Final Thoughts by Paul Cunningham

Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) would not make my list of the top U.S. Presidents. I suspect that many others would agree. To be fair, he served during a time when the political divide was even wider than it is today, which gives a small indication of just how bad things were in the mid-1960s.

Nevertheless, LBJ will forever hold a special place in the annals of American politics for several reasons: his unabashed use of power and bullying to get political rivals to see things his way (authors Rowland Evans and Robert Novak described the “Johnson Treatment” as an almost hypnotic experience [that] rendered the target stunned and helpless.); the sad circumstances under which he ascended from reluctant and uncooperative vice president to President of the United States (following the assassination of John F. Kennedy); and his handling/mishandling of domestic crises (the civil rights movement) and foreign conflict (the war in Vietnam).

If you are sick and tired of the verbal mudslinging that has characterized the 2010 political season over the past few months, then thank LBJ for another legacy that should cast him among the least favorite Presidents. The pervasive use of negative ads in modern era elections to a large degree can be traced back to his 1964 presidential run. The practice has evolved from merely a distasteful strategy to gain votes practically into a science and a staple of election campaigns. That’s too bad, because it is a sorry commentary on the state of politics today.

Some of us watched on a September night in 1964 when the Johnson campaign ran what is still considered one of the most controversial, negative political ads ever. It was aimed directly at a statement made by LBJ’s Republican opponent. Arizona Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, in his speech accepting the GOP nomination a month earlier stated, “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!” Known today as the “Daisy Girl Ad,” it was designed to capitalize on those comments and create a fear about Goldwater’s intent to use nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

The ad started with a shot of a little girl picking petals off a flower, counting each one slowly. As she pulls the final petal, an off-screen announcer begins a countdown of his own, a precursor to a missile launch (10, 9, 8, 7, etc.). The camera slowly zoomed in to fill the screen with the dark pupil of the girl’s eye, and when the countdown reached zero, the audience saw a flash and mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion.

From the center of the firestorm, Johnson voice was heard saying, “These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.” Another voiceover (sportscaster Chris Shenkel) then is heard, “Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home.” Eerie stuff!

The TV ad generated thousands of calls to NBC from both sides, not the good kind either. It only ran once as a paid ad, but it has proved to have a lasting effect. Whether it actually had anything to do with LBJ’s landslide win or not, it was obvious that people paid attention. The precedent was set. Building campaigns on the politics of fear eventually would become common on either side of the aisle. In present day 2010, we are lucky to hear anything but negative ads.

Listening to the endless string of malicious attacks against candidates’ opponents is the aural equivalent of watching the frequent player-induced spit showers that now are an integral part of televised baseball games. It leaves the same residual feeling and is enough to make a person disgusted enough to consider sitting out the election and not voting. But, think again, please.

As we approach Election Day tomorrow, November 2, there is still no more important civic duty than to exercise our right to vote. It is the one sure means for preserving the heritage of freedom and democracy that so many have fought and died for throughout the country’s history. Another U.S. President, Dwight D. “Ike” Eisenhower, who had a lot of skin in the game related to fighting and dying for country, summed it up best, saying, “The future of this republic is in the hands of the American voter.” Ike’s assessment will never change.

Tomorrow it won’t matter if you are a Democrat, a Republican or an Independent; a proud supporter of the Tea Party, a Green Party enthusiast or even if your politics lean more toward a non-existent Green Tea Party. The only thing that will matter tomorrow is that you get out and vote. Here’s hoping that I’ll see you at the polls.