

Before Their Destiny: The Early Lives of Harry Truman,
Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford

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Introduction

While the deeds of even our most obscure and inconsequential presidents are often retold at length within high schools and college classrooms across the country, less well known are the actions and events that brought the presidents to their vaunted position. Although some administrations have been blessed with more success than others, it has always seemed to me to be the case that all presidents have lost some of their humanity. People do not really pause to consider that George Washington was a man like any other man; that he had to eat and drink like every other human. It is difficult to look back on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and imagine him in color, for almost every photo we have of him is in black and white. We think of him as part of a bygone era filled with people to whom we cannot connect, both because of their deeds and the aura that has arisen about them. Even less legendary presidents, such as George H.W. Bush or Bill Clinton, are viewed as being somehow separated from the rest of us by virtue of the office they held.

But the oft-overlooked truth is that these men were and are mere mortals just like the rest of us. They were conceived and born as we all were. Most of them held jobs that we ourselves have worked, and many of the presidents failed miserably where 'average' Americans succeed every day. Why, even in the age of cynicism and information-overload, do Americans think of the presidents as people who could stop the world from turning?

I think one of the reasons is because from the time that we are first taught about any of these men they are already larger than life. I know, from experience, that whenever teachers and professors lecture students about our history it always seems as though historical figures appear from nowhere, as if they come onto the grand stage by

cue. ‘Lincoln has been shot. Enter: Andrew Johnson – stage left.’ When a professor teaches a class about modern diplomacy he could move from Reagan to Bush to Clinton to Bush to Obama and never once mention that there was a time when Ronald Reagan was ‘just’ a lifeguard; or when George W. Bush was a homesick high schooler. Teachers do this of course because they do not have the time to delve into the younger lives of these men. For every president (with the possible exception of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison) the presidency is the pinnacle of their career; when they are at the height of their influence and leave their greatest mark upon the world.

Unfortunately this results in so much of our presidents’ unique history to be missed. When students are exposed to the presidents it is at their height of success, yet it is often said that more is learned in failure than in success. And make no mistake – some of our most revered presidents were abject failures before turning their lives and fortunes around. There is too much to learn in the early lives of these men for their stories to go untold. That is what I have set out to do with this text. I have tried to use biographical information to extrapolate how certain experiences shaped three young, anonymous men into future presidents. From these events I try to uncover how their upbringing and early lives gave them the character needed for their political success. For each man my research reveals certain overarching themes that dominate the person’s life. Their experiences reinforced these themes, and their adherence to these overarching traits led to their later experiences. It is, plainly, a self-fulfilling concept, but I believe it is an accurate one.

I have chosen to write about Presidents Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford for several reasons. The first has to do with practicality. There is simply more unadulterated information about modern presidents than older ones. Much of the details and intricacies of older presidents (and the details and intricacies provide some of the most fascinating material) have been either lost to history or spun into legend. Although modern presidents are not immune from this, I have found that there are simply more tangible facts that can be confirmed by multiple sources for the modern chief executives. That being said, I feel that a large amount of biographical work that has been written about Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama seems to vary back and forth between character assassination and pro-regime propaganda.

The second consideration I had to make was how to link three presidents together. I knew that I wanted to write about Harry Truman, and having found ample legitimate source material to work with I knew that it could be done. But what characteristics or events did Harry Truman share with two other modern presidents?

Ultimately I made the decision to link these men not by their younger lives, but by the circumstances under which they assumed the presidency. By choosing Truman, Johnson, and Ford I would write about the three modern presidents who were forced to assume the presidency outside of the normal electoral sequence. Truman and Johnson each assumed power upon the death of their predecessor, while Ford was sworn into office in the wake of Richard Nixon's resignation. During my research I realized that these men shared other similarities, but this was the main theme linking them together from the outset.

For each of these men I describe the important moments, themes, and actions of their upbringing and early adulthood, up to and including their first successful attempts at running for public office. For Johnson and Ford, this would mean their congressional races. For Truman this means his election as county judge. Although each man was notable for their electoral history on the national stage as well (Truman was the victor in one of the biggest upsets in presidential history, Johnson took the largest percentage of the popular vote ever recorded, and Ford never won a national election), their important elections in terms of the goals of this text are their first elections.

There are certain qualities these men possessed as famed politicians that I sought to uncover the origins of. I also made an attempt to insert quirks and other humanizing elements of their pasts into this text. Ultimately I wanted to tell accurate stories that are worth reading. I wanted to tell stories that could impart lessons to other politically ambitious young men and women. As an aspiring office-seeker myself, it has been heartening to learn that there is no one path into public office, and that hard work and determination really can pay off. I have always believed that who you are when you are born matters, but whom you choose to become matters more. My work for this text has confirmed that to me, and I hope it does for others as well.

Also, having an avid interest in history has imparted upon me a tendency to look to the past for inspiration and guidance when I think about my goals in life. By writing about three presidents from the modern era, I feel as though I am uncovering details and stories that are both applicable and accessible to my life and the lives of my peers. I learned that a job should be much more than a line on a resume; it should be an opportunity to grow as a person and to find out just how well I work with, as well as

against, other people. I learned that failure only occurs when people fail to learn from their actions.

At the same time, from reading about these men, I got at times a sense of ‘there but for the grace of God’ sentiment. So many factors had to fall into place for these men just to have an opportunity at winning their local electoral contests. But for a slight twist of fate each of these men could have been completely absent from the history books. Their experiences also caused me to draw parallels between their lives and an entirely different subject matter.

There is a theory among evolutionary biologists which states that species evolve at an incredibly slow rate (even by evolutionary standards), and then a certain environmental stimulus takes place that creates a moment in natural history where there is evolutionary upheaval, and evolution among an area’s species takes a great leap forward. Essentially, evolution will almost plateau for an extended period before experiencing a violent upsurge in evolutionary activity. I mention this because when I took a grand view of the lives of these three men it seems as though their lives always moved in a certain direction before an opportunity or event presented itself and set their lives on a different course, which was later followed by another event, and so on. Over time these events opened new paths that were previously barred to these men, much as the Ice Age created a land bridge between Asia and North America, opening those environments to each other.

This is not *An Expanded Treatise on the Statistical and Psychological Analyses of Presidents Truman, Johnson, and Ford*. This work is designed to look at a variety of factors of their younger days and forge an interesting, informative, and substantive

analysis of the way their early lives prepared them for the challenges they faced as adult politicians. I try to blend a small amount of psychology with history in order to draw conclusions about these men. Most of all, this work was meant to be my own, something unique that I could share with others. My research and work for this thesis has given me a new resolve and fresh perspective when I consider my goals, and I hope it does the same for others.

As Shakespeare told us: “What is past is prologue.”

Literature Review

As already mentioned, one of the primary motivations for me to write about the subject of the young lives of our presidents was what I felt to be a tremendous absence of literature about the early experiences of our leaders. Although biographies abound about our nation's presidents, very few of them go into detail about what these men did before they were household names. Although this makes perfect sense, really, I felt that my thesis could play a small role in filling such a void, and perhaps serve as the basis for a more complete publication sometime in the future.

To that end, the main sources from which I extrapolated information were biographies about each of these three men. Although the greater part of these biographies focused on their actions as president (or, in Ford's case, the Watergate scandal), by accessing enough biographical information I was able to piece together sequences of events that highlighted what I believe to be the dominant themes for each man's early life. For Truman, the theme was undoubtedly one of determination in the face of failure. For Johnson, it is the tale of a troubled early life, fraught with emotional and financial fragility. And with Gerald Ford, it is the story of his work ethic, born from the athletic arena.

For each man there were certain literary works that stood apart from the others. David McCullough is one of our nation's most celebrated historians, and the work he did for *Truman* shows why. I believe that the only biographical works more thorough than that McCullough's *Truman* are Edmund Morris's books about Theodore Roosevelt and Robert Caro's works about Lyndon Johnson (see below). My only criticism of *Truman* stems from the goal of this paper: I feel as though the book does not put young Harry's

early experiences, especially pre-World War I, into the proper context when compared to his early political career.

Lyndon Johnson is one of the most pivotal figures in modern American history. In terms of both domestic and foreign policy, his actions are unparalleled. No president since Franklin Roosevelt has had as sweeping an impact upon our national landscape as Johnson has. It is therefore appropriate to say that no biographer has done as sweeping a job writing about Lyndon Johnson than Robert Caro. Of all the biographies I studied for this work, it was Caro's epic trilogy concerning the life of LBJ that I found most impressive.

Incidentally, historians have been far more prolific in producing historical biographies about the lives and careers of Truman and Johnson than they have about Gerald Ford. Ford's own autobiography and the work of James Cannon formed the bulk of material directly available to me. Luckily, in the case of Ford, I was able to find direction from a small network of mentors in Washington, D.C. who pointed me in the right direction in finding material to use for Ford, as well as supplying personal anecdotes that gave me an insight into Ford's personality. This, in turn, gave me clues to what I should be looking for when dissecting the origins of Ford's character.

Although biographies served as the main source of information, I also drew upon some works of psychology, notably for the Johnson and Ford chapters. I found that for each of these men there was much to be gained from reading about the impact certain experiences can have on a young man's psyche. Reading Sigmund Freud was an especially useful exercise for my research surrounding Lyndon Johnson. For psychological sources for Gerald Ford, one of my advisors pointed me in the direction of

an acclaimed youth sports coach. Given the role that athletics played in Gerald Ford's life, this work gave me a unique perspective into how sports shaped Ford into the man he became.

During my research along the psychoanalysis track I was guided to an author named Paul Elovitz, who has written about his approach to the study of the early lives of our presidents. I was unable to access the primary article I was directed to, but I did manage to find a transcript of a conversation he had with a colleague who was studying a similar subject. Reading the transcript confirmed, in my view, the basis for my decision to write in the style and manner that I have chosen. Mr. Elovitz has obviously completed an exhaustive amount of analysis during his career, but I find his methodology flawed and his conclusions inaccessible to people who I feel would be interested in this subject.

Although Mr. Elovitz states how his work in this area focused “on how personality is developed in childhood and tested in facing the traumas of life”, he decides to dedicate his efforts to subjects “whom I tend not to trust.”¹ This is hardly an objective basis from which to begin his analysis. For example, in his analysis of President Carter, he admits “The South's apartheid system, which I had demonstrated against as part of the civil rights movement, had left me with a distrust of Southerners.”²

Perhaps I'm being too harsh, since I am well-removed from the immediate consequences of the policies of Truman, Johnson, and Ford (although my father was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam), but it is tough for me to accept the veracity of this man's claims when he freely admits to not trusting his subject on the basis of geography (of

¹ Paul Elovitz, as quoted in “A Conversation on Alternative Approaches to Political Personality”, reprinted from *Clio's Psyche*. Originally published June 1999. <http://www1.csbsju.edu/uspp/Gore/Conversation.html>. Accessed 4/3/2011.

² Ibid.

course, by his account, he was able to bravely overcome his struggle with such stereotypes for the sake of his research).

The other panelist in this conversation, Aubrey Immelman, claimed that her work on this subject was based on a methodology that would take a person's actions and traits and use those elements to somehow quantify a candidate's personality, thereby adding a layer of predictability to a person's actions.³ Recently I saw an article published on Yahoo!'s homepage, in which scientists claimed to have uncovered the traits and qualities that lead to successful marriages. I am no psychoanalyst, but I feel that if you cannot understand love and emotion, to the extent that you feel the need to quantify it, then you will just never comprehend it. Humans are not math problems. We do not even have the capability to exactly quantify how many of us there are at any one time, let alone quantify our personalities. Reading the accounts of these psychoanalysts convinced me that my approach to my thesis and research was sound. I saw a real scarcity of objective, emotional, and humanizing analyses of the younger lives of our presidents, and so I set out to do my part to amend that.

Therefore, although much of the hard information for this work was drawn from outside sources, it was I who reached many of the conclusions I explain in the paper. I have, in all cases, striven to use hard information to support my claims, and I feel that I have done so. What I mean is, when I was forced to speculate about certain areas of their lives I would do so with the backing of hard information. For example, as someone who is no older than Gerald Ford was when he was a young athlete and coach, I feel confident that my own athletic and coaching experiences have given me a unique perspective and an exceptional chance to draw my own conclusions. Just as I have my whole life ahead

³ Ibid.

of me, so did these young men who I have written about. They may have dreamt of great accomplishments, but they could hardly have known where their lives would lead. This work has been written with hindsight, but from the perspective of an author who is, in his own life, working toward similar goals as these men once were.

Other literary resources that I could not have done without include the U.S. Senate's website, which has accurate and fairly detailed biographies of every vice president. CQ Journal archives were also an excellent online reference. And while writing about the early lives of these men, I often took the time to consider the world in which I am maturing. To that end, Google books was an outstanding tool to have at my disposal, and played a crucial part in finding some obscure quotes and information. I could not imagine completing this thesis without all of my online resources, but especially these three.

Finally, I endeavored to only use sources that were as objective as possible. I was in search of facts from which I could draw conclusions; I was not looking for the conclusions of others. As I mentioned in the introduction, so much of modern political literature is outright character assassination, and too many of today's bestsellers are written with a specific agenda in mind: to pander to a clearly defined constituency who already have their minds made up about an issue.

I will conclude this literature review simply by saying that what I have written about these men is exactly the literature I want to give to the world. I want to fill a void of knowledge, and hopefully encourage other people to take an interest in history. I hope this literature makes history more accessible to others, as people realize that there is not

an insurmountable divide between 'us' and 'them'; that we are all capable of achieving our goals. We are all flawed, we are all unique.

Harry S Truman

“I never give them hell. I just tell the truth and they think it’s hell.”

There have certainly been many presidents of the United States who came from humble origins. Lincoln, Carter, Clinton, and others all began their lives with no hint of being destined for greatness. Yet even among the presidents who hail from common stock, Harry S Truman stands apart. No other president was born into more unassuming circumstances, and certainly no other president remained in those circumstances for as long a time as Harry Truman did. For example, Clinton and Obama were each born into inconspicuous conditions, but each eventually found their way to Ivy League institutions on their path to the presidency; Harry Truman never attended college. Jimmy Carter and Dwight Eisenhower attended military academies, but Harry Truman had to overcome his poor eyesight and jump through hoops for the opportunity to command a company of a regiment's 'worst' soldiers in World War One. Many presidents can claim to have come up from the common citizenry, but no president was as much of an 'ordinary American' as Harry Truman. And yet this 'ordinary American' would accomplish enough in his seven years as president to overcome the shadow of his predecessor, earn the respect of the greatest leaders of his era, and see his legacy vindicated by history.

If there is one continual theme that followed Truman from his Missouri farms to the halls of Congress and through to the White House, it is that other people were constantly underestimating him. Though the subject here deals mostly with his younger days, when he wore his Missouri origins on his sleeves, people of all walks of life persistently miscalculated Truman's abilities. His humble origins cannot possibly be the only explanation for this, since even the people of his Missouri community had trouble believing in Truman's potential. It was not simply a case of Washington insiders sniping behind the back of a man from the country, since even the country folk could hardly

envision the future achievements of Harry Truman. The man who had trouble getting his own countrymen, and sometimes his own family, to accept him as a leader would one day be credited by Winston Churchill as doing “more than any other man” to “have saved Western Civilization.”⁴

Harry Truman was born on May 8, 1884. From an early age he was handicapped by his outward appearance. It was not a case necessarily of looks, but rather of *image*. Truman had malformed eyes which resulted in atrocious vision. After a fireworks show in which young Harry shuddered at every blast, because he could not see and anticipate the explosions, his mother decided that the taboo on eyeglasses had to be broken. Harry’s father was out of town, and so his mother hitched two horses to a wagon and rode into Kansas City, where Harry was prescribed the first of many pairs of thick glasses, which would become a trademark of his.⁵ Though not unpopular among his childhood peers, he was usually left to stand on the sidelines while the other kids played sports. He gained some acceptance with the other children as an umpire because of his characteristic honesty and incorruptibility, which even at that early age was apparent to all who knew him.⁶

Harry’s father, John Truman, was consistently unimpressed by Harry, and often irritated by him. Young Harry was just never able to develop the physical prowess that a manual laborer like John held in high regard. John Truman did love Harry, but had a special affection for Harry’s younger brother Vivian. Vivian was far more of an

⁴ Time Magazine Archives (online – No author given), “The Presidency: The World of Harry Truman”, originally published 1/8/1973, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,910501-1,00.html>, accessed 3/20/2011.

⁵ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973), 47.

⁶ Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S Truman* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1973), 50.

outdoorsman than Harry ever was, and even participated in the mule-trading business with his father. This may have resulted in Harry's predilection for hard work of any sort that he could handle (i.e. if not manual labor, than soldiering or politicking); viewing his father's displeasure as a chip on his soldier.

The one subject where Harry and his father shared a common affinity was politics. John Truman was certainly no political boss, but he was very involved in the activities of the local Democratic Party. Harry admired the way his father would return home some nights with his fists bruised and bloodied from campaign events that the family would be talking about for weeks to come. For his part, Truman did the best he could as a young man to learn the issues that faced the nation's citizens, and to study the nation's political history. Nevertheless, Harry's bookish tendencies were lost on John Truman.

Though raised in a household accustomed to manual labor, young Harry gravitated toward reading and educational pursuits. This irked Harry's father, but his mother, Martha, tried her best to cultivate Harry's learning instincts. She had been fairly well-educated in her youth, and wished the same for her son. Harry spent much of his youth in the local library, reading everything that he could get his hands on. When Harry was ten years old his mother bought him a set of biographies titled *Great Men and Famous Women* by Charles Francis Horne; Truman would never part with the books, save for his service in World War One.⁷ Those books would also serve as the foundation for Truman's historical philosophy; that is, not merely *how* events happened but *why* they happened. He would adopt a philosophy that historians (often derisively) call the 'Great

⁷ Alfred Steinberg, *The Man from Missouri* (New York: GP Putnam's Sons, 1962), 25.

