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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 76 First Lady as Catalyst: Lady Bird Johnson and Highway Beautification in the 1960s  
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## *First Lady as Catalyst: Lady Bird Johnson and Highway Beautification in the 1960s*

Lewis L. Gould

Students of the environmental movement now recognize the contributions of Lyndon Johnson and his presidency to the emergence of an ecological spirit in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> But Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson's campaign on behalf of the beautification of the United States has not yet become part of the historical record of her husband's presidential administration. Lady Bird Johnson's similar efforts to improve the appearance and quality of Washington, D.C., her advocacy of highway beautification, and her general concern for the environment are still regarded as either trivial and elitist sideshow from the real work of the Johnson years, or a politically motivated task with which the first lady could occupy herself.

Those assumptions first appeared in the early comments about the beautification campaign after the Johnsons left the White House. By selling memoirs of White House employees assigned credit to Mrs. Johnson's aides, Elizabeth "Liz" Carpenter and Bess Abell, for devising a program that enabled the first lady to emulate, but not imitate, the restoration work that Mrs. John F. Kennedy had performed. Nancy Dickerson, writing in the mid-1970s, conceded the serious purpose of Mrs. Johnson's work, but argued that "beautification was probably the only subject that LBJ would have let her handle without jealousy." The caustic Barbara Howar, in *Laughing All The Way*, speculated about Lady Bird's impact on her husband and his presidency "had she used her influence in matters more crucial than beautifying a troubled nation."

More positive evaluations were less heralded. June Sochen, in a 1971 study of women activists and scholars in the twentieth century, advanced the view that "Lady Bird's concern for the natural environment forestalled the much publicized ecology movement of the late sixties." Recent appraisals have extended Sochen's conclusions. In a comparison of first-lady activists with the model of Eleanor Roosevelt, Abigail McCarthy observed that beautification, "despite the somewhat gimmicky nature of its title," bore real results, because it directed attention to the environment and improved the quality of life in towns and cities, especially



Washington, D.C. Vaughn Bornet, too, assigns the Johnsons credit for laying the groundwork for environmentalism in the 1970s and calls the first lady, "well suited to being the organizer, propagandist, spokeswoman, and recruiter of talent for her cause of beautification."<sup>1</sup>

To this point, however, no one has investigated Mrs. Johnson's performance as a catalyst for the beautification and environmental impulse of her husband's presidency. Several thousand boxes of documents at the LBJ Library now being reviewed for researchers reveal that, in pursuing beautification, the first lady functioned as legislative aide, advisor on appointments, shaper of policy, and public advocate for the administration. The tangible results of her efforts included the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, enhancing the physical appearance of Washington, D.C., and other urban and rural places, and the involvement of the environmentally minded groups in framing government programs. Less visible, but important, was the stimulus she gave to increasing the ecological consciousness of the nation. Like her husband, Mrs. Johnson had a significant role in providing a foundation for the environmental movement that burgeoned in the 1970s.

This paper will examine the most controversial and enduring aspect of her career, the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Called "Lady Bird's Beauty Bill" when it was passed in October 1965, the law sought, in its less publicized provisions, to upgrade the appearance of interstate highways and to curb junkyards along the nation's roads. But its most important provision dealt with the control of outdoor advertising, specifically billboards, which were to be controlled within 660 feet of the right-of-way along the Interstate and primary road system. Federal and state governments were required to remove signs that violated the law's provisions by January 1, 1968.<sup>2</sup>

Environmental advocates and proponents of the regulation of outdoor advertising now regard the Highway Beautification Law as a flawed measure. One critic notes that "the Act has largely been a failure, achieving little toward the accomplishment of the stated Congressional goals" for its enactment. A spokesman for the Coalition for Scenic Beauty wrote in January 1985 that "the act created the illusion that the Federal Government was doing something while in fact it was giving the billboard companies custody of America the Beautiful."<sup>3</sup> Like other Great Society legislation, the Highway Beautification Act is now described as an example of good intentions gone wrong because of weaknesses in the law and a lack of commitment to enforce it.

