

Education During the Great Society: The Pragmatic Solution to Poverty

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“How much talent has this great, powerful Nation lost because America has failed to give all our children a chance to learn?” It was April of 1965, and President Lyndon B. Johnson was addressing the press regarding one of his many education reform bills.¹ Once a schoolteacher himself, LBJ brought enormous change to the American education system during his time in office. Under his supervision, education was prioritized at the federal level of government like never before. However, historians still debate what caused this push for education.

Prior to the 1960s, education was largely overlooked at the federal level. Many proponents argued for federal aid to education in the decades leading up to the 1960s, but their voices were droned out by conservatives who feared the federal government would cause more harm than good by meddling with the affairs of state governments. Thus, for the most part, the federal government continued to stay out of education through the 1940s and 1950s.² The GI Bill of 1944 signed by FDR did provide scholarships for veterans to attend college, but funds for schools still came largely from state or local governments. Even in the mid-1960s, approximately 54 million adult Americans hadn't finished high school, constituting one quarter of the entire population.³ Of course, even more adults had not attended college. Lyndon Johnson strove to change that ratio.

In office, LBJ signed many landmark pieces of education legislation into law. The two most significant of these bills were the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Higher Education Act of 1965. (For a list of education legislation passed under Johnson, see Appendix A.) Under Johnson, federal education expen-

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ditures more than quadrupled. In 1963, the federal government appropriated \$662 million for education, higher than any year in the prior decade.⁴ The ESEA added almost one billion dollars to that amount,⁵ and alongside other Johnson initiatives, caused the 1966 federal appropriations for education to exceed \$3 billion.⁶

Although it is clear that Johnson desired educational reform, his motivations for doing so are less obvious. Some historians argue that education was an integral part of Johnson's lofty, broad vision for a utopian America.⁷ When assessing Johnson's education programs, it is possible to view him as an idealist. Indeed, Johnson did engage in idealistic thinking. However, Johnson also held more pragmatic intentions: he used education as a weapon to fight poverty and strengthen America economically. Because of the political pressures acting on the federal government in the 1960s, education presented itself as the most pragmatic solution to poverty while simultaneously strengthening the American economy. Because liberal presidents before Johnson such as FDR and JFK aspired to use education to alleviate poverty and increase economic opportunity, these aspirations influenced Johnson and his education agenda followed a similar path.

Johnson's Idealistic Vision

Because education was central to Johnson's vision of an ideal society, his push for education legislation did not arise solely out of an economic necessity. In his vision for a Great Society, education was necessary for both the productivity of workers but also for the intellectual character of a nation. Historian James Lanier has called Johnson's vision "utopian," meaning Johnson was highly idealistic. According to Lanier, although it is true that the Great Society addressed poverty and included welfare policy, its purpose was ultimately much greater. Johnson wanted to craft a truly Great Society, using education as a measure for greatness.⁸ In support of his position, Lanier cites Johnson's famous "Great Society" speech to the University of Michigan in 1964. Although Johnson used the term "Great Society" prior to delivering this speech, this was the first event in which the term "Great So-

ciety” received popular recognition. In his address, Johnson not only emphasized the pressing need for more education, but also his dream of an educated America. He believed that the benefits of education extended beyond work and also into the realms of personal life. Johnson asserted that it was important to empower Americans to enrich their mental faculties for the sake of learning and imagination, not just for the sake of productivity in the workplace.⁹ As demonstrated in this speech, the purpose of more education in the 1960s was not solely to end poverty. Johnson intended to raise the standard of American life far beyond that of minimum sustenance and to build a society where everyone could appreciate the richness of their world.

Later, Johnson again echoed this sentiment after signing a bill appropriating additional funds for education under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 passed earlier that year. The speech was delivered on September 23rd, and in it Johnson asserted that the purpose of spending more on education was “not only to create educated citizens, but to shape the destiny of this great Republic.”¹⁰ In this instance, Johnson once again expressed his idealistic belief that education was a necessity to build a great country, identifying education as a precursor for greatness. Education, Johnson believed, was necessary to craft America into a “great Republic.”

