

THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR ON POVERTY

by

Lisa Cohen

History 195H
June 15, 1990
Professor Lindemann
Professor Kalman
Professor Bergstrom

INTRODUCTION

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.

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.¹

When President Lyndon Johnson put forth this notion on May 22, 1964, few Americans understood exactly what Johnson expected from his "unbridled war on poverty." They learned that this President had dedicated himself to enriching the lives of all Americans, including the poor, a group more often than not overlooked when discussing the American Dream. The legislation of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 set up far-reaching programs, more commonly referred to as the War on Poverty, with the expressed goal of ridding the nation poverty, an issue federal policy had never addressed in the past.

Americans had always believed that they had an obligation to help those less fortunate than themselves. They just could never decide exactly how to help. Americans took for granted that everyone had certain rights guaranteed by the

¹. Public Papers of the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64, I, P. 704-7

constitution, such as the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but many believed that poor people somehow less deserved these rights. Their "laziness" prevented the poor from working hard enough to secure basic needs for themselves.

Although a widespread notion existed that the poor should receive relief, not many of the affluent willingly parted with those funds out of their own pockets.

For this reason, local government took from private charity the responsibility for the poverty stricken, beginning very early in American history. However, local government did not see as its role the actual abolition of poverty. Instead, it appeased the poor by overseeing the payment of "relief" money. While these funds did benefit those in poverty, they were difficult to come by and did little more than put a minimal amount of food on the table. None of these relief payments provided enough money to lift a person out of poverty. The payment of relief by on a local level was, however, the first step towards the realization that government did have a responsibility for the welfare of its citizens.

Poverty did not come to the forefront as a national issue in need more of federal than local attention until the end of the nineteenth century. Progressives such as Jacob Riis brought the lives of the poor in the slums to the attention of the more affluent population through the use of photographs. One would have to be hard-hearted indeed not to be moved by the desperate images, many of them children, staring out from the

pages with hunger and desperation written all over their faces. In response, President Theodore Roosevelt called a national conference which focused on the care of poor children.

Progressives made up only a small portion of the population, and although they made themselves heard, they accomplished very little in the way of concrete federal programs.

The federal government did not implement a large-scale anti-poverty program until the Great Depression of the 1930s. The task of relieving the jobless and their families after the crash of 1929 first fell to private and local agencies. These channels soon found themselves unprepared and unable to meet the growing crisis. For many then, the Depression answered once and for all the question of whether private or public agencies had the greater responsibility for relief for the poor.

With the inception of the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt created programs designed to bring assistance to the twenty-five to fifty percent of the population stricken by destitution as a result of events as they transpired. The New Deal generated jobs so that men and women did not have to take "handouts" and could maintain their pride. The New Deal also provided for temporary programs such as soup kitchens, which supplied food to the many hungry people who had no where else to go. One of the aspects of the New Deal that differentiated it from previous federal poverty policy was that programs were designed to work both on a local and a federal level. Permanent programs like Social Security aimed to meet the needs of Americans on a more continuous basis.

Although the range and scope of these programs were vast, they lacked something. The New Deal established very few programs to deal with the people who had been poor before the Great Depression began. In other words, New Deal programs resolved to deal with an immediate problem and did not aim to eliminate poverty over the long haul.

The national government finally acted upon that goal in the mid-1960s in the form of a federally supported antipoverty program, the War on Poverty. The idea that poverty could be eliminated, though not entirely new, was a new ambition for the federal government. Much talk went on through the years of obliterating poverty through the private sector, but achievement of that goal did not occur. The United States by the 1960s had grown to such an enormous size that the eradication of destitution at a local level seemed inconceivable. President Johnson was the first man to succeed at passing legislation of such a large scope aimed at the abolition of poverty.

Historians have looked at the War on Poverty from many different angles. Scholars have written volumes attempting to assess the success or failure of individual programs and the War on Poverty as a whole. Others choose to look at the War on Poverty as an economic issue and discuss the validity of its premises. Still others look back to the War on Poverty and evaluate its usefulness to policymakers today interested in the creation of similar agendas. In other words, historians have looked at the nuts and bolts and the effects of the War on

Poverty. Rarely, however, have they looked at its roots.

The idea of a federally subsidized poverty program was not new. What was new was the idea that the federal government could do more than just combat poverty -- it could defeat it. Federal programs had been implemented in the past, but they had as their goal the amelioration of the symptoms of poverty, not the eradication of its causes. Why, then, this shift in focus? Looking at the different definitions of poverty and how those definitions translated into poverty policy prior to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society will give the best indication of the origins of the War on Poverty.

The roots of the Economic Opportunity Act lay in an amalgamation of the rapidly shifting focus with regard to federal involvement in poverty policy. The New Deal represented the first great shift in focus and its scope would later have a great effect upon the shaping of the War on Poverty. Although the period immediately following World War II brought seemingly unbridled prosperity, a few people (albeit a very few) were still concerned with poverty in the United States. One must look back to the ideas of these people in assessing the impetus of the War on Poverty as well. Looking at the steps taken by the Kennedy Administration with regard to poverty policy will also lend a clue as to the origins of the war on poverty. By examining the steps taken by prior administrations and assessing the bases upon which policy was based, the Johnson Administration was able to create the most comprehensive federal anti-poverty program to

date. The precedents of the previous thirty years combined led to the belief that a federally subsidized program that had as its goal the elimination of poverty was possible. The federal government could indeed wipe poverty of the face of the nation forever.

POVERTY DEFINED

The anti-poverty programs implemented by the Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations, though different in range and scope, had at least one common factor in that they were based upon the most current definitions of poverty. This may seem odd to those who believe that every word has a clear and succinct meaning. The nebulous nature of "poverty" makes its definition in terms that are satisfactory to everyone nearly impossible. For this reason, the poverty battled by Franklin Roosevelt may have differed greatly than that fought by Eisenhower or Kennedy, and thus affected the shape that policy took during each individual administration. The Johnson Administration's attack on poverty benefitted in that it could base its assault upon an amalgamation of the previous definitions of poverty with the newest vein of intellectual activity about the problem.

The lack of a large-scale federally subsidized anti-poverty

program prior to the New Deal can in large part be attributed to the widely accepted definition of poverty at the time. Before the New Deal (with the exception of the Progressive Era) poverty had largely been defined as an absolute phenomenon. Proponents of this definition believe that people suffer from absolute, or purely economic poverty, when their basic needs exceed their means to satisfy them.² These people often live without the things that the more affluent population takes for granted, such as light, heat, warm clothing, food, and shelter. As not many Americans fit in to this category, the belief existed that no widespread poverty existed in the United States except, perhaps, in overcrowded urban areas which, it was believed, should take care of their own problems.

