

“A Mouthful of Civil Rights and an Empty Belly”

THE WAR ON POVERTY AND THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL EQUALITY

In early June 1967, War on Poverty officials in Washington approved a \$238,429 award to the Community Alert Patrol (CATPL), a black community group in South Central Los Angeles. Established in the aftermath of the infamous Watts rebellion in mid-August 1965, CATPL's fifteen-member team monitored the conduct of local law enforcement in an effort to combat police brutality, an issue that concerned local people and that had sparked the Watts riots. Unarmed, group members—many of whom were local youths with criminal records—were explicitly forbidden to intervene in police affairs directly. The group aimed to improve community-police relations, they explained, by acting as a “buffer” between the two.¹ CATPL hoped to use War on Poverty funds to expand its operations by purchasing a garage and relevant equipment. This, in turn, would allow the group to provide local black youths with the chance to learn automobile repair trade skills, acquire valuable on-the-job experience, and earn an income servicing CATPL's patrol vehicles.²

Once news of the award broke, surprised local officials and politicians were quick to criticize the decision. Republican senator George Murphy expressed disbelief that neither Mayor Sam Yorty nor the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had been notified of the application's approval.³ State governor and leading conservative Ronald Reagan implored Sargent Shriver, head of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)—the federal agency responsible for the War on Poverty—to block CATPL funding. Outraged at the lack of OEO consultation, Mayor Yorty complained directly to President Lyndon Johnson, lamenting the prospect of federal tax funds being used “to finance direct interference with the vital operations of our nationally heralded police force”—an objection echoed by LAPD chief Thomas Reddin.⁴

Many city voters agreed, and some saw CATPL as a dangerous experiment that undermined established authority. As one local citizen explained in a letter to Governor Reagan: “In order to keep peace with the Negro community the police officer will be forced to abide by the Community Alert Patrol—and the Community Alert Patrol will demand more and more power! Our whole system begins to crumble because of a few.”⁵

The furor over the OEO’s decision had the desired effect. Washington officials suspended award of the grant, advising CATPL they would support the group only on condition that it stop its police-monitoring activities. The grant was rubberstamped after CATPL reluctantly agreed.⁶ This episode highlights a number of this book’s key themes. First, it reveals black communities’ commitment to using the War on Poverty and other public policies to combat racial discrimination and urban inequality. Second, it exemplifies the kind of political controversy generated by the War on Poverty. In Los Angeles, and in cities nationwide, conservative opponents identified the antipoverty program as another ill-considered liberal social policy devised by distant, interventionist Washington bureaucrats that wasted taxpayers’ money. Last, the episode demonstrated the strength and success of white mainstream opposition to black activism and to the scope of public policy where it threatened established power arrangements or white privilege and authority. In this case, it was the authority of the LAPD—a vital organ and symbol of local white political control—that seemed at risk. Allowing CATPL members—some of whom were urban black youths with police records—to continue monitoring the police’s conduct at the taxpayers’ expense threatened an intolerable subversion of local power relations.

As this chapter demonstrates, the War on Poverty enabled challenges to established urban power arrangements that met this pattern of decisive white mainstream political resistance time and again. Ultimately, white mainstream politicians and groups, and the pressures they created, played the definitive role in dictating the boundaries of public policy and the potential for change.

The debates and controversy generated by the War on Poverty have done much to shape its reputation. At the time, opponents typically portrayed the War on Poverty as a costly failure that embodied the excesses of big government and paternalistic welfare state liberalism. In the decades since, ascendant conservatives have reinforced and popularized this powerful and persuasive critique of the antipoverty program as a misguided attempt to mitigate economic inequality. Only during the past decade have historians begun to

undermine this dominant conservative narrative and its core assumptions by reassessing the War on Poverty's impact on inequality and on American society more broadly.

Scholars such as Peter Edelman have argued that, far from being a failure, the War on Poverty was remarkably successful given its meager funding. Indeed, by 1974, after ten years of antipoverty operations, the number of Americans estimated to be living below the poverty line had been halved. Moreover, the Johnson administration's Great Society program—of which the War on Poverty was a vital part—helped better the lives of millions of Americans by providing improved education, housing, food, and medical care to communities where they were desperately lacking. Despite conservatives' best efforts to roll back the antipoverty program, Edelman explains, it has in fact proved highly resilient. Many War on Poverty programs and subagencies (albeit in different guises) remain in operation today, and they “continue to make a substantial difference in the quality of life of millions of Americans.”⁷

The significance of the War on Poverty, however, extends far beyond the question of its success or failure.⁸ As Edelman suggests, “the War on Poverty energized thousands upon thousands of people across the country and served as a stepping stone into politics, continuing activism, civic participation, and economic success.”⁹ This chapter establishes how the War on Poverty made a vital and lasting impression on black community activism, mainstream engagement with Black Power, white voters' support for redistributive liberalism, and future landscapes of reform. In doing so, it sets out and explores a number of important ideas and themes that stretch across the book.

First, it outlines black enthusiasm for the War on Poverty and explores its relationship to historical shifts in conceptions of American citizenship shaped first by the New Deal welfare state and then by the apotheosis of a Cold War domestic consumer culture. Promising to help break the shackles of poverty, African Americans responded energetically to President Johnson's antipoverty legislation. Where the New Deal and postwar public policy had served white (and especially white male) interests primarily, African Americans claimed ownership of the War on Poverty. By engaging with the political question of how to meet African Americans' desire for economic citizenship, the War on Poverty established the political framework that the alternative policies discussed in chapter 2 challenged.

Second, the chapter identifies the War on Poverty's roots in urban minority social problems, shedding light on both how and why the antipoverty program became so thoroughly entwined with the black freedom struggle in

ghetto communities across the nation. It helps to explain the War on Poverty's limitations by exploring the sometimes conflicting core assumptions of Cold War liberalism that guided War on Poverty planners and other administration policy makers—assumptions and limitations that, as chapter 2 reveals, vitally shaped alternative public policies put forward to meet African American aspirations for economic empowerment and urban improvement.

Attention is then turned to how the War on Poverty helped transform the American political landscape. While President Johnson hoped the antipoverty program could improve the lives of millions of Americans, it engendered challenges to the nation's political equilibrium that he neither expected nor desired. These challenges were often bound up with poor black and other minority communities' battles for racial and economic justice. As one of the bill's supporters on Capitol Hill, Democratic representative Sam Gibbons from Florida, warned: "If you're scared what poor people will do when they get motivated and interested in their government then you ought to be against this legislation because it is going to bring them into the mainstream."¹⁰ By bringing the poor into the realm of politics, the War on Poverty precipitated a clash between established city power brokers and poor people that reverberated from local politics to the corridors of Congress. Conflict over the War on Poverty not only highlighted the desire for greater self-determination among inner-city blacks but also fueled racial identity politics among minority groups, illuminating the growing vitality of nationalism in the nation's ghettos. As later chapters demonstrate, the War on Poverty attracted and channeled nationalist organizing at the local level, making it a key site of Black Power's development in communities nationwide.

Finally, while the War on Poverty created a vibrant, diverse, and multiracial coalition of antipoverty supporters—including a wide range of religious, labor, civil rights, Black Power, and liberal interest groups—it also widened the fissures between conservatives and liberals, and eroded white working and lower-middle-class support for the Democratic Party. The War on Poverty fueled important debates about government, race and public policy, and economic justice, taxes, and the welfare state that played a vital role in the development of Black Power and in the late-1960s' rightward shift in, and subsequent realignment of, American democracy. As later chapters also demonstrate, these debates helped constrain political possibilities under black mayors such as Tom Bradley in Los Angeles and Maynard Jackson in Atlanta through the 1970s and beyond.

**PUBLIC POLICY, ECONOMIC CITIZENSHIP, AND
THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE**

To understand how the War on Poverty became so entwined with the urban black freedom struggle, and the influential role it played in driving divisive political debate and shaping future policy reforms, it is necessary to (1) explore its roots in both contemporary crises and the New Deal liberal tradition on which it built; (2) outline the longer history of African American demands for economic citizenship and the ways those demands were shaped by previous public policy; and finally—where we now begin—(3) trace the unusual trajectory of the War on Poverty’s emergence onto the nation’s political agenda.

Whereas President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal three decades earlier had been a response to the Great Depression and the economic crisis and mass poverty it produced, the War on Poverty instead emerged during a period of unparalleled national abundance. The postwar economic boom produced an American society in the 1950s and early 1960s characterized by increasing domestic affluence, the inexorable rise of mass consumerism, and suburbanization. However, this increasing material comfort was not shared by all. By 1960 over forty million Americans—22 percent of the population—lived a very different life, below the poverty line.¹¹ They remained largely on the margins of the nation’s economy, political landscape, and wider public consciousness, until the publication of two books—economist John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* in 1958 and sociologist Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* in 1962—helped to scandalize the extent of America’s “poverty amidst plenty.”¹²

Harrington’s work, in particular, proved highly influential in Washington, impressing President John F. Kennedy and helping to establish poverty as a target for federal action.¹³ In late 1963, with the presidential election nearly a year away, Kennedy’s advisers began to draw up possible domestic programs for the president’s reelection campaign and took the first steps in planning what later became the War on Poverty. Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, however, saw the embryonic proposal pass on to the enthusiastic stewardship of his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, who ordered the program’s swift development. Soon after, on January 8, 1964, President Johnson used his first State of the Union address to tell the nation that his administration was declaring “unconditional war on poverty.”¹⁴

The War on Poverty’s rapid rise was, generally speaking, most unusual. Unlike most social legislation, it was not the result of organized or public

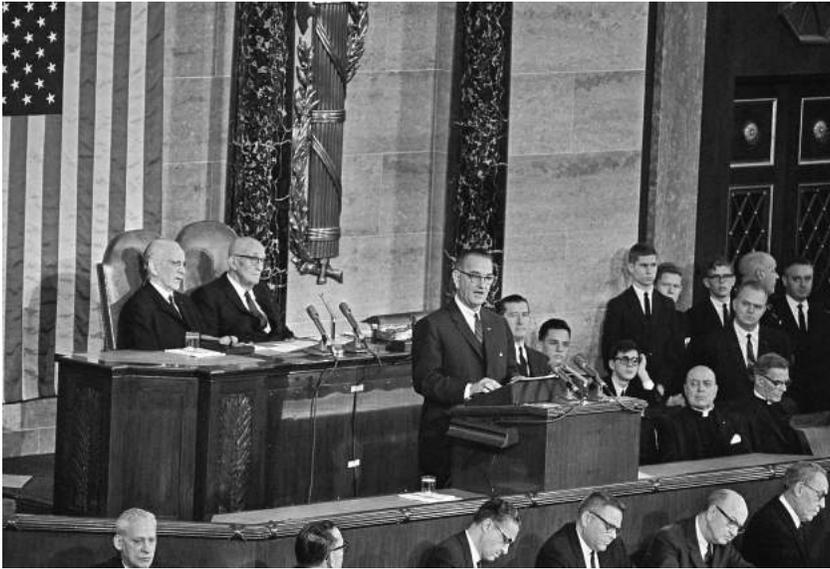


FIGURE 1. “President Lyndon B. Johnson delivers his State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress on Jan. 8, 1964.” © Associated Press.

pressure. Rather, it resulted primarily from a convergence of concerned professional academic elites and the activist inclinations of federal government liberals.¹⁵ In light of its relatively unheralded arrival, some conservative opponents saw the War on Poverty as proof positive of the creeping socialism of interventionist and interfering liberal policy makers intent on subverting the traditional values and foundations of American society. As the decade progressed, this kind of sentiment resonated with increasing numbers of white American voters who began to question the moral and political dimensions of liberal social spending.

