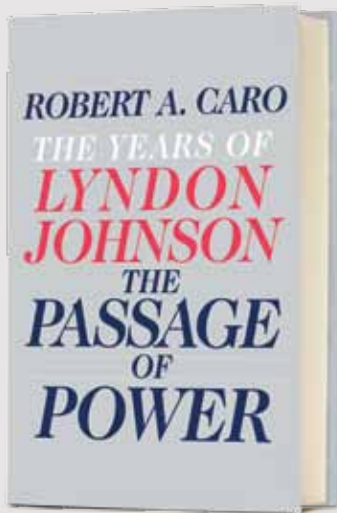


In Review

Master of the Game

Amassing power is one thing, wielding it is another



It would be difficult to imagine a more stunning and remarkable transition into leadership than that experienced by Lyndon Baines Johnson. In the space of those few horrible seconds in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, three rifle shots cracked through the air and changed the course of history. With President Kennedy mortally wounded in the limousine just ahead of his own, Vice President Johnson, whose political fortunes up to that moment were so bleak that he was mired in an extended depressive funk, was suddenly the president of the United States.

Having become a scorned, ridiculed (but mostly ignored) political ghost in the vibrant Kennedy administration, Johnson, who had given up his powerful leadership position in the U.S. Senate to join Kennedy's presidential ticket, had sunk into

near irrelevance. Smirking political insiders called him "Rufus Cornpone" and the oft-heard query around Washington about the former "master of the Senate" was, "Whatever happened to Lyndon Johnson?" His blood feud with Robert Kennedy only made things worse. Like a caged lion, he roared for a while and then fell into a quiet state of abject misery.

But an assassin's bullet changed all that in the shortest, breathtaking instant. Lyndon Johnson, with the president's bloodstained widow Jackie Kennedy by his side, took the oath of office on Air Force One just before the plane, carrying the dead president's body, set off for a solemn journey back to Washington.

In a small room at Parkland Memorial Hospital, when JFK's chief of staff Ken O'Donnell came in and said simply, "He's gone," Johnson's hang-dog look of the past three years disappeared. It was replaced by an expression that those who knew him the longest, his oldest aides and allies, recognized. "The big jaw jutting, the lips above it pulled into a tight, grim line, the corners turned down in a hint of a snarl, the eyes, under those long black eyebrows, narrowed, hard and piercing," Caro writes. "It was an expression of determination and fierce concentration; when Lyndon Johnson wore that expression, a problem was being thought through with an intensity that was almost palpable."

In "The Passage of Power," the fourth installment of his planned five-part biography "The Years of Lyndon Johnson," Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert A. Caro revisits the Kennedy assassination in a manner so riveting, so poignant, so masterful that it is as if one is read-

ing about it for the first time. By presenting the events from Johnson's point of view, Caro adds a powerful dimension to an historic moment we had believed had been as well documented as possible. There are dozens of LBJ biographies yet Caro finds a way to incorporate such remarkable detail with his sturdy writing style and unparalleled knowledge of his subject that history buffs will have their breath taken away. And the accomplishment goes well beyond history. It is an unmatched portrait of leadership achieved, lost and regained in a heroic manner that no great novelist could have conjured from the imagination.

For those of the '60s generation who were left with little compassion for LBJ and his unfortunate and misguided choice to escalate the war in Vietnam, Caro has provided the insight and nuanced understanding of this complex, driven politician that no one else has attempted. Few great historical figures live up to the overused cliché "larger than life," but Lyndon Johnson was such a man. Caro's biography is the kind generally reserved for history's greatest leaders, and he brilliantly makes the case that Johnson belongs in this high echelon.

In "The Passage of Power," set in the years 1958 to 1964, Caro reveals Johnson's complex personality fueled most notably by his deep-seated fear of defeat and humiliation, a humiliation a teenage Johnson experienced when his father, once a respected state senator whom he idolized, lost everything during the Depression and became an object of ridicule and scorn in their tiny hamlet in the impoverished Texas Hill Country.

Rising from such poverty, Johnson had a lifelong dream to become

president of the United States and openly declared it as often as possible. His emergence as the most powerful man in the U.S. Senate during the 1950s set the stage for a likely run for the White House. Caro spends the first half of this volume recounting Johnson's reluctance and ambivalence about leaping into the race until it was far too late to derail John F. Kennedy, the young, charismatic senator from Massachusetts. When JFK, believing he could not win the election without a palatable Southerner on the ticket, approached Johnson about taking the VP slot, Johnson had to weigh his difficult options. Believing his path to the White House was effectively blocked for good, LBJ joined the ticket. Caro explains that Johnson considered death in office as a possible route to the presidency. He had aides research the numbers, and they found that 10 vice presidents had eventually ascended to the presidency. Within that mix, seven presidents out of the 33 who had served, had died in office. This portentous scenario, seemingly far-fetched when it came to the apparently vigorous young Kennedy, proved to be tragically prescient.

On that fateful Dallas afternoon, LBJ wasted no time in establishing himself as the commander in chief, and not just of the military. After a deftly and sensitively handled transition period, Johnson cloaked himself in the mantle of power and leadership so effectively that he seemed destined for the job.

He cajoled most of JFK's Cabinet to remain with him through the remainder of the term, imploring each individually, "I need you more than Kennedy needed you." In an address to Congress five days after the assassina-

tion, Johnson said, "No memorial could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long." He cannily gave credit to Kennedy and then employed his mastery of congressional procedures, tactics and relationships to pass a once-doomed tax cut and bulldoze the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, Head Start, Medicare and a list of other Great Society legislation through a Congress that was nearly as partisan as it is today. In a time of openly advocated segregation and racism, this Texas rancher displayed powers of persuasion that turned the most hard-hearted obstructionists into willing players.

In what Caro writes was the end of his transition between the 35th and 36th presidencies, on Jan. 8, 1964, Johnson gave a State of the Union address. "Masterful as it was politically, it was much more as well," *Time* magazine reported. With this speech, he "had made the presidency his own," writes Caro, "put a stamp, a brand on it. He had done it with an announcement of a program with goals so new and ambitious that it was necessary to go back to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to find, perhaps not an

equal, but at least a comparison."

Profane, heavy-handed, and mean-tempered, LBJ could turn on the charm or fix a hesitant player with an icy gaze so intense that even the toughest opponents grudgingly offered respect. Caro's deft storytelling and deep research provide remarkable insight into this complex personality. Though his fellow Southern legislators assumed he was a segregationist, LBJ had empathy for the poor that could only be borne by someone who had lived such a life himself.

It would be no surprise if Caro wins another Pulitzer Prize for this volume, and his readers are eagerly awaiting the final installment — focused on Johnson's single full term as president — of this work. Great leaders, we repeatedly learn, frequently carry the baggage of flawed complexity and often-questionable integrity. We forgive their trespasses because they seem more than mortal. Beyond their flaws lies an inherent and extraordinary ability to pull diverse forces, often against intense resistance, toward a common center. Reading a magnificent treatise on how this happens is nearly as inspirational as witnessing such a leader in action in real time. !

THANKS BUT NO THANKS

65% of polled senior business executives believe a corporate CEO is as skilled as or better than a presidential candidate with a traditional political background. But only a quarter of those executives say they'd be interested in the job.

SOURCE: THE KORN/FERRY INSTITUTE

