

— PROFESSOR A.J. BADGER

LBJ and Albert Gore, Al's father, helped to transform the Southern States.



President Lyndon B. Johnson and Albert Gore, June 1968.
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Library photo by Mike Geissinger

Lyndon Johnson and Albert Gore:

Southern New Dealers And The Modern South

Two Southern New Dealers

Lyndon Johnson and Albert Gore were elected to Congress within a year of each other in 1937-38. They were elected in the old style of patronage-oriented southern Democratic Party politics in which a plethora of candidates, with few issues to divide them, contested primary elections. Both circumvented the local county seat elites who usually delivered their counties' votes by taking their case directly to the people, mounting vigorous campaigns to establish their name recognition. Johnson reached out to the tiniest and most isolated communities in his district and completely overturned the 'leisurely pace normal in Texas elections.' Gore played the fiddle with a small band to attract a crowd on Saturday afternoons in courthouse squares across his district.

But if they started their political lives in the traditional, old, rural South, their careers – LBJ till he stood down from the Presidency in 1968 in the face of the intractable war in Vietnam, Gore till he was defeated as the no I target of the Nixon Southern Strategy in 1970 – spanned the creation of the modern South. In no small measure they themselves contributed to the collapse of the poor, rural, white supremacy South and the creation of a prosperous, urban, bi-racial South. Their careers saw the replacement of the props that had underpinned the Old South: a rural one-crop region mired in poverty became a booming industrialized, urbanized society with a diversified agriculture; a rigidly segregated South became a desegregated society in which African Americans enjoyed full civil rights; a politics which excluded disfranchised African Americans became a bi-racial democracy in which African Americans voted, held office and shaped public policy; a one party system in which the Democrats monopolized power became a two-party system in which a lily-white Republican Party routinely won the region's presidential votes.

Gore and Johnson were very similar. Both came from the hill country South and had struggled to go to modest colleges. Both had taught in poor schools but only briefly. Both were natural politicians who carved out reputations in state politics before going to Washington. Both served in World War II for strictly limited periods and neither had the sort of tough war-time experience that profoundly shaped so many southerners, white and black.

Johnson and Gore were elected to the Senate in 1948 and 1952. Johnson defeated the rigidly conservative, popular governor, Coke Stevenson, Gore defeated the veteran chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee and ally of Boss Crump, Kenneth McKellar. Both did so by dauntingly vigorous personal campaigns. While Johnson used a helicopter to follow a punishing schedule across the state, the stately Stevenson deigned to give one address in each county seat. While Gore criss-crossed Tennessee in a relentless daily



schedule of stump speeches and television broadcasts, the enfeebled McKellar largely remained in his hotel while supporters hit the campaign trail as surrogates.

Both represented a new style of issue-oriented politics heralded by the New Deal and an activist federal government. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and cheap public power were the key factor in this new politics. To a new generation of southern politicians the TVA was a model for what the federal government might do for the poorest region in the country. They became, in north Alabaman John Sparkman's words, TVA liberals. Just as the federal government had rejuvenated a whole valley, so the federal government could rejuvenate a whole region. Federal assistance through flood control, cheap power and water resource development could be the engine of economic growth modernizing agriculture and stimulating industry. Aid to education could transform the schools. Federal assistance could

provide everything from hospital construction to rural telephones.

What Gore saw in the Tennessee Valley, Johnson saw when rural electrification came to the Hill Country and when he could see what the great projects on the Lower Colorado River could achieve. Whereas, for southern conservatives, the federal government was the problem, for southern New Dealers like Johnson and Gore the federal government was the solution. Federal aid, they believed, was essential to solve the region's health care and educational problems. Cheap credit from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation would liberate the region's entrepreneurs. In the battle to develop the region's infrastructure, Johnson and Gore would be allies from the late 1930s to the Great Society: most notably, on interstate highways, federal aid to education, and Medicare.

Gore, with Johnson's backing, was the main congressional sponsor of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956.

President Lyndon B. Johnson and Albert Gore meet in the Oval Office, White House, June 1968. *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Library photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto*

His time in Germany convinced him of the value of the autobahns. And at the end of the war there was a dramatic increase in car ownership. As Al Gore recalled:

I remember seeing as a child the long, long, long lines of red tail lights stretching out of highway 70 at night and the equally long line of headlights coming in the opposite direction. And at that time with only one, two-lane road going representing the main east-west corridor for Tennessee but also nationally. Highway 70 north was the principal east-west route for the whole midsection of the country.

