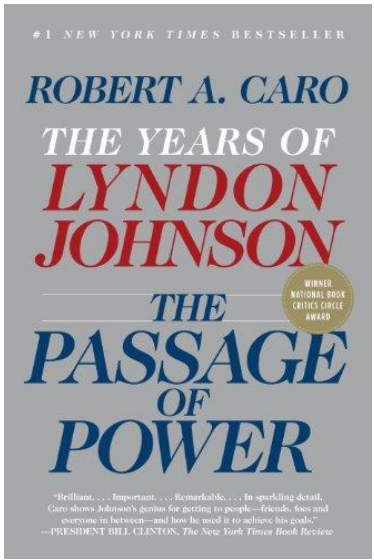




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The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson IV

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For all John F. Kennedy’s remarkable ability—his eloquence on the podium, whether for a speech or a press conference—to inspire a nation, to rally it to its better, most humane, aspirations, and for all his triumphs in dealing with the rest of the world—the Peace Corps, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Cuban Missile Crisis—few of his domestic goals that required legislation had been turned into reality, and at the time of his death, every major Administration bill that was before Congress was stalled, even the two bills that in 1963 the young President had lumped together as his “first priority”: a civil rights bill and a tax reduction bill vital not only to expansion of the economy but to liberal aims, since economic expansion, and the resultant increase in tax revenues, were necessary if government was to fund new social welfare programs. The coalition blocking his bills—the southern Democrat-Republican coalition, the conservative coalition, that had ruled Capitol Hill for a quarter of a century—in November, 1963, was ruling Capitol Hill still. During the last week or two before the President’s trip to Texas, in fact, the stalemate in Congress—the press had taken to calling it a “logjam”—had escalated to new, historic levels; both the bills were stalled, caught in a logjam that on the day John F. Kennedy died gave no signs of breaking up. But the story of Lyndon Johnson’s transition is a story not only of difficulties he faced but how he surmounted them. He not only broke the congressional logjam, he broke it up fast, and he broke it up on civil rights.

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eighty-two years earlier. It was not a strong bill. By the time Johnson had finished fashioning a compromise that the southerners would accept, provisions that would have enforced school desegregation and banned racial segregation in housing, hotels, restaurants and other public places—provisions liberals considered essential—had been removed; only a single civil right, voting, remained, and the provisions for enforcing that lone right proved largely useless. But the mere fact of the bill's passage—that after eighty-two years in which every civil rights bill that reached the Senate had died there, one had finally been passed—was of historic significance. “It opened a major branch of American government to a tenth of the population for which all legislative doors had been slammed shut,” Johnson's longtime press secretary, George Reedy, said. And Johnson argued—in a contention that would be vindicated by history—that although there was only one right remaining in the bill, that was the right that mattered: that it gave blacks the power to at least begin fighting for other rights. Furthermore, he pointed out, once a bill was passed, it could be amended to correct its deficiencies. “It's just a beginning,” he said. “We'll do it again, in a couple of years.... Don't worry, it's only the first.”

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The union leader Bobby focused on was Jimmy Hoffa of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, a man in whom, he said, he saw “absolute evilness.” In his dealings with Hoffa, Robert Kennedy demonstrated another trait. He tried to trap Hoffa on a bribery charge, boasting that the case was so airtight that if the Teamster boss wasn't convicted, he would jump off the Capitol dome. But Hoffa wasn't convicted. Then he indicted him on an illegal wiretapping charge; when, at a first trial, the jury deadlocked, he brought the union leader to trial again on the same charge, and he was acquitted. “Frustrated to the point of fury,” as one account put it, Kennedy never stopped trying to influence the public against Hoffa, through reports of his committee, a steady stream of inflammatory press releases and the use of “friendly reporters to propagate” the image of Hoffa that he himself saw; one reporter was given a key to the committee offices so that he could obtain information about Hoffa while Kennedy could deny he had leaked it. And when, in 1961, Kennedy would become attorney general, and had at his command, as the journalist Nick Thimmesch writes, “the full arsenal” of the government's legal powers, he used them. Forming an elite “Get Hoffa” squad in the Justice Department, he launched an all-out campaign against the union leader, in which he also deployed the FBI and the Internal Revenue Service. At one time, fourteen separate grand juries were probing the

