Fifty Years Later:

Did the War on Poverty Fail?

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For about two weeks this January, poverty was recognized as a serious problem in this amazingly rich but unequal country, as we observed the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty. In his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson said:

Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope -- some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity.

This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.

When you look at the full text of the speech, it is clear that LBJ believed that poverty could be eradicated, not just reduced. In fact, he states unequivocally that “we shall not rest until this war is won.” State of the Union addresses are obviously political statements, and I am sure that many – especially those on the Right – will challenge LBJ’s sincerity. What else would you say if you believe that the War on Poverty was a dismal failure? Yet proclaiming it a failure ignores the reality of this era and the programs that emerged from the Great Society: the Economic Opportunity Act (1964), the Food Stamp Act (1964), the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Social Security Amendments
creating Medicare and Medicaid (1965), the Immigration and Naturalization Act (1965), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), among others.

No matter how we may feel about his disastrous policy of war in Southeast Asia, LBJ left a legacy of profound change for the poor, the disenfranchised, and the vulnerable – the excluded in America. His Great Society opened doors for many. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment – particularly as a southern politician – was the Voting Rights Act which made it possible for many African Americans to actually be able to vote, a century after the Civil War.

So we saw for a couple of weeks a recognition that there had once been a war on poverty in America. It wasn’t our first one, especially when we consider poverty not just in economic terms but also as having social and political dimensions. Since the founding of our country, we have seen movements aimed at opening the doors for those left out, be they women, people of color, the poor or any other category of social exclusion. There was no social safety net before Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, especially the Social Security Act of 1935. The War on Poverty helped to expand those programs and to create for awhile the possibility of a real social safety in a society that is still deeply rooted in the ideology of individualism and self-reliance – as if we all live in a social vacuum where we really don’t need anyone else.

But now we are back where we were two weeks ago. For several days, we heard some people assert that the War on Poverty was a success, others that it was a failure, and some giving it a mixed review. But lost in those statements was any appreciation
for the spirit of the 1960s – a time when even a U.S. president could say that poverty can be eradicated.

Now poverty is once again invisible – what it is on most days past and present in America. The poor are unseen and unheard as ever – even though they are everywhere in this nation. All you have to do to see and hear them is walk out on any street in America and open your eyes and your ears – and your heart. But as Frances Fox Piven has noted, poverty and the poor are toxic words. So if we don’t speak those words, then those realities don’t exist.

Well, they do exist. It is only those with the coldest of hearts and souls who can say otherwise. It is only those with the coldest of hearts and souls who can say that the poor are responsible for their condition, that they are lazy and shiftless and uneducated and unwilling to work and drunks and drug addicts who lay around their houses and neighborhoods and take advantage of public benefits and on and on and on and on and on. What we hear day in and day out about the poor is not merely cruel and mean-spirited but also wrong. They are as hard-working as anyone else. They care for their families and friends just as much as anyone else. They have endured through generations of isolation and exclusion, surviving as best they can with what they have. They deserve what anyone else does: dignity and respect.

There have been times when the rhetoric about the poor has changed. During the Great Depression, it was obvious to most that people were not poor just because they didn’t want to work. There were no jobs to be had. At that time, many of our leaders had experienced the hardships of poverty personally and knew better than to listen to
the words of those on the Right. During the 1960s, it was obvious to many once again
that people were not poor because of any personal failing but because of a lack of jobs
and opportunities. LBJ’s policies opened doors. The Economic Opportunity Act
included the creation of community action agencies, bringing the poor into decision-
making about their needs and futures. Those who had been discriminated against – in
education, in housing, in job opportunities, in voting, etc. – were given their civil rights,
their human rights – the opportunity to participate as members of their society, no
better or worse, no different than anyone else. The social safety net begun during the
Great Depression was mightily augmented during the War on Poverty, including
education, health, job training, food, and income supports.

Those who say that the War on Poverty was a failure either do not know their
history or are cynically denying the truth. There is absolutely no question that it was a
phenomenal success – particularly for a program that was never funded to the extent
needed to eradicate poverty. In 1964 the official poverty rate was 19.0%; by 1969 it was
down to 12.1%. The child poverty rate was cut in half. Head Start was making inroads
in preparing poor and vulnerable children for school. Medicaid brought health care to
many poor people, especially children. Women on public assistance were able to go to
college. The community action agencies (CAA) were amazingly successful in opening
doors for the poor, helping to enfranchise many potential voters. Of course, all of these
programs led to a backlash. Just look at the efforts to destroy ACORN, for years one of
the major targets of the Right especially in their renewal of voter suppression drives.
Or the assault on public assistance, leading to then candidate Bill Clinton’s promise to
“end welfare as we know it,” which he did when he signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996) six years later.

During that two-week time block when the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty happened, there was a lot of revisionist history to be heard. There were comparisons drawn between the 19.0% poverty rate of 1964 and the current poverty rate of 15.0% (for 2012, the latest year for which data are available). There was little recognition given to the fact that poverty rates fell even well below the 12.1% level of 1969. In fact, the lowest were 11.1% in 1973 and 11.2% in 1974. As the War on Poverty programs were reduced in the 1970s, there was a gradual rise upward through the end of that decade. During the “golden days” of the Reagan-Bush era, poverty rates ranged from 12.8% in 1981 to 15.2% in 1992. During the Clinton years, poverty dropped from 15.1% to 11.3%, approaching the lows of the War on Poverty. But there was a gradual escalation from 2001, with poverty moving upward, especially after the beginning of the so-called Great Recession. Some make note of how high poverty rates have been under Obama, but that of course reflects the worsening of the economic crisis begun during the second Bush era.

When we as a nation commit to eliminating poverty, we have made great progress. Even acknowledging that the official poverty rate too low a number and that poverty is actually much greater than those figures show, poverty declines when the social safety net is enhanced. Even during the Clinton years, there was progress while the economy was humming. His welfare reform appeared to be working while those removed from the rolls by time limits and work requirements could find jobs, but all that started to
change dramatically after the dot.com bubble burst and accelerated when George W. Bush took office and the 2008 banking crisis nearly destroyed the U.S. economy.

The War on Poverty did not eradicate poverty. That is true. But it was clearly one of the most successful efforts in bringing poverty rates down ever seen in this country. We did it once. We can do it again. We had the will to do it once, and that is what we need to bring back. I do not believe that most people are cruel and mean-spirited. Those who are most vocal on the Right – especially in the Tea Party and in the media – reflect the worst in our society. But most Americans are not like that. Most of us know on some level that poverty can happen to any of us. Most of us know that the rich do not create jobs but instead live privileged lives by exploiting the 99%. So isn’t it time to do again what we did 50 years ago?