

The War on Poverty in Appalachia

Ronald D Eller
Distinguished Professor of History
University of Kentucky

The occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the War on Poverty this year provides an opportunity to reflect on the 1960s, one of the most dramatic decades of change in American history, as well as upon continuing public efforts to fight poverty.

It is not surprising that these reflections have been highly politicized, with conservatives pointing to the failure of expensive government programs to eliminate poverty and liberals pointing to the successes of these programs in creating opportunities for the poor and as a safety net against social disaster. Recently Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin issued a 200 page report criticizing the inefficiencies and failures of government anti-poverty programs, while President Obama, in a speech reminiscent of President Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union Address in 1964 called growing income inequality in the United States "the defining challenge of our time." President Johnson called for a wide-ranging war on poverty. President Obama has called for increasing the minimum wage, improving educational opportunities, and following through on health care reform.

Appalachia continues to play a major role in this debate over poverty and inequality, just as it did in the 1960s. A rash of recent media attention has refocused national interest on Appalachia, more often than not as a symbol of the failure of the War on Poverty to complete its mission. One recent writer for the National Review described the region as a

"Big White Ghetto", a "vast moribund matrix of Wonder Bread-hued . . . towns and villages stretching from northern Mississippi to southern New York, a slowly dissipating nebula of poverty and misery. . . ." The most talented young people have already migrated to the city, he claimed, leaving behind a depressed population of unemployed, dependent, drug addicted rejects trapped by geography, "adverse selection," and their own self-destructive values. A more sympathetic journalist simply blamed the desperate economic conditions in the mountains on "a lack of job opportunities," and another has referred to the declining economic condition of the entire American middle-class as the "Appalachification of the world." Many of these recent accounts of poverty in Appalachia apply the same false assumptions about the culture and history of the mountains that fueled the War on Poverty in the 1960s, and most continue to ignore the structural challenges within the political-economy of the region. Challenges that continue to fuel inequality.

Significant differences, however, exist between the 1960s and the present, and understanding the context for the War on Poverty and the Great Society rhetoric in which it was embedded provides a framework for considering both the successes and the failures of that effort. Appreciating the lessons that can be learned from the past five decades of anti-poverty efforts in Appalachia also offers insight and a valuable window to the current national debate.

The origins of the War on Poverty lay deep in the experiences of depression and war that shaped the post-World War II generation as well as in the enduring values and assumptions that have fueled the American Dream for two centuries. Having crawled from the depths of a Great Depression and overcome the challenges of a global war, Americans in the 1950s were supremely confident and optimistic about their future. Having witnessed

the benefits of new science, new technologies, and massive government planning efforts during the war, middle-class Americans had great faith in the power of education and technology to level the economic playing field. In an era of Cold War competition with world communism, they believed that the American political and economic system could extend the benefits of prosperity to everyone if only disadvantaged people would seize the opportunity and make the right choices. There was certainly nothing wrong with the American system, and youth were encouraged to help spread the benefits of that system through public service, education, civic involvement, and outreach to the poor.

It was a time of growing prosperity and affluence, and when writers such as Michael Harrington began to point out that the new prosperity had failed to reach certain populations and places within America and when Jack Kennedy saw the plight of unemployed coal mining families in West Virginia during the Democratic primary of 1960, it was an easy step for a new generation of leaders to want to eliminate this inequality. A small anti-poverty program was already in the planning stages when Kennedy was assassinated, and Lyndon Johnson, never someone to do things in a small way, declared "all-out war on human poverty and unemployment" in January of 1964. "We have (today)," he told Congress, "a unique opportunity and obligation to prove the success of our system; to disprove those cynics and critics at home and abroad who question our purpose and our competence."

