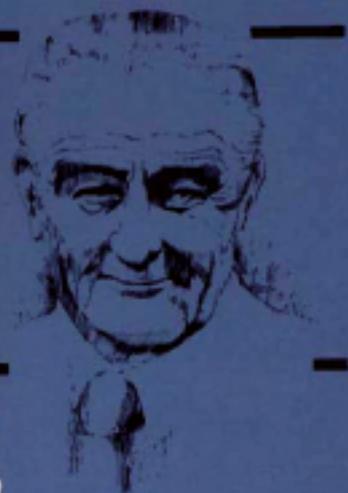


THE

**LBJ**



THE  
NATION  
SELDOM  
SAW

BY ROBERT L. HARDESTY

# The LBJ the Nation Seldom Saw

by

Robert L. Hardesty

President

Southwest Texas State University

This publication was prepared to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the birthdate of Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th president of the United States and Distinguished Alumnus of Southwest Texas State University. The author is Robert L. Hardesty, president of Southwest Texas State University and former aide to President Johnson.

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## The LBJ the Nation Seldom Saw

**O**n the night of September 22, 1966, a group of 150 non-incumbent Democratic candidates for Congress sat in rows of straight-back chairs in the State Dining Room of the White House and waited for the military aide to announce, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States."

These men and women were in town for a Democratic National Committee campaign workshop. They had been attending briefings all day, and this was to be the capstone of their visit.

When the announcement came, they stood, and in strode the President, his long legs propelling him across the room toward the podium, with an air of urgency. Wherever Lyndon Johnson went, he was in a hurry to get there.

But when he began to speak, it was slowly and quietly. You had to strain to hear him. He sounded tired.

As he warmed to his subject, he began to come alive—and so did his audience. He was talking about the Republican estimates of how many Congressional seats they expected to pick up in the November election—and he observed that the newspaper columnists were echoing the GOP predictions.

"Remember most of them are Republican columnists," he said, "and most of them are Republican papers. They inherit them from one generation to another, and along with it they inherit that philosophy."

The audience laughed and broke into applause. They were leaning forward, now, to catch every word he spoke. They were smiling and nodding.

From then until the end of the speech, 45 minutes later, those candidates were a captive audience. They were caught up in a whirlwind of rhetoric and emotions that most of them had seldom experienced. One minute they were roaring with laughter. The next minute they were sitting in a chilled hush, some with tears in their eyes. The next minute they were on their feet, cheering.

Lyndon Johnson was in total control. He had a few pages of notes in front of him, but he seldom referred to them. He was ad-libbing all the way and it was a vintage LBJ performance. He was presidential; he was partisan; he was hilarious; he was compassionate; he was outrageous; he was reflective.

Above all, he was having fun with the Republican Party.

He talked about those politicians who were always against everything new: "We used to have folks like that around the store in Johnson City," he said. "We called them dispeptics. When they put the railroad through town for the first time, one old man stood there and looked at it and said, 'They'll never get the damn thing started.' The girl came up with a great wine bottle and hit it across the snoot of the locomotive and it started going out about 15 or 20 miles an hour. And they went up to him and said, 'What do you think now, Uncle Ezra?' And he said, 'They'll never get the damn thing stopped.' "

He talked about the difference between Republicans and Democrats: "We're *for* something, and they are against everything. Mr. Rayburn was asked one time, 'What do you think—after 50 years—is the primary difference between the Republican and Democratic parties? Is it the tariff?'

" 'No.'

" 'Well, what *is* the difference?'

"Mr. Rayburn replied, 'I'll tell you the easiest and best explanation—one that I have observed, and I came here during Woodrow Wilson's administration. *They* hate all of *our* Presidents.'

"He said, 'I didn't hate Harding. I felt sorry for him, but I didn't hate him.' He said, 'I didn't hate Coolidge. I thought he was totally inadequate to the responsibility, but I used to go down and eat scrambled eggs and just watch him. He never *said* anything. You couldn't tell what he thought of anything.'

"He said, 'I didn't get angry with Hoover. Everything in the country folded up and we had bread lines all over the country and everybody in the Southwest was chasing rabbits in order to eat. But I didn't hate him. We tried to help him. But look what they did to Roosevelt when *he* came in. They were after his wife. They were after his daughter. And they finally got down after his dog.' "

And LBJ pointed toward the South Lawn where his beagles were kept and said: "And I've got three of them out there to jump on if they want to."

He talked about the difference between constructive action and ob-



*Lyndon Johnson and Senator Everett Dirksen. The President's persuasive powers were at their best in personal communication.*

structive action: "Any jackass can kick a barn down. But it takes a carpenter to build one."

He talked about inflation: "Prices have gone up 10% in the last six years. Wages have gone up 40%. So we've got 40 cents to pay for 10 cents and have 30 cents left—but we're mad as hell about it.

"Now I don't want to see these prices go up," he said. "I don't like to see bread and milk, that mothers have got to buy, go up—and I'm doing everything that one man can do to keep them from going up. . . . But I'm going to try my best not to do what Mr. Hoover did about it. I'm going to try my best not to make a fellow pay for it with his job. . . . I'd rather have a little money in my pocket, and be able to pay a little more for bread, than to have no money in my pocket—and no job—and still have to eat bread, too."

He talked about his domestic agenda in the most fundamental of terms—not as an intellectual commitment to legislation and programs, but as a response to his deeply felt, emotional commitment to the needs of the people. "P-E-E-P-U-L," he said. "Not the interests: P-E-E-P-L-E. Not for the corporations, but for the folks."

He spoke of the basic goals of those programs—"to put food in peoples' stomachs and clothes on their backs . . . all the education their minds can take . . . and all the health their bodies can get from modern knowledge. Food for your stomach, clothes for your back, education and training and skill for your mind, and health for your body."

