Prelude to the Great Society: Cultural Change in the 20th Century America

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PRELUDE TO THE GREAT SOCIETY:
CULTURAL CHANGE IN 20TH CENTURY AMERICA

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SPRING 1994

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[Signatures]

[Date] 5/5/94
ABSTRACT

The decades immediately following World War II were prosperous but filled with great inequalities. Many social change movements, including the War on Poverty, attempted to eliminate these inequalities. Yet, programs as large and far-reaching as these required many changes to the society itself.

President Lyndon Johnson and Dr. Julius Richmond, director of Head Start, agreed that certain societal factors were necessary before social change could occur. Johnson felt that these conditions were "a recognition of need, a willingness to act, and someone to lead the effort" (Johnson *The Vantage Point* 70).

The widespread existence of poverty in Post World War II America's affluence helped America recognize the need that existed among its poor. Books such as John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, Harry Caudill *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, and the most influential of all, Michael Harrington's *The Other America* showed the affluent society the existence and the need of their poor counterparts.

Many changes had to occur before the American people were willing to help the poor. These changes began in the 1930s with the programs of the New Deal. The acceptance of the concept of structural poverty, poverty that was intertwined within the system and not the fault of the individual, increased the public's willingness to help the underprivileged. The inequalities brought to light by the Civil Rights movement raised social consciousness about many oppressed groups, including the
poor. Finally, President John F. Kennedy's assassination touched the hearts of the American people and made them more willing to help their fellows.

Lyndon Johnson saw himself in the role of strong leader, his final requirement. He felt that his poor background and work with poverty-stricken children helped qualify him for this task. His work with the National Youth Administration also prepared him to fight poverty.

Gallup polls showed that before the War on Poverty began, many people favored fighting poverty over balancing the budget (Schwarz 159). As the programs expanded, support for them grew. Statistics show that these programs significantly reduced poverty in America.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those people without whose support and guidance this, and all of my other, accomplishments would not be possible. No thanks can fail to include my parents, Mike and Norma Davis, who installed in me a love of learning at an early age that has carried me through my academic career. I would also like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Charles Bussey, whose guidance and support made my task much more manageable. Dr. Sam McFarland, Director of the University Honors Program, has made my four years in the Honors Program very rewarding. My friends--John and Lena Sweeten, and David Serafini--also deserve a great deal of credit for their endless support, proofreading and typing. Without the support of these very special people this thesis would not have reached the form it is in today.
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Within a short time after World War II, the American economy emerged as the most advanced and powerful in the world. The defeat of Germany in World War II had profound and far-reaching effects on American society. The victory over Japan was another significant event that helped to shape the post-war world. The United States emerged as a major world power and began to play a significant role in international relations.

Ever since the end of the war, the United States has undergone significant changes in its domestic and foreign policies. The Cold War, which lasted from 1947 to 1991, had a profound impact on American society. The war was fought primarily between the United States and the Soviet Union, with the support of their respective allies.

During the post-war period, the United States experienced significant economic growth and prosperity. The Baby Boomer generation, born between 1946 and 1964, played a significant role in shaping American society. They were the first generation to grow up with the benefits of the post-war economy and were the first to experience the cultural changes that accompanied the economic growth.

In conclusion, the United States has undergone significant changes since World War II. These changes have had a profound impact on American society and continue to influence the country today.
The decades immediately following World War II were prosperous but filled with great inequities. While Whites enjoyed full citizenship, minorities received few of their legal rights; men were allowed to choose their own destinies while women were forced to conform to society's expectations; capitalism excused almost any behavior while communist viewpoints earned persecution and scorn. Most importantly, the America of unprecedented wealth harbored a large population encumbered by abject poverty. The years from the 1930s to early 1960s set the stage for great changes in American society: the Civil Rights movement, the Feminist movement, the end of the Red Scare, and the War on Poverty forever changed the face of the nation. These movements defined the decade of the 1960s as one of the most progressive in American history. Of these, the War on Poverty was the most important because it cut across barriers the others attempted to batter down; poverty did not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, or political ideology.

However, programs as sweeping as the Great Society could not emerge from a vacuum. During the years between the advent of the Great Depression and the dawn of the Great Society, many significant cultural changes took place in American society. No
longer were people able either to ignore these inequalities or consider them acceptable. Before any understanding of the Great Society itself is possible, these cultural changes, and their effect upon the legislation, must first be understood.

Two men instrumental in the planning and implementing of the Great Society—President Lyndon Johnson and Dr. Julius Richmond, director of Head Start—agreed that certain societal factors had to be present before social change could occur. Johnson felt that these three conditions were "a recognition of need, a willingness to act, and someone to lead the effort" (Johnson The Vantage Point 70). He saw these conditions coming together in historic proportions during the early to mid 1960s. Although many of the problems he sought to correct had existed for decades, if not centuries—poverty, discrimination and poor education—they had not been addressed adequately prior to Johnson's programs. Yet during the 1960s, people began to see the plight of the American poor more clearly than they had in the past (70).

