**The Legacy of the Great Society, 50 years Later**

With 50 years’ perspective, there are things that liberals and conservatives agree the Great Society got right, including some that were politically costly in their day.

After signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Johnson gloomily observed to Moyers, “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.”

Few now, however, would dispute that it was a good thing to remove barriers to racial equality — or that government dictate was the only way to do it.

“The anti-discrimination laws that were passed in the 1960s have probably done more to reduce economic inequality than have government programs,” said Diana Furchtgott-Roth, who was the Labor Department’s chief economist during the George W. Bush administration and who is now a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

In addition to tackling the oldest problems, the Great Society took the federal government into realms where it had never gone before.

Chief among them was education. Until the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Washington had never provided comprehensive funding for education below the college level. Its aid to college students was largely limited to helping veterans through the GI Bill.

Where the federal government spent less than $150 per elementary and high school student in 1960, in inflation-adjusted dollars, the figure by 2011 had reached about $1,600. In 2008, more than 64 percent of undergraduates on college campuses were receiving federal financial assistance of some kind.

The federal role “has remained controversial to this day,” said Margaret Spellings, education secretary under Bush, whose No Child Left Behind initiative attempted to hold schools more accountable for student achievement. Play Video

In the Great Society, “what succeeded is resourcing around poor, minority and disadvantaged students, an acknowledgment that there was a role for the federal government to level the playing field,” Spellings said. “. . . What I think has not worked is thinking that that was enough, that just that input would do the job. That’s why things like accountability and No Child Left Behind — fast-forward 40 years — were important, to deliver on the promise.”

Yet the political battle over the Common Core — a set of achievement standards developed by governors and encouraged by the Obama administration — is the latest example of the tension that arises when the federal government puts its finger on the scale in education. Criticism of the Common Core has come from an diverse chorus that includes tea party activists and teachers unions.

Some of the Great Society’s biggest accomplishments are rarely acknowledged today. For instance, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 scrapped a 1920s-era quota system that had effectively shut out most of the world, except for blond, blue-eyed Western Europe.

The 1965 law inviting in Africans, Latin Americans and Asians “was in some ways the most important determinant of our ethnic composition,” said Schuck, who taught immigration law and policy at Yale Law School.

Other Great Society initiatives are being whittled away. In 2013, the Supreme Court [struck down a key part of the Voting Rights Act](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/supreme-court-stops-use-of-key-part-of-voting-rights-act/2013/06/25/26888528-dda5-11e2-b197-f248b21f94c4_story.html), saying that some of its restrictions are outdated, in light of the racial progress that has been made.

And last month, the court [upheld Michigan’s constitutional amendment banning affirmative action in college admissions](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/supreme-court-reverses-decision-that-tossed-out-michigans-ban-on-racial-preferences/2014/04/22/44177ad6-9d8f-11e3-9ba6-800d1192d08b_story.html) — a blow to another Great Society program that some believe has outlived its usefulness. (Johnson himself thought of affirmative action as a limited, temporary measure, necessary for only a generation or so, Califano said.) Since the ban passed in 2006, black enrollment at the University of Michigan has dropped by a third.

For Gwendolyn Calvert Baker, there was a poignancy in that court decision.

She had been sitting near the front of her 1964 University of Michigan graduating class when Johnson delivered his Great Society speech.

Baker would have been easy to spot in that sea of caps and gowns. She was older than most of the students, a mom who had returned to college on a Rotary Club scholarship. And she was one of only about 200 African Americans on Michigan’s campus of nearly 28,000 students.

Baker got her PhD in 1972, joined the Michigan faculty as an education professor, and went on to run the University of Michigan affirmative-action program that in more recent years came under court challenge.

“The content of that speech, I really can’t say I remember a lot of it,” said Baker, who is now retired and living in Florida. “But it had meaning. I was feeling good that he was at least thinking in some of the ways I had been thinking.”

A half-century later, Baker said, she is pretty sure she knows what LBJ would think of how it all turned out.

“He would say we’ve come a long way, but we’ve still got a long way to go.”