

**DEBORAH LEFF:** Welcome. I'm Deborah Leff. I'm director of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, and on behalf of John Shattuck of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, I would like to welcome you here on the day which would have been the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Robert F. Kennedy. This library seeks to inspire all who want to have a better and more just world, and we remember Robert Kennedy fondly.

Today's Kennedy Library Forum is part of a chronological series we do, looking in depth at the United States presidents. And today we examine the presidency of Lyndon Baines Johnson. Before introducing our speakers, I'd like to thank those who make the Kennedy Library Forum series possible: Bank of America, Boston Capital, the Lowell Institute, and Corcoran Jennison. And I'd like to acknowledge our media sponsors: WBUR, which rebroadcasts these forums Sunday nights at 8:00 p.m.; the *Boston Globe*; and Boston.com.

Earlier this week, I happened to run into CBS newsman Bob Schieffer, who has been doing research at both the Johnson and Kennedy Libraries for a book he's thinking of writing. Bob mentioned to me that he thought President Kennedy and his Vice President, Lyndon Johnson, were an extraordinary team.

Lyndon Johnson may have been the greatest inside operator ever. Not for nothing did some notable author call him “the master of the Senate.” And

President Kennedy was the man with the extraordinary outside appeal - the charisma and the leadership that could move a nation.

When President Kennedy died and Vice President Johnson became President, his exceptional vision and capabilities laid the groundwork for a great society, a society committed to civil rights, voting rights, Medicare, conservation, education, and urban renewal. The legislation Johnson pushed through is a remarkable legacy and a gift to this country. But there was also Vietnam, and a country torn apart.

Lyndon Baines Johnson was nothing if not quotable, and I imagine you're going to hear some pretty fabulous quotes today, so let me start off with just one. Lyndon Johnson once complained, "If one morning, I walked on top of the water, across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read, 'President can't swim.'" (laughter) At times, Johnson felt he couldn't catch a break. He accomplished so much, and it's important to remember that, along with Vietnam.

To look at this larger than life leader, and to analyze this very complex man and his legacy, we have a wonderful assembly of scholars and associates today. After our keynote address, I'll be introducing you to them, including Jack Valenti, who was Lyndon Johnson's Special Assistant.

But let me begin by introducing you to Lyndon Johnson’s extraordinary biographer, Robert Caro. It takes an exceptional man to capture the qualities of this President: the energy, the brilliance, the understanding of power and how to use it, the commitment to using that power to bring about change.

Robert Caro has done that repeatedly, writing riveting, thoroughly insightful history that has been recognized with virtually every major honor, including two Pulitzer Prizes, the National Book Critics Award for Best Non-Fiction Book, the National Book Award, the HL Mencken Award, and the Carl Sandburg Prize. His first book, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, was chosen by the Modern Library as one of the “100 Greatest Non-Fiction Books of the Twentieth Century.” And he has written three volumes about Lyndon Baines Johnson: *The Path to Power*, *Means of Ascent*, and *Master of the Senate*.

There are hardly enough adjectives to capture the rave reviews he has received, and one testament to the interest these books inspired is the size of today’s audience. So please join me in welcoming Robert Caro, and after his remarks, I’ll be back to say a few words about the remarkable other people who will be joining us today to talk about President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Thank you.

*(applause)*

**ROBERT CARO:** Thank you, Deborah. That introduction was so glowing that it reminds me - when Lyndon Johnson got an introduction that good, he used to say that he wished his parents had been there to hear it because his father would have loved it, and his mother would have believed it.

(laughter)

I'm happy to be at the Kennedy Library, although to tell you the truth, if you knew me, you'd know that I would probably be happier if I were sitting doing research at a desk here. The way things seem to have worked out in America today, if you're a writer, you spend a lot of time giving talks. But for me, no matter how many talks I give, I'm always happier doing research or writing. I'm always more comfortable at a typewriter than I am up here at a lectern.

And in fact, every time I get up to speak, I'm reminded-- I feel like the young rabbi, Jewish like me, who's just graduated from rabbinical school and he's assigned as the assistant rabbi to a large metropolitan congregation. And after a few weeks, the senior rabbi comes to him and says, "Next Friday night, you're going to give your next sermon." And the young rabbi says, "Well, I have to tell you, I always get very nervous when I speak in public. Do you have any advice?" And the older rabbi says, "Well, you know, you're allowed to have a water glass up there on the pulpit with you. And I find it helps if I fill it with a very dry martini." (laughter)

So, the young rabbi takes the advice and he gives the sermon, and as soon as it's over, he hurries to the back of the synagogue and he says to the older rabbi, "How'd I do?" And the older rabbi says, "Well, I have three comments to make. Number one, when I told you you could have a water glass up there on the pulpit in front of the entire congregation and fill it with a martini, I didn't mean you should leave the olive in it. Second, I suggested that you sip the martini at crucial points in your sermon, not drink the entire thing in one huge gulp at the beginning. And third, David slew Goliath-- he didn't beat the shit out of him!" (laughter)

But I'll tell you a reason why I do feel great to be in this building. Symbolically, it means to me that I'm finally done with the third volume, and I'm on to the fourth, because the Kennedys - John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Ted Kennedy - are all major figures in this book. It's a fascinating story, the Kennedys and Lyndon Johnson, one of the great epics, I think, in all of history, if it's told right.

It's also a good thing to be here. This is about the only major library to which I have not yet dispensed my whole research team. My whole research team has spent many months doing research at the Roosevelt Library, the Eisenhower Library, the Truman Library. And I'd like to introduce you to this whole team: Ina Caro, a wonderful historian in her own right, who nonetheless takes time to do the research with me on my books--the only person who's ever done research on my books, the only person I would ever trust to do research on my books. Ina, would you stand up?

(applause)

I have to say, and I was thinking coming up here today, that a lot of the things in the books that people give me credit for, Ina found out. In the last volume, I really wanted to show the true depth of the racial hatred of Richard Brevard Russell, the southern leader of the Senate, who is so idolized by the Washington press corps for his legislative abilities. And I was able to do that because of the months Ina spent down in the Russell Library, looking at papers that no one before had ever seen, and as far as I can tell, no one has looked at since.