Education Moves to the Forefront of the Poverty Debate

Because of the changing political landscape leading up to the 1960s, Johnson prioritized education over other methods of fighting poverty. Johnson believed education was the most pragmatic approach to combatting poverty, and his “War on Poverty” reflected that belief. A notable transition took place in the years preceding Johnson’s presidency regarding how the government attempted to create economic growth and opportunity for those struggling financially.

Previously, regulation of industry and direct intervention in the economy had been major considerations in the creation of poverty policy. This included laws such as a federal minimum wage, a bracketed in-

come tax system, and welfare for the unemployed. Much of this regulation arose from the lobbying efforts of unions, which gained a significant amount of power under the New Deal. FDR offered more political support for unions than any prior president by greatly advancing their legal status through the NIRA and the Wagner Act. Many elements of New Deal legislation advanced union interests by establishing a minimum wage, pensions for workers, maximum hours and other working regulations. During this time, unions became much more aggressive in their quest for workers' rights. However, in the period spanning from the end of the Second World War to Kennedy's inauguration, the organized labor movement encountered some obstacles and became less vocal than they had been under FDR. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 (officially the Labor Management Relations Act) under Truman gave workers within unions additional rights, but detracted from the power of union leadership.¹¹ Union leaders met further resistance from businesses and Congress after post-war strikes soured their reputation.¹² Then, in the 1950s, the Senate exposed scandals involving union leadership, and President Eisenhower took action to stop what he called the "abuse of union power."¹³ When the 1960s arrived, unions retained little of their former bargaining power. As a result, the federal government felt less pressure to regulate labor markets and was able to explore alternatives to the poverty issue that indirectly lifted up the poor.

In the 1960s, education presented itself as a viable method for providing the poor with the tools necessary to lift themselves out of poverty. When Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, came to LBJ after Kennedy's assassination to discuss antipoverty policy, he advised Johnson that education would be central to any successful attack on poverty.¹⁴ This interaction further suggests that a transition had taken place in the government's approach to antipoverty policy. The focus had shifted to education.

The Johnson administration maintained exceptionally high confidence in the potency of education as a tool for economic success and as an investment in the future economic independence of American individuals. In many instances, Johnson openly expressed this confidence in education as an effective method to raise people out of poverty. In

a special address to Congress regarding the causes of poverty in 1964, Johnson identified a lack of education as one of the largest contributors.¹⁵ Because impoverished young Americans were trapped in the cycle of poverty, the only way to break free was to obtain an education comparable to those who grew up with more opportunity.¹⁶ Earlier that same year, in his State of the Union address, Johnson offered a similar rationale for the importance of education. He asserted that although many identify unemployment and a lack of money as the causes of poverty, the root cause is actually a lack of opportunity. Therefore, to Johnson, education was the most logical method by which he could help the poor. Rather than suppressing its symptoms, Johnson's solution was to attack the origins of poverty through education.

Johnson also believed that since bolstering education would benefit both the poor and taxpayers alike, it was therefore a productive use of government funds. When affluent individuals must pay taxes to assist the poor with healthcare, food, housing, and other welfare projects, poverty strains the American economy as a whole. However, if instead the impoverished members of society had been educated and given the opportunity to support themselves, then the affluent members of society benefit as well. This belief was held by reformers in the Johnson Administration, and was therefore a motivating factor in the push for educational reform. For example, Joseph Califano Jr., the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Department under Johnson, claimed that education reform was designed not to burden taxpayers, but to actually relieve that burden by assisting the needy.¹⁷ To Califano, more federal government involvement in education was a victory for everybody. Johnson echoed a similar sentiment on multiple occasions. On March 1st, 1965, Johnson made some remarks at the National Conference on Education Legislation. He talked about how children born into poverty are trapped there, and without a good education they become dropouts, delinquents, and unemployed. They become "taxeaters instead of taxpayers."¹⁸ Later, for a press conference in April of 1965 regarding the education bill pending Congress' approval, LBJ prepared a number of statistics comparing the cost to educate a single child versus that of supporting a troubled American later in life. At the time, the federal government spent an average of \$450 per child in the public

