

Jim Lehrer
LBJ Lecture Feb. 11, 1997

Introduction of Jim Lehrer
By Jerome H. Supple
President
Southwest Texas State University

Good evening. We are delighted to have all of you with us tonight.

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, 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 tonight — writer Liz Carpenter, who charmed us with a talk in 1992, and former FBI director William Sessions, who spoke to us in 1989. And, Jim, these are hard acts to follow, no pressure intended.

Tonight's speaker is appropriate company for Liz, Judge Sessions, Barbara Jordan, Gerald Ford and others who have given the LBJ Lectures in the past. Jim Lehrer is best known to most of us from his work with PBS, the Public Broadcasting System. He comes to us by way of the *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer and through his work as moderator for presidential debates.

Jim is a native of Wichita, Kansas, and received his degree from the University of Missouri before joining the Marines. He earned his journalism spurs at the Dallas Morning News and the Dallas Times Herald, then entered a career in public television. For more than 20 years he and Robert MacNeil brought us fair, comprehensive news coverage through The MacNeil-Lehrer Report, and now he does so with his own news program.

Jim has a side career, however, that came about from his passion for literature. He began to write novels, and now has 12 to his credit. You noticed in the foyer that Book People in Austin is selling copies of Jim's newest novel, *White Widow*. He will be signing those books after this lecture.

Jim Lehrer became Southwest Texas' defender last summer — a role I'm sure he didn't plan. He and some other commentators were sitting around the PBS news table while covering the Republican National Convention. During a lull in the tremendous excitement of that convention, the discussion turned to various former presidents.

One of the commentators said that the difference among past presidents has been almost entirely one of character — that all of our presidents have been reasonably intelligent and capable. Then Mark Shields says, "Why, Lyndon Johnson could have been Phi Beta Kappa if he'd gone to the right school." To which Jim Lehrer said, "Well, Mark, Southwest Texas State University would say that Lyndon Johnson did go the right school." Thank you, Jim.

So we thought it would be terribly fitting to ask Jim Lehrer to give the Lyndon Johnson Distinguished Lecture.

Please join me in welcoming Jim Lehrer.

A Conversation with Jim Lehrer

by Jim Lehrer

Journalist, Author

. . . And Jerry wrote me a letter after that, and he said, “Right on, really appreciate it” And I wrote him back and said, “Thank you very much.” And almost by return mail, he said, “Hey, by the way, would you like to come to San Marcos and deliver the LBJ Lecture?”

So, it is an honor to be here. The honor comes from participating in something named after Lyndon Baines Johnson and from all of the distinguished people who have given the lecture. (I even include Liz Carpenter on that list of distinguished people — you’re welcome, Liz.)

I understand that Mrs. Johnson was going to come tonight but had a small health problem. There is a story I was going to tell about her and I’ve decided it’s still very appropriate and I’m going to tell it anyway.

It also involves somebody else that I understand is coming to speak here later— Jack Valenti. Jack is very much a Texan and very much involved with the Johnson. Valenti, as you know, is in charge of the Motion Picture Association of America. He’s the motion picture industry’s number one lobbyist, has a very nice office and a private screening room. He has parties there every once in a while. You come and have a buffet and drinks and get to see movies in these plush chairs before anybody else gets to see them.

It’s a terrific way to entertain, believe me. Nobody turns down an invitation. At one of these parties, I was at the table with Lynda Bird Robb and Senator Robb, and we were eating before we went in to the movie. I had just come from doing the (*NewsHour*) program — we tape it in Washington from 6 to 7, and it airs at different times after that depending on where you are in the country. You need to know that because of my story. At any rate, before we go into the theater, Lynda gets up, excuses herself and is gone a few minutes. She comes back and walks right up to me. She says, “You’re not going to believe what just happened. I called my mother down in Texas, and I said, ‘Mother, I’ve got one question to ask you.’ And she says, ‘Honey, is it really important?’ ‘Well, yeah, that’s why I’m calling, Mother.’ ‘Now, honey, is it an emergency?’ And I said, ‘Well, no, not an emergency.’ And Mother said, ‘Well, then, could you just call me back later? I’m watching *MacNeil/Lehrer* right now, and I don’t want to be interrupted!’”

As Liz knows, Mrs. Johnson is a great fan of our program. She has also given real meaning to the term *first lady* that goes way beyond the normal term as it’s used officially as wives of presidents. She is the first lady of the land and always will be. Whoever sees her next please tell her I said that and give her my love.

Baseball, Newspapers or Books?