In the spring of that year the President launched a national poverty tour in order to drum up media support for his proposed Economic Opportunity Act, the heart of the War on Poverty. Some of the first stops on his tour were locations in Appalachia, a rural and predominantly white part of Harrington's "Other America." Just days before coming to

southeast Ohio, he and Mrs. Johnson visited Martin County in eastern Kentucky. Standing on the porch of unemployed worker Tom Fletcher's hillside home, Johnson famously declared, "We are not going to be satisfied in this administration until we drive poverty underground and until we find jobs for all people who can and want to work. We are not going to be satisfied until our people have decent housing, until our aged folks have medical care, until our people have equal rights."

Johnson continued his tour two weeks later when he visited Appalachian Ohio, stopping in Nelsonville, a declining coal community, and Athens, where for the first time he linked the campaign to eliminate poverty with a larger crusade to build a Great Society for all Americans. "With your courage and with your compassion and your desire," he told the students gathered outside the portico of Memorial Hall at Ohio University, "we will build the Great Society. It is a Society where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled. Where no man who wants work will fail to find it. Where no citizen will be barred from any door because of his birthplace or his color or his church. Where peace and security is common among neighbors and possible among nations." Johnson would later deliver a commencement address at the University of Michigan in which he laid out a more formal vision for the Great Society, but his challenge to young people to "finish the unfinished work in your own land" and to correct the inequalities of race and poverty was first laid down in Appalachian Ohio.

Appalachia was central to the War on Poverty, and the War on Poverty was as an essential element in a larger moral crusade to achieve a good society based upon American principles of liberty and justice. Often lost in our cynical, partisan political world today,

these principles underlay the political culture of the 1960s and fueled the post-war confidence that prosperity was the right of every American. "For a century we labored to settle and to subdue a continent," Lyndon Johnson reminded the country. "For a half century we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all our people. The challenge of the next century," he added, "is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization." For white middle-class Americans, Appalachia provided an important symbolic link between the values of an older, rural American civilization as they understood it and their post-war vision of the future. The romantic idea of Appalachia as a region of hard-working, independent, and patriotic people reinforced traditional republican ideals. In an era of heightened racial consciousness, the region's perceived "whiteness" connected the War on Poverty to the great Society's larger goals of abundance, liberty, and opportunity for all.

Certainly the roots of the War on Poverty were intertwined with the civil rights movement, urban decay, presidential politics, and the rising influence of social scientists in government, but Appalachia, with its contradictory images of American otherness, was at the center of that campaign. When asked whether the War on Poverty was designed specifically to help urban blacks, Adam Yarmolinsky, a key advisor to both Kennedy and Johnson, commented that administration planners in 1963 paid less attention to the problems of the ghettos than to Appalachia. "Color it Appalachian," he concluded, "if you are going to color it anything at all."

The deeply rooted notion of Appalachian "whiteness," inaccurate from the start, ironically provided additional justification for including Appalachia in the "other America"

during a Cold War era in which white society sought to hide institutional racism and saw inequality as the product of natural selection and cultural choice. The pervasiveness of poverty in white Appalachia allowed proponents of the War on Poverty to minimize racism and economic injustice as causes of poverty and to focus on changing the behavior of the poor themselves. Along with poor people of color in inner city neighborhoods, rural areas of the South, migrant communities, and native American reservations, white hillbillies, so the argument went, only needed to modernize their attitudes and values in order to participate in the American success story.

That same optimism about the future, therefore, and the same confidence in education and technology that led post-war Americans to believe that they could create the Great Society also diverted public attention from weaknesses and inequalities within American economic and political life and placed the burden of responsibility for poverty upon the victims of those injustices. Poor people and poor places needed to be brought into the American mainstream by bringing to these places the symbols of economic opportunity (education, health care, housing, transportation, and jobs) and by changing the values and expectations of poor people themselves, especially the children. While programs to improve the nation's infrastructure, environment, and cultural life characterized the majority of Great Society legislation helping to grow the new middle-class, the War on Poverty, through the vehicle of the Office of Economic Opportunity, concentrated on moving individuals from a "culture of poverty" into the cultural mainstream. Although based upon two different strategies for development, both sets of policies were grounded in post-war assumptions about growth, the consumer culture, and the fairness of the American system.

Most Great Society programs were designed to improve the quality of American life by expanding access to consumer goods that had become more widely available as a result of American wealth. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, Medicare, Medicaid, amendments to the Social Security Act, the Food Stamp Act, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, public broadcasting, the Urban Mass Transportation Act, a series of acts to protect the environment, special programs for rural development and consumer protection, and many other reforms contributed to an emergent middle-class culture, greater security for the elderly, and increasing opportunities for young people.

In Appalachia, the incarnation of the larger Great Society strategies was to be found in the Appalachian Regional Commission. Created the year after the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act and never really part of the War on Poverty, the ARC focused its resources on building public infrastructure such as roads, industrial parks, vocational schools, and water systems that were deemed necessary for industrial development in the region. Based upon the assumption that economic development had by-passed the mountains because of geography, ARC programs for the past five decades have sought to connect Appalachia to the national and global economy and to modernize its public institutions. Like other Great Society legislation, ARC policies have concentrated resources in a select few "growth centers" in the region, expanding services to the poor and growing the mountain middle class, but doing little to alter conditions in the most rural distressed counties or to address systemic political or economic inequalities throughout Appalachia.

The heart of the War on Poverty, on the other hand, was the Equal Opportunity Act and its associated programs. Launched in the summer of 1964 the anti-poverty campaign itself was comparatively short-lived, losing most of its energy and funding by 1968. Although some of its programs, such as Head Start and Community Action survived, budget cuts and mission changes, shifting federal budget concerns because of the escalation of the Vietnam War, criticism from state and local power brokers, and a new administration under Richard Nixon that shifted anti-poverty priorities from uplift to management, brought about a decline of enthusiasm for the War on Poverty in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the period from 1965 - 1972 marked a period of dramatic confrontation within the United States and especially within Appalachia over the causes of inequality and whether the nation was willing to pay the price of justice for all its citizens.

While the Appalachian Regional Commission assumed that what Appalachia needed most was infrastructure for economic development, the Office of Economic Opportunity assumed that poverty was an individual condition that could be overcome by changes in attitudes and behavior and by extending opportunities for job training to the poor. The initial plans for the War on Poverty were drawn up by the President's Council of Economic Advisors and reflected the common belief among economists that economic growth would eventually lift all boats if government investment in education and job training were expanded for the poor. Many of the special programs associated with the War on Poverty, therefore, reflected this emphasis on New Deal type job training activities. Others introduced strategies from the new behavioral science disciplines designed to engage poor people in their own uplift and to expand social services to the poor at the local level.

Central to these strategies and what would become critical to the success of the War on Poverty was the idea of community action which would organize local anti-poverty agencies made up of local leaders, social service providers and poor people. These community action agencies would design local intervention strategies that would be funded by the OEO, and volunteers, mostly college students (who served as VISTAs or Appalachian Volunteers), were assigned to each program to help implement them. By 1965 community action agencies had been organized in almost every Appalachian county or group of counties. The majority of these agencies were controlled by local elected officials, often school superintendents, and local social service providers, with token representation from the poor, but in a few cases poor citizens or their representatives came to dominate the agency.

Although the idea of local decision-making appealed to President Johnson, many of the intellectuals who planned the War on Poverty feared that white leaders in Southern and urban communities would siphon off federal funds designated for poor black communities. Thus initial OEO policies required the "maximum feasible participation of the poor" on agency boards. Some OEO administrators early in the program believed that community action agencies should empower poor people to organize themselves as a political bloc in order to challenge control of existing institutions, just as middle-class voters used their political power to challenge special interests. Several inner-city community action programs and some in Appalachia adopted this more confrontational approach, which was advocated by Chicago sociologist and labor leader Saul Alinsky as an alternative to the traditional strategy of simply expanding services to the poor. These more aggressive political strategies proved to be especially popular among young volunteers and

anti-poverty warriors fresh from the civil rights movement, and in Appalachia some of the more radical activists soon began to confront long established political machines and economic interests. Organizations of poor people and poverty workers challenged school boards, tested welfare rights and policy for public housing, and confronted the coal industry on surface mining and black lung issues.

