

**Jim Wright**  
**LBJ Lecturer**  
**October 16, 1984**

Introduction of Congressman Jim Wright  
The Sixth Lyndon Baines Johnson  
Distinguished Lecturer  
Robert L. Hardesty  
President  
Southwest Texas State University

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the sixth in the series of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lectures.

I am particularly pleased to see so many of our SWT community here tonight, along with so many friends of South west Texas.

I would like to extend a special welcome to some of our honored guests: the Honorable Kathy Lowry, a member of our Board of Regents, and her husband, Dr. Tim Lowry; the Honorable Bob Barton, Representative from the San Marcos District to the Texas House of Representatives; the Honorable Myra McDaniel, Secretary of State of the state of Texas, and her husband Reuben; the Honorable Emmie Craddock, Mayor of San Marcos and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Southwest Texas. We are particularly happy to welcome the members of our Speaker's family: Mrs. Betty Wright, his wife, and his sisters, Mrs. Mary Connell and Dr. Betty Wright who is a member of the health and physical education faculty at SWT.

It is exciting to realize that we are tonight fulfilling a promise that President Johnson made to this university shortly before his death in 1973. That promise, as most of you know, was to bring to South west Texas some of the nation's most prominent men and women to meet with university students, faculty and staff. Since we began this lecture series three years ago, we have done just that.

I am sure that our lecture tonight is exactly what President Johnson had in mind for his alma mater, a chance for students, faculty, and friends of SWT to meet and hear the best and most informed people in the nation, the newsmakers and decision makers of the day. And tonight's speaker exemplifies exactly the kind of person LBJ had in mind. For Jim Wright is, in the words of President Johnson, "One of the greatest congressmen in the United States."

Texas has a tradition of leadership in the Congress. John Nance Garner, Sam Rayburn, and Lyndon Johnson are only three of many who have played major roles in our nation's development. Jim Wright continues that tradition. He began his political career following World War II. During the war he served with valor as a combat pilot in 1 he South Pacific, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Legion of Merit. After the war, he was elected to the Texas Legislature.

Next he became Mayor of Weatherford, Texas, his boyhood home. Then, at the age of 31, he was elected by the people of Fort Worth to the United States Congress, where he is currently serving his nth consecutive term. Since 1976, Jim Wright has served as House Majority Leader, the number two post in the House of Representatives.

President Johnson wasn't the only statesman to recognize Congressman Wright's qualities. In a confidential survey conducted by U.S. News and World Report in 1980,

each member of the House was asked to choose the most respected member of that body and the most persuasive debater. Wright won in both categories.

Another President, John F. Kennedy, said; “I know of no city that’s better represented in the Congress of the United States than Fort Worth.”

Although Jim Wright is his party’s leader in the House, he is not an intensely partisan man. Rather, he serves all the people he represents. The support he received from his district, and from his colleagues, attests to that.

SWT’s own Betty Wright, Jim’s sister, told me that when they were children, she and her sister always thought Jim would grow up to be a minister. When World War II was over and he came home, she asked him about such plans. He put his arm around her and said, “No, Betty, I’m not going to become a minister. I’m going to be a politician. There are enough honest ministers in the world, but there are not enough honest politicians, and I’m going to be one.” He has lived up to that promise throughout his long and distinguished career.

He embodies all of the qualities, intelligence, integrity, concern, and ability that we would like to have in all of our elected representatives. We are delighted that Jim Wright could be here tonight to share some of his thoughts with us.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce Texas Congressman, and my friend, the Honorable Jim Wright.

Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture  
House Majority Leader Jim Wright

### Walls and Bridges

In thinking about what might be an appropriate subject to discuss tonight as we celebrate the public career of Lyndon Baines Johnson, I decided that we should honor his memory by considering together two very familiar models of the building trade—things we see every day here on the campus and wherever we go in our walks of life.