My journey to this spot, standing here tonight as the LBJ ‘camel, began not far from here, down in Beaumont. We moved there from Kansas. I was going to high school and wanted to be a baseball player, a professional baseball player. I wanted to play short stop for the Brooklyn Dodgers when Peewee Reese stepped aside. Then I realized I

wasn't a very good baseball player. I also realized that there were guys that came to our baseball games at French High School in Beaumont, who worked for the newspapers, the *Beaumont Enterprise* and the *Beaumont Journal*. And I thought, "My God, think about that — being paid money to go to baseball games and to write stories about them!" And about the same time I got a paper I'd written on Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* back with an A on it and the teacher had written, "Jimmy, you're a very good writer."

Those two things happened almost simultaneously. And I decided, "Hey, I'm going to be a sports writer. I'm going to be a writer."

And it grew. We lived in Beaumont a couple of years and then moved to San Antonio, which is, as you know, a suburb of San Marcos. And I became a sports writer, sports editor of the high school newspaper my junior year and then editor of the newspaper my senior year. I also got introduced to people like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Then I went to Victoria, between Houston and Corpus Christi, and went to junior college. The first two years of college were at Victoria Junior College — we called it VU but it was really Victoria College. And I was editor of the newspaper there. Just to give you a feel for what it was like: I went to the faculty adviser of the newspaper and said, "I'd like to work on the newspaper." It was the first day of school. He was an economics teacher, and he got up from behind his desk, stuck his hand out and said, "Congratulations, young man, you're the editor!" I was the first and only person who came in and volunteered to work on the newspaper. And for those two years, I wrote every story in that newspaper, every headline. I took it down to the local real newspaper where it was published, and then I brought it back to campus and distributed it. To give you a feel for the size of the school: The first story and banner headline I wrote was "VC Enrollment Soars to 320."

At any rate, it was at Victoria College that I decided I wanted to be a writer. A real writer. And it was not only because of Ernest Hemingway. There was also Robert Ruark. Some of you all I'm sure remember Robert Ruark. He was a guy who patterned his life after Hemingway. He wrote a newspaper column, novels about Africa. His column appeared in the *Victoria Advocate*, and I locked in on it. I made a decision right then and there that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing two things: writing fiction and doing journalism. And someday I wanted to grow up and be a big-time national journalist and a published novelist.

Best Job in Journalism

And here I stand, in San Marcos, Texas, as a journalist and published novelist (I wouldn't say 'big time' but not too bad). Now what if I had decided that I really wanted to be a baseball player? What a frustrated person I would be now! How fortunate I am to have chosen when I was 16 or 18 years old two things that I wanted to do. And I've been able to do them. I had the ability to do them, and most importantly, I've had the opportunity all these years to do them.

Now what I want to talk to you about are these two parts of my life. And while I know it's called a lecture, don't take that too seriously. I think we all have heard enough lectures. I'm going to talk to you a little bit about journalism, then a little about writing fiction and my new book in particular. The book is set not far from here and it's about, well, it's about us.

On journalism, let me tell you right now that I have the single best job in American journalism today. I don't mean one of the best. I don't mean the best in television journalism. I mean in all of journalism. Five nights a week I am able to go on television and report on stories that I believe are important and in a way that I believe should be known. I do not have to be an entertainer. I do not see Madonna as my competition, nor the sitcoms, nor the exotic dancers, nor the flag pole sitters. When the program is over every night, I say, "Thank you and good night." I do not say "thank you and good night" with the hope that there are millions of people all across America crying their eyes out or loud guffaws because I am not in the entertainment business. My only hope is that those folks in my audience know a little bit more about a few important stories, events and issues because they watched our program that night.

Now that sounds terribly simple, doesn't it? And very routine in a way. But — trust me, my friends and fellow and sister Texans — in American journalism today, it is neither routine nor simple. I am one of the fortunate practitioners of journalism. Many of my colleagues whom I consider to be as good and as professional and as dedicated as I am are being forced in a current market place to play the entertainment, the hype and the sleaze game. I make no excuses for them because there are no excuses that can be made. But in the process, they and their colleagues are changing journalism in a way that I believe may be difficult to reverse soon and easily.

The O.J. Simpson story, in my opinion, is the crux of it, and the most perfect example of what I mean. Yes, there were elements of real news in the O.J. story. It was news when the murders were committed. The Bronco chase was news. The arrest and indictment of O.J. Simpson was news.

So was the opening of the trial, the Furman developments in the trial, the verdict and the reaction to the verdict. The civil trial was news when it began and when it ended the other day. Everything else in between and connected to this in my opinion was soap opera. Good soap opera. *Great* soap opera. But soap opera, not news. But many national television and print news organizations treated every day of both of those trials as if what was happening was in fact serious news. They made the participants celebrities, and they created an industry, O.J. Inc., which now exists.

