

We want to hear new ideas and new solutions and new answers. And at that time, if we see fit then to form a black nationalist party, we'll form a black nationalist party. If it's necessary to form a black nationalist army, we'll form a black nationalist army. It'll be the ballot or the bullet. It'll be liberty or it'll be death.

23.8

Lyndon Johnson Proposes the "Great Society" (1964)

Raised in an impoverished part of southwest Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973) succeeded through sheer force of will. While attending Southwest Texas State Teachers College, he taught at a predominately Mexican-American school and was deeply affected by his students' poverty. Upon graduating, he began working in Washington, D.C., as a legislative assistant to a Texas congressman. In 1934, he married Claudia "Lady Bird" Taylor. In 1937, he won election to the U.S. House of Representatives. Twelve years later, he won a seat in the U.S. Senate. He quickly ascended through the Democratic ranks and in 1955 became the youngest Senate majority leader ever. Johnson possessed an extraordinary talent for offering compromises and built a powerful Democratic coalition.

Although he was disappointed when he lost the 1960 presidential nomination to John F. Kennedy, he agreed to be Kennedy's running mate. He found the vicepresidency frustrating and disliked many of Kennedy's aides. Nonetheless, when Kennedy was assassinated, he retained many Kennedy advisors and pushed the fallen president's policies. Using his formidable political skills, he secured passage of a federal civil rights law significantly stronger than the one that Kennedy originally proposed.

In May 1964, in a commencement address at the University of Michigan, Johnson outlined his own domestic agenda. His "Great Society" was the most ambitious legislative program since the New Deal. It included job training, preschool for poor children, anti-poverty initiatives, additional civil rights laws, federally funded health benefits for the elderly and poor, public housing, urban renewal, conservation,

SOURCE: Public Papers of the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, 1963-1964 (Washington, 1965), 704-705

public broadcasting, support for the arts and humanities, consumer protection, federal aid for education, and new immigration policies. It contributed to a substantial decline in poverty. Between 1959 and 1969, the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line fell from 21 percent to 12 percent.

At the same time, the Great Society expanded government spending and the federal bureaucracy. At first, a thriving economy enabled the nation to absorb its costs. But, as the Vietnam War escalated, the Great Society foundered, and Johnson's reform consensus disintegrated. The economy stalled. Some programs failed. Poor Americans grew disillusioned. Black radicalism and urban riots alienated many whites. In the years to come, Americans would hotly debate the impact of the Great Society and the proper role of the federal government in addressing social problems.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. How does Johnson define the "Great Society"?
2. What programs does he propose?
3. Was the Great Society a success? What role should the federal government play in addressing social problems? Explain your answers.

... I have come today from the turmoil of your Capital to the tranquility of your campus to speak about the future of your country.

The purpose of protecting the life of our Nation and preserving the liberty of our citizens is to pursue the happiness of our people. Our success in that pursuit is the test of our success as a Nation.

For a century we labored to settle and to subdue a continent. For half a century we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all of our people.

The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization.

Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, of a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. 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 of man serves not only the needs of the body and 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. It is a place which honors creation for its own sake and for what it adds to the understanding of the race. It is 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 safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, 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.

So I want to talk to you today about three places where we begin to build the Great Society—in our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms.

Many of you will live to see the day, perhaps 50 years from now, when there will be 400 million Americans—four-fifths of them in urban areas. In the remainder of this century urban population will double, city land will double, and we will have to build homes, highways, and facilities equal to all those built since this country was first settled. So in the next 40 years we must re-build the entire urban United States.

Aristotle said: "Men come together in cities in order to live, but they remain together in order to live the good life." It is harder and harder to live the good life in American cities today. The catalog of ills is long: there is the decay of the centers and the despoiling of the suburbs. There is not enough housing for our people or transportation for our traffic. Open land is vanishing and old landmarks are violated.

Worst of all expansion is eroding the precious and time-honored values of community with neighbors and communion with nature. The loss of these values breeds loneliness and boredom and indifference.

Our society will never be great until our cities are great. Today the frontier of imagination and innovation is inside those cities and not beyond their borders. New experiments are already going on. It will be the task of your generation to make the American city a place where future generations will come, not only to live but to live the good life.

I understand that if I stayed here tonight I would see that Michigan students are really doing their best to live the good life.

This is the place where the Peace Corps was started. It is inspiring to see how all of you, while you are in this country, are trying so hard to live at the level of the people.

A second place where we begin to build the Great Society is in our countryside. We have always prided ourselves on being not only America the strong and America the free, but America the beautiful. Today that beauty is in danger. The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air that we breathe, are threatened with pollution. **Our parks are overcrowded, our seashores overwhelmed. Green fields and dense forests are disappearing.**

A few years ago we were greatly concerned about the "Ugly American."

Today we must act to prevent an ugly America. For once the battle is lost, once our natural splendor is destroyed, it can never be recaptured. And once man can no longer walk with beauty or wonder at nature his spirit will wither and his sustenance be wasted.

A third place to build the Great Society is in the classrooms of America. There your children's lives will be shaped. Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination. We are still far from that goal.

Today, 8 million adult Americans, more than the entire population of Michigan, have not finished 5 years of school. Nearly 20 million have not finished 8 years of school. Nearly 54 million—more than one-quarter of all America—have not even finished high school.

Each year more than 100,000 high school graduates, with proved ability, do not enter college because they cannot afford it. And if we cannot educate today's youth, what will we do in 1970 when elementary school enrollment will be 5 million greater than 1960? And high school enrollment will rise by 5 million. College enrollment will increase by more than 3 million.

In many places, classrooms are overcrowded and curricula are outdated. Most of our qualified teachers are underpaid, and many of our paid teachers are unqualified. So we must give every child a place to sit and a teacher to learn from. Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty.

