

**ANOTHER CELEBRATION OF OUR HERITAGE:
THE JOHNSON WHITE HOUSE AND THE NATION'S BICENTENNIAL**

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During the state of Georgia's semiquincentenary year it is interesting to consider President Lyndon B. Johnson's reactions to the suggestions of his aides concerning the celebration of the bicentennial of the nation's founding. A recent biography of Lyndon Johnson, actually the first of two volumes, by Texas journalist Ronnie Dugger is entitled The Politician, and in his first paragraph Dugger writes, "of the great American politicians of the century . . . Johnson was the Master." Few who have studied Lyndon Johnson's career¹ would disagree. Johnson was a politician from the very core of his being.

Successful politicians must be able to recognize the major issues of their time, on which they are virtually required to take a stand, and lesser issues which, nonetheless, have great voter appeal. It is, therefore, a bit of a disappointment for scholars to realize that master politician Johnson apparently considered the bicentennial matter to be neither of sufficient magnitude nor voter appeal to deserve much of his attention. The Johnson administration White House files reveal that although the President's aides considered the issue extensively, the President gave only minute hints of his views and was finally irritated when presented with a bill which he had either to sign or veto. In short, faced with the more important issues of Vietnam and the civil rights revolution and the more popular entitlement aspects of the war on poverty, Johnson would presumably have preferred to leave consideration of the bicentennial celebration to his successors in the White House.

Lyndon Johnson became President at the time government officials were beginning to plan the nation's bicentennial celebration. The earliest dated document concerning this topic which reached the President's files was a February 5, 1964, State Department memo proposing a committee to plan a national bicentennial world's fair. This suggestion received the President's sanction on May 19 with his instruction to Secretary of State Dean Rusk to establish a₂ committee to make recommendations regarding a 1975 or 1976 exposition.

Johnson's aides began working on the project by contacting the Departments of State and Commerce and the United States Information Agency concerning candidates for a committee to plan a bicentennial exposition. Aide Ralph A. Dungan expressed his belief that there were votes in the bicentennial: "Appropriate attention should be paid to political personages since it seems to me a foregone conclusion that the United States will participate in the Bicentennial Exhibition."³

History professor and Johnson aide Eric Goldman in June of '64 initiated a very important transition from exposition to commemoration with an unusually long seven-page memo to the President. Goldman reported that congressmen, lawyers, historians, and others were urging preparations for a bicentennial. Some wanted observances to begin as early as 1965 for the Stamp Act. Goldman suggested that Johnson appoint a Presidential Commission on the National Heritage to advise the President and coordinate planning for an observance of the nation's bicentennial and the 175th anniversary of the creation of the Presidency.⁴

Another important contribution to the eventual nature of the bicentennial celebration came from Richard W. Barrett, Special assistant to the Deputy Under-Secretary of State for Administration, who believed that the bicentennial committee should limit itself to recommending themes, locations, and timing of observances and should promote an entire year of activities rather than just an exposition. He believed there should be no one site for the celebration, but rather local, state, and regional activity, and the emphasis should be on ideas and concepts. People should "ask not what 1976 can do for your community but what your community can do for 1976."⁵

At the same time pressure was beginning to build in congress, particularly from Republican Congressman John O. Marsh of Virginia. In addition to lobbying the White House, Marsh in January, 1965, introduced a resolution to create an American Revolution Bicentennial Commission and another to create a commission to observe the 200th anniversary of the Stamp Act Congress in 1965.⁶

Shortly thereafter Joseph A. Califano, Jr., Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense but soon to join the Johnson staff, wrote Johnson press secretary Bill Moyers advocating Congressman Marsh's bicentennial idea. Califano believed the President could use it to encourage historical research, remind the world of the revolutionary nature of the nation's founding, and "unite this country behind the basic concepts that we all believe in, rather than divide the country over the issues on which we disagree." Califano went on to say that "I am told that 'the White house' is not in favor of such a commission for some reason I do not understand."⁷

In response to the President's request, Civil Service Commission chairman and talent scout John W. Macy, Jr., on July 1, 1965, sent the President a list of fifteen names for appointment to a Presidential Bicentennial Committee. Later aide W. Marvin Watson received the memo with a note: "The President asked that you go this [sic] carefully with Bill -- Several good, top, Johnson people on it -- possibly good business contributors--...." This showed Johnson the politician at work, seeking whatever benefit he could derive from the proposal. Watson fulfilled the President's wish by sending Macy a list of names for the committee, but added that historians "and others of that type" should be left on the list.

