

**Julian E. Zelizer.** *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society.* New York: Penguin Press PHC, 2015. 384 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59420-434-0.



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If Lyndon Baines Johnson were alive today, he would surely appreciate all the attention that he has been receiving. In 2012, Johnson's biographer Robert Caro released his fourth volume of the series, exploring Johnson's three years as vice president and first year in the White House. In 2014, actor Bryan Cranston (of *Breaking Bad* fame) portrayed President Johnson on Broadway in a play titled *All the Way*, a Tony Award-winning drama about Johnson's herculean effort to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. *All the Way* is now enjoying success off-Broadway (it is currently playing in Washington, DC's Arena Stage) and HBO broadcast a film adaptation, also titled *All the Way*, in May 2016.[1] Caro's award-winning, best-selling books, and the popularity of plays like *All the Way*, suggest the broad popular appeal of political history.

As the nation commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of LBJ's signature domestic achievement, the Great Society, it is unfortunate that Johnson as a character seems to dominate this important historical narrative. Perhaps "the Treat-

ment" is to blame. During his career in public office, Johnson developed the so-called Treatment, using his imposing six-foot-four-inch frame to dominate his peers, physically and psychologically. Unfortunately, the Johnson Treatment has become cliché, an oversimplified way of explaining the complex political and policy negotiations that made the Great Society possible. This misreading of the past has consequences today. Recently, frustrated liberals blamed President Barack Obama for not acting more like LBJ. "Few things have annoyed President Obama's top aides more than the frequent regaling of Lyndon B. Johnson's legislative successes and his mastery of congressional deal-making," wrote journalist George Condon for the *National Journal* in the spring of 2014. Liberals reasoned that "Obama's problems with Congress could be eased if he would just be more like LBJ." [2]

The admonishment of modern presidents for not behaving like President Johnson is based on a flawed understanding of politics and process in the 1960s (and today). Julian Zelizer, the Malcolm

Stevenson Forbes Class of 1941 Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton University, aims to correct that narrative for a general audience with his book *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society*. Zelizer argues that Johnson's political success was historically contingent on a variety of factors. "The veneration of the Treatment obscures how politics works; it overemphasizes the capacity of 'great men' to effect legislation by force of personality and undervalues the more complicated and significant effect of the political environment in which a president must operate," Zelizer writes (p. 7). No one is better suited to challenge the president-centric political narrative of the Great Society era than Zelizer. For nearly two decades he has been a leading scholar of political and policy history whose numerous books (written for scholarly and general audiences) have explored the complexities of policymaking (and especially Congress's role in that process) in the twentieth century.[3]

Zelizer has organized the book thematically. The book's first chapters examine congressional politics in the early 1960s. The middle chapters consider the battle to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the electoral pressures of the Goldwater-Johnson presidential contest, and the legislative accomplishments of the 89th Congress (1965-66). The final chapters explore Johnson's waning political power, as the twin problems of the Vietnam War and inflation fractured Johnson's bipartisan coalition of support in Congress on which his policy initiatives had come to depend. Zelizer tracks the incremental pace of political and policy change, translating a few Great Society achievements into engaging and accessible prose. He explains arcane legislative procedure (such as, the filibuster, committee discharge petitions, and the complex amendment process in the House and Senate) without getting bogged down in the proverbial weeds. His account is strongest when it emphasizes the push and pull of the legislative dance, acknowledging the role of groups and indi-

viduals outside the electoral process that influence negotiations and shape final policy outcomes.

Those familiar with the political historiography of the Sixties will not find new interpretations here. More than half of the book considers the challenges of passing civil rights bills through a legislative branch dominated by southern conservatives who opposed them. The chapter on the 89th Congress, which approved the bulk of the Great Society legislation, lacks the detailed focus of the earlier civil rights chapters. Surprisingly, few members of Congress are recognized as key players in managing the passage of these landmark bills through Congress. Zelizer knows how to write engaging political history. Yet, despite his argument that Johnson does not deserve the full credit for Great Society achievements, Zelizer's book is dominated by LBJ's perspective, perhaps because the presidential focus allows for a more manageable, linear, and straightforward narrative. A review of the book's endnotes suggests that Zelizer relied primarily on sources archived at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas (there are few references to congressional collections).

I wish this book paid more attention to Congress. In a monograph written for a general audience, it is worth stressing the point that political parties in the 1960s were far more heterogeneous than they are today. There were liberal Republicans who supported Great Society programs and conservative Democrats who opposed them. Zelizer's story is strongest and most interesting when it describes how Johnson's strategy of cultivating bipartisan coalitions to support his Great Society programs was essential to the longevity of these programs. The book's sole chapter on the legislative accomplishments of the remarkable 89th Congress, which included the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, the Water Quality Act, the Immigration and Nationality Act, and the Social Security

Act Amendments (to name just a few), deserves far greater detail.[4]

There is a lot at stake in a renewed public interest in the legislative period known as the Great Society. Zelizer makes a persuasive argument that a more nuanced understanding of the legislative accomplishments of this era requires looking beyond LBJ's Treatment. The story of how Congress shaped the Great Society, however, remains to be told.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Caro, *The Passage of Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2012); *All the Way*, written by Robert Schenkkan and directed by Bill Rauch.

[2]. George E. Condon Jr., "The Tension Between Obama and LBJ," *The National Journal Daily*, Apr 8, 2014, 4.

[3]. See *Taxing America: Wilbur D. Mills, Congress, and the State, 1945-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security from World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

[4]. For more information about the legislative achievements of the remarkable 89th Congress, see the online exhibit curated by the Association of Centers for the Study of Congress, <http://acsc.lib.udel.edu/exhibits/show/89th-congress> (accessed April 20, 2016). The president's staff evaluated the 89th Congress's accomplishments in a memo to the president; see the University of California, Santa Barbara's online American Presidency Project: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27931> (accessed April 20, 2016). Larry O'Brien and Joe Califano offer effusive praise of the 89th Congress: "In a word, this was a fabulous and remarkable Congress. We say this not because of its unprecedented productivity--but because what was passed has deep meaning and significance for

every man, woman and child in this country--and for future generations. A particularly striking feature about the 89th was that its second session was as equally productive as the first."

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