

# BOOKS

# CARO'S WAY

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

**I**t was the most contested election in the history of Texas. On August 28, 1948, Lyndon B. Johnson, a ruthless young Texas congressman, squared off against former Governor Coke Stevenson in a brutally competitive runoff for the U.S. Senate. In the chaotic days following the election, Stevenson appeared to be victorious. STEVENSON'S MARGIN FIRM, blared *The Dallas Morning News* five days after the polls closed.

But election officials received an amended return from Jim Wells County, a backward region in south Texas, which showed two hundred additional votes for Johnson. Those votes put Johnson ahead of Stevenson, and eventually guaranteed his victory by eighty-seven votes. Pundits would later refer to "the eighty-seven votes that changed history" — votes that came from Precinct 13 in Alice, Texas. The election judge for Precinct 13 was a burly, belligerent *pistolero* named Luis Salas, a top lieutenant to the "boss of bosses" in Jim Wells County and a political ally of Lyndon Johnson. Salas stole the votes.

In 1986 Robert Caro, hard at work on volume two of his projected four-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson, ventured to southern Texas in search of Luis Salas. The elderly men in the streets of Alice told him that Salas was deceased, but eventually someone exclaimed: "No, Luis is alive." After several weeks of scouring telephone books, Caro found



Salas in the Houston suburbs, where he was living in a mobile home in the backyard of his daughter's house. The author knocked on the door. Caro recalls: "It was just like he was expecting me."

Caro was greeted by an eighty-four-year-old man, frail and withered, who bore no resemblance to the thug he had read about in old newspaper clippings. "Mr. Salas, my name is Robert Caro. I'm doing a book on Lyndon Johnson." "Oh," Salas replied, "then you want to know about Box 13." They sat on a couch in the trailer. Salas's ailing wife languished in an adjacent room, and Caro has never forgotten the old man's tenderness toward her. With regard to the 1948 election, Salas announced: "I have written it all down," at which point he produced a battered, typed and handwritten manuscript that revealed, in striking detail, the machinations surrounding Box 13. The two men went to a stationery store and made a Xerox copy. Caro thanked him. "Everyone is dead except me, Robert," Salas remarked. "And I'm not going to live long. But Box 13 is history. No one can erase that."

By obtaining the firsthand recollections of the man who actually stole the crucial votes in the 1948 Texas Senate

race — and thereby set Lyndon Johnson on the road to the presidency — Caro achieved a stunning journalistic feat. For years, Johnson's partisans had worked to create an obfuscatory haze around LBJ's chicanery in that election; but the Salas manuscript is the closest thing we have to a smoking gun.

It was vintage Caro. Beginning at *Newsday* in the 1960s, Caro has forged a reputation as an indefatigable muckraker, a man whose tenacious research and in-depth reporting have enabled him to produce books that are acclaimed by his peers and celebrated by his readers, books that leap to the top of the best-seller lists. His first book, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and continues to sell briskly a quarter century after its publication. Since then, Caro has dedicated himself to a massive biographical project on LBJ, a project dubbed *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. The first book in the series, *The Path to Power* (1982), covered LBJ's life until 1941. *Means of Ascent* (1990) tracked Johnson from 1941 to 1948. The third volume, *Master of the Senate*, has just been published, at nearly twelve hundred pages.

In some influential journalistic quarters, Caro's infallibility is simply assumed. In a recent *New York Times* article concerning the plagiarism controversy swirling around the historians Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin, the publishing columnist Martin Arnold wrote: "As for today's popular historians, no one would waste a moment checking Robert A. Caro, who

*Even after 2,600 pages, LBJ remains elusive*

## The praise for Caro is not unanimous; his work is controversial and contested

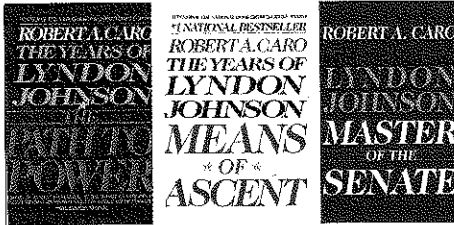
invests years in researching and writing each of his books.”

Yet the praise for Caro is not unanimous; his work is controversial and contested. The sides are clearly drawn. Firmly in Caro's corner are two of the most powerful institutions in American literary life: Alfred A. Knopf, his publisher, which is promoting *Master of the Senate* as “the most celebrated political biography of our era,” and *The New Yorker*, which recently ran two long excerpts from *Master of the Senate*.

But a formidable array of critics have challenged Caro's portrait of LBJ. *Means of Ascent*, which deals almost entirely with the 1948 election, was engulfed by criticism when it was published in 1990. “By tilting the tables to make crystal-clear the personal abhorrence he has come to feel for his subject,” David Broder wrote, “[Caro] strains credulity.” “Though Caro likes to present himself as a simple fact collector on a giant scale,” Garry Wills thundered, “he is actually a mythmaker, and what he gives us in this book is a nightmarishly inverted fairy tale.”

Now Caro faces a dual challenge: to please both his critics and his publisher, Knopf, which is printing 200,000 copies of a book about Lyndon Johnson's twelve-year tenure in the U.S. Senate.

