

**Larry L. King**  
**LBJ Lecture Oct. 3, 1991**

Introduction of Larry L. King  
The 14th Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecturer  
By Jerome Supple  
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When we were considering a speaker for the LBJ lecture and a speaker to have on campus in conjunction with the dedication of our Southwestern Writers Collection, the name of Larry L. King immediately came to the top. King has made his career as a writer of things southwestern. He was one of the first contributing authors to our collection. And as far back as 1941 he's been following the life and times and remembrances of Lyndon Johnson.

King is a Texas product. He comes from the dusty oilfield roads of Putnam and Rotan and Midland. Much of his work reflects these origins.

He wrote for newspapers in New Mexico and Texas in the late Forties and early Fifties. He made his first marks on the literary world in 1964 as a contributor to *Texas Observer* and *Harper's* magazine. An incredibly prolific writer, he was soon known not only for his, magazine pieces but also for his TV documentaries, plays, screenplays and books.

Although he has won Emmys and other awards for his more serious work, surely one of his best known is *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. He made Sheriff Ed Earl and Miss Mona household names nationwide. If you check out the video of the movie, be sure to notice that it's SWT's band marching around the rotunda of the Capitol in one scene. And if you'd like to see the musical on stage, it is playing at the Live Oak Theater in Austin through October 20. Cathy and I saw it last night and it's as delightful as ever.

In *Whorehouse* and in other works, King pokes fun at politicians. But next to his Texas stories, King's best writing is about politics.

He admits to falling under the mysterious spell of politics when he was nine. He says, "The idea of being applauded by a crowd for bragging about yourself, and maybe getting paid for it besides, fascinating me."

He was sidetracked for a decade in his early career by working in the offices of Texas Congressmen J.T. Rutherford and Jim Wright and in the 1960 presidential campaign of Lyndon Johnson. That was, before he came to his senses and returned to writing.

In trying to explain the appeal of King's writing style, others have said, "He rings an American bell" or "he writes with a touch of Mark Twain in his soul." He's been called "a novelist masquerading in journalist's clothing" and "the prince of redneck prose" and "the Texan with a Mencken touch."

Whatever the explanation, King weaves together words and ideas and pictures to bring to life and posterity a part of Texas that is fast disappearing. Texas is lucky that Larry L. King was here to chronicle the passing of this era. And we are fortunate to have him with us tonight.

Would you join me in welcoming to Southwest Texas Mr. Larry L. King.

## Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture

By Larry L. King

On receiving any introduction during which courtesy exceeded the facts-of-record, Lyndon Johnson used to say that he wished his parents had been present to hear it “because my father would have *enjoyed* it . . . and my mother would have *believed* it.” I borrow those words, Dr. Supple, in thanking you for your introductory courtesies here tonight.

My old friend Willie Morris — who was my editor at *Harper’s* magazine from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, and who before that time was a writer and editor at *The Daily Texan* and *The Texas Observer* — on hearing that I would deliver the Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture at Southwest Texas State University . . . laughed and laughed. Willie said he’s known me for 30 years — and had known Lyndon B. Johnson even before he knew me — and that, somehow, the word “distinguished” rarely jumped to his mind when he thought of either of us.

Dare I add that Willie said if the authorities could be persuaded to call it the Lyndon Baines Johnson Hog-Calling Contest — and if I would consent to be a contestant — then he would come all the way from his home in Jackson, Mississippi, to witness the event. But we couldn’t arrange that, so Willie is at home in Mississippi working on his autobiographical book, *The New York Years*.

Which is perhaps just as well, because the audience tonight already is replete with so many of my relatives — and old friends — that, should I indulge in the usual pretensions and exaggerations, I fear hearing laughter where no fun was intended. It’s only fair to warn that this condition will severely restrict my abilities to inform or entertain you.

But on whatever terms I am here, and no matter certain prevailing attitudes among those with whom familiarity has perhaps bred a benign contempt, I’m pleased and proud to be at Lyndon Johnson’s old school. Some say if I stay as long as two hours it will eclipse my undergraduate hours at my old school, Texas Tech. And they aren’t far wrong. The late Huey Long once bragged that he had finished law school at Tulane University in six months. When challenged by a Tulane spokesman, who pointed out that Long had not *graduated* from Tulane Law School, Long simply said, “Maybe not — but I *finished!*” Well, my first brag here tonight is that I *finished* Texas Tech even quicker than The Kingfish finished Tulane Law School.

