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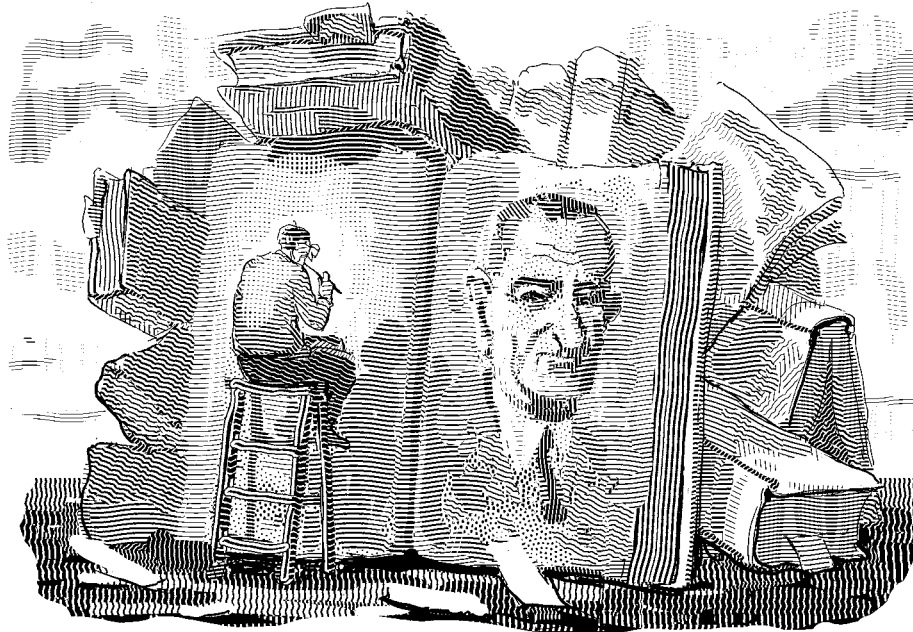
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Book Review by Michael Nelson

TOO MUCH INFORMATION

The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson, by Robert A. Caro.
Alfred A. Knopf, 736 pages, \$35



ROBERT A. CARO BEGAN WORKING ON a biography of Lyndon Johnson in 1974, the year he published his award-winning *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. He meant *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* to be a six-year, three-volume project. Instead, Caro's first volume, *The Path to Power*, appeared in 1982—eight years of his life spent recounting the first 33 years of Johnson's. *Means of Ascent* was published in 1990. It covers seven years, culminating in Johnson's election to the Senate in 1948 (widely suspected but not proven to have been stolen until Caro uncovered clear documentary evidence). *Master of the Senate*, published in 2002, spans the first ten years of Johnson's career as a senator and Senate Democratic leader. *The Passage of Power*, published last year, covers the period from 1958 to early 1964: ten years from Caro; five years of Johnson.

Devoted readers of this biography can take little encouragement from the actuarial tables. If Caro levels off at his current pace, taking two years of research and writing to chronicle one year of Johnson's life, it will be another two decades before Caro publishes the volume that takes Johnson through his presidency—that is, through the 1964 election, the Great Society, Vietnam, the 1968 election—and into retirement as a former president.

Caro turned 77 in October, however, and has been requiring *more* time to account for his subject's life, which is understandable since it grew increasingly complex and consequential. At every stage of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, Caro has underestimated the number of installments to come and the number of years he'd need to complete them. What's more, he's also writing a book about the writing of his books, a project that can only prolong the completion of the LBJ biography.

AS ONE OF CARO'S FAITHFUL AND, ON balance, admiring readers, I'm in a minority among presidential scholars. The three previous volumes of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* won most of the Pulitzer Prizes and National Book Awards for which they were eligible...and left academic historians notably unimpressed. Stanford in Washington professor Robert Dallek's two-volume biography—*Lone Star Rising* (1991) and *Flawed Giant* (1998)—was hailed as the corrective to Caro. As best I can tell, neither of Dallek's volumes received a single adverse review by any history professor in any scholarly journal. Many reviewers mentioned Caro, almost always for the purpose of saying how much better Dallek was.

