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Reflecting or Reshaping? Landmark Anniversaries and Presidential Legacy

On 7 February 1909, the *Chicago Tribune* printed what they deemed the 'The Great Issue of the World's Greatest Paper'. Weighing in at a mighty 3 ¼ pounds, this Sunday edition of the *Tribune* composed 194 pages, and placed prominently on the frontpage was a cartoon, depicting a young boy in a rocking chair excitedly reading, 'The Story of Lincoln'. Underneath the drawing, the *Tribune* mused that "Somewhere in this country today there is an unknown boy who will be the country's greatest living man forty years from now."¹ Undoubtedly, with the 100th Anniversary celebrations of Lincoln's birth fast approaching, the editors were making it clear where the newspaper proudly stood on the 'Great Emancipator's' legacy. Two days later, the nation (parts of the white South excepted) followed suit. In Chicago, businesses shut down to enable the public to attend special centennial events, including a speech by the President of Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson.² In New York, one million people took part in Lincoln celebrations, while in Kentucky, President Theodore Roosevelt gave a moving speech before laying the cornerstone of a new Lincoln Memorial. Beyond American shores, the Brazilian Navy ordered a 21-gun salute to "that noble martyr of moral and neighborly love."³ Caught up in the Lincoln haze, scholars also churned out Lincoln books and poets penned odes to a great man. And perhaps most significantly, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was officially formed on 12 February 1909 – exactly one hundred years since Honest Abe's birth.⁴ The Lincoln Centenary, it is fair to say, was not a small affair.

Presidential anniversaries, and the way American society chooses to mark them, reveal a great deal about presidential legacy. Nevertheless, in his study of Abraham Lincoln in American memory, the scholar Merrill D. Peterson observes that, "The commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth was one of those events that took up more space in the actual observance than it would in the historical record."⁵ Indeed, while historians have lavished attention on the popular outpouring of grief that trailed Lincoln's body as it made its winding journey from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois in 1865, they have not given similar consideration to the Lincoln Centenary. Yet, both events reveal much about Lincoln's legacy during the time in which they took place. The former unearthed a surprising swell of affection for a leader whose popular mandate had appeared in question only a few months earlier, while the latter confirmed that this emotional

¹ *Chicago Tribune*, 7 February 1909, A1

² 'This is Lincoln Centennial Day,' *CT*, 12 February 1909, A1

³ 'Lincoln's Contested Legacy,' *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2009 <
<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lincolns-contested-legacy-44978351/>>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 175

attachment had only continued to grow in the decades since the 16th President's final journey home. Lincoln's legacy, the centennial celebrations confirmed, had only been enhanced by the passage of time and for many Americans he was without doubt their greatest president.

Lincoln, however, just as he was an exceptional president, is also an exceptional case study. Most presidents have not, and never will, enjoy such remembrance on similar anniversaries. One million New Yorkers did not pause to commemorate William Howard Taft's centennial and it is unlikely that the Brazilian Navy will be on standby to celebrate Rutherford B. Hayes's upcoming 200th birthday. Still, even those presidents who do not enjoy a substantial legacy, are often remembered on a smaller-scale during landmark anniversaries. For example, as of writing, plans are afoot in Warren Harding's hometown of Marion, Ohio to build a Harding Presidential Center as part of the Harding 2020 project to mark one hundred years since his ascension to the nation's highest office.⁶ It is doubtful, however, that many beyond Marion's confines will flock to commemorate a President most remembered for an array of scandals and his romantic penmanship. Nonetheless, even presidential anniversaries that are muted affairs reveal much about presidential legacy. The nation, by not remembering presidents on significant anniversaries, is often saying just as much as the *Chicago Tribune* was when it printed 194 pages in 1909.

For those that are remembered, this article will argue that such anniversaries can trigger a reassessment of a president's legacy or they can simply confirm that the original legacy remains firmly in place. In most cases, it is the latter – celebrations that *reflect* a presidential legacy, but do little to alter it. Nevertheless, in some rare cases, presidential anniversaries can *reshape* a presidential legacy. Lyndon B. Johnson's recent reassessment following a spate of landmark anniversaries, is one such example of this phenomenon and will be discussed extensively as a case study below. In addition to Johnson, this article will briefly examine the most prominent anniversary celebrations, including legendary presidential figures, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan, as well as the myriad of anniversaries devoted to John F. Kennedy. Of all these anniversaries, it is clear that only Jefferson and Johnson – and perhaps Reagan – had their legacy reshaped in some way. Nonetheless, the anniversaries of Washington, Roosevelt, and Kennedy, offer an insight into not only their legacies, but also contemporary political divides and the evolving state of the media in the United States. Presidential landmark anniversaries therefore, in reflecting or reshaping presidential legacies, are also illustrative of larger trends in American politics and society.

