LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND BLACKS: 
THE EARLY YEARS

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History will award President Lyndon B. Johnson a prominent role in the legal advancement of civil rights for blacks. Judicial decisions, presidential actions, and congressional legislation promoting those rights occurred during the presidencies of Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, but these were only a prelude to the Johnson administration. Even though much remained undone when Johnson left office, the years when he was President—1963-1968—constituted an important era in the progress of civil rights for blacks. Passed during the Eisenhower administration, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 inaugurated the post-Reconstruction legislation helpful to blacks.¹ Considerably more significant was the Johnson administration’s Civil Rights Act of 1964, an omnibus bill whose most far-reaching provisions related to nondiscrimination in public accommodations.² Fast upon the heels of this measure came the Voting Rights Act of 1965, providing for elaborate and more effective federal machinery for registering voters and assuring the right to vote in certain areas of the nation.³ In early 1968 Congress passed another comprehensive civil rights bill, whose major provisions dealt with the reduction of discrimination in housing.⁴ While President, Johnson pressed for the passage of these three bills, and he willingly signed each of them into law.

In addition, Johnson took other public actions which helped identify his administration with black civil rights. In February 1965 he issued an Executive Order designed to coordinate the various agencies of the federal government involved in the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of equal opportunity. Also, Johnson appointed a number of blacks to high office.⁵

Johnson spoke many times in behalf of the civil rights of black Americans. During the years he was President, on at least 232 occasions he made public references to the subject.⁶ The highpoint of the President’s public remarks came on March 15, 1965, when he spoke on black civil rights before a joint session of Congress and a national television audience. Referring to black voting rights,

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¹United States Statutes at Large, vol. 71, pp. 634-38; vol. 74, pp. 86-92.
²Ibid., vol. 78, pp. 241-68.
³Ibid., vol. 79, pp. 437-46.
⁴Ibid., vol. 82, pp. 73-92.
⁵For a detailed study of the progress of black civil rights and the Johnson presidential years, see James C. Harvey, Black Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration (Jackson: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973).
⁶Civil Rights Index of Statements of Lyndon B. Johnson as President, Lydon Baines Johnson Library. (Hereafter referred to as LBJL.)
equal economic opportunity, and adequate housing, Johnson issued an emotional appeal to the nation to put aside "the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice."17 No President had ever publicly identified himself so closely with the problems of the nation's largest racial minority.

Was President Johnson sincere when he pressed for civil rights legislation, issued Executive Orders, and spoke out publicly for black rights? Did he always hold such expressed views? Was he consistent throughout his career regarding civil rights for blacks? Or was he an expedient politician who desired only to advance his own career by yielding to current pressures? This essay, focusing on Johnson's early relationships with and attitudes toward blacks and their civil rights, is addressed to these questions.

Lyndon B. Johnson was born in 1908 on a farm in Blanco County in central Texas, and he grew up in the small town of Johnson City, Blanco's county seat. Of the country's 4,311 inhabitants in 1910, only 350 were black. By 1920 the population had declined to 4,063, with blacks totaling only 169; and in 1930 these two figures had further declined to 3,842 and 133.8 With so few blacks residing in the county during his childhood years, young Johnson had hardly any occasion to know or have dealings with blacks. Sometimes a black family passed through Johnson City on the way somewhere else; an occasional black migrant was hired to help the family harvest its crops; but that was about all. Young Johnson matured without strong color prejudice. He neither liked nor disliked blacks. Not being visible, blacks were not an issue in his life. Reflecting the southern attitudes of other whites in the county, Johnson assumed that blacks and whites should be separated; but Blanco County was not a part of the old Confederacy, and Johnson later confessed that he "never sat on my parents' or grandparents' knees listening to nostalgic tales of the antebellum South."9 Southern traditions and blacks were on the margin of young Johnson's frame of reference. The Mexican-American minority in Blanco County was no greater than was the black,10 although Johnson had a few Mexican-American playmates. The only minority of some significance was the German-Americans,11 and distinctions between them and the Anglo-Americans were virtually nonexistent. Under these circumstances, Johnson had


11Ibid., p. 976.
no reason to be prejudiced toward any minority group—nor to feel any sympathy for such groups if they were downtrodden. Johnson did not seethe with indignation in regard to class or race struggles. In the cultural isolation of the Pedernales valley, he took his own rights for granted and paid little attention to his fellow men who did not have the same rights.\textsuperscript{12}

This situation was altered when Johnson became a young adult. After attending Southwest Texas State Teachers College for a year and a half, Johnson took a job as an elementary school teacher in Cotulla, Texas, a small LaSalle County community in south Texas. Cotulla had a large Mexican-American population, and because of the tradition of segregation only Mexican-American pupils attended the small school to which he was assigned. During the 1928-29 school year at Cotulla, Johnson had intimate contact with Mexican-Americans. He came to love the children. He spent money from his own pockets so his poverty-stricken pupils could have play equipment at their impoverished school. He spent hours outside the classroom with his pupils in extracurricular activities such as softball, volleyball, debating, and a literary society.\textsuperscript{13} In his later years Johnson often made reference to his Cotulla experience and the deep impressions his young pupils made upon him.\textsuperscript{14} Also, for the first time in his life he became conscious of the white society’s discrimination toward the Mexican-American minority, and in later years this consciousness was extended to include blacks. This consciousness evolved into a genuine caring for members of minority groups.\textsuperscript{15}