I’d like for us to think together tonight about walls and bridges, things that separate and things that unite—not just the physical structures of wood and masonry and metal, the objects of architecture. In a larger sense, almost everything we do in life—surely everything we do as a government and as a society, and many things we do in our interpersonal relations with other people—build either a wall or a bridge. Either we divide people and separate them from their natural destiny by means of an impenetrable barrier, a wall, or we unite them and connect them to those destinies by means of a bridge.

### LBJ: Bridge Builder

Walls of misunderstanding disconnect people from other people, and ridges of understanding unite them. I hope that you will be builders of bridges. I don’t think anything could be more symbolic of the public life and career of Lyndon B. Johnson than to speak in terms of bridge-building. He spent a great portion of his public life tearing down walls of alienation and hostility and separation—walls which divided class against class, race against race, religion against religion, section against section—and building

bridges in their place. I think it's not an exaggeration to suggest that Lyndon B. Johnson probably was the preeminent bridge-builder of modern America.

He was surely our century's most skilled practitioner of compromise, building bridges of understanding, reason, arrangements of mutual accommodation, consensus. "Do not despise compromise," Henry Clay once said. "It is the cement that holds the Union together."

As Senate Majority Leader and as President, Lyndon Johnson repeatedly fashioned compromises that spanned the deep chasms of misunderstanding which had separated political parties and had separated branches of our government. As Senate Majority Leader he reached across the Senate aisle with bridges of understanding and conciliation. Both as President and as Senate Majority Leader, he built bridges of understanding between Congress and the White House. He helped tear down the walls of alienation that divided the North and the South in this country. He was an apostle of bipartisan foreign policy. I remember what Lyndon Johnson said when a group of Democrats suggested that we challenge President Eisenhower on some foreign policy question. He said "Look, if we were all flying over the ocean together in a large commercial aircraft—though we would not have picked the pilot, though he might be someone we might not have individually chosen—I don't believe there's a man here who'd be silly enough to pour water in the gasoline tank just to embarrass the pilot."

That was Lyndon Johnson's attitude in the question of foreign policy when a Republican sat in the White House. As Majority Leader of the Senate he felt that he had the responsibility to demonstrate to the nation and the world that when the President of the United States speaks for us in the councils of the nations, he speaks for all of us. He demonstrated that we are not so torn apart and eaten up by the internally corrosive acids of political division that we're incapable of presenting a consistent foreign policy position to the rest of the world. In that role Lyndon Johnson was superb.

His was the hand, of course, that guided through Congress the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction days. In this way he built a bridge that united races. Along with Sam Rayburn, Lyndon Johnson provided the leadership which led this state of ours along the path of peaceful compliance with the Supreme Court's ruling on segregated schools. He didn't let Texas get trapped into the position of some of the other Southern states, with massive resistance, riots, and other forms of social disruption.

### Personal Reminiscence

I remember an episode in 1956. Lyndon had been thrown somewhat unwillingly into a contest to become leader (If the Democratic state delegation to the national convention in Chicago that year. He hadn't asked for that role; it had been thrust upon him by his friend and mentor—my mentor—Sam Rayburn.

Without even asking Lyndon, Mr. Rayburn stated publicly that he thought Lyndon Johnson ought to be the leader of the delegation. Well, there was vigorous competition for the position. A very popular governor wanted to apply for that role. Four years earlier the governor had led our delegation to a national convention, and he had come back to endorse the Republican nominee for President.

Lyndon, thrown into the middle of the ring but not quite ready for the contest, asked me if I would fly down with him and do some missionary work among the people in my part of the state. Or the way down, we were reading the newspapers. It was a bitter,

vicious kind of contest. Those contesting his leadership described him as “Lyndon Johnson, a tool of the NAACP,” and other pejorative things that brought up ghosts of racial intolerance and memories of the Ku Klux Klan. (This was, remember, only two years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*. There still coursed through our state tremors of resentment against that Supreme Court ruling.)

