Caro’s Flawed Tale of LBJ’s Rise

Exclusive: Author Robert Caro has labored through decades of his multi-volume study of Lyndon Johnson’s life, only now reaching LBJ’s presidency in The Passage of Power. But the much-praised book misses or misrepresents many of the key events, writes Jim DiEugenio.

By Jim DiEugenio

The Mainstream Media (or MSM) has a long and ongoing romance with Robert Caro. Most authors have a tough time getting an ad campaign behind their books. Not Bob Caro. Most authors have an even tougher time getting their books reviewed in mass circulation journals. Not Bob Caro.

Most authors have an almost impossible time getting interviewed in print or broadcast media that has any real reach. Not Bob Caro. Ever since he began writing his multi-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson, Caro has had the Keys to the Kingdom as far as authors go.

I can think of no other current biographer who has had the media eating out of his hand as much as Caro has. Or for as long as he has: over three decades.

I was never in the Caro fan club. In fact, I did not even read Caro’s previous three volumes on Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power, Means of Ascent, and Master of the Senate. I had two general reasons for not doing so.

First, I have never been impressed by a book’s length. For instance, Peter Wyden’s book on the Bay of Pigs invasion is almost twice as long as the volume by Trumbull Higgins. But Higgins’ book is much more valuable than Wyden’s.

Second, I understand the concept that some famous men are complex and multi-faceted. But I also understand the fact that, actually, many famous men are complex, and some complex men are more worth understanding than others.

Therefore, as an historian and author, I have been quite satisfied with reading much shorter books about Lyndon Johnson, of which there are many, in order to piece together what is important about the man.

After reading all 692 pages of The Passage of Power I feel no need to believe that I was wrong in that judgment. But before addressing why this book is a serious disappointment, let us give Caro his due, for there are some good things in it.

First, Caro is a skilled and supple writer. He knows how to, as Warren Hinckle used to say, “Draw a scene in prose.” That is, give us the backdrop, etch in the
characters, let us know what is at stake therein, describe the action, and then wind the scene down. But then, how to use a tag line from that scene to transition to the next. Caro uses this technique throughout the book and it keeps the flow going.

Caro’s discussion of the 1960 race for the Democratic nomination, Johnson’s choice as Vice President, and his role in John Kennedy’s subsequent winning campaign is all quite good. In fact, that part of the book, which amounts to about a hundred pages, ranks with the best I have read in that category.

It is pretty clear from this account that Johnson very likely could have had the nomination if he had not vacillated so long in getting into the race. The key would have been getting the majority of the Western state delegates.

If Johnson had done that, he would have stopped Kennedy from winning on the first ballot. And he could have easily won those delegates. The problem is that, against the predictions of his political adviser Jim Rowe, he did not send his representatives to meet with them until December of 1959. (Caro, p. 72)

By then, it was too late. Knowing the importance of those states, JFK had sent his brother Ted to tie them up months before. This was crucial, for as campaign manager Robert Kennedy was counting the votes at the convention, he told his brother Ted that their first ballot victory would come down to the last state called, namely Wyoming. (ibid, p. 107)

And Ted needed to get all of the 15 delegates to pull it off. If not, and the process went to a second ballot, they would lose the nomination. Therefore, Ted was standing with that delegation when they announced all of their votes for Kennedy. Johnson made a huge miscalculation getting into the race too late. And he also underestimated the Kennedy organization.

Caro also does a good job in explaining why Kennedy picked Johnson as his Vice President, and why Johnson accepted the position. Kennedy made the choice as a simple political decision.

After a meeting with a group of southern governors, Kennedy and campaign director Larry O’Brien decided that they simply could not win the fall race without Texas. And further, they had no chance at all of beating Nixon in Texas without Johnson. (ibid, p. 126)

On Johnson’s side, he figured that if Kennedy won, he as Senate Majority Leader Johnson would not be the top Democrat in town anymore and it would not be his legislative agenda he would be passing. (ibid, p. 112)

Further, Johnson was convinced that a man branded as a southerner would not win
the presidency. By accepting the vice presidency, he was getting out of Texas, getting next to a northeast liberal, and raising a more national profile.

Further, Johnson had done a study which placed the odds of becoming president from the vice president’s office as much higher than gaining the office from the Senate. In fact, after Kennedy won the West Virginia primary, Johnson let it be known that he would not be averse to accepting a vice-presidential offer. (ibid., p. 116)

Johnson also communicated his willingness to House Speaker Sam Rayburn and Gov. David Lawrence of Pennsylvania. In turn, Lawrence told Kennedy that Johnson would accept the office if he offered it to him. In fact, Johnson had hinted to a New York Times reporter a week before the convention that he would accept the vice presidency if his party needed him. (ibid, p. 117)

Therefore, the morning after he won the nomination, Kennedy called Johnson at his suite and told him he would be down to talk to him in a couple of hours. Figuring what was in store, Johnson met with his closest advisers: John Connally, Bobby Baker, and Rowe. They all told him that, if it came, he should accept the offer.