school system. However, per year it also cost \$1,800 to keep a juvenile in a detention home, \$2,500 to support a family on welfare, and \$3,500 to incarcerate a criminal in a state prison. According to Johnson's argument, by investing in education at that time, America would save a significant amount of money in the future by implementing fewer corrective measures to assist the poorly educated populace.¹⁹ This further served to justify immediately attacking poverty, rather than placing the issue on the back burner for a decade longer.

The Johnson Administration believed the most effective way to combat poverty was through education, and the political pressures of the 1960s made education an exceptionally logical choice. Moreover, by educating the poor, American society as a whole would bear a lesser burden economically. Because of these factors, education presented itself as a pragmatic solution to poverty.

Past Liberals Influence Johnson's Agenda

Johnson strove to further the legacies of former liberal presidents such as JFK and FDR, both of whom aspired to use education to provide equal opportunity to all children and alleviate poverty. Therefore, because the goals of Johnson's predecessors entailed combatting poverty and increasing economic opportunity, Johnson's own programs also aimed to fight poverty and generate economic opportunity. Indeed, much of the legislation he produced incorporated the aspirations of his predecessors.

FDR was Lyndon Johnson's lifelong political idol, and consequently some aspects of Johnson's education legislation reflected FDR's accomplishments and beliefs. Especially formative were Johnson's years running the Texas branch of the National Youth Administration. The goal of the NYA was to provide work and schooling to those who never had the opportunity to obtain an education. Johnson himself relates that his attitude towards education was impacted by his time in the NYA. In his memoir, *Vantage Point*, Johnson reflects that a successful poverty program would help the poor "lift themselves out of the treadmill of poverty." Additionally, he states the the NYA caused him to ensure that substantial efforts were put towards helping children and youth,

because they represented the best chance at breaking out of the poverty cycle.²⁰ Johnson himself asserted that his time in the NYA caused him to view education as a necessary tool to combat poverty.

Additionally, the torrent of legislation Johnson introduced during the Great Society was reminiscent of Roosevelt's work during New Deal times. One specific parallel between legislation passed by FDR and Johnson can be seen in the GI Bill and the Higher Education Act of 1965. The GI Bill, signed into law by FDR, provided college scholarships to veterans. The Higher Education Act was enacted by President Johnson with the intention of strengthening America's university system. Alongside initiatives to strengthen university resources, the law also provided scholarships and low interest loans to students seeking a college education. In both instances, providing college-aged youth with the means to attend college was a central aim. While Johnson did take his higher education program farther than FDR, the evidence does suggest a possible connection between the legislation Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt enacted to improve access to higher education.

Moreover, Johnson internalized FDR's desire to use education to expand opportunity to all children. After signing a bill providing funds for programs under the ESEA, Johnson delivered a speech starting with a reference to FDR. He spoke of how FDR had called upon Congress to improve education twenty-one years before, and how FDR referred to education as "our national obligation to all our children." Johnson then justified the legislation he just enacted by relating it to FDR's challenge to provide all children with an adequate education.²¹ In his speech, not only did Johnson tie his own actions to those of FDR, but he outlined what he believed FDR's stance on education to be. Because FDR believed that education was a national obligation, Johnson was motivated to provide all children with equal opportunity through education as well. This included providing impoverished children with the tools to get ahead.

The cartoon in Appendix B exemplifies Johnson's aspiration to fulfill FDR's vision, connecting Johnson's push for more schools with FDR's New Deal mandate.²²

In the cartoon, Johnson asks FDR's portrait for approval regarding a new piece of antipoverty legislation, demonstrating his desire to continue advancing FDR's New Deal by increasing the federal government's role in combating poverty (see Appendix B). The purpose of this legislation was "freedom from fear," a term FDR originally used in his famous "Four Freedoms" speech.²³ Therefore, according to this cartoon, Johnson's respect for FDR led him to craft education legislation to spread economic opportunity.

