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Reading Robert Caro's Life of Lyndon Johnson

Stephen Whitfield

L'impact politique et social de Lyndon B. Johnson, à la tête des États-Unis de 1963 à 1969, est incontestable. Ses débuts dans un milieu démuni, au cœur du Texas Hill Country – « les pays des collines », ont forgé sa détermination à réduite la pauvreté, à garantir le droit de vote aux Noirs du Sud et à rendre les soins de santé accessibles à tous les Américains. Aucun président, depuis Franklin D. Roosevelt, n'a fait preuve d'un plus grand savoir-faire dans l'usage des leviers du pouvoir – ce qui a également conduit à la débâcle de la guerre du Viêtnam, dont Johnson avait hérité, mais dont il est devenu pleinement le commandant en chef. Distinguer ses succès en politique intérieure de ses échecs en politique étrangère, mesurer la compassion face au désastre représentent un défi pour tout biographe. Mais c'est en Robert Caro que Johnson a trouvé, de manière posthume, le plus ingénieux et le plus dévoué des chercheurs, le plus consciencieux et le plus ambitieux de tous ceux qui se sont penchés sur les responsables politiques du XX^e^ siècle. Toutefois, malgré les nombreuses récompenses et distinctions qu'il a obtenues, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* a été entaché d'accusations d'hostilité et de préjugés discutables. De telles accusations méritent d'être examinées et clarifiées, afin de rendre justice tant à l'œuvre monumentale de Robert Caro qu'à l'héritage de Lyndon B. Johnson.

Mots-clés : droits civiques, Robert Dallek, Texas Hill Country, Robert Moses, Coke Stevenson

Lyndon B. Johnson cut a larger-than-life figure in American politics. In death, which occurred exactly a little over half a century ago, in 1973, he has loomed even larger, because the magnitude of his achievements has been revealed in Robert A. Caro's four volumes of an unfinished biography. The research invested in it is extraordinary, in measuring what Johnson did and how he did it. His historical importance as a

Congressman, Senator, Vice President and 36th President has therefore been magnified. Mark A. Lawrence, who directed the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum in Austin, Texas, rightly warned that Johnson didn't do it all alone (Pengelly, 2023). Yet the sheer scale of Caro's scrutiny makes Johnson seem even bigger. He has become more inescapable – a politician whose legacy needs to be reckoned with, in order to fathom the middle third of the 20th century in America. No biography is more helpful, indeed more indispensable, in performing such a task than *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.

The life of Robert Caro

Born in 1935 and educated at Princeton, Caro published his first book in 1974. *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography the following year, as well as the Francis Parkman Prize, bestowed for literary excellence in the presentation of the past. At the end of the century, when the Modern Library conducted a poll to identify the hundred greatest works of nonfiction of the previous hundred years, *The Power Broker* made the list. During the height of the pandemic, when Zoom interviewers entered the homes of scholars, pundits, and political figures, bookshelves often appeared in the background. Conspicuously placed on them has been *The Power Broker* (Rubinstein, 2020: 19). Those talking-heads who were interviewed with a copy of *The Power Broker* behind them didn't even have to prove to have perused it. But President Barack Obama did read it, when he was 22 years old; and he professed to be "mesmerized" (Burkeman, 2015). In 2010, in the White House, he gave Caro the National Humanities Medal. The situation was a little delicate. Because of the reputation of Johnson's arm-twisting skill in bending Congress to his will, and because Obama was struggling against implacable Republican opposition on Capitol Hill, the honoree reassured him that the multi-volume biography was not intended to be read as "an unspoken attack on you" (Risen, 2014: 26).

Like *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* to date, *The Power Broker* has never been out of print. In 1975, the recommendation of the jury for the Pulitzer Prize for Biography was unanimous. Chairman Leonard W. Levy explained why: "*The Power Broker* is gargantuan in theme and

impact as well as size. It is shattering, enormously vital, and original in a sense that no other book [that year] is." Levy added: "the research is as impressive, prodigious, and thorough as it could be." Caro interviewed 522 people, including Robert Moses (1888–1981), who was still alive when the book was published. Moses restrained his enthusiasm for it; nor did it inspire unmodulated praise even from Levy, who conceded that *The Power Broker* "has many faults. It is too long… it has a pugnacious and prosecutorial tone; it is filled with righteous indignation [and] scorn" (Levy, 1980: 10–2; Caro, 2019: 188). Such objections would re-emerge in reviews of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.

Johnson met Moses only once, in 1964 in New York, at the World's Fair; which the latter had built (Richards, 1991: 17). The former was then at the height of his power. The astonishing legislation that the 89th Congress was about to pass under his leadership can be summarized as follows: Medicare, Medicaid, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Transportation, and the National Endowment for Arts and Humanities. He secured passage of the Voting Rights Act, the Higher Education Act with its federal aid to elementary and secondary education, the Water Quality Act, the Motor Vehicle Air Pollution Control Act, the Highway Beautification Act, the Highway and Motor Vehicle Safety Acts, the Clean Waters Restoration Act, the Demonstration Cities Act, and the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act. He achieved a major amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act (Menand, 2021: 73), which repudiated the nativism that denied undesirables the chance to become Americans. No wonder then that Lawrence called that record of leadership "perhaps the most striking embodiment of faith in Washington's capacity to fix what ails the nation or the world" (Pengelly, 2023). The intensity of that faith registers quite apart from any judgment about the success in funding and implementing such an overwhelming avalanche of laws.

