

Lies, Bandits, and Jackanapes

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The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent, vol. 2., by Robert Caro (New York: Knopf, 1990) Index, photographs, bibliography, 506 pages.

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Corrupt influence, which is itself the perennial spring of all prodigality, and all disorder; which loads us, more than millions of debt; which takes any vigor from our councils, and every shadow of authority and credit from the most venerable parts of our constitution. — Burke, **Speech on Economical Reform**, 1780.

The Burke headpiece is the short review of the life and mind of LBJ. What follows then is, as theologians might say, an exegesis of the text.

What LBJ could not do by legal, political means, he did by deceit, underhanded dealings, back door bribery, and outright prodigality. Again, Burke's dictum is to the point: "Criminal means, once taken, are oft preferred." For LBJ, it is hard to determine if he ever tried any other means.

Robert Caro has chronicled all of this for the indefatigable and the insomniac in two volumes of a projected multi-volume set that should be the undoing of LBJ and his claque. It ought also to be the undoing of liberal theo-politico leanings, but I am not so naïve as to believe that. Liberals who delighted in his Great Society will have a very hard time living down his infamy. They invested too much faith in his "act" and therefore must swallow the monster they encouraged and fed.

The Honesty-Thing

In Caro's first volume, *The Path to Power* (National Book Critics Circle Award and best-seller), we saw Johnson as a young man, a rather vulgar young man, who was in heat to be something other than a poor Texan with an impoverished education. His father,

himself a politician, was dirt poor, but a man of integrity. Johnson determined that he would not be poor, even if it meant selling his mother's soul. When he was not talking locker room lingo about his sexual member, he was cheating his way to becoming class president. Johnson thought no elected office too inferior to cheat to obtain.

No doubt some Texans will smile at my words, wink a knowing eye at one another, laugh, and say, “Boy, you jest don't git the Texas waaay. Hats jest Texas pollyticks, per and sample.” But to argue that Johnson epitomizes Texas politics is to argue that Texas is inveterately immoral. While certain malversations no doubt occur in politics—no state is without them—they cannot be said to be standard political warfare.

Texas Whiz-Kid Loses

Means of Ascent begins with Johnson at the age of thirty-two. It is 1941, 28 June, and Johnson is on the verge of yet another victory. This tall, lanky young man with Dumbo-sized ears is already known as the “wonder kid” of Texas politics. At the age of 23 he was the “Boss of Little Congress”, an organization of congressional assistants. At 26, he was the youngest of forty-eight state directors of Roosevelt's socialistic National Youth Administration, and perhaps the youngest man ever entrusted with statewide authority for an New Deal program. At 28, he jumped headlong into a race the pundits said he could not possibly win—and won. Now, at 32, he was a congressman with clout, one who had restored centralized financing to his party's congressional campaign and rejuvenated its mortmain Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee with oil money from Texas fat cats.

What could possibly go wrong? Statewide polls showed him gaining on Governor W. Lee “Pappy” Daniels, and then outdistancing him. And his political credo was, if not unprincipled, then nonpareil: “If you do *everything*, you'll win.” Then Johnson, with typical surquedry that would dog him to his deathbed, made a mistake. The hideous corrupt South Texas border bosses whose support he had already purchased, asked him when they should turn in their poll results. Johnson told them to send them in whenever they pleased, confident, with his ever-widening lead, that Daniels could not catch up. They did. And Daniels won. Johnson was devastated.

It is odd, when you look back on it, how closely the world came to missing LBJ as its president. LBJ could have as easily decided to sell shoes, become a university president, or even enter a seminary. All are good occupations, and all have scoundrels. But LBJ could not get out of his mind one maddening point: he had been out-cheated.

We often get what we deserve. If we can say that John F. Kennedy was the president most given to profligacy—and it must be admitted that he has few contenders outside of his own family—then Johnson was the one most given to proclivities. From this moment on, Johnson's political credo (“If you do *everything*, you'll win”) became his political mandate. And he began from that day forth to make certain no stone was unturned, no

grave unrobbed.

