
LET US CONTINUE...

Chapter 49

The Great Society

What is the proper role of government in shaping American society?

49.1 Introduction

On November 22, 1963, the day that John Kennedy was assassinated, Vice President Lyndon Johnson took over the presidency. Most Americans knew little about Johnson and doubted his ability to take Kennedy's place as president. However, Johnson handled the crisis masterfully. "A nation stunned, shaken to its very heart, had to be reassured that the government was not in a state of paralysis," he recalled later. "I had to convince everyone everywhere that the country would go forward."

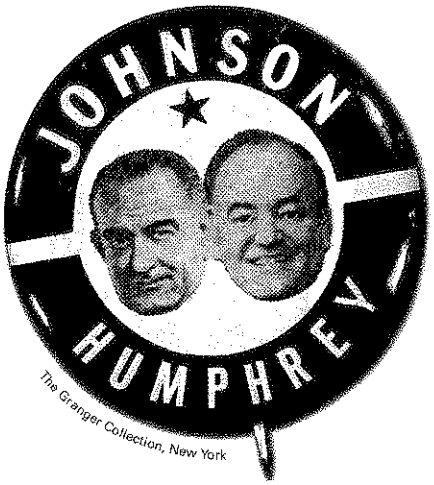
In his first address as president, Johnson sought to put people's doubts to rest. He vowed to carry on the late president's dreams for the nation. Invoking the challenge Kennedy had laid out in his inaugural address, Johnson exclaimed,

> On the 20th day of January, in 1961, John F. Kennedy told his countrymen that our national work would not be finished "in the first thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But," he said, "let us begin." Today, in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow Americans, let us continue.
>
> —Lyndon B. Johnson, Joint Session of Congress, November 27, 1963

Johnson echoed his "let us continue" message the following year, when he ran for a full term as president. In his speech accepting the nomination, Johnson looked back to a long line of Democratic presidents: "I know what kind of a dream Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman and John F. Kennedy would dream if they were here tonight," he told the delegates at the nominating convention. "And I think I know what kind of dream you want to dream." Looking ahead to the challenge of turning that dream into a new political reality, Johnson ended with these words: "So as we conclude our labors. let us tomorrow turn to our new task. Let us be on our way!"

In contrast to Harvard-educated Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson was a rough-hewn Texan. He served in Congress for 23 years before becoming vice president. A master of the legislative process, Johnson had far more political experience than Kennedy. Comparing the two presidents, one journalist said, "Kennedy inspired . . . Johnson delivered."

◀ The 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey



This 1964 campaign button shows President Johnson with his vice presidential running mate, Hubert Humphrey. Notice the nearly equal size of the two heads. That fall, the president's campaign issued a similar button in which Humphrey's head appeared to be larger than Johnson's. Johnson had a fit. Campaign officials replaced the offending button with one that showed Johnson larger than his running mate.

49.2 The 1964 Election: Debating the Role of Government

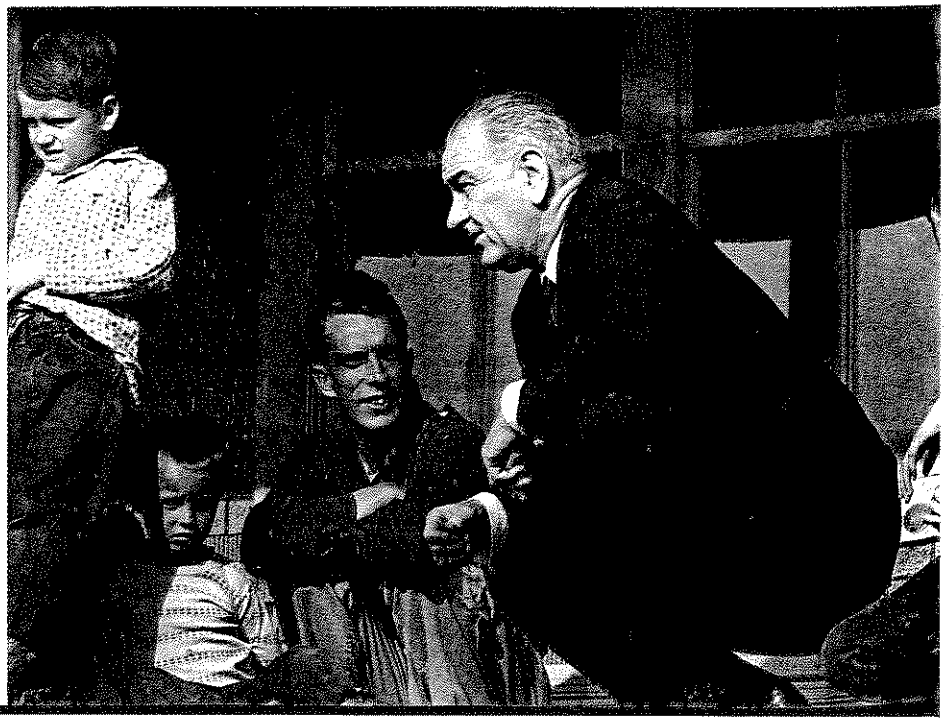
Lyndon Johnson was a man of enormous energy and big ideas. As president, he wanted to do far more than simply enact Kennedy's programs. Soon after taking office, he began developing an ambitious vision for his own presidency, should he win reelection the following year.