“**Y**ou're really happy to be done,” Caro remarks with a chuckle one recent afternoon. His desk is nearly empty, except for some white legal pads, the galleys for *Master of the Senate*, and a Smith Corona Electra 210, the model on which he composed *The Power Broker*. (He bought seventeen Electra 210s when the company quit making them decades ago.) The typewriter looks small and vulnerable on his massive desk. Caro's relief is reflected in his attire. Normally he arrives at his Fifty-Seventh Street office dressed in a jacket and tie, but today, his book finished, he is wearing a dark blue sweater, a light blue shirt, and gray trousers. With his preppy appearance and tortoise-shell



glasses, he looks like the Princeton man that he is. The phone hums. The caller is Walter Isaacson, chairman and CEO of CNN News Group, expressing his enthusiasm for the *New Yorker's* second excerpt from *Master of the Senate*, which just hit the streets.

“I've never been interested in writing a book just to show the life of a famous man,” Caro explains. “Each book is about something else. It's the life of Lyndon Johnson that's holding it together, but the books are really about political power.” *Master of the Senate* took some nine years to write. Caro has been working on Johnson for a quarter-century, and he still hasn't arrived at Johnson's presidency: the new book ends in 1961.

To immerse himself in the Senate, Caro moved to Washington, where he sat in the Senate Gallery (for which he received a special pass); he haunted the cloakrooms; and he kibitzed with Senate staff. Caro also conducted a thousand interviews, perused (along with his wife) nearly three hundred oral history transcripts, and ran his eyes over many hundreds of thousands of documents. It was a herculean effort, and Senate staffers were impressed by it. “I don't think anybody has tried to grapple with the institution, as much as Caro has, in half a century,” says Donald Ritchie of the Senate Historical Office.

Capturing other worlds is an endeavor to which Caro has dedicated his life. He spends much of his time on the road, plundering archives and conducting interviews all over the country, but much of his work, and all of the writing, is done here — on the twelfth floor of the Fisk Building in Manhattan. The building itself, a warren of suites filled with dentists, literary agents, and small-business peo-

ple, imparts a shabby elegance. Caro's immaculate office is twenty-two feet by twenty-two feet. One wall is filled with bookshelves and crammed file cabinets; another wall contains a massive cork board, which he plasters with detailed outlines of his chapters. There is a couch, on which he sometimes naps.

This is the office of a man who takes himself, and his work, seriously. It's a monastic, claustrophobic space. There are no sources of music, no pieces of art. There are no photographs, except for a single image of the U.S. Senate chamber, emptied of its occupants, which hangs on the bulletin board. Only the big window provides relief. The austerity of the room is deliberate: “It's too hard to write,” Caro says wearily. “It's too easy not to write. If you could do anything else, you'd be doing it.” But write he does. Caro keeps track of his daily word count on a calendar. “Hemingway wrote the word count every day,” Caro avers. “So do I.” He also keeps a note attached to his desk lamp, a stark reminder of his priorities: “When you're at this desk,” the note reads, “the only thing that matters is what is on the page.”

In 1958, Caro was a restless young reporter for the *New Brunswick Daily Home News* in New Jersey, the first byproduct of his tenure as managing editor of the *Daily Princetonian*. In an effort to escape New Brunswick, he sent his résumé to a variety of newspapers. Only one answered his call. *Newsday*, in the early 1960s, was not the first-class paper we know today; it was a smallish daily in Garden City, Long Island. But the paper had a civic-minded, idealistic publisher, Alicia Patterson, who fostered investigative reporting.

Not everyone there was encouraged by Caro's hiring. In his authorized history of *Newsday*, Robert Keeler noted that managing editor Alan Hathway “preferred street-wise reporters to eager college boys, and he responded to the hiring of Caro with a grumble.”

Shortly after Caro began, an editor dispatched him to a railroad crossing, just

east of the office, to report on a near-accident. "He was so raw," Keeler wrote, "that he drove to the west instead, and didn't realize it until he reached Queens." But Caro would soon demonstrate a gift for both roads and archives. One day he was sent to examine some Federal Aviation Administration documents at what is now the John F. Kennedy airport.

