

■ Proposal for a Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty

Date: March 16, 1964

Author: President Lyndon B. Johnson

Genre: speech; plan; proposal

Summary Overview

Lyndon B. Johnson's proposal for a nationwide War on Poverty, announced in 1964, was a key component of his "Great Society" vision. It aimed to reduce poverty through comprehensive programs such as economic opportunities, education, healthcare, and community development. The initiative sought to address systemic inequalities and provide equal chances for all Americans.

On March 16, 1964, in a special message to Congress, President Johnson announced his support for a series of actions to reduce poverty in the United States. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 would become a central element of his administration's "War on Poverty." It was one of several domestic programs known collectively as the "The Great Society." Johnson's speech begins by noting that the act intends to "strike at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty." The effort will be multifaceted and will include the creation of multiple federal government work and educational training programs. Nearly half a million young people from underprivileged backgrounds would participate. The act would create a Community Action Program (CAP) to help state and local communities fight poverty, enlist volunteers, and launch a series of initiatives to provide loans, incentives, and re-training to businesses and workers in need of support. To oversee the operation of these programs, Johnson also called for the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

Defining Moment

Vice President Johnson became president after the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. As President, Johnson constructed an extensive and ambitious platform of domestic reform known collectively as "The Great Society." After taking office, Johnson, evoking Kennedy's memory, successfully persuaded Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned discrimination in public accommodations based on race, color, religion, or national origin; created the Equal Economic Opportunity Commission; and provided limited protections for Black voters. Johnson's next effort was a systematic attack on poverty in the United States known as the "War on Poverty," which he had proposed in his first State of the Union Address. Its centerpiece was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which Johnson introduced in a special message to Congress on March 16, 1964. The Act, which Johnson would sign on August 20, 1964, created OEO to oversee a variety of educational, employment, housing, and health care

initiatives designed to combat poverty in the United States. After he won a landslide victory in the 1964 presidential election, Johnson continued to push for progressive domestic reform. Proponents of Black civil rights had turned their attention to Black voting in the South where the vast majority of African Americans were disenfranchised. In a March 15, 1965, speech to Congress Johnson expressed support not only for the protests but also for legislation that would provide federal protections for Black voters. Congress was slow to act, but on August 6, 1965, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed into law.

The Johnson administration continued to push for reforms in other areas well. The Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated ethnic and racial restrictions on immigrants, which had been in place since the 1920s. The Social Security Amendments of 1965 led to the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, which provided publicly financed medical care for the uninsured, the elderly, the poor, and children. In 1965 and 1966 Congress created more social programs than any of its



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Poverty Bill (also known as the Economic Opportunity Act) in the Rose Garden, White House, while press and supporters of the bill look on, August 20, 1964. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

predecessors. By the end of Johnson's presidency (1969) there were 435 federal domestic programs, 390 more than at the end of Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency (1953).

Author Biography

Lyndon B. Johnson was born in Stonewall, Texas, on August 27, 1908. He graduated from Southwest

Texas State Teachers College in 1930. He taught at a segregated school, which enrolled only Mexican Americans, an experience that had a profound impact on him. In 1937 he was elected to the House of Representatives from the Tenth District in Texas. In 1948 he was elected to the United States Senate where he quickly rose the ranks of the Democratic party leadership. In 1952 he became the Senate minority leader

and when the Democratic Party gained a majority in the Senate in 1954, he was chosen Senate majority leader. Johnson sought the Democratic nomination for president in 1960 but lost to John F. Kennedy who chose Johnson as his vice-presidential running mate. On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated, and Johnson became president. Johnson pushed for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He also sought passage of an ambitious platform of domestic reform, which would be known collectively as “The Great Society.” Foremost among these pro-

grams was an effort to reduce poverty in the United States. The Johnson administration also sought to gain civil rights for African Americans, most notably gaining passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, the Johnson administration also oversaw the expansion of the American war effort in Vietnam, which would damage its reputation and credibility. Johnson’s inability to gain support for his policies in the Vietnam War led to a decision not to seek reelection in 1968. On January 22, 1973, Johnson died at his farm in Stonewall, Texas.



