

The Great Society at 50 – Part 1

Karen Tumulty – May 17, 2014

One day shortly after starting his new job as presidential adviser and speechwriter, Richard N. Goodwin was summoned to see the boss. Not to the Oval Office, but to the White House swimming pool, where Lyndon B. Johnson often went to ruminate.

Goodwin found the leader of the free world naked, doing a languorous sidestroke. Johnson invited him and top aide Bill Moyers to doff their own clothes: “Come on in, boys. It’ll do you good.”

It was an unorthodox manner of conducting official business. As they bobbed in the tepid water, the president “began to talk as if he were addressing some larger, imagined audience of the mind,” Goodwin later wrote in his memoir.

The 32-year-old speechwriter forgot his chagrin as he was drawn by “the powerful flow of Johnson’s will, exhorting, explaining, trying to tell me something about himself, seeking not agreement — he knew he had that — but *belief*.”

This happened in early April 1964, just a little more than four months after a tragedy in Dallas had made Johnson the 36th president of the United States.

“I never thought I’d have the power,” Johnson told Goodwin and Moyers. “I wanted power to use it. And I’m going to use it.”

“We’ve got to use the Kennedy program as a springboard to take on the Congress, summon the states to new heights, create a Johnson program, different in tone, fighting and aggressive,” he said. “Hell, we’ve barely begun to solve our problems. And we can do it all.”

Johnson’s vision would come to be known as the Great Society — the most ambitious effort ever to test what American government is capable of achieving. And in doing so, to discover what it is not.

In laying it out, LBJ even set out a specific time frame for it to come to fruition — 50 years, a mark that will be reached on Thursday. Johnson launched his program with a University of Michigan commencement address, delivered on the clear, humid morning of May 22, 1964, in Ann Arbor.

Today, the laws enacted between 1964 and 1968 are woven into the fabric of American life, in ways big and small. They have knocked down racial barriers, provided health care for the elderly and food for the poor, sustained orchestras and museums in cities across the country, put seat belts and padded dashboards in every automobile, [garnished Connecticut Avenue in Northwest Washington with red oaks](#).

“We are living in Lyndon Johnson’s America,” said Joseph A. Califano Jr., who was LBJ’s top domestic policy adviser from 1965 through the end of his presidency. “This country is more the country of Lyndon Johnson than any other president.”

The backlash against the Great Society has been as enduring as its successes.

Virtually every political battle that rages today has roots in the federal expansion and experimentation that began in the 1960s. It set terms of engagement for ideological warfare over how to grapple with income

inequality, whether to encourage a common curriculum in schools, affirmative action, immigration, even whether to strip federal funding for National Public Radio. (Yes, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is another Great Society program.)

Many Great Society programs are now so popular it is hard to imagine the country as we know it without them. Others — including some of its more grandiose urban renewal efforts — are generally regarded as failures. Poverty remains with us, with the two parties in deep disagreement over whether government has alleviated it or made it harder to escape.

When Johnson spoke that day in Michigan, before a crowd of 70,000, the country was enjoying unprecedented affluence.

So he beckoned Americans to consider what they could do with their riches, to imagine ahead — to today — a time that many who heard his words have lived to see.

“The challenge of the next half-century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life and to advance the quality of our American civilization,” the president said. “Your imagination and your initiative and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time, we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society but upward to the Great Society.”

The import of that pronouncement was lost on the graduates of the Michigan Class of 1964. Their college years had been framed by the thrill of John F. Kennedy’s election when they were freshman and the heartbreak of his death when they were seniors. They graduated six months to the day after his

assassination; their speaker was a stand-in for the president they had originally invited.

Undergraduate student-body president Roger Lowenstein sat onstage behind Johnson. When he saw the words “GREAT SOCIETY” roll by on the teleprompter — in his recollection, the phrase was underlined and written in big letters — Lowenstein snickered with Michigan Daily newspaper editor Ron Wilton, who was next to him.

“It did sound corny, and it wasn’t catchy,” said Lowenstein, who went on to become an attorney, then write for the hit TV show “L.A. Law,” and now runs a charter school in Los Angeles.

“We were just typical 21-year-old wise guys,” he said, “with complete ignorance that history was happening in front of us.”