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congressmen and senators of both parties who felt that Hoffa's corruption and brutality did not justify the tactics that Kennedy was using against him, but from the American Civil Liberties Union. Kennedy never changed them, and, finally, in 1964, he got a conviction. It had taken seven years—but he had gotten it. "When Bobby hates you, you stay hated," Joe Kennedy told a friend. And he hated Lyndon Johnson. Years before, the two men would pass in the halls of the Senate Office Building. "This was the Leader, the Leader," says a reporter who covered the Senate. "Everybody gave him deference. Bobby could barely look at him." As for Johnson, his feelings were

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Then, in March, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion visited the United States. New York attorney Edwin Weisl, a major financial supporter of both Israel and Johnson, had arranged for the two men to meet in New York. Saying that the meeting would make him look like a candidate, Johnson backed out at the last moment, however, and wouldn't meet with the prime minister in public even when Ben-Gurion came to Washington. Johnson was finally taken secretly, without reporters being informed, to talk with Ben-Gurion at Abe Fortas' Georgetown home.

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Bobby's statement is buttressed by a remark that Jack Kennedy made a few days later to a friend, the syndicated columnist Charles Bartlett, a statement made off the record and not put in print by Bartlett until 1964. According to Bartlett, Kennedy told him that his offer to Johnson had been merely a "gesture"—and not much of a gesture, hardly an offer at all. "I just held it out like this," he said, holding his hand two or three inches from his pocket, "and he grabbed at it." The Kennedys, Bartlett wrote, were "shocked" when Johnson "seized the offer and held fast to it."

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Those accounts are given weight by many historians because of Robert Kennedy's repeated, and emphatic, reiterations of them, and because of the acceptance of those reiterations as accurate, and the restatement of them in books and articles by Arthur Schlesinger, whose writings on John and Robert Kennedy have for decades set the template for the image of the two brothers in history. In 1984, Schlesinger would still be writing, "As Robert Kennedy's oral history makes clear, the offer of the vice-presidential nomination was pro forma; the Kennedys never dreamed Johnson would accept." Those accounts are not, however, supported by a number of actions that John F. Kennedy actually took that day.

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Thirty-one thousand and 21,000—in an election that was decided by 46,000 votes, the weight of those votes could hardly have been a minor factor. Whatever the explanation for the results from the “ethnic bloc” in Texas, John Kennedy had selected Lyndon Johnson in part to take back Texas for the Democratic presidential ticket, and Johnson had done it.

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He couldn't bear to stay in Washington. After Kennedy's triumphant confrontation with Big Steel in April, during which, to battle inflation, the President forced the United States Steel Corporation to rescind the price increases it had announced—a four-day-long episode in which Johnson played no part—he began spending more and more time on his ranch, leaving Washington on Thursday and not returning until Monday. But he couldn't relax there. To while away the time, he played endless games

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Although McCone laid out for Johnson “in considerable detail” the thinking that had gone into Kennedy's decision, the Vice President did not agree with it, according to a “Memorandum for the File” that McCone wrote the next day. A blockade, Johnson said, would be “locking the barn after the horse was gone” since missiles were already in Cuba. He was also not in favor of gradual escalation, which he called “telegraphing our punch.” Instead, he wanted “an unannounced [air] strike”—bombing Cuba without warning. (The scale of the strike he was advocating is not made clear in McCone's memo.) He “finally agreed reluctantly [with the blockade plan] but only after learning among other things the support indicated by General Eisenhower,” McCone wrote.