Those charges have some merit, but they overlook the difficulties that confronted any type of national billboard regulation law in the 1960s. It is not surprising that the 1965 act was only a partial measure; it is noteworthy, however, that any law was passed at all. Had it not been for the energy and commitment of both the Johnsons in 1965, and especially the first lady, billboard control would not have been adopted.

To the legislative process, Lady Bird Johnson brought a personal devotion to roadside beauty. Her participation was instrumental in the law's initial conception, its passage through Congress and final enactment in October 1965, and its survival against congressional efforts to weaken the measure after it went into effect.

To understand the obstacles confronting highway beautification it is necessary to review the regulatory situation toward billboards as it existed in 1963-1964. Responding to initiatives from congressional opponents of billboards, lawmakers enacted in 1958 a measure that gave states an extra one half of one percent of federal highway funds if they controlled outdoor advertising along their highways. The Bonus Act, as it was called, was amended in 1959 to exempt from federal control all areas zoned for business use before the act became law. The Bonus Act was not widely adopted. By 1965 only twenty-three states had taken advantage of its provisions, and fewer than two hundred miles of highway had been affected. Secretary of Commerce John T. Connor reported in the summer of 1965 that the law was "ineffective in obtaining adequate control of billboards along our highways."<sup>4</sup>

The political alignments that determined the outcome of the first billboard regulation struggle were still in effect when Mrs. Johnson entered the scene in late 1964. The public supported billboard control by decisive majorities in opinion polls. Roadside councils, garden clubs, and newspapers that competed with billboards, spoke out in favor of limiting the ability of outdoor advertisers to alter the landscape alongside the public highways.<sup>5</sup>

The opposition to highway beautification through the removal or restriction of billboards was as powerful as it was parochial. The billboard industry was not monolithic. The Outdoor Advertising Association of America spoke for owners and operators in the urban and developed areas of the nation. Other industry organizations, such as the Roadside Business Association, represented the interests of rural sign owners. Both segments, of course, opposed the regulation of billboards. Allied with the industry forces were businesses that depended upon traveling motorists for their livelihood—motels, service stations, and tourist attractions such as caves and parks. Organized labor also was part of the pro-billboard coalition. Those who constructed, painted, and maintained the signs joined with union members who worked in motels, restaurants, and other businesses to add AFL-CIO backing for the billboard cause.<sup>6</sup>

The billboard industry enjoyed great influence on Capitol Hill. Politicians knew that billboards were an important asset in modern campaigning; opposition from local operators could imperil reelection. An effort to regulate outdoor advertising could have an immediate adverse financial impact across a legislator's constituency. Moreover, the



billboard lobby was attentive to lawmakers and watched for bills directed against it. Proponents of regulation could not match that array of political power; they could only invoke the intangible benefits of billboard-free scenery for the traveler. The constituency for natural beauty at the roadside was large, diffuse, and hard to mobilize. As a result, only carefully drawn and cautious billboard proposals had a chance of surviving the hazards of the legislative process in the mid-1960s.

As a senator, Lyndon Johnson devoted little attention to the billboard issue, but the scattered evidence available indicates his sensitivity to the industry's clout. He opposed the Bonus Bill in 1958 and supported weakening amendments a year later. The billboard industry regarded Johnson as a friendly senator.<sup>9</sup>

Mrs. Johnson's views on highway beauty were closely associated with her experiences as the wife of a rising national politician. In the 1960s her husband said that she had influenced his decision to pursue a roadside park program three decades earlier as the director of the National Youth Administration in Texas.<sup>10</sup> Lady Bird also observed the changing face of the landscape, the junkyards of abandoned automobiles, the billboards, and the commercialization of the roadside, in campaign trips across Texas and the long drives to and from the national capital. "I saw a lot of land between Washington and Austin, over and over and over, but never without a sense of delight and excitement." But she also noticed the "spaghetti" interchanges and cluttered highways that marred her sense of pleasure. In the first year of her husband's presidency, as Lyndon Johnson spoke about the Great Society and its commitment to natural beauty, Mrs. Johnson realized that the "environment and beautification" were topics she might devote herself to.<sup>11</sup>