The Liberal View: Expanding Government to Promote Well-Being Johnson unveiled his vision in a commencement speech at the University of Michigan. "In your time," he told the graduating class, "we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the **Great Society**." The president explained further,

> The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice . . . But that is just the beginning.
>
> The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city . . . serves not only . . . the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.
>
> It is a place where man can renew contact with nature . . . a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods.
>
> But most of all, the Great Society is not . . . a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.
>
> —Lyndon B. Johnson, May 22, 1964

As the election campaign continued, Democrats adopted the goals of the Great Society as their party platform. In their eyes, Johnson's vision continued a tradition of liberal reform that stretched back to Franklin Roosevelt and, before him, to the Progressive Era. Like Progressives, these liberal Democrats believed the power of government should be expanded to promote social well-being.

President Johnson once said he wanted to be president so he could "give things to people —all sorts of things to all sorts of people, especially the poor and the blacks." His vision of the Great Society reflected that desire.

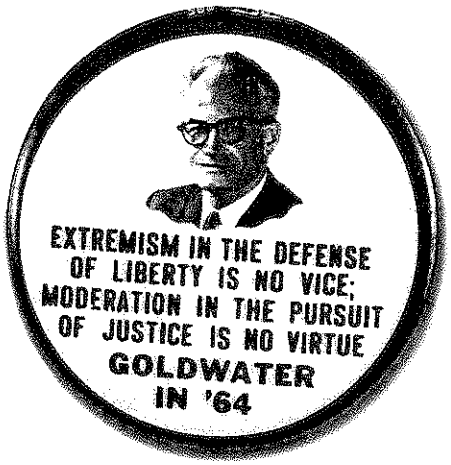


The Conservative View: Limiting Government to Preserve Liberty Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, the Republican candidate for president, held a very different view on government. An outspoken conservative, he had rejected Eisenhower's modern Republicanism as "a dime-store New Deal"—that is, a cheap version of the Democrats' famous domestic program.

Goldwater believed that government's most important role was to "preserve and extend freedom." Regulating every aspect of people's lives was not its proper role. Yet, he observed, that was exactly what it had done since the time of the New Deal. "Our defenses against the accumulation of power in Washington are in poorer shape," he warned, "than our defenses against the aggressive designs of Moscow." Like many conservatives, Goldwater longed for a presidential candidate who had the courage to say what he had said himself:

> I have little interest in streamlining government or in making it more efficient, for I mean to reduce its size. I do not undertake to promote welfare, for I propose to extend freedom. My aim is not to pass laws, but to repeal them. It is not to inaugurate new programs, but to cancel old ones that do violence to the Constitution, or that have failed in their purpose, or that impose on the people an unwarranted financial burden. I will not attempt to discover whether legislation is "needed" before I have first determined whether it is constitutionally permissible. And if I should later be attacked for neglecting my constituents' "interests," I shall reply that I was informed their main interest is liberty and that in that cause I am doing the very best I can.
>
> —Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative,* 1960

In 1964, Goldwater got his chance to be that candidate. When more moderate Republicans warned that voters would reject Goldwater's views as **extremism,** or radicalism, he answered, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And . . . moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."



