

**SEEING IS BELIEVING:
THE ENDURING LEGACY OF LYNDON JOHNSON**

**The Keynote Address by
Joseph A. Califano, Jr. at the
Centennial Celebration for President Lyndon Baines Johnson
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For many in this room, Lyndon Johnson's Centennial is a time for personal memories. We remember how LBJ drove himself—and many of us—to use every second of his presidency. We remember his five a.m. wake-up calls asking about a front page story in the *New York Times*--the edition that had not yet been delivered to our home; his insatiable appetite for a program to cure every ill he saw; his insistence that every call from a member of congress be returned on the day it was received—even if it meant running the member down in a barroom, bathroom or bedroom; his insistence that hearings begin one day after we sent a bill to Congress; his pressure to get more seniors enrolled in Medicare, more blacks registered to vote, more schools desegregated, more kids signed up for Head Start, more Mexican-Americans taking college scholarships or loans; more billboards torn down faster—for the country, and for Lady Bird.

And we remember his signature admonition: “Do it now. Not next week. Not tomorrow. Not later today. Now.”

We who served him saw that Lyndon Johnson could be brave and brutal, compassionate and cruel, incredibly intelligent and infuriatingly stubborn. We came to know his shrewd and uncanny instinct for the jugular of both allies and adversaries. We learned he could be altruistic and petty, caring and crude, generous and petulant, bluntly honest and calculatingly devious—all within the same few minutes. We saw his determination to succeed run over or around whoever or whatever got in his way.

As allies and enemies alike slumped in exhaustion, we saw how LBJ's relentless zeal produced second, third and fourth bursts of energy—to mount a massive social revolution that gave new hope to the disadvantaged. As he did so, he often created a record that Machiavelli might not only recognize, but also envy. To him, the enormous popularity of his unprecedented landslide victory, and every event during his presidency—triumphant or tragic—were opportunities to give the most vulnerable among us a fair shot of the nation's abundant blessings.

We saw these things. But somehow the world beyond—and even the people of his own party—seem not to see.

Throughout this year, and last week in endorsing Barack Obama, John Edwards made reducing poverty a centerpiece of his presidential campaign. Yet he never mentioned Lyndon Johnson, the first—and only—President ever to declare war on poverty and sharply reduce it.

A few weeks ago in his eloquent victory speech in Raleigh, North Carolina, Barack Obama followed a familiar pattern of omission. In recounting the achievements of previous Democratic presidents, he mentioned the pantheon of FDR, Harry Truman, JFK—but not LBJ. Not Lyndon Johnson—not the man who would be proudest of Barack Obama's candidacy and what it says about America, the president uniquely responsible for the laws that gave this man (and millions of others) the opportunity to develop and display his talents and gave this nation the opportunity to benefit from them.

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Earlier in the campaign, when Hillary Clinton publicly noted that “it took a President” to translate Martin Luther King’s moral protests into public laws, she broke the taboo and mentioned President Johnson. The New York Times promptly rebuked her in an editorial for daring to speak that name—and instantly things went back to normal: Lyndon Johnson was put back in his place as the invisible President of the twentieth century.

The reason, of course, goes back to Vietnam. The tragedy of Vietnam has created a dark cloud obscuring the full picture of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency.

Without downplaying in any way the tragedy of the Vietnam war, I am convinced that to make Lyndon Johnson the invisible President—particularly for Democrats to indulge such amnesia as politically correct—is unfair not so much to him, but to our nation and its future.

Why? Because if we make Lyndon Johnson’s whole presidency invisible—if we are unable or unwilling to speak his name—we become less able to talk about the lasting achievements of this nation’s progressive tradition—a tradition that spans both parties over the last century. If we are unable or unwilling to see this President, we break the chain of history and deny our people an understanding of the remarkable resilience of progressive tradition from Theodore Roosevelt, through Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, Harry Truman’s Fair Deal and John Kennedy’s New Frontier, to Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

Of even greater danger to our nation, by making the presidency of Lyndon Johnson invisible, we lose key lessons for our democracy: courage counts and government can work—and it can work to the benefit of the least among us in ways that enhance the well-being of all of us. Think about this: Americans under 40 have seen in Washington only governments that were anti-government, corrupt, mired in scandal, inept, gridlocked, driven by polls, favored the rich and powerful, or tied in knots by Lilliputian lobbyists and partisan bickering.

