

Jack Valenti
LBJ Lecture April 3, 1997

LBJ distinguished lecture
Remarks for President Jerome suppl
Evans auditorium
Thursday, April 3, 1997
2 p.m.

We are delighted that all of you could be here this afternoon.

We are particularly delighted to have with us today Mrs. Ladybird Johnson, a good friend of Southwest Texas, and her daughters, Lynda Robb and Luci Johnson.

Would you all please stand?

As you know, Lyndon Johnson envisioned this lecture series during one of his last visits to our campus.

His passion was education, and he wanted to bring to students the ideas of outstanding people in a variety of fields.

And we think we have fulfilled his vision.

In the past we have asked experts in: government, theatre, music, civil rights, the media, law enforcement, literature, and business to give this lecture.

Southwest Texas has benefited greatly from their presence among us. In fact, we have two of them here today — William Sessions, former Director of the FBI, and Congressman Jake Pickle.

Would you both stand?

Today's speaker is appropriate company for Judge Sessions and Congressman Pickle and Jim Lehrer and Barbara Jordan and others who have given LBJ lectures in the past.

Jack Valenti has a face most of us recognize from telecasts of the academy awards. In fact we saw him just a couple of weeks ago when the Oscars were handed out. However, it was jack's misfortune to share the stage with Kristin Scott Thomas [star of the *English Patient*, who was incredibly beautiful and elegantly dressed at the ceremony], so I'm not sure how many people even noticed jack.

Jack Valenti is an excellent choice to give the Lyndon Johnson Distinguished Lecture.

He was with Johnson from the first minutes of his presidency and became as close a confidant as LBJ ever had, except for Mrs. Johnson, of course.

Mr. Valenti, like Johnson, is a Texan. He was born and reared in Houston, learning the value of hard work early in his life. Ironically, one of the jobs he held as a young boy was ushering at the Iris Theatre, a Houston movie house, for \$11 a week.

He collected several battle decorations as a bomber pilot during world war two.

After the war he earned his bachelor's degree at night at the University of Houston and later his MBA at Harvard.

He was working for his own successful ad agency, Weekley and Valenti, when he met Senator Lyndon Johnson in 1956. He was immediately taken with Johnson's unique

style and effectiveness. He worked for Johnson during his bid for the presidency in 1960 and later for the Kennedy Johnson ticket.

On November 21, 1963, Valenti gave a dinner in Houston, which was attended by Kennedy and Johnson, and then flew with Johnson to Fort Worth. The following day, Valenti was in the presidential motorcade when Kennedy was fatally shot. And arranged the details of the new president's impromptu inauguration at the Dallas airport.

He became Johnson's first hire as president [and] for the next three years he was Johnson's special assistant, constant companion, trouble shooter and as he once described himself, "the roving linebacker of the white house staff."

He resigned in 1966 to become only the third person in history to head the Motion Picture Association of America. In that position, he has guided the American film and television industry through three decades of enormous change and growth.

Among other accomplishments, he has instituted the audience rating systems, freed filmmakers from outdated taboos, encouraged young talent, and negotiated trade agreements with other countries.

Even after leaving the White House, Valenti remained a close friend of Lyndon Johnson and his family. Two of the three Valenti children are named after the president. And one of the four books Valenti has written is about Lyndon Johnson, entitled *A Very Human President*.

We believe President Johnson would be extremely pleased to know that his friend Jack Valenti is giving a lecture named for him.

Please join me in welcoming Jack Valenti.

The Unpredictable World of Politics: Lessons I Have Learned

By Jack Valenti

Chairman & CEO

Motion Picture Association of America

Thank you, Mr. President, for that lavish introduction. A little brief, but that's all right. LBJ used to say nobody ever gets mad at you when you're bragging on them, so I'm not mad at you.

I am honored and overjoyed that Mrs. Johnson is here; thank you, Mrs. Johnson. And Lynda and Luci, whom I've known forever and whom I care about as if they were my own family. I don't mind saying that without Lyndon Johnson I wouldn't be up here today. I wouldn't be who I am today. I owe him everything. I would probably still be in Houston, not living unhappily but I wouldn't have had the opportunity to have the exciting career — at least from my standpoint — that I've had.

Now the first thing I'm going to do is start my stopwatch. I have to tell you one little story before I begin. When I was a small boy growing up in Houston, we were Catholic in the grand slum of Sicilian immigrants. In that part of Texas, there weren't many Catholics and damn few were Sicilians, I can tell you that. So oftentimes I would go with my friends to, what we call in East Texas, brush arbor revivals. Where you raise a tent, and itinerant preachers would come in, circuit-riding preachers, and mount a pulpit, and then kick the bejesus out of the devil for the next four, five hours. So one Sunday, when I was about 10 years old, I went with my friend and his father to a brush

arbor revival. This preacher there was known as one of the great filibusterers of all time. He could talk longer than Strom Thurman, who has talked for 94 years. The first thing this preacher did was haul out a big pocket watch and put it right in front of him. My friend tugged at his daddy's lapel and he said, "Daddy, what does it mean when the preacher puts that watch in front of him?" And the father leaned down and whispered, "Son, not a goddamn thing." So, as you can see, I started my stopwatch.

