

THE WAR ON POVERTY NOTES ON INSURGENT RESPONSE

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There have been no shortage of writers to refute the claims of Johnson's War on Poverty. The liberal-radical publications have echoed each other in a long critique: Johnson's "total war on want" is predicated on the questionable assumptions that the economy is "sound" and that a few dollars and a few demonstrations will start a giant parade of poor people toward middle-income America. The official poverty program, as we have been told, does nothing to strike at economic stagnation or to reverse the generally regressive tax structure in the country. It will not rehabilitate the slums or build public homes or plan for human needs in any manner requiring basic changes in the status quo political economy.

Its belittlers say that the war on poverty amounts to no more than a dramatic consolidation of existing service programs plus a new version of Roosevelt's CCC. The current debate is whether Johnson's battle cry is the rhetoric of a cruel politician after a few votes or a sincere search for temporary amelioratives to face the crisis of joblessness and youth delinquency. But the implications of the war on poverty are more significant than the size of its first budget would imply.

The President's televised Poverty Message to Congress and the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act which followed it have brought a remarkable array of people from universities, private welfare and charitable organizations, foundations, and local governments vying for the poverty millions. The announced commitment to "total victory" has shaken funds loose from numerous private sources for research, air travel, conferences, publicity, and prospectuses related to poverty. Citizens' groups like the UAW-backed Crusade Against Poverty have been formed to supplement and keep a watch-eye on the program of Johnson. In city after city, Johnson's declared war has mobilized "poverty corporations" comprised of the city's political and business elite who are meeting to determine the size of their bid for the available poverty contracts. The magnitude of influential involvement in the "token" war on poverty is impressive and a compelling reason for those of us who work cooperatively in a young movement of urban and rural poor to ask, on what side do we stand in this war on poverty?

Predecessors to the War on Poverty

Wherever SDS supports field organizers in poor communities, there is a local government making preparations for a war on poverty. None of these preparations shape up to be very big or show evidence that they could have any significant relation to the people with whom we work. However, each is potentially a copy of the dozen or so community action projects already in existence through which private and public agencies are implementing multi-purpose, heavily-financed programs of social, legal, educational and economic aid to poor people. Community action empires exist or are in advanced stages of planning in Boston, Charleston, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Lane County (Oregon), New Haven, Providence, Minneapolis, New York, North Carolina, Oakland, St. Louis, Syracuse and Washington, D.C. If we are able to take the Washington officials at their word, it is these million dollar empires that are to be duplicated in the more advanced stages of the Johnson war on poverty. They are the concrete examples behind the catchy war imagery of the new poverty outfit.

What significantly characterizes the largest and most "advanced" of these demonstration community organizations is their approach to poverty as a problem in logistics requiring professional planning and supervision for execution. One is struck by the fact that the military language used by Johnson has real significance for those who run these corporate giants. They have an approach to poverty that is distinctly military. And in defending civilian populations, like any army, they are apt to overpower the "enemy" while trampling the people.*

The Army Approach to Poverty

The individual who assumes that the solution to poverty is to help the poor secure more money without otherwise changing power relationships is one who may unknowingly lend time and talents toward increasing the dependency and powerlessness of the poor. The army approach to poverty, often the brainwork of most sincere men, works toward this end. Its strategy (based on an "objective" measure of community needs) is to blanket a "blighted" area, as efficiently as possible, with those services and improvements needed to fill individual and community deficiencies (training, slum clearance, clean-up, jobs, community centers, and so on). The army approach recognized that the miseries of forgotten people are the consequences of interrelated complex problems which require comprehensive rather than single-pronged solutions. But overall solutions and programs to implement them come from above, rather than below. Civilian acquiescence to a "needed" poverty program is demanded; citizen planning and initiative are not. Wars are fought by trained professionals for the citizenry.

Central to the army approach is the mobilization of community power and expertise into a single, overall campaign. "Effectiveness" against poverty requires a coordination of established service agencies and the people who "can get things done": the available experience, knowledge, and resources of the non-poor community are brought together for an efficient and rational program of aid.