I

⁶ 'Harding 2020,' *Ohio Historical Society* < <https://www.ohiohistory.org/give/harding-2020> >

Presidents are remembered and reassessed through various anniversary landmarks. Most obviously, are those occasions associated with a president's birth or death. More tangential, but no less frequent, are anniversaries that mark the passage of significant legislation or the outbreak of a war with which a president is associated. Sometimes these celebrations are not even related to events that occurred during the individual's presidency. For instance, George Washington was minted on a coin in 1876 during the nation's centennial, while one scholar argues that celebrations to mark the War of 1812's centennial did much to cement Andrew Jackson's legacy as a heroic figure in American history. Both of those events being remembered, however, took place before either man had ascended to the nation's highest office.⁷ On the spectrum's bizarre end, Theodore Roosevelt was remembered in 2002, when retailers released a 100th Anniversary special edition 'Teddy bear' which, upon squeezing its paw, told 'T.R.'s' story.

Beyond simply offering an insight into a president's legacy, presidential anniversaries often offer a window into contemporary political divides. This was especially true of the nation's first president, George Washington. In 1832, preparations for the centennial of Washington's birth exposed sectional tensions that were already rife in the young nation. As the anniversary approached, Senator Henry Clay suggested that Congress mark the occasion by interning Washington's body from its resting place in Mount Vernon, Virginia, and moving it into the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Southerners, rather than critiquing Clay's plan for being a bit odd, instead charged Clay and those supporting the resolution with attempting a Northern power grab by the federal government against Virginia and the South. Future President and proud Virginian John Tyler argued – in what was meant as a compliment – that Washington's body was a "state relic."⁸ Thankfully, common sense prevailed, and the fierce debate was cut short when Washington's ancestor refused the federal application anyway. Despite the controversy, it was then widely reported that Washington's centennial was celebrated by Americans in the spirit of national unity and patriotism for which it was intended.⁹ While Washington's anniversary exposed the frailties in the nation he helped build, ultimately his centennial reflected the esteem with which he continued to be held by most Americans.

Washington's fellow Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, however, had not been so universally appreciated in the years following his death. Nonetheless, his bicentennial offered the perfect moment to rehabilitate the 3rd President. As Francis Cogliano outlines, Jefferson's legacy had been damaged by both the Civil War and the process of industrialisation in the United States. The

⁷ Tom Kanon, 'Forging the 'Hero of New Orleans': Tennessee Looks at the Centennial of the War of 1812,' *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 71, 2 (Summer 2012)

⁸ John Tyler quoted in Matthew Costello, 'Centennial of Washington's Birthday,' *George Washington's Mount Vernon* < <http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/centennial-of-washingtons-birthday/> >

⁹ Ibid.

former event had brought to the forefront Jefferson's slave ownership and his views on states' rights, while the latter had undermined his vision of an agrarian America – instead boosting the legacy of his great rival, Alexander Hamilton.¹⁰ Jefferson's 200th birthday would bring with it the chance to reshape this damaged legacy.

In 1943, with the United States embroiled in the Second World War, Jefferson became an avatar of American values of freedom and democracy. Fresh from having his face carved onto Mount Rushmore, the 1940s would prove the “age of Jefferson monuments” as America's Enlightenment man resurfaced to aid the battle against the darkness of the Third Reich and Japanese militarism.¹¹ During his bicentennial year, the Jefferson Memorial was opened in Washington, D.C. and was quickly followed by a six-volume biography that cemented Jefferson's reputation as an American icon for the age.¹² In this instance, Jefferson's anniversary had coincided with the ideal moment for his legacy to enjoy a resurgence in popular and academic opinion. Of course, in Jefferson's case, the hagiographic reshaping of his legacy proved temporary, and his legacy would evolve again in the 1960s towards a more critical view.¹³ Still, the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. is a permanent reminder of how the nation chose to celebrate his bicentennial. As President Franklin Roosevelt noted in his remarks at the opening of the memorial: “To Thomas Jefferson, Apostle of Freedom, we are paying a debt long overdue [...] for our generation of Americans can understand much in Jefferson's life which intervening generations could not see as well as we.”¹⁴ Roosevelt's comments once again serving to underline the importance of the bicentennial's context to the reshaping of Jefferson's legacy.

In 1982, Roosevelt himself was subject to a contentious centennial celebration. Far from coming together in a spirit of harmony to remember FDR, the occasion proved an outlet for contemporary political disputes. Gathering at Roosevelt's old Hudson River estate, the Governor of New York, Hugh Carey, used the occasion to take a swipe at President Ronald Reagan's slashing of social welfare programmes. Declaring “we need [FDR] now more than ever,” Carey caustically noted, “Franklin Roosevelt gave us the New Deal, but now we are getting the fast shuffle.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, Franklin Roosevelt Jr. refused to attend a White House ceremony honouring his father's centennial

¹⁰ Cogliano, Francis Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: reputation and legacy* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 5

¹¹ Cogliano, 6

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 7

¹⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, ‘Address at the Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial,’ 12 April 1943 *The American Presidency Project* < <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16383> >

