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The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson

The Drive for Power,
from the Frontier
to Master of the Senate

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Were private companies to be allowed to build the dams and pile up profits from the power generated from the publicly-owned falling water? Or would the government own the dams and sell the power cheaply to the citizens? Different companies could not compete to provide the electricity since you could not efficiently have two companies selling one river's power in the same areas. The case for the limited socialism called "public power" was plain, and Johnson knew and felt the sting of his position. "They hated me for these dams," he told me. "The power companies gave me hell. They called me a Communist." Still he went ahead, never failing to extract from the crunch every benefit he could.

A scene was staged at the White House for his home-town press, especially friend Marsh's Austin papers. "I came in and saw the president," Johnson said in the White House. "He called Jimmy Roosevelt in here and gave Jimmy a check, and Jimmy gave it to me." The reporters were assembled to be the audience for the scene on the White House portico: the president's son greeting an Austin delegation and presenting the five-million-dollar authorization to Johnson. WPA administrator Harry Hopkins was onstage, too, saying, "We are doing this for Congressman Johnson," who had been "fighting for this project." Back in Austin the newspaper headlined the story, "Johnson Awarded Five Million to Finish Colorado Work." People like Charley Marsh, producers of politics as a series of one-act plays, must have enjoyed this one. Later it was claimed that Johnson had persuaded Roosevelt to provide the money.⁴

37. Housing for the Poor, by Race

In some corporate board rooms resentment of Johnson's commitment to public power was sputtering like a snapped electric cable, but during this early period of his humanist crusading his first public conflict came over public housing.

In the 1920s a movement had begun in Europe to provide slum dwellers who could not afford private housing with publicly-owned or publicly-aided living quarters. In 1937 this movement reached the United States with the enactment of the Wagner-Steagall bill to have the federal government provide the poor with low-rent public housing through local agencies.

Johnson didn't just vote aye. He went to Austin, called together Tom Miller and his other local heavies, and said, "Now look, I want us to be first in the United States if you're willing to do this, and you've got to

be willing to stand up for the Negroes and Mexicans." As Ray Lee remembered, "Tom got his shirt-tail to flyin' and the wheelers and dealers decided to go ahead with the thing."

Toward the end of the year the new U.S. Housing Authority awarded its initial aid for public housing to New York City, New Orleans, and Austin, Texas. Why Austin? "Because," said Leon Keyserling, then deputy administrator of the federal agency, "there was this first-term congressman who was so on his toes and so active and so overwhelming that he was up and down our corridors all the time. . . ."

Johnson called on Keyserling and said, "Lady Bird and I want you to have cocktails with us."—"How's that?"—"Well, we want Austin to be announced first."—"Well, why first? Mayor LaGuardia [of New York] might not like that."—"Well, it's first in the alphabet, isn't it?"

The three were announced simultaneously.

Johnson went before the city council in Austin just before Christmas, 1937. "We have some slums in Austin," he told them. "We ought to be progressive enough to remove certain eyesores." He argued there was a correlation between poor housing areas and juvenile delinquency, crime in general, and poor health, especially tuberculosis and syphilis. The next day the city organized a housing authority, Johnson himself naming two of the five members. By year's end the agency had applied for ninety percent federal funding of a half-million-dollar program to build 550 rooms that would be rented at three dollars to five dollars a room a month, but only to families whose incomes were not more than five times the rent. Washington approved in two weeks, giving Austin a first for the Southwest.

Johnson had warned of opposition by "selfish real estate interests." Waking with a start to what was going on, a past president of the Chamber of Commerce spoke up against the city going into the rental business, since, he said, every American has the right to say where he will live and "if his home is built of license plates, he still retains his independence." Governor Allred said the opposition was coming from people who had "forgotten what it is to be poor" and from people who owned slums. The *Marsh* papers ran stories about a "tin-can shack village" and families living in tents and the bodies of old cars, and Johnson made a walking tour through the city's slums on Christmas day:

"I found one family that might almost be called typical living within one dreary room, where no single window let in the sun," he said. "Here they slept, they cooked and ate, they washed themselves in a leaky tin tub after hauling the water two hundred yards. Here they raised their children, ill-nourished and sordid. And on this Christmas morning, there was no Santa Claus for the ten children, all under sixteen, that scrambled around the feet of a wretched mother bent over her wash-tub, while in this same room her husband, the father of her brood, lay dangerously ill with an infectious disease." Thirty years later

Johnson still remembered the squalor he saw that Christmas day, "five blocks a hundred families, an old man with TB, dying, a child of eleven . . . all of them Mexicans."

In a meeting attended, according to people's memories, by conservative realtors, Mayor Miller, Johnson, and others, the opposition was pincered. When one of the realtors would flail the socialistic plan, Johnson would point out how many slum units the man owned. Once again he was slugging back hard at the charge of socialism and unfair public competition with business. "The government is competing," he said, "with the shacks and hovels and hogsties and all the other foul holes in which the underprivileged have to live." At a meeting of several hundred at the courthouse he said one out of every six houses in the city had no running water, one out of five no lights, almost one out of three no bath—at that, the clubwomen joined the crusade. When a councilman bucked him he fought mean, telling a reporter the councilman "told me that he was for the housing project if it did not compete with his rent houses. . . ."

Austin's housing agency became the first in the country to complete and lease a unit under the 1937 Housing Act. Posing happily with five Mexican-American children in front of their new home in the project, Johnson said, "This country won't have to worry about isms when it gives its people a decent, clean place to live and a job, they'll believe in the government—they'll be willing to fight for it."

But the project had at least two serious flaws, each one in its own way a clue to the future.

The New Deal did not seek integration; the social crusaders of the thirties were content to advocate gains for the poor within segregated patterns. The first public housing in Austin came in three parts, Chalmers courts for whites, Santa Rita courts for Mexicans, and Rosewood courts for blacks.

The second problem was the scale of the reform, its size. Even after it was enlarged by a couple of hundred thousand dollars, the Austin project funded only "forty Mexican units, sixty Negro units, and eighty-six or more white units, with possible expansion of white units to be governed by the surplus," housing for not more than two hundred families in a city of fourteen thousand homes.¹

38. Lighting Up the Farmhouse

Like Johnson, Sam Rayburn of north Texas had seen his mother doing the family washing in a tub and straining to read the Bible by a lamp. While Johnson was running the NYA in Texas, Rayburn was