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A High-Wire Crusade: Republicans and the War on Poverty, 1966

Abstract: During 1966, the Republican Party launched a largely successful challenge to Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." Republican candidates pursued an anti-War on Poverty midterm strategy, which made antipoverty programs the symbol of Great Society liberalism, rather than its more popular programs, such as Medicare or the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Moreover, in Congress and on the campaign trail, Republicans offered well-crafted alternatives—such as their "Opportunity Crusade"—to offset charges of negativism and elitism that had dogged the Grand Old Party (GOP) since the creation of the New Deal in the 1930s. Significantly, while the War on Poverty survived the year, the Republican minority was unexpectedly successful in making important changes to the Economic Opportunity Act during the antipoverty legislation's renewal. Overall, the Republican challenge to the War on Poverty in 1966, boded ill for the program's longevity when the GOP finally secured the levers of power.

Keywords: War on Poverty, Great Society, Opportunity Crusade, Economic Opportunity Act, Republican Party, Lyndon B. Johnson

Scholarship on Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent times. Prior to the early 2000s, historians widely assessed Johnson's vision as a failure that ran aground on the rocks of the Vietnam War, racial animus, and a host of other contentious issues that emerged during the Texan's presidency. Writing in the 1980s and 1990s, such scholars were perhaps unduly influenced by the electoral ascendance of an increasingly conservative Republican Party that successfully stoked public disillusionment with "big government" liberalism.¹ Recent scholarship has, however, attempted to flip this narrative on its head. Instead of focusing on its

failures, historians have become almost awestruck by the longevity and continued growth of the Great Society's most notable socioeconomic policies—especially Medicare and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—during a time of Republican ascendance. Indeed, according to Gareth Davies, the Great Society “bequeathed an era” in federal government expansion.² Similarly, writing in 2015, Julian Zelizer observed, “One of the most remarkable aspects of the Great Society is how much still lives with us today, fifty years later, so much so that most Americans regard its programs as essential manifestations of the national government’s responsibility to its citizens.”³ To such historians, Republican success in dismantling Great Society liberalism has been grossly exaggerated.

While fresh acknowledgment of the Great Society’s substantial legacy is welcome, there is a danger of scholars pushing this countervailing narrative too far. The Republican Party, while it has acquiesced to education and health care programs, has not shown such a willingness to go along with other aspects of the Great Society’s legacy. Most notably, the War on Poverty—a central pillar of Johnson’s Great Society vision when it was passed in 1964—was dismantled when Republicans seized the levers of government in 1981. Just seventeen years after its creation, it was cast aside by President Ronald Reagan and unceremoniously ended. Reagan, delivering a simple obituary for a program that had remained controversial and often unloved during its short history, pithily declared: “poverty won.”⁴ Given its rapid fall from grace, one historian justifiably deems the War on Poverty “one of the greatest failures of twentieth-century liberalism.”⁵ Such a failure cannot be brushed under the carpet by those arguing for greater recognition of the Great Society’s endurance—especially as the consequences for liberals, who dreamed of eradicating want from American society, continue to endure. Undeniably, the impetus to do battle with poverty that was briefly experienced in the 1960s and early 1970s has largely left an American political culture that prefers to focus on the “the middle class.” Michael Katz even labels poverty a “third rail” that twenty-first-century politicians dare not touch.⁶

The War on Poverty, unlike other aspects of the Great Society, never built substantial support in the opposition party. Most Republicans opposed the antipoverty effort from its inception and ended the program as soon as it was politically feasible. Nonetheless, historians of the War on Poverty have cited a myriad of reasons—including racism, Johnson’s overpromising rhetoric, and politically unrealistic demands from liberals—in order to understand the poverty war’s failure and yet have ignored the Republican elephant in the room.⁷ None have sufficiently analyzed how the Republican Party were a

check to its overall success, or indeed, how during the 1960s, they shaped the antipoverty effort's implementation. This article begins to fill this scholarly lacuna by examining GOP actions and rhetoric toward the War on Poverty in 1966—a year in which the antipoverty effort faced a contentious congressional renewal that allowed Republicans to impact how the “war” was being fought, while also playing a starring role in the Republican campaign against Johnson's Great Society during the midterm elections. In these twin developments, it becomes evident that the antipoverty effort was on borrowed time until the Republican Party seized power, and the limits of the Great Society's success reemerge.

REPUBLICANS AND THE WAR ON POVERTY

The Republican Party's overall approach to the War on Poverty across the program's seventeen-year lifespan was characterized by relentless—and sometimes fierce—opposition. Certainly, most elected Republicans opposed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964 from the outset. The EOA—the bedrock legislation for the War on Poverty—was an experimental package that rested on five key pillars: job training, community action, volunteerism, incentives for businesses to hire particularly hard-hit or stigmatized groups, and coordination of these efforts under the watchful eye of an Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). In addition to being experimental, it also had a relatively small appropriation of under \$1 billion when it was first passed. Republicans, however, believed it to be an expensive government giveaway to the poor that was designed to boost LBJ's election efforts in 1964, while also suspecting that it was enlarging the federal government's power at the expense of the states and the private sector. As the War on Poverty became reality from 1965 onward, Republicans only found more reasons to dislike the anti-poverty effort. Most elected Republicans believed that the OEO was partisan, corrupt, and wasteful. Moreover, they opportunistically soured on a project that many working-class whites came to resent in the belief that the OEO was only helping urban black Americans—thus presenting the GOP with a shot at attracting the bedrock voter of the Democratic Party's New Deal coalition.⁸ In short, most Republicans disliked the War on Poverty from the beginning, and their distaste only grew with each passing year.

