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When President Lyndon Baines Johnson declared “an unconditional war on poverty” 51 years ago in his State of the Union Address, it marked the first and last time the federal government launched an all-out attack to eliminate poverty in this country. Sadly, Johnson turned out to be the only president in our history to be a strong, forceful advocate for poor and disadvantaged people.

Prior to the early sixties, responsibility for dealing with poverty was left to the states and local governments, neither of which devoted more than a modicum of resources and concern to the issue. Only when Michael Harrington wrote his celebrated book, The Other America in 1962, revealing the massive extent of poverty in both urban and rural America (estimated at between 20-25%), did the American public and political leaders awaken to the pervasive problem of poor people in the U.S.

Some of the groundwork for the Johnson anti-poverty programs was built by community organizing groups in the 1950s, led by organizers like Saul Alinsky and Fred Ross. The Ford Foundation's Gray Areas program that targeted five cities and Mobilization for Youth on the lower east side of New York city also featured prototypes of community action and advocacy that characterized much of the early war on poverty.

President Johnson and his planners saw the need for a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction, not just the provision of a few scattered services. Medicare and Medicaid, the introduction of food stamps, the expansion of social security benefits and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts accompanied the administration's flagship program in the war on poverty, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), run out of the White House.

With a starting budget of \$1 billion, OEO created a large number of new programs, projects and services, many of which still exist today. These initiatives—Head Start, the Job Corps, community health centers, community development corporations, Volunteers in Service to America (Vista), legal services and community action agencies—continue to provide vital assistance to millions of people in need throughout the country.

Other projects like the Neighborhood Youth Corps, summer youth programs, manpower training programs, senior health centers and family planning clinics were eventually discontinued but later picked up in some form by other agencies, both federal and state. A robust research and demonstration division at OEO tested new ideas and projects, resulting in such efforts as early computer programs, the creation of a Navajo community college and model comprehensive community service centers.

But by far the most controversial, creative and politically sensitive part of Johnson's War on Poverty was the creation of community action agencies (CAAs), local organizations (mostly

nonprofit) with independent boards and budgets that provided services and advocacy help to poor residents of cities, rural areas and Indian reservations. State anti-poverty offices were also established to help coordinate and supplement the work of CAAs.

The premise of community action was that local residents, especially the poor and other disadvantaged people, had to have the tools and power to play an active role in shaping and administering programs and services in their own communities. This concept, then referred to as maximum feasible participation, called for low-income people to be heavily represented on CAA boards as well as on boards of social service agencies. This was a revolutionary idea at the time that rankled many politicians, government officials and establishment citizens. In many counties and small cities, CAA budgets often exceeded those of government jurisdictions, creating added tensions, resentment and ill will.

In a little over a year, the Office of Economic Opportunity established well over 1200 community action agencies, hired tens of thousands of people and created a huge number of programs to help poor and minority residents who had been ignored by the authorities and society in general. In many, if not most, jurisdictions, CAAs became either the lone or strongest advocate for poor people. Many civic institutions were upset by this shift in the balance of power at the local level, unused to hearing strong voices from what Harrington had called the “invisible poor”.

All these activities were accomplished with a first year’s budget of only a little over \$300 million. Years later, ironically, critics of the OEO programs claimed the federal government had simply thrown money away on these programs that turned out, in retrospect, to be a bargain investment.

Not surprisingly, the new community action initiatives that generated such apprehension and turmoil among local governments were bound to create a severe political backlash. By 1967, Congress mandated changes in the community action program. Locally elected officials were required to designate a CAA as the official agency in the area before the latter could collect federal funds. And their boards had to have broad representation: one-third government officials or representatives appointed by them; one-third members of the private sector, including nonprofits; and one-third representatives from low-income communities. While this new CAA structure somewhat dampened the ardor of community action advocacy, the agencies continued to deliver essential services to their poor constituents. Surprisingly, most of the CAAs that existed in 1968 survive today. In many rural areas, they continue to be the only organizations that advocate for poor people.

While the national budget for community action increased slightly during the initial years, it never reached a level that would have enabled the program to meet the momentum it had created, or even keep up with inflation. Moreover, Sargent Shriver, the OEO director, was never comfortable with community action, preferring to focus his attention on safe programs like Head Start and Job Corps. Community action was left to fend for itself.

Johnson's anti-poverty program, despite some of its weaknesses, had an enormous impact on the country. As the initiative started in 1964, the poverty rate hovered slightly over 19%; by 1973 the rate had fallen to about 11%. Social Security increases lifted 50% of senior citizens above the poverty line.

