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## THE PLAY

It is 1965 and **President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ)** is at a critical point in his presidency. He is launching "The Great Society", an ambitious set of social programs that would increase funds for health care, education and poverty. He also wants to pass the Voting Rights Act, an act that would secure voting rights for minority communities across the country.

At each step, Johnson faces resistance. Conservatives like **Senator Everett Dirksen** are pushing for budget cuts on his social welfare programs. **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** is losing patience at the lack of progress on voting rights. With rising discrimination against black communities in America, King takes matters into his own hands, organizing a civil rights protest in Selma, Alabama.

Outside the U.S., the crisis in Vietnam is escalating. When the **Viet Cong** attacks a Marine support base, Johnson is faced with a difficult decision: should he deploy more American troops to fight overseas or should he focus on fighting the war on poverty within the U.S.?

Time is ticking and the next presidential election is around the corner. In an America divided by civil rights protests and the anguish of the Vietnam War, can Johnson pave the way for a great society?

**Viet Cong** — a communist political organization in South Vietnam operating with the support of North Vietnam

# THE GREAT SOCIETY

WRITTEN BY **ROBERT SCHENKKAN** | DIRECTED BY **KYLE DONNELLY**  
FICHANDLER STAGE | FEBRUARY 2 — MARCH 11, 2018



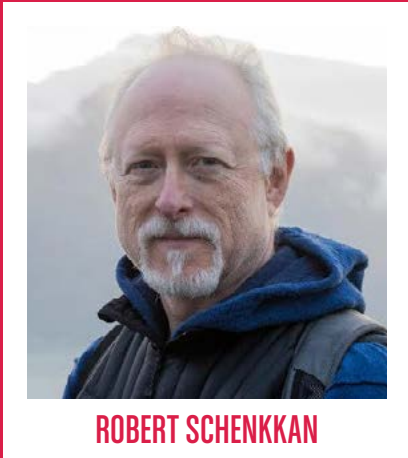
**"There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is only an American problem — the failure of America to live up to its unique founding purpose — all men are created equal."**

— President Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Great Society*

Additional support is provided by **Decker Anstrom and Sherry Hiemstra** and the **David Bruce Smith Foundation**.

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# MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



ROBERT SCHENKKAN

**“Change, while it may not feel that way, is constant and inevitable. There are ways we either embrace that or resist that.”**

Robert Schenkkan’s work investigates how we are shaped by the eras in which we live, and how history repeats itself.

This curiosity led him to write two plays based on President Lyndon Baines Johnson’s life — *All The Way* and *The Great Society*. As a kid, Schenkkan eagerly supported Johnson’s election. After writing two plays about the president’s tenure, he has newfound admiration for the efficacy of this sometimes unpopular leader.

Robert Schenkkan was born in North Carolina and raised in Texas. He studied theater and discovered his passion for creating original worlds through playwriting. In 1992, Schenkkan won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama with *The Kentucky Cycle*, a 6-hour collection of plays that follows three families through 200 years of American history.

In 2013, *All The Way* won the Edward M. Kennedy Prize, an award for exemplary drama inspired by American history. His writing has been heard on stages, TVs, and movie screens (*The Quiet American*, *Pump Up the Volume*) across the nation.

# DID YOU KNOW?



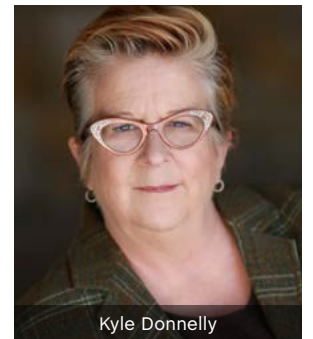
Photo of Jack Willis as President Lyndon Baines Johnson and Bowman Wright as Martin Luther King, Jr. by Stan Barouh.

*The Great Society* is the second part of a 2-part series on Lyndon Baines Johnson’s life written by Robert Schenkkan. The first part, *All The Way*, was performed at Arena Stage in April 2016. Cast members Jack Willis as President Lydon Baines Johnson and Bowman Wright as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have performed in both productions.

# FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

## WHY *THE GREAT SOCIETY*?

**“It is fascinating to experience *The Great Society* through the lens of our current political situation. We are more divided than ever before and the chance of significant legislation being passed is questionable at best. And to contrast our current president with LBJ is illuminating. LBJ was a master politician who knew how to get legislation through, and he had an impressive plan in his Great Society that would make significant changes in how we treat our fellow citizens, even those disadvantaged and discriminated against. But the tragic flaw that LBJ could not or would not escape was the Vietnam War. It ended his career and was a disturbing and controversial derailment of much he dreamed about.”**



Kyle Donnelly



# PRESIDENTIAL PROFILE

**LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON (LBJ)** was born on August 27, 1908 into the rural poverty of Stonewall, Texas. He became a school teacher and witnessed firsthand the discrimination that his students of Mexican descent faced. While in Texas, he fell in love with and married Claudia Alta Taylor, who was later known by the nickname “Lady Bird” Johnson.

In 1937, Johnson became a U.S. Congressman for Texas. He served six terms, only taking a break to serve in the Navy during the initial strikes of World War II. His influence grew when he became a U.S. Senator in 1948. In 1953, he became the youngest majority leader of the Senate.

With an outstanding reputation for **bipartisanship** and forceful bargaining, Johnson ran alongside John F. Kennedy in 1960, and became the vice president. When Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Johnson took an impromptu oath of office aboard Air Force One. He was president for the remainder of the term — a period some call “the accidental presidency.”

Johnson seized the moment. He envisioned a new America, a vision he would later call “the Great Society.” Public broadcasting would unite the national voice. Federal government would declare a war on poverty. All citizens, regardless of race, would have an equal chance at success.

When Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 after fighting for its ratification, many were finally convinced of his ability to lead the country. However, the Republicans and southern Democrats remained resolutely opposed. This divide activated a heated 1964 presidential election against conservative candidate Barry Goldwater.

Johnson won the 1964 election by a landslide and set out to build his Great Society. In many ways, he did. During Johnson’s presidency, more than 200 major bills were passed focusing on social programs. For the first time, African Americans were appointed to the Supreme Court and presidential Cabinet. He established the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Great Society enacted the most social progress since Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. Despite these accomplishments, Johnson’s legacy remains closely attached to the nation’s problematic entry into the Vietnam War.

Johnson passed away in his hometown in 1973.



**bipartisanship** — cooperation between two political parties

# FROM SELMA TO MONTGOMERY



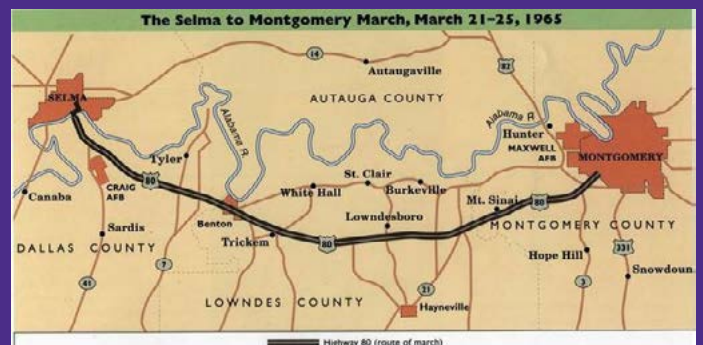
Dr. and Mrs. Martin L. King Jr. led the way into Montgomery, Alabama, during the 1965 march. Photo by Spider Martin, courtesy of Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

On March 25, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led thousands of nonviolent demonstrators on a 5-day march from Selma, Alabama to its capital, Montgomery.

Despite repeated attempts to register to vote, only two percent of African Americans were on the voting rolls in Dallas County, Alabama. King, the SCLC, SNCC and other African-American activists chose to focus their efforts in Selma because they anticipated that the ruthlessness of local law enforcement, led by Sheriff Jim Clark, would attract national attention. In turn, this would pressure President Lyndon Baines Johnson and Congress to finally enact new national voting rights legislation and force the fight for civil rights forward.

Weeks before on March 7, non-violent African-American protestors, led by Hosea Williams and John Lewis, had attempted a march. State troopers viciously beat them with clubs, whips and even barbed wire. They charged at the protestors, who remained non-violent, and tear-gassed them. This was known as “Bloody Sunday.” Television cameras captured the brutality. Seeing this horrifying event brought thousands of activists, protestors and religious leaders to Selma.

*The Great Society* brings audiences out of the Oval Office and into the streets, churches and meeting rooms to witness the courage of Civil Rights activists, the tension within the movement and the brutality of racism in America.



