

# Anti-poverty activism in the 1960s

## *A metaphorical war for an invisible people*

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### **An American kitchen in Moscow**

July 24 1959 at the American National Exhibit, Moscow saw Richard Nixon gently steering Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev towards the model kitchen. He wanted to show him a brand new washing machine. "What we want to do" said the Vice President "is make easier the life of our housewives."

Confronted by the gleaming white front-loader Khrushchev struggled to respond. First he objected to the "capitalist attitude to women," then argued that the American appliances were "merely gadgets" and finally claimed that new Russian houses were equipped with the same appliances. The washing machine was clearly a formidable opponent. Nixon suggested that it might be "better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets" (Salisbury, 1959).

American propaganda experts had decided to make consumerism the focus of the exhibition. Cars, cosmetics, women's shoes, frozen vegetables and Pepsi cola were featured prominently and all attracted intense interest from Russian visitors. According to historian Walter Hixson American diplomats in Moscow had advised that:

Washington should supply "as many Sears Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, and other catalogs as possible," allow them to "disappear," and replenish stocks with additional supplies. One diplomat reported that Sears and Roebuck catalogs were being sold on the black market for 75 roubles—almost \$20, a vast sum in the USSR at the time (Hixson, 1997).

The Soviets mounted a counter-propaganda effort which included planting agitators amongst the crowds:

The Soviet agitators interrupted guides to demand explanations for the existence of unemployment, expensive health care, lack of concern for the mentally ill, segregation and race discrimination, the arms race, U.S. imperialism, and myriad additional criticisms of capitalist society. Unemployment and race relations received the most attention in Soviet counterpropaganda (Hixson, 1997).

Throughout the 1950s consumer goods and prosperity fought alongside jet fighters and intercontinental ballistic missiles in the struggle against communism. And as if to repay the compliment many American cars of the late 1950s mimicked jet fighters and space ships.

Hollywood also joined the struggle blending deadly force and hedonistic consumption in movies like *Jet Pilot* (1957). In this film John Wayne plays a jet fighter pilot who wins over a wily and seductive Russian spy (Janet Leigh) with char grilled steaks, lingerie and spacious American housing.

American propagandists worked hard to promote the United States as a land of opportunity where a willingness to work hard was all that was needed for material success. In 1956 the Eisenhower administration was pushing the idea of "People's Capitalism" a system which could "fulfill man's age old dream of a life free from want with each individual free to develop to the fullest those talents and abilities given him by the Creator" (quoted in (Hixson, 1997).

In Moscow Nixon was drew on this image of the US as a peaceful nation which more concerned with domestic comforts than rockets, satellites or world domination. The US may have fallen behind in the space race but was a rich nation making the transition from industrial to postindustrial society. As Nixon explained to *National Geographic* readers the Soviet Union was yet to become a fully fledged industrial society:

We must remember that fully 40 percent of the Soviet Union's labor force works at agriculture, that it takes one person to produce food for himself and about four other Soviet citizens. Contrast this with the American average of 1 to 22, and you have some idea of how far the Soviet Union still has to go in turning itself into an industrial nation (Nixon, 1959).

America's government and intellectual elite constructed a story about their nation and its political and social system which identified it with progress and prosperity. The USSR was, on this account, a backward nation and communism, not a path to the future, but a dead end. Washing machines and colour televisions were symbols of American superiority. Seen this way the absence of modern consumer goods in poor American homes would not be just a personal tragedy but a symbol of national failure.

## **Granny gets a new TV**

A year earlier, in 1958, liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote that in the contemporary United States "the ordinary individual has access to amenities — food, entertainment, personal transportation, and plumbing — in which not even the rich rejoiced a century ago" (Galbraith, 1985). But it was soon obvious that not all Americans enjoyed this level of affluence. In February 1960 the *Saturday Evening Post* ran an cover story exposing "chronic, grinding poverty" in West Virginia (Plein, 2001).

That same year Senator John F Kennedy visited West Virginia as part of his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Over the past ten years employment in the region's coal mining industry had shrunk by two thirds (Moynihan, 1969). Appalachia had become a symbol of poverty and cultural backwardness and Kennedy, apparently moved by what he had seen, promised to do something about it.

Two years later CBS aired *The Beverly Hillbillies* in 1962 and viewers instantly recognized the stereotypes. *The Beverly Hillbillies* became the country's most popular show climbing to the top of the ratings faster than *I Love Lucy* (People-Weekly, 1989). The sitcom's premise was straightforward — after striking oil on their backwoods property the impoverished Clampetts suddenly become multi-millionaires but despite their wealth and prestigious new address they don't know how to consume like rich people. In one episode their bank manager Mr Drysdale gives Granny a new TV for

Christmas ('Christmas at the Clampetts') — she mistakes the unfamiliar appliance for a washing machine.

