



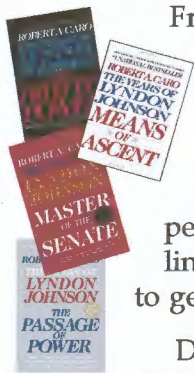
## Can immoral methods produce moral results?



This question has been on my mind a lot recently. Partly that's because of what I see as immoral steps continually being taken by the current U.S. president and his administration. It's also because I see similar steps happening at other levels of government and even in churches.

The question has become especially apparent to me because of what I've been reading for the past few weeks. It's the series of four books by Robert Caro, about the life of Lyndon Johnson. It started with *The Path to Power: The Years of Lyndon B. Johnson I* (Random House, 1982). Later volumes have been *Means of Ascent* (1990), *Master of the Senate* (2002), and *The Passage of Power* (2012). The fifth and final volume is due in the next few years.

### An ugly but accurate picture



From beginning to end, much of the picture of LBJ that Caro's books present is far from pretty. Johnson was ruthless. He was crude. He lied constantly. He had several extra-marital affairs. He was secretive, especially about money. He was controlling; he shamelessly manipulated people to get them to do what he wanted.

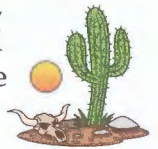
Does this picture sound familiar? It does to me. It's appallingly similar to the picture of our current president that keeps growing with every day's news.



### Terrible isolation and poverty

Unlike President Trump, however, Lyndon Johnson grew up in what Caro describes as terrible isolation and poverty. It was in the part of Texas known as the Hill Country—the frontier, the edge of settlement in Central Texas, hundreds of miles from the state's more populated areas.

After early settlers drove out the native Comanches, the settlers expected to become farmers. However, what thrived was not worthwhile crops but cactus, yucca, cedar, and mesquite. "The Hill Country was down to reality now," Caro writes, "and the reality was rock." As a result, the empire that the settlers had started building was soon gone, and over the years they kept getting poorer.



### Respect that turned to ridicule

That's what happened to Lyndon Johnson's family. However, LBJ's father, Sam Johnson, says Robert Caro, had a gift not only for making men go along with him but for making them like him. He was "relatively uneducated and thoroughly unsophisticated" but "conspicuously honest." At age twenty-seven he became a member of the Texas House of Representatives in Austin. Seeming "to know instinctively the steps of the legislative dance," he felt at home there. But he couldn't afford to stay. He returned home, first to the ranch and then to tiny Johnson City. Living conditions were primitive, and the sense of isolation was overwhelming, writes Caro. Sam's inability to succeed there changed him from a figure of respect to a figure of ridicule.

### Desperate to get out

Lyndon, his oldest child, felt desperate to get out. "There was an incentive that was born in him," Caro finds, "to advance and keep advancing." He wanted to be somebody. His parents wanted him to go to college, but he was afraid that at Southwest Texas State Teachers College at San Marcos, the only college in the Hill Country, the academic standards would be too high for him even though they were very low. Besides, the value his idealistic parents—especially his mother—placed on learning about literature, "social graces," elocution, and the arts had no appeal for him. He ran away and got a job in a cotton gin near Corpus Christi, then



made his way to California and stayed for two years. Working in a cousin's law office, Johnson hoped to become a lawyer but soon realized that he could never get a law degree with his very inadequate high school education, so he went home.

Finally he decided to try the only available college but soon saw he didn't have enough money. He impressed the admissions officer by having a plan that he expected to follow, however, and by showing no fear. He was admitted, although only to the Sub-College, and talked two popular students into letting him share their room rent-free. Then he struck up a surprising friendship with the college president, who normally stayed aloof from students. Soon they were having regular discussions about politics.



Before long, the president gave him a coveted job mopping floors near his office, and then a job inside the president's office, which Lyndon had suggested to him. "Within five weeks of his arrival at the college—before, in fact, he had even been admitted to it—he was working in the president's office, in a job which hadn't even existed before he got there." Soon he organized a club for students from his county. He also managed to become editor-in-chief of the school paper. In addition, he wrote admiring notes to his professors at the bottom of each exam paper, and he never disagreed with his professors.



The popularity with the president and faculty that this brought, however, didn't carry over to the students. Johnson was obsequious to people who were above him but overbearing to those who were not. Also, the students continually saw "a certain lack of accuracy in his conversation." Says Caro, "it began to seem unwise to believe Lyndon Johnson on any subject. ... It just seemed like he had to lie about everything." Yet he was not embarrassed even when he was caught in an exaggeration or an outright falsehood.

