

# LARGER THAN LIFE USER GUIDE

## ★ INTRODUCTION ★

In *Larger Than Life*, author Anne Quirk opens many doors to twentieth-century American history. She invites you to walk through and further investigate the events and vital issues that led to the passage of the 1964 voting rights act. She also introduces the key players in that time who helped reshape much of America and redefine its character.

## ★ ACTIVITIES ★

Watch Lyndon Baines Johnson give a speech on his proposal for a voting rights act, one of the most important accomplishments of his presidency, on March 15, 1965.

President Johnson's Voting Rights speech March 15, 1965:  
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?153273-1/president-lyndon-johnson-address-voting-rights>

Do you think LBJ was an effective speaker? How would you characterize his style? What particular lines or statements affected you the most? Explain. Compare his speech to those by contemporary politicians.

The path to the presidency for Lyndon Johnson was neither laid out for him nor linear. It seems more like happenstance: one thing somehow led to another. But he saw a pattern and found purpose. Create a timeline of his jobs from the time he was a teenager to his adult life in politics to the presidency. How did each prepare him for being president?

**[Page 30]**

Although he was a southerner, “Johnson didn’t care which side of town the school was on.” Cite examples throughout *Larger Than Life* that lead you to believe that he was unprejudiced.

Anne Quirk reveals qualities of LBJ’s character through his actions, his choices, his vision for his life, and his personal ambitions, as well as his ambitions for the United States. Make a list of at least six of his character traits and cite examples from the text that demonstrate them.

Similarly, make a list of the values that guided Lyndon Johnson’s life. Who in politics today shares LBJ’s values?

**[Pages 37, 45]**

To Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, the Civil War was not about slavery. It was “a fight about power. . . . It was a fight about whether the states in the South could make their own laws. . . .” In other words, it was about states’ rights.

The Tenth Amendment to the Constitution defines the term states’ rights. It expresses the principle that the federal government has only those powers delegated to it by the Constitution, and that all other powers not forbidden to the states are reserved to each state, or its people.

Senator Russell and the Southern bloc believed that this extended to how individual states treat their citizens. One example of a right afforded to the states is the rules states impose on the way they conduct voting for elected officials.

Talk about how the southern states used the idea of states’ rights to subvert the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which declares that no one could be denied the right to vote because of race or color. What were some of the rules and restrictions the southern states imposed on people of color?

**[Page 38]**

The Jim Crow laws were “an array of state and local laws in the South that strictly enforced separate schools for Black people, separate hospitals, and separate sections on buses, in restaurants, and in movie theaters.” Senator Russell had proclaimed: “The whites and Blacks alike in our section have learned that it is better for the races to live apart socially.”

Research these laws and their supporters, as well as the people who opposed those laws. Write an op-ed editorial column

expressing your thoughts on why the Jim Crow laws were wrong, and trying to persuade people to come to your point of view.

**[Page 90]**

LBJ believed that all of us can be better. All of us can *do* better. Can you apply this to yourself? Cite things that you can do in your personal life that follow this motto.

Make a list of the important historical people who are introduced in *Larger Than Life*, including but not limited to Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Richard Russell, and George Wallace. Research each one and write about their roles in the fight for the right to vote.

What is a leader? Of the historical figures noted in *Larger Than Life*, what qualities did they share? What made them leaders? Is leadership a characteristic a person has or is it bestowed on someone because of the position he or she holds? Cite some examples of leaders you admire and why.

President Johnson's speech and the voting rights legislation were not universally accepted across the United States. Southern Democrats were opposed while the rest of the Democrats and almost all of the Republicans in Congress were in favor of it. How has the political landscape changed in the last fifty years? Research articles from current newspapers that report on the actions and views of both the Democratic and Republican political parties.

**[Page 110]**

It has been said that if it wasn't for Vietnam, LBJ would be known as one of the greatest presidents. "No other president, not even Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had been able to pass so much major legislation in such a short amount of time. No other president had extended the reach of the federal government into so many corners of everyday life. . . ."

Besides the voting rights legislation, identify one new law that was enacted during Johnson's presidency and research its impact over the years on American life.

Look through the timeline at the end of *Larger Than Life* and select one event that interests you. Research it, then work with other students to create a script for a television special report or dramatic program that discusses the event. Cast it with your fellow students and perform it for the class.

Three fundamental hallmarks of United States democracy are a well-informed electorate, elections that are free from tampering, and that no eligible voters are prevented from exercising their right to vote. How do you view this assessment? Where do you get information from to help you make your decisions and form your opinions: newspapers, television news programs, internet feeds, social media? How do you know that your sources are reliable and not partisan? As a future voter, what do you see as your responsibility?