As socialist activist Michael Harrington would explain "being rich was not a simple fact, like a large bank account, but a way of looking at reality, a series of attitudes, a special way of life" (Harrington, 1963). And it was this the Clampett's lacked — the Beverly Hills view of reality. This collision of cultures drove the show's comedy. As Pierre Bourdieu might say, the hillbillies lacked the appropriate 'cultural capital.'

## 'The book that sparked the War on Poverty'

In July 1959, while Richard Nixon was arguing with Khrushchev about rockets and household appliances, an article appeared in the magazine *Commentary* with the claim that there were 50 million poor in America. *Commentary's* editor Anatole Shub saw that poverty was emerging as an issue and asked Harrington to write an essay (Dorrien, 2000).

In 'Our Fifty Million Poor: Forgotten Men of the Affluent Society' Harrington argued that, between 1940 and 1957, increases in productivity had tripled corporate profits but the left the poor no better off. Economic growth, he argued, was not an automatic solution to the problem of poverty. Harrington also attacked the myth that poverty was primarily a problem of the rural south or of non-whites. "These millions" he wrote, "are, in fact, a predominantly urban, white population."

In the late 1950s cities like Baltimore, St Louis, Chicago and Detroit experienced a wave of migration, not just of black Americans, but of poor white 'hillbillies'. These new migrants were often viewed with hostility. Harrington wrote:

The adults, unfamiliar with the rationality and speed of city ways, tend to job-jumping and rent-skipping. In an environment of high racial tension, these white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants have awakened prejudice and hatred that equals the hostility toward the Negro" (Harrington, 1959).

This essay would form the basis of Harrington's 1962 book *The Other America*, widely credited as "The book that sparked the war on poverty."

Harrington was a product of the Greenwich Village socialist milieu of the early fifties and a one time member of the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL or 'Yipsels').<sup>1</sup> He was closely associated with Max Shachtman an influential and fiercely factional Trotskyist. Shachtman exerted a powerful influence in the New York intellectual circles and was connected with prominent figures such as cultural critic Dwight MacDonal, Irving Howe, Irving Kristol and Seymour Martin Lipset (Isserman, 1995) (Isserman, 1996) (Palmer, 1999). Shachtman was hostile to the Soviet Union and Stalinism and his followers uncompromising anti-communism would, by the 1960s, become a wedge between the old left of the New York intellectuals and the new left of the college campuses.

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<sup>1</sup> Other well known former Yipsels include Harry Braverman, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Irving Kristol.

Harrington was not an academic researcher or an expert in poverty — he was a political writer and a socialist activist. When he turned his attention to the problem of poverty he looked to the work of an anthropologist and fellow socialist, to give his project a theoretical backing.

Harrington took Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty thesis and applied it to America's urban ghettos and rural backwaters. Lewis' work in Mexico during the 40s and 50s convinced him that while material conditions were ultimately responsible for the existence of poverty, the way poor communities adapted to their position could help sustain it (Lewis, 1961). As human geographer David Harvey and colleague Michael Reed explained:

For Lewis, the mechanics of capitalist production for profit, not the folkways of its victims, caused poverty. It was among the economically marginal and superfluous populations that Lewis lived and worked. When he wrote, he knew full well that his subculture of poverty thesis was placing the capitalist mode of production, not the poor, in the dock (Reed, 1996).

By the end of the 1960s the idea of a culture of poverty would become associated with conservative thinkers like Edward Banfield (Banfield, 1990). In this new mutated form it was used to absolve the political and economic structures of society from blame and to point the finger at the disadvantaged themselves. Banfield, for example, asserted that "the lower-class person prefers near-destitution without work to relative abundance with it (Banfield, 1990) : 139). But in *The Other America* Harrington emphatically rejected this view:

Here is the most familiar version of social blindness: "The poor are that way because they are afraid of work. And anyway they all have big cars. If they were like me (or my father or my grandfather), they could pay their own way. But they prefer to live on the dole and cheat the taxpayers."

This theory, usually thought of as a virtuous and moral statement, is one of the means of making it impossible for the poor ever to pay their way. There are, one must assume, citizens of the other America who choose impoverishment out of fear of work (though writing it down, I really do not believe it). But the real explanation of why the poor are where they are is that they made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents, in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong industry, or in the wrong racial or ethnic group. Once that mistake has been made, most of them would never even have had a chance to get out of the other America.

There are two important ways of saying this: the poor are caught in a vicious circle; or, The poor live in a culture of poverty (Harrington, 1963).

