

War on Poverty

Begun officially in 1964, the War on Poverty was an ambitious governmental effort to address the problem of persistent poverty in the United States. Over the next decade, the federal government—in conjunction with state and local governments, non-profit organizations, and grassroots groups—created a new institutional base for antipoverty and civil rights action and, in the process, highlighted growing racial and ideological tensions in American politics and society. Marked by moments of controversy and consensus, the War on Poverty defined a new era for American liberalism and added new layers to the American welfare state. Legislatively, the first two years were the most active. Between President Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union address in 1964 and the liberal setbacks suffered in the congressional elections of 1966, the Johnson administration pushed through an unprecedented amount of antipoverty legislation. The Economic Opportunity Act (1964) provided the basis for the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the Job Corps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Upward Bound, Head Start, Legal Services, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, the Community Action Program (CAP), the college Work-Study program, Neighborhood Development Centers, small business loan programs, rural programs, migrant worker programs, remedial education projects, local health care centers, and others. The antipoverty effort, however, did not stop there. It encompassed a range of Great Society legislation far broader than the Economic Opportunity Act alone. Other important measures with antipoverty functions included an \$11 billion tax cut (Revenue Act of 1964), the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Food Stamp Act (1964), the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), the Higher Education Act (1965), the Social Security amendments creating

Medicare/Medicaid (1965), the creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (1965), the Voting Rights Act (1965), the Model Cities Act (1966), the Fair Housing Act (1968), several job-training programs, and various Urban Renewal-related projects.

The Republican administration of President Nixon continued the broadly defined War on Poverty. Although President Nixon expressed dislike for much of the War on Poverty, his administration responded to public pressure by maintaining most programs and by expanding the welfare state through the liberalization of the Food Stamp program, the indexing of Social Security to inflation, and the passage of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program for disabled Americans. Beyond such escalations of specific programs, the Nixon administration's most noticeable contributions to the War on Poverty consisted of replacing the OEO with the Community Services Administration, redistributing control over many antipoverty programs to more traditional federal bureaucracies, and proposing a Family Assistance Plan that failed to gain congressional approval. The Nixon administration also endorsed a "New Federalism" in which the federal government shifted more authority over social welfare enterprises to state and local governments. This new vision for federalism was most fully realized during the administration of President Ronald W. Reagan, which replaced the Community Services Administration with the Community Services Block Grant system, redesigned job training, cut back the Food Stamp program, and initiated what some scholars have called a War on Welfare.

The War on Poverty was complex in its origins, its implementation, and its impact. Its programs and philosophies were born out of the political discomfort caused

by the persistence of poverty amid the abundance of post-World War II America, the vexing questions of citizenship raised by the Civil Rights movement, and decades of social scientific thought about poverty and social reform. With the War on Poverty, American liberalism's insistent optimism and deep faith in expertise met head-on a domestic crisis of race, social order, and political economy comparable in scope only to the Civil War and the Great Depression. The administrations of President John Kennedy and his successor Lyndon Johnson became the primary organizers of the governmental response to that crisis. To deal with concern that poverty threatened American progress, their administrations pushed hard for economic growth that could create full employment and for social reform that could enable the poor to access what President Johnson called "the good life."

The political will necessary for an extensive poverty war intensified in the early 1960s. Part of that intensification came from the moral and organizational groundswell of the Civil Rights movement. Another part grew from a "rediscovery" of poverty. Leading the rediscovery were several exposés by journalists and social reformers. Two particular works caught the attention of President Kennedy, Homer Bigart's *New York Times* series on Appalachian poverty and Dwight MacDonald's extensive *The New Yorker* review of Michael Harrington's searing polemic *The Other America* (1962). Harrington's book offered a stunning portrait of an allegedly separate, forgotten America populated by an estimated fifty million poor Americans. Those works likely compounded Kennedy's concern about poverty that had been roused during a 1960 campaign visit to depressed coal regions in West Virginia. Whatever motivated Kennedy, his administration put in motion a process that became the foundation for Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

During President Kennedy's lifetime, however, that process yielded scant benefits for the poor. Like his administration's involvement with civil rights, the efforts against poverty were piecemeal, hesitating, and limited to relatively safe political terrain. The Area Redevelopment Act (1961) mainly provided infrastructure in the Appalachian region. A slightly more substantial record was established through wage policies, an experimental Food Stamp program, and the Manpower Development and Training Act (1962). The longest lasting efforts came in the background work for an eventual tax cut and the work of the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime (PCJD). The PCJD embraced several ideas and developed important strategies that guided much of the later War on Poverty. Its leaders, which included Robert F. Kennedy, Kennedy's close friend David Hackett, and several influential academics and social reformers, were especially captivated by the concept of community action. They drew heavily on social thought from the so-called Chicago School of sociology (particularly the drive to create "community competence"), the "culture of poverty" theory most closely associated with anthropologist Oscar Lewis that reinforced a sense that poverty was intergenerational and hard to eliminate because poor people absorbed values and behaviors that kept them in poverty, and, perhaps most directly, the Ford Foundation's Gray Areas project that funneled resources into target areas of a select number of cities. Another major influence was the Opportunity Theory of Lloyd Ohlin (a member of the PCJD) and Richard Cloward that contended that change in ghettos had to come through deep-rooted systemic reform. The multi-layered attack on poverty found in Cloward's Mobilization for Youth project in New York City was repeated to an extent in the War on Poverty.