The impetus for the New Deal came out of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the subsequent absolute poverty suffered by a large number of American citizens. The blame for this destitution did not rest on the shoulders of the poverty-stricken; most people agreed that events had transpired beyond anyone's control. Therefore, the federal government felt a sense of obligation to help out those unlucky enough to get caught in the downward spiral of the economy. For the first time, the absolute definition of poverty was put to use in the form of a federally subsidized anti-poverty effort, out of which came programs to alleviate the symptoms of impoverishment until the

² "The Problem of Poverty in America," The Economic Report of the President, January 1964 as found in Miller, Herman P., ed. Poverty American Style.

economy had a chance to right itself. Smaller scale depressions had occurred in the United States before, and the country always seemed to bounce back just fine.

Roosevelt, however, was unwilling to wait for the economy to fix itself, and from the actions he took in attempting economic reform came the first hint of a structuralist argument with regard to poverty. In other words, Roosevelt gave the indication that he felt that perhaps not all of the blame for poverty lay with the victim but instead with the structure of the economy, which had some inherent flaws. This idea did not really take hold until the 1950s, at which time it was expanded upon by several economists. Many of Roosevelt's contemporaries felt that his meddling in the economy with programs such as the NRA and the AAA would prove dangerous and advocated sticking with ameliorative programs such as the WPA and preventative programs such as Social Security.

Entry into World War II stimulated the economy to such an extent that the absolute poverty felt during the previous decade rapidly diminished. With the reduction of absolute privation came a perceived lack of a need for federal poverty programs. Truman tried to rally support behind further legislation in his Fair Deal, but the country failed to back him. Both the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations were marked by merely keeping much of the New Deal intact and not offering up any comprehensive new legislation. In spite of the lack of interest by the general population and by policymakers, a whole new range of definitions

appeared , although they were not immediately acted upon.

The perception of poverty began to change in the 1940s and 1950s as it became more apparent that an absolute definition was insufficient. Poor people in the United States no longer could be categorized, at least in the eyes of economist and sociologists, as a group of beggars who refused to work. Instead, it was asserted by men such as John Kenneth Galbraith that certain barriers existed within the capitalist structure of the United States that prevented all its citizens from sharing in its riches. Galbraith also asserted, however, that while poverty existed in the United States, it existed in isolated "pockets" such as Appalachia.³

The reason that poverty was not perceived as widespread was that the type of poverty had changed from that which existed in the 1930s. As Michael Harrington described in his book The Other America,⁴ the poor in this country had become increasingly invisible. Poverty could no longer be described in absolute terms. Very few Americans walked around barefoot or lived with no electricity. Consumer goods had been made so accessible in the post-War boom that even those with very little income were able to afford what had once been luxury items such as televisions and automobiles. Writers would come to realize that poverty had become a relative matter. This poverty would prove

³ Galbraith, John Kenneth, The Affluent Society, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1958)

⁴ Harrington, Michael, The Other America: Poverty in the United States. (NY: Penguin Books, 1962)

even more painful for those immersed because of the proximity of those who had the things that they could not afford. Relative poverty finally became recognized as a problem by the Kennedy Administration after he read Harrington's book.

Another idea that was first put forward in the late 1950s and was expanded upon in the early 1960s was that along with the economic and relative deprivation suffered by the poor, there also existed a culture of poverty. Theorists who espoused a full-fledged culture of poverty argued that the chronically poor had developed, as a reaction to their marginal position in society, certain traits and values that differed from those of the more affluent population. "The man without a job, without any opportunity to care for himself and his family develops a sense of bitterness and rejection. He is poor. His friends and neighbors are poor. He is surrounded by a culture of poverty."⁵ Culturalists argued that poverty encompassed more than a lack of income or relative deprivation and that policymakers must be sensitive to the cultural gulf that separated the poorer groups from the rest of society.

As the Johnson Administration began to gird itself for the War on Poverty, they had thirty years of poverty policy and several different definitions of poverty upon which to base their attack. Instead of merely trying to make a carbon copy of the New Deal, Johnson recognized the importance of looking at all

⁵ Humphrey, Hubert, War on Poverty. (NY: MacGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964) p. 13

these definitions of poverty and attempted to combine them all in a comprehensive attack against poverty. Policymakers had to take into account the fact that the poor were not a homogenous group and that people in destitution had many different and distinct needs. The planners of the War on Poverty intended to deal with all these issues in their fight to erase poverty from the nation.

THE NEW DEAL

The definition of poverty as translated into policy in the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt provided the first precedent for the War on Poverty. Both the War on Poverty program and the New Deal encompassed wide-range and far-reaching legislation directed toward helping the poor. Both Roosevelt and Johnson pushed their programs through Congress in a relatively short period of time. On a more simplistic level, Lyndon Johnson idolized FDR and held himself up as a good "New Dealer." Johnson wanted to introduce a program of his own that was built upon the New Deal tradition.

The similarities of the two programs on the surface are in many ways rather obvious. What effect, thought, did the intellectual groundwork of the New Deal have on the shaping of

the War on Poverty? What FDR and his "brains trust" believed about the concept poverty and the role of government proved important not only for the creation of the New Deal, but also for the effect it had on the thought of the whole following generation that was to follow. It is in this way that the New Deal serves as one of the intellectual origins of the War on Poverty.

During the early years of the Great Depression the country President Herbert Hoover still held the office of President. The actions that he took to alleviate the ever worsening situation fell in with the general vein of thinking at the time with regard to federal intervention in the economy. Hoover was trapped by his loyalty to the American folklore of self-help; generations of Americans had prided themselves on the "rugged-individualism" which had brought their country to such greatness. For Hoover, the idea of giving relief to the poor took on not just economic implications, but also moral ones. Hoover approved of the work done by private charity, but was hesitant to approve of a "dole" given by public agencies."⁶ Hoover believed that private enterprise and the marketplace would eventually right itself, as they had always done during economic crises in the past. Because of these old ideas he rejected almost all ideas for federal aid.

