

Lyndon B. Johnson and the Republican Challenge to the Great Society

By Mark A. McLay

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, Scotland

M.A.McLay@sms.ed.ac.uk

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I was awarded a Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) Grant-in-Aid to support research for my doctoral project which investigates how, why, and with what success the Republican party was able to challenge President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society agenda between 1964 and 1968. My nine-day visit to the RAC in Spring 2012 marked the final stop on a two month long, cross-country trip which included research at libraries and archives in Texas, California, Michigan, Virginia, District of Columbia, and finally, New York. Before reaching the RAC I had thus already explored the papers of President Lyndon B. Johnson and many prominent Republicans including: Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, John Tower, Gerald Ford, Melvin Laird, Hugh Scott, Edward Brooke, and Jacob Javits. The bulk of my research at the RAC focused on the Personal Papers (RG4) of Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) and the NAR Gubernatorial Papers (RG15), while I also spent a short time with the Papers of Winthrop Rockefeller (RG9).

Traditionally, historians studying politics during the 1960s have centered their attention on the failures of liberalism and splits in the Democratic party, in addition to focusing on the goals of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and their pursuit of the New Frontier and the Great Society. Recent scholarly approaches, however, have turned to examining the emerging success of conservatism and the Republicans. In the last five years there have been important reassessments of the party's behavior with regards to issues such as the Vietnam War and race,

while another study details the key arguments and developments within the Republican party throughout the decade.¹ Nevertheless, the Republicans' response to Johnson's Great Society remains an area of considerable scholarly neglect, which is especially regrettable in light of the significance LBJ's domestic initiatives posed to the United States both during and after the 1960s.

As recent heated debates about the debt ceiling and the role of welfare programs such as Medicare in Washington highlight, issues of the size of government have remained ever-present in American life and politics. This debate was greatly heightened in 1964 when Johnson announced his intention to mobilize the federal government to help create a Great Society. Arguably, the long-term beneficiary of this move has been the Republican party which has won votes through "small government" arguments ever since, and while it is certainly true to say that Republicans had been employing this line of attack long before the Johnson presidency, it must also be accepted that it was only in the mid-1960s that this strategy gained significant traction with the voters. Moreover, it is prudent to note that while demanding smaller government has become a successful electoral avenue, Republican presidents have failed to turn rhetoric into reality, as even the administration of Ronald Reagan was unable to curb government growth. Indeed, it is arguable that the advent of the Tea Party movement can be traced back to the inability of elected Republicans to fulfill promises made since the Johnson years.

Existing historiography all too often fails to appreciate that during LBJ's presidency leading Republicans—both conservative and liberal—were finding new and creative ways to challenge Johnson's agenda as they attempted to move the GOP away from the image of stodgy, "just say no to anything" politics that had contributed to LBJ's landslide defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964. At the same time, as historian Robert David Johnson's recent work on the

1964 presidential election notes, Johnson was trying to win the support of many of these Republicans to establish a Great Society consensus.² Certainly, LBJ had a degree of success with this tactic of “frontlash” as many moderate Republican voters cast their ballots for the Texan in the 1964 election, while also supporting his endeavors in the field of civil rights. Yet, despite his best efforts there would be no Great Society consensus in the long term, as American politics embarked upon a critical process of polarization during the Johnson presidency that has worsened with the passage of time.

The driving force of the study, and the question that will provide the structure to my dissertation, is to consider *how* the Republican party responded to the Great Society. The working hypothesis is rooted in two explanations: Firstly, as many historians have noted, Lyndon Johnson and his administration made the mistake of overselling his initiatives during the halcyon days of 1964-1965. In retrospect, ill-advised grandiose statements about eliminating poverty, achieving racial harmony, and defeating Communism in Vietnam only served to heighten expectations which could realistically never be met. Moreover, historian Gareth Davies argues that, in 1965, the administration began moving from *opportunity* to *entitlement* rhetoric regarding programs aimed at solving problems involving poverty and race relations, which was an approach to welfare that the majority of the electorate viewed as fundamentally un-American³. Davies’s study however, is more concerned with the implications for the Democratic party and liberalism. Accordingly, this project intends to explore the effect this oversell and overreach had upon the Republican party’s strategy against the Great Society. In particular, it will consider how the GOP was able to manipulate the contrast between Johnson’s promising outlook for the administration’s War on Poverty in 1964 and 1965, with the later reality of rising welfare rolls, rising crime, and racially-motivated riots across the United States.