¹⁵ ‘Roosevelt's Centennial Celebrated at Hyde Park; He is Needed ‘Now More Than Ever,’ Carey Says,’ *New York Times*, 31 January 1982

in protest that Reagan was whittling away FDR's programmes.¹⁶ Speaking at those celebrations, Reagan protested, "This is not a political gathering. It's a celebration of a great man who led our nation through historic times." Moreover, Reagan – an avowed admirer of FDR – sought to create a lineage between himself and his erstwhile hero. Noting that legendary columnist Walter Lippmann had initially described Roosevelt as "a pleasant man, who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be President," Reagan, the former actor, joked that "Forgive me but now and then I think I've been hearing an echo."¹⁷

Reagan did, however, attempt to use FDR's centennial to justify his own actions – just as Roosevelt had looked to Jefferson in the 1940s. Having used his inaugural address to declare that government – which Roosevelt had done much to expand – was no longer the solution to American problems, Reagan suggested that FDR would have acted similarly if he had been in the Oval Office in the 1980s. "[Americans are] a practical people with an inborn sense of proportion," Reagan told his audience, "We sense when things have gone too far, when the time has come to make fundamental changes. Franklin Roosevelt was that kind of a person, too." Moreover, the 40th President had no doubt that the 32nd President would have supported increased pressure on the Soviet Union's 'Evil Empire'. Reagan asserted that "Like Franklin Roosevelt we know that for free men hope will always be a stronger force than fear, that we only fail when we allow ourselves to be boxed in by the limitations and errors of the past."¹⁸ Later that year, Reagan signed a bill authorising the creation of a Roosevelt memorial in the Tidal Basin, although the legislation included no government funding to begin construction. As historian William Leuchtenburg wryly notes, "No expression of the baffling, labyrinthine relationship of Ronald Reagan and Franklin Roosevelt could have been more fitting."¹⁹

Still, Reagan's attempt to wrap himself in FDR's legacy during the centennial celebrations stood in stark contrast to his conservative colleagues, many of whom were repulsed by the very idea of celebrating the president who gave rise to the American welfare state. Despite a Democratic Congress appropriating \$7 million for former President Herbert Hoover's centenary in 1974, a more conservative Congress restricted funding for his more illustrious successor to \$25,000.²⁰ Moreover, the *National Review* lampooned proposed FDR celebrations, speculating that if the organisers truly sought to remember Roosevelt then the centennial would be "bureaucratic, [...] unconstitutional, more expensive than any before, and perpetual so that our children's children can help pay for it a

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ronald W. Reagan, 'Remarks at a White House Luncheon Celebrating the Centennial of the Birth of Franklin Delano Roosevelt,' 28 January 1982, *TAPP*, < <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42798> >

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman and Barack Obama* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009), 291

²⁰ Ibid.

hundred years from now.”²¹ All things considered, the Roosevelt Centennial showed that FDR continued to inspire either adoration or loathing among Americans – albeit with more of the former than the latter – just as his presidency had when it began fifty years previously. The centennial celebrations merely reflected this legacy, rather than offering a reassessment or reappreciation of America’s longest-serving president.

In 2011, Ronald Reagan’s centennial took place in a media landscape that had shifted dramatically over the three decades since ‘The Gipper’ had honoured Roosevelt. The *Washington Post*, for instance, devoted an entire section of their website to evaluating Reagan’s life and legacy. Little effort was spared in a climate where content was king and the *Post*’s coverage included everything from opinion columns to a live Q&A with Reagan historians, an online quiz, and articles which asked “Is Obama like Reagan?,” “How 2012 [Republican presidential candidate] hopefuls can claim the Reagan mantle,” and the helpful, “What’s named after Reagan where you live?”²² *Life Magazine* compiled two separate online galleries of photographs to mark Reagan’s life and released them as special collections to purchase on *Amazon*.²³ Meanwhile, a vastly increased range of television channels meant that there were more biographic documentaries to mark a president’s centennial than ever before. While Roosevelt’s centenary received one documentary, Reagan’s 100th birthday was marked with separate documentaries on HBO, The History Channel, and PBS. Over on the 24-hour news channels, Reagan’s centennial was also a goldmine for news directors. Reflecting the esteem with which conservatives continued to hold Reagan, Fox News entitled one segment: ‘A Truly Beautiful Human Being.’²⁴ For a media consumer in February 2011, it would have been quite the accomplishment to avoid Reagan Centennial coverage.

While Congress had dragged its heels over FDR’s centennial, it showed no similar reluctance for Reagan. In 2009, a Democratic-controlled Congress passed an act, signed by President Barack Obama, that created a twelve-member bipartisan Centennial Commission – containing members running the ideological gambit from liberal Senator Dianne Feinstein to conservative commentator Peggy Noonan – to develop plans to celebrate the anniversary.²⁵ The Ronald Reagan Foundation was also able to raise substantial sums of money for the celebration, including a \$15 million donation

²¹ *National Review* quoted in *Ibid*.

