

Public Life & the Pursuit of Good Information (Thanksgiving 1937)

*John Q. Barrett**

Copyright © 2018 by John Q. Barrett.
All rights reserved.

On the evening of Wednesday, November 24, 1937, United States Assistant Attorney General Robert H. Jackson, then heading the Antitrust Division in the U.S. Department of Justice, spoke in Washington at a private gathering of young, liberal Members of Congress. The group included Senator Sherman Minton (D.-IN), Representative Knute Hill (D.-WA), and others.

AAG Jackson spoke to these Senators and Representatives at length and powerfully. Jackson had, by then, become a national figure. He was a leading voice of President Roosevelt's New Deal. Its policies had led the U.S. economy to optimism and recovery following the worst of the Great Depression. President Roosevelt had been reelected overwhelmingly—he won 46 of 48 States—just one year earlier. But now the Administration, including Jackson, was contending with mixed economic conditions. There were signs of a renewed downturn and, as a result, some public discontent.

Robert Jackson, in this speech—which it seems that he made from notes and papers that, alas, he did not preserve—criticized some businesses for thwarting further economic recovery. Jackson recited statistics on recent business behavior. He discussed manufacturers' recent price increases, which had produced high profits for companies but not led them to raise their workers' wages. He showed the Members a chart depicting rises in prices and industrial profits.

* * *

* Professor of Law, St. John's University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York (www.roberthjackson.org). I emailed an earlier version of this essay to The Jackson List on November 21, 2018.

For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which include document images or photographs, visit <http://thejacksonlist.com>. This essay is posted there as a PDF file with "live" hyperlinks.

To subscribe to The Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, send "subscribe" to barrettj@stjohns.edu.

The next day, Thursday, November 25, 1937, was Thanksgiving Day. It seems that Robert Jackson and his wife Irene spent the holiday, with their daughter Mary (a senior at National Cathedral School for Girls) and maybe also with their son Bill (a Yale College freshman), at their home in Washington.

On that Thanksgiving morning, elsewhere in Washington, one of the young Congressmen who had heard Jackson speak the previous evening dictated this letter (which then got typed up, signed, and delivered to Jackson's DOJ office, probably the next day):

My dear Bob:

This Thanksgiving morning, before I tie into the things which are ahead for the day, I want to stop long enough to tell you how much I enjoyed and profited by your speech last night.

It was certainly an inspiration to anyone feeling his way through the maze of things as they are today. It was informative from first to last, and the best kind of a picture I have ever seen drawn of our problems and complexities in a brief space of time.

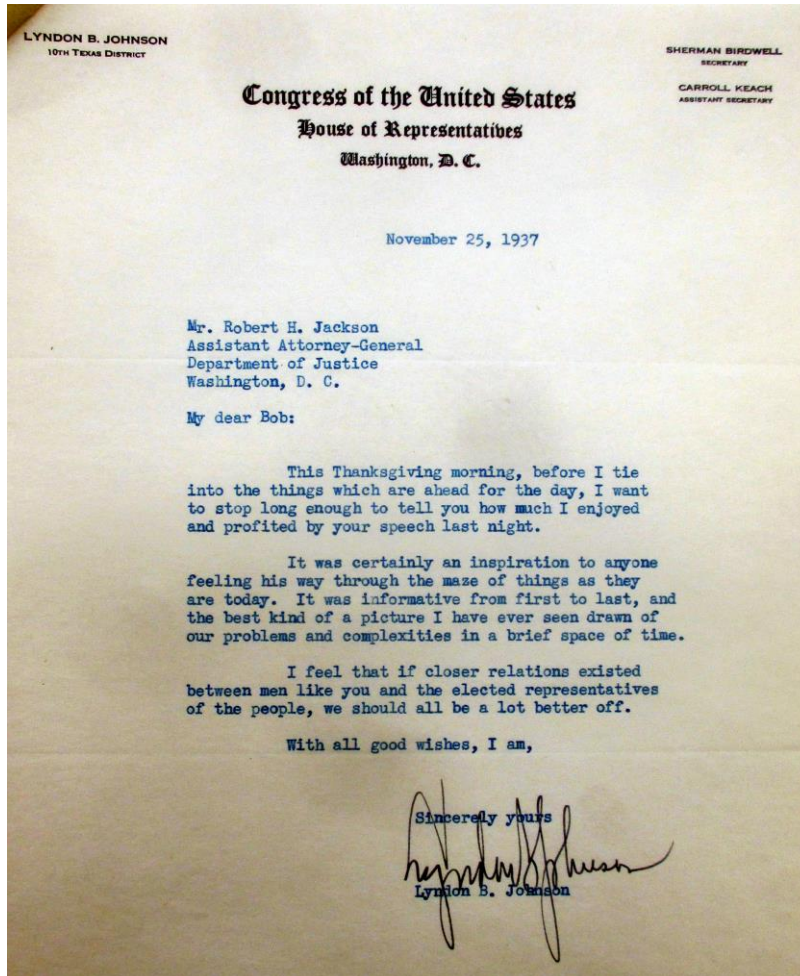
I feel that if closer relations existed between men like you and the elected representatives of the people, we should all be a lot better off.

