



University of Pennsylvania  
**Scholarly Commons**

---

CUREJ - College Undergraduate Research  
Electronic Journal

College of Arts and Sciences

---

1-2-2007

# Lyndon Johnson's Unfinished Legacy: The 1964 State of the Union Address and the "War on Poverty"

Jordan M. Grossman

*University of Pennsylvania*, [jordang@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:jordang@sas.upenn.edu)

---

This paper is posted at Scholarly Commons. <http://repository.upenn.edu/curej/58>  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Lyndon Johnson's Unfinished Legacy: The 1964 State of the Union Address and the "War on Poverty"

## **Abstract**

Despite Lyndon Johnson's impressive record as a congressman and senator, the ruthless legislative effectiveness and extraordinary expansion of domestic activity that would later characterize his time in the Oval Office did not appear inevitable, or even likely, to most of the country in late November 1963. With an assortment of stalled legislation remaining from his predecessor and a host of Kennedy advisors kept on at the White House to maintain the appearance of stability, it appeared at the outset that the Johnson administration would simply be an encore performance of Camelot, with the star being portrayed by a miscast understudy. Yet, in the seven weeks between the Dallas tragedy and the president's annual message to Congress, Johnson's bold and personal embrace of an evocative issue, considerable political skills, and dogged lobbying efforts primed the dramatic opening act of a new presidency and Johnson's personal legacy: the declaration of an "unconditional war on poverty" in the 1964 State of the Union address. This paper demonstrates that Johnson had mutually reinforcing goals for the speech which introduced his wide-ranging moral crusade to eradicate poverty: asserting his administration as independent from Kennedy's while channeling residual support for the slain president into political momentum for his own agenda. It concludes with a discussion of why Johnson's "War on Poverty" legacy endures, yet remains incomplete.

## **Keywords**

poverty, speech, address, state of the union, 1964, january 8, lyndon johnson, war on poverty, kennedy, sorensen, legacy, jordan grossman, Humanities, Communication, D. David Eisenhower, Eisenhower, D. David

## **Disciplines**

Social Influence and Political Communication

**LYNDON JOHNSON'S UNFINISHED LEGACY**  
*The 1964 State of the Union Address and the "War on Poverty"*

**JORDAN GROSSMAN**  
**JANUARY 2, 2007**

On January 8, 1964, just seven weeks after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy shocked the nation, Lyndon Baines Johnson delivered his first State of the Union address. Prior to this message, the only major speech he had delivered to a national audience was a special message to a joint session of Congress in the days after the tragedy, in which he reluctantly assumed the presidency and vowed to execute dutifully the program of his predecessor.<sup>1</sup> Unknown to much of the country when he took office, the plain-speaking former Senate majority leader from Texas had persuaded a number of luminaries from Kennedy's staff to remain temporarily in the new administration in order to maintain the appearance of continuity in the tumultuous period.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Theodore Sorensen, who crafted many of Kennedy's most famous turns of phrase, became the primary author of Johnson's imminent State of the Union. Additionally, an assortment of stalled Kennedy legislation awaited Johnson in his first days as chief executive – more than enough to fill the address that would open the coming election year. Thus, at the outset, it appeared that the Johnson administration – and the 1964 State of the Union in particular – would simply be an encore performance of Camelot, with the star being portrayed by a miscast understudy. Despite Johnson's impressive record as a congressman and senator, the ruthless legislative effectiveness and extraordinary expansion of domestic activity in the form of the Great Society that would later characterize Lyndon Johnson's term in the Oval Office did not, by any means, appear inevitable, or even likely, to most of the country in late November 1963. Yet, in the seven weeks between the Dallas tragedy and the annual message to the Congress, Johnson's bold and personal embrace of an evocative issue, considerable political skills, and dogged lobbying efforts primed the dramatic opening act

---

<sup>1</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 180-182.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

of a new presidency and Johnson's personal legacy: the declaration of an "unconditional war on poverty."

This paper is divided into two main sections: (I) description of the preparations and events that made the announcement of a "War on Poverty" possible and (II) analysis of a series of drafts of the State of the Union message in which the declaration is made. The chaotic nature of the time period examined here – spanning from Johnson's first full day in office, November 23, 1963, to the date of his first State of the Union message, January 8, 1964 – cannot be overemphasized. While preparations for modern state of the union addresses typically involve a systematic collection of policy ideas, a coordinated team of speechwriters, and a well-organized trail of memorandums and speech drafts preserved for posterity, the development of the 1964 State of the Union consisted of haphazard solicitations of policy suggestions, multiple speechwriters independently composing starkly different drafts, and a virtually indecipherable paper trail that spans the presidential libraries of two presidents and the papers of a variety of advisors and administration officials, with oral histories of firsthand participants plugging many, but not nearly all, of the holes in the narrative. While these circumstances present self-evident disadvantages, they also offer a unique opportunity. Instead of simply offering an interpretation of readily available and methodically stored archival documents, piecing together the actual narrative itself through diffuse sources is a critical facet of the historical and communication analysis included in this paper. The thematic analysis of the drafting of the speech found in Part II particularly reflects this approach.

This paper will demonstrate that Johnson had mutually reinforcing goals for the speech which would introduce his wide-ranging moral crusade to eradicate poverty: asserting his administration as independent from Kennedy's while channeling residual support for the slain

president into political momentum for his own agenda. He strove to achieve these goals by drawing on principles from both ends of the ideological spectrum – as he had throughout his career of consensus-building in Congress – to ensure the resonance of his message and a convincing legislative victory. Yet, two issues regarding the actual development of policy for the “War on Poverty” emerged in his otherwise successful quest. First, because of Johnson’s rhetorical imperatives and the rapidly approaching deadline of the address, the policy was formulated without adequate review of all its implications. Second, in the translation from policy proposal to speech text, the policy facet was fundamentally altered in such a way that undercut its long-term aims. Thus, although Johnson’s political maneuvering and rhetorical tactics thrust poverty onto the national agenda in an enduring way, his hurried and muddled development of policy has resulted in a legacy in the field of poverty that remains incomplete.

## **I. Preparing to Announce a “War on Poverty” in the State of the Union**

### **A. Background**

*“Why, at this particular point are we going ahead with a poverty program?”*

In the 1964 State of the Union message, President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed:

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.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this urgent and eloquent announcement, the origins of the “War on Poverty” and the rationale for enacting it at “this particular point”<sup>4</sup> were not entirely clear. Contrary to the

---

<sup>3</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

conception of other great national initiatives, the affected constituency in this case had not employed lobbyists to pressure the political apparatus to enact the wide-ranging crusade, nor did overwhelming public demand for such an initiative exist before the president's declaration. In fact, prior to 1964, the index of both the *Congressional Record* and the *Public Papers of the President* lacked the term "poverty" as a heading, signifying that Americans had never before considered "poverty," on its own, a pressing element of the national agenda.<sup>5</sup> As Representative Robert Taft, Jr., a Republican from Ohio, asked Sargent Shriver, President Johnson's "personal chief of staff for the War on Poverty,"<sup>6</sup> during hearings on the legislative formulation of the "War":

**Taft:** I thought we had been working against poverty since the beginning of this country. I thought many of the programs, the Manpower Development and Training Act, vocational education, unemployment compensation, all kinds of measures of this sort were trying to keep our economy strong... Why, at this particular point are we going ahead with a poverty program as such in an omnibus bill?

**Shriver:** It is a question of timing... There is a time when the timing is right to bring things together to go ahead and solve the problem.<sup>7</sup>

For the most part, Shriver's response was correct. In 1964, for the first time in years, the United States enjoyed a brief respite from the immediate tensions of the Cold War. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis and the ratification of the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963, conventional wisdom held that America could slightly relax its intense focus on the Soviet Union and turn inward to address neglected domestic matters.

Yet, Johnson's emphasis on poverty was not simply a product of the timing of his ascension to the presidency. The drastic degree to which President Johnson's rhetoric shifted

---

<sup>4</sup> *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on the War on Poverty Program of the House Education and Labor Committee, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session (Mach 17, 1964), 99.

<sup>5</sup> James L. Sundquist, ed., *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives From Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Sundquist, *On Fighting Poverty*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, hearings (Mach 17, 1964), 99.

away from foreign policy represented a notable and deliberate shift from President Kennedy. Kennedy, who had few domestic accomplishments in his short tenure, often used foreign policy rhetoric to implicitly weigh in on domestic concerns. His references to the “common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself” in his inaugural address, for example, implied a domestic undercurrent.<sup>8</sup> The “War on Poverty,” however, was an explicitly and exclusively domestic program. Moreover, a variety of unresolved issues requiring legislative action, such as the civil rights movement and a stalled tax cut, already cluttered the domestic agenda. Thus, a shift toward a domestic focus in American politics does not sufficiently explain the addition of “poverty” to the nation’s lexicon, much less a metaphorical declaration of war against it. “Timing” did play a role in fostering a sense of urgency for a major federal poverty program, but not in the abstract sense that Shriver implies. Rather, the new president recognized a unique opportunity to simultaneously distinguish his administration from Kennedy’s while benefiting from the grief that endured from the slain president’s death by shrewdly channeling the nation’s sense of loss into support for the launch of his own moral crusade.

### **B. Gaining Presidential Approval for a Poverty Program** ***“That’s my kind of program...Move full speed ahead”***

A variety of scholarly works and primary historical materials examine the beginnings of the “War on Poverty.” As Kermit Gordon, Director of the Bureau of the Budget when Johnson ascended to the presidency, recalls, “There have been a number of versions of the origins of the OEO idea of the war on poverty – all of them partly accurate, partly inaccurate, in my recollection.”<sup>9</sup> In particular, accounts of President Kennedy’s role in initiating the poverty

---

<sup>8</sup> John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Transcript, Kermit Gordon Oral History Interview IV, April 8, 1969, page 3, LBJ Library.



program suffer such mixed degrees of accuracy, as former members of his administration sometimes exaggerate his relatively minor influence on the formation of an attack on poverty.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for example, details a series of events towards the end of Kennedy's life to support the thesis that a poverty program "would be the centerpiece in [Kennedy's] 1964 legislative recommendations."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as many have reported, confronting unmitigated poverty in America while campaigning in West Virginia during the 1960 primary campaign deeply disturbed Kennedy. In addition, a series of articles by Homer Bigart in the *New York Times* that highlighted the problem, and the novels *The Other America* by Michael Harrington and *The Affluent Society* by Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith (an eventual member of the Kennedy administration), further aroused Kennedy's interest in the issue.<sup>11</sup> In response, according to Gordon, Kennedy marshaled existing programs and funds into a "crash program" to aid the eastern region of Kentucky – a particularly disadvantaged area highlighted by the *Times* articles.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, he instructed his chief economic counselor, Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA), to assemble facts and figures on the poverty problem in the United States. Heller, who was keenly interested in the issue and would play a critical role throughout the formation of the "War on Poverty," devoted a significant amount of staff to researching the problem and brought Robert Lampman, an economist at the University of Wisconsin who had studied poverty in the America for years, to the CEA in the summer of 1963.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in oral history interviews, Heller says that in May and June of 1963, he "had difficulty getting [Kennedy] on board, so to speak" with plans for a poverty program.<sup>14</sup> On

---

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 1,012.

<sup>11</sup> Sundquist, *On Fighting Poverty*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon Oral History Interview IV, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Oral History Interview IV, 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Transcript, Walter Heller Oral History Interview I, February 30, 1970, pages 19-20, LBJ Library.

