



America's longest war

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Washington (CNN) -- Fifty years ago, in his State of the Union address, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a "war on poverty."

"This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America," he proclaimed, speaking to Congress and the nation.

Johnson worked with Congress to pass more than 200 pieces of legislation that attempted to address the more than 37 million people living in poverty at the time.

Johnson's policies are considered the largest expansion of social safety net programs in history. He created Medicare and Medicaid, which provided health care to millions of low-income people and seniors. He also launched the Head Start early education program and made housing available for low-income people. On top of that, Johnson successfully expanded funding for K-12 education, passed the Voting Rights Act and provided money for artists through the National Endowment for the Arts.

The programs began to immediately reduce the number of people living in poverty, especially seniors. The poverty rate dropped to 12.1% by the time he left office. While an improvement, poverty still existed.

Johnson saw problems with his agenda almost immediately. Most notably, funding and focus turned to another war -- the Vietnam War -- hampering Johnson's vision.

Fifty years later, partisan battles over the size, efficiency and worth of government assistance programs persist. And the success of Johnson's war on poverty has been heavily debated. The [poverty rate has followed a hilly path](#) that reached as low as 11.1% in 1973 and hit a high of more than 15% in 1983, 1993 and 2010, and it's still at that level today.

Here's a look at the war on poverty and the men who guided it:

Richard Nixon

President Nixon detested Johnson's "Great Society." He called the welfare system "a hopeless failure."

But Nixon didn't dismantle Johnson's anti-poverty agenda. While he altered some of it, many programs expanded.

Nixon tightened eligibility requirements of the welfare system that included job training programs, but he added assistance for child care. He called his welfare reform bill the "single most significant piece of social legislation to be considered by the Congress in decades."

He also expanded the Social Security program to allow for cost of living adjustments and for disabled Americans to receive benefits. And it doesn't stop there. He expanded the food stamp program and low-income housing assistance. Nixon also created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, credited for improving conditions for workers.

Nixon did, however, begin to dismantle the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which Johnson created to head the anti-poverty programs. And he heavily altered the Community Action Agencies, which worked to involve community organizations in anti-poverty programs.

While the poverty rate increased at the beginning of Nixon's term to 12.6% in 1970, which was during a recession, it ticked back down to 11.1% but rose again slightly by the time he resigned in 1974.

Gerald Ford

Watergate sunk Nixon, forcing him to resign -- making Gerald Ford the only president never popularly elected to the executive branch.

From the outset, regaining the public's trust was Ford's primary focus. In his first press conference, Ford said he wanted to "heal the wounds throughout the United States" and address the "turmoil and divisiveness" brought on by the Watergate scandal.

But in 1975, Ford signed the Earned Income Tax Credit, a Nixon idea that provides a tax rebate for low or middle class working families with children. The conservative Hoover Institute at Stanford University, which advocates tax cuts as poverty reduction measures, said it is "probably the most cost-effective anti-poverty program the federal government operates."

Jimmy Carter

By the mid-1970s, aided by a market crash in 1973 and oil crises throughout the decade, economic pessimism gripped America. This, along with the end of the Vietnam War and the unraveling of the Watergate saga, led Americans to sour on government.

President Jimmy Carter took cues from this anti-government sentiment and was critical of the war on poverty, saying it -- much like Vietnam -- was an unwinnable endeavor. Carter ran as an outsider and someone who would shake up government in 1976, and his position on poverty helped bolster that image.

"Government cannot solve our problems, it can't set our goals, it cannot define our vision," Carter said in his 1978 State of the Union Address. "Government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy."

Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University, said that while Carter was a Democrat, "he still supported a lot of what the war on poverty aimed to achieve, but like some Democrats, he thought the programs had unintended consequences."

Ronald Reagan

If Carter began to scale back the war on poverty, President Ronald Reagan attempted to expedite the process, comparing many of the programs started by Johnson as "misguided welfare programs" that have "actually helped turn a shrinking problem into a national tragedy."

He entered office in 1981 during a multi-year recession, when the poverty rate rose to its highest level since the 60s, and it remained above 13% for his entire presidency.

Reagan, a vigorous opponent of welfare, famously said Johnson "declared a war on poverty and poverty won."

