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Kennedy, Johnson, and the War on Poverty

Carl M. Brauer

When President Lyndon B. Johnson declared metaphorical war on poverty in 1964, he set in motion an important, complex, and controversial phase in the history of reform in the United States, whose shockwaves were still being felt in the early 1980s, a time of counterreformation. Although poverty reform in the 1960s influenced the historical profession no less than some others—in the rise of social history, for example—historians concentrated their research efforts on the more distant past. Analysis of the history, workings, consequences, and lessons of the War on Poverty remained largely the business of social scientists, who turned it into a sizable industry. The passage of time and the growing availability of primary sources now invite historical investigation, which has no more apposite starting point than the War on Poverty's genesis.

Social scientists explain the War on Poverty's creation in essentially three different ways. Daniel P. Moynihan in his *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* does not treat motive systematically or explicitly, but he builds a powerful implicit argument that the War on Poverty grew out of the rising influence of social science itself. In particular, Moynihan attributes the Community Action Program, which became central to the War on Poverty, to reform-minded, though unscientific, sociologists. A second school of thought emphasizes interest groups and political calculation. Among those who take this approach, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have probably been most widely read. President John F. Kennedy and President Johnson, they argue, launched the War on Poverty in order to attract a high percentage of black votes in the 1964 election. Third, the War on Poverty's birth has been explained through the cyclical theory of reform. After a period of dormancy, James Sundquist maintains, the reform impulse once again swept through the American political system, bringing with it a national effort to eradicate poverty.¹

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¹ Daniel P. Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on*

These treatments have value, particularly in describing the intellectual and institutional backgrounds of specific programs associated with the War on Poverty and in providing eyewitness accounts. Separately from his analytical chapters, it should be noted, Sundquist presents an accurate, though incomplete, narrative of events. In light of documentary and oral evidence now available, however, none of these treatments provides a satisfactory explanation of the War on Poverty's beginnings. Historical research leads to a different picture of them than social scientists have thus far painted.

The War on Poverty most definitely had political motives, but not the particular ones that Piven and Cloward claim. It also had intellectual motives and did reflect the rising influence of social science, yet Moynihan emphasizes sociology when economics figured far more significantly. Political and intellectual motives were intertwined, though in flux, throughout the War on Poverty's gestation. At some moments, political calculation was narrow; at others, broad. Likewise the ideas involved varied widely in terms of complexity, implication, and ideology. The very slogan "War on Poverty" represented the marriage of political self-interest to political culture. Although a cycle of reform may be observed in American politics, its existence alone fails to explain why poverty was singled out for attention.

Most accounts of the War on Poverty's birth make it seem inevitable, but historical research highlights the roles of chance—the assassination of President Kennedy—and of circumstance—the succession of President Johnson. Indeed, discussions of its birth sometimes pay too little attention to an obvious, but critical, fact: the War on Poverty was called into being by a president. Government policies sought to reduce poverty long before then; they continued to do so well after the rallying cry, War on Poverty, faded into memory. An examination of why President Kennedy considered making the elimination of poverty a centerpiece of his program in 1964 and why President Johnson did so proves instructive about the problem of origins while simultaneously illuminating the role of the presidency in recent American history.

From its rediscovery in the 1950s, poverty was a partisan issue, pushed by Democrats, usually liberal Democrats, and resisted by Republicans. Campaigning for reelection in 1954, Senator Paul H. Douglas of Illinois, a liberal and a professional economist, made the economic depression that gripped the southern part of his state an effective issue. When he was returned to office, he sponsored legislation to aid depressed areas, through which the federal government would underwrite public works projects, job retraining, and business expansion in high unemployment areas. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and a majority of Republicans would only go along with a much smaller program than Douglas and a majority of Democrats sought; so the legislation stalled.

Poverty (New York, 1970); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York, 1971); James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, 1968). Social scientists have written voluminously on the causes of the War on Poverty; these are, I think, the most representative and influential works.

The long struggle, however, popularized the notion that "pockets of poverty" existed in different parts of the country. Similarly, Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota, another liberal Democrat, proposed a Youth Conservation Corps, modeled after the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), to put 150,000 unemployed young people to work on conservation projects. This proposal also languished in Congress but helped publicize high rates of unemployment among youth and accompanying increases in juvenile delinquency, both of which were particularly associated with the poor.²

Prominent Democrats outside Congress also began to raise the poverty issue in the mid-1950s. Governor Averell Harriman asked the New York legislature in 1956 for funds to study the causes of poverty and to establish pilot projects to raise the earning capacity of low-income families. The program received publicity disproportionate to its extremely modest scope. Later that year, in a campaign speech in Oklahoma, Adlai E. Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee, recounted his party's efforts to push back poverty and pointed out that a sizable number of Americans lived on excessively low incomes. Without proposing a program to remedy the problem, Stevenson declared his faith "that we can abolish poverty."³

Liberal writers likewise called attention to the endurance of poverty. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith's best-selling book, *The Affluent Society*, did not have as much impact as Henry George's enormously popular *Progress and Poverty* of the previous century, but it made a similar observation: that poverty existed alongside plenty. Poverty, Galbraith wrote, "can no longer be presented as a universal or massive affliction. It is more nearly an afterthought." To Galbraith, poverty was a national disgrace, but he saw widespread affluence as the more notable phenomenon of the time. By featuring it in his title he struck a responsive public chord. Where George had proposed taxing away the unearned increment on land as the solution to poverty, Galbraith recommended increased social investment in the poor and in their communities. Using higher income floors, writers to the left of Galbraith, such as Michael Harrington, estimated that as many as a third of the nation's population had substandard incomes.⁴

While some liberals and Democrats were rediscovering poverty and questioning the extent and moral worth of affluence, many conservatives and

² Paul H. Douglas, *In the Fullness of Time: The Memoirs of Paul H. Douglas* (New York, 1972), 512-18; Sar A. Levitan, *Federal Aid to Depressed Areas: An Evaluation of the Area Redevelopment Administration* (Baltimore, 1966), 1-17; Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 60-76.

³ "Governor Harriman's Message to the Legislature," in New York State Department of Labor, *Industrial Bulletin* (Jan. 1956), 18-19; "Governor Harriman's Message to the Legislature," in *ibid.* (Feb. 1958), 12-14; Michael Levitas, "Progress against Poverty," in *ibid.* (July 1958), 3-7; *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1956, pp. 1, 10, Feb. 4, 1956, p. 18, Jan. 31, 1957, p. 13, Feb. 2, 1957, p. 8, Jan. 9, 1958, p. 24, Jan. 28, 1958, p. 20, June 30, 1958, p. 21; John Bartlow Martin, *Adlai Stevenson and the World: The Life of Adlai E. Stevenson* (Garden City, 1977), 365.

⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston, 1958), 323; Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York, 1931); Michael Harrington, "Our Fifty Million Poor: Forgotten Men of the Affluent Society," *Commentary*, 28 (July 1959), 19-27; H. Brand, "Poverty in the United States," *Dissent*, 7 (Autumn 1960), 334-54.