November 19, 1963, in Heller's last meeting with Kennedy before the assassination, Kennedy did commit to "something in the line of an attack on poverty," yet, according to Heller:

He was saying, "I'm committed to doing something," but he did not at that point have a program. There was not a poverty program at that time. We [CEA] were in the process of trying to pull one together. His own thinking, I'm sure, had not gone beyond the vague concept of doing something that would focus specifically on the roots of poverty.<sup>15</sup>

Just a few days later, Heller met with Johnson on his first full day as president and related the November 19<sup>th</sup> discussion with Kennedy regarding the preliminary exploration of a poverty program. In contrast to Kennedy, Johnson's reaction was immediate and unequivocally favorable:

That's my kind of program; I'll find money for it one way or another. If I have to, I'll take away money from things to get money for people... Give it the highest priority. Push ahead full tilt.<sup>16</sup>

Johnson's memoirs provide some context for his instantaneous decision to pursue such a sweeping problem. He believed three distinct conditions were required for radical social change, such as a national offensive to eradicate poverty, to be successful in America: "a recognition of need, a willingness to act, and someone to lead the effort."<sup>17</sup> He personally considered the need to ameliorate poverty, "one of the most stubbornly entrenched social ills in America... growing to overwhelming and unmanageable size," self-evident.<sup>18</sup> Second, in terms of action, he reasoned that the assassination of President Kennedy, "created the impetus to send the country surging forward."<sup>19</sup> With his political skills, Johnson felt he could adeptly channel the country's grief into a commitment to his chosen moral crusade. As he famously said:

---

<sup>15</sup> Heller Oral History Interview I, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Accounts of exactly what Johnson said differ slightly from source to source. This quotation amalgamates Heller's and Johnson's personal recollections: Heller Oral History Interview I, 20; Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency 1963-1969* (Austin: HEC Public Affairs Foundation, 1971), 71.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* .

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 70-71.

Everything I had ever learned in the history books taught me that martyrs have to die for causes. John Kennedy had died. But his ‘cause’ was not really clear. That was my job. I had to take the dead man's program and turn it into a martyr's cause. That way Kennedy would live on forever and so would I.<sup>20</sup>

Third, regarding the stewardship of the change effort, Johnson felt:

[T]he 35 million American poor...had no voice and no champion. Whatever the cost, I was determined to represent them. Through me they would have an advocate and, I believed, new hope...When I got through no one in this country would be able to ignore the poverty in our midst.<sup>21</sup>

Johnson would pursue this Herculean task through a massive rhetorical and political campaign which, contrary to past programs, would single out the impoverished as the focus instead of merely including them as one group among many to benefit from a policy. As Kennedy’s genuine but unfocused interest indicates, the vicious cycle of poverty that perpetually plagues portions of the United States easily evokes sympathy and token measures but rarely arouses comprehensive action. Typically, a well-funded Washington lobby, a determined bloc of lawmakers, and a vocal constituency are necessary for a social issue of this magnitude to gain sufficient traction for a meaningful bill to pass in Congress. However, Lyndon Johnson possessed legendary skills through which he managed to build consensus and develop successful legislation in matters most had never considered politically feasible. It is clear that from his first days as president, Johnson was determined to use these unique political capacities to ensure that Congress addressed the cause of poverty in America.

### **C. Developing Policy for the “War on Poverty”**

***“It had to be big and bold and hit the whole nation with real impact”***

#### **i. The Initial Proposal: Heller and Gordon Seize Upon Community Action**

---

<sup>20</sup> Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 185.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 71-72.

After gaining the president’s unqualified support at their initial meeting, Walter Heller and his CEA staff rapidly began formulating the basic framework for a long-term “attack on poverty.”<sup>22</sup> By December 20, 1963, they produced a 40-page memorandum outlining such a program for Johnson, his advisors, and Theodore Sorensen, the chief speechwriter for the 1964 State of the Union message.<sup>23</sup> In it, they emphasized the cyclical nature of intransigent poverty, noting that “evidence is mounting that the most important breeder of poverty is poverty itself...the legacy of poverty from parents to children is real.”<sup>24</sup> As a result, they suggested “as the over-riding objective...the prevention of poverty.”<sup>25</sup> To accomplish such a goal, the program would necessarily have to plan for the long-term and actively study the problem in-depth even as measures were taken to eliminate it. Thus, the memo insists, a poverty program should be initiated imminently, but “we must, as an integral part of [the] program, devote more resources to the measurement and understanding of poverty.”<sup>26</sup> Throughout, the program is labeled a “10-year attack on poverty,” reinforcing the long-term outlook of the policy team.

Importantly, the memo also reflected Johnson’s demand for “the development of a new concept.”<sup>27</sup> In his memoirs, Johnson recalls, “I didn’t want to paste together a lot of existing approaches. I wanted original, inspiring ideas.”<sup>28</sup> This made the president’s emphasis on the poverty program’s ability to rouse the attention of the American people and to muster sufficient support to press Congress to act unmistakably clear. Under pressure to conceive this type of new concept in time for preparations for the State of the Union message, the “poverty team” – as Johnson refers to Heller and Gordon in his memoirs – seized upon the “Coordinated Community

---

<sup>22</sup> Memo, Walter Heller to Theodore Sorensen, 12/20/63, “Poverty Program,” Legislative Background: Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Box 1, LBJ Library.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Memo, Heller to Sorensen, 12/20/63, pages 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Memo, Heller to Sorensen, 12/20/63, page 13.

<sup>26</sup> Memo, Heller to Sorensen, 12/20/63, page 16.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 74.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Action Program” in late December. They adapted this concept from a small experimental effort to combat juvenile delinquency employed at the time by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy’s Justice Department.<sup>29</sup> In his oral history, Gordon recalls in detail the rationale that emerged during the formation of the poverty program to support the community action concept:

First of all, we saw a large numbers of federal grant programs to states and cities in the fields of education, training, employment, public assistance, housing, etc. A large number of categorical programs that were operating essentially independently of each other. The lines went from bureau chief in Washington to the bureau chief in the state Capitol or his counterpart in the city. These programs were narrowly conceived...they were quite narrow programs, and they operated almost independently of each other. They did not treat the person in trouble as a person. They treated him as somebody who needed training, or somebody who needed help getting a job, or somebody who needed some health care, or somebody who needed public assistance—but never as a person. Out of these reviews that we did at the time we came to feel very emphatically that there was something wrong with the system that put out so many kinds of one-dimensional assistance activities into the states and cities, and yet seemed to be accomplishing so little and seemed in so many cases to be operating in conflict with each other; or if not in conflict with each other, at least without contact with each other. Out of this perception came the notion that the problems of the poverty areas in the cities were highly complex, differed from city to city, differed in racial composition, differed in employment opportunities, differed in age groups, differed in the capacity of the city government to deal with the problem. Out of this came the notion that the monkey ought to be put on the back of the city itself to analyze and diagnose the characteristics of its own poverty problem and to design a concerted and coordinated attack on the poverty problem in the city with federal assistance. Our picture at that time was a picture of community action agencies, which we thought at the beginning would be dominated by local government, but would have what involved representatives of a wide range of private groups as well – business groups, non-profit social groups, etc., dominated by local government – that would act in effect as the coordinating body for all these categorical federal programs... So we thought of community action as first involving a self-analysis of the nature and dimensions of the problem by responsible elements in the city. Secondly, we thought of community action as a coordinating effort to bring to bear the categorical tools and facilities and funds the federal government provided to attack these problems.

Thus, the innovative program they devised deliberately repudiated the diffuse, imprecise effects of the broad federal welfare programs often associated with liberal social justice

---

<sup>29</sup> Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 107-119.

initiatives. Instead, it emphasized self-sufficiency, establishing the prevention of “the tragedy of dependency from befalling youth as they become adults” as a chief objective, and it drew upon principles more typically associated with conservatives, such as local determination and decentralized planning in focusing on specific local areas of poverty and coordination between federal, state, local, and private programs.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it made clear the futility of the federal government attempting to accomplish its goals for preventing poverty on its own. As the December 20<sup>th</sup> memo notes, “the contribution that voluntary groups can make is great, if not critical, for the success of many programs hinges on public understanding and support. Federal measures to attack poverty should encourage the active participation of local, non-governmental groups.”<sup>31</sup>

Promoting these conservative facets of the proposal became an overt element of the political strategy for the “War on Poverty,” as an undated memo by top Johnson aide Bill Moyers entitled “Why Should Conservatives Support the War on Poverty” reveals.<sup>32</sup> In it, Moyers emphasizes that the poverty program is “business-like” as it is essentially an investment in the future American workforce which will return thousands to the national economy, driven by local initiative and joint public and private sector cooperation as opposed to being a “Federal handout,” and is “financially sound” because it is funded entirely by cutting back waste or low priority items in the budget. Johnson frequently referenced these qualities in his efforts to build broad political support for the program. (This aspect of Johnson’s efforts is explored further in section I-D.)

Thus, Johnson’s demand for a new, original initiative with wide appeal yielded a promising policy concept. Yet, the “poverty team” embraced coordinated community action only

---

<sup>30</sup> Memo, Heller to Sorensen, 12/20/63, page 22.

<sup>31</sup> Memo, Heller to Sorensen, 12/20/63, page 15.

<sup>32</sup> Memo, Moyers, “Why Conservatives Should Support the War on Poverty.”

conditionally, as they felt that the deadline posed by the State of the Union message prevented adequate review of the program and its implications.<sup>33</sup> As James L. Sundquist, a member of the Task Force which eventually wrote the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, stresses, “*They did not know and had no time to find out exactly how community action was in fact working*” in the few areas that had actually experimented with it (emphasis in original).<sup>34</sup> As a result, though the flexible new program clearly had promise, the December 20<sup>th</sup> memo firmly states that the idea should initially be pursued in a “limited number of demonstration areas” in order to determine how to most efficiently and effectively coordinate a joint federal-local poverty program *before* committing substantial resources to it.<sup>35</sup> As Gordon recalls in his oral history:

I remember arguing very, very strongly that there ought to be no money for program activity for the first year; that the first year ought to be spent in organizing community action groups and financing studies, diagnoses, and analyses of local poverty problems and the design of local programs. The first year as a planning year, with the federal government picking up the tab for the planning effort, but no substantial program money.<sup>36</sup>

## **ii. Discussions at the LBJ Ranch: Johnson’s Input Compels Changes**

Heller and Gordon traveled to the LBJ Ranch with the president the following week in order to incorporate his input into the initial framework for the poverty program prior to the State of the Union. Though President Johnson embraced the community action concept, he flatly rejected the suggestion that it be pursued on a limited or experimental basis. Convinced such a tactic would diminish the rhetorical and legislative appeal of the poverty program, Johnson recalls in his memoirs that he “urged them to broaden their scope. I was certain that we could not start small and hope to propel a program through the Congress. It had to be big and bold and hit the

---

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 165.

<sup>34</sup> James Sundquist, *Politics and Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1968), 140, in Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 165.