Goodwin still has his [first draft of the Great Society speech](#). For decades, it was boxed away in the Concord, Mass., home he shares with his wife, the historian and author Doris Kearns Goodwin.

Settled in a comfortable chair in his study, Dick Goodwin pulled eight typewritten pages from a folder. They show a work in progress: notes penciled in the margins, phrases underlined for emphasis, entire paragraphs scratched out.

“He knew his ambitions,” Goodwin said of Johnson. “When I first drafted that speech, somebody else on the staff took it upon himself to redo it so it became just another anti-poverty speech. In fact, it was rewritten. I went in to see

Johnson. This was intended to be much more than anti-poverty. It was a grand master plan. Johnson had it changed back to what it had been.”

The transformation

LBJ’s brand of government activism was inspired by his idol, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the New Deal of his Depression-era youth. (At 26, he had run FDR’s National Youth Administration work and training program in Texas.)

But the reach of Johnson’s Great Society was broader, its premise even more idealistic.

“Roosevelt did not set out to start a revolution in this country. He was trying to put out the fire” of an economic catastrophe, said political scientist Norman J. Ornstein, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. “Coming at a time of prosperity, Johnson really was looking for a way to transform America.”

LBJ prodded the 89th Congress , which was seated from January 1965 to January 1967, to churn out [nearly 200 major bills](#). It is regarded by many as the most productive legislative body in American history — and the starkest contrast imaginable to the Capitol Hill paralysis of today.

In the space of a few years came an avalanche of new laws, many of which were part of LBJ’s [War on Poverty](#): Civil rights protections. Medicare and Medicaid. Food stamps. Urban renewal. The first broad federal investment in elementary and high school education. Head Start and college aid. An end to

what was essentially a whites-only immigration policy. Landmark consumer safety and environmental regulations. Funding that gave voice to community action groups.

Before the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act, which sought to bring blacks to the polls, there were believed to be about 300 African American elected officials in this country. By 1970, there were 1,469. As of 2011, there were more than 10,500, [according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies](#).

One of them sits in the Oval Office.

Critics said some of the Great Society programs perpetuated the problems they aimed to solve, stirred social discontent and worked mostly to the benefit of the massive, intractable bureaucracies they created.

Enormous sums were spent on ideas that had never been tested outside of social-science theory, and some proved unworkable in the real world.

The Model Cities program, for instance, was shut down in 1974. Dick Lee, the slum-clearing mayor New Haven, Conn., who had overseen one of the most ambitious of the federally financed initiatives, once said, “If New Haven is a model city, God help America’s cities.”

The Office of Economic Opportunity, which ran the War on Poverty, was abolished in 1981.

“We were coming up with programs so fast, even Johnson could barely remember what he proposed,” Goodwin said.

Disillusionment gained force as the Vietnam War sapped Johnson of his political capital and his moral authority, and squeezed his budget.

In a 1978 book, Henry Aaron of the Brookings Institution wrote that the speed and intensity with which the country shifted gears “is unique in American political history.”

Johnson was acutely aware of that. “He was conscious of how limited time there was to get things done,” Califano said, “and how he was spending capital all the time.”

LBJ was elected in 1964 with what was then the biggest landslide in U.S. history. Just two years later in the midterm contests, his party lost three seats in the Senate, 47 in the House and eight governorships. Republicans would win five of the next six presidential elections.

Among those presidents was Ronald Reagan, who memorably said that the United States had waged a war on poverty and poverty won.

Reagan wrote in his diary on Jan. 28, 1982: “The press is dying to paint me as now trying to undo the New Deal. I remind them I voted for F.D.R. 4 times. I’m trying to undo the ‘Great Society.’ It was L.B.J.’s war on poverty that led to our present mess.”

The irony, of course, is that while Reagan and other presidents tried to eradicate Great Society programs, nearly all survived in some form, and spending on them continued to rise. The federal government has grown even larger — more than five times as big as it was in 1960, in real dollars — while public faith in it stands near all-time lows.

“That’s the paradox of the Great Society,” said Peter Berkowitz, a senior fellow at Stanford University’s conservative Hoover Institution. “It has never been more entrenched.”

The right time

The debate over the proper size and role of the federal government is a distinctly American one. In no other country has that question been argued for so long and with such intensity, going all the way back to Alexander Hamilton (who wanted a powerful central authority) and Thomas Jefferson (who feared one).

