

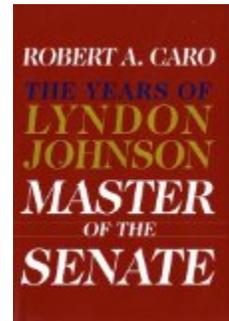
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Robert A. Caro. *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. xxiv + 1167 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-394-52836-6.

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Lyndon Johnson and the Transformation of the Senate

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Master of the Senate may surprise readers of volumes 1 and 2 of Robert A. Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.^[1] Many of the Caro series's characteristics are present—use of an extensive base of interviews, effective story-telling technique, excessive length. But *Master of the Senate* presents a more nuanced view of Johnson than did the earlier books, especially *Means of Ascent*. Caro still portrays Johnson as a fundamentally unethical figure willing to subordinate principles to achieve partisan gain. But he also admires Johnson's ability to change how the Senate did business, and, eventually, to use his power to help pass the first piece of civil rights legislation in nine decades. The book has three principal arguments: that Johnson's assumption of power revealed elements of his character; that the 1950s presented a transformative period in the Senate's institutional history; and that as the 1950s progressed, Johnson's personal ambition and the public good increasingly pointed to the same policy options. In the end, *Master of the Senate* resembles Caro's portrayal of Johnson—a mixed bag, with considerable strengths and substantial flaws.

Any reviewer of a book in the *Years of Lyndon Johnson* series has to note its length (in this case, 1,040 pages, excluding endnotes), at once its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. On the positive side, the length and Caro's extraordinary interview base allow him to offer the clearest explication of how Johnson wielded power in the Senate. It is no wonder that the current Senate Major-

ity Leader, Tom Daschle (D-SD), recently admitted that he was reading the book to gain insights on how to improve his performance.^[2] On the negative side, a book 15 or 20 percent shorter would have offered a more readable account and presented a clearer argument without loss of context. Moreover, surprisingly in a book this long, Caro slights an important aspect of his story—Johnson's final three years as majority leader.

This book's opening section—a 105-page summary of the history of the Senate before Johnson's arrival following the 1948 election—is a good example of material that could have been shortened with no real loss. This section's sources are thin, and the story it tells is familiar: the Constitution's framers created the Senate to cool the passions of the House; the upper chamber's reputation reached its height in the pre-Civil War era of the "great triumvirate" (Webster, Clay, and Calhoun); the Senate declined in the Gilded Age, becoming the bastion of conservatism and corruption; in the twentieth century, the seniority system assumed an increasingly important role in the body; and because of the one-party nature of its politics, the South's Senate contingent expanded its influence during the five decades following 1900.

From this material, Caro stresses three items that play an important role in the rest of the book. First, he notes, the seniority system encouraged the aging of the Senate. The average age of Senators crept upwards throughout the century; by the time Johnson entered the Senate, most committee chairmen were in their late sixties or seventies. Second, Caro emphasizes the importance

of loopholes in Rule 22 (the Senate rule that established procedures for imposing cloture against filibusters) in enhancing Southern power. Third, he shows how both these factors led to increasing public and press criticism of the Senate as an institution—less for ideological reasons than on the grounds of inefficiency. Still, Caro is not entirely convincing in his contention that the Senate as it evolved departed noticeably from the framers' intent.

Thus stood the upper chamber that Johnson entered after an election tainted by charges of vote fraud. As in his earlier volumes, Caro stresses unattractive elements in Johnson's personality and style, but he also convincingly shows Johnson's ability to adapt his personality to meet pressing political needs. This man with a massive ego spent hour upon hour in his first Senate year sitting quietly in the Senate chamber, getting a sense of the institution. He also observed institutional niceties by treating his senior colleagues with exaggerated deference. Indeed, Caro observes, Johnson's skill at cultivating older men—already shown in his dealings with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Sam Rayburn—served him especially well now, as he ingratiated himself with the most powerful figure in the postwar Senate, Richard B. Russell (D-GA).

