

The U.S. Senate Through Lyndon Johnson's Eyes

by Stuart Lewis

The Years of Lyndon Johnson, Master of the Senate

by Robert A. Caro

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Imagine, until 1957, no civil rights legislation had been approved by the United States Senate since 1875. (The House of Representatives had occasionally passed Civil Rights legislation to always see it die in the Senate.) Quite a dry spell—which was only broken by the guidance of the “Master of the Senate,” Lyndon Johnson. The story and the clever manipulations and stratagems that allowed Johnson to maneuver the legislation through Congress are wonderfully and fully portrayed by author Caro in his more than 1,000 page book. Caro, it can be said, is “Master” of the Johnson biography, as this is the fourth of a series on his life, with still another to be written about Johnson’s Presidential years.

In telling the story, leading up to the 1957 passage of a civil rights bill, the author goes through all aspects of Johnson’s Senate and personal life, trying to give you an understanding of what made Johnson tick, as well as going through the broader historical context of his actions.

The Confederate ‘Old Ways’ in the Senate

Caro sets up the story, in the first 100 pages, by barely mentioning Johnson, and instead, elaborating a history of the Senate. Most importantly, how the Senate, whose members are elected to six-year terms, is the legislative body least responsive to popular opinion. While on one level that might be good, knowing that popular opinion is often wrong, in

the Senate’s case, it was a detriment to the advancement of civil rights.

Especially, when the Senate was dominated by openly racist, Southern states’ Senators who could easily manipulate to ensure the killing of any legislation they disapproved of. Most civil rights legislation never made it out of committee. The Southern bloc, made up of the Old Confederacy, knew how to use the rules of the Senate better than most of their other colleagues, and often took advantage of their knowledge, to confound and thwart the efforts of the majority of the Senate. Furthermore, because of the seniority rules, they controlled most of the major committee chairs, and used these advantages to prevent any weakening of the power of the filibuster, to stop any pending legislation they didn’t like. While the situation wasn’t as bad as the days before the Civil War, when even bringing petitions opposing slavery had been banned from the House of Representatives, the Southern Senators cloaked their racism in the mantle of the legalistic argument for “states’ rights.”

Johnson’s Life, A Tangled Tale

But, trying to understand Johnson’s motivation in favor of passing civil rights legislation is no easy matter, as this book lays out the seemingly major contradictions and conflicts in Johnson’s life. The major conflict was between doing the right thing, and doing what was right for Johnson’s career advancement. If doing the right thing got in the way of Johnson’s career, Johnson’s career came first. And for a career, Johnson’s goal was to be President of the United States, and neither friend nor principle would stand in Johnson’s way.

As Caro describes it, “Another quality that Lyndon Johnson had displayed on each stage of his march along the path to power was an utter ruthlessness in destroying obstacles in that path.” While many thought of Johnson as a Roosevelt

New Dealer, and as Johnson portrayed himself in Washington as “the protégé of Franklin Roosevelt who told his liberal Washington friends about cheap electricity,” when it came time to please his Texas moneybags financial backers, Johnson unflinchingly, and thoroughly, destroyed the career of Leland Olds.

Olds was then chairman of the Federal Power Commission, which regulated corporations that created power from natural resources, as well as sold that power to the public. Olds was committed to breaking the backs of the utility company monopolies, and via regulation of electric rates, to ensuring rural areas had the electrical power they required. But, Johnson’s Texas oilmen backers did not like their energy resources regulated; and in 1949, Senator Johnson used extremely vicious McCarthyite, guilt-by-association innuendo that Olds had links to the Communist Party USA, to utterly devastate Olds during the confirmation hearings. Johnson so orchestrated the hearing, that Olds was never even able to competently defend himself, as Johnson continually badgered and interrupted Olds’s testimony. Civil rights attorney Joe Rauh called what Johnson did to Olds, “really vicious . . . one of the dirtiest pieces of work ever done.” And besides destroying Olds’s career, the utility regulation that Olds had fought for was reversed as well—just as Johnson’s oilpatch backers wanted.

Balancing Act

And yet, Johnson’s driving ambition could play a positive role as well. “He knew . . . that the only way to realize his great ambition [of becoming President] was to fight—*really* fight, fight aggressively and effectively—for civil rights; in fact, it was probably necessary for him not only to fight, but to fight and *win*: Given their conviction that he controlled the Senate, the only way the liberals would be satisfied of his good intentions would be if that body passed a civil rights bill.” Was Johnson really in favor of civil rights? He certainly came down on both sides of the issue many times during his career. Being associated with the Southern Caucus, he had to let them believe he was a racist. On the other hand, he is quoted telling a biographer, “I’m not prejudiced nor ever was.” While Caro finds numerous examples to show that Johnson was not color-blind, he did have empathy for the poor and dark-skinned, and had the ability to read people’s souls, put himself in their place, and “feel what they were feeling.”

For him, passing a civil rights bill would be the supreme balancing act. To be President, Johnson would have to get the support of more than just the Southern Senators. However strong the Southern Senators were in their extremely strong hold on Senate matters, they did not have the power to put a Southerner in the White House. Johnson had to balance a civil rights bill that liberals and non-Southerners could support, and that was not too bitter a pill for the Southern Senators to swallow.

Luckily for Johnson, he had Georgia Sen. Richard Russell on his side. Russell was the leader of the Southern Caucus,

and one of the, if not *the* most powerful, behind-the-scenes movers in the Senate—and Russell was committed to seeing Johnson become President. But, of course, it was more than just luck, that Johnson had the favor of Russell. Johnson, throughout his career, was able to find individual weaknesses of those whose favor he needed. When Johnson was in the House of Representatives, he sucked up to House Speaker, Texan Sam Rayburn. It was no different with Richard Russell, for whom Johnson showed no shame in flattering and winning Russell’s affection, most necessary for Johnson’s career to advance. It worked so well, that Russell, an avowed racist, after whom one of three Senate Office Buildings was named in 1972, was still willing to do battle to help Johnson with civil rights legislation in order to help him become the first *post-bellum* President from the South.

Of course, Caro never gives the short version of anything, and includes much interesting background and history of the civil rights struggle, before the blow-by-blow of how Johnson did manage to beguile, manipulate, and pressure whomever he needed, in order to pass the 1957 Civil Rights Act. The 1957 Act was a weak law, dealing only with voting rights—not touching many of the other injustices, such as segregation in schools, housing, and restaurants.

In 1960, the net gain of registered voters in the Old South, was zero. But, as Johnson said, “It’s just a beginning. . . . We’ve shown that we can do it. We’ll do it again, in a couple of years.” And, events showed Johnson to be true to his word, as President Johnson got passed and signed the two historic Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965.

New English Translations Of Schiller’s Great Works

by William F. Wertz, Jr.

Friedrich Schiller, Poet of Freedom, Volume IV

edited by William F. Wertz, Jr.
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A little more than three months after the death of Schiller Institute Vice President Marianna Wertz, on Jan. 15, 2003, Volume IV of translations of the works of the Poet of Freedom, Friedrich Schiller, was released. The publication of this beautiful book was made possible by contributions in memory of Marianna, to whom it is dedicated.

The book includes a foreword by Helga Zepp-LaRouche,