The Six Great Societies

URSULA HACKETT
University of Oxford

"The Great Society" denotes, variously: a slogan or shorthand, a utopia, a means, an end, an era, and a set of normative claims. This article tracks the changing meanings of The Great Society in order to clarify and formalize scholarly claims about the Johnson administration. Employing Edward Sapir's conception of "condensation symbols" and Keith Donnellan's distinction between "referential" and "attributive" descriptions, I create a typology of six Great Societies and trace the origins and deployment of these six meanings through qualitative textual analysis of presidential speeches, newspapers, and scholarly writings. Attributive uses of the term gave way to referential uses in the late 1960s, as radical movements and practical implementation problems eclipsed utopian visions of a great society. The analysis illuminates Johnson's character and contributes to the literature on the rhetorical presidency by demonstrating the importance of context, ambiguity, and the attribution of descriptive content to political slogans.

The rhetoric, which today seems so hollow, not because it is untrue, but because it is unaccompanied by action, shadow without substance, seemed then—as the decade of the sixties neared its midpoint—a description of possibility, a manifesto of intent. And, however foolish or arrogant the speeches and messages of the sixties sound, they are authentic, like faded daguerrotypes, a reminder to our more cynical age of that time when public service, the turbulent energies of a whole nation, seemed bursting with possibilities—conquer poverty, walk on the moon, build a Great Society.
—Richard Goodwin (1989, 292)

On May 7, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson (or LBJ) gave a speech at Ohio University in which he invited his audience to help build "The Great Society": "It is a Society where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled. Where no man who wants work will fail to find it. Where no citizen will be barred from any door because of his birthplace or his color or his church" (Johnson 1964a). On May 22, he fleshed out his vision for the Great Society at the University of Michigan. "The Great Society rests on

Ursula Hackett is a junior research fellow in U.S. politics at the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on U.S. politics, federalism, education policy, religion and politics, and the methodology of qualitative comparative analysis.

abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time" (Johnson 1964b). The president laid out a program for the achievement of this goal by rebuilding America's urban infrastructure, clearing up environmental pollution, and improving schools. In Congress, Johnson and his legislative lieutenants moved to pass large quantities of social welfare legislation. They were extraordinarily successful. In the space of a few years, the president signed the Civil Rights Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, and many other pieces of legislation.

The phrase *the Great Society* denotes, variously a slogan or shorthand, a utopia, a means, an end, an era, and a set of normative claims.[1] The term has been used in strikingly different ways by politicians, activists, and scholars since the Johnson era. This article tracks the changing meanings of the Great Society in order to clarify and formalize scholarly claims about the Johnson administration and the rhetorical presidency. Using Keith Donnellan's distinction between "attributive" and "referential" descriptions and Edward Sapir's conception of "condensation symbols," I create a typology of six Great Societies and trace the deployment of these six meanings through textual analysis of presidential speeches, newspapers, and scholarly writings.[2]

1. The phrase *the Great Society* has a rich genealogy (Gettleman and Murmelstein 1967). It was first widely used during the 1381 English Peasants' Revolt also known as The Great Rising. Led by Wat Tyler, a group of artisans, village officials, townsfolk,k and peasants took the name *the Great Society* in their rebellion against the feudal establishment. They sought lower taxation and an end to serfdom but were rebuffed by King Richard II and other members of the nobility. Although playwright Beverley Cross appeared to link this rebellious group to the Johnson administration in his 1974 play *The Great Society: The Peasant's Revolt of 1381*, there is no evidence that LBJ or his speechwriters were aware of the medieval use of this phrase (Cross 1974; Lewsen 1974; Matheson 1998, 146). The modern use of the term *great* to mean "excellent" or "admirable" was an American development of the nineteenth century. In the medieval context, *great* meant large, emotional, strong, or pregnant (Simpson 2013). Similarly, there is no evidence that the Great Society of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* directly influenced LBJ's choice of words in his Ohio University speech on May 7, 1964 (Smith 1993, bk. IV, chap. 2). But Smith's vision of the Great Society as a global economic community constituted by bonds of international trade has parallels in LBJ's arguments against isolation, and the medieval usage of the Great Society is reminiscent of LBJ's populist Community Action Projects, tax cuts, and calls for equality of opportunity (Gettleman and Murmelstein 1967, 15).

Although there is no evidence that they read either work closely, if at all, the president and his chief speechwriter, Richard Goodwin, may have been influenced by Graham Wallas's *The Great Society* and John Dewey's *The Public and Is Problems* (Dewey 1927; Wallas 1914). As an educator during the 1920s LBJ might have been aware of Dewey, one of America's most influential educational reformers (Apostle 1965). Drawing upon Wallas, Dewey and his contemporary Harold Lasswell use the Great Society to refer to the modern, globalized, industrial world in which new inventions revolutionize production, travel, and communication (Lasswell 1927, 221). The liberalism and pragmatism of Lasswell, Wallas, and Dewey are intellectual antecedents of the New Deal and the Great Society. Dewey's commitment to democracy, his involvement with the forerunner to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and his belief in education as a site of social reform, all find echoes in the Johnson administration's programs. However, despite similarities in their views on education, politics, and civil society, LBJ's Great Society is not that of Wallas and Dewey. The Great Society Wallas and Dewey describe is dangerous, unstable, mechanical, and impersonal. Wallas's book is devoted to understanding "the difficulties created by the formation of what I have called the Great Society" (Wallas 1914, 20); Dewey's is devoted to explaining "how it is that the machine age in developing the Great Society has invaded and partially disintegrated the small communities of former times without generating a Great Community" (Dewey 1927, 126-27). Johnson's use of the phrase *the Great Society* corresponds far better to the "Great Community" than to Dewey's Great Society.

2. Keith Donnellan is a philosopher of language at University of California, Los Angeles. He is best known for his work on proper names and descriptions. Edward Sapir was an anthropologist–linguist whose early twentieth-century work on symbolism forms the basis of modern research on political rhetoric by scholars such as Murray Edelman and others.

