Why did Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty fail?

Viewpoint: The War on Poverty failed because the war in Vietnam drained resources, and the Republicans, particularly after the election of Richard M. Nixon, hindered the program.

Viewpoint: The War on Poverty failed because it did not focus on the one sure way to eliminate poverty: creating jobs.

Lyndon B. Johnson believed his Great Society program would complete the work of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration in ensuring a decent living and an opportunity to succeed for all Americans. Instead, by the end of his administration the Great Society was in ruins, and twenty years later conservative scholars actually blamed the Great Society for perpetuating the cycle of poverty Johnson hoped to break.

What happened? How did a program launched with such noble motives come to such an ignominious end? Most historians attribute the Great Society’s failure to the simultaneous drain of the Vietnam War, which eliminated the budget surpluses that Johnson had hoped to spend in lifting Americans out of poverty. Others see the failure to produce jobs as the crucial element. Economists might argue that the kind of poverty Johnson hoped to combat was structural, endemic to the system. The Heritage Foundation and other conservative groups attribute poverty to the failure of an individual, and would argue that no government program could change these unworthy poor.

There are two related questions at work here. One is the historical question, what happened to the Great Society? The other is a public policy question, was the Great Society a good idea? Both of the scholars represented here, Judith A. Barrett and Robert J. Allison, think the Great Society was a good idea, and both lament its failure. However, as historians, they differ on why it failed. Barrett, with long experience in state government, looks to the failure of Johnson and his advisers to understand the nature of poverty and to their naive belief that the United States was different from other nations and that it was possible, with a few minor changes in policy, to eliminate poverty. She argues that the failure to provide jobs, the failure to grapple with the idea that maybe as an industrial society the United States was not different from other nations, ultimately forced Johnson’s failure to achieve the Great Society. Allison, on the other hand, sees the failure in more mundane terms, that the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) created in 1964 was fatally flawed and that political circumstances combined to destroy the plan of such great promise.

In addition, while both scholars see the War on Poverty and the Great Society as failures, each one also points to some notable successes. Barrett notes that the War on Poverty actually did ease poverty in many cases, and the Nixon administration, which dismantled the OEO, actually stabilized and extended other facets of the Great Society. Allison, too, sees in the most controversial feature of the War on Poverty, the Community Action Programs, not only the seeds of the Great Society’s defeat but also the seeds of its greatest
triumph. Johnson is, as Barrett says, a tragic figure, and his failure, his tragedy, is one of contradiction and irony. Perhaps it is a tragedy inherent in our nature as human beings, and as Americans, to pursue a goal with means that make it impossible to achieve.

Viewpoint:
The War on Poverty failed because the war in Vietnam drained resources, and the Republicans, particularly after the election of Richard M. Nixon, hindered the program.

The War on Poverty failed for two major reasons: one, because resources that would have gone to fighting poverty instead were absorbed into the Vietnam War. In 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty,” the U.S. government had a financial surplus, and projections promised that it would grow into the early 1970s. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, one of the planners of the War on Poverty, said that Johnson did not launch the program because it was necessary, but because it was possible. With this much extra money coming in, Johnson had the opportunity to spend it on an ambitious legislative agenda. But by 1967 the surplus had been absorbed into the military, and the United States was going into debt. Second, while the War on Poverty began with the promise of collaboration between different government agencies and with private institutions (notably the Ford Foundation), what ensued was fierce bureaucratic infighting. There were also fundamental disagreements over basic strategy and philosophy at different levels of government and among the poor themselves.

By 1963 four major areas of concern, in which the federal government could provide leadership, came to the attention of the White House. These problems involved the urban poor, who lived in blighted housing and were being displaced by urban renewal, which often involved simply tearing down slum neighborhoods without providing for the displaced residents; juvenile delinquents, who were the subject of an Eisenhower administration study completed in 1960; growing welfare rolls, which indicated that the rising economy was not lifting all Americans out of poverty; and adult illiteracy. President John F. Kennedy had asked Walter Heller, his chief economic adviser, to prepare a legislative agenda for 1964 focusing on these problems, trying to imagine ways the federal government could address poverty. To prepare this agenda Heller convened a committee of individuals drawn from different government agencies: the Bureau of the Budget, the Departments of Labor and Agriculture, the Council of Economic Advisors, and the White House staff. On the afternoon of 22 November 1963, Heller and his committee were working on their proposal, “Widening Participation in Prosperity,” when they were interrupted with the tragic news of Kennedy’s assassination.