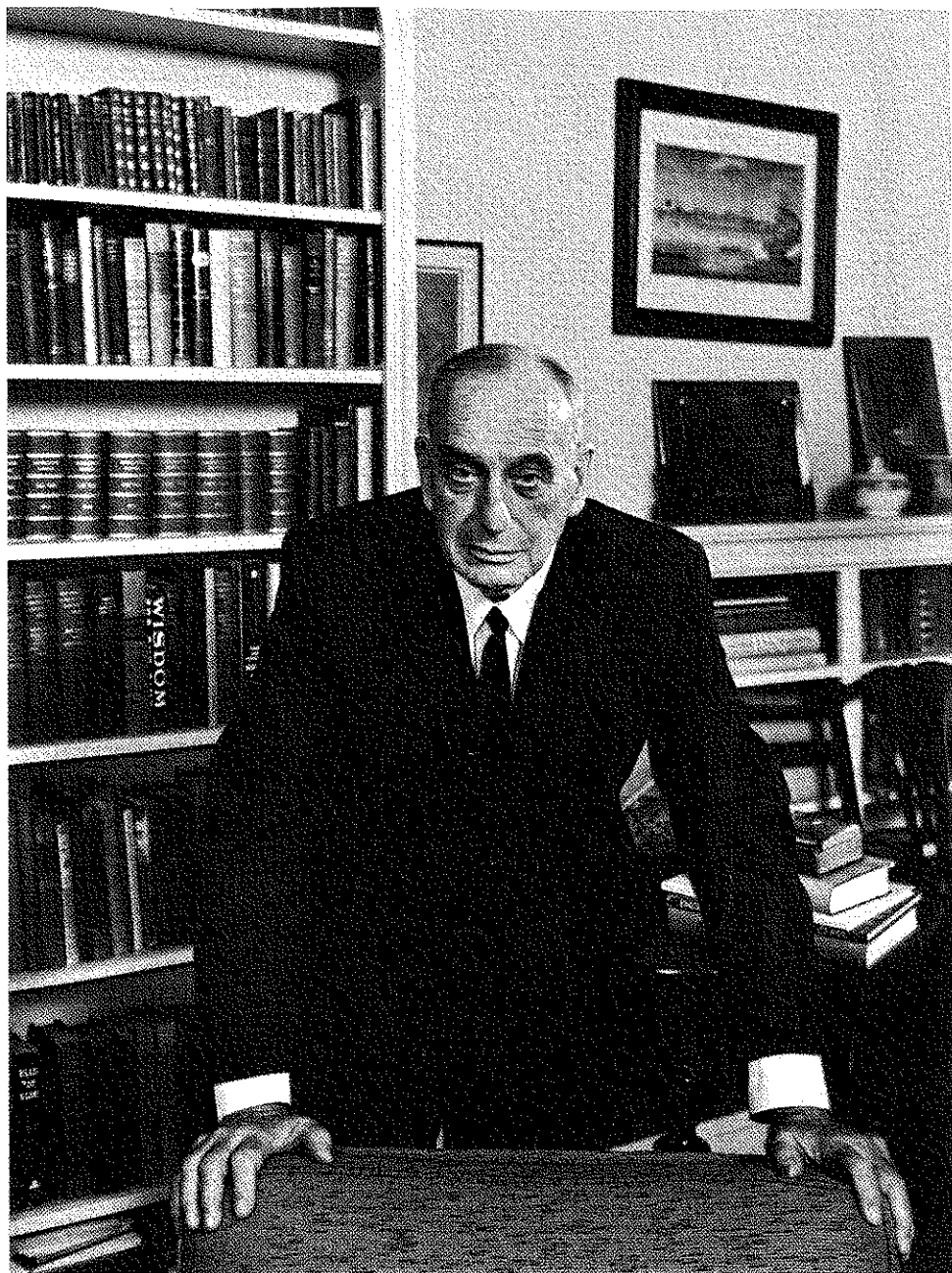
Shortly thereafter, Caro was summoned to Hathway's office, where he expected to be discharged. In Keeler's account, the crusty old editor proclaimed: "I didn't know someone from Princeton could do digging like this. From now on, you do investigative work."

While at *Newsday*, Caro developed an interest in New York State Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, who was both ubiquitous and elusive in the public mind. During a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard in 1966, Caro decided to undertake a full-length biography of Moses — even though Moses's p.r. man told him at the start that he would have no access to Moses, or to his colleagues and friends. Caro resigned from *Newsday*, and went ahead and did the research anyway on a paltry advance from his publisher. Still, the *Newsday* years were crucial to Caro's development as a writer. "His time as a journalist has helped make him a better historian," says Pete Hamill, "because he knows how to make the writing vivid, while simultaneously telling a story." Adds Hamill: "Caro doesn't bother with the academic babble; it's as if in his head there's some old guy from the copy desk looking down at him, and saying: 'Uh, Bob, what does this bullshit mean?'"

In May 1967, Moses, impressed by Caro's tenacity, agreed at last to see him. Caro drove to Moses's home on the south shore of Long Island, and found him sitting in front of a huge picture window that framed one of many bridges he himself had built. "So," Moses said with a wide grin, "you're the young fellow who thinks he's going to write a book about me."

Published in 1974, *The Power Broker* traced Moses's journey from idealistic reformer to rapacious autocrat. In fifty chapters that totaled more than twelve hundred pages, Caro showed his readers the many achievements of Robert Moses, but also

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize  
**THE POWER BROKER**  
 Robert Moses and the Fall of New York



ARNOLD NEWMAN/GETTY IMAGES

## THE FIRST TARGET: Caro's book about Robert Moses (above) stands in the tradition of Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens, and Ida Tarbell

the dark side of his record. In building his expressways, for instance, Moses evicted 250,000 people, a process that, in Caro's vivid description, destroyed entire neighborhoods and left deep scars on those who were uprooted. Some of the finest pages in *The Power Broker* contain

the firsthand reminiscences of ordinary people crushed by Moses's ambition. *The Power Broker* contained sprightly vignettes of numerous individuals, but Caro managed to achieve something even more difficult: he took matters like bond issues, municipal legislation, machine

*'It's the life of Lyndon Johnson that's holding it together,  
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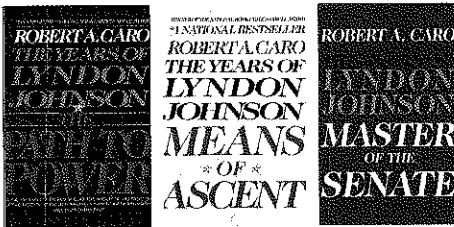
politics, and highway construction, and brought them vividly to life.