What bothers me most as a professional, though, is that in the process they've created a new definition of what is news. Now they have to live with it. What happens now? How do they match the O.J. story? How do they now feed the new definition? What other stories are there?

We haven't got another professional football player who may or may not have killed his former wife, but maybe we've got a semi-pro hockey assistant coach who may have robbed a bank or done something heinous. It goes on and on and on. It used to be that you had to go to your grocery store checkout counter for your tabloid fixes. Now all you have to do is sit in front of your television or go to your front porch. End of sermon. I'll be delighted to talk more about this after a while if you would like.

Presidential Debates

Now the other thing Jerry mentioned in his introduction is that I moderated the presidential debates. Why was I chosen to moderate the presidential debates? Because of the kind of journalism that I am allowed to practice — and I mean *allowed*. I am allowed by the Public Television System and the people who run the Public Television System,

who are the people at local public television stations all over the country. It's not run in Washington or New York. They are the ones who have made it possible for Robin — Robert MacNeil — and me together for many years and now all of my associates and me to practice this kind of journalism. They are the ones who created the atmosphere and supported us all these years. And I'm not being falsely modest. (You don't go on television five nights a week for over 20 years and be falsely modest, okay? Trust me on this.) When I was selected to do the debates, I saw it as a tribute to the kind of journalism that I had been practicing for 20 years as much as a tribute to a wonderful Jimmy Charles Lehrer, formerly of Victoria, Texas. Let me tell you about the debates. I must tell you that it was the single most difficult, terrifying piece of work I've ever done in my life. Think about it: I've been interviewing people running for office for years on live television. But this wasn't just another television program. If I screwed this up, I couldn't look out there and say, "Oh, sorry, I'll try to do better tomorrow night." In the meantime, what's happened? The presidential election may have been resolved in some way because of a mistake that I made.

You may disagree with my attitude about moderating the debates. You may even disagree with the way I ran the debates. But let me tell you what my thinking was when I went into it and what my thinking was when I came out of it. I did not go into the debates thinking I was there functioning as a practicing journalist. And these were not a series of interviews. I was not interviewing Senator Dole and President Clinton. I was facilitating a discussion between the two of them on issues that had already been raised in the campaign. And I had two bottom lines for me personally: One was when it was over, I did not want anybody to be able to say, "That was not fair to Senator Dole" or "That was not fair to President Clinton." That was my No. 1 bottom line. My No. 2 bottom line was simply that I'm not auditioning for another job because I already have the best job in the world. So this was not about me.

Two of my three grown daughters came and held my hand at the Hartford debate. My wife was traveling because of a prior commitment on a new book of hers, and one of my daughters lives overseas. The other two came with me to Hartford. And I told them as we were driving over there, "When this thing is over tonight, if people are talking about my questions instead of the answers of these two candidates, I will have failed." I felt very strongly about this. And when I was sitting there doing it, I never, ever had a moment when I didn't realize what was at issue here. I also realized that here were two men whom a lot of people liked, a lot of people disliked, a lot of people had very strong political opinions about — but the fact of the matter was, they were the choice. One of these two men was going to be the president of the United States. One of them already was. He was either going to continue to be or the other one was going to be, and it was very, very important business. And, I'm telling you, that concentrates the mind when you're sitting there doing what I was doing.

I came out of it the most exhilarated I have ever been doing anything in television. It's not that I felt I had done a terrific job. I didn't feel I'd done a lousy job, either. But it was the ultimate high for me because I felt I had done what I set out to do. The real reason I mention this is that I've had many people say, "You look so relaxed out there." I'm thinking, "Think about it, friend — relaxed? I'm not even relaxed on my own program!" Try being relaxed, try to speak, and try to say something coherent and make

your mind work. I defy you to do it. To be working on all cylinders, I have to be a little bit afraid and a little bit nervous, and I was that night.

White Widow

Now to my fiction writing. As Jerry said (sorry — as your *beloved president* said), this is my 12th book, my 10th novel. It is called *White Widow*, and it's based on my experience when I went to Victoria College. At night I worked as a ticket agent for Continental Trailways, and I did that for two years. This was the 1950s. I can prove to you that I used to work at Continental Trailways:

[in monotone] "May I have your attention please? This is your first call for Continental Trailways 8:10 a.m. air conditioned two liner to Houston and Dallas. Now leaving from lane 1 for InezEdnaLakeTexana-GanadoLouiseElCampoPierceWhartonHungerfordKendletonBeasleyRosenbergRichmondSugarLand. lapplause! ". . .StaffordMissouriCityHouston-HuntsvilleBuffaloCorsicanaDallasAllaboarddon'tforgetyourluggageplease."