In 1963, the Kennedy administration considered expanding their antipoverty agenda, with Walter Heller, Chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, leading the call for far more extensive antipoverty program. After the tragic assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, the torch passed to Lyndon Johnson. After a series of meetings with Chairman Heller and other key economic advisers at his ranch in late December 1963, Johnson decided to greatly enlarge the antipoverty effort and to make community action one of the centerpieces of his own War on Poverty.

Approximately two weeks later, in his 1964 State of the Union address, Johnson made this decision public with his famous metaphorical declaration of war. This War on Poverty quickly grew into a multi-faceted attempt to attack the confusing, intertwined causes of poverty. Wanting to do more than ameliorate the symptoms of poverty, policymakers sought reform in a wide range of areas that included education, housing, health, employment, civic participation, and psychological disposition. Antipoverty planners tried to provide poor people access to the American "good life" by offering them a "hand-up" rather than a "handout." A full attack on poverty, therefore, came to require local action and individual initiative. Early antipoverty warriors, especially in the OEO, placed great responsibility on local people and great hope on the skills and vision of people at the ground-level. This expectation encouraged thousands of distinctive battles against poverty throughout America. It also insured that the War on Poverty would expose far more social, political, and economic problems than it could fix.

In early 1964, the two most pressing priorities of President Johnson's antipoverty agenda involved passing a massive tax cut designed to stimulate the economy and organizing a task force to shape the War on Poverty. The tax cut passed Congress in

February and contributed to an extraordinary economic expansion. The task force—headed by Sargent Shriver, the director of the highly popular Peace Corps and brother-in-law to the slain president—established the basis for the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) that Johnson signed in August. The EOA was a remarkable piece of social welfare legislation that many contemporaries considered “the” War on Poverty. Premised on improving economic opportunity instead of providing cash transfers or creating a New Deal-style jobs program, the antipoverty legislation created a long list of programs designed to help individuals develop marketable skills, political power, and civic aptitude. The legislation established the Office of Economic Opportunity, a new bureaucracy under control of the President that oversaw the Community Action Program, Job Corps, VISTA, Head Start (1965), Legal Services (1965), and other programs. Other Economic Opportunity Act programs like the Neighborhood Youth Corps, Adult Basic Education, and rural loan programs were distributed to traditional executive departments.

Other parts of the War on Poverty were located outside the Economic Opportunity Act framework and, in the long-term, likely had more impact on the lives of Americans. Those programs and legislation certainly accounted for far more expenditures than the Office of Economic Opportunity, which received an initial appropriation of slightly less than \$1 billion and experienced only marginal increases after that. The Food Stamp program, for instance, fed hungry Americans and eventually reached almost ten percent of the population and 60 percent of the poor. Medicare subsidized health care for the elderly (with almost 40 million enrollees in 2000 according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services), while Medicaid applied to qualified poor residents. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided money to local school districts who

were supposed to use the funds to help their poor students. The Higher Education Act eased the financial burdens of millions of college students. The Civil Rights Act opened up new spaces in the American marketplace, while the Voting Rights Act did the same for the political marketplace. The Fair Housing Act established an important base of law to combat housing discrimination.

None of those programs or acts functioned flawlessly. Corruption, abuse, and inefficiency took their toll on often hastily planned programs. Costs rose. Bureaucracies bulged. For many programs, meager budgets were tightened even more, and funding goals were rarely met. Aggressive war rhetoric created expectations that could never be met. In the end, the War on Poverty did not end poverty and did not retard the economic isolation of inner city ghettos. It did not redistribute much wealth or address deep structural problems in the American economy, and, except on the fringes, those options were not serious considerations. In retrospect, scholars see that the easier-to-reach poor were reached more often and benefited more fully than those considered “hard-core” poor. Many scholars also argue that War on Poverty programs assisted middle class Americans as much or more than poor Americans, and the political processes responsible for their creation and implementation were often exercises in purchasing support from key non-poor constituencies. Legions of doctors, lawyers, farmers, grocers, hospital administrators, medical professionals, social welfare professionals, and politicos built homes, businesses, and careers through parts of the War on Poverty. Nevertheless, the problems and shortcomings of War on Poverty programs were not enough to end most of them. Much of the antipoverty framework weathered attacks and, as late as the turn of the Twenty-First Century, remained central to American social policy.