Politics Texas-Style?

Johnson felt it most important that the world see him as not only smart—i.e., intelligent—but as wily, shrewd, calculating. While he rarely succeeded with the first, he abounded with success in the second. Two cases will illustrate. On a college campus where elections were more a matter of fun than of serious intent, Johnson cheated in order to win. In a meaningless election on Capitol Hill, presidency for the Little Congress—a kind of head of all hall monitors—Johnson had the ballot box stuffed, and won again.

If this were not enough, he *miscounted* the ballots so that the margin of victory (for the victory was already his by virtue [sic] of the illegal ballots) would be greater than it would be, left to mere malversation. He did this with an organization that was so loosely coupled that one later president announced, “My God, who would cheat to win the presidency of something like the Little Congress?”

Apart from the election there was Johnson's notoriety at Texas State Teachers College. Johnson went by the nickname of “Bull”—short for a longer epithet that this family magazine cannot name. The nickname was, according to those who remember Johnson, appropriate owing to LBJ's penchant for telling anything but the truth, unless that, too, would enlarge his base of power.

Wars and Rumors of Wars

But that is only the beginning of the lies. Sitting in his secure Senate office after recouping from his earlier defeat, Johnson made a series of promises about the threat of war. Johnson proclaimed, “If ever that day comes when my vote must be cast to send your boy to the trenches—that day Lyndon Johnson will leave his Senate Seat to go with him.” If that was not clear enough, LBJ later added with characteristic bobance, “If Hitler makes this an all-out-war, I shall vote in the Senate for war.... And when I cast my vote, I shall tear up my draft number and join the boys picked to defend our homes and our God and our liberties.” It is easy to see from this posturing why it was that Fortas, the so-called genius of the Supreme Court, saw LBJ as the genius of politics. Though Johnson was often surrounded by men far more intelligent than he, he would be their tutor when determining how things worked politically. Reading Caro, one gets the distinct impression that LBJ knew how things worked both above and under the table politically, but especially under since that is where he spent most of his time.

Hitler, if memory serves, did make it an all out war, but LBJ did not tear up his card and did not join the boys in trenches. Rather he and his sidekick, John Connally, made a bee-line for office work and R & R. Connally, reflecting on the war-is-hell years, later recalled how much fun they had. LBJ often made it out to the left coast to join up with his then mistress Alice Glass. So, while the boys were working away in the trenches, LBJ

could be said to have been working away with another man's wife.

But adultery notwithstanding, Johnson was restless. He did not want to go to war, but he hated the threat inaction posed to his Senate seat. He wrote back to friends in 1942 that he had given up his Senate seat for “a paper-shifting job, placating the Navy and placating the New Zealanders.... It was nothing”, he wrote, “I have given up my seat in Congress for nothing.” The lie he told about going to war and then staying at home grew so uncomfortable that even Lyndon's mentor, Sam Rayburn, arguably the most powerful man in Congress at the time, became annoyed with Johnson. Rayburn saw Johnson as his surrogate son, to the point of allowing LBJ to kiss his bald head almost at will. Though Rayburn had forgiven even an earlier attempt by Johnson to deceive him, Rayburn was now beginning to worry over his adopted son. The forgiveness of the people, however, was another matter entirely.

When in Doubt, Lie

LBJ got a crisis letter from his confidant O. J. Weber. Weber told Lyndon that he was caught either way. That if he stayed in those dinky desk jobs or was called back to Congress—which could, of course, be arranged long before the war was over—everybody would say, “See, I told you it was all huff and puff.” One lie even LBJ could not afford was one that the people would not forget. He asked for active duty after about nine months of fun and frolic.

His active service came when he got to serve as a Navy observer at Seven Mile Strip, flying to Lae. As a *Navy* observer, LBJ did not have to fly. He could just go to the American base at Seven Mile Strip and send back press releases. But he knew his political career was on the line.

