

Lyndon Johnson's Legacy

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance.
- Analyze phases of Lyndon Johnson's career and assess his legacy.
- Create a collage that reflects their assessment of Johnson's legacy and then provide arguments to support their assessment.

Portraits

Lyndon Johnson and Theodore Green

By George Tames

Gelatin silver print, 1957

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Frances O. Tames

NPG.94.184

[Link >>](#)

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson

By George Tames

Gelatin silver print, c. 1961

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Frances O. Tames

NPG.94.192

[Link >>](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson

By Peter Hurd

Tempera on panel, 1967

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the artist

NPG.68.14

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Lyndon B. Johnson

By Pietro Annigoni

Pastel on paper, 1968

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of *Time* magazine

NPG.78.TC473

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Materials:

Large and small copies of the four portraits
Construction paper
Markers
Scissors
Glue

Background Information for Teachers

Information about Lyndon B. Johnson:

Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973) honed his impressive political skills as Senate majority leader and vice president before becoming president upon the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Johnson was the most powerful and effective Senate majority leader in U.S. history, and he loved having that job. He was much less happy being vice president, where he didn't have enough to do and felt left out of important decisions. He said of the vice presidency, "in the end, it is nothing. I detested every minute of it." In his five years as president, Johnson secured passage of one of the most extensive legislative agendas in American history, but ultimately saw his administration sink under the weight of the conflict in Vietnam.

Johnson used the national grief and glorification of Kennedy that followed the assassination, as well as his own skill and experience as a legislator, to shepherd the passage of the historic Civil Rights Act called for by his predecessor. A year later, having been elected in his own right with the largest popular majority in American history, Johnson announced his plans for a federally funded War on Poverty and for the creation of what he called a "Great Society." Over the next few years, Congress enacted almost all of his Great Society proposals, including voting rights, increased federal aid to education, conservation and environmental protection, development of depressed regions, and the Medicaid and Medicare programs to provide health care to the poor and the elderly.

Johnson also continued his predecessors' commitment to stopping the spread of communism in Vietnam. He sharply escalated U.S. military involvement in the conflict and ordered a massive bombing campaign of Vietnamese targets. Johnson was criticized both by pro-war "hawks," who accused him of mishandling the war, and by anti-war "doves," who accused Johnson of personally causing the deaths of U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese civilians. In March of 1968, facing enormous opposition to the war, urban riots, and weakened support for his beloved domestic programs, Johnson surprised the world by withdrawing from the 1968 presidential race and beginning the long process of peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese. In early 1969, he retired to his ranch in Texas and lived only a few more years.

The Tames Photographs:

These two photographs were both taken by *New York Times* photographer George Tames. The first was taken in 1957, when Johnson was the Senate majority leader. It was part of a series that became known as "The Johnson Treatment," which showed Johnson in conversation with Senator Theodore Green (D-Rhode Island). In this series, Johnson's political skill and dominant personality is very much on display. The second photograph was taken sometime in 1961, early in the presidency of John F. Kennedy, and reflects the more retiring role that Johnson was forced to play as vice president.

The Hurd Portrait:

In late 1964, when *Time* magazine named Lyndon Johnson its Man of the Year, the magazine called on the noted Southwestern artist Peter Hurd to make Johnson's cover portrait. Johnson liked the resulting image so much that he decided that Hurd should paint his official White House portrait. When Hurd brought his finished portrait to the Johnson ranch for a private showing, however, Johnson declared the picture "the ugliest thing I ever saw." Shortly thereafter it was shipped back to Hurd, who later gave it to the National Portrait Gallery. Meanwhile, the joke making the rounds in Washington noted that artists should be seen in the White House, but not "Hurd."

The Annigoni Time Cover

In a televised speech on March 31, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson startled the nation, Washington, and even his own staff by announcing that he would not seek reelection to the presidency. Only his wife, Lady Bird, knew about it in advance. In his speech, the president declared a unilateral halt to air and naval bombardment of North Vietnam and invited the Vietnamese to seek a peace settlement. More than any other Cold War crisis, U.S. involvement in Vietnam dominated the Johnson presidency. Faced with overwhelming hostility to his management of the war, even within his own Democratic Party, Johnson felt he was forced to withdraw for the good of the country. Pietro Annigoni's portrait, painted shortly after Johnson's speech, reflects the president's sense of defeat. It appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine on April 12, 1968.

Lesson Procedures

Portrait Activity

Students compare and contrast the four portraits in order to determine what each one reflects about Johnson and his career.

Questions to consider with your students:

- Describe Johnson's pose and facial expression in each portrait.
- What is Johnson doing in each portrait?
- What adjectives would you use to describe Johnson in each of these portraits?
- What might Johnson be thinking in each portrait?
- What does each portrait reflect about Johnson at that stage in his career?
- Based on what you have learned about Johnson, which portrait best reflects him?

Extension Activities

Part I: Collage

Using the four portraits and additional symbols of their own creation, have students create a collage to reflect their assessment of Johnson's legacy.

Divide class into small groups, and give each group large and small copies of all four Johnson portraits, along with construction paper, markers, scissors, and glue. Students should assess Johnson's legacy by discussing the following questions:

- During which stage in his career was Johnson most influential? Why?
- How should Johnson be remembered in American history? What were his biggest successes and failures?
- Which portrait best reflects the way that we should remember Johnson today?

Each group will then use the portraits and art materials to create a collage that reflects their assessment of Johnson's legacy. As they create the collage, they should consider the following questions:

- What is the overall point about Johnson that you are trying to make in your collage?
- Which images (from the portraits provided) will you put in your collage? Which will you leave out entirely?
- You have been provided with two different sizes for each image—for which will you use the bigger and for which the smaller?
- Of the images that you will include, how will you place them? Which will be front and center? Which will be in the background? Which will be higher? Lower?
- How will you connect the various images to each other? What organizing principle(s) will you use to group them together or to keep them separate in your collage?
- What symbols or images will you add to your collage besides the ones provided?

Part II: Debate

Students will explain and defend their assessment of Johnson's legacy.

Have each group come up with 2–3 arguments for why their collage best reflects Johnson's legacy. Groups will then share their collages and debate which one best reflects Johnson's legacy, using their prepared arguments.