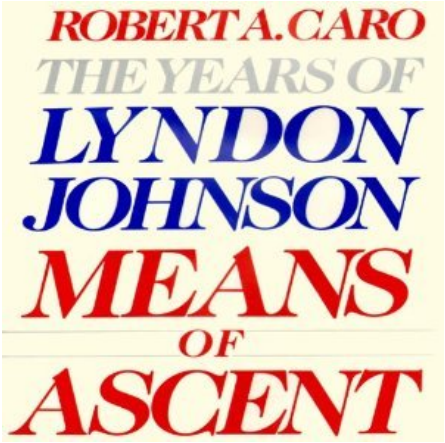

Means of Ascent

Robert A. Caro , Grover Gardner (Narrator)

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Robert A. Caro's life of Lyndon Johnson, which began with the greatly acclaimed The *Path to Power*, also winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, continues - one of the richest, most intensive, and most revealing examinations ever undertaken of an American President. In *Means of Ascent*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer/historian, chronicler also of Robert Moses in *The Power Broker*, carries Johnson through his service in World War II and the foundation of his long-concealed fortune and the facts behind the myths he created about it. But the explosive heart of the book is Caro's revelation of the true story of the fiercely contested 1948 senatorial election, for 40 years shrouded in rumor, which Johnson had to win or face certain political death, and which he did win -- by "the 87 votes that changed history."

Caro makes us witness to a momentous turning point in American politics: the tragic last stand of the old politics versus the new - the politics of issue versus the politics of image, mass manipulation, money and electronic dazzle.

Means of Ascent Details

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From Reader Review Means of Ascent for online ebook

James Thane says

This is the second volume (of four thus far) in Robert Caro's magisterial biography of former president Lyndon B. Johnson. It treats the period from mid-1941, when Johnson lost a special election for the U.S. Senate, through 1948, when Johnson won election to the Senate in a hotly contested and heatedly disputed primary election. Johnson was crushed by his loss in 1941, and believed that the election had been stolen from him by an opponent who was more clever than he. He vowed it would never happen again.

Months after that defeat, Johnson was still a sitting congressmen when World War II began with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In campaigning for the Senate in 1941, Johnson had promised Texas voters that if he voted to send their sons to war, he would leave the Senate and be out in the trenches with them. Once war was declared, Johnson thus found himself in a bind because he had absolutely no interest in being in the trenches or anywhere else, other than in the Congress.

As means of finessing the situation, Johnson requested a leave from the Congress. He had earlier enrolled as a Lieutenant Commander in the Naval Reserve and now left the Congress to go on "active" duty in California and elsewhere, far from any fighting.

Johnson knew, though, that his political career would be imperiled if he did not see *some* action, especially in light of the promise he had made. Thus he ultimately arranged to get to Australia and then to go on a single combat mission as an observer, not as a combatant, flying on a B-26 bomber. The bomber came under enemy fire from Japanese Zeros, but returned safely to its base. Another bomber in the flight was shot down.

Having seen this action, Johnson returned home and fairly quickly thereafter, to his duties in the House of Representatives. But in the years following, he continued to embellish the story of his combat experience until it bore no resemblance whatsoever to the action that had actually occurred. Johnson also managed to win a Silver Cross, simply for being a passenger on a plane that had come under enemy fire, and he wore it proudly for years thereafter as he boasted of his heroic wartime actions.

Having disposed of Johnson's war "record," Caro then goes on to recount how Johnson established the foundation of the fortune he would accumulate in the coming years by taking over a small, struggling radio station. The station, and the others to follow, were technically owned by Johnson's wife, Lady Bird, and Johnson always insisted that the radio empire was hers alone and that he had nothing to do with it. Caro quickly demolishes that story as well and demonstrates that Johnson was actively involved in the radio business from the start and strongly suggests that Johnson, perhaps improperly, used his political influence to grow his fortune in this regard.

Caro devotes the bulk of the book, though, to Johnson's second effort to win election to the Senate, this in 1948. It's not a pretty picture and resembles nothing remotely approaching the innocent picture of democracy in action that we all learned in grade school civics classes.

In a nutshell, Caro believes that this election was make-or-break for Lyndon Johnson. He had to give up his congressional seat in order to run for the Senate, and Caro argues that if Johnson had lost the election, his career in politics would have been finished. That point is arguable, though. Johnson was still a relatively young man in 1948, and certainly, had he wanted to, he could have pursued other political options.

Caro is also convinced that Johnson blatantly stole the election and does everything he can to marshal the evidence in favor of his case while ignoring anything that might argue against it. Caro says that he initially intended to cover the election in only a single chapter, but he was apparently so incensed by the story that, instead, he devoted three-quarters of this volume to it.

As is the case with his other books, Caro has done prodigious research into the topic. The problem, it seems to me, lies in the way he has used that research. For example, much of the book rests on oral interviews. One gets the impression that Caro must have talked to anyone who ever even passed Johnson on the street from the time Johnson was born until the day he died.

The problem, though, is that Caro seems all too willing to take at face value any criticism that anyone has to offer of Johnson. If, on the other hand, someone might say something nice about the man, Caro often stops to present a counter-argument, suggesting that the compliment perhaps was not deserved.

The over-arching problem of Caro's treatment of the election, though, is that he sees this as a contest of black and white, good versus evil, virtue against vice, with no middle ground apparently possible. Johnson is clearly the guy in the black hat and his principal opponent, Coke Stevenson, is crowned with the white hat.

Given the nature of Texas politics in the late 1940s, winning the Democratic primary was tantamount to winning the election. Several candidates ran for the Senate seat in the primary with Stevenson leading the pack and Johnson coming in second. But Stevenson did not win a majority of the vote and so had to face Johnson in a runoff election. In the second election, Johnson emerged the winner by a scant total of eighty-seven votes. Caro argues that the outcome was the result of unprecedented electoral fraud never before seen, even in Texas.

In order to make Johnson appear as crooked as possible, Caro resorts to turning his opponent, Coke Stevenson, into a sainted hero of the Old West--a man of the people, humble, wise, simple and honest beyond reproach. He waxes on at length about Stevenson's virtues, noting at one point that, "He loved the law that he had taught himself on the ranch, loved it as he loved his land, loved it with an intensity so deep it was almost religious, believed in its majesty, its power to right a wrong."

The only problem with Caro's depiction of Stevenson is that few, if any, other historians would recognize it. The Coke Stevenson described by many other observers was a small-minded reactionary, an advocate of states' rights who distrusted government, the federal government in particular, an isolationist and a racist as well.