By November 1964, with a full term ahead, the first lady considered those policies she might identify as her own. A summer campaign swing through the Rocky Mountain states in August 1964 with Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall gave her the opportunity to talk about land and resource problems with the most ardent conservationist in the Cabinet. Udall later believed that the journey pulled her toward beautification. Mrs. Johnson was also aware of the recommendations of the President's Task Force on the Preservation of Natural Beauty that had spoken strongly about billboard legislation. Given the Johnsons' shared affection for the landscape, it is reasonable to assume that they listened to each other on conservation issues and encouraged their mutual endeavors. Shortly after the election, Lady Bird began asking friends for suggestions about beautification in Washington, D.C., that laid the basis for her First Lady's Committee for a More Beautiful National Capital.<sup>12</sup>

A few days after the 1964 election, Lyndon Johnson queried Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges: "Lady Bird wants to know what you're going to do about all those junkyards along the highways?" That

conversation, in which the president asked Hodges to assemble a "program for highway beautification," triggered the events that led to the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Lady Bird's concern galvanized the president; his heightened sensitivity in turn aroused the bureaucracy in the White House and the Department of Commerce. In light of Lyndon Johnson's previous support for the billboard industry, he was probably more comfortable with his wife's interest in the appearance of Washington than with her emphasis on roadside beauty. He understood instinctively the political strength of the billboard and highway construction coalitions in Congress, both of which would be targets of legislation that devoted money to removing billboards, cleaning up junkyards, and improving roadside landscapes. Nonetheless, the phone call was made, the campaign begun, and the first lady's influence exercised.<sup>13</sup>

After extended deliberations in November and December, the Commerce Department developed recommendations for roadside beauty that included the control of junkyards, the use of federal highway funds for improved landscaping and, most important, a mandate that the states control outdoor advertising or lose federal highway funds. President Johnson announced his intention to push for highway beauty in his 1965 State of the Union Message. Two and a half weeks later, in a letter to the new secretary of commerce, John T. Connor, the president specified what he sought in the way of highway beautification.<sup>14</sup>

Lyndon Johnson's thought processes are not easily discernible amid the mass of documents in his presidential library. Other people drafted most of his speeches, letters, and public statements. Often there are few clues to what he believed other than a check mark by a "Yes" or "No" on the memoranda his staff sent to him. It is a measure of Mrs. Johnson's influence in the area of beautification that the president added six lines in his own handwriting at the bottom of the original letter to Secretary Connor:

Jack. All industry, labor and public service organizations quartered here should be enlisted. Touch base with these organizations and get their help. Talk to Udall (get his cooperation on the proposed conference)—also check out appropriate Congressional Chairmen and ranking members. Let's get all garden clubs working— with Mary [Lasker] and Lady Bird giving them encouragement by appearances. Get back to [Horace] Busby on the National Conference and when we should announce it and call it. L

The president kept the pressure on his administration to do something about highway beauty and billboards in the winter and spring of 1965. On February 5, he sent Secretary Connor a newspaper story about highways with the comment:

I can't emphasize too much the importance of this particular program to all of us. I hope you will follow through on it seeing that it not only gets off the ground but gathers steam as it goes along.



He sent Connor another editorial about billboards in early March 1965, and a letter in April praising the Bureau of Public Roads for acting against unauthorized road signs in Alabama.<sup>11</sup>

Given the proposals of the Natural Beauty Task Force and President Johnson's message on natural beauty in February 1965, an initiative on billboards and highways would probably have been part of the administration's program even if Mrs. Johnson had not acted. But, her sponsorship of the idea placed the subject on the White House agenda earlier and in a more visible public setting. Highway beauty became identified as an administration priority to which Commerce and Public Roads had to respond. Because the enactment of the law came at the end of the congressional session, the initial impetus she supplied was vital.

