

The Great Society Speech (1964)

Lyndon B. Johnson

Historical Background

Lyndon Johnson was born and raised in rural Texas. During and after attending college at Southwest Texas Teachers College (now Texas State University), he taught public school, including a year at a segregated Mexican-American school in a poverty-stricken community in south Texas. The lack of educational and economic opportunities for the students he taught affected him deeply, and throughout his long political career, education and poverty were central issues in his work. When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Johnson became president, and in 1964, he was elected president in his own right in a resounding victory, largely based on his campaign platform. Known as the Great Society, his vision included active governmental intervention not only in issues of education and poverty, but also in civil rights. In Johnson's 1964 speech, he outlines his vision to alleviate and reform the ills of American society, making it not just rich and powerful but truly great.

Historical Significance

Johnson's Great Society was a progressive reform program that placed the federal government in a position of central responsibility in addressing the problems of poverty, educational opportunity, and civil rights. He authored, campaigned for, and enacted powerful laws and policies that included the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Head Start, Medicare/Medicaid, Job Corps, VISTA, and many others. Many felt he did not go far enough in enacting sweeping reform. Others felt that he had overstepped the place of federal government in private lives. The problematic escalation of military involvement in Vietnam overshadowed his domestic program, as did the increasingly radical protest movement sweeping the nation's campuses and cities.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: Great Society; Head Start; Medicare and Medicaid; War on Poverty; Title I; Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act; Urbanization and Sprawl; Urban Blight

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Define and describe the key elements of LBJ's Great Society initiative;
- Compare LBJ's Great Society to other ambitious presidential plans such as the FDR's New Deal and Truman's Fair Deal;

- describe LBJ's diagnosis of the ills of the nation;
- compare and evaluate this diagnosis with other historical evidence;
- evaluate the progress made by programs initiated by the Great Society to solve the problems outlined by LBJ.

Questions to Explore

How central to the speech are issues of racial civil rights? How central do you think they should have been?

Do you agree with Johnson's vision? What would you add? What would you remove? Is his vision too ambitious? Should it be the task of presidents to try to make people's lives more meaningful? What are the advantages and risks of trying to elevate the national life in the way Johnson aspires to do?

Johnson devotes a great deal of his speech to education, a policy area usually addressed by states and localities. Then and today it is controversial for the federal government to involve itself in this area. What are the merits and the drawbacks to greater federal involvement in the educational sphere?

Johnson paraphrases Aristotle as follows: "Men come together in cities in order to live, but they remain together in order to live the good life." Why do people come to live in cities in contemporary America? Why do some choose to live in suburbs or in more rural areas? Is choice the right word to use in describing the place Americans live? Do you think Aristotle's view is compatible with the way of life practiced by modern American individuals? Why or why not?

Johnson devotes a surprisingly large amount of the speech to the theme of beautification of the United States. While some of this is related to the fight against pollution, much of it is not. What do you think about this focus? Would a president today get a chance to make this one of his primary issues? Why or why not?