Man' theory. As Truman would later say: "Men make history - history does not make the man."⁸

Harry's mother brought him to the local library as often as she could, and Harry would spend hours devouring every historical text available. He especially loved military history, and day-dreamed about grand formations of soldiers marching across the battlefield. This gravitation toward history helped him with his Sunday school studies where he impressed his teachers, and a young blonde girl named Bess, by being able to read very well from an early age. Harry also took up piano lessons, and became quite good for his age. He would rise at five in the morning every day to practice, and would go to lessons twice a week, facing the jeers of other boys for each visit.⁹

In high school, Harry fastidiously studied Latin at the home of his Aunt Ella (it was during these lessons that he first swooned over Bess Wallace). His mother never doubted that Harry was a special youngster, but she was viewing him through a mother's eyes. Despite Harry's desire to learn, and despite the piano lessons, he was not even top of his class. His friend Charlie Ross was valedictorian, which earned Charlie a kiss at graduation from the English teacher, Tillie Brown. When other students asked why they were not afforded such a treat, Ms. Brown replied that they had to earn one, before adding "I hope yet to kiss a President of the United States."¹⁰ She made that remark surely because she felt it was the most ridiculous achievement to hope for from the class of 1901.

Thus the Harry Truman who was familiar to his community at this point was known as a decent and upright young man, but nothing marked him apart from the

⁸ Harry Truman, quoted in Margaret Truman, 53.

⁹ Robert Ferrell, *Harry S Truman: A Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 15.

¹⁰ Tillie Brown, quoted in Steinberg, 28.

ordinary. Even a college education, which Harry rightly deserved, eluded him as his family's financial situation led him into the workforce. Truman had to work for any employer who would have him in order to keep his siblings in school. He abruptly halted the piano lessons in order to save money and to focus on providing a measure of comfort for his family. He was a timekeeper for a railroad construction company, a mail-room clerk at a newspaper (whose Republican leanings caused Truman much consternation), and a bookkeeper at a bank in Kansas City (where one of his housemates was an older brother of Dwight Eisenhower).¹¹

It was during his time in Kansas City, the furthest he'd ever been away from home, that Harry started to become a man of his own. He made some friends and would use his piano talents to make some extra spending-money. When President Theodore Roosevelt came to Kansas City, Truman was a member of the throng that clamored for a glimpse of the American icon. He also decided to join a Missouri National Guard Unit, becoming a member of Battery B, an artillery formation. Truman learned the guns and learned his way around a drilling square. He was especially proud of wearing the blue dress uniform. As an interesting sidenote, his grandmother refused to gaze upon Harry's dress blues, and forbid them in her household, because her property had been ravaged by Union soldiers when she was young.

During this time Harry's father moved the family from one misfortune to the next. The strain of trying to provide for a family coupled with the repeated, almost baffling failure of the elder Truman to make a living from any of his ventures led to John Truman's deteriorating health. After a final disappointment in the corn business in 1905,

¹¹*The Autobiography of Harry S Truman* – 2002 Edition (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 125.

John Truman moved the family to Grandview farm, which was owned by Harry's grandmother. In 1906 Harry was asked to move to Grandview from the city to help with the fieldwork. It was back to the insular life of the countryside for Harry Truman, just as he was beginning to come to grips with himself in Kansas City.

Yet even with the influence that his time in Kansas City had on him, Truman was still perceived as a non-entity. Not only was he not made an officer in Battery B, but he was not even made a sergeant.¹² His English teacher's comment was just as preposterous in 1906 as it had been in 1901. Nothing he had done up to this point implied that any sort of grand destiny lay before him.

The gift of hindsight, however, reveals that there is a certain amount of foreshadowing. Living on his own taught Truman, as living alone teaches many young men, the art of self-reliance. Truman was willing to work an extra job or sacrifice a little comfort if it meant a chance to get ahead. It must be mentioned that Truman had to *pay* to be a member of Battery B. There was no war in America's foreseeable future; there was no patriotic fervor that swept Truman into the Guard unit. Truman just so desperately wanted to prove to himself that he could live out the soldiering fantasy, even if it was one day per week plus a camping trip in the summer. This is not a young man who is hoping for an opportunity to come his way. He has not been disillusioned by his father's failures. He is a young man who still believes that hard work and individual initiative provide a person the surest path to success. At that time he felt, as he always did, that the determination to succeed was equally as important as skill and circumstances.

¹² David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 72.

Even with his newfound responsibilities on the farm, he decided to make a gutsy business move and entered into an oil venture with a group of Kansas City associates. Truman was named treasurer of the fledgling company, and the men set out to drill in what was then viewed as fairly profitable land in Missouri. But the company would always struggle, and Truman never fully recovered his stake by the time he left the company before World War One. Nevertheless the business venture demonstrates a determination to make a name for himself.

Despite this determination, in 1906 he was still a relative loner with few real friends. Nor has determination ever been an instant recipe for success. Although he never mentioned it explicitly, Truman had to have felt a tinge of bitterness at being forced back to the life of a farmer just as he was becoming enamored with the city. Not only would this be a setback socially and professionally, but he made it very clear that he would not allow himself to seriously court Bess until he had proven his ability to provide a steady living for the two of them, and farming was *not* what Truman had envisioned.¹³ And although husband and wife would later declare that they were meant to be together, at this time Harry Truman was not Bess's only suitor.

Truman and Bess had not seen each other socially since high school. But in 1910, despite his economic situation, Truman made his first romantic overture to Bess in the form of a letter. Sometime later, in a story that would be oft-repeated in the Truman household, Harry was visiting relatives in Independence and a plate had to be returned to Bess's mother. Harry immediately seized the opportunity, and struck-up a conversation with Bess when he arrived. It was the beginning of a lifelong romance. They first

¹³ Richard Lawrence Miller, *Truman: The Rise to Power* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 61.

corresponded by letter, mostly talking about books, but Harry eventually made his courtship of Bess a second occupation.¹⁴ Like most things in Truman's life, once he had made up his mind about a goal he was determined to see it through to the end.

Although Truman ably managed the farm and became a proficient farmer, if not an expert, he was simply too much of a thinker to be able to be perfectly content in the fields. Nor was such a man destined for that fate. Truman's service in the First World War is where his ability to lead men first made itself apparent. Before the war Truman had been a relative loner who was, at most, a partner with someone else in any professional venture; never the 'boss'. He was never captain of the football team or CEO of a company. Although he may have been the head of a household and a family farm, those are not positions that require the ability to be a leader of men. The war would be the first time where his leadership abilities would be put to the test, and there is no more arduous test of leadership than to command a group of men in a warzone where one wrong decision could cost the lives of hundreds of soldiers. It would have been a difficult enough task in any war up to that point, let alone the most destructive conflict yet unleashed upon the Earth. Once again, the man from whom no one expected much would prove more than equal to the task, and prove to himself and to others that he was a man capable of leadership under the most daunting circumstances.

The decision to join an Army unit in the first place was very difficult for Truman to grapple with. He was the man of his household and would be leaving his sister in charge of managing the farm. Also, his courtship of Bess had reached the point where many wondered just when Harry was going to propose to her. The war would also force

¹⁴ Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry Truman: His Life on the Family Farms* (Worland, Wyoming: High Plains Publishing Company Inc., 1991), 75-77.

Harry to abandon his stake in the oil venture, which would prolong his efforts to become financially independent.

Ultimately, as was the case with many young men, Truman was swayed by the patriotic fervor sweeping the nation. Though he had quit the National Guard in 1911, Truman had maintained contact with his comrades from his unit, some of whom had been deployed with General Pershing to the Mexican border to combat Pancho Villa's outfit. The men would regale Truman with their war stories, and any young man with an interest in military affairs would feel the desire to gain war stories of his own. When the United States declared war on Germany in 1917 the old two-battery Missouri artillery force was to be expanded into the six-battery 2nd Missouri Field Artillery. Although Truman had his previously mentioned misgivings about enlisting, when Major John Miles asked Truman to rejoin his unit and help with recruiting for the expanded outfit, Truman accepted.

But was there more on Harry Truman's mind than his financial situation, or even Bess? Truman had recently exhibited a desire to get into the real work of politics. He began attending meetings of the Kansas City Tenth Ward Democratic Club, which was headed by Mike Pendergast. He would make the long drive into the city for every meeting. These were occasions where the business of machine politics was conducted amidst the free flow of alcohol, and the participants would adjourn only to walk to the nearest saloon for more of the same. Truman's closest friend later in life, Tom Evans, described it thus: "We were all there for fun, but Harry seemed to be different. If anyone there had been asked whether this quiet fellow had a political future, it would have got a

big horse laugh.”¹⁵ There was still nothing up to that point to suggest to others that Truman had the toughness, skill, and wherewithal to endure the rough and tumble world of early 20th century Midwest politics. Truman had to have known that the hard-drinking crowd that the Pendergast machine consisted of would not respect him in his current condition. Whether bound by duty to country or his own ambition, Truman could not afford to stay behind during the war. As Truman would later say “My whole political career is based upon my war service and war associates.”¹⁶

When war was declared the standing armed body of the United States, combining the Army, Navy, and National Guard units, totaled roughly 190,000 men.¹⁷ The Missouri artillery unit was, if possible, in even worse shape. Though the batteries had served on the Mexican border, expiration of enlistments had greatly reduced the number of men that could be called upon to serve. Harry Truman, who at 33 had been a farmer, bank clerk, and company treasurer, managed to recruit men for the field artillery so effectively that he told the officers that he deserved to be made a sergeant. Major Miles, after reviewing and inspecting Truman’s work, decided instead to make him a lieutenant in command of Battery F.¹⁸ The unassuming man with eyesight so poor as to be unfit for regular Army service was now in command of a battery of artillery.

When the 2nd Missouri Battery departed for Camp Doniphan in Oklahoma for more intensive artillery training (where it would be incorporated into the 129th Field Artillery), Truman was placed in charge of establishing and managing the regimental

¹⁵ Tom Evans, quoted in Steinberg, 35.

¹⁶ Harry Truman, quoted in Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (New York: JB Lippincott Company, 1950), 90.

¹⁷ Economic History Association (online), “U.S. Economy in WW1”, <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/Rockoff.WWI>, accessed 1/29/11.

¹⁸ Daniels, 91.

canteen. There was nothing in Truman's past to suggest to his superiors that he had the business sense to run a canteen, but he was already making an impression on those around him as a dependable, hard-working, and thorough man whose honesty in business could be counted upon. Truman chose Sgt. Eddie Jacobson to be his assistant. It would be the start of a close friendship.

To start their enterprise Truman and Jacobson collected \$2 from each man to contribute to the initial stock. Despite having no experience operating a business like a canteen, the two men succeeded in running the only canteen at Camp Doniphan to turn a profit.¹⁹ Not only was the canteen run at a profit, but from the initial investment of \$2,200 the Truman canteen garnered \$15,000 in profit, for a 666 percent return.²⁰

Truman was also becoming skilled at the science of modern field artillery. There were likely few students of West Point who had studied as much military history as Harry Truman did as a young man, but his eyes had always kept him from becoming a US Army soldier. Now he was not only succeeding as an officer, but *thriving* as one. Though he had yet to be battle-tested, he was excelling in any duty asked of him, which is why he was selected to be one of ten officers and roughly one hundred enlisted men to be sent to France ahead of the regiment for additional training.

Before he departed for France, Bess implored him to go together to a church and be married. In a most unselfish move Truman refused, on the grounds that he would not wish to saddle Bess with caring for him should he return home a cripple. In consolation however, he did propose to her and so began the official engagement. Bess then gave

¹⁹ Alonzo Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 61-62.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Truman a small photograph of her, and wrote “Dear Harry, may this photograph bring you safely home – Bess”; he kept the photo with him for the rest of his life.²¹

Truman arrived in France in April 1918 and began his training just as the Germans began preparing a major drive toward Paris.²² The only chance the Germans had was to force an armistice before the over one million American soldiers reached France. His training in France mostly centered around learning to use the French 75mm gun (the Americans had been trained on different guns in Oklahoma), which despite some drawbacks was one of the most effective weapons utilized by the Allies in World War One. Truman spent five weeks learning to master the French guns and how to maneuver the guns around the trenches with their outdated chassis (the guns were all mounted on frames connected to large, wooden wheels).²³ During these five weeks he trained under the command of Captain (and future General) Dick Burlison, whose swearing would send shivers down the spine of any clergyman and whom Truman would later order, as commander in chief, to Russia as a military liaison with Ed Pauley.²⁴ The rest of Truman’s regiment had arrived in France by the time Truman had finished his training under Burlison.

Two important developments occurred at this stage. The first was that Truman received an official promotion to captain. The second, and far more consequential, was that his superiors thought so highly of him as to place him in charge of battery D, nicknamed ‘Dizzy D’, which had a reputation as being the most unruly and undisciplined battery in the regiment. Largely composed of Irish Catholics from Kansas City, Dizzy D

²¹ Margaret Truman, 59.

²² Steinberg, 44.

²³ McCullough, 114.

²⁴ Harry S Truman Library and Museum (online), Oral History Interview with John W. Snyder, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/snyderj1.htm>, accessed 12/23/10.

had gone through three previous commanders before Truman. The men of Dizzy D were known for getting into fights that would leave equipment smashed and men in the infirmary. The regimental commander had contemplated splintering the company to break up the disruptive, yet cohesive, group of men, but Truman convinced him otherwise and accepted the challenge of turning the battery around. When meeting the battery's NCOs for the first time in his position as commander, Truman told the assemblage "I didn't come over here to get along with you. You've got to get along with me. And if there are any of you who can't, speak up right now and I'll bust you back right now."²⁵ Despite his outward confidence, Truman later admitted that the realization of the task before him, and his first moments addressing the company, was the most frightening time of his life, whether on the front, in the White House, or anywhere else.²⁶

On July 14, 1918 the Germans attempted their last-ditch drive toward Paris. Truman's regiment took no part in the fighting, but after the attack was halted the regiment was deployed to Vosges Mountains in Alsace, supposedly a 'quiet' or 'dead' sector. On September 6th, after having fired 500 gas shells at German lines, Dizzy D found out just how loud the 'quiet' sector really was.

Roughly thirty minutes after Dizzy D completed their barrage, the Germans retaliated with a thunderous barrage of their own. Truman may have been saved by his ill-luck after having fallen off of his horse into a shell-hole just before the bombardment started. It was from that vantage point that he watched as the battery started to flee in terror. A sergeant had yelled "Run, boys, they got a bracket on us!"²⁷ The battery was all too willing to oblige the sergeant's wishes. Truman, incensed at such behavior and

²⁵ Harry Truman, quoted in Daniels, 95.

²⁶ Richard Miller, 119.

²⁷ Hamby, 69.

trying to rally his men, let fly with language and gestures so coarse that the experience never quite left the memory of the regimental chaplain, who for decades after would recall the onslaught of swears originating from Captain Truman.²⁸ It had the desired effect. The men who began running away returned to their positions. The so-called Battle of Who Run was a blight upon the honor of Battery D, but it cemented Truman's position as leader of supposedly the toughest and rowdiest battery in the regiment.

It was not just his conduct under fire that made the men look up to Truman. After the fighting, when Truman was urged to court-martial the offending sergeant, Truman instead took mercy and only busted him down the ranks. Perhaps Truman was remembering General George Washington's act during the winter of 1778, when at the last moment he pardoned seven of eight men condemned to death, thereby reestablishing his authority and preserving discipline.

Dizzy D's experiences for the rest of the war typified what American soldiers went through on the front in World War One; the deplorable conditions in the trenches, the long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of absolute terror, and the slow but steady destruction of the German war machine. Though Truman certainly conducted himself admirably and his men always remembered his bravery under fire, probably his highest accomplishment was maintaining the discipline and fighting integrity of Dizzy D. World War One was different from previous wars in a multitude of ways, not the least of which was the magnification of the disconnect between the generals (and their staffs) and the men who actually did the fighting. Whole forests have been destroyed to supply paper for books written about that subject, so it will not be retold here. What is important

²⁸ Ferrell, *Harry S Truman: A Life*, 66.

is that Harry Truman, as a commanding officer, endeared himself to the most untamed and roughest battery in the regiment.

When the armistice finally took effect on November 11th, 1918 the men of Dizzy D celebrated like they never had before. French wine and other liquor flowed freely. After the initial euphoria of peace came the long, agonizing wait to be sent home. Once again Truman proved that he was capable of keeping the men disciplined even without the specter of a hostile enemy to keep them in line. Truman issued furloughs to many of his men who still had family in Ireland, and he took trips to Paris and much of the French countryside. When President Wilson arrived in the French capitol, Truman was there for the parade to watch the man he so admired. Truman earnestly believed in Wilson's stated motivation of "making the world safe for democracy."²⁹

Yet there was only so much Captain Truman could do to affect the peace process, both in Paris and in his own country. Senator James Reed, of Missouri, was one of the men who led the charge against President Wilson's peace plan, an act for which Harry Truman never forgave him. When later asked about Reed, Truman said "I hated his guts after the way he treated Wilson" before wryly adding "He was opposed to me every time I ran for something."³⁰ Despite Truman's feelings, the American people were weary of war, and received Wilson's plan for a League of Nations with trepidation. Though Truman himself was now an internationalist, his fellow citizens were reluctant to enter into an agreement that could entangle them in another European mess.

At that time even Truman and his men just wanted to go home - no amount of furloughs to Nice and Monte Carlo could change that - and by February 1919 they were

²⁹ *Autobiography*, 41.

³⁰ Harry Truman, quoted in Daniels, 100.

among the more than 1.2 million American soldiers who had returned to the United States.³¹ They were men who just wanted to get back to their normal lives.

When Truman was discharged on May 6th, 1919 he was a thirty-five year old man who had only one clear goal: to marry Bess. Beyond that he had no idea what he was going to make of himself. Yet it is clear to see just what he had already *made* of himself during the war. He had departed for Europe as a young farmer from Missouri with little in the way of experience leading any sort of team. He had departed as a young man who had never really gained honor for himself. Yet he returned from the trenches as a proven leader with the respect and admiration of his men. Was this the same man who had previously resigned himself to being the treasurer of a struggling oil company? Or had Truman transformed himself while he was in the Army?

The war experience was, quite simply, the first instance of unqualified success in Truman's life. It is clear that Truman meant it when he said "My whole political career is based upon my war service and war associates."³² What the war did for Harry Truman was remove doubts; his own and those of others. Certainly his life would continue to be plagued with people who doubted his abilities, but they would now become part of what eventually became a long list of people who misjudged Harry Truman.