If he did not, Kennedy would lose both Texas and the election. And if that happened, Johnson would be blamed. But if Kennedy won, Johnson would be in a better position to take the presidency. (ibid, pgs. 118-119)

Kennedy came down and made the offer. Johnson said he would accept if Kennedy went to see his mentor House Speaker Sam Rayburn and he agreed. Kennedy did so. Rayburn told Johnson to accept. (ibid, pgs. 128-29)

**RFK/LBJ Feud**

The problem was Robert Kennedy. RFK never liked Johnson, even when he was working as a lawyer in the Senate. Further, Kennedy was working closely with both the labor unions and the civil rights caucus at the convention. Neither group wanted Johnson as VP.

So when they heard the unwelcome news, cries of outrage got back to RFK. Bobby then went to see Johnson. When LBJ would not meet with him personally, Bobby met with his representatives. RFK said Johnson would have to endure a brutal floor fight. Therefore he might want to withdraw. The younger Kennedy visited the Johnson suite three times with this message, even after JFK had announced Johnson as his VP to the press. (ibid, p. 136)

Most commentators, including Jeff Shesol, author of the definitive book on the LBJ/RFK feud, Mutual Contempt, have concluded that Bobby was acting on his own
in these visits — without the authorization of his brother. (And this was what Johnson always felt.)

Caro, after measuring the arguments for and against, agrees with Shesol that this was the case. Bobby Kennedy’s later arguments are simply not convincing in light of JFK’s actions at the time, and the testimony of other witnesses. (ibid, p. 138)

But the upshot of Bobby’s independent maneuvering to get Johnson off the ticket was significant. Up to that point, Robert Kennedy did not like Johnson. After this incident, Johnson hated Robert Kennedy.

The third aspect of this section of the book that is exemplary is Caro’s portrayal of Johnson’s success in the 1960 campaign. Johnson worked tirelessly for the election of the ticket.

Like a modern-day William Jennings Bryan, Johnson got on board a 13-car train called the “LBJ Special.” He then visited town after town after town from morning to night for weeks on end. Johnson understood his job was to win the South, especially his home state. This was not easy since Dwight Eisenhower had made a significant dent in the Democrats’ Solid South in 1956 by winning five of the 11 states of the Confederacy. (ibid, pgs. 144-45)

Further, Eisenhower had taken Texas not just in 1956 but also in ’52. There can be little doubt that without Johnson, Kennedy would have lost not just Texas, but probably three other states in the South.

At the start of the election, the Republicans thought they would take seven states in the South. Excluding Mississippi, which voted for an independent slate, the Democrats ended up winning seven states, including Texas. (ibid, p. 155)

Caro rightly concludes that Bobby Kennedy was wrong and his older brother was right. Without Johnson, Massachusetts Sen. Kennedy most likely would not have become President Kennedy.

Sketching Characters

There are some other good things in the book. Caro sketches in the Bobby Baker and Don Reynolds scandals that were in process respectively at Life magazine and in the Senate at the time of Kennedy’s murder on Nov. 22, 1963.

The Baker scandal was about a double-cross in an influence-peddling scandal, the Reynolds case was more like bribery. LBJ was indirectly involved in the former, he appeared directly involved in the latter. Both scandals seemed to disappear
after Kennedy was killed.

Caro does a nice job showing how obsessed with getting good press in Texas Johnson was. He got a reporter investigating his fortune in TV stations removed from that assignment. He then got the Houston Post to supplement their negative reporting on him with more positive reporting.

But the problem with The Passage of Power is that all the above takes up about 125 pages, or less than 20 percent of the book. The vast majority of what Caro has written here seems to me quite questionable, especially in light of all the declassified documents that have become available about the Kennedy administration.

One thing that struck me was Caro’s reliance on secondary sources. The last installment of this series, Master of the Senate, was published a decade ago. So Caro had 10 years, and much money to dig into the two million pages of declassified files made available at National Archives II.

To be frank, he didn’t make much use of them. And the materials he did use are things that are quite easy to attain today. So much so that they are on YouTube, e.g. Johnson’s phone call with Sen. Richard Russell to cajole him into joining the Warren Commission.

But beyond that, some of the books Caro chose for his information on the Kennedy administration are surprising. Are we really to believe that the celebrated author could find time to read The Kennedys by Peter Collier and David Horowitz but he couldn’t find time to read JFK: Ordeal in Africa by Richard Mahoney?

That somehow Caro thought it was important to read Seymour Hersh’s discredited The Dark Side of Camelot, but it wasn’t important to read John Newman’s milestone work, JFK and Vietnam? With these choices made, one can see why Caro’s discussion of the Kennedy administration, although longer, is no more sophisticated or nuanced than the work of Chris Matthews. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Why Mr. Hardball Found JFK Elusive.”]

Missing JFK’s Achievements

Reading Caro, and exaggerating only slightly, one would think that President Kennedy did three things while president: oversaw the Bay of Pigs invasion, supervised the Cuban Missile Crisis, and sent troops to allow James Meredith to attend Ole Miss (a key event in the civil right struggle which Caro underplays.)

