CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction 1


Conclusion 248
Notes 263
Index 343
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to all the archivists across the country who helped me research this subject. Thanks to David Congdon and Joyce Harrison for their counsel and support for my project. Thank you to David Zarefsky and Edward Schmitt for reading and reviewing the manuscript and recommending it for publication. As always, my deepest gratitude is to my wife, Nelly, for her patience, understanding, and love—and for helping me prepare this book.
The Presidents and the Poor
INTRODUCTION

Americans love to win. Their obsession with sports, their worship of wealth, and their homage to their nation’s exceptionalism have long infused American culture and shaped American history. “In war,” General Douglas MacArthur memorably told Congress in April 1951, “there is no substitute for victory.”

Yet MacArthur’s commander in chief, Harry Truman, had decided that, rather than risk potential Soviet intervention and nuclear confrontation, the Korean conflict would be a limited war. So he had relieved MacArthur of his command of United Nations forces. Hostilities in Korea would end in a stalemate two years later. Never again would American troops fight a total war.

Victory has proved equally elusive on the home front. “This administration, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty,” President Lyndon Baines Johnson proclaimed in his first State of the Union address in January 1964. “We shall not rest until that war is won.” Yet not only would Johnson not win his war, but every president from Richard Nixon to Barack Obama has failed to eliminate poverty in America.

It has not been for a lack of trying. Democrats and Republicans at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and at all levels of government have tested a plethora of ideas and have spilled a deluge of dollars as the antipoverty campaigns enter their sixth decade. Yet there is no end in sight, no victory at hand.

The rivalry of the two-party system; the frequency of congressional elections; the fluctuations of the economy; the demands of foreign policy; the inertia of the federal bureaucracy; the tensions among cities, states, and Washington; the priorities of the presidents, the press, and the public; the historical residue of discrimination; and the pathologies afflicting some of the disadvantaged have conspired to frustrate Democratic efforts to escalate Johnson’s War on Poverty and Republican attempts to unravel it. It is no accident that many of the most profound changes in post–World War II
American society, such as school desegregation, abortion rights, and same-sex marriage, have emanated from the Supreme Court, which is largely immune to such pressures. But the court has not yet discovered a constitutional right to escape poverty.

Despite the admirable motives of Presidents Johnson through Obama, neither the Democrats’ nor the Republicans’ attacks on poverty have ever really had a chance of winning. Soaring rhetoric, well-meaning compromises, and emergency half measures have proved no substitute for victory. Although presidents from both parties have helped produce genuine and meaningful improvements in the lives of the nation’s underclass, their setbacks have been as notable as their successes. None of them has demonstrated the resolve and fortitude required to surmount the enormous socioeconomic, political, and cultural barriers to eradicating poverty.

Even if these presidents had been completely free to execute their programs and implement their budgets, they would have fallen short of the unrealistic objective of erasing poverty. No country anywhere at any time has done that. And no American president has that kind of power. Even Lyndon Johnson admitted in the same speech in which he launched his war that “it will not be a short or easy struggle.”

Yet surely he would have expected more progress than would occur under the eight presidents who have succeeded him. Unlike Johnson, none of them would declare “war” on poverty. But like Johnson, all of them would ultimately lose their own battles against an unyielding enemy.

Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty had its roots in the administration of John Kennedy. As a presidential candidate in 1960, Senator Kennedy had spent nearly a month in West Virginia, witnessing abject poverty firsthand in his successful campaign in that state’s primary. “He was appalled by the pitiful conditions he saw, by the children of poverty, by the families living on surplus lard and corn meal, by the waste of human resources,” Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen would recall. “He saw poverty in Massachusetts, my God, in the 1958 [senatorial] campaign,” President Kennedy’s deputy special counsel Myer Feldman agreed. “But it is true that West Virginia made an impression.”

