

rest," hears "music in the Temple," and finds that Bardia has returned; she asks him, "let us go into the King's garden and look at the blue lily." Perhaps the blue lily (in this context, the lily-of-the-nile) is the object of her meditation because of its bisexual flowers. Like many other writers in her time — Harold Frederic and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example — Chopin contemplated Darwin's analysis of the "conditions of life" that might provide no "motive for the separation of the sexes"; such conditions as presently pertain in the case of monoecious plants or hermaphroditic animals. As Darwin had explained, the sexes were not originally separated in either plant or animal life, as evidenced by such phenomena as the human male's rudimentary breasts. Adjusting to "changed conditions of life," some kinds of plants, for example, had evolved a division of sexual labor in the production of "pollen and seeds" whereby each individual could protect its "vital powers... [in] the struggle for life to which all organisms are subjected."¹⁸

In "An Egyptian Cigarette" Kate Chopin briefly indulged her fantasy that a return to the garden of life as explained in *The Origin of Species* might open the way to a different evolutionary pathway — one that would avoid the sexual strife her lovers had known. But, always in search of "a true knowledge of life as it is," she immediately abandoned this fantasy for her masterful analysis of Edna Pontellier's sexual reality. To make her point she began the story of Edna's awakening by introducing her with an image that captures her in her present evolutionary state — "advancing at snail's pace from the beach."

¹⁸ Charles Darwin, *The Different Forms of Flowers of the Same Species* (London: Murray, 1877), 334. In *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), Dr. Ledsmar studies monoecious and dioecious plants (i.e. those with male and female flowers on the same plant, and those with male and female flowers on separate plants, respectively) in order "to test the probabilities for or against Darwin's theory that hermaphroditism in plants is a late by-product of these earlier forms" (Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* [Cambridge: Belknap, 1960], 228); and in *Women and Economic*, Gilman discusses "the evolution of the processes of reproduction," whereby "it was ascertained by nature's slow but sure experiments that the establishment of two sexes in separate organisms, and their differentiation, was to the advantage of the species" (p. 29).

War on Dependency: Liberal Individualism and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964

GARETH DAVIES

In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson, professing himself alarmed by the seemingly "endless growth of relief rolls," declared "war" on poverty.¹ Walter Heller, his chief economic adviser, had recently remarked that it would be quite possible to eliminate the symptoms of poverty by simply redistributing two percent of the national income.² Johnson, however, preferred to attack the *sources* of deprivation, claiming that the range of rehabilitative services provided by his Economic Opportunity Act would allow the poor to engineer their own paths to affluence.

In characterizing welfare as part of the problem rather than the solution, Johnson tapped a deep and historic vein of national hostility to dependency. Additionally, he aligned his Great Society vision with a powerful New Deal tradition whose political success over three decades had owed much to its congruence with popular individualism.

Throughout the remainder of the 1960s, continued popular adherence to the work ethic indicated that liberal office-holders who chose to abandon the social philosophy of Roosevelt and Johnson would pay a high political price. Yet, paradoxically, this same period saw a revolution in liberal conceptions of individual entitlement, such that by 1972 Senator George McGovern (D-S.D.) could win his party's nomination for the presidency despite having proposed to guarantee an annual income of

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¹ Johnson's remarks were made at the signing ceremony for the Economic Opportunity Act on 20 Aug. 1964. See "Administrative History of the Office of Economic Opportunity," 32, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

² *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, Hearings before the AdHoc Subcommittee on the War on Poverty of the House Committee on Education and Labor, 88th Congress, 2nd Session, 29.

\$6,500 (twice that provided by a full-time minimum wage job) to every American family. The consequences of the Democrats' abandonment of popular individualism became clear in November, when Richard Nixon defeated the sometime Party of the Common Man in 49 of the 50 states.

The sources of the entitlements revolution are to be found in interrelated problems of racial strife, war in Vietnam, economic dislocation and political realignment, problems that combined during the second half of the 1960s to destroy both the early promise of the Johnson presidency and — ultimately — the New Deal Democratic coalition. Scholars examining the origins of the War on Poverty have been powerfully influenced by their awareness of what happened next: namely that — marginalized by a burgeoning racial crisis, and crippled by inadequate resources — the War on Poverty failed either to equalize opportunity or to defuse the rage of the ghetto.

Anyone examining the origins of the Economic Opportunity Act must clearly take account of its ultimate fate. Such a focus exposes both the inherent weaknesses of the War on Poverty and the damaging consequences of the inflated hopes which overblown rhetoric inspired. Nevertheless, excessive attention to the problems that beset Great Society liberalism after the summer of 1965 can also serve to distort our understanding of the very different political and intellectual climate of 1964, downplaying the role that genuine optimism, philosophical conviction, and relative social tranquillity played in determining the Attenuation of the Economic Opportunity Act. The purpose of the present article is to recreate the buoyant spirit and sense of boundlessness that characterized American liberalism in 1964. The War on Poverty was primarily the product neither of political expediency nor of racial imperative. Rather, it was the autonomous expression of a genuine faith in the traditional American ideal of equal opportunity. That such a faith also served the political interests of President Johnson and his allies need not detract from its authenticity.

Existing scholarship on the origins of the War on Poverty may be divided into two groups. The first views the programme as a pragmatic exercise in politics and social control impelled by black militancy. This school of thought is represented most prominently by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. In *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (1971) they argue that John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had to inject federal funds into the ghetto in order to pacify "a population that was extremely volatile and politically rebellious." Worried that local Democratic machines failed to do enough for their disaffected minority

constituents, the national party sought "to reach blacks, to integrate them into the urban political system."³ Allen Marusow offers a variation on this theme, contending that "the War on Poverty began...because the civil rights movement was educating whites to the realities of black deprivation and because deprived blacks were mute no longer."⁴

The second group of scholars argues instead that liberal policymakers acted in part upon a naive faith in individual rehabilitation. Their confidence would soon appear badly misplaced, but in 1964 it was buoyed by previous inattention to poverty (and consequent lack of understanding), by the "can-do" spirit of the New Frontier, and by economic prosperity. However, representatives of this orthodoxy — including James T. Patterson, Henry J. Aaron, Sar A. Levitan and James L. Sundquist — also stress the role that political calculation played in dictating the focus on opportunity rather than income support. Patterson believes that the authors of the War on Poverty were fully aware that the opportunity approach was not in itself sufficient and that income support must be central to any comprehensive programme. However, "in developing legislation, they drew back from these facts and placed their faith in extending opportunity."⁵ Aaron argues that Johnson's refusal to consider cash support for the poor reflected both a genuine faith in opportunity, and "concern that such 'far out' ideas might raise the question the administration so assiduously avoided, income redistribution."⁶ To varying degrees, these scholars consider that the patently unrealistic claims which Johnson made for his opportunity approach in 1964 had damaging consequences for liberalism and American society once the social crisis of his presidency gained momentum.

This article disagrees fundamentally with the Piven and Cloward thesis, but accepts the basic thrust of the second approach. Its principal purpose

³ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage, 1971), Ch. 9. The quotations are from p. 272.

⁴ Allen J. Marusow, *The Unraveling of America: American Liberalism During the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 120.

⁵ James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900-1985* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 156. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a contributor to Sargent Shriver's anti-poverty task force, goes further, claiming that "an immense opportunity to institute more or less permanent social changes — a fixed full employment programme, a measure of income maintenance — was lost while energies were expended in ways that very probably hastened the end of the brief period when such options were open." Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Mismisunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 193.