Republicans were celebrating prosperity and the wondrous benefits of the free enterprise system. The Advertising Council, for example, hailed the arrival of "people's capitalism" for creating prosperity and making workers stockholders. The Eisenhower administration expanded some of the broad-based social programs of the New Deal, such as Social Security, but resisted special assistance to the poor. Campaigning for president in West Virginia in 1960, the Republican nominee, Richard M. Nixon, castigated his Democratic opponent's assertion that seventeen million people went to bed hungry every night. That only provided "grist for the Communist propaganda mill," Nixon charged. He recounted Eisenhower's response: "Now look, I go to bed hungry every night, but that's because I'm on a diet. The doctor won't let me eat any more."⁵

Although international threats in the 1940s and early 1950s had served to discourage critical examination of America's internal shortcomings, the growing perception of renewed dangers from abroad in the late 1950s had the opposite effect. The Soviet Union's successful launching of Sputnik, the first artificial earth satellite, galvanized American fears of Soviet technical, educational, and military prowess and precipitated a wide-ranging questioning of America's ability and resolve to meet the communist challenge. Democratic politicians both led and exploited this questioning process. The theme of Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960, as set out for his speechwriters, was "to summon every segment of our society . . . to restore America's relative strength as a free nation . . . to regain our security and leadership in a fast changing world menaced by communism."⁶

Kennedy called attention to weaknesses in the American economy, in particular its sluggish rate of economic growth. Too many of America's workers were unemployed, he insisted, too much of its industrial capacity idle. He criticized Republicans for opposing legislation to aid the nation's economically depressed areas. In the important West Virginia primary election, he made the poverty, unemployment, and hunger he witnessed in that state major themes of his winning effort. During the general election campaign, he occasionally singled out poverty. Commemorating the anniversary of the Social Security Act, he called that legislation an "opening battle" while declaring that the "war against poverty and degradation is not yet over."⁷

In his eloquent inaugural address, Kennedy several times mentioned the fight against poverty; but characteristic both of the speech and his early administration, he referred to poverty as a foreign or international problem, not a

⁵ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, 1977), 106–23; Edward Berkowitz and Kim McQuaid, "Welfare Reform in the 1950s," *Social Service Review*, 54 (March 1980), 45–58; U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, *Freedom of Communications: Final Report* (2 vols., Washington, 1961), II, 311.

⁶ Charles C. Alexander, *Holding the Line: The Eisenhower Era, 1952–1961* (Bloomington, Ind., 1975), 184–293; Miller and Nowak, *Fifties*, 259–64; memorandum for speechwriters, July 23, 1960, box 26, Theodore C. Sorensen Papers (John F. Kennedy Library, Boston). For the 1960 campaign generally, see Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York, 1961).

⁷ Committee on Commerce, *Freedom of Communications*, I, 18.

domestic one. American poverty did not become a focal point of debate or policy during his first two years in office. Kennedy signed area redevelopment and manpower development and training legislation. He created a Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime, which he placed under the direction of his brother, Robert, the attorney general. At his behest, Congress emphasized the rehabilitation of welfare clients. Each represented a discrete response to discrete social or economic problems, which were not collectively identified as poverty.⁸

Sluggish economic growth, slack demand, and unacceptably high rates of unemployment, not poverty, captured Kennedy's attention in his first two years as president. After his first approaches to these interrelated problems failed to stimulate the economic expansion he desired or, in the case of expenditures, were ruled out by congressional opposition, he gradually, in 1962, came to adopt the solution put forth by professional economists on the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), across-the-board tax reduction for individuals and corporations. Although a significant part of the economics profession and some influential businessmen welcomed this proposal, it encountered opposition from those who believed in balanced budgets, from those who worried greatly about inflation, and from certain liberals who preferred tax reform to tax reduction and increases in social expenditures to a potential diminution of government's capacity to spend on worthy causes. Hence the tax cut made slow progress through Congress.⁹

The tax cut left President Kennedy open to criticism that he was indifferent to poverty. Prior to appearing on a year-end interview show in 1962, Kennedy asked Walter Heller, chairman of the CEA, for an analysis of assertions by Harrington and Leon Keyserling that poverty was much more widespread than commonly assumed. Harrington, a journalist, socialist, and social activist, estimated that 50 million Americans were poor. Keyserling, once chairman of Harry S. Truman's CEA and an acerbic critic of the tax cut, put the number at thirty-eight million and said an additional 39 million lived above the poverty line though still in deprivation. In responding to President Kennedy's request, Heller noted that "there was controversy about past and future progress against the scourge of poverty" but insisted that under "any *absolute* poverty line, we have reduced the share of the population in poverty during all periods of prosperity." "Contemporary poverty," he observed, though, "to the extent it is peculiarly associated with nonwhite color, widowhood, old age, etc.—

⁸ "The President's News Conference of January 25, 1961," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, 1962), 13; Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 83–97, 115–34; Daniel Knapp and Kenneth Polk, *Scouting the War on Poverty: Social Reform Politics in the Kennedy Administration* (Lexington, Mass., 1971), 65–107; James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty, 1900–1980* (Cambridge, 1981), 126–33.

⁹ Council of Economic Advisers panel oral history interview, Aug. 1, 1964, transcript (Kennedy Library); Herbert Stein, *The Fiscal Revolution in America* (Chicago, 1969), 372–453; Walter W. Heller interview by Carl M. Brauer, March 29, 1979 (in Brauer's possession); Gregory H. Hawley, "The Kennedy Tax Cut: A Study of the Interrelationships of Politics, Economics, and Government" (B. A. thesis, Harvard College, 1979); John Kenneth Galbraith to President, July 10, Aug. 20, 1962, box 30, Special Correspondence, President's Office Files (Kennedy Library).

may be harder to overcome than the more generalized poverty of earlier generations."¹⁰

No one, in fact, asked Kennedy about poverty on the show, but in February a television documentary narrated by Howard K. Smith stimulated about one hundred letters to the president, most of them, it appeared, from Democrats who were neither poor nor southern. The writers wanted the president "to adopt a mood either of sympathy for the poor (like Eleanor Roosevelt) or of vigorous demands for action (like FDR)," according to a summary prepared for the White House. Frequently the letters referred to phrases from Kennedy's own campaign or from his inaugural address. Many proposed public works projects, training programs, and increased social services, but few mentioned "the tax cut as a way to alleviate or prevent poverty." Indeed, more correspondents singled it out for opposition than any other policy.¹¹

Although poverty was not producing a groundswell of public interest or an outbreak of public protest, it was attracting more attention in 1962 and early 1963 than at any time since the 1930s. Dwight MacDonald's long review essay in *The New Yorker* in January 1963 undoubtedly was more widely read than the books it discussed, including Harrington's *The Other America*, which, it should be noted, did not become a best seller until after the War on Poverty was declared the following year. President Kennedy read MacDonald's essay and Harrington's book. Born to wealth and privilege himself, Kennedy had been brought up with a firm sense of noblesse oblige. He believed in government's duty and ability to solve social and economic problems. In addition, he was sensitive to the intellectual currents of his times and to any suggestion that he was not meeting the country's problems. So it is not surprising that he asked Heller to look into the poverty issue in greater depth.¹²

Heller welcomed the assignment. Although he had been instrumental in selling Kennedy on the tax cut, stressing growth and efficiency objectives, he had been trained in the economics department of the University of Wisconsin, which, since the days of John R. Commons, had been concerned with distributional objectives, with social justice and economic equity. Heller thus combined the techniques of modern post-Keynesian economics with the moral ideals of Wisconsin progressivism. In Heller's view, the elimination of poverty

¹⁰ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York, 1962); Leon Keyserling, "'Two-Fifths of a Nation,'" *Progressive*, 26 (June 1962), 11-14; Gardner Ackley to Walter W. Heller, April 27, 1963, box 76, President's Office Files; Leon Keyserling to Galbraith, July 3, 1963, box 38, John Kenneth Galbraith Papers (Kennedy Library); Heller interview; Heller to President, Dec. 16, 1962, box 63, President's Office Files.