Talk to many Americans today about Washington and they’re likely to say: it doesn’t work; it doesn’t care; it doesn’t understand my problems; the special interests control it. Tell an American that Washington can work, it can help them, and they react like doubting Thomas: I won’t believe it till I see it.

That’s the political reality of our skeptical times: seeing is believing.

So as we begin our observance of this centennial in this critical political year, here is the question: Do we want to rekindle support for progressive ideas, for a modern progressive movement? If so, if we hope to restore belief in a government that serves and lifts up the many as well as the few, if we want to make government work again, then we must see our history more clearly and tell it more completely. We must see the full vision and achievement of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency, the domestic revolution that he not only conceived, but carried out. Failure to do so not only distorts our past, it short changes our future. For there is a connection between seeing and believing--and also between seeing and *achieving*.

We live in an era of political micro-achievement. In recent years, it is considered an accomplishment when a President persuades Congress to pass one bill, or a few, over an entire administration: one welfare reform; one No Child Left Behind. Partisan attacks and political ambition choke our airways, not reports of legislation passed or problems solved.

What a contrast. In those tumultuous Great Society years, the President submitted, and Congress enacted, more than one hundred major proposals in each of the 89th and 90th Congresses. In those years of do-it-now optimism, presidential speeches were about distributing prosperity more fairly, reshaping the balance between the consumer and big business, rebuilding entire cities, eliminating poverty, hunger and discrimination in our nation. And when the speeches ended, action followed, problems were tackled,

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ameliorated and solved. This nation did reduce poverty. We did broaden opportunity for college and jobs. We did outlaw segregation and discrimination in housing. We did guarantee the right to vote to all. We did improve health and prosperity for older Americans. We did put the environment on the national agenda.

When Lyndon Johnson took office, only eight percent of Americans held college degrees; by the end of 2006, twenty-eight percent had completed college. His Higher Education legislation with its scholarships, grants and work-study programs opened college to any American with the necessary brains and ambition, however empty the family purse. Since 1965 the federal government has provided more than 360 billion dollars to provide 166 million grants, loans and work study awards to college students. Today six out of ten college students receive federal financial aid under Great Society programs and their progeny.

Below the college level, LBJ passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, for the first time committing the federal government to help local schools. By last year, that program had infused 552 billion dollars into elementary and high schools. He anticipated the needs of Hispanics and other immigrants with bilingual education, which today serves four million children in some 40 languages. His special education law has helped millions of children with learning disabilities.

Then there is Head Start. To date, more than 24 million pre-schoolers have been through Head Start programs in nearly every city and county in the nation. Head Start today serves one million children a year.

If LBJ had not established the federal government's responsibility to finance this educational surge, would we have the trained human resources today to function in a fiercely competitive global economy? Would we have developed the technology that leads the world's computing and communications revolution?

Seeing is believing.

In 1964, most elderly Americans had no health insurance. Few retirement plans provided any such coverage. The poor had little access to medical treatment until they were in critical condition. Only wealthier Americans could get the finest care, and then only by traveling to a few big cities like Boston or New York.

Consider the changes Johnson wrought. Since 1965, some 112 million Americans have been covered by Medicare; in 2006, 43 million were enrolled. In 1967, Medicaid served 10 million poor citizens; in 2006, it served 63 million people. The program is widely regarded as the key factor in reducing infant mortality by seventy-five percent--from 26 deaths for each 1,000 live births when Johnson took office to less than seven per 1,000 live births in 2004.

The Heart, Cancer and Stroke legislation has provided funds to create centers of medical excellence in just about every major city—from Seattle to Houston, Miami to Cleveland, Atlanta to Minneapolis. To staff these centers, the Health Professions Educational Assistance Act provided resources to double the number of doctors graduating from medical schools and increase the pool of specialists, researchers, nurses and paramedics.

Without these programs and Great Society investments in the National Institutes of Health, would our nation be the world's leader in medical research? In pharmaceutical invention? In creation of surgical procedures and medical machinery to diagnose our diseases, breathe for us, clean our blood, transplant our organs, scan our brains? In the discovery of ingenious prosthetic devices that enable so many of our severely wounded soldiers to function independently?

