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LYNDON B. JOHNSON: AN APPRECIATION
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Any well informed person today would agree that Lyndon B. Johnson was a giant in the field of civil rights. But it wasn't always so. Many liberal Democrats, including some of the nation's foremost civil rights advocates, volubly objected when John F. Kennedy chose Johnson as his running mate in 1960

The first of my few face-to-face meetings with Johnson occurred in April 1961, shortly after he became Vice President. He had just been named chairman of the newly appointed President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, this too over the protests of some civil rights supporters. Johnson was elated by the appointment and eager to begin implementing Kennedy's executive order requiring federal contractors to take affirmative action in minority hiring, training, and promotion. But his elation was tempered by resentment of the Dixiecrat label pinned on him by skeptical liberals. The three colleagues who were with me in that meeting were as impressed as I was by the eloquence and evident sincerity of his commitment to make fair employment a reality.

Johnson fully met our expectations. But no one was prepared for the tragic assassination of Kennedy and the sudden elevation of Johnson to the presidency. Some of the former skepticism still remained. I encountered it at first hand when the leaders of the major civil rights organizations -- Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, and the rest -- gathered in the conference room of the Potomac Institute for a strategy session before their first meeting with the new president. Their mood was hopeful, but tinged with anxiety. Now that Johnson was chief of state, they wondered how high a priority he would assign to the politically troublesome issues of civil rights.

As they were soon to learn, their anxiety was baseless. In an unprecedented display of forceful presidential leadership, Johnson proceeded to engineer passage of the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964, and subsequently voting rights and fair housing legislation. No president since Abraham Lincoln had accomplished so much to extend first class citizenship to black Americans, and by extension to all minorities.

One of the provisions of the 1964 Act that was especially near to Johnson's heart was that creating the Community Relations Service. A genius at persuasion himself, he had long cherished the notion of a governmental agency that would go beyond the limits of bureaucratic enforcement and apply the arts of diplomacy and negotiation to racial conflicts in this land.

Since the most immediate and severe racial problems then existed in the South, he appointed to head the new Service a Southerner, former Florida Governor Leroy Collins, who had courageously championed racial justice in his state. It was my good fortune to be loaned by my organization to assist Collins in setting up the new agency.

If I had had any remaining doubts about President Johnson's commitment to civil rights (which I did not), they would soon have evaporated in the light of that experience. The President gave the fledgling agency his whole-hearted backing. He appointed a blue-ribbon advisory committee of leading citizens to lend their prestige and efforts to its work. He insisted on inviting all four hundred of them to gather in the White House rose garden for his special kind of laying on of hands. Whenever a danger arose that the new Service might become snarled in red tape or other bureaucratic problems, the President and his aides were immediately responsive to our calls for help. Johnson was insistent on results, in the form of tangible civil rights gains, but in return he was prepared to put the power of his office behind the effort to achieve them.

This kind of moral commitment, backed up by personal attention to detail, is rare at any level of government, and perhaps rarest of all in the Oval Office of the White House. For me and others, having some first-hand exposure, however slight, to the depth and intensity of Lyndon Johnson's commitment to civil rights made it all the more vivid. But even those who have come to maturity since those years can appreciate his leadership. They need only consult the record he left behind -- his stirring appeals to the nation's conscience, his bold demands of Congress, and the far-reaching legislation that resulted. They may hark back to his first presidential appearance before a joint session of Congress, when he served this notice:

"We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for a hundred years or more. It is time to write the next chapter -- and to write it in the books of law."