

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's Job Programs.

THE GREAT SOCIETY: JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS

President Johnson described his War on Poverty as a continuation of the basic American bargain that all people should be given a decent shot at achieving their life goals and securing stable lives built on genuine freedom and economic opportunity. Some of the most notable public programs of the Great Society are those that provided job training, particularly to disadvantaged youth.

Job Corps

Still active today, Job Corps offered free educational and vocational training to youth ages 16-24. It was modeled on the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the 1930s, which was formed as an emergency relief program for unemployed young people at the height of the Depression and discontinued in the recovery years after World War II. Johnson's program was aimed at high school dropouts. Today, youth who meet low-income eligibility requirements can acquire hands-on training in over 100 fields and/or earn a high school diploma or GED. Job Corps also offers classes in employability and life skills.

Neighborhood Youth Corps

Similar to Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps provides employment, job counseling and education to youth ages 16-21. Like Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps helps to increase participants' employability and provide them with work experience. The difference lies in its focus on slightly younger and urban disadvantaged youth.

Volunteers in Service of America (VISTA)

VISTA is a service program of the Economic Opportunity Act aimed at fighting poverty and empowering the poor. It is also known as the domestic version of the Peace Corps. The first VISTA members worked in rural areas, such as Appalachia, and city neighborhoods such as Hartford, Connecticut. VISTA members worked in many capacities ranging from agricultural cooperatives to credit unions. Since the 1960s, the program has grown to encompass such fields as law, health care and architecture by training and sending workers to the poorest communities. VISTA is now a part of the AmeriCorps program and accepts members for a year term of service in exchange for training, living expenses, child care benefits and a basic health plan.

College Work Study Program

The College Work Study Program of 1965, now known as the Federal Work Study Program, provides college students with part-time employment to help fund the costs of postsecondary education. Students complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form to obtain work in the educational institution, a federal, state or local agency, or a private organization. Qualifying students will work at jobs that pay at least the federal minimum wage. In a 1967 statement, when Johnson signed amendments to the Act, he stated:

"The student who works to pay for his education does more than help himself financially. He builds resources of character, self-reliance and independence that make his degree even more valuable to himself and to the country. And every student in the program contributes importantly to his college and his community.



In the past few years, we have embarked on an historic campaign to give every citizen an equal chance in America--regardless of his birth or his race or his financial status. This law is one way of moving that great effort forward. Its influence in America will be a lasting tribute to the 90th Congress."

Lyndon B. Johnson: "Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill To Strengthen the College Work-Study Program," Sept. 7, 1967. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "The American Presidency Project." www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28425.

Stay tuned for the next article on the education programs of the Great Society.

CURRENT CONNECTION

- What are the advantages of a work study program?
- What other opportunities exist for job training for youth?
- How about for involvement and stewardship?
- Would you like to be involved in a program like AmeriCorps VISTA?
- Should all young Americans be required to serve their country through programs like AmeriCorps VISTA or through military service?
- What opportunities for financial assistance (such as grants) exist for at-risk youth?
- What are the advantages of an apprenticeship for a job?