

President Johnson's Great Society

With the sorrow created by the unfulfilled promise of slain President Kennedy and his New Frontier came an overwhelming Democrat mandate in the 1964 presidential election. With unprecedented political skill and Liberal Democrat control of both houses of Congress to overwhelm conservative opposition from southerners and Republicans, President Johnson launched one of the largest legislative agendas in our history—The Great Society. Although the conflict in Vietnam and conservative opposition would ultimately take the nation's attention and funding away from the Great Society's programs and destroy Johnson's presidency, its legacy, good or bad, continues today.

Background to the Great Society

Senate Majority leader Lyndon B. Johnson from Texas was a skilled lawmaker, frequently demonstrating a unique ability to get laws passed through negotiation, often employing a personal style that involved physical persuasion and closeness—the “Johnson treatment.” During the 1960 presidential campaign, Kennedy's advisers believed that Johnson's connections in Congress and his Southern background would help Kennedy's presidential chances, and they asked him to be Kennedy's Vice-Presidential candidate. Johnson agreed, helping Kennedy win important states in the South and the 1960 election.

With the impact of President Kennedy's death coupled with President Johnson's leadership, Congress passed two bills that Kennedy had previously failed to maneuver through Congress—a tax cut to help stimulate the economy and the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which forbade job discrimination and the segregation of public accommodations. Campaigning for the 1964 Presidential election and influenced by intellectuals such as **Michael Harrington**, Johnson declared a “war on poverty.” He challenged Americans to build a “**Great Society**” to eliminate the conditions experienced by the poor. Johnson's decisive victory over his archconservative Republican opponent **Barry Goldwater** of Arizona became a mandate for his goals. Johnson presented his goals for the Great Society (a term coined by speechwriter **Richard Goodwin**) in a speech at the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964. In this address, which preceded the election-year party conventions, Johnson described his plans to solve pressing domestic problems:

We are going to assemble the best thought and the broadest knowledge from all over the world to find those answers for America. I intend to establish working groups to prepare a series of White House conferences and meetings--on the cities, on natural beauty, on the quality of education, and on other emerging challenges. And from these meetings and from this inspiration and from these studies we will begin to set our course toward the “Great Society.”

Implementation of the Great Society

With the help of multiple experts, a dedicated personal staff, including **Jack Valenti**, **Bill Moyers**, etc., and the democratically controlled Eighty-Ninth Congress, Johnson's Great Society began in earnest with the passage of the **Economic Opportunity Act**. This law created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which itself reflected a fragile consensus among policymakers that the best way to deal with poverty was not simply to raise the incomes of the poor but to help them better themselves through education, job training, and community development. Central to its mission was the idea of “community action,” the participation of the poor in framing and administering the programs designed to help them.

The War on Poverty began with a \$1 billion appropriation in 1964 and spent another \$2 billion in the following two years. It spawned dozens of programs, among them the **Job Corps**, whose purpose was to help disadvantaged youth develop marketable skills; the **Neighborhood Youth Corps**, established to give poor urban youths work experience and to encourage them to stay in school; **Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)**, a domestic version of the Peace Corps, which placed concerned citizens with community-based agencies to work towards empowerment of the poor; the **Model Cities Program** for urban redevelopment; **Upward Bound**, which assisted poor high school students entering college; legal services for the poor; the **Food Stamps program**; the **Community Action Program**, which initiated local **Community Action Agencies** charged with helping the poor become self-sufficient.

Facilitating the educational component of the Great Society was the **Elementary and Secondary Education**

Act of 1965, designed by Commissioner of Education **Francis Keppel**. It provided significant federal aid to public education, initially allotting more than \$1 billion to help schools purchase materials and start special education programs in schools with a high concentration of low-income children. Additionally, the **Higher Education Act** of 1965 increased federal money given to universities, created scholarships and low-interest loans for students, and established a **National Teachers Corps** to provide teachers to poverty-stricken areas of the United States. It began a transition from federally funded institutional assistance to individual student aid. Finally, the **Bilingual Education Act** of 1968 offered federal aid to local school districts to assist them to address the needs of children with limited English-speaking ability, while **Project Head Start** offered preschool education for poor children.

Addressing the provision of health care to the impoverished, the **Social Security Act of 1965** authorized **Medicare** and **Medicaid** to provide federal funding for many of the medical costs of older Americans, in the case of Medicare, and welfare recipients, in the case of Medicaid. The legislation overcame the bitter resistance to the idea of publicly-funded health care or “socialized medicine” by making its benefits available to everyone over sixty-five, regardless of need, and by linking payments to the existing private insurance system.



Perhaps the most significant achievement of the Great Society was to bring to fruition the rewards of a long and bloody civil rights movement and translating them into law. Four civil rights acts were passed, including three laws in the first two years of Johnson's presidency. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade job discrimination and the segregation of public accommodations. The **Voting Rights Act** of 1965 assured minority registration and voting. It suspended use of literacy or other voter-qualification tests that had sometimes served to keep African-Americans off voting lists and provided for federal court lawsuits to stop discriminatory poll taxes (Ultimately the **24th Amendment** would end the practice of poll taxing). It also reinforced the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** by authorizing the appointment of federal voting examiners in areas that did not meet voter-participation requirements. The **Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965** abolished the national-origin quotas in immigration law. The **Civil Rights Act of 1968** banned housing discrimination and extended constitutional protections to Native Americans on reservations.

