

Great Society Programs, Critique, and Aftermath

Directions: Read the following excerpts, and answer the questions.

Document 1

Major Great Society Programs

Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency was marked by a legislative agenda aimed at improving the lives of the poor in America. Many of his Great Society programs attacked poverty by improving living conditions. Other programs attempted to break the cycle of poverty, in which so many Americans were mired, by providing schools in poor areas with new and better-equipped classrooms, additional funds for scholarships, and a program of low-interest college loans for qualifying students. New childhood education programs like Head Start provided disadvantaged four- and five-year-olds with an advantage. The establishment of Medicare and Medicaid guaranteed health care to every American over the age of sixty-five and to individuals living below the poverty level. Other programs sought to reclaim and conserve the environment and to promote the preservation of our nation's artistic and literary heritage. The Job Corps, a new program to provide skills to American youth, many of whom lived below the poverty line, was also created.

Document 2

New Deal to Great Society

The New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt established the foundation of a welfare state in America. During Roosevelt's administration, the majority of programs benefited whites rather than African-Americans, who were still confined to the lower ranks of the labor class and denied the training needed for higher paying jobs. Few whites who benefited from the programs recognized the fact that their advantageous position came about because of government intervention or aid. By the 1960s, programs aimed to redistribute the opportunity to succeed and to move out of poverty by providing the means to succeed directly to the poor.

Lyndon B. Johnson in his Great Society programs sought to redistribute not wealth in America, but rather the opportunity to become wealthy. Through the establishment of programs and resources which provided the poor, particularly poor blacks, with improved educational opportunities and job training, Johnson, with an eye toward fiscal conservatism, tried to manage with little in the way of new funds. By the end of the 1960s, a middle-class backlash against the Great Society had begun, even though most of the programs had spread their benefits to the middle class as well as to those living below the poverty line. Federal funds for educational improvements were distributed through school systems, not directly to poor children. All schools in a district benefited, not just the poor ones. The Federal School Lunch Program, which mainly benefited middle class families, was not regarded by most of its beneficiaries as welfare, but food stamps were seen as a form of dependence on the federal government, as a portion of "the dole."

Legacies of the Great Society

Directions: Study the following political cartoon. What does it tell you about Nixon's attitude toward social change in the 1970s?



Fig. 25.1.

Fig. 25.1. "You One of Those Extremists Who Thinks It's Time for Desegregation?" A 1969 Herblock cartoon, copyright by the Herb Block Foundation.

A Trip to China

Directions: The following excerpt pertains to a meeting between Henry Kissinger and the leadership of the People's Republic of China to lay the groundwork for Richard Nixon's historic visit to China. Read the document, and answer the questions. Be prepared for discussion.

Memorandum for the President

We have laid the groundwork for you and Mao to turn a page in history. But we should have no illusions about the future. Profound differences and years of isolation yawn between us and the Chinese. They will be tough before and during the summit on the question of Taiwan and other major issues. And they will prove inplacable foes if our relations turn sour. My assessment of these people is that they are deeply ideological, close to fanatic in the intensity of their beliefs. At the same time they display an inward security that allows them, within the framework of their principles, to be meticulous and reliable in dealing with others.

Furthermore, the process we have now started will send enormous shock waves around the world. It may panic the Soviet Union into sharp hostility. It could shake Japan loose from its heavily American moorings. It will cause violent upheaval in Taiwan. It will have major impact on our other Asian allies, such as Korea and Thailand. It will increase the already substantial hostility in India. Some quarters may seek to sabotage the summit over the coming months.

However, we were well aware of these risks when we embarked on this course. We were aware too that the alternative was unacceptable—continued isolation from one-quarter of the world's most talented people and a country rich in past achievements and future potential.

And even the risks can be managed and turned to our advantage if we maintain steady nerves and pursue our policies responsibly. With the Soviet Union we will have to make clear the continued priorities we attach to our concrete negotiations with them. Just as we will not collude with them against China, so we have no intention of colluding with China against them. If carefully managed, our new China policy could have a longer term beneficial impact on Moscow.

With Japan our task will be to make clear that we are not shifting our allegiance in Asia from her to China. On Taiwan we can hope for little more than damage limitation by reaffirming our diplomatic relations and mutual defense treaty even while it becomes evident that we foresee a political evolution over the coming years. With our other Asian allies we will need to stress both our continued bonds and our hope that reconciliation between us and the Chinese will serve the cause of regional peace. And in India, after the initial shock, our China moves might produce a more healthy relationship.

For Asia and for the world we need to demonstrate that we are enlarging the scope of our diplomacy in a way that, far from harming the interests of other countries, should instead prove helpful to them.

Our dealings, both with the Chinese and others, will require reliability, precision, finesse. If we can master this process, we will have made a revolution.¹

¹Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon, "My Talks with Chou En-lai," July 14, 1971, box 1033, Miscellaneous Memoranda Relating to HAK Trip to PRC, July 1971, National Security Council Files, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives.