Semicentennial of LBJ's War on Poverty

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This year, the cheerleaders for big government are celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the launching of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. This should be an occasion for mourning, not celebration, because that was the most expensive legislative failure in our history.

Yes, failure. Today we have four million Americans who have been unemployed for more than six months, 49 million Americans living below the poverty line, and 100 million people receiving some form of food aid from the federal government.

Johnson came into power in 1964 on the biggest landslide in U.S. history, and then he brought about the largest expansion of government in our history, surpassing even the expansion of government initiated by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. Instead of lifting Americans out of poverty, LBJ's 40 federal programs trapped millions of Americans in poverty and permanent dependency.

Today's legislative battles -- raising the minimum wage, expanding and perpetuating government-financed health care for seniors and the poor, extending long-term unemployment benefits, and big appropriations to the education establishment are all about extending government spending for Johnson's programs.

LBJ announced his War on Poverty in his 1964 State of the Union address. He then expanded his goal to the Great Society, using the "great" concept 16 times in his commencement speech in May before a crowd of 70,000 at the University of Michigan.

With his insufferable ego, LBJ declared that he planned "to move us not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society." Johnson summoned his young speechwriter, Richard N. Goodwin, and told him to use the unfinished John F. Kennedy program "as a springboard to take on Congress" and turn it into an "aggressive Johnson program."

With a super majority of Democrats in Congress and using his famous bullying tactics known as the "Johnson treatment," LBJ pushed Congress to pass 200 expensive new laws. Key pieces of Great Society legislation were enacted by 1968 and Joseph A.

Califano Jr. boasted that "This country is more the country of Lyndon Johnson than any other president."

These new spending bills included the start of Medicare, Medicaid, direct federal aid to public schools, bilingual education, Head Start, food stamps, vocational education through the Job Corps, urban renewal programs, new spending for the arts and humanities, a giant expansion of immigration, public housing, aid to college students, and handouts to non-commercial TV and radio including PBS and NPR.

LBJ's pie-in-the sky promises, followed by expansion of the taxpayer spending he rammed through Congress, gave us a dozen years of what we, with hindsight, can see was a massive change in the role of government.

Charles Murray's influential book "Losing Ground" showed that the Great Society's changes actually made the problems of the poor and the disadvantaged worse, not better. The policy of channeling all welfare money to mothers made the father family-provider unnecessary, and thereby broke up millions of intact families.

Unfortunately, most of LBJ's spending programs survive to this day and continue to rise. The federal government is now five times as big in real dollars as it was in 1964.

LBJ's Great Society spending was not merely an Obama-style strategy to redistribute the wealth. Johnson's purpose was to shift power from the states to the federal government, from Congress to executive-branch regulators, and from big-city political machines to Alinsky-style community groups so they could organize and make demands to increase federal control.

For example, federal meddling in public school education, encrusted with lavish federal spending, started with LBJ's Great Society. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act were both born in 1965.

Prior to that, the federal powers-that-be never presumed to tell schools what to teach or to bribe them with federal money. The only pre-LBJ money that went to education was the GI bill to help World War II veterans attend college.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 scrapped our immigration system that had been in place since 1924 and replaced it with admitting large numbers of Latin Americans, Africans and Asians instead of Western Europeans. This greatly increased the number of immigrants with welfare and public education costs.

When LBJ started to hand out the tax-paid goodies, polls reported that a big majority of Americans trusted the federal government to do what is right. But by 1966 the favorable view of Washington declined and kept going down. Reagan wrote in his diary: "I'm trying to undo the 'Great Society.' It was L.B.J.'s war on poverty that led to our present mess."

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