For a work that was published in 1974, *The Power Broker* is very much alive. It has been used in hundreds of colleges, and Caro's younger colleagues speak of it with awe. Michael Tomasky, political columnist for *New York* magazine, considers it "a huge journalistic landmark and model." "Each chapter was like a short story," recalls Wayne Barrett, a reporter and editor for *The Village Voice*. With *The Power Broker*, which has sold 200,000 copies, Caro did the hardest thing a writer can do: he produced a book that endures, a book that stands in the tradition of Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens, and Ida Tarbell.

**A** striking feature of *The Power Broker*, which resulted from 522 interviews, was the staggering amount of research that went into it, a fact that is true for all of Caro's books, including *Master of the Senate*. If the books are remarkable in that respect, it is largely because Caro has a secret weapon — his wife, Ina Caro, who works as his full-time researcher. All of his books are dedicated to her, and the inscription for *The Path to Power* contained an additional line from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "More is thy due than more than all can pay."

"Bob is really quite incredible," Ina Caro said one recent afternoon in their spacious, immaculate apartment overlooking Central Park. A handsome woman in her sixties, with short dark hair, she is witty and imperious, and more articulate than her husband. Reflecting on the way in which Caro has fused scholarship and investigative reporting in his books, she affirms: "He combines them both beautifully, which is really the reason it takes so long." How long would it take without her? "It would take an awful lot longer," she replies, a trace of satisfaction in her voice.

From the start, she was his anchor. Caro's advance for *The Power Broker* was



minuscule, so while he worked on the book, she got a job as a substitute teacher to support the family. (They have a grown son, who graduated from Princeton and is now a lawyer.) A historian in her own right — she has a graduate degree in medieval history — she performed thousands of hours of research on *The Power Broker*, and then typed the two-thousand-page manuscript — twice. But the full range of her talents would not become fully apparent until she and Caro moved to the Texas Hill country in the late 1970s to research the boyhood of Lyndon Johnson; they stayed for three years.

As a young congressman in the 1930s, Johnson harnessed the machinery of the New Deal to bring electrification to his district in central Texas, one of the poorest, most backward regions in the state; it was LBJ's greatest achievement as a congressman. Caro wanted to know what electricity really meant to the impoverished residents of the Hill Country — especially the beleaguered women — so he sent his wife to interview them. "The women there didn't want to talk to Bob," recalls Ina Caro. "He's a New York male. They were uncomfortable with him. They were more comfortable with me." The fruit of her labor resulted in *The Path to Power's* finest chapter, "The Sad Irons." In powerful detail, the chapter brought to life the crushing regimen faced by Hill Country women in the years before electrification — washing, ironing, canning, baking — a regimen that left them stooped and crippled and broken in their thirties, a regimen that called to mind the Middle Ages, or the lives of peasants in Brazil. A writer for *Texas Monthly* once said "The Sad Irons" may be the "most brilliant single passage of prose ever written about Texas."

Decades of collaboration have resulted in an ironclad routine for the Caros. She rises early and works on her own books from 5:00 A.M. to 9:00 A.M. She is the author of *The Road from the Past: Traveling through History in France* — published in 1996 and still in print — and is currently working on another historical travelogue about France. Beginning at 9:00, she works a full day for her husband. Ina Caro dislikes doing interviews, but is completely enamored of libraries and archives. For *Master of the Senate*, she spent protracted amounts of time, by herself, in presidential libraries and archives in Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Georgia. Then she typed the gargantuan first draft of *Master of the Senate*, since her husband refuses to write on a computer. (Ina Caro says she has always enjoyed the typing, and that running his words through her own typewriter taught her how to write books herself.)

What explains her dedication? First and foremost is her love of research, but there are other reasons, too. "What really fascinated me historically was how democracy came into being," she says. "The fragility of democracy fascinates me." Her husband's work touches directly on that theme.

"I felt that what Bob was doing was very important. He makes you understand how democracy works — really works — not how a political scientist says it's supposed to." And she is obviously enmeshed in her husband's idealism: "Bob became a reporter because he felt very strongly that the press was the fourth branch of government," she says. "He felt journalism was a crusade to protect democracy. That sounds corny today, but I think it was deeply felt."

The Caros live well. They have a house in East Hampton, their own table at the tony Café des Artistes, and they spend each summer in France, where he assists her, in ways large and small, with her own books. Still, over the years, she has endured feminist abuse — not from her friend Betty Friedan, who has always been supportive of her arrangement with her

husband, but from Susan Brownmiller, who once instructed Mrs. Caro to “do something socially useful.” Those words stung her. “I’ve always been a feminist,” Ina Caro explains, “so it really is very difficult, in some respects, to say that I’m working for my husband.” Did she mean to say working *with* her husband? “No,” she replies, a bit stiffly. “I’m working *for* . . .”