The consequence of federating existing community powers into the war on poverty is to guarantee a program and a strategy which discourages local initiative and protest and opposes fundamental community change. With welfare and school boards, the mayor and businessmen, church, union and charitable organizations contributing to the benevolent community drive, valuable services -- some greatly needed -- may be given away, but by the agencies and individuals from whom the poor should be free. In no case will the army approach encourage powerful initiative by the poor in their own behalf. The "best" community action organizations may stimulate indigenous community groups "to keep the city honest" or accept limited militant actions like rent strikes or civil rights demonstrations as "necessary." But none which are rooted in existing community power and dependent on large budgets and a good image for longevity will tolerate serious civilian uprisings as a consequence of their war on poverty.

* For another exposition of the military approach to poverty, see Edgar and Joan Cahn, 73 Yale Law Journal 1317.

The local community group that wants a welfare program fairly administered, or wants rats out of living quarters or wants a politician on city council who will represent the needs of the forgotten people may not "fit in" with the strategy of the army approach. An independent organization of poor people can deeply irritate a powerful welfare agency or slumlord or councilman -- all of whom may be major backers to the local war on poverty. They can be a powerful source of criticism and protest and agitation which can only impair the "overall" program.

If possible, ways will be found to stop an indigenous, dissident group -- by buying off its leadership with jobs and status in the official program; by discrediting the organization in the community with smears of communist control; by cutting members off welfare. Experience has shown that the army approach to poverty can be used as a weapon to combat local protest movements.

A Strategy of Insurgent Response

Two assumptions are basic to our discussion: (1) poverty in America can be eradicated, but not without a new political basis for public planning, guaranteed levels of human decency and massive public programs to allow people to work at urgently needed, social tasks; (2) the seeds for a real war on poverty lie in the powerful Negro movement and the significant stirrings of poor whites now converging around the common problems of poverty.

The notes which follow are for people who work on these assumptions, who are anxious that Johnson's army approach to poverty not destroy a young movement only slightly aware of its own potential and who want to help find means for the poor to assume the initiative and control in any war on poverty.

A "strategy of insurgent response" begins by asking what is most worthwhile about Johnson's war on poverty and in what ways can we encourage its better tendencies: the war on poverty will dramatize for all the slums and shacks and prisons of poverty; it will provoke new consciousness among many deprived and alone people to see poverty in social rather than individual terms; it may legitimize the fight against poverty in the way churches made civil rights acceptable and in many instances, as local officials are compelled to travel into poor lands to make new promises they cannot deliver, the basis will be laid for neighborhood struggles and new political action.

Our response to Johnson's War on Poverty should be to help it do all of these things better: by challenging the top-down approach of the city poverty warriors; by dramatizing the deeper nature of the economic crisis in our inner cities and rural "pockets"; by turning government services into the just victories of organized people rather than hand-outs to the weak and dependent; by converting the rhetoric of the official campaign into greater consciousness and articulate demands from the forgotten poor man.

Specific means for accomplishing these objectives will be called "insurgent response." It is not a phrase signifying fundamental opposition to the war on poverty. Insurgency is conceived as a way to challenge the donor-donee relationship built into the army method of dispensing aid and as a set of tactics which help to visibly contrast the magnitude of poverty-related problems against Johnson's token poverty program.

Insurgency is not a general strategy, easily applied where there are wars on poverty, nor can it be until Johnson's own tactics are more clearly articulated and concretely applied. It can only be illustrated by examples responding to the specifics of the present legislation and the scattered efforts to implement it.

The Specifics of the Present War on Poverty

What is contained in the Equal Opportunity Act and what is the basis for insurgency? The relevant sections of the seven titles can be quickly summarized:

Title I. Youth Programs

\$412.5 million is authorized for three programs: (a) "conservation camps" and residential training centers for approximately 40,000 youth this year and 100,000 next year to increase the employability of young people in a Job Corps; (b) \$150 million to governments and private organizations to pay full or partial cost of employing young people to continue their education or to increase their chances of employment through work-training; (c) \$72.5 million to allow 140,000 youth to enter or continue college by getting part-time employment through a federally supported work-study program.