<sup>35</sup> Memo, Heller to Sorensen, 12/20/63.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon Oral History Interview IV, 8-9.

whole nation with real impact.”<sup>37</sup> This signified a key moment in the formation of the policy for the War on Poverty, as Johnson refused to reduce the rhetorical or political value of the grand proposal he sought to a mere “pilot venture” simply to conform to prudent policymaking techniques or time constraints. For him, coordinated community action met the only criteria that mattered: it neatly unified the poverty proposal in a bold, dramatic way.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, Johnson decided that:

this plan had the sound of something brand new and even faintly radical...Gordon and Heller...warned me of the risks...that might make the outcome uncertain. I was willing to take the chance. Community participation would give focus to our efforts.<sup>39</sup>

Though conflicting accounts of its conception exist, Johnson claims in his memoir that the slogan “War on Poverty” was adopted during these discussions at the LBJ Ranch as well, and for similar rhetorical and political reasons. Regardless of the true origins of the phrase, the justifications Johnson provides for choosing it are illustrative of his views of the announcement of a “War on Poverty” in the State of the Union address and the ramifications of that formulation in the speech drafting process. Johnson says he acknowledged the significant disadvantages of using the military metaphor – its connotations of identifiable victories and defeats were misleading for a program whose chief objective was prevention of an abstract state of existence. Yet, he decided the sense of drama and importance conveyed in the powerful synecdochic statement outweighed its possible drawbacks. Johnson recalls that, ultimately, he “wanted to rally the nation, to sound a call to arms which would stir people in the government, in private

---

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 73-74.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 74-75.



industry, and on the campuses to lend their talents to a massive effort to eliminate the evil” of poverty.<sup>40</sup>

**iii. A Policy Shift: Johnson’s Rhetorical and Political Imperatives are Incorporated**

Consequently, the “poverty team” quickly made striking revisions to the proposed program prior to the State of the Union address to reflect the president’s orders. On January 6, 1964, Heller and Gordon sent a second memo outlining the poverty program to Sorensen – circulated also to the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Interior, and Health, Education, and Welfare – that reflected the primacy of Johnson’s “big and bold” criteria.<sup>41</sup> It called for roughly \$500 million in new federal funding and \$625 million in existing and other programs for community action programs, compared to a total of \$125 million for limited coordinated community action programs in the December 20, 1963 memo. In fact, in a vivid illustration of the primacy of rhetorical and political tactics over calculated policy consideration, Johnson subsequently called Gordon to insist that he wanted “501 million [dollars]. I want more than 500 million. And I think you’ve got it equal to 500, haven’t you? ... Because what’s a million between friends?”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, all mentions of the necessity of a trial period and a limited number of demonstration areas were eliminated.<sup>43</sup> Gordon later recalls that, because of the need to persuade Congress to pass the War on Poverty and the considerable appropriations the president desired for the program, the Johnson administration deemed the “slow working kind of notion [community action] as we had it” as:

---

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Memo, Walter Heller to Theodore Sorensen, 1/6/64, “Memorandum for the Honorable Ted Sorensen,” Papers of LBJ: Welfare (Ex We9 11/22/63-3/31/65), WHCF, Box 25, LBJ Library

<sup>42</sup> Max Holland, ed., *The Presidential Recordings: Lyndon B. Johnson, the Kennedy Assassination, and the Transfer of Power, November 1963-January 1964, Volume 3* (Charlottesville: Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2005), 208.

<sup>43</sup> Memo, Heller to Sorensen, 1/6/64.

politically impossible. Once the sales pressure to get Congress to accept the program was mounted, the pressure was so strong that the Administration felt it simply had to go ahead and try to make tracks and achieve results quickly...Having sold the program as a matter of the highest urgency, it would have then been very difficult to say we needed a year for planning.<sup>44</sup>

#### **D. Johnson's Adept Political Maneuverings**

***"Why anyone should hate an anti-poverty program, I don't know"***

It is critical to note that President Johnson did not simply latch on to a lofty domestic program and expect an eloquent speech to propel it to success, however. As Sundquist states, "Whatever history may judge to have been its legislative merits, the political merits of the war on poverty in 1964 cannot be denied."<sup>45</sup> This reflects Johnson's clever and multifaceted campaign for his proposal prior to its announcement which made opinion makers and ideological constituencies stakeholders in its success when he introduced it in his State of the Union address. In signature Lyndon Johnson fashion, he manipulated political reaction by emphasizing different aspects of the plan to different ideological interests. As political scientist Stephen Skowronek observes:

[I]t was a war to be waged without enemies...This program was conceived as an economic development measure, a boon to business; it was also a job-creating measure, a boon to labor; it was a race-neutral measure, a "substitute for the high emotional costs of fighting race prejudice"; it would benefit the South as well as the North, attacking rural as well as urban poverty.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, Johnson believed that, by maximizing his efforts to build consensus with a proposal in which political actors across the ideological spectrum would be invested, he could successfully launch a moral crusade against poverty that would distinguish his presidency without alienating supporters of John Kennedy.

---

<sup>44</sup> Gordon Oral History Interview IV, 8-9.

<sup>45</sup> Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 145 in Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 172.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1993), 346-7.

### **i. The Prologue: Freeing the Tax Cut from Senator Byrd**

Surveying the political climate after ascending to the presidency, Johnson determined that he needed to pair his poverty program with an economic stimulus in the form of the stalled tax cut. In his reflections upon early preparations for the State of the Union, top Johnson aide Jack Valenti says, “It was his general feeling, after discussing with Walter Heller and Kermit Gordon...that all that President Johnson wanted to do would be hinged to the tax cut.”<sup>47</sup> Consequently, he made his first official order of business a meeting with conservative Democrat Harry Byrd. Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Byrd had steadfastly prevented consideration of the tax bill because he believed the federal budget was too large to justify tax relief. According to Valenti’s firsthand account, Johnson invited Byrd to lunch with a calculated plan to assuage these concerns in order to secure the bill’s release for a vote. Johnson began his pitch with entreaties that the tax cut was vital to his legislative program, yet, unsurprisingly, Byrd held firm in his convictions. Johnson then confided, somewhat misleadingly, that in all likelihood, he felt he could only lower the budget to \$103 billion or \$104 billion from the expected figure of between \$107 million and \$109 million. As expected, Byrd told Johnson these figures were still too high. Johnson used these queries to establish a contrast with his actual proposal, which he disguised in offhand, hypothetical language. Johnson mused to Byrd about the possibilities for a budget that were less than \$100 billion. Conventional wisdom at the time suggested that composing a budget this small would be nearly impossible, leading Byrd to agree that *if* the budget were indeed that low, his committee would act on the tax bill. Johnson immediately ended the lunch, having gotten the commitment he sought.<sup>48</sup>

### **ii. Laying the Groundwork: Composing a \$100 Billion Budget**

---

<sup>47</sup> Transcript, Jack Valenti Oral History Interview II, October 18, 1969, page 31, LBJ Library.

<sup>48</sup> Valenti Oral History Interview II, page 31-32.

Subsequently, the president began an extensive and intense series of meetings with Budget Bureau Director Kermit Gordon to meet his objective. According to Jack Valenti:

They really rode over every item of that budget and they were hacking away with machetes...Gordon was spending practically every night down at the White House in the President's office, going over this budget. Then they would call in department heads, one at a time, and work on them so that the President got the budget down.<sup>49</sup>

The two systematically eliminated obsolete programs and wasteful spending, and trimmed every program within the budget to the minimum possible appropriation. This effort continued for weeks, ultimately resulting in the projected budget figure of \$97.4 billion announced in the speech.<sup>50</sup> Johnson knew that the striking decrease in federal expenditures combined with the release of the tax bill would complement the poverty declaration perfectly from the fiscally conservative point of view of many Republicans and conservative Democrats. Proposing the smallest budget since 1951 and securing release of the tax bill would inoculate him from accusations of fiscal irresponsibility or liberal tax-and-spend policies when he simultaneously announced the wide-ranging poverty program.

### **iii. Building Support: Soliciting Advice from Liberal Leaders and Leading Intellectuals**

While working to secure the release of the tax bill he considered so essential, Johnson simultaneously laid the political groundwork for the poverty program, employing a multitude of persuasion techniques. In mid-to-late December, he personally contacted many liberal opinion leaders by phone and sought their written input on themes for the State of the Union address. Those contacted included Whitney Young, Executive Director of the National Urban League, Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto

---

<sup>49</sup> Valenti Oral History Interview II, 32-33.

<sup>50</sup> Speech draft, "1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft."

Workers union, and Alfred Friendly, managing editor of the *Washington Post*, among others.<sup>51</sup> Johnson insisted they forward their thoughts practically immediately. In a fashion typical of the shrewdly calculating consensus builder, seeking advice served as a means of flattery—not policymaking. In asking these figures to contribute to his State of the Union message, Johnson both confirmed the continuing support of these constituencies and made them stakeholders in the programs he would announce in the speech.

The administration's efforts at outreach to the intellectual elite targeted a group less receptive to Johnson, but reflected similar tactics. The president had tapped Princeton professor Eric Goldman to serve as a liaison to the intellectual community, and held a high-level meeting with him in December 1963 to discuss themes for the State of the Union message.<sup>52</sup> Johnson instructed Goldman to solicit suggestions, in strict confidence, from leading intellectual minds throughout the country. Goldman in turn contacted a cross section of scholars, writers, and other specialists for their ideas, including Bruce Catton, Editor, *American Heritage*; Kenneth Clark, Professor of Psychology, City College of New York; John R. Coleman, Chairman, Department of Economics, Carnegie Tech; Fedele F. Fauri, Professor of Public Welfare Administration, University of Michigan; John Fischer, Editor, *Harper's* magazine; William C. Friday, President, University of North Carolina; Edwin H. Land, President, Polaroid Corporation; C. McKim Norton, Director, Regional Plan Association; Arthur M. Ross, Director of the Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California at Berkeley; Clinton Rossiter, Professor of Government, Cornell University; and George P. Shultz, Dean, School of Business

---

<sup>51</sup> Max Holland, ed., *The Presidential Recordings: Lyndon B. Johnson, the Kennedy Assassination, and the Transfer of Power, November 1963-January 1964, Volume 2* (Charlottesville: Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2005), 781-785; 777-781; 824-825; 743-748.

<sup>52</sup> Valenti to Fortas, Reedy, Moyers, Nelson, and Busby, 12/9/63, Statements of LBJ: Jan. 8, 1964-Jan. 27, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

Administration, University of Chicago.<sup>53</sup> He requested “suggestions for the upcoming State of the Union Message with respect to (1) what the general theme and tone of the Message should be; [and] (2) specific new ideas” but gave them just two days to respond.<sup>54</sup> This strategy elicited the desired response of engaging intellectuals, with whom the new president was not very popular, on behalf of Johnson. As Goldman’s memo notes, “Some of the men expressed surprise. They said they had not expected the president to be so interested in the suggestion of ‘intellectuals.’”<sup>55</sup> In addition, several noted that “they were especially glad that men from a number of institutions and parts of the country were being consulted. They felt that the previous Administration had tended to limit itself too much to one group.”<sup>56</sup>

On the whole, Goldman reported a desire for “vigorous, confident action.” As Bruce Catton, editor of *American Heritage* wrote:

One of the most encouraging developments of the last few weeks is that the new president will really get things done. We had a long time of preparation in which magnificent expression was given to a number of basic ideas, but nothing much resulted in the way of a concrete program...I think the country is in the mood to applaud a Message along this line.<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly, a member of the intellectual elite repudiates “magnificent expression” here in favor of tangible results. Moreover, Edwin Land, president of the Polaroid Corporation warned, “it is dangerous arithmetic to believe that the ineffectual and frustrated portion of American life will stay the smaller portion.”<sup>58</sup> Goldman reported that the men contacted overwhelmingly suggested that Johnson’s specific suggestions should “concern the economically depressed, white and

---

<sup>53</sup> Memo, Goldman to the President, 12/21/63, “Summary of results of contacting 12 writers, scholars or other specialists around the country,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Negro.”<sup>59</sup> In addition, citing the nation’s mood in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, “memo after memo called for establishing an organization that would release the idealism of the nation, especially its youth, in an attack on poverty inside the United States.”<sup>60</sup> This led to Goldman’s suggestion in a subsequent memo to the president to “establish an independent agency, responsible only to the President...to clean up one by one the areas of trouble by the tried and tested methods of helping those who want to help themselves.”<sup>61</sup>

While these responses appear constructive for the formation of the poverty program, they are in fact significant for a different reason. It does not appear that these suggestions had a notable impact on the creation of the poverty program or the content of the State of the Union. In fact, Goldman himself composed a draft State of the Union address after reviewing the suggestions he culled from the intellectual community and submitted it to the president and his staff. None of this 7-page draft appears to have influenced the Sorensen-drafted State of the Union address composed the following week. Instead, these suggestions, like the suggestions solicited from the civil rights and labor leaders, indicated to Johnson that the political interests who these leaders represented would support his plans for a sweeping poverty proposal. In contacting them Johnson accomplished the twin goals of confirming that support for his policies existed among leaders of liberal groups and other liberal elites and ensuring that these major public figures would consider themselves stakeholders in Johnson’s State of the Union message and the domestic programs he announced in it.

