

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

Johnson and Civil Rights

Seattle Repertory Theatre's productions of Robert Schenkkan's "All the Way" and "The Great Society" shed light on Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous presidency. In this 10-week series, we'll explore the legacy of Johnson's noteworthy legislative acts and how decisions made 50 years ago continue to resonate in modern America. Today's topic: The Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964

When Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) stepped into the role of President after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, he not only took on the great challenge of leading a grieving nation, but also the task of passing bills which Kennedy had endorsed. One of these bills was to become the Civil Rights Act of 1964, legislation that was strongly opposed by Southern Democrats.

One of the most notable achievements of Johnson's presidency, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation and discrimination based on race, gender or religion in hiring, promoting and firing. Outlawing segregation meant that blacks and whites now had the legal right to attend the same schools and to patronize the same establishments. Facilities such as whites-only drinking fountains or restrooms were now illegal. During passage through Congress, the bill was opposed by many Southerners, but strongly supported by the North. Johnson's stance lost him the support of many Southern Democrats. Johnson said:

"We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law."

www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/summer/civil-rights-act-1.html

Johnson and Civil Rights

Many questioned Johnson's true motivation in passing the Civil Rights Act. Was he a true believer in equal opportunity for all Americans, or was passing the bill a pragmatic move to avoid further violence while gaining the support of a substantial minority vote?

Those who believed his motives were pure pointed to his humble upbringing and early experiences teaching as insights to his belief system. Despite Texas' identity as a segregated state. As a member of Congress, Johnson supported federally funded housing for people of all races who lived in the Austin slums, as well as the Supreme Court's decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education which led to desegregation of public schools. As President, Johnson appointed black Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and maintained a team of black advisors. As a result, many consider Johnson's record to include significant affirmative actions in support of civil rights.

Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Johnson and Dr. King met less than two months after President Kennedy's assassination. Each man had already spoken highly of the other and an alliance on civil rights was imminent. The conversation focused on the tendency for poverty to affect blacks more than whites and bringing the civil rights movement to a national level.

Author Nick Kotz of "Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws That Changed America," wrote of Dr. King: "The public remembers King as a great orator (and fails to appreciate him as the) cool, rational, tough, pragmatic politician (who was) "the field general and tactician (of the movement)."

Just as the public's view of Johnson is sometimes limited to that of the leader of the Vietnam War, King is sometimes also held in a limited view as pacifist speaker. In truth, both men were both focused, skilled political leaders whose signature achievements were in advancing civil rights. The passage of civil rights laws was a huge step towards equality, but 50 years later, many would argue that discrimination still persists in hiring, housing and other parts of everyday life. www.law.virginia.edu/html/news/2005_spr/kotz.htm



Members of the SCLC, NAACP and SNCC share their views. Ensemble. Photo by Jenny Graham.



Lyndon Johnson (Jack Willis) and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (Kenjuan Bentley) argue about voting rights (Ensemble: David Kelly, Daniel T. Parker, Derrick Lee Weeden). Photo by Jenny Graham.

CURRENT CONNECTION

Lyndon B. Johnson fought for discrimination against blacks in particular. Discuss the following questions on civil rights issues.

- What other groups are and have been discriminated against?
- How have presidents of past and present championed equal rights for these groups?
- How is the LGBT rights movement of today similar to the civil rights movement of the 1960s?
- What has Washington state done to address the inequality?
- How does this compare to the actions of other states?

ENTER THE GREAT 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.