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Caro's Lives: Comparative Biography as Political Theory

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Abstract: Robert Caro's biographies of Robert Moses and Lyndon Johnson prove fruitful for political theory, particularly when approached in tandem, along the lines of Plutarch's comparative profiles. Building on the supposition that general insights into political power and its ethics lie in biographical particulars, Caro demonstrates that the most exhaustively detailed research of the most extreme subjects can yield otherwise inaccessible findings. Similarities between Moses and Johnson expose common mechanics of accumulating power, converting personal relationships into institutional authority, and show that norms are given effect as tools used by politicians. Contrasts offer the career as a unit of moral evaluation and suggest that although power may corrupt, it also "reveals." A praiseworthy career should aim at ends distinct from both ideals and means. Assessment depends not only on intents or accomplishments, but on means, weighing their morality against their necessity.

> The ancient truth that it is not knowledge but action which is the great end and objective of life, and that for every dozen men with bright ideas there is at most one who can execute them.
>
> —Robert Moses[1]

> It is ambition that makes of a creature a real man.
>
> —Lyndon Johnson[2]

The moralist and historian Plutarch tells his readers that "we have thought fit to spend our time and pains in writing of the lives of famous persons."[3] Plutarch was himself famous for writing not just biographies but comparative biographies.[4] He paired historical figures with "great natures" who shared some trait or experience, and would frequently conclude his couplets with comparisons meant to elicit reflection about the pair's moral significance.[5]

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[1]Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 832. Henceforth *Moses*.

[2]Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 442. Henceforth *LBJ I*.

[3]Life of Pericles, in *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 1 (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 202.

[4]On Plutarch's comparative method (*synkrisis*), see Timothy Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 243–62.

[5]Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 62.

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Emerson, for one, found tremendous "wisdom" in Plutarch's remarkable ability to use comparative biography "to philosophize yet not appear to do it."[6]

In this article, I sift through some of the philosophical possibilities offered by comparative biography by taking up the writings of a modern-day Plutarch, a man who, fittingly, has recently won the inaugural Plutarch Biography Award: the great political biographer Robert Caro.[7] Invariably described as magisterial, but heretofore unnoticed by political theory, I contend that Caro's rich biographies are worthy of our serious attention. If not intended as systematic philosophy, these tomes are nevertheless rife with hints of Caro the political philosopher standing behind Caro the historical biographer. Particularly if taken in tandem, Caro's two massive biographies of Robert Moses, the "master builder" of New York City, and Lyndon Baines Johnson evoke Plutarch's didactic approach of "setting lives besides lives and actions besides actions, like great works of art."[8]

My inquiry into the possibilities of comparative biography and the lessons to be gleaned from "Caro's Lives" is divided into three sections. I begin by digging into Caro's own historiographical method, governed by a basic postulate that attention to historical particulars is an especially rich way of eliciting general insights. For Caro, this means, first, that the more exhaustively detailed the research, the truer becomes the portrait of political power. Second, he seeks out extremes as the most rewarding grist for his all-encompassing research program. Scrutinizing the lives and deeds of politicians whose extreme talent and hunger for power allowed them to dominate their times furnishes unusually instructive and memorable historical scholarship. In his aspiration to understand power and his special reliance on extremes, Caro hews a little more closely to another comparative student of

[6]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Plutarch," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 10, *Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), 312.

[7]There are certain affinities between this approach and the recent renaissance of "political realism" in contemporary theory that can only be gestured at here. Central to this movement, says Karuna Mantena, is a "view of politics in which power and conflict are taken to be constitutive and a suspicion of doctrines and theories that elide this fact as carelessly idealist or utopian" (Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 [May 2012]: 455). Raymond Geuss enumerates several axioms of political realism, including that it deals "not with how people ought ideally" to act, but with how "institutions actually operate in some society at some given time," it recognizes that politics is "about action and the context of action," and that "politics is historically located: it has to do with humans interacting in institutional contexts that change over time" (Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008], 9–13). For an overview, generally, see William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (October 2010): 385–411.

[8]"Bravery of Women," in *Plutarch's Moralia*, vol. 3 (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1931), 477.

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exemplary politicians, Machiavelli, with whom I also occasionally compare him.

I then move past Caro's own historiography into comparative exercises in order to quarry lessons from Caro's works heretofore left unmined. The second section engages in comparative biography to investigate the similarities in how Moses and Johnson acquired and used power. Comparative analysis of Caro's lives reveals common, perhaps generalizable mechanics of accumulating power: the conversion of the precarious, idiosyncratic influence of personal relationships into formal and stable institutional authority. In comparing Caro's protagonists, we also come to appreciate that some of the most fundamental political norms and principles are given effect largely as tools in the personal pursuit and exercise of power.

Third, and this was the whole point for Plutarch, comparative biography raises (and may help to answer) important moral questions that we otherwise would not think to ask.[9] Contrasts between Johnson and Moses draw our attention to the career, the ongoing interplay between character and power, as the indispensable level at which to conduct our moral evaluations of politicians. Alongside the maxim that, over the course of a career, power may corrupt, Caro suggests that it also "reveals." Ultimately, comparative biography suggests that a career worthy of approbation is likely to be oriented by political ends distinct from both moral ideals and compromise for its own sake. Neither the politician's intents nor his accomplishments alone provide an adequate standard for such an evaluation. The spotlight must also fall on the means that made a career as we weigh the morality of their methods against their necessity.

Part I—Biography as Method

Power's Hidden Details

On my reading, Caro's biographies can be best understood on the basis of an implicit methodological axiom that particulars are fruitful, even indispensable means of discovering general insights into the workings of politics. Among this axiom's multiple specific instances is the notion that the most detailed factual investigations can yield especially incisive, perhaps even universal lessons.[10] "Sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better," Plutarch himself said, "than the most famous

[9]See Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 52–71.

[10]There is something quixotic about lauding his great detail in an article too short to actually be able to convey this detail. For a few striking examples, see *LBJ I*, 279, 420; Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 367 (hereafter *LBJ III*).

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sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever."[11] Caro's own biographies are notorious for their prodigious detail and, as a result, their staggering length. As his longtime editor notes, Caro's "genius" stems from the fact that, for him, the "*smallest thing is as consequential as the biggest*."[12] Caro "simply finds out more than anybody else finds out about anything. And then, out of the infinite detail he accumulates, he creates real drama."[13] One of Caro's own most direct statements in regard to the consequence of particular details comes in remarks justifying the value of studying a single election:

> Study a particular election in sufficient depth—study not merely the candidates' platforms and philosophies and promises but its payoffs, study it in all its brutality—focus deeply enough on all of these elements, and there will emerge universal truths about campaigns in a democracy, and about the nature of the power that shapes our lives.[14]

By "universal truths" found in the particular, Caro does not mean that a single event is sufficient to teach us everything, but that certain insights are only accessible if we pay attention to the finest of details. Focusing deeply enough on the details of the right subjects will yield abiding truths about the realities of politics. "Why," Caro asks himself, "does it take so long to research and write?" Because, he says, he "really want[s] to take the time to find out what happened, and *time equals truth*."[15] Only by "explor[ing] something all the way to the end,"[16] only by "turn[ing] every page"[17] can this "truth" of time accrue.

Though certainly interested in the how and why of politics, Plutarch was foremost a moralist. By contrast, Caro's emphasis on details of "the nature of the power that shapes our lives" brings his biographies somewhat more toward the fold of political science. Nowhere is the unification of the specific and the general more fully realized than with power. The roots of the powers Caro investigates run deep into broad political and historical soil—the New Deal, mid-century America's exploding demand for oil, urbanization, and the Civil Rights movement—but above ground, power branches out into particular forms that depend on the tangled deeds of specific flesh-and-blood men. Caro is convinced that failing to enter into the thicket of detail has left

[11]Life of Alexander, in *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 2 (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 139.

[12]Charles McGrath, "Robert Caro's Big Dig," *New York Times Magazine*, 15 April 2012, MM34, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/magazine/robert-caros-big-dig.html.

[13]Stephen Harrigan, "The Man Who Never Stops," *Texas Monthly*, April 1990, 100.

[14]Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), xxxi. Hereafter *LBJ II*.

[15]Harrigan, "The Man Who Never Stops," 100 (italics added).

