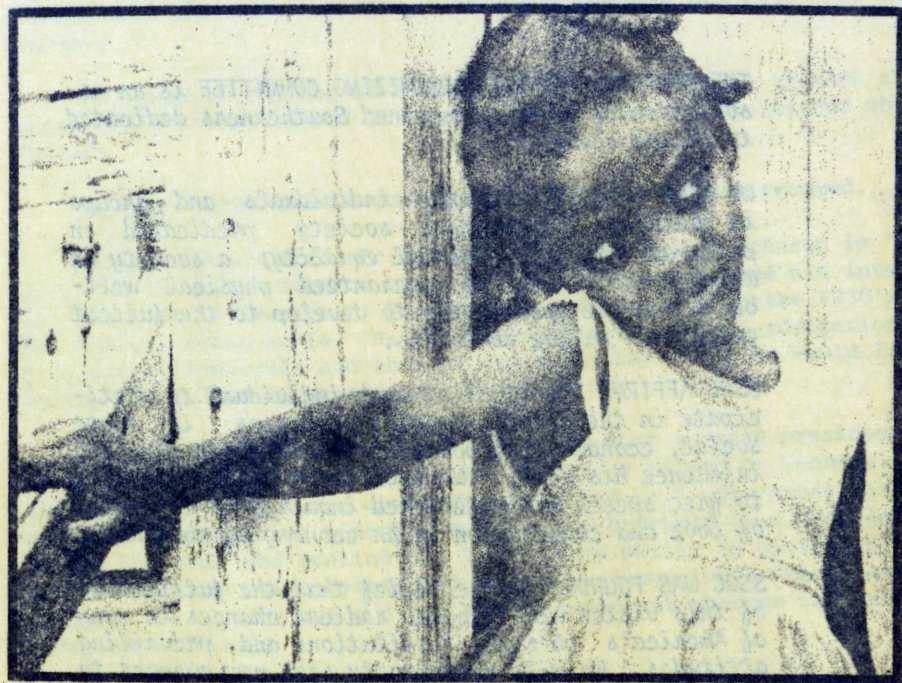




The Peace Called War



Lyndon Johnson's Poverty Program

by

David Nolan

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THE PEACE CALLED WAR:
Lyndon Johnson's Poverty Program

In 1964, when Lyndon Johnson was playing liberal and posing as a peace candidate, he called his goal "The Great Society" and outlined several of its component parts. But as the work of the Great Defoliator became more and more demanding, the Great Society programs went out the window.

To speak of the War on Poverty at this time may be to kick a dead horse, but for the record we might discuss some of the reasons why it failed.

We must first examine the context in which it was created.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has written that Lyndon Johnson is "compelled by a malign fate to struggle with problems beyond his intellectual interest or control." Johnson entered politics in the 1930's as a New Dealer, Texas-style. He has repeatedly voiced his admiration for Franklin D. Roosevelt and thus it can be assumed that he would like to follow FDR's path to greatness.

To quote Schlesinger again, "he knows that a great president must do great things, but unlike the Roosevelts or Wilson or Kennedy, he does not know what those great things should be." So rather than develop great new ideas himself, Johnson has borrowed from the ideology of the New Deal and applied his legislative skills to getting bills passed that are thirty years old in their conception. These laws, tailored to another age and not taking important changes into account, have not sufficed.

The Office of Economic Opportunity, the bureaucratic embodiment of the War on Poverty, then, suffers from problems of conception and scope as well as the publicized failures in implementation.

Conception

The poverty program is designed to fit people into a society that is seen as basically good--whose only fault is that it does not yet extend its benefits to everyone. Working from this basic assumption of superiority, the goal is to change people rather than society in a sort of mass psychoanalytical approach. It has no provision for giving people money directly, but rather concentrates on teaching them skills, which it is assumed will make them qualified for existing jobs. Or it tries to make the conditions of poverty more liveable by such devices as recreation centers.