But yet, entire books have been written about Kennedy’s wide domestic program. The problem is, you won’t find them in Caro’s bibliography. To list just three good ones absent from his bookshelf: Promises Kept by Irving Bernstein, Battling
To use just one example of this imbalance: Caro never even bothers to explain what President Kennedy’s strategy was in regards to civil rights. Bernstein spends two chapters explaining this subject in detail. (Bernstein, pgs. 44-117)

Kennedy understood that he could not send a civil rights bill to Congress in 1961. It would simply die in committee, pigeonholed by southern committee chairmen. Understanding this, he decided to spend his first two years going as far as he could in the use of executive orders in order to force the issue and make it high profile.

The violence at Ole Miss in 1961, where two people were shot, and many injured was a prime example. Between U.S. Marshals, the Army Engineer Corps, Army M.P.’s and the National Guard, JFK had over 2,000 troops on hand to protect Meredith. For two years, Meredith was escorted by military police to and from each class.

But this is only one example among many. I could also point out Kennedy sending in the National Guard and Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to confront Gov. George Wallace at the University of Alabama. The point is Kennedy was waiting for a huge public moment where the South would overplay its hand and northerners would be repelled by the brutality they saw.

It happened in April 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. There, amid the arrest of 3,000 people, rabid German shepherd attack dogs, and the use of fire hoses by Police Chief Bull Connor to break up demonstrations, Kennedy decided the time had come to send a civil rights bill to Congress.

As Bernstein notes, “The Birmingham crisis was decisive in making civil rights the central domestic issue of the decade.” The sight of this ugly conflict on the nightly news was shocking to average Americans. And Kennedy wryly remarked that the black leaders there, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth, owed a lot to Connor. (Bernstein, p. 95)

Now, in any chronicle of the civil rights movement in the years 1960-65, the siege of Birmingham looms quite large. Yet, in over 600 pages of text, Caro spends six lines on it. (Caro, p. 257)

Recall, the title of the series is “The Years of Lyndon Johnson.” Caro chose that title because he explicitly states he does not just wish to tell LBJ’s story, but to depict the temper of the times. (See pages xvi-xii) How can you do that without really dealing with Birmingham?

Ignoring MLK’s Speech
But yet, there is something missing in *The Passage of Power* that is even more surprising than that. Caro at least mentions, however briefly, Birmingham. He doesn’t even mention King’s great “I Have a Dream” speech and the March on Washington in August 1963.

The impact of that speech was galvanizing. And President Kennedy was the first white politician to support King’s rally in public. He then handed control over the huge demonstration to his brother Robert. (Bernstein, p. 114)

When I noted Caro had skipped this episode, I began to detect an unnatural pattern in the book. No objective historian attempting to depict the struggle to pass a Civil Rights bill in 1963-64 could possibly discount the impact of those two events in embedding the issue into the consciousness of the public, the media and the politicians in Washington D.C.

Caro does so because he wants to minimize the impact of Kennedy and King in the eventual passage of the bill. Why? Because he wants to hand the trophy to Johnson. Which is absurd because the bill was already in Congress when King made his great speech. It had been sent up to Capitol Hill on June 19, 1963. (Bernstein, pgs. 105-07)

In a very tough fight, Kennedy had shepherded it through the Judiciary Committee. In November, it was in the hands of the Rules Committee. That committee was helmed by the 80-year-old arch-conservative, arch-segregationist Howard Smith of Virginia. And he was going to do everything in his power to stop the bill from coming to the floor.

In the face of those circumstances, the only way to get the bill out of Smith’s hands and to a floor vote was through a discharge petition. Which was simple. Why? Because the Democrats had a large majority in the House. The bill eventually passed there 290-130. Caro somehow wants to give Johnson kudos for thinking up this strategy. As if that dolt Kennedy would not have realized this tactic when he got back from Dallas.

Caro’s imbalance is also clear when he describes the procedure to pass the bill in the Senate. As Bernstein notes, Kennedy always understood that the real battle would be there because of the ability of southern senators to filibuster. So he realized that he needed the votes of liberal and northern Republicans in order to defeat the filibuster through a cloture vote.

Caro wants the reader to think that only with Johnson as president could the Democrats have understood that the key to defeating the filibuster was Minority Leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois. Not so. Kennedy understood this in the summer of 1963. (Bernstein, p. 106) And Kennedy got along quite well with
Dirksen. With Dirksen on board to break the filibuster, the bill passed handily by a vote of 71-29.

One will find Caro using these same rhetorical tactics with the other piece of legislation that Kennedy originated and Johnson passed. Namely the tax cut bill. Again, Caro promotes the feeling that somehow this bill had been floundering around Congress for years and Kennedy was completely lost about how to get it passed. Not true.

Kennedy sent his tax bill to Capitol Hill after he made his State of the Union address in 1963. It was 300 pages long and took five months to write. (Bernstein, p. 157) The hearings went on for two months and 267 witnesses testified.

Because budget and finance matters originate in the House, everyone wanted to testify and everyone wanted input. But it finally came out of the Ways and Means Committee in August, and was passed by the House in late September. And unlike what Caro writes, the Republicans in the House made no effort to tie the tax bill to the civil rights bill. (Bernstein, p. 159)

The Senate Finance Committee did not open its hearings until Oct. 15, 1963. So, far from being stranded or lost in the Senate, the bill was in the middle of hearings at the time of Kennedy’s death. Kennedy expected those hearings to end at the end of November.