As governor of Texas, Stevenson had slashed spending for social services. He was very critical of a Supreme Court decision in 1944 that expanded black voting rights in Texas, and said regarding a lynching in Texarkana that "certain members of the Negro race from time to time furnish the setting for mob violence by the outrageous crimes which they commit." Ol' Coke was a bit more generous toward Mexicans noting that "Meskins is pretty good folks. If it was niggers, it'd be different."

But this is a far cry from the Stevenson that Caro portrays, and when challenged on this score, Caro insists that the portrait of Stevenson that others now take as gospel results from the fact that they are perpetuating the lies that Johnson and his supporters spread about Stevenson during the election. But these kinds of criticisms had been made of Stevenson long before 1948, as had allegations that he was in bed with the oil interests, though this is hardly a unique charge in Texas politics. Well before 1948, Stevenson had earned the nickname "Calculatin' Coke," which was not always intended as a compliment.

Caro does admit, almost grudgingly, that Johnson displayed great leadership skills as he marshaled his forces during the election contest, that he raised huge sums of money to finance his campaign, that he worked himself to the bone, and that he conducted what would become the first modern political campaign in Texas history.

Stevenson, campaigned in the old-fashioned way, driving around Texas, talking to voters wherever he could find them in a very low-keyed effort. Johnson, on the other hand, barnstormed the state in helicopters, using advance me to line up crowds and making heavy use of radio, newspapers and other media. Irrespective of who should have won the election, even Caro is forced to admit that Johnson out-worked, out-thought, and ultimately out-maneuvered Stevenson. But it's almost as if Caro thinks that Johnson wasn't being fair to the old boy; that instead of flying around the state meeting as many voters as he possibly could, Johnson should have been knocking around Texas in an old beater pickup, talking to people one at a time as a show of deference to his older opponent.

In the end, in Caro's view, the runoff election was decided by several thousand votes that were manipulated in Johnson's favor in a few south Texas counties, principally Duval, which was under the firm control of political boss, George Parr, the "Duke" of Duval.

A common tactic in Texas elections at the time was for candidates to withhold votes from counties they controlled and then report them as needed, "correcting" and "updating" the totals often for several days after the election was supposedly over, as they watched the votes reported from areas that favored their opponents. Parr was a master at this tactic, and the precincts under his thumb very often produced huge, lopsided vote totals for the candidates that Parr favored.

In this case, Parr favored Johnson and, at the very last moment, when the election seemed clearly decided in Stevenson's favor, Duval County reported 202 new votes--200 for Johnson and 2 for Stevenson. This flipped the election in Johnson's favor by 87 votes, a total that withstood challenges in several arenas and which earned Johnson the nickname, "Landslide Lyndon."

Naturally, Stevenson--and Caro--screamed "Fraud!!!" Both claim that the election was stolen from the rightful winner. One would expect this from Stevenson, but one would also expect a more dispassionate argument from an allegedly neutral historian. The problem with Caro's account is that he focuses exclusively on the electoral manipulations perpetrated by the Johnson camp and totally ignores the claims of fraud that were made against Stevenson by Johnson and others. Certainly, Stevenson's supporters were manipulating votes as well, correcting and updating their totals for several days, just as the Johnson camp was doing.

Moreover, Caro leaves the reader with the impression that Parr, the "Duke of Duval," was clearly in Johnson's pocket. Others, though, have argued that the only political fortunes that Parr was concerned with were his own. He backed the candidate that he though would most benefit his own interests and in this case, that candidate was Johnson.

Caro also neglects to mention that, previously, the "Duke's" candidate had been Coke Stevenson. In the three elections prior to 1948, Parr had furnished votes out of Duval County favoring Stevenson over his opponents by 3,643 to 141, 2,936 to 77, and 3,310 to 17. Ironically, Stevenson did not consider these returns to be suspicious and not surprisingly, he did not challenge them.

But in his last term as governor, Stevenson took actions that angered Parr, and the "Duke" took his revenge in 1948 by delivering similarly lopsided margins to Johnson. Suddenly now, the vote totals out of Duval County *did* seem suspect to Stevenson and he screamed bloody murder, but to no avail. Robert Caro

continues to scream bloody murder on Stevenson's behalf, but his argument rings a bit false because of the way in which Caro has chosen to use the evidence he has collected. I've never been a fan of Lyndon Johnson, but you hardly have to love the guy to think that he deserved more even-handed treatment than he gets from Caro on this subject.

Ultimately, the only thing that seems perfectly clear in all of this is that politics in Texas in the late 1940s was a cesspool, and that anyone who wanted to play the game had to dive into it. As Caro makes very clear, certainly fraudulent votes were added to Johnson's total. As he is less willing to admit, fraudulent votes also inflated Stevenson's totals and it's impossible to know which of the candidates might have won an election conducted along the lines of the aforementioned civics lesson.

Perhaps the last word in all of this might best go to former Austin mayor and Johnson supporter, Tom Miller, who later said, "They were stealin' votes in east Texas. . . . We were stealin' votes in south Texas. Only Jesus Christ could say who actually won it."

Matt says

In reading Caro's second volume of the LBJ biography series, I was completely blown away. While some call it the lesser exciting of Caro's first two volumes depicting LBJ's Texas life and early congressional years, I felt that it helped shape the image of the president I knew from the history books. Means of Ascent is by no means a shrinking violet in the literary world, though its action does, perhaps, pale when placed against its older sibling, Path to Power. Still, Caro brings to life those years that bridge the lead up to his arrival on Capitol Hill and his arrival in the Senate, where he made a national name for himself. From falsified war stories to his campaign and complete robbery of the 1948 Democratic primary for the US Senate. And here I thought 'Dewey wins' was the #1 story in the 1948 election cycle.

Caro pulls no punches, appearing to side only with the truth and that which the record reflects, rather than cozying up to the famed LBJ. We learn a great deal about the chain-smoking, ill-tempered LBJ as the story progresses from his arrival on the scene as a congressman and his failed attempt at the Senate in 1941. The reader will, more than likely, not leave this volume with a strong feeling that the hometown son will vanquish his foes.

What stunned me most in this volume, perhaps in the entire biography up to this point, is the story (read: saga) surrounding the 1948 US Senate election and LBJ's attempts to (and success at) steal the Democratic primary by any means necessary. Caro makes this election campaign the poignant part of this volume, spending a great deal of time on the issue and looking at it, both in-depth and from a variety of perspectives. Not being American, I was not as aware of his moment is history as some may be (and it seems the US media really picked up on it after LBJ's death in 1973), but the 87 votes that changed the world really is a key event in both the progression of this biography and the life of LBJ. For, as it is said many times, had he lost (and actually been declared the loser), his limelight would surely have burnt out and left others to fill the void. It was with this victory that his way to greatness and infamy on the national political scene was paved.

