

Lbj's great society

Society



Lyndon Baines Johnson moved quickly to establish himself in the office of the Presidency. Despite his conservative voting record in the Senate, Johnson soon reacquainted himself with his liberal roots. LBJ sponsored the largest reform agenda since Roosevelt's New Deal. The aftershock of Kennedy's assassination provided a climate for Johnson to complete the unfinished work of JFK's New Frontier. He had eleven months before the election of 1964 to prove to American voters that he deserved a chance to be President in his own right. Two very important pieces of legislation were passed.

First, the Civil Rights Bill that JFK promised to sign was passed into law. The Civil Rights Act banned discrimination based on race and gender in employment and ending segregation in all public facilities. Johnson also signed the omnibus Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The law created the Office of Economic Opportunity aimed at attacking the roots of American poverty. A Job Corps was established to provide valuable vocational training. Head Start, a preschool program designed to help disadvantaged students arrive at kindergarten ready to learn was put into place.

The Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) was set up as a domestic Peace Corps. Schools in impoverished American regions would now receive volunteer teaching attention. Federal funds were sent to struggling communities to attack unemployment and illiteracy. As he campaigned in 1964, Johnson declared a "war on poverty." He challenged Americans to build a "Great Society" that eliminated the troubles of the poor. Johnson won a decisive victory over his archconservative Republican opponent Barry Goldwater of Arizona. American liberalism was at high tide under President Johnson. The Wilderness Protection Act saved 9.1 million acres of forestland

from industrial development. •The Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided major funding for American public schools. •The Voting Rights Act banned literacy tests and other discriminatory methods of denying suffrage to African Americans. •Medicare was created to offset the costs of healthcare for the nation's elderly. •The National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities used public money to fund artists and galleries. •The Immigration Act ended discriminatory quotas based on ethnic origin. An Omnibus Housing Act provided funds to construct low-income housing. •Congress tightened pollution controls with stronger Air and Water Quality Acts. •Standards were raised for safety in consumer products. Johnson was an accomplished legislator and used his connections in Congress and forceful personality to pass his agenda. By 1966, Johnson was pleased with the progress he had made. But soon events in Southeast Asia began to overshadow his domestic achievements. Funds he had envisioned to fight his war on poverty were now diverted to the war in Vietnam.

He found himself maligned by conservatives for his domestic policies and by liberals for his hawkish stance on Vietnam. By 1968, his hopes of leaving a legacy of domestic reform were in serious jeopardy. The turbulent 1960s reached a boiling point in 1968. When the year began, President Johnson hoped to win the war in Vietnam and then cruise to a second term to finish building his Great Society. But events began to spiral out of his control. In February, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam brought a shift in American public opinion toward the war and low approval ratings for the President.

Sensing vulnerability, Eugene McCarthy challenged Johnson for his own party's nomination. When the Democratic primary votes were tallied in New

Hampshire, McCarthy scored a remarkable 42 percent of the vote against an incumbent President. Johnson knew that in addition to fighting a bitter campaign against the Republicans he would have to fight to win support of the Democrats as well. His hopes darkened when Robert Kennedy entered the race in mid-March. On March 31, 1968, Johnson surprised the nation by announcing he would not seek a second term.

His Vice-President Hubert Humphrey entered the election to carry out Johnson's programs. The Great Society program became Johnson's agenda for Congress in January 1965: aid to education, attack on disease, Medicare, urban renewal, beautification, conservation, development of depressed regions, a wide-scale fight against poverty, control and prevention of crime and delinquency, removal of obstacles to the right to vote. Congress, at times augmenting or amending, rapidly enacted Johnson's recommendations. Millions of elderly people found succor through the 1965 Medicare amendment to the Social Security Act.

Under Johnson, the country made spectacular explorations of space in a program he had championed since its start. When three astronauts successfully orbited the moon in December 1968, Johnson congratulated them: " You've taken ... all of us, all over the world, into a new era. . . . " Nevertheless, two overriding crises had been gaining momentum since 1965. Despite the beginning of new antipoverty and anti-discrimination programs, unrest and rioting in black ghettos troubled the Nation. President Johnson steadily exerted his influence against segregation and on behalf of law and order, but there was no early solution.

The other crisis arose from Viet Nam. Despite Johnson's efforts to end Communist aggression and achieve a settlement, fighting continued. Controversy over the war had become acute by the end of March 1968, when he limited the bombing of North Viet Nam in order to initiate negotiations. At the same time, he startled the world by withdrawing as a candidate for re-election so that he might devote his full efforts, unimpeded by politics, to the quest for peace. When he left office, peace talks were under way; he did not live to see them successful, but died suddenly of a heart attack at his Texas ranch on January 22, 1973.