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EMAIL

# The Big Guy

**Marshall Frady**

NOVEMBER 7, 2002 ISSUE

*The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*

by Robert A. Caro

Knopf, 1,167 pp., \$35.00

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## 1.

Lyndon Johnson was indeed, as has become almost a commonplace by now, a being of Shakespearean dimensions—a hulking, bush-country colossus, gargantuan of ego and energy, of self-delusions and glooms and paranoias, crass cruelties and rampant vulgarities, but gargantuan also in his benevolent ambitions. All he wanted was to be the greatest president in the history of the Republic, by abolishing with his Great Society benefactions all poverty, hunger, and racial wrong from the land.

Given in his oscillations of mood to a lugubrious woebegoneness—“He could be just the saddest-looking thing,” remembers Roger Wilkins, one of his administration deputies—Johnson while president brooded ponderously over how he was discounted by the intellectual left as a blustering boor. He thus attempted to disguise himself in his public appearances in the improbably solemn mien of some Episcopal archbishop or Ivy League chancellor. But before that, as a young Texas hill-country congressman and then senator, he had a brawling, uncontainable aliveness, once, in galumphing conviviality, leaping atop a table in a Spanish restaurant to stomp out a flamenco. He was an effusive raconteur as well, mimicking his subjects like a master actor, with expressions of glee, dismay, lechery, piety scampering over his face.

He had the same gusto in all things, eating, smoking, and whiskey-drinking “like a man who had a date with a firing squad,” Russell Baker once remarked, and his carnal romplings ranged from stray scrimmagings to more operatic passions like his long romance with the former actress Helen Gahagan Douglas, a mare-like beauty then a member of the House from California. Johnson’s intrepidly dutiful wife, Lady Bird, would later gamely offer, “Lyndon loved *people*. It would be unnatural for him to withhold love from half the people.” On the whole, it was as if he had been born with some extra

helping of an almost monstrous vitality, Johnson himself once allowing, “I keep myself on a leash, just like you would an animal.”

If so, it was only a very occasional and loose leash. He early became fabled for a Rabelaisian earthiness, urinating in the parking lot of the House Office Building as the urge took him; if a colleague came into a Capitol bathroom as he was finishing at the urinal there, he would sometimes swing around still holding his member, which he liked to call “Jumbo,” hooting once, “Have you ever seen anything as big as this?,” and shaking it in almost a brandishing manner as he began discoursing about some pending legislation. At the same time, he would oblige aides to take dictation standing in the door of his office bathroom while he went about emptying his bowels, as if in some alpha-male ritual assertion of his primacy. Even on the floors of the House and Senate, he would extravagantly rummage away at his groin, sometimes reaching his hand through a pocket and leaning with half-lifted leg for more thorough access.

Yet he had an overwhelming presence. “He’d come on just like a tidal wave sweeping all over the place,” Hubert Humphrey marveled. “He went through walls.... He’d take the whole room over.” At the same time, he seemed to have a preternatural capacity for quickly sounding the innermost truths of whoever was before him—the actual compulsions of vanity or ambition or grievance, submerged beneath whatever the man might be telling him. An old Johnson familiar told me once, “When it came to dealing psychologically with other men, he was like Bach playing the organ pipes. But it was also like he knew almost too much about human nature, *too much* about the way people are, to move to any higher perspective.”

From that faculty came what would later be famous as the Johnson Treatment, a ferocious manner of persuasion that proceeded by a kind of progressive physical engulfment: wrapping one giant arm around a colleague’s shoulder with his other hand clenching his lapel, then straightening the senator’s tie knot, then nudging and punching his chest and spearing a forefinger into his shirt, Johnson would lower his face closer and closer to his subject’s in escalating exhortation until the man would be bowed backward like a parenthesis mark. More diminutive members, like Rhode Island’s John Pastore, he would hoist by their lapels up to his face with their shoe-tips barely grazing the floor.

