

Campaign by Helicopter

In 1948, "All the Way with LBJ" meant scooting around Texas in a Bell 47D

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During his 1948 Senate campaign, Lyndon Johnson (hat raised) won voters with novelty—a new way to travel—and convention (posing for photos). (Jimmie A. Dodd Photograph Collection, e_jd_0061, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin)

Before the Iowa State Fair opened for business last August, presidential candidate Donald J. Trump announced that he would offer kids free helicopter rides directly from the fairgrounds. Officials said he wouldn't be launching from their property, but he was free to find another spot nearby, and he did, renting a lot a mile away and flying kids five at a time over the fair, throwing a shadow over candidates stuck on the ground. For a few minutes at least, the young passengers got to sink into Italian leather seats sporting seat belts with gold buckles, as befits a machine said to cost \$7 million.

Trump's ride was a Sikorsky S-76B, a much more sophisticated model than the company's first passenger-rated civilian model, the S-51, which was also used to good effect by a politician: a young and lanky Congressman determined to land in the downtown streets and courthouse squares of 1948 Texas. Wanting crowds all around, he would risk his life in ways not understood until helicopter practices matured in the following decades.

The saga began just months before the July 1948 Democratic primary, when U.S. Congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson of the Texas 10th District decided to run for an open

seat in the U.S. Senate. The Democratic Party was so strong in Texas that if he won the primary, he was sure to win the general election in November.

There was one problem: Every poll gave a wide lead to Coke Stevenson, who had recently retired from a long and successful career as governor. Stevenson had stood for political office 12 times, and had won 12 times. By 1948, Stevenson was known statewide as a quiet conservative who could keep government on a short leash. Johnson was little known outside his Austin-area district, and those voters knew him as a Roosevelt liberal who wanted government to lead the way.

LBJ laid out a busy campaign schedule, which within a few days was undone when he suffered an attack of kidney stones, accompanied by high fever and nausea. He was rescued by famous flier Jacqueline Cochran, who flew Johnson and his stretcher to Rochester, Minnesota, for experimental surgery at the Mayo Clinic. The procedure worked, and in days Johnson was back at his campaign headquarters in Austin, yelling for action.

And action was needed: He had just seven weeks to catch the trusted and popular Stevenson, who had been working the voters for six months. Johnson and his top aide, a young lawyer named John Connally, decided the only path to victory was getting a hard-hitting conservative message to a huge number of swing voters, who lived outside the cities. The message would be simple: Stevenson was too old for Washington, and a tool of big business and big labor besides, but Johnson was a young man—why, virtually a war hero!—who would lead Americans to Peace, Preparedness, and Progress.

But how to get attention across the vast and dusty stretches of Texas? Airplanes were timely, and Johnson was calling for a beefed-up Air Force. “We talked about a lot of different gimmicks,” recalled Jake Pickle, who worked on the campaign. One was to rent an airplane that would fly west across the state and toss out flour bombs, to show the state’s vulnerability to Soviet bombers.

Wisely, Johnson vetoed the idea. He favored helicopters, which offered a path to towns that no conventional candidate would bother with. Johnson had watched a demonstration of military helicopters in Washington months earlier, and knew what they could do by way of door-to-door delivery.



On campaign fliers, the helicopter got top billing. (LBJ Library)



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Better yet, the machine exuded novelty. In 1948, only a handful of rotorcraft in the world were certified to carry passengers, and while millions of Americans had watched them in newsreels, many had never seen one in person. Fortunately the Sikorsky Division of United Aircraft had one available, a used S-51 four-seater, one of two that the Greyhound Great Lakes bus line had bought to serve an experimental route in Detroit between the bus station and the airport. The service proved too costly, and Greyhound sold the helicopters back to Sikorsky; the company kept one for promotional work.

And election work. It wouldn't be the first time a candidate had used a helicopter (that was Alexander Smith, during a 1946 U.S. Senate campaign in New Jersey), but it would be the first time helicopters made a difference in the outcome.

On June 10 at the United Aircraft plant at Stratford, Connecticut, Sikorsky helicopter N92805 lifted off. At the controls was James Chudars, who had flown B-25 bombers during World War II; the crew chief was Harry Nachlin, who knew the ship well, having been crew chief on the Greyhound trials.