I was never an intimate of Lyndon Johnson’s . . . though to read some of my early political writings you’d never know that. No, the only Southwest Texas State man with whom I claim anything like an intimate friendship is Dr. Keith Kennedy, Class of 1957, who grew up to become the long-time chairman of the Drama Department at Memphis State University, and who there directed the first productions of my plays *The Night Hank Williams Died* and *The Golden Shadows Old West Museum*. In the case of Lyndon Johnson, I worked only on the periphery of LBJ’s orbit — during the years he was Senate majority leader, vice president and, briefly, while he was president of the United States — in a spear-carrier’s role or, to be accurate, in several such minor roles. I was an occasional “advance man” for political rips, an “advance man” being the nearest thing the

Western World has devised to the Chinese coolie, and I was dispatched in pre-National Convention days in 1960 to numerous western states to attempt to lasso delegates for LBJ at a time when he was running for president on one hard and denying it on the other. I contributed, through George Reedy and Booth Mooney the occasional odd sentence or paragraph for some few LBJ speeches, and as a paid functionary for Texas Congressmen J. T. Rutherford and Jim Wright, I worked on numerous Texas projects in harmony with LBJ's staff and, occasionally in that work, my path crossed that of the Great Eminence Himself.

### Kicking down LBJ's barn

It's fair to say that during most of that time, Lyndon Johnson couldn't have called my name had I walked in wearing a red suit and a neon name plate . . . a condition of anonymity for which I then was grateful to a merciful and protective God. Those who served Lyndon Johnson for longer, better and much more intimately than I ever did would not — I think — quarrel with my claim that all he demanded was perfection. Let the record show that Lyndon B. Johnson never once accused anyone of perfection within my hearing.

It was only after I left Capitol Hill and began to write about Lyndon Johnson in *Harper's*, *The Progressive*, *Nation* and other publications — sometimes in less, than flattering terms — that he began to know who I was. If he was *impressed* with who I was, or became enamored of my prose, he managed to conceal his admiration for the rest, of his life. I suppose I may have been among those many of whom he disdainfully said, “Any jackass can kick down a barn, but it takes a carpenter to build one.”

For all my differences with LBJ — and they became sharp differences during the Vietnam quagmire, in that period when America became unbolted and political passions divided both ideological and personal friends — I like to think that, even if unknowingly, we perhaps shared a few similarities other than big ears and doting mothers. Whatever we became, whatever dreams we chased — and certainly Lyndon Johnson's dreams were grander than mine and better realized — began to be shaped, I believe, by our time and our place.

I grew up about 20 years behind and a little, over 200 miles west of when and where. Lyndon B. Johnson grew up. We each were the products of then-rural, then-undeveloped areas of Texas during hard-scrabble times. With the exception of a few school teachers, and one uncle who became a medical doctor, I did not personally know during childhood a single person who had been to college or then would have thought he or she might have the opportunity to go. I'm sure it was much the same with the young Lyndon. Johnson.

The young *boy* that I then was, and the young man that Lyndon Johnson then was, saw Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal as the savior of a nation that was — in Mr. Roosevelt's words — “ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed.” We saw President Roosevelt and the New Deal as the one great hope of repairing a failed economic system we passionately blamed on Herbert Hoover and black-hearted Republican money men. We saw enough of poverty — and, yes, of racial intolerance and of mean ignorance and uncaring economic royalists — to turn us into “yellow-dog Democrats” who passionately believed that the federal, government was a legitimate instrument for the betterment of

people's lives, and who — furthermore — believed in the bounded *duty* of our men in Washington to work toward that end.