At times, approaching a senator sitting in one of the couches in the cloakroom, Johnson would sink down beside him and commence to, in effect, cage the man, crossing one long leg in front of the senator like a railroad-crossing gate while curling his other arm behind the man to knead his shoulder, then clamping a hand to the man’s thigh. “I want to see ‘em, feel ‘em, smell ‘em,” Johnson once explained. Indeed, it was like a compulsion, in all encounters he cared about, to connect also through an elemental physicality: seated while president next to the patrician wife of Mexico’s president in a brutally hot sun, he took a heavy, lip-smacking swig from a glass of water and held it out to the elegant lady, inviting her to share a swallow with him.

There was, in all, something deep and knowing about the voracious immediacy in his dealings with other people. In that sense, perhaps few presidents, up to, arguably, Bill Clinton, have been quite so primally human.

To be sure, that Johnson can be found in the 1,040 pages of the third volume, *Master of the Senate*, of Robert Caro's gigantic projected tetralogy, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. Totalling some 2,500 pages so far, it has already become a work that is stunning in, if nothing else, the sheer Brobdingnagian magnitude of its narrative ambition, a feat of reportorial industry impossible not to admire. The difficulty in Caro's third volume, though, is that the intermediary passage of Johnson's progress it follows, his twelve years in the Senate, was largely confined to parliamentary theater—hardly without moment in that time of McCarthy malaria and the massing of the cold war. But that it would take Caro over a thousand pages, far more than in either of his previous volumes, to narrate this interim stage in Johnson's story would seem a testimonial to its indefinite dramatic currency; and one cannot escape the impression that Caro has expended great effort to somehow make it matter with a piling up of words about it.

Over those expanses of prose, one bafflingly encounters profusely detailed but strangely weightless stretches—including an opening hundred-page exploration of the evolution of the Senate—in which Johnson himself recedes virtually out of sight. Throughout there are arrestingly rich scenes—Johnson's feverish mirage that he was a serious candidate at the 1956 Democratic convention; the night of the Senate vote on the 1957 civil rights bill when the galleries filled from dinner parties and embassy receptions over town with spectators still in jewels and formal evening dress. But those scenes mostly decorate what turn out to be, like the passage of that 1957 civil rights bill itself, essentially pseudo-happenings.

More dispiritingly, there persists from the prior two volumes Caro's understanding of Johnson, which reduces him to a mere vast appetite for power—as if he amounted to not much more than a stupendous political Snopes. To the actual mysterious fugue of Johnson's interior urgencies and compassions and dreads, Caro has applied the flattening overlay of a simplistic cynicism that his “empathy and tenderness for people oppressed... was not as strong as his need for power,” that what most drove him was “not the desire to ‘help somebody’ but to ‘be somebody.’” That characterization impelled Caro in his previous volume to transmogrify Johnson's opponent in the 1948 Senate race, former governor Coke Stevenson—by almost any measure one of Texas's more paleolithic conservatives and racists—into a kind of cowboy statesman of a rough frontier nobility, all for the sake of contriving a morally melodramatic contrast with Johnson's supposed feral rapacity. Portraits of great grotesques carry their own fascinations, of course, but they don't make for tragedy—they “grieve no universal bones,” in Faulkner's phrase—if, as when Johnson came to his tremendous capsizing over Vietnam, nothing of value, nothing once grand and moving, is really lost in the fall.

Having been somewhat belabored by such critics as Garry Wills, Ronald Steel, and Murray Kempton for his single-dimensional casting of Johnson in his first two volumes as mainly just a political raptor, Caro in *Master of the Senate* seems to feel obliged to offer such pronouncements as,

In the twentieth century... Lyndon Baines Johnson was the greatest champion that black Americans and Mexican-Americans and indeed all Americans of color had ... in all the halls of government.

Still, Caro contends that whatever good Johnson brought about was mostly just a by-blow of his rapacity—that if “Lyndon Johnson’s interests always came first with Lyndon Johnson, there were times when those interests coincided with...the cause of social justice,” but “it would have to be compatible with the ambition.”

