WHY I COMPARE L.B.J. WITH MY FATHER, F.D.R.

by

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr.

DOESN'T L.B.J. remind you of F.D.R.?"

That's the question I hear most these days. He does, and touring through the poverty-stricken states of Appalachia with President Johnson, I saw why.

Looking at the faces in the crowds, it was like the trips and campaigns of the thirties. These were not people who came to stare or who came just to say they had seen the President of the United States, and Lyndon Johnson was not a President who came just to say he had been there. For both the people and the President learned from what they saw. The effect of the President on the people and of the people on the President makes the comparison between President Johnson and my father even more striking.

I remember my father touring the towns and villages around Warm Springs, Georgia. He would stop and talk with mill owners and farmers and listen intently to their problems. Later he would address the nation using the experiences of these men to dramatize the economic problems the country faced. As my father himself once said:

"I well remember that while I sat in my study in the White House, preparing to talk with the people of the United States, I had before my eyes the picture of all those Americans with whom I was talking. I saw the workmen in the mills, the mines, the factories; the girl behind the counter; the small shopkeeper; the farmer doing his spring plowing; the widows and the old men wondering about their life savings. I tried to convey to the great mass of American people what the banking crisis meant to them in their daily lives."

This spring I watched the President of the United States sit down on a pile of old boards on Tom Fletcher's front porch in Inez, Kentucky, and I heard these two men talk about

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the surplus food program—not in terms of millions of dollars, but in terms of Tom's hungry children. The example of Tom, living in his two-room cabin on an income of $400 a year, became for the President a way of explaining poverty to a generally prosperous nation. And for Tom Fletcher the government became not an impersonal dispenser of welfare, but a man who cared and had come to say so.

Housing and Urban Development Act cartoon by Keith Temple for the New Orleans Times-Picayune *(1965)*

The concern shown in these instances by both my father and President Johnson was meaningful to the people because it stemmed from a deep commitment to principles—principles that had been translated into programs of action. The elements of the New Deal answered needs that were all too real to the people who came to see my father in the thirties. The understanding shown by my father and by the one-third of a nation that was destitute combined to enlist the determination of the other two-thirds of the nation to endorse the action that was to follow. Similarly, President Johnson, in his own words, seeks to "arouse the conscience of the nation" in his fight against poverty and in his fight for the equal rights of every American.

This is another similarity between my father and Lyndon Johnson—the ability to see and learn coupled with deep concern. In Huntington, West Virginia, President Johnson said, "I wish I could look into every face and shake every hand. I wish I could tell you how proud I am of the faith and the hope that I have seen in your eyes as I have traveled over five states since daylight this morning."

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Traveling and working with President Johnson on that trip and on the next one, which took us into five more Appalachian states, I could see that he was truly the people's President just as my father had been some 30 years before.

Besides this remarkable ability to communicate man to man with the people of this nation, there are other similarities between President Johnson and my father. This is only natural because Lyndon Johnson's political career started in the early days of the New Deal, and he was strongly influenced by my father.

In 1934, Lyndon Johnson was appointed Texas State Director of the National Youth Administration and then was elected to Congress in 1937. He campaigned on his support for the New Deal, for F.D.R. and even for the plan to enlarge the Supreme Court. This won him considerable attention in the press; so after the election, when my father was traveling back to Washington from Mexico, he stopped his train in Texas to meet "this brave young man called Lyndon Johnson." Representative-elect Johnson came on board, and my father was so impressed with him that he insisted that the young man ride with the Presidential party all the way to Washington—even though Johnson protested that he didn't have a change of clothes or even a toothbrush with him.

Throughout the New Deal, Lyndon Johnson served in the Congress as a loyal supporter and close associate of my father. This, however, did not mean that the successful methods of F.D.R. were merely adopted by L.B.J. The comparisons exist only because their methods suited the personality of each. A President cannot utilize mass communication as my father did and as L.B.J. does—without first developing his own response to it.

It was said during my father's administration that Marconi had invented the radio primarily as a means of transmitting the Fireside Chats. While the chronology may be a little mixed, its aptness is obvious. The Fireside Chat was a unique way of carefully explaining the most complex problems in a way that was easily understandable to all of the citizens.

Whether he was describing the

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German submarine packs as "the rattlesnakes of the Atlantic," or labeling war as "a contagion" or saying that Lend Lease was like "lending your neighbor your hose if his house is on fire," he made them understand.

For President Johnson, turning out the lights in the White House was a way of dramatizing economy in government. Similarly, when he was faced with the problem of explaining the far-reaching effects of a national railroad strike, he did it in the simplest possible terms. He read a letter he had received from 7-year-old Cathy May, asking him to keep the trains running so her grandmother could come to her first communion. By announcing the railroad settlement in this manner, the President brought home its significance to all Americans in a very real way.

The settlement of the railroad dispute points up another aspect of the similar F.D.R. and L.B.J. use of mass communication. When the settlement was complete, President Johnson wanted to announce it to the nation at once. He was told it would take about an hour to set up the TV and radio equipment in his White House office. Instead of waiting, he got into his car, drove to a nearby TV station and interrupted the evening news programs with his broadcast.