Bill Moyers was the White House aide assigned to highway beauty (another reflection of the president's emphasis on the matter), and he led the campaign in the spring of 1965 to shape legislation that would be acceptable to the Outdoor Advertising Association (OAAA). That strategy of negotiating with the major billboard lobbying group for sign owners in urban areas grew out of the realistic calculation that legislation directed against all billboards had almost no chance of gaining congressional approval. If the support of the OAAA could be secured in advance, a winning coalition on Capitol Hill might be possible. The problem was that such an approach would likely alienate the anti-billboard forces who wanted more restrictive legislation. In addition, the agenda of the OAAA did not harmonize with the goals of the Johnson administration. The billboard people wanted a franchise that had federal endorsement and an explicit recognition of their right to do business. Their acquiescence in the goal of regulation was not sincere.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, talks went forward to produce a legislative package. By late May 1965 Moyers and the OAAA president, Phillip Tocker, had agreed on language prohibiting billboards from the Interstate and primary road system except on "areas zoned or used for business or commercial purposes."<sup>13</sup> Such an exception opened the door for state and local governments to change zoning regulations to accommodate pressure from billboard owners. It was a concession that the White House believed was necessary to pass the bill. The compromise, made public at the White House Conference on Natural Beauty on May 24-25, 1965, resulted in an angry response from roadside councils and anti-billboard groups who thereafter offered little support for the measure.<sup>14</sup>

The highway beauty proposals received an icy reception on Capitol Hill during the summer of 1965. Because the regulation of billboards and the improvement of highways was to be paid for out of the Highway Trust Fund, both of the Public Works committees in the House and Senate reacted negatively to touching money whose status, Lawrence O'Brien told Mrs. Johnson, was "almost" sacred. Pressure from the

billboard lobbying groups other than the OAAA added to the heat on the lawmakers. By August 1965 highway beautification was in serious trouble, and the administration bills were bottled up in committee.<sup>15</sup>

Lady Bird Johnson had already begun to assert herself on behalf of the White House program. She kept abreast of the legislative situation in mid-summer through memoranda from O'Brien and his staff, and concurred with the decision to drop portions of the program that lacked any real support. Late in August she met with Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers who promised to assemble organized labor and civil rights groups to push for highway beauty. "We'll keep our fingers crossed about the beautification legislation," Mrs. Johnson told Reuther. "I've lived through enough last days of Congressional sessions to know that anything can happen. We'll hope for the best!" But Mrs. Johnson was doing more than relying on hope. The word went out from the White House that "the highway beauty bill was one of the ones the President wanted this year, that he had to have this one, it was reported, 'for Lady Bird.'"<sup>16</sup>

The need for such White House action was evident in the billboard legislation that emerged from the Roads Subcommittee of the Senate Public Works Committee on September 3. One provision watered down the enforcement thrust by requiring that billboard owners receive "just compensation" for the cost of taking down a sign; another left the definition of what constituted an industrial or commercial area to state legislatures. In addition, the effective enforcement date had been moved back from July 1, 1970, to July, 1972. When the full committee reported the bill on September 8, the administration had gotten the enforcement date returned to July 1970 and had modified slightly the just compensation provision. The determination of what constituted a commercial or industrial area remained with the states. The president phoned Mrs. Johnson about the latest developments at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where she was attending a meeting of the National Forestry Association and the National Council of State Garden Clubs. She informed an aide, "I'm very glad. It's one more step in the right direction. I was delighted to learn that the bill had been strengthened."<sup>17</sup>