The fact that OEO was located in the White House gave the programs, and the urgent need to address the problems of poverty, a national focus and drive. The issue thus became a priority for both politicians and our civil society. That our President and federal government were actually calling on poor citizens to organize and speak out to help themselves legitimated the notion of community organizing and the sharing of power. The concept of citizen participation, now commonly accepted, was cradled in community action and the advocacy of the White House, for which neither has received sufficient credit.

It marked a high point in our nation's struggle to overcome inequality, one that was cut short by the President's slow political disenchantment with the program and his distraction by the war in Vietnam.

Community action, more than any other stimulus in the 1960s and 1970s, or since, can take credit for creating tens of thousands of nonprofit organizations—community organizing groups, social service institutions, economic development organizations and advocacy coalitions—to service new programs and projects. These groups placed low-income people on their boards, as well as hiring many employees previously ignored by conventional employers.

Many of today's national, regional and local nonprofits can trace their origin, either directly or indirectly, to the original OEO programs. The National Council of La Raza, the Center for Community Change, the Legal Services Corporation, many native American groups, the Grantsmanship Center, the National Puerto Rican Coalition and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives are among those which grew out of these programs. State anti-poverty offices were also responsible for greatly expanding new initiatives and nonprofits within their states.

What was probably the most important, astonishing and, yet unheralded, product of the OEO initiatives was the creation of the most effective leadership program in American history. In a two decade span, hundreds of thousands of poor blacks, whites, Latinos, and Native Americans were employed in positions from which they were previously shut out and given opportunities to grow and enter the mainstream of the American economy. Several beneficiaries like Ron Dellums in California, Parren Mitchell in Maryland and Esteban Torres in California became Congressmen. Many others won elective office as mayors, judges and state legislators. Others became school superintendents, government agency heads and nonprofit leaders. Low-income whites in Appalachia rose to prominence throughout the area, upsetting the stranglehold of the region's dominant class.

In the early seventies, Mayor Hatcher of Gary, Indiana, convened a national meeting of over 2,000 black leaders from all over the country. Over 90% of the attendees were graduates of the Johnson anti-poverty programs. Had similar conventions of Latino and Native American leaders

been held, we would have seen the same results.... a pervasive influence that is still being felt today.

Darren Walker, the new head of the Ford Foundation, was given his first opportunities at an early age through the Head Start program and working at a community development corporation in New York City. The distinguished ex-president of the National Council of La Raza, Raul Yzaguirre, was an employee at the Office of Economic Opportunity. The former Chief of the Navajo nation served as a legal services officer for his tribe. And the list could go on endlessly. It is a remarkable tribute to the impact of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty. People of color and marginalized whites for the first time were given the chance to succeed or fail. Little documented or talked about, it deserves to be recognized as the crown jewel of the Johnson anti-poverty initiatives.

Yet conservatives and some Democrats have criticized the OEO programs for a number of reasons. They claim that, despite all the efforts and years, we still have massive poverty, the rate continuing to hover at around 15% of the population. They further argue that many of the programs have created dependent poor people, not independent workers, who rely on public services and the federal government. Greater emphasis, they add, should be given to self-help strategies, personal counselling on matters of teen pregnancies and family retention and on work requirements for women with children. Their stress on jobs, of course, seems more rhetorical than substantive, since most conservatives and Republicans seem unwilling to support public job creation in the absence of the private sector's inability to produce sufficient jobs for those in poverty.

Several major weaknesses, however, did seriously undermine OEO-managed anti-poverty programs. Perhaps the most grievous was their much too narrow definition of poverty. That definition set the eligibility qualification for inclusion in the programs at such a low level that it excluded millions of low-income, white working class people, thereby creating a serious division between many whites and people of color. For many whites, community action became known as a minority only program. And this perception continues to linger in some quarters.

The second major weakness of the programs was the failure by OEO officials to hold many CAA's and other OEO-funded programs accountable. Community action agencies in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and Memphis were corrupt and unaccountable, serving the political needs of their Democratic mayors. Johnson and his aides set a double standard for accountability, one for his favored Democratic mayors and another for the rest of the jurisdictions. The Administration's willingness to tolerate the shenanigans of Democratic politicians did a great deal to undermine the integrity of community action.

