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Politics

LBJ fought a quiet battle to desegregate housing — his own

As vice president, he renounced restrictive covenants on his house



President Lyndon B. Johnson reaches to shake hands with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. after presenting the civil rights leader with one of the 72 pens used to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in Washington on July 2, 1964. (AP)

By **Karen Tumulty and Alice Crites** January 5 at 7:29 PM

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A controversy over the portrayal of Lyndon B. Johnson in the movie “Selma” has revived interest in the 36th president’s role in the civil rights struggles of the 20th century.

But a little-noted episode from the period shows that LBJ believed that the battle for equality should — quite literally — begin at home. As vice president in 1961, he and his wife, Lady Bird, defied the discriminatory real estate covenants that prevented Jews, African Americans and other minorities from living in their elite Northwest

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Washington neighborhood.

Their stand is a reminder of a practice once common in Washington and elsewhere. Many of the federal government’s most powerful figures lived in sections of the city where segregation was a contractually mandated part of the deal they made when they bought their homes.

The picture that emerges from this small, quiet incident bolsters the arguments of Johnson’s defenders, who say that he is [unfairly portrayed in the new, critically acclaimed film](#). Some complain that the movie depicts him as a reluctant warrior for civil rights and an early adversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the drive to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

When Johnson became John F. Kennedy’s vice president in 1961, there was no official residence for the holder of the nation’s second-highest office. So that year, he and Lady Bird [bought an estate](#) from the legendary hostess and former ambassador Perle Mesta in the graceful community of Spring Valley at the city’s leafy edge.

President Lyndon B. Johnson addresses a joint session of Congress in Washington on March 15, 1965, to outline his proposals for voting rights for all citizens. Vice President Hubert Humphrey is at left and House Speaker John McCormack is at right. (AP)

The property was called “The Elms.”

One thing about the

neighborhood rankled them: A set of restrictive covenants, the likes of which were common at the time.

Typically, the language of such agreements stipulated that no part of the property could be occupied by or sold to “negroes, or any person or persons of negro blood or

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extraction, or to any person of the Semitic Race, blood, or origin, which racial description shall be deemed to include Armenians, Jews, Hebrews, Persians and Syrians.”

So, in a small act of rebellion, the Johnsons [filed their own legal document](#) on June 15, 1961.

The affidavit declared that the buyers refused to be bound by any covenant that “restricts their right to permit the property to be occupied by, sold, demised, transferred, conveyed unto, or in trust for, leased, rented or given, to anyone, because of any such person’s race, color or creed.”

Further, the Johnsons argued that any such restrictions were not “legally or morally enforceable.”

Such covenants were also becoming a political embarrassment. Diplomats from African nations, for instance, said they found it difficult to find suitable housing in the District. Leaders of the burgeoning civil rights movement also complained about such restrictions.

For Johnson, the issue would come to a head sooner than anyone expected.

On the Friday night after Kennedy’s November 1963 assassination, as attorney Sheldon Cohen was heading out to services at his synagogue, he got a call from Abe Fortas, whom Johnson would later appoint to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In an interview Monday, Cohen recalled that Fortas

asked him to come over to his Georgetown home to help the new president and first lady sort out their personal finances.

Their radio stations would go into a blind trust. But how to dispose of the house?

“You sell it to anybody who’s got the ability to [pay for] it,” Lady Bird told Cohen, according to his recollection.

He added that it was a bold move on their part. “I couldn’t have bought a house in Spring Valley at that point,” Cohen said. “It was just the beginning of desegregation.”

If the Johnsons had condoned the continued segregation of their neighborhood, he added, “nobody would have known the difference.”

The house sold the following spring to Florida investor Luther B. Smith. Within two months, Smith sold it to its current owner, the government of Algeria, a predominantly Muslim country, which uses the property as a home for its ambassador. Algeria, too, announced that it would not be bound by the restrictive covenant.

Amid the riots that occurred after King was assassinated in April 1968, Johnson argued that the tragedy should become a rallying point for [speedy passage of long-stalled fair housing legislation](#), which would ban racial and religious discrimination in the sale, rental or financing of property.

Less than one week after King’s death, Johnson signed the bill into law.

Karen Tumulty is a national political correspondent for The Washington Post, where she received the 2013 Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting.