Not only had he become a proven leader, but he had done so in front of men who would become his allies later in life. Father Tiernan, the regimental chaplain, would become the Army's highest-ranking chaplain during Truman's presidency (for Tiernan's part, he would later say that Truman "had integrity and much more than normal intelligence, and there is no limit in a free society to what men with those attributes can

³¹*Dear Bess: Letters from Harry to Bess Truman 1910-1959*, edited by Robert H. Ferrell, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1983), 269-270.

³² Harry Truman, quoted in Daniels, 90.

attain”).³³ Harry Hawkins Vaughn, whom Truman had met in training while each man was successively reprimanded by a general, would one day become a trusted, if controversial, member of Truman’s inner circle. Roger Sermon, with whom Truman became involved in a lengthy poker game that lasted from the armistice until returning home, eventually found his way into Truman’s senate and campaign offices. He also knew, briefly, a young lieutenant named Jim Pendergast, who was in the 129th before being transferred to another regiment. This is only a small sample of the lifelong friendships that Truman made in the military. One more bears mentioning however, and that is Truman’s sergeant in the canteen, Eddie Jacobson, with whom the next chapter of Truman’s professional life would begin.

Before Truman made his foray into elected office however, he would be forced to endure yet another financial setback. This time it was the haberdashery store he co-founded with Jacobson. The store was operated out of space rented near the famous Baltimore Hotel in Kansas City in 1919.³⁴ There was likely no happier time in Truman’s life than the six months between returning home from the military in May 1919 and opening his store later that year. He was newly married, times were good for the Midwest, and he and Eddie Jacobson roamed from one wholesaler to the next trying to build up inventory for the new store.

There was easy money in the immediate post-war era. Wheat prices were high, which meant prosperity for the Kansas City clientele. From autumn 1919 to summer 1920 the store seemed like the best break Truman had ever been given in business. The store priced shirts for sixteen dollars, and men were all too happy to pay for Van Heusen

³³ Father Tiernan, quoted in Merle Miller, 103.

³⁴ Harry S Truman Library and Museum (online), Search: “Truman and Jacobsen”, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/places/kc4a.htm>, accessed 12/19/10.

shirts with collars guaranteed not to wilt.³⁵ Silk underwear was the norm. Many of the men from the 129th patronized the store, spending hours recalling the ‘old days’ when the men had served in uniform together. The two business partners seemed well on their way to duplicating their success with the regimental canteen. Then, in autumn 1920, wheat prices tumbled.

The dramatic fall in wheat prices (from a high of \$2.15 in 1919 to \$1.44 by late 1920, and an eventual drop of eighty-one percent) devastated the region.³⁶ At the same time high labor prices so shocked the old-school establishment powers at the Treasury Department and banking industries that a policy of deflation was decided upon in an effort to curb the power of labor. Obviously the farmers were hit hard, but the miasma soon spread to the merchants in the towns and cities. Truman and Jacobson had negotiated with the wholesalers when wheat was high. The men had paid top-dollar, but had expected to reap a profit. Now they were forced to lower their prices to move merchandise, but still could not sell enough to stay out of debt. Jacobson ultimately jumped-ship while Truman doggedly fought the futile battle to keep the store open. In an emblematic demonstration of Truman’s character, he never held a grudge against Jacobson for declaring bankruptcy before he did.³⁷ Although it would not be the last time that Truman fought on in the face of almost certain defeat, his business fortunes during the early twenties would not parallel his political fortunes in 1948.

It was at this point, in 1921-22, with his business failing rapidly and other opportunities for gainful employment proving elusive, that Truman began to think

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶ Eric Brothers, “The U.S. Recession of 1921 and its Coinage”, <http://www.suite101.com/content/the-us-recession-of-1921-and-its-coinage-a317265>, accessed 1/1/11.

³⁷ Harry S Truman Library and Museum (online), The Edward Jacobson Papers, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/hstpape/jacobson.htm>, accessed 1/1/11.

seriously about entering the political arena. He had set his sights upon the post of county judge for the Eastern District of Jackson County (it was not the equivalent of an actual judge; a more familiar name for the post would have been county ‘commissioner’). The most Truman had become involved in politics up to this point was participating in the regular Democratic meetings and helping organize what modern campaigns would call ‘fieldwork’ or a ‘ground game’ (mobilizing volunteers and ‘get out the vote’ drives) for his now retired commanding officer, Major John Miles, who happened to be a Republican (Miles would later return the favor by helping to guard ballot boxes against corruption when Truman ran for office).³⁸ Unit cohesion and comradeship among old military units was strong enough to transcend party lines, which helped John Miles to victory and which Truman would also have to utilize in order to win.

The problem was not that Truman had failed to make a name for himself; it was that the name he had made was not taken seriously by the Democratic powers in Kansas City. Ultimately it came down to one contact Truman had with a man named William Southern, editor of a local newspaper and a player within the local Democratic party. Southern tried his best to talk Truman out of running for several reasons. First, Southern appealed to common sense, arguing that the demands of campaigning would place too much stress on his home life. Southern also decried the way politicians often developed an unhealthy greed for public approval, and how their lives can be consumed by the need to be better-liked than anyone else. One of the final arguments Southern made against Truman was more practical and probably Southern’s chief concern. Frankly, Southern felt that Truman was just depressed about the failure of his business and was looking for an escape; hardly a compelling enough reason on which Southern could stake his own

³⁸ Ferrell, *Harry S Truman: A Life*, 98.

reputation by sponsoring Harry Truman. But Truman was adamant, and declared that he was going to make his career in politics.

Having failed to dissuade Truman and having been suitably impressed by his war record, Southern took his recommendation to another local boss named Nick Phelps, who in turn recommended Truman to Mike Pendergast.³⁹ Mike Pendergast, though overshadowed by his brother, Thomas, headed the Pendergast machine in the rural areas of Jackson County.⁴⁰ In addition to this pressure, Truman used his friend and wartime associate Jim Pendergast to place added pressure on Mike, who was Jim's father. A few days later Mike Pendergast walked into the floundering haberdashery store and asked Truman "How would you like to be county judge?" When Truman shrewdly equivocated, Pendergast bluntly replied "If you want it, you can have it."⁴¹ It was the first time Truman had directly discussed electoral business with one of the Pendergasts, the political powerhouse that dominated Missouri politics. Though Truman would eventually become the most famous product of the Pendergast machine, right now he was just looking for the partnership that would give him a fighting chance to win elected office. Even with the hurried endorsement from Mike Pendergast, his victory was not guaranteed.

In June 1922, Mike Pendergast called together the members of the 10th Ward Democratic Club. Speeding through the rudimentary business, Mike Pendergast eventually shouted "Now I'm going to tell you who you're going to support for county judge..." and after a brief pause, continued "It's Harry Truman. Harry Truman is a

³⁹ Robert Ferrell, *Truman and Pendergast* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 7-8.

⁴⁰ Margaret Truman, 64.

⁴¹ Harry Truman and Mike Pendergast, quoted in Andrew Dunar, *The Truman Scandals and the Politics of Morality* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 5-6.

returned soldier, a captain ‘over there’ with a fine record and whose men didn’t want to shoot him!”⁴² Most of the men at the gathering congratulated Truman and pledged their support, but there was already trouble brewing inside the machine.

Mike Pendergast had gone ahead with the nomination without Tom’s knowing, and Tom had promised to support a candidate from a different machine in the Eastern district in exchange for that machine’s support of Thomas’s candidate in the Western district. When Truman found out about this, he must have sensed that the Pendergasts would have no choice but to leave him on his own. Mike’s support meant a great deal, but not nearly enough to counteract the will of Tom Pendergast. Lesser men may have quit after learning that the crux of their strategy had just been demolished, but Truman was determined to keep going. If he won the primary, the county judgeship was almost guaranteed. He would travel across the county every day, shaking hands and trying his best to impress upon voters that he was the right man for them. He was as determined to win as anyone had ever been, but he needed outside support, and he knew where to get it.

Once again, it was Truman’s military experience that became the determining factor. When Truman asked for help from a former lieutenant in the 129th named Edgar Hinde, Hinde gladly spearheaded the effort to drum-up support from the local veterans units. While Truman visited every last inch of his district shaking hands and chatting with voters, Hinde and the veterans were making sure that word was getting out wherever Harry Truman could not go in person that day. Truman was also counting on the backing of his Masonic brothers and the farmers whom he had known during the harsh years before the war.

⁴² Mike Pendergast, as quoted in Harry Truman, *Memoirs, By Harry S Truman – Volume 1: Years of Decisions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1955), 136.

There was, however, one group that gave Truman great cause for concern. The Ku Klux Klan had risen in Jackson County to become a prominent, though not determining, force to be reckoned with in county politics. Two of Truman's opponents had the backing of the Klan, and there is enough recorded evidence to suggest that Truman had at least contemplated reaching out to the group. There are conflicting reports as to how Truman went about this and why he ultimately went through with his campaign *sans* Klan support. One story relates how he was going to receive an endorsement from a Klan leader, only to have the Klansman refuse to endorse Truman upon discovering that Truman would never side against Catholics (which of course constituted the bulk of his beloved war comrades, not to mention Tom and Mike Pendergast). Truman's version tells it differently; he said "I told them to go to Hell. They were a bunch of damn cowards hiding behind bedsheets."⁴³

Truman campaigned hard, but he was fighting against the wishes of multiple bosses and a system where corruption was simply part of the culture. He knew it was going to be close on the day of the primary election, so he and his friends kept campaigning right up to the last moment. On the day of the election itself, Truman and his friends had learned that some of his opponent's supporters were planning on stealing the ballot boxes at one specific location. A young man from the 129th named John Gibson was dispatched with a few comrades to guard the ballot box. When the would-be thieves arrived Gibson stuck his .45 caliber revolver into the chest of one of the men, thereby scaring them off.⁴⁴ Truman would later find out that the man Gibson had threatened was Joe Shannon, Tom Pendergast's chief opponent for leader of the

⁴³ Harry Truman, quoted in Merle Miller, 130.

⁴⁴Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 122.

Democrats in the Kansas City area. Truman won the primary by five hundred votes, and continued with his success in the general election.

Harry Truman, in his late thirties, had made his first foray into electoral politics and had emerged victorious. He was honest with himself about his limits, and knew that he was going to depend heavily on the help of his friends if he was to stand any chance of winning. He also knew that he could not sacrifice his values for the sake of winning. He was unwilling to abandon the many friends he had made in the Irish-Catholic community even to gain the backing of a group that had the capability to hand him the election.

Most importantly, he had won not with the firm backing of a political machine, but with grueling, personal, and effective campaigning. True, this victory would endear him to a powerful machine, but this first experience taught him that there was simply no substitute for direct engagement with voters. When everyone was counting him out, when his initial backers had withdrawn much of their support, Harry Truman took his campaign to the lawns and storefronts of his constituency. There would always be people with greater gifts of oratory, and there would always be candidates with better connections, but nobody was going to out-work Harry Truman. Truman was never going to develop a reputation as being lazy or complacent. He endeared himself to people who knew that they would be voting for or working for a man who was every bit as hard-working as they were.

Truman's service in World War One and his success in his first election became the foundation upon which he would base the rest of his career. As already mentioned, he said with hindsight that he owed his success to his experience in the war. Many veterans have made similar statements, but we know that with Truman he is absolutely

telling the truth. Internally, he needed the confidence in himself gained from his leadership and bravery in the trenches. He led some of the toughest men the Midwest had to offer into combat and had emerged as their avowed leader. In a more practical, campaign-oriented sense, he needed the aid and support from his wartime associates to win the election. They in turn were not supporting him because they saluted the rank; they supported him because he had earned their trust, respect, and admiration. They flung themselves into the political fray because they were working to elect one of their own. Truman was one of them.

‘One of them.’ A reputation that politicians would often like to impart upon the voters but a reputation for which few politicians ever achieve. Yet Truman consistently made people feel as though he really was ‘one of them.’ When voters cast their ballot for Truman, they were not voting for the class valedictorian. They were not voting for the retired general. They were not voting for the princely aristocracy. They were voting for a man to whom they could relate. No matter what office he held, to the common person he was always going to be ‘Citizen Truman.’

Truman’s embodiment of the ‘common man’ persona has proven that the common American is inherently uncommon. The memory of Harry Truman makes people believe that the most ordinary among us have within ourselves the capability to achieve the extraordinary. Truman was a man of his time (e.g. he rose through the Pendergast political machine) who as president was also ahead of his time (his executive order to desegregate the military). Now he is the symbol of a hallowed past when Americans felt represented by ‘one of their own.’ Truman is remembered not just for coming from the people, but for remaining one of them and proving just how incredible

we really can be. The 'common' man can stand against fascism and communism because Harry Truman could. The 'common' man can prevail against his enemies when no one believes in him because Harry Truman did precisely that (again and again). The much-underestimated 'common' American is not so common after all.

Lyndon Baines Johnson

“I don’t believe I’ll ever get credit for anything I do in foreign affairs, no matter how successful it is, because I didn’t go to Harvard.”

In the immediate aftermath of a death of a president there is a void in leadership. The United States Constitution has clearly delineated the chain of command in preparation for such an event. Officially, the only barrier separating the vice president from the White House is a heartbeat. In reality, no law or provision could ever hope to completely ease the sudden transfer of power. There have been eight instances of a vice president having to take over upon the death of a president. Even for vice presidents who felt prepared for such an occasion, the experience can be jarring and traumatic. Theodore Roosevelt, upon hearing the news of William McKinley's death, said "A great and terrible bereavement has befallen our people. The president of the United States has been struck down" before continuing "Now, therefore I, Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States..."⁴⁵

Lyndon Baines Johnson also assumed power in the wake of the assassination of a president, but unlike Theodore Roosevelt there was no time for Johnson to prepare for his ascension to the presidency. November 22nd, 1963 was one of the most traumatic days in the history of the United States, and the man who had to step into the Oval Office and replace John F. Kennedy was an old-school politician chosen for the vice presidency in large part because of electoral math. But whether a person agreed with Johnson's politics or not, it was clear that in the years following the assassination President Johnson established his own brand of presidential leadership. His grasp of Senate protocol and rules would enable him, as chief executive, to preside over sweeping social and economic reforms that rivaled Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in their scope and complexity.

The dark side to Johnson's qualities was an intractable arrogance, and also hints of paranoia stemming from the inferiority he felt during his childhood years and, indeed,

⁴⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, as quoted in Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), 16.

throughout his career. For Lyndon Baines Johnson was not born the son of a wealthy and privileged member of society, nor was he schooled in the upper echelons of Northeast academia like his predecessor. His was an experience rooted in the hard work that is required for a simple country boy to rise to the highest circles of power. Johnson became a consummate politician because it was the only way he ever learned how to attain his goals. Of Truman, Johnson, and Ford it was Johnson who most took to the intrigue, strategy, and trickery of politics. He could be both high-minded and petty, sensitive and brash. Though these qualities and faults lit up the public stage during his presidency, they were formed in Johnson's early years, first as a boy struggling to make it in rural Texas, then as a young politician with ambitions beyond anything that could have been expected of him.

Whether by nature or nurture, much of Lyndon Johnson's adult personality was formed in his childhood years spent in the Texas Hill country. Though the land could be picturesque to outsiders, for those who lived there and worked the soil it was a tough existence. Farming was very difficult because of the highly unpredictable climate, and the soil was not as fertile as other parts of the Lone Star state. Those who made their living in these difficult conditions were a hardscrabble lot, with a grim pride in their land that was exceptional, even by Texas standards.

Johnson's parents were two people who exemplified the disparity that existed between the residents of the Hill country and their more urbanized fellow Texans. Johnson's father, Sam, had inherited a struggling farm from his ancestors and worked as hard as he could to make the land productive. It was often a futile effort. But Sam was gifted with an above-average intellect, and even at a young age valued education.

Because he was needed to work the farm, Sam Johnson was self-taught and had to sit for a special state examination to qualify as having graduated from high school. If he passed the test he would be deemed certified to teach. As Sam would later say with the upmost pride, he scored a one hundred on the test - a perfect score - and started a teaching career that lasted all of a few years, until he won his first election.⁴⁶

After three years of teaching Sam had set his mind to bigger goals. He wished to pursue a law degree, believing that law was the gateway to a better life. But in 1904, while he was saving money for law school, he heard that his area's seat in the state legislature was going to be vacant. Almost on a whim, he decided to enter the race...and he won.

It was through his interactions with the diverse crowd in Austin that Sam first met Rebekah Baines, a teacher and stringer for an Austin newspaper. Rebekah and Sam met during an interview for the newspaper, and they quickly fell for each other. Rebekah had been college-educated and came from a refined and somewhat aristocratic family. But she was completely taken by Sam Johnson's sociability and political station in life. After a rushed and emotional courtship, the two were married on August 27, 1907.

The honeymoon period, literally and figuratively, did not last long. It was shortly after the couple moved into a small, four-room farmhouse on a piece of land near Sam's father that Rebekah began to resent the situation she was in. She felt that she had somehow been duped into marrying beneath her, and she inwardly railed against her new surroundings. Sam tried the best he could to make her comfortable, but women had to pitch-in around the farms as well, and the days were long and arduous. There was no gas

⁴⁶ Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), 56.

or electricity for the house; water had to be warmed in large, cast-iron pots. The stoves had to be fed with a constant supply of wood. Rebekah had to wash clothes with homemade soap, whose harshness makes a mockery of the modern convenience we enjoy today. For the first year of the marriage Rebekah was in an absolute hell.

On August 27, 1908, exactly a year after their marriage, Rebekah and Sam welcomed their first child into the world. It was a boy, and they named him Lyndon Baines Johnson. Lyndon's entire extended family doted affection and attention upon him during his first two years of life, and it left an indelible impression on the young boy. He had relatives almost everywhere he turned (his great-grandparents, on both sides of the family, could together claim hundreds of descendants by the time of Johnson's birth).⁴⁷ All of his relatives felt that the young boy was bright, and his mother began his education at a very young age, possibly as early as two and a half years old.⁴⁸ As Rebekah's first source of salvation from the drudgery of farm life, Lyndon would become his mother's favorite child, to whom she would give the most loving attention, but also from whom would be demanded great accomplishments.