For many African Americans, however, the arrival of antipoverty legislation was especially welcome. Statistical analysis confirmed the unmistakable intersection between race and poverty. Over 50 percent of all African American families lived below the government-defined poverty line (\$3,000 or less annual income for a family of four) compared to just 20 percent of white families. In 1962 the average black family income was \$3,023—barely above the poverty line—whereas the average white family’s was nearly double at \$5,642.¹⁶

In the early 1960s, from a total black population of just under 19 million, 3.6 million black men were unemployed, and 40 percent of those with jobs

worked in low-skilled and low-paid industrial labor or service positions, effectively trapped there by insufficient education and the prejudice of employers and unions.¹⁷ Attending underfunded and underperforming schools, the vast majority of black youths were denied the necessary standard of education required to compete for skilled jobs in an economy witnessing rapid technological advancement. Worse still, those who found employment would more than likely be paid less than their white counterparts for doing the same job. African Americans who did attain four years of college education still faced earning less over their lifetimes than a white person with far less schooling. When President Johnson declared that the War on Poverty would produce better education and more job training and employment opportunities, then, his words understandably resonated among African Americans.¹⁸

When first debated on Capitol Hill at the same time as the Civil Rights Bill, antipoverty legislation struck many black leaders as a much needed answer to the racial and economic problems besetting the nation's urban centers. Speaking at congressional hearings in April 1964, Whitney Young, head of the National Urban League (America's largest racial progress and urban interest advocacy group) made it clear that civil rights legislation would not "solve the problem of poverty." "We're afraid," he continued, "that we'll end up with a mouthful of civil rights and an empty belly." Failure to enact antipoverty legislation, he explained, could have dire consequences. "The alternatives are very clear—either help Negroes to become constructive, useful citizens or they will become destructive, disgruntled dependents."¹⁹ In agreement was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who celebrated the War on Poverty and civil rights legislation as "twins" and as complementary parts of the nation's attack on racial discrimination.²⁰

President Johnson did much to encourage African Americans' strong identification with the War on Poverty. In announcing the impending antipoverty bill, he explicitly identified the need to tackle black poverty. Shortly after a meeting between Johnson and civil rights establishment leaders, James Farmer, executive director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), told reporters that the president had "made it very clear that he feels the fight on poverty and illiteracy is a vital part of the fight against discrimination."²¹ African Americans across the nation shared Johnson's vision and seized upon the War on Poverty as a way to advance their struggle for greater self-determination, economic empowerment, and a better standard of living.

Although the War on Poverty was a specific, somewhat unheralded response to the period's myriad socioeconomic issues, it was also another chapter in a domestic liberal tradition that, since the New Deal, had forged a highly contradictory and problematic relationship between the black freedom struggle, public policy, and the federal government, and had encountered persistent white political resistance. On the one hand, New Deal liberalism had done much to invigorate African Americans' battle against discrimination. As historian Anthony Badger has argued, although the New Deal failed to deliver substantial material gains to black Americans, it did help establish civil rights as a genuine political issue. It also reconfigured labor relations and enabled the expansion and empowerment of unions, some of which offered important support in the struggle for racial and economic justice. Moreover, it had explicitly attempted to deal with economic inequality. By seeking to reshape the U.S. economy in a bid to create employment opportunities for the working poor, the New Deal gave the federal government an unprecedented stake in the economic well-being of African Americans, convincing many of the value of interventionist federal support in the struggle against poverty and racism. By bringing blacks into the Democratic fold, the New Deal transformed the Democratic Party, and inspired a political realignment that produced the broad liberal consensus responsible for the legislative civil rights revolution of the mid- to late 1960s.²²

At the same time, however, the two-tier New Deal welfare state heavily disadvantaged and marginalized African Americans by helping to reify the nation's white supremacist, male-dominated socioeconomic order. As historian Alice Kessler-Harris has explained, the top-tier legislation—which consisted primarily of policies tied to employment (in particular the Social Security Act and unemployment insurance)—targeted white middle-class men and their families. These “entitlements” protected the interests of households headed by male breadwinners earning a “family wage” that supported a housewife and dependent children, enshrining this social paradigm as a cultural ideal. Southern congressmen worked to ensure that the vast majority of employed African Americans were initially excluded from top-tier programs. Second-tier policies were largely means-tested direct aid “relief” or “welfare” programs—in particular, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—which became increasingly associated with poor and unmarried or single female-headed families in minority communities. Employment and family structure thus became hardwired into the celebrated normative model of American life. As Kessler-Harris argues, when the fed-

eral government tied “wage work to tangible, publicly provided rewards, employment emerged as a boundary line demarcating different kinds of citizenship. Casual laborers, the unskilled and untrained, housewives, farm workers, mothers and domestic servants all found themselves on one side of a barrier not of their own making.”²³ African Americans (especially women) remained tethered to the bottom of the nation’s socioeconomic and racial order. This gendered view of economic citizenship persisted in both the War on Poverty and the alternative public policies discussed in chapter 2.

The Roosevelt administration proved a reluctant ally of blacks in their growing aspiration to secure access to “family wage” jobs and the New Deal state largesse and citizenship status they conferred. The black demand for fair employment practices and greater economic opportunity was a fundamental part of the broader fight to secure the vision of first-class citizenship that the New Deal welfare state had simultaneously pedestaled and denied most African Americans. It was, as labor historian Nancy MacLean has suggested, a view of citizenship shaped profoundly by the intrinsic place of the “work ethic and success myth” at the heart of American culture, which privileged employment and economic empowerment, alongside political and civil rights, as necessary and fundamental parts of full inclusion in national life.²⁴

The Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), created by Roosevelt in June 1941 in response to black agitation against discrimination in the nation’s expanding war industries, promised an unprecedented extension of the federal government’s protective legal and moral authority over blacks’ economic rights. Across the nation, African Americans—millions of whom had left the South for cities in search of jobs in defense industries—committed themselves to using the FEPC as a tool for racial change and their advancement in the workplace. However, high hopes among African Americans for a strong FEPC were sorely disappointed. With weak powers of enforcement, and in the face of considerable political resistance (especially in the South), the FEPC did virtually nothing to challenge the persistence of endemic discrimination in the workplace.²⁵

Despite the FEPC’s inadequacies, President Roosevelt again appeared to lend support to black demands for a greater share in national abundance when, during his January 1944 State of the Union address, he outlined an “Economic Bill of Rights.” In a resurgent post-Depression United States, Roosevelt identified economic security as a new, fundamental right of all American citizens—“regardless of station, race, or creed”—which included, among other things, the right to remunerative employment, decent housing,

medical care, and a good education.²⁶ Institutional racial discrimination, however, remained a critical roadblock after the war, as public policy continued to enable ever increasing numbers of white men and their families to enjoy these “rights” while deliberately inhibiting their extension to blacks and other minorities.

At the same time, poverty became increasingly out of step with a changing national identity. As Elizabeth Cohen has explained, the exigencies of the Cold War and the goal of postwar prosperity saw American “policymakers, business and labor leaders, and civic groups” join together to reshape the nation’s image. What they helped create was a national “economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of freedom, democracy, and equality.” Under this changing conception of Americanism, then, truly “full” citizenship required the economic means necessary to access the material comfort and personal freedoms that this consumer lifestyle seemed to hold.²⁷

African American hopes for a share in increasing national prosperity were undermined by the onset of the Cold War, which transformed domestic politics and constrained debate over racial and economic justice. As anticommunist crusaders attacked the New Deal liberal-labor–civil rights coalition in the late 1940s and 1950s, black leaders increasingly turned away from questions of poverty and economic disadvantage and instead prioritized less controversial targets and methods, such as legally challenging segregation and disfranchisement and securing formal legal equality. The result, historian Adam Fairclough has explained, was that as “the economic radicalism of the New Deal order faded away, the scope of racial equality narrowed. Few questioned the established economic order in the 1950s, and as a result, existing structural inequalities persisted and became in some respects even more pronounced.”²⁸

As calls for fundamental reform of America’s political and economic institutions were effectively suppressed during the early Cold War, national debate on racial inequality shifted toward an alternative analysis of American racism that centered on the influential work of Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal. In *An American Dilemma*, his celebrated 1944 study of southern race relations, Myrdal presented racism in the United States as both a sectional, southern issue and a problem of moral conscience. As such, eradicating racial injustice required only appeals to the better nature of white Americans and the inherently egalitarian “American Creed.”²⁹ This analysis became central—at least on the surface—to the nonviolent direct action phase of the civil rights movement during the mid- to late 1950s and early 1960s.

However, while the movement's efforts to desegregate the nation's hotels, restaurants, cinemas, and stores promised to open the doors of consumerism and commercial choice for middle-class and elite blacks, they did little to improve the economic status of the majority of African Americans mired in poverty. Access to remunerative jobs and better-quality education and housing remained their best hope for greater prosperity and "full" citizenship. In the early 1960s, as the constrained political atmosphere of the early Cold War was slowly lifting, the focus of black activism—especially beyond the South—began to revive an economic analysis of racial inequality in the United States. This was demonstrated by the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," which brought nearly 250,000 people (the vast majority of whom were black) to the National Mall to protest racial discrimination and economic inequality on August 28, 1963.³⁰ It was a powerful restatement of African Americans' demand for full citizenship and desire for economic independence, and of the need for structural reform in the name of racial and economic justice.

The War on Poverty further undermined the Myrdalian model by stimulating ferment in black urban communities nationwide that made plain the national reach and structural nature of racial inequality. In the process, the antipoverty program played a vital part in an ongoing shift within the black freedom struggle: the drawing of focus away from the rural South to the problems of the urban North that led to the crystallization of the Black Power movement. Furthermore, as Roger Wilkins explained in the memo discussed at the outset of this book, an economic analysis of racial inequality—which the War on Poverty helped to vivify—was consistent across the political and philosophical spectrum of Black Power ideology. In America's ghettos, an emergent Black Power movement offered a critique of racial discrimination in the United States that emphasized its economic and institutional roots, rejecting the Myrdalian framework and the faith that many civil rights advocates had in the value of moral appeals to white America.³¹

Announced just four months after the March on Washington, then, the War on Poverty was nothing if not timely. Two decades on, President Johnson's antipoverty legislation seemed to extend Roosevelt's "Economic Bill of Rights" to African Americans. As the War on Poverty unfolded, it inspired and shaped both black activism and white conservative political resistance, developments that helped transform domestic national politics. As this chapter ultimately reveals, by energizing the black freedom struggle, the antipoverty program engendered challenges to established power

arrangements and national political culture that undermined the liberal consensus—a legacy shaped by the peculiar circumstances and underlying principles that guided its development.