In 1966, however, the GOP approach to Johnson's antipoverty efforts was complex. In Congress, the EOA was up for renewal and instead of calling for the War on Poverty's full repeal (as many congressional Republicans would have liked to do) the leadership chose to design and offer their own moderate

antipoverty alternative—the “Opportunity Crusade.”⁹ Hardly an extreme list of proposals, the Republican Crusade called for a reprioritizing of funding for antipoverty efforts toward the more popular programs of the War on Poverty, more influence for the states and the poor themselves, and for reorganizing which federal departments ran the programs. At the same time as appearing conciliatory in Congress, various Republicans relentlessly attacked the War on Poverty on the campaign trail in the hopes of making the increasingly unpopular antipoverty effort the symbol of Great Society liberalism writ large.¹⁰ Again, however, rather than dismiss any “war on poverty” entirely, these Republicans also offered their own creative solutions to eradicating hardship.

This GOP high-wire act was pursued for two reasons. First, elected Republicans were a more ideologically diverse group in the 1960s than they would be in the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s. Indeed, in 1966, the party had four discernible factions—fundamentalists, stalwarts, moderates, and progressives.¹¹ Fundamentalists were a rising force in the party and had seized the presidential nomination when Barry Goldwater ran in 1964, but it would be another fifteen years until they seized control of the party. Typically, fundamentalists emerged from the “Sunbelt,” an area running from Southern California to Virginia, and opposed all social welfare programs. In 1966, Ronald Reagan would emerge as the standard bearer for this group (and perhaps the most anti-War on Poverty candidate of the year). The largest group in the party consisted of stalwarts, who tended to reside in the Republican heartlands of the Midwest and mountain states. Unlike fundamentalists, they had voted for the civil rights acts in 1964 and 1965 but, led by House Minority Leader Gerald Ford (R-Mich.), they also opposed most of Johnson’s Great Society programs. Once Medicare and ESEA were on the books, however, stalwarts often became amenable to voting for increased funding for such programs.¹² Moderates, most evident in the mid-Atlantic states, had largely voted in favor of Democratic social programs in healthcare and education, while remaining skeptical of the War on Poverty that they perceived as either wasteful, corrupt, or both. Michigan Governor George Romney, for instance, deplored the federal nature of the War on Poverty and sought to form voluntary alliances between business and local government to support those in poverty. Finally, progressives, who were the smallest faction in the party but enjoyed disproportionate influence in the Senate, tended to offer solutions that could have been devised by a liberal Democrat, albeit with a greater skepticism of anything that smacked of government welfare. Edward Brooke from Massachusetts, who became the first ever African American directly

elected to the Senate in 1966, personified this approach. Bearing this ideological mix in mind, it is important to note that the GOP in 1966 was also striving for greater party unity following the disastrous 1964 election during which many moderates and progressives even refused to endorse their own presidential candidate.¹³ As such, with Republicans attempting project a more cohesive public image to suggest a readiness for governance, the party had to take all ideological views on board when crafting their congressional opposition and political messaging.

Another motivating factor for the complex approach was the political context in which Republicans were operating. The War on Poverty's passage in 1964 appeared to trap the GOP in the same dynamic that had stymied the party over the previous thirty years since Franklin D. Roosevelt had initiated the New Deal. Over that time, Robert Mason convincingly argues, the GOP—frequently in the minority in Congress and with only war hero Dwight Eisenhower occupying the White House since 1933—failed to deal with a Democratic agenda that advocated “support for activist government in pursuit of economic prosperity and welfare guarantees,” largely because “the resulting Republican alternative was often reactive, oppositional, and even negative.”¹⁴ As a result, Democrats continued to promise and win elections, while Republicans blocked and lost at the ballot box, and in the process many in the party became overly comfortable in the minority. Brooke, a GOP rising star, captured the essence of this phenomenon in reflecting on the Republican performance in 1964. Brooke bemoaned the abundance “of Republicans who would rather lose the ball game just as long as they decide who is going to pitch.” Continuing, Brooke also regretted the negative reputation attached to the GOP resulting from the party's reactive approach: “You see, the Republican Party, in rejecting the Democratic Party's solutions to problems, often gives the impression to the people that it is rejecting the existence of the problems themselves.”¹⁵ Republicans were therefore put in the position of seeming to be against ending hardship if they came out too harshly against the idea of a “war on poverty,” and when they did come out against the bill, it played into the long-established Democratic narrative that Republicans were merely the “Party of No.” Even more troublesome for Republicans, opposing a war on poverty echoed another disparaging term applied to the party: the “Party of Privilege.” As such, Republicans spent most of the 89th Congress (1965–67) offering what party leaders termed “constructive alternatives” to a host of Johnson's Great Society proposals.

Despite already being passed in the 88th Congress, no legislation featured more prominently in this new Republican blueprint than the EOA.

When the bill had passed in September 1964, 87 percent of House Republicans voted against the measure, while in the Senate, 69 percent of Republican senators voted against (the upper chamber was the sole institution where Republican progressives were a substantial force during the 1960s). When compared with most other Great Society legislation, the War on Poverty thus enjoyed paltry bipartisan support from the outset.