Much like Johnson, Russell was a complex man. As Caro shows, he could act patriotically, as when he led the Senate opposition to General Douglas MacArthur's critique of Harry Truman's Korean War policy. But for the most part, Caro presents a less than sympathetic view of Russell, with relentless (probably excessive) coverage of white Georgians' persecution of their African-American fellow citizens—with the open encouragement of the political establishment that Russell personified. Russell never married, had few close friends, and worked long hours—and thus was a lonely man. Because Russell liked baseball, Johnson developed an interest in the sport, and the two soon started going together to Washington Senators games. Because Russell was a power on the Armed Services Committee, Johnson successfully sought a slot on the panel. Because Russell frequently ate alone on the weekends, Johnson started inviting his colleague for Sunday meals. As Russell remarked later, Johnson was almost like the son he never had.

This relationship was more, Caro reminds us, than a sentimental attachment of a lonely older man and an ambitious younger colleague. Russell demanded an ideological price to enter his family: opposition to civil rights. Senator Johnson's maiden speech thus demonstrated his fidelity to Russell's cause. "We of the South,"

the new Senator declared, used the filibuster to fight prejudice—that is, Northern prejudice against the South. And Southern senators, Johnson claimed, wanted not to fan the flames of racial prejudice but to guard against the inevitable controversies between the races that would result from the enactment of civil rights legislation. Some of Johnson's rhetoric was extreme even by his time's standards: the proposed Fair Employment Practices Commission was unconstitutional because "if the Federal Government can by law tell me whom I shall employ, it can likewise tell my prospective employees for whom they must work." In an interpretation offered by no other senator, Johnson claimed that if the FEPC could "compel me to employ a Negro, it can compel that Negro to work for me. It might even tell him how long and how hard he would have to work. As I see it, such a law would do nothing more than enslave a minority." A pleased Richard Russell termed the address "one of the ablest I have ever heard on the subject" (pp. 212-215).

If appeasing Russell was crucial to establishing Johnson's power in the Senate, then appeasing Texas oil and gas producers was crucial to establishing Johnson's power at home—especially as he had triumphed by only eighty-seven votes in the 1948 Democratic primary. Johnson came to the Senate with a reputation as a New Deal liberal. In 1937, he had made his initial foray into electoral politics in a special election to the House of Representatives that attracted national attention. Using the slogan "Franklin D. and Lyndon B.," Johnson stoutly defended FDR and the New Deal when the President was on the political defensive following the Court-packing controversy. Johnson spent eleven years in the House of Representatives. Throughout his time in office, he remained a strong supporter of Roosevelt, one of the President's few consistent backers in an increasingly conservative Texas delegation. Thus, although national liberal activists did not expect the new senator to adopt a progressive view on civil rights, they did anticipate a supporter on key economic questions.

That expectation was called into question by Johnson's performance in blocking the renomination of Leland Olds as chairman of the Federal Power Commission. The Olds battle is an important event that most histories of the time mention but fail to explain in sufficient detail. Caro effectively shows both the issue's importance (because of the FPC's composition, blocking Olds all but scuttled aggressive federal regulation of natural gas) and the dastardly tactics that Johnson, the chair of the subcommittee that handled the nomination, used to end Olds's career. Because of Johnson's identifica-

tion with public power from the New Deal era, especially FDR's Rural Electrification Program, Olds expected fair treatment from him. Instead, Johnson dredged up misleading, out-of-context quotes from the 1920s, when Olds was a journalist for a public power organization, to imply that Olds had communist leanings. In the early Cold War, this attack was enough—and Olds, despite his two terms in office, received fewer than 20 votes in his renomination bid. The affair showed Johnson at his most brilliant politically—he killed Olds's candidacy, obtained credit for his action among Texas oil and gas interests, but acted covertly enough that he did not receive much criticism from national liberals.