²² ‘Ronald Reagan Centennial,’ *Washington Post*, 2011 < <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/reagan-centennial/> >

²³ ‘Ronald Reagan at 100,’ *Life Magazine*, 1 February 2011

²⁴ ‘Ronald Reagan Centennial: “A Truly Beautiful Human Being,”’ *Fox News*, 31 January 2011 < <http://video.foxnews.com/v/4518081/> >

²⁵ Press Statement, ‘Inaugural Meeting of the Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission at U.S. Capitol,’ 29 July 2010, < <https://www.archives.gov/files/reagan-centennial-commission/press/rrcc-pr-01.pdf> >

from Reagan's old employers, General Electric.²⁶ Out of these efforts sprung a new Ronald Reagan stamp, a rock concert, and even a Reagan Centennial NASCAR show car. More traditionally, an extravagant gala to celebrate Reagan's life also took place in Washington, D.C.²⁷ Beyond such official events, Americans in Pasadena, California, had already led a 55-foot float featuring black-and-white photographs of Reagan, while in Eastern Europe, cities hoisted statues to commemorate Reagan's contribution to bringing about the Cold War's end. To top it all off, Reagan received a video homage during America's most watched event – the Super Bowl.²⁸

For all the noise made around Reagan's centennial, what did it actually mean for his legacy? Perhaps given the recent nature of Reagan's passing (he died in 2004 after a long battle with Alzheimer's), and with his widow Nancy Reagan heavily involved in events, there was less of the rancour on display that had been seen in FDR's centennial. If anything, there was a hint that Reagan's legacy was undergoing a change among his former Democratic opponents. Following the Republican party's lurching to the right during the 2010 midterm elections, Democrats were especially keen to portray the new Grand Old Party (GOP) as being too extreme, even for Ronald Reagan. While this did not involve embracing all aspects of the Gipper's legacy it meant a softening towards their old nemesis. Indeed, during the lead up to the centennial celebrations, Obama's staff let it be known that current president was reading a sympathetic Reagan biography.²⁹ Meanwhile, for Republicans, the centennial celebrations saw GOP presidential candidates jostle for the position of Reagan Admirer-in-Chief. Former Speaker Newt Gingrich ultimately taking the prize when, during the centennial, he toured with a hagiographic documentary, *Ronald Reagan: Rendezvous with Destiny*, hosted and narrated by Gingrich and his wife.³⁰ Ultimately, Reagan's legacy was not fundamentally reshaped, especially for conservatives who continued to adore Reagan, although it was not entirely unaltered by his centennial.

John F. Kennedy represents somewhat of an oddity when it comes to how his anniversaries have unfolded. For a presidency that achieved comparatively little, Kennedy's legacy has been boosted by consistent bursts of anniversary remembrance since his tragic death. Historian Mark White's analysis of JFK's cultural legacy (published fifty years after Kennedy's assassination itself) reveals spurts of media and scholarly output that coincide with ten-year intervals from Kennedy's short presidency.³¹ For instance, the *Kennedy* television miniseries starring Martin Sheen as JFK first

²⁶ 'GE Announces \$15 Million Contribution to Ronald Reagan Centennial Celebration,' *Philanthropy News Digest*, 28 March 2010

²⁷ 'Ronald Reagan Centennial Celebration Events,' *Reagan Foundation* < <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/programs-events/ronald-reagan-centennial-celebration-events/> >

²⁸ Lisa Rein, 'Exhibits, festivities to mark 100th anniversary of Reagan's birth,' *WP*, 6 January 2011

²⁹ 'Obama Reading About Reagan,' *ABCNews.com*, 23 December 2010

³⁰ *Ronald Reagan: Rendezvous with Destiny*, Gingrich Productions, dir. Kevin Knoblock (2009)

³¹ Mark White, *Kennedy: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)

aired on 20 November 1983, almost exactly twenty years since his assassination.³² Fifty years on from his inauguration, *The Kennedys* (2011) cast a more critical eye over JFK on the small-screen.³³ Beyond television, waves of JFK scholarship appeared at the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s, while Oliver Stone's controversial *JFK* (1992) appeared in such a timeframe.³⁴ JFK was also honoured with his own GI Joe Doll on the 40th anniversary of his election victory – proving that Teddy Roosevelt was not the only president to inspire bizarre ephemera. Finally, the 50th Anniversary of Kennedy's election moved President Obama to publish an article on JFK's inspiration qualities, *USA Today* to publish a special edition of their newspaper, and the New York Mint to issue a new coin in his honour.³⁵

Meanwhile, another round of JFK-frenzy unfolded amid the 50th anniversary of events in Dallas, including novelist Stephen King's *11.22.63*, which sought to imagine a world where Lee Harvey Oswald's plot was foiled and JFK lived. By the time Kennedy's centennial arrived in 2017 – despite the Kennedy Foundation's best efforts – it was a somewhat muted affair as Americans had little left to learn. Even content hungry news outlets devoted far less time to the centennial than they had the 50th Anniversary of his assassination. Still, the seemingly endless sequence of JFK-related landmark anniversaries have undeniably contributed to what White calls the “extraordinarily potent” image of Kennedy.³⁶ Indeed, it is an image that has seen him remain the most fondly remembered post-World War II President among Americans.³⁷ While Kennedy's presidency was not without accomplishments, such omnipresence in American culture and memory remains excessive if judged against his time in the Oval Office. Perhaps then, Kennedy's legacy will start to recede without such obvious anniversary landmarks on the horizon.