MAINTAINING THE URBAN CRISIS? INTERNAL CONFLICTS AND COMPETING VISIONS IN THE WAR ON POVERTY

When announcing his intention to wage “war on poverty,” Lyndon Johnson declared that it was a war that “must be won in the field, in every private home, in every public office, from the courthouse to the White House.” Fighting the battle to “help more Americans [...] escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls,” he continued, would require “better schools, and better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities” for the disadvantaged.³² This broad-based vision for tackling poverty emerged from the interconnected work of social scientists and domestic liberal policy makers during the 1950s. Much of the controversy generated by the antipoverty program resulted from the conflicting and sometimes contradictory ways these two groups understood the War on Poverty’s purpose. Nowhere was this clearer than in the program’s capacity for politicizing and mobilizing the urban poor, the roots of which lay in postwar New York City and the social science research that came to underpin the War on Poverty.

In the late 1950s, a team of Columbia University academics led by Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin conducted a study of the warring black and Puerto Rican youth gangs of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Their research grew out of policy makers’ concerns over the increasing incidence of juvenile delinquency among male urban minority youth since the end of World War II.³³ Gang violence not only raised the fear of racial violence and crime but also seemed to relate to a number of other concerns connected to the inner cities, including the social impact of mass black urban in-migration, widespread unemployment and deprivation, social disaffection, and urban decay. Social scientists’ focus on young black men reflected a gendered approach to urban problems, inherited in part from the New Deal, that would later characterize the War on Poverty and subsequent public policies aimed at remedying inner-city racial inequality.

Ohlin and Cloward’s research fitted into a broader shift within 1950s public policy making, one in which the Ford Foundation—their primary nongovernmental backer—played a leading role. As historian Alice

O’Conner has explained, the Ford Foundation, one of the nation’s largest philanthropic institutions, supported the burgeoning social sciences throughout the decade and became a proactive intermediary for Washington officials, providing funding, technical assistance, and academic expertise for research projects. In the process, the foundation “helped to mediate an intellectual and policy shift away from the bricks and mortar concern of early urban renewal and toward the human face of the urban crisis.”³⁴

In 1960, after nearly four years of in-depth study, Cloward and Ohlin published their findings, which set out their so-called opportunity theory. Put simply, they contended that juvenile delinquency resulted from a lack of opportunity for young minority males to achieve conventional societal goals—principally, gainful paid employment, self-sufficiency, and economic independence. Frustrated in their bid to meet these expectations, they instead found their manhood, and a sense of self-worth, through a life of crime and violence. This was a self-perpetuating vicious circle that eroded traditional moral behavior and promised an even bleaker—and potentially more violent—future for minority groups in urban America. The lack of opportunity, however, was seen as both a symptom and a cause of the myriad inequities of inner-city life that many youngsters had to endure: grinding poverty, urban squalor, broken families, crime, inadequate health care, and a substandard education.³⁵ A lasting solution to these problems, the authors argued, required a program to improve local social services and create opportunities for social mobility through job training and education in which the whole community was engaged. As later conflicts over the War on Poverty proved, this idea had radical potential as it rested on the premise that the poor had to control their own organizations and lobby local power structures to improve the state of their communities.

In 1961 an organization called Mobilization For Youth (MFY) was set up on the Lower East Side to put the “opportunity” theory to the test by organizing the local community and offering neighborhood-based jobs training, as well as education and family services programs.³⁶ Strongly committed to tackling the urban crisis, the Ford Foundation broadened the application of Ohlin and Cloward’s ideas by placing the “opportunity” theory at the heart of their experimental “Gray Areas” programs of the early 1960s, which targeted deprived minority communities in cities such as Oakland, New Haven, and Boston.³⁷

Cloward and Ohlin’s pioneering work soon attracted the attention of policy makers in Washington, D.C. In May 1961 President Kennedy

established a legislative task force on juvenile delinquency headed by Richard Boone (a Ford Foundation employee) and David Hackett (a close personal friend of Robert Kennedy). Highly impressed by MFY, Hackett and Boone took up the “opportunity” theory as the intellectual basis for what proved to be the War on Poverty’s most controversial element: the Community Action Program (CAP).³⁸ Cloward and Ohlin’s influence did not end there, however. As the title of the War on Poverty’s legislative centerpiece—the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA)—suggested, their work profoundly shaped the character of the entire antipoverty program.

Signed into law by the president on August 20, 1964, the EOA created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), a new governmental body charged with coordinating the nation’s antipoverty effort and administering a wide range of programs. In addition to the CAP, these included Headstart, which aimed at improving elementary-level education; Job Corps, to provide job training for unemployed young adults and school dropouts; Neighborhood Youth Corps, to prolong the education of disadvantaged children and teenagers; Legal Aid, which offered legal services and advice to the poor; and Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA), a domestic version of the Peace Corps that delivered services to poor communities.³⁹

Federal officials’ eager acceptance of the social science theory behind the MFY and the Ford Foundation’s work betrayed several important and interlocking assumptions that guided domestic liberal social policy making during the early Cold War. As O’Connor has explained, policy makers in Washington broadly accepted “culture of poverty” theories that implied the need for the reforming of attitudes and behavior rather than more substantial change. They therefore saw urban problems not as the result of institutional racial discrimination or capitalism but of natural and unstoppable socioeconomic forces that could be successfully managed, if not solved, by the state-sponsored application of technocratic and scientific expertise. This premise fit perfectly with Cold War liberalism’s antipathy toward structural economic reform (like the Myrdalian analysis of American race relations). As a result, O’Connor argues, MFY’s “strategy of reorienting services and empowering poor constituencies,” which so vitally shaped the War on Poverty, “was at best a partial response to a problem that required more fundamental structural change to address the roots of inequality.”⁴⁰ From the outset, then, an important contradiction lay at the heart of the War on Poverty: it possessed the radical potential for mobilizing the poor, but its fundamentally conservative economic and philosophical foundations would tightly circumscribe its

ability to substantially reduce poverty. As chapter 2 demonstrates, this contradiction would help inspire alternative approaches to dealing with racial inequality in America's cities.

The announcement of the War on Poverty quickly revealed the lack of broader consensus over how best to deal with economic inequality and revived a long-standing and wider debate about the nature and limits of government responsibility. For some, the government was overstepping the mark. Conservatives and business interests across the country criticized the War on Poverty as an extension of the "big government" New Deal liberalism that they had always opposed. Economist Henry Hazlitt voiced this sentiment when, drawing on conservatives' anti-New Deal rhetoric of the 1930s, he outlined the Right's vision for combating deprivation: "The way to cure poverty is not [...] 'share the wealth' schemes, and socialism but by precisely the opposite policies [...] a system of private property, free markets, and free enterprise [...] to keep this system, to reduce government intervention instead of increasing it; [and] to reduce government taxation."⁴¹ Others welcomed Johnson's announcement. The AFL-CIO executive committee, leaders of America's largest labor union, applauded the Johnson administration's intentions and argued (as many black leaders did) that "success in winning civil rights for Negroes and other minority groups is inseparably linked to effectively waging war on want." Though strongly supportive, the committee members worried that the proposed legislation did not go far enough, and insisted that federal public works employment programs would be required if millions were to be lifted out of poverty. Failing to commit enough resources to the antipoverty program, they warned, could have lasting consequences. "If we now engage in merely a token effort—a mere skirmish instead of a war—we will be deluding the millions of impoverished and frustrating the expectations of the nation and of the world."⁴²

President Johnson, however, had his own view of the War on Poverty. Johnson endorsed Cold War liberals' assumption that the American economy did not require structural change, and thus dismissed the idea of federal job creation programs. Johnson possessed an unshakeable faith in the nation's free enterprise system and believed that the \$11 billion tax cut his administration passed in February 1964 would stimulate economic growth, in turn creating more private-sector jobs. The War on Poverty would complement the tax cut by preparing the poor, through skills training, to take up those jobs.⁴³ As such, the antipoverty program's underlying fiscal philosophy was far from radical. As leading Democratic congressman Wilbur Mills later

suggested, aiming to “convert those willing to learn and willing to work from tax recipients—through the welfare program and similar efforts—to taxpayers” meant that, at its core, “the structure and strategy of the program” was “entirely conservative.”⁴⁴

The Johnson administration’s view of the War on Poverty was also predicated on its commitment to what historian Robert Self has called “breadwinner liberalism”—the New Deal welfare state’s highly gendered social and cultural mission, which privileged and idealized the “Citizen-Worker” male earning a “family wage” and providing for his wife and children in an environment of middle-class domesticity. During the postwar economic boom, the GI Bill further bolstered the white wage-earning male privilege encoded in the New Deal by making home ownership, credit, and education more affordable and accessible to returning white soldiers and their families while systematically denying those benefits to black veterans.⁴⁵

Increasing the number of male breadwinner-headed black households became a key concern of New Frontier and Great Society policy makers during the 1960s because they identified the chronic levels of unemployment among African American men as the root cause of both black poverty and wider social breakdown. In this logic, the psychologically crippling and emasculating effects of being unable to fulfill their expected role as breadwinners led black men to abandon their families and, in their despair, turn to alcoholism, drug abuse, and crime in increasing numbers.

This in turn resulted in both deeper poverty and rising levels of welfare dependency, as the number of AFDC-supported single female-headed black families in the nation’s inner cities increased markedly—developments then blamed for the spread of juvenile delinquency among the hundreds of thousands of young African Americans growing up without a traditional male authority figure at home. These interlocking suppositions ensured that liberals’ solutions to urban poverty, the breakdown of the black family, and the deepening social problems of the ghetto rested on two main aims: increasing the employment of black men, and better educating and preparing black male youth for jobs and for constructive civic duty in the short and longer term.⁴⁶

From the outset, Washington officials made it very clear that the antipoverty legislation was chiefly designed to put men back to work and on the way to restoring them to traditional and idealized social, economic, and familial roles—a goal the president wholly endorsed. Johnson’s view of the War on Poverty was forged by his past experience as head of the Texas arm of the National Youth Administration (NYA), a New Deal agency dedicated to

providing education and work to impoverished teenage and young adult (especially male) Americans in the mid-1930s. Consequently, Johnson saw greatest value in the Job Corp and Neighborhood Youth Corps, the War on Poverty programs that most closely resembled the NYA. Johnson's leadership of the NYA kindled both his desire to help the poor and disadvantaged and his strong commitment to the gendered politics of breadwinner liberalism, two traits that defined his vision for the antipoverty program.⁴⁷ However, Johnson did not fully appreciate that the social science theory behind parts of the War on Poverty aimed at politically mobilizing the nation's poor.

As the War on Poverty was rolled out nationwide in late 1964, it began what proved to be a highly controversial journey. Nowhere was this more evident than in the nation's inner-city ghettos, where the War on Poverty enabled the urban poor to challenge city halls across the nation for control of antipoverty programs, bringing political turmoil to cities across the country.

MAKING WAVES: COMMUNITY ACTION BEGINS

The political impact of the War on Poverty was felt across the country. While some rural southern blacks used the antipoverty program to challenge Jim Crow, the War on Poverty was fought most fiercely in America's inner-city ghettos.⁴⁸ As the *Los Angeles Times* suggested, "Nationwide the birth pangs of the new effort are indelible from the White House to the human warrens of Harlem, the kindling wood hovels of Atlanta's Buttermilk Bottom, the red brick tenements of Philadelphia's Brewertown, and the sun-baked shacks of Los Angeles' Willowbrook district."⁴⁹ Offering the poor the chance to control antipoverty programs for themselves, the Community Action Program (CAP) swiftly became the primary site of conflict in the War on Poverty in New York and Los Angeles. In the process, the CAP highlights two major concerns of this book: first, the close relationship between public policies and community activists who strove to capitalize on, and maximize, the opportunities they presented; second, the enduring commitment of mainstream and entrenched white class interests to dictating the pace and direction of socioeconomic and political change (and their success in doing so).