The formidable paper trail he left behind at his Presidential library would be daunting to any researcher – but especially someone who felt obliged to "turn every page" when examining documents. The library holds about 45 million of them. When Caro went through the congressional papers, which covered a period that lasted barely more than a decade, he found 349 boxes. Each box could hold about 800 pages. He admitted

that he could not read each of them for the nearly six presidential years (Santel, 2016: 11; Caro, 2019: 84). Not every scholar cut Caro slack. For instance, the chairperson of the Department of History at the University of Texas at Austin noticed that Caro had failed to examine enough municipal and county libraries throughout the State; and this critic thus regarded the first volume as less than "thorough" (Gould, 1983: 59, 62). Because Caro is not an academic, no graduate students have helped him. His only assistant has been his wife Ina, who was 16 years old when they met; he was 19 (Jones, 2012: 97).

Caro began his research in 1976, expecting to write one volume. It soon bloomed into a trilogy and then a tetralogy; and readers now await another, concluding volume. So exponential has been the growth of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* that the third installment, *Master of the Senate* (2002), is about as long as the two previous volumes combined. It is as thick as the printer could bind the 1,167 pages into a single volume. Caro has estimated that less than five percent of the material he has gathered can be detected in the books (Williams, 2017: C3). He takes no shortcuts. *The Path to Power* (1982) required him to spend six years researching and describing the first 33 years, from Johnson's birth in 1908 until his defeat in a Senatorial primary race in Texas in 1941. *Means of Ascent* (1990) covered the next seven years of Johnson's life, but Caro needed eight years before the book was published. Johnson spent 12 years in the Senate. *Master of the Senate*, which also won the National Book Award, took Caro exactly as long – 12 years – to complete (Nelson, 2003: 2). *The Passage of Power* (2012), needed 736 pages of text to get from the Democratic Party nominating convention in the summer of 1956 to Johnson's State of the Union address in January 1964. This publishing schedule has thus barely kept pace with the arc of Johnson's own career. At the age of 64, the ex-President was still far from elderly when he died, only four years after leaving office. Caro's investigations have been spectacularly rewarded. *The Path to Power*, *Means of Ascent*, and *The Passage of Power* all won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Master of the Senate* earned a Pulitzer Prize. In 2006, the American Academy of Arts and Letters gave Caro the Gold Medal in Biography, and a decade later he won the National Book Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Such acclaim stems from work habits that must be classified as eccentric. The writing starts on legal pads, going through about four drafts in longhand, revising with pencil. Caro then switches to a Smith-Corona Electra 210 typewriter, a model last manufactured in the late 1970s. He uses carbons. Some readers are so desperate for him to finish this biography that they have sent him their own Smith-Corona Electra 210 typewriters, from which he extracts spare parts (Caro, 2019: xii, 187, 201; Santel, 2016: 17; Vick, 2019: 18; Barry, 2021: 31). Just as aspiring American novelists who wanted to write like Hemingway bought fishing tackle and tickets to bullfights, some young scholars may now be imitating Caro's methods. But such authors will probably not be treated as indulgently as the publisher Alfred A. Knopf handles Caro, who "rewrite[s] the galleys completely," an interviewer learned. "I even rewrite in page proofs, which they don't actually allow you to do, but they've been very good to me. I'd rewrite in the finished book if I could." His is a special case (Caro, 2019: 200; Jones, 2012: 92), an author who produces bestsellers without forfeiting the admiration of historians – although never formally trained in their discipline. Nor has the aging process deterred him. "I don't want to rush," Caro declared. He intends the final tome to continue to brandish the same literary and evidentiary strengths. If he fails to finish, his will specifies that no one else is permitted to complete the book that will examine the presidential years (Jones, 2012: 96).

Criticism of Caro

The high status that *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* has earned should not disguise, however, the criticism targeted at this biography. Robert Dallek, for example, has published his own two-volume biography of Johnson. Dallek described it as "balanced," as a judicious corrective to Caro, who claimed to have detected both bright and dark threads throughout Johnson's political career (Dallek, 1991: vii; Caro, 1982: xix). Dallek found "it very difficult to locate the bright thread," however, in assessing the first two volumes of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. It made Johnson into "what the French call a *monstre sacré*. Johnson was a scoundrel. He broke laws at every level of politics," Dallek conceded. "But he was also a brilliant politician and a visionary who married his ambition to his country's

interests" (Dallek, 1991: 6). Caro's later two volumes corroborated this corrective, by the way. They demonstrated a "unique political genius," he insisted – which hardly sounds like animus without nuance. For example, Johnson "made the Senate work." Caro asserted in 2016. "For a century before him, in the era of Clay, Calhoun and Webster, the Senate was the same dysfunctional mess it is today." When Johnson left the upper chamber after six years as its majority leader, "it goes back to the way it was," (Caro, 2019: 82, 183, 191; Dreifus, 2018) where maverick Senators could easily throttle the will of the majority. Such praise of Johnson's unexcelled effectiveness certainly does not suggest imbalance. Another biographer, Randall B. Woods, spent a decade researching and writing *LBJ* (2006), which runs to 1,107 pages. But Woods apparently showed such disdain for Caro that nowhere among 71 pages of endnotes is he cited – with one exception (Woods, 2006: 886, 957), as though to show that at least *The Path to Power* had been checked out of the library.

