

■ President's Remarks on the Launching of Project Head Start

Date: May 18, 1965

Author: President Lyndon B. Johnson

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

Project Head Start is considered a key component of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." Launched in 1965, Head Start is a comprehensive early childhood education program designed to support the development of low-income children and their families. It aims to improve educational outcomes, promote social and emotional development, and reduce disparities from an early age. Head Start reflects the Great Society's emphasis on addressing poverty, improving education, and promoting equal opportunity, making it a notable liberal milestone in Johnson's social reform agenda.

The manner in which new programs are implemented by the federal government can often contribute to the success or failure of the effort. The use of the Rose Garden by presidents has often helped emphasize the importance of the issue being announced. In this case, President Johnson used the Rose Garden to indicate the importance of the Head Start program to him and the First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson, personally, as well as to highlight the potential he believed Head Start had to help the nation win the ongoing War on Poverty. Having earned a degree in education and briefly worked in the field, Johnson understood that most children from families living in poverty were less prepared for school than those from more affluent families. He established the Head Start program because he believed this difference in preschool experiences tended to make children from middle-class or better-off families more successful in school and ultimately throughout their lives, while many children from poorer families were doomed to be poor students and continue the cycle of poverty as they grew into adults and began raising their own families.

Defining Moment

The 1960 election of John F. Kennedy, as president, and Lyndon B. Johnson, as vice president, was based in part on the pair's liberal campaign platform, which reflected not only their values, but those of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Kennedy's intervention during the campaign to secure the release of Martin Luther King Jr. from a Georgia jail, resulted in the endorsement of Martin Luther King Sr. and in greater African American support than had been the case for Democratic candidates in the previous few election cycles. Upon Kennedy's death in November 1963, Johnson assumed the presidency and not only pushed many of Kennedy's proposals in Congress, but launched many others as well. In Johnson's 1964 State of the Union address, he called for a War on Poverty to help create greater equality in American society. This included research into the causes of poverty and its effects on families.

One legislative proposal sent to Congress was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which made its way through the House and Senate and was signed into law by President Johnson on August 20, 1964. Most of the programs created or funded by this bill were based on the understanding that education was a major component in giving people the opportunity to move out of poverty. In addition to funding the development of Head Start, this law created the Job Corps, work-study grants in higher education, adult basic education, aid to migrant families, the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, and several other programs. Johnson believed that poverty wasted human lives and potential, as it prevented the individual's full development. As the name implies, Head Start was to be the initial step for children from families with limited resources to develop in such a way that when they entered school, they could compete with children from families with more resources.



First Lady Lady Bird Johnson visits a Head Start class in 1966. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

It took until the spring of 1965 for the pilot Head Start programs to be developed and locations chosen. Thus, Johnson made this speech to kick off the program and to bring it to the attention of the American public. Although Head Start was for children of all races, since participation was initially based on the income of the child's family, the disproportionately large number of poor African American families made this an important program for that segment of the American population. (In 2019, 30 percent of Head Start participants were African American versus about fourteen percent of the general population.)

Author Biography

Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908-1973), the thirty-sixth president of the United States, was born in Texas where, after high school, he graduated from Southwest Texas State Teachers College. Prior to seeking elected office, Johnson taught school, was an aide to a representative, and ran the Texas National Youth Ad-

ministration. Married in 1934 to Claudia Taylor (Lady Bird), he often relied on her political advice. Johnson was elected (as a Democrat) to the House of Representatives in 1937, the Senate in 1948, and the vice presidency in 1960. As Senate Majority Leader, he helped President Dwight Eisenhower (a Republican) get much of his legislation passed. Upon the death of President Kennedy, Johnson became president in 1963, and was then elected in a landslide in 1964. His domestic policies were very liberal, with his legislative proposals collectively known as the "Great Society" program. The best-known part of this was probably Medicare, but programs founded under the Economic Opportunity Act, such as Head Start, along with others such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, represent Johnson's political legacy. At the same time, Johnson's support for military operations in Vietnam made him very unpopular, and was the primary reason he decided not to run for reelection in 1968.



Historical Document

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Mr. Shriver, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests:

On this beautiful spring day it is good to be outside in the Rose Garden. Of course, the White House is a place where when you go outside you are still inside.

In that same vein, I would note that the Rose Garden is a garden without roses today, and the Fish Room is now a room without fish. But there is one compensation—open nearly any door here in the West Wing and you are liable to run into Sargent Shriver, and sometimes you will find him in more than one room at the same time.

This is a very proud occasion for him and for us today, because it was less than 3 months ago that we opened a new war front on poverty. We set out to make certain that poverty's children would not be forevermore poverty's captives. We called our program Project Head Start.

The program was conceived not so much as a Federal effort but really as a neighborhood effort, and the response we have received from the neighborhoods and the communities has been most stirring and the most enthusiastic of any peacetime program that I can remember.

Today we are able to announce that we will have open, and we believe operating this summer, coast-to-coast, some 2,000 child development centers serving as many as possibly a half million children.

This means that nearly half the preschool children of poverty will get a head start on their future. These children will receive preschool training to prepare them for regular school in September. They will get medical and dental attention that they badly need, and parents will receive counseling on improving the home environment.

