

**Vanquishing Injustice Once and For All:  
Marking the 50 Years of the War to End Poverty  
Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey**

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Thank you Serena and a very Good Morning to all! I am absolutely delighted to be here today, truly appreciative of this opportunity to share my thoughts with you. I am very familiar with the work that so many of you do on a daily basis to make the lives of others a little better. Without you and your dedication everything that we are going to talk about today, would have been in even more dire straits. So before I begin I want to recognize you and applaud all that you do.

In marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War to End Poverty, The Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey acknowledges that the task of vanquishing poverty is ongoing. Even as we recognize and celebrate the successes of those earlier engagements, we at this conference today want to explore how we go about changing attitudes and laws to bring changes in the lives of the poor and the vulnerable so they can grow and flourish and fulfill their true human potential. It is a tall order. But I believe that as we learn from the past, and as we gather the collective experiences, energies and commitments of those like you around the state and the nation, it can be done. It will take time and much effort, but it will get done –

There were many currents and forces in society which strengthened President Lyndon Johnson's hand as he delegated to his administration the responsibility of marshalling an "unconditional war on poverty."

There were intellectuals whose books and ideas opened the nation's eyes and forced the hand of the government. Michael Harrington's legendary book, *The Other America* stirred the nation's conscience by making visible the desperate poverty hidden in the recesses and alcoves of coal country and rural America. Dwight Macdonald's long review of that book in the *New Yorker* brought poverty home to its socially conscious readers in the northeast. American economist John Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society*, and Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal's *Challenge to Affluence* provided a "structural diagnosis of poverty," and

located the source of poverty in the persistently high rates of unemployment. Both saw poverty's solution in a bigger role for the government, in increases of public sector investments. Both Myrdal and Galbraith advocated for a "domestic Marshall plan" with emphasis on job creation and income guarantees to eradicate poverty.<sup>1</sup>

The great social and political forces of the time – the Civil Rights Movement, the Great Migration of southern Blacks to northern cities and manufacturing hubs, and the charismatic leaders who carried their hopes and aspirations also exerted a compelling push for the government to step up. The War on Poverty was the natural corollary to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It is not widely known that the War on Poverty leveraged federal funds to push for desegregation – when local governments and private organizations failed to desegregate, federal money was withheld. In his address to the graduating class of Howard University in June 1965 President Johnson said as much –

“. . . . It is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.

This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity.”<sup>2</sup>

The War on Poverty's origins lies in the Kennedy White House but found expression in the prerogatives of the Johnson administration. Lyndon Johnson had seen the ravages of poverty first hand when he was a young teacher in rural Texas, and embraced the anti-poverty initiative passionately. When he declared the "unconditional war on poverty" he also added that the objective was nothing less than total victory.<sup>3</sup>

So he chose the war metaphor. It was chosen consciously, says Michael Katz, "as a unifying device to rally the nation."<sup>4</sup> Couching it in any other terms might have failed to capture the notion that poverty in a nation of plenty ultimately degraded everyone – the poor, but even the rich.

No less a person than Michael Katz, who wrote the unforgettable book *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, and died this year, could have written so

eloquently of President Johnson, “Proclaiming war on poverty was a brave, unprecedented act on the part of an American president, an expression of optimism, faith and idealism rarely encountered among politicians.”<sup>5</sup> No other President since Lyndon Johnson placed fighting poverty at the top of their domestic agenda. Even as the country was reeling from repeated bouts of economic uncertainty, it did not merit mention in the election campaigns of either Republican or Democratic candidates.

President Johnson and his Council of Economic Advisers had originally summarized the problem of poverty in structural terms. People were poor because they did not have jobs, or earned too little or received too little help from the government. But when the program was unveiled the primary focus was on services – social and educational services to equalize opportunity - and not to confront the reality of limited jobs and inadequate wages and salaries. It is due to this inability or unwillingness to address the structural underpinnings of poverty that the War finally fell short of its objective.

Besides, there never was enough money to fund all the service programs to begin with, even less when another war, Vietnam and many others that followed, sucked up government revenues and derailed its commitments to the poor and disadvantaged. The unrelenting backlash from fiscal conservatives beleaguered every effort to replenish the coffers for the service initiatives. Is it any wonder that we are still fighting the battles and skirmishes around poverty?

But there is no denying that the War on Poverty changed the landscape of American society. It did not eradicate poverty but had a profound influence on all our lives. Our society would be even more unequal without it – even more inequitable and unfair. Let us consider some numbers -

“In 2012 alone the programs associated with the War on Poverty kept over 45 million people from falling into poverty. Between 1968 and 2012 on the average 27 million people have been prevented from falling into poverty every year.

According to the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which includes tax credits and other transfer payments in calculating poverty, the percent of the population in poverty in 2012 was 16

percent compared to 25.8 percent in 1967.