He paused and looked squarely into the faces of his audience and asked: "Is anything more fundamental?"

There wasn't a sound in the room.

He individualized just about everything he did. When he spoke of the new minimum wage bill that he was scheduled to sign the next day—a bill which would bring eight million more people under its coverage—he said: "It doesn't take care of Rockefellers or DuPonts or Melons; it takes care of eight million (people)—eight million of them are going to be brought under the coverage. That means the little charwoman who scrubs the floor of that motel. That means the little waitress that's got three kids at home, that goes in there in the morning before daylight to be ready to serve coffee when they drop in at six o'clock—and usually stays there until dark."

He talked about the presidency as a kind of national lightning rod: "Someone asked me the other day—a reporter—do I consider myself a President in trouble. And they're sadistic," he said. "They kind of hoped I was. And I said, 'Well, what do you think a President's for?'"

He talked about all the commotion that just a handful of critics can make: He said that Huey Long used to refer to the old farmer down in Louisiana who couldn't sleep at night because of the noise the frogs were making. "He finally got mad and went down there and took his disc plow and just cut a hole in that dirt tank and emptied all the water out of it so he could get rid of those frogs."

The President's voice went down almost to a whisper and he said, "And he found two." He paused to let it sink in. "Been keeping him awake all night."

Some of those vocal critics were talking about LBJ's "failure to have rapport with intellectuals." Well, he said, he had had a "bad day yesterday." He had appointed one Rhodes Scholar and three Phi Beta Kappas. The audience broke up and he couldn't help milking it for one more laugh: "That may be one thing wrong with government," he added.

He talked about the ever-present critics in his own party: "A President," he said, "not only has to fight domestic problems, and foreign problems, and the weather, and the insects and the Viet Nams, but he always has a goodly portion of his own folks who are picking at him and clipping at him from behind and sideswiping him and complaining and getting upset and nervous—and he has to carry them on his back, too.

"Remember this," he said: "Anybody who criticizes the President always get attention. . . . The easiest thing for them to do to get into the newspapers is to say that something is wrong with their own President. I imagine you can get in the papers this afternoon," he told his audience. "Just go out and call a press conference and denounce your wife and say you caught her trying to poison your children. That will get you a good headline. . . ."

He brought the audience to its feet when he said, "So I'm doing the

best I can and it's almost like the old man in my county that said he felt like a jackass in a hail storm: He just has to hunker up and take it."

When he finished, he brought them to their feet again, and the ovation would have gone on for three minutes or more if he hadn't stopped it.

Afterward, one of the candidates said to me, "I'm totally drained. He took us through the entire range of emotions. I've never witnessed a performance like that in my entire life. Why doesn't he do it more often?"

The answer was, he did—regularly. In fact, to those of us who worked in the White House, a Johnson *tour de force* like that was almost a daily occurrence. On those occasions, Lyndon Johnson was one of the funniest, most spellbinding, most outrageous, most captivating, most effective and most persuasive speakers ever to occupy the Presidency. He once prompted the late Leon Jaworski to remark, ". . . this man makes the greatest, most persuasive talk to a small group of anyone I have ever known. . . . I have never heard his equal."

It became almost a cliché to say that LBJ was "bigger than life." But it wasn't a cliché to thousands of people who came under his spell: the people he wanted to convert, or inspire or thank. To them, he was, indeed, a giant.

Johnson's favorite biblical passage was from Isaiah: "Come now, let us reason together." He practiced it, daily.

He sold Civil Rights to Southerners, wage restraint to union leaders, price responsibility to corporation presidents, Medicare to doctors, safety requirements to auto moguls and the blessing of job training for the unemployed to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

They all left the White House a little dazed. Most of them left true believers—at least for the time being.

And the question was asked again and again: "Why doesn't he come across like that to the nation—in his major speeches and TV appearances and press conferences?"

We used to ask ourselves the same question. Why was it that one of the greatest story tellers and mimics of his age—and one of the most colorful politicians in history—came across to the American people as stiff, humorless and not particularly likeable?

Sometimes, out of frustration, we tended to overstate the case. After all, Lyndon Johnson did rise to great oratorical heights on a number of occasions.

Certainly his voting rights speech to a Joint Session of Congress in 1965—in the aftermath of the bloody Selma, Alabama, incident—was one of those occasions. Who, among the millions who saw him on television that night, can ever forget that dramatic, electrifying moment when, speaking of the urgent need to overcome the "crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice," he leaned forward toward the assembled senators

and representatives and said in a slow, clear, deliberate voice: "And . . . we . . . *shall* . . . overcome."

His somber, ringing "Let Us Continue" address to Congress—just five days after John F. Kennedy's assassination—had a profoundly healing effect on the nation and spurred a heretofore balky Congress into action on a number of fronts.

His first State of the Union Address, in which he declared war on poverty, made it clear that he was not going to settle for the *status quo*. He had decided to rip the glittering cellophane wrapper off of our society and force us to look at what lay underneath—poverty, injustice, illiteracy, sickness, hunger.

His vision of America in his 1965 Inaugural Address was eloquent and inspiring: "I do not believe that the Great Society is the ordered, changeless, and sterile battalion of the ants. It is the excitement of becoming—always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again, but always trying and always gaining."

There were others, many others.

But those were serious speeches, reflecting only a part of Lyndon Johnson—eloquent, yes; dramatic, yes; visionary, yes—but one-dimensional. They never revealed to the American people the humor, the passion, the compelling, persuasive power of the man—or the sheer energy that he exuded. Why couldn't he reveal *all* of himself? Why was one of the great one-on-one communicators of his age unable to become a *national* communicator?

