“The View from the Top: Robert Caro's Portraiture of Lyndon Johnson”

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Review Article

“The View from the Top: Robert Caro’s Portraiture of Lyndon Johnson”


When asked about President Obama in a 2011 interview with the *New York Times*, poet laureate Philip Levine said,

> I think I voted for a man who is not as able and confident as I thought. When he campaigned, he seemed like a genius, but I think he may not have been up to the task... We need a bully... a really shrewd manipulator... It’s foolish to say this, but the guy we need right now is Lyndon Johnson.¹

Levine’s choice is apt. Having served as representative, senator, vice-president, and president, Johnson was one of the most formidable political actors in American history. He was not only “a bully” when it came to dominating others, but was indeed “a shrewd manipulator,” with a talent for political strategy unrivalled in the twentieth century. However, as Levine warns, such nostalgia may be “foolish” since Johnson applied his genius not only to civil rights and the Great Society, but to Vietnam as well. Robert Caro’s ongoing epic biography of Johnson provides us with the chance to reassess not only his life, but also the nature of political power in the United States. In an age where history from the bottom up has become the new common sense among progressive intellectuals, Caro’s view of the twentieth century through the eyes of one of its giants poses a

¹“Philip Levine Still Knows How to Make Trouble,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, November 6, 2011. This essay has benefited enormously from the critical comments offered by Tom Cheney, Paul Gray, Luke Hilton, Steve Maher, and Leo Panitch. I also thank Chad Lavin for his editorial assistance.
refreshing opportunity to reexamine the way we portray political actors in history and understand what structures their behavior.

First and foremost, it must be said that Caro’s volumes are simply literary masterpieces. The product of decades of meticulous research, encyclopedic in their historical detail, they are also often breathtaking in their creativity, ranging from panoramic sweeps of rural Texas, reminiscent of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, to page-turning chronicles of Washington intrigue that read like nail-biting political thrillers.

Caro frames Johnson’s life as driven by two unequal impulses: compassion and ambition. He recounts Johnson’s early years spent in the poverty and politics of the west Texas hill country, where he often watched his father, Sam Ealy Johnson, a member of the Texas state legislature, rail against “the interests” and advocate for those caught in the “tentacles of circumstance.” A politically principled man cast in the mold of farmer populism and dead-set against corruption, Sam Johnson, however, was not well suited to thrive in Texas state politics, where much of the compensation came in-kind from slick Austin lobbyists. Additionally, his stubborn determination to scrape together an idyllic family ranch from the cruel hills of west Texas only kept the Johnson family in poverty. Obsessively intent on escaping his poverty and powerlessness while avoiding the humiliating fate of his idealist father, Lyndon Johnson’s quest for power was born alongside a precocious instinct for pragmatism.

If Johnson shunned his father’s idealism for a more practical approach it was not because he was insensitive to the ends for which his father fought in vain. Caro’s pages are filled with innumerable moments when Johnson used, or abused, someone’s trust for his own personal advantage. Yet there is also evidence, if not nearly as much, to demonstrate the opposite: his compassion for those who suffer under conditions similar to his own impoverished upbringing. When at college, for instance, Johnson spent a year in the boarder town of Cotulla teaching primary education to poor Mexican immigrants. Caro recounts Johnson’s outrage at their dispossession, their lack of resources, demanding they learn English because it would be their only advantage in what was sure to be a difficult life. At the time, of course, Johnson had little power to do anything to change his students’ circumstances, falling back on English-immersion as the only practicable recourse. But, for Caro, the example is telling. When his drive for power was held in abeyance, Lyndon Johnson’s compassion came to the surface.

The portrait Caro paints of Lyndon Johnson calls to mind Machiavelli’s theory of the prince, the political actor with the skill and flexibility to take a reading of the balance of forces and formulate his strategy according to the contingent shifting of circumstances. Machiavelli’s primary concern was that Christian principles of charity and self-sacrifice, while certainly appropriate for private life, had no place in politics, an autonomous realm with a logic all of its own. An effective political actor must dispense with absolute, inflexible formulas by knowing what is necessary and when to do it. As Johnson once said, “it is not the job of a politician to go around saying principled things” (IV, p. xviii). It is a politician’s responsibility, Machiavelli and Johnson would have agreed, to get results.

But if for Machiavelli the ends justify the means, not all ends are equally legitimate. For Caro, Johnson’s inner compassion, however buried beneath a preternatural *Realpolitik*, was always at the ultimate end of his ambition. Thus Caro tells us that while power may sometimes corrupt, it always *reveals*; that is,
“when a man is climbing... he must conceal those traits that might make others reluctant to give [power] to him... Once the man has power, it is no longer necessary for him to hide those traits” (III, p. xxi). Once Johnson finally took the reins of power, then, his true self emerged. In one such revealing moment, during the hectic days following Kennedy’s assassination, as Johnson scrambled to take command over the administration and its legislative program, he cornered the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors and said:

Now I want to say something about all this talk that I’m a conservative who is likely to go back to the Eisenhower ways or give in to the economy bloc in Congress. It’s not so and I want you to tell your friends—Arthur Schlesinger, Galbraith, and other liberals—that it is not so. I’m no budget slasher... I am a Roosevelt New Dealer.