He was obviously not around to manipulate things in case Harry Byrd, chairman of the committee, had any problems at the conclusion of the hearings. Byrd did. He would not grant the tax-cut bill unless the budget was cut to below $100 billion, without accounting gimmicks. So Johnson did that. He then called in Byrd and told him that he could now tell his friends that he made the president do his bidding before he voted for his bill. Which Byrd did. (Caro, p. 553)

Caro presents this as Johnsonian legislative genius. Well, if you cut out almost everything Kennedy did on the bill, and imply that JFK could not figure out how to please Byrd and massage his ego, then yes you can present it as such.

MSM’s Praise

What I have just described, the passing of the tax and civil rights bill has been praised by the MSM as being the highlights of the book. But as I have noted, Caro presents a very curtailed and unbalanced picture of the passage of both. He also tries to imply that Kennedy kept Johnson isolated from all facets of the civil rights effort. Again, this is not accurate.

When Kennedy gave his famous June 11, 1963, televised speech on the moral evils
of racism, Johnson had input into it and was right in the room when he gave it. Kennedy placed Johnson in charge of the integration of government contracting. When Kennedy met with black leaders before sending his civil rights bill to Congress, Johnson was sitting right next to him. (Bernstein, p. 108)

And when Kennedy met with King after the March on Washington, Johnson was again, standing right next to the President. (See photo facing page 103 in Bernstein.)

From here, the book gets worse. One would think that if an author were presenting a history of the Kennedy years, which Caro is in large part doing, one would have to explain why Kennedy’s presidency inspired so much hope and excitement. Well, Caro doesn’t do that.

If Caro is unfair to Kennedy on the domestic side, he is worse than unfair in dealing with Kennedy’s foreign policy. There is very little background on Kennedy’s interest in the Third World during the Fifties. Like Chris Matthews, Caro does not mention Kennedy’s visit to Saigon in 1951 and his meeting with Edmund Gullion. (Richard Mahoney, JFK: Ordeal in Africa, pgs. 14-15)

In this day and age, if an author leaves that incident out then you know he has not done his homework on the man. For it was Gullion who altered Kennedy’s view of the Cold War and how it was being fought in the Third World. There is also no mention of Kennedy’s attack on Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles for contemplating the use of atomic weapons at Dien Bien Phu to bail out the French in 1954. (ibid, p. 16)

Caro devotes all of seven lines to Kennedy’s great and daring 1957 speech on the French colonial war in Algeria. (Caro, p. 32) So it naturally follows that Caro mentions not a word about how Kennedy broke the Eisenhower/Dulles Cold War consensus after he was inaugurated in 1961. And he did so on more than one front: in Laos, Indonesia, Congo, and of course Vietnam.

By leaving all this out, there can be no closing of the circle, because by 1965, Johnson had reversed course and gone back to the Eisenhower/Dulles formula in all these places, plus the Dominican Republic. But this is a narrative arc that Caro apparently wanted to avoid even though it’s undeniably true.

How he will avoid it in the next volume escapes me, because there is no doubt that Johnson left the United States a much worse off country than the one he inherited. A country that was ripe to be taken over by the likes of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. And the rest, as they say, is history.

If there is a tragic arc from 1960-68, and there is, then that is the story line to hew to: How Johnson took a country at relative peace and great prosperity and drove it into war, economic stagflation and race riots. But you won’t find it
here.

LBJ’s Descent

In the immediate aftermath of Kennedy’s death, clearly the two most important things Johnson did were to 1.) Convene his first Vietnam meeting on Nov. 24, 1963, and, a few days later, 2.) Appoint the Warren Commission. Caro spends all of two pages describing the former. (Pgs. 401-03)

For a point of comparison, when German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard visits Johnson at his ranch in Texas a month later, Caro spends four pages describing it. (Caro, pgs. 506-10) Yet nothing of enduring substance happened there. As described by other authors, most notably John Newman and James Douglass, Johnson’s first meeting on Vietnam was quite notable.

First, Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge was in attendance. He had been summoned to Washington by President Kennedy. But Kennedy had already made the decision to get rid of Lodge. (James Douglass, JFK and the Unspeakable, p. 375)

The reason Kennedy wanted to get rid of the ambassador was because he did not approve of the handling of the overthrow of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, which had resulted in the killing of both Diem and his brother Nhu. Caro characterizes Lodge’s role in that overthrow by saying that Lodge “had not been at all opposed to the coup. . . .” (Caro, p. 401)

Understatement does not come any richer than that. For both James Douglass and John Newman demonstrate beyond question that, from the moment he arrived in Saigon, Lodge worked assiduously to get rid of Diem by any means. This went as far as having CIA station chief John Richardson removed since Richardson supported Diem (Douglass, p. 186)

But this is only the beginning of Caro’s distortion of this meeting, for the author cannot bring himself to type the words NSAM 263. This was the order issued by Kennedy in early October to begin the withdrawal of American advisers from Vietnam. A thousand men were to be removed by the end of the year with the complete withdrawal to be finished by 1965.