I asked him on the way, “Lyndon, what are you going to say, how are you going to answer this criticism?” He said, “Well, Jim, I’m not. If I have to prove that I hate Negroes worse than somebody else in order to lead this state delegation, I’m not going to win this contest.” He mentioned a little colored girl—that was the polite term in those days--named Helen, who brought his coffee into the Majority Leader’s office every morning. He said, “I’m not going to have to avert my eyes and look away when she comes in because I’m ashamed of something I’ve said.” Then he went on to describe his feelings a year earlier right after he suffered his near-fatal heart attack. I felt this was the genuine man speaking, not the public figure polished up for newspaper consumption. “When I lay there in the hospital bed, I thought of a lot of things. I’m aware of a lot of things I’ve done in my life that I’m not too proud of, but I’m not going to die with that on my conscience.” Lyndon Johnson then came to Texas, and he explained that he was here in a unifying role, not to divide classes or to divide races or to divide religions.

### Bridges of Opportunity

I think maybe the greatest bridges he built were bridges of opportunity. The massive programs that Lyndon Johnson initiated for education in this state and throughout the United States made it possible for literally millions of young Americans to cross those bridges of opportunity to a college education and better, more satisfying lives. Others who had for one reason or another been found wanting—failed, dropped out of school—were given a second chance in projects like the Job Corps. There many of them redeemed those chances; they lived up to Lyndon’s faith in them. Seventy percent of the people in the Job Corps got jobs and paid in taxes to the government many times over the amount that had been invested in giving them a second chance. They used the bridges of opportunity.

One of the last speeches Lyndon made after he announced that he would not seek re-election as President was at Texas Christian University in my city of Fort Worth. It was there that he announced his advocacy of the 18-year-old vote. This was a bridge of participation for those whom he wanted so fervently to extricate from Vietnam. I think the greatest disappointment of Lyndon Johnson’s political career was the fact that he failed, despite so earnestly trying—through speeches, through offers, through public gestures—to build a bridge of peaceful understanding with the North Vietnamese. In one speech at Johns Hopkins University he offered the North Vietnamese a peace plan which would provide massive help so both sides could jointly reconstruct the war-ravaged regions of that shattered country. The deepest disappointment that beset him was that, in that effort and in many less advertised private overtures, he wasn’t able to build that bridge to peace. When he left the presidency he did so with a very heavy heart, and he did so with a pledge that he wanted to spend the rest of his days in office seeking peace. Lyndon B. Johnson was a bridge-builder.

### Builders of Walls

As for the builders of walls, there are those in our society whose main preoccupation in life is to divide people, to build walls that separate people. They make a cohesive society infinitely more difficult. I think I can attest to that as few people can because I have the dubious responsibility and thus know the difficulty of trying to weld together a heterogeneous mass of opinionated individualists—the Democrats in the House—to get them to agree on any one thing at any one time. To try to do that is to know what Will Rogers meant when he said, “I don’t belong to any organized political party; I’m a Democrat.” That’s just about the way it is.

A cohesive society is made even more difficult by something that Kevin Phillips described very ably in an article he wrote a few years ago for *Harper’s* magazine. Entitled “The Balkanization of America,” Phillips’ article described a growing spirit of parochialism which is splintering our society and disintegrating our fundamental national sense of unity. Too many Americans, he concluded, have begun to think of themselves first and foremost as members of some particular economic, social, racial, or religious group, and only afterwards, if at all, as Americans.

I see this every day in the House of Representatives. You know, the Congress is just a mirror of the American people. The kind of government we have is probably not much better or much worse than we deserve. If we want the kind of leadership that divides us, that appeals to our prejudices, that stirs up our dislike for this or that or the other group, then that’s the kind of government we’re likely to have.

Congress can rise to heights of sparkling statesmanship, but it can also sink to levels of crass mediocrity because Congress is people. I suppose the best definition of the United States House of Representatives is its title. We are representative of the people who send us there. We probably have about the same mixture of faults and virtues and strengths and weaknesses as the electorate. As a whole, we distill the diverse and sometimes inchoate public mood into an essence.