By distinguishing different meanings of the Great Society, this article contributes to the literature on presidential rhetoric that followed Neustadt's *Presidential Power* (Neustadt 1960; see also Sorenson 1979). The central question examined by this literature is whether presidents can influence public opinion using the "bully pulpit," and if so how (Cohen 1995; Edwards 2003; Kingdon 1995; Wood, Owens, and Durham 2005). Deploying sophisticated content analysis techniques, scholars examine the effects of presidential rhetoric in election campaigns, public policy, public opinion, and the operation of government (Rhodes 2013; Schonhardt-Bailey, Yager, and Lahlou 2012; Schroedel et al. 2013). But recently, attention has turned toward the production of presidential rhetoric as a dependent variable: the study of the antecedent conditions of presidential speeches and context in which he communicates (Arthur and Woods 2013; Lim 2002; Rowland, Payne, and Payne 1984). Literature in this latter category tends to deemphasize the role of the president as a political entrepreneur who sets his own agenda, focusing instead upon the institutional framework he inherits and the broader cultural context in which he struggles to assert his leadership (Skowronek 2011). This article considers changes in how Johnson, his newspaper allies, and critics used the rhetoric of the Great Society and what those changes indicate about Johnson, his programs and era, and the production of presidential rhetoric more broadly (Schuman, Corning, and Schwartz 2012; Zarefsky 2004).

I find evidence of a radical shift in presidential usage of the rhetoric of the Great Society over the course of the Johnson administration, indicative of a shift in presidential priorities and public opinion during the course of the 1960s. Deploying a qualitative, explicitly interdisciplinary approach to presidential speeches and newspaper articles, this analysis complements existing statistical work in political science. I adjudicate between competing hypotheses about the effects of mounting policy problems, growing public criticism, and speechwriter professionalization, upon Johnson's usage of Great Society rhetoric. Elucidating several meanings of the Great Society helps resolve three puzzles: What was the Great Society? How did social and institutional factors shape LBJ's usage of Great Society rhetoric? And why do disagreements persist among historians and political scientists as to the Great Society's origins, scope, and legacy? This article argues that the Great Society is a "condensation symbol," to use Edmund Sapir's term: it is a rhetorically important expression with many different meanings, condensing several layers of historical significance and emotional content (Sapir 1932). I argue that there are in fact six Great Societies, not one, and that some usages function better as rhetorically significant symbols than others.

Of the six main uses of the phrase *the Great Society*, three are "attributive" and three are "referential" definite descriptions. In the attributive use of the phrase, descriptive content is an essential part of the specification of truth conditions. In other words, the phrase *the Great Society* is used to denote an end state, whether achievable or not, that is actually or supposedly "great." By contrast, in the referential use of the phrase, the descriptive content is used merely to guide the audience to a particular individual, era, mechanism, or slogan. No assumptions are made about the "greatness" of the referent; indeed, it is sometimes an unpleasantly necessary means to a further end. The multivocality of *the Great Society* phrase is mirrored by ambiguities in the person of LBJ and in the rhetorical

presidency more broadly. By exposing these underlying fault lines of rhetorical production, this article contributes to our understanding of the paradoxical demands of modern presidential communications, which are increasingly "anti-intellectual yet highly abstract; and. . .democratic and conversational while also very assertive" (Lim 2002, 347).

The Six Great Societies

The phrase *The Great Society*, like Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal Harry Truman's Fair Deal, functions as a condensation symbol (Sapir 1932). It is multivocal: it has multiple meanings, and the term is rhetorically important because it is prominently positioned within a network of historical meaning: being easily introduced into the foreground of discussion, recurrent, salient, emotionally significant, and with an epideictic function for both supporters and opponents—sharpening connections within each group, though perhaps not *between* groups, by providing a common rallying slogan. The phrase is also ambiguous. Edelman argues that the ambiguity of condensation symbols enables political elites to rally diverse supporters under a common umbrella term. "The leader's dramaturgical jousts with public problems make the world understandable and convey the promise of collective accomplishment to masses who are bewildered, uncertain, and alone" (Edelman 1967, 91).

Writing at the end of Johnson's presidency and during Nixon's tenure in office, Edelman noted that condensation symbols such as "the War on Poverty" are rhetorically important because they enable leaders to mobilize the public.

> The "War on Poverty" suggests massive mobilization against a universally hated enemy, and thereby helps win political support. It gives people the gratification of seeing themselves support a crusade against evil. It just as effectively enables them to ignore other values implicit in the program that are dominant in the metaphors of some of its critics: that the resources committed to the war have been too small to harass the enemy, much less win the war; that the war on poverty has become embroiled in political infighting and sometimes stalemated in city after city. (Edelman 1971, 71)

This article suggests that there is not just one Great Society but many and that some usages of the phrase *the Great Society* fulfill the mobilizing function of condensation symbols better than other usages do.

In his works on philosophy of language, the first and most influential of which was published in the middle of the Johnson presidency (1966), Keith Donnellan distinguished between two uses of definite descriptions (Donnellan 1966, 1970, 1972). By "definite description" philosophers mean phrases of the form *the X* such as the Great Society, the winner of the 1964 presidential election, or the winner of the 2016 presidential election.[3] Donnellan argued that definite descriptions have both attributive and referential uses. In the attributive use of a definite description, the descriptive part of the statement is essential to meaning. For example, attributive uses of the Great Society say

3. As opposed to an *indefinite* description of the form "an X."

something about the society being judged as great. In referential uses, by contrast, the description is not essential; it simply serves as a marker to point the audience toward a particular thing (Donnellan 1966). For example, referential uses of the Great Society might signpost the audience toward concepts such as big government, the social safety net, the Johnson administration, or the 1960s and say something about *those* concepts.

Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive descriptions hinges upon two distinct usages of phrases of the form *the X*. The purpose of a description used referentially is simply to pick out a *particular* person or thing, whereas the purpose of a description used attributively is to provide a characterization of *whomever or whatever* fits the description. Referential descriptions do not primarily attribute descriptive characteristics; attributive descriptions do. Hence, it does not matter what the precise description is for referential descriptions as long as the description enables the speaker and audience to *pick out* a particular object or person and refer to that thing. Conversely, it does not matter precisely who or what actually fits the description in the attributive use, because the *attributes* in the description are most important. While most descriptions can be used in both referential and attributive ways, some phrases of the form *the X* exemplify either the referential or the attributive usage.