Title II. Urban and Rural Community Action Programs

\$340 million appropriated for (a) "stimulation and incentive for urban and rural communities to mobilize their resources to combat poverty through community action programs." Such programs should provide new employment opportunities, improve motivation, and better the conditions in the community and the work-place through a program "which is developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas"; (b) programs of basic education and literacy for adults; (c) information centers to encourage voluntary assistance for needy children.

Title III. Special Programs to Combat Poverty in Rural Areas

\$35 million for (a) loans to improve farms and develop family cooperatives; (b) assistance to migrant families for education, sanitation and housing; (c) indemnity payments to farmers for milk which had to be removed from the market because of pesticide contamination.

Title IV. Employment and Investment Incentives

No specific amount is authorized. Small business loans up to \$25,000 are available for low interest, particularly to firms hiring long-term unemployed.

Title V. Work Experience Programs

\$150 million to pay the costs of experimental or pilot projects designed to stimulate states to adopt programs providing constructive work experience or training for unemployed fathers and needy persons.

Title VI. Administration and Coordination

An Office of Economic Opportunity is established to administer the Act and to work with other agencies and organizations in a "coordinated attack" on poverty. The Director is authorized to recruit and train "Volunteers in Service to America" (VISTA) who will work against poverty in local communities upon request of state or local agencies or private organizations. No volunteer can enter a state without the approval of the Governor.

Title VII. Treatment of Income for Certain Public Assistance Purposes

The first \$85 plus one-half of any amount over \$85 paid to a person under Title I or II in any month cannot be counted as income in determining a person's need for public assistance. No grant made to families under Title III shall be regarded as income in determining the need of any members of that family.

Title II is the critical provision, though it is not yet heavily funded. Federal agencies are specifically mandated (Sec. 612) to give preference to any application for assistance to a community action program. (Jack Conway is Director of Title II.) Without Title II, the Act is not a significant departure in government programming -- some small loans to businessman and farmers; training programs for a few; fix-up, paint-up, clean-up by college students in slum areas. Title II opens the door to an unlimited range of service and community organizing activities, with federal and local funds meeting the expenses. It will stimulate the formation of a new army of professionals and social workers, who, in some areas, may be granted the power and wealth to distribute valuable services to materially deprived citizens, but unfortunately, in a manner detrimental to individual dissent, community protest, or national political action from the poor.

It is on the probability that the army approach to poverty will dominate any escalation in Johnson's war that a list of responses is now proposed -- tentative suggestions for compelling democratic alternatives for implementing a real war on poverty. The illustrations are brief and for discussion.

I - Challenging the Unrepresentative Nature of the "Poverty Corporations"

Sec. 202 of the Poverty Act provides for "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in developing, conducting and administering the poverty program. Yet, in most cities, the mayor has already joined representatives of business, welfare, and school institutions into a Poverty Board or Corporation in which the poor hold no stock. Poverty Boards, meeting typically in secret session, have completed several hundred program prospectuses for consideration by the Office of Economic Opportunity. In all but one city where SDS has organizing projects, circulated copies of the draft programs have been exceedingly scarce. Requests from indigenous organizations participate in the deliberations of the Poverty Board have been denied. Not even the major civil rights, trade union, charitable, church and other "substantial" liberal organizations have generally had a say in the city's plan or had access to draft copies of the anti-poverty plan.

While Johnson's program explicitly calls for representation of the poor, few cities or counties have made even token gestures in this direction. In Cleveland, Ohio, movement people have used this issue to call the hand of the local politicians behind the war on poverty. SDS staff and representatives of four indigenous community organizations have joined church, university, and civil rights people in a Citizens' Committee for an Adequate Poverty Program in Cleveland. This city-wide coalition was formed to expose the Mayor's Poverty Board as a business and political enterprise of questionable motivation rather than a sincere program to help low-income people. Not one representative of the city's inner region -- the hard core of Cleveland's poverty -- is on the official Board. The current demand of the Citizen's Committee is to double the 22-man Board with additions to include persons at or below the poverty level, members of low-wage and Negro unions, clergy groups close to poor people, civic leaders from poverty areas, civil rights representatives, and social work and teaching groups. The "rebel groups," as one welfare mother describes it, has succeeded in getting Washington to postpone a grant to Cleveland until an investigation of the rebel charges can be held.