Well, to begin with, LBJ had the obvious misfortune to succeed a most eloquent and articulate President. Following the measured cadences and the lilting New England tones of Kennedy, Johnson's flat, Southwestern twang came as a shock and a disappointment to millions of Americans. Harry Truman had suffered a similar fate. (That may seem hard to believe to those under-40 Truman worshippers who don't remember how "country" and unlettered Truman sounded after twelve years of the most eloquent President of them all—FDR. He was ridiculed. He was made the butt of jokes. He was scorned.)

Johnson fared somewhat better than Truman—but only somewhat.

When LBJ spoke, people did not stop to think that this was a very sophisticated man who had been at the heart of power for nearly 30 years . . . who had been a friend of presidents . . . who had dealt intimately with popes and prime ministers and kings . . . who had traveled the world . . . who had dined with publishers, novelists, industrialists, and actors . . . who had been the youngest and most effective Senate Majority Leader in history.

When he spoke, all the American people seemed to hear was his accent—and many of them wrote him off without even listening to what he had to say. One network television correspondent, who should have known better, once remarked scornfully: "Do you know who Lyndon



*President Johnson's speeches before Joint Sessions of Congress were often eloquent, dramatic and visionary.*

reminds me of? Colonel Harlan Sanders: finger lickin' good."

Somehow people didn't "hear" LBJ's accent when they were in his presence—when his personal charm and magnetism seemed to overpower everything else.

Another problem he had was that Americans, for the most part, weren't tuned in to his major objectives. It is one thing to respond to a President's call for new initiatives to help the poor and the dispossessed during times of economic crisis; it is something else entirely to respond to such a call in an era of unprecedented prosperity, as we had in the 1960's. The American people just didn't want to think about the poor and the minorities. They wanted to be left alone.

Part of the problem, I think, was of LBJ's own making. He had difficulty "being himself" with the national spotlight on him. He had a notion that he had to be "presidential"—whatever that might mean. Whatever it *did* mean, the unfortunate result was that he was stiff and formal and sermonizing on major occasions.

Then, too, he was stubborn. He refused to accept the notion that he had to change his "style" to get people to listen to him.

There were times when he seemed to be making a breakthrough in

style—only to pull back again. His famous 1967 press conference was a case in point. They put a lavalier microphone on his lapel for the first time—and suddenly he was free of the podium. He didn't have to stand there in front of the microphones as if his feet were set in cement. He began to pace and gesture. He relaxed. He became animated and human (and, ironically, very presidential). Everyone in the room, newsmen and aides alike, sensed that something unusual was happening. And evidently, so did millions of television viewers across the country. It was a Lyndon Johnson they had never seen before and they obviously liked what they saw. The telegrams and letters poured in for days, telling him to keep it up.

Just about every member of the White House staff thought that this was the breakthrough they had all been waiting for. That lavalier microphone gave the President the physical freedom to be himself.

He never wore a lavalier microphone at a press conference again. No one could persuade him to do so.

We were mystified. We sent memos to him. We sent friends of his to talk with him about it. Nothing did any good. Finally, someone asked him why he refused to use such a simple device when it clearly enhanced his performance; when it gave the country the opportunity to see him as he really was. He replied, "I'm not a goddamn actor."

But all of those handicaps aside, I believe there was one reason, above all others, why Lyndon Johnson found it difficult to communicate with the American people: He just wasn't a television President. He never got used to television. He never made it *his* medium.

That's ironic, too, since Lyndon Johnson was at the forefront of television history. He and Lady Bird Johnson were the founders of one of the early TV stations in Texas—and one of the most successful ones. He understood the power of the medium as well as anyone. He just couldn't convert its power to his own use.

He was too people-oriented. He *needed* people. He needed to touch people and interact with them. When he told a funny story, he needed to hear people laugh. When he talked about the plight of the poor or the sick or the elderly, he needed to see tears in people's eyes.

There had to be an electrical exchange between speaker and audience. Without that exchange, he never came fully alive. He was unable to personalize the camera, as FDR had personalized the microphone—to look into it as though he were looking into the eyes of his audience, to *speak* to it—and it alone. He spoke *at* it, instead. The damn thing was just too cold and impersonal.

He was like a great stage actor who never really feels at home in front of a camera—who can't seem to make the transition from Broadway to Hollywood.

His political career was a love affair with people—and it's pretty hard to carry on a love affair over the air waves.

Well, as Kurt Vonnegut would say, "So be it." It's history, now, and nothing will ever change it.

But then again, nothing will ever change the excitement and exhilaration of being around him during those presidential years; of listening to his stories . . . of hearing him exhort people to further sacrifices and greater effort . . . of weeping with him . . . of sharing his sense of commitment and mission.

There was frustration, too—lots of it. Being easy to work for was not one of Lyndon Johnson's most notable traits.

But neither was being dull one of his notable traits.

There is nothing in life that prepares a 33-year-old speech writer, fresh from the Post Office Department, for the experience of being around such a man. He just had to ride with it and sort out its meanings as he went along.

It started for me one August morning in 1965 with a call from Bill Moyers at the White House. Would I be interested in writing speeches for the President? Would I come over and discuss it?

John Gronouski, the Postmaster General, said in his gravelly voice, "Well, Hardesty, if they're going to steal my speech writer, at least you're going to arrive in style."

Where else does history record a presidential speech writer arriving for his first day of work in the Postmaster General's long, black chauffeured limousine?

The interview with Moyers went well—until the end. I would report for duty the next morning with my secretary and my files. I was being "detailed" to the White House from the Post Office Department (which meant, conveniently, that I would remain on the Post Office Department's budget.)

"Good luck," Moyers said. Then he added: "But I don't want you to feel too badly if it doesn't work out. President Johnson is difficult to write speeches for."

"What's he talking about?" I thought. "Of course it will work out. One speaker is the same as another."

