

David Shribman
LBJ Lecture April 30, 2001

UNEDITED

LBJ Distinguished Lecture
Remarks for President Jerome Supple
Student Center Teaching Theater
Monday, April 30, 2001
7:30 p.m.

We are glad that all of you could be here this evening.

As we all know, Lyndon Johnson is the university's most illustrious alumnus.

After graduating in the class of 1930, he took his teachers' college diploma in hand and began to work his way up the political ladder to the nation's highest office.

And he returned to campus often to give talks, sign important legislation, visit his roots.

On his last visit to campus shortly before his death, he envisioned this lecture series.

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

We believe we have fulfilled his vision.

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

Southwest Texas has benefited greatly from their presence among us.

Tonight's speaker is appropriate company for those lecturers of the past.

David Shribman has been a newspaperman almost all of his life, and his association with the *Boston Globe* runs deep.

As a kid growing up in Boston, he delivered the globe in his neighborhood.

As a student at Dartmouth years later, he was the recipient of the *Globe's* annual Arthur Segal scholarship.

It is fitting that he now works for the *Globe*, as chief of the newspaper's Washington bureau.

He began his professional career, however, at the *Buffalo Evening News*.

He has also covered the national political scene for the *Washington Star*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

He earned the Pulitzer Prize in journalism in 1995 for his coverage of the nation's Capitol and American politics.

He writes a syndicated newspaper column and a regular column for *Fortune* magazine.

He also happens to be working on a book about Lyndon Johnson.

We are delighted to have him with us tonight. Please welcome David Shribman.

David M Shribman.

Thank you President Supple. I'm delighted to be here in the city of Luling [audience laughter].

I understand this is the last day of classes and this is kind of the celebration event. You guys sure know to have a good time here at Southwest Texas.

I want to talk, just to give you an idea of where I'm going to take you here. I'm going to talk about two Texas presidents: President Johnson, and the second President Bush. And then I'm going to open up for questions, and as I told some students a little bit earlier today, if they're hard, I'll evade them.

In any case, you have two astonishing characters here, in Texas presidents, the other president Bush is a pretty amazing character too, but I kind of think of him more as a New Englander, like myself, he'd probably dispute that.

Let's take President Johnson first. I like to argue tonight that the highest political figure in the nation today isn't George W. Bush, but it's Lyndon Johnson. He was the most prominent political victim of Vietnam—as you all know—a target of protestor's chants, a symbol of big-spending liberalism; the last apostle of Washington's social engineering. He was for many years, President Johnson was, the subject of contempt and ridicule, particularly from fellow Democrats. But now he's been out of office for thirty years, a new Lyndon Johnson seems to be rising from the historical mists and myths.

The new Johnson is visionary, sympathetic, avuncular, wise, effective, and a lot smarter than the smart people who didn't think he was very smart. The Johnson revisionism is coming only partially from academics, it's also coming from the arena. Former Vice President Al Gore put LBJ in the list of presidents he most admired. In the last year alone, the Harvard economist John Kenneth Goldbraith, a one time Johnson intimate who broke with the president over Vietnam, and helped lead an insurrectional movement designed to dump Johnson, described the president as the most effective political activist of our time. Former Senator George S. McGovern of South Dakota, who was no friend, nor admirer of president Johnson during the war, and was the Democratic Presidential nominee in 1972, argued that aside from Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson was the greatest American President since Abraham Lincoln.

But the current Johnson revival reveals more about us at the beginning of the twenty-first century than it does about the America that during the tumultuous Johnson years reached the 2/3 mark of the last century. It tells us that there's a yearning again, in the Democratic Party and the rest of the country at large, for a president with big dreams, big plans, and this is recognized in Johnson more in hindsight than at the time, a big sense of self-confidence.

Even before this latest burst of revisionism, there have been many Lyndon Johnsons. The striving capitalist schemer who ingratiated himself with Franklin Delano Roosevelt today I learned about the President Johnson who twice, two summers, was the editor of the campus newspaper. And it's a fit predecessor, Jennifer Walsh, for your distinguished tenure. President Johnson also is known as the biggest New Dealer of his time. So much so that he tried to make the Mekong River Delta into a New Deal project of its own.

He was the son of a Depression poor Texas he dreamed of bigger horizons for the poor, the black, and the Hispanic and much of you know that much of that dreaming began here, on this campus.

He was a gifted Senate Majority leader who felt stifled as John F. Kennedy's understudy.

And then in the most tragic transition of the twentieth century, he became Kennedy's successor—the shrewd Washington hand who slammed a social activist program through Congress, with deftness only to be dragged down, and bogged down in a civil war in Vietnam.

