

Did LBJ Say, 'I'll have those n*ggers voting Democratic for 200 years'?

For reasons that are obvious, at a recent editorial meeting topic of conversation swung toward some of the most shocking things ever said by U.S. presidents. Of course Lyndon Baines Johnson's name quickly popped up.

LBJ, a beer-swilling, blunt-speaking Texan, didn't shy from using what today we refer to as The N Word. One sentence often attributed to LBJ, which has gained great fame on the internet, is this: "I'll have those n*ggers voting Democratic for 200 years."

The line is often trotted out to allege that the civil rights legislation LBJ pushed and ultimately signed was motivated not by altruism but a cynical ploy to lock up votes.

Did LBJ really say that, someone asked at our meeting?

I said I believed the source of the quote was historian Doris Kearn Goodwin's biography of LBJ, [Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream](#), and that she was a pretty credible source (despite the [plagiarism charges](#)).

The source was not Goodwin, however. I had confused that LBJ quote with this one:

These Negroes, they're getting pretty uppity these days and that's a problem for us since they've got something now they never had before, the political pull to back up their uppityness. Now we've got to do something about this, we've got to give them a little something, just enough to quiet them down, not enough to make a difference.

This quote appears on page 155 of Goodwin's [LBJ biography](#). The utterance was made to Richard Russell, a fellow Democratic Senator from Georgia.

The source of the "200 years" quote is Ronald Kessler's 1995 book [Inside the White House](#). Kessler got the quote from Robert MacMillan, an Air Force One steward who said LBJ uttered this comment to two governors during a conversation on the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Snopes, a fact-checking website, [states](#) "there's little evidence to back up" the quote.

It's a strange claim since Snopes admits the quote "wouldn't have been entirely out of character for LBJ" and other sources corroborated many of the other "juicy tidbits" MacMillan gave Kessler (such as LBJ's penchant for walking around nude in the presence of others).

So why doubt the quote's authenticity?

Snopes brings into question MacMillan's veracity, noting that "Luci Baines Johnson flatly denied MacMillan's claim that when she was a teenager she once screamed at him to go 'Find my n*gger' (i.e., her servant) and threatened to slap him if he didn't."

It must not have occurred to Snopes that many people would "flatly deny" such a claim. The fact-checking outfit, which has a notable [left-leaning tilt](#), seems primarily concerned with defending the idea that LBJ's action on civil rights was anything but "genuine idealism." They ignore or overlook the following facts to reach this conclusion:

1. Kessler's source is historically sound (a firsthand account from an eyewitness).
2. LBJ's paternal and racist rhetoric toward African Americans (his fondness for the use of the word "n*gger" [is well documented](#)) casts some doubt on the idea that

his motivations on civil rights were altruistic.

3. Luci Baines Johnson, who likely heard her father use racial epithets, would have motivation to deny any racist utterances she might have made.
4. Goodwin's quote confirms that LBJ possessed a well-honed political calculus on the issue of civil rights.
5. If LBJ said what MacMillan claimed, MacMillan's "editorializing" comments, which Snopes frowned upon, make sense. (MacMillan used the words "phony" and "ploy" to characterize LBJ's motivations on the Civil Rights Act of 1964.)
6. Numerous historians have LBJ on the record referring to the Civil Rights Act of 1957 as "the n*gger bill," a phrase that runs counter to altruism on civil rights.
7. One can imagine LBJ saying what MacMillan claims he said, especially if LBJ was trying to whip up support for his bill among reluctant Democrats.

We likely never will know for certain if LBJ said what MacMillan claims, but Snopes' case falls short of casting serious doubt on the testimony of an eyewitness account.