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Protest to Preparation: The Very Different Histories of Community Action and the Opportunities Industrialization Centers in Philadelphia's War on Poverty

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THE VERY DIFFERENT HISTORIES OF COMMUNITY ACTION AND THE
OPPORTUNITIES INDUSTRIALIZATION CENTERS IN PHILADELPHIA'S WAR ON
POVERTY

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IF THERE IS NO STRUGGLE, THERE IS NO PROGRESS. THOSE WHO PROFESS TO FAVOR FREEDOM, AND YET DEPRECIATE AGITATION, ARE MEN WHO WANT CROPS WITHOUT PLOWING UP THE GROUND. THEY WANT RAIN WITHOUT THUNDER AND LIGHTNING. THEY WANT THE OCEAN WITHOUT THE AWFUL ROAR OF ITS MANY WATERS. THIS STRUGGLE MAY BE A MORAL ONE; OR IT MAY BE A PHYSICAL ONE; OR IT MAY BE BOTH MORAL AND PHYSICAL; BUT IT MUST BE A STRUGGLE. POWER CONCEDES NOTHING WITHOUT A DEMAND. IT NEVER DID AND NEVER WILL.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *AN ADDRESS ON WEST INDIA EMANCIPATION*, 1857

“Unfortunately 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,” said President Lyndon Baines Johnson in his first State of the Union address in 1964. “...This Administration here and now declares unconditional war on poverty in America.”¹ As one of the centerpieces of President Johnson’s “Great Society” – which sought to combine anti-poverty, civil rights, and social service policies with a program of liberal economic development – the War on Poverty was born amid the raging civil rights struggle, the emerging Black Power movement, and the reality of rampant urban poverty in the 1960s United States. Operating on the assumption that the personal deficiencies of poor people (often urban blacks) were responsible for their conditions, it organized a range of job training and education programs aimed at remedying those deficiencies. One program – the Community Action Program (CAP) – was slightly different. As a way to give local communities the authority to devise solutions to poverty tailored to their specific circumstances, the only requirement of the program was that

it include the participation of the poor themselves. Despite resting on similar intellectual foundations as the other War on Poverty programs, it held within it a radical kernel: it could empower the poor and existing civil rights organizations to directly challenge urban power structures. In many cities, this tension led local governments to attempt to control Community Action from the top down.

In a number of ways, 1960s Philadelphia represents an ideal case study. One of the country's largest cities – with a large poor black population – Philadelphia was among the first to apply to establish a Community Action Agency. Yet the program would never be used for its intended purpose, quickly being hijacked by the city's Democratic machine. Nevertheless, owing to the city's reputation for being a hotbed of civil rights and Black Power activism in the North and for having a strong local government, it provides useful insight into the nature of the conflicts over Community Action. If Philadelphia's program typified the failure of the Community Action, then Leon Sullivan's Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC), which existed side-by-side with Community Action in the city, tell a much different story. While Community Action was racked by internal conflict, Sullivan, a renowned Philadelphia clergyman and advocate of self-help and black capitalism, attained War on Poverty funding and grew his job training program into an international operation.

How are we to understand the vastly different outcomes of these two "battles" in the War on Poverty? In this essay I will argue that the failure of Community Action in Philadelphia is primarily attributable to its inherent contradictions. Namely, the inconsistencies inherent in a program that left open the possibility of the poor and local activists devising solutions to poverty that could pose a direct challenge to local authority. For OIC, I contend, the opposite was true. OIC's political quietism and open acceptance of notions of poverty as personal defectiveness explain why it was able to endure, and thrive, through the Nixon administration. In telling this story, I will attempt to paint a broader picture of the city's black political scene at the time. Some questions that will be addressed are: Who were the individuals and organizations active during the War on Poverty? What did they think? What were the relationships of these individuals and groups to each other and to city government? Finally, in what ways did notions of Black Power find expression in these two programs?

MAXIMUM FEASIBLE PARTICIPATION?

On August 20th, 1964 – seven months after his declaration of the War on Poverty – President Johnson signed into law the Economic Opportunity Act, thereby signaling the beginning of the federal government’s commitment to the largest social welfare program since the New Deal. Shortly after its passage, Congress approved the allocation of \$800 million for the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which was principally responsible for the administration of the various War on Poverty programs. Johnson appointed Sargent Shriver – attorney, former director of the Peace Corps, and brother-in-law of the late President John F. Kennedy – to head the agency. Among the programs assigned to the OEO’s purview were the Job Corps, VISTA, Head Start, and the Community Action Program.²

