

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

EXCERPT FROM LYNDON B. JOHNSON, "THE AMERICAN PROMISE," SPECIAL MESSAGE TO CONGRESS DELIVERED ON MARCH 15, 1965.

Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, I:107, pp. 281–287, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1966.

Of course, people cannot contribute to the Nation if they are never taught to read or write, if their bodies are stunted from hunger, if their sickness goes untended, if their life is spent in hopeless poverty just drawing a welfare check.

So we want to open the gates to opportunity. But we are also going to give all our people, black and white, the help that they need to walk through those gates.

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican-American school. Few of them could speak English, and I couldn't speak much Spanish. My students were poor and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them. But they knew it was so, because I saw it in their eyes. I often walked home late in the afternoon, after the classes were finished, wishing there was more that I could do. But all I knew was to teach them the little that I knew, hoping that it might help them against the hardships that lay ahead.

Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child.

I never thought then, in 1928, that I would be standing here in 1965. It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country.

But now I do have that chance—and I'll let you in on a secret—I mean to use it. And I hope that you will use it with me.

This is the richest and most powerful country which ever occupied the globe. The might of past empires is little compared to ours. But I do not want to be the President who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominion.

I want to be the President who educated young children to the wonders of their world. I want to be the President who helped to feed the hungry and to prepare them to be taxpayers instead of taxeaters.

I want to be the President who helped the poor to find their own way and who protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election.

I want to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races and all regions and all parties.

I want to be the President who helped to end war among the brothers of this earth.

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QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. When did Johnson deliver this speech?
2. At what event or occasion did Johnson deliver this speech?
3. For what audience or audiences was this speech written?
4. What does Johnson say he learned as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas?
5. What sort of president does Johnson intend to be?
6. What does Johnson mean when he says he wants to turn “taxeaters” into “taxpayers”?
7. Judging from this excerpt, what influence did Johnson’s teaching career have on the policies he pursued as president? Explain your answer.
8. What did Johnson intend to achieve with this speech?
9. How do you think the audience responded to Johnson’s speech? Explain your answer.
10. List three things this excerpt tells you about life in the United States at the time Johnson delivered it.

ACTIVITIES

Use your textbook and other print and online resources to complete the following activities.

1. Imagine you are one of President Johnson’s former students from the school in Cotulla, Texas. Write a short letter to the President describing your response to the speech and his description of your school.
2. Make a list of the societal problems (e.g., poverty, illiteracy) that Johnson refers to in this passage. Then review the poster’s list of Great Society initiatives passed during Johnson’s presidency. Which of those initiatives address problems that Johnson refers to in the speech?
3. Watch the video recording of this speech online:
<http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3386>. What insight did you gain from watching and listening to the speech that you would have missed if you had only read the transcript? Be specific.

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