#### **iv. Broadening Support: Preparing and Persuading Conservatives**

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Memo, Goldman to the President, 12/21/63, “Suggested New Idea for State of the Union,” Papers of LBJ: Speeches, State of the Union, Box 133, LBJ Library.

Johnson's shrewd pre-speech advocacy was not confined to liberals and intellectuals, however. After reaching out to them, and beginning the drafting process with Sorensen, Gordon, and Heller at the LBJ Ranch during Christmas week, Johnson shifted much of his political energies toward building support for his State of the Union message among more conservative figures. Johnson's conversations with several individuals and groups in particular reveal his extensive and elaborate courtship of conservative interests prior to the State of the Union address.

One of the first individuals that he contacted to accomplish this objective was Henry Luce, the conservative publisher of *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, and *Sports Illustrated*, editor-in-chief of Time, Inc., and husband of a former Republican congresswoman from Connecticut. In typical fashion, Johnson softly promoted the poverty program in between discussions of the budget and tax cut proposals which he knew Luce favored:

**Johnson:** What I'm trying to do is...I'm trying to get our budget down to 100 billion [dollars] and take enough out of these archaic establishments to give a little bit on our social consciousness—a little poverty stuff, and a little for the Appalachia area of West Virginia and Kentucky and Pennsylvania. I think I'm going to work it out where I can get not too far away from what it was last year.

**Luce:** Well, I've been very impressed with what I've read about that.

**Johnson:** We've made some progress on it, but I just *got* to get my tax bill passed, and I want you to give me some help.

**Luce:** All right...<sup>62</sup>

Yet, Johnson did not simply highlight the conservative principles of his State of the Union in his lobbying efforts. He also incorporated degrading descriptions of the disadvantaged groups his poverty program was designed to help and insulted a variety of "liberals" in his attempts to his attempts to forge a common interest with some conservative factions. The following conversation between the president and Walker Stone, editor-in-chief of the Scripps Howard newspapers and an Oklahoma native, evocatively captures this strategy:

---

<sup>62</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 123.



**Johnson:** But I've got my State of the Union. I've got one that suits you. It won't suit you and Harry Byrd in every respect, but it will in dollars. Kennedy had a 98.8 [billion dollar] budget, and he's been adding 5 billion a year. I guarantee you I didn't add 5 billion. I may add a little, but not 5 billion. I've got less employees than the Defense Department's had in 15 years. I've got less total employees this year than I had last year. Kennedy added 135,000, and I've added none. I just told the chief of civil service that. So far as prudence and frugality is concerned, you'll like it. You won't like my poverty.

I'm going to try to teach these nigras that don't know anything how to work for themselves, instead of just breeding.

**Stone:** [Unclear].

**Johnson:** I'm going to try to teach these Mexicans [that] can't talk English to learn it, so they can work for themselves. I'm going to try to build a road in eastern Kentucky and northern West Virginia and a few of these places so they can get down and go to school, and get off of our taxpayers' back, and so forth. And that I'm going to call poverty. But the liberals are already after me. The *Washington Post* this morning has got a story that says that Johnson's going to cut so much in the budget, that by not adding this extra 5 or 7 billion [dollars], we'll have a depression.

**Stone:** Yeah.

**Johnson:** And [Arthur] Schlesinger's going to resign on me. [*sarcastically*] That's really going to make me die. I don't know how I'm ever going to save that. [*Stone laughs*] But I've got to have help from you and old man Dobie [a renowned Texas folklorist, University of Texas faculty member, and mutual friend of Johnson and Stone].

Stone: You got it; you got it.<sup>63</sup>

Johnson's efforts continued, as his calculated courtship of Bob Anderson – the conservative economist and Treasury secretary under President Eisenhower who Johnson knew personal from mutual ties to Texas – prior to the State of the Union demonstrates his serious commitment to winning the support of the business community as well. This conversation with Kermit Gordon on January 7, 1963 reveals the importance of this element of the political spectrum to Johnson:

**Johnson:** From the conservative viewpoint, I think we ought to point out every advantage we can... We ought to show them what a tight budget we've got. And when we get to labor and education, we have got to show them that we're trying to get these people off the tax rolls, instead of on them, like [through] vocational training and manpower retraining and things of that kind.

**Gordon:** Mm-hmm.

---

<sup>63</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 179-180.

**Johnson:** And that we have made substantial cuts....just show him that we cut it down right to the bone. Try to get a good reaction from...

**Gordon:** I'd be happy to do that, Mr. President.

**Johnson:** All right...bear in mind, now, he's ultra-conservative. I'd show him and tell him we're just betting on the private sector doing some investing here.<sup>64</sup>

It is important to note that Johnson had profound disagreements with Anderson's economic ideology. But Johnson courted Anderson *because* of those disagreements, not in spite of them.

As he curtly told an aide who warned him about Anderson's views:

You're telling me he's a g-ddamn reactionary. I know that. That's exactly why I called. I wanted to find out what the views of a sophisticated and thoughtful g-ddamn reactionary are, and that's what I use Bob Anderson for.<sup>65</sup>

"Use" was an apt description of Johnson's relationship with Anderson in the period immediately preceding the State of the Union. He enjoyed extraordinary success in convincing Anderson that his administration's policies were consistent with conservative principles, and as such, Anderson threw his considerable stature in conservative circles behind the Johnson program, as this conversation from January 7, 1963 shows:

**Anderson:** I had two or three things I thought I'd touch base with you on.

**Johnson:** Good.

**Anderson:** Number one: I spent most of yesterday down in the financial community and I was very inquisitive as to how they felt the Johnson administration was doing. You will be pleased to note that I did not get a single adverse comment. These are from some of the most hardheaded people in the country. They're people who were critical of me at a part of the time when I was in the Treasury, so I talked to them very objectively. I know them well enough that if they had any reservations, they would darn well have communicated them to me. But I thought you ought to know that I have not seen a more remarkable display of confidence in a president in my lifetime—

**Johnson:** Well that's...

**Anderson:** —than the financial community is showing at this moment...point number two: I thought if you wanted Kermit Gordon or somebody to send me on a confidential basis some of the highlights of what might go into this budget...

**Johnson:** All right, yeah.

**Anderson:** I would do such things as this: I'll get Walther Thayer [of the *New York Herald Tribune*], I'll get Murray Rozan at the *Wall Street Journal*, I'll get

---

<sup>64</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 250-251.

<sup>65</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 158.

some of the—I'll get Henry Luce [of Time, Inc.], I'll get some of the people that I know quite well, and I will do my best, although you never can promise what a writer will do. But I'll do my best to get these people prepared to come out immediately with favorable and supporting comments.<sup>66</sup>

In an effort to fortify the support of the business community, Johnson hosted a dinner with members of the Business Council, “a group of high-powered executives founded in 1933 that functioned as an unofficial clearinghouse between business and government,” on the eve of his address.<sup>67</sup> At the dinner, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the members of the Council of Economic Advisers, and the president himself spent hours discussing the economic agenda.<sup>68</sup> Johnson delivered a brief formal address in which he advocated the tax cut, greater private investment, and restraint regarding wage increases, but, notably, he also promoted the “War on Poverty”. Johnson argued that “doing something about poverty is economical in the long run...you don't have to be loose with a dollar to prove you are a liberal—or callous to prove you are conservative.”<sup>69</sup> One businessman left the event commenting, “that man made a lot of friends,” and Werner Gullander, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, publicly celebrated “a new President who has paid a sincere tribute to the free enterprise system.”<sup>70</sup>

In other words, the event was a tremendous success, capping a whirlwind effort to secure support from liberals, conservatives, intellectuals, and businessmen alike. The political stage was set for Johnson to deliver his rhetorical bombshell.

---

<sup>66</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 233-234.

<sup>67</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 266-267.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

## **II. Drafting and Refining the Text of the State of the Union Address to Conform to Johnson's Major Objectives**

Various memorandums, notes, and speech drafts reveal decisions regarding both content and tactics that reinforce the primary objectives of the 1964 State of the Union address and the declaration of the “War on Poverty” in particular: channeling the nation’s grief for President Kennedy into support for an ambitious domestic program that establishes Lyndon Johnson as a distinguished president in his own right. As these documents show, over the course of crafting the address, references to President Kennedy that do not explicitly advance a Johnson purpose are eliminated, the fallen president’s agenda is endorsed but also subsumed into the new president’s poverty theme, foreign policy as a major point of departure is consistently rejected even after prominent Kennedy appointees urge its inclusion, and deliberate political calculations are made to reinforce the consensus-building efforts Johnson had made prior to the speech. Furthermore, the poverty section of the speech itself reveals the very personal nature in which Johnson viewed the “War on Poverty” and his fervent desire to make it rhetorically appealing.

### **A. The Evolution of References to President Kennedy**

***“Let us carry forward the plans and programs of John Fitzgerald Kennedy – not because of our sorrow or sympathy but because they are right.”***

The degree and manner in which to refer to President Kennedy was a chief concern of those involved in shaping the speech. The text of the final draft suggests that Johnson and his chief aides ultimately decided that recapitulating the nation’s peaceful and levelheaded response to the assassination in an extended manner risked prolonging the mourning period and thereby delaying the beginning of Johnson’s own term of leadership in the public’s mind. Yet, the trail of memos and speech drafts shows that this bold position was not the initial inclination of many of the address’s contributors.

In a memo dated December 28, 1963, for example, Johnson advisor Clark Clifford notes that the State of the Union message “should contain a graceful tribute to President Kennedy, but should set the guidelines of President Johnson’s own policies for the year ahead.”<sup>71</sup> However, the introductory paragraph that Clifford attached as a means of accomplishing this included an extended tribute to President Kennedy which only briefly referenced President Johnson’s own role and thus does not conform to Johnson’s objectives:

There are times in the lives of men and nations when events come upon us which seem beyond our capacity to bear; events which shake our spirit; events which try our faith. There are times when all things seem to pause, all forward progress stops. We have passed through such a time when stunned sorrow for our dead President held all things still.

Our Nation has known other shocks and other tragedies. One of them was the economic paralysis that gripped our country in the late twenties and early thirties. In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke to his countrymen of the fallen Woodrow Wilson, sorely missed, and of the tasks ahead. I would like to read you his words, for I am struck with how uniquely appropriate they are for our day and our John Fitzgerald Kennedy:

“Let us now and here highly resolve to resume the country’s interrupted march along the path of real progress, of real justice, of real equality for all of our citizens, great and small. Our indomitable leader in that interrupted march is no longer with us, but there still survives today his spirit. Many of his captains, thank G-d, are still with us, to give us wise counsel. Let us feel that in everything we do there still lives with us, if not the body, the great indomitable, unquenchable, progressive soul of our Commander-in-Chief.”

Let me then, in that spirit, call you forth from sorrow to new accomplishment. As we resume our country’s interrupted march, my first responsibility under the Constitution is to report to you upon the state of the Union.<sup>72</sup>

This language might have been appropriate for the eulogistic special message to Congress on November 23, 1963, but it certainly would not have helped to establish Lyndon Johnson as his own president in the State of the Union message. It conjures the image of a mythic figure whom

---

<sup>71</sup> Memo, Clifford to the President, 12/28/63, “The State of the Union Message,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 8, 1964-Jan. 27, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

a successor cannot possibly match. Likely for these reasons, no portion of this excerpt is included in any official drafts of the State of the Union.

However, in Theodore Sorensen's first draft, dated January 1, 1964, four days later, the opening section does contain an extended homage to President Kennedy:

As we go forward, our hearts are still heavy with grief for our fallen leader. Let us be true to John Kennedy's memory and worthy of his trust. Let us carry out his plans and carry on his programs – not because of sorrow or sympathy but because they are right.

National tragedies reveal national strengths – and this nation showed its strength in the mournful task of maintaining the effective continuity of government at a time of dismay and despair. But more exacting tasks of effective and efficient government are at hand.<sup>73</sup>

This passage, in essence, subordinates Lyndon Johnson to John Kennedy. It professes a hope to “be true to John Kennedy's memory and worthy of his trust” as though seeking the symbolic approval of the slain president supercedes all else. Moreover, the phrase “our hearts are still heavy with grief for our fallen leader” suggests that the Kennedy era is still not over and Johnson is simply executing the legacy of his predecessor.