With all good wishes, I am,

Sincerely yours

/s/ Lyndon B. Johnson¹

¹ Letter from Rep. Lyndon B. Johnson to Asst. AG Robert H. Jackson, Nov. 25, 1937 (original), in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. ("RHJL"), Box 34, Folder 6. An image of this document is on the next page.



* * *

During the next week, Representative Johnson (D.-TX), age 29, elected to Congress in a special election the previous April, continued to think about Assistant Attorney General Jackson's November 24 speech. Jackson apparently did not respond promptly to Johnson's November 25 letter. So on Wednesday, November 30, Johnson dictated and sent a second letter to Jackson:

My dear Mr. Jackson:

The more I think of your excellent address the other evening, the more I appreciate what a wealth of material and research was in it.

I wonder if you would be so kind as to steer me a little in my efforts to educate myself more fully in the lines which you followed out. Could you, for instance, tell me where it would be possible for me to obtain the full information concerning the increase in prices of products in the major manufacturing fields during the past few years, in their relation to increases in wages and in profits? I was most interested in that, and related phases, of your discourse.

With all good wishes, I am,

Sincerely yours

/s/ Lyndon B. Johnson²

Representative Johnson—LBJ, if I may, although the fact that 1937's Johnson would become our "LBJ" would not have been apparent then—was not alone in being interested. Two days later, Representative Hill also wrote to Jackson:

My dear Jackson:

I was very much impressed with your talk before the Liberal bloc last Wednesday night, and particularly by the chart you presented, which showed the contrast [sic—correlation] between the rise in prices and the rise in profits in industries.

You may recall that I asked you if it would be possible to secure a copy of this chart, which you intended to have reprinted. I sincerely hope that this will be possible, as I am anxious to study the correlation in more detail.

Sincerely yours

/s/ Knute Hill³

* * *

² Letter from Rep. Johnson to AAG Jackson, Nov. 30, 1937 (original), *in id.*

³ Letter from Rep. Knute Hill to AAG Jackson, Dec. 2, 1937 (original), *in id.*

At the Department of Justice, Jackson's staff moved to get him to answer the Congressmen's queries. Someone put a printed pink slip, reading "SPECIAL," on Johnson's second letter.⁴ Jackson's secretary Grace Stewart added a typed note: "Is the information available? Senator Minton also inquired."⁵

In mid-December, Jackson responded by dictating letters that were typed and sent back to the Congressmen. His letter to Representative Hill, age 61 and just reelected to his third term in the House, was direct:

My dear Mr. Hill:

I have not had a chance to get the figures which I used the other night completed with sufficient accuracy so they would be suitable for being publicly used. I understand that [Roosevelt economic adviser] Leon Henderson has some studies which are dependable, and I would suggest that you rely on his for the present.