⁶ Henry J. Aaron, *Politics and the Professions: The Great Society in Perpetuative* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1978), 28.

therefore is one of re-emphasis. Clearly there *was* a strong element of politics in the decision to declare "unconditional" war on poverty in 1964 and to surround the enterprise with inflated self-help rhetoric. But this was also a time when American liberalism was naturally and instinctively at ease with the nation's individualistic ethos. Since the late 1960s the national Democratic party has suffered from its association with "liberal" positions on social policy and civil rights which Republicans have routinely and successfully represented as being "un-American." In 1964, however, liberal Democrats belonged to a very different political tradition. Particularly when set against Barry Goldwater's marginalized Republican party, they could accurately claim to articulate the authentic spirit of middle America.⁷

II

In order to understand the roots of the War on Poverty one must do more than simply explore the immediate circumstances of its inception. If the timing owed much to a variety of factors specific to the early 1960s (and examined below), then the commitment to eradicate dependency should also be viewed in a broader historical context.⁸ The individualistic social philosophy that Lyndon Johnson retained throughout his long career owed much to his upbringing in the Texas hill country and to his formative political experience as a New Deal administrator. James

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Sundquist, who participated in the task force that designed the antipovertry programme, recalls that Johnson "could talk feelingly of his first-hand knowledge of poverty in the Texas hills,"⁹ and James C. Gaither, a White House assistant to Johnson, remarks upon his lifelong faith in education and the "log cabin" myth:

I think there's one basic philosophical strain that's seen through almost everything that the President has done...and that is a very deep conviction that everybody in this society should be given a full and complete chance to make his own way.... I have never sensed any great interest on his part in the welfare programme or any other that is a basic subsidy kind of approach. He feels that if you let people start off on an equal footing...then this society will get along all right and we won't have poverty; people will pull themselves up."¹⁰

Other colleagues agree that Johnson never lost his deep and instinctive hostility to "welfarism." Robert Lampman, an economist who advised both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, recalled that Johnson was always "very hostile" to the notion of a guaranteed income.¹¹ And Charles Schultz, head of Johnson's budget bureau, believed that "[i]t is clear he sincerely, deeply, fundamentally believed in...the basic concept of providing opportunities. Or, put another way...he is all for doing a lot of things for the deserving poor."¹²

Johnson's instinctive dislike of welfare dependency was reinforced by his formative political experience, which came with his appointment as Texas director of President Roosevelt's National Youth Administration. An ardent New Dealer, Johnson shared his mentor's conviction that "[c]ontinued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fibre."¹³ The New Deal's most enduring and frustrating testament to this view came with the Social Security Act of 1935, the founding legislation of the modern American welfare state. Thirty years later, and despite powerful evidence to the contrary, President Johnson remained wedded to the Act's assumption that the welfare state would eventually wither away.

⁷ James L. Sundquist, "Origins of the War on Poverty," in Sundquist, ed., *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 49.

⁸ Gaither, *Oral History* No. III, 11, Johnson Library.

⁹ Lampman, *Oral History* No. I, 13, Johnson Library.

¹⁰ Schultz, *Oral History* No. II, 61-62, Johnson Library.

¹¹ Roosevelt, budget address, 4 Jan. 1935, cited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 267-68.

¹² In Katznelson takes a different view, believing that it was the *failure* of post-war liberalism to break with the individualist tradition that paved the way for the subsequent rise of the Right in America. He considers that Truman era liberals spurned an historic opportunity to build upon "the social democratic potential of the New Deal." Rather than act to "organize markets and mitigate market outcomes," government "changed the locus of political debate from questions of social organization and class relations to issues of technical economics and interest group politics." The Great Society "embedded the trajectory of the 1940s," its hostility to marketplace intervention facilitating "the election of President Reagan on an explicit pro-market, anti-state platform." See Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?" in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 186-7. To this author, it seems more plausible to argue that the disappointing results of opportunity-based Great Society programmes during a period of growing social instability *did* in fact cause the dominant strain of American liberalism to embrace, by 1970, fundamentally "un-American" notions of income entitlement. The growth of the Right owed more to the Democratic Party's new identification with unpopular social democratic notions of income redistribution than to the conservatism of President Johnson's War on Poverty.

¹³ For a useful introduction to the dynamics of welfare state formation in America see Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, "Understanding American Social Politics," in Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 5-27.

III

The Social Security Act did much to harden the traditional dichotomy between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, making a firm distinction between those who were entitled to social insurance and those who could claim public assistance. The latter was restricted to three narrow categories: the indigent aged, the blind and permanently disabled, and widows with dependent children. Roosevelt, convinced that "[c]old war relief... is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit," expected able-bodied males to take advantage of New Deal public work programmes rather than to languish on welfare.¹⁴ With the return of economic prosperity and the growth of social insurance, it was confidently expected that the need for public assistance would largely disappear.

Reference to the text of the Economic Opportunity Act confirms that its creators shared a modified version of the melting away myth, but the very need to reaffirm it amid the prosperity of the 1960s attested to the frustrating record of the post-New Deal period. Nothing had served to symbolize the failure of the myth more vividly than the persistent growth of the widows programme, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). Responding to public anxiety about burgeoning relief rolls, President Kennedy had in 1962 promised to reorientate ADC towards prevention and rehabilitation. The War on Poverty adopted a similar approach, completely excluding the cash support proposals that would dominate intellectual and political discourse by the end of the decade.

Each of the Act's six titles reaffirmed the central and traditional objective of extending opportunities for individual initiative. Its opening "Declaration of Purpose" announced that the purpose of the War on Poverty was "to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty" by "opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity."¹⁵ The commitment to eliminate poverty was dramatic and new, but the rights of the poor were to opportunities, not to outcomes.

The two most important programmes were the Job Corps and the Community Action Program. The first (Title I of the Act) was intended to "increase the employability of youths aged from sixteen through

twenty-one by providing them in residential centres with education, vocational training [and] useful work experience."¹⁶ President Johnson told Congress that Job Corpsmen would "be drawn from those whose background, health and education" made them "least fit for useful work" – by implication, even the most hardened juvenile delinquent could be brought within the opportunity structure of the affluent society.¹⁷ Senator Hubert H. Humphrey (D-Minn.), soon to become Johnson's Vice President, celebrated "an opportunity to break the chain of self-perpetuating defeats and failure, and substitute in their place the unique experience of accomplishment and self-fulfillment."¹⁸

The Community Action Program (Title II) was designed "to provide stimulation and incentive for urban and rural communities to mobilise their resources... to combat poverty." The proposed Office of Economic Opportunity would award "special consideration to programmes which give promise of effecting a permanent increase in the capacity of individuals, groups, and communities to deal with their problems without further assistance."¹⁹ Strong emphasis was placed on the need for local solutions to local problems – a sharp contrast with the subsequent liberal judgement that poverty was a national problem which must be tackled at a national level. Title II also included a small Adult Education Program whose purpose was to reduce illiteracy, thus making its beneficiaries "less likely to become dependent on others."²⁰

The remaining titles of the Economic Opportunity Act established projects for rural areas (Title III), small business loans (Title IV), and a work experience programme for welfare recipients (Title V). Senator Humphrey believed that Title III would assist those who in the past had "found their way to the cities, only to become misfits, and new entries on the welfare rolls." Similarly, he viewed Title V as "an effort to break the pattern of poverty by fighting family disintegration and abandonment of children, and by promoting the ability and habit of self-support in those who need it so desperately."²¹ Later in the decade, the dominant strain of American liberalism would regard "self-support" as an excuse for denying dependants their basic rights, but in 1964 it seemed axiomatic that declining dependency would provide an indication of success in the war against poverty. The remainder of this article demonstrates that the

¹⁴ Schlesinger, 268.

