

**Liz Carpenter**  
**LBJ Lecture**  
**October 1, 1992**

UNEDITED

Remarks by President Jerome Supple  
Partially omitted

.....

Several years ago, this Texas native gave up the Washington scene for a somewhat less frantic life in Austin.

As she writes prolifically, arranges her speaking engagements, and entertains her friends, she entertains them in her favorite hangout—her hot tub. Which she says will hold eight Democrats or six Republicans. [audience laughs]

When she turned sixty, which I think was a year or two ago [Carpenter laughs], Liz Carpenter says she took a vow: never to say no to an invitation because she might miss something fun.

She's probably had to say no since then.

Were glad she said yes to us and accepted our invitation to give the Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture.

Please help me welcome Liz Carpenter.

Liz Carpenter

Well, Dr. Supple, I am really honored to be asked to give this lecture. I thought you'd never ask and I think you did just in the nick of time because I'm 72 and I'm in the parts department and I'm down to one of everything. [audience laughs] So, I'm awfully glad I'm here this year.

I do feel qualified. I knew Lyndon Johnson. He was a friend, we worked together, and I will tell you there was *no one* like Lyndon Johnson. He was the only one because nobody really could combine that mass of energy and vision that he did. And dreams, big dreams. And he believed, I think, and I like to put it this way, that in a democracy, government is the arrangements committee for the people. And it's the way that we can obtain, the fairest way that we can obtain or at least shove forth, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And he did just that, with his remarkable partner Lady Bird Johnson.

I think, and I went all over the campus today, he would love this university today. He loved it when he was here, he was the hustler, he was all over the campus painting, working for the president, being a janitor, everything. And I know that he would be full the same kind of zest, and so proud of the students who are here. Proud of that Southwest Writers—he always wanted to be a writer, he was the editor of a newspaper. But he would be proud of that Southwest Writers Center I saw. And let me urge everybody to go up there and see it. You can meet Gus all bandaged up, just lying there, because Bill Wittliff has given all of the artifacts from "Lonesome Dove" to this campus. It's a great place to be on Halloween night I'm sure. [audience laughs]

Another thing that I know would make him proud to look at the array of fantastic alumni that you have. And I've had the fun of knowing a lot of them. Emmett Shelton, my across the road neighbor, I think is your oldest graduate—87 years old. Emmett was one of Texas' most famous trial lawyers for sixty years—imagine practicing in Texas courts for sixty years—and now sliding lots of his earnings back into this university. He's writing his memories now. He has the best arrow-head collection in the state. And he keeps the neighborhood alive by blowing his bugle for special occasions. So, Emmett, on your feet, lets have a little bugle call [Emmett plays bugle, last notes crack]. Can't hardly get notes like that anymore.

Another wonderful old grad is Walter Richard, who just has meant so much to the REA and the whole process of public life in this state, how thrilled that he's here. And my friend, Billy Porterfield who has the fanciest pick-up truck, a big hat, and writes beautifully for the Austin paper. He tells me there are lots more out there that I've never met, but for you, who are new-comers here, I am just trying to just pick out a few facts. The *New Yorker* cartoonist, Charles Barsotti is a graduate of here.

I really have long had a very personal feeling because a lot of my Sutherland aunts and uncles went here—Ara, John, Elizabeth, Emma Jean and maybe Frank—all came here. And so I've heard a lot about this, and I grew up going to my grandmother's house which had the pin-ups of this college on the wall.

But for this evening, we don't just want to talk about kinfolks.

We want to talk politics, because that's the season.

Presidents, and politics, and laughter! God knows one leads to another. One is *necessary* for the other.

I have never met a president that wasn't looking for a laugh, and I've met nine.

They also work at trying to give them. In fact, when I was kind of on my way out of Washington, I started collecting anecdotes about presidents and the laughter that they thought they had contributed.

Of course, when you talk about a president, you have to stretch the word humor, because what would normally just be a smile for somebody else, with a president delivering it, it's a guffaw.