In 1965, armed with large liberal majorities in Congress, Johnson requested a doubling of funds for antipoverty programs, which were already receiving critical commentary in the media. Republicans, otherwise bereft of power for much of the Congressional term, therefore saw the EOA's renewal as an opportunity to strike at a key element of LBJ's Great Society. House Republicans, led by new Minority Leader Gerald Ford, exuded a sense of purpose that had been sorely lacking in the previous regime. Ford appointed two rising stars among the House Republican caucus in Al Quie (R-Minn.) and Charles Goodell (R-N.Y.)—dubbed the “Young Turks”—to lead the charge against the War on Poverty. At the time, both were stalwarts (Goodell would drift toward more moderate positions as the 1960s wore on, before being appointed to fill Robert Kennedy's vacant Senate seat in 1968) and they were part of a new generation of congressional Republicans who were desperate to escape the minority status to which many older elected members had become too comfortably accustomed. Quie, who one scholar describes as the “kind of attractive young face that the GOP needed if it were to combat the appeal of [John F. Kennedy's] Camelot,” used the War on Poverty's controversies to position himself, and thus his party, on the side of the poor who—according to Quie—were being failed by the Administration's offering.¹⁶ It was therefore hoped that dynamic messengers from a new Republican generation and a more compassionate sounding position would mute charges of GOP negativism.

Republicans, however, largely failed to get a hearing in 1965 as the Great Society's legislative tide surged through the first session of the 89th Congress. Despite bitter Republican complaints over the conduct of the War on Poverty, the EOA's first renewal saw antipoverty funds doubled and the OEO's authority strengthened, when a governor's veto of poverty programs was removed from the initial legislation.¹⁷ This was much to the dismay of Republicans who saw this as a naked federal power grab. Nonetheless, the Watts riots that broke out in August 1965 raised challenging questions about the antipoverty effort's effectiveness, exposed divisions in the Democratic Party, and disillusioned many traditionally Democratic white working-class Americans over the War on Poverty's desirability as they perceived it to be

disproportionately helping ungrateful African Americans. These events, combined with the strain put on the budget and the American body politic by a major increase in troops being sent to fight in Vietnam, meant that Republicans would not remain irrelevant for long.

With the midterm elections fast approaching, the War on Poverty's popularity continued to diminish. Having enjoyed two-thirds approval from the public in January 1966, support had fallen to 57 percent by June, far below other Great Society social welfare programs. Respondents, asked which federal spending programs they would like to see cut, cited "Aid to Cities," "Farm Subsidies," and the "War on Poverty" as three of the top four. Out of the most common responses, only the "Space Program" did not directly affect the nation's poor.¹⁸ While it is impossible to prove the reason for the drop in the War on Poverty's support, Republicans had done their level best throughout 1966 to hasten the War on Poverty's decline in popularity. This was done not only by highlighting the flaws of antipoverty effort in Congress and the campaign trail but also, first, by offering a constructive Republican alternative.

THE OPPORTUNITY CRUSADE

The Republican strategy in offering the Opportunity Crusade during 1966 was twofold. On the one hand, Quie and Goodell, having spent much of 1965 criticizing the War on Poverty, redoubled their efforts to discredit the OEO's record. At the same time, they sought to present the Republican Party as the antipoverty effort's saviors; without significant changes, Quie argued, the War on Poverty would be abandoned.¹⁹ Moreover, with the antipoverty effort now in its second year, Republicans were increasingly dismissive of Democratic arguments that the antipoverty effort would find its feet once it was over its teething problems. Rebutting such suggestions, Quie bluntly stated, "the Administration's War on Poverty is no longer in its infancy and the time for target practice is over."²⁰ It was high time, in the words of Goodell, for "a complete substitute for the President's lagging war on poverty."²¹ In March, both men duly launched the Opportunity Crusade in the lower chamber.

While the Opportunity Crusade was an extensive and multifaceted opposition proposal—the draft of the bill ran to over one hundred pages—it was, boiled down, essentially calling for five key changes: fewer responsibilities for the OEO, more participation by the poor in their own struggle against poverty, more permanent jobs for the poor, an increase in the private sector's role, and reduced federal authority. Quie and Goodell supported these proposals with thirty-eight "poverty memos" that were released between March

and April and served, according to Goodell, as a way of “reciting the problems with the poverty program.”²²

Primarily, the Opportunity Crusade proposed stripping the OEO of all responsibilities, excepting Community Action and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). As such, the GOP proposal advocated shifting job-training initiatives, such as the Job Corps and Neighborhood Youth Corps, to the Department of Labor, while all education programs, such as the popular Head Start (which would enjoy an increased budget), to the Office of Education. This negative approach to the OEO is unsurprising as Republican feelings toward the department ran the gambit from suspicion to outright hostility. Goodell referred to OEO Director Sargent Shriver’s newly created agency as the “fuddle factory” and vowed that the Opportunity Crusade would “eliminate the waste and scandal and abuses” that the *New Yorker* believed characterized the OEO.²³

Republican criticisms also suggested that many in the GOP saw the OEO as a tool of the Democratic Party. Quie and Goodell’s poverty memos often drew upon examples of the OEO’s excessive patronage to city politicians—most of whom belonged to Shriver’s own party. For instance, Goodell charged a Boston Community Action Agency (CAA) with “political favoritism” and the next day noted that CAAs across the country had suffered because “Too often the big city politician has taken over.”²⁴ Quie cited the OEO’s funding of a hotel renovation in West Virginia under the pretense of setting up a Job Corps center where the State Commerce Commissioner—a Democrat—was president of the corporation that owned the hotel. Linking the poverty program to a frequent Republican charge being leveled at Lyndon Johnson primarily over his prosecution of the Vietnam War, Quie suggested that there existed a “Credibility Gap at [the] OEO.”²⁵ As such, the OEO—founded as a coordination agency—would have had little left to coordinate under Republican plans.

