

23 The Biggest Vote in History



FDR and LBJ meet in Galveston, Texas. In the center is Texas governor James Allred; later on he was often airbrushed out of this picture to enhance Johnson's importance.

Andrew Johnson, who was president right after the Civil War, and who also succeeded a martyred leader, was the last southern president until Lyndon Johnson.

[Johnson] said the only power he had was the power to persuade. That's like saying the only wind we have is a hurricane.

—RALPH HUITT,
A SENATE COMMITTEE ASSISTANT

young man...this boy could well be the first southern president [in a century].”

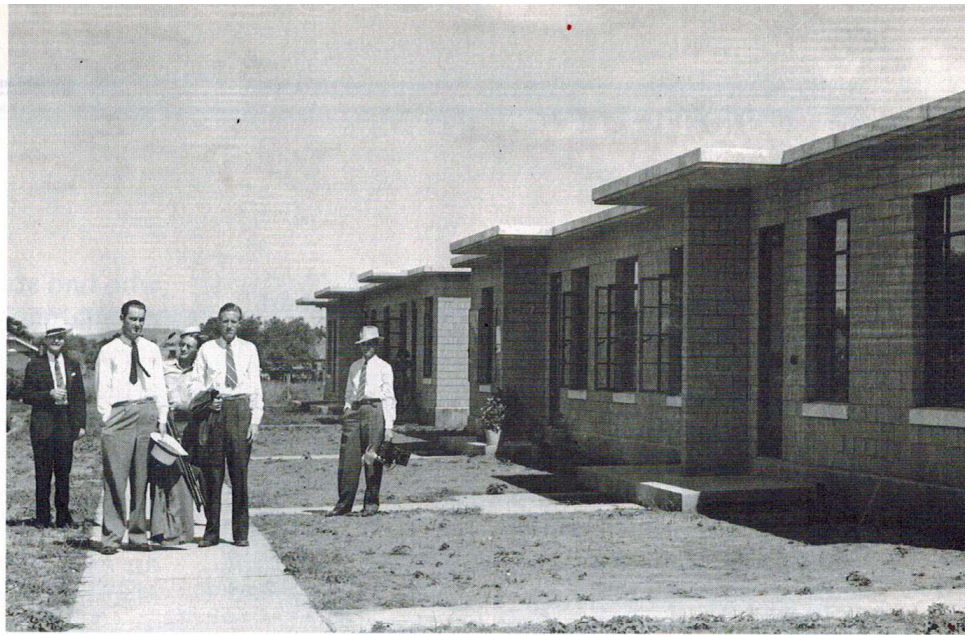
As a congressman, Johnson worked 16-hour days and sometimes longer; he expected his aides to work right along with him. That was nothing new for him, but one of his assistants had a nervous breakdown. Naturally, Johnson got a lot done, and impressed some Washington old-timers. One of them recalled, “There was this first-term congressman who was so on his toes and so active and overwhelming that he was up and down our corridors all the time.” An-

Lyndon and Lady Bird. Their Alabaman friend Virginia Durr (see page 80) said: “Bird was a sweet-looking, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl who seemed to adore her husband....She talked very little and let him do all the talking.”

Some people are born to be preachers and some to be teachers and some to be ball-players. Lyndon Johnson was born to be a politician. He was 29 when he was first elected to Congress, and he set out like a sprinter in a running race. Right away, he arranged to meet President Franklin Roosevelt. Afterward, FDR called an assistant and said, “I’ve just met a most remarkable



other remembered, "This fellow was a great operator....Besides the drive and the energy and the doing favors, which he did for everybody, there was a great deal of charm in this man." All that energy meant benefits for his district. He got the government to help finance slum-clearance projects and low-cost housing in Austin, the



state capital. And he insisted that Mexican Americans and blacks have a fair share of the new houses. Money he got for the region helped farmers go from back-breaking horse-and-plow farming to 20th-century farm machinery. He brought electricity to the Texas Hill Country.

