

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

Seattle Repertory Theatre's productions of Robert Schenkkan's "All the Way" and "The Great Society" shed light on Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous U.S. 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 War on Poverty

JOHNSON AND THE WAR ON POVERTY

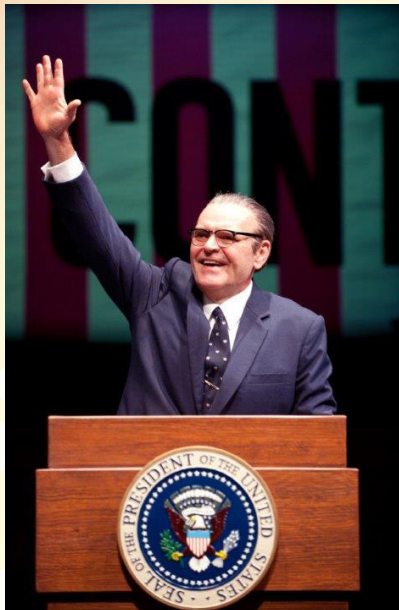
Johnson's Dream

LBJ's vision for the U.S. was rooted in equality. He wanted to create a nation with the highest standard of living in the world and equal access to safe housing, education and health care. His Great Society programs represented the largest expansion of social services since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs of the 1930s.

Johnson Introduces The Great Society

Johnson shared his vision for a Great Society at a University of Michigan speech in 1964. He outlined that The Great Society would be built in our cities, our countryside and our classrooms. He stated:

"The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.



Lyndon Johnson (Jack Willis) cheers his supporters at the Democratic Convention. Photo by Jenny Graham.

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 that 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.

But most of all, the Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning the U.S. toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor."

The War on Poverty

One of the most notable initiatives of the Great Society was what Johnson referred to as the War on Poverty, a comprehensive series of over 40 bills designed to eliminate hunger and deprivation and improve living and working conditions for America's poorest citizens.

The central component of this program was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity. The aim of the Economic Opportunity Act was to provide opportunities in job training and education to eliminate poverty and the consequences of poverty. The act provided job training for those in cities, but also focused heavily on advancement for those living in rural areas.

For example, the Urban and Rural Community Action provided funds to public and private nonprofit agencies for community action programs. The Loans to Rural Families program granted loans to low-income rural families of up to \$2,500 to help them transition out of poverty. Additionally, Assistance for Migrant Agricultural Employees gave assistance to state and local governments, nonprofits and individuals to help migratory workers meet their basic needs. The Economic Opportunity Council led subgroups that worked with local communities to establish these programs.

Such wide-sweeping programs were bound to draw criticism. Several southern states took issue with the Economic Opportunity Act's ability to distribute federal funds directly to local governments, bypassing state government infrastructures. As with his civil rights legislation, Johnson was alienating some of his core supporters to accomplish his goals.

Next week, you will read about the War on Poverty's employment and education programs including Job Corps, VISTA and Neighborhood Youth Corps. As you learn about these and other programs of the Great Society, consider how they have shaped America.

CURRENT CONNECTION

- Is there less poverty in America today than there was 50 years ago?
- What is your reaction to today's \$15.00 minimum wage campaign?
- What individuals and groups champion this change? Which do not?
- What is your opinion?
- What other programs do we have today, such as the Washington Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which provide services to low income families?