Community Action—the one major program that would have remained in OEO hands under the Republican proposal—was earmarked for significant alteration. When the EOA had original been drawn up, Community Action was the antipoverty package’s least understood part. Community Action Programs (CAPs) were to form Community Action Agencies (CAAs) to tackle problems in rural and urban communities. Demanding “maximum feasible participation” from local communities, CAPs had to seek funding and approval from the federal OEO before beginning. As such, this aspect of the War on Poverty—despite its focus on local communities—came under strong Republican criticism for giving too much power to the federal

government at the expense of states and localities. Furthermore, the hazy nature of the phrase “maximum feasible participation” meant that CAPs often became battlegrounds for fights between local community leaders and the local political establishment.²⁶ Therefore, it was surprising that the Opportunity Crusade budget set federal funding for CAPs at \$700 million—a vast increase on the \$475 million requested by the Johnson administration.²⁷ Second, Quie and Goodell proposed that the poor be guaranteed one-third representation on poverty boards. Their rationale for the guaranteed representation was that the War on Poverty had failed to achieve the “maximum feasible participation” on behalf of the poor for which the EOA had legislated. The two Republicans cited events, such as the Watts riots in 1965, and the prospect of future widespread riots as proof of the OEO’s failure to include the poor. They suggested that implementation of the one-third rule would help avoid violence and lack of participation in future.²⁸

While Quie and Goodell’s proposed doubling of federal funds for Community Action may have been in good faith, it is also possible that they saw a further opportunity to divide Democrats. By 1966, there were more than one thousand CAAs in existence, the majority of which were in urban areas, and many of them were causing headaches for big-city mayors—most of whom were Democrats.²⁹ Quie and Goodell stoked the fires of Democratic division, proposing a mayor’s veto with relation to CAAs. They quoted Rep. Adam Clayton Powell (D-N.Y.), the House Education and Labor Committee’s (through which the EOA was reported) controversial chairman, as saying: “If we have this mayor’s” veto, then I’m ready to wash this war on poverty right down the drain and forget it.”³⁰ The flamboyant Powell, who saw CAAs as a means to provide direct services for his constituents, was also in conflict with New York City residents who saw Community Action as a vehicle for social action and protest.³¹ Thus, Community Action stirred many layers of division in Democratic-controlled cities.

Furthermore, while many CAAs undoubtedly did important and successful work, there were also stories emerging from Community Action that embarrassed the Johnson administration during 1966.³² For example, the Harlem CAA in New York City—HARYOU-ACT—indulged in poor financial practices that left it over budget while paying high salaries to its employees. Later in the year, it stood accused of funding revolutionary black nationalist LeRoi Jones.³³ At the other end of the ideological spectrum, Goodell pointed to a CAA in San Jose, California, where only three elected representatives turned up to a poverty board meeting, and one of them was a member of the far-right John Birch Society.³⁴ For Republicans looking to discredit the War

on Poverty while simultaneously exploiting divisions in the Democratic Party, inflating the importance of Community Action made great sense. It is also worth noting that most Republicans represented rural and suburban districts, and therefore difficult changes to the predominantly urban Community Action would have little effect on the GOP.

The main job-training programs—the Job Corps and the Neighborhood Youth Corps—were different in this regard because they also operated in rural, small-town, and suburban America. Here, Quie and Goodell assured Congress that the Opportunity Crusade would do a better job of providing more “productive and dignified” jobs while also interacting with the private sector more effectively than the OEO.³⁵ On the first point, Republicans often derided the War on Poverty’s job training placements as placing poor youngsters in dead-end jobs, such as “leaf raking and make-work in public employment.”³⁶ Therefore, the Opportunity Crusade included an Industrial Youth Corps (IYC) that would provide incentives for private companies to train unskilled youths and, in exchange, the youths would be paid only one-third of the minimum wage for their labor. The IYC, according to Quie, would provide “the kinds of jobs which would make them taxpaying citizens who would be an asset to the country rather than a burden and taking from the tax revenues of the Federal Government.”³⁷ Youth unemployment, Quie and Goodell argued, had stubbornly remained at 12 percent over the previous five years because the minimum wage was pricing young people out of the market.³⁸ This was, of course, a convenient argument for Republicans who, more often than not, opposed minimum-wage laws.

The IYC proposal was coupled with another overt appeal to the private sector—the Human Investment Act (HIA). This act called for a 7 percent tax credit to employers if they engaged in certain types of employee training. The HIA would act as an incentive for employers to engage in training of the poor and unemployed that would offset other proposed reductions in federal spending. Indeed, the Opportunity Crusade proposed that private companies would pay two-thirds of the trainees’ wages rather than the 10 percent the companies currently contributed under Johnson’s War on Poverty. This meant a reduction in federal spending on job training and allowed Quie and Goodell to claim that “the Opportunity Crusade will help more poor people while spending \$200 million less than the war on poverty.”³⁹

This focus on private enterprise was an issue around which the ideologically diverse Republican Party could unite, and the Opportunity Crusade’s final aspect was similar in this respect. During its launch, Goodell asserted that the Opportunity Crusade would “enlist states as partners” in the war

against poverty. The clear implication was that the OEO was acting on its own wishes and not engaging in state consultation. In its place, Republicans proposed to introduce “Revenue Sharing,” which would see states receive block grants from the federal government with no strings attached and therefore reduce the control that OEO could exert on the states.

All in all, the Opportunity Crusade was irrefutably a thorough opposition proposal that stood in contrast to the GOP’s record of negativism. Moreover, while the Crusade took sharp aim at the OEO, it was an altogether moderate proposal from a stalwart-dominated House Republican caucus. The Crusade drew heavily upon both the War on Poverty’s failures but also largely upon Republican ideological principles. When the EOA’s renewal reached Congress in September, House Republicans were now armed with their own proposal and were ready for a fight.