The improbable result of this somewhat mechanistic formulation was that Johnson became, as Caro acknowledges, “the President who wrote mercy and justice into the statute books by which America was governed.” But somehow there is a certain gawky artificiality to Caro’s efforts now to reconcile that appreciation with his other, running characterization of Johnson as a creature, as posed in an earlier volume, empty of “any consistent ideology or principle, in fact of any moral foundation whatsoever.”

Even so, in those seemingly irresolvable dissonances in Caro’s construction of his character there lie, like a kind of shadow text, intimations of the true mystery of Johnson’s story.

## 2.

He had come out of the vast vacant South Texas hill country, a scruffy barren under wizened trees and the occasional distant slow flutter of a windmill in its far voiceless spaces. Here, Johnson had grown up on the shabbier outer fringes of the ruling order of his time and place, in a starkly bare household of the wasted gentry. His father was a frenetically ambitious populist state politician battling for people “caught,” as he once declared, “in the tentacles of circumstance”; but he was improvident and ineffectual in trying to scrabble together a name and station for himself. Caro’s notion is that it was the disastrous consequences for his family of his father’s “idealism” that forever after propelled Johnson “with the feverish, almost frantic intensity that...was really desperation and fear, the fear of a man fleeing something terrible.”

But there can be no doubt of the authenticity of Johnson’s own early surges of populist passion. Scantly educated, laboring for a time on a road gang, he spontaneously identified with the lowly and outcast around him, and as a twenty-year-old teacher in a Mexican-American school in a glum little South Texas town, he heaved his entire being into trying to remake the spirits, minds, and lives of these children of a long-abject and disregarded underclass, to fit them to enter into a full citizenship. While Texas director of the New Deal’s National Youth Administration, he labored to salvage the futures of thousands of otherwise derelict youths, and as a perfervid New Dealer congressman during Franklin Roosevelt’s second term, he struggled mightily against power-utility interests to bring electricity to the still primeval outback of his hill-country district.

By the time he arrived in Washington as a twenty-eight-year-old congressman, he had already come to seem something of a political prodigy—a tall gangling youth with a certain dark gloss about him, wearing ties as wide as a shovel blade, which were illustrated with scenes of Texas ranchland and oil derricks. But he had a thin-eyed simmering look that betrayed immense interior hankerings. He

instructed one aide to simply use his initials in press releases: “FDR– LBJ—do you get it?” He abhorred being just one of the herd in the House—even at dinner parties, if the center of discussion slipped from him to someone else around the table, he would shortly nod off. He moaned to one confidant about the likely pace of any unfolding of his own advent in the House, “Too slow. Too slow.”

After having allowed himself to be out-stolen in the vote count in his first campaign for the Senate, Johnson in 1948 succeeded in conjuring sufficiently more imaginary votes than Coke Stevenson—a final statewide margin of eighty-seven—to deliver himself at last into the Senate. Entering that marbled, soft-lit sanctum for the first time during a recess, he paused for a long look around and then, as an aide with him later recalled, murmured that it was just “the right size.” It was as if he instantly recognized it as the sort of theater, compact and insular and discreet, with its small cast of individual players, that was perfectly proportioned for the exercise of his particular personal powers.

But the Senate also happened to be an institution self-fortified against anyone exerting command over its individual members. The important authority over its proceedings was apportioned by Senate rules to the elders presiding as chairmen of its fifteen major committees, an arrangement like that of so many independent sultanates. Moreover, the leadership of those committees was decided, not through appointment or election or collegial considerations of ability, but through the Senate’s long-sacrosanct canon of seniority.

Nonetheless, Johnson had always prospered by a nimbly diligent cultivation of older men who had already arrived at positions of eminence vital to his own fortunes—earlier including Roosevelt himself, then Daddy figures like, in the House, its dour speaker, fellow Texan Sam Rayburn. Behind Rayburn’s crustily authoritarian deportment dwelled, Johnson quickly sensed, a deeply shy soul, a man who had been married once long ago for three weeks and had been ever since a self-enclosed figure, childless, solitary, lonely. Johnson thus began inviting Rayburn to his small apartment for dinners cooked by Lady Bird, and at sessions in Rayburn’s office he would sometimes lean over and kiss Rayburn atop his glassily bald dome, occasionally muttering, “How are you, my beloved?” Rayburn, while he was heard once grumping, “I don’t know anyone who is as vain or more selfish than Lyndon Johnson,” nevertheless came to cherish him. Listening to him enthusing to others about how Mr. Sam had become like a father to him, Rayburn would sometimes brim with tears.