Farming wives soon had washing machines. Farming families could turn on the lights. "Of all the things I have ever done," said Johnson 20 years later, "nothing has ever given me as much satisfaction as bringing power to the Hill Country of Texas."

A congressman represents one district in a state. Some states have many congressmen; the number depends on the state's population. But each state has only two senators; each senator represents the whole state. Twelve years after entering Congress, Lyndon Johnson was elected to the Senate. Four years after that, he was elected leader of the Democratic Party in the Senate. A cyclone in the Senate chamber might have been less noticed. When Lyndon Johnson let loose with his never-stop Texas energy, he usually got whatever it was he wanted. But he wasn't all bluster. He knew how to compromise. During the Eisenhower presidency he worked closely with the Republicans. He helped them get bills passed; they helped him get favors for Texas.

President Kennedy's programs had been stalled in the Republican Congress. President Johnson knew how to trade and maneuver and twist arms. He soon began to get Kennedy's programs passed, and then he added his own vision—it extended the New Frontier and the New Deal. He called it the "Great Society." It was a vision of a place where there was no poverty; where all children were well schooled; where health care was a birthright; where jobs and job training were attainable by all. If he could make all that happen—well, he would be the greatest president.

The American people didn't know quite what to make of Lyndon Johnson. Sometimes he just seemed like a big, crude country boy

Johnson (left) at Austin's Santa Rita Housing Project. He fought for federal money to build these apartments, and he won; Austin was one of the first five cities in the country to get FHA (Federal Housing Authority) approval for a new kind of loan issued through the Public Works Administration.

The Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.