**T**he Caros used their time in Texas productively. *The Path to Power*, published in 1982, provided a microscopic account of Johnson’s youth in the barren Hill Country, one that began with a detailed reconstruction of his family’s history in the region. Caro interviewed hundreds of people who knew the Johnson family, and the result was an affecting portrait of a young man who grew up in squalor (“It was a *dirty* house,” one neighbor insisted), with idealistic parents ill-equipped to handle the brutal realities of life in the Hill Country. Caro’s detailed account of Johnson’s early adulthood — the hard labor he performed on a road gang, his pathetic courtships, his devious maneuvering as a student politician at a tiny state college — surpassed that of other Johnson biographers.

*The Path to Power* and *Means of Ascent* (1990) provided a startlingly intimate portrait of Johnson. In 1931 Johnson went to Washington as the secretary to a do-nothing congressman, and he soon hired two assistants, L.E. Jones and Gene Latimer, whom, according to Caro, he quickly enslaved:

The toilet in the office suite was set in a short corridor between its two rooms. Johnson would sit down on it, and, Latimer says, “there would come a call: ‘L.E.!’ L.E. would say, ‘Oh, God,’ because he hated this.” He would take his pad, and go to the bathroom. At first, he attempted to stand away from the door, but Johnson insisted he come right into the doorway, so he would be standing over him, and “L.E. would stand with his head and nose averted, and take dictation.”

The pleasure of *Path to Power* and *Means of Ascent* does not, by and large, come from the craftsmanship of the writing. As a prose stylist, Caro is not in the same class as Garry Wills, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Robert Hughes, or Marshall Frady. Instead, the enjoyment, and the instruction, come from learning about



## A SECRET WEAPON: Caro's wife, Ina, is his full-time researcher

the inner workings of Texas and Washington politics, and in the narrative energy Caro brings to his story — especially in *Means of Ascent*, which culminates in a thrilling account of Johnson’s theft of the 1948 election. Indeed, with his sprawling canvas, his laborious and frequently sentimental prose, his sympathy for the underdog, and his insatiable curiosity about the way things work, Caro closely resembles another ambitious newspaperman turned book writer — Theodore Dreiser, whose gritty, early twentieth century masterpieces, *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, have lost none of their power or relevance.

In making the transition from newspaper reporter to biographer, Caro, to a certain extent, left his sense of balance behind. Caro’s Johnson is a man full of “viciousness and cruelty,” a man who enjoys “breaking backs and keeping them broken,” a man with an urge “not just to defeat but to destroy.” In Johnson, Caro gives us a chilling portrait of an amoral politician, a man, in Caro’s words, devoid of “any consistent ideology or principle, in fact of any moral foundation whatsoever.” Caro would pay

a price for this attitude, since reviewers were quick to pick up on his personal dislike of Johnson. Writing in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1982, the Harvard historian David Herbert Donald called *The Path to Power* “fascinating, immensely long and highly readable,” but also found it “repetitive and fiercely polemical.”

The most perceptive review of *The Path to Power* appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, by a newspaperman who spent decades observing Lyndon Johnson — the late Murray Kempton. Kempton was untroubled by the book’s polemical zeal, since, in his view, Johnson “devoted his life to violating every civic ideal of our politics.” What bothered Kempton was not Caro’s lack of balance but his lack of subtlety and ambiguity: “Justice [Oliver Wendell] Holmes said once that Justice [John] Harlan had a mind like one of the larger vases; it was incapable of holding small objects. Caro seems to have a mind of the opposite variety: it is a vise acutely calculated for the particular and not quite large enough for the general.” Kempton’s prevailing sentiment — that



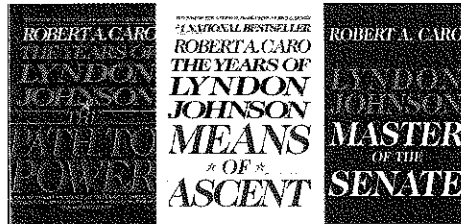
# Caro 'makes you understand how democracy works — really works'

Caro's Lyndon Johnson was too one-dimensional — would be echoed by other reviewers.

Published in 1990, *Means of Ascent* triggered an acrimonious debate. At the heart of it was Caro's portrait of LBJ's opponent in the 1948 Senate race — former Governor Coke Stevenson. The architecture of *Means of Ascent* rests on the assumption that Stevenson was a "legend," one of the "most beloved figures in the state's history," while Johnson was something close to a miscreant — a contrast starkly revealed in the book's index, where, as Sidney Blumenthal pointed out in *The New Republic*, the entries for Stevenson's "character" ("dignity," "fairness," "frugality," "honesty and integrity") stand in contrast to the entries for LBJ's ("bragging and exaggeration," "cruelty," "cynicism," "determination to win"). It's pretty clear that Caro fell in love with Coke Stevenson. (In *Path to Power*, Caro presented an idealized portrait of House Majority Leader Sam Rayburn. "Obviously, I fell in love with Sam Rayburn," he told *The Washington Post* in 1982.) And in *Master of the Senate*, Caro falls in love, to a certain extent, with Richard Russell, the powerful segregationist Senator from Georgia.