Social Security lowered poverty among the elderly from 35 percent in 1960 to 14.8 percent in 2012.”<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the Affordable Care Act, the embattled progeny of the War on Poverty, about 10 million more people have health insurance coverage this year. And according to a recent report in the *New York Times*, “Obama care has actually pushed back against inequality, [by] redistributing income in the form of insurance subsidies to many of the groups that fared poorly over the last few decades.”<sup>7</sup> People with the lowest incomes benefitted the most.

The continued presence of the poor does not in any way negate the vision, the dreams and the aspirations of the architects of the War on Poverty. It does shed light, however, on the fallacy of making the program only one of providing services without addressing the roots of poverty in the structures of American capitalism, which defines and directs the trajectory and priorities of its economy.

And today as we face poverty and its fallout in multifaceted ways in people’s lives and in their communities, the question is what can we do?

### **Vanquishing Injustice Once and For All**

First and foremost we must address the structural impediments which stand in the way of realizing a more equitable society. The problem of poverty and inequality is ultimately a problem of insufficient jobs. Not just any jobs, but jobs that pay adequately so that people can live with their dignity and wellbeing intact. But the system of capitalism is not in the business of providing jobs, at least not the kind of jobs which allows people to realize their inalienable rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Not because capitalism has necessarily failed, but because it simply cannot. Capitalism is an economic system which has to continuously increase its profit margin if it is to survive, if it is to compete, if it is to drive its competitors out of the market place. Wages and salaries drain the profit margin more than anything. In its single-minded drive to garner increasing levels of profit, finding cheap regions of labor, mechanizing work, diverting more and more capital into financial speculation – anything that minimizes labor cost and even eliminates the need for it, is the preferred path. But that leaves people and

communities empty-handed. People need work to survive, to flourish to get ahead in life. Without work people lose out. Even Pope Francis speaking to the European Parliament last week recognized joblessness as the most profound cause of poverty. John Maynard Keynes and Galbraith knew that the market could not be trusted to provide economic democracy and social justice and that is why they asked for public sector investments and job creation.

Instead the government overrun by conservatives and timid liberals has facilitated a process of deepening inequality. Deregulating financial activities, legislating trade treaties which make it easier to outsource jobs, and sculpting an increasingly non-progressive tax code in which the middle class American pays the same tax rates as the richest, continued intransigence in raising the minimum wage and regularly subverting attempts to bolster transfer payments through sequesters and other crafty devices – in all these ways the government has strengthened the forces which have intensified inequality.

But don't we live in a democracy and regardless of how much money is poured into the election campaigns; is not the vote, the people's voice far stronger?

But sadly even that is embattled. Observers of the American political process have warned that American democracy is descending towards an oligarchy or rule of a few, where decisions reflect the interests of the top 1 percent. Americans are absent in this process, either by choice or under duress.

In this so called citadel of democracy – a government of the people, by the people and for the people – the people are missing – disengaged, disinterested, discouraged, disillusioned – either because they believe that government matters little in their lives, or because the choices that the election campaigns provide are considered increasingly inadequate or because they have been disenfranchised in ways reminiscent of the shameful past. Consequently, in the last mid-term elections (November 2014) only 34 percent of all eligible voters actually cast their vote.

When democracy takes a back seat, it is the poor who suffer the most. Because when the market does not provide what people absolutely need to survive and flourish, it is the government which is supposed to fill that void. But not when the role of the government and the scope of its intervention, primarily in the lives of the poor, is endlessly contested by the

increasingly brazen fiscal conservatives – a fight from which the so called liberals and progressives have shied away from, and have largely abandoned. Politics has become an arena for vicious, mean spirited partisan wrangling, not honest principled discourse.

So it is left to us. Those who are intimately familiar with the struggles of the poor and the vulnerable, to gather together and mobilize a new War on Poverty. But what will it require?

First and foremost there's a need to change society's attitude towards the poor. Their humanity has to be restored in the minds of the general public who for too long have been conditioned to think of poverty as a problem of persons with roots in personal deficiencies – moral, cultural or biological and thus undeserving of society's compassion. It is impossible to talk of poverty without bringing up race, since so much of the denigration of the poor is because they are considered mainly Black. After the most recent deaths of young Black men, killed with utter impunity, even the *New York Times* asks if this is because Black men are seen as being expendable in the urban landscape – not quite human.<sup>8</sup> To their credit Johnson and his Council of Economic Advisers firmly rejected the idea that individuals were responsible for their predicament. It is a critical first step to situate poverty as a problem of resources, political economy, power and the market place in the public mind.<sup>9</sup>

Coalitions and networks are needed to raise awareness, educate the public, tear them away from their electronic toys and shopping malls and reconnect them with their community.