When Roosevelt was elected for the first time in 1932, he brought with him to the White House new ideas upon which to base

⁶ Trattner, Walter I., From Poor Law to Welfare State. (NY: The Free Press, 1974) p. 230

an attack on the wide-spread poverty of the day. Roosevelt acted on a different set of beliefs than those put forth by Hoover. He believed that one had a responsibility for the well-being of others. From this belief came the conviction that public relief was not a matter of charity but a matter of justice that rested upon a person's right to a minimum standard of living in a civilized society. The very existence of a democratic state depended on the health and welfare of its citizens.⁷

The government would no longer subscribe, even in words only, to the idea of laissez faire. Instead, it expanded its capacity to include the roles of protector and regulator. The state became a constructive force in improving the nation and the individual. According to Roosevelt, "the legitimate object of government is to do for the people what needs to be done but which they cannot by individual effort do at all or do as well for themselves."⁸ The New Deal permanently altered the role and function of the federal government. First, the New Deal encompassed a commitment to the notion that the federal government could and should play a significant role in economic affairs. Second, the New Deal dedicated the federal government to the concept of welfare for the needy.⁹

With these ideas in hand, Roosevelt and his advisors set to

⁷ Ibid., p.234

⁸ Humphrey, Hubert, The Political Philosophy of the New Deal, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970) p. x

⁹ Keaton, Page, in The New Deal: Fifty Years After, edited by Wilbur J. Cohen, (Lyndon Baines Johnson Library: 1984) p. 23

the task of creating a program that would alleviate the suffering brought on by the Great Depression. FDR quickly plunged the federal government into the business of relief. He handed most of the job over to Harry Hopkins who he named as head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). The government allocated three billion dollars for assistance to the poverty stricken and Hopkins put this money to work immediately. He established principles of public welfare which were unheard of at this time and announced that the citizen was entitled to federal relief as a matter of right. Hopkins also arranged for cash payments which would go directly to recipients who would decide for themselves how to spend the money. He insisted against precedent that relief must include funds not only for food, but for rent, clothing, and medical care as these were all a part of a citizen's rights.¹⁰

Apart from merely handing out money as a dole to those who needed it, FDR and Hopkins created a national plan of "made work." They based this program upon the conviction (also supported by John Maynard Keynes) that the key to economic recovery lay in purchasing power.¹¹ The Civil Works Administration (CWA), an offshoot of FERA, within four months initiated 180,000 projects that set people to work repairing schools, improving roads, beautifying parks, and other programs

¹⁰ Lens, Sidney, Poverty: America's Enduring Paradox, (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969) p. 265

¹¹ Patterson, p. 43

along those lines. The criterion for each of these projects lay not in how useful it was to the public in the long run, but in how quickly it provided jobs. This form of assistance lent a certain dignity to the recipient which direct relief did not.

These programs were marked by their merely palliative nature. Neither tackled poverty that had existed before the Depression or reformed existing conditions to ensure that the federal relief game would someday end. The idea that living as a citizen of the United States entitled one to a minimum standard of living, and thus entitled one to relief as well, became a part of the War on Poverty that found its roots in the New Deal. The social welfare system created as a part of the "second" New Deal also provided a precedent for the War on Poverty.

Roosevelt and his advisors knew that relief alone would not set the country back on its feet again after the Depression. They believed that times of economic emergency necessitated relief, but they also surmised that they needed something of a more permanent nature that would prevent dependency.¹² Roosevelt appointed Edwin E. Witt and Wilbur J. Cohen to head the Committee on Economic Security which put together the Social Security Act of 1935. The administration fundamentally assumed that the federal government ought to handle only residual needs. They created social insurance to lead the fight against poverty. The virtue of Social Security was that it was a preventive

¹² Trattner, p. 237

program.¹³

Social Security also proved to be a landmark in American history. The Act brought expanded and improved standards of welfare throughout the entire nation, standards which at first seemed unbelievable, but soon became the norm. Social insurance sought to hit at some of the leading causes of poverty. Economic benefits were given in cases of unemployment, old-age, and widowhood, as well as for various disabilities. By doing this, Social Security helped prevent destitution and dependency in instances where, historically, they most likely occurred, and did so in a way that preserved individual freedom and human dignity.¹⁴

By the end of Roosevelt's second presidential term, the American welfare state had assumed the form which remains today. It was broken down into four main parts. The first part set up general relief, which the states and localities funded and used mainly for "unemployables." General relief resembled what existed in the pre-New Deal years. Work relief for employables comprised the second part which the federal government funded and consisted of programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration. Categorical public assistance was the third type of aid offered by the federal government which evolved into Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and programs to help the needy blind and aged. The Social Security

¹³ Patterson, p. 60

¹⁴ Trattner, p. 241

Act provided the basis for the fourth part of the newly structured social welfare system, which provided pensions to retired workers and temporary compensation to the jobless.¹⁵

The federal government no longer blamed individual weakness for particular cases of poverty. Instead, they began to regard poverty as a fundamental social and economic problem which attacked society as a whole and needed to be battled by society as a whole. In this belief one can see the precursor for the structuralist argument for the following decades. The American people accepted the notion that failure to provide benefits to those in need was socially and economically shortsighted, whether or not they liked the concept of giving relief.¹⁶

The New Deal put a cushion under poverty more extensive than ever known before, and some of the programs are still relatively unmodified.¹⁷ Johnson gave tribute to the intellectual framework of the Social Security Act by not greatly amending it, and in this paid tribute to FDR as well. When Johnson came to the presidency in 1963, he gave almost every indication that he wanted nothing more than to be a Roosevelt follower and to perpetuate his ideas. In fact, President Johnson wanted a good deal more than that. He wanted to be "the greatest of them all,

¹⁵ Patterson, p. 64

¹⁶ Trattner, p. 242

¹⁷ Lens, p. 287

the whole bunch of them."¹⁸ Johnson knew that the greatest president in history would have to not merely continue Roosevelt's programs or match his performance, but actually exceed it.

The War on Poverty programs aimed to do just that. Planners of the war took the precedent of the New Deal and built upon it. They went further than the New Deal in two respects. First, reform in the 1930s meant only economic reform.¹⁹ Unemployment was the main problem facing the country, and many of the programs of the New Deal did their best to deal with just that. Public officials had to cope with an emergency situation and did not have time for social engineering. FDR did not wish to restructure society or redistribute wealth; he wanted, simply, to put the country back on its pre-Depression track. Johnson used a similar agenda to attempt both economic and social reform.

Second, the planners of the New Deal concerned themselves more with the alleviation and the prevention of poverty than it was with its actual abolition. FDR gave evidence of this plan of attack in the special message he sent to Congress in June, 1934, in which he called for "some safeguards against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated in this man-made world of ours."²⁰ Roosevelt did not believe that the government could wholly

¹⁸ Cohen, Wilbur J., The New Deal: Fifty Years After. (TX: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, 1984) p. 71

¹⁹ Leuchtenburg, William E., Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1963) p. 339

²⁰ Trattner, p. 237

eradicate poverty. This idea did not come to the forefront as a possibility until the War on Poverty, which developed in a generally prosperous, confident time, a time similar in its unparalled economic growth to the decades immediately following World War II.

