

Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. 506 pp. Illustrated.

Lyndon Baines Johnson's years as president in the 1960s were a time of extraordinary upheaval both in the United States and in the world. When he took office in the late fall of 1963, following the assassination of Kennedy, the U.S. had 16,000 "advisers" in remote Vietnam. The following year Johnson won an overwhelming victory in the presidential election. A new period of reform, summed up in the phrase "The Great Society," was about to begin.

Five years later, when Johnson retired from public life in shame and ignominy, the U.S. had 549,000 combat troops in the jungles of Vietnam. More than 30,000 Americans had lost their lives in the war, not to mention an even greater number of Vietnamese. At home, in the ghettos of the big cities and on college campuses, the situation occasionally approached a state of war. Arson, riots, and demonstrations became a common feature of daily life.

And that is not all. The Johnson administration witnessed a fundamental change in how people looked upon the presidency. From having been viewed by the average American with a respect bordering on worship, the office of president—and thus the office-holder himself—was seriously discredited in the space of only a couple of years. It is difficult today to recall just how thoroughly reviled Johnson was in broad circles. A well-known columnist, Richard Rovere, wrote shortly before Johnson's retirement: "What may well be a majority of the American people are persuaded that the President is a dishonest and dishonorable man" (quoted in Caro, p. 387).

Lyndon Johnson was undoubtedly one of the most controversial and most complex presidents in American history. Depicting his life and work requires good judgment and finely tuned instruments of analysis. Robert A. Caro, the American journalist and historian, possesses both and is now in the process of carrying out a remarkable project. For more than fourteen years he has been doing research about LBJ, as the president came to be called. Caro has gone through thousands of books and documents and has interviewed hundreds of people who had some connection with LBJ. The result, thus far, is two thick volumes which, in their breadth, richness of detail, and sharpness of outline surpass nearly everything else that has been written in the genre of political biography.

The first volume is entitled *The Path to Power* (Knopf, 1982). It delineates with great, in fact sometimes trying, thoroughness Johnson's upbringing and college years in the poor Hill Country region of Texas, his early contacts with big-time politics in Washington, D.C., and his first congressional election campaigns (he was elected in 1937). The book ends with his defeat in the senatorial election of 1941, when Lyndon was still only thirty-two years old.

Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, governor of the state many times over, and one of the most popular figures ever to appear on the Texas political scene. According to Caro, Stevenson was everything that LBJ was not: honest, untouchable, and principled, an old-fashioned conservative individualist who preferred lecturing to voters on constitutional issues to making election pledges to them.

An old style, on its way out of politics, was pitted against a new one. Stevenson carried out his campaign the way he always did. Sitting in an old automobile, he drove around voting districts and conversed with, rather than rallied, the voters. LBJ, on the other hand, mustered all the techniques we now associate with a modern election campaign: opinion polls, advertising spots on the radio, special mailings to key groups, etc. His backers—newly wealthy magnates in the state's oil and defense industries—saw to it that he had all the funding he needed.

Johnson eschewed no means that might help carry him to victory. Stevenson was cast as being on the side of the unions—a decided handicap in Texas—and very nearly a communist sympathizer, an absurd claim which nevertheless caught on to some extent as a result of Johnson's superior media resources (and Stevenson's peculiar habit of not bothering to answer criticism). What's more, LBJ used some one hundred so-called "missionaries," a euphemism for Johnson supporters who were sent around to cafés and bars to systematically slander his opponent.

When not even these methods helped, votes were bought—many votes, costing a lot of money. Manipulation and electoral fraud finally resulted in Johnson "winning" the election by a robust margin of 87 votes, the "87 votes that changed history." Caro's thesis is *not* that LBJ's methods were new to Texas politics (they were not), but rather that the extent of their use was unique. If the election had proceeded correctly and honestly, Stevenson would probably have won, and the 36th president of the United States would not have been named Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Caro's presentation of this election campaign is destined to be a classic. The reader is enthralled by the suggestive narrative style and amazed at the wealth of detail that the author has managed to dig out the archives. What I find bothersome is not so much the attempt to demonize LBJ, which is indeed evident, but rather the glorification of his opponent. Having read the description of Coke Stevenson and put the book aside for a moment, one reflects that no human being can be as good and angelic as this paragon. To quote from Garry Wills' perceptive review of Caro's book: "One finishes this long volume with the fear, page by page, that Bambi will show up in the final paragraph to lick Coke's cheek" (*The New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1990, p. 10).