Although blocking Olds helped consolidate Johnson's political base, it did little to bring him a national reputation. The outbreak of the Korean War gave him his first chance to shine. Using his connections with Russell, Johnson obtained the chairmanship of a new subcommittee created to investigate defense mobilization. The subcommittee was modeled on the World War II Truman subcommittee, and the comparison with the earlier body was lost on no one—press commentary at the time termed the subcommittee a presidency maker. Johnson understood the new ways that the postwar Congress could exercise power on international matters: through the effective use of what Caro terms “a new kind of staff suited to the new, more complicated postwar world”; the ability to shape public opinion; and the importance of the image of bipartisan unity (p. 311). At the same time, Johnson's experience with the subcommittee offered another demonstration of his political skills; as Caro notes, LBJ had “a remarkable proficiency in the mechanics of politics, in the lower-level, basic techniques that are essential to political success but that some politicians never seem to learn” (p. 315). The subcommittee itself accomplished almost nothing legislatively or in terms of policy. But Johnson built his power by using targeted press leaks and bombastic rhetoric that suggested he was accomplishing something important—as a *Newsweek* cover story suggested.

It looked as if Johnson would have to relinquish his subcommittee chairmanship after the 1950 elections; Armed Services Committee chair Millard Tydings (D-MD), up for reelection in 1950, had made it clear that he would fold Johnson's inquiry into the general committee, beginning in 1951. But Tydings did not return to the Senate in 1951; also defeated were the Democratic majority leader, Scott Lucas (D-UT), and the Democratic whip, Francis Myers (D-PA). Caro sympathizes with the overwhelming difficulties of being a Democratic Senate leader—because of the Southern caucus's power, the

Democratic leader had relatively little room to maneuver, but nonetheless got blamed when the Senate failed to function efficiently. But Johnson recognized the potential in the position, and, with Russell's backing, moved into the Senate leadership in 1951, when he was unanimously elected Democratic whip.

Because of the weakness of the new majority leader, Ernest MacFarland (D-AZ), Johnson's power as whip was substantial. And as he transformed the position, he also began to transform the Senate. Beyond providing quiet assistance to aged committee chairs, Johnson maximized his political influence in six concrete ways. First, he organized the use of Senate pairs—using his position to help absent Democratic senators arrange pairs—and increasingly pushed the idea of live pairs, which heretofore had been rarely used. Second, Johnson used his contacts from the House, traveling to Speaker Sam Rayburn's chambers every day after the House ended business to discuss legislative matters, thus making him the senator with the greatest ability to deliver the House. Third, he used his Texas contacts to help raise funds for other Democratic candidates; Caro recounts stories of Johnson aides traveling back from Texas to Washington with money stuffed in their pockets. Fourth, Johnson put in the extra time to make friends; he joined Warren Magnuson (D-WA), for instance, as the only senators to attend the funeral of Senator Harry Byrd's (D-VA) daughter. Fifth, he found a way to appeal to Senate liberals by reaching out to Hubert H. Humphrey (D-MN), the liberal hero of the 1948 Democratic convention who had been shunned by more conservative Democrats since arriving in the Senate. Finally, Johnson entered into a highly profitable (in many ways) alliance with Bobby Baker, the Senate aide whose career would be intertwined for Johnson's over the next fifteen years.

Despite these procedural innovations, Johnson was hardly preeminent in the Senate: the most powerful member of the Democratic caucus remained Richard Russell. After Truman fired MacArthur for insubordination in 1951, MacArthur returned to the United States to a hero's welcome, and his claim that the Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsed his military strategy seemed to threaten the supremacy of civilian control of military matters. Caro argues that Russell, who had succeeded Tydings as chair of Armed Services, played the key role in helping to dim MacArthur's appeal. The hearings over which Russell presided were content-oriented rather than sensational, and they exposed the regional limits of MacArthur's strategic vision. As one after another member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff affirmed their

opposition to MacArthur's proposals, the general's supporters lost the will to fight. The Senate had functioned as the framers intended, cooling temporary, dangerous passions. And, fresh from the experience, Russell launched a bid for the 1952 Democratic presidential nomination.

Caro's coverage of the 1952 and 1956 Democratic presidential races is exceptionally good, and important in that Russell's 1952 bid played a key, if unintended, role in LBJ's subsequent career. Although he began the race as a purely Southern candidate, Russell increasingly entertained hopes that he could prevail, partly because his qualifications seemed so superior to those of the other major announced candidates, Senator Estes Kefauver (D-TN) and former Vice President Alben Barkley (D-KY). But Russell's Southern heritage and his position on civil rights blocked any chance he had of appealing to northern delegations, and the nomination went instead to Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson. Russell would never again attend a Democratic national convention. Though he abandoned his presidential hopes, he would not give up on the idea of a Southern President in his lifetime. And he knew exactly whom he wanted in that position—his Texas protégé, Lyndon Johnson, whom he saw as the only Southerner that possibly could be elected nationwide.

