



The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society

Julian E. Zelizer

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society

Julian E. Zelizer

The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society Julian E. Zelizer

A majestic big-picture account of the Great Society and the forces that shaped it, from Lyndon Johnson and members of Congress to the civil rights movement and the media

Between November 1963, when he became president, and November 1966, when his party was routed in the midterm elections, Lyndon Johnson spearheaded the most transformative agenda in American political history since the New Deal, one whose ambition and achievement have had no parallel since. In just three years, Johnson drove the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts; the War on Poverty program; Medicare and Medicaid; the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities; Public Broadcasting; immigration liberalization; a raft of consumer and environmental protection acts; and major federal investments in public transportation. Collectively, this group of achievements was labeled by Johnson and his team the “Great Society.”

In *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, Julian E. Zelizer takes the full measure of the entire story in all its epic sweep. Before Johnson, Kennedy tried and failed to achieve many of these advances. Our practiced understanding is that this was an unprecedented “liberal hour” in America, a moment, after Kennedy’s death, when the seas parted and Johnson could simply stroll through to victory. As Zelizer shows, this view is off-base: In many respects America was even more conservative than it seems now, and Johnson’s legislative program faced bitter resistance. *The Fierce Urgency of Now* animates the full spectrum of forces at play during these turbulent years, including religious groups, the media, conservative and liberal political action groups, unions, and civil rights activists.

Above all, the great character in the book whose role rivals Johnson’s is Congress—indeed, Zelizer argues that our understanding of the Great Society program is too Johnson-centric. He discusses why Congress was so receptive to passing these ideas in a remarkably short span of time and how the election of 1964 and burgeoning civil rights movement transformed conditions on Capitol Hill. Zelizer brings a deep, intimate knowledge of the institution to bear on his story: The book is a master class in American political grand strategy.

Finally, Zelizer reckons with the legacy of the Great Society. Though our politics have changed, the heart of the Great Society legislation remains intact fifty years later. In fact, he argues, the Great Society shifted the American political center of gravity—and our social landscape—decisively to the left in many crucial respects. In a very real sense, we are living today in the country that Johnson and his Congress made.

The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society Details

Date : Published January 8th 2015 by Penguin Press

ISBN : 9781594204340

Author : Julian E. Zelizer

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : History, Politics, North American Hi..., American History, Nonfiction, Presidents, Us Presidents

 [Download The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, an ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society Julian E. Zelizer

From Reader Review The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society for online ebook

Alesha says

What a great book for anyone interested in history, presidents, Lyndon B Johnson, anything surrounding the presidency of Mr Johnson. I found this book to be entertaining, with information that I did not know. I do not like spoilers, so pick up this book and see what you think.

Mike Hankins says

This book is a detailed explanation of the major legislation of the civil rights movement and LBJ's "Great Society." The emphasis being the legislation itself -- civil rights leaders like MLK and Stokely Carmichael are mentioned in passing and only in the context of the pressure they put on legislators. The action of this book is centered entirely around the White House and Capitol Hill. This is the story of how LBJ put intense pressure on legislators, other committee chairmen pushed their own agendas, the American people put pressure on their congresspersons, and how the balance of congress changed over the years.

Ultimately, Zelizer's argument is not that a single strong personality (like LBJ) forced these things through, but that the political mood of the country, represented by the shifting balances in congress, create a set of possibilities, and that set is constantly shifting. LBJ and others had to work within the realm of possibilities that were available to them at given times -- sometimes that meant they could push through the voting rights act and the civil rights act, but other times, they were forced to pull back.

I really enjoyed the close look at the compromises that had to be made, the way congresspeople interacted with their constituents, as well as the deft maneuvering around congressional rules and traditions that allowed for the civil rights act, voting rights act, and medicare/medicaid (and other aid to the poor) to be passed. It was also incredibly interesting to see that the biggest resistance in congress (and the American people) came from housing integration--a measure that generated fierce resistance even in the north.

Zelizer also emphasizes that even though these battles were incredibly difficult for liberals to win, they quickly became accepted as key parts of the status quo that are taken for granted, even by conservatives who might have opposed them originally. What is almost eerie about the book is how much it echoes present-day arguments. The battles over health care, aid to the poor, civil rights, etc. seem the same today as they did in 1964, and they even use much of the same rhetoric, down to the same phrases.

