The Years Of Lyndon Johnson, Volume II:
Means Of Ascent
By Robert Caro

Summarized by Jay Lotz
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PART I: TOO SLOW

Chapter 1: Going Back
After his defeat in his 1941 race for the Senate, Johnson returned to Washington. Fortunately, Roosevelt still liked him, and Johnson remained a member of the President’s inner circle. Johnson planned to run for Senate again in 1942, and was assured of the President’s support, and Brown & Root’s. Unfortunately, Pearl Harbor would interrupt his plans.

Chapter 2: All Quiet On The Western Front
During his 1941 campaign for senate, Johnson repeatedly promised that if war ever came, he himself would sign up and be “in the trenches.” When war actually did come, however, Johnson did not go into combat (although nearly 30 Congressmen did). Johnson went up and down the West Coast inspecting naval yards checking on training programs, and partying in nice hotels. He repeatedly lobbied Roosevelt for a high level job in Washington, and even with all this going on he hadn’t yet ruled out running for the Senate, though Roosevelt himself advised Johnson that he should not run. Eventually, when questions were raised about the nature of his service, Johnson asked Roosevelt to assign him to a three man observing team, send to the Pacific to report back on how the War was going.

Chapter 3: In the Pacific
During his time as an observer, Johnson flew on one combat mission. It was a bombing raid over Lae, considered to be a very dangerous target. According to the airmen on the plane, Johnson remained calm throughout the raid, although it was quite treacherous. The plane’s engine failed as they approached the target, and it limped all the way home while pursued by Japanese Zeroes. One of Johnson’s fellow observers had been killed on another plane (in fact the plane that Johnson was originally going to fly in, until his fellow observer took his seat). General McArthur awarded Johnson the Silver Star. Soon after this incident, Roosevelt ordered all fighting Congressman to return to Washington. Half quit the armed force, half quit Congress. Johnson quit the armed forces. Back in Washington, Johnson continually bragged about his wartime experience, often exaggerating it beyond all resemblance to the truth.

Chapter 4: Lady Bird
Here again, as he did in the previous volume, Caro notes Johnson’s poor treatment of Lady Bird. However, here Caro adds an interesting anecdote. In 1942, while her husband was in the Pacific, it was Lady Bird’s task to run his office. And run it she did. She answered letters, met with cabinet heads, and chased down federal bureaucrats to satisfy constituent requests. She did it so well in fact that people joked she should replace her husband as Congressman. Despite her effort and competence, once Johnson returned he resumed his poor treatment of her.
Chapter 5: Marking Time

Things were not going very well for Johnson in Washington. First, his lobbying efforts to get himself appointed to a high level wartime post met with failure. Second, his fundraising job was taken away from him. Starting in 1940, a California businessman had become a powerful force in democratic fundraising. He had access to the oilmen that previously only Johnson had access to. Only a direct intervention from Roosevelt could have saved Johnson’s position, but Roosevelt was preoccupied with the war. Johnson couldn’t advance himself in this way any longer. Not only that, but Johnson also failed to introduce any major legislation, or indeed make a major speech or fight for any cause. His efforts as Congressman primarily consisted of fulfilling constituents’ requests (the war had even sucked up his ability to deliver projects to his district), and this was done mainly by his staff. So what did Johnson direct his time and energy towards?

Chapter 6: Buying and Selling

He directed it towards making money. By the time Johnson entered the Oval Office, he would be the richest man who ever did. The story of his fortune began with a small Austin radio station, KTBC. Started by a few Austin businessmen, KTBC had a very troubled beginning. All their dealings with the FCC were plagued by delays and red tape, and they were soon running in the red month after month. Frustrated, they decided to sell. But even getting permission from the FCC to sell was nearly impossible—until Lyndon Johnson got involved. Officially, the station was bought and run by Lady Bird. Lady Bird borrowed $20,000 to buy the station, and the deal went through. She petitioned the FCC to change KTBC’s frequency and hours (something the station’s original owners had been trying to do for years). Her petition was granted in a month. Lyndon Johnson managed the get CBS to grant KTBC an affiliation (again, something the original owners had been working at for some time). Johnson got it in short order.