¹⁵ Text of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (H.R. 10440), "Findings and Declaration of Purpose," sec. 2. *U.S. Code Congressional and Administrative News*, 88th Congress, Second Session (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing, 1964), I, 177.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Title I, Part A, 586.

¹⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, *Public Papers of the President*, 1964, I, 377.

¹⁸ *Congressional Record*, 23 July 1964, 16780.

¹⁹ Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, sec. 201, and sec. 205(d), *U.S. Code*, 595, 598.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 121, 599. ²¹ *Congressional Record*, 23 July 1964, 16781, 16783.

omission of any income maintenance proposal reflected widespread faith in the service strategy rather than mere political opportunism.

IV

Today, for the first time in our history, we have the power to strike away the barriers to full participation in our society. Having the power, we have the duty. President Lyndon B. Johnson, 16 March 1964.²⁵

Never before...have we had the potentiality for the application of resources, skills, and knowledge to the attack on poverty.... We are at a point where poverty is no longer necessary.

Leonard J. Duhl, *The Urban Condition* (1963).²⁶

If liberal adherence to self-help and equal opportunity owed much to the legacy of President Roosevelt, then the remarkable enthusiasm with which the individualistic orthodoxy was espoused during the early 1960s reflected economic prosperity and the intoxicating spirit of President Kennedy's New Frontier.

The dramatic shift from the non-interventionist philosophy of the Eisenhower years to the activist approach of the New Frontiersmen was epitomized by the New Economics, and in particular by the tax cut of February 1964. The affluence of the postwar period had until 1960 been tarnished by regular recessions (three during the 1950s) and by persistently high unemployment, but President Eisenhower's economic messages had typically featured strong attacks on "constant stirring or meddling in the economy."²⁴ During the 1960s, however, a preoccupation with balancing the federal budget was replaced by the Keynesian conviction that government could and should "fine tune" the economy so as to eliminate the tiresome pattern of "boom and bust." Hence Kennedy's proposal to cut taxes by \$11.5 billion would produce accelerated and noninflationary economic growth despite a significant budget deficit and rising federal expenditure.

The New Frontier's faith in Keynesian techniques of fiscal management

²⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Special Message to the Congress Proposing a Nationwide War on the sources of Poverty," *Public Papers of the President*, 1964, I, 379-80.

²⁶ Leonard J. Duhl, "Planning and Poverty," in Duhl, ed., *The Urban Condition: People and Policy in the Metropolis* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 295.

²⁷ 1954 Economic Report of the President, cited by James E. Anderson and Jared E. Hazleton, *Managing Macroeconomic Policy: The Johnson Presidency* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 33.

both embodied and encouraged a new spirit of social activism.²⁵ Walter Heller would later recall that the importance of the tax reduction lay in the stimulation of "a better economic setting for financing a more generous programme of federal expenditures."²⁶ Poverty had, as Henry Aaron of the Council of Economic Advisers observed, previously been "considered to be largely outside the proper realm of public policy." With the advent of New Frontier-Great Society liberalism, however, "[t]he view that solutions...were the proper business of government gained currency and temporarily became dominant."²⁷

Keynesian techniques of demand management created the economic conditions in which the elimination of poverty could seriously be contemplated but President Johnson warned that "[w]e cannot leave the further wearing away of poverty solely to the general progress of the economy."²⁸ This view was shared by the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee:

Poverty in America can be expected to diminish in the future as it has in the past. We will certainly continue to enjoy economic growth and an increase in our general well-being. Doing nothing more than we have been, we can anticipate a steady reduction in the incidence of poverty. To fail to do more, however, would condemn substantial millions of our citizens to continue leading a life of deprivation and dependency for decades to come.²⁹

The conviction that continued economic expansion would not eliminate deprivation stemmed largely from an uncomfortably high rate of unemployment (5.5 percent in January, 1964),³⁰ much of which had a structural rather than a cyclical character. Unemployment had in fact preceded poverty as a matter of public concern and - while the two problems were far from identical - it seemed clear that any federal attack on the latter must confront the causes of the former. This was an insight of considerable significance, for simply providing the victims of structural unemployment with income support would not enhance their capacity to meet the changing requirements of the labour market. If, however, the

²⁸ Donald F. Kertl contends that the spirit of the New Economics may have been more significant than its substance. See Kertl, "The Economic Education of Lyndon Johnson: Guns, Butter, and Taxes," in Robert Divine, ed. *The Johnson Years* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), II, 56.

²⁹ Walter Heller, *Oral History* No. II, 17, Johnson Library.

³⁰ *Economic Report of the President*, 1964 (Washington, D.C.: Govt. Printing Office, 1964), 60.

³¹ *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, Report of the Select Committee on Poverty of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare (June 1964), 6.

³² *Economic Report of the President*, 1964, 6.

long-term unemployed could be equipped with the relevant skills and motivation, then a dynamic economy could offer them opportunities for self-advancement – a far more American concept than public assistance.

If the basic dynamic for the War on Poverty was the boundless optimism of its liberal sponsors therefore, then concern about persistent joblessness also played its part.³¹ Reference to the antipoverity debate of 1964 reveals widespread fears surrounding the “problem” of automation, a phenomenon that seemed to reduce opportunities for the poor even as the majority population enjoyed unprecedented affluence. The celebrated Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal spoke of an emergent “underclass,” contending that “something like a caste line is drawn between the people in the urban and rural slums, and the majority of Americans who live in a virtual full-employment economy”:

[T]here is an underclass of people in the poverty pockets who live an ever more precarious life and are increasingly excluded from any jobs worth having, or who do not find any jobs at all.³²

The theme was taken up with enthusiasm by both conservative and liberal supporters of the Economic Opportunity Act. Rep. Phil Landrum of Georgia recalled that during his youth it had been possible to deal with poverty on “an individual or small group basis.” Now, however, “the frontiers such as existed for our forebears and for us as young men simply do not exist any more.”³³ Senator Ralph Yarborough, a Texas liberal, echoed his conservative colleague, recalling “the early days when the will to work and a strong back, or a fertile imagination and a great deal of energy were all that one needed to get ahead.” The ideal of equal opportunity could again be realized, but only if America provided education and training to complement the traditional national virtues of “energy and imagination.”³⁴ Sargent Shriver, the President’s choice to head the proposed federal antipoverity agency, adopted a similar line:

Certainly, in the early days of our country... “America, the land of opportunity” was really true, I guess, for nearly everybody in it. But there are some people, said

³¹ For the relationship between the War on Poverty and federal employment policy, see Margaret Weir, “The Federal Government and Unemployment: The Frustration of Policy Innovation from the New Deal to the Great Society,” in Weir, Oloff, and Skoopol, eds., *Politics of Social Policy, 149–90*. Weir demonstrates that, while concern about poverty was generated in part by the unemployment problem, the Economic Opportunity Act can not be regarded as part of “a comprehensive active labour market policy” (Weir, 190).

³² Gunnar Myrdal, “War on Poverty,” *The New Republic*, 8 Feb. 1964, 14.