[16]Ibid.

[17]Chris Jones, "The Big Book," *Esquire*, 12 April 2012, http://www.esquire.com/features/robert-caro-0512.

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us with "an inadequate understanding in America of how power works."[18] He inveighs against the failures of political scientists, who are misled as they hold forth on how it works "in theory" and "[find] themselves baffled" by the obscure powers Caro eagerly delves into.[19] The "essence of power," he says crisply, is "not what we're taught in political science."[20] From the outside looking in—say, to Johnson's Senate cloakroom or to Moses's Randall Island offices—it is enormously difficult to really understand the "quiet, murky depths, impenetrable to the public gaze, in which real power lurks."[21] Caro believes that his alternative science of politics, based on a microscopic observation of historical detail, can help rectify these failures. If you just plumb deeply enough, the eccentricities of flesh and blood, and time and place—all that which one would surmise only affords philosophically arid contingency and idiosyncrasy—can actually lead to enlightenment, and make a "previously bewildering picture come blindingly clear."[22] The "secrets of American politics" are there to be uncovered, but only "if you're willing to spend the time."[23]

What is "true about campaigns" is "as true" about "men," Caro says: "Explore a single individual deeply enough . . . and truths about all individuals emerge."[24] A Caro biography uses "the life of its protagonist" in order "most particularly to focus on and examine" political power, to explore "the acquisition and use of various forms of that power," and "to ascertain also the fundamental realities of that power; to learn what lay, beneath power's trappings, at power's core."[25] The key to the biographical form is Caro's insight into power as something that, while ultimately grounded in the broader political landscape of its times, exists in the realm of action. Caro endeavors to show us power at its most immediate: in the day-to-day, even minute-by-minute, words and deeds of politicians who use their historical, institutional, and personal circumstances to influence or control how others act. Biography can "bring out exactly how things were done." The quest to understand power through practice is why, he says, he "concentrate[s] so much on *mechanics*."[26] Though circumstances and personalities are protean and unique, Caro thinks that tangible and generalizable insights

[18]McGrath, "Robert Caro's Big Dig."

[19]*Moses*, 745; *LBJ III*, 510. For detailed examples of how political science misunderstood power, see *Moses*, 743–54 and *LBJ III*, 507–11.

[20]Nicholas von Hoffman, "Robert Caro's Holy Fire," *Vanity Fair*, April 1990.

[21]*Moses*, 671.

[22]*LBJ II*, xxxi.

[23]McGrath, "Robert Caro's Big Dig."

[24]*LBJ II*, xxxi.

[25]Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), xvii. Hereafter *LBJ IV.*

[26]William Goldstein, "Writers at Work: Robert Caro Talks about His Art, His Methods and LBJ," *Publisher's Weekly*, 25 November 1983, 41 (italics added).

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into enduring "mechanics" of power are discernible in the minutiae of biography.

Comparing Extreme Politicians

Shifting biography's center of gravity from moral excellence to the intricacies of political power requires a shift in method. Though by no means unconcerned with power wielded by historical figures, Plutarch's primary interest in moralizing gave him the latitude to use historical context very selectively —to the extent that it embellished and framed character analysis.[27] By contrast, a science of the practice of power demands a deep immersion into the details of the world in which the powerful act. This broadens the sphere of inquiry in potentially overwhelming ways. This does much to explain the most visible difference between the "Lives" of Plutarch and of Caro: the former are as brief as the latter are protracted. But a second iteration of Caro's methodological postulate helps him manage the otherwise intractable detail. The most extreme men, deeds, and moments, he surmises, can be the most broadly instructive. Focusing on extremes chisels down the otherwise aimless manifold of historical data, providing sturdy treads on which to hang and organize the still gargantuan stockpile of details.

Johnson "found" and "created" senatorial power with a "raw, elemental brutality." Caro elaborates that "studying something in its raw and most elemental form makes its fundamental nature come clear, so an examination of these sources of power that Johnson discovered or created, and of his use of them, should furnish insights into the true nature of legislative power, and into its potentialities."[28] Similarly, the "transition period" immediately following November 22, 1963, is "particularly well suited" for learning about "power's core," because one way

> to gain insight into the most fundamental realities of any form of power is to observe it during its moments of deepest crisis, during its most intense struggles, when, under maximum stress, its every resource must be brought to bear—with the undiluted pragmatism born of absolute necessity—if the challenges facing it are to be met. It is at such moments that every one of those resources, every component of that power, is not only visible but, being used to its utmost, can be observed in all its facets.[29]

It is instructive to compare Caro's approach to extremes with Machiavelli's methodological remarks in *The Prince*. Machiavelli uses a pair of typological distinctions to specify the sort of principalities he is interested in. Principalities are "hereditary" or "new." In turn, a prince "wins" a new

[27]See Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 22–30.
[28]*LBJ III*, xxi.
[29]*LBJ IV*, xvii.

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principality "either by *fortuna* or by *virtù*."[30] It is this last, most extreme category, the new prince who acquires his power with his own "arms," through his own *virtù*, that so infatuates Machiavelli, and whose study he feels best reveals abiding truths about political power. Likewise Caro's own princes of *virtù* are particularly rich subjects, first, because of the unusual extent to which their "conquests" were brought about through their own conscious and strategic deeds and, second, because they created and exercised especially novel types of power.

First, Caro gravitates to Moses and Johnson because of their unrivaled mastery of the grammar of power. In contrast to their aristocratic nemeses, Franklin Roosevelt and Robert Kennedy, respectively, these "new princes" lived the extreme lives of self-made men, beginning as powerless outsiders and advancing solely through their personal genius for collecting and wielding power. Terribly ambitious and morally insensate, they were obsessed with power to the exclusion of everything else. To an "unusual degree" both men were "unencumbered by philosophy or ideology."[31] Their personalities were somehow hollow, drained of the obscuring noise of moral values or a balanced, quotidian lifestyle.[32] Their "whole li[ves]" were unabated "drama[s] of the interplay of power and personality"[33] in which we can discern the "repetition" of power's "vivid patterns."[34] Their undistracted, lifelong obsessions with politics hone them into acute lenses through which to focus on power.

Second, Caro's books aim at more than merely recounting the foibles of uncommonly one-track lives. Central to the enterprise of political biography is the supposition of a correspondence between the deeds of the protagonist and, as Plutarch puts it, "the times in which they were performed." The conduct of a great man, he continues, "is ever suited to the present posture of affairs."[35] The power attained by Moses and Johnson fastened them to their historical and political circumstances. They left profound marks on the course of history, and they did so by inventing and wielding revolutionary forms of power derived from broad political forces flowing around them. The implicit subjects of Caro's biographies, as much as his flesh-and-blood heroes, are the City and the West: the contrasting worlds of the urban center's local politics and the rural periphery acceding to national power. The name Robert Moses is a metonymy for public building on an unprecedented scale. *The Power Broker* "tell[s] two stories at once," one about "how New York, forty years ago a very different city from the city it is today, became what it has become," and a second, about "how the idealistic

[30]Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 7.
[31]*LBJ I*, xvii.
[32]See the "inescapable questions" in *LBJ III*, 619.
[33]*Moses*, 4.
[34]*LBJ II*, 179.
[35]Life of Themistocles, in *Plutarch's Lives*, 1:146.

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Robert Moses became what he has become."[36] Meanwhile, Johnson's career is the story of the burgeoning West and its "lonely" inhabitants, poor farmers and wildcatters with fates tied to their fickle land and severed from the resources, opportunities, and attention of the eastern establishment. The rise of Johnson the politician "sheds light on the new economic force that surged out of the Southwest in the middle of the twentieth century." If "not the architect of [its] ascendancy," he was "its embodiment and its instrument—its most effective instrument."[37] Because this force came to have such a profound influence on Washington, Johnson is a perfect foil for "explaining how national power works."[38]

Political biography is historical in the obvious sense that historical context is indispensable for examining a powerful life. But biography can also be a uniquely effective device for marshaling history's details and, above all, for crystallizing the lessons yielded by aggregating them. Caro "wants his books to last because he had studied those books that had lasted"—books like Plutarch's.[39] Potentially "as well written as fiction," biographies can accommodate the expressive and memorable tropes of "literary works." A Caro biography has a gripping plot, grand narrative sweep, and an overall moral purpose. If they are "as well written as fiction," biographies can endure at the pinnacle of the historical genre. Caro's sights are set high: "Gibbon," he observes, "wrote in the same level as Tolstoy. . . . That's what you'd like to be like."[40] As literary achievement, biography uses the drama of individual lives to encapsulate, preserve, and convey broader historical meaning.

