

Shelby County Schools
Extended Learning Guide



High School

U.S. History

Name: _____ Class: _____

Lyndon Baines Johnson and the Great Society

By Mike Kubic
2017

Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908-1973), commonly called LBJ, was the 36th President of the United States. Johnson is remembered in part for his program titled "Great Society," that included a variety of legislation to improve life in America for people in need. Former Newsweek correspondent Mike Kubic further discusses Johnson's Great Society and the effects his legislations had on America. As you read, take note of how the laws Johnson championed changed both American society and the public's opinion.

- [1] Christmas of 1964 was an important occasion for Lyndon B. Johnson, the 36th president of the United States. Americans were still traumatized by the previous year's assassination of the greatly loved President John F. Kennedy, but in November 1964, Johnson, who had served as Kennedy's vice president, had won reelection with 61.1% of the vote — an all but unprecedented¹ landslide.



"Lyndon Johnson meeting with civil rights leaders" by Yoichi Okamoto is in the public domain.

On December 18, as he was about to light the White House Christmas tree, Johnson sought to comfort the nation by describing an American future that he hoped to make a reality:

"These are the most hopeful times in all the years since Christ was born in Bethlehem," he said. "Today — as never before — man has in his possession the capacities to end war and preserve peace, to eradicate² poverty and share abundance, to overcome the diseases that have afflicted the human race, and permit all mankind to enjoy their promise of life on this earth."

It sounded like an overhyped political oratory,³ but Johnson was uniquely qualified to try to live up to it. The son of Samuel Ealy Johnson Jr, a prominent member of the Texas House of Representatives, he was endowed⁴ with exceptional talent, experience, and personality. Affecting a modesty (which he did not feel), Johnson liked to describe himself simply as a "free man, American, Texan, and a Democrat, in that order."

- [5] In fact, he was a rare phenomenon — a man utterly dedicated to the art of political persuasion and leadership.

1. **Unprecedented** (*adjective*): never done or known before
2. **Eradicate** (*verb*): to end or destroy something completely
3. the practice of formal speaking in public
4. **Endow** (*verb*): to provide with a quality, ability, or right

When Johnson got his first job in Washington's Capitol Hill in 1931, he was just another congressional aide:⁵ a rail-thin, homely-looking, six-foot four-inch, 23 year-old former youth organizer and elementary school teacher from Cortulla, Texas. But he soon became known as an advocate for the government's responsibility to give a leg up to people who deserved it; he was equally known for his own boundless energy in providing such help.

Those qualities, combined with his sharp mind and Alpha-male personality, propelled Johnson rapidly upwards: in 1937, he won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives; in January, 1949 — after serving during World War II in the U.S. Navy — he was sworn in as a United States senator; and in 1955, at the age of 46, his colleagues elected him as the Senate Majority Leader, the head of what was then deservedly called, the “world's most exclusive deliberative body.”

Johnson — by then known as “LBJ” — now held the second most powerful position in the U.S. government. He used his political skills in a fashion so memorable and effective that it deserves a brief description.

Johnson's key advantage was the detailed knowledge he'd assiduously⁶ collected over the years about his fellow legislators — their political standing in their home districts, the issues they sought to advance, the committee assignments they wanted, what new road, dam, or other infrastructure they'd liked to deliver to their voters, and even what time of the day they were most amenable⁷ to making a deal.

[10] All of this intelligence, together with Johnson's dogged refusal to accept a “no” as an answer — a trait one biographer called his “indomitable will” — made up something called “The Johnson Treatment.” Two *Washington Post* columnists described it as “central...to his manner of persuading and manipulating people.”

“When (Johnson) applied the Treatment,” they wrote, “he towered over people, moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling. From his pockets poured clippings, memos, statistics. Mimicry, humor, and the genius of analogy made the Treatment an almost hypnotic experience, and rendered the target stunned and helpless.”

Senator Hubert Humphrey, who later became Johnson's vice president, said only half-jokingly that after getting the “Treatment,” that he came out covered in several bodily fluids including blood, sweat, tears, and spit.

The Treatment, sometimes applied with a generous helping of bourbon whisky, was regarded as irresistible. Not everyone subjected to it had fond memories: one of LBJ's most severe and knowledgeable critics was George Reedy, his long-time press secretary. He described his boss as overly demanding, hard to work for, and brusque.⁸ But, Reedy admiringly added that Johnson “was capable of inspiring strong attachments even with people who knew him for what he was.”