Barry Goldwater lost his bid for the presidency in 1964. But his book, *The Conscience of a Conservative,* sold 3.5 million copies and helped inspire a new generation of conservatives. Some observers consider Goldwater to be the most influential losing candidate in the nation's history.

Johnson Wins by a Landslide The campaign quickly turned nasty. Opponents portrayed Goldwater as a reckless extremist who, if elected, would abolish Social Security and take his anticommunist aggression toward the Soviet Union so far as starting World War III. On September 7, the Johnson campaign aired "Daisy," a television advertisement that quickly became famous. It showed a young girl counting the petals of a daisy. Suddenly her voice was drowned out first by a nuclear countdown and then by a mushroom cloud. The ad announced, "Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home." "Daisy" ran only once, but that was enough to scare voters.

Johnson beat Goldwater in a landslide, winning 44 states to Goldwater's six. Johnson won 61 percent of the popular vote, the greatest margin received by any president to that point. Democrats also gained a large majority in Congress.

However, the election gave rise to two developments that would eventually challenge the Democrats' hold on power. One was the modern conservative movement, which grew out of Goldwater's ideas. The other was the political transformation of the South. In 1964, for the first time since Reconstruction, five southern states voted Republican. This shift marked the beginning of the transformation of the South from solidly Democratic to reliably Republican.

Here Lyndon Johnson puts the "Johnson treatment" to work on Senator Theodore Green. The president would lean in close, coming face to face with the person he addressed. Energetic in his speech, facial expressions, and hand gestures, Johnson used this treatment to persuade legislators to vote in his favor.

49.3 Implementing Johnson's Great Society

Johnson took his decisive election victory as a mandate to move forward with his Great Society agenda. Long before the election, he had begun work on civil rights and antipoverty programs. Now he was ready to move forward with a broad range of proposals for improving life for all Americans.

The Johnson Treatment Gets Results in Congress In contrast to Kennedy, who had trouble getting his legislative program through Congress, many of Johnson's bills passed. Having served in Congress for more than two decades, Johnson knew how to deal with legislators. He praised them publicly, sought their advice, returned their calls, and instructed his aides to do the same, "or else."

> When all else failed, the president subjected lawmakers to "the treatment." Two journalists described Johnson's persuasive powers in this way:
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> Its tone could be supplication [pleading], accusation, cajolery [persuasion], exuberance, scorn, tears, complaint, the hint of threat . . . Johnson . . . 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 . . . The Treatment [was] an almost hypnotic experience and rendered the target stunned and helpless.
>
> —Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power,* 1966

The "treatment," along with a Democrat-controlled Congress after 1965, helped Johnson compile an extraordinary legislative record. In the five years of his presidency, he shepherded more than 200 measures through Congress.

Ending Racial Injustice Johnson envisioned a society free of racial injustice. One of his first priorities as president was passage of Kennedy's civil rights legislation banning discrimination in public accommodations. "No memorial oration," Johnson said, "could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill." Several months later, Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law.

The new law was quickly tested in the courts. The case known as *Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States* arose when a motel owner refused to rent rooms to blacks. He argued that the Civil Rights Act overstepped the power given to Congress to control interstate commerce. He also claimed that it violated his rights under the Fifth and Thirteenth amendments by forcing him to use his property in ways he opposed. The Supreme Court rejected these claims. It noted that much of the motel's business came from out-of-state guests. Hence, Congress had acted within its power to regulate interstate commerce.

Johnson continued to push Congress to end racial injustice. In 1965, he signed the Voting Rights Act, which guaranteed voting rights to African Americans. Three years later, he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited housing discrimination. These laws helped move the country toward Johnson's vision of a color-blind society.

Declaring War on Poverty Another goal that both Kennedy and Johnson

shared was the elimination of poverty. Spurred by Michael Harrington's book *The Other America,* Kennedy had asked his advisers to develop strategies for attacking poverty. Johnson expanded these ideas into an ambitious antipoverty program called the **War on Poverty**.

The centerpiece of the War on Poverty was the **Economic Opportunity Act**. Passed by Congress in August 1964, the act created dozens of federal antipoverty programs and an Office of Economic Opportunity to oversee them. One program, the Job Corps, worked to teach disadvantaged young people job skills. Project Head Start set up programs for low-income preschool children. Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA, was modeled on the Peace Corps. VISTA volunteers lived and worked in poor communities within the United States, providing job training or educational services.

