

Lyndon B. Johnson as President

Learn more about the president who expanded both the war in Vietnam and social programs at home.

Overview

- Lyndon Johnson became president of the United States after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. He served as president from 1963-1969.
- **The Great Society**, a package of programs and legislation aimed at eradicating poverty and improving health care and education, was President Johnson's chief domestic policy program and one of his permanent legacies.
- President Johnson vastly expanded the US military role in **Vietnam**.
- Johnson chose not to run for re-election in 1968, largely due to the Vietnam debacle and the disarray of the Democratic Party. He was succeeded in office by Richard Nixon.

Lyndon Johnson Ascends to Power

Lyndon Baines Johnson, a New Deal Democrat from rural West Texas, served in both the House of Representatives and the Senate before becoming vice president to [John F. Kennedy](#). He was the Senate Minority Leader for two years, the Senate Majority Whip for two years, and the Senate Majority Leader for six years, and some historians believe he was the most effective majority leader in US history.

On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was felled by an assassin's bullet in Dallas, Texas. Two hours after the assassination, Johnson was sworn into office aboard Air Force One. He pledged to carry on Kennedy's legacy and to fulfill his political agenda, particularly concerning civil rights. In the presidential election of 1964, Johnson won in a landslide against conservative Republican Barry Goldwater.



Figure 1: Lyndon Johnson's swearing-in ceremony on Air Force One, just hours after Kennedy's assassination. Former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy stands next to Johnson. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

LBJ and the Civil Rights Movement

Once in office, Johnson moved quickly to secure the passage of civil rights legislation that had languished in Congress during Kennedy's presidency. The [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) banned racial segregation in public education and facilities, and prohibited discrimination in jobs and housing. In March 1965, Johnson delivered a speech in which he condemned racial bigotry and informed the nation that he was sending another civil rights bill to Congress. The [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#) outlawed poll taxes, literacy tests, and other devices that had been used to prevent Southern blacks from voting.

Together, these two acts constituted the most comprehensive civil rights legislation ever passed, and were a paramount achievement of Johnson's presidency.

The Great Society

Johnson's major focus as president was the **Great Society**, a package of domestic programs and legislation aimed at eradicating poverty and improving the quality of life of all Americans. The Great Society vastly expanded the welfare state and included initiatives such as the **War on Poverty**.

Johnson launched the War on Poverty in March 1964, when he sent the Economic Opportunity Act to Congress. The bill created the **Job Corps** and the Community Action Program, which aimed to eliminate poverty through job creation and block grants to local communities for services such as **Head Start** for early childhood development. The Office of Economic Opportunity was established to oversee the disbursement of funds to community-based anti-poverty programs, and the Food Stamp Act of 1964 expanded the federal food stamp program.



Figure 2: Johnson signs the Medicare Bill into law, 1965. Image courtesy Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

President Johnson's Great Society also established **Medicare** and **Medicaid**, which provide healthcare to the poor and to the elderly.

The Great Society also involved education reform. The Primary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 authorized \$1 billion in federal funding for public education and established special programs for schools in low-income areas. The Higher Education Act of 1965 increased federal funding for universities and extended scholarships and low-interest loans to college students.

In sum, the Great Society was an ambitious domestic program that expanded the scope of the federal government far beyond the limits of the [New Deal](#), and it constitutes one of Johnson's most enduring legacies.

Johnson and the War in Vietnam

In August 1964, reports that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked two US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin led Johnson to request and obtain from Congress the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, which authorized the use of military force in Southeast Asia. Johnson made a series of controversial decisions that dramatically escalated military action and enlarged the US troop presence in [Vietnam](#). As US casualties mounted, the conflict stalemated, and revelations emerged that the Johnson administration had lied to the American public about the nature and scope of the war. Anti-war sentiment intensified and LBJ's approval ratings plummeted.

Johnson chose not to run for re-election in 1968, largely due to the disastrous war in Vietnam and the internecine conflicts tearing apart the Democratic Party. He was succeeded in office by [Richard M. Nixon](#).

What do you think?

1. Do you agree with Johnson's decision to not run for re-election in 1968? Why or why not?
2. Which had a greater impact on poverty in America, the Great Society or the New Deal? Why?
3. What were Johnson's greatest achievements? What were his biggest mistakes?
4. Who accomplished more for civil rights, Johnson or Kennedy?