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Congress Back Then: The Lost War on Poverty



by K. Daniel Glover
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Editor's note: For more on poverty in America, be sure to check out VoxCap.com's ongoing feature on the subject.

Poverty is making a political comeback." So said the *Chicago Tribune* in an Oct. 21 story that echoed a theme just about every media outlet (including *IntellectualCapital.com* and our parent site, VoxCap.com) has reported at some time over the past several months.

Although arguably unwarranted when you consider the White House's Sept. 30 announcement about the declining poverty rate, the media emphasis certainly seems justified by the attention some policymakers and candidates have been giving poverty. President Clinton, for instance, heralded his poverty tour to Appalachia in July. And Vice President Al Gore recently upstaged Democratic presidential rival Bill Bradley by introducing his plan for attacking childhood poverty one day before Bradley announced his ideas.

No one, of course, ponders the state of poverty today without first recalling President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" in the 1960s. Whether for good or bad, it is the milestone achievement in the federal government's quest to feed, clothe, house and employ the nation's poor.

The three-legged stool of poor policy

Before Johnson's presidency, poverty rarely was a cause for federal intervention. The "charity begins at home" mantra had shaped the nation's thinking on the poor for much of its history. In his 1992 book *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, conservative Marvin Olasky, a key adviser to GOP presidential candidate George W. Bush, said the traditional approach to poverty consisted of "a three-legged stool of family, church and neighborhood."

The admonition of colonial preacher Cotton Mather served as a guiding principle for more than two centuries. "Instead of exhorting you to augment your charity," Mather told his followers in 1698, "I will rather utter an exhortation … that you may not *abuse* your charity by misapplying it. … Let us try to do good with as much application of mind as wicked men employ in doing evil."

Even when the growth of cities made the three-legged-stool model less workable, the government was reluctant to get involved. In 1854, President Franklin Pierce vetoed a bill that would have authorized money for federally supported mental hospitals. His reasoning: "If Congress has the power to make provision for the indigent insane, it has the same power for the indigent who are not insane." Pierce did not think it wise for the nation to head down that path, and Congress upheld his veto.

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The issue of aid to the indigent arose again, this time within a racial context, after the Civil War. The debate pitted Radical Republicans in Congress against President Andrew Johnson, who argued that a "system for the support of indigent persons … was never contemplated by the authors of the Constitution." But the Republicans, who ultimately impeached Johnson for his obstinate opposition to their Reconstruction policies, prevailed in their quest to aid freed blacks.

Not until the early 1900s did the idea of poverty as a federal concern take root. Ministers and media giants of that day promoted government-backed welfare, particularly for children, and their mission soared to the top of the nation's agenda in January 1909, when President Theodore Roosevelt scheduled the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children.

Three years later, Congress created the U.S. Children's Bureau to craft plans for extending federal involvement in poor policy. In 1921, a year that nearly saw the birth of a Department of Welfare under conservative President Warren G. Harding, Congress passed the Maternity and Infancy Act, providing the first federal funds for child welfare. And in reaction to the Great Depression and its peak unemployment of 25%, the nation made its first huge step toward the entitlement era.

'Our objective: total victory'

The 1950s -- like the 1990s, a decade of noteworthy national prosperity -- saw "a wave of resentment" against people claiming entitlements, Olasky said in his book. But it also saw a marked increase in the emphasis on poverty, with a 1958 study on the nation's welfare needs and publication of John Kenneth Galbraith's book *Affluent Society*.

In 1962, social welfare experts at the University of Michigan predicted that poverty could be eliminated at a cost of $2 billion a year. President John F. Kennedy contemplated a poverty initiative for his second term but was assassinated in November 1963, thus leaving the issue for Johnson, Kennedy's constitutional successor, to consider.

Johnson jumped at the opportunity. Johnson biographer Vaughn Davis Bornet said that on Johnson's first full day in office, he told economic aide Walter Heller to "give [the poverty program] the highest priority. Push ahead full tilt." By the time of his first State of the Union address in January 1964, Johnson was ready to boldly proclaim: "This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America."

Johnson named Peace Corps chief Sargent Shriver, a Kennedy in-law, to head the effort, but Johnson's commitment to the cause proved to be its most valuable asset. He twice toured poverty-stricken regions of the country, proclaiming to a Pittsburgh audience April 25 that his modest goal was to give everyone "a little house with a picture on the wall and a rug on the floor and music in the home."


AP PHOTO
President Johnson declared war on poverty in his 1964 State of the Union address

Considering the realities of election-year and racial politics and the scope of Johnson's program -- nearly $1 billion in funding and consolidation of existing and new poverty initiatives in a new Office of

Economic Opportunity (OEO) -- Congress moved quickly to pass legislation. In 20 days of hearings, the House heard from 76 witnesses, but only nine opposed the plan.

Lawmakers ignored the GOP characterization of Johnson's plan as an "election-year gimmick" and resolved states'-rights concerns by giving governors the right to veto any poverty-related contracts with private organizations. They also added language designed to keep subversives from benefiting from the program and dropped Adam Yarmolinsky, who had spearheaded the integration of Southern military bases, as Shriver's potential deputy because of Southern animosity toward him.

The Senate passed its bill on a 61-34 vote July 23; the 226-185 House vote came 16 days later; and the Senate cleared the measure by voice vote Aug. 11. Johnson signed it into law Aug. 20, with Congress later appropriating $800 million for the first year of the initiative. Not even Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), Johnson's GOP rival in the presidential election, spoke against the measure from the floor.

A noble but futile endeavor

Americans elected Johnson to a full term in November, and both the public and the policy community greeted his anti-poverty initiative warmly at first. With a larger Democratic majority, Congress nearly doubled the appropriation in 1965 and upped it again slightly in succeeding years.

But the honeymoon soon ended. The 1966 U.S. Conference of Mayors accused Shriver of "fostering class warfare," and critics complained that it would be cheaper to send Americans to Harvard for a year than to keep them an equal time in the Job Corps, a key element of the Johnson program. Congress overhauled the OEO in 1967 to require General Accounting Office assessments, and that same year, in the wake of urban rioting, Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh said the program was "almost worse than nothing at all."

In hindsight, most policy experts, regardless of their political leanings, agree that Johnson lost his war on poverty; they only disagree on why he lost. Those on the left argue that Johnson failed because he was more financially committed to war in Vietnam ($120 billion from 1965 to 1973) than in the American streets ($15.5 billion). Conservatives say he failed because government is not equipped for such a war.

Whatever the reason, policymakers of today who want the government to attack American poverty should consider the conclusion of Bornet in his book, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson*. "A noble presidential effort it all was," Bornet wrote, "accompanied by moving language and some positive results; but the War on Poverty was hardly of a scale and type capable of eliminating poverty then or later."

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