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GUEST ESSAY

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By David Paul Kuhn

Mr. Kuhn is the author of “The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution.”

Lyndon Baines Johnson would fall asleep at night and imagine himself tied to the ground surrounded by thousands of voices, he once told Doris Kearns Goodwin. “They were all shouting at me and running toward me: ‘Coward! Traitor! Weakling!’ They kept coming closer. They began throwing stones.” Then he would awaken, “terribly shaken.”

This is the troubled man who withdrew from the presidential race. “Johnson gave you all of himself,” Norman Mailer once wrote. “He was a political animal.” He would be diminished as one, too — alone, at least politically.

Increasingly isolated, President Biden surely shared that agony when he made the decision to bow out of the 2024 presidential race. Perhaps, ultimately, he came to recall in assessing the race and his situation a fundamental principle of politics. “Politics is about tomorrow, not yesterday,” he told me in 2007.

With the years since showing, he must have accepted that he is yesterday and chose to let the party move on.

Most presidents look backward to find a way forward. They live amid portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Rarely, but occasionally, they have found that there is no way forward. Not long before Johnson's shocking announcement, he asked an aide for details on President Harry Truman's 1952 declaration that he would not seek another term.

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For Truman, like Johnson, the presidency had worn him thin. Truman's wife had told him that she did not think either of them could survive four more years and urged him not to run.

Truman and Johnson had also endured dreadful wars, costing tens of thousands of American lives, and suffered embarrassing outcomes in New Hampshire Democratic primaries.

Mr. Biden had the nomination, and however divided the party is over the war in Gaza, for Americans, the blood and treasure are minuscule compared with what they gave to Korea and Vietnam.

For Mr. Biden, it was the mounting calls to exit the race and the realization that someone else might be more able to win it. Truman had asked close advisers if he should run again and was discouraged. After long enabling Johnson's delusions on Vietnam, the "wise men" told him hard truths. Days later, he withdrew.

Johnson had accomplished domestic feats unmatched since Franklin Roosevelt, who was president when Johnson entered Congress. Like many Democrats of his generation, Mr. Biden saw Johnson's accomplishments eclipsed by Vietnam.

Mr. Biden had to wrestle with whether Donald Trump was his Vietnam and what losing to him would do to his legacy.

It was not easier for Johnson. By 1968, Johnson had worked so hard for the presidency and done so much while in office that it was difficult for him to let it go. He thought the presidency was his in 1960, only for John Kennedy to win. Johnson saw a showman who hadn't earned it.

“Jack was out kissing babies while I was out passing bills,” Johnson once said.

This is how Mr. Biden felt in the 2008 primary contest. Like Johnson, Mr. Biden had mastered Washington. But Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton garnered the presidential spotlight. Then Mr. Biden became vice president, only for Mr. Obama and senior Democrats to pass him over to enable Hillary Clinton's moment. In 2020 leading pundits underestimated him. By beating Mr. Trump, he seized another chance at leading the nation into tomorrow.

In recent weeks, the president was being asked to heed those who doubted him in races past and never thought he would get this far. Truman and Johnson listened to those voices. Now, too, has Mr. Biden. We will see if Democrats can avoid the fate that followed Truman and Johnson. Both led to Republican presidents. But Johnson and 1968 haunt Democrats most. Then, as now, they stare down an August convention in Chicago, bedeviled by intraparty rifts.

Johnson was originally supposed to be in Chicago for the convention to celebrate his 60th birthday at Soldier Field. Instead, he sat with his family in Texas, forced to watch on television, like regular Americans, as his party clashed inside and outside the convention hall. The unrest underlined the chaos of the era — Vietnam, civil unrest, rising crime, the murders of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

Rather than show a way out, Democrats magnified the era's disarray. We will soon see if Democrats can find a way forward without getting mired in the conflicts that sundered them, as they did back when Mr. Biden was young.

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