An apt description was given by the late Majority Leader Hale Boggs when he said the United States House of Representatives is a collection of ordinary men and women grappling with extraordinary problems. There are coursing through the electorate as a whole those who would divide rather than unite—those who would cast doubt, mistrust, and suspicion on other groups in our society. That is going to be reflected in the House of Representatives. It is dissolving some of the glue that once held us together. It is making the process of governing infinitely more difficult.

Some nations and governments are builders of walls. In the third century B.C., the Ch’in dynasty of China built the world’s longest, most continuous wall to separate their country from all other countries and to shield their people from what they saw as the evils of foreign influence. It was the first complete national isolationism. Nobody could get in or out. Behind that wall, China languished for 1,800 years and fell hopelessly behind the rest of the world. It had erected a barrier which mankind’s new discoveries and increasing knowledge couldn’t penetrate.

There could not be a more grotesque example than the Berlin Wall. Its purpose is not to keep others out, as was that of the China wall, but to keep its own people in, to make a prison of a whole society. It seems to me that the refusal of any country to permit out-migration of the citizens who want to leave is a confession of the moral and social impoverishment, economic destitution and intellectual bankruptcy of that country.

## Inspirational Leadership

On the other hand, I guess the most inspiring people of history are those who have been builders of bridges. Abraham Lincoln was a builder of bridges. He was a conciliator. He wanted very desperately to find a means to solve the differences between the North and South. There is preserved in a parlor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, a church which I sometimes attend when I'm in Washington, a bill written in Lincoln's own hand which would have provided a means for settling the differences between the North and South peacefully and without bloodshed. He proposed and wrote a bill by which the Federal government would purchase the slaves from the slaveholders so that they would not suffer agonizing financial loss or economic trauma, and then would give the slaves their writs of manumission as a gift of the United States government.

Lincoln called the representatives of the loyal slave states roundabout and made an earnest appeal to get support for this approach. He said, "May the whole vast future not have cause to lament that we neglected the best opportunity to save human life." Well, neglect it they did. There wasn't a single person who would introduce the bill. It never did get introduced, and Lincoln the bridge-builder and peace-maker had failed.

The greatest people of history are the bridge-builders. They are the ones we remember. Sometimes they are martyred because people of hate will not tolerate their works of good will. Gandhi believed that bridges could be built in which one nation might become pluralistic enough that it could serve within its constituency people of both the Hindu and Mohammedan religions. Because of that, Gandhi was slain. But who today remembers the name of his slayer?

Anwar Sadat was a man whom I have come to admire greatly. I knew him as a warm and gracious, daring and courageous human being. I admired him perhaps more than any other world leader in that era because he had the physical courage, the intellectual courage, and the moral courage to stand for something that wasn't necessarily popular among his people. He wanted to build a bridge over which these ancient half-brothers, the sons of Abraham—after so many long and fruitless centuries of alienation, anger and mistrust—might meet in the middle and solve their problems in a mutually acceptable way. Because of that, he was slain. Who can remember the names of the people who slew Anwar Sadat?

America through most of its history has been a builder of bridges. I think that's what characterizes our nation. There have been times when we've not lived up to that promise, times when the Ku Klux Klan foments its poison, times when economic necessity drives us to build economic walls in the form of tariffs and quotas. There have even been times when we have been unwilling to listen to other people. In this political season, we have seen the rebirth of a sad spectacle on a few college campuses where people shouted speakers down instead of hearing them out—boorish kinds of childish chanting not worthy of a college campus or even of a high school campus. To wall off speakers with vocal screeching and not let those hear them who want to is mental infantilism. It is the antithesis of intellectuality. It is building a wall, a throwback to prehistoric times.

Pope John XXIII was a builder of bridges, religious bridges to a warmer fellowship among the different religious faiths and denominations. There are some people in organized religion who would arrogate to themselves the attributes of the deity and arbitrarily exclude others. They build sometimes the biggest walls. There are some who

endow their own political prejudices with religious justification. I guess from the beginning there have been people not content to be created in God's image. They wanted to recreate God in their own images, to endow the Creator with their own petty prejudices. They believe that because they don't like something, therefore God doesn't like it, and they're impelled to go out and destroy it in His name. Religious walls.

