

Lyndon B. Johnson and the War on Poverty: Introduction to the Digital Edition

Guian A. McKee

Associate Professor of Public Policy

Miller Center of Public Affairs, Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy

University of Virginia

IN A LATE AFTERNOON PHONE CALL ON 29 JULY 1964, President Lyndon Johnson implored a fellow Texan, House Appropriations Committee Chairman George Mahon, for help in passing the economic opportunity bill that would launch Johnson's War on Poverty: "You help me, because this is one I just can't lose. This is the only Johnson proposal I've got. The only bill, and it's as sound as a dollar."¹ Although Mahon avoided a commitment during the conversation, he would eventually vote for the bill, bringing with him a number of other Democrats from Texas and the South. The recorded exchange on 29 July, however, captured a key moment in the Johnson presidency. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act earlier in the month, Johnson had achieved a historic victory that might not have been possible without his leadership and legislative skill. Yet he remained deeply insecure. Worried about the upcoming Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, about the loyalty of many Democrats, and about the challenges of implementing the civil rights legislation and managing the intensifying conflict in Southeast Asia in the midst of a presidential election, Johnson desperately sought a victory all his own. The economic opportunity bill, and the War on Poverty that it would initiate, represented a chance to establish a legislative and policy identity completely independent of his slain predecessor.

This digital volume, which includes all of Johnson's recorded conversations about the War on Poverty during the second half of 1964, traces Johnson's intense effort to pass the economic opportunity bill. Although it is primarily a record of the president's attempt to lobby, negotiate, and cajole Congress toward this end, it captures dimensions of Johnson's personality, political style, and policy views that would eventually shape his management of the War on Poverty—and his presidency. Through these recorded conversations, listeners gain a sense of Johnson's famous skill as a legislative tactician and of his ability as a deal maker and a flatterer who understood the ways of Washington, and especially of Congress, at an intimate level. Gradually, though, something else builds through the recordings: a sense of what Johnson actually thought he was doing in implementing an unprecedented federal initiative to address the problem of lingering poverty amidst the broad prosperity of the post–World War II United States. We gain, as we can from no other source, a new understanding of what Lyndon Johnson actually believed.

This is the great value of the secret White House recordings. Records at presidential libraries and the National Archives reveal much of the daily discussion within the White House, and they demonstrate the ideas and information that the president encountered. They remain mostly silent, however, about the actual thoughts of the individual himself. Like most modern presidents, Lyndon Johnson left a very limited written record. Most of the available archival material consists of the memos, telegrams, and policy papers of aides and advisers. Johnson's voice appears rarely, as a scrawled note of approval or rejection across the bottom of a memo, or perhaps in a formal letter, or indirectly in an adviser's notes about a conversation or meeting. The recordings, in contrast, offer a record of the president's words and thoughts, direct, unmediated, and unfiltered, at least by anyone other than himself. With the deep engagement in the War on Poverty recordings provided by this volume, we gain a sense of why Johnson so badly wanted the legislation passed and how he went about accomplishing this goal. The recordings also offer insights into why Johnson wanted to undertake a War on Poverty at all, and beyond that, into how he viewed the role of government itself in American society.

The Context: Lyndon Johnson in 1964

By the time this volume begins, much had already occurred both in the Johnson presidency as a whole and in the shaping of the War on Poverty as a policy initiative. Upon taking office following the assassination of President Kennedy, Johnson had reassured the shaken nation through his steady leadership and deep understanding of the institutions of government. This had not been a minor task. The assassination had been a deeply traumatizing event, both for the country as a whole and, more immediately, for those in the White House who had worked most closely with President Kennedy. Johnson himself experienced doubt about his ability to manage a task of the magnitude that he was undertaking. Nonetheless, he seized the political opening provided by the crisis—and the goodwill that most Americans felt for a man thrust so unexpectedly into office under such impossibly difficult circumstances—and achieved a string of important legislative victories during his first months in office. Although the initiatives had begun under Kennedy, and thus by Johnson's own estimation were not his alone, they nonetheless represented significant accomplishments. A major tax-cut bill, a budget that included cost savings and that came in under the psychologically significant \$100 billion limit that Johnson had set, a farm bill, a long-overdue pay increase for federal employees, and, not least, the Civil Rights Act, all passed during Johnson's first eight months in office. The civil rights legislation required Johnson and his congressional allies to overcome a fifty-seven-day Senate filibuster by southern Democrats and to hold together a tenuous alliance with moderate Republicans. As a result, racially based tensions within the Democratic Party would shape the president's efforts to pass the economic opportunity bill.²

Even as the Civil Rights Act finally moved toward passage in early summer, the difficulties that its implementation would pose became brutally clear when three young civil rights workers

disappeared on a rural road near Philadelphia, Mississippi. The Johnson recordings volume on civil rights traces the administration's efforts to oversee the FBI's "Mississippi Burning" investigation—both before and after the murdered workers' bodies were found in an earthen dam in Mississippi's Neshoba County.³ August would bring a new indication of the perils that the movement posed for Johnson, as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenged Mississippi's segregated delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.⁴ Meanwhile, violent racial upheavals exploded in the inner-city areas of Harlem, Philadelphia, and Rochester, New York, as the nation experienced the first of the "long hot summers" that would come to characterize the 1960s. Unrest in the urban North suggested the discomfiting possibility that racial problems in the United States were not limited to backward corners of the rural South.⁵