City-wide challenges of this sort may be generally feasible where established liberal groups have not been invited to the Poverty Corporation, though they have programs involving substantial members of low-income people. As in many cities, in Baltimore and Philadelphia the conditions for a challenge exist and the idea is being considered seriously. Representatives of inner-city churches, trade unions, charitable organizations and indigenous community organizations will form a coalition committee more representative of the poor than one Mayor's hand-picked Board. Their demands will be for Washington to recognize the citizens group as the appropriate agency for preparing and executing the city's poverty program.

From the point of view of the organizer, the advantages of coalition challenges to the war on poverty are that they create a congenial forum for discussion of city politics and radical alternatives with potential liberal allies; they provide a worthwhile experience of indigenous

community leadership outside their own groups; and they publicly dramatize the top-down approach of the city poverty program.

The disadvantages, based on the experiences of the SDS Cleveland Community Project, are that liberals will talk about putting the poverty program into the hands of the poor, but not believe it possible; the local poor people, while benefitting from the discussions and getting a better understanding of differences in the liberal-radical end of the political spectrum, will not have a conception that they are in an organization belonging to them (which is correct); the staff organizers will have new pulls on their time and feel pressures which erode the psychological frame of mind needed to work steadily in the bars and the streets and the homes of the community (formal meetings, many phone calls, trips downtown, reversions to the "old rhetoric," etc.)

Challenges issued directly from the indigenous community groups to the elite Poverty Board may be a more effective and appropriate means of spotlighting an unrepresentative poverty army corps and will run fewer risks of co-optation than working through an essentially non-poor committee of liberals and radicals. Also, preparing for a grass-roots challenge will be more consonant with organizational work in the community union than coalition building among people in all parts of the city.

II - The War on Poverty as a Basis for Community Organizing

In the towns and villages where deprivation is personal rather than organized resentment, can the war on poverty be an issue that will bring people together: Can it be a talking point on doorsteps and street corners which people understand, are mad about, or would come to a meeting to learn more about? In ERAP, there is disagreement among organizers on these questions, with many insisting that the federal poverty program is complicated and difficult to explain and that there are deeper felt grievances than the government's fraudulent pledge to end want. But in Baltimore and Chicago JOIN projects (predominantly unemployed people) limited experience indicates the "poverty" issue raises fundamental questions which people quickly grasp: the typical way program to help the poor "never do any good"; that poverty means a lack of jobs and money and control in people's lives and Johnson's war isn't going to fill these lacks; that most of the money will be spent on fat salaries and new office space and won't get into the pockets that need it.

Chicago JOIN has taken the war on poverty into unorganized blocks, employing teams of student volunteers and JOIN members to canvass new areas of Chicago's Northside, trying to get a better understanding of local grievances, telling people about JOIN and bringing in new members. One paper written by JOIN for new student canvassers says: "Introduce yourself in a manner similar to this: "Hello, I'm from JOIN, an organization in this neighborhood which is concerned about housing, school, and employment problems. We understand that the federal government is about to put a lot of money into this area, but it has not consulted the people who live here about how the money should be used. We were wondering

if you could give us a few minutes to tell us what you think the chief needs of this area are." If a good discussion comes out of these questions, the canvasser is instructed to try to get the person "to agree to interview some people for himself" or he can suggest that the person "have some of the other people on his block get together with him sometime in the near future to discuss their problems and what can be done about them."