Seeing is believing.

Closely related to LBJ's Great Society health programs were his initiatives to reduce malnutrition and hunger. Today, the Food Stamp program helps feed some 27 million men, women and children in 12 million households. The School Breakfast program has served more than 30 billion breakfasts to needy children.

Seeing is believing.

It is not too much to say that Lyndon Johnson's programs created a stunning recasting of America's demographic profile. When President Johnson took office, life expectancy was 66.6 years for men and 73.1 years for women. Forty years later, by 2004, life expectancy had stretched to 75 years for men and 80 years for women. The jump was most dramatic among poor citizens--suggesting that better nutrition and access to health care have played an even larger role than medical advances.

For almost half a century, the nation's immigration laws established restrictive and discriminatory quotas that favored blond and blue-eyed Western Europeans. With the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, LBJ scrapped that quota system and put substance behind the Statue of Liberty's welcoming words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." This Great Society legislation refreshed our nation with the revitalizing energies of immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe, south of the border, Asia and Africa, converting America into the most multi-cultural nation in the history of the world and uniquely positioning our population for the Twenty-First century world of new economic powers. In the year before Immigration reform was passed, only 2,600 immigrants were admitted from Africa, less than 25,000 from Asia and 105,000 from Central and South America. With the lifting of the quotas, in 2006, 110,000 immigrants were admitted from Africa, more than 400,000 from Asia and 525,000 from Central and South America. I can't see LBJ eating at an Ethiopian or Sushi restaurant, but I can see him tapping into the intellectual acumen, diversity and energy of this new wave of immigrants.

Seeing is believing.

Lyndon Johnson put civil rights and social justice squarely before the nation as a moral issue. Recalling his year as a teacher of poor Mexican children in Cotulla, Texas, he once told Congress, "It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country. But now I do have that chance—and I'll let you in on a secret—I mean to use it."

And use it he did. He used it to make Washington confront the needs of the nation as no president before or since has. With the 1964 Civil Rights Act Johnson tore down, all at once, the "Whites only" signs and social system that featured segregated hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, toilets and water fountains, and rampant job discrimination.

The following year he proposed the Voting Rights Act. When it passed in the summer of 1965, Martin Luther King told Johnson, "You have created a second emancipation." The President replied, "The real hero is the American Negro."

How I wish that Lyndon Johnson were alive today to see what his laws have wrought—especially the Voting Rights Act that he considered the most precious gem among the Great Society jewels.

In 1964 there were 79 black elected officials in the South and 300 in the entire nation. By 2001 (the latest information available) there were some 10,000 elected black officials across the nation, more

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than 6,000 of them in the South. In 1965 there were five black members of the House; today there are 42 and the black member of the Senate is headed for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Seeing is believing.

But LBJ knew that laws were not enough. Thus was born the concept of affirmative action, Johnson's conviction that it is essential as a matter of social justice to provide the tutoring, the extra help, even the preference if necessary, to those who had suffered generations of discrimination in order to give them a fair chance to share in the American dream.

LBJ set the pace personally. He appointed the first black Supreme Court Justice (Thurgood Marshall), the first black cabinet officer (Robert Weaver) and the first black member of the Federal Reserve Board (Andrew Brimmer). He knew that if executives and institutions across the private sector saw qualified blacks succeeding in positions of high responsibility, barriers across America would fall—because for them, he knew, seeing was believing.

Less known, and largely ignored, was Johnson's similar campaign to place women in top government positions. The tapes reveal him hectoring cabinet officers to place women in top jobs. He created what one feminist researcher called in her book, *Women, Work and National Policy*, "An affirmative action reporting system for women, surely the first of its kind...in the White House...." LBJ proposed and signed legislation to provide, for the first time, equal opportunity in promotions for women in the Armed Forces. Signing the bill in 1967, Johnson noted, "The bill does not create any female generals or female admirals—but it does make that possible. There is no reason why we should not someday have a female chief of staff or even a female Commander in Chief."