Busy aiming to write political biographies that are almost scientific in empirical rigor yet literary in epic scope, Caro does not also strive for systematic political theory. He leaves it up to his readers to conjecture more precise conclusions. Plutarch, too, makes his pupils responsible for mulling over his Lives and their moral messages, but his closing comparisons and contrasts offer somewhat firmer guidance than we find in Caro's biographies. At this point, then, we must begin to shift from an exegesis of Caro's own historiography toward an extrapolated method of comparative biography—what Plutarch called *synkrisis*—capable of encouraging more theoretical reflection. Caro himself is aware of the idea of comparative biography, even if he has not set Moses and Johnson alongside each other in order to take stock of his oeuvre's full ambit. Prefacing an extended study of Johnson's 1948 Texas Senate race, he tells us that the "contrast between [Johnson's] extreme pragmatism" and his opponent's "extreme idealism" makes "Johnson's methods

[36]*Moses*, 20–21.

[37]*LBJ 1*, xxi–xxii.

[38]Jonathan Darman, "Robert Caro's Last LBJ Volume," *Newsweek*, 13 March 2010, http://www.newsweek.com/robert-caros-last-lbj-volume-82573.

[39]Jones, "The Big Book."

[40]Goldstein, "Writers at Work," 40.

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stand out in the clearest possible relief."[41] With two "perfect exemplar[s]" pitted against each other, the campaign demonstrated "as complete a contrast between the new and the old as can be imagined."[42] The "clash of such mighty—and violently contrasting—opposites illuminates" not just the lives of individuals, but "some of the most fundamental ethical, moral and philosophical issues of American politics and government in the twentieth century."[43] Comparative biography, we can ascertain, requires both underlying similarity, in this case a common electoral race, and acute—or "exemplary"—difference, here between the "extreme pragmatism" of "the new" and the "extreme idealism" of "the old."

Similarity and difference frame our Moses-Johnson comparison as well. Despite the dramatic contrast between the City and the West, the two men share, like each of Plutarch's pairs, fundamental similarities that constitute a background that clarifies and focuses comparative analysis. Caro's biographies portray not only each protagonist's "life but his years"; both capture the intimate realities of "America in the middle decades of the twentieth century."[44] Each represents a facet of the same pivotal moment in American history when the modern city and modern state were built: massive tangles of edifices and institutions, concrete and steel, legal and political. The most striking commonality between Moses and Johnson is found in how they situated themselves in this era. Both were remarkable in how far-ranging were the positions they promoted and the people they allied with. Both won support from constituencies across the whole political spectrum: progressive, big-government liberals, on the one hand, and on the other, racial or fiscal conservatives committed to curtailed governance, at least in the realms of racial supremacy and market regulation.

The dramas of Johnson's and Moses's political lives unfolded under the same backdrop: the "GREAT THINGS" that were "UNDERWAY!" in New Deal Washington, as La Follette Jr. telegrammed.[45] Even "dramati[c]" differences among the likes of Johnson and Moses were "overrid[den]" by agreement on "the public power issue."[46] Moses's biography depicts vast streams of federal money funneled toward what was then the largest flurry of construction in world history. Johnson's is nothing less than a "microcosm" of "the story of how, at last, government, deaf for generations, finally, during the New Deal, during the Age of Roosevelt, answered the pleas of impoverished farmers for help in fighting forces too big for them to fight alone."[47]

[41] *LBJ II*, xxxiv.
[42] *LBJ II*, xxxiii.
[43] *LBJ II*, xxxiv.
[44] This, Caro tells us, is precisely why his multivolume Johnson biography is entitled *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (*LBJ IV*, xvi–xvii).
[45] *LBJ III*, 55.
[46] *LBJ II*, 12.
[47] *LBJ I*, xviii.

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These two wide-ranging careers are snapshots that show "at the closest range" the politics of "translating" the revolutionary reforms of the New Deal "into action."[48]

Springing up alongside vast public power was a bitter resistance to meliorative social, economic, and racial agendas, and both Moses and Johnson kept one foot solidly in the camp of the opposition. Moses came to decry progressive "do-gooders," occasionally allied with conservative business interests (even running for governor on their ticket), and scorned the poor, ignoring their need for parks and herding them into fortresses of public housing, while building roads specifically intended for the car-owning rich. Throughout his career, Johnson played a great game of prevarication—identifying himself with the New Deal when it benefited him while talking the talk of southern states' rights and racism with equal fluency.

Money was the key to straddling left and right. Rivers of dirty cash traced the shifting geographic flow of the American people in the middle of the twentieth century, running between Texas oil derricks and Capitol Hill, between the coffers of Moses's Randall Island headquarters and the pockets of well-connected Manhattan fat cats. Both Moses and Johnson were masters in the "use of money as a lever to move the political world."[49] Both were able to channel public funds into contracts with privileged private interests, funds which, boomeranging back as political contributions, helped to further influence public decision-making in their favor.[50] A whole network emerged interconnecting money and politics, represented by these exemplary men positioned at its nodal points.

The value in homing in on power in this particular transitional era of political realignment is analogous to that found in the study of the power transition of a single election. The New Deal demarcates an epochal reconfiguration of the American political regime. An emerging pluralism constituted by a wide range of interest groups and voting blocs was fertile ground for power brokers adept at forging shifting, case-specific majorities among groups who frequently shared little other than concurrence on the issue at hand. The era of New Deal pluralism, with its fluid coalition-building among idiosyncratic interest groups, is a particularly good laboratory for the study of a central sort of democratic power. A political climate unburdened by deep ideological cleavages, it empowered men unburdened by principle and skilled in the unadulterated mechanics of brokering power.

This overarching historical similarity between Moses and Johnson situates all of the comparative exercises that follow. Part II investigates further similarities in how they acquired, created, and used powers offered by their times.

[48]*LBJ I*, 273.

[49]*LBJ II*, 180.

[50]See, for instance, the story of "The Dam," *LBJ I*, 369–85. See also *LBJ 1*, 598–99 as well the "brown paper sack" in *LBJ II*, 274.

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Part III identifies differences between them in order to extract a blueprint for judging the morality of the deeds and lives of politicians.

Part II—A Political Science

The Personal Creation of Power

Moses and Johnson were in some sense what Machiavelli called "new princes," but, of course, they took and exercised power not in new principalities but in a republic that preexisted and outlasted them. Caro explores what it might mean for such princely innovators to found Machiavellian "new modes and orders," and in what ways they can manage to impose their personality, their *virtù*, upon an extant republic they can only in part remake. Poring over his tomes on lunch breaks in the shadows of city halls or on the National Mall after Congress has adjourned, it seems that today's aspiring power-mongers have turned to Caro's corpus for practical guidance as a latter-day Machiavellian handbook for the art of politics. Caro might very well impart genuine lessons for today's would-be princes. Comparison reveals that Moses and Johnson managed to rise through the ranks by way of a common political genius, an ability to convert informal personal influence into stable institutional power. We can reconstruct four distinct stages in the "entwining of personality and power"[51]: *entrance*, *brokering*, *consolidation*, and *institutionalization*.

First, in their entrance into politics, both figures gained early toeholds by cultivating personal relationships with powerful patrons. In this most impersonal of fields—public power—they established the most personal of connections, akin to those between father and son. Moses depended on the New York governor Al Smith's paternal favor for years before establishing his own independent base of power. Always the "professional son,"[52] Johnson "had a gift with old men who could help him,"[53] old men who included the likes of Sam Rayburn and Richard Russell, the two most powerful men on Capitol Hill, as well as Franklin Roosevelt himself.[54]

"Playing" older men who "crave[d] . . . affection" was just the most personal facet of these actors' common talent for making themselves valuable by being all things to all people. As power brokers, they orchestrated new connections among existing political blocs, using their personal access in one domain to reward or punish people elsewhere. Both enjoyed startling success in unifying disparate geographic, economic, institutional,

[51]*LBJ III*, xxiii.
[52]*LBJ I*, 294.
[53]*LBJ III*, 154.
[54]*LBJ I*, 448–49, 458–60; *LBJ III*, 162, 207–12, 475.

