

# The War on Poverty and Affirmative Action

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## Introduction

Guy Peters describes public policy as: “the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through other agents, as it has an influence on the lives of citizens“ (Gerston, 1997). The public agendas ‘War on Poverty’ and ‘Affirmative Action’, addressed social and substantive issues that were not only controversial, but had major and long-lasting impacts on society. These issues shaped society into what it is today. The public agendas that these policies created will remain relevant for years to come.

## Public Policy - War on Poverty

In the State of the Union address 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared ‘War on Poverty’. His vision was that every citizen should have the opportunity to reach their full potential regardless of social class. The vision was to allow the underprivileged to break free from the cycle of poverty through a ‘hand-ups’ approach (i.e., through resources that would help them to move out of the cycle) and to provide the socially and/or economically disadvantaged with the tools to equip themselves to compete successfully in the job market. This was part of Johnson’s ultimate vision of building a ‘Great Society’. The aim of the Johnson ‘War on Poverty’ was that “the poor will be less dependent and more employable and to provide them with equal opportunities to develop and participate in all of society” (Brown-Collier, 1998). Johnson not only had a desire to

help the poor, he knew that he had the influence to bring this problem to the policy makers to do something about it, as he stated in his address in March 1965: “But now I do have that chance - and I’ll let you in on a secret - I mean to use it” (Brown-Collier, 1998). Seizing upon his opportunity, he exposed the problem of poverty in his State of the Union address: “the cycle of poverty affects nearly 35 million Americans” (Grolier Encyclopedia, 2004) and thereby initiated a highly controversial political debate that continues in some ways even until this day.

Not only did Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’ challenge the American Vision (the ability of an individual to realize his / her dream regardless of his/her race, class, social status etc.) but changed the illusion of success to a stark vision of a sometimes cruel reality. The American Dream was not attainable for the economically and /or socially disadvantaged.

This vision challenged the belief of the America of the 1960s, that every individual had the possibility to realize his/her potential and made the public aware that the existence of poverty was not due to personal character flaws, but rather to external environmental influences. If the people and their political leaders had become sensitized to the problem of poverty in the early part of 1960s, it was largely the product of exposure to the dismal condition of poor whites in Appalachia. The ‘War on Poverty’ made the public aware of the problems of the inner cities, rural areas, etc. and of the deprivation and desperation that many people were forced to suffer.

A major substantive issue that the ‘War on Poverty’ agenda was trying to address was the vision of classless society. As mentioned before, the economically / socially disadvantaged were not fully equipped to participate in society. In order to fulfill this

vision of breaking the cycle of poverty and achieving a classless society, income needed to be redistributed across class lines.

This was highly controversial. It meant more involvement by the government in society, at a point in time when such matters were considered to be of a private nature. A controversial component of this issue was re-distribution through taxation. This was seen to have the potential to create tensions between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Today society has somewhat changed its focus on this issue.

The planners of the 'War on Poverty' addressed this issue by reassuring the public that there would be no 'hand outs' but rather resources that would help the underprivileged to move out of the cycle of poverty. Also, the advantages of helping the underprivileged would be better for the nation as a whole. The political propaganda promoted the belief that the 'War on Poverty' would not be an additional public cost but rather a benefit.

Even though Johnson referred to African Americans and poverty in his State of the Union address: "25% of young blacks were destined for irregular employment" (Grolier Encyclopedia, 2004), policy makers did not always relate the two issues and were not prepared for the racial repercussions that accompanied the process. Economists and sociologists were only in the process of accumulating data that revealed the prevalence of poverty in urban African American ghettos, but the deprivation and desperation of those in such neighborhoods would become widely known only after the 'War on Poverty' was underway.

The strategy of the 'War on Poverty' agenda was to "pass the bill now, worry about its effects and implementation later" (Butler and Kondratas, 1987). Therefore, the

objectives of programs for the agenda were not fully investigated or even clearly stated, and the fine details were often not fully included. It was “Johnson’s belief that these details would be worked out later” (Brown-Collier, 1998). He also believed that he had only nine months to pass all of his proposed bills before his honeymoon relationship with Congress would come to an end. The strategy behind the agenda was to provide the overall intent and objective of the ‘War on Poverty’ vision, and later implement the programs and continuously modify the strategy as the knowledge and experience of the programs came into effect.

