were funneled to public and private agencies in an attempt to reach people in need directly and to combat entrenched racial discrimination in local government. Poor people organized to make welfare agencies, school boards, police departments, and housing authorities more accountable to the people they served. Such demands did not sit well with local officials, leading Johnson to back off from genuine representation for the poor. Still, CAP opened opportunities for political leadership and federal funds to those usually excluded from government.

Liberalism at High Tide

As the 1964 election approached, Johnson projected stability and security in the midst of a booming economy — a dramatic contrast to his far-right Republican opponent, Arizona senator Barry M. Goldwater, who attacked the welfare state and entertained the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. Johnson achieved a record-breaking 61 percent of the popular vote, and Democrats won resounding majorities in the House (295–140) and Senate (68–32). Still, Goldwater’s considerable support marked a growing conservative movement and a threat to Democratic control of the South.

Johnson laid out an ambitious vision for what he called the “Great Society,” taking aim at the unfinished business of the

New Deal and Fair Deal but also pressing beyond it. Large Democratic majorities in Congress, his own political skills, and grassroots pressure enabled Johnson to obtain legislation on discrimination, poverty, education, medical care, housing, urban development, consumer and environmental protection, and the arts. Reporters called the legislation of the Eighty-Ninth Congress (1965–1966) “a political miracle.”

Poverty remained a core focus of Johnson’s administration. Congress doubled the funding for the Economic Opportunity Act in 1965, authorized economic development measures for depressed regions, and allocated more than $1 billion to improve the nation’s slums. The government offered direct aid as well. A new food stamp program gave poor people greater choice in obtaining food, and rent supplements provided alternatives to public housing.

Those in need also organized their own grassroots movements, most prominently the National Welfare Rights Organization. Assisted by antipoverty lawyers, mothers on welfare pushed administrators of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to ease restrictions on welfare recipients. The number of families receiving assistance jumped from less than one million in 1960 to three million by 1972, a full 90 percent of those eligible.

Johnson’s War on Poverty favored expanding individual opportunity — through education, job training, food security, health care, and political empowerment — rather than redistributing income. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, a turning point in involving the federal government in K–12 education, channeled funds to local school districts and provided equipment to private and parochial schools serving the poor. That same year, Congress passed the Higher Education Act, vastly expanding federal assistance to colleges and universities for buildings, programs, scholarships, and student loans.

An even greater watershed was the federal government’s entry into health care. Faced with a powerful medical lobby opposed to national health insurance, Johnson focused on the elderly, who constituted a large portion of the nation’s poor. Congress responded in 1965 with the **Medicare** program, providing the elderly with universal medical insurance financed largely through Social Security taxes. A separate program, **Medicaid**, authorized federal grants to supplement state-paid medical care for poor people. By the twenty-first century, these two programs covered 87 million Americans, nearly 30 percent of the population.

Whereas programs such as Medicare fulfilled long-standing liberal goals, the Great Society’s attention to racial discrimination represented a break with the past. Advised

early on not to waste his political capital on civil rights, Johnson retorted, “What the hell’s the presidency for?” Whereas racial minorities had been excluded from or discriminated against in many New Deal programs, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made discrimination in employment, education, and public accommodations illegal. The **Voting Rights Act of 1965** banned literacy tests and other practices used to disqualify black voters, authorizing federal intervention to ensure access to the voting booth.

Another form of bias fell with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished quotas based on national origins. The law maintained caps on the total number of immigrants and, for the first time, included the Western Hemisphere in those limits; preference was now given to immediate relatives of U.S. citizens and to those with desirable skills. One unanticipated consequence was a surge of immigration in the 1980s and thereafter (as discussed in chapter 31).

Great Society benefits reached well beyond victims of discrimination and the poor. Medicare covered the elderly, regardless of income. Consumer activism led to legislation making cars safer and raising standards for the food, drug, and cosmetics industries. LBJ insisted that the Great Society meet “not just the needs of the body but the desire for beauty and hunger for community.” In 1965, he sent

Congress the first presidential message on the environment, obtaining measures to control water and air pollution and to preserve the natural beauty of the American landscape. The National Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 funded artists, musicians, writers, and scholars and brought their work to public audiences.

Assessing Johnson's legislative accomplishments, Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield concluded that the president "has done more than FDR ever did, or ever thought of doing." The flood of reform legislation dwindled after 1966, however, when Democratic majorities in Congress shrank and conservative opposition to government programs gained ground. The Vietnam War dealt the largest blow, diverting Johnson's attention, spawning an antiwar movement that crippled his leadership, and devouring tax dollars that might have been used for reform (see chapter 29).