The next day, Heller met with the new president. He presented Johnson with the grim facts their study had uncovered: 20 percent of American families lived below the poverty line, which the government defined as a family of four earning less than $3,100 a year. More alarming, the economy was no longer rising quickly enough to lift people out of poverty. The Council of Economic Advisors identified four groups of people most prone to living in poverty: blacks, people without a high school education, families headed by women, and Southern or rural families. The nature of poor, rural, undereducated, or single-parent families made it difficult for children in these families to pull themselves out of poverty, perpetuating what the advisers called the “cycle of poverty.” Heller’s committee was preparing several different strategies to combat poverty, but needed approval from the president. Johnson, after hearing Heller’s report, told him “That’s my kind of program . . . Move full speed ahead.”

Heller and the task force moved ahead; in his State of the Union speech in January 1964, Johnson declared the War on Poverty. Later in the year, in a commencement speech at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Johnson called on Americans to join him in creating a “Great Society,” which would offer opportunities to all. Johnson believed in the power of government to correct social wrongs: he is the only president who spent his entire adult life working for the federal government, beginning in 1931 as an aide to a Texas congressman. Between 1931 and 1969 the only time Johnson spent outside of Washington was a two-year stint as Texas director of the New Deal’s National Youth Administration. Johnson hoped that the War on Poverty and the Great Society would be his personal achievements, but he also intended them to be the culmination of work begun by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.

After the problems were identified and the war was declared, Heller’s task force began preparing a legislative agenda. Johnson persuaded Sargent Shriver, former director of the Peace Corps and the brother-in-law of the late Presi-
dent Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, to take charge. Shriver quickly took on the responsibility and challenge of organizing the largest government effort to end poverty ever launched, as Johnson prepared to spend $1 billion to begin his program. Shriver called on government agencies and the private sector to contribute ideas, and the administration prepared the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

The act, which Johnson signed on 20 August 1964, created the Job Corps to help find jobs for the urban unemployed, the Neighborhood Youth Corps to provide work and training to urban youths, and the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, a domestic version of the Peace Corps. It provided aid to farmers and grants for education. It also established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which would oversee an ambitious Community Action
Program (CAP). In addition the Johnson administration created the Head Start program to prepare young children for kindergarten, expanded the Food Stamp program, began work-study programs, and created Pell Grants to help pay for college education.

The administration advanced a bold and ambitious agenda. Some features of the War on Poverty are today taken for granted and approved by even the most conservative thinkers. Head Start, Pell Grants, Food Stamps, and Vista are almost without controversy. Yet, the flagship of the antipoverty fleet, the OEO, almost immediately came under attack and did not last much beyond the 1960s. Its failure cast in doubt the entire Johnson enterprise of using the federal government to resolve a social problem. Its failure lies partly in the Vietnam War, which diverted not only the financial resources of the federal government but also the time and energy of the White House. However, a more plausible explanation must lie in the nature of the Washington bureaucracy and local bureaucracies, the changing temper of both Americans at large and the constituencies served by the OEO, and in the conflicting agendas of the men and women who organized the War on Poverty.

Though Shriver had been called into service as the director of the antipoverty program, he quickly found that his actual responsibilities would extend no further than the OEO. Head Start, Vista, and Food Stamps, the more popular features of the program, were taken over by other agencies. The OEO was left the administration of Community Action Programs (CAPs), which proved to be the most contentious and unpopular aspect of the War on Poverty and ultimately undermined the whole thing. At a cabinet meeting Shriver proposed a five-cent tax on cigarettes, which would help the OEO establish a fund to create employment. The Labor Department had criticized earlier versions of the antipoverty program for not generating jobs—Shriver hoped through this tax to do the one thing certain to end poverty, putting people to work. Johnson, though, vetoed the idea.