I cannot express how impressed I am with this book and the progression of this series. As I enter the third book (longest and probably the most powerful, as we examine LBJ in the Senate), I cannot wait to see what Caro reveals and what history has to say about this powerful man, who will do anything to get what he wants.

Jessica Brown says

In my view the best of the 3 Caro books on Johnson. (All are great.) He made me care about Coke Stephenson someone I'd never heard of before. I'm just hopefully Caro stays healthy enough to finish this wonderful series.

Antonio Nunez says

I first heard of this book in 2001, when the Sunday Times of London asked William Hague, former chief of the UK Conservative Party, which book would he take to a desert island. At the time Hague was licking his wounds after having been mauled in Parliamentary elections, and was forced to step down as Party Leader. He was defeated by one of the most brilliant and ruthless political operators this country has known since the days of Baroness Thatcher, Tony Blair. Having seen the book in a used-book shop I decided to pick it up in spite of its heft. I wasn't disappointed. I read the book very quickly, and understood why Hague had been so impressed by it. It covers a period in which nothing much was happening in LBJs life. After a hard early life (LBJ's father, a political idealist, was bankrupted due to bad investments, and his children became paupers almost overnight) Johnson was able to parlay his inexhaustible energy, his sharp mind and tart tongue, and his strong personality into a sucessful political career. Having reached the House of Representatives he found himself stuck there, bored, blocked by the seniority system which would take him his whole life to overcome.
Johnson was always looking to the White House, and he knew that in order to make the jump from Texas state politics to the nationals he needed to be elected senator. The book's main set-piece is a wonderful day-by-day description of the 1948 senatorial election that pitted Johnson against a legend of an older time, former governor Coke Stevenson. Much has been said about Stevenson, including that he was a racist, and that he cheated as much as Johnson ever did. Be that as it may, it seems well-proven that Stevenson was indeed a much-larger-than-life compendium of old-fashioned Western virtues. He was laconic. He was frugal. He was hard-working. He always kept his word, even when doing so was physically dangerous for him (no one could accuse Johnson of being a brave man, neither as a student nor as an adult). He had a lean, weather beaten face that reminded me of Clint Eastwood in his more recent Western, The Unforgiven. Stevenson's allies may have cheated in their own districts, but it is clear from Caro's research that Johnson won the election only because of very clear and fairly inept fraud in South Western Texas, the kingdom of the Duke of Duvall (a corrupt local politician out of Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men" who used patronage and corruption to maintain power for decades). One of the perpetrators came forward and admitted it to Caro many years later, and there is a wonderful picture of some of the Duke of Duvall's men posing with a missing ballot-box. Some of these men would have looked just fine at the side of Boss Hogg in the Old "Dukes of Hazzard" TV show. Even more interesting than the actual cheating and the hear-stopping climax, which Caro manages to make exciting even though we know Johnson wins in the end, is the wonderful sense of an era re-created. Caro brings to life the dusty towns, the heat, the working women and men, with no electricity, who eagerly listen to the candidates hoping for action that might improve their lives.

Another point concerns the clash between new and old ways of doing things. Johnson represented the "new" politics, that currently dominates the landscape not just in the US. In this approach, the candidate is a product, slickly packaged, supported by carefully controlled media disclosures and eye-catching stunts, such as using a helicopter to tour the State. Stevenson is politics as it was, where the candidate campaigned on his

character, campaign meetings were an opportunity for the electors to meet the candidate, and an appeal was made to the electors' good sense rather than their love of gimmicks. Obviously, the Johnson-Stevenson clash could not but appeal to William Hague, after having been trounced by the most successful practitioner of "new" politics in the UK, Tony Blair.

Although the heart of the book is the 1948 election, Caro reveals much about Johnson's military service and business activities. Johnson saw little or no military action and in fact spent most of his time in service touring defence facilities in the West, which left him enough time to buy clothing and socialize. A single sortie in a fighter plane in the Pacific was enough to get him a decoration from General MacArthur, and he embellished his brief contact with the troops in ways that could sicken those with weak stomachs. And this is another important point. Johnson was shameless, and apparently believed his own lies at the time he told them. He was astonished whenever he found out that others weren't fooled. And the description of the way he built his media empire (when he became President he was a rich man, perhaps the richest to occupy the post) is also illustrative of the many opportunities that state patronage gives to the unscrupulous to better their lot with little risk.

While this is clearly not a pretty picture, I don't believe that Johnson comes out mainly as a villain. It is unavoidable that an intelligent, ambicious, energetic young man should use all his powers to achieve his goals. And he wasn't the worst of the lot. Many deals were proposed to him that he turned down, whether on ethical grounds or to avoid damage to his reputation. Many succcesful political figures were as bullying as Johnson (Teddy Roosevelt and W. S. Churchill come to mind), and others were as economical with the truth as he was (Richard Nixon and Tony Blair come to mind). Many leaders, whether in academia, or in business, or in politics, tend to overstate their own merits and downplay their failures. Johnson's main flaw is that he was more human than the rest. While not admirable, this is surely something that we can understand.

Eric says

I loved this book. I was halfway through a long review when I inadvertently obliterated it with the heel of my hand. I'm too frustrated right now to reconstruct my work.

H. says

Means of Ascent is the second volume in (now) projected 5 volume biography of LBJ. It covers the period from after his first, unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate until his successful run six years later. For what at one time was to be a 4 volume biography, it seems a poor allocation of resources to devote the same amount of space (an entire volume) to six years spent in the House of Representatives as to the eight years spent as either the Vice President or President of the United States of America. Even with another projected volume added, it’s still too much, especially with 5/8 of the book devoted just to LBJ’s Senate run.

Caro’s biography remains thematically about power, and Means of Ascent demonstrates just how far LBJ would go for it and how much it meant to him. An incredible physical coward, LBJ threw himself into harm’s way during WWII when it became clear that his future political career demanded it. His wife Lady Bird proved more than competent in managing affairs in his absence, something that threatened him and he felt the need to crush upon his return (hers is a particularly sad story). Bitterly poor his entire life, LBJ refused opportunities for wealth through oil—a signal of just how high his ambitions were for a politician

from oil-friendly Texas (he instead made his fortune in radio—apparently it pays to have friends in the FCC and donors with a little more to donate that allowed under election law).

