

Observer-Reporter

Bruce's History Lessons: The bad battle plan of the "War on Poverty"

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This week (May 22) in 1964, in a commencement address at the University of Michigan, President Lyndon Johnson unveiled what would be the keystone of his domestic policy. Titled "The War on Poverty," it outlined how the government would create a "Great Society" through new legislation and a cornucopia of new and expanded government agencies to put that legislation into practice. The two-tiered goal of "The Great Society" was to end racial discrimination and eradicate poverty.

On ending racial discrimination, Johnson deserves great credit, for he somehow convinced Congress – in 1964 dominated by southern committee chairmen with no interest in civil rights for blacks – to pass both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Acts of 1965. With their passage, blacks were finally granted equal rights under the law.

By contrast, the war on poverty was not at all successful. In 2014, the 50th anniversary of the Great Society's "War on Poverty," the total cost to the U.S. taxpayer, measured in inflation-adjusted dollars, was \$20 trillion, yet there was no measurable improvement in the number of people categorized as below the poverty line.

Why was that? Because in waging this war Johnson used the wrong battle plan. Most of the resulting welfare programs were (and are) not designed to end poverty, but to ease its burden by providing financial assistance, either in the form of welfare checks or in-kind benefits such as free or subsidized public housing, health care, and food stamps.

The result has been a permanently dependent underclass. In a Cato Institute poll conducted in 2019, 80% of Republicans and 72% of Democrats said the "War on Poverty" was a failure. And in that poll a majority – 63% – of those on welfare agreed. To them the problem was not insufficient government funding but spending money on the wrong priorities. Rather, the focus should be on eliminating the causes of poverty.

Bottom line: Most (not all) people prefer freedom and self-sufficiency to dependency. Rather than stay tethered to the welfare state, they desire the freedom to make their own decisions about their future, including accepting the consequences of bad decisions while reaping the rewards of good ones.

So, the correct battle plan is not to help them endure poverty, but escape poverty by providing them with both the incentive and means to do so. That would include spending money on a good education and/or good vocational training in a marketable profession, while simultaneously instilling in them a sense of self-sufficiency, independence and self-worth.

In the war on poverty, as in all wars, the chances of winning are greater if you give soldiers a good reason to fight, not an excuse to surrender.