As scholars have shown, a set of assumptions about the sources of poverty, which emerged out of post-WWII social scientific and psychological studies, informed the strategies for combating poverty adopted by government officials and, in turn, gave the above programs their shape. It was generally understood that poverty was primarily the result of personal deficiencies that led to blocked employment opportunities. Hence, instead of focusing on the task of job creation and redistribution of wealth, the logic of job training and education underlaid the War on Poverty as exemplified by programs like the Job Corps and Head Start. Moreover, the findings of Oscar Lewis’ influential study, which posited that the impoverished remained mired in a “culture of poverty,” characterized the thinking of many of the government officials charged with crafting the War on Poverty strategy. According to Lewis, the culture of poverty consisted of a set of heritable attitudes and practices of poor people that in turn alienated them from civil society and rendered them incapable of seizing opportunities to transcend their conditions. From this perspective, poverty was, in essence, pathological. The behavioralist assumptions of the culture of poverty thesis were further elaborated and racialized in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s notorious report for the Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, released in 1965. For Moynihan, ingrained cultural practices led to the disintegration of the black nuclear family, which was primarily responsible for the breakdown of black community structures and, in turn, led to economic marginalization. The Community Action Program was built on these intellectual foundations as a remedy for the culture of poverty especially afflicting black, primarily urban, populations.³

Of the many sub-agencies of the OEO the Community Action Program was the largest, receiving \$300 million of the \$800 million set aside by congress for the War on Poverty.⁴ Drawing on the programs to combat juvenile delinquency developed under the Kennedy administration, CAP encouraged the creation of local Community Action Agencies (CAA) to develop programs for fighting poverty tailored to local realities and apply for funds from the OEO. Writes one historian, the CAAs had three basic purposes: “to provide new services to the poor; to coordinate all federal, state, and local program dealing with the poor; and to promote institutional change in the interests of the poor.”⁵ Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the CAP, however, was the requirement that CAAs “be developed and administered with the maximum feasible participation of the members of the groups and residents of the areas served.”⁶ If the poor suffered from a culture of poverty that left them alienated from mainstream institutions, organizations, and the mechanisms of public authority, then “maximum feasible participation” was seen as a vehicle for encouraging the poor to take an active role in improving their own conditions while inculcating in them a sense of political power and restoring community. The *Community Action Program Guide* makes this clear:

The long-range objective of every community action program is to effect a permanent increase in the capacity of individuals, groups, and communities afflicted by poverty to deal effectively with their own problems so that they need no further assistance. Poverty is a condition of need, helplessness, and hopelessness. It is rooted in a network of social ills that include inadequate education, unemployment, poor health, and dilapidated housing. To alleviate them requires a varied and coordinated attack.⁷

The precise meaning of “maximum feasible participation,” however, became a point of serious contestation, not just on the local level between city governments and poor populations, but within the ranks of the federal government itself. For city-dwelling blacks engaged in grassroots political efforts who embraced the nascent mood of “Black-Power-as-community-control,” CAP was seen as an opportunity to secure black representation in local political structures and to fashion a program for fighting poverty on the terms of the black poor. Thus, the shape community action took in any given city depended largely upon the relative

strength of the political forces operating in those cities. For instance, in cities like Chicago with strong, well-entrenched political machines and relatively weak black political organizations, local governments maintained near complete control in determining the amount of participation of the poor in CAP.⁸ In Atlanta, where the business elite was strong and well connected to the Democratic Party, citizen participation also remained very low. Meanwhile, in San Francisco the strong local Black Power organizations succeeded for a time in defining citizen participation in the city's poverty war.⁹

The conflict over the meaning of "maximum feasible participation" ultimately had the effect of undermining the government's experiment with Community Action. In many ways, Philadelphia exemplifies the tensions present in many cities between local governments and black populations as well as the tensions within black populations themselves to define the scope of citizen participation in the struggle over CAP. On one hand, exploring this tumultuous period in American history from the vantage point of Philadelphia provides a snapshot of the social, political, and economic issues that gripped the black population of one of the country's largest cities. Moreover, it sheds light on the ideas, debates, and actors at play in this particular city at this particular time. On the other hand, the fight for CAP in Philadelphia can speak more generally to the failure of Community Action on a national level.

1960s Philadelphia embodied the postwar Urban Crisis that faced many of the United States' large northern cities. Deindustrialization saw a shift from manufacturing economy – with more stable employment opportunities – to a primarily service-oriented economy. While many whites were drawn to the suburbs, Philadelphia's sizable, largely poor, black population remained confined to several ghettos across the city. Like many other large urban centers, *de facto* segregation characterized the public schools and other public services. Furthermore, as the civil rights struggle raged in the South, racial tensions bubbled in Philadelphia. Those racial tensions boiled over on several notable occasions in the 1960s. Among the most significant instances were the selective patronage campaign aimed at fighting employment discrimination, the North Philadelphia race riot of 1964 that arose out of the friction between community residents and city police, and the 1967 student walkout for better learning conditions and "community control" of the public schools.¹⁰ While Philadelphia exhibited many of the problems of

other Northern cities in the era of Civil Rights and Black Power, the presence of strong, well connected black political organizations would factor significantly into the fight over CAP in the city.