Richmond's requirements dealt more with health reform than social reform, but they were remarkably similar to Johnson's ideas, especially Richmond's second requirement—political will. He defined this concept as "society's desire and commitment to support or modify old programs or develop new programs" (Richmond "Political Influence" 388). He went on to say that the Great Society programs came about largely because of a change in the national will (389). In the role of Johnson's final requirement, a strong leader, he pictured himself (The Vantage Point 71). He
felt that his previous experience and personal viewpoints would allow him to fulfill this role and lead the American people to a victorious conclusion of the War on Poverty. However, a great deal of effort and controversy led to the fulfillment of these three requirements, without which the first battle of the War on Poverty could not have been fought.
SECTION 1
RECOGNITION OF NEED

Of Johnson's three requirements for social change, the first, recognition of a problem, was the most important. This was the factor upon which all others rested. After all, people would not be willing to attack a problem they were unaware of, nor would they show any serious interest in an area they perceived as problem free. Therefore, the American people's recognition of poverty as a problem would have to be addressed before further analysis of the cultural changes allowing the War on Poverty could be understood.

One reason poverty, once found, was so recognizable in Post-World War II America was the contrast between the poor and the rest of society. The fact that poverty existed at all in a nation enjoying unprecedented prosperity, much less to the extent proven during this period, shocked many people. This shock helped the nation recognize the problems faced by the American poor and by those Americans who cared for those same poor.

World war II drew the United States out of the Great Depression by solving unemployment and increasing government funding for wartime production. During the war more people than ever before entered the workforce, yet because of rationing and war-caused shortages, few goods were available for consumption. Hence, as a whole, the United States population exited the war
with increased savings. By 1960 the nation had taken great strides toward becoming an affluent country. In fact, it was "the wealthiest nation in the world and has great prospects for growth" (Hoey 128). Abundant natural resources and a large, skilled work force permitted employment levels and incomes to rise, allowing the majority of families to achieve high standards of living (128). In the thirty years between 1930 and 1960, the country had faced both extremes of the economic spectrum—swinging from the worst depression in recorded history to a period of unprecedented national prosperity.

The onset of the Cold War also helped national prosperity. Increased government spending on military supplies stimulated the economy by creating employment through expanding defense industries. Also, more taxes were collected from the defense corporations and their employees. However, other than those employed in the military or munitions industry, defense spending did little to help the majority of the poor.

By most economic indicators, the U.S. economy was prospering in 1960. Industry had reached incredible production proportions, and real estate and stock values had skyrocketed, allowing the nation as a whole to amass great wealth (137). Executives benefited from high salaries that often allowed them to join the ranks of the wealthy. Skilled workers also benefited, working shorter hours for a comfortable standard of living complete with many fringe benefits. Many professional and scientific workers also enjoyed greater compensation than they had in the past. In fact, between 60 and 70 percent of all Americans were considered
to be middle class; their families had incomes between $10,000 and $25,000 (Manchester 1001, Hoey 137).

Despite the great wealth of these decades, the American people retained the mindset of a people mired in poverty, where the source of the next meal is uncertain. John Kenneth Galbraith, an economic advisor to President John F. Kennedy, hypothesized that throughout recorded history, most people were extremely poor (13). The mindset and values created by poverty, such as fear and frugalness, continued to prevail during this century's middle decades. After all, traditions which took generations to form could not be vanquished overnight. These viewpoints, involving perceived problems and their possible solutions, guided many of the population's actions during the affluent society, according to Galbraith:

...and as a further result we do many things that are unnecessary, some that are unwise and a few that are insane. We enhance substantially the risk of depression and thereby the risk to our affluence itself (14).

Yet, the problems of an affluent society paled in comparison to those of previous poverty-stricken societies. Although not completely eliminated, viewpoints did adapt to the changing culture of wealth. If able to avoid the dangers inherent in obsolete mindsets, sufficient adaptation to current conditions would be possible.

The affluence of the majority of the population only makes the poverty of the minority more crushing in comparison. Although the American poor had a better standard of living than those of most other nations, in comparison to mainstream society,
they lived very poorly indeed. Poverty cannot be measured by other times or lands; community standards define poverty. If weatherproof housing and three square meals a day were the standard which nearly all could afford, then those who lived in homes with leaky roofs and only ate sporadically because of financial constraints lived in poverty (Bagdikhian 8).

Although prosperity blessed the nation as a whole, a large proportion of the population, 34.5 million by one count, lived under the poverty line in the early 1960s (Friedlander 284). Expanding the definition of poverty to include those living in economically caused deprivation, increased this number to as many as 54 million (Bagdikhian 7). The income distribution of this period told a compelling story not only about the extent of poverty but also about its growth. In 1910 the bottom 20% of the population received 8% of the national income; by 1955 the same segment of the population received only 4% of national income (Senior 67). In forty-five years the bottom fifth of the population found its real income halved, exacerbating its poverty.