As a matter of fact, to tell the truth, John F. Kennedy was a little too conservative to suit my taste (IV, p. 397).

But just what such moments really reveal is not so clear. Johnson, we learn, also had a penchant for “working himself up,” committing himself emotionally and almost spiritually when taking up a new battle. Caro insists that Johnson’s eventual embrace of civil rights revealed that “empathy and compassion for black Americans had always been there inside Lyndon Johnson, but it had always been held in check” (III, p. 890). That may well be true, but it is not exactly clear how Caro knows this. It is telling that early on in his multivolume study Caro himself appears to render the opposite verdict when he tells us that “A hallmark of Johnson’s career had been a lack of any consistent ideology or principle, in fact of any moral foundation whatever—a willingness to march with any ally who would help his personal achievement” (I, p. 663). Whatever solidarity with the poor and people of color Johnson may have harbored, what was foremost on his mind when ramming through the 1964 Civil Rights Act was establishing his credibility with the senior Kennedy staff—a cohort that had always been suspicious, if not hateful, of him precisely because of his long legislative record defending the South from civil rights. In addition to revealing the compassionate Johnson that had necessarily remained concealed as he climbed the rungs of power, Caro’s study seems to simultaneously suggest a rival interpretation, one that does not so much reveal a moral undercurrent beneath Johnson’s ruthless exterior, but a man for whom ethics came after a strategically valuable target had been identified—a man for whom even ethics were instrumental.

Now one can debate the true inner sentiments of Johnson and the ambiguities surrounding the evidence, but Caro, while clearly sympathetic to his subject, is saying something more important. While these books are a biography of Lyndon Johnson, they are not only that. As in his previous biography of New York urban planner Robert Moses, Caro’s intention is not to tell the story of Lyndon Johnson as such but to examine how political power works through the “prism” of Johnson (III, p. xx).

Caro locates political power beyond the level of personality in the complex dynamics between structure and agency. His third volume, for instance, begins with a one hundred-page history of the Senate entitled “The Dam,” detailing its historical origin and the intention of the founding figures to design an institution that would stem the flow of social change. In the hands of the conservative Southern Bloc the Senate became the chief weapon with which the forces of
reaction resisted the abolition of slavery and, following the end of Reconstruction, exacted their unending revenge on the North by crushing every single attempt to pass civil rights legislation.

Not all forms of political power, however, are about obstruction and stasis. Caro stresses the transformative dimension of Johnson’s political practice. This quality was creative not merely in the lower, technical aspects of politics but on much higher levels... It was a capacity to look at an institution that possessed only limited political power—an institution that no one else thought of as having the potential for any more than limited political power—and to see in that institution the potential for substantial political power; to transform that institution so that it possessed such power; and, in the process of transforming it, to reap from the transformation substantial personal power for himself (III, p. 350).

Johnson was, to employ a favorite term of political science, a consummate “political entrepreneur,” one who “does not simply play by the rules of the game, but attempts to win the game by changing them.”

If the institutional configuration of the Senate conferred power on those who favored caution and gradualism, such a terrain proved frustrating to the freshman senator from Texas, eager to climb to the commanding heights of national power. But even Johnson’s rise to Senate majority leader, meteoric though it was, did not automatically confer any real power. Traditionally, Senate leaders had little formal authority over their colleagues, a feature which contributed to the chamber’s lethargic atmosphere and sluggish legislative process. By cleverly interpreting and utilizing ambiguous parliamentary procedures, however, Johnson changed the way the Senate worked (introducing rules that limited debate, streamlining committee functions, and creating party leverage where there had been no leverage before). By amending the long-practiced system of seniority committee appointments, Johnson rewarded junior senators with cherished committee positions that could subsequently be taken away if they were disloyal or refused to feed Johnson insider information. By gathering details about committee business he further inserted himself as mediator in legislative disputes. Whereas previously, the committees had been separate, proudly independent baronies; there were threads—slender but strong—between them now. And only the Leader knew all of those threads, and how they had been tied together. Only he knew the promises that had been made, the threats that had been withdrawn. The myriad legislative matters of a single Senate session made up a vast tapestry in which a thousand threads were interwoven in a complex, intricate pattern; only Lyndon Johnson knew that pattern (III, p. 560).

During high profile roll call votes Johnson even controlled the speed at which the names were read, gesturing faster or slower depending on how many reliable senators his aides had corralled from the cloakroom. Having “bent” an institution “that had seemed, during its previous century and three-quarters of existence, stubbornly unbendable,” Johnson was “leading the Senate the way a conductor led an obedient orchestra” (III, pp. xxii, xix).