Lady Bird Johnson's involvement in passage of the billboard measure was far from concluded. When she returned home from Wyoming, the administration was trying to forestall a report from the House Subcommittee on Roads that promised to be no stronger than what the Senate committee had done. The first lady participated in conferences aimed at changing the definition of what comprised an "unzoned business area" to allow the secretary of commerce to establish the criteria or, at least to give the secretary a final approval of state action. The White House was, in fact, shifting its position and ending its alliance with the Outdoor Advertising Association.<sup>18</sup>



To move minds and votes on Capitol Hill, a working group, including Lady Bird, met with the president to determine specific lobbying assignments. Participation in a substantive gathering of this kind was a departure for a presidential wife. Not even Eleanor Roosevelt had sat in on legislative strategy sessions nor had she been given assignments to woo votes in Congress. Bess Truman advised her husband in private, but took no part in actual decision-making. Mamie Eisenhower and Jacqueline Kennedy were never consulted about such issues. No feminist impulse lay behind Mrs. Johnson's presence as far as she or her husband were concerned. It was her issue, and it required her voice and influence. But that fact also stretched the boundaries of what first ladies could do."

Mrs. Johnson had four House members to call, including the chairman of the Roads subcommittee, John Kluczynski (D-Illinois), who had been cool to the bill from the start. The congressman was in the restaurant business and the president suggested that her call might find him "slapping mayonnaise" on bread. Lady Bird phoned Kluczynski, after which a White House staffer told the president: "Obviously Mrs. Johnson's call has had its effect and the Congressman is all for anything we want." With White House pressure visible, a version acceptable to the administration was worked out in the Public Works Committee over the next week.<sup>24</sup>

Before the Senate version of the bill went to the floor, the White House asked the leadership to accept strengthening amendments. That put the Democratic senators, particularly committee chairman Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, in the awkward position of seeking changes in a bill that the committee had reported unanimously. By a four vote margin an amendment went through to give the secretary of commerce an equal voice in determining the status of unzoned commercial and industrial areas. The bill passed the Senate on September 16 by a vote of 63 to 14, a margin that overstated the extent of legislative enthusiasm for billboard control. The bill included the "just compensation" clause, without which it would have failed. The monetary cost that the provision added to enforcement of the law subsequently proved to be one of the most significant obstacles to billboard removal. Mrs. Johnson's bill had cleared an important legislative barrier, but the price in substance and political damage had been high.<sup>25</sup>

The House Public Works Committee reported out the Senate bill with amendments on September 21, 1965. The Republicans called it a

poorly thought out proposal which was brutally forced upon the Committee on Public Works by spokesmen for the administration who wielded the power and influence of the White House to an extent which we have never before seen.

Although the bill was not all the administration wanted, it was all that Mrs. Johnson and her husband could get. Congress was showing the strains of enacting Great Society legislation and the large Democratic majorities had become weary and restive.<sup>26</sup>

Warned by its operatives on Capitol Hill that its "best effort" would be needed when the House bill reached the floor to prevent amendments or outright defeat, the administration launched its campaign for the Senate version. "I know that the people of this country will be disappointed—as I will, if a bill on highway improvement is not enacted before Congress adjourns," the first lady wrote to sympathetic members of the public. Lady Bird's aides assembled names of architects, park executives, and garden club members for White House staffers to call, and friends like Mary Lasker sent telegrams to doubtful congressmen and to news organizations. Esther Peterson rallied women leaders in forty-one states to support "Lady Bird's Bill," and the Izaak Walton League, the National Wildlife Federation, and the National Consumers League offered help."