One of the tragedies of the program is that people who have been retrained have not been able to find jobs, or else are only able to find marginal jobs that will no longer exist in five years because of automation. Are we then to force people to undergo retraining every five years? It is a truism that businesses are reluctant to hire

people over 40 or 45 anyway, so then what do we do?

Poverty vs. Powerlessness

In order to understand OEO, we must differentiate between the problems of poverty and the problems of powerlessness. As the law was written, providing for "maximum feasible participation of the poor", it could conceivably affect the latter, and to the extent they are related, the former as well. This, however, is working on a result rather than a cause of poverty. Even so, it is possible that this would be better than nothing.

Think, for instance, of a small Southern town, divided 50-50 racially, where the whites own all the businesses, most of the land, and hold all of the public offices. If an OEO community action program were set up in this town, controlled by the poor (most, if not all, of whom would be Negro because of the refusal of whites to participate), it could in many instances be a counter-government, financed by the federal government, and would certainly be a source of power to the poor. If white banks refused to loan Negroes the capital to set up businesses, this could be done through the poverty program. If the white school board refused to allow the teaching of Negro history, a poverty program could be set up to teach it to adults and children. If Negroes constantly caught the short end of white justice in the courts because of inadequate legal aid, the poverty program could provide sympathetic legal assistance for them. Negroes could set up cooperatives and credit unions with poverty program financing as a means of offsetting white economic control.

But these possible radical implications of the poverty program did not escape the attention of white Southerners bent on preserving their privileges. The poverty program could equally be used to preserve the status quo, to further consolidate white power, and to provide tremendous profits, direct and indirect, to white businessmen. It all depended on who controlled the poverty program. Money might be used to start a Negro cooperative or credit union, or it might be used to build a community center on land owned by a white man, with building materials from a local white firm, providing jobs for local whites.

Implementation

It is a sad commentary that given these alternatives, the Office of Economic Opportunity, under political pressure, decided to discard the provision for "maximum feasible participation of the poor" and permit local poverty programs to be run by whites who profited from poverty by owning slums, underpaying workers, gouging debtors, and the like. This is the built-in contradiction of the War on Poverty.

The poverty program in Brunswick County, Virginia is an example. Brunswick County is 60% Negro. 80% of the Negroes and 40% of the whites earn less than the government's poverty level of \$3,000. a year.

By any standards, the poverty program should have been run by Negroes and by those earning less than \$3,000. a year. However, when Brunswick Community Action, Inc. was set up, 19 of the directors were white. Only 11 were Negro and none earned less than \$3,000. a year. The process of democracy was satisfied by having the all-white County Board of Supervisors appoint the Negro representatives in BCA, with predictable results.

Petitions with over 500 names were sent to Washington to protest this situation, and an OEO investigator came to Brunswick County. He talked first with the whites, and then, rather than consult the Negroes, he went to a white civil rights worker to find out the opinion of the Negro community. The man from OEO said that the racial balance in BCA could not be changed because then the whites would refuse to participate. When the "maximum feasible participation of the poor" section of the law was brought up, he said that he considered 1 or 2 (out of 30) to be "strong minority group representation." When asked if he considered whites to be a minority group in Brunswick County (since they form only 40% of the population), the investigator became flustered and left.

It was obvious from that point on that OEO was not concerned to see a meaningful poverty program in Brunswick County. It was learned that Barbara Guss, an OEO employee in Washington, was feeding the names of Negro protestors to the whites who controlled BCA. Then Rev. Grover Jenkins, the white minister who was chairman of BCA, and a man who hardly enjoyed a sterling reputation, was appointed a high state official of OEO. Compromises which were later made in BCA were in the direction of giving Negroes more token representation but never control of the program as they should have had.

CDGM

Developments with the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) --that state's Head Start program--are another example. CDGM was organized by SNCC workers and was recognized as one of the most effective programs in the country in terms of involving the poor in the poverty program. But this was severely frowned upon by Senators Stennis and Eastland (whose power, after all, rests on the dis-involvement of the poor, especially the black poor, in Mississippi politics) and they promised to raise havoc with congressional appropriations if CDGM was not stopped. What was OEO's response? Did they defend this highly successful program?