Four days later, Carl Phinney, Johnson's north Texas campaign manager, presented the helicopter to LBJ at Love Field in Dallas. The machine was now equipped with a loudspeaker system and painted with slogans in big block letters. Phinney told reporters that "Dallas Veterans for Johnson" would be covering the cost. Allegedly, these were 100 patients at a veterans' hospital who had contributed five dollars apiece.

"The campaign said they were paying for it," Harry Nachlin said later, "but what they paid wouldn't have covered even my salary."

LBJ's air assault on rural Texas began in Terrell, 30 miles east of Dallas, where a small crowd was waiting at a softball field. Johnson played the part of the indignant conservative, waving his arms in anger about Truman's civil rights program (a "fraud and a sham" that he would fight) and federal attempts to control schools. Then he rose up and headed off to seven more stops that day. He would fly six days a week, dawn to dusk, in what Time magazine called the first new gimmick to hit Texas politicking since the hillbilly band and the free barbecue.

One idea was abandoned immediately: that, in the interest of efficiency, the helicopter would hover a few feet above the ground while Johnson gave his stump speech over a bullhorn. Dust and noise made that impossible. And advance men had picked out some ridiculously small landing spots, thinking that the machine only needed a space the size of the rotor disk. At the drafty headquarters in Austin during that first week of trial and error, the team worked out a solid plan for the flying circus.

An advance team pulled into each town at least a week ahead of the helicopter arrival, picked a landing spot, and cleared it with the town. They lined up a greeting committee, jotted down items of local interest—federal projects completed, water conservation, pensions—and rounded up volunteers to contact each voter by phone. They also arranged for articles and ads in the local paper.

A day or two prior, another advance team arrived to make sure that publicity was on the streets and that the landing zone was marked with yellow crepe paper or a whitewashed "X." Someone would phone final details to Johnson's traveling secretary the night before, and she would combine each town's logistics with arrangements for fuel and lodging. Nobody caught much sleep until Sunday, which was reserved for planning the next six-day blitz.

Depending on distances and weather, each flying day saw from 13 to 30 landings. Shortly before the helicopter's arrival, one or two cars with roof-mounted bullhorns raced into town, playing martial music and clamoring for everyone to "come to the speaking."

The grueling pace paid off. After one week, Johnson had climbed to second place and was just 10 points behind Stevenson, a stunning development. A man who had struggled to fill a room for his opening speech (and in his own district) was looking over crowds that exceeded a town's entire population. The Austin headquarters was taking calls from mayors and local bosses across the state, pleading for visits from the "Johnson City Windmill." Newspapers, even big-city ones that opposed him, liked the novelty angle and assigned reporters to tag along. Smaller newspapers brimmed with enthusiasm; a front-page editorial cartoon in the Tyler paper showed Johnson dropping a bomb from his helicopter, putting the old guard on the run. The bomb was tagged "Young and Vigorous Approach."

At each stop, the Sikorsky took up an orbit above the landing spot. As Johnson bellowed over the loudspeaker for attention, Chudars examined the spot for hazards. If the streets were wide and police were on hand to control the crowd, Chudars sometimes agreed to land downtown, even within a stone's throw of department stores and their plate-glass windows.



When telephone lines or crowds made space too tight for the three-passenger S-51 to land in town, the pilot would search for the nearest field. (LBJ Library)



"Wherever we saw more than two people and a big dog, we'd stop and talk," said James Chudars, who flew Johnson in the Sikorsky. (LBJ Library)

"The Congressman was enamored of the fact that that's what a helicopter was for, was to be able to get you where the people are," said Warren "Woody" Woodward, a campaign aide. "He kept pushing for sites in town."

But because of the helicopter's shortage of power, the pilot sometimes decided to scrub a close-in landing. Johnson was a micro-manager; if anyone disobeyed, the candidate's reaction would be fiery. "The only guy that could get Johnson to do what he wanted was the pilot," Nachlin said. "In fact, LBJ would introduce him that way: 'That's Jim Chudars, that's the only guy who can say no to me.' He couldn't care less what LBJ thought." So the pilot sometimes made Johnson hop out. Johnson found a silver lining to being ejected from the machine: He would take the sound truck's microphone and urge the crowd to stay and pray that the pilot might clear the trees, wires, and buildings.

Drama aside, the risk was real. Civilian helicopters were crashing at a rate 30 times higher than today's pilots face. Several times the campaign came close to raising that rate: a near-collision with a school building in New London, close encounters with wires at a ballpark between Sherman and Denison, and a fuel-related engine stoppage over east Texas as the campaign's first helicopter headed home. (The campaign's second ship, a Bell 47D, once got caught in its own downwash and plunged toward an east Texas street, narrowly missing parked cars and landing so hard it must have come close to losing the tail boom.)