# MEET THE POLITICAL PLAYERS

*The Great Society* is a historical drama, and the characters on stage are fictionalized portrayals of real people. Sometimes, the dialogue on stage has been copied directly from speeches or papers written by the political figures. Other times, their words are the work of the playwright's imagination.

## INNER CIRCLE



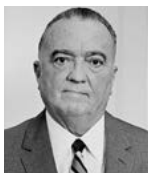
**LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON**  
President



**HUBERT HUMPHREY**  
Vice President



**ROBERT McNAMARA**  
Secretary of Defense



**J. EDGAR HOOVER**  
FBI Director



**GARDNER ACKLEY**  
Council of Economic Advisers



**LADY BIRD JOHNSON**  
First Lady

## CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS



**REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**  
President of SCLC



**REV. RALPH ABERNATHY**  
Vice-President of SCLC



**STOKELY CARMICHAEL**  
SNCC Organizer and Activist



**BOB MOSES**  
Head of SNCC



**JIMMIE LEE JACKSON**  
Activist



**HOSEA WILLIAMS**  
SNCC Organizer



**JAMES BEVEL**  
SCLC Organizer



**JOHN LEWIS**  
SNCC Organizer

## OTHER KEY PLAYERS



**EVERETT DIRKSEN**  
Senate Minority Leader



**REPRESENTATIVE WILBUR MILLS**  
Chairman, House Ways and Means Committee



**JIM CLARK**  
Sheriff of Dallas County, Alabama



**RICHARD DALEY**  
Mayor of Chicago



**RICHARD NIXON**  
Former Vice President for President Eisenhower



**GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND**  
Head of American Forces in Vietnam

## OPPONENTS



**GEORGE WALLACE**  
Governor of Alabama



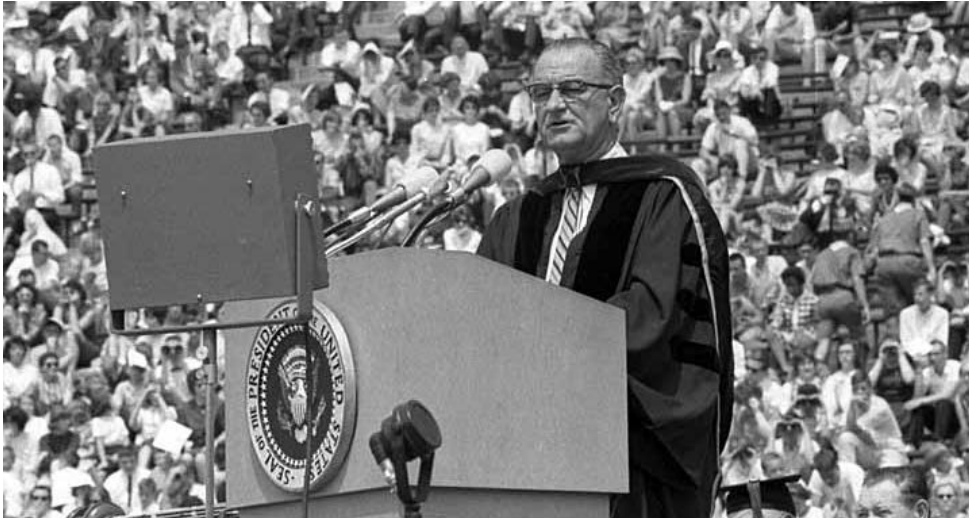
**ROBERT F. KENNEDY**  
Senator from New York

### ACRONYM DEFINITIONS

**SCLC:** Southern Christian Leadership Conference

**SNCC:** Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

# WHAT IS THE GREAT SOCIETY?



President Johnson introduces his platform for the “Great Society” at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor’s commencement on May 22, 1964.  
Source: The Online Library of Law and Liberty

## “The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all!”

—Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Great Society*

On Jan 4, 1965, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, in his State of the Union speech, announced his collection of social programs “The Great Society.” In the two weeks following the speech, he introduced bills that would fund huge increases in support for health care, education, voting and civil rights and a campaign he called “the war on poverty.” In a whirlwind of legislative activity, Johnson managed to pass 181 bills over the next two years, including:

- The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provided federal aid for materials and special education programs for low-income children and also established Head Start to provide preschool education for poor children.
- The establishment of Medicare, which provided low-cost hospitalization and medical insurance for Americans over 65.
- The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which provided methods through which young people from poor homes could receive job training and higher education. The Act increased funding for the Office of Economic Opportunity and enhanced programs such as Job Corps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and the Model Cities Program for urban redevelopment.
- The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which regulated the administration of elections so voters would not be discriminated against based on race. One of the key pieces of this legislation ensured that voting laws could not be changed at the state level.

