

Capitol Hill in Black and White

Part two of a three-part series on the revelations of the former maitre 'd of the Senate dining room. Reprinted by permission of Dodd-Mead & Company, Inc., from "Capitol Hill in Black and White," by Robert Parker and Richard Rashke, copyright 1986.

Life With LBJ

The aunt and uncle my mother sent me to live with were prominent in the Wichita Falls colored community. Aunt Rebecca was the only black beautician there that white women allowed to curl their hair. Uncle Curtis was a real estate investor who owned twenty-five or thirty houses. I enrolled in Booker T. Washington High School in 1936 and got a part-time job as a busboy at the segregated Wichita Falls Club, where my older brother George was headwaiter. I was angry and lonely during my high school years. Fortunately, there was football, and I soon became BTW's star full-back. Jackie Robinson, the most versatile athlete in the country, became my idol. He was a star at every sport he tried at UCLA—football, baseball, track, and tennis, even Ping-Pong and bowling. He was bright and famous—everything I wanted to be. Like him, I planned to go to college and earn my reputation on the gridiron.

I was eager to meet Lyndon Johnson, for, although he was not yet a senator, everyone in Texas knew he would be someday. Wichita Falls had been little more than an old oil town before Senator Morse Sheppard dipped into the pork barrel and came up with Sheppard Air Force Base, just outside of town. Now Wichita Falls was a key city in the congressional district, and since Johnson was widening his political base, he and his chief aide, Walter Jenkins, were frequent visitors at the local club.

"This is my little brother," George said to Congressman Johnson. "He's a star football player at Booker T. Washington."

Johnson shook my hand. I was impressed by how tall and skinny he was, and I kept my eye out for him over the next several months. He'd always say hello to me. It made me feel good that important people were beginning to recognize me, for already as a teenager I sensed that meeting the powerful would be my way out of poverty.

After that, I watched Johnson closely whenever he came into the club. My mother had told me that I could learn more about people by watching them than by hearing what they were saying. Johnson impressed me as a careful, cautious, and determined man, preoccupied with something bigger than just his steak, his friends, and Wichita Falls. As he listened to the politicians and contributors he met at the club, he seemed to be making mental notes. When I heard him speak, his voice was soft and persuasive. There was none of the raucous bellowing that I would hear later when I worked for him.

I was graduated from high school in 1940. But before I could be drafted, I joined the army. In August 1941, I entered Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for my basic training. I hated army life. Most of the black soldiers were old, uneducated, and mean; the officers were young, white, and filled with contempt. It was hard to find a drop of human kindness.

Once the Japanese invaded Pearl Harbor, the army decided it needed Negro officers to command its Negro fighting men. I took an exam for the officers' training school at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and passed. Modean [Parker's wife] answered the government's urgent call for help and took a job as a War Department secretary in Washington for \$1,040 a year, so we could be together. Before I could be admitted to Fort Belvoir, I had to complete combat training at Fort Leonard Wood. Unfortunately, I was severely injured in a fall, breaking my right shoulder and leg in several places and twisting my neck. Doctors had to use pins and plates to put me back together again. I would never make it to Fort Belvoir. In the fall of 1943, I received a medical discharge and left Missouri to join Modean. I had big dreams.

The first place I went for a job in the capital, after Modean and I had settled into our one-bedroom apartment on S Street in northwest Washington, was to Lyndon Johnson. I visited his office at least once a week, but couldn't get past his receptionist and aides. "He's out of town," they'd say. "Away from his desk. Not in." They wouldn't tell me when he would be available or let me make an appointment to see him. But I kept coming back.

My determination paid off. One morning, late in 1943, the receptionist told me Congressman Johnson would see me. I was naively counting on him remembering me. "I'm Robert Parker," I told him. "I met you several times at the Wichita Falls Club." When his eyes showed no recognition, my heart sank. I began dropping names of mutual acquaintances. He remembered them, but not me. As a last resort, I described how I used to wait on him. There was a flicker of recognition and a little smile on his face. He didn't know Robert Parker, but he knew the "boy" who had served him so often with obvious admiration and eagerness to please.

