

Great Society Speech, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1964 (Modified)

I have come today from the turmoil of your Capital to the tranquility (peace) of your campus to speak about the future of your country. . .

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning. . .

It is harder and harder to live the good life in American cities today. There is not enough housing for our people or transportation for our traffic. . . . Our society will never be great until our cities are great. . .

A second place where we begin to build the Great Society is in our countryside. We have always prided ourselves on being not only America the strong and America the free, but America the beautiful. Today that beauty is in danger. The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air that we breathe, are threatened with pollution. Our parks are overcrowded, our seashores overburdened. Green fields and dense forests are disappearing. . .

A third place to build the Great Society is in the classrooms of America. There your children's lives will be shaped. Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination. We are still far from that goal. . . Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty. . .

For better or for worse, your generation has been appointed by history to deal with those problems and to lead America toward a new age. You have the chance never before afforded to any people in any age. You can help build a society where the demands of morality, and the needs of the spirit, can be realized in the life of the Nation.

So, will you join in the battle to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires, whatever his belief, or race, or the color of his skin?

Will you join in the battle to give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty?

Will you join in the battle to build the Great Society, to prove that our material progress is only the foundation on which we will build a richer life of mind and spirit?

Source: The speech above was delivered by President Johnson as a commencement (graduation) speech at the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964.

Major Great Society Programs

War on Poverty: forty programs that were intended to eliminate poverty by improving living conditions and enabling people to lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty.

Education: sixty separate bills that provided for new and better-equipped classrooms, minority scholarships, and low-interest student loans.

Medicare & Medicaid: guaranteed health care to every American over sixty-five and to low-income families.

The Environment: introduced measures to protect clean air and water.

National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities: government funding for artists, writers and performers.

Head Start: program for four- and five-year-old children from low-income families.

Sampling of the laws passed during the Johnson administration to promote the Great Society.

PREVENTION & ABATEMENT OF AIR
POLLUTION
(THE CLEAN AIR ACT)
DEC. 17, 1963

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ACT
DEC. 18, 1963

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964
JULY 2, 1964

URBAN MASS TRANSPORTATION
JULY 9, 1964

FEDERAL-AID HIGHWAY ACT OF 1964
AUG. 13, 1964

CRIMINAL JUSTICE ACT OF 1964
AUG. 20, 1964

FOOD STAMP ACT OF 1964
AUG. 31, 1964

NATIONAL ARTS CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT
ACT OF 1964
SEPT. 3, 1964

SOCIAL SECURITY AMENDMENTS
JULY 30, 1965

VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965
AUG. 6, 1965

HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT ACT
AUG. 10, 1965

PUBLIC WORKS AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT ACT
AUG. 26, 1965

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN
DEVELOPMENT ACT
SEPT. 9, 1965

NATIONAL FOUNDATION ON THE ARTS &
THE HUMANITIES ACT
SEPT. 29, 1965

HIGHER EDUCATION ACT OF 1965
NOV. 8, 1965

CHILD NUTRITION ACT OF 1966
OCT. 11, 1966

CHILD PROTECTION ACT OF 1966
NOV. 3, 1966

NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH ACT
MAY 8, 1968

PRO: What Was Really Great About The Great Society (Modified)

By Joseph A. Califano Jr.

The Washington Monthly (online), October 1999

If there is a prize for the political scam of the 20th century, it should go to the conservatives for [claiming that the] Great Society programs of the 1960s were a misguided and failed social experiment that wasted taxpayers' money.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, from 1963 when Lyndon Johnson took office until 1970 as the impact of his Great Society programs were felt, the portion of Americans living below the poverty line dropped from 22.2 percent to 12.6 percent, the most dramatic decline over such a brief period in this century. . . . If the Great Society had not achieved that dramatic reduction in poverty, and the nation had not maintained it, 24 million more Americans would today be living below the poverty level. . . .

Since 1965 the federal government has provided more than a quarter of a trillion dollars in 86 million college loans to 29 million students, and more than \$14 billion in work-study awards to 6 million students. Today nearly 60 percent of full-time undergraduate students receive federal financial aid under Great Society programs. . . .

Head Start has served more than 16 million preschoolers in just about every city and county in the nation and today serves 800,000 children a year. . . . Lyndon Johnson knew that the rich had kindergartens and nursery schools; and he asked, why not the same benefits for the poor?

Is revolution too strong a word? Since 1965, 79 million Americans have signed up for Medicare. In 1966, 19 million were enrolled; in 1998, 39 million. Since 1966, Medicaid has served more than 200 million needy Americans. In 1967, it served 10 million poor citizens; in 1997, 39 million. . . . Closely related to these health programs were efforts to reduce malnutrition and hunger. Today, the Great Society's food stamp program helps feed more than 20 million men, women, and children in more than 8 million households. Since it was launched in 1967, the school breakfast program has provided a daily breakfast to nearly 100 million schoolchildren.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965. . . opened the way for black Americans to strengthen their voice at every level of government. In 1964 there were 79 black elected officials in the South and 300 in the entire nation. By 1998, there were some 9,000 elected black officials across the nation, including 6,000 in the South. . . .

Source: Joseph Califano, Jr., became a special assistant to President Johnson in July 1965, and served as President Johnson's senior domestic policy aide for the remainder of Johnson's term.

CON: War on Poverty Revisited (Modified)
By Thomas Sowell
Capitalism Magazine (online), August 17, 2004

The War on Poverty represented the crowning triumph of the liberal vision of society -- and of government programs as the solution to social problems. . .

In the liberal vision, slums bred crime. But brand-new government housing projects almost immediately became new centers of crime and quickly degenerated (declined) into new slums. . .

Rates of teenage pregnancy and venereal disease had been going down for years before the new 1960s attitudes toward sex spread rapidly through the schools, helped by War on Poverty money. These downward trends suddenly reversed and skyrocketed.

The murder rate had also been going down, for decades, and in 1960 was just under half of what it had been in 1934. Then the new 1960s policies toward curing the "root causes" of crime and creating new "rights" for criminals began. Rates of violent crime, including murder, skyrocketed.

The black family, which had survived centuries of slavery and discrimination, began rapidly disintegrating in the liberal welfare state that subsidized (paid for) unwed pregnancy and changed welfare from an emergency rescue to a way of life. . .

The economic rise of blacks began decades earlier, before any of the legislation and policies that are credited with producing that rise. The continuation of the rise of blacks out of poverty did not -- repeat, did not -- accelerate during the 1960s.

The poverty rate among black families fell from 87 percent in 1940 to 47 percent in 1960, during an era of virtually no major civil rights legislation or anti-poverty programs. . . . In various skilled trades, the incomes of blacks relative to whites more than doubled between 1936 and 1959 -- that is, before the magic 1960s decade when supposedly all progress began. The rise of blacks in professional and other high-level occupations was greater in the five years preceding the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than in the five years afterwards.

Source: Thomas Sowell is a conservative economist, author, and social commentator. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.