Johnson claimed over and over again while he was in the Senate and later the Oval Office that he had nothing to do with the station, that Lady Bird owned and ran it all on her own. This was not so. After using his influence as a Congressman to obtain the FCC’s permission to buy the station and change its operating status, he began to hire a staff and give orders (and, again, it was he who secured the CBS affiliation). This staff was again of the type he had recruited during his time at the NYA and as a Congressman’s secretary and a Congressman—men who were absolutely subservient. The station, with its new spot on the dial, better hours, and better programming, soon began to pay off. By 1948, Johnson’s net worth was over a million dollars.

Chapter 7: One of a Crowd

Johnson had a number of bad years spanning the time he returned from the war until he ran for Senate again in 1948. Roosevelt had died in 1945, and with that Johnson finally became indistinguishable from his fellow Congressman. Perhaps only Sam Rayburn’s friendship gave him any distinction at all. Johnson did not get along well with Truman, and he was not invited to the Oval Office often. Johnson decided that he would run for Senate in 1948, and if he lost he would leave politics. Texas law prevented running for two offices at the same time—he would be giving up his House seat to run for Senate, win or lose. In the early days of his campaign, it looked like his chances were good—until Coke Stevenson entered the race.
PART II: THE OLD AND THE NEW

Chapter 8: The Story of Coke Stevenson

Coke Stevenson was born in 1888, in the Hill Country of Texas. As a teenager, he started his own freighting business, crossing the Hill Country’s streams and rugged paths several wagonloads at a time all on his own. At night, he taught himself bookkeeping, and eventually managed to get a job at a bank, as a janitor at first, then later as a bookkeeper and cashier. He then taught himself law, and became one of the most highly regarded trial lawyers in all of Texas. Despite this, he never left the Hill Country for a more prestigious law firm in Austin or elsewhere. He never planned to enter public service, his ambition was to earn enough money practicing law so he could buy a ranch (which he did) and become a rancher. However, Coke was a natural leader. Twice, he was drafted into public service—once to catch cattle thieves and once more to build a road. On both jobs, he exceeded all expectations, and then quit as soon as they were done.

But he couldn’t be kept away for long. In 1928, his district’s legislator left, leaving a spot open. Worried that a free-spending liberal from another town was going to win, Coke reluctantly entered the election and won. He was so well respected by his fellow legislators that he was made Speaker in 1933. Then, in 1935, he became the first man in Texas state history to serve a second term as speaker. He was an unusual Speaker—he did not pound his gavel as much as some would have liked, and he wasn’t an arm twister. And yet, he was unusually effective as well. He presided over one of the most productive and transformative times in the legislature’s history.

In 1937, he once again planned to quit politics, and was again drawn back in. He entered the race for lieutenant governor in order to defeat a man who proposed to turn the Texas legislature into a unicameral body. After waging an unusual campaign (he had no platform, and made no campaign speeches—he simply drove into towns and started talking to people) he won the election. In 1941, when Pappy O’Daniel went to the Senate, he became Governor of Texas.

As Governor, Stevenson managed to cut spending while increasing benefits for the citizens of his state. His main message was economy: cut excess spending. The people loved him for it, and he won his 1944 campaign with 85% of the vote. When he left the Governor’s mansion in 1947, he was Texas’s longest serving governor ever, and the people were pleading with him to run for a third term. He refused, and went back to the ranch. However, he soon became dissatisfied with the direction of the federal government (and O’Daniel’s representation of Texas in that government), and all the while the people of his state were begging him to run for Senate in 1948. On New Year’s Day, 1948, he announced his candidacy.

Chapter 9: Head Start

As they did in 1937 and 1941, Brown & Root pledged to give Johnson all the money he needed for his campaign. And he would need lots of it. First off, Johnson needed to buy the “boxes” in south Texas that were run by George Parr. This would give him a 25,000 vote head start. Second, Johnson was going to use polling and radio on a scale never seen before in Texas politics. Most campaigns polled three or four times in a campaign. Johnson wanted to poll three or four times every week. And he wanted the polls to show not just which candidate the voter was supporting, but the depth of that
voter’s support, and what issues he cared most about. Most campaigns used radio only to
give occasional speeches. Johnson wanted not just to make speeches, but to create
programs with scripts and musical acts. He wanted to use radio more than any other
candidate before him. In many ways, Johnson’s 1948 campaign was the beginning of
modern politics.

Chapter 10: “Will!”