Anyway, I think that however solemn presidents might have appeared, they managed to say something funny—every single one, at least one funny thing while in office. Not always a belly laugh, but maybe a William Howard Taft quip.

One of these occurred when Taft was out on the campaign trail, and someone in the crowd tossed a head of cabbage at him. It rolled to a stop at his feet. He said, "Pardon me, but one of my adversaries seems to have lost his head."

Of course, the master, and the one that sorta [sic] brought presidential humor on stage was Abraham Lincoln. His stories were widely criticized at the time. He would interrupt cabinet meetings, visitors to his office, and pull out Artemis Ward, the writer of the day, and read a story. These kinds of stories would not have been played on television today, they were not one-liners. But they had a moral, and a laugh at the end, and some wisdom. However, he was widely criticized for using laughter in the grimness of the Civil War.

The story goes that a Congressman Arnold came by one time to see him on a serious problem. Mr. Lincoln paused to read him a story and Arnold was so disgusted and said, "How in the face of the battle statistics from Gettysburg can you sit there and tell

your little jokes?” And Lincoln, the story goes, with tears streaming down his face, slammed the joke book on the table and said, “Mr. Arnold were it not for my little jokes, I would not be able to carry the burdens of this office.”

I think that says it all. That you simple do, and I believe this is not just true of presidents, but of all of us, you simply have to have along with a sense of purpose a sense of humor.

There were many other funny presidents.

Woodrow Wilson wrote limericks “My face I don’t mind it for I am behind it for it’s the fellow in front that I jar.” I bet you didn’t know he wrote that. He wrote it when he was at Princeton.

FDR and LBJ were big storytellers. Generally telling about their part of the world.

Kennedy’s one-liners are legend, and of course his most quoted one is the one where the Nobel Prize winners were dining in the state dining room. And he said, “Never have so many brains been assembled in this room, (pause), since Thomas Jefferson dined here alone.”

Well, in my long quest of laughing presidents, I have found some real surprises.

For instance, Calvin Coolidge and even Richard Nixon were funnier than Thomas Jefferson.

It’s hard to believe that a great wordsmith like Thomas Jefferson, a man for all seasons, a man with brilliance, really didn’t have much humor about him. His biographers say he was too busy being eloquent and serious. History shows that he really had very little laughter in him and he delivered very few speeches. He had a high voice that didn’t lend itself to being a good speaker.

And of all people, Calvin Coolidge, who if you’ve seen pictures of him he had a cadaver like appearance, was very thin lipped, and even his appearance invoked humor. Alice Roosevelt Longworth once said: “Cal looks like he was weaned on a pickle.” And when Dorothy Parker was informed that President Coolidge was dead, replied, “How did they know.” But what he had was the Greta Garbo technique: Few lines, and therefore all the most valuable. Each word counted. Coolidge scholars claim that he is the most quoted president in the United States. Hard to believe. He liked to stop others from talking too—he didn’t just want no sound of his voice, he didn’t want the sound of anyone’s voice.

One woman came up to him and said, “I come from Boston.”

And he replied, “Yes, and you’ll never get over it.”

How’d you like to be met with that kind of president?

But, he was known as being our best slept president. He required at least 11 hours of sleep a night. In fact, H.L. Mencken said of him: “He slept more than any other president by day and by night...Nero fiddled but Coolidge only snored.”

As I said, I’ve been researching laughter in politics since I graduated from the University of Texas, and with my journalism degree in hand and my virtue intact, I set off for Washington D.C. I still have the journalism degree. [audience explodes in laughter] Franklin Roosevelt was president at the time. Sometimes when I just say Roosevelt, they think its Teddy, not Franklin. [audience laughter] I was a brunette and so naive I thought the “body politic” was a Congressman’s wife.

But, like so many others, (and it’s addicting) I was swept up by that great magnificent white marble capital “granddaddy and grandchild of all the Main Streets of America, in which evil men do good things and good men do evil in a way of government

so delicately balanced that only Americans can understand it and often they are baffled.” Remember that quote? That’s the marvelous definition from *Advise and Consent*, which I think remains the best novel ever written about Washington DC, unless Jack Valenti’s that just came out yesterday tops it. But it was Alan Drury’s book, and it’s worth rereading.

