

“Creative Conservation:” The Environmental Legacy of Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969

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The Great Society Responds to the Environmental Crisis

Overview Providing Context to Educator

It was the United States’ unbridled growth and economic development through industrialization that created, over time, the environmental crisis of the 1960s. From our country’s founding, Americans exploited the land and its resources for private economic benefit. Resource management and conservation was not a priority. As early as 1960, President Eisenhower, commissioned a public health study on the effects of car fumes on the air quality.

In 1962, scientist, Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*. This work brought attention to the use of synthetic pesticides in agriculture and to control insects. Although she did not begin the environmental movement, her book gave the movement an additional impotence and created public awareness. Both President Kennedy and then Vice-President Johnson read her book and followed her testimony closely before Congress in 1963.

By the time that LBJ became President of the United States, the effects of environmental degradation were more apparent on the landscape of the country. Severe smog epidemics plagued major cities such as Los Angeles and New York. Polluted rivers, such as the Cuyahoga River in Ohio near Cincinnati, caught fire. Urban sprawl and inner-city decay were widespread in metropolitan areas across the nation, and the disappearance of open spaces galvanized activists and politicians to demand the government action.

During Johnson’s presidency the environmental movement flourished. LBJ admired the conservation work of former presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt and was inspired by the conservation work brought about by the New Deal during his own early political career. As Johnson assumed office, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, appointed in 1961, continued to play an important role as cheerleader of environmental conservation, instilling faith that the federal government could lead the country in the conservation battle, thus shaping Johnson’s own environmental views. Along with Kennedy’s legacy and Udall’s encouragement, Johnson was also influenced by his wife Lady Bird, who helped raise environmental issues to national attention and was most responsible for shaping his aesthetic sense. As president, Johnson made it a personal goal to accomplish more than his predecessors in the preservation of the nation’s natural beauty, to bring about his vision for a Great Society.

Johnson signed the first Clean Air Act that regulated pollution in December 1963. More importantly, he brought the Federal government in as an active player in improving and maintaining the quality of the American environment. Johnson felt strongly about our environment and preserving it—both for health and for recreation. He said, “...Once our natural splendor is destroyed, it can never be recaptured.”

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The Environmental Crisis and the “Great Society”

On May 22, 1964, President Johnson delivered his famous “Great Society” speech at the University of Michigan’s commencement ceremony. While the address is best known for Johnson’s endorsement of civil rights and his declaration of War on Poverty, the president also outlined how his vision of a Great Society would commit itself to the cause of environmental protection.

He also warned those in the audience that, “once our natural splendor is destroyed, it can never be recaptured.” Johnson noted that the challenge of the next half century, “is whether we have the wisdom to use (the nation’s) wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of life of our American civilization.” The idea of “quality of life” played a key role in Johnson’s vision for a Great Society.

During his time in office, Johnson worked to refocus and reorganize existing federal programs to efficiently address the issues of the environmental crisis and bring natural beauty and preservation to the foreground. His administration believed that government assistance could give Americans the means to overcome blight and restore beauty, not only in the nation’s countryside and national parks, but also in city parks, along riverfronts, in older residential neighborhoods and along highways. His vision for a Great Society sought to apply scientific management of the nation’s natural resources, for the benefit of a growing society and economy, while at the same time preserving designated areas, a source of inspiration and restoration of the human spirit. Johnson’s administration also worked to educate the public and government officials of the shortcomings of the nation as stewards of the natural environment in the hope of changing American values and beliefs concerning natural resources used for the betterment of mankind. In his State of the Union address in 1965, Johnson noted that his vision for a Great Society asked, “not how much, but how good; not only how to create wealth but how to use it; not only how fast we are going, but where we are headed.”

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LBJ’s Environmental Legislation

From 1963 to 1968, Johnson organized nine task forces to directly address environmental problems and oversee his plans for a Great Society. He signed into law almost three hundred conservation and beautification measures supported by \$12 billion in funding. His legislation spanned issues from land policy to water pollution, and from wilderness areas to urban open spaces representing more environmental measures than had been passed in the previous 187 years of the nation’s history.