¹¹ "Television and Radio Interview: 'After Two Years—A Conversation with the President,' December 17, 1962," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1962* (Washington, 1963), 889-904; Robert J. Lampman to Heller, March 22, 1963, microfilm roll 68, Walter W. Heller Papers (Kennedy Library).

¹² Dwight Macdonald, "Our Invisible Poor," *New Yorker*, 38 (Jan. 19, 1963), 82-132; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 1010; Herbert S. Parmet, *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1980); Heller interview; Robert J. Lampman interview by Brauer, Jan. 24, 1979 (in Brauer's possession); William M. Capron interview by Brauer, Feb. 5, 1979, *ibid.*; Richard Goodwin interview by Brauer, June 21, 1979, *ibid.*; Theodore C. Sorensen interview by Carl Kaysen, May 20, 1964, transcript (Kennedy Library), p. 168.

was not only to be sought on moral grounds but on efficiency ones, for poverty bred disease, ignorance, and crime and therefore reduced productivity. Like his mentor, Harold Groves, and other Wisconsin economists, such as Edwin Witte or Commons himself, Heller operated comfortably in the world of politics, which meant living with small, incremental steps on the road to the ideal.¹³

Heller turned to Robert J. Lampman for assistance. Lampman, a fellow student of Groves and a leading expert on wealth and income distribution, had come to the CEA as a consultant in 1961 and as a full-time staff member in 1962. He now updated an earlier study he had done for the Joint Economic Committee of Congress. He found that the impressive rate of reduction in income-poverty, which he had previously documented for the ten years, 1947 to 1956, had slowed down. Between 1947 and 1956, the percentage of families with less than \$3,000 of total money income (in 1961) declined from 33 percent to 23 percent; in the five years since 1956, though, it dropped only 2 percent more. The findings distressed Heller. "They offer one more demonstration of the costs of economic slack," he wrote President Kennedy, "and they, therefore, also provide another dimension of what's at stake in the proposed tax cut."¹⁴

In Heller's view, economic growth historically held the key to reducing poverty, and the tax cut held the key to economic growth. Yet several things in the spring of 1963 caused Heller to focus on the poverty problem itself. The new data from Lampman indicated a worse picture than one might have expected from his earlier study. Sensitive to politics, Heller worried about the tax cut's liabilities, for its greatest immediate benefits would go to those with middle or upper incomes. It might simply be politically prudent, he reasoned, for the president to have something specifically aimed at helping the poor. Heller was impressed when Kenneth O'Donnell, a political aide to the president whose judgment Heller respected, told him to "stop worrying about the tax cut." "It will pass and pass big," O'Donnell optimistically forecast; "worry about something else." Heller has also recalled learning from a newspaper story that a Republican presidential aspirant was considering an antipoverty program of his own. It was folly, Heller believed, to allow a Republican to steal a march on a naturally Democratic issue. A search of Heller's papers and clippings files at the Kennedy Library failed to turn up the particular story; so it is possible that Heller's memory was faulty. Accurate or not, however, the recollection reveals that Heller viewed poverty not only as an economic or moral problem but also as a political one.¹⁵

¹³ Heller interview; Lampman interview; Capron interview; *The Annual Report of the Council of Economic Advisers* (Washington, 1964), 32; Edward S. Flash, Jr., *Economic Advice and Presidential Leadership: The Council of Economic Advisers* (New York, 1965), 176-77; Lafayette G. Harter, Jr., *John R. Commons: His Assault on Laissez-Faire* (Corvallis, Ore., 1962); Theron F. Schlabach, *Edwin E. Witte: Cautious Reformer* (Madison, 1969).

¹⁴ Lampman interview; Robert J. Lampman, "The Low Income Population and Economic Growth," in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *Study Papers* (Washington, 1959), 1-36; Heller to President, May 1, 1963, box 76, President's Office Files.

¹⁵ Heller interview; Lampman interview; Capron interview; Walter W. Heller, *New Dimensions of Political Economy* (Cambridge, 1966), 20; Heller to Carl M. Brauer, January 23, 1980 (in Brauer's possession).

Dramatic events in the spring and summer of 1963 gave the poverty issue an additional allure to this administration. During that time the racial issue was reaching a boil in the South. Kennedy made an important shift in his own civil rights policy when he advocated sweeping civil rights legislation and thereby risked a break with the southern wing of his own party. Since the 1930s the racial issue had been dividing Democrats roughly along the Mason-Dixon line. Although not always united across regional lines on economic issues, southern and northern Democrats found more to agree on economically than on civil rights matters. For both intellectual and political reasons, President Kennedy often framed civil rights issues in economic terms. Even in proposing his civil rights legislation in 1963, he renewed requests he had earlier made of Congress for educational and training programs which would, of course, benefit people of all races. Southern members of Congress could be expected to oppose civil rights legislation in force, but some of them, the president and Heller hoped, would welcome efforts to reduce poverty because their region had a disproportionately large share of it.¹⁶

President Kennedy at this point worried far more about how southern whites would vote in 1964 than he did about how blacks would vote nationwide. In fact he had little concern about where he stood with black voters. He was not taking their votes for granted exactly, for his success in politics had been predicated on vigorously pursuing all voting blocs he might have a chance of winning. Yet his close identification with the civil rights cause and then his championing of it in June 1963 precluded the need for doing anything fundamentally new, like proposing an attack on poverty. Furthermore, he and Heller viewed poverty either as more of a white problem than a black one or as one that superseded race. When Heller informed Kennedy on June 20 that he was having Lampman "consider what might go into an Administration 'assault on poverty' program in 1964," he observed that "the civil rights message covers a lot of the ground, but there may well be room for a broader program not limited to race." At a cabinet-level meeting in the fall, Heller noted how "disadvantaged groups other than Negroes now deserve our attention." When the president considered dramatizing the poverty problem in the fall, he contemplated a trip to Appalachia, which was populated predominantly by whites.¹⁷

Heller asked Lampman on June 3 for his ideas on "a possible Kennedy offensive against poverty." He wanted to know how much of the poverty problem would "yield to a successful tax cut, full employment, and faster growth." "What specific measures aimed at the victims and the sources of poverty are needed," Heller wondered, and what had the federal government done and left

¹⁶ Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York, 1977), 42-43, 230-64; Heller interview.

¹⁷ Brauer, *John F. Kennedy*, 297-302; Heller interview; Heller to President, June 20, 1963, box 76, President's Office Files; Heller's notes on "Meeting in Sorensen's Office, Oct. 21, 1963," Oct. 22, 1963, box 13, Heller Papers; "Confidential Notes on Meeting with the President," Oct. 21, 1963, box 6, *ibid.*

undone? He requested recommendations for a "practical, Kennedy anti-poverty program in 1964."¹⁸

A week later Lampman responded at length. Full employment and long-term growth could certainly reduce poverty significantly, he maintained, just as it had in the ten years beginning in 1947. In that period, however, three groups generally proved immune to the benefits of economic growth: the elderly, the disabled, and families headed by women. Numerous federal programs, such as medical care for the aged and job retraining, were either under way or had been proposed to help these groups and others. Practically speaking, Lampman proposed that they think in terms of "opening the exits out of poverty (particularly for young people) and preventing retreats into poverty." He would open exits by "aggressive expansionist full employment fiscal policy, by anti-discrimination efforts, by better school and public facilities for low income children." He would "supplement retraining programs by relocation allowances" and "improve environments of the poor by community development and public housing." Finally, Lampman would "prevent retreats by stronger programs against extended unemployment, prolonged disability, and loss of savings," and through "higher transfers to families of disabled and women without husbands."¹⁹