With the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act and the creation of OEO in the summer of 1964, Philadelphia became one of the first major cities to throw its hat into the ring for federal funding to create an anti-poverty program. Likely sensing the potential “maximum feasible participation” had to unsettle the political balance of power in the city, Mayor James H.J. Tate – the Irish-American, long-time Democratic politician from Pennsylvania and mayor of Philadelphia for 10 years – assembled a task force of local elites and public officials to create and submit to Washington a proposal for Philadelphia’s anti-poverty plan.¹¹ While the War on Poverty was welcomed by the city’s black population as a way to improve the conditions of a large portion of the black population, some expressed concern with the exclusion of both blacks and poor people from the Mayor’s task force. “The Economic Opportunities [sic] Act has written into it the condition that there ‘must be citizen participation’ in the local policy making, planning and administration,” wrote a reader to the *Philadelphia Tribune*. “Yet there is only one Negro on the Task Force. There seems to be no indication that Mr. Tate intends to have any other Negroes anywhere in this top policy, planning and administrative body.”¹² The Citizens Emergency Committee on the Anti-Poverty Program, formed in February of 1965 as a coalition of seventeen local labor, religious, settlement, neighborhood, and civil rights groups – including CORE, SNCC, and the NAACP – criticized the Mayor’s task force and suggested that the federal government reject the city’s proposal. The OEO agreed and Tate was forced to restructure his plan to conform to the requirement for citizen participation.¹³

Tate thus scrapped the task force plan and in the same month submitted an alternate proposal for the creation of the Philadelphia Anti-Poverty Action Committee (PAAC) – a board of 31 members from the city’s business, religious, and civil rights communities including twelve “representatives of the poor” elected directly by the city’s poor population. The first order of business, however, was selecting someone to head the committee. Mayor Tate appointed a five-person panel to nominate a candidate to head PAAC, to be approved by Tate.¹⁴ As the list of potential candidates narrowed, the nominating process became increasingly contentious. On one side, the 64-year-old black concert promoter, vice-chairman of PAAC, and close ally of Mayor Tate, Sam Evans, backed the 34-year-old black attorney Charles

Bowser. On the other side, Cecil B. Moore, the outspoken president of the Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP, threw his support behind Isaiah Crippins, another black attorney. When it became clear that Bowser would get the nod, the dispute between Moore and Evans intensified, with Moore ultimately suggesting that if Bowser was appointed he would withdraw all NAACP support for PAAC and urge his friend, the renowned Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. from Harlem, to withhold federal funding from the program.¹⁵

Moore's support for Crippins and opposition to Bowser rested on two central claims that are worth exploring in depth, as they reveal much about both the struggle between city government and local activists to set the terms of citizen participation in Philadelphia's anti-poverty program and basic understandings of black middle class representation of poor blacks' interests. Moore's first claim was that the selection of Bowser was politically motivated. Though Bowser, too, had done legal work for the NAACP, Crippins' connections to NAACP leadership made the prospect of his appointment as chair unattractive to Democratic city officials who wished to maintain control of PAAC. "Some people want to use the war on poverty program as a political football," said Moore. "The benefits to be derived from the antipoverty program will be drained away from the Negro community by the politicians."¹⁶ Moore's claim would certainly be borne out by subsequent developments – to be discussed below – as Evans was able to make Community Action function as an arm of the city's democratic machine.

Moore's second claim was a bit more debatable. Crippins, he argued, was more closely connected to Philadelphia's black community and thus better equipped to act on their behalf. Said Moore, Crippins "knows poor people, and has the backing of the entire Negro community."¹⁷ A closer examination of the similar personal histories of both Bowser and Crippins, however, reveals little to distinguish one from the other in this regard. Born in 1911 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Isaiah Crippins attended grade school in Kentucky and was an academic and athletic standout at Knoxville College where he performed menial tasks to raise the money for his tuition. Before entering the Army during World War II he spent time as a teacher and a personnel manager for the Tennessee Valley Authority and upon his return from service he enrolled in Yale Law School where he graduated with honors. He was hired in 1952 by the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office where he worked until 1959 when he went into private practice.

