

Congress, the Great Society in the 1960s, and Today

Excerpts from President Lyndon B. Johnson's State of the Union Address January 4, 1965

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Members of the Congress, my fellow Americans:

...And so tonight, now, in 1965, we begin a new quest for union. We seek the unity of man with the world that he has built--with the knowledge that can save or destroy him--with the cities which can stimulate or stifle him--with the wealth and the machines which can enrich or menace his spirit.

We seek to establish a harmony between man and society which will allow each of us to enlarge the meaning of his life and all of us to elevate the quality of our civilization. This is the search that we begin tonight....

TOWARD THE GREAT SOCIETY

World affairs will continue to call upon our energy and our courage.

But today we can turn increased attention to the character of American life.

We are in the midst of the greatest upward surge of economic well-being in the history of any nation.

Our flourishing progress has been marked by price stability that is unequalled in the world. Our balance of payments deficit has declined and the soundness of our dollar is unquestioned. I pledge to keep it that way and I urge business and labor to cooperate to that end.

We worked for two centuries to climb this peak of prosperity. But we are only at the beginning of the road to the Great Society. Ahead now is a summit where freedom from the wants of the body can help fulfill the needs of the spirit.

We built this Nation to serve its people.

We want to grow and build and create, but we want progress to be the servant and not the master of man.

We do not intend to live in the midst of abundance, isolated from neighbors and nature, confined by blighted cities and bleak suburbs, stunted by a poverty of learning and an emptiness of leisure.

The Great Society asks not how much, but how good; not only how to create wealth but how to use it; not only how fast we are going, but where we are headed.

It proposes as the first test for a nation: the quality of its people.

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This kind of society will not flower spontaneously from swelling riches and surging power.

It will not be the gift of government or the creation of presidents. It will require of every American, for many generations, both faith in the destination and the fortitude to make the journey.

And like freedom itself, it will always be challenge and not fulfillment. And tonight we accept that challenge.

A NATIONAL AGENDA

I propose that we begin a program in education to ensure every American child the fullest development of his mind and skills.

I propose that we begin a massive attack on crippling and killing diseases.

I propose that we launch a national effort to make the American city a better and a more stimulating place to live.

I propose that we increase the beauty of America and end the poisoning of our rivers and the air that we breathe.

I propose that we carry out a new program to develop regions of our country that are now suffering from distress and depression.

I propose that we make new efforts to control and prevent crime and delinquency.

I propose that we eliminate every remaining obstacle to the right and the opportunity to vote.

I propose that we honor and support the achievements of thought and the creations of art.

I propose that we make an all-out campaign against waste and inefficiency.

THE TASK

Our basic task is threefold:

First, to keep our economy growing;

--to open for all Americans the opportunity that is now enjoyed by most Americans;

--and to improve the quality of life for all.

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In the next 6 weeks I will submit special messages with detailed proposals for national action in each of these areas.

Tonight I would like just briefly to explain some of my major recommendations in the three main areas of national need.

1. A GROWING ECONOMY: BASIC POLICIES

First, we must keep our Nation prosperous. We seek full employment opportunity for every American citizen. I will present a budget designed to move the economy forward. More money will be left in the hands of the consumer by a substantial cut in excise taxes. We will continue along the path toward a balanced budget in a balanced economy.

I confidently predict--what every economic sign tells us tonight--the continued flourishing of the American economy...

ON THE FARMS

Our economy owes much to the efficiency of our farmers. We must continue to assure them the opportunity to earn a fair reward. I have instructed the Secretary of Agriculture to lead a major effort to find new approaches to reduce the heavy cost of our farm programs and to direct more of our effort to the small farmer who needs the help the most.

INCREASED PROSPERITY

We can help insure continued prosperity through:

- a regional recovery program to assist the development of stricken areas left behind by our national progress;
- further efforts to provide our workers with the skills demanded by modern technology, for the laboring-man is an indispensable force in the American system;
- the extension of the minimum wage to more than 2 million unprotected workers;
- the improvement and the modernization of the unemployment compensation system.

