

**Tom Johnson**  
**LBJ Lecture April 2, 1982**

Introduction of W. Thomas Johnson  
The First Lyndon B. Johnson  
Distinguished Lecturer  
Robert L. Hardesty  
President  
Southwest Texas State University

It is a pleasure for me this morning to preside at the first Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture. I don't think I've done anything in my life that has given me more pride and enjoyment than the creation of this program at Southwest Texas State University.

These lectures not only will enrich our academic programs through the men and women who will present them, they also will recognize SWT's most distinguished alumnus in a way which I think would have made him proud.

For me, the Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture Series is a personal tribute to a man whom I loved as a leader and a friend—the greatest man I have ever known.

When President Johnson made his last trip to Southwest Texas in 1973, he brought with him Walter Heller to speak to the students here. Dr. Heller had been LBJ's economic advisor and his speech touched on the problems of national economy. It was followed by a lively question and answer session and some of the questions were asked by the President himself.

When the lecture was over, President Johnson said that he wanted the Heller lecture to be the first of many that he wanted to help arrange for Southwest Texas. A few days later, the President died, but his promise was not forgotten. And, today, we are keeping it for him.

Education was a subject that was very close to President Johnson's heart. He believed that nothing mattered more to the future of our country. He believed education to be the path to peace—the path that would place reason over force.

Throughout his years in the White House, LBJ spoke of the need to provide higher education to all who would qualify for it. And he wanted the kind of education that encourages “excellence which inspires a talented student to enlarge the limits of his capacity.”

His hope for American education was shared by all of us who worked for him and knew him. But his hopes and dreams were shared most completely by one who is with us today as a special guest for this inaugural lecture—Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson.

And with her is Ms. Luci Johnson.

We have two other special guests for this occasion whom I would like for you to welcome—The family of our Distinguished Lecturer, Mrs. Edwina Johnson and their daughter, Christa.

The selection of Mr. Wyatt Thomas Johnson as the first Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecturer was a very deliberate choice—and a very appropriate one.

Though he is not related to LBJ by blood, Tom Johnson is certainly a relative of the soul. He was truly like a son to the President—and one of LBJ’s greatest protégés.

During his years at the White House, he was very close to the President, to Mrs. Johnson, and their daughters. He was once described as the “advisor to the President and the advisor to the nervous bridegrooms of the White House brides.”

Tom Johnson came to Washington as a White House Fellow assigned to Bill Moyers—the ink still wet on his Harvard MBA degree and barely 24 years old but with an enthusiasm and drive that was to become his hallmark and judgment far beyond his years. He was already an accomplished newspaperman. He worked for the Macon (Georgia) Telegraph and News while he was still in high school, and by the time he had completed a journalism degree at the University of Georgia and his master’s degree, he had made almost all the slots—sports, reporting, wire desk, city and state desks, circulation, and management training.

Within a year after his arrival he had been promoted to Assistant White House Press Secretary, and a year later he was named Deputy Press Secretary to the President under Press Secretary George Christian.

We called him “Boy Wonder.” And Liz Carpenter often added, “because we wonder if he will ever be anything but a boy.” And that was not a reflection on his ability; it was a tribute to his youthfulness, a youthfulness that not only possessed the characterizations of youth—drive and enthusiasm—but also an uncommon amount of wisdom.

The “Boy Wonder” designation is hard to overcome. Tom recently celebrated his fortieth birthday and among the greetings he received was one from Luci Johnson which read, “You may no longer be a boy, but you’ll always be a wonder.”

Tom was -more than a media specialist for President Johnson. LBJ depended upon him for many things and included him in high-level policy meetings. Tom was often his traveling companion and the one to whom LBJ turned for advice on many fronts.

When the President retired from office, Tom became his Executive Assistant and contributed greatly to the writing of his memoirs, *The Vantage Point*.

But the journalism business remained his first calling, and, though he maintained close family and personal ties with LBJ and Mrs. Johnson, he went back to it. He was Executive Vice President of the Texas Broadcasting Corporation in Austin from 1971 until 1973. And went on to become Executive Editor and later Publisher of the *Dallas Times Herald*.

His reputation as a newspaperman received national attention when Time magazine named the *Dallas Times Herald* one of the five best newspapers in the country in 1975.

In 1977 he joined the *Los Angeles Times* as President and Chief Operating Officer and was named Publisher and Chief Executive Officer in 1980.