5. a person who supports a congressperson in whatever duties are deemed necessary

6. **Assiduous (adjective):** showing great care, attention, and effort

7. **Amenable (adjective):** open and responsive to suggestion; easily persuaded

8. **Brusque (adjective):** abrupt or offhand in speech or manner

Building the Great Society

His front seat in the well of the of the U.S. Senate, and his more than five years in the White House gave Johnson the platform to pursue his legislative goal, which was as oversized as his personality: he wanted to surpass the social progress achieved by the New Deal⁹ of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the New Frontier¹⁰ of President Kennedy.

- [15] It was a very ambitious¹¹ aim, but as the *New York Times* wrote in 1964 after Johnson entered the White House with a 70% popular approval, the new president was “riding on the greatest economic boom in peacetime history.”

The American Gross National Product rose from 1960 to 1964 a spectacular 25%; unemployment plummeted to 4.1% by the end of 1965; inflation hovered around 1% a year; and income inequality was the lowest since the 1930s because of a 70% tax on the highest incomes.

Johnson, who never forgot the poor children he had taught as a young man — and never missed a political trick — knew what to do. He took advantage of the atmosphere of affluence¹² and optimism to introduce the “Great Society,” his own far-reaching program for improving the lives of African Americans and others in need.

The slew of laws he pushed through Congress included two measures of historic importance: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Both statutes¹³ put an end to legal racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. Both were passed after Johnson used every ounce of his power and prodigious persuasiveness to crush the stiff opposition of not only Republicans, but also die-hard Southern Democrats.

The Civil Rights law was a showpiece of LBJ’s wall-to-wall social betterment agenda: It extended federal minimum wage to millions of unprotected workers and included such measures as an education bill to help disadvantaged students; a provision (later called Medicare) to provide health care for the elderly; a law that increased the funding for the “War on Poverty,” a program to increase the employment opportunity for the poor; and even provisions to protect clean air and water, improve the landscaping of highways, and creating the National Foundation of the Arts.

- [20] In addition, the act sought to eliminate “every remaining obstacle to the right and opportunity of all citizens to vote,” an issue to which Johnson returned the following year with the Voting Rights Act. This law was designed specifically to protect the right of black Americans to register and vote in the South, and it climaxed a dramatic political change that had started with the passage of the Civil Rights Act: Segregationist Southerners and other pro-segregation Democrats left their party and joined the Republicans.

9. a group of government programs and policies designed to improve conditions for persons suffering in the Great Depression
10. a slogan used by President Kennedy to describe his goals and policies
11. **Ambitious** (*adjective*): intended to satisfy high aspirations and therefore difficult to achieve
12. **Affluence** (*noun*): the state of having a great deal of money; wealth
13. a written law passed by a legislative body

As Johnson told an aide after one of his difficult legislative victories, “We have lost the South for a generation.” It was a prediction that began coming true already in the midterm elections in 1966, when the Democrats lost three seats in the Senate, 47 in the House and the majority in eight state legislatures.

But such was Johnson’s political and personal clout¹⁴ that even the shift did not block the passage of the vast majority of the “Great Society” laws. By the time he left the White House, Congress had passed and Johnson had signed into laws an astonishing 96% of his 87 legislative proposals — more than double the percentage that had been achieved by the idolized President Kennedy.

Collectively, these statutes took long steps to help erase the disgraceful stain left behind by the slavery: the legal segregation and discrimination in America. But as Johnson soon found out, that progress had little, if any, immediate impact on two major problems that in the mid-1960s kept America from reaching the nirvana¹⁵ of his Christmas speech.

One of them was the country’s continued racial divide. It was painfully illustrated in the South by the deep hostility with which white police and politicians fought against the blacks’ freedom marches demanding their voting rights. And it was equally starkly shown by the thousands of African Americans whose deeply held mistrust of police and their treatment of minorities resulted in riots in Los Angeles and Chicago.

[25] The reaction to these violent events included a sharp drop in the public’s support for LBJ’s policies. When asked in a 1965 Gallup poll¹⁶ how blacks might improve their situation, 88% of whites suggested self-improvement, education, and hard work rather than help from the government.