What Harrington argued in his 1959 *Commentary* article was that federal spending on the welfare state needed to increase, but on its own this would not be enough:

Because poverty is a culture, the poor must often be helped onto the escalator of social mobility before they can benefit from traditional programs of social reform. Remedial education is, indeed, imperative to deal with the obvious scandals of a decrepit school system, inadequate health care, low pensions and so on. Yet, so long as such actions are piecemeal, they will least help those who most need them (Harrington, 1959).

The *Commentary* article, and a follow up on housing policy, were well timed. Kennedy's 1960 campaign in West Virginia attracted media attention to the problem of poverty in

Appalachia while a CBS documentary aired after the election, *Harvest of Shame*, documented poverty amongst migrant agricultural workers. Unemployment and the sluggish rate of economic growth were also a pressing issues in 1960. US unemployment stood at 5.5 percent while most developed nations had rates below 3 percent (Australia's stood at 1.6 percent) (US Department of Labor, 2001).

Harrington was approached by publishers to turn his *Commentary* articles into a book but, at first, he was reluctant. Eventually Macmillian persuaded him to take on the project and *The Other America* was published in 1962 (Democratic-Socialists-of-America, 2000) (Dorrien, 2000).

According to his biographer, Maurice Isserman, Harrington did not expect the book to be a big seller and left the US for an extended stay in Paris. But in 1963 the *New Yorker* published a lengthy review by cultural critic Dwight MacDonald.<sup>2</sup> *The Other America* was a slim book — almost a pamphlet — but MacDonald's review occupied fifty pages of the *New Yorker's* January edition. Thousands of reprints were ordered and the article attracted the attention of Walter Heller, the chair of president Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisers (Democratic-Socialists-of-America, 2000). Heller had the council work up a memo entitled "Program for a Concerted Assault on Poverty" (Moynihan, 1969).

## The war begins

Heller had trouble selling the idea within the administration. It was obvious that poor Americans were not going to be an electorally decisive group. According to Journalist Nicholas Lemann, Kennedy was briefed by Richard Scammon — the director of the census — on the prospects for the 1964 election,:

Kennedy asked him how a new poverty program might affect the campaign. Scammon said that it wouldn't do him much good, because most voters didn't consider themselves poor, and those who did weren't the ones a Democratic presidential candidate had to win over (Lemann, 1989).

Heller's approach was to promote the anti-poverty program as a way of "pulling good-hearted suburban Republican Protestant churchwomen away from Nelson Rockefeller" (Lemann, 1989). The program's planning reflected this approach, it would avoid any suggestion of redistribution or 'doles' for the poor — instead, it would be a program to promote economic opportunity. Kennedy outlined the administration's official view on poverty in a 1962 address:

...the nature and causes of poverty have changed. At the time the Social Security Act established our present basic framework for public aid, the major cause of poverty was unemployment and economic depression. Today, in a year of relative prosperity and high employment, we are more concerned about the poverty that persists in the midst of abundance.

The reasons are often more social than economic, more often subtle than simple. Some are in need because they are untrained for work--some because they cannot work, because they are too young

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<sup>2</sup> Dwight Macdonald, "Our Invisible Poor," *New Yorker*, Vol. 38, No. 48, January 19, 1963, pp. 82-132

or too old, blind or crippled. Some are in need because they are discriminated against for reasons they cannot help. Responding to their ills with scorn or suspicion is inconsistent with our moral precepts and inconsistent with their nearly universal preference to be independent. But merely responding with a "relief check" to complicated social or personal problems--such as ill health, faulty education, domestic discord, racial discrimination, or inadequate skills--is not likely to provide a lasting solution. Such a check must be supplemented, or in some cases made unnecessary, by positive services and solutions, offering the total resources of the community to meet the total needs of the family to help our less fortunate citizens help themselves (Kennedy, 1962).

A comprehensive anti-poverty program would have settled naturally into Kennedy's 'New Frontier' rhetoric. In accepting the Democratic nomination he called for renewal — a chance to sweep away the old leadership with its "old slogans and delusions and suspicions" and bring a new generation to power. Kennedy wanted to move beyond the left-right divisions of his times — today he might have been called a 'third way' politician. In 1960 America seemed to have stagnated. Unemployment was high, growth was slow, the Soviets were ahead in the race for space and the mythology of open opportunity, particularly for African Americans, strained against the reality of everyday experience. America's national self image was built around the challenges of the frontier — it was a nation constructed on the promise of progress. To many Americans the Eisenhower years were years of stagnation and lost opportunity. The Russians were launching men into outer space while American cars grew tail fins and played at being rocket ships. In his 1960 acceptance speech Kennedy promised to rediscover the lost frontier:

the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric--and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me, regardless of party (Kennedy, 1960).