Secondly, following the disastrous defeat of 1964—when the Republican party was at its most divided since 1912—the GOP regrouped under the leadership of House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford and Republican National Committee (RNC) chairman Ray Bliss to present a unified image to the country, despite the ideological divisions that still existed behind closed doors. Choosing to attack LBJ instead of each other, the Republicans were able to provide a united front against the Great Society both in Congress and to the public; an approach that contrasted with a Democratic party whose internal divisions became ever more public over involvement in Vietnam and how to pursue the Great Society as the Johnson presidency progressed. Furthermore, opposition to the Great Society gave the Republican party a positive identity with the electorate which it had not enjoyed during the 1940s and 1950s, due to the GOP's persistent inability to craft an alternative to the New Deal consensus that had persisted throughout those decades. The Great Society agenda however, which was arguably more ambitious in nature—and therefore more open to criticism—presented the GOP with an opportunity to be more creative in opposition.⁴ As a result, the Republican party, which had looked clueless and disjointed in 1964, regrouped effectively, resulting in congressional gains in 1966 and 1968, while also electing Richard Nixon president. The party's dynamic opposition to the Great Society, which helped return an air of electability to the party, was crucial to these developments.

When considering *why* the Republicans challenged the Johnson agenda in the manner that they did, much of the existing historiography is very weak, painting the Republicans as one-dimensional, unthinking allies of conservative Southern Democrats in Congress. However, not only does this view fail to appreciate the differences that existed between Southern Democrats and Republicans, it is also inaccurate in its portrayal of the GOP as an ideologically coherent

force dominated by conservatism. Also ignored are the different, and somewhat surprising, challenges that conservatives made to the Johnson agenda. Indeed, even a cursory glance at the responses of leading party members to the social programs of the Great Society demonstrates this: Ronald Reagan, darling of the right, extolled his vision of a “Creative Society,” which advocated a full-frontal attack on “big government” that sought to replace state welfare with volunteerism; Gerald Ford, another conservative by nature, pressed for a partnership between the private and public sectors to help create the jobs he felt that the War on Poverty would fail to create; while the leading Republican liberal, Senator Jacob Javits argued that there was a need for a government-sponsored “Marshall Plan for the Cities.” Furthermore, one of the key Republican think tanks, the Ripon Society, argued for the introduction of liberal initiatives such as the negative income tax and revenue sharing, ideas which the Nixon administration would later propose to Congress. It may seem contradictory to note these divisions, while also stressing the importance of unity to the Republican challenge to the Great Society; however, it is important to draw a distinction between the reality of division and the image of unity. The crucial point is that Republicans were exploring different ways to respond to the Great Society without directly confronting each other in public. This can be due to the underlying motivation of many GOP leaders experiencing exasperation at having been the minority party for so long. As a consequence they were willing to bury any grievances they had with each other for the greater good of party cohesion.

Due to the emphasis on the role of leading Republicans, it is impossible to write this dissertation without a thorough consideration of Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller. Certainly, during the 1960s, there were few Republicans who had the national stature of Rockefeller, and few who shared his activist approach to governing. As a result, his response to the Great Society is

significant as it runs against the previously noted narrative which places all Republicans as conservative opponents of Johnson's initiatives. Indeed, in an interesting reveal, one of LBJ's closest domestic advisers recalled that Johnson was actually hoping that Rockefeller would win the 1968 presidential election (and thus defeat Johnson's vice-president, Hubert Humphrey), because he believed that Rockefeller would be the best man to nourish Johnson's Great Society programs.⁵ Despite this belief on Johnson's part, NAR's personal papers reveal that by the time he belatedly ran for the presidency in 1968 he was disillusioned with many of LBJ's initiatives regardless of the personal warmth that the two men shared.⁶ One campaign speech, contained in the files of Oscar Reubhausen, illustrates this disenchantment perfectly as it shows NAR focusing his fire on the Great Society for its preeminent role in causing inflation and engendering the loss of local control in government.⁷ It should be noted, however, that NAR did display sympathy with many of the aims of the Johnsonian agenda, in particular urban renewal and ending poverty in America. As such, in a later campaign event, also contained in the Reubhausen files, he was willing to concede that the Great Society included some "good programs."⁸