By this time Goldman had grown weary of the delayed response to his suggestion for the bicentennial. He feared that the "antiquarianism and commercialism" of the Civil War centennial would be repeated and that patriotic groups would make the bicentennial an "assault on dissidence." Furthermore, he feared passage of one of the bills already introduced in congress, all of which he believed inadequate. Goldman wanted a Presidential Commission created as soon as possible that would "understand the essential meaning of the Revolution" and "serve as a guiding spirit" for the "right kind of projects."⁸

In October Watson sought aide Lee White's opinions. White, a specialist in race relations, agreed that the commission was appropriate, but he did not want the observance to last ten years. He believed the four-year Civil War Centennial Commission had operated too long.¹⁰

In December Goldman confused the situation by suggesting the establishment in early 1966 of Presidential Professorships in American History for mid-career scholars of great repute who were undertaking projects concerning "some grand theme" of American history. The resulting works would reach a wide public and influence opinion on American history

in the United States and abroad. Goldman suggested Richard Hofstadter and David Donald as possible candidates. The program would run ten years; each year two historians would be named as Presidential Professors and each would serve for two years. They would receive \$25,000 per year in salary and \$15,000 per year for expenses. Each resulting book would have the Presidential seal on the title page and a statement that the book was written while a Presidential Professor. The total cost would be \$1,650,000, to be financed by the Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie foundations. Johnson authorized Goldman to solicit the views of Moyers, Presidential counsel Harry McPherson, and the foundations.

The same day Goldman wrote to Califano that he was receiving pressure for a bicentennial commission from such organizations as the American Bar Association, American Historical Association, American Philosophical Society, American Political Science Association, Phi Beta Kappa, Society of American Historians, and Chicago and Philadelphia municipal organizations. Goldman repeated his view that a commission was needed and emphasized that he wanted to "avoid inadequate and dreary things done by past bodies such as the Civil War Commission." He also enclosed a copy of his memo to the President concerning Presidential Professorships.¹²

As the new year dawned, McPherson lined up with Goldman by endorsing a bicentennial commission. McPherson lamented the lack of historical work on the period, suggesting the French might be persuaded to open their military records of the revolutionary period for a documentary publication. But he questioned whether Presidential Professors would feel obliged to write safely and whether the country needed a national official history. If the program were approved, McPherson preferred more grants with less money per grant. He suggested a series of books on ethnics in America and another on the westward movement.¹³

Presidential Professorships received a lethal blow when Moyers wrote Goldman supporting a bicentennial commission, but added: "I am not enthusiastic about the Presidential Professorships. The Dick Hofstadters and David Donalds are going to publish great books with or without grants. However, if they do want a grant they can pick up the phone and get a Ford any day they choose." Moyers continued, "I even see a positive danger in identifying the office of the President with 'approved' books resulting from the favors of the Chief Executive. There are other reservations which lead me to conclude this ought not to be a Presidential project." Moyers sent a copy of the memo to the President, who was quoted on an attached note as saying, "I agree."¹⁴

In late January Goldman began campaigning for a special celebration of Washington's birthday at which the President could announce that he was sending congress a recommendation for a bicentennial commission. The President could comment on historical observances, explain how this one would be different, and mention the world-wide significance of the American Revolution. "The latter seems to me to offer a perfect opportunity to say obliquely some things of high relevance to the present discussion over Vietnam." Guests could include governors of the original thirteen states, heads of patriotic societies,¹⁵ scholars of the Washington period, and heads of appropriate associations.

McPherson soon wrote to Moyers advocating Goldman's suggestions concerning the significance of Washington's birthday. McPherson agreed that it would be a good time to announce a bicentennial commission, which he knew the President had already approved. McPherson recommended that Moyers aide Hayes Redmond get McPherson, Moyers, Goldman, aide Douglass

Cater, and Macy together to decide on the bicentennial issue. At the top of this memo is a written notation, apparently from Moyers, to Redmond to arrange the meeting.¹⁶

Filed adjacent to this memo are undated handwritten notes on Hay-Adams Hotel stationery and a typed version of the handwritten notes that apparently resulted from such a meeting as was called for in the February 3 memo. The question discussed was what the bicentennial commission should do. The participants agreed it should encourage the recognition of ethnic groups and give special attention to the participation of children through pageants and contests. Cultural centers such as the Lincoln Center in New York City and the Kennedy Center in Washington should produce commemorative plays, ballets, and music. There should be museum exhibits of American art, interior decoration, and design. The National Archives and Library of Congress should loan historical documents, particularly revolutionary documents and memorabilia, to state capitols and city halls for exhibition.

