

Backbiting on the LBJ Staff

This is the sixth in a series excerpted from the book My Brother Lyndon.

By Sam Houston Johnson

Lyndon Johnson worked on his State of the Union Speech as we flew back to Washington, carefully checking each word of an initial draft that had been prepared by Ted Sorenson and two or three members of his staff.

We arrived at the white "penitentiary" at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. in a special helicopter that made the trip from Andrews Air Force base in about 15 minutes. That beautiful presidential mansion didn't seem like a penitentiary at first sight, but I soon found out that it was. There were security people all over the place.

My bedroom was in the family section of the second floor, which is as difficult to penetrate as the high-security cell block of a prison. Secret Service men guard every access, and any visitor you have must get specific permission from the President—yes, even the guests of Lady Bird and the girls had to get that special permission.

I really shouldn't complain about life in the White House. The room and board were free. My room was elegant and more than ample, with all kinds of historical doodads strewn about.

Of the several important legislative measures that had been stalled in Congress during the Kennedy era, the items that engaged Lyndon's most immediate concern were the tax bill and the Civil Rights Act. The tax bill had been approved by the House before he took office, but it faced considerable difficulty in the Senate.

On the morning of Jan. 23, 1964, Minority Leader Everett Dirksen offered an amendment to the committee that would cut at least \$445 million in taxes. Realizing this would probably lead to a rash of other changes, Larry O'Brien immediately phoned the White House and got hold of Lyndon as he was having his lunch; he never finished his soup.

Within the next two hours he phoned almost every member of the committee, appealing to one man's patriotism, another man's personal interest, a third man's party loyalty—hard-talking, sweet-talking, joking, pressuring, telling an anecdote to prove a point, quoting scripture, counterarguing, horse-trading, and if necessary, gently threatening with the full force of the Presidency to back him. By midafternoon the Dirksen amendment was voted down in the committee, nine to eight.

The bill was finally approved on Feb. 26, with no significant changes. Thus, after being stalled in Congress for 13 months, the first of John Kennedy's four major proposals became a law just 96 days after my brother took over.

Tackling all problems at once with enormous driving energy and bulldog determination, Lyndon demanded more from his staff than ever before.

Among these was Walter Jenkins. I first met Walter

about 1940 when my brother had him appointed as a special policeman on Capitol Hill.

Later he went to work as a clerk-accountant in Lyndon's congressional office in Austin. After serving in the Quartermaster Corps in Africa and Italy during World War II, he passed through Washington on his way back to Texas; and when he called the office, Lady Bird invited him out to the house for supper.

Until that particular evening Lyndon had paid very little attention to Walter. Then, in a most casual way, he asked Walter what he planned to do now.

"Well, I'm hoping to get married right soon," said Walter. "I've been corresponding with this girl back home, and she's agreed to it."

"But what will you live on?" asked Lady Bird. "You haven't a job yet."

"I've got my savings, ma'am," he answered. "I managed to save more than \$5,000 while I was in the service."

I said: "You musta been pretty lucky with the dice."

"No, sir, Mr. Sam," he quickly protested. "I never gamble or anything like that. Those are my savings. I saved every penny of my army pay."

"You saved it all?" asked Lyndon, suddenly alert. "All your pay as an enlisted man?"

"Yes, sir, that's what I did," said Walter. "I told the paymaster to put it all in savings bonds."

As of that moment, Walter Jenkins' career was settled: He became a permanent member of the LBJ senatorial staff. Nothing could have impressed Lyndon more than Walter's incredible feat of frugality and discipline.

"You go home and get married," he said to Walter. "Then I want you to come to work for me."

Soon thereafter Walter married Marjorie Whitehill,

a lively and pretty Catholic girl for whom he abandoned his Protestant religion.

Later, when he moved into the West Wing, right next to the Oval Office, there could be no doubt that he was the President's chief executive officer. Almost no memoranda or any other important documents could get to the President's desk without first being screened by Jenkins.

He was not a "policy man," nor did he pretend to be. His responsibility was to get things done, to carry out the hundreds of administrative details that were involved in the policy decisions flowing from Lyndon's office.

Quite apart from his official duties, Walter had been for many years a close personal friend and confidant of Lyndon. On the night Lyndon and Lady Bird finally moved into the White House, they had a quiet family dinner at the Jenkins' home, and it was Marjorie who gave a very private party for Lady Bird on her first birthday as First Lady.

It was because of their close friendship as families that the Johnsons (that means all of us) were so painfully saddened when Walter was arrested for disorderly conduct in the basement of the YMCA.

George Reedy was also an extremely loyal worker and a devoted friend, and probably the brainiest man on my brother's staff.

Once in a while, during their many years of close association, Lyndon would get impatient with George's casual, lumbering manner. His slow, ponderous gait is often matched by a slow, deliberate way of talking.

But that slow speech is often a convenient cover for a mind that works like a steel trap. The competitive pressures in the West Wing got him down. "I've never seen so much backbiting," he told me one day in a soft, weary voice. "All those people giving each other the shaft and still pretending to be friends. I never realized ambition could be so ugly."

"Anybody shafting you?" I asked.

He looked down at his huge, fleshy hands, apparently reluctant to mention anyone and yet wanting to. "There might be someone," he finally said. "As a matter of fact, I have a hunch Bill Moyers is putting me down to Lyndon and Walter Jenkins. Probably wants my job."

Bill Moyers was perfectly suited for that type of intramural squabbling. He was young, bright, hard-working and totally dedicated to his own personal advancement.

Needless to say, his influence increased when he replaced George Reedy as press secretary. (Contrary to some reports, George was not fired. He had to quit to get medical attention for an old ailment, and my brother volunteered to absorb the hospital bills for both him and his son, who apparently had the same ailment.)

Bill was inclined to bask in the spotlight and to become a spokesman for administrative policy rather than a convenient channel for presidential views.

Knowing how much Lyndon disliked being upstaged by subordinates, I was rather surprised at his almost paternal tolerance when Moyers moved onto stage center. I mentioned this at dinner one night, and Lyndon passed it off with a slight shrug.

But my personal gripe against Moyers isn't related to his performance, good or bad, as press secretary. The thing that annoyed me was the way he was bootlicking around the Kennedy crowd at the same time Bobby was giving my brother a royal shafting.

When Moyers finally left Washington to join a Long Island newspaper, some of the press reported that he had become disenchanted with LBJ. I imagine this was prompted by a prior disenchantment on Lyndon's part.