Moyers must have been reading my thoughts. "You know," he said, "John Steinbeck tried writing speeches for the President during the 1964 campaign. It was a disaster."

My spirits plummeted. Steinbeck was a hero of mine. If Moyers had told me that when I first got there, I'd have gone right back to the Post Office Department.

But it was too late to back out.

They assigned me to the ornate Old Executive Office Building, adjacent to the White House. I found myself sharing a suite of offices with another speech writer, Will Sparks, who had just been "stolen" from the Secretary of Defense. We were the two new resident speech writers.

In due course, we were summoned to the Oval Office where we were introduced to the President. It was time for the famous “Johnson treatment.” We were told how important we were to him; how much he was counting on us. We were told what a privilege it was to serve the President—not Lyndon Johnson, individually, but the President of the United States. Did we know how many presidential assistants there had been since Washington’s time? Probably not more than 75 or 100. We were now among that exalted company. It was not just an honor, but also a responsibility. Don’t ever do anything that will reflect badly on the presidency.

“And remember those assistants of Roosevelt who had a ‘passion for anonymity,’” he said. “That’s what you all have got to have: a passion for anonymity. Speech writers especially. Keep out of the newspapers. People have a hard time learning that. They come here and do a good job—and then they spoil it all by getting their names in the papers. They never seem to get the picture.”

I didn’t have any trouble getting *that* picture. (In fact, I became one of the few public servants in modern history who regularly bought drinks for reporters to keep his name *out* of the newspapers.)

LBJ told us he wanted us to be around him as much as possible—at meetings and when he was speaking. “If you are going to write speeches for me,” he said, “you’ve got to get to know me. I want you to know how I say things and what’s on my mind. You’ve got to stay close to me.”

Was the “treatment” effective? *Was it effective?*

Try spending 30 uninterrupted minutes in the Oval Office with the Leader of the Free World while he tells you that, next to the Secretary of State, and his wife, you’re probably the most important person in Washington. If you discount 95% of it as hyperbole, you’re still left with some pretty heady stuff.

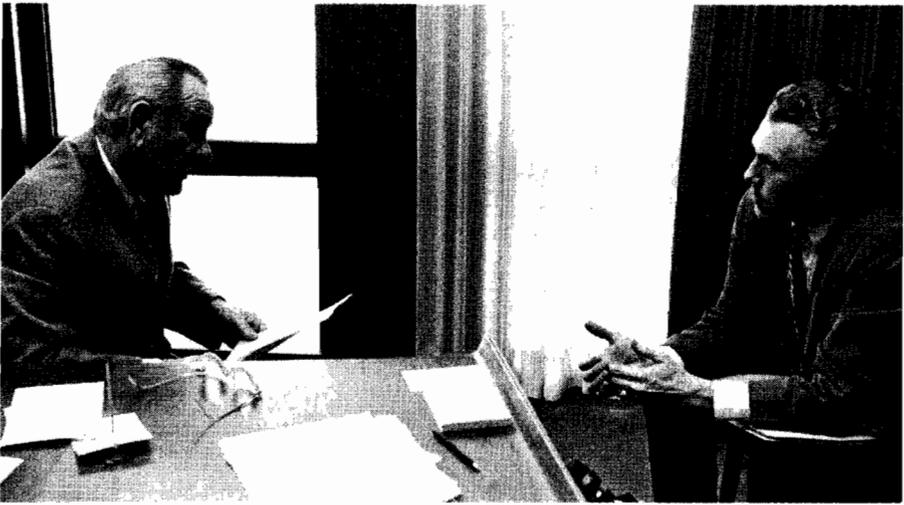
At the end of the interview, he pulled out two copies of William F. White’s biography of him—*The Professional*—and inscribed them both. In mine he wrote, “To Bob Hardesty, who does much for many, but mostly me. Lyndon B. Johnson.”

I may have been young, but I wasn’t naive. That was his subtle way of telling me that the Postmaster General may still be paying me my salary, but I was working for the President. I got that picture, too.

\* \* \*

We soon learned that LBJ had strong opinions about how a speech should be written. And brevity was a cardinal rule. For some reason, “four” seemed to be a magic number.

“Four-letter words,” he would say, “four-word sentences, and four-



*Speechwriter Robert Hardesty was given the “Johnson treatment” when he joined the President’s staff in 1965.*

sentence paragraphs. Keep it simple. You’ve got to write it so that the charwoman who cleans the building across the street can understand it.” (I’m not sure, but I think that was the same charwoman who was later to be brought under the new minimum wage bill.)

It was also a rule-of-thumb that if the President had difficulty pronouncing a word—or thought he did—that charwoman certainly wouldn’t know what it meant. His longtime executive secretary, Juanita Roberts, used to tell about the time back in LBJ’s Senate days when one of LBJ’s aides wrote a speech for him to deliver in Houston. He seemed happy with it when he left Washington, but the next day, after delivering it, he was on the phone in high dudgeon.

“That was the worst speech anyone ever wrote for me.”

The writer was mystified. “What was the matter with it, Senator?”

“Matter? You filled that speech with words I can’t pronounce.”

“Words like what, Senator?”

“Like ‘eons’. You know I can’t pronounce ‘eons,’” he said, pronouncing it perfectly. “Besides, I don’t even know what it means. Damn it, if you mean ‘ages,’ say ‘ages.’”

But the magic number “four” did not end with “four-sentence paragraphs”—unfortunately. Unless he were delivering a major address—away from the White House—the President wanted everything written for him limited to 400 words—and not a word more.

His reasons were sound. He was a busy man and didn’t want to waste his valuable time delivering a lot of empty rhetoric. And, as a superb editor, himself, he knew that if you really put your mind to it, you could say just about anything you had to say in 400 words.

