

## Review: 'The Fierce Urgency of Now' by Julian E. Zelizer



President Lyndon B. Johnson shakes the hand of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. (Hulton Archive, Getty)

By **Scott Porch**

JANUARY 8, 2015, 8:46 AM

**I**n the mid-1960s, Congress passed and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a series of laws that came to be known as the Great Society, which set in motion the most transformative period of social change of the last half-century and delivered on many promises left unfulfilled by the Bill of Rights, Reconstruction and the New Deal. The breadth of the Great Society is pretty astonishing when you consider even just the highlights:

→The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it unlawful to discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin in hotels, restaurants, public accommodations, public schools and employment.

→The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which provided assistance to the poorest regions of the country.

→The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which dramatically strengthened voting protections for African-Americans.

→The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which together were the largest injection of federal funds into the American education system at that time and helped establish the Head Start program.

→The Social Security Act Amendments of 1965, which established medical insurance for people age 65 and older (Medicare) and for the poor (Medicaid).

→And the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited discrimination in the sale and rental of housing.

How it all happened is the subject of "The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society," Julian E. Zelizer's authoritative new history of Congress' massive reorientation of the country's priorities in the mid-1960s toward protecting individual rights of African-Americans and strengthening the social safety net for the poor and the elderly. Zelizer sets out to correct what he considers to be two myths about the 1960s that have led to a general misunderstanding of how the Great Society was passed: that it was the culmination of a long trend toward liberalism and that Johnson willed it into existence.

Zelizer is convincing on the first myth. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the product of Johnson carrying on a slain president's push for civil rights reform and popular sentiment that African-Americans have the same right to sit at a lunch counter or stay at a hotel as anyone else. Most of the remaining Great Society legislation was made possible by giant Democratic majorities in the House (295-140) and Senate (68-32) on the coattails of Johnson's 1964 landslide victory over Barry Goldwater. (Zelizer calls this chapter of the book "How Barry Goldwater Built the Great Society.") Before the 1964 election, the conservative factions of both parties had dominated Congress and stymied previous efforts — including by John F. Kennedy — at reforms like civil rights protections and health care for the elderly.

The second myth is a bit more complicated. Americans love a good story, and Johnson had one. His years in public life were a mythic, Shakespearean arc of triumph and tragedy — an ostracized vice president, pressed into the presidency by an assassin's bullet, who presided over landmark social legislation that remade the social compact, who won the biggest landslide election to that point in history, who was so politically wounded by popular disfavor over Vietnam that he did not run for re-election and who died shortly after leaving office. That's powerful stuff, and it feeds a political narrative that great presidents work their will on Congress.

The fact that it's partly true — Johnson doesn't deserve full credit for passage of the Great Society legislation, but every bit of it bears his imprint — is not a recipe for future presidents to follow. The hope that the next president will cure what ails us has become the empty vessel of American politics. We have elected three consecutive presidents — Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama — with the expectation that each would be a force for bipartisanship. Then, when it doesn't work out that way, supporters say the system is broken and detractors say the president is disingenuous for running on bipartisanship and governing otherwise.

We're an optimistic bunch. We think that what comes next will be better than what we have now and that anything is possible if you just try hard enough. In a May 2012 interview, The Wall Street Journal asked Johnson biographer Robert Caro what it would take to repair the broken Senate. Caro said he didn't know but added, "Someday a political genius will come along and make the Senate work."

The expectation that the next president will magically fix income inequality, pass immigration reform, streamline the tax code, curb carbon emissions, etc., if he or she just tries as hard as Johnson did is grossly unrealistic. The real lesson of the Great Society for the next president is this: If you want to do big things, you will need big majorities in Congress. The most sweeping period of legislative change since the Great Society was Obama's first two years in office when — with large Democratic majorities in the House and Senate — he won a \$787 billion package of economic stimulus and tax cuts, the General Motors and Chrysler bailouts, and health-care and financial regulatory reforms. Obama's legislative presidency effectively ended after the 2010 midterm elections when the Republicans took over the House.

The same thing happened to Johnson; after the 1966 midterm elections in which the Republicans cut significantly into Johnson's House and Senate majorities, the only significant social legislation in the remainder of his presidency was the Civil Rights Act of 1968, also known as the Fair Housing Act, which passed largely in response to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

Although "The Fierce Urgency of Now" expertly illustrates both the breadth and the limitations of presidential power, Zelizer resists telling the story of the Great Society as Johnson's biography. History doesn't always come in the form of a tight narrative with a compelling hero, and it doesn't here.

Johnson, as Zelizer notes, "had managed the liberal ascendancy and made the Eighty-ninth Congress historically productive, but the midterm elections, the budget debates, and the Vietnam War had eroded all his advantages. In the Ninetieth Congress, he could control very little, and he could dominate nothing."

Although Congress returned to its center-right status quo in 1966 and has largely stayed there except for short periods in the 1990s and 2000s, the Great Society — and especially health-care coverage — is now a part of the social contract. "Grassroots activists and voters had given Johnson a tremendous opportunity in 1964 and 1965 to remake domestic policy," Zelizer writes. "He took advantage of that moment, fully aware it would not last very long, and Americans in the twenty-first century are still living with the domestic policies born out of that transformative moment."

*Attorney Scott Porch is writing a book about social upheaval in the 1960s and '70s.*

### "The Fierce Urgency of Now"

By Julian E. Zelizer, Penguin, 370 pages, \$29.95

Copyright © 2015, Chicago Tribune

---

### About this story

This piece first ran in Printers Row Journal, the Chicago Tribune's premium Sunday book section. [Learn more about subscribing to Printers Row Journal, which is available for home or digital delivery.](#)

---

## FROM AROUND THE WEB

Sponsored Links by Taboola

**Please Don't Retire At 62. Here's Why.**  
The Motley Fool

**1 Dirty Little Secret To Eliminate 15 Years Of Mortgage Payments**  
LowerMyBills

**Need A New Credit Card? Here Is The List of 2015's Best Credit Cards**