I'm going to talk this afternoon about the legacy of Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. As far as the presidency is concerned, which is the book I'm writing now, I'm still learning new things all the time. At this moment, I haven't reached all my conclusions on what that legacy is yet. It's something I'm puzzling through. It's a very complicated legacy.

You know, as Deborah said, it's not like writing about the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt. When you look at the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt --whatever ups and downs there were-- the great arc is clear: he brought the nation through a great depression and a great war, successfully. It's a triumphant presidency.

Lyndon Johnson's legacy is much more complicated than that, as Deborah said. You can sum up the complications in a shorthand of songs and phrases:

"We Shall Overcome," the great civil rights anthem that Lyndon Johnson made his own when he said, in one of the mighty addresses to Congress on civil rights that he gave: "Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really, it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And *we* shall overcome."

"We shall overcome." But also, another chant: "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" Civil rights, but Vietnam. The war on poverty, the Great Society, but the credibility gap. The legacy of Lyndon Johnson is a very complicated legacy. It's a terribly poignant story, as the whole story of Lyndon Johnson, to me, is poignant. Think of what he told Doris Kearns in his retirement, how he would sit in the hill country on his ranch, night after night, thinking about those kids chanting that horrible song: "Hey, hey, LBJ."

The one thing I'm sure about right now is that the presidency of Lyndon Johnson is a watershed presidency in American history. And I use the word "watershed" in the exact meaning of that term. A watershed is a continental divide. On one side of it, the water's running one way, and on the other side, it runs the other way. The presidency of Lyndon Johnson was a watershed presidency, one of the great divides in American history in the evolution of the country's policies, both foreign and domestic. It was a presidency that changed America forever.

But one part of his presidency, civil rights, is unrelievedly glorious. He himself called the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 his greatest accomplishment, and that assessment was correct. It was the high water mark of the great wave of legislation for social justice that emerged from his administration.

As I have written, "Abraham Lincoln struck off the chains of black Americans. But it was Lyndon Johnson who led them into voting booths, closed democracy's sacred curtain behind them, placed their hands upon the lever that gave them a hold on their own destiny. Made them, at last and forever, a true part of American political life."

I want to talk about the civil rights aspect of Lyndon Johnson's legacy this afternoon, not just because it is glorious, but because it began in the United States Senate, where he was Majority Leader for six years--from January 1955 through the end of 1960. And where, in 1957, in a feat of pure legislative genius, he passed the first Civil Rights Act to be passed in 82 years. The first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction.

And the fact that he did it in the Senate, and how he did it in the Senate, is something I want to look at this afternoon because in my opinion, it throws light on an issue that is bubbling beneath the surface in Washington right now, that has so far been kept from coming to a climax, but I think is going to come to a climax in about two months. It's been obscured by the controversies over the nominations of John Bolton to the United Nations,



and Harriet Myers and now Judge Alito. But I think the issue underneath them all is far more important than any single nomination, even a Supreme Court nomination, because it involves what the newspapers call "the filibuster," but what is really the right of unlimited debate. And what that is really about is, what is the role of the Senate of the United States?

What the Senate was supposed to be, what the Founding Fathers intended it to be. That ties right into the legacy of Lyndon Johnson, into his place in American history. Because the legacy of Lyndon Johnson is not just in the presidency, but in the Senate. And what he did in the Senate should remind us not just of what the Senate was supposed to be, but what it could be again.

The Senate hasn't really been, or hasn't really fulfilled the role--let me put it that way--that the Founding Fathers intended for it for a long time now. For decades. For decades, it seems to me, it's just been a reactive body, an obstacle to be gotten around, an institution that reacts to what the White House proposes. Now, after decades of this, that trend has resulted in a body whose majority is, in many ways, no more than a rubber stamp for the President.

And also right now, it has a leader, a Majority Leader, who seems to regard himself more as a White House functionary, more as a White House staff member, than as a Majority Leader of the Senate. As if the Senate he leads is just some sort of subordinate and reactive body. He said he would have no

hesitation whatever--“No hesitation whatever” is his quote--about moving to end the right of unlimited debate if the Judge Alito nomination is stalled. And that would, I think, drive in the first wedge that would destroy something that is so important to America: the fundamental balance between majority rights and minority rights.

Look what happened this last week. The Republicans, the White House, wanted an extension of the Patriot Act. We’re not talking to that. I’m not talking today about whether it should be extended or not. The White House wanted it. The House of Representatives is controlled by the same party as the President, and so is the Senate. The House passed it and the Senate was going to. When six senators said they would filibuster, because of that, the Act was withdrawn. They’ve gone back to negotiate some more. Negotiate some more? What does that mean? What’s negotiation? Compromise. That’s what democracy is all about.

If you respect the rights of the minority, you realize how important it is, that just because there’s a President and both Houses of Congress in one party, that there be something that can stand against them and to say, “We are going to have our voice heard.” If you don’t have that, what do you have but a tyranny of the majority?

Now, defending the right--defending the filibuster--defending the right of extended debate is always tricky. And you’re looking at someone who spent, it seems to me, over a hundred pages in the last book explaining that it was

used for decades to be the most effective barrier in the most ignoble of causes, the continuation of racial segregation. But placing restrictions on that right, allowing a simple majority vote to confirm a judicial nominee, is also tricky, and it's very disturbing. The framers of the Constitution had some very strong ideas of what they wanted the Senate to be. And one of the things they wanted it to be was a check on a popular and a powerful President. And on the tyranny of the majority.

The framers wanted to check and restrain not only the people's rulers, but also the possibility that the majority would be used, in James Madison's words, "to oppress the minority." The framers, the Founding Fathers, the framers of the Constitution, Madison said, "established the Senate as the body first to protect the people against the rulers, and second to protect the people against the transient impressions into which they themselves might be led."