In Kennedy's rhetoric, clearing away America's 'pockets of poverty' was part of the same vision as the space program. It was about the nation fulfilling its manifest destiny.

On 22 November 1963 Lyndon Johnson took over the presidency and inherited the anti-poverty plans. With Kennedy's assassination the New Frontier made way for the Great Society. Johnson liked to describe himself as a New Dealer and he shared Roosevelt's opposition to hand outs. In a conversation about the proposed anti-poverty program with Walter Heller he announced "That's my kind of program. We should push ahead full-tilt on this project" (Dallek, 1998).

In April 1964 Johnson visited the home of Tom Fletcher an unemployed man in his early 30s and a father of eight. From the porch of Fletcher's tar paper shack outside of Inez Kentucky Johnson announced that the nation was at war with poverty (Economist, 1992) (Straub, 1999). Fletcher looked the part, was in his early thirties, white, had no teeth of

his own. His dilapidated shack was easily accessible from a sealed road. Fletcher became the official symbol of poverty in America.<sup>3</sup>

Johnson didn't just say he was going to do something to reduce poverty, he said he was going to *eliminate* it. Aide Harry McPherson explained the thinking behind the announcement:

The problem of democratic leaders, little "d" and big "D", is that they must grab the attention of the public; they must convince the public that there is an urgent problem that needs to be solved, and to do that they really have to hit him like the old farmer hits the mule between the eyes to get his attention. And once he has his attention, then they have to come along and say "But all is not lost. We have a solution." That's the format that has always been used (McPherson, 1969).

Johnson got the public's attention — major news weeklies carried pictures of the president at Fletcher's shack — but before announcing the war on poverty the administration had been uncertain about what shape a solution might take. Some, like Council of Economic Opportunity member Morris Abram, were optimistic about the prospects for a war on poverty. Others, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, were more skeptical. In a 1984 interview Abram recalls:

I was on the Council of Economic Opportunity and helped in the conference in shaping the War on Poverty. I went down there several times. Shriver was getting a lot of people to rally around, [to] discuss the theses of Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America*, [or] whatever it was. I must say at that time I was very much of the opinion that the government could wipe out poverty, like it could wipe out venereal disease if it just had enough penicillin...<sup>4</sup> (Abram, 1984).

The public were less convinced than Abram. According to Johnson biographer Robert Dallek, "the Gallup poll asked whether people thought poverty would ever be done away with in this country, only 9 percent said 'yes' and 83 percent said 'no' (Dallek, 1998).

The decision to act against poverty provoked internecine fighting within the administration. Moynihan, who worked within the Department of Labor, favoured a massive employment program. The Council of Economic Advisers, and Heller, pushed for community action programs and "maximum feasible participation" by the poor. This produced a deadlock which Johnson resolved by appointing Sargent Shriver — JFK's brother in law — to head the anti-poverty effort. Shriver ended up negotiating a package which included a substantial community action component (Moynihan, 1969).

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<sup>3</sup> Fletcher and his family continued to receive unwanted media attention in the years following the war on poverty. In 1991, according to the *Economist* he and his wife were indicted for murder after one of Fletcher's daughters died of an overdose of anti-depressants. Another child was shot in the driveway of their home and another imprisoned as a result of a burglary conviction. Journalists who followed up on Mr Fletcher's progress after the president's visit found that his circumstances hadn't improved greatly as a result of the war on poverty (*Economist*, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Abrams continues: "...and I must have been one of those who was loyal to the view of the Great Society and the Community Action Program with maximum feasible participation of the poor, which turned out to be a rip-off. The only thing it did was to teach a good many blacks to become more effective leaders, which is not a bad thing. But it was a rip-off..."

## Hawks in retreat

In the 1964 presidential campaign turned to nuclear weapons in the fight against his Republican opponent Barry Goldwater. In one of the best known campaign ads in US politics, scenes of young girl pulling petals from a daisy give way to a military count down and the blast of an atomic warhead. "We must love one another or die" said LBJ's voice over.<sup>5</sup> This was the same quote from WH Auden that Michael Harrington had used to express his outrage at the plight of the other Americans (p 10).

The Johnson campaign and the martyrdom of JFK vaporized Barry Goldwater's presidential ambitions. The Arizona senator was too extreme to appeal to mainstream Americans. But following in the wake of the Goldwater campaign was a movement of right wing Republicans — their champion would be Ronald Reagan.