In revisions of this first draft, one aide, most likely Bob Lampman, suggested the passage be revised as follows:

As we go forward, our hearts are still heavy with grief. Let us be true to John Kennedy's ideals and worthy of his sacrifice. Let us carry forward his plans and carry on his programs – not because of sorrow or sympathy but because they are right. National tragedies can reveal national strengths – and this Nation found the strength to maintain effective continuity of Government in our time of dismay and despair. But now we must turn to the tasks which lie ahead.<sup>74</sup>

These revisions depersonalize the tribute slightly by removing “for our fallen leader,” replacing “John Kennedy's memories and worthy of his trust” with “John Kennedy's ideals and worthy of

---

<sup>73</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft,” 1/1/64, Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

<sup>74</sup> Speech draft, Bob comments, “1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

his sacrifice” and “Let us carry out his plans” to “Let us carry forward his plans.” While the first draft of the passage is *personally* adulatory, these revisions modulate slightly to suggest Kennedy’s ideas and plans were valiant without mourning the man himself to as great an extent. Yet, dwelling on the assassination for two paragraphs in the introductory section of the address does not conform to the objective of setting Johnson’s presidency apart from Kennedy’s. A portion of another passage present in the introduction of the first draft hinders this objective as well:

In short, we have in 1964 a unique opportunity and obligation – to prove the success of our system – to disprove those cynics at home and abroad who question our competence and our capacity, *yours and mine and all America’s*. (emphasis added).

The inclusion of an acknowledgement of doubts about Johnson’s own capacity in no way advances his goal of projecting an image of a decisive leader able to steer the country to happier and better days.

Nevertheless, the eulogistic passage – and the theme of remembering Kennedy early in the speech – and the clause doubting Johnson’s “capacity” is largely retained through the first few iterations of the State of the Union. In a draft labeled “second draft” and marked with revisions by Bill Moyers, the only alteration of the mournful passage is a change from “As we go forward, our hearts are still heavy with grief for our fallen leader” in the first draft to “As we go forward, the memory of John F. Kennedy is very much with us.”<sup>75</sup> While the second version is slightly less evocative, it is not significantly different thematically. Similarly, this draft alters the capacity clause to read: “...to disprove those cynics and critics at home and abroad who question our purpose and our competence, yours and mine and all America’s.” While the switch to “purpose and competence” from “competence and capacity” is an improvement, the portion in

---

<sup>75</sup> Speech draft, “Second Draft,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

most tension with Johnson's goals for the speech – “yours and mine and all America's” – is retained.

Interestingly, even an entirely separate draft of the State of the Union message composed by Johnson's favorite speechwriter, Horace Busby (which was not used at all in the speech as delivered), contains an extended treatment of Kennedy and the Dallas tragedy in its introduction:

Three years ago – from this same platform – the man in whose place I stand told us all:

“Before my term has ended, we shall have to test anew whether a nation organized and governed such as ours can endure. The outcome is by no means certain; the answers are by no means clear. All of us together – this Administration, this Congress, this Nation – must forge those answers.”

My fellow countrymen...[o]ur system has been tested – greatly. Our people have met that task – magnificently. By their courage, cohesion, and common sense, the people in every section and every state have left no doubt that this nation stands strong and secure as the fortunate heir of John F. Kennedy's life and not a forlorn victim of his death.<sup>76</sup>

This passage suggests that the nation's ability to endure without John F. Kennedy – and thus *with* Lyndon Johnson – was in doubt. Additionally, the phrases “in whose place I stand” and “the fortunate heir to John F. Kennedy's life” imply Johnson's administration is solely a continuance of Kennedy's. Again, this completely contradicts Johnson's objective of establishing himself as a leader, as it elevates John Kennedy's life to mythic stature and implies Johnson is merely carrying on Kennedy's legacy as opposed to the beginning of a new course.

Returning to the Sorensen-drafted speech, the next iteration eliminates the “yours and mine and all America's” phrase but does not substantially change to the mournful passage:

As we go forward, the memory of John Fitzgerald Kennedy is very much with us. Let us be true that memory. Let us be worthy of his trust. Let us carry forward his plans and carry on his programs – not because of our sorrow or sympathy but because they are right. National tragedies can reveal national strengths. And this nation found the strength to maintain effective continuity of Government in a

---

<sup>76</sup> Speech draft, Horace Busby, 1/2/64, Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.



tragic time of dismay and despair. But more exacting tests of our effectiveness lie before us.<sup>77</sup>

However, a subsequent draft written around January 6 eliminates the passage entirely from the introduction. Instead, a new passage is added to the *conclusion* of the speech:

My fellow Americans: In these last seven sorrowful weeks, we have learned anew that nothing is so enduring as faith and nothing is so degrading as hate. John Kennedy was a victim of hate – but he was also a builder of faith – faith in our fellow Americans, whatever their creed or color or station in life; and faith in the future of man, whatever his divisions and differences.

This faith was echoed in all parts of the word. On every continent and in every land to which I traveled, I found faith and hope and love toward this land and its people.

I ask you all now, in the Congress and in the country, to join with me in expressing and fulfilling that faith – in working for a nation that is free from want and a world that is free from hate – a world of peace and justice, freedom and abundance for our time and for all time to come. (emphasis in original).<sup>78</sup>

This change represents a key shift: rather than refer to the fallen president to honor his memory, the speech will allude to Kennedy to reinforce the policies Johnson outlines. The reference to the assassination and its aftermath is brief and is not the main thrust of the passage. In this way, instead of evoking sadness for Kennedy, the speech elicits support for Johnson and his policies with his clever and calculated invocation of his predecessor.

In keeping with this strategy, subsequent drafts reintroduce a line from the eulogistic passage to the beginning half of the speech, but place it directly after a passage that urges legislative action:

Here in Congress, you can demonstrate effective leadership by discharging the public business with clarity and dispatch – voting each important proposal up or voting it down but at least bringing it to a fair and final vote.

---

<sup>77</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union Message – Fourth Draft.” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Speech draft, unlabeled, “1964 State of the Union,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

Let us carry forward the plans and programs of John Fitzgerald Kennedy – not because of our sorrow or sympathy – but because they are right.

While this addition most overtly alludes to Kennedy’s pending civil rights bill and the threatened filibuster by conservative Southerners, it possesses a broader significance: Johnson is intimating that to honor the fallen president, Congress must bring “public business” to prompt votes.

According to political communication expert Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the function of the State of the Union address as a genre is to establish what the “public business” is.<sup>79</sup> The Constitution states that the president “shall from time to time give to the Congress information on the state of the Union and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” Jamieson asserts that this passage of America’s founding document provides the president with a unique opportunity to shape the legislative agenda. Thus, when Johnson proceeds from the passage associating Kennedy and the “public business” to the portion of the speech that announces the “War on Poverty” as an urgent national issue, he cleverly implies that in order to pay tribute to Kennedy, Congress must consider – and pass – his own legislative proposal.

This addition remained in the speech unchanged in the third to final draft written January 6. However, another phrase was inserted into the second to final draft that immediately followed the allusion to Kennedy, which read:

In his memory, I especially ask all members of my own political faith – in this election year – to put country ahead of party and to debate principles, not personalities.<sup>80</sup>

Again, this reference most overtly refers to the civil rights bill, and the opposition of many Southern Democrats to it. It also implicitly alludes to the discomfort some liberal Democrats felt

---

<sup>79</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52-54.

<sup>80</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

exchanging a president from Massachusetts for a president from Texas, and the related tension between the slain president's brother and his official successor regarding who was the true heir to the Kennedy legacy. Yet, it also has a deeper message, addressed to these liberal members of the party to whom John Kennedy was a particular hero. Johnson is asking for latitude in order to achieve goals that Kennedy had not expressly pursued but would ultimately enhance the legacy of the Democratic party: namely, the "War on Poverty" which included many conservative principles and required Johnson to lobby and placate conservative constituencies (as discussed in Part I).

## **B. Foreign Policy**

### ***"We put in a page, it doesn't have much"***

Another way in which Johnson's speech established his presidency as independent was its overwhelming focus on domestic issues. The content of Kennedy's three State of the Union addresses broke down, on average, to 63% foreign policy issues and 37% domestic policy concerns. Johnson, by contrast, devoted fully 80% of his speech to domestic concerns and just 20% to foreign policy.<sup>81</sup> Some observers might argue that a respite from international tensions in the Cold War was responsible for this shift. However, during the speech's composition, Johnson deliberately ignored input from a variety of sources – including notable Kennedy administration officials – that strongly advised including more foreign policy themes. Additionally, the succession of drafts reveals systematic elimination of any foreign policy topics or phrases that could evoke strong reactions and distract from Johnson's domestic proposal. Combined, these factors suggest the lopsided focus on domestic issues was a deliberate Johnson tactic to assert himself as independent from Kennedy policy and to promote his new legislative proposals.

---

<sup>81</sup> Memo, Moyers to Johnson, "History of State of Union Messages," Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

On January 2, 1964, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a key Kennedy advisor who would soon depart the Johnson administration, submitted a memo to Walter Jenkins, one of Johnson's top aides, summarizing his impressions of the first draft of the State of the Union completed and circulated by Sorensen the day before. Schlesinger's memo offered extensive comments on foreign policy. He wrote:

I do think the Message needs a good deal more on foreign affairs. Outside the United States, people tend to suppose that President Johnson is more interested in domestic than in foreign policy, and that his accession to the Presidency may mean a diminished US concern for the world. The rather perfunctory section on foreign affairs (with its implication that the balance-of-payments problem is the major issue we face in the world) may strengthen this idea. I believe that the language on foreign policy ought to be much more urgent and elevated.<sup>82</sup>

Clearly, Johnson did not view the impression that he cared more for domestic than foreign policy as necessarily unfavorable (or untrue), as the speech is never changed to treat the two in a more balanced manner. In a blunt memo submitted the same day, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's National Security Advisor, expanded upon Schlesinger's criticism on behalf of the foreign policy establishment as a whole in response to the first draft of the State of the Union. Bundy wrote:

Attached is a completely new version of the foreign affairs section of the State of the Union message... The draft which was sent up here was just too short and thin to meet the continuing requirement that all your major addresses should give full weight to your central role in strengthening the world's peace.

In the main, this new draft speaks for itself, but there is one passage which is put in deliberately as a means of stirring your own judgment, and that is the long passage on foreign assistance... it is essential to give this whole program a strong new face and new means of action this winter... This revised draft has been reviewed with State, Defense, AID, and USIA representatives and has their concurrence. The structure of thought is mainly Rostow's and the structure of language is mainly Schlesinger's.<sup>83</sup>

While Johnson did adopt the organizational structure of numbering his foreign policy priorities featured in the redraft submitted by Bundy, he did not warm to the development assistance

---

<sup>82</sup> Memo, Schlesinger to Jenkins, 1/2/64, "State of the Union Message," Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

<sup>83</sup> Memo, Bundy to Johnson, 1/2/64, Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

proposal nor to the revised draft's extended length, as his complaints to (Kennedy appointee) Secretary of State Dean Rusk about the Kennedy "brains" two days after receiving the Bundy memo illustrate:

**Rusk:** Now, I'm having a meeting here with some of the brains [Bundy, George Ball, Walt Rostow, William Bundy, Jerome Wiesner, and several others]. We'll be meeting most of the day.

**Johnson:** I thought our foreign policy... We've got them where they're just unworkable Mr. Secretary. We put in a page, it doesn't have much, and then the department puts in 12 pages of... and that's so much we couldn't have... if we had two State of the Union messages, we wouldn't have enough time for them.