While this article cannot assess every presidential anniversary, the examples of Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, Reagan, and Kennedy, offer an insight into how Presidents have been remembered on landmark occasions. Clearly, it is a process that is greatly affected by the context in which the anniversary takes place; the level of celebration affected by how highly Americans value a president's successes or failures from the platform of hindsight on which the contemporary public, media, and scholars stand. Nevertheless, it is only on rare occasions that a true reassessment is proffered during anniversary remembrance. Perhaps the most recent example of this infrequent phenomenon has taken place in recent years with regards to one of the nation's previously most forgotten presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson.

³² *Kennedy*, dir. Jim Goddard (1983-)

³³ *The Kennedys*, dir. Jon Cassar (2011-)

³⁴ *JFK*, dir. Oliver Stone (1992)

³⁵ White, 116-139

³⁶ White, 1

³⁷ Andrew Dugan and Frank Newport, 'Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President,' *Gallup*, 15 November 2013 < <http://www.gallup.com/poll/165902/americans-rate-jfk-top-modern-president.aspx> >

II

Robert Dallek, the great presidential biographer, concluded his excellent and nuanced portrait of Lyndon Johnson by arguing that, with regards to LBJ's legacy, "Only one thing seems certain: Lyndon Johnson will not join the many obscure – almost nameless, faceless – Presidents whose terms of office register on most Americans as blank slates. He will not be forgotten."³⁸ Arguably, Dallek who was writing in 1998, had already failed to perceive that Johnson was well on his way to becoming one of the United States' many faceless former presidents. Sandwiched between the headline-grabbing presidencies of John Kennedy and Richard Nixon, LBJ was the odd-one-out in the triumvirate of 1960s presidents who dominated the political landscape during an era which profoundly shaped American society. Historian Bernard von Bothmer, conducting a study into the political legacy of the 1960s, found in 2010 that, "More than anything, Johnson is simply forgotten: when members of the public are asked whether they approve or disapprove of past presidents, Johnson always leads in the category 'unsure'."³⁹ By 2015, Dallek was forced to revisit his old assertion, admitting that "LBJ has disappeared."⁴⁰ An observation confirmed by the fact Dallek's admission came in an article for a book entitled *LBJ's Neglected Legacy*. Since this was the President who presided over the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and a host of 'Great Society' legislation that remade the government's relationship to the American people on a par with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Johnson-amnesia was a puzzling phenomenon.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, recent years have seen this trend reversed – in large part, thanks to a host of landmark anniversaries that have brought LBJ back into popular memory. As the editors of *LBJ's Neglected Legacy* began their collection, "The centennial anniversary of the birth of Lyndon B. Johnson and the fiftieth anniversaries of his signal legislative achievements [...] have combined to stimulate renewed interest in the legacies of his extraordinary and controversial presidency."⁴¹ In this assertion, the editors were half right as, in reality, Johnson's centennial passed without much acknowledgement beyond official events. Certainly, LBJ was almost entirely ignored by his own party, when the Democrats failed to recognise Johnson at their 2008 convention. Given the symbolism attached to Barack Obama's nomination as the first African-American to head a major party ticket, it was telling that the Democrats chose to shun a video tribute to LBJ – the President

³⁸ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and his times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 628

³⁹ Bernard von Bothmer, *Framing the sixties: the use and abuse of a decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 142

⁴⁰ Robert Dallek, 'Remembering LBJ: One Historian's Thoughts on Johnson's Place in the Pantheon of Presidents,' *LBJ's neglected legacy: how Lyndon Johnson reshaped domestic policy and government*, eds. Robert H. Wilson, Norman J. Glickman, Laurence E. Lynn Jr. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 21

⁴¹ Wilson, Glickman, Lynn Jr, 'Preface', *LBJ's neglected legacy*, 2

most closely identifiable with civil rights and voting rights. As Dallek speculates, this decision may well have been partly inspired by the controversial Iraq War serving to revive negative memories of Johnson's Vietnam legacy.⁴²

Instead, it was the slew of anniversaries related to his legislative accomplishments that thrust LBJ back into the spotlight between 2013 and 2016. As will be discussed, Johnson received voluminous coverage in the news media, reassessment by Hollywood, a new burst of scholarship, and a revival as a figure whose legacy triggered debate amongst contemporary politicians – both Democratic and Republican. While it is likely that anniversaries of his grand accomplishments, such as the civil rights acts, would have increased focus on Johnson anyway, it is the context in which these anniversaries took place that helped spur a greater reassessment of Johnson – largely in a positive fashion for the 34th President. Finally, it is also true that Johnson's legacy was out of kilter with his accomplishments anyway, and therefore his legacy was uniquely placed to benefit from a reassessment triggered by a wave of landmark anniversary celebrations.