"It's not easy," he would admit. "It takes discipline to write succinctly. (He used a lot of words like "succinctly." But you'd better not put one like that in a speech.) *Anybody* can write a long speech." Then he would tell us about the time Woodrow Wilson was asked how long it took him to write a speech. Wilson replied that it depended on how long the speech had to be. He said he could write a 60-minute speech in just a few hours, but it would take him a day or two to write a ten-minute speech.

That would be a *normal* ten-minute speech. Mr. Wilson did not reveal how long it would have taken him to write a ten-minute speech with four-letter words, four-word sentences, and four-sentence paragraphs.

You don't just *write* a speech like that. You chisel it. You carve it. And when you finish, you start cutting—and your most beautiful prose usually goes first.

The President was right, of course. Writing a 400-word speech forced you to organize your thoughts, and disciplined you to write sparingly and clearly. If you did it right, you ended up with a little gem.

But it wasn't natural. It went against a writer's training. Anyone who has ever written a college term paper knows you are supposed to *pad*, not *cut*. It's difficult enough, just putting a blank piece of paper into a typewriter. But to be limited to four-letter words, four-word sentences, four-sentence paragraphs, and 400 hundred words—that's cruel.

One Friday, after we had been at the White House for several grueling months, and had our first free weekend ahead of us, my colleague Will Sparks asked me what I was going to do with two whole days of free time. "I'm going to go home," I said, "and do nothing for 48 hours but think in long, convoluted sentences."

There was another problem. We were always working on such tight deadlines that we never had the luxury of spending a day or two, as Wilson had, to write a 10-minute speech. An hour or two was usually more like it.

So we cheated. We narrowed the margins, put more words on the pages, and pretended it was a 400-word speech. That didn't work for very long. The trouble with cheating is, it knows no limit. Pretty soon, 450 words gave way to 500 words . . . then to 550 words . . . then to 600. Lyndon Johnson understood that all too well. He didn't have a fixation about 400-word speeches as such. But he knew he had to draw the line somewhere. If he had just said, "Boys, keep them short," he'd have been handed a State of the Union Address for every occasion—writers being what they are.

One evening I turned in a speech for the President to give the next day that had to be 600 words, minimum. That's what did us in. The Old Man, becoming suspicious, actually counted the words. I've always had difficulty since then conjuring up the image of the most powerful man

in the world going through his night reading and counting the words of a speech.

But he did. And he put a stop to our “overruns.” From that day on, whenever a writer turned in a speech, he was required to put his name at the top, and under his name the actual word count. It was the writer’s way of “certifying” that the speech was, in truth, under 400 words.

It was disaster time and we appealed to our chief editor and protector Jack Valenti. He was (and is) a brilliant writer, a great editor and a kindred soul. He could take a pencil to the drabest sentence ever written, and with three or four swift strokes, make the words march and sing. (He also had a secret respect for long, convoluted sentences.)

“Jack, for God’s sake,” we pleaded, “we’ve got to have some flexibility. What happens if one of us has a 435-word speech and there is no more time to edit—if it has to be turned in right then? You *can’t* just chop off the last paragraph.”

Valenti stared off into space and thought. Then a smile played across his lips. “Fellows,” he said, “I know that the Old Man doesn’t really expect you to include ‘a’s,’ ‘and’s’ and ‘the’s’ as part of a word count. He doesn’t really think of them as words. So don’t count them.”

“That’s your official position?” we asked.

“That’s my official position.”

It was a small victory, but helpful.

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All of this is not to say that brevity, to Lyndon Johnson, was more important than content. On the contrary. He could not tolerate purely ceremonial speeches. A speech, no matter what the occasion, had to say something; it just had to say it in 400 words. If a speech didn’t say anything, it was a waste of LBJ’s time, a waste of the audience’s time, and a waste of the reporters’ time who were covering the event.

Above all, a speech had to have a news lead.

“Now there are three sure ways to get a news lead,” he told us—time and time again:

“Announce a new program.

“Make a prediction.

“Or set a goal.”

His preference was to announce a new program, although he would settle for a prediction or a goal if his writers forced him to . . . if they just let him down . . . if they couldn’t find a new program to announce anywhere in the entire federal establishment.

You wouldn’t think that the Chief Executive of the United States Government—and his writers—would have any trouble keeping up with all of the federal programs ready to be announced. But the trouble was, the President’s Cabinet officers were competing for news leads, too, and

most of them would hoard the juicy announcements for themselves. If the President was scheduled to speak to a group of senior citizens, for example, he would want to be able to announce the latest government program on behalf of the elderly.

But the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare might be speaking to the same group on the following day. It wouldn't be at all unusual for him to hold back the *big* announcement for himself—and give the crumbs to the President to announce.

The result was that a White House speech writer had to become an investigative reporter, calling around the mid-echelons of government, trying to get a clue of what was going on and then following up on that clue until he could confront the Secretary or Undersecretary with the fact that he knew that an announcement of a new program was pending. Once confronted, a cabinet officer could not refuse to give the President announcement rights. That would be insubordination. A little disloyalty was OK, but there were limits.

