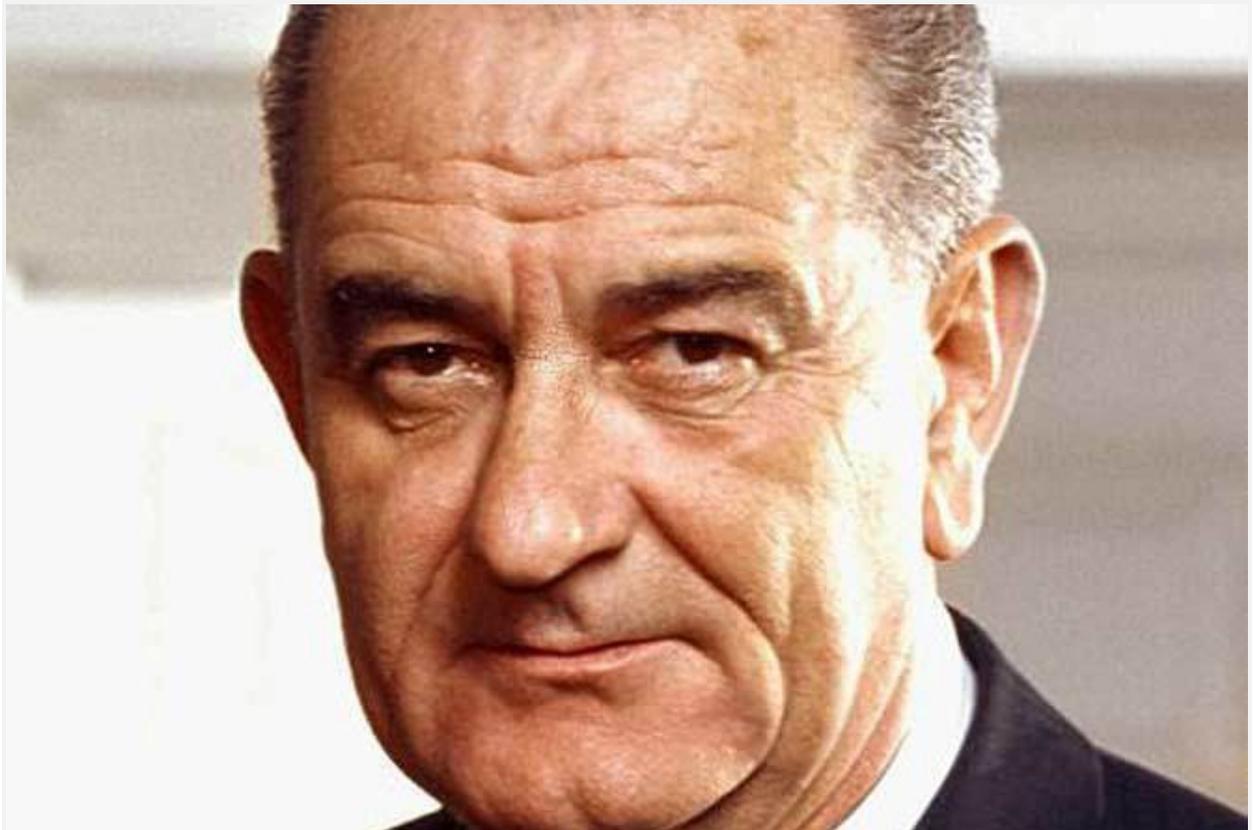


LBJ: Much More Than A Texas Hillbilly



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Today, Wednesday, July 2nd, marks the 50th anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The bill was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, yet it seems the media downplays his significant role in the passage of that historic legislation. Google “civil rights heroes” and notice that Johnson is missing.

Thurgood Marshall can be found on some lists. He was the first black Supreme Court Judge and was appointed by...Lyndon Johnson.

According to historian Robert Caro:

During the twentieth century, of all its seventeen American Presidents Lyndon Baines Johnson was the greatest champion that black Americans, and Mexican-Americans and indeed all Americans of color had in the White House, the greatest champion they had in all the halls of government.