Despite the lobbying campaign, highway beautification encountered "a brick wall of opposition" when it reached the House Rules Committee. Congressman Thomas P. O'Neill proffered that some billboards "are more beautiful than old buildings." The Rules panel sent the bill forward by a 7-6 vote, reflecting the lack of ardor for a bill "that the President—and Mrs. Johnson want badly." The first lady then sent her press secretary to see the lawmakers. Liz Carpenter "put on my best Joy perfume and tightest girdle" and visited wavering Texas lawmakers to convey Mrs. Johnson's support for the measure. George Mahon replied: "No one in the Texas delegation likes the bill, but no one wants to vote against Lady Bird." Carpenter also coordinated lobbying through conservation groups and elicited favorable newspaper editorials as the vote neared. On October 6, she informed the president that it would be better to bring the bill up the next day, because "members want to go home and are tired of hearing about the bill." Faced with what one newspaper called the prospect of "an ungallant rejection of Mrs. Johnson's special project," House leaders were "counting noses and twisting arms to beat the band on this one."<sup>27</sup>

When the House debated the highway beautification bill on October 7, the members were scheduled to attend a gala "Salute to Congress" at the White House that evening. Discussion of the bill began late in the afternoon and, as the proceedings went on into the evening, word circulated that the president "would rather have the bill for which his wife had campaigned zealously, than to go ahead with the Salute." In the debate, Republicans vented their resentment at the president and Lady Bird. Melvin Laird (R-Mich) complained about press reports that "we must pass the bill tonight so that it can be delivered to the lovely First Lady as a present . . . at the White House party." Robert Dole (R-Kansas) offered an amendment to substitute "Lady Bird" for "Secretary of Commerce" wherever the latter appeared in the bill. That motion lost on a voice vote. After passing an amendment limiting the authority of the secretary of commerce to rule on the size, lighting, and spacing of



billboards, the House passed the Highway Beautification Act by 245 to 138."

The Senate concurred, and President Johnson signed the Highway Beautification Act on October 22, 1965. For the first lady, the battle had meant a good deal of public visibility and political criticism. "This legislation is a WHIM of Mrs. Johnson," one billboard owner wrote the president, "and you are backing it to the hilt to please her with no regard to the effect it will have on thousands and thousands of people in the Outdoor Advertising business." In Montana, a billboard appeared calling for the "Impeachment of Lady Bird" that led cartoonist Bill Mauldin to depict a motorist crossing a landscape festooned with billboards, one of which read "Impeach Lady Bird."

The initial reaction to the end of the long struggle over highway beautification was guardedly positive. However, criticism quickly surfaced charging that the Johnson administration had conceded too much to Congress and the billboard lobby and, in Elizabeth Drew's words, that the result was a bill of "only wan beauty." Some of the criticism had a point; the White House might have done more to enlist conservationist support and to resist Congressional weakening of the bill. Still, it did become law, and that would not have occurred without Mrs. Johnson's initiatives in November and December of 1964. The momentum she imparted placed beautification on the legislative agenda and sustained the campaign through the summer of 1965. When Congress sought to bury the bills in committee, her intervention kept the bill alive in the House and Senate. She supplied overall direction to the lobbying campaign once floor action took place. She played a new role as first lady in serving as a legislative aide and lobbyist; without her the bill would not have passed. President Johnson also deserves credit for his support of the bill, but it was his wife who channeled his energies in the desired way.

Discussion of Lady Bird Johnson's impact on highway beautification rarely extends beyond the passage of the 1965 law. In fact, the struggle for highway beauty continued until the end of the Johnson presidency. The antagonists were not evenly matched. The billboard industry devoted its energy to watering down the law and encouraged Congress to repeal it altogether. The federal bureaucracy often proved more solicitous of industry needs than of the views of the first lady. Nonetheless, Mrs. Johnson and her staff labored to enlist conservation groups in the battle, to stiffen the spines of federal departments, and to stave off the assaults of the enemies of beautification on Capitol Hill.

A few examples will illustrate what Mrs. Johnson did in these areas. On private social occasions, through requests for regular progress reports, and by seeking answers to inquiries that she received regarding the slow pace of billboard removal, she reminded the Department of Commerce and the Department of Transportation of her keen concern for the program. In January 1966, she told Secretary of Commerce Connor that

"It seems most valuable to have strong administrative procedures at the outset" as the department worked on guidelines for billboard regulation." She directed aides to talk with the Bureau of Public Roads about proposed regulations that specified larger signs than in "customary" use."

