

The Great Society: Extending the New Deal?

Center for Legislative Archives

Worksheet 1:

Contrasting the Historical Context of the Great Society and the New Deal

Instructions: Read the following summaries and draw from them to answer the questions that follow.

1. The New Deal

In his March 4, 1933 Inaugural Address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for “a New Deal for the American people.” The nation was devastated by the Great Depression with banking paralyzed by a national crisis, the economy shattered, and unemployment at historically high levels. Roosevelt called Congress immediately in to session, and within the first 100 days it passed fifteen major programs that fundamentally changed American politics and the economy. Unemployment relief, banking reform, programs to boost agriculture, programs to reorganize industry, and programs to create jobs through public works spending quickly gained approval. The Tennessee Valley Authority was created to construct hydroelectric dams and spur the economic development of one of the nation’s poorest regions. A host of “alphabetical agencies” were created to bring relief to hard-hit people and to extend government oversight to a wide variety of issues. For example, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration led agricultural reform, the National Industrial Recovery Administration exercised authority over businesses, the Civilian Conservation Corps provided jobs and career training for unemployed young people, while the Public Works Administration created public works jobs. In President Roosevelt’s first term in office, the New Deal primarily addressed the immediate consequences of the Great Depression. During his second term, however, the “Second New Deal” saw the passage of legislation creating old age pensions (The Social Security Act), protecting of the rights of workers to form unions (The Wagner Act), and unsuccessfully attempting to create a system of national health insurance (under the proposed, but not passed, Wagner National Health Act, 1939). The New Deal transformed many aspects of American life, but did not significantly advance the cause of African American civil rights.

2. The Great Society

Despite the fact that the mid-1960s were a period of unprecedented prosperity and affluence for many Americans, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared that the time had come for America to eliminate poverty by attacking its causes. He used the term “Great Society” in his January, 1965 State of the Union Address to set a goal for the nation and to signal his intention to use the resources of the federal government to improve the living conditions and opportunities for disadvantaged Americans. Working with the 89th Congress (1965- 67), Johnson proposed 115 pieces of legislation, and Congress passed 89 of them. A few examples demonstrate the wide ranging assault launched against

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conditions that contributed to poverty and show how the Great Society provided programs to assist needy people at all stages of life. The Head Start program provided pre-school education and nutrition. The Higher Education Act provided federal support for education by increasing and improving resources at higher education institutions and providing financial assistance to students in postsecondary education. The Economic Opportunity Act led the war on poverty through the actions of a variety of educational, training and employment agencies, and the Job Corps trained unemployed workers. The Medicare program expanded Social Security to provide health insurance for the elderly. In addition, the Appalachian Regional Development Act directed federal resources to develop one of the poorest regions of the country. The Great Society also advanced civil rights. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 protected the rights of African Americans from race-based obstructions to voting — expanding the protections against racial discrimination contained in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Questions:

1. How were the overall economic conditions in the nation different at the start of the New Deal and at the start of the Great Society?
2. What view of the role of government in society did the two initiatives have in common?
3. What areas of society were successfully addressed by the Great Society but not accomplished by the New Deal?

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