Much of America's poor population was crowded into inner city ghettos or scattered throughout the rural South. The city poor were often camouflaged as Ben Bagdikhian noted:

...more than ever before the most wretched people are unseen in the central cores while their comfortable compatriots are gone to the suburbs. And the poor are concealed by modern apparel; all Americans tend to dress casually and modern dyes keep old clothes unfaded. (7)
Many rural poor left the South, attracted by the mecca and myth of the Northern cities. Tradition told them that all would be fed and that at least jobs abounded. In the forty years prior to 1964, 27 million Americans followed this beacon and migrated to large cities (12). Tradition, however, as it so often does, did not tell a true tale, and most of the transplanted rural folk were no better off than before. New arrivals, especially African-Americans, found that they did not possess the skills necessary to climb the social and economic ladder, leaving poverty far behind (May 79). The low-skilled population found that mechanization caused many of their jobs to be eliminated, adding them to the ranks of the poor.

African-Americans were not the only formerly rural people transplanted in the urban landscape. What Michael Harrington, editor of *New America* and *Dissent* and a former social worker, called urban hillbillies populated city slums (101). These displaced people were Appalachian mountain people, Arkansan cotton pickers, Southeastern Missouri laborers, and Oakies who never recovered from the Great Depression. Although they came from diverse backgrounds, this group had many common traits—ninth-generation Anglo-Saxon features, dialects, taste for distinctive country music, and lack of preparation for urban life (101). Another characteristic of the urban hillbillies was their transient nature, for as Galbraith said:

Their lives were almost completely mercurial. An entire family would literally pack up and leave on a moment's notice. They had few possessions, no roots, no home. (102)
This migration rendered what government programs were in effect prior to the War on Poverty and the programs it instituted ineffective. Students rarely stayed in school throughout an entire term and were unable to obtain a quality education that would help to break the cycle of poverty. Also, many families had difficulty meeting residency requirements for state programs. Their search for a better life deprived many urban hillbillies of available resources.

Rural Southerners and urban hillbillies migrated to cites for good reason—their original homes were either as or more poverty-stricken than their new ones. After World War II American agriculture experienced structural changes which forced many into poverty. Mechanization eliminated many of the jobs previously performed by poorer country folk. However, these changes were not without benefits to the rest of the nation, for as large corporate farms grew in both size and wealth the consumer paid less for food. Since 1949 food costs increased less than nearly any other item on the cost-of-living price index. At under 20%, Americans spent less of their total income on food than any other nation in the world (41).

Although agriculture was clearly a pinnacle of success for the Affluent Society, "...perhaps the harshest and most bitter poverty in the United States [was] found in the fields (41)." When corporate farms increased their holdings, they did so at the expense of the marginal farmer. Since a limited amount of land existed, corporate farms often bought out marginal family farms in order to grow. Yet, the prices brought by these small
holdings failed to sustain the family as it sought alternate employment. Forced to sell by the increased competition presented by large farms, the loss of family farms contributed to the flow of rural people to the cities.

Many poor rural areas held great emotional appeal for residents and non-residents alike; the Appalachian region was one such example. This area's natural beauty awed tourists and contributed to the impoverishment of residents. Even the native population was awestruck by their home's foliage, streams and hills, refusing to leave in the face of crushing poverty. The natural beauty of this area masked a region mired in a quagmire of poverty. The land itself, so fertile for natural growth, resisted planned crops viciously. Small farms were the norm there; corporate farming had yet to reach the area, but only because geography kept them from being profitable. Yet the very characteristics that prohibited the corporate farming takeover, also prevented the native farmers from reaping large profits, or even an adequate living (Galbraith 253).

Coal caused much of this region's recent misery. During the 1950s it began to replace agriculture as the main economic force of the Cumberlands. Prior to this decade, the corporations which held the land's mineral rights were content with absentee ownership, retaining their rights without acting upon them. However, this decade brought strip and auger mining to the Appalachians--destroying the land and further impoverishing the people (Caudill 305).
Kentucky state courts upheld, and in the eyes of some expanded, the contracts which allowed corporations to use whatever measures necessary to remove coal from the land, even if those measures destroyed the land and thus its owners' only means of support. These rulings allowed for the destruction of homes and land beyond the range of possibilities when the mineral rights were sold. The destruction also surpassed any known or foreseeable method of reclamation (305-308). Profits for the few came at the expense of both the environment and the livelihood of many. Never an affluent area, the economic stability of the Appalachians was sacrificed for the present, and possibly the future.

During that decade, 1,500,000 people left the region (Harrington 43). With them, went the future hopes of the Cumberland, for as Michael Harrington said:

They were the young, the more adventurous, those who sought a new life.... Those who were left behind tended to be older people, the less imaginative, the defeated. A whole area, in the words of a Maryland state study, became suffused with 'a mood of apathy and despair. (43-44)

As time passed, this despair only grew until, during the early 1960s, 85% of Appalachian youth were forced to leave the area to escape a life of poverty. This migration did not bode well for the Cumberland because "a place without the young is a place without future" (44).

Appalachian poverty was made more devastating by the realization that many of these problems were caused by personal greed. Much of this damage could have been prevented, and,
despite assistance programs, much of it still exists. Perhaps, with future technological innovations, the wounds to Appalachia can be healed; however, at this time the prospect seems unlikely.

