“Absolutely sort of normal”: the common origins of the war on poverty at home and abroad, 1961-1965

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Scholars identify the early 1960s as the moment when Americans rediscovered poverty – as the time when Presidents, policymakers, and the public shifted their attention away from celebrating the affluence of the 1950s and toward directly helping poor people within the culture of poverty through major federal programs such as the Peace Corps and Job Corps. This dissertation argues that this moment should not be viewed as a rediscovery of poverty by Americans. Rather, it should be viewed as a paradigm shift that conceptually unified the understanding of both foreign and domestic privation within the concept of a culture of poverty. A culture of poverty equally hindered poor people all around the world, resulting in widespread illiteracy in India and juvenile delinquency in Indianapolis. Policymakers defined poverty less by employment rate or location (rural poverty in Ghana versus inner-city poverty in New York) and more by the cultural values of the poor people (apathy toward change, disdain for education, lack of planning for the future, and desire for immediate gratification). In a sense, the poor person who lived in the Philippines and the one who lived in Philadelphia became one. They suffered from the same cultural limitations and could be helped through the same remedy. There were not just similarities between programs to alleviate poverty in either the Third World or America; the two became one in the mid-1960s. Makers of policy in the War on Poverty understood all poverty around the world as identical and approached it with the same remedy.

President John Kennedy inspired the paradigm shift. After reading about the culture of poverty in Dwight Macdonald’s review of Michael Harrington’s book The Other America: Poverty in the United States, Kennedy began to bring together experts within a new mentality to discuss a program to end poverty. The experts had been working for separate programs that focused on seemingly disparate issues—juvenile delinquency, poverty in New England, and Third World development—but they now realized that they were all working on the same problem, namely, the culture of poverty. The understanding that cultural values created poverty led them to unify their programs and approaches as they created the War on Poverty in 1964. The discovery was not the beginning of national attention on poverty but a culmination that brought together prominent people, ideas, and programs already in existence within a new paradigm.

Keywords: American History; Poverty; War on poverty; Culture of poverty; 1960s; Kennedy, John F

Graduation Month: December
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy
Department: Department of History
Major Professor: Donald Mrozek
Date: 2014
Dissertation

Files in this item

Filename: DanielAksamit2014.pdf
Size: 1.179Mb

Record URL: http://hdl.handle.net/2097/18671
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The right wing castigates the War on Poverty as the quintessence of big government and liberalism gone awry. Ronald Reagan was blunt in his assessment of the priorities of the Great Society agenda, declaring, "There is one reason for inflation in America, and that is simply that government for too long has been spending too much money...[T]oo much government, too much red tape, too many taxes and too many regulations...[are] robbing our people of the prosperity that is. At the same time as it was fighting poverty and building a Great Society on the cheap, the Johnson administration was spending enormous sums on the Vietnam War and more to send a man to the moon--the ultimate expression of the Cold War rivalry winning out over human needs. The origins of the War on Poverty lay deep in the experiences of depression and war that shaped the post-World War II generation as well as in the enduring values and assumptions that have fueled the American Dream for two centuries. Having crawled from the depths of a Great Depression and overcome the challenges of a global war, Americans in the 1950s were supremely confident and optimistic about their future. The original goal of the War on Poverty was not to prop up living standards artificially through an ever-expanding welfare state. Instead, Johnson declared that his war would strike "at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty."[16] He added, "Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it."[17] Some authors suggest that the continuing decline in official poverty from 1965 to 1970 demonstrates the initial success of the War on Poverty, but over 90 percent of the increased spending during this period was in the form of non-cash benefits that the Census does not count for purposes of measuring poverty.[20] It is therefore impossible for the expansion of.