

JOHNSON'S LEGACY TODAY: DO WE LIVE IN A GREAT SOCIETY?

An Introduction to Lyndon B. Johnson

The Seattle Repertory Theatre will begin its production next month of two plays which shed light on the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ). In this 10-week series, we'll explore Johnson's noteworthy legislative acts and presidency as a whole. As we begin this exploration, let's first examine Lyndon B. Johnson the man.

LBJ was born in rural Texas in 1908, the oldest of five children. His mother taught children out of their home and his father was involved in local government. Thus, growing up, he was taught the value of education. Their home was simple, without running water. Perhaps his upbringing sparked his quest to improve the lives of those who faced poverty and discrimination.

After graduating from San Marcos Teachers College, he took a job in a small school in Cotulla, Texas teaching Mexican-Americans. Johnson also was said to have tutored the janitor, sitting with him on the front steps of the school every day after classes, teaching him English. Johnson later taught debate at a public high school, leading his team to the district championship. He was recruited to Washington, D.C. to work as Congressman Richard Kleberg's secretary. Shortly after, Johnson was elected to the House of Representatives.

During his time in Washington, Johnson became well-acquainted with the workings of Congress and began establishing relationships with those in political power. As he immersed himself in the legislative process for three years, he continued to reflect on the sobering conditions of the Great Depression. Looking around him and thinking back to the schools where he taught and his own upbringing, he saw a need for the government to directly assist those in need. After a brief enrollment at Georgetown University Law School in 1934, Johnson accepted President Roosevelt's nomination as the Texas Director of the National Youth Administration (NYA). The NYA was a New Deal agency created to help young people access education, vocational training and jobs—an appropriate role for Johnson, drawing on his work in education and politics. Following this role, he was elected to Congress in 1937, where he served for six terms. In 1948, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in a close and controversial election. Five years later, at age 45, he became the youngest Senate Minority Leader and then the youngest Senate Majority Leader the following year.

During this time, Johnson exhibited his trademark negotiating and strategy skills to pass a number of legislative measures during the Eisenhower administration. When he assumed the presidency following John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Johnson continued to doggedly pursue the passage of over 1,000 pieces of legislation, many of which were aimed at creating the "Great Society." He was responsible for securing passage of civil rights laws, Medicare, Medicaid and other economic assistance programs to fight what he called a "War on Poverty." However, his compassion for those facing discrimination due to their race or economic situation was often overshadowed by his actions in the Vietnam War. We will explore these pieces of legislation, Johnson's presidency and the public's opinion in detail in the coming weeks.

CURRENT CONNECTION

To many Americans, Johnson is remembered not for his work fighting discrimination and poverty, but as the president who initiated and escalated America's involvement in the Vietnam War. As you learn more about Lyndon B. Johnson in this series, and after you see the plays "All the Way" and "The Great Society," consider the following questions:

- Can President Lyndon B. Johnson's involvement in Vietnam be compared to President Barack Obama's involvement in the Middle East? Why or why not?
- How do you think Obama will be remembered as president?
- How is this similar to or different from Johnson?
- What can Obama learn from Johnson?
- What could Johnson have learned from Obama?

ALL THE WAY | Nov. 14, 2014 - Jan. 4, 2015
THE GREAT SOCIETY | Dec. 5 - Jan. 4, 2015

It's 1963, and an assassin's bullet catapults Lyndon Baines Johnson into the presidency. A Shakespearean figure of towering ambition and appetite, the charismatic, conflicted Texan hurls himself into Civil Rights legislation, throwing the country into turmoil. But in faraway Vietnam, a troublesome conflict looms, overshadowing his many accomplishments. Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime theatrical event with Robert Schenkkan's Tony Award-winning "All The Way" and its companion piece, "The Great Society," playing together for the first time.

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SOCIETY ESSAY CONTEST!**
Students can have their essay published in *The Seattle Times* and win **\$600** by writing an essay which answers the question, "Do we live in a Great Society?" View contest details and rules at www.seattletimes.com/nie.