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Speaking confidently in 2014, Larry Temple, a former Johnson aide and head of the LBJ Foundation, predicted a revival for his former boss. "The next five years will be the 50th anniversary of everything he did," Temple presciently observed. Taken together, Johnson's anniversaries have inspired such vast amounts of spilled ink – be it real or virtual – that it would make the editors of the *Chicago Tribune's* Lincoln special edition blush. Like Reagan's centennial celebrations, the wave of Johnson anniversaries took place in a new media climate that prized opinion columnists over investigative journalists, and which demanded reams of content to fill both web and printed pages. Dissecting Johnson's legislative achievements proved perfect fodder for such a task. For instance, on the 50th anniversary of Johnson's announcement that his administration would pursue a 'Great Society', the *Washington Post* ran a series reviewing how LBJ's major programmes had evolved since and whether they could be deemed successful – it ran to 62 pages and was released as its own Kindle book.⁴³ Elsewhere, in most major newspapers, columnists – conservative and liberal – battled it out over whether Johnson's social welfare legislation in areas of health care, education, immigration, and consumer regulation had benefited or harmed American society in the ensuing

⁴² Dallek, *LBJ's neglected legacy*, 21

⁴³ 'The Great Society: 50 Years Later,' *Washington Post*, May 2014

fifty years. Scholars also chipped in, as Johnson's Great Society legacy was reassessed in popular history books, such as those by Julian Zelizer (positive) and Jonathan Darman (negative).⁴⁴

The fiftieth anniversary of the 'War on Poverty', a controversial element of Johnson's Great Society, sparked such debate that it spilled over into the political arena. In January 2014, five decades on from LBJ's declaration of an "unconditional War on Poverty" – Republicans used the occasion to once again hammer home Ronald Reagan's old damning maxim that, "We fought a War on Poverty, and poverty won."⁴⁵ Symbolically speaking in the Senate's Lyndon Baines Johnson Room, Marco Rubio, a young Republican senator preparing to run for president, made a speech calling for the states to take control of those federal poverty programmes that remained from Johnson's era.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, future House Speaker, Paul Ryan, used the occasion to release 'The War on Poverty: Fifty Years Later' – an unflattering report on the Johnson's antipoverty initiatives.⁴⁷ On the other side of the aisle, Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi released a statement that affirmed, "The programs born from the War on Poverty [...] have lifted millions of American families out of destitution and despair." "On the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty," Pelosi demanded, "we must renew our commitment to rooting out poverty in America."⁴⁸ Such partisan commentary reflected the growing polarisation that had commenced between the two parties on social welfare issues since the 1960s. Moreover, it demonstrated that five decades on, despite previous ignorance of his years in office, Johnson's presidential legacy was still relevant to American society.

The Johnson anniversaries also witnessed the entertainment industry take another look at LBJ's larger than life character. Prior to 2013, Johnson – if he featured in historical dramas at all – was often depicted in an entirely negative light. For instance, Johnson's portrayal in the aforementioned 1980s *Kennedy* series was almost wholly unflattering, while the HBO film *Path to War* (2002) focused on a misguided Johnson escalating the Vietnam War and the subsequent unravelling of his presidency.⁴⁹ By 2014, however, Johnson was the central character in the zeitgeist Broadway phenomenon – *All the Way*, in which Bryan Cranston portrayed a dynamic and complex Johnson as he strove to pass the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and win his presidential election.⁵⁰ Cranston then went onto reprise his role for the successful HBO film of the same name that

⁴⁴ Julian E. Zelizer, *The fierce urgency of now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress and the battle for the Great Society* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015); Jonathan Darman, *Landslide: LBJ, Reagan, and New America* (New York: Random House, 2014)

⁴⁵ Reagan quoted in James T. Patterson, *America's struggle against poverty, 1900-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 224

⁴⁶ Jackie Kucinich, 'Rubio: War on Poverty has been lost,' *WP*, 8 January 2014

⁴⁷ 'The War on Poverty: 50 Years Later,' House Budget Committee, 2014

⁴⁸ Press Statement, 'Pelosi Statement on 50th Anniversary of War on Poverty,' 8 January 2014 < <http://www.democraticleader.gov/newsroom/pelosi-statement-50th-anniversary-war-poverty/> >

⁴⁹ *Path to War*, dir. John Frankenheimer (2002)

⁵⁰ Peter Osnos, 'How Pop Culture is Re-Evaluating Lyndon B. Johnson's Legacy,' *The Atlantic*, 1 April 2014

appeared in 2016.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Hollywood has churned out another film – entitled *LBJ* – due to be released in early 2018, featuring Woody Harrelson as Johnson. The film will examine Johnson’s early life, as well as his leadership following Kennedy’s assassination – a time that historians almost unanimously agree Johnson handled with immense skill.⁵² Finally, Ava DuVernay’s film *Selma* (2014), which focused on the struggle for the Voting Rights Act, offered a largely negative portrayal of Johnson.⁵³ Nonetheless, this kicked off a fierce debate in the media as former Johnson aides and historians jumped to his defence. As such, unintentionally, the film triggered media coverage that portrayed Johnson in a positive light once again.⁵⁴

In April 2014, LBJ’s anniversary revival was crowned by a Civil Rights Summit at the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas. With President Obama delivering the keynote address, and former President William J. Clinton also speaking, the event was guaranteed media attention. Obama, in keeping with a long line of previous leading Democrats, had embraced JFK in his rhetoric, eschewing any mention of Johnson. As such, it represented a departure for the incumbent president to speak glowingly of LBJ’s contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, Obama also saluted Johnson’s faith in the power of government to do good, justifying this through his own life story: “Because I have lived out the promise of LBJ’s efforts. Because Michelle [Obama] has lived out the legacy of those efforts. Because my daughters have lived out the legacy of those efforts. Because I and millions of my generation were in a position to take the baton that he handed to us.”⁵⁵ It represented a ringing endorsement of Johnson from the Democratic Party’s leader, when only six years earlier, the same party had spurned LBJ during Obama’s own nomination.

