THE ANATOMY OF A SPEECH

Lyndon Johnson's
Great Society Address
Cover design by Marla Camp.
The Anatomy of a Speech: 
Lyndon Johnson's 
Great Society Address

ROBERT M. WARNER
Introduction

University commencements customarily feature addresses by leading figures in public service, education or the arts. While many of these discourses are soon forgotten, conveying little more than words of encouragement to the departing graduates, a few stand out as historically important. One of these was the speech given at the University of Michigan by President Lyndon B. Johnson in May, 1964. Delivered only six months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and remembered now as the "Great Society Address," the speech provided the theme for much of the new Johnson administration's domestic program. The story of that appearance by the President and the ideas he presented on that occasion comprise the subject of Robert Warner's account, "The Anatomy of a Speech—Lyndon Johnson's Great Society Address." Utilizing the resources of both the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and the Bentley Historical Library, the author has reconstructed the circumstances surrounding the University's invitation to Johnson to address its graduates and skillfully examined the way in which the President's speech reached its final form.

Robert Warner first joined the staff of the Michigan Historical Collections as a graduate assistant in 1953. He has been director of the Michigan Historical Collections, the Bentley Historical Library since 1966. He is a past president of the Society of American Archivists and holds academic appointments in both the School of Library Science and the Department of History of the University of Michigan.

Richard M. Doolen
Assistant Director
The Anatomy of a Speech
Lyndon Johnson’s
Great Society Address

by Robert M. Warner

"THE WORLD'S LARGEST COMMENCEMENT" headlined the University of Michigan alumni magazine's story of Lyndon Johnson's Ann Arbor appearance on May 22, 1964 in a hyperbole that any good Texan would approve. Without doubt it was one of the biggest audiences Lyndon Johnson ever addressed. One estimate put the number of those hearing him at 70,000, another at over 85,000. In any event, an enormous number of people were in Michigan Stadium on that warm May morning. More came to this event than to many of the Saturday fall football games when the Michigan Wolverines battled some Big Ten rival. The setting for the presidential visit was in many ways similar to a football Saturday, although there were no hawkers of souvenirs and no hot dog stands. The grassy field was brilliantly green. The smartly dressed University band turned out in full strength. A large platform, elaborately decorated with a small forest of potted trees and a colorful array of flags and flowers, had been constructed at the north end of the stadium to accommodate the 300 guests of honor. Behind the speaker’s platform were wide maize and blue streamers extending to the top of the stadium, adding more color to the proceedings, although this was not the reason for them. The Secret Service did not want anyone sitting behind the President. Actually, earlier in the morning there had been a similar array of streamers at the south end of the stadium, because the security people were convinced that the large crowd predicted by the University would not appear, and they did not want the television cameras to reveal hundreds of empty seats. Their fears, of course, were completely groundless. The streamers had to come down to accommodate the large numbers of people who arrived from every corner of the state.

The weather on this Friday morning was exactly as the White House weather service had predicted, clear and hot. Even though it was only mid-morning when the festivities got under way, the temperature was warm and humid. On a football Saturday the tunnel into the stadium resounds with the heavy footfall of a hundred or
more husky young men—the Michigan team and its opponent for the day. On this spring day, however, black-gowned men and women, adorned with brightly colored academic hoods, solemnly marched through the tunnel into the stadium forming the anachronistic but still awe-inspiring University procession. When President Johnson and University President Harlan Hatcher came into view, they were greeted with a great roar from the people in the stadium.

One of the honorary degree recipients who was in the procession reflected the excitement of the day in his diary:

We caught a glimpse of the huge Stadium, filled with people and with the graduating students being seated in the field itself. It was a thrilling sight. We marched to the platform erected at the north end of the Stadium. Every precaution had been taken to protect the President from some crank or crackpot, and the place was filled with peace officers. . . .

We took our seats on the platform—each one having his seat marked. I sat about five seats away from President Johnson. The music was good—taps excellent, the singing strong and clear. There was a great feeling by all of the importance of the event—you sensed it strongly.³

Ordinarily, the deans of the various colleges have to do some arm twisting to get professors to participate in commencement, but not for commencement 1964. There were more volunteers than could be accepted, and the posts had to be carefully assigned to reflect University constituencies. In a similar departure from recent tradition a large proportion of the graduates showed up for the occasion. In the 1950s and 1960s it had become fashionable, particularly for undergraduates, to skip commencement, but this was not so in 1964. Most of the 4,943 graduates turned out to occupy the prime seats that had been allotted them in the middle of the field, near the speaker's stand. Although the rows of chairs did not extend from one end zone to the other, they filled virtually two-thirds of the vast green field.