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DURING THESE FIVE DAYS—from Monday, October 22, through Friday, October 26—Lyndon Johnson was in the Cabinet Room hour after hour as ExComm met, but he hardly spoke, at least while the group was sitting around the Cabinet table with the President presiding. According to Robert Kennedy and Ted Sorensen, he would, however, speak after the meeting was over and the President had left the Cabinet Room, having switched off the tape recorder. “Frequently, after the meetings were finished, he would circulate and whine and complain about our being weak, but he never made ... any suggestions or recommendations,” Robert Kennedy would say. “He was displeased with what we were doing, although he never made clear what he would do. He said he had the feeling that we were being too weak, and that we should be stronger.” He didn’t speak even at one meeting at which he might particularly have been expected to. On the Monday of that week, just before his telecast, President Kennedy met in the Cabinet Room with twenty congressional leaders, hastily ferried back to Washington by Air Force planes from all over the country, to inform them of the decision he had made, and of the

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reasons behind it, and he had Johnson attend the meeting.

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softened. But Johnson was one member of ExComm the President hadn’t won over at all, whose attitude had not softened at all, as became apparent on the sixth day after the Vice President’s return from Hawaii, the twelfth—and climactic—day of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Saturday, October 27.

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Showing weakness to a mad dog was always a mistake, Lyndon Johnson said. “He’s [Khrushchev] got to get a little blood.” And now, by shooting down the U-2, “he’s got it.” And America was still not responding. “Now, when they realize that they shot down one of our pilots, we’re letting this ship go through and that ship go through ...” What was needed was strength, action. The American people were going to demand action, he said. “I think you’re going to have a big problem right here, internally, in a few more hours in this country.” An American plane had been shot down, and the President was taking no action. “This ought to start the wires [coming] in now from all over the country, the states of the Union: ‘Where have you been? What are you doing? The President made a fine speech. What else have you done?’ ... They see that there’s some ships coming through. There’s a great feeling of insecurity.”² He was pounding home the idea that the time for negotiation—at least for negotiation alone—was over, that immediate military action was needed, rallying the hawks. In the midst of an exchange with two of them, Treasury Secretary Dillon and former ambassador to Russia Llewellyn Thompson, he demanded: “You just ask yourself what made the greatest impression on you today, whether it was his [Khrushchev’s] letter last night, or whether it was his letter this morning, or whether it was that U-2 boy going down?” “The U-2 boy,” Dillon replied. “That’s

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WHEN EXCOMM RECONVENED about nine o’clock that Saturday evening, the two brothers were a little late—and during the few minutes before they arrived, there were more strong words from Lyndon Johnson about how to handle the Russians, and, listening to him, Sorensen suddenly felt “chilled.” It wasn’t just the bellicosity of the words but the force behind them: Lyndon Johnson could persuade men, and, without the countervailing presence of the brothers, he might, Sorensen saw, be persuading these.

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HAD BEEN NO OVERSIGHT that Lyndon Johnson wasn't invited to that crucial conference in the Oval Office on Saturday evening. On Sunday, after the final ExComm meeting, Jack Kennedy said to his brother that this was the night he should go to the theater, like Lincoln after the Union victory in the Civil War, and Robert—the subject of assassination having been raised, and with it, of course, the reminder that the Vice President would thereupon become President—said that “if he was going to the theater, I would go too, having witnessed the inability of Johnson to make any contribution of any kind during all the conversations.” In later years, he would recall Johnson's displeasure “with what we were doing,” the way, in Bobby's words, that “he would circulate and whine and complain about our being weak,” while never making “any suggestions or recommendations” himself. The people who “had participated in all these discussions,” Robert Kennedy was to say, “were bright and energetic people. We had perhaps amongst the most able in the country, and if any one of half a dozen of them were President the world would have been very likely plunged in a catastrophic war.” Lyndon Johnson, he would make clear, was one of that half dozen. Jack Kennedy, as always, was more oblique, but, through the means of another, shorter, list, he also made his feelings clear. Recalls his friend, the journalist Bartlett: “He said after the Cuban Missile Crisis that there were three men on that Executive Committee that he would be glad to see become President of the United States: McNamara, Dillon, and his brother Bobby. He said that a couple of times.” Three men whom John F. Kennedy would be happy to have succeed him as President. The Vice President wasn't one of them.