Understandably given the above, Means of Ascent is the harshest of the three toward LBJ. This harshness is even more apparent in Caro's coverage of LBJ's Senate race against popular governor Coke Stevenson. LBJ infamously stole the election, although in his defense the earlier election had been stolen from him in turn. And to hear Caro tell it, he stole it from George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt rolled into one. Stevenson was indeed an incredible man. But he was also more than a little racist, and virulently isolationist. Caro chooses to bury this information deep in an appendix amidst ample other notes on Stevenson rather than trust his reader to interpret it appropriately in the main text. One could certainly come to the view that LBJ was not appreciably better than Stevenson on matters of race (although as Caro as ably shown us, LBJ's personal views were never as deplorable as his record). One could conclude that foreign policy was irrelevant to the 1948 Senate race. But the reader is entitled to come to that conclusion, and Caro robbed the many readers who will never thumb through the appendix of that.

Ben says

This volume of Robert Caro's epic multivolume biography of Lyndon Johnson would seem to be inessential. LBJ is cast to the political wilderness after the death of FDR, his greatest booster, and from the description, it sounds like it will be Lyndon kicking a can down a dusty road and feeling sorry for himself. Do not be deterred! I enjoyed it even more than the first volume. It has personal intrigue, cutthroat business deals, vicious political maneuvering, courtroom drama, and my favorite thing, insane conspiracies that are probably true.

Almost the entire book is about LBJ's 1948 Senate campaign. We join up with Lyndon as he's building his fortune with a radio station he purchased that just so happens to get some incredible competitive advantages from Lyndon's friends at the FCC. Lyndon is making huge amounts of money, pretending he isn't, and bragging about his military service, which consisted of flying in a bomber that was shelled by the Japanese. The soldiers who shot down the enemy planes receive no decoration, but Lyndon receives a Silver Star that he wears on his lapel constantly. He talks of all the bombing missions he was on and all the good friends who lost their lives. He won't let anyone talk him out of a Senate race, even though he's already lost once and he'd be running against the most popular politician in Texas history.

Like all great biographies, "Means of Ascent" puts the Senate race in its proper historical context and the reader will learn a lot about the passage of history through the modernization of political campaigns. I'm always amazed by how some historical figures seem to be placed in the perfect place and time to make the most of their talents. LBJ was born to run a political campaign in Texas in 1948. His opponent, a sort of ranch Cinninatus, is the morally serious governor of Texas named Coke Stevenson. Stevenson is so old school that he refuses to make campaign promises or speak about his opponent directly. He doesn't care about being on the radio. He doesn't bother to seriously fundraise. He travels from small town to small town shaking hands and reminding voters that they know he'll do the right thing.

Johnson, on the other hand, takes money from whoever he can and gives it to whoever can help him however they can. He flies from town to town in a borrowed helicopter, dazzling the small town people who have never seen one. He yells at them through a bullhorn from the sky. He screams at hotel employees for no reason. He spends incredible amounts of money on radio ads, where he smears Stevenson constantly. When Stevenson politely declines to comment on a labor bill, assuming that his decades in elected office will

inform the electorate of his views on organized labor (opposed), LBJ accuses him of making a secret pact with labor leaders. When Stevenson finally sticks up for himself, Lyndon calls him a Johnny Come Lately and a doubletalking sleaze.

I have to say that the one criticism of Caro is that he doesn't detail the grosser side of Stevenson enough. For one, there's good evidence that Stevenson paid for votes, too. And being a hands-off conservative Texas governor in the 1940's meant that he made some depressingly heartless political decisions. Lynchings, of course, were a constant problem, and Stevenson dismissed them by essentially blaming the victims for not acting right. Not that Lyndon was a civil rights hero at this point in his career. He was amoral. But it's not a case of good vs. evil, it's a case of two flawed and calculating men. There is a Gary Wills essay from the New York Review of Books that should be read in conjunction with this volume. Caro responded to that essay in the same publication but I didn't find it convincing that Coke Stevenson was the last moral politician in Texas. It's a hard sell for Caro.

The side characters in this story are just as compelling as LBJ and Stevenson. There's a border mob boss, a "pistelero" mob enforcer who goes through a moral crisis, a genius attorney, corrupt local officials, opportunistic lobbyists, hardnosed local judges, LBJ's sweet and able wife, LBJ's clever and beautiful mistress whose husband bankrolls LBJ's career, and staffers that LBJ drives to multiple nervous breakdowns. Caro has a great sense of foreshadowing and providing background information. You know that he's telling you how LBJ made money in the radio business for a reason. You know the asides will come back to enrich the narrative later on.

I highly recommend this book.

Sue says

I know perfectly well how Lyndon Johnson’s life turned out, yet I was urgently turning the pages as his 1948 run for the Senate played out its sordid finish in this second volume of Robert Caro’s monumental biography. A biography researched and documented, yes; but a narrative stranger than fiction.

“Means of Ascent” covers seven years of Johnson’s life, comprising his brief (and greatly aggrandized) career in the Navy in World War II and the beginnings of his considerable fortune through ownership of Austin radio station KTBC, which was held in his wife’s name but closely monitored by Johnson and benefitting from his useful contacts in and out of government.

But the second half of the book is the dramatic heart of this book, which is considerably shorter than his other volumes (just over 400 pages). Caro wisely chose to end the installment with Johnson’s accession to the Senate, and future volumes will turn to his powerful Washington career.

But how he got there! The mendacity of the 1948 Johnson effort is the story of vote buying, ballot box stuffing, and courtroom theatrics. But the campaign was also a study in electioneering styles. LBJ needled and goaded, but his opponent, the popular former governor Coke Stevenson, never revealed a platform nor responded to the obvious lies LBJ was telling. He simply said he’d keep taxes down and uphold the constitution; he refused to dignify the charges Johnson was bringing by responding to them. It was a mistake, and his old-fashioned campaign style allowed Johnson to make dramatic inroads into Stevenson’s considerable lead with voters.

The final gap in votes was covered by the people who controlled the voting in the valley south of San Antonio. The Mexican-American residents in Duval and Jim Wells counties rarely cast their own votes, but this time their votes were cast overwhelmingly for Johnson – and reported six days after the election. The resulting challenges and courtroom dramas finally put Johnson into his Senate seat with a margin of 87 votes. The infamous ballot box 13 from Jim Wells County went missing, and poll results went missing.

Caro's preface to "Means of Ascent" makes reference to the extraordinary civil rights triumphs of the 1960s, surely to acknowledge what many people believe to be Johnson's most important legacy. But that is in the future, and how Johnson achieved his toehold is a story for the ages. Caro the historian digs and unearths, then Caro the storyteller grabs the reader and won't let go.