And, indeed, Dallek captured LBJ's complexity in ways that compare favorably with

Caro's interpretation. Although the Johnson of *Lone Star Rising* and *Flawed Giant* is almost as unattractive as the man Caro describes, Dallek argued that Johnson's personal ambition served a larger lifelong cause: to integrate the South into the nation by developing its economy and ending racial segregation. In Dallek's view, Johnson's "liberal nationalism" only went wrong when he tried to extend it to Southeast Asia, where he committed 550,000 troops in a bootless effort to stop North Vietnam from bullying South Vietnam and, notoriously, promised the north a billion dollars to stop fighting and let him develop the Mekong River valley with a foreign aid counterpart to Franklin Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority.

Dallek diminished himself, however, by picking fights with Caro in that favorite scholarly sniping ground, the footnotes, and sometimes seemed to think he had won just because he cited a fellow academic historian who interpreted an incident differently from Caro. In one case, Caro called Johnson's failure to vocally support Franklin Roosevelt unprincipled. Dallek quoted William Leuchtenburg saying it was *not* unprincipled, and then lazily or tendentiously treated that opinion as conclusive. In another footnote, Dallek said Caro was wrong to criticize John-



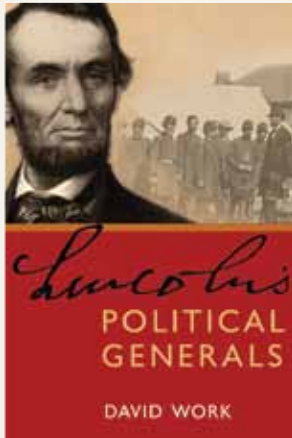
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son's conduct as a naval officer because Caro is "ever ready to put Johnson in the worst possible light"—as if attacking Caro sufficed to defend Johnson. Dallek went after Caro in his notes 13 times in *Lone Star Rising*, exactly 13 more times than he criticized all his other sources combined.

University of Arkansas historian Randall Woods called and raised Dallek's hostility to Caro in his able but testy 2008 book *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. Woods didn't criticize Caro, as Dallek did; he simply dismissed him. "I do not quote him once," Woods said in an interview and, reminded that he actually did cite him—once—replied, "I meant to take that out." Woods also said he refused to read any of Caro's books about Johnson because, "when you read you absorb things indirectly and his work is just not trustworthy. And, too, he's such a compelling writer, and so that book is going to make an impression on you whether you want it to or not."

THEIR SNOBBERY NOTWITHSTANDING, Dallek and Woods have virtues as historians that correspond to weaknesses Caro displays. The latter is usually at his worst when he turns to "political power and how it shapes our lives," which he insists is the true subject of all his books. Robert Moses, on the local and state level, and Lyndon Johnson, on the national and international scene, interest Caro because they sought political power more ardently, wielded it more effectively, and lost it more tragically than any other Americans of their time. How well he illuminates power, then, is the standard by which Caro's work ultimately must be judged. And because nearly every one of his insights into Johnson is transposed from his study of Moses, one can't understand *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* without knowing what Caro learned from writing *The Power Broker*.

Caro's passion for understanding political power in general and Moses in particular flowed from his work as an investigative reporter for New York's suburban newspaper *Newsday* in the mid-1960s. After Caro wrote a series attacking Moses's plan to build a bridge across the Long Island Sound, "the paper sent me up to Albany to 'lobby' against Moses's bridge." Governor Nelson Rockefeller and every legislator Caro talked with agreed that the bridge was "the worst idea in history." But a week later, after Moses paid a visit to the legislature, they voted to approve it "by something like 138-4." "You think you understand politics, and in fact you don't have any idea what you're talking about," Caro concluded.

"Here's a guy who has...enough power to turn the entire state around, and you don't have the slightest idea how he got it. And I determined then that I wanted to understand."

Caro knew Moses was powerful. But simply knowing that left two important questions unanswered. First, how had this man "shaped New York and its suburbs in the image he personally conceived"? Moses built 13 vehicular spans, including the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, still the longest suspension bridge in North America and, at the time of its completion in 1964, the longest in the world. He also was the main reason for the construction of public housing units for 550,000 tenants and 15 expressways, adding more miles of major highway than the total mileage of any other city, even car-crazed Los Angeles. Second, why had Moses, who initially sought power as a means to accomplish great ends, become a monster who sought "power for its own sake"?

THE NINE MONTHS CARO SET ASIDE TO write *The Power Broker* became seven years. Answering the first question—how Moses was able to wield power so skillfully—was the main obstacle. To be sure, the answer included some familiar elements of political leadership. Moses forged alliances with powerful figures in business, politics, and the media. In public, he successfully cultivated a reputation as a reformer while privately channeling jobs, legal fees, insurance premiums, and other benefits to powerful machine politicians. Convinced that no court or elected body could stop one of his massive projects once he had driven the first stake, Moses mastered the art of the *fait accompli*. He was a hands-on taskmaster whom devoted subordinates both loved and feared.