³³ *Congressional Record*, 5 Aug. 1964, 18206. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 July 1964, 16632.

to say, today, who are caught and they can't get out. They are flat on their backs. They don't have the capital to move. They have responsibilities where they are. It is for these people that we are trying to open up exits.³⁵

In retrospect, these fears would come to seem overstated. The following five years saw a remarkable decline in unemployment, despite the expanding labour force, and Allen Matusow observes that attempts to combat automation represented a “cure for a disease that did not exist.”³⁶ Nevertheless, the “automation problem” was widely perceived in 1964 – Rep. James Roosevelt (D-Cal) went so far as to speak of “industrial dust bowls”³⁷ – and provided important justification for the War on Poverty.

This theme of a jobless underclass highlighted the shortcomings of public policy in the United States, but few liberals doubted that ready solutions lay at hand. The conviction that America’s poor could be rehabilitated despite automation and structural unemployment owed much to one archetypal New Frontier theme, namely the “knowledge revolution.” Senator Humphrey proclaimed the new liberal “discovery” that, once identified, any problem had a solution. In his 1964 book, *War on Poverty*, the future Vice President cited the view of former Assistant Secretary for Defense John H. Rubell that “the new knowledge can literally solve any problem if there is what he calls the ‘social need’.” Humphrey believed that “[o]nly if we wait passively for the future to come will we be its victims rather than its masters.... For no matter how complex the world might be, it is still *our* world, and its complexity is in great part *our* creation.”³⁸ In a remarkable article in the *Public Interest*, Daniel Patrick Moynihan celebrated the imminent victory over poverty:

The prospect that the more primitive social issues of American politics are at last to be resolved need only mean that we may now turn to issues more demanding of human ingenuity than that of how to put an end to poverty in the richest nation in the world.³⁹

James Sundquist’s account of the “rediscovery” of poverty during the early 1960s provides a good case study of the “knowledge revolution” in

³⁵ *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, Hearings before the Ad Hoc Committee on the War on Poverty of the House Committee on Education and Labor, 88th Congress, 2nd Session, on HR. 10440, 67.

³⁶ Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 103–104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁸ Hubert H. Humphrey, *War on Poverty* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 132.

³⁹ He acknowledged that the nation “may not be accustomed” to prioritising the quality of life issues that he had in mind, but contended that “no one can say they will be boring or trivial!” Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Professionalisation of Reform,” *Public Interest* (Fall 1963), 16.

action. He recalls that early Kennedy administration initiatives had sought to reach the victims of sundry social problems – juvenile delinquency, slum housing, illiteracy and dependency – but had failed to make much impact. By 1963 however the emergence of a range of new concepts about rehabilitation and community organization encouraged the search for a “concerted, unified, and innovative” response, predicated on the conviction that these various problems were simply symptoms of some underlying condition.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, Michael Harrington’s powerful book *The Other America* did much to dramatize social distress, and “poverty” – a word that had previously appeared in the index of neither the *Congressional Record* nor the *New York Times* – quite suddenly, and without popular pressure, emerged as the “bedrock problem” to be eliminated. Together with this insight came the central conviction that a coordinated “war” on the sources of poverty would enable policy makers to equalize opportunity without offending traditional ideas about self-help. And the service strategy embodied by the Economic Opportunity Act would, unlike the income approach, provide permanent exits from poverty.

The War on Poverty, then, was a war born of optimism. Abundance created the conditions in which a successful campaign might be launched, while new knowledge encouraged the belief that the causes – and not merely the consequences – could be eliminated. The apparent political genius of the Economic Opportunity Act lay in its congruence with the individualist ethos. The War on Poverty would provide “a hand-up, not a hand-out.” Where the liberals of the late-1960s and early-1970s were to identify an unqualified entitlement to income wholly at odds with the social philosophy which they had inherited, the 1964 position constituted a celebration of American values and a reaffirmation of the nation’s belief in equality of opportunity.

V

So strong was the bipartisan national commitment to the American creed of equal opportunity in 1964 than many liberal commentators defined poverty as the absence of such opportunity rather than the presence of material hardship. Rep. Richard T. Hanna (D-Cal.) told the House of Representatives that “[p]overty is only incidentally a condition of low income,” observing that it was possible to be materially deprived but not impoverished. “The poverty we are here addressing ourselves to is the

⁴⁰ James L. Sundquist, “Origins of the War on Poverty,” in Sundquist, ed., *On Fighting Poverty*, 8.

impoverishment of opportunity.”⁴¹ Union leader Walter P. Reuther addressed Adam Clayton Powell’s War on Poverty subcommittee in similar terms, fearing that, while the United States was “more richly blessed than any country in the world,” that poverty which remained constituted “a much more serious problem than the poverty of Africa in terms of what it does to the persons involved.” The key here was the absence of any sense of participation or dignity, and the essence of opportunity was access to the economic system which had allowed other Americans to fulfil their individual potential.⁴² The Republican minority’s response to President Johnson’s 1964 *Economic Report* endorsed the philosophy of the War on Poverty, demanding that it “accentuate and extend the vast successes of our system in order to realize the promise of the free and open society for all our people.”⁴³ The confidence with which legislators across the political spectrum insisted on the attainability of equal opportunity reveals an optimism which would come to seem naive in the extreme in subsequent years; liberals debating welfare reform in 1969 and 1970 were to be openly scornful of the notion that rehabilitation could be facilitated in the absence of a comprehensive income strategy.

In 1964 the notion of income redistribution exerted little appeal. The War on Poverty recognized that men were born equal, but this conferred an entitlement not to equal reward but rather to an equal opportunity to fulfil individual potential. Redistribution was of course the antithesis of this creed, derided by Congressman Hanna as “an immoral exercise of taking from the rich and giving to the poor in a vain attempt to equalize”:

No effort made by us will equalise the lot of men. But this should not deter us from investing in programmes and processes whereby we bring...meaningful equality of opportunity to all our citizens.⁴⁴

Senator William Fullbright (D-Ark.) concurred:

It is not the purpose or function of this legislation to give material goods to those who have little. It is not merely another programme of charity, which will only temporarily release the symptoms of poverty. Its only gift to its beneficiaries is opportunity.⁴⁵

Congressman Powell’s subcommittee reported that “the philosophy behind the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 is not that existing wealth

⁴¹ *Congressional Record*, 6 Aug. 1964, 18309.

⁴² *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, House Hearings, 423.

⁴³ *Joint Economic Report*, together with Minority Views, of the Joint Economic Committee, on the Economic Report of the President, Jan. 1964, 43.

