Leaders in Our Lives: LBJ
OLLI Fall 2015
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Syllabus

Week One: “Growing Up Poor...and Progressive”

Lyndon Baines Johnson’s father, Sam, had to make a 17 mile, 3 hour horseback trek across uninhabited central Texas to court LBJ’s mother Rebekkah Baines. Sam was a poor farmer, whose was admired and trusted by his neighbors; so much so that he was elected to represent them in the Texas legislature. A self-educated lawyer, he found in his wife a rare intellectual equivalent. LBJ was their first child, born in 1908. They taught him to read by age 3, as they moved from rural isolation to the tiny town of Johnson City (pop. 323), without streets, electricity or running water. More children were born – eventually seven. Sam was a minority liberal in the legislature: pro-women’s suffrage, pro-immigrant, anti-prohibition. And strongly opposed to the Ku Klux Klan, which had built a significant post-Civil War presence in their region.


Week Two: “Educated, Educator, Educating”

Brought up in a household with respect for knowledge, LBJ was an exception in his region. One of only six to graduate in his high school class, he had trouble affording the only available, inexpensive further education at SW Teacher’s College. But his horizons widened as he went to California to live, work (as an elevator operator, and road gang laborer), and study with a cousin, a lawyer. Back in Texas, he re-enrolled in college, became a student leader, active in campus and regional politics. And interned as a teacher in a rural, mostly Mexican-American school, an experience that marked him for life. Finally graduating with a teacher credential, he moved to Houston to teach high school.

Week Three: “A Natural”

Having been raised in the home of a successful, grass-roots politician, LBJ had no difficulty transitioning to a bigger stage, the local office of a Texas Congressman. His personal gifts: the ability to connect with people, to understand the electoral/representation aspects of government; and to sort out the demands of constituencies served him well. He worked as a statewide administrator for an FDR New Deal Program, and was elected to Congress at the age of 29, (although with only 37% of the vote) in 1937. He was alarmed by what he saw as the U.S. unreadiness for WW II, and lack of attention to the growing fascism in Europe, especially persecution of Jews. But he was defeated in a campaign for US Senate just four years later; election irregularities were similar to those which later were part of his successful Senate elections (in 1948) and vice-president in (1960).


Week Four: “War and Its Aftermath: Master of the Senate”

Like Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and FDR ahead of him, LBJ found a natural place for his executive and political skills in the Navy. But he also sought and got actual battlefield experience. As well as exposure to the realities of military politics. Outraged by war profiteering and waste, he tried to do something about them. But FDR “Dr. New Deal” had become “Dr. Win the War,” and had other priorities. Meanwhile, via his wife, LBJ had begun to be part of a family media empire that would eventually be worth multi-millions, with Texas newspapers, radio stations, and eventually TV holdings. LBJ’s election to the Senate in 1948 led to a long career as one of the most powerful legislators in US History.

Week Five: “From Tragedy to Resignation”

LBJ had reluctantly accepted the vice-presidential nomination in 1960; to him it felt like a depressing end to a political career that he had always hoped would lead to the White House. Then came the assassination of JFK, and Johnson’s unexpected presidency. Contrary to expectations, LBJ rose to the occasion, seeing it as a time when his progressive politics could finally be effective. In civil rights, in workplace fairness and opportunity, in health care, and in education, LBJ and his Democratic majority – backed by the Supreme Court – produced one of the most progressive eras in US history. But the administration was unable to focus entirely on domestic issues, as the Vietnam War and militarism, inherited from previous presidents dating back to Truman and Eisenhower, increasingly preoccupied and divided the nation and its political system.

Suggested Reading: “LBJ: Architect of American Ambition” pp. 400-466


The 1960’s were a time of great turbulence in the U.S., and Johnson’s presidency came apart as a result. The assassinations of JFK, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy; the non-violent and violent resistance to the political system, and the increasing inability of electoral politics to respond: all contributed to a deep sense of national unease and malaise. Johnson’s refusal to run for re-election marked the end of an era, but not of the crisis. As a result, historical evaluation of LBJ has tended to be negative, especially as the influence of militarism and money on politics has grown, and the tendency of politicians, like LBJ, to enrich themselves while in office has increased exponentially as well.

Additional Reading: “The Years of Lyndon Johnson” (4 volumes to date)