If you have a President and both houses in the control of one party, and the Vice President can take the presiding officer's chair in the Senate--which is what Frist is proposing to do--and can rule that a simple majority can change the rules of the Senate, and that the rule can then be changed so that a simple majority can confirm a judicial nominee, you really have done something that is contrary to the spirit of the Constitution. It's sometimes very hard to remember what the Senate was supposed to be, what it once was. I myself have to say, have to confess, that I didn't understand it when I started

working on my last book. And therefore I didn't understand enough about Lyndon Johnson.

In fact, if I tell you the precise moment when it dawned on me, what I didn't know about the Senate and about Lyndon Johnson, I'll really be explaining to you why my overall work, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, is now a four-volume work instead of the three volumes it was supposed to be. You know, when Winston Churchill was asked once how his biography of Lord Marlborough was coming along, he said, "I'm working on the fourth of a projected three volumes." (laughter) Well, not to equate myself to Churchill, but I'm in the same boat.

*The Years of Lyndon Johnson* was originally supposed to be three books, but in my attempt to examine his career in the Senate, grew and grew until a whole separate volume was needed to examine it, and *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* became four books. All my books are really basically about political power, so I knew that when I got to Johnson in the Senate, which was just going to be a small part of a longer book, I knew that it was not only going to be about Lyndon Johnson, but it was going to be about legislative power. And I can still recall quite freely the very moment when I realized the book had to be not only about Lyndon Johnson, and not only about legislative power, but about the Senate of the United States and its history.

I've been doing what I always do at the start of a book, which is simply hanging around a place--the Texas hill country or wherever--that I'm going

to write about, trying to understand its feelings and its moods, its mores, so I can show that place to the reader, so I can understand it for myself better and show it to the reader. Because if you yourself can't feel a place, can't feel its moods and its intricacies, how can you ever hope to explain it to someone else?

Now I've been doing that, I've been watching the Senate from the gallery. I would sit there for hours, groups of tourists would come in and out and leave after five minutes, and I would sit there. I would watch it on C-SPAN. And I don't know how the Senate looks to you all when you see it on C-SPAN, but to me, it just looked rather silly. The desks looked too small for the men who were standing at them, there are these endless quorum calls. You think that with the schoolboy desks and the quorum calls, you think it's like a school room in which they're always taking attendance. The same droning words: "without objection, so ordered"; "without objection, so ordered."

But at the same time that I was being bored by this, and looking down at the Senate with this sort of amused contempt, I was doing a lot of interviewing. I was trying to find whatever not only the elderly senators who once had served with Lyndon Johnson--there weren't many of those--but the oldest staff members, administrative aides and all, who remembered the time of Johnson. The clerks on the dais and the parliamentarians, the pages in the cloakrooms--what I realized I was hearing from these people was a sense of reverence about the Senate. And I simply couldn't understand it.

But I had never been down on the floor of the Senate. In those days, it was very difficult, if you weren't a staff member, to get a pass to go down on the floor. But my pass finally came through, and I can still remember that moment. I came in the door on the left, and the Senate wasn't in session. No one was there except me. I walked down between the desks, into the well of the Senate, and I turned around. And in that moment, I understood what I hadn't understood before--in one instant.

You know, from up above, the desks looked, at least to me, sort of silly. But when you're down in the well of the Senate, the desks are in four great arcs. They're very close together. They're made of a mahogany that's burnished every day so that it gleams and glows from the lights overhead. And so when you're standing down there, in the well of the Senate, I suddenly found myself surrounded by these four gleaming, glowing arcs, stretching out and away from me, powerful and majestic.

And in that moment I thought of something. I thought, "Daniel Webster stood at one of those desks." Now, I knew that, of course; in fact, I knew something about Webster, because at Princeton I'd written a paper about Daniel Webster, but that had never struck me before. And I remembered in that moment what I had learned: how when Webster was fighting to save the Union, decade after decade, he never walked back and forth. He always stood immobile while he was speaking, but he kept his hand flat on the desk as he spoke. He wasn't a tall man, but he was very powerfully built. That's how he stood. Black Dan Webster with his jutting black eyebrows and his jet

black hair. Daniel Webster, whose voice, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "could shake the world." You know, Emerson called Webster "a great cannon, loaded to the lips for liberty." And I remembered how he stood there, and what he was doing.

Now, I live in New York, on Central Park West and 69<sup>th</sup> Street. So when I go into Central Park to jog, I go in the 69<sup>th</sup> Street entrance, turn to the left to run up to the reservoir, and almost the first thing I pass is this great statue of Daniel Webster. And engraved on the pedestal are his words: "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable."

Now, we all learn that speech in high school: Webster's Second Reply to Hayne, January 26, 1830. It's said that no speech in the English language, and perhaps no speech in modern times, has ever been as widely distributed and widely read as Webster's Second Reply to Hayne. You know, they printed the speeches from the Senate then. They're not just in newspapers, but as pamphlets. And when the supply ran out, it was passed from hand to hand in the Western states. It was said that in Tennessee, each copy of that speech was read by 50 people.

Emerson said, "That speech made the Union a part of the religion of this people." And those last great nine words: "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable", they would be memorized by generations of schoolchildren. They would be chiseled in marble on walls and monuments.

Those words that were spoken, I suddenly realized, in the Senate, among the desks of the Senate. I thought of Webster, so of course, I thought of Henry Clay. He didn't stand still in the Senate. No, Webster was the most charming of men. When he went to dinner parties in Washington, it was said that the white gloves of the hostesses that he kissed were treasured, and were mementos. He charmed the Senate, he would walk back and forth in the aisles, waving, flourishing a handkerchief, tapping a snuff box for emphasis.

Webster, Clay, and Calhoun. Fighting for over 30 years to make their compromises--the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1830--one compromise after another to save the Union. Now, you could say that these three men failed, because civil war came. But another way of looking at it, and what I think is a more accurate way of looking at it, is--by buying the Union 30 years of time, this infant nation, it gave the Union time enough to grow strong, so that when there was a civil war, the Union could, at the end of it, come back together again.

