

Chapter 17

Cowardice asks the question—is it safe? Expediency asks the question—is it politic?
Vanity asks the question—is it popular? But conscience asks the question—is it right?
And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe,
nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right.
—*Martin Luther King, Sermon at National Cathedral, 1968*

We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas,
alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people
judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.
—*John F. Kennedy*

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...In 1941, Lyndon Baines Johnson, at the time a congressman from Texas, fought an uphill battle for a vacated Senate seat in his home state. Dubbed the “Screwball Election in Texas,” he and twenty-six other aspirants had thrown in their hats for the winner-take-all contest. With his exhaustive work ethic of sixteen to eighteen hour days, Johnson emerged from a deep deficit of public recognition to a neck-and-neck race with then Governor “Pappy” O’Daniel. Pappy was a vacuous and unscrupulous Texas celebrity who had gained office more by his traveling song and dance show than by any leadership ability. With the near-final vote tallies recorded, Lyndon squeaked out a victory over the more popular O’Daniel with a mere 5,100 vote margin. After a jubilant party with his supporters, he retired for the evening. But in the vagaries of Texas vote-rigging, and the great desire of the local Texas power elite to rid themselves of the inept current Prohibition-supporting governor by moving him to DC, Johnson awoke to find that tardy overnight ballots had materialized to give his Senate-destined opponent a 1,100 vote lead before the election was declared final. Defeat had shocked and eventually educated young Mr. Johnson as to just how politics worked in his home state. He had tasted the office he had coveted only to have it pulled from his grasp a day later.

And now it was about to happen again.

Lyndon tried to put on a congenial visage, but it was easy to see in his face a landscape of conflicting emotions, and joy at seeing the president’s rebounding health was not one of them. Fifty-five years of harsh Texas weather and rough-and-tumble political skullduggery have a way of aging a person, and the Texas-size crags around his eyes and mouth became more evident as the years progressed; these were only more defined when the tantalizing taste of a long desired power was gifted, and then quickly rescinded.

Standing in for the injured president had been a watershed event for Lyndon. During the previous three years, he had been shoved to the wings as a disrespected and marginalized vice president, wasting away to a shadow of his past glories. He had been a major power broker in Washington during the years he occupied the position of senate majority leader. He wielded authority with an instinctive understanding of

the strengths and weaknesses, desires and fears of the Senate members whom he herded expertly to gain passage of a record number of bills. To call him ambitious and talented was an understatement. But in the shadow of the cultivated Kennedys' popularity, and the near powerless position of the vice presidency, he had become a spectral vestige of his former self.

Over the last ten days, though, he had been reborn. The one thing he cherished most in life was the attainment of the supreme pinnacle of power. And that goal was within his grasp. For the last ten days he had been the president, if not in name, then at least in position. He felt the infusion of leadership in his veins. He saw the shifting deference as those attuned to the currents of political power viewed him with a burgeoning respect. He was finally at the table of power—only to have the meal left unserved. Jack Kennedy, the man he would replace, was recovering. Johnson could see debilitating, humiliating uselessness beckoning him back to his gilded cage, the vice presidency.

LBJ might have been the most dejected man on the planet as he walked into JFK's hospital room. He knew his future was past.