However, I don’t want to get ahead of my laughs. Ambassador Bill Crook tells me that this crowd likes laughs. In fact he says, “Some days they like laughs better than the like thought.” And so, that’s why I decided to name the speech tonight “A funny thing happened.” I thought that’d just about cover everything including aging when I wrote a book called *Getting Better All the Time* at 65, I find out now, it’s not. So, I’m going to take the advise of a friend of mine and write one called *I lied*. [audience laughs]

Well, funny didn’t always happen, but on the days that it did it really relieves holding public office. God knows, Lena Guerra could use a laugh. Her opponent is getting more of one than he deserves. I think the important thing will be who gets the last laugh—and she may just have it.

In search of current, newsworthy laughs for you, cause I know you want to be on top of the news, I dropped by the Capitol press room to see some of my old newspaper friends. To warm up, I just want to pass them along [sic]. These are just three one-liners that you can take as you wish.

“A woman for Bush is like a chicken for Colonel Sanders.” [hearty audience laughter and applause]

And this is what you call a convertible line—you can switch it around according to your own affiliation. “This campaign is like covering the Land of Oz. Quayle is looking for a brain, Bush is looking for a heart, and Bill Clinton is looking for Dorothy.” [audience laughter] I think Ronald Reagan used that on the West Coast, he switched it around.

And another, “If Barbara Bush wants to do something about literacy, she ought to begin with the vice president who can’t spell, and her husband who can’t complete a simple sentence.”

Political jokes generally characterize Democrats more because Democrats seem smile more, and, after being out of office 12 years, they need more smiles.

I remember so well the first time I was invited to the White House for dinner. I’d been in the White House, in and out as a reporter for many years. But to be invited for dinner, President and Mrs. Eisenhower invited me, it was just after they had come into office. I was standing there in the hallway and a great, you know DAR-type woman swept in, Laura Gross well-known for her Republicanism and of generous proportions and she said, “It’s been eighteen long years since I’ve been invited to the White House. Eighteen long miserable years.” Well, I’m going to use that line, perhaps, when I am invited back. Say, “It’s been twelve long years since I’ve been in the White House.”

Anyway, I’m very glad you let me come clean with being a lifelong, footwashing total immersion Democrat because I just thought I’d put it our front. You might not have known, and I am too old to strain to make every statement bi-partisan. My doctor tells me, “don’t hold back, Liz, it raises your blood pressure which is already higher as the national debt.”

I wanted to tell you though that because of this span of time, and I really have had a great old time, thanks to Texas, thanks to Lyndon Johnson. Because of this span of time

in Washington, being close to history, watching this campaign has been a little like drowning. Every political story, everything that's been happening, or that ever happened to me has been racing back through my mind.

From Franklin Pierce, our 14th president—I was not there at the time, but I've heard tell—we really learn, from Pierce, the sense of absurdity that must sweep over every mortal, *should sweep over every mortal*, who comes to that high office at least once in his term. I doubt that this would ever sweep over Ross Perot.

Pierce liked to tell the story about learning of his own nomination for president. He was virtually the last person to know. Because the Democratic convention nominated him had gotten deadlocked on the 48<sup>th</sup> roll call. And on the 49th roll call, in a desperate move to break a deadlock this man who wasn't even there, but was summering (that's a George Bush term) summering [audience laughter] in New Hampshire was not present. So, they nominated Franklin Pierce. By chance, his manservant, happened to be done grocery shopping in Concord, NH, and he heard the news and rushed back and burst in through the doors and said, "Oh, Mr. Pierce! Mr. Pierce! Ridiculous as it may seem, you have just been nominated President of the United States." [audience laughter]

You can't hardly get nominations like that anymore! And I doubt if you'd get presidents who are that willing to admit how absurd it is.