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But Caro’s careful attention to the dynamics of structure and agency, richly insightful though it is, falls victim to some of the most pernicious problems of presidential history. This brings out a serious limitation of Caro’s use of Johnson as his “prism” through which to recount and understand the forces shaping postwar American politics. There is something inherent in the genre of political biography that almost guarantees that the subject’s impact on the course of history is likely to be overdrawn. This larger-than-life expository tendency often minimizes the degree to which the institutions or structures within which the actor is embedded constrain or shape their perceptions of what is happening and therefore what actions are possible. And while Caro’s books are very good at demonstrating the biases inscribed in state structures and the way these constraints act upon the behavior of political actors, he limits his attention to the formal institutions of the state. This excludes any consideration of how non-state social forces, like the civil rights movement, act as constraining or inducing influences on state actors. The latter is by no means absent from Caro’s pages; indeed, we are treated to exquisitely written descriptions of the quotidian experience of blacks in the Jim Crow South and the horrors of mob violence, the soaring rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr, and the ringing songs of protest in front of the White House gates. Yet aside from one moment when Johnson’s limousine passes through such a crowd en route to his historic State of the Union address where he invoked their chant, “we shall overcome,” there is little to no account of how the movement weighed on Johnson’s consciousness, of its contribution, however mediated, to the historic shift in the state’s role in the struggle for racial justice. The movement and Johnson narratives run parallel, eventually intersecting, but never interacting. Black Americans and other people of color are present in Caro’s books, but more as features of a landscape where only Lyndon Johnson has any real transformative power. While we get some isolated acts of black defiance, they mostly serve to convey that population’s victimization by the structures of white supremacy, which they are powerless to overcome. Two passages demonstrate the extremes to which this perspective tends:

Lincoln freed black men and women from slavery, but almost a century after Lincoln, black men and women—and Mexican-American men and women, and indeed most Americans of color—still did not enjoy many of the rights which America supposedly guaranteed its citizens; they did not—millions of them, at least—enjoy even the most basic right, the right to vote, and thereby choose the officials who governed them. It was Lyndon Johnson who gave them those rights (III, p. 715).

Abraham Lincoln struck off the chains of black Americans, but it was Lyndon Johnson who led them into voting booths, closed democracy’s sacred curtain behind them, placed their hands upon the lever that gave them a hold on their own destiny, made them, at last and forever, a true part of American political life (II, p. xxi).

But if Caro is a bit too pat about this, so too is the typical social history perspective that claims it is the civil rights movement that bears primary responsibility for the Civil Rights Acts. Both views fail to adequately portray the dialectical picture where the grass-roots uprisings provide part of the structure within which political insiders formulate policy and the effects of those policies.
open up new terrains of struggle. As the Wagner Act passed during Franklin
D. Roosevelt’s New Deal created new opportunities for the labor movement, so
too did Johnson’s Civil Rights Acts create new spaces for the intervention of social
forces. At its best moments this becomes a dynamic process where elite policies
further encourage while simultaneously legitimating popular pressures emanat-
ing from the streets, churches, and social movement organizations. While these
reforms will inevitably be partial and tainted by the compromises necessary for
their passage, it is the trajectory in which they tend that is most important, the
direction in which they push.

For many scholars writing today the presidential synthesis has been surpassed
by the shift to telling history from the bottom up, which is not only a reorientation
of research interests and methods but a commitment to reveal the agency of the
victims whose voices are otherwise lost in the narratives of the victors. But Caro’s
books force us to ask: has the view from the heights of power been abandoned too
hastily? It should not be controversial to say that social movements, no matter
their power, do not draft, debate, vote on, or reconcile legislative bills. They do
not, and they cannot, guide bills through the winding paths of congressional
committees. While the implications may well be unsettling it is nonetheless the
case that as potent a force for change as the civil rights movement had become by
the mid-1960s, it was the personal intervention of Lyndon Johnson and his
unrelenting drive that got the civil rights bills passed. As Richard Russell, the
most powerful southern senator and mentor to Johnson, said after learning that
his protégé planned to apply his power to the late president’s stalled legislative
program, “he’ll pass them… We could have beaten Kennedy on civil rights, but
not Lyndon Johnson” (IV, p. 465).

Caro’s biography of Johnson represents history from the top down at its best.
While it does not transcend all the typical limits of its genre, it contains invaluable
insights into the nature of power and the intricacies of elite politics in the United
States—insights of which progressive intellectuals ought to take note. History
from the bottom up is not inherently better than its elite rival if it only provides
partial explanations from a different vantage point. As inextricably linked, social
history that cannot also explain political history remains incomplete in its
explanatory power, and therefore limits its impact on the world that it studies.
If we are disappointed with the outcome of Obama’s post-partisan politics and
tempted to look back with nostalgia at the awesome power of Lyndon Johnson, we
must not only acknowledge the importance of the individuals in the state, but the
social forces that shape the context in which they act.

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Notes on Contributor

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