Without a program to create jobs, how exactly would the OEO fight poverty? Actually, by the early 1960s some thoughtful Americans argued that lack of work was not really the problem. The change in thinking was reflected in the 1960 report of the Division of Juvenile Delinquency Service, a division within the Children’s Bureau, an agency established during the Wilson administration to fight child labor. This study of delinquents, who had been perceived to present a social problem, and why youths gravitated to drugs and crime overturned current theories. Previously delinquency was thought to be caused by poverty, broken homes, poor education, race, or other factors. Not so, said the study. These things were concomitants of delinquency, not its causes. Developing on the ideas of society posed by French scholar Emile Durkheim, sociologists saw the real cause of delinquency as alienation or anomie—a feeling of powerlessness in society. Juvenile delinquents were the James Deans of American society, rebels without causes, listless and feeling unloved. Providing jobs, better schools, nurturing families, and ending racism would not be enough to end delinquency. Furthermore, the delinquents really were not the problem—society was, and the delinquents, through crime and drugs, were making a protest against a harsh and oppressive world.

That this argument turned prevailing social theory, as well as common sense, on its head seems clear. George C. Wallace, the governor of Alabama who was seeking support among urban whites in the North, criticized the "pointy-heads" and "intellectual morons" and the "bearded professor who thinks he knows how to settle the Vietnam war when he hasn’t got enough sense to park a bicycle straight." The criminal who knocks you down, Wallace says, will be "out of jail before you’re out of the hospital and the policeman who arrested him will be on trial. . . . But some psychologist says, Well, he’s not to blame. Society’s to blame. His father didn’t take him to see the Pittsburgh Pirates when he was a little boy."

The sociological theory made an easy target for Wallace, and even for Republicans. It also created a problem for those sincerely interested in ending poverty. If delinquency is caused by anomie, if powerlessness, not poverty, is the problem, how can it be combated? The answer seemed to be in giving more power to these alienated youths. In the early 1960s, the Ford Foundation had joined with the City of New York and the Kennedy administration in forming the Mobilization for Youth, a community-based organization in New York’s Lower East Side. The Mobilization for Youth represented a new idea in poor relief—instead of establishing jobs, it provided empowering opportunities and helped to organize the poor into agitation groups. The basic philosophy behind the Mobilization for Youth would also inform the Community Action Programs, formed under the OEO.

The case of Syracuse, New York, is instructive. A local reform organization, which had been established to combat juvenile delinquency, transformed itself into a Community Action Program when the OEO came into being. The Syracuse Crusade for Opportunity continued the work it had begun, but now sought to empower all the poor of Syracuse. Under the OEO the poor were to enjoy “maximum feasible participation” in these CAPs; they were designed to help them help themselves. Organizers attempted to address serious problems with most public welfare agencies—that the poor often did not feel in control of their own destiny and that welfare agencies and the police, the two government agencies with which many people dealt most
often, were unresponsive bureaucracies. So the OEO determined that the poor would learn the benefits of participatory democracy through the creation of CAPs. An irony here was that many of the initial agencies, such as Mobilization for Youth or the Syracuse Crusade for Opportunity, were not created by the poor but rather by well-intentioned middle-class people, often under the auspices of a university, armed with the latest sociological theory.

In Syracuse the Crusade for Opportunity quickly found itself challenged by another CAP, this one emanating from Syracuse University. With the support of an OEO grant, Syracuse University launched a Community Action Training Project (CATP) to train the poor and mobilize them to take action. The Crusade for Opportunity was a white, middle-class philanthropic endeavor; the CATP was mainly a black and radical organization. Militant and radical activists of the 1960s saw organizations such as the former one as useful tools to take on the power structure, and the first step in a general mobilization of the poor would be to take over the Crusade for Opportunity. After all, the OEO had guaranteed "maximum feasible participation," and the poor would have control of their own destinies. By 1966 the CATP had taken over the Crusade for Opportunity, which ceased being an umbrella group drawing on disparate parts of the Syracuse community. It instead became a radical group that pretended to speak for the "dispossessed" of Syracuse. The goal of "empowerment" may have been achieved for some, though ending poverty was not, at least not for those who did not have the good fortune to be employed by CATP. Of some $8 million dollars spent by this CAP, $7 million went to salaries of its staff.

