



## PRESIDENTS AND THE CONSTITUTION

### *FEDERAL POWER: LYNDON JOHNSON AND RONALD REAGAN*

MARCH 9, 2009

© [The Bill of Rights Institute](#), All rights reserved

#### OVERVIEW

Debate over the power of the federal government to regulate the every day affairs of the people intensified in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lyndon Johnson, interpreting Congress's role to promote the "general welfare" broadly, assembled a team of experts to discover ways to improve society, and sent dozens of bills to Congress which became "Great Society" programs intended to benefit the poor and the elderly. Ronald Reagan, by contrast, called the War on Poverty a failure, and proposed budgets which reduced spending on social programs while increasing the size and capabilities of the military. Additionally, Reagan called for lower taxes to spur economic growth, reward perseverance and encourage personal responsibility. The two Presidents had markedly different views on the purposes and constitutional powers of the federal government and carried out the duties of their offices accordingly.

#### RESOURCES

- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/lyndonjohnson/>
- <http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=92>
- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/ronaldreagan/>
- [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/reagan1.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/reagan1.asp)

#### NARRATIVE

Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan had different understandings of the role of the federal government, particularly when it came to domestic policy. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson announced his administration's biggest domestic goal: the building of a "Great Society." These programs would go beyond ending racial injustice—a goal to which Johnson believed the US was already committed—to improving and perfecting all areas of life. Fourteen task forces made up of academics and government experts studied American society: transportation, education, natural beauty, and civil rights. Every task force worked directly for the President. Their findings and recommendations were shared among government officials.

The President has no power to make law; he can only propose laws to Congress. Johnson submitted eighty-seven bills to Congress. Congress passed eighty-four, and Johnson signed them into law. Great Society programs included Medicare and Medicaid, which provide health care to the elderly and the disadvantaged, and Head Start, which provides preschool and other educational services for poor families.

About fifteen years later, the economy was in a deep recession. Inflation was approaching twelve percent. More than ten percent of Americans were out of work. Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan ran a campaign based on lower taxes, strong national defense, and less government involvement in individuals' lives. Reagan was elected President in 1980. In his First Inaugural Address, he stressed the importance of persevering and the power of individuals to control their own destinies. Government, he said, was not the solution to the problem, government was the problem.

Throughout his Presidency, Reagan worked to decrease the size of the federal government, and advocated policies and reforms that he believed empowered individuals. He called for a thirty percent tax cut over three years. Congress passed a twenty-five percent cut, which Reagan signed into law. Reagan also worked to cut federal spending on domestic programs, because of his concerns about the constitutionality of these programs. He called for \$41.4 billion in budget cuts, mostly from Great Society programs. While not touching Medicare and Social Security, Reagan approved cuts in federal education programs, food stamp programs, workplace programs, and other non-military domestic programs. Believing the US had neglected the military after the Vietnam War, and as the Cold War continued, Reagan asked for increased funds to strengthen the armed forces. The decrease in taxes and increase in military spending resulted in the biggest budget deficits in



## PRESIDENTS AND THE CONSTITUTION

### *FEDERAL POWER: LYNDON JOHNSON AND RONALD REAGAN*

MARCH 9, 2009

the country's history to that time. The deficits continued each year, but Reagan vowed to veto any tax increases Congress passed.

Unemployment peaked at 10.8% percent in December 1982, and then went down through the rest of Reagan's time in office. By the mid 1980s, the economy was booming.

Today, many debate the constitutionality as well as the outcomes of both Presidents' policies. Some charge that many of Johnson's programs, while well-intended, have not achieved their goals and should be discontinued. Reagan's critics assert that his tax plan unfairly benefited the wealthy, and blamed "trickle-down economics" for large deficits that deepened the national debt.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What were the goals of the "Great Society"?
2. What types of measures did Johnson recommend to Congress?
3. What was the key message of Reagan's First Inaugural Address?
4. What actions did Reagan take to bring about his goal of decreasing the size of the federal government?
5. How would you assess the constitutionality of each President's actions?

#### EXTENSIONS

- A. Have students read Johnson's "Great Society" Address, as well as Reagan's First Inaugural Address using two highlighters of different colors. They should highlight sentences where the speaker suggests increasing federal power in one color, and sentences where the speaker suggests scaling back federal power in the other color. Have students look at the speeches side by side when they have finished. What do they notice?
- B. Have students write one to two paragraphs in response to the questions: Because a federal law is well-intentioned or a good idea, does that mean it is constitutional? If not, what is the difference? If a certain problem should be addressed by government, which level of government should address it: federal, state, or local? Explain.



## **PRESIDENTS AND THE CONSTITUTION**

### ***FEDERAL POWER: LYNDON JOHNSON AND RONALD REAGAN***

**MARCH 9, 2009**

#### **ANSWERS**

1. Great Society programs would go beyond ending racial injustice, and improve and perfect all areas of life.
2. Laws promoting education, beautifying the country, strengthening medical research, developing distressed regions, preventing crime, removing barriers to voting, supporting the arts, and eliminating waste and inefficiency.
3. Reagan stressed his belief in the power of individuals over their own destinies. Government, he said, was not the solution to the problem, government was the problem.
4. He signed nine tax bills providing across-the-board tax cuts. He called for \$41.4 billion in budget cuts, mostly from Great Society programs. While not touching Medicare and Social Security, Reagan approved cuts in federal education programs, food stamp programs, workplace programs, and other non-military domestic programs.
5. Accept reasoned answers.