Sigmund Freud once stated that "A man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feelings of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success."⁴⁹ By three years old Rebekah had Lyndon reciting Tennyson; by four he was regularly spelling basic words. Although Rebekah had given birth to other children by this point, who young Lyndon was often jealous of, she continued to treat

⁴⁷ Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982), 5.

⁴⁸ Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), 8.

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud* – "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 82.

Lyndon as the star of the family. But try as she might, Lyndon's desire for attention was insatiable, and both mother and son frequently battled with each other.

Lyndon's favored strategy to get attention as a young boy was to run away. Usually he could be found at a relative's home or the schoolhouse, but other times he would stay out in the fields and refuse to answer his parents' call. The boy did not care, so long as attention was diverted away from his siblings and toward him. For Rebekah's part, whenever she would find Lyndon's performance or behavior inadequate she would completely ignore him, all the while treating Sam and the other children especially nicely. When Lyndon was seven years old he began music lessons. While he progressed well, he hated playing the violin, and so abruptly refused to keep attending classes. His mother proceeded to ignore him for days afterward, lavishing attention on his sisters and younger brother instead.⁵⁰ Lyndon loved his mother, but the relationship was plainly built around a concept of 'love equals approval, and approval equals love.' Her love was, at its core, conditional.

Lyndon was always large and physically imposing, but his early experiences made him feel smaller than he really was. One day he would spend a night in the same bed as his mother, and the next day he would be completely shut out of her life because of some perceived infraction. The kind of love he received from his mother left the impression on him that love is based on performance; that people can only be really loved for their accomplishments. Given the influence parents can have on a child, it requires no stretch of the imagination to view Lyndon's parental upbringing as instilling the origins of his ambition. Many of the most pivotal, personal decisions Johnson made in his career can be argued as having been based on this subconscious need for approval.

⁵⁰ Alonzo Hamby, *Liberalism and its Challengers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 233.

This obsessive relationship with his mother did not mean that he had no affection for his father. In fact, Lyndon revered his father. As a young boy Lyndon would desperately try to keep pace with Sam during long outdoor excursions, and would try to accompany him whenever he was out on the town. To Rebekah's eternal exasperation the young boy adopted his father's common and often colloquial manner of speech. Lyndon even took to dressing like his father in order to emulate him as closely as he could.⁵¹ Sam's love for Lyndon was far less conditional than Rebekah's, but that did not stop Lyndon from his exacting efforts to gain his father's approval. By accompanying his father during his younger years Lyndon was also exposed to his first taste of Texas politics.

Politics was in the Johnson bloodline. Lyndon Johnson's great-great uncle, John Wheeler Bunton, signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, helped write the State Constitution, sat in the first Texas Congress, and voted for the creation of the Texas Rangers (the famed law enforcement unit).⁵² Lyndon's maternal grandfather had been elected to public office at a young age, as had Lyndon's father.

Sam Johnson was a legislator in the Texas Statehouse in Austin. Although lobbyists could usually drink, bribe, or pimp their way into the hearts of most of the legislators, Sam made a name for himself by being straight-laced and morally upright, at least compared to his colleagues. He was admired by his peers in Austin as well as his constituents back in the Texas hill country. He was amiable to friends and opponents alike. But behind the docile façade was always a keen legislative mind, as well as an aptitude for internal maneuvering and alliance building.

⁵¹ Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, *LBJ: A Life* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 11.

⁵² Texas State Cemetery (online), "john wheeler bunton" as search http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/pub/user_form.asp?pers_id=106, accessed 2/25/2011.

Lyndon's father also had a way of leaving people feel as though they'd been stamped by a bull after they had debated or conferenced on an issue with Sam. It was a trait that Lyndon would copy and make famous as 'The Johnson Treatment': Sam would debate both friend and foe alike by getting right up close to his target, often draping his long, strong arm around their shoulder and tugging him close. He would proceed to dominate the ensuing conversation, never relinquishing an enormous smile as he did so. Most people on the receiving end of such an onslaught had no idea how to cope or respond, and it was a method that served both Johnsons very well in their careers.

Sam got Lyndon involved in the political process as much as he could. Lyndon rode with his father during long campaign trips into the hinterlands of Sam's district, and always remembered those times as some of the fondest memories of his life. The two would drive for endless miles in the family's Ford Model T, stopping occasionally for a quick bite to eat before continuing on the campaign trail. His father was an idealist, and instilled in young Lyndon the mindset of an idealist more than any concrete political dogma.

Sam taught his son one of the keys to becoming a successful politician: whatever the constituents might say about the government, whatever their philosophy, nothing garners votes quite as effectively as government relief. The name of the game in Texas politics was, as the saying goes, to 'bring home the bacon', and Lyndon learned the game well (there is only one real reason why NASA Mission Control is located in Houston, roughly one thousand miles away from the launch pad). This was easier said than done in a legislature that met only once every two years. Sam went to great lengths to secure pension payments for as many of his constituents as possible. During the early 1920s, in

the midst of a serious drought, Sam organized the expenditure of two million dollars on seed and grain to be handed out to Texas farmers, making Texas one of the first states to adopt a policy of direct aid to farmers.⁵³ Lyndon's firsthand experience with government relief/handouts from a very young age presaged his adoration for Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs and Lyndon's own Great Society legislation in the 1960s.

Indeed, if politics was in Lyndon's blood, then it was the politics of populism. Lyndon's populism would be a practical blend of lofty ideals and direct government aid to his constituents. For as long as Johnson lived he prided himself on his affiliation with the ordinary man. No matter how wealthy he grew or how high his political station in life, he never once believed that he was all that different from the farmers and merchants of the Texas Hill country. Unfortunately, it would become apparent that during his whole career he had a strong inferiority complex when dealing with men who were decidedly *unordinary*. Lyndon would just never feel comfortable around men of privilege. Thus it was that Johnson's populist beliefs stemmed both from an earnest desire to help the 'little guy' and from a troubled ego that could only be assuaged by gaining approval.

As much as Lyndon admired and imitated his father, he could not discern the good qualities from the bad. As Sam continued his service in the legislature into the early 1920s he began to neglect other aspects of his life. Though mostly gregarious and affable, he became increasingly moody and began drinking in excess. The consequences for displeasing him became more severe as time went on, and he would lambast his oldest son for even slight provocations.

⁵³Dugger, 88.

The family had moved to Johnson City after all the children were born, and in addition to his politics Sam took up real estate and cattle dealing.⁵⁴ Although Johnson 'City' contained between three and four hundred people, it was enough of an upgrade from the farm for Rebekah. There were the rudiments of society in Johnson City, and even though there were no paved roads, piped-in water, or sewage systems, it was still less isolated than the farm had been. Lyndon was able to enroll, and excel, in a local elementary school. Unfortunately, things were beginning to unravel for the Johnson family.

Lyndon and Sam quarreled often, and Sam was becoming ever-more cruel. Johnson City, like most Texas towns at that time, had little in the way of children's entertainment beyond farmyard chores and the great outdoors. Lyndon despised doing his chores around the farm, and (like Tom Sawyer) could often goad other children into doing the chores for him, much to his father's fury.⁵⁵ When it came time for play, the young boys would often go varmint hunting, though Lyndon did not really have the stomach for it. His father once saw Lyndon refuse to shoot at what would have been an easy kill. Sam verbally undressed his son, and accused Lyndon of cowardice. In a fit, Lyndon shot and killed a rabbit...and promptly vomited.⁵⁶

But that was nothing compared to the trauma that the Johnson family was about to collectively endure. When Sam's mother had died she had bequeathed her four hundred-plus acre farm to her eight children, and Sam decided to buy-out his siblings' shares and grow cotton on the land. The mortgage on the property was substantial, and Sam had

⁵⁴ Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990), 7.

⁵⁵ Sam Houston Johnson, *My Brother Lyndon* (New York: Cowles Book Company, 1969), 13.

⁵⁶ Dugger, 78.

seriously miscalculated the market for cotton. When restrictions on the importation of Egyptian cotton were lifted in 1920, cotton prices plummeted to twenty-eight cents per pound (it had previously been as high as forty cents per pound).⁵⁷ Almost as soon as he'd bought the farm he was forced to sell it, at a substantial loss. The family was only saved from bankruptcy by the intervention of Sam's brothers, who provided enough money to keep the creditors at bay.

Lyndon Johnson would later declare that his father "squandered the little money we had...Sometimes he'd be lucky and make a lot of money, then two years later he'd lose it all."⁵⁸ Johnson's childhood insecurity manifested itself throughout his life, but as a youth it caused him to rail against his parental authority. His father eventually gave up his seat in the legislature, becoming a highway foreman on a road that he himself had sponsored. Sam began to drink heavily, which tormented Rebekah. It was bad enough that Lyndon's male idol was now perceived as a failure, but now Lyndon believed that Sam was also the source of his beloved mother's anguish.

Lyndon had lost respect for his father, and he would never truly regain it. Where he had once admired his father beyond all other men he now felt only bitterness toward what he perceived as the source of his family's suffering. He started his own shoe-shining enterprise in the back of a barbershop to bring in a little extra cash for the family. His family had gone from being universally respected to openly derided. His father could never pay bills on time (so it was just as well that the town did not have electricity) and he drank heavily in a town that had openly embraced the prohibitionist cause. Sam went

⁵⁷ University of Arizona Library (online), "1920 cotton crash" as search term, <http://www.library.arizona.edu/exhibits/pams/exotic.html>, accessed 2/24/2011.

⁵⁸ Lyndon Johnson, as quoted in Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1976), 24.

through ever-heavier bouts of drinking and took to his bed for weeks at a time, likely a result of severe emotional depression.

Lyndon would later remark that “There was nothing my mother hated more than seeing my daddy drink.”⁵⁹ Rebekah blamed their money problems for Sam’s drinking; while simultaneously naming alcohol as the source of the family’s woes. Sam’s descent into ruin broke what was left of Rebekah’s pride. She took to long periods of writing poetry, escaping into an alternate part of her mind where there was no financial trouble...or a family.

Lyndon believed that it was now up to him to be the paternal figure. He took to bossing his siblings around, all the while feeling bitter about being thrust into his new position within the family (of course, he was the one to blame for assuming such a role). He lamented, as he saw it, having to be the one to restore a hint of credibility to the family, but at the same time refused to back down from these overly dramatic delusions. Once Lyndon had adopted this self-imposed, fatherly role for himself he never relinquished it for the rest of his life. For his entire career he would treat his staff members as extended family, viewing himself as the patriarch. Though it is purely speculation (since neither Johnson nor any member of his staff ever admitted it), this paternalistic desire must have played some part in his quest to be president of the United States. Every time he was elected to a new position it would never be enough for him. Even after he became the ‘father’ of the Senate he set his eyes upon the only office in Washington, D.C. with more clout.

The Johnsons’ precarious financial situation also led to Lyndon’s desire for great wealth. His dirt-poor upbringing scarred him for life. Lyndon always felt that he, at all

⁵⁹ Lyndon Johnson, as quoted in Caro, *Path to Power*, 54.

times, stood on the precipice of financial ruin, and so he worked hard to ensure his financial stability – even if that meant bending the rules a little. When he acquired a broadcasting station later in life he did everything within his (considerable) power to make sure the station would expand as he desired (after all, radio and broadcasting stations exist with the permission of the government).

His family’s financial woes lasted throughout his high school years, and this exacerbated his social awkwardness. He would later tell others about how, as a boy, he felt that the townspeople would snigger at him as he walked by because of his family’s poverty and fall from grace. More likely, however, is that Lyndon was being jeered at because of the pitfalls of his intense desire for attention and success. He hated to lose at sports or in a fight with another boy, and when he lost he could often be seen running through the streets crying his eyes out; peculiar behavior for a high school boy. One of the townspeople, Emmett Redford, recalled that:

“All anyone had to do was touch Lyndon and he would let out a wail you could hear all over town. He wanted attention. He wanted everyone to know that someone had injured him. He wanted everyone to feel sorry for him.”⁶⁰

What was not peculiar was Lyndon’s growing interest in women. Lyndon treated dating as just another chance to win by gaining the approval of his heart’s desire. For example, his first real high school girlfriend was a young woman named Kittie Ross, who came from a prosperous and respected family. The two of them went on picnics and dates to ice cream socials, which was all standard fare for young couples at that time. What is odd however, and what reveals Lyndon’s drive for approval and attention, was

⁶⁰ Emmett Redford, as quoted in Unger, 16.

his hypocritical participation with Kittie in temperance marches. Though Lyndon abhorred his father's drinking, he had started drinking behind his family's back like many other young boys his age.⁶¹ Indeed, he once 'borrowed' his father's car after a night of drinking with his friends and drove it into a ditch. He was so ashamed of himself and so fearful of his parents' wrath that he fled to the home of a relative in another city (since it was in the summer, Lyndon even stayed with the relatives long enough to get a job at a cotton gin!).⁶² Ultimately, in a gesture that likely only added to Lyndon's emotional complexes, Kittie's parents halted the budding relationship because they felt that Lyndon was simply not good enough for their darling daughter.⁶³

Lyndon's adolescent years, though troubled, were not filled entirely with negative experiences. He became a skilled debater as a member of the high school's debate team, which gave him enough practice speaking in front of a crowd that he became quite good at it. He and a teammate won the debating title for Blanco County in his senior year, but failed to advance in the state finals. Indeed, one of the advantages to Lyndon's obsessive desire for attention was a certain fearlessness when he had to engage a crowd, whether the crowd agreed with him or not. His best grades were in civics and history classes, as expected, and with the help of his mother he was able to succeed in his math classes as well. He also sought to look like a success. Besides being tall and having unmistakable features, he slicked his hair back like a businessman and always wore a bow tie to school. In his senior year he managed to gain possession of a sports coat and paired it with a

⁶¹ Kearns, 40.

⁶² Unger, 17.

⁶³ Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 7. Though it was the end of the relationship, Lyndon was always a sentimentalist, and never forgot the people he loved at any point in his life. In 1965 he flew Kittie and her husband to Washington, DC to attend his inauguration.

straw boater hat.⁶⁴ Everything about him, from his appearance to voice, was designed to grab attention.

When in 1924 it came time to graduate from high school, Lyndon, on the surface, appeared to be on the cusp of a successful progression from high school, to college, and then to a career. He was class valedictorian, which pleased both Lyndon and Rebekah (Rebekah for molding her son into a successful student; Lyndon for gaining the approval of his mother and extra attention at graduation). But the joyous mood quickly turned sour, when Lyndon announced that he had no desire to attend college. Rebekah and Sam each took turns reprimanding Lyndon and decrying his decision. When their words failed to sway him, his mother resorted to her usual tactic of shutting Lyndon out of her life. This time, however, she so completely ignored Lyndon that the young man thought that his mother would never speak to him again; that she'd thoroughly abandoned him and cast him from her life.⁶⁵ Lyndon ultimately relented to this pressure, and prepared to take the necessary steps to enter college.

Unfortunately, once he had made up his mind (or, rather, when his mother's intransigence had broken his will) he faced obstacles to entrance that he was not determined enough to overcome. His high school was not an accredited institution, so Lyndon and his fellow graduates would have to take additional classes that fall at a 'subcollege' program and then pass three entrance exams, including math, in order to be fully admitted to college. What occurred that fall at Texas State Teachers College – San Marcos has never been precisely explained. All that is known for certain is that Lyndon returned to Johnson City having not completed the required coursework. Perhaps he did

⁶⁴ Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography*, 25.

⁶⁵ Dugger, 100.

this on purpose as an act of civil disobedience against his mother. Perhaps he simply failed one or more of the tests. Whatever happened, we know for certain that when Lyndon returned home he immediately began planning to make his way to California with two hometown friends.

Just as it is unclear as to the exact reason for Lyndon's failure, so too is the exact reaction of his parents. Despite a dearth of evidence, it is a fact that Sam and Rebekah were livid. Lyndon and his friends planned on meeting-up with an acquaintance that had moved to California, where they would then be given jobs in a cement plant. Sam specifically forbade Lyndon from doing this, so Lyndon planned his move in secret. One day, when his parents were both out of the house, Lyndon grabbed a briefcase that had already been packed, met his three companions at a gas station, and drove out of town. Sam was furious, vowed to drag Lyndon back home, and called every sheriff between Johnson City and the state border in an effort to have Lyndon brought back to Johnson City.⁶⁶ Lyndon knew that his father would do this however, and out-foxed the sheriffs by sleeping during the day and travelling mainly at night.

For someone who was so dependent on his mother, and who had taken it upon himself to be a father figure within the family, Lyndon showed a remarkable amount of independence and selfishness in his actions. It is true that, like many adolescents, he was searching for a way to perhaps prove his adulthood, both to others and to himself. At the same time he was forsaking all of the hard work that his mother and father had invested into his education, and was deserting the family that he once felt it was his duty to support. Was this an isolated incident in Johnson's life? Or, looking back, can we assume that this is just one example of a lifetime trend of stubbornness and a desire to get

⁶⁶ Ibid.

what he wanted, regardless of whatever people, institutions, or rules barred his path? Though not the subject of this paper, I believe Johnson's actions in and out of politics provide ample proof for the latter assumption (for example: he proposed to his wife on their first date).⁶⁷ This is at times an advantageous trait to have: Lyndon would become fearless in pursuit of his goals. At other times, however, it created obstinacy that caused friction with others and sometimes led to the failure he so desperately wanted to avoid.

Sam and Rebekah probably kept themselves awake at night thinking of their own explanations for why Lyndon embarked for California. They could not understand why their boy, who had graduated top of his class, would ever consider skipping college to work at a cement factory on the west coast. At that time they could hardly have known that of the four young men who departed for California, only two of them managed to get a job in the cement plant. Lyndon and another companion were forced instead to harvest fruit, primarily grapes.⁶⁸ Lyndon would later regale listeners with stories of near-starvation and consumption of grapes for all three meals some days (it is not clear how much was exaggeration). What is not in dispute are the wretched conditions Lyndon worked in, and so after a few weeks he called his cousin, Tom, a lawyer in San Bernardino, to ask for a job as a legal clerk.