And as pledged in our 1960 and 1964 Democratic platforms, I will propose to Congress changes in the Taft-Hartley Act including section 14(b). I will do so hoping to reduce the conflicts that for several years have divided Americans in various States of our Union.

In a country that spans a continent modern transportation is vital to continued growth.

TRANSPORTATION FOR GROWTH

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I will recommend heavier reliance on competition in transportation and a new policy for our merchant marine.

I will ask for funds to study high-speed rail transportation between urban centers. We will begin with test projects between Washington and Boston. On high-speed trains, passengers could travel this distance in less than 4 hours.

2. OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Second, we must open opportunity to all our people.

Most Americans enjoy a good life. But far too many are still trapped in poverty and idleness and fear.

Let a just nation throw open to them the city of promise:

--to the elderly, by providing hospital care under social security and by raising benefit payments to those struggling to maintain the dignity of their later years;

--to the poor and the unfortunate, through doubling the war against poverty this year;

--to Negro Americans, through enforcement of the civil rights law and elimination of barriers to the right to vote;

--to those in other lands that are seeking the promise of America, through an immigration law based on the work a man can do and not where he was born or how he spells his name.

3. TO ENRICH THE LIFE OF ALL

Our third goal is to improve the quality of American life.

THROUGH EDUCATION

We begin with learning.

Every child must have the best education that this Nation can provide.

Thomas Jefferson said that no nation can be both ignorant and free. Today no nation can be both ignorant and great.

In addition to our existing programs, I will recommend a new program for schools and students with a first year authorization of \$1,500 million.

It will help at every stage along the road to learning.

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For the preschool years we will help needy children become aware of the excitement of learning.

For the primary and secondary school years we will aid public schools serving low-income families and assist students in both public and private schools.

For the college years we will provide scholarships to high school students of the greatest promise and the greatest need and we will guarantee low-interest loans to students continuing their college studies.

New laboratories and centers will help our schools--help them lift their standards of excellence and explore new methods of teaching. These centers will provide special training for those who need and those who deserve special treatment.

THROUGH BETTER HEALTH

Greatness requires not only an educated people but a healthy people.

Our goal is to match the achievements of our medicine to the afflictions of our people.

We already carry on a large program in this country. for research and health.

In addition, regional medical centers can provide the most advanced diagnosis and treatment for heart disease and cancer and stroke and other major diseases.

New support for medical and dental education will provide the trained people to apply our knowledge.

Community centers can help the mentally ill and improve health care for school-age children from poor families, including services for the mentally retarded.

THROUGH IMPROVING THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

The City An educated and healthy people require surroundings in harmony with their hopes. In our urban areas the central problem today is to protect and restore man's satisfaction in belonging to a community where he can find security and significance.

The first step is to break old patterns--to begin to think and work and plan for the development of the entire metropolitan areas. We will take this step with new programs of help for the basic community facilities and for neighborhood centers of health and recreation.

New and existing programs will be open to those cities which work together to develop unified long-range policies for metropolitan areas.

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We must also make some very important changes in our housing programs if we are to pursue these same basic goals.

So a Department of Housing and Urban Development will be needed to spearhead this effort in our cities.

Every citizen has the right to feel secure in his home and on the streets of his community.

To help control crime, we will recommend programs:

- to train local law enforcement officers;
- to put the best techniques of modern science at their disposal;
- to discover the causes of crime and better ways to prevent it...

A President's hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right.

Yet the Presidency brings no special gift of prophecy or foresight. You take an oath, you step into an office, and you must then help guide a great democracy...

A President does not shape a new and personal vision of America.

He collects it from the scattered hopes of the American past.

It existed when the first settlers saw the coast of a new world, and when the first pioneers moved westward.

It has guided us every step of the way.

It sustains every President. But it is also your inheritance and it belongs equally to all the people that we all serve.

It must be interpreted anew by each generation for its own needs; as I have tried, in part, to do tonight.

It shall lead us as we enter the third century of the search for "a more perfect union."

This, then, is the state of the Union: Free and restless, growing and full of hope.

So it was in the beginning.

So it shall always be, while God is willing, and we are strong enough to keep the faith.

(Excerpted from the American Presidency Project:

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26907>)

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