Did Caro nevertheless exhibit an unsavory aptitude for making Johnson look bad? That reputation hovers over this biography. The Harvard historian David Herbert Donald shared Dallek's opinion. Donald himself twice won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography, and he wrote one of the last major one-volume biographies of President Abraham Lincoln. On the front page of the nation's most important forum, the *New York Times Book Review*, Donald called *The Path to Power* "intelligent, engrossing, revealing," but he also considered the volume "far too long, repetitive, and fiercely polemical" (Donald, 1982: 1). Leonard Levy had of course made exactly the same criticism of *The Power Broker*. Over breakfast with Donald one morning, after his review appeared, I countered by claiming that Caro, through the tenacity of his inquiries, found what was there a trail in Johnson's boyhood and youth of deceitfulness and mendacity. In 1929, he had already stolen his first election, when he ran for a student government post at Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos. Four years later, on Capitol Hill, when a group of Johnson's fellow legislative aides voted for its leader, he cheated his way to victory. Dallek himself revealed the difficulty of finding "balance" when tracing such a career. *Lone Star Rising* mentions that "ineligible voters… may have" elected Johnson to head the legislative aides

(the "Little Congress"). Ten pages later, Dallek had become more certain about this "embarrassing" victory: "Some of those supporting Lyndon… were ineligible to vote" (Dallek, 1998: 112, 122). That's called fraud.

When I talked with Donald, he did not dispute such facts; admittedly he can no longer speak for himself. But I argued with him that bias should not be ascribed to a biographer who diligently retraced the steps that Johnson took in the quest for power. Assiduous interviewing enabled Caro to find Texans who knew Johnson from college as well as earlier. The portrait that Caro drew from the stories he was told depicted "a very unusual young man, a very brilliant young man, a very ambitious, unscrupulous and quite ruthless person, disliked and even despised," someone who was even "feared" (Caro, 2019: 104). Instead of dismissing this characterization as false, Garry Wills attacked Caro's portrayal even more emphatically than Donald did. Wills found it troubling enough to imperil the state of the author's soul. "There is something eerily obsessive about Caro's stalking of his villain," Wills declared. The "unmixed contempt" that Caro has shown for Johnson, if entertained too long, "rots the soul," Wills warned (Wills, 1990: 7–9). That may be so, if true. But in 1982, he himself published a take-no-prisoners attack on President John F. Kennedy and his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, entitled *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power*. On its dust jacket, an endorsement hails Wills' book as "a search-and-destroy mission," portraying a family locked into an unquenchable, amoral drive for power that seems no different than *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.

One bright thread that Caro apparently missed was the Congressman's clandestine, illegal help to European Jews. They were desperately seeking to flee Nazi rule; and some came to Galveston, Texas. "Early in 1940," Dallek wrote, "Johnson began helping hundreds of Jewish refugees… reach Texas through Cuba, Mexico, and countries in South America." He arranged for hundreds of visas and false passports. "I don't know of any other Congressman who did that," Dallek added (Willwerth & Dallek, 1991: 6; Dallek, 1998: 169–70). In December 1963, when the new President spoke at the dedication of a synagogue in Austin, congregants came up to him and told his wife, Lady Bird Johnson, according to her diary, "I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for him. He helped

me get out" (Dallek, 1998: 170; Anderson, 2012: 82; Ben-David, 2008: 13). Dallek noted that *The Path to Power* omitted this pivotal help. Caro did mention what Johnson did for Erich Leinsdorf, the Viennese-born conductor who would win fame with major American orchestras. The Congressman intervened as a favor both to Charles Marsh, the wealthy anti-Nazi publisher of the *Austin American-Statesman*, and to his idealistic wife Alice Glass (with whom Johnson was conducting a secret affair over the course of seven years). A handful of other Jews were probably saved through his efforts, such as Leinsdorf's immediate family. But all of them arrived legally, archivist Claudia Wilson Anderson concluded. Employed for two decades at the Johnson Presidential Library, she investigated the tale of a secret rescue of hundreds of Jewish refugees and debunked this stirring episode. No historical evidence supports it (Caro, 1982: 480–3, 485; Anderson, 2012: 83–4, 98, 105, 110, *passim*).

"Mr. Caro sees Johnson as an utterly unprincipled man," (Willwerth & Dallek, 1991: 6) as nothing more than an opportunist, Dallek charged. Blown by the shifting winds of expediency, Johnson could not pretend to be merely a pragmatist – that is, he was not a candidate or office-holder who can be excused because he was operating within a set of historical circumstances that he did not choose. Instead Johnson was someone who might have spouted Groucho Marx's declaration: "Those are my principles; and if you don't like them – well, I have others." To be sure Johnson himself liked to tell the story of a Texas teacher desperately seeking employment during the Great Depression. A member of the school board wanted to know the job applicant's scientific beliefs. Did he think that the world was round or flat? The applicant paused before stating, "I can teach it round or flat" (Shapiro, 2006: 498; Lewis, 2002: 9). Yet even Caro's first volume showed that opportunism cannot explain all of Johnson's aspirations and actions. A bright thread was evident then – and perhaps especially then. In Cotulla, an hour's drive north of the Rio Grande, he had *been* a schoolteacher. Teaching Mexican children, Johnson proved to be selfless, dedicated, and inspiring. He instilled in his pupils an appreciation of learning. He also saw the light go out, as they came to realize how cramped their adult chances would be. Johnson

later claimed that he had vowed to rectify such injustices, which is what the War on Poverty was intended to do.