Marc says

Great book.
The author chronicles the life of LBJ from 1941 to 1948 in 3 acts:

- His record as a naval officer in the Pacific (where Johnson spent a total of 13 minutes in combat zone despite all the fake stories he made up to appeal to Texas voters)

- His acquisition of a radio station to make some money outside of politics

- the 1948 democratic senate race against Coke Stevenson

I enjoy reading Caro for his taste of details and description of Texas politics. Only minor critic is that Stevenson is depicted as a quasi holy honest figure who was wronged in all ways omitting the fact that he also teamed up with the racist wing of the party to win the senate seat.

Mary says

The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent - Robert A. Caro

Spoiler Alert: This book is not for the politically squeamish nor the faint of heart.

This is the fourth biography I have read about LBJ. It is also the second of four (a promised fifth still to come) focused on LBJ's life by Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winning author, Robert Caro. Like all of LBJ's biographers, Caro must come to grip with the man's insatiable need to be in control - unlike the other biographers I have read so far, he understands that need in less kindly terms . Most say he believed he needed to have power in order to accomplish the things for other people he wished to achieve and that someplace along the line he crossed the line into seeking to win at all costs because he was convinced only HE would look out for them. Caro points to much darker motives: fear, hubris, desire for revenge, financial greed, and the need to dominate, physically and emotionally, for its own sake. LBJ was a bully - he bullied his wife and daughters, his staff, his political associates, his party, the electorate, and ultimately the entire political system into doing his bidding, by hook or (mostly) by crook. In the first volume in the series, Path to Power, Caro traces the sources of these motives in LBJ's own pathology from his desperately

impoverished boyhood in the hill country of Texas up to his terms in office in the House of Representatives during the New Deal era, which is where this second volume picks up.

While this book does explore his work in the House as well as his "service" (such as it was) during World War II, most of the book is about the Senate Democratic party primary elections in Texas in 1948 where LBJ ran against former Texas governor and old-fashioned political figure Coke Stevenson. In almost excruciating detail, Caro shows how, bit by bit, using absolutely any means, legal and illegal, LBJ destroyed what had been Stevenson's golden reputation as a man who could not be bought and, in the process, managed to "buy" for himself the Democratic nomination, insuring he would win the US Senate election in Texas which essentially had only one party in those days). Dirty tricks doesn't even begin to describe it. One of my mentors used to say of deceitful people, "They lie when the truth would serve." And it is clear, by the time he reached this point in his political career, LBJ had no idea nor interest in the truth. ANYTHING and EVERYTHING was used to insure that LBJ made it to the US Senate. Lies and damned lies were spread about his opponent, day and night, on the radio, in slick mailings, in his speeches (delivered in the shadow of a helicopter he used to get around Texas), in the backroom and bar-room whisperings of paid "travelers" who spread the bad word. He also lied repeatedly about his own record - about his supposed "distinguished" service "in the trenches with the boys" during the war (he had a silver star he had forced MacArthur to give him because he was in a plane once in the South Pacific which encountered some fire power) ; his feverish work in his eleven years in The House (In fact, he had not introduced a single piece of legislation the entire time!), about his support for veterans, farmers, and "hard working common men" (non-existent in the records). Money was no object (his own, his wife's, his friends, and all the oil, shipping and real estate interests he could garner.) Intimidation (sometimes at the point of lawmen with guns or mobsters with brass knuckles), ballot stuffing, ballot buying, the changing of numbers on vote tallies. There were whole districts, where the African American and Hispanic voters traded their pre-paid poll tax stubs for pre-marked ballots and where LBJ came in with 98% of the votes even though in previous elections Stevenson had won by wide margins. The dead voted and winning votes came hours and days after the polls closed, in one case, with people voting in alphabetical order. And when his election (by a mere 87 votes) was challenged by his opponent, first with the board of the Texas Democratic party, then in Texas courts, and finally in Federal Court, LBJ convinced Harry Truman to involve a Supreme Court judge to overrule the findings of a local federal judge and put an end to any hope of a recount, by convincing Truman that is if Stevenson won he would support the Dixie-crats (again, there is no evidence that this is true and much evidence that it was not true - but what did Truman know about Texas politics?) Despite all of this -- or rather, because of this, just after noon on January 3rd, 1949, Lyndon Baines Johnson was sworn in as US Senator from Texas. In an amazingly short time, he would go on to be minority whip, minority leader, then majority whip and majority leader of the Senate, then vice president of the United States, and on November 22, 1963, the day JFK was killed in Dallas, Texas, president of the United States. This is the story Caro covers in his next two books about LBJ, "Master of the Senate," and " The Passage of Power."

So, would I recommend this book or this series? As I say, it is not to the politically squeamish or the faint of heart. BUT, as Caro points out in his opening comments, LBJ's run for the Senate in 1948 marks a significant shift in how campaigns are run in America. He wasn't the first politician ever to buy an election nor the first ever to tell lies about his opponent, but he was among the first to use what we would today call "the mass media" for the spreading of his message (truth or not). Perception was everything; facts mattered hardly at all. He saturated the airwaves, dominated the press, and made sure that mailboxes were filled to overflowing with what can best be described as pure political propaganda. For better or (more probably) for worse, this is now the way politics work in this country though, of course we now have twenty-four hour hyper television coverage and instant internet connection as the main tools in that effort. The importance of this book for me is that by exploring the 1948 campaign for Senator from Texas, Caro raises critical questions about the degree to which, somehow, in this political new age, the truth often gets lost in the telling. Winning at any

cost IS the watchword now - and LBJ's Senatorial election in 1948 illustrates powerfully that what is most often sacrificed in the process is any semblance of rule of law. We like to believe that we are exceptional in how we conduct ourselves, openly and honestly, in the politics of this country. We are convinced that political corruption exists elsewhere, but not here. "Means of Ascent" exposes that lie for the whole world to see. We would do well to read it.

Mehrsa says

What was I thinking? I have read every word Caro has written, but I had imagined I could skip this one because nothing really happened and I'd already read the over 200o pages of the Johnson series. But I had forgotten why I had been reading them in the first place. It wasn't about plot or to find out what happened or didn't happen to Johnson. It was to read Caro write! Duh. The man is the best writer I've ever read and I have fully atoned for my error in believing that it was a good idea to skip a book. In fact, I was so parched for Caro that I read the introduction to this book 3 times just to relish the brilliance of the master. It is an utter delight to read about Johnson's corruption in this narrative. It is not just about the man, but it is about politics, human nature, and American history. Bravo. May he live to finish the series....

Steve says

https://bestpresidentialbios.com/2017...

“Means of Ascent: The Years of Lyndon Johnson” is the second volume in Robert Caro’s series covering the life of Lyndon B. Johnson. Caro is a former investigative reporter and the author of two Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies: “Master of the Senate” (the third volume in this series) and “The Power Broker” about the life of Robert Moses. Caro is currently working on the fifth (and, presumably, final) volume in his LBJ series.

