

Jennifer Sudwal

July 25, 2008

Economics 1

Nebbia

### War on Poverty Programs Since 1964

President Lyndon B. Johnson first introduced the War on Poverty legislation during his State of the Union Address. During a time when national poverty was at nineteen percent, his War on Poverty Speech started many programs that helped alleviate the problem. Since 1964 this concept has waned, however many of the programs that were put into action then are still very important. In addition the standard of living has also increased since 1964 based on longevity and GDP per capita.

In Johnson's speech, he addresses three main issues in the society that he wants to improve. For instance, Johnson addresses problems with the cities, listing that "There is the decay of the centers and the despoiling of the suburbs. There is not enough housing for our people or transportation for our traffic. Open land is vanishing and old landmarks are violated" (CNN). He wants to make cities a better living place for families. He encourages Americans to help make the places where they live, with aid from programs, more hospitable. Secondly, the president also emphasizes that "The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air that we breathe, are threatened with pollution. Our parks are overcrowded, our seashores overburdened. Green fields and dense forests are disappearing" (CNN). Johnson voices his concern for the environment as well in his War against Poverty speech. He basically wants to bring the public's attention to their surroundings and the need to take care of it as well. Lastly, Johnson admits to Americans

that there are problems in the educational system and “we must give every child a place to sit and a teacher to learn from. Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty” (CNN). Many teachers are not well qualified or well paid, and often classrooms are overcrowded. Living standards are not optimum in many areas, but that poverty needs to be fought, and should not take overshadow the importance of education. The president considers these as the three central issues of the Great Society he aims for, and calls upon cooperation between the public and local and central governments in order find a solution.

However, the main focus of the War on Poverty programs was, like the name suggests, fighting poverty. During the Johnson administration acts such as the Economic Opportunity Act proved the basis for many other programs such as the Job Corps, the Community Action Program, the college Work-Study Program, local health care centers and more. The EOA was a highly affective social welfare legislation. A \$11 billion tax cut (Revenue Act of 1964) stimulated and expanded the economy. Many of the acts passed are long lasting due to their effectiveness in fighting poverty. For instance, the Food Stamp Act fed hungry Americans and reached 60 percent of the poor. The Social Security amendments that created Medicare and Medicaid subsidized health care for the elderly and qualified poor residents. In addition, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided money to local school districts who were supposed to use the funds to help their poor students, while the Higher Education act eased the financial burdens of millions of college students. These first two years were the most active in antipoverty operations.

Later on, the pace began to slow down. Five years after Johnson's speech, during the administration under Nixon, most programs were maintained and welfare was expanded. Poverty rates had dropped since the beginning of the War against Poverty to 12 percent. A "New Federalism" was endorsed, that resulted in a shift of authority over social welfare from federal government to state and local governments. In 1981 welfare programs decreased as President Ronald Reagan replaced the Community Services Administration with the Community Services Block Grant system and cut back on the Food Stamp program. During Reagan's administration poverty levels went back up to as high as 15 percent, dropping down to 12.8 under George H. W. Bush. The economy went into a mild recession and the unemployment rate began rising in 1991, resulting in Bush's signing of a bill providing additional benefits for unemployed workers, and increasing welfare. By the end of his time in office the poverty rate had gone up to 14.8 percent. Today, under George W. Bush's administration, unemployment rates has risen from 4.2 percent to 6.2 percent but then dropped again to 4.5 percent. The nation's poverty rate also increased as the political agenda has shifted its attention away from antipoverty efforts to the war on terrorism and moral issues.

Since 1964 and Johnson's War on Poverty Speech many presidents have been in office with varied approaches to this effort. Generally speaking, as time went on the high level of interest since Johnson's administration slowly waned and decreased to the point where some of the welfare programs were actually being cut back. However, overall the living standard and poverty rate has decreased and many antipoverty programs initiated in 1964 still survive today, continuing to impact life.

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