## The teacher who cared

Johnson soon made a friend of one of the school superintendents who came to summer school at Southwest Texas. He was the superintendent at Cotulla, a little town sixty miles above the Mexican border. He offered Johnson a teaching job in the Mexican school there, and Johnson accepted. "He was a teacher like Cotulla had never seen," Caro reports. "No teacher had ever really cared if the Mexicans



learned or not. This teacher cared." As a result, for the first time he was somebody.



After two years at Cotulla, he returned to the college and began campus politics there. "Because elections had been conducted honestly in the past," Caro explains, "no one was prepared for something different." But they got it from LBJ. He sized up the situation like a pro, planning his tactics secretly and then using hate and fear to put them to use. And he had a will of steel. What's more, he didn't merely count votes; he stole them.

## A morality that is amorality

"Perhaps the most significant aspect of the pattern," in Caro's view, "was its lack of any discernible limits. Pragmatism had shaded into the morality of the ballot box, in which nothing matters but victory and any maneuver that leads to victory is justified—into a morality that is amorality."

Caro tells us that when he began interviewing people who had known Johnson during his college years, he expected to hear about a popular campus leader, because the LBJ library had collected oral histories from students who described him that way. But as Caro looked deeper, he instead found hostility that was striking in its depth and passion. "All the characteristics of Majority Leader and President Lyndon Baines Johnson that were so unique and vivid when unveiled on a national stage—the lapel-grabbing, the embracing, the manipulating of men, the 'wheeling and dealing'—all these were characteristics that the students at San Marcos had seen."



After college graduation, Johnson took a job in a Houston high school, which Caro says he did as if his life depended on it. He was as popular there, Caro found, as he had been unpopular at San Marcos. As a result, he was recommended to Democrat Richard Kleberg, a Congressman whom he had never met but who had just won a special election and needed an administrative aide. Johnson got the job and went to Washington.

## Naked, glaring, and raw behavior



Throughout Johnson's years in Washington, explains Robert Caro, the same behaviors that had been so apparent at San Marcos—"na-

ked and glaring and raw” — were prominent. So were worse ones.

◆ He was crude. Even while he was president, he often made people take dictation from him or discuss issues with him at close range while he was sitting on the toilet. This treatment included not only his staff but also high government officials. The resulting humiliation was a method of control. In addition, his office conversation was permeated by sexual imagery. Also, he was well known for displaying great pride in his sexual apparatus, observes Caro. And “none of the body parts customarily referred to as ‘private’ were private when the parts were Lyndon Johnson’s.”



◆ He was often verbally cruel and unreasonably demanding of others. These included not only staff members but also family members, including his wife. Yet most put up with this treatment and even stayed fiercely loyal to him, because he had chosen them so well. They felt that he was going to the top, and they wanted to get there with him. Consequently, they were “willing to take orders and curses without resentment, to be humiliated in front of friends and fellow workers, to see their opinions and suggestions given short shrift.”

◆ He took advantage of others’ weaknesses. He was known as a reader of men. His gift for finding a person’s sensitive point, observes Caro, “was supplemented by a willingness—an eagerness, almost—to hammer at that point without mercy.” He was more interested in men’s weaknesses than in their strengths, because it was their weaknesses that could be used against them, to control them.



◆ Until late in his career, he avoided revealing where he stood on issues. He made liberals think

he was one of them and conservatives think he was one of them. “He was always aware,” Caro explains, “that what he said might be remembered and repeated—even years later.” While he was likely to dominate a conversation on a controversial issue, at the end of it none of his listeners would know his position on that issue. Says Caro, “The essence of his persuasiveness was his ability, once he had found out a man’s hopes and fears, his political philosophy and his personal prejudices, to persuade the man that he shared that philosophy and those prejudices—no matter what they happened to be.”



◆ He craved power. “The hunger that gnawed at him most deeply,” Caro writes, “was a hunger not for riches but for power in its most naked form: to bend others to his will.” And what he always sought was not merely power but the acknowledgment of it by others—the deferential, face-to-face, subservient acknowledgment that he had it.

