

Series Overview

Untold Stories from the Front Lines

"This is America's opportunity to bridge the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. And the question is whether America will do it. There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. But the real question is whether we have the will."

- Martin Luther King, Jr., March 31, 1968

"Our greatest failure as a nation remains our inability to deal with racism and poverty."

- Henry Hampton

On January 16, 1995, as America commemorated Martin Luther King, Jr.'s struggle to realize social and economic justice for all, public television presented a landmark series examining the poverty programs of the 1960s and '70s and their impact on those whom King fought to empower.

More than three decades ago, in the midst of unprecedented national prosperity, policymakers, the mass media and the American public made the startling "discovery" that millions across the country were living in poverty. The nation responded with federal programs, foundation and private sector initiatives and grassroots political efforts. Few chapters in American history have been more politicized, distorted and misunderstood than the "unconditional war on poverty" declared by President Lyndon Johnson during his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964.

Thirty-one years later, shortly before President Bill Clinton addressed the nation on the state of the union, *America's War on Poverty* premiered on PBS January 16, 17 and 18, 1995. The five, one-hour programs documented this historical moment of opportunity -- a time when America seemed to possess inexhaustible natural and technical resources and an abundance of goodwill.

Through the eyes of prominent political figures and poor people, activists and onlookers, the

series offers firsthand accounts from the front lines of this "war." Sargent Shriver, director of Lyndon Johnson's Office of Economic Opportunity, muses: "If you've never waged a war. . . against something like poverty, and nobody's around to talk to -- there are no graduates like military strategists to tell you what to do -- you have to do it by trial and error. That's what we did." Unita Blackwell, an organizer for a parent-run, federally funded Head Start program in Mississippi, recalls that many communities were inspired to adopt a broadbased approach to their local anti-poverty efforts: "If you don't have some health and some education and some participation, a feeling that you can govern yourself, then you'll forever stay in poverty." Karen Bolte, a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer living with a family in rural Kentucky, remembers: "I was taught as a child that if you work very hard in this country, you can get ahead. And here was a family that had worked very hard all their lives, and they had nothing, really, through no fault of their own, but [because of] the way the system was set up." Such encounters with poverty, echoed by on-screen "witnesses" throughout the series, became a call to action answered by thousands of grassroots leaders fighting to make a difference in their own neighborhoods.

From the struggles of Head Start in Mississippi to the conflicts of VISTA in Appalachia; from community organizing on the streets of Newark and in the fields of California to the formation of a national welfare rights movement, the series chronicles events across the country that capture the vitality and conflicting visions of America's War on Poverty. Asked about the hotly contested legacy of this turbulent time, Hyman Bookbinder, a member of the Poverty Task Force which drafted the legislation for Johnson's original program, says: "I am personally convinced that, in the long run, history will judge, and should judge, that the years of the War on Poverty constitute one of the noble chapters in American history -- noble because the country as a whole, starting with its president, was saying, 'We will not tolerate a situation where the many who are okay say it's not their business to be concerned about those who are not.'"

"We need to demythologize the War on Poverty, and to learn from its failures and successes," says executive producer Henry Hampton. "We believe it is important to deliver stories that confirm the enormous human potential and the lessons of leadership development that came out of the War. Our greatest failure as a nation remains our inability to deal with racism and poverty. If we are to tackle these issues today, we need good and truthful history to prepare us for choices."

A paperback companion book, [*America's New War on Poverty: A Reader for Action*](#), features contemporary personal essays, fiction and profiles of anti-poverty programs that speak to the realities of poverty today. The Community Outreach Initiative, a collaboration of the Civil Rights Project, Inc., the Lincoln Filene Center at Tufts University and Blackside, Inc., used *America's War on Poverty* as a resource for local poverty education and outreach activities in communities nationwide. In conjunction with the series, a national public opinion poll, conducted by the Americans Talk Issues Foundation and the Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes, documented contemporary American opinion about poverty and how to address it.