This concern became apparent when Johnson was director of Texas’ National Youth Administration (NYA) from July 1935 to February 1937. The youngest state administrator in the nation, Lyndon Johnson was eager to succeed as he directed the activities of the largest NYA state agency. Johnson wrote thorough reports, unceasingly strove to acquire more money for Texas youth, instituted programs which were copied by other states (the most notable being the construction of “pocket-sized” highway parks), and garnered more than his share of newspaper publicity. His generally good job as state administrator greatly impressed the national office of the NYA.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{13}Dorothy Nichols Interview, Sept. 24, 1968, Oral History Collection, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{E.g.}, see the transcript of the C.B.S. television program, Feb. 1, 1973, in \textit{ibid}; and his major television address on civil rights in 1965: “Remarks, Joint Session of Congress, 3-15-65,” Box 25, Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{15}William S. White Interview, March 5 and 10, 1969, Oral History Collection, \textit{ibid}. This care was illustrated in 1949 when Johnson was on a cross-town bus in New York City. An elderly black woman boarded the bus, and since no vacant seat was available, Johnson rose and gave his seat to her. His companion later asked Johnson why he had done this and the reply was that he hoped that if his mother entered a crowded bus, some man, whether black or white, would offer her his seat. Personal letter from Homer Thornberry, April 17, 1975.

\textsuperscript{16}Richard R. Brown to LBJ, March 17 and 20, 1936; LBJ to Brown, March 12, 1936, Box 2, NYA Files. (These and future references to NYA Files are from copies in the LBJL.)
Johnson’s concern was to help the youth of Texas—regardless of color—during the gloomy days of the Great Depression, and his administration was generally nondiscriminatory. Soon after Johnson set up his statewide headquarters in Austin, he initiated a meeting with black leaders in the city. In the basement of a black Methodist Church, Johnson informed the blacks that he was eager to assist jobless black youths. Some blacks were surprised that he would make such an overture, and many were distrustful of his motives. One black contemporary has concluded that Johnson helped blacks not only because he desired to do a good job, but also because he “cared for people.”

In view of Texas’ historical racial customs, NYA director Johnson decided to have two advisory committees, one white, one black. He appointed leading black citizens to the Negro Advisory Committee. This committee met separately from its white counterpart, its primary function being to assist Johnson and his staff in planning and promoting NYA programs for black youth. The Negro Advisory Committee worked diligently, and Johnson’s superiors were impressed with the cooperation its members gave Johnson. Throughout his nearly two years in office Johnson met on a number of occasions with the presidents of the Negro colleges in Texas to discuss plans for greater participation by Texas Negro youths in the state program. These college presidents gave Johnson their full cooperation.

Blacks had good reason to cooperate with Johnson. His lengthy monthly reports to the national office carried details of projects designed to give work to black young people, as well as reports revealing how much money college students at Negro colleges had received. Students in numerous Negro high schools and thirteen colleges regularly received NYA aid. While the figures varied, nearly 1,000 black high school students and nearly 500 black college students regularly received NYA aid in Texas. These figures jumped for a brief period in 1936 when Johnson requested and received an additional $10,000 to be used specifically for Negro colleges. On one occasion Johnson travelled to Washington to plead successfully for increased funds for Negro colleges. He somehow always man-

19Special Report of Negro Activities of the National Youth Administration of Texas, Box 11, ibid. Some black youths worked on Texas NYA projects—particularly those handled by the State Highway Department—which were not specifically designated as “Negro projects.” However, on such projects the two races were “somewhat segregated” as far as the actual work was concerned. Ibid.
20Juanita J. Saddler to LBJ, April 9, 1936, Box 2; Mary E. Branch to LBJ, March 11, 1936, in Special Report of Negro Activities of the National Youth Administration of Texas, Box 11, ibid.
21Texas Administrator Monthly Reports, Feb. 1936, Box 8; Nov. 1936, Box 10, ibid.
22See various monthly reports of the Texas State Administrator, ibid.
23LBJ to Brown, Feb. 26, March 9 and 11, 1936; Brown to LBJ, March 5, 1936, Box 2, ibid.
aged to wrangle more money than his normal quotas allowed, and he never turned money back.\textsuperscript{24}

Besides the general monies made available to black students, Johnson's administration supported a number of specific projects for black youth. It established successful domestic training projects for girls at four black colleges, plus one in the city of Corsicana in cooperation with the WPA Emergency Division. Johnson himself made trips to the local campuses to further the progress of these projects. On one such occasion he was accompanied to Prairie View State College by Byron Mitchell, State Director of the National Reemployment Service, who was interested in making arrangements for the placement of these project-trained girls in private employment.\textsuperscript{25} Johnson established a number of camps to provide vocational instruction for unemployed young women, one near Houston being for blacks only.\textsuperscript{26} The NYA financed a constructive clean-up program employing black boys and girls in the town of Taylor, when a sanitation and health survey of the city revealed problems regarding community health and the spread of disease.\textsuperscript{27} Johnson also showed interest in a "Negro research project" to be established in Houston, and in response to a letter from the President of Prairie View State College he used his influence to have established near that campus a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp for black young men.\textsuperscript{28}

The most interesting of Johnson's projects was the Freshman College Center Program, an educational endeavor sponsored by the NYA in conjunction with colleges or universities, offering first-year-college work to students whose families were subject to work relief. He established a number of such centers in the state, fifteen of which served a total of 471 black college freshmen.\textsuperscript{29} Because of the success of all these programs, Johnson received continued praise from his superiors. After visiting San Antonio, Austin, and Houston, a field representative from the national office wrote: "I believe I know the Negro condition in the Southern states, and no one would be more delighted to see them have the kind of training that Mr. Johnson is setting up in Texas. The Texas Director is doing what many of us are talking." The letter concluded with the statement that the Texas training program "is a credit to the National Youth Administration."\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{24}LBJ to J.C. Kellam, (undated telegram, Box 11; S.S. Tucker to LBJ, Dec. 21, 1936; LBJ to Brown, Sept. 21 and Dec. 22, 1936; Sam Gilsstrap to LBJ, Jan. 8, 1937, Box 1; memo of telephone conversation between LBJ and Brown, Oct. 29, 1936, Box 2, \textit{ibid.}; telephone interview with O.H. Elliott, March 4, 1975.