MINORITY MUSCLE

With an election nearing, the stakes over the EOA’s renewal were high and Republicans duly arrived with a long list of grievances but also a great number of alternatives. Rep. William Ayres (R-Ohio), a stalwart and perennial foe of the War on Poverty, set the tone during the first day of debate on September 26, 1966, when he told the lower chamber that “I am of the opinion [. . .] that there are very few Members of this body who really believe in their hearts that this is good legislation.”⁴⁰ While many Democrats robustly defended the anti-poverty initiatives, Republicans echoed Ayres’s sentiments. Over the next four days, the War on Poverty was subjected to harsh Republican rancor, the type of which few other Great Society ventures would endure. Joseph Loftus, a *New York Times* journalist, observed the bitterness of the EOA debate, noting that it was marked by politicians of both parties who shouted “politics!” at each other.⁴¹

Revealingly, it was moderate House Republicans—including some who had voted for the EOA’s previous two incarnations—who led the charge against the War on Poverty. Rep. William Cahill (R-N.J.), after noting his previous support, outlined his voting dilemma during the opening debate: “I do not know what I am going to do this time, because I am deeply concerned personally about what I conceive to be political motivations in this bill. More importantly . . . the American public is deeply concerned.”⁴² Rep. Alphonso Bell (R-Calif.), another moderate, rose on September 27 to lead a long monologue of “I told you so” to those who had initially voted for the War on Poverty. Bell, who voted for other Great Society legislation but against the

original EOA, told the House that those who had voted against the War on Poverty had “had our votes vindicated.” He believed that Congress had been “naïve” as “none of us realized in 1964, when we enacted the Economic Opportunity Act, just how formidable a task we had taken on.” His specific complaints related to the “impossible task” facing the OEO, which was expected to juggle five programs. While he conceded the popularity of Head Start, Bell warned that if responsibility for the program was not shifted from the OEO to the Office of Education, Head Start would be stifled by OEO confusion. Bell concluded his anti-EOA soliloquy by quoting an Iowa school superintendent who had been waiting months for OEO funds and had said of the War on Poverty’s help: “We’re getting to the point where we don’t know if it’s worth it.”⁴³

Bell’s testimony was damning of the OEO but it paled in comparison to that of his fellow moderate Republican Paul Fino (R-N.Y.). Fino, a New Yorker who had voted for the EOA on both previous occasions, had a moderate voting record but would, as the Johnson presidency progressed, emerge as one of the loudest proponents of racial conservatism in the GOP. The Bronx congressman denounced his previous votes and told his fellow representatives: “I have become completely disenchanted with the whole concept for rooting poverty out of the American soil. I might go further and admit that I am disgusted with these glamorous-sounding programs that have and will continue to produce confusion, hate, bitterness and misuse of our taxpayers’ money.”⁴⁴

Calling the War on Poverty a “shabby, disgraceful thing [that] has let American down,” Fino’s criticisms were a mix of traditional GOP arguments over OEO waste and corruption combined with white backlash fears roused by the Watts riots and anxiety over the decline of morality in the United States. Speaking of the Job Corps, Fino asked, “Why spend \$370,000 getting [the poor] special blazers? I know another type of outfit they could wear. It has brass buttons too. I firmly believe we ought to draft out the Nation’s punks and hoods instead of coddling and paying them in the Job Corps.” Mocking OEO employees as “poverty beatniks and troublemakers,” the congressman defiantly argued that Congress should “say ‘no’ in definite terms to care and feeding of punks, rioters and black nationalists.”⁴⁵

Democrats, who had been engaged in a bitter dispute over Adam Clayton Powell’s handling of the EOA bill during the committee phase, closed ranks when they finally realized that the extent of Republican opposition to the EOA threatened the \$1.75 billion funding allocation for antipoverty measures.⁴⁶ Rallying to the support of the War on Poverty, Democrats sought

to discredit Republican criticisms and alternatives. Before addressing the detail of Republican proposals, numerous Democrats situated GOP criticisms within a long history of Republican negativism toward Democratic social welfare programs.⁴⁷ Affirming the “Party of No” narrative, Rep. James O’Hara (D-Mich.) described Republican charges as “familiar old friends to all of us, polished by the frequency of their use [. . .] like an old slipper, almost comfortable from age alone.”⁴⁸ New Jersey’s Charles Joelson backed up O’Hara, asserting that “the minority report, in the typical minority fashion, was negative.” According to Joelson, “The Republican substitute is not an opportunity crusade: it is just opportunity delayed, opportunity mislaid, and opportunity dismayed.”⁴⁹

Despite the strong riposte from Democrats favorable to the War on Poverty, there were also reminders that a strengthened conservative coalition between Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats after the 1966 midterms could endanger antipoverty programs.⁵⁰ Many Southern Democrats—some of whom had voted against the original EOA—agreed with their GOP colleagues on the War on Poverty’s failures. One such example was Rep. Charles Bennett (D-Fla.), who blamed the poor execution of poverty programs for the increase in race riots. Bennett charged that the War on Poverty “has contributed more than any other single factor to the riots and unrest among the underprivileged of our country. It is impossible to legislate self-respect.” The Jacksonville-based Democrat concluded—in ideological harmony with the majority of Republicans—that American free enterprise should fight poverty.⁵¹ For the time being, however, both Bennett and the Republicans found themselves on the wrong side of the voting tally. The Opportunity Crusade—which Bennett supported—was defeated handily (228–117 against, with all but 6 Republicans voting in favor) when it was proposed by Quie on September 28. Much to Johnson’s relief, enough Democrats remained loyal to the president’s signature legislation.