As one who has spent his entire adult career in two of life's classic fascinations — politics and movies — I have known in both those worlds the great, the near great and those who thought they were great. I have known important people like Judge William Sessions and my old friend Jake Pickle. I have become convinced that movie people and politicians spring from the same DNA: They are both unpredictable, sometimes glamorous, usually in crisis (imagined or otherwise), addicted to power, anxious to please, always on stage, hooked on applause, enticed by publicity, always reading from scripts written by someone else, constantly taking the public pulse, never really certain, except publicly. Indeed, it's difficult to say which deserves more the description of "entertainment capital of the world," Hollywood or Washington, D.C.

Which is why I would like to talk today about what I have learned since I arrived in the Federal City aboard Air Force One on Nov. 22, 1963. It was on that day that a young president was slain in the streets of Dallas. And it was on that day less than two hours later that Lyndon Johnson, at age 55, became the 36th president of the United States.

I'm not going to recount that nightmarish day, every second of which is seared in my memory forever, except to say that on that day my life changed radically, and more importantly, so did the country. And so today, I offer you some lessons I have learned in the intervening 34 years. I have in turn been an intimate participant at the highest station of this government, as well as a clinical observer through the administrations of seven presidents, from the 88th Congress through the 105th Congress. Perhaps some of these musings will be of some casual interest to a few of you. They are quite interesting to me.

So, let me count the lessons I have learned.

I have learned that no man or woman is indispensable. Aboard Air Force One on that day, I watched as there occurred a unique celebration of the country's molecular roots: the peaceful transfer of the most awesome power known on this planet. In a brief oath inhabited by plain, simple words specified in the Constitution and sworn to by every president since George Washington spoke them in the birth year of the Republic, the president's power, duties and obligations are passed, peacefully, from one national leader to the next. It is a magnificent, and perhaps even divine, continuity. I learned that while the light in the White House may flicker, the light in the White House never, never, goes out. The nation's frame is invariably firm. The nation's journey is never interrupted. The nation's spirit is always intact.

I learned that in the White House there is one enduring standard by which every assistant to the president, every presidential adviser, every presidential consultant must inevitably be measured. Not whether you went to Harvard or Yale or Southwest Texas or the University of Houston, or whether you scored 1600 on your SATs, or whether you are endlessly charming and charismatically enabled or whether you made millions in what we sardonically call "the private sector." These are all attractive credentials which one may wear modestly or otherwise. But when the decision crunch is on in the Oval Office,

they are all merely tracings on dry leaves in the wind. What does count, the ultimate and only gauge, is whether you have “good judgment.”

I learned that no presidential decision is ever made where the president had all the information he needed to make the decision. There are never enough facts. Very quickly, the decision corridor grows dark, the mapping indistinct, the exit inaccessible. What is not useful are precedents or learned disquisitions by op-ed page pundits, some of whom would be better suited to raising pigeons. Finally, the decision is made by the president on judgment alone.

You don't learn “good judgment” in the Ivy League or by reading the New York Times, the Washington Post, or Bridgett Moffatt of the San Marcos Daily Record or by watching CNN. It is well to remember, as Oscar Wilde once said, that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught. Judgment is something that springs from some little elf who inhabits an area between your belly and your brain, and who from time to time, tugs at your nerve edges, and says, “No, not that way, the other way.” This mysterious inhabitant is called instinct, intuition, judgment. It is the one ingredient on which the rest of the human condition depends for guidance.

I learned that economic forecasts beyond about a week have the same odds of accuracy as guessing the winning numbers in the D.C. lottery. If you truly believe in long-term predictions of economic activity, estimates based on so-called “real numbers,” which is the mantra of the current budget debate, then you are enrolled in a defunct mythology. Economic forecasts are usually unwarranted assumptions leaping to a preconceived conclusion. Just remember, whenever an economist can't remember his phone number, he will give you an estimate.

I learned that most people vote for a president viscerally, not intellectually. Most people choose a president romantically, a choice made in unfathomable ways, which is how romance is formed.

I learned from Lyndon Johnson never to desert a friend nor humiliate an enemy. In a political struggle, never get personal, else the dagger digs too deep. Your opponent today, as LBJ used to say, may need to be your ally tomorrow. Therefore, when you are about to win, always leave your antagonist an exit way so he can depart the field with his dignity intact.

I learned that nothing lasts. What is up will inevitably go down and what is down will sooner or later go up. Victory is often the prelude to defeat. Failure is often the precursor of triumph. The breeding ground of politics and movies and TV is irrigated and nourished by change. As one who has fallen from political power, I can instruct current White House aides how quickly they lose their charm and their enticements when they no longer sit at the right hand of the Sun King.

