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978-0-521-73752-4 - All the Way with LBJ: The 1964 Presidential Election

Robert David Johnson

Excerpt

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Prologue

In an October 1964 conversation with Lyndon Johnson, Alex Rose, vice chairman of New York's Liberal Party, gushed, "I've never seen a man running for public office so on top of everything that's going on in the campaign." The president was, Rose continued, his "own campaign manager" – the "star performer" of the election.¹

Despite his penchant for flattery, Rose in this instance expressed conventional wisdom: ignoring political custom, Lyndon Johnson managed his own campaign. The president involved himself with decisions ranging from how best to trigger a political realignment to determining the size and quantity of the campaign's bumper stickers.

Johnson's centrality to all aspects of his electoral effort might have posed a significant obstacle to examining how he achieved an overwhelming victory against Republican Barry Goldwater. Johnson rarely set his thoughts to paper, and he mistrusted many of the political advisers he inherited from John Kennedy. As a result, the Johnson campaign had no central organization that left behind extensive staff memoranda to explain the campaign's grand strategy or the rationale for its tactical decisions.

In the early 1970s, however, Johnson hinted at the existence of a different type of documentary materials for his campaign. In a conversation with his former aide, Doris Kearns, he spoke of "transcripts" from which,

¹ President Johnson and Alex Rose, 2:22 P.M., 10 Oct. 1964, Tape WH6410.06, Citation #5860, Recordings of Telephone Conversations – White House Series, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, Lyndon B. Johnson Library [hereafter LBJ Recordings].

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he said, she would learn more about the inner workings of politics and government than from 100 political science textbooks.²

Johnson was referring to the more than 800 hours of conversations that he secretly recorded during the course of his presidency. For 1964 these tapes consisted almost exclusively of telephone calls. The president certainly was not hesitant about conducting political business over the phone. An aide described him as “on the phone morning, noon, and night – almost any hour. He phones from the dinner table, from the bed, from the swimming pool, from the automobile.”³ A story circulated that Johnson, after failing to reach an aide who was indisposed, had a telephone placed in the aide’s bathroom.⁴

These recordings provide a behind-the-scenes narrative of a president and a Democratic partisan coming to grips with the monumental political changes that the Civil Rights Act would produce, with the intersection between international crises and his domestic political needs, with the effects of policy initiatives on his electoral standing, and with personal crises caused by his poisonous relationship with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and the arrest of his closest aide, Walter Jenkins.

This private Johnson demonstrated extraordinarily keen political insights, unmatched by anyone on either side of the campaign (with the possible exception of his wife, Lady Bird). He also possessed a remarkable ability to detect how he could achieve political benefit from public policy developments. But the tapes also reveal a politician willing to employ tactics – trying to smear Goldwater as a member of the Ku Klux Klan, instructing his legal counselor to remove potentially incriminating documents from a White House safe just before FBI agents were scheduled to arrive – that might have troubled even twenty-first-century win-at-any-cost political figures such as the Clintons or Karl Rove.

Francis Sayre, dean of Washington’s Episcopal Cathedral (and grandson of perhaps the greatest idealist in twentieth-century American politics, Woodrow Wilson), testified to these contradictions in a widely publicized sermon, delivered in mid-September 1964. After dismissing Goldwater as “a man of dangerous ignorance and devastating uncertainty,” Sayre lamented Johnson’s dominance of the Democratic national convention, calling the president “a man whose public house is splendid in its every

² Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 412.

³ *U.S. News & World Report*, 13 Jan. 1964.

⁴ *New York Times*, 1 Feb. 1964.

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appearance, but whose private lack of ethic must inevitably introduce termites at the very foundation.”⁵

The tension between Johnson’s willingness to cross ethical lines and his idealistic policy goals would not have surprised Russell Baker. The long-time *New York Times* columnist described Johnson as “a human puzzle so complicated nobody could ever understand it” – a “storm of human instincts: sinner and saint, buffoon and statesman, cynic and sentimentalist, a man torn between hungers for immortality and self-destruction.”⁶ Johnson balanced his crusade for civil rights with occasional racist comments. He used government both to improve the lot of the poor and to promote his financial self-interest. His obvious joy in the art of governing and political life coexisted with a self-pitying nature that magnified routine criticism to the level of attacks on his personal integrity. His ability to forge the legislative coalitions necessary to implement his agenda failed to temper an insecurity that sometimes fueled a sense of paranoia. As his onetime protégé – and later adversary – Joe Kilgore recalled, Johnson possessed an amazing capacity to “convince himself of anything, even something that wasn’t true.”⁷ He was a candidate, and a political strategist, unlike anything before in American politics.