An even more striking instance of his loyalty to the forgotten is Chapter 27 of *The Path to Power*. He had arrived in Washington, D. C. in December 1931, carrying a cardboard suitcase and wearing the only coat he owned. Six years later Johnson won election to Congress, and soon managed to transform the texture of life in the Hill Country of his origins. Johnson City had a population of only about 323 when he was growing up; he lived mostly outside of town. Miles of dirt roads separated the houses and ranches and farms in the 24,000 square miles of the Hill Country. Texas is so huge that it is a fifth larger than France, for instance. Even the sprawling Tenth Congressional District was bigger than Delaware and Connecticut combined. The milieu that had produced Johnson was bleak, empty, desolate. Caro, a lifelong New Yorker, realized that, to understand his subject, he and his wife needed to move there. A dismayed Ina asked him: "Why can't you do a biography of Napoleon" instead (Caro, 2019: 103, 143, 155; Santel, 2016: 23)?

Giving depth to Johnson

Because the couple spent most of three years living in the Hill Country, Caro was able to convey its loneliness to his readers. Johnson's younger brother, Sam Houston Johnson, told Caro that the two boys would sit on a fence for hours, hoping that someone would ride by so that they would have someone else to talk to. Sheer determination enabled Johnson to extract "himself out of this incredibly lonely and impoverished place," the biographer remarked with some awe. As late as the mid-1930s, almost no power lines had been installed there. Virtually no one could afford to pay electric bills anyway – not for pumps to draw water, not for clothes to be washed, not for stoves to be lit. Caro learned how heavy a bucket was, when water was drawn from a deep well. Families carried those buckets on their shoulders by yoking themselves like cattle to heavy wooden bars. In the horrid heat in the summer, cooking could be done only on stoves lit by fire; and clothes could be washed only on stoves lit by fire. Outside, in the fields, husbands and wives and children toiled – according to the local phrase – "from dark to dark" (Santel, 2016: 2, 24; Caro, 2019: xviii). As a

Congressman, Johnson provided a remedy. He manipulated the machinery of bureaucracy to bring rural electrification to the Hill Country; and his 200,000 constituents cherished him, because "he brought us the lights" (Caro, 2019: xv-xvi, xvii; Evans, 2019: 20). He knew how to use the Rural Electrification Administration (created in 1935–6) to transform the Hill Country. "That's genius," Caro exclaimed. "That's governmental genius" (Richards, 1991: 17; Santel, 2016: 16). A dozen or so earlier biographies of Johnson barely mentioned what Caro highlighted in his Chapter 27.

Could prominent reviewers have somehow skipped it? Surveying the responses to *The Path to Power* and to *Means of Ascent*, journalist Robert Sherrill concluded that the second installment "is filled with even more hatred than the first. I happen to like that." In fact, anyone seeking a truly harsh and unforgiving portrait could turn to Sherrill's 1968 exposé, *The Accidental President*, which begins by noting that Johnson "is not likeable"; he is "treacherous, dishonest, manic-aggressive, [and] petty." In 1990, Sherrill told readers of the liberal *Texas Observer* that, "detesting, loathing Johnson as he clearly does, Caro" added only corroborating details to earlier portraits (Sherrill, 1968: 9; Sherrill, 1990: 14, 16). Reviewer Ronald Steel giddily quoted Caro's own summation of Johnson's "utter ruthlessness… and a seemingly bottomless capacity for deceit, deception and betrayal." Steel himself wrote a biography of Walter Lippmann that won both the Bancroft Prize in History and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Steel called *Means of Ascent* "immensely engrossing and deeply disturbing" too. Indeed, both volumes constituted "a stern and unrelenting morality tale." But he complained that what it lacked was complexity, with "no moments of self-doubt or remorse: only scheming, cynicism and lying." Caro's Johnson "is a man seemingly devoid not only of human decency but of human ambiguity as well" (Steel, 1990: 1, 24, 25).

But where would evidence of a complicated psyche be found? Johnson kept no diary or journal, no record of his interior life. No one who knew him was impressed by his capacity for self-reflection. Lady Bird Johnson undoubtedly knew him best. But after the publication of *The Path to Power*, Johnson's widow refused to cooperate with Caro, nor did others in her circle agree to let him interview them. He was shut out of a

