History often casts its glow capriciously. Sometimes we get a contemporaneous read on how those who fill its pages will be reflected in its light; sometimes it takes a little longer to sort things out.

In 1865, when an assassin's bullet felled Abraham Lincoln, his loss was felt immediately, and his place in the presidential pantheon was all but assured. Though he had elicited withering criticism during the course of his four-year presidency, Lincoln had lived to see the Civil War to its bloody end, keeping the Union whole while putting a constitutional end to the odious institution of slavery. “It is small consolation that he died at a moment in the war when he could best be spared,” wrote Harper’s Weekly just after his death, “for no nation is ready for the loss of such a friend.”

It has taken history far longer to catch up to the legacy of Lyndon Johnson. Though slavery had long been abolished at Lincoln’s hand, and the promise of “all men are created equal” was etched indelibly in the Declaration of Independence, racism, virulent and abiding, continued to plague much of America by the time Johnson took office on November 22, 1963. Five days into his accidental presidency, in the wake of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Johnson used a speech before a joint session of Congress to press for passage
of the civil rights bill that had been proposed in vain by Kennedy the summer before. Knowing his appeal would fall on the deaf ears of intractable Southern segregationists in his own party, Johnson implored the body to pass the bill as a means of honoring the memory of his slain predecessor.

Through what became known legendarily as “the Johnson Treatment”—wielding political capital, horse-trading, threatening, cajoling, flattering, whatever it took—Johnson got the Civil Rights Act passed, striking down the Jim Crow laws that, with their false promise of “separate but equal” public accommodations, allowed for racial segregation throughout the South. Later called “the bill of the century,” the Civil Rights Act had been nearly as long in the making. When Johnson signed it into law on July 2, 1964, it became the first meaningful civil rights bill to pass since Reconstruction—and it laid the groundwork for two additional landmark civil rights laws to come.

A year later, Johnson passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, followed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Along with the Civil Rights Act, they became a triumvirate of reform that saw a legal end to racism, lifting the veil of oppression that had for so long held back America. As Johnson said in 1968 when he signed the Fair Housing Act, “I do not exaggerate when I say that the proudest moments of my Presidency have been moments such as this, when I have signed into law the promises of a century. I shall not forget that it was more than one hundred years ago when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation—but it was a proclamation; it was not a fact.”
Johnson considered the second of his civil rights laws—the Voting Rights Act of 1965—to be his greatest legislative triumph. That’s saying something, given that he helped to forge modern America through the passage of dozens of transformational laws that gave the country Medicare and Medicaid; federal aid to education; freedom of information; sweeping immigration reform; and the creation of Head Start, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, PBS, NPR, five national parks, and 150 national forests. It was pushing through voting rights and expanding the American franchise that gave him the most pride. Prior to its passage, the power of the ballot eluded many people of color, mostly in the Southern states. In Mississippi alone, less than 7 percent of the black population was registered to vote in the early 1960s. On March 7, 1965, a voting rights protest march in Selma, Alabama, led by civil rights activist John Lewis, was violently stone-walled by Alabama state troopers, shedding harsh light on the need for reform. Eight days later, Johnson stood before Congress and delivered one of the great, unheralded speeches of the time, a plea to put the Voting Rights Act into law. His voice strong, his will determined, he said:

“As times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom.”

At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. There, long-suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many were brutally assaulted.

There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma. There is no cause for self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans. But there is cause for hope and for faith in our democracy in what is happening here tonight. For the cries of pain and the hymns and protests of oppressed people have summoned into convocation all the majesty of this great government—the government of the greatest nation on earth. Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.

But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and State of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our
cause too. Because it’s not just Negroes, but really it’s all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

And we shall overcome.

Johnson spoke the last words pointedly as his mouth tightened and eyes narrowed, squaring intently on his audience. Those words were key. The song “We Shall Overcome,” originally a labor union protest song, became the anthem of the civil rights movement. When Johnson invoked the same words, it told the soldiers of the movement, struggling day after day, often against repugnant opposition, that the president—their president—heard them.

When Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965, it was under the prodigious dome of the U.S. Capitol. As he scrawled his name on the bill, a marble statue of Abraham Lincoln, head bowed slightly, the troubles of his administration weighing heavily on his countenance, stood over his right shoulder. It was apt; it took Lyndon Johnson to finish what Abraham Lincoln had started.

Yet despite his titanic role in America’s quest for civil rights, the greatest domestic movement of the twentieth century, Johnson had for decades been largely underappreciated—even ignored—as the failed war in Vietnam hung balefully over his legacy. Lincoln won his war, vanquishing the Confederate Army, but Johnson could never quite overcome the Communist insurgency in Vietnam; Ho Chi Minh prevailed there, not LBJ. Though Johnson pursued the war as determinedly as he had the fruition of civil rights, it was a losing cause resulting in the nation’s division, demoralization, and loss of 36,000 troops by the time he left office in 1969, after forgoing a run at reelection. And while the failed war was the product of many like minds weaving from the Eisenhower Administration through the Nixon Administration, it stuck most inextricably to Johnson.

But nearly two generations after leaving the White House, as the dark cloud of Vietnam receded with the turn of years and the dissipation of passions, Johnson’s legacy in civil rights and social justice has continued to resound. It reached a crescendo from April 8 through 10, 2014, as the library bearing LBJ’s name hosted an historic Civil Rights Summit to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. For three glorious spring days, a host of luminaries—including President Barack Obama and former presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter—came to the LBJ Presidential Library.
President Lyndon B. Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. attend a civil rights meeting in the Cabinet Room at the White House on March 18, 1966.
to recognize the progress made in the country’s long, often troubled journey toward civil rights.