Sincerely yours,

/s/ Robert H. Jackson⁶

To Johnson, Jackson sent basically the same letter, calling his "figures ... hastily assembled and pretty rough for public use."⁷

And it seems that Jackson responded to Senator Minton—who a dozen years hence would become his U.S. Supreme Court colleague—by telephone.⁸

⁴ See "SPECIAL" slip, *in* RHJL Box 34, Folder 6.

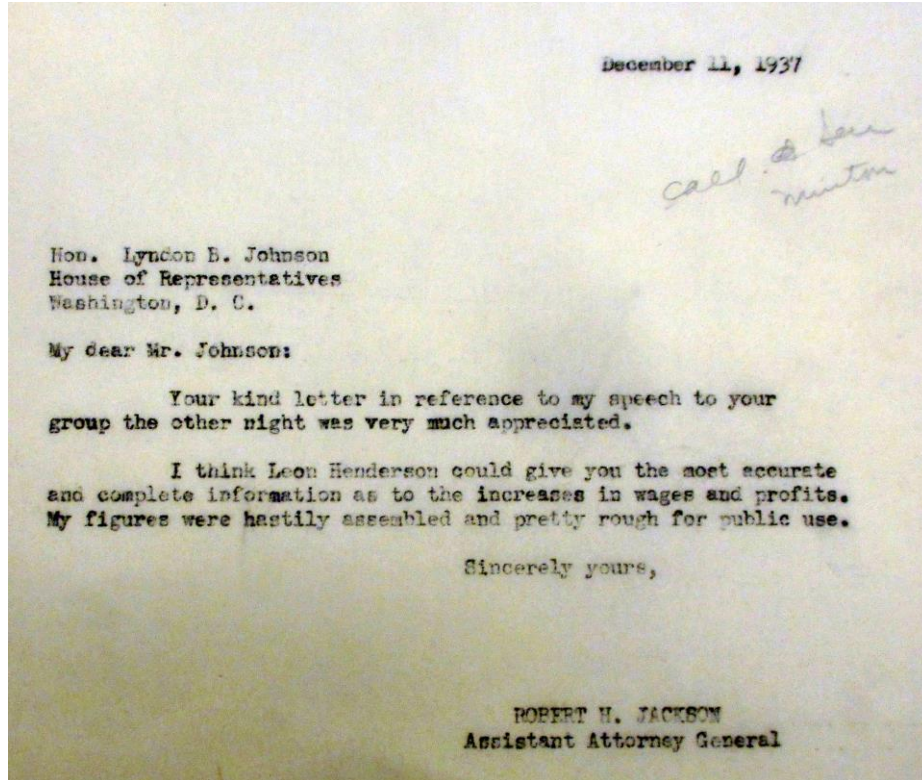
⁵ Note from "GMS" [Grace M. Stewart] (undated), *in* RHJL, Box 34, Folder 6.

⁶ Letter from AAG Jackson to Rep. Hill, Dec. 11, 1937 (unsigned carbon copy of typed letter), *in id.*

⁷ Letter from AAG Jackson to Rep. Johnson, Dec. 11, 1937 (unsigned carbon copy of typed letter), *in id.*

⁸ See pencil note ("call ~~S~~ Sen Minton"), author unknown, *on id.* An image of this document is on the next page.

PUBLIC LIFE & THE PURSUIT OF GOOD INFORMATION (THANKSGIVING 1937)



* * *

I hope that, as Thanksgiving Day 2018 dawns tomorrow, you wake up thinking of important topics and great people, and that you can make contact with them and get good responses.

I hope that you will “tie into” many good things throughout the day and always.

I hope that your representatives in government pursue good information diligently.

And I thank you for your interest in the Jackson List.