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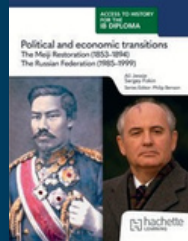
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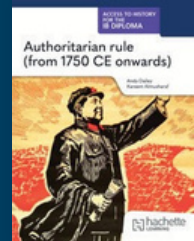
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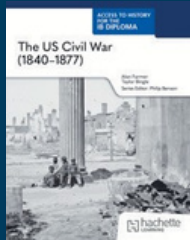
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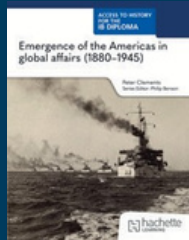
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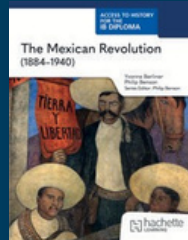
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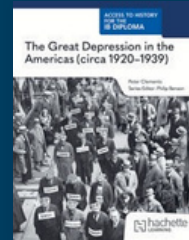
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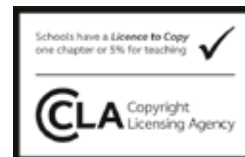


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Challenges and successes in domestic politics of the USA (1961–77)

This chapter looks at the challenges facing Presidents John F Kennedy, Lyndon B Johnson, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, and assesses the extent of their success and their roles. You need to consider the following questions throughout the chapter:

- ★ What social policies were pursued from 1961 to 1977 and how successful were they?
- ★ What was the significance of the Watergate scandal and the pardon of Nixon?
- ★ What were the changes and internal conflicts within the two main parties from 1961 to 1977 and how did they impact elections?
- ★ What were the roles of Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford?

KEY DATES

1960 Democrat John F Kennedy defeats Republican Vice President Richard Nixon in the presidential election	Medicare and Medicaid; Education Act Voting Rights Act
1961 Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women established	1968 Nixon defeats Vice President Hubert Humphrey in presidential election
1963 Kennedy proposes Civil Rights legislation Kennedy assassinated, Vice President Lyndon Johnson becomes president	1972 Attempted cover-up of Watergate break-in discovered
1964 Johnson declares war on poverty Johnson introduces 'Great Society' ambitions Civil Rights Act	1973 Senate investigates Watergate affair
1965 First US ground troops in Vietnam	1974 Nixon resigns, Vice President Gerald Ford becomes president President Ford pardons Nixon
	1976 Democrat Jimmy Carter defeats Ford in presidential election

1 Social policies, including New Frontier and Great Society

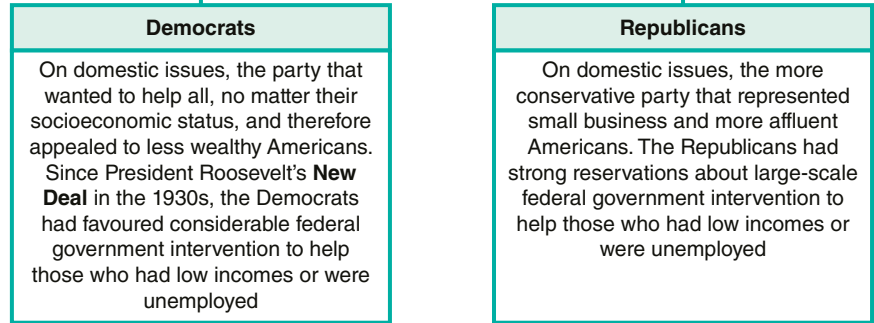
- **Key question:** How successfully did presidents respond to the social challenges that they faced during 1961–77?



KEY TERM

New Deal President Franklin D Roosevelt's programme to bring the USA out of the Great Depression in the 1930s. New Deal measures such as the introduction of Social Security laid the foundations of a welfare state that looked after citizens from the cradle to the grave.