Though critics of the CAPs, such as Moynihan, have argued that the phrase "maximum feasible participation" ultimately destroyed the entire War on Poverty, James Sundquist, deputy undersecretary of agriculture and, like Moynihan, an original architect of the antipoverty policy, argues that the real key word to explain the radical nature of the CAPs was not "maximum," "feasible," or "participation," but rather "unconditional." Johnson had declared an "unconditional war on poverty," and members of the CAPs regarded themselves as warriors in an unconditional war, not as bureaucrats in a government agency. Members of these groups had been working under the auspices of private grants to study or combat poverty before the president joined the battle; their mandate was to get at the causes of poverty, not simply to ameliorate the living conditions of the poor. So it is not surprising that when the federal government seemed to promise its resources to combat poverty, these activists would seize the opportunity. It seems strange that the U.S. government would support organizations committed to revolutionary change, but the War on Poverty was in this sense a real war. In this case the federal government was moving away from state and local bureaucracies, creating or trying to create new power structures in communities.

The undermining of existing structures of power had another dimension. It provoked a backlash from established bureaucracies, who fought back. These bureaucrats, unlike the young revolutionaries and poor people they organized, understood more effective means of fighting bureaucratic war. Instead of a frontal assault on the OEO, the enemies of the CAPs sought to create a competing program that had the same goals, the Model Cities Program. This project, launched in 1966, gave grants directly to cities and towns to create antipoverty programs in their jurisdictions, under the auspices of the local government. The Model Cities Program, though considered part of the Great Society, had the effect of draining resources from the OEO and the CAPs and thus offered a bureaucratic victory to the welfare establishment.

Another instructive example of flaws in the CAP approach comes from a related movement, the Economic Research and Action Projects (ERAP), funded by a United Auto Workers grant in 1965. The ERAP, as activist Sara Evans has recounted in Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (1979), sought to empower the poor and dispossessed, organizing them into an active political force that could take on the establishment. In fact, ERAP workers were also members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and saw their work with the poor as part of a general revolutionary movement. In approaching their work in the urban ghettos, though, the members of ERAP unconsciously divided along gender lines. All had gone into the communities they sought to organize with the idea that the juvenile delinquents were a potential revolutionary force. The men attempted to "organize" the gangs of youths who hung out on street corners; the women, on the other hand, concentrated on females in the housing projects and turned their skills to organizing welfare mothers and working women. From the experience of ERAP the women saw that juvenile delinquents were not necessarily a revolutionary force, and also that women, as women, needed to be organized. Their experience helped direct the feminist movement of the late 1960s, which rejected the power structure imposed by men.

Though CAPs lent themselves to ridicule and provoked a political backlash against the Great Society in general, it would be a mistake to label them a complete failure. In the 1960s these organizations had a somewhat bizarre relationship both with the communities they hoped to serve and with the local power structures; the basic program evolved into something much more interesting. At
first the leadership was in the hands of white middle-class intellectuals and activists, armed with good intentions and clear ideas about what was best for the communities they sought to empower. Implementation of the programs was a disaster, but the basic intention was the fundamental idea of American government—power should be in the hands of the people, or their elected representatives. By organizing people in communities, the CAPs created political bodies that could use the political system to achieve goals. Ultimately the inner-city communities “organized” by the young white activists could use their newfound political voice to achieve their own goals. These communities did not become, as some white organizers had hoped, the vanguard of revolution. Yet, community organization did ultimately lead to political power and improved social services for previously underserved communities. The poor in America now had organizations of their own to agitate to improve their lives. This goal was a modest one, far short of Johnson’s aim to end poverty and create a “Great Society.” The achievement was the creation of this more vocal political constituency.