\textsuperscript{25}LBJ to Brown (telegram), March 4, 1936, Box 2; State Administrator Monthly Reports, Oct., Nov., and Dec. 1936; Jan. 1937, Box 10, NYA Files.

\textsuperscript{26}General Report of NYA District No. 2, Sept. 17-28, 1935, Box 7, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{27}Texas State Administrator Monthly Report, April 1936, Box 9, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{28}LBJ to Brown, Feb. 18, 1936; Mary H.S. Hayes to LBJ, March 3, 1936, Box 2; W.R. Banks to LBJ, Sept. 4, 1935; LBJ to Hugh H. Bennett, Sept. 8, 1935; LBJ to John J. Corson, Sept. 8, 1935; Corson to LBJ, Sept. 12, 1935, Box 3, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{29}Texas Administrator Monthly Reports, Feb. 8, 1936, Box 8; April through June, 1936, Box 9; Brown to LBJ, Feb. 11, 1936; LBJ to Brown, Feb. 6, 1936, Box 2, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{30}Beatrice Denmark to Brown, Feb. 9, 1937, Box 10, \textit{ibid}.
The NYA files contain no information that Johnson discriminated against black youth; no comments of disparagement; nothing negative. To be sure, he operated a segregated administration, but that was to be expected in view of the national organization and the times. There are at least two hints that Johnson discriminated against blacks within his own administration. After conferring with Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune (national director of the NYA’s division of Negro activities), the national Deputy Executive Director of the NYA recommended to Johnson that he hire a Negro assistant to help with black youth programs. Such an appointment would contribute to “a more efficient and harmonious program.”

Johnson apparently did not reply to this letter, and he certainly did not follow the suggestion. Even though the members of the Negro Advisory Committee cooperated with Johnson, they complained when so few blacks were placed in paid supervisory positions on Johnson’s staff. They were unhappy that all the supervisors of the Freshman College Centers were white. After the Johnson administration established a Junior Employment Service in Fort Worth, it assigned white counselors to interview black youths. In a letter to Johnson a field supervisor remarked pointedly: “The fact that the Government is aiding and supporting various projects in the State, seems to me to allow leeway for liberal and tolerant groups and individuals in the community to try to make the social patterns more just and equitable for all the people in the community.”

Johnson did not consciously discriminate against black youths, but he did not appoint blacks to paid supervisory capacities, and he was interested only in helping black youths economically, not in altering traditional social patterns. In a special report to his superiors, Johnson wrote: “The racial question during the past one hundred years in Texas . . . has resolved itself to a definite system of customs which cannot be up-set over night. So long as these customs are observed, there is peace and harmony between the races in Texas, but it is exceedingly difficult to step over a line so long established, and to up-set a custom so deeply rooted, by any act which would be shockingly against precedence . . .”

Johnson’s was a paternalistic administration committed to the status quo in regard to race relations.

Johnson retained this general attitude toward Texas blacks throughout his nearly twelve-year stint as a national congressman. Having resigned from his NYA job in March 1937 to run for the position vacated by the death of the incumbent congressman of Texas’ Tenth District, Johnson won the special election and took his seat in July 1937. The Tenth District is composed of ten counties in central Texas, including Travis, in which the state capital is located. On the western edge of the state’s black belt, the district’s counties varied greatly in the percentages of blacks in their populations. In 1940 the eastern-most Washington County was highest in black percentages with 38.1, while Burnet, the

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31 Brown to LBJ, Aug. 3, 1936, Box 2, ibid.
32 Juanita J. Saddler to LBJ, April 9, 1936, Box 2, ibid.
33 Special Report of Negro Activities of the National Youth Administration of Texas, Box 11, ibid.
northwestern-most county, had only 1.7 percent of its population black. The average for all ten counties was 20.7 percent blacks. During an era when blacks were generally disfranchised, Johnson felt no compulsion to appeal to them. Even though he campaigned on the basis of being a representative for all the people, he omitted blacks when he listed the people in the district who had problems which he hoped to help solve.34 No evidence indicates that the subject of black rights or problems arose in Johnson's 1937 congressional campaign, nor that black rights were issues in the subsequent congressional elections. The same statement can be made for Johnson's successful attempt in 1941 to move up to the Senate.35

Congressman Johnson concerned himself with constituent requests of both whites and blacks. He tried to answer every letter on the day it was received, and he earned the reputation of having never failed to answer a letter from a constituent. He was not embarrassed to be called "the bell boy" for his district. At the end of his congressional career he stated that he had been happy to run errands for "the farmer, the veteran, the little businessman, and all the people."36 While he did not specifically list blacks, he did not exclude them from his assistance.37 When federal slum clearance money was first made available, Johnson persuaded Congress to earmark $500,000 for a public housing project to alleviate somewhat the horrible conditions in an Austin slum inhabited by blacks and Mexican-Americans. In addition to looking after his black constituents specifically, Johnson worked and voted for legislation which would help both white and black Texans. He always favored more money for the Farm Security Administration, which provided relief for tenant farmers and sharecroppers, and in the late 1930's a bureaucrat in that agency observed that Johnson "was the first man in Congress from the South ever to go to bat for the Negro farmer."38 He favored increased appropriations for the National Youth Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, and he worked to insure that blacks were included within the provisions of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938.

