

**Book Review: Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the
American Dream***

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Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream, Doris Kearns first book, published three years after LBJ's death, present one of the first drafts of history for our thirty-sixth President. President Johnson chose the twenty-five year old Doris Kearns from the White House Fellows program for his staff after he shocking announced to the nation that he would not seek another term as President of the United States. The choice surprised many since the Harvard doctoral candidate had coauthored an article critical of LBJ's Vietnam policy in the *New Republic* titled "How to Remove LBJ in 1968". After his Presidency ended, he asked her to live at the LBJ ranch and help him write his autobiography, *The Vantage Point*. Kearns spent long weekends and breaks from her teaching of government at Harvard at the ranch with Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson. Their relationship lasted the last five years Lyndon Baines Johnson's life.

Thesis

Doris Kearns attempts to analyze the childhood, look at the conflicting demands his parents put on him and see how the larger than life personality that emerged dealt with each stage of his political rise and fall. Famed developmental psychologist and Harvard professor Erik Erikson is referred to frequently. Johnson's motives for giving such access to his personal recollections and papers in the final stage of his life lead to speculation. "Perhaps, even at the end, Lyndon Johnson was looking, planning, for some chance to achieve that place in history that meant so much to him" (Kearns, pg. 18). Kearns acknowledges that other biographers will examine how truthful LBJ was with her. "What I offer here is simply my account and my interpretation of what Johnson told me in last stage of his life." (Kearns, pg. 17)

Several questions emerged out of our summer sessions of TAH that led me to choose LBJ. I was particularly interested in LBJ's early career and his rise to power. Harvard Law Professor Michael Klarman raised the point in his excellent book on *Brown v. Board of Education*, that this Supreme Court decision to force school integration created a backlash that drove southern politicians into a radical segregationist position if they wanted to get elected. How did Texas politician, LBJ, achieve his civil rights legacy in this climate? Klarman responded that powerful men like Georgia Senator Richard Russell, saw LBJ had national potential and protected him. But LBJ was already a Senator when he was allowed to avoid this litmus test.

Mark Lytle (Professor of History, Bard College) points to an incident in his book on the 1960's where the Vice Presidential candidate and Lady Bird Johnson landed in Dallas to shore up much needed support for Senator John Kennedy. The Johnson's were greeted by the "mink coat mob" (Lytle, pg. 103), angry female supporters of Congressman Bruce Alger, a John Birch Society supporter, who viewed LBJ's civil rights stance as communist inspired. Lady Bird's white gloves were grabbed from her, thrown in the gutter and the Johnsons were yelled at and spat upon. Obviously LBJ was not given a complete pass on civil rights. However, the Democratic ticket did carry Texas and the election.

Doris Kearns was at her best in this biography illustrating how the LBJ personality, work ethic, ability to quickly size up people and along with political circumstance, helped him on the path to becoming the most powerful man in the world. Johnson had the skill to take job, turn into a much more powerful position, impress his superiors by learning everything about them and making himself indispensable. LBJ accompanied his father Sam, who like his father before

him was a Texas State Legislator. At San Marcos College he ingratiated himself to the president, Cecil Evans, and became an assistant when they made trips to the Legislature. Lyndon became a school leader, editor of the campus newspaper and when he needed money to finish school, secured a position as a principal of a rural elementary school in Cotulla, Texas through a recommendation from Evans. While finishing up at San Marcos, Johnson successfully ran a campaign for the Texas State Senate for Welly Hopkins. A grateful Hopkins recommended LBJ to the newly elected United States Congressman Richard Kleburg. Johnson left his position at Sam Houston High School to become a legislative assistant in Washington, D.C. in 1931. Running the congressional office, outworking the disinterested Congressman by going above and beyond for Texas constituents, LBJ was learning, gathering information, and developing a name for himself back home.

In 1935 Lyndon Johnson got his chance to become part of the New Deal. The day the National Youth Administration was announced; Johnson lobbied the Texas Congressional delegation and was appointed Director of the Texas NYA. He became the youngest NYA Director in the country, in charge of finding sponsors for 18,000 Texas youth that needed work. Working eighteen hour days, lining up 350 sponsors, Texas became a model for the NYA and Johnson's efforts even came to the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt.

Within a year, LBJ's political break came. The United States Congressman from Johnson's district, James P. Buchanan died. Senator Alvin Wirtz advised LBJ's campaign and \$10,000 of Lady Bird's inheritance got it started. At the time, FDR was being criticized for the Supreme Court packing scheme. LBJ was the first of the eight candidates to come out and strongly

support the President's efforts. Campaigning tirelessly, he pledged to bring electricity to his poor farming district, a promise he would keep. At twenty-eight years old, LBJ was a United States Congressman.

Johnson continued to cultivate men of power. LBJ's first meeting with President Roosevelt, he expressed interest in naval affairs, which led to a seat on the prestigious House Committee on Naval Affairs. Fellow Texan Sam Rayburn would become a powerful ally as Speaker of the House. After "Landslide Lyndon" won a Senate seat by 87 votes, he immediately attached himself to one of the most powerful members, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia. A bachelor workaholic, LBJ would often cook him breakfast to gain access.

