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Prisoners of Hope: Lyndon B. Johnson, the Great Society, and the Limits of Liberalism

By Randall B. Woods



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President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society was breathtaking in its scope and dramatic in its impact. Over the course of his time in office, Johnson passed over one thousand pieces of legislation designed to address an extraordinary array of social issues. Poverty and racial injustice were foremost among them, but the Great Society included legislation on issues ranging from health care to immigration to education and environmental protection. But while the Great Society was undeniably ambitious, it was by no means perfect. In *Prisoners of Hope*, prize-winning historian Randall B. Woods presents the first comprehensive history of the Great Society, exploring both the breathtaking possibilities of visionary politics, as well as its limits.

Soon after becoming president, Johnson achieved major legislative victories with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. But he wasn't prepared for the substantial backlash that ensued. Community Action Programs were painted as dangerously subversive, at worst a forum for minority criminals and at best a conduit through which the federal government and the inner city poor could bypass the existing power structure. Affirmative action was rife with controversy, and the War on Poverty was denounced by conservatives as the cause of civil disorder and disregard for the law. As opposition, first from white conservatives, but then also some liberals and African Americans, mounted, Johnson was forced to make a number of devastating concessions in order to secure the future of the Great Society. Even as many Americans benefited, millions were left disappointed, from suburban whites to the new anti-war left to African Americans. The Johnson administration's efforts to draw on aspects of the Great Society to build a viable society in South Vietnam ultimately failed, and as the war in Vietnam descended into quagmire, the president's credibility plummeted even further.

A cautionary tale about the unintended consequences of even well-intentioned policy, *Prisoners of Hope* offers a nuanced portrait of America's most ambitious—and controversial—domestic policy agenda since the New Deal.



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