I used to tell MacNeil all the time, "Well, okay, so you can quote Shakespeare, but you can't do that."

My story is about a bus driver named Jack T. Oliver. He drives overnight from Houston to Corpus. In other words, he drives down from Houston to Corpus one day, spends the night and drives back or vice versa. And my fictional company is called Great Western Trailways. Jack T. Oliver loved driving a bus. For instance, let me read to you from the book where he's just pulled out of a bus depot in Victoria:

In a few minutes and miles, U.S Highways 59 and 77 parted, 59 running straight west through Goliad, Beeville, Mathis and Alice to Laredo. Highway 77 turned south towards Corpus Christi.

Jack made the turn with 77. He whistled some air out of his mouth and shook his shoulder slightly. Here he was again, out on the road at full speed. On the open road at full speed. Again, again, after each stop in each town, it happened to him day after day, run after run. No other experiences in his life electrified him, aroused him, thrilled him the same way."

And he was in fact a terrific bus driver. He was the best Great Western had. In fact he was so good that, when the book opens, he's about to be made a master operator. A master operator is a driver who's driven at least 12 years without a chargeable accident, without black marks on his name for smoking while driving, or not having his hat on when he goes into a town, or showing up for work with his trousers and his shirt not pressed, without having any complaints against him from any passengers, without any complaints about having forgotten to throw off any express, etc., etc.

Jack was the best there was. And at the dinner in Houston at the Ben Milam Hotel, where he was given his gold badge, there was a man who talked about what being a bus driver is all about. And the man who did the talking was Rex Al Barney, who was Great Western's chief operator and director of operator training. They called him Pharmacy (Rex Al...get it?) Anyhow, he makes a little speech where the bus drivers and their families are, where they're getting their gold badges. And he says, "I am always asked what it takes to be a bus operator, a bus driver. You know, the qualifications for employment. Not the ones about being so tall and so smart and so unfat and so able to get a driver's license and so physically fit, and so able to see the road ahead. I mean the real

qualifications. The personal qualifications. Well, finally after all these years I found them written down, they were in a magazine put out for the employees of Tri-state Trailways over in Louisiana and Mississippi. All it says is that a guy named Smokey wrote it. I don't know who Smokey is.'

A Good Bus Driver

'But here's what he said about the kind of man a bus driver must be.'

'He must be a man of vision and ambition, an after-dinner speaker, a before- and after-dinner entertainer, a night owl — work all day, drive all night, appear fresh the next day. He must be a man who can learn to sleep on the floor and eat two meals a day to economize on traveling expenses so he can entertain his friends in the next town.'

'He must be able to entertain passengers, wives, sweeties and pet waitresses without becoming too amorous. He must inhale dust, drive through snow 12 feet deep at 10 below and work all summer without perspiring or acquiring B.O.'

'He must be a man's man, a ladies' man, a model husband, a fatherly father, a devoted son-in-law, a good provider, a plutocrat, Democrat, Republican, a New Dealer, fast dealer — a technician, electrician, politician, polytechnician, mechanist, mechanic, polygamist and ambidextrous.'

'He must attend labor union meetings, tournaments, funerals and births and visit all passengers in hospitals and jails once a month.'

'He must have a wide range of telephone numbers of all principal cities and villages when entertaining the traffic department.'

'He must be an expert driver, talker, liar, dancer, traveler, bridge player, poker hound, toreador, golf player, diplomat, financier, capitalist and philanthropist — and an authority on palmistry, chemistry, archaeology, psychology, physiology, meteorology, redheads and lingerie.'

'That's what this guy Smokey had to say, and from my driver's seat it seems to me he's got it about right. What do y' all think?'

Oliver's Love of Padre

Now, Jack has a problem and I'm not going to tell you what it is. It has to do with a white widow. Jack wasn't sure where the expression white widow actually came from, but he heard it from his first day with Great Western. It meant any mysterious, beautiful, female passenger who was probably not available. A white widow gets on his bus, and Jack falls madly in love with her. And he has a full-scale love affair with this white widow, all in his imagination, with consequences that are rather dark. I'm not going to tell you what they are. But when he tries to figure out what to do with his life, he goes to Padre Island. Now this is in the 1950s:

"The newspaper and everybody else kept talking about the development boom that was coming to Padre. Maybe so, but right now it was still a 50-mile-long strip of isolated sand that followed the coastline from Corpus down to Brownsville, the Rio Grande Valley and the Mexican border. It was only 2 miles wide, and except right around Corpus on the north and Brownsville and Port Isabel on the south, where there were Holiday Inns and a handful of stores and houses, it was mostly desolate and unapproachable, except from the sea or by four-wheel-drive jeeps left over from the military.