Other Great Society measures were directed at arts and culture: The **National Endowments for the Arts**; The **National Endowment for the Humanities**; and **Public Broadcasting Act**, creating the **Corporation for Public Broadcasting**, which would eventually operated the **Public Broadcast Service (PBS)** and **National Public Radio (NPR)**

The creation of the **Department of Transportation** in 1966 emphasized government efforts to improve public transportation. The **Urban Mass Transportation Act** of 1964 provided \$375 million for large-scale urban public or private rail projects in the form of matching funds to cities and states and created the **Urban Mass Transit Administration** (now the Federal Transit Administration). The **National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act** of 1966 and the **Highway Safety Act** of 1966 were enacted, largely as a result of Ralph Nader's book *Unsafe at Any Speed*.

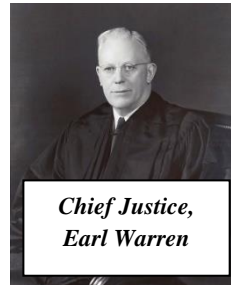
In the area of consumer protection, President Johnson, in 1964, named Assistant Secretary of Labor Esther Peterson to be the first presidential assistant for consumer affairs. With this emphasis on safety, the **Cigarette Labeling Act** of 1965 was passed, requiring packages to carry warning labels, the Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 (already mentioned) was passed to set standards through creation of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and the **Fair Packaging and Labeling Act** was passed to require products to identify manufacturer, address, and mark quantity and servings. The **Child Safety Act** of 1966 was passed to prohibit any chemical so dangerous that no warning can make it safe. **Flammable Fabrics Act** of 1967 set standards for children's sleepwear, but not baby blankets. **Wholesome Meat Act** of 1967 required inspection of meat which must meet federal standards. **Truth-in-Lending Act** of 1968 required lenders and credit providers to disclose the full cost of finance charges in both dollars and annual percentage rates, on installment loan and sales. **Wholesome Poultry Products Act** of 1968 required inspection of poultry which must meet federal standards. **Land Sales Disclosure Act** of 1968 provided safeguards against fraudulent practices in the sale of land. **Radiation Safety Act** of 1968 provided standards and recalls for defective electronic products.

Finally, the Great Society extended concerns for the environment beyond conservation, by promoting numerous new environmental laws to protect air and water quality.

The Supreme Court and the Great Society

The wave of liberal reform that characterized the Great Society also affected the Supreme Court. Chief Justice **Earl Warren** took an active role (judicial activism) in promoting more liberal policies. The **Warren Court** had ruled school segregation unconstitutional in **Brown**. The court also went on to ban prayer in public schools and strengthen the right of free speech. The Warren Court also changed congressional **reapportionment**, or the way in which states redraw their election districts. The Court ruled that election districts in each state had to have roughly the same number of people in them. Because so many people lived in the cities, the court's ruling led to the creation of many new urban districts. As a result, political power shifted from the countryside to the cities, where people once under represented were given more political power. The Warren Court also strengthened the rights of people accused of crimes. The Court ruled police had to read suspects their rights before questioning them, known as **Miranda rights**. The most famous of the Warren Court Decisions include the following:

- **Brown v. Board of Education** (1954), which banned the segregation of public schools;
- The "**one man, one vote**" cases of 1962–1964, which dramatically altered the relative power of rural regions in many states (reapportionment); **Baker v Carr** and **Reynolds v Sims**
- **Gideon v. Wainwright** (1963), which held that the Sixth Amendment required that indigent non-capital criminal defendants receive publicly-funded counsel (the law to that point only required the assignment of free counsel to indigent capital defendants);
- **Miranda v. Arizona** (1966), which required that certain rights of a person being interrogated while in police custody be clearly explained, including the right to an attorney (often called the "Miranda warning").
- **Loving v. Virginia** (1967), which allowed inter-racial marriage, over-turning the Racial Integrity Act of 1924.



Impact of the Great Society

The Great Society and the Warren Court changed America. People disagree on whether these changes left the nation better or worse off than before. On one hand, Johnson's antipoverty measures helped reduce the suffering of many people and lowered the number of people living in poverty. However, many of Johnson's proposals did not achieve their stated goals. Most people agree on one point: No president since World War II increased the power and reach of federal government more than Lyndon Johnson. Eventually, some Americans began to question the increased size of the federal government. This led to the rise of a new group of Conservative Republican (neo-conservative) leaders, like **Ronald Reagan**. It would seem the Great Society increased the rights of criminals, created a class of lazy welfare-dependent citizens, and created huge government bureaucracies and expenditure, or it brought our society into the modern age and fulfilled the hopes and expectations of liberal reformers from generations passed.