Another influential figure shaping Johnson's education policies was his immediate predecessor, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Upon taking office, Johnson made it clear to the American public that he would carry out the agendas of the fallen JFK. He kept many of Kennedy's top aides in his cabinet, and pledged to carry out Kennedy's anti-poverty plans, including efforts directed at education. When Walter Heller, who Kennedy originally tasked with assessing poverty in the U.S., approached Johnson with the anti-poverty plan his team put together, Johnson embraced the proposal with open arms. He told Heller, "Give it the highest priority. Push ahead full tilt."²⁴ The Kennedy agenda lived on under the Johnson administration.

Indeed, there are many parallels between the Great Society education policies and Kennedy's "New Frontier" education plan. Before his death, Kennedy planned to allocate new funds for teacher salaries. Johnson not only signed legislation to address that issue but also supported the training of new teachers. Both Kennedy and Johnson allocated funds for building new schools, and both men were dedicated to making higher education more accessible and widespread.²⁵

The evidence suggests that both Kennedy and FDR influenced Johnson's use of education legislation. Because both presidents used education to offer economic opportunity to the needy, Johnson's programs reflected that focus.

The Ongoing Search

As is often the case with the study of history, conducting research frequently uncovers more questions than answers. This paper in no way represents a complete account of the causes of Great Society education legislation, but rather a reflection of the evidence I discovered. While researching, there were many interesting leads I came across but did not have ample time to explore in any depth.

For example, the Cold War had possible effects on education legislation in the 1960s. After the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, the Americans began questioning their intellectual superiority over the Russians. This fear of inferiority to the Soviet Union could have increased support for widespread educational reform in order to maintain global economic and military superiority.

The Civil Rights movement was another promising area that caught my attention. The push for equal opportunity especially affected African Americans, as vast numbers of them were trapped by poverty as the result of racial discrimination. Given the circumstances, it would be reasonable for a connection to exist between the growing pressure for equality among races and the federal government's to push for more equality in education.

Education also could have had a deeper personal significance to LBJ. Although Johnson did not attend an elite university as many of his government colleagues did, he was able to escape life on the farm through his education. He excelled in school, became a teacher, and obtained a job in government, none of which would have been possible without his education. For Johnson, his own story was likely a motivating factor when he later had the power to give others similar opportunities.

Finally, there are more primary sources I wasn't able to acquire that would have shed more light on this topic. When Johnson drafted his education legislation, he used a secret task force headed by Sargent Shriver to assess the problem and develop the most effective solution. Looking into conversations or memos that were documented from that process could provide a unique insight into the planning of Johnson's education policy. Furthermore, the discussions in Congress over education bills would also have been an interesting place to look to gain additional perspectives regarding the intentions of the legislators who voted on the bills.

The interplay of a variety of motivations led to the creation of Great Society education legislation. Johnson had idealistic tendencies, yet was simultaneously pragmatic in his approach. He sought to combat poverty while also creating a Great Society for everyone. If one thing has become apparent through my research, it is that no one thing caused Johnson to reform education. ●

Appendix A

Table 12. Chronology of major education legislation passed by the 88th Congress and the first session of the 89th Congress