America's War on Poverty was presented on PBS by WGBH Boston. Funding for the series was provided by the Ford Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and public

television viewers, the Surdna Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the Cummins Engine Foundation, the Victoria Foundation, the Arca Foundation, the Boston Foundation, the Maurice Falk Medical Fund and the Ruth Mott Fund.

In This Affluent Society

Less than two months after he is sworn into office, President Lyndon Johnson chooses poverty as the focus of his administration's domestic agenda, building an ambitious vision for America's future on groundwork laid by his predecessor, John F. Kennedy. During his State of the Union address in January 1964, Johnson declares "unconditional war on poverty," launching a series of initiatives designed to end poverty forever -- not through welfare or jobs creation, but by expanding opportunities for the poor through education and training. The announcement comes during a period of unprecedented national prosperity. The economic and industrial boom following World War II has made America the wealthiest nation in the world -- but not all Americans share in the good fortune. By 1959, nearly 40 million are living in poverty, their livelihoods threatened by the very innovations that have made the nation rich. In the impoverished 10-state region of Appalachia, many find their jobs disappearing as machines play an ever-larger role in the workplace. Hundreds of Kentucky coal miners displaced by automation strike out at their former employers in 1962, bombing mining machinery to shut down production. Millions of others forced out of agricultural or mining jobs across Appalachia and the rural South head north to begin a new life in Chicago, where they face overcrowded tenements and schools, and the familiar inequities of segregation. By 1963, the unskilled jobs that have sustained the newcomers are disappearing as Chicago's economic base shifts away from manufacturing. This story is echoed in cities across the country, creating the landscape of urban poverty that will last for decades -- but in 1964, hopes are high that America can fight poverty and win. Congress passes two pieces of legislation in August 1964 that will profoundly shape America's future: the Economic Opportunity Act and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. The nation has embarked on an unprecedented anti-poverty initiative, but turmoil abroad and troubles at home present formidable obstacles to its success.

Key interviews:

Doris Kearns Goodwin, New Jersey resident; later White House fellow

Hamish Sinclair, radio reporter, community organizer in Appalachia

A.B. Hatfield, coal miner in West Virginia

Sylvester Monroe, Chicago resident

Timuel Black, Chicago resident

Mitchell Sviridoff, union organizer, Poverty Task Force member

Hyman Bookbinder, union organizer, Poverty Task Force member

Harry McPherson, aide to President Lyndon Johnson

Sargent Shriver, director of the Office of Economic Opportunity

Anndrena Belcher, Appalachian migrant to Chicago, writer

Hattie Kelly, Southern migrant, Chicago resident

Given a Chance

While providing opportunities for the poor, many War on Poverty programs are attacked by those who fear that the social, political and economic status quo is being upset. Head Start, created early in 1965 to provide poor children with adequate nutrition, health care and education, battles strong opposition at the height of its success in Mississippi, America's poorest state. The Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) is one of the first Head Start programs to receive funds, and by all Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) standards, the program achieves enormous early success. While Head Start is aimed at all poor communities, Mississippi's participants are overwhelmingly African-American. Parents are trained as teachers and administrators, and they contract with local black-owned businesses to supply the sites. Within a year, former tenant farmers, sharecroppers, laborers and domestics are running dozens of Head Start centers across the state, and the impact on black communities is electric. For the first time, poor people are educating their own children, holding well-paying jobs, registering to vote without fear of losing those jobs, building their own economic power structure and controlling hundreds of thousands of federal dollars. But in the heat of the battle for civil rights in Mississippi, conservative white forces rise up to fight CDGM, charging the organization with fiscal mismanagement and use of funds for civil rights activities. Mississippi Senator John Stennis, a powerful member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, threatens to hold up funding for the entire War on Poverty if CDGM is not defunded, and OEO Director Sargent Shriver orders an audit, hoping to defuse Stennis' investigation. The battle continues through 1967. For Shriver and President Johnson, CDGM becomes a major headache. For Mississippi's poor, it holds the promise of a better life, and they are willing to fight to preserve that hope.

