

# HBO's *All the Way*: Lyndon B. Johnson and the civil rights movement

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HBO's *All the Way*—directed by Jay Roach (*Trumbo*)—is an adaptation by Robert Schenkkan of the first of his two plays devoted to Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency. It spans Johnson's first year in office, from November 1963—following the assassination of John F. Kennedy—to November 1964. (Schenkkan's *The Great Society* covers November 1964 to March 1968, when Johnson suddenly announced he would not run for re-election in the face of Vietnamese resistance to the American military and growing opposition in the US to the brutal conflict.)

Happily, *All the Way*, like the recently aired *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson*, eschews contemporary identity politics. Its depiction of Johnson's campaign on behalf of his proposed “War on Poverty” plus several outstanding performances combine to create an unusually successful attempt to present American history, or a slice of it, in an authentic manner.

At the same time, several of the HBO drama's characterizations are lacking, as are its presentations of the arguments made before Congress during the civil rights bill filibuster and the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

Following Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, now President Lyndon Johnson (Bryan Cranston) and his wife, Lady Bird (Melissa Leo), return to Washington, DC. Although haunted by insecurities—born of both his hard-scrabble youth and the Kennedy administration's (especially Robert Kennedy's) animosity toward him—Johnson's first act as president is to deliver a speech to the House of Representatives in which he urges passage of Kennedy's civil rights bill.

Johnson's urgings meet resistance from both liberals and conservatives in Congress, resulting in a lengthy filibuster in the Senate. There is also the initial opposition of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Anthony Mackie) to the elimination of voting rights from the bill.

The escalating Vietnam War contributes further to the newly installed president's fears regarding the possibility of re-election in 1964. Johnson furiously works both sides of the aisle in support of the civil rights measure. The president

also eventually wins King's support when he assures the latter that while voting rights will not be included in the present legislation, they will be part of his War on Poverty.

The eventual passage of the Civil Rights Act is followed swiftly by Johnson's landslide victory over right-wing Republican Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election. However, Johnson fears this triumph may be a pyrrhic one because the passage of the civil rights bill could well guarantee the Democratic Party's loss of the South to the Republican Party for generations to come.

For many viewers, used to the right-wing discourse of present-day American politics, *All the Way*'s portrayal of Johnson's impassioned arguments for his proposed War on Poverty may well come as a surprise. In his January 1964 State of the Union address, for example, Johnson declared, “This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.” He went on: “We have in 1964 a unique opportunity and obligation—to prove the success of our system ... If we fail ... then history will rightfully judge us harshly.”

In *All the Way*, instead of resorting to the identity and gender politics that have defined the Democratic Party for the past four decades, Johnson urges King to consider what such a bill will mean for poor children of all races. (In a later scene, Johnson recounts for the press corps his experiences teaching Mexican children in rural central-southern Texas in the late 1920s and how desperate they were to learn.)

The willingness of the American ruling elite, with whatever pulling and pushing were necessary to enact the civil rights bill and contemplate a War on Poverty, was made possible by the continued dominance of US capitalism on a world scale. As late as 1964, the US still controlled 40 percent of the globe's industrial output. The Johnson administration's measures represented the last gasp of American social reformism.

And they came, in the end, to very little. As the WSWWS explained in January 2014 on the 50th anniversary of Johnson's State of the Union, “The War on Poverty never came close to eradicating poverty and hunger. It failed

because it could not touch the foundations of class rule within the US or abroad. Relative to the wealth of the US ... only a paltry amount of resources were tapped into, while Johnson's program included tax cuts for the rich. Far greater resources were directed to the American war machine [in Vietnam and elsewhere]." Today, the civil rights legislation itself is in the process of being eviscerated.

To Schenkkan's credit, LBJ—a savvy, cynical bourgeois politician—is far from heroic or one-dimensional in *All the Way*. His use of a crude, sexist anecdote to “close the deal” with King is but one of many instances in the HBO film when Johnson resorts to vulgarity or worse to win support. Not only does Cranston's Johnson prove capable of moving smoothly from heart-touching anecdotes to ribaldry in the same breath, he does so in a way that seems well-rehearsed and well-practiced.

Frank Langella turns in a mature performance as Georgia Democratic Senator Richard (Dick) Russell. The 66-year-old Russell is torn between maintaining his decades-long opposition to civil rights (based on a belief in “states rights” and the values of the “old [Jim Crow] South”) and preserving his father-figure/mentor relationship with Johnson, who called Russell “Uncle Dick.” The Georgia Senator's opposition to civil rights won out. After Johnson signed the legislation in early July 1964, Russell, along with a group of other southern Senators, boycotted that year's Democratic National Convention.

Leo's Lady Bird can be both supportive and critical of her husband's decisions and behavior, which is largely how history has recorded her role as wife and First Lady.

The television drama honestly portrays Johnson's well-documented ability to use people whom he obviously could not stomach. He cajoles both United Automobile Workers (UAW) leader Walter Reuther (Spencer Garrett) and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover (Stephen Root) into doing whatever is necessary to make King support the civil rights bill.

Each evinces a certain cold-hearted pleasure in carrying out Johnson's orders. This is especially true of Root's Hoover. He not only tapes King's extramarital affair, but sends the incriminating evidence to King, along with a letter dictated in a state of near delirium demanding that the civil rights leader kill himself for his immorality.

Several reviewers have praised *All the Way* for giving us a more historically accurate, flawed Martin Luther King, and the inclusion of the extra-marital affair, and King's willingness to compromise his principles when necessary, suggest this praise has been earned. Grasping King socially and historically, however, is more important than weighing up the pros and cons of his personality. He was a pacifist, not a socialist or a revolutionary, and he never broke with the two-party system. Nonetheless, his courageous

opposition to social inequality and the imperialist war in Vietnam brought him into conflict with the American powers that be.

Anthony Mackie's interpretation of King lacks the passion that one recalls from his speeches and encounters with the press. Perhaps King did put his more passionate side aside when he negotiated and held meetings behind closed doors with top officials, but this reviewer finds that hard to believe.

The characterization of Hubert H. Humphrey is also limited. Bradley Whitford's portrayal of the vice president and former Senator from Minnesota as little more than an errand boy for Johnson is accurate as far as it goes. But there are moments in *All the Way*, such as the scene in which the president informs Humphrey they now have enough votes in Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act, when one anticipates the appearance of the almost boyish excitement that the real Humphrey could display on occasion, but that's not the case here.

Other, minor problems include the brief amount of time devoted to the arguments presented in Congress for and against the Civil Rights Act, and the even briefer time spent portraying the 1964 Democratic National Convention (and the lazy use of only archival footage at that).

Nonetheless, *All the Way* deserves praise for authentically pointing to some of the larger issues involved in Johnson's first year in office. One hopes that HBO's airing of this drama, along with the positive critical response to *American Crime Story: The People vs. O.J. Simpson*, will encourage similar efforts from other networks and artists.



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