And while I didn't think of it all at that moment, I began to realize, in that moment, that the book should not just be about Lyndon Johnson, and not just about legislative power, but about the Senate. The history of the Senate. What the Founding Fathers intended it to be when they said that each state should be sovereign, and each state should have the same number of votes, so that a majority of the population can't run over a minority of the smaller states. When it said that the senators should be independent of the President.



Think of that: that's why the term of a senator is longer, six years than four, than the term of a President.

When they said that the Senate should be independent, not just of a popular and powerful President, but of the people. That's why only one-third of the Senate can be elected in any election, because the Founding Fathers didn't want popular will to be able to get at the entire Senate at the same time.

What they left out, deliberately, from the Constitution was any provision for anybody to lead the Senate. You know, the Constitution says there will be a Speaker of the House of Representatives. It doesn't say, "And because of that, the Speaker can undergird himself because of that provision with the great powers that the Speaker has."

In the Constitution, it doesn't name anybody to lead the Senate. The Vice President will preside over it, but will cast the vote only in case of a tie. It names only minor officers: the Chaplain and the Sergeant at Arms. They don't even want any provision for someone to lead the senate. Because these were senators from sovereign states. And why would the representatives of sovereign states want to be led?

For many decades, the Senate was what the Founding Fathers had intended, certainly through the Civil War. And the battles in which Webster, Clay, Calhoun, and their great compatriots--Charles Sumner, Thomas Hart Benton --the battles on the Senate floor were battles over the momentous issues of the age. And the Senate was often the dominant arena in which those issues

were decided. It was not the White House, but Capitol Hill that was the epicenter of government in the decades before the Civil War. And the Senate was the dominant house of Congress.

Webster, Clay, and Calhoun were the most celebrated men of their time. They were the people that visitors from Europe wanted to see. It was very often their ideas that were the key to governmental policy. They formulated policy. All across the country, men and women pored over their speeches, as I said; and they were not Presidents, but senators. That's what the Senate was.

But I also learned, as I was doing my research, that for decades and decades after that--for a century, really--the Senate gave away its powers. Became almost a joke. What do we think of the Senate? They stopped the isolationists, stopped Woodrow Wilson from implementing the League of Nations, stopped Roosevelt from mobilizing the nations of the world and the country against the rise of totalitarianism. It was a joke until Lyndon Johnson became the Majority Leader. At the time he became Majority Leader, there was actually speculation, not just in political science journals, but it was coming in the editorials in the press, that maybe we didn't need a Senate. Maybe we should only have one House of Congress.

And Majority Leaders said, "Well, we can't do anything about it." One of Johnson's predecessors, Alvin Barkley, said, "No one can lead the Senate. I can't lead senators. I have nothing to promise them. I have nothing to

threaten them with." And nobody could break the filibuster. At that time, there were 96 senators, so you needed 64 votes to impose cloture and end the debate. Thirty-three votes and you could just keep talking. The South had 22 votes all by itself. There were all the Midwestern conservatives that were really their allies. There were all the people who talked civil rights but didn't really believe in civil rights, and what the Southerners said was, "You get up to 33 real fast."

So the Senate didn't work until, again, until Lyndon Johnson became Majority Leader. And I realized then that if I was truly trying to examine the roots of legislative power--senatorial power--for the purposes of my book, I had to try to show the Senate actually exercising its power and then losing its power. I would have to try to find out why it lost it, and the consequences for America of the fact that it lost it. The Senate was created to do great things, to be independent. For a while, it did great things and was independent. Then that stopped. Why? Why did the Senate stop working? And how did Lyndon Johnson make it work again? How, after he got the leadership, did he run the Senate so effectively?

One of his predecessors said, "I have nothing to promise them. I have nothing to threaten them with." Well, Lyndon Johnson found things to promise them, and he found things to threaten them with. It takes me hundreds of pages--I think I identify 20 or 21 separate causes, ways that he got power in places where no one had thought to look for it before, so I won't go into it today.

I will say that the best explanation of what he did is a quote, not from me, but from him--from Lyndon Johnson himself. I use it as the epigraph of the book. Here is Lyndon Johnson talking about himself. I think that every phrase in this quote is significant: "I do understand power, whatever else may be said about me. I know where to look for it, I know where to find it, and I know how to use it."

Well, Lyndon Johnson was right in that self-assessment. In this book, he looks for and finds power, as I said, in places where no one else had ever thought to look for it. I was trying to think, is there any one place that I can sum up one of these things in one paragraph? It's the use of campaign contributions--cash. Cash and campaign contributions had been used before, but never with the effectiveness that Johnson could do.

When he wasn't running, one of his lawyers, Arthur Stanley, once described walking into his ranch, at Lyndon Johnson's ranch house on the Pedernales during the elections of 1952, when Johnson wasn't running, but other senators were. Johnson is sitting there with two telephones, one up to each ear, and he's saying, "I've got 20 for him and 20 for him and 40 for him."

Before Lyndon Johnson, committee assignments were not really a source of power for a Majority Leader, because seniority governed them. People just advanced because of seniority. Johnson saw he couldn't get power in this

area unless he ended--unless he modified, severely, the seniority system, and he did. And then he had power over committee assignments.

And he used these powers with a ruthlessness that made them even more effective. Here is another quote from Lyndon Johnson, speaking about himself: "I'm just like a fox. I can see the jugular in any man and go for it, but I always keep myself in rein. I keep myself on a leash, just like you would an animal." That's Lyndon Johnson talking about himself.

Well, there are plenty of instances in *Master of the Senate* where Lyndon Johnson let himself off the leash and destroyed people with his ruthlessness. There are a lot of instances of senators crying over what Lyndon Johnson did to them. I'm thinking today of Paul Douglas, a great crusader for civil rights. Now, Lyndon Johnson, before he passed the Civil Rights Bill in 1957, had been against civil rights for 20 years, and very effectively against civil rights. And Douglas was always fighting for it and refusing to bow down to Lyndon Johnson.