During the process of the implementation of the programs of the ‘War on Poverty’, there was a shift of focus, and the policy was re-examined and adjusted. This was caused primarily by change in political support for the agenda due to the perception that the ‘War on Poverty’ began to be associated with African Americans. Due to changes in policy agenda, planners had to constantly be on the defense when trying to implement new innovative programs.

In order to carry out this vision of the ‘War on Poverty’, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was passed. This statute wages the ‘War on Poverty’ under the banner of economic opportunity.

The act addressed the following areas of need in American Society in 1960s:

1. the need of young Americans who did not have the skills or education to successfully compete in the job market (they were too poor to obtain or complete their education);
2. the need to develop both strategies and commitment in local communities;
3. the need to remove barriers to alternatives for workers and farmers;

4. the need for volunteers to help fight the ‘War on Poverty’;
5. the need for a governmental agency to address and support the ‘War on Poverty’ strategy.

These needs were envisioned as opportunities. The act brings forth the following opportunities for those in need:

1. the opportunity for young Americans to develop in the areas of experience, knowledge and skills in order to be adequately prepared for the job market;
2. the opportunity to develop long and short term strategic action plans to attack the issues of poverty in local communities;
3. the opportunity to create new options for workers, farmers, etc. to break free from the cycle of poverty;
4. the opportunity for dedicated people to offer their services to the cause of eliminating poverty;
5. the opportunity to establish a National Headquarters for the ‘War on Poverty’.

Government Strategies on how new opportunities would be created, included:

1. creating a skilled workforce among young Americans via Job Corps, Work Training Programs, and Work Study Programs;
2. assisting each community to address the issues needed to prepare action programs;

3. creating an 'Enlist Program' for those who wanted to volunteer their time in helping those in need;
4. providing programs such as new loan and guarantee programs, incentive programs, etc. to those who employ the unemployed, as well as retraining and work programs, agricultural programs, etc.

To provide direction and strategies to the 'War on Poverty' and address and oversee the issues related to the newly created programs (such as Head Start, Job Corps, CAP), the bill created the agency of the 'Office of Economic Opportunity'. The OEO reported directly to the President. Sargent Shriver directed the new programs during most of the Johnson administration.

Other agencies also operated certain programs, e.g., the Department of Labor - Work Training Programs, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare - the Work-Study programs, etc.

As noted, Congress had little knowledge of the agenda of the 'War on Poverty', but did not relinquish all control, as it still had the ability to pass further legislation to modify the policy. Various other programs were passed or modified during this period in relation to the 'War on Poverty' to build Johnson's 'Great Society', including:

1. Food Stamps Program - to provide assistance via coupons for food;
2. Head Start legislation - to provide educational assistance;
3. Health Care Programs - to provide health assistance;
4. Housing Programs - to provide housing assistance 'model housing units';
5. Rural Programs.

By the end of Johnson's administration, the eradication of poverty had not been accomplished. However, statistics did show that there had been a major improvement. "The number of persons living under the poverty line had fallen from 40 million to 26 million" (Brown-Collier, 1998).

Many studies that assessed the 'War on Poverty' contrast the success and the failures. The Brookly institute was the major assessor of the 'War on Poverty' during the end of the Johnson administration and the periods after. The major failures were the lack of funding for programs, the lack of clear objectives and goals, and lack of structure in the area of designing the administrative side of the programs. This was mainly caused by the Johnson mentality of pass-now / details-later, and Congress' lack of investigation prior to approval. Additionally, Congress shifted its focus due to the Vietnam War and applied funds intended for domestic issues to foreign issues, creating a funding vacuum.