LBJ had his heart in his War on Poverty. Though he found the opposition too strong to pass an income maintenance law, he took advantage of the biggest ATM around: Social Security. He proposed, and Congress enacted, whopping increases in the minimum benefit. That change alone lifted 2.5 million Americans 65 and over above the poverty line. Today, Social Security keeps some thirteen million senior citizens above the poverty line. Many scholars look at Social Security and that increase, Medicare and the coverage of nursing home care under Medicaid (which funds care for more than 64 percent of nursing home residents) as the most significant social programs of the Twentieth Century.

Seeing is believing.

Johnson's relationship with his pet project—the Office of Economic Opportunity—was that of a proud father often irritated by an obstreperous child. For years conservatives have ranted about the OEO programs. Yet Johnson's War on Poverty was founded on the most conservative principle: put the power in the local community, not in Washington; give people at the grassroots the ability to walk off the public dole.

Today, as we celebrate LBJ's 100th anniversary some forty years after he left office, eleven of the twelve programs that OEO launched are alive, well and funded at an annual rate exceeding eleven billion dollars. Head Start, Job Corps, Community Health Centers, Foster Grandparents, Upward Bound (now part of the Trio Program in the Department of Education), Green Thumb (now Senior Community Service Employment), Indian Opportunities (now in the Labor Department), and Migrant Opportunities (now Seasonal Worker Training and Migrant Education) are all helping people stand on their own two feet.

Community Action (now the Community Service Block Grant program), VISTA Volunteers and Legal Services are putting power in the hands of individuals—down at the grassroots. The grassroots that these programs fertilize just don't produce the manicured laws that conservatives prefer. Of all the Great

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Society programs started in the Office of Economic Opportunity, only the Neighborhood Youth Corps has been abandoned—in 1974, after enrolling more than 5 million individuals.

Ronald Reagan quipped that Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty and poverty won. He was wrong. When LBJ took office, 22.2 percent of Americans were living in poverty. When he left five years later, only 13 percent were living below the poverty line—the greatest one-time reduction in poverty in our nation’s history.

Seeing is believing.

Since Lyndon Johnson left the White House, no president has been able to effect any significant reductions in poverty. In 2006 the poverty level stood at 12.3 percent. Hillary Clinton in her presidential campaign has promised to create a cabinet level poverty czar in her administration. In the administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson, the President was the poverty czar.

Theodore Roosevelt launched the modern environmental movement by setting aside public lands and national parks and giving voice to conservation leaders like Gifford Pinchot. If Teddy Roosevelt launched the movement, Lyndon Johnson drove it forward more than any later President—and in the process, in 1965, he introduced an entirely new concept of conservation:

“We must not only protect the countryside and save it from destruction;” he said, “we must restore what has been destroyed and salvage the beauty and charm of our cities. Our conservation must be not just the classic conservation of protection and development, but a creative conservation of restoration and innovation.”

That new environmental commandment spelled out the first inconvenient truth: that those who reap the rewards of modern technology must also pay the price of their industrial pollution. It inspired a legion of Great Society laws: the Clean Air, Water Quality and Clean Water Restoration Acts and Amendments, the 1965 Solid Waste Disposal Act, the 1965 Motor Vehicle Air Pollution Control Act, the 1968 Aircraft Noise Abatement Act. It also provided the rationale for later laws creating the Environmental Protection Agency and the Superfund.

Johnson created 35 National Parks, 32 within easy driving distance of large cities. The 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act today protects 165 river segments in 38 states and Puerto Rico. The 1968 National Trail System Act has established more than 1,000 recreation, scenic and historic trails covering close to 55,000 miles. No wonder *National Geographic* calls Lyndon Johnson “our greatest conservation president.”

Seeing is believing.

These were major areas of concentration for Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, but there were many others. Indeed, looking back, the sweep of this President’s achievements is breathtaking.

Those of us who worked with Lyndon Johnson would hardly consider him a patron of the arts. I can’t even remember him sitting through more than ten or fifteen minutes of a movie in the White House theatre, much less listening to an operatic aria or classical symphony.

Yet the historian Irving Bernstein, in his book on *The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson*, titles a chapter, “Lyndon Johnson, Patron of the Arts.” Think about it. What would cultural life in America be like without the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where each year two million visitors view performances that millions more watch on television, or without the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden that attracts 750,000 visitors annually? Both are Great Society initiatives.