The second, personally even more terrifying — and eventually decisive — issue for the President was the demands of his generals for sending more American troops into the voracious¹⁷ maw¹⁸ of the war in Vietnam. Johnson, who was far more sensitive than his public persona suggested, agonized over each request, and was profoundly hurt by the young Americans shouting, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids you killed today?”

By August, 1967, the public opposition to his handling of the war reached 60%; he became reluctant to show up outside the White House; the emotional strain of the war was taking a visible toll on his health. He became easily irritated, depressed and dropped hints that he would not run for another term in the office.

He reached the final decision on March 31 of the following year. As Johnson described it, his daughter Lynda — who was expecting a baby while her husband, a Marine officer, was serving in Vietnam — approached him with “tears in her eyes and voice” and asked, “Daddy, why does Chuck have to go and fight and die for people who don’t want to be protected?”

At 9 p.m. that evening, Johnson scrapped¹⁹ a scheduled TV report to the nation about limitations on the bombing in Vietnam. Instead, he announced that “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination... for another term as your president.”

14. **Clout** (*noun*): influence or power, especially in politics or business

15. **Nirvana** (*noun*): a state of perfect happiness

16. an assessment of public opinion by questioning of a statistically representative sample

17. **Voracious** (*adjective*): extremely eager or hungry

18. the jaws or throat of a hungry animal

- [30] On January 23, 1973, four years after he had turned over his office to Republican President Richard Nixon, LBJ died — apparently of heart attack — at his ranch in Texas. He was only 64, but he had left behind a priceless legacy: the Great Society laws, and their enormous contribution to the rights, liberty and quality of life of all American citizens.

"Lyndon Baines Johnson and the Great Society" by Mike Kubic. Copyright © 2017 by CommonLit, Inc. This text is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Lyndon Johnson was respected and admired for making difficult decisions throughout his presidency, including the Vietnam War.
 - B. Lyndon Johnson was recognized for improving American society with laws regarding civil rights, but was criticized for his decisions during the Vietnam War.
 - C. Lyndon Johnson was widely considered to be too forceful and abrasive during his presidency, and was met with resistance because of his off-putting attitude.
 - D. Lyndon Johnson set high expectations for himself during his presidency. However, his inability to deliver on many of his promises lost him the public's support.

2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Today — as never before — man has in his possession the capacities to end war and preserve peace, to eradicate poverty and share abundance," (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "Not everyone subjected to it had fond memories: one of LBJ's most severe and knowledgeable critics was George Reedy, his long-time press secretary." (Paragraph 13)
 - C. "these statutes took long steps to help erase the disgraceful stain left behind by the slavery: the legal segregation and discrimination in America. But as Johnson soon found out, that progress had little, if any, immediate impact on two major problems" (Paragraph 23)
 - D. "Johnson scrapped a scheduled TV report to the nation about limitations on the bombing in Vietnam. Instead, he announced that 'I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination...for another term as your president.'" (Paragraph 29)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of "indomitable" in paragraph 10?
 - A. deceitful
 - B. determined
 - C. accommodating
 - D. intimidating

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Johnson's dogged refusal to accept a 'no' as an answer" (Paragraph 10)
 - B. "central... to his manner of persuading and manipulating people." (Paragraph 10)
 - C. "he towered over people, moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target" (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "the genius of analogy made the Treatment an almost hypnotic experience" (Paragraph 11)

Lesson 2

Today's Standard: US.83 Evaluate the impact of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society Programs, including Medicare, urban renewal, and the War on Poverty.

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican-American school. Few of them could speak English, and I couldn't speak much Spanish. My students were poor and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them. But they knew it was so, because I saw it in their eyes. I often walked home late in the afternoon, after the classes were finished, wishing there was more that I could do. But all I knew was to teach them the little that I knew, hoping that it might help them against the hardships that lay ahead.

Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child.

Source: "The American Promise" speech by President Lyndon B. Johnson, March 15, 1965 in Selma, Alabama

We are citizens of the richest and most fortunate nation in the history of the world...We have never lost sight of our goal: an America in which every citizen shares all the opportunities of his society, in which every man has a chance to advance his welfare to the limit of his capacities. We have come a long way toward this goal. We still have a long way to go.