Throughout his congressional years, Johnson made few public statements revealing his attitudes toward blacks. While he did not join his southern colleagues in their anti-black remarks in Congress, neither did he protest their rantings; indeed,

34 Austin American, March 12, 1937; unidentified newspaper clipping, Feb. 28, 1937, in Scrapbooks, LBJL.

35 James W. Partin, Jr., "The Texas Senatorial Election of 1941" (M.A. thesis, Texas Technological College, 1941). In later years Johnson professed to have taken the unpopular stand in 1937 favoring the right of blacks to vote, and he once stated that he came out for black rights in all of his congressional campaigns. Texas newspapers and documents in the LBJ Library do not substantiate these statements. For Johnson's recollections, see Robert C. Rooney (ed.), Equal Opportunity in the United States: A Symposium on Civil Rights, December 11-12, 1972 (Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin, 1973), p. 166.

36 Houston Post, Aug. 27, 1948.

37 Mary E. Branch to LBJ, April 20, 1943; LBJ to Branch, April 23, 1943, Box 1, Education, House of Representatives, 1937-1949, LBJL.

38 Quoted in Booth Mooney, The Lyndon Johnson Story (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1956), p. 35. Also see Robert C. Weaver Interview, Nov. 19, 1968, Oral History Collection, LBJL.
viewed from the perspective of his voting record alone, Johnson was a traditional southern congressman on the subject of civil rights for blacks. He voted against an anti-lynching bill in 1940, as well as anti-poll tax bills in 1942, 1943, 1945, and 1947. During the Second World War, when the Congress desired to provide more convenient absentee ballots for overseas soldiers, he voted with southerners who favored a state (as opposed to a federal) ballot, so that the states could control the voting process (i.e. regulate the black vote). In 1946 when Congress was considering a federal school-lunch program, he voted “No” on an antidiscrimination amendment offered by Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem, and in that same year he voted with those southerners who successfully employed parliamentary tactics to kill a bill to create a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC).39 Johnson justified these votes on the basis of states’ rights. He believed that law enforcement, voting qualifications, and economic opportunity were the proper domains of the states, and he did not want the national government involved in these areas of American life. Whenever he made these statements, he sounded very much like his southern colleagues. He protested that he was not “against” blacks, but was rather “for” states’ rights.

When Johnson spoke with black constituents in his congressional district, he often tediously explained that he did not actually vote against particular civil rights bills; rather he voted to recommit them for revision or study.40 He hoped these technical explanations would make blacks less unhappy with his votes. At other times he frankly informed the blacks that he had to vote with the southern leaders in Congress so that he could obtain their support on other matters of importance. He reminded the blacks that the civil rights bills against which he had voted would not have passed anyway, and he preferred to wait and vote “Yes” when his vote would make a difference. Johnson said, “I must vote this way, but I’m for you and I will get what I can for you in the future.” In reference to civil rights, over and over again Johnson said, “Timing is important.” Black supporters knew they were taking chances by backing Johnson during those years, but they had faith that Johnson “would do something for them when he had a real opportunity.”41 But many Texas blacks were suspicious of Johnson. They did not believe that he sincerely wanted to help them, and they looked upon him as cynically opportunistic in regard to their civil rights. These blacks believed not only that Johnson’s public stands were conservative, but also that his private views were conserva-

39Cong. Record, 76 Cong. 3 Sess., p. 253; 77 Cong. 2 Sess., p. 8174; 78 Cong. 1 Sess., p. 4889; 79 Cong. 1 Sess., p. 6003; 80 Cong. 1 Sess., p. 9552 (Johnson did not actually cast a vote when the 1947 anti-poll tax bill was before the House, but he was “paired against” it, and would have done so had he been present.); 78 Cong. 2 Sess., pp. 1229, 2639; 79 Cong. 2 Sess., pp. 1541, 6351, 6353, 6354, 6356, 6357, 7161, 7589.

40Personal letter from Ben Ramey, June 25, 1975.

Johnson left no records revealing his private thoughts, but his public stance tended to undermine his protestations that he was a true friend of blacks.

Johnson continued to take anti-civil rights stands after his career in the House of Representatives ended. When he ran for the Senate in 1948, he opposed President Harry Truman’s announced civil rights program. Opening his senatorial bid on May 22 before a large crowd in Austin and over a twenty-station radio hook-up, Johnson said: “The Civil Rights Program is a farce and a sham—an effort to set up a police state in the guise of liberty. I am opposed to that program. I have voted AGAINST the so-called poll tax repeal bill; the poll tax should be repealed by those states which enacted them. I have voted AGAINST the so-called anti-lynching bill; the state can, and DOES, enforce the law against murder. I have voted AGAINST the FEPC; if a man can tell you whom you must hire, he can tell you whom you can’t hire.” Despite these remarks, Johnson did not emphasize civil rights as a campaign issue; rather his major campaign themes were preparedness, peace, and progress. Furthermore, among Johnson’s ten opponents in the Democratic primary, only two were serious contenders for the nomination, and both of them were more opposed to black civil rights than was Johnson. The three major candidates devoted much attention to the nation’s foreign policy toward Russia, inflation, taxes, government controls, and deficit spending. Other subjects were the Taft-Hartley Act, selective service, and universal military training. As a campaign issue civil rights trailed far behind. After his opening speech, Johnson made no references to civil rights in his canned speeches. In the eastern sections of the state where prejudices were stronger, he occasionally reiterated his anti-civil rights stand, but the issue remained secondary. A survey of 147 Texas newspapers revealed that civil rights was hardly mentioned during the 1948 campaign.

