



Obituaries

Richard N. Goodwin, 'supreme generalist' who was top aide to JFK and LBJ, dies at 86

By [Matt Schudel](#) May 21 [✉Email the author](#)

Richard N. Goodwin, a top adviser and speechwriter to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson who was credited with coining the term “[the Great Society](#)” to describe Johnson’s ambitious domestic agenda of the 1960s before parting ways with the president over the Vietnam War, died May 20 at his home in Concord, Mass. He was 86.

The cause was complications from cancer, said his wife, Pulitzer Prize-winning presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. Early in his career, Mr. Goodwin was something of a prodigy of public service. Before he turned 30, he was a law clerk at the U.S. Supreme Court, a congressional investigator who helped uncover the television quiz-show scandals of the 1950s, a speechwriter for Kennedy, a White House official and a deputy undersecretary of state.

Known for his craggy face, blunt manner and ever-present cigars, Mr. Goodwin had a sharp mind — he was first in his class at Harvard Law School — and, some would say, sharper elbows. He was considered one of the closest confidants of Kennedy and his brother Robert F. Kennedy, then the attorney general.

In his book “A Thousand Days,” about Kennedy’s presidency, historian and White House adviser [Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.](#) pronounced Mr. Goodwin “the supreme generalist who could turn from Latin America to saving the Nile Monuments, from civil rights to planning a White House dinner for the Nobel Prize winners, from composing a parody of Norman Mailer to drafting a piece of legislation, from lunching with a Supreme Court Justice to dining with [actress] Jean Seberg — and at the same time retain an unquenchable spirit of sardonic liberalism and unceasing drive to get things done.”

During the 1960 presidential campaign, Mr. Goodwin worked alongside head speechwriter [Ted Sorensen](#) as one of Kennedy’s most gifted phrasemakers. He then became the top White House authority on Latin America and launched the Alliance for Progress, an economic development program for Central and South America.

In 1961, soon after the catastrophic, American-backed Bay of Pigs invasion that attempted the overthrow of the new socialist regime of Fidel Castro in Cuba, Mr. Goodwin had a secret meeting with Ernesto “Che” Guevara, an architect of the Cuban revolution, while both were in Uruguay to ratify the Alliance for Progress.

“But, of course, when we started this conversation though, he said, ‘Mr. Goodwin, I’d like to thank you for the Bay of Pigs,’ ” Mr. Goodwin recalled in a 2007 gathering at the John F. Kennedy library in Boston. “He said, ‘We were a pretty shaky middle class, support was uncertain, and this solidified everything for us.’ So what could I say? I knew he was right.”

Over the objections of State Department diplomats, Mr. Goodwin arranged a goodwill tour by Kennedy to South America, which turned out to be a resounding success. Mr. Goodwin later moved to a top position at the newly formed Peace Corps.

A New York Times profile announcing yet another appointment for Mr. Goodwin as the White House adviser on the arts described him as “someone whom the President turns to naturally and with a sense of intimacy.”

The profile appeared on Nov. 22, 1963, the day Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Mr. Goodwin never assumed his role as arts adviser and, instead, joined the Johnson administration as a speechwriter and special assistant to the president.

In April 1964, Mr. Goodwin recalled in a 1988 memoir, “Remembering America: A Voice From the Sixties,” he found himself skinny-dipping in the White House swimming pool with Johnson and another presidential adviser, Bill Moyers.

“Now, some men want power so they can strut around to ‘Hail to the Chief,’ ” Mr. Goodwin recalled Johnson saying as they splashed in the pool. “Some . . . want it to make money; I wanted power to use it. And I’m going to use it. And use it right if you boys’ll help me.”

Mr. Goodwin took the name the Great Society from a 50-year-old book by a British sociologist to describe an idealistic vision of America encompassing advances in civil rights, health care, education, environmental preservation and what became known as “the War on Poverty.” Johnson first used the term “Great Society” in a [speech in May 1964](#).

The following year, soon after civil rights marchers were attacked by police officers and vigilantes on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., Johnson asked Mr. Goodwin to draft a speech addressing the country’s racial divisions.

In just eight hours, Mr. Goodwin composed an address that Johnson delivered before a joint session of Congress on March 15, 1965. Often called the [“We Shall Overcome” speech](#), after a popular civil rights anthem, it was one of the most powerful statements of Johnson’s presidency.

“Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man,” Johnson said. “What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”

After the speech, Mr. Goodwin returned with Johnson to the White House, where they sat up talking and sipping Scotch until 3 a.m. At 33, Mr. Goodwin had, in many ways, reached the summit of his career.

Sitting with LBJ, he “could indulge, inwardly, my mingled arrogance, pride, excitement at authorship of words that had touched, might change, the nation,” he later wrote.

Within months, Johnson signed the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, which banned discrimination in voting and office-seeking in the United States. He gave one of the pens he used to sign the bill to Mr. Goodwin.

In addition to the Voting Rights Act, other Great Society legislation established Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, urban renewal programs and national endowments for the arts and humanities. At the same time, however, Johnson was escalating the U.S. military presence in Vietnam, leading to an irreparable split with Mr. Goodwin, who resigned in September 1965.

The next year, he helped Robert Kennedy craft a memorable address in South Africa in which he condemned the apartheid system and warned against the “danger of futility: the belief that there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills. . . . Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lots of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

That same year, Mr. Goodwin also published a book critical of the Vietnam War, [“Triumph or Tragedy.”](#) Under an assumed name, he wrote several articles for the New Yorker magazine denouncing Johnson’s Vietnam policies. He also represented Jacqueline Kennedy in a legal battle over perceived invasions of privacy in [William Manchester’s](#) book “The Death of a President.” Portions of the manuscript were deleted, and tapes of Manchester’s interviews with the widowed first lady were sealed for 100 years.

In 1968, he wrote speeches for antiwar presidential candidate Sen. [Eugene J. McCarthy](#) (D-Minn.). But when Robert Kennedy entered the race, Mr. Goodwin joined his old friend, saying he could not “campaign to defeat a man I’ve eaten dinner with once a week for these many years.”

After Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles in June, Mr. Goodwin rejoined McCarthy, who lost the nomination to Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey (D-Minn.).

Mr. Goodwin later remarked that a decade that began with the youthful promise of John F. Kennedy’s election ended in sorrow and despair.

“For a moment, it seemed as if the entire country, the whole spinning globe, rested, malleable and receptive, in our beneficent hands,” Mr. Goodwin wrote in his memoir. That sense of hope “came to an end in a Los Angeles hospital on June 6, 1968,” with the death of Bobby Kennedy.

Richard Naradof Goodwin was born Dec. 7, 1931, in Boston. His father was an engineer, his mother a homemaker. Mr. Goodwin said his Jewish heritage sometimes led to schoolyard beatings during his childhood.

He graduated in 1953 from Tufts University in Medford, Mass. After two years in the Army, he received his law degree from Harvard in 1958. He clerked for Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter and then worked for a U.S. House committee investigating corrupt television quiz shows, particularly “Twenty One,” on which literary scholar Charles Van Doren was given answers in advance and won more than \$100,000 in prize money.

Mr. Goodwin wrote about the investigation in his memoir “Remembering America,” which formed the basis of the Oscar-nominated 1994 film [“Quiz Show,”](#) directed by Robert Redford. Mr. Goodwin was portrayed by actor Rob Morrow.

Mr. Goodwin’s first wife, Sandra Leverant, died in 1972. Survivors include his wife of 42 years, Doris Kearns Goodwin of Concord; a son from his first marriage, Richard Goodwin; two sons from his second marriage, Michael Goodwin and Joseph Goodwin; and two granddaughters.

In 1988, Mr. Goodwin stirred up controversy when he wrote in “[Remembering America](#)” about what he called Johnson’s “sporadic paranoid disruptions” that affected the president’s judgment, particularly about Vietnam.

He was “convinced that President Johnson’s always large eccentricities had taken a huge leap into unreason,” but other longtime White House insiders, including former secretary of state Dean Rusk, derided such speculation as “nonsense.”

Mr. Goodwin was the political editor of Rolling Stone for a short time in the 1970s and published several other books, including “[The American Condition](#)” (1974) and “[Promises to Keep: A Call for a New American Revolution](#)” (1992). He also wrote a play about the 17th-century dispute between the scientist Galileo and Pope Urban VIII.

After 1968, Mr. Goodwin largely stayed out of the fray of electoral politics, but he did write one other memorable speech — Al Gore’s concession after the disputed presidential election of 2000.

In his final years, Mr. Goodwin was seen as one of the last links to the Camelot era of the Kennedys. It was never too late, he wrote in his memoir, to “pick up the lost instruments and resume the great experiment which is America.”

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