Key interviews:

Hodding Carter, III, editor, *Delta Democrat Times*, Greenville, MS

Polly Greenberg, OEO Program Analyst, Southeast Region; later director of teacher and curriculum development, Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM)

William Spell, staff assistant to Mississippi Senator John Stennis

Dr. Tom Levin, psychologist, Medical Committee for Human Rights, New York; later director, CDGM

Sargent Shriver, director of the Office of Economic Opportunity

Unita Blackwell, organizer for Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and CDGM

Marian Wright Edelman, attorney, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, board member, CDGM

Lavaree Jones, MFDP, teacher and community organizer, CDGM

Hattie Saffold, teacher, CDGM

Harry McPherson, special counsel to President Lyndon Johnson

City of Promise

Community action, one of the cornerstones of Johnson's program, calls for "maximum feasible participation" by the poor in designing and administering federally funded anti-poverty programs. In Newark, New Jersey, the lessons of community action are played out against the backdrop of an urban center desperately lacking adequate housing and jobs. Here, as in other cities, residents vent emotions that underlie the national debate on poverty: the anger and despair of the poor at their powerlessness, and the anger and frustration of the middle class at having to pay for "other's mistakes." Community organizers in Newark form the United Community Corporation (UCC) and attempt to reclaim the inner city through community action. While successful programs are launched throughout the city, Newark's political establishment becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the UCC's control over federally funded services and jobs. Poor residents, on the other hand, are frustrated by low levels of government funding for community action. In October 1966, Congress passes legislation creating the Model Cities Program, which will fund the planning and rebuilding of large urban areas. Newark, by 1967 the second most-crowded city in the nation, is a prime candidate. Its central district has been deserted by the middle class; factories have been gutted by owners moving south lured by cheaper (non-union) labor; and neighborhood stores have been abandoned by aging immigrant proprietors. In the wake of a devastating urban riot, the Model Cities partnership between federal and local activists offers new hope in Newark while returning administrative control to city officials. Tensions build between the UCC and the city government, culminating in a battle

over plans to clear 155 acres of land to build a state medical school, displacing thousands of poor blacks. Faced with local political opposition, Newark's citizen activists use the Model Cities program, with the backing of the federal government, to secure compromises from city administrators. While Newark continues to struggle with housing shortages, unemployment and racial tensions, the city's poorest residents are, ironically, acquiring the power to protect their own rights and interests.

Key interviews:

Joseph Califano, chief domestic advisor to President Lyndon Johnson

Mary Smith, Newark resident, Central Ward

Donald Malafronte, administrative assistant to Newark Mayor Hugh Addonizio

James Walker, Newark resident, Central Ward

Cyril Tyson, executive director of the United Community Corporation

Junius Williams, activist for Students for a Democratic Society

Sharpe James, Newark resident, South Ward

Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), poet, playwright and Newark resident, South Ward

Louise Epperson, Newark resident, Central Ward

Edna Thomas, Newark resident, Central Ward

In Service to America

From the coal mines of Appalachia to the farmlands of California, the poor and the middle class forge partnerships in the War on Poverty that open new doors for both groups. Students and other young people, roused by the social movements of the early 1960s, are drawn by the thousands to programs such as Legal Services and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), which broaden the old American idea of voluntarism to a national scale. In May 1966, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funds the creation of California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), establishing a network of rural law offices to take on individual cases and class action suits. Lawyers forego lucrative private practices to team up with migrant farm workers to fight for better working and living conditions. CRLA forces the federal government to stop importing low-paid Mexican laborers, or braceros, who are taking jobs from American workers; protects striking California farm workers, led by Cesar Chavez, from eviction by their employer-landlords; and demands that Spanish-speaking children, labeled mentally retarded based on English-language test scores, be re-tested in their native language. In CRLA's most

