

Great Society, great awakening

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January 20, 2015

President Barack Obama's State of the Union proposed to enlarge the American promise of prosperity by introducing a new tax structure for the very wealthy, tax credits for families outside of the wealthy stratum, increased access to retirement plans for more American workers, and a plan to subsidize community college tuition. While there will be resistance to the president's proposals, the impulse behind them is an appeal to an idealized form of decency that Lyndon B. Johnson believed would make his idea of a Great Society an American reality.

Fifty years ago this month, Johnson introduced his vision to a Congress that, as [Julian Zelizer](#) has explained, changed the political landscape for millions of Americans who had almost no access to the American ideals of prosperity and opportunity. There are many ways to understand the origins of Johnson's (and Obama's) vision for a better American society, and religion does not necessarily have to be an obvious one. However, it also seems apparent that Johnson's vision in the Great Society had religious connotations.

In his biography of Johnson, [Randall Woods writes](#) that "a constellation of ideas" informed Johnson's "vision of America." But Woods notes that LBJ's religion was "in this mix a final and most important element." An example of Johnson's religious convictions could be seen in a conversation he had with a group of civil rights leaders in spring 1964. Johnson told them: "From the time of the ancient Hebrew prophets and the dispersal of the money changers, men of God have taught us that social problems are moral problems on a huge scale. They have demonstrated that a religion which did not struggle to remove oppression from the world of men would not be able to create a world of spirit. They have preached that the church should be the first to awake to individual suffering and the church should be the bravest in opposing all social wrongs. . . . It is your job as men of God, to reawaken the conscience of your beloved, the United States of America." In early 1965, Johnson himself had a great awakening.

Johnson delivered a State of the Union address on January 4, 1965, introducing the Great Society as a plan to Congress. He described the responsibility given to American political leaders. “We worked for two centuries to climb this peak of prosperity,” Johnson reasoned. “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.” Johnson launched the programs—from education and healthcare to anti-poverty legislation—that created the society we live in today.

Yet, a month later, Johnson asked those gathered at the annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast to pray with him, not specifically for any one thing (including the Great Society) but together as a people who needed the support prayer provided. Johnson [asked his audience](#) to pray for the courage to do what had become their duty to their age.

Yet Johnson himself, though a political visionary and commanding legislative leader, required a particular kind of inspiration to seize the historical moment and provide the most basic element for a good society, the ability to vote. On March 15, 1965, Johnson appeared before a joint session of Congress to deliver the greatest speech of his life. It was a week after the “Bloody Sunday” attacks against civil rights protesters in Selma, Alabama. The heroics of the marchers, who had endured yet more violence at the hands (and clubs and cattle prods) of racist officers, had awakened their president and their nation to the cause of dignity and democracy. “There is no Negro problem,” [Johnson declared](#). “There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.”

The movie *Selma* provides insight into the connections between faith and the extraordinary action of civil rights heroes who pushed LBJ to act faster than he had planned—though for a nuanced analysis of the movie’s depiction of religion see [Ulrich Rosenhagen](#). The combination of faith and activism, as Rosenhagen argues, provided the prophetic and political power to awaken a nation and its president. Johnson personalized and generalized what Americans had seen in news from Alabama, imploring his listeners to see that “their cause must be our cause too.” Despite the legacy of racism, Americans had a duty to act, and, employing the language of the movement, he declared “and we shall overcome.”

Johnson’s Great Society drew upon the general Christian and civil religious notions of social welfare of the America he inhabited, and he hoped prayer would focus the

disparate visions of his fellow Americans. But it took the prophetic power of religion and the courage of religious Americans to turn his Great Society into a great awakening as he faced, squarely and publicly, the revelatory distance between reality and a good society.

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