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All of the jobs he had been given—the chairmanships of the Space Council and the CEEO, the membership on the National Security Council—“all of this together adds up to only a fraction of his old power and influence. He is free to speak up, but nobody, really, has to heed him anymore.” The popular television show Candid Camera asked random passersby: “Who is Lyndon B. Johnson?” Not one knew. One of those questioned said he couldn't be expected to know: “I'm from New Jersey.” “Well,” said another, “he's not President. Am I getting close?”

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The reins on the Vice President were tightened by his hand. Johnson's requests for planes—not for the foreign trips he took on presidential orders but for domestic trips—would be ignored until the last minute, and then the planes he was assigned were generally the small Military Air Transport Service planes with the wording he hated on their sides; it became more and more difficult for him to travel on a plane he considered appropriate for a Vice President. It was made clear now that not only his speeches but his brief introductory remarks—his every public utterance—had to be approved, and not only by the White House but by the attorney general. Working with the Justice Department on Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity matters was necessary almost every day, and Johnson's secretaries and assistants, telephoning Bobby's office, felt the contempt. "They went out of their way there to make you know that they were in and you were not," Gonella says. "We just dreaded having to call over there." So integral a part of the Hickory Hill gang's culture was the contempt that at least once it was expressed, without thinking, in Johnson's presence. Two middle-level Administration officials, Ron Linton and John J. Riley, were chatting at a cocktail party when Linton realized that someone was standing next to them, wanting to be part of the conversation. The listener was Lyndon Johnson. They didn't stop talking. After a while, Johnson walked away. And when Linton said, "John, I think we just insulted the Vice President of the United States," Riley blurted out, "Fuck him"—loud enough for Johnson to hear. Whirling around, he stared at the two men for a moment. But what was there to say? Turning again, he walked away.

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As Johnson's star had been waning in Texas, furthermore, another star—that of John Connally, elected Governor in 1962—had been rising. The same Belden Poll that showed Kennedy-Johnson's approval at 50 percent put Connally's at 61 percent, and likely to go higher; formerly undecided voters had begun swinging over to him. Lyndon Johnson's onetime assistant was heading rapidly toward the pinnacle he would one day occupy as a three-term governor, one of the most popular and powerful in the history of the state. No sooner had Connally moved into the Governor's Mansion in Austin, moreover, than he began to demonstrate that the organizational and political skills he had deployed for Lyndon Johnson were just as effective on his own behalf. Sitting on the fence of his ranch in Floresville just after sunrise one morning decades later, watching Mexican vaqueros exercising his stable of quarter horses, he would say, "One thing I'm proudest of: We built the strongest organization in the history of the state while I was Governor." His pride was justified, and the base of his power was the people who controlled Texas: the powerful conservative establishment. Lyndon might have turned liberal; they didn't have to worry about John. He was already, in the first year of his governorship, showing that he was willing to lower taxes on banks and business, and to fight proposals by liberals in the legislature for increases in the minimum wage. They saw, also, that he was, as governor, talking the same way he had talked as Lyndon Johnson's aide and Sid Richardson's lawyer, as he had been talking all his life; he shared their views—with the fervency of the true believer. Johnson and Connally "still had the same political base," Joe Kilgore says, but, as the congressman

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adds, it had become “just a little bit more John’s political base than Lyndon’s.”