Tom allowed Lyndon and one of his companions to come to his office, and he promised to train them as lawyers. Although California required professional training to enter the legal world, nearby Nevada did not, and Lyndon hoped that he would learn enough to be admitted to the Nevada bar. Such a move would make him financially independent, and prove to his parents that he could work a respectable career without

⁶⁷ James McPherson, *To the Best of My Ability* (New York: D.K. Publishing, 2004), 262.

⁶⁸ Hamby, *Liberalism and its Challengers*, 234.

having to go to college. What Tom had failed to tell Lyndon was that the Nevada bar only admitted lawyers who were at least twenty-one years old (Lyndon was seventeen at the time). In addition, Tom was living a dual-lifestyle: family man by day, carousing philanderer at night. Eventually Lyndon was paying many of Tom's bills out of his own pocket. Dejected, Lyndon finally admitted defeat, and made his way back to Texas, more broken than when he had left it. He later told his official biographer that it was on the ride back to Texas that he decided to one day become a politician (he said, ominously, that by doing so his mother "would never be disappointed in me again").⁶⁹ Perhaps he felt that being a politician would earn back his father's respect, win back his mother's love, and redeem the family name.

When Lyndon returned to Johnson City he was disillusioned and disappointed with the world. He began to resume his delinquent behavior, falling-in with a moonshine-drinking, roughhousing group of older boys. He once again wrecked his father's car, and once again ran away (this time to San Antonio). One night, after coming home with bruises on his face and hands, his mother sat on the edge of his bed and cried, lamenting what her son was doing to her. But one day in winter 1927, after returning from a job cold, wet, and exhausted, he declared "Mother, if you and Daddy will get me into college, I'll go right away."⁷⁰ His parents made immediate arrangements for him to attend the Teachers College at San Marcos. Lyndon was soon riding away to college, and leaving behind the adolescent rebelliousness of the last few years. Beginning at San Marcos, all of his rebellious energies would be channeled into the first of many political battlegrounds.

⁶⁹ Lyndon Johnson, as quoted in Kearns, 44.

⁷⁰ Lyndon Johnson, as quoted in Johnson, 24.

College was really the first venue where Lyndon put his political ideas into action. His political involvement on campus would, characteristically of his later career, be populist, petty, and effective. He would also be single-minded. As college friend Ella SoRelle remembered: “Lyndon focused his energies where he was most interested, and let everything else go at whatever luck he could luck out with.”⁷¹

His first two years at college were marked by loneliness and discontent. He dearly missed his family and friends back in Johnson City, and he was having a tough time making friends on campus. Lyndon just could not understand why his boasting about his ancestors and IQ was making him unpopular amongst his peers. Lyndon would alternate between moments of great resolve and bottomless despair. At one point he even inquired with one of his friends who was still in California as to whether he could return for another chance in the Golden State. His better judgement eventually prevailed, and although he was never a dedicated student he (barely) passed enough courses to qualify for a temporary teaching certificate at the end of his sophomore year.

His junior year at San Marcos is when fortune started to turn in his favor, though it began with what he then viewed as a major social setback. His roommate at the time was Alfred Johnson (no relation), who was one of Lyndon’s few friends on campus. Alfred was part of the Beta Sigma fraternity (the Black Stars, as they were known) which consisted of the athletic and social elite on campus. The Black Stars controlled most of the student government, and Lyndon wanted to be in on that action. Alfred nominated Lyndon for membership, but one member of the fraternity ‘black-balled’ him, and Lyndon was rejected. It was the start of a bitter feud and the downfall of the Black Stars on campus.

⁷¹ Ella SoRelle, as quoted in Unger, 22.

First, Lyndon found another avenue to exercise influence on campus. Most students at San Marcos had to earn their tuition money by working side-jobs during the semester. Lyndon had started as a garbage man and janitor, but he had his eyes set on a position that opened up in the office of the college president, Cecil Evans. Luckily Cecil was an old acquaintance of Sam, and Lyndon was given the job. Evans was impressed by Lyndon, and many onlookers were a little shocked to see the normally aloof president be so open and gracious to the young student.⁷² Though Lyndon started with basic secretarial work, he soon ingratiated himself with President Evans enough so that he was handling much of the President's political correspondence. Lyndon developed a reputation as the gateway to President Evans among legislative staffers and state agency workers who dealt with San Marcos.

By June 1929 Lyndon was ready to make the final push to complete his studies at San Marcos. During the previous year he had continued building his relationship with President Evans, and had also taught classes at a nearby grade school, which satisfied his paternal desires and allowed him to connect with many of the lower class citizens he so identified with. He was more mature, though if anyone believed that maturity would overcome his pettiness they would have been mistaken. When Lyndon returned to campus he had two goals: to graduate on schedule, and to overthrow the Black Stars' stranglehold on student governance. He had a score to settle, and he was determined to see his vendetta through.

The Black Stars had begun to abuse their power, and were generating resentment amongst unaffiliated students. Just as Lyndon returned to campus, a secret opposition

⁷² Texas State University – San Marcos (online), “The College Years”, http://www.ua.txstate.edu/UA-departments/Hillviews_SS_08/LBJ_ss_08.html, accessed 2/25/2011.

society was being formed to counter the Black Stars. They called themselves, somewhat predictably, the White Stars. What they had in common with the Black Stars was their reluctance to admit Lyndon into their society. Perhaps the White Stars were unsure if a boastful loudmouth such as Lyndon could keep a secret. They eventually realized the value of having an embittered Black Stars applicant in their ranks, and so Lyndon was admitted to the group.

That summer Lyndon and the White Stars plotted their ascent to power. Lyndon himself was not nominated for any student positions, but he was instrumental in getting his friend Willard Deason to run against the Black Stars' Dick Spinn, a football and track star who was the archetypical Beta Sigma member. The White Stars had their nominees, but now they needed a platform.

The key issue that the White Stars seized upon was an all-inclusive and mandatory student fee that collectively paid for all student activities, from athletics to the yearbook society. Many students felt that the Black Stars had manipulated the expenditure of these funds to give more money to athletics than was necessary. Lyndon's political acumen was sharper than that of his opponents and his allies in this case. He realized that this issue would be a huge appeal to the female students at San Marcos, who comprised over two-thirds of the total student body and who had no sport teams to play on. Lyndon therefore sought to build a coalition of disgruntled female and male students, or, in populist terms, the have-nots versus the haves. Once again, Lyndon knew from firsthand experience the value of securing or promising handouts for the disenfranchised.

For the White and Black Star candidates the election was certainly important, but was not a matter of life and death for them. Although the issues before them were

contentious ones, the candidates did not believe that the future hung in the balance of these student elections. Not so for Lyndon Johnson. No one took the election more seriously than Johnson did, and he viewed it as part of the eternal populist struggle against those who were perceived to have abused their positions of power. Every night he spoke in the dormitories and handed out campaign literature. As one biographer put it “He talked to every student he could *accost*” (emphasis added).⁷³ Utilizing the ‘Johnson Treatment’ he had witnessed so long ago with his father he was able to convince others to believe in the righteousness of his cause. If politicians are indeed salesmen, then Lyndon was an expert.

One of Lyndon’s traits that lasted throughout his career was his tireless effort to get every last vote he could. Not until every precinct closed, not until every Senator had voted would Lyndon finally relinquish his quest. The election on campus was sure to be tight, and despite Lyndon’s constant electioneering, on the day of the election the White Stars were consigning themselves to having tried their best but nobly failed. But when the final votes were tallied they learned that Willard Deason had beaten Spinn by eight votes, and their other candidates fared well also.

Unfortunately, other traits of Lyndon Johnson’s career were a tendency toward manipulation and retribution. In the wake of their victory Lyndon led the White Stars to consolidate their hold on campus government, just as the Black Stars had done. Soon, the best student jobs on campus were being staffed by White Star favorites. Later in life,

⁷³ Quote from text, Unger, 29.

after the presidency, Lyndon recalled that “It was my first real dictat – Hitlerized – operation, and I broke their back good. And it stayed broke for a long time.”⁷⁴

This triumph in campus politics soon led to his first professional foray into real-world politics. Indeed, the next couple of years in Lyndon’s life, before he ran for Congress, were a blur of frenzied activity, marked by moving from one job to another. Just before graduation Lyndon went to work for the Pat Neff campaign. The campaign allowed Lyndon to speak publicly and canvass for Neff all across the state. A family friend named Welly Hopkins, who was running for state senate, happened to hear Lyndon speak at one event and asked him to do some work on his campaign as well. Lyndon agreed, and did an excellent job for the Hopkins campaign. He even convinced President Evans to allow him to hold a rally on the San Marcos campus. Hopkins won, and credited Lyndon with having been an irreplaceable part of the campaign.⁷⁵

Much more can be said about Lyndon’s time spent as a teacher than can be covered here. Suffice to say that for the next two years (1930-1931) Lyndon taught geography and arithmetic at Sam Houston High School (in, of all places, Houston), where he also coached the debate team. He led the boys’ team to the state final, where they were ultimately defeated (Lyndon was vomiting in the bathroom after the defeat).⁷⁶

Luckily for him, however, he was about to catch his first big break in the political world.

Richard Kleberg, owner of what was reputed to be the largest cattle ranch in the world, had just won a seat to the United States Congress in a special election. His district

⁷⁴ Lyndon Johnson, as quoted in Robert Beckhusen, *The University Star* (online), “The Lyndon Johnson Complex, Part 1”, <http://star.txstate.edu/node/2613>, accessed 2/27/2011.

⁷⁵ The United States Senate Official Website, “Lyndon Baines Johnson, 37th Vice President (1961-1963)”, http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP_Lyndon_Johnson.htm, accessed 2/27/2011.

⁷⁶ Caro, *Path to Power*, 211.

covered San Antonio and included parts of the Texas Hill country, where his political allies told him about the young man from Johnson City who had shown a natural gift for politics. Kleberg and Lyndon arranged an interview, whereupon Kleberg offered Lyndon a job as administrative aide. Lyndon gladly accepted. He packed his suitcase and boarded a train bound for Washington, D.C. When he arrived on December 7, 1931, few could have ever guessed that it was the start of a political career that would span thirty-eight years.

Lyndon spent every available minute of his early days as a congressional secretary roaming through the halls of power, shaking hands with everyone he came across. The term ‘networking’ was not in use then, but that is exactly what Lyndon did. Johnson quickly learned which congressmen actually possessed real power; the ones who led the pack. Lyndon was so fixated on politics that whenever a group invited him to a baseball game or other social event he would go along not because he was interested in the event, but because he did not want to be left out of the discussion. Lyndon, at all times, just *had* to be at the center of things.

Although critics will say that such a lifestyle is shallow and the friends that are made can be phony, there is no denying that Lyndon was soon walking in some serious circles of power. He was constantly trying to gain access to influential Texans, and two in particular took a liking to Lyndon. The first was Congressman Wright Patman, who had known Sam Johnson in the Texas legislature and who enjoyed talking about politics with the young and enthusiastic Lyndon. The second man was a congressman on the House Commerce Committee named Sam Rayburn. Rayburn had (vaguely) known Sam Johnson in the Texas legislature, but was interested in Lyndon because he genuinely

enjoyed Lyndon's company.⁷⁷ The two men became very close friends to the point that, during one incredibly serious bout of pneumonia, Rayburn stayed by Lyndon's bedside to keep an eye on him.⁷⁸

He also met and ingratiated himself with an assortment of Texan lobbyists, who represented interests ranging from cattle ranching to the oil business. Indeed, all Kleberg was good for in Washington was introducing Lyndon to his influential friends – Kleberg preferred the golf course to politics. Nevertheless, when it was time to run again in 1932, Kleberg defended his seat handedly with the help of his campaign manager: Lyndon Johnson.

Lyndon's hamstringing thirst for attention as a youth had turned into a special talent in the political world: an unyielding determination to inject oneself into every important circle of power. While Lyndon was not exactly making many friends among his peers with such a method, he was making the right friends who would aid him in his career. He had figured-out politics in a fraction of the time it would have taken another D.C. greenhorn. By assuming the day-to-day work of the office (on account of Kleberg's lack of commitment) Lyndon became the face of the Kleberg office in Washington.⁷⁹ Whenever a lobbyist, congressman, or agency official needed to get to Kleberg they had to go through Lyndon. Much like in the office of President Evans, Lyndon had set himself up as the gateway. It was also Lyndon who, as the country entered the throes of the Great Depression, responded and listened to the troubles of his constituents. Of

⁷⁷ Hamby, 236.

⁷⁸ Charles Peters, *Lyndon B. Johnson* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC., 2010), 12.

⁷⁹ Miller Center of Public Affairs – University of Virginia (online), "Lyndon Baines Johnson", <http://millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/essays/biography/2>, accessed 2/26/2011.

course, Lyndon also knew that this was just another step on the path toward becoming an elected official in his own right.

Although Lyndon had fallen in love with Washington, the Depression pulled him more and more back to his homeland. Letters from stricken constituents poured into Kleberg's office by the thousands. Lyndon, whose populist sentimentalism was as strong as ever, became an ardent supporter of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives. When the House was set to vote on the Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1933 (which gave farmers federal relief in exchange for eliminating surpluses and issued a special tax on the processors of several major commodity crops) Kleberg, who was out of touch with his constituents, was against it. Lyndon had to threaten to resign and called Kleberg a veritable traitor before Kleberg relented and voted in favor of the bill.⁸⁰ Lyndon was far less interested in the moral and philosophical debates surrounding the New Deal. All he cared about was that the New Deal programs were supporting his fellow lower-class Texans, and that was reason enough (in a political and emotional sense) to support them.

By 1933 it was clear that Lyndon had a political future, but it was not clear where he would end up. He had established a notable presence in Washington, but he had not, in title, advanced passed congressional secretary. He had also attempted to gain a law degree from Georgetown, but soon dropped out as his old educational tendencies returned to derail his studies.⁸¹ In the end, two factors helped decide the matter of where Lyndon would make his start in his own electoral career: his love for the poor folk of Texas, and his love for a woman.

⁸⁰ Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography*, 43.

⁸¹ Caro, *Path to Power*, 338.

Lyndon fell in love with Lady Bird Taylor within moments of meeting her. She had everything a man such as Lyndon was looking for in a woman: looks, smarts, and a rather large bank account. This is not mentioned as a cynical attack on Lyndon's reasons for loving Lady Bird, but just to reiterate that Lyndon's upbringing had created an overwhelming desire for financial stability, and Lady Bird's family could help provide that; especially during what Lyndon felt could be a volatile early career. He proposed less than twenty-four hours into the relationship. Though Lady Bird demurred that night, Lyndon proceeded to bombard her with letters, gifts, even an engagement ring. Finally, after a whirlwind courtship lasting all of two months, the couple was wed in a four-person ceremony (the minister, Lyndon, Lady Bird, and Lyndon's friend Dan Quill) in San Antonio.⁸² Lyndon now had even more of an emotional attachment to his home state, and though the young couple had to spend their first months in Washington, it was clear that Lyndon was determined to return to Texas.

His friendship with Rayburn was about to pay off. For unknown reasons Kleberg and Lyndon had a falling out. Rumors have since swirled to provide some sort of answer for this. The most outlandish, but not insubstantial, is that Kleberg's wife, Mamie, who had been very close to Lyndon, had successfully seduced Lyndon at some point and had not been discreet about it.⁸³ Another rumor was to the effect that Kleberg became wary of Lyndon's ambition and thought that Lyndon would try to usurp him (of course, if a person ever wanted to ensure that Lyndon would come after them, all they had to do was make him an enemy by, for example, firing him). The most likely explanation is that

⁸² Peters, 16.

⁸³ Unger, 52.

Lyndon had simply felt it was time to move on, and when he started asking around for other jobs, Kleberg let him go.

In June 1935 President Roosevelt created the National Youth Administration by executive order. Though New Deal programs were putting adults back to work, millions of young men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five needed to find employment or training. The National Youth Administration (NYA) was created to address this. The NYA would be run through forty-eight directors, one for each state. Lyndon used his influence with Sam Rayburn to get appointed director of the NYA for Texas. On August 15, 1935 Lyndon opened the Texas NYA headquarters in Austin (Lady Bird was elated to return to Texas).⁸⁴

As NYA director Lyndon once again demonstrated his innate talent for building a team of loyal staff and building a broad coalition of support for his goals (reminiscent of the San Marcos campaign). He brought in Willard Deason from San Marcos and two childhood friends from Johnson City for his capitol staff, and convinced other White Stars to serve as staff elsewhere in Texas. He also reached out to blacks and other minority groups in Texas. For whatever reason, Lyndon had never subscribed to the bigoted beliefs that were present in the Jim Crow era in Texas, but realized that he could not explicitly challenge the racial mores of the state. To invite controversy would bring disaster upon the program. To this end Lyndon hired black leaders to deal with the black communities, and tried to publicly downplay the services being given to blacks while simultaneously providing them with equitable measures of support.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Deborah Lynn Self, "The National Youth Administration in Texas 1935-1939", Texas Tech online theses database (Adobe PDF format), 26. Result of Google Search: "August 15 1935 lyndon johnson NYA".

⁸⁵ Ibid, 61.

Lyndon also recognized the value of education, even if he had never been a model student. He tried to relocate Civilian Construction Corps (CCC) camps to be closer to college campuses so workers could take classes if they so chose. When the NYA administrators in Washington blocked Lyndon from doing this he took the proposal right to President Roosevelt (through Sam Rayburn). Roosevelt thought it was a brilliant proposal, and the president would routinely check-in on Lyndon to hear about the progress being made in Texas.

Lyndon worked himself to the bone for the NYA, and he made sure people knew about it. He utilized the Texas press corps to make his name all but synonymous with the NYA. Even though he knew that he was doing great work, and helping thousands of people as they tried to rebuild their lives, he also knew that the NYA was just one more step on the path to public office. Willard Deason would later say that Lyndon's political machine "all went back to that NYA."⁸⁶ Lyndon was fixated on finding a way of using his success in the NYA to vault him into Congress. On February 23, 1937 the opportunity presented itself.

