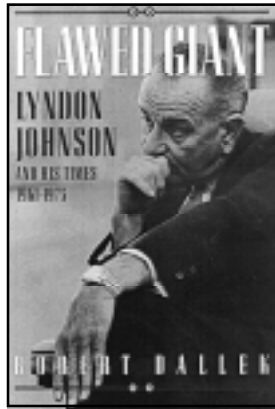


A Major LBJ Biography, Volume Two

Flawed Giant: Lyndon B. Johnson and his times, 1961–1973
by Robert Dallek. (New York: Oxford University Press,
1998. 736 pp. \$35 cloth)

Flawed *Giant* is not a book about civil rights, the War on Poverty, the Great Society or Vietnam but a book about all these themes with Lyndon Johnson as the protagonist in this Greek tragedy. *Flawed Giant* is historian Robert Dallek's follow-up volume to *Lone Star Rising*, his masterpiece on LBJ's ascendance to national prominence.



Dallek traces LBJ's fortunes from his lean, largely unfulfilling years as JFK's emasculated vice president to his death in 1973. After Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Dallek maps Johnson's presidency from the highs of the Civil Rights Act and the flurry of Great Society legislation to the deepening lows of the Vietnam War. As was Johnson's presidency, *Flawed Giant* ultimately is consumed by the never-ending horrors of Vietnam.

Six Days, the Soviets, and Thurgood Marshall

Dallek's structure is wobbly because it is both chronological and thematic. Dallek follows a thread—i.e. Vietnam—and then jumps back in time to cover another theme during roughly the same period. This approach can help one follow a particular issue over a period of months, but at times, the organization is mystifying.

With Chapter 5, the book alternates between Vietnam and potpourri. And Chapter 8, "Sea of Troubles," closes with a synopsis of the Six Day Arab/Israeli War, then a bit on U.S.-Soviet relations, followed by Thurgood Marshall's appointment to the Supreme Court. Perhaps some explanation of the organization and an overarching chronological order with a few thematic subdivisions would have made for easier reading. Certain topics—crime in Chapter 8, the Department of Transportation in Chapter —could have been excised without damaging the book's integrity.

With the jumps in time, *Flawed Giant* loses the immediacy, continuity, and competing demands of the presidency that made Michael Beschloss' book on Johnson's presidential tapes compelling. However, Dallek's book does not lack drama. He evokes authenticity by drawing from the oral histories, interviews, and unpublished papers of LBJ staffers and contemporaries who were subjected to the President's great wit, anger, and later fits of depression and paranoia as the Vietnam War wore down his normal can-do ebullience.

"Get the Hell Out of My Office"

Dallek is in his element recreating events and capturing the emotions of the players then and now. Such is the work of the dedicated historian, sifting through vast amounts of material (in this case, much of it from the Johnson Presidential Library at the University of Texas) to select the most relevant to draw out the past. Dallek is a capable and convincing storyteller.

Johnson's exasperation with his military advisors over failures in Vietnam policy is told chillingly by a military man who described a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

He [LBJ] screamed obscenities, he cursed them personally, he ridiculed them for coming to his office with their "military advice."...He then accused them of trying to pass the buck for World War III to him. It was unnerving. It was degrading....He told them he was disgusted with their naive approach toward him, that he was not going to let some military idiots talk him into World War III. It ended when he told them to "get the hell out of my office." (342)

Despite the strength of such dramatic episodes, Dallek seems compelled to sum up Johnson's domestic policy achievements, but Dallek is not the right man to evaluate the lasting impact of Great Society reforms. Here, the book is lacking, as any book of such prodigious scope would have to be. The problem partly stems from Dallek's conversion from skeptic to near true believer in the Johnson cause, at least in terms of domestic policy. It seems hard for Dallek, as a self-described "old-fashioned liberal," to offer a dispassionate judgment of LBJ's living legacy. (To be fair, Dallek restores a sense of even-handedness in the Afterword.)

Johnson comes across as over-reaching in 1965 as Vietnam looms larger in his mind. Instead of consolidating the gains of 1964 by overseeing the implementation of reforms, LBJ exhorts his staff to come up with more sweeping legislation to rival his first year.

Dallek doesn't go far enough to challenge LBJ's legacy, even if ultimately to defend it. Right-wing critics would argue that Johnson's expansion of the welfare state coupled with the Vietnam War facilitated the high taxes, fiscal profligacy, and unsustainable entitlement programs (like Medicare) which encumber present politicians.