On March 10, 1966, the President sent letters to Hubert H. Humphrey, President of the Senate, and John W. McCormack, Speaker of the House, transmitting a joint resolution establishing the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission. The celebration was to be decentralized: "In the rich diversity that is America, each community will celebrate in its own way and will draw its own inspiration from the Revolution." To be composed of members of the legislative and executive branches and distinguished Americans appointed by the President, ARBC would "Provide a creative and helping hand to State, local, and private groups in their commemorations; Increase our knowledge and appreciation of the American Revolution through our schools and universities and our historians and scholars; Plan for celebrations at the national level; Recall to America and to the world the majestic significance of the Revolution." The President also pointed to the example the Revolution had been for the world and included a reference to a growing problem: "Today, the Vietnamese people are fighting for their freedom in South Vietnam. We are carrying forward our great heritage by helping to sustain their efforts."¹⁸

Now that the President had finally publicly proclaimed his support for the ARBC, Goldman wanted the bill ready for signing by July 4, but he ran into a snag because the House Judiciary Committee was debating open housing provisions on the 1966 civil rights legislation. Goldman sought assistance from a former student who was on the committee staff and from Harold Barefoot Sanders, Jr., an Assistant Deputy Attorney General who spent time on Capitol Hill working for the President's legislative program. Republican congressmen were particularly difficult to convince because they had earlier introduced their own bicentennial bills, were feeling pressure from Boston and Philadelphia for special consideration, and were worried that the whole affair would resemble the Civil War centennial.¹⁹

The business of congressional passage of ARBC went very slowly. On April 21 White House congressional liaison staffer Sherwin J. Markman wrote Postmaster General Larry O'Brien, who continued to shepherd legislation as he had done for President John F. Kennedy, attaching a proposed list of sixty-two priority legislative items, including ARBC, for discussion in conferences with legislative leaders. Califano wrote the President on April 30 that Sanders would get ARBC out of the Senate Judiciary Committee within two weeks, but that it would be bottled up in the House Judiciary Committee until the completion of civil rights

hearings. Two weeks later O'Brien had to report to the President that no action had been taken in either House. Similar reports continued to be sent to the President through the month of May.²⁰

The legislation had to be passed in June to allow a July 4 signing. Deputy Attorney General Ramsey Clark reported on June 3 that the counsel for House Subcommittee Number Four of the House Judiciary Committee was scheduled to discuss ARBC that week, but some of the members were on Subcommittee Number Five, which might consider civil rights legislation, and if so, the Subcommittee Number Four meeting would be postponed.²¹

On June 9 Califano and Mike Manatos, of the White House congressional liaison staff, sought guidance on how badly the President wanted the legislation by July 4. "With pressure from [Attorney General Nicholas] Katzenbach, House Committee can report out by June 30 or earlier. Also with pressure from Katzenbach, Senate Judiciary Committee can report out by June 30. Floor action ready shortly therefore." Administration priorities were made clear in a June 16 memo from Henry Hall Wilson, of the White House congressional liaison staff, to O'Brien reporting that Senator James O. Eastland foresaw no problem in getting the ARBC bill reported from the Senate Judiciary Committee by the end of June. However, Wilson recommended, "Efforts ought to be restrained in the House Committee because of the Civil Rights bill." Nevertheless, in the next few days the bills made their respective ways through the subcommittees and committees and were easily passed by the Senate on June 28 and the House on June 29.²²

Although Goldman suggested that the signing ceremony be a special July 4 picnic at the White House or the ranch with John Steinbeck or Bruce Catton presenting a special oration, Califano believed it was too late to plan such a project. In a memo to the President on July 1, aide Robert Kintner joined Califano in advocating that it would be "appropriate and newsworthy" to sign on July 4. They also assured the President that although Macy was gathering names for Presidential appointees to the commission, Califano and Kintner would review the list to get a "proper intellectual balance" and assure that the commission be "broadly representative of all aspects of our society." Since naming the commission members would take at least a few weeks, they recommended a private bill signing on July 4 and a ceremony whenever the members were named. Attached to this memo is a note that the bill was signed on July 4 at 11:30 P.M.²³

Eric Goldman has written that he was puzzled on July 5 not to find in the Washington Post an article about the new commission, so he called the ranch. "When I phoned the ranch I learned that LBJ had kept muttering about 'this damn thing' and pushing it aside but finally, shortly before midnight, had signed the legislation. Then 'somehow' the Press Office had not released the information." Goldman talked to Acting Press Secretary Robert H. Fleming, who did not know about the matter and agreed that it could be embarrassing to the administration. Goldman did some research and inserted the second paragraph of the signing statement which explained the delayed announcement of signing.²⁴

The signing statement the President issued from his San Antonio press office on July 8 explained the late date by saying that the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, but it was first publicly read in Philadelphia on July 8 after people were summoned by the Liberty Bell. The President repeated the Vietnam language from his March 10 letter. The President believed that the role of the commission would be to: "Recall to Americans and to the world the majestic significance of

the Revolution:--Provide a creative and helping hand to State, local, and private groups in their commemorations;-- plan for celebrations at the national level;--increase our knowledge and appreciation of the American Revolution in our schools, universities, and general public thinking."²⁵

Goldman wrote later that Johnson did not take an interest in the bicentennial because the President disliked Goldman, the East coast, ideas, and intellectuals. Though all of those prejudices may have tainted the issue, Johnson's indifference can also be attributed to his political acumen, i.e., there were more important national issues and other matters which would produce more votes. Ironically, even from a scholar's view, the President's most important act for the nation on July 4, 1966, was not the signing of the bicentennial bill, but rather the signing into law of the Freedom of Information Act, a headache to federal bureaucrats, but also a reaffirmation of the right of the American people to know how their government operates so that they may participate in its workings and make it responsive to their wishes.