In 1968, Johnson obtained one more civil rights law, which banned discrimination in housing and jury service. He also signed the National Housing Act of 1968, which authorized an enormous increase in low-income housing: 1.7 million units over three years.

Legacies of the Great Society

Great Society programs like food stamps and Medicaid extended the reach and responsibility of the federal government. Federal expenditures on health, education, and welfare tripled, constituting more than 15 percent of the U.S. budget by 1970.

The resulting reduction in poverty was significant. The number of poor Americans fell from more than 20 percent of the population in 1959 to approximately 13 percent in 1968. Those who in Johnson's words "live[d] on the outskirts of hope" found new opportunities. To Rosemary Bray, what transformed her family of longtime welfare recipients into taxpaying workers "was the promise of the civil rights movement and the war on poverty." A Mexican American who learned to be a sheet metal worker through a job training program reported, "[My children] will finish high school and maybe go to college.... I see my family and I know the chains are broken."

Government spending in the 1960s improved the lives of millions, even if that spending never approached the amounts necessary to claim victory in the War on Poverty. The aged fared better than others. Many male-headed families rose out of poverty, but impoverishment among female-headed families increased. Whites escaped poverty faster than racial and ethnic minorities. Great Society programs contributed to a burgeoning black middle class,

yet one in three African Americans remained poverty-stricken (**Figure 28.1**).

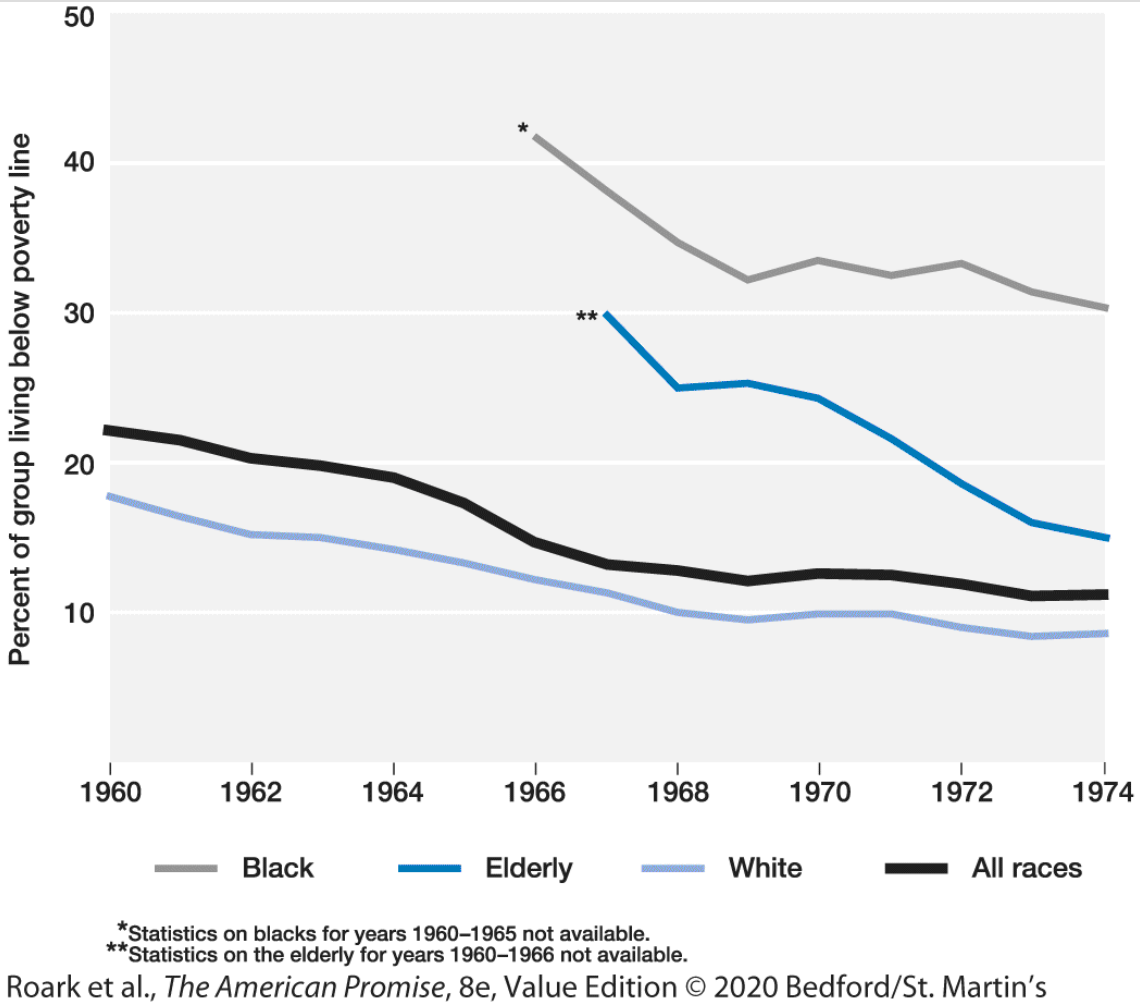

FIGURE 28.1 Poverty in the United States, 1960–1974

The results of economic growth and the Great Society's attack on poverty are seen here. Which groups experienced the sharpest decline in poverty, and what might account for the differences?