So Douglas, of course, was a very respected economist. He'd written a very respected textbook in economics, and he wanted to go on the Finance Committee. Lyndon Johnson wouldn't let him on the Finance Committee. He wanted to rub it in, so he created a committee called--I think this has just gone out of my mind--it's like the Joint Committee on Economic Opportunity. That's not quite right. And he said to Bobby Baker, his aide,

"That committee is as useless as tits on a bull." And he meant, that was Paul Douglas's committee.

But the committee did have something--it had this beautiful office in the Capitol. A two-room suite of offices. Well, one afternoon, Lyndon Johnson tells Walter Jenkins, his aide, to get him the master keys that will open every door in the Capitol. And that evening, he and Jenkins go around, from room to room. Sitting in the room of Douglas's committee is an aide named Grover Ensley. The door suddenly slams open, and Ensley looks up, and there is Lyndon Johnson staring in the doorway at this beautiful suite. Johnson walks over to see what the view is, and pulls the curtain back, and it's a wonderful view of the Mall. And the next day a letter comes, saying that those offices are going to be used by the Majority Leader from now on. He had given Douglas a committee whose only perk was its office, and now he had taken it away.

And you see, in the year 1956, Douglas makes this heroic attempt to pass a civil rights bill. And Johnson is infuriated, and he does something to humiliate Douglas on the floor. He has a maneuver where he traps Douglas into making a motion, and then he insists on not a voice vote to vote it down. As the senators come onto the floor--Bobby Baker is standing there saying, "The Leader wants a no." This is on Douglas's motion. "The Leader wants a no." Of course, everyone is going to vote no. And they think it's just going to be by a voice vote.

But Johnson knows, and Joe Rauh, one of Douglas's friends, a liberal leader in Washington--I'm sure the name is familiar to some of you here - said, “This was just Lyndon Johnson putting his foot on Paul Douglas's neck to humiliate him.” And he calls for a roll call vote, and Douglas has to say, “Even my friend Hubert Humphrey voted against me. And the final vote was something like 76 to 6.”

As Paul Douglas, he has to sit there and watch as everybody votes against this simple motion. As he's leaving the Senate, he's so broken, you know, senators, if they want the elevator, they push the button three times, then the elevator operator knows it's a senator, and they stop for him. And Douglas is walking out with an aide of his named Howard Shuman. And Douglas says to Shuman, “Push the button three times. Let's pretend we're senators.”

Then Douglas says he went to his office and he cried. Douglas was a hero. He led a charge at Iwo Jima up the beaches. He said, “I hadn't cried in years, but I sat there and cried not for myself, but for civil rights. I remember thinking, ‘How is anyone ever going to get civil rights through the Senate?’”

Scoop Jackson, who worked very closely with both President Kennedy and President Johnson, both in the House of Representatives and the Senate, was once trying to define the difference between John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson. And Scoop Jackson did it this way--these are his words. He said that if Kennedy needed a vote from a senator, he would call him down to the White House, and, quote, “would explain precisely why the

bill was so important, and why he needed the senator's support." But if the senator said that his constituency just wouldn't let him vote that way, Jackson said, quote, "Kennedy would finally say he was sorry they couldn't agree, but he understood." Lyndon Johnson, Scoop Jackson would say--and Jackson worked closely with Lyndon Johnson for 25 years--Lyndon Johnson wouldn't understand. He would refuse to understand. He would, and these are Jackson's words, quote, "He would charm you, or knock your block off, or bribe you, or threaten you, anything to get your vote. He would do anything he had to to get your vote. And he'd get it. That was the difference. He'd get it."

So when Lyndon Johnson became leader, he had the powers he had found and created and the ruthlessness with which he was willing to use them. And what did he do with this power? What did he do with the power that he thus obtained by such methods, by such means? Only this: he broke the dam that the Senate had erected against all forms of social welfare legislation, and that had been standing for about 20 years. Desperately needed legislation was passed under him. Housing for the poor on a new scale, the increase in the minimum wage, the first expansion of the Social Security system since Roosevelt. He added disability benefits, he started adding them when he was still in the Senate, and made the Social Security Act the vehicle that was later to include much broader social welfare programs.

Most important, in my view, he passed that civil rights bill--the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction. The first in 82 years. You know, during that



time, hundreds of bills had been introduced. Scores of them had passed the House of Representatives. Not one had passed the Senate. You know, we all learn in college about Lord Acton's axiom, that "all power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." The more that I write about power, or try to think about it, the less I think that that is always true.

What I think is always true, what power always does, is that power reveals. There are two sides to that. When a man is climbing, trying to persuade others to give him power, he must conceal those traits that might make others reluctant to give him power. Once the man has power, it is no longer necessary for him to hide those traits. The cruelty and brutality that characterize some of Johnson's human relations only increase once he gets his Senate power. Douglas is not the only senator he made cry.

But it is not only depth that power reveals - and think what it reveals in the case of Lyndon Johnson. When he was still a school teacher in Katula, when he was 20 years old, teaching poor Mexican children, he said, "I swore then" --this is not quite the right quote; I didn't write it down - "that if I ever got the power to help those children, I was going to use it." Years later, 35 years later, he got the power, and he uses it.

Throughout Lyndon Johnson's life, there had been hints of what he might do with great power, should he ever succeed in attaining it. Hints of compassion for the downtrodden, and of a passion to raise them up. Hints that he might

use power not only to manipulate others, but to help others. To help, moreover, those who most needed help.

Now, once he acquired that power in the Senate, that compassion shone forth at last. In order to appreciate what Lyndon Johnson did for civil rights in 1957, you have to appreciate the magnitude of the problem; or maybe it's better for me to say, the depth of the problem. I really didn't understand that. I was from the North. And it seemed there was one thing in particular that I wasn't understanding, and that's this: in 1956, the last election before 1957, out of six million black Americans who were eligible to vote in the South, only one million had registered, had been able to register. One out of six. That's bad enough.

But there was another figure. Out of the one million who had registered in 1956, somewhat less than 600,000--only about half a million, actually--had actually cast votes. In other words, more than 400,000 of the million--almost half of them--had registered but hadn't voted. Now, for a black man or woman to register to vote in the South in the 1950s took great courage. Therefore, what I didn't understand was, what were the conditions or the factors that could make people who had the courage to do that, to register, not exercise that vote? Not go to the polls on Election Day?