But there have also been eras when the country has opened its arms to a more expansive, muscular Washington. Sometimes, it has been because of a thirst for reform, as happened during the progressive movement of the early 20th century. At others, because the problems are so dire, as was the case with the New Deal in the 1930s.

LBJ recognized that, in the early 1960s, another set of atmospheric forces was building a storm system for government activism.

The economy was booming, ginned up by a big tax cut. America was mourning a slain president who had ignited its idealism. The civil rights movement had awakened its conscience. The nation was led by a president of unmatched legislative skills. And confidence in Washington was as high as pollsters have ever seen it.

Back then, when Americans were asked how often they trusted the federal government to do what is right, nearly 80 percent said just about always or most of the time, according to [data compiled by the Pew Research Center](#).

That confidence would begin to erode dramatically in the mid-1960s as Vietnam and social disruption surrounding the Great Society shook Americans' faith in the government that had brought them through the Depression and World War II.

By the end of 1966, their favorable view of Washington had declined sharply, to 65 percent — and it had a lot farther to go. It stood at 19 percent after last year’s government shutdown.

Yale Law School emeritus professor Peter Schuck, who was an official at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare during the Jimmy Carter administration, argues that the extension of the government’s reach and ambitions has deepened public cynicism.

“In short, the public views the federal government as a chronically clumsy, ineffectual, bloated giant that cannot be counted upon to do the right thing, much less do it well,” Schuck wrote in his new book, “Why Government Fails So Often.” “It does not seem to matter much to them whether the government that fails them is liberal or conservative, or how earnestly our leaders promise to remedy these failures.”

The Great Society promised too much. [Sargent Shriver](#), whom LBJ put in charge of the War on Poverty, said that “ending poverty in this land” was actually achievable by 1976.

Decades later, Shriver reflected on why such a righteous undertaking should have become so reviled. One reason was the explosion of disorder, even riots, that followed.

“We weren’t quite prepared for the bitterness and the antagonism and the violence — in some cases, the emotional outbursts — that accompanied an effort to alleviate poverty,” Shriver told Michael Gillette, director of the LBJ Presidential Library’s oral-history program.

“There were an awful lot of people, both white and black, who had generations of pent-up feelings,” Shriver said. “. . . The placid life of most middle-class

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Liberals and conservatives disagree on why the War on Poverty fell short — whether it was abandoned or was destined to fail from the start.

“Government has crowded out civil society in many ways, inadvertently,” said House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.). “. . . The federal government has a very important role to play here. I’m not suggesting they don’t. But it needs to be a supporting role, not a commanding role, not a displacing role.”

In the past few years, the plight of those on the bottom has gotten new attention as the country has struggled to reach escape velocity from its latest recession. The disparity between the rich and the poor has grown.

Ryan, who was on the 2012 GOP presidential ticket as Mitt Romney’s running mate, said his committee did a yearlong study of federal anti-poverty initiatives and discovered that Washington is spending \$800 billion on nearly 100 programs, with no accountability for results.

In March, [Ryan’s committee issued a report](#) noting that the official poverty rate in 2012 was 15 percent, just a couple of points lower than where it stood in 1965.

But the president’s Council of Economic Advisers uses a broader measure — including tax credits and benefits such as food assistance — that [estimates that poverty has dropped by more than a third](#), from more than 25 percent of the population in the mid-1960s to 16 percent in 2012.

So who is right?

“Economists always argue over the ‘counterfactual’ outcome,” said Austin Nichols, senior research associate at the Urban Institute’s Income and Benefits Policy Center. “You don’t know what things would have looked like if the programs hadn’t existed, and how many external factors there are, like economic growth.”

“It’s even harder with the Great Society programs, since a lot of them were constantly being modified,” he added.

For instance, Nichols noted in a recent blog post, federal spending on food stamps “mushroomed in size in the 2000s as it was called on to replace shrinking cash welfare programs.”

For some, the Great Society clearly made life better. In 1964, despite Social Security, more than one out of three Americans over 65 were living below the poverty line, in no small part because of their medical bills. (Forty-four percent had no coverage.) Today, with Medicare available, [fewer than one out of seven do.](#)

“These endeavors didn’t just make us a better country,” President Obama said earlier this year. “They reaffirmed that we are a great country.”