

Talk about a Green New Deal is rife these days, but perhaps what we should be talking about instead is a Green Great Society. Actually, Lyndon Johnson's vision of the great society was green from the get-go, so maybe we could just call for a renewed Great Society. What the Great Society is known for now is its anti-poverty campaign. Conservatives have focused their attacks on that for decades. But the anti-poverty effort did have some clear successes that are now deeply embedded in our society, such as Medicaid and food stamps. And there was much more to Johnson's vision than anti-poverty efforts, including urban planning, education, and the environment.

When he announced the Great Society in a commencement speech at the University of Michigan, Johnson gave the environment a leading place. He began his May 1964 speech with the plight of American cities, where he decried "the decay of the centers and the despoiling of the suburbs." Then he turned to the environment: "The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air that we breathe, are threatened with pollution. Our parks are overcrowded, our seashores overburdened. Green fields and dense forests are disappearing." He added, "For once the battle is lost, once our natural splendor is destroyed, it can never be recaptured. And once man can no longer walk with beauty or wonder at nature his spirit will wither and his sustenance be wasted."

Johnson's Presidency was accompanied by a surge of environmental laws. Here are some of the laws he signed:

1963 The Clean Air Act

1964 The Pesticide Control Bill

The Water Quality Act

The Wilderness Act

1965 The Water Resource Planning Act

The Water and Sanitation Systems in Rural Areas Bill

The Solid Waste Disposal Bill

The Safe Water Conservation Act

1966 The Air Quality Act

National Historic Preservation Act

Endangered Species Act

1967 The National Water Commission

Wild and Scenic Rivers

Wetlands Preservation Bill

Many of these laws are remembered today only as the preludes to the stronger laws that followed in the 1970s. But these Johnson-era laws provided the foundation for that later legislation, and they set the precedent for vigorous federal protection of the environment.

Johnson never had FDR's level of popularity, and by the time he left office he was reviled by many in his own party. His hardscrabble roughness has not been appealing to biographers.

But among his very real accomplishments was launching the modern environmental era. That aspect of the Great Society vision, along with its attack on inequality, should make it an appealing model for present-day progressives.