Back when I grew up in Texas in the Bible belt, you could run for public office on a three-plank platform: paying your honest debts, saving your seed potatoes and baptism by total immersion. It was a much simpler day. But the country has grown. The problems have grown, and perhaps the scoundrels have multiplied. Sometimes it seems like it.

My friend, who was a special assistant to President Johnson Douglass Cater, and a wonderful writer, poses the awesome question, "Can we govern?" Can we govern? Have we lost the will, have we lost the energy or talent? He remembers that Secretary of State Dean Acheson used to have three boxes on his desk: one that said "In", one that said "Out", and one that said, "Too Hard." [audience laughs]

Well, this even as we celebrate the world's oldest constitutional democracy. And we wonder if we have, as this "too hard box runneth over, lost faith in ourselves. I don't think that we can do that, I don't think that we can give up and survive as the nation of vision, as a nation of progress, a valiant nation of heart. We constantly have to be primed to solve the unsolvable things, to make some progress, to become a more civilized society. So we search desperately, I think we're searching desperately for leadership that can cope and will cope on behalf of average Americans. Let me say that one of the things about this election that really offended me is they have taken up, both sides, a term that I do not think belongs in our country: middle class. Until this year everybody's talked about middle income, or lower income, and suddenly everybody is using "middle class." I don't like it. I don't know whether we can ever get rid of it. But, I don't think it belongs in the vocabulary of this country.

When you get down to it, no one is really good enough, or capable enough, or apparently clean enough to be president. I do think we owe a debt to Ross Perot, which he'll probably make us pay, [audience laughs] revving us out of our cynicism that one person can't make a difference. God knows he's made a difference. You can't turn on TV and not see Ross bouncing from one channel to another. That's one of the things that's distinctive in this election. He has revved up our energies to think "well, I can count." I think Anita Hill has been a larger factor. Women are truly angry. Women are running for

office as never before. I think we know that something wrong with the greedy years of helping the rich and ignoring the helpless. And we're even tired of the "No more taxes" slogan. If we can have a more workable government, or a better educated country, it's worth more taxes.

I want to say that women are a factor and will continue to be one for good. Women have become just within maybe the last five years a class act in [sic] the political stage. Women candidates are running as never before. And our woman governor is a governor who—hold your breath—works—*works* at making the state work for people. Seventy-three percent approval rating two weeks ago. I think the fact that she's created a national example, and I promise you that other states certainly scrutinize the Ann Richards administration, of trying to even up appointments to policymaking boards that include everyone—lots of people who have always been left out women, blacks, Hispanics. Even, the Board of Regents at Texas A & M has taken on a different nature than it ever has. So it proves that it can be done.

I think if this onetime unlikely candidate this onetime housewife, this reformed alcoholic, can use her common sense and political instincts to set Texas and its agencies aright, the path to higher-political office will be much more secure for women everywhere, and always.

You know we hear a lot about family values, Cactus Pryor last night was doing a spoof on President Bush and he said, "Yes, we know what family values are Barbra I'm worth \$25 million and you're worth \$50 million." Well, family values has become almost a laughable term because of everyone's opinion. But we hear about them, but we're also seeing more family battering. I never thought I would see a worthy young woman, editor of the *Yale Law Review*, one of the one hundred top attorneys in this country, an activist in the bar association and the Children's Defense Fund have to suffer so much indignity as Hillary Clinton. Her opponents, the Republicans, have tried to stuff her in a cookie jar. Her own party has almost throttled her. Let me tell you, from a long study of first ladies, we've never had a good cook as first lady of this country. [audience laughs] The closest we ever came Mamie Eisenhower who gave out recipes for Million Dollar Fudge and it didn't even harden in the Rocky Mountain states. [audience laughs]

Even our beloved Lady Bird would tell you that she gardens a lot better than she can make Toll House cookies. Once, she very wryly observed that a candidate for president "should be born an orphan and remain a bachelor." Because everything you do seems to get you into trouble.

Back when Jimmy Carter was elected in the wake of Watergate, he was really determined to have no scandals in office. Those of us he appointed—and I was one of them to be in the education department—not only did we have to be cleared by the FBI, but we had to go by the White House and fill out a form.