The people's right to know what their President is doing and how he is doing it was fully recognized by my father, who was the first President to hold informal press conferences—conferences where questions were not submitted in writing in advance. For the first time, reporters had complete news access to the President on any subject. My father insisted on this because he saw the importance of the President being close to the people and answering

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Author of this article, F.D.R. Jr., Asst. Sec. of Commerce, withPresident Johnson

questions that the country might be asking.

Under President Johnson the press conference has assumed its most flexible proportions. He has held them in his office, in the Rose Garden, in the Cabinet Room, over coffee, over punch and cookies, on a hay bale, in his airplane, in the State Department, at the World's Fair and on a front porch in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. In fact, the word around Washington is that if you're looking for the President, stand near a reporter who has just ended a sentence with a question mark. He's bound to show up.

In the judgment of most historians, our greatest Presidents have been (allowing 50 years or more for perspective): Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln and Wilson. These men have been adjudged great because they fully used the powers of the office they held. That they were all very different in background, personality and method of operation is apparent. Therefore, when you talk about similarities between Presidents, you actually compare the ways they used the powers granted them under the Constitution.

This is where another similarity emerges between my father and President Johnson. My father greatly enjoyed the power he was elected to use; he knew how to use it, when to use it—and when not to use it. Judging from President Johnson's first nine months in office, he, too, is completely at home in the Presidency. He is thoroughly familiar with its powers and relishes the opportunity to continue using them.

The use of Presidential powers in labor-management disputes illustrates how both F.D.R. and L.B.J. similarly used their powers. When a coal strike threatened in the late thirties, my father called the negotiators for both sides into his office. Sitting behind his desk, he opened a drawer, took out a piece of paper and waved it in front of his visitors. He told them it

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front of his visitors. He told them it was an order drafting the miners into the Army. Then he urged that a settlement be achieved or he would issue the order—in effect putting the miners under Federal control.

As the representatives left the office, Labor Secretary Mrs. Frances Perkins stayed behind and asked the President if he really meant what he said. He opened the drawer again, took out the paper and revealed that it was blank on both sides. "Ma, you know me better than that," he said.

When President Johnson achieved a settlement of the recent railroad dispute, it was not on quite the same blunt basis, but his use of Presidential power was just as complete. He demanded frequent periodic reports from the negotiators, had them meet in the White House, displayed them to poet Carl Sandburg as the men who could throw millions of other men out of work, and regularly informed the press of their progress or lack of it. In the end, his appeal for the national and public interest won a settlement.

In their dealings with the Congress, both F.D.R. and L.B.J. knew the art of political courtship. My father frequently played host to Congressmen on the Presidential yacht, *Sequoia,* and rare is the current Congressman who has not been entertained at the White House.

In this matter of entertaining, another similarity between these two men is evident. My father had his beloved Hyde Park, which was frequently used to entertain royalty, heads of state and other visitors. He was devoted to his home on the Hudson and loved the natural beauty of its surroundings. For President Johnson, the same is true of the L.B.J. Ranch. Chancellor Ludwig Erhard of Germany has already been there and doubtless many other distinguished visitors will follow. All will be treated to horseback rides, ranch breakfasts, hunting, barbecues and other bits of Texas hospitality. The same sort of treatment was given visitors to Hyde Park. Rare was the guest who was not taken on a tour of the woodlands and farm, or did not either witness or participate in the baseball games between teams managed by my father and by Lowell Thomas.

Finally, I cannot help but compare the role of the great women behind these two great men. Because

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President Roosevelt shaking hands with Texas Representative Lyndon Johnson while Texas Governor James Allred looks on. Galveston, Texas, 1937

his ability to get around was hindered by polio, my father depended on my mother to act as his eyes and ears throughout the country. In this role she traveled thousands and thousands of miles. I remember a cartoon that appeared in the early forties. It showed two coal miners deep inside a mine. One says to the other, "Don't look now, but here comes Mrs. Roosevelt."

This was as true as it was amusing. My mother criss-crossed not only the country but the world, talking to people, hearing about their hopes, seeing what they were doing. Her reports were invaluable to my father.

President Johnson is fortunate in having a wife who is doing and will be doing much the same for him. Not only does she usually accompany the President, but she has already gone out several times on her own, to see conditions for herself and to report back on them. One day last spring, during a hectic speaking tour, her plane was hit by lightning and, soon after, the car she was in broke down. Undaunted, she didn't let these incidents interfere with her schedule.

I have talked about the similarities between my father and President Johnson and yet I have not mentioned the obvious—the physical similarities. The description: over 6 feet 2, 200 pounds, high forehead, graying hair, fits both men. Both men went through serious illnesses and, in both cases, this gave them a new zest for life and damaged their self-confidence not one bit.

Both found their greatest strength in being with, talking to and listening to the people they were elected to serve. In Goldsboro, North Carolina, this spring, President Johnson

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said something which I know was a firm conviction of my father's: "If you ever need pepping up a little bit in Washington, all you have to do is get on the plane and go out and see the people. They are the optimistic group. They know we have much in this country to preserve, much to protect; they love our country, and they want guidance and leadership in what we can do to make it a better land."

In trying to make it a better land, and in dealing with the great problems of the thirties and forties, my father would say: "Let us sit down together, you and I, to consider our own pressing problems that confront us."

President Lyndon Johnson, in facing the great challenges of the sixties, has his favorite motto: "Come, let us reason together."

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