POST WORLD WAR II

Like the era into which the War on Poverty emerged, the years immediately following World War II also saw unbridled economic growth. In contrast, the two decades following the War are generally noted for their lack of new legislation. If it is true that the 1940s and 1950s saw no new breakthroughs in the area of poverty policy, then how can one consider these decades an origin of the War on Poverty? The New Deal provided the Johnson administration with the precedent of a comprehensive, multifaceted poverty program. The post-World War II era had a less simple part, and one that many have considered less important. The lack of new legislation itself proved to be an important factor in the implementation of policy in the 1960s because it brought to the public eye the complacency of the previous era. In spite of this complacency, new ways of thinking about poverty arose during the Truman and Eisenhower Administration, and although both presidents took little action, these theories proved valuable in the shaping of the War on Poverty. World War II set in motion a host of political and social changes that on the surface had little to do with poverty, but had the effect of increases in popular expectations which led in part to a declared war against poverty in the 1960s.

When assessing the contributions of the New Deal toward federal poverty policy, historians often look at the three "r's": relief, recovery, and reform. The Roosevelt Administration had

these three things as the original goals of their poverty measures. While there is truth in the assertion that the Administration provided for extraordinary relief measures, the New Deal, aside from a few exceptions, fell far short of the goals of recovery and reform. Although New Deal programs served to soften the blow of widespread poverty brought about as a result of the Depression, it took World War II to put the country back on the road to prosperity. The post-World War II years, offered little in the way of reform, but did provide within the framework of the three "r's," an era of economic recovery.

World War II had the effect of lifting the country out of the depths of poverty in which it had been immersed for over a decade. Some expected that hard times would soon return at the end of the war, for they doubted that the peacetime economy could absorb the ten million war workers and twelve million men from the armed services.²¹ Many more had unparalleled faith in the fall of 1945 in the economic strength of the United States.

The newfound confidence did not come out of nowhere. Absolute poverty diminished rapidly between 1939 to 1941, the first years of the war in Europe. It continued to fall during World War II and decreased from 1946 to 1956 as well. The key to this progress lay not with welfare legislation, which was relatively insignificant during this time, but in economic

²¹ Leuchtenburg, William E., The Unfinished Century, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973) p. 678

growth.²² By 1956, the income of the average American had increased by more than fifty percent since 1929, a fact that amazed many who had lived through the previous decades believing that the prosperity of the 1920s would remain unparalleled.²³

What brought forth this widespread affluence? The economy expanded in such an explosive manner as a result of increased consumer spending. Most adult Americans had spent the last fifteen years with no luxury items, either because they could not afford them, as during the Depression, or because of increased government intervention and rationing of these items during the war. People hungered for any consumer products they could purchase. By the middle of the 1950s the United States, a country with only six percent of the world's population, produced and consumed over one-third of the world's goods and services.²⁴

The belief that this post-war affluence touched all sectors of society contributed in large part to the lack of social legislation in the two subsequent presidential administrations. At least some Americans hoped that the end of the war would bring new opportunities for social reform and the chance to build on gains made during the war.²⁵ In this they were disappointed. The affluence of the general population brought about a feeling

²² Patterson, p. 79

²³ Leuchtenburg, The Unfinished Century, p. 680

²⁴ Ibid., p. 711

²⁵ Chafe, William H., The Unfinished Journey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 79

of contentment which left them with little concern for the needs of the poor. Legislators felt little pressure from their constituents to go ahead with new social reform. People felt that the Social Security Act sufficiently protected most citizens from poverty and want. Many social workers, therefore, felt no need to concern themselves with issues of poverty. These decades also wrought a change in the priorities of the American people. The birth of the Cold War brought with it a prevailing feeling that the country should be primarily concerned with the sheer survival of the human race; advances in the field of social welfare seemed insignificant by comparison.²⁶

The complacency of the previous era had a great affect on the shaping of policy during the 1960s. When men such as Michael Harrington again brought poverty to the attention of the American people, social scientists and others directly involved in the issue were appalled to realize how little they knew about it.²⁷ They succeeded in forgetting about the horrors of the Great Depression to such an extent that policymakers forgot that poverty had existed even before the 1930s, and that residual poverty endured. The reformers in the War on Poverty would later consider the "benign neglect" of poverty during the immediate post-WWII years far more malignant. The rediscovery of the reform impulse provided just as important an impetus in the shaping of Johnson's Great Society as the rediscovery of poverty.

²⁶ Trattner, p. 250

²⁷ Patterson, p. 78.

Though the social legislation that did pass following World War II hardly moved the earth, the attempts at reform cannot be entirely dismissed. Both Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower had their own ideas about what to do about poverty and what role the federal government should play in the implementation of that policy. Historians have described Truman as a man who wished to carry on the legislation of his predecessor, while Eisenhower took the position that policy would work itself out with little help from the executive branch.

Truman, following in the footsteps of Franklin D. Roosevelt, had his own social agenda that he wanted to offer the American people in the form of a Fair Deal. Truman faced a difficult task in adapting the ideas and policies behind the New Deal to an age of economic growth.²⁸ Unfortunately for him and for the programs that he hoped to enact, he never achieved success in that endeavor. Many critics believed that the agenda that Truman had to offer was merely a warmed over New Deal. Truman attempted to introduce some new issues such as civil rights legislation, national health insurance, and federal aid to education as part of the Fair Deal but they found defeat in Congress.

Truman succeeded in expanding some of the programs of the New Deal. He raised minimum wages under the Fair Labor and Standards Act and Old Age and Survivor's benefits increased as well.²⁹ Although many consider the mere continuation of New

²⁸ Leuchtenburg, The Unfinished Century, p. 693.

²⁹ Lens, p. 297.

Deal policies a failure of Harry Truman's poverty policy, others consider it one of his greatest achievements in this realm. Although very little new activity took place, Truman kept most of the previous legislation intact during the Eightieth Congress, a legislative body so conservative in nature that it had on its agenda the dismantling of the New Deal.

The presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower provided a contrast to Truman's attempt to not only save but to expand the New Deal. Eisenhower inherited from Truman an affluent economy and a feeling among the American people that the prosperity would remain. Therefore, even if he had tried to crusade for the rights of the poor, the passage of much new social legislation in this era of increasing complacency remained very unlikely. Eisenhower, however, did not push for social reform. He firmly believed that the Executive branch ought to stay out of the legislative process altogether, summing up his stance by saying, "I don't feel like I should nag them."³⁰

Although Eisenhower deliberately sought ways to reduce the role of the federal government in the economy, he did accept the need for a small degree of government responsibility. During his tenure, Congress increased social security and unemployment compensation coverage, raised the minimum wage, and established a Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which would later prove instrumental in the War on Poverty. Eisenhower, the oldest person up to that time to hold the Executive office of the United

³⁰ Leuchtenburg, The Unfinished Century, p. 760.

States, provided for a sharp contrast to John F. Kennedy, the youngest President, during whose administration came the conception of many programs of the War on Poverty.