But more classrooms and more teachers are not enough. We must seek an educational system which grows in excellence as it grows in size. This means better training for our teachers. It means preparing youth to enjoy their hours of leisure as well as their hours of labor. It means exploring new techniques of teaching, to find new ways to stimulate the love of learning and the capacity for creation.

These are three of the central issues of the Great Society. While our Government has many programs directed at those issues, I do not pretend that we have the full answer to those problems.

But I do promise this: We are going to assemble the best thought and the broadest knowledge from all over the world to find those answers for America. I intend to establish working groups to prepare a series of White House conferences and meetings—on the cities, on natural beauty, on the quality of education, and on other emerging challenges. And from these meetings and from this inspiration and from these studies we will begin to set our course toward the Great Society.

The solution to these problems does not rest on a massive program in Washington, nor can it rely solely on the strained resources of local authority. They require us to create new concepts of cooperation, a creative federalism, between the National Capital and the leaders of local communities.

Woodrow Wilson once wrote: "Every man sent out from his university should be a man of his Nation as well as a man of his time."

Within your lifetime powerful forces, already loosed, will take us toward a way of life beyond the realm of our experience, almost beyond the bounds of our imagination.

For better or for worse, your generation has been appointed by history to deal with those problems and to lead America toward a new age. You have the chance never before afforded to any people in any age. You can help build a society where the demands of morality, and the needs of the spirit, can be realized in the life of the Nation.

Christ, we cheered when Nixon sent troops to Cambodia—we are praying we'll also see Laos.

And how in the hell do you think that we in Vietnam feel when we read of the disension and unrest in our country caused by young, worthless radicals and the foremost runner of them all: the vile and disease ridden SDS. This is what we feel like: We have an acute hatred, an unfathomable lust to maim, yes, even kill. You ask, "Is this towards the NVA and VC?" We answer, "Hell, no, it's for all of you back in the World who are striving to make us feel like a piece of shit for fighting and dying for what we believe in—freedom."

Last month my company lost 12 good men and five more were torn up so bad that they have been sent back to the States. We shed true tears for these men. What did you do? Protest. In your feeble and deteriorating and filthy degenerate minds you have forced and caused these men to die for nothing. Do you place such a low value on our heads? We are trying to end the war so that our loved ones will never have to face the harsh realities of death in our own country.

Do not judge us wrongly. We are not pleading for your praise. All we ask is for our great nation to unite and stand behind President Nixon. Support us, help us end the war, damn it, save our lives....

I am coming home soon. Don't shout and preach your nothingness to me. I am ashamed to be fighting to keep you safe, the rest of the loyal Americans. I am proud to give my life for you members of the SDS and your followers. I am returning to educate you on what it feels like to be in Nam. Yes, I am bringing the war home. We'll see if you're as good in fighting as you are in protesting.

Prepare yourselves—the makers are returning. May your children honor and respect our dead and chastise your actions.

We personally challenge you to come to Vietnam and talk with the VC and NVA in the A Chau Valley. Let us know what they say, if you live.

We the undersigned are in full [agreement] with the forth-put statements....

With love,

Greg Lusco

Phu Bai

South Vietnam

Sp/4 Gregory Lusco, who served in Vietnam between November 1968 and August 1970, and nineteen other soldiers from Company B, 159th Aviation Battalion, 101st Airborne Division, wrote this letter, which was published in the Greenfield (Massachusetts) Recorder on 23 July 1970. He is now in the Navy, stationed in Japan aboard the U.S.S. Midway.

6 September '70

Dear John,

...Saigon [is] completely different from I Corps—almost luxurious. The MACV [Military Assistance Command/Vietnam] complex, where so many of my friends work, has a golf course, Olympic-size swimming pool, etc. But with all the surface glitter and bustle of Saigon, I came away with a very gloomy

feeling. The people are fanatically trying to make every last cent they can from the Americans before [the soldiers] leave. The war has brought out all the venality imaginable in these people....

My friends are somewhat depressed. It now seems they have to rewrite all their reports because the truth they are putting out is too pessimistic. The higher echelons, for their career's sake and the plans of Nixon's Vietnamization, will not allow a bad situation to exist—no matter how true it may be! I saw myself some of the different drafts of some reports that were to go to [General Creighton] Abrams [commander of American forces in Vietnam]—and how they had to be changed to get to him. What a disgrace—and still people are dying every day!

To top this all off, we got hit again last week—twice in one night. The second phase was while we were all watching a Korean floor show. It was ~~was~~ hysteria when those rockets started coming in! Chairs flying, people running to bunkers! Boy, do I hate those things. I'm going to be a nervous wreck when I get out of here! Then, there has begun a witch hunt for pot smokers. We have a group of self-appointed vigilantes (most of whom are Southern beer-drinking, obnoxious alcoholics! You can see my prejudices in that statement!) who go around spreading untrue rumors about those they do not like. It's at such a point that open warfare might break out in the company. I'm so worked up now because one of the vigilantes is my own boss. It just makes me sick! My own impressions are that the supposed "pot heads" are much easier to work with more pleasant, never bothersome, and more intelligent than the redneck factor of boozers! Yet that counts for nothing in the Army....

John, Peace—my warmest regards and thanks for letting me ramble on and take out my frustrations.

Tom

Sp/5 Thomas Pellaton, 101st Avn. Cpn., 101st Abn. Div., Phu Bai, 1970-197

23.12

Guy Strait, "What Is a Hippie?"

While some young people gravitated to the political movements of the sixties, others were attracted to the counterculture. Like their predecessors the Beats, the "hippies" or "flower children" challenged traditional views of sexuality and

SOURCE: Alexander Bloom and Vin Brenson, eds., *Take It to the Streets: A Student Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 310-312.