Lampman wanted an annual accounting of "exits and retreats into poverty" that would "concentrate upon the inter-generational transmission of poverty." Though he did not explicitly say so, such an accounting would have tested a key element in the popular theory of a culture of poverty, put forth by Harrington, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, and others, according to which poverty was handed down from generation to generation, trapping the young in an interminable cycle of deprivation. In this culture or cycle, the young supposedly acquired defeatist attitudes and a variety of bad social habits that only impeded their chances of ever escaping poverty. If valid, the culture of poverty implied the need for extensive new rehabilitative and educational services, aimed particularly at the young. Because poverty was presumably "deep" and inbred, mere cash assistance could not be expected to cure the underlying problem.²⁰

Although some sociological evidence suggested that poverty was being passed down from generation to generation—a sample of welfare recipients, for example, found that over 40 percent of their parents had been raised in homes where some public assistance had been received—Lampman knew that no one had shown how far back in time this phenomenon went, how statistically significant it was, or whether it was increasing or decreasing. Six months later, however, when the CEA included a chapter on poverty in its annual report, it facilely embraced culture-of-poverty theory.²¹

¹⁸ Heller to Lampman, June 3, 1963, box 1, Legislative Background, Economic Opportunity Act, White House Central Files (Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas).

¹⁹ Lampman to Heller, June 10, 1963, microfilm roll 37, Heller Papers.

²⁰ *Ibid.* For a very interesting and up-to-date discussion of the debate over a culture of poverty, see Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty*, 115–25.

²¹ Lampman interview; *Annual Report of the Council of Economic Advisers, 1964*, 43, 47; James M. Morgan, Martin H. David, Wilbur J. Cohen, and Harvey E. Brazer, *Income and Welfare in the*

If the jury was still out on the intergenerational transmission of poverty, the verdict seemed clearer to Lampman and other economists on the salutary role of education. Human-capital theory, which maintained that education was critical in raising productivity and therefore in reducing poverty, had swept the economics profession in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Burton A. Weisbrod, one of its champions, was a CEA staff member who assisted in developing early antipoverty plans. In addition, sociological evidence showed a correlation between educational attainment and poverty, confirming the everyday observation that it was hard to find a highly educated person who was poor, except by choice. Yet other data suggested that attitudes acquired in the home affected receptivity to education, which might have made people skeptical about how much educational institutions could affect the young.²²

Lampman's preference for investing in youth as the best way to fight poverty reflected faith in education and human-capital theory. It also was based on an important demographic fact, that the postwar baby boom was significantly increasing the number of poor school-age children and young adults. "Is it possible," he speculated, "that by a tremendous, educational effort or family allowance or retraining programs for the children of the present poor that we would drastically improve the exit from poverty rate for the youngsters?" "Can we imagine," he wondered, "spending twice as much public money on the education and health of poor children as we do on non-poor children? Perhaps it is fair to say that until we do we aren't dedicated to the eradication of poverty."²³

Lampman worried about the lack of a "politically workable definition of concept of poverty." Poverty, he observed, was particularly associated with the South, nonwhites, smaller cities, the old, the poorly educated, and broken families. Like Harrington, he believed it was "relatively invisible to many people in the U.S." Perhaps, he speculated, racial conflicts were making it more visible. Reflecting prevalent views about the lack of class conflict in America, he wrote that "most people see no political dynamite in the fact that our income distribution at the low end is about the same as it has always been." "The bottom fifth of income receivers," he pointed out, "get no more than 5 percent of total income."²⁴

Practical political considerations discouraged Lampman and other administration economists from proposing income transfers. "Probably a

United States (New York, 1962), 206–12. Social historians have subsequently been wrestling with the time dimension and with the question of poverty's heritability. See, for example, Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880–1970* (Cambridge, 1973).

²² Lampman interview; Jacob Mincer, "Investment in Human Capital and Personal Income Distribution," *Journal of Political Economy*, 66 (Aug. 1958), 281–302; Theodore W. Schultz, "Investment in Human Capital," *American Economic Review*, 51 (Jan. 1961), 1–17; Theodore W. Schultz, "Reflections on Investment in Man," *Journal of Political Economy*, 70 (Oct. 1962), 1–8; Gary S. Becker, "Investment in Human Capital: A Theoretical Analysis," *ibid.*, 9–49; Burton H. Weisbrod, "Education and Investment in Human Capital," *ibid.*, 106–28; Morgan, David, Cohen, and Brazer, *Income and Welfare in the United States*, 371–83.

²³ Lampman interview; Lampman to Heller, June 10, 1963, microfilm roll 37, Heller Papers.

²⁴ Lampman to Heller, June 10, 1963, microfilm roll 37, *ibid.*

politically acceptable program must avoid completely any use of the term 'inequality' or of the term 'redistribution of income or wealth,'" Lampman early advised Heller. Similarly, Lampman and James Tobin, a CEA member, discussed a negative income tax but concluded that it was a political and budgetary impossibility. In its chapter on poverty the following January, the CEA bowed to political reality when it observed that, though all the poor could be raised above the poverty line by redistributing to them an \$11 billion levy on everyone else, it would not be a proper solution, for it "would leave untouched most of the roots of poverty. Americans want to *earn* the American standard of living by their own efforts and contributions." "It will be far better, even if more difficult," the council maintained, "to equip and to permit the poor of the nation to produce and to earn the additional \$11 billion and more."²⁵

The economists made a reasonable reading of political reality. Progressive tax reforms had originally accompanied the tax cut, but they proved to be a price the administration had to pay for tax reduction. Even after that price was paid, the tax cut, contrary to O'Donnell's confident assurances to Heller, languished in the Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Harry F. Byrd of Virginia. An apostle of the balanced budget, Byrd was fighting to hold down spending, and, in addition, he was perturbed by the administration's advocacy of civil rights legislation. Other major new spending programs with more broad-based appeal than increases in assistance to the poor, such as medical insurance for the aged under Social Security and aid to education, were also stalled in Congress. The 1962 welfare amendments, with their emphasis on rehabilitation, had been partly designed to cool off an incipient popular rebellion against welfare. This, then, hardly seemed an auspicious moment to propose significant increases in transfer payments to the poor.²⁶

At best it might be possible to redirect several hundred million dollars from existing programs into a new antipoverty effort. The economists expected that the tax cut would eventually generate more revenues by increasing national income and thus produce a "fiscal dividend" which could be used to help those who had not benefited from it immediately, but that lay in the future. As practical individuals, the economists preferred a modest poverty program to none at all. As practical individuals who were serving a president up for reelection, they were looking for a program that would be both workable and popular. Their abandonment of transfers also in part reflected their belief in human-capital theory, their acceptance of the work ethic and culture-of-poverty assumptions, and their faith in society's ability to train, educate, and reform individuals. To growth- and efficiency-oriented economists, increasing the productivity of the poor was intrinsically preferable to paying them not to work. For all these reasons, practical and intellectual, they leaned toward an

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Heller interview; Lampman interview; Capron interview; "Poverty and Urban Policy," transcript of conference held in Waltham, Mass., June 16–17, 1973 (Kennedy Library), p. 148; *Annual Report of the Council of Economic Advisers, 1964*, 54.

