

1A1-0 About 1A1 The Economic Opportunity Act

One theory of change is “punctuated equilibrium”. The concept that things plug along and stay pretty much the same, sometimes for decades, then a lot of changes happen within a short period of time. One example is the period between 1900 and the first World War. In 1906 Congress created the food and drug act. In 1909 the 13th Amendment enabled the collection of the national income tax. In 1913, Congress created the Federal Reserve.

Most people thought that most of the economy should be left to the private sector with no government interference (that mythology is still alive in some libertarian circles) but then the roaring twenties sputtered into the Great Depression which persuaded most people that government should take a more active role. It did:

- * regulating the economy through a Securities and Exchange Commission;
- * helping workers balance the power of employers by joining unions;
- * getting a fairer deal from the economy with a minimum wage;
- * establishing a safety net for people through Social Security;
- * providing direct employment through the WPA, PWA, and the National Youth Administration headed up by a young Lyndon B. Johnson which in concert with the Civilian Conservation Corps provided jobs to five million people including one million women.

So when the “Overton Window” opened in the 1960’s, LBJ was ready to: (1) reach back to ideas that had worked in the Depression and to expand them by creating the Neighborhood Youth Corps, (2) implement ideas that had been floated in the 1930’s like legal services, (3) take new theories of early childhood development from Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Albert Bandura and others and turn them into programs like Head Start, and (4) pursue the goals of social movements like civil rights. The good news is that LBJ catalyzed an avalanche of new federal programs like Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, the Civil Rights Act, and the EOA of 1964. The other news is that advocacy groups have been overly focused on pushing the presidential button ever since then, but have not produced anything like what happened in the 1960’s.

We think of FDR and the New Deal, JFK and Camelot, LBJ and the Great Society, Ronald Reagan and the Shining City on the Hill, but it is incredibly difficult to sort out who and/or what are responsible creating change – individuals, public perceptions, racism, social movements, political parties, inertia, checks and balances, lobbyists, money, ideological movements, religious beliefs and on and on.

This archive offers no magic wand to resolve this dilemma. Instead, it shows how a few thousand people grabbed the elephant and describes their handholds.