Before entering the White House, the president-elect appointed a task force, headed by a fellow Democrat, Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, to devise legislation to aid depressed areas. Just one day into his presidency, Kennedy issued an executive order expanding the federal surplus commodities program in an effort to feed the nation’s hungry. The Douglas task force
report led to Kennedy’s signature on the Area Redevelopment Act in May 1961, which sent federal funds to the distressed regions of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky.5

In June, Kennedy signed the Housing Act of 1961, which expanded low- and middle-income housing, housing for the elderly, and urban renewal in what the president called “the most important and far-reaching Federal legislation in the field of housing since the Housing Act of 1949.” Three months later, the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act became law. It would extend grants to local, state, and private agencies for counseling, job training, and job placement for troubled youth. In March 1962, Kennedy signed the Manpower and Development Act, the first major federal effort to retrain the unemployed and underemployed.6

By the 1960s, African American families constituted 40 percent of those on the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) rolls, and most adult recipients were divorced, deserted, or never-married mothers rather than widows. In July, the president signed the Public Welfare Amendments of 1962, designed to improve administration of, and reduce dependence on, the AFDC program by raising the federal share in service costs; combating welfare fraud; offering child care to low-income working mothers; increasing grants to the elderly, blind, and disabled; and including a second parent in AFDC grants. Kennedy described the legislation as an effort to modernize the welfare system while “stressing the integrity and preservation of the family unit.”7

These relatively mild measures incurred criticism from both the right and the left. Conservatives attacked Kennedy for spending too much. Eighty-one percent of congressional Republicans voted against the area redevelopment bill, while 95 percent rejected the housing legislation. Without the support of progressive Democrats, Kennedy said in October 1962, every bill backed by his administration in 1963 “will be in control of a dominant Republican-Southern Democratic coalition that will defeat progress on every single one of these measures.” The proposed reauthorization of the Area Redevelopment Act would be one casualty of this right-wing alliance.8

Liberals blasted Kennedy for spending too little. Robert Solow, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a consultant to Kennedy’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), derided the Kennedy presidency as the “third Eisenhower Administration.” Seymour Harris, a Harvard professor and adviser to Treasury secretary Douglas Dillon, came to Kennedy’s
defense in a letter to the Washington Post in only the second month of his presidency. “Not too many people have accused me of being less liberal than Mr. Eisenhower,” the president wrote Harris, “but I am certainly delighted to have such a well-reasoned rationale of the economic policies I am trying to pursue.” Though Kennedy would shift leftward as his presidency proceeded, he remained a conservative to some observers. “JFK was a cautious conservative chief executive, mindful of his 1964 reelection bid after the squeaker of 1960,” political scientist Larry Sabato concludes. “He was fiscally conservative, careful about spending and deficits, and sponsored an across-the-board tax cut that became President Reagan’s model for his 1981 tax cut.”

Kennedy’s overtures to the underprivileged were not part of any grand strategy. And none of his signing statements mentioned the word “poverty.” Then Kennedy read Dwight MacDonald’s New Yorker essay “Our Invisible Poor” and Homer Bigart’s New York Times series on Appalachia. These works demonstrated the need for a coherent federal commitment organized around the concept of poverty. “Words and concepts define programs,” political scientist James Sundquist, whom Kennedy consulted and President Lyndon Johnson would employ as deputy secretary of agriculture, would recount. “Once the target was reduced to a single word, the timing became right for a unified program.”

Kennedy then took up the suggestion of his sister Eunice to appoint a task force, headed by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, which would propose to Congress a domestic Peace Corps to fight poverty. The president also assigned Walter Heller, chairman of the CEA, to study the poverty problem. Yet these efforts stalled. The task force, chairman David Hackett would recall, advised “that we were not going to involve ourselves . . . in a ‘war on poverty’ at this time, basically because we didn’t know enough.” Robert Kennedy would claim that his brother realized that a federal assault on poverty could cost “several billions of dollars each year.” Historian James Patterson would conclude that Kennedy did not fully accept the concept of “a culture of poverty” as described in journalist Michael Harrington’s book The Other America (1962).