### Bright expectations

In 1931, Lyndon B. Johnson went to Washington from the Hill Country as the 23-year-old assistant to a Texas congressman . . . and in 1954 I went to Washington from the West Texas flatlands as the 25-year-old assistant to a Texas congressman. I would learn — years later — that during Lyndon B. Johnson's early days as a Capitol Hill secretary, he lived in a flawed basement cubical in the old Dodge House Hotel virtually at the foot of the Capitol Building — the same hotel, perhaps even the same shabby basement cubical, that I occupied during my early time as a Capitol Hill secretary. Don't worry: I'm not going to give you an O. Henry twist ending here — I won't claim that we *both* wound up being president of the United States. The most *I* can claim, unfortunately, is that I eventually made "whorehouse" a household word.

But I'm reasonably confident that when Lyndon Johnson arrived in Washington in 1931, he saw his new job as a personal opportunity as well as an opportunity to assist the democratic processes . . . because I in 1954 arrived in Washington with those feelings and innocent expectations. Indeed, I now blush to recall the clarity of my conviction that I would personally put an end to red tape, energize foot-dragging bureaucrats balance the budget and at once, in the words of FDR's man Harry Hopkins, "spend-and-spend and elect-and-elect." It was my assumption that my fellow Texans, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson and House Speaker Sam Rayburn, would personally solicit my advice on problems both foreign and domestic almost as soon as I got my bags unpacked. In truth, it was months and months before I got close enough either to LBJ or Mr. Sam to hail them without a megaphone. The first time Lyndon Johnson called me anything other than "Boy" or "Hey You" he called me "Slick" — the nickname of the Texas congressman for whom I then worked. And Mr. Rayburn, for reasons he took with him to the grave in 1961, called me "Ritchie" the first time he saw me, the last time he saw me, and all during the six year, in between. I didn't correct him: young Capitol Hill functionaries wouldn't have dared dispute the speaker of the House in those days, even on the smallest or most personal matter.

Even after the political realities became apparent — among them, that any freshman congressman originally had little more impact in the corridors of power than the Odessa fire chief, and that I as his functionary was as powerless as a buggy without a horse — I was delighted to be a witness to the making of history, if from a back-row seat. In my first months in Washington, I saw the fearful, raging, careless power of Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin reduced to bluffing sputters by Senate censure — with Lyndon Johnson of Texas pulling the behind-the-scenes strings of his Senate marionettes. That, I thought then — and think now — was work in a good cause. I took pride in LBJ's role, he having carefully named the committee members who brought about McCarthy's come-uppance within the rules of the Senate and within the system's machinery for redress. If I might have preferred that Senator Johnson be out in front of the parade, twirling' lighted batons, I could live with the political realities. And the reality was that the Red-baiting senator from Wisconsin unfortunately remained in good odor among rich, powerful, activist Texans it would not benefit LBJ to publicly cross.

It was not the last time I found myself defending what my liberal friends — “the Red Hots, the Kamikazes,” LBJ pithily dismissed them — thought to be a trimming of sails amounting to shameful compromises. Perhaps because I was then *inside* the political process, I was more tolerant ‘than I later became of the theory that politics is the art of the possible more nearly than the vehicle of the ideal. I was neither the first nor the last man to discover, in making the switch from political insider to observing journalist outsider — or vice versa — that one’s vantage point of necessity will change to fit the new position.

Looking back, I revert more than not to my earlier tolerance. You must remember that LBJ in the 1950s presided in the Senate over a thin paper majority, not a *true* ideological majority. Many conservative Democrats — “Dixiecrats” — were officially included in Johnson’s alleged majority but gave him little help. Such Dixiecrat senators basically had the ideological instincts of the early primates; they were not disposed to buck the Eisenhower Administration — nor the popular president himself — in the absence of cajoling, log-rolling trades or arm-twisting pressures. LBJ was not above doing whatever it took to win the legislative day. If he had not been willing •to mix it up politically — trading here, begging there, twisting arms when he had to — then divided government would not have worked. We’d have experienced a stalemate in Washington had LBJ been as inflexible as was the Senate minority leader, Bill Knowland of California. President Eisenhower confided to his private diary, we now know, that there apparently was no limit to Knowland’s iron-bound “ignorance” and that without LBJ little of substance could have passed the Senate in those years.

#### A natural showman

It was sometimes said back then = and is still said by some persistent critics — that the “miracle man” image Lyndon B. Johnson created in passing prodigious amounts of legislation as Senate majority leader was a mock show, that LBJ wouldn’t call bills up for a vote until he knew he had the votes to win, that he often stashed away a “surprise” senator or two, calling them in at the most dramatically effective moment to cast the deciding vote and win yet another cliff-hanger.