“There was plenty of room for everybody who wanted to come and walk or ride or fish or do nothing but be on the beach. Nothing but be on the beach was what Jack had come to do.

“He drove south on the beach road for the 3 miles until it petered out; then he parked and started walking south. He was wearing a pair of jeans, a pullover short-sleeved shirt and a pair of white high-top tennis shoes. After a few minutes he took off the shoes. It wouldn't be long now. He came upon two middle-aged men tending fishing poles, and then a young man and a young woman lying on a blanket.

“He moved off the rough path through the sand and went closer to the water. Oh, my, how he loved this. There was nothing more white and more bright than a spring afternoon like this. The sun bounced off the water and the white sand to make everything white and bright. Even a dark black suit would have been turned white and bright.

“A dark black mood would have been turned white and bright.

“Jack sat down on the sand. And then he lay down and stretched out, his arms high above his head, his legs as far down as they would go. Here I am, sun. All of me. Here I am, Jack T. Oliver, back for some whiteness and brightness.

“He could not count the number of times in his life he had come to Padre and stretched out in the sand like this. He first came with his parents and then with his junior high and high school classmates and finally with Loretta (that's his wife) and some older friends.

“In the early days he ran as fast as he could into the waves and then wore himself out playing jump-the-waves. And he built forts and houses out of sand.

“In high school he swam in the Gulf and drank beer on the beach. Some of his friends came with their girlfriends, but Jack didn't have a girlfriend in high school. But from about the age of 11 on, he had many sexual experiences on this beach, with cheerleaders and drum majors and English teachers and carhops and theater ushers. All in his head of course.

“But mostly he came here to be by himself. He was a thinker even if he wasn't a man of great ideas and heavy thoughts, even if he was stupid; even if he was a bus driver. He used his mind to go places and do things. His mother was the only one who really knew he did that a lot, and she said he should be careful with all of that imagining because it could lead him to real trouble someday.

“It was on this beach that he thought it all through to realize once and for all that he wanted to drive a bus forever and never go back to Beeville like his mom wanted him to. Jack had just met Loretta and was driving for Nueces Transportation (that was the transit company in Corpus) when his mother called him out of the blue. She asked him to come home. Jack told her about the thrill he got from driving a bus and said, who knows, someday he might even move on to intercity, to the big over-the-road buses. She said she was sure that would be great. But weren't there buses in Beeville he could drive? No, he said, there weren't any buses in Beeville. Only school buses, and he didn't want to drive school buses. Jack listened to his mother and went out to Padre, lay down on the beach and thought it through to deciding he wanted to spend his life being a real bus driver.

“Now that might soon be over, too. He would no longer be a bus driver. He dug his heels deeper into the sand. He stuck the fingers of both hands down into the sand. He

banged his head against the sand several times. He moved his butt back and forth to burrow out a deeper hole. He did the same with his shoulders and legs.

“Into the sand. He wanted to go deeper and deeper into the sand, his sand. He wanted to disappear. Where are the waves? Cover me up, water.

“Cover me up.

“He closed his eyes (and saw a very bad scene). In a few minutes he opened his eyes. What he saw was bright and white and blue. Here came a cloud from the right. It was a bright and white cloud that would do no harm to the sky or to any person or thing.

“He tried again to dig himself deeper into the sand. But it was no use. He could go no farther.”

And I’m not going to tell you anything more about what happens.

Writing about buses and bus drivers, as I said, is based on my experiences many years ago in the ‘50s in Victoria, Texas. It took me all this time to finally get it together to write about it, and it’s been quite an experience for me. Anytime you write fiction, you write it, put it out there and wait for people to tell you what it means. And that’s been stunning to me in this particular book, the kinds of responses I’ve gotten. “Oh, my God, you meant. . .” I didn’t mean anything. I was just telling a story. And, anyhow, it’s been a very exciting experience.

Now, I’d love to talk about anything that I’ve already talked about in my journalism world or in my fiction world. And I would only say three things to you about your questions: No. 1, I’m not a pundit. No. 2, I’ve been on the other side for over 30 years. You want me to demonstrate how to deflect, to dodge and duck? I’ll show you. And No. 3, I don’t handle criticism well. My wife would say not at all. But I’d love to talk about anything.

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