For example, the World Series is typically used referentially to pick out a particular thing: a certain annual championship series of Major League Baseball. Although the phrase contains the descriptive content "world," this baseball league consists solely of North American teams so the descriptive content does not determine the truth or falsity of statements containing the phrase *the World Series*.[4] In other words, the fact that this league cannot really be described as a "world" series is not important when it comes to the validity of claims about the World Series, because the description is used referentially simply to pick out this particular championship and not to attribute descriptive content to it. By contrast, the phrase *the person reading this statement* is typically used attributively, not to pick out a particular person but to make a general point about whomever happens to be reading the statement: as in "the person reading this statement should consider A, B or C." The writer does not know precisely whom she is referring to when making this statement, if anyone. The primary task of this statement is not to refer to a particular person but to identify members of the class of people who happen to fit the description "is reading this statement."

The definite description the Great Society is deployed in both referential and attributive ways, and these different usages correspond to differences in meaning. The descriptive content of a statement used attributively helps determine whether the statement is true or false. The descriptive content of a statement used referentially does not have this function. In the attributive uses of the Great Society the descriptive content "great" is essential to the statement's meaning, whereas in the referential use of the statement, the description is simply a marker to point the audience toward the referent. In other words, referential uses of the Great Society take no position as to the greatness of the referent. Attributive uses do take such a position.

4. Some argue that *the World Series* was named for the *New York World* newspaper, but this view is disputed (Winchester 2003).

TABLE 1
The Six Great Societies

Six Great Societies		*Meaning*	*Referential or Attributive?*	*Prototypical Example*
1	**Utopia**	An end-state that is impossible to achieve, e.g., the elimination of poverty or environmental pollution	Attributive	"The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time" (Johnson 1964b).
2	**End**	An end-state that is possible to achieve and measure, e.g., the reduction of poverty or pollution	Attributive	"We leave the speculation on the Great Society and return to the program for its construction" (Marcuse 2007, 6).
3	**Epithet**	A normative proposition, either pejorative or positive, indicating that which makes society "great", used respectfully or ironically	Attributive	"How Great Was the Great Society?" (Milkis 2011).
4	**Slogan**	A rhetorical device designed to direct audiences toward LBJ's program. A politically expedient, content-less label	Referential	"The words *Great Society* came to represent an often derisive catch phrase for liberal programs and federal regulations" (Germany 2007, 3).
5	**Era**	A loosely defined period during the mid-1960s, or shorthand for "the Johnson administration"	Referential	"The Great Society was an era of big policy" (Balogh 2005, 173).
6	**Means**	A mechanism by which society is *supposed* to be improved, e.g., bill requiring states to obtain preclearance for election changes	Referential	"Great Society initiatives . . .ultimately produced mixed results" (Ahlberg 2008, 3).

Donnellan's "referential" and "attributive" terminology can be distinguished from the terms "referential symbol" and "condensation symbol" used by Edward Sapir, Murray Edelman, and other scholars of rhetoric. Referential symbols are "symbols which are agreed upon as economical devices for purposes of reference" whereas condensation symbolism "is a highly condensed form of substitutive behavior for direct expression, allowing for the ready release of emotional tension in conscious or unconscious form" (Sapir 1932, 493), that is, referential symbols are ordinary words without special emotional content; condensation symbols are

rhetorically important words with a high level of emotional content that compress a network of historical meanings. The Great Society is a condensation symbol that can be used in both referential and attributive ways, in Donnellan's sense.[5]

The Great Society of Johnson's supporters is entirely unlike the Great Society of his detractors because the very same utterance can have different meanings for various audiences. Unsurprisingly the president's 1965 Inaugural Address was described as "inspiring" and "eloquent" by Democrats and "dull" and "platitudinous" by Republicans (*New York Times* 1965b). The ambiguity of condensation symbols may also be exploited to create *rhetorically sensitive campaigns* that appeal to multiple audiences (Schroedel et al. 2013; Smith 2010, 225). This article distinguishes six meanings of the statement *the Great Society*, of which three are attributive and three referential, all of which function as condensation symbols. These meanings are summarized in Table 1.[6]

The three attributive uses of the definite description the Great Society are Types 1, 2, and 3, termed *Utopia*, *End*, and *Epithet*. In his speech at the University of Michigan, LBJ laid out an inspiring vision of America and used the phrase *the Great Society* to refer to a society that is truly great, with prosperity, opportunity, and equality. At times he engaged in hyperbole, as when he said, "The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time." This is Type 1: The Great Society as Utopia.

Elsewhere in the University of Michigan speech, LBJ referred more prosaically to an end state that can still be described as great but is possible to achieve and measure, for example, reduced environmental pollution and improved high school graduation rates. This is Type 2: The Great Society as End. Types 1 and 2 are distinguished from each other by their attainability: the former are hyperbolic, idealistic, and unrealistic; the latter are achievable.[7] Since the 1960s, the phrase *the Great Society* has also been used as a normative proposition to refer to whatever it is that actually makes society great. In praising Head Start, Medicaid, legal services, neighborhood health centers, and job training, commentators have referred to LBJ's successes as the Great Society. This is Type 3: The Great Society as Epithet. Type 3 usages can be respectful or ironical, positive or negative in tone—including the sarcastic modern

5. Both Sapir's and Donnellan's terms describe particular usages of language and the effect of utterances upon audiences, but Sapir's and Donnellan's terms are not identical and should not be conflated. Donnellan's "referential" and "attributive" apply only to definite descriptions of the form *the X*, whereas Sapir's "referential" and "condensation" apply to all words and phrases. More importantly, Donnellan's "referential" and "attributive" terms make no claims about the emotional content, rhetorical significance, or historical meanings associated with the descriptions. Donnellan's distinction arises from different functions of descriptions rather than broader cultural understandings. There are referential descriptions that are not referential symbols and attributive descriptions that are not condensation symbols, and vice versa.

6. These meanings cover the most common usages and need not be exhaustive.

7. The former need not be couched in terms of an absolute statement of a desired end and the latter need not be cast as relative improvement. *Absolute* goals that are achievable, such as the elimination of certain dangerous chemicals in manufacturing, would be classed as Type 2. *Relative* goals that are utopian, such as an impractical figure for the reduction of pollution in a short time period, would be classed as Type 1.