Al Gore remembered that the six to eight round trips a year between Carthage and Washington became 'a much longer ordeal.' The lesson his father learnt from those regular trips was that these two lane roads were no longer adequate.

Albert Gore Sr. and Lyndon B. Johnson at the Democratic Convention, Chicago, 1956. Photo by Hank Walker Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Gore took great pride in his leadership of Senate forces in support of the Interstate Highway system, what he and his House co-sponsor called 'the greatest construction program in the history of the world.' As chair of the Subcommittee of Public Roads of the Senate Public Works Committee he followed up on Eisenhower's initiative and, even before General Clay's task force reported, introduced legislation for federal funding over the next six years of an interstate system. He believed that, without it, 'national economic development would be seriously impaired'. Given his head by the alcoholic chair of the Committee, Dennis Chavez, Gore secured Senate passage of his bill in 1955. In 1956 the House tackled the source of funding – user taxes paid into a Highway Trust fund – and the Interstate Highway Act passed that summer. Gore consistently led the fight to ensure that there was no 'stretch-out' of the programme, to ensure that spending on the program was not cut back in the late Eisenhower administration and throughout the 60s.

The South led the nation in securing federal funds for interstate construction and led the nation in devoting their state budgets to highway construction. In 1965 every southern state but North Carolina exceeded the US level of highway spending per thousand dollars of personal income. Mississippi spent twice the national ratio.

Johnson and Gore had particular enthusiasms for special aspects of federal investment in the South.



For LBJ it was the space programme which brought such spectacular benefits to Alabama and Florida but above all Houston. The powerful Houston congressman, Albert Thomas, the only congressman LBJ was allegedly afraid of, actually opposed the space programme as chair of the Appropriations subcommittee that controlled space spending. But once the Soviets launched Sputnik, LBJ saw the potential to embarrass the Eisenhower administration and rally Democrats. He and Sam Rayburn got Thomas onside together with another Texan, Olin 'Tiger' Teague, chair of the House Space Committee, and led the fight to establish NASA. NASA awarded 50 of its 130 research grants and contracts to southern universities. When it was announced that the Manned Spacecraft Center would be built in Houston, 29 companies had located there within a year, even before construction started.

For Gore it was atomic power. He had been made privy by FDR to the developments at Oak Ridge. He was as enthusiastic about the peaceful use of atomic power as he was for the TVA. In his senate campaign in 1952 he vowed to make Tennessee the 'atomic capital' of the nation. Despairing of the slowness of private industry to develop nuclear reactors on the scale of the British, he secured passage with Johnson's help of a Senate bill in 1956 for government financing of reactor construction. The bill floundered in the House.

But Johnson and Gore did not merely want to see economic growth in the South, they also wanted to help the region's poor. LBJ's Great Society produced a welfare explosion in the South in the 1960s. It increased transfer payments through the War on Poverty, Medicare and Medicaid. It gave access to educational opportunity that facilitated the

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Lyndon Johnson taking the oath of office on *Air Force One* following the assassination of John Kennedy, Dallas, Texas, 22 November 1963.

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library photo

dramatic increase of the black middle class. It empowered local black activists as they sought control of the new federal programmes. Gore supported Johnson fully in these endeavours.

Gore may have been more of a populist on economic issues than LBJ: he distrusted tax cuts, pushed for tax reform and constantly lamented policies of high interest rates. But both men admired and cultivated rich and successful businessmen: for Johnson, George Brown of Brown and Root and some of the independent oilmen, for Gore, Bernard Baruch and Armand Hammer. Raised in economic insecurity, both strove to achieve financial success. Johnson made his money while in office through his radio and TV empire in Austin. Gore had more modest goals while in office – he set up a local food and feed mill with Grady Nixon, which gave him enough

financial security to contemplate the senate race in 1952. He also set up a cattle breeding business with Armand Hammer. They consoled each other over the loss of their prize Angus bull, the 382, and Hammer suggested they place an obituary of the 382 in the *American Angus Journal*. But Gore made serious money after he left office. Setting up as a lawyer in Washington with Hammer's Occidental as one of his clients, Gore became chair of the Island Creek Coal Company, one of Hammer's subsidiaries and he travelled the world negotiating one to one with foreign heads of state like Ceausescu of Rumania and with the Chinese.