Yet Kennedy never abandoned the idea of an offensive against poverty, in some form, as a portion of his prospective 1964 legislative program. Shortly before he died, Kennedy scribbled a single word on a piece of paper, then circled it many times. The word was “poverty.”

When Kennedy died in November 1963, he left his successor a thriving
economy, with 3,192,000 fewer Americans in poverty (defined by the federal government as lacking “the basic material necessities to sustain a decent life”) than on Inauguration Day. Robert Kennedy passed along his brother’s note to President Johnson, and Heller continued his research. Early in 1964, invoking his predecessor, Johnson proclaimed the War on Poverty that Kennedy, despite his misgivings, in some small ways had already begun.13

From that day forward, the “War on Poverty” would mean many things to many people. Johnson himself used the term narrowly to describe his Office of Economic Opportunity and broadly to include measures such as Medicare and federal aid to education, which did not exclusively target the poor. Fifty years later, President Barack Obama would credit Johnson’s War on Poverty for Social Security and the Earned Income Tax Credit. But the former had arrived under Franklin Roosevelt in 1935, and the latter would come under Gerald Ford in 1975. Robert Rector of the conservative Heritage Foundation would lament that “Johnson’s war” had expended “22 trillion dollars” over “fifty years of failure.” Yet most of those expenditures belonged to the twenty-four Congresses and eight presidents—five Republicans and three Democrats—who followed the Johnson administration.14

Rather than insufficiently reducing the War on Poverty to the Office of Economic Opportunity or inaccurately treating the War on Poverty as a five-decade slog, assigning credit or blame primarily to Lyndon Johnson, the following pages thus chronicle nine administrations, as each commander in chief fought his own battles. Though every president inherited the remnants of his predecessors’ policies, each sought to make his own mark and secure his own place in history. The combatants changed, the terrain shifted, the losses mounted, and the victories faded. Though Johnson (inspired by Kennedy) devised the initial strategy to conduct the campaign, subsequent presidents amplified, altered, and even overturned it.

This is not the first book to explore federal antipoverty policy. Robert Asen’s Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination (2002); Roger Biles’s The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945–2000 (2011); Richard Caputo’s U.S. Social Welfare Reform: Policy Transitions from 1981 to the Present (2011); Marisa Chappell’s The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America (2010); James T. Patterson’s America’s Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century (2000) and Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle over Black Family Life—From LBJ to Obama (2012); and William Julius Wilson’s The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and
Public Policy (2012) are among the most recent treatments of the subject. There have also been numerous studies of the presidents featured in this book, and countless evaluations of Johnson’s War on Poverty. But this volume contains the first comprehensive analysis of the antipoverty (broadly defined as substantially, if not solely, aimed at the poor) approaches of the eight presidents who succeeded LBJ. For the impact of these policies to reach those at the bottom of American society, the impetus had to come from those at the top.¹⁵

This is an account of honorable intentions, innovative ideas, colossal sums of money, and a vast expansion of government. In the end, however, it is a tale of how nine presidents did not do too much, but too little, to help the disadvantaged. Democrats Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama were never fully able to commit the resources that they believed were necessary to conquer poverty. Republicans Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush could never completely fulfill their alternate visions of LBJ’s war. Some—notably Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton—did better than others in making short-term inroads against poverty, but all fell short of their long-term goals. And impoverished Americans were left to wonder what might have been, if only their presidents had fought to win.
CHAPTER ONE

The Limited War
Lyndon Johnson, 1964–1969

Nobody was calling Lyndon Baines Johnson a conservative anymore. When he launched his domestic policy in a commencement address at the University of Michigan in May 1964, the president from the Jim Crow South promised to surpass even Franklin Delano Roosevelt's progressive handiwork. He foresaw an American society that could be not just good but "great," one that would deploy the levers of the federal government not only to alleviate poverty but to eliminate it.

