



Chapter 4: Close Up on Primary Sources

American Presidents on Federalism

The issue of federalism, the division of power between the States and the Federal Government, is one that is never far away from presidential politics. In the second half of the 20th century, Presidents and presidential candidates often debated how power and authority should be divided between the Federal Government and the States. While all Presidents have upheld federalism—one of the basic principles of the Constitution—many Presidents have supported policies favoring a strong Federal Government at the expense of the States, contrary to federalist ideals.



President Dwight D. Eisenhower

Dwight D. Eisenhower and Federalism

Although he was a Republican—from the party that typically favors States' rights—Eisenhower produced a number of policies that asserted the priority of the Federal Government over State governments. In 1957, for example, Eisenhower ordered federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to integrate Central High School, when that State's governor, Orval Faubus, refused to abide by a federal court ruling. Eisenhower also promoted the "biggest peacetime construction project" in the history of the United States—the creation of the federal highway system. Eisenhower later described the project:

More than any single action by the

government since the end of the [Second World War], this one would change the face of America....Its impact on the American economy—the jobs it would produce in manufacturing and construction, the rural areas it would open up—was beyond calculation.

Lyndon B. Johnson and Federalism

Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat, was also willing to promote the Federal Government. Johnson is perhaps best remembered for his "Great Society" programs, social and economic programs sponsored by the Federal Government to improve housing, education, and health for all Americans. And yet, Johnson viewed this program as a sort of federalism, when he proposed it in 1964:

The solution to these problems does not rest on a massive program in Washington, nor can it rely solely on the strained resources of local authority. They require us to create new concepts of cooperation, a creative federalism, between the national capital and the leaders of local communities.

Today, many opponents of expanded government power view the Great Society programs as an example of "big government" and the opposite of federalism. As the debate continues, Americans struggle to find an acceptable balance between promoting the welfare of the entire country and granting power to the States.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why would people consider sending United States troops to integrate a local school an action that goes against the principles of federalism?
2. What did Lyndon Johnson mean by "creative federalism" in his proposal for Great Society programs?