The failure of the President and the Congress to provide adequate funding for the programs was the third weakness in the OEO effort. President Johnson grew tired of the political attacks against the programs, and the departure of Sargent Shriver from the agency left it leaderless and even more vulnerable to criticism. Without stern defenders, OEO continued to function, but with less energy and vision. Under Republican administrations, it was transformed into the Community

Services Administration, removed from the White House and, ultimately, reduced to a block grant program under the Health and Human Services Administration.

Despite the qualms of politicians and locally elected officials, the OEO programs did have a major, positive influence on the structure and activities of state and local governments. They succeeded in helping transform these entities into more functional jurisdictions. County governments became stronger, developed larger budgets, began to deliver their own social and educational services, elected more enlightened legislators and executives and took a much greater interest in the plight of their poor residents. Their employees increasingly began to reflect the diversity of their communities. State governments were also motivated to change, if only to respond more adequately to the pressures and demands of an activist federal government.

Most of the programs created in the 1960s by OEO, still exist, and many, for the most part, are thriving. Even community action agencies that over time have been muted by politics and a shortage of funds still provide essential services to low-income communities. In many rural areas they remain the only major advocates for poor people. More than 900 community action agencies have survived, many of them with large budgets that sustain nonprofit housing programs and economic development projects.

What is surprising is the number of community action agency directors and employees who are still working in the programs after 25, 35 and even 50 years. Their resiliency is a testimony to the vision and zeal that OEO inspired, and, to many, still does. As Rick Cohen noted in an article about the program's 50th anniversary, "The graduates of the War on Poverty aren't giving up".

The Three Rivers Community Action Agency, for example, is a \$10.5 million nonprofit that serves 20 counties in Minnesota and runs a wide variety of programs, ranging from Head Start, to energy assistance, to homeless services, to meal deliveries. It has built 540 units of low cost housing and even operates a 40-fleet public bus system.

Others like the Community Action Partnership in St. Luis, Obispo County in California, and the Fulton Atlanta Community Action Authority in Atlanta not only run more traditional anti-poverty programs but are also heavily involved in entrepreneurial activities, creating small businesses and micro-lending opportunities.

Because public funding has been so drastically reduced, many CAAs have become adept at raising private sector money, trying to bring their organizations more attuned to modern conditions. While the current Administration launched its Social Innovation Fund to expand the number of successful nonprofits and increase foundation giving—a program that by all accounts has been a dismal failure—it nevertheless proposed to cut the Community Services Block Grant that helps finance community action agencies. Ironically, we now have a Democratic president refusing to support even unenthusiastically what has been a pillar of the Johnson War on Poverty.

During the 1960s and 1970s poverty was on the public's radar screen, part of the national political agenda. Since those days, a growing conservatism has muted the importance of the

issue. Budget and tax cuts reduced the amount of federal money available for discretionary programs, and a series of wars from Vietnam, to Korea, to Afghanistan and Iraq siphoned off much of the federal treasury. The social movements like Welfare Rights, tenants' rights and public housing residents organizations slowly withered away—lacking funds—and, with them, the pressure they had placed on politicians and legislators at the grassroots level for attention and more money for social change. The loss of influence by labor unions, as well as the rise of corporate power, added to the weakening of the social safety net. The strong constituency that had pushed for and sustained anti-poverty programs lost its strength.

The lack of Presidential leadership did not help. After Johnson, no president has seemed willing to reignite the torch that had lighted the OEO programs. Yet, President Nixon surprisingly proved to be a “big government” believer—expanding the food stamp program, indexing social security for inflation, passing the Supplemental Security Program for disabled Americans, continuing most of the Johnson programs and introducing a welfare reform measure that, had it been passed, would have provided minimum payments to mothers and children in need, much more generous than the welfare reform measure passed by the Clinton administration.

Presidents Clinton and Obama focused the country's attention on the middle class and its economic difficulties and struggles. Absent in their administrations was any serious concern about the plight of the poor. A reflection of this approach was the fact that poverty was only mentioned once in all the State of the Union speeches they gave over a 14-year period. Between the two Democrats and George W. Bush, the social safety net that had helped protect the poor for decades, was slowly, but steadily, shredded. Even the food stamp program and unemployment benefits succumbed recently to the budget axe of Congress without much of a fight from the current administration.