Caro describes some of Kennedy’s plan, but does not actually name the National Security Action Memorandum. Further, he ascribes NSAM 263 to a report handed to Kennedy in October 1963 by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor (Caro, p. 402), as if Kennedy had just come up with this idea upon their return from Saigon.

This is nonsense on multiple grounds. First, that report was not even written by
McNamara and Taylor. It was composed in Washington by presidential military aide Victor Krulak, but under Kennedy's supervision. And far from being presented to Kennedy by those two men, it was given to them by the President to present to him. (John Newman, JFK and Vietnam, p. 401)

Kennedy was not leaving anything to chance about his intent to withdraw from South Vietnam, for he had been planning this withdrawal for two years. In the fall of 1961 he had sent John K. Galbraith to Saigon in order to counter a report by Walt Rostow and Taylor to insert combat troops into South Vietnam. Galbraith’s report had later been delivered to McNamara. (Newman, p. 236)

And in May of 1963, the actual withdrawal of American advisers had been planned at a large meeting in Hawaii with the entire in-country team from South Vietnam in attendance. (Douglass, p. 128)

So far from being as Caro says, “tentative”, or beginning in October of 1963 with McNamara and Taylor, the withdrawal plan had been firmly decided many months before by Kennedy himself.

Further, Caro states that because of the overthrow of Diem, Kennedy may have later altered his view of the withdrawal plan. He fails to note that in reply to a press conference question of Nov. 12, which was after Diem’s overthrow, Kennedy said his goal “was to bring Americans home.” (Newman, p. 426) And there is no evidence in the record that Kennedy changed his mind on this issue prior to his death.

Caro mentions OPLAN 34A, the plan for covert operations against North Vietnam. The seed for this plan was approved by Johnson as part of NSAM 273 in late November of 1963. Caro actually calls it a “reaffirmation.” (Caro, p. 403) If what he means is a reaffirmation of Kennedy’s policies, then this is just wrong.

As John Newman noted in JFK and Vietnam, Johnson tried to characterize his signing of the NSAM in the same terms i.e. as a continuance of Kennedy’s policy. (Newman, p. 445) Newman wrote that this was “extremely misleading” because, first, Kennedy never saw the draft of the NSAM that National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy presented to Johnson.

Therefore, it is not known what he would have done with it. But we do know that Bundy held stronger views on the war than Kennedy did. Because Bundy admitted this to Gordon Goldstein, who was to be Bundy’s co-author for his posthumously published memoir Lessons in Disaster.

Johnson’s War

It turns out that Johnson had stronger views on the war than even Bundy, because
he made three modifications to NSAM 273, and all of them were escalatory. The most important change was the one in which Johnson allowed for direct U.S. Navy involvement in provocative patrols against the North.

This later resulted in the DESOTO missions in which American destroyers worked in tandem with South Vietnamese speedboats in violation of North Vietnam’s territorial waters. That operation led to the Gulf of Tonkin incident of August 1964, which Johnson used to launch the first air attacks against North Vietnam.

Johnson’s new and militant tone was apparent at his first Vietnam meeting. CIA Director John McCone actually wrote about it in his notes to the meeting. In fact, he directly contrasted Johnson’s stance with Kennedy’s. McCone wrote that Johnson was tired of Americans emphasizing social reforms and being “do-gooders.” (Newman, p. 443)

In his memoir *In Retrospect*, McNamara also noted the difference in the two men on Vietnam. McNamara wrote that, at this meeting, LBJ was much more forceful on winning in Vietnam because he saw it as part of the storied struggle between America and the communist forces of China and Russia. (McNamara, p. 102)

Both Bundy and McNamara agree that Kennedy, who was much more sophisticated about the Cold War, did not see Vietnam that way. But the reader of Caro is not aware of this important distinction because the author has cut out Kennedy’s 1951 visit to Saigon, his meeting with Gullion, and his protest against the Eisenhower/Dulles attempt to use atomic weapons in support of the French in 1954.

In fact, during this meeting, Johnson explicitly compared the loss of South Vietnam with the loss of China in 1949. (Caro, p. 402) This is a comparison that no one recalls Kennedy ever making. And it continued after the meeting adjourned when Bill Moyers walked into the room afterwards.

The new president said to Moyers that he intended to “stand by our word. I want ‘em to get off their butts and get out there in those jungles and whip hell out of some Communists.” (Newman, p. 445) This crucial dialogue with Moyers is not in Caro’s book. Again, no one can recall Kennedy ever talking like this about Vietnam.

Caro picks up with the Vietnam issue again about one month later. Here, Caro quotes Johnson as saying that the earlier intelligence reports he had on Vietnam had misled him into “over-optimism.” (Caro, p. 532) He now needed hard facts and not “wishful thinking.”

So Johnson sent McNamara to Vietnam to come back with the real story on what was happening there. McNamara returned and told Johnson that the situation was very
disturbing, and the country may soon be neutralized or be subject to a communist takeover.