Born in 1908 to a strong-willed mother and a father whose reputation for integrity survived the tumultuous world of Texas politics, Lyndon Baines Johnson graduated from Southwest Texas State Teachers College. His first break came in late 1931, in a special election in Texas’s 14th Congressional District. Although Johnson’s father by that point had fallen on hard times, Richard Kleberg, a conservative Democrat from King County, sought out Sam Johnson’s support. After he narrowly won the election, Kleberg named Lyndon as his secretary. In Washington Johnson distinguished himself with his ambition, work ethic, and political skills. He helped manage Kleberg’s successful reelection campaign in 1932 and, like many young Texas politicians of the era, supported Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. In mid-1935 he was rewarded with an appointment as Texas director of the National Youth Administration (NYA).⁸

The New Deal relied on bureaucracies like the NYA to interpret vaguely worded legislation, enhancing the administration’s maneuverability.

⁵ *Time*, 25 Sept. 1964.

⁶ Russell Baker, *The Good Times* (New York: Plume, 1989), pp. 281–2.

⁷ Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 52.

⁸ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, p. 77.

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FDR assembled a talented staff, which bonded in what historian Alan Brinkley described as an “informal pattern of friendships and intellectual associations.”⁹ This network spread beyond the bounds of former Ivy Leaguers to include strong Roosevelt supporters in Congress, legislators like Claude Pepper of Florida and Maury Maverick of Texas. Johnson gradually entered this circle of New Dealers, coming into contact with figures such as James Rowe, Tommy Corcoran, Abe Fortas, and Ben Cohen. Ideologically, he never relinquished his faith in New Deal liberalism as the most appropriate expression of Democratic idealism.

Johnson, however, was not in Washington to partake in intellectual exchange among the capitol’s elite. Throughout his career, he placed a premium on pragmatism, a pattern evident in his work with the NYA. For someone so young, Johnson demonstrated remarkable executive ability during his time with the organization. He also expanded his political contacts. In 1937, when a vacancy opened in the Texas 10th Congressional District, he made a bid for the seat. Employing a slogan of “Franklin D. and Lyndon B.,” Johnson defended FDR at a time when the court-packing fight left the president on the political defensive. At the start of the campaign, few observers gave Johnson much of a chance: poorly known in Austin, the heart of the district, he registered only about 5 percent in polls. But by outworking his opposition, he rallied to defeat a field of eight candidates.¹⁰

For the next eight years Johnson was one of Roosevelt’s few consistent backers in an increasingly conservative Texas delegation. The new congressman arrived in Washington as the New Deal was running out of steam; the court-packing scheme galvanized an opposition that eventually coalesced into an alliance between Southern Democrats and Republicans. This conservative coalition remained in place, in various manifestations, until the 1960s, when Johnson would confront it as president.

Blocked on the domestic front, Roosevelt turned his attention to the international situation. In East Asia Japanese expansionism spread beyond Manchuria into other parts of China. In Europe Hitler’s German regime discarded the restrictions established by the Treaty of Versailles. Prospects for peace all but vanished in 1938 after Britain and France signed the Munich agreement, which turned over German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia (along with the country’s defenses) to the Third

⁹ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 52.

¹⁰ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Volume 1, The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982), pp. 185–270.

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Reich. The concession failed to appease Hitler, and, when the Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, England and France declared war. Roosevelt inched the United States closer to involvement in the conflict, persuading Congress to weaken the Neutrality Act, first by expanding the cash-and-carry policy, then by approving the Lend-Lease Act.

Johnson supported all of these initiatives, in the process learning the lessons of the era – the dangers of appeasing an expansionist tyrant, the need to prevent America’s defenses from lapsing. A quarter century later, nearly every prominent figure in his administration would recall the 1930s in a similar fashion. But Johnson alone among them held public office during the period, and his reluctance to move beyond the lessons of Munich seemed just a touch stronger than for the rest.