NOTES

(Views expressed in the foregoing paper are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Archives and Record Service.)

¹Ronnie Dugger, The Politician, the Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), p. 11.

²All of the manuscripts hereafter cited are from the Johnson Presidential Papers, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas. Robert J. Manning to Craig Colgate, Jr., and Johnson to Rusk, White House Central File (hereafter WHCF), Executive (hereafter EX) Federal Government--Organizations (hereafter FG) 999-13.

³Dungan to Edward L. Sherman, 3 June 1964 (quote), Sherman to Dungan, 4 September 1964, and Dungan to Bill Moyers, 10 October 1964, WHCF, EX FG 999-13.

⁴29 June 1964, WHCF, EX Holidays.

⁵Barrett to Edward L. Sherman, 1 September 1964, WHCF, EX FG 999-13.

⁶Marsh to Bill Moyers, 25 May 1964 (attached to Richard L. Latimer to Juanita Roberts, filed 17 November 1965), WHCF, General FG 605; Marsh to Larry O'Brien with enclosure, 8 January 1965, WHCF, EX FG 605.

⁷20 February 1965, with enclosed Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to Marsh, 13 February 1965, WHCF, EX FG 605.

⁸Macy to Johnson, mjc note, 2 July 1965, and Watson to Macy, 2 August 1965, WHCF, EX FG 999-13.

⁹Eric F. Goldman, The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 480.

¹⁰Watson to White, 14 October 1965, and White to Watson, 19 October 1965, WHCF, EX FG 605.

¹¹Goldman to Johnson, 22 December 1965, WHCG, EX FG 605.

¹²"American Revolution Bicentennial Commission," Califano Box 1597, Aides Files.

¹³McPherson to Goldman, 3 January 1966, "American Revolution," Moyers Box 1402, Aides Files.

¹⁴10 January 1966, WHCF, EX FG 605.

¹⁵Goldman to Jack Valenti, 28 January 1966, and Goldman to Johnson, 2 February 1966, WGCH, EX FG 605; Larry Levinson to Califano, 2 February 1966, "American Revolution Bicentennial Commission," Califano Box 1597, Aides Files.

¹⁶3 February 1966, "American Revolution," Moyers Box 1402, Aides Files.

¹⁷"American Revolution," Moyers Box 1402, Aides Files.

¹⁸Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson. . . 1966 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967), 1: 302-303.

¹⁹Goldman, Tragedy, pp. 482-483.

²⁰Markman to O'Brien, et.al., "Legislation General-1966 Apr, May, Jun," Manatos Education Opening Box 5, Aides Files; Califano to Johnson, "Legislative Info 1966 Califano," Manatos Education Opening Box 2, Aides Files; O'Brien to Johnson, 13 May 1966, "Legislative Status of Bills 1966 Jan-Dec Memos to the President," Manatos Education Opening Box 5, Aides Files; O'Brien to Johnson, 17 May 1966, "23 May 1966," Pending Legislation; list titled "Report on Legislation," 21 May 1966, "Legislation General-1966 Apr, May, Jun," Manatos Education Opening Box 5, Aides Files; Wilson to Johnson, 23 May 1966, and Wilson to Johnson, 27 May 1966, "Legislative Into 1966 H.H. Wilson," Manatos Education Opening Box 2, Aides Files.

²¹"Weekly Report-Major Legislation," "8 June 1966," Pending Legislation.

²²Califano and Manatos to Johnson, "Legislative Info 1966 Califano," Manatos Education Opening Box 2, Aides Files; Wilson to O'Brien, "20 June 1966," Pending Legislation: U.S. Code, Vol. 2: Legislative History, pp. 2436-2439 (1966).

²³Kintner to Johnson (draft apparently never sent), 30 June 1966, "American Revolution Bicentennial Commission," Califano Box 1597, Aides Files; Kintner and Califano to Johnson, "P.L. 89-491," Enrolled Legislation.

²⁴Goldman, Tragedy, pp. 483-484.

²⁵Public Papers . . . 1966 (1967), 2: 713-714.

²⁶Goldman, Tragedy, pp. 481-482; Public Law 89-487.