The majority of community action programs, however, followed a more traditional pattern of expanding social services to the poor, modernizing facilities, and transforming expectations and values. Based upon the ideas of anthropologist Oscar Lewis and over a century of mythology about Appalachian culture, reformers assumed that it was the attitudes and values of mountain people, not the inequalities that resulted from the economic and political history of the place, which prevented individual success and community progress. Mountain people, like minorities elsewhere, lived in a "culture of poverty" that prevented their assimilation into the affluent mainstream. Let me use a personal story to illustrate my point.

When my family out-migrated from West Virginia in the 1950s because there were few employment opportunities in the coal fields, we landed in a working-class neighborhood of an Ohio industrial town. My schoolmates were the sons and daughters of blacks from the Deep South and ethnic immigrants from Eastern Europe, but because I was white and male, my white middle-class teachers believed that I could overcome my background. One day not long after we arrived, a teacher got me aside and said: "Ronnie, you have talent, and you can make something out of yourself, but first you will have to become somebody different from who your people are." Of course she was referring to the fact that I spoke like a hillbilly, dressed like a hillbilly and went back home to Appalachia

every other weekend. Because I wanted to succeed and because my mother hoped that her children would all graduate from high school, I soon learned to talk properly, to dress properly - no longer wearing my mother's handmade clothes - and to listen to the proper kind of music. I learned to pass, but I never gave up completely my culture.

Years later when I was in college, I encountered these assumptions again. Just before my family returned to West Virginia, I won an athletic and academic scholarship to attend a small college (that is how a small number of minorities seize their opportunity for success. We become entertainers or athletes). During the summer of one of my academic years, I got a job as a case worker in child welfare in my home county in southern West Virginia and thus joined the War on Poverty. At one of our training sessions we were handed a small book titled Yesterday's People. We were told that it would provide us with all we needed to know about the children with whom we would be working. The author was a missionary minister who had come to the mountains a decade earlier. He found that the major barrier to helping people in the region was its anachronistic culture. Mountaineers, he suggested, were a people out of step with the times whose attitudes and values did not allow them to succeed in the modern world. Our job as summer case workers was to raise the expectations of the children of our poor clients so that they too might aspire to higher education and thus escape the chains of their culture.

It did not take us long, however, to realize that there was nothing particularly wrong with the attitudes and values of these families. They did not value education because they themselves were not valued by their schools. They failed to succeed in school because they didn't have the clothing or books in their homes that were common among middle-class kids, and the middle-class teachers often had lower expectations of certain children from

certain families in the community. They were poor because their fathers did not have jobs, and often their fathers did not have jobs because they voted the wrong way or the alternatives for employment were limited. We learned, along with many other poverty warriors, that it was not some deviant culture that had caused the inequalities within our communities but the consequences of race, class, and gender subjugation that had allowed some to succeed and others to be trapped in generational poverty. The ground was uneven because resources were unequally distributed, the wealth generated by hard labor was shipped out of the region to enrich others, public institutions were scattered and weak because taxes were sparse or non-existent, the political system responded more to those with economic power than to the common good, and government strategies for economic growth unduly benefitted local elites or distant investors.

