

The Great Society and Lyndon Johnson

1964

The Great Society was a series of federal government programs designed to remedy social problems in the United States during the 1960s. President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society called for two specific reforms: to eliminate poverty and to end racial discrimination. In addition, President Johnson planned to introduce other reforms concerning transportation, medical care, education, and urban development.

The Great Society began during an era of prosperity in the United States. President John F. Kennedy's proposed tax cut went into effect in February 1964 and cut most Americans' taxes by ten percent. Despite this tax cut, revenue for the federal government increased. However, poor social conditions were still prevalent, particularly in the South. There was a long history of racial discrimination and animosity against African Americans in Southern states. In the 1950s African Americans had launched the Civil Rights Movement and suffered a white backlash.

President Johnson coined the phrase "Great Society" during a speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan, at the University of Michigan's graduation ceremonies. The first part of the Great Society focused on the Civil Rights Movement. Johnson supported laws African Americans advocated. He overcame resistance from the South when he supported these laws. Johnson's support was instrumental in Congress passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation. In addition, Johnson supported the Voting Rights Act the next year. This act assured citizens the right to vote.

President Johnson also focused on fighting the war against poverty. He wanted to continue reforms President Kennedy had supported. Johnson was determined to end American hunger. He supported the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEC). The OEC took charge of programs to help end poverty in America. Some officials believed the way to end poverty was to raise poor workers' wages. However, Great Society programs provided educational opportunities to impoverished Americans. Education was believed to lead to better jobs. Other groups created were the Job Corps, Volunteers in Service to America, and the Upward Bound program.

As a former teacher, President Johnson focused on educational reforms. He passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provided federal aid to education programs. This law created the Head Start Program that gave impoverished students a good foundation with which to enter schools. The Higher Education Act of 1965 aided colleges and universities because it allowed institutions to grant scholarships and loans to students.

Health care played a huge part in the Great Society because of the passage of the Social Security Act of 1965. This act instituted Medicare, which provided medical care for senior citizens in the United States. The Medicaid program also was established. Medicaid provided medical assistance to citizens who could not afford health insurance.

Another Great Society reform concerned transportation. All federal transportation agencies were merged into the Department of Transportation, and the Secretary of Transportation became a Cabinet position. Congress authorized the creation of the Department of Transportation on October 15, 1966. The Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964 provided \$375 million to build public and private rail lines across the country.

While many praised President Johnson's initiatives, others believed he was engaged in too many reforms. These programs were implemented while the United States was engaged in the Vietnam War, the space program, and the Cold War nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. Regardless of other distractions and problems, President Johnson's Great Society changed life in the United States and aided many people.

After completing the Guided Reading, answer the following questions. Be sure to include textual evidence to support your responses.

- 1. What were the two main reforms of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society?**
- 2. How strong was U.S. economy when the Great Society reforms were enacted?**
- 3. What two legislative acts advanced the Civil Rights Movement?**
- 4. What was the purpose of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964?**
- 5. What educational reforms were instituted through Johnson's Great Society?**
- 6. What two programs provided health care to Americans?**

Answer Key

1. **What were the two main reforms of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society?**
*The Great Society's purpose was to eliminate poverty and racial **discrimination** in the United States.*
2. **How strong was U.S. **economy** when the Great Society reforms were enacted?**
*The Great Society began during a period of prosperity in the United States. John F. Kennedy's proposed tax cut went into **effect** in February 1964. It reduced taxes by ten percent. Despite the hefty tax cut, revenue for the federal **government** increased.*
3. **What two legislative acts advanced the Civil **Rights** Movement?**
*The Civil **Rights Act** of 1964 and the Voting **Rights Act** of 1965 advanced the reforms of the Civil **Rights** Movement.*
4. **What was the purpose of the Economic Opportunity **Act** of 1964?**
This created the Office of Economic Opportunity, which implemented anti-poverty programs.
5. **What educational reforms were instituted through Johnson's Great Society?**
*He passed the Elementary and Secondary Education **Act**. This provided federal aid to education programs and created the Head Start Program. The Higher Education **Act** of 1965 aided colleges and universities. This **act** provided scholarships and loans to students seeking admission to colleges and universities.*
6. **What two programs provided health care to Americans?**
The two programs were the Medicare and the Medicaid programs.