In the second week of his campaign, Johnson began to suffer from a kidney stone.
For days he managed to push through and continue giving speeches and shaking hands,
hiding the agonizing pain and high fever. Eventually, despite his resistance, he was
persuaded to check into a hospital, where the doctors said an operation was necessary.
The recovery period for an operation was about six weeks; if Johnson had the operation,
his campaign would be over. Luckily, an associate informed him of a doctor in Minnesota
who was an expert of a new, less invasive, procedure for removing kidney stones.
Johnson went to Minnesota, and the procedure was successful. Now, though, he had only
seven weeks to catch up to Coke Stevenson.

Chapter 11: The Flying Windmill

To make up for lost time, Johnson embraced an idea he had earlier resisted.
Johnson chose to ride around the state of Texas in a helicopter, which would soon be
labeled “the flying windmill” by the press. The helicopter was so novel and unusual in
these days that Johnson drew huge crowds—Pappy O’Daniel sized crowds—wherever he
landed. And he landed it just about everywhere. Often, when he saw a group of men
standing in a field, he would have his pilot land, shake some hands, and get back on and
fly away. Sometimes he didn’t even land, he simply hovered over a small town and spoke
to them through a loudspeaker: “Hello, down there!” The novel tactic was working.
Crowds were mesmerized wherever he landed, and he was sweeping up votes.
And not only did Johnson have a gimmick, he had an issue. The AFL, because of
their hatred of Johnson (whom they felt had betrayed them by proclaiming himself to be a
New Dealer and then refusing to help them in Washington), endorsed Coke Stevenson.
Stevenson did not bother to repudiate the endorsement, despite the average Texas voter’s
dislike of organized labor. Johnson took advantage of Coke’s oversight and ran with it.
He claimed Stevenson and the AFL made a secret deal in which he had promised to vote
to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act (which limited labor unions’ power) once he became
Senator. It was a lie, and in fact it was so brazen a lie that Stevenson refused to answer
the charge at all. Polls showed that Johnson was cutting into Coke’s lead.

For a while, Johnson’s enthusiasm over these numbers became overbearing. His
confidence caused him to mistreat people. Even in front of reporters or crowds, he would
berate his aides for failing to perform up to his standards. This came to an end over the
July 4th weekend, just a few weeks away from the first primary. Every year since 1930,
Texas held a Cowboy Reunion on July 4th. This year, Coke Stevenson went, and received
an outpouring of support. When Johnson heard of the reception Stevenson was getting, he
decided not to attend the event at all. This, combined with new polls which showed
Johnson was failing to make any more headway, caused a change in Johnson. He became
the campaigner he had been in 1937: warm, friendly, effective.
In the first primary on July 24, Stevenson polled 40 percent of the vote, Johnson 34 percent, another candidate 20 percent, and all other candidates polling a combined 7 percent. Stevenson had not won 50 percent of the vote, so there would be a runoff between him and Johnson. It was widely expected that most of the votes for the minor candidates would go to Coke. For Johnson, the situation looked hopeless.

Chapter 12: All or Nothing

To close the gap between himself and Stevenson, Johnson played the AFL issue harder than ever before, eventually to the point of insinuating Stevenson was a Communist. Johnson had friendly reporters ask Stevenson again and again—in an abrasive and rude tone—whether Stevenson supported Taft-Hartley or not. Stevenson, for weeks, remained too proud and stubborn to respond. Stevenson’s pride allowed the issue to take hold, and even some of his strongest supporters began to question where he stood.

Johnson took advantage and managed to get some of the state’s conservative businessmen to throw their weight behind him instead of Stevenson. He did this by delivering a speech—called the Pappy O’Daniel speech because it was delivered in the former governor’s time slot—that accused Stevenson of being a tool of big union leaders and communists. The speech was so cruel that even Johnson nearly backed out of it. But he didn’t. He made the speech, and received the reward. Conservatives around the state began to throw their weight behind Johnson, to the astonishment of the Stevenson campaign.

When Stevenson finally did reply, and finally began to make his own attacks on Johnson’s record (and the campaign contributions and support that Johnson received from labor unions), it was too little too late. His financing had dried up almost entirely; his campaign couldn’t afford statewide radio addresses, mass mailings, or re-printings of Stevenson’s statements in newspapers.