Under the CAP, each targeted poor area was required to set up (with federal money) a community action agency (CAA) to act as a clearinghouse to administer and coordinate social service, education, job training, and legal services programs. Whereas the New Deal had channeled money through

local political elites, recognizing and reinforcing existing power structures, the CAP made it possible for CAAs to receive federal money directly, in theory allowing local politicians to be bypassed altogether. War on Poverty planners had also written into CAP guidelines the need for “maximum feasible participation” of the poor themselves in the planning and delivery of those programs. While this reflected Ohlin and Cloward’s desire to mobilize and empower poor communities in the fight against poverty, the specific phrase “maximum feasible participation” was born of policy makers’ desire to ensure that white southern politicians would not be able to exclude blacks from local programs.⁵⁰

But “maximum feasible participation” was an imprecise and flexible term, and the degree of control over CAP operations it allowed the poor was hotly contested. The CAP soon became a lightning rod for political controversy. Many of the country’s poor citizens understood “maximum feasible participation” to mean they—not local politicians—should control antipoverty programs. However, most city executives—fearful of seeing their power eroded—argued that the guidelines sanctioned only the limited involvement of the poor in program and service design. The legislation’s indefinite language, however, meant neither interpretation could be definitively declared “wrong.”

Wherever the poor did fight to win control over antipoverty programs, the struggle brought political disruption for urban politicians (many of them big-city Democratic power brokers) that threatened to undermine completely the pursuit of consensus so central to President Johnson’s vision of liberal politics.⁵¹ The War on Poverty’s success in politically mobilizing the poor—especially the minority poor—was reflected in the myriad struggles for control over antipoverty programs in cities and communities nationwide. These struggles produced a fundamental clash of political cultures and precipitated a fierce backlash against the poor’s incursion into established urban power arrangements.

Few cities exemplified the conflict over the CAP better than New York, where the antipoverty apparatus set up by Democratic mayor Robert Wagner Jr. and his deputy Paul Screvane failed to include the poor. Wagner had been elected in 1954 with a majority of black votes, but progress for African Americans under his leadership was slow. While the city claimed some victories, including the nation’s first (albeit very weak) antidiscrimination housing bill in 1957, in other areas, such as school integration, virtually nothing was achieved.⁵² Mayor Wagner had been a vocal supporter of civil rights

throughout his time in office, but concrete gains for the city's black population under his leadership had been few and far between.

The Wagner administration's handling of the War on Poverty was another disappointment for black New Yorkers. Democratic Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell criticized city hall for excluding the poor, accusing municipal leaders of running antipoverty programs as "giant fiestas of political patronage."⁵³ Richard Cloward, MFY's research director, argued that "City Hall doesn't want powerful organizations built in the ghetto by Negroes and Puerto Ricans. It doesn't want any ghetto in City Hall; it wants more City Hall in the ghetto."⁵⁴ Paul Screvane, head of the city's official antipoverty body, the New York City Council Against Poverty (NYCCAP), mirrored the response of municipal politicians nationwide when he declared: "We are not about to turn this thing over to private organizations to administer. We have to have at least some say in the way the money is spent." Wagner agreed with Screvane that "such decisions should be made by City officials who are all trained professionals in their fields."⁵⁵

Poor communities across the country recognized the opportunities offered by the new legislation and began preparing to take advantage of them. In New York, for example, the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council (CBCC), a coalition group representing over one hundred membership organizations from the local black community, held a "War on Poverty Conference" shortly after its launch attended by more than five hundred local residents.⁵⁶ After years of antipoverty experimentation in the city, New York's poor black communities understandably assumed the War on Poverty was intended for them. In a city where poor whites outnumbered poor blacks two to one, the pilot antipoverty agency, MFY, had been established in an area with a largely black and Puerto Rican population, and the next two set up in the years before 1964—HARYOU-ACT and Youth-In-Action (YIA)—were located, respectively, in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant, the city's two largest black ghettos.⁵⁷

Screvane and Wagner's unwillingness to relinquish full control of the city's antipoverty programs seriously delayed New York's War on Poverty. The city's first plan called for the establishment of a policy board with sixty-two members, including just six representatives from poor communities, a plan rejected by both the OEO and state governor Nelson Rockefeller for so badly underrepresenting the poor. When New York finally had a plan accepted, it was one of the last cities in the country to do so.⁵⁸ Wrangling over inclusion of the poor had seriously undermined the city's antipoverty efforts during its first

year. As one local newspaper argued, “The poverty program was created to help the impoverished citizens, but in New York City, red tape, indecision, politics and mismanagement have hamstrung the program and kept it from reaching the vast majority of the people it was designed to help.”⁵⁹

On the West Coast, the first year of Los Angeles’s War on Poverty also proved acrimonious. Like New York, Los Angeles had been home to early-1960s experimental antipoverty programs. In April 1962, following an earlier meeting with David Hackett and Richard Boone of President Kennedy’s juvenile delinquency task force, local officials established the Youth Opportunities Board of Greater Los Angeles (YOB). However, while the YOB was created to improve the delivery of services to poor neighborhoods, it was dominated by city bureaucrats and saw the poor only as clients of its services.⁶⁰ In early September 1964 Mayor Sam Yorty made clear his vision for the city’s War on Poverty, telling reporters it would offer “work training for unemployed men and women through participation in community and public works programs.” Control of the effort, he implied, would rest with city agencies.⁶¹

Concerned about Yorty’s intentions, local African American community groups, led by the Welfare Planning Council, joined together to form the Economic Opportunity Federation (EOF) in order to challenge the YOB for designation as the city’s official antipoverty body. The EOF demanded full inclusion of the poor in running the War on Poverty and was backed by several local liberal Democrats, including Congressman Augustus Hawkins, who opposed the mayor.⁶² City officials instantly dismissed the EOF, with YOB head (and Yorty ally) Robert Goe declaring that the “makeup and experience” of the YOB made it “the best possible agency to coordinate the antipoverty program here.”⁶³

In January 1965, after three months of dispute, the OEO proposed a merger between the YOB and EOF in order to end the stalemate. The resultant organization, OEO leaders argued, would keep the YOB at the heart of the city’s antipoverty operations, while the EOF’s involvement would bring the substantial community representation that they and much of the local black poor desired and upon which the release of OEO funds was contingent. However, Mayor Yorty rejected the OEO’s solution because it placed more community and private-agency representatives on the new organization’s board than city officials (twelve to ten). While Yorty’s position reflected his genuine belief that public funds had to remain under the authority of public officials, it was also intensely political. Elected with strong black support in

1961, Yorty had failed to make good on his campaign promise to stop police brutality and had instead become a strong supporter of the LAPD and a close ally of the city's openly racist police chief, William Parker. This bolstered Yorty's image among white voters but deepened black disillusionment with his leadership. Having abandoned black voters, the mayor strove to prevent them from making any inroads into his political power.⁶⁴

In February 1965 the YOB and EOF agreed on the proposed merger, which would produce the Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency of Greater Los Angeles (EYOA). However, Yorty again refused to accept the plan, demanding that city officials alone direct antipoverty programs. In late May frustrated black Angelenos gathered in Congressman Hawkins's South Central office and formed the Community Antipoverty Committee (CAPC), an umbrella organization committed to challenging Yorty that comprised all the area's leading civil rights groups and their leaders, as well as a number of community groups. Norman O. Houston of the NAACP, Dr. Thomas Kilgore of CORE, Reverend H.H. Brookins of the United Civil Rights Committee (UCRC) and Archie Hardwick of the Westminster Neighborhood Improvement Association (WNIA), among others, were all prominently involved. Though predominantly black, the CAPC also included some Mexican American and Japanese American groups, highlighting broader minority interest in the War on Poverty. At the same time, anger over the mayor's position spawned new community organizations, such as the Watts Action Committee and the Southeast Citizens Improvement Association, which demanded control over local antipoverty programs. As the president of one of the groups announced: "We've decided that there is no group or person outside this community who will do the job for us [...] we are going to do it for ourselves."⁶⁵

The CAPC and other local minority groups continued to battle the recalcitrant mayor until, in August of that year, Watts, a black ghetto neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles, erupted in six days of rioting, breaking the deadlock.⁶⁶ In the aftermath, national attention focused on Los Angeles, and President Johnson sent LeRoy Collins, director of the federal government's Community Relations Service, to bring an end to the EYOA debacle. The subsequent negotiated settlement created an organization in which poor community representatives were narrowly outnumbered by public officials. Although an improvement on Yorty's terms, many black and Latino Angelenos resented the settlement for failing to better represent them, and anger over the protracted saga remained in the minority community for some

time. Nevertheless, the EYOA's confirmation as the city's official lead antipoverty agency did mean that, just over a year after the War on Poverty had been signed into law, the city's antipoverty effort could finally begin.⁶⁷

A "BLACK" WAR ON POVERTY? RACIAL IDENTITY POLITICS AND INTERRACIAL CONFLICT IN THE WAR ON POVERTY

By introducing resources, jobs, and power into poor minority communities, where they had traditionally been absent, the War on Poverty was always likely to result in a clamor for control over its rewards. What was, perhaps, less inevitable was the regularity with which local struggles were drawn along racial lines. Across the country, the War on Poverty inspired racially nationalist organizing, becoming a catalyst and conduit for the subsequent emergence of Black Power and various other racial liberation movements in America's ghettos. African Americans in New York and Los Angeles swiftly identified the War on Poverty as prime territory for black advancement. However, this led to repeated clashes with other minority groups. Interracial conflict, rather than cooperation, came to characterize the War on Poverty in both cities.

Throughout the 1965 New York mayoral election, candidates appealed to the aspirations of urban minority communities. Liberal Republican candidate John V. Lindsay reached out to those groups traditionally marginalized, or excluded from city government altogether, telling voters that a Lindsay administration War on Poverty would empower the poor. It was clear, he concluded, that the poor were no longer content with being "merely a delegation to City Hall. They want to be a part of City Hall." Victorious at the polls later that year, Lindsay soon set about making good on his campaign promises.⁶⁸

Throughout his two terms in office, Mayor Lindsay strove, in his own words, "to bring democracy to the streets of New York." Nowhere was this more apparent than in the city's War on Poverty, which he expanded significantly soon after taking office by designating an additional ten official "poverty areas" (bringing the total up to twenty-six) in the city and establishing an official CAA—or "community corporation," as they were known—in each. Every community corporation was required to have two-thirds of its board made up of representatives drawn from the local poor community. It was an approach, he later explained, designed to meet the expectations of "the disadvantaged of our city streets who [. . .] want, and sometimes fiercely

demand, participation in the decisions affecting their lives.”⁶⁹ As historian Vincent Cannato has suggested, Lindsay was truly committed to making the city “a laboratory for Great Society social policy” and proved adept at attracting federal funds for the city’s antipoverty fight.⁷⁰

Lindsay believed that combatting New York’s socioeconomic problems required significant reform of city government, and in mid-August 1966, eight months into his first term as mayor, he signed an executive order creating the Human Resources Administration (HRA). The HRA was the city’s new, all-encompassing apparatus for coordinating employment, social service, antipoverty, and public assistance programs. It consisted of five departments, each with different responsibilities, including the Community Development Agency, which was given oversight of the city’s War on Poverty.⁷¹

Lindsay’s reorganization of city government was also intended to serve an important political purpose. Entering office as a Republican mayor in a city with an overwhelming majority of Democratic voters—the first elected in in two decades—Lindsay encountered a hostile Democratic political machine and uncooperative city bureaucracy. In the face of their resistance, Lindsay looked to unite the city’s sizable minority groups and white liberals and progressives in a new political coalition of his own and, toward that goal, began opening up city government—in particular its expanded official antipoverty apparatus—to the city’s poor black and Puerto Rican communities.