Solid book that I'll probably be going back to for reference often, but go in expecting some detailed (some readers might say tedious) discussions of congressional voting patterns and procedural matters. Don't expect a rousing tale of sit-ins and marches, this is a story of how the sausage gets made in D.C., but in this case, it's some of the best sausage the town ever produced.

Dan says

Useful book on the Great Society, with a particular emphasis on civil rights legislation. Zelizer is interested

in the mechanics of legislation: he focuses intensely on Congressional committees--like the Rules Committee, Ways and Means, etc.--and how they can hinder or assist presidential priorities. This sort of focus leads one *away* from an emphasis on the particular personality of Lyndon Johnson and *towards* a focus on the institutional prerogatives and biases of the Congress. This is a welcome and important change.

The *other* thing that's very good about this book is that it assigns "blame" for the Great Society to Barry Goldwater. Goldwater's negative coattails gave LBJ the majority he needed to pass the legislation he wanted, but in the face of a more competitive opponent, he never would have earned those majorities. This follows from the focus on the Congress itself.

Only four stars b/c Zelizer's tone is vaguely hagiographical about Medicare and Medicaid, even though both programs were designed with unrealistic assumptions about cost.

Ben Vance says

A view easy overview of how the Great Society was passed through Congress with an emphasis on LBJ's work with the house and senate. It's a fun easy read that does a good job a introducing the stage for beginners. I found the set up for the 88th Congress to be helpful in understanding 60's America. I will say that it isn't particularly deep and the author isn't interested in question the movies of Johnson or asking difficult questions of his complacency in opposition to the civil rights movement. Otherwise a fun read.

Irene says

I received this book from the Goodreads Giveaway.

Excellent book..... proficiently researched, extremely detailed and well composed. Having read other books such as The Roosevelts An American Saga by Peter Collier, Supreme Power by Jeff Shesol, and The Memoirs of Richard Nixon helped provide a foundation for some of the lesser details within this book.

Having an understanding of FDR's New Deal and knowing President Johnson was a disciple of FDR's philosophies who jumped on Roosevelt's bandwagon, this book provides further insight to put this era into perspective.

As a former participant in the political arena, some of the tactics outlined here have greater merit to me.

Some academia and minorities continue to focus credit to President Kennedy for civil rights achievements actually orchestrated by President Johnson.

Definitely recommend Julian Zelizer's book, especially for a political science major.

Tommy Kiedis says

A fascinating and insightful analysis of the people and events that facilitated the amazing legislative efforts

of LBJ and the 89th Congress. Zelizer appreciates Johnson and gives him his due, but demonstrates that the "great man" was aided by fortuitous circumstances in his quest to build the Great Society.

Jeremy says

This book tells the story of the passage of the Great Society legislation and it's cast of characters. There was a narrow window of time for this to get done and LBJ and others navigated the small window to pass some of the most impact full legislation in US history. Johnson had several stars line up at once and he (and others) took advantage of the moment in history. Read this book to understand how the Great Society and Civil Rights laws came to be.

Robb Bridson says

Disclosure: I received this book from the publisher at no cost, as part of Goodreads' first reads program.

This is one of those great works of historical nonfiction that will both help you better understand how our political system works (or doesn't) and develop fresh new views on history. Far from being just another presidential biopic, this comprehensive tale of LBJ's era answers the questions of how such a great progressive moment was possible and how it endured even as the typical conservatism and legislative dysfunction came back.

Yes, LBJ was a great political strategist and a passionate fighter for liberal goals, but that isn't the whole story. He was certainly a requirement for the success of his presidency but not in and of himself sufficient. Various other strategists in congress, civil rights leaders, and the power of a liberal moment in the population all made the Great Society possible... and even made it hard to fight against.

There is a lot of amazing description of political battles and shifting alliances. Overall the story emphasizes to me just how screwed up our system is... but at the same time it shows how when the right moment comes, good changes are possible... and reactionary forces don't have such an easy time rolling them back.

