

I examine **President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty** and argue that it was not as successful as it could have been. I show that **domestic political concerns** led much of the War on Poverty to **fail**—not the cost of the Vietnam War, which siphoned funds away from these programs and is often blamed for their ineffectiveness.

In order to pass War on Poverty programs, Johnson had to **compromise with the segregationist wing of the Democratic Party and ardent anti-communists in both parties**. LBJ, a master legislator, got these two blocs to pass anti-poverty legislation by promising that these programs would be placed under **local control**.

Anti-communists favored local control because they feared federal control of these programs, which would expand the size of the government in ways that allegedly resembled communism.

Segregationists believed that local control would allow them to maintain their white privilege, with Jim Crow governments choosing to keep anti-poverty funds out of impoverished African American communities.

Not all War on Poverty programs were unsuccessful. Certain programs, notably **Head Start, Medicare, and Medicaid** gained popularity and became “untouchable” programs. These programs are still present today and remain major parts of society's efforts against poverty.

“While every man's house cannot be a castle, it need not be a hovel.”

— President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966

“But we will not permit those who fire upon us in Vietnam to win a victory over the American people. This Nation is mighty enough, its society is healthy enough, its people are strong enough, to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society here at home...I recommend that we prosecute with vigor and determination our war on poverty.”

— President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966

Local control led to inconsistent and often ineffective approaches to ameliorating poverty. Community Action Programs, in particular, were mismanaged and rendered unsuitable for bettering the lives of the poor they sought to serve. Local politicians in charge of CAP's, particularly in large northern cities, often used these programs to **build patronage**, which caused **significant tensions** to arise between poor communities and municipal leaders.

by Greg Mulroy



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