John F. Kennedy submitted the Civil Rights Act to Congress in 1963 and receives much of the praise for it. But due to the congressional logjam against his bills, it likely wouldn't have passed had Kennedy served out his term. In fact, Kennedy was frustrated by what he called "this damned civil rights mess."

While in Congress Lyndon Johnson had earned a much-deserved reputation as a cynical wheeler-dealer who likely stole an election or two, but after 20 years of voting against civil rights, Senate Majority Leader Johnson rammed through the first civil rights bill to pass Congress (albeit in a very watered down form) since Reconstruction. When Johnson had accumulated enough power to do something — a small something — for civil rights in the Senate, he did it. When he was suddenly thrust into the presidency after Kennedy was assassinated, he had a lot more power, and he didn't

take too long to reveal what he wanted to do with it. Lyndon Johnson's speech to a joint session of the House just a few days after JFK was murdered, made the civil rights issue his first priority, stating, "no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights for which he fought so long."

This was tantamount to treason for the men who had raised him up to power, the conservative Southern Democratic bloc of senators — Russell, Talmadge, Byrd, Gore, and Thurmond — the men who had believed and were assured that Johnson was one of them. And the bill Johnson passed was broader in scope than JFK's.

But even though Johnson knew that his endorsement of the civil rights bill might cost his party the South — "We have lost the South for a generation," he was said to have uttered upon signing — and him the 1964 election, it was a sacrifice he was willing to make. (Some have speculated that ensuring black loyalty to the Democratic Party was a tradeoff he was also willing to make.) In the wake of this landmark legislation the Democratic Party became steadily more liberal, and many Southerners went Republican thereafter.

Winning the 1964 presidential election against Barry Goldwater by one of the biggest landslides in American history, Lyndon Johnson was the first Southerner elected to that office since 1848. And the

taint of magnolias was finally off Southerners. It's unlikely that Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton would have been as popular as they were had LBJ never been elected president.

There may have been something personal about civil rights for Johnson. While John Kennedy's wealth afforded him servants all his life, LBJ grew up poor among even poorer Mexicans in the hill country of Texas. While for JFK poverty and discrimination were abstract concepts, they were concrete for Lyndon Johnson. He would often tell his fellow Southern lawmakers who opposed civil rights about his black secretary, who while traveling was unable to get served in a diner or use a public restroom. Within a month of assuming the presidency, Johnson had hired the first black secretary to hold that position in the White House.

Granted, LBJ wasn't marching or being clubbed over the head, but it was his great ability to work Congress that got the controversial bill passed. He shepherded it through the House and Senate by outmaneuvering the entrenched Southern bloc and his mentor, Georgia Senator Richard Russell.

Despite LBJ's far-reaching liberal programs that have utterly changed the United States — Medicare, War on Poverty, Immigration Act, Public Broadcasting Act, Gun Control Act, and the Civil Rights Act — he's not as popular among Democrats as one might expect. According to a Gallup poll taken last year, Lyndon Johnson is *less* popular than he was when he left office.

Undoubtedly the war in Vietnam is the main reason for his unpopularity. It is what undid his decades-long political career so thoroughly that he refused to run again for president in 1968. And even giving LBJ credit for his role in civil rights can be considered controversial: In the 2008 presidential primaries, Hillary Clinton was criticized for making the point that “Dr. King’s dream began to be realized when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It took a president to get it done.”

I believe there is another reason why the media downplays his contributions to civil rights: Johnson did not fit the modern Democratic Party narrative. He was gauche. He was corny. His Texas accent was a liability to the progressive liberals and the Northern elites who were coalescing their power over the Democratic Party in the 1960s. He was offensive to their sensibilities — he often slipped into saying the word “nigrah” instead of “Negro” and sometimes was known to use the N-word. He was a big, loud, grotesque Southerner. And there is, even 50 years later, *still* a prejudice against that type of Southerner. A prejudice that even obscures the prejudice the man tried to undo.

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