
Female: From the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

Sheryl Cannady: Hello, I'm Sheryl Cannady at the Library of Congress. It's my pleasure to introduce Robert Caro, who is the winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, and the National Book Award, among many other honors. He is the author of several critically acclaimed books about the 36th president of the United States, Lyndon Johnson.

Mr. Caro, you've spent more than 30 years researching and writing about Lyndon Johnson. With a final volume yet to be published, what aspects of Johnson's character or career most fascinate you?

Robert Caro: Well, his use of political power. I don't regard these books as just a biography of Lyndon Johnson. I never had any interest in writing the life of a great man, whether it be Robert Moses or Lyndon Johnson. My books are studies of political power, and the thing that fascinates me most about Johnson, and that just gets more fascinating the longer I get into it, is his absolute genius in the use of political power.

Sheryl Cannady: Now you've written about Johnson's legislative genius. In his recent review of your latest book on the 36th president, Bill Clinton credits Johnson with, "More ability to move legislation through the House and Senate than just about any other president in history." How do you think Johnson's legislative skills would fare in today's congressional climate?

Robert Caro: Well, he probably wouldn't approach things the same way 'cause it's a different atmosphere. But I think he had such a genius in acquiring and using power that he would become a legislative force no matter what the conditions were. Part of the nature of political genius is that it can do something where no one else could do it before.

Before Johnson became majority leader of the Senate, the Senate really had been in the same almost dysfunctional body for a century, since the Civil War. He becomes majority leader in 1955, and is majority leader for six years. And during those six years, the Senate is a center of government energy and ingenuity and creativity in Washington. He leaves, and the Senate almost immediately goes back to being a dysfunctional body, so he was almost unique in his ability to make it work.

Conditions are different today. You have to approach things differently today. But Johnson, no matter what situation he found

himself in as a young man, as a Congressman, always found a way to get power for himself out of the conditions in some institution, and make the institution work.

Sheryl Cannady: Was this an innate trait that he had, or did he learn it?

Robert Caro: *[Laughs]* That's a good question. He seems to have had it almost from his earliest days. We see him at college, creating a political organization. It was a small college in Texas where campus politics had never mattered. He makes it matter, creates a campus political organization, and that organization helps him when he was appointed to his first federal job as Texas administrator of the National Youth Administration, and when he goes to Congress. Not when he goes to Congress, but when he is running for Congress.

Sheryl Cannady: Now in this election season, one thinks about the extraordinary conditions under which President Johnson was inaugurated following Kennedy's assassination.

Robert Caro: Yes.

Sheryl Cannady: By comparison, his second inaugural drew a record 1.2 million people, a record not broken until President Obama's 2009 inaugural.

Robert Caro: *[Laughs]* I didn't know that.

Sheryl Cannady: Now how do you think he felt about his second inaugural, considering the tragic circumstances of his first one?

Robert Caro: Well, that's another good question. He knew, like the first inaugural, his main task is to create in America, a sense of continuity, of stability so that the country will feel that although President Kennedy was assassinated, the country is still on a firm, steady course. So his key words in his first speech are, "Let us continue." That's not the first inaugural, but that's his first speech, the speech he gives to the joint session of Congress four days after Kennedy is assassinated.

Now then he realizes that first he pushes through Kennedy's stalled legislation, the Civil Rights Bill, the Tax Cut Bill, among those pieces of legislation. But then he tells friends, "Now it's time to make the presidency my own," and in his first inaugural speech, which was in January 1964, he sets out a new course, a new policy, the War on Poverty, which is his great initiative. And he follows

that up with a great society, so we see a transition from continuity, to making the presidency his own.

Sheryl Cannady: You've recently said that Barack Obama is Lyndon Johnson's legacy. Can you elaborate on that, please?

Robert Caro: Yes. When Lyndon Johnson sets out to pass the Voting Rights Act, black people in America are so restricted in their voting, particularly in the south, but in the north, also, that only 11 percent of black voters who are eligible to vote actually cast ballots. Physical intimidation is used against them in the south. It is made very difficult for them to register, and economic intimidation, losing your job if you register is used against them.