I learned that a political poll is Janus in disguise. The life of a poll is about 10 nano-seconds. It is already in decay when it is published. A political poll, like the picture of Dorian Gray, is the face of entropy. (I've been looking for years for a speech where I could use that word.) The veteran professionals know that. The old pols use polls to raise money. When polls are up, go for the fat wallets. But the politician who persistently lifts his wet finger to test the political polls before he acts usually leaves office with a wet finger.

I learned that if a president, a congressman, a senator, a head of a movie studio does not have convictions, he or she will be right only by accident. If a public man or

woman has not convictions, then they are deprived of the passion which fuels every great political captain, and is the essence of leadership in the long-term benefit of the people whose interests are the prime priority of elected officials.

I learned that the frustrating constant of modern-day American politics is perennial gridlock, caused by forces at either extreme. It has been said that a man does not show his greatness by being at the end of one political boundary or the other, but rather by touching both at once. In our free republic, political parties argue and shout, but finally they touch both ends of the extremes and draw them together. That is called "compromise." It is not an ignoble word. Compromise is the canopy under which men and women finally behave wisely, once they have exhausted all other alternatives. Without compromise, parliamentary bodies will "split into a bundle of unfriendly and distrustful fragments."

I learned that if we live in the incestuous world of Washington or Hollywood long enough, we become, in the main, skeptics and cynics, who view with lacerating contempt the boobs and the rabble, the unlearned and unlettered, who live out there, somewhere east of Beverly Hills and west of the Washington Beltway. But those boobs and rabble are the very folks who over two centuries of cruel disjointings have sustained this free and loving land.

I have a special feeling for the rabble because I'm one of them. My grandparents were part of that rabble. They came to Texas from Sicily, poor immigrant peasants, strangers in a strange, but to them wondrous, land. They became unabashed patriots, which to them meant fierce loyalty and unbreakable fidelity to their new country.

These days we are uneasy with the designation "patriot." It's corny. We regard it in much the same queasy manner as one does holding a wolf by the ears. Too bad. When knives fill the night, when lightning is seen and drums are heard, when the dagger is at the nation's belly, the boobs and rabble — the patriots — are always there, ready to fight, and ready to die if need be, to defend their country and to protect those who stayed home, for sound and convenient reasons, of course.

But the greatest lesson I have learned, the most important of my education, is really the essential imperative of this century. It is called leadership. We brandish the word. We admire its light. But we seldom define it. What is leadership? Outside Caen in the Normandy countryside of France is a little cemetery. Atop one of the graves is a cross on which is etched these words: "Leadership is wisdom and courage and a great carelessness of self." Which means, of course, that leaders must from time to time put to hazard their own political future in order to do what is right to be done for the people they have by solemn oath sworn to serve. Easy to say. Tough to do.

I remember when I first bore personal witness to its doing. It was in December 1963. Lyndon Johnson had been president but a few short weeks. At that time I was actually living on the third floor of the White House until my family arrived. The president said to me on a Sunday morning, "Call Dick Russell and ask him if he would come by for coffee with you and me."

Senator Richard Brevard Russell of Georgia was the single most influential and prestigious figure in the Senate. He towered over all others in influence and honor and respect. He would have been president except for one irremediable flaw: He was the leader of the segregationist forces in the Senate. When in 1952, the Senate Democratic leadership post fell open, the other senators turned immediately to Russell, imploring him

to take the job. “No,” said Russell, “let’s make Lyndon Johnson our leader; he’ll do just fine.” So at the age of 44, just four years into his first Senate term, LBJ became the youngest-ever Democratic leader and in a short time the greatest parliamentary commander in Senate history.

When Russell arrived, the president greeted him warmly with a strong embrace, the 6-foot-four LBJ and the smallish, compact Russell, with his gleaming bald head and penetrating eyes. The president steered him to the couch overlooking the Rose Garden, in the West Hall on the second floor of the mansion. I sat next to Russell. The president was in his wing chair, his knees almost touching Russell’s, so close did they sit.

The president drew even closer, and said in a soft, even voice, “Dick, I love you, and I owe you. If it had not been for you, I would not have been leader, or vice president or now president. But I wanted to tell you face to face, Dick, please don’t get in my way on this Civil Rights Bill. It’s been locked up in the Senate too long. I’m going to pass this bill, Dick. I will not cavil. I will not hesitate. And if you get in my way, I’ll run you down.”

Russell sat mutely for a moment, impassive, his face a mask. Then he spoke, in the rolling accents of his Georgia countryside. “Well, Mr. President, you may just do that. But I pledge you that if you do, it will not only cost you the election, it will cost you the South forever.”

President Johnson in all the later years in which I knew him so intimately never made me prouder than he did that Sunday morning so long, long ago. He touched Russell lightly on the shoulder, an affectionate gesture of one loving friend to another. He spoke softly, almost tenderly: “Dick, my old friend, if that’s the price I have to pay, then I will gladly pay it.”

Of all the lessons I have learned in my political life, that real-life instruction in leadership was the most elemental, and the most valuable. It illuminated in a blinding blaze the highest point to which the political spirit can soar. I have never forgotten it. I never will.

Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant, 2007-08