The program that generated the most intense controversies and came to dominate the politics of the early War on Poverty was the Community Action Program. Envisioned as a foundation of the War on Poverty in 1964, the CAP offered the most promise for reform, but also the most potential for turmoil. Administered by the idealistic and aggressive new OEO, the implementation of the program proved to be the most contentious part of the War on Poverty. Most controversies involved the distribution of power to poor people that often bypassed traditional federal, state, and local bureaucracies. By requiring the “maximum feasible participation of the poor” in Community Action Agencies, the Economic Opportunity Act substantially elevated the role of marginalized people and set off a daring policy experiment. Through community action, the War on Poverty became inextricably intertwined in the struggle for racial equality.

Almost immediately after the initiation of the Community Action Program in August 1964, the innovative program stirred a storm of protest, particularly from some southern white leaders who wished to preserve African-American subordination and from entrenched local politicians and social service leaders who found their power threatened by newly empowered people. Over the next few years, solutions to the controversies reduced the flexibility envisioned in the original Community Action Program and narrowed the meaning of maximum feasible participation to a concise mathematical formula. Through the Green Amendment of 1967, Congress effectively required that city halls and established civic leaders give their approval to actions of Community Action Agencies. Partly as a result of the Green Amendment and partly as a result of administrative difficulties for local creation of new policies from scratch, “national

emphasis” programs came to dominate the work of Community Action Agencies. Further changes arose from the intensification of urban civil disorder after 1965. Urban unrest narrowed the War on Poverty and turned the OEO and the CAP into major anti-riot endeavors. By 1969, over 1,000 Community Action Agencies were in operation, and they offered ready-made organizations capable of dealing with tension on the streets. In that role, according to several studies, the OEO proved relatively effective at calming tensions and reconfiguring attention paid to American ghettos. With modified structures and functions, Community Action Agencies generally became much less controversial and developed into accepted social welfare institutions carrying out fairly specific service delivery. Like other War on Poverty programs, attacks on the CAP did not kill the entire project. Despite repeated calls for its termination, the CAP created agencies that actually became widespread and relatively popular. In 1999, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that 96 percent of all counties in the United States were operating Community Action Agencies or their equivalent.

The legacies of the Community Action Program and the rest of the War on Poverty remain a subject of contentious debate. Generally, the War on Poverty has been most often remembered for its controversies and its obvious incapacity to end poverty. Interpretations of the federal antipoverty effort, therefore, have tended to differ according to the political affiliation and ideological orientation of the interpreter and the spirit of the times. One example is the debate over the reasons for a startling decline in the black poverty rate from 55 percent of all African-Americans in 1959 to 33 percent in 1970 and for a drop in the overall U.S. poverty rate from 22 percent to 12 percent in same time period (in 2000, the rate for African-Americans was 22 percent and the overall rate was

11 percent). Critics of the Great Society have tended to credit economic growth spurred by American entrepreneurship, while blaming the Great Society for impeding further economic growth. Defenders have tended to argue that the Great Society was crucial for that growth and for directly helping to move people out of poverty.

In the 1980s and 1990s, disagreements over the legacies of the War on Poverty and Great Society became especially intense. President Reagan and others on the political right convinced many that the War on Poverty represented a failure of big government. Instead of helping to alleviate poverty, the programs supposedly encouraged sloth, dependency, crime, single parenthood, and unproductive citizenship. Conservative critics, led by Charles Murray in his book *Losing Ground*, charged that most of the programs were misguided, mismanaged, mangled attempts at social engineering in which liberal overspending stifled market-based solutions and covered up for the faults of individuals. Defenders of the Great Society retorted that social programs—despite being fragmented, under-funded, and besieged—helped lower the poverty rate, reduce disorder, and absorb the shock from Baby Boomers entering the job market. Those defenders pointed out that most Americans have favored most of the Great Society’s programs. In that regard, support for the Great Society’s contributions to the welfare state—especially elements with formidable popular backing like Medicare, Head Start, Social Security expansion, and education funding—limited the effect of conservative assaults.

Two presidential moments hint at the political distance traveled by the War on Poverty since its inception. In Lyndon Johnson’s first State of the Union address (1964), the rough-hewn Texas Democrat declared an “unconditional war on poverty in America.” With eager bravado, he promised not to “rest until that war is won.” His audience

thundered in ovation. Almost a quarter century later, in President Ronald Reagan's final State of the Union address (1988), the smooth, good-looking California Republican announced that, in America's War on Poverty, "poverty won." His audience rumbled with laughter. The applause and the laughter on all sides may continue until much time or the next major domestic crisis closes the analytical gap and introduces a new paradigm.

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See also Area Redevelopment Act; Civil Rights Movement; Community Organizing; Culture of Poverty; *Economic Report of 1964*, Council of Economic Advisers; Education Policies; Employment and Training; Federalism; Food Stamps; Health Policy; Housing and Housing Policy; Juvenile Delinquency; *Losing Ground*, Charles Murray; Legal Aid/Legal Services; New Right; *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, Harry Caudill; North Carolina Fund; *Other America, The*, Michael Harrington; U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development; Urban Poverty; Urban Renewal; Vista; Welfare Policy/Welfare Reform.