An hour before the beginning of the procession, the Presidential jet landed at Detroit's Metropolitan Airport, where University of Michigan Vice-President Marvin Niehuss and a delegation of the major political leaders of the state formed the welcoming committee. Governor George Romney, U.S. Senators Philip Hart and Patrick McNamara, Detroit's mayor, Jerome Cavanagh, and labor leader August (Gus) Scholle were all on hand to greet the President. In his airport remarks Johnson noted the presence of several members of Congress from Michigan: Neil Staebler, Martha Griffiths, James O'Hara, John Dingell, and John Lesinski. He also introduced the
people from Michigan serving in his administration: G. Mennen Williams, Wilbur Cohen, and Hobart Taylor. He paid special tribute to the people of Detroit, with a greeting appropriate for the mid-sixties but filled with irony a decade later. Detroit and its people, he said, "are the herald of hope in America. Prosperity in America must begin here in Detroit. You folks in Detroit put American Citizens on wheels; you have [the] American economy on the move. Unemployment in Detroit is down, profits are up, wages are good, and there is no problem too tough or too challenging for us to solve." He paid tribute to labor leader Scholle and also to industrialist Henry Ford. With them "by his side," the President noted "the sky is the limit and the sky is bright today."4 After this brief political foray, Johnson immediately left to keep his scheduled date with the University of Michigan graduating class of 1964.

How did it happen that Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan came to be the site of this major speech, which set the tone of the domestic sphere of the Johnson administration and also of the forthcoming presidential campaign? As with many other facets of the Johnson administration, the origins lay in the Kennedy administration. In July, 1963, Roger Lowenstein, a senior in the University of Michigan and student president of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, wrote a letter to the President of the University, Harlan Hatcher, suggesting that he invite John F. Kennedy to address the 1964 graduating class. Lowenstein pointed out that this would be most appropriate since it was at the University of Michigan that Kennedy had first mentioned the concept of the Peace Corps. Hatcher received Lowenstein's suggestion favorably.5 On October 11, 1963, Hatcher wrote the President inviting him to the Ann Arbor commencement. Just a month before Kennedy's assassination Hatcher received a reply from presidential assistant, Kenneth O'Donnell, indicating that the President was interested in making the speech but stating that it was too early to make a firm commitment. He suggested that Hatcher write again about March 1, 1964 for definite confirmation.6 Very soon after the assassination the University decided to reissue the invitation to the new President, Lyndon Johnson. Consequently Hatcher, on December 19, sent off the invitation.7

Soon after the first of the year, Hatcher received a reply from O'Donnell that was much like the one he had received when O'Donnell was serving Kennedy. O'Donnell told Hatcher that the President would consider the invitation and suggested that he check back on the first of April for confirmation.8 This information was relayed to U.S. Senator Philip Hart, who wrote Hatcher that the response was "perfunctory." Hart promised to continue working to secure Johnson for the occasion.9 These efforts succeeded when on April 14, the University announced that Johnson had accepted the invitation to be Michigan's commencement speaker. The only modification was the

\{ 3 \}
change of date from the 23rd of May to the 22nd to accommodate the President's schedule.¹⁰

There were all the usual preparations for a Presidential visit. The Secret Service was in the city days before the event to check all the arrangements. The head of the University security service arranged for one grim detail: an inconspicuous station wagon was fitted out to serve as an ambulance, and a route was selected to the University Hospital should such services be needed by the President.¹¹

Nothing unplanned occurred, however, and the program went off without incident. It began at 10 o'clock with an invocation and the national anthem. Then the degrees were awarded—bachelors', masters', and doctorates, and finally the honorary degrees.¹²

President Johnson received his honorary L.L.D. last. Along with the customary University diploma, Hatcher, with a touch of humor, also gave Johnson "the pen with which I signed it."¹³ This part of the commencement ceremonies completed, the program moved to the featured event—the President's address. In a forceful manner, the President, using a teleprompter, delivered his Great Society speech, a bold and idealistic call not only to the graduates but to the entire nation.