Most of the American people shared their leader's vision, awarding him an overwhelming victory in the November 1964 presidential election and the largest legislative majority for the president's party since the reign of FDR. Johnson then hit the ground running, matching his grandiose words with gargantuan deeds. Racial barriers fell in homes, schools, workplaces, and polling booths. The air and the water became cleaner. Students, no matter how poor, and the elderly, no matter how rich, received help from Washington. Welfare, which Roosevelt had largely restricted to white widows, now reached able-bodied Americans of all ages and races.1

And then he slowed to a crawl. Just as Roosevelt's New Deal was effectively over by the middle of his second term, Johnson's Great Society largely ended midway through his presidency. The escalating human, financial, and psychological costs of LBJ's war in Vietnam took his War on Poverty out of the limelight and down the ledger. As voters began to question the dollars spent to combat poverty and the lives lost to confront communism, Johnson's once mellifluous congressional chorus grew increasingly discordant.

And Johnson became increasingly more conservative. By the time challenges from the left on his foreign policy helped preclude him from seeking reelection, discontent on the right over his domestic policy helped deter him from escalating his antipoverty offensive. For the next five decades conservatives and even some liberals would lament that President Johnson
tried to do too much too soon in fighting poverty. The result, they claim, was a haphazard assortment of overlapping and underperforming agencies that in some ways worsened the problems they were trying to solve.

In many ways these critics were right. But this analysis is incomplete. For while it correctly focuses on the War on Poverty’s early stumbles, it mistakenly overlooks the War on Poverty’s emerging obstacles. Johnson deserves much of the blame for the former. But many of his detractors should accept responsibility for the latter. In the end, Lyndon Johnson faltered not only because of his inability to meet his lofty aspirations but also because his opponents wouldn’t really let him try. He nonetheless deserves praise for starting a war he needed to fight, even if the enemy proved greater than he was willing to acknowledge.

Hitting the Ground Running

President Lyndon Johnson’s January 1964 State of the Union address was a progressive tour de force. In a dramatic departure from his predecessor, Johnson placed more emphasis on domestic policy than on foreign affairs, while calling for an “unconditional war on poverty.” The centerpiece of the antipoverty crusade would be the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), to be headed by John Kennedy’s brother-in-law Sargent Shriver, and to be divided into two major components, the Community Action Program (CAP) and the Job Corps, as well as several smaller ones. Among the CAP agencies (which would primarily serve large cities) would be Legal Services (legal aid for the poor) and Neighborhood Health Centers (health care for the poor). The Job Corps would distribute funds to federal, local, or private agencies to establish conservation and training camps for sixteen- to twenty-one-year-olds. Eighty times during the address, the members of his party applauded the president’s ambitious proposals, while most Republicans sat on their hands.2

The administration vowed to mount a comprehensive campaign. “We must at all costs avoid a poverty program which simply adds a little bit to each Federal agency’s list of programs,” an internal memo asserted a month after the speech. Decrying the existing array of local, state, and federal programs aimed at the disadvantaged as at times “diffuse,” “not coordinated,” and “wasteful,” the memo committed the administration to “permanent
improvement from the war on poverty—not merely temporary relief.” Two days later, at a meeting to formulate the antipoverty legislation, James Sundquist, deputy undersecretary of agriculture and a member of Shriver’s antipoverty task force, would record, “It was shared by everybody in that room that ‘Well, if we’re going to have a War on Poverty, let’s put into it all the weapons we can assemble.’ So out of that meeting came a grand directive to go out and get all the ideas that we could.”

One idea that Johnson rejected was Shriver’s proposal of a massive public employment initiative to be funded by a tax on cigarettes, now definitively linked to lung cancer. Gardner Ackley, the acting chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), helped persuade Johnson that the tax would destroy as many jobs as the program would create. The president, already committed to the income tax cut proposal that he inherited from John Kennedy, saw no political or economic advantage to raising one tax while reducing another.