Over the past couple of decades nonprofit attitudes toward poverty issues has mirrored the shifting political agendas. Back in the 1980's and 1990's, nonprofits joined together to fight proposed cuts in social safety net programs. When in the late 1970's President Ford tried to shut down almost all of the Johnson-era anti-poverty programs, a grand coalition of social service, health, education, consumer and grassroots organizations, as well as unions, successfully fought this threat to poor people. Chaired by the League of Women Voters, the coalition mobilized tens of thousands of their members in political districts throughout the country, sufficient to convince the Congress that the President's proposals were not justified.

In those days it was common for nonprofits of all sizes and shapes to have poverty as one of its highest program priorities. Strong middle class organizations like the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the Consumer Federation and women's church groups joined forces with low-income and grassroots organizations to fight on poor and minority people's issues. These partnerships commanded the attention and respect of politicians.

As the political climate changed and presidents and their parties lost their enthusiasm and appetite for the plight of the poor, so did the nonprofit community. The old coalitions between established, middle class organizations and their low-income, grassroots counterparts gradually

fell apart. Nonprofits on the whole appear to have abandoned their program and advocacy priorities focused on poverty issues.

This was evident recently when very few nonprofits were willing to rush to the defense of the food stamp program which was under massive attack by the Congress and only lightly defended by the current administration.

Occasionally, some measures do stir the interest of and receive strong support from nonprofits. The Affordable Care Act (Obama care) was one such instance. The collective action of many nonprofits and several foundations did help push the legislation over the top. Yet this is a modern-day anomaly.

Most nonprofits continue to remain satisfied with their narrow agendas, whether related to the environment, education, reproductive rights or gay marriage. They show little concern about the ravages brought on the country by income inequality, homelessness, hunger and unemployment. Their executives are rewarded by their boards only for the work they do for the organization's narrow agendas, not on broader anti-poverty work or for their involvement in coalitions.

In its early days, for example, Independent Sector, a national coalition then of some 1000 of the largest nonprofit and donors, was involved in some of the federal budget fights and was an advocate for greater support for poor peoples' programs. Today, much smaller, it has thrown much of its energy into the fight to maintain the charitable deduction at its current level, even though a deduction in the rate might produce additional revenue for health programs for the poor. The same is true for the National Council of Nonprofits which, earlier on, placed much of its focus on the poor, but now focuses on the charitable deduction and government contracts. And this shift in priorities has characterized many other nonprofits. The indifference of political leadership, of course, has reinforced the negligence of these nonprofits

The fiftieth anniversary of the Johnson poverty programs should have been a celebratory event. Instead, it served as a stark reminder of how much we have retreated from the heady days of the 1960s. The official poverty rate today is around 15%, only 4% lower than it was in 1965. The rate for child poverty remains at approximately 20%. The inequality gap in wealth and income has grown dangerously large, greater than that of any other developed country. And, according to a recently released report by the Southern Education Foundation, 51% of all children attending public schools are eligible for subsidized lunches, indicating that most of them come from low-income families.

We might have expected an outpouring of studies and books on the occasion of the 50th anniversary, but there was but a trickle of publications and only one serious academic work. Few university graduate students, not to mention undergraduates, have ever heard or read anything about the programs and are unaware of their impact. They are ignorant of the vast leadership development program that diversified and strengthened our professions and working class. Our high schools have done little to inform them of this important phase of recent American history.

Have we as a nation relegated our poor and marginalized inhabitants to a permanent underclass? Will our “invisible poor” once again regain visibility? Can our political and nonprofit leadership once again light the spark to renew the movement to eliminate poverty?

There are some hopeful signs that a renewal of a national anti-poverty campaign is possible. Some national nonprofits like the Center for Community Change, the Food Research and Action Center, Feeding America, then National Council of La Raza and a variety of church groups are ramping up their activities, joined by a resurgence of interest in poverty on the part of middle class organizations like the League of Women Voters and the National Association of University Women, as well as some large foundations like Ford. Grassroots community organizing and advocacy groups seem to be multiplying, providing some ground cover to what could become a new national initiative.

What is currently lacking is the political leadership that gave the 1960s efforts such a fillip. Do the two political parties have candidates that might initiate a new poverty program should they win in 2016? Only time will tell. But very recent statements by several presidential candidates that poverty needs to receive priority national attention gives us some hope that major changes may be in the offing.

In the meantime, it is an embarrassment to our country that our political system and our nonprofit organizations are so little concerned about economic inequity and social justice. How did our federal government, the Congress and our nonprofit community lose their sense of decency? Can they once again be aroused not only to do the right thing but to address the problem of poverty, an issue that prevents us from tapping into the enormous resources and potential that our diverse population offers. The national self-interest requires nothing less



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