

# Riot in South Yarra.

A riot in the leafy streets of South Yarra seems highly unlikely, but it did happen. Domain Road was the location, the Vietnam war was the issue, and a visit by Lyndon Johnson was the catalyst.

The following article was written in 2010 on the eve of a presidential visit to Australia by Barack Obama and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Mr. Michael Shmith, a journalist for The Age at the time.

## Having seen presidential spectacle, I don't expect another.

By Michael Shmith

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At this stage, it is not certain if President Barack Obama's Australian tour includes Melbourne. Therefore, we don't yet know if Air Force One will fly into Tullamarine and disgorge the President, First Lady and First and Second Daughters (we assume the First Hound will be subject to Australian quarantine restrictions) for an action-packed day, taking in Federation Square, the Royal Botanic Gardens and (for the junior ones) Luna Park.

If previous presidential visits are any indication, Melbourne will be lucky to see Mr Obama in the flesh. Only four presidents out of 44 have been to Australia while in office; of these, only two made it to Melbourne: Lyndon B. Johnson, who visited twice, in October 1966 and December 1967, to attend the memorial service for former prime minister Harold Holt; and George Bush, who was in Melbourne for four hours on January 3, 1992. A few days later, at a state dinner in Tokyo, the president threw up over the Japanese prime minister's trousers.

The only other serving presidents to visit Australia were Bill Clinton (1996, to Sydney, Canberra, and Port Douglas) and George W. Bush (2003, to Canberra; 2007, APEC, in Sydney).

I well recall Johnson's Melbourne tour 44 years ago. It was the height of the Vietnam War, and, on a warm late afternoon in spring, the president and party dropped in to Elm Tree House, in Domain Road, South Yarra, to visit his old friend, the late Dame Mabel Brookes, whom he had last visited when he was stationed in Melbourne during World War II. School was out, and a few of us went along to see what a real president was like. I popped my glasses in an inside pocket for safekeeping.

This was something! The first president to visit Australia, here in South Yarra, with a yellow rose in his buttonhole and Lady Bird by his side. As they emerged from Elm Tree House, 2000 or so well-wishers moseyed forward to press the flesh and say Howdy to LBJ.

Not for long. Pressing *our* flesh, forcing us back, was a phalanx of police and US Secret Servicemen. LBJ was no help: "Get back! Please get back!" he hollered. "You don't want to hurt this lady here, do you?" - this in the direction of Dame Mabel, whose small but doughty presence would have stopped the Battleship Missouri dead in the water. Whereupon, the presidential chief honcho, a man with the delightful name of Rufus Youngblood, shoved me with a shovel-sized paw, instantly pulverising the glasses in my pocket to smithereens. "You bastard," I said. Quietly.

Moments later, it was nemesis for Rufus. As the motorcade moved off, the anti-war protesters struck, hurling plastic bags of paint at LBJ's Lincoln Continental, which turned into a portable Jackson Pollock. Rufus didn't escape: he looked more like a late-period Streeton of the duck pond in the Royal Botanic Gardens. By the way, the White House still owes me \$27.65 for the new glasses.

I recalled this episode 19 years ago, on the eve of George Bush snr's flick-book tour of Melbourne; but it's worth mentioning again, if only because of what's happened since to some unwise anti-presidential demonstrators (George W. Bush, shoes). It was not Melbourne at its most traditionally well-mannered and might explain why it's been a long time between presidents. Perhaps, if Obama and co make it here, we could be a little nicer.