Four useful articles on American democracy and voting rights can be found on the websites below:

The Pew Research Organization

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/04/26/the-public-the-political-system-and-american-democracy/>

The Atlantic Monthly Magazine

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1893/12/democracy-in-america/523974/>

Facing History and Ourselves

<https://www.facinghistory.org/educator-resources/current-events/voting-rights-united-states>

FairVote is a nonpartisan champion of electoral reforms that give voters greater choice, a stronger voice, and a representative democracy that works for all Americans. In seeking fair election reform, FairVote’s work is often guided by the Voting Rights Act.

<https://www.fairvote.org/voting-a-right-a-privilege-or-a-responsibility?>

What is your civic responsibility? The importance of voting is an underlying theme for Lyndon Johnson’s presidency and for *Larger Than Life*. Below are samples of statements excerpted from the website of the National Civic League by noted Americans speaking out on the importance of voting.

<http://www.nationalcivicleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Democracy-Voting-Civic-Responsibility-E-Book.pdf>

“Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility.”

—ELIZABETH CADY STANTON,  
writer, suffragist, and abolitionist

“Voting is the most precious right of every citizen, and we have a moral obligation to ensure the integrity of our voting process.”

—HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON,  
former United States secretary of state

“Voting is how we participate in a civic society—be it for president, be it for a municipal election. It’s the way we teach our children—in school elections—how to be citizens, and the importance of their voice.”

—LORETTA LYNCH,  
former United States attorney general

“We are bound by ideals that teach us what it means to be citizens. Every child must be taught these ideals. Every citizen must uphold them. . . . I ask you to be citizens. Citizens, not spectators. Citizens, not subjects. Responsible citizens building communities of service and a nation of character.”

—GEORGE W. BUSH,  
43rd president of the United States

“Elections belong to the people. It’s their decision. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters.”

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN,  
16th president of the United States

“Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves and the only way they could do this is by not voting.”

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT,  
32nd president of the United States

“Young people need to vote. They need to get out there. Every vote counts. Educate yourself too. Don’t just vote. Know what you’re voting for, and stand by that.”

—NIKKI REED,  
American actress

“Elections remind us not only of the rights but the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy.”

—ROBERT KENNEDY,  
former United States senator and attorney general

Interview local politicians, teachers, neighbors, and friends about their thoughts on voting. Use the quotes above, quotes you gather from your interviews, and your own thoughts on voting and democracy to create placards, posters, and banners. Get permission from your school’s supervisors and post them around the school building.

**[Pages 134–136]**

At a civil rights symposium at the LBJ Presidential Library on December 12, 1972, former President Johnson spoke these words:

“I believe that the essence of government lies with unceasing concern for the welfare and dignity and decency and innate integrity of life for every individual . . . regardless of color, creed, ancestry, sex, or age. . . . And if our efforts continue, and if our will is strong, and if our hearts are right, and if courage remains our constant companion, then, my fellow Americans . . . I am confident that we shall overcome.”

It is almost fifty years since President Johnson made this stirring call to America. Has his optimism come to fruition?

Has America stepped up or is it slipping back to a pre–civil rights era mentality? Write and discuss with others your views. Cite events that have occurred over the last fifty years as well as references from newspaper articles, television reports, and internet websites. Particular attention should be given to the 2020 presidential election.

Helpful websites are:

<https://www.nytimes.com/topic/subject/civil-rights>

<https://firstfocus.org/blog/unfinished-business-the-civil-rights-act-of-2020>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/06/2020-not-1968/>

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/fighting-voter-suppression>

<https://www.cwa-union.org/sites/default/files/voting-rights-are-under-attack.pdf>

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/voting-rights-act-history-and-consequences/>

Lyndon Johnson coined the phrase; “The Great Society,” to describe his plan to eliminate poverty and social injustice for all Americans. Research the main elements of his Great Society. How successful was it? What effect did the war in Vietnam have on his presidency and on The Great Society that he envisioned? Look into the presidencies of his successors to determine who continued his goals. After reviewing your

research of the programs he championed, which do you think had the most impact on the American public? Explain. Cite the sources you used in your research and those used to form your opinion.

The following websites will help you get started:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/national/great-society-at-50/>

<https://www.ideainfanttoddler.org/pdf/AppA.pdf>

<https://daily.jstor.org/how-great-was-the-great-society/>

The focal point of the march in Selma on March 7, 1965, where hundreds of peaceful marchers were brutally attacked by state troopers is the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Why has the name of the bridge become an explosive issue? Recently there has been a movement to change the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Why? Research who Edmund Pettus was. After learning about him, do you agree that his name should be removed from the bridge or should it be kept there as a symbolic reminder of the civil rights movement? This can be extended to a debate about whether bridges named for historical figures should have their names changed, or in the case of monuments be removed. If the bridge is renamed, who should it be named for? Explain your choice.