President Johnson also hoped to reverse the decline of America's cities. In 1965, he created the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to manage federal programs aimed at revitalizing blighted urban neighborhoods. Its head, Robert Weaver, was the first African American to join any president's cabinet.

President Johnson's wife, Lady Bird, helped promote his Great Society programs. As part of the effort to beautify America, she helped coordinate the planting of wildflowers along highways. She also took an interest in children and education.

Improving Access to Health Care Also high on Johnson's list of Great Society goals was helping needy Americans gain access to health care. Liberals in Congress had tried for years to provide hospital insurance to retired workers as part of Social Security. Johnson made this measure a top priority.

In 1965, Congress established the **Medicare** and **Medicaid** programs. Medicare is a federal health insurance program that pays for hospital and nursing home services for citizens 65 years or older. Medicaid is a health insurance program jointly financed by federal and state governments. It covers low-income people as well as older Americans whose medical needs have exceeded their Medicare benefits. With the creation of these programs, many Americans no longer had to forgo medical care for lack of health insurance.

Supporting Lifelong Learning and Culture Education, Johnson believed, was the key to a better life. He pushed several measures to improve the nation's educational system. One was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provided federal aid to school districts nationwide. Because the government allocated funds to needy students rather than to schools, the act helped finance both public and parochial, or faith-based, education.

That same year, Johnson signed an act creating the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). These organizations give grants to artists, musicians, writers, scholars, and researchers to promote a vibrant national culture. Johnson also spearheaded passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. "While we work every day to produce goods and create new wealth," he explained upon signing the act, "we want most of all to enrich man's spirit. That is the purpose of this act." The act established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which supports the development of public radio and television programs. One of the first CPB-funded shows was *Sesame Street,* which first aired on public television stations in 1969.

Sesame Street is one of many public television programs that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting supports. This educational show is designed to teach reading fundamentals to young children. It first aired in 1969 in the United States. Today it is broadcast worldwide in many languages.

How Have Great Society Programs Saved Our History and Natural Heritage?

Among the most enduring legacies of the Great Society are four landmark laws enacted to preserve historic sites, endangered species, free-flowing rivers, and wilderness areas for generations to come.

Wilderness Act of 1964
What it did: Created the National Wilderness Preservation System to preserve areas "where earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man."
Long-term impact: Nearly 107 million acres of land were preserved as wilderness areas by the end of 2006.

At more than 9 million acres, the Wrangell–Saint Elias Wilderness in Alaska is the nation's largest wilderness area.

The bald eagle was declared an endangered species in 1967. Since then the FWS has helped the eagles make a remarkable comeba

Opening Doors for Immigrants Johnson also supported a major overhaul of the nation's immigration policy. Since the 1920s, the government had placed quotas on immigration from every part of the world except Western Europe. Johnson, who believed this quota system was rooted in prejudice, wanted to end it.

The **Immigration Act of 1965** eliminated the old quotas based on national origin. It made a person's skills and ties to family in the United States the key criteria for admission into the country. Johnson praised the act for repairing "a very deep and painful flaw in the fabric of American justice." He had no idea what an impact the law would have: in the years since its signing, immigration has quadrupled, with immigrants arriving from all over the world.

Preserving the Environment In striving toward the Great Society, Johnson hoped to improve the quality of the environment for all. In 1962, the publication of the book ***Silent Spring,*** by Rachel Carson, had raised public interest in **environmentalism,** or protection of the environment. The book showed how uncontrolled pesticide use was poisoning the environment. "The air we breathe, our water, our soil and wildlife," Johnson warned, "are being blighted by poisons and chemicals which are the by-products of technology and industry."

Johnson worked with Congress to pass several environmental laws. The Clean Air Act of 1963 set emission standards for factories to reduce air pollution. Other laws focused on cleaning up waterways, preserving wilderness, protecting endangered species, and beautifying the landscape.

Protecting Consumers Johnson also supported **consumerism,** or the protection of the rights of consumers. The Cigarette Labeling Act of 1965 required cigarette packages to carry labels warning that smoking could cause health problems. Other acts set standards for wholesome meat and poultry products, for truth in lending practices, and for honest labeling of food.

