Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set
War on Poverty

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/war-on-poverty/

Teaching Tips
The media sources in this collection introduce students to political conflicts related to the War on Poverty. The first three clips introduce the rationale for fighting the War on Poverty and lay out the general political debates between left and right about the role of government in the economy. The next three sources provide three case studies (Appalachia, Chicago, and Trinidad, CO) that illustrate the social conditions in different impoverished regions of 1960s America and provide some examples of War on Poverty programs that were enacted in this era. The final group of four clips focuses on Black Americans, illustrating the interactions between the War on Poverty and the Black Freedom Struggle. Notably, Community Action Programs became a site of conflict between Black activists and local political leaders in a battle for control of anti-poverty programs.

Background Information
Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:
- The growing economic prosperity of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s
- The Black Freedom Struggle
- The Great Society programs established under President Lyndon Johnson

Essential Question
Why are people poor and what is the role of the state in alleviating poverty?
General Discussion Questions

- What were the theories about the causes of poverty and social mobility that shaped War on Poverty programs? Do you think the designers of these programs correctly identified these causes?
- Why did the federal government want Community Action Programs to be federally funded but locally administered with “maximum feasible participation” of poor people? What were some of the challenges that emerged in American communities as the CAPs were implemented across the country?
- What was the relationship between the War on Poverty and the Black Freedom Struggle? Why might some historians argue that the battle for control of Community Action Programs shaped the growth of the Black Power movement?
- Do you believe that any American can rise out of poverty through their own efforts, or does the government need to equalize opportunity and remove structural barriers to upward mobility?
- What steps do you think the government should (or shouldn’t) take to help Americans rise out of poverty?

Classroom Activities

1) The Political Debate about the War on Poverty

Ask students to watch and listen to the following sources:
- Michael Harrington Describes Poverty in The Other America (1962)
- Lyndon Johnson Declares an “Unconditional War on Poverty” (1964)
- Economists Debate Government Intervention and Poverty (1966)

Ask students the following discussion questions:

What are some arguments that Harrington and Johnson are making about why poverty is a serious social problem that the government needs to fix?

In these clips, you heard the views of various left-wing politicians and social commentators. What seem to be some theories about the causes of poverty and social mobility that shaped War on Poverty programs?

What seem to be some right-wing criticisms about using government policy as a means of addressing poverty?
2) Impoverished Regions and Community Action Programs

Ask students to watch the following sources:

- Fighting the War on Poverty in Appalachia (1964)
- Fighting the War on Poverty in Urban Chicago (1966)
- The Challenge of Local Administration in Community Action Programs (1965)

Ask students the following discussion questions:

According to the clips, what are some of the social and economic problems that contributed to poverty? What are some of the ways that War on Poverty programs sought to address poverty?

Why do you think the Johnson Administration wanted Community Action Programs to be community-run with “maximum feasible participation” by poor people? What reasons are articulated in the clips? Do you suspect that there were any other motivations that weren’t explicitly stated in the clips?

Do you think the locally-run CAP’s were a good way to tackle the problem of poverty? What do you see as the value of these programs? What do you suspect were the limitations of these programs?

3) The War on Poverty and the Black Freedom Struggle

Ask students to watch the following source:

- LBJ Argues That “Freedom Is Not Enough” for African Americans (1965)

Ask students the following discussion questions:

What does Lyndon Johnson mean when he says that “freedom is not enough”? What point is he making in his analogy about asking someone to run a “race” when they were just recently “hobbled by chains”? Why might some people argue that War on Poverty programs represented an effort to create “equal opportunity” and “equality of result”?

Next, ask students to watch the following sources:

- Head Start Meets the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi (1966)
- Black Activists Rally Against the “Power Structure” in Los Angeles (1966)

Ask students the following discussion questions:

How are the dynamics of these two conflicts similar? How are they different? How can you relate these clips to the emergence of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s?

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Finally, ask students to listen to the following source:

- Bayard Rustin Offers an Alternative: The “Freedom Budget” (1967)

Ask students the following discussion questions:

Based on the clip description and the clip itself, what is Rustin’s critique of the War on Poverty and why would a “Freedom Budget” be more effective? What is his critique of the actions of “Black militants” who are fighting for control of anti-poverty programs?

Extension Activity: If you have time for an extension activity, have students write a “Letter to the Editor” channeling a particular perspective about Black community involvement in War on Poverty programs. Have students choose one of the following perspectives:

A. a supporter of Lyndon Johnson explaining why the War on Poverty is essential to granting opportunity and meaningful social equality to Black people
B. a member of the CDGM in Mississippi arguing that the federal government must restore Head Start funding
C. a Los Angeles activist protesting the firing of Opal Jones
D. a local government official arguing that professionals, rather than community activists, should be shaping the direction of CAPs.
E. a supporter of Bayard Rustin making the case that Black activists should fight for the enactment of a “Freedom Budget” rather than local control of CAPs

4) Assessing the War on Poverty

On the White House lawn in 1987, President Ronald Reagan quipped that “in the sixties we waged a war on poverty, and poverty won.” This is just one example of how the arguments over War on Poverty programs continued long after Johnson left office. Historians and politicians continue to debate: Did the War on Poverty work? Did Community Action Programs, Medicaid, Head Start, Food Stamps, and other anti-poverty programs succeed in improving the lives of impoverished Americans? If you have time, a useful culminating activity would be to allow students to grapple with these questions. After they have watched at least some of the above clips, have students read the following reports that were published near the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty:

- “Chart Book: The War on Poverty at 50”, by the left-wing Center for Budget and Policy Priorities
- “The War on Poverty after 50 Years”, by the right-wing Heritage Foundation

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Here are some questions you could have students discuss after they are done reading:

- According to the CBPP, what has happened to poverty in America since the 1960s? Why might government programs associated with the War on Poverty be partially responsible for these changes?
- What criticisms are leveled against government anti-poverty programs in the Heritage Foundation reports? What are some of the negative developments in American life that the authors believe are partially the result of the misguided government policy?
- The CBPP source uses the federal government’s new “Supplemental Poverty Measure” in their report. Why might the authors argue that this measure is a better way of understanding the impact of government policy? Why might the authors of the Heritage Foundation disagree with the use of that metric?
- Based on what you learned from the clips above and what you read in these two reports, what do you think? Did War on Poverty programs reduce poverty rates? What government programs do you think are most helpful to impoverished Americans? What programs are least helpful?