⁴⁴ *Congressional Record*, 6 Aug. 1964, 18309. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 July 1964, 16761.

should be redistributed." Rather, the War on Poverty would provide the skills and resources with which the poor could "earn their rightful place in society."⁴⁶

Whereas liberal legislators of the late Sixties were to find it difficult to hold any of the poor responsible for their condition, their position in 1964 was less determined by fears of "blaming the victim." Essentially, the traditional distinction between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor was still seen as valid. Once the Economic Opportunity Act had provided the necessary tools for self-advancement, the structure of the national economy would permit the deserving poor to prosper. (Later liberals would protest that such tools could not be provided and that, in any case, that nation's economic system was fundamentally flawed.) Senator Humphrey acknowledged that "there will be a few loafers and freeloaders - there always are,"⁴⁷ and his colleague Warren Magnuson (D-Wash.) was similarly realistic:

I do not think that we will ever completely abolish poverty. There are some people who do not possess either the will or desire to lift themselves out of poverty, even when given a better opportunity.⁴⁸

Having been granted opportunity, such wasters enjoyed no further entitlement to Federal support. Rep. Carlton Sickles (D-Md.) of the House Education and Labor Committee conceded the "risk of legislating for a large and diverse population with a variety of human virtues and human weaknesses":

I am sure that there will always be those who would not take a job...[o]r continue with the education if given a chance, and there will always be those who squander both the wealth of others and the hopes that others have for them. I believe, however, that if the great majority of these Americans who now live in poverty are given half a chance, they could, and yes they would, pull themselves up by their economic bootstraps.⁴⁹

The corollary of the equal opportunity creed described above was a deep hostility to welfare dependency, a hostility that President Johnson shared and was eager to tap:

This [measure] is not in any sense a cynical proposal to exploit the poor with a promise of a hand-out or a dolc. We know - we learned long ago - that answer is no answer...[T]he purpose of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 is to offer

⁴⁶ *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the House Committee on Education and Labor, 1.

⁴⁷ *Congressional Record*, 22 July 1964, 16622.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 Aug. 1964, 18307.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 July 1964, 16742.

opportunity, not an opiate.... We are not content to accept the endless growth of relief rolls or welfare rolls.⁵⁰

To extend an assured income to a group or individual which realistically could take advantage of the tools that Johnson sought to supply, would be to stifle the essential genius of the individualist tradition. "Charity" seemed a terribly patronising and defeatist response to material deprivation, and no response at all to the spiritual malaise which beset the American poor. William Ryan (D-N.Y.), one of the most outspoken liberals in the House of Representatives and in 1968 sponsor of the first ever guaranteed income bill, had no doubts about the debilitating effects of welfare:

Public assistance is necessary for those who have no place else to turn. But it provides subsistence only. It deadens the spirit. It provides no encouragement, no incentive, no room for growth. [Training]... will give new hope to those who are desperately poor, encouraging them to develop the skills that will enable them to make their own way in our increasingly complex society.⁵¹

Among supporters of the Economic Opportunity Act, antipathy to the spectre of dependency was uniform. The degree of hostile rhetoric varied however, with unambiguously liberal legislators anxious to avoid the ugly stereotypes which characterized popular attitudes about the dependent poor. For Rep. Ryan, and for senators such as Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.), Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.), and Pat McNamara (D-Mich.), the principal welfare programme, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, was a necessary but cumbersome device which failed to match the promise of American ideals. But for the War on Poverty's more conservative supporters this programme was a major irritant, and the 1964 Act's co-sponsor Phillip Landrum (D-Ga.) promised not simply to "add another layer of icing on an already heavily-coated welfare cake."⁵² The implication that America's public assistance programme was excessively generous was arguable, to say the least, but this popularly held conviction was extremely useful to the Economic Opportunity Act's liberal advocates.⁵³ The War on Poverty was both a compassionate response to

⁵⁰ President Johnson's remarks, Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 signing ceremony, 20 Aug. 1964. Cited in "Administrative History of the Office of Economic Opportunity," 32, Johnson Library.

⁵¹ *Congressional Record*, 6 Aug. 1964, 18125.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5 Aug. 1964, 18208.

⁵³ In 1964, average monthly AFDC payments totalled \$140 per family, or less than 21% of average family earnings. Because the Social Security Act allows individual states to set benefits at whatever level they desire, payments varied from \$212 per month in Illinois to as little as \$39.47 in Mississippi. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1965*, 309. For average family earnings see *ibid.*, 40.

suffering, and a means of obviating public assistance. Senator McNamara — who had little obvious ideological affinity with his co-sponsor, Landrum — warned conservatives that “the visible cost of not adopting this programme, in terms of direct public assistance payments alone, is \$5 billion per year.”⁵⁴

Rep. Roman Pucinski (D-Ill.) was another who sought to garner conservative support for the War on Poverty by raising the spectre of relief:

Is there a member in this House who does not have in his congressional district, local, township, county, or State, governments whose resources are not taxed beyond all ability because of the rising cost of public relief?

The Chicago congressman went so far as to claim that the sole purpose of the Economic Opportunity Act was “to get people off of relief.” Accordingly, the bill’s conservative opponents were effectively “voting for a continuation of the so-called welfare state.”⁵⁵

Faced with rhetoric such as this, opponents of the War on Poverty inevitably struggled in their bid to label it “another Democratic hand-out.” Their task was made still more difficult by the ease with which the Act’s conventional social philosophy allowed Great Society liberals to express their convictions in avowedly patriotic terms. Florida Democrat Sam Gibbons exploited this advantage to the full:

There is a great national purpose to this legislation, that we raise up every American not by a handout, not by a giveaway, not by any magic hocus-focus, but by the same fine American principles that have supported this country.⁵⁶

The same buoyant pride in America recurs time and again in the anti-poverty debate of 1964. For Senator Fulbright, it was “a tribute to our democracy that in a time of relative prosperity the Senate should now be considering legislation to strike at the roots of poverty.”⁵⁷ Administration officials testifying on behalf of the bill were predictably quick to wrap themselves in the flag. Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz addressed the Powell subcommittee in these terms:

I think I share with every citizen of this country a great pride in being part of the successes which put the United States of America at the head of the nations of the world.... It gives me a feeling of warmth, satisfaction, and of pride to be able to say that we believe in progress but, as far as we are concerned, there are going to be no human hostages to progress.⁵⁸

America’s tradition dictated that its anti-poverty crusade respect popular

⁵⁴ *Congressional Record*, 22 July 1964, 16612.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6 Aug. 1964, 18310.

⁵⁶ *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, House Hearings, 189.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5 Aug. 1964, 18298.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 23 July 1964, 16761.

individualism. Later liberals, anxious to jettison the individualist “myth” and overcome “outmoded” popular assumptions about obligation and entitlement, would have struggled to recognize the philosophy of Wirtz’s conclusion:

I understand the principle of democracy to be that the ethic of the Government must be exactly the same as the ethic of the individual.... If therefore seems to me that we are met this morning on a piece of business which spells out the relationship between the individualist ethic in this country and the idea of democracy.⁵⁹

In introducing the Economic Opportunity Act to his House subcommittee, the frequently controversial Adam Clayton Powell was happy to acclaim the War on Poverty as a celebration of “equal access to freedom, justice, and the right to work and make a living” as enshrined in the very origins of the Republic:

In our actions at this point, we are rededicating ourselves to the proposition that all men are created equal and reaffirming our belief in the Declaration of Independence and the inalienable rights which it guarantees.⁶⁰

VI

Before my term is ended, we shall have to test anew whether a nation organized and governed such as ours can endure. The outcome is by no means certain.

President John F. Kennedy, 1961.⁶¹

Cold War tensions added a note of menace and urgency to this dominant mood of patriotism and self-congratulation. Three years after Kennedy’s stern message, superpower friction had admittedly declined, allowing the *Nation* to express astonishment “that it took fifteen years to get out from under the cold war incubus and to show a decent concern for the victims of industrialism.”⁶² Nevertheless, policymakers in 1964 were so accustomed to the concept of a global ideological struggle for the minds of men that the War on Poverty had a significant international context.⁶² Businessman Thomas Nichols told the Powell subcommittee that the elimination of poverty was “our national destiny.” He continued:

Ours is a robust, muscular economy. It is a society that is incorrigibly optimistic. We must keep it that way. Yet we know that today America rides the eye of the hurricane in world affairs.⁶³

Poverty — like racism — was an embarrassment to a superpower anxious

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁶¹ Cited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of Confidence* (New York: Bantam, 1969), vii.