—ROBERT J. ALLISON, SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY

Viewpoint:
The War on Poverty failed because it did not focus on the sure way to eliminate poverty: creating jobs.

Lyndon B. Johnson is a tragic figure in U.S. history because he is the only president to launch two wars that America could not win: the War on Poverty and the Vietnam War. Until the language of “welfare reform” gained currency in the United States, however, Johnson’s public memory lay almost exclusively with Vietnam. Terms such as “Tonkin Gulf Resolution,” “Tet” and “POW-MIA” have meant more to high-school and college American-history students in the past twenty years than “VISTA,” “CAP” and “OEO,” largely because textbook authors emphasized the foreign-military policy dimensions of Johnson’s presidency over his domestic agenda. Thus, the names of people such as Ho Chi Minh and General William Westmoreland became fixed in American minds, while those of Ted Sorensen and Sargent Shriver faded quickly for all but a handful of economists and sociologists whose careers were cut from the cloth of social reform.

Those who grew up during the 1960s can usually answer three where-were-you-when questions: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Johnson’s retreat from the 1968 presidential race, and Woodstock. Johnson withdrew his candidacy for reelection after the Tet Offensive, the “surprise” attack by North Vietnam on scores of South Vietnamese cities and towns during the Lunar New Year. Although Tet took place on Vietnamese soil, the political fallout occurred in the United States. Led to believe that the government was winning the Vietnam War, Americans found out—seemingly overnight—that victory was by no means assured. Televised nightly news turned living rooms into the white house. On 31 March 1968 he told voters that he was finished with presidential politics.
Johnson had sent American troops into combat just two weeks before the 1965 Watts riots. By then "War on Poverty" was an eighteen-month-old slogan from Johnson's 1964 inaugural address. Moved by the plight of the Appalachian poor, Congress had passed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the new implementing agency—the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)—was advancing Johnson's $350 million antipoverty strategy from paper to practice. The act authorized several initiatives, some administered directly by the OEO and others by local Community Action Programs (CAPs).

It was no accident that the War on Poverty's original concern was low-income youth. What compelled Kennedy and later Johnson to make poverty a major national policy issue was juvenile delinquency, largely because of Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin's *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs* (1960). Michael Harrington's *The Other America; Poverty in the United States* (1962) supplied the remaining proof liberal Democrats needed to put an antipoverty campaign at the top of their agenda. By removing educational barriers and building hope for the nation's youth, Johnson believed government could reduce delinquency and school dropout rates and ultimately stem the tide of poverty.

The president and his advisers also believed in the ideology of American exceptionalism. From their perspective, poverty did not suggest extant or emerging deficiencies in either the economic system or postwar economic development trends. It was a problem, but not a systemic one. Johnson envisioned a "Great Society" anchored in the capitalist free-market system that worked well for the American mainstream. Thus, the War on Poverty excluded from its long list of initiatives any formal or federally coordinated approach to economic and industrial development. The American economy was stable and relatively strong in the early 1960's. Even John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, published two years before the 1960 presidential campaign season, gave only a modicum of attention to national poverty.

Suffice it to say that because Johnson thought poverty could be cured by removing the social and educational hurdles that kept a majority of Americans poor—35 million people—administration policy planners paid almost no attention to job creation and new business development in the design of War on Poverty programs. To Johnson, the ghettos and Appalachia were anomalous in an otherwise exceptional nation.

Under the organizational plan contained in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the OEO directed the Job Corps, which supplied job training to low-income youth; Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), an inner-city public service and teaching program modeled after the Peace Corps; and the Work Study Program for lower-income students to work their way through college. While OEO was administratively responsible for CAP agencies, these nonprofit organizations were steered by residents of designated high-poverty target areas. They administered their own Head Start and Upward Bound programs (education for preschoolers and youth from low-income households); "Foster Grandparents" and the Work Experience Program, which made day care and social services available to the poor; and several smaller efforts.