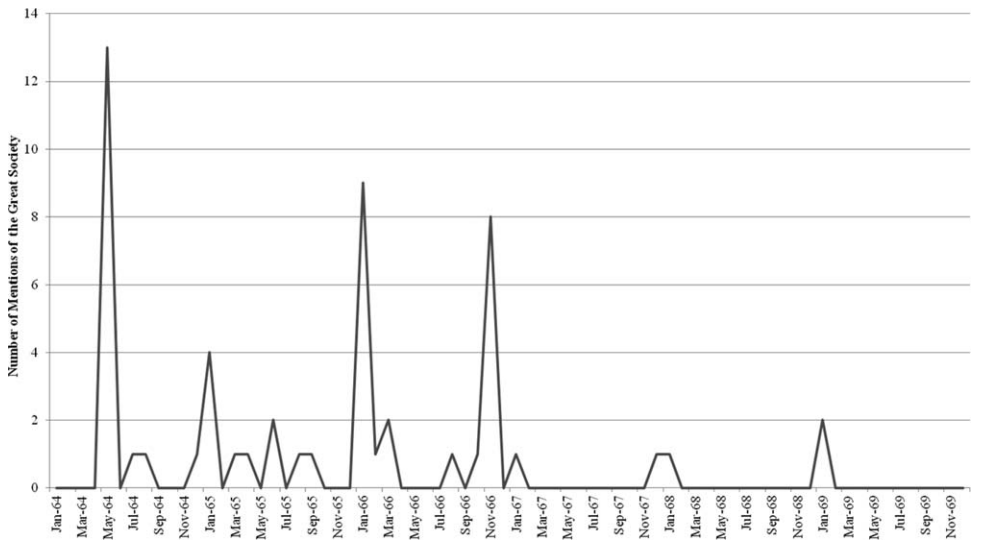

FIGURE 1. Presidential Mentions of the Great Society by Months.

usage of "great"—and can be applied to many different objects: policy outputs, ideology, administrative strategies, time periods, individuals, and organizations. They are defined by their ascription of normative content. For each of these three attributive usages, the utterer is asserting that the Great Society is truly great. The descriptive content is an essential part of the meaning of the statement.

The three referential uses of the definite description the Great Society are Types 4, 5, and 6, termed *Slogan*, *Era*, and *Means*. For these usages the descriptive content is not essential to the meaning of the statement; it simply directs the audience toward the intended referent. One of the functions of the phrase *the Great Society* was as a campaign slogan similar to the New Deal, the New Frontier, the Fair Deal, and others that preceded it. In this function the Great Society is simply a catch phrase whose wording is irrelevant; other words would have worked just as well. The function of this catch phrase was to direct the audience toward LBJ's project rather than to assert anything about the nature of that project. This is Type 4: The Great Society as Slogan. Similarly, The Great Society is often used by historians to refer to the period during the mid-1960s or as shorthand for the Johnson administration. Like The Great Society as Slogan, the usage does not assert anything about how great this period of time actually was. This is Type 5: The Great Society as Era.

The administrative strategies launched by LBJ's administration between late 1963 and 1968 expanded the federal government's role in education, welfare, housing, transportation, health care, and many other areas. They augmented the financial and regulatory resources of the state to enforce civil rights for racial minorities and reduce poverty. But many of these administrative strategies were criticized as federal government overreach. Even some supporters acknowledged that, for example, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 placed considerable administrative burdens on states in its requirement that they obtain

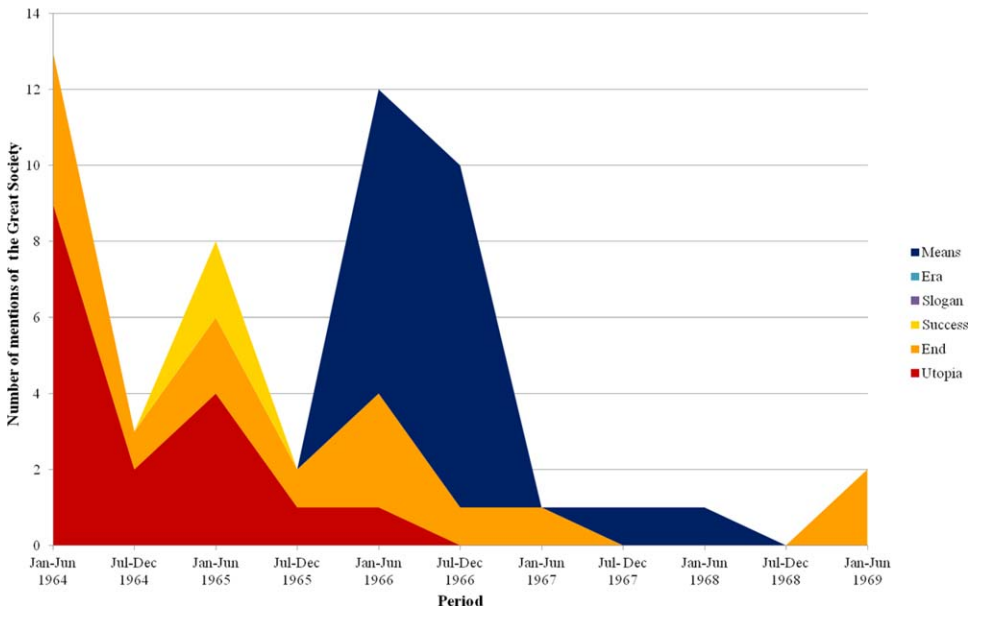

FIGURE 2. Presidential Use of the Phrase *the Great Society* by Category.

federal preclearance for electoral procedure changes. The section 106 review process of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 required federal agencies to evaluate the impact of all federally funded or permitted projects on historic properties, a process involving considerable expenditure of time and financial resources (Listokin, Listokin, and Lahr 1998). The requirement of "maximum feasible participation" under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was intended to combat poverty and welfare paternalism but also involved many problems and controversies in its implementation (Rubin 1969, 25-26). These administrative strategies, the mechanisms by which civil rights, the preservation of historic buildings, and economic opportunity were to be secured, are also referred to as rhe Great Society. They are not themselves great; indeed, several may be described as unpleasantly necessary means to some further, desirable, end. This is Type 6: The Great Society as Means. It should be noted, however, that as referential descriptions, Type 6 statements do not *in themselves* imply a negative evaluation but simply refer neutrally to a particular thing: policy mechanisms. Only attributive uses of the Great Society contain positive or negative evaluations of the referent.

