

Lyndon B. Johnson and the Civil Rights Movement

Scott Tierno

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Dr. Richard Abel

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Lyndon Baines Johnson wasn't just an accidental president; he was a politician, a family man, and an unlikely champion for civil rights legislation. As a southern politician, the courage of his conviction on this subject was amazing.

Johnson was born on August 27, 1908, near Johnson City, Texas. He was the eldest son of Sam and Rebekah Johnson. He attended public schools in Johnson City and received a degree from Southwest Texas State Teachers College. He taught grade school for a year in Cotulla before going to Washington in 1931 as secretary to a Texas congressman. On November 17, 1934, he married Claudia Taylor, also known as "Lady Bird" Johnson. They had two daughters, Lynda Bird and Luci Baines.

Franklin Roosevelt asked Johnson to head the National Youth Administration, which was part of the New Deal legislation. "At age 26, Lyndon Johnson had been the youngest state director of the NYA, which funded jobs for unemployed youths during the Great Depression. [Mary McLeod] Bethune had lectured an initially reluctant Johnson that "you represent the federal government, and the NYA is a federal program" – and that therefore the program must serve all youths, not just whites" (Kotz, 2005, p. 25). This job entailed helping young people obtain employment and schooling. It confirmed Johnson's faith in the positive potential of government and won for him many supporters back in Texas. In 1937, Johnson sought and won a Texas seat in Congress, where he championed public works, reclamation, and public power programs.

In 1948 he ran for the U.S. Senate, winning the Democratic Party primary. Johnson moved quickly into the Senate hierarchy. In 1953 he won the job of Senate Democratic leader.

The next year he was re-elected as senator and returned to Washington as majority leader for six consecutive years.

In the late 1950s, Johnson began to think seriously of running for the presidency in 1960. Despite being slightly conservative Johnson moved was more liberal on domestic issues, especially on civil rights laws, which he supported the Supreme Courts decision on *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1954). This decision was “among the most significant judicial turning points in the development of our country. Originally led by Charles H. Houston, and later Thurgood Marshall and a formidable legal team, it dismantled the legal basis for racial segregation in schools and other public facilities” (Brownvboard.org, 2004).

The Presidential nomination in 1960 went to Senator John Kennedy. Kennedy selected Johnson as his running mate where they defeated the Republican ticket, Richard Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge. Johnson was appointed by Kennedy to head the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities, a post that enabled him to work on behalf of blacks and other minorities.

The assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963 elevated Johnson to the White House, where he focused on domestic affairs. In 1964, Congress passed a tax-reduction law that promised to promote economic growth and the Economic Opportunity Act, which launched the program called the *War on Poverty*. “The Act does not merely expand on old programs or improve what is already being done. It charts a new course. It strikes at the causes of poverty . . . Not just the consequences of poverty. It can be a milestone in our 180-year search for a better life for your people” (<http://www.oco.org>, 2010). Johnson and Congress work hard on securing that Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the years to come it proved to be a vital source of

legal authority against racial and sexual discrimination. Major features of the Civil Rights Act included,

“Title I

Barred unequal application of voter registration requirements, but did not abolish literacy tests sometimes used to disqualify African Americans and poor white voters.

Title II

Outlawed discrimination in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and all other public accommodations engaged in interstate commerce; exempted private clubs without defining "private," thereby allowing a loophole.

Title III

Encouraged the desegregation of public schools and authorized the U. S. Attorney General to file suits to force desegregation, but did not authorize busing as a means to overcome segregation based on residence.

Title IV

Authorized but did not require withdrawal of federal funds from programs which practiced discrimination.

Title V

Outlawed discrimination in employment in any business exceeding twenty five people and creates an Equal Employment Opportunities Commission to review complaints, although it lacked meaningful enforcement powers” (congresslink.org).

Johnson's triumph in 1964 gave him a mandate for his domestic program known as the *Great Society*. Congress responded by passing the Medicare program, which provided health services to the elderly, approving federal aid to elementary and secondary education,

supplementing the War on Poverty, and creating the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It also passed another important civil rights law--the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This act prohibited any discrimination of who could participate in federal or state elections.

Despite being a southerner, especially from Texas, it is amazing how much he was able to accomplish in his presidency. The Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and his War of Poverty. Unfortunately, with all these great opportunities his propensity to be a celebrated president is overshadowed by the Vietnam War.

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