Nor were the problems facing the president limited to the domestic sphere. During the spring of 1964, American reconnaissance planes had been shot down over Laos, where Communist insurgents had made military gains against the country's unstable right-wing government. Next door in South Vietnam, the administration struggled with a corrupt and often incompetent government that seemed incapable of fighting off the Communist Vietcong guerrillas, much less military incursions from Communist North Vietnam. In June, Johnson had replaced the American ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, who had proved unwilling to implement administration policy directives and remained interested in a last-minute bid for the Republican presidential nomination. Finally, as the economic opportunity bill moved at last toward a vote in the House of Representatives, the situation flared into crisis when a North Vietnamese vessel fired on the USS *Maddox*, a destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. As a series of confused reports filtered back to Washington regarding a possible second attack on the *Maddox* and another U.S. ship—reports that later proved false—Congress passed the administration-sponsored Gulf of Tonkin resolution. This measure gave the president broad authority to conduct military operations in Vietnam. It would be the primary legal basis for Johnson's catastrophic expansion of the war in Vietnam in the coming years.

Why a War on Poverty?

Why, given this already complex and troubled environment, did Lyndon Johnson decide to undertake a War on Poverty? The answer lies in two streams of policy development, one long-term and the other short-term. The long-term strand stretches back to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal during the 1930s. Beginning with the New Deal, liberals had struggled to establish policy structures that would secure a basic modicum of economic security for all Americans. The Social Security Act of 1935 provided old-age insurance (which now bears the name of the legislation itself, Social Security), unemployment insurance, direct assistance to the elderly and blind, maternal and child health programs, and payments to dependent children with an absent or deceased father (which by the 1950s evolved into Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the

program that became popularly known as “welfare”). In effect, the Social Security Act created the core of the multilayered welfare state that persists in the United States to the present day, but its exclusion of key employment categories and its deference to local administration insured that many Americans, and especially African Americans, would be left out. It also made no guarantees of employment (or health care, another issue that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations would take up). These limitations would have profound implications for how Americans conceived of social and economic rights in the postwar world and thus for how the War on Poverty would be structured. Late in his presidency, in the “Economic Bill of Rights” that he unveiled in his 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt returned to the issue of employment security, prominently including the right to a job among those that Americans should expect to attain in the postwar world, although efforts to implement this concept of rights went down to defeat when Congress deleted the principle of employment as a matter of right from the Employment Act of 1946.

During the 1950s, liberal economists and policymakers continued to push for policies that would support full employment through relatively direct federal job creation efforts such as targeted investments in depressed areas. Although congressional Democrats twice passed relatively strong “area redevelopment” bills during the 1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower vetoed both bills. After President Kennedy took office in 1961, he signed an Area Redevelopment Act that had been so weakened during the legislative process that it had little positive effect and actually helped to discredit policy strategies based on direct governmental interventions in the economy. Meanwhile, Social Security had become intertwined with both the pension plans of large corporations and the collective bargaining strategies of unions, deeply entrenching it in American life. Welfare, in the form of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, remained relatively small in scale and continued to be distributed unequally and in ways that intentionally stigmatized and further marginalized its recipients.⁶

Faced with this policy and political environment, as well as the growing challenge of the civil rights movement to basic assumptions about public policy in the United States, the Kennedy administration turned in a new direction. Although President Kennedy had been close to economist John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the leading advocates of a version of Keynesianism based on spending and direct intervention in the structure of the economy, he lacked a well-developed understanding of economic theory—or any preconceived idea about appropriate policies. In office, Kennedy turned away from Galbraith to advocates of the “New Economics,” who argued for a less interventionist form of Keynesianism that emphasized the maintenance of overall economic growth through tax cuts rather than direct spending. Led by Walter Heller, who chaired Kennedy’s Council on Economic Advisers (CEA), this group labored to educate the president about the latest ideas in macroeconomic management. By 1963, Heller had succeeded in convincing Kennedy to pursue a large, broad-based tax cut as a means to generate economic growth. Such a strategy would limit Kennedy’s ability to launch new structural initiatives. Although a Democrat had regained the

White House, the country would not see bold new initiatives in public employment, public works, or economic planning—the sorts of interventions favored by structuralists such as Galbraith and liberal senators Paul Douglas of Illinois and Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania.