I find those curious criticisms, indeed. Would Lyndon B. Johnson — or his party, or the country for that matter — have *gained* anything by his calling up bills when they were certain, or even likely, to be defeated? I think not. True, a few lost-cause battles may have helped define the difference between the Democratic and the Republican parties, might even have won Johnson more respect or friendships among those troublesome few he called “the Red Hots.” But in terms of *effective* politics, in a time when the Eisenhower Administration overwhelmingly fit the public mood — if we can believe two presidential elections in the 1950s — I don’t think LBJ’s party would have profited at all by choosing to do battle simply for battle’s sake.

As for the second part of that criticism — that Lyndon Johnson was sometimes guilty of dramatic stagings — all I can say is, I sure wish I’d had him around to assist a couple of my stage plays.

Sure, LBJ loved to astonish the press and the public, while ensuring that a certain credit accrued to himself. Hell, the man wasn’t a bookkeeper--he was a political animal if such ever lived. He had an ego, he looked both to the main chance and to the future, and he had a natural flair for showmanship. I, for one, believe that more “art” attended LBJ’s

old shows than attends the dry, ubiquitous “photo opportunities” of recent presidents not nearly so entertaining! The difference is something like that difference between live theatre and tired television reruns. I had objections to LBJ, yes but not with his colorful shows.

### Quietly killing de Manifesto

Even if we admit that Lyndon Johnson ran a three-ring circus — cracking the whip at every step while jumping tame tigers through firey hoops — we lose the point of his exuberant manipulations if we fail to take into account what went on in the center ring — in other words, the results attained. In those early leadership years, I witnessed the annexation of Hawaii and Alaska as the 49th and 50th states, the 1957 Civil Rights Bill — the first since Reconstruction days — the National Highway Program, a bold public housing bill, a minimum wage raise, reciprocal trade extensions, 90 percent of parity and soil banks for farm families, increased Social Security benefits for the, aged with particular attention to the disabled, health bills for medical research and hospital construction, water and land conservation bills. These, now, in the placid waters of the 1950s, a period of relative political contentment. I recall LBJ helping to defeat the Bricker Amendment, which would have too stringently tied any president’s hands in conducting foreign policy. I remember how he worked against — and refused to sign — the “Southern Manifesto” opposing public school desegregation -- which was unfortunately, signed by no less than 101 Southern congressmen and senators, including several Texans, and I recall his attempting to limit filibustering so that a willful minority could not indefinitely thwart the will of the majority in the Senate. There were complaints, yes, that many of the bills Johnson guided through the Senate were “half-loaf” measures, that he settled for too little. In truth, more often than, not the Senate under LBJ’s leadership passed programs expanded *beyond* what the Eisenhower Administration requested. And I believe, as one who was there and as one who recalls the temper of those times, that a half-loaf was about all that reasonably could be expected. The 84th, 85th and 86th Congresses -- those in which Lyndon B. Johnson served as majority leader, 1955 through 1960 inclusive—were far from liberal or progressive in make-up. I loved the flinty integrity of House Speaker Sam Rayburn, yes, and his largely populist instincts, but I fear that Mr. Rayburn was past his prime — old and ailing —during those years. Without his Texas protégé’s efforts on the Senate side of the Capitol Building, I believe, those years, might have been legislatively barren.

And as for what *President* Lyndon B. Johnson cajoled and bulled through the 89th Congress — in that time before Vietnam and other conflicts robbed him of popular support — well, simply put, no other president or Congress has been as productive with the *possible* exception of the first “one hundred days” of the New Deal back in very desperate times. In the 89th Congress alone — we’re talking 1965 and 1966 now —the Johnson Administration pushed to passage 181 domestic bills of 200 it sought. Nor were these showcase “toilet paper and ice water” bills — that is, minor measures long on public relations or rhetoric but short of legislative teeth. No. They were bills with teeth and bite and they established programs and *did* things. Eighteen education bills. Twenty-four medical care bills. Twenty conservation bills. Bills to attack poverty, secure minority rights and job opportunities, establish model cities and mass transit systems, rent supplements, drug rehabilitation clinics. There were laws dealing with highway, auto and

tire safety; truth-in-packaging legislation; measures to eliminate unsafe toys, attack the hazardous wastes problem and other consumer protection measures.