Analysis of Great Society Rhetoric

All six meanings of the Great Society have been deployed in the period during and after LBJ's presidency as the "Usage" column in Table 1 shows. In the following sections, I conduct two separate analyses of Great Society rhetoric. The first is an examination of the 53 times Johnson used the phrase in his official presidential speeches, proclamations,

and signing statements. Data are drawn from the American Presidency Project.[8] Due to the small number of instances of the Great Society, in-depth qualitative analysis of the universe of cases is appropriate. I explain how Johnson and his speechwriters used Great Society rhetoric and consider the significance of these usages in relation to the social and institutional context in which the president was required to operate. The second analysis uses a sample of *New York Times* articles from the period during and since the Johnson administration in order to examine how the Great Society rhetoric diffused into the public realm. The first and second analyses are not directly comparable given the differing sample sizes and selection procedures, but they do complement one another. The second analysis explains how Great Society rhetoric was received and in turn deployed by a major media outlet, as an indicator of the extent to which each of the six Great Societies has penetrated the public consciousness:

> Advocates of a particular constitutional understanding cannot simply assume that a favored construction will remain part of the constitutional "common sense"; if a construction endures in the popular culture, it is due in no small part to the ongoing rhetorical and political efforts of its proponents to maintain "narrative hegemony" against alternative constructions. (Rhodes 2013, 568)

The analysis contextualizes shifts in journalistic usage of Great Society rhetoric in terms of policy shifts and presidential communication efforts. In so doing, it adjudicates between three sets of competing hypotheses detailed below.

Scholars identify three trends during the Johnson period that affect the production of presidential rhetoric: mounting domestic and foreign policy problems (Handlin and Handlin 1995), growing public criticism of the president (Yarmolinsky 1968), and the continuing professionalization of speechwriters and other institutional changes (Lim 2008). For each of these variables, two outcome scenarios are plausible with respect to attributive and referential uses of the phrase *the Great Society*. Policy problems might increase the number of referential usages and decrease attributive usages, particularly Utopian ones (Type 1), because of the need to discuss policy implementation (Type 6). If the dilemmas of modern governance entail an impoverishment of the deliberative process (Tulis 1987), then we might expect fewer efforts to ascribe descriptive content to the Great Society. An alternative, competing hypothesis is that policy problems decrease referential usages and increase attributive ones if the president needs to engage in blame avoidance or claim responsibility for policy successes by attributing descriptive content to a well-worn phrase. In so doing, he may hope to take control of the narrative and perhaps to alter it (Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2008).

Growing disenchantment and public criticism of the president might increase referential usages because soaring rhetoric no longer resonates. If "Americans, by and large, are no longer seeking the Great Society, because they are preoccupied with preservation of the present order" (Yarmolinsky 1968, 208), then we would expect a reduced number of attributive uses. But an alternative hypothesis is that attributive usages will grow when

8. For further information, see http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.

the public mood is critical of the president's policies because of a perceived need to provide additional descriptive content to persuade (McCabe 2012) and to avoid meaningless sloganeering that trivializes and frustrates (Goodwin 1989).

If the trend toward the institutionalization and professionalization of speechwriters tends to accelerate the simplification of presidential rhetoric (Lim 2008), then this postwar trend might result in fewer attributive and more referential usages of the Great Society, particularly empty slogans. But an alternative hypothesis is that such changes result in more attributive usages of the phrase. As speechwriting becomes more professionalized, such positions are occupied by full-time, well-paid, intelligent operators with better understanding of policy goals of Types 1 and 2 (Ritter and Medhurst 2004), and the brief to shape how people think about the president, by injecting more value judgments and descriptive content into speechmaking (Type 3).

There are potential dangers for political entrepreneurs in both attributive and referential usages of the Great Society: attributive usages may involve overpromising and raising expectations excessively (Genovese 2011). They may include value judgments that generate a public backlash (Handlin and Handlin 1995). But referential usages have also been subjected to criticism, particularly on the grounds that they are devoid of policy substance and represent an anti-intellectual trend in presidential politics (Lim 2008), but also on the grounds that slogans can come to shape policy in unintended ways (Tulis 1987). In examining Great Society rhetoric, the following analyses adjudicate between the three pairs of competing hypotheses above.

Presidential Usage of the Great Society

Johnson famously deployed the phrase *the Great Society* for the first time in his speech at Ohio University on May 7, 1964. He used the phrase three times in that address and 10 times during his equally famous May 22 speech at the University of Michigan. In subsequent speeches, signing statements, news conferences, and proclamations, he tended to use the phrase only once per talk, except for his State of the Union Addresses in 1965 and 1966, Economic Report to the Congress in 1966, and three news conferences in January and November 1966. The timing of presidential mentions of the Great Society is displayed in Figure 1.

In total, Johnson used the phrase 53 times during his presidency in 30 talks: in his inaugural address and four of his six State of the Unions, 12 news conferences, three signing statements, three proclamations, and five other speeches. The 1973 *New York Times* article was correct to state that Johnson "used the tag less and less" as he encountered more civil disturbances and problems in Vietnam; after 1966, he used the phrase just five more times. But he did not completely jettison the phrase, including the Great Society in his 1969 State of the Union address and a news conference in January 1969.

Johnson's use of the phrase *the Great Society* is broken down by category using qualitative textual analysis of the 30 presidential speeches, proclamations, signing statements, and news conferences in which the president used the phrase. Where a usage of the phrase is ambiguous between two or more meanings, the usage was categorized as the

predominant meaning. Prototypical examples of each usage are displayed in Table 1. The coding guidelines are available on request. The results of the textual analysis are displayed in Figure 2 for Johnson's 53 uses of the Great Society. An intercoder reliability test was performed in which two coders independently coded the same material.[9] The relatively low average reliability score—80%—is explicable in terms of the ambiguity of condensation symbols. Since rhetorical constructions such as the Great Society are often ambiguous, some subjective interpretation is required in coding. The fact that eight in 10 codes for both presidential speeches and news articles were *precisely* aligned among coders, on average, provides reasonable confidence in the robustness of the coding guidelines. The reliability score for correct attributive/referential categorization, by contrast, averaged 91% across all documents, a figure that offers confidence in the integrity of the categories in broad terms.