Johnson’s push for preservation and beautification stressed the value of managing the nation’s natural resources not just for economic security but for the betterment of the human spirit in his Great Society. His call for partnership in preservation with local participation appealed to the American sense of individualism and the personal pursuit of prosperity, emphasizing the human benefits in restoring beauty and preserving the natural environment.

President Johnson’s Legislative Legacy

President Johnson left a significant legacy by setting a precedent of government action related to environmental issues by including the environment as part of the Great Society platform. His formal legislation includes:

Clean Air Act, 1963	Air Quality Acts, 1966 & 1967
Wilderness Act, 1964	National Water Commission
Pesticide Control Bill, 1964	Central Arizona Project
Water Quality Act, 1965	Nation Historic Preservation Act, 1966
Water Resources Planning Act, 1965	Endangered Species Act, 1966
Water and Sanitation Systems in Rural Areas Bill, 1965	National Park Foundation , 1967
Solid Waste Disposal Bill, 1965	National Trails, System, 1967
Highway Beautification Act, 1965	Wild and Scenic Rivers System, 1967
Saline Water Conservation Act, 1965	Wetlands Preservation Bill, 1967

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Activity:

Check out these websites for a list of various timelines on Environmental History:

<http://archive.pov.org/ifatreefalls/environmental-timelines/>;

<https://sites.google.com/site/thewesterngreen/publications>;

What do the various timelines say about humankind’s relationship to their world? -

How active has the United States been in the environmental movement?

As demonstrated by LBJ’s legislative successes, groundbreaking environmental legislation was passed during his administration, however, he is rarely credited with this accomplishment.

Have you ever been in a situation where you weren’t given credit for something you did?

Do you think Johnson deserves more credit for his commitment to the environment? _____

How could that be accomplished? Discuss with a partner for four minutes.

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Activity: Analyze this cartoon created by Bill Roberts for the Cleveland Press in the 1960s using the National Archives analysis worksheet located at:

<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/cartoon-novice>

Source: Doyle, Jack. “Burn On, Big River...,” Cuyahoga River Fires, *PopHistoryDig.com*, May 12, 2014.



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Activity:

In post World War II America multiple environmental crises resulted in death, prompting the federal government to take action. One such crisis occurred in Denora, Pennsylvania in 1948.

Watch the 1:41 video linked below then answer the following questions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOGvQsWW1As>

Find Denora, Pennsylvania on a map?

Why is the community’s location unique for industrialization?

What were the main forms of industry in this area? _____

What form of pollution was most prevalent? _____

What is a temperature inversion?

What was the result of this pollution crisis?

What effect can the government have in regulating these types of problems? What’s needed to enforce government law? Discuss with a partner.

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Additional Resources and Activity:

The following You Tube video gives a 1-minute overview of Rachel Carson’s work related to environmental advocacy. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zpBfK_HtKU

For more information on Rachel Carson:

Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin: Cambridge, 1962.

Mid-Century Smog Events:

Multiple smog and water pollution events, some deadly, affected American cities throughout the 1950s and 1960s prompting local governments and the federal government to take action. To learn more about these events consult the following sources:

Popkin, Roy. “Two ‘Killer Smogs’ The Headlines Missed.” *EPA Journal* 12, no 10 (December 10, 1986): 27-29.
<https://nepis.epa.gov/Exe/ZyNET.exe/93000EN0.txt?ZyActionD=ZyDocument&Client=EP A&Index=1986%20Thru%201990&Docs=&Query=&Time=&EndTime=&SearchMethod=1&TocRestrict=n&Toc=&TocEntry=&QField=&QFieldYear=&QFieldMonth=&QFieldDay=&UseQField=&IntQFieldOp=0&ExtQFieldOp=0&XmlQuery=&File=D%3A%5CZYFILES%5CINDEX%20DATA%5C86THRU90%5CTXT%5C00000029%5C93000EN0.txt&User=ANONYMOUS&Password=anonymous&SortMethod=h%7C-&MaximumDocuments=1&FuzzyDegree=0&ImageQuality=r75g8/r75g8/x150y150g16/i425&Display=hpfr&DefSeekPage=x&SearchBack=ZyActionL&Back=ZyActionS&BackDesc=Results%20page&MaximumPages=1&ZyEntry=29>

BUKRO, C. “22 Died in Donora's 'Killer Smog.’” *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)* November 16, 1969.

