

How well did President Harry Truman and/or President Lyndon Johnson handle the challenges faced? (100)

Both Lyndon Johnson and Harry Truman achieved numerous successes in handling the challenges they faced. Both Truman and Johnson were both 'thrown into office' after the tragic assassinations of their predecessors. It can be argued that both achieved great things with regards to domestic policies, creating drastic improvements in modern American society. Both embarked on overly ambitious foreign policies in either the Cold War or Vietnam but it was Johnson who failed hugely in the area of foreign policy causing America to fail a war for the first time. Although Johnson made more significant improvements for American society, he ended up costing the US millions of dollars. Truman was also considered a 'friendly' president who insisted on speaking to all of his employees. Johnson on the other hand was considered a very domineering personality who 'bullied, badgered and brainwashed'. As both handled the challenges of domestic policy well it can definitely be argued that Truman handled the area of foreign policy with more care, decisiveness and was a preferred leader of the US.

Johnson's strengths lied in the areas of domestic affairs. He tackled the main issues head first and set up great campaigns to improve society. His main aim was to create a "Great Society". This was an agenda to end poverty and injustice. This would positively impact other countries

and was to operate in cities, country-sides and classrooms. The Great Society promoted civil rights, clean housing facilities, a cleaner country-side environment and improved the quality of education. Housing facilities were improved by his establishing of a Department of Housing and Urban Development. While developing this he also promoted civil rights by appointing the first African American to cabinet Robert C. Weaver to head this campaign. The department organised slum clearances, public housing and coordinated services such as water, refuse and road. Johnson also improved the appearance of America's countryside while controlling the amount of pollution in the Highway Safety Act. It is safe to say that Johnson handled these domestic issues very well.

As part of this 'Great Society', the area of education was also vastly improved, an area that was thought to be neglected by previous presidents. Johnson worked to increase education funding hugely. As a teacher himself, he believed education was an escape route from poverty and the key to improving American Society in the future. Extra funding was given to ethnic and poorer schools. Remedial and learning support services were provided in many areas where they were desperately needed. This was definitely looked at as a well handed success for President Johnson.

Johnson also embarked on a War on Poverty. Johnson looked at poverty as a problem due to 20% of the population living below the poverty line despite America being the richest country in the world. In 1964, Congress passed the Economic Opportunities Act. This Act included several social programs to promote and improve health, education and general welfare of the impoverished. It also provided employment as it employed locals to run the programmes.

Health care was improved with the addition of **Medicare and Medicaid** programme. Medicare provided health care for the elderly while Medicaid helped the poor or 'medically indigent'. Government spending on the poor soared under Johnson and the amount of Americans living under the poverty line hugely decreased. Personally, I think this was undoubtedly a success and an incredibly well dealt with problem but it did embark minor controversy with the wealthier aspects of US society.

The area in which Johnson dealt with, with most success was in the area of Civil Rights. In 1964, he signed the Civil Rights Act. He was looked at as a leader after his speech on the Civil Rights Act while referring to freedom, morality and unity and persuading a two thirds majority in favour. The 1965 Voters' Act outlawed literacy tests and abolished poll taxes and the poll tax. It also featured the establishment of voter registration offices around the country. This led to fantastic results such as the black voter turnout tripling and black politicians starting to be elected. Johnson even appointed the first black Supreme Court judge in 1967. Although these achievements led to success, they also created bigger problems for Johnson to face. It caused a rise in urban unrest and the American South changed from being predominantly Democrat to Republican stronghold. Johnson can be seen here as facing problems with great success or creating larger problems for him.

Truman also had a firm handling on domestic affairs but it could be argued that he lacked Johnson's authority. His decisions were not always taken seriously. Aspects of his Fair Deal programme were initially rejected. He also vetoed Taft-Hartley Act and yet it still got passed. He worked hard to improve American economy as he did not want a post World War 2

recession. He tried to achieve this by setting up Council of Economic Advisers and passed Employment Act. This finally meant that the Government would have more involvement in the economy. The GI Bill gave loans for education, housing and gave business to veterans. During his time as president he achieved major economic growth. He also established the Fair Deal programme ensuring better social security and more public housing. However not all aspects of the programme were developed and didn't serve a fraction as successful as Johnson's Great Society. Truman was also the first president to pave the way for American Civil Rights. He used Executive Orders to end racial discrimination in federal employment. At first glance it appears Johnson made more significant advances domestically and had more power domestically as president however Truman's domestic efforts and economic improvement were constant unlike LBJ. Truman had good intentions but his efforts rarely were recognised, funded or passed through Congress yet still attempting to handle domestic affairs successfully.

Johnson may have faced all domestic problems well but his handling of Foreign Affairs is where he lacked authority, clarity or order. His foreign policy ultimately ended his presidency. He had a similar view of communism to those of previous presidents lacking the initiative he showed in his domestic affairs. He believed in the Domino Theory, this meant that if one state in a region came under the influence of communism, then the surrounding countries would follow, in a domino effect. This led his viewing of the Vietnam War as being part of a global war against communism. Johnson feared being the first president to lose a war and believed in outweighing the Vietnamese in arms and troops. Johnson underestimated the Vietnamese calling them a *"raggedy- ass, little fourth rate"* power. Johnson increased the US involvement in Vietnam and believed this would put an end to communism in Vietnam. This led to great expense and an unpopular defeat that led to Johnson's later infamy as President.

Johnson used the Tonkin Resolution allowing him to protect American interests in South East Asia by taking 'all necessary steps, including the use of military force.' This permitted him to attack North Vietnam due to their support Vietcong. In 1965 Operation Rolling Thunder commenced. This was a bombing campaign that lasted seven years. It included more bombs than the whole of the Second World War but had little effect on the Vietnamese country-side and strengthened the resolve of the North Vietnamese. Johnson then greatly increased the amount of American troops to 80,000 in 1965. The war cost over \$30 billion a year by the end of 1960's. 58,138 US soldiers died in Vietnam. This was a figure that many believed was only made so large by the failures and poor handling of problems faced by LBJ.

Johnson's involvement in Vietnam was incredibly unpopular. People hated the high cost and high death rate that they believed he accumulated. Vietnam was the first war to be televised so the cruelty of it was clearly visible. Footage was seen of towns being bombed and innocent children being killed as a result of LBJ's Operation Rolling Thunder. Anti war protests were established with slogans such as *"Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"* He handled this negative controversy very poorly and withdrew from the next election.

Truman embarked on some major developments in Foreign Policy. At Potsdam, Truman demanded unconditional surrender from the Japanese. Japan refused to Truman ordered for an atomic bomb to be dropped. This killed thousands, started the atomic age but achieved success in making Japan surrender thus creating another American victory. Truman believed in a policy of Communist containment. In effect this meant that America would oppose to Communism expansion in Europe and around the world. In keeping this policy, he announced the Truman Doctrine. This stated that the US would help any country that was under Communist attack from groups inside or outside the country. He also developed the Marshall

Plan which acted as an American help for the economic recovery of Europe. It cannot be argued that Truman handled every aspect of Foreign Policy with a sense of decisiveness that Johnson always lacked.

Both showed their strengths throughout their presidencies, both tackling domestic affairs effectively. With the help of Truman's Fair Deal and Johnson's Great Society, America was shaped into a wealthier, fairer country. Both also achieved great successes in the area of Civil Rights making America a more tolerant place to live. However it was Truman who built up US economy without tearing it back down, he was more tactful with Government spending, US involvement in international wars and proved more decisive in every area of foreign policy, proving to handle problems far more effectively than Johnson.