Racial Moderates

Southern liberals believed that federally-sponsored economic development would eventually solve the region's racial problems. Economic growth would eventually

lessen the need for competition between lower-income whites and blacks and eliminate poor white racism. Gore and Johnson were cast in this southern liberal New Deal mode on race but for personal and political reasons freed themselves from the fatalism and resignation on the race issue that affected so many other white southern liberal politicians. Both favoured economic measures as the key to gradual racial change. Both Johnson and Gore supported the drive to abolish the poll tax. Both claimed to have an epiphany on segregation as a result of their drives to and from Washington. Johnson lamented that his cook had to squat in the bushes to relieve herself because there were no colored rest rooms at the filling stations. Gore dated his awareness to his first drive to Washington DC in 1939 with their new baby and African American nanny. Unable to find a motel that would house them for the overnight stop, they detoured to a cousin's in the East Tennessee mountains. Subsequently he came to an arrangement with a motel whereby they could all be housed, provided they arrived after dark and left before other guests rose in the morning. Mrs Gore outraged the wife of another Tennessee congressman during the war by addressing an African American woman with the prefix 'Mrs'.

Gore considered himself 'personally upfront' on the race issue but if he and Johnson had any doubts about segregation they carefully avoided sharing these doubts before 1954 with their constituents. Indeed



1964 Presidential Election Night, President Lyndon B. Johnson with reporters
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Library
photo by Cecil Stoughton

Johnson after his narrow Senate election victory in 1948 strove to ingratiate himself with both Texas conservatives and Richard Russell and the older Southern senators with flamboyant segregationist speeches attacking the spectre of federal government interference with southern race relations. Johnson instinctively wanted to avoid the civil rights issue. Like his mentor Sam Rayburn he saw it as a sectional issue that could only divide the Democratic party: he disliked the fire-eaters on both sides, the segregationist diehards from the South and the civil rights 'bomb throwers' from the North. After the Brown school desegregation decision of 1954 Johnson and Gore were two of only three southern senators who refused to sign the Southern Manifesto in 1956, a blast of defiance to the Supreme Court drafted as part of Massive Resistance by the segregationists.

Johnson, anxious to establish his civil rights credentials to win over northern Democrats and to show that the Democratic Party, contrary to Republican charges, was not paralysed on civil rights, masterminded the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, the first since Reconstruction which essentially opened the way for the Justice Department to protect the right to vote in the South. Gore was able to support the 1957 Civil Rights Act (as he would again in 1960) once he had managed, he claimed, to eliminate its worst coercive elements. He was unequivocal in his defence of the right to vote.

As vice-president, Johnson made substantial progress jawboning defence and government contractors to open up equal employment opportunities for African Americans. When Kennedy finally introduced strong civil rights legislation in 1963, Johnson advised him not to be scared of the southerners. As President, Johnson had the measure of the southern opposition. He knew he had to get the strongest possible bill through to win over northern liberal doubters and legitimize his nomination in his own right as President. He faced down the southern filibuster and retained the loyalty of Republicans by demonstrating that he was not going to compromise. That Republican support was crucial to the final passage of the 1964 Act. Having dismantled overnight the physical attributes of segregation and laid the basis for massive school desegregation and the ending of job discrimination, Johnson was anxious to move on to end black disfranchisement. His landslide

victory in 1964 and the violence at Selma gave him the leverage to drive through the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The effect was dramatic. Freedom Summer had registered less than a thousand voters in Mississippi. Less than 6% of the voting age black population were registered. Within three years of the passage of the Voting Rights 60% of Mississippi blacks could vote.

It was to be LBJ's last major civil rights victory. The long hot summers of race riots strengthened northern hostility to further civil rights concessions. Congress was increasingly unsympathetic to black demands. Jobs were harder to legislate for than voting rolls. The Vietnam War distracted Johnson and took money away from social programmes. He shied away from Martin Luther King and could not deal with younger black militants. He was prey to the poison that J Edgar Hoover put in his ear about King, revolutionary black radicals, and communist conspiracies. He reacted angrily to the Kerner Commission on the riots which he took as a personal affront to all he had tried to do.