We need people to understand this, advocate for and elect leaders who will fight for their interests. They need to recognize that regardless of what they have been told their well-being is aligned more with the marginalized and the poor. That when the social safety net is defended, augmented and fortified, broad segments of society stand to gain, not just the poor.

But people need real choices. They need credible political parties which put the working people, the middle class and the poor first and foremost. They need principled, honest and sincere leaders who facilitate “the arc of the moral universe to bends towards justice.”

We must engage the community – the poor and their advocates – to form coalitions and interest groups to articulate their own needs and advocate for their rights. Engaging the

community partners and building coalitions to provide needed services is particularly critical at this time when public funding is scarce and there is a shift away from societal support for human services at all levels of government. Across the country as service providers' buckle under the weight of ever growing need, individuals and organizations will have to step in to pick up the slack even more and reach out to ensure that programs for the poor do not become poor programs, as Wilbur Cohen a key architect of many War on Poverty programs cautioned.

I have learned this first hand in Lakewood and Ocean County. When Tent City was dismantled and the 120 homeless men and women were scattered into apartments and hotels throughout Ocean County – they had shelter but had lost their community, one which gave them a certain independence and dignity, camaraderie and support. In Tent City people looked out for each other. But now in the isolation of their homes they are rudderless – isolated, invisible and forgotten. No caseworkers were assigned to ensure that they had the support they needed to take care of their basic needs – transportation to food pantries, to social services, to alcohol and drug rehab, to vocational rehab, to help them learn the ropes of independent living and how to move to the next stages of life. Without such support and facing the complexities of their lives they are often precariously balanced – falling into bouts of depression, alcoholism and self-medication - conditions which intensifies their vulnerabilities and pushes them further away from pathways to re-entering society.

Many ad hoc groups and volunteers have stepped in to do the needful. And their work has been critical to often avert perils. But the need itself is too overwhelming, and no matter how well meaning the groups and volunteers might be they need the partnership of professional caregivers, social workers and human service personnel.

There are needs which have to be taken care of in the short run – these require what are called “bread and butter” coalitions. Here professionals and volunteers coordinate their efforts to provide the services that are needed on a daily basis.<sup>10</sup>

Coalitions and networks also need to be formed for raising public consciousness and citizen education.

Groups and individuals are needed to advocate for long term policy change. This would require reaching out to our elected officials and the legislative process by building and nurturing political support, reciprocity, trust, mutually supportive relationships such that advocating for the poor becomes strategic for electoral gain. As advocates we need to do our homework – and recognize that we will have to educate the decision makers and convince them of the urgency of what we propose.

No other institution has fought on behalf of workers, the poor and the forgotten as much as unions. The sorry state of our affairs today is to a large extent because of the eclipse of unions due to the unrelenting backlash that they have faced from corporate America and its neo-liberal supplicants. We need the unions to reclaim their role in advocating for their workers once again. Unions have been vilified precisely because of the credible countervailing power they embody. They need to be welcomed as crucial community partners to carry the War on Poverty to the next stage.

It is imperative to recognize that in the final analysis it is the state's responsibility to pick up the mantle of taking care of the needy in a serious, systematic way which recognizes the dignity of each individual, and gets the work done in an efficient and commonsense way. There's need for significant job creation in the public sector as Galbraith, Keynes and Myrdal had called for. A recalibrated tax code which makes people pay their due share will provide for the needed revenues.

No one chooses to be poor and homeless. They are the fallouts of a system in which profits matter more than people, and power is considered an end in itself and not a means to correct the imperfections of society. Yes, there's much to be done.

But ultimately it is just a matter of political will in which the primary driving force are the people, citizens who awaken from their slumber and demand that common sense policies be put in place to eradicate injustice – injustices rooted in class and race, in history and contemporary structures of injustice.

As he ended his commencement speech at Howard University in June 1965 President Johnson quoted the Scriptures:



“I shall light a candle of understanding in thine heart, which shall not be put out.”

Together, and with millions more, we can light that candle of understanding in the heart of all America.

And, once lit, it will never again go out.

Thank you!

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Katz, *The Underserving Poor*, p. 104, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Commencement Address at Howard University.

<sup>3</sup> Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*. P. xvii

<sup>4</sup> Katz, pp. 112-113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111

<sup>6</sup> Council of Economic Advisers, *The War On Poverty 50 Years later: A Progress Report*

<sup>7</sup> Quealy and Sanger-Katz, “The Health Care Law as Equalizer,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2014, p. Sunday Business

<sup>8</sup> Editorial Board of the New York Times, “The Meaning of the Ferguson Riots,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2014, p. A26.

<sup>9</sup> Katz, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>10</sup> Dluhy, *Building Coalitions in the Human services*, p.2.

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