Bigart, Homer. “Smog Emergency Called for City.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Nov 26, 1966

Doyle, Jake. “ ‘Burn on Big River...’ Cuyahoga River Fires.” *Pophistorydig.com*. May 12, 2014. Accessed December 2, 2019. <https://www.pophistorydig.com/topics/cuyahoga-river-fires/>

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113.16. Social Studies, Grade 5, Adopted 2018

Knowledge and Skills

(5) History. The student understands important issues, events, and individuals in the United States during the 20th and 21st centuries. The student is expected to:

(A) explain the significance of issues and events of the 20th century such as industrialization, urbanization, the Great Depression, the world wars, the civil rights movement, and military actions

(C) identify the accomplishments and contributions of individuals and groups such as Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, the Tuskegee Airmen, and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in the areas of civil rights, women's rights, military actions, and politics

(6) Geography. The student understands places and regions in the United States. The student is expected to:

(D) create a map of important physical features such as the Appalachian Mountains, Great Lakes, Mississippi River, Great Plains, and Rocky Mountains.

(7) Geography. The student understands the location and patterns of settlement and the geographic factors that influence where people live. The student is expected to:

(A) identify and describe the patterns of settlement such as rural, urban, and suburban;

(B) explain the geographic factors that influence patterns of settlement and the distribution of population in the United States; and

(8) Geography. The student understands how people adapt to and modify their environment. The student is expected to:

(A) describe how and why people have adapted to and modified their environment in the United States such as the use of human resources to meet basic needs; and

(B) analyze the positive and negative consequences of human modification of the environment in the United States

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113.16. Social Studies, Grade 5, Continued

(12) Economics. The student understands patterns of work and economic Activity in the United States. The student is expected to:

(A) compare how people in different regions of the United States earn a living, past and present;

B) identify and explain how geographic factors have influenced the location of economic Activity in the United States;

(17) Citizenship. The student understands the importance of individual participation in the democratic process at the local, state, and national levels. The student is expected to:

(A) explain why individuals have a duty to participate in civic affairs at the local, state, and national levels; and

(B) explain how to contact elected and appointed leaders in local, state, and national governments.

(18) Citizenship. The student understands the importance of effective leadership in a constitutional republic. The student is expected to:

(A) identify past and present leaders in the national government, including the president and various members of Congress, and their political parties; and

(B) identify leadership qualities of national leaders, past and present.

(21) Culture. The student understands the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups to the United States culture. The student is expected to

(B) summarize the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups to our national identity.

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113.18. Social Studies, Grade 6, Adopted 2018

Knowledge and skills.

(3) Geography. The student understands the factors that influence the locations and characteristics of locations of various contemporary societies on maps and/or globes. The student is expected to:

- (A) identify and explain the geographic factors responsible for patterns of population in places and regions;
- (B) explain ways in which human migration influences the character of places and regions;
- (C) identify and locate major physical and human geographic features such as landforms, water bodies, and urban centers of various places and regions; and

(4) Geography. The student understands how geographic factors influence the economic development and political relationships of societies. The student is expected to

- (A) explain the geographic factors responsible for the location of economic Activity in places and regions; and
- (B) identify geographic factors such as location, physical features, transportation corridors and barriers, and distribution of natural resources that influence a society's political relationships.

(5) Geography. The student understands the impact of interactions between people and the physical environment on the development and conditions of places and regions. The student is expected to:

- (A) describe ways people have been impacted by physical processes such as earthquakes and climate;
- (B) identify and analyze ways people have adapted to the physical environment in various places and regions; and
- (C) identify and analyze ways people have modified the physical environment such as mining, irrigation, and transportation infrastructure

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113.18. Social Studies, Grade 6, Continued

(11) Citizenship. The student understands that the nature of citizenship varies among societies. The student is expected to:

- (A) describe and compare roles and responsibilities of citizens in various contemporary societies, including the United States; and
- (B) explain how opportunities for citizens to participate in and influence the political process vary among various contemporary societies

(12) Citizenship. The student understands the relationship among individual rights, responsibilities, duties, and freedoms in societies with representative governments. The student is expected to:

- (A) identify and explain the duty of civic participation in societies with representative governments; and
- (B) explain relationships among rights, responsibilities, and duties in societies with representative governments.