When letter writers complained about government departments, such as Defense, that used billboards for advertising, the first lady sent memoranda to the secretary of defense expressing hope "that posters advertising government activities are not in violation of the provisions" of the Highway Beautification Act." Mrs. Johnson also endeavored to influence appointments involved with the enforcement of the law. She worked with Liz Carpenter to approach California state senator Fred Farr about the post of Highway Beauty Coordinator in the Bureau of Public Roads, and then had Carpenter submit Farr's name to the bureau in late 1966. Farr accepted the job early in 1967. His selection also reflected the improved relations that Mrs. Johnson sought to create with state roadside councils and other conservation groups."

The major problem that highway beauty faced in those years was in Congress where opposition persisted and memories rankled about the administration's pressure to pass Mrs. Johnson's program. In 1966 lawmakers sought to cut appropriations for beautification, and they criticized the proposed standards of the Department of Commerce regarding billboards. The principal assault on the program came in 1967 when the Highway Beautification law came up for renewal and new appropriations had to be authorized. Congressman Kluczynski called hearings on the workings of the 1965 measure with the aim of achieving, as Secretary of Transportation Alan Boyd told the president, "relaxation of the proposed standards for urban billboards." Lyndon Johnson responded to this pressure by saying that any attempt to cut back on funding for beautification would see Mrs. Johnson "come to the Capitol to lobby for the funds."

In response, Lady Bird Johnson had Liz Carpenter try to assemble anti-billboard congressmen into a coherent bloc of votes, and the first lady had pro-regulation speeches drafted for inclusion in the *Congressional Record*. In August 1967 she met with White House staff members to complain again about government use of billboards and to plan legislative strategy to deal with the House Roads subcommittee. Two months later, with beautification legislation before the House, she obtained a list of key congressmen to lobby for support of the highway program. In November 1967 she and the president discussed what should be done about the beautification legislation, and they decided to make their push to save the law."

The struggle focused on the authorization of \$85 million in beautification funds in the proposed federal highway aid act of 1968. In the House Public Works Committee, the figure was slashed to \$8.5 million, and then on the floor, the funds were dropped completely. Billboard



supporters triumphed by a 211 to 145 vote. "Our best hope," Liz Carpenter and Sharon Francis told the first lady, was "to get the [House-Senate] conferees to stick close to the Senate version" which had retained money for highway beauty. With Lady Bird Johnson personally involved in the legislative deliberations, including personal calls to lawmakers, it was still all the White House could do to retain \$2 million for billboard regulation in the conference report that eventually became the Federal Highway Act of 1968. Because the measure also contained language about the controversial Three Sisters Bridge project in Washington, D.C., Mrs. Johnson and the president weighed carefully whether the bill should be vetoed. "It is a mother hubbard, with many things thrown in," she said. "The beautification advantages may not be worth the disadvantages." In the end, responding to the urgings of key Senate Democrats, the president decided not to veto the measure.<sup>1</sup>

The conclusion of this congressional battle also marked the end of Mrs. Johnson's involvement with highway beautification as a legislative program in her husband's presidency. After she left Washington, she remained active on behalf of Texas roads, and her National Wildflower Research Center now promotes wildflowers as an efficient and beautiful way to landscape the roadsides.<sup>2</sup> In the years since the Johnsons left Washington, the Highway Beautification Act has been further amended, often studied, and sporadically enforced; many proponents of billboard control now regard it as worthless. The "just compensation" provision has proved both a continuing obstacle to sufficient funding and a deterrent to states and localities seeking to regulate billboards. The 1965 law has become, as the journalist Neal R. Peirce expressed it, "a proven paper tiger against the thousands of billboards blighting America's highways."<sup>3</sup>

To the extent that the Highway Beautification Act was loosely drafted and framed without a command of the complexities of the billboard issue, President and Mrs. Johnson bear some of the responsibility for the unhappy results of the law. They believed in having generalists around them, rather than experts, and they relied on aides and staff members who could not match the knowledge and precision of the billboard lobbyists and their congressional allies. Their failure to enlist roadside councils and conservation experts in shaping the original bill proved crucial.