Black newspapers gave little more attention to the civil rights issue than did the candidates or the white-controlled Texas papers. During this era Texas black newspapers were almost without exception politically independent. They wrote

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43“May 22 Speech,‘” pp. 9-10, in “Speeches of Lyndon B. Johnson, 1948,” vol. 1, Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, LBJL.
46See “Speeches of Lyndon B. Johnson, 1948,” vols. 1 and 2, in Box 1, Statements of Lyndon B.
Johnson, LBJL.
47The Houston Chronicle, June 7, 1948, carried the headline “JOHNSON WILL GIVE VIEWS ON RACE ISSUES,‘” but the entire article was devoted to a radio speech in which the candidate opposed “all violations of states’ rights.” The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, May 26, 1948, indicated that Johnson “mentioned” his civil rights stand in Amarillo, but nothing else was reported. By contrast, examples of the candidates’ speeches and replies on other campaign issues were plentiful. See Houston Post, June 22, 1948; Dallas News, July 31, Aug. 7 and 20, 1948; Austin American, June 20 and Aug. 5, 1948; Lubbock Avalanche, June 26, 1948; Waco Herald-Tribune, July 21, 1948; Fort Worth Star-Telegram, June 23, 1948; San Antonio Express, Aug. 15, 1948.
about discrimination, bigotry, segregation, inequality, and injustices based on color, but they seldom became more specific. They advocated black voting rights, but they said little about specific elections and the 1948 campaign was no exception.48 The Dallas Express gave no attention to Johnson as a candidate in 1948, until after the runoff primary had been held.49 It carried editorials on the subjects of civil rights, Truman, the Dixiecrats, and the Wallaceites, but it made no comments upon the Texas senatorial contest. The Houston Informer editorially criticized politicians who favored states’ rights and who refused to consider civil rights advances for blacks, but it mentioned no candidate specifically—including Johnson.50 The Informer supported Johnson after the runoff primary ended.51

The results of the July 24 Texas primary showed Coke Stevenson with 477,077 votes, Lyndon Johnson with 405,617, and George E. B. Peddy with 237,195. The eight minor candidates won a total of 82,503.52 While issues had been discussed somewhat during the first primary, the runoff primary between Stevenson and Johnson focused almost entirely on personalities. If the issue of civil rights was played down before July 24, after that date it was nonexistent. Truman’s renomination at the Democratic national convention in Philadelphia on July 15, the adoption of strong civil rights plank and the Dixiecrat walkout did not inject the civil rights issue into the Texas runoff primary. Nor did a southern filibuster of an anti-poll tax bill in the summer of 1948 bring out the issue in Texas.53

The runoff primary, held on August 28, did not immediately settle the political dust. The totals were so close that it took weeks of counting and recounting, much political maneuvering, and a lengthy court battle before Johnson was certified as the 87-vote victor. In the meantime, political manipulation, lawsuits, and charges of fraud and corruption occurred, all of which meant that no issue existed after August 28 except who would be the Democratic nominee. The race against an unknown Republican in the November election was wholly anticlimactic. Here again civil rights was not an issue. When President Truman made a train tour through Texas late in the campaign, Johnson happily rode across the state with the President, even though Johnson had spoken against Truman’s civil rights program.54 Such actions must have created some confusion in the minds of Texas voters.

A poll conducted a few weeks prior to the first primary revealed that an appalling number of voters were ignorant of the candidates’ views. To a question,
"What do you think these candidates' stands are on Truman" (i.e. civil rights), the following resulted:\(^{55}\)

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The white voters in the cotton-growing, heavily black populated counties of eastern Texas had voted for Peddy in large numbers in the first primary, but they switched their votes to Johnson in the second. Perhaps Johnson's occasional references to his anti-civil rights stand, or at least his image, had something to do with this new votes.\(^{56}\)

When rural blacks exercised their right to vote, an estimated 65 to 90 percent of them voted for Johnson in the runoff.\(^{57}\) Since about one-half of Texas' blacks lived in urban areas in 1948 and since a higher percentage of these blacks were involved in politics, the black urban vote was more significant than the black rural vote. In heavily populated black urban precincts in Dallas and Houston, Johnson ran up large majorities.\(^{58}\) Many black leaders in the major cities had campaigned actively throughout the race and had contributed substantial sums to Johnson "because we believed in him."\(^ {59}\) Why this loyalty? Blacks looked upon Johnson as the liberal candidate. They knew Stevenson had not helped them while he was governor, and they preferred Johnson even though the latter was by no means liberal on the race issue.\(^ {60}\) In the national presidential campaign, Texas blacks chose Truman over Henry Wallace. They believed that Wallace was too pro-Russia and they felt he was too idealistic about civil rights.\(^ {61}\) They rejected Wallace because his racial views were too liberal (i.e., impractical), and they rejected Stevenson because his were too conservative (i.e., discriminatory). Thus, Texas blacks voted overwhelmingly for Truman and Johnson; they looked upon both men as moderates even though the two candidates disagreed on civil rights.\(^ {62}\)

While in the House of Representatives, Johnson had earned the reputation as a politician who knew where political power lay and who unabashedly moved toward it. Because of the bitterness and questionable procedures surrounding his

\(^{55}\) Austin American, July 3, 1948.