In 1965, the book *Unsafe at Any Speed,* written by Ralph Nader, focused public attention on auto safety. It showed how lax engineering standards in the automobile industry had put drivers at risk. The book spurred Congress to pass the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966. This law required automobile makers to install seat belts in all cars.

ndangered Species
reservation Act of 1966
What it did: Directed the U.S. ish and Wildlife Service (FWS) identify and protect plants nd animals that are endangered threatened with extinction. ***ong-term impact:*** By mid-2006, he FWS had listed 1,868 endan- ered or threatened species orldwide, of which 1,300 were the United States. It has also rought several species back rom the brink of extinction.

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966
What it did: Created the National Register of Historic Places, a list of sites, structures, and objects worthy of preservation.
Long-term impact: More than 79,000 places were registered as historic sites by the beginning of 2006.

The nationally registered F.W. Woolworth Building, Greensboro, N.C., is the site of the first civil rights lunch counter "sit-in" in 1960.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968
What it did: Created the National Wild and Scenic River System to preserve rivers of great scenic, recreational, wildlife, or historic value "in free-flowing condition."
Long-term impact: By late 2006, the system covered 11,358 miles of river.

The Middle Fork of the Salmon River was one of the original eight rivers designated as wild and scenic in 1968.

Debating the Great Society By the early 1970s, the impact of Johnson's Great Society reforms could be seen in many areas of life. The poverty rate had fallen from 22.2 percent of Americans in 1960 to just 12.6 percent in 1970. High school graduation rates were rising. In 1962, only about 42 percent of black students and 69 percent of white students completed high school. By 1970, those rates had climbed to about 60 percent for blacks and 80 percent for whites. African American participation in politics was growing as well. By 1970, ten members of the House of Representatives and one Senator were black.

Despite these successes, the Great Society had its critics. The War on Poverty proved especially controversial. Left-wing opponents complained that its mix of programs was not the best approach to ending poverty. In their view, poverty resulted from social and economic forces beyond the control of the poor. The best way to help low-income people, they argued, was to give them money while trying to change the economy to create more jobs for them.

Critics on the right alleged that the War on Poverty was creating an underclass of people who were dependent on government welfare. In their view, poverty's main cause was a lack of individual responsibility on the part of the poor. The best approach to ending poverty, they argued, was to find ways to change the behaviors that kept poor people poor.

At the heart of the debate over Johnson's Great Society were age-old questions about the proper role of government in a democracy. Liberal supporters applauded the scheme's broad goals and multitude of programs aimed at improving American life. Their main concern was that many of the programs were not funded well enough to achieve those goals. Conservative critics, on the other hand, saw the Great Society as government run amok. The high cost of the many Great Society programs confirmed their belief that government should not try to solve all of society's problems.

Johnson's presidency proved to be a high point for the liberal view of government as society's problem solver. After he left office, world events caused liberals to lose ground to more conservative politicians. Still, the Great Society left a lasting imprint on American life. Few Americans today voice a desire to do away with Medicare, *Sesame Street,* or consumer protections. Many such products of the Great Society have become fixtures of American life.

Earl Warren, a Republican, was governor of California when President Eisenhower named him Chief Justice. Warren proved much more liberal than expected. Eisenhower later cited Warren's appointment as the biggest mistake he ever made. Nicknamed the "Superchief," Warren earned the ire of many conservatives with his strong leadership of the Court.

Scenes like this were common in public schools until the Supreme Court ruled in 1962 that state-sponsored school prayer violated the First Amendment.

49.4 The Activist Warren Court

The Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, also played a role in reshaping American society during the 1960s. By reinterpreting much of what had been settled law, the Warren Court became known as an "activist" court.

Ensuring "One Person, One Vote" The Warren Court decided two important cases that changed the political landscape. The first, *Baker v. Carr,* began when Charles Baker, a Republican citizen of Tennessee, sued Joe Carr, the secretary of state of Tennessee, because the state had not redrawn its legislative districts in five decades. During that time, many rural families had migrated to cities. As a result, Baker's urban district had many more residents than some rural districts, but the number of representatives did not reflect that increase. Baker claimed that this imbalance violated his Fourteenth Amendment right to "equal protection under the laws."