Another Shriver suggestion that Johnson shelved was a negative income tax. Two years later, Congress would create the Commission on Income Maintenance, and the president would appoint his friend Ben Heineman of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad as its chairman. The commission’s report in the first year of the Nixon administration reiterated Shriver’s request.

While sympathetic to the overall direction of the poverty package, the GOP senators and representatives on the Joint Economic Committee questioned the administration’s estimate of the extent of poverty in the nation and feared the inflationary impact of the proposed federal antipoverty spending. “Because people living in poverty [are not] a homogeneous group,” the legislators concluded, “local and selective approaches by business, organized labor, and non-profit enterprises are far more important than the role of the Federal government.”

The administration prepared its responses to the Republican objections. Chris Weeks and Ann Oppenheimer conceded that poverty statistics were inherently imprecise but countered that they could just as easily be too low for some groups as too high for others. As for the cost of a potential War on Poverty, the administration devised no effective rebuttal. “Aside from the question of right and wrong concerning an attack on poverty,” Robert Lampman of the CEA advised Shriver, “there is the question of ‘what will it get us?’” Lampman explained that “this question arises naturally enough

© University Press of Kansas. All rights reserved. Reproduction and distribution prohibited without permission of the Press.
out of a discussion of the $1 billion per year in government expenditures which are proposed.” Sounding like the Republicans, Lampman admitted, “Actually, of course, the ‘investment’ will be far more than this.”7

Indeed, Johnson’s special message on poverty, delivered to Congress in March, repeatedly appealed to the goodness and fairness of the American people. “There are millions of Americans—one-fifth of our people—who have not shared in the abundance which has been granted to most of us,” said the president, “and on whom the gates of opportunity have been closed.” Only once did he mention the cost of his endeavor—“970 million dollars,” which was only “one percent of our national budget.” But that was just for this year. “We are fully aware that this program will not eliminate all the poverty in America in a few months or a few years,” Johnson confessed. Yet he pledged “total victory.”8

Then the president who knew poverty visited people who knew nothing else, in a fifteen-hour dash through five states on what he called “a trip that should be unnecessary.” To offset the perception that he intended only to help poor blacks, Johnson bypassed the inner cities and headed for the mountains. In Pittsburgh, he promised more than a chicken in every pot, musing that a true measure of the success of his antipoverty offensive would be how many people had obtained “a little house with a picture on the wall and a rug on the floor and music in the home.” In the Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky, he visited the three-room shack that housed Tom Fletcher, his wife, and eight children—a home that must have reminded the president of where he grew up. “Don’t forget now,” the former teacher told Fletcher, an unemployed sawmill worker who had earned $400 the previous year, “I want you to keep those kids in school.”9

Two weeks later, Johnson was back on the road, traveling to six Appalachian states. “Not a stone’s throw away,” the president told the crowd at the new arena in Knoxville, Tennessee, he had witnessed “people as poverty-ridden as any I have seen anywhere in the United States.” In Cumberland, Maryland, he assured the crowd gathered in front of city hall that he understood their suffering. “I have been unemployed. I have stayed waiting in the employment office, waiting for an assignment and a placement,” the president empathized. “I have shined shoes as a boy. I have worked on a highway crew from daylight until dark for one dollar a day, working with my hands and sweating with my brow.”10

Johnson also understood that it was an election year, and there were votes in those hills. But first he had to secure enough votes on Capitol Hill to
pass the Economic Opportunity Act, the legislative package that contained his antipoverty proposals. The key question being raised about the anti-poverty bill in Congress, Adam Yarmolinsky, Johnson’s choice to head the proposed Youth Conservation Corps, related, was “whether, under the work training program or the community action program, agreements could be entered into with sectarian institutions (churches or church schools) to provide assistance to them in carrying out activities under the bill.” Catholic Democratic members of the House Education and Labor Committee were threatening to oppose the legislation if it didn’t ensure funding for parochial schools.11