If anything stood in the way of a broad endorsement for the War on Poverty, it was the CAP concept and, in particular, the statutory call for a program "developed, conducted and administered with maximum feasible participation by the residents." By giving the poor the institutional capacity, funding, and power to design and run their own antipoverty programs, portions of the Economic Opportunity Act drew almost instant wrath from state and local officials who thought Washington was making an end-run around federalism on one hand and local control on the other. It comes as no surprise, then, that the theory of community action became a major practical obstacle to the War on Poverty's success: resident boards had their share of "respectable" civic leaders, but the boards also gave power, prestige, experience, and jobs to minorities. In December 1965 Democratic mayors from across the country held a special meeting in Miami, all because of shared resistance to community action. Eventually, federal policymakers took heed.

The interdependence of urban politics, the White House, and Capitol Hill is exemplified well by a "second generation" War on Poverty initiative that Johnson put before Congress in 1966: the Model Cities Program. Although Appalachian poverty was on the public's mind in the early 1960s, it took little time to shift the emphasis toward decaying American cities. Federal highway construction, urban renewal, and suburbanization had already siphoned whites and middle-class African Americans out of inner-city areas, leaving behind the poorest urban residents. In late 1964 Moynihan, assistant secretary for policy planning in the Labor Department, discovered that although unemployment among black men was declining, welfare cases and births to unmarried urban black women were rising.

Moynihan saw a connection between these two phenomena and produced a well-known, but hotly contested, report on black families and black family structure. Although Moynihan's report was discredited by angry African Americans and leftist whites, it reinforced age-old beliefs about the "Negro problem" and gave support to the "culture of poverty" framework that shaped future planning by the Johnson administration. More significantly, it put the spotlight on African Americans and
urban ghettos as key elements of the poverty profile in America.

The Model Cities Program, which Congress agreed to create in 1966, brought a “bricks and mortar” element to the War on Poverty—something Johnson had wanted from the beginning. Model Cities was not “community action,” but “community development.” It introduced massive amounts of federal aid to the most economically distressed urban centers, where city officials could use Washington’s money to rebuild ghettos and provide comprehensive social services. Although city leaders had to consult with residents during the planning and implementation of Model Cities projects, local government had the final say: the grants belonged to city hall. In less than two years anti-CAP forces in Washington had succeeded at convincing the Johnson administration to pull back on resident control and let the mayors take charge.

The Model Cities legislation was a scaled-back version of an earlier proposal, the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Program, which differed in two respects from the bill that finally倒入 Congress. “Demonstration Cities” would have reached more than one hundred American cities, large and small, while the Model Cities authorization gave the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) enough money for grants to about fifty communities nationwide. The more important distinction, however, was race policy. Owing to enormous congressional resistance to a proposed requirement that Demonstration Cities public-housing units be racially integrated, the amended Model Cities plan included no such mandate. Unsurprisingly, some Model Cities housing projects were blocked later when community organizations, backed by the NAACP and the Urban League, sued city governments and HUD under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Their charge was that the Model Cities Program was racially discriminatory. It is altogether ironic, yet telling, that the only means of redress against discriminatory housing practices in the early days of federally financed community development lay with the federal courts and the doctrine of strict scrutiny. Equally ironic, perhaps, is that an important source of legal support for housing discrimination complaints was OEO’s Legal Services Program.

Although War on Poverty administration eventually called upon a complex arrangement of about eighty public agencies as the number of antipoverty programs and services grew, the original design involved a new department with direct access to the president—the OEO—and the local CAPs. When Food Stamps, Model Cities, and Income Maintenance were added to the mix, the bureaucratic dimensions of the War on Poverty changed. Indeed, as the reach of the antipoverty campaign increased, the risk of winning a few battles at the expense of the war also increased. The risk was real not because of cost but rather because the War on Poverty transformed and diversified in ways that brought politically conservative, racist, and patriarchal forces together in a counterraassault under the banner of “Welfare Reform.” Their strategy was to shore up faith in capitalism and invoke the trademark of American self-consciousness, “exceptionalism.” Their ammunition was morality, money, and middle-class values. What had been a moderately palatable “hand up” for the nation’s “underprivileged” in 1964 became a “hand-out” for “the undeserving poor” in the mid 1980s. Americans were accustomed to the concepts of an upper class, a middle class, and a lower class. By 1982, America had an underclass.

