

Kevin J. Fernlund. 2009. *Lyndon B. Johnson and Modern America*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press. pp. xii, 175. \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-806-14077-3

Kevin Fernlund offers a superb analysis of Lyndon Baines Johnson's western roots and President Johnson's expansive view of presidential leadership. Fernlund creates an insightful account of American political leadership, its potential and its limitations. Fernlund engages the reader with a readable prose and illuminating observations about the making of the man Lyndon and the government's role in developing western potential. President Johnson saw the west as a great desert lacking in infrastructure. In order to achieve its full potential, the government would have to redirect resources westward in order to exploit the land and favor the people. The iconic view of western independence needed government assistance. Johnson wasted little effort to make it happen.

President Johnson expanded this template of government assisting those in need and applied it to Vietnam. The Vietnamese needed help and Johnson wasted no time coming to their assistance. Fernlund's analysis asserts that one of the greatest Senatorial leaders ever to grace the halls of Congress found himself in a tsunami of trouble in Southeast Asia. One of Fernlund's best traits is the care he takes in explaining the initial attractiveness of LBJ's vision, and his sensitivity in describing the innate limitations of LBJ's appeal. Undergraduates in particular would benefit considerably from Fernlund's treatment of the fragile nature of

mass appeal, and how quickly wild popularity can be converted to visceral contempt in the fickle collective mind of the American electorate.

Fernlund asserts that Johnson's first big mistake was to leave the Senate and his second big mistake was to quit his 1968 reelection bid. The reader must ponder the magnitude of these mistakes. How far can a leader rise before they achieve incompetence? How much can government do to make things better? Moreover, how much change will citizens accept before they find a voice of resistance? These questions certainly seem relevant today. Hence, Fernlund's historical analysis speaks with particular force to the dilemmas facing our current president.

Fernlund summarizes Johnson's administration with the same fairness that Michael P. Riccards does in his Ferocious Engine of Democracy. Riccards and Fernlund both give credit where credit is due and do not hesitate to provide constructive criticism. Graduate students will not fail to find good analysis on numerous issues. Johnson provided sound leadership in the aftermath of the assassination of JFK, and while Johnson was adept at reading the political mood of the country, he often reached too far. He saw where the country needed to go, but was not so adept in handling the backlash and rejection.

Johnson saw the hidden flaws of poverty, racism, ignorance plaguing an otherwise affluent society. Fernlund addresses Johnson's willingness to enter into the struggle for meaningful racial equality. Many resisted and many demanded even greater reforms. Fernlund observes that the race riots of 1966 comprised a sort of revenge of rising expectations. The author is quite good at identifying the limits of power.

I would urge readers to consider Fernlund's thesis that leaders must lead and not quit when the road rises steeply to challenge them. LBJ's earthquake was the accumulation of years of change and activism that seemed too much for too many. 1968 appears to be the crescendo that stopped westward expansion 200 miles west of Hawaii and not all the way to Hanoi. It also awoke a growing sense of resistance to activist government. Fernlund's treatise will help the reader digest these limitations of government action.

Fernlund amply substantiates his claim that Johnson's vaulting ambitions in Vietnam and with the Great Society was halted by myriad forces. Fernlund enters into his prologue and speculates as to whether Johnson may have given in too early and too readily to protests. I applaud

Fernlund for venturing into the realm of the hypothetical. Scholars with their reasoned insights need to help reader's with the "what if's." In this case, Fernlund's analysis seems sound. Humphrey almost beat Nixon in 1968, and LBJ as the incumbent had an even better chance of success than Humphrey. American history would have been different, and much improved, according to Fernlund's projection, if President Johnson, instead of discovering his limitations, had recalled his stubborn will.

I wholeheartedly recommend Fernlund's book for anyone interested in presidential politics, 1960's policy development and the Vietnam era. Readers at all levels will find it a well-paced and intriguing read.

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