²⁶ Brauer, *John F. Kennedy*, 303; Stein, *Fiscal Revolution in America*, 428–53; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 148.

antipoverty strategy that favored human services over income transfers, reform of individuals rather than economic equality.²⁷

Heller assigned William M. Capron, the CEA's senior staff man, to work with Lampman. Capron had played an important role in the CEA's successful campaign to win the president over to the tax cut. Although he was familiar with the field, he was not an expert in income distribution. He had been trained in public administration, not economics, specializing in the application of economic tools to policy issues. He knew the ins and outs of Washington bureaucracy and had the advantage of enjoying good relationships with Theodore C. Sorensen, a top presidential aide, and with the Bureau of the Budget, where he had once worked. Under President Kennedy, it should be noted, the Budget Bureau had become unusually involved in policy making. Over the summer, Capron and Lampman convened an informal group of staff members, largely fellow economists, from several departments and agencies to discuss ideas and proposals. In the fall, Lampman returned to the University of Wisconsin and the burden of developing a program fell largely to Capron, working closely with Budget officials Charles L. Schultze, William Cannon, and Michael March.²⁸

These planners were generally unimpressed with the recommendations they received. From the departments came numerous program suggestions which had been languishing on Capitol Hill. Each department watered its own field; the Labor Department wanted a massive jobs program; the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, educational and health programs; and so on. This confirmed the planners' skepticism toward the departments, a skepticism that permeated the upper reaches of the Kennedy administration. The departments and agencies, it was believed, were bureaucracies with their own internal agendas whose programs were often ineffectual. Experts they consulted from social work and the social sciences, meanwhile, made divergent recommendations, based on sharply differing diagnoses of the poverty problem.²⁹

The planners did like the idea of local demonstration or community action projects, which they heard about from people who had been involved in such projects—David Hackett and Richard Boone of the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime, Paul Ylvisaker of the Ford Foundation, Mitchell Sviridoff in New Haven, and George Esser in North Carolina. In a "community action project," "demonstration project," or "development corporation," as the idea was variously called, the federal government would directly fund service-oriented, coordinated efforts in localities where poor people resided in significant numbers, such as Appalachia and the nation's largest black ghettos.

²⁷ Heller interview; Lampman interview; Capron interview.

²⁸ Capron interview; Lampman interview; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 138–42; Larry Berman, *The Office of Management and Budget and the Presidency, 1921–1979* (Princeton, 1979), 67–73.

²⁹ Capron interview; Lampman interview; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 142–45; Adam Yarmolinsky interview by Brauer, Feb. 22, 1979 (in Brauer's possession).

The planners were attracted to this idea because it seemed to hold out the promise of having a dramatic impact. "Rather than developing a 'program' which simply adds funds to existing across-the-board programs, or creates new programs in which a large part of the funds are spent on those whose need is marginal," one of the planners argued, "we ought to make a concentrated effort to assist those whose needs are substantial." They liked the emphasis on experimentation, for total funding was expected to be small and social welfare experts were divided about what should be done. Because of the expectations of low funding as well, they wanted to prevent the money from being spread around so thin as to negate its effects, which is what had happened to the Area Redevelopment Administration (ARA). When ARA was first considered by the Senate in 1956, it was estimated that 69 areas would qualify for assistance; in 1963, however, 780 areas qualified. Congress had sliced a small pie exceedingly thin. Each member had wanted to have a piece for himself; so everyone had received a diet portion.³⁰

A coordinated and concentrated federal effort at the local level also appealed to the planners precisely because of their skepticism of federal bureaucracies. It offered a way of bypassing them or at least shaking them up. They perceived in a localized approach advantages that were partly ideological and partly political. "The program ought to be presented quite frankly in terms of the obligations which a prosperous majority owes to a submerged and desperately poor minority," one of them, probably Schultze, observed at the time. Although he wanted to highlight the practical aspects of the program, such as its impact on economic growth or on reducing welfare costs, he believed that "poverty-in-the-midst of plenty" should be the main theme. He explained:

There are two ideas which go hand-in-hand in this approach: First, the concept of equity—initial opportunities for all as close to equal as possible (Remember, even Bob Taft was strong for this.); and second, the concept of the social obligation of the "rich" to the "poor." Both of these are powerful themes in American history, and, after all the political cynicism is taken into account, may well form a more realistic approach than the alleged realism of narrow self-interest Congressional District by Congressional District. Moreover, a party division along these lines would be "duck-soup" for Democratic candidates.

Finally, this approach promised the mobilization of people at the local level, of getting previously uninvolved people to work for their communities. It therefore accorded with Kennedy's call to patriotic sacrifice in his inaugural address, his challenge to Americans to ask what they could do for their country, something the tax cut had obviously not required.³¹

³⁰ "Poverty and Urban Policy," 142–54; C. L. Schultze, "Some Notes on a Program of 'Human Conservation,'" Nov. 1, 1964, box 1, Legislative Background, Economic Opportunity Act, White House Central Files; David L. Hackett to Heller, Dec. 1, 1963, *ibid.*; WMC [William M. Capron] to WWH [Heller] and attached memo by William Cannon and Sam Hughes, Dec. 12, 1963, *ibid.*; Heller interview; Capron interview; Lampman interview; Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 77–80, 168–69; Richard Blumenthal, "The Bureaucracy: Antipoverty and the Community Action Program," in *American Political Institutions and Public Policy: Five Contemporary Studies*, ed. Allan P. Sindler (Boston, 1969), 147–49.

³¹ Schultze, "Some Notes on a Program of 'Human Conservation'"; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 142–54; Heller interview; Capron interview; Lampman interview.

Although the planners paid considerable attention to political considerations, particularly to how an antipoverty program might be framed to win united Democratic support in Congress, there is no evidence to support the Piven-Cloward thesis that community action was intended to shore up black support in the 1964 election. At a conference in 1973, antipoverty planners, though acknowledging certain political motives, challenged Piven and Cloward face to face. "We would have run it completely different if we had followed your thesis," argued Hackett. "If it had been a political program and if the administration wanted to cater to the black votes, we would have done it completely different. We didn't do it that way. We were going initially with the mayors and the establishment."³²

Like community action, the National Service Corps, a domestic version of the Peace Corps, appealed to the planners for summoning the nation's idealism. Legislation to create such a corps was stalled on Capitol Hill, but the planners hoped they might pry it loose by including it in the president's anti-poverty program. In addition, they looked forward to incorporating the recommendations of a special interagency task force the president had appointed to look into the problem of selective service rejectees. In the spring of 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara observed that President Kennedy himself frequently expressed his concern that "poverty was becoming an inherited trait," as evidenced by the failure of a third of the young men examined each year for the military draft to pass either mental or physical examinations. Kennedy's elusive logic reflected acceptance of culture-of-poverty assumptions.³³

As discussion proceeded on an antipoverty program in the fall, members and friends of the Kennedy administration raised questions about the whole enterprise. Wilbur Cohen, an influential assistant secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and others with backgrounds in Social Security observed that programs benefiting the poor alone were bound to be impoverished ones—that is, inadequately funded. Myer Feldman, a White House counsel, pointed out to Lampman that his ideas would make good ammunition for Republicans in that they implied the failure of social welfare programs long identified with the Democrats. At a general strategy meeting on the 1964 election in November, Richard Scammon, director of the Census Bureau, in answer to a question from the president about the pending poverty program, noted that most people did not consider themselves poor. At an informal seminar in Robert F. Kennedy's home, George F. Kennan, the diplomat, departed from his topic to reflect that nothing could be done about poverty since, as the Bible said, the poor would be with us always. Heller strenuously objected and was joined in the ensuing debate by Robert F. Kennedy and Harriman against Ken-

³² "Poverty and Urban Policy," 201.