⁶² *The Nation*, 20 Jan. 1964, 61.

⁶³ *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, House Hearings, 833.

that its ideals should prevail among the newly-independent nations of the world. Rep. Edward Patten (D-N.J.) feared that poverty "darkens America's image throughout the world"⁶⁴ while a number of legislators were concerned at the inability of the poor to fulfil their obligation to defend freedom. Rep. Hugh Carey (D-N.Y.) adopted a particularly lurid tone:

One of our great foes at this time is a slumbering giant across the Pacific. The giant is flexing his muscles. That giant has one tremendous asset which we all recognize — yes, the greatest population in the world in enslavement. To contend with the giant we have to develop every young American to carry his share of the burden of freedom.⁶⁵

For later liberals, the idea that the "victims" of American society had any duties at all would seem distasteful. The notion that such obligations had an international context would appear positively obscene, given the emotions of shame and guilt which America's commitments in South East Asia would then inspire. Finally, far from seeking to sell the virtues of rugged individualism abroad, such liberals were to re-examine their own support for "outmoded" assumptions and look to more social democratic nations for guidance on public policy. In 1964, however, America's global mission was perceived as a noble one, and in such a context the War on Poverty was indeed "a challenge worthy of the finest minds and most dedicated spirits."⁶⁶

VII

But if Piven and Cloward and Allen Marusow are to be believed, the principal threat to which the War on Poverty represented a response was neither cold war anxiety nor automation, but racial imperative. Marusow provides a succinct summary of his argument:

[T]he government did not undertake a War on Poverty because Michael Harrington wrote a book. A constituency both aggrieved and vocal had first to demand it. In the spring of 1963 the civil rights movement took a mass dimension, creating that constituency overnight.⁶⁷

Clearly these scholars are right to argue that the black struggle for racial equality played a critical role in creating and shaping the liberal reformist spirit of the 1960s. Furthermore, black leaders insisted from an early stage that theirs was a struggle for economic as well as legal equality. The 1963 "March for Jobs and Freedom" in Washington, and the pronouncements

⁶⁴ *Congressional Record*, 6 Aug. 1964, 18309.

⁶⁵ Rep. Charles Weiner (D-Ga.), in *ibid.*, 28 Jan. 1964, 1263.

⁶⁶ Marusow, *Unraveling of America*, 119.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3 Aug. 1964, 18302.

of civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and Whitney M. Young acted as a reminder to white America that more was at stake than the collapse of the segregationist South.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that white liberals remained notably insensitive to the economic plight of black America during the planning phases of the War on Poverty. Indeed, President Johnson's Secretary of Labor, observed in a February 1964 memorandum that "for most Americans the strongest visual image of poverty is that of the miners and hill-folk of Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia."⁶⁹

The War on Poverty would eventually come to be viewed by liberals almost as an arm of the civil rights struggle, but in 1964 this was manifestly not the case. Committed individualists in a time of great optimism, they favoured the "colourblind" approach that both philosophical conviction and political expediency demanded. Robert Kennedy addressed the economic needs of the ghetto in passionate and urgent tones but emphasized that his concern went "far beyond the question of civil rights." Observing that blacks comprised only twenty percent of the poor population, he stressed that "[w]e are equally interested...in all the people in this nation who live without opportunity."⁷⁰

Participants in the presidential task force that drew up the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 confirm that race was not uppermost in their minds. Daniel Patrick Moynihan recalls that "at this time the American poor, black and white, were surprisingly inert":

The Negro civil rights movement in the South was still just that; a movement in the South for civil rights. There was almost no economic content to the protest. The American poor were not only invisible, in Michael Harrington's phrase, but they were also silent.⁷¹

Adam Yarmolinsky concurs, remarking that in 1964 "the whole problem

⁶⁸ See Revd. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), and Whitney M. Young, Jr., *To Be Equal* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁶⁹ Memorandum, Wirtz to Bill Moyers, 29/2/64. "Legislative History of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964," Box 2, Johnson Library. Wirtz's analysis is supported by the content of contemporary popular articles about poverty. See, for example, William Francois, "Where Poverty is Permanent," *The Reporter* 27 Apr. 1961, 38-39; Francois, "West Virginia: The First Front," *Reporter*, 13 Feb. 1964, 21, 34-35; John Ed Pearce, "The Superfluous People of Hazard, Kentucky," *Reporter*, 3 Jan. 1963, 33; Thomas B. Morgan, "Portrait of an Underdeveloped Country: Appalachia, U.S.A.," *Look*, 4 Dec. 1962, 25-33; "Poverty, U.S.A.," *Newsweek*, 17 Feb. 1964, 19-38; Michael Harrington, "Close-up on Poverty," *Look*, 25 Aug. 1964, 66-72; John Dominis, "The Valley of Poverty," *Life*, 9 Oct. 1964, 54-65.

⁷⁰ *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, Senate Hearings, 207.

⁷¹ Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 24.

of the northern ghetto was still not seen in anything like its full depth and complexity":

While we see the poverty problem today [in 1968] as almost coal black, in the spring and summer of 1964 it was at most light grey.... There was no visible concern at the time that the programme might be accused of financing revolt and insurrection in the ghetto.⁷⁵

The idea that blacks deserved special treatment because of a legacy of racism was promoted by a number of black leaders in 1964, but was explicitly and repeatedly repudiated by white liberals. Even so fervent a campaigner for civil rights as Gunnar Myrdal warned that "this demand for a discrimination in reverse, i.e. to the advantage of the Negroes, is misdirected." He continued:

Nothing would with more certainty create hatred for Negroes amongst other poor groups in America, who have mostly been their bitterest enemies as they have been the only ones who have felt them as competitors.⁷⁶

The War on Poverty did have an important racial dimension, but it did not centre on any incipient or actual ghetto revolt. Rather, it stemmed from Southern anxiety that federal insistence on racially-mixed Community Action Programs and Job Corp camps would hasten the demise of segregation. Howard "Judge" Smith, the crusty and reactionary Virginian who presided over the powerful House Rules Committee, issued the following warning:

I want to say to the Members from the South who are going to vote for this bill — and I know that there are a lot of them — that they are voting to implement the civil rights bill that they opposed and voted against.⁷⁷

Smith's offensive was a worrying and dangerous one, given that Republican opposition to Johnson's election year programme made the support of Southern Democrats for the Economic Opportunity Act critical. Rep. Jack Flynt (D-Ga.) told one administration official of

⁷⁵ Adam Yarmolinsky, "The Beginnings of O.E.O.," in Sundquist, ed., *On Fighting Poverty*, 49.

⁷⁶ Myrdal, "The War on Poverty," in *The New Republic*, 8 Feb. 1964, 15. The same hostility to racial preference is evident from the debate surrounding Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which sought to outlaw discrimination in employment). Dismissing the "bugaboo" that the creation of an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission indicated a commitment to racial quotas, Hubert Humphrey insisted that "Title VII is designed to encourage hiring on the basis of ability and qualifications, not race or religion." Robert Kennedy's Justice Department told Senator Joseph P. Clark (D-Pa.) that "any deliberate attempt to maintain a given balance would almost certainly run afoul of Title VII." *Congressional Record*, 30 Mar. 1964, 6549; and 8 Apr. 1964, 7207-10.

