

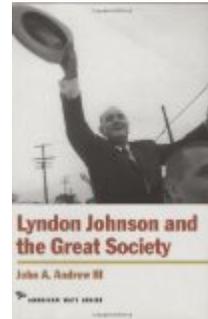
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John A. Andrews, III. *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1998. ix + 211 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-184-6.

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The Great Society Reform Struggle

Intent on completing Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agenda, Lyndon Johnson initiated the "Great Society" program in his 1964 commencement address at the University of Michigan. Johnson envisioned an active, purposeful federal government which would call upon America's great post-war wealth to diminish inequality and improve the quality of life. By placing government at the helm of the country's unprecedented prosperity, Johnson sought to eliminate poverty, expand access to education and health care, rebuild the cities and modernize the nation's infrastructure.

Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society is a balanced, judicious primer on the history of the Great Society which can serve as an excellent first stop for undergraduate students interested in the period.[1] Andrews systematically takes on all of the major policy initiatives of the period in admirable detail; this is a remarkable feat in light of the book's brevity. Those interested in learning about Johnson's leadership style will be disappointed, however, since the focus is on the era's programs rather than the President. Two thematic strands anchor the book: first, that the politics of race defined the challenges facing liberal reformers in the 1960s and, second, that the administration's guiding principle was managerial liberalism, an assumption that a high performance economy could pay for liberal programs without demanding sacrifices from the middle class. Lyndon Johnson was wrong for thinking, Andrews concludes, that reform is inexpensive and easy.

The passage of landmark civil rights legislation is Johnson's most enduring legacy, and Andrews correctly places the issue at the center of his analysis. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 reaffirmed the right to vote and banned discrimination in the provision of public services and in federally funded projects. Southern segregationists in the Senate—giants like Richard Russell (D-GA), Robert Byrd (D-WV) and Strom Thurmond (D-SC)—waged a titanic battle to stop its passage, but liberal Democrats and Republicans under the able floor management of Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) teamed together to pass the legislation. The 1965 Voting Rights Act gave the Justice Department power to regulate registration laws in the South and to insure that state election laws did not restrict ballot access. Initially, Johnson feared that civil rights would swamp the rest of the Great Society agenda. But after defeating Republican Presidential nominee Barry Goldwater in the landslide election of 1964, the administration placed the Voting Rights Act on the fast track. The administration went even further in later years. Johnson proclaimed his support for affirmative action proposals and, in 1968, moved through Congress legislation that banned housing discrimination.

Johnson knew that moving the Democratic party toward racial progressivism would erode Southern support. He told aide Bill Moyers, "I think we delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time" (p. 31). What Johnson did not anticipate was how the politics of race and the tumult surrounding it—the riots, the violence and the rise of black nationalism and white resentment—

would blotch the blueprints of dispassionate “managerial liberalism” and check the architects of the Great Society from renovating the New Deal edifice through the painless harnessing of economic growth.

The dominance of the race question is clearly evident in the War on Poverty. As Andrew astutely notes: “The coincidence of these two efforts led many whites to see anti-poverty programs as an adjunct to the civil rights movement and poverty as a ‘black’ issue, even though most of the poor were white” (p. 59). The poverty program—officially, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964—intended to change the “culture of poverty” through job training and a hodgepodge of other programs for the poor. While many programs like Head Start and the Jobs Corp quietly worked, the Community Action Program (CAP) received the most attention. In an effort to involve the poor in the political process, CAP funneled federal anti-poverty funds through grassroots, neighborhood-run organizations that often antagonized local party elite, particularly big-city mayors. In a few high publicity cases, black militants ran local Community Action Agencies (CAAs). The War on Poverty was not well-planned or coordinated, and it was critically under-financed. The country was not prepared to distribute income or opportunity in the amounts required to end poverty. “Naive hopes were punctured by sharp realities,” Andrew concludes (p. 59).

The limits on federal power were most evident in the Model Cities program. Johnson appointed a task force of urbanists to develop a plan to rebuild old cities. The task force called for the development of a program that combined physical and infrastructure development for the urban landscape and social services for urban residents. The new concept was to concentrate and coordinate federal resources on an experimental basis in a few, select neighborhoods. The architects of the Model Cities program hoped to avoid the problems of Community Action by working closely with the urban establishment. In the transition from theory to practice, however, federal agencies did not work well together, and local governments resisted the transformative blueprints of federal planners. Congress spread Model Cities money among so many cities that the concentration of resources was impossible. For better or worse, federal efforts could not halt the economic and demographic exodus from the big urban centers.