Let me be clear. The inequalities within Appalachia and between Appalachia and the rest of the nation are the result of relationships of power not the deviant qualities of race or regional culture. When young poverty warriors and local poor people began to organize in order to confront these power structures, political elites within the region complained loudly that the War on Poverty was fomenting revolution, not uplift. Using tactics similar to those employed by segregationist leaders in the South to resist the civil rights movement, they accused the OEO of funding communist sympathizers and other outsiders who were seeking to overthrow the established order in the mountains. By the end of 1965, most of the followers of the Alinsky school of community organizing left Washington, and by 1968 new federal legislation required that all OEO funds be administered through elected state and local governments. The cost of the Vietnam War took its toll on federal budgets, and opposition to the war brought down the Johnson

administration itself. The new President, Richard Nixon, appointed Donald Rumsfeld to dismantle the OEO, and most of its associated programs were spun off to other agencies.

Public policy toward the poor in the last quarter of the twentieth century shifted to one of maintenance, expanding the welfare "safety net" by dramatically increasing government transfer payments. The War on Poverty was over.

If the War on Poverty failed to eliminate poverty in America, let alone in Appalachia, it was not because of some deficient culture within the mountains but because of the lack of national will to build a fair and equitable society and because of the failure of government programs to create a level playing field within the region. Michael Harrington was wrong. Appalachia is not part of some "other America" but is in fact a reflection of America. Anti-poverty programs did little to address problems of inequitable land ownership, capital outflow, or political cronyism in Appalachia. Programs designed to provide jobs and to develop the region's economy concentrated resources in middle-class growth centers, failed to protect the landscape and water quality, encouraged the growth of consumer dependency, and facilitated the outmigration of youth. Except for the passage of the coal severance tax, there has been little tax reform aimed at promoting energy efficiency, civic infrastructure, or alternative economic growth.

Fulfilling the promise made by President Johnson to the people of Appalachia that spring of 1964 will require us to reject simple, pejorative, and romantic notions of Appalachia and to confront the structural inequalities within American life with honesty as well as compassion. Rebuilding the American Dream in the mountains calls for us to re-envision the economy and to reform public institutions. Appalachia's long history as a

resource colony has not only limited economic diversification, income security, and upward mobility in its coal communities, but it has narrowed the economic alternatives and enterprise potential for neighboring, non-extractive communities as well. Bringing balance to a new economy will demand strategies that address geographic disparities within the region between urban and rural places and that promote investment in a wide variety of business sectors ranging from tourism and forest products to small scale agriculture, light manufacturing, and innovative technologies. An economic vision that focuses only on marketing extractive resources to consumers outside of the mountains must give way to a more sustainable vision that includes regional markets, energy efficiency, and local energy production. Above all a new economy must place the interests of local communities and working families above those of distant corporations and markets.

Such changes will require many public institutions to rethink their role in the mountains, including higher education and health care, but none more than the role of government. For decades Appalachia has served as the nation's poster child for government incompetence and corruption. At least since the turn of the twentieth century powerful economic interests have controlled public decision making and stifled democracy. In an economy with few options, those who control the jobs control the political system, and they use their wealth and power to protect their own interests or those of their distant investors. Taxes are kept low; public services are neglected; workplace and environmental regulations are ignored, and dissent is punished. When industry is allowed to purchase the complicity of state and local officials, the result is a kind of social inequality that leaves the majority of citizens (not just the poor) powerless, angry, and/or apathetic. This

inequality in political power fuels economic injustice, limits opportunity, and perpetuates dependency.

So what can we do about persistent poverty in Appalachia, about growing income inequality in America as a whole? We can pick up the challenge laid down by President Johnson to those students in 1964 to become active in the quest to build a better society and to "bring equal justice to all our citizens." We can renew the energy that motivated the post-war generation to continue the American struggle to extend the American Dream to all its citizens, and we can revive the commitment of so many young people in the 1960s to fulfilling that promise in our time. The War on Poverty may have failed to achieve its objectives, but we have learned much from that failure, and its goals remind us that democracy is a continuing process. Perhaps it is time for us to abandon the petty politics of self-interest and recover the spirit of collective responsibility that motivated the War on Poverty, the civil rights movement, and the movement for women's rights. Perhaps it is time for a new generation to pick up the President's vision for a great society. This may be the defining challenge of our time.