



Power And The Years of LBJ

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There is almost a cult amongst readers of political history and biography: those who count down the years until the release of the next volume of Robert Caro's totemic biography of Lyndon Johnson.

Commencing with *The Path to Power* in 1982, followed by *Means of Ascent* in 1990 then *Master of the Senate* in 2002, the latest volume, *The Passage of Power* released earlier this year was a full decade in the making. This latest volume covers the period leading into the 1960 election, when Johnson competed with Kennedy for the Democrat nomination, through to early 1964, the assassination of John Kennedy and its aftermath.

Caro has been working on this project since completing his first book, the Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*, published in 1974. For an author of only 5 books



over more than 40 years, Caro has an exceptional series of awards—two Pulitzers and a clutch of National Book Awards and the National Humanities Medal and Presidential Medal of Freedom.

All the LBJ volumes are titled ‘The Years of Lyndon Johnson’ and this is an important distinction.

These are more than simply a biography; they are a history of the United States seen through the prism of the activities of one of its most influential figures. Through Caro’s extraordinary ability to paint word pictures, a different period of time is brought vividly to life. This applies equally to his descriptions of the life of African Americans in the Deep South under Jim Crow as it does to the grief of Robert Kennedy following the assassination of JFK.

In an interview two decades ago, Caro outlined his aspirations for his writing:

‘I don’t regard my books as biographies so much as I do as history. That’s why I call them “The Years of Lyndon Johnson” and I feel that in order to endure, a work of history has to be written, the prose, has to be at the same level as a novel that will endure, and I don’t think there’s enough emphasis in the writing of a lot of history, on the fact that this is a book.’

The introductions to each of Caro’s LBJ works invite the reader to continue into the large volumes, giving not only a taste of what is to come, but reminding a reader of past volumes as well. This is just as well, with the almost decade-long average between publication.

His introduction to the third volume, *Master of the Senate* is the best short history of the US Senate yet written. One hangs on every word of its almost 100 pages as it builds to the arrival of a man who would dominate it like no one had before.

The introduction to *The Passage of Power* is similarly enticing to the reader. The key theme of Caro’s work is about detailing the use of political power—for good and ill. In his introduction to *The Passage of Power*, Caro argues that power reveals the true nature of the person. While one conceals characteristics in order to rise in political power, the elevation to supreme power reveals the true person. This is as true in a presidential system as it is in a parliamentary one. While the character of John Howard was revealed as he served as Prime Minister, so was that of Kevin Rudd and their respective longevity says something about both.

The Passage of Power moves away from the focus on legislative power outlined in *Master of the Senate* and his fight for office in *Means of Ascent*. It focuses on Johnson’s humiliation upon taking office as Vice President and his subsequent assumption of office amidst the first televised national tragedy. It should not be forgotten just how momentous Johnson’s ascension was. Kennedy was the first television president, a signal of generational change, and this was the first assassination of the modern media era.

Johnson taking office also represented something profound—the first President from the South, the old confederacy, since Andrew Johnson assumed the office following the assassination of Lincoln. Apart from the fissures in the Democratic Party itself, which sometimes existed in name



and banner only, the very notion of a President from the segregated South was anathema to much of the nation.

Yet, in the aftermath of the assassination, Johnson seized power in an extraordinary fashion. Through what some may consider craven actions, he took control of Congress in a manner that had not been done since the very early days of FDR.

He smashed the conservative coalition of the Republican Party and Southern Democrats of which he was formerly a leader. He passed the largest tax cut until that point, along with the pivotal civil rights bill that had both been bottled up in Congress with no prospect of proceeding. In the words of Caro from a previous volume 'it was Abraham Lincoln who struck the chains from black Americans, but it was Lyndon Johnson who took them by the hand, led them into the voting booth, drew democracy's curtain behind them and made them once and for all and forever a part of American political life.'

This achievement can never be underestimated. Bringing about the end of Jim Crow was the final step in removing a stain upon the Great Republic. Despite many attempts, no-one else had even got close. But LBJ did, and did so in such a fashion that the Southern Caucus was stunned.

When reading about these events, one at the same time admires LBJ's capacity to work and his insights into what makes his fellow politicians tick, but at the same time is repulsed by his seeming lack of moral boundaries.

The other main feature of this volume is Johnson's war with Bobby Kennedy. One can learn a great deal about the Kennedys from this book: the family project to get to the White House, the vanity of JFK, the Clinton-like ability to create a myth simply through allowing others to project their hopes onto you.

Robert Kennedy, long romanticised, is described in a manner that one cannot come away without being a little more sceptical about he and his Presidential brother.

If Caro is not the greatest writer of biography then he at least earns himself a position on the podium. Regardless of what one thinks about LBJ, any student of history can learn a great deal about the United States, its government and this era through reading this latest volume. It is not my favourite volume, that remains the previous volume about LBJ's time in the Senate. But *The Passage of Power* greatly adds to understanding of those days in late 1963 and early 1964 following the Kennedy assassination. In Caro's unique style, it does so by looking at past events as well as through an extraordinarily detailed description of the period itself.

Now the countdown begins for the fifth and final volume.