Rather than accept defeat, House Republicans moved onto Plan B—offering a total of thirty-three amendments to the EOA before final passage—and it was during this process that Quie and Goodell’s work bore fruit.⁵² The most substantial change to the EOA as it made its way through the House was Quie’s amendment that the representatives of the poor must make up one-third of every poverty board. The OEO attempted to stave off the one-third proposal by releasing statistics that showed 29 percent of CAAs were already so constituted. This was challenged by Loftus in the *New York Times*, who argued that these representatives could have been political appointees.⁵³ Ultimately, the attempted rebuff was to no avail as the Quie amendment was

adopted, ensuring that the effort invested in proposing constructive Republican alternatives was not in vain. The amendment, after all, was directly lifted from the Opportunity Crusade and it resulted in positive headlines for the GOP. Indeed, the *New York Times* editorialized that “One of the interesting developments of the [EOA] debate was a Democratic concession that let the Republicans become the champions of “maximum feasible participation” by the poor.”⁵⁴

Republicans also exercised influence when the EOA arrived in the Senate in early October. The GOP, displaying awareness of white backlash sentiment to the further race riots that had taken place in the summer, provided the votes to ensure acceptance of Senator Harry Byrd’s (D-Va.) amendment requiring that the EOA bar assistance to “anyone who incited or carried on a riot or was a member of a subversive organization.”⁵⁵ Elsewhere, California Republican George Murphy successfully had the Hatch Act applied to the EOA, thus prohibiting OEO employees from engaging in political activity. This development seemed to lend credence to Republican claims that anti-poverty workers were straying into partisan territory (such as voter registration for the Democrats) while doing their work.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Sen. Winston Prouty’s (R-Vt.) accepted amendment that earmarked 36 percent of Community Action funds for Head Start confirmed the bipartisan support for that program that would largely endure for the following five decades.⁵⁷ Most significantly, Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen’s (R-Ill.) proposal to reduce the appropriation from the \$2.5 billion requested by the president to the \$1.75 billion approved by the House was passed thanks to GOP votes.

The EOA debate had confirmed that most Republicans in both houses of Congress had identified the War on Poverty as a weak spot in the Great Society’s armory. Nonetheless, by offering a comprehensive alternative, Republicans were able to parry charges of negativism as the midterm election approached. Moreover, the Republican success in altering the EOA in 1966 was an unexpected fillip for the GOP during the “Rubber Stamp Congress,” famous for its willingness to back almost all of Johnson’s wishes. Greater success, however, lay in the near future, and again the War on Poverty was to play a key role.

POVERTY POLITICS ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

The 1966 midterms have largely been portrayed by historians as representing a turning point; heralding an epochal shift from New Deal / Great Society liberalism to modern conservatism that would unfold over the

next two decades.⁵⁸ Again, however, there is a danger of overstating this narrative. The elections did not constitute a backlash to the Great Society *per se*—only extremists advocated a repeal of Medicare, Medicaid, ESEA, civil rights laws, liberalized immigration, or consumer protections—but the nationwide vote on November 8 did represent a backlash against the new perception of Great Society liberalism among the American people. This perception, embodied by the War on Poverty, held that the Great Society's aims were to help the undeserving few rather than the deserving many. As such, when Republicans campaigned against the "Great Society" in 1966 what they were often explicitly campaigning against was the War on Poverty. This was a smart strategy—had Republicans chosen to go after a more universalist program, such as Medicare, then the result would likely have been disastrous for the party. As it was, attacking the antipoverty effort proved perfect fodder for Republicans seeking to make an electoral comeback from the nadir of 1964.

To stoke anti-War on Poverty sentiment, Republicans were relentless in tying the antipoverty programs to welfare dependency. By the mid-1960s, welfare had become a salient issue, particularly among white voters who believed government largesse was going exclusively to what they perceived as lazy and riotous urban African Americans. This is even though the War on Poverty—mainly a host of experimental programs as discussed above—was not in any meaningful way a welfare program.⁵⁹ All the while, Republicans continued to perform an impressive high-wire act. Instead of lapsing into outright negativism or advocating a scrapping of the War on Poverty, Republicans continued to argue that they would be better generals in the fight than the Democrats had proved. Indeed, while high-profile Republican candidates as ideologically diverse as Reagan, Brooke, Romney, and Ford campaigned forcefully against the antipoverty effort, they always did so with their own constructive alternative to offer as a replacement. Taken together, the campaigning of these four victorious Republicans is instructive of the GOP campaign in 1966.

Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial campaign in California was the star turn of the 1966 midterm elections. The former Hollywood actor emerged from the elections as the new occupant of the Golden State's governor's mansion and with a national profile that was the envy of many a battle-hardened politician. Historians have highlighted the dual role of university protests and the Watts riots in Reagan's victory over Democratic incumbent Pat Brown, but it was the former actor's "Creative Society" vision that lay at his campaign's core.⁶⁰ The Creative Society concept was vague in Reagan's public words—not

untypical of political visions—but the persistent theme that emerge was that the Creative Society would involve the private sector in areas that were, at the time, the sole preserve of the public sector. Moreover, the Creative Society was proudly antiwelfare dependency.

