

Johnson's Vision: The Great Society

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (and following his victory in the presidential election of 1964), Lyndon B. Johnson worked to implement his vision of a Great Society. In addition to continued federal action on behalf of civil rights, a number of initiatives—to improve education, reform health care, and alleviate poverty—were enacted as a result of the Great Society program. Johnson also secured Congressional approval for greater American involvement in Vietnam, which would have important consequences for his domestic agenda.

1. Voting Rights for All

No law is perfect. Despite its significance, the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** was flawed because of some key omissions. One of the most important omissions was the act's lack of protection for African American voting rights. Additionally, three events that occurred in 1964 and 1965 called into question the **Great Society** program's ability to create true racial equality. The first of these events was the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, also known as **Freedom Summer**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Civil Rights Act of 1964

Civil rights law that bans discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Great Society

Lyndon Johnson's plan to eliminate poverty and racial injustice in the United States and to improve the lives of all Americans.

Freedom Summer

A 1964 civil rights campaign launched to register as many African American voters as possible in Mississippi.

During the summer of 1964, Black and White volunteers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other civil rights organizations were harassed, beaten, and arrested as they attempted to register Black voters in Mississippi. Three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman—were killed by the Ku Klux Klan. Other opponents of Black voter registration burned or destroyed approximately three dozen homes, churches, and other buildings owned by or affiliated with civil rights activists in Mississippi.

The events of Freedom Summer led to the formation of the **Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)**. The creation of this party resulted in a confrontation between Black political activists and Democratic Party regulars at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.



TERM TO KNOW

Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)

A political party organized by civil rights activists in 1964 to challenge the all-White Democratic Party in Mississippi.

During the summer of 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Robert Parris Moses, and other Mississippi civil rights activists campaigned across the state to win the seats of the all-White Mississippi Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, scheduled to take place in August. **Lyndon B. Johnson**, along with Democratic Party leaders, worried that seating the MFDP delegates at the convention would cause Southern White Democrats to walk out.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lyndon B. Johnson

Democratic U.S. president from 1963 to 1969, whose grandiose domestic agenda for civil rights and economic equality, known as the Great Society, ran up against a growing conflict in Vietnam and an unraveling of the liberal New Deal coalition that supported the Democratic Party.

Convention organizers attempted to compromise with the MFDP by proposing to seat two of its delegates as nonvoting observers. The MFDP rejected the proposal and questioned Johnson's commitment to civil rights. White Democratic delegates from Mississippi were offended that the party had been willing to negotiate with the MFDP and left the convention. Johnson's Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, won Mississippi and several other Southern states, indicating that White Democrats were frustrated by their party's civil rights initiatives and were willing to leave it to support Republican candidates.

The third event occurred in March 1965, when **Martin Luther King Jr.** and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—an organization of Black church leaders in the South at the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement—began a voter registration campaign in Selma, Alabama.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Martin Luther King Jr.

Baptist preacher, activist, and leader of the Civil Rights Movement, whose advocacy of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience characterized the movement for much of the 1950s and early 1960s.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1965, only 355 of Selma's 15,000 Black residents were registered to vote.

The campaign to register Black voters in Selma met strong White resistance, most notably on March 7, 1965, a day later known as **Bloody Sunday**.





TERM TO KNOW

Bloody Sunday

The violent suppression of a civil rights march in Selma, Alabama, by state and local law enforcement.

As approximately 600 civil rights activists crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they encountered local and state police who used tear gas against the marchers and beat them. Images of the brutal behavior of the police appeared on television screens throughout the nation and compelled the president to respond.

African American marchers in Selma, Alabama, were attacked by state police officers in 1965. “Bloody Sunday” increased support for the Civil Rights Movement among Northern Whites.

Source: Library of Congress.

Disturbed by the violence (and the refusal of Alabama Governor George Wallace to stop it), Johnson spoke to a joint session of Congress about the situation and introduced a bill that would remove obstacles to Black voter registration. On August 6, 1965, he signed the **Voting Rights Act** into law.