Although a fifth of the American population lived in poverty, the affluent society was very nearly unaware of the problem. A communication gap prevented the full impact of poverty from being shown to the American people. In fact, one of the most important characteristics of the poor was their invisibility. Harrington stated that most people were unaware of this problem "because poverty is often off the beaten track" (3). Many of America's poor lived crowded into inner city tenements or scattered around widespread rural areas. Since the wealthy, or even middle class, rarely ventured into these areas, they were not confronted with poverty. Hence, many were not aware of it.

The invisibility of the poor was a major factor in the lack of assistance they received. Until Americans were forced to view "the worn and weathered face" of poverty, they would not rally to help the needy (May 73).

Many popular books attempted to show America the face of poverty during the late 1950s and early 1960s. John Kenneth Galbraith's 1958 book, *The Affluent Society*, admitted that poverty existed in a sea of plenty. Yet, this book downplayed poverty. In fact, Illinois senator Paul Douglas commissioned a study with the express purpose of refuting Galbraith (Lemann 1988 43). Harry Caudill's 1962 work, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, graphically depicted the contrast between the rich natural beauty and the poor inhabitants of Appalachia. However, the most far-
reaching book of this time was Michael Harrington's 1962 sensation *The Other America*. Although the book itself was read primarily by sociologists and social workers, it awakened policymakers to the plight of the poor (Friedlander 324, Ellwood 34).

Not inconsequentially, the media began to portray images of poverty in the affluent society, showing America the worn face of poverty necessary to bring about social change (Ellwood 34). Harrington's work was indeed the "catalyst... for the latest war on poverty (Lens 308)."
SECTION 2
WILLINGNESS TO ACT

Regardless of the extent of a problem, people will not be willing to act unless they agree that a problem should be solved. Although knowledge of the situation is crucial to political will, the problem must be one which can touch hearts of the American people. Many changes took place in the United States between the 1930s and the 1960s which allowed prosperous Americans to empathize with the plight of their poor counterparts. These changes were largely responsible for the politicians’ and population’s political will, and hence, fulfilled Johnson’s and Richmond’s second requirement for social reform.

Prior to the Great Depression, public assistance was considered antithetical to dominant American values. Popular culture prided itself on its self-reliant work ethic (Patterson 130). People felt that individuals were responsible for their own well being; if individuals could not care for themselves, their families, not their government, should provide relief (Chambers 147). In fact, during Herbert Hoover’s presidency, he was horrified to learn that his Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon, felt that economic depressions were the mechanism by which the natural law of supply and demand operated. It eliminated the weak and gave the strong the opportunity to thrive
(Freidel 5). Mellon's ideas, in various forms, were shared by many Americans, including some people impoverished by the Great Depression. Capitalism's equation of worthiness with success was so internalized by Americans that many counted their losses as personal failures and doubted their worth because of them. In fact, one person dispossessed during this era felt that "the only logical solution to the Depression was to execute the poor and unemployed who had proven themselves so unworthy" (Peeler 45). The speaker counted himself among those condemned to death. This type of attitude hindered the creation of the welfare state.

Despite Hoover's quest to alleviate the problems of the Depression, he too feared extensive government intervention in people's private financial affairs. He, like many of his counterparts, thought that government aid sent directly to poverty-stricken citizens would cause "...the destruction of state and local responsibilities and of individual initiative" (5). These theories caused Hoover to create limited social programs, the failure of which readied the electorate for more drastic measures.

These values persisted into the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt (FDR), and shaped some New Deal policies. Many of the programs focused on unemployment rather than poverty, an understandable attitude during the rampant joblessness of the Great Depression. Work-related programs were expected to alleviate this problem, and once the economy gained speed, would no longer be required. The New Deal promoted policies of social insurance instead of welfare. In time, this insurance was
expected to conquer poverty, hence eliminating the need for future programs (Patterson 131, 133).

Although few of FDR's New Deal programs survived beyond the Great Depression, those that did became the mainstays of the welfare state. Social Security, brought about by the Social Security Act of 1935 and amended in 1938, was the most important of these programs. Most people were in favor of it because it helped the so-called deserving poor—the disabled, elderly, and families which had lost a working member. Since Social Security emphasized traditional American values, few criticized it. Benefits were tied to past earnings, so people who worked more in the past received larger checks. Also, it allowed elderly workers to retire with pensions and encouraged the states to offer unemployment insurance. This program did more than just provide for the elderly; it helped the disabled and families with deceased workers. By contributing during their working years and tying benefits to past earnings, people felt that Social Security provided workers their just deserts.

Yet Social Security's greatest accomplishment was to legitimize social welfare. It did this by showing "for the first time that the federal government had a social responsibility for the welfare of its citizens" (Louchheim 151). This act and program were the first steps toward government intervention in the private financial affairs of its citizenry for their well-being. No longer were people alone in the world; if they could not support themselves and their families were unable to help them, the government had a responsibility to lend a helping hand.
Another of FDR's programs that survived was Aid to Families with Dependant Children, AFDC. FDR originally set up this program to protect poor widows, women with disabled spouses, and abandoned women, all with children (Louchheim 175). The relief was expected to be used for a short period of time, until the mother could reenter the workforce or the children could support her, and then be eliminated. Nearly all people considered these to be upstanding families who were simply down on their luck and, hence, deserving relief.