Johnson himself became Democratic leader in 1952, after Arizona voters replaced MacFarland with a little-known department-store owner named Barry Goldwater. In his first days in his new position, Johnson took on the seniority system, and Caro's treatment of the new leader's political maneuvering—opening up committee slots for talented junior senators such as Humphrey, Mike Mansfield (D-MT), and Stuart Symington (D-MO)—is one of this book's impressive parts. We long have known that Johnson transformed the position of majority leader—but Caro shows us how he accomplished that feat.

Johnson's maneuvering had important consequences for Democrats, because he ensured that the party had talented figures on the 83rd Congress's key committees. Humphrey and Mansfield obtained seats on Foreign Relations; Symington, the former Air Force secretary, on Armed Services; Magnuson on Appropriations; and Symington and Henry M. Jackson (D-WA) on Government Operations (the committee from which Joseph McCarthy [R-WI] ran his anti-communist witch hunt). And Johnson finessed the Senate barons to agree to his schemes by ensuring the support of Russell and Russell's colleague, Walter George (D-GA). As a result, the new

Democratic leader gave some satisfaction to liberals in the party caucus, allowed freshmen senators to receive choice committee slots, and managed the first successful challenge to the culture of seniority that Caro believes formed a linchpin of the post-Civil War Senate.

Johnson's second major innovation came in his use of the Democratic Policy Committee. Here his success was all the more striking because of his ability to revolutionize the Senate without the upper chamber's powerful Southerners, themselves figures of considerable political skill, understanding the extent of his changes. As with his investigative subcommittee, Johnson proved his brilliance in using committee staff, in this instance with a goal of creating a more efficient legislative process and muffling dissent. He named Bobby Baker the liaison between the Policy Committee and the Senate's standing committees, with responsibility to check on the progress of legislation. Eventually, in an unprecedented move, Johnson himself started consulting with the other committee staff directors, offering suggestions on how they could ensure passage of their committee's legislation. He thus attempted to use the Leader's position to fashion a "Democratic" congressional agenda.

Now that he had the power, Johnson set out to use it, though he was only Minority Leader (for Democrats had lost control of the Senate in the 1952 elections that swept Republican Dwight Eisenhower into the White House). But Johnson saw in the Eisenhower presidency a political opportunity for the Democrats—because of deep ideological divisions within the GOP, Johnson could make the Democrats the Senate party that supported the President's legislative agenda; in the process, he could improve his stature as well. Johnson's handling of the Bricker amendment controversy showed him at his most effective—he almost single-handedly blocked the amendment (which sought to limit the power of the executive to enforce treaties), made the Democrats appear to be the chief administration allies, and satisfied Southerners and his own Texas supporters by seeming to support restrictions on presidential power.

The Bricker amendment battle demonstrated that when Johnson's personal power and political concerns dovetailed with the national interest, he could have an extraordinary effect. But when the two forces clashed, Johnson retreated. His response to McCarthyism best illustrates this pattern—Caro portrays a senator with no stomach for taking on the Wisconsin demagogue, wary of the political effects of seeming to attack McCarthy. Johnson did have one important role in the

controversy—he ensured that the Army-McCarthy hearings were televised—but beyond that move, the most striking aspect of his handling of McCarthy came in his caution. And though Caro offers reasons for Johnson’s passivity—LBJ’s fear of moving too early, his desire to avoid making an attack on McCarthy look like Democratic partisanship—Caro is not altogether convincing in explaining why the “master of the Senate” did not move more aggressively against a figure who so flagrantly violated the Senate’s institutional norms.

