Lyndon Johnson’s legacy as President of the United States will always be tarnished by the war in Vietnam. That said, historians continue to give extraordinarily high marks to his domestic policy
initiatives in civil rights, voting rights, Medicare and Medicaid, food stamps, social and economic welfare, Head Start, federal aid to elementary, secondary and higher education, consumer and environmental protections, immigration reform, and support for the arts, humanities and public broadcasting.


As Zeitz evaluates the impact of The Great Society, however, Johnson’s staff often drops out of sight. Zeitz underestimates the tensions between President John F. Kennedy’s (Massachusetts) holdovers and Johnson’s (largely) Texas-based assistants. And, at times, Zeitz’s claims exceed his evidence. Valenti and Moyers, it seems to me, should not be characterized as two of Johnson’s three “trump cards” in the presidential election of 1964. Zeitz acknowledges as well that despite his immense talents, Moyers was a divisive force within the administration, undercutting his White House rivals, cozying up to Robert Kennedy, and, as press secretary, contributing mightily to Johnson’s “credibility gap.” Nor does Zeitz emphasize as much as he should that the staff successes depended on Johnson’s mastery of the legislative process and on large Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1965 and 1966.

 Nonetheless, “Building the Great Society” adds to our knowledge of the implementation of landmark legislation. With the active involvement of Califano and Cater, for example, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the Office of Education specified the percentage of blacks in each district in the South who should be attending desegregated schools. Districts that did not comply would no longer be eligible for federal education funds. Between 1965 and 1968, Zeitz reveals, the percentage of African Americans in white majority schools in the South increased from 2 percent to 23 percent. By 1980, more than three quarters of southern black children attended integrated schools.

Medicare presented a different set of daunting challenges, including registering senior citizens, getting hospitals and doctors to join the network, and insurance carriers to handle disbursements. One of the most sweeping government operations since D-Day, the launch was stunningly successful, in no small measure, Zeitz notes, because, in contrast to the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, state governments cooperated fully and powerful lobbies did not engage in guerilla warfare against the
legislation.

It took a village, Zeitz implies, and in 2018, we still live with these programs that touch virtually every American, mostly for the better.

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