Once these policies were instituted in the 1930s, they created expectations about the government's role in the plight of the deserving poor. They also produced benefits, which may have been small, but which later politicians were loath to eliminate. From this process of social reform emerged a consensus on the morality and necessity of social insurance, and later of welfare (Patterson 127-128).

After battling the concept of the welfare state for many years, why did Depression-era America accept and embrace it during the New Deal? The attributes of the programs themselves accounted for much of this enthusiasm. Social Security was popular among young workers faced with mass unemployment because it provided an incentive for older workers to retire (Chambers 150). AFDC, on the other hand, was perceived as helping working families and, as Congress put it, was "the only decent thing to do" (153). By adhering to the dominant values of the time, these programs allowed Americans to accept the social insurance as a proper function of government.
Also, the Great Depression deserved much of the credit for public enthusiasm. After many years of hardship, workers began to realize that their financial troubles did not stem from personal failure; some forces were simply beyond their control (Chambers 149). This fundamental attitudinal change allowed Americans to support and vote for politicians who believed in government intervention to relieve the worst financial hardships. People no longer considered economic hardship proof of worthlessness; rather, it was considered bad luck that could, and during the Depression, did happen to anyone. These changes allowed the New Deal to lay the foundations for modern America and its social policy.

However, not all of these new ideas survived the years between the New Deal and the Great Society; by the 1950s poverty was again seen as avoidable. Before The Affluent Society and The Other America became popular, poverty was often seen as the fault of the individual. The consensus was "that there really is no reason for anyone to be poor in an affluent society" (May 75). Galbraith agreed with this sentiment when he claimed that poor people were considered somehow indecent by their neighbors (251). He went on to define two types of poverty: case and insular. He credited case poverty to a flaw in the poor individual and insular poverty to a homing instinct which prohibited the poor from seeking a better life elsewhere (252-3). Both of these forms of poverty claimed that the poor simply were not strong enough to make a better life for themselves and their children. It was not a problem the government should address (Lemann 44).
The discussion generated by *The Other America* and related books helped change attitudes by defining another type of poverty referred to as structural poverty. By the end of 1963 structural poverty was, with the exception of Civil Rights, the most discussed domestic problem in the nation. This type of poverty was entangled within the economic system of the country itself and was not affected by economic growth. In fact, the only way to challenge this problem was to revamp the system (Murray 27). This theory led to a shift of the blame for poverty from the individual to the system. Thus poverty was no longer considered the result of character flaws or lack of effort on the part of the poor person; the economic system of the time was to blame. This change in mindset toward the poor allowed for increased public concern for and willingness to help them. Without this change in national attitudes, the War on Poverty, in all likelihood, would not have been fought.

The emergence of the Great Society and the War on Poverty during the height of the Civil Rights movement was not purely coincidental. These movements shared common goals: equal opportunity, equal access to the goods and services of society and, with luck, equality of outcome, collectively known as social justice for all Americans. In fact, the actions of the Civil Rights movement served not only to improve the lot of African-Americans, but also to raise social consciousness about many oppressed groups, including the poor.

While striving for equality for both races, civil rights leaders discovered that despite the large number of poor African-
Americans, many of the poor were white. Their struggle highlighted the devastating conditions of poverty, galvanizing Americans to help the poor, as Marcia Bok observed:

The nation began to focus its attention not only on the racial inequality that existed, but also on the economically disadvantaged throughout the country. (93)

The fight for Civil Rights for African-Americans served not only to show prosperous White America that poverty existed, but also to put a human face to the concept. This act of personalizing poverty energized people and politicians alike in their commitment to fighting the War on Poverty (Smith 193-194). In fact, it led Baynard Rustin to write in 1965 that "the Civil Rights Movement...did more to initiate the War on Poverty than any other single force" (93).

Besides raising social consciousness, the Civil Rights movement also changed the structures of society by altering the relationship between African-Americans and the rest of society (7). Cultural as well as legal changes took place. African-Americans gained political power for the first time because of forced migration to Northern cities. Their sheer numbers made them a formidable force at the ballot box (Piven and Cloward 196). However, with the destruction of old patterns of servile compliance, decades of pent up trauma and anger had to be released, much of it directed toward the social structure and white population (227).

The Civil Rights movement fanned a great deal of this anger during its attack on institutionalized American racism. Its
long, dramatic struggle to enact legislation aimed at creating social justice and equality for African-Americans also had the effect of politicizing people, especially inner-city youth (224). The conflicting messages of failing institutional controls and continued exploitation, along with low incomes, created unrest among urban African-Americans (235).

During the 1960s, as well as today, African-Americans were more likely to suffer from poverty than whites. Under the Social Security Administration's definition of poor, an African-American male's chances of being classified as poor were over three times as great as those of a white man (Lens 304). Black ghettos of nearly all cities, Northern as well as Southern, were havens of poverty and other developmental disabilities. These difficulties caused the development of a culture of Black poverty, along with a rising tide of frustration among poor, urban African-Americans.