Even as Kennedy and his advisers began to work toward passage of the tax cut, they began to cast about for issues they might take up as a domestic policy focus for the 1964 presidential campaign. Among the possibilities discussed was a focus on poverty. This had a number of attractions. For one, it offered a broad unifying theme that transcended the very limited, piecemeal domestic policy accomplishments that the administration had so far achieved. For another, it balanced the middle-class focus of the tax cut (which would not actually pass until 1964) with an emphasis on those left behind by American prosperity. Heller and the CEA recognized that even the most successful macroeconomic policies would not reach all Americans: some would remain unemployable, some would remain stuck in low-wage jobs, some would still face skill deficits, family hardships, or other problems that left them outside the economic mainstream. Poverty as a theme thus offered a subtle but crucial variation on structuralist Keynesians' straightforward emphasis on unemployment. Rather than requiring a focus on the problems of the economy as a whole, it allowed policymakers to emphasize the inadequate resources of poor individuals and communities.

CEA economists working for Heller soon documented the severity and some of the intractability of the problem. They highlighted especially the disturbing possibility that during the previous decade, macroeconomic growth had become less effective in lifting people out of poverty. By the summer of 1963, a working group of staff members from the CEA, the Bureau of the Budget, and relevant departments met to consider the issue, and in the fall, Heller convened a more formal interagency task force to begin formulating specific proposals for the president's consideration. Just days before the assassination, Kennedy gave Heller the go-ahead to devote additional staff resources to developing the project as a priority for the next year.

There was, of course, another context to the emergence of poverty as a national policy priority. The civil rights movement had focused attention on economic inequality, particularly as it related to the nation's pervasive patterns of racial discrimination. The August 1963 March on Washington had captured this dynamic relationship, as its formal title was the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Martin Luther King frequently addressed the relationship between poverty and discrimination in ways far more radical than most commentators now choose to remember.⁷ It was at the local level, however, that civil rights, poverty, and pressing economic issues became most closely linked. This occurred in the North as well as the South, casting doubt on the traditional narrative that has seen discrimination as a problem confined to one exceptional region. Although northern activists marched in support of their southern brothers and sisters, they also increasingly challenged discrimination in their own communities. Boycott movements against discriminatory employers had taken place in northern cities since the 1930s, and they flared again

in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Northerners had struggled throughout the postwar years for the creation of city and state Fair Employment Practices commissions, and then, once such bodies were established, they fought to make them even marginally effective as tools to combat employment discrimination. In 1963, protests against segregation in the well-paying construction industry quickly spread from Philadelphia to New York, Cleveland, and other cities, forcing President Kennedy to issue an executive order banning discrimination on federally funded construction projects (it proved ineffectual, leading to the establishment of the first affirmative action programs in 1967).⁸ This context does not appear to have affected the Kennedy administration's deliberations about a possible poverty program, as their concerns seem to have been more focused on rural white poverty, especially in Appalachia, than on the African American poor in the South or in northern cities.⁹ These developments in the civil rights movement, though, would have a profound effect on how the War on Poverty actually operated.

This was the long-term strand of policy development behind the War on Poverty. It created the broad context into which the new initiative fit. The short-term strand of policy development that would lead to the War on Poverty's actual implementation began when Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency. The day after the assassination of President Kennedy, Johnson received a briefing from Walter Heller, who mentioned the still incipient concept of the poverty program. Johnson had grown up in the hardscrabble Texas Hill Country, taught the children of migrant workers as a schoolteacher in the Rio Grande Valley, and come to political prominence as a protégé of Franklin D. Roosevelt and as a New Deal loyalist. He responded instinctively: "That's my kind of program; I'll find money for it one way or another." He then instructed Heller to speed the planning for the new initiative.¹⁰

That planning process had only recently come into focus. Early efforts to generate ideas for specific components of a federal antipoverty effort had produced little more than a rehash of existing departmental programs and old proposals. Little fresh thinking seemed to be occurring. In early November, however, two participants in Heller's task force, David Hackett and Richard Boone, had begun circulating a new and potentially unifying theme for an antipoverty campaign. This was the idea of "community action." It was in turn based on the concept of "opportunity theory," which had been developed by Columbia University sociologists Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin. Opportunity theory had originated as a strategy for addressing the problem of youth gangs in low-income urban neighborhoods—an issue that had been a prominent concern in major cities during the 1950s and early 1960s. Cloward and Ohlin's core insight was that members of such gangs did not entirely reject the norms and aspirations of mainstream society. Like most Americans, they sought social status, personal security, material comfort, even wealth, but they lacked access to the normal range of opportunities for achieving such goals. As a result, such young people turned to the gang as an alternative social structure that would meet these basic needs. The solution to gangs and juvenile delinquency thus lay in opening the blocked avenues of

opportunity in such communities, thereby reducing the allure of the gang. The best way to do this, Ohlin and Cloward argued, was to involve both gang members and others in their communities in planning social services and educational and vocational programs that responded to the needs of the individuals involved.¹¹

Beginning in 1961, Ohlin and Cloward attempted to implement the opportunity theory idea in an experimental program in New York City known as Mobilization for Youth. Additional experiments funded by the Ford Foundation and a presidential committee on juvenile delinquency headed by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy expanded the opportunity theory concept into a strategy for attacking the problem of poor communities more generally.¹² Both Hackett and Boone had been deeply involved in these efforts and were soon recruited to join the new antipoverty planning effort within the Kennedy administration. With that effort floundering, they suggested the community mobilization approach of opportunity theory as a specific strategy for fighting poverty. Renamed “community action,” the concept provided the thematic and strategic coherence that the antipoverty task force had sought for much of the fall.¹³