³³ Schultze, "Some Notes on a Program of 'Human Conservation'"; Theodore C. Sorensen to Kermit Gordon et al., October 23, 1963, box 13, Heller Papers; Capron to Heller, Dec. 5, 1963, box 1, Legislative Background, Economic Opportunity Act, White House Central Files; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor, *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964: Hearings on H.R. 10440*, 88 Cong., 2 sess., March 18, 1964, 110-11.

nan, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, and Randolph Churchill, son of the former British prime minister.³⁴

Criticisms like these made those planning the poverty program acutely aware of its packaging, and so they considered such titles as "Human Conservation and Development," "Access to Opportunity," and "Widening Participation in Prosperity," in order to broaden its appeal. They thought of billing it as a "domestic aid program" in order to "capitalize on some of the anti-foreign aid sentiment—especially on the part of those who continually chide us for 'sending money overseas when there is so much to do at home.'" On the other hand, they worried that whatever was gained for the domestic aid programs might be lost to foreign aid, and they were concerned about giving the Soviet Union "a well-documented stick to beat us over the head with—although this will be true of any case we make that there are important segments of the U.S. population living a submarginal existence."³⁵

In considering possible constituencies for this program, some political operatives in the White House looked to the upper middle class; "suburban women" was the catchphrase. The poor themselves were assumed to be politically passive, and an antipoverty effort was therefore most likely to impress those who were among the most affluent and presumably most conscience-stricken. John F. Kennedy himself was puzzled that the poor in this country were not angrier and more demanding. "In England," he commented to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in the spring of 1963, "the unemployment rate goes to two per cent, and they march on Parliament. Here it moves up toward six, and no one seems to mind." Although there had been more agitation among the poor in the 1930s than was usually recalled in the 1950s and 1960s, it was also true that by international standards the American poor in this century were relatively quiescent. Civil rights demonstrations in the early 1960s repeatedly focused on access to the political and economic systems, not on economic inequality or poverty. Labor unions, whom socialists like Harrington thought of as allies of the poor, generally failed to beat the drum for an antipoverty program. When Heller gave a speech about poverty to the Communication Workers of America, his audience responded indifferently. It made Lampman recall a lesson that Selig Perlman, the labor economist, had taught him as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin: that unionists regard the poor as competitive menaces.³⁶

Given all the doubts expressed, the planners were sometimes uncertain whether the president would even decide to adopt an antipoverty program. A

³⁴ Wilbur Cohen interview by Brauer, Aug. 6, 1979 (in Brauer's possession); Lampman interview; Sorensen interview, 168; Heller interview. Richard Scammon does not specifically recall the question of poverty being discussed at the general strategy meeting but accepts Sorensen's recollection since it occurred much closer to the event. Richard Scammon to Brauer, Jan. 11, 1979 (in Brauer's possession).

³⁵ Schultze, "Some Notes on a Program of 'Human Conservation'"; notes on "Meeting in Sorensen's Office, October 21, 1963," Oct. 22, 1963, box 13, Heller Papers; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 173–74; Heller interview; Lampman interview.

³⁶ Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 1010; Lampman interview; Heller interview; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 155–222.

timely piece of reporting helped their cause. In October Homer Bigart wrote grippingly in the *New York Times* about the plight of impoverished miners in Kentucky. The report prompted President Kennedy to observe to Heller "that there was a tremendous problem to be met." According to Heller's notes, Kennedy indicated that "if he could get sufficient *substance* in a program to deal with poverty, he would like to make a two- or three-day trip to some of the key poverty-stricken areas to focus the spotlight and arouse the American conscience on this problem from which we are so often shielded." To Heller it seemed "perfectly clear" that Kennedy was "aroused about this and if we would really produce a program to fill the bill, he would be inclined to run with it." Soon thereafter, Heller wrote the heads of several departments and agencies to tell them that the president had "tentatively decided that a major focus in the domestic legislative program in 1964 will be on a group of programs variously described as 'Human Conservation and Development,' 'Access to Opportunity' and 'Attack on Poverty'" and to ask their help formally in devising a general framework as well as specifics.³⁷

After November's election strategy meeting, the president remained interested, though circumspect. "I'm still very much in favor of doing something on the poverty scheme if we can get a good program," is how Heller summed up Kennedy's attitude on November 19, "but I also think its important to make clear that we're doing something for the middle-income man in the suburbs, etc. But the two are not at all inconsistent with one another. So go right ahead with your work on it." At the time of Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, antipoverty plans emphasized youth, human services rather than income transfers, experimentation, selectivity, coordination, and local administration. They included a domestic Peace Corps and a remedial effort aimed at Selective Service rejectees. There is no telling, of course, what would have happened to these plans had the president not been shot.³⁸

The day after the assassination Heller met with Johnson. He informed the new president, among other things, of the CEA's work in developing the "attack on poverty," as his notes of the conversation termed it. He told Johnson there was enthusiasm within the government for the idea, but it was uncertain whether an attractive program could be constructed. He also reported President Kennedy's last words to him on the subject. According to Heller's notes, Johnson "expressed his interest" in the poverty program, and "his sympathy for it, and in answer to a point-blank question, said we should push ahead full-tilt on this project." As Heller was about to depart, Johnson drew him back in and said:

Now I wanted to say something about all this talk that I'm a conservative who is likely to go back to the Eisenhower ways or give in to the economy bloc in Congress. It's

³⁷ "Poverty and Urban Policy," 168; *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1963, pp. 1, 18; "Confidential Notes on Meeting with the President"; Heller to Secretary of Agriculture et al., Nov. 5, 1963, box 1, Legislative Background, Economic Opportunity Act, White House Central Files.

³⁸ "Notes on a Quick Meeting with the President and other leading members of the Kennedy Family," Nov. 19, 1963, box 6, Heller papers; Heller interview; Lampman interview; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 169-70.

not so, and I want you to tell your friends—Arthur Schlesinger, Galbraith and other liberals—that it is not so. I'm no budget slasher. I understand that expenditures have to keep on rising to keep pace with the population and help the economy. If you looked at my record, you would know that I am a Roosevelt New Dealer. As a matter of fact, to tell the truth, John F. Kennedy was a little too conservative to suit my taste.³⁹

Through his service as senator from Texas and Democratic leader in the Senate, Johnson had indeed developed a rather conservative reputation, but a combination of influences—personal, political, and cultural—led him to adopt the poverty issue and make it his own. In his postpresidential memoir, Johnson noted he was always an activist, taking pleasure in getting things done. Profoundly impressed by the New Deal, Johnson believed in government, in its responsibility, and in its capacity to solve problems. For social change to occur, he reflected, three conditions had to be met: a recognition of need, a willingness to act, and someone to lead the effort. Johnson recalled that in 1963 America had the needs, the launching of Sputnik and the shock of President Kennedy's assassination had produced a popular readiness for change, and he was personally disposed to lead.⁴⁰

Bill Moyers, Johnson's protégé and aide, has observed that, though Johnson could rationalize any decision after the fact (of course, historians do likewise with the decisions they study), he was a highly instinctual politician, whose instincts, rather than cold calculation, told him that the poverty issue was well suited to him personally and that the right moment had arrived to raise it. Some of Johnson's aides, like some of President Kennedy's, warned him not to "get caught in the snare of a program directed entirely toward helping the poor," Johnson himself recalled. Horace Busby, one of his assistants, urged that he pay attention instead to Americans "in the middle," those earning between \$3,000 and \$9,000 a year, a majority of the country. Assistance to people like that, Busby asserted, had accounted for Franklin D. Roosevelt's great political success. On the other hand, a private survey of intellectuals that the historian Eric F. Goldman conducted for Johnson indicated widespread interest in a new national effort to help the disadvantaged. "Memo after memo," Goldman reported, "called for establishing an organization that would release the idealism of the nation, especially its youth, in an attack on poverty inside the United States. The usual specific proposal was setting up a Domestic Peace Corps or reconstituting an NYA [National Youth Administration] or CCC."⁴¹

Although Johnson had never been impoverished himself, his occasional claim to the contrary notwithstanding, he had seen much poverty during his youth in Texas. For a time he taught school to impoverished Mexican-Americans in Cotulla, Texas, an experience he never forgot. In his first important government post, he directed his state's NYA which gave unemployed

³⁹ Heller, "Notes on Meeting with President Johnson," Nov. 23, 1963, box 7, Heller Papers.