Caro's genius lay in discovering how Moses's power relied not just on these familiar elements but also on tools and techniques he essentially invented. After turning an obscure student literary magazine at Yale into a vehicle for becoming a Big Man on Campus, Moses spent his life devising ways "to take an institution with little or no power...and to transform it into an institution of immense power." The "public authority" was just such an institution. Historically, governments created public authorities to sell bonds to build a single toll road or bridge. The authority went out of business when enough tolls had been collected to pay off the bonds. Moses realized that if he could write the powers of the Triborough Bridge Authority, which he headed, into the contract between the authority and its bondholders, then the authority could



continue to float bonds, long after the bridge was built, to finance other projects of his own design. The state government that had created the authority might want to put it out of business, but the contract clause of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits states from impairing contractual obligations, would deny it that right. The millions, then billions of dollars that the Triborough authority accumulated over the years made it the most powerful institution—and Moses the most powerful man—in New York.

Despite Caro's nuanced explication of how Moses accumulated power, his analysis of why Moses sought power in the first place is as subtle as one of his subject's bulldozers. Caro first trots out Heredity with a capital H, through which Moses's mother's side of the family endowed him with "[t]he strain of brilliance, idealism, and arrogance...passed on through her—undiluted, strong but somewhat formless—to her son Robert." Caro then brings in environment (small e, not quite as important): the Oxford education that instilled "the British belief...in the duties—and the rights—of those born to wealth and privilege." The duties, as Moses understood them, entailed a career in public service. The rights included deciding which services the public needed, regardless of whether it wanted them or not. On "the edge of the bright gold of his idealism," Caro writes, was "a darker shadow," and "with each small increase in the amount of power he possessed, the dark element in his nature had loomed larger."

CARO'S ACCOUNT OF MOSES'S ULTIMATE fall from power is a mechanistic tale of his hereditary arrogance overcoming the idealism he gleaned from his environment or, as Caro repeatedly writes, of the "dark shadow" dimming the "bright gold." With the passage of time, Moses increasingly surrounded himself with yes-men who, as one reporter said, "nodded when he wanted them to nod,... laughed when he wanted them to laugh." With no one brave enough to steer him from political error, Moses picked and lost unnecessary, tabloid-hyped fights with upscale patrons of a Central Park playground and with Joseph Papp, impresario of Shakespeare in the Park. Worse than the ensuing loss of popularity was the death of Moses's reputation for invincibility. Neither loved nor, at the end, feared, he was maneuvered into retirement by Governor Rockefeller in 1968. (And that bridge over the Long Island Sound was never built.)

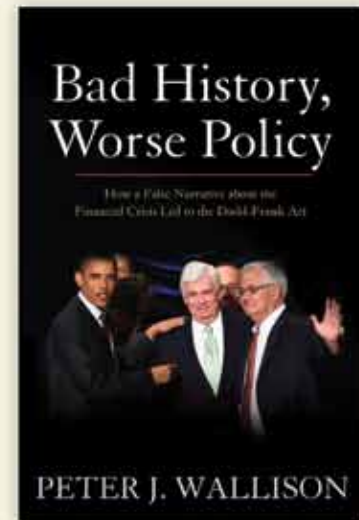
Caro's portrayal of Lyndon Johnson has all the strengths and weaknesses of *The Power*

Broker. The writing remains dramatic and compelling. This is no accident. Caro has described Johnson's 1948 Senate election as a "thrilling campaign," and said, "If your account of that campaign isn't thrilling, it's false, even if it's factually accurate." Caro has lost none of his capacity either to thrill or, when the material calls for it, to inspire, outrage, intrigue, frustrate, or fascinate. Only one bit of flab has crept into his prose: increasing resort to as-I-have-written references to the previous three volumes. By my count, he does this 16 times in *The Passage of Power*, occasionally quoting several hundred words at a crack, and every single time it's annoying.