**Rusk:** All right.

**Johnson:** So what we've really got to do is find 2[00] or 3[00] or 400 words, at the most, that would go into the State of the Union.<sup>84</sup>

Yet, it was not just former Kennedy officials or members of the foreign policy establishment who urged a more extensive focus on foreign policy issues. The alternative State of the Union draft written by Horace Busby also features foreign policy much more prominently than the Sorensen draft does, incorporating it throughout the speech as opposed to just the final section.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, Johnson was presented with an expanded foreign policy message and strongly urged by Kennedy's advisors to include it, but flatly rebuffed doing so. He personally insisted on limiting the space devoted to foreign affairs, admitting the foreign policy section he favored "doesn't have much."<sup>86</sup> As a result, the speech does not use the expanded development assistance proposal favored by Bundy and the other "brains," instead blandly calling for "a more rigorous administration of our development assistance."<sup>87</sup> In fact, he only mentions this after adding to this section of the speech comments regarding his desire to "frustrate those who prey on poverty and chaos. To do this, the rich must help the poor—and we must do our part."<sup>88</sup> Therefore, not

---

<sup>84</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 129.

<sup>85</sup> Speech draft, Horace Busby, 1/2/64, Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

<sup>86</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 129

<sup>87</sup> Speech draft, "1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft."

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

only does he decline to include the development assistance proposal in the speech, the brief mention he accords the topic is essentially a veiled promotion of his poverty program. Clearly, Johnson wanted to make a dramatic impact in domestic affairs, and did not want foreign policy matters to distract whatsoever from the bold domestic agenda he intended to announce.

Further analysis of the speech drafts supports this contention. References in early drafts to provocative or controversial foreign policy issues are eliminated or toned down in the version of the speech that Johnson delivered. The first draft reads, “We cannot complain with conviction that the hideous wall of East Berlin prevents the reunification of families when our own arbitrary wall – a wall of restrictive immigration legislation – has exactly the same effect.”<sup>89</sup> This line was struck from the speech because concerns existed about the accuracy of the analogy and the potential that the Soviets would use the phrase for propaganda purposes.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the Bundy-suggested foreign policy section claimed “President Kennedy...demonstrated the futility of nuclear blackmail,” a phrase that was ultimately changed to “Kennedy used it...to demonstrate...the futility of nuclear war,” in a clear effort to tone down inflammatory rhetoric.<sup>91</sup> In addition, the section on development assistance claimed, “This is the underlying principle of our network of alliances – of our commitment of American soldiers across the world from Berlin to Viet Nam.” This mention of American troops in confusing foreign conflicts is avoided in the final draft of the speech.<sup>92</sup> The Bundy section also stated, “For political and economic frustration is everywhere communism’s most potent ally,” and that “I regard no part of our foreign policy more important than collaboration with the free states of the Americas to produce a strong and thriving hemisphere, free of communism and dictatorship and dedicated to a better

---

<sup>89</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union – First Draft.”

<sup>90</sup> Memo, Schlesinger to Jenkins, 1/2/64.

<sup>91</sup> Memo, Bundy to the President, 1/2/64.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

life for its peoples.” These specific references to the Soviet ideology were not included in the blander final foreign policy section.<sup>93</sup> Lastly, the Bundy-suggested section stated:

We shall not be second in the search for better understanding of with the people and the Government of the Soviet Union. We know that the Russian people, like the American people and all other people, aspire for a peaceful destiny for themselves and their children. With our allies we shall seek positive moves that would help realize those aspirations; we will work with the Soviet leaders to relax tensions through agreements which violate the interests of none and enlarge the hopes of all.

In fact, later drafts added, then removed, the line “Specifically, this nation is ready to match, with proper and adequate safeguards, any verifiable arms reduction made by the Soviet Union.”

The elimination of this line, and all the phrases mentioned here, show that Johnson avoided aggressive foreign policy language that might dilute the appeal of his domestic agenda or distract from it to such an extent that all explicit mentions of “communism,” the “Soviet Union,” and “Russia” are eventually removed. In the final draft, Johnson simply listed ten fairly unimaginative foreign policy goals with language suitably bland to arouse little interest at all.

**C. Johnson’s Goals: Subsuming the Budget, Tax Cut, and Civil Rights into the “War on Poverty” Theme**

*“I had to take the dead man's program and turn it into a martyr's cause. That way Kennedy would live on forever and so would I.”*

Johnson focused on the budget, tax cut, and civil rights in such a way as to prime the “War on Poverty” section – the longest section in the speech. The language and organization used throughout the discussion of these other domestic programs show that each of these issues, rather than being priorities in their own right, actually underpins the poverty program. The role of reducing expenditures as the precursor to the “War on Poverty” is refined across a number of drafts. By contrast, the decision to explicitly subordinate civil rights and the tax cut – the two

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

policy thrusts directly inherited from Kennedy – into the “War on Poverty” is evident throughout the drafting process.

**i. The Budget Section: Evolving Prose to Achieve Johnson’s Goals**

The budget section of the address, the first major section, itself appears to have four chief aims that relate to the overall objectives of the speech: (1) Draw contrasts with Kennedy by identifying spending reduction as a Johnson accomplishment; (2) Demonstrate a commitment to fiscal restraint to satisfy conservatives; (3) Identify reduced spending as a means to accomplishing progressive goals to satisfy liberals; and (4) Situate the budget and the whole legislative program as a precursor to ensuring all Americans have a chance to pursue their basic hopes – an underlying rationale of the “War on Poverty” section which immediately follows the budget section in the speech.

The first draft introduces the budget section with the following passage:

For my part, I pledge a frugal, honest, efficient and progressive administration. The Budget to be submitted shortly is in full accord with this pledge. While some increases are unavoidable – representing previously enacted commitments and essential new proposals – this Budget, I repeat, will call for a significant reduction in federal expenditures and employment.

It will cut our deficit in half.

It will be the smallest budget, in proportion to our national output, since 1951.<sup>94</sup>

As written, the passage implies fiscal responsibility is an equal, if not more significant, goal to having a “progressive administration.” This differentiates rather than subordinates Johnson’s budget proposals from his poverty program. Additionally, though it emphasizes the reductions in spending, it offers no specific reference point to contextualize them. In his suggested revisions to the first draft, Walter Heller “strongly urge[s] that budget and deficit totals for both years be

---

<sup>94</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft,” 1/1/64.



given” – recognizing the rhetorical value of contrasting Johnson’s first budget and Kennedy’s last.<sup>95</sup>

Bob Lampman, a chief architect of the poverty program along with Heller, also suggested revisions<sup>96</sup> which resulted in three critical changes. First, he changes the first sentence to “For my part, I pledge a progressive administration which is frugal, honest, and efficient.” This makes Johnson’s commitment to “a progressive administration” the overarching goal of which fiscal discipline is merely a facet.

Second, he eliminates the phrase “While some increases are unavoidable – representing previously enacted commitments and essential new proposals – this Budget, I repeat, will call for a significant reduction in Federal expenditures and employment.”<sup>97</sup> This line equivocated on Johnson’s commitment to restraining spending and broaches the possibility of continuance of the practices of the previous administration – muddling the goals of appealing to fiscal conservatives and distinguishing Johnson’s own administration. Interestingly, Arthur Schlesinger’s memo critiquing the State of the Union vividly demonstrates the message’s effectiveness in differentiating from the Kennedy administration and appealing to conservatives. Schlesinger writes:

I also think that the Message goes overboard on the question of “a significant reduction in federal expenditures and employment.” I do not quarrel with this as a tactic in the fight for the tax cut. But surely a Democratic Administration only does itself long-run damage if it talks about the budget in a way which seems to validate and reinforce the Republican idea that “reduction in federal expenditures and employment” is by definition a great thing and ought to be an annual national objective... Yet the Message, with its repeated references to the virtue of budget reduction, seems tacitly to accept this Republican premise. Indeed, the beginning

---

<sup>95</sup> Speech draft, Heller comments, “1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft.” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 8, 1964-Jan. 27, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

<sup>96</sup> The revisions of the speech on which this analysis is based are labeled “Bob comments”. After examining other documents at the Johnson library and exploring several secondary sources, I determined that Bob Lampman was most likely the “Bob” whose comments are analyzed here.

<sup>97</sup> Speech draft, Bob comments, “1964 State of the Union – First Draft.”

of Section II [the budget section] sounds a good deal more like Eisenhower (and George Humphrey) than like Roosevelt, Truman, or Kennedy.<sup>98</sup>

Schlesinger's criticism appears to be largely ignored, as further revisions enhance rather than diminish the conservative appeal of the speech. Throughout the process of preparing and drafting this speech – and throughout his career – Johnson and his own advisers tried to appeal to the broadest swath of the political spectrum possible. As opposed to Schlesinger and other Kennedy advisers, he is less interested in ideological battles than he is in substantive political victories. For instance, Johnson aide Bill Moyers subsequently eliminates an entire passage in the budget section that read:

For no American is an island unto himself. In this Union of 50 interdependent states, each man's hopes are affected by every man's fears.

The security of your family is diminished by the insecurity of your neighbor's  
The man employed today may be unemployed tomorrow.

No family is safe from the illness of an aged parent or the decline of a school or the decay of a neighborhood.

And the dread [sic] consequences of poverty, disease, ignorance, and injustice often spread without regard to economic, educational, or ethnic differences.

This excerpt appears to appeal to a liberal social welfare philosophy, and thus it is unsurprising that Moyers, author of a memo entitled "Why Conservatives Should Support the War on Poverty," would strike it from the speech.

The third critical change initiated by Lampman makes explicit the link between reduced spending and Johnson's progressive goals. After the above excerpt, the first draft continues:

But it is not a stand-still budget – for America cannot afford to stand still. By closing down obsolete installations and programs, both civilian and military, this Budget will enable us to open up new opportunities for progress – providing, in fact, more money than ever before in history for education, for health, for

---

<sup>98</sup> Memo, Schlesinger to Jenkins, 1/2/64.

retraining the unemployed, and for helping the economically and physically handicapped.<sup>99</sup>

Lampman changes the second sentence to:

Closing down obsolete installations and programs helps us open up new opportunities for progress. By cutting back where cutting back is possible, I am able to recommend more money than ever before in history for education, for health, for retraining the unemployed, and for helping the economically and physically handicapped.<sup>100</sup>

While this exact formulations is not retained in the final draft, the notion of making the causal connection between fiscal restraint and progressive policies clearly persists – and is expanded – in the rest of the drafting process. In a draft labeled “fourth draft,” the above sentence is given more rhetorical emphasis, as it is revised to read:

*By closing down obsolete installations and programs which have already served their purpose, by cutting back where cutting back is possible, by insisting on a dollar’s worth for a dollar spent, I am able to recommend in this reduced budget the most Federal support in history for education, for health, for retraining the unemployed, and for helping the economically and physically handicapped. (emphasis added).*<sup>101</sup>

The budget section concludes with a transition to the “War on Poverty” section. In

Sorensen’s first draft of the speech, this reads:

The task of government, therefore, is to assure all its citizens an opportunity to meet their minimum needs. This is not so complicated. What after all, does the American citizen require, for himself and his fellow citizen: a fair chance to make good and fair play from the law – a full-time job on full-time pay – a decent home for his family in a decent community – a good school for his children with good teachers – and security against the insecurities of sickness, unemployment, and old age. Those simple requirements are the essence of America’s hopes and dreams – and they are the essence of our domestic legislative program for this Congressional session.<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft,” 1/1/64.

<sup>100</sup> Speech draft, Bob comments, “1964 State of the Union – First Draft.”

<sup>101</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union – Fourth Draft,” Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 92, LBJ Library.

<sup>102</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft,” 1/1/64.