Using the war on poverty as the door-opener in canvassing does allow the organizer to discuss casually a whole range of economic and political problems related to poverty. He can stimulate thinking and writing about community problems and solutions and get people involved in organizing through interview work. Of course, there are broad issues in addition to the poverty program which can open doors in a community and elicit good discussions. Generally, getting right down to the agency or slumlord or specific outside institutional structure on which the individual feels unfairly dependent is a better way to learn "what the people need" than asking someone what services he would like or how things should be done if ordinary people were running the show. But out of canvassing and informal talk about federal poverty plans, some people will want to demand that poverty money go to them and their neighbors rather than the businessmen and patronage pockets downtown. Block groups may begin to formulate their own plans for helping the poor and push their community union to develop an area-wide proposal. In Baltimore, U-JOIN is preparing alternative measures for the city's \$24 million anti-poverty plan. With a minimum of technical assistance (provided by Johns Hopkins economists), they will present a JOIN prospectus to a governor's conference which reviews all city and county programs. The prospectus will be the result of weeks of small and large gatherings of working and unemployed people discussing and writing their ideas for a new Baltimore. According to a summary distributed by the League of Women Voters, the official plan U-JOIN opposes will pay 119 social workers ("Expeditors") \$12,000 a year to work a six-square mile area setting up street clubs ("to bring under control the anti-social behavior of delinquents identified as troublesome by residents and expeditors in the area"), to help administer day-care centers, to coordinate legal service programs, and so on through the service gamut. U-JOIN has been bringing people to meetings with a leaflet appeal asking: Do we want our neighborhood invaded by more social workers and bureaucrats or do we want a war on poverty that will help the poor?

From small meetings of unemployed can come a meaningful basis for community organizing, as people are ready to fight to have poverty money go into the community union instead of the big agencies and will challenge the decisions of the official poverty forces, which ignore the program agreed on by the block groups in the neighborhood. Eventually demands have to be made on the city for a real war on poverty.

III - Challenging the Local Leadership of the War on Poverty

Rural Mississippians, Hazard miners, Cleveland welfare mothers, Newark housing tenants -- all have shown how a few plain people can directly and dramatically expose the inadequacies and phoniness of plans designed by local politicians for poor people. While realizing a strategy of

insurgent response may result in sneers of an indigenous group or pressures on leadership to join the official force, a well-organized, politically sophisticated community union should eventually carry its counter-attack right into the power structure behind the war on poverty, getting to the heart of the matter. Tactics like local mass tax strikes are means of demonstrating to local politicians the power of forgotten people and the needs they have. Such methods are more "militant" in the sense that they will force the poverty warriors to retreat with their program or defend it openly. There is no easy middle ground, as can be illustrated by several examples:

a) Organize the community to flood token public service with large numbers of applicants.

The shortages of public services and programs to improve living conditions and job opportunities for the poor may be readily apparent in the city ghetto or the rural farm or a mining community, but rarely are comprehended by the affluent "outsider." It is commonly accepted that more poverty programs are not needed because existing ones are not used. The fact is that people who need them, for a variety of good reasons, stay out: they get "rough treatment" from the bureaucrats; they "never get accepted"; they don't know of their existence, etc. The politicians' myth that "we are doing all that we should" should be met head on-- using one illustration, by jamming an existing service or training program with applicants, crippling the capacity of the poverty officers to extend the service intended. In organized areas, long lines could be extended around a recruitment office -- lines which would convert to pickets and sit-ins as legitimate candidates for the program were denied access to the program being tested. Demands for improvement in the public service should include establishment of a community grievance committee to hear cases of improper procedures or mishandling of any applicant by a deputy or bureaucrat in the program's administration.

b) Demand full control over a program operated in the local community.

The war on poverty, like most federal programs, provides for "local participation" in decision-making, though the local power structure, unless it is powerfully confronted, manages to control things. Under Title II, many community "action" programs will locate offices in depressed neighborhood to "coordinate" the different local programs or provide places for people to meet and "work on their problems." The professional staffs charged with running these offices will bring in community people as a nominal gesture to local citizen participation and as a way to create "better communication links" between the community and themselves.

To spotlight the fundamental issue of control by professionals, rather than organized poor in the war on poverty, a community union could demand total supervisory authority over the professional staff working in the neighborhood. Mass pickets would demand the rights to hire and fire the professional staff and the right to set program priorities in the area.

