

Politics or Principle: Why Did L.B.J. Sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

Lyndon Johnson was born in 1908 on a farm near Stonewall in the Hill Country of central Texas. It was a long way from the White House. Despite the humble surroundings, Johnson was smart and had tons of energy. While still in college, at the age of 20, he took a job teaching fifth, sixth and seventh grade at a segregated Mexican-American school in Cotulla, Texas. After earning his teaching degree, he went to work at Sam Houston High School in Houston. Johnson poured himself into his teaching. A fellow teacher called him a “steam engine in pants.” In 1931, Johnson took this ambition and enthusiasm to Washington, D.C., where he worked as a congressional aide.

In 1937, Johnson won a Texas seat in the US House of Representatives, holding the position for 11 years. When World War II broke out, he enlisted in the United States Navy as a lieutenant commander, serving in the South Pacific until President Roosevelt recalled him to Washington.

In 1948, Texans elected Johnson to the first of two six-year terms in the United States Senate. He quickly became a star, though his workday left his aides exhausted. In fact, Johnson was said to have two work days – up at 6:00 A.M., work until early afternoon followed by a two-hour nap in his pajamas. Then it was up again at 4:00 P.M., a shower, a fresh change of clothes, and work until midnight or beyond. When Democrats took control of the Senate in 1954, Johnson became **majority leader**. In that role, he became one of the most effective, hard-working leaders ever to serve in the US Senate.

During his senate years, Johnson, like most Southerners, did not support federal **civil rights** laws. When President Harry Truman proposed laws against **lynching** and **poll taxes**, Johnson opposed them. The Texas senator believed it was

the job of the states, not the federal government, to deal with those issues. In 1957, Johnson did support a federal law on voting rights, but the final bill was so **watered-down** it had little effect.

Johnson’s next step in his climb to political power was the vice-presidency. He’d wanted to be president, but in 1960 lost the Democratic Party’s nomination to John F. Kennedy. With one eye on Texas electoral votes, Kennedy chose

Johnson as his running mate. Three years later, Kennedy was killed. Through this tragic twist of fate, Johnson got what he wanted: he was suddenly President of the United States.

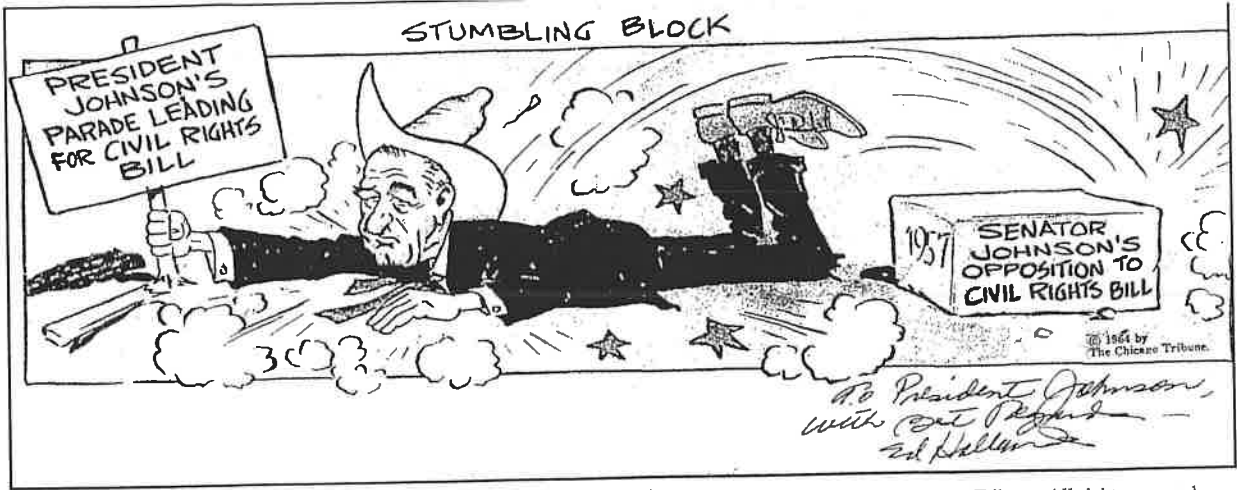
When Kennedy died, a meaningful civil-rights bill was struggling to get through Congress. Martin Luther King’s 1963 March on Washington and



the Kennedy promise of equality for all were fresh on America’s mind. But the bill was not a sure thing until Johnson stood behind it, despite the opposition of fellow Southerners, notably Senator Richard Russell of Georgia (shown in photo). Johnson’s efforts paid off. On July 2, 1964, he signed the Civil Rights Act into law. The bill expanded voting rights, strengthened equal employment opportunity, and guaranteed all Americans the right to use public facilities such as schools, restaurants and swimming pools. It was a big moment in history.

