

The Great Society and Its Critics



Applying Historical Thinking to Better
Understand LBJ's Great Society

Content Block

Use the document set to respond to the following:

1. What was the Great Society effort designed to accomplish?
2. What types of programs did the Great Society create in this attempt?
3. What are the primary historical opinions regarding the Great Society?

By 1964, many Americans were used to thinking of their nation as the wealthiest and most powerful on Earth.



After victory in World War II, the United States was seen as the world's number-one superpower in its Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union.

Navy recruiting poster, 1957

At home, Americans were enjoying a prosperity only few could have imagined even just a few decades earlier.



New York City skyline, 1962

For most, the Great Depression and the hard years of World War II were fading memories.



In fact, young people of a huge new generation had no memory of those years at all.

However, America was not a perfectly peaceful land.



A massive civil rights movement was fighting to overcome the legacy of slavery and end the injustice of “Jim Crow” segregation.

The March on Washington,
1963

Deep pockets of poverty still existed, in remote rural areas, and in inner-city slums where large numbers of minorities lived.



Slums being torn down to make room for a housing project

So invisible had this poverty become to many that a famous book of the day called these areas “The Other America.”

In 1960, John F. Kennedy and his running mate Lyndon B. Johnson vowed to deal with these forgotten poor.



As part of their campaign, JFK and LBJ called for a “New Frontier.” Among other things, they promised to deal with what they called “depressed areas.”

President Kennedy made a start in trying to deal with these problems—and with the need for major new civil rights laws.



Johnson is sworn in on a plane just after the assassination with Kennedy's wife Jacqueline at his side

Kennedy's assassination (November 22, 1963) put a tragic end to his presidency. Johnson took over and promised to continue JFK's plans. In fact, he soon went far beyond Kennedy's plans.

The “Johnson Treatment”



George James, the legendary New York Times photographer, brilliantly captures the essence of Lyndon B. Johnson's power in this series of 1957 images called **"The Johnson Treatment."** Johnson, left, then Senate majority leader, works over Theodore F. Green, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.



Concerning civil rights, LBJ took charge of getting Congress to pass the most sweeping laws in American history.



Martin Luther King Jr. congratulates LBJ for signing the Voting Rights Act

Civil Rights Act (1964)

Banned discrimination in all public accommodations, employment, etc.

Voting Rights Act (1965)

Federal protection to ensure equal voting rights for all

Then in a speech in May 1964, he used the phrase “Great Society” for his vision for America’s future.



Johnson at the University of Michigan
commencement exercises

*“For in your time we have the
opportunity to move not
only
toward the rich society and
the powerful society, but
upward to the Great
Society.”*

Lyndon Johnson,
University of Michigan, May 22, 1964

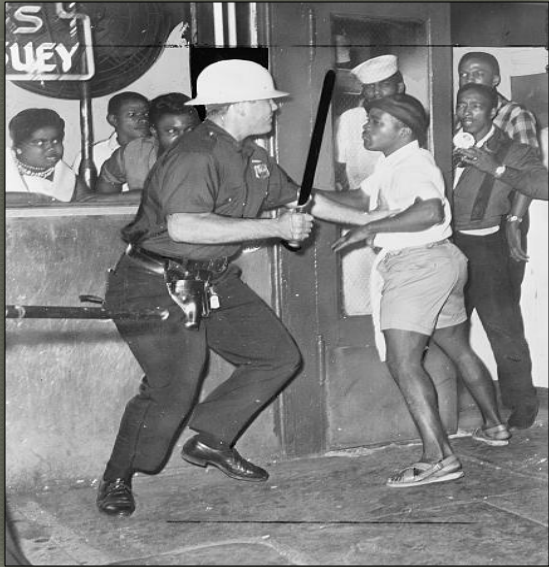
His Great Society programs dealt with a number of problems affecting many different groups.



First Lady Lady Bird Johnson
reads to a Head Start class

- Medicare and Medicaid
- The Civil Rights laws
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act
- Head Start preschool education
- Job Corps
- Neighborhood Youth Corps
- Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)
- Food Stamp Program
- Model Cities Program
- National Endowment for the Arts
- National Endowment for the Humanities
- Various environmental laws

However, LBJ saw the festering anger among minorities in America's inner cities as a great challenge.



New York City, 1964



Washington, D. C., 1968

The part of the Great Society known as the “War on Poverty” was especially directed at this problem.



Johnson at a job training center

The War on Poverty funded many community action programs in the nation's inner-cities.

Was the Great Society, with its War on Poverty, a success? Did it make a difference at all?



The Great Society had its champions and defenders. It also had critics of all kinds—and still does.

Between the Great Society's defenders and its critics, how can historians come to firm conclusions about this reform effort?



In part, it depends on which primary sources they decide are the most important.

For example, some sources see the Great Society as a huge and permanent success.

“To me the public legacy of those years was nothing short of a revolution that saved this nation. It was during those years that Johnson proposed and Congress enacted hundreds of bills that forever changed America.”

From *A Public and Private Life*, by Joseph Califano,
a key adviser to LBJ

Others suggest that its hope to end poverty forever was a dream doomed to fail and to produce only anger and distrust.

“Faith in the perfectibility of man and confidence that good intentions together with strenuous exertions will hasten his progress onward and upward lead to bold programs that promise to do what no one knows how to do and what perhaps cannot be done, and therefore end in frustration, loss of mutual respect and trust, anger, and even coercion.”

From *The Unheavenly City* by Edward Banfield,
a key critic of the Great Society

Historical Context – “How did contemporaries view the Great society?”

Continuities and Changes – “What changed and what stayed the same as a result of the Great Society?”

Causes and Effects – “What caused the turmoil in inner cities during the Great Society era?”

Comparisons and Contrasts – “What were the political and economic outcomes of the Great Society compared to its social and cultural results?”

Note: Use the document set “Great Society Documents” to complete this activity.

ESSENTIAL HISTORICAL QUESTION:

*Is the legacy of the Great
Society one of success or
failure?*

2-Minute Drill

- Make sure you have the textbook readings for tomorrow completed
- Read the brief selection “Conservatism begins in the Sixties.” under Period 8 on the website