The techniques of managerial liberalism worked best with programmatic initiatives that were removed from the politics of race, and provided benefits for both the

poor and the middle class alike. The passage of the Medicare and Medicaid programs in 1965, for example, expanded health care access for the elderly and the poor. Medicare in particular enjoyed overwhelming public support with ninety-three percent of senior citizens participating in the program. The conflict managerial liberalism seeks to avoid, Andrew points out, comes at a cost. In order to satisfy the American Medical Association, hospital and doctor payments were inflated. In order to provide a safety net for the poor, expensive middle class entitlements were codified. The same processes were at work in the federal aid to education programs of the Great Society. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act sent federal money to poor and wealthy school districts alike through a grant formula that did not prioritize according to need and did not challenge school

Andrew is mildly critical of Johnson for throwing federal dollars at flawed institutions like state and local governments, school districts and the health industry that could not balance the twin goals of equality and efficiency. The programs of the Great Society, Andrew repeatedly emphasizes, “effected reform without making significant structural change” (p. 102). Why? Andrew argues that the ideology of managerial liberalism sought to build consensus and avoid conflict with entrenched interests and that Johnson underestimated the tenacity of the problems he hoped to solve. The legacy of Great Society reform is citizen entitlement without bureaucratic efficiency. Many Americans, for example, have access to health care as a result of Medicare, but the costs of the program are uncontrollable.

Andrew’s criticism of Johnson on this point is unfair, in part because he does not discuss the nature and limitations of the American political system and he appears to misrepresent Johnson’s motivations. Enduring and politically viable programs needed middle class support.[2] While inefficient in the narrow sense that many programs were not targeted to those who were the most needy, they often met the more important standard of political feasibility. Powerful checks on Presidential power—influential pressure groups, an assertive Congress, and a decentralized federal system—prevented the President from reforming and rationalizing policy. Enduring structural reforms were beyond the scope of the Presidency.

Andrew spends little time discussing Johnson’s personality or leadership style, and this hurts his analysis of Great Society policy. Johnson’s experience as a politician and legislator—perhaps the most influential Senate

Majority Leader and the most effective “legislative president” in history—believes the notion that Johnson naively sought consensus above all else. He forged the major initiatives of the Great Society through horse-trading and hard bargaining. Johnson did not think that he was leading the country toward a new consensus or that the 1964 landslide gave him an unchallenged mandate to facilely enact reform. Great Society programs were rushed through Congress quickly because Johnson realized that the open window for liberal reform after the 1964 election was sure to close. If he could get legislation on the books that expanded access, he reasoned, efficiencies could be enacted as problems arose. In this regard, the quandaries of the Great Society inform contemporary debates over domestic policy. Johnson joins contemporary liberals who advocate “mend don’t end” approaches to a variety of New Deal/Great Society style programs including Social Security, Affirmative Action policies and Medicare/Medicaid. As Andrew points out, conservatives point to the cumbersome reform process as evidence of failure, and question the legitimacy and necessity of federal intervention in American social and economic life in the first place.

In the end, the politics of race, in Andrew’s words, “played a central role in the Great Society’s accomplishments and failing” (p. 184). Johnson’s great triumph was in the field of civil rights. He helped to break the back of Jim Crow. In part because of the politics of race, his domestic reforms did not match the achievements of FDR. Unlike his predecessor, however, Johnson dealt with the question of racial injustice squarely, even as it exploded

the New Deal coalition and undermined many of his domestic reforms. For that he numbers among the most important—perhaps even heroic—presidents of this century.

Notes:

[1]. Andrew also provides a very good and useful bibliographic essay that summarizes the major studies of the Great Society. Two important works that were published around the same time that Andrew’s book went to press are Robert Dallek *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson And His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Michael R. Beschloss *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

[2]. After the 1994 Congressional election, a group of scholars formed “The New Majority Project” to discuss ways to revive the Democratic party. They concluded that the Democrats need to address the concerns of the middle class. The most successful programs are inclusive enough to gain the support of the majority of voters, while also targeting resources to help the needy (e.g., Social Security). Stanley B. Greenburg and Theda Skocpol *The New Majority: Toward a Popular Progressive Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

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