⁴⁰ Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York, 1971), 70-71.

⁴¹ Bill Moyers interview by Brauer, June 15, 1979 (in Brauer's possession); Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 71; Horace Busby to President, Dec. 30, 1963, file We9, Executive, White House Central Files; Eric F. Goldman to President et al., December 21, 1963, file SP2-4, box 133, White House Central Files.

young people jobs during the Great Depression. Roosevelt became Johnson's idol, and after Johnson became president, his model as well. Much as Roosevelt had helped those who needed help, Johnson hoped to do likewise. Soon after becoming president, he told Richard Russell, a close Senate friend, that he hoped his epitaph would someday read: "Lyndon Johnson did his best for folks who couldn't do theirs." Clearly Johnson had emotional needs that were met by helping people, but these needs also coincided with the nation's political culture, for Americans mythologized those presidents whom they perceived as helping others. "If you do good, you'll do well," Johnson often observed about politics, and poverty was unmistakably a "do good" issue. Johnson found confirmation for his general view of government in *The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations* by Barbara Ward, the eminent British economist. When Liz Carpenter went to work for Johnson, who was still vice-president, he once picked up Ward's book, which he said he had read many times. "This is what it's all about—this is what the whole government effort is all about," he said. "It's right here in one sentence—the mission of our times is to eradicate the three enemies of mankind—poverty, disease and ignorance."⁴²

The particular tragic circumstances of Johnson's assumption of office also help explain his adoption of the poverty issue. During his early weeks as president, Johnson strove to show members of the Kennedy administration, the nation, and the world that there would be continuity in policy, yet at the same time to establish his own authority, identity, and constituency. The poverty issue afforded him a way of doing both. By giving Heller the go-ahead, Johnson signaled the Kennedy team that he planned to carry on as President Kennedy would have, but because Kennedy had not publicly announced the drive against poverty, Johnson could present it as his own to the nation. Since he was assuming so many of Kennedy's policy commitments, including civil rights, the tax cut, medical insurance for the aged, and federal aid to education, Johnson welcomed the chance to promote his very own cause.⁴³

Finally, the poverty issue appealed to Johnson because, like many southerners, he believed that the nation's racial problems were essentially economic in nature. If blacks only had good jobs and decent incomes, whites would, in his view, respect them and let them exercise their civil rights. President Kennedy would not have disagreed, though he had felt it necessary to address racial discrimination directly. When Kennedy was contemplating his re-

⁴² Moyers interview; Liz Carpenter, *Ruffles and Flourishes* (Garden City, 1970), 250–51; Heller interview; Otis Singletary interview by Joe B. Frantz, Nov. 12, 1970, transcript, Oral History Collection (Johnson Library). Lyndon B. Johnson, it would appear, was not quoting Barbara Ward exactly; see Barbara Ward, *The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations* (New York, 1962), 158–59. Johnson has been the subject of many books, and he will undoubtedly be the subject of many more. Among the most useful published works on Johnson are: Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York, 1980); Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* (New York, 1966); Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, 1976); Harry McPherson, *A Political Education* (Boston, 1972); Jack Valenti, *A Very Human President* (New York, 1975); Booth Mooney, *LBJ: An Irreverent Chronicle* (New York, 1976); T. Harry Williams, "Huey, Lyndon, and Southern Radicalism," *Journal of American History*, 60 (Sept. 1973), 267–93.

⁴³ Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 18–41; Moyers interview.

quest for major civil rights legislation in the spring of 1963, Johnson had privately expressed reservations about its timing to the president's aides. He was not opposed to the legislation, he told Sorensen—indeed, he wanted President Kennedy to take a strong moral stand in favor of civil rights—but he feared that “we run the risk of touching off about a three- or four-month debate that will kill his program and inflame the country and wind up with a mouse.” To Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Burke Marshall, Johnson recommended that the administration concentrate on solving underlying economic problems, specifically black unemployment, and harked back to his own experience with the NYA.⁴⁴

When Johnson suddenly became president, he could not have reversed his predecessor's commitment to civil rights legislation, even if he had wanted to, for that would have violated the whole spirit of continuity that he was trying to engender and would have cast Johnson as a parochial, sectional leader, not up to national responsibilities or national office. It would have alienated the significant pro-civil rights constituency in the Democratic party. Given the political situation, his desire for continuity, and his own genuine sympathy for the civil rights cause, Johnson, in one of his first public statements as president, committed himself unequivocally to passage of President Kennedy's civil rights legislation. That legislation would be Kennedy's, a memorial to him, but the poverty issue, with its economic instead of racial thrust, would be quintessentially Johnson's. Perhaps his fellow white southerners would even forgive him his transgressions on civil rights as matters of personal loyalty to the slain president and political necessity, especially when they saw he was addressing the underlying problem on his own.⁴⁵

Johnson worried, though, about how to identify the problem. Walt Rostow, an economist and foreign-policy aide, recounted Johnson's views at a meeting in late December on the State of the Union message: “In domestic affairs, civil rights was at the top of the list. Then the tax bill. He would move ahead with the poverty program, but he wanted it to be a positive effort to fulfill human needs and widen opportunity. Poverty was too negative a concept. (General discussion yielded no satisfactory alternative phrase.) We had to fulfill Kennedy's programs and move beyond. He wanted to see military resources shifted to education, human needs, and manpower development.”⁴⁶

In his State of the Union address to Congress on January 8, Johnson did not find a substitute for the term *poverty* when he announced his emphatic opposi-

⁴⁴ Moyers interview; Brauer, *John F. Kennedy*, 30–37, 245–46, 314; Johnson conversation with Sorensen, June 3, 1963, Edison Dictaphone recording transcript, box 1, Office Files of George Reedy (Johnson Library); Robert F. Kennedy and Burke Marshall interview by Anthony Lewis, Dec. 4, 1964, transcript (Kennedy Library), 26–27; “Notes of Troika Meeting with President Johnson,” Nov. 25, 1963, box 7, Heller Papers; Monroe Billington, “Lyndon B. Johnson and Blacks: The Early Years,” *Journal of Negro History*, 62 (Jan. 1977), 26–42.

⁴⁵ Moyers interview; Harry McPherson interview by T. H. Baker, n.d., transcript, Oral History Collection, tape 2, pp. 11–12. Johnson's civil rights sympathies are in clear evidence in Johnson conversation with Sorensen. There is no indication why Johnson had this particular conversation recorded.