Johnson’s reputation during his House service came not from his national security activities but from his continuing ties to FDR, his close relationship with Speaker Sam Rayburn, and his effective work as chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. As Johnson advanced nationally, though, Texas politics changed. In 1938 the reaction against Roosevelt cost pro-New Deal congressmen Maury Maverick and W. D. McFarlane their House seats. Texas voters also installed the reactionary W. Lee (“Pappy”) O’Daniel as governor.¹¹

Despite the state’s rightward turn, Johnson launched a bid for the Senate after incumbent Morris Sheppard died in April 1941. The special election did not require him giving up his House seat, and so he had little to lose by running. He obtained support from FDR – the first time the president had made an endorsement in a Democratic primary since the unsuccessful attempt to purge conservative Democrats in 1938 – but still faced long odds. Johnson’s House colleague, the ultra-conservative Martin Dies, state Attorney General Gerald Mann, and Governor O’Daniel all filed for the seat.

As in 1937, Johnson strongly identified himself with the president, though on this occasion largely on foreign policy matters. That approach netted him what appeared to be a stunning upset: with 96 percent of the vote counted, he led O’Daniel by more than 5,000 votes. But then O’Daniel allies in East Texas went to work, changing tallies that once had favored Dies to boost O’Daniel’s total. By the time the counting was concluded, O’Daniel had squeaked out a 1,095-vote victory. As Robert Dallek, one of Johnson’s biographers, has noted, the defeat convinced Johnson “as never

¹¹ George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938–1957* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 20–8.

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before that politics was a dirty business in which a willingness to be more unprincipled than your opponents was a requirement for success.”¹²

The bitter loss did not temper Johnson’s statewide ambitions. Once the United States entered World War II, he sensed that status as a veteran would form a precondition for postwar political success. The congressman used his influence with Roosevelt first to obtain a naval commission (he was sent to inspect the morale of U.S. forces in Australia) and then a presidential statement urging members of Congress to tend to their work in Washington rather than serve in the military.¹³

During the months that Representative Johnson was in the Pacific, he ceded responsibility for running his House office to his wife. Born in 1912 to an emotionally troubled mother and a wealthy merchant father, Claudia Taylor, nicknamed Lady Bird, had a hard childhood; her mother died when she was six and her father paid her little attention. Despite such trials, Lady Bird was a person of unusual gifts. Like her future husband, she was ambitious; she distinguished herself at the University of Texas in the early 1930s by obtaining both a B.A. and a Bachelor of Journalism degree. At the university she encountered Lyndon, who proposed to her only 24 hours after they met. They were married shortly thereafter. Observers in her husband’s office would scarcely have known that she lacked a background in politics; after a few months, most believed that she would win the seat if Lyndon remained in the military.¹⁴

When the congressman returned from the Pacific, his priorities changed. Like most prominent figures in Texas politics, Johnson benefited from the blurry line between money and politics in his state’s political culture. His assistance for prominent Texas businessmen, especially George and Herman Brown, co-owners of the Brown and Root construction firm, helped him not only to obtain campaign contributions but also to satisfy his expensive tastes. Meanwhile, after Lady Bird used money from an inheritance to purchase Austin radio station KTBC, Johnson’s political influence ensured a series of favorable rulings from the Federal Communications Commission. By implying that those wanting his favor on government policy should advertise with the station, LBJ turned KTBC into a highly profitable venture.¹⁵ In 1952 KTBC assumed control of an

¹² Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, p. 224.

¹³ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, pp. 182–8.

¹⁴ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, pp. 153, 186, 234; Carl Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of Presidents’ Wives and Their Power* (New York: Morrow, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 38–51.

¹⁵ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Volume 2, Means of Ascent* (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 80–118.

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Austin television station, and FCC rulings ensured that it was the only station to carry network television programming in the Austin market. By the mid-1950s Lyndon Johnson was a multimillionaire, with a fortune accrued during his stint on the federal government payroll.