The hard reality, however, was that even a rigorous billboard regulation measure would have faced almost certain defeat in Congress in 1965. There simply has been little congressional support for the kind of law that conservationists have advocated. Mrs. Johnson's support for highway beauty in late 1964 placed it as high on the Great Society agenda as it would ever have reached. Her endorsement and the public impact of the Natural Beauty Conference created enough momentum to carry the matter ahead in Congress through the summer of 1965. Without her

personal lobbying and her influence with the president, the bill would have died in the September-October debates. From 1966 until her husband left office, Lady Bird sustained the highway beauty program with her personal commitment. No one in the government in a position of influence cared as much about it as she did, and no one with power accorded it as much backing. Her efforts prevented the program from disappearing in a Congress angry over the Vietnam War and determined to cut back on social programs. She was the essential element, the catalyst, that kept highway beautification in being.

Whether it was all worth doing is another issue. Friends of billboard control argue that having no bill would have been preferable to the 1965 law, and that the Johnson administration should have built a public consensus behind regulation and pushed for a more stringent law. Anything is possible, but the record of congressional distaste for billboard legislation does not indicate that a more potent highway beautification law would have had a chance. If Mrs. Johnson had done nothing about highway beauty, the issue would likely have sputtered along in the rear of other environmental questions. Instead, the Highway Beautification Act made the problem a matter of continuing public debate, and the recent upsurge of local regulations in cities such as Houston, San Antonio, and Austin suggests that a new round of billboard control may be on the way.<sup>4</sup> For all the faults of the law associated with her name, Lady Bird Johnson deserves credit for her part as a catalyst in making highway beauty and billboard control an enduring part of the effort to improve the national landscape.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>John P. Crevelli, "The Final Act of the Greatest Conservation President," *Prologue*, 12 (1980), 173-91.

<sup>2</sup>The memoirs are James B. West, with Mary Lynn Kotz, *Upstairs at the White House: My Life With the First Ladies* (New York, 1973), 331-32; Traphes Bryant, with Frances Spatz Leighton, *Dog Days at the White House: The Outrageous Memoirs of the Presidential Kennel Keeper* (New York, 1975), 106; Nancy Dickerson, *Among Those Present: A Reporter's View of 25 Years in Washington* (New York, 1976), 106, 136; and Barbara Howar, *Laughing All the Way* (New York, 1973), 126.

<sup>3</sup>June Sochen, *Movers and Shakers: American Women Thinkers and Activists, 1900-1970* (New York, 1973), 244-45; Abigail McCarthy, "ER as First Lady," in Joan Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman, eds., *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt* (Bloomington, IN, 1984), 220-21; Vaughan Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (Lawrence, KS, 1983), 137.

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Brenner Drew, "Lady Bird's Beauty Bill," *Atlantic*, 216 (December 1965), 68-72. For the provisions of the bill, see *Congressional Record*, 89 Cong., 1 Sess. (October 13, 1965), 26860-62.

<sup>5</sup>*The New York Times*, January 28, 1985. For the earlier criticism, see Charles F. Floyd and Peter J. Shedd, *Highway Beautification: The Environmental Movement's Greatest Failure* (Boulder, CO, 1979), 1; and Government Accounting Office, *The Outdoor Advertising Program Needs To Be Reassessed* (Gaithersburg, MD, 1985), 42-43.



"John T. Connor to Mrs. Johnson, January 19, and Mrs. Johnson to Connor, January 22, 1966, John T. Connor File, Alphabetical Files, WHSF, box 101.

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