The Great Society speech began at 10:55 and ended at 11:15, a total of twenty minutes—not a long speech, but ten minutes longer than the original schedule had indicated. According to the official White House record, the speech was interrupted fourteen times with applause. An unknown aide indicated on his copy of the speech where the applause had come and noted quite accurately at the end of the manuscript, "long applause."¹⁴

A decade and a half later this speech seems to pass the test of time. Much of what it contained has meaning for today. There is little that seems dated and pertinent only to another era. Because it dealt with domestic matters and not foreign affairs, it ignored the problems of the Vietnam War, which were to plague so many of Johnson's utterances and make them seem inappropriate when read today. In his speech Johnson called upon the best instincts of his audience. He urged the people not to be content with the nation as it was but to look ahead, particularly at three areas where great problems remained. The first of these was the city, which continued to attract more and more people yet seemingly met fewer of their needs. The second was the countryside, where Johnson pointed to the problems of pollution, overcrowding, and the desecration of the natural splendor. The third area of challenge for the future was in the classroom, where much still needed to be done, both in school-building and in the improvement of teaching. He asked his audience to join in the effort to meet these problems, to end poverty, to work for peace, and to bring about equality regardless of race. For his own part, he promised to convene conferences of the best minds to work
on these far-reaching problems. In all, it was a very good speech, well delivered, and did the President justice.

From the Presidential papers of Lyndon Johnson, it is evident that the President and his closest advisors and speechwriters viewed this as a speech that would perhaps set the tone of not only the forthcoming 1964 election but also of the entire Johnson administration in the area of domestic policy. For this reason, the Johnson papers contain a large number of suggestions from a variety of persons as to what should be included in the address. In fact, some associates submitted full drafts of speeches for consideration. Most interesting of all, however, are drafts of the speech as it actually developed. Through these we can see how the speech was written and what modifications were made. What we will probably never know is exactly what percentage of input from what individual went into making this speech and, most important of all, how much of the President’s own thoughts served as a catalyst for the speech or how much the speechwriter served as a catalyst for Johnson’s thinking. As far as the President’s impact is concerned, it is fair to say that the speech and the thoughts therein were typical of the man and his attitude toward his job. He discussed the great society idea with his aides, and he made the decision to go with the Goodwin draft rather than other versions. Beyond that, we cannot say specifically how much his speech reflected his own precise thinking regarding the topics at hand.

Contained in the Presidential archives is a significant memorandum from Bill Moyers to George Reedy that was prepared the day before the speech was given, apparently to reflect the President’s own views about the speech. The memorandum made eight points. One, that although this was an election year, the President was “also thinking of the next generation” in writing the speech. Two, the President, since he assumed office, had spent a good deal of time thinking about the long-term consequences of his decisions. Three, the President must look far into the future at the consequences of his actions, or there would not be effective national planning. Only the Presidential office “has power to match responsibility and means to match motives.” Four, since the President was worried that political considerations would overshadow long-term national concerns, he hoped in this speech to focus on major issues of general significance to the nation. Five, the three points he made concerning the cities, the countryside, and the classroom were “deliberately chosen by the President for this speech.” Six, the President recognized urbanization as inevitable but thought that urbanization could be tempered if people had access to the outdoors and outdoor influences. Seven, he deliberately chose a university commencement to express these ideas because his own experience in the Great Depression showed him what motivated young people could accomplish. Eight, he saw his office
Johnson's arrival at Willow Run Airport. Behind the President are Neil Staebler, U.S. Senator Philip Hart, Governor George Romney, and Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh.
University Vice-President Marvin Niehuss, Governor George Romney, President Johnson, University President Harlan Hatcher, Assistant to the President of the University Erich Walter.
The University of Michigan Stadium filled on three sides for the address. To the left are tables set up for the Press.

as one offering a great opportunity to provide moral leadership for the whole country and to focus the public's attention on these major issues. From these various points, it is clear, if the Moyers' memo reflects the President's thinking (and there is no reason to assume otherwise), that Johnson looked upon this speech as one of decisive significance, that the setting was chosen thoughtfully, and the words were given much attention by Johnson himself.17

Among those giving advice was Wilbur J. Cohen, a member of the faculty of the University of Michigan, then serving as Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. Cohen gave specific information on what the University of Michigan was doing about problems relating to poverty, aging, water pollution, public health, and other areas of concern to the nation. He noted that the University was a leader in educating foreign students and had been the site for the announcement of the Peace Corps. Since this memo was received only a few days before the speech was to be given, it apparently had no effect on the final draft.18 Certainly the specific references to the University of Michigan were all excluded. Even if the memo had been received earlier, this would probably have been the case since the speech-drafters and the President wanted to avoid any semblance of parochialism in the address. To be sure, it was given at the University of Michigan, but it was in fact a national policy speech.