Well, you say, *most* of the ills those bills were designed to correct have not been corrected, right? Right. But let's think for a moment about *why*. For one thing — and a very big thing it is, too — virtually *none* of those areas have been of paramount concern to LBJ's five *successors* in the White House. Particularly in the 1980s — and, yes even now — the poor, the homeless, minorities, the have-nots, our rotting cities, our fouled *planet* — have been largely ignored. Say what you will of Lyndon Johnson's warts — it's become a cliché to say he had them, and Lord knows he surely did — he at least *tried* to use his presidential power in ways that might help and uplift and address grievances and old inequities among those who had little control of their destinies in the absence of a helping hand. This was the LBJ who as a young man dreamed of using government for good.

### The good Lyndon

And somehow, that is the side of Lyndon Johnson that we haven't heard much about for near to a quarter century. We just don't *hear* much about “the good Lyndon”; we hear about “the bad Lyndon.” The Lyndon Vietnam, the Lyndon who cozied up to oilmen, the Lyndon who profited from Washington connections in the radio and television fields, the Lyndon who lied and strutted vainly and cursed and hoo-hawed in the Taj Mahal and ate too much barbecue sauce. Well, nobody's perfect.

I don't mean that to sound as flippant as it obviously sounds. Most of those “warts” I just mentioned made me furious with LBJ; even before it became popular sport to attack him, I wrote a *Harper's* piece rather sarcastically entitled “My Hero LBJ,” in which I held my old hero to the demanding, untarnished ideals of a Texas boy at a rural crossroads in the 1930s and early 1940s — and, of course, I found our president falling short of such impossible standards. If that piece was perhaps unfair, it was only a little bit so. But later, as Americans divided and literally warred in the streets as a counterpoint to the larger war in Southeast Asia, and as it actually became *unsafe* for the president of the United States to show himself except in carefully regulated circumstances — and that was the Secret Service's conclusion, not mine — I wrote some things about LBJ that were unfair. Pieces written in anger, pieces that generated more heat than light. In one, I dwelled excessively on LBJ's “lack of style” — on yes, his hoot-and-holler, shoot-from-the-hip Texas hoo-hawing — as if I a boy from Putnam, Texas, might myself be a Boston Brahmin. Quite naturally, I contrasted the Johnson style with that of the martyred John F. Kennedy and his alleged bright, shining Camelot.

What a delusion! Camelot, I now know, never was. The shining knight of Camelot, whom I revered in my political youth and who became an instant martyr on the same day I began to sour on politics, — and whose shocking, sudden demise was the reason for that — turned out in the long run to himself have tarnished armor. But even if the Camelot myths had not been punctured in later years, I would have been — *was* — wrong to blame the nation's problems, or LBJ's, on anything as vaporous or contrived as surface “style” or “image.” But that is something that in early 1968 I was too blindly passionate and too unthinking to understand.

In one *Harper's* piece I called for LBJ to step aside . . . not seek reelection. I don't know, now, if I was wrong about that. Sometimes, considering events as they have

transpired since LBJ did indeed decide to step aside, I think I was wrong. Other times, I believe he did the right thing in returning to the Hill Country, if only because the nation then seemed to cry out, for relief from its long, mad sorrow; to cry out for some new if uncertain or unspecified beginning. Lyndon Johnson, at least, concluded that was the case and so he stepped aside, came home. I now see that as a big thing, perhaps a noble thing, on his part — because I believed he hated with his every fiber to leave his work unfinished and to quit with his proud banner trailing in the dust. It seems obvious, now, that in retirement, he really wasn't motivated to take care of himself — he began smoking again, drinking more, he brooded often that he would never be vindicated in his time — and while he had upswings, in his mood on occasion, seeming now and again to be the energetic up-and-doing LBJ of old — most of what I have read and heard of the man's last years, in his Hill Country Elba, strike me as sadder than good people would have wished for him.