An article in the New York Times on October 4, 1966 gives a clue to OEO's actions:

Clarence C. Ferguson, Dean of the Howard University Law School, has complained to Sargent Shriver, dir-

ector of the poverty agency, that some of his students, working as summer employees of the agency, had been "misused" in connection with the Mississippi investigation.

Several of these students reported that they had been instructed to disguise themselves in their "movement clothes"--dress that would identify them with a civil rights organization--and find derogatory information about CDGM.

The subsequent renewal of the CDGM grant was the result of pressure from its supporters, including Walter Reuther's Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, and the National Council of Churches. Without these powerful supporters, CDGM would have been crushed by the not-so-conscientious poverty warriors of OEO.

The Other War

Those who are students today have lived all their lives in the Cold War. This is the period where the politics of fear developed the balance of terror, where men like Herman Kahn calmly calculate the difference between 40 million deaths and 80 million deaths, where over half the national budget goes for "defense", and where we live in a permanent war economy. Fred J. Cook has written a book calling America The Warfare State.

It is not surprising that during this period military terminology has come into wide use, and the justification for actions has been presented in terms of the "national defense." Thus, when money was desired for higher education in 1958, the bill was called the National Defense Education Act, and was justified because more education made America a mightier nation, not because education was a good thing in itself.

Similarly, for several years one of the arguments for civil rights was that racism tarnished America's image with the nonwhite countries of the world and gave the communists a propaganda trump--rather than saying that racism was wrong in and of itself, whether the world approved or disapproved.

So we should not be surprised to see the poverty program cloaked in the military terminology of a "war on poverty", nor should we be surprised that Adam Yarmolinsky, while in the Defense Department, was one of the architects of the poverty program, nor should we be surprised that there is still a close relationship between the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Department of Defense.

Time magazine recently redefined the American Dream in the following terms: "the armed forces remain the model of the reasonably integrated society that the U. S. looks forward to achieving in another generation."

Since the Office of Economic Opportunity is concerned with the fulfillment of the American Dream, it is not then out of place for the Job Corps to train people to the point where they can be drafted, or for the Defense Department to allot 10% of its contracts to poverty areas to provide jobs in America's biggest business, and it is justifiable to fire VISTA volunteers who inauspiciously protest the war in Vietnam.

The Problem of Relevance

In the final analysis, the question we must consider is whether the poverty program, with its conception firmly rooted in the thinking of the 1930's, is relevant to the problems of today which are being influenced and will increasingly be shaped by automation and cybernation, two developments of the 1950's and 1960's.

The economist Robert Theobald has written: "We must comprehend that the emergence of the cybernated era based on full education means the end of the industrial age based on full employment." Or in other words, our present concept of full employment is on the way out. "The drive to provide toil is obsolete...the true challenge is to educate people in such a way that they can live a life which will appear meaningful to them, and to their fellow-men."

The poverty program is geared, if anything, to a society where there is a direct relationship between work and income. But through the process of cybernation, most of the presently existing jobs could be taken over by machines, and we must expect that this will increasingly be done as it offers the promise of better profits to businessmen. The problem then will be how to distribute income when it is no longer necessary to work in the sense that we now know it. A guaranteed annual income seems the most reasonable proposition--where the profits made by the machines are taken and divided up among the people, with a constitutional guarantee (to prevent political manipulation) that each person will have enough to live on.

We see, then, that even if OEO were to perform its job satisfactorily, it does not have the necessary scope to meet the great technological changes that will shape America's future. And these changes will make irrelevant the work of the poverty program.

(The End)

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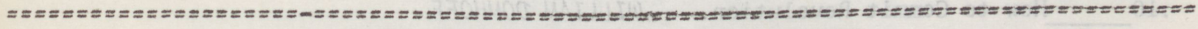
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