significant coterie. One of the President's closest aides was Bill Moyers, a Baptist minister who served as White House Press Secretary (Jones, 2012: 96; McGrath, 2012: 52; Lemann, 2002: 23). On one occasion he was delivering a prayer to a group that Johnson had convened. When Johnson interrupted him to complain that the prayer was inaudible, Moyers replied: "I wasn't speaking to you, sir." But he also refused to speak to Caro. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, Steel lamented, "unveils his ambition but ignores his heart" (Steel, 2002: 174–5). Maybe he did so in his most serious extramarital liaisons, with Alice Glass Marsh and later with the actress and politician Helen Gahagan Douglas. But what sources would have enabled Caro to probe more deeply? What paper trail is Caro supposed to have followed? Dallek covers the affair with Alice Glass Marsh in slightly less than two pages, without any acuity; and he fails to mention the second paramour. Perhaps a focus on a monomaniacal drive for power isn't so peculiar after all. Woods's *LBJ* is subtitled *Architect of American Ambition*. Or take Lincoln. He was undoubtedly the U. S. President least corrupted by power. But he counts in at least one respect as Johnson's predecessor. William H. Herndon, Lincoln's law partner in Springfield, Illinois, called his ambition "a little engine that knew no rest." Lincoln "was always calculating and planning ahead" (Hofstadter, 1948: 93, 99). That attribute shows up in the chapter on Lincoln in *The American Political Tradition* (1948). Historian Richard Hofstadter found it "difficult to think of any man of comparable stature whose life was so fully absorbed into his political being" (Hofstadter, 1948: 95; Wilson, 1962: 108).

Caro's books are "not so much biographies in any conventional sense," Steel declared, "as they are virtual lamentations on the evils of power." Politicians' "character flaws are Caro's specialty," he added (Steel, 2002: 170–2). That is untrue. *The Power Broker* finds no disturbing corruption in the way that Governor Al Smith and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia exercised power. In *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, Sam Rayburn is portrayed as a Congressman who could not be bought, and as a Speaker of the House who used his authority with restraint. *Master of the Senate* showed that Leland Olds chaired the Federal Power Commission (1940–9) in a way that proved too pro-consumer for the oil and gas interests who were

funding Johnson's career. (Senator Johnson crushed Olds in a way that smacked of McCarthyism.)

The most striking counter-example to Steel's charge was Coke R. Stevenson (1888–1975), who served as Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, as Lieutenant-Governor, and as Governor of Texas. Stevenson was the first politician in the State to hold these three highest offices, and the only one to do so in the 20th century. Caro idealized Stevenson and called him "a public official of extraordinary personal integrity." Stevenson never ran for office by buying votes or by stealing them, because he didn't need to. That's how popular he was, Caro believed. Yet *Means of Ascent* must be faulted for presenting Stevenson as too admirable a figure – which subjected Caro to harsh criticism. He would have been spared it, had Stevenson's insidious racism been highlighted instead of ignored. Even Robert Gottlieb, who has edited Caro's books for Alfred A. Knopf, objected to the sympathetic portrait of Stevenson in *Means of Ascent* (Caro, 1991: 1, 24–9; McGrath, 2012: 37; Gottlieb, 2016: 115). Reviewers cannot have it both ways – complaining that Caro hates what politicians do, while accusing him of glorifying a politician like Stevenson.

No critic of Caro marshalled more evidence against the second volume than Sidney Blumenthal, a journalist who is also writing a multi-volume biography (of Lincoln). Blumenthal called Caro's first two volumes "demonological." The weekly *New Republic* found his criticism of *Means of Ascent* so devastating that Blumenthal's review appeared as a cover story (June 4, 1990), as "Gunfight at the LBJ Corral: The Epic Errors of Robert Caro." He was accused of "prosecutorial zeal," and of having "used his material selectively, tendentiously" (Blumenthal, 1991: 12; Blumenthal, 1990: 32, 36). Paradoxically, the extensive review did not underscore Caro's alleged animus against Johnson, however, but rather the sharp contrast with a Coke Stevenson painted in unduly rosy colors (Blumenthal, 1990: 29–32, 34–5). Caro never interviewed Stevenson, who died in June 1975, during an initial research foray into Texas. In the 1948 Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate, both Johnson and Stevenson professed to be segregationists; and both fervently opposed President Harry S. Truman's civil rights program. The target of Johnson's campaign was his opponent's character,

which had to be impugned (Caro, 1991: 1, 24–9). Indeed, the 1948 primary inaugurated what Caro called "a new era in politics" (Steel, 1990: 24), in which Johnson got huge cash infusions from oil and construction interests to take to the airwaves with "negative campaigning" (a euphemism for mudslinging). About half of *Means of Ascent* – roughly 200 pages – is devoted to this quest for the Senate, the most expensive in the history of the state.

The Path to Power ended in 1941, with Johnson's defeat in his Senatorial campaign. His opponent had "outstole" him (to use the Texas terminology). That procedure wasn't difficult, because a common way to cheat – especially in south Texas – was to "vote the dead." Because voters who were 60 years old or older were exempted from the requirement to pay poll taxes, the names of the deceased were rarely checked and excised (Caro, 1990: 183). In 1948, Johnson was determined not to lose again. In the July 24 Democratic primary, however, he lost to Stevenson by about 71,000 votes, out of more than 1 million cast. But because the winner got only about 40% of the ballots, a runoff was held on August 28. On the following morning, Stevenson was declared the winner, by 854 votes. Revisions and recounts and further recounts showed his lead holding, by a little more than 150 votes. A week later another ballot box came in, from Alice, in Jim Wells County, in south Texas. Box 13 contained 202 votes, cast overwhelmingly for Johnson. Out of a little less than a million ballots in the primary, he had triumphed by 87 votes. Box 13 was unusual. The names of those who had paid their poll taxes and had voted in the runoff were written in differently colored ink than in other ballot boxes. Whether living or dead, Johnson's south Texas supporters were so disciplined that they voted in alphabetical order. Meeting in Fort Worth, the executive committee of the Democratic Party nevertheless certified his victory (29 to 28). A federal judge, suspecting foul play, ordered Johnson's name to be omitted from the ballot in the general election in November, pending an investigation. But the Johnson forces derailed it. They got the case quickly to the single justice of the Supreme Court who supervised the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals: Hugo L. Black. He ruled against federal intervention in a State election, and therefore the decision of the executive committee was allowed to

stand. Because no candidate of the Party of Lincoln had a chance to win in mid-20th-century Texas, Johnson's election in November was assured (Verhovek, 2000: 29). Box 13 supplied the necessary margin for him to earn the sobriquet of "Landslide Lyndon."