And I guess what I was trying to do was get more of a feeling for what life for a black American was like in the South. The United States Commission on Civil Rights had held all these hearings on voting rights in 1958, 1959,

and 1960. So I went through the list of witnesses and called them to try to find, number one, someone who was alive--I was doing this 40 years later--and to try to understand more [about] that question. Why had so many blacks not wanted to vote?

I guess I wanted to know, what was life like for African-Americans trying to vote. What was life like outside the voting process? What was daily life like, if you will? I wanted to try to get a feeling for that. So I was calling all these people. And it was after I did that that I started to understand the depth of the problem, and what Lyndon Johnson [had done], the depth of his achievement. I remember I called a man named Aaron Sellers in a place called Barber County, Alabama. I don't remember the town. And he had led a group of half a dozen black Americans to register. And then, over a lot of physical intimidation, but he had done it, and they hadn't voted.

Now, when I called him, as it turned out, Mr. Sellers who was then, I think, 82, was stone deaf. So this interview was not going to go too well. Luckily, his daughter, Gladys Sellers, was visiting him from Washington Heights in New York, and she would shout my questions and then tell me the answers. And that's where you hear things, and you realize what life was like in America. That's where I first heard about the list.

He said, "Well, we didn't vote because the white people had the list." I said, "Well, what do you mean by a list?" And he said, "They made a list of those of us who had registered, and they carried it in their pockets for ready

reference." And what would the ready reference do? Well, among the things that would happen was, in the spring, poor black farmers needed crop loans. I myself didn't even know what a crop loan was. But it turns out if you're a farmer, if you're poor, you need a loan to get money to buy seed and fertilizer so you can plant in the spring and have a crop to harvest in the fall. If you can't do that, you can't plant, you can't live, really. You have to pack up your wife and children, get into a car, and drive away, often with no place to go.

Then there was the thing about the chairs. There was another woman, her name was Margaret Frost, and she was from a little town called Eufala. And she had testified about all the times she had gone to try to register, and she would--they would ask her these questions, and no matter what she answered, they would say, "Well, you've got one wrong." They would never tell her what the one was. "And you all go back," the chairman of the Board of Registrars say. "You all go back and study some more, and come back." And she did. So I was trying to get a feeling, so I did what I often do, and I said, "Well, describe the room. Tell me about the room."

And she was talking about - she said, "Why?" I said, "Well, what was the room?" She said, "It was the County Clerk's office. There was this counter. It was after hours, the County Clerk's people had gone home, the registrars would be behind the counter and I'd be standing in front of it." And I said, "You mean, you'd be sitting in front of it." She said, "No, there were no

chairs." So I said, "Why were there no chairs?" And of course, the answer was because they knew the hearing wasn't going to take very long.

And she said, "Maybe you want to talk to my husband." Her husband was David Frost, who had registered some years before. And he told me the story with which I open *Master of the Senate*. He had registered. He had overcome all of these obstacles to register. But then, a white man had told him, quote, "'The white folks are the nigger's friend as long as the nigger stays in his place.' But that I had got out of my place, if I was going to vote along with the white man." How one night, when they learned that he was actually going to vote this time, a car filled with men had stopped in front of his house and shot out the porch lights, and how, cowering inside his door, he had thought of calling the police - until the car drove away, and he saw it was a police car. A police car. So where do you turn if you can't turn to the police?

I came to realize that I was writing about a people who had no place to turn, and about the man who gave them a place to turn, a Civil Rights Act which is a very weak act. But it was necessary in order to pass the greatest Civil Rights Acts to come. And just think of how Lyndon Johnson passed that act, as we watch the Senate today. And think about what its relationship with the President should be.

Think of two aspects of Lyndon Johnson's great battle of 1957. One, the bill that was passed wasn't a White House bill; it was essentially his bill. The

original bill, the Eisenhower administration had sent over a Civil Rights Act, but it was so confused and contradictory, and it had no realistic chance of passage. He wrote it. He transformed it. He made it his bill - a Senate bill. The Senate, then, was the center of creative energy, the center of government energy and creativity, that it had been supposed to be.

And second, and then I'll stop for the day, he didn't do it by changing the rules. He didn't suggest putting the Vice President in to make a ruling that was clearly against the traditions of the Senate. He didn't change the 33. To watch Lyndon Johnson whittle away those votes, so he got the necessary 66 votes, one by one, is to watch legislative genius at its very height.

He would inspire people. I was just saying, when Frank Church, who was a young senator--he was only 32 years old, and his wife, Bethine--he's died long since, but his wife was telling me, he played a very important role in this act. He was from Idaho, and his wife, Bethine Church, was telling me how Frank always was for civil rights, but he was for it intellectually. It didn't really matter for him. Because, after all, in Idaho, if I have the figures right, the population was 600,000 and there were something less than a thousand blacks. So it wasn't on the top of his plate.

And Lyndon Johnson, Bethine Church said, would speak to Frank Church, and would make him see that he did care about civil rights. Frank always had this great sense of justice, Bethine said. Lyndon Johnson worked on that. And finally he said the magic words to Frank Church: he said, "You have to

be a Senator of the United States. You have a national duty." Those were the words that brought Frank Church - with everyone, Lyndon Johnson found whatever it took to bring him along.

So the Civil Rights Act of 1957 is part of the legacy of Lyndon Johnson for civil rights. But there was another part of the legacy in the act that is not about the presidency, but about the Senate. What Lyndon Johnson did in 1957 shows what the Senate can do when it is the Senate as the Founding Fathers intended it to be. That act is about the legacy of Lyndon Johnson, as much as the presidency. And it's a legacy that, the more I think about it, grows bigger and bigger.

I wanted to keep it shorter than this, but if I could do things short, I wouldn't always be writing such long books. Thank you very much.