It is a commonly held belief that many of the "new" ideas about poverty that were acted upon in the War on Poverty were conceived of during the Kennedy Administration. While it is true that much of the impetus for these programs did find their roots in the early 1960s, many people overlook the fact that there were a few people coming up with new ideas about poverty even during the "complacent" decades of the 1940s and 1950s. The new ideas of this era can be categorized, for convenience sake, into three headings: the cultural, liberal, and structuralist perspectives.

The cultural view of poverty espoused by sociologists such as William F. Whyte and E. Wight Bakke should not be confused with the old idea of an ingrained culture of poverty. While it had been argued in years past that poverty was a vicious cycle out of which the lower classes had no chance of escape, the new culturalists argued something different. They believed that different ethnic groups and social classes possessed distinctive traditions that sustained them in crisis time.³¹ In other words, while sociologists had before considered lower class lifestyles inferior, Whyte and Bakke argued that their culture was in its own way functional. Social divisions persisted in American life, and until policymakers addressed these distinctions, an effective poverty policy designed specifically

³¹ Patterson, p. 91.

for the poor would not exist. These ideas would prove instrumental in the design of some of the programs of the War on Poverty.

The liberal view of poverty during this era came from people who had been closely associated with the New Deal programs. Unlike most Americans who believed that the post-WWII affluence would in itself solve the problem of destitution, proponents of the liberal view insisted that welfare must remain an important element in public policy. It was this group that had the greatest effect on the shaping of poverty policy during the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations. This group moved slightly away from social insurance principles and moved toward merging social security and welfare.³² This trend continued during the early 1960s and would later be acted upon during the Johnson Administration as well.

The structuralist perspective of poverty concentrated on the pronounced stratification of capitalist society. It was their belief that the incredible growth of the 1940s and 1950s did not help many of the poor because lower-class Americans were set back by structural barriers which blocked their economic opportunity.³³ Proponents of the structural view, who were mainly Keynesian liberals and democratic socialists, called for great increases in public assistance and policies to counter low wages and underemployment.

³² Ibid., p. 92.

³³ Merton, Robert (as found in Patterson, p. 94)

One of the most comprehensive explanations for the structuralist view can be found in John Kenneth Galbraith's The Affluent Society. Galbraith argued that the survival of poverty in so prosperous a society was a disgrace. He believed that a "forthright remedy for poverty," such as securing a minimum income for all citizens, "is beyond reasonable hope."³⁴ He was aware of the temper of the times and believed that since the affluence of the American people was sure to continue, so too was their complacency. Galbraith's hope for the abolition of poverty was to invest in the children of the poor, with the hopes that they could break the structural bonds that held them in the depths of poverty. This proved to be one of the fundamental ideas acted upon in the War on Poverty.

Though these new perspectives on poverty were all but ignored until the 1960s, some political and social changes did occur during the post-WWII era which, while on the surface had little to do directly with poverty, set the stage for further social reform in the following decades. World War II enhanced the political power of organized labor, promoted the spread among economists of Keynesian notions concerning the role of fiscal policy, and expanded the federal bureaucracy, which later led to government response to pressures for better social services.³⁵ Other issues acted upon during the Truman and Eisenhower

³⁴ Galbraith, John Kenneth, The Affluent Society, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1958) p. 328.

³⁵ Patterson, p. 83.

Administrations included urban renewal, juvenile delinquency, public housing, illiteracy, and mental health.³⁶ Each of these things, while not dealing specifically with poverty, prompted long-range revolutionary increases in popular expectations that helped absolutely to improve the lot of the poor in the late 1960s and 1970s. In this way the events of the 1940s and 1950s helped bring to the forefront the need for a war against poverty.³⁷

³⁶ Sundquist, James L., Politics and Policy: the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1968) p. 112.

³⁷ Patterson, p. 82

THE REDISCOVERY OF POVERTY

Historians of poverty policy in the United States generally credit writers of the early 1960s with the "rediscovery" of poverty that did not occur in the previous decades. If the nation had forgotten its poor in the 1950s, by the middle of the 1960s, public attention to poverty -- embodied in the War on Poverty -- could not have been greater. A small handful of social observers, most notably Michael Harrington, Robert Lampman, and Dwight Macdonald, wrote about the issue and brought the plight of the poor home to the American public. By forcing the average citizen to take notice of those less fortunate than themselves, these writers brought poverty into the spotlight of the public arena.

The mid- and late-1960s are generally noted in American history as a time of an intensive drive for social change. It must be true, then, that the desire for this social change came

before the action. The early 1960s, the years during which John F. Kennedy led the nation from the White House, represented that trend. The country was marked during this era by an increase in intellectual activity regarding social problems, as well as by the initial drafts for the proposed federal solutions to those problems. Included among the areas of interest were ideas and plans of action with regard to a federal anti-poverty program. In this way, the early 1960s provide a political origin for the War on Poverty that was to follow after Kennedy's assassination.

One must have an understanding of how poverty was rediscovered in the first place before one can understand the rediscovery of poverty and how it led to political steps taken to deal with the problem, one must first have an understanding how poverty was rediscovered in the first place. In other words, why, after having affixed blinders which were not removed for twenty years, were the public and the federal government receptive to the idea that something had to be done about poverty? Historians have suggested a number of contributory factors. One historian has put forth the notion that Americans were ready to see their own poor because recently, as a result of American foreign aid, they had discovered the discrepancies between the affluent and the poorer nations of the world, which may have caused them to be on the lookout for similar discrepancies at home.³⁸ In other words, Americans could not very well continue to ignore poverty in their own nation while

³⁸ Trattner, p. 253.

pledging themselves to aiding the poor abroad.

Another explanation is that the rediscovery of poverty in the United States stemmed from the discovery of other social problems.³⁹ Many of these social problems, such as juvenile delinquency, had actually been discovered during the fifteen years following World War II. The work done during those years by social workers was expanded upon during the early 1960s. Kennedy, for example, created a task force on juvenile delinquency. The findings of this task force, and commissions like it that were created to address problems such as illegitimacy, pointed to the still broader problem of family breakup, which was later correlated with low income.⁴⁰

Finally, there was the recognition around 1960 that the seemingly unbridled economic growth of the preceding twenty years was slowing down, and that poverty was not going to wither away on its own.⁴¹ Gunnar Myrdal, Kenneth Boulding, and especially Leon Keyserling were among the economists at the time who were warning that growth would not continue inevitably. Keyserling, whose involvement in the federal government went back to service on Truman's Council of Economic Advisors, believed that poverty could be fought by increasing public spending to accelerate economic growth. In his book, Progress Against Poverty, Keyserling stated, "... due to our unparalleled productive

³⁹ Patterson, p. 100.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 112

capabilities and the need to use them more fully, the abolition of poverty has passed from a "dream" or a "possibility" or mere "practicality" to a veritable necessity. ...massive poverty has become intolerable because it is no longer unavoidable."⁴²

The social and economic issues of the early 1960s, combined with the new books being published at the time about a "new" poverty in the United States, created an environment in which the rediscovery of poverty by the American people would be possible.