\(^{56}\) Houston Post, Aug. 28, 1948.


\(^{58}\) Houston Post, Aug. 31, 1948; Dallas News, Sept. 1, 1948.

\(^{59}\) Hobart Taylor, Sr. Interview, Jan. 29, 1972, Oral History Collection, LBJL.


\(^{61}\) Houston Informer, Aug. 7, 1948.

\(^{62}\) Dallas Express, Nov. 13, 1948; personal interview with M.R. ("Andy") Anderson, March 5, 1975. National black leaders such as Robert C. Weaver and Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune strongly favored Johnson's election. Clarence Mitchell Interview, April 30, 1969, Oral History Collection, LBJL.
narrow primary victory, Johnson informed John Stennis, Mississippi Senator and member of the Senate Rules Committee, that his (Johnson's) victory might be contested when his name was presented to the Senate for acceptance. In his reply Stennis informed Johnson that he would not judge the case until the facts were in, but Stennis negated this impartiality when he continued, "As far as our personal relationships are concerned, I just have a feeling that we will have a lot in common, I came very near being a Texan myself, as my parents once lived there before I was born."63 In his reply Johnson thanked Stennis for his letter and wrote, "Your friendship will always be remembered and reciprocated."64 By making contact with the only southerner on the Rules Committee, Johnson was not only solidifying his relationship with a key man in the Senate, but also he was deepening his ties with the southern bloc which had had great power in the Senate for many years.

This became patently clear when Johnson publicly aligned himself with the southern bloc less than two months after he took the oath of office as a senator in January 1949. Even though the civil rights issue had been muted in the Texas senatorial race, it was one of the major issues in the national arena. Truman's victory in the presidential race encouraged the President to continue to press for civil rights legislation, setting the stage for yet another southern filibuster in the Senate. Richard Russell of Georgia, leader of the southerners, had begun to apply filibustering tactics to motions to take up bills he opposed. To prevent his maneuver, Truman's supporters attempted to extend Senate Rule XXII to motions as well as to actual bills. Rule XXII permitted an end to debate on a bill when two-thirds of the senators present voted to do so. For over two weeks of the early days of the Eighty-first Congress, this procedural question dominated the Senate's attention. Lyndon Johnson early realized that Richard Russell was a powerful leader, and the new Senator already had begun to flatter and cultivate the slow-talking Georgian.65 Eager to become involved, Johnson persuaded Russell to permit him to make his first Senate speech during the filibuster. On March 9, Johnson delivered his now-famous address. Referring to "we of the South," Johnson firmly tied himself to the southern bloc with this speech. He advanced all the traditional arguments about free speech (i.e., the right to filibuster) which southern senators had been repeating for many years. Admitting that the filibuster was in fact against civil rights, not just a matter of free speech, he attacked Harry Truman's program unmercifully. Reiterating his stand that states should outlaw the poll tax and punish lynchers, he deplored efforts to pass national legislation. He also spoke out against the FEPC. Advancing an old southern platitude, he said, "We cannot legislate love."66

Although Johnson rationalized that he was not speaking against blacks, reaction

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63 John C. Stennis to LBJ, Oct. 21, 1948 Box 5, Senate Congressional File, ibid.
64 LBJ to John Stennis, Oct. 25, 1948, ibid.
65 Allen Ellender Interview, July 30, 1969, Oral History Collection, ibid.
66 Cong. Record, 81 Cong. 1 Sess., pp. 2042-49.
from the minority race in Texas was immediate. The executive secretary of the Houston branch of the NAACP telegraphed: "THE NEGROES WHO SENT YOU TO CONGRESS ARE ASHAMED TO KNOW THAT YOU HAVE STOOD ON THE FLOOR AGAINST THEM TODAY. DO NOT FORGET THAT YOU WENT TO WASHINGTON BY A SMALL MAJORITY VOTE AND THAT WAS BECAUSE OF THE NEGRO VOTE. THERE WILL BE ANOTHER ELECTION AND WE WILL BE REMEMBERING WHAT YOU HAD TO SAY TODAY". Johnson's reply, which majored on the general principle of unlimited debate, was unacceptable, and a delegation of Houston blacks traveled to Washington to protest. The confrontation ended unsatisfactorily after heated words had been exchanged between the visitors and the new Senator. Other NAACP chapters passed resolutions censoring Johnson for his remarks.