Caro reports this with no comment and goes no further with it except to say that 1.) Johnson announced the thousand man withdrawal had been completed when it had not, and 2.) Johnson continued to plan for covert operations in secret. (Caro, p. 535) Caro never asks himself, why would McNamara announce a thousand-man withdrawal in October under Kennedy based upon intelligence reports, but then, just two month later, tell Johnson that Vietnam was in danger of falling?

The answer to this question, of course, is the theme of Newman’s book, which, apparently, Caro never consulted. Kennedy understood there was an intelligence deception going on about Vietnam.

And he was going to use the (false) rosy reports to justify his withdrawal plan, thus hoisting the Pentagon perpetrators on their own petard. But when the military understood what Kennedy was doing, they now began to substitute and backdate more realistic reports. (Newman, pgs. 425, 441)

**Moving McNamara**

When McNamara understood where Johnson was coming from, that a new sheriff was in town, he knew which reports to get. The completeness with which Caro misses this point is shocking because it appears that Johnson knew what the real reports were all along. He was getting them through a back channel provided by his military aide Howard Burris. (Newman, p. 225)

So, while McNamara was telling Congress how well the war was proceeding, Johnson was getting a much more realistic view, namely that the Army of South Vietnam could not put a dent in the incursions by the Viet Cong. In fact, the Viet Cong attacks were growing in frequency and size.

Johnson actually encouraged Burris to provide him with this information. In other words, Johnson was fully aware of the duplicity in the reporting. When he sent McNamara to Saigon, he understood what he would get when he came back.

In other words, this was actually done more for McNamara’s sake than for Johnson’s. LBJ immediately knew where he was headed. He wanted to make sure McNamara understood that also.

But it is not accurate to say that once McNamara brought back the new and negative reports Johnson only contemplated further covert action. Within a month after getting McNamara’s new reports, the Joint Chiefs sent a proposal to the White House recommending both bombing of the North and the insertion of U.S. combat troops. (Gordon Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p. 108)
These were not covert actions, they were overt acts of war. And these are things Kennedy would never countenance in his presence. Less than six weeks later, the Pentagon passed another proposal to the White House for proposed action against the North. It included bombing, the mining of North Vietnamese harbors, a naval blockade, and possible use of tactical atomic weapons in case China intervened. (Ibid, Goldstein.)

Caro extends his discussion of the Vietnam issue up to an announcement made by Johnson on March 7, 1964. The Joint Chiefs made this proposal to Johnson on March 2. So the decision by Caro not to include it in the text seems arbitrary, especially in light of the fact that this proposal would become the basis for NSAM 288, Johnson’s formal plan for waging war against the North.

In just three months, Johnson had now done what Kennedy did not do in three years: assemble full-scale battle plans to attack North Vietnam. I would think a lot more of *The Passage of Power* if Caro would delineate these pretty obvious distinctions.

**Warren Commission**

As bad as Caro is in his discussion of the crucial Vietnam issue, he is perhaps just as bad in his discussion of Johnson’s appointment of the Warren Commission. Although Caro ostensibly devotes a chapter to this subject, it’s actually less than that since he spends part of that chapter describing the layout and history of the Oval Office. In reality it’s about 10 pages.

Caro understands that Johnson’s original plan for an investigation of JFK’s death was to hold a Texas Court of Inquiry supported by the FBI. Johnson and FBI Director Hoover had talked about this, and up until Nov. 25, 1963, this was the operative plan.

But something happened on Sunday the 24th that, unbelievably, Caro leaves out of his narrative. Namely the murder of Lee Oswald by Jack Ruby in the basement of the Dallas Police Department, with the suspect literally surrounded by the Dallas Police. And the shooting was broadcast live on television.

This alerted certain members of the Power Elite that the image of Texas had taken a horrific beating in the last two days. In order, the President had been killed in broad daylight, a police officer had then been shot dead on a city street, and now the only suspect had been murdered live on television while in the direct custody of the police.

Texas authorities were now going to investigate what appeared to be a Wild West Show with live ammunition? Who would accept the credibility of such a verdict?
Within two hours of Oswald’s murder by Ruby, forces from outside the White House began to work on changing Johnson’s mind on the matter. Eugene Rostow, Dean of Yale Law School and brother of Walt Rostow who would be Johnson’s National Security Adviser called the White House and talked to assistant Bill Moyers.

Rostow suggested a national blue-ribbon commission to investigate the three murders in Texas. And in this call, Rostow revealed that he had already talked to Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach. (*The Assassinations*, edited by James DiEugenio and Lisa Pease, p. 7)

Although it appears that Rostow was the first person to call the White House and suggest an investigatory model like the Warren Commission, Caro doesn’t mention him. Rostow seemed to have an effect since Hoover told Walter Jenkins on Nov. 24 that in talking to Katzenbach, the Deputy AG thought a presidential commission should make a determination on the assassination and issue a report. (ibid, p. 9)

But the next morning, in a call with Hoover, Johnson still expressed displeasure with the commission idea. Then, at 10:40 a.m., nationally recognized columnist Joe Alsop called Johnson. (Caro says that Johnson called Alsop, but all one has to do is read the opening lines of the phone transcript to see it’s the other way around.)