—LYNDON JOHNSON, 1965

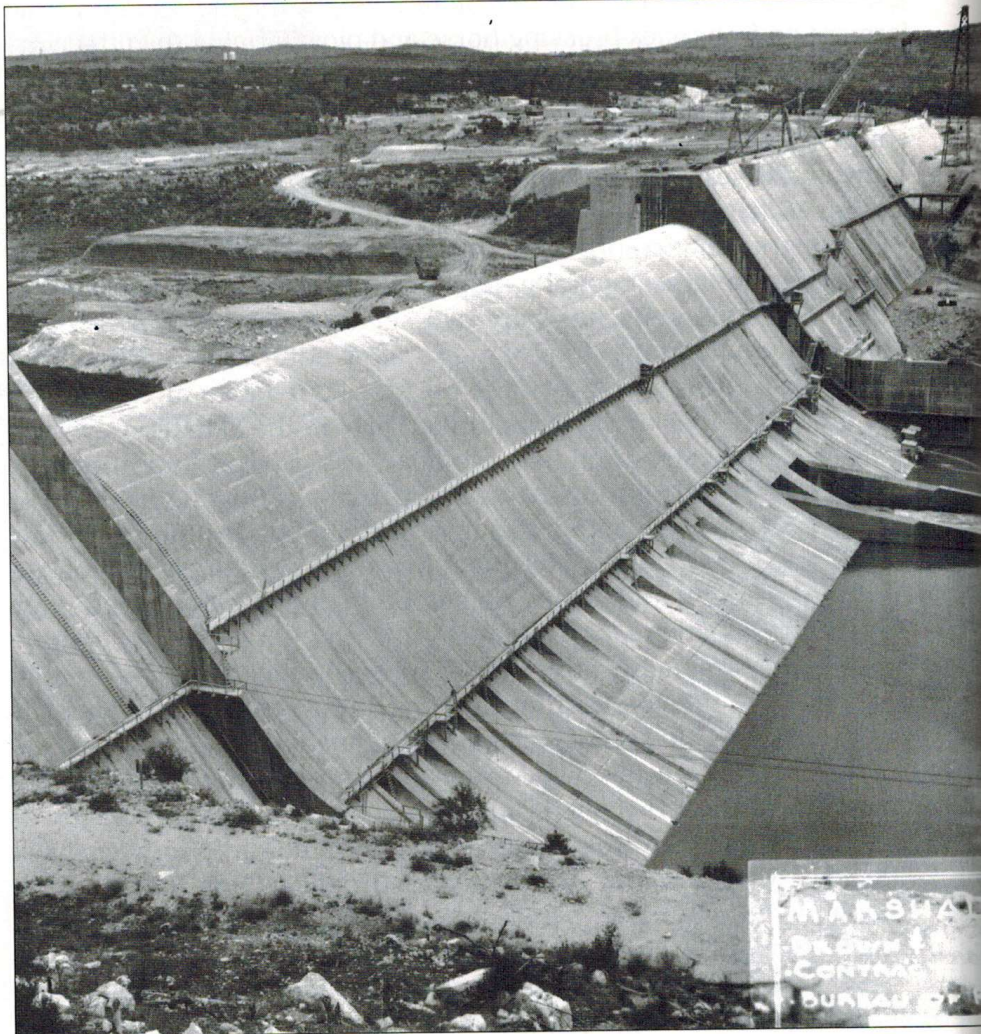
A HISTORY OF US

Psychiatrist, scholar, and writer Robert Coles, describing Lyndon Johnson, said that he was “a restless, extravagantly self-centered, brutishly expansive, manipulative, teasing and sly man, but he was also genuinely, passionately interested in making life easier and more honorable for millions of hard-pressed working-class men and women. His almost manic vitality was purposefully, intelligently, compassionately used. He could turn mean and sour, but...he had a lot more than himself and his place in history on his mind.”

who had stumbled into the presidency. Some people made fun of him. The Kennedys had served gourmet meals to Harvard professors, artists, and Nobel prize winners in the White House dining room. The Johnsons seemed to be serving Texas chili to politicians.

Johnson was hurt. He wanted everyone to admire and love him. He didn't want to be an accidental president. He wanted to be elected president himself. He soon had that chance. In 1964 he took his ideas to the American people. He ran for the presidency

Johnson worked for years to get the 278-foot-high Mansfield Dam (also called the Marshall Ford Dam) approved. Built between 1937 and 1942, it controls floods on the Lower Colorado River (in Texas) and supplies hydroelectric power, too. The Hill Country, where Johnson came from, was one of the poorest, most isolated parts of Texas. Before the dam, it had no effective electricity. That didn't just mean no lights or refrigerators; it meant no running water, because you needed electricity to pump water. When Johnson got the government to electrify the Hill Country, he changed its farmers' lives.





on his own. He didn't just want to be elected; he wanted the biggest popular vote in the history of the country.

Well, he got what he wanted: the biggest popular vote ever! And he also got a Congress that was Democratic; it would support his programs. Now he had an opportunity few presidents have had. He had that grand vision of a Great Society. He had support from the people to get things done. And he had the ability and energy to make it happen.

The American people had elected him so overwhelmingly that he could be himself. He decided he would wear a gray business suit to his inauguration instead of the traditional top hat, tails, and striped pants. He even danced at his inaugural ball. According to the record books, only two presidents had done that: George Washington and William Henry Harrison. Isaac Stern (a great American violinist) and Van Cliburn (a great American pianist who happened to be from Texas) performed with the National Symphony Orchestra at an inaugural party. At a State Department reception, composers, writers, and dancers were honored. The president was triumphant.

"All the way with LBJ" was Johnson's election slogan. He shook so many hands on his 1964 campaign that he had to be bandaged to protect his own bruised, bleeding hand.

January 8, 1964.

President Johnson tells Congress that he is declaring a war on poverty. He outlines a plan that includes aid to Appalachia, youth employment programs, improved unemployment insurance, a domestic Peace Corps, and expansion of the area redevelopment program. Later, his budget puts the cost of the war on poverty at \$1 billion. Actual expenditures in fiscal 1964–1965 are slightly more than \$600 million. The deficit for that year is the lowest in five years. (A government has a *deficit* when it spends more money than it brings in—from taxes, import duties, etc. What is a *fiscal year*?)

This administration, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America....It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won.

—LYNDON JOHNSON, 1964

