

## **PRO: What Was Really Great About The Great Society (Modified)**

By Joseph A. Califano Jr.

*The Washington Monthly* (online), October 1999

If there is a prize for the political scam of the 20th century, it should go to the conservatives for [claiming that the] Great Society programs of the 1960s were a misguided and failed social experiment that wasted taxpayers' money.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, from 1963 when Lyndon Johnson took office until 1970 as the impact of his Great Society programs were felt, the portion of Americans living below the poverty line dropped from 22.2 percent to 12.6 percent, the most dramatic decline over such a brief period in this century. . . . If the Great Society had not achieved that dramatic reduction in poverty, and the nation had not maintained it, 24 million more Americans would today be living below the poverty level. . . .

Since 1965 the federal government has provided more than a quarter of a trillion dollars in 86 million college loans to 29 million students, and more than \$14 billion in work-study awards to 6 million students. Today nearly 60 percent of full-time undergraduate students receive federal financial aid under Great Society programs. . . .

Head Start has served more than 16 million preschoolers in just about every city and county in the nation and today serves 800,000 children a year. . . . Lyndon Johnson knew that the rich had kindergartens and nursery schools; and he asked, why not the same benefits for the poor?

Is revolution too strong a word? Since 1965, 79 million Americans have signed up for Medicare. In 1966, 19 million were enrolled; in 1998, 39 million. Since 1966, Medicaid has served more than 200 million needy Americans. In 1967, it served 10 million poor citizens; in 1997, 39 million. . . . Closely related to these health programs were efforts to reduce malnutrition and hunger. Today, the Great Society's food stamp program helps feed more than 20 million men, women, and children in more than 8 million households. Since it was launched in 1967, the school breakfast program has provided a daily breakfast to nearly 100 million schoolchildren.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965. . . opened the way for black Americans to strengthen their voice at every level of government. In 1964 there were 79 black elected officials in the South and 300 in the entire nation. By 1998, there were some 9,000 elected black officials across the nation, including 6,000 in the South. . . .

*Source: Joseph Califano, Jr., became a special assistant to President Johnson in July 1965, and served as President Johnson's senior domestic policy aide for the remainder of Johnson's term.*

**CON: War on Poverty Revisited (Modified)**  
By Thomas Sowell  
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The War on Poverty represented the crowning triumph of the liberal vision of society -- and of government programs as the solution to social problems. . .

In the liberal vision, slums bred crime. But brand-new government housing projects almost immediately became new centers of crime and quickly degenerated (declined) into new slums. . .

Rates of teenage pregnancy and venereal disease had been going down for years before the new 1960s attitudes toward sex spread rapidly through the schools, helped by War on Poverty money. These downward trends suddenly reversed and skyrocketed.

The murder rate had also been going down, for decades, and in 1960 was just under half of what it had been in 1934. Then the new 1960s policies toward curing the "root causes" of crime and creating new "rights" for criminals began. Rates of violent crime, including murder, skyrocketed.

The black family, which had survived centuries of slavery and discrimination, began rapidly disintegrating in the liberal welfare state that subsidized (paid for) unwed pregnancy and changed welfare from an emergency rescue to a way of life. . .

The economic rise of blacks began decades earlier, before any of the legislation and policies that are credited with producing that rise. The continuation of the rise of blacks out of poverty did not -- repeat, did not -- accelerate during the 1960s.

The poverty rate among black families fell from 87 percent in 1940 to 47 percent in 1960, during an era of virtually no major civil rights legislation or anti-poverty programs. . . . In various skilled trades, the incomes of blacks relative to whites more than doubled between 1936 and 1959 -- that is, before the magic 1960s decade when supposedly all progress began. The rise of blacks in professional and other high-level occupations was greater in the five years preceding the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than in the five years afterwards.

*Source: Thomas Sowell is a conservative economist, author, and social commentator. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.*