TERM TO KNOW

Voting Rights Act

Federal civil rights law that prohibits state and local governments from passing laws that discriminate against voters on the basis of race.



(a)



(b)

The Voting Rights Act (a) was signed into law on August 6, 1965, in the presence of major figures of the Civil Rights Movement, including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. (b).

The Voting Rights Act banned literacy tests and other barriers that had prevented African Americans from voting in the South previously. It also empowered federal officials to register voters and oversee elections at the local, state, and federal levels.



MAKE THE CONNECTION

In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, which required certain areas of the country to submit proposed changes to voting laws to the federal government for

review. The court's decision asserted that "things have changed dramatically" since the Voting Rights Act was enacted. Civil rights activists and members of Congress continue to debate over voter identification laws and proposed amendments to the Voting Rights Act, which raises the question of whether the court's decision was correct.



DID YOU KNOW

The Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which prohibits the imposition of poll taxes on voters, was ratified in January 1964.

Following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, a quarter of a million African Americans registered to vote. By 1967, the majority of eligible African Americans had done so. In some areas, Black votes led to the defeat of county sheriffs, state legislators, and other officeholders who had benefited from segregation and the restriction of Black voting rights.

2. The Great Society

Together, civil and voting rights were one of the components of President Johnson's Great Society. The program also included initiatives in three other major areas:

- Education
- Health care
- Poverty

2a. Education

Unlike John F. Kennedy, who came from a rich and powerful family, Lyndon B. Johnson grew up in the hill country of South Central Texas. For a brief time during the 1930s, Johnson taught at a school where his pupils were poor White and Mexican students. The experience led him to realize that poverty was often the result of a lack of education. As president, he ensured that education reform was a pillar of the Great Society program.

The **Elementary and Secondary Education Act** of 1965 was one of the most important laws that Congress passed to achieve Johnson's educational goals.



TERM TO KNOW

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Provided increased funding to public elementary and secondary schools to ensure equal access to public education.





Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in his hometown of Johnson City, Texas, alongside his childhood schoolteacher, Kate Deadrich Loney. The act ultimately allocated more than \$1 billion for the purchase of books and library materials, the creation of educational programs for disadvantaged children, and other initiatives to promote quality education in public schools.

Congress also passed a Higher Education Act in 1965, which increased federal funding for public colleges and universities, created the federal college loan program, and organized a short-lived Teacher Corps program that trained teachers for schools in impoverished areas.



DID YOU KNOW

President Johnson signed legislation that created the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, which provide federal grants to artists and scholars. The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 authorized the creation of the private, not-for-profit Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which helped launch the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) in 1970.

2b. Health Care

In addition to his efforts to improve education, Johnson addressed the needs of the elderly, who were among the poorest and most vulnerable citizens in the United States. His administration created the **Medicare** program in 1965.



TERM TO KNOW

Medicare

A federal health insurance program for those over 65.

Before Medicare was implemented, more than half of Americans over the age of 65 did not have health insurance.

The administration also implemented the **Medicaid** program in 1965 to provide health coverage to low-income citizens, including the disabled and single mothers with dependent children.



TERM TO KNOW

Medicaid

Allots federal funds that help low-income Americans pay for medical care.

Medicare helped senior citizens access health-care services they might not have been able to afford otherwise. Similarly, when Medicaid became available, it enabled many low-income people to go to the doctor for the first time.

2c. Poverty

Educational reforms and Medicaid can also be considered part of the third component of the Great Society program: the **War on Poverty**.



TERM TO KNOW

War on Poverty

The Johnson administration's plan to end poverty in the United States by extending federal benefits, job training programs, and funding for community development.

Some facets of the War on Poverty, such as food stamps and rent subsidies for those living in public housing, provided direct aid to the poor. However, most War on Poverty programs focused on empowering low-income Americans with skills and opportunities to lift themselves out of poverty.