Lyndon was nothing if he was not personable, and he stepped off onto Seven Mile Strip and made friends immediately. He boarded the *Wabash Cannonball* with his camera and sat waiting for departure for his flying observation. When the plane did not leave immediately, LBJ answered a common call of fear, deplaned, and found a spot where he could make himself more comfortable. When he finished these micturitions, he got back on the plane and found that Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Stevens, also an observer, had taken his place. Johnson climbed aboard another B-26, the *Heckling Hare*, and waited. When the plane began its taxi, he remembered his camera aboard the other plane.

Johnson must be credited with bravery, a trait he had not shown before this moment. When the firing began, Johnson did not cower in a corner, but stood in a turret and watched the battle as planes flew all around him. Suddenly he saw a B-26 get hit broadside and go into a fatal tailspin. It burst into flames and crashed in the Pacific; the pilot and all the crew were killed. Johnson's camera was also lost, for it was the *Wabash Cannonball* that had just been blown from the sky, right before Johnson's eyes. Stevens, the man who had taken Johnson's place, took Johnson's spot in the grave.

The *Heckling Hare* episode was all that Johnson needed. He had seen active duty in *one* combat mission, for *one* day. On his way back to the US, he caught a chill, the dengue fever, had to be hospitalized for several days, and lost 25 pounds. Johnson's active duty had lasted a total of *seven days*. He issued the following statement: "I have been ordered back to Washington by my Commander-in-Chief".

How, then did this become a lie? Johnson turned the 25 pounds he lost into 35, 38 and later 40 pounds during his 1948 re-election speeches. His *one* mission was turned into dozens of missions. The 20,000 miles he had flown became first 60,000 and then 70,000 miles. His *day* of combat became "May, June, and part of July."

Lieutenant Walter Greer, whose brilliant flying saved Johnson's neck, received not so much as honorable mention in the *Stars and Stripes*. Corporal Harry Baren, who shot down the one Jap Zero that Johnson later multiplied to fourteen did not get a slap on the back from White House politicians. Nor did any other member of the *Heckling Hare*. In point of fact, members of that crew who were later to fly twenty-five more missions, did not receive *any medal* for service.

LBJ, however, sycophant-elect for Roosevelt, who did nothing on that one mission but watch the plane meant for him take another home to his reward, received the coveted Silver Star. Lyndon swore to everyone he would never wear it because he did not deserve it. It hardly needs to be said that once stateside, "I will never wear it", referred only to the shower. Johnson was never seen in a suit without it gracing his lapel.

When Certain, Lie

Johnson circulated rumors about those in jobs he wanted. He stretched stories about his own achievements, and minimized the real achievements of others. He told Conservatives he was on their side, and Liberals, he was their man. Johnson demanded blood from his turnips and they bled as freely as hemophiliacs. He promised interviewees the sun and the moon and, when on staff, barely delivered them a flashlight. He humiliated employees, including those who worked within the White House later. It was his way. It was the way he held power over them.

Even in the case of his fortune, Johnson prevaricated. He could not earn the money through oil, so he pulled strings in Washington and took over a radio station, KTBC, from a law professor and two attorneys. What the three men could not accomplish in nearly two years, Johnson did in less than six months. In 1936, the former owners were able to make about \$2,600 a month in advertising fees. Under LBJ's shadow management (he always claimed it was "Bird's" investment), KTBC jumped to \$16,000 monthly. By 1948, LBJ, the dirt-poor Texas boy who wore hand-me-down rags was a millionaire. Doesn't this mean he was a better businessman than the former eggheads? Perhaps, but it helps when you tell advertisers that if they do not advertise on your radio station, they will see a loss in profits. It also helps when you can call up major broadcasting companies

and get prime spots placed on your radio station when dozens of other stations have been pleading for them for years.

Senate Slot for Sale

Perhaps the most terrible larceny of lies and posturing came during the now infamous 1948 senate race against Coke Stevenson. What makes this particular lie especially perfidious is the character of the man against whom it was aimed. Coke Stevenson, alias "Mr. Texas", was a man's man. Living off the legend of the old west, Stevenson became involved with government because he wanted to do something good for people. Stevenson represented the most formidable opponent for LBJ, even more than Pappy O'Daniel. Stevenson was the largest vote getter in Texas politics up to that time.

