

## **"Let us Reason Together"** **Lyndon Johnson, Master Legislator**

During the [1992 presidential election](#), many people talked of gridlock—the inability of Congress and the [president](#) to pass major legislation. Some argued that our system grinds to a halt whenever one party occupies the White House and another party holds a majority in Congress. Yet during the 1950s, a Republican president and a Democratic Congress worked together to pass important legislation.

They were brought together by one man — [Lyndon Baines Johnson](#).

He is probably best remembered as the president who ordered the massive buildup of American military forces in [Vietnam](#) and for his subsequent failure to win the war. But there was another, more successful role that Johnson played during his many years of public service. Lyndon Baines Johnson was a master legislator.

### **Politics Was His Destiny**

Born in Texas in 1908, Lyndon Johnson trained to be a teacher, but he made politics his life's work. He first went to Washington in 1931 as the secretary to a Democratic congressman. In 1935, he became the Texas director of the [National Youth Administration \(NYA\)](#), one of President [Franklin Roosevelt's](#) [New Deal](#) agencies. The NYA was designed to put Americans back to work during the [Great Depression](#). After two years with the NYA, he ran for a seat in the [U.S. House of Representatives](#) and won.

Congressman Johnson quickly came under the wing of [Sam Rayburn](#), a fellow Texan and one of the most powerful leaders of Congress. Rayburn saw to it that the 28-year-old Johnson got appointed to major legislative committees.

Re-elected to the House in 1938 and 1940, Johnson set his sights on higher office. When a [U.S. Senate](#) seat fell vacant in 1941, Johnson entered the race. He lost the Texas primary by a little over 1,000 votes. In December of that year, the Japanese attacked [Pearl Harbor](#) and the United States went to [war](#). Johnson became the first member of Congress to volunteer for active military duty. He saw combat in the Pacific and won the Silver Star before President Roosevelt recalled to Washington all members of Congress serving in the military.

When the war ended, Johnson positioned himself for another run at the Senate. He began to move away from his earlier New Deal liberalism while endorsing President [Truman's](#) efforts to contain [communism](#).

### **Rise to Power**

In his 1948 campaign for the Senate, Johnson was able to deliver 350 speeches in two months by flying around Texas in a helicopter. He carefully tailored each speech for his Texas constituency. He spoke out against [socialized medicine](#), big [labor unions](#), and [civil](#)

[rights](#) laws, while advocating [farm price supports](#) and defense spending. In conservative and segregationist Texas, Johnson told the voters what they wanted to hear. He won the Democratic primary amidst charges of ballot box stuffing and voter [fraud](#).

In the predominately Democratic South, a victory in the primary virtually guaranteed his election. Lyndon Johnson entered the Senate in 1949. From then on his rise to power was unstoppable. He attached himself to Senate powerhouses like [Richard Russell](#) of Georgia who helped him get on the important [Armed Services Committee](#). Johnson became a leading advocate for bolstering the nation's military defenses to confront the spread of communism.

In the election of 1952, Republicans won both the presidency and control of the Senate. When the new Congress convened in 1953, Johnson had acquired an enormous amount of power for a first-term senator. He was named minority leader ahead of many Democratic senators with more seniority. His job was to advance Democratic interests in a Republican-dominated government.

As minority leader, Johnson cooperated with [Eisenhower](#)'s Republican Administration while he attempted to unify the liberals and conservatives in his own party. Typically, Johnson would modify Eisenhower's bills with Democratic [amendments](#). Johnson used this technique to pass a new [minimum wage](#) law, expand [Social Security](#) benefits, encourage public housing construction, and introduce a new interstate highway system.

In 1954, Texas voters returned Lyndon Johnson to the Senate for a second term. The Democrats regained majority control of the Senate by one vote. In January of 1955, Senate Democrats made Johnson their majority leader. At age 46, he was the youngest majority leader in Senate history. Journalists called him the most powerful man in Washington except for the president.

### **"The Treatment"**

As majority leader, Lyndon Johnson became the most effective legislative leader of his time. How did he do it?

First, Johnson controlled Democratic [appointments](#) to the Senate [committees](#). He guaranteed every senator at least one important committee assignment. This placed many new senators in his debt. Second, Johnson controlled the introduction of bills and would speed them up or slow them down at will. "Timing can make or break a bill," he would say. Any Democratic senator who wanted to pass a bill had to get Johnson's approval. Third, Johnson used his Senate scheduling power to pass bills or bury them as he chose.

Majority Leader Johnson was in a position to grant many favors. He kept close count. For every favor granted, Johnson expected one in return —usually a vote. Johnson's favors ranged all the way from approving budgets for Senate committees to assigning office parking spaces. He maintained a personal touch with senators of both parties with birthday and anniversary cards, sickbed visits, and boxes of cigars.

Lyndon Johnson once said, "the only real power available to the leader is the power of persuasion." Johnson's persuasive powers were immense. He became master of rehearsed hallway encounters and cloakroom compromises that put together the votes he needed to make laws.

The most awesome display of Johnson's persuasive ability came forth in a face-to-face encounter with a senator whose vote he wanted. Journalists called this "The Treatment." Columnists Evans and Novak described it this way:

He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling. From his pockets poured clippings, memos, statistics. Mimicry, humor, and the genius of analogy made The Treatment an almost hypnotic experience and rendered the target stunned and helpless.

Johnson believed that finding the middle ground was the essence of legislative leadership. Referring to one of his father's favorite passages from the Bible, he would say to a senator, "[Come now, let us reason together](#). . . ."

### **The Civil Rights Act of 1957**

Early in 1957, the Eisenhower Administration introduced a civil rights bill. The bill called for the creation of a bipartisan commission to investigate violations of black citizens' civil rights. The bill also proposed that the federal government be given the authority to enforce voting rights, to seek injunctions (court orders) against all civil rights violations, and to prosecute violators of these injunctions. The bill easily passed the House of Representatives, but faced near-unanimous Southern opposition in the Senate.

Lyndon Johnson never believed in racial segregation. He pushed for the civil rights bill, but as a Southerner, he had to be politically careful. He could not attack segregation outright without jeopardizing his chances of being re-elected. Still, Johnson was convinced that segregation condemned the South to educational and economic backwardness. Johnson believed that, in order to join the mainstream of America, the South would have to abandon racial segregation. Most important, Lyndon Johnson wanted to be president of the United States — he realized he would never be accepted outside the South if he were perceived as just another Southern segregationist.

Majority Leader Johnson told his Southern colleagues that they were bound to lose if they did not compromise. Johnson modified the civil rights bill to restrict the use of federal injunctions to voting cases only. As a further restriction, Southern senators proposed an amendment guaranteeing a [jury trial](#) to anyone charged with violating an injunction in a voting rights case. This amendment would make the bill almost useless—all-white southern juries would never convict other whites for violating the rights of black persons.

Liberal senators objected to the Southern attempt to water down the civil rights bill. Johnson offered a compromise: jury trials could be guaranteed in criminal, but not civil violations of voting rights. To gain support from Northern liberal senators, Johnson

offered an amendment to the legislation that would provide jury trials for [union](#) members accused of breaking [strike](#) injunctions.

The bill, as amended by Johnson, passed the Senate. The House, however, refused to accept the Senate changes. Johnson went back to work and applied "The Treatment" to key members of both houses of Congress. The outcome was a further compromise. Senator [Strom Thurmond](#), a Democrat from South Carolina, was the only Southern holdout in Johnson's Senate. Thurmond conducted a record-setting one-man 24-hour [filibuster](#) against the compromise bill. But Thurmond failed to talk the bill to death. The compromise passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law by President Eisenhower on September 9, 1957.

Critics of the Civil Rights Bill of 1957 called it a sham. It did little to protect the voting rights of blacks and nothing to protect their other rights. Still, this was the first civil rights law passed by Congress in over 80 years. The bill opened the door for later legislation that would force the South to desegregate. Much of the credit for reconciling the South to the rest of the nation belongs to Lyndon Baines Johnson.

After he became president, Johnson continued to use his skills as a master legislator. One of the most important laws he pushed through Congress was the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#). Finally, Southern black citizens would be guaranteed the right to vote.

### **For Discussion and Writing**

1. William S. White, a journalist who followed Lyndon Johnson's entire political career, once described him as an expert at "politics as the art of the possible." What did White mean by this?
2. Describe the methods used by Lyndon Johnson to get laws passed. Do you agree his methods are necessary for a legislature to work in a democracy? Why or why not?
3. Evaluate Johnson's role in the passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1957. Do you think he should have acted differently? Why or why not?

## **A C T I V I T Y**

### **The Art of the Possible**

Lyndon Johnson was a master of compromise. His ability to convince Congressional adversaries to "reason together" enabled Johnson to push controversial legislation through Congress. Today, Congress has been criticized for its inability to overcome gridlock and pass vital legislation. Many believe that the process of compromise has been stalled.

Imagine that you are a member of Congress. The Democratic president has just introduced a \$40 billion dollar domestic aid bill that provides \$10 billion for education; \$10 billion for extended unemployment benefits, job training, and emergency funding for

summer jobs; \$10 billion for highway improvements and other public works programs; and \$10 billion for drug abuse treatment centers, infant vaccinations, and city parks and recreation areas. This bill is going to pass in some form. (It could end as a \$80 billion bill or a \$1 million bill.) Your job is to forge a compromise in your constituents' best interests.

1. Break into subcommittees of four congressional members each. Each student plays one of the four congresspersons described below: Smith, Waverly, Leong, and Williams. If a group has five members, two students can team up as a single legislator.
2. All role players with the same name, e.g. all the Williams, Leongs, etc., meet together to discuss their districts, their constituents' needs, and their strategy on the bill.
3. Return to the congressional subcommittees and begin negotiating a compromise bill. You need three votes to pass the compromise bill.
4. After a set amount of time, regroup the class and have each group report back their compromise bill.

### **Legislator Profiles**

Congressperson **Smith** is a Republican from a middle-class, suburban bedroom community. Most of his/her constituents own their own homes, commute 20 to 40 miles daily on unimproved highways. Many send their children to private schools. Because of defense cuts, the district has a high percentage of white-collar unemployment. A fiscal conservative, Smith has promised to reduce the deficit.

Congressperson **Waverly** is a Democrat in an inner-city district. Most constituents are minorities and immigrants who rent apartments in racially fragmented neighborhoods that suffer from high unemployment. Neighborhood joblessness in turn contributes to high crime rates, drug abuse, gang activity, and vandalism. Most constituents send their children to public schools. After school, the kids play in the streets.

Congressperson **Leong** is a Democrat in a mixed district that encompasses a large population of elderly homeowners, many of them retired and living on social security and other government benefits. This district has recently sanctioned the construction of mini-malls, and several large industrial parks. In addition, a new series of housing developments has increased the need for schools. Leong has promised to reduce the deficit, but has voiced support for the president.

Congressperson **Williams** is a Republican in a rural district. Williams' constituents are typically long-term residents of the area who own property but are often only seasonally employed by agribusinesses. Others own small tourist businesses. A third group are retirees and others who have moved to the area to get away from cities. Proudly self-reliant, the constituents seldom depend on any social services other than public schools. Williams has also promised to reduce the deficit.