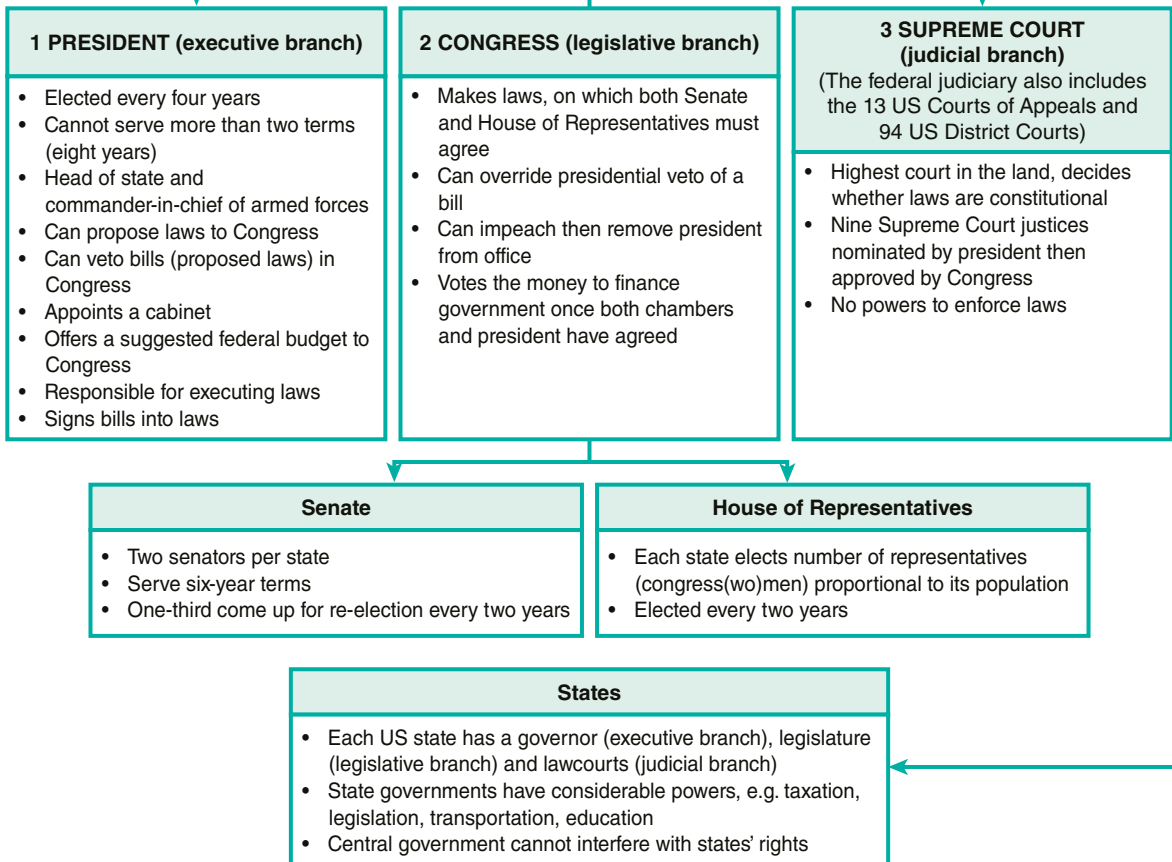
US political parties 1961



The US political parties in 1961

US Constitution

- Written in 1787 to set out rules by which USA would be governed. Since then, 27 amendments have been added, e.g. the 13th Amendment abolished slavery
- Established a federal government with three branches



The US political system in 1961

Kennedy and the ‘New Frontier’, 1961–3

In his speech accepting the Democratic nomination for the presidency in July 1960, Kennedy introduced his ‘New Frontier’ idea (see Source A).

How successfully did Kennedy handle the social challenges he faced?

KEY FIGURE

John F Kennedy (1917–63) Born into a wealthy, ambitious Irish American family, Kennedy was decorated for wartime heroism. After an undistinguished career in Congress, he won the 1960 presidential election and took office as the 35th president of the USA on 20 January 1961. He and his wife, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, brought unprecedented glamour to the White House. The president’s youth and charisma made his assassination on 22 November 1963 particularly shocking. Popular fascination with Kennedy has affected opinions of his presidential performance. He prioritized foreign policy and most historians consider his domestic achievements somewhat unimpressive.

SOURCE A

Extract from John F Kennedy’s speech accepting the Democratic nomination for the presidency and introducing his ‘New Frontier’, Los Angeles, 15 July 1960, accessed at www.jfklibrary.org

I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier ... we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960’s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats. ... the New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises—it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them. ... Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus ... the choice our nation must make [is] ... between the public interest and private comfort...