Now with the emphasis among scholars and commentators and journalists and amongst some of you is on Johnson as a political magician—more as a magician than as a Cold War tactician. With more public fascination with Johnson's role as a dreamer than as successes as a schemer he seems particularly big to us now. Not only to somebody on this campus, not only to someone like me that grew up in the Johnson years, that came of age, I suppose, politically in the Johnson years. He's particularly big to us now, because he's a president who was eager to take on big challenges.

He entered office in the most strained of circumstances—taking the oath in Air Force One, while the blood-stained widow of his predecessor looked on, and as a shocked world trembled. Within hours, his advisors, a mix of Johnson loyalists and Kennedy holdovers told him that Kennedy's commitment to civil rights legislation was driving down his poll ratings. They counseled him that as a southern president, as an accidental president, as a president that hadn't even been elected on his own, he had every excuse to put the legislation aside for a year, or for forever. He asked, and this is the most important question anybody asked during the Johnson years, “What's the presidency for if it was not for urgent, national priorities like civil rights?”

That was the attitude that Johnson used when proposing the Great Society including Medicare and the voting rights bill, which he correctly recognized was good for America and bad for the Democratic Party, by delivering the solid South, the backbone of the Democratic coalition since Roosevelt's time to the Republican Party. And the stain of Vietnam hasn't receded and if you have any doubts, think about the questions we're asking Senator Bob Kerry this very week. Johnson's one-time critics haven't sought to erase that stain either. That Goldbraith said he regretted the way we allowed the Vietnam War to become the totally defining effort of those years, and likewise of history. George McGovern argued that it would be a historic tragedy if Johnson's outstanding domestic record would be forever obscured by his involvement in a war he did not begin and did not know how to stop. The vindication, after three decades, finally dawns for Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Now, a vindication of a different sort also dawns for George W. Bush. Who, as you know was regarded as a man not quite up to the job, not quite fit for the job not quite smart enough for the job, and not quite robust enough in his electoral powers to win the job.

The last time I was in Texas we were in the middle of a debate over who actually had won the presidency. And, I'd like to tell you know that we finally settled it, and that George W. Bush is the president. And I want to tell you that this may be remembered as the year when politics made its comeback. And you can thank George Bush, in a way, for that.

For decades, Americans had complained that their votes didn't matter and in any case, elections had no consequences. In only a hundred days' time, at exactly the hundred day mark, there's been ample evidence to disprove both of those notions. The opening

weeks and months of the George W. Bush administration may have lacked the attention and the excitement, and the daring, I suppose, of the Clinton years. But, they've not lacked significance.

Much has changed. The business and the regulatory climates, global diplomacy, and energy and environmental policy, the walls between church and state, the way the Capitol works. But the most intriguing change may be the view of a Republican president who lost the popular vote to a Democrat would not have the heft to change the way the government worked and to change the way the country looked at Washington.

Far from acting like a minority president, Bush has taken command of the executive branch, spoken boldly and acted as if he won 371 electoral votes, rather than only 271. None of the hesitancy that the commentators expected has materialized. Nor did any of the caution that analysts said was necessary in the political atmosphere where the president won office in a contested election where the Senate is split 50 to 50 and where House Republicans outnumber Democrats by only 9 souls.

Though his tax cut plan faces obstacles in the Congress, the president was able to muscle his legislation through the first stage in his first few weeks in office. And though his offense against regulation prompted howls of pain from organized labor, he was able to erase Clinton-era ergonomic rules from the slate. Though there has been controversy attendant to it, the president has begun to forge his own ideas about the environment. And though his ideas have raised protests from the foreign policy establishment, he brought to an end the US negotiations with North Korea that in the fading days of the Clinton administration almost produced an agreement between two bitter foes.

None of this was supposed to happen. None of this, I suppose, does everybody approve of. But it's happened, and it's happened with decisiveness and swiftness.

Several characteristics of the Bush agenda are already apparent. The president may not delve into the gritty details of things, but he knows the direction he wants to go. He may not know all the questions, but he knows his own mind. He may not stay up until all hours of the night having pizza and discussing policy options, but he works hard enough to get his way. He's also, always on time. The result is a new Washington, or at least a new feeling around town.

Some of it comes from the cessation of personal intrigue in the White House. All administrations, of course, have scandals—there will be a Bush administration scandal—they're all racked with controversy, but this administration began scandal free.

He has, moreover, spent his first 100 days on the offensive, on taxes for example, and on education. Not on the defensive, like on gays in the military, as Clinton did or his personnel appointments.