⁷⁷ *Congressional Record*, 5 Aug. 1964, 18198.

distressing G.O.P. charges in his district to the effect that the proposed legislation was "another device to foster racial integration without real regard for poverty."⁷⁸ In a similar vein, Rep. John McMillan of South Carolina wrote to Johnson explaining that, despite his sympathy with the bill's objectives, he had felt constrained to oppose it because of Goldwaterite sentiment in his district.⁷⁹

Ultimately, however, as many as sixty Southern Democratic congressmen were to support the Economic Opportunity Act. Some, such as Charles Welner (D-Ga.) of Atlanta and Sam Gibbons (D-Fla.) of Tampa, represented a new, urban and moderate South, and sought to build new voting coalitions including newly enfranchised blacks. Many more were influenced by the weighty sponsorship of Congressman Phil Landrum (D-Ga.), who was attracted by the opportunity approach and would remain a loyal supporter of the programme. Landrum's impregnable electoral base made him invulnerable to attack from the likes of Judge Smith or Barry Goldwater. Moreover, he had since the 1950s been vilified by liberals on account of his sponsorship of the anti-labor Griffin-Landrum Act, and thus held impeccable conservative credentials. President Johnson's success in persuading Landrum to shepherd the Economic Opportunity Act through the House of Representatives significantly increased the credibility of the legislation with the right.

It is understandable that scholars preoccupied with the catastrophic ghetto violence of the "long hot summers" should seek racial explanations for a War on Poverty that came to be viewed largely as a response to black discontent. But neither archival sources, the public record, nor the recollections of the antipoverty "warriors" support the contention that the Economic Opportunity Act was prompted by racial exigencies. To the contrary, the authors of the Economic Opportunity Act explicitly repudiated notions of racial targeting in favour of a highly optimistic social philosophy predicated on the notion that all the poor needed was individual opportunity.

VIII

Before closing, however, it is important to ask if liberal enthusiasm for the individualistic principles of the Economic Opportunity Act did not reflect the mere political expediency of an election year rather than philosophical

⁷⁸ Reported to John W. Carley: Memorandum to Adam Yarmolinsky and Wilson McCarthy, 20 July 1964, Office files of Bill Moyers, Box 38, Johnson Library.

⁷⁹ Memorandum, McMillan to Johnson, 10 Aug. 1964, "Legislative History of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964," Box 2, Johnson Library.

conviction. If it can be demonstrated that liberal sentiment outside of government was less than enthusiastic about the "opportunity theory," then it can perhaps be inferred that liberal legislators and administration officials too were more committed to the politics of the War on Poverty than to its ideals.

For the Johnson Administration, and for congressional Democrats, one of the most appealing aspects of the War on Poverty was its congruence with the individualist tradition. Yet for a number of analysts the political appeal of the Economic Opportunity Act was somewhat dulled by the sense that its popularity was founded on American "myths" which would inevitably be exposed by the very challenges to which the Great Society was responding. Reinhold Niebuhr, writing in *The New Leader*, and Adam Walinsky, in *The New Republic*, were among those who identified a whole series of myths which the Johnson programme sought to accommodate rather than confront. Niebuhr was struck by the immense strength of the President's political position in 1964 and offered an explanation:

Johnson's ascendancy has many causes, [one of which is] his great skill in manipulating the political myths of the American democratic tradition.... Myths have the function of sanctifying historically contingent value with absolute worth, and of simplifying the complex realities of political life.⁷⁷

Just as the genius of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal lay in its grafting of "new realities and complexities to the older, simpler bourgeois myths of 'freedom,'" so Johnson had cushioned the "jolt" of entering a new era by a "shrewd appeal to the slogans and myths of past eras." Such expediency, however, would be of limited long-term utility, for ultimately – and here Niebuhr was thinking primarily of foreign policy – "the substitution of mythical images for the complex realities which confront imperial power will not solve our problem."⁷⁸

Walinsky disputed Niebuhr's views that myths were essentially anachronistic. Rather, they served an important function in assuaging the status anxiety of the middle class, at a time when routinization was undermining the traditional role of work as a source of position in society. Rhetorical commitments to "equal opportunity" were made in the full knowledge – indeed on the condition – that the ideal would never be achieved, for in the 1960s the middle class was "defined largely by the fact that the poor exist."⁷⁹ No serious attempt to improve the condition of the

⁷⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Johnson and the Myths of Democracy," in *The New Leader*, 25 May 1964, 18.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 19–20.

⁷⁹ Adam Walinsky, "Keeping the Poor in their Place: Notes on the Importance of being One-Up," in *The New Republic*, 4 July 1964, 15.

poor could be undertaken until the middle class felt secure. In a conclusion that recalled the qualitative liberal angst of the 1950s, Walinsky proposed a way out for the Johnson administration:

A serious programme must offer the middle class a new life-style in return for the raise in status it would give to the poor; it must deal not only (or even primarily) with pockets of economic poverty, but with the poverty of satisfaction, purpose, and dignity that afflicts us all.

The role of work in modern society also troubled a group of liberal and radical intellectuals who in 1964 combined to form the "Ad Hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution." This short-lived but much-publicized body was founded by the British economist Robert Theobald, but also included such luminaries as Michael Harrington, Gunnar Myrdal, the civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, and Irving Howe of *Dissent* magazine. Contending that "the traditional link between jobs and incomes" was "being broken," the Ad Hoc Committee argued that society must respond by making "an unqualified commitment" to provide "every individual and every family with an adequate income as a matter of right."⁸⁰ One signatory, the political scientist Michael Reagan, warned that while "[i]t may be easy to scoff at the A.H.C. proposals," such a response would reflect a destructive unwillingness to "face up to the problem of automation."⁸¹

Doubts about the philosophical basis upon which war had been declared were not confined to the intellectual community. Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers attacked the myth that poverty could be defined in absolute terms, and that – by inference – the poor could attain economic security without income being redistributed. Reuther conceded that maldistribution of wealth was a "painful" issue to confront but told Adam Clayton Powell that he intended "to keep talking about it, because someday this country will wake up to the real test of the twentieth century."⁸² The National Social Welfare Assembly was anxious to dispel the attractive yet ultimately unrealistic notion that the War on Poverty would obviate public assistance, warning the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare that "the public must not be led to expect that [the Economic Opportunity Act] will reach all poor people or that it will solve the problem of poverty."⁸³ Finally, Ernest Hollander of the Americans for Democratic Action reminded legislators that, regardless of the merits of

⁸⁰ *New York Times*, 23 Mar. 1964, 1.

⁸¹ Michael D. Reagan, "For a Guaranteed Income," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 June 1964, 20.

⁸² *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, House Hearings, 459.