This passage betrays Johnson’s goals for the “War on Poverty” in two ways. First, it implies that it is because it is “the task of government,” not Johnson’s efforts, that the program is required. Secondly, the discussion of the government providing basic needs and guaranteeing wages and employment has the connotations of a welfare state. This directly contradicts with Johnson’s themes that self-sufficiency and a more efficient free enterprise system are primary goals of the poverty program. Suggested changes are made in multiple drafts, resulting in this change to the fourth draft which endured throughout the revision process:

*This budget – and this year’s legislative program – are designed to help each and every American citizen fulfill his basic hopes:  
His hopes for a fair chance to make good,  
his hopes for fair play from the law,  
his hopes for a full-time job on full-time pay;  
his hopes for a decent home for his family in a decent community;  
his hopes for a good school for his children with good teachers;  
and his hopes for some security when faced with sickness, unemployment, or old age.  
(emphasis added)<sup>103</sup>*

This version addresses both problems with the previous formulation. First, it identifies Johnson’s budget and legislative program as the driving force behind the proposals, as opposed to an abstract conception of the “government’s role.” Second, it frames the list as a set of “basic hopes” to which Americans aspire and to which government should ensure the opportunity to pursue as opposed to a list of needs that the government is obliged to satisfy.

## **ii. Subsuming Kennedy’s Domestic Priorities into the “War on Poverty”**

### **1. Discussion of the tax cut**

The placement of discussion of the tax cut in the section entitled “War on Poverty,” the interweaving of justifications for the tax cut with the broader benefits of a “War on Poverty,” and the lack of any revision to this portion of the speech consisting of more than a few words from

---

<sup>103</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union – Fourth Draft.”

first to final draft reveal a deliberate attempt, from the outset, to subsume the Kennedy-proposed tax cut into Johnson's poverty theme. In the poverty section (discussed in more detail below), Johnson relays a list of efforts needed in order to prevent poverty. The final item on the list reads:

Above all, we need to release \$11 billion of tax reduction into the private spending stream to create new jobs and new markets in every area.<sup>104</sup>

The speech immediately proceeds to a justification for *all* facets of the poverty effort, of which the tax cut is a critical element, stating:

These programs are obviously not for the poor and underprivileged alone. Every American will benefit by the extension of social security to cover the hospital costs of their aged parents. Every American community will benefit from the construction or modernization of schools, libraries, hospitals, and nursing homes, from the training of more nurses and from the improvement of urban renewal in public transit. And every individual taxpayer and every corporate taxpayer will benefit from the earliest possible passage of the pending tax bill from both the new investment it will bring and the new jobs that it will create.<sup>105</sup>

Only then does the speech proceed to discussing the merits of the tax cut on its own, and even that discussion is concluded with a justification for the broader poverty effort:

We need a tax cut now to keep this country moving.  
For our goal is not merely to spread the work. Our goal is to create more jobs.<sup>106</sup>

Thus, in perhaps the most overt attempt in this speech to accomplish Johnson's twin goals for his wide-ranging poverty crusade of asserting himself as an independent president while channeling residual support for the slain president into momentum for his own policies, the Johnson team successfully reframed the tax cut from a Kennedy initiative submitted on its own as an economic stimulus measure to one critical element among Johnson's various "War on Poverty" proposals.

---

<sup>104</sup> Speech draft, "1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft."

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Remarkably, through shrewd speech organization and simple framing techniques, they achieve these objectives without major revisions to the text.

## 2. Civil Rights: Conflating Prejudice with Poverty

Civil rights is given its own section in the speech, yet the issue is similarly reframed as an element of the poverty effort throughout as well. In Sorensen's original draft, the "War on Poverty" section opens with the passage:

Unfortunately, two types of Americans too often live on the outskirts of hope – one because of their poverty, the other because of their color. Their degradation degrades us all, and we must all help replace their despair with hope.<sup>107</sup>

This distinctly separates the problems of poverty and discrimination. While common disadvantages exist, the causes of those disadvantages are presented as fundamentally different.

Bob Lampman, a chief architect of the poverty program, reframed the relationship between poverty and civil rights in his revisions to the first draft:

Unfortunately, too many Americans live on the outskirts of hope – some because of their poverty, some because of their color, and *all too many because of both*. Their plight degrades us all, and we must all help to life them from despair to hope and opportunity. (emphasis added).<sup>108</sup>

This formulation *combines* the causes of disadvantage. It suggests that while prejudice on its own can inhibit the realization of one's hope, the broader problem is prejudice *conflated* with poverty. With this simple revision, the speech cleverly subordinates the moral issue of rectifying prejudice to Johnson's broader moral imperative of eradicating poverty – thus simultaneously embracing and diminishing the importance of civil rights to his agenda.

Additionally, the clause "their degradation degrades us all" is eliminated in early revisions of the speech, thus omitting a castigation of the practice or passive acceptance of discrimination. Without this clause, the message changes from an imperative to correct past

---

<sup>107</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, "1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft," 1/1/64.

<sup>108</sup> Speech draft, Bob comments, "1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft."

errors to a duty to help those in need. This change is undoubtedly an early attempt by Johnson to temper visceral condemnation of opponents of civil rights in order to persuade fellow Southerners to join his efforts to pass civil rights legislation. In other words, rather than imploring Southerners to frankly acknowledge deficiencies in their personal character and culture, Johnson emphasizes supporting civil rights measures as an act of benevolence and charity – the same motivations that, in part, drive the anti-poverty measures.

Johnson continues this amalgamation of civil rights and poverty issues in the first line of the first draft of the civil rights section of the speech (which, similar to the discussion of the tax cut, also undergoes few changes in the revision process):

Let me make one principle of this administration abundantly clear: these opportunities in employment education, housing and all the rest must be opportunities for all Americans of every color...For this is not merely an economic issue – or a social political or international issue. It is a moral issue.<sup>109</sup>

By introducing the civil rights section in this way, Johnson manages to retain the overall theme of a “War on Poverty.” It seems that the speech turns to the issue of civil rights as a consequence of the discussion of new opportunities in the poverty section that comes before it. The civil rights section’s relative brevity (the poverty section is approximately six times longer) and placement immediately after the poverty section supports this notion. Moreover, Johnson tacitly reveals that civil rights is introduced as a result of the discussion of the economic benefits in the poverty section by conceding “[f]or this is not merely an economic issue...It is a moral issue.” Such an explanation is needed only because, if not for this qualifier, Johnson’s overwhelming focus on the poverty aspect of civil rights would leave the impression that civil rights is simply an economic opportunity issue relating to the poverty program.

---

<sup>109</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union – First Draft.”

#### **D. The Climax: the ‘War on Poverty’ Section**

***“This administration, today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America”***

This paper has examined how Johnson used the preparation for and content of the sections of the State of the Union address not expressly about the “War on Poverty” to accomplish a variety of goals relating to his declaration of a “War On Poverty.” Yet, the section of the speech in which he announces the program itself encapsulates many of these objectives.

##### **i. Johnson’s Personal Investment in the “War on Poverty”**

First, the poverty section reflects a portion of the overarching aim of the speech: establishing Johnson as president in his own right. The declaration itself reflects this aim. In the first draft of the speech, it reads, “This administration hereby declares unconditional war on poverty in America.”<sup>110</sup> Notably, it is not Congress or even the United States that declares war, but instead the Johnson administration. In later drafts, the declaration is changed to, “This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.”<sup>111</sup> The insertion of “today, here and now” explicitly emphasizes that this speech – and more importantly, this declaration – is meant to be a major turning point at which Johnson asserts his personal leadership of the country by taking the boldest course of action available to a president: initiating a discretionary war. As opposed to wars waged because of public outcry or a provocative attack, the successes and failures of discretionary wars (even metaphorical ones) are attributed solely to the president who began them – precisely the result Johnson desired for his bold policy. Only in the late drafts was a supplemental line added to the declaration, “I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort.”<sup>112</sup> Yet, even this reflects Johnson’s

---

<sup>110</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union – First Draft.”

<sup>111</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft.”

<sup>112</sup> Speech draft, Valenti corrections, “1964 State of the Union—Third from Final Draft,” 1/6/64, Statements of LBJ: Jan. 8, 1964-Jan. 27, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.



personal investment in the “War on Poverty.” Since he “urges” Congress and the American people to join the effort, it clearly is not a self-evident imperative, as most war declarations tend to be. Moreover, he asks for Congress and the public to “join with me in that effort,” making clear that he will actively lead the campaign.

## ii. Johnson’s Appeal to Political Consensus in the Poverty Section

The evolution of the language used in the rest of the poverty section reflects Johnson’s desire to appeal to a variety of ideological interests in building consensus for the “War on Poverty.” For example, Bob Lampman suggests the addition of the following phrase immediately before the declaration of war, “Ours is a rich and productive nation. We can well afford to do what is necessary to wipe out the remnants of poverty. We can ill afford to wait.”<sup>113</sup> Starting in the fourth draft, this phrase is incorporated *after* the declaration, and is altered to read, “The richest Nation on Earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it.”<sup>114</sup> This phrase works towards three objectives. First, it dramatizes the declaration and endows it with added urgency. Second, the first portion suggests that the government should use its influence to actively help those in need – a clear appeal to the liberal audience. Third, the second portion suggests that as a matter of efficiency and economy, investment in this program is vital to avoid colossal costs in the future – a clear appeal to the conservative audience.

Political considerations played a role in the revision of another portion of this section as well. Early drafts paired a section claiming that the program would return many fold on its investment in the future labor force, with a more liberal, nationally focused line of reasoning:

The Federal Government, of course, has been fighting poverty at least since the days of Franklin Roosevelt. But one-fifth of all American families still have incomes too small to meet their basic needs. The onward rush of our technology, population, and prosperity has left too many of our countrymen behind.

---

<sup>113</sup> Speech draft, Bob comments, “1964 State of the Union Message – First Draft.”

<sup>114</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union Message – Fourth Draft.”

What we must do – initially though a pilot program – is to sharpen, focus and accelerate our attack, channeling more directly the efforts and resources of all interested Federal agencies into helping more Americans – especially young Americans – escape from squalor and misery.<sup>115</sup>

Though Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a personal hero of Johnson's, he represented liberal orthodoxy and alluding to him and "Federal agencies" did not help in the challenging task of persuading proponents of smaller government to support the poverty program. Moreover, the passage is circled, labeled with the amount of words it contains, and crossed out – implying that the contributors to the speech determined that its content did not justify its length. Interestingly, much of the passage was reintroduced in later drafts, but with an added emphasis on the war metaphor:

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.<sup>116</sup>

This version omits allusions to Roosevelt and "Federal agencies" and pointedly mentions its goal of clearing the unemployment rolls where "other citizens help to carry" impoverished Americans.

### **iii. Absence of a Connection Between Heller and Gordon's Proposals and Drafts of the Poverty Section**

Notably, the minor reference to a "pilot program" was eliminated, reflecting the changes made to the actual "War on Poverty" program devised by Gordon and Heller at the behest of Johnson. Another reference to the Coordinated Community Action Program present in the first draft was changed in the final draft as well:

This attack must be directed at the state and local level, accompanied by appropriate state and local fund efforts. The bill I shall submit will emphasize this

---

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Speech draft, "1964 State of the Union Message – Next to Last Draft."

cooperative approach. For the war against poverty will not be won in Washington. It must be won in the field.<sup>117</sup>

The implications of this passage raised the ire of Arthur Schlesinger, who wrote in his memo:

[T]he sentence “This attack must be directed at the state and local levels” suggests that the federal government intends to hand the poverty program over to the states and communities. This is bad (a) because poverty is a national question and cannot be left to the states, any more than agriculture or fair labor standards can; (b) because, even if poverty were primarily a local issue, very few states and communities have the personnel capable of running an honest and efficient program (or rather 50 honest and efficient programs); and (c) because it reinforces the Republican theory that the federal government is the enemy and is more wasteful and corrupt than local government – a theory refuted by most of our history. Why not simply say “This attack calls for the closest state and local collaboration”?<sup>118</sup>

Schlesinger’s critique again demonstrates Johnson’s attempts to broaden the appeal of the program beyond liberals and reveals his independence from the Kennedy administration in this speech. However, perhaps more importantly it also makes clear that an extensive description of the Coordinated Community Action Program would indicate that most of the “Action” involved took place at the state and local level. Thus, it appears this passage was revised to include a more active role for Johnson and the federal government, as its final form implies:

Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national organization and support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the State and the local level and must be supported and directed by State and local efforts.