In mixed neighborhoods, this approach fueled significant and sustained interracial conflict over War on Poverty jobs and resources. Peaking in late 1969–early 1970, clashes over the antipoverty program were ongoing in nearly every mixed black and Puerto Rican neighborhood in the city. In South Bronx, local blacks were outraged when Frank Lugano, the Puerto Rican board chairman of the South Bronx Community Corporation, fired Frank Wright, its African American executive director. The incident was just one in a number, a local reporter noted, that reflected “a struggle for power in the South Bronx poverty agency which has jobs and political patronage to bestow.” The situation was replicated elsewhere, as another report explained: “In East Harlem, Shirle Brown the black executive director of the district’s community corporation, MEND, is under fire from Puerto Rican board members who are trying to dismiss him. In Coney Island, delegate agencies occupied the community corporation offices for a week in August in a dispute over Black–Puerto Rican appointments. Minor conflicts, even acts of violence, between the two groups have broken out in East New York, Williamsburg, and Brooklyn.”⁷² Leading local Puerto Rican politician

Herman Badillo argued that conflict resulted from making the two groups fight over “one small piece of the pie.” “The best way to solve the problem,” Badillo continued, “is for Mayor Lindsay to appoint blacks and Puerto Ricans to important positions in other areas besides the Council [Against Poverty] and Human Resources, such as Finance, Public Works or Parks and Culture.”⁷³ Badillo’s words reflected not only the strength and pervasive nature of racial identity politics within the city’s War on Poverty, but also the extent to which, under Lindsay, minority groups claimed ownership of the antipoverty program and, increasingly, city government jobs too.

The racial dynamics of Los Angeles’s War on Poverty differed significantly from those in New York. As only the second-largest minority group in the city, black Angelenos found themselves increasingly in conflict with the largest—Mexican Americans—over the spoils of the local antipoverty program. As historian Robert Bauman has revealed, interracial conflict was especially pronounced between EYOA, the city’s official antipoverty body, and the Neighborhood Adult Participation Project (NAPP), the first and only community action organization established by the EYOA. Few local blacks or Chicanos supported EYOA, believing it to be a political tool of Mayor Yorty. NAPP, on the other hand, was headed by Opal Jones, a black female civil rights activist strongly committed to empowering local poor communities and defending community action. While EYOA concentrated on social service delivery, NAPP instead focused primarily on community organizing through its thirteen “outpost” offices in poor communities across the city. Each NAPP office employed up to thirty neighborhood aides, the vast majority of whom were members of the local poor and, more often than not, were female. At least half of these aides were usually deployed as liaisons between parents and various local institutions (such as schools and welfare offices). The remaining NAPP neighborhood aides spent their time organizing people around issues of local importance.⁷⁴

During its first year, NAPP mobilized local groups to lobby for improved city services such as garbage collection, better street lighting, and child-care facilities. Irritated by their activity, and perceiving NAPP as a threat to his power (in particular because of Jones’s close ties to Congressman Hawkins and Councilman Tom Bradley), Mayor Yorty soon moved against NAPP. First, Joe Maldonado, the Mexican American head of EYOA and a Yorty ally, fired Jones for refusing to abandon NAPP’s community organization-focused approach. However, after Jones appealed, OEO intervened and not only reinstated her but also stripped EYOA of authority over NAPP.



FIGURE 2. Protesters march down a downtown Los Angeles sidewalk, with one sign reading “NAPP For Community Action,” in 1966. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Used under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

However, the newly independent organization soon became mired in growing interracial conflict stemming from anger among its Latino employees, who felt Hispanics were seriously underrepresented within NAPP and the antipoverty program more broadly. Although Mexican Americans constituted the largest minority poor group in the city, only three of NAPP’s thirteen outposts were in areas with majority Chicano populations: Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, and Pacoima. Those centers were also the only ones with Mexican American directors. Arguing that the city’s War on Poverty was favoring blacks (just as Puerto Rican groups in New York had), Chicano NAPP staff members demanded that Jones give Mexican Americans

a greater share of organizational jobs and power. Despite increasing Latino representation as a result, interracial tensions in NAPP continued to simmer. In 1969 the OEO (now under directives from the Nixon White House) stepped in to restructure the organization. The result was a shift in NAPP's focus toward job training and firmly away from community organization.⁷⁵ Interracial antagonism also fatally undermined EYOA as opposition from the city's Chicano groups—again over the issue of underrepresentation—eventually increased to such an extent that the organization was shut down in 1972 and its powers transferred elsewhere.⁷⁶

Speaking at a “Save Our War on Poverty” conference in May 1972, Opal Jones reflected that the scarcity of antipoverty resources had done much to inspire interracial conflict in the city's program:

For seven long years we have struggled to work in these [antipoverty] programs in Los Angeles. Our funds have been steadily reduced year after year and as the poverty and problems increased, the money decreased. In spite of the attacks against the community based programs we continued to try and work with many odds, blocks and many obstacles which were forever put in our way. Year after year we have had to go and beg for more funds. We have been placed in a pitiful and dreadful situation where we have been pitted in battle against each other: Blacks against Browns and Browns against Blacks; Blacks against Blacks and Browns against Browns. [. . .] We must unite against the forces that make us fight over the crumbs of the War on Poverty.⁷⁷

Regional NAACP director Leonard Carter regarded the “increased competition and polarization developing between black and brown communities” in the city with trepidation. In a letter to Congressman Augustus Hawkins in mid-1972, Carter lamented that after having “carried the brunt of the civil rights movement,” African Americans now saw the gains they had made in employment and education under threat from the region's Latino community: “Today, the pressure is on from our Spanish-speaking citizens and they are rightfully demanding a greater share of jobs.” The problem was, Carter complained, that “it is becoming increasingly clear that many brown representatives are attempting to remove blacks from jobs and then to replace them with browns.”⁷⁸

Panracial class solidarity, then, was an exception, rather than the rule, in both New York and Los Angeles. The clear trend of racial identity politics in both cities' antipoverty programs reflected the growing strength of nationalist ideologies in black and other minority communities. It also underlined the War on Poverty's capacity for nurturing racial nationalism, something

most clearly visible in the organizations examined in the following chapter. Lastly, racial conflict between minority groups over antipoverty jobs and resources further discredited the War on Poverty and lent weight to white criticism that it was a liberal, pro-minority program that put taxpayers' money in the hands of fractious, militant inner-city communities that brought unwelcome disruption to public life.

CALMER WATERS? ATLANTA'S WAR ON POVERTY

Whereas in New York and Los Angeles the War on Poverty engendered challenges to established local power structures, in Atlanta it seemed largely to strengthen them. This can be explained, at least partially, by the way in which Atlanta's political elites managed local blacks' efforts for inclusion. Just as the Watts riots began amid the turmoil swamping LA's antipoverty program, the *Los Angeles Times* lauded the apparently smooth running of the War on Poverty in Atlanta, calling it "a beacon which burns through the miasma of cynicism engulfing the efforts in some big northern cities."⁷⁹ A year later, local liberal newspaper the *Atlanta Journal* celebrated Atlanta's place just below Pittsburgh at the top of the OEO's funding rankings, commending the "alertness [. . .] of city and county officials" in "taking advantage of what was available for a most important kind of work."⁸⁰ Atlanta's success was also due in part to the virtual absence from the city's antipoverty program of serious conflict and delays of the kind that had beset efforts in New York and Los Angeles. Key to this was the city's established pattern of top-down biracial political cooperation.

As soon as the War on Poverty was announced, Mayor Ivan Allen ensured that the city's biracial leadership elite was well represented within the city's official antipoverty agency, Economic Opportunity Atlanta, Incorporated (EOA Inc.). The organization's board included some of the city's leading black power brokers, including Martin Luther King Sr., insurance executive and publisher Jesse Hill Jr., and real estate mogul W.L. Calloway. Dr. Tillman Cothran, former professor of sociology at Atlanta University and the cochair of the Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference (ASLC)—the preeminent contemporary black leadership organization—was appointed associate director of EOA Inc.⁸¹ Other local black elites who expected to be included pushed to ensure they were. One such leader was local NAACP head John Calhoun, who leveraged his relationship with Dan Sweat, EOA

Inc.'s white associate director, to secure an appointment in the organization. As Sweat explains: "John showed up the first day on the job and said—my first day in the job—and says 'I'm here to go to work.' And I said 'what are you talking about?' He said, 'Well,' he said, 'This is the greatest opportunity of my lifetime for blacks. It has so much potential, and I'm not going to get left out. I've got to be involved.'" ⁸²

As whites continued to leave the city en masse for the suburbs and blacks' numerical strength grew, Atlanta's black establishment pressed to increase its political power at every opportunity, an effort in which its members were generally quite successful.⁸³ As local historian Harold H. Martin has suggested: "The dialogue between the Black Summit Conference leaders and the EOA [Inc.] board set a pattern that would be followed for many years to come: the blacks asking for more and more recognition, more and more participation in government at all levels, and the white leaders agreeing."⁸⁴

Lacking the influence of well-connected African Americans like Calhoun, Atlanta's poor black citizens found their opportunities within the city's antipoverty effort much more limited. The "citizens advisory councils"—the vehicles for community participation in antipoverty affairs—had no say in policy or decision making. In late November 1965, grassroots leaders from across the city came together to discuss their concerns over the citizens advisory councils' lack of power and the absence of poor representatives on the EOA Inc. board. Their subsequent request to discuss these issues with EOA Inc. officials in person, however, was rejected. In the words of Reverend Cadamus Samples, the board's refusal to meet with them was "a slap in the face. We were made to feel like floor mats. These people are supposed to be our representatives and we can't even speak to them." Although Otelus Shelman, the groups' other leading spokesman, wrote to Sargent Shriver insisting on the need for poor people to be represented at the "upper administration levels" of the city's War on Poverty, little changed as a result. The poor would never acquire any meaningful degree of decision-making power in the city's antipoverty program.⁸⁵

While the poor lacked influence over Atlanta's War on Poverty, they were not excluded from the program altogether. What limited opportunities for involvement they did have resulted from the antipoverty organizational model that developed in the city. Atlanta's official antipoverty agency, EOA Inc., had grown out of the West End Project, a neighborhood service center set up in a poor mixed neighborhood in 1962 in order to relocate services from the downtown business area to the point of delivery—that is, into the

poor community itself. The West End center, a contemporary assessment explained, was “run by local indigent personnel and supervised and guided by social service type organizational employees.” Because city officials perceived the West End Project as a great success, EOA Inc. used it as a template in creating “neighborhood service centers” (NSCs) in a number of designated poor communities, black and white, across the city. These NSCs focused overwhelmingly on the delivery of services to the city’s poor residents, so much so in fact that, according to one report, after two years of operation less than half of 1 percent of EOA Inc.’s budget was allocated for Jobs Corp, the War on Poverty’s main job training element.⁸⁶ Under this paradigm, the poor were identified primarily as clients and the role of service planning and delivery reserved mainly for professional social workers. Candidates for the handful of center management roles were drawn habitually from the ranks of Atlanta’s well-educated black middle class. As the city’s War on Poverty developed, NSC activities became dominated by programs like Headstart, homemaking, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and child care. In September 1965 the city received \$6.3 million in additional antipoverty funding that was used to add a further eight of these multipurpose service centers to the four originally created, nearly all of them built in poor African American neighborhoods. This social service–oriented model was seen by some critics to exemplify the shortcomings and limitations of the War on Poverty insofar as it did little to undermine the structural causes of poverty.⁸⁷