Now in the Senate, Johnson found his Sam Rayburn in the person of Richard Russell of Georgia, one of that chamber’s preeminent grandees—a taciturn, scrupulously reserved Dixie brahmin with the look and carriage, his long slack pharaonic-nosed face lifted high, of an aristocratic hound. In particular, Russell happened to head that inner conclave of power within the Senate in which, through the genteel workings of the seniority system, it was as if the South, having lost on the battlefield, had then proceeded patiently to reverse that verdict with its senators and congressmen abiding through the years, through the folk loyalties of the tribal politics back home, to ultimately appropriate the Capitol. And in the Senate, with Southerners holding the chairmanships of most principal committees, Russell served more or less as the chairman of chairmen.

Like Rayburn, though, Russell was an aging, solitary sort, a bachelor, withdrawn and resolutely private; and Johnson set about a gentle siege of blandishments and sentimental overtures so florid, an aide would later remark, that if Russell had been a woman, “he would have married him.” Taking to addressing Russell as “The Old Master,” Johnson began ambling by his office late in the afternoon, where up to now Russell had retired after a day’s session to sit alone with a glass of bourbon listening to the radio news. Before long Johnson was accompanying him to baseball games, though “I doubt that Lyndon Johnson had been to a baseball game in his life,” an aide would say. Soon, instead of Russell’s usual evening meal sitting by himself at the counter of a seafood grill, Johnson began inviting him to dinners prepared by Lady Bird, albeit careful that these occasions never coincided with Rayburn’s continuing visits there. “Lyndon didn’t want his two daddies to see how he acted with the other one,” a confidant then told Caro.

For all Russell’s air of staunch rectitude, though, he shared with his fellow Southerners the moral glaucoma of an implacable segregationist dogmatism. And perhaps the tawdriest part of Johnson’s campaign of ingratiation began with his debut speech on the floor of the Senate, in which he strenuously denounced Truman’s civil rights bill to end lynchings and job and voting discrimination, announcing himself one of “We of the South”—though, in truth, Texas and the bare hill country of Johnson’s own origins had always amounted to a marginal outskirts of the culture of the Old South.

But Johnson seemed to have a peculiar chameleon-like quality about him—not only a mutability of pronunciation, ranging from “nigger” to “nigra” to “negra” depending on the company, but a capacity for seeming to assume the attitudes of whomever he might be appealing to at any given point. The effect was to leave Russell and the other Southern senators with the warm impression that he was wholly of their moss-hung mind, while liberal senators felt assured that he remained in his soul a populist New Dealer. Actually, this was probably not so much a premeditated dissembling as his habit of transmuting himself into one character or another, according to the moment. Aides would even hear him behind the door of his inner office rehearsing for a contentious meeting by voicing out not only his own arguments but the rejoinders of the others, actually conducting the whole expected exchange by himself.

In any case, it was mutability that was central to Johnson. Among the fascinations of Caro’s third volume on Johnson are the intimations that flicker throughout of the calamity to come with Vietnam, not the least of them Johnson’s propensity to convince himself about an uncomfortably uncertain but unavoidable matter through exhorting others about it. In urging a legislative initiative deeply dubious to Southern conservatives or Northern liberals as well as to himself, he “could start talking,” an old friend would remember, “and convince himself it was right, and get...all worked up and emotional” about this just-dawning conviction. It was a kind of self-sorcery that Johnson would carry on into his presidency when, his assistant Joseph Califano recalled, he “would quickly come to believe what he was saying even if it was clearly not true.”