However, failures led to increased program evaluation, clearer objectives, and more effective implementation of programs. The agenda was highly criticized due to both the high expectations of the poor and resistance of certain groups. This caused a high demand for program evaluation.

Statistics at the end of the Johnson administration proved that the policy did work by reducing poverty but not by completely eliminating it. As Johnson himself said, the 'War on Poverty' would take years, and it has.

The 'War on Poverty' was continuously modified to meet times and needs, as had been predicted by Johnson who stated that policy should be continuously modified to meet new conditions. Under every administration after Johnson, including Nixon, Regan,

Clinton, etc. the agenda was addressed and reviewed. These social programs initiated under Johnson's 'War on Poverty' now represent a major part of federal spending.

Overall the 'War on Poverty' was a success. The economic report to President Clinton in 1997 states that "poverty would be much higher today if it were not for the programs and policies we associate with the War on Poverty" ( Brown-Collier, 1998). However, this successful trend may now end by the shift in focus and funds from the poor to Anti-Terrorism (including the war in Afghanistan and Iraq) and Homeland Security.

Even though the 'War on Poverty' did not eliminate poverty from society, it did shift the perception of society. The awareness created by this public policy caused the problem to be addressed. This awareness allowed the public to be more involved and supportive in the political process.

The legacy of the 'War on Poverty' will be always linked to the Democratic party and this perception lingers on to this very day. The public policy makers' awareness of this, has helped to shape the US political process through the years. Today, no domestic policy discussion can be made without asking first, what it does for the poor.

#### Public Policy – Affirmative Action

The aim of 'Affirmative Action' is to help eliminate discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Civil rights programs have been evolving since 1866 but did not take form until the 1960s and 1970s. The actual law has been continuously modified, principally via the judiciary process.

Rosa Parks, in 1955, sparked a series of incidents that precipitated the most powerful civil rights movement in history, one that would change US society forever. The 1960s marked an era of confrontation and demand for change. Dr. Martin Luther King was the pioneer and leader of this movement. The protests of African Americans and the cruel tactics of local police forcefully brought this issue to the attention of the public. With publicity, awareness grew in society. The need for change pressed public policy makers to come up with concrete solutions.

In response to the racial issues, President John F. Kennedy passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1961, which made reference to Affirmative Action in the hiring practices of all federally funded programs (including projects, institutions, etc.). This act was regulated by the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity.

Johnson was the president that defined the concept of Affirmative Action, and was the first to actually use the term. As in the 'War on Poverty', Johnson developed a similar pattern of implementation for the policy of Affirmative Action, i.e. "pass the bill now, worry about its effects and implementation later" (Butler and Kondratas, 1987). Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act 1964, during his first six months in office. The legislation was a landmark, as it provided the equal opportunity of employment without discrimination on the grounds of race, color, religion and national origin.

Like all of Johnson's strategies, he passed the bill first and defined it later. In his speech 1965, Johnson explained the concept of 'Affirmative Action' to the American people. His speech was powerful. "You do not take a man who for years has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race, saying, 'you are free to compete with all others,' and still justly believe you have been completely fair..."

This is the next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity - not just legal equity but human ability - not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result” (Brunner, 2004).

It was Johnson’s vision to continuously modify the strategy as the knowledge and experience of the programs came into effect. To further promote this vision, the Voting Rights Act 1965 was passed. This legislation prohibited racial discrimination in voting. The Civil Rights Act was amended to include gender in 1967.

Again under the Johnson administration, there was a shift of focus and implementation of ‘Affirmative Action’ under the Philadelphia plan, due to pressure from third parties (such as unions, etc.) and within government agencies to drop the program. The objectives were not clearly drawn up and this gave way to the enemies of Affirmative Action, giving them ground to oppose it.

On the other hand, civil rights groups such as A. Phillip Randolph Institute, pointed out and expressed their concerns towards the implementation of ‘Affirmative Action’. They believed that the role of the government should be more proactive.