One of the questions on it, asking us to declare our purity, one of the questions said, "Do you have any relatives who might possibly embarrass the President of the United States?" [audience laughs] This from Billy Carter's brother! [audience laughs] I just scrawled across the form, "Thousands." [audience laughs] And my honesty got me by.

I think there's a very healthy thing happening this year on the political scene, and that is we have gotten back to eyeball to eyeball campaigning with the whistlestops. It

brings the candidates, and government closer together. Much closer than you get from a 30-second sound bite from a TV studio could.

When I think of whistlestop politicians, I will tell you there was no master like Lyndon Johnson. I see a day in 1960 when LBJ was running as Vice President on the Kennedy-Johnson ticket. We were going down and you can go from Alexandria, Virginia to New Orleans—47 stops in eight states, and the train stops in the middle of the town. Anyway, LBJ was wound up. He was not a very good speaker on television. He had to press the palms and feel the flesh to get vibrations going.

And on this day he was standing on the back of the train and we were in Culpepper, Virginia. And he couldn't stop. He just kept going on and on. The people were gathered around the back of the train across the track. And so, the timekeeper, a guy named Jim Jones, just kept tugging on his coattail and he wouldn't give up. And finally, knowing that we had all these stops on down the track, Jones just gave the signal to the engineer to slowly pull on out. And you have this hilarious sight of Johnson keeping on talking as the train was pulling out. [audience laughs] People were disappearing in the distance and he had to have the last word and he shouted, "I ask, what did Dick Nixon ever do for Culpepper?"

And one old feller [sic] down near the front who had a cane just shook it at the train and said, "Hell, what did anyone ever do for Culpepper?"

There was North Carolina. I saw that the candidates were in North Carolina the other day. LBJ was working the crowds at the courthouse square. And when LBJ worked the crowds, I promise you, kissed every baby, signed every cast on arm or leg, shook hands. Shook hands that weren't even shakable. Dan Rather was following him along through the square, and he came back and he told us, "I promise you. He went up to the Confederate statue, shook his hand. then he saw a man who had his hands in his pockets of his overcoat. He reached in and pulled out his hand, shook it and put it back in the pocket." [audience laughs]

So, he was born for personal campaigning.

As I really survey the long span of national politics I have seen, I must say that The Eisenhower Era grows in stature with time. Four "giants," and we really had giants in those days, made it a sort of Golden Age of Harmony—peace on earth, goodwill between the legislative and executive. President Eisenhower, Speaker Sam Rayburn, and Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson—three Texans. On the Supreme Court was that mild mannered and fair-minded Chief Justice Earl Warren. [audience laughs]

As LBJ commented at the time, "The President hasn't submitted any controversial legislation. The Democrats are very anxious to be the loyal opposition. So far we have been able to be loyal but it's pretty difficult to be the opposition."

I am glad I was there as a reporter, to see if first hand.

It reminds me of how good politics and government can be. How civility, and that's a word you don't hear about politics much anymore, can operate to make government work.

What kind of campaigning do we see today? I think there is more sting than fun, more malice than magic. TV has to make every minute count and every second cost. There is really no time for joshing and no leeway for mistakes. Candidates blame the media, and rightly so. My gosh they can take after a story and beat it to death and ignore

99 others. Some journalists came out of the Republican convention wearing T-shirts that said. "Blame me I'm the media." Well, I think they did.

Any off-hand joke or off-the-cuff remark is often twisted and hammered back in an accusatory way. Politics today is a precision business in this high-tech world, it's figured to the finest percentage point by pollsters, spin doctors, and bounce predictors. There is an increasing distance between candidate and voter makes us yearn for something closer. That's why I think the Clinton-Gore ticket was wise to come up with the bus trips, which were unique enough—it's almost like something out of the past--to draw daily national coverage. Free coverage; it doesn't have to be bought if it's newsworthy enough. And the Bush campaign has quickly followed up with the whistlestop train. Again, a show worth covering.