(18) Science, technology, and society. The student understands the influences of science and technology on contemporary societies. The student is expected to:

- (A) identify examples of scientific discoveries, technological innovations, and scientists and inventors that have shaped the world;
- (B) explain how resources, economic factors, and political decisions affect the use of technology; and
- (C) make predictions about future social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental impacts that may result from future scientific discoveries and technological innovations.

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113.19. Social Studies, Grade 7, Adopted 2018

Knowledge and Skills

(15) Citizenship. The student understands the rights and responsibilities of Texas citizens in a democratic society. The student is expected to:

(B) explain civic responsibilities of Texas citizens and the importance of civic participation

(17) Citizenship. The student understands the importance of effective leadership in a democratic society. The student is expected to:

(A) identify the leadership qualities of elected and appointed leaders of Texas, past and present, including Texans who have been president of the United States; and

(B) identify the contributions of Texas leaders such as Lawrence Sullivan "Sul" Ross, John Nance Garner ("Cactus Jack"), James A. Baker III, Henry B. González, Kay Bailey Hutchison, Barbara Jordan, Raymond L. Telles, Sam Rayburn, and Raul A. Gonzalez Jr.

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113.41. United States 113.41 History Studies Since 1877, Adopted 2018.

Knowledge and Skills

(2) History. The student understands traditional historical points of reference in U.S. history from 1877 to the present. The student is expected to:

(A) identify the major eras in U.S. history from 1877 to the present and describe their defining characteristics

(9) History. The student understands the impact of the American civil rights movement. The student is expected to:

(C) describe the roles of political organizations that promoted African American, Chicano, American Indian, and women's civil rights;

(D) identify the roles of significant leaders who supported various rights movements, including Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Rosa Parks, and Betty Friedan;

(G) describe presidential actions and congressional votes to address minority rights in the United States, including desegregation of the armed forces, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965;

(I) evaluate changes in the United States that have resulted from the civil rights movement, including increased participation of minorities in the political process

(10) History. The student understands the impact of political, economic, and social factors in the U.S. from the 1970s through 1990. The student is expected to:

(E) describe significant societal issues of this time period such as the War on Drugs and the AIDS epidemic. (Environmental movements)

(11) History. The student understands the emerging political, economic, and social issues of the United States from the 1990s into the 21st century. The student is expected to:

(B) identify significant social and political issues such as health care, immigration, and education from different viewpoints across the political spectrum

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113.41. United States 113.41 History Studies Since 1877, Continued

(13) Geography. The student understands the causes and effects of migration and immigration on American society. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze the causes and effects of changing demographic patterns resulting from migration within the United States, including western expansion, rural to urban, the Great Migration, and the Rust Belt to the Sun Belt; and

(B) analyze the causes and effects of changing demographic patterns resulting from immigration to the United States.

(14) Geography. The student understands the relationship between population growth and the physical environment. The student is expected to:

(A) identify the effects of population growth and distribution on the physical environment; and

(B) identify the roles of governmental entities and private citizens in managing the environment such as the establishment of the National Park System, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Endangered Species Act.

(18) Government. The student understands changes over time in the role of government. The student is expected to:

(A) evaluate the impact of New Deal legislation on the historical roles of state and federal government;

(B) explain constitutional issues raised by federal government policy changes during times of significant events, including World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the 1960s, and September 11, 2000

(D) describe the role of contemporary government legislation in the private and public sectors such as the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

(19) Government. The student understands the changing relationships among the three branches of the federal government. The student is expected to:

(B) evaluate the impact of relationships among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, including Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to increase the number of U.S. Supreme Court justices and the presidential election of 2000.