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informational, or partisan blocs, assuring their own value, even indispensability, to far-flung gatekeepers of power. Much of this talent for coalition building and reconciliation of different interests was due to their unprincipled and chameleonlike promiscuity with diverse affiliations.[55] Portraying themselves differently to suit different audiences, they became, above all, the personal liaisons between progressive state-builders and right-wing laissez-fairists eager to preserve economic and racial hierarchies of privileges and influence. They brought newly expanding government into uncharted domains and, reciprocally, funneled unprecedented amounts of money from private interests into politics, carving rivers of cash into the political landscape—some of them clean, many very dirty.

An enormous amount of Moses's weight as a "power broker" derived from his holding offices at both the state and city level. His position in the Triborough Authority was created out of whole cloth, precisely so that the city obtain federal funds for public works.[56] Using power in one office, he enhanced it in another.[57] Moses made himself "the broker—the middleman—between the Mayor and the Governor, between the city and the state, between Democrats and Republicans."[58] Moses made revolutionary use of the federal government's new local involvement, deploying its generous resources to city and state authorities in order to "unite behind his aims" the city's banks, labor unions, contractors, bond underwriters, insurance firms, retail stores, real estate tycoons, and so forth—all the forces, in short, "which are not in theory supposed to, but which in practice do, play a decisive role in political decisions."[59]

Similarly, in an era where the Senate was deeply riven between New Deal northerners and the cotton-and-oil bloc of the South, "passage of most significant legislation required putting together, for each bill, a new, unique, collection of votes, and the margin would always be narrow."[60] Successful coalitions might lie fallow, but it took Johnson's entrepreneurial talent and personality to bring them together. He had an unmatched ability to "persuade" men that he "shared [their] philosophy [and] their prejudices—no matter what they happened to be."[61] Johnson was able to "make liberals think he was one of them and conservatives think he was one of *them*."[62] A well-connected southerner in Washington, DC, Johnson was one of "the relatively few men in Washington to have a foot firmly in both camps."[63] Thus

[55]*LBJ I*, 533.
[56]*Moses*, 360.
[57]*Moses*, 466–67.
[58]*Moses*, 761. See also 475–76.
[59]*Moses*, 18.
[60]*LBJ III*, 585.
[61]*LBJ III*, 137.
[62]*LBJ II*, 15.
[63]*LBJ III*, 471.

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positioned, Johnson became the liaison between the White House and the House,[64] between the Senate and the House,[65] and between Texas and DC[66]—the latter especially because of the limitless campaign money of the contracting firm Brown and Root (later KBR and later still a major piece of Halliburton) that he could slip along to amenable congressional colleagues.[67]

Brokering between conservatives and progressives, and between money and politics, gave Moses and Johnson seats at the table. From there, they shifted from facilitating alliances between already-extant blocs to creating new sorts of politics with them at the center. They consolidated power, not along the main partisan fault line, but through personal relationships of friends and foes. Moses's access to federal money allowed him to consolidate great sums of wealth in his person and his projects.[68] With such resources at his disposal—financing, planning, influence, contracts, patronage, and jobs—Moses supplanted the diffuse Tammany Hall system with a new efficient machine under the instruction of a single will. Moses was the machine's "feeder, the supplier of the raw meat of patronage and contracts, of premiums and fees, of the whole stew of 'honest graft' on which it battened."[69] And "because he spoke for" all of these special interests, "it was his voice that counted most of all."[70]

Lyndon Johnson "was demonic in his drive" to achieve the single ambition of his entire life—the presidency.[71] To rise from the Senate to a position from which to run for president depended on the support of the southern senators, support which would be "forthcoming only after they had been thoroughly convinced" of their colleague's "firm" allegiance to "the cause"—maintaining racial apartheid. Yet since "no Democrat could become president without the North's support," support "not available" to a segregationist, it was "an article of faith in Washington that no southerner could ever become President of the United States."[72] Only if he could earn great personal credit as Senate majority leader for making the party as a whole legislate effectively would he begin to have a shot at the White House.[73]

Johnson translated this unbridgeable national rift into the manageable task of persuading and reconciling representative individuals.[74] So much of his

[64] *LBJ I*, 453.

[65] *LBJ III*, 401, 463.

[66] *LBJ I*, 285, 361. For one of the most extraordinary stories on Johnson's genius for manipulation, see *LBJ I*, 557–605.

[67] *LBJ I*, xxi, 606–17.

[68] *Moses*, 739–54.

[69] *Moses*, 1011.

[70] *Moses*, 18.

[71] *LBJ III*, 677.

[72] *LBJ III*, 124–25.

[73] *LBJ III*, 439.

[74] *LBJ III*, 413.

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power came from these face-to-face interactions and the famous "Johnson treatment." To Johnson, "every man was a tool,"[75] and "the more uncompromising the man, the better tool he would be for the making of compromises."[76] To this end, Johnson cleaved to the Senate's two lodestars, the leaders of the southern and liberal blocs, Richard Russell and Hubert Humphrey. The very personification of the southern cause, Russell saw a Johnson presidency as the way "to heal the breach" between North and South.[77] Russell was willing to let Johnson appear distant from the South for the sake of his political ambitions, but never doubted his friend's commitment to the cause.[78] Knowing that the liberal bloc whose support he so desperately needed would follow Humphrey, the embodiment of the great liberal principles of his day, Johnson made use of this principled man as his conduit to northern liberals.[79] Johnson offered him access to Senate leadership—"the first power" Humphrey "had had in the Senate"—on the condition that Humphrey assert and retain control over his bloc, seeing to it that all liberal interests were filtered through and only through him personally.[80] Humphrey would hold this power "only at Johnson's pleasure,"[81] making him another in a long line of people whom Johnson "would maneuver . . . into positions of dependency and vulnerability so he could do what he wanted with them."[82] Though political nemeses, progressive Humphrey and southern leaders like Russell and Harry Byrd ended up on the same side—the friends of LBJ.[83] While any politics of principle would have exposed "the Democratic schism,"[84] Johnson's politics of personal alliances and productivity for productivity's sake unified Democrats, not by "reconciling but ignoring conflicts."[85]

Brokering among existing blocs let Moses and Johnson consolidate new friend-and-foe politics, but though these were definite reequilibrations, they remained informal and highly dependent on personal relationships. Informal relationships had to be hardened and stabilized by institutionalization. Not just the pinnacle of Moses's and Johnson's common "genius" for doing "something new and remarkable, something unique,"[86] the discovery

[75] *LBJ II*, 368. See also *LBJ III*, 681–82.
[76] *LBJ III*, 439.
[77] *LBJ III*, 472.
[78] *LBJ III*, 599–600, 866.
[79] *LBJ III*, 454. For Johnson's brilliantly crude comparison of himself with Humphrey, see *LBJ III*, 459.
[80] *LBJ III*, 485. For the payoff, see 600.
[81] *LBJ III*, 485. See also 461.
[82] *LBJ III*, 130.
[83] *LBJ III*, 599.
[84] *LBJ III*, 508.
[85] *LBJ III*, 510.
[86] *LBJ III*, xxii.

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of these mechanisms of institutionalizing and regularizing informal power is also Caro's own most tangible and definite contribution as a political scientist.