Another objection is that the election campaign is presented as an exclusively Texan affair, which it hardly was. In 1948 deep disagreement on the issue of civil rights threatened to cleave the Democratic party right down the

Throughout the major part of this first volume there emerges a full-fledged *arriviste*, unencumbered by any ideology, keenly hungry for money and power, and prepared to do anything for the sake of getting ahead in politics. But the picture is not unmitigatedly black. For alongside his voracious appetite for power Johnson evinced a burning ambition and an almost unrivalled capacity for work. Coupled with his great ruthlessness there were also feelings of sympathy for the weak and a phenomenal ability, once he put his mind to it, to get things done.

The two faces of Lyndon Johnson, one bright, one dark, are both clearly portrayed in the first volume. In the second newly published book in the series, *Means of Ascent* (Alfred Knopf, 1990), the dark features dominate, leading critics to accuse Caro of "one-sidedness" and "character assassination." This type of criticism is like the Swedish soccer team in the World Cup: it misses the goal. The author points out in the introduction that, for special reasons, the brighter sides will be conspicuously absent from this particular volume. The alert reader will thus be prepared for what is to come.

To my mind, the question of Lyndon Johnson's "true character," which has thus far figured prominently in the debate about Caro's books, is a red herring, an aberration that obscures the central questions involved in the author's project. They are, rather: what does LBJ's career tell us about that elusive quantity called "power"? What does it tell us about the political system and culture of the United States? What is the relationship between means and ends in politics? What should it ideally be? Is it permissible or desirable, for example, to occasionally employ "dirty" methods to attain "noble" objectives? Anyone interested in such matters will find these captivating volumes a treasure-trove.

*Means of Ascent* depicts three episodes in Johnson's life from 1941 to 1948: his brief military service during World War II, his take-over of a failing radio station in Austin, and his 1948 election to the U.S. Senate. In all three of these cases our main character comes off in unflattering light.

Caro convincingly demonstrates what an easy time of it Lyndon had in the war and how immoderately he subsequently exaggerated his exploits. Similarly, it is shown that the future president took advantage of political connections in his acquisition of the radio station KTBC, the cornerstone of a financial empire that would eventually render him economically independent.

The book's *tour de force*, however, which takes up nearly half of the 506 pages, is the description of the 1948 senatorial election campaign. At the time Lyndon was an ordinary congressman, with no prospects of advancement beyond becoming chair of a committee in his old age. After his defeat in the 1941 senatorial race he lost his enthusiasm and motivation for political work for a while. A new, more lucrative, career in business beckoned.

But he decided to have one more crack at it when the opportunity arose in 1948. The only problem was that his opponent was Coke Stevenson, former

middle. President Truman put all his prestige on the line to pass a new civil rights law which would better look after the interests of the black population. This was vehemently opposed by many Southern Democrats, the so-called Dixiecrats, who were worried that racial conditions would change in the South. Lyndon Johnson entered into a kind of alliance with the Truman wing in exchange for their support in the legal imbroglio that arose out of the senatorial election. Unfortunately it is only at the end of the book that we are clued into this broader political strife, which obviously bears heavily on our judgment of the players involved.

Something else the book lacks, in my opinion, is a critical discussion of the problems of source reliability. Much of the substance of Caro's book is based on interviews with key persons. But these events took place in the distant past, and it is easy to imagine that various later opinions about the central course of events have had their effect on these people's memories. One would have wished the author had addressed this problem.

Robert Caro has by no means solved or laid to rest the problems of power in the books he has published to date (he has also written a brilliant study of New York developer Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*, 1974). But he has placed them under the loupe in the most intriguing manner by so thoroughly penetrating the way in which a full-blooded politician reached the temples of power. In subsequent volumes Caro will be turning the spotlight on Washington, D.C., the Senate, and the White House. It is with great expectations one awaits the completion of this *magnum opus*.