Chapter 13: The Stealing

At the end of election day, a Sunday, Stevenson was ahead by 854 votes. Johnson’s organization set to work. The huge majorities delivered to him in the Valley and in the bloc votes in the cities weren’t enough. All throughout the week, small revisions were made—3 or 4 votes here, another 40 here—until by Friday Johnson was less than 200 votes behind. On Friday, in precinct 13 (run by George Parr and his enforcer Indio Salas), 200 more Johnson votes were found. Over a million votes were cast in the election, Johnson would win by only 87.

Chapter 14: Lists of Names

Stevenson determined to prove that Johnson had stolen the election from him. He, his attorneys, and the legendary Texas Ranger Frank Hamer went down into the Valley to see the list of votes in precinct 13. When they inspected the list of votes, they saw that the last 200 hundred names were written in a different colored ink and handwriting than the first 800. They took down some of the last 200 hundred names, and went looking for them. All those that they spoke to said that they had not voted in the primary. Some they couldn’t speak to—they were dead.

Then the legal wrangling began. First, the Jim Wells Democratic Executive Committee had to vote to certify the final results—either with the 200 Johnson votes or
without them. Then the results would go to a canvassing subcommittee of the State Democratic Executive Committee, which would certify the results—either the results they had now (with the Johnson votes) or the results the Jim Wells committee gave them (which may have the 200 hundred votes removed). Then, the canvassing subcommittee’s report would be given to the State Committee as a whole.

Wirtz managed to get a judge to issue an injunction to stop the Jim Wells Committee from acting before the subcommittee, thereby preventing the subcommittee from certifying anything but the results they had—the results containing the extra 200 votes. But there was a hitch: the members of the subcommittee did not certify the results. In essence, it was left up to all the 62 members of the State Committee to choose either Johnson or Stevenson. With 58 members present, the vote was 29 Johnson, 28 Stevenson.

Chapter 15: Qualities of Leadership

The battle was not over yet. Stevenson brought his case to a federal court. Stevenson’s lawyers managed to get the judge to issue an injunction, preventing Johnson’s name from being placed on the November ballot, until Stevenson’s allegations of fraud could be decided. Johnson needed the judge’s injunction overturned—quickly. The deadline for adding names was October 3rd, and it was already late September. Johnson’s lawyers could not decide on a course of action. Most wanted to appeal to a higher federal court, which did not meet until October 4th, and then later try to somehow put Johnson’s name back on the ballot. To sort it out, Johnson called on Abe Fortas, the smartest legal mind he had ever met, and a man who would advise Johnson throughout his political career.

Johnson’s lawyers were recommending that Johnson first try the State Circuit Court, and then appeal to the Supreme Court if necessary. Fortas felt there was no time; Johnson should gamble it all on one judge—Hugo Black of the Supreme Court, head of the Fifth District. Fortas outlined a brief designed to lose in the Circuit Court, which it did. This allowed them time to appeal to Judge Black. He agreed to hear their appeal, and ultimately ruled in their favor and stayed the injunction. Precinct 13’s ballot boxes, and the ballot boxes of many other precincts, would never be opened. Stevenson tried to interest the FBI and the Senate itself in starting an investigation, but neither was taken the situation very seriously. Johnson was put on the ballot and won. He was now the junior Senator from Texas.

Chapter 16: The Making of a Legend

Years later Caro interviewed Salas, who confirmed all of the accusations made against Lyndon Johnson during the 1948 campaign. He had in fact presided over the adding of the 200 names.

What is even more surprising is that Lyndon Johnson himself at times seemed to confirm the accusations. Once in the Senate, he jokingly referred to himself as “Landslide Lyndon,” and often made jokes and told stories about the 1948 campaign—and about George Parr. On one occasion he even showed a photograph of his political allies from the Valley gathered around ballot box 13 to a reporter. The specter of the 1948 campaign would surface again and again as Johnson’s fame and power grew.
Chapter 17: A Love Story
      After Coke Stevenson lost the 1948 Senate race, he went back to practicing law in Junction City and living on his ranch. He remarried and had a daughter, remained strong and vital into old age, and lived happily.

Chapter 18: Three Rings
      The Senate valued seniority as much as the House did, but that couldn’t hold back Lyndon Johnson. Within two years, he would be the whip, and within a few more he would be the minority leader. Once his party won back the majority, Lyndon Johnson would become the most powerful majority leader the Senate had ever seen.