

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | 9-12 Lessons :

LBJ ASCENDS TO THE PRESIDENCY : AFTERMATH OF JFK ASSASSINATION

In that week before Thanksgiving, President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline traveled to Texas. The trip was political—Kennedy was unsure of his support in this southern state. In the previous two years, very little Texas money had come into the coffers of the Democratic National Committee, and more and more Texas voters who opposed Kennedy’s civil rights stance were joining Republican ranks. He wanted to raise money and improve his image in this important pivotal state for the 1964 election. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird, would meet the Kennedys in San Antonio when they arrived on November 21. The president needed Johnson’s help. He hoped that the vice president’s considerable political influence in his home state might help mend a rift in the Democratic Party there. That fateful afternoon in Dallas, November 22, 1963, Johnson and Lady Bird were in the fourth car of a motorcade taking the Kennedys to a downtown business district where the president was scheduled to make a speech. Johnson remembered distinctly hearing the rifle shots that took Kennedy’s life, then the confusion and shock that followed as a secret service agent pushed him to the floor of the Lincoln, shouting, “Get down! Get down.”¹ Forty-five minutes later at Parkland Memorial Hospital, the head of Kennedy’s Secret Service detail came to tell the Johnsons that the president’s wounds were very serious, and the vice president should fly back to Washington immediately in case there was a widespread conspiracy that could threaten him as well. Ten minutes later the agent returned with the news that the president was dead.²

A News Flash

CBS-TV interrupted its afternoon soap opera, *As the World Turns*, to give Americans their first inkling of what loomed on the national horizon. A distraught Walter Cronkite relayed a UPI report from Dallas that three shots had been fired at Kennedy, adding that apparently “the president was ‘seriously wounded.’” Then, a few minutes later, Cronkite delivered the dreaded news: “From Dallas, a flash, apparently official, President Kennedy died at 1:00 p.m. central standard time, 2:00 eastern standard time, some thirty-eight minutes ago.”³ The seasoned professional commentator took off his glasses and wiped tears from his eyes. From these early telecasts the word spread like wildfire. The nation, and soon the world, was

(next page)



in a state of grief and anguish. How could such a young, vibrant president, so full of plans and promise, be dead? In Dallas, Lyndon Johnson understood immediately the need to act quickly so the people would not panic. His ability to think on his feet and make quick decisions, skills that had been tamped down by his shadow role as vice president, now came to the fore. Though he would later be criticized for it, he immediately insisted that he would take the president's plane, Air Force One, back to Washington. Not only that, but he would have the swearing-in ceremony before taking off.

Claiming Legitimacy

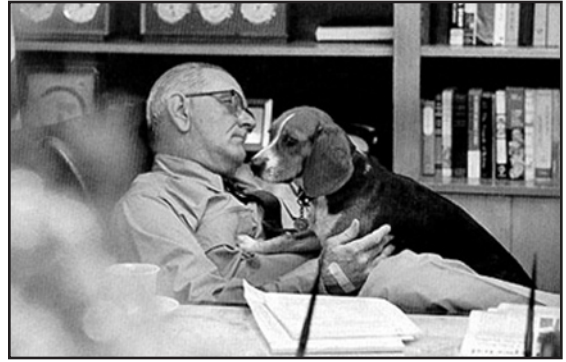
Johnson had several reasons for these actions, not the least of which, according to a Kennedy associate, was "a compelling desire to calm a frantic people and reassure a shocked world." Moreover, though he had actually succeeded to the office of the presidency when Kennedy died, Johnson wasn't sure of that. He believed his swearing-in would establish his "legitimate hold on the presidency." If there was a conspiracy and he needed to take some counteraction, he wanted the clear authority to act. ⁴ Finally, as if to seal the legitimacy of the transfer of power, he insisted that the slain president's wife stand beside him as he was sworn in aboard Air Force One. At 2:30 p.m., less than an hour and a half after Kennedy's death, Lyndon Baines Johnson took the oath of office. When the plane touched down late that evening at Andrews Field near Washington, the people of the United States had a president. Johnson made his first televised statements there, then was taken by helicopter directly to the White House.

It was 4:34 a.m., November 23, when the casket of John F. Kennedy, now covered by an American flag, was carried into the White House and placed upon the catafalque in the East Room.⁵ Neither the nation nor Johnson could have believed that the vice president would be called upon to fill out the term of this young president who now lay dead. In fact, many believed that Johnson was in a dead-end job. Once he had been powerful—the youngest Senate majority whip in 1953, Senate majority leader two years later at the age of forty-six.⁶ In 1955, the same year he rose to majority leader, and just as his name was circulating as a possible presidential candidate, Johnson suffered a massive heart attack. He had to slow down, something that was very difficult for a man of great ambition and energy. Unable to regain political momentum after his recovery, he lost his 1960 chance for the presidency to the young John F. Kennedy. To the amazement of many who had seen Johnson wield power for thirty-two years, Johnson agreed to "balance the Democratic ticket" and become Kennedy's running mate. That November the Democrats won by a narrow margin. For the most part, Johnson was relegated to the role of chairing advisory committees and making goodwill trips—to Senegal, the Philippines, Thailand, India, Pakistan, and South Vietnam. As vice president to the youngest man ever elected president, many believed that Johnson's days as a powerful national figure were over. President Johnson must have thought of what John Adams had written when he was vice president: "I am vice president. In this I am nothing, but I may be everything."⁷





President Kennedy's funeral cortege leaves the White House. John F. Kennedy Library



BJ and friend. Lyndon B. Johnson Library

Taking the Lead

Johnson would never have wished to acquire presidential power in this way, but now he was everything. Yet coming to the role under such tragic and dramatic circumstances, he worried that he could not meet the responsibilities of the office. He later said, I took an oath. I became President. But for millions of Americans I was still illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper. And then there was Texas, my home, the home of both the murder and the murderer. And then there were the bigots and the dividers and the Eastern intellectuals, who were waiting to knock me down before I could even begin to stand up. The whole thing was unbearable.⁸

In looking back on those days, Johnson would later say,

A nation stunned, shaken to its very heart, had to be reassured that the government was not in a state of paralysis . . . that the business of the U.S. would proceed. I knew that not only the nation but the whole world would be anxiously following every move I made—watching, judging, weighing, balancing. It was imperative that I grasp the reins of power and do so without delay. Any hesitation or wavering, any false step, any sign of self-doubt, could have been disastrous.⁹

The United States has a constitutional framework that defines a set of procedures for a vice president who succeeds to the office of the presidency, but it was not inevitable that the transition would be as smooth as it was. Johnson's biographers note that, despite his fears, the president's positive actions were important to the outcome. As the biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin said, "Here was a case where the exercise of talent joined with personality and opportunity to produce a brilliant display of leadership and political skill."¹⁰ The historian Robert Dallek had high praise as well, describing Johnson as an inspiration to the country:

His public appearances, his use of language, his management of the press promoted feelings of continuity and unity. To be sure, traditions of political stability and shared assumptions about cooperative efforts to advance the national well-being eased Johnson's burden. But an almost uncanny feel for the appropriate word and gesture honed by thirty-two years in the political arena were as important in making him equal to the task.¹¹



Johnson took specific actions as well. He declared a national day of mourning so the nation could gather strength from spiritual, family, or community sources. In a very practical way, he gathered his own resources. Though the cabinet officers of a previous president traditionally resign, in a meeting with Kennedy's cabinet at the White House on November 23, Johnson asked them to stay on, telling them, "I need you." He also had another concern. He believed it was important to give the American people an answer to the questions everyone was asking: Who was behind the murder of Kennedy and why had he been killed? Yes, Lee Harvey Oswald had been arrested as the alleged assassin, but Oswald had been shot in Dallas by a nightclub operator, Jack Ruby, a few days later. Had there been a conspiracy? Who was to blame? Johnson appointed a bipartisan panel to investigate the death, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren. Though the findings of the Warren Commission Report—that Oswald and Ruby both acted alone—have been disputed and debated since its release, Johnson's initial efforts to discover the motives for the assassination allayed people's fears.¹²

On November 27, President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress from the podium of the House. In his televised remarks, both the Congress and the people of the nation heard him deliver a masterful speech. He told them, "All I have I would have gladly given not to be standing here today. The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time. . . . An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the presidency." Johnson invoked the memory of Kennedy and linked that solidly to his hopes for the country he now led, saying:

On the 20th day of January, in 1961, John F. Kennedy told his countrymen that our national work would not be finished 'in the first thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet.' But, he said, 'let us begin.' Today, in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow Americans, let us continue.¹³

Continuing

In the days following the assassination, 70 percent of the country had doubts about how it would "carry on" without Kennedy. Gallop polls a year later showed Johnson had a 79 percent approval rating. In December 1964, he was at the top of the list of the ten most-admired men in the world: Dwight D. Eisenhower, Winston Churchill, and the humanitarian Albert Schweitzer followed.¹⁴ Lyndon Johnson had said in a press conference, shortly after Kennedy's death, that his objective was to create a sense of continuity and unity in the country. This he had done. Though Johnson had some rough political battles ahead, the republic would continue.