As the name “Creative Society” suggests, in 1966, Reagan was very much the anti-Great Society candidate; and in bashing the Great Society, Reagan almost always focused his rhetorical fire on poverty programs.⁶¹ Reagan was loath to concede any virtue in Johnson’s War on Poverty and he framed the initiatives as Democrats doling out welfare to undeserving Americans. While Reagan accepted that “human compassion and simple brotherhood demand that where there is need we should do our utmost to provide some of the comforts that make life worthwhile,” he cautioned that “this should be in response to need, and where the need is temporary, the help should be temporary, aimed at restoring self-sufficiency.”⁶²

Declaring that one of the basic laws of economics is the rule that “there ain’t no such thing as a free lunch,” Reagan offered his private enterprise-led Creative Society as a viable alternative to his perception of the current War on Poverty: “A creative society mobilizing the business and industrial community to pinpoint who is unemployed, where and why, and then how to make a place for them in our protective free economy, can fight a war on poverty, 1,000 times more effectively than government.”⁶³ Pointedly, Reagan stressed the popularity of his position. By September, the GOP candidate noted that one of the first questions he was regularly asked by members of the public was: “If elected Governor, what will you do about welfare?”⁶⁴ Reagan was therefore aware of the political damage that he could cause by tying the War on Poverty to voter concerns surrounding welfare dependency. Furthermore, in running against incumbent Democrat Pat Brown, Reagan was in competition with one of the nation’s state executives most in step with the antipoverty effort and the only governor who, in 1965, had *failed* to request that the governor’s veto over OEO projects remain. The stakes for the War on Poverty in the nation’s most populous state were clear.

Reagan, however, was not the only GOP headline act of 1966. Ed Brooke shared center stage, becoming the first black senator since Reconstruction when he emerged victorious in the Bay State. Brooke, a progressive, characterized himself as a “Creative Republican,” a designation not too dissimilar from Reagan’s Creative Society vision. Brooke believed that Democrats conceived of good ideas but were unable to convert those ideas into workable policy due to the party’s attachment to city machines and the patronage demanded by such a system. Brooke reasoned that

Republicans could run existing programs better and also offer smarter programs if elected.⁶⁵

In particular, Brooke described Democratic initiatives as having a “very serious flaw and that is that the Democratic Party seems to give temporary relief to problems. It doesn’t cure the problems. I think that the Republican Party is the best equipped to bring about these resources.”⁶⁶ In February, during one of his many appearances on a national television, Brooke identified the War on Poverty as the key program where the GOP could make a difference. Despite widely varying political philosophies, Brooke agreed with Reagan’s assertion that the current antipoverty effort was increasing welfare dependency.⁶⁷ Rather than stoke public anger with welfare or sound the klaxon for private enterprise to come to the rescue, Brooke instead called for increased participation by the poor in the antipoverty effort.

Given his standing as the highest-profile African American running for elected office, Brooke was afforded a significant media platform to voice his views on race and the War on Poverty. In doing so, Brooke was explicit in tying the dependency problems he outlined in his War on Poverty critique to the black community, perhaps giving voice to an opinion that many white politicians subscribed to but could not voice.⁶⁸ Rather than fudge the issue of race, Brooke chose to meet it head on: “Let us admit that the great majority of people who are classified as on the borderline of poverty in this country are Negroes, and people who live in the ghettos.”⁶⁹ Of course, Brooke was incorrect. While poverty disproportionately affected the black population, a greater number of impoverished Americans in the country were white and belonged to rural communities.⁷⁰ That this misperception was gaining common acceptance showed a deviation from the script that the Johnson administration had written in 1964, keenly aware of the pitfalls if the War on Poverty was seen as targeting the few rather than the many—black Americans were, after all, a minority of the population.⁷¹ Brooke, clearly hoping to improve rather than kill the antipoverty effort, was conceivably helping to undermine it by moving the War on Poverty further and further away from the image of the struggling, down-on-his-luck, white Appalachian. As Timothy Thurber outlines, many whites—despite the advancements in civil rights legislation—continued to associate the black population with negative stereotypes of laziness and, increasingly, violence.⁷² Thus, they were not inclined to fund government programs that catered exclusively, or at least predominantly, to black Americans.

Away from coastal battles, in America’s Midwestern heartland Governor George Romney was also battling with how best to solve poverty during his

successful re-election effort in Michigan. Romney, on a visit to Los Angeles in late 1965, had remarked: “Handouts, although sometimes necessary and always well-intentioned, are degrading to the human spirit.”⁷³ Romney’s statements during 1966 reflected a governor torn between touting his administration’s liberal record on welfare spending while also hoping to offer a constructive alternative to Democratic approaches to poverty. For instance, Romney’s campaign boasted that “Michigan is making full use of the Federal Economic Opportunity Act,” citing a \$4 million program to aid underprivileged children.⁷⁴

Despite his record of government intervention, Romney focused his rhetoric on volunteerism—a distinctive element of the Governor’s philosophy. Romney declared during his State of the State address in January that “government alone can never solve our mounting human and social problems.”⁷⁵ In May, Romney went further, remarking to fellow Republicans that “our Republican opportunity in 1966 is to present superior candidates and superior programs that will turn loose America’s vast, as-yet-untapped potential of voluntary people-power to solve the people’s problems.” In particular, the former American Motors chairman cited the need for government “to develop independence, not dependence” in those less fortunate.⁷⁶ Romney’s dual critique was characteristic of Republican governors in Midwestern and Northeastern states who had decided to try to use the EOA as much as possible, but still felt that Republicans could do a better job of drawing up the legislation in Washington.