The 1954 elections yielded a Senate with 48 Democrats, 47 Republicans, and 1 independent, Oregon Senator Wayne Morse. Johnson and Morse had not had a warm relationship at any point in their careers—nor would they in the future, when Morse emerged as a chief critic of then-President Johnson’s foreign policy. But with Morse holding the balance of power in the Senate, Johnson gave him what he wanted: a seat on the Foreign Relations Committee. In return, Morse voted with the Democrats to organize the Senate and made Lyndon Johnson majority leader. Johnson was forty-six years old.

Johnson’s new position only accelerated his campaign to revolutionize the Senate. In particular, he used his authority over scheduling legislation (a meaningful power given his *de facto* control of the Policy Committee) to affect the content of legislation. And, under the guise of assisting older chairs such as Walter George (D-GA) of Finance (77 years old), James Murray (D-MT) of Interior (78 years old), and Theodore Frances Green (D-RI) of Rules (87 years old), Johnson took over as floor manager of a variety of bills, a privilege previously reserved for committee chairs. The leadership post also gave Johnson more patronage power, which he used in both positive and negative ways—he froze out those he did not like, such as Kefauver, Paul Douglas (D-IL), and Herbert Lehman (D-NY), all part of a broader pattern whereby the (affected) humility that had characterized his early tenure in the Senate passed away.

My work with the Johnson presidential tapes has convinced me of the need for a more nuanced view of how Johnson exercised political power. As President, Johnson occasionally used bluster and intimidation. But more often he cajoled, begged, appealed to political self-interest, or invoked ideals to get his way. And he placed himself in a position to use this “Johnson treatment” only through his extraordinary mastery of legislative tactics. Caro offers a similar conclusion in explaining Johnson’s mastery of the 1950s Senate, from the regularization of pairs to his

successful challenge of the Senate seniority system. But, Caro notes, “perhaps the most striking example of the creativity that Lyndon Johnson brought to the legislative process” came in his extensive use of unanimous consent agreements (p. 572). Because the agreements limited time of debate and were impossible to amend, their proliferation produced a subtle but significant change in how the Senate did business. They shifted the legislative process away from public debates, which tended to stress the articulation of ideals, to backroom dealmaking, reflecting Johnson’s own conception of how the Senate should function. Legislation, not educating the public, would be Johnson’s chief mission as leader.

And then, at the height of his power, Johnson was almost struck down; on July 2, 1955, he suffered a serious heart attack. For several days, doubts existed about whether he would survive. The heart attack produced two important political changes for Johnson. First, he changed his relationship with his staff. Although still a very difficult man for whom to work, he tried to avoid his violent mood swings and started to treat his staff with some respect. Second, the heart attack brought Johnson’s wife back into his political life. Lady Bird Johnson was a personal of unusual gifts. Like her husband, she showed ambition early in life; during World War II, when Representative Johnson was briefly in the Pacific, he turned over to her the day-to-day responsibility of running his House office. Although Lady Bird had no background in politics, after a few months the general assumption was that she could have won the seat had Lyndon remained in the military.[3] After Johnson’s return, he excluded her from his political world, partly, no doubt, feeling threatened by her performance. Caro goes into great detail at showing Johnson’s dismissive treatment of Lady Bird before the heart attack, and his willingness to turn to her again after it. Given her remarkable abilities as First Lady, this change had important long-term consequences.

The Washington press assumed that Johnson’s heart attack finished him as a credible presidential candidate, at least in 1956, but his rapid recovery and Eisenhower’s own heart attack that year changed the political equation. Johnson badly wanted the 1956 nomination, but his experience mirrored Russell’s in 1952. Through the intervention of Sam Rayburn, Johnson received the Texas delegation’s favorite-son nomination, but he was out of his league at the Democratic convention: he assumed that his Senate colleagues could deliver their state delegations as they delivered their votes in the upper chamber. His mastery of the Senate did not yet extend to national pol-

itics.

Johnson's failed presidential bid had one important result, however—he concluded that, if he were to have a future in national politics, he would have to deliver a Senate program that would appeal to liberals outside his regional base. On a personal level, he reached out to prominent liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., John Kenneth Galbraith, and Philip and Kay Graham. They all made clear that Johnson would have to ensure passage of a civil rights bill if he was to have a national future.