In a review in *The Washington Post*, Broder affirmed that Caro made "a persuasive case" that LBJ "stole the victory in the 1948 Senate race." "That would be enough," Broder continued, "to satisfy most investigative reporters or exposé-minded authors. But Caro wants to write a morality tale, an epic of democracy betrayed." Broder ridiculed Caro's assertion that Coke Stevenson was "perhaps the most respected public official in the history of Texas." "Really?" questioned Broder. "Texans to whom I have quoted that line are inclined to hoot."

Blumenthal's blistering cover story in *The New Republic* emphasized Stevenson's racial views. In his book, Caro mostly ignores Stevenson's views on race — except to say, in passing, that "Stevenson accepted all the southern stereotypes about [the black] race." But Blumenthal went back and reexamined the chilling details of a case in which a black man was



accused of raping a white woman and dragged out of his hospital bed and lynched, and noted that U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle urged Stevenson to bring the murderers to trial. Stevenson's written reply? "Certain members of the Negro race from time to time furnish the setting for mob violence by the outrageous crimes which they commit."

The avalanche of criticism continued. "Caro reserves information where it would partly exonerate," Garry Wills wrote in *The New York Review of Books*, "and produces it only when it further incriminates." And he lamented Caro's "unremittingly humorless" pages. "To write of Lyndon Johnson without a sense of humor," Wills averred, "is like setting a tone-deaf man to write about Mozart."

Caro responded to this critical onslaught with a disjointed, rambling essay in *The New York Times Book Review*, which Knopf, in an unusual move for a publisher, modified and inserted in the notes to the paperback edition of *Means of Ascent*. Caro admitted that Stevenson was a segregationist, but insisted that "civil rights was not an important issue in the campaign." "To have given significant emphasis to race in this book," Caro declared, "would have been to wrench the campaign out of its historical context, to have looked at a 1948 event through a lens ground in 1990."

That was a highly dubious assertion. In *The Power Broker*, Caro wrote at length about Moses's racist views toward blacks — not because Moses's racism was an issue in a political campaign (it wasn't) but because those views were essential to Moses's life and work. Caro was right to include Moses's racist views, and wrong to exclude Stevenson's. In the furious war of words that enveloped *Means of Ascent*, Caro's detractors were correct on almost every point, which in no way diminishes

the value of the book. *Means of Ascent*, flawed though it is, is a work every journalist should read, for it is a riveting, hour-by-hour account of how an election was stolen. The book has acquired new relevance since the Florida quagmire. Says Caro, dryly, "There's a lot more interest in the second volume since the Bush/Gore election."

Lyndon Johnson arrived in the Senate in 1949, became its majority leader in 1955, and left it in 1961. During that time, he took absolute control of the institution, and quickly showed himself to be a virtuoso parliamentarian and strategist. Caro, in the course of his research, became obsessed by the nature of senatorial power; by the concept of "legislative genius"; by the byzantine rules that prevail in the chamber; and by the way in which Johnson bent the institution to his will. None of this, Caro came to feel, had been properly analyzed by other writers and scholars, so he endeavored to nail down every aspect of LBJ's presence in the Senate, to the smallest detail. Caro expended much effort, for instance, in attempting to ascertain what precisely LBJ did with a tiny passageway (four square feet in size) between his office and the Senate cafeteria; in the end, after much investigation, the true purpose of the passageway eluded Caro. To verify that LBJ "towered" over his associates, Caro asked Senator Bill Bradley, who is just over six feet four, to stand at the majority leader's desk, so Caro could observe, with his own eyes, "precisely to what degree Johnson had in fact 'towered' as he stood there."

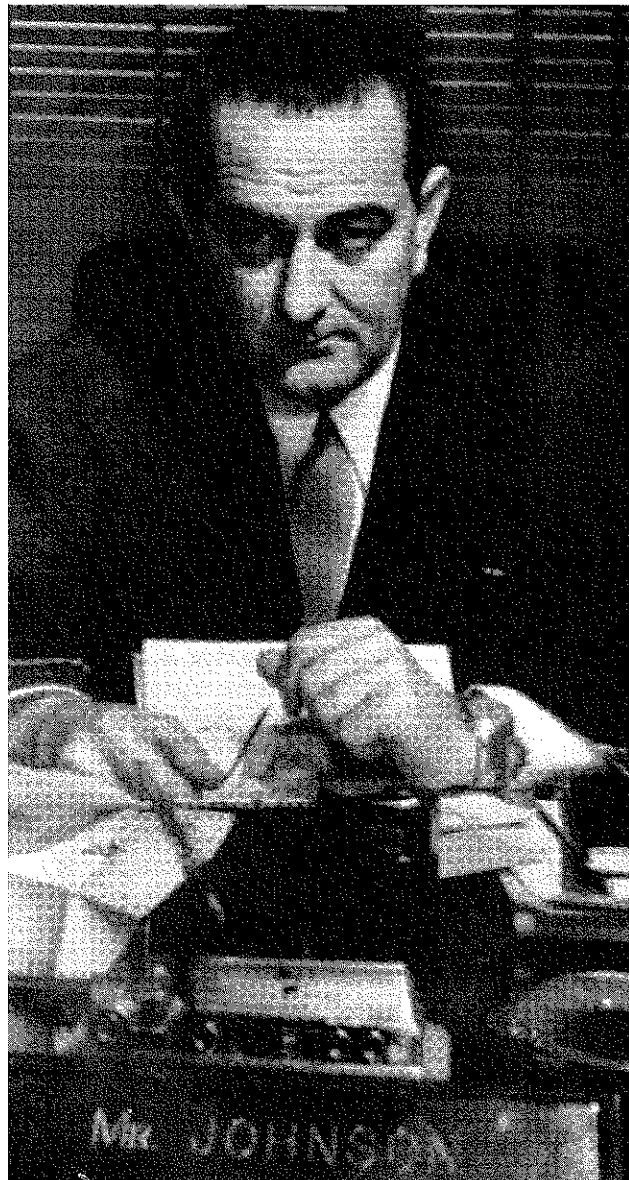
But Caro's obsession with the Senate, his endless quest for details and minutiae, may have led him into a biographical cul-de-sac. Perhaps, in the end, the institution defeated him, for *Master of the Senate* is Caro's least successful effort. His three previous books were fired by a powerful narrative engine. But the new book moves slowly, very slowly. In attempting to write the definitive work on LBJ in the Senate, Caro has written a massive account on the Senate itself, a book that often loses sight, amid the thicket of legislative maneuvering, of Johnson himself.