It cannot be said that Stevenson was without spot or wrinkle. But it can be said that, compared to LBJ, his record vied him for sainthood. Given his story up to that time, Lyndon knew he was fighting a legend in Texas politics.

Stevenson did not like to put a "spin" on stories. He enjoyed novel things, like telling the truth. That, plus his hard work for the people of Texas, won him a place in their hearts and they made him governor. As Governor, he inherited a \$34 million dollar deficit that he turned into a \$35 million surplus before leaving office. To say he was a simple man with simple needs is to bark at understatement. Coke did, after all, live out his life at home without ever installing a permanent phone. His political philosophy may best be summed up by his remark to a reporter who wondered why he was not taking a side in a huge floor debate. "As long as they're not voting, they're not passing any laws. And as long as they're not passing any laws, they're not hurting anybody."

Lyndon cranked up his state machinery against Stevenson who took a huge lead in the early polling. George and Herman Brown of Brown & Root paid Johnson back for the millions of dollars of federal contracts Johnson had sent their way while a Representative and later as a Senator. Precursors of the Perot way to fame and fortune via government contracting, the Brown bothers beat out the competition by having it eliminated for them in Washington. Now with more millions at stake with Johnson in the Senate, they opened their wallets (and the wallets and purses of everyone else from whom they could filch) to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars.

But even with the money and the influence and the political racketeering, LBJ could not cheat everything. Early in the race illness struck him in the form of a kidney stone, one so serious that it threatened his life. While waiting for him to pass it, and with no sign of movement in the stone, surgery seemed inevitable. The doctors made preparations to put Johnson under the knife. Johnson knew this would take him out of the race for at least eight to ten weeks. Such a long hiatus from campaigning at so critical a time would insure defeat for LBJ, so he dictated his withdrawal speech to Warren Woodward to send to the Dallas newspapers. "Can you imagine", Woodward remarked years later, "what would

have happened if I had done that? The whole course of history—we might not even have had Vietnam or the Great Society.” Woodward defied Johnson this one time, and did not send the withdrawal notice. Johnson passed the stone.

Doubling the Evil

Burke once argued that, “vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.” LBJ had a way of doubling the evil and the grossness, and still winning. When his illness slowed him down, Lyndon bought power by incorporating into his attack the “flying windmill”—the helicopter. Unheard of in the late forties, the chopper brought slapdash to the Johnson campaign. And he used it like a professional huckster. The helicopters—for Johnson was to use more than one of them—were a huge cost. But Root & Brown were there with the cash. In this manner, Johnson could cover the state, especially the small towns that Stevenson would not have time to stop in, far more effectively than any other opponent in Texas politics had.

Johnson used the chopper as a source for dramaturgy. Often times the helicopter could not take off loaded in tight spaces, so Johnson would not take off with his pilot, but would meet him miles from the city, where more space was available. But Johnson never lost a chance to make points. Although the whole effect was staged, he knew it would impress. “Now folks”, he would say, “I want you all to stay here and wait until Joe gets the Johnson City Windmill off the ground. He’s going to need all the help he can get—he going to need your prayers to get through this safely. We all hope the good Lord sees that Joe gets over those high-tension wires over there. I know we’ll all be here helping to pray for him.” And then Johnson would take the act over the edge of blasphemy and say, “Help him, O, Lord. Help this brave man make it out of here safely.”

But if you do everything, you’ll win. Even this was not enough, and Johnson fell to circulating lies about Stevenson. He lied about Stevenson’s labor position, his stand on Taft-Hartley, and his position on Communism. In the end, Johnson, for all his lies, only managed to require a run off because no one got a majority vote.

During this runoff, Brown & Root wanted to cut their losses and head for high ground. But they knew Johnson’s loss was their loss too. So they filled grocery bags with money totaling forty to fifty thousand and went shopping for votes near the Texas-Mexico border. But they did not buy votes only. They also used the money to buy individuals who would circulate lies about Stevenson.

