



HISTORY

For LBJ, The War On Poverty Was Personal

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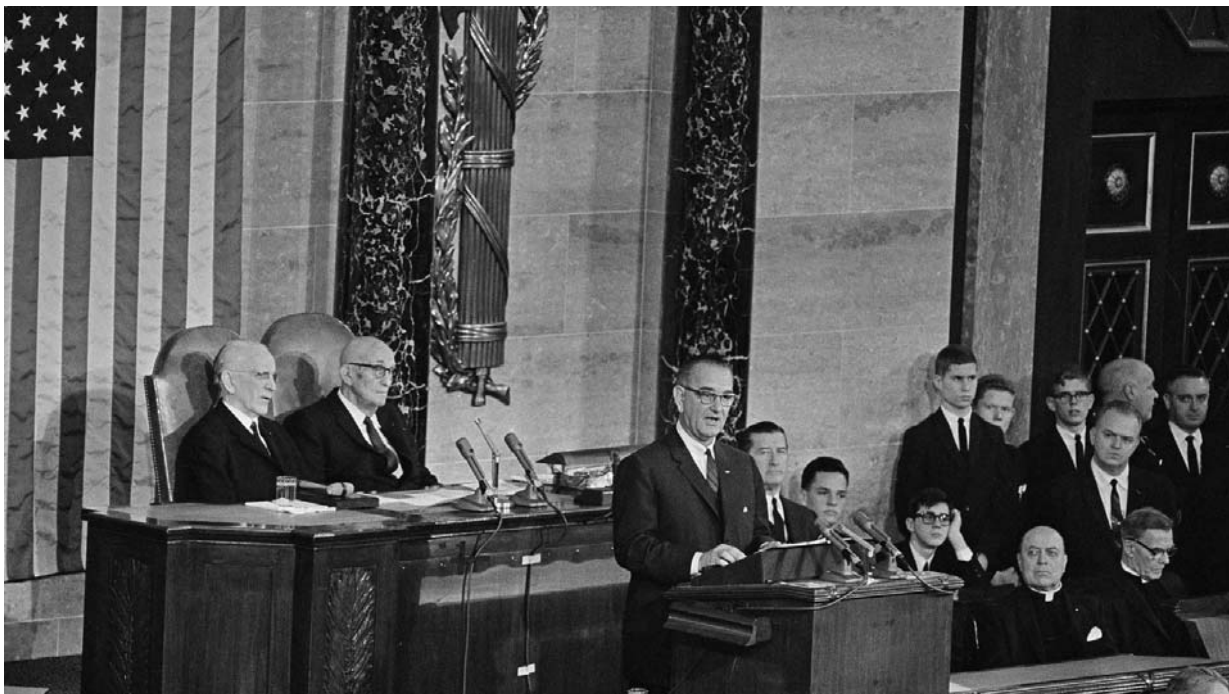
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Transcript



President Lyndon B. Johnson delivers his State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress on Jan. 8, 1964.

AP

President Lyndon Johnson stood in the Capitol on Jan. 8, 1964, and, in his first State of the Union address, committed the nation to a war on poverty.

"We shall not rest until that war is won," Johnson said. "The richest nation on Earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it."

It was an effort that had been explored under President Kennedy, but it firmly — and quickly — took shape under Johnson.

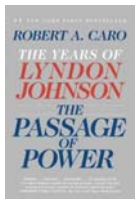
On Nov. 22, 1963, just hours after Kennedy was assassinated, Johnson was meeting with advisers in Washington to get the affairs of state in order. The chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Walter Heller, mentioned to Johnson that under Kennedy, he had begun looking at ways to help those in poverty — about 1 in 5 Americans at the time.



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"And Johnson slams the door shut so he can talk to Heller another couple of minutes about it, and Heller asks him, 'How fast do you want to move ahead with this program?' and Johnson says to him, 'Full tilt,' " historian Robert Caro tells NPR's David Greene. Caro's most recent book, *The Passage of Power*, the fourth volume in his biography of Johnson, recounts the early weeks of the Johnson presidency, when he launched the war on poverty.



The Passage Of Power

The Years Of
Lyndon Johnson

by Robert A. Caro

Paperback, 768 pages

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That ambitious initiative would help Johnson politically. Many liberals, who had rallied around the cause of poverty, were suspicious of him — but it was something he knew the pain of personally.

Interview Highlights

On Johnson's face as he delivered the State of the Union speech

He had a very tough face, and sometimes his eyes narrow and his lips get into a very thin, grim line, and they're sort of pulled down on the corners so they almost seem like a snarl. The senators and representatives sitting below him as he was making the speech were suddenly looking into a face they knew from his time in Congress, the face of a Lyndon Johnson who was determined to win. He put everything into that speech because it was something he believed in so deeply.

On Johnson's personal connection with poverty

His father failed. He once had been a very respected state legislator and businessman, and he totally failed. And as a result, for the rest of his boyhood, Lyndon lived in a home that they were literally afraid every month that the bank might take away. There was often no food in the house, and neighbors had to bring covered dishes with food. In this little town, to be that poor, there were constant moments of humiliation for him, and insecurity. It was a terrible boyhood.

On the phrase "war on poverty"

He loved that phrase, and it was part of his hatred of poverty. Johnson could be a very ruthless man. I wrote [in *Passage of Power*] he knew what to do. He says [the causes of poverty may lie] "in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live." These were to Johnson real-life foes, and Johnson knew what to do with enemies: You destroyed them. So he loved the word "war."

On what the war on poverty tells us about Johnson

To me, Lyndon Johnson, in everything he did, there was always a political calculation. But in some of the things that he did, there was ... something more, something that had to do less with strategy than with memories. And I think that driving him was not only the political calculation to make himself more palatable to liberals, to put his own stamp on the presidency because he was going to be running for re-election; there was also the memories of his youth and what poverty meant to him, and how it hadn't been his fault that he was in poverty. And that translates in the [State of the Union] speech into the sentences where he basically says too many people are living on the outskirts of

hope. "Some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity. This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America."

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