What was written during the early 1960s that created such an overwhelming demand for a federal anti-poverty effort? One small book, which at first did not receive much public attention, was written by Michael Harrington in 1962. The Other America,⁴³ is generally given credit for the rediscovery of poverty amongst policymakers. The Other America movingly described an "invisible" American poor. Harrington pointed to the idea of a structurally based relative poverty. The poor in America had become invisible because they looked just like their affluent neighbors but they remained poor because they lacked the money necessary to provide themselves with all the basic needs.

Poverty struck because of inherent structural flaws within the American system of capitalism. Because of this, Harrington believed that the government of the United States owed it to the

⁴² Keyserling, Leon, Progress Against Poverty: The U.S. at the Crossroads. (Washington, D.C.: Conference on Economic Progress, 1964) p. 1

⁴³ Harrington, Michael, The Other America: Poverty in the United States. (NY: Penguin Books, 1962)

poor of the nation to attack the problem of poverty.

One of the first people to hear Harrington's plea and take it seriously was a man named Dwight Macdonald. While Harrington's book had the greatest effect upon the Kennedy Administration's attempt to launch an attack on poverty, it is they more likely heard about it because of a review written by Macdonald in the New Yorker.⁴⁴ The article, entitled "Our Invisible Poor," reviewed more than just Harrington's book. Macdonald also looked at John Kenneth Galbraith's, The Affluent Society, as well as a book entitled Wealth and Power in America by Gabriel Kolko and Income and Welfare in the United States, compiled by James N. Morgan. Macdonald's review transcended evaluation of these books to analyze the facts that these books reported and explain their meaning to the average citizen. Macdonald concluded, just as Harrington had concluded, that the time had come for the American people to wake up and notice the poor and for the federal government to launch an attack.

It was important to their fate that these books were published at a time when the United States was being led by a man who was open to change in poverty policy. Though President Kennedy's role in other domestic policy is subject to much debate, the man was interested in helping the poor. His interest had been piqued during his campaign visits to West Virginia during which he witnessed first-hand what life was like in one of

⁴⁴ Macdonald, Dwight, "Our Invisible Poor," The New Yorker, Vol, XXXVII., No. 48, January 19, 1963, p. 82+

the "pockets" of poverty. Even before the elections of 1960, Kennedy had as a United States Senator in 1958-59 supported a range of programs for the poor including Medicare, federal aid to education, manpower training programs, and extension of public assistance.⁴⁵

After becoming president in January 1961, Kennedy continued to attack poverty in a categorical, round-about way. In May of 1961 he created the aforementioned President's Commission on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime, which later led to the conclusion that family breakup and poverty were among the roots of the problem. Also in May 1961, Congress passed the Area Redevelopment Act which supplied aid to depressed areas. In 1962, Congress passed Kennedy's Manpower Development and Training Act which was to provide job training to the unemployed as a means of alleviating poverty.

The Kennedy Administration's major accomplishment in the field of poverty was the Public Welfare Amendments of 1962. These amendments extended Aid to Families with Dependent Children (an extension of the New Deal Program, Aid to Dependent Children) for five years, granted federal funding for special training of social workers, and authorized federal payments to the states of seventy-five percent of the cost of rehabilitative or preventative social services for the needy. While these accomplishments were noteworthy, they were piecemeal measure, and none amounted to a confrontation with poverty.

⁴⁵ Patterson, p. 126

Given Kennedy's action against poverty, it is not surprising that after he read Macdonald's review in The New Yorker and got a copy of The Other America that he wished to study the problem of poverty to see if the government could launch a full-fledged attack.⁴⁶ Kennedy set Robert Lampman to work on the task of evaluating economic growth and poverty over the previous years. Statistics compiled in Lampman's report to the President showed an increase in the percentage of the poor who were most in need of assistance: the aged, members of female-headed families, the young, and minorities.⁴⁷ Lampman also confirmed the suspicion of Myrdal and Boulding that growth alone would not eliminate poverty, reporting a decrease between 1957 and 1962 of the rate at which economic growth was attacking poverty. In other words, Lampman's report lent proof to the suspicions that something else needed to be done about poverty.

Kennedy turned the problem of creating a comprehensive federal anti-poverty program over to Walter Heller, one of his economic advisors. The plans that were drawn up during Kennedy's tenure in office would later become the basic framework of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty. Among the ideas of the War on Poverty which found their roots in the early work done by Kennedy's advisors was the idea that a program against poverty was a good investment. Ideally, the money spent to create

⁴⁶ Sundquist, James L., On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience. (NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1969) p. 7

⁴⁷ I didn't bring the report with me to the computer lab. Will rectify the situation post haste.

programs now would be made up for many times over in the long run because welfare would eventually become unnecessary. The hope was that by attacking the roots of poverty and opening up opportunity, the federal government would help the poor help themselves. This would be achieved by offering services and not cash. These assumptions hearken back to the structuralist views of poverty that came out of the 1950s.

When Kennedy was assassinated in November of 1963, the early plans for an attack against poverty could have been buried along with him. Not many people were even aware that plans for a federal anti-poverty program were even underway. Walter Heller contacted Lyndon Johnson three days after Kennedy's death and told him of the early plans. Johnson, who once told reporters, "When I was young, poverty was so common that we didn't know it had a name," liked the idea and told Heller to continue his work. It was under Johnson's leadership that these early plans took on the grand scale of a War on Poverty.

THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ACT

The War on Poverty took the previous definitions of poverty along with previous legislative successes and attempted to form them into a comprehensive blueprint for a battle against poverty. Since the inception of the New Deal legislation in the 1930s, the United States has developed an intricate, though some may argue far from comprehensive, welfare system. The basic tenets remained that the country needed special programs to take

care of the diverse needs of the poor. Welfare, as it existed in 1964, consisted more of a series of makeshift measures than a tailor made "system" of programs. Millions of needy simply fell through the cracks and received little or no aid. The assistance offered could not lift the beneficiaries above the poverty level. In fact, benefits rarely brought recipients to the very poverty line itself.