Guns, Butter, Hearts, Minds

Because the book often dwells on the circular frenzy of Vietnam War deliberations, Dallek's thesis deserves more than cursory attention. His initial premise is uncontroversial: the Vietnam War drained resources

from the Great Society. Dallek's hindsight critique of Johnson's public relations on Vietnam is more likely to have its detractors. Drawing from public opinion polls, Dallek argues that the anti-war movement was a minority opinion for much of the Johnson presidency. Despite popular mythology, Johnson's Vietnam policies received relatively strong support into 1966.

Dallek argues that Johnson never fully explained to the public the sacrifice that would be required if we were to have any success dislodging the Communists from South Vietnam. Had he done so, Johnson, at the very least, would have insulated himself politically from being held responsible for the war's protracted, messy non-ending. LBJ might have been able to sustain support for the war effort.

Instead, Johnson vacillated, tried to make the gradual build-up of troops seem like small, reversible steps. Ultimately, because of the size of the commitment, he had to explain events to the American people. LBJ tried to put the best face on bad news, so much so that he lost the public's confidence as media reports contradicted his propaganda war.

Though this approach offers an interesting way of looking at Vietnam, surely the more important question is, "Could Johnson have done something to end the war sooner?" With the spate of self-flagellating films of the '70s and '80s, the revised conventional wisdom in our country would have it, as Dallek argues, that Vietnam "was the worst foreign policy disaster in the country's history" (626). The assumption is that we could have gotten out sooner without any serious foreign policy implications.

Even if neither China nor the Soviet Union had any grand expansionist ideas for Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese Communists had a long historical record of wanting to reunify the fragments of French colonial rule in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Though American involvement in the region can be criticized for habitually backing an anti-Communist autocrat or worse (i.e. Diem, Pol Pot), it is not obvious, given Dallek's presentation, that Johnson could have merely afforded to give up Vietnam without repercussions for the region's stability.

What about the missed possibilities for peace? Dallek suggests our bombing campaigns hardened North Vietnamese resolve when peace talks seemed promising. Is this how the Vietnamese saw it? Declassified documents and testimonials from Vietnamese officials could shed light but have not been tapped. What might have happened if Nixon, in order to get elected, didn't scuttle the 1968 Paris talks by discouraging the South Vietnamese from participating (as Dallek so vividly retells it)?

Dallek both drew his circle of scholarship too wide, trying to tackle too many issues, and too narrow, focusing too much on opinion polls and the internal drama of

White House policy. With so many issues to cover, Dallek could not look beyond the immediate cast to the wider players.

Dallek is on stronger ground when he recreates the mood and action of the times. The many moments of Johnson's private torture over Vietnam allow us to sympathize with the man. Bill Moyers recalls a cowed Johnson in bed with "covers almost above his head" anguished over the decision in 1965 to send in more troops. In an interview with Dallek, Lady Bird's sadness and memory haunt her the way the decisions dogged her husband:

"It was just pure hell and did not have that reassuring, strong feeling that this is right, that he had when he was in a crunch with civil rights or poverty or education....So, uncertainty, we had a rich dose of that...True, you can 'bear any burden, pay any price' if you're sure you're doing right. But if you do not know you're doing right"—she ended, and her voice trailed off. (283)

"He did more for us than anybody...."

As much as I'm impressed by Johnson's achievements in upending the racist traditions of our country, I'm left feeling that LBJ's lofty rhetoric and hubris allowed for a cynical backlash to take root when expectations were not met and social forces—riots, demonstrations, counterculture—once unleashed eluded the control of the great legislative fixer. I agree with Princeton Professor Sean Wilentz who wrote in his *New York Times* review of *Flawed Giant*: "By alienating Southern whites over desegregation and Northern liberals over Vietnam, Johnson presided over the collapse of the New Deal spirit that he was trying to preserve and extend, instead preparing the way for a profound shift rightward of the political center over the next 20 years."

Still, Dallek rightly points out that one of the mourners paying respects to Johnson overheard a black woman say to her daughter: "People don't know it, but he did more for us than anybody, any President, ever did" (623).

The pall cast by Vietnam on the domestic sphere is to be truly lamented, for the "rightward shift" we have undergone has sacrificed Johnson's pragmatic empathy for those less fortunate for a politics that caters to middle-class interests and ducks the difficult issues of the day. And so *Flawed Giant* is an important reminder that mainstream leaders once spoke of poverty with an urgency and concern abandoned by today's chattering classes who would prefer to will away the destitute in American society.

Josh Busby is a Peace Corps volunteer in San Jose de Poaló, Ecuador. In 1992 he served as an intern in Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen's office.