This frustration came to a head in 1964 when the first race riot of the decade broke out in Harlem. The riots started thirteen days after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed. The Act was considered a triumph of the Civil Rights movement; no longer could people legally be denied access to the nation's resources, yet the infamous race riots of 1964 quickly followed in its wake. The year 1966 saw the most famous of these riots in the section of Los Angeles known as Watts. This uprising alone cost thirty-four lives and $35 million in property damages, as well as resulting in hundreds of people being injured and thousands being arrested (Lens 304).
Not surprisingly, the people involved in this period's riots were more political, more alienated and more resentful than their more peaceful neighbors as Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward claimed:

Rioters were more likely to have participated in protest actions...; their hostility to whites and their "pride in race" were significantly greater; [and] they were more likely to be contemptuous of efforts by local government in their behalf (336).

Also, 69% of the rioters felt that racial discrimination was the greatest obstacle to obtaining better employment, compared with 50% of non-rioters (336). Yet, the violent members of the community were better informed about the political and economic conditions of their race and about the political system as a whole (336). No evidence exists as to whether this information exacerbated the hostilities of the rioters, or whether their violent outbursts occurred despite their expanded knowledge. Frequently, understanding mollifies people, yet during the race riots of the 1960s the opposite appeared to have happened.

Bloody as they may have been, the riots played a role in increasing the welfare system. The government believed that the blame for the chaos lay within the system, and thus the system must be reformed. The logic of such a viewpoint is not as important as its results are, leading Charles Murray to observe that:

The fact that this view was so widely shared helped force the shift in the assumptions about social welfare. White America owed Black America; it had a conscience to clear (33).
Since White America felt responsible for the plight of poor African-Americans, it also felt a responsibility for resolving their plight. The Great Society was designed to assume this responsibility.

The current welfare system was in fact blamed for heightening the tensions which led to the riots. The U.S. Riot Commission Report stated that the failures of welfare alienated those who depended on it and those whose tax dollars supported it (457). The system excluded people who needed relief and kept those it included in an economically deficient state. As Mitchell Ginsberg, chair of New York City's Welfare Department, said, "The welfare system is designed to save money instead of people and tragically ends up doing neither" (457).

Although this unrest took place during the time of the Great Society, the Commission lauded the ideals set forth through many of its programs and stated that reaching these goals was the best way to prevent future violence (396). The Commission recommended the further expansion and overhaul of the welfare system in an attempt to ease inter-racial tensions. Race relations affected the Great Society both before its inception and after its creation.

The riots played another role in legitimizing the War on Poverty, that of appeasing the poor, including the rioters. The riots themselves proved local government and agencies incapable of helping their swelling African-American populations (Piven and Cloward 262). Johnson admitted as much when he said:
People are not going to stand and see their children starve and be driven out of school and be eaten up with disease in the twentieth century. They will forgo stealing, and they will forgo fighting, and they will forgo doing a lot of violent and improper things as long as they possibly can, but they are going to eat and they are going to learn, and they are going to grow. (Johnson *The Vantage Point* 80)

The President felt that people would avoid illegal behavior as long as possible, but that when faced with illegal activity or permanent damage to their children, they would choose illegal activity. The War on Poverty was designed to prevent people from reaching this desperation point. It was also intended to placate and help poor African-Americans, and in turn, theoretically, prevent the outbreak of additional violent action on their point.

The Civil Rights movement helped change America's culture in ways conducive to the acceptance of the Great Society. By bringing the plight of poor people to the public eye at the same time it fought for equality between the races, this movement helped implement the Great Society. Also, the race riots of the 1960s brought the plight of poor urban African-Americans to the forefront. White America felt the need to make restitution for prior inequalities, and Washington, D.C., wished to prevent a recurrence of the violence.

A combination of rising civil unrest and Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, or more likely, Dwight Macdonald's review of it, touched then President John F. Kennedy (JFK) and brought the problem of poverty to his attention (Burner 149, Lemann 1988 43). Shortly before his death, JFK began to consider using money from the prosperous economy to combat
poverty. It would, he felt, be both morally right and politically feasible (Burner 141). In fact, in November 1963, he informed his aides that he planned to announce a comprehensive plan to battle poverty in his next State of the Union Address. A few days later he went to Dallas and was assassinated (149).

Shortly after his inauguration, President Lyndon Johnson learned of Kennedy’s plans and decided to adopt them. They coincided well with Johnson’s own liberal views. However, the assassination of JFK may have been a deciding factor in the political will of the population. As Johnson said,

This act of violence shocked the nation deeply and created the impetus to send the country surging forward. His death touched all our hearts and made us, for a while at least, a more compassionate people, more sensitive to the troubles of our fellow men. (The Vantage Point 71)

Johnson counted on this sensitivity to allow him to institute his plan for the War on Poverty. Yet, he felt that this tragic occurrence contributed to the political will which allowed social reform of the magnitude he envisioned to come about.
SECTION 3
STRONG LEADER

Regardless of public attitudes, legislation as controversial and costly as the War on Poverty would not be possible without the support of a strong president. In fact, strong leadership fulfilled the final requirement Lyndon Johnson believed was required before social change could take root and flourish in national life (Johnson, *The Vantage Point* 70). As he stated while reflecting on his presidency, "When I looked inside myself, I believed that I could provide the third ingredient - the disposition to lead" (71). Johnson believed that a Great Society would require a great leader, and he envisioned himself in that role.

