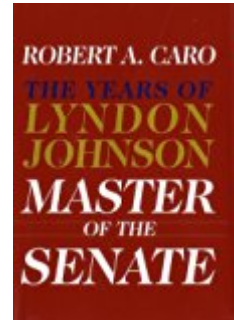




Robert A. Caro. *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. xxiv + 1167 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-394-52836-6.



Reviewed by Raj Jethwa

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Master of Johnson

Robert A. Caro's *Master of the Senate* is the third volume in his biography of Lyndon Johnson entitled *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. For any student of Johnson, or of U.S. politics in the 1960s, this volume presents an interesting picture of the man who was to occupy the White House from Kennedy's assassination in 1963 until 1968. As president, Johnson can be admired for his domestic achievements in the field of civil rights and welfare reform, but more often he will be remembered for the escalation of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. *Master of the Senate* gives the reader an idea of the skills and strengths that were to make Johnson the Great Society reformer of the 1960s. Crucially, it makes the point that civil rights, when they were achieved, were accomplished "not by idealism but by rough stuff" (p. 838).

Caro's biography is an interesting read for anybody who admires Johnson as a key liberal politician in the 1960s. Johnson certainly was that, but the point that emerges from Caro's biography is that Johnson's achievements were not the result of sheer idealism. However, the book does point

to the way in which Johnson was to develop his views and in it readers can catch glimpses of the civil-rights hero emerging. It gives a vivid description of Johnson's energy and determination in his long-term quest for the presidential nomination. A Democratic senator from Texas, Johnson was a natural ally of the Southern Democrats. This group ranked among the most powerful members of the Senate. A strength of Caro's book is its comprehensive introduction to the history and workings of the Senate (in a volume of over 1,000 pages, some 100 are taken up at the beginning to describe the evolution of Senate custom and practice). A significant component of the Senate's working was the seniority system, which dictated that committee positions were filled by the older, established members of the Senate. This concentration of established Southern Democratic senators allowed them to dominate those important committee posts which controlled Senate business. But it was this same group who vigorously opposed racial integration and progress in the field of civil rights. To be a liberal Democratic Senator meant to be diametrically opposed to the Southerners. Johnson, a Texan, had no hesitation

in aligning himself with the South. His first memorable speech, "we of the South" (p. 213), was part of the filibuster by Southern senators against Truman's proposed civil rights legislation, which would have given black Americans protection against lynching, and made it easier for them to register to vote.

But, whereas the other Southern senators were steeped in their racial prejudice against black Americans, Johnson was essentially process-driven. As Caro demonstrates, Johnson's alliance with the South was part of a calculated attempt to win the patronage of the most important member of the Senate, Richard Russell of Georgia. Richard Russell was elected as the youngest governor in the history of Georgia in 1931. He entered the Senate two years later in 1933 and rapidly showed his talents by becoming one of the most respected members of the Senate. Johnson knew that he needed the support of Russell if he was to fulfil his own political ambitions. Russell was won over completely by Johnson and remained loyal to him even during the 1960s when Johnson pushed through his major civil rights reforms against Russell's opposition. This patronage also paid off in the short term through Johnson's ability—with Russell's support—to win election first for Assistant Leader and then Leader of the Democrats in the Senate. This eventually made him Senate Majority Leader, and, with the Republican Eisenhower in the White House, one of the leading national Democratic politicians. Johnson's major achievement was to transform the workings of the Senate and to unify the Democratic party in the Senate. Only a politician who conservatives were comfortable with could have convinced those Senators to sacrifice their seniority rights to allow liberals onto key committees. Caro brings out in excellent detail Johnson's diplomacy and agility in working the deals which united the liberals and the South.

Another strength of Caro is the detail with which he describes other important figures of the

time, Richard Russell for one, but also Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey, later Johnson's Vice President, entered the Senate as a young prominent liberal and contemporary of Johnson's. Caro paints rich portraits of these and other important figures from U.S. politics in the 1950s. Chapters are devoted to Russell, to Humphrey as the "orator of dawn" (p. 439), to the liberal Leland Olds who was brought down by Johnson's sub-committee, and, of course, to Joseph McCarthy. Not only do we see detailed character sketches of these figures, but we also receive an insight into how Johnson "read" them, and how he attempted to "play" them. There is no doubt that Johnson had an understanding of people which allowed him to unify the Party and to manage Senate business. It was an understanding which helped Johnson to forge alliances and broker deals across the Senate floor.

But Johnson was not purely a machine politician. Despite his initial stance on civil rights, in this biography the reader also glimpses Johnson the operator delivering on key liberal demands such as social housing and the minimum wage. And in the closing stages of the period covered by this book, Johnson's role is shown as pivotal in getting a civil-rights bill onto the statute book. When, in 1965, Johnson moved both Houses of Congress with his statement "we shall overcome," he made reference to his attempts in the 1950s and the failure of that legislation. But, as Johnson predicted in 1957, the psychological achievement of putting the first voting-rights bill into legislation laid the foundations for his two major reform bills of 1964 and 1965.

Caro's biography of Johnson should be well-received and frequently referred to for a number of reasons. As a biography of an influential Senator in the 1950s, the book can have few parallels. It offers an introduction into the history and workings of the Senate. It also places the Senate in the context of broader political developments such as the war in Korea and Washington's anti-

Communist witch-hunts. As a prelude to the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, Caro's book offers an interesting insight into the development of his political ideas. The reader is left under no illusion that Johnson was no liberal and no friend of the labor movement or the civil-rights movement when he entered the Senate. But in an interesting inversion of the typical course of history, Johnson was to pursue a more liberal policy as president than anybody could have guessed. While the Kennedys epitomised the Northern liberal base of the Democratic Party, Johnson was a staid Southern conservative from Texas. Where Kennedy embodied the aspirations of young idealists, Johnson was the steady political operator representing the status quo in American politics. And yet it was the Kennedys, fearing Southern reaction, who prevailed upon Sammy Davis, Jr. (then connected with the JFK campaign through Frank Sinatra) to postpone his wedding to his white partner until after the 1960 election. Still fearing a Southern backlash they pointedly cancelled his invitation to the Presidential inauguration at the last minute. Where most radical politicians are inevitably forced to compromise, Johnson moved in the opposite direction. And he brought with him the skills he had learnt in the Senate: his ability to negotiate, flatter and brow-beat his opponents into submission in order to get his way. Caro demonstrates admirably the way in which Johnson acquired, developed and honed those skills throughout the 1950s. That is what makes the book such a valuable resource as well as such an enjoyable read.

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