

Presidents on Poverty

The Wall Street Journal

Since President Lyndon Johnson launched his War on Poverty in 1964, every president has addressed the vexing problem. Review some of their memorable words on the topic.

Lyndon B. Johnson

“This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort. It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest Nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it.

“[T]he war against poverty will not be won here in Washington. It must be won in the field, in every private home, in every public office, from the courthouse to the White House.

“The program I shall propose will emphasize this cooperative approach to help that one-fifth of all American families with incomes too small to even meet their basic needs.

“Our chief weapons in a more pinpointed attack will be better schools, and better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities to help more Americans, especially young Americans, escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls where other citizens help to carry them.

“Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children.

“But whatever the cause, our joint federal-local effort must pursue poverty, pursue it wherever it exists—in city slums and small towns, in sharecropper shacks or in migrant worker camps, on Indian Reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in the boom towns and in the depressed areas.

“Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.”

Jan. 8, 1964

“Americans today enjoy the highest standard of living in the history of mankind. But for nearly a fifth of our fellow citizens, this is a hollow achievement. They often live without hope, below minimum standards of decency.

“We cannot and need not wait for the gradual growth of the economy to lift this forgotten fifth of our nation above the poverty line. We know what must be done, and this nation of abundance can surely afford to do it

“There are two major prongs to our specific attack on poverty in America: First, to enable every individual to build his

earning power to full capacity; second, to assure all citizens of decent living standards regardless of economic reverses or the vicissitudes of human life and health.”

Jan. 20, 1964

“Because it is right, because it is wise, and because, for the first time in our history, it is possible to conquer poverty ...

“What you [Congress] are being asked to consider is not a simple or an easy program. But poverty is not a simple or an easy enemy. It cannot be driven from the land by a single attack on a single front. Were this so we would have conquered poverty long ago. Nor can it be conquered by government alone ...

“Today, for the first time in our history, we have the power to strike away the barriers to full participation in our society. Having the power, we have the duty

“We are fully aware that this program will not eliminate all the poverty in America in a few months or a few years

“Poverty is deeply rooted and its causes are many. But this program will show the way to new opportunities for millions of our fellow citizens. It will provide a lever with which we can begin to open the door to our prosperity for those who have been kept outside. It will also give us the chance to test our weapons, to try our energy and ideas and imagination for the many battles yet to come And this program is much more than a beginning. Rather it is a commitment. It is a total commitment by this President, and this Congress, and this nation, to pursue victory over the most ancient of mankind’s enemies.”

March 16, 1964

Richard Nixon

“Whether measured by the anguish of the poor themselves or by the drastically daunting burden on the taxpayer, the present welfare system has to be judged a colossal failure

“What began on a small scale in the Depression ‘30s has become a huge monster in the prosperous ‘60s. And the tragedy is not only that it is bringing states and cities to the brink of financial disaster, but also that it is failing to meet the elementary human, social and financial needs of the poor. It breaks up homes. It often penalizes work. It robs recipients of dignity. And it grows.”

Aug. 8, 1969

“I propose that the federal government pay a basic income to those American families who cannot care for themselves ... I propose that dependent families receiving such income be given good reason to go to work by making the first \$60 a month they earn completely their own, with no deductions from their benefits ... I propose that we make available an addition to the incomes of the ‘working poor,’ to encourage them to go on working and to eliminate the possibility of making more from welfare

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than from wages ...

"I propose that all employable persons who choose to accept these payments be required to register for work or job training and be required to accept that work or training ... I propose a major expansion of training and day care facilities so that current welfare recipients able to work can be set on the road to self reliance ... I propose that we also provide uniform federal payment minimums for ... the aged, the blind and the disabled."

Aug. 11, 1969

"[A]ny job for an able-bodied man is preferable to life on the public dole. No task, no labor, no work, is without dignity or meaning that allows an individual to feed and clothe and shelter himself, and provide for his family."

Dec. 28, 1971

Gerald Ford

"Unfortunately, our federal welfare system has grown like Topsy. It has, over the period of years, come from the welfare system that developed in the Depression. And there hasn't been any really honestly fashioned program that coordinates all of the programs where people who are disadvantaged get what they need.

"Now, at the present time, there are too many people who are getting welfare, food stamps, who don't need them. On the other hand, there are many of the needy who are being shortchanged. But the fault is that we've got so many programs that are proliferated all over the federal lot. And what we are going to have to come to at some point ... [is] to have one single plan.

"And let me give you an idea of what it might be, but we haven't finalized it yet. Back in 1971 there was a plan put together called a Family Assistance Plan, which did away with the traditional welfare ... I thought it was a good plan."

Feb. 8, 1976

"[I]f we are going to help the needy, we ought to concentrate our emphasis on those truly in need and not help and assist those who are not in need."

March 12, 1976

Jimmy Carter

"About 90% of the people on welfare cannot work. The other 10% can work. I am perfectly willing to give humane and adequate aid to those who are not able to work. I am not willing to support those who are able to work and won't. The separation of that will be a major thrust of my government."