Moses had a "genius" for "seeing potentialities for power where no one else saw them."[87] He could "take an institution with little or no power" and "transform it into an institution with immense power, power insulated from and hence on a par with the power of the forces that had originally created it."[88] Moses made his name with the Triborough Public Authority—a quasi-independent public corporation authorized to handle specific building and public-works projects. The greatest of all of Moses's brokering among disparate bases of power, the public authority "possessed not only the powers of a large private corporation but some of the powers of a sovereign state" including eminent domain, discretionary spending of an independent revenue stream, and "the power to govern its domain by its own laws."[89] The fount of Moses's power was the sanctity of the contracts between the Triborough authority and private investors. "By writ[ing] the powers which had been vested in him into the bond contracts of his authorities . . . those powers would be his for as long as the authorities should remain in existence and he should control them." Unlike powers granted through the traditional route of legislation that, if "amended or repealed," could be "revoke[d]," the obligations of contract "could not be impaired by anyone—not even the governing legislature of a sovereign state."[90] Moses, "in effect," had created "within a democratic society" a "new, fourth branch, a branch that would, moreover, in significant respects, be independent of the other three."[91]

Johnson's genius was likewise his ability to "see in [an organization] political potentialities that no one else saw, to transform that organization into a political force, and to reap from that transformation personal advantage."[92] Foremost was his transformation and "master[y]" of the Senate.[93] When Johnson arrived at the US Senate in 1948, committees and their chairmen held all of the power, and the Senate was locked in a Catch-22: power could be wrested away from the chairmen—conservative southern Democrats, preponderantly—only with their unforthcoming permission. Johnson had to "persuade" these barons "to give it to him" while ensuring that "they didn't realize that they were."[94] Among other tactics, he used the short-term specter of Republican power in the Eisenhower era to convince these barons

[87]*Moses*, 631.
[88]*Moses*, 614.
[89]*Moses*, 623.
[90]*Moses*, 629.
[91]*Moses*, 624.
[92]*LBJ I*, 607. Johnson did this time and again throughout his life. For a litany of early examples, see *LBJ I*, 175, 281–90, 345, 360, 397.
[93]*LBJ III*, xxii.
[94]*LBJ III*, 489.

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of the strategic necessity of awarding a handful of critical committee assignments by merit rather than seniority.[95] Though he concealed his aims so that his requests seemed only a "trivial departure"[96] from current procedure, discretion over just a few committee assignments, a few spaces on the board, gave him a vast opening to play his "chess game."[97] Each open committee assignment was assigned in exchange for others over which he gained discretion, and so on down the whole line. Instead of "seniority" or "qualifications," committee assignments under the new "Johnson rule"[98] were "made on the basis" of members' "personal allegiance to Lyndon Johnson."[99]

Second, Johnson undid the committee system through the theretofore-impotent Democratic policy committee.[100] Transforming the policy committee into a clearinghouse of information among previously uncoordinated islands of committee power, senators worked increasingly through Johnson as an intermediate rather than among themselves. The process was self-reinforcing: the more information on senatorial bills and negotiations that only Johnson held, the more indispensable it became to work with him to coordinate activity.[101] An informal arrangement at first, Johnson's mediatory role eventually swallowed up the great formal powers of legislative scheduling and the management of bills on the Senate floor.[102]

The "formalist" apogee of Johnson's Senate revolution—his correlate to Moses's bond contracts—were unanimous consent agreements, a procedural device by which the Senate agreed to limit the total amount of time a bill was debated, vest control over the allocation of time in Johnson's hands, and to limit amendments and other procedural moves.

> Unanimous consent agreements were a culmination of all the powers that Lyndon Johnson had created over scheduling, over the content of bills, over the managing of bills, over committee assignments. The agreements were made possible—senators had no choice but to accept them—because of the combining of these internal powers with the powers he had brought to bear from outside the Senate: the power of Rayburn, the power of money. And the agreements cemented his power, made it formal, as formal as the wording of the Senate orders in which the agreements were embodied.[103]

[95] *LBJ III*, 493–95.
[96] *LBJ III*, 496, 514.
[97] *LBJ III*, 416, 490.
[98] *LBJ III*, 505.
[99] *LBJ III*, 563.
[100] *LBJ III*, 507–11.
[101] *LBJ III*, 558–60.
[102] *LBJ III*, 560–62.
[103] *LBJ III*, 577.

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Unanimous consent agreements limited debates so dramatically that with their repeated use "the very nature of the Senate was altered."[104] Through them, "Lyndon Johnson made the Senate work,"[105] on his terms, like "an orchestra conductor."[106] These arrangements represented nothing less than "the legislative embodiment" of his "personality."[107]

This, I think, is the most significant contribution that comparative biography based on Caro's works has to offer to political science. His new princes took control of the republic by finding what turned out to be stunningly similar ways to convert personal influence into formal authority and weave the yarns of personality and power ever tighter.

Political Norms Realized as Personal Tools

Along this path of political ascent lies another example of power's paradoxical unification of particular deeds and political generalities: the upside-down relation between politicians and political norms. Attention to the day-to-day practice of politics reminds us that abstract norms are concretely realized and acquire tangible meaning through the exercise of power. Because politicians, Caro observes, "view . . . great events" and the values at stake in them though "the lens of personal opportunity,"[108] norms are frequently brought to bear by being *used* in the service of personal ends. The realization of even (or perhaps especially) the broadest of public ideals may depend on them being honed into the sharpest of individual tools—invoked, manipulated, or abused as instrumental sources of positive empowerment.

Powerful actors can exploit ideal norms by wielding weaponized simulacra of them. Take the two most important norms of constitutional democracy appropriated by politicians: government by laws and democratic publicity. The spirit of the laws is worn down as legalism uses arcane rules, precedents, or procedural technicalities as "private weapon[s]." In turn, legalism may serve as a technology of power used to sidestep public opinion and elected representatives. Meanwhile, a politician's "eloquence" or his dexterity at manipulating public opinion is his great public "weapon."[109] The manipulation of public opinion can supplant the will of the people. Manufactured publicity can then empower its beneficiary to ride roughshod over judicial and institutional obstacles.

By straddling the public and private, Moses's public authority situated him perfectly to use legalism to avoid publicity and public opinion to circumvent

[104]*LBJ III*, 575.
[105]*LBJ III*, 597.
[106]*LBJ III*, 595.
[107]*LBJ III*, 579.
[108]*LBJ III*, 308.
[109]*LBJ III*, 59. See also 659.

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legal and institutional obstacles. Moses linked his personality to the impartial cause of public service and assiduously maintained an "image" of "the fearless independent above politics."[110] Whether it was "fighting for parks" where he "could hardly help being a hero"[111] or later efforts with highways and housing, Moses's "success in public relations" was "due primarily to his masterful utilization of a single public relations technique: identifying himself with a popular cause."[112] Early on, Moses "identified himself" so well with "battles against crooked politicians and red-taping bureaucrats" that "the public accepted it" entirely.[113] Moses was the farthest thing from "the antithesis of the politicians" that he claimed to be, and his public authorities were anything but "outside and above politics."[114] But it didn't matter: for forty years, "in every fight, Robert Moses could count on having on his side the weight of public opinion."[115] Powerless against him, "no Mayor or Governor dared to try to breast the wave of public opinion in whose curl Moses rode."[116]

After a terrible run for governor in 1934, Moses learned once and for all that the "path to power" through "normal democratic processes" of voting was "forever barred to him."[117] His political genius was located rather in the "myriad ways of conferring, or denying, power by written words."[118] The "best bill-drafter in Albany," Moses knew "how to lull the opposition by concealing a bill's real content."[119] Versed in "thousands of precedents," Moses was able to "cull out the one" that served his aims to make a bill legal or carefully guide dubious statutes away from "the purview of an old one that might make it illegal."[120] His authority "gave him" the "secrecy" he needed for this, "for unlike the records of conventional governmental agencies, which were public, subject always to inspection, an authority's records were corporate records, as private as those of a private corporation."[121] After decades of power, once the "tide of public opinion" finally ran vigorously "against [a] Moses proposal—to an extent it had never run against him before," betrayed "reformers" looked at last to "public opinion" as an ally to help reel Moses in.[122] But thanks to his theretofore-unrecognized legal powers they just

[110] *Moses*, 632.
[111] *Moses*, 218.
[112] *Moses*, 423.
[113] *Moses*, 424.
[114] *Moses*, 16.
[115] *Moses*, 17.
[116] *Moses*, 16–17.
[117] *Moses*, 630.
[118] *Moses*, 141.
[119] *Moses*, 141. See also 625.
[120] *Moses*, 141.
[121] *Moses*, 632.
[122] *Moses*, 662.