(Caro begins with a hundred-page history of the Senate, and Johnson doesn't make a full appearance until page 105.) To be sure, LBJ's Senate years are difficult to render: much of what he did there took place in private offices and restricted cloakrooms, and behind-the-scenes legislative wrangling is difficult to recreate on the page — facts that suggest the need for a much shorter book.

Johnson's tenure in the Senate, however, was not without drama. In 1949 he presided over the reconfirmation hearing for Leland Olds, head of the Federal Power Commission. Olds had been a red-hot radical in his youth in the 1920s, but had risen to become a respected, dutiful bureaucrat — a fact that didn't stop Johnson from destroying him with red-baiting tactics. Caro takes seventy pages of *Master of the Senate* to tell the story of Leland Olds, and while his account is the most comprehensive and detailed one to date, his very thoroughness drains the story of its suspense. Robert Sherrill's short book on Johnson, *The Accidental President* (1967), covers the Leland Olds episode in a crisp eleven pages, and with more drama and verve than Caro manages.

In considerable detail, *Master of the Senate* chronicles LBJ's relationship with Senator Richard Russell, which laid the groundwork for his own rise in the Senate; his brazen affair with the glamorous liberal Helen Gahagan Douglas; his deteriorating health and 1955 heart attack; and his dismal performance at the 1956 Democratic convention in Chicago, where his presidential hopes were temporarily dashed. In the new book, race is a paramount concern of Caro's, and *Master of the Senate* concludes with a protracted 180-page account of the political maneuvering that led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first legislation of its kind since Reconstruction.

Caro makes much of LBJ's political wizardry in getting the 1957 legislation passed, arguing that it was an important first step on civil rights. But it is here, with the 1957 Act — which was so weak that



## BLACK AND WHITE: Are the lines and shadows missing in Caro's LBJ?

some civil rights leaders opposed it — that Caro may face critical ire. Two most outstanding books on the civil rights movement — David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* (1986) and Taylor Branch's *Parting The Waters* (1988) — each contains less than four pages on the 1957 legislation, and critics are sure to question Caro's relentless focus on it. Thirty-five years ago, Sherrill himself, in *The Accidental President*, anticipated the argument Caro would make in 2002: "The legend persists," Sherrill wrote, "that Johnson worked a 'miracle' in 1957 in passing a

civil rights act; it will doubtless persist for many years."

Indeed, *Master of the Senate* offers a glimpse into how Caro will approach the subject of LBJ and civil rights in his next — and final — volume. Caro seems acutely sensitive to the charge that he is too zealously critical of LBJ, so *Master of the Senate* tries half-heartedly to emphasize Johnson's "compassion." But what really comes through, after twelve hundred pages, is Johnson's deceit and cold-blooded pragmatism; we will have to wait until the next volume for a more complete portrait of LBJ's transformation into a civil rights hero. What's clear, in any case, is that Caro's expertise in political machines, highway construction, and Texas politics does not automatically carry over to civil rights.

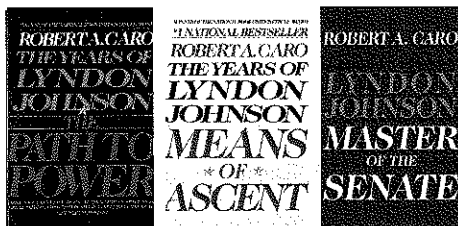
In *Means of Ascent*, Caro proclaimed that "it was Lyndon Johnson who led [black Americans] into voting booths, closed democracy's sacred curtain behind them . . . [and] . . . made them . . . a true part of American political life." That same sentiment — that LBJ "led" blacks into the voting booth — suffuses *Master of the Senate*. Caro's critics will certainly note that it was actually the other way around — that decades of civil rights agitation forced the political class to yield on black enfranchisement. Shrewd observers understood this at the time. In the mid-1960s, after LBJ delivered a major speech on civil rights, Murray Kempton recalled, in the *New York Post*, the heroic efforts of various civil rights activists, and noted, in a passage not cited by Caro: "We have had a few presidents who bent down to be kind to these people. But last night for the first time we had a president who looked up and saluted them. May God reward them for what they have done to make him what he was last night and us what we may be tomorrow."