On that day the local headlines read that Congressman James P. Buchanan of Houston had passed away, and there would now be a special election to determine who would fill his seat. Lyndon immediately seized this chance. He could focus on nothing else as he began to formulate his campaign. He contacted a local political boss named Alvin Wirtz for advice. Wirtz told him that his biggest obstacle would be money. There were wealthy, Kleberg-esque men who would be interested in that seat, and they would be gobbling-up donors as quickly as they could. Lady Bird, when told of her husband's

⁸⁶ Willard Deason, as quoted in Unger, 58.

predicament, called her father to see if he could help. Lyndon would need a ten thousand dollar advance. The next day, Lady Bird's father wired the money to a local bank.

Although there were several difficult decisions to make during the campaign, and he had a total of eight opponents, Lyndon was going to win the election. He aligned himself entirely with President Roosevelt's platform, and although the other candidates also claimed solidarity with most of Roosevelt's proposals Lyndon was able to capitalize on their opposition to the 'court-packing' plan. Johnson had a network of loyal followers from all across the state, and he was the personal favorite of none other than Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt had remarked "I have moments of real terror when I think we may be losing this generation."⁸⁷ She had visited the Austin NYA headquarters and had come away very impressed with Lyndon.

Lyndon campaigned with tenacity, knowing that nothing could be taken for granted in Texas politics. Then, mere days before the election, an extremely odd event effectively clinched the election for Lyndon. He had been complaining of stomach pains for almost a week when he suddenly collapsed and was rushed to the hospital. His appendix was about to burst by the time doctors got him onto the operating table.⁸⁸ In the days leading up to the election all of the Texas newspapers were publishing stories about Lyndon's operation. Even though this was not necessarily political publicity, by saturating the front pages of the regional newspapers the story of Lyndon's travails robbed his opponents of the chance to get their names and issues publicized. His opponents even accused him of faking the entire episode, but the truth was that Lyndon almost died. He had campaigned himself to exhaustion, having lost over forty pounds in

⁸⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, as quoted in Caro, *Path to Power*, 341.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 436.

as many days.⁸⁹ He did not plan the appendicitis, but he certainly felt no scruples about hamming it up for the press.

He had the newspapers eating out of his hand from that moment on. He ‘campaigned’ from his sickbed, inviting well-wishers into his room to take photos with him. By the end of Election Day he learned that he had carried a plurality of the votes (all that was needed to win in the special election). Congratulatory telegrams poured into the hospital room. A photo of him, flanked by two nurses and with all of those telegrams, was splashed on most Texas newspapers the next day. Word of his victory was even carried by the *New York Times*. President Roosevelt, who was yachting in the Gulf of Mexico a few days after the election, asked Lyndon to join him at Galveston to be congratulated by the president in person. Lyndon, still weak from the operation, managed to muster enough strength to meet with Roosevelt, and the two became relatively close for the rest of Roosevelt’s life.

Lyndon had worked his way into Congress the only way he knew how: by being out in front on every issue, and by being loud about every one of his opinions. Rebekah wrote him a letter, which basically stated that Lyndon’s victory had avenged the defeat of her father, who had campaigned unsuccessfully for Congressman years before. In that same letter she also said that Lyndon had “justified my expectations, my darling boy, my devoted son, my strength and comfort.”⁹⁰ He would become famous on Capitol Hill for the personality he developed in Texas: “vituperative and bullying one moment and contrite and conciliatory the next.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ James Patterson, *Grand Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 528.

⁹⁰ Rebekah Johnson, as quoted in Kearns, 88-89.

⁹¹ Quoted from text, Lewis Gould, *The Modern Presidency* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 138.

Lyndon's overwhelming thirst for attention was a tremendous attribute for his election effort, and it would serve him well throughout his entire career. All elected officials know that as part of their campaign effort they will have to put themselves before the people for judgment. But Lyndon *wanted* to be before the people; he *needed* to be in front of a crowd. I honestly feel that if Lyndon had spent his childhood in New York than there is a good chance he would have become a Broadway actor. But his upbringing in the Texas back country, his father's populist idealism, and his mother's 'love' pushed him toward political success. His long electoral career would span decades, and he would take center-stage during a momentous period of our nation's history. But at that moment, lying in his hospital bed, he had reached what he had sought for so long: elected office.

Lyndon, who had been so indelibly marked by Rebekah, had won his first campaign. And yet, like many ambitious people, but especially for Lyndon, it was not enough. Nothing would ever be enough for Lyndon. His first electoral victory was merely the first great leap into the pool of power. Even as president it was never enough that he occupied the Oval Office – he wanted to be the greatest president our country ever had. His desire for affection and attention would always be a double-edged sword during his political career. This psychosis would help drive him to put in the hard work necessary to win, but would hamper his ability to truly relate to others. He would always strive to be 'daddy' but could rarely abide being 'friend.'

Gerald Rudolph Ford

(a.k.a. Leslie King, Jr.)

“I am a Ford, not a Lincoln.”

When Millard Fillmore ascended to the presidency after the death of Zachary Taylor in 1850, his political opponents derisively nicknamed Fillmore “His Accidency.”⁹² If only we could have reached Fillmore’s opponents for their opinion on Gerald Ford. Perhaps no American president in any era of United States history has risen to the Oval Office as much by accident as Gerald Ford did. Having filled the space left by an outgoing vice president embroiled in corruption scandals, Ford would ultimately succeed Richard Nixon when the president was forced into his own resignation amid the drama of impeachment proceedings. Before October 1973 the most votes Gerald Ford had ever received in an election were 131,461 from the two counties he represented as a congressman from Michigan.⁹³ His highest ambition for his strictly legislative career was to be Speaker of the House (which he never attained). Yet on August 9, 1975 Ford became the chief executive of the United States and the leader of over 210 million Americans.

Being president was never an ambition of Ford’s, nor could anyone have possibly predicted that he would one day rise to such a position. He was a Midwestern congressman who had climbed the ranks in Congress largely through hard work, good timing, and a genuine likability amongst both voters and fellow congressmen. Although he was certainly a career politician, he lacked any of the negative, stereotypical traits associated with such a career path. The stigma of the scheming, callous, conniving professional politician was about as far from Ford’s personality as one can get. Ford was successful in Congress, and in life, because of an innate ability to abstain from making enemies, an aptness to reward hard work and talent, and a desire to keep every promise

⁹² Cormac O’Brien, *Secret Lives of the US Presidents* (Philadelphia: Quirk Productions, Inc., 2004), 72.

⁹³ Our Campaigns (online), Search: “Gerald Ford MI 5th district”, <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=63182>, accessed 2/10/11.

he made. To a nation traumatized by Watergate, Ford was a breath of fresh air. Yet it was no accident that this ‘accidental’ president was a man who possessed such reassuring virtues. His younger days, at times tumultuous, instilled in Ford those qualities that would make him a trusted figure at a moment of national disgust.

Ford’s development as a leader cannot be boiled down to one single episode or era in his life. Whereas it is very clear that Harry Truman’s most pivotal years (before being president) were the years he spent in the military, Ford’s development as a leader during his younger years was far more gradual, and resulted from a combination of events and a series of personal and professional experiences. It is true that nobody ever has a single event that makes them who they are, but compared to other leaders there is no one instance in Ford’s life where historians could assert that ‘it was at *that* moment that Gerald Ford was set on his path to destiny.’

Gerald Ford, born Leslie King Jr., entered the world on July 14, 1913 – Omaha’s hottest day of the year. It is a minor miracle that Ford survived the pregnancy, birth, and his initial days as an infant. His father, Leslie King, was physically and emotionally abusive to Ford’s mother, Dorothy Gardner. King first beat Gardner on their honeymoon and would not relent until the poor woman eventually left him roughly a year later.⁹⁴ Although King had assured Dorothy’s father at the time of the marriage that he would be able to comfortably, and even luxuriously, provide for his bride, it soon became apparent that he was heavily in debt and far from financially secure.⁹⁵ Though King was descended from a very prominent Midwest family, he and his beleaguered bride were forced to eke out a spartan existence in Omaha.

⁹⁴ James Cannon, *Time and Change: Gerald Ford’s Appointment with History* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1994), 3.

⁹⁵ Cannon, 5.

It was into this atmosphere that Leslie King Jr., the infant who would one day be the thirty-eighth President of the United States, was born. The doctor who delivered the baby so feared for Dorothy's well-being that he assigned a nurse to the mother and infant and ordered her to remain by their side no matter the circumstances. The doctor selected a brave nurse, for not long after the baby was born King threatened the nurse, mother, and child with a butcher's knife.⁹⁶ The nurse called the police, who had to physically restrain King.

Now fearing not just for her life but also that of her child, Dorothy fled to her parents (without even taking the time to pack her things) and settled in Chicago. She filed for divorce, and though King vigorously challenged her claims, Dorothy's lawyer produced police reports, witnesses, and other incontrovertible evidence of King's barbarity.⁹⁷ King was ordered to pay several thousand dollars in damages, plus child support. He refused to pay a dime, and when the courts moved to seize his assets they found that he had squandered everything he had. King's father, Charles, realizing the extent of his son's misconduct, cut his son out of the family business and promised to pay the child support (though when he died some years later the payments abruptly ceased). However, though he may have been embarrassed, Leslie King could at least remain in his hometown. Social norms and propriety at the time dictated that Dorothy could not return to her hometown, and she and her parents resolved to build a new existence in a new city. They eventually settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was to be in Grand Rapids that 'Junie' (as the future president Gerald Ford was then called) built the foundation of his values and ideals.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Edward and Frederick Schapsmeier, *Gerald R. Ford's Date with Destiny: A Political Biography* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1989), 4.

The years in which Gerald Ford grew up were in many ways the prime years in the history of Grand Rapids. Like much of the Midwest, Grand Rapids was settled largely from central European immigrants, predominantly Dutch and Germanic peoples. The heavy Dutch influence inspired a sense of thrift and mercantilism. From the 1910s to the 1920s Grand Rapids was booming. Economic development progressed at an astonishing rate in the early 1900s, and the city was blessed with capable and effective public servants. Despite having some of the lowest tax brackets in the state, the tax dollars spent on education were enough so that Grand Rapids was widely considered to have the best public school system in the Midwest, if not the country.⁹⁸ Children could spend one day fishing or hunting and the next day in one of a number of libraries. The economic opportunity led to roughly half of all residents owning the houses they lived in. By the 1920s the city was serviced by no less than seven railway lines and daily air service to Detroit. Although the predominantly industrial work could be hard, pre-Depression Grand Rapids provided opportunity for anyone willing to perform (or invest in) such work.

Grand Rapids embodied the American dream at its most natural level: that hard work, character, and honesty pay off. The city could be a lifelong hometown or a springboard to more distant opportunities. It was no accident then that the Gardners chose to migrate to Grand Rapids. It had the atmosphere, vibrancy, and opportunity they would need to start over. Most of all, Dorothy hoped, Grand Rapids would provide the environment from which her infant son could grow into a man of integrity.

Luckily for Dorothy she soon met her own man of integrity. She and Gerald Rudolph Ford, a paint salesman and Grand Rapids resident, first became acquainted at an

⁹⁸ Douglas Brinkley, *Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 2007), 3-4.

Episcopal Church event in 1915. 'Jerry', as he was known, was tall, disciplined, and possessed the self-confidence of someone who had earned his economic security. Jerry's father had been killed in a train accident when he was just fourteen, and so he was forced to drop out of school and find employment in order to help put food on the table for his family.

He and Dorothy courted each other for roughly one year, before being married on February 1, 1916 in the same church where they had initially met. Jerry always had a special affection for kids, and never treated Junie as anything less than his own natural son. And that young boy, whom everyone began to call 'Junie *Ford*' and then 'Jerry' as well, always treated the elder Jerry as his father, both in fact and circumstance. The elder Jerry could hardly have known that he would help shape his adoptive son, the product of his new wife's first, failed marriage, into a future president (henceforth, future president Gerald Ford will be referred to as 'Gerald' or 'Ford').

For her part, Dorothy found renewed energy in her marriage to Jerry. By moving forward from the awful Leslie King experience, and once again independent of her parents, she devoted herself to her new family and new community. She and Jerry would have three children together, and Dorothy was active in all manner of community service organizations, both secular and ecumenical. She was active in a book club, civic club, her Episcopal parish, and the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Jerry Sr. and Dorothy would provide an emotionally stable household for young Gerald Ford and his siblings in a way that was unimaginable under Leslie King. Dorothy set out to obliterate all traces of Leslie from Gerald, most notably his temper, which the boy displayed from a very early age. Whenever the young boy would become angry,

Dorothy would first try to reason with him or make faces to show him how ridiculous he looked. If that was unsuccessful she would send him to his room to calm down. Dorothy once had him memorize Rudyard Kipling's poem "If", and would later tell Ford to remember the poem every time he became moody.⁹⁹ Although Gerald would eventually learn to control his temper to an extent, his friends and loved ones throughout his life would note that an explosive temper lay just below the surface, and was only kept in check by Ford's constant self-control.

Jerry Sr. also provided an outstanding role model. Both of Ford's parents set their own high standards *and* lived up to them, so for young Gerald to bask in the example his stepfather set was surely one of the factors that led to Ford's own moral code. His father, despite his modest station in life, was an active Mason, Elk, Shriner, and a strong supporter of the Boy Scouts (as Ford himself would be one day). For Dorothy and Jerry community service was not something exceptional, it was something that was expected. Their sons would take strength from those values and strive to replicate them in their own lives.

Jerry introduced Gerald to sports almost as soon as the boy could run. Football was the premier sport in Grand Rapids. Although Gerald did not play organized football until eighth grade, he always found either his father or his friends willing to play. Jerry gave sports an almost mythic status in life. He firmly believed that sports were essential to building the character of a young man. Ford said of his father "He believed that sports taught you how to live, how to compete but to play by the rules, how to win, how to lose

⁹⁹John McCain and Marshall Salter, *Hard Call: Great Decisions and the Extraordinary Men Who Made Them* (New York: Hatchett Book Group, 2007). Accessed 2/28/2011 via Google Books.

and to come back to try again.”¹⁰⁰ Gerald Ford could articulate his stepfather’s sentiment so well because he believed it himself. Until Ford became a congressman he spent much of his time directly involved in sports (either as an athlete or a coach) and was an active person throughout his life. Sports often opened the door to other opportunities in his life, and could bring out the best (and sometimes worst) of his qualities. Although Ford’s athletic pursuits yielded far more tangible benefits than a philosophy of ideals, it is worth mentioning that after his presidency he once remarked:

“There’s no question that my experience and exposure to athletics had a major impact on my life. In fact, I think that sports, particularly football, gave me an opportunity to be out front, to be a leader, which helped me later on when I got into politics.”¹⁰¹

Sports became an instrumental part of Gerald Ford’s development as a person, and it was his stepfather who pushed him into that world.

The choice of where Gerald should go to school was also an important decision his parents made that would later have crucial consequences. As already stated, Grand Rapids had an exceptional public school system. Because of a geographical peculiarity, the Ford’s had a choice regarding what high school they could send their children to.

There were two schools that were for children from the better parts of town, dominated by upper-class families. Then there was South High, a far more diverse school that drew in lower, middle, and upper class students. His parents agonized over the decision, and finally asked a good friend of theirs (who happened to be the basketball coach at South High) for advice. He told them “You send Gerald to South, that’s where he’ll learn more

¹⁰⁰ Gerald Ford, as quoted in Cannon, 10.

¹⁰¹ Gerald Ford, as quoted in Brian Kilmeade, *The Games Do Count* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2004), 40.

about living.”¹⁰² His parents ultimately chose to send him to South High. It was a fateful decision, for while there Ford would meet a man whose coaching set Ford on a path to athletic glory.

Like any athlete, Ford could recall his coaches for the rest of his life. It was at South High that he met the first of a long line of coaches who would give him the opportunity to succeed through hard work (South High began High School at eighth grade instead of ninth). His first football coach, Clifford Gettings, took one look at the eighth grader with blond hair standing before him and told Ford that he was going to be a center. Clearly the coach saw something special in young Gerald, or at least had an instinct for spotting talent, because in Ford’s time the center position was even more important than it is now. Old football offenses ran many plays that involved direct snaps to a player in motion in the backfield, and a center had to be able to snap the ball at the right moment and recover in time to block a defensive lineman who was already ahead of him. Gettings and Ford practiced for hours and hours until Ford managed to make it instinct. It was the first step Ford would make on his journey to becoming a pro-caliber center.

One overlooked aspect of how athletics can prepare a person for adulthood is that it provides an opportunity to escape from one’s parents and make decisions on your own. There are certainly children who are smothered by their parents when playing sports, but more often the young men and women on any team find themselves having to make snap decisions on their own. They find out who they can rely on in certain situations. They find out whether they have it within themselves to withstand the pressure of competition. More importantly, especially in a sport such as football, young men learn the value of

¹⁰² Cannon, 12.

teamwork and the limits of what an individual can achieve. By becoming the center of South High's freshman football team, Ford had to assume the mantle of leadership and play effectively, or he would quickly find himself replaced. There can be no question of how Ford handled the responsibility: he started every game and played both center *and* linebacker.¹⁰³ His hard work and dedication to his team would result in him being named to the All-City team three years in a row.

Around this time, his twelfth birthday marked the chance at another momentous opportunity. Ford was now eligible for membership in the Boy Scouts, and he enrolled as soon as he could. He memorized the Scout Oath and remembered it for the rest of his life:

1. To do my duty to my God and country, and to obey Scout Law;
2. To help other people at all times;
3. To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

Ford's entire class of Grand Rapids Boy Scouts Troop 15 of 1925 would make Eagle within three years. It was the beginning of a lifelong affiliation with, and service to, the Boy Scouts of America.

At the same time that he was learning from sports and the Boy Scouts, Ford was taking it upon himself to learn and develop his morals somewhat independently from his parents and his peers. Ford later recalled observing the way trivial differences or disagreements could create real hatred and rivalry. He said that he then developed a philosophy that sustained him through high school, college, and his professional life, that "Everyone...has more good qualities than bad. If I understood and tried to accentuate

¹⁰³Schapsmeier, 9.

those qualities in others, I could get along much better.”¹⁰⁴ It seems that from an early age Ford regarded notions of fairness, honesty, and teamwork as more than platitudes to spout for admirers on the way to personal glory. He sincerely believed that every human being had something to offer the world. This attitude would later aid him in Congress by keeping him from becoming a partisan warrior at a time in our history when bipartisanship was still an essential part of the legislative process.