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And a “party house” was, innuendo-wise, thin gruel beside another venue that, over the weekend of October 26 and 27, began to appear in newspaper stories as part of the Bobby Baker case. It was a small hotel, the Carroll Arms, situated not a hundred yards from the Senate Office Building, “just an ice cube’s throw from the Capitol,” as one article put it. On its second floor, the stories said, was an “intimate” club, a “discreet little private club,” “smoky and dimly lit,” a spot where “the ceiling is red and the lights are low”—an “intimate and elegant gathering place” named the “Quorum Club” that Baker had, the stories said, organized for “romantic caucuses” of senators, lobbyists and congressmen. And there were stories also about the caucusees, the young women, the “hostesses,” or “party girls,” the articles called them, in a euphemism for call girls—and in particular about one of the hostesses. For those who didn’t prefer blondes like Carole Tyler, this one was a brunette—and on any scale of scandal material, she was off the charts. “Clad,” as one account put it, “in a brief, revealing, skin-tight costume and black net stockings,” sultry, dark-haired, dark-eyed Ellen Rometsch, the spectacularly exotic and sensual-looking wife of an East German army sergeant, had worked at the Quorum Club, and at the Carousel Motel, for more than two years before, in August, 1963, she had been expelled from the United States and hustled back to East Germany because, as Clark Mollenhoff reported that weekend in the Des Moines Register, she had been “associating with congressional leaders and some prominent New Frontiersmen from the ‘executive branch’”—and because of fears that she was an East German spy. As it happened, Lyndon Johnson had no more association with Elly Rometsch than he had with the Quorum Club, which had not even been established until after he left the Senate; he was not even a subject of her boasts. The official with whom she was rumored to have had sex was John F. Kennedy. Apparently she had bragged that she had had sex with the President, and in July, 1963, an informant had reported the boast to the FBI, which was already investigating rumors that she was a spy, the agency’s suspicions “fueled,” as one account puts it, by her “expensive lifestyle,” which, the FBI investigators concluded, “hardly could have been maintained on the pay of a German army enlisted man.” The FBI had found no evidence to corroborate either rumor; a summary, written in July, of its preliminary inquiries concluded that “Investigation has not substantiated the security allegations against subject nor does she apparently have the high-level sex contacts she originally boasted of.” Not a week earlier, however, Harold Macmillan had resigned as prime minister of Great Britain, brought down by the “Profumo Affair,” in which the British defense minister, John Profumo, was caught in “impropriety” with a call girl who was also the mistress of a Russian naval attaché—a concatenation of circumstances that raised the spectre of security breaches. The parallels between the Profumo affair and the rumors about Elly Rometsch’s White House connections and about her spying would turn her boasting into a big story if the press got wind of it. Robert Kennedy, who, as Evan Thomas puts it, “From the outset ... understood that the merest whiff of a sex-and-spies scandal could be threatening to the president,” had, in August, arranged to have her quietly deported, and the matter had appeared closed. If she had no connection to Johnson or Kennedy, however, Ms. Rometsch certainly had one to Bobby Baker’s club, and now, with Baker big news, she was news, too, and she certainly had the figure (35–25–35) and face (an “Elizabeth Taylor look-alike,” one reporter called her) and, apparently, sexual proclivities (“Lesbian prostitute,” was how Mollenhoff described her in his notes; the German Defense Ministry was to mention her “somewhat nymphomaniacal inclinations”; another source said simply, “She would do anything”) to elevate a scandal to new heights. OUST BEAUTY TO HEAD OFF DC SCANDAL was the New York Daily News story that Sunday: “A beautiful German beauty with a lusty yen for men was rushed out of the country in August after bragging about affairs with important Washington figures, informed sources disclosed tonight.” And with reporters tracking down every fact and rumor about her, how long could it be before the identity of the most “important Washington figure” of all was in print? HILL PROBE MAY TAKE