The National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities are fulfilling a dream Johnson expressed when he asked Congress to establish them and, for the first time, to provide federal financial support for the Arts to increase “the access of our people to the works of our artists, and [recognize] the arts as part of the pursuit of American greatness.”

LBJ used to say that he wanted fine theater and music available throughout the nation and not just on Broadway and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In awarding more than 130,000 grants totaling more than four billion dollars since 1965, the Endowment for the Arts has spawned art councils in all 50 states and more than 1,400 professional theater companies, 120 opera companies, 600 dance companies and 1,800 professional orchestras. Since 1965, the Endowment for the Humanities has awarded 65,000 fellowships and grants totaling more than four billion dollars.

Johnson established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to create public television and public radio which have given the nation countless hours of fine arts, superb in-depth news coverage, and programs like “Sesame Street” and “Masterpiece Theater.” Now some say there is no need for public radio and television, with so many cable channels and radio stations. But as often as you surf with your TV remote or twist your radio dial, you are not likely to find the kind of quality broadcasting that marks the more than 350 public television and nearly 700 public radio stations that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting supports today. They, as well as the rest of the media, have been helped by the Freedom of Information Act, the Great Society’s contribution to greater transparency in government.

Seeing is believing. So is listening.

For urban America, LBJ drove through Congress the Urban Mass Transit Act, which gave San Franciscans BART, Washingtonians Metro, Atlantans MARTA, and cities across America thousands of buses and modernized transit systems. His 1968 Housing Act, creation of Ginnie Mae, privatization of Fannie Mae and establishment of the Department of Housing and Urban Development have helped some 75 million families gain access to affordable housing.

In the progressive tradition in which Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt confronted huge financial and corporate enterprises, Johnson faced a nationalization of commercial power that had the potential to disadvantage the individual American consumer. Super-corporations were shoving aside the corner grocer, local banker, independent drug store and family farmer. Automobiles were complex and dangerous, manufactured by giant corporations with deep pockets to protect themselves. Banks had the most sophisticated accountants and lawyers to draft their loan agreements. Sellers of everyday products—soaps, produce, meats, appliances, clothing, cereal and canned and frozen foods—packaged their products with the help of the shrewdest marketers and designers. The individual was outflanked at every position.

Seeing that mismatch, Johnson pushed through Congress a bevy of laws to level the playing field for consumers: auto and highway safety for the motorist; a Department of Transportation and National Transportation Safety Board; truth in packaging for the housewife; truth in lending for the homebuyer, small businessman and individual borrower; wholesome meat and wholesome poultry laws to enhance food safety; the Flammable Fabrics Act to reduce the incendiary characteristics of clothing and blankets. He created the Product Safety Commission to assure that toys and other products would be safe for users. When he got over his annoyance that it took him five minutes to find me in the emergency room of George Washington University Hospital, with my three year old son Joe who had swallowed a bottle of aspirin, he proposed the Child Safety Act which is why we all have such difficulty opening up medicine bottles.

Seeing is believing.

By the numbers the legacy of Lyndon Johnson is monumental. It exceeds in domestic impact even the New Deal of his idol Franklin Roosevelt. It sets him at the cutting edge of the nation's progressive tradition. But there is also an important story behind these programs that speaks to the future—that offers the lessons of what it takes to be an effective president. What lessons does this president have for our nation and his successors, especially those who value the progressive tradition?

First, Lyndon Johnson was a genuine, true believing revolutionary.

His Texas constituency and the tactical constraints of his earlier offices reined him in before he became President. But his experiences--teaching poor Mexican American children in Cotulla, Texas, working as Texas director of Roosevelt's National Youth Administration, witnessing the indignities that his black cook, Zephyr Wright, and her husband Gene Williams, suffered during his senate years when they drove from Washington to Texas through the segregated south—fueled his revolutionary spirit.

He saw racial justice as a moral issue. He refused to accept pockets of poverty in the richest nation in history. He saw a nation so hell bent on industrial growth and amassing wealth that greed threatened to destroy its natural resources. He saw cities deteriorating and municipal political machines unresponsive to the early migration of Hispanics and the masses of blacks moving north. To him government was neither a bad man to be tarred and feathered nor a bag man to collect campaign contributions. To him government was not a bystander, hoping wealth and opportunity might trickle down to the least among us. To LBJ, government was a mighty wrench to open the fountain of opportunity so that everyone could bathe in the shower of our nation's blessings. He wanted his government to provide the poor with the kind of education, health and social support that most of us get from our parents.

