

The Impact of the Great Society Upon The Lives of Families and Young Children

In May of 1964, the newly elected president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, unveiled his revolutionary plans for the Great Society. The challenge for the remaining century required the use of wisdom, Johnson explained, to advance the quality of our American civilization. . . .*"we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society. . . . It is a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their governments than the quality of their goods. The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice."*

In 1965, Democratic majorities in the 89th Congress passed eighty of eighty-three major legislative proposals: an unparalleled record. By 1969, nearly all of Johnson's Great Society reform legislation had become law.

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, and the removal of obstacles to the right to vote. Johnson reasoned that, in modern America, every citizen has the right to adequate health care, a full education, decent housing, and the opportunity to develop his or her own talents. Utilizing a variety of task forces composed of experts, Johnson's Great Society created cutting-edge legislation that included the Equal Opportunity Act, Medicare, Medicaid, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965), the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, Head Start, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, the Educational Opportunity Act, the Job Corps, Model Cities, Aid to Appalachia, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Air Pollution and Water Pollution Control Acts, and the Urban Mass Transportation Act. He considered the Great Society basically an extension of the Bill of Rights, continuing the social reform policies under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s.

In 1960, despite the prosperity of the times, almost one-quarter of all American families were living below the poverty line, and entire regions of the country, like central Appalachia, were bypassed by the economic growth of the postwar years. Moreover, technological advances in industry were also changing job requirements for American workers. The good-paying, unskilled jobs of the past were disappearing, and those without education and skills were being left behind.

The first piece of Great Society legislation, the Economic Opportunity Act 1964, tried to give people tools to get out of poverty. The bill created a Job Corps similar to the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps; a domestic peace corps; a system for vocational training; and Head Start, a pre-school program designed to prepare low income children for success in public school. The bill also funded community action programs and extended loans to small businessmen and farmers.

One of the most ambitious efforts was the establishment of Medicare to provide health care for America's senior citizens. In 1964, 44 percent of seniors had no health care coverage, and with the medical bills that come with older age, this propelled many seniors into poverty. In fact, more than one in three Americans over 65 were living below the poverty line -- more than double the rate of those under 65. Medicare was an important and big change in American health care. Virtually all seniors now have health care, and the poverty rate for the elderly has fallen to approximately one in ten -- a rate lower than that of the general population.

Along with Medicare, the Johnson Administration established the Medicaid program to provide health care to the poor. Different from Medicare, this Federal-state partnership is largely determined in form and construct by each individual state. We will shortly turn our attention to this important program.

In 1964, 8 million American adults had not finished 5 years in school; more than 20 million had not finished eight years; and almost a quarter of the nation's

population, around 54 million people, hadn't finished high school. In 1965, Congress passed the groundbreaking Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which – for the first time – provided federal funding for education below the college level. Congress also passed the Higher Education Act, which created a National Teachers Corps and provided financial assistance to students wishing to attend college.

Urban renewal and conservation was the third major component of the Great Society. Ever since the end of World War II, cities faced a shortage of good, affordable housing. At the same time, the suburbanization of America along with the changing economy meant that many businesses began to leave city centers, an exodus that was accelerated by urban rioting that began in earnest after the Watts riot in 1965 in Los Angeles, and continued throughout Johnson's term. As part of a response, Johnson signed the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 that established the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and expanded funding for public housing. In addition, he provided aid to cities to rebuild blighted areas.

195 million Americans were affected by programs initiated by Johnson. Yet, the Great Society and Johnson's "War on Poverty" had their critics. Some said that it added layers of bureaucracy and wasted money on "hand-outs" to people who did not deserve them. Critics of the Great Society also charged that these programs just created bureaucracies and threw money at problems without producing results. Still others rejected the notion that the federal government should be undertaking these tasks at all. At the same time, government spending on domestic problems coupled with the war in Viet Nam, placed a large strain on the economy with the result being that many of these initiatives were circumvented in their total development. Nevertheless, the impact of the Great Society in many areas is undisputed as political leaders today still wrestle with how to deal with the issues of poverty, health care and education.