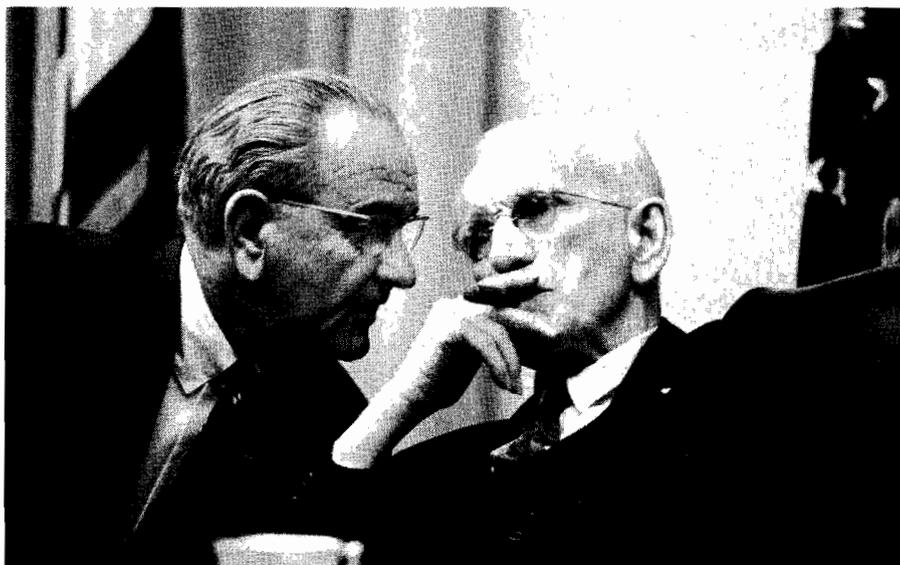
Sometimes the pressures of coming up with a news lead forced the speechwriters to develop programs of their own. I don't mean that we made them up. But there were occasions, in the course of his snooping around the departments and agencies, when a speechwriter came across the germ of an exciting new idea that hadn't yet been staffed and fully developed. He might send a memorandum to the President, asking him if he were interested in the idea and if he wanted it developed for an upcoming speech. If the President checked "yes" at the bottom of the memorandum—a *program was born*.

The trouble was, programs cost money—usually millions of dollars—and when they were developed for a speech, the Budget Director usually was the last person to find out about them. LBJ's Budget Director, Charles Schultze, used to complain: "You damned speech writers spend more money than all the rest of the Executive Branch put together." (An exaggeration, but not without a grain of truth.)

But we "damned speechwriters" weren't alone in doing violence to the budget. LBJ could develop some pretty far-reaching programs himself—when he was just winging it.

Once, in 1966, he decided to have a full-dress swearing-in ceremony for Robert LaFollette Bennet, whom he had just named to be the new Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Bennet would be the first full-blooded Indian to occupy that post in nearly a hundred years and LBJ wanted to get him started right. Indian leaders from all over the country were invited to be there.

He told Will Sparks and me to write a speech which would begin the process of "balancing history's ledger." He then gave us a little history lesson on how shabbily the government had treated the Indians over the years, with a string of broken treaties. "Even my hero, Andy Jackson, broke every treaty he ever made with them," he said.



*President Johnson and John W. McCormick, Speaker of the House of Representatives.*

Well, we were going to start making amends. He told us to start putting down some ideas on what the government could do to improve the lot of American-Indians—especially those living on reservations. “Find out what programs we have going on now—and let’s see what we can do to improve them.” He made it clear he wanted the complete cooperation of the entire Federal Establishment on this one. This was to be a government-wide effort.

Will and I spent nearly a week on the speech draft, talking to cabinet officers and program directors and gathering ideas and suggestions before putting a word on paper. We were quite pleased with the speech when we sent it in, but the President sent it right back. It was OK, he said, but he wanted more—more ideas, more programs.

We sent in the second draft the night before the ceremony.

The next morning, the East Room was filled—with American-Indian leaders, with cabinet officers, with members of Bennet’s family and his friends.

The President began by speaking of his great hopes for the new Commissioner—predicting that he would be one of the greatest Indian Commissioners the United States had ever known.

The audience was clearly pleased.

The Commissioner had a big job ahead of him. History had ignored the Indians, he said. “In 1966, the year that is known as the most prosperous year that the United States of America ever enjoyed, Indians on reservations this year have the lowest standard of living in the entire

United States. . . . On some reservations, large Indian families have annual incomes of less than \$2,000 per year. Indian family income today is less than one-quarter of the national average for the whole country."

The audience murmured and nodded—and then came to its feet when he declared, "Now that is something we ought to be concerned about."

Fired by the enthusiasm of the audience, he began ad-libbing, talking passionately about sub-standard housing, sub-standard incomes, sub-standard education and sub-standard health care.

The audience was cheering.

He looked over at the new Commissioner and said, "I want you to put on your hat and go back over there to the Bureau and begin work today on the most comprehensive program for the advancement of the Indians that the Government of the United States has ever considered. And I want it to be sound, realistic, progressive, adventuresome, and far-sighted. I want the Secretary of the Interior to support you," he said, pointing to Stuart Udall, "and let's write it into the laws of this land so we can remove the blush of shame that comes to our cheeks when we look at what we have done to the first Americans in this country."

The audience was cheering and applauding.

Will Sparks and I were standing at the back of the room, wondering how it was going to end, when Jim Duesenberry, of the Council of Economic Advisers, rushed over to us and said in a stage whisper, "Holy God, someone run over to the Budget Bureau and get Charlie Schultze. He's giving the country back to the Indians!"

**N**ews leads by goal-setting were usually safer—and easier on the national treasury—than programs, although obviously less dramatic.

But not always.

I remember well one night in 1966 when I was called from my dining room table at 9:00 p.m. to return to the White House to produce some last-minute remarks for the President to deliver the next morning when he accepted the prestigious Robert H. Goddard Space Trophy. He had originally planned just to accept the trophy with a thank-you and some picture-taking, but decided at the last minute to make a speech. So I found myself heading back to the office.

It had been a long day. I was tired. But I produced what I thought was a good ceremonial speech, sent it in for the President's morning reading about midnight, and went home for a few hours of sleep.

The next morning, I found the speech draft back on my desk with a cryptic note informing me that there wasn't a news lead within five miles of the damned thing.