Second, Lyndon Johnson was perpetually impatient, relentlessly restless, always in a hurry.

Andrew Marvell's words could have been written for him: "But at my back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot, hurrying near." Lyndon Johnson saw himself in a desperate race against time as he fought to remedy the damage slavery and generations of prejudice had inflicted on black Americans. Why? Because he feared that, once black Americans sensed the prospect of a better life, the discrimination they had once accepted as inevitable would become intolerable; they would erupt--and, subvert their own cause. "Hell," he said to me during some of those eruptions, "Sometimes when I think of what they've been through, I don't blame them."

He saw himself in a race against time as he sized up Congress, political reality and attitudes of affluent Americans. LBJ knew that he must use—now!--the sympathy generated by John Kennedy's assassination and the huge margin of his own election victory in 1964. He knew that his political capital--no matter how gigantic in the early days of his presidency—was a dwindling asset.

Third, Lyndon Johnson was a man of extraordinary courage.

For me the greatest price our nation pays for our collective blindness is this: by rendering LBJ invisible we lose sight, for the future, of how much a truly courageous political leader can accomplish.

Sure, LBJ had the politician's hunger to be loved. But, more than that, he had the courage to fall on his sword if that's what it took to move the nation forward. He did just that when, in an extraordinary act of abnegation, he withdrew from the political arena to calm the roiling seas of strife and end the war in Vietnam.

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To me no greater example of Presidential political courage exists than Lyndon Johnson's commitment in the area of civil rights. He fought for racial equality even when it hurt him and clobbered his party in the South.

After signing the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Johnson was defeated in five southern states, four of them states that Democrats had not lost for 80 years.

Still he kept on. In 1965 he drove the Voting Rights Act through Congress. In 1966, he proposed the Fair Housing Act to end discrimination in housing. His proposal prompted the most vitriolic mail we received at the White House, and Congress refused to act on the bill that year.

In the November 1966 mid-term elections, the Democrats lost a whopping forty-seven seats in the House and three in the Senate. Border and southern state governors met with the President at his ranch in December. In a nasty assault on his civil rights policies, they demanded that he withdraw his fair housing proposal and curb his efforts to desegregate schools.

Undeterred, in 1968, he drove the Fair Housing Act through the senate—tragically it took Dr. King's assassination to give Johnson the leverage he needed to convince the House to pass it.

You have to see political courage like that to believe it. I was fortunate to see it close up. I want our people and future leaders to be able to see it.

Fourth, Lyndon Johnson knew how to use power.

Johnson married his revolutionary zeal, impatience and courage to a phenomenal sense of how to use power skillfully—to exploit a mandate, to corral votes, to reach across the aisle in order to move this nation, its people and the Congress forward.

Lyndon Johnson felt entitled to every lever, to help from every person, every branch of government, every business, labor and religious leader. After all, as he often reminded us, he was the only President we had. He had no inhibitions in reaching out for advice, ideas, talent, power, support. He often saw traditions of separation of powers, or an independent press, or a profit-minded corporate executive, as obstacles, to be put aside in deference to the greater national interest as he defined it. He was brilliantly opportunistic, calling upon the nation and the Congress in the wake of even the most horrific tragedies—the assassinations of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King—to bring a new measure of social justice to all Americans.

He knew how to harness the power of the protestors and the media to tap into the inherent fairness of the American people. He asked Martin Luther King in January 1965 to help with the Voting Rights Act by “getting your leaders and you yourself....to find the worst condition [of voting discrimination] that you run into in Alabama....and get it on radio, get it on television, get it on—in the pulpits, get it in the meetings, get it every place you can...and then that will help us on what we are going to shove through in the end.” He loved King's choice of Selma, Alabama. He knew, as he told Dr. King, that when the American people saw the unfairness of the voting practices there, they would come around to supporting his bill. And they did.