The builders of walls usually operate out of fear. All the legal and economic tricks which for years kept blacks and other minorities from voting and getting an education and sharing fully in the richness of this society were walls. They were built for the most part by people who honestly feared that unless the minorities were walled off and kept in their place, there would be fewer privileges for themselves. They saw freedom as if it were in short supply, to be hoarded, rather than as a gift to be shared and made more rich for the sharing.

In response to that, we saw about a decade ago a retaliatory building of walls among some blacks. Riots broke out, and they began to build their own walls in retaliation, burning the bridges of understanding that had been so laboriously built up over many years, blaming white people in general for their problems, defending violence in the name of black power. You remember that sad period. You see, one wall begets another. That's the thing about it. Communication breaks down, riots break out, and a nation begins to break apart.

#### Thrust of American History

"Something there is," as Robert Frost said, "that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down." Given occasional aberration, the history of this country of ours has been one long, sometimes sporadic, but generally continuous process of building bridges.

We've been breaking through those horizontal walls that hold people down and the vertical walls that hold people in and don't let people expand. We've tried our best as a nation, I think, to create something new in the world. And if America stands for anything distinctive, it is that we set out, only half consciously perhaps, to do something different from our predecessors in Europe. They created an aristocracy and endowed it as a ruling class. We didn't do that. Nor did we follow the example of the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution—destroy the aristocracy and put in its place a dictatorship of the proletariat, bringing everything down to its lowest common denominator.

No, our goal was to expand the privileged class until it shared its benefits with the humblest citizens of the land, an aristocracy with a difference. Not a nobility to which some are born and others forever denied, but one to which all may aspire and most can attain. Not a snobbish aristocracy of exclusiveness but one which constantly seeks to enlarge its membership. Not an aristocracy of special privilege, but one of universal privilege, whose members qualify by self-preparation and by assuming the responsibilities that go with privilege. That's what we've stood for. That's what has become the American dream. There hasn't been any society in the world's history that has been so upwardly mobile or so expansionary in making a piece of the action available to more and ever more people.

This evolved over the years, the generations: a country where the humblest child born of the most improvident circumstance may have as his or her birthright the right to as good a free, public education as a prince or potentate could get anywhere else on earth,

unlimited by lack of opportunity; an equal right to vote and participate in the political process; the right to useful work; a very real chance to own property; a people's capitalism in which more and more people can participate.

In starts and stops, in bursts of creative energy and pauses for regrouping we have moved consistently toward these goals. They're not wholly fulfilled for all of America's children. Not yet.

In the past three or four years we have seen the beginning of an era of retrenchment. We seem to have lost the zeal, the dream, the drive and thrust to go out and expand these rights and opportunities to more and ever more people. Maybe that's a good sign. Maybe it shows that we have thus far done pretty well, and that we want to stop and be able to assimilate those gains we have made.

### Dangers of Retrenchment

But there's something about it that disturbs me. I don't want to see an era of retrenchment stall and stop the progress toward the full realization of the American dream that has been our heritage and our history.

Consider what progress we did make in just twenty years, the two short decades from 1960 until 1980. In those twenty years, think about the bridges that were built for Americans. The number of college graduates annually receiving degrees increased by 150 percent. The growth in graduate education was even more impressive. In 1980 the nation conferred approximately 400,000 master's degrees, compared with only 78,000 in 1960. That's an increase of some 400 percent. For millions of Americans, these were the bridges of opportunity.

By 1980, we'd reached a point where 79 percent of the non-white youth were finishing high school. Not nearly good enough, but a whole lot better than the 52 percent that did so in 1960. In the age group of those who will receive baccalaureate degrees from Southwest Texas State University this year, one out of every four Americans will complete college. In 1960, the number was one out of every eight.