(applause)

**DEBORAH LEFF:** Thank you so very much. Obviously, we have a lot to talk about, and we have just the people to do it. We're greatly honored to have with us today, sitting beside Mr. Caro, Jack Valenti. From 1966 until just recently, Mr. Valenti was Chair and Chief Executive Officer of the Motion Picture Association. But we also know him as one of President Johnson's closest aides, and one of only two Special Assistants to U.S. Presidents who have lived in the White House. Mr. Valenti, who knew President Johnson as well as almost anyone, has called him--and I'm

quoting--“The single most formidable political character, political leader, that I have ever known. In him resided all the elements of a great leader.”

Mr. Valenti met Lyndon Johnson in 1955, when Johnson was Senate Majority Leader. He was with then Vice President Johnson when President Kennedy was assassinated, and was on the plane that returned from Dallas to Washington. He has written four books, and has been awarded France’s Legion of Honor, as well as his own star on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame.

We welcome back to the Library former *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, who has twice been awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Mr. Lewis has written extensively about the civil rights movement in both articles and books, and during the Johnson administration, he was reporting for the *New York Times*, first from Washington and then as London Bureau Chief.

Beside Mr. Lewis is Bruce Schulman, professor of history at Boston University. Professor Schulman graduated *summa cum laude* in history from Yale University and then earned his Masters degree and doctorate from Stanford University. He is widely published in both the scholarly and popular media, and has written numerous books, among them *Lyndon B. Johnson: An American Liberalism*, published by St. Martin’s Press.

And moderating today’s forum, it’s a pleasure to welcome back to the Kennedy Presidential Library my good friend, Professor Lizabeth Cohen, the Howard Mumford Jones Professor of American Studies in the department of



history at Harvard University. Professor Cohen won the Bancroft Prize and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for her first book, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago*, and her most recent book is *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*.

Please join me in welcoming our distinguished panel.

*(applause)*

**LIZABETH COHEN:** Thank you, Debbie Leff, for all of us here on the panel. I welcome you all here this afternoon to join us in examining the life and legacy of Lyndon Baines Johnson. The panelists have not seen or heard this talk before you have, and I'm going to start by asking them to just share some initial responses to it, ideas that it may have triggered in their own minds.

The rules of the game here are going to be that I'm looking forward, and eager to hear, the thoughts of our panelists, and also for there to be some give and take among them. So I'm going to ask them to speak, but not to go on too long, so that we can have that sharing. And at a certain point, we will open the floor to you to join in for questions.

So, let's begin. Jack, would you like to start, and just share some initial responses?

**JACK VALENTI:** All right. Thank you all very much. I'm quite honored to be here.

I was a great acolyte of President Kennedy's, and within two days--maybe some of you are aware, but some of you may not--on Tuesday will be the 42<sup>nd</sup> year since a senseless act of mindless malice, the 35<sup>th</sup> President was slain in the streets of Dallas. It was a nightmare of a day, and every second of that day is etched into my brain, because I was there, six cars in back of the President. Went to Parkland Hospital, was summoned there by the new President. Hired by him that day, I think, the firstly minted Special Assistant. And I flew back to Washington with him, leaving behind my pleasant life in Houston, Texas. I've never forgotten it.

And I am here with great humility. I have to say, in the interest of full disclosure, to Mr. Robert Caro, who I think is probably the most engaging biographer in writing that I've ever read, and he will be the definitive biographer of Lyndon Johnson, no question about that; he writes so eloquently, and so enticingly. But in the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that I didn't think too much of his first two books. (laughter)

I say that to you, instead of saying behind your back, I want to say it to your front. (laughter) The second book, particularly, I was vexed and frustrated. Because I'm a native Texan, born in Houston, and I knew Texas very well. The second book of Johnson's life is about the 1948 senatorial campaign. And one of the things that caused me such vexation was that in this book,

Coke Stevenson, the governor, was pictured as a purified figure, brought down by the angels of mercy, full of virtue and goodness. And Johnson was painted as a Satanic figure of the worst kind.

Now the fact is that Coke Stevenson was not a good man. He was a bigot, he was anti-Semitic, he was anti-black, and he was anti-Catholic. And as a Catholic, I can tell you that John Kennedy was the first man since 1845 to win a statewide election in Texas. He won by 43,000 votes. Four years later, Johnson won by a million.

But all things change, and I'm here to confess to Mr. Caro that, having read his third book, I was deeply engaged by it. (laughter) And I have offered to the Majority and Minority Leaders of the Senate when his book first came out, they should read this book, particularly the third part of it, and learn how the greatest parliamentary commander in the history of the Senate wrought his magic.

And I found, on page 715 of the Alfred A. Knopf hardcover edition, copyrighted 2002, I'm a great advocate of copyright, I want you to know that, Mr. Caro (laughter)-- and I hope that you will allow me to read something that I think could be constituted as fair use under the copyright doctrine, since your book was over 800 pages and this is just three paragraphs.

But I want to read you this, because it was etched indelibly into my mind.

And after hearing his speech today, I feel comforted by the fact that I believe the next book will not be all that I like about Lyndon Johnson, because I loved him, and I'm very loyal to him, though I never thought loyalty made you not cite the flaws and frailties in a man. Lyndon Johnson is honeycombed with contradiction. Almost everything you can say about him, good or bad, has some tinge of truth in it.

But the fact is, that as Ralph Ellison once said, two days before Lyndon Johnson left office in New York City. He came up to him, and I was standing next to the President, and Ralph Ellison said, "Mr. President, because of Vietnam, you're just gonna have to settle for being the greatest American President we've ever had, for the undereducated, young, the poor and the old, the sick and the black. But Mr. President, that's not a bad epitaph."

I still heard those words. I hear them in my mind right now, and they took place in 1969. Four years later, Lyndon Johnson was dead.

...(inaudible) tact, and almost beaten half to death, within almost 24 hours, Johnson moved, because he knew then that those television pictures were his weapon, again, to get that bill passed. And that's when he made, as Mr. Caro pointed out, his famous "We Shall Overcome" speech. And that bill went through.