While he grew financially more secure, Johnson's influence lessened in the postwar political environment. The Republicans seized control of the House and Senate in 1946, consigning the congressman to minority status. Johnson thus became all the more determined to make another bid for the Senate. This time, however, he would have to risk his political career. O'Daniel's term expired in 1948, and the senator, whose support had dropped to 7 percent in one poll, retired.¹⁶ Johnson entered the race as an underdog to Coke Stevenson, O'Daniel's successor as governor and a man whose vote-getting prowess was unmatched in modern Texas history. Later Texas governor John Connally recalled the contest as "the beginning of modern politics," as Johnson employed all of his political skills – and fundraising ability – to win an election that many considered unwinnable.¹⁷

In the primary Johnson finished a disappointing second, with 34 percent of the vote to Stevenson's 40 percent. The third-place finisher, Houston attorney George Peddy, was a strong conservative, and observers figured his runoff votes to go to the conservative Stevenson. But Johnson had other ideas. On the campaign trail he portrayed Stevenson as out of touch with the postwar world and contended that the former governor had obtained labor's support only by promising to vote to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act. (This charge was baseless: many Texas unions had endorsed Stevenson to punish Johnson for his rightward drift in the late 1940s.) Behind the scenes Johnson allies poured money into regions of the state – San Antonio and counties on the Mexican border – where large blocs of votes could be purchased.

On election night the race was too close to call, with Stevenson ahead by 854 votes out of nearly 1,000,000 cast. But then "corrected" votes started arriving, especially from the south Texas counties controlled by the "Duke of Duval," George Parr. In Duval County Parr claimed that 99.6 of the registered voters went to the polls, where they favored Johnson by a margin of 4,622 to 40. Six days after the election, however, Stevenson retained the lead – until the "corrected" returns from another Parr-controlled precinct arrived. In Box 13 in Alice, Texas, Johnson gained

¹⁶ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, p. 56.

¹⁷ Connally quoted in Caro, *Means of Ascent*, p. 193.

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200 votes, including at least three from registered voters who had died but whose names remained on the rolls. With these 200 votes the final tally gave Johnson 494,191 votes to Stevenson's 494,104.¹⁸

With such blatant evidence of vote fraud, Stevenson challenged the results. He obtained an injunction preventing Johnson's name from being listed on the ballot as the Democratic nominee, and a federal judge ordered an inquiry into the Box 13 ballots. Johnson's national contacts then worked to his advantage. A team of high-profile attorneys headed by Abe Fortas, at the time a partner at an influential Washington law firm, successfully blocked the injunction, employing a high-risk legal strategy that involved a direct appeal to Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black. With his 87-vote margin of victory, "Landslide Lyndon" was headed to the Senate.¹⁹

In 1957 the political columnist, Washington insider, and Johnson admirer William S. White sympathetically portrayed the institution Johnson now would call home. *Citadel* described the upper chamber as dominated by tradition, mutual respect among its members, and a set of unwritten rules handed down by its Inner Club. In White's view a good senator lacked "petty exhibitionism," could concentrate on the "coherent and important" rather than the "diffuse and doubtful," possessed a "deep skill" at understanding what the body could realistically achieve, could understand others' points of view, and recognized the need to compromise. Indeed, "one of the ultimate truths of the Senate" was that "the art of high negotiation is an absolutely necessary part of senatorial equipment."²⁰

These requirements perfectly suited Johnson's personal, political, and legislative skills. In 1953 Johnson took over as Senate Democratic leader, a post from which his two predecessors had failed to win reelection. He used the position to become the second most powerful man in government.²¹ Between 1953 and 1959, as Johnson revolutionized the role of Senate party leader, he also transformed the Senate. He demonstrated an almost unparalleled parliamentary imaginativeness, mined his local contacts to raise funds for other Democratic candidates, worked with Republicans as comfortably as Senate liberals, and entered into a highly

¹⁸ Caro, *Means of Ascent*, pp. 255–300.

¹⁹ Caro, *Means of Ascent*, pp. 300–410.

²⁰ William S. White, *Citadel: The Story of the U.S. Senate* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 84, 107, 115–17.

²¹ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Volume 3, Master of the Senate* (New York: Knopf, 2002), p. 315.