There are, moreover, several important indicators that this is a markedly different era in the Capitol. Some of them are as follows. One, a new approach to tax questions. Clinton began his administration raising taxes, a sin the Bush team wishes to expunge from the federal code. The Bush tax initiative will be chewed on for months—I think of it as an employment program for reporters like me. Tax lawyers and lobbyists will examine every clause, but the important element of the 2001 tax cut isn't what's in the fine print, but what is written large by the measure itself. The Bush tax cut marks a departure from the ethos, that with the exception of the Reagan years, marked American politics from the New Deal of 1933 to the present. The Bush measure would choke off the oxygen of big government. The appearance of a bigger budget surplus had given liberals grand thoughts

of new programs, many of which were designed to meet what Democrats called, “the pent-up demands created by years of budget deficits.” A tax cut would reduce the revenue stream from which to create new spending programs. The Reagan tax and budget cuts of 1981 were designed to nudge the federal budget back into balance. But former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York realized acutely, and swiftly, that the tax cut actually fed the deficit making social spending even more difficult to pass. The difference between then and now is that now is a time of surpluses, it makes social spending difficult even without a budget deficit.

There’s a new approach to regulation. Under the New Deal and LBJ’s Great Society, government took on a more aggressive role in policing working conditions and monitoring product safety. This year’s actions—eliminating the ergonomics regulations—signals another ethos in the Capitol; one less reliant on federal bureaucrats in determining, for example, standards for safe workplaces. The Bush team came into office skeptical, if not hostile, to regulation. The Bush administration is unlikely to promulgate new aggressive regulatory standards on its own. The administration is likely to pick and choose carefully among many regulatory options rather than reflexively press ahead with new rules. All the while, being far more cognizant of the economic costs of regulation that its predecessors were.

This marks an important change in the Washington landscape. In his six years as governor here in Texas, a state as you know without an aggressive regulatory tradition, Bush rarely pressed for stronger regulation. He signaled in Washington a preference for market-oriented solutions to regulatory questions—an impulse that prompts opposition among his Democratic foes, particularly in organized labor.

The president has already begun a new approach to foreign affairs. This winter’s decision not to press forward with negotiations with Pyongyang stands out as a symbol of this administration’s willingness to find a separate way in diplomacy. Not simply to continue with the initiatives begun by the Clinton team. But, the North Korean episode is not alone. The Bush administration declined to continue the Middle East peace process, a process that the Clinton people were devoting enormous amounts of time to even in the last few minutes of its administration (between the parties of course). At the same time, the State Department is undergoing a serious review of US policy toward Iraq. The administration is reexamining the terms of economic sanctions dating from the Gulf War of 1991. And, if this winter’s bombings are any indication, it’s willing to uphold the sanctity of the no-fly zone with more vigor than the Clinton team ever did.

There’s also a different philosophical approach to diplomacy. Throughout the presidential campaign, candidate Bush spoke of a “national interest” as the principle element in determining whether the United States would become involved abroad. This suggests that US peacekeeping efforts through the United Nations and other groups may be minimized during the Bush administration. It’s a momentous shift in the United States’ stance throughout the world.

And finally, a new emphasis on management. Many commentators have remarked that Bush is the first president to hold a masters degree in business administration. In fact, the new president has a management outlook on life. Not only that he wants meetings to begin and end on time, but he also believes that problems can be managed. That’s a subtle but fundamental change from the Clinton approach, which called for problems to be attacked. Bush’s view of the management of politics has several elements. He prefers

that problems be managed at the local and state level rather than on the federal level. He believes in conciliation over conflict. He puts enormous stock in the potential power of goodwill. All this represents a great departure from the dominate ethos of Washington. When Bush said he came to the capitol to change the culture of Washington, he took on a formidable challenge.

And so we have two presidents, from two different generations, both from Texas, both steeped in the values of this part of the world, both understanding your heritage, your culture, and your outlook, with two *vastly* different viewpoints of the role of government and the way the presidency should operate.

I suppose you could think of no state that in one lifetime could produce two presidents (or three if you include President Bush's father) of such divergent points of view, such strong personalities.

I think that together they both argue that politics makes a difference, that elections make a difference.

And I suppose before we're finished we'll see with President Bush, as we have with President Johnson, that one politician himself can make a difference.

I've been fascinated in my study of Texas politicians and Texas presidents but I suspect that here, on the last night of classes you have other questions in mind, you probably want to ask about the role of the press in this or that or how we operate, or who will win the 2004 election, or whether the Red Sox will win the World Series again in the year 2001 as we did like clockwork 84 years ago in 1918. I'm open to all of your questions, and as I said, I don't have any other engagements this evening, so I can stay all night.

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