Johnson's background set the stage for his advocacy for the poor. As a child, he could not count on a stable income. Sam Johnson, the father he idolized, had a penchant for excessive drink, which led to financial fluctuations for the family. The elder Johnson squandered what little money the family had on the cotton and real estate markets. Some years his investments paid off; other years they failed, plunging the family back into poverty (Kearns 24). When LBJ was thirteen, the family fell from its former semi-respectable position in the small Texas town of Johnson City to what he would come to call "the bottom of the
heap” (Caro 25). LBJ spent the rest of his youth in a state of constant uncertainty—fearing that his family would lose its modest home and that he would suffer humiliation as the son of a man in debt to nearly the entire town (25). The family’s former respectability only served to worsen the situation by showing LBJ the drastically different conditions faced by those with money and those without it.

However, the family’s lack of disposable income did not prevent a youthful LBJ from entering San Marcos College in 1927. At this time, Johnson had an experience which further opened his eyes to the problems poverty and racism imposed on children. During nine months in 1928, the San Marcos sophomore served as principal at the small Welhausen Ward Elementary School in Cotulla, Texas (Kearns 65). There he came face to face with true deprivation—75% of the town’s 3,000 residents were Mexican-Americans, many of whom spoke only Spanish; many of his students lived in dirt hovels and were too busy trying to survive to strive for success (65).

Welhausen Ward Elementary School was the first place to reap the benefits of Johnson’s benevolence. The plight of his students deeply affected him, as he described in a March 1965 speech before a joint session of Congress:

My students were poor...and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. They knew even in their youth the pain of injustice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them, but they knew it was so, because I saw it in their eyes. I often walked home...wishing there was more I could do. (The Vantage Point 65)
Yet few of Cotulla’s residents thought that LBJ should have done more. As well as teaching, he persuaded the school board to buy sports equipment to allow hungry children the distraction of playing games during their lunch hour. Also, he organized baseball games, track meets, and debates with other schools, as well as an English-only rule designed to allow the children easier integration into society (Caro xxvii). Although few if any of the former teachers at the school had cared if the students learned or not, LBJ did. Unfortunately, none of his reforms continued after he returned to San Marcos.

Later, in 1935, Johnson became the Texas State Director of FDR’s National Youth Administration, NYA. This assignment began a period of service to the New Deal and FDR that would last until FDR’s death in 1945. Johnson’s work with the NYA influenced his thinking on social policy in ways that would affect the Great Society. He learned how to implement public policy, but he also misinterpreted American’s later stand on the Great Society. Nearly everyone was in favor of the NYA’s work in Texas; consensus there made public opposition to his later programs difficult to comprehend (Kearns 85). However, during this period, Johnson gained both an idol and mentor in the shape of FDR, a man who proved invaluable in furthering Johnson’s political career (Caro xxvii).

These actions, and those instituted with the Great Society, exemplified LBJ’s theories on power and responsibility. At an early age LBJ learned from his mother, Rebekah, that power was valuable only when it was used to help others (Kearns 53). The
belief that the strong must care for the weak stood at the center of both Johnson's and his mother's philosophy (55). Recollecting on his time in office, Johnson claimed that he wanted power not for himself, but to "...give things to people--all sorts of things to all sorts of people, especially the poor and blacks (sic) (Kearns 54)." Although this statement may appear cynical, Kearns testified to its validity when she stated,

Conceptions of sacrifice, duty and benevolence were as inseparable from and as deeply rooted in his character as his political skills and his pursuit of power (56).

Johnson's very ideological makeup required his quest to right the wrongs he found in society. As Johnson's power grew, so did the extent of his charitable acts.

Experience and ideology combined to make Johnson an advocate for America's poor. He saw poverty as a cycle in which adults had no money, and hence, inadequate food and shelter, poor medical care, little education, and no chance to train for employment. Even worse, this bleak lifestyle was all the adults ever knew and all they were capable of passing on to their children. Beating poverty would require breaking this cycle (Johnson The Vantage Point 73). Those trapped within this cycle were not equipped to help themselves, lacking even the motivation to strive for a better life. They expected nothing better "because the sum total of their lives was losing" (Califano 73).

Rather than helping the poor at the expense of the rest of society, Johnson felt that the War on Poverty would improve conditions for all by strengthening "the moral and economic fiber
of the entire country" (Johnson *The Vantage Point* 72). He saw the poor as a group of people against whom the gates of opportunity had closed. The economy would provide the needed jobs to remove many from poverty; many barriers--such as lack of education, ill-health, and racial injustice--prevented them from pursuing these avenues of escape (Johnson *Who is my Brother's Keeper?* 92). LBJ wanted the War on Poverty to give the poor a chance to use their own capabilities to obtain a share of the nation's prosperity. He felt that this plan was economically, as well as morally, right. By raising the earnings of the poor, the programs would raise the GNP and cut public assistance programs. Indirect savings would be realized through decreased costs in battling other problems, such as crime and hunger (93). By improving the lot of the poor, LBJ felt the Great Society could benefit America as a whole.