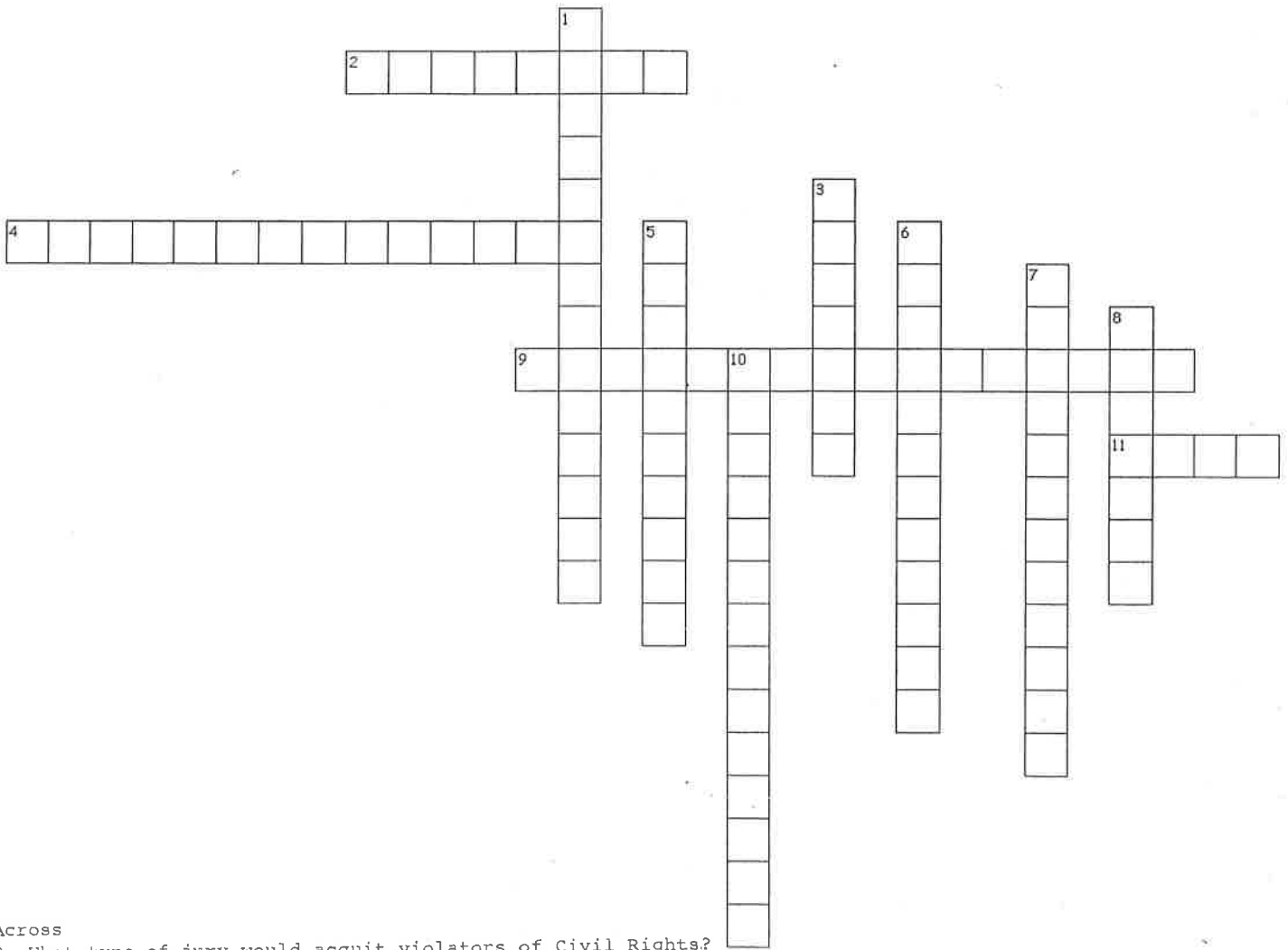
But what drove Johnson to push so hard for civil rights? The 1964 presidential election was just around the corner, and Johnson wanted to be re-elected. Was political ambition his motivating force, or was there something more? ~~Your task is to examine the five documents that follow and answer the question: *Politics or Principle: Why did Lyndon B. Johnson sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964?*~~

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Note: As Senate Majority leader, Lyndon Johnson did not directly oppose the 1957 civil rights bill. However, he did help push through a provision saying that anyone accused of violating the act would get a jury trial. This made it likely that any defendant in the South would be tried by an all-white jury and acquitted [let go]. Note also the playful inscription to Johnson by cartoonist Ed Holland.



Across

- 2. What type of jury would acquit violators of Civil Rights?
- 4. What was Johnson's title in the Senate?
- 9. The Civil Rights Act guaranteed all Americans the right to use _____.
- 11. Which branch of the military did he serve in?

Down

- 1. Who opposed the Civil Rights Bill (full name).
- 3. Who was the artist of the cartoon?
- 5. What was the motivation for Johnson to push for Civil Rights?
- 6. What kind of law did Johnson support in 1957?
- 7. Where did Johnson first teach?
- 8. Who was the 1960 Democratic Presidential nominee?
- 10. Where did the political cartoon appear?