What this part of Ford’s life represents is a foundation for his future – physically, mentally, and morally. Pushed to excel in school by his father, in sports by his coaches and his own innate competitiveness, and morally by a multitude of sources, Ford was fast becoming a young man who could be respected and looked up to. Added to this was his athletic physique and distinctive good looks, which created a quiet charisma (if such a thing is not a contradiction in terms). For being so young, he displayed remarkable maturity.

This is no doubt due to the fact that all of his goals at this point – making Eagle scout, getting onto the varsity football team, going to college – required him to match up to young men older than he. He sought to emulate what he thought those men were, or at least what he thought they should be. This is not to say that he always met such high standards (his temper and competitiveness would often get the best of him on the football field), but it is a testament to his desire to become a specific kind of man: trustworthy, honorable, and respected. He once told a classmate “If you accentuate the good things in dealing with a person, you can like him even if he has some bad qualities. If you have that

¹⁰⁴ Gerald Ford, as quoted in Gerald Ford, *A Time To Heal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 46.

attitude, you never hate anybody.”¹⁰⁵ Rather poignant, especially considering such a sentiment is coming from a competitive adolescent male.

While Gerald’s grades were certainly admirable, his accomplishments in extracurricular activities are what marked him apart from his classmates. His involvement in the Boy Scouts brought him into contact with all kinds of people, and Ford grew comfortable conversing and engaging with others. In his sophomore year of high school he was the starting center on the varsity football team, which won the city championship, and Ford was named to the all-city roster. His temper could sometimes get the better of him, and there was even one game where he was ejected for a late, retaliatory hit on an opposing player. Ford apologized after the incident, and kept his temper stable for the most part. Although his grades were not stellar, he did make the National Honor Society and ranked in the top-forty of his 220-student class.¹⁰⁶ All of this, combined with a multitude of part-time jobs, made Ford a growing personality in town. One day, in spring 1930, Ford’s celebrity status resulted in unintended consequences.

That spring Ford had gotten a job working at a burger joint near South High. Leslie King, who was passing through Grand Rapids and knew of Ford’s football prowess, had little trouble tracking Ford down (a school secretary knew where Ford worked). Ford was working behind the counter when he noticed King had been staring at him for a few minutes. When Ford finally asked if he could help the man to a burger, King replied “I’m Leslie King, I’m your father. Can I take you out to lunch?”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Gerald Ford, as quoted in Brinkley, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ford, 47.

¹⁰⁷ Leslie King, as quoted in Max Lerner, *The American Presidents and the Perils of Power* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company Inc., 1996), 386.

Ford would later call it the first major “shock” of his life.¹⁰⁸ He was stunned. Although his mother had briefly mentioned that she had been previously married, and that Jerry was not his actual father, Ford was nonetheless startled to be so suddenly confronted with the part of his past he hardly knew. Although Leslie King owed substantial payments in child support, he had made no attempt until this point to establish contact with Ford.

King pressured Ford to ask his boss to take off the rest of the shift, and Ford’s boss acquiesced. The two of them went to lunch along with King’s girlfriend. At the end of the lunch, King handed Ford twenty-five dollars, told him to buy something nice, and drove off. It would not be the last time Ford saw his real father, but it confirmed to Ford that his father was not someone to be looked up to.

When he came home that night he told his mother and stepfather what had happened. Although Ford never divulged exactly what was said between the three of them, he maintains that the conversation was one of love and support. Such a situation would be difficult for anyone to handle, but Ford navigated the swirl of emotions and emerged as a stronger person because of it.

Despite being a star athlete and popular student Ford grew to be a very independent young man, doing things his own way. His peers said that unlike other athletes, Ford would not give teachers trouble or be especially boisterous. Ford even wore a shirt and tie to high school most days, whereas other students dressed far more

¹⁰⁸William Greider, “Integrity and Sincerity”, *Washington Post*, December 7, 1973. Acquired via ProQuest <http://proquest.umi.com/proxygw.wrlc.org/pqdweb?index=2&did=120916291&SrchMode=2&sid=3&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=POD&ROT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1299080325&clientId=31812>, accessed 3/1/2011.

casually.¹⁰⁹ Ford was a serious student, although his independence and serious tendencies led some to draw the wrong opinion of him. One of his female classmates, who, admittedly, had tried but failed to get Ford to go on a date with her, described him as “a big St. Bernard.”¹¹⁰ This young girl was one of many people who would underestimate Ford during his life.

Beneath Ford’s serious and sometimes off-putting demeanor was simply a young man who was eager for success, and he did not want to get distracted along the way to making a respectable name for himself. Ford’s independence was born from having to forge his own path on the road to success. He could not rely on his family’s finances or clout to get him through high school and beyond. This is not to say that his friends and family were not there to help him. He was beloved by these people and they helped him in any way they could. But they could not help Ford study, or snap a football, or scrape together enough money to buy a car, clothes, and other accoutrements. He had to depend on his own wits and intelligence to steer him through the problems and travails of youth. He had to make decisions on his own.

In addition, Ford recognized that through sports he could extricate himself from the parts of his biological father that still lingered within him. Joe Zemaitis, a swimming and triathlon coach who holds the nineteen-and-under age group record for the Hawaiian Ironman, has written about how athletes often use sports to suppress negative traits in their personalities. Zemaitis mentions how “The Shadow”, a term coined by Carl Jung representing the points of the human personality opposite of its positive traits, has to be

¹⁰⁹ Bud Vestal, *Jerry Ford, Up Close: An Investigative Biography* (New York: Booth Newspapers, Inc., 1974), 58.

¹¹⁰ Virginia Berry, as quoted in Vestal, 59.

confronted by athletes and overcome if they are to succeed.¹¹¹ Ford often learned the hard way that the violent temper of his father was no asset even on the football field, and could sometimes be a liability. By overcoming his temper he not only improved his team, but improved his chances for success later in life.

And one of the most important decisions he had to make as a young man in high school was where to attend college and, equally as important, how to pay for it. Although he was a celebrated athlete, athletic scholarships were not as significant in his time as they are today. His proficiency at center would no doubt aid his entry into college, but it would not help him pay for it. Like most of his decisions, Ford embraced the fact that his only option was to work harder than he ever had before. He would continue to set the standard to his maxim that hard work always paid off in the end, more so than any other strategy.

The South High principal, Arthur Krause, though a graduate of the University of Illinois, was an ardent University of Michigan fan, and urged Ford to attend at Ann Arbor. Although the University of Michigan continues to enjoy a sterling reputation today, both on and off the football field, when Ford was applying to colleges it was regarded as one of the best, if not *the* best, public university in the nation. Krause knew of Ford's financial situation, and so arranged for Ford to receive a scholarship for South High students with clear potential.¹¹² The scholarship would only cover one year, but it would be enough to get Ford started. Gerald worked around the clock at part-time jobs during the summer of 1931 before his first semester in order to scrape together enough money to cover his eventual expenses. Other than the small but appreciated contributions

¹¹¹ Joe Zemaitis, *Joe's Rules* (Phoenix: Balance Point Press, 2007), 127.

¹¹² Jeffrey Ashley, *Betty Ford: A Symbol of Strength* (Hauppauge, New York: Nova History Publications, 2003), 27. Accessed 2/19/2011 via Google Books.

of an aunt and uncle, Ford would earn everything on his own (every two or three months he would receive twenty-five dollars for donating blood at the university hospital).¹¹³

The story of Ford's years at University of Michigan is divided between two segments: time spent on the football field, and time spent off of it. Football's contributions to Ford's life extends beyond developing part of his moral code. On a more mundane level, the connections he made and the reputation he developed through his achievements on the football field would propel him beyond the University of Michigan in a way that his grades would not be able to.

Ford would not start a game at center for the University of Michigan until his junior year; a consequence of playing behind an All-American center named Chuck Bernard. Michigan won national championships during Ford's stay, but by the time of Ford's senior year the team had to slog through a mass exodus of starters from previous seasons, and they lost key components of their backfield to injury. The team played on the best they could, but the season was an unmitigated disaster. There was one highlight however that resonated through the years far more than any win ever could.

During that awful season, the Michigan team fielded one of the few black players in the NCAA at that time, a man named Willis Ward. Ford and Ward would room together while travelling for away games, and the two became fast friends. The third game of the season was against Georgia Tech, an all-white school whose coach refused to play if Michigan fielded Willis Ward. Ward's teammates came to his defense, and at Ward's urging, Ford decided to play the game (he had been thinking about boycotting). Inspired to rise to the occasion, Michigan won the game. It was one of the few highlights in an otherwise dismal season.

¹¹³ Ford, 50.

Though the team as a whole fared poorly, Ford enjoyed great personal success on the field. He had won the Morton Trophy as a freshman (given to the player who shows the most potential in terms of skill and leadership), and in his senior year made the All-Conference team and was voted by his teammates as the most valuable player (he also graduated in the top twenty-five percent of his class despite all of his other obligations).¹¹⁴ At the last minute, Ford was chosen to play in the Shrine East-West game, essentially an All-Star game for collegiate football. Ford did not start, but the young man ahead of him broke his leg two minutes into the game, and so Ford went in...and had the game of his life. On the train heading back to the Midwest Ford was offered professional contracts with the Green Bay Packers and Detroit Lions (who offered him \$200 a game).

Some may deride Ford's scholastic experience at Michigan as unremarkable in terms of his grades, but Ford was never a bookworm intellectual. His greatest quality was that his grades were coupled with a magnetism that drew others around him. He had an essential combination of likability and leadership that marked him apart from his peers. Ford was that rarest of popular students: scholastically adept, socially popular, and athletically talented. When Ford was elevated to Michigan Hall of Fame in the 1935 yearbook, his frat brothers said he was chosen for such an honor because:

“...the football team chose him as their most valuable player; because he was a good student and got better grades than almost anyone else on the squad; because he put the DKE house back on a paying basis; because he

¹¹⁴Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 9.

never smokes, drinks, swears, or tells dirty stories...and because he's not a bit fraudulent and we can't find anything really nasty to say about him."¹¹⁵

He was, if not an exceptional student, an exceptional *person*. He knew that as much as he may admire his stepfather, that man's values and the values Ford held himself meant that a young man as talented as Ford was could not spend his life filling paint cans, or even playing football. He looked out at the world and saw where he belonged: in law.

It was one of the most fateful decisions of Ford's life, and he made it not because he thought that there would be an opportunity to make money, even though there would be. He did not do it in order to raise his stature in society, though that could happen through law. Ford wanted to be a lawyer because he believed that lawyers could, and should, be the inherent peacemakers in society. Lawyers could heal wounds, not open them. Ford remembers taking heart to Abraham Lincoln's quote "It is as a peacemaker that the lawyer has a superior opportunity."¹¹⁶ He felt that a profession in law was exactly the place where a man of his moral code belonged.

But, once again, he faced the hurdle of financing his way into higher education. He was one thousand dollars in debt to various benefactors, and returning to Grand Rapids to stock his father's paint business would take him further away from his goal. As before, athletics came to the rescue. Ford decided that he would coach at an institution with a law school, and hope that the coaching salary and service to that school would be enough to get his foot in the door.

Ford tried to stay on as a coach at Michigan, but discovered that there simply would not be enough money to keep him around. However, the head coach at Michigan

¹¹⁵ DKE Yearbook quote for Ford, quoted from Cannon, 21.

¹¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, as quoted in Ford, 54.

did know the football coach at Yale, a man named Ducky Pond. It so happened that Pond was looking for an assistant line coach for the Yale football team *and* someone to coach the freshman boxing team. After a brief interview, Ford was invited to New Haven to visit the Yale campus. At the end of the second day Coach Pond offered Ford \$2,400 a year to be the line coach and freshman boxing coach. It is a sign of Ford's trustworthiness that Pond believed Ford when he said that he'd take boxing lessons when he returned to Grand Rapids for the summer of 1935. On the last day of his visit he mentioned to Pond his desire to attend law school, and wondered if Pond would have a problem with Ford trying to gain entry to Yale Law. Pond was skeptical at best. The coaching would be a full-time job during the academic year, and Ford would have little free time as it was, let alone with the prodigious workload of Yale Law thrust upon him. Nevertheless, Pond promised to relay Ford's desire to the school's deans (who promptly shot down the idea).

Again, Ford's first instinct was not to beg and plead his way in, perhaps trying to finagle some influential contacts. The only solution available to him, as he saw it, was to work his way into the system. And it would be no easy task, for as exclusive as Yale Law graduates like to think the school is today, it was far more exclusive in Ford's time; reserved primarily for the rich and well-connected. Yet Ford remained undeterred. He was confident that a path into Yale Law would present itself eventually.

As a coach for the Yale squad Ford was praised both by other coaches, who admired his maturity and knowledge, and by the players he coached, who appreciated his fairness and diligence. Robert Taft and William Proxmire, both of whom eventually

reached the U.S. Senate, were just two of Ford's many admirers.¹¹⁷ Ford honored every commitment to the teams he coached, but he remained fixated on getting into law school. Unfortunately, as the summer of 1936 approached, Ford was again rebuffed by the admissions committee.

That summer, Ford travelled west to work at Yellowstone National Park as a seasonal park ranger. On the way there he visited with Leslie King for another strained meeting. King's father had by now passed away, and he had drawn a fine inheritance from the elder King's estate. At the end of the summer Ford returned for a couple of weeks to Grand Rapids, as invigorated as ever by the prospect of Yale Law School, but as far away from achieving that goal as he ever was.

Hearing of her son's ambitions, and of her first husband's affluence, finally loosed the bitterness that had been welling inside Dorothy for two decades. She asked Ford if he knew a lawyer who could help, and Ford recommended a Michigan friend of his who had been in his fraternity. Dorothy brought a suit against King in an attempt to recoup payments that were owed to her. After a lengthy and strenuous legal process, it was decreed that King owed Dorothy (and Ford by extension) over \$6,000. King refused to pay, even after the lawyers negotiated the sum to \$4,000. In retaliation Dorothy contacted King's local sheriff, and King was jailed for a night for refusing to obey a court order. And yet King still refused to give in, eventually visiting Ford in New Haven and pleading for mercy. But Ford was unmoved. He did not care about the money, but viewed it as a just punishment for King's treatment of Dorothy. Finally, King's resolve broke, and he paid the \$4,000 settlement. It was the last time that Ford ever saw his biological father.

¹¹⁷ Cannon, 23.

Through this entire episode Ford never wavered in his coaching duties, nor did he falter in his quest to make it into Yale Law. In the summer of 1937 he took two law classes at Michigan to whet his appetite, earning Bs in both classes. When he returned to Yale in the fall Ford's pay was increased to \$3,600 a year, but he also took on scouting duties, some administrative work in the athletic department, and received a promotion to head coach of the varsity team. After speaking to one of the law professors who suggested he could be admitted on a trial basis if he gave up some of his coaching duties, Ford decided to keep both parties in the dark as to the full extent of his academic and coaching duties in order to begin his studies on a trial basis.

That fall Ford took two law courses at Yale while maintaining his full coaching duties. In a true testament to the kind of person he was, Ford worked harder than he ever had before and managed to get Bs in both classes. It was standard Ford: hard working, busy, and respectable (Ford would never be a valedictorian, but how much better could anyone do in his position?). Thus convinced of his potential and dedication, the board of admissions allowed Ford to enter classes full-time.

Ford's actual academic career at Yale, much like at Michigan, is unremarkable in terms of his grades, but very important in terms of context. A law degree from Yale was even more impressive back then than it is today, and Ford's graduating class was one of the most illustrious in Yale's history. Two Supreme Court justices, two future governors of Pennsylvania, a U.S. Secretary of State, one U.S. senator, and Sargent Shriver, who would become the first director of the Peace Corps.¹¹⁸ And yet, if a person in 1941 had to

¹¹⁸ Miller Center of Public Affairs – University of Virginia (online), “Gerald Rudolph Ford”, <http://millercenter.org/president/ford/essays/biography/2>, accessed 3/21/2011.

pick who among them would one day become president, it is doubtful that anyone would have wagered money on Gerald Ford.

This is just another example of what exactly it was that constituted Gerald Ford. It was not pedigree or finances; it was nothing that could be put down on paper, measured and recorded to be analyzed. Ford's greatest attributes were always the intangibles. Ford's peers never had any recollection of him scheming behind a rival's back or conspiring against another classmate, even when competing for girls. It was his work ethic, trustworthiness, honor, and dedication to a goal that got him through his six years spent on the East Coast. He could have stayed there if he had wanted to. His Yale degree garnered serious job offers from several New York firms. But his heart was still in the Midwest.

Ford returned to Grand Rapids in 1941 with the goal of opening a law office and slowly building a network of companions that would help him with his long-term goals. Late in his time on the East Coast Ford had become involved in the Wilkie campaign for president. Wilkie ultimately lost, but Ford had discovered that he genuinely liked politics and politicking. He did not yet know how he was going to make it to public office, but he was determined to wind up there eventually. In the immediate however, he needed to find an office in Grand Rapids where he could set up his practice.

One of Ford's fraternity brothers from Michigan, Phil Buchen, shared Ford's ambition and impatience. As soon as both men had passed the bar exam they opened their own law office: Ford & Buchen. Their practice took any case that walked in the door, and if they dreamed of quickly rising to the top of the Michigan law scene, their illusions were quickly scattered. But the two of them loved the work, and business was

steadily increasing by late 1941. Then, like so many other young men, Ford's life was changed forever.

Until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 Ford was a typical Midwestern isolationist, determined to be left alone by the world beyond our nation's borders. After the attack, Ford joined a long list of Americans who took it upon themselves to risk their lives in the fight against totalitarianism. In early 1942 he joined the Navy, and was commissioned a lieutenant. Because of his past coaching activities the Navy originally assigned him to Annapolis and Chapel Hill as a physical fitness instructor.