Like the West End Project, the city’s NSCs did provide some opportunities for the direct involvement of the poor through employment as “neighborhood aides.” However, the organizational status of neighborhood aides raised questions about the EOA Inc.’s disposition toward involvement of the poor in the antipoverty program. As Otis Cochran of local community group the Vine City Improvement Association complained, “The only staff positions involving the poor are the aide positions, and the valuable pension program does not include them.” Denied the full benefits enjoyed by their more senior colleagues, neighborhood aides were effectively given second-tier status within EOA Inc.⁸⁸ Regardless, competition over the limited number of these jobs available was strong. In a statement to a local newspaper, one anonymous group of neighborhood aides charged that, contrary to the spirit of the War on Poverty, the positions were not going to the genuinely poor: “There are some people working with the EOA [centers] who are paid a good salary. These people have husbands working at Lockheed, the Post Office, Conley, teaching school, and other high paying jobs. In the first place these women

were not in poverty. The women without husbands who needed the jobs, and could have done the job, were left out [and] their applications overlooked.”⁸⁹

Implicit in the aides’ criticism was their expectation that the War on Poverty should provide poor single black women (and their children) a route to the family wage they lacked, as well as the status it conferred. In their estimation, women with employed husbands already enjoyed the fruits of economic citizenship and thus were less deserving of these jobs. While the War on Poverty was seen as a prime opportunity for extending economic citizenship to those historically denied it, it revealed a complex contest over female empowerment that was itself (somewhat paradoxically) shaped by the existing male-breadwinner social paradigm. Concerns over who exactly should enjoy the benefits of the antipoverty program were not exclusive to women. In a letter to EOA Inc., Edward Moody, a prominent spokesman for the poor of the Summerhill-Mechanicsville area, complained that the board of a recently created local child care association (sponsored by the local NSC) was remarkably unrepresentative of the area’s poor residents: “The present [board] members are ‘what’s in it for me?’ members. The community is resentful of the employees driving expensive autos to and from work. The applicants['] applications are tampered with. Certain people are employed. Always a family tie. A board member or a friend. Employees are allowed to work two jobs. Employees['] mates are already doing good.”⁹⁰

The apparent anti-poor bias in EOA Inc. was manifested in other organizational arrangements. W. H. Montague, president of the Georgia AFL-CIO, spoke out against EOA Inc. after it declared its policy on the garnishment of employee wages. In late November 1967, at a meeting presided over by Martin Luther King Sr., the organization stated that it did not consider indebted individuals “desirable employees” and warned that any employee receiving a garnishment would be sacked.⁹¹ As indebtedness was an issue that disproportionately affected the poor, EOA Inc.’s rules seemed one more way to inhibit their involvement. Montague lambasted EOA Inc.’s position as “worse than the most recalcitrant, unenlightened, and backward Georgia employer” and “contrary to the entire conception of the poverty program.”⁹²

The poor would find themselves on the fringes of Atlanta’s War on Poverty from its first day till its last. A consistent critic of the city’s efforts, local newspaper editor J. Lowell Ware suggested in late 1971: “We tire of saying it but the efforts of government and private business to provide work for those who need it, housing for those who must have it, and a way up and out of the pit of poverty is, and has been, a rotten little game in which career bureaucrats

and hardened social work hacks grow fat while a generation of children linger, wither and die before they reach age ten.”⁹³

Although restricted involvement of the poor was an issue in all three cities, the War on Poverty in Atlanta proved to be far less of an organizational platform for mobilizing the city’s poor black community than it did in New York and Los Angeles. While the limits of the NSC model ensured that community organizing and mobilization were rarely practiced within Atlanta’s antipoverty program, the fact remains that there appears to have been a much more vocal and sustained resistance to the exclusion of the poor in New York and Los Angeles. In Atlanta, although the War on Poverty did provide improved services to the poor, it was more a source of administrative positions for local middle-class and elite blacks than it was an engine of local community activism as it proved to be in New York and Los Angeles.⁹⁴ The community organizations (discussed in chapter 2) that emerged in the mid-to late 1960s from the intersection of Black Power, antipoverty organizing, and alternative public policies never materialized in Atlanta during this period. Their absence can be explained, at least in part, by the way in which the War on Poverty unfolded, the entrenched model of biracial cooperation between black and white elites, and the relatively less intense grassroots activism in Atlanta compared to New York and Los Angeles.

The War on Poverty in Atlanta also highlighted two other significant facts. First, it revealed that the War on Poverty—and especially its poor-as-clients social service–delivery model—was seriously limited, struggling as it did to effectively reduce poverty levels. Second, it showed that class, as much as race, dictated the terms and conditions of black engagement in the War on Poverty. Opportunities were available to middle-class and elite black Atlantans, but not for their less fortunate counterparts. Increasing middle-class opportunity would also become a defining characteristic of the alternative public policies discussed in the following chapter, as it would remain in local racial politics in Atlanta. Class bias also lay at the heart of mainstream political reaction to the War on Poverty’s impact where it energized and mobilized the inner-city minority poor.

THE POOR IN POLITICS: AN UNWELCOME CHALLENGE

The resistance of local authorities and urban power brokers to the transformative political change threatened by the War on Poverty soon found

voice at the national level too. Speaking before the U.S. House of Representatives in August 1965 as an extension to the antipoverty bill was being debated, OEO chief Sargent Shriver found himself under attack from congressional leaders angry at the widespread political ferment the antipoverty program appeared to be encouraging in poor urban communities nationwide. As Alphonso Bell, a member of the House ad hoc subcommittee of the War on Poverty and Republican representative from Los Angeles, complained to Shriver: "We're all in favor of fighting poverty, but you're opening the gunwales to loads of political activity."⁹⁵

The following month, the director of the Bureau of the Budget, Charles Schultz, explained to President Johnson that "many mayors assert that the CAP is setting up a competing political organization in their own backyards." Underlining the importance of mayoral support, Schultz advised that "we ought not to be in the business of organizing the poor politically." He recommended that OEO be ordered to stop sponsoring elections to poverty planning boards, to tone down its conflicts with city politicians over representation of the poor (which, he acknowledged, "may cause some friction with civil rights groups"), and step up its efforts to involve the poor at the working, rather than the planning, level of the antipoverty program.⁹⁶

In late November 1965, the United States Conference of Mayors (USCM) submitted a special report to OEO based on consultations with representatives of ninety-three local governments. The report revealed widespread concern with community action and the relationship between public and private agencies, and also blamed CAP inefficiencies on the lack of technical expertise among many of the poor communities involved. There was, the report argued, too much focus on the form of organization rather than on substantive program building. Local CAAs, the report insisted, "should operate as service centers." In many ways, Atlanta's War on Poverty exemplified the USCM's ideal formula. Decision-making power and oversight of antipoverty programs, the mayors believed, had to rest with public officials and qualified professionals.⁹⁷

President Johnson shared municipal politicians' concerns over the CAP. As Guian McKee explains, Johnson's past experience as head of the Texas arm of the New Deal's National Youth Administration (NYA) played a critical role in shaping his own view on this matter. As Texas NYA chief, Johnson had had programmatic and financial control, reflecting the federal government's implicit trust in his expertise and suitability for that role. As such, Johnson agreed that control of CAPs should rest with city officials, and had

assumed that it would. Moreover, Johnson's gendered political vision of the War on Poverty meant he valued programs that trained and employed men most highly. The president had therefore paid little regard to the CAP when War on Poverty legislation was drawn up. Here, Johnson's view clashed with those of the antipoverty program's authors most significantly. While he subscribed completely to the principles of New Deal breadwinner liberalism, advocates of community action sought instead to mobilize and empower the very groups that had been most marginalized by the New Deal welfare state. As historian Thomas F. Jackson has argued, although many African Americans perceived the antipoverty program as a tool for widening and accelerating the battle for equality, Johnson "had no idea that his War on Poverty would become so thoroughly entangled with the black quest for independent political power." Johnson's far more limited vision did not include politically mobilizing the nation's poorest citizens, and he swiftly turned against it when faced with the political strife it created.⁹⁸

Politicians' concerns over the CAP were, in some respects, well founded. Poor communities' general lack of administrative and managerial experience did threaten to undermine the efficiency and quality of War on Poverty programs. In New York, Mayor Lindsay's aide Jim Carberry gave voice to this problem. Advising Lindsay on how best to explain to angry community groups the city's delayed application for OEO funds, Carberry suggested being honest. The truth, he argued, was that

this administration tried too diligently to engage the poor in preparation of the applications for funding. The poor, inescapably, do not have typewriters. They don't spell very well. They are not precise in language and they are unfamiliar with the requirements of preparing project proposals. They don't have adding machines and their figures don't balance. Consequently, an effort to truly give poor people a rightful and effective voice in determining the use of poverty money creates an additional workload on those who are formally charged with preparing the bureaucratically correct applications to OEO. Moreover, it requires one hell of a lot of time to translate the often conflicting requests of the poor into proper, accurate applications.⁹⁹

The emphasis on community participation regularly resulted in delays to antipoverty programs nationwide. CAAs with significant and diverse community representation often found themselves bogged down in long debates over how best to organize, something generally avoided by top-down, tightly controlled, city hall-led CAAs, which often established and implemented programs swiftly. Moreover, as some feared, the introduction of money and

resources into poor neighborhoods led in some cases to corruption and misuse of funds. As later head of New York's antipoverty program Major Owens explained, "Once you introduce money into the situation poor people behave like anyone else—the greed factor takes over and you have problems."¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, as historian Thomas Sugrue has suggested, "it is unclear whether maximum feasible participation actually improved services to the poor."¹⁰¹

Beneath these issues of suitability and practicality lay a broader clash of cultures and expectations, as a letter to Los Angeles congressman Augustus Hawkins from his South Central district office aide Charles Knox reveals. Reporting back on a meeting he had attended in the Compton-Willowbrook area, Knox complained, "I could summarize the meeting by calling it a big 'mess.' However, intrinsic in the interaction is the raw and often time unintelligible approach to the board's problems." The underlying and inescapable issue, he asserted, was that the poor were ill-equipped for such positions of authority, leadership, and management. "Unfortunately, inherent in a board of thirteen low-income representatives, who display all of the common disabilities of the poor, is resentment, conflict, destruction, etc." To overcome this problem, he suggested that "the board needs the direction of a very firm and emotionally secure chairman who will ride herd and nip a lot of the internal jealousy and conflict in the bud." The board members were, he concluded, "guilty in maintaining internal struggles that limit good planning in all areas. I certainly don't want to be overly critical or subjective in evaluating the meeting. However, I feel just and objective in surmising from what seems to be occurring on the board, another demonstration of N-[igger] business."¹⁰²