Finally, Gerald Ford, the stalwart Minority Leader, spent the year touring the United States on behalf of GOP candidates and railing against the War on Poverty. Still, his speeches throughout the year revealed his keen awareness of the need to avoid standard GOP negativism. As a result, following the launch of the Opportunity Crusade in Congress, Ford promised that “if elected, [Republicans will] enter into an antipoverty war alliance with the states and private enterprise that will muster more than an additional half billion dollars annually for the assault on poverty while costing taxpayers far less.”⁷⁷ By stressing a GOP alternative that pledged more money, Ford hoped to avoid walking into a political trap set by the White House. At the forefront of his thinking was likely Johnson’s 1966 State of the Union, when, according to Ford, LBJ had “turned and looked directly at the Republican side of the Chamber, and with somewhat of a hard, snarling look said in effect to the Republicans, whom will they sacrifice—the poor?”⁷⁸ The Minority Leader’s indignant response was a full-throated “no.” Ford’s approach, however, stood in contrast to his Senate counterpart, Minority Leader Dirksen, who

was less prone to finessing his argument. Responding to a question on cost-of-living rises in August, the Illinoisan left little to the imagination in advocating that Congress “put the axe at some of these “Great Society” programs. Look at the waste there has been in the anti-poverty program.”⁷⁹ Dirksen’s reflexively negative approach merely served to show that he was part of an older generation of Republicans that, by 1966, was in the process of being replaced by newer faces like, Reagan, Brooke, Romney, and Ford.

Election night 1966 made happy viewing for Republicans. Color returned to the faces of those in the GOP who had felt the blood drain from them watching the news two years previously. The *New York Daily News* declared that “the Republican Party put on a performance like . . . that of Mark Twain when he remarked that reports of his death had been greatly exaggerated.”⁸⁰ British *Pathé* accurately described the election as the “biggest shot in the arm” for the Republican Party and focused its newsreel footage heavily on the victories of Ronald Reagan—already described as a potential presidential candidate—and Ed Brooke.⁸¹

November 8 was also a momentous day for the War on Poverty. As voters were delivering their verdict at the ballot box, Johnson affixed his signature to EOA’s renewal. Following conference between the House and Senate, the antipoverty effort had received an appropriation of \$138 million less than the administration had requested. In his signing statement, Johnson chose to ignore the clear political challenge that the War on Poverty had faced over the previous two months and instead stressed that “the majority of Americans [now] recognize the problem of poverty in our Nation and are determined to defeat it.”⁸² Whether this assertion was true is open to debate, but by the time Johnson had gone to bed that night, many Americans had repudiated the President’s agenda at the polls. As voters sent forty-seven additional Republicans to the House, three to the Senate, and installed eight more Republicans in governor’s mansions, LBJ’s War on Poverty was more politically vulnerable than ever.

The substantial Republican gains ensured that the Conservative Coalition regained its strength to rein in liberal legislation that it had briefly lost over the previous two years. Accordingly, given Republican campaign rhetoric, it was entirely foreseeable that, in the election’s aftermath, the War on Poverty would be cited as the Great Society program that stood to lose the most. The *Washington Post* and the *Christian Science Monitor* both ran stories in late November that named the War on Poverty as likely to face the greatest challenges from the new Congress. Both press reports read distinctly as

anonymous briefings from the Republican hierarchy on GOP strategy.⁸³ Still, while the War on Poverty was prevented from growing during the rest of Johnson's presidency, killing the antipoverty effort was not an action that most Republicans, mindful of their image, were prepared to take just yet.

CONCLUSION

The year 1966 witnessed a turning of the tide against the War on Poverty both in Congress and on the campaign trail. On Capitol Hill, congressional Republicans—despite their lopsided minority status—significantly influenced EOA's second renewal. While Quie and Goodell failed to pass their Opportunity Crusade, the very existence of such a detailed proposal suggested that the Republican Party was grappling seriously with how best to use their role as the opposition party to propel the GOP into the majority. Gone, it seemed, were the days when, in the words of Ed Brooke, Republicans “would rather lose the ball game just as long as they decide who is going to pitch.” Moreover, by stressing “creative” solutions and “constructive alternatives” to antipoverty programs, the GOP were making their first significant step to becoming the “party of ideas” as Democratic Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, famously remarked in 1981.⁸⁴ A nomenclature that would play significantly better with the electorate than the “Party of No.”

The Republican challenge to the War on Poverty in 1966 was also the GOP's first significant electoral success in campaigning against a socio-economic program of the New Deal / Great Society era. Unsurprisingly, such success did not go unnoticed by the most astute of political observers. In 1968, Richard Nixon—who had appeared with GOP candidates across the country in 1966—singled out the War on Poverty as the Great Society program he would most significantly alter during his presidential run.⁸⁵ Yet, once elected, Nixon would appoint the liberal Moynihan as a key policy adviser on poverty, while devoting his first significant presidential speech on domestic policy to stressing his commitment to finding new, innovative solutions to poverty.⁸⁶ The Republican high-wire act with regards to poverty policy would thus maintain its balance well into Nixon's presidency.

There remains scope for a full study that examines the Republican role in undermining and prematurely ending Johnson's War on Poverty. Historians have effectively chronicled the antipoverty effort's shortcomings and the disillusionment it occasioned among certain Democrats, but they have failed to identify how the Republican Party's consistent opposition ensured that the War on Poverty would never gain the bipartisan acceptance required

to sustain it through times when the Democratic Party no longer held power. While Johnson's antipoverty effort certainly was open to criticism, Republicans were often adroit in their opposition. A political vacuum, after all, does not fill itself. Beginning in 1965, the GOP coupled harsh anti-War on Poverty rhetoric with its own moderate alternatives—a smart strategy to avoid appearing overly negative. As the Johnson presidency wore on and the War on Poverty fell further in the public's estimation, Republicans used the antipoverty effort as the poster-child policy for criticizing the entire Great Society. This approach would help tar the entire creed of Great Society liberalism—or, indeed, liberalism as a whole—and assist the Republican Party in its electoral rise in the following decades.

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