Social challenges

In the same speech, Kennedy also detailed the social challenges facing the USA.

SOURCE B

Another extract from John F Kennedy’s speech explaining the ‘New Frontier’, Los Angeles, 15 July 1960, accessed at www.jfklibrary.org

The old people without medical care—the families without a decent home—the parents of children without adequate food or schools...

An urban population explosion has overcrowded our schools, cluttered up our suburbs, and increased the squalor of our slums...

A peaceful revolution for human rights—demanding an end to racial discrimination in all parts of our community life—has strained at the leashes imposed by timid executive leadership...

A medical revolution has extended the life of our elder citizens without providing the dignity and security those later years deserve...

ATL

Self-management skills

Research the ideas for notetaking techniques on the open.ac.uk website. As you read through this Social policies section in the book, take notes and experiment with the different techniques recommended on that website with the aim of finding which one is best for you.

Presidential candidate John F Kennedy suggested in this speech that the USA needed great changes. To what extent does the context of his speech explain his perspective?



Judging from Source B, what social challenges was Kennedy expecting to face as president? To what extent does the context of his speech explain his perspective?



Self-management skills

Create a table based on the following template and fill it in as you read through this section of the book. You can add multiple social challenges for each president. Then try ranking the presidents on their social policies and explain your reasoning. Compare your ideas with those of a study partner throughout.

President	Social challenges	Attempts at solving them	Success or failure?
Kennedy (1961–3)	Housing	Half-hearted measure on future federal housing	Failure
Johnson (1963–9)			
Nixon (1969–74)			
Ford (1974–7)			
Carter (1977–81)			
Reagan (1981–9)			
George HW Bush (1989–93)			
Clinton (1993–2001)			
George W Bush (2001–9)			
Obama (2009–17)			
Trump (2017–21)			

‘Poverty and surplus’

To help tackle the ‘poverty and surplus’ he mentioned in his New Frontier speech, Kennedy’s Social Security Amendments Act of 1961 expanded benefits for older people, people with disabilities and unemployed people. When Congress passed his Minimum Wage Bill it raised the minimum wage by \$0.25 to \$1.25 per hour and covered an additional 3.6 million workers, although 500,000 of those from the lowest-income backgrounds remained without coverage. The Food and Agriculture Act (1962) subsidized farmers, but rural poverty persisted.

Kennedy used his executive powers to focus federal purchasing power and construction projects in areas of high unemployment and to double food distributions to people with low incomes and unemployed people. His pilot **food stamp programme** fed 240,000 people at a cost of \$22 million each year. He also supported and extended President **Dwight D Eisenhower**’s school lunch and milk programmes so that each year from 1961, 700,000 more children could have a hot lunch and 85,000 more schools, childcare centres and camps received fresh milk.

KEY TERMS

Food stamp programme
First used during the Great Depression, revived by President Kennedy and made permanent by President Johnson’s Food Stamp Act 1964. Impoverished individuals presented stamps provided by the government and received food in return.

KEY FIGURE

Dwight D Eisenhower (1890–1969) General Eisenhower gained immense popularity and eventual election to the presidency (1953–61) due to his leadership as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force during the Second World War. He was preoccupied with the Cold War and disliked federal government activism in domestic affairs. Most historians have considered that he did not go far enough in combating racial inequality in the USA.

Slums, schools and sickness

Kennedy's Housing Act of 1961 granted \$5 billion for the extension of existing programmes such as urban renewal and public housing and authorized low-interest loans for struggling middle-income families. However, many major Kennedy legislative initiatives were denied by an uncooperative coalition of Republicans and **conservative Southern Democrats**. During 1961–2, he asked Congress to establish a Department of Urban Affairs and Housing to co-ordinate programmes to halt urban decline, grant federal financial aid for elementary and secondary education, and fund senior citizen healthcare, but his requests were repeatedly rejected.

'Racial discrimination'

As he stated in his New Frontier speech, Kennedy demanded an end to 'racial discrimination'. When he became president, many Black people in northern and midwestern cities faced **de facto segregation** in historically under-resourced communities. Racism and poverty excluded them from better housing and education and impacted health, while Black **infant mortality** was twice that of white infant mortality. Black people in the South suffered **de jure segregation** in education, transportation, lunch counters and diners. The Supreme Court had ruled segregated schools unconstitutional (*Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954) but set no date for compliance, which left scope for resistance by determinedly segregationist school boards, local authorities and states in the South.