Throughout the 1960s and until the mid 1970s, there were indicators that the quality of life for lower-income Americans had begun to inch upward. In several antipoverty arenas—housing, health services, social services, educational, and economic opportunities—the statistics looked cautiously promising. Medicaid and Medicare caused enormous declines in the percentage of poor Americans who had never seen a physician for a routine medical examination; the infant mortality rate dropped by more than one third between 1965 and 1972; and life expectancy among the poor rose dramatically in the same period. Despite fraud, discrimination; and other problems in federal housing programs, the reality is that by 1976 America had reached a record low for the proportion of families living in overcrowded or substandard housing units. Food Stamps and other federal nutrition programs all but eliminated hunger, which in 1960 had been a serious national problem especially, but not exclusively, in rural areas.

A combination of declining federal resources (attributable in part to Vietnam); Richard M. Nixon’s dismantling of OEO; the conversion of many antipoverty programs to federally funded, state-run public service systems; and the virtual gutting of CAPs contributed to the collapse of the War on Poverty. There were other problems, however. The 1970s decline in manufacturing increased overall joblessness, particularly among workers with limited employment skills, and caused a number of small-business closures as well. In fact, a fundamental restructuring of the U.S. economy was underway. As the transformation continued during the 1980s, it became clear that the American workplace and its workforce were at fundamental odds.

Working-class people who had spent most of their adult lives in a particular industry found themselves unemployable. High-tech industrial growth created jobs, but they required new, specialized skills. Service jobs swelled during the same period, but they paid poorly. As the 1970s progressed, not only did America retain its traditional
poverty base of minorities and women, but it also gained dislocated workers. The scope of poverty had grown to overwhelming proportions by 1980. Incredibly, the federal government’s response was to reduce overall assistance spending, blame the “welfare state” for America’s economic woes, and call for a return to traditional (some would say, “antiquated”) solutions to social needs: private charitable relief, the business community, churches, and other nonpublic institutions. Welfare had made life too easy, the arguments went, as evidenced by the steady rise in single-parent households on AFDC since the War on Poverty initiatives materialized in the 1960s.

In short, President Ronald Reagan and the far-right coalitions he represented laid the blame on Johnson’s doorstep. Known causes of poverty among women (especially, but not only, black women)—occupational segregation, limited skills, the shortage and cost of quality day care, domestic violence, divorce, displaced homemakers, and unequal pay for equal work—were submerged beneath the rhetoric of welfare reform. Further, the competition for a shrinking pool of jobs forced many Americans to work longer hours at distant locations, often for considerably less than they had made before. As Michael B. Katz expresses in his book In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America (1986):

In the late 1960’s, the federal government expanded social welfare primarily to insure social order and mobilize the votes of black Americans; in the 1980’s, another of welfare’s historic goals—the regulation of the labor market—and an attempt to mobilize political support among affluent and middle-income voters combined to fuel a war on poverty.

Hindsight permits us to see common cultural roots in a set of 1960s events that seemed almost unrelated at the time. The War on Poverty, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, uneasiness-turned-resistance against the Vietnam War, urban race riots, protests and liberation movements, and the height of the Cold War all occurred contemporaneously. The leftist-liberal-conservative ideological confrontations that germinated in the early 1900s and rekindled during the 1930s were rekindled at the close of the 1950s. These confrontations, reenacted under 1960 circumstances, played out in a wide political pendulum swing that put a liberal Irish Catholic Democrat with an engaging smile in the White House, only to replace him with a scowling, impersonal, conservative Republican by the end of the decade (and a far-to-the-right candidate one decade thereafter). The country Nixon inherited in January 1969 differed significantly from the one that narrowly elected Kennedy nine years earlier. By the time Watergate forced Nixon to resign in 1974, the War on Poverty was an all but abandoned federal agenda, put aside for more pressing international problems that fell to presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter to resolve.