The Supreme Court had treated **reapportionment**—redrawing voting district boundaries to reflect population changes—as a matter for state legislatures to decide. But in 1962, after long deliberation, the Warren Court rejected that stance, ruling that reapportionment *was* a question for federal courts to consider.

The Court returned to reapportionment in the case of *Reynolds v. Sims*. In his majority opinion, Chief Justice Warren wrote,

> A citizen, a qualified voter, is no more nor no less so because he lives in the city or on the farm. This is the clear and strong command of our Constitution's equal protection clause . . . This is at the heart of Lincoln's vision of "government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people." The equal protection clause demands no less than substantially equal state legislative representation for all citizens, of all places as well as of all races.

As a result, legislative districts across the country were redrawn following the principle of "one person, one vote." That is, each legislator would represent the roughly same number of people, allowing each person's vote to count equally.

Ruling on Prayer in Public Schools In 1962, the Court considered the role of prayer in public schools. The case of *Engel v. Vitale* arose when state officials, including William Vitale, ordered New York schools to have students recite a morning prayer. Parents, led by Steven Engel, sued the state, claiming that the prayer violated the **establishment clause** of the First Amendment. This clause states, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion."

The Supreme Court agreed with the parents. It found that state-sponsored prayer in school, even if voluntary, was unconstitutional because it was "wholly inconsistent with the establishment clause." This controversial decision sparked efforts to amend the Constitution to permit prayers in public schools.

Protecting the Rights of the Accused Another series of Warren Court rulings reshaped the criminal justice system. The case of *Mapp v. Ohio* involved a woman, Dollree Mapp, who had been convicted of a crime based on evidence found during an illegal police search of her home. The Court ruled in 1961 that evidence obtained illegally may not be used in court.

In *Gideon v. Wainwright,* defendant Clarence Gideon had not had the money to hire a lawyer. Forced to defend himself, he had been found guilty and sent to prison. In 1964, the Court ruled that Gideon's Sixth Amendment right to an attorney had been violated. As a result, courts now provide public defenders to people who are accused of a crime but who cannot afford a lawyer.

In another 1964 case, *Escobedo v. Illinois,* police had denied a murder suspect, Danny Escobedo, an opportunity to speak to a lawyer during questioning. Escobedo eventually confessed to the crime and was convicted. The Court overturned the conviction because Escobedo's constitutional right to be represented by a lawyer after his arrest had been violated.

In a 1966 case, *Miranda v. Arizona,* the Court ruled that the police must inform suspects of their rights before questioning. A suspect must be told, wrote Warren, "that he has the right to remain silent, that any statement he does make may be used as evidence against him, and that he has a right to the presence of an attorney." These protections are called **Miranda rights,** after the defendant.

Americans hotly debated these and other Warren Court rulings. Some critics called on Congress to impeach Chief Justice Warren. "Of all three branches of government," argued Senator Barry Goldwater, "today's Supreme Court is the least faithful to the constitutional tradition of limited government." Others praised the Warren Court for doing what Congress had failed to do: protect the rights guaranteed to every citizen by the Constitution.

Summary

In 1964, voters elected liberal Democrat Lyndon Johnson by a wide margin. Johnson used this mandate to enact a broad program of reforms he called the Great Society. With his powers of persuasion, Johnson pushed more than 200 bills through Congress.

War on Poverty Johnson's Great Society grew out of the liberal tradition of the Progressive and New Deal eras. Its centerpiece was an ambitious War on Poverty.

Economic Opportunity Act This act created a number of antipoverty measures, including the Job Corps, Project Head Start, and VISTA, which all helped cut poverty rates almost in half.

Medicare and Medicaid As part of the Great Society, Congress amended the Social Security Act to include medical health insurance for the elderly and disabled.

Immigration Act of 1965 This measure ended the national origins quota system begun in the 1920s. Entry to the United States was now based on criteria such as skills and family ties.

Silent Spring This influential book sparked a new interest in environmentalism. As a result, Congress passed several environmental laws.

"One person, one vote" The activist Warren Court changed the political landscape by insisting that states create legislative districts following the principle of "one person, one vote."

Miranda rights In a series of controversial decisions, the Warren Court expanded the rights of the accused. It ensured that people placed under arrest be informed of their rights before questioning.