Ultimately, LBJ’s spate of anniversaries triggered a revival of his image for the public to consume. As it was with Reagan’s centennial, it would have been quite the feat for a news consumer between 2013 and 2016 to avoid hearing or reading about Johnson’s achievements. This is without even considering the impact that social media – vastly expanded in years since Reagan’s 2011 centennial – likely had in spreading the word beyond traditional outlets. While it is hard to accurately measure how much this led to a broader societal appreciation of Johnson’s legacy, it is fair to say that the anniversaries pushed many Americans to learn more about the man who had perhaps previously been the most forgotten of America’s unforgettable presidents. It also reshaped

⁵¹ *All the Way*, dir. Jay Roach (2016)

⁵² *LBJ*, dir. Rob Reiner (2017); For example, Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (New York: Knopf, 2012)

⁵³ *Selma*, dir. Ava DuVernay (2014)

⁵⁴ Mark McLay, ‘The Meat in the Coconut: Lyndon Johnson and the Voting Rights Act of 1965,’ *The Shadow of Selma*, eds. Joe Street and Henry Knight Lozano (Florida: University of Florida, 2018)

⁵⁵ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by the President at LBJ Presidential Library Civil Rights Summit,’ 10 April 2014 < <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/10/remarks-president-lbj-presidential-library-civil-rights-summit> >

his legacy from the man who had escalated the Vietnam War, to the President who had embraced civil rights and sought to improve American society through government action. Nonetheless, as with Jefferson during World War II, the context in which LBJ's landmark anniversaries took place was just as important to the Johnson legacy revival.

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While Obama's presence at the Civil Rights Summit boosted the prestige of that occasion, it was his presidency that provided the context to ensure Johnson's anniversaries received the level of attention that they did. Following the 2010 midterm elections – in which Republicans gained control of both houses of Congress and consequently stymied Obama's efforts at passing new liberal legislation – commentators increasingly began to draw comparisons between LBJ's handling of Congress with that of Obama's. "Lyndon Johnson has come to look far more formidable today than he did in 1968," historian Sean Wilentz noted in 2014, "Current commentators yearn for a time when a master partisan politician worked the levers of power in Washington and won numerous victories."⁵⁶ Despite Obama's glowing tribute to LBJ at the Civil Rights Summit, it was not a comparison that was received well by the White House. By June 2015, *Politico's* Chief Washington Correspondent, Edward-Isaac Doveve observed that, "In the White House, there's no topic that so quickly and consistently makes heads explode as suggesting Obama needs to be more like LBJ."⁵⁷ Obama, clearly irked, refuted the comparison himself in an interview – somewhat justifiably claiming that LBJ had the same problems with congressional obstruction following Republican gains in 1966 as Obama experienced after 2010.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, Johnson's stature was only increased by the whole episode. In a sense, as Obama struggled to make further gains, LBJ became a lionised liberal icon – a status he was never granted either during his time in office or in the decades that followed.

Other aspects of Obama's presidency ensured that Johnson's anniversaries had a disproportionate impact. Firstly, American race relations – a core element of Johnson's legacy – were once again front and centre in American politics following the election of the first African-American president and an array of events that brought racial politics to the fore. Indeed, the formation of Black Lives Matter in late 2013 and unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, coincided with the fiftieth anniversaries of the Civil Rights Act. While these incidents showed that Johnson's

⁵⁶ Sean Wilentz, "Landslide: LBJ and Ronald Reagan at the Dawn of a New America," by Jonathan Darman, *New York Times*, 17 October 2014

⁵⁷ Edward-Isaac Doveve, 'Obama v. LBJ on display at congressional picnic,' *Politico*, 17 June 2015

⁵⁸ Obama quoted in George E. Condon, 'The One Piece of Advice Obama Aides Hate Hearing,' *The Atlantic*, April 2014

presidency had far from solved racial issues in the United States, they also ensured that his civil rights legacy was discussed.⁵⁹

Obama's final contribution to reviving Johnson's legacy lay in their shared visions for the government's role in the United States. Certainly, Obama was the first president to openly affirm his belief in the federal government's ability to improve Americans' lives since LBJ left the White House. In the decades following Johnson's departure, conservatives were ascendant, and Johnson's embrace of increasingly loathed 'big government' was tarnished by many of his successors. Reagan made no secret of his antipathy towards the Great Society, blaming Johnson's programmes for the mess that the US economy had gotten itself into in the following years.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, even Democratic President Bill Clinton famously declared, "the era of big government is over."⁶¹ With Obama in residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, those who believed in the Great Society's ethos – its faith in government to solve problems – once more had a spokesman in the White House. Indeed, in passing the Affordable Care Act of 2010 – 'Obamacare' – the 43rd President passed the largest social welfare expansion since the Johnson era. All in all, the coinciding of Obama's presidency with the series of Johnson legislative anniversaries proved a potent mix in reviving LBJ's legacy.