Public law number	Title of law	Date signed by President
1. 88-129	Health Professions Educational Assistance Act of 1963	9/24/63
2. 88-164	Education Provisions (Title III), Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act of 1963	10/31/63
3. 88-204	Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963	12/16/63
4. 88-210	Vocational Education Act of 1963	12/18/63
5. 88-214	Manpower Development and Training Act, Amendments of 1963	12/19/63
6. 88-269	Library Services and Construction Act of 1964	2/11/64
7. 88-352	Civil Rights Act of 1964: Titles IV and VI	7/2/64
8. 88-368	Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Contract Act, Amendments of 1964	7/9/64
9. 88-452	Economic Opportunity Act of 1964	8/20/64
10. 88-579	National Arts and Cultural Development Act of 1964	9/3/64
11. 88-581	Nurse Training Act of 1964	9/4/64
12. 88-665	National Defense Education Act, Amendments of 1964; and School Assistance to Federally Affected Areas, Amendments of 1964	10/16/64
13. 89-10	Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965	4/11/65
14. 89-15	Manpower Development and Training Act, Amendments of 1965	4/26/65
15. 89-36	National Technical Institute for the Deaf Act	6/8/65
16. 89-69	Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act, Amendments of 1965	7/8/65
17. 89-105	Training Teachers of the Handicapped, Amendments to P.L. 88-164	8/4/65
18. 89-209	National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965	9/29/65
19. 89-253	Economic Opportunity Act, Amendments of 1965	10/9/65
20. 89-258	Captioned Films for the Deaf, Amendments of 1965	10/19/65
21. 89-287	National Vocational Student Loan Insurance Act of 1965	10/22/65
22. 89-290	Health Professions Educational Assistance Act, Amendments of 1965	10/22/65
23. 89-291	Medical Library Assistance Act of 1965	10/22/65
24. 89-313	Disaster Relief for Schools	11/1/65
25. 89-329	Higher Education Act of 1965	11/8/65

Source: Francis Keppel, *The Necessary Revolution in American Education*.

Appendix B



Source: Keith Temple. "How About This Chief?"
Cartoon, *The New Orleans Times*, 1965.

Notes

1. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Education Bill" (1965), in *The Johnson Presidential Press Conferences*, (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1978), 289.
2. Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe, "Class, Race, and the Emergence of Federal Education Policy: From the New Deal to the Great Society," *Educational Researcher* 24, no. 3 (April 1995): 4, JSTOR.
3. Lyndon B. Johnson, "The Great Society," (Ann Arbor, May 22, 1964).
4. Francis Keppel, *The Necessary Revolution in American Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 82.
5. *Ibid.*, 72.
6. *Ibid.*, 82.
7. James Lanier, "Lecture on the Great Society." (1993), in *The Great Society Revisited: Success, Failure, or Remorse?*, ed. Mel G. Grinspan (Memphis: Rhodes College, 1993), 7-8.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Lyndon B. Johnson, "The Great Society," (Ann Arbor, May 22, 1964).
10. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks After Signing Bill Providing Funds for Programs Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1969*, 11 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964-1969), 1965, vol. 2, 1014.
11. Labor Management Relations Act, 7 U.S.C. § 141 (1947).
12. Kantor and Lowe, "Class, Race, and the Emergence of Federal Education Policy," 6.

13. Albert Clark, "Ike Acts to Speed Up Legislation to Curb Labor Union Abuses," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 1957.
14. James Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 136.
15. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Special Message to the Congress Proposing a Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty," (Washington DC, March 16, 1964), The American Presidency Project.
16. Lyndon B. Johnson, "State of the Union," (Washington DC, January 8, 1964).
17. Joseph Califano, "How Great Was the Great Society?" (1987), in *The Great Society: A Twenty-Year Critique*, ed. Barbara C. Jordan (Austin: Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 1986), 124-5.
18. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks Before the National Conference on Education Legislation," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1969*, 11 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964-1969), 1965, vol. 1, 227.
19. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Education Bill" (1965), in *The Johnson Presidential Press Conferences*, (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1978), 289.
20. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, (New York: Popular Library, 1971), 73.
21. *Papers*, 1965, vol. 2, 1013.
22. Keith Temple, "How about this..." Cartoon, *The New Orleans Times*, 1965.
23. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Four Freedoms," (Washington DC, January 6, 1941).
24. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 71.

25. John F. Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress on Education," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961-1963*, 3 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961-1963), 1962, vol. 1, 110-14; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1705, 2151, 5211 (1965).

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