Hackett and Boone’s initial proposal had called for a limited series of demonstration projects to perfect the community action concept and determine whether it represented an effective solution to poverty. Lyndon Johnson, however, had little interest in pilot projects. He wanted action, and he wanted to make bold strides in attacking a social evil. Upon being briefed on the community action concept during a Christmas meeting at his Texas ranch, Johnson initially rejected the idea—and possibly the entire antipoverty effort itself—before accepting it on the condition that it be vastly expanded. This meant that an academic concept idea that had barely been tested in a real-world setting would suddenly form the core of a major federal social policy endeavor.¹⁴

With the decision made, Johnson and his closest advisers prepared to unveil the new program to the nation. In his State of the Union Address on 8 January, the president dramatically announced that “this administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.”¹⁵ The metaphor of war had great political appeal, suggesting as it did the marshalling of the nation’s resources to combat, and presumably defeat, a vicious national enemy. Launching a War on Poverty presented immediate advantages in dramatizing the issue and pushing the legislation through Congress. For the same reasons, future presidents would deploy the military metaphor against foes ranging from cancer to terrorism. Over a longer time horizon, this framing of the initiative would create significant problems when the program’s results did not match such lofty expectations.¹⁶ In 1964, however, the administration’s concerns lay elsewhere, in formulating and then passing a specific legislative package.

The White House Recordings and the Planning of the War on Poverty

During the period from the assassination to the State of the Union speech, Johnson's recorded conversations reveal something of his own thoughts about what the War on Poverty might be, and how it might affect his presidency. These conversations have already been published in the Presidential Recordings Program's eight chronological transcript volumes, which cover the time period from the assassination to the signing of the Civil Rights Act in early July 1964. Johnson's recorded conversations from these months reflect little or no engagement with concepts such as community action that motivated the men and women who were actually trying to plan a federal antipoverty program. Instead, they illustrate Johnson's general beliefs about what the state should and could do to help ordinary Americans—and equally significant, what he felt such citizens owed the country in return.

Johnson's early thinking about the War on Poverty had two primary currents. The first consisted of equipping the poor to take advantage of opportunity while demanding that they then help themselves. On the morning of the State of the Union speech, he explained to former Eisenhower Treasury Secretary Robert Anderson that

What we're trying to do—instead of people getting something for nothing, we're going to try to fit them where they can take care of themselves. . . . That's our program. We don't want them to get something for nothing. We want to get them where they can carry their own weight.¹⁷

Johnson's second recurring theme lay in his own experiences as Texas director of the National Youth Administration (NYA) during the New Deal. The NYA was a New Deal program that provided work-study jobs for high school and college students and work experience jobs for unemployed young people. Johnson first came to national notice through his innovative projects and efficient implementation of the Texas program. He envisioned the War on Poverty as a revived NYA, both in actual programmatic content and in administrative style. In a late December discussion about the program with Walter Heller, the president reminded the economist that "I'm an old NYA man," and pointed out that "I had the best record of any administrator in the nation. . . . I put a little steel in some statewide roadside parks. But I got 4,600 of them down there now . . . and they're still lasting. And I got a dollar to show for every dollar I spent."¹⁸

The NYA experience shaped Johnson's view of the War on Poverty in two ways. First, it suggested that the best approach to fighting poverty lay in equipping young people, and specifically young men, to take on responsible and productive positions in the national life and economy. Second, it suggested that such efforts could be facilitated by relying on innovative local

and state administrators of the type that he had been with the Texas NYA.¹⁹ This would define his view of what community action meant: decentralizing bureaucratic authority so that creative administrators at lower levels of government could find and implement innovative solutions to poverty. On 20 January 1964, he told Chicago Mayor Richard Daley to “get your planning and development people busy right now to see what you do for the crummiest place in town, the lowest, the bottom thing, and see what we can do about it. We’ll get our dough, and then you can have your plan ready, and we’ll move.”²⁰ For grassroots activists in poor communities around the country, community action would soon come to mean something very different: providing poor people themselves with the authority and resources to challenge the same local administrators whom Johnson saw as the core of his program.

Johnson’s only direct comment on the content of the developing War on Poverty program during this period came on 6 January, when he asked NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins for help in formulating detailed policy ideas: “Give me a little direction. These boys are pretty theoretical down here, and if I get it passed, I’m going to have to have more practical plans.”²¹ This remark suggests that Johnson had doubts about concepts such as community action. By the end of the month, he had concluded that the planners needed a more coherent approach and more guidance from a firm administrative hand. As a result, in a series of four lengthy telephone calls on 1 February, the president cajoled and even bullied Peace Corps Director Sargent Shriver into accepting a second position heading the task force that would write the antipoverty legislation.²² Johnson selected Shriver for two reasons. As the husband of Eunice Kennedy, the sister of John and Robert Kennedy, he provided a link to the Kennedy clan and their supporters, many of whom were deeply alienated from the new President and posed a potential political threat. Second, as the director of the successful and popular Peace Corps, Shriver had great credibility with Congress, the media, and, to a lesser extent, the public. He would be a valuable ally in securing passage of the bill. Having just returned from a tour of Peace Corps sites around the world, Shriver felt exhausted and rushed, telling the president at one point, “the more I really think about this, the more I really would like to suggest . . . that you give me a few more days to get this thing straightened out, so that when it is announced, I can make some sense about it.”²³ Johnson refused and announced Shriver’s appointment at a press conference.