With his bill in jeopardy, Johnson telephoned his congressional liaison, Lawrence O’Brien, with instructions to appease O’Brien’s fellow Catholics. “Now, Larry,” the president implored, “we’ve got to put a provision in this report that will allow Shriver to treat all kids alike. We can’t be doing anything for parochial schools as such. We’ve got to do it for children.” Johnson told O’Brien to assure the American Catholic bishops that “they can trust me and they can trust Shriver to administer this thing to take care of every damned Catholic in the United States.”12

The administration and the bishops agreed to a “bypass” provision in the legislation, allowing federal funds to reach religious institutions only after passing through an intermediary state or municipal agency that ensured that the money aided the impoverished, not the religious school or church that administered it. When the amended bill passed the House Education and Labor Committee, Speaker of the House John McCormack, a Catholic Democrat from Massachusetts, warned that the bypass provision jeopardized House passage of the legislation. 13 The bishops nevertheless refused to relinquish their support for the bypass mechanism. “If the South (with the Republicans) wants to join in embarrassing the President,” the bishops’ representative William Consedine told McCormack, “it’s their problem, not ours.”14

The president also refused. “If you allow these crackpot preachers to get in here and say that the Pope has rewritten the bill, and we’ve got a Catholic administration and a Catholic writing the bill,” the president told Catholic Democratic representative Frank Thompson of New Jersey, “then we have a stinker’s chance.” Hearkening to his tenure as state director of President Franklin Roosevelt’s National Youth Administration in Texas during the Great Depression, Johnson recalled that he had “made allotment directly to every damn grade school, high school, and college that they had.”15
Johnson then assured his fellow Protestant Texans, Congressmen Robert Poage and Wright Patman, that “[New York’s Francis Cardinal] Spellman hasn’t given any orders,” and “the Pope’s not going to take over yet.” When a leading Southern Baptist minister called to protest the inclusion of Catholic institutions in the antipoverty bill, White House press secretary Bill Moyers quipped that, unfortunately, the president was unable to come to the phone. He was in the White House pool with (famed Baptist evangelist) Rev. Billy Graham.16

The former Senate majority leader shrewdly lobbied influential actors from both ends of the spectrum and both sides of the aisle. “I’m going to teach these Nigras that don’t know anything how to work for themselves, instead of just breeding,” Johnson told conservative editor Walker Stone. “I’m going to teach these Mexicans (that) can’t talk English to learn it, so they can work for themselves.” He helped pry the economic opportunity bill from conservative Virginia Democrat Harry Byrd’s Senate Finance Committee with a promise to keep his overall budget under $100 million. Then he assured Walter Reuther, the liberal leader of the United Auto Workers, “Don’t you get alarmed about all this crap about economy. What I’m doing is taking from the haves and giving to have-nots.”17

Johnson’s intercession helped rescue the antipoverty legislation from Republican and southern Democratic opposition. The measure passed the Senate, 61–34, on July 23, and the House, 226–185, on August 8. The Senate then remarkably approved the House version by voice vote. When Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act on August 20, he thanked Shriver and those “men and women in the Congress who fought so long, so hard to help bring about this legislation.”18

The implementation of the Economic Opportunity Act under its devoutly Catholic director would be a model of church-state cooperation. The nation’s two most prominent Baptist ministers, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Billy Graham, endorsed the antipoverty effort. By the end of the year, Catholic parochial school children in Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and New Haven would be receiving Office of Economic Opportunity grants. The National Council of Catholic Women would join the United Church Women, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the National Council of Negro Women in establishing Job Corps recruitment centers throughout the country.19

In Milwaukee, a Catholic priest, Rev. John Maurice, would assist Tejano migrant workers. In Selma, Alabama, another Catholic priest, Rev. J. P.