dramatic battle, a farm worker confronts Governor Ronald Reagan in 1967 to roll back his proposed cuts in state health care benefits for 1.3 million poor people. Across the country, another War on Poverty program introduces middle-class Americans to a level of hardship most have never encountered. The VISTA program, a domestic version of the Peace Corps, sends its young volunteers into the country's poorest areas to provide basic community services. In coal-rich Appalachia, VISTA volunteers find themselves compelled to go beyond repairing schoolhouses and conducting book drives. The Appalachian Volunteers and local residents unite against strip-mining companies which are destroying homes, polluting the water and scarring the countryside. Both CRLA and VISTA form productive partnerships with the poor while raising significant questions in the public's mind about activities the government is funding in the name of poverty eradication.

Key interviews:

Sargent Shriver, director of the Office of Economic Opportunity

Karen Bolte Mulloy, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) volunteer in Kentucky

Joe Mulloy, Appalachian Volunteer field man, Louisville, KY

Sue Ella Easterling Kobak, Poorbottom Hollow, KY resident, Appalachian Volunteer

Edith Easterling, Poorbottom Hollow, KY resident

Elinor Constable, VISTA field supervisor

Edward T. Breathitt, governor of Kentucky (1964-68)

Jim Lorenz, founder of California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA)

Cruz Reynoso, farmworker; later director of CRLA

Judge Lucy McCabe, CRLA lawyer

Hector de la Rosa, CRLA Community Worker

Robert Gnaizda, CRLA lawyer

Lewis Uhler, director of the State of California Office of Economic Opportunity

John Ehrlichman, chief advisor for Domestic Affairs in the Nixon Administration

My Brother's Keeper

The American welfare system created in 1935 as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal was never intended to serve the staggering number of poor people who have joined the welfare rolls by 1968. Twenty-five million Americans live below the poverty line; more and more are

asking for assistance. While the War on Poverty has stressed education and training to lift families out of poverty, it has not addressed the growing welfare crisis, and American dissatisfaction with the system is evident. Welfare recipients, mostly mothers, begin to demand full benefits in protest marches and demonstrations across the country. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which by 1968 has grown to include 300 local welfare rights groups, employs a "crisis strategy," believing that overloading state and local welfare rolls will force the current system to collapse and a new, improved federal program to be created. The new Nixon Administration and the NWRO, in a surprising partnership, bring the nation to the brink of overhauling the federal welfare system and replacing it with a guaranteed annual income for all citizens. This tenuous alliance crumbles, however, when Nixon's proposed guaranteed income falls woefully short of the \$5,500 that NWRO advocates for a family of four. Through lobbying, demonstrations, media events and an efficient national network, the NWRO continues to push for a welfare system that its members believe provides adequate support for all the nation's citizens. It is an American story that gets to the heart of the country's conflicting notions about the deserving and undeserving poor. At the end of the hour, we are left with the critical issues that continue to challenge and divide us today: a welfare system under attack, families and communities facing economic crisis, and proposals that the government become the employer of last resort. As the next century looms, what will work and who deserves a hand? For America and America's poor, the clock is ticking.

Key interviews:

Roxanne Jones, welfare recipient, National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO)
Philadelphia

Tim Sampson, NWRO staff

Bob Jorgan, deputy commissioner of welfare, New York City

Johnnie Tillmon, chairperson, NWRO

Jacqueline Pope, welfare recipient, NWRO New York City

Nitza Vera, child of New York City welfare recipient

Terry Lucas Szpak, welfare recipient, NWRO Boston

Hulbert James, director of New York Citywide Welfare Rights, NWRO staff

Faith Evans, welfare recipient, NWRO New York City

Daniel Schorr, CBS reporter

Martin Anderson, aide to President Richard Nixon

John Ehrlichman, chief advisor for Domestic Affairs in the Nixon Administration

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