Under the Nixon administration, the Department of Labor was committed to “equal opportunities for all Americans” (Kotlowski, 1998) and the Executive Secretary of the Department was a prime promoter of this thinking. The latter believed that “equal opportunities for all Americans” should be a priority for the society. However, Congress was split on this issue. This was a controversial plan. The vision of ‘Affirmative Action’ was the same as the ‘War on Poverty’, i.e. equal opportunity “...an equal chance at the line and then giving those who haven’t had their chance, who’ve had it denied for a

hundred years, that little extra start that they need so that in truth it's an equal chance" (Kotlowksi, 1998).

Nixon defended Affirmative Action by saying "we must set goals, targets and timetables..... The way we put the man on the moon in less than 10 years is with goals, targets and timetables"( Kotlowksi, 1998).

Nixon was a shrewd politician. His support of the policy was largely due to the fact that many Democrats had stopped supporting it. He also used a number of political tactics, such as waiting for the Congressional session break before Christmas to pass the Philadelphia Plan, (and it worked).

The Minority Business Enterprise that fosters economic development of minorities was also implemented. Amendments made in 1972 to the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, gave the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission more authority to force companies to comply with Affirmative Action Programs. The EEOC also began to regulate the private sector.

Since the Act was so poorly planned, like most of Johnson's policies, the courts started to see its flaws, e.g. reverse discrimination, and the lack of clear company or educational institution policies for Affirmative Action as in the case of the Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke. In response to public awareness on reverse discrimination various states, including California, Washington, and Florida have recently banned certain forms of 'Affirmative Action'.

The Clinton administration reaffirmed that 'Affirmative Action' was needed and stricter guidelines needed to be implemented. However, Clinton condemned any

programs that were used for the purpose of reverse discrimination, quotas, and preferred preference.

The 'Affirmative Action' review report to the president, showed that 'Affirmative Action' did have some positive effects. It allowed citizens to seek help against discrimination. However, discrimination still existed and there were still controversial issues to be resolved. The report to the president stated the following:

“Blatant discrimination is a continuous problem in the labor market. Perhaps the most convincing evidence come from the 'audit' studies, in which white and minority (male or female) job seekers are given similar resumes and sent to the same set of firms to apply for a job. These studies often find that employers are less likely to interview or offer a job to minority applicants and to female applicants” (Brown-Collier, 1998).

The report also provided that the salaries of white males were higher than those of minorities and females, (with all of the other factors being the same). In addition the report identified that there were substantial complaints in relation to discrimination to the Fair Employment Practices Commission.

Even though 'Affirmative Action' did not eliminate discrimination against African Americans, women, etc., it did shift the perception of society. For example, Colin Powell would not be in his current position if it were not for this change in perception. However, there is still room for improvement, discrimination still occurs and the judiciary and the legislative have not done enough to give African Americans, women and other minorities that 'equal chance'.

Many in white society did not want to acknowledge that African Americans, women, and other minorities have been at a disadvantage. In 1970's protesters decried

‘Affirmative Action’, saying that it was not fair. They failed to see the reality. It was not fair that African American college graduates, like Colin Powell, were given jobs cleaning floors because no one wanted to give them a job because of their color. It was not fair that women were paid less because of their gender. Tensions from years of injustice cannot be cleared up through the passing of legislation. However, the legislation needs to be enforced. Both the legislative and judiciary branches of government still give mix messages on ‘Affirmative Action’ issues.

As per Colin Powell’s speech to the Republican National Convention, ‘Affirmative Action’ is needed. ‘Equal Opportunity’ is the overall message of both the ‘War on Poverty’ and ‘Affirmative Action’. The agenda was and is to provide every citizen with the same chance to fully participate in society. Johnson’s legacy is that the most significant legislation had been passed during his administration. This legislation has shaped / re-shaped society today. Even though both of these policies did not reach their original expectations, circumstances and situations have improved drastically from 1960. There is still room for additional improvement, but as Johnson said, policy makers should modify conditions of the programs as experience shows. “We seek not just freedom but opportunity - not just legal equity but human ability - not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result ”(Brunner, 2004). People want / need an equal chance at the American Dream.

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