Published in 1990, “Means of Ascent” covers seven difficult years of LBJ’s life – from shortly after his 1941 loss in a special election for the U.S. Senate (while a congressman) to his controversial 1948 Senate victory over former Texas governor Coke Stevenson. This 412-page volume is the shortest in Caro’s series but again demonstrates the author’s tenacious research habits and willingness to dive deeply into a subject.

Caro’s writing style in this volume is strikingly similar to his prose of the first volume: it is neither elegant nor flowery, but is packed with intensity and a clever, if slightly unwieldy, bent. Individual sentences often read as though they were authored by Charles Dickens…but with even more punch. The third sentence in this book, for instance, contains 124 words and more than a dozen commas, colons and semicolons.

Despite being an integral part of a much larger series, “Means of Ascent” is designed to be a standalone volume. Caro repeats enough of the first volume’s highlights in early chapters that a reader could begin the series here without missing important themes. And in this book’s final chapters Caro foreshadows where the next volumes will take LBJ and his insatiable thirst for power.

Volume 2 begins in earnest with Johnson’s brief service in World War II (the subject of significant

embellishment by the future president). This is followed by LBJ's purchase of a Texas radio station which eventually proved no less contentious. But the book's primary focus is LBJ's election to the U.S. Senate in a fascinating and well-told story of intrigue, corruption and rural Texas politics. The book could easily have been titled "The Stolen Senate Election of 1948."

Readers familiar with Caro will recognize the meticulously thorough research which underpins this biography; he seems to have interviewed everyone who knew LBJ…as well as everyone who knew someone who knew LBJ. Also familiar: his use of captivating mini-biographies to introduce important supporting characters.

The most important of these introductions is aimed at Coke Stevenson (Johnson's primary opponent in his 1948 Senate bid) who receives an entire chapter – much like Sam Rayburn in the previous volume. But there are others who also receive interesting, if less extensive, treatment such as George Parr and Frank Hamer.

Caro also continuously provides the reader with enough context, perspective and imagery that it is difficult to read this text and not imagine being at the scene of nearly every moment he describes.

But this biography also possesses its share of blemishes. It often resembles a skilled prosecutor's most zealous and unrelenting case against LBJ's (admittedly numerous and disturbing) personality defects. Where the first volume systematically develops a case against LBJ, this volume feels like a blistering, non-stop critique of nearly every aspect of his character.

Caro often (but not always) provides convincing evidence to support his portrayal of LBJ, but he frequently fails to include evidence that could soften the sharp edges of that portrait. Oral testimony solicited decades after an event is regularly used to condemn Johnson, but I cannot remember a single instance of testimony being used in his defense.

And in the process of highlighting the darkest threads of Johnson's character during his 1948 Senate bid, Caro elevates Coke Stevenson to lofty heights which most Texas historians probably wouldn't recognize. Every villain, it seems, requires a hero. And if Johnson is – in the eyes of some – this volume's controversial antagonist, Stevenson is its strangely flawless luminary.

Overall, "Means of Ascent" is a commendable successor to "The Path to Power" though not quite its equal. Due to its relatively narrow scope it offers fewer piercing revelations about Johnson than the first volume, but does an admirable job bridging two extremely consequential periods in his life. Most importantly, however, "Means of Ascent" leaves the reader deeply embedded in Johnson's life, fully engrossed in Caro's series and eager to tackle the next volume.

Overall rating: 4¼ stars

Stewart Mitchell says

Caro's massive, unending biography of Lyndon Johnson's life continues in spectacular fashion in this book, the second volume in his *Years of Lyndon Johnson* series.

This volume covers the years in between Johnson's first (failed) attempt at a Senate position and his eventual victory over Coke Stevenson to earn one in 1949. As Caro describes in the immersive introductory chapter,

these were Johnson's "dark years". These were the years in which he took a backseat to politics and built up a fortune, strengthened his political ties, and prepared himself for his diabolical return to the campaign trail.

As the first volume in this series hinted at, Johnson's story is a tale of manipulation, vigilance, ingenuity, political brilliance, insecurity, power, and absolute control. Caro has proven that it is a story that only he is worthy to tell, and his writing (much improved since even the previous volume) speaks for itself in its grandiosity, compelling readers to keep turning the pages and at the same time capturing an entire era in its complexity. What started as a fascinating look at a remarkable man's early life has become an epic, told by an epic historian.

Lovers of history, biography, politics, human psychology, character studies- read this series. It deserves the highest praise.

Christopher Saunders says

The Means of Ascent, the shortest volume of Robert Caro's LBJ series by far (at "just" 500 pages), continues in this vein, describing Johnson's WWII service (an uneventful term as a naval inspector and intelligence officer, capped by a single combat mission he blew into an act of epochal heroism), his struggle to find a footing in postwar, post-FDR Washington (he did not get along with Truman at all), and most of all his successful Senate run against Coke Stevenson in 1948. The latter takes up nearly two-thirds of the book, and is an utterly fascinating explication of old-fashioned politicking; campaigns mixing savage personal attacks with crowd-wowing tricks (Johnson's helicopter tours of Texas are treated as something profoundly innovative), the relative lack of actual issues, and the rather blatant, undisguised fraud, ballot stuffing and intimidation. It's hard to come away from this volume, in particular, without thinking Johnson a cad, though in fairness Caro's careful to frame his actions as relatively normal for its time and place. A worthy follow-up to its predecessor, and a lead-in to even more ambitious works to come.

Darwin8u says

"A platform, he said in his dry way, was like a Mother Hubbard dress: it covered everything and touched nothing. Platforms and campaign promises were meaningless; politicians issued them or made them, and then as soon as they were elected forgot them."
- Robert A. Caro, Means of Ascent, quoting Coke Stephenson

This was a different book from Caro's Vol. 1 of the Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power. 'The Path to Power' detailed the rise and early history of LBJ. It set the table. It showed LBJ as a boy, showed the Hill Country. It described his father (so much of LBJ can be explained by his complicated relationship to his father). It moved through LBJ's college career, early political connections, and how all the attributes that made LBJ who he was were formed. It ended as LBJ lost the 1941 election for the US Senate to W. Lee O'Daniel. He basically had the election, out stolen from him. He lost focus too soon.

This book starts off with LBJ's brief stint in the Navy after Pearl Harbor, his attempt and failure to move up in D.C. (with FDR, with Truman, in congress with the Party). He was stuck. So it moves on to LBJ using the

power he had, to buy a radio station in Austin. One that would later be the source of his and Lady Bird's enormous wealth (it is amazing how many of our politicos enter DC rich and leave quite rich).