If demonstrations were held at the neighborhood office, an enormous turnout could be expected, giving visible evidence of the generally unrecognized commitment to the principle of democratic control in matters of relief and services to poor people.

c) Establish a symbolic radical alternative program which competes with the city's plan.

An anti-poverty measure in many cities and towns will be the Job Corps provided for in Title I. The local poverty officers will launch a recruitment campaign of some color and appeal for unemployed people to join countryside camps to get "work experience."

A community union could dramatize the absurdity of the local program by actually creating a competing operation for the city's unemployed--one which put people to work at rehabilitating the neighborhoods. Street corner recruitment stands would be placed adjacent to the official placement center, drawing people out of the country and back into the city. The public challenge would be one that would go to the core of the poverty program's mission: whether it is to give training and experience to fill non-existent jobs; or whether it is to create new employment.

Now would a competing work-program be paid for? For a short period, rent strikes could provide the funds for employing the jobless at fixing the tenements. The expenses for improving the inferior public facilities of the city would be dramatically turned over to the mayor or the Poverty Board. The community would undertake its own fundraising drive to support much of the work. And, shortages of funds would be a justification for mass demonstrations, petitions, and public appeals for people across the city and country to support a movement to put the unemployed to work at meaningful tasks--creating decency out of the squalor and decay of the inner cities rather than shoving them into the make-believe conditions of the Job Corps.

V - Poverty Money for Organized Poor

Should a strategy of insurgent response include fundraising from the war on poverty? Are funds available for groups which are publicly denouncing (or which intend to denounce) the fraudulency of the Johnson skirmish? It is one of the paradoxes (and tricks?) of the American way that there is a little.

However, since most proposals for federal money under the current legislation can be vetoed by a state governor, COFO in Mississippi is not likely to find support (money can, however, be sent around the Governor via educational institutions). In Northern cities which have locked out the public from consideration of the anti-poverty blueprint, federal money to organized radical neighborhood groups should be written off. In states in which the Governor is taking an extremely active role in molding all rural and city plans into an overall state poverty strategy (such as Maryland) it will require extreme finesse to squeeze any but

the most responsible representatives up to the trough. But if a city or county poverty program is being planned by many organizations (particularly small liberal ones) and the community action program is somewhat decentralized (as contrasted to the army approach), support for a community service program related to the organizing and political objectives of a community union may be obtained.

Newark appears to be this sort of exception and has parallels in other areas. The 63-man poverty board in Newark includes virtually all segments of the liberal establishment--trade union, civil rights, university, and non-partisan, charitable agencies. Election of the poverty board is by a self-appointed citizens' group in which any citizen can join after petitioning the secretary of the Board. The Newark Community Union (NCU) and the Newark SDS staff believe that money could be made available to the community union for a number of purposes. NCU is considering asking for a social-coffee center (an organizing office) and for salary to community people to work in the center (organizers),

Other independent "political" organizations based in poor areas may find support for education programs with adults, using specifically developed materials describing and analysing "problems" known to the neighborhood; neighborhood legal firms created to defend local residents; regional or national conferences of community leaders for discussing the role of the poor in a grass-roots war on poverty; VISTA volunteers (if they can be converted to a different of community living and have good politics) who may serve as office managers, or in some cases, organizers and who can give their money to the community union (volunteers get \$50 a month in addition to expenses for housing, travel, hospital and boarding costs).

Like any establishment financial backing, federal or local poverty funds are to be seen as seed money to be replaced by more independent backing once the program is functioning. But refusing to ask for or take federal money should not be a principle of the movement. Indeed, we should demand it, realizing and planning for the consequences of a grant not being renewed.

A strategy of insurgent response to the war on poverty is essentially a fight by poor people for control over the existing poverty money and for federal support to a real war on poverty. And that fight begins at the neighborhood level, where block groups write their own plans and seen them downtown. Eventually poor people must get together and make demands on the whole national system. But the beginnings for a more shared abundance and democratic participation are found at the neighborhood level where ordinary people are talking to each other about how to change the ghetto and the outside country.