The welfare system consisted of three types of programs. The first type included programs which offered cash assistance mainly to those outside the labor force. This included Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) and such things as public assistance under the Social Security Act. The second type of programs provided services and goods to those in the work force. Examples of this were unemployment insurance, minimum wage protection, and aid to depressed areas. The third type of programs provided services and goods to the poor on the basis of need, whether they were in the labor force or not. Examples included child care, subsidized housing, and several forms of food distribution.⁴⁸

No one involved with the creation of the War on Poverty argued for the abolition of these continuing programs. In fact, the War on Poverty actually partly comprised programs which had previously existed. President Johnson rejected mere income support of the poor which provided the difference in the poverty

⁴⁸. Levitan, Sar A. The Great Society's Poor Law: A New Approach to Poverty. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969) p. 4

program included in Johnson's Great Society. He indicated disdain for the handout when he said, "The days of the dole in our country are numbered. We are not content to accept the endless growth of relief roles or welfare roles. We want to offer the forgotten fifth of our people opportunity and not doles."⁴⁹

As early as January 1964, President Johnson publicly called for an unconditional War on Poverty. Policymakers at that time had already been working busily behind the scenes to create such a program. The 1964 Economic Report of the President included a profile of poverty in the United States, spelling out in detail the composition of the poor, characteristics of poor families, and what had been done to date to alleviate poverty. The report concluded with a series of proposals for "combating" poverty and "organizing the attack." Johnson decided to set up an independent agency within the White House, rather than assign his poverty program to an existing department. He enlisted Sargent Shriver, head of the Peace Corp and a brother-in-law of the recently assassinated president, to lead the task force.

Shriver determined the scope and direction of the poverty program during the two weeks that followed his appointment. During that time Shriver contacted some 130 people inside and outside the government who contributed their ideas.⁵⁰ Shriver

⁴⁹. "Politics of Poverty: Key Provisions." Time Magazine, Aug. 28, 1968, p. 24

⁵⁰. Plotnick, Robert D., and Skidmore, Felicity, Progress Against Poverty, (NY: Academic Press, 1975) p. 3

looked for new ideas and fostered the image of bold innovation. Social workers and welfare officials were conspicuously absent from the list of those Shriver consulted. Apparently the "old way" of doing things offered little insight for the planning of the new way.⁵¹ The planners of the War on Poverty decided early on that direct redistribution of money or goods would not provide an important or particularly appropriate weapon. To create a broad attack on poverty, something had to be provided for everybody.

Within six weeks, the task force had come to a consensus. The Economic Opportunity Act, which went before Congress in March 1964, more than any other piece of legislation is identified with the Great Society's commitment to the poor in the United States. This act set up an independent agency within the executive branch called the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The legislation included in this act came provided the bulwark of the War on Poverty, although in reality it comprised only a small part of the federal budget set aside to deal with this problem. The Economic Opportunity Act, commonly equated with the War on Poverty, provided a range of experimental new programs created under the auspices of the OEO.

The theory that came out of the looking to the precedents of federal poverty policy was that no single approach could by itself make much of a dent in poverty. The planners created a multifaceted program whose main goal was not to alleviate

⁵¹. Levitan, The Great Society's Poor Law, p. 30

poverty, but to eliminate it. They hoped to do this with preventative programs that were geared mostly, but not entirely, toward the young. They also hoped to do this while using a very limited budget. Johnson wanted a War on Poverty, but he didn't want the more affluent American people to have to finance it.

The total budget requested in the Economic Opportunity Bill was 962.5 million dollars to be divided among the programs listed in its six titles. This represented only a small part of the 100 billion dollars spent directly and indirectly each year by the federal, state, and local governments.⁵² The following is a brief summary of the provisions of the Bill that went before Congress in March 1964.

PROVISION	APPROPRIATION REQUESTED (in millions of \$)
<u>Title I</u>	
Job Corp (OEO managed) a residential training program for young men and women between ages 16 to 21	190.00
In-School and Out-of-School Neighborhood Youth Corp (delegated to Dept. of Labor), an at home training and work experience program for young men and women ages 16 to 21	150.00
College Work-Study Program (delegated to the Office of Education in Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare)	72.50
<u>Title II</u>	
Community Action Program (OEO), a set of comprehensive rural and urban local-initiated and planned programs	315.00
<u>Title III</u>	

⁵². "War on Poverty: First Shots" Newsweek, December 14, 1964 p. 71

Rural Loan Program (delegated to the Farmers Home Association in the Department of Agriculture), a program of small farm and non-farm operating loans to rural individuals and cooperatives

Migrant Farm Workers Program
(managed by CAP within OEO)

50.00

Title IV

Small Business Development Centers (delegated to the Small Business Admin.), a program of loans and technical aid to small businessmen who are either poor themselves or hire the poor

25.00

Title V

Work Experience Program (delegated to the Welfare Admin. in HEW), a program of work and training for welfare recipients and those -- particularly unemployed fathers -- whom the administration hoped to make eligible for welfare, via state action

150.00

Title VI

VISTA- Volunteers in Service to America (OEO), domestic counterpart of the Peace Corp

10.00⁵³

Congress finally approved the bill in the amount of 800 million dollars. Shriver admitted that he could use a good deal more money "but," he said, "it's a mistake to think that you'll end poverty simply by spending more and more."⁵⁴ He, like Myrdal and Boulding, realized that economic growth alone would not eliminate poverty, but that it needed to be eradicated at the roots.

In an article in the Saturday Review, Shriver listed the goals of the Economic Opportunity Act. Among the concrete

⁵³. Plotnick, p. 7

⁵⁴. "War on Poverty: First Shots" p. 71

results he envisioned were that nearly 250,000 youths would be earning money while working, undergoing intensive training, and learning skills and basic work habits. Many of these youths would enroll in the Job Corp to experience a totally new living and working environment in conservation camps and training centers. The framers of the Economic Opportunity Act also hoped to provide unemployed parents raising their families on public assistance with the chance to enroll in training and employment programs so that they could gain the confidence to build self-sufficiency. One of the most innovative programs to come out of the War on Poverty was the Community Action Program. CAP provided funds for communities to put together a team of professionals and poor people themselves to root out causes of poverty on the home front.⁵⁵

These programs were aimed toward giving the poor a chance to help pull themselves out of poverty. They enabled the poor to take that first step up the ladder to success. With all the services and programs that had existed to help the poor they would remain useless if the poor did not have help at the first rung, and were left to find their own way through the maze of agencies. The expenditures of new money would not of itself end poverty. For the first time, the federal government attempted to ask the poor what they needed instead of dictating to them what they would receive.