Money Votes

The day of decision came. With Stevenson holding a 20,000 vote lead in early returns, Johnson looked to San Antonio for help. Though Stevenson had won one runoff there by a 2-1 margin, he did not win by that margin at all this time. In fact, he *lost* the region. Stevenson still had a 17,000 vote lead, but then the Valley came in. Johnson won in the

districts by 5 - 1, 3 - 1, and 31/2 - 1 margins. In some areas, Johnson polled more than 90% of the votes!

From the early morning hours with a 20,000 vote lead, Stevenson's margin fell to an 800 vote lead by 1:30 am the following morning. Most of these votes had been cast on paper ballots. About 2:00 a.m., Johnson called on his campaign workers to call the precinct counters to "recheck" the vote count and see if they could "find" some votes. Johnson did not call the precinct vote counters himself. Why, that would have been illegal and considered vote tampering. But somehow these men got the message and they began to count. Luis Salas was among the most corrupt of the counters. Even after all this, the Dallas newspaper headlines told the tale: *Stevenson leads by 349 votes with about 40 votes out.* The fifth day after the election, the lead was smaller, but it still favored Stevenson. The sixth day after then election, the Valley was heard from yet again, this time with more votes for Johnson. Now Coke led by only 157 votes. Then it happened. Though Jim Wells County had turned in 765 votes six days earlier, they now called in with 965. Those 200 votes won the day. Out of 988,295 votes cast, Johnson had 494,191 and Coke 494,104. Johnson had won by 87 votes, less than 1/100 of *one* percent!

How Lyndon got away with the votes was relatively simple. A loop was added to the seven making it a nine. Names were added, in alphabetical order no less, after the 842nd name. Though all the names up to 842 were in black ink, all the names beginning with 843 were in blue. In order to keep this election, ballot box number 13, in the soiled hands of Luis Salas, could not be opened. But Stevenson challenged the results, and the challenge meant that the box would eventually be opened. James Gardner later testified that the certification showed the vote for Lyndon Johnson was 965, but it was "evident from looking at 965 that the nine had been changed. It had previously been a seven. The seven had been marked over in pen and ink from a seven to a nine." It was later revealed that three of the names of the extra 200 had been dead for more than thirty years.

The matter was turned over to the Executive Committee where Johnson won again 29-28. But Stevenson sued on the ground of voter fraud in Jim Wells County. All of LBJ's lawyers told Lyndon not to go to court. It was over. LBJ called in Abe Fortas, whom he would later appoint to the Supreme Court, to settle the matter. It was late September by now and no Democratic contender had been declared for the November election. Fortas told LBJ to put all of his eggs into a very precarious basket. He told Lyndon to lose the Circuit Court case in order to get it to Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, who was coincidentally head of the fifth Circuit Court with advice responsibility. Johnson's political fate depended on Black agreeing to hear the case as a single judge and make his judgement, as Fortas thought, solely on jurisdictional grounds. All that stood between ballot box 13 being opened and Johnson's fraud was Black and the Fortas argument that this was a state matter.

The last scene looked something like one staged by Hollywood. A phone was set up in the court house in Texas where ballot boxes were already being opened, but box thirteen was awaiting Black's decision. As the time drew near, Black agreed with Fortas. "It

would be a drastic break with the past”, Black argued, “which I cannot believe Congress ever intended to permit, for a federal judge to go into the business of conducting what is to every intent and purpose a contest of an election in the state.” With this whimper, Stevenson's political life was over, and Johnson was loosed upon the electorate.

The Good Men Do

But what of the Liberal argument that the end justifies the means, that Johnson's end, Civil Rights legislation and the Great Society, being pure penance for his means? Hardly. In the first case, prior to his presidency, Johnson's record on Civil Right was 100% all right—100% *against* it. He assailed Truman's Civil Rights measures as an attempt, “to set up a police state.”