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could not stop him. They "didn't understand how much power—power over politicians—Moses had been given, or how independent of public opinion he now was."[123]

Everything Johnson touched, he instrumentalized. Throughout his political life, he *used* legality—"not the law in its majesty but the law in its littleness," as his high-minded Senate race opponent thought, who knew that Johnson had "relied on its letter to defy its spirit."[124] Nowhere was this skill more dazzling than in the Senate, where its rules became "weapons" at the parliamentarian strategist's "command." Time and again, Johnson deployed procedure tactically—often in brilliantly original ways.[125] Thanks to its constitutional charter and its myriad rules and precedents, the Senate that Johnson came to personify had traditionally been "armored . . . as a whole against public opinion"[126] and considered "an impenetrable wall against . . . democratic impulses."[127] Johnson, perhaps self-servingly, believed that "the politician's task" was "to pass legislation, not to sit around saying principled things," and he understood genuine political debate "as dangerous to the conduct of government." Rather, legislative "achievement was possible only through careful negotiations in quiet backrooms where public passions did not intrude." Naturally, this attitude "left no room in the LBJ philosophy for the Senate as a deliberative body."[128]

Publicity was a similarly effective, if vitiated, tool in Johnson's large and scabrous hands (vividly described by Caro, incidentally). Knowing that the "bedrock of political power is public support," Johnson was a "master of" the "art" of "influenc[ing] public opinion, and the journalists who mold it."[129] Johnson worked assiduously at "creat[ing] a picture of himself in the public mind,"[130] though of course, usually, the "reality was very different."[131] Senatorial debate was only a tool "to divert attention from the main work, and buy time for him to do it."[132] At the apogee of the instrumentalization of public speech was the filibuster: the use of unlimited debate as a parliamentary weapon.

[123] *Moses*, 663.
[124] *LBJ II*, 351. See also 335.
[125] For examples of his genius in parliamentary procedure, see *LBJ III*, 399 and 795–96.
[126] *LBJ III*, 103.
[127] *LBJ III*, 105.
[128] *LBJ III*, 578.
[129] *LBJ III*, 315.
[130] *LBJ III*, 427.
[131] *LBJ III*, 429. For other examples, see *LBJ I*, 268, 395–96. An especially illuminating case is to be found in *LBJ III*, chap. 13, "No Time for a Siesta." But the most remarkable (and possibly the most cruel) episode is the Leland Olds reappointment hearing (*LBJ III*, chap. 10, "Lyndon Johnson and the Liberal").
[132] *LBJ III*, 577.

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Comparative biography reminds us that the more accurate proposition about day-to-day politics is not that actors wield power as an instrument to serve ideals, but rather that they use ideals in order to serve power. To the extent that norms take effect through their instrumental deployment, and thus as a byproduct of the pursuit of power, the primary focus of our scholarly attentions should shift, as it does with comparative biography, from the ideals used as tools to the doers that wield them and the deeds by which they are brought to bear.

Part III—Mirrors for Princes

Careers of Means and Ends

The inversion of the instrumental link between power and ideals has important implications once we turn, in this third section, to the question of how to morally judge politicians. The Greek biographer hung the lives of great men before his readers as "mirrors" that would let them look inward upon their own characters, fostering moral reflection and inculcating virtue.[133] Emerson called Plutarch's Lives a "Bible for heroes."[134] Likewise, Caro's moralism opts for "investigating the deed," as Plutarch put it, as the richest approach to moral character, pedagogically far superior to deracinated philosophical contemplation.[135] Not just an amoral scientist of power, Caro seems to encourage contemplation of political virtue, or at least of the ethical dramas and dilemmas intrinsic to political activity. Though befogged by vice, the dark images Caro shows us are an authentic contribution to the long tradition of moralizing "mirrors" literature.[136]

On this reading, the moral weight of Caro's long biographical expeditions draws from a sense of a riddle at the nucleus of political power. Caro tells us that his biographies center on the "relationship between means and ends."[137] Political activity aims at ends, and the matter of ends is a moral one. Whatever the ends are, power is the prerequisite for realizing them. Garnering the political power necessary for achievement depends, says Caro frequently, on "compromise." Compromise widens support, but to the extent that the ends sought after are formulated prior to or independently of the practice of political compromise, power is likely to be acquired at the expense of blunting or shifting those ends. Compromise is the means necessary for achieving

[133]See Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 30–34.

[134]Emerson, "Plutarch," 318.

[135]See Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 34–45.

[136]The "practice of virtue, Plutarch maintains, is to be aided by an understanding of vice" (Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 46).

[137]*LBJ II*, xxxiv.

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ends, but it certainly complicates, probably transforms, and possibly even sabotages them.

Caro approaches this riddle of means and ends by stretching his interrogations across the full length of a political career. The emphasis of Caro's protagonists on their own careers—on personal advancement and the accumulation of power—blurs the lines between means and ends. The inverted relationship between ideals and power reminds us that what looks outwardly like political ends achieved (legislation passed, for example, or roads built) is, once refracted through the lens of a career in pursuit of power, also a means.[138] To the extent that the means of personal advancement come through morally clear-cut achievements, our riddle is attenuated. Moses built Jones Beach to universal acclaim; Johnson's early ascent was propelled in part by recognition of his fine accomplishments in using New Deal resources to improve the lives of the common people of rural Texas, especially his success with rural electrification.[139] But as Caro unfurls their careers before us, we find congruity between political power and straightforwardly moral ends to be more of an exception than a rule. Moses had to keep building bigger and bigger and faster and faster to keep money and power flowing through the Authority. Power demanded that his projects grow more intrusive and ever less carefully planned or defensible. Meanwhile, Johnson's very ascent to power depended on successfully ensuring that he was never identified too closely with any ideal or principle, left or right.[140]

Caro threads his way through this labyrinth of power and morality by identifying deep, enduring personality traits whose manifestations he can track across careers. Both biographies begin with men at the beginnings of their careers, naked of the raiments of power but already clothed in their profound ambition.[141] Amid a sea of similarities, however, the contrasting circumstances of the City and the West distinguish the inflections of our protagonists' lives and, ultimately, our evaluations of them. Moses was born in the empyrean heights of wealthy New York. His privileged upbringing fostered a disdain for the masses he deemed beneath him alongside a reformist noblesse oblige and a paternalistic desire to improve man's lot. He began his career as "the optimist of optimists, the reformer of reformers, the idealist of idealists."[142] A progressive stalwart captivated by the capacity of talented and idealistic civil servants to govern and reform, he was an uncompromising true believer "that Truth and Logic would prevail."[143]

[138]See *LBJ I*, 442, 551; *LBJ III*, 114.

[139]*LBJ I*, 258, 518–28.

[140]For a subtle tension between principle and success, see *LBJ III*, 389.

[141]For Plutarch, "ambition . . . can lead to great deeds, but also to disaster" (Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 86).

[142]*Moses*, 5.

[143]*Moses*, 4.

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Johnson could not have been more different. His early days as a common yeoman close to the dirt of rural Texas stamped him with a temperament as pragmatic and straightforward as Moses's metropolitan progressivism was pretentious. Herein lay the origins of both his desperate, grasping ambition to succeed at any cost and his latent compassion for the suffering. With "the energy of a man fleeing from something dreadful"[144] and "a burning ambition" to be "*somebody*,"[145] Johnson, it seemed, "believed in *nothing*, nothing but his own ambition."[146] Living the life of a man who would be "found on no barricades,"[147] Johnson "ridiculed—intensely and harshly—politicians who fought for ideals and principles."[148] Buried beneath that ambition, there were "hints" of another trait, "a true, deep compassion for the downtrodden, and particularly for poor people of color, along with a true, deep desire to raise them up."[149] But for decades, this grain of compassion would invariably take a backseat to the overweening ambition.[150]

Betrayals of men who had been their means of ascent pinpoint career pivots—the acquisition of independent and stable institutional power. Moses "had always needed the reformers because he had always relied on public support, and they were in many ways the key to that support." But once he had firmly ensconced himself in the Public Authority, "he didn't need [their] support any longer." And when they raised doubts about his projects, he "turned on them," violently and arbitrarily rejecting their rather sensible input.[151] Johnson, too, exhibited a capacity for betrayal throughout his career,[152] but his betrayal of betrayals was definitively abandoning "the cause," an "abrupt and total reversal of his twenty-year record on civil rights."[153] The South had "rais[ed] to power the man who was going to end [their] way of life."[154]

As politicians climb and gather power at hand, they are unfettered from prior constraints. With firm control of the means of power comes the freedom to select ends from a more open menu of alternatives. So liberated, a politician's conduct now evinces his personality and the effects power has wrought on it. Two maxims pertain: a well-known one, "power corrupts," and a second, coined by Caro: "power reveals." To say that power corrupts is to say that means become their own ends. Lord Acton's old adage refers

[144]*LBJ I*, 225.
[145]*LBJ I*, 229.
[146]*LBJ I*, 275.
[147]*LBJ I*, 601.
[148]*LBJ II*, 15. See also *LBJ I*, 189, 273–77.
[149]*LBJ IV*, 9.
[150]See *LBJ III*, chaps. 31 and 32.
[151]*Moses*, 656–57.
[152]On his earlier betrayals, see *LBJ I*, 571 and *LBJ III*, 286–87.
[153]*LBJ III*, xxiii.
[154]*LBJ IV*, 465. See also *LBJ III*, 868–70.