Another memo, also of May 18, was addressed to Bill Moyers by Roy Courage, who was the administrative assistant for Neil Staebler, Michigan congressman-at-large. This statement provided an exte-
sive summary of current Michigan politics and identified various political contests occurring in Michigan in 1964. It noted that Senator Hart was running for re-election and that Neil Staebler would probably be the Democratic nominee for governor, facing incumbent George Romney. None of this material found its way into the speech, and it probably was not intended for that purpose in any case.

Jim Fitzpatrick, chairman of the Young Citizens for Johnson, presented a long memo to Jack Valenti and Moyers centering on the youth role in the administration's proposed poverty bill, and including a draft for the speech. Fitzpatrick no doubt should receive credit for his enthusiasm, but his suggestions do not appear to have affected the final draft. They were particularly designed to provide support for the Economic Opportunity Act then pending in Congress.

Another suggested full draft came from Horace Busby. He used the "Great Society" theme but developed the idea quite differently from the form it assumed in the final speech. His draft pointed out that the United States had fulfilled the traditional American dream of national abundance and leisure for all. What was needed now, he concluded, was a new vision to accommodate great scientific and technological capabilities.

Two others made mention of the Great Society in their suggestions. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall sent Moyers a copy of his April 18 speech given at the University of Rhode Island. Although this speech had used the term "Great Society," its effect on the final draft is not clear. In his memo, Fred Ricci, executive secretary of the Young Democratic Clubs of America, used the phrase "a great society of the highest order" and again emphasized the use of volunteers in fighting poverty in America.

Eric Goldman, in his critical study of Lyndon Johnson, contends that he had a significant role in shaping the speech. He recounts visiting with Richard Goodwin, who was being "badgered" by the President "for a 'big theme' that would characterize the administration." When Goodwin subsequently asked for further advice on a "big theme" speech, Goldman recommended a strong statement that would place modern America in historical perspective and call upon the nation "to clean up the unfinished business of the second American era—the creation of a generally affluent society—while envisioning and working toward what lay beyond." He suggested "the Good Society" as the slogan for the speech.

All of the drafts and suggestions were no doubt examined by the speechwriters and perhaps helped to shape the address. The existing papers, however, make clear that for all practical purposes the Great Society speech was the work primarily of one person, speechwriter Richard Goodwin, whose ideas were refined and modified somewhat by Bill Moyers.
The Ann Arbor speech was probably Johnson's most important pronouncement on domestic matters. This was the intention of the President at the time, and its significance was recognized by the press in its reporting of the event. The passage of more than a decade has confirmed the assessment.

ARCHIVAL FOOTNOTE

With one exception all the drafts of the speech and manuscript copies of it are a part of the Johnson papers in the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. The actual teleprompter cards used by Johnson in giving the speech are located in the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan. When I heard the speech, I thought it quite important and suggested to the then director of the Michigan Historical Collections that we attempt to acquire the original manuscript for the University archives. Agreeing, the director passed on the suggestion to Secretary of the University Erich Walter, who made the request to the President. The cards were autographed by the President and sent to the University by his aide, along with the following letter:38

July 20, 1964

"Dear Mr. Walter:

After a great search of inside suit coat pockets, the cards that the President used for his Ann Arbor speech were found.

It was a pleasure for him to sign them and have me send them to you. . . ."

Sincerely,
/s/ Ivan Sinclair
Assistant to the President
FOOTNOTES

1 *Michigan Alumnus*, LXX (June 1964), 287.

2 *Ibid.* In describing the 1964 commencement and preparations for it, I have relied upon the article noted above in addition to Erich A. Walter's "Once in A Hundred and Twenty Years," *Ibid.*, 291–295, and my own recollections.

3 Roscoe O. Bonisteel Diary, May 22, 1964, Roscoe Bonisteel Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan, hereafter cited as Bentley Historical Library.