Yet, there is something deeply disturbing to me in the present scene. The number of high school and college graduates as a percentage of our population has remained at a plateau for the past three years and has even shown some alarming signs of turning downward. Economic conditions in general, tuition costs, declining availability of student loans and financial assistance, could if we are not careful limit the accessibility of higher education to a declining percentage of our young population. That, in my judgment, would be tragic, probably the worst thing on God's earth that could happen to us. It would be historically retrogressive, going backwards.

Last year we graduated some 54,000 young Americans from colleges and universities in the United States in scientific, mathematical and engineering disciplines. Japan, with half our population, graduated about 77,000. Russia graduated some 300,000 people they call engineers. There is no comparison in the curriculae, of course. But they graduated 300,000 people with some technological proficiency.

I think the very best investment this government ever made, with the single possible exception of the Louisiana Purchase, was the G.I. Bill of Rights after World War II. You can demonstrate clearly and without any doubt that it enriched our social fabric, made for a stronger economy, paid the government back in dollars and cents twenty times over. The higher earning capacities it made possible for hundreds of thousands of people

of my generation paid back the government in taxes. Yet today we quibble and quarrel over whether we can afford such things as Pell Grants and student loans and work study programs. I think that we, like Nebuchadnezzar, are in the process of forgetting the dream.

It doesn't make any difference how sophisticated our weapons are nor how sophisticated our machines of production if we do not have the educated, skilled, talented manpower and womanpower able to operate, design, maintain, and create them. We're not going to be first in defense nor first in economic competition among the nations if we don't have the human resources.

### International Bridges

There are other bridges, of course. I just want to challenge you to renew this American commitment to build bridges, ever more bridges, of understanding with other nations of the world.

Student exchanges are powerful bridges. In Central America, Cuba and the Soviet Union are giving 7,500 full-time scholarships to promising Central American students. Our country is giving about fifty. And then we wonder why those people are tempted to look elsewhere. Bridges have to be built to demonstrate that a government created by electoral means is capable of helping those people solve their legitimate social and economic objectives. If we were willing in sufficient numbers to send a Peace Corps, send a literacy corps, send a medical corps, we wouldn't ever have to send the Marine Corps. It strikes me that those are the kinds of bridges we need to build.

And so, on this day I ask you to make a commitment in your lifetimes and in your careers that you will seek to be builders of bridges. I ask even that you will try that hardest bridge of all. Someday, somehow, we're going to have to find a means of building a bridge of mutual understanding with the people of the Soviet Union. I cannot believe that those people, however misguided they may be in their political philosophy, are devoid of the same basic human instincts that we have: a love of their children and the desire for those children to be able to grow up and live in peace, rather than under the menace of a mushroom cloud.

Today the United States and Soviet Union together are spending about \$600 billion on the unproductive implements of terror. We're doing it because we're afraid of what Russia would do to us if we didn't, and I suppose they're doing it because they're afraid of what we might do to them if they didn't. We live in a world of some 50,000 nuclear warheads with one million times the destructive capacity of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and ushered in the nuclear age.

In both of our countries there are unmet needs: the need for research to be done, diseases to be cured, people to be educated, hospitals to be built, better housing and all kinds of infrastructural things that make life richer and better for all of our people.

Now, we won't resolve these needs overnight. We won't find a peaceful solution at the snap of our fingers. We're not going to accept their form of society, and probably they aren't going to accept ours. They don't have to accept our form of society if they don't want to. But it defies common sense that sane, adult, mature people with presumed intelligence that I think all of us in God's creation should have, cannot find some way to build bridges of understanding whereby mutually we might be able to divert a little bit more of our substance into the ennobling things like feeding the hungry, clothing the

naked, caring for the sick, educating the illiterate. Every minute in 1984, thirty children in the world will die of hunger or for want of inexpensive vaccines. And every minute the world's military budgets will consume \$1,300,000 for the unproductive implements of terror.

And so, I urge that you and all those you may influence might extend to the best of your abilities the arts and talents of the bridge-builder and not of those who build walls that divide and separate people from one another.

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