

## Did the United States Lose the War on Poverty?

Lyndon Baines Johnson had a vision for America. During the 1964 Presidential campaign, he often spoke about it. He envisioned an America "where no child will go unfed and no youngster will go unschooled; where every child has a good teacher and every teacher has good pay, and both have good classrooms; where every human being has dignity and every worker has a job..." Johnson called his vision the Great Society, and he committed his administration to waging a "war on poverty."

To combat poverty, the federal government raised the minimum wage and enacted a battery of programs to train poorer Americans for better jobs. To assure adequate housing, the government attacked urban blight, began a program of rent subsidies, and set up a cabinet-level Department of Housing and Urban Development. To promote education, the federal government set up a system of college loans. To address the nation's health needs, the federal government enacted Medicaid, to pay for the medical expenses of the poor, and Medicare, extending medical insurance to older Americans under the Social Security System.

When Lyndon Johnson left the presidency in 1969, he left behind the legacy of a transformed federal government. At the end of the Eisenhower presidency in 1961, there were only 45 domestic social programs. By 1969 the number had climbed to 435. Federal social spending, excluding Social Security, rose from \$9.9 billion in 1960 to \$25.6 billion in 1968. Johnson's "war on poverty" represented the broadest attack Americans had ever waged on the special problems facing poor and disadvantaged families. It declared decisively that the problems of the poor—problems of housing, income, employment, and health—were ultimately, a federal responsibility.

When Johnson announced his Great Society program in 1964, he

promised to reduce poverty, alleviate hunger and malnutrition, expand community medical care, provide adequate housing, and enhance the employability of the poor. Did he keep his promise?

When President Johnson came to office 22 percent of the nation's families lived in poverty, down from 30 percent in 1950. The nation's largest programs to assist the poor—Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Social Security, and Food Stamps—provided meager benefits to only a small proportion of the country's impoverished population. AFDC paid just \$388 a month in 1980 dollars to a family of four. Social Security payments averaged just \$184 a month in 1980 dollars, and food stamps reached just two percent of the nation's poor. Medicare and Medicaid did not exist. Thirty- three million poor people competed for just 600,000 public housing units.

When Johnson left office, the official poverty rate had fallen from 22 percent in 1960 to 13 percent, which is where the poverty rate remains today. AFDC payments had risen to \$577 in 1980 dollars. Infant mortality among the poor, which had barely declined between 1950 and 1965, fell by one-third in the decade after 1965 as a result of the expansion of federal medical and nutritional programs. Before the implementation of Medicaid and Medicare, twenty percent of the poor had never been examined by a physician. When Johnson retired as president the figure had been cut to eight percent. The proportion of families living in substandard housing—that is, housing lacking indoor plumbing—also declined steeply, from twenty percent in 1960 to eleven percent a decade later.

Despite these gains, Johnson's critics charge that "in the war on poverty, poverty won." Political conservatives argued that public assistance, food subsidies, health programs, and child care programs weakened poorer families. President Ronald Reagan voiced a common conservative viewpoint when he declared, "There is no question that many well-intentioned Great Society-

type programs contributed to family breakups, welfare dependency, and a large increase in births out of wedlock."

To support their arguments, conservatives cite a close chronological connection between increased government welfare expenditures and dramatic increases in female-headed households and illegitimacy among the poor. Back in 1959, just ten percent of low-income Americans lived in a single-parent household. By 1980, the figure had climbed to 44 percent. At the same time the number of illegitimate births among the poor grew substantially. Had the number of single-parent families remained at the 1970 level, the number of poor families in 1980 would have been 32 percent lower than it was.

Did the expansion of state services contribute to rising rates of illegitimacy and single parenthood? The answer to this question remains in dispute. On the one hand, there is no empirical evidence that there is a correlation between the levels of welfare payments the number of children in single parent families. Other studies have shown that increases in the wages of the poor produce a sharp drop in female-headed households—suggesting that it is low wages and unstable jobs, and not the level of welfare payments that are the major contributors to family instability.

Some of the apparent deterioration in poor families is illusory. If female-headed families made up a growing proportion of the poor, this partly reflected a sharp reduction in poverty among other groups. One of the consequences of the Great Society was to dramatically alter the profile of the poor. Increases in Social Security payments sharply reduced the incidence of poverty among the elderly. The Supplemental Social Security program introduced in 1973 greatly reduced poverty among the disabled. As a result of reductions in poverty among the elderly and disabled and increases in the number of single parent, female headed households, poverty has been increasingly feminized.

And yet, if the war on poverty accomplished more than its critics charged, there can be little doubt that the Johnson administration failed to persuade Americans that it had been successful.

Beginning with the Presidential election of 1968, the Republican Party won five of six elections and controlled the White House for sixteen of twenty years. Why?

A 1969 book entitled *The Emerging Republican Majority* by political commentator Kevin Phillips offered an answer. He claimed that the Great Society provoked an angry reaction among large segments of the white working class and middle class. Issues of race, such as affirmative action, school busing, residential integration, and racial preferences in job selection and government contracting—along with a reaction against the antiwar movement, cultural permissiveness, crime, cutbacks in local control of schools and neighborhoods, and liberal Supreme Court decisions on subjects ranging from pornography to the rights of criminal defendants, Phillips argued, had fractured the political coalition that had arisen during the Great Depression of the 1930s.