For the 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.<sup>119</sup>

#### **iv. Shortcomings of the Supremacy of the War Metaphor in the Drafting of the Poverty Section**

In fact, the absence in the speech drafts of even this brief description of the innovative Coordinated Community Action Program helps substantiate the notion that instead of the poverty

---

<sup>117</sup> Speech draft, Sorensen, “1964 State of the Union – First Draft.”

<sup>118</sup> Memo, Schlesinger to Jenkins, 1/2/64.

<sup>119</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft.”

policy proposal shaping the drafting of this speech, the rhetoric fundamentally changed the eventual policy recommendation. As described in Part I of this paper, Johnson insisted the program be labeled the “War on Poverty” to maximize its rhetoric effect in order to “hit the whole nation with real impact.”<sup>120</sup> It appears this *ethos* basis of the “War on Poverty” was adopted so wholeheartedly in the drafting of the poverty section that it made exploring the *logos* of the poverty proposal politically unfeasible. Because of its inherently long-term nature and its heavier emphasis on preventing poverty than on alleviating poverty, the program planned by Gordon and Heller could not possibly show a sufficient amount of immediate “victories” to justify the war formulation. Moreover, the Coordinated Community Action Program was essentially a solitary policy idea requiring a single piece of legislation.

By contrast, as Sundquist later noted, “the very idea of a massive coordinated attack on poverty suggested mobilizing under that banner all or as many as possible of the weapons that would be used.”<sup>121</sup> Consequently, matching the expansive language Johnson wanted in the drafting of the speech required the inclusion and repackaging of a variety of preexisting legislative items – precisely the policy of “past[ing] together a lot of existing approaches” Johnson had initially rejected as unworkable.<sup>122</sup> The emphasis of Johnson’s war metaphor over his policy imperatives resulted in the following laundry list of recommendations in the poverty section of the speech which does not include and is not related to community action:

No single piece of legislation, however, is going to suffice.

We will launch a special effort in the chronically distressed areas of Appalachia.

We must expand our small but our successful area redevelopment program.

---

<sup>120</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 74.

<sup>121</sup> Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 142 in Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 166.

<sup>122</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 74.

We must enact youth employment legislation to put jobless, aimless, hopeless youngsters to work on useful projects.

We must distribute more food to the needy through a broader food stamp program.

We must create a National Service Corps to help the economically handicapped of our own country as the Peace Corps now helps those abroad.

We must modernize our unemployment insurance and establish high-level commission on automation. If we have the brain power to invent these machines, we have the brain power to make certain that they are a boon and not a bane to humanity.

We must extend the coverage of our minimum wage laws to more than 2 million workers now lacking this basic protection of purchasing power.

We must, by including special school aid funds as part of our education program, improve the quality of teaching, training, and counseling in our hardest hit areas.

We must build more libraries in every area and more hospitals and nursing homes under the Hill-Burton Act, and train more nurses to staff them.

We must provide hospital insurance for our older citizens financed by every worker and his employer under Social Security, contributing no more than \$1 a month during the employee's working career to protect him in his old age in a dignified manner without cost to the Treasury, against the devastating hardship of prolonged or repeated illness.

We must, as a part of a revised housing and urban renewal program, give more help to those displaced by slum clearance, provide more housing for our poor and our elderly, and seek as our ultimate goal in our free enterprise system a decent home for every American family.

We must help obtain more modern mass transit within our communities as well as low-cost transportation between them.

Above all, we must release \$11 billion of tax reduction into the private spending stream to create new jobs and new markets in every area of this land.<sup>123</sup>

In essence, the drafts appear to show that Johnson believed immediate and decisive rhetorical and legislative victories comprised the most favorable path to “tak[ing] the dead man's program and turn[ing] it into a martyr's cause,” thereby ensuring that he would live forever as

---

<sup>123</sup> Speech draft, “1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft.”

“the greatest president of them all.”<sup>124</sup> Yet, Johnson’s strategy for drafting the introduction of the “War on Poverty” in his State of the Union address created a deep tension with the very policy he had hoped to promote with it.

### **III. Immediate Reaction and Results** ***“How You Going to Beat a Guy like That? That is Franklin Delano Hoover”***

In the immediate aftermath, Republicans had no effective rejoinder to Johnson’s shrewd State of the Union message. As James Rowe, former advisor to Franklin Roosevelt and a friend of Johnson’s marveled, “How you going to beat a guy like that? That is Franklin Delano Hoover,” suggesting that Johnson’s surprisingly firm embrace of conservative financial principles combined with a visceral appeal to help Americans in need effectively inoculated him from attacks from the left or right.<sup>125</sup> Without realizing he was illustrating the appeal of Johnson’s message, Les Arends, the Republican House minority whip, grumbled that Johnson “promises something for everyone. He even promises to give everyone more of everything previously promised at less cost.”<sup>126</sup> Barry Goldwater’s comment, “it’s my impression he out-Roosevelt[ed] Roosevelt, out-Kennedyed Kennedy and even made Truman look like a piker,”<sup>127</sup> – made while campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination that day in New Hampshire – revealed Johnson had successfully taken the first steps to accomplishing his goal of becoming greater than “the whole bunch of them [presidents]” by implying Johnson transcended the two most popular Democratic presidents of the twentieth century.<sup>128</sup>

The “War on Poverty” proposal in particular put Republicans in a dilemma when Congressional hearings began on the omnibus bill that encapsulated the lengthy list of proposals

---

<sup>124</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward, “The Full Johnson,” *American Heritage*, September 1991, Volume 42, Issue 5.

<sup>125</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 337.

<sup>126</sup> *Washington Post*, January 9, 1964 in Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 285.

<sup>127</sup> Holland, *Presidential Recordings*, 340.

<sup>128</sup> Ward, “The Full Johnson,” *American Heritage*, September 1991.

Johnson had included in the poverty section of the speech. As one flummoxed Republican Congressman put it, “‘War on Poverty’ is a terrific slogan, particularly in an election year. It puts doubters under the suspicion of being in favor of poverty.”<sup>129</sup> Sundquist notes that “[t]he frustration of the Republican leaders in trying to find reasons why the Congress should reject a bill [the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964] whose objectives they were compelled to endorse is evident throughout the five months’ record of the congressional debate.”<sup>130</sup> In the end, 60 of the 100 southern Democrats and 22 Republicans joined 144 northern and western Democrats to pass the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 in the House of Representatives by a wider than expected margin of 226-185. In the Senate, 10 out of 32 Republicans supported the bill as it passed 61-34.<sup>131</sup> Thus, in the short term, Johnson achieved his goals for introducing his wide-ranging social proposal, the “War on Poverty,” in the 1964 State of the Union address: he seized upon the opportunity presented by Kennedy’s death while simultaneously distinguishing himself from his predecessor – and in the process drew upon principles from both ends of the ideological spectrum to ensure legislative triumph.

**IV. Conclusion: Implications for Johnson’s long-term legacy**  
***“His clear [rhetorical and political] victory ensured that he and not Congress would be blamed if the program failed. And fail it did.”***

Both main sections of this paper suggest several long-term repercussions. First, it appears possible that because of their scale, some of Johnson’s extraordinary short-term triumphs in the 1964 State of the Union – for example, distinguishing himself from Kennedy, forging poverty onto the national agenda, and subsuming civil rights and the tax cut into the poverty theme – would have endured in some form. Second, from the outset, Johnson’s subordination of policy

---

<sup>129</sup> Rep. Charles B. Hoeven (R-IA), *Congressional Record*, August 6, 1964, p. 1,831.

<sup>130</sup> Sundquist, *On Fighting Poverty*, 28.

<sup>131</sup> Sundquist, *On Fighting Poverty*, 28-29.

formation to rhetorical and political considerations foreshadowed adverse results in implementing poverty policy. When comparing the results of this paper's examination of Lyndon Johnson's 1964 State of the Union address and declaration of a "war on poverty" to polling in the last 15 years, these inferences and three long-term implications stand out.

First, decades after his death, Americans primarily associate John Kennedy with civil rights and the Cold War – not poverty. When asked about the two most important lessons of his presidency, a plurality cite "Promoting equal rights and barring discrimination" and "Standing up to communism and making the American military strong," while fewer than one in six indicate "Making sure our poorest citizens, as in Appalachia and the inner cities, have opportunity."<sup>132</sup> This reinforces the paper's finding that Kennedy's impact on poverty policy was minimal.

Second, a full generation later, sizable majorities of Americans are aware that LBJ started the "War on Poverty," believe society and government have a moral obligation to do something about it, and think reducing poverty is an intelligent economic policy and helps to alleviate racial tension – revealing that Lyndon Johnson achieved many of his major objectives for the 1964 State of the Union address. In an extensive poll on the topic three decades after the speech, nearly 60% of Americans report knowing that Lyndon Johnson began "a series of programs called the 'War on Poverty'" in the 1960s, evidence that a *Johnson* legacy of combating poverty endures.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, 84% of Americans reported believing society has a moral obligation to try to alleviate the poverty in our midst, 80% thought the government has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty in

---

<sup>132</sup> Survey by Public Interest Project and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, April 5-April 8, 2004. Retrieved January 2, 2007 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>133</sup> Survey by Americans Talk Issues Foundation and Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes, University of Maryland, October 13-October 16, 1994. Retrieved January 2, 2007 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.



this country, and only 19% agreed that poverty is a result of the culture of the poor about which government can do nothing.<sup>134</sup> These findings illustrate that Americans agree with Johnson's assertion that the government must take decisive action to reduce poverty. Moreover, 92% agreed that government efforts to reduce poverty represent a good economic investment by reducing the costs of social services, putting more people to work, and generally cultivating a more productive economy – reflecting Johnson's assessment that "The richest nation on earth can afford to win [the War on Poverty]". We cannot afford to lose it.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, 73% agreed that reducing poverty will help reduce racial tension and crime, validating Johnson's efforts to subsume civil rights into the poverty theme.<sup>136</sup>

Third, however, Americans do not believe federal, state, or local governments have the abilities to efficiently and effectively combat poverty, and most think that the "War on Poverty" started by Lyndon Johnson actually increased or had no effect on poverty. 75% agreed that government programs to alleviate poverty ultimately do not help poor people and waste taxpayers money.<sup>137</sup> Fewer than 45% have confidence that state or local governments possess the capabilities necessary to deal with poverty, and fewer than 40% have confidence in the federal government's ability to deal with the issue.<sup>138</sup> This is a stark repudiation of the results of the actual poverty efforts initiated by Johnson. In fact, almost 70% of those aware that Lyndon Johnson initiated the "War on Poverty" in the 1960s thought that it actually increased or had no

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Speech draft, "1964 State of the Union Message – Final Draft," Statements of LBJ: Jan. 1, 1964-Jan. 8, 1964, Box 93, LBJ Library.

<sup>136</sup> Americans Talk Issues Foundation and Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes, University of Maryland, October 13-October 16, 1994.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

affect on poverty in America.<sup>139</sup>

Thus, though the “War on Poverty” Lyndon Johnson introduced in his 1964 State of the Union address successfully distinguished his administration from Kennedy’s, forged poverty onto the national agenda in a lasting way, convinced Americans that government should combat the problem, and subsumed economic and racial harmony arguments into the poverty theme, its failure in the policy realm – which the supremacy of Johnson’s rhetoric over his policy in the drafting process of the speech portended from the outset – undermined the public’s confidence in government’s ability to handle the challenge. This pairing of political and rhetorical success with policy failure comprises Lyndon Baines Johnson’s s unfinished legacy in the field of poverty. The question that remains is whether a current or future policymaker will seize upon this unfinished legacy – and successfully complete it.

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.