For the past fifty years, the event on March 7, 1965, “Bloody Sunday,” in Selma, Alabama, has been etched into the American

consciousness. It reminds us that the fight for voting rights is still an ongoing fight. In December 2020, the *New York Times* ran an article on the front page of the Friday arts section on the tradition of quilting as storytelling by black Americans. A quilter from Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, Sharon Kerry-Harlan, addressed voting rights in her quilt “Bloody Sunday,” her interpretation of the march from Selma to Montgomery. The quilt is an abstract field of black faces crossed out in red surrounded by a border of American flags. You can view her quilt in the *New York Times* archives for Friday, December 18, 2020.

Examine the quilt. What is your response? It is an artistic expression of the way the quilter felt about that event. You can find photographs and film of the events of Bloody Sunday by searching the internet. Now it’s time for you to create your own artistic interpretation. It can be in any art form: visual or written. Present your work to your fellow students.

To get you started, useful websites are:

#### NBC News

<https://www.nbcnews.com/video/bloody-sunday-a-flashback-of-the-landmark-selma-to-montgomery-marches-1191243331868>

#### History.com

<https://www.history.com/news/selma-bloody-sunday-attack-civil-rights-movement>

You’ve read about Lyndon Johnson’s upbringing and the events in his life that led him into politics and eventually to the presidency. How do his experiences compare to those of his successors? Below are the men who over the years followed him to be president of the United States. The names are divided into five groups. Pick one from each group and learn more about each person’s background and political life. What were their major accomplishments? What were their failures? How do they compare with Lyndon Johnson’s? Which, if any, should be admired? Which, if any, did not act in the best interest of the country? Be specific and detail your views.

#### GROUP 1

Richard Nixon      Gerald Ford

#### GROUP 2

Jimmy Carter      Ronald Reagan

#### GROUP 3

George H. W. Bush      Bill Clinton

#### GROUP 4

George W. Bush      Barack Obama

#### GROUP 5

Donald Trump      Joe Biden

★ *QUESTIONS FOR ANNE QUIRK* ★

**Why did you decide to write a book about Lyndon Baines Johnson and the 1965 Voting Rights Act?**

Lyndon Johnson's moral compass, especially in his younger days, could be wobbly. A white Texan born in 1908 with deep roots in the segregated South, he was a protégé of one of the most powerful racists in Congress. He never fully trusted Martin Luther King Jr. But when he became president, after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, LBJ allied himself with King and expertly summoned the full force of the federal government—the executive branch, the legislative branch, the judicial branch—to right one of the greatest wrongs in American history. Nonfiction for children often focuses on uplifting individual achievements—and that's important—but I wanted to write about how individuals transform institutions, and vice versa.

**What connections do you draw between the themes and events described in the book and current events?**

Your vote is your voice in our democracy. It's also your superpower, which perhaps is why it's so often challenged. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 addressed a great injustice and remade the political landscape of the nation, but the law has been weakened recently. Young readers are just a few years

away from being young voters. I'm rooting for a bumper crop that supports expanding access to the vote, not limiting it.

**What did you learn about LBJ that was new to you? When you did your research, did anything surprise you?**

I knew he was a prodigious sinner, but I was surprised by the sincerity of his religious beliefs. He quoted the Bible freely because he revered the Bible. Martin Luther King Jr. and LBJ shared a deep Christian faith. But so did, which I found fascinating, LBJ and Governor George Wallace, one of King's most ferocious adversaries.

**Many Americans today know very little about Lyndon Baines Johnson. What do you want them to take away after reading *Larger Than Life*?**

That our democratic institutions matter. That our laws matter. That voting matters.

**You did extensive research. How did you decide what information to include and what to leave out?**

There were many great stories about LBJ that I was tempted to include—he was, as the title says, larger than life—but ultimately the book just took its own shape, which I hope suits middle-grade readers. If I did my job properly, readers will eventually discover Robert Caro's magnificent, multivolume

biography of LBJ or Brian Cranston's portrayal of LBJ in *All the Way* or any number of other brilliant books and films.

**Were you able to interview people who knew Lyndon Johnson or were active in politics or civil rights during his presidency? Did their experiences change the way you approached writing the book?**

No, I didn't formally interview anyone about Lyndon Johnson, but I made a point of seeking out antiwar activists from the Vietnam War era—many of whom still loathe him—and aged university professors, who remembered the Johnson years as exhilarating and exhausting. Nobody is ever neutral about LBJ.

**Of all the people you mention in *Larger Than Life*, who would you most like to interview and why?**

Lady Bird Johnson. She was the quiet daughter of an overbearing father and the shy wife of an overbearing husband, but she was a woman of exceptional gifts: business savvy, political insight, exquisite tact. She lived to be 94, outliving her husband by thirty-three years. The smartest thing that Lyndon Johnson ever did was marry her, and I think they both knew that.

*User guide was prepared by Clifford Wohl, educational consultant*