◆ He lied constantly. “The only brush he had with the war ... was to fly as an observer on a single mission, at the conclusion of which he left the combat zone on the next plane out,” Caro tells us. He was given the Silver Star as a token because he was a senator, but he wore it constantly, acted as if it had been given for combat, and “arranged to accept it in public. Several times.”

◆ He had numerous extramarital affairs.

◆ He blatantly fawned over older men over whom he wanted to exert control. This paid off for him in valuable ways with House Speaker Sam Rayburn, President Franklin Roosevelt, and powerful conservative senators Richard Russell and Harry Byrd, just as it had so many years earlier with the college president.



This issue, all back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, a list of recent books I recommend, and more *Connections*-related information are available free from my website, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). I no longer send new issues of *Connections* by U.S. mail. To get paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 back issues, send me \$5 (address on page 1) for each year or any 12 issues that you want, and let me know which ones you want.



I’m a lifelong lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself, from personal funds. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics that I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Some of these behaviors apparently grew out of his childhood and teenage years in the Hill Country, when he felt humiliated by seeing his father ridiculed, his family and friends living in poverty, his inability to afford a good-quality education, and his overall inability to “be somebody.” But does Johnson’s background justify his despicable behavior?



## Outstanding accomplishments too

In addition to Johnson’s despicable traits, he also became well known for outstanding accomplishments: electricity for the Hill Country, the first civil-rights bill in more than eighty years, the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, and many education bills. His father’s view that the purpose of government was to help the poor people who were “caught in the tentacles of circumstance” probably motivated the good that his son was determined to accomplish. So did seeing the desperate poverty of his students at Cotulla.

Do his admirable accomplishments make up for his bad behavior? Every person behaves at times in ways that aren’t admirable. Surely we shouldn’t hold those against the person forever.

Can good ends justify immoral means?



Or can moral behavior alone make for excellence in an officeholder? Like

Johnson, several U.S. presidents of recent decades have been known for having extramarital affairs. Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Clinton come immediately to mind. In contrast, Truman, Nixon, Ford, and Obama apparently were faithful husbands and attentive fathers, but did this make them our best presidents? Probably not.

## What if there’s no good with the bad?

What about officeholders who display obvious immoral behavior but who, unlike Lyndon Johnson, have no accomplishments that might make up for it? Our current president, notably, displays many of the behaviors that were so reprehensible in LBJ. Among the most obvious are crudeness, extramarital affairs, lying (one major newspaper says it has counted more than 10,000 lies from Trump so far), expressing contradictory views at different times and to different people, and being verbally cruel. What’s more, Trump has done plenty of things that seem clearly harmful: canceling efforts to slow climate change and damage to the natural environment, ruining good relations with allies, greatly in-

creasing the national debt, supporting dictators, and canceling efforts to reduce nuclear weapons, among others. And what worthwhile accomplishments can we attribute to him? I don’t see any.

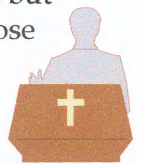
## An obligation of leaders

Many Congress members and other government officeholders also show immoral or amoral behavior often. The top priority for many seems to be holding onto the office they currently hold, at any cost. Standing up for truth, justice, and the common good doesn’t seem important, if by doing it they risk losing the next election.



Even in the church, where we most feel we should expect moral behavior, we don’t always find it. Like LBJ, many church officials seem to have a craving for power. Many also seem to give money a high priority. Too many are failing to expose sexual abuse in the church, to avoid making the church look bad or causing a fellow pastor to be removed from the ministry. These pastors’ top priority, like that of so many government officials, seems to be keeping the position they currently hold. They aren’t willing to say or do anything that might cause them to lose members and thus be demoted to a smaller church that pays a lower salary.

Consequently, many pastors use Lyndon Johnson’s method of refusing to reveal where they stand on issues, apparently for fear of losing members. I’ve known a bishop and several other clergy who habitually seemed to agree with whoever they were talking to at the moment, especially if that person had power. They’ve spoken only about non-controversial issues in sermons. Some of these clergy have actually had progressive views on issues, doubts about church doctrine, or even theological beliefs that were considered unorthodox, but they weren’t willing to risk revealing those until they were safely past retirement. Until then, it was hard or even impossible to know where they really stood.



Our churches and our governments both need leaders who are more open, honest, and effective than this. Leaders of such institutions, especially if they’re at the very top of those, also have an obligation to model moral behavior. Amoral or immoral methods shouldn’t be acceptable, even for reaching worthwhile ends.

*Barbara*