With these arts, Johnson while still a freshman senator managed, with Russell’s complicity, to get himself elected the Democrats’ assistant leader, or whip—a post heretofore regarded as rather

innocuous and incidental. But gaining that first, minimal footing, Johnson swiftly went about establishing himself, in the Senate's arabesque system of diffused power, as the central source of information on the status of all developing legislation, the likely vote counts, and possible amendments. And he soon moved from providing that omnibus information service to actually coordinating the parliamentary processes himself. In this, so wily were his devices that he contrived to rescue one of Truman's foreign-aid bills from what seemed certain ravaging by Senate reactionaries. Of immense assistance in this ascent as a Senate impresario was his closeness still to Sam Rayburn, whose House had also to pass most Senate legislation, a circumstance investing Johnson with the additional heft of being able to intercede with Rayburn for special attention to a senator's bill.

Before long, Johnson had in effect displaced the Democrats' amiably muzzy leader, Arizona's Robert McFarland, and was soon announcing to one journalist,

I run both houses of Congress right now.... Here in the Senate I have to do all of Boob McFarland's work.... And then every afternoon I go over to Sam Rayburn's place. He tells me all about his problems he's facing in the House, and I tell him how to handle them.... I'm running everything here in the Capitol.

### 3.

With his spare, taut mouth and tight, earnest squint in his sharp-billed face, there still lurked in Johnson's voice the plain cornbread-and-buttermilk textures of his South Texas origins. He incessantly smoked cigarettes in jittery snatches, and lighting another he would bow far over in the old countryman's way, facing his shoes, for a first long pull. But with those lingering traces of his hill-country genesis, his rangy figure, now lent an extra sleekness by a corset, was garbed with a studied swankiness in shimmering, voluminous suits, with glints of gold and diamond accessories. Ceaselessly hurrying about the marbled spaces of the Capitol at a headlong, hectic lope, vaulting up steps two at a time, it was as if he had come to feel some furious urgency of time constantly harrying him. When driving, he would blare his horn at slower cars in front of him and, passing on the right, whack his huge hand on the outside of his door while baying imprecations at the other driver. He even seemed somehow to be rushing when simply standing on the Senate floor, dipping back and forth while one hand jingled the change in his pocket, repeatedly rising rooster-like on his toes to glare about him.

And in due time, with Bob McFarland's defeat for reelection in Arizona opening up the leader's position itself, Johnson, again with Russell's help, was elected by his party's senators to that post. Up to then, the leader's authority had actually been fairly meager and ceremonial against the powers of the committee chairmen. But Johnson in short order consolidated in the leadership increasing supervisory responsibilities, through myriad ploys and stratagems recounted by Caro in all their nuanced intricacy—improvisations on Senate rules, shuffling promises and counterpromises like poker hands, alternating baleful and tender persuasions, discreet understandings with Democratic liberals allowed by the grand vizier Russell, who was already beginning to entertain his own wistful speculations that Johnson might just turn out to be the first Southern-seasoned president since the Civil War.

Finally, after the Republicans' electoral sweep under Eisenhower in 1952, Johnson warned his party colleagues that they could lapse into a perpetual inconsequence unless they performed more impressively in the Senate by installing their ablest members on major committees irrespective of seniority. He thus largely accomplished the dissolution of that ancient protocol governing Senate leadership, transferring much of that leadership into his hands instead. At the same time, he cannily attached himself and the Senate's Democrats to Eisenhower's overwhelming popularity in the country, and Ike was surprised to find that Johnson worked with him far more readily than the fractious reactionaries in his own Republican party.

When the Democrats regained control of Congress in the 1954 elections, Johnson at last ascended to Senate majority leader—at forty-six, the youngest in the history of the Republic. He was now to assimilate the Senate's operations almost entirely into his own person, assuming a power over the chamber never seen before or since. And while grappling with the increasingly fretful complications and liabilities entailed in gaining that power, he would nevertheless begin his reach in earnest for the presidency itself.

—*This is the first of two articles on Lyndon B. Johnson.*

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