

The War on Poverty

The War on Poverty, declared in the State of the Union address on Jan. 8, 1964, was the attempt of President Lyndon B. Johnson to break the cycle of poverty affecting nearly 35 million Americans. Economic expansion had reduced unemployment to 5.3 percent, but projections showed that 25 percent of young blacks were destined for a life of irregular employment. Johnson, having enacted the modest antipoverty program of his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, wanted his own, and directed Sargent Shriver to steer the development and passage of an omnibus bill ¹

An excerpt from the 1964 State of the Union Address clearly states this...

“This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort.

It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest Nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it. One thousand dollars invested in salvaging an unemployable youth today can return \$40,000 or more in his lifetime.

Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national organization and support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the State and the local level and must be supported and directed by State and local efforts.

For the war against poverty will not be won here in Washington. It must be won in the field, in every private home, in every public office, from the courthouse to the White House.” ²

Two months later on March 16, 1964, President Johnson called a special meeting of Congress and proposed this omnibus bill.....The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.....

Economic Opportunity Act of 1964

“Because it is right, because it is wise, and because, for the first time in our history, it is possible to conquer poverty, I submit, for the consideration of the Congress and the country, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.” – Lyndon B. Johnson³

Paraphrased:

The Act did not merely expand old programs or improve what is already being done, but instead charted a new course. It intended to strike at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty. It provided five basic opportunities. It will give:

1. underprivileged young Americans the opportunity to develop skills, continue education, and find useful work
2. every community an opportunity to develop a comprehensive plan to fight its own poverty and help them to carry out their plans
3. an opportunity to enlist as volunteers in the war against poverty
4. workers and farmers the opportunity to break through particular barriers which bar their escape from poverty
5. entire nation the opportunity for a concerted attack on poverty

This is how it was proposed to create those opportunities:

1. Giving a high priority to helping young Americans who lack skills, who have not completed their education or who cannot complete it because they are too poor. Recommended the creation of a job Corps, a Work-Training Program, and a Work Study Program
2. Through a new Community Action program, strike at poverty at its source in urban and rural areas for the young and old alike. It asks men and women throughout the country to prepare long-range plans for the attack on poverty in their own local communities
3. Asked for the authority to recruit and train skilled volunteers for the war against poverty
4. Intended to create new opportunities for certain hard-hit groups to break out of the pattern of poverty
5. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) is created to prevent uncoordinated and unrelated efforts³

“What you are being asked to consider is not a simple or an easy program. But poverty is not a simple or an easy enemy.

It cannot be driven from the land by a single attack on a single front. Were this so we would have conquered poverty long ago.

Nor can it be conquered by government alone. . . .

Thursday, August 12, 2010

Today, for the first time in our history, we have the power to strike away the barriers to full participation in our society. Having the power, we have the duty.....

We are fully aware that this program will not eliminate all the poverty in America in a few months or a few years. Poverty is deeply rooted and its causes are many.

But this program will show the way to new opportunities for millions of our fellow citizens.

It will provide a lever with which we can begin to open the door to our prosperity for those who have been kept outside.

It will also give us the chance to test our weapons, to try our energy and ideas and imagination for the many battles yet to come. As conditions change, and as experience illuminates our difficulties, we will be prepared to modify our strategy.

And this program is much more than a beginning.

Rather it is a commitment. It is a total commitment by this President, and this Congress, and this nation, to pursue victory over the most ancient of mankind's enemies." - Lyndon B. Johnson ³

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Johnson on August 10, 1964.

1. Source: Internet: The American Presidency

Directory: <http://ei.grolier.com/presidents/aae/side/waronp.html>

2. Source: Internet: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum

Directory: <http://www.lbiblib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640108.asp>

3. Source: Internet: Modern History Sourcebook

Directory: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1964johnson-warpoverty.html>

4. Source: Internet: The National Community Action Foundation

Directory: <http://www.ncaf.org/wiw.html>

5. Source: Internet: The Community Action Association of Pennsylvania

Directory: <http://www.thecaap.org>

6. Source: Internet: The National Community Action Foundation

Directory: <http://www.ncaf.org/cacaa.html>

7. Source: Internet: the National Community Action Foundation

Directory: <http://www.ncaf.org/eua.html>