Feb. 16, 1977

"[W]e've worked ... during the last three months [to assess the present welfare system ... It's much worse than we had anticipated ... This conclusion is in no way meant to disparage the great value of the separate and the individual programs enacted

by Congress over the last 15 years ... [T]hese many separate programs, taken together, still do not constitute a rational and coherent system that is adequate and fair for all the poor ... [T]he present welfare program should be scrapped entirely and a totally new system should be implemented."

"[U]nder this system every family with children and a member of the family able to work will have access to a job. Incentives will always encourage full-time and part-time private sector employment. Public training and employment programs should be provided when private employment is unavailable. A family should have more income if it works than if it doesn't work. Incentives should be designed to keep families together ... [A] decent income should be provided ... for those who cannot work or earn adequate incomes, with federal benefits, consolidated into a simple cash payment ... "

May 2, 1977

Ronald Reagan

"After we undertook our welfare reforms in California, I received a letter from a woman with several children who had been on Aid to [Families with] Dependent Children. She wrote that she had become so dependent on the welfare check that she even turned down offers of marriage. She just could not give up that security blanket that it represented. But she said she'd always known that it couldn't go on forever. So when our reforms began, she just assumed that the time had come, and that somehow she would be off welfare. So she took her children and the \$600 she had saved from her, as she put it, "so-called poverty," and went to Alaska, where she had relatives. And she was writing the letter now not to complain about our reforms but to tell me that she had a good job and that working now had given her a great deal of self-respect, for which she thanked me, and then one line that I'll never forget. She said, 'It sure beats day-time television.'

"Before the idea got around that government was the principal vehicle of social change, it was understood that the real source of our progress as a people was the private sector."

Oct. 5, 1981

"I was raised in poverty, and I remember very well what poverty is. And I remember what it was like in the Great Depression. That's one of the advantages of being my age. Now there are many of you here who have only read about it.

"[W]ith all the talk about budget cuts and so forth, if anyone will ever study what it is we've done in many of the social programs, yes, we've taken some 800,000 people off food stamps, because their incomes were about 150% or more of the poverty level. But we have four million more people getting food stamps because we redirected more effort and \$3 million more in spending on food stamps down to people that were ... at the poverty level or below.

"The same is true in many of the things—the school lunch

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programs, the aid to college students, and so forth ...

“The rich don’t need my help, and I’m not doing things to help the rich. I’m doing things that I think are fair to all the people. But what I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich.”

June 28, 1983

“We’re helping the poor as never before. There is, for example, no crueler burden on the poverty-stricken and the elderly than inflation. And by bringing inflation to a virtual standstill, we substantially increased the buying power of the poor families of America. So, too, our recent reform of the tax code will take millions of working poor people off the tax rolls entirely. Above all, we’ve built an economy that is creating millions of new jobs every year, providing growth and opportunity the poor need more than anyone.

“It is our welfare system that is one of the most serious obstacles to progress for the poor. The evidence is in, and the history is clear: Twenty years ago, with the best of intentions, the federal government began a program that would wipe out poverty in America. Today, the federal government and state governments ... spend more than \$130 billion to pursue this objective. And now, with less than half of this money, we would give every poor man, woman and child enough to lift them above the poverty line.

“During the past few years, we’ve seen serious questions raised -- in scholarly works like Mr. [Charles] Murray’s ‘Losing Ground,’ which show poverty went up as the federal government spent more to eliminate it ...

[T]he issue here is really compassion. How compassionate is a welfare system that discourages families that are economically self-reliant, that takes 6,000 pages of federal regulations to explain, and is so complete it confuses and demoralizes the poor? How compassionate is a system that robs the poor of the tools to break the cycle of dependency? ...

[T]he federal welfare system has become a poverty trap, a trap that is wreaking havoc on the very support system that the poor need most to lift themselves up and out of destitution—the family.”

Feb. 9, 1987

George H.W. Bush

“Conventional wisdom in our day once held that all solutions were in the hands of government—call in the best and the brightest, hand over the keys to the national treasury. Bigger government was better government: compassion was measured in dollars and cents, progress by price tag. We tried that course. As we ended the ’70s, our economy strangling on inflation, soaring interest rates, and unemployment, America turned away from government as ‘the answer.’

“So, conventional wisdom then turned to the genius of the

free market. We began a decade of exceptional economic growth and created 20 million new jobs. And yet, let’s face it, many of our streets are still not safe, our schools have lost their edge, and millions—millions still trudge the path of poverty. There is more to be done, and the marketplace alone can’t solve all our problems.

“Is the harsh lesson that there must always be those who are left behind? America must have but one answer, and that answer is no. There is a better way, one that combines our efforts—those of a government properly defined, the marketplace properly understood, and services to others properly engaged ...

“First, it requires the power of the free market; second, a competent, compassionate government; and third, the ethic of serving others, including what I call the Points of Light. These three powerful forces create the conditions for communities to be whole and free, and it’s time that we harnessed all three of them.”

June 12, 1991

“[T]he child care legislation I initiated has expanded the earned income tax credit so that low-income working families receiving that help can decide how best to care for their children. Providing tax relief for low-income families who work is the best way to help these families end the cycle of poverty.”