Historical Document

LBJ's Special Message to Congress

Because it is right, because it is wise, and because, for the first time in our history, it is possible to conquer poverty, I submit, for the consideration of the Congress and the country, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The Act does not merely expand old programs or improve what is already being done. It charts a new course. It strikes at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty. It can be a milestone in our one-hundred eighty year search for a better life for our people. This Act provides five basic opportunities. It will give almost half a million underprivileged young Americans the opportunity to develop skills, continue education, and find useful work. It will give every American community the opportunity to develop a comprehensive plan to fight its own poverty and help them to carry out their plans. It will give dedicated Americans the opportunity to enlist as volunteers in the war against poverty. It will give many workers and farmers the opportunity to break through particular barriers which bar their escape from poverty. It will give the entire nation the opportunity for a concerted attack on poverty through the establishment, under my direction, of the Office of Economic Opportunity, a national headquarters for the war against poverty. This is how we propose to create these opportunities.

First we will give high priority to helping young Americans who lack skills, who have not completed their education or who cannot complete it because they are too poor. . . . I therefore recommend the creation of a job Corps, a Work-Training Program, and a Work Study Program. A new national job Corps will build toward an enlistment of 100,000 young men. They will be drawn from those whose background, health and education make them least fit for useful work. . . . Half of these young men will work, in the first year, on special conservation projects to give them education, useful work experience and to enrich the natural resources of the country. Half of these young men will receive, in the first year, a blend of training, basic education and work experience in job Training Centers. . . . A new national Work-Training Program operated by the Department of Labor will provide work and training for 200,000 American men and women between the ages of 16 and 21. This will be developed through state and local governments and non-profit agencies. . . . A new national Work-Study Program operated by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare will provide federal funds for part-time jobs for 140,000 young Americans who do not go to college because they cannot afford it. There is no more senseless waste than the waste of the brainpower and skill of those who are kept from college by economic circumstance. Under

this program they will, in a great American tradition, be able to work their way through school. . . .

Poverty is not a simple or an easy enemy... But this program will show the way to new opportunities for millions of our fellow citizens.

Second, through a new Community Action program we intend to strike at poverty at its source—in the streets of our cities and on the farms of our countryside among the very young and the impoverished old. This program asks men and women throughout the country to prepare long-range plans for the attack on poverty in their own local communities. . . .

Third, I ask for the authority to recruit and train skilled volunteers for the war against poverty. Thousands of Americans have volunteered to serve the needs of other lands. Thousands more want the chance to serve the needs of their own land. They should have that chance. Among older people who have retired, as well as among the young, among women as well as men, there are many Americans who are ready to enlist in our war against poverty. They have skills and dedication. They are badly needed. . . .

Fourth, we intend to create new opportunities for certain hard-hit groups to break out of the pattern of poverty. Through a new program of loans and guarantees we can provide incentives to those who will employ the unemployed. Through programs of work and retraining for unemployed fathers and mothers we can help them support their families in dignity while preparing themselves for new work. Through funds to purchase needed land, organize cooperatives, and create new and adequate family farms we can help those whose life on the land has been a struggle without hope.

Fifth, I do not intend that the war against poverty become a series of uncoordinated and unrelated efforts—that it perish for lack of leadership and direction. Therefore this bill creates, in the Executive Office of the President, a new Office of Economic Opportunity. Its Director will be my personal Chief of Staff for the War against poverty. I intend to appoint Sargent Shriver to this post. . . . What you are being asked to consider is not a simple or an easy program. But poverty is not a simple or an easy enemy. It cannot be driven from the land by a single attack on a single front. Were this so we would have conquered poverty long ago. Nor can it be conquered by government alone. . . . Today, for the first time in our history, we have the power to strike away the barriers to full participation in our society. Having the power, we have the duty

We are fully aware that this program will not eliminate all the poverty in America in a few months or a few years. Poverty is deeply rooted and its causes are many. But this program will show the way to new opportunities for millions of our fellow citizens. It will provide a lever with which we can begin to open the door to our prosperity for those who have been kept outside. It will

also give us the chance to test our weapons, to try our energy and ideas and imagination for the many battles yet to come. As conditions change, and as experience illuminates our difficulties, we will be prepared to modify our strategy. And this program is much more than a beginning. Rather it is a commitment. It is a total commitment by this President, and this Congress, and this nation, to pursue victory over the most ancient of mankind's enemies.