Charles Bowser, nineteen years Crippins' junior, was born in North Philadelphia and attended the city's public schools. He served in the Army during the Korean War and later received his law degree from Temple University. As an attorney, Bowser sat on the Police Advisory Board – hearing citizens' complaints in cases of police brutality. Both Crippins and Bowser provided legal council for the Philadelphia NAACP – Crippins representing the NAACP in its 1963 suit charging the city's Board of Education with racial discrimination and Bowser directing a suit in the same year to ban blackface from the Mummer's Parade.¹⁸ In the absence of any means for the black population to directly select a candidate to head the PAAC, Moore's claims for black middle class representation of the black poor were made through the language of racial "authenticity." From this perspective, because Crippins "knew," "understood," and "came from the ranks of" the black poor he was better suited to operate as their proxy as PAAC chair. This rhetorical strategy was undermined partly by the city's determination to keep PAAC tightly within its grasp and partly by the fact that the assertions that Crippins better represented the community carried little weight given Bowser's own North Philadelphia roots.

Despite the protests from Moore, Mayor Tate approved the nomination of Bowser for the \$18,000 per year position as PAAC director in April of 1965. Meanwhile, after continued threats from Moore to pull out NAACP support for PAAC and appeal directly to Washington for War on Poverty funds, Crippins accepted a \$15,000 per year position as general legal advisor to PAAC. As executive director, Bowser's responsibilities included being the primary spokesman for the city's program and coordinating projects between local communities and organizations, federal agencies, and PAAC. Crippins, according to Tate, was to "accompany Bowser to all meetings with federal and state antipoverty program administrators" and to "assist the executive director in negotiating the terms and provisions of all contracts under antipoverty programs." Though still concerned that the appointment of Bowser as director was an attempt by the city government to wrest control of PAAC from the poor, the clarification of Crippins' duties convinced Moore that Crippins could "be an effective watchdog."¹⁹

Bowser's first assignment as executive director was to organize and implement the second major feature of Mayor Tate's revised anti-poverty plan – the creation of local Community Action Councils and the selection of "representatives of the poor" to sit on PAAC. "I believe that the solution to poverty must come from the poor people themselves," said Bowser, ex-

pressing the logic that undergirded the innovation of community action as an anti-poverty strategy. "I believe very deeply that the poor can handle and deal with their own problems."²⁰ The practical application of Bowser's belief in self-help would be the creation of twelve, twelve-person Community Action Councils (CAC) – one located in each of twelve predetermined "pockets of poverty" composed of the highest concentration of the city's poor. Each CAC would then select one "representative of the poor" to sit on PAAC. Of the major cities to apply for OEO funding, Philadelphia was the first to employ direct elections for representatives in its Community Action program. This would prove to be a massive undertaking, requiring significant preparation and clarification. The election process would also bring to the fore the underlying tensions between politicians, the poor, and local organizations active in predominantly poor areas over the character of Community Action in the city.²¹

With elections scheduled for the late spring of 1965, PAAC called for a series of informational town hall meetings to be held in each of the twelve pockets of poverty to provide details about Community Action and field questions about the program from members of the city's poor population. Held on the night of April 28th, 1965, the first meetings drew nearly 9,000 of Philadelphia's poorest residents. Before mostly packed, sometimes rowdy, school auditoriums, local War on Poverty administrators answered a range of questions about the program, centering primarily on eligibility requirements and procedural issues. The most contentious matter was the income requirement. To qualify for election, single or married residents could make no more than \$3,000 annually – adding \$500 to the cap for each dependent. This raised concerns that the representatives of the poor would be limited in their ability to influence PAAC: "It is ridiculous to think that a person with that kind of income is going to be able to make himself heard in the company of government officials and trained social workers," said one woman. Candidates and voters were required to reside in the designated pocket of poverty that they sought to represent and in which they wished to vote. Finally, voters were to cast their ballots for each of the twelve seats of their local CACs. Local officials viewed the meetings as successful, and the one-month dash to election day was underway.²²

Within a month of the first town hall meetings, 361 people had filed for candidacy for the 144 available CAC seats. As the election approached, however, city government began to feel uneasy. Owing to the twelve-person ballot format, local organizations active in Philadelphia's black neighborhoods

assembled and campaigned on the basis of twelve-candidate slates. For neighborhood activists, slates were a logical way to attain a voice in the local War on Poverty and hinder city government's efforts to circumvent already established neighborhood organizations. "Organizing a slate is democracy at the highest level," said Alvin Echols, director of the North City Congress – the prominent coalition of North Philadelphia neighborhood groups. "It is the only way that you can make sure that the best job possible will be done for your neighborhoods."²³ Meanwhile, city politicians grew uneasy. For some, slates threatened to politicize the War on Poverty and create an insurgent class of grassroots neighborhood activists that would challenge the authority of local elected officials and initiate a power struggle in the halls of city government. "There is real danger that local people who are very articulate power seekers may organize this election," said Dr. Julian L. Greifer. "Sending these leaders to PAAC would result in a struggle for power and jealousy that would injure the war on poverty."²⁴ The concerns of Tate administration officials, on the other hand, were far more immediate: the election of full slates of neighborhood activists to CACs would make it more difficult for City Hall to dictate the direction of the War on Poverty. Thus, anti-poverty officials encouraged citizens to vote for individuals as opposed to slates. "It is certainly unfair," stated one spokesman, "to select twelve people to represent an entire area, when some areas will have as many as 46 people on the ballot."²⁵ Though city government was primarily interested in maintaining control of the anti-poverty program, urging a vote for individuals could also have been construed as indicative of a commitment to full citizen participation.

With Federal War on Poverty officials observing from afar, voting began at 9 AM on May 26th. A successful election could very well establish Philadelphia's Community Action Program as the blueprint for future cities. While reports indicated that as many as 500,000 Philadelphians were eligible to vote, only 13,500 had cast ballots when the polls closed at 9 PM. Despite the light turnout, PAAC executive director Charles Bowser was optimistic: "To get more than 13,000 people in an election of this type, with amateurs running and no party loyalty at stake is just thrilling."²⁶ In several North and West Philadelphia districts, twelve-person slates – most backed by the North City Congress – were, in fact, able to win control of CACs. Generally speaking, heavily black districts displayed larger turnouts than majority white sections of the city. In sum, 91 women – 35 of them housewives – and 53 men were elected to the 144 non-paying positions.²⁷ Two weeks

later, the recently elected CACs convened to select from their ranks twelve representatives to sit on PAAC. The gender balance of those selected reflected the composition of the 144 CAC representatives – 9 women and 3 men.²⁸

It is worth discussing, briefly, the backgrounds of some of the representatives of the poor as it can provide a glimpse into the range of issues that faced the city's poor and the diversity of their experiences. Perhaps the best known and most well respected of the twelve representatives was the long-time North Philadelphia resident and mother of 10, Clara Baldwin. Born in Delaware, Baldwin attended Dover State College prior to moving to Philadelphia in 1937. Belying her classification as “poor” by federal standards was an extensive involvement in community affairs – Baldwin was an active member of a number of local women's and uplift organizations. Dedicated to the ethic of self-help and education that characterized the strategy of the War on Poverty, she purchased a house in 1958 and opened the Clara Baldwin Community Center from which she ran recreational and educational programs for children. In 1964 she received a grant to construct the Clara Baldwin Neighborhood House, which served as a community center and hub for various job training and educational programs. Finally, she was active in local politics, running unsuccessfully for a seat in the state General Assembly in 1964 as a Republican. At age 55, she was one of the oldest representatives of the poor.²⁹

On the other hand, the 22-year-old Allison Bryant was the youngest member of the council. A master's student at Temple University, he led children's recreational programs to finance his education. In addition, several single mothers sat on PAAC, including 27-year-old mother of three, Christine Allen, and 39-year-old mother of five, Viola Pankey. While Allen was unemployed and not affiliated with any community organizations, Pankey held positions in five different organizations. Other women on the council included the self-employed candy maker, Mayme James, and Ida Mae Watkins, a grandmother from the city's Germantown section active in several local civic organizations. Yet, no member of the PAAC better exemplified the inherent contradictions of Community Action in Philadelphia than Samuel Yarborough. Despite expressing prescient concerns about jobs being dangled by anti-poverty officials in exchange for support for the political machine, the 46-year-old, unemployed, high school dropout would himself become embroiled in a controversy after accepting a \$9,000 per year job working on PAAC staff.³⁰ As will be discussed below, Yarborough is but

one example of the ultimately successful attempt by the city's Democratic machine to effectively neuter Community Action in Philadelphia.

Federal officials and the OEO initially expressed optimism at the smooth, if sparsely attended, election and the creation of PAAC and it was not long until federal funds began rolling in – nearly six million dollars – for a handful of children's educational programs and adult job training programs. If the OEO's intention was for CACs to create and operate new anti-poverty programs in response to local needs, Philadelphia's War on Poverty quickly deviated from this model. By the middle of 1966, Charles Bowser and Sam Evans came under the harsh scrutiny of local activists for muzzling the voice of the representatives of the poor on PAAC and in the CACs. "The emphasis seems to be on control rather than liberation of people in poverty areas," said Norval Reece of Americans for Democratic Action. "We were elected as stooges," charged CAC member Eulalia Horan. "The program is politically controlled from city hall."³¹ As foreshadowed by Mayor Tate's initial anti-poverty task force proposal, the battle between Bowser and Crippins for the position of director of PAAC, and the attempts by city government to limit slate voting in the anti-poverty election, Sam Evans, abetted by Bowser, took steps to eliminate citizens participation from the city's anti-poverty program once and for all.

Local activists, CAC members, and the OEO alike accused Evans of transforming Community Action into a political patronage program for the city's Democratic Party. By the summer of 1966, the OEO found that as many as 118 CAC members and 142 of their relatives were employed in the anti-poverty program or city government. By dangling such jobs in exchange for votes of the representatives of the poor on PAAC and in CACs as well as offering OEO funds to already existing welfare agencies sitting on PAAC, Evans and Bowser were able to move the program in precisely the direction they wanted. As a result, local CACs atrophied. Instead of performing the intended task of involving the poor in finding solutions for poverty, the Philadelphia poor were "virtually unaware of PAAC," according to a government official. One North Philadelphia CAC could conduct business only four times in 18 meetings owing to a lack of quorum. OEO moved to impose restrictions on Evans' patronage enterprise by forcing those who were both employed by the city and CAC members to resign from one of the two posts. Evans expressed outrage at the federal constraints, stating: "We in Philadelphia feel we have enough knowledge of the community to get the best results for the money spent." Moreover, after offering only \$40,000 in funds for the

1966 CAC election, another low turnout, and similarly paltry results in other cities, OEO terminated direct elections of Community Action representatives. Finally, in a last ditch effort to revitalize Philadelphia CACs in 1967, the OEO withheld funding until Isaiah Crippins' position was slashed – prompting Bowser to resign as director. Coinciding with the OEO's effective abandonment of CAP in late 1967 thanks to similar difficulties in other cities, PAAC faded in relevance – receiving less and less federal money – despite Evans operating it as a patronage program until the eventual collapse of the War on Poverty.³²

The Black Power ideals of community control and grassroots solutions to poverty could not coexist with the reality of urban political machines, like that in Philadelphia, committed to maintaining power. As we have seen, this contradiction reared its ugly head at every stage during Philadelphia's experiment with Community Action. In reality, this was a contradiction that was written into the very fabric of CAP by War on Poverty strategists: a piece of public policy specifically designed to bypass traditional avenues for the implementation of public policy – namely local governments and agencies. Instead it was to be implemented by the very people who themselves lived in poverty. The Tate administration would not sit idly while Washington underwrote a social movement that could threaten the authority of city government. Again, the shape “maximum feasible participation” took in any given city depended largely upon the specificities of that city. But in places like Philadelphia with strong, well-organized political machines, genuine citizen participation was very much stillborn. As we will see, however, where the shared Black Power and War on Poverty sensibility of community control of anti-poverty programs failed to harmonize with the interests of local government in Philadelphia, another program connected to the War on Poverty in Philadelphia that also embraced a strain of Black Power ideology succeeded with flying colors.

TUSKEGEE IN PHILADELPHIA

The prominence of education and job training programs in the War on Poverty flowed from what had become common sense assumptions, backed by social science of the day, about the roots of poverty in the post-WWII period. If, as this common sense held, personal defects and a “culture of poverty” left the poor unqualified and unprepared for employment, then it followed that education for children and job training for adults could begin

to correct the problems of unemployment and poverty. This narrative avoided a critique of structural inequality and American capitalism rooted in political economy and instead defined poverty as a form of individual pathology – it was not the creation of jobs that was necessary, it was the creation of individuals fit to fill them. Moreover, the commitment to job training fit agreeably with the program of “Growth Liberalism” to which the Johnson administration was wedded. Likely adding to the political expedience of the issue was the fact that an anti-poverty program focused on education and job training was relatively inexpensive.³³

In this ideological climate and in the context of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, the OEO’s dedication to such a formula found an analogue in a particularly conservative strain of Black Power ideology where notions of self-help and black entrepreneurship were connected to a project of racial uplift. In Philadelphia, the most visible proponent of this sensibility was the Reverend Leon Sullivan with his Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC). Starting as a local adult job training program, OIC would receive significant War on Poverty funding and go on to outlive the War on Poverty itself – growing into an international organization. Existing side-by-side in Philadelphia with the Community Action Program – viewed as an abject failure – OIC flourished. Despite studies suggesting only a tenuous link, at most, between education and earning power, the logic of job training has endured into the present.³⁴ So too, did OIC. What can the early history of this organization tell us about the reasons for its long-term survival?

Leon Sullivan came to Philadelphia in 1950 after spending several years as a pastor in New Jersey and as Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr.’s understudy at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Born in Charleston, West Virginia in 1922, the six foot, five inch Sullivan attended the historically black West Virginia State College on a basketball scholarship. Growing up under Jim Crow, he described the experience of being denied seating after ordering a soda in a local store as a formative event in his childhood. At that moment “...I decided...that I was going to stand up against that kind of thing the rest of my life,” he said. Upon his arrival in Philadelphia to lead the Zion Baptist Church, the charismatic pastor involved himself in community affairs and quickly earned the reputation as a champion of civil rights. Prefacing Sullivan’s development of OIC was his involvement on the front lines

of the city's selective patronage movement in the early 1960s. Sullivan brought together a coalition of black clergy and organized members of the black population in a campaign targeting local businesses that discriminated against blacks in their hiring practices. While the boycotts were successful in winning agreements from businesses to hire blacks and Sullivan's centrality in the campaign further cemented his image as a stalwart of civil rights, the failure of blacks to fill many of the recently opened positions and the persistence of unemployment in Philadelphia's ghettos sent him looking for new solutions to the problems faced by poor black Philadelphians.³⁵

By the summer of 1963 – nearly two years before the start of the War on Poverty – Sullivan had found his solution. During a meeting at the Zion Baptist Church, he announced his plan to establish the Opportunities Industrialization Center – one of the first black-run job training programs of its kind. Though the selective patronage movement had been successful, he argued, blacks in Philadelphia still faced the problem of being underskilled for many of the new positions that were opening up. Training was required to provide them with the skills necessary for employment. Further, by encouraging black business and entrepreneurship, he saw OIC as a step towards uplifting the black population and bridging the racial disparity in wealth. Sullivan's intention was to fund the program through foundation grants and federal money, and he cast his gaze on an abandoned police station on the corner of 19th and Oxford streets in North Philadelphia as the program's first training center. Quickly, support for OIC among city government, the business community, and the black population began to build. Corporations began to donate money and machinery to the program and the city agreed to lease the abandoned police station to the program for one dollar per year. Interest in the program had grown so high that by the time the center was set to open in January of 1964, some 1,000 Philadelphians – ten percent of them white – had applied to participate. "It is our intention to prove that genius is color blind," said Sullivan, "and to indicate to the nation that in the future, Negroes intend to help themselves." OIC received the Presidential seal of approval at its opening gala on January 26th – two weeks after Johnson declared "unconditional war on poverty." At the packed event attended by almost 9,000 supporters, a telegram from Johnson sent greetings and cited OIC as representing the vanguard in the War on Poverty.³⁶

Classes got underway at OIC in early March. In many ways, OIC's program resembled typical job training and industrial education programs, with students receiving basic education in a trade of their choice, graduat-

ing when they became employed. In other ways, however, it reflected Leon Sullivan's commitment to racial uplift, self-reliance, and black capitalism. It also illustrated his belief in poverty as primarily the result of personal deficiencies and highlighted the points at which this interpretation coincided with mainstream ideological currents. The "feeder program," for instance, launched in September, 1964, was designed for OIC applicants believed to be in need of more comprehensive training. In this program, students were taught the basics – reading, writing, and mathematics – as well as speech, grooming, and dress. If poverty was understood as at least partly ingrained in the behavioral patterns of the poor, then correcting these patterns was a legitimate anti-poverty strategy. Finally, the feeder program emphasized black history. Sullivan's explanation betrayed a quasi-nationalist sensibility typical of the Black Power era: "You have been brainwashed for more than 100 years into believing you are inferior. We are going to wipe that brainwashing away." To Sullivan, then, the evaporation of race pride and self-respect in city-dwelling poor black people was responsible for their pathology – learning their own history would, in turn, restore pride and self respect by reminding them of their capabilities. Perhaps what most endeared OIC to the business community and politicians – state and federal – was its explicit eschewal of politics at a time when black protest was at its very apogee. For Sullivan, the problems with the black population and the solution to those problems lied within.³⁷

Over the next few years, a torrent of funds from a variety of sources inundated OIC. The steady stream of corporate donations – both money and equipment – was punctuated in 1964 by a \$200,000 Ford Foundation grant. That same year, Sullivan received the first significant federal funding for OIC when the Department of Labor granted the program \$458,000 – foreshadowing the large OEO grant that would soon follow. Corporate and government donations were not the only sources of funds, though. Also in 1964, Sullivan launched the "Month of Opportunities Drive" to raise funds locally. 1,000 female OIC supporters were put in charge of the drive and the goal was set at raising \$100,000. By the end of the month, the goal had been surpassed and more than half of the money raised came from the donations of local blacks. With a solid base of financial support thus in place, OIC was set to expand. And thanks to a Bucks County farmer, in December, expand OIC did. The anonymous farmer gave Sullivan the use of a seven story building in West Philadelphia for a second OIC location at a yearly rent of "[o]ne slice of black bread and one cup of black coffee (without sugar)..."³⁸

When it was clear that Philadelphia would adopt the Community Action Program in late 1964, Sullivan moved quickly to secure War on Poverty funding for OIC. After being included in Tate's rejected proposal to the OEO, upon the creation of PAAC and the election of CACs, OIC finally received \$1,756,163 of the six million dollars in federal money allotted to Philadelphia's War on Poverty. This allowed Sullivan to open a third OIC branch in South Philadelphia. From here, OIC and PAAC took quite divergent paths. While turmoil struck PAAC and Community Action became little more than a front for the city's Democratic machine, at the same time, OIC enjoyed only resounding success. Groups of fact-finders seeking to replicate OIC in cities across the country toured Philadelphia's four branches regularly, and almost all were quick to praise the program. "It is really most impressive," said one visitor. "This is the best program of this type that I've seen or heard of in the country." A group from New York City was equally impressed: "We came to Philadelphia to see OIC for ourselves. We heard it was working. And we are glad we came," they said. By the summer of 1966, eight new programs were set to open in cities ranging from Oakland to Washington D.C.³⁹

The federal government, too, was quick to get behind Sullivan's project. During his visit to Philadelphia that same winter, Robert Kennedy praised OIC while defending the War on Poverty: "This is not a substitute for the poverty program," he said, "It does not answer all of the problems of the big cities. However, it is doing one of the most important jobs in the poverty program, providing job opportunities for the unemployed." Less than a week later, Sullivan appeared before a Senate subcommittee to request \$100 million for OIC branches in 65 other cities, comparing the cost of 20 jets being used for the war in Vietnam. That such a request was even possible reflects the bi-partisan consensus that job training had become a common sense anti-poverty strategy. OIC continued to grow through the 60s and, by 1968, Sullivan boasted of branches in 75 cities nationwide. Then, in 1970, when the War on Poverty was on its last legs, the Senate voted 68 to 6 to include OIC in the federal budget with the Employment Training Act.⁴⁰ In just seven years, Leon Sullivan's "grassroots job training program" had gone from an abandoned police station in North Philadelphia into the federal budget.

CONCLUSION

In 1973, President Richard Nixon eliminated the Office of Economic Opportunity, effectively ending the War on Poverty. While President Johnson's attempt to eliminate poverty in the United States certainly fell short of that goal, its results were, in fact, mixed. The same cannot be said for perhaps the most controversial element of the War on Poverty: the Community Action Program – viewed almost universally as an utter failure. Philadelphia was no exception. If “maximum feasible participation” of the poor was the primary stipulation of CAP, then Philadelphia's anti-poverty program proceeded in brazen defiance of the rules. OIC, on the other hand – born at the same historical moment and in the same political context as CAP in Philadelphia – did not die when the War on Poverty ended. In fact, it enjoyed sustained growth during Nixon's presidency, due, in part, to Leon Sullivan's support for Nixon. Nowhere were the conservative implications of Sullivan's brand of Black Power more apparent than in his endorsement of the right-wing president: “Don't underestimate Richard Nixon,” he said. “In terms of black enterprise, he did more than any president.”⁴¹

How, then, do we account for the vastly different legacies of these two contemporaneous programs? The answer may be as simple as one word: politics. While both were informed by similar notions about the roots of poverty and the ways to overcome it and both appealed to proponents of strains of the emergent mood of Black Power, CAP failed because it was unavoidably political. As illustrated by the history of PAAC, local politicians and elites would not relinquish control of a program that had the potential to give federal backing to the social movements of the 1960s. By comparison, OIC was explicit in its abstention from politics. During his visit to Philadelphia in 1967, President Johnson praised this approach: “The movement has moved from protest to preparation, unleashing the power which was there but which had been obscured.”⁴² Of course, what Johnson's formulation overlooked was the fact that the success of *every* social movement in history has been, in part, dependent on the ability of those movements to protest effectively. This was an observation that Frederick Douglass made more than a hundred years before with his now famous dictum: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

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- ³ Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 16-29, 79-81; Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), 91; Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994), 35-37.
- ⁴ Matusow, 245.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.
- ⁶ Quoted in J. David Greenstone and Paul E. Peterson, *Race and Authority in Urban Politics: Community Participation and the War on Poverty* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973), 4-5.
- ⁷ Office of Economic Opportunity, *Community Action Program Guide: Volume 1. Instructions for Applicants* (Washington D.C.: OEO, 1965), 7.
- ⁸ Greenstone, 19-24.
- ⁹ Matusow, 255-256, 260-262; for case studies of Community Action in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York City, see: Greenstone, 29-43; for the War on Poverty in New Orleans, including CAP, see: Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2007), 19-208; for Oakland see: Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003), 198-214, 233-242.
- ¹⁰ Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 104-110, 155-163, 223-257.
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- ¹⁵ Chris J. Perry, "Bowser Seen As 7th Anti-Poverty Head Possibility," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 23, 1965; Mark Bricklin, "Moore's Threats Sank Crippins, Sam Evans Says," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 6, 1965; Lawrence M. O'Rourke, "Bowser Sees Difficult Task in Poverty War," *Bulletin*, Apr. 14, 1965.
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³³ Katz, 79-101.

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