Barely six months after assuming the presidency following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson came to the University of Michigan to receive an honorary degree and deliver the commencement address at the Spring graduation ceremony on May 22, 1964. Speaking in Michigan Stadium to a crowd estimated as large as 85,000, Johnson used the occasion to deliver a major domestic policy address and outline his vision of a "great society".

The President challenged the graduates:

"Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the 'Great Society'".

Fourteen years after the speech, Robert Warner, former Director of the Michigan Historical Collections (now Bentley Historical Library) published a brief account of the circumstances surrounding the university's invitation to Johnson, the writing of the speech by Johnson's staff, and the speech's contemporary reception and historical significance. (The website American Rhetoric rates it #53 among the 100 most important political speeches of the 20th Century)

WUOM, the university radio station, recorded the speech and photographers from the University News and Information Service documented the day's events. Follow the links at the left to read Warner's publication, listen to the speech or view a selection of photos.
President Lyndon Johnson
University of Michigan Commencement, 1964
"The Great Society" Speech
Lyndon Johnson, Great Society Speech photos

All photos from the News and Information Services (University of Michigan) photo collection. Series C, #409.