Black newspaperman Carter Wesley editorially criticized the filibusters, and in strongly worded letters the powerful black leader expressed to Johnson his disappointment in the March 1949 speech. Other disapproving blacks wrote to Johnson, and the Senator did not satisfy them when he pointed out, "Too many people confused the cloture issue with civil rights. Actually they had no direct connection since there have been many filibusters in the Senate on other subjects." He seemed hurt when he was accused of political expediency and when blacks pointed out the implications of his speech. He wrote, "It has been a matter of profound regret to me that many Negro citizens of Texas have viewed my speech in the Senate as an affront to them. I did not and would not make a speech in that spirit." White supporters of civil rights expressed their objections too. When Johnson had 15,000 copies of his speech printed and distributed in Texas, one man mailed a copy back to Johnson with a note scribbled across the front. With an arrow pointing to the "B." in Lyndon B. Johnson, he wrote: "Does the 'B' stand for 'Bilbo'? Really, now—we Texans aren't as ignorant (or as proud of our traditions) as you give us credit for being. Have the courage to defend your own convictions, Mr. Johnson, and you'll gather more votes than you will by aligning yourself with the old die-hards of the South." Another disgusted Texan returned a copy of the speech with the following typed across the front: "Dear Lyndon: The Post Office Dept goes into the red handling this kind of hot air. Why don't you fellows cut out the bull and get down to work. A supporter of yours."
Johnson’s arguments in his replies to his constituents centered on free speech as a principle. He believed that civil rights issues and free speech in the Senate were distinctly separate issues. He argued that if the last vestiges of free speech and free debate were stricken, the nation would be playing directly into the hands of the Communists. He stated that the right of unlimited debate was the last hope of protection for the laboring man, the Negro, and all other minority groups against ruthless majorities.  

He believed that the civil rights bills as then drawn were “obviously unconstitutional and certainly unworkable, more likely to create chaos than goodwill.” He would like to see poll taxes eliminated in Texas but not by federal legislation. He believed that “the crime of lynching should be punished promptly and effectively,” but this was a matter of state enforcement. He believed the United States had “made great strides toward our goal through conviction rather than the proposed method of compulsion which we are considering here now.”

When one Texan accused Johnson of having changed his position, he replied, “I can assure you that my views regarding the nation’s difficulties are exactly the same as they were when I came to Congress twelve years ago. I said in 1937 that I was opposed to the poll tax and have said it in every campaign since. The same is true of my feelings regarding lynching. I abhor all types of violence and feel that strict measures should be taken to curb it by the proper forum.” To another he wrote, “The position that I took in my speech is the same that I took in six campaigns for Congress and two for the United States Senate . . . .” To a personal friend who had written him after the speech, he said that the anti-poll tax bill, the anti-lynching bill, and the FEPC were not germane to the subject of civil rights. “To secure these rights,” he confided, “I think we must carry on the frontal assault on the ‘ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-fed’ problem facing part of our nation. Until this problem is met, all your other legislation is built upon sand. That is the end of the problem I hope I can grab hold of and do something about during my years in the Senate.” Johnson believed that he remained wholly consistent in regard to civil rights for blacks. On the basis of principle he had continually opposed certain federal legislation for them; at the same time he did what he could to help the economic conditions of blacks.

But one should not forget that Johnson was in touch with the sentiment of white Texans. He knew that his anti-civil rights stand in the 1948 campaign and in the Senate in the spring of 1949 reflected the attitudes of the great majority of the Texas voters. While blacks and liberal whites wrote letters of criticism, a much

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77LBJ to Roscoe H. Collier, March 18, 1949, ibid.
79LBJ to E.J. Siegert, March 15, 1949, ibid.
80LBJ to R.N. Jones, March 28, 1949, ibid.
81LBJ to Frank Baldwin, March 10, 1949, ibid.
82LBJ to C.C. Creighton, March 23, 1949, ibid. Italics added.
83LBJ to Frank Baldwin, March 10, 1949, ibid.
84LBJ to James H. Rowe, Jr., March 15, 1949, ibid.
larger number of Texans who agreed with him expressed their approval. Johnson appreciated these constituents’ words of support, and he reveled in the more laudatory letters.\textsuperscript{85} In all likelihood his positive response to letters of praise was greater than it otherwise might have been because he was offended by rumors that he had agreed to take a stronger anti-civil rights stand in return for assurance that the recent disputed election would end in his favor.\textsuperscript{86}

Throughout his first term in the Senate, Johnson continued to hold the same public stand in regard to civil rights for blacks which he had previously held. In May 1949 he voted “Yes” on a discriminatory public accommodations amendment proposed by Mississippi Senator James Eastland to the perennial District of Columbia home rule bill. In 1950 he voted to table an amendment to outlaw poll taxes; he voted down the line with his southern colleagues against an FEPC measure the Senate was considering; he voted to table an amendment to prohibit racial discrimination in unions; and he supported an unsuccessful amendment to a military draft law providing that a young man have the right to choose to serve in a unit composed only of members of his own race.\textsuperscript{87}

When the San Antonio branch of the NAACP approved a resolution demanding that Johnson support Civil Rights Legislation, since citizens were “being denied the rights of first-class citizenship,”\textsuperscript{88} Johnson replied, ‘I cannot agree that the civil rights legislation as it is currently written would extend to any citizen ‘the rights of first’class citizenship.’ First-class citizenship begins at the meal table, in the schools, at the doctor’s office, and many places other than in court . . . . In the future, as in the past, I shall work to equalize the opportunity and reward of all Americans through better housing, better schooling, better health, and all those things which are the true rights of first-class citizenship.”\textsuperscript{89} To those who protested his stand, Johnson reminded them that he had supported public housing, federal aid to education, and many other measures “which have raised the living standards of all our people and expanded the economic opportunity for all.”\textsuperscript{90} Even while opposing anti-lynching bills and the FEPC, he wrote, “I shall support those measures which will help make America a better place for men to live.”\textsuperscript{91} To another he wrote, “I should not like to see the people of Texas and the South undergo the wave of riots and stress which I believe would follow if we tried to


\textsuperscript{86}Personal letter from A. Maceo Smith, March 21, 1975.