Reagan played a major part in Goldwater's '64 campaign. His stump speech 'Time for Choosing' contained a harsh attack on the war on poverty identifying it, not with the work and equal opportunity message that Johnson had been preaching, but with handout mentality of 'welfare' and the cancer of bloated bureaucracy:

We have so many people who can't see a fat man standing beside a thin one without coming to the conclusion that the fat man got that way by taking advantage of the thin one. So they are going to solve all the problems of human misery through government and government planning. Well, now, if government planning and welfare had the answer and they've had almost 30 years of it, shouldn't we expect government to almost read the score to us once in a while? Shouldn't they be telling us about the decline each year in the number of people needing help? The reduction in the need for public housing?

But the reverse is true. Each year the need grows greater, the program grows greater. We were told four years ago that 17 million people went to bed hungry each night. Well, that was probably true. They were all on a diet. But now we are told that 9.3 million families in this country are poverty-stricken on the basis of earning less than \$3,000 a year. Welfare spending is 10 times greater than in the dark depths of the Depression. We are spending \$45 billion on welfare. Now do a little arithmetic, and you will find that if we divided the \$45 billion up equally among those 9 million poor families, we would be able to give each family \$4,600 a year, and this added to their present income should eliminate poverty! Direct aid to the poor, however, is running only about \$600 per family. It would seem that someplace there must be some overhead (Reagan, 1964).

Before the war was even underway Reagan had pronounced it a failure. He told the story of a woman with six children who wanted a divorce so she could claim welfare, said that social insurance was a fraud and asserted that the Democrats were taking America down the road to socialism.

By promising to *eliminate* poverty Johnson made it impossible for the war to end in victory. Wars are not supposed to last for decades and the metaphor is dangerous when it is applied to chronic problems. Americans had been led to expect a *cure* for poverty — something like an emergency operation to remove an infected appendix. But poverty in a

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<sup>5</sup> The daisy spot aired only once. Like other controversial campaign spots (for example, the Willie Horton ads of the Bush/Dukakis campaign) its major impact came from the controversy it generated.

market economy is more like diabetes than appendicitis. The condition is chronic and the treatment must be both regular and constant. The most appropriate response was a permanently expanded welfare state but the war metaphor made that response look like the intractable conflict the US was stuck with in Vietnam.

From 1960 to 1966 the proportion of Americans in poverty had declined from 22 to 17 percent. In 1959 there were 38 million poor Americans, by 1967 there were fewer than 26 million. Employment was up and unemployment was down. However, by 1966, the mood in Washington was grim. Community action and "maximum feasible participation" had raised expectations and fueled a wave of political activism (Dallek, 1998) : 330–331).

According to Robert Dallek "Local officials began complaining to Washington that Marxists intent on class struggle were organizing the poor into tenant unions, welfare protesters, and political action groups seeking to overthrow local authorities" (Dallek, 1998) : 331). In 1967 Moynihan remarked that militants were "seeking to transform welfare recipients into a powerful interest group that will no longer be forced to accept whatever bargain the welfare establishment could strike with the larger society" (quoted in (Melnick, 1994) : 76).

The number of Americans receiving welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children — AFDC) exploded during the 1960s. Unlike unemployment insurance (UI) AFDC was a 'handout' program — it went mostly to single mothers many of who were never married and did not work. Recipients of UI needed a work history and a record of contributions. AFDC recipients did not.

Poverty was also becoming more closely associated with black Americans. In 1964 around one quarter of those in poverty were black. Magazine depictions of poor Americans roughly mirrored this proportion. However by 1967 over 70 percent of pictures of the poor were of blacks (Gilens, 1999) :114).

Government action on poverty depended on two things; it had to be based around work and economic opportunity — not grudgingly offered handouts — and it could not become racialized. To retain public support the anti-poverty effort needed to be seen as the realization of the myth Nixon was selling in Moscow — that America offered all its citizens freedom from want and the chance to fulfil their potential if only they were willing to work to the best of their ability.

Rising welfare expenditure, political conflict generated by the community action approach, and the perception of poverty as a black problem eroded support for the anti-poverty program. From the late 1960s on the culture of poverty would be identified as black ghetto culture and anti-poverty programs as welfare. On the conservative accounts of Reagan and his supporters welfare was what shielded ghetto culture from the one thing which could reform it — the discipline of the labour market.

## Public opinion and the war against poverty

By the late 1960s liberals and the left had lost control of the narratives which shaped public perception of poverty and its causes. Today's anti-poverty campaigners use the language of rights and entitlement. They focus on the redistribution of wealth and make a firm distinction between 'structural' and 'individual' causes of poverty. The shift to this rhetorical pattern began in the late 1960s. However, the war on poverty was founded on an entirely different set of narratives — narratives which were more acceptable to the intuition of most voters.

