

Fifty years since Johnson's “Great Society” speech

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This week marks the fiftieth anniversary of the “Great Society” speech delivered by US President Lyndon B. Johnson on May 22, 1964 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The speech and the policies that it inaugurated constituted the high water mark of post-war liberal reformism.

Johnson's Great Society agenda included a series of social programs targeting some of the most egregious expressions of social misery in post-war America. The measures reduced extreme poverty in the United States, significantly expanded the quality of public education, provided health care for tens of millions of people, and enacted regulatory checks on major corporations.

The programs included Medicare and Medicaid, which provided health care benefits for the elderly, disabled and the poor. The Food Stamp Act of 1964 created the United States's food assistance program. Federal funding for primary and secondary education was significantly expanded, particularly in poor areas, and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities was established.

None of these programs were gifts from on high. Along with Roosevelt's New Deal reforms three decades earlier, they were won through bitter struggle. They were part of the American ruling class's response to the mass upheavals of the 1930s, which led to the formation of the industrial unions; the strike waves of the 1940s and 50s; and the mass struggles in opposition to Jim Crow racial segregation that were ongoing during the fifties and early sixties.

The New Deal and Great Society, moreover, expressed the continuing historical reverberations of the Russian Revolution and the US ruling class's fear of social upheaval at home. They were implemented in the context of the continued existence of the Soviet Union, and amid ongoing anti-colonial uprisings throughout

the world. They were made possible by the as yet still predominant global economic position of American capitalism.

In announcing the “Great Society,” Johnson set out a half-century time-frame to judge its success. “The challenge of the next half century,” he declared, “is whether we will have the wisdom to use [America's] wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization.... 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.”

In an earlier speech, Johnson presented the fight against poverty as a historic test of the capitalist system. “We have in 1964 a unique opportunity and obligation—to prove the success of our system [i.e., capitalism]... If we fail... then history will rightfully judge us harshly.”

Fifty years later, what remains of the “Great Society”? Every indicator of American social misery is on the rise. One in five children in the US lives in poverty—the “wealthiest nation in the world” has one of the highest child poverty rates of any major capitalist country. There are dozens of counties throughout the US where a third of children do not get enough to eat. Food pantries report running out of supplies, and each year cities say they face ever-greater demand for assistance for the homeless. American capitalism has, by any measure, failed in the “challenge” outlined by Johnson 50 years ago.

In fact, the Great Society was, from the beginning, a political abortion. Within three months of Johnson's speech, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which, on the basis of a fabricated incident, set the stage for a massive escalation of the US military intervention in Vietnam. By the end of Johnson's

administration, there were over 500,000 US troops in Vietnam.

The contradiction between Johnson's pretensions of social reform at home and mass murder abroad proved to be unbridgeable. The enormous cost of the war, economic and social, came at the expense of any attempt to alleviate social misery in the US, and the conflict had a brutalizing effect on American society that lasts to this day.

Social conflict continued throughout the 1960s. The Vietnam War protests came alongside a wave of urban uprisings that began in 1964, and spread to over a hundred cities by 1968. The growth of mass opposition to the war led Johnson to announce that he would not run for a second term, leaving the presidency in 1969 to Nixon, who began to roll back sections of Johnson's reforms even as he escalated involvement in East Asia.

The quagmire in Vietnam came at the zenith of the military and economic power of the United States. Beginning in the 1960s, the United States' balance of trade declined and ultimately turned negative, as America's global competitors, including Japan and Germany, began to outstrip it.

The American ruling class responded to its long-term economic decline with a ruthless program of wealth transfer, deindustrialization and financialization. This process actually began within a month of Johnson taking office, when Congress voted to slash the top income tax rate from 91 percent to 70 percent, and cut corporate taxes from 52 percent to 48 percent. This was at the beginning of a continual series of tax cuts for the rich over the subsequent decades, to the point that major US corporations now pay an effective tax rate of under 13 percent.

Successive administrations, Republican and Democrat alike, have stripped away corporate regulations and taken an axe to social programs. Wages have stagnated as millions of jobs have been wiped out. Social inequality has soared to levels not seen since before the Great Depression and the New Deal.

The past five decades have seen the disintegration of social liberalism in America, of the character associated with the "Great Society" program. In its place, the "left" politics practiced by the Democratic Party and its auxiliary organizations is a marriage of the interests of the financial aristocracy and the identity politics practiced by more privileged sections of the upper

middle class.

These tendencies too have their roots in the 1960s. Following the upheavals of that decade, the Nixon administration initiated a conscious policy of undermining the egalitarian conceptions that animated the Civil Rights movement and incorporating sections of the African American middle class into the institutions of power and exploitation.

Black mayors were brought forward to run many of the major urban centers in the United States—presiding over the increasingly disastrous conditions that confront the vast majority of African Americans. The aim, as Nixon crudely put it, was to give black nationalists "a piece of the action" in the "exciting ventures of private enterprise." Nixon subsequently created the first affirmative action program.

For their part, the American trade unions responded to the decline in the position of American capitalism by ever-more-openly adopting the perspective of corporatism. As they collaborated in destroying the jobs and wages of the workers they claimed to represent, the union executives integrated themselves into corporate management, functioning as labor policemen and contractors.

These social and political processes have reached a culmination in the Obama administration, which has implemented sweeping cuts to public education, Medicare, and Medicaid, and has proposed significant cuts to Social Security. As a result of these attacks, the conditions of life for the great majority of people were driven inexorably backward.

The 50 years since Johnson's speech have seen the rise not of the Great Society, but of the society of unemployment, poverty and inequality. This is an indictment not merely of the Democratic Party and its allies, but of an entire social and political system. The truth, first affirmed by Marx a century and a half ago, that capitalism leads inevitably to the growth of poverty, inequality, war, and dictatorship, has been inarguably confirmed.



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