Housing, transport and education

Kennedy frequently struggled to obtain congressional co-operation where race was concerned. His 1962 bill to assist Black voting failed because of a southern **filibuster**. In his election campaign, Kennedy had promised to end discrimination in housing, but as president he feared congressional conservatives would reject other important legislation if he promoted it. He managed a half-hearted measure that applied only to future federal housing.

Supreme Court rulings against segregation on interstate transport (1946) and interstate bus facilities (1960) were tested by a small integrated group that travelled the South in 1961. Kennedy considered these 'Freedom Riders' provocative and unpatriotic for exposing US domestic problems during the **Cold War**, but their persistence in the face of racist mobs forced his **administration** to try to protect them and ensure the Supreme Court rulings were enforced.

The Supreme Court had also ruled against segregated universities (1950), but Deep South states such as Mississippi and Alabama maintained them. The Kennedy administration sent 500 ill-equipped marshals to help James Meredith, a young Black man, enrol as a student at the University of Mississippi. After one-third of the marshals were injured in



KEY TERMS

Conservative Southern Democrats A powerful faction of the Democratic Party in the racially segregated south, primarily focused on maintaining segregation, white supremacy and opposing civil rights legislation.

De facto segregation Racial or social separation not caused by laws but rather by social, economic or other influences.

Infant mortality The number of babies who die before their first birthday per 1,000 live births in a given year. It is a key indicator of a population's overall health.

De jure segregation Segregation in law, as applied to the USA's southern states from the late 19th century to the 1960s.

Filibuster A political procedure used in congressional debates to stop bills being voted upon.

Cold War The struggle between the capitalist USA and Communist Soviet Union, c.1946–90. The superpowers never fought each other directly but amassed weaponry and allies and faced off in proxy wars and propaganda battles.

Administration The government body (officials, advisers and agencies) as led by a president.



KEY TERM

National Guardsmen

Members of the US National Guard, state-based armed forces reserves that can be called up by the president (federalized).

Not all white southerners were racist but many remained silent about the racism of others. Debate the following proposition in a group: 'When there is injustice in society, inaction is equivalent to opposition to change.' (Ethics, Perspectives, Scope)

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an ensuing 14-hour battle with a 2000-strong racist mob, Kennedy sent a total of 31,000 army troops, US marshals and **National Guardsmen** to ensure Meredith's admittance. It was 1963 before the administration persuaded the last segregated southern university, the University of Alabama, to desegregate.

Birmingham and Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill

Kennedy was reluctant to introduce a Civil Rights Bill. He feared Southern Democrat opposition in Congress and polls suggested it would cost him and other Democrats votes. However, televised pictures of the brutal treatment of civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in June 1963, so sickened him and damaged the reputation of the nation that he introduced a Civil Rights Bill. In an address to the nation he asked Congress to act, because:

'The Negro baby born in America today... has about one-half as much chance of completing high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day – one-third as much chance of completing college – one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man – twice as much chance of being unemployed... a life expectancy which is seven years less – and the prospects of earning only half as much.'

The proposed bill attempted to end segregated public places and to aid Black voters and workers. After the announcement, a poll showed that national approval of the administration fell from 60% to 41%, and that 70% of white southerners and 50% of Americans thought the president was moving too fast on integration. The bill remained stuck in Congress at Kennedy's death.

Women and discrimination

President Kennedy did not consider women's equality an important issue, but he laid the groundwork for feminism and a new women's movement 'almost inadvertently' (Nancy Woloch, 2024). Influential women in the Democrat-supporting labour unions and the Democratic Party persuaded him to establish a Commission on the Status of Women. It facilitated a new communications network for women's issues and led to the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which although not immediately impactful (see page 00) was the first federal law against sex discrimination.

ACTIVITY

Continuity and change

Research online the full texts of President Kennedy's speeches on civil rights of 28 February 1963 and 11 June 1963. What similarities and differences can you find? Can you think of any reasons to explain the differences?

ACTIVITY

Continuity and change

Working in a group, research President Kennedy's relationship with the women's movement and discuss the extent to which you consider him helpful in meeting the challenge of women's political, social and economic inequality.