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profitable alliance with Bobby Baker, the aide whose fate would play an important role in the 1964 election. The heart of Johnson's power came from his ability to craft compromises, a task he accomplished through what some termed the "Johnson treatment" and what White more precisely described as "cajoling, entreating, flattering, blandly threatening, sometimes saying words and taking action that would have been forgiven in none other than a Senate type."²² Asked later about his legislative philosophy, Johnson stated bluntly, "I'm more a compromiser and a maneuverer. I try to get something. That's the way our system works."²³

In *Citadel* White observed that "the qualities that make a good senator are in no important way those that make a good President."²⁴ Or a good presidential candidate, as Johnson discovered in 1960. In a Democratic field that included Minnesota senator Hubert Humphrey, Massachusetts senator John Kennedy, Missouri senator Stuart Symington, and two-time presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson, Johnson's chances seemed reasonably strong. Yet he conducted his campaign in an uncharacteristically passive way, allowing Kennedy to garner momentum with a string of primary victories. Johnson's skills in cobbling together diverse coalitions in Congress translated poorly to national politics, and he could not prevent Kennedy's narrow victory at the national convention. Then, to almost everyone's surprise, he agreed to serve as Kennedy's running mate, where he critically assisted the ticket in several Southern states.

The vice presidency, however, did not suit this self-described "can-do man." Although Kennedy went out of his way to include Johnson in the decision-making process, by 1963 the vice president's importance had diminished to such an extent that rumors circulated of Kennedy choosing another running mate in 1964. And then, to the shock of the nation, Lyndon Johnson was president.

The new chief executive had a keen, if topically limited, understanding of history, and he eagerly applied what he considered the "lessons of the past" to his presidential bid in 1964. Indeed, Lyndon Johnson's knowledge of American politics probably surpassed that of any other president before or since. Beginning in 1932 Johnson, like every Democrat who followed FDR, reaped the benefits as well as the tensions of the New Deal

²² White, *Citadel*, pp. 89, 105, 210.

²³ Robert Mann, *The Walls of Jericho: Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Russell, and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1996), p. 135.

²⁴ White, *Citadel*, p. 219.

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coalition, which brought together liberals, labor, blacks, and the South in an uneasy but politically potent alliance. But the two contests that most affected Johnson's approach to the 1964 election were Roosevelt's successful reelection races in 1936 and 1940.

Roosevelt in 1936 perfected the strategy of running from ahead. He portrayed himself as the leader of "all the people," eschewing campaign appearances in favor of "nonpolitical" events that he understood were actually "the most effective political trips a President can make."²⁵ Even his overtly political addresses occurred on an "almost biblical plane" – he instructed his advisers to insert biblical passages dealing with themes of hope, faith, and charity into all his campaign speeches.²⁶ (Johnson would mimic the strategy 28 years later.) In 1940, despite pleas from Democrats, FDR resisted overt partisan appeals and instead praised Republicans who sympathized with his national security policies. The president also (in another tactic duplicated by Johnson) instructed his aides to avoid mentioning Republican Wendell Willkie's name – "call him our opponent. Call him anything, but never call him bad names."²⁷

In 1948, meanwhile, as Johnson was winning election to the Senate, presidential politics featured the biggest upset in the twentieth century, as Harry Truman bested the heavily favored Republican nominee, New York governor Thomas Dewey. The lessons from the 1948 presidential contest were contradictory and thus much harder to interpret than those from 1936 or 1940. But the memories of Truman's performance nonetheless played a key role in 1964, especially for the Democratic operatives with whom Johnson dealt. The first, and most obvious, was for politicians to trust political instinct over polls, since every major pollster had predicted a comfortable Dewey triumph. Second, political observers detected dangers in waging a campaign based on generalities. As one wit observed, Dewey's proposals were so bland that "the next thing we know he'll be endorsing matrimony, the metal zipper, and the dial telephone."²⁸ Third, Truman proved that a Democratic victory did not require a solid South. After the Democratic convention passed a platform plank urging a renewed federal commitment to civil rights, South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond, running as a "States' Rights Democrat," captured the

²⁵ Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), p. 198.

²⁶ Gil Troy, *See How They Ran: The Changing Role of a Presidential Candidate* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 169–72.

²⁷ Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 115.

²⁸ Troy, *See How They Ran*, p. 195.