When welfare reform became a major campaign issue in 1996, the conservative Heritage Foundation was probably correct when it estimated total War on Poverty spending at $5.4 trillion. Yet, by ascribing War on Poverty failures to government-sponsored “behavioral poverty,” mainly unwed welfare mothers who taught their children bad morals by example and became grandmothers to the next generation’s poor, the Heritage Foundation took an indefensible leap of faith. It committed what William Ryan recognized as “blaming the victim” nearly thirty years ago.

Indeed, “blaming the victim” served as the rallying call for partisans committed to an anti-welfare issue network. Right-wing political leaders joined forces with religious organizations that opposed aid to single parents on moral grounds, leading the Heritage Foundation to claim that “illegitimacy is a social catastrophe.” Similarly, Libertarian congressional candidate Ken Bisson blamed the victims in 1996 by concluding: “We give handouts to single mothers, we get more single mothers. We give a blank check for Medicaid recipients. Medicaid spending explodes.” When Republican allies of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich endorsed the “Contract with America” manifesto in 1994, they agreed to enact laws in order to change “destructive social behavior” among welfare recipients and reverse the “illegitimacy, crime, illiteracy and more poverty” that Johnson’s Great Society initiatives had spawned. As one caught up in the groundswell of “blaming the victim,” Gingrich chose a revealing name for the welfare reform legislation he promised to put through once Republicans regained control of Congress: The Personal Responsibility Act.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of welfare reform, the U.S. government did not “cause” poverty, illegitimacy, idleness, or an underclass. Rather, “in poverty discourse, moral assessments have nearly always overlain pragmatic distinctions. The issue becomes not only who can fend for themselves without aid, but . . . whose behavior and character entitle them to the resources of others.” Johnson’s concept, molded after the theories of Cloward, Harrington and others, was to empower America’s poor, not to blame them. The proliferation of low-income advocacy organizations during the
past thirty years attests in part to the success of Johnson's efforts, yet he stopped short of creating sustainable economic opportunities because he thought the poverty problem could be solved by equalizing access to political, educational, and social institutions rather than by fundamentally restructuring the nation's economic system. The War on Poverty should be criticized not for what it did accomplish, but for failing to address the one measure that lifts people from poverty by giving them the means to earn a living: jobs.

—JUDITH A. BARRETT, DUXBURY, MASSACHUSETTS

References

Ken Auletta, The Underclass (New York: Random House, 1982);
Liva Baker, Miranda: Crime, Law, and Politics (New York: Atheneum, 1983);
Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin, Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960);
Sara Evans, Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Knopf, 1979);
David Farber, The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994);
John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958);
Herbert J. Gans, The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy (New York: BasicBooks, 1995);
Michael L. Gillette, Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History (New York: Twayne, 1996);
Newt Gingrich, Contract with America (New York: Random House, 1994);
Michael Harrington, The Other America; Poverty in the United States (New York: Macmillan, 1962);
Michael B. Katz, In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America (New York: BasicBooks, 1986);
Katz, The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare (New York: Pantheon, 1989);
Sar A. Levitan, The Great Society's Poor Law: A New Approach to Poverty (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969);
Peter Marris and Martin Rein, Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the United States (New York: Atherton, 1967);
Daniel P. Moynihan, Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty (New York: Free Press, 1969);
James T. Patterson, America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900–1980 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981);
Marc Pilisuk and Phyllis Pilisuk, eds., How We Lost the War on Poverty (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1973);
Frances Fox Piven and Frances Fox Cloward, The Breaking of the American Social Compact (New York: New Press, 1997);
Piven and Cloward, Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare (New York: Vintage, 1971);
Rector and William F. Lauber, America's Failed $5.4 Trillion Dollar War on Poverty (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1995);
William Ryan, Blaming the Victim (New York: Vintage, 1971);