Although in the past Ford had only sparingly sought to have his connections pull strings for him, when he became aware of his assignments as a fitness instructor he used every possible contact to get him reassigned to ship duty. Like all young men who believe themselves invincible, Ford desperately wanted to be where the action was.

Eventually the Navy chose to reassign Ford after reviewing his file. Looking at Ford's Naval Officer candidate file it is clear that the Navy realized that Ford was too exemplary to spend the war training cadets back home when he could be leading them at the front. One excerpt from a testimony in his file reads:

“He took well (at Yale) and fulfilled his responsibilities, financial and otherwise, without criticism. I found him reliable, trustworthy, and intelligent...I am also convinced that he is thoroughly patriotic...Furthermore, he has no bad habits; does not drink to excess and he is no philanderer.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Quote from text of Officer Candidate Application for Gerald Ford, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/usnavy/navy.asp>, accessed 2/11/11.

And also:

“Subject is honest, discreet, loyal, one hundred per cent in all respects, and is eminently desirable for the Navy.”¹²⁰

Ford was reassigned to duty aboard the *U.S.S. Monterey*, a cruiser that had been converted into an aircraft carrier. The *Monterey* saw action in the Pacific theatre, where it participated in the Marianas Turkey Shoot. But if Ford thought that he had seen the end of the action, he was sorely mistaken.

On one mission in October 1944 the *Monterey*'s planes set off to strike Taiwan. After a successful mission, the planes returned and were secured belowdecks. Just as the final planes were being stowed away, the Japanese struck a retaliatory blow against the fleet. The *Monterey* barely escaped damage, but two of the fleet's cruisers were severely damaged and had to be towed by other ships. The next day, still only eighty miles from Taiwan, the Japanese struck again. The attacks lasted all through the day, until the sun had set. And yet the sailors of the fleet hardly had time to catch their breath before they were beset upon by an even more deadly foe: the weather.

A major typhoon engulfed the fleet. The two damaged cruisers were finally lost, and multiple destroyers simply capsized and sank, along with a great many of their sailors. Ford himself nearly perished trying to cross the *Monterey*'s deck, and only through incredible luck and his natural athleticism was he able to narrowly avoid being tossed overboard by the pitching deck.¹²¹ No sooner had Ford reached the relative safety of his quarters than he was awoken by an alarm as equally dreaded as a battle siren: the fire alarm. The seas had caused one of the planes to break loose from its moorings, and

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel – A Member of Penguin Group, 2011), 163-164.

the resulting commotion had started a fire that in addition to damaging the ship was sending smoke through the ship's air vents. Three of *Monterey's* four boilers failed because the crew had to abandon them or suffer death by asphyxiation. If the last boiler failed, water pressure in the fire hoses would be lost and the ship would be at the complete mercy of the sea. Admiral Halsey, commander of the fleet, ordered all ships to stand by and make ready to receive *Monterey's* sailors when they would eventually be forced to abandon ship (an almost suicidal proposition given the rough seas). Miraculously, however, the captain of the *Monterey* managed to guide the ship enough so that her brave crew stood a chance of extinguishing the blaze and get the boilers operating again. When the typhoon eventually abated, the *Monterey* was completely unfit for service, and limped into Saipan for repairs. For Ford, the war was over. He was flown back home to commence with further training, but the Japanese surrendered before he could return to action.

The War changed Ford in ways that no peacetime experience ever could. He received glowing reports from his superior officers, which combined with his skills as a leader is what allowed Ford to quickly ascend the ranks (he retired as a Lieutenant Commander). He kept his wits about him during the absolute worst of times, when it was so important to the men around him that he remain steady in the face of danger. His courage was tested and found strong. It may have taken guts to lead a squad of championship-caliber football players, or to coach another team of players who were of a social strata far above Ford's; but to have the trust and confidence of young men when their lives are threatened is a true mark of leadership. Whatever trace of the boy that was left in Ford before the War, he was a man by the end of it.

Ideologically, Ford's belief in his core values was reinforced by America's greatest triumph...with one exception. Upon returning from overseas Ford came to believe that the United States could never again isolate itself from the world. He believed that the country had fully matured and now had a responsibility to lead the world to the wealth and freedom that its citizens enjoyed. And although the United States had just simultaneously defeated two of the most powerful dictatorships in the history of civilization, the threat of another totalitarian regime left little time for petty debate over whether or not to spend American money to repair Europe. Said Ford "I felt...that a strong America would need strong allies...we simply *had* to provide the money, muscle, and manpower to help the Western European nations rebuild their shattered economies."¹²²

World War Two had also changed Grand Rapids. The furniture industry was still strong, but other industries had moved in during the war years. General Motors opened a manufacturing plant in Grand Rapids along with other auto-parts manufacturers. Labor unions were beginning to emerge as the city's economy became larger and more diversified. Grand Rapids had also seen a large influx of blacks during the war, and the old, Dutch political grip was starting to weaken. It was the outset of a new era for Grand Rapids, and there was a young man who was preparing to capture the city's trust.

Phil Buchen, Ford's pre-war business partner, had moved on to another firm, and Ford inquired as to whether there was an opening. Although the firm's managers could not promise a partnership right away, they assured him that it would happen eventually. Ford was back in stride as a lawyer, but it was all but a cover for his real plan: running for office.

¹²² Gerald Ford, as quoted in Ford, 61.

Jerry and Dorothy had been involved in many community service organizations, and had instilled in their children an ideal that community service was of great importance in life. Gerald Ford had already accepted such a commitment, but once he had his mind set on running for office he became a part of just about every civic organization possible. He helped with cancer drives and fundraisers; he was a Mason and an American Legionnaire; he even joined the local chapters of the NAACP and Urban League.¹²³ He was getting his name out among the Grand Rapids grassroots, and subtly forming a network of people who would gladly return the favor in Ford's hour of need. Ford was not being selfish, but he must have contemplated the political benefits of his community involvement.

Ford was a Republican by birth and culture. The Republican Party was long established in Grand Rapids politics, and for a candidate to win the Republican primary was equal to winning the seat. This one-party dominance had led to corruption however, and by the time Ford decided to run for Congress in the 1948 election the old party hacks were beginning to feel a revolt stirring in the ranks beneath them. Whereas Harry Truman sought to align himself with a political machine, Ford's goal was to tear one down. For when Ford decided to run for Congress, he was challenging one of the most powerful men in Michigan politics.

Ford's decision to run for office as a candidate from outside the machine of Grand Rapids politics was not something to be taken lightly. Beyond having a genuine desire to serve the public Ford also had to have some bravado. The machine he was challenging was under the sway of Frank McKay, and had earned a reputation not just for corruption, but for retribution.

¹²³Schapsmeier, 24-25.

McKay himself had his hand in just about every kind of business a person could be involved in. As the preeminent Republican Party boss in the Grand Rapids region, a region that would not see a semblance of the Democratic Party until the late 1950's, McKay dominated the political process on every level. He secured contracts with the state government, managed real estate, and even sold tires to various local government entities.¹²⁴ He was also a banker, financier, and insurance broker. Though his power was starting to wane by the time Gerald Ford decided to challenge the machine's power, McKay was still a formidable and entrenched opponent.

There were rumors to the effect that McKay and his supporters could also be deadly opponents. The evidence to those rumors stemmed from an investigation of illegal lobbying activities in the state's legislature. During World War Two a state legislator named William Stenson alleged that banking lobbyists had tried to bribe him. Michigan's laws at the time were set up in such a way that any legislation concerning the banking industry needed a two-thirds vote in the state House and state Senate in order to pass. Acting on Stenson's suspicions, a Detroit-based good government group delved through some proposed legislation and found it rife with questionable bills being put before the legislature, including bills to increase small-loan profitability, introduce branch banking, and even finance horse track construction along with a bill to legalize dog racing.

As public furor mounted, a grand jury investigation was launched to determine if there was enough evidence to confirm criminal activity. This is when events started to spiral downhill. An official of a trucking company under investigation was killed when a

¹²⁴Vestal, 79-80.

train hit his car. State Senator Earl Munshaw (of Grand Rapids) was found dead of an apparent suicide two days after testifying to the grand jury. A short time after Munshaw's death State Senator Warren Hooper testified before the grand jury, and allegedly gave testimony condemning McKay. Two days later, as he drove home from the capitol, he was gunned down along a back road and his car was set ablaze. The investigation into the murder included McKay, but found no clear proof that he had conspired to kill Warren Hooper. Certainly there were other powerful entities that were interested in the banking legislation, but the public came to believe that McKay was capable of ordering such an act.

This was the nature of the beast that Ford was attempting to overcome. It was not a decision to be taken lightly by a young man with a lot of potential and his whole life ahead of him. But Ford had reason to be confident. He was young and gregarious. He had the support of a core group of friends and assistants that could be counted on to put in the hard work that a campaign requires. He had faced the rigors of Yale Law School and returned from the east coast with his ideals intact. He survived the Second World War and returned to Grand Rapids to continue his service to those ideals. If Ford was intimidated by the McKay machine, he never showed it.

But Ford also had another reason to think twice before deciding to run. In late 1947 he had begun seeing a (very) recently divorced woman named Betty Bloomer. Although the two of them tried not to jump into anything (Ford's career was taking off; Betty had been through a troubled marriage) they each began to feel irrevocably pulled toward the other. If Ford remained a lawyer he could have a nice, settled, and affluent life with a wonderful woman. It is a sign of Ford's commitment to public service that he

chose to continue his with political ambitions and challenge Frank McKay's lackey in Congress – Barney Jonkman. At that time Ford had been advised to keep his candidacy as much a secret as possible, which included keeping Betty out of the loop. The only hint Ford gave her was in February 1948, when Ford told Betty “I would like to marry you, but we can't get married until next fall and I can't tell you why.”¹²⁵ Ultimately the purpose for Ford's circumspection became clear, and in order to project a good image (and to declare his intentions to the love of his life) he and Betty announced their engagement in mid-1948.¹²⁶

As Ford quietly built a grassroots organization to make a run at the September 1948 nomination, Jonkman and McKay assumed that they were safe. Even when Ford declared his candidacy, on the last possible day to do so (for maximum surprise), McKay thought nothing of this thirty-four year-old political upstart. That is, until the Ford campaign set up their office within sight of Frank McKay's window. When McKay tried to intimidate them and force them off the property, he was shocked to find that Ford not only refused to retreat, but would welcome a public confrontation with the McKay machine. McKay wisely chose to back down rather than give Ford free publicity. After all, there was no way Jonkman could lose; Congress would soon be out of session and Jonkman would be shoring-up his support back home.

Then, roughly two months before the election, Ford received aid from an unlikely source: Harry Truman. Truman had decided to call Congress back into session, which allowed Ford to get an uncontested head start on his campaign. Jonkman had developed a reputation for laziness and complacency, and so the Ford team chose as their slogan:

¹²⁵ Gerald Ford, as quoted in Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 54.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

*Gerald Ford – to Work for You in Congress.*¹²⁷ To emphasize Ford’s tenacity and work ethic he drove through every neighborhood and to every farm in his district. He wore a suit and loafers, but was not afraid to get them dirty if it meant securing a few votes.

When Jonkman finally returned to Grand Rapids a few weeks before the election he found himself in an unexpected fight. Ford repeatedly challenged Jonkman to debates, but Jonkman refused each time, which in turn allowed Ford to assert that Jonkman believed he was entitled to that seat. Foreign policy was the dominant issue of the day (with the Chinese Civil War and the Marshall Plan splayed on the front pages of the newspapers). Jonkman was a firm isolationist, which provided Ford an opportunity to be a sharp contrast to his opponent.¹²⁸ When *The Grand Rapids Press* endorsed Ford ten days before the election Jonkman flew into a rage and publicly criticized the *Press*, violating one of the most important rules in politics: don’t start fights with the media. Every day leading up to the primary *The Grand Rapids Press* published enthusiastic reports of Ford.

Primary day was September 14, 1948. Ford had done everything he could to win the election. He controlled every element he could, from the timing of his announcement, to his message, and his tenacity on the campaign trail. He had kept Jonkman off-balance the entire race, which put Jonkman in the awkward position of constantly playing catch-up to a rookie challenger. When the votes were tallied on that September day Ford had won 22,632 votes, to Jonkman’s 14,341.¹²⁹ It was his first electoral victory, and he managed not just to win, but to crush a five-term incumbent who

¹²⁷ Google Image Search: “gerald ford to work for you in congress”, resulting image obtained from: <http://www.boerner.net/jboerner/?p=13816>, accessed 2/10/11.

¹²⁸ Mieczkowski, 9.

¹²⁹ Our Campaigns (online), Search: “Gerald Ford MI 5th district”, <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=148439>, accessed 2/10/11.

had the full backing of the McKay machine. As he put it “Nobody thought I could win, but I ended up winning two-to-one.”¹³⁰ Ford would not lose another election until 1976.

Gerald Ford had risen from a troubled home of despair to one of the highest public offices that Grand Rapids could offer. Although he would steadily climb the ranks in the House of Representatives, he would not hold a different job for over twenty-five years, until the trusted son of Grand Rapids would become a national figure. His family, hometown, and athleticism all contributed to the man he eventually became. Although Ford spent most of his adult life in Washington, D.C. his ideals and morals were the same as they always were during his younger days in Grand Rapids.

As has been asserted throughout this chapter, Ford did not allow changing circumstances and settings to affect his core values. Though his political views may have changed from time to time, those views were almost transient compared to the moral code he lived by. He never doubted that hard work and friendliness would always pay more dividends than any amount of conniving duplicity. Any who doubted his code were left behind, and when the citizens of the United States were most in need of a trusted figure, when the shadowy schemers had been exposed and dethroned, there was only one man in Washington they could turn to.

¹³⁰ Gerald Ford, as quoted in Philip Kunhardt, Jr., Philip Kunhardt III, Peter Kunhardt, *The American President* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999), 79.

Some Final Points

Looking at the early lives of these three men, it is of course possible to find similarities. One apparent similarity is that each man was heavily influenced by his mother. Were it not for Harry Truman's mother, young Harry may have aspired to be a mule trader like his father. It was Harry's mother who instilled in him, early on, that a world beyond the farm existed in the pages of books and the notes of music. These bookish pursuits fueled Harry's desire to become a part of the world that existed beyond the farm.

Lyndon Johnson, of course, had the most complicated maternal relationship of all three of these presidents. The relationship between Rebekah and Lyndon was mutually obsessive; by that, I mean to say that each person was consumed with the life of the other. I do not believe that 'mutually obsessed' (or, 'obsessive') is a standard psychological term, but I think it sums up the relationship nicely.

Of these three men, I think Gerald Ford's parents least affected the way their child developed into an adult. I think that Ford, far more than Truman and Johnson, had other adult role models as a youth, and so he was able to absorb multiple viewpoints and form his own moral code. That said, he and his mother shared a history that was darker than anything Truman and Johnson had to endure. Though Ford has no memory of his infancy, his very life was in daily peril as a result of Leslie King's excessive temper and violent outbursts. It was a history that only he and Dorothy shared; something that marked them apart even in their own household.

This is not to say that their fathers lacked any influence on these men. John Truman and Sam Johnson were often openly hostile toward their children, and it left a mark. Johnson in particular never regained the respect he once held for his father after

the family's financial security crumbled. Gerald Ford's two fathers as well each contributed to the person Ford became. But I think the evidence is clear that the mothers were the parents who had the most influence on these three men.

And yet, in every parent-child relationship, a mother and father will inevitably have an effect on the child's maturation to adulthood, but not all children become politicians and presidents. These men developed, quite independently, an inner drive that propelled them to the circles of power. Therefore, I think it is more important, and encouraging, to look at the differences between these three men.

The obvious difference is geography. There is little that Independence, Johnson City, and Grand Rapids all have in common, beyond being the hometowns of presidents. Each man was indelibly marked by his hometown culture, but each also, in a way, outgrew the narrow confines of their hometowns. Lyndon Johnson, the champion of federal welfare, obviously had a ideological scope beyond what could ever be realized in a town of four-hundred residents. Gerald Ford, though raised in the most cosmopolitan setting of these three men, also knew from very early on that he would have to leave Grand Rapids in order to realize his goals in the legal profession. And Harry Truman, a Missouri farmer, was the man responsible for saving the Western world, according to Winston Churchill.

I feel, ultimately, that what my research has shown is that each man, when given the opportunity to act independently, found his own way to succeed in a way that other people do not. Some people are not meant to be out on their own in the world, but each of these three men, when given the chance, was able to prosper when brought out from under the bubble of his hometown. Granted, Gerald Ford's athletic career forced him to

excel without adult supervision long before he left for the East Coast. With Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson there was no way of knowing if they would be able to succeed once they departed their homestead.

Yet when Harry moved to Kansas City he flourished. He managed to find work that did not entail manual labor, which was a huge improvement from working with his father on the farm. He made friends and found his way in the bustling world of Kansas City. Later, when he once again journeyed away from the farm, a man with no history of leadership or any military experience managed to become the successful leader of an artillery battery, and was respected by the roughest, meanest men in the outfit. As I asserted in that chapter, this was due to Truman's innate determination to prove not to others, but to himself that he could be more than just a farmer.

As for Lyndon Johnson, even the catastrophic California excursion proved that he was capable of finding his own way. Had his cousin, the lawyer, been a little more helpful, Lyndon could have climbed the ladder in the legal profession. Though he stagnated upon returning home, once he began his studies at San Marcos he became the marshal behind the effort to overthrow the establishment powers on campus. Finally, once he arrived in Washington, he managed to impress and befriend none other than Sam Rayburn. How many other 'mama's boys' can do that?

Their success as independent young men is what later gave them the confidence to succeed as politicians. I chose the experiences that I felt were essential to explain in order to provide evidence of the traits that led these men to success. Even if the trait was what some feel to be negative, as in the case of Johnson's need for attention, I still included it because I felt it played a role in that person's political success.

Having read and re-read this completed work dozens of times, the final point I'd like to make here is the one that I always notice with every reading: that no one in our political system can ever be counted-out. There are ways for anyone with the work ethic and determination to achieve their goals. Every person has certain traits and characteristics that cannot be lost with an election for failed business. We have but to keep trying and keep fighting, and eventually we will find what fulfillment we seek.

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