Aug. 4, 1992

“We know that in recent years the number of single-parent families has exploded. Half the kids in single-parent homes live in poverty, five times the rate of others. Well, the Berlin Wall crumbled. Russians trooped to the polls. The Poles opened a new stock exchange. We got all these things going, but we need to help these children and help these families.”

July 24, 1992

Bill Clinton

“The working poor for the first time are lifted out of poverty by not taxing them into poverty if they work hard. This is a very big deal in America. Eighteen percent of the people who work full-time in this country are living below the Federal poverty line. It is hard to lecture people, to say, ‘Well, don’t be on welfare; go to work,’ if you don’t reward work. That is something the Government can do that I think all Americans should support.”

July 26, 1993

“There’s no greater gap between our good intentions and our misguided consequences than you see in the welfare system.

“It started for the right common purpose of helping people who fall by the wayside. And believe it or not, it still works that way for some, people who just hit a rough spot in their lives and have to go on public assistance for awhile, and then they get themselves off, and they do just fine. But for many the system

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has worked to undermine the very values that people need to put themselves and their lives back on track. We have to repair the damaged bond between our people and their Government, manifested in the way the welfare system works. We have to end welfare as we know it.

"In a few days ... I will send to Congress my plan to change the welfare system, to change it from a system based on dependence to a system that works toward independence, to change it so that the focus is clearly on work ... I developed a phrase over the last few years that would end welfare as we know it by saying welfare ought to be a second chance, not a way of life. One young woman I met a few moments ago said, "It ought to be a stepping stone, not a way of life." Maybe that's even better, but you have the idea."

June 14, 1994

"The [welfare-reform] bill restores America's basic bargain of providing opportunity and demanding, in return, responsibility ... After I sign my name to this bill, welfare will no longer be a political issue. The two parties cannot attack each other over it. Politicians cannot attack poor people over it. There are no encrusted habits, systems, and failures that can be laid at the foot of someone else. We have to begin again. This is not the end of welfare reform, this is the beginning. And we have to all assume responsibility. Now that we are saying with this bill we expect work, we have to make sure the people have a chance to go to work. If we really value work, everybody in this society—businesses, nonprofits, religious institutions, individuals, those in government—all have a responsibility to make sure the jobs are there ...

"Today we are ending welfare as we know it. But I hope this day will be remembered not for what it ended but for what it began: a new day that offers hope, honors responsibility, rewards work, and changes the terms of the debate so that no one in America ever feels again the need to criticize people who are poor on welfare but instead feels the responsibility to reach out to men and women and children who are isolated, who need opportunity, and who are willing to assume responsibility, and give them the opportunity and the terms of responsibility."

Aug. 22, 1996

George W. Bush

"Lyndon Johnson advocated a War on Poverty which had noble intentions and some enduring successes. Poor families got basic health care; disadvantaged children were given a head start in life. Yet, there were also some consequences that no one wanted or intended. The welfare entitlement became an enemy of personal effort and responsibility, turning many recipients into dependents. The War on Poverty also turned too many citizens into bystanders, convinced that compassion had become the work of Government alone.

"In 1996, welfare reform confronted the first of these prob-

lems with a 5-year time limit on benefits and a work requirement to receive them. Instead of a way of life, welfare became an offer of temporary help—not an entitlement but a transition. Thanks in large part to this change, welfare rolls have been cut in half; work and self-respect have been returned to many lives. This is a tribute to the Republicans and Democrats who agreed on reform, and to the President who signed it, President Bill Clinton ...

"Welfare as we knew it has ended, but poverty has not. When over 12 million children live below the poverty line, we are not a post-poverty America. Most states are seeing the first wave of welfare recipients who have reached the law's 5-year time limit. The easy cases have already left the welfare rolls. The hardest problems remain, people with far fewer skills and greater barriers to work, people with complex human problems like illiteracy and addiction, abuse and mental illness. We do not yet know what will happen to these men and women or to their children, but we cannot sit and watch, leaving them to their own struggles and their own fate.

"This is a great deal at stake. In our attitudes and actions, we are determining the character of our country. When poverty is considered hopeless, America is condemned to permanent social division, becoming a nation of caste and class, divided by fences and gates and guards.

"Our task is clear, and it's difficult: We must build our country's unity by extending our country's blessings."

May 20, 2001

"A compassionate society must promote opportunity for all of us including the independence and dignity that come from ownership. This administration will constantly strive to promote an ownership society in America. See, we want more people owning their own home. We have a minority home ownership gap in America. I proposed a plan to the Congress, starting with helping with the poorest of poor make a down payment for a home, to close that gap. It's in the national interest that more people own their own home. We want people owning and managing their own healthcare accounts and their own retirement accounts. We want more people owning their own small business. This is an administration that understands when someone owns something, he or she has a vital stake in the future of our country."

January 15, 2004

"Welfare reform has proved a tremendous success over the past decade. By insisting on programs that require work and self-sufficiency in return for federal aid, we have helped cut welfare cases by more than half since 1996. Now we're building on that progress by renewing welfare reform with a billion dollar increase in child care funding, and new grants to support healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs."

Feb. 8, 2006