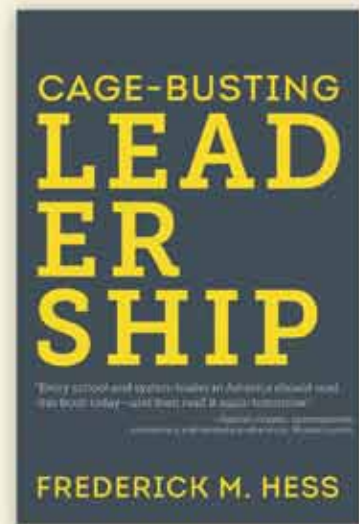
The research that forms the basis for Caro's Johnson books is even more impressive than the writing. It's one thing to say he conducted thousands of interviews and reviewed millions of pages of documents. It's something else again to see the fruits of that diligence. For example, surely every previous Johnson biographer had heard that, as a junior member of the House of Representatives, Johnson acquired enormous influence with his colleagues by raising and channeling Texas oil and contractor money into their 1940 reelection campaigns. But as New Deal insider and Johnson confidant Tommy Corcoran told Caro, "[Y]ou're never going to be able to write about that.... Because you're never going to find anything in writing." Caro dug and dug and ultimately found the evidence—who donated the money, how much, when, and who received it—in previously neglected boxes of Johnson's House papers.

THE TRUE TEST OF THE JOHNSON BOOKS, as of *The Power Broker*, is Caro's own criterion: how well do they explain political power? Johnson's lifelong genius, like that of Moses, was "taking 'nothing jobs' and making them into something—something big." As an undergraduate at Southwest Texas State Teachers College, Johnson joined a fringe social group called the White Stars and transformed it into the most powerful political organization on campus. When he was a young aide to a Texas congressman he became speaker of the somnambulant "Little Congress," and used the organization of House staffers as a vehicle to network with prominent Washington officials. As a junior member of Congress, Johnson turned the politically insignificant Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee into an instrument of personal power, steering Texas money to grateful, and then obligated, Democratic candidates.

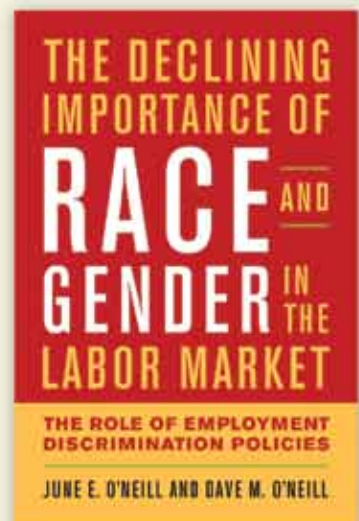
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More important, not just for Johnson but also for Congress and the nation, was his use of the position of Senate party leader. The job Johnson sought and won in 1952 offered leadership in name only of the Democrats, newly returned to the Senate minority by the Eisenhower landslide. Committee chairmen wielded the real power in the chamber, but because the party leader had “leader” in his title, the press and public held him responsible for the Senate’s failings. No wonder Johnson, still a first-term senator, faced little opposition when he sought the post—another “‘nothing job’...that no one really wanted.”

But as Caro showed in *Master of the Senate*, Johnson transformed the role of party leader into a position of power, just as Moses had transformed the role of public authority chairman. Facing a Democratic caucus divided between Northern liberals and Southern conservatives, Johnson first took on the seniority system. As a way of winning the loyalty of younger members like Hubert Humphrey and Mike Mansfield, the new leader instituted the “Johnson Rule,” which provided that no senator would receive a second major committee assignment until every senator had received his first. He took the Democratic Policy Committee, a relatively new body that liberal activists had hoped would highlight the differences between the two parties in starkly ideological terms, and turned it into a forum in which Democratic senators of all political hues, overseen by Johnson, privately hammered out compromise positions they could unite behind. With these and other maneuvers, including the vaunted “Johnson treatment” of physically and verbally engulfing senators whose votes he needed, he took a scorned position of nominal leadership and turned it into a job more powerful than any in Washington, excepting the presidency and, possibly, Speaker of the House.

JOHNSON THOUGHT HE COULD WORK SIMILAR magic on the vice presidency, which occupies much of the first half of *The Passage of Power*. Caro demolishes in detail Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s argument that John F. Kennedy was merely extending a political courtesy by asking LBJ to leave the Senate majority leadership and become vice president. Johnson reasoned that he could take the then-despised office, transform it into a cockpit of political power, and ride it into the presidency as Kennedy’s successor. Specifically, he thought he could persuade Senate Democrats to let him continue functioning

as their leader and get Kennedy to sign an executive order granting him a large staff, a West Wing office, and authority as a de facto national security adviser. No such luck: both his Capitol Hill colleagues and the president rebuffed Johnson’s power grabs. “Power is where power goes,” Johnson had boasted when accepting the vice presidential nomination. Not this time. “Being vice president is like being a cut dog,” he said after holding the office for a while.