The last half of the book details the 1948 Senate election when LBJ ran against Coke Stephenson for the Texas Senate seat. At this point, it becomes almost a dual biography. One of opposites. Coke was old school, honest, thoughtful, popular, low key. In many ways he resembled LBJ's father. Caro never said it directly, but in many ways he didn't need to. LBJ's character was formed as a reaction to his father's unwillingness to get into the gutter. LBJ was all ends. He would use whatever MEANS were required. And in 1948, that meant MONEY and corruption.

Anyway, it was hard to decide to give this 5-stars. It wasn't as impressive a book, in some ways, as Vol 1. However, it was beautiful. I loved reading about Coke. Coke was a good counterbalance to LBJ's style. But it is hard, too, not to admire LBJ's work ethic and his ability to take enormous risks and sometimes his brilliant ability to read and use people.

The book is also a lesson on how we are also suckered by the exact things we think we want badly. I'm pretty sure, the men who bought/brought LBJ into office certainly loved some of the things he did, but I'm not sure they would ever have thought their "Man" would eventually pass the Civil Rights Act and much of his great society agenda. Eventually, many would come to regret their man. LBJ was never anyone's man.

Matt says

To say that *Means of Ascent* does not reach the towering heights of Caro's first volume of his *Years of Lyndon Johnson* is no slight. *Path to Power* is one of the greatest feats of biography I've ever read. The only reason *Means* falls short is because it happens to dwell on LBJ's wilderness years.

This was the time between his first failed senate run, during a special election, and his second, successful senate run, which culminated in the famed "87 votes that changed America." During these 7 years, LBJ, the ambitious, over-weaning, butt-kissing, glad-handing, lying, cajoling, cheating, adulterous power-seeker was backed into a corner. His flamboyant traits were diminished as he came up against an imposing barrier: the seniority rules of the House of Representatives.

LBJ, as one of 435 members of the US House, was neutered. His 11-year career was inauspicious and, to put it bluntly, a little depressing. He made no speeches, asked no questions, introduced only 7 bills, of which only 2 became law. He spent a little time grabbing for money, through a radio station he owned, but other than this secondary ambition - to be rich - he mostly stewed in the belief that he would die before gaining his ultimate goal - to be president.

Means lacks the first volume's great arc, from Hill County bumpkin to Roosevelt favorite. It also lacks the great side-story of Alice Glass and Charles Marsh, as LBJ sacrificed the great love of his life to his all-consuming drive for the White House. *Means* also drips with Caro's disgust for this version of LBJ. It is almost unconcealed, and seldom softened. LBJ is not only crass and unscrupled, but what is worse, he has no moral compass. No beliefs. Caro paints him as the ultimate chameleon. However, as Caro notes in his forward to volume 3, LBJ was shifting throughout his life in order to gain power. The great question, then, was what he would do with that power once gained. It is how LBJ finally used his capital that ultimately proves the measure of this man; it is this story that awaits the further volumes.

Means has much to offer. As in volume 1, when Caro raised Sam Rayburn to mythic status, a different hero is presented to stand athwart and in constrast to LBJ. This is Coke Stevenson, whom Caro, flirting with demagoguery, calls a "legend." Stevenson comes off as almost impossibly good. However, his story is incredibly touching, and Caro never fails to deliver the human elements. In all his books, he manages to delve into the personal details that drove the great men and women of our times. He wrote beautifully of Sam Rayburn's loneliness and shyness in volume 1; here, he gives us Coke, the self-made man, honorable and tough, who studied late into the night by light of candle. Coke, who lost his first wife and, late in life, found love once again. Coke, who "didn't know how to steal an election."

Caro has a way of shaping history to suit his narrative, which is both enjoyable to read, and capable of stretching reality. Coke is positioned as the exact opposite of the venal, sneaky LBJ.

In the '48 election, LBJ runs for the senate against Coke. LBJ pulls out all the stops. He gets in his bubble helicopter and flies around Texas. He makes speeches and shakes hands till his voice is gone and his hands are bleeding. He campaigns till exhaustion. Then, when that isn't enough, he cheats. It is this section of the book that is most enlightening. Caro proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that LBJ, with the help of border boss George Parr, out and out stole the senate election. It's a fascinating tail, filled with desperadoes and bandits and shady, squint-eyed men doing business in the shadows (the business being the buying and selling of Mexican-American votes). There is even a cameo by future Supreme Court jurist Abe Fortas, who stops a federal judge from opening contested ballot boxes.

The end result, of course, is that LBJ gets to the senate. The book ends, appropriately enough, with Coke Stevenson, retiring nobly to his ranch with his new love, to fade into history. We are left with an image of LBJ as - Caro frankly says - an "immoral" man, and Coke as an honorable Man of the West.

I thought this book was excellent, but I have to add an addendum: *thank God LBJ stole that election*. History may show that Coke never stole an election, but it also shows - and Caro FAILS to mention - that he didn't care one whit for blacks. It was LBJ, at the end of the day, who took a lifetime's worth of accumulated power and spent it on the Great Society, a package of program that did more for civil rights than any event in history short of Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

History is funny that way - it offers redemption at every turn.

Nancy says

Finished: 19.08.2018
Genre: non-fiction
Rating: C+
#ccspin nr 18
Conclusion:
This book was about LBJ but it did spur me on
...to learn more about the defeated candidate
in the 1948 race for Texas senator...
'Coke' Stevens and the democratic political boss
that put LBJ in the 1948 senate:
The Duke of Duval...George Berham Parr
#MeanerThanABarnyardDog

Review

Judy says

The second volume of Caro's biography of Lyndon B Johnson is the sordid tale of how he stole his election to the US Senate. That is right. He did! At the time, he was accused of doing so but not busted for it. It was 1948, he lawyered up and escaped justice in the courts. Caro did the research and uncovered facts that had been buried for decades.

Coming in at 412 actual reading pages (not counting notes and index) this volume is approximately half the length of Volume 1, The Path to Power. It covers just seven years. The sense of a man who would do anything and everything to reach his goal of being President of the United States with the underlying thirst for power and the determination to "be somebody" continues. This is Caro's thesis about the man.

I have been discussing POTUS 35 with various friends and acquaintances ever since I finished the first volume in August. Many of them feel he was a great and important Commander-In-Chief. I began reading the series with the negative bias I formed against the man in the late 1960s when I was an anti-war hippy. Nothing I have read so far has disabused me of that bias. I will keep going and attempt to maintain an open mind.

Was his Great Society really great? Was his Civil Rights bill actually effective? Did he know what he was doing in Vietnam? Most important for me is to discover if he ever became a true statesman and leader with the good of our country as his prime motivation, or at least part of it. I get it that being President is a hard job and they all make mistakes.