Kennedy's social policies: conclusions

No major new domestic legislation was passed during Kennedy's presidency. Much of what Congress passed was not New Frontier legislation but extensions of existing programmes. However, Congress was uncooperative and Kennedy had at least put 'poverty and surplus' and racial and gender discrimination on the national legislative agenda.

ACTIVITY

Continuity and change

Write an essay plan for this question:

'To what extent do you agree with the argument that Kennedy's social programmes were successful in meeting the challenges of which he spoke in July 1960?'

Discuss your ideas with a study group.

Johnson and the Great Society



← How successfully did Johnson handle the social challenges he faced?

← Why would Johnson want the so-recently widowed Jacqueline Kennedy alongside him as he took the presidential oath of office?

After President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November 1963, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in on the presidential plane, Air Force One. Johnson's wife is to his left and to his right is Jacqueline Kennedy, who agreed to Johnson's request that she be there at his swearing in. She was on the plane because President Kennedy's body was aboard.

KEY FIGURE

Lyndon B Johnson (1908–73) Johnson spent his life employed in public service, as a teacher, congressional aide, New Deal official, congressman (1937–49), senator (1949–61), vice president (1961–3) and president (1963–9). As president he promoted the 'Great Society' and obtained an unprecedented quantity of social reform legislation. His civil rights, education and healthcare legislation achievements were particularly notable. From 1965 he focused increasingly on the Vietnam War; the escalation of which made him unpopular.

In a May 1964 speech, President **Johnson** promised a Great Society characterized by racial equality, educational reform, better housing, and the defeat of poverty and urban decay. The feeling that the nation should rally around the assassinated president's chosen successor and Johnson's long-standing mastery of the legislative process led Congress to pass an exceptional quantity of reformist, impactful legislation during his administration.

Civil Rights legislation

The Civil Rights Act gave the federal government the legal tools to end *de jure* segregation in the South. It prohibited discrimination in public places, furthered school desegregation and established an Equal Employment Commission. It passed due to emotions aroused by Kennedy's death, Johnson's determination and a change in public opinion. Polls showed 68% of Americans favoured the bill by January 1964, which Congress could not afford to ignore.

The Civil Rights Act did little to ensure southern Black voting rights, without which it was difficult for Black people to obtain the political representation needed to ensure social equality. However, racist attacks on peaceful civil rights protesters in Selma, Alabama, and subsequent intense public outrage, enabled the passage of the Voting Rights Act on 6 August 1965.

The feeling that the civil rights legislation had not solved the problems experienced by the Black community contributed to what some perceived as urban uprisings and others perceived as riots in 1964–8. Housing was a major cause of discontent in low-income neighbourhoods and Johnson said 'imprisoning the Negro in the slums' was immoral and exacerbated racial tensions. White taxpayers did not want to fund large-scale improvements, so Johnson focused on obtaining an end to discrimination in housing sales. The White House was deluged with hate mail and Congress repeatedly refused to act, until a legislative tribute was deemed necessary after Martin Luther King, Jr's assassination in 1968. Johnson's Fair Housing Act (1968) prohibited discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, but it proved difficult to enforce in the face of determined white opposition.

ACTIVITY

Cause and consequence; Perspectives

Research Johnson's Texas background. To what extent do you think it affected his perspective and performance on the political, social and economic inequality of Black people during his political career?

ACTIVITY

Perspectives

Research any uprising that occurred in low-income neighbourhoods during 1964–8, for example, that of Watts, Los Angeles, in 1965. Discuss with a partner what you perceive to be the difference between an uprising and a riot and why there are different perceptions as to whether 1964–8 saw uprisings or riots.

The War on Poverty

In January 1964, Johnson declared ‘unconditional war on poverty’ and persuaded Congress to pass an Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) that established an Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to co-ordinate that war. There were programmes for job training, jobs to enable young people to stay in education or receive training, and adult literacy courses, in all of which members of families on welfare were encouraged to participate. Thousands of volunteers aided groups such as underprivileged children, Indigenous Peoples and migrant workers. Urban communities in impoverished areas were empowered through participation in the Community Action Program (CAP), which identified and combated the social and economic problems in their cities.