Caro spends less than a paragraph on this call. What is worse, he only reports the conversation from Johnson’s side. The marvel of this phone call is the extraordinary persistence and use of rhetorical devices by Alsop to get LBJ to seriously consider the idea of a presidential commission.

Alsop knows just what buttons to push with Johnson to get his guard down on this issue. By the end of the call, Johnson, who previously had been vehemently opposed to the idea, is now willing to consider it. (ibid, pgs. 11-15) You would hardly get any of this from Caro’s brief review of this important conversation.

In his discussion of the recruitment of the actual Warren Commissioners, Caro leaves out another important piece of information. As the author notes, Sen. Richard Russell was reluctant to join. One of his excuses was that it would be too time consuming.

Johnson’s reply to this is remarkable. He says it won’t take any time since all Russell will be doing is evaluating a report that Hoover had already made. (Transcript of 11/29/63 call made at 8:55 p.m.) Since Johnson had been talking to Hoover regularly, he must have known that Hoover had solely focused on Oswald as his only suspect since the afternoon of the assassination.

Therefore, LBJ was asking his close friend and mentor to assist in a non-
investigation of Kennedy’s assassination in which the chief investigator made up his mind the day of the shooting. Caro leaves this out. Apparently, he didn’t want to tell us that the fix was in and his man Johnson knew about it. (Caro, p. 448)

Scaring the Chief Justice

In his conversations with Russell and Chief Justice Earl Warren, Johnson used a common technique to get both of them to serve on the Commission. It was the threat of thermonuclear war with tens of millions of Americans killed.

Why and how did Johnson come up with this? After leaving New Orleans in late September, Oswald allegedly went to Mexico City by bus. While there he supposedly visited both the Cuban and Soviet consulates in order to obtain something called an in-transit visa for Russia by way of Cuba. He was ill prepared to attain it, and did not secure the visa while there.

The night of the assassination, David Phillips’s aide, Anne Goodpasture, delivered a tape that was supposed to be Oswald speaking to a consular official to FBI agent Eldon Rudd for delivery to Hoover. (John Newman, *Oswald and the CIA*, p. 653, 2008 edition.)

The day of the assassination, the FBI called the CIA and found out that, while in Mexico City, Oswald had allegedly spoken to a man named Valery Kostikov, a KGB agent under foreign service cover in the Russian consulate. The CIA then added that Kostikov was in charge of KGB assassinations in the Western Hemisphere. (ibid, p. 631)

In other words, a former defector to Russia, who was working for communist causes in New Orleans, had met a KGB assassination specialist seven weeks before he supposedly killed the President. This is where Johnson found this nuclear holocaust material to use with both Russell and Warren. He actually alludes to it directly on occasion to both men. (Douglass, pgs. 83, 231) Johnson told Russell that this threat brought Warren to the brink of tears.

Caro does not explain the Oswald in Mexico City angle being the source for the nuclear holocaust threat. Neither does the author say what happened as a result of Johnson’s hanging this specter of a mushroom cloud over Warren. It intimidated Warren down to his toenails.

At the first executive session meeting of the Warren Commission, the Chief Justice came out meek as a lamb. In essence, Warren did not want to do any investigation. He wanted to rely on the FBI. He did not want to hold public hearings, he did not want to hire investigators, and he actually did not even want to call any witnesses! (Executive session meeting of 12/5/63, pgs. 1,2)
In other words, Johnson’s warning about Armageddon had effectively neutralized Warren into not wanting to investigate Kennedy’s murder.

A Fake Voice

But that’s not the worst part. The worst part is this: the evidence about Oswald in Mexico City and doing what he allegedly did at the two consulates was dubious. The voice on the tapes turned out not to be Oswald’s. But it’s still worse: Johnson knew that when he used the threat of nuclear destruction on Russell and Warren!

For Hoover called Johnson within two days of getting the tapes. Hoover had agents who questioned Oswald in Dallas listen to them and they told him the voice on the tapes was not Oswald’s. The Director then relayed that message to the new president.

The most obvious way that a false voice could have occurred on the tapes is if the plot was an internal one. Consciously or not, Johnson ignored that fact and proceeded as if the only suspects could be foreign. To say that this ploy worked does not do it justice.

In still another part of the story that Caro does not tell, Richard Russell turned out to be the most honest Warren Commissioner. He perceived very soon that what was happening was a cover-up. He actually composed a letter of resignation to Johnson that he never delivered. He was so disgusted with the proceedings that he actually pursued his own private inquiry, which came to contrary conclusions than the Commission’s. Again, Caro ignores this. (Dick Russell, On the Trail of the JFK Assassins, pgs. 126-27)

All of this, using knowingly false information to instigate a cover-up about Kennedy’s death, ignoring the possibility of a domestic plot of which he had prima facie evidence of, making his friend Russell then serve as part of that cover-up, something which Russell regretted until his death, somehow this is deemed as praiseworthy by Caro. (Caro, pgs. 450-51, 600)

But for me, that’s still not the worst part. Because Warren was essentially neutered by Johnson, the man who came to dominate the Commission was former CIA Director Allen Dulles.