Description

"The horizontal axis has years and the vertical axis shows percent of group living below poverty line. In 1968, 40 percent of the Blacks were living below the poverty line but it reduced to 35 percent by 1970. With

minor fluctuations, it remained so during the subsequent years before it decreased to 31 percent in 1974. The elderly stood close in poverty to the Blacks as 30 percent of them were living below the poverty line in 1968. However, it dropped to 26 percent and followed a slow and gradual descent to below 20 percent by 1972. The Whites, on the other hand, experienced relatively less with only 18 percent living below the poverty line in 1960 that reduced to 10 percent by 1968. With hardly any variations, poverty amongst the Whites continued to account for less than 10 percent till 1974.

The graph shows that poverty among all races was alleviated over the years as the percent of people living below poverty line was 22 percent in 1960, which significantly reduced to 15 percent in 1966, and further reduced to 11 percent by 1974.

Statistics on blacks for years 1960 to 1965 not available.

Statistics on elderly for years 1960 to 1966 not available.

All data are approximate.”

Johnson’s War on Poverty triggered fierce political debate. Conservative critics charged that the government had overstepped its bounds and that the new programs discouraged individual initiative and fostered family dysfunction by giving handouts to the poor. Liberal critics claimed that focusing on training and education wrongly targeted poor people, rather than an economic system that could not provide enough adequately paying jobs.

Others noted that, unlike the New Deal, the Great Society avoided structural reform of the economy. Funded by

economic growth rather than new taxes on the rich or middle class, Johnson's poverty programs led to no significant redistribution of income. Paid for by prosperity, these programs would become vulnerable in less flush times. The Great Society left a mixed legacy, frustrating lofty liberal aspirations even as it bolstered conservatives' argument that the government was incapable of solving pressing social problems.

The Judicial Revolution

Led by the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren (1953–1969), the judiciary was another instrument of liberal change in the 1960s. In contrast to the federal courts of the Progressive Era and New Deal, which blocked reform, the **Warren Court** often moved ahead of Congress and public opinion, energizing the "rights revolution" of the 1960s. The Court granted new protections to disadvantaged groups and accused criminals, expanding the Constitution's promise of equality and individual rights.

Some of the Court's rulings established federal oversight of areas once left to the states. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision of 1954 (see chapter 27), the Court struck down southern states' maneuvers to avoid integration. In *Baker v. Carr* (1963) — which grew out of a complaint that sparsely populated rural

districts were often allotted far more representatives than densely populated urban areas — the Court established the principle of “one person, one vote” for state legislatures and for the House of Representatives.

The Court underscored protections for freedom of assembly and speech, including that of protesters. In addition, it announced for the first time a constitutional right to privacy in the birth control case, *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965). A unanimous Court in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) invalidated state laws banning interracial marriage, citing marriage as one of the “basic civil rights.”

In decisions that dramatically altered law enforcement practices, the Warren Court declared that the states, and not just the federal government, were bound by the Bill of Rights. *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963) established the duty to provide counsel to accused criminals who could not afford to hire a lawyer. *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) required police officers to inform suspects of their rights upon arrest. The Court overturned convictions based on evidence obtained wrongfully — whether by unlawful arrest, by electronic surveillance, or without a search warrant. While liberals celebrated these rulings as ensuring equal treatment in the criminal justice system, critics accused the justices of “handcuffing the police” and letting criminals go free.

The Court’s decisions on religion were even more divisive. A 1963 ruling found that requiring Bible reading and prayer in public schools violated the First Amendment principle of separation of church and state. Later judgments banned official prayer in public schools, even if students were not required to participate. The Court’s supporters saw these decisions as protecting the rights of non-Christians and atheists, leaving others free to worship on their own. But the rulings infuriated many Christians. Billboards demanding “Impeach Earl Warren” joined a larger backlash mounting against Great Society liberalism.

REVIEW

How did the Kennedy and Johnson administrations exemplify a liberal vision of the federal government?