
Politics or Principle: Why Did L.B.J. Sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964?



Overview: On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson (L.B.J.) of Texas signed a civil-rights bill that prohibited discrimination in voting, education, employment and other areas of American life. As a US senator, he had helped to weaken such bills because he felt that it was the job of the states, not the federal government, to protect civil rights. Why did President Johnson change his mind? Did he sign the bill because he thought it would help him win the Presidential election or because he felt it was the right thing to do?

The Documents:

Document A: L.B.J. the Teacher

Document B: Public Opinion on Civil Rights (charts)

Document C: Pressure from the South (map)

Document D: Living Down the Past (cartoon)

Document E: "Free at Last"

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Politics or Principle

Directions: Many decisions that people make are based on politics; others are based on principle. Some decisions are based on both. A political decision is calculated, thought-out, and sometimes in one's self interest. A principled decision is based on strongly-held beliefs.

Below are eight decisions. With a partner, discuss each and place a check in the box that matches your thinking. Be prepared to discuss your responses in class.

| | Politics | Principle | Both |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. High school boy decides to mow the lawn before asking dad for use of the family car. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. A woman decides not to pay taxes to show her opposition to a war. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. After seeing polls, candidate changes his position on the death penalty. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Student council votes to extend the lunch hour by 15 minutes. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. After years of silence, major league slugger Mark McGwire admits to using steroids. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Ignoring threats, a mother decides to testify in a trial as a witness to an assault. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Teacher agrees to raise a grade for a basketball star after pressure from coach and assistant principal. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Students and teachers risk being removed from school because they insist on holding open prayer sessions during lunch. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Politics or Principle: Why Did L.B.J. Sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

Lyndon Johnson was born in 1908 on a farm near Stonewall in the Hill Country of central Texas. It was a long way from the White House. Despite the humble surroundings, Johnson was smart and had tons of energy. While still in college, at the age of 20, he took a job teaching fifth, sixth and seventh grade at a segregated Mexican-American school in Cotulla, Texas. After earning his teaching degree, he went to work at Sam Houston High School in Houston. Johnson poured himself into his teaching. A fellow teacher called him a “steam engine in pants.” In 1931, Johnson took this ambition and enthusiasm to Washington, D.C., where he worked as a congressional aide.

In 1937, Johnson won a Texas seat in the US House of Representatives, holding the position for 11 years. When World War II broke out, he enlisted in the United States Navy as a lieutenant commander, serving in the South Pacific until President Roosevelt recalled him to Washington.

In 1948, Texans elected Johnson to the first of two six-year terms in the United States Senate. He quickly became a star, though his workday left his aides exhausted. In fact, Johnson was said to have two work days – up at 6:00 A.M., work until early afternoon followed by a two-hour nap in his pajamas. Then it was up again at 4:00 P.M., a shower, a fresh change of clothes, and work until midnight or beyond. When Democrats took control of the Senate in 1954, Johnson became **majority leader**. In that role, he became one of the most effective, hard-working leaders ever to serve in the US Senate.

During his senate years, Johnson, like most Southerners, did not support federal **civil rights** laws. When President Harry Truman proposed laws against **lynching** and **poll taxes**, Johnson opposed them. The Texas senator believed it was

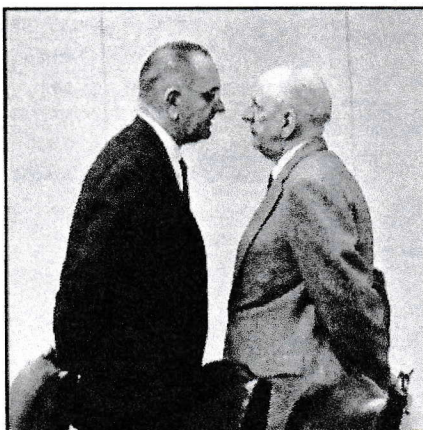
the job of the states, not the federal government, to deal with those issues. In 1957, Johnson did support a federal law on voting rights, but the final bill was so **watered-down** it had little effect.

Johnson’s next step in his climb to political power was the vice-presidency. He’d wanted to be president, but in 1960 lost the Democratic Party’s nomination to John F. Kennedy. With one eye on Texas electoral votes, Kennedy chose

Johnson as his running mate.

Three years later, Kennedy was killed. Through this tragic twist of fate, Johnson got what he wanted: he was suddenly President of the United States.

When Kennedy died, a meaningful civil-rights bill was struggling to get through Congress. Martin Luther King’s 1963 March on Washington and



the Kennedy promise of equality for all were fresh on America’s mind. But the bill was not a sure thing until Johnson stood behind it, despite the opposition of fellow Southerners, notably Senator Richard Russell of Georgia (shown in photo). Johnson’s efforts paid off. On July 2, 1964, he signed the Civil Rights Act into law. The bill expanded voting rights, strengthened equal employment opportunity, and guaranteed all Americans the right to use public facilities such as schools, restaurants and swimming pools. It was a big moment in history.

But what drove Johnson to push so hard for civil rights? The 1964 presidential election was just around the corner, and Johnson wanted to be re-elected. Was political ambition his motivating force, or was there something more? Your task is to examine the five documents that follow and answer the question: *Politics or Principle: Why did Lyndon B. Johnson sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964?*

Background Essay Questions

1. What does it mean to say that Johnson's birthplace was "a long way from the White House"?
2. When and where did Lyndon Johnson teach?
3. Who was President when Johnson was first elected to the US House of Representatives?
4. What evidence is there that Johnson was a hard worker?
5. In his earlier years in Congress, what was Johnson's position on national civil-rights laws?
6. How did Johnson get to be President of the United States?
7. What were three of the important rights guaranteed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964?
8. Define each of the following:

majority leader

civil rights

lynching

poll tax

watered-down

Timeline

1948 – Lyndon Johnson elected Texas US senator by 87 votes.

1960 – John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson elected President and Vice President of US

1961 – NASA opens the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston.

1963 – President John Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas.

1963 – Lyndon Johnson becomes president of the United States.

1968 – Johnson decides not to run for re-election.

Document A

Source: From a speech delivered by President Johnson to Congress titled "The American Promise," March 15, 1965.

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Tex., 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.



Lyndon Johnson (center) and his students at Welhausen Elementary School, Cotulla, Texas, May 7, 1929

Document Analysis

1. Who are the students in this photograph?
2. How are the students dressed? What does that tell you about them and their families?
3. What are some of the life difficulties they faced?
4. Which parts of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (see end of Background Essay) might have helped Johnson's students overcome these difficulties?
5. How can this document be used to help answer the Mini-Q question?