He offers a defining lesson in the importance of mustering bipartisan support. These Great Society proposals were cutting edge, controversial initiatives and LBJ assiduously courted Republican members of congress to support them. His instructions to us on the White House staff were to accord Senate Republican minority leader Everett Dirksen and House minority leader Gerald Ford the same courtesies we extended to Senate Majority leader Mike Mansfield and House Speaker John McCormack. It was not only that he needed Republican votes to pass bills like the civil rights, health, education and

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consumer laws; he saw bipartisan support as an essential foundation on which to build lasting commitment among the American people. He knew that the endurance of his legislative achievements, and their enthusiastic acceptance by state and local governments, powerful private interests and individual citizens across the nation, required such bipartisan support.

He didn't accomplish all he wanted. He called "the welfare system in America outmoded and in need of major change" and pressed Congress to create "a work incentive program, incentives for earning, day care for children, child and maternal health and family planning services."

He saw the threat posed by the spread of guns and proposed national registration of all guns and national licensing of all gun owners. Congress rejected his proposals. But he did convince Capitol Hill to close the loophole of mail order guns, prohibit sales to minors, and end the import of Saturday night specials.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to get expand Medicare to cover pre-natal care and children through age six, and used to say, "If we can get that, future presidents and Congresses can close the gap between six and sixty-five."

He spotted the "for sale" signs of political corruption going up in the nation's capital and called for public financing of campaigns.

Our nation and its leaders pay a heavy price when such a towering figure—among the most towering political figures of American history—becomes at the same time America's invisible president. In this year, when for the first time in our history a black American is a leading candidate for the Presidency, when so many domestic issues dominating the campaign—access to health care, persistent poverty amidst such plenty, affordable higher education, effective public schools, environmental protection—are issues LBJ put on the national government's agenda, it is time to see the full measure of this President. Too many lessons of his presidency have been ignored because the Democratic party, the academic elite, political analysts and the mainstream media have made him the invisible president.

In this troubled time, when political pollsters and consultants parse the positions of candidates for public office, Johnson's exceptional courage on civil rights should be a shining example for a new generation of political leaders. His recognition of the significance of bipartisan support for controversial—but needed—domestic initiatives, and his ability to muster such support, should be studied by politicians and citizens who seek to change the world. His unique ability to make Washington work, to nourish and maintain partnerships between the Executive and the Congress, the public and private sectors, and to focus the people on critical needs like racial justice and eliminating poverty demonstrate "Yes, we can!" to skeptical citizens who have never seen Washington get it done.

It's time to take off the Vietnam blinders and let our eyes look at and learn from the domestic dimension of this presidency. Let everyone think what they will about Vietnam. But let us—especially Democrats—also recognize the reality of this revolutionary's remarkable achievements.

It is encouraging to me that some of Johnson's severest anti-war critics have begun the call for recognition of the greatness of his presidency.

Listen to the words of George McGovern who ran for president in 1972 on an anti-war platform and maintains that "The Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations were all wrong on Vietnam:"

"It would be a historic tragedy if [LBJ's] outstanding domestic record remained forever obscured by his involvement in a war he did not begin and did not know how to stop.... Johnson did more than any other president to advance civil rights, education and housing, to name just three of his concerns...."

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The late John Kenneth Galbraith, another leading critic of the Vietnam War, has called for “historical reconsideration” of the Johnson presidency:

“In the New Deal ethnic equality was only on the public conscience; in the Kennedy presidency it was strongly urged by Martin Luther King and many others....It was with Lyndon Johnson, however, that citizenship for all Americans in all its aspects became a reality.....On civil rights and on poverty, the two truly urgent issues of the time, we had with Johnson the greatest changes of our time....The initiatives of Lyndon Johnson on civil rights, voting rights and on economic and social deprivation...must no longer be enshrouded by that [Vietnam] war.”

And listen to Robert Caro, LBJ’s most meticulous and demanding biographer:

“In the twentieth century, with its eighteen American presidents, Lyndon Johnson was the greatest champion that black Americans and Mexican Americans, and indeed all Americans of color, had in the White House, the greatest champion they had in all the halls of government. With the single exception of Lincoln, he was the greatest champion with a white skin that they had in the history of the Republic. He was...the lawmaker for the poor and the downtrodden and the oppressed.... the President who wrote mercy and justice into the statute books by which America was governed.”

Historian David McCullough has said that the threshold test of greatness in a president is whether he is willing to risk his presidency for what he believes. LBJ passes that test with flying colors. It’s time for all of us to give his presidency the high marks it deserves.