A persistent myth amongst anti-poverty activists is that the American public has become less concerned about the poor and more punitive in its attitudes. For example, in *No Mercy* their 1996 book on conservative think tanks Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado write:

Three decades after President Lyndon Johnson launched the "War on Poverty," Americans are rethinking their attitudes towards the poor, calling for major overhauls of the welfare system and outright abolition of many of its components. During the Great Society period (the 1960s and 1970s) public sentiment held that extrinsic forces are the cause of much poverty and that government should take responsibility for assisting those so afflicted (Stefancic, 1996) : 82).

Apart from the strange incorporation of Nixon's presidency into the Great Society era this account confuses hostility towards welfare with hostility towards those in poverty.

In 1965 polls showed that the American public was broadly in favour of the government's anti-poverty program. In a Harris poll in November 1965 63.4 percent of voters said that they approved of the government's bill for the anti-poverty program. Only 23.4 percent said that they disapproved. In 1964 Harris asked "Do you tend to believe that welfare and relief payments make people lazy and irresponsible?" 53.1 percent said that they did (36.2 percent said they believed that they did not).

In the mid 1960s as the war on poverty was getting underway a majority of voters supported the program but a majority also had negative attitudes towards welfare. Responses to another survey question in 1966 help explain this pattern. When asked "Do you think it is possible to develop a program of federal help in which people who live in poverty can be made to help themselves or do you think such a program isn't possible?" 67 percent responded that they believed such a program was possible while only 17.2 percent said that they believed it was not (IRSS, 2002).

There was no golden age of receptive public attitudes to income redistribution and there has not been a drastic shift in attitudes towards to the poor or those on welfare. A time series of results from National Elections Studies surveys shows a reasonable amount of stability in attitudes towards both groups.

### *Poor people — feeling thermometer (0–100)*

	1972	1974	1976	1980	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994
Anti rating (0–40)	4	3	6	4	4	4	4	5	4	4

Neutral (41–59)	9	8	10	8	20	14	25	13	18	18
Pro rating (60–100)	86	90	85	88	76	81	71	83	79	79

***People on welfare — feeling thermometer (0–100)***

	1976	1980	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994
Anti rating (0–40)	33	34	29	38	33	37	32	41
Neutral (41–59)	25	22	32	22	33	21	26	21
Pro rating (60–100)	43	44	40	40	34	43	42	28

Source: National Election Studies. Quoted in (Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995)

As the table below shows, Stefancic and Delgado are also wrong to suggest that there has been a significant shift in attitudes about the causes of poverty.

***"In your opinion, which is more often to blame if a person is poor—lack of effort on his own part, or circumstances beyond his control?"***

	1964	1965	1967	1984	1988	1990
Lack of effort	34	40	42	33	40	35
Circumstances	29	29	19	34	37	45
Both (volunteered)	32	28	36	31	17	17
No opinion	6	3	3	2	6	3

Source: Gallup. Quoted in (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999)

The important shift has been at the elite level — the stories anti-poverty activists and their opponents call on in their search for public support. The public rhetoric of the war on poverty did not exploit the now ubiquitous dichotomy between individual and structural causes of poverty. Poverty was portrayed as 'backwardness' — the plight of people and places which had remained isolated from progress. The solution was to bring the poor up to speed with the rest of the country. This meant education and training, better housing and medical care. It also meant a change in 'culture.' Poor Americans were not just backward in their living conditions but also in their approach to life, their aspirations, attitudes and habits.

In *The Other America* Michael Harrington wove a story which incorporated both the 'lack of effort' and 'circumstances' explanations for poverty. The conclusion he urged was that government needed to do more to help those in poverty and that moralizing about their behaviour was inappropriate. Today his kind of approach seems unacceptably paternalistic. But in the 1960s it was a powerful way to harness the intuitions Americans had about poverty.

## All the way with LBJ — warmongering in Australia

"In a hot summer's night in December 1964" recalled Donald Horne "I was about to write the last chapter of a book. The opening sentence of this last chapter was: 'Australia is a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck'" (Horne, 1991).

*The Lucky Country* was an ironic title. Horne was arguing that the Australia of the 60s was a "derivative society" with too few of its own ideas. But, as Horne would later complain "other people got hold of my phrase and gave it some infuriatingly different meanings." In the late 1960s many of the lucky country's citizens were eager to follow LBJ into the other war — the war on poverty.

In 1972 Peter Hollingworth wrote:

Australia emerged in the 1950's as "the lucky country". Most Australians believed they were living in times of abundance and that everybody was sharing in this new-found national affluence. Poverty existed only in under-developed countries, having long since vanished from Australia (Hollingworth, 1973).

But then Australians began to hear about the 'other America' and the war on poverty. Clearly poverty *did* exist in wealthy western nations. A check of the literature showed that the British, despite having created a substantial welfare state, had also discovered poverty. Researchers and journalists in Australia weren't going to be left behind, they too would discover the paradox of poverty in a wealthy egalitarian nation.