⁵⁵. Shriver, Sargent, "Challenge with a Difference," Saturday Review, p. 30

president Johnson did not leave the fate of the antipoverty program to the whims of Congress. He perceived the War on poverty as his program and he wanted to see to it that it passed. He launched a successful campaign to persuade Congress and the public of the urgent need for the proposed legislation. The enlistment of support through the Shriver task force and favorable publicity through the mass media all helped to generate a public awareness of and support for the proposed program. The Economic Opportunity Act passed through Congress relatively unscathed. The budget cuts were not large and the major provisions of the bill remained intact. However, a general consensus in Congress in favor of the program did not exist. The bill barely passed, but Johnson sustained enough public support to squeak the bill through Congress.⁵⁶

Among the criticisms of the blueprint for the War on Poverty was the accusation that it duplicated already existing federal antipoverty efforts. Advocates of the program replied that in each case a slight, yet important, difference existed. For example, the 1963 Vocational Education Act provided for residential training centers for poor youngsters, just as the Job Corp did, but the VEA was restricted to school-attending students while the Job Corp welcomed dropouts. The Work-Study program for college students also had a precedent in the National Defense Education Act. The difference lay in that the NDEA made tuition loans to students with financial resources, while Work-Study

⁵⁶. Levitan, The Great Society's Poor Law, p. 46

helped to create part-time jobs for students who had no resources whatsoever.⁵⁷

Although individual programs had similarities, an important difference remained. Efforts made prior to the Economic Opportunity Act had been done in a make-shift manner. The War on poverty was the first effort since the New Deal to create a comprehensive federal antipoverty program. It went further than the New Deal, however, in that it built upon programs created during Roosevelt's tenure in office while incorporating ideas from subsequent administrations. Although the War on Poverty was later mired in difficulties, the thought behind it remains as an example of what the federal government can aspire to do.

CONCLUSION

⁵⁷. "Politics of Poverty: Key Provisions" p. 24

Although it is true that the United States' government had been involved to some extent in poverty policy before the Roosevelt Administration, the New Deal was the first concerted effort of the federal government to attack the issue of poverty out of a sense of its duty to the American people. Before the Great Depression, poverty as an issue in itself was not on the national agenda. It was the advent of the New Deal programs that brought with it the perception that the federal government had to address the social problems of its people. The New Deal, by setting up a multi-faceted attack on the problem of poverty, set a precedent for the federal government to follow in the future.

That precedent was largely ignored in the ensuing twenty years. This was not necessarily because the people of the United States cared less about their fellow citizen or because they felt that the power of the federal government should be diminished. Rather, the complacency of the 1940s and 1950s was more a result of the widespread affluence of the time. Evidence of the continuing strong role of the government comes with the fact that the programs of the New Deal were left largely intact and that benefits under Social Security were actually expanded. The status quo had changed. No longer would the federal government sit idly by and allow its citizens to wallow in the misery of abject poverty.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a "rediscovery" of poverty in the United States which led to a widespread feeling that, once again, something had to be done to help the destitute

in this country. Book after book followed after the popularization of The Other America written by Michael Harrington. Whereas in the previous decades the word poverty found no place in popular magazines and was relegated to economic and sociological journals, concern for the underprivileged soon became widespread. Kennedy was killed before he could launch his intended war on poverty, but the groundwork done during his administration provided an important boost to the Great Society of the Johnson Administration.

Finally, with the declaration of a war against poverty in 1964, the federal government once again pledged itself to doing something about the plight of the poor. Unlike previous efforts, however, Johnson was not satisfied with merely ameliorating the symptoms of poverty. Instead, he wished to launch a broad based attack with the hope of defeating want. He hoped to do this by taking the precedent of the New Deal, mixing it with some of the new ideas of the previous decade, and creating a comprehensive poverty program in which no one would fall through the cracks.

Although the War on Poverty was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its original aims, that is, the elimination of poverty, it nonetheless provided an example of what the federal government could hope. It is still debated whether the War on Poverty was not successful because it was halted, or whether it was halted because it was not successful. The War in Vietnam and the subsequent problems in which Johnson was mired took his attention away from his pet program. Once it was perceived that

the President had lost interest, Congress and the rest of the nation followed his lead. Several of the programs of Johnson's Great Society, including programs of the War on Poverty still exist today, but they cannot hope to work as the original comprehensive plan could have.

What was so special about a failed anti-poverty program such as the War on Poverty hold the facination of historians and policymakers today? For one thing, it embodied a sense of idealism that had never occurred to the federal government before. That the government of a capitalist country as large as the United States believed that it could eliminate poverty seems on one level somehow preposterous. Poverty had existed in the United States since its inception, and surely, more problems existed in the 1960s than had ever existed before. Perhaps the youthful exhuberance of the fledgling "Movement," which encompassed the Civil Rights and Feminist movements along with the New Left rubbed off on the government in those years before they became more cynical.

Another aspect of the War on Poverty that is so fascinating is that the range and scope of legislation were so great, and yet the whole thing seemed very comprehensive and organized. Johnson's fight against destitution was based upon all the latest data about how to best eradicate poverty and had the precedent of thirty years upon which to build as well. Perhaps Johnson was aiming too high. He and his advisors tried to synthesize so many different definitions of what poverty could be that maybe they

missed the mark altogether. Perhaps there is an as yet undiscovered definition of poverty that will someday lead to its defeat.

The question still remains as to the importance of the War on Poverty as a precedent for later policymakers. Have legislators tried to build upon the ideas of the War on Poverty, or has it largely been ignored? One could assert an argument for both sides. On the one hand, some of the programs set up in the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson, such as VISTA and job training programs, survived the general purging of the rest of the program. On the other hand, their roles were diminished to such an extent that many were not even aware that they still existed. The programs that did continue were so mired in bureaucracy that those who were in the most dire need of assistance were largely ignored.

Many parallels can be drawn between the decades immediately following the New Deal and those following the War on Poverty. Both eras saw a new strength in the Republican party and conservative presidents at the helm following liberal Democratic administrations. Both also were marked by a perception of the American people that an overtly strong federal government, especially with regard to intervention in the economy, was undesirable. The 1970s and 1980s were different than the post-war decades in that there was a general recognition that even amidst the perceived widespread affluence of the time, poverty still existed. The federal government, as well as the general

population, chose to take a different tack on poverty than had been introduced in the New Deal and War on Poverty.

It was widely perceived after the War on Poverty that those who were poor were somehow at least partly to blame for their situation. This attitude is strikingly different from that which existed from the 1930s through the War on Poverty. For this reason, instead of trying to pose a broad based attack on poverty itself, the 1970s and 1980s were marked more by piecemeal attempts to attack different aspects of poverty. For example, the early 1980s were marked by an attempt to clean up welfare fraud; there was a perception that there was much abuse of the existing system. The late 1980s were marked by an attempt to bring to the forefront single issues of poverty, such as homelessness.

What were the motives behind separating poverty into single issues? Some believe that this was done so that the government could concentrate all its efforts to really ridding the nation of individual problems. The broad based approach of the War on Poverty failed, these people maintain, because it spread itself too thin. Better to concentrate on individual aspects so that the problem could be taken care of once and for all. This reasoning seems logical but for one thing: programs such as building homeless shelters are designed to treat the symptoms, not the roots, of poverty. The War on Poverty was an attempt to move away from this tactic as its intent was to get to the victims of poverty before they were victims, and thus discontinue

the cycle.