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Means Of Ascent: The Years Of Lyndon Johnson

ROBERT A. CARO
THE YEARS OF
LYNDON
JOHNSON
MEANS
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ASCENT



Synopsis

Robert A. Caro's life of Lyndon Johnson, which began with the greatly acclaimed *The Path to Power*, also winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, continues - one of the richest, most intensive, and most revealing examinations ever undertaken of an American President. In *Means of Ascent*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer/historian, chronicler also of Robert Moses in *The Power Broker*, carries Johnson through his service in World War II and the foundation of his long-concealed fortune and the facts behind the myths he created about it. But the explosive heart of the book is Caro's revelation of the true story of the fiercely contested 1948 senatorial election, for 40 years shrouded in rumor, which Johnson had to win or face certain political death, and which he did win -- by "the 87 votes that changed history." Caro makes us witness to a momentous turning point in American politics: the tragic last stand of the old politics versus the new - the politics of issue versus the politics of image, mass manipulation, money and electronic dazzle.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 22 hours and 8 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: December 10, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00GS4WQ36

Best Sellers Rank: #113 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical & Political Figures #178 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Presidents & Heads of State #209 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Political

Customer Reviews

I loved "The Path to Power" but I held off on reading this volume because I could not understand why Caro would devote an entire volume to seven years in LBJ's life. After I read this book, I have no doubt that this decision was a good one. These years--particularly the 1948 Democratic Senatorial Primary--were some of the most historically significant events on the last hundred years. It was this election that perhaps more than any other lay the foundation for politics as we know it.

Without the eventual win in this election, Caro argues that LBJ's political career would have been finished. If that were true, he never would have gone on to be president. And if that did not happen, one most ask would Vietnam or "The Great Society" ever have happened quite the way they did. Caro is very convincing in arguing that this dramatic election is one of the most important in U.S. History. Aside from the significance of the year, I would like to emphasize what a truly exciting read this volume is. I was utterly enthralled to read about what unfolded next in the battle for the democratic candidacy for Texas' senatorial seat. This in spite of the fact that everyone reading the book already knows the outcome. Many have said that this is a hatchet job on LBJ. While this is not a positive portrait of LBJ as a moral figure, it praises him highly as a calculating politician--possibly one of the greatest of all times. The other thing to remember is that Caro is highlighting an election in 1940s Texas, which has always been notorious for corruption in politics (witness the cartoonish and stranger-than-fiction Pappy O'Daniel). The difference in this case was that Coke Stevenson was not as willing to accept that corruption as LBJ was.

This book, published in 1982, has already achieved a legendary status among history and political buffs. When it was released its author, Robert Caro, won enormous acclaim for his unprecedented research and engrossing writing style - and plenty of criticism for his harsh and unsparing portrait of Lyndon Johnson. Caro literally spent years living in and interviewing people in the arid Texas Hill Country where Johnson was born and raised, and in the process he acquired a level of knowledge about his topic that few other biographers even approach. Like William Manchester's "Last Lion" biographies of Winston Churchill, "The Path to Power" is far more than a simple biography of the young Lyndon Johnson's desperate desire to escape the grinding poverty of rural Texas in the 1930's and achieve power in Washington. Caro writes unforgettably of the Johnson family, the culture and history of the Texas Hill Country, the incredibly corrupt political system in Texas at the time, and of how Johnson both brilliantly and cynically manipulated that system for his own purposes. Caro's descriptions of the people in LBJ's life - from his mother to his wife Lady Bird to fellow Texan Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives and Johnson's mentor in national politics - are superb and detailed. However, Caro's unsparing portrait of LBJ as a power-obsessed liar and bully who would stop at nothing to succeed greatly offended many of LBJ's associates whom Caro had interviewed, as well as liberal historians who cherished Johnson's activism on Civil Rights and other liberal causes (and who conveniently wanted to forget Johnson's record in Vietnam and elsewhere).

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