

Advancing POTUS, '60s Style

By Jeb Byrne

The Washington Post recently told us that there is a plethora of political books lately published, or in the works, about the current president and related subjects. Some prolific Big Name authors are among the many scribes scrambling for behind-the-scenes White House exclusives.

So what is the rationale at this time for a small book, by a little-known author, writing about a long-gone presidential campaign?

I've written such a book, entitled [*Out in Front: Preparing the Way for JFK and LBJ.*](#) The book is basically framed by the tragic assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the campaign in which Lyndon Baines Johnson was elected to the presidency on his own after serving out the remainder of JFK's first term.

When the publisher sent me my free allotment of books, I held one of them in my hands and was grateful. But then I said to myself, "Why did I write it?"

I came up with an answer in three parts.

I thought back to the 1930s, when the reigning technological device was the radio and families gathered in the living room on Sunday nights to be entertained by comedians. The actor who played a character named Baron Munchhausen popularized the expression, "Vas you dere, Sharlie?" to the point where it became a household phrase.

In the period and places I chose to write about, I was "dere." I was JFK's advance man in Forth Worth, Texas on the morning of the day that he would be assassinated in Dallas. I also served as a principal advance man for Lyndon Johnson in his 1964 campaign. Memories from these vantage points deserved to be shared.

This is particularly true because of all the falsehoods that were perpetrated about the president's Texas trip in the wake of the assassination. True, my involvement sheds no direct light on the most intense controversies about the assassination. But to the extent that it is an unvarnished account, and contributes to an overall understanding of what happened before and on November 22, it merits being noted down.

Then there was the matter of needed corrections. A case in point is [Theodore H. White's](#) 1964 edition of his *The Making of the President* series. White described LBJ's campaign teams but made nary a mention of the advance unit. [Rowland Evans](#) and [Robert Novak](#) in their otherwise excellent 1966 book, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power*, erred even more. They went so far as to claim that because of LBJ's idiosyncratic approach to scheduling, advance men "became superfluous" in the '64 campaign. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Here is some delayed news for journalists, historians, and other who care about such things: advance men were out in front of LBJ everywhere he campaigned in the two months before the election. And some teams were sitting at locations where he decided not to go after forerunners had been dispatched.

An inconsequential detail? Not if you knew the depth of the role played by the advance unit throughout the 1964 campaign. It turned fuzzy plans into reality, made things work. Presidential assistant [Bill D. Moyers](#) coached from the White House; [Wilson McCarthy](#) was a hands-on manager; and [Marty Underwood](#) and I were deputies to McCarthy. Later, [W. Marvin Watson](#), the president's confidant, became a strong presence in the advance operation as well as other presidential matters.

Was there a conflict of interest in the writing of this book? Only if you consider the genre of memoir a conflict of interest. This one was long delayed. LBJ's admonition to advance men to remain anonymous seems to have had lasting power.

The last reason for doing the book is to provide a fuller account of '60s-era politicking for students of elections. Every presidential campaign builds on the perceived lessons of its predecessors. And while many aspects of retail politicking are changing, that organic evolution is a constant. *Out in Front* tries to provide a better account of LBJ on the campaign trail than was available through the contemporary news media, which often overdid punditry at the expense of leg work—or perhaps I should say *because* of the expense and energy required for journalistic leg work.

The book's many vignettes from the campaign trail flesh out the record of a political era that helped shape the presidency of today.

Prior to becoming a presidential advance man, Jeb Byrne was a UPI reporter in Maine and political adviser to a Democratic governor. He subsequently became a career civil servant; his last position with the federal government was as director of the Federal Register.