Yet all the time he worked away at doing what he did best, trying to get legislation through. He kept pushing for civil rights measures even when the odds were stacked against him. He understood black impatience and understood how little had been done for the black poor in the ghettos. He retained the closest relationships with black leaders like Roy Wilkins, James Farmer and Whitney Young and, when King was assassinated, he

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seized the chance to get through Open Housing legislation. He cemented the loyalty of African-American voters, north and south, to the Democratic Party. And what he did for black civil rights remained his proudest achievement until his death in 1973.

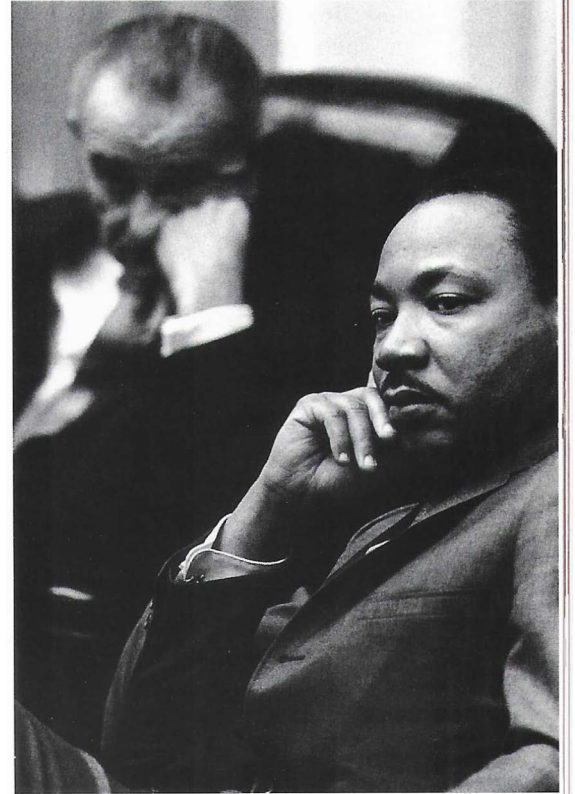
Gore, like other southern moderate congressmen, failed to support the 1964 Civil Rights Act but Gore found Johnson's address to Congress after Selma 'inspiring' and from the start indicated that he would support the Voting Rights Act. 'Freedom of the ballot box is the very essence of democracy,' he proclaimed. Indeed, as someone who had supported anti-poll tax legislation in 1942, he supported the efforts to add the abolition of the poll tax by legislation rather than constitutional amendments.

Gore also supported the Open Housing Act in 1968 and opposed the Supreme Court nominations of conservative white southerners



Martin Luther King, Jr. talks with President Lyndon B. Johnson, Oval Office, White House, Washington, DC
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Library
photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto

Clement Haynesworth and Harold Carswell. These votes won him much praise from the black political organization, the Tennessee Voters Council. Gore received overwhelming black support. But there was always a certain distance between black voters and Gore. Gore himself acknowledged that 'while black leaders almost unanimously supported me, some of them were not all that enthusiastic. For they never felt I was quite their man. While I had supported civil rights legislation generally, I was not the kind of person to 'clear' things in advance with black leaders – or any other kind of leader.' Gore's relations with African Americans reflected the general pattern of southern moderates of his generation. They campaigned for black support at one remove,



dealing through intermediaries with black leaders who were expected to deliver the black vote. That style of campaigning for black support made it hard for Gore to pick up some of the immediacy and impatience of black demands and to enthuse the black electorate.

Rivalry

Johnson and Gore therefore had much the same political agenda. They were natural allies. They worked hard to like each other. Gore rejoiced in Johnson's Senate victory in 1948. They flattered each other and joked about their respective herds of cattle. They visited each other's ranches. Their wives got on well. Gore gave Johnson a much-appreciated pig for his ranch and they spoke in each

Sen. Albert Gore in the Cabinet Room, White House May 1967.
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Library
photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto



President Lyndon B. Johnson greets American troops in Vietnam, 1966. *National Archives and Records Administration*

other's states. In particular, Johnson called Gore over to Texas to speak in the last week of the 1956 campaign as he and Rayburn tried to keep the state in Democrat hands. Johnson cast Texas votes for Gore's vice-presidential bid in 1956. Gore had the greatest admiration for Johnson's legislative expertise. He supported the Great Society legislation enthusiastically.