Figure 2 shows that, greatly reduced instances of the phrase after 1966 notwithstanding, Johnson used the Utopian Great Society (Type 1) less each year and never after 1966. Although he continued to use "the Great Society" attributively throughout his presidency to refer to an achievable end-point (Type 2), beginning in 1965, he often used the phrase referentially to refer to his policy mechanisms and administrative strategies (Type 6). Instances of Types 4 and 5 are, unsurprisingly, limited in Johnson's own statements: usage of the Great Society as Era require at least some distance in time from Johnson's initial proposal, because the programs must be implemented before they can be evaluated, and it is easier to characterize periods of time in this way afterward rather than during the period itself. The slogan usage of the Great Society is unlikely to be made explicit in Johnson's own public statements because it is merely an empty buzzword.

Johnson's uses of the Great Society conform to scholarly expectations in some respects but diverge from them in others. The reduction in the number of Utopian Great Society usages is explicable in terms of the presidential "honeymoon" period immediately after assuming the presidency giving way to popular anger and unrest, as America's military commitments in Vietnam escalated and the pace of racial integration failed to keep up with expectations (Brace and Hinckley 1991; Manheim 1979). The large increase in Great Society as Means (Type 6) in 1966 follows the trajectory of the Johnson administration's domestic programs; because many passed in the first 18 months after Johnson's Ohio and Michigan speeches, the president could start to look back upon his programs from 1966 onward and announce his programs' achievements. Interestingly, the total number of uses of the Great Society reached a second peak in 1966, followed by a precipitous drop-off. Unlike those in other years, the 1966 uses of the Great Society were almost all from news conferences. In 1964 and 1965 the president had used speeches to rally the public behind his domestic policy vision; by 1966 he was answering questions about his programs.

The observed shifts from attributive to referential uses of the Great Society—and particularly the distinction between the Great Society as Utopia (Type 1) and the Great Society as Means (Type 6)—provides an additional interpretation of literary theorist Kenneth Burke's phrase "the bureaucratization of the imaginative." This term is used by

9. Instructions given to independent research assistants and the completed coding score cards used to compile the intercoder reliability index are available upon request.

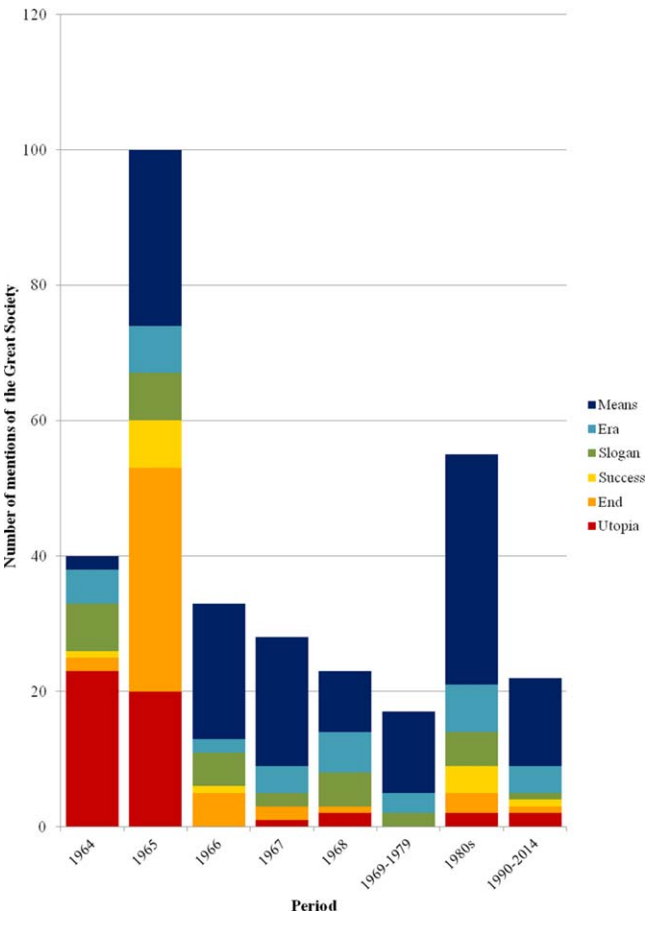

FIGURE 3. Journalistic Uses of *the Great Society* Phrase by Category.

Burke to describe the process by which visionary, prophetic possibilities for the improvement of society are translated into mundane actuality. "An imaginative possibility (usually at the start Utopian) is bureaucratized when it is embodied in the realities of a social texture" (Burke 1937, 225). Some scholars suggest "the bureaucratization of the imaginative" is an obvious truism, by simple definition of the terms "*ideal*", "*possibility*", and "*actuality*" (Hook 1969). Burke himself seemed to view this process as inevitable and teleological: "the imaginative being the seed, and the bureaucratization the fruit; they are two stages in the development of himself [man] as an 'entelechy'" (1984, 246). In this uninformative philosophical sense, Johnson's vision of the Great Society was "bureaucratized" simply through its delivery by concrete policy mechanisms, but this article provides an alternative, nontrivial understanding of Burke's phrase. The "bureaucratization of the imaginative" represents the clash of two descriptive functions: attributive and referential. The former attributes "greatness" to the Great Society phenomenon ("the imaginative"); the latter merely picks out a certain referent.

Shifts between attributive and referential uses are not inevitable by definition (as shifts from "possibility" to "actuality" are) but involve a choice of rhetorical devices that is informed by audience and context.

There was nothing inevitable about Johnson's shift from attributive to referential uses of the Great Society, as evinced by the three competing pairs of hypotheses outlined in the previous section. Commentators suggest that the best way to inspire followers is to "offer nothing in the present" but to provide radical visions of the future, a view that favors attributive uses over referential ones and denies the inevitability of a linear transition from one to the other (Hoffer 1951). Moreover, . "the march of rights and freedoms associated with the New Deal and Great Society has always been unsteady in domestic affairs" (Rhodes 2013, 564). If Johnson had not faced so many domestic and foreign challenges in the latter part of his presidency—not only the rising financial and military costs of Vietnam but also opposition to rent supplements and model cities, the loss of many northern Democrats in the 1966 elections and a growing white backlash against desegregation—he might have used attributive phrases more and referential ones less (Lekachman 1968). Soaring rhetoric gave way to more prosaic statements. But this analysis also shows that efforts to impute descriptive content to the Great Society also fell away over the course of LBJ's presidency as vocal opposition grew.