In his *New Yorker* article 'The Invisible People' Dwight McDonald popularized the story of Harrington's "invisible land" — poverty in the midst of plenty. In his introduction Harrington wrote:

The other America, the America of poverty, is hidden today in a way that it never was before. Its millions are socially invisible to the rest of us. No wonder that so many misinterpreted Galbraith's title and assumed that "the affluent society" meant that everyone had a decent standard of life (Harrington, 1963) : 10).

In Australia journalist John Stubbs uncovered *The Hidden People*. The idea for this 1966 book came from its publishers. Stubbs' book is sprinkled with references to *The Other America* with some passages showing the American book's influence.

Rural poverty is often considered picturesque — a fact that is unfortunate for its victims.

The increasing pace and pressures of modern city life have probably boosted the desert island complex among the urban middle-classes. The harassed office worker envies what he believes is the simple and self-sufficient life of the country labourer, the fisherman, the family with a small dairy farm. But he seldom chooses to change his lot for theirs...

Beauty can be a mask for ugliness. That is what happens in the Appalachians.

Driving through this area, particularly in the spring or the fall, one perceives the loveliness, the openness, the high hills, streams, and lush growth. Indeed, the people themselves are captivated by their mountain life. They cling to their patches of land and their way of living. Many of them refuse to act "reasonable"; they stay even though misery is their lot...

An equally widespread, and equally false, belief is that people who live in these circumstances are not sensitive to their plight, that they are in some way at peace with their comfortless surroundings and content with their limited possessions.

(Stubbs, 1966) : 120–121)

But, the traveler may say, granted that there is a low level of income, isn't it still true that these folk have escaped the anxiety and the rigors of industrialism? Perhaps this myth once held a real truth. Now it is becoming more false every day.

(Harrington, 1963) : 44–45)

*The Hidden People* borrowed themes and motifs from Harrington's book but the stories he told were Australian. Stubbs gathered information from researchers like R G Brown and Ronald Henderson, and he interviewed social welfare workers like Ted Noffs of the Wayside Chapel. Peter Hollingworth recalls the publication of *The Hidden People* as "a major local event" (Hollingworth, 1973) : 18).

University of Adelaide researcher R G Brown published an article on poverty in Australia in 1963 (Brown, 1963). His point of departure was Townsend's work in the UK. Ronald Henderson began publishing substantial quantitative findings on poverty in Melbourne in 1966.

*The Hidden People* did not have the same effect on Australian public life as *The Other America* had in the United States. Part of the reason for this was that poverty was not as significant a problem in 1960s Australia as it was in the US. In 1965 Donald Horne observed that while "20 per cent of American households and 14 per cent of British households are in severe need, only eight per cent of Australian households live at the poverty level" (Horne, 1965) :72). But as Horne explained, a fascination with American social-problem literature was part of the derivative nature of Australian intellectual life:

Power elites, Paper Economies, Organization Men, Radical Rights, Hidden Persuaders... These ogres march upon Australians with such force that Australians sometimes look for Radical Rights or Organization Men under their own beds... (Horne, 1965) : 85.<sup>6</sup>

By the late 1960s other Australians were searching for an invisible country. In 1969 the Australian Institute of Political Science devoted its 35<sup>th</sup> Summer School to poverty. Researchers Henderson and Brown were joined by W C Wentworth (minister for social services), the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Janet Paterson, the American ambassador William Crook and David Donnison from the London School of Economics.

It was the overseas speakers who seemed to generate the most excitement. During a discussion Colin Benjamin (a Victorian social worker) said that the speeches had "shown clearly how much Australia lags behind both America and Britain in its thinking" (Masterman, 1969) : 62). J Spigelman President of the Sydney University SRC attacked the Australian minister for social services saying "It is basically a case of Australia in its

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<sup>6</sup>The ogres under the bed are: *The Power Elite* C. Wright Mills, 1959. *The Paper Economy* David Bazelon, 1963. *The Hidden Persuaders* Vance Packard 1957. *The Radical Right* Daniel Bell (ed) 1963 (and earlier version *The New American Right*, 1955). *The Organization Man* William Whyte 1956.

current stage refusing to adopt the fervour of social welfare thinking that has gone on in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom" (Masterman, 1969) : 64).

In her talk, the Brotherhood's Janet Paterson quoted Michael Harrington (from MacDonald's *New Yorker* article) and cited other American experts suggesting that another "concept we could well borrow from America is participation — it is time poor people were consulted and involved instead of merely planned for..." (Masterman, 1969) : 116).