\textsuperscript{87}\textit{Cong. Record}, 81 Cong. 1 Sess., p. 7018; 81 Cong. 2 Sess., pp. 512, 550, 551, 7300, 8996, 9074, 9982, 16,378.

\textsuperscript{88}“Resolution on Civil Rights,” San Antonio Branch, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Jan. 16, 1950, Box 2, Pre-Presidential Papers, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{89}LBJ to Harry V. Burns, Jan. 18, 1950, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{90}LBJ to Charles H. Braxton, Jan. 27, 1950, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{91}\textit{Ibid}.
When the Supreme Court in 1954 handed down its famous decision requiring the desegregation of the nation's schools, southerners in Congress circulated a "Southern Manifesto" expressing their opposition. Every senator from the old Confederacy except Johnson signed the protest document. He was "firmly opposed to forced integration," and he believed that "the states should be allowed to work out their own solutions to problems coming within their proper jurisdiction," but he could not sign the document. To a constituent he wrote, "Now that the Supreme Court has ruled, . . . I can only hope that the problem will be worked out reasonably and with fairness to all concerned." In the wake of the Supreme Court decision blacks and others more strongly pressured the Congress to pass civil rights legislation, and a second "Southern Manifesto" was circulated in March 1956. Johnson did not sign this statement either. Having been elected Minority Leader in 1953 and elevated to Majority Leader in 1954, Johnson refrained from signing the documents because he did not want to endanger his position of leadership in the Senate. He told reporters, "I am not a civil rights advocate." A few months later when a well-known reporter entitled a nationally-syndicated column "Lyndon Pushes Civil Rights," Johnson protested that he was not involved in planning civil rights legislation. Johnson was upset that a nationally-circulated newspaper column so clearly identified him with efforts on Capitol Hill to legislate in this area.

Despite these protests, for the first time in his life Johnson in 1956 began to give serious thought to the possibility of the passage of a civil rights bill and to his role in that action. In a three-page memorandum to the Senator, George Reedy addressed himself to the then current civil rights "uproar" in the Democratic party. Reedy relegated to failure any policy which would approach the civil rights issue from the standpoint of recovering lost votes for the Democratic party; "Nevertheless, some effort should be made to produce legislation along the civil rights lines—not to recover votes but simply because the issue has reached a point where some action is necessary." Johnson had always believed that "timing is important." With the Democratic party on the verge of splitting over the civil rights issue, with black pressures mounting, with Johnson's leadership under fire because of inaction, and with the Senator beginning to have more than vague aspirations to be President, Johnson decided that the time had come for Congress to pass a mild civil rights bill. The result was the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Whatever the weak-

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92 LBJ to Mary Tom Jackson, Jan. 24, 1950, ibid.
93 LBJ to E.K. Snider, Jan. 16, 1957, Box 15, Pre-Presidential Papers, ibid.
94 LBJ to Merle Lorentz, Jan. 16, 1956; see also LBJ to Mrs. A. P. Andrews, Oct. 8, 1956, and LBJ to Charles L. Hachher, May 18, 1956, Box 7, ibid.
96 LBJ to Robert S. Allen, Dec. 26, 1956, Box 7, Pre-Presidential Papers, LBJL.
97 Dec. 3, 1956, ibid.
nesses of that measure, it inaugurated an era of civil rights legislation unparalleled in the nation's history. Lyndon Johnson had taken a public stand for civil rights, and as Congress passed each succeeding law, he became more firmly committed to civil rights for all Americans. His later senatorial career, his vice-presidential years, and his presidency attest to his public posture. No evidence exists to indicate that his private thoughts in those years differed from this public statements and actions.

Cynics say that Johnson moved from anti-civil rights stands in the 1930's and 1940's to pro-civil rights stands in the late 1950's because he was ambitious, expedient, opportunistic, and politically motivated. Johnson saw himself as totally consistent, always the friend of blacks even when voting against civil rights bills. Johnson was too complex to be categorized simply as "consistent" or "expedient." The record shows that over three decades in public life Johnson was not consistent. But that record shows less expediency than the growth of an individual in public life. While he was a congressman from Texas' Tenth District, Johnson naturally reflected in his voting record the anti-civil rights views of the majority of his constituents, during an era when black pressures were not great and when publicity about the plight of minorities was limited. When he became a senator his early Senate voting record and speeches continued to reflect his now statewide constituency. Concurrent with his elevation to the leadership of the Democratic Party in the national Congress was an increased national consciousness of minority rights and Johnson's own thoughts about the presidency. The converging of these streams of consciousness pushed Johnson in the direction of public action for blacks and explains his dominant role in the passing of the first civil rights act since Reconstruction. As Vice-President and as President, Johnson had a nationwide constituency at a time when black frustrations often resulted in violence. His role as national leader compelled him to act for the interests not only of the oppressed minority but also for all the people of the country. The story of Johnson's public stance on civil rights is one of evolution, of maturation, of growth.

The same may be said of Johnson's attitudes toward blacks and their civil rights, although here the evolutionary process was less dramatic. Johnson's love for people, with him from his earliest years, compelled him to be concerned about minority groups—from the Mexican-American children in Cotulla in the 1920's to the bitter black rioters in the 1960's. Even though he did not support civil rights legislation in the 1930's and 1940's there is no reason to believe that he did not sincerely desire to help blacks. The practical situation tempered his private attitudes. He had often told blacks that he would help them when had the power and when the timing was right; when those two conditions were met he carried out his promises.