After running on a campaign that pledged to reform government entitlements -- the 40th president had mixed results.

He did continue to deride welfare -- "We're in danger of creating a permanent culture of poverty as inescapable as any chain or bond," Reagan said during a radio address in 1986 -- but by the end of his administration in 1988, spending on entitlements had only slightly slowed.

"Most of the welfare state survives Ronald Reagan," said Zelizer. "Reagan shifts the debate but is not someone who dismantles the government. One of the big problems he finds is that a lot of these programs are more popular than he expected."

Reagan did, however, greatly expand the Earned Income Child Credit, which he called "the best anti-poverty, the best pro-family, the best job creation measure to come out of Congress." Some conservatives still agree.

George H.W. Bush

By the time President George H.W. Bush became president in 1988, his hands were somewhat tied economically. With the federal budget debt at \$2.8 trillion -- three times larger than it had

been in 1980 -- the economic situation, as well as a lack of political will, did not lend itself to increasing the fight on poverty.

Like Carter, Bush is also consumed with other issues: The recession, deficit reduction and the war in the Persian Gulf, to name a few. He doesn't seem to harangue welfare as much as Reagan.

What's more, after eight years working under Reagan, Bush had a firsthand view of the difficulties in slashing the social safety net. He saw how vocal his predecessor had been -- and how little actually changed in those eight years.

"Welfare and the war on poverty just weren't on the top of his agenda" said Zelizer. "Bush is also from an era of Republicans that are generally fine with the social safety net."

In Bush's four years in office, the percentage of Americans in poverty rose to about 15%.

Bill Clinton

President Bill Clinton served his entire term without the cloud of recession hanging over him. But even the economic boom of the 1990s did not eliminate poverty. The poverty rate was 15% when Clinton entered office, when the country was recovering from another recession, and continued to decline to 11.3% during his last year in 2000.

Clinton's moderate take on governing disappointed liberals, especially when he worked with Republicans to drastically alter the welfare system. The controversial reforms tightened work requirements. It was hailed by conservatives as one of the most important changes to the safety net and denounced by some liberals as harsh and limiting.

Clinton did, however, implement the greatest expansion of health care since Johnson's creation of Medicare and Medicaid. He created the Children's Health Insurance Program, enabling children in families just above the poverty line to receive health care for the first time.

George W. Bush

Only a few years out of office, Bush's presidency is decried by both liberals and conservatives -- for different reasons. Conservatives denounced Bush's government spending, which dramatically increased under the 43rd President.

Bush increased spending from \$1.79 trillion in 2000 to \$2.98 trillion in 2008, a 60% hike, according to the libertarian Cato Institute. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had a lot to do with it, but so did an expensive expansion to Medicare.

Bush created Medicare Part D, a prescription drug program for seniors, subsidizing the cost of seniors' expensive prescription drugs. The program fit in line with his campaign promise of compassionate conservatism.

Guian McKee, a professor of public policy at the University of Virginia, said the program is "an anathema" for conservatives.

"If you are a progressive, it is a pretty significant expansion of the social policy system," McKee added.

In addition, Bush greatly expanded corporate welfare with major tax cuts at the beginning of his term and spending hundreds of billions of dollars bailing out Wall Street at the end of it.

Barack Obama

President Obama has governed through a deep recession and a slow recovery. During this time, government spending on anti-poverty programs continued on an upward trajectory. Then major cuts were made with the sequester, which cut some of the most popular of Johnson's programs, including Head Start, the National Endowment for the Arts and food stamps, just to name a few.

While many social programs have been cut during the Obama administration, the current President has seen a major expansion of health care, especially for low income people. Through the Affordable Care Act, people living above the poverty line are receiving government assistance to purchase health care and millions of low-income families are gaining health care through the expansion of Medicaid.

There's still dispute over the safety net. Congress is debating how much more to cut the food stamp program and Obama has indicated he's open to slight reductions to Social Security. Additionally, he has launched a campaign to address income inequality by raising the minimum wage and passing immigration reform.

While his term has been plagued with a relatively high poverty rate -- about 15% in a post war-on-poverty era -- Obama still has time in his administration to make his mark.

Battles continue over the right mix of policies to address poverty, but people of all stripes agree on one thing: The country has not yet achieved Johnson's goal.