Who earned the most votes of eligible living Texans in that runoff will never be known, although Caro's account is characteristically absorbing in its detail. Any politician wanting to learn how to steal an election can use *Means of Ascent* as a training manual, a user's guide. Whoever really won cannot be determined. But what is undeniable is the speed of Johnson's ascent in national politics. No one ever rose faster in the upper house of Congress, which is notorious for the value it places upon seniority and upon waiting one's turn to advance. Still in his first term, Johnson became minority leader. In the first year of his second term, he was already majority leader – the youngest in history (Lemann: 2002: 25). Had he lost that primary, his career would probably have been over. He certainly would not have been on the Democratic ticket in 1960, and he is very unlikely ever to have become President. In 1948, Johnson used unsavory methods to defeat an opponent whom Dallek called "a reactionary and a racist." Even Sherrill, while incorrigibly hostile to Johnson, acknowledged that, if Stevenson had become a U.S. Senator, he "would have done nothing for Texas and less for the nation…. Texans should be grateful they did not wind up with… Coke Stevenson" (Willwerth & Dallek, 1991: 10). Yet the contrast did not seem so obvious at mid-century. During Johnson's first two decades in Congress (1937–57), he voted against every bill ever introduced to protect the rights of Black Americans, including anti-lynching bills (Caro, 2019: 168). Despite the divisions within the Texas Democratic Party in the 1940s and 1950s, Johnson "threw his considerable weight and prestige" against the liberal faction, whom he called "red hots," a disappointed former staffer recalled (King, 1968: 45, 46).

But beginning with *Master of the Senate*, continuing with *The Passage of Power*, and presumably ending with the fifth volume, Caro has wanted to show how Johnson's "legislative genius" gave the republic a chance to realize "some of the noblest ends ever seen in American politics" (Richards, 1991: 17; Dreifus, 2018). He "had this genius for turning

or transmuting… compassion into law." His character did not change, Caro insisted. But Johnson got an opportunity to use "the ruthlessness, the savagery for wonderful ends" (Vick, 2019: 18; McGrath, 2012: 52). Yet even in reviewing the fourth volume, historian Sean Wilentz could notice only the dark threads, and called Caro's portrait an "unforgiving view of the man" (Wilentz, 2012: 31). It is as though the bright threads were frayed beyond repair. Yet this biography shows Johnson taking command so adroitly after the shock of the assassination, as he converts it into a martyrdom that the cause of civil rights might redeem.

This then becomes the riddle of his career, whose "true mystery is how," journalist Marshall Frady wrote in reviewing *Master of the Senate*:

> Through all the base compromises of his sulfurous compact with the Senate's Southern leaders and the feudal powers in Texas to win and keep his overwhelming power in the Senate, he also managed to retain within him as much of the original passions of innermost political nature as he did, to be released when he finally won the Presidency.

Johnson's "cynicism and idealism were mysteriously inseparable, all of a piece," Blumenthal asserted (Frady, 2002: 17; Blumenthal, 1990: 36); and Caro would certainly concur. Johnson's progressive impulses had never been entirely buried. When he headed the National Youth Administration in Texas, he stayed overnight in historically black colleges to observe how its programs were faring there. As a Congressman, he ensured that black farmers benefitted from federal loans as fully as did the white farmers of the Tenth Congressional District. For all the barnacles that cling to his sordid reputation for wheeling-and-dealing in domestic affairs, for all the burdens that a Lone Star State official had to bear (whether accepting Jim Crow to backing the oil-depletion allowance), somehow the ease with which he mixed with the boys in the backroom did not extinguish his yearning for a more just society. Johnson was no Coke Stevenson.

As a Senator, he refused to join nearly all the other Southerners in defying, with "the Southern Manifesto," the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In his deepest political convictions, Johnson "was really an S. R.," John P. Roche, who served for two years as

a Special Consultant in Johnson's White House, once told me. It is surely easy to scoff at so implausible an allusion to the Socialist Revolutionary Party, which had helped topple the Tsarist regime in 1917 before getting crushed in turn when the Bolsheviks seized control. But perhaps at least a kernel of truth can be found in that bizarre designation. In 1973, when T. Harry Williams delivered the presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, he ranked Huey Long (the subject of the Louisiana State University professor's earlier, Pulitzer Prize-winning biography) and Johnson as "the two greatest political radicals of recent history" (Williams, 1973: 267). Long was assassinated before he could run for the White House, and only by accident was Johnson given the chance to move the nation to the left. With a compulsive sense of urgency and with prodigious nonstop energy, he undoubtedly pushed the U.S. further than it wished to go. But after President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who predicted that "this boy could well be the first Southern President," since a Tennessean with the same surname succeeded the assassinated Lincoln (Caro, 1982: 668), no President signed more significant social legislation to enlarge the meaning of democracy than did Johnson.