**ROBERT CARO:** And it was also a function of that, not only of that, but of his legislative genius and this incredible drive. You know, when he came down from giving the “We Shall Overcome” speech, Emmanuel Celler, who was the Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, was one of the people crowding in to congratulate him as he came off. And Mr. Celler, who was a great civil rights advocate from Brooklyn himself, said, “We’re gonna start those hearings next week, Mr. President.” And Lyndon Johnson jabbed him in the chest and said, “Start ‘em tomorrow.” (laughter)

**LIZABETH COHEN:** Very good. Okay, we have about ten minutes left, so, to get through the three of you, I’ll just ask the panelists certainly to answer, but to be as concise as you can.

**Q:** My name is Nancy Macmillan. And first of all, just very quickly, thank you all so much for telling wonderful stories, and for giving us so much to reflect on this afternoon.

Getting back to the Senate as an institution, in my youth--and we won’t comment on when this was--there was a seemingly genuine sense of bipartisanship as it related to foreign policy in the Senate. I would be interested in Mr. Caro or Mr. Lewis’s take on how much this reflected a devotion to principle, how much it owed to arm-twisting that we were not always privy to, how much of it might have been related to a shared culture in the Senate itself--even though senators came from many different local

cultures--that we have now lost. There was an allusion to more ideology, more fracturing in the Senate now, and will we ever get that back?

**ANTHONY LEWIS:** I can't answer your question. I can't give you the answer it deserves. It's really a very good question. A profound answer would take in the factors you mention--national and local cultures and so on.

But I remember one thing that I think indicates a change in mood. When the Civil Rights Act of '57 and again '64 came forward, the Republicans seemed to be against it. But what the crucial step was that allowed them to pass, at least I think of the first one, but I'm not sure--I think it was true of both, but Bob will correct me if I'm wrong--was that the Senate Minority Leader, Edward Dirksen of Illinois, compromised. He came forward with a proposal, and he was quite willing to have this bill passed. He wasn't trying to make a partisan point. He trimmed this or that, and it was satisfactory to Johnson. They worked it out. And it wasn't such a hard edge partisan difference between them.

And I just can't imagine that happening today, a day in which, although President Bush very admirably corrected it today, the first reaction of the people in the House of Representatives when Congressman Murtha made his speech was to say he was a traitor. The Republicans. That's the mood--that's where we are today--a man who spent --

**LIZABETH COHEN:** A coward.

**ANTHONY LEWIS:** A coward. A coward, a man who fought as a Marine. That’s where they are. And you know, a Dirksen-like figure-- there were a lot of things that were sort of funny about Edward Dirksen, those of us who remember him. You know, he’s the man who said, “A million here, a million there, pretty soon you’re talking about real money.” (laughter) Now, it would be a billion here, a billion there. But in the end, he really cared about the country, more than about his party.

**Q:** Thank you.

**Q:** To go for the jugular, my name is Timothy O’Driscoll McInerney. FDR dropped the gold backing for the dollar, and Lyndon Baines Johnson withdrew the silver backing for the dollar. So dollars today are worthless. And what do you say, members of the panel?

**LIZABETH COHEN:** I think you stunned them.

**JACK VALENTI:** That’s beyond my--

**LIZABETH COHEN:** So let’s take the last question.

**Q:** Good afternoon. My name is David Sachs, and I too thank you for an extraordinary afternoon, and Mr. Caro, for all your wonderful writing. Mr. Valenti, could you please give us some insight on, from your perspective, the relationship between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and how it played out during those White House years?

**JACK VALENTI:** Do I have to?

(laughter)

**LIZABETH COHEN:** Do you have another hour? A year. A year, I've been corrected.

**JACK VALENTI:** I have to say, to the following, between John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and between Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Johnson, there was a forging of great affection. I remember being on Vice President Johnson's ranch, when he had four or five of his rich cronies around the table. And they were having a good time talking. And one of them began to really coarsely attack President Kennedy.

And I remember sitting at the other side of the table, and suddenly Johnson's hand came down, and the glasses clattered, and he said to this man - who was his generous supporter, and had been his friend for 30 years - he said, "So and so, no one at this table speaks ill of the President. And if you intend to keep at it, then you must not only leave my table, but leave my home."



Scared the hell out of these guys, because they hadn't expected that kind of an answer. And when one of them said, "Sorry, Lyndon, didn't know you cared that much," he said, "Well, I damn sure do." He said, "I'm sorry. I apologize."

But between Bobby Kennedy and President Johnson, I have to say, there was a - what's the word I'm looking for here? - hostility. (laughter) I don't know whence it came. But I saw it. I think it came because it came from people other than President Johnson, that when Johnson was Vice President, John Kennedy could not have treated him with more deference and respect. Made sure he was involved in every meeting. He made sure that he was consulted. He gave him charge of the Equal Opportunity Commission as well as NASA.

But the people around Bobby Kennedy were contemptuous of Johnson. They called him "Uncle Corn Pone." They made jokes behind his back, and even put out the leak that he would not be on the ticket in 1964, and then President Kennedy had to, I believe through his press secretary, set the record straight. So that was it--the hostility. And it did not, it did not regress.

And finally, Bobby Kennedy asked President Johnson to help him campaign in New York. And I was on that trip. We started out early in the morning, and we went all over New York. Ended up in Manhattan at night. And Johnson carried New York by about 2 million votes, and Bobby Kennedy

carried it by about 600,000, so there was a lot of ballot splitting and going for Ken Keating on the other side.

And I was at the Driscoll Hotel on the night of the election, and Bobby Kennedy came on in New York and he thanked everybody: Governor Harriman and all of the people. He talked, I think he thanked everybody in every county of New York. The one person he didn't thank was Lyndon Johnson. The omission was just so stark. I watched the President's face. It was impassive. Not a tremor. He didn't say anything. Never mentioned it since. But I can imagine how he felt.

**LIZABETH COHEN:** Well, on that historic note, I think we'll close. (applause) I want to thank all the panelists. It's been extremely interesting, I hope to you as to me, and all of you as well. Thank you for coming.