This is a most remarkable accomplishment and it has been done in a very short time. It would not be possible except for the willing and the enthusiastic cooperation of Americans throughout the country.

I believe this response reflects a realistic and a wholesome awakening in America. It shows that we are recognizing that poverty perpetuates itself.

Five and six year old children are inheritors of poverty's curse and not its creators. Unless we act these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark.

This program this year means that 30 million man-years—the combined life span of these youngsters—will be spent productively and rewardingly, rather than wasted in tax-supported institutions or in welfare-supported lethargy.

I believe that this is one of the most constructive, and one of the most sensible, and also one of the most exciting programs that this Nation has ever undertaken. I don't say that just because the most ardent and most active and most enthusiastic supporter of this program happens to be the honorary national chairman, Mrs. Johnson.

We have taken up the age-old challenge of poverty and we don't intend to lose generations of our children to this enemy of the human race.

This program, like so many others, will succeed in proportion as it is supported by voluntary assistance and understanding from all of our people. So we are going to need a million good neighbors—volunteers—who will give their time for a few hours each week caring for these children, helping in a hundred ways to draw out their potentials. We need housewives and coeds. We need teachers and doctors. We need men and women of all walks and all interests to lend their talents, their warmth, their hands, and their hearts.

The bread that is cast upon these waters will surely return many thousandfold.

What a sense of achievement, and what great pride, and how happy that will make all of us who love America feel about this undertaking.

Thank you.



Glossary

coeds: female students

Sargent Shriver: a brother-in-law of President Kennedy; Shriver helped create the Peace Corps, Job Corps, and Head Start

Rose Garden: an area of the White House grounds (on the east side, outside the Oval Office), formerly used for stables, which became a garden in 1902; it is often used for ceremonies

Document Analysis

As one who always tended to speak informally, Johnson starts his brief address with a few informal comments before getting to the reason he had gathered people together in the White House Rose Garden. This was to give a public affirmation to the launching of Project Head Start, which had been established and funded the previous year. As part of his broader War on Poverty, Johnson set forth the initial goals for the program and the approach to be used to meet these goals. Ultimately, Johnson believed that Head Start would be a key component in breaking the cycle of poverty that seemed to have taken hold in many low-income families.

His humorous reference to Sargent Shriver serves as an indication of the importance in which Johnson held Head Start. While Shriver was in the Kennedy/Johnson administrations partly due to his being an in-law of President Kennedy, he was also an accomplished thinker and administrator known for creating quality programs. Johnson wanted Head Start to succeed not just for the nation, but more so for the children. While most poverty programs were geared toward making changes in the current situation, Head Start was designed to make long-term changes for the children who would participate in it and their families. This was the “new war front on poverty.”

The key, for Johnson, was that Project Head Start was going to be a joint federal/local effort. The federal government was going to give the basic funding and guidelines for Head Start. However, the local citizens, especially the children's parents, would give direction to the local effort. (The parental involvement also meant that they would learn skills which could make them better parents.) This program was not established for any one racial or ethnic group, rather it was for children from economically disadvantaged families. It was based on studies that demonstrated that these children started school with fewer academic skills (because of things like not having books in the home) and in poorer health than children from families with more economic resources. Thus, the initial summer program would help the participating children gain a greater understanding of many basic

concepts that teachers knew they should have when school started in the fall. For Johnson, this joint effort would make it possible for people from a wide variety of backgrounds to participate and for everyone to help the children.

Johnson states that “five and six year old children are inheritors of poverty's curse and not its creators.” The fact that children were being helped directly made it possible for this program to gain widespread support. Johnson was optimistic about changing the conditions of poor families for the better. What he viewed as a commonsense approach to helping children, families, and the nation was in reality a radical social experiment.

Essential Themes

Since the time President Johnson gave this speech, more than 36 million children have participated in Head Start, with the number currently being about a million a year. This is an indicator of the program's success in meeting the needs of the communities it serves. Since beginning as the eight-week summer program Johnson mentioned in this speech, in most places Head Start has grown to be year-round. While the specific goals, performance standards, and regulations have changed over the decades, the ultimate goal has remained the same. Head Start has not ended poverty in the United States, yet it has proven to be beneficial for most children who have participated. The goal, mentioned by Johnson, of ultimately reducing welfare payments did succeed. (A 2019 study found that those who had participated in Head Start became adults who were 12 percent less likely to be below the poverty line than their peers, and 29 percent fewer were on public assistance, as compared to those from a similar background who did not participate. Also, they were 19 percent more likely to complete college than non-Head Start individuals.) The mandate of using large numbers of volunteers has remained, and this has had a positive impact on families and communities.

The optimism of Johnson for the possibilities of the program, when he gave this speech in 1965, has proven to be justified. This is one reason why Head Start continues to grow and (with some changes) has

remained a part of the Health & Human Services budget through the various presidential administrations. Johnson's belief that the American spirit would support this approach to ending poverty and helping children has been demonstrated. For example, in the Fiscal Year 2019 report, more than a million adult volunteers (just under three fourths were children's parents) worked with over 100,000 staff members at Head Start centers to help the children. The sense of achievement Johnson mentioned in this speech has come to pass for millions of Americans since the program was implemented in 1965.

—Donald A. Watt, PhD

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