As a journalist and publisher—as in all things he has accomplished in his remarkable career—Tom Johnson is a consummate professional. He takes a total view, rather than a narrow one. He is a strong believer in the responsibilities of the press toward the public and is gaining a national reputation for urging the media to re-examine its ethical practices, to uphold its public obligations, and to use its power sparingly.

His stand has aroused some biting responses from the press, but it is typical of Tom Johnson. His ultimate concern in his role as publisher of one of the nation's most influential newspapers is for the people of this nation. That same concern is what made him a valued assistant and friend to Lyndon Johnson.

President Johnson said something when he introduced Walter Heller in 1973 on campus and I think it is very appropriate for this occasion. He said:

“I think the real test of the worthwhileness of any person is his concern and his care for his fellow man. All of us have a certain amount of selfishness and we are concerned with our own day-to-day problems, but, thank God, in this country there are still some who are concerned with the fate of all people.”

I think Tom Johnson is such a person and I think Lyndon Johnson would have told you that if he were here. The boss would have been proud.

And, ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to present my dear friend, Mr. Tom Johnson.

### Reflections on LBJ—A Personal Perspective

W. Thomas Johnson

April 2, 1982

On January 16, 1973, Lyndon Baines Johnson made a commitment to the kJ students of this university.

On what was to be his last visit to Southwest Texas State, he brought with him one of his former White House economic advisors, Walter Heller, who spoke on campus that day.

President Johnson said that it was his intention to arrange for future appearances here of other speakers active in many aspects of American life.

But death came to the 36th President only six days later. He was unable to keep that promise.

But now—after nine years—it has been kept for him by Bob Hardesty through the founding of this lecture series, and I consider it a high privilege to be the first of the speakers.

In the years ahead, other lecturers will discuss issues ranging across the full spectrum of national and international concerns. But, for this first address, I would like to look back in time and reflect on the man whose name and spirit will animate this series.

You should expect objectivity from a person in my profession, and I will try to provide it. But I must confess to you, quite candidly, that my observations come to you through a filter of deep respect and personal affection for President and Mrs. Johnson.

How proud he would be if he could be with us today!

This was his alma mater. Although he was to receive honorary degrees from 16 colleges and universities—many of them of prestigious rank—he was *proudest* of his Bachelor of Science degree from Southwest Texas.

In the old days, whenever I had to face the press corps in the White House briefing room to speak for President Johnson, I tried to be very, very certain that I knew *precisely* what was on his mind.

Since his death, there have been many opportunities to comment on what his reaction would have been to this or that situation. But it didn't seem quite Wright that I should, and I kept my silence.

I intend to break that silence today and speak for him once again. I *know* that I can say, without the slightest question, how pleased he would be that Bob Hardesty, one of his ablest associates, is now the president of this university.

Bob and I saw this campus through President Johnson's eyes long before we ever set foot on it. And then, in the years of his retirement, we came here with him on a number of occasions—all of them happy ones.

So both of us know this university in a special way, through the recollections of a man who identified it as the place where many of his ideas took root, ideas that later were to change a nation.

There is a spirit of nostalgia in the air today. There is also a host of living reminders of President Johnson and his career: members of the Johnson family—old friends and political allies—and many, like myself, who had the opportunity of serving him and his causes during his long career in public life.

But none is more important than the presence of Lady Bird Johnson, his partner of almost 40 years. She, more than all the others, can appreciate the confluence of lives, of events and of history that we celebrate today.

The highest accolade LBJ could pay was to say, "This is a person you can go to the well with." No one went to the well with him more often than Lady Bird—and no one's judgment was more respected by the President than hers. I am W. honored by your attendance, Mrs. Johnson.

For all of us who knew the man, this is a most sentimental reunion. But many in this audience were not yet alive when Lyndon Baines Johnson first took the oath of President under tragic and fateful circumstances. You know him only in the cold and impersonal context of history.

I would hope that my remarks today will help you to understand the loyalty, the respect and the love with which I and many others here remember the most eminent alumnus of this university.

This campus always was close to the heart of Lyndon Johnson, class of 1930. 1 Through his long career in the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the White House, he often came back to San Marcos, as he did the week of his death.

It was in this city, in 1937, that he began his first campaign for Congress.

It was here, as President, that he signed into law the Higher Education Act of 1965.

