



Lyndon B. Johnson

Lyndon B. Johnson, architect of the Great Society and commander in chief during the Vietnam War.

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Lyndon B. Johnson: A Great Society Shadowed by War

President he succeeded: John F. Kennedy

Term of office: November 22, 1963–January 20, 1969

Lyndon B. Johnson took the presidential oath aboard Air Force One on November 22, 1963. Jacqueline Kennedy, still wearing the clothes stained with her husband's blood, stood beside him. The image captured the terrible circumstances under which Johnson became president.

Johnson quickly reassured the country that the government would continue functioning. He also urged Congress to honor John F. Kennedy by passing the civil-rights and tax legislation Kennedy had supported.

A former Senate majority leader, Johnson possessed an extraordinary understanding of Congress and an unmatched ability to pressure, persuade and bargain. His efforts helped secure passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited segregation in public accommodations and employment discrimination. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 attacked barriers that had prevented Black citizens from voting.

After winning a landslide election in 1964, Johnson pursued his vision of a “Great Society.” His administration created Medicare and Medicaid, expanded federal aid to education, strengthened environmental and consumer protections and launched programs intended to reduce poverty.

Johnson also signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended the national-origins quota system that had heavily favored immigrants from northern and western Europe. His administration created the Department of Housing and Urban Development and appointed Robert Weaver as the first Black Cabinet secretary.

These achievements made Johnson one of the most effective domestic legislators ever to occupy the White House. They were overshadowed, however, by Vietnam.

Johnson steadily increased the number of American troops in Vietnam, believing withdrawal would damage American credibility and permit communist expansion. As casualties mounted without a clear victory, public trust collapsed. Television brought the war into American homes, while antiwar demonstrations divided the country.

The 1968 Tet Offensive contradicted repeated assurances that progress was being made. That March, Johnson announced that he would not seek another term.

Johnson’s legacy is profoundly divided. His civil-rights and social-welfare laws changed millions of lives and remain pillars of American public policy. Yet his escalation of the Vietnam War caused enormous suffering and destroyed his presidency.