Poverty and health

Older people traditionally constituted a large proportion of low-income people, partly because healthcare was expensive. Democratic presidents since Harry S Truman had advocated federal financial support for healthcare, but conservative Americans claimed this smacked of **communism**. With Democrat majorities in both houses of Congress, Johnson persuaded Congress to establish **Medicare and Medicaid** in the Social Security Act of 1965.

Together, Medicare and Medicaid helped 19 million Americans in 1966. Medicare lifted millions of older Americans out of poverty and within a decade was so popular that no president dared to oppose it. However, the system was not perfect. Not all treatments were covered, the programmes proved far more expensive than anticipated, and reasonably priced care remained problematic for the 80% of the population not covered by Medicare and Medicaid. Overall, though, these programmes constituted a massive advance and Johnson rightly boasted of having produced a ‘healthcare revolution’.

Poverty and education

In 1964, Johnson highlighted the extent of the challenge in educational issues:

- 54 million Americans had never finished high school
- 8 million Americans had under five years of schooling
- 100,000 high school graduates with proven ability could not afford to enter college
- schools were overcrowded, run down and short of good teachers.

Presidents traditionally struggled to obtain funds for education because Congress favoured local control, but Johnson persuaded Congress to double federal expenditure on education to \$8 billion and pass the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act (1965). Also in 1965, ‘**Head Start**’ was launched. This was an eight-week summer programme for disadvantaged preschoolers that emphasized literacy and mathematics.

KEY TERMS

Communism A far-left ideology that emphasizes economic equality to be brought about by the revolutionary redistribution of wealth from the rich to the wider community. In the early 20th century, Russia became a communist state, the Soviet Union. Most Americans feared and loathed communism, preferring capitalism, which they considered to be a superior economic system despite the massive disparities in wealth it generated.

Medicare and Medicaid President Johnson’s programme to provide federally funded health insurance for over-65s and people with disabilities, regardless of their income or existing medical conditions (Medicare), and federal government financial assistance to states to help them provide medical treatment to impoverished residents unable to afford essential medical services (Medicaid).

Head Start A federal government programme to help economically disadvantaged preschoolers, providing educational, health, social and other services.

By the end of Johnson's presidency, there was no teacher shortage, new buildings had been constructed and over 13 million children had benefited from federal aid to education. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) helped children in the inner cities and in the South, where economically deprived states like Mississippi benefited from the federal funding. By 1970, 25% of college students received some financial aid thanks to the Higher Education Act (1965) having made a college education more accessible. By the end of the 1960s, the number of Black people with a high school diploma increased from 40% to 60% and the number of Black college students quadrupled within a decade.

Johnson's biographer Robert Dallek (1998) concluded, 'If his educational reforms did not lead to a Great Society, they have at least made for a better society. It is an achievement for which Johnson deserves the country's continuing regard.'

Poverty and urban problems

US inner cities were overcrowded and characterized by low or no incomes and under-resourced schools and housing. Johnson suggested legislation to combat urban decay and Congress responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm and effectiveness. Despite the social reform legislation of 1965–6, problems in low-income neighbourhoods remained.

Johnson's legislative proposals for urban improvements and the congressional response, 1965–6

Johnson's suggested legislation	Congressional response
A new government department (Housing and Urban Development, or HUD) to co-ordinate programmes designed to combat urban housing shortages and decay	Congress agreed to HUD (1965).
Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Washington, DC were to be designated 'demonstration' or 'model' cities where affordable housing and transportation, recreational facilities and slum clearance would be combated	Congress passed the Demonstration Cities Act (1966). However, Johnson estimated the programme would need \$2.4 billion to be successful, but at \$1.2 billion it was underfunded. The <i>New York Times</i> said New York City alone needed \$6 billion and claimed that the model cities failed because members of Congress demanded something for their constituents too, so that the six cities grew to 150 cities, meaning the money was spread too thinly to be effective.
Cheaper and desegregated housing	Congress passed the Omnibus Housing Act (1965), which financed rent supplements and \$8 billion of low- and moderate-income housing (in 1968, he would also pass the Fair Housing Act (see page 00)). Johnson used federal loans in persuading builders to construct reasonably priced housing.

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Vivienne Sanders taught history in schools for over 30 years and continues to educate through homeschooling. She is the author of numerous titles in the Access to History for the IB Diploma series and has published nearly 20 US history textbooks with Hodder Education/Hachette Learning. Her academic work on US history has also been published by the University of Wales Press.

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