But I think what seems to be missing from our political scene is compassion and the kind of leadership and eloquence that rallies us together, that speaks to our hearts and spirits—that makes us recognize the truth: that we really all are in this together. That it could be an exciting adventure. That it could be, surely we have come to a point where we ought, it shouldn't be anything so difficult out there that we can't tackle and accomplish with people of good will. I think this is happening a lot at the local level, and we're not seeing it at the national level.

It doesn't take a crystal ball to know that things are not running well in our republic. That our economy is in trouble and that our infrastructures are declining. We seem to have abandoned responsibility and just yielded to, "what can I do?" to a sort of hopelessness. We know:

Government responses are too slow and often hedge or stall, often ignore.

Our Congress has been irresponsible with their personal finances. That they been those that deliberately write worthless checks and get surprised when it catches up with them.

Corporate America has been caught with its hand in the till.

We worry and wonder if we allowed our emotions to be whipped into a costly war . . . \$1 billion a day. Two days of that would take care of all the day care needed in America—that's the thing that makes you anxious.

The media is also unfocused and concentrates on the bizarre. Tom Brokaw begins to sound like the National Enquirer and a Geraldo mentality permeates everything. We seem to be nitpicking the little stuff . Dan Quayle doesn't want Murphy Brown to have a baby but he doesn't want her to have an abortion either. What does it take to lead us out of this wilderness and inertness? I think rallying voices of hope and rallying voices to fire you up and I haven't heard things that fire me up in a long time.

Back in the early days we rallied behind the voice of Franklin Roosevelt, who told a generation that it "has a rendezvous with destiny." I wish we had something like that today. Dwight D. Eisenhower's warning to "guard against the unwarranted influence of the military-industrial complex." And God knows we need to be on guard against that. And the pledge of Martin Luther King, "We shall overcome." The familiar challenge of John F. Kennedy "Ask not what your country can do for you, but [sic] what you can do for your country." I was so pleased today talking to the students to hear one or two students say they want to join the Peace Corps. They want to do something in politics. I'm so glad they're not turned off. And then, of course, the President I knew best—LBJ—"I want a great society where every boy and girl in America can have all the education he

or she can absorb.” If you ever been up to the LBJ Ranch you have stood in front of that little one-room schoolhouse where he went to school and where he came back to sign the Elementary and Secondary Education Bill. He said, “The only valid password out of poverty is education.” And it is. and that’s what the struggle is about today.

Those voices are stilled. But I am cheered, very cheered that we are seeing a new generation emerge, shaped by absolutely different forces than shaped those of us who grew up in the Depression, who grew up in the Bible Belt, so to speak. Who are shaped by Watergate, who are shaped by Vietnam, who are shaped, very much, by the environmental movement—and I’m not sure that isn’t the most lively movement today. They’re sharp young men and young women with keen intellects and a desire to do something about the public good.

And this year, to see the four of the best and brightest of our own South come on stage and be so well educated—I wonder if we’ve ever had so well educated a foursome. Three law degrees and one master of psychology. Rattle off Yale, Oxford, Harvard, Smith, Boston University—a whole litany of this foursome who are so much like our own sons and daughters. Who have taken advantage of the educational opportunities there. I do not want to tread on the toes of those of you permanently committed to President Bush, and I have kinfolk who are in this room. But I do think that if I have learned anything it’s that we have to turn away from the era of greed and we have to offer hope. And we have to tackle the Too Hard box

I was asked to make a prediction, and so I’m going to just go all out and say that the young governor of the “small state” is going to get elected with his well-chosen vice president.

I think that also, we’re going to feel a surge of energy with this. To take part and be not a spectator and a critic, but a participant in the public pool.

I like so much, and I want to leave you with a quotation from Franklin Roosevelt: “Governments can err, officials do make mistakes, but the immortal Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted on different scales. Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference.”

I hope these words of Franklin Roosevelt are true. And I hope it will stimulate all of us to take on the hard jobs in the years ahead.

Thank you very much.

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