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Finally, the unique nature of Johnson's legacy meant that – under the right conditions – his presidency was ripe for revisiting and reviving. Simply put, the legislative avalanche unleashed during LBJ's presidency was too significant in its impact on American society for the man who precipitated it to fade into obscurity. For Johnson, salvation ultimately lay within his substantial domestic accomplishments. Indeed, historians had long been preparing the ground for a revival on such grounds. For while the public showed ignorance towards the Texan, LBJ has always been a rich figure for biographers and political historians alike. As Johnson scholar, Kent Germany noted in 2009, "writers have produced approximately 250 Ph.D. dissertations, well over one hundred books, and countless articles regarding specific aspects of Johnson's career and his policies."⁶² Part of this phenomenon, Germany notes, stemmed from the wealth of sources Johnson left behind, whether it was his presidential tape recordings or Johnson's insistence that the LBJ Library be an institution that let scholars have access to everything – good and bad – in his presidency. Still, more important, is

⁵⁹ Michael W. Flamm, 'From Harlem to Ferguson: LBJ's War on Crime and America's Prison Crisis,' *Origins*, 8, 7 (2015); Elizabeth Hinton, 'Why We Should Reconsider the War on Crime,' *Time*, 20 March 2015

⁶⁰ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 65

⁶¹ William J. Clinton, 'Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,' 23 January 1996, *TAPP* < <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=53091> >

⁶² Kent B. Germany, 'Historians and the Many Lyndon Johnsons: A Review Essay,' *The Journal of Southern History*, 75, 4 (2009), 1002

Germany's observation that "Johnson was more than just a president during a momentous era. He was a historical whirlwind unto himself."⁶³ Moreover, in recent decades, scholars have observed that LBJ's Great Society "bequeathed an era" in American politics and society – thus underlining the significance of his presidency.⁶⁴

As such, Johnson's forgotten legacy was purely a public phenomenon rather than a scholarly one. LBJ's legacy ultimately lay dormant, bubbling away intensely in academia, until the eruption of public and media interest was unleashed by his landmark anniversaries. Attempting to understand the previous lack of public interest, Dallek believes it can be explained by a combination of the Vietnam War and the ascendancy of conservatism's anti-government message.⁶⁵ In addition, there was the small aforementioned issue of Johnson being sandwiched between the martyred JFK and the dastardly Richard Nixon in the public memory. Perhaps also, Johnson – due to his dour appearance on television – was not remembered as a particularly charismatic personality. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the centennial of his birth, with its obvious focus on Johnson 'the man', made such a small splash in comparison to the anniversaries of his legislative achievements. Whatever the reason, when the time came to revive Johnson's legacy – as it did between 2013 and 2016 – there was a wealth of scholarship for media outlets and Hollywood to draw upon.

Of course, for Johnson – as happened to Jefferson – his legacy may well evolve again. For while his domestic accomplishments have been the focus of recent years, it is likely that the upcoming anniversary of the Tet Offensive – the Vietnam War's most pivotal event – in 2018, may well turn the attention back onto Johnson's folly in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, even if his legacy is tarnished by another reassessment, perhaps Dallek's assertion that LBJ will not join the nameless or faceless presidents in American history is finally true.

Conclusion

Presidential legacies, as this volume demonstrates, are complicated tapestries, woven together with many different materials and by many different artisans. For even the best artisans – in this case, historians, presidential foundations, the media, Hollywood, literary figures, and the public – can only produce something truly remarkable if the raw materials – vision, foreign and domestic leadership, moral authority, and a positive effect on future society – are there in the first place. Landmark anniversaries can either see this tapestry brought out and given a prominent position in the national

⁶³ Ibid., 1003-1004

⁶⁴ Gareth Davies, *See government grow: education politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 287

⁶⁵ Dallek, 'Remembering LBJ,' *LBJ's neglected legacy*, 22

gallery to receive appreciation from the American people, or it can simply be left to gather dust in the attic – deemed unremarkable and unworthy of attention. Occasionally, however, the tapestry can acquire a new design and thus a new appreciation.

As such, landmark anniversaries often reflect a presidential legacy, but on rare occasions they can reshape one. Beyond their relevance to presidential legacy, landmark anniversaries can also reveal much about American society at the time in which they take place; whether it be sectional tensions during Washington's centennial, a spirit of national unity during Lincoln's centennial and Jefferson's bicentennial, political polarisation during Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan's one hundredth birthdays, or even a nation still mourning a lost leader in the consistent remembrance of John F. Kennedy. In the case of Lyndon Johnson, the desire for a politician bestowed with near-mythical deal making powers, spoke volumes at the frustrations felt at the contemporary Washington gridlock. With one eye on the horizon, the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal will surely offer a similarly fascinating reveal of American society. Historians would do well to observe the occasion with keen interest.