The day-to-day routine was slightly less exciting: Just before landing in a town, Johnson liked to fling his cowboy hat out the door. It was a grand hat-in-the-ring gesture, but Johnson couldn't afford to give away 10 \$25 Stetsons a day, so he demanded that aides chase the hat down or pay a dollar to anyone who brought it back. At the end of the seven-week blitz, the candidate claimed he'd spent a hundred dollars to get his hat back—a bargain, since sometimes he chucked it accidentally into a bramble patch or a swamp. Sometimes a dollar fell short, particularly if the audience was surly, as it was at a rodeo in Waco on June 22. That evening the helicopter spooked the animals and covered the crowd with dust, drawing angry shouts. The disruption may have encouraged one youth, who found the hat and ran off. Then the staff found that Johnson's spare hat, kept handy in a chase car, had been flattened because mechanic Nachlin had been sitting on it.

Normally things went more smoothly. As the rotor swung to a stop, Johnson and his airborne publicity man, Joe Phipps, got out and climbed into a platform or flatbed truck. Phipps warmed up the crowd with cheers such as "Ain't gonna be no runoff!"

Johnson's stump speech described his hill-country boyhood. After reminding voters of his many virtues, he took aim at a calculating, pipe-smoking opponent who refused to take clear positions on controversial matters because he was covering up corrupt bargains. Even when Johnson didn't name the rascal, all listeners knew he meant the frontrunner, Calculatin' Coke Stevenson.

Despite the energetic adversary, Stevenson showed little anxiety about getting to the Senate. His campaign routine was simple and low-tech: Stevenson would shake a few hands, then get back on the highway without bothering to make a speech.

Johnson, on the other hand, behaved like a man with demons snapping at his heels. He slept only a few hours each night. After each frenetic talk he surged into the crowd, grabbing hands and yanking each person past so he could seize the next. One reason for the pace may have been a concern that because many people had come to see the helicopter, any waning of energy would let the crowd drift away.

"Of course, mostly they came to see the helicopter," political operative Tommy Corcoran told Merle Miller, who wrote the LBJ biography *Lyndon*. "They'd never seen one before. Christ, it was brilliant as hell."

According to Phipps' book of recollections, *Summer Stock*, in his testier moments, Johnson saw the machine as upstaging him. In Victoria, Texas, a crowd of boys greatly outnumbered adults of voting age. During his talk the kids charged the aircraft, climbing on it and yelling. Johnson screamed at them, demanding to know where their parents were. Fortunately for the candidate's image as a warmhearted man of the people, all the reporters in the pool had bypassed the late-afternoon event and were already drinking at the hotel, so the meltdown went unreported.

Normally aides and reporters were on hand at each speech, but left early. Sprinting to the cars, they raced to the next town, hitting speeds of 90 mph to beat the helicopter, which could move a bit faster and in a straight line. One aide, Sam Plyler, a wartime assistant to General George Patton, wanted to make sure that when the machine landed, bystanders and particularly children were kept away from the tail rotor.

"When it was getting ready to leave, people would get back but they'd never get back far enough," Nachlin said. "The pilot would wave 'em back, and when the dust started to fly they'd wish they'd gotten back like he said." Impressively, in the hundreds of close-up landings and takeoffs, no bystanders were injured.

The Johnson City Windmill did blow one away, in a manner of speaking. One audience member in Littlefield was Dwayne Williams, age five. "The vacant field was pretty much clear other than a few folks who had probably been forewarned of his arrival," Williams recalls. "Aside from those guys, my buddies and I were the first ones to arrive." It was the first helicopter he'd seen. Looking back, he feels that Johnson's visit steered him toward a lifelong career: It started with a tour as an Army gunship pilot in Vietnam; later he became a test pilot for Bell and other manufacturers.

Between the scheduled stops, Johnson swooped down on highway crews, section gangs on the railroad, and farm workers. In the early days he took the mike and hailed them over the loudspeaker. He identified himself and asked for votes. After he realized that the rotor noise and raspy loudspeaker prevented listeners from knowing who was at the mike, he turned that job over to the pilot. Speaking in a Texas drawl, the pilot asked for votes and chucked handfuls of brochures (sometimes accidentally accompanied by a Thermos jug) out the door. Meanwhile, Johnson was able to nap between appearances.