Journalistic Usage of the Great Society

Journalists took up LBJ's phrase *the Great Society* with alacrity when Johnson and his speechwriter, Richard Goodwin, employed it:

> The somewhat grandiloquent phrase—"Great Society"—was not initially contrived as a summarizing caption for the Johnson administration. It first appeared as little more than a fragment of rhetorical stuffing in a speech I had prepared for a relatively trivial occasion. ("In our time we have the opportunity to move not just toward the rich society or the powerful society, but toward the great society.") The phrase caught Johnson's fancy and he used it on two or three other occasions until the press—ever-alert for the simplifying slogan—began to insert it in their efforts to analyze and describe the new administration. By the time of our swimming-pool meeting [April 1964], capital letters had been substituted—the Great Society—and, inadvertently, the embryonic Johnson program had a name. (Goodwin 1989, 272)

Like all condensation symbols, the Great Society is a multivocal utterance: it has many meanings. Although some usages of the term are ambiguous between two or more meanings, it is usually easy to infer which of the meanings is intended given the identity of the speaker, the type of audience, and context. For example, in an interview, Joseph Califano was asked, "As Lyndon Johnson's *alter ego* on domestic affairs you played a crucial role in creating the Great Society. Is President Reagan now unraveling what you stitched together?"(Hunter 1981). Here "The Great Society" may mean either an end-state or a set of policies (Type 2 or 6), but since the interview examines the administrative strategies pursued by the administration, it clearly refers to the latter, Type 6.

The attributive–referential dichotomy aids the categorization of multivocal condensation symbols. For example, in a piece on President Obama's program,

> "There are striking similarities to Johnson and Great Society," said Robert Dallek, the presidential historian who has written extensively about Johnson's promise of an end to poverty, a commitment made in a State of the Union address 45 years ago, and one that he was only able to deliver on in part . . ."Obama's rhetoric is not as grandiose," Mr. Dallek said. (Sanger 2009)

Initially it seems unclear whether Dallek intends to refer to the Great Society as Utopia, End, or Slogan (Types 1, 2, or 4). The comment on rhetoric suggests Type 4, but the quotation is really assessing the degree to which Johnson succeeded in attaining his policy objectives, which suggests the attributive uses: Types 1 or 2. A 1973 *New York Times* article states,

> The Great Society became the slogan of Mr. Johnson's 1964 campaign to win a full four-year term in office, and well into that term he often promised that America could indeed become the great society. But he used the tag less and less as the nation became embroiled in racial strife, civil disorders and the ruinous war in Vietnam.

These usages of the phrase *the Great Society* are ambiguous between Types 3 and 4. It may refer simply to the referential Slogan use or to the attributive Epithet story. The fact that LBJ used the phrase less as problems mounted domestically and internationally suggests that the phrase *the Great Society* does have some descriptive content and is used attributively here.

I conducted in-depth textual analysis of a sample of the *New York Times* archival search results for "the Great Society." The 2,000 entries returned by the newspaper's algorithm for this phrase were too numerous for the required manual analysis so examination was restricted to the hundred "most relevant" according to the newspaper's algorithm.[10] This sampling technique has the advantage of mechanization so that it is not subject to coder biases. It also captures the most frequent uses of *the Great Society* phrase, yielding 318 individually identified instances of the term for examination. Journalistic use of the phrase *the Great Society* peaked in 1965. After 1970 the phrase continued to be used, albeit infrequently. The newspaper has 1,025 records of the phrase during the 1960-69 period and then 100-300 per decade ever since. A minor peak occurred during the 1980s as Ronald Reagan fought for, and won, the presidency: he made headlines for his criticism of the Great Society (*New York Times* 1982). "The Great Society grows greater every day," Reagan was quoted as saying, "greater in cost, greater in inefficiency and greater in waste" (Broder 1966; Weisman 1982).

Figure 3 shows journalistic use of *the Great Society* phrase by category.

10. Because the six Great Society categories are identified by means of an understanding of context, intention, and audience rather than basic semantics and syntax, computer-aided quantitative analysis is not feasible here.

Because nearly 70% of the uses occurred before 1970, the horizontal axis is truncated for the years after 1968. Figure 3 shows that newspaper articles first tended to use the phrase attributively to denote an End or Utopia (Types 1 and 2), but after 1966, these uses almost completely stopped and articles started to use the phrase referentially to denote a Means or Era (Types 5 and 6). Usage of the Great Society as Johnson's slogan or catch phrase (Type 4) remained fairly constant across the entire period, whereas the normative use of the Great Society to mean "that which is great, excellent or admirable about the Johnson program" (Type 3) was used only sporadically. Compared to earlier periods, by 1967 journalists shifted from attributive to referential uses as Johnson's imaginative and Utopian vision for America was "bureaucratized," sloganized, criticized, and even used sarcastically[11] during the Johnson administration and by subsequent generations of commentators (Etzioni 1984; Gross 1987; Mead 1984; Novak 1987).

Implications

Disentangling the six Great Societies is not merely an exercise in linguistics. It helps answer three important questions in the study of Johnson and of the rhetorical presidency: What was the Great Society? How did social and institutional factors shape LBJ's usage of Great Society rhetoric? And why do disagreements persist among historians and political scientists as to the Great Society's origins, scope, and legacy? Rothbard (1967, 511) argued that "the most important fact about the Great Society under which we live is the enormous disparity between rhetoric and content." He was right, but not necessarily for the reasons put forward. Rothbard argued that the Great Society advances itself under the banner of "liberalism" but in reality involves the progressive limitation of freedom. This disjunction arises from the attributive—referential distinction as much as it does from the tensions between individual citizens and the exercise of state power: that which is true of the Great Society as Slogan ("rhetoric"), for example, need not be true of the Great Society as End or the Great Society as Means ("content").