As in *The Power Broker*, Caro’s virtues as a biographer make it all the more disappointing that his analysis of *why* Johnson sought power is so shallow. Once again, heredity (the “Buntton strain” of “pride and ambition” from Johnson’s paternal grandmother’s side) combines with environment (his father’s steep descent from respected state representative to “embarrassment, disgrace, humiliation” as a landless, low-paid road crew foreman when Johnson was 13) to bind the fate of Caro’s protagonist. “It was the interaction of his early humiliation

The true test of the Johnson books is Caro’s own criterion: how well do they explain political power?

with his heredity,” Caro writes, “that gave his efforts their feverish, almost frantic intensity, a quality that journalists would describe as ‘energy’ when it really was desperation and fear.” Again, as with Robert Moses, the experience of college only made Johnson worse: “obsequious to those above him...overbearing to those who were not...[a] mixture of bootlicker and bully.”

Caro portrayed Moses’s character as a pattern of bright gold gradually blotted out by a dark shadow. His image for Johnson is nearly identical—and just as crudely Manichean. Now, there are two threads, one “bright” and one “dark,” that “run side by side,” chiaroscuro-like. In what the historian Ronald Steel criticized as “language that seems a bit clearer than truth,” Caro identifies the bright thread as compassion and the dark thread as ambition—“a hunger for power in its most naked form, for power not to improve the lives of others, but to manipulate and dominate them, to bend them to his will.” Guess which motive dominates the “tapestry” of Johnson’s character when doing good conflicts with do-

ing well? Choose ambition, and you’ll be right every time.

Sometimes, though, doing the right thing coincided perfectly in Johnson’s life with doing the selfish thing—that is, venting his compassion for poor people and the victims of discrimination (Mexican Americans when he was a young man in Texas, African Americans when he moved to Washington) while simultaneously feeding his ambition for power. According to Caro in *Master of the Senate*, that is exactly what happened in 1957 when Johnson faced pressure from Senate liberals and the Eisenhower Administration to advance a civil rights bill. The right thing, Caro asserts, was to get a bill. For a Texas senator whose unblemished, two decades-long, anti-civil rights record had helped keep him in office but who now wanted to win the presidential nomination of a party dominated by Northern liberals, the best route to power was also to get a bill. So Johnson worked all the levers at his considerable command and passed the first civil rights act since Reconstruction.

The story of Lyndon the Compassionate picks up in the second half of *The Passage of Power*, which takes him through the early weeks of his presidency. Once again, civil rights was the main issue and Johnson bigheartedly wanted to do the compassionate thing. And once again, passing a civil rights bill was the smartest move on the political board for someone who desperately wanted the acquiescence of the Kennedy crowd to satisfy his ambition to be nominated and elected president in his own right. Caro nicely identifies an element that further raised the degree of difficulty for Johnson’s accession: “The President, the King, was dead, murdered, but the King had a brother, a brother who hated the new King. The dead King’s men—the Kennedy men, the Camelot men—made up in Shakespearean terms, a faction.”

The brother, Robert F. Kennedy, hated Johnson, whom he described as “vicious, an animal in many ways.” But with flattery and feigned humility, the new president peeled off various members of the Kennedy faction, especially in the national security arena and the cabinet. No longer the cut dog of his miserable thousand days as vice president, Johnson took to the presidency “like Popeye after a can of spinach,” in Rutgers political scientist David Greenberg’s phrase. With skill and sensitivity that Caro chronicles in brilliant detail, Johnson persuaded a Senate ill-disposed to do anything more than dilute JFK’s civil rights bill to pass a full-strength version. And then, after RFK somehow convinced himself that his



brother had been on the verge of trying to end poverty at the moment of his death, Johnson took away that issue (and gave rein to his compassionate streak) by launching the War on Poverty as the initial salvo in the Great Society.