Document Analysis

On March 16, 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson, in a special message to Congress, outlined a number of legislative proposals which would be combined in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. They were a part of a larger effort known as the “War on Poverty.” Johnson’s speech begins with an assertion that “for the first time in our history, it is possible to conquer poverty.” He asserts that the goal of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 is not meant to build or improve on past programs but instead to set an entirely new course in the battle against poverty. He proclaimed, “It strikes at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty.”

Johnson describes the proposed law as having five basic elements designed to reduce poverty. First, the proposal would provide nearly half a million underprivileged young people with access to job and educational training in the form of a “job corps, a Work Training Program, and a Work Study Program.” The job corps would enlist 100,000 young men from disadvantaged backgrounds to work on conservation projects or receive “a blend of training, basic education, and work experience in job training centers.” The Work Training Program, operating in the Department of Labor, would provide work and job training for an additional 200,000 men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. Lastly, the Work Study Program, administered by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, would provide part-time employment for 140,000 young people to enable them to afford college. Johnson notes “that there is no more senseless waste than the waste of brainpower and skill of those who are kept from college by economic circumstances.”

The second major component of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was the development of Community Action Program (CAP) which would aid states and local communities to develop their own plans to combat poverty. The third component was the creation of a volunteer program in which Americans, young and old, male and female, would have the opportunity to “enlist in our war against poverty.” The fourth was the creation of a series of programs to provide loans and incentives to businesses willing to hire unemployed workers. These programs would also

provide retraining for workers and provide “funds to purchase needed land, organize cooperatives, and create new and adequate family farms.”

The last major component was the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) within the Executive Office of the President. Johnson noted that “poverty is not a simple or an easy enemy” and as such the “War on Poverty” required a coordinated effort led by the executive branch. Johnson noted he would appoint Sargent Shriver, married to one of John F. Kennedy’s sisters, as Chief of Staff of the “War on Poverty.”

Johnson asserted that for the first time in its history, the United States had the ability to “strike away the barriers to full participation in our society. Having the power, we have the duty.” He further stated that although the programs created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 would not entirely eliminate poverty, they were a necessary step which would provide new opportunities for millions of Americans. His speech ended with the assertion that these efforts should not be seen as the end of the battle against poverty, but instead the beginning of a collective effort to “pursue victory over the most ancient of mankind’s enemies.”

Essential Themes

On August 20, 1964 the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 became law. The law included many of the elements Johnson had pushed for in his March speech before Congress. Most notably, it created the OEO which would manage many programs synonymous with the War on Poverty, including AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), Job Corps, Upward Bound, CAP, and Head Start. Collectively, these programs poured considerably money and resources into the War on Poverty, which quickly became a central aspect of Johnson’s “The Great Society” platform. The OEO spent nearly \$3 billion in its first two years of operation. The Head Start program, which was designed to provide educational and economic support for disadvantaged preschoolers and their families, alone began with a budget of \$96 million.

The Economic Opportunity Act did not eliminate poverty in the United States, but it was not without its successes. OEO-administered programs undoubtedly improved the lives of millions of Americans providing them with greater access to educational and employment opportunities. These and other “Great Society” programs helped cut the number of people living in poverty in the United States between 1960 and 1970 in half (just over 10 percent of the population), the lowest level in the twentieth century.

Johnson’s efforts received considerable pushback from conservative critics who criticized such a large expansion in domestic spending. Others criticized the inefficiency of individual programs, especially those connected to CAP, which by design relied on the involvement of poor communities in the fight against poverty. Not surprisingly, given the racial climate of the time, CAP programs, which appeared to be benefitting African American communities, received the most criticism. Johnson also contributed to the “War on Poverty” and “Great Society’s” undoing. The Johnson administration’s decision to expand the War in

Vietnam diverted funds from the “War on Poverty” into the ever-growing conflict in South Asia. The Johnson administration dedicated \$10 billion dollars to the War on Poverty, yet it spent \$140 billion on the Vietnam War during the same period.

—Gerald F. Goodwin, PhD

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