There can be no doubt that LBJ made many problems for himself. It is a well-established cliché that he was a man of many contradictions, and it is also the truth. Though he could quote the prophet Isaiah — “Come, let us reason together” — he could, be harder to reason with than a pit bulldog once he set his mind. For all his bombast and braggadocio, he was in truth a man of many insecurities who feared not measuring up. That, I believe, caused him to sneer at “the Harvards” even while perhaps secretly envying them, and I have absolutely no doubt he credited them with more wisdom and mysterious knowledge than they actually possessed. I went to Harvard as a Neiman Fellow, in 1969-70, assuming that Harvard men were born knowing most of what God knew and had learned the rest at Harvard. Not so, dear friends. I met old fools and young fools at Harvard, fools among the faculty and fools among the students. Oh, sure, there were “Harvards” who knew more of their specialties than I did, maybe even a near genius or two, but in six weeks I lost my awe of Harvard people as superior intellectual godheads — because it simply wasn't true. I recall telling Willie Morris when he came from New York to visit me in Cambridge, “Willie, I'd give anything if Lyndon Johnson could have spent a year here. He never would have feared ‘the Harvards’ as he did, and he wouldn't have found it necessary to become the crude, hoo-hawing Texan in their presence just to remind them who was boss.” And I believe that to this moment.

#### A political master

I further believe that such studied conduct on Lyndon Johnson's part led to the impression that he was an unsophisticated bumpkin. Maybe LBJ had a small appreciation for grand opera or ballet but this was a man who *quickly* mastered the *intricacies* of politics, of Washington, of power, of his colleagues, almost from the day he arrived as a congressional secretary in 1961. He learned all the ways of doing things, and added new wrinkles of his own. To be privy to be behind-the-scenes glimpses of LBJ's working methods — or to hear details from others who witnessed him at work — sometimes led one to think of walking on, water or turning water into wine.

And even if Lyndon Johnson liked to say he had not read a single book “all the way through” since he was a student here at Southwest Texas State, never think he was anything less than a prodigious reader of newspapers, political journals, *The Congressional Record*, congressional committee reports, *The Federal Register*, staff position papers and memos. I don't know, really, what accounted for LBJ's perversion in

depicting himself as more unlettered than he was — maybe it was his phobia about “the Harvards” — but he was damned intelligent, quick, a sponge who soaked up facts and could put them to profitable uses with amazing recall. Anyone who truly believed him to be an “unsophisticated bumpkin” themselves had much further to go in knowing the world and the people in it than they suspected. I would have liked to have seen many such “sophisticates” try to keep up with him in the Washington maze, in one-on-one persuasions, or even at the domino table. It *was* Lyndon Johnson who said to a steel magnate — in response to the steel executive’s opening ploy of “Mr. President, I’m just a country boy . . .” — “Hold it right there! Anytime I hear that ‘just a country boy’ stuff, I know to check to see if I’ve still got my billfold.”

So why — if LBJ had the intelligence, the energy, the compassion, the heart, the toughness and, yes, the ruthlessness — with which he has been credited, *why* did he fail . . . if, indeed, he truly failed. I am persuaded that future historians’ — looking back with the vision of 20-20 hindsight and perspective filtered through a bloodless distancing — will conclude that *if* Lyndon Johnson failed, he failed to a degree far less than was thought during the passions and furies of his time. The burning rocks of baby Earth will have been cooled — so to speak — by the mists and rains and erosions of time.

He said, ‘Take my hand’

I think it will be clearer to those who will look back on us — than it is to us right now — that Lyndon Johnson was victimized by transitions and collisions beyond his control, some of the transitions — ironically — coming about partially as a result of new freedoms advocated by Lyndon Johnson himself. Think a moment on a more recent and perhaps more graphic example: that of the Soviet Union’s Mr. Gorbachev, the leader who dared encourage *perestroika* and *glasnost* . . . and who almost became, may *yet* become, the resulting new freedom’s foremost personal victim. Historically, we know — we long have known — two things about new freedoms: 1) the more freedom they have, the more freedom people demand and 2) almost universally, the people’s demands quickly outstrip the pace of those leaders first willing to unshackle their chains. And I argue that more than any president of his time, before his time, or since his time to date, Lyndon Johnson wanted to strike and tried to strike the chains and bonds of racial, economic and civil slavery from the underclass citizens of the United States. He said to them, “Rise up, be all you can, take my hand.” But when they did rise up — but bit his hand instead of taking it — he very humanly and naturally recoiled from the rejection, was puzzled by it, hated it, was haunted by it, could never understand it in historical terms because it was too personal, too political in the moment. We — none of us — really think of our lives in historical perspective. We live in the moment . . . that’s what we react to, that’s what’s here and now, that’s what puzzles us and vexes us, and it’s what we have to deal with. And that can be hard, difficult,, sapping, confusing, discouraging; we make mistakes, we lose heart, we are mere mortals.