Reflecting the legal strides to that end, a temporary exhibit titled “Cornerstones of Civil Rights” stood in the library’s majestic Great Hall linking the civil rights bequests of Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson. It featured a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and the proposal for the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution banning slavery, both signed by Lincoln, and the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, both signed by Johnson. Beside them were emblems of the sixteenth and thirty-sixth presidents: Lincoln’s iconic stovepipe hat and Johnson’s Stetson cowboy hat, which he often wore at the LBJ Ranch, known in his presidential years as the “Texas White House.”

But it was the programming that made the summit momentous. Heroes of the civil rights movement—Julian Bond, John Lewis, and Andrew Young—took the stage, looking back on their battles on its front lines. Pulitzer Prize–winning historians Taylor Branch and Doris Kearns Goodwin reflected on the movement’s grand significance in our country’s annals, and Johnson White House aides Joe Califano and Tom Johnson recalled their hard-driving former boss’s storied prowess in getting laws passed through the halls of Congress, contrasting with today’s Washington, where sausage making has all but ground to a halt.

More importantly, the summit also looked forward. LBJ would have wanted
it that way. “We are not caretakers of the past,” he said as president, “but are charged with the construction of tomorrow.” Accordingly, he wanted his presidential library to be a “springboard to the future,” a place that would be not only a repository of things past, but a forum to explore the issues of our day. It was Johnson’s vision that led to a broader charter for presidential libraries, expanding their role and profiles on the American landscape.

In that spirit, the icons of the movement of the 1960s shared the summit’s spotlight with those who, along with them, are making a difference today. Prior to President Obama’s keynote address, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame singer and civil rights activist Mavis Staples sang “We Shall Overcome” with a resonance that acknowledged there are still struggles in our midst. Other proceedings from the summit brought these struggles to a focus: Former legal rivals Ted Olson and David Boies discussed why they joined forces to mount a Supreme Court challenge against Proposition 8, a ballot initiative that would have banned gay marriage in California. George W. Bush’s secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, and Democratic congressman George Miller talked about their bipartisan efforts toward education reform with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, while San Antonio mayor Julián Castro and former Mississippi governor Haley Barbour explored changes in immigration policy.

Sports legends Jim Brown and Bill Russell offered their views on the barriers of race in the 1960s, when they dominated their sports—football and basketball respectively—and the issues athletes face today. David Robinson, a basketball star of a more recent era, joined former Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin, disability policy expert Lex Frieden, activist and journalist Maria Shriver, and hip hop entrepreneur Steve Stoute to discuss leadership in the modern causes that will make for a better world.

The three former presidents also weighed in, each praising the courage and conviction manifest by Johnson in carrying out his civil rights agenda, but heeding warnings that while the laws he brought to bear are in place, there is still work to be done. Jimmy Carter, who came on April 8, the summit’s first day, spoke of the “gross disparity” that still exists between America’s black and white populations in unemployment and education. “There’s not any real equality between the two that exists in this country,” he allowed. “We are pretty much dormant now. . . . We feel like, ‘Lyndon Johnson did it; we don’t have to do anything anymore.’ I think too many people are at ease with the still-existing disparity.”
On day two, April 9, Clinton told of voting rights being under siege in state legislatures throughout the country. “All of a sudden there are all these new barriers to voting, to make it harder to vote,” he noted. “This is a way of restricting the franchise after fifty years of expanding it. . . . America is best suited to deal with [challenges] because of our diversity, and yet here we are, seriously considering undermining the spirit of both the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Acts.”

George W. Bush, who came on the afternoon of April 10, the summit’s last day, expressed concern over the widening racial gap in education as he related statistics that evinced the problem, echoing a refrain from his campaign for the presidency in 2000, when he said, “I fear that the soft bigotry of low expectations is returning.”

But the summit’s most anticipated event came when President Obama, accompanied by the first lady, visited the library on the morning of April 10, to deliver the summit’s keynote address. History came alive as the forty-fourth president, the first African American to achieve the nation’s highest office, climbed the stairs of the Great Hall and went on to the “Cornerstones of Civil Rights” exhibit, where he gazed upon the very documents that allowed for his ascent to the presidency.

When Johnson made his first speech before Congress after President Kennedy’s assassination, in which he implored its members to pass Kennedy’s civil rights bill, he opened by alluding to the tragedy that propelled him into office. Dolefully, he said, “All I have, I would have given gladly not to be standing here today.” But while his presidency may have been accidental, his effect on civil rights was fateful. How fitting then, that President Obama, in his address, inadvertently but triumphantly, used the same phrase that Johnson had used in the wake of tragedy as he proclaimed, “Because of the civil rights movement, because of the laws President Johnson signed, new doors of opportunity and education swung open for everybody. They swung open for you, and they swung open for me. And that’s why I’m standing here today.”

“A tree is best measured when it’s down,” wrote Carl Sandburg in reference to the nation’s outpouring of appreciation for Lincoln after his untimely end. Though Johnson died long ago, succumbing to heart failure at his beloved ranch in 1973 at the age of sixty-four, we are only now starting to get the true measure of the man.
President Lyndon B. Johnson speaks at the Capitol Rotunda before signing the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965.