It is not difficult to understand the importance of this institution to the future President. He came here from a hardscrabble ranch on the Pedernales and from the provincial life of the hill country.

Prior to his enrollment, he was working on a highway construction gang for \$2 a day, and before that he held odd jobs in California and in Texas.

The tuition then—believe it or not—was only \$17 a term, including books, but he had to borrow to finance his first year of studies.

Despite the hard times, there was no indication then of the strong social consciousness that was to dominate his career in government. It was only much later that

he said, "I believe the reason most poor people are poor is that they never got a decent break. I know what poverty means."

Professor H. M. Greene, who taught government and debate here, was to have a lasting influence on that 19-year-old freshman. Greene was an iconoclast who was constantly at odds not only with his superiors at the university but also with most of the conservative political thinking of the time.

It can be said that LBJ's intense commitment to social justice and his early involvement in politics were due in large part to Professor Greene.

In his undergraduate days, his interest in politics often took him to Austin to watch the Legislature in action, and the trips cost him more than he could afford. The story may or may not be true that he was able to restore his solvency by convincing Dr. Cecil E. Evans, then president of the university, that his garage was in need of painting. It was said that the garage got at least one new coat of paint a year and sometimes two. It was also said that it may not have been the best-painted garage in Texas, but it was certainly the most-painted.

This much is certain. Professor Greene was the first to arouse Johnson's passion for politics and to imbue him with many of his own convictions.

It is significant, I think, that Greene held to the belief that "democracy is of necessity a compromise"—that government is made up of people of strong will who cannot and should not prevail as individuals. Forward movement, he said, is possible only through compromise.

That was to be a guiding principal of Lyndon Johnson's political philosophy through all of his 35 years in public life. He said it was often necessary to accept half a loaf, but never to abandon the effort to secure a full loaf.

One of his favorite quotations was from Isaiah: "Come, let us reason together"—and, parenthetically, I can think of no better advice for the present national leadership in its efforts to secure bipartisan agreement on the vexing challenges that face this country today in dealing with the economy and with international affairs.

Much later in their lives, President Johnson was to show his affection and his respect for Professor Greene, his old mentor. In 1965, years after his retirement from active teaching, he came to Washington as a special guest of his former student to witness his inauguration as the 36th President of the United States.

There was an interruption in Johnson's education at Southwest Texas. He left for a time to serve as the principal and teacher of a small, three-grade elementary school in Cotulla, Texas. His students all were of Mexican descent, and Johnson was to recall "that not many of the children could speak English, and I couldn't speak much Spanish. They were poor and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. They knew, even in their youth, the pain of poverty and prejudice."

LBJ had a long memory. That was more than 30 years before his presidency, but one must believe that Cotulla, Texas, had much to do with his later advocacy of bilingual education and proper nourishment of school children.

These were the years that first brought him into direct contact with the social, economic and racial injustices that were major factors in shaping him as a public man.

It was an education that drew him toward Franklin Delano Roosevelt's challenging new precepts of government. And later, as a young member of Congress, he

was to become one of Roosevelt's protégés because of his forthright advocacy of the New Deal reforms.

This campus, then, set Lyndon Baines Johnson on a course that was to have dramatic impact on the life of every American. The changes he wrought in our society distinguish him, I think, as a great innovator and humanist.

LBJ laid down the basic beliefs of his administration early in his presidency. I He said, "All Americans have the same hope and harbor the same fears. They want education for their children and an improving life for their families. They want to protect liberty, and they want to pursue peace. They expect justice for themselves, and they are willing to grant it to others."

And, more than that, he said it was the first responsibility of government to *nourish* hope and *banish* fear.

Out of those beliefs grew the reforms on which he thought it was possible to build the Great Society. The achievements toward that goal were remarkable both in number and in scope.

In 1965, the first year of his own full-term presidency, he was able to push through Congress the largest commitment of federal funds to public education in the nation's history.

Head Start and the Teachers Corps came into being. Much more money was made available for college and university construction and the expansion of libraries. There was a quantum increase in undergraduate scholarships and loans.

LBJ's Vice President, Hubert H. Humphrey, said later that Johnson was a zealot on education. He said, "He thought it was the greatest thing he could give to the people. He just believed in it, like some people believe in miracle cures."

But curative powers or no, education in this country took giant strides forward during that presidency, and many millions of young Americans were the beneficiaries.