4 "Remarks of the President upon arrival at Metropolitan Airport Wayne County, Detroit, Michigan," May 22, 1964. Official White House news release, Box 7, L. B. Johnson Statements in the Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, hereafter cited as Lyndon B. Johnson Papers. A complete file of copies of all documents from the Johnson papers cited in this article plus other materials relating to the Great Society speech are located in the Bentley Historical Library, under the heading "Michigan University Commencement 1964."

5 Roger Lowenstein to Harlan Hatcher, July 25, 1963; Harlan Hatcher to Roger Lowenstein, August 15, 1963, Box 36, Harlan Hatcher Papers, Bentley Historical Library.

6 Harlan Hatcher to President Lyndon B. Johnson, October 11, 1963; Kenneth O'Donnell to Harlan Hatcher, October 24, 1963, Box 36, Harlan Hatcher Papers.


8 Kenneth O'Donnell to Harlan Hatcher, January 8, 1964, Box 36, Harlan Hatcher Papers.


10 Erich Walter reports that the acceptance came in a telephone call from Johnson to Hatcher on April 14. Walter, "Once in A Hundred and Twenty Years," p. 291.

11 The writer's next door neighbor was Wesley Sanford, head of the security service. I saw the station wagon being fitted and talked with him about it. R.M.W.

12 One of those who did not receive an honorary degree was Thurgood Marshall, whom Johnson would later appoint to the Supreme Court. He was offered a degree but was unable to attend the commencement to accept it. Thurgood Marshall to Erich Walter, April 28, 1964, Box 8, Michigan University. Assistant to the President Papers, Bentley Historical Library.

13 "World's Largest Commencement," and Walter, "Once In A Hundred and Twenty Years." Johnson's citation read:

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON, President of the United States. Assuming an office which an act of wanton hatred had left vacant, President Johnson picked up the reins of government with an assurance born of understanding and experience and entered upon a task for which he was pre-eminently fitted: a ministry of reconciliation joined with vigorous pursuit of peace and human welfare. He has labored to improve the lot of citizens deprived of civil rights and of economic opportunity; he has yet avoided those doctrinaire antagonisms which can render the most humane of purposes inhumane. He has shown a realistic awareness of human complexity, a worthy American
respect for diversity, and a will to act always in the spirit of an immortal predecessor—"with malice toward none and with charity for all." Upon this greatly gifted man and leader of men, the University respectfully confers the degree Doctor of Civil Law.

14 "Flat Release to PM Papers Friday May 22, 1964 . . . Remarks of the President . . ." Box 7, L. B. Johnson Statements, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers. There is a tape recording of the speech in the WUOM Archive, Bentley Historical Library. [Tape D743]


16 Hugh Sidey, A Very Personal Presidency, Lyndon Johnson in the White House (New York, 1968), p. 59. Sidey’s account is the most complete discussion of the origin of the speech, Goodwin’s role and the part other Johnson aides played in the story. See pp. 49, 54–66.

17 Bill Moyers to George Reedy memo, “The President’s Speech on the Great Society,” May 21, 1964, Box 36, L. B. Johnson Speeches, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers.


23 Eric F. Goldman, The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson (New York, 1969), pp. 164–165. Goldman also says that Goodwin was responsible for generating many of the memos and suggestions for the speech. Ibid.


25 There seem to have been three drafts by Bill Moyers and one by Douglass Cater in addition to the three by Richard Goodwin. Box 36, L. B. Johnson Speeches; Box 7, L. B. Johnson Statements, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers. Among the less fortunate late additions added by Moyers were two weak jokes. Example: “This university has been coeducational since 1870, but I do not believe it was on the basis of your accomplishment that a Detroit High School girl said, ‘In choosing a college, you first have to decide whether you want a coeducational school or an educational school.’”

26 Affidavit of William B. Cudlip, May 22, 1964 at 6:30 p.m., and sworn to on May 26, 1964, Box 7. Assistant to the President Papers. Johnson was pleased with his honorary degree—“It is with a special pride,” he wrote, “that I tell my

414
friends that I am an honorary alumnus of the University of Michigan." Lyndon
B. Johnson to Harlan Hatcher, June 4, 1964, Box 36, Harlan Hatcher Papers.
27 G. Mennen Williams to thirty-two leaders, June 17, [1964], Box A47, G. Mennen Williams Papers, Bentley Historical Library.
38 Special Correspondents File, Bentley Historical Library.