A key theme of *Master of the Senate* is that as the 1950s unfolded, Johnson (and, importantly, Richard Russell) increasingly saw the national interest and the Texan's political self-interest as complementary. The pattern's clearest example, Caro argues, was Johnson's central role in the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act. Caro delayed the publication of this book for several years as he completed the interview base necessary for this and future installments of the series. Unfortunately, that delay prevented *Master of the Senate* from adding much to the story of the Senate and 1950s civil rights legislation. Caro's general approach—positioning LBJ as part of the Senate—pales in comparison with Robert Mann's *The Walls of Jericho*, a joint study of Johnson, Humphrey, Russell, and civil rights and arguably the finest work of congressional history ever published.[4]

Mann and Caro agree that the act presented yet another example of Johnson's legislative brilliance. Having decided to champion a civil rights bill, Johnson confronted the key question of how to do so without alienating Southern senators, without whose support he could not function as majority leader. Russell played the key role here—he recognized that Johnson's presidential chances depended on the passage of some form of civil rights legislation. And Johnson convinced many Southerners that, as some bill would pass eventually, they should cooperate with him to ensure that the bill that did pass was weak.

As the debate proceeded, Title III, which made segregation illegal in schools and all public places, emerged as the bill's most explosive element. Southerners wanted Title III excised; liberals and the Eisenhower administration viewed it as the measure's heart. Johnson realized that he had to find a way to keep Title III in the bill while rendering it meaningless. He accomplished this goal by arranging for an up-and-coming liberal senator, Frank Church (D-ID), to introduce an amendment requiring jury trials for all alleged Title III violations. Because no all-white Southern jury would convict in a civil rights

case, the jury-trial amendment fatally compromised Title III. Johnson's political skills served him well: he obtained the votes of Church and other Western liberals for this amendment by pressuring Southern senators to vote for a bill dear to Church, a measure calling for a federally financed public power plant at Hells Canyon, Idaho.

Beyond the legislation's specifics, Caro successfully, if somewhat excessively, establishes the absurdity of Johnson's later claims never to have expressed any racist sentiments. What distinguished Johnson from his Southern colleagues, Caro points out, was not a more progressive attitude on racial issues, but rather his ability to look beyond his personal bigotry to act for the public good.

Caro sees Johnson's role in passing the 1957 Civil Rights Act as his most important achievement as majority leader. The book then races through Johnson's last three years as Senate leader in a somewhat unsatisfactory fashion. Caro does little to challenge the conventional view that Johnson struggled in the late 1950s, especially after a stunning Democratic performance in the 1958 midterm elections brought to the upper chamber a host of Northern and Western liberals and gave the party an almost 2-to-1 majority.[5] But Caro leaves more questions than he answers in explaining Johnson's difficulties. Why did a man who, as President, brilliantly led a Congress dominated by liberals struggle to do so when he was in the Senate? Did Johnson encounter difficulties because other senators had tired of his tactics—or did it become harder to get his way when he had to deal with more liberals? If the former, how transformative were Johnson's procedural innovations? If the latter, could ideological shifts in the populace at large change the way the Senate does business? Both questions challenge the portrayal of the Senate that Caro offers, and he should have addressed them more thoroughly.

A weak beginning and end and a climactic scene better told elsewhere limit the appeal of *Master of the Senate*. But, for its detailed description of how Johnson wielded power in the Senate, its impressive analysis of how changes in parliamentary norms transformed the upper house, its nuanced explanations of the 1952 and 1956 Democratic conventions, and its characteristically detailed storytelling style, *Master of the Senate* will be a key book in understanding postwar political and congressional history.

Notes

[1.] Robert A. Caro, *The Path to Power*, vol. 1 of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

1982); Robert A. Caro, *Means of Ascent*, vol. 2 of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). Caro expects to complete the study with a final volume, now in progress.

[2.] Kirk Victor, "Deconstructing Daschle," *National Journal*, 31 May 2002.

[3.] Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908-1960* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1991), pp. 153, 186, 234.

[4.] Robert Mann, *The Walls of Jericho: Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Russell, and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996).

[5.] Michael Foley, *The New Senate: Liberal Influence on a Conservative Institution, 1959-1972* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

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