

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2014 Essay Contest

FIRST PLACE ESSAY

Changes in the United States over the Last 50 Years

by Mia Fisher

Each year, the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The 2014 essay prompt asked students to reflect on the changes the nation has undergone—politically, economically, technologically, and culturally—over the past 50 years since 1964, when Margaret Chase Smith announced her candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination. We are pleased to feature here the top two 2014 prize-winning essays.

Anyone who turns on the *Nightly News* with Brian Williams or who reads the *New York Times* will come across issues of Social Security and other safety net programs, foreign policy, a bipartisan Congress, tax cuts, economic growth, and technological advances. If it weren't for the legislation, economic changes, advances in technology, and cultural shifts in America since 1964, the stories seen in and on the news would be very different. The past 50 years have included significant political, economic, technological, and cultural changes in American history and have shaped the legal system, economy, and values of America today.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered his first State of the Union address, after being sworn in November after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. During his speech, LBJ declared "The War on Poverty"—a war that is not nearly over but that has changed America greatly. He also coined the phrase, "The Great Society," at Ohio University and University of Michigan during the same year, asserting the importance to work towards the end of poverty and racial injustice. LBJ's presidency brought about significant changes to and additional safety net programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, which provides health insurance to those ages 65 or older and low-income individuals or families, under Title XVIII and XIX of the Social Security Amendments of 1965.

In 1965, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, which provides health and nutrition services to low-income women and infants and children under five, and the Head Start program, which gives low-income children and their families access to early childhood education, family and community support, and other health and nutrition services were also created.

Many of these federally administered social programs started since 1964 have contributed immensely to America's values and continue to fuel many of the current debates in America today. Since 1964, the rate of poverty has decreased from 25 percent to 15 percent. Additionally, the programs approved during LBJ's presidency set a precedent for other welfare programs and reforms. For example, President Barack Obama and Congress passed legislation with the same hope of reducing poverty in America. Obama's Affordable Care Act passed in 2010 aims to provide high-quality and affordable health insurance to all Americans regardless of income level.

LBJ's Great Society also included the end to racial injustice, particularly in the South. Originally proposed by President Kennedy in 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlaws discrimination based on "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin," was passed after numerous attempts to block the bill through filibusters in the Senate. In addition, the Voting Rights Act of 1965

prohibited discrimination in voting. These pieces of landmark legislation were just two attempts to use the power of the federal government to promote equality.

The change in American ideals and addition of federal legislation to promote equality moved people to speak out against racial segregation and inequality in the past 50 years. Although there is still work to be done in ensuring equality, many events would not be possible had it not been for this legislation and shift in Americans' values. For example, Barack Obama would probably not be president, Kerry Washington would not star as Olivia Pope in Shonda Rhimes' TV drama *Scandal*, and Jay-Z and Beyoncé would not be on the "World's Most Powerful Couples List."

The past 50 years have also been a time when social issues and institutions were brought up for discussion on a more public level. A major cultural shift that took place in 1964 was the feminist movement after Betty Friedan released the book, *Feminine Mystique*. Since 1964, women have become more educated and empowered. Today, young girls are able to see women such as Facebook's Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg, General Motors' Chief Executive Officer Mary Barra, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hold positions of power. Women have fought and are fighting for increased freedoms and choices, which allows them to decide their role in society rather than have their role decided for them. More women are pursuing professional degrees and are joining in workforce. Women are the primary earners in four out of ten American households. More generally, all people—women and children especially—began to go against society's traditional molds.

The events in 1964 served as a turning point in American history and gave rise to many political, economic, technological,

and social changes. It transformed the ways in which we view our country and without the events in 1964, America would look very different. 🐉



Mia Fisher, from Cumberland, Maine, was a member of the National Honor Society, secretary of Key Club, and

captain of the varsity field hockey team at her high school. She was also actively involved with the international organization Seeds of Peace. This fall she started college at James Madison University, studying marketing and international relations.