

LBJ "Great Society" Speech

"My Fellow Americans

"The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community. It is a place where man can renew contact with nature. It is a place which honors creation for its own sake and for what it adds to the understanding of the race. It is a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods.

"So I want to talk to you today about three places where we begin to build the Great Society -- in our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms.

"And our society will never be great until our cities are great. Today the frontier of imagination and innovation is inside those cities and not beyond their borders. New experiments are already going on. It will be the task of your generation to make the American city a place where future generations will come, not only to live, but to live the good life. And I understand that if I stayed here tonight I would see that Michigan students are really doing their best to live the good life.

"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. Today, 8 million adult Americans, more than the entire population of Michigan, have not finished 5 years of school. Nearly 20 million have not finished 8 years of school. Nearly 54 million -- more than one quarter of all America -- have not even finished high school.

"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 make it possible for all nations to live in enduring peace -- as neighbors and not as mortal enemies?

"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?"

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

By Joseph A. Califano Jr.

The Washington Monthly (online), October 1999

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. Since then, the poverty rate has hovered at about the 13 percent level and sits at 13.3 percent today, still a disgraceful level in the context of the greatest economic boom in our history. But 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.

A Fair Start

Education and health were central to opening up the promise of American life to all.

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 and their progeny.

When these programs were enacted, only 41 percent of Americans had completed high school; only 8 percent held college degrees. This past year, more than 81 percent had finished high school and 24 percent had completed college. By establishing the federal government's responsibility to finance this educational surge and the concept that access to higher education should be determined by ability and ambition, not dollars and cents we have amassed the trained talent to be the world's leading industrial, technological, communications and military power today.

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. The 1968 Heart, Cancer and Stroke legislation has provided funds to create centers of medical excellence in just about every major city from Seattle to Houston, Miami to Cleveland, New Orleans to St. Louis. To staff these centers, the 1965 Health Professions Educational Assistance Act provided resources to double the number of doctors graduating from medical schools, from 8,000 to 16,000. That Act also increased the pool of specialists and researchers, nurses, and paramedics.

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.

In 1964, life expectancy was 66.6 years for men and 73.1 years for women (69.7 years overall). In a single generation, by 1997, life expectancy jumped 10 percent: for men, to 73.6 years; for women, to 79.2 years (76.5 years overall). The jump was highest among the less advantaged, suggesting that better nutrition and access to health care have played an even larger role than medical miracles. Infant mortality stood at 26 deaths for each 1,000 live births when LBJ took office; today it stands at only 7.3 deaths per 1,000 live births, a reduction of almost 75 percent.

Of the 35 national parks established during the Great Society years, 32 are within easy driving distance of large cities. The 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act today protects 155 river segments in 37

states. The 1968 National Trail System Act has established more than 800 recreational, scenic, and historic trails covering 40,000 miles.

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. In 1965 there were five black members of the House; today there are 39.

In 1960, black life expectancy was 63.6 years, not even long enough to benefit from the Social Security taxes that black citizens paid during their working lives. By 1997, black life expectancy was 71.2 years, thanks almost entirely to Medicaid, community health centers, job training, food stamps, and other Great Society programs. In 1960, the infant mortality rate for blacks was 44.3 for each 1,000 live births; in 1997, that rate had plummeted by two-thirds, to 14.7. In 1960, only 20 percent of blacks completed high school and only 3 percent finished college; in 1997, 75 percent completed high school and more than 13 percent earned college degrees.

Despite the political rhetoric, every president, Ronald Reagan included, has urged Congress to fund these OEO programs or has approved substantial appropriations for them.

CON: War on Poverty Revisited (ORIGINAL)

By Thomas Sowell

Capitalism Magazine (online), August 17, 2004

August 20th marks the 40th anniversary of one of the major turning points in American social history. That was the date on which President Lyndon Johnson signed legislation creating his "War on Poverty" program in 1964.

In the liberal vision, slums bred crime. But brand-new government housing projects almost immediately became new centers of crime and quickly degenerated into new slums. Many of these projects later had to be demolished. Unfortunately, the assumptions behind those projects were not demolished, but live on in other disastrous programs, such as Section 8 housing.

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.

Government social programs such as the War on Poverty were considered a way to reduce urban riots. Such programs increased sharply during the 1960s. So did urban riots. Later, during the Reagan administration, which was denounced for not promoting social programs, there were far fewer urban riots.

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. It dropped another 17 percentage points during the decade of the 1960s and one percentage point during the 1970s, but this continuation of the previous trend was neither unprecedented nor something to be arbitrarily attributed to the programs like the War on Poverty.

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.