The next volume, Master of the Senate, should be another eye-opener regarding how our upper legislative body works. It will be the longest volume yet at about 1100 pages. Am I up for the challenge? You bet.

Joe Martin says

I loved the first volume of Robert Caro’s biography of Lyndon Johnson, *The Path to Power*. I’d ever read a better biography. I’ve still never read a better one but I’ve now read one that’s just as good.

This book really succeeds because it’s essentially four stories in one book.

Chapters 1–5 are the story of Johnson’s later years in Congress and what he did during World War II. (Johnson spent most of the war avoid danger and then flew into danger, literally, at the last minute in order to have some record to present to his increasingly restless constituents.) This first section of the book is crucial. It portrays the absolute desperation that Johnson felt both to get out of the House and to gain wealth.

I feel that this section of the book is the slowest and repeats the most information from *The Path to Power*. (Sometimes entire paragraphs are listed from the previous book.) Caro did this to remind the reader of

crucial aspects of Johnson's character but, when reading the books back to bad, it really feels repetitive and slows the pace.

Chapter 6 is a terrific look at crony capitalism. This is where the book really begins to pick up, in my opinion. It's the story of how Lyndon Johnson acquired the KTBC radio station. He used the power of politics to turn a money-losing business into an insanely profitable business practically overnight. If you've ever wondered how crony capitalism works or how a politician can become wealthy just from "serving" in Congress, this is your chapter. After reading it, I don't think I'll ever look at the intersection of business and politics the same way again.

Chapter 8 is an utterly fascinating mini-biography of Coke Stevens, a forgotten figure in Texas politics. Prior to the 1948 Senate race, he was a living legend. During the race, Johnson and his partisans slimed him mercilessly. Today, he's remembered only as another reactionary conservative in a long-line of reactionary conservatives.

Robert Caro corrects the historical record and shows a man who lived an incredible life as a self-taught lawyer, accountant, architect, and rancher. He ran a one-man "freight line" when he was just 17, transporting goods in and out of the most inhospitable regions of Texas. He drove the horses during the day and taught himself law at night, by firelight. He scrimped and saved to buy his own books, always saving a a tiny amount for the ranch that he wanted to one day buy.

When he did finally start to buy land for his ranch, he did all of his own branding and shearing. He taught himself architecture so that he could build single handedly build his ranch house. He dug his own post holes and set his own fence posts. He nearly singlehandedly built the entire ranch, from the ground up.

He was a politician only reluctantly but was the most successful politician in Texas history. In his second gubernatorial election, he received 85 percent of the vote (the highest ever total in a contested Texas primary) and won all 254 Texas counties. "He was also the only man in the state's history who had held all three of the top political posts in state government: Speaker, Lieutenant Governor, Governor." And he served an unprecedented two consecutive terms as Speaker: the only man in Texas to ever succeed himself as Speaker.

This mini-biography alone is nearly worth the entire purchase of the entire book.

Chapters 9–16 chronicle the 1948 Senate election. Caro definitely investigates allegations that Johnson stole the election—and finds them to be true beyond a reasonable doubt. The fraud was breathtaking in both its sheer audacity and scope.

More than that though, he chronicles the entire election. Johnson, a mediocre vote getter, was running against Coke Stevenson, the most successful vote getter in Texas history. Johnson had very little hope of beating Stevenson in a fair fight. So, he did the only thing he could: he relentlessly slimed his opponent. He used an unlimited fund of money, coming from crony capitalists dependent on him, to blanket the radio airwaves, to cover newspapers, and to stuff voter mailboxes with dishonest rhetoric and accusations. It was the most rotten and contemptible form of campaigning imaginable and Caro reports on every aspect of it.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. It was a fascinating and enlightening look at modern American politics and a pivotal player in them.

Aaron Million says

Caro's second, thorough volume on LBJ picks up after his defeat in the 1941 special Senatorial election. Caro then spends a few chapters basically summarizing what happened in volume I The Path to Power. While this is certainly helpful for anyone who did not read the first volume, or perhaps needed a refresher on Johnson's rise to Congress, I found it somewhat unnecessary. Not bad by any means, just not really needed. This includes a chapter on Lady Bird and Johnson's despicable and harsh treatment of her.

Caro then punctures the myth behind Johnson's "service" in WWII. Johnson flew to the Pacific, and went on one bombing mission - as an observer only. The mission was highly dangerous, and the plane easily could have been shot down. By all accounts, Johnson remained very calm and collected, not panicking whatsoever. Nevertheless, he did nothing to contribute to the plane making it safely back to base. He became ill on the long journey home, and ended up being hospitalized. But prior to that, he was awarded a Silver Star by General Douglas MacArthur. This was a purely political move as none of the crew members on the plane received any awards or medals, or even any recognition for their part in the mission.

Despite his relative lack of combat experience, and his complete lack of actually being an active participant in the War, Johnson played up his brief time in the Navy for all it was worth and more: in the 1948 campaign he wore the Silver Star pinned to his suit jacket lapel, and constantly showed it off by pushing it forward with his fingers. Johnson also increasingly exaggerated his experience to make it seem as if he had spent "months" fighting on the front lines, when in fact his total time in the Pacific was only a few weeks - including the time that he was in the hospital.

Caro also has a chapter devoted to Johnson's purchase of radio station KTBC in Austin (legally, Lady Bird purchased it, but Johnson was the one calling the shots). Johnson's fortune derives mainly from this radio station. Great work by Caro showing exactly how Johnson used his influence with the FCC to get favorable rulings and then using his connections with the firm of Brown and Root to line up advertisers for the station.

The bulk of the book focuses on Johnson's blatant theft of the 1948 Texas Senatorial primary election from former Governor Coke Stevenson. The final result was that Johnson "won" by 87 votes but this is nowhere near the truth. As Caro painstakingly shows, in reality Johnson lost by several thousand votes. He basically paid off the "Border bosses" in "the Valley" - the area south of San Antonio and along the U.S.-Mexico border. As in the first volume, Johnson once again comes across as an amoral, unethical, vain, abusive, egomaniac bent on collecting more and more power and money. As with the first book, I am left with a very unimpressive opinion of Johnson as a human being.

Caro delves into Coke Stevenson's life - both before and after the campaign, and provides a really good mini-biography of him. This reminds me of his treatment of Sam Rayburn in The Path to Power. Caro is a great writer and it shows - he is a master story teller and is able to give the reader a vivid sense of what 1948 Texas was like. My only complaints - and they are minor - is the rehashing at the beginning of things that had been explored in the previous book, and also I would have liked to have seen a map showing Johnson's travels via helicopter across Texas that summer.

Grade: A-