An African American himself, Knox's intraracial criticism reveals that class tensions, and a clash of political cultures, could just as easily occur between established black middle-class and professional political elites and black poor citizens as it could between the black community and white officials. It was a conflict that encompassed issues of education, class, cultural orientation, and the expected standards of behavior that prevailed within mainstream political life. Moreover, it raised broader questions about the place of the poor within national politics, the class bias of mainstream U.S. politics and society, and the limits of inclusive democracy. Importantly, these questions were later amplified by the growth of a vibrant welfare rights movement that placed increasingly militant poor black women on the front line of a national debate about the moral and political dimensions of the taxpayer-funded American welfare state and the pursuit of economic justice.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS DISAPPOINTED

If politicians were unhappy with the results of the War on Poverty, so were many poor communities. Aside from frustrated ambitions to control antipoverty programs, many inner-city minority communities were angered by the underfunding of the War on Poverty. As New York senator James H. Scheuer explained to a House subcommittee on poverty, the program's first-year appropriations of \$800 million dollars amounted to "less than \$30 an impoverished person."¹⁰³ Sargent Shriver made plain the insufficiency of War on Poverty appropriations and the underutilization of its programs when he testified before a Senate subcommittee on the OEO's first two years of operations. Headstart, he explained, had reached more than 700,000 poor children and their families each year, but this represented less than one-third of the total number of children aged three to five targeted by the program. Of the nation's 8 million children aged six to fifteen, he estimated that OEO operations were reaching only about 300,000. Out of 3 million impoverished sixteen- to twenty-one-year-olds, only 20 percent of those attending school and 40 percent of dropouts were involved with antipoverty efforts. Success in getting job training and placements to adults was even more limited, with just 6 percent of the 9.5 million poor people aged between twenty-two and fifty-four receiving jobs or vocational training in 1966. Worse still, antipoverty programs were consistently meeting the needs of only around 5 percent of the 5.4 million elderly Americans living below the poverty line.¹⁰⁴ In a June 1967 message to Congress, President Johnson admitted that although 8 million poor Americans had been reached by the War on Poverty during its first two and a half years, another 24 million remained unaffected by the program.¹⁰⁵

Greater financial commitment to fighting poverty at home, however, was precluded by the cost of fighting communism abroad. As a *Atlanta Journal* editor suggested:

The declaration of the War on Poverty [...] accompanied by exuberant White House promises of relief for the country's 34 million people below the poverty line, amounted to a national promise and an official underwriting of hope. Yet the program had funding which, from the start, was judged by authorities on the subject to be grossly inadequate for the promises being made. Then, six months after the act [EOA] was passed, the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the beginning of full American involvement there threw a major obstacle in front of the program.¹⁰⁶

Black disillusionment was only deepened by the apparent willingness of the federal government to sacrifice the pursuit of social and economic justice in favor of an increasingly controversial war overseas. According to Martin Luther King Jr., it was a symptom of a society that had habitually and chronically failed African Americans, and another injustice that fed the groundswell of black disappointment from which the Black Power movement grew.¹⁰⁷

In October 1966, presidential aide Robert Kintner acknowledged in a memo to Johnson that the funding of the War on Poverty had become “a real political issue, as you know better than I, in every large city in this country.”¹⁰⁸ The following month, in a detailed message to the president entitled “Great expectations vs. Disappointments,” Bureau of the Budget director Schultz suggested that the administration’s lofty rhetoric concerning the elimination of poverty at home was quickly becoming a political liability for the White House. “States, cities, depressed areas, and individuals,” Schultz wrote, “have been led to expect immediate delivery of Great Society programs to a degree that is not realistic.” With the deepening military conflict in Southeast Asia now diverting increasing levels of federal funds away from domestic programs, the “frustration, loss of credibility, and even deterioration of state and local services” he expected to result would, he predicted, prove “very troublesome in the 1968 campaign.”¹⁰⁹

At the same time that the War on Poverty was disappointing social and economic justice advocates, the political turmoil it caused had helped turn the political tide decisively in favor of conservative opponents of redistributive liberal social policy. As a confidential White House report explained, “The outcome of the 1966 midterm elections, in terms of Congressional support for the War on Poverty, is very grim. In the House, the program has fallen from a position of relative strength to one of desperate jeopardy.” The Democrats, and liberals in particular, suffered heavy reversals. Of the seventy-one politicians unseated in the elections, fifty-five had been behind the War on Poverty. Of their replacements, only eight could be counted as supporters, with a further six considered “doubtful” and the rest understood to be hostile to the antipoverty program. American voters, conservatives argued, had delivered a resounding verdict on the Johnson administration’s policies and its handling of the urban crisis. In the 90th Congress the War on Poverty would, in all likelihood, face a clear and sizable majority opposition. Its future seemed bleak at best. As the White House report concluded, “The War on Poverty is in great peril in the House. On paper it looks as though

the conservative coalition can work its will against our legislation, at least to the point of drastically restructuring and reorganizing the program.”¹¹⁰

With the stage set for the War on Poverty’s retrenchment, the report’s dire predictions were soon realized. Antipoverty program opponents oversaw a number of sizable cuts to OEO funding in 1966–67. On the ground, the impact was considerable. In Los Angeles, Mayor Yorty wrote to Sargent Shriver to warn him that the planned cuts (an expected loss of \$10 million in OEO funds for the city) “shall severely handicap the functioning of the local CAP agency [. . .] this could mean the loss of about 500 jobs for poverty area residents and the disappearance of programs serving approximately 135,000 people.”¹¹¹ In Atlanta, EOA Inc. head Charles Emmerich wrote to Richard Boone, then head of the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP), to explain that

EOA Inc. is struggling to reduce its opportunity programs in line with the reductions outlined by Sargent Shriver. The reductions represent approximately 50% of our anticipated budget for 1967. When you consider that EOA Inc.’s program has been escalating over a two year period and during this same period it has become very close to the community, it is easy to understand our frustration. Our local committees are cooperating beautifully, but it is heartbreaking when they are required to reduce programs which are efficiently and effectively serving their communities. Frankly we find the reduction extremely difficult to accept and it is also most difficult to maintain a reasonable degree of high morale among our disadvantaged. Again they began to build up real hope and enthusiasm and now, as always, they are told this seems to be another broken promise.¹¹²

With President Johnson backing away from the War on Poverty from late 1965, growing political opposition eventually led to the passage of two congressional amendments in 1967 that diluted the CAP’s potential for politically engaging the poor. The Quie and Green Amendments assured local officials of the authority to decide which community groups were eligible for OEO funds and also required that one-third of antipoverty board seats go to elected officials, with another third to consist of local social service and welfare professionals, as well as representatives from private-sector organizations.¹¹³ City politicians across the country had exerted their influence to restrict the antipoverty legislation’s capacity to challenge established authority, pushing back against poor communities’ attempts to interlope in existing urban power arrangements. However, while politicians succeeded in winning control over the War on Poverty, they proved less able to control the

increasing fiscal burden of public assistance programs that it generated. The growing cost of liberal social spending produced a backlash that had far-reaching consequences for American politics.

BROADENING THE INSURGENCY: WELFARE RIGHTS AND THE WAR ON POVERTY

One of the War on Poverty's most important political legacies was its helping to amplify, mobilize, and expand urban movements for social and economic justice. By offering a platform for disadvantaged communities to assert and defend their rights, the War on Poverty became intertwined with other important movements within the broader antipoverty coalition. The most significant of these was the welfare rights movement. As the War on Poverty intensified the focus on economic rights and urban organizing within the black freedom struggle, it provided extra impetus and support for a nascent welfare rights movement that grew rapidly in the mid- to late 1960s. Led primarily by inner-city black (and other minority) mothers, the blossoming of a national welfare rights movement brought vigorous challenges to local and federal government for comprehensive reform of the existing, much maligned welfare system and for a fuller extension of benefits.¹¹⁴

Welfare rights activism centered on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the program created by the 1935 Social Security Act. AFDC became an important support system for many inner-city blacks as millions left the rural South for the urban North in the decades following the Great Depression. Unlike the top-tier New Deal welfare programs (such as Social Security, workmen's compensation insurance, and unemployment insurance), which aimed to protect and valorize the male breadwinner-headed family paradigm, AFDC actively undermined it. By providing assistance only to female-headed households, the program effectively incentivized the father to leave the home, thereby destabilizing the traditional two-parent family structure in poor black communities nationwide, stigmatizing single mother-led black families and further dislocating AFDC recipients from the idealized vision of American citizenship and social organization.¹¹⁵

Worse still, payments were usually low, sometimes barely enough to cover food, rent, and other bills, leaving little, if anything, for other expenses. Welfare rights protesters often demanded more money for essential items for their chil-

dren such as school uniforms and shoes and for extra winter clothing. A strained relationship existed between AFDC clients and their (often hostile) welfare caseworkers. Many welfare recipients especially resented home eligibility checks that investigated for evidence of a “man in the house,” arguing they were inhumane and demeaning. As one black AFDC mother from Los Angeles explained to Sargent Shriver when he visited the city in August 1966:

How much do you think the human mind and body can stand? [. . .] You think there is something nice about being on welfare and having a social worker come snooping under your bed, to see if you got a man there? It don't leave no dignity. You know it would be real nice if some of you people could change yourselves and be poor for a while. You see what the poor people have to go through. Who wants welfare? Who wants to have someone look down their nose at you all the time to give you a piece of bread? That's enough to make you want to blow your own brains out.¹¹⁶

The recent wealth of scholarship on the welfare rights movement has revealed its roots in earlier civil rights protest and its place within the broader tradition of African American consumer and economic rights activism.¹¹⁷ The War on Poverty played a central role in transforming relatively isolated, disparate protest groups into a national, coordinated movement. As poor inner-city residents, welfare recipients naturally formed a vital War on Poverty constituency and were a primary target for organizing by advocates of the poor. In a May 1966 article, New York sociologists (and Mobilization For Youth staff members) Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven outlined a plan for forcing reform of the welfare system as a precursor to building a fairer society. Although opponents of the welfare state often criticized the cost of the nation's welfare system, it was in fact, they argued, both inadequately provisioned and seriously undersubscribed:

A vast discrepancy exists between the benefits to which people are entitled under public welfare programs and the sums which they actually receive. [. . .] It is widely known, for example, that nearly 8 million persons (half of them white) now subsist on welfare, but it is not generally known that for every person on the rolls at least one more probably meets existing criteria of eligibility but is not obtaining assistance. The discrepancy is not an accident stemming from bureaucratic inefficiency; rather, it is an integral feature of the welfare system which, if challenged, would precipitate a profound financial and political crisis. The force for that challenge, and the strategy we propose, is a massive drive to recruit the poor onto the welfare rolls.¹¹⁸

In 1967, growing welfare enrollment and activism led to the founding of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). The group's chief architect was George Wiley, a former chemistry professor and CORE leader. In late August 1967, more than 250 groups from eighty cities in thirty states convened in Washington, D.C., to establish a national organization. As Wiley explained, "From deep in the ghettos and barrios of American cities welfare recipients and other poor people have been banding together to seek a better life for them and their families."¹¹⁹ Efforts to expand the numbers on welfare rolls proved highly successful. In 1960 there were 3.1 million AFDC clients. By 1965 that figure climbed to 4.3 million. Five years later it had rocketed to nearly 8.5 million. As historian Marisa Chappell has explained, over a quarter of all new recipients were added in just two states: New York and California.¹²⁰

As more and more local groups formed across the country, welfare rights organizations became fundamentally intertwined with the War on Poverty and minority women's struggle for liberation, not just from poverty but from racial and gender discrimination too. While the Johnson administration had intended the War on Poverty to decrease welfare enrollment (a natural corollary to the training and employment of African American men in the nation's ghettos), it was far more successful in vaulting a highly vocal, militant, female-led welfare rights movement to national prominence.