Despite his initial hesitance, Shriver threw himself into the planning work and quickly became the public face of the War on Poverty. After an initial briefing from the task force on the existing plans, Shriver and his top deputy, Adam Yarmolinsky (borrowed from the Department of Defense), quickly concluded that community action alone would not provide a sufficient programmatic base for what Johnson had already promised. Yarmolinsky later recalled that “the first impressions were the ones that we [Yarmolinsky and Shriver] exchanged with each other when we were standing at the stalls in the men’s room after we had had the briefing from Heller and [Budget Director] Kermit Gordon at that very first meeting. We had independently reached

agreement that the program they were presenting to us made no political sense.”²⁴ They pushed the planners to come up with a series of additional programs. Over the following six weeks, an expanded task force engaged in a frenzied flurry of legislative drafting and program development, conducted in a series of makeshift offices around Washington. At one point, the task force had to hastily abandon offices in the Clerk of Claims building when an engineer discovered that nearby construction had created a dangerous crack in the building’s foundation. An official history of the War on Poverty recalled the drafting period as “a time of chaos and exhaustion when energies were fueled by excitement and exhilaration—itsself, at times, the product of a kind of hysteria—‘the beautiful hysteria of it all,’ as one participant put it.”²⁵

By mid-March, the legislation had been drafted and a presidential message to Congress had been prepared. Now known as the (proposed) Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the legislation included a range of training, educational, and service programs, along with community action. The newly added programs included the Job Corps, which would provide educational and vocational training for poor young people in residential camps; the Neighborhood Youth Corps, which would offer work-training and work-study programs for high school and college students; programs of loans for low-income farm families and for small businesses; the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, which would recruit volunteer antipoverty workers as a kind of domestic parallel to the Peace Corps; and new or expanded programs for adult basic education, job training for unemployed fathers, and aid to migrant workers and dependent children.²⁶ The recorded conversations in both this volume and the earlier collections show that for Johnson, the opportunity-oriented Job Corps and Neighborhood Youth Corps programs constituted the core of the War on Poverty. In his imagination, they would provide the skills and the work ethic necessary to connect young men to the opportunities of the wider society, building on but also transcending the legacy of the New Deal.

Unlike the New Deal, however, the bill made no provision for the direct creation of jobs for the poor. At a February Cabinet meeting, Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz had proposed the inclusion of a public jobs component. The President, however, had rejected the idea with what Yarmolinsky recalled as an “absolute blank stare.”²⁷ The War on Poverty thus represented a further break from the emphasis that earlier liberal policies had placed on underlying problems with the structure and operation of the U.S. economy. Instead, it emphasized the correction of cultural deficiencies within poor communities and improvement of the “human capital” of the poor themselves. It simply took for granted that the Keynesian macroeconomic management strategies heralded by the 1964 tax cut would create sufficient opportunities for the newly empowered poor, and that they would do so in or near the communities where the poor actually lived. Such assumptions would soon prove highly problematic.²⁸

The community action section of the economic opportunity bill contained another element that would shape much of the public perception of the War on Poverty. These provisions included a little-noticed requirement that community action should facilitate “the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and groups served” by the programs. Community action supporters such as Richard Boone had included this language to insure that African Americans would not be cut out of the program, especially in the still-segregated South.²⁹ In practice, however, “maximum feasible participation” would provide the basis for controversial demands that the poor not only be allowed to participate in the community programs, but that they be given control. This view was anathema to mayors like Richard Daley, and (as later tapes show) to the president himself. Maximum feasible participation would cause significant controversy and pose dangerous political dilemmas for the Johnson administration, especially in the first eighteen months of the program. Yet it also represented the most transformative, radical dimension of the War on Poverty. At its best, it led to the transfer of power and resources to low-income people, many of them minorities and women, who had never had them before. Without a political commitment to the concept, though, and without a deeper engagement with the underlying economic problems and needs of poor communities, this transformation would too often prove fleeting, vulnerable to the recriminations of those threatened by such change, and susceptible to the cutoff of the very resources and authority that made them possible.³⁰

Most of the programs would be overseen by a new Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which would be located in the Executive Office of the President. The Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) had both lobbied to control some or all of the War on Poverty programs. Shriver, however, wanted a separate agency, vested with presidential authority, and he received the backing of a number of Cabinet members and, eventually, the president. In the end, the bill gave DOL authority over the Neighborhood Youth Corps, while HEW would implement the Adult Basic Education program. OEO managed the remaining programs and had overall oversight of the War on Poverty.³¹ This status, close to the president himself, gave OEO prominence and emphasis within the administration’s overall agenda, and it increased the possibility that OEO’s new programs would lead to actual innovation rather than simply being subsumed into the normal bureaucratic operations of the Cabinet departments. It also, however, increased the risk to Johnson because it linked any failures to the president himself.