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to the danger that power destroys or perverts original commitments to ideals, or supplants them as it becomes an end in itself.

But, according to Caro, power does "not always" corrupt. "What power *always* does is *reveal*."[155] To claim that power reveals is to say that ends are freed from the constraints of means.

> When a man is climbing, trying to persuade others to give him power, concealment is necessary: to hide traits that might make others reluctant to give him power, to hide also what he wants to do with that power; if men recognized the traits or realized the aims, they might refuse to give him what he wants. But as a man obtains more power, camouflage is less necessary. The curtain begins to rise. The revealing begins.[156]

Hard-won through compromise and tactical self-advancement, power at last makes it possible to achieve ends previously obscured by the careerist's requisite tact and dissimulation. Power may simply reveal a corrupted character, in which means have become ends in themselves. But, as Johnson's career shows, it is not the only possible revelation.

The tragic arc of Moses's career shows how his arrogance displaced his zeal for public service. His idealism was at first a major weakness as he foundered for years in middling civil-service jobs. But when "the curtain rose on the next act of Moses's life, idealism was gone from the stage." Learning that "ideas—dreams—were useless without power to transform them into reality," he "spent the rest of his life amassing" it.[157] At first, "the power Robert Moses amassed was the servant of his dreams," but then, "slowly but inexorably," his building project "became not ends but means—the means of obtaining more and more power."[158] The "principles of the Good Government reform movement which Moses had once espoused became principles to be ignored."[159]

Johnson's moral saga is more complicated and more puzzling for, by early adulthood, his personality was already "*formed*, shaped"—"a shape so hard it would never change."[160] Already "glaring and raw" in the young man was his "hunger for power in its most naked form," a hunger "so fierce and consuming that no consideration of morality or ethics, no cost to himself—or to anyone else—could stand before it."[161] Unlike "most men" who are "altered" by attaining "great power," Johnson was not in the least changed by it.[162] He

[155]*LBJ III*, 562.
[156]*LBJ IV*, xiv.
[157]*Moses*, 5.
[158]*Moses*, 19.
[159]*Moses*, 19. See also 655.
[160]*LBJ I*, 201.
[161]*LBJ I*, xix.
[162]*LBJ I*, 200.

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was not corrupted, because there were, Caro suggests, few values in him to corrupt.[163] But, with power, the "veil was allowed to fall,"[164] revealing his "character" and its "violent contradictions."[165] On the one hand, his long-submerged but never extinguished "compassion, and the ability to make compassion meaningful, would shine forth at last."[166] Yet it also revealed his character "darker . . . than ever."[167] The United States' brutal, ill-founded excesses in Vietnam were an equally authentic expression of Johnson's deeper self, his callousness, lust for control, and capacity for deception.

In sum, Moses's sophisticated reformism turned out to be an oversimplifying elision of politics and morality. His corrupted quixotism ended up more malignant than Johnson's forthright and immutable egotism. By contrast, Johnson's primitiveness, though no Arcadian simplicity, did immunize him to some of the morally corrosive complications of a career of power. Caro's answer to the riddle of means and ends seems to be that, above all, politicians must be disposed to keeping political ends distinct from both moral ideals and empowering means.

By turning values into tools, political activity proves itself inhospitable to rarified idealism. Thus the more deeply idealistic the politician's initial character, the more corrupting power is likely to be to his moral personality. If his political ends are pure moral ideals, then when the crucible of politics compromises those ideals, the ends, too, will be eroded. All that will be left are amoral means, reminted as ends to fill the vacuum: power purely for its own sake. Unlike extrapolitical moral idealism, political ends must be endogenous to politics, resembling those of Johnson more than Moses. Adopted ends must be of a sort that can accompany the compromises that pave the path of a career of power without being totally annihilated or corrupted.

Conversely, if the politician keeps in mind no ends beyond acquiring means, as appeared for so long to be the case with Johnson, then should he gain power, the curtain will rise to reveal an empty stage. To consist of more than a squalid, purposeless will to power, political ends must aspire beyond successful brokering of compromise. Only because of Johnson's lasting legislative achievements can we even consider apologizing for his means of ascent. Properly balanced political ends—kindred to but sharply distinct from both moral excellence (virtue) and prowess with power (*virtù*)—appear to be for Caro the sine qua non of politics as a vocation.

[163]See *LBJ II*, 357.
[164]*LBJ III*, 563.
[165]*LBJ II*, xxx.
[166]*LBJ III*, xxi.
[167]*LBJ II*, xxvii.

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Evaluating Careers of Power

Caro shows that these men were rather similar—abusive, corrupt, and selfish—but he reaches different moral assessments of each. Johnson's story is generally one of redemption—tempered, to say the least, by the catastrophe of Vietnam—with power itself finally leavening his political ambition with racial compassion. In contrast, the story of Moses looks more like a classic tragedy of excellence, hubris, overreach, and fall. To the extent that he couches his narratives in terms of enduring personality traits, Caro seems to direct us to their underlying intentions as the main object of our moral appraisal. But the markedly different emplotments, one redemptive, the other tragic, do not fit harmoniously with the bulk of their professional lives. Moses's intentions, vulnerable though they began and corrupted though they became, were closer than Johnson's to a genuine spirit of public service; indeed this is just what makes his tragedy so poignant, in contrast to Johnson's aberrational and alien amorality.

Pinning our evaluations of the political careers of Moses and Johnson to their moral personalities is insufficient because character is not the cause of every effect. For instance, having found that it wasn't always true that "power is where power goes," Johnson languished in the powerless office of the vice president. It seemed a devastating end to his lifelong wish to reach the White House. Only because of "Fortune's reversal"[168] delivered by an assassin's bullet did Johnson get the chance to achieve that which helps to redeem him in our eyes. Johnson's fate depended on circumstances totally outside his control. The mismatch between personality and the course of both his career and history suggests that the shifting interpolation of abiding character traits is an insufficient basis for definitive moral judgment.

Neither are their accomplishments alone wholly adequate standards for moral judgment. It is true that our final appraisals of Moses and Johnson seem to depend on the moral status of highways and civil-rights legislation. Johnson, concludes Caro, "used the power of the presidency for purposes as noble as any in American history."[169] Though it was Abraham Lincoln who "struck off the chains of black Americans," it was "Lyndon Johnson who led them into voting booths."[170] By contrast,

> to advance his own purposes, [Moses] systematically defeated every attempt to create the master plan that might have enabled the city to develop on a rational, logical, unified pattern—defeated it until, when it was finally adopted, it was too late for it to do much good. . . . In the evening of Robert Moses' forty-four years of power, New York, so

[168]*LBJ IV*, 581.
[169]*LBJ II*, xxii.
[170]*LBJ II*, xxi.

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> bright with promise forty-four years before, was a city in chaos and despair.[171]

This certainly suggests that in Caro's mirrors we might see ourselves as more Machiavellian than we might have suspected. But our intuitions cannot be reduced to the dictum that ends justify the means because this oversimplified approach, a cousin to Moses's own corrupted idealism, dangerously fails to confront the moral hazards endemic to a career spent accumulating power. Indeed, despite his rather distinct assessments, Caro scatters across his pages the intimation that had Moses been more responsive to public input, more judicious in what he chose to build—had he just put up a few public transportation lines alongside his highways, he might have placed himself in the canon of great city builders alongside Haussmann, L'Enfant, and Burnham. Rather than antithetical narratives of redeemed villainy and corrupted virtue, we are at times left feeling that only a thin line marked by the contingent precipitant of personality and circumstance separates Caro's two power politicians.