Joseph Califano, former U.S Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, said, “. . . from 1963 when Lyndon Johnson took office until 1970, the portion of Americans living below the poverty line dropped from 22.2 percent to 12.6 percent, and the percentage of African Americans below the poverty line dropped from 55 percent in 1960 to 27 percent in 1968.”

However, a variety of factors undermined support for many of the Great Society programs. The cost of the Vietnam War reduced funding for domestic programs. Rising inflation and government spending deficits led to public support for further reductions. In the upcoming years, although Medicare remained fully funded, the Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford administrations dismantled the Office of Economic Opportunity. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan further cut funding for many of these programs.

Content Courtesy: Oregon Shakespeare Festival



## ACTIVITY

Lyndon Baines Johnson’s Great Society and Voting Rights Act were key achievements in U.S. history. How much of his vision for the country remains intact today? Come up with your own definition of A Great Society. What programs would you create?

## WHY ARE WE IN VIETNAM?

After World War II, France tried to take control of Vietnam, leading to eight years of conflict, 400,000 casualties, and the rise of communist leader Ho Chi Minh. When the French surrendered, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in military advisors to prop up the new South Vietnamese government. This was a policy President John F. Kennedy continued despite corrupt leadership in South Vietnam. When that corrupt government fell apart, Johnson sent in troops to protect decades of investment in the region. Why did he do that? Fear of nuclear war with Soviet Russia was tangible during the Cold War (1946–1991). The Cold War was a rivalry to be the world’s super power between the democratic U.S. and the communist Soviet Union. It created heightened tension between the two, especially since both had nuclear weapons. According to the “Domino Theory,” if South Vietnam became communist, so would nearby countries like Laos, Thailand, and even Australia, threatening American security in a region dominated by communist China and Soviet Russia. To a Cold War generation, victory in Vietnam was a matter of national security.

Courtesy of Seattle Repertory Theatre Education Department

Written by Emma Watt, Rose Woodbury, and Scott Koh.



## THE PROBLEM OF INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS

While Johnson was an expert at building relationships domestically by bargaining with local politicians, he was not able to apply these skills as easily to conflicts overseas. Many Americans came to see the Vietnam conflict as a civil war which had gone on for decades and could not be resolved by U.S. intervention. No American president had lost a war, and Johnson was determined not to be the first. He believed that if he persisted in demonstrating America's strength, Ho Chi Minh would come to the bargaining table. Ultimately, by the time Johnson left office in 1968, the conflict in Vietnam had overshadowed his many domestic accomplishments.

*Courtesy of Seattle Repertory Theatre Education Department  
Written by Emma Watt, Rose Woodbury, and Scott Koh.*

## THE MEMORIAL WALL

Inscribed on the black granite walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are the names of more than 58,000 men and women who served and sacrificed their lives in the Vietnam War. The wall is located north of the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.



## HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- You may take photographs of our sets before the show starts and during intermission.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls or games.
- You cannot make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

## RESOURCES

BBC — The Vietnam War  
<https://goo.gl/tAqDRD>

PBS American Experience — Johnson  
<http://goo.gl/XoTzBX>

Robert Schenkkan  
<http://www.robertschenkkan.com>

Stanford Encyclopedia — Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
<https://goo.gl/VQStcg>

The Johnson Presidential Library  
<http://www.johnsonlibrary.org>

U.S History — Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society"  
<https://goo.gl/38zrrm>

Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Fund  
<https://goo.gl/zwPXwf>



the mead center  
for american theater

1101 Sixth Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20024  
Phone: 202-554-9066  
Fax: 202-488-4056

Written by Akhila Khanna  
Edited by Rebecca Campana  
Special thank you to Oregon Shakespeare Festival  
and Seattle Repertory Theatre

Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more  
information on Arena Stage productions  
and educational opportunities.



### LISTEN

<http://tinyurl.com/nprgardens>

Speaking to his special assistant of national security in a May 27, 1964 in a recorded telephone conversation President Lyndon Baines Johnson expresses his anguish over the Vietnam War.

Source: LBJ Library

## THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What makes a  
presidential  
legacy?

2

What are the  
limits of  
power?

3

How can the  
U.S. become a  
"Great Society"  
today?