Education was LBJ's highest priority. He used to exhort us with his unending passion for learning. He would say, "By God, I want to fix it so every boy and girl in this country, no matter how poor, can have all the education they can I take."

There is no doubt that the trouble he had financing his own education on this campus was a factor in his determination that poverty should not be a barrier to a higher education. And, just as certainly, his commitment to elementary education also must have been a direct consequence of his frustrations as a young teacher in schools of that era.

There were many other achievements of the Great Society: The War on Poverty, Medicare, the rehabilitation of our cities, housing for the poor, employment opportunities, a more realistic and compassionate immigration policy. And, more than that, the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were the greatest advancements for civil rights in the past century.

There is not time today to list all the 'other achievements of the Johnson presidency or all of its hopes. But there is one that deserves our special attention because of Lady Bird Johnson's presence.

I speak of her husband's commitment to the beautification of this country—to the preservation of its parks and seashores and wilderness. It is a cause to which Mrs. Johnson has given much of her time and energy during her bus," band's presidency and all the years since.

It would please me to be able to say that our national commitment to the environment—to the preservation of our scenic and recreational resources—is as strong now as it was then.

But the evidence is everywhere that we are planning for their future with a bulldozer and a chainsaw, not with a heart.

In the Johnson era, as now, there was strident conservative criticism of higher government funding of social programs, and LBJ often dealt with it humorously.

He told the story of a Texan who went to the hospital in Houston for a heart transplant. The surgeon told him he had the choice of three hearts. The first was that of a young ski instructor who had died in an avalanche. The second was that of a young all-state athlete who had died in a car crash. The third was that of a 78-year-old Republican banker who had died in his sleep.

Without hesitation, the man chose the heart of the banker. The operation was a success. And, on the day he left the hospital, the surgeon said to him: “You know, sir. I don’t understand. You had the choice of two strong, young hearts, but you chose one from a 78-year-old banker. Why?”

His patient replied; “I wanted to be absolutely sure I got a heart that had never been used.”

In the heart and mind of Lyndon Johnson, the human priorities were not negotiable. People did come first—people struggling to improve their lives or just to make ends meet.

Again, I would like to be able to tell you that his dreams of a Great Society—and his labors to achieve it—have lost none of their vitality and thrust. But that simply is not the case.

Different administrations respond to different constituencies and set different priorities. The result is that the drive toward many of LBJ’s objectives is either slowing or at a dead stop.

We are, of course, living in hard economic times and hard choices must be made between competing demands on the nation’s resources.

But I believe that President Johnson would question the *extent* of the present re-allocation of federal funds away from human services.

It was his conviction that the strengthening of education—certainly in this “age of high technology—was just as important to our national security as a new weapons system.

It was his conviction that a nation that could afford to feed the hungry elsewhere in the world could afford to feed its own, that a nation that stands for social, economic and political freedom elsewhere in the world ought to be able to guarantee those same rights in our own free society.

And yet, we witness a decline in the vigor of our national commitment to greater educational opportunities, to the eradication of poverty, and to the protection of civil and political rights.

But I am confident that what LBJ stood for and fought for ultimately will prevail and that we will turn again toward his vision of what this country can be and ought to be.

His vision will prevail because it is responsive to the hopes of America. It will prevail because it is *right*.

The support for Lyndon Johnson's presidency was to suffer from the long and agonizing war in Vietnam. Those of us who were at his side during that terrible time can tell you that he constantly sought ways to end it and that the failure to find peace was the greatest disappointment of his life.

History will assign Lyndon Johnson the high rank he rightfully deserves among American presidents. The Johnson era was one of triumph and turbulence, of national resolve to right old wrongs, of a quest for a Great Society, and, finally, the anguish and frustration of a vain search for peace in the jungles of Vietnam.

He was an *extraordinary* man, a great human tidal wave, larger than life. I will not see his like again in my lifetime.

He had a vision of a more perfect society. And he had the powers of persuasion and leadership to move America closer to that vision.

In closing, I would like to share with you for a moment or two a few personal recollections of the man that might show a side of him that was *not* generally known.

I was with LBJ for much of his time in the White House and for all of the years after his return to Texas. His first injunction to me—I was then a 23-year-old—was “When in doubt, do what is right—even if it’s the hardest thing to do.”