I think historians of the future will clearly see what we see only through a glass, darkly. That Lyndon Johnson — following in the steps of a young, handsome, stylish, martyred president -- never had a cut-dog’s chance to be accepted or judged on fair or impartial terms. Especially considering how — and most importantly where — young John F. Kennedy died. In Texas. Shot by a Texan. In Johnson Country. That’s how many people saw it, at any rate; that was the perception. And, though it is in no way historically

important — it may account for why I, personally, was so quick to embrace the martyred legend rather than the native son of my state who succeeded him. I'm not proud of saying it, but the trauma of November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, made me, tend to shrink from Texas

The crime of succeeding Kennedy

for awhile . . . even though I had a bar-room fight with another drunk because he blamed Texas and Texans for the assassination of President Kennedy. I knew he wasn't right . . . but I wasn't sure of his degree of wrong.

In that atmosphere — of anger, of guilt, of fear, of grief, of confusion, of suspicions and amid whispers of the darkest conspiracies — Lyndon B. Johnson came to the presidency, just as the Constitution provided. Many could not forgive him for that “crime” — they called him “the accidental president,” thought him a pretender, unfit to sit in the chair of the departed young knight. And so, when he began passing legislation the Kennedy Administration had been able to move, the grieving and the angry and the frustrated dispossessed jumped him for invoking JFK's name in his causes! I don't know whether Lyndon B. Johnson actually believed it when he said that “John F. Kennedy is looking down on us from Heaven and will know what we do here,” and I don't really care. What I *do* know is that he meant it when he said, “We shall overcome,” that the utterance gave hope and joy to black Americans and inspired Congress to pass truly *meaningful* civil rights legislation and that our country became the better for it.

Johnson was no, dummy, and so he knew — *of course* he knew — that he was resented as an interloper, that the press loved the Kennedy style and would often remind him — and us — that *he* could never match it. That *whatever* he did would not, could not, be enough to bind the nation's wounds or restore Camelot. And this knowledge, I think, drove him a little bit mad. Made him try too hard, too heavy-handedly, to force feed the public the notion that he, too, was a wonderful fellow deserving of love and respect. He wanted to hear the warm sweet music of applause and accolades, wanted it so desperately he crashed and banged about like a fellow come home too late from the party and too drunk to dance even if the music had been given. For awhile, yes, he pushed so much legislation through Congress and was so forceful and energetic we had to give him a certain amount of applause and approval. But even as he was on the way to, winning the landslide victory over Goldwater in 1964, he was warning his associates privately that soon the honeymoon would be over, that honeymoons always were, that his would be no different and that it was therefore imperative to push forward on many fronts, to extend the limits, to stretch the possibilities before time ran out, as it surely would . . . and as it surely did.

And *when* it did — when we began to realize there was not and would not be the long-promised “light at the end of the tunnel” in Vietnam, when people exercising their new freedoms inevitably demanded more freedoms faster than the process could or would grant them, when the young declared the old rules null and void and refused any longer to be bound by them, when all was sound and fury — there stood Lyndon Johnson as the tall target of opportunity available to anybody who had a sling shot, and, brother, a lot of us had them. We blamed him for things that were his fault, for things that were the fault of others, for things that maybe were nobody's fault or everybody's fault and for things that may have been *our* fault. It was a time of honest rage and true anger and political

revolution, and — as well — it was a time of political exploitation, and bile and blame-placing, a time to kill the king.

Then — quite suddenly — for most of us it was over. We got tired, and we went back to sleep and we snoozed until Watergate briefly woke us, and we found that made us tireder still, and so we punched our soft pillows and turned our faces to the wall and began to imitate Rip Van Winkle and we're imitating him still.