My mouth felt like cotton when I realized that this was my one chance to land a decent job. If I failed in the next sixty seconds, I'd probably never find work.

"What can I do for you, boy?" Johnson asked quietly.

"I need a job, sir," I managed to say.

"What kind of job, boy? What can you do? Would you like to work in the post office, boy?"

I couldn't even stammer an answer. Johnson grabbed the phone and dialed the city post office director. "I wanna sponsor this boy," he said.

At that moment, I stood in awe of Lyndon Johnson. I had never seen such power. With one phone call, I not only had a job, but I had a career civil service position, without even taking an examination. Little did I realize then how simple the whole thing was, for Johnson had developed contacts all over Washington who owed him favors. What I did realize, however, was that now that Johnson had sponsored me, I owed him. And if I didn't pay, I could have my "career" job jerked away as fast as it had been granted. It was a polite form of slavery, but a small price to pay for a good job that, I sensed, had opportunities for a black man. That civil service rating turned out to be extremely important, for twenty years later I would use it to win better working conditions for the blacks who worked in the Senate Dining Room.

In the post office, I learned an important survival lesson: At most, education could only help get me somewhere. What I really needed was power, the kind that comes from money, friends, and inside information. I took stock. I had no experience and only a high school education, yet I was sorting and delivering mail next to attorneys, making the same kind of money and lifting the same kind of bags, because I knew someone with power and had gone to him for help.

Rightly or wrongly, I decided early in my post office job that a college education would not help me survive in Washington, although it might work for other young black men. I saw the world as a jungle, and I knew I needed to learn quickly who had the power and how I could get some.

I got what I thought was a break several months after I became a mail carrier. Johnson's office called to tell me that the congressman needed a driver at six o'clock in the evening to take him and Mrs. Johnson to dinner at the Congressional Country Club, one of his favorite haunts. I was told to dress like a chauffeur, black hat and all, and that if I didn't have a uniform, to buy one. Lyndon Johnson, who did not have either a limousine or a regular driver, was beginning to collect on my debt.

I became such a good unpaid chauffeur that Johnson called on my at least once a week to drive him around town and to the Naval Academy in Annapolis on every Saturday that the Navy football team played at home. Johnson was on the Naval Affairs Committee and got free tickets. I hated those Saturday trips. I'd pick up LBJ at ten in the morning. Usually he had invited Virginia Senator Harry Byrd and Georgia Senator Richard Russell to ride with him. Both were also on the Naval Affairs Committee, and the free ride was just one more way for Johnson to extend his power base in Congress.

Annapolis had been one of the biggest slave markets on the East Coast, and in the mid-1940s its attitude toward blacks was just as hostile as it had been before emancipation. I would drive Johnson and his party up to the front gate of the Navy stadium with instructions to be waiting there when they walked out after the game. Whenever I was late, no matter what the reason, Johnson called me a lazy, good-for-nothing nigger. He especially liked to call me nigger in front of southerners and racists like Richard Russell. It was, I soon learned, LBJ's way of being one of the boys.

I was beginning to feel a sense of power. I was somebody, because I drove for Lyndon Johnson. Today, I know that makes me sound like an Uncle Tom, but in the mid-1940s it was one of the few kinds of power for a black man. And I was proud because I was surviving, and doing it honestly and better than most. One evening while I was driving Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson to the Congressional Country Club for dinner, I asked Johnson if he could get me a job there. "Why not serve at my parties and my friends?"



Author: Robert Parker.

Courtesy of Fox Studio

A new life opened up for me.

Johnson's parties were usually small affairs for half a dozen politicians and their wives. Sam Rayburn, who was unmarried, was always there. Vice President Truman came sometimes. So did Henry Stimson, the secretary of war. Then there were Senators Richard Russell of Georgia, Alben Barkley of Kentucky, Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, Tom Connally of Texas, Olin Johnston of South Carolina, and John McClellan of Arkansas. Given Johnson's political ambitions, it was a powerful group. Rayburn was Speaker of the House; Barkley, majority leader in the Senate. Truman would become president the following year, 1945, after Roosevelt died; Barkley, Truman's vice president in 1949. Senator Connally was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and a power in Texas politics. Russell, Bilbo, Johnston, and McClellan were white supremacists and leaders of the Democratic southern bloc that, most observers agree, controlled Wash-

ington at that time.