Dulles was the man who deceived Kennedy about the Bay of Pigs operation. When that doomed endeavor capsized, there were two investigations into it. One by the CIA, and one by the White House.

As a result of these inquiries, President Kennedy decided to fire Dulles, thereby ending the longest reign ever by a CIA Director. So the question then
became: If that were the case, why would Johnson appoint Dulles to the Warren Commission? Well, Caro says Johnson didn’t really appoint him. He only did so at Robert Kennedy’s request. (Caro, p. 442)

What does the author base this startling statement on? A diary entry made by Johnson for his upcoming memoir in 1969. Now, let us recall that by 1968 Johnson was facing a ruined presidency. He could not even run for reelection since he faced certain defeat at the hands of his own party.

If he had run, he would have been trounced in the Democratic primaries by his longtime antagonist RFK. Johnson had left the Democratic Party so divided that Richard Nixon defeated Vice President Hubert Humphrey for the White House. Humphrey had lost in part because Johnson would not let him denounce the disaster of the Vietnam War until too late in the race.

Johnson was so bitter about the possibility of Bobby Kennedy becoming president that, as Robert Dallek revealed in his book Flawed Giant, Johnson wanted Nelson Rockefeller to run on the Republican side because he didn’t think Nixon could beat Kennedy.

**Collapsed Presidency**

Further, by this time, most of the American public knew that the Warren Commission was a flimsy cover-up designed to conceal the true circumstances of JFK’s murder. For this was after the publication of books by critics like Mark Lane, Sylvia Meagher, Harold Weisberg, and Josiah Thompson. It was also after the discoveries about Oswald in New Orleans by DA Jim Garrison.

So both the Commission that Johnson had appointed and his presidency had fallen apart. But further, in 1969, Robert Kennedy was dead. So he could not deny Johnson’s accusation. When Johnson called Sen. Russell in 1963, Russell asked him if Robert Kennedy had suggested any Commissioners. Johnson said no. (Caro, p. 445)

Most historians will tell you that when there is an inconsistency in an individual’s testimony, the witness testimony nearest to the event should be believed, especially in light of the circumstances I have listed.

Yet Caro chooses to believe the statement from five years later. But further, the fact that Caro bought into this shows his poor primary research on the Kennedy years, especially the Bay of Pigs, for one of the chief investigators into the Bay of Pigs debacle during the White House inquiry was Robert Kennedy.

Suspecting Dulles had tricked his brother into a hopeless mission, RFK went after Dulles mercilessly. He then had his father Joseph call Robert Lovett who
the elder Kennedy had served with under Eisenhower on a supervisory board over the CIA.

Lovett told RFK that he and David Bruce had written a report about Dulles for Eisenhower. They concluded that Dulles had completely altered the Agency from its original intelligence-gathering mission. Dulles had made it into a rogue organization that was irresponsibly replacing foreign governments and making America into a bogeyman in the Third World.

Lovett told RFK that he, Joe Kennedy and Bruce had tried to have Dulles fired. They could not since Eisenhower was influenced by Allen’s brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. All this important information is in Arthur Schlesinger’s book Robert Kennedy and His Times. (See pgs. 474-76)

That book is in Caro’s bibliography. Are we to believe that he didn’t notice it enough to make a note of it? But further, after RFK got his brother to fire Allen Dulles, he then asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk if there were any more members of he Dulles family still serving in the administration.

Rusk replied that Allen had a sister named Eleanor who worked in the State Department. RFK told him to fire her also because “He didn’t want any more of the Dulles family around.” (Leonard Mosley, Dulles, p. 473)

But yet, if one believes Caro, after finding out about Allen Dulles’s duplicity in the Bay of Pigs, and being so repulsed by it that he wanted no member of the Dulles family in the administration, we are to believe that RFK asked Johnson to appoint Dulles to investigate the suspicious death of his brother. Add to that the fact, as David Talbot notes, that Bobby first suspected that the CIA had killed JFK. (Brothers, pgs. 6-7)

To pile a howler onto all this, Caro writes that Operation Mongoose was still operative on Nov. 22, 1963, with RFK in charge. In fact, Mongoose had been disbanded after the Missile Crisis, many months before the assassination. (Morris Morley, Imperial State and Revolution, p. 151)

I could go on and on about the further shortcomings of this inflated and much overrated book. The worst thing about it is that it does not teach you more about the era Caro is describing. Because his leading character the man Caro chose to devote decades of his life to did little in these years, Caro decided to make him more attractive by diminishing those around him. (In addition to not describing the March on Washington, Caro does not even mention Malcolm X.)

That technique does not make for good history because it shortchanges us on facts. But in The Passage of Power, Caro does not seem very interested in facts. He wants to construct a narrative first, with Johnson as the lead actor in it.
Even though, in these years, he wasn’t.

With what Caro does here, I don’t look forward to the final volume. Now that I have seen him operate close up, he reminds me of the likes of Stephen Ambrose and David McCullough. That is, historians who worship success more than the truth.

Jim DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era.