Johnson passes the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which really bring black Americans fully into the American political process. And 43 years later, in 2008, which really is just a blink of history's eye, there is an African American in the White House. That's what I mean by saying that Barack Obama is Lyndon Johnson's legacy.

Sheryl Cannady: Now you mentioned the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Obviously, there are some concerns that that issue is being revisited.

Robert Caro: Yes.

Sheryl Cannady: What do you think about that? Is there some validity in that?

Robert Caro: Legislation always has to be revisited. Conditions change and you have to take another look at things. But the basics, the great stride for social justice that the Voting Rights Act is, that can't be changed. That shouldn't be changed. Martin Luther King said the moral arc of the universe bends slowly, but it bends towards justice. Well, with that Voting Rights Act, Lyndon Johnson gave that moral arc a real bend. He made it bend, and I don't think even if this act is revisited, that will ever be reversed.

Sheryl Cannady: Good news. One more question.

Robert Caro: *[Laughs]*

Sheryl Cannady: *[Laughs]* One more question.

Robert Caro: Good news, if I'm right.

[Laughter]

Sheryl Cannady: The nation will be marking the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War. The challenges faced by Lincoln are being revisited, most notably a nation deeply divided on the issue of race. Like Lincoln, Johnson's true motives on promoting racial equality have been questioned. Have you come to any conclusions about that?

Robert Caro: Yes. The reason it's questioned, and, of course, it's a legitimate reason to question is that for no less than 20 years in Congress, from 1937 when he came to Congress as a young representative from Texas, to 1957, his record was on the side of the south. He not only voted with the south on Civil Rights, but he was a southern strategist. He wasn't just a southern soldier in the Congress and Senate, he was southern strategist. In fact, he was the protégé of the segregationist leader, Richard Brevard Russell, of Georgia, who was the head of the renowned and powerful southern caucus, the southern block in Congress.

But in 1957, Johnson changes and pushes through the first Civil Rights Bill since reconstruction in, I think, 82 years. Wish you would check that. It says in the introduction to the book, but I believe it's 82. The first Civil Rights Act in 82 years.

Now people, therefore, say did he do this just because of political opportunism. And, of course, political opportunism, as always with Johnson, plays a role in it. He's still hoping to become the democratic presidential nominee in 1960, and he realizes he's never going to get that, unless he changes his position on Civil Rights. But did he always want to change his position on Civil Rights? Yes. And I'll tell you how I think I know that – well, let me just go back.

I say in the book that he always had this compassion, this true, deep compassion to help poor people, and particularly poor people of color. But his overriding, even stronger than the compassion, was his ambition, and as long as ambition and compassion were pointing in different directions, the ambition saying he had to be on the side of the south to rise to power in the Senate, then the ambition would always win. But when the year aligned, when compassion and ambition finally are pointing in the same direction, then Lyndon Johnson becomes a force for racial justice, unequalled certainly since Lincoln.

And how do I feel I know that this was sincere? Because when he's 20 years old, he's going to this small college in Texas and he's so poor that he has to drop out of school and teach for a year, and he teaches at what's called the Mexican School in Cotulla,

Texas, little dusty town of Cotulla, Texas.

I wrote that no teacher – this is a quote from my first book, *The Path to Power*, “No teacher had ever cared if these kids learned or not. This teacher cared. And not only did he work so hard at teaching the kids, he taught the janitor.” That’s how I feel I know he was sincere. The janitor’s name was Thomas Coronado. Johnson wanted him to learn English. He bought him a textbook, and every day before and after school, they’d sit on the front steps of the school and Coronado says, “Johnson would pronounce. I would repeat. Johnson would spell. I would repeat. I believe he always wanted to help.”

And he gets to be president, and he tells one of his aids, Richard Goodwin, who asked the same question you do, really, in a more veiled way, “Is this sincere?” and he says, “You know, I’ll tell you something. I swore back then when I was teaching those kids that if I ever had the power to help them, I’d use it, and I’ll tell you a secret. Now I have the power, and I mean to use it.” Yes, I think Johnson’s compassion, his desire for racial justice was sincere, and very deep.

Sheryl Cannady: Mr. Caro, thank you very much for an enlightening conversation.

Robert Caro: Sure. Thank you.

Female: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at LOC.gov.

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