On 16 March, Johnson delivered his message on poverty to Congress, and with it officially submitted the antipoverty bill. In the message, the president noted that the War on Poverty would be “a struggle to give people a chance . . . to allow them to develop and use their capacities, as we have been allowed to develop and use ours, so that they can share, as others share, in the promise of the nation.” Under the direction of New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, the House Labor and Education Committee began hearings the following day.³² In one of his most important decisions, Johnson chose Representative Phil Landrum of Georgia as the floor leader for the bill in

the House. A conservative southern Democrat, Landrum had gained a reputation as a crusader against labor unions by sponsoring the 1959 Landrum-Griffith anticorruption bill that weakened labor's ability to organize and recruit new members. This had earned him the enmity of union leaders—key parts of the Democratic coalition—and many northern liberals. In the midst of the civil rights struggle, however, Johnson believed that he needed a southern floor leader who could reassure his regional colleagues that the bill was not simply an extension of the Civil Rights Act. As many of the conversations show, Landrum proved to be an adept tactician who managed to hold an often fractious coalition together.³³

Over the period preceding the start of this volume, the recorded conversations about the War on Poverty capture questions of legislative strategy, struggles regarding jurisdiction over the bill, and occasional controversies over its implications. Johnson grew frustrated with Powell's lethargy in moving the bill through his committee, particularly as the flamboyant chairman left Washington frequently on personal business. Even more challenging was the conservative segregationist who chaired the House Rules Committee, Representative Howard Smith of Virginia. Without a rule governing the terms of debate, the full House could not begin consideration of the bill. Smith's power over this key committee represented one of the primary bottlenecks in the process, and a point at which the passage of the legislation could itself be threatened.³⁴ As this volume begins, Smith's committee still had not granted a rule for the economic opportunity bill. Jurisdictional issues, and simple considerations of power, also entered the debate when House Agriculture Committee Chairman Harold Cooley of North Carolina complained that despite the legislation's farm provisions, his committee had not been allowed to hold hearings on the bill.³⁵ Finally, in April and May, a bitter controversy over the possible funding of Catholic schools through the community action program threatened to undermine the entire program. Catholicism remained a hot-button issue in American politics in the early and mid-1960s, contrary to a now popular belief that the election of John F. Kennedy had settled the issue. As committee deliberations proceeded, a group of northern Catholic congressmen demanded that the bill permit parochial school funding—a move that would lead to the mass defection of southern congressmen whose constituents still harbored a deep distrust of all things Catholic.³⁶

The White House Recordings and the Economic Opportunity Act

These were among the issues with which Lyndon Johnson, Sargent Shriver, and their advisers and congressional allies had already struggled as this volume begins in early July 1964. With the Civil Rights Act signed into law, the administration turned its full legislative focus toward the economic opportunity bill. In the recorded conversations about the War on Poverty that follow through the remainder of 1964, a number of key themes emerge. The first, touched upon at the beginning of this essay, is the president's strong desire to separate himself from his predecessor and establish a clear identity for the fall campaign. Although this may have reflected a psychological need on the

part of the often insecure Johnson, it also suggests the building pressure of the campaign itself. Along with his desire for a legislative victory unassociated with Kennedy, Johnson believed that he could not afford a loss on the economic opportunity bill. Such a defeat, he felt, would show weakness and an inability to control his own party.

Second, the recorded telephone calls clearly demonstrate the president's underlying conception of the War on Poverty as a way to connect the poor, and particularly poor men, to the opportunity structures of mainstream society. As Johnson lobbied for congressional votes, he repeatedly claimed that the bill would put poor young men to work, that it would provide them with training, and that it would inculcate in them a transformative work ethic. Johnson referred in such cases to the Job Corps and Neighborhood Youth Corps programs that he saw as the core of the War on Poverty. In no case, however, did he address the question of whether permanent jobs would actually be available to participants in these programs when they returned home or finished school or a training program. This underlying limitation remained unaddressed, and perhaps unrecognized. A related feature of Johnson's claims in this regard is his repeated insistence that the antipoverty programs would halt the rioting that had begun to break out in northern cities. This aspect of his thought had a direct racial context, as most of the upheavals came in black neighborhoods. It also suggests a variation on an argument developed by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward that the War on Poverty was a political device intended to secure the loyalty of blacks to the Democratic Party (as southern votes were increasingly lost). Johnson's emphasis on the riots, however, suggests that the racial context of the initiative lay less in holding on to African American votes for the long term than in limiting the immediate political damage that he feared the riots might cause among moderates and especially southern Democrats.³⁷