Nothin' comes free

Caro's readers are bound to wonder how providence could have selected so crude an instrument of progressive change. Readers do learn, however, the sources of Johnson's idealism. He recalled the indignity and inconvenience that his black housekeeper had to endure when driving between the nation's capital and the Texas ranch, because public restrooms were generally forbidden to her. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* does justice to both the purposive politician and the unseemly human being, to both the sly ally of the civil rights movement and the cunning dealmaker fully aware of the compromises that the experiment of self-government requires. His career continues to stir fascination because so much that was mean was entwined with a capacity for greatness. In the HBO film *All the Way* (2016), Bryan Cranston, playing President Johnson, utters a stinging line: "Nothin' comes free – nothin'. Not even good." Such reflectiveness was quite uncharacteristic of Johnson; but it echoes the credo of the fictional Willie Stark, a believer in original sin (as well as

Robert Penn Warren's 1946 version of Huey Long). "Goodness" can only come "out of badness…. Because there isn't anything else to make it out of" (Warren, 1946: 272).

This generalization suggests the price to be paid in order to realize reforms. How the skills of persuasion and intimidation were exercised to change history Caro explained as follows:

> Every time a young man or woman goes to college on a federal education bill passed by Lyndon Johnson, that's political power. Every time an elderly man or woman, or an impoverished man or woman of any age, gets a doctor's bill or a hospital bill and sees that it's been paid by Medicare or Medicaid, that's political power. Every time a black man or woman is able to walk into a voting booth in the South because of Lyndon Johnson's Voting Rights Act, that's political power.

But nothin' comes free – not even good, so add to that list the carnage and deaths in Indochina (Caro, 2019: 4). In late 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated, about 16,700 U.S. military personnel were stationed in South Vietnam, ostensibly to advise its armed forces. Johnson introduced combat troops in the spring of 1965; and when he left office, more than half a million Americans found themselves fighting a major war (Pengelly, 2023). He made a bad situation much worse.

That is why any assessment of his Presidency is bound to be equivocal and unsatisfactory. How are the scales to be weighed? He left to his successors the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, in defeat. The war generated a furious divisiveness, with dissent turning to hatred and even hysteria without precedent – other than the Civil War. Johnson cannot be faulted for subscribing to the Cold War consensus that communist advances needed to be checked. But he pointlessly escalated the intervention in Indochina, fearing that only by protecting his right flank against the inevitable Republican accusations of military weakness could his dream of the Great Society be salvaged. That assumption was wrong; it was a fatal mistake. The financial costs of the war drained the resources needed to sustain his domestic programs; and in 1968, the attacks that drove Johnson from office came from the left, not the right. *The Passage of Power* barely hints at the escalation and quagmire for which Johnson

would soon bear responsibility. On one scale was the cost of a brutal conflict, an intervention without redeeming features. On the other scale was the gratitude of several generations of Americans who have been spared the cruelty of racial segregation as well as the financial torment of caring for aged and impoverished relatives. This historical conundrum is pivotal to any assessment of Johnson's legacy.

Throughout his years in the White House, he struggled to elude the shadow of his debonair and witty predecessor, with his glamorous, Sorbonne-educated wife. A war hero who had won a Pulitzer Prize for Biography, Kennedy was the first President to come across as "Prince Charming" (Stone, 1989: 12). Over the six decades since his assassination, Gallup polls continued to rank him among the greatest of all presidents. Occasionally, in the estimate of the public, he even topped Lincoln. The magnetism of Kennedy's brother Bobby, as a U.S. Senator from New York, was comparable; and he continued to bedevil Johnson as the heir apparent of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. As though to compensate for the absence of charisma, Johnson got things done with what was widely known as "the treatment" – cajoling, bullying, threatening, bear-hugging, caressing, flattering, lying, demanding loyalty. The treatment could take a few minutes, or it could last hours. Johnson's domineering manner did not permit rebuttals, counter-arguments, or vows to reconsider. His physical presence was intended to intimidate. Except for Lincoln, Johnson was the tallest President in history. "He'd be towering over you, leaning over you," Caro reported. "Johnson made the couches in the Oval Office softer so people would sink down and he, sitting in his rocking chair, would be higher" (Santel, 2016: 20). For *Master of the Senate*, Caro wanted to gauge how Johnson could dominate the Senate from the front of the chamber. The tallest Senator then serving was asked to stand there to convey the authority that Johnson would have exerted. The experiment was conducted with a Senator who was barely taller, a Hall of Famer of the National Basketball Association, Bill Bradley of New Jersey. At least according to myth, "the treatment" that Johnson inflicted upon legislators was irresistible. If, somehow, it failed, then he "never forgot, and he never forgave," former Governor John Connally of Texas told Caro (Caro, 2019: 95).