Welfare rights activism reached its climax in a national discussion, stretching from 1969 through 1972, over welfare reform and a guaranteed minimum income, a discussion that centered on the Nixon administration's proposed Family Assistance Plan (FAP).¹²¹ The apotheosis of welfare rights activism, and the fiscal burden brought by growing welfare enrollment, played an important part in the increasing polarization of American politics, in shaping future public policy reform, and, later, in limiting the scope of black political power.

RESHAPING AMERICAN POLITICS: THE BROADER CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR ON POVERTY

A memo to President Johnson in late December 1963 revealed that the Kennedy administration's choice between instituting a federal program that sought to attack poverty and forming one that addressed the problems faced by America's middle-income citizens had been a close call. While Kennedy was keen to help the nation's poorest citizens, he and his economic advisors

also feared alienating the “American in the middle”—in the \$3,000–\$10,000 income bracket—who they saw as “the key to our economy, society, and political stability.” Perfectly capturing the gendered perspective of breadwinner liberalism, their assessment explained: “He pays most of the taxes, carries most of the credit, makes or breaks the consumer goods market, is the home-buyer, car-buyer, etc. He is also the man in the gunsights of the future: automation is his job threat, high costs of education are his worry as a parent, high costs of elderly medical care fall heaviest on him as son. His consent is vital—his dissent is fatal—to our social progress vis-à-vis Negro rights, etc.”¹²² As the decade wore on, millions of white voters in this constituency, later characterized by Richard Nixon as the “Silent Majority,” abandoned the Democratic Party and liberalism, forming the first shoots of what contemporary political commentator Kevin Phillips famously termed the “emerging Republican majority.”¹²³ The War on Poverty, and the welfare rights movement it helped to expand, played an important part in this developing political realignment. As antipoverty efforts and welfare rights protest became inextricably bound up with movements for racial and economic equality, many “middle Americans” increasingly resented liberal social policies that they believed privileged the interests of poor black and other minority groups. Writing in 1970, Mayor John Lindsay recognized this growing sentiment among white New Yorkers:

In the last few years, governments at all levels have mounted a wide range of programs to aid the deprived. They have, in the main, been meager programs; they have in no sense represented the commitment of resources and energy we need—but they have been visible. Many governments, New York City’s included, have attempted to break through the decades of neglect and demonstrate to our most deprived citizens that government cares about them and it can respond to their grievances. And seeing this—seeing at least the effort and concern among one part of the citizenry—the mainstream New Yorker may well ask: “Where is an effort being made to answer *my* grievances? Is the black man to be bettered at my expense?”¹²⁴

The sense of injustice over redistributive liberal social policy was a powerful emotion among many white American voters across the country and became a vital axis of conservative political resurgence from the mid-1960s onward. Spiraling welfare enrollment was especially troubling for many who saw the growing fiscal burden it placed on the taxpayer as a violation of the sanctity of property rights and as undermining the cultural meaning and value of work and self-reliance. As a white voter in Los Angeles explained

eloquently in a letter to African American congresswoman Yvonne Braithwaite:

I believe that our government, in the years passed and at present, is drifting into a welfare program which places the recipients in a position of expecting welfare, believing it is their right to have welfare, and that being on welfare is an honorable profession. On the other hand, many of the donors, including myself, feel that being forced through taxation, or having the results of our labors appropriated in the guise of taxation, and redistributed to others, is not good for our country. In other words an undercurrent develops in the mind of the donor, which leaves the donor with a sense of frustration, a feeling of "What's the use?" and, "Why be a fool? Why should I work to take care of those who are able to work but who prefer to be recipients?"¹²⁵

It was not just the moral and economic dimensions of redistributive liberalism that upset American voters. The apparent link between liberal social policy and a broader protest culture among dissenting minorities and the white Left also deepened the disenchantment among the nation's "Silent Majority." Some blamed the antipoverty program for stoking the fires of urban discontent, rewarding agitators, and encouraging challenges to authority, established institutions, and traditional values. The sight of antipoverty warriors and welfare rights activists—sometimes with Black Power militants alongside them—agitating against the very government that was funding them offended many people. Labor writer Victor Riesel captured this view when he accused the OEO of funding people to "spend their time confronting, frequently battling, the police, picketing city halls and boards of education, closing down schools, struggling with union workers, and [. . .] discrediting the U.S." It was clear in Riesel's mind that antipoverty officials were on a mission to "go out and 'revolutionize' the nation's ghettos."¹²⁶

In July 1964, just two months after Whitney Young had warned Congress of the possibility of unrest during War on Poverty hearings, Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York's two largest black ghettos, were rocked by six days of rioting. Precipitated by the shooting of a black youth by a white police officer, it started a pattern that developed a familiar rhythm over the following four summers in black ghettos nationwide.¹²⁷ Reaching a new scale in Watts in August 1965, by the time the last wave of rioting ended in 1968, it had claimed many dozens of lives and caused billions of dollars' worth of damage to property and businesses across the nation.¹²⁸ Some opponents saw the hand of the War on Poverty in the devastation of America's urban centers. As segregationist Atlanta businessman and Georgia governor Lester Maddox

complained in a letter to the president: "Hundreds of millions of federal dollars are being expended by [. . .] the War on Poverty programs to encourage, train, and finance the bums, criminals, beatniks and misfits who have brought near chaos to our Country as they burn, kill, and wreck much of America."¹²⁹

Seeking to defend the OEO against what he called "unfounded and irresponsible charges," Shriver sent President Johnson a report following the 1967 riots extolling the positive role played by War on Poverty summer programs in both preventing and minimizing racial disturbances in cities across the nation.¹³⁰ Atlanta and Los Angeles were singled out for special praise. Shriver quoted a telegram he had received from Mayor Ivan Allen that read: "OEO's assistance is proof positive of the value of federal-local cooperation. Recreation funds and EOA CAP Centers have contributed greatly to cooling off summer problems. CAP Center and personnel provided quick communications facility for easing explosive situation in Dixie Hills disturbance. Continued OEO help to urban cities is a must. Thanks for the helping hand." In Los Angeles, police chief Thomas Reddin (Parker's successor) commended NAPP for distributing tens of thousands of leaflets that emphasized the damage riots did to the black community and urged locals to "Keep Cool This Summer." Another city official identified OEO programs in ghetto communities as an important factor in the declining number of juvenile arrests.¹³¹ The following year, there was outcry in New York over the impact that cuts to OEO funds would have on the city's summer jobs programs. The loss of twenty thousand summer jobs for ghetto youth, Mayor Lindsay argued, would undoubtedly increase the chance of "violence and bloodshed" in the streets. "If violence again occurs in our cities," he concluded, "those in Washington who have ignored our pleas for help will have to assume their share of responsibility."¹³²

While these cases all demonstrated the War on Poverty's role as a positive force in the nation's cities, they also gave weight to criticism that the antipoverty program was little more than "riot insurance" designed to prevent urban unrest by buying off militants and preoccupying inner-city youths in summer work programs. Even if, as mayors like Lindsay intimated, some antipoverty programs were, to a degree, riot prevention measures, opponents argued that they had failed. As California Republican Assembly chairman Dick Darling suggested: "The more money that has been appropriated for all these programs (federal cities programs including the War on Poverty, welfare, urban renewal, housing) the more violence we have had. Therefore it would seem that congressional spending alone will not end city riots."¹³³

The increasingly vociferous agitation, protest, and in many cases open rebellion and rioting of urban minority groups against their condition during the mid-1960s, political scientist Ira Katznelson has explained, “came to undermine the security of the dominant and middle-classes.”¹³⁴ As historian Dan Carter has argued, although most northern whites ostensibly eschewed overtly segregationist politics, many nevertheless shared southerners’ “deep and visceral apprehensions” concerning African Americans, and rioting brought these fears to the surface. Urban rioting shattered the civil rights movement’s carefully sculpted media image of blacks as peaceful and nonviolent, stoking fear and feeding prejudice among whites everywhere.¹³⁵ When added to the maelstrom of campus unrest, antiwar demonstrations, counter-cultural protest, rising crime, and growing welfare dependency, the riots helped deepen a growing sense of resentment and anger among many whites. In the process, the broader national consensus over existing liberal prescriptions for managing social, racial, and economic change disintegrated. White ethnic working- and middle-class voters began to question and abandon their support for integration, civil rights legislation, the liberal welfare state, and economically redistributive government spending, all of which, many believed, privileged racial minorities and the poor (especially African Americans) at their expense, and, worse still, encouraged urban disorder, welfare chiseling, and declining respect for authority, the established social order, and traditional American values.¹³⁶ Not only had liberals’ policies failed to provide answers to the nation’s problems, but increasing numbers of voters blamed them for making them worse.

This growing white racial resentment and disillusionment with liberal policies had already found its voice in national politics in efforts to roll back or narrow the scope of domestic reforms. For example, in May 1967, southern and northern conservatives in Congress combined to pass an amendment (by a vote of 232 to 171) discontinuing the Rent Supplement Program. Established in the Housing Act of 1965, this program specifically targeted tenants in public housing and new and rehabilitated Federal Housing Authority–financed accommodations (but not privately owned slum housing). The program had been described by one black poor advocacy group as “one of the very few which offer decent housing to the poor at rents more or less in keeping with their incomes.” Some critics had used the rising cost of war overseas to justify their position; others, led by Bronx Republican congressman Paul Fino, made clear the racial and socioeconomic dimensions of their opposition. Accusing the federal government of conspiring to “spread rent supplement into middle-

income suburbs and neighborhoods,” Fino dismissed the program as a “racial and economic balance sheet” that “rewards rioters and subsidizes spongers.” For Fino (who also strongly opposed the antipoverty program and busing), rent supplements were another example of liberals’ attempts to socially engineer the nation toward integration and redistribute whites’ hard-earned wealth to the undeserving inner-city minority poor. In the process, he believed, big-government, welfare state liberalism not only trampled the personal and economic freedoms of the white majority but also violated core traditional American values associated with self-reliance, hard work, and private initiative and responsibility.¹³⁷ This kind of conservative message resonated with increasing numbers of American voters from the mid- to the late 1960s and vitally shaped the political environment in which alternative public policies for dealing with racial and economic inequality developed.

As the following chapter illustrates, leading national politicians such as Richard Nixon and Robert F. Kennedy put forward different solutions for dealing with economic inequality that were deliberately sensitive to the changing political landscape. Rather than advancing the existing liberal-civil rights coalition’s government-focused, integrationist, and economically redistributive politics, they instead offered alternatives designed not only to appeal to, or appease, white conservatives but also as a way to meet and sublimate the growing demand for black empowerment in the nation’s ghettos. In the process, they encouraged the pursuit of a more middle-class, capitalist enterprise-oriented vision of Black Power intended to draw African Americans away from the transformative political solutions championed by social and economic justice movements and by some of Black Power’s most radical adherents.