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113.41. United States 113.41 History Studies Since 1877, Continued

(23) Citizenship. The student understands the importance of effective leadership in a constitutional republic. The student is expected to:

(A) evaluate the contributions of significant political and social leaders in the United States such as Andrew Carnegie, Thurgood Marshall, Billy Graham, Sandra Day O'Connor, and Hillary Clinton

(25) Culture. The student understands how people from various groups contribute to our national identity. The student is expected to:

(A) explain actions taken by people to expand economic opportunities and political rights for racial, ethnic, gender, and religious groups in American society;

(C) explain how the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, gender, and religious groups shape American culture; and

(26) Science, technology, and society. The student understands the impact of science, technology, and the free enterprise system on the economic development of the United States. The student is expected to:

(A) explain the effects of scientific discoveries and technological innovations such as electric power, telephone and satellite communications, petroleum-based products, steel production, and computers on the economic development of the United States;

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113.44. United States Government, Adopted 2018

Knowledge and Skills

(2) History. The student understands the roles played by individuals, political parties, interest groups, and the media in the U.S. political system, past and present. The student is expected to:

(A) describe the processes used by individuals, political parties, interest groups, or the media to affect public policy; and

(B) analyze the impact of political changes brought about by individuals, political parties, interest groups, or the media, past and present.

(6) Government. The student understands the American beliefs and principles reflected in the U.S. Constitution and why these are significant. The student is expected to:

(B) explain how the federal government serves the purposes set forth in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution;

(F) identify how the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution continue to shape American beliefs and principles in the United States today.

(7) Government. The student understands the structure and functions of the government created by the U.S. Constitution. The student is expected to:

(D) identify the purpose of selected independent executive agencies, including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and regulatory commissions, including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

(F) analyze selected issues raised by judicial activism and judicial restraint

(8) Government. The student understands the concept of federalism. The student is expected to:

(B) categorize government powers as national, state, or shared;

(C) analyze historical and contemporary conflicts over the respective roles of national and state governments; and

(D) explain how the U.S. Constitution limits the power of national and state governments

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113.44. United States Government, Continued

(12) Citizenship. The student understands the rights that are protected and secured by the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. The student is expected to:

(B) identify and define the unalienable rights;

(13) Citizenship. The student understands the difference between personal and civic responsibilities. The student is expected to:

(A) describe scenarios where good citizenship may require the subordination of personal desire for the sake of the public good

(14) Citizenship. The student understands the importance of voluntary individual participation in the U.S. constitutional republic. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze the effectiveness of various methods of participation in the political process at local, state, and national levels;

(B) analyze historical and contemporary examples of citizen movements to bring about political change or to maintain continuity; and

(C) describe the factors that influence an individual's political attitudes and actions

(15) Citizenship. The student understands the importance of the expression of different points of view in a constitutional republic. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze different points of view of political parties and interest groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the National Rifle Association (NRA), and the

(B) explain the responsibilities, duties, and obligations of citizenship such as being well informed about civic affairs, serving in the military, voting, serving on a jury, observing the laws, paying taxes, and serving the public good; and

(16) Culture. The student understands the relationship between government policies and the culture of the United States. The student is expected to:

(A) evaluate a U.S. government policy or court decision that has affected a particular racial, ethnic, or religious group such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the U.S. Supreme Court cases of *Hernandez v. Texas* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*; and

(B) explain changes in American culture brought about by government policies such as voting rights, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill of Rights), the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, affirmative action, and racial integration.

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113.44. United States Government, Continued

(17) Science, technology, and society. The student understands the role the government plays in developing policies and establishing conditions that influence scientific discoveries and technological innovations. The student is expected to:

(B) identify examples of government-assisted research that, when shared with the private sector, have resulted in improved consumer products such as computer and communication technologies.

(18) Science, technology, and society. The student understands the impact of advances in science and technology on government. The student is expected to: (A) describe the potential impact of recent scientific discoveries and technological innovations on government policy; and

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Cuyahoga River Cartoon:

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You Tube Video:

"Killer Smog in Donora, Pennsylvania, October 1948." You Tube video, 1:41, posted August 25, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOGvQsWW1As>