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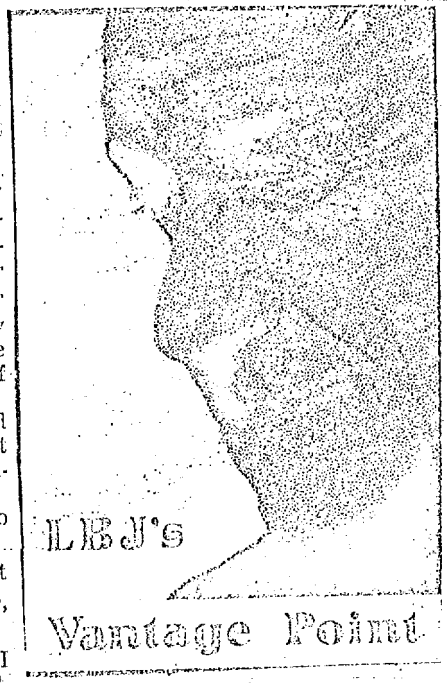
'Growing Up' in Race Relations

This is the fifth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.



"THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE"

When I was in the Senate, we had an extra car to take back to Texas at the close of each congressional session. Usually my Negro employees—Zephyr Wright, our cook; Helen Williams, our maid; and Helen's husband, Gene—drove the car to the Ranch for us. At that time, nearly twenty years ago, it was an ordeal to get an automobile from Washington to Texas—three full days of hard driving.

On one of those trips I asked Gene if he would take my beagle dog with them in the car. I didn't think they would mind. Little Beagle was a friendly, gentle dog.

But Gene hesitated. "Senator, do we have to take Beagle?"

"Well," I explained, "there's no other way to get him to Texas. He shouldn't give you any trouble, Gene. You know Beagle loves you."

But Gene still hesitated. I didn't understand. I looked directly at him. "Tell me what's the matter. Why don't you want to take Beagle? What aren't you telling me?"

Gene began slowly. Here is the gist of what he had to say: "Well, Senator, it's tough enough to get all the way from Washington to Texas. We drive for hours and hours. We get hungry. But there's no place on the road we can stop and go in and eat. We drive some more. It gets pretty hot. We want to washup. But the only bathroom we're allowed in is usually miles off the main highway. We keep going 'til night comes—'til we get so tired we can't stay awake any more. We're ready to pull in. But it takes us another hour or so to find a place to sleep. You see, what I'm saying is that a colored man's got enough trouble getting across the South on his own, without having a dog along."

Of course, I knew that such discrimination existed throughout the South. We all knew it. But somehow we had deluded ourselves into believing that the black people around us were happy and satisfied; into thinking that the bad and ugly things were going on somewhere else, happening to other people.

There were no "darkies" or plantations in the arid hill country where I grew up. I never sat on my parents' or grandparents' knees listening to nostalgic tales of the antebellum South. In Stonewall and Johnson City I never was part of the Old Confederacy. But I was part of Texas. My roots were in its soil. I felt a special identification with its history and its people. And Texas is a part of the South—in the sense that Texas shares a common heritage and outlook that differs from the Northeast or Middle West or Far West.

That Southern heritage meant a great deal to me. It gave me a feeling of belonging and a sense of continuity. But it also created—sadly, but perhaps inevitably—certain parochial feelings that flared up defensively whenever Northerners described the South as "a blot on our national conscience" or "a stain on our country's democracy."

These were emotions I took with me to the Congress when I voted against six civil rights bills that came up on the House and Senate floor. At that time I simply did not believe that the legislation, as written, was the right way to handle the problem. Much of it seemed designed more to humiliate the South than to help the black man.

Beyond this, I did not think there was much I could do as a lone Congressman from Texas. I represented a conservative constituency. One heroic stand and I'd be back home, defeated, unable to do any good for anyone, much less the blacks and the underprivileged. As a Representative and a Senator, before I became Majority Leader, I did not have the power. That is a plain and simple fact.

But what stands out the most when I think of those days is not my Texas background or my Southern heritage but the recognition that I was part of America growing up. This was an America that accepted distinctions between blacks and whites as part and parcel of life, whether those distinctions were the clear-cut, blatant ones of the South or the more subtle, invidious ones practiced in the North. This [illegible] submissiveness and good nature that hid the deep despair inside the hearts of millions of black Americans.

So there was nothing I could say to Gene. His problem was also mine: as a Texan, a Southerner, and an American.

All these attitudes began to change in the mid-1950s and early 1960s.

With the Democratic victory in the 1954 congressional election, I was promoted from Minority Leader to Majority Leader of the Senate. My national responsibilities, as well as my ability to get things done, increased. I was aware of the need for change inside myself.

But nothing makes a man come to grips more directly with his conscience than the Presidency. Sitting in that chair involves making decisions that draw out a man's fundamental commitments. The burden of his responsibility literally opens up his soul. No longer can he accept matters as given; no longer can he write off hopes and needs as impossible.

In that house of decision, the White House, a man becomes his commitments. He understands who he really is. He learns what he genuinely wants to be.

So it was for me. When I sat in the Oval Office after President Kennedy died and reflected on civil rights, there was no question in my mind as to what I would do. I knew that, as President and as a man, I would use every ounce of strength I possessed to gain justice for the black American. My strength as President was the tenuous—I had no strong mandate from the people; I had not been elected to that office. But I recognized that the moral force of the Presidency is often stronger than the political force. I knew that a President can appeal to the best in our people or the worst; he can call for action or live with inaction.

Even the strongest supporters of President Kennedy's civil rights bill in 1963 expected parts of it to be watered down in order to avert a Senate filibuster.

One man held the key to obtaining cloture: the Minority Leader of the Senate, Everett Dirksen.

Dirksen could play politics as well as any man. But I knew something else about him. When the nation's interest was at stake, he could climb the heights and take the long view without regard to party. I based a great deal of my strategy on this understanding of Dirksen's deep-rooted patriotism.

A President cannot ask the Congress to take a risk he will not take himself. He must be the combat general in the front lines, constantly exposing his flanks. I tried to be that combat gen-

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