⁴⁶ W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York, 1972), 305.

tion to the condition it described. "This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty," asserted the president. The analogue of war, a legacy of progressivism and World War I, had been popular during the depression and the New Deal when Johnson was young and had entered public life. The idea of invoking it once again in 1964, if not Johnson's originally—its exact paternity is uncertain—appealed to him viscerally. "It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice," Johnson said, "but we shall not rest until that war is won." Alluding to the country's prosperity, he observed that "the richest nation on earth can afford to win it." But he also immediately set forth a practical, efficiency argument to justify the effort: "We cannot afford to lose it. One thousand dollars invested in salvaging an unemployable youth can return \$40,000 or more in his lifetime."⁴⁷

Lacking specific antipoverty plans, Johnson emphasized the general recommendations of the economists and budget officials who had begun to work under President Kennedy: improved coordination of existing federal programs, new efforts organized and carried out locally. "For the war against poverty will not be won here in Washington," Johnson explained. "It must be won in the field, in every private home, in every public office, from the court house to the White House." "The program I shall propose," he said, "will emphasize this cooperative approach to help that one-fifth of all American families with incomes too small to even meet their basic needs."

Beyond his new antipoverty program, Johnson called for "better schools, and better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities to help more Americans, especially young Americans, escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls where other citizens help to carry them." Thus Johnson went beyond mere efficiency justifications for fighting poverty to a frankly antiwelfare position. Give the poor the tools to lift themselves out of poverty, he told Congress, and working Americans would no longer have to support them on relief. Lack of money or employment, he asserted, were often symptoms of poverty, not its cause, which he speculated lay deeper, perhaps in society's failure to give everyone a fair chance. "But whatever the cause," he said, "our joint Federal-local effort must pursue poverty, pursue it wherever it exists." He requested legislative action in a wide variety of areas, including special aid to Appalachia and expansion of ARA, youth employment, a broader food stamp program, a national service corps, and a higher minimum wage. Although Johnson had essentially argued that poverty be taken out of people, his inclusion of food stamps and minimum

⁴⁷ "Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union, January 8, 1964," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964* (2 vols., Washington, 1965), I, 114; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 69-76; Heller interview; Moyers interview; Goodwin interview; Jack Valenti interview by Frantz, Oct. 18, 1969, Oral History Collection, II, 28-29. In drafts of the speech in the Johnson Library the phrase "unconditional war on poverty" was present from the beginning; the Budget Bureau evidently added efficiency justifications. "State of the Union Address," box 112, Statements (Johnson Library). For an interesting discussion of the war analogy in the depression and New Deal, see William E. Leuchtenburg, "The New Deal and the Analogue of War," in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth Century America*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and Everett Walters (Columbus, Ohio, 1964), 81-143.

wages implied acceptance of the opposite idea as well, that people would also have to be taken out of poverty through income transfers and entitlements. The importance of the latter idea had been recognized from the beginning by experts like Lampman, but it had been downplayed largely for political and budgetary reasons.⁴⁸

The president's speech was interrupted frequently by applause, more than any State of the Union message for which such interruptions had been recorded, according to a newspaper search that was done for Johnson. "There was scarcely a sentence in the speech that was not applauded," James Reston reported in the *New York Times*, "but most of the 80 demonstrations from the floor of the House came from the Democratic side, and it was obvious that there was strong opposition on the Republican side, precisely because his poverty program was so reminiscent of the New Deal programs the G.O.P. fought for so many years." "'War on Poverty' is the President's new and disarming name for a whole bundle of old programs leavened with a few new wrinkles," one skeptical Republican reported to his constituents after the specifics were provided. Republican members of the Joint Economic Committee likewise cast a wary eye: "A war on poverty will not be won by slogans; nor by shopworn programs dressed up in new packaging; nor by the defeatist relief concept of the thirties; nor by the cynical use of poverty for partisan political ends; nor by overstating the problem and thereby inexcusably lowering America's prestige in the eyes of the world." Poverty had long been a partisan issue; the Republican reaction suggested that it would remain so.⁴⁹

Several weeks after his State of the Union address, Johnson asked R. Sargent Shriver, director of the Peace Corps and brother-in-law of the late president Kennedy, to assemble his antipoverty program and guide it through Congress. Shriver adopted community action but added to it a variety of other ideas. His overall thrust was the creation of new programs and services rather than improved operation or coordination of existing ones, and he downplayed income transfers. Shriver became identified as field marshal in Johnson's domestic war, and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which Congress established in August in a heavily partisan vote and which Shriver ran in its early years, was widely thought of as its headquarters. OEO, of course, proved to be highly controversial, with far-reaching ramifications which cannot be examined here.⁵⁰

A review of the key steps taken on the road to the War on Poverty requires substantial revision of current explanations. First, although social scientists did play a significant role in launching the war, they were economists, not the sociologists that Moynihan and others feature. These economists were in part

⁴⁸ "Annual Message to Congress," *Public Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964*, I, 114-15; Moyers interview; "Poverty and Urban Policy," 179-80.

⁴⁹ Dorothy Territo to President, Jan. 9, 1964, file SP2-4, box 133, White House Central Files; *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1964, p. 7; "Norris Cotton Reports to You from the United States Senate," April 16, 1964, box 14, Norris Cotton Papers (University of New Hampshire Library, Durham); *Congressional Record*, 88 Cong., 2 sess., Feb. 26, 1964, p. 3672.

⁵⁰ Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 142-54.

guided by ideals of social justice, but their approach to poverty also reflected efficiency ideals, faith in human-capital theory, and culture-of-poverty assumptions. Equally important, they acted politically. Heller was concerned about protecting the Kennedy administration's left flank on the tax cut. He and his colleagues abandoned discussion of income transfers, redistribution, and inequality largely because of their perceived political liabilities. They were prepared to accept a modest antipoverty program aimed at the nation's youth even though it would do nothing for many of the poor. Thus it would be wrong to think of these economists simply as technocrats; they had technical knowledge and skills, it is true, but they were consciously and explicitly political as well. They loyally served the presidents they worked for, and they operated comfortably in the world of political compromise.

Just as the economists were not purely technocratic in their motives or behavior, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were not solely political. Both believed that poverty amidst plenty was intolerable and that government had the responsibility and capacity to reduce or even eliminate it. Expert opinion and information impressed them, and they wanted programs with substance, ones that would work. Not surprisingly, of course, political self-interest also motivated them and political realities shaped their responses. Contrary to Piven and Cloward's view, neither John F. Kennedy nor Johnson was drawn to the poverty issue because of black votes; in fact, they each hoped that poverty might transcend the politically nettlesome racial issue in their party. Both men also hoped poverty would be a popular issue, one that would appeal to the nation's conscience, though each worried about the opposite possibility. Thus, when Johnson declared war on poverty, he said the cause was not only just and winnable but practical and economical, able to prevent dependency and welfare, thereby saving public expenditures and expanding government revenues. That kind of rhetoric and the impulses behind it stand in sharp contrast to the popular reputation that the War on Poverty eventually acquired for largesse, egalitarianism, and humanitarianism.

Politics and ideas were entwined at every turn on the road to the War on Poverty, but fortune also played a role. There is no certainty that President Kennedy would have made poverty a leading issue had he lived. His assassination, however, created fortuitous circumstances, including most importantly Johnson's succession. Poverty was the right issue for the right man at the right time. Although poverty was receiving considerable attention from intellectuals, social critics, and journalists in the period immediately preceding Johnson's declaration, it differed from the civil rights issue. Masses of people were not demonstrating about it; that would only come after Johnson used his office to legitimize and publicize the issue. Like America's involvement in the undeclared war in Vietnam that was already in progress, its declared War on Poverty came on presidential initiative, another powerful example of the presidency's pivotal role in recent American history.