Textual analysis of journalistic usage of the Great Society provides evidence of a perspectival shift among newspaper commentators over the course of the Johnson administration and in subsequent decades. Walter Lippmann complained in the spring of 1960 of a "defensive" public mood (Lippmann 1960). Johnson's vision of the Great Society is a response to the mood of complacency. "The Great Society," he said, "is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed" (Johnson 1964b). This tension between conservative and radical forces, the desire to preserve or disrupt, is partly mirrored in the clash between Great Society as End and Great Society as Means. Textual analysis of presidential speeches and newspaper articles shows that the former usage started to give way to the latter during the late 1960s, a trend that continued in subsequent

11. See, for example, Russell Baker's sketches on the Great Society (Baker 1964a,1964b,1965).

decades. The change in usage does not imply that the mechanisms of the Great Society became more acceptable to commentators. On the contrary, most of these usages were Reagan-era criticisms of the policy mechanisms. But this change in usage does imply a shift in perspective: rejection of the complacent idea of a finished product, a harmonious society (in one contemporary Republican's acerbic words: "a glowing blueprint for paradise" [*New York Times* 1965a]), replaced by attention to the radical, disruptive effects of the Johnson programs.

Heclo recognizes this shift toward radical new governmental commitments combined with increasing public dissatisfaction, which is reflected in the increased use of the Great Society as Means:

> If one takes the term "Great Society" to signify sweeping new commitments to activist national government, it is clear that the Great Society years did not end with Lyndon Johnson's departure from the White House but surged into the 1970s even as general public distrust in government was growing. (Heclo 2005, 58)

Many scholars note Americans' paradoxical relationship with the state; their simultaneous desire for, and distrust in, government (Davies 1996; Levitan 1980; Mettler 2009). Disaggregating the six Great Societies provides additional analytic leverage with respect to this puzzle because although the phrase can be used ambiguously, the six Great Societies have distinct truth conditions and epistemological status. A person can consistently, reasonably, and truthfully hold different views of each of the six Great Societies. This analysis shows that Heclo was right: The Great Society need not be confined to the 1960s because it is not a univocal utterance. There is not one Great Society; there are many.

A potential problem with regard to the study of presidential rhetoric is the problem of generalizability.

> Rhetoric is situational; it is grounded in particulars and resists easy generalization. Unpacking a text, probing its dimensions and possibilities, helps the scholar to understand better the richness of a very specific situation that already has passed and will not return in exactly the same way. But if every rhetorical moment is altogether unique, then our assessments are highly idiosyncratic and have no generalizability. (Zarefsky 2004, 610)

How generalizable are our conclusions about the six Great Societies? The conclusions of this article are generalizable insofar as the typology aggregates individual uses of the phrase for the purposes of comparison. Although each usage of the phrase is indeed unique, qualitative textual analysis shows that patterns of rhetorical choice repeat themselves, and these patterns are indicative of changing attitudes toward the president and his programs. Scholars could attempt a similar project for the New Deal, a comparable phrase that has come to mean something greater than a simple slogan. Such efforts might explain why there has been no further successful "sloganization" of presidential programs since the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society. "The Reagan Revolution" has neither the

situational density nor the conductivity of terms such as *the Great Society* that preceded it,[12] and there have been several attempts to coin phrases akin to LBJ's the Great Society that have failed to gain widespread interest as condensation symbols, notably Nixon's "the new federalism," Reagan"s "the creative society" and Clinton"s "the new covenant" (Broder 1966; Clinton 1991; Grinker 1982). Although it is beyond the scope of thisarticle to explain why the Great Society has no obvious successor with respect to presidential use of rhetoric, intensifying public criticism of "sound-bite politics" from President H. W. Bush onward may be a contributory factor (Chopra 2008; Fehrman 2011; *New York Times* 1992).

Rhetoric is not a mere epiphenomena; it is vital to scholarly understanding of the president as a political figure who can monopolize public space, to questions of presidential legitimacy, and to the president's self-understanding (Lim 2002; Schonhardt-Bailey, Yager, and Lahlou 2012). This analysis offers three lessons for the literature on the rhetorical presidency: First, context is important. By answering the call to investigate the antecedent conditions of presidential rhetorical production (Arthur and Woods 2013), it is easier to discern the obstacles presidents face and the institutional context in which he must advance his agenda. Second, it is possible to track rhetorical shifts within a presidency, not only from soaring rhetoric to prosaic implementation, but also a reduction in the attribution of descriptive content to political terminology: sloganization. Third, rhetorical ambiguity can be useful in appealing to multiple audiences (Schroedel et al. 2013), but multivocal concepts can also provoke fierce disagreement among different constituencies (Davies 1996; Milkis and Mileur 2005; *New York Times* 1966).

The ambiguity of the Great Society is mirrored by ambiguities in the person of LBJ himself. Film producer Charles Guggenheim said of the president: "He was so multifaceted. He could be kind, he could be abrupt, he could be mean, he could be loving, he could be compassionate, he could be devious. He was just bigger than life—that is what makes him so fascinating" (Gamarekian 1990). In the period leading up to his presidency Johnson altered his public stance on civil rights and trade unions. He castigated Truman's 1948 health insurance program as "socialized medicine" when running for the Democratic nomination for the Senate, then signed Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 as president. "Elected repeatedly from a state dominated by conservatives, LBJ had dreamed liberal dreams," a man whose provincial image was shed in a slew of visionary federal programs (Woods 2006, 4). "He's thoughtless and thoughtful, cruel and compassionate, simple and intensely complicated," said one associate, "I don't know anyone who doesn't feel ambivalently about him" (Osborne 1967, 36).

Distinguishing different ways Johnson described the central domestic project of his presidency—the Great Society—casts light upon his character. The hyperbole of Type 1 accompanies shrewd rhetorical devices of Type 4, well-articulated goals and compassion

12. In order to identify phrases that function as condensation symbols, scholars have identified three features that provide special connectedness in networks of meaning: situational conductivity, density, and consensus (Kaufer and Carley 1993). Conductivity "refers to the capacity of a linguistic concept to elaborate and to be elaborated by other concepts in a particular context of use"; density "denotes how often a word or expression is likely to recur as parts of larger sentences, paragraphs, genres in context"; consensus "refers to the extent to which a concept is elaborated *in similar ways* across a given population in a given context."

for the poor and minorities of Type 2, and the legislative experience to "wheel and deal," sometimes ruthlessly, to pass bills of Type 6. At least at the beginning of his presidency Johnson tended to use the Great Society attributively rather than referentially, with the descriptive content essential to the meaning of his utterances. He used the phrase as if he thought that the Great Society is indeed "great." Was it? Between the polarized responses to this question I insert a third option: the answer need not be "all" or "neither," because the Great Society is a multivocal utterance.

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