President Johnson signs the Economic Opportunity Act on August 20, 1964. The act created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which oversaw many of the War on Poverty programs.

The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) administered and managed programs that included the following:

- The Job Corps and the Neighborhood Youth Corps provided job training programs and work experience to disadvantaged Americans.
- Through the Community Action Program (CAP), the OEO funded local “community action agencies,” organizations created and managed by the residents of disadvantaged communities to improve their lives and those of their neighbors.

MAKE THE CONNECTION

One of the best-known programs of the War on Poverty is Head Start, which provides early education and other services to low-income families with young children. It began as a summer program for

disadvantaged preschool children and quickly expanded its scope. Head Start funded the popular children's television series *Sesame Street*.



BIG IDEA

Taken together, the programs and initiatives of the Great Society were a significant expansion of the welfare state. In some instances (e.g., the movement to secure Black voting rights and other civil rights agitation), the expansion was advanced through grassroots activism. Other Great Society reforms (e.g., the War on Poverty) resulted from a combination of federal oversight and local organization. The Medicare program extended federal power to provide for the health-care needs of the most vulnerable citizens.

In the view of liberal Americans, the federal government had a responsibility to protect individual rights and improve the quality of life of all citizens. The Great Society was evidence that the Johnson administration shared that view.

3. Escalation in Vietnam

President Johnson considered the Great Society his first priority. Nevertheless, beginning in the summer of 1964, the administration made a series of decisions that increased American involvement in South Vietnam.

On August 2, while gathering intelligence in the Gulf of Tonkin (off the coast of Vietnam), the destroyer U.S.S. *Maddox* reported an attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Two days later, on August 4, the *Maddox* reported another attack. A second ship, the U.S.S. *Turner Joy*, also reported that it had been fired upon.



DID YOU KNOW

The North Vietnamese vehemently denied the second attack. The National Security Agency has since revealed that the alleged attacks on August 4 never occurred.

Relying on the information available to him, Johnson told Congress and the American people that U.S. ships had been attacked. On August 7, 1964, Congress issued the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**.



TERM TO KNOW

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Gave President Johnson the authority to use military force in Vietnam without asking Congress for a declaration of war.

The House of Representatives approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution unanimously, and only two members of the Senate voted against it.

The resolution dramatically increased the war-making powers of the executive branch. It officially changed the American role in Vietnam from advisor to combatant.

For the next 3 years, Johnson's efforts to create a Great Society were hindered by growing involvement in Vietnam. Throughout this period, he was unwilling to de-escalate the conflict or to withdraw forces from Vietnam, fearing that his political opponents would paint him as "soft" on communism. Like President Truman, another liberal who sought to implement a domestic reform agenda, the demands of containment and conformity forced Johnson to pursue a firm foreign policy.

Initially, 200,000 U.S. military personnel, including combat troops, were sent to South Vietnam. By 1968, more

than half a million Americans were fighting in the Vietnam War. Money that could have been spent on Great Society programs instead funded the war effort. Increased military spending, combined with Johnson's refusal to raise taxes or cut domestic spending, contributed to a growing federal deficit.



DID YOU KNOW

Large-scale U.S. bombing of North Vietnam began in 1965. Military spending increased significantly after Johnson's decision to escalate the war, from \$49.6 billion in 1965 to \$80.5 billion in 1968.



SUMMARY

The Great Society was the largest expansion of the American welfare state since the New Deal. Unlike the New Deal, which was instigated by a severe economic crisis, Johnson's plans to invest in education, support the arts, and provide security to the poor and the elderly were a product of prosperity, optimism, and confidence in the government's ability to solve problems. Continuing agitation by civil rights activists increased the federal government's responsiveness to voting rights and equal protection issues. Johnson's determination to honor and expand American commitments in Vietnam reduced the administration's ability to realize the goals of the Great Society and polarized American society.

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