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As part of his attempts to ease tensions with the Soviet Union, President Kennedy had, in October, offered to help alleviate its serious food shortage by selling it wheat from America's surplus, and by allowing Russia, short of foreign exchange reserves, to finance the purchase on credit from the United States Export-Import Bank. Helping Russia out of a jam was anathema to Capitol Hill hard-liners. Calling Kennedy's plan "indefensible," one of the hardest, Republican Senator Karl E. Mundt of South Dakota, had attached an amendment to the foreign aid bill prohibiting the Export-Import Bank from extending the credit. The amendment would probably kill the wheat deal. It would certainly infringe on the President's authority in foreign affairs. On November 14, a week before the President left for Texas, the Kennedy Administration had tried to defeat Mundt's prohibition in the Senate—and had failed, mustering only forty votes. Mundt was then persuaded to withdraw it, so that the foreign aid bill could proceed—not that it did proceed—but only by Mansfield's promise that he would be allowed to submit it as a separate bill and to have a vote on it on an early date, which had been set for Tuesday, November 26. At the legislative leaders' breakfast on November 21, the day Kennedy left for Texas, Kennedy had insisted that the Mundt bill must be defeated. From the report Mansfield and Humphrey now gave Johnson, however, the former President's words had little relation to reality: the bill, they reported, was probably going to be passed. In reporting this to Johnson, Mansfield and Humphrey seemed to feel that they were talking only about a vote on a wheat sale, and Smathers hadn't considered the Mundt bill important enough to mention it, but none of these senators were Lyndon Johnson, who as master of the Senate had demonstrated a gift, an intuition, for seeing, in a vote on some individual bill, larger implications seen by no one else. In the instant the wheat sale vote was mentioned to him—"just the moment he heard about it," George Reedy says—he knew that because of Kennedy's death and the resultant change in Presidents, the vote was now about more than the wheat sale, that it now possessed a far broader significance.

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A tentative step in a different direction had recently been announced by the Kennedy Administration. On October 2, McNamara and Taylor, returning from an inspection trip to Vietnam, had recommended stepping up the training of the Vietnamese army so that American military personnel could be withdrawn from Vietnam, and had said that if this was done, “It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of US personnel” by the end of 1965. Their report concluded that a thousand Americans could be withdrawn by the end of 1963. “We need a way to get out of Vietnam, and this is a way of doing it,” McNamara said. At the close of Kennedy’s meeting with his two envoys, on October 2, Pierre Salinger had publicly announced that the President had endorsed their recommendations, saying that the President accepted “their judgment that the major part of the US military task can be completed by the end of 1965 They reported that by the end of this year ... 1,000 military personnel can be withdrawn.” The number of American personnel in Vietnam at the time was 16,732, and it was forecast that by the end of the year, the number would be reduced to about 15,700. That had been before the coup. Whether Kennedy, despite the coup, would have kept the pledge to withdraw the thousand troops is unknown, but the pledge was on the public record. Johnson, calling in reporters after his meeting with Lodge and the others, “reaffirmed,” the New York Times said, “the policy objectives of his predecessor regarding South Vietnam.” The Washington Post reported that after the meeting “White House sources said the late President Kennedy’s statement” about the troop withdrawals “before the end of the year remains in force.”

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THE PROBLEM OF who was going to investigate the assassination, and the assassin’s murder, had to be addressed, he knew—“The atmosphere was poisonous and had to be cleared”—for he was aware of the directions in which the poison might spread. “Russia was not immune,” he was to write in his memoirs. “Neither was Cuba. Neither was the State of Texas. Neither was the new President of the United States.” The rumors about Russian or Cuban involvement in a conspiracy, rumors being kept fresh every day with new reports, mostly false, of Oswald’s connections to the two Communist countries, had “very dangerous implications,” he felt, since “if they got a headstart”—if suspicions mounted that Khrushchev or Castro was responsible for Kennedy’s death, or if, in Russia, fears about America’s suspicions, and about the possibility that they might cause America to retaliate, created a feeling that perhaps Russia should move first—they contained the seeds of escalation, in an age in which escalation could mean annihilation. Jack Ruby had added fuel to the fire, he was to write. “With that single shot the outrage of a nation turned to skepticism and doubt”—to heightened fears of conspiracy, international or not, that further unsettled a country to which he was trying to bring a feeling of calm and stability.