Yet in many ways they were too similar. Both saw themselves as potential southern presidents, Gore was never a member of the Southern caucus and he was never part of Johnson's inner circle. He was too uncompromising for the majority leader who were always anxious to compromise. As Harry McPherson recalled:

He [Johnson] had a terrible time with Gore. They had a lot in common politically, but Gore had the damndest ability to offend through a kind of righteous pomposity that would drive Johnson right up the wall and me too. I used to just despise it. He always looked like a Baptist bishop standing back

there speaking of the outrageous thing that had just been perpetrated on the people by the Establishment. Then Gore was also terribly ambitious.

As Gore's admirer, Adrian Fisher recalled, Gore was 'a hard man to put pressure on' and Johnson wanted to be able to pressure everybody. Where Johnson was a friend of J Edgar Hoover, Hoover targeted Gore from 1953. Gore was far friendlier with Johnson's Texas nemesis Ralph Yarborough than with Johnson. He was close also to other Senators whom Johnson often humiliated – like Paul Douglas of Illinois and Herbert Lehman of New York – or tough men Johnson could not control – like Gore's closest ally, Mike Monroney of Oklahoma.

Johnson kept Gore off the Finance Committee for a long time. He undercut Gore's efforts to investigate campaign finances in 1956. From 1958 onwards, the conservative Buford Ellington, whom Gore regarded as a 'dolt', was Johnson's point man in Tennessee. Much as Gore needed Johnson's

support, he chafed at the deference required to the majority leader. In 1960 he led an effort to undermine Johnson's absolute control of the Democratic Policy Committee. Gore invited all the likely Democratic presidential candidates to Tennessee in 1960. He saw no reason to feel inferior to any of them and he supported Kennedy rather than Johnson for the presidency in 1960. He thought that Johnson was too subservient to the big money interests. He also thought that Johnson was the meanest man in Washington, and he meant 'mean' as in cruel. When Kennedy was elected and Johnson became vice-president, Gore must have thought that his days of having to defer to Johnson were over. By the time Kennedy's second term would be over in 1968, Gore might have a realistic chance of being the first southern president. When Johnson attempted to continue as vice-president to control the Democratic caucus and keep his majority leader's office, Gore was the leader of the powerful minority that effectively drove Johnson off. Gore spoke with the unguarded vehemence of someone who would not have to worry about Johnson again. Johnson also coldly ensured that Gore, who knew more about the control of nuclear weapons than any man in the Senate, was excluded from the congressional delegation that helped negotiate the test ban treaty in Washington. When Kennedy was assassinated, Gore will have realized that he would never have the chance to be president.

Despite Gore's support of Great Society legislation, Gore infuriated

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LBJ by his opposition to the tax cut, his opposition to the nomination of Henry Fowler as Secretary of the Treasury, and his repeated criticism of the high interest rates and tight money in the later Johnson years.

But it was foreign policy that was to see a lasting and bitter breach between the two southern New Dealers.

Southern Internationalists

Like most southerners, liberal or conservative, Johnson and Gore were liberal internationalists. They were committed to preparedness and support for Britain during the run-up to World War II, supporters of the Roosevelt-Hull foreign policy, supporters of containment, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. They were staunch anti-communists and opponents of

President Lyndon B. Johnson addresses the Nation 31 March 1968, announcing a bombing halt in Vietnam and his intention not to run for re-election.
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Library photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto

Republican isolationism. But they differed bitterly on Vietnam.

Johnson committed himself to the war in Vietnam as a means of demonstrating America's resolve in the Cold War, as a way of stopping the dominos falling in South East Asia and because he thought that defeat in South East Asia would unleash the great reactionary beast in the United States, just as the loss of China, as he saw it, unleashed McCarthyism. But Johnson, as Lloyd Gardner has compellingly argued, also saw Vietnam through the eyes of a Southern New Dealer. Like Texas in the 1930s it was ripe for infrastructure development. His billion-dollar development plan, laid out in his Johns Hopkins speech of 1965, would enable Vietnam to be transformed in the same way as the New Deal had changed the South. For the Tennessee Valley, read the Mekong Delta. Johnson liked to believe that other Asian leaders shared his vision and for a time he believed that Ho Chi Minh would

find the bait of that development plan irresistible. LBJ never quite understood why Ho did not react like Lister Hill or John Sparkman or himself to the promise of cheap electrical power. Robert Komer, director of pacification in Vietnam, recalled that LBJ drove him up the wall about rural electrification. Johnson persuaded the old head of the TVA, David Lilienthal, to take charge of special development programmes in Vietnam.