He was not the easiest man to work for. The hours were long and his standards were exacting. I recall leaving the White House many times at one or two o’clock in the morning while he was still at work. He made it clear to us that we were dealing with the people’s business and that we could not spend too much time at it.

LBJ had a reputation for being a tough taskmaster, and he was. But he was also capable of tremendous warmth and affection. My wife, Edwina, our two children and I literally became members of the Johnson family, and he and Mrs. Johnson members of ours.

Although his public image was that of a shrewd, tough politician, he was also a man of great humor. He often told a story relating to his own irresistible urge to address whatever audience might be at hand.

It was the story of a public hanging in a small town that had drawn a huge crowd of spectators. The condemned man was led to the scaffold and the warden told him he could have five minutes to say goodbye to his friends *and* to this world.

“Go ahead with the hanging,” the man said, “I have nothing to say.”

A second later, a voice rang out from the back of the crowd. “Wait a minute. If he doesn’t want the five minutes, can I have them? I’m a candidate for Congress in this district.”

LBJ was also able to poke fun at his own limitless capacity for work and the consequent demands on his staff. He told the story of a delegation from the Women’s Christian Temperance Union that came to call on Winston Churchill in the closing days of World War II.

“You have set a bad example for the country,” the leader of the delegation told the prime minister. “I would estimate that during this war you have drunk enough brandy to fill the room this high.” And she raised her hand over her head.

Churchill glanced from the floor to the hand and said, “So much we have done.” Then, measuring the greater distance from her hand to the lofty ceiling, he said, “Yet so much have we still to do.”

Looking back, I often wish that we on the White House staff had tried harder to communicate the warmth, the generosity and the humor of President Johnson to the public.

Yet, I doubt that he would have stood still for it. He was not an *image* President. He was a can-do President.

Many of my friends told me that my decision to return to Texas with LBJ after he left the White House was a mistake, that he would be a bitter man who would retreat into deeper and deeper isolation after leaving public office for the first time in 35 years.

Well, they didn't know Lyndon Johnson. His agenda, as always, was full: The building and staffing of the presidential library in Austin and the Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, the writing of his memoirs, *The Vantage Point*, a series of television interviews with Walter Cronkite.

There was also the management of the ranch and his many business interests and the conveyance of the main ranch house and land along the Pedernales to the National Park Service. And, finally, assistance to Mrs. Johnson in the publication of her "White House Diary."

Those were years of intense and satisfying work in which he also found time to keep current on national and international affairs. His advice frequently was sought by other political leaders.

LBJ, who had taken at least his share of criticism in the White House, never tried to second-guess his successor nor did he join in the partisan attacks on President Nixon.

I remember coming back to Texas with him one day on an extremely turbulent flight. He said: "Tom, this plane is very much like our country, buffeted by all kinds of troubles and dangers.

"There was a time when I was the pilot and Humphrey was the co-pilot, and people kept running up to the flight deck telling us what we were doing wrong and trying to wrestle the controls away from us.

"Well, Nixon and Agnew are in command of the plane now, and they have information on the weather and other conditions that I don't have. They have the *best* intelligence on what's going on.

"And unless they want to come back here and ask me how I would 'fly the plane through this turbulence, I'm just going to sit here and be the best passenger I can."

I recall also that he was not very harsh toward latter-day critics of his presidential policies. His common response was that "it takes a good builder a long time to build a good barn—any jackass can kick it down in a day."

In the days preceding his death, every post-presidential task he had set for himself was accomplished. His affairs were in good order; his desk was clear. And he had begun to look for other projects to occupy himself.

And so it was that he came to this campus six days before his death to propose a lecture series, a series that I have had the great privilege of inaugurating today.

And so, I end as I began—by telling you of LBJ's commitment to this school.

One evening, at Blair House, he entertained Lester Pearson, the prime minister of Canada. At the table of 10 were high officials in President Johnson's administration, men of literacy and accomplishment.

LBJ rose to his feet and began his toast with these words:

“Tonight, we have at this table public servants rewarded with the best of education. In this room are three Rhodes scholars, three graduates of Yale, three graduates of Harvard, and one graduate of Southwest Texas State Teachers College.”

It was pure LBJ—full of humor and pride, pride in his roots, pride in his school.

It is good to be among his friends and colleagues from the White House days again. And it is good to recall times, and the presence of a man, that will *forever* remain vibrant and alive in our memories.

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