I began taking notes on who drank what and when. Soon I was passing out the right drinks before I was asked. Truman liked Old Fitzgerald with branch water; LBJ, Scotch and water; Rayburn, who didn't drink much in public, sour mash and ginger ale; and Olin Johnston's wife, ginger ale and whiskey without ice. Before long, even bigots like Bilbo were asking Johnson, "Where did you get this nice colored boy? We'd like to use him, too." They gave me their private phone numbers, and I began moonlighting several nights a week. I had become a status symbol. "If you want a successful party," the word went, "you must have that nice colored boy."

During the next few years, Johnson loaned me to his friends for a variety of jobs as a means of extending his power base. I regularly drove Olin Johnston, Tennessee Congressman Estes Kefauver, and Oklahoma Congressman Carl Albert around town. I'd take them to the airport in LBJ's car and drive them to apartments and hotels at night. I'd sit in the car, struggling to stay awake, until one and two o'clock in the morning, sometimes all night. When I worked exceptionally late, Johnson or an aide would call the post office and get me the next day off.

The spot LBJ, Kefauver, Johnston, and Albert seemed to like to visit the most was the Rhode Island Avenue Plaza, a luxurious apartment house for blacks in northeast Washington. In the 1940s, successful, professional black couldn't rent apartments or buy homes in the nicer parts of the city. Most drifted to the Plaza, which housed more talent and ambition than any building in Washington, including the Capitol.

I'd drop the congressmen or LBJ's constituents off at a side door at the Plaza and wait until the wee hours of the morning. I remember driving Kefauver there one night. As we turned the corner, he saw Carl Albert coming out the side door. "Keep driving," Kefauver ordered as he slid down in the back seat. "Go around the block." He didn't want Albert to know he had a colored "friend" there, too. I never did find out which woman they visited, but I know that one or two who lived there eventually broke into politics.

Johnson never paid me for the boring night duty, and I understood this was how he expected me to earn his patronage. But when I didn't bring money home, Modean thought I was cheating on her. There she was, sitting at home with our baby, Barbara Ann, who was born in the spring of 1945, while I was out on the town. How was I to convince her that I wasn't the one who was out at night with a woman? The moonlighting and late hours brought a terrible strain to our marriage.

As pleased as I was with the exposure I was getting and the extra money I was making, working for Johnson during the 1940s in Washington was a painful experience. Although I was grateful to him for getting me a job with the post office and for giving me other opportunities, I was afraid of him because of the pain and humiliation he could inflict at a moment's notice. I thought I had learned to fight my bitterness and anger one day at a time, the way my mother had taught me, with kindness. But Johnson made it hard to keep the waves of bitterness inside. I would like him one minute and hate him the next. But I had to swallow or quit. If I quit, how would I support my family?

I chose survival and learned to swallow with a smile. It's what most black men did in Washington in the 1940s, before the civil rights movement was even a dream. As young as I was, I knew that before I could fight racism, I needed power. To get it, I had to survive. And that was a lonely, full-time job.

PCC Interpreter Training Program Schedules Orientation Sessions

The Interpreter Training Program at Portland Community College has scheduled six orientation sessions for prospective students at Cascade Campus, 705 N. Killingsworth.

The sessions will supply information about the program and other fields related to deafness, help the prospective student decide whether or not to apply for the sign language interpretation program, provide counseling and answer questions.

Sessions will be held the evenings of April 6 and May 21, and both days and evenings August 17 and September 8.

Those who wish to attend the orientations are advised to call Chris Cady, ITP secretary, at 283-2541, Ext. 5288, to book an appointment.

Blood Pressure Clinic

A public Hypertension (blood pressure) Screening clinic is scheduled Thursday, May 7, from 1:30-3 p.m., at the King City Retirement Center, 11777 S.W. Queen Elizabeth, King City. The clinic will be staffed by registered nurses from Meridian Park Hospital, Tualatin. The clinics are scheduled the first Thursday of each month, appointments are not necessary, and there is no charge. For more information, call 692-2656.

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