NICHOLAS LEMANN HAS IDENTIFIED some of the ways that Caro's Moses resembles Caro's Johnson. Both are "big-time government doers, nearly superhuman in their abilities, workaholic, monstrous, dominating, obsessed with the getting and the using of 'power,' and prone to flipping back and forth between good and evil." Other qualities belong on this list as well. Johnson and Moses both cared more about power than money, but used money to win the support of other politicians who cared about it avidly. Both were unsurpassed in their ability to take previously meaningless jobs and organizations and transform them into power bases, notwithstanding Johnson's failure as vice president and Moses's as a defeated candidate for governor of New York. And both men hated subordinates who said no when all they wanted to hear was yes. Johnson regarded that kind of staffer as "a defeatist," and "soon he was no longer on the payroll."

As for Lemann's observation that Moses and Johnson each oscillated between good and evil, he is right about Johnson but not about Moses, who just got worse and worse as his power grew. The war between the dark and bright threads in Johnson was ongoing. To be sure, every time "compassion had been in conflict with ambition, invariably ambition would win." But the compassion was never extinguished.

The greatest contrast in *The Power Broker* and *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* is not between the bright gold and dark shadow of Moses and the dark and bright threads of Johnson, but between Caro's deep, even granular accounts of these leaders' actions and his dualistic, mechanistic view of their motives. Politics in all its forms is complex and fascinating, and no one conveys this better than Caro. But where does that subtlety go when it comes to assigning motive to his protagonists? No one, much less larger-than-life men like Johnson and Moses, can be reduced to just two opposed qualities. Caro ought to know that politicians are every bit as complex as politics.

Although he long refused, with gruff sanctimony, to discuss the subject with interviewers because he "hasn't finished my research on the presidency," the truth is that Caro reached his conclusions about the Johnson presidency a long time ago. Thirty years past, in *The*

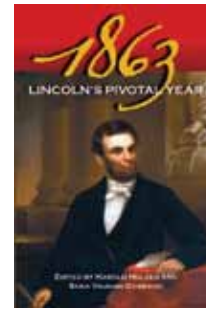
Path to Power, Caro asserted that Johnson's character was fixed at an unusually early age, certainly no later than the end of his childhood and college years. The character of many other "famous figures" continually develops through life, Caro noted, but Johnson's did not. "All the traits of personality which the nation would witness decades later—all the traits which affected the course of history—can be seen at San Marcos naked and glaring," Caro concluded. "The Lyndon Johnson of college years was the Lyndon Johnson who would become president."

WHEN JOHNSON SUCCEEDED Kennedy on November 22, 1963, Caro wrote in that 1982 book, his rigidly fixed personality turned out to be crucial in two important ways. In explaining the main events of his administration, both the Great Society (definitely the bright thread, according to Caro, who never mentions a Big Government program—even federal rent control—except to praise it) and the war in Vietnam (bad, bad, bad—the *really* dark thread), "Johnson's personality bore, in relation to other factors, an unusually heavy weight." Beyond that, Caro argued, his personality accounts for developments even more lasting and significant than his five years as president. In Caro's view, the emergence of a deeply ingrained distrust by Americans of their government and the unhappy "evolution from a 'constitutional' to an 'imperial' Presidency... were to a considerable extent a function of this one man's personality."

People can dispute Caro's claims that personality determines individual behavior and that individual behavior directs the course of history. That's an age-old argument, and Caro's position in the "great men or great forces" debate is both legitimate and, even if he's wrong, understandable in a biographer. What is less defensible is that Caro reached his conclusions about the Johnson presidency before doing what he said he would do first—namely, finish the research. There will be good reasons to read anything Caro writes in the future about Johnson, not least the pleasure of his prose and the biographical and historical nuggets he will uncover that academic historians have overlooked. But gaining new insights into "political power and how it shapes our lives" won't be one of those reasons.

Michael Nelson is the Fulmer Professor of Political Science at Rhodes College and a senior fellow at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs.

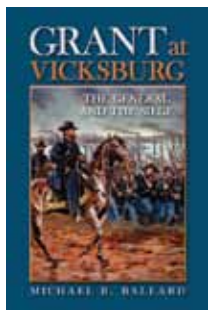
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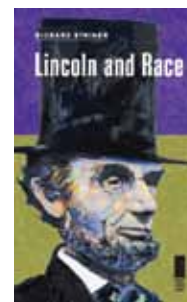
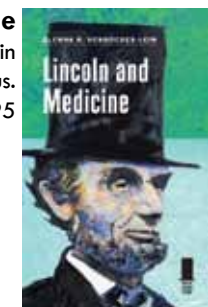


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