Several discussants like Colin Benjamin and Ian Robinson, wanted an immediate declaration of war. "First of all" said Robinson, "I think we need to have a co-ordinated war on poverty..." (132). Garrie Hutchinson, a student, wanted something more radical — a revolution. Hutchinson commented approvingly on the line taken by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the US.<sup>7</sup>

Donald Horne argued that part of the reason Australia was open to American ideas was because "Australians do not find distasteful the official story of what America is supposed to be. Freedom, equality, affluence, the pursuit of happiness... these words are all right by Australians". Australians, he said, associated America with "electric washing machines, military strength, MacArthur, Kennedy, TV, egalitarianism" (Horne, 1965) : 83–84). But a nation founded on slavery and the dispossession of its original inhabitants would always struggle to live up to its official ideals. The rhetoric of the war on poverty far outstripped its actual achievements.

Stealing ideas from overseas wasn't always a bad idea, according to Horne. He regarded Australia's level of poverty as a disgrace and a sign of failure. However he suggested that instead of looking to America we should take a look at another small nation at the edge of the world — Sweden. This is just the kind of thing the author of *The Other America* might have recommended. As Tom Hayden remembers:

Michael himself was so immersed in European political discourse, so involved in the Socialist International, that former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme once said he would have become a prime minister were he European (Hayden, 2000).

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<sup>7</sup> SDS was founded in 1960 and was the first organized manifestation of the New Left in America. The Port Huron Statement, drafted by Tom Hayden and others in 1962 was an early declaration of group's beliefs. While SDS's early ideas on poverty were similar to Harrington's their major concerns were with civil rights, the cold war, colonialism and wars of liberation. In keeping with his Shachtmanite orientation to left wing faction fighting Harrington attacked the group. Other members of the old left like Irving Howe would do the same. SDS founder Tom Hayden remembers that:

"In 1962 Michael spent the entire opening night at the founding convention of Students for a Democratic Society in Port Huron, Michigan, attacking the draft I wrote of the Port Huron Statement for its criticism of both sides in the cold war arms race, its suggestion that organized labor lacked a vision and its assertion that students were a historical agency of change. He left abruptly the next morning, later acknowledging that he hadn't read the document" (Hayden, 2000).

## Beyond the myths — the war on poverty in perspective

It is tempting to think of the 1960s as an era of moral awakening where the climate of public opinion offered activists opportunities which do not exist today. However voters in 1960s America had surprisingly similar attitudes towards the causes of poverty and the desirability of welfare 'handouts' as they do today. The war on poverty did not get off the ground because it had an unusually receptive climate of public opinion. Nor was it foisted on an unwilling public from above. The initiative for the war came America's intellectual and administrative elites but it enjoyed popular support because of the way it tapped into popular fears, aspirations and shared narratives.

The war on poverty did *not* begin as the result of new research. Harrington's account of poverty in late 1950s America was assembled from publicly available statistics which others had used to tell quite different stories. Nor is it likely that the ideas in the book shifted deep seated attitudes Americans had about the causes of poverty. What Harrington and others did was tell a story about poverty which incorporated people's existing beliefs about poverty and their country and constructed the problem in a new way. Harrington's account made the elimination of poverty a part of what America must achieve in order to preserve its self image.

A popular myth amongst today's advocates is that government action on poverty must be accompanied by research and education campaigns. Research will reveal the 'true' causes of poverty (which anti-poverty advocates know in advance will be 'structural' and not 'individual')<sup>8</sup> and education will bring the public around to this view. For example, in a recent focus group study for the Brotherhood of St Laurence Janet Johnson reported that:

While poverty in Australia remains inaccurately characterised and poorly understood, there appears little chance of changing attitudes, according to those in our study. They see the need to identify the dimensions of the problem and to create community understanding before any real resolution can take place. Their own acceptance of some poverty myths and stereotypes is indicative of the work that needs to be done (Johnson, 2000).

The experience of the 1960s offers little support for this view. Good research would have been valuable in the war on poverty, but not for building a base of political support. The major problem was not identifying a politically acceptable problem but in finding an effective and acceptable solution. As Moynihan and others have written, policy makers frequently did not know what they were doing or have any reason to be confident that their plans would work (Moynihan, 1969).

Translated into the Australian context, Harrington's story lost much of its power. The incumbent government was conservative, there was not the same connection between material affluence and national prestige and both unemployment and poverty were less

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<sup>8</sup> This begs the question — why is more research needed? If advocates already have good reasons for believing that poverty is the result of structural causes why can't they just make these public? If there are no compelling reasons for thinking that poverty is overwhelmingly structural then advocates should wait for the results of research before declaring the public in need of education.

significant problems than in the US. Australian anti-poverty advocates would have to wait until the early 1970s for the political environment to shift in their favor.

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