as General De Gaulle had earlier withdrawn from Algeria.

In any event Johnson's disturbing fondness for flashing raised a character issue of real consequence, and one which should have been reported at the time. The President's in-your-face immodesty and puerile boasting suggested personal insecurities so crippling that they should not have been left to future historians like Mr. Dallek.

President Clinton's more recent exposures, on the other hand, could have been ignored by the press and the special prosecutor with perfect safety to the Republic. Never mind how tacky Mr. Clinton's behavior with Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky may have been, it pointed to no character flaw that really mattered much to the nation or the world.

The difference lay not in the two presidents' acts of exposure, which were equivalently low-rent, but in their choice of audience. Mr. Clinton, needing above all to be loved, exposed himself to women; Mr. Johnson, needing above all to dominate, chose men. The lust for love is arguably private business, but the lust for bullying leads, in a president, to the very public business of war.

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