The growing economy provided the basis for Johnson's plans. It would allow the poor, particularly African-Americans, to enter the job market without displacing whites. Also, rising tax revenues from increasing wages and profits would, theoretically, pay the costs of the War on Poverty without requiring higher tax rates (Califano 75). During the period of greatest change in welfare, 1964 to 1967, the GNP continued to rise while inflation remained minimal (Murray 25). Many of the economists of the time told Congress that they had unlocked the secrets of the economic cycle and could continue to raise GNP without inflation as Charles Murray said,
Not only were we enjoying an unprecedented boom, we now thought we had the tools to sustain it indefinitely. If there was poverty amidst plenty, its solution did not come as easily as the initial optimism had projected, then there was still no good reason to back off (26).

This economic prosperity affected many of Johnson's decisions about the poor. Since the government had the money to help the poor, there was no excuse for allowing this problem to continue.
CONCLUSIONS

Lyndon Johnson was correct when he said that the conditions for social change came together in historic proportions in 1963 (The Vantage Point 70). Even before Johnson announced his plans, people supported government measures to reduce poverty. In 1960, years before spending accelerated on these programs, Gallup polls found that many people put funding slum clearance and medical programs for the elderly above balancing the federal budget through cutting government spending (Schwarz 159). This support intensified as the projects took form; the first Gallup poll about people's views on the War on Poverty released in 1966 asked, "Overall, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the anti-poverty program nationwide?" It showed that of those having an opinion, 61% felt favorably toward the programs and 39% did not (159). The surprising element of these polls was the diversity of those supporting the programs, it "received favorable plurality in the north, south, east, and west, in the business and professional worlds, in the white-collar and blue-collar worlds, in communities large and small (159)."

The overarching theme of the War on Poverty was community action. This theory involved allowing the poor to help plan and administer the programs designed to help them. These programs could involve any strategy, including challenging the local
political structure (Lemann 1989 56). Needless to say, this program was unpopular with local political leaders who feared relinquishing the power that accompanied distributing government funds. When it began in 1964, it was a controversial and unproven proposal.

Many of the War on Poverty programs promoted work instead of welfare. In the beginning, slogans such as "A hand up, not a hand out" were used to promote the programs (57). Johnson was responsible for this aspect of the War on Poverty because he hated handouts, except to the elderly on Social Security (57). On the other hand, he did not oppose creating jobs. In fact, it was Johnson's preferred program. Yet, despite his intentions, the government was unable to adopt a large scale jobs program that lasted for any length of time. These programs never materialized, in part because of cost; jobs' programs were the most expensive antipoverty programs. Also, organized labor opposed these programs for fear they would weaken wages and hurt unions (57).

Public opinion favored almost all of the programs put forth, especially the work programs. A 1968 Gallup poll showed that nearly 80% of those polled favored programs that would provide enough work for every American to earn at least $3,200 a year (Schwarz 161). Yet the public also supported other types of programs to the point where a 1972 poll determined that twice as many people polled wanted to increase spending to five of the six main types of government programs at the time, low-rent housing,
rebuilding the inner cities, Medicaid, programs for the elderly and education programs for low-income children (161-162).

The only true measure of the effects of American cultural changes involved the consequences of the War on Poverty, and much controversy surrounds this point. Few argue that poverty lessened between 1965-1972, yet the reasons for this decrease continue to be controversial. Although many people credited the booming economy for this change, government programs actually alleviated poverty. In 1960 around 20% of the United States population lived in poverty, by the latter half of the 1970s only 4-8% of the population did (Schwarz 32). After taking all income except government subsidies into account, 19.2% of the population would have lived in poverty, about 10% less than in 1965. However, when income from government programs were factored into the equation over half of those living below the poverty line rose above it, leaving only 9% of the population in poverty. Poverty decreased a total of 60% during those seven years; 10% from economic increases and 50% from government programs showing that without the Great Society, poverty would have lowered, but to the extent it did during those seven years (34-5). These statistics alone present a compelling argument for the effectiveness of the War on Poverty.

Immediately after World War II massive inequalities became apparent—ranging from racial and gender discrimination to political persecution. These discrepancies set the stage for turbulent protest movements in later decades. These movements and their effects made the 1960s a progressive decade. Although
at first invisible, poverty, and the war against it, played an important role during that prosperous period of history. Yet this war would not have been possible without the conflict, strife, and social change that preceded it.

Lyndon Johnson set forth a formula for social change; without a public recognition of need, a willingness to help, and a strong leader social change was impossible. The changes that took place in America between the beginning of the New Deal and the advent of the Great Society fulfilled all of these requirements. If they had not, the War on Poverty would have ended in defeat before it even began.
Works Cited


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