Lyndon Johnson died 36 years ago in 1972. But his legacy endures. It endures in the children in Head Start programs in hamlets across our nation, in the expanded opportunities for millions of blacks, Hispanics and other minorities. It endures in the scholarships and loans that enable the poorest students to attend the finest universities. His legacy endures in the health care for the poor and the elderly that are woven into the fabric of American life. It endures in the public radio stations millions of drivers listen to as they drive to and from work. It endures in the cleaner air we breathe, in the local theatres and symphonies supported by the National Endowments, in the safer cars we drive and safer toys our children play with.

Seeing is believing.

That legacy also endures—let us remember—in the unfinished business of our nation’s long progressive movement that he pressed so impatiently for us to finish. LBJ knew that movement could be stalled, but he knew that it must never be stopped.

So, over these few days, as we look back and celebrate this centennial, let us also look forward and let us inspire others to see clearly and fully.

Because seeing is not only believing; seeing has everything to do with achieving.

Seeing is Believing: The Enduring Legacy of LBJ

With these acts President Johnson and Congress wrote a record of hope and opportunity for America

1963

College Facilities
Clean Air
Vocational Education
Indian Vocational Training
Manpower Training

1964

Inter-American Development Bank
Kennedy Cultural Center
Tax Reduction
Farm Program
Pesticide Controls
International Development Association
Civil Rights Act of 1964
Water Resources Research
War on Poverty
Criminal Justice
Truth-in-Securities
Food Stamps
Housing Act
Wilderness Areas
Nurse Training
Library Services

1965

Medicare
Medicaid
Elementary and Secondary Education
Higher Education
Bilingual Education
Department of Housing and Urban Development
Housing Act
Voting Rights

Immigration Reform Law
Older Americans
Heart, Cancer, Stroke Program
Law Enforcement Assistance
Drug Controls
Mental Health Facilities
Health Professions
Medical Libraries
Vocational Rehabilitation
Anti-Poverty Program
Arts and Humanities Foundation
Aid to Appalachia
Highway Beauty
Clean Air
Water Pollution Control
High Speed Transit
Manpower Training
Child Health
Community Health Services
Water Resources Council
Water Desalting
Juvenile Delinquency Control
Arms Control
Affirmative Action

1966

Child Nutrition
Department of Transportation
Truth in Packaging
Model Cities
Rent Supplements
Teachers Corp
Asian Development Bank
Clean Rivers
Food for Freedom
Child Safety
Narcotics Rehabilitation
Traffic Safety

Highway Safety
Mine Safety
International Education
Bail Reform
Auto Safety
Tire Safety
New GI Bill
Minimum Wage Increase
Urban Mass Transit
Civil Procedure Reform
Fish-Wildlife Preservation
Water for Peace
Anti-Inflation Program
Scientific Knowledge Exchange
Protection for Savings
Freedom of Information
Hirshhorn Museum

1967

Education Professions
Education Act
Air Pollution Control
Partnership for Health
Social Security Increases
Age Discrimination
Wholesome Meat
Flammable Fabrics
Urban Research
Public Broadcasting
Outer Space Treaty
Modern D.C. Government
Federal Judicial Center
Deaf-Blind Center
College Work Study
Summer Youth Programs
Food Stamps
Urban Fellowships

Safety at Sea Treaty
Narcotics Treaty
Anti-Racketeering
Product Safety Commission
Inter-American Bank

1968

Fair Housing
Indian Bill of Rights
Safe Streets
Wholesome Poultry
Commodity Exchange Rules
School Breakfasts
Truth-in-Lending
Aircraft Noise Abatement
New Narcotics Bureau
Gas Pipeline Safety
Fire Safety
Sea Grant Colleges
Tax Surcharge
Housing Act
International Monetary Reform
Fair Federal Juries
Juvenile Delinquency Prevention
Guaranteed Student Loans
Health Manpower
Gun Controls
Aid-to-Handicapped Children
Heart, Cancer and Stroke Programs
Hazardous Radiation Protection
Scenic Rivers
Scenic Trails
National Water Commission
Vocational Education
Dangerous Drug Control
Military Justice Code
Tax Surcharge