Lilienthal had been Gore's mentor. But Gore was unpersuaded by the possibilities of American success in Vietnam. His own visit there in 1959 had led him to doubt American ability to compensate for a corrupt and authoritarian regime. He listened to dissenters like David Halberstam, whom he had nurtured when he was a cub reporter on the *Tennessean*, and to Chester Bowles and John Kenneth Galbraith who had worked with him on price controls in World War II. He pleaded with Kennedy in 1963



to plan for a quick withdrawal. He became a leading opponent of the war on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The war compounded Gore's distrust of Lyndon Johnson.

He never wavered in his belief that his course of action on Vietnam was right. 'If I have ever,' he told Gene Sloan in November 1969, 'been right about anything in my entire life then I was right in opposing our involvement in the Vietnam War. I cannot claim a perfect record because I permitted myself to be misled into voting for the Tonkin Gulf resolution. I am confident that I was right in opposing escalation of the war. Indeed, except for the role that I and others played in this regard, we may well have been in war with Red China today.' Gore was defeated a year later. He had allowed himself to get out of touch with his constituents but the Republicans also targeted new cultural issues like school prayer and coded racial issues – law and

order, the Supreme Court nominations, gun control. However, as his successful opponent noted, Gore's stance on Vietnam was one of the 'major factors' in his defeat.

Lyndon Johnson and Albert Gore, inspired by the New Deal, helped create the infrastructure that put the South on the road to economic modernization. They helped destroy racial segregation and empower African Americans politically. They did not succeed in eliminating the vast swaths of poverty that were the 'Shadows of the Sunbelt' and their policies drove the majority of white Southerners into the arms of the Republican party. They were political allies but their personal rivalry, even hatred, never abated. After the 1970 election Jimmy Stahlman, conservative editor of the *Nashville Banner*, sent two exultant telegrams. Referring to the defeat of both Gore and the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, John Jay Hooker, whom Stahlman hated

even more than he hated Gore, Stahlman telegraphed Richard Nixon at San Clemente the day after the election: WE GOT 'EM BOTH, ONE WITH EACH BARREL. GLADYS JOINS IN BEST TO YOU AND PAT. The next day he sent a telegram to Lyndon Johnson: THANK GOD, WE HELPED GET RID OF ONE OF YOUR ARCH ENEMIES. NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT NECESSARY.

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On the Web

Bane and glory

It seems to be the politician's glory and/or bane to trace a path where private and public elements coalesce, at best, if they do not interfere with each other, to the doom of catastrophe, at worst. In the cases of Lyndon Baines Johnson and Albert Gore and his namesake son, they made it and nearly made it, depending on the viewpoint. For the historian, the task remains to scrutinise the unforgiving past and set its dramatis personae in a fair perspective.

Starting with LBJ, his biography (www.aca.ch/lbjbio.htm) will travel from the South of the United States to the

President's Office in the White House and end amidst the Vietnam War in the 1970s. For that reason, his political record and achievements continue to be tainted by his demise, so that some people wrap him up as a 'Flawed Giant' (www.nytimes.com/books/first/d/dallek-giant.html). Fortunately for him, one of his successors in the post, Bill Clinton, has spoken up and described him as 'a President I admired for all he did for civil rights' (www.pbs.org/newshour/election2000/demconvention/clinton3.htm).

Similarly, AG followed a remarkably parallel path and nearly made it (Albert Gore and His Papers. The Senate Collection. spider.georgetowncollege.edu/htallant/border/bs10/mitchell.htm) but it was his son who acceded to the Vice-Presidency. One of the latter's supporters wanted him to go all the way: 'I am for

Albert Gore for president, but not because he has been vice-president' (www.populist.com/99.10.mccarthy.html). On the other hand, there were those concerned about 'Inventing Al Gore' (www.nytimes.com/books/first/t/turque-gore.html).

Furthermore, they made politics in a climate of personal attacks, which might bunch together members of the family. 'Was Albert Gore Sr. a Crook? - No, but he was sleazy enough to... ' (slate.msn.com/id/78634). 'These days, almost anyone can call public figures Big Liars. (...) Gore "lies like a rug", the author said, and he listed a string of alleged... (...) flood relief is more serious than Lyndon Johnson lying the country into a war [in Vietnam]' (www.dailyhowler.com/h051600_1.shtml).

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