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The Passage Of Power: The Years Of Lyndon Johnson



Synopsis

National Book Critics Circle Award, Biography, 2013
The Passage of Power follows Lyndon Johnson through both the most frustrating and the most triumphant periods of his career - 1958 to 1964. It is a time that would see him trade the extraordinary power he had created for himself as Senate Majority Leader for what became the wretched powerlessness of a Vice President in an administration that disdained and distrusted him. Yet it was, as well, the time in which the presidency, the goal he had always pursued, would be thrust upon him in the moment it took an assassin's bullet to reach its mark. For the first time, we see the Kennedy assassination through Lyndon Johnson's eyes. We watch Johnson step into the presidency, inheriting a staff fiercely loyal to his slain predecessor; a Congress determined to retain its power over the executive branch; and a nation in shock and mourning. We see how within weeks - grasping the reins of the presidency with supreme mastery - he propels through Congress essential legislation that at the time of Kennedy's death seemed hopelessly logjammed and seizes on a dormant Kennedy program to create the revolutionary War on Poverty. Caro makes clear how the political genius with which Johnson had ruled the Senate now enabled him to make the presidency wholly his own. This was without doubt Johnson's finest hour, before his aspirations and accomplishments were overshadowed and eroded by the trap of Vietnam. It is an epic story told with a depth of detail possible only through the peerless research that forms the foundation of Robert Caro's work, confirming Nicholas von Hoffman's verdict that "Caro has changed the art of political biography."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Thirty years have passed since the publication of *The Path to Power*, the first of what Robert Caro had envisioned would be a three-volume biography of America's 36th president. This, his fourth volume, ends in the first months of Johnson's presidency, and Caro's assertion that this is the penultimate volume is a little hard to swallow given the thoroughness he has covered his subject's life even before reaching his time in the White House (with a third of this book's 700+ pages chronicling just the first four months as president). Yet Caro has sacrificed brevity for a detailed portrait of irony in his depiction of a master of political power who suddenly found himself deprived of it. Caro begins with Johnson at the height of his success in the Senate. Still only in his second term, he had taken the weak position of Senate Majority Leader and turned it into the second most powerful office in national politics, thanks largely to his enormous personal and legislative abilities. But Johnson had his eye on an even larger prize: the presidency itself, an office he had aspired to for decades and which in 1960 seemed to many to be his for the taking. Yet Johnson hesitated to commit himself to the race, fearing the humiliation of a defeat. This created an opening that John F. Kennedy eagerly exploited. With his brother Robert collecting commitments in the west - a region critical to Johnson's chances - Kennedy outmaneuvered the Texas senator and won the nomination, demonstrating just how completely Johnson had misjudged his opponent.

For those of us who have read the previous volumes of Robert Caro's portrait of the life of Lyndon Johnson, we have all eagerly awaited this the latest installment. When the author first began writing what has become the definitive biography of the 36th President, he was basically vilified by scholars as getting it wrong. With each passing year, and volume, historians have come over to Caro's side of the story in troves. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* can either be read as part of the anthology or as a standalone story of Johnson's years during the Vice Presidency, and his ascension to the oval office upon the tragic death of John Kennedy. Either way, you are in for a real treat. Many readers agree that writing doesn't get any better than this, and the proof is that Caro's writings have stood the test of time, and his reputation has simply gotten bigger. This is 605 pages (736 with footnotes) of detailed writing that any student of that period will cherish. The first half of the book, over 300 pages is dedicated to the last two Senate years, and the Vice Presidential years when LBJ lived the most down in the valley depressing type experience. He was ignored by the President, and castigated by young Robert Kennedy. Between the two of them Johnson's power had been castrated, and he was boxed into a small office. In a city where power was everything, Johnson now had none. This is especially interesting in light of the heights from which he the former

Senate Majority leader had fallen. Johnson as leader was considered the most powerful man in the Congress, with the White House held by the popular Republican President Dwight Eisenhower. Ike could get nothing done in the Democratic Congress without LBJ's help.

Caro has famously written few books in a long career as a biographer, but surely his series on Lyndon Baines Johnson, of which this is volume four, will be remembered as one of the finest in United States biography. Caro has spoken to everyone he could find, read every piece of paper he could locate, but that factual basis is not what makes this such an important biography. It is the immense depth of insight he has brought to the subject, a depth that provides a study of power in all of its guises. It is this analysis, written in clear crisp language that sets this book, and the others in the series (and Power Broker as well) apart from most biographies. If you have never read Robert Caro before, take a few minutes and read the introduction to this book on your computer. Certainly many people, especially those who have no personal memory of the years covered in this book, might wonder why a slice of only a few years in the life of a not especially beloved President is worth reading. The answer is first that few US politicians were as complex and bigger-than-life than LBJ. And most importantly, LBJ was, from a young age, possessed by a need for power and with a startling ability to work hard and concentrate on what he wanted, became a master of how to obtain power, Power. In doing so LBJ pushed himself further and further in and up the United States political power structure, improbably ending as President after the assassination of Kennedy. The fact that a poor, ill-educated, physically unattractive politician with a heavy Southern accent could attain the presidency says much about both the US and about LBJ. Caro has captured that time in US culture and politics, and his subject, LBJ, with astute observations, particularly about power.

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