The Senate is where LBJ excelled. He used his connections to become the party whip, a position not many Democratic Senators wanted. Eventually Johnson became the Minority Leader then the Majority Leader. There were only ninety-five other Senators to get to know everything about. LBJ expanded membership of key Senate committees to be used as perks for junior Senators. Most Senate bills were decided behind closed doors where Johnson could control information and effectively use his powers of persuasion. Johnson would not waste his time or political capital pursuing lost causes. This limited open debate and legislation went through quickly. He deferred to the popular President Dwight Eisenhower on matters of foreign policy. When the public focus turned to the Little Rock, Arkansas school desegregation crisis, LBJ pushed through the first Civil Rights bill since Reconstruction. When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, Johnson's efforts were largely responsible for the creation of NASA.

As President, LBJ was able to use the same techniques to persuade Congress to pass an enormous amount of “Great Society” legislation. Johnson skillfully used the legacy of John Kennedy after the assassination and his own landslide victory mandate to pass Medicare, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act. His powers failed him later in his presidency when he could not control information about Vietnam. People watched the Tet Offensive on television and it did not match the administration spin on the war. The “credibility gap” along with the war itself, would devastate the Johnson Presidency.

Another question I always had about Lyndon Johnson was the source of his fortune. Born poor, starting out as a teacher, then becoming a career politician, how did he amass such wealth? Doris Kearns gave me a partial answer.

Lady Bird (the former Claudia Taylor) used \$10,000 of her inheritance to help finance her husband’s first successful run for Congress. Kearns does a credible job outlining how the Johnson’s bought the debt ridden Austin radio station KTBC in 1943 for \$17,500. The Johnsons somehow avoided conflict of interest inquiries even though Lyndon was on The Senate Finance Committee which oversaw FCC and appointments. In a Pulitzer Prize winning series in the *Wall Street Journal* Louis Kohlmeier wrote “ Like two young oaks springing up side by side, the LBJ careers in government and business grew mightily---their trunks rising parallel and their branches intertwining.” (Kearns pg. 99) KTBC made \$18 the first year. By 1964 it was making the Johnsons \$500,000 a year and was worth over \$7,000,000.

Robert Caro, in volume one (of three) of his biography of LBJ published six years after Doris Kearns describes two other sources of wealth. Charles Marsh was a powerful owner of

fourteen newspapers in Texas. Further investments in oil wells and land made Marsh just the kind of powerful older man that Lyndon made his business to cultivate. Marsh was a cultured man who traveled extensively with very attractive woman, Alice Glass. She was the mother of his two children and half his age. Charles and Alice had heard Hitler speak and actively helped prominent Jewish refugees escape Europe. Congressman Johnson became part of Marsh's circle by helping a promising conductor from Vienna with a visa problem allowing him to stay in the United States. In return Charles Marsh gave LBJ positive publicity and sold the Johnson's prime Austin real estate for the same price he had bought it for years before, \$12,000. Despite these indulgencies, Lyndon had a long time affair with Alice Glass.

The man who provided a road to the first time land owners was hard edge boss, Herman Brown, of Brown & Root. Herman Brown was originally skeptical of the young candidate for the Tenth Congressional District. Brown & Root had already spent \$1,500,000 to get started building the Marshall Ford Dam (later renamed the Mansfield Dam) and was having a problem with final congressional authorization. LBJ gained their confidence and support by getting the final authorization for the dam pushed through Congress. After LBJ's defeat in his first campaign for the United States Senate, an Internal Revenue Service investigation turned up hundreds of thousands of dollars Brown & Root had paid out in "lawyer's fees " and "bonuses" that had ended up illegally in LBJ's failed campaign. The same day Texas Senator Alvin Wirtz and Johnson met with FDR, the six IRS agents who had been working the case for eighteen months were replaced with a single agent. The new investigation took three days and concluded there was not enough evidence for fraud indictments. Brown & Root eventually paid

\$372,000 in back taxes and penalties. Brown & Root today is known as KBR and is the construction arm of Halliburton.

Doris Kearns only mention of Herman Brown was that when Johnson had his heart attack in June 1955, he was at Brown's Virginia estate. She does not mention Charles Marsh at all. Kearns does state that on some matters the President swore her to secrecy and they do not appear in the book. LBJ might not have wanted revelations of back door financing getting in the way of his Horatio Alger life story. As for Alice Glass and other women in LBJ's life, Kearns may have left them out of respect for Lady Bird.

Lyndon Johnson was President when I was in junior high and high school. In my teaching, I find it takes more effort to be objective about eras I lived through. Doris Kearns had even more biases to deal with. Going from taking a public stance against "Johnson's war" and then developing a personal five year relationship had to create conflicts with her objectivity. She does a great job describing LBJ's personality (although the psychoanalysis wears thin at times) and methods of dealing with government institutions on his path to power and how they ultimately led to his downfall. I found the career before the Presidency to be the most interesting part of the book. This led me to look at Robert Caro's more unvarnished version of LBJ to get a more complete picture.

In the PBS American Experience video on LBJ Johnson at one point is described as a deal maker without convictions. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* did a convincing job portraying a man who cared about all Americans, even the poor and less fortunate. Lyndon Johnson was pragmatic and would only act when he could control the outcome of the deal.

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