The distance which remains is the measure of the great unfinished work of our society. To finish that work I have called for a national war on poverty. Our objective: total victory. There are millions of Americans – one fifth of our people – who have not shared in the abundance which has been granted to most of us, and on whom the gates of opportunity have been closed.

What does this poverty mean to those who endure it? It means a daily struggle to secure the necessities for ever a meager existence. It means that the abundance, the comforts, the opportunities they see all around them are beyond their grasp. Worst of all, it means hopelessness for the young...

...We must also strike down all the barriers which keep many from using those exits. The war on poverty is not a struggle simply to support people, to make them dependent on the generosity of others. It is a struggle to give people a chance. It is an effort to allow them to develop and use their capacities, as we have been allowed to develop and use ours, so that they can share, as others share, in the promise of this nation.

We do this, first of all, because it is right that we should...We do it also because helping some will increase the prosperity of all. Our fight against poverty will be an investment in the most valuable of our resources-the skills and strength of our people...It strikes at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty.

Source: "War on Poverty" speech by President Johnson 1964

1. Based on the texts, how did President Johnson's early teaching experiences affect how he viewed poverty?
2. Why did President Johnson believe that a War on Poverty was necessary?
3. Compare the experiences that Johnson described in the first source to the article that you read yesterday about Johnson and the Great Society. How could those experiences have impacted laws that President Johnson passed in the 1960s? What evidence do you find from yesterday's text?
4. After reading the second source, what are some potential criticisms that people might have had about the speech?

Lesson 3

Today's Standard: US.85 Explain significant achievements of President Richard Nixon's administration, including his appeal to the "silent majority" and his major foreign policy actions.

The United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, hereinafter referred to as the Parties:

Taking into account the devastating consequences that nuclear war would have for all mankind, and recognizing the need to exert every effort to avert the risk of outbreak of such a war, including measures to guard against accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons,

Believing that agreement on measures for reducing the risk of outbreak of nuclear war serves the interests of strengthening international peace and security, and is in no way contrary to the interests of any other country,

Bearing in mind that continued efforts are also needed in the future to seek ways of reducing the risk of outbreak of nuclear war,

Have agreed as follows:

Article 1

Each Party undertakes to maintain and to improve, as it deems necessary, its existing organizational and technical arrangements to guard against the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons under its control.

Article 2

The Parties undertake to notify each other immediately in the event of an accidental, unauthorized or any other unexplained incident involving a possible detonation of a nuclear weapon which could create a risk of outbreak of nuclear war. In the event of such an incident, the Party whose nuclear weapon is involved will immediately make every effort to take necessary measures to render harmless or destroy such weapon without its causing damage.

Article 3

The Parties undertake to notify each other immediately in the event of detection by missile warning systems of unidentified objects, or in the event of signs of interference with these systems or with related communications facilities, if such occurrences could create a risk of outbreak of nuclear war between the two countries.

Article 4

Each Party undertakes to notify the other Party in advance of any planned missile launches if such launches will extend beyond its national territory in the direction of the other Party.

Source: Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) 1971, Signed by President Nixon and Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev

And now I would like to address a word, if I may, to the young people of this nation who are particularly concerned, and I understand why they are concerned about this war. I respect your idealism. I share your concern for peace. I want peace as much as you do. There are powerful personal reasons I want to end this war. This week I will have to sign 83 letters to mothers, fathers, wives and loved ones of men who have given their lives for America in Vietnam.

It is very little satisfaction to me that this is only one-third as many letters as I signed the first week in office. There is nothing I want to do more than to see the day when I do not have to write any more of those letters...

And I want to end the war for another reason. I want to end it so that the energy and dedication of you, our young people, now too often directed into bitter hatred against those responsible for the war, can be turned to the great challenges of peace, a better life for all Americans, a better life for all people on this earth...

Let historians not record that, when America was the most powerful nation in the world, we passed on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism.

So tonight, to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans, I ask for your support. I pledged in my campaign for the Presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed. For the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate in Paris.

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that...

Source: Silent Majority Speech, President Nixon, November 3, 1969

1. Based on the two texts above, what issues were most important to President Nixon?
2. Based on the texts, how did President Nixon work to achieve détente (decline in Cold War tensions)?
3. Based on the second text, how would President Nixon most likely respond to critics of his handling of the Vietnam War? What evidence leads you to that conclusion?