I was still tired. I had several other major projects that had to be finished that morning. I was irritable. I said to myself, "Well, if he wants a news lead, by God, I'll give him one."

Toward the end of the speech, I had written a reaffirmation of his and President Kennedy's pledge to land an American on the surface of the moon in the 1960's. That had been our goal from the outset. But we had been careful never to say that we would get there ahead of the Russians.

I made some telephone calls to staff members at NASA and the Space Council.

Where did we stand? Were we ahead of the Soviets? Could we beat them?

All the responses were unofficial. But they all agreed that we could get to the moon first if we put the resources into the program. So I wrote into the speech, "We intend to land the first man on the surface of the moon and we intend to do it in this the decade of the sixties."

I sent the speech back to the President, thinking that he'd probably cut the sentence and go back to my original draft.

At one o'clock that afternoon, I turned on my radio to listen to the latest news. The newscaster came on with excitement quivering in his voice. "A dramatic announcement at the White House."

Somehow I knew what was coming and I could feel the hair standing up on the back of my neck.

"President Johnson has just announced for the first time that the U. S. will beat the Soviets to the moon."

I turned the radio off, feeling a little sick. I wondered what had happened. Had he gone in there and delivered the speech without re-reading it? I decided he had—and felt sicker.

My phone rang. It was Ed Welsh, Chairman of the National Space Council. What in the hell was going on? Did I know what I had done? Did I know I had thrown the entire space program into a state of chaos?

At that point, I was certain I was going to be fired. It was only a matter of when.

I decided that the safest course of action for me was to stay out of the President's sight—perhaps forever. I stayed in my office for the rest of the day and worked, waiting for the inevitable phone call.

About 7:30 that night, I was getting ready to leave for home when Jack Valenti called. He needed me in his office.

"Oh, God," I thought, "this is it." I walked to the West Wing of the White House like a condemned man walking to the gallows.

But Jack was in good spirits. He wanted to talk about the next day's schedule.

When I left his office, I caught sight of a tall figure standing in the doorway of the Oval Office. I turned left abruptly and hurried toward the elevator.

But I had been seen.

"Robert," came the familiar, booming voice. I stopped. This really was it. "Aren't you even going to stop long enough to shake hands with your President?"

I turned and walked back toward him. As our hands clasped, he grinned and said, "Now that's what I call a news lead."

He had known exactly what he was doing all along! That "news lead" was his way of re-energizing our space effort . . . of building a fire under the bureaucrats.

Writing speeches for LBJ was like being caught up in a hurricane. He was perpetual motion. He was the hardest worker and the fastest mover I have ever seen. He worked two 8-hour days, every 24 hours. Being around him was a grueling, exhausting, frustrating—and fascinating experience.

He taught you never to be satisfied with letting well enough alone. No matter how hard you worked on a project, it could always be done better.

He demanded much of himself—and expected no less of those around him. Some people called him a “slave driver.” But if that was true, he was the biggest slave of them all.

He did teach you to stretch yourself—to demand more of yourself than you ever thought you were capable of delivering.

I remember once when I turned in a speech draft about 3 a.m.—after having written two other speeches without a break. It was a bad draft—and I knew it was bad. But it had to be in his morning reading when he awoke, and I was completely drained of ideas and too tired to write another line.

I was back at my desk early the next morning—still exhausted—when the telephone rang. It was the President. He sounded very tired. His voice was low, without emotion.

“That speech you sent over this morning . . .”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’ve got a threatened steel strike on my hands . . . I’ve got Ambassadors in capitals all over the globe, trying to get the North Vietnamese to the conference table . . . I’ve got three major bills tied up in committee . . . and I’ve got inflation heating up.”

He paused for a moment and I could hear his breathing over the phone.

“I don’t have time to worry about all of those problems and to worry about my speeches, too.”

My God, I felt like Benedict Arnold.

“Now, if I send this speech back to you, do you think you can work it over between now and 10 o’clock and turn out something that I can be proud to deliver and that you can be proud to say you wrote?”

No soldier—no athlete—ever received a quicker jolt of adrenalin. I came alive. I ordered my thoughts. I summoned my secretary. And I wrote him a pretty good speech in an hour and a half.

If he had yelled at me, I probably would have walked out of the building, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

It wasn’t that he *drove* people so much as it was that he knew how to get them to drive themselves.

But we survived and we thrived on it.

We also received the only kind of reward that matters to a writer:

critical acclaim—even if it was only from a critic of one.

I once sent in a report on a project and he wrote “A+” on the top of it and sent it back. I laughed. He was a school teacher to the very end. That evening he had a reception for the congressional leadership. As I was going through the receiving line, the President stopped me and said to Speaker McCormick: “Mr. Speaker, what do you think of a young assistant who gets an A+ from his President?”

“Why, I think I would cherish it,” the Speaker replied.

I did—and I still do.

\* \* \*

Another time, he called Will Sparks and me over to the Oval Office to introduce us to a new special assistant. He wanted him to meet the speech writers. After the introductions, the President said, “I wanted you to meet Bob and Will because they’re the best speech writers any President ever had.”

I thought to myself, “Well, he’s finally recognized the eloquence of my prose and the brilliance of my ideas.”

Then he explained: “They’re not temperamental. They don’t miss deadlines. And they don’t get drunk the night before a major speech.”

We all laughed. I still have a photograph taken at that exact moment.

In retrospect, I wouldn’t mind having that on my tombstone. If nothing else, I would be remembered as a professional—who worked for one of the greatest professionals of them all.

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To watch LBJ in action was to watch a master at work. When he was giving a speech, he didn’t just speak to people; he didn’t just address them. He courted them. He wooed them.

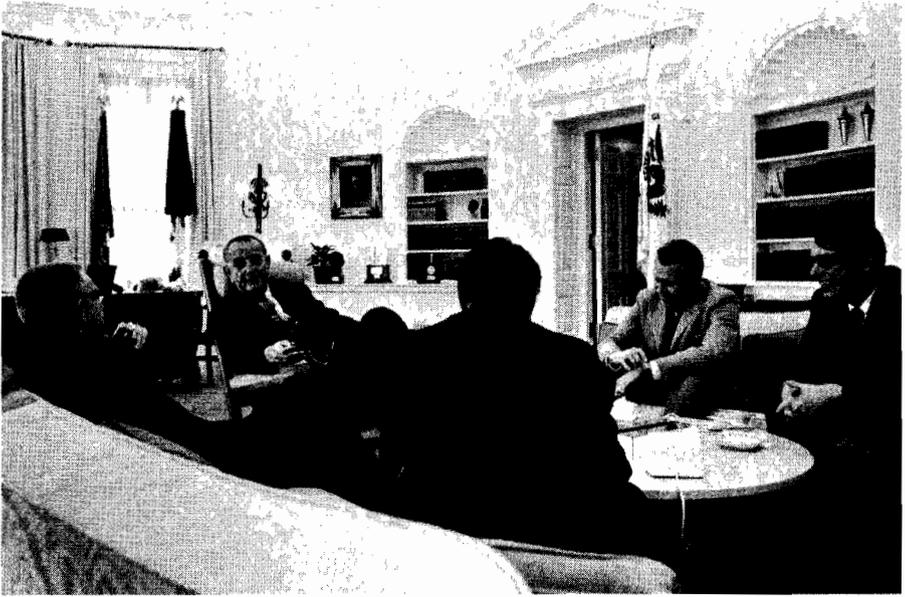
He used every opportunity he had to sell his programs and to convert his critics. He believed, as Teddy Roosevelt did, that the Presidency is a “bully pulpit.” And he never missed a chance to preach the gospel according to LBJ.

He was, as Jack Valenti later wrote, “A very personal President”—and he put his own unique stamp on everything he did.

I remember him weeping with the mother of a dead soldier as he presented her a posthumous Medal of Honor.

I remember him meeting with the most important railroad men in the country, telling them that bad service and total insensitivity to the comfort of customers was killing passenger service in America. “Do you want to be known to your grandchildren as the men who killed the railroads?” he asked them.

I remember him addressing a group of Internal Revenue Service



*President Johnson introduced his speechwriters, Hardesty (center) and Will Sparks (right), to presidential aide Robert Kintner (left), with special assistant to the president Jack Valenti (foreground).*

field officers, telling them he wanted them to do the best job they could of collecting taxes, but that he *never* wanted to hear any of them violating any citizen's Constitutional rights—including tapping their phones.

I remember him reminding a group of Congressmen that Theodore Roosevelt once wished he could turn loose 16 lions on the United States Senate. When someone pointed out that the lions might make a mistake, Roosevelt replied, "Not if they stay there long enough!"

And then there were the stories—those wonderful, funny earthy parables that illustrated almost everything he said.

"My daddy used to tell me . . ."

"We had an old preacher down in Johnson City . . ."

"Senator Kerr once met a man . . ."

"One of my classmates down at Southwest Texas State . . ."

A boyhood friend of his—a judge—once berated him for saying that the Nation could no longer tolerate all-white juries when a black person was on trial. The judge was offended. He said that had never happened in his court.

"Do you remember old Otto who was in high school with us?" Johnson asked him.

"Yes."

"Well, Otto got beered up one Saturday night and went to a dance over in Stonewall and announced he could 'lick any Dutch son-of-a-bitch

in the house.' A German farm boy with biceps the size of boulders grabbed him by the collar and demanded, 'Vot you say?'

" 'I said I could lick any Dutch son-of-a-bitch in the house,' Otto repeated. 'Are you a Dutch son-of-a-bitch?'

" 'You better not believe it,' the boy said, tightening his grip.

" 'Well then,' said Otto, 'I wasn't talking about you.'

" 'And I wasn't talking about you,'" the President added. "But the point is still valid."

But to me, the best story of all was the last one he told publicly—at the Symposium on Civil Rights at the LBJ Library in December, 1972, just a month-and-a-half before his death. He had delivered his prepared remarks, and at the end of the program, he wanted to say a few words more. He was concerned about some of the ugly things that had been said about President Nixon that evening. In the audience were the giants of the Civil Rights movement: Roy Wilkins, Julian Bond, Clarence Mitchell, Burke Marshall, Barbara Jordan, Earl Warren, Patricia Harris, Vernon Jordan, Hubert Humphrey.

He told those leaders that there was no point in denouncing the Nixon Administration or Nixon personally. He said if they hoped to accomplish anything, they were going to have to find an accommodation with the President—to reason with him.

He spoke, he said, from experience. He knew what the Presidency was all about.

"Out in my little town," he said, "Court Week is very exciting. All the boys leave town to avoid the Grand Jury and all the citizens go to court to hear the proceedings.

"The town drunk, hung over, came up to the hotel one morning as the old judge was leaving and said, 'Would you give a poor man a dime for a cup of coffee?'

"And the judge said, 'Hell, no, get out of the way. I wouldn't give a tramp anything.'

"The poor fellow with the hangover walked away dejectedly, and just as soon as he got to the end of the porch, the judge said, 'Come back. If you'd like to have a quarter for a pick-me-up, I'd be glad to help you.' And he handed the old fellow a quarter.

"The drunk looked at him, startled, but with great appreciation in his eyes and said, 'Judge, you've been there, haven't you?'"

Well, Lyndon Johnson was there—and while he was there, there was a sense of excitement and purpose and dedication seldom equalled in the history of the American Presidency. He infected those around him with that sense.

And he sure could spot a news lead.



Southwest Texas State University