Rockefeller is also of great importance to the study as a result of his symbolic place as the preeminent member of the GOP's so-called "eastern establishment;" a group of liberal and moderate Republicans who had traditionally controlled the presidential nominating process and who displayed sympathy with aspects of the Great Society project. While it is true that the intraparty influence of these "Rockefeller Republicans" was in decline following their reaction to the nomination of arch-conservative Barry Goldwater in 1964—which ranged from lukewarm support to outright rebellion—they remained influential in Congress and on the national stage. Indeed, their continued power could be seen in the Republican Coordinating Committee (RCC),

of which Rockefeller was a member, that among other things, advocated government involvement in programs aimed at reducing poverty in racially tense northern cities. This type of recommendation was anathema however, to those who had supported Goldwater in 1964, and it meant NAR had little chance of achieving his party's nomination in 1968. Rocky's lack of popularity within the GOP is acknowledged in a strategy meeting contained in the Reubhausen files which shows NAR's brain trust settling on a approach of relying on national poll numbers to display Rockefeller's electability and thus propel him to the nomination. It seems therefore, that there was a tacit acceptance that an activist Governor of New York had no chance of achieving the GOP nomination based on his policy record.⁹

Aside from providing a crucial insight into NAR's response to the Great Society, his papers are also a great source of information for those interested in other leading Republican figures. Due to the large and renowned research team that 'Rocky' assembled, detailed information on men such as Goldwater, Nixon, Romney, and Reagan can be found in the files of Reubhausen and the files of George Hinman. In addition, the files of the New York City Office (J1) are especially helpful in providing greater detail about NAR's national campaigns in 1964 and 1968. In particular, the material on 1964 helps the researcher to understand how forcefully NAR attacked Goldwater for the Arizona Senator's negative stance on the Civil Rights Act—a key achievement of the Great Society era. In one speech NAR goes as far as to declare that “it is inconceivable to me that a man [Goldwater] taking these positions could be the standard bearer of the Republican party for he has effectively abandoned the Republican party on the most fundamental issue of our time.”¹⁰ While much of the historiography of the nomination contest, particularly the California primary, has been devoted to the extent to which the birth of NAR's

first child with Happy Rockefeller impacted on the result, it is crucial to remember that The Golden State bore witness to one of the defining battles for the soul of the GOP.

While I am still in the midst of processing the thousands of digital images that I amassed at the RAC, it is already clear that the resources held at the Center provide my dissertation with an invaluable and unique insight. Accordingly, I am incredibly grateful to the Rockefeller Archive Center for allowing me the chance to visit Sleepy Hollow and conduct research in such a historically rich environment.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming in 2011; Timothy Thurber, "Goldwaterism Triumphant? Race and the Republican Party, 1965–1968." *Journal of the Historical Society* 7: 3 (September 2007), pp. 349-384; Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

² Robert David Johnson, *All the Way With LBJ: The 1964 Presidential Election*. U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

³ Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas 1996.

⁴ More ambitious in the sense that LBJ proposed the Great Society during a time of affluence rather than in the midst of the Great Depression, as was the case with FDR's New Deal. Moreover, Johnson was proposing to add to the already existing presence of government that was inherited from FDR, and therefore the Great Society had a higher ambition for what government could do for its citizens.

⁵ Joseph A. Califano. *The Triumph & Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991, pp. 289-290.

⁶ An example of this can be found in their correspondence post LBJ's Presidency: NAR to LBJ, June 8, 1972, Folder 226, Box 9, Ann Whitman Files, Series P, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁷ NAR, Speech to Economic Club of Detroit, Michigan, May 22, 1968, Folder 7, Box 1, Oscar M. Reubhausen Files, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Sub-series 3, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁸ NAR, Q&A Session at Hirsch High School, Chicago, Illinois, July 17, 1968, Folder 11, Box 4, Oscar M. Reubhausen Files, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Sub-series 3, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁹ NAR Staff, Summary Memorandum on Substantive Policy, May 30, 1968, Folder 42, Box 4, Oscar M.

Reubhausen Files, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Sub-series 3, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹⁰ NAR, Speech on the Passage of the Civil Rights Act, June 19, 1964, Folder 158, Box 21, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Sub-series 1, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.