All that skill was applied most dramatically to the advancement of civil rights. Johnson understood the urgency of fully incorporating Texas and the rest of the former Confederacy into the nation which was erratically distancing itself from the heritage of bigotry. Only after it had been repudiated might the poverty that he experienced in the Hill Country be reduced, he believed. Johnson started in 1957. As majority leader of the Senate, he engineered the first civil rights bill passed since Radical Reconstruction almost a century earlier. This law helped liberate Johnson somewhat from the shackles of his Southern origins, but it was mostly symbolic. It was so weak that only Strom Thurmond of South Carolina bothered to filibuster against it. Richard B. Russell, who had served as Johnson's mentor in the Senate, announced that "this bill is not going to work any hardship on the people of Georgia." Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche told President Dwight D. Eisenhower that it would have been "better to have no bill" than the one that he signed into law (Sherrill, 1968: 160). Dallek's *Lone Star Rising* needs only eight pages (519–27) to describe the passage of this bill into law. By contrast, *Master of the Senate* devotes seven chapters – or nearly 200 pages – to the fight for this legislation, a sense of proportion that is dubious. But the *New York Times*' Anthony Lewis disagreed. To get a civil rights bill through the Senate "looked impossible," Lewis wrote in a review of *Master of the Senate*. "Johnson made the impossible happen. Caro's description of how he did it is masterly; I was there and followed the course of the legislation closely, but I did not know the half of it." Only through the depth of Caro's riveting detail could such reporters have learned, decades later, in "this amazing book," of Johnson's adroitness (Lewis, 2002: 8, 9).

Caro and others have claimed that the Civil Rights Act of 1957 made passage easier of a far more effective law in 1964 to weaken racial segregation in the South. By then the zeitgeist was radically altered. Democrats controlled the executive branch; and Bobby Kennedy and his closest associates, like Nicholas Katzenbach and Burke Marshall, actively committed the Department of Justice to racial equality. The civil rights movement had generated tremendous moral momentum on behalf of the bill in 1964. The efforts that Johnson himself exerted to secure passage were so conspicuous that he knew he would lose the Deep South in that

fall's elections (Risen, 2014: 27). He signed the bill anyway. White officials in Alabama were so angry that Johnson's name wasn't even allowed on the ballot.

He had largely transcended the racism that was once required to seek elective office in Texas. The shift was not only internal. Leaders of the movement like Martin Luther King Jr. could claim some credit for enabling Johnson to find the redeeming features that had long been suppressed. Here too a predecessor was Lincoln, who did not publicly condemn slavery until 1854, when he was already 45 years old (Hofstadter, 1948: 110). Wendell Phillips spoke for the Abolitionist movement in boasting that Lincoln grew "because we have watered him" (Hofstadter, 1948: 129). Very soon after Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he foresaw what legislation needed to be next. He told Katzenbach, the acting attorney general, to draft "the goddamnedest, toughest Voting Rights Act that you can devise" (Raines, 1978: 371). In the spring of 1965, when Johnson urged Congress to pass that bill, he roused his listeners with the unexpected vow that "we *shall* overcome." The federal government and the civil rights movement were now stunningly united. Watching on television in Alabama, King did something that his associates never remembered seeing before. He broke down and cried (Caro, 2008; Caro, 1990: xix-xx; Frady, 2002: 163). Johnson's transformation was so remarkable that a Senator from Alabama turned on Richard Russell: "You *trained* that boy.… What happened to that boy?" (Dallek, 1998: 221). How the metamorphosis occurred will presumably be shown in the fifth volume of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, which will help answer the question: What will happen to this massive biography? Did it strike the right balances? Let Caro's editor take a stab at prophecy. "These books will live forever," Robert Gottlieb predicted. "We all know that" (Jones, 2012: 95).

* * *

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LYNDON B. JOHNSON : ENTRE CONTINUITÉS ET RUPTURES

2025 marque une série d'anniversaires liés à la présidence de Lyndon B. Johnson. En matière de politique étrangère, 1965 voit le lancement de l'opération *Rolling Thunder*, tandis que 1975 est marquée par la déclaration du président Ford proclamant la fin la guerre du Vietnam. Sur le plan intérieur, 1965 est aussi l'année du vote par le Congrès du *Voting Rights Act* et du *Social Security Act*, instaurant Medicare et Medicaid.

L'énigme de la présidence Johnson – législateur aguerri, président impérial, puis président déchu – continue d'interroger. Cet ouvrage explore les multiples arcs narratifs de sa présidence, mettant en lumière l'articulation entre la personnalité de l'homme et les contextes politique et géopolitique d'alors. Car si Johnson a su tirer parti d'un climat social et politique favorable pour insuffler une impulsion législative hors du commun, le contraste est immense avec son bilan désastreux en matière de politique étrangère, résultante de la guerre du Vietnam.

Structuré en trois parties, l'ouvrage s'ouvre sur un regard général porté sur le président et son mandat, se poursuit avec une analyse de la question des droits citoyens et sociaux, et se conclut par une réflexion sur la guerre contre la pauvreté, pilier de sa « Grande Société ». Les contributions réunies ici mettent en lumière l'ampleur du travail accompli par Johnson et son administration, ses limites, et ses résonances dans l'Amérique d'aujourd'hui. La présidence Johnson apparaît alors comme une période de profondes mutations, révélant une société clivée, dont les fractures ne cesseront de s'amplifier.

Juristes, historiens et spécialistes de la civilisation américaine croisent ici leurs approches comparées pour éclairer la complexité d'une présidence dont l'héritage résonne encore dans les débats contemporains.

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