It didn't take a very big crowd to justify a swoop: Even a lone woman picking peas in a field near Woodville was enough to get the helicopter to descend near her (she was startled nearly to death). If the aircraft had to wait out a thunderstorm, the pilot looked for a farm, whereupon Johnson jumped out and banged on the door for shelter and a vote.

Despite the rising poll numbers, by July the campaign faced two major problems. Chudars and Nachlin had told Johnson that they'd have to break off once the Sikorsky had logged 100 hours; after that, it would be due for a major overhaul back at the factory in Connecticut. As June ended and the machine approached the time limit, Johnson suggested that they come back to Texas, or that Chudars quit Sikorsky and stay to fly another helicopter. Chudars declined, and the Sikorsky duo left on July 5.

Fortunately for the campaign's momentum, Bell Aircraft's helicopter division (then based in New York) offered a Bell 47D, pilot, and mechanic. Compared with the Sikorsky, the Bell was smaller and less powerful but more maneuverable. Bell would charge nothing for two weeks of heavy use, adding up to 7,000 miles. Bell executives figured that Johnson's use would build future business. The company had done the same when making Bells available for experimental use servicing offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.

The second problem, hitting at the same time, was cash. Bill collectors had started lurking around the Austin headquarters, once catching an aide who was climbing out a window to escape. By July 5, the campaign helicopter sat grounded in Harlingen for lack of gas money. Johnson told his wife, Lady Bird, he was going to end the campaign. She reached out to a wealthy friend, Sid Richardson, who advanced enough credit to put the helicopter back in the air. Suddenly the campaign was rebuilding its flight schedule. At the same time Johnson and Joe Mashman, the new pilot, were learning to get along.

That part proved easy, because Mashman was an expert at aerial showmanship and embraced his role with an enthusiasm that bordered on derring-do. While Chudars had never tried to land his two-ton ship on a building roof, Mashman agreed to set the 1,900-pound Bell atop a gas station in Rosenberg, a town 30 miles southwest of Houston.



Before the Bell could make a splashy rooftop landing in Rosenberg, the building had to be shored up with beams hauled from a lumberyard by mule teams. (LBJ Library)

The helicopter's novelty had proved valuable in rural settings; as the primary season entered its last week, Johnson shifted his efforts to the cities, where it was harder to leverage that novelty. Some cities wouldn't allow off-airport landings, and some legal sites were more trouble than they were worth. Hoping for a mass night rally in Houston's Hermann Park, the campaign leaned hard on Houston Power & Light to put up poles and lights with just five hours' notice. But on the way the Bell's engine overheated (campaign literature had clogged the cooling fins), and the helicopter had to set down elsewhere. While everyone at the park was looking to the sky, Johnson pulled up in a car. Quipped the emcee to an unsmiling candidate, "That was a mighty smooth landing!"

On July 24, Coke Stevenson out-pollled the other 10 candidates. But he didn't cross the 50 percent threshold, so a runoff election was slated for August 28. Lyndon Johnson had clawed his way onto the runoff ballot, but he trailed by 71,000 votes.

The helicopter had gotten him that far, but now he parked it and, relying on shoe leather, worked harder than ever. According to the official tally from the August 28 runoff, nearly a million votes were cast. Johnson won by 87 votes, despite charges that Johnson's people had bought hundreds of ballots from county bosses. Twelve years later, Johnson was headed to the White House.

The Sikorsky S-51 Johnson's campaign used flew commercially, mostly for constructing utility lines, until the 1970s, when it was acquired by the U.S. Army Aviation Museum in Fort Rucker, Alabama. The Bell 47D worked in the Gulf of Mexico oil patch from 1949 to 1954, when ownership shifted to a mineral exploration company in Colombia.

As president and ex-president, LBJ continued to have a soft spot for helicopter travel. He insisted on adding heliports to the Federal Building in Austin and his presidential library. Johnson invited Mashman to the ranch for social events; once he joined the pilot in the machine to help rescue people along the flooding Pedernales River.

Although Johnson didn't use a helicopter in his runoff campaign, statistics from that election show that the earlier helicopter campaign may have helped him. Even though runoffs rarely see a strong turnout, a very high percentage of the voters who came out to vote for Johnson were rural—the same people he had dropped in on during seven hot and anxious weeks.