Robert Caro has now composed twenty-six-hundred pages on Lyndon Johnson,

## To write the final volume, the Caros will move to Vietnam

which makes it possible to draw certain conclusions about the colossal project to which he has dedicated twenty-five years of his life. In many respects the books are remarkable, and where they are best is on the concrete, material reality of Johnson's life: the terrain he sprang from; the friends he betrayed; the furious political campaigns he ran; the dams and electricity lines he helped to get built; the elections he stole; the political machine he forged; the combat service he evaded; the fortune he accumulated in office; the powerful older men he cultivated; the Senate rules he mastered. These are not small achievements for a biographer, and they culminate in Caro's damning account, in all three books, of LBJ's close association with Texas-based oil, gas, and construction interests — which provided, from day one, the money on which his political career was built and sustained. "One of the concerns of my work," Caro once wrote, "is the use of economic power to create political power." Few have documented it better than Caro has.

Yet, in spite of all this, something is missing from Caro's portrait of Lyndon Johnson. In a brilliant review of *Means of Ascent* in *The New York Times Book Review*, Ronald Steel, author of the prize-winning *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (1980), noted that Caro's emphasis on how power is used — to build dams, win elections — is "masterly," not least because it "contributes to the moral energy of his books." But Steel described the limits of Caro's brand of muckraking — it "washes away lines and shadows. There is not much complexity in this Johnson," Steel determined, "no moments of self doubt or remorse, only scheming, lying, and a cynicism that had no discernible limits." A comparison with other recent biographies, like Marshall Frady's extraordinary *Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson* (1996), helps to illuminate Caro's shortcomings. The comparison between Jesse Jackson and Lyndon Johnson is not academic or gratuitous; people who knew both men, like the journalist Roger Wilkins, were struck by how similar they were, both in background



and temperament. Frady spent years with Jackson, and he provides a dizzying, Faulknerian portrait of his subject — his fears, his cruelty, his self-doubt, his vanity, his courage.

Frady — who has worked at *Newsweek* and ABC News, and written biographies of George Wallace, Billy Graham, and, most recently, Martin Luther King Jr. — insisted that there is something unknowable about Jackson's inner core. "One is presented," Frady wrote, "with a personality of such deeply contrary properties that he might almost best be described in terms of quantum physics." In the end, after observing Jackson tour a ramshackle housing project in Watts, where he received an ecstatic reception, Frady concluded that Jackson "operates in the interior regions of the heart." The biographer, too, must navigate those interior regions; but Caro prefers the archives. What's clear is that Frady's novelistic sense of character enables him to see more — and delve deeper — into his subject. Jesse Jackson comes alive in Frady's pages in a way that Lyndon Johnson does not in Caro's.

No one would doubt that Caro has written the biography of Robert Moses, but not everyone agrees that he is writing the definitive work on LBJ. Some reviewers have expressed a preference for Robert Dallek's two-volume history, *Lone Star Rising* and *Flawed Giant*. "Caro seeks understanding through simplification," the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David M. Kennedy wrote in *The Atlantic* in 1991, "with the result that his account, especially in *Means of Ascent*, is in the end as one-dimensional as the lone and level Texas llano. Dallek renders his subject with much more chiaroscuro." Caro met Dallek once, at the Johnson Library in Austin, where, according to *The New York Times*, Caro remarked to him: "Who are you?" ("He knew exactly who I was," Dallek told the *Times*.) In any

case, Caro has contempt for Dallek. A few weeks ago, over lunch at the Café des Artistes, Caro remarked, with steel in his voice: "Look at how many interviews Dallek did. In fact, I'd like to ask you to do that." (Dallek, a Boston University historian, relied mostly on oral histories instead of personal interviews. "I'm not a journalist," he explained recently.)

For the next and final volume, Caro and his wife plan to move to Vietnam; he wants to know precisely what it felt like, in the 1960s, for a Vietnamese peasant to be bombed by an American B-52. Ina Caro, for her part, is rather ambivalent about going to Vietnam, but she says she will use the time to write a travel book about that country. Yet *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* is not the only project Caro is working on. For thirty years he's been writing a novel, tentatively titled "Powers of the Press"; Knopf purchased the book in the 1970s, but it remains on Caro's desk. All he will say is that it's "basically about a young reporter."

It's unlikely that Caro will finish his novel in the near future. His commitment to LBJ towers over everything else. Still, when asked why he chose Johnson in the first place — as opposed to Eisenhower or Kennedy or Nixon — Caro is surprisingly vague, and one can't escape the sense, in pondering his energetic pursuit of four-foot passageways, that his interest in the minutiae of LBJ's career has led him astray. In any case, Caro's challenge for the next volume is clear: to refocus his energy, and produce a book that, in recreating LBJ's most crucial years — the years of civil rights and the Vietnam war — has the drama and panache of *The Power Broker* and *Means of Ascent*, and a portrait of Johnson in his full complexity, lines and shadows intact. It's a challenge, one suspects, that this industrious and immensely gifted writer will relish. In his heart of hearts, Caro knows that in the end, the expeditions to France don't matter; the meals at Café des Artistes don't matter; the prizes don't matter. The only thing that matters, for him, is what is on the page. ■

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