Third, the conversations demonstrate Johnson's immense legislative skill, but they also reveal him as an executive who was not deeply engaged in the details of policy. In these conversations, Johnson almost never addressed the community action program that still stood at the core of the bill. When he did mention it, he did so only in the context of his NYA-inspired vision of bureaucratic innovation. Late in the process, as the bill approached final passage in the House of Representatives, Johnson suddenly lashed out against much of his own bill—and particularly, community action. In a conversation with Special Assistant Bill Moyers on 7 August, Johnson growled, "I'm going to rewrite your poverty program. You-all, you boys got together and wrote this stuff, and I thought we were just going to have [another] NYA." Continuing, he informed Moyers that

I thought we were going to have CCC camps. . . . and I thought we were going to have community action where a city or county or a school district or some governmental agency could sponsor a project—state highway department sponsor it—and we'd pay the

labor and a very limited amount of materials on it but make them put up most of the materials and a good deal of supervision and so forth just like we used to have.³⁸

The President closed the point with a devastating dismissal of one of the key ideas behind community action: “I’d a whole lot rather [Chicago Mayor] Dick Daley do it than the Urban League.”³⁹ As militant anger built in the urban north and elsewhere, and as African Americans, women, and others who had been excluded from the benefits of the New Deal state mobilized around community action and black power, Johnson would soon be faced with claims far more radical than those of the Urban League.

Finally, Johnson’s heavy emphasis on congressional bargaining revealed the depth of his concern about repairing the breach that the Civil Rights Act had created between himself and southern Democrats. On a series of issues related to the economic opportunity bill, he made or supported compromises to attract southern votes. These included the acceptance of a provision allowing state governors to veto community action programs, as well as the administration’s accession to the demand of a group of North Carolina congressmen that Adam Yarmolinsky be barred from consideration for a position in the new Office of Economic Opportunity.⁴⁰ The congressmen objected to Yarmolinsky because of his role in the desegregation of public facilities near southern military bases. Finally, Johnson showed an almost obsessive concern with the votes of Texas’s Democratic congressional delegation, which he apparently viewed as a test of his leadership among southern members of the party. Johnson made repeated calls to members of the Texas delegation and frequently monitored their status through the reports of his aides. In the end, Johnson would win the support of enough southerners and Republicans, without alienating northern Democrats, to pass the legislation.

In recent years, the War on Poverty has been partially rehabilitated by historians who have emphasized the vitality of the community-based programs and institutions that it sometimes supported.⁴¹ In particular, such scholars have emphasized that despite its numerous flaws, its imperfect implementation, and its frequent subjection to existing local power structures, the War on Poverty managed to provide unprecedented resources and authority to poor people, and especially poor women. These individuals in many cases developed new programs and services that met their very real need for jobs, for better housing, for health care, and for political power. Nothing in these conversations contradicts such findings, but it does show a President who never saw the potential of such federally backed grassroots action, and thus never knew how to fight for it—had he been so inclined.

Notes

- [1] See Conversation WH6407-18-4407.
- [2] For the early part of Johnson's presidency, see Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 415–500.
- [3] Kent B. Germany, ed., *Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson: Civil Rights, 1964* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America In The King Years: 1963–65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 361–400.
- [4] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 272–302.
- [5] Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).
- [6] James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900–1994* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 105–11.
- [7] Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
- [8] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*; Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- [9] "Poverty and Urban Policy: Conference Transcript of 1973 Group Discussion of the Kennedy Administration Urban Poverty Programs and Policies," Brandeis University, 16–17 June 1973, in *The John F. Kennedy Presidential Oral History Collection*, pt. 1 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), pp. 162–63.
- [10] Transcript, Walter F. Heller Oral History Interview 1, 20 February 1970, by David McComb, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, pp. 20–21.
- [11] James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1968), pp. 115–25; Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 124–28; Noel A. Cazenave, *Impossible Democracy: The Unlikely Success of the War on Poverty Community Action Programs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 19–63.
- [12] Peter Marris and Martin Rein, *Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the United States* (New York: Atherton Press, 1967), pp. 20–30; O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, pp. 127–36.
- [13] "Poverty and Urban Policy," pp. 126–28, 144–45, 172–73, 177–79; Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, pp. 138–39; Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1984), pp. 12–22.

