

# Expanding Presidential Powers

## The Case

**Powers of Congress**  
**He [the President]**  
**shall from time to time**  
**give to the Congress**  
**Information of the**  
**state of the Union, and**  
**recommend to their**  
**Consideration such**  
**Measures as he shall**  
**judge necessary and**  
**expedient. . . .**

—Article II, Section 3

### Powers of the President

**The principal power**  
**that the President has**  
**is to bring them in and**  
**try to persuade them**  
**to do what they ought**  
**to do without**  
**persuasion. That's**  
**what I spend most of**  
**my time doing. That's**  
**what the powers of the**  
**President amount to.**

—President Harry S. Truman,  
 May 1948

The Constitution of the United States grants the President a number of formal powers. At first glance it appears that the President has considerable leverage. The annual State of the Union address, the submission of bills for consideration, the veto power, the power of appointment, and patronage seem to provide tremendous power. It is becoming apparent today, however, that one of the most important resources at the President's disposal is the ability to persuade. Although the President can propose legislation and veto bills, the President can do little to ensure that his or her proposed measures will be enacted.

President Lyndon B. Johnson observed that:

*In some ways . . . Congress is like a dangerous animal that you're trying to make work for you. You push him a little bit and he may go just as you want but you push him too much and he may balk and turn on you. You've got to sense just how much he'll take and what kind of mood he's in every day. For if you don't have a feel for him, he's liable to turn around and go wild. And it all depends on your sense of timing.*

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON, 1964

During most of his time in office, President Johnson was one of the two Presidents most skilled in getting his legislation adopted. The other was Franklin D. Roosevelt during the first year of his New Deal that was designed to curb the nation's Great Depression. Of the modern Presidents, only Lyndon Johnson through his Great Society programs has matched the successful legislative record of the New Deal. Political scientists, writers, and politicians all have speculated about what made Lyndon Johnson so successful at first. Was it the time, the program, or the man? Perhaps it was all three.

## Background

Most observers agree that Lyndon B. Johnson, who became the youngest Senate majority leader in 1955, was an astute student of Congress and a master of persuasion. Washington correspondent Jack Bell described the way it worked:

## More About the Case

If Abraham Lincoln could be called a lawyer's lawyer, then Lyndon Johnson was a politician's politician. Johnson's first experiences with the legislative process came as a young boy when he escorted his father to the Texas house of representatives, where his father represented the Hill Coun-

try of central Texas. After college, Johnson taught for a year and then became secretary to United States Representative Richard M. Kleberg in 1931.

In 1937 Johnson ran for a vacant congressional seat in central Texas. He won the election by pushing himself to give 7 to 10 speeches a day during



While he served as the Senate's Democratic leader, the Texan . . . maintained a furious pace. Operating from his frontrow desk he was always prodding everyone in sight to get along with the business in hand. . . . He busied himself collaring colleagues, thrusting his face within inches of his victim's as he argued and cajoled. . . .

There was no gainsaying the record. Johnson was effective in the Senate. What Lyndon wanted, Lyndon nearly always got. . . .

—JACK BELL, *THE JOHNSON TREATMENT*, 1965

By the late 1950s, Lyndon Johnson had set his sights on the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination. At the national convention, however, John F. Kennedy won the nomination. Kennedy then offered Johnson the vice presidential nomination. In an extremely close election, the Democratic ticket won and President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson took office in January 1961.

**The Great Society** Following the tragic assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson became the thirty-sixth President of the United States. In keeping with his senatorial experience, the new President set about to create support for his presidency and for Kennedy's legislative programs that were stalled in Congress. On November 27, five days after the assassination, President Johnson went to address Congress, "prepared for a dramatic and emotional effort to unify Congress and the American people behind him. . . ."

He began his speech with the statement, "All I have I would gladly have given not to be standing here today." Johnson continued:

No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long. We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter—and to write it in the books of law.

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON, 1963

The new President went on to confirm commitments to foreign countries and to call upon Congress to



#### Presidential Influence

Presidents with strong connections to Congress, like LBJ, fare better in getting their legislation passed than do "outsiders" such as Jimmy Carter.

enact the tax cut President Kennedy had proposed as well. Most members of Congress warmly received the call for action.

President Johnson's relationship with Congress played a major role in the success of his first years in office. Under his leadership Congress eagerly passed the stalled legislation of Kennedy's New Frontier, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and a cut in taxes. It was that year that Lyndon Johnson also announced his program of reform—the Great Society:

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.

The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce, but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON, 1964



## CASE STUDY

In fall 1964 the nation rallied behind its new President, giving him a landslide victory for another term. At the same time, successful Democratic congressional candidates swept into office in such large numbers that the previous coalition of Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans were easily outnumbered in both houses of Congress. Johnson was assured of the consensus he needed in the legislature to put the Great Society into action.

When the Eighty-ninth Congress met in 1965, the President outlined the legislation he deemed necessary. The result was astonishing. Congress passed 84 of the 87 bills requested. Included were bills covering medicare and medicaid, another civil rights act, War on Poverty legislation, aid to elementary and secondary education, and several conservation measures.

Many observers credit the amazing first year of the administration to the President's uncanny understanding of Congress. Johnson counseled his staff:

*You've got to give it all you can that first year. Doesn't matter what kind of a majority you come in with. You've got just one year when they treat you right and before they start worrying about themselves. The third year, you lose votes . . . the fourth year's all politics. You can't put anything through when half of Congress is thinking about how to beat you. So you've got one year.*

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON, 1965

These were prophetic words because in 1966, rising inflation, inner-city riots, draft riots, and the war in Vietnam spelled the end to Johnson's run of successes. Congress had grown weary of the President's endless calls for more legislation. At the same time, the President turned his attention to the war in Southeast Asia and spent less time cultivating Congress. Congress quickly assumed a new attitude of independence.

### Significance

What was it exactly that enabled Lyndon Johnson to accomplish with Congress what so many other Presidents were unable to do? Was it because of his style, or was Johnson a beneficiary of his time? In the President's opinion:

*If I were to name the one factor above all others that helped me in dealing with the Congress, I would say it was the genuine friendship and rapport I had with most Congressmen and Senators.*

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON

Was this the answer, or was it as Doris Kearns concluded:

*He succeeded, and for many reasons: one, the circumstances of his assumption of office, creating a mood of strong national unity; two, the fortuitous state of Kennedy's administration at the time he was killed—the legislative programs had been articulated but not passed; and three (the most important reason, but dependent on the first and second), his transformation of the conduct of the Presidency in such a way that he could utilize those techniques that had served him so well in the Senate: one-to-one relations, bargaining, consensus, and insulation from choice.*

—DORIS KEARNS, 1976

Whatever the reason, the results can still be seen today. Many Great Society programs fell disappointingly short of success, but others remain to the benefit of people in the 1990s. One can only guess what might have happened if the war in Vietnam had not divided the nation and led to the end of the Johnson presidency.

### Examining the Case

#### Reviewing Facts

1. Explain why President Truman felt that the ability to persuade was so important for a President.
2. Describe how Johnson won support for the Great Society.
3. Identify three reasons President Johnson was so successful in 1965.

#### Critical Thinking Skills

4. Making Comparisons How did President Kennedy and President Johnson differ in their relations with Congress?
5. Predicting Consequences Would the Great Society have succeeded if the United States had not been involved in Vietnam? Explain your answer.