But wasn't Johnson a master legislator? Again the matter is a case for the mythologists. In 1937, 1938, 1939, 1942, 1943, and 1944, for example, Johnson had not *one line* in the *Congressional Record* for having discussed anything in the House during those years. So, if Johnson was no Civil Rights leader, and no legislator, what else does that leave?

Surely he can't be faulted for the Great Society. Surely there we may find some means to forgive this ascent. Lamentably, this sad story is the saddest here. Charles Murray in *Losing Ground* has pointed out that the Great Society did more to indenture Blacks to Welfare than anything the South did to them during slavery. Apart from holding Blacks in “their place”, it further broke Black families apart, giving single black mothers money for having children, but not when the husband was present. The statistics tell the story. Blacks make up about 12% of the culture, but account for more than half of all violent crimes, most of these perpetrated against other Blacks. Black women are more likely to get pregnant out of wedlock, more likely to be the single head of a household, and more likely not to be the victim of rape or sexually transmitted diseases. Contrast this with another minority, say Asians, the Irish, or Jews, and you see *nothing* of the same pattern.

Many have bemoaned the Los Angeles riots as proof that not enough was done. But the county in which most of the rioting took place earns more federal dollars than any county in the US. Johnson was benevolent in a sentimental mode, the worst form of beneficence one can have. As Gertrude Himmelfarb points out in *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*, in its sentimental mode, “compassion is an exercise in moral indignation, in feeling good rather than doing good; this mode recognizes no principle, no limit, no respect for the constraints of policy or prudence.” In this mode, compassion for the poor will be a narcotic that will addict them to hand-outs, and make them eschew the infrequent helping hand.

From the early fifties to the early sixties, the poverty rolls *decreased*. Since the middle sixties, the U.S. has spent 2.65 trillion on the war to end poverty. From the mid-sixties until now, the rolls have increased to the point of absurdity. We have hardly moved off dead center, and certainly have not matched the results the Victorians had when welfare

programs were mostly outreaches of various church groups. So badly has the war on poverty been waged that it has been estimated that Blacks and those indentured to welfare would have been far better off to get \$20,000 a year for each family of four than to get a welfare check—better *and* cheaper.

Smoke and Mirrors

So how did he do it? How did this man succeed? He did follow the press's buddha, John F. Kennedy. If LBJ was good enough for JFK, he had to be good enough for the USA. He also bought a lot of people with money that flowed more copiously than the water at Niagara. His big misstep with the press was Vietnam, but they even forgave that for a season. Johnson was a master magician, selling nostrums to people who were itching to buy. He succeeded because the press and the people wanted to be deceived, wanted to be lied to. He was just the man to do it.

Without becoming too Oliver Stone-ish, one can say that if future history reveals some Johnson involvement with the JFK assassination, it will not surprise. LBJ, it is widely known, hated JFK as much as one can and still work with him, and it *was* Texas.

This leaves us with a most disconcerting conclusion. Why was Johnson let lose on us? Why did God in His infinite wisdom and mercy allow such a man to impoverish not one generation with his madness, but generation after generation with his "compassion" run amok? Why did God entrust to such a man so important a matter as Vietnam, which Johnson mangled in mismanagement and lubricated with lies, let alone this nation? Why, when there were so many opportunities in the life of this man to be sidetracked to another sphere, was he, miraculously, turned around and headed right back to us like a smart bomb gone mad?

Could it be that when a people cease to act as if ideas have consequences; when they cease to act as if there is a right and wrong; when they cease to act as if moral conscience has meaning, both in themselves and in those whom they elect to lead them; when virtue ceases and vice erupts, that all their fear is changed into desire? If this is the case, then they have nothing else to look forward to but horror of bad ideas working out their more horrible consequences. Perhaps this is why John Jay, one of the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, wrote "Providence has given to our people to choose their rulers, and it is the duty as well as the privilege and interest of a Christian nation to select a preferred Christian as its ruler." Such a reflection may just be the needed astringent to apply to our minds before the upcoming November elections.