- [14] Heller Oral History Interview 1, pp. 26–28; Transcript, William Cannon Oral History Interview 1, 21 May 1982, by Michael L. Gillette, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, pp. 3–11; Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, pp. 122–23.
- [15] “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, 8 January 1964,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), 1:114.
- [16] For an insightful study of the rhetorical strategies surrounding the War on Poverty, see David Zarefsky, *President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1986).
- [17] Johnson to Kermit Gordon and Robert Anderson, 10:37 A.M., 8 January 1964, in *The Presidential Recordings, Lyndon B. Johnson: The Kennedy Assassination and the Transfer of Power, November 1963–January 1964*, vol. 3, *January 1964*, ed. Kent B. Germany and Robert David Johnson (New York: Norton 2005), p. 275. Gareth Davies emphasizes the centrality of traditional American themes of opportunity and uplift in the initial conception of the War on Poverty. Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).
- [18] Johnson to Walter Heller, 12:00 P.M., 23 December 1964, in *The Presidential Recordings, Lyndon B. Johnson: The Kennedy Assassination and the Transfer of Power, November 1963–January 1964*, vol. 2, *December 1963*, ed. Robert David Johnson and David Shreve (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 699.
- [19] On Johnson and the NYA, see Woods, *LBJ*, pp. 106–15; Sidney M. Milkis, “Lyndon Johnson, the Great Society, and the ‘Twilight’ of the Modern Presidency,” in *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism*, ed. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), pp. 3–4, 9–13, 30–31.
- [20] Richard Daley to Lyndon Johnson, 6:10 P.M., 20 January 1964, in *Presidential Recordings, Johnson*, vol. 3, *January 1964*, ed. Germany and Johnson, p. 651.
- [21] Roy Wilkins, 5:12 P.M., 6 January 1964, *ibid.*, pp. 193–94.
- [22] See Johnson to Sargent Shriver, 1:02 P.M.; Sargent Shriver to Johnson, 2:25 P.M.; Johnson to Sargent Shriver, Time Unknown; and Sargent Shriver to Johnson, 6:28 P.M., all occurring on 1 February 1964, in *The Presidential Recordings, Lyndon B. Johnson: Toward the Great Society, February 1, 1964–May 31, 1964*, vol. 4, *February 1, 1964–March 8, 1964*, ed. Robert David Johnson and Kent B. Germany (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 13–25, 36–49, 55–70.
- [23] Sargent Shriver to Johnson, 2:25 P.M., *ibid.*, p. 36.
- [24] Transcript, Adam Yarmolinsky Oral History Interview 2, 21 October 1980, by Michael L. Gillette, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, p. 3.
- [25] Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), “The Office of Economic Opportunity During the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson; November 1963–January 1969,” 1969, “Volume I, Part II; Narrative History” folder (1 of 3), Box 1, Special Files: Administrative Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, pp. 28–29.

- [26] Ibid., pp. 35–38; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 1964, vol. 20 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1965), pp. 210–12.
- [27] “Poverty and Urban Policy,” p. 287. The jobs program would have been funded by a tax on tobacco products. In another account of the meeting, Yarmolinsky stated that “the President just ignored him [Wirtz]. It was a shocking demonstration of the way Johnson sometimes handled things. He didn’t even bother to respond; he just went on to the next item on the agenda.” Yarmolinsky Oral History Interview 2, pp. 3–5.
- [28] O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, pp. 121–23, 141–42, 164–65; Judith Russell, *Economics, Bureaucracy, and Race: How Keynesians Misguided the War on Poverty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- [29] “Poverty and Urban Policy,” pp. 243–49, 254–55; Adam Yarmolinsky Oral History Interview 1, 13 July 1970, by Paige Mulhollan, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, pp. 9–11; Yarmolinsky Oral History Interview 3, 22 October 1980, by Michael L. Gillette, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, pp. 15–17. For evidence that some of the poverty planners recognized the radical potential of maximum feasible participation, see F. O’R. Hayes, “The Role Of Indigenous Organizations In Community Action Programs,” 4 May 1964, Office Files of White House Aides: Fred Bohlen, Box 2, “OEO Material,” Lyndon B. Johnson Library, p. 3; “Poverty and Urban Policy,” p. 230; Jack Conway Oral History Interview 1, 13 August 1980, by Michael L. Gillette, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, pp. 18–19, 24–25.
- [30] Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Robert Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty: From Watts to East L.A.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008).
- [31] OEO, “The Office of Economic Opportunity During the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson,” pp. 31–33; Orville Freeman to Lyndon Johnson, 8:08 P.M., 6 March 1964, in *Presidential Recordings, Johnson*, vol. 4, *February 1, 1964–March 8, 1964*, ed. Johnson and Germany, pp. 958–59.
- [32] “Special Message to the Congress Proposing a Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty,” 16 March 1964, *Public Papers, Johnson, 1963–64*, 1:376; OEO, “The Office of Economic Opportunity During the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson,” p. 34; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1964, vol. 20, pp. 215–22.
- [33] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, pp. 146–47.
- [34] For both the Smith and Powell issues, see Sargent Shriver to Johnson, 7:38 P.M., 30 April 1964, in *The Presidential Recordings, Lyndon B. Johnson: Toward the Great Society, February 1, 1964–May 31, 1964*, vol. 6, *April 14, 1964–May 31, 1964*, ed. Guian A. McKee (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 367–75.
- [35] Johnson to Bill Moyers, 6:03 P.M., 23 April 1964, in *ibid.*, pp. 191–99.

- [36] Johnson to Phil Landrum, 10:00 A.M., 14 May 1964, in *ibid.*, pp. 708–12, and other related conversations in volume 6.
- [37] Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Random House, 1971).
- [38] See Conversation WH6408-12-4815, 4816, 4817 between Bill Moyers and Johnson.
- [39] *Ibid.*
- [40] For Yarmolinsky's memory of these events, see Yarmolinsky Oral History Interview 1, pp. 16–27; Yarmolinsky Oral History Interview 3, pp. 38–40; Michael L. Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), pp. 134–40.
- [41] See the works cited in note 30 above.