It was never over for Lyndon Johnson. He died in 1973, his programs had begun to wither by then, some have died since, many are sick and remain unattended. Is there a doctor in the house?

I quit my little corner of the political arena in 1964, less than six months after John F. Kennedy's assassination — *because* of that assassination — it having driven home to me the hard new knowledge that I would not live forever and that I had yet to begin the books and plays I dreamed in my Texas childhood of one day writing.

My expectations were much greater then than now, my hopes high my vision untested and therefore theoretically limitless, my dreams undashed on the rocky shoals of reality. I now know that Shakespeare's work is likely to last longer than mine, and Hemingway's and Faulkner's and Eugene O'Neill's, and that it's probably too late even to run Norman Mailer and William Styron and Larry McMurtry or Arthur Miller out of town.

God only knows and no man can even *suspect* what mad foolish optimism made me dream so grand. I began sending little stories to magazines at the age of 10 and was absolutely *astonished* when presumably professional editors failed to snap them up. I continued, *persisted*, through high school, the Army, my brief wrestling match with college, and the near-decade I worked in Congress. I never got over the shock of rejection slips; each one, somehow, came as a surprise.

LBJ belongs with the good few

I wrote a play, in my youthful newspaper days in Midland and Odessa — about the havoc caused in many lives when a struggling, independent noble local newspaper was bought by a big chain newspaper publisher, Lord knows where *that* notion came from, my own newspapers being safely monopolistic and about as noble as a grocery store ad. Nonetheless, I expected that play to become an instant Broadway hit, sell to the movies for vast sums, and win whatever grand prize it was that whoever it was bestowed on plays. Both Midland Community Theatre and the Permain House in Odessa passed on giving that play its Texas premiere, indeed its *world* premiere — possibly because it required about 95 actors, six hours to perform, and the “action” largely consisted of everybody making unbroken back-to-back speeches of what I then presumed to be new and exciting philosophies. I want to publicly state my tardy appreciation for the wife who divorced me years ago for her public service in burning that play, thereby preventing its embarrassing presence in the Southwestern Writers Collection.

In my years in Congress, I gave available nights and weekends to the creation of three tortured, mutilated works of genius I then thought to be exceptional novels, a belief not shared by any publisher, though I sent them to all who admitted to a fixed address. I had the good sense, in a rare moment of discouragement, to burn them myself in 1962.

In 1963, either I got better or my luck did, and I actually sold a novel, and soon began to publish in magazines, and what with one thing and another, I've somehow managed to avoid honest work or heavy lifting ever since.

I have — and I have not — realized my early dreams. More accurately, perhaps, I should say I've done better than I had a reasonable right to expect, but the work itself has seldom, and then only fleetingly, been of the quality I would ideally have it be, and most of the time did my best to make it be. Most books, most plays, most pieces of writing of any kind, are never truly finished. One simply takes them as far as one can, and then has to let go and live with the' new evidence of imperfection. It's very frustrating, very demoralizing, over the long haul. The amazing thing is that we get up after each new fall and try it again. I really don't know why. Could be it's nothing but a virus.

I've meandered here. Let me try to "connect up" as the lawyers say: Once upon a time we were boys – or girls — and we dreamed dreams and made plans, and hoped — even *thought* they might all come true. For most of us they didn't — not in the fullness we would have them flower, at least. For a relative few — perhaps because they were more talented or more dedicated or brighter; perhaps because they were more driven; perhaps because they prepared themselves better; perhaps because of the element of luck — that relative few came closer to doing what they set out to do . . . whether doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. In my current craft, writing, I would include in the relative few those writers earlier named and George Bernard Shaw and John Steinbeck and Mark Twain — it's a personal list, remember, and you can add names of writers best striking your fancy. The point is, for all their adversity they faced, for all their personal faults or professional mistakes, they persevered; they left behind good and useful works, their time upon this earth was in the end better used than not, their existence justified by their work and their contributions to humankind's long, uncertain march.

And in his own field — when all is said and done and judgments weighed and verdicts rendered — I believe that Lyndon B. Johnson belongs among that good relative few.

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