Neither virtuous intents nor tangible accomplishments—that is, neither moral excellence nor worldly consequentialism—provide an adequate moral yardstick for modern politics. Both fail to do full justice to the indivisible character of a career. Incorporating into our moral calculus a third variable between intent and achievement, means, helps us to apprehend the career's span. We can ask, first, how moral, considered in themselves, were the means selected? Second, how necessary were they to bring about political ends ultimately realized? In sum, we survey a career by asking: could the ends achieved have been reached along a different, higher path or did they really require morally problematic means? In addition to assessing the value of the ends achieved in themselves, we must judge, as best we can, by weighing the morality of a career's means against their necessity. "Reformers who had learned through bitter, repeated experience the difficulty of translating ideas into realities," says Caro, "were almost in awe of [Moses's] success in doing so."[172] Because "democracy had not solved the problem of building large-scale urban public works," Moses "solved it by ignoring democracy."[173]

And, even more pointedly:

> Men of principles and ideals . . . had been trying for decades to pass a civil rights bill, with absolutely no success. . . . *It took a Lyndon Johnson*, with his threats and deceits, with the relentlessness with which he insisted on victory and the savagery with which he fought for it, to ram that legislation through.[174]

[171]*Moses*, 20.
[172]*Moses*, 348.
[173]*Moses*, 848.
[174]*LBJ III*, xxiv (italics added). See also 612, 722, 797–98, 838, and *LBJ IV*, 490.

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Assessing means readies us for assessing the *men* who used them. "Would New York have been a better place to live if Robert Moses had never built anything? Would it have been a better city if the man who shaped it had never lived?" Caro asks us.

> Any critic who says so ignores the fact that both before and after Robert Moses . . . [New York City] was utterly unable to meet the needs of its people in areas requiring physical construction. . . . Moses himself . . . believes he will be justified by history. . . . Perhaps he is right. It is impossible to say that New York would have been a better city if Robert Moses had never lived. It is possible to say only that it would have been a different city.[175]

The effort to weigh the morality of his means against their necessity for his achievements even more squarely captures the riddle of Johnson's enigmatic life.

> Many of the ends of Lyndon Johnson's life—civil rights in particular, perhaps, but others, too—were noble: heroic advances in the cause of social justice. . . . Those ends are a part of that life: many liberal dreams might not be reality even today were it not for Lyndon Johnson. Those noble ends, however, would not have been possible were it not for the means, far from noble, which brought Lyndon Johnson to power. . . . And what are the implications of that fact? To what extent are ends inseparable from means? Of all the questions raised by the life of Lyndon Baines Johnson, no question is more important than that.[176]

Those in place to use power to make the weightiest public decisions have spent whole careers using compromise as their means of empowerment. So it is only with the panoramic view of the whole career in sight that we can even ask some of the most important moral questions about power politics. Are means of ascent in tension (or outright contradiction?) with the ends that only the powerful can achieve? Is it unlikely for the powerful to be also good? If steps in a career are evil but its climax heroic, can we condemn the ascent but praise the apex?[177] Comparative biography does not yield easy answers, but without its assistance, we might not even think to ask.

[175] *Moses*, 21.

[176] *LBJ II*, xxxiv.

[177] Plutarch is also interested "in the morally paradoxical possibility that actions which are virtuous in themselves may in fact harm the state as a whole, and bad actions contribute to its well-being" (Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 264). And, similarly, "it is this high valuation of success, a success achieved sometimes at the cost of strict morality or without the benefit of a correct psychological configuration, which makes some Lives so interesting and so problematic" (ibid., 98).

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Conclusion

I conclude this foray into comparative biography with a few remarks about the sort of knowledge it can yield, the political science it recommends, and the moral disposition it imparts. First, like Plutarch, Caro trains us to know what it is that we don't know. Both recount lives in order to suggest profound questions of political morality. By leaving them unanswered, both encourage ethical reflection and a trained skepticism toward pat lessons.[178] In addition, Caro's works counsel special caution against innocently contemplating ideals without any appreciation for the profound complications posed by power. Piercing through the miasma by which power masks its true nature, Caro gives us a sense of the wide gulf between how we almost always find power portrayed or justified and what it would look like if we could see its vital minutiae. In interviews, Caro has discussed "one of the transformational moments" of his life, when he discovered that a bridge-building scheme, whose folly he himself had documented in a series of well-received exposés, was, despite very broad opposition, making its way toward authorization solely because Robert Moses wanted it. "I kept thinking to myself," Caro has said, "everything you've been doing is baloney. . . . Here's a guy . . . who has enough power to turn the entire state around, and you don't have the slightest idea how he got it.'"[179] Out of this reckoning was born Caro's first masterpiece. By showing us the intricate details of what power really looks like in reference to two extreme lives, Caro helps guide his readers to a similar epiphany. We are immunized against accepting simple appearances or abstract precepts as corresponding to political reality.

Second, Caro's studies highlight the profound influence that shifting historical and institutional contexts have on the practice of politics. They are instructive subjects by which to contrast contemporary politics with a seemingly bygone age of thoroughgoing compromise. It was once so much the norm that sensible observers bemoaned the confused tangle of cross-cutting fault lines as a morally bereft politics without principles. Broad and variegated coalitions of left and right ultimately disintegrated, leaving serried and antagonistic partisan camps. Intransigent adherence to convictions—consequences be damned—has increasingly foreclosed the spirit of compromise that is a prerequisite for functional democratic politics. If the power to act depends on compromise then an uncompromising politics is ultimately a powerless politics incapable of action. Our politics of principle and its concomitants—gridlock, fanaticism, and perhaps instability—turns out to be a compromised politics. In light of this, political science might contribute by analyzing regimes in terms of the sorts of politicians they cultivate and

[178] "Plutarch invites us to address moral issues, but simple answers, simple paradigms, are not always forthcoming" (Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 71).

[179] McGrath, "Robert Caro's Big Dig."

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select. What sorts of politics make possible epic compromisers like Moses and Johnson? What makes a "world" one "in which deals [can] always be made, bargains [can] always be arranged, in which men [are] reasonable in compromising their principles"?[180] And what else is there to be learned about the republic by studying its princes and their paths to power?

Finally, Caro's biographies leave us with a sense of the moral dilemmas of political power. Caro's dialectics of particularity and generality, of the broadly determined and the narrowly contingent, of political ends and the means of compromise, lead us from his two representative hero-villains to his off-stage protagonist: American democracy. The People play a secondary role to Caro's titanic men. As a young journalist, Caro had "been writing under the belief that power in a democracy comes from the ballot box."[181] By contrast, the veteran author's subsequent biographies show us through the eyes of practitioners the scant control and even comprehension that the People have over the all-important minutiae of the powers that politicians use in their name. Caro's biographies convey a sociological point, perhaps akin to Robert Michels's iron law of oligarchy, that the democratic rule of the people requires that some individuals be endowed with powers of rule. As Plutarch put it, we "love and hate" the politician yet "cannot do without him."[182] If power's essence is in granular, contingent actions, then the lifeblood of politics has a deeply antidemocratic aspect to it. As a result, whatever determinacy of the people's moral judgment of powerful actors is possible, it is surely clearest in retrospect, from the biographical perspective of a Robert Caro, with the whole narrative canvas of a career at hand. But, of course, any such judgment comes too late to affect any of the deeds that have retreated into an unchanging past. Whether a politician will abandon his reformist ideals and ally with private interests or betray his closest brethren and put an end to their racist way of life is difficult to know until it has already been done. Only through power's revelatory function is the politician truly unmasked, but by then, it is too late to withhold power. The irreducible tension between moral character and power's exercise leaves democracy reliant upon on-stage politicians yet threatened by them. Ultimately, then, comparative biography teaches us that its true protagonist, democracy, is a tragic hero. Perhaps this is the deepest lesson of Caro's Lives.

[180]*LBJ III*, 807.
[181]McGrath, "Robert Caro's Big Dig."
[182]Life of Alcibiades, in *Plutarch's Lives*, 1:269.

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