Lesson 4

Today's Standard: US.86 Examine the Watergate scandal, including:

- Background of the break-in
- Changing role of media and journalism
- Controversy surrounding President Ford's pardon
- Legacy of distrust
- *United States vs. Nixon*

Early on the morning of June 17, 1972, five men broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate hotel and office complex in Washington, D.C. A security guard discovered the team and alerted the metro police, who arrested the burglars, who carried more than \$3,500 in cash and high-end surveillance and electronic equipment.

While the burglars awaited their arraignment in federal district court, the FBI launched an investigation of the incident. The dogged ¹reporting of two *Washington Post* journalists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, raised questions and suggested connections between Nixon's reelection campaign and the men awaiting trial in federal district court. The White House denied any connection to the break-in, and President Richard Nixon won reelection in a landslide in November 1972.

On January 10, 1973, the trial of the Watergate burglars and two accomplices began. After weeks of testimony, Chief Federal District Judge John Sirica expressed skepticism that all the facts in the case had been revealed. Five men pleaded guilty and two were convicted by a jury. Judge Sirica urged those awaiting sentencing to cooperate with the soon-to-be-established Senate select committee.

Throughout the Congressional inquiry called to investigate these events, President Nixon rebuffed ²the committee's requests for access to information. Claiming a constitutional separation of powers, he refused to allow his aides to testify. Senator Ervin insisted that executive privilege could not be extended to cover criminal behavior and he threatened to authorize the sergeant at arms to arrest White House aides who refused to testify. Conceding to public pressure, the president allowed his aides to cooperate but continued to deny the committee access to presidential papers. Nixon repeatedly declared that he knew nothing about the Watergate burglary, but former White House counsel John Dean III testified that the president had approved plans to cover up White House connections to the break-in. Another former aide, Alexander Butterfield, revealed that the president maintained a voice-activated tape recorder system in various rooms in the White House.

Source: Senate.Gov, Summary of Watergate Investigation

¹ Dogged—Persistent and determined

² Rebuffed—Rejected

This is the 37th time I have spoken to you from this office, where so many decisions have been made that shaped the history of this Nation. Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.

In all the decisions I have made in my public life, I have always tried to do what was best for the Nation. Throughout the long and difficult period of Watergate, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me.

In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing that effort. As long as there was such a base, I felt strongly that it was necessary to see the constitutional process through to its conclusion, that to do otherwise would be unfaithful to the spirit of that deliberately difficult process and a dangerously destabilizing precedent for the future.

But with the disappearance of that base, I now believe that the constitutional purpose has been served, and there is no longer a need for the process to be prolonged.

I would have preferred to carry through to the finish whatever the personal agony it would have involved, and my family unanimously urged me to do so. But the interest of the Nation must always come before any personal considerations.

From the discussions I have had with Congressional and other leaders, I have concluded that because of the Watergate matter I might not have the support of the Congress that I would consider necessary to back the very difficult decisions and carry out the duties of this office in the way the interests of the Nation would require.

I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interest of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad.

To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home.

Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead.

Source: President Nixon's Resignation Speech, August 8, 1974

It is believed that a trial of Richard Nixon, if it became necessary, could not fairly begin until a year or more has elapsed. In the meantime, the tranquility to which this nation has been restored by the events of recent weeks could be irreparably lost by the prospects of bringing to trial a former President of the United States. The prospects of such trial will cause prolonged and divisive debate over the propriety of exposing to further punishment and degradation a man who has already paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing the highest elective office of the United States.

Now, THEREFORE, I, GERALD R. FORD, President of the United States, pursuant to the pardon power conferred upon me by Article II, Section 2, of the Constitution, have granted and by these presents do grant a full, free, and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon for all offenses against the United States which he, Richard Nixon, has committed or may have committed or taken part in during the period from January 20, 1969 through August 9, 1974.

Source: Presidential Pardon issued by President Gerald Ford, September 8, 1974

1. Why did Congress investigate President Nixon?
2. What was the media's role in the Watergate scandal?
3. How did President Nixon's reactions to the scandal affect the scandal?
4. How did President Ford justify pardoning President Nixon?
5. Based on the three documents, make a prediction about how the public would have reacted to Ford's pardon of President Nixon. Provide evidence from the texts to support your prediction.