The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson by Robert A. Caro

Every Page Is Scintillating, Moving, And Documented - Caro Once Again Breaks New Ground - 5 Stars !!!!!

A publishing event: the fourth volume in Robert Caros monumental biography, The Years of Lyndon Johnson, which began with the best-selling and prize-winning The Path to Power, Means of Ascent, and Master of the Senate.

The Passage of Power follows Johnson through both the most frustrating and the most triumphant periods of his career. It tells the story of his volatile relationship with John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy during the fight they waged for the 1960 Democratic nomination for president and through Johnsons unhappy vice presidency. It gives us for the first time the story of the assassination from the viewpoint of Lyndon Johnson himself. And with the depth of insight, the profound grasp of both the life and times of his subject that Robert Caro has consistently brought to this mesmerizing biography, it reveals what it was like to suddenly become president in a time of great crisis--an assumption of presidential power unprecedented in American history; how he stepped, unprepared, into the presidency and within weeks forced through Congress bills on the budget and civil rights that it had determined to let die; how through his singular political genius he set out to make the presidency his own, and to fulfill the highest purpose of the office. It is Johnsons finest hour, before his aspirations and his accomplishments were overshadowed and eroded by the trap of Vietnam.

My Personal Review:
For those of us who have read the previous volumes of Robert Caros portrait of the life of Lyndon Johnson, we have all eagerly awaited this the latest installment. When the author first began writing what has become the definitive biography of the 36th President, he was basically vilified by scholars as getting it wrong. With each passing year, and volume,
historians have come over to Caros side of the story in troves. The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power can either be read as part of the anthology or as a standalone story of Johnsons years during the Vice Presidency, and his ascension to the oval office upon the tragic death of John Kennedy.

Either way, you are in for a real treat. Many readers agree that writing doesnt get any better than this, and the proof is that Caros writings have stood the test of time, and his reputation has simply gotten bigger. This is 605 pages (736 with footnotes) of detailed writing that any student of that period will cherish. The first half of the book, over 300 pages is dedicated to the last two Senate years, and the Vice Presidential years when LBJ lived the most down in the valley depressing type experience. He was ignored by the President, and castigated by young Robert Kennedy. Between the two of them Johnsons power had been castrated, and he was boxed into a small office. In a city where power was everything, Johnson now had none.

This is especially interesting in light of the heights from which he the former Senate Majority leader had fallen. Johnson as leader was considered the most powerful man in the Congress, with the White House held by the popular Republican President Dwight Eisenhower. Ike could get nothing done in the Democratic Congress without LBJs help. Now with a potential Democratic President coming into office, he Johnson would be virtually unimportant as the new President would grasp power from both Ike, and Johnson. LBJ therefore knew that the Vice Presidency was where he wanted to be, or so he thought at the time.

As the book so poignantly points out however, Johnson also knew that seven other men had become president by simply being Vice President, and that is why he wanted the job so badly. Absolutely competent, understanding power, and desperately ambitious, Johnson would relegate himself to the job that former Vice President John Nance Gardner had described as not worth a bucket of warm spit.

For the first 300 thoroughly documented pages we feel Lyndon Johnsons pain as Vice President. It is both intense and unrelenting. The author has interviewed scores of the Presidents contemporaries who poured themselves into the story in order that Caro could get it right. Thousands of documents were studied as Caro once again lives in Washington DC for weeks and months at a time trying to get inside the head of his subject, moving down the same corridors that Johnson himself walked. As in previous volumes, the reader can just sense that the author has penetrated to the heart and soul of this most interesting of Presidents, and one who still remains bigger than life.

More than 60 pages of the book are devoted to the day John Kennedy dies, and then LBJs successful attempt to reframe the nations collective pain and use it to galvanize the Congress in coming months to pass his
predecessors agenda, something the late President was not able to get
go head to head in the narrative as Caro rips to shreds Schlesingers
previously accepted belief that JFK would have passed his own agenda
had he lived.

The book also deals with the hotly debated topic of whether JFK expected
LBJ to accept the Vice Presidency when the offer was made. The story of
Bobby Kennedy attempting to talk his brother out of it, and even telling
Johnson he should withdraw his name is covered in detail. Interviews were
conducted, documents studied and tape recordings of Lyndon Johnsons
discussion of the matter are all covered in detail. Once again, Caro has
rewritten conventional wisdom.

Readers on both sides of the discussion as to who killed JFK will be sorely
disappointed if they expect Caro to shed new light on this hotly contested
topic which still remains red hot some 50 years after the assassination.
The author is of the opinion that the Warren Commission got it right, and
he spares no attempt in his praise of the commission and its conclusions.

CONCLUSION

This latest installment of Robert Caros The Years of Lyndon Johnson is
once again a first rate biography of a President that had tremendous
impact on our country, our history, and what we have become. It covers a
short period in the Presidents life, his ascension to the Vice Presidency
and his coming into the Presidency itself. Basically nothing of the
wrenching Viet Nam experience is covered. That will probably be left to the
next installment. In the meantime we have enough to chew on in this
volume to keep any fan of Caros going until years from now, the author
may shed new light on the American experience in Viet Nam. This reader
urges all readers of politics, history, and fascinating biography to pick up a
copy of this book and read it cover to cover.

Richard Stoyeck

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