⁸³ *Economic Opportunity Act*, Senate Hearings, 327.

the "culture of poverty" argument, "the poor are poor...because they have too little money, and whatever else is done they will remain poor until they have enough."⁸⁴

A certain scepticism in some quarters about American "myths" and doubts about the practicality of the administration's ostensible objectives, however, do not justify the contention that the Economic Opportunity programme evaded a "real" war on poverty because of political considerations. It is significant that many of the 1964 Act's liberal and radical detractors shared its supporters' conviction that poverty was a complex and partly cultural condition, impervious to an unadorned income strategy. This formulation had little in common with the subsequent liberal belief that the poor were separated from the mainstream solely by their lack of money. Groups such as the Americans for Democratic Action and the United Auto Workers evidenced more than a hint of confusion in their critiques of the War on Poverty. Even as it told Congress to recognize that a principal goal of any such "war" must be "to assure incomes to provide an adequate living...for all Americans," the former organization characterized "social and spiritual impoverishment" as "the most difficult and deep-seated aspect of the problem," fearing that many of today's poor were "permanent wards of the welfare state."⁸⁵ Similarly, while emphasizing the need for income redistribution, the U.A.W. urged Johnson not to treat poverty symptomatically. At its Atlantic City convention, the Union adopted a highly orthodox resolution:

The nation's war against poverty must focus mainly on eradicating its causes and not on relief for its symptoms. Obviously, the poor need immediate assistance and should receive it. But, above all, they need help in lifting themselves and their children out of poverty.⁸⁶

Furthermore, at least two signatories to the Ad Hoc Committee's declaration, Michael Harrington and Gunnar Myrdal, possessed views about poverty which actually owed far more to the prevailing liberal orthodoxy than to Robert Theobald's proposed entitlement revolution. In *The Other America*, Harrington flatly rejected the notion that poverty could be defined in economic terms alone:

There is, in a sense, a personality of poverty, a type of human being produced by the grinding, wearing life of the slums. The other Americans feel differently than the rest of the nation. They tend to be hopeless and passive, yet prone to bursts

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 287-88.

⁸⁶ "Report No. 4, Resolutions Committee, U.A.W. Constitutional Convention, March 20-27, 1964," reprinted in *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, House Hearings, 453-63.

of violence; they are lonely and isolated, often rigid and hostile. To be poor is not simply to be deprived of the material things of this world. It is to enter a fatal, futile universe, an America within America, with a twisted spirit."⁸⁷

Harrington was convinced that, in addition to income-based measurements, "[p]overty should be defined psychologically in terms of those whose place in the society is such that they are internal exiles who, almost inevitably, develop attitudes of defeat and pessimism and who are therefore excluded from taking advantage of new opportunities."⁸⁸

Myrdal, in approving the thesis of the Ad Hoc Committee, had seemingly endorsed the principle of income entitlement. But in *Challenge to Affluence* he provided a strong defence of the traditional work ethic:

The well-meaning proposals put forward by progressive writers for paying greatly increased unemployment benefits, or sometimes even full wages without time limit, to people who have been thrown out of work...underestimate how unhealthy and destructive it is for anybody...to go idle and live more or less permanently on doles.... [Work is] the basis for self-respect and a dignified life.⁸⁹

But even if members of the Ad Hoc Committee had possessed a distinct and coherent alternative to the prevailing orthodoxy, it would still be a mistake to accord much significance to their views. After all, most commentators who worried about the consequences of automation in 1964, far from advocating entitlement, viewed economic modernization as justification for opportunity-based liberalism. Theobald's view had little impact on the antipoverty debate, despite efforts by one Republican to associate the national Democratic party with the Ad Hoc Committee.⁹⁰

Even the Economic Opportunity Act's liberal and radical critics, then, tended to share Johnson's basic conviction that curing poverty implied something more than simply cash support. Indeed, the most radical voices in the debate tended to belong to the strongest supporters of the opportunity theory - figures such as David Hacker and Richard Boone, who had worked for President Kennedy's juvenile delinquency committee and developed a crusading faith in the empowering potential of

⁸⁷ Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 120.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸⁹ Myrdal, *Challenge to Affluence*, 46.

⁹⁰ Rep. Dave Martin (R-Neb.) asked Robert F. Wagner, the Democratic mayor of New York City, whether he would support the notion of a \$3,000 guaranteed annual income, helpfully observing that "we have this kind of plan worked out in Communist nations." Wagner demurred, remarking that all he wanted was "to give some people the opportunity to get some dignity." Rep. James Roosevelt (D-Cal) characterized the Ad Hoc Committee as "a group of private people who got together to express a point of view." To suggest that their views had any relevance to the Economic Opportunity Act did "not make any sense at all." *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, House Hearings, 746-47, 770-71.

community action.⁸¹ Marcusow observes that even Hacker and Robert Kennedy had no interest in the redistribution of income.⁸² The key to eliminating poverty lay instead in transforming individual opportunity through community development. In terms of entitlement, the almost universal convictions that deprivation was in part a spiritual condition, and that America should confront its sources rather than simply ameliorate its consequences, excluded the guaranteed income "solution." Government's obligation was not to identify new rights for the poor, but, rather, to give relevance to the rights which, in principle, they already shared with the rest of the population.

Insofar as liberal legislators did express reservations about the Economic Opportunity Act, they tended to concern the Administration's rhetorical tendency to promote it as a universal panacea for the problem of poverty. Even here, however, administration witnesses were generally prepared to acknowledge the Act's limitations in Congressional testimony. Walter Heller emphasized that "in humanitarian terms, War on Poverty must be fought wherever it is found."

Much of it is found among the aged and the disabled, and in the broken home. Here, the battle for a better life must be fought chiefly by strengthening our existing programmes of public welfare, public health, and social security. And this we are pledged to do, both as a people and as a government.⁸³

Similarly, Sargent Shriver was quite prepared to acknowledge that the 1964 Act did little for the aged, but asked "how do you reach them effectively?" In his view, the Economic Opportunity Act was "distinguished by one fact," namely that there were "no handouts...in it." O.E.O. programmes would focus on those who could realistically be expected to seize opportunity, in particular on youth.⁸⁴

IX

Political consideration alone would have provided reasons enough for the Johnson Administration to reject the income strategy in favour of a programme of rehabilitative services. The Economic Opportunity Act helped to place the new President's vision of a Great Society firmly within America's core individualist tradition, and further marginalised Barry Goldwater's inherently unattractive brand of extreme Republicanism.

⁸¹ For good accounts see Marcusow, *Unraveling of America*, and Peter Mattis and Martin Rein, *Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the United States* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1972.)

⁸² Marcusow, 126.

⁸³ *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, Senate Hearings, 67.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

Additionally, it was an initially inexpensive programme, consistent with Johnson's perceived political need to keep the federal budget below \$100 billion while cutting taxes by \$11.5 billion.

But the fact that the Economic Opportunity Act's social philosophy made political sense does not mean that its liberal supporters were merely engaged in some kind of cynical electoral gambit. Tactical considerations were peripheral in dictating the philosophical orientation of the programme. Liberals declined to define bold new conceptions of entitlement for the simple reason that they continued to uphold the very different New Deal tradition which they had inherited. If the President was sensitive to the political advantages of the anti-poverty programme, there can be no real doubt that his faith in education and opportunity, and his antipathy to "welfarism" were sincere.

The philosophical appeal of equal opportunity, liberal identification with a Cold War in which the furtherance of individualism was a patriotic duty, the incumbency of a President identified with the New Deal's work-orientated ethos, and not least the impact of affluence and the "knowledge revolution" on the prospects for success, all served to make the Economic Opportunity Act an attractive vehicle for cherished liberal ideals. In 1964, the paradox of poverty was not that deprivation existed (some would always spurn possibilities for self-advancement) but rather that millions of Americans were deprived of an equal opportunity in a nation historically committed to that ideal. In a war which sought to tap the buoyant optimism and idealism of the American people, the guaranteed income, far from representing the triumph of liberalism, would have been considered the ultimate admission of defeat.