Mrs. Danvers says

Just what I was looking for - a historical account of the forces that combined to enact the Great Society legislation, written recently enough to also include the reverberations through succeeding presidencies.

Jim says

This book was, from the perspective of this reader, a miniature biography of Lyndon Johnson.

Mehrsa says

Honestly, this was more of a broad history of the Johnson era as opposed to a specific account of the great society (which is what I was hoping to read). As a history, there isn't really anything new here. If you've read Caro's Johnson series (which you should go and do right now if you have not) or Civil Rights history, this book is pretty repetitive.

Clayton Cummings says

Excellent book. Excellently written. Even if you are familiar with the fight for Civil Rights and Voting Rights, Zelizer still manages to keep you on the edge of your seat.

Paul Wilson says

Interesting, though factually spurious, book on the Great Society's journey from Kennedy's failed domestic agenda to LBJ's Great Society successes of 1964-1965. The author reinforces the frustrating notion that Kennedy was a moderate/closet conservative, when in reality he had one of the most liberal voting records of any senator during his tenure. The failure to initiate Medicare and other poverty programs was due more to the more conservative congress in his tenure, which became much more liberal after the 1964 landslide.

The book is, however, a great insight into the 1960s congress, which many books on this era tend to overlook. Zelizer clarifies that the LBJ "treatment" is overrated in terms of his legislative success, whereas the overall more liberal makeup of congress facilitated Great Society successes. The height of New Deal liberalism was ultimately undone by the "white backlash" against black riots more than the Vietnam War. The New Deal coalition was inevitably going to fall (blacks and white southerners were never going to stay in the same political party), but the growing pains that resulted from civil rights was the final death knell for that coalition and American liberalism in general.

Great read for political history nerds.

Paul says

Somebody someday will write a book comparing the first two years of Barack Obama's first term with the same period of Lyndon Johnson's first term. In reading "The Fierce Urgency of Now" — Julian Zelizer's breezy if not perfunctory overview of the passage of the Great Society legislation of 1964-66 — the comparison practically leaps out unbidden. A Democratic president, taking office in the middle of a national crisis and given enormous liberal majorities in both houses of Congress, seeks to stimulate the economy and remakes the nation's social welfare programs before losing momentum and taking fire from both the right and the left.

Obama was not as proficient at getting his agenda through Congress as Johnson was — but Johnson had bigger majorities to work with and a less partisan atmosphere. Zelizer's argument is that Johnson (and, though left unspoken, the implication extends to all modern presidents) had less agency in getting his

priorities through Congress than he's often credited with. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 were ideas whose time came thanks in large part to the provocations of marchers in the Deep South and the virulent racists who rose to take the bait; the establishment of Medicare and Medicaid would have been impossible if not for the landslide election of 1964 that left Republicans scrambling to avoid looking anything like Barry Goldwater. Johnson did, however, work his negotiation magic to pass a key tax cut and education funding bill before that election.

Zelizer also takes care to reflect on what happened after the Great Society was enacted: the race riots, the campus antiwar protests, the sudden rise of law and order as a primary concern among voters. The result was a conservative resurgence in the 1966 midterm elections, followed by the turbulent election of 1968, fought on left-leaning grounds seemingly unthinkable today. Despite Johnson's tremendous unpopularity by the time he left office, his successor, Richard Nixon, actually expanded the Great Society, and its existence is rarely threatened, even in today's Tea Party-infused environment. Johnson's domestic legacy has required 50 years to get out of the shadow of Vietnam; one wonders if in 50 years, historians will be toasting Obama's own accomplishments in similar ways.

Bryan Craig says

When looking at civil rights and Great Society legislation, historian Julian Zelizer turns away from the usual tale about LBJ's legislative prowess to examine these legislative victories in a wider and important context, specifically looking at Congress.

LBJ ushered in a landslide victory, so with this and the conditions from the grass-roots, it was a good time to get big legislation passed. However, the conservative coalition slammed the door on LBJ. The president had a two-year window, and by 1966, with Vietnam, white backlash, and rioting, liberals were on the defensive and no major legislation was passed. The book revises the standard accounts in a good way. This is a fascinating account and highly recommended.
