

Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

This issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* evokes memories of a time when all things seemed possible in America and the elimination of poverty in all its guises was within the grasp of imaginative policy, committed government, and public consensus. In July 1965, President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed his War on Poverty “not as a struggle simply to support people, to make them dependent on the generosity of others [but] to give people a chance. It is an effort to allow them to develop and use their capacities . . . so that they can share, as others share, in the promise of this nation.” He called for a war, “Not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it, and above all to eliminate it.”

It was “an investment in the most valuable of our resources — the skills and strengths of our people . . . which would return its cost manyfold to our entire economy. . . . Our history has proved that each time we broaden the base of abundance, giving more people the chance to produce and consume, we create new industry, higher production, increased earnings and better income for all.”

In the end, of course, the essential components necessary for a sustained consensus — committed government, imaginative policy, and public consensus — became casualties of the war. Almost forty years after President Lyndon Johnson summoned the nation to what undoubtedly would have been its greatest achievement, poverty is rife, resources to fight it scarce, and public will conspicuously absent. The country is mired in deficits of historic proportion, the tax system is increasingly tilted toward the wealthy, the middle class is shrinking, and the disparity in the distribution of income and wealth — the gap between those in the highest rungs of income and wealth and the lowest — has increased alarmingly since the end of the 1970s.

The data in Chuck Collins’ article “The Economic Context: The Growing Disparities in Income & Wealth,” show just how Johnson’s vision of an America more equal and thus more just has been eviscerated in the last twenty years.

The poor now inhabit an economic and social space that places them outside the country’s public discourse. Marginalized and forgotten, they have become our “unseeables.” Many countries in the first tier of developing economies have better health care systems and more comprehensive safety nets

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for their poor. It's become a cliché to talk of the 40 million plus Americans without health care coverage, of the millions of children who suffer from malnutrition, of the homeless. And yet, rather than matters improving from one administration to the next, remedial legislation gets stuck in Congress or vetoed by whatever administration is in the White House or regressive legislation eliminating benefits to the poor sails through. The concentration of income and wealth leads ineluctably to a concentration of power.

Moreover, the increasing propensity for U.S. voters to split their political choices so that Congress is controlled by one party and the White House by the other has contributed to a state of permanent political paralysis, especially in domestic matters. Change is incremental, at best, whereas the problems of inequality and poverty increase exponentially and demand commensurate action.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has become an increasingly polarized country — the red states and the blue states and the sixteen-odd “swing states” themselves divided narrowly between the reds and the blues. There is no room for a political kaleidoscope, a rainbow coalition, or for hues to merge and create their own hybrids. Our apartness grows, and so, too, our values. “The reality is that U.S. society is polarizing and its social arteries hardening,” writes Will Hutton, the British commentator on America. “The sumptuousness and bleakness of the lifestyle of the rich and the poor represents a scale of difference in opportunity and wealth that is also medieval — and a standing offense to the American expectation that everyone has an opportunity for life, liberty, and happiness.”

And thus the paradox: The country that is the self-proclaimed most powerful entity that has ever bestrode the planet, a Colossus that is unmatched and unrivalled in the depth, breadth, and reach of its economic and military power, cannot or will not eliminate the scourge of poverty within its own borders. To whom does this enormous wealth accrue? For what purpose? And what meaning *E Pluribus Unum*?

In this issue, special guest editors, Elaine Werby and Donna Haig Friedman, assemble an array of distinguished scholars, policymakers, community activists and political advocates to examine the interaction of the economic, political, and social “flows,” the undercurrents of history that stymied the war on poverty. Their articles and essays chart the beachheads that must be secured before the war can be successfully resumed; No war, they collectively remind us, is won without some battles being lost. You do not secure the future of the country if you abandon the principles of equity and equality for all, the bedrock of the constitution. Bringing democracy to countries with histories of tyranny and oppression can only be successfully achieved if those countries can see that here in the United States we practice the principles we want to export, that in a country as bountiful and blessed as ours, we empower our

downtrodden. If they see us uplifting our own poor, they will be more likely to believe that we will uplift them, too.

But we are left with a troubling framework: The American experience has been duplicated across the developed world, although the disparities are not as great. And as developing countries make their way out of the nether land of poverty, they too experience similar disparities in the distribution of income and wealth. However, on the more optimistic side of the equation there are signs, as Barney Frank cogently argues, that among the nations huddled in the global village, there is a growing consensus “that the goal of substantially diminishing global poverty will not be accomplished until those making international economic policy begin to include those people who are its intended beneficiaries.” ❀