For more than 30 years, Robert Caro, the Pulitzer Prize winning biographer of "The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York," has been in hot pursuit of Lyndon Johnson.

In the first three volumes of his magnificent and monumental series, "The Years of Lyndon Johnson," Caro traced Johnson's journey from the Texas hill country to Washington, D.C. and his tenure as "master" of the United States Senate.

Caro's Johnson was a complicated and contradictory creature: a champion of the poor and oppressed; a faithful lieutenant of the anti-civil rights Southern caucus; a brilliant legislative tactician; and a politician with insatiable appetites and ambitions, who would do just about anything to acquire and retain power.

Insightful volume

In volume four, "The Passage of Power," Caro takes Johnson from his unsuccessful race for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States in 1960 to banishment from the corridors of power as John F. Kennedy's vice president to the breathtaking achievements of the nine months following Kennedy's assassination, which culminated in the passage of the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Like Caro's earlier volumes, "The Passage of Power" is entertaining, engrossing, mind-boggling in its command of detail, and awash in insights, some of them speculative, about critical moments in Johnson's career.

Had Johnson entered the presidential sweepstakes earlier, Caro suggests, not all that persuasively, he might have prevented Kennedy from being nominated on the first ballot. Caro makes a compelling case, however, that had Kennedy run for re-election he might well have dumped Johnson from the ticket.

Pushed civil rights bill

Revisiting the cliché that power always corrupts, Caro reminds us in this book that "power always reveals." Told by an adviser soon after he became president that he should not waste his time on lost causes like civil rights (and antagonize southern Democrats), Johnson apparently replied, "Well, what the hell's the presidency for?"

In a breathtakingly knowledgeable narrative, a practical primer on the inner working of the United States Congress, Caro shows how Johnson made good on his vow that if he ever had the power he would "make sure that every Negro had the same chance as every white man."

As if by magic, the civil rights bill, which had been stalled when Kennedy was president, made it through the House Rules Committee controlled by Howard Smith of Virginia and a filibuster in the Senate.

"That man will twist your arm off at your shoulder and beat your head in with it," Senator Richard Russell, Johnson's one-time mentor, observed, in a mixture of admiration and resignation.

Volcanic temper at times

Johnson secured the confidence of the American people during the presidential transition, Caro indicates, not only by displaying his virtuosity in getting legislation passed, but by holding in check the doubts and fears that had, at times, paralyzed him, a volcanic temper, a predilection to crush his enemies, and perhaps most important, his hatred for Robert Kennedy.

To be sure, he remained willing to destroy the careers of journalists intent on investigating his connections to Bobby Baker, a Senate staffer (and LBJ protégé), who was under investigation for influence peddling, larceny, and tax evasion. But he...
seemed composed, calm, competent, and even humble.

The qualities he subdued, Caro reminds us, "were still there, as powerful as